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Presidents as Men of Letters

By Jim Kratsas

As Americans we have had an almost drunken, passive-aggressive, love-hate relationship with our presidents. We look at past presidents with much more admiration than when they held office. They have gone up and down in our estimation depending on the times and, in many cases, what biography has recently hit the bestseller list.

Yet Americans love to have identifiable leaders and a first family -- the four or eight year equivalent of dynastic families. They are, after all, the royalty we spurned in 1776.

Rail against sitting presidents as you wish, each has contributed to our nation's evolution. They have led by example, by action, and, above all, by written and spoken word. Many have left us with enduring prose that shines as bright today as when it was written; prose that has left us with insights into their convictions, beliefs, and personalities.

Memoirs: Carter and Grant

Presidents have written in many genres and for many reasons. They have left us with memoirs, speeches, and personal correspondence -- whatever they have needed to justify actions by the nation, to vindicate themselves, to make money, to provide humor, or to inspire citizens.

In the twentieth century, Richard Nixon penned numerous volumes on foreign affairs as well as memoirs in a serious attempt to rehabilitate his reputation after his resignation. Within five years of his exit from the White House, he was considered an elder statesman whose counsel was sought after by presidents, foreign heads of state, and even the most volatile organizations in the world: major league baseball and the umpires' union.

Others in the twentieth century have penned their memoirs in part because of lucrative offers from publishing houses. Lyndon Johnson, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and most recently Bill Clinton fall into this category.

In some cases such lucrative offers have come at desperate times for ex-presidents. Jimmy Carter was stunned by his landslide loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election. Things were even worse since the hostage crisis was as yet unresolved. Upon arriving at home in Plains, Georgia, Carter was confronted by possible bankruptcy due to a poor economy and the poor business practices of his brother on the peanut farm. With every prospect of facing yet another humiliation -- bankruptcy -- a reprieve was offered in the form of a half-million dollar advance by Bantam for his memoirs.

Not the most enthralling of memoirs, *Keeping Faith* may in fact be more reflective of his post-presidency than his four years in the White House. And Carter certainly did not stop with that book -- he has gone on to write a total of 19, ranging across such topics as the dilemma of the Middle East, how to live longer and healthier, hunting and fishing, and, most recently, boyhood recollections of Christmas in Plains. Considering his prodigious writing, his numerous charities, and his work around the globe, it may be agreed that he has been one of our most active and energetic former presidents.

Another president who was faced with financial woes was U.S. Grant. He was approached to write memoirs of his service in the Civil War several times by friends, but by Grant's own admission at age 62, the actual motivation for producing the text was similar to that of Jimmy Carter: "the rascality of a business partner developed itself by the announcement of a failure. This was followed soon after by a universal depression of all securities, which seemed to threaten the extinction of a good part of the income still retained, and for which I am indebted to the kindly act of friends."

Grant's memoirs are considered one of the finest of its kind in American history. It is made all the more remarkable by the fact that Grant was in a race with death to finish it -- he was diagnosed with throat cancer that claimed his life only 21 days after the manuscript was completed. The memoirs provided his family with a comfortable living and remain in print to this day.

One additional work of Grant's should be mentioned -- his terms of surrender composed for Robert E. Lee's signature at Appomattox. This short surrender document of less than 200 words helped ease the destruction and divisiveness of the Civil War. The terms were generous and Lee himself understood the graciousness of Grant: the Confederates were permitted to return to their homes with their own horses and personal effects, "so long as they observe their paroles and the laws in force where they reside." Grant took no political bent in drafting these terms. It was a military document that afforded his brothers-in-arms the dignity they deserved as soldiers who performed their duty.

Ike, TR, Washington, and Wilson

Another warrior turned president, Dwight Eisenhower, carried on the Grant tradition. His World War II memoir, *Crusade in Europe*, was a huge success and as apolitical as Grant's. Ike, too, had to juggle his duties as Supreme Commander with the politics of leading an allied effort that included several immense egos, not the least of which was British General Montgomery. It is hard to imagine that Monty could have uttered humble words such as these by Eisenhower at the end of the war: "Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in the blood of his followers and the sacrifices of his friends."

The most critical time in the war was the invasion of Normandy, an operation that had been planned for many months. But on the morning of June 6, no one was certain that the invasion would succeed. An agonized Ike drafted two announcements for that morning -- the one we know that ends with, "I call upon all who love freedom to stand with us now. Together we shall achieve victory." The other was drafted in case of a defeat on the shores of France. The latter composition survives and illustrates the military man in Ike. He assumed total blame for the defeat while praising the brave men who served under him.

