

## Citizen-In-Chief: The Second Lives Of The American Presidents.\*\*

What happens to American presidents after they leave office? One impression is that the majority retire to their ranches or beach front homes, become caretakers of vast philanthropic foundations and official archives, or give speeches on a variety of topics with a liberty they did not enjoy while attempting to please domestic political constituencies. There is also the suggestion that many, like Warren Harding, prefer to go fishing and leave it at that, and that they are also entitled to that pleasure given hard years of campaigning and governing. Ex-presidents, stated one named Grover Cleveland, have already suffered enough.

This welcome book, full of insights and vignettes, demonstrates that the bucolic life of ex-presidents is largely a fiction. They remain engaged; and they often appear to be in a state of lingering conflict with those of opposing views. They become influential statesmen, they adopt causes, and yes, they make money.

John Quincy Adams returned to Congress, Theodore Roosevelt founded a new political party that ultimately led to his own party's, the GOP's defeat to Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1912. William Howard Taft joined the Supreme Court, Thomas Jefferson established a brilliant university in Virginia, and a fellow southerner Jimmy Carter, was active on a variety of fronts. He built homes for people of modest means and then went on to win a Nobel Peace Prize. The more youthful age of presidents and an increased life expectancy makes an exploration of their post-official lives both interesting and inspiring for an age bent on continuing mental stimulation and lifelong learning projects.

Plenty of inspiration can be found in 'citizen-in-chief.' But there are cautionary tales as well. Lyndon Johnson lived a scant four years after his presidency—one that he hoped would focus on civil rights and equal justice, and one that got terribly side-tracked by the horrors and unpopularity of the Vietnam War. Johnson appeared to have "resigned from life itself." He spent hours in reflection, suffered from heart trouble, gave up his favorite cigarettes, and sought redemptive causes personally and with respect to his presidential library at the University of Texas where faculty was not consulted about his plans. Johnson was particularly active in preserving his documentary legacy: one journalist could never find an astute or critical evaluation of the War in the library's archives. The library was itself dubbed a 'pharaonic pomposity,' not unlike the man who in simpler down-home terms was judged to be exceedingly strong with nothing "chicken" about him.

It is difficult not to encounter the Reagan years of illness or Richard Nixon's quest to reestablish himself before party and country. Less familiar is the role played by the fathers of presidents who were presidents in their own right. The prickly question of dynastic succession arises with John Adams and his son John Quincy, but is soon dashed by the fact that the father's campaign was enthusiastic but rather limited to front porch efforts from his home in Massachusetts. William Henry Harrison died in office after one month so that not a son, but a grandson, Benjamin, seemed understandably disconnected from a meager presidential past.

Bush family endeavors are another matter. Close in time, and at one point, similar in political perspective, the elder Bush, George H.W., always claimed a certain distance,

distinguishing himself from that Kennedy Clan on the basis that no one of the Bush family, no political member at least, ever felt truly entitled to anything at all.. Yet father supported son through the perplexing times of a voter recount in Florida. The fact that a brother was serving as Florida's governor during those agonizing days, provided a familial network of confidence as well.

There remains no general public agreement on what ex-presidents should do. Despite myriad activities in their civilian life, a primary occupation has been to further build their legacies and to expand on them, and to campaign for others in speech, interview, and on the stump. Humanitarian and charitable endeavors also follow the top leadership position as does a harvesting of international good will. There is as well a real trend towards the accumulation of capital and a rising questioning of how much wealth can be gained before the dignity of office is reduced or denied.

Louis Brandeis is quoted aptly here; "sunlight is the best disinfectant," he wrote. So, too, are more mindful US histories. The authors provide several hints about conclusions. Personal eras of American ex-presidents can be long and fruitful for terms of office are constitutionally limited to 8 years. Under such circumstances, apparent dynasties have a way of rising, declining, potentially rising, and then declining yet again. As with those who have never entered into politics, life and lifeways, interested social engagements, slowly come to an end. The many homes are reduced to a constrained living space within a single favored habitat; and the checkbooks have a way of running out.

\*\* Leonard Bernardo and Jennifer Weiss: New York, HarperCollins, 2009

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