

KEY AND TELEGRAPH



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President Taft's Telegraph Key

In earlier times, when the means of travel available to our president were relatively slow, the telegraph made it possible for him to participate, from his desk, in ceremonies thousands of miles away. Several presidents used a telegraph key to signal, remotely, important openings or dedications.

Whether at the White House or some other location, and at all hours of the day or night, the President routinely opened expositions, bridges, dams, buildings, etc. with the pressing of a telegraph key. What made it possible were the large telegraph networks then operated by the Western Union and Postal Telegraph Companies.

One of the first telegraph keys that was specially made for a president was manufactured in 1893 by E.S. Greeley & Co. of New York. General Greeley supplied a Victor model key made of solid gold, and with large ivory knobs, for use by President Cleveland in opening the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago on May 1, 1893. The key was later used on other ceremonial occasions by Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.

However, the key that received the most use by a president was "The Taft Key." It was used by at least eight different presidents over a span of



President Roosevelt prepares to open the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge on October 12 1936 by closing the Taft key. (Copyright Bettman/Corbis)



After being gifted to Taft in 1909, various presidents used this key to remotely signal dedications and openings for some 30 years. ((Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

many years. It was presented to President Taft on May 17, 1909 by George W. Carmack, a discoverer of gold in Alaska and a congressional delegate from Washington State. It was built specifically for President Taft to open the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition to be held in Seattle.

This key is made of solid gold, with the exception of its platinum contacts, and is mounted on a slab of Alaska marble. It is also studded with 22 individual gold nuggets. The gold used was some of the first discovered in the Klondike region. A large gold decorative label on the key is inscribed with details of the presentation and its intended use. On June 1, 1909, President Taft pressed this key in the East Room of the White House to start the machinery at the Exposition in Seattle.

After Taft had used the key to open the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, he presented it to Edward W. (Doc) Smithers, the chief telegrapher of the White House. Smithers, who served as White House Telegrapher for 41 years, safeguarded the key and brought it to the East Room whenever it was needed by a president for ceremonial openings. Smithers also traveled with presidents, bringing the key with him.

The story goes that Smithers once turned down a \$5000.00 offer for the key. When he passed away in January of 1939, it was given to his widow.

In April of 1939, Western Union began a tradition of presenting individual telegraph keys to presidents. Presentation Keys were given to Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy

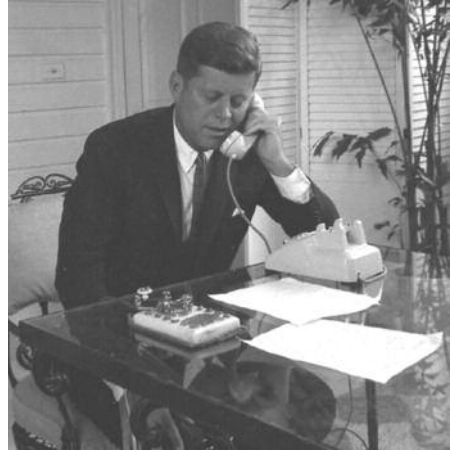
and Johnson. They were all legless, Triumph-style keys, either chromium or gold-plated and mounted on a clear Lucite sub-base over a black Catalin main base. The knobs were also made of clear Lucite.

These Western Union keys had unique labels for each president. For example, President Roosevelt's key has the presidential seal with the date of the presentation (April 26, 1939). President Truman's key has a "V" for "Victory;" President Eisenhower's has an American flag and President Kennedy's has "PT-109."

But it was the Taft Key that received the most use over the years, having been the exclusive ceremonial key from 1909 through 1939. President Coolidge used the key for forty-one ceremonies alone. However President Franklin D. Roosevelt appears to have been the key's heaviest user.

Usually there were two telegraph circuits set up for a ceremony, each taking a separate route to the destination. Besides serving as an alternate line in case of failure, the extra circuit enabled the telegrapher to report back on the success of the signal right after the President sent it.

On one occasion, after President Hoover sent the signal to set off an explosion to clear away the



In what may have been the key's last ceremonial role, President Kennedy uses the instrument, in 1962, to open the Seattle World's Fair. (Cecil Stoughton, White House/ John F. Kennedy Library, Boston)

last rock in the seven mile railway tunnel through the Cascade Range in Washington State, no reply was received. When the White House telegrapher sent a request to determine if the President's signal was successful, the telegrapher at the tunnel replied: "How the hell do I know? When the explosion occurred it blew me thirty feet."

Some of these remote openings were done over considerable distances and were impressive technical feats for the era. On October 10, 1913, President Wilson sent a signal over a 5,172 mile telegraph and cable circuit to the Isthmus of Panama. The signal set off a blast of dynamite destroying the Gamboa Dike on the Panama Canal, the last barrier separating the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The president's signal was also simultaneously repeated from the White House into another 3,000 mile circuit across the country to downtown San Francisco where a separate ceremony for the occasion was taking place at Union Square.