Now that I've raised the testosterone level with all this military talk, it must be time to turn to the most published president of all -- Theodore Roosevelt. How someone could wrestle and box, play with his wild children, give speeches, go big game hunting, be a rancher, travel the globe, negotiate ends to wars, fight in wars, start wars, and write 18 books during his political career, taxes the imagination.

TR, as we all know, was a sickly child who was determined to become physically strong. In his heart, he was a military man dedicated to a strong U.S. naval force. Serving as undersecretary of the Navy in 1898, he took it upon himself to begin a shooting war. While his boss the secretary of the Navy was preoccupied at lunch, TR as acting secretary cabled Admiral Dewey to attack and sink the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. TR then resigned his position and enlisted his friends to go and fight in Cuba as the Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War.

After the war TR wrote a history of the Rough Riders. This publication followed three books on recollections as a rancher out west, his great history of American westward expansion, *The Winning of the West*, and his first work, *The Naval War of 1812*, still considered the definitive work on the subject. TR was actually able to pen 18 books in 35 years -- a remarkable amount considering he published nothing during the eight years he was president.

But not everyone was enamored with the verbose TR. It was said after TR's first formal address to Congress that the Government Printing Office exhausted its supply of the personal pronoun. One humorist read TR's *Rough Riders*, his swashbuckling account of his part in the Spanish-American War, and suggested the book be re-titled *ALONE IN CUBA*.

In contrast to TR's aggressive publishing, one of our presidents had his journals published unbeknownst to him and was made a villain in several capitals in Europe. In a small hollow in western Pennsylvania, a 21-year-old lieutenant colonel in the Virginia militia, his 40 men, and a few Indian allies touched off a world war. Giving the orders to fire on a small French party, George Washington entered history by precipitating the French and Indian War that flared into the Seven Years War.

The leader of the small French force was a nobleman named Joseph Coulon de Villiers, Sieur de Jumonville. His brother was the commander of



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Fort Duquesne. Following the brief firefight, one of Washington's Indian allies, named Half King, asked Jumonville whether he was English. Upon receiving a negative answer, Half King buried his tomahawk into Jumonville's skull. Washington, sure that the death of the nobleman would be avenged by the French forces at Fort Duquesne, hastily erected a stockade that he called Fort Necessity. Washington's forces were soon defeated. The surrender terms referred to Washington as the "assassin" of Jumonville; his journal was subsequently captured by the French and published in Europe. Imagine, all that work and fighting and not one pound in royalties.

While Washington's early military career was checkered by several defeats, his stature reached its zenith by the end of the Revolutionary War. The newly independent nation viewed Washington as its leader, with those in the Continental Army and many others wishing that a monarchy be established under King George I. No idea could have been more distasteful to George Washington. In reply to a letter from Colonel Lewis Nicola of the Army, which suggested the establishment of a monarchy under Washington, the General replied, "I must view with abhorrence and reprehend with severity such ideas.... Let me conjure you then, if you have any regard for your country, concern for yourself or posterity, or respect for me, to banish these thoughts from your mind and never communicate as from yourself or anyone else a sentiment of the like nature. Your most obedient servant, George Washington."

Undoubtedly the most enduring of Washington's words are from his Farewell Address. He began his remarks, "Friends and Fellow Citizens." He proceeded to denounce political parties and sectional interests that would tear at the nation. He wanted citizens to view the federal government not as the enemy but as their own -- all the more important to the nation's infancy. Washington's farewell address has always been pointed to as a directive to stay out of foreign affairs or "foreign entanglements," such as those that had erupted between France and Britain. Instead, Washington counseled the nation to remain neutral for 20 years, when he knew the nation would mature in population and resources, enabling it to "bid defiance to any power on earth." How prophetic was he? Within 20 years we defied Great Britain in the War of 1812.

Washington, a man of few words but of great actions, left us with more than any president and much more to ponder.

Now let us turn to a man of many words, Woodrow Wilson, who was our most academic president. A college professor and president of Princeton, he might be a shining example of the idea that the most intelligent person may not always make the best president. He had penned numerous works on government and a multi-volume history of the American people. His treatises were long and, to many, tiresome. His greatest achievement may have been his famous "Fourteen Points," a blueprint for peace after World War I. It was hailed by many but French Premier Clemenceau was quoted as saying, "God only needed 10 commandments, not 14."

To be fair, Wilson recognized the difficulty of brevity in the written and spoken word. An admirer complimented Wilson on a speech he had just given. The admirer asked, "How long does it take to write a 15-minute speech?" Wilson replied, "Days." "Well, how long for a 30-minute speech?" Wilson said, "Hours." "Then what about an hour long speech?" Wilson said, "No time at all -- I'm ready to give it."

