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Gleaves on Humor and the Presidency

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Gleaves on Humor and the Presidency

How important is a good sense of humor to a successful presidency?

Humor is one of the greatest allies a president can have -- at the very least it's a stress reliever. Harry Truman once said, "Any man who has the job I have and didn't have a sense of humor wouldn't still be here." Abraham Lincoln once challenged his advisers to lighten up: "Why don't you laugh, gentlemen? If I didn't laugh, I should die, and you need this medicine as much as I do."

Presidents often use humor to deflect criticism. Take our current commander in chief, George W. Bush. The media have had a field day with Bush's tendency, when tired, to mispronounce words and utter an occasional malapropism. Shortly after becoming president, Bush said, "In this administration, there is no room for nepotism or any other word I don't understand."

Among recent presidents, Ronald Reagan (a.k.a. the Great Communicator) was considered a master of humor. He used laughter to turn a potential weakness into a strength. Take the issue of his age -- he was the oldest elected president. In 1984, in the second debate with Walter "Fritz" Mondale, Reagan won over his audience by saying, "I want you to know that ... I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." Everybody laughed, even Mondale and fellow Democrats. [\[1\]](#)

At the Republican National Convention in 1988, Reagan quipped, "This convention brings back so many memories to a fellow like me. I can still remember my first Republican convention: Abraham Lincoln giving a speech that sent tingles down my spine. No, I have to confess, I wasn't actually there. The truth is, way back then, I belonged to the other party."

Reagan's intelligence was often underestimated by his liberal opponents, and our 40th president knew how to parlay the put downs into a laugh. "There are advantages to being elected president," he remarked in a commencement address. "The day after I was elected, I had my high school grades classified as Top Secret."

Reagan could also capture a serious thought with wit and concision: During the Cold War struggle with communism, Reagan was challenged to name what was wrong with Soviet agriculture. "Spring, summer, fall, and winter," he snapped.

John F. Kennedy also used humor to good effect. As he campaigned for president, he threw a humorous barb at Ike: "As I interpret [the Eisenhower administration], we're now at the end of the beginning of the upturn of the downturn. Every bright spot the White House finds in the economy is like the policeman bending over the body in the alley who says cheerfully, 'Two of his wounds are fatal -- but the other one's not so bad.'"

Humor will always be a staple of the presidency. As Will Rogers observed, "There's no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you!"

There are two books about presidential humor that I'd recommend: (1) Bob Dole, editor, *Great Presidential Wit (I Wish I Was in This Book)* and (2) Helen Thomas, *Thanks for the Memories, Mr. President*.

Speaking of books.... Since you, Julia, are the first person to submit a question to Ask Gleaves, I am sending you an autographed copy of Michael Beschloss's *Illustrated History of the Presidents*. Thank you for helping launch this new Hauenstein Center feature. Write again! (*Question from Julia C. of Houston, Texas*)



Former Presidents Reagan, Carter, Ford, and Nixon toasting in the White House Blue Room.



[\[1\]](#) Michael K. Deaver, *A Different Drummer: My Thirty Years with Ronald Reagan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 112