The route from Washington, D.C. to the Panama Canal went like this: A Western Union circuit was created from the White House to Galveston, Texas. From there a cable connection was made with the Mexican Telegraph Co. that crossed the Gulf of Mexico into Coatzacoalcos, Mexico. The circuit continued from there overland to Salina Cruz on the Pacific Ocean connecting to another cable that went along the Pacific Coast to San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua and to Panama. At Panama, a land line connection was made with the Panama Railroad to the Gamboa Dike.

The ceremony at the White House for this



The Taft Key on display at the Smithsonian Institution. (Courtesy of Harold Wallace, Associate Curator, NMAH, Washington, DC)

event was informal. There was a pre-arrangement of the procedures and at the appropriate time, White House telegrapher Doc Smithers sent four dots over both circuits. After a thirty second delay, President Wilson pressed the Taft Key, sending a signal to both the Panama Canal and San Francisco.

In the FDR photo in this article, the Taft Key's cord and wedge are connected to a Triumph-style key on a Western Union telegraph set that included a stand-alone Ghegan sounder. On September 11, 1936, in front of an audience at the Third World Power Conference in Washington D.C., President Roosevelt used a similar arrangement to start the turbines at Boulder Dam. A microphone was placed near the telegraph set so that the audience could hear the sounder as the president pressed the Taft Key and the telegrapher replied from the dam.

The last use of the Taft Key by a President appears to have been when President Kennedy opened the Seattle World's Fair on April 21, 1962. On that day, Kennedy was in Palm Beach,

Florida at the home of a friend, retired colonel C. Michael Paul. The technology for this opening was rather more elaborate than for previous ones.

One of President Kennedy's aides was off to the side of the President's table carefully watching the second hand of his watch. At the appropriate time, Kennedy pressed the Taft Key signaling a computer in Andover, Maine that activated a radio telescope, causing it to focus on the sun or the star Cassiopeia. The telescope then picked up a "wave" producing a signal that was relayed to Seattle, setting off bells, lights and releasing 2000 balloons to start the Fair.

Today the "Taft Key," still in the White House collection, is on loan to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. It can be seen in the "The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden" exhibit on the third floor of the museum.

Below is a partial list of some the events that were opened remotely by a president via the telegraph since 1909. Most were done from the White House.

William H. Taft: 1909-1913

Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition
Honolulu Fair (6,200 miles)

Woodrow Wilson: 1913-1921

Gamboa Dike, Panama Canal
Panama-California Exposition at San Diego, CA
Panama-Pacific Exposition at San Francisco

Warren Harding: 1921-1923

Marine Exposition, New York City

Calvin Coolidge: 1923-1929

The San Mateo-Hayward Highway Bridge, CA
The Holland Tunnel, New York City
Skagit Hydro-Electric Plant, Seattle, WA
Chesapeake & Delaware Sea Level
Waterway, DE
Moffat Water Tunnel, Colorado
Carquinez Bridge, California
A new 25 foot deep channel into Miami,
FL harbor
The New York Life Building in New York City
Pony Express Revival, St. Joseph, MO

Herbert Hoover: 1929-1933

The Empire State Building, New York City

Bridge connecting Oregon and Washington at Longview, WA.

The opening of the Chicago Board of Trade Building

The lighting of the Lindbergh Beacon, Chicago International Vehicular Tunnel between Detroit and Windsor, Canada

Plant openings of the Chicago Daily News, the Boston Herald, Detroit Times and the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co. at Gadsden, AL
Railway Tunnel through the Cascade Range in Washington State.

World-Wide Samuel Morse Centennial, Washington, D.C.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: 1933-1945

(All done with the Taft Key prior to 1939)

The opening of the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco

Radio Station WOR's 50 kW transmitter Norris Dam, Tennessee Valley Authority

The construction of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge

The opening of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge

University Bridge, Seattle, WA

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San Diego Exposition

The power house at the Boulder Dam

Power Plant at Muscle Shoals, AL

Fort Worth Frontier Fiesta

The Snake River Stampede Rodeo, Nampa,
Idaho (From Hyde Park, NY)

The Great Lakes Exposition

The Century of Progress Exposition, Chicago

Harry Truman: 1945-1953

Grand Coulee Dam Generator, Washington

The annual lighting of the White House
Christmas Tree. (From Independence, MO)

Dwight D. Eisenhower: 1953-1961

Glen Canyon Dam, Page, AZ

Conveyer System, Washington, D.C.

Post Office, (World's most mechanized
P.O.)

Upper Colorado River Storage Project,
Kanab, UT

National UPI Wire System

John F. Kennedy: 1961-1963

Seattle World's Fair (From Palm Beach, FL)

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4-21-1962