Letters: Truman and John Adams

Another later Democrat, Harry Truman, also deserves attention tonight. He was famous not just for his speeches, but also for his letters. Letters provide great insight, capturing, like a photograph, a moment in time; crystallizing a thought and saving it for posterity, sometimes honoring and sometimes embarrassing its author. It's in that latter state that we occasionally find Harry Truman, the plainspoken man-of-the-people.

Harry's daughter, Margaret, fancied herself a singer and had studied the art. Ready or not, she debuted on the New York stage. "NOT ready!" wrote one critic. Ever the protective father, the president wrote the following on White House stationery to a music critic at the *Washington Post* who had penned a less than flattering review of Margaret's concert:

Mr. Hume,

I've just read your lousy review of Margaret's concert. I've come to the conclusion that you are an eight ulcer man on four ulcer pay. It seems to me that you are a frustrated old man who wishes he could have been successful. When you write such poppycock as was in the back section of the paper you work for, it shows conclusively that you're off the beam and at least four of your ulcers are at work. Some day I hope to meet you. When that happens, you'll need a new nose, a lot of beefsteak for black eyes, and perhaps a supporter below. Pegler, a guttersnipe, is a gentleman alongside you. I hope you'll accept that statement as a worse insult than a reflection on your ancestry.

As if to prove the point that sometimes it is better to write a letter and burn it, Truman himself mailed the letter.

But Truman would not be Truman without being blunt. Asked for the umpteenth time to justify his decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the commander in chief wrote:

You have to remember that people forget that the bombing of Pearl Harbor was done while we were at peace with Japan. All you have to do is go out and stand on the keel of the battleship in Pearl Harbor with the 3,000 youngsters underneath it who had no chance whatever of saving their lives. I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half-million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped. I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again. And this letter is not confidential.

One man's correspondence may have exceeded all others -- that of John Adams. He and his contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, must have been born with pens in their hands. Adams's letters, most to his wife Abigail, could fill numerous volumes. As you may know, John Adams loved to be contrary, verbose, and argumentative. Abigail probably she was his only rival in these characteristics. They loved each other dearly.

While Adams was on one of his lengthy stays in Europe, he received a letter from Abigail that said, "No man even if he is sixty years of age ought to live more than three months at a time from this family." He replied lustily, "Oh that I had a bosom to lean my head upon. But how dare you hint or lip a word about sixty years of age for if I were near, I would soon convince you that I am not above 40."

Abigail could match John's sentiments. She wrote:

Here, I say, I have amused myself in reading and thinking of my absent friend, sometimes with a mixture of pain, sometimes with pleasure, sometimes anticipating a joyful and happy meeting, whilst my heart would bound and palpitate with the pleasing idea, and with the purest affection I have held you to my bosom 'til my whole soul has dissolved in tenderness and my pen fallen from my hand.

John to Abigail:

Oh, my dear girl, I thank heaven that another fortnight will restore you to me after so long a separation. My soul and body have both been thrown to disorder by your absence and a month or two more would make me the most insufferable cynic in the world.

Abigail to John:

My dearest friend. How much is comprised in that short sentence. How fondly I call you mine bound by every tie which consecrates the most inviolable friendship, yet separated by cruel destiny, I feel pangs of absence sometimes too sensibly for my own repose. Is it not natural to suppose that as our dependence is greater, our attachment is stronger?

Abigail was much more than a spouse and mate -- she was also his closest advisor. She wrote to him in 1775 concerning petitions that were being circulated calling for reconciliation between the colonies and England: "I could not join today in the petition -- let us separate, they are unworthy to be our brethren."

In a lengthy correspondence between them on the eve of the Declaration of Independence, Abigail wrote,

And by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands, if particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies we are determined to foment a rebellion -- remember all men would be tyrants if they could.

Adams responded, tongue in cheek:

Depend on it, we know better than to repeal our masculine systems. Although they are in full force, you know they are little more than theory. We dare not exert our power in its full latitude. We are obliged to go fair and softly, and in practice you know we are the subjects. We have only the name of masters, and rather than give up this, which would completely subject us to the despotism of the petticoat, I hope General Washington and all our brave heroes would fight.

