



# Fireside 21ST CENTURY Chat

## WHITE HOUSE WEBSITE PUTS THE PRESIDENT'S BEST FOOT FORWARD

**O**n Monday, the nation celebrates the birthday of the father of our country. The official federal holiday is known as Washington's Birthday, but most people refer to it as Presidents Day and assume it also celebrates Abraham Lincoln, another February baby and former president.

Our nation honors these two historical giants not with picnics and parades, but with obnoxiously advertised sales on cars and mattresses.

It's doubtful while Washington waged the bloody battle for independence, or Lincoln struggled to save the Union and free the slaves, that either man imagined someday U.S. citizens would be rewarded with free box springs in their honor.

### From radio to the Web

Today, presidents live in an insulated bubble, making it difficult to connect with the average citizen. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to broadcast his Fireside Chats over the radio in an effort to speak directly to the people and build support for his controversial policies during the Great Depression.

Contemporary presidents have revived and expanded FDR's practice. Not only does President Obama give a weekly radio address, but he also posts a video of it on the presidential website at [Whitehouse.gov](http://Whitehouse.gov). Blogs, videos, photo galleries and press releases are also posted on the site in a modern, high-tech, 24/7 version of the Fireside chats. It's a very slick, well-designed site with lots of rich, interactive media.

### Campaigning or governing?

Incumbency has its benefits when running for re-election. One such benefit is a government-sponsored website where you can tout your accomplishments with no dissenting opinions. Though there's lots of useful and interesting information on the site, it's obviously a powerful campaign tool as well.

When you log on to the website you are greeted with a very presidential-looking photo of Obama in the White House. There's a plea to sign up for regular updates from the president and his staff. If you don't want emails from the president, visitors can click "No Thanks" and proceed to the home page.

There's a banner across the top of the page with links to inside pages and an elegant drawing of the White House in the center. The typography and the palette of blues and greys give it a stately feel.

Beneath the banner, the main package is a slide show that features issues the president wants to promote. Currently, his campaign to encourage congress to extend middle class tax cuts at the end of February, labeled "What \$40 Means," is being hyped. A series of quotes, from presumably average Americans, tell what losing \$40 a paycheck would mean to them.

In addition, the president's proposed budget is plugged here with a photo of him giving a speech to a group of workers standing in front of a sign that says "An America Built to Last." A video of his weekly address and a photo gallery of the first lady's "Let's Move" campaign fill out the rest of the package.

Below the main package is a "Featured Topics" section. Visitors can click through numerous topics that feature the president in a positive

light, including an impressive interactive timeline on the Iraq war and a nice infographic on the resurgence of the American auto industry.

Next on the page are several sections of text briefs that link to blog entries and other information. The blog headlines have a decidedly pro-Obama spin. The president's and vice president's schedules are also available here. Links to featured legislation take you off the White House site to explanations on the Library of Congress website.

One link takes you to a page where you can create or sign a petition to the White House. "A Photo of the Day," a search field and links to social networks finish off the home page.

### Not just propaganda

Whitehouse.gov is more than just an extended campaign commercial for the president. The inside pages feature a wealth of information on the White House and the history of its occupants.

There's an interactive tour and articles on the people and trappings of the president's world. Descriptions of the branches and various agencies of the federal government are available, as well as profiles of major figures in the administration. A "Live Stream" feature allows you to watch speeches and events as they happen. You could easily spend hours viewing the many interesting photo galleries and videos of presidential life.

The White House site is very well designed, useful and functional. If the government worked as well as this website, our country would have no problems.

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