The year 1818 saw Adams's soul tormented by the death of Abigail. One of the first to offer his condolences was John's fellow revolutionary, friend, then bitter political enemy, then dear friend again, Thomas Jefferson. From Monticello, the letter to Adams goes as follows:

Tried myself in the school of affliction, by the loss of every form of connection which can rive the human heart, I know well and feel what you have lost, what you have suffered, are suffering, and have yet to endure. [Jefferson also lost his wife and six of the seven children she bore to him.] The same trials have taught me that for ills so immeasurable, time and silence are the only medicines. I will not, therefore, by useless condolences, open afresh the sluices of your grief, nor altho' mingling sincerely my tears with yours, will I say a word more where words are vain, but that is of some comfort to us both that the time is not very distant at which we are to deposit in the same cerement our sorrows and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved and lost, and whom we shall still love and never lose again. God bless you and support you under your heavy affliction -- Th. Jefferson.

For fourteen years, the close friendship between Adams and Jefferson that had begun in Philadelphia at the onset of the Revolution was, by many accounts, damaged beyond repair. The political attacks suffered by each at the hands of the other imposed a silence between them. On January 1, 1812, encouraged by Dr. Benjamin Rush, a close friend of both Adams and Jefferson, Adams wrote a note to Jefferson about the Adams' family. The ice was broken and a reconciliation letter from Jefferson was received at Quincy, Massachusetts. The sage of Monticello wrote, "A letter from you calls up recollections very dear to my mind. It carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow laborers in the same cause, struggling for what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government."

These two minds exchanged correspondence on aristocracy, the Indians, Napoleon and Plato, Calvin and cosmology, revolutions and self-government. Imagine the lively conversations these two may have had, had they been able to visit one another -- but then we would have missed out on their great correspondence. It is remarkable that on July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after they signed the Declaration of Independence, both passed away. Jefferson fell in and out of a coma on July 3, constantly asking whether it was yet the 4th. Shortly after noon on the 4th he passed away. At nearly the same time Adams collapsed in his favorite reading chair. Unaware that Jefferson had already died, Adams summoned up what strength he had and uttered his last words, "Thomas Jefferson survives."

Jefferson

While we may consider ourselves done with Mr. Adams, Jefferson warrants more inspection. In our nation's history, he was the most brilliant man to have occupied the presidency -- but not necessarily the greatest president. The man studied farming, weights and measures, and the cosmos; he experimented with hybrid crops and mechanical devices, introduced parmesan cheese to the United States, and authored the Declaration of Independence. He was so conversant on so many subjects that only Ben Franklin could rival him. In 1962, John Kennedy hosted a dinner for all the Nobel Prize winners that year. Kennedy's toast to this group was, "Never has there been so much collective intelligence in this room, since Jefferson dined here alone."

While a great thinker and philosopher, Jefferson borrowed from others -- the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was derived from John Locke's treatise for example. However, Jefferson replaced "property" with "the pursuit of happiness" to include all men's endeavors. There is no doubt how thoroughly and beautifully written the Declaration of Independence is -- and to think the 33-year-old Jefferson composed the piece under threat of a horrific, traitor's death as prescribed by law.

Even so, Jefferson was able to capture the mood of the Revolutionaries by citing all the grievances that the Americans had with England. What was important was that this document mirrored those opinions of Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* -- that Americans had grievances with the King, not the traditional enemy, Parliament. Again, these views, these grievances, these rights that were declared were not new. What makes this Declaration truly important is that this philosophy, which had been banded about throughout Europe and the Americas, became institutionalized in the birth of a new nation. It is made up of two separate documents -- the Preamble that declared all men are created equal, that all have inalienable rights (a definite threat to all monarchies in Europe), and then the list of grievances that those in America had suffered. While the grievances are not in our daily minds, the promises and rights in the Preamble are dear to us and they inspired a long list of Revolutionaries in subsequent years. Jefferson's works live on and are celebrated to this day.

Jefferson was also proud of *The Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom* that he composed. In this short, far-reaching document, Jefferson acknowledged a dear principle for Americans -- that of religious freedom. This bill was readily accepted by Virginia and adopted one year after the Declaration of Independence.

What better measure of Jefferson's accomplishments could we have than the epitaph he himself drafted in the last year of his life? Given all of his immense achievements, Jefferson offered a self-assessment: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and Father of the University of Virginia." He did not mention that he was governor of Virginia, vice president of the United States, or president. To him these political achievements paled in comparison to these enduring documents and the higher center of learning he created. In Jefferson's own words, "Because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered."

Jefferson knew he would be remembered for these things -- he could foresee the legacy he left. In one instance, though, Jefferson missed the mark. Upon finalizing the Louisiana Purchase, he believed that the land would be populated by small farms and that Americans had enough land to expand for 1,000 years. In less than 87 years, this land as well as all the land of the contiguous 48 states was settled, and the frontier closed.

But as far as he missed this prediction he was able to foresee the storm that would engulf this nation in a civil war over slavery. In response to a friend regarding the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which drew an imaginary line marking the separation between free states and slave states, Jefferson wrote,

This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once the knell of the Union. It [slavery] is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say & that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach & we have a wolf by the ears and we can neither hold him or safely let him go. I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be, that I live not to weep over it.

Forty years later the nation became embroiled in the Civil War. As much as Jefferson hated the peculiar institution of slavery, he was the only slaveholder among the founding fathers who did not free his slaves upon his death. It truly is an unsettling aspect to this great lover of freedom.

Lincoln

Mention of the Civil War brings me to my last subject and our greatest man of letters among the presidents -- Abraham Lincoln. He has been called "the great American story" -- and with good reason. Both an idealist and a pragmatist in his humor, in his shrewdness, in his capacity for growth -- above all, in his unyielding faith in the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence -- Lincoln embodied our national character. Born to poverty, largely self-educated, dogged by political disappointment, and haunted by death, he vindicated the democratic conviction that extraordinary things can be accomplished by seemingly ordinary people.

He had a unique ability to blend backwoods humor with parables that packed great morals. He left us with some of the most beautiful and meaningful prose in his second inaugural address and in the greatest speech in American history, the Gettysburg Address. He could use great wit to make his point. For a man who served just over four years as president at the nation's most crucial moment, it is hard to think of Lincoln as anything but a great man and leader.

As to his humor let us look at a few examples of his wit. In the course of the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, Stephen Douglas thought he scored a point when he recalled his first meeting with Lincoln -- at a time when Lincoln was a storekeeper in New Salem, selling whiskey and cigars. "Mr. Lincoln was a very good bartender." Lincoln replied,

What Mr. Douglas has said is true enough. I did keep a grocery and I did sell cotton, candles and cigars and sometimes whiskey. I remember in those days that Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers. Many a time have I stood on one side of the counter and sold whiskey to Mr. Douglas on the other side, but the difference between us now is this: I have left my side of the counter, but Mr. Douglas still sticks to his as tenaciously as ever.

When Douglas called the homely Lincoln two-faced in another debate, Lincoln said, "I leave it to you, my audience, if I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?"

One man who was a thorn in Lincoln's side during the Civil War was General George McClellan, a man who was not as aggressive as Lincoln wished in meeting the Confederate Army on the battlefield. In one telegram Lincoln asked that McClellan keep him better informed of his actions. Exasperated, McClellan thought he would score a point by informing Lincoln that the army had captured six cows. "What would you like me to do with them?" the general asked. Lincoln's reply was quick and succinct: "Milk them."

To another telegram from McClellan Lincoln responded, "I have just read your dispatch about sore tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigue anything?"

And finally Lincoln asked, "General McClellan, if you are not using the army, I should like to borrow it for a while."

Wit is best when brief. The same could be said of great thoughts. Lincoln was asked to give his definition of democracy, to which he wrote on a small scrap of paper, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Lincoln the lawyer drafted the Emancipation Proclamation, a legal document worthy of some of the best legal minds of the time.

But this same man was able to outline a blueprint for the United States following the Civil War. In his second inaugural address, shortly before the end of the war and his own death, Lincoln left us with words that inspire and are in the same vein as those in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln concluded the address,

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle; and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

The words of Lincoln that have resounded throughout the ages come from the Gettysburg Address. He was not the featured speaker that day--that distinction fell to Massachusetts governor Edward Everett. Lincoln was an afterthought since the organizers of the event never thought the president would come. When Lincoln had accepted he was asked as a matter of courtesy to make a few appropriate remarks. Everett kept the crowd waiting an hour. Known as a great orator, Everett proceeded to speak for two hours, a speech that was well received by the gathered crowd. Next came the president. In a speech of 272 words and only three minutes in length, Lincoln was at the podium such a short time that photographers were unable to capture him on camera. Upon finishing his address, Lincoln said to a friend, "That speech won't scour. It is a flat failure." How wrong he was. Everett later wrote Lincoln, "I should be glad if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes."

While we have all memorized the Gettysburg Address in school, it still warrants us to recite a portion of Lincoln's words.

We cannot dedicate -- we cannot consecrate -- we cannot hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we have increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Inspiring words. But I'd like to end my talk here tonight with my favorite Lincoln prose. In a letter he penned to a friend in 1836 describing a decision to end a love affair and engagement to one Mary Owens, Lincoln's burlesque humor comes through. After calling Mary "a fair match for Falstaff" Lincoln goes on to write,

Now when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting into wrinkles, but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general, and from a kind of notion that ran in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than 35 or 40 years.