



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Presidential Places
Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places (I)**

Presidential Places

George Washington	Birthplace
Andrew Jackson	Home and Grave
Abraham Lincoln	Home, Museum, and Tomb
Herbert Hoover	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
Harry Truman	Birthplace, Home, and Museum/Library
Dwight D. Eisenhower	Childhood Home and Museum
Ronald Reagan	Museum and Grave
Richard Nixon	Childhood Home, Museum, and Grave
George H.W. Bush	Museum/Library
William Clinton	Childhood Home
William Clinton	Museum/Library
George W. Bush	Museum/Library

Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places: Government Graft

Pending:

George Washington	Mount Vernon
Thomas Jefferson	Monticello
James Madison	Montpelier

And others as I travel America

Presidential Places

Hundreds of books, movies, and television programs are available about the homes, libraries, museums, birth, and burial places of America's Presidents. I cannot hope to replicate these works, nor do I wish to. My hope is that the essays in the *Presidential Places* series offer different and humorous perspectives about several of America's revered historical places.

Many of the places we visit in this series are called *libraries*. They are unique places containing historical information about America in general and specifically about an American president during his time in office.

Here is one definition of such a library: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept."

Here is an alternate and more accurate definition: "A repository of historical information, where many books are kept away from the public."

Here is another definition of a presidential library, "A library, whose contents are forbidden to be examined by people who paid admission to enter the library and examine its contents in the first place. Therefore, Disneyland-like exhibits are created to placate the crowd."

A fourth definition: "Thinly disguised attempt to bolster the public image of a former President."

These definitions are acceptable to those who flock to presidential places. After all, presidential places are crowded places. The visitors must be curious about White House dinner menus, presidential pins, catchy campaign slogans, first-ladies' gowns, and other artifacts of American politics. Because these places vary in how they are named, I use the words *museum* and *library* interchangeably. It appears most of the places have buildings and rooms that serve both as museums and libraries.

In each of these places I visited, I had my fill of political drivel. But of more importance, I witnessed a deep sense of pride the site creators have about these places. And time and again, I beheld the thankfulness and patriotism of American citizens who were aware, while knowing America's faults, that the country offered a better way of life than many other nations. Even with tongue in cheek, I carried away a sense of American citizens' reverence for America and for America's Presidents' contributions to this legacy.

It is my goal in *Presidential Places* to provide you with some lesser-known and humorous aspects of Americana as well as a sense of the pride and patriotism of the sites' creators and visitors.

Unless otherwise noted, the cover page depicting the face of a U.S. President is sourced from Google.

Reflections on Visits to Presidential Places (I) Government Graft

December 12, 2006

Hello from Your On the Street Reporter. In *Traveling America (IV)*, Your Reporter hit the road out of Abilene, Kansas, and headed south into Texas, eventually ending-up in Idaho, where I am now located. I was reluctant to depart the homes of three revered American Presidents. I had the privilege of visiting the residences of men whom I had admired for many years. I might not come back to see them again. But as anon said, "We cannot continue to revisit the past, it restricts what we might do in the future."

Honest Abe, Harry, and Ike

During these days of visiting the homes and museums of former Presidents Lincoln, Truman, and Eisenhower, I was struck by how much time Lincoln spent with office seekers. Same with Harry. While Truman was a county judge in Jackson County, Missouri (county commissioner, not an actual judge), he too was besieged with visits from people wanting to be on the government payroll. Harry would sometimes leave his office or home and stay in a hotel just to gain relief from the pressures of the job and the crush of crowds. Ike kept his distance from the masses by playing golf and painting pictures.

It is informative to contrast how these honest men dealt with the corrosive influence of politics; its associated spoils and largesse. During Harry's first thrusts into electoral government, he asked his friends about being a politician. One man, a newspaper editor, tried to dissuade him, "I told him all the bad effects a life of chronic campaigning could have on a man...I told him how poor were its rewards...how undermining the constant need for popular approval could be to a man's character."¹

To add to Truman's problems, his political career in Missouri was sponsored by the Pendergast family, a political combine operating on the spoils system: non-bid government contracts with their resulting payoffs and kick backs. The "Pendergast Machine" was one of the most infamous political cartels in the country, and Harry, an honest man himself, had daily contact with Pendergast cronies. Truman considered some of the men working with him to be thieves.²

At times, Truman's honesty went in the face of his mentors. Thomas Pendergast paid a call on Truman after he learned Harry would not give away lucrative road construction contracts to Pendergast's cronies:³

"These boys tell me that you won't give them contracts," Pendergast began.

"They can get them if they are the low bidders," Harry answered, "but they won't get paid for them unless they come up to specifications."

¹ David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 161.

² *Ibid.*, 184.

³ *Ibid.*, 185.

"Didn't I tell you boys," said Pendergast. "He's the contrariest cuss in Missouri."

Harry got away with it, but he was an exception to the rule in Jackson County. Perhaps an exception to the way politics work. Truman was a competent, tenacious, and honest public official. He revolutionized Jackson County's good old boy network in those areas where he had control---at least during his terms in office. He cut the budget almost in half, yet expanded and improved the roads in the county. A remarkable record of honesty, efficiency, and competence.

Let's flash-forward almost thirty years later to see what Ike had to say about the subject. Note the sideway description of how Eisenhower framed the problem. But reading between the lines, he was concerned that the Pendergasts of Missouri might become the Pendergasts of America.

The Military-Industrial Complex

One of Ike's most famous pronouncements, one in which he used the phrase, "military-industrial complex," came as he was leaving office. He issued this warning to America:⁴

... "the conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry," which he said was "new in the American experience." ... "We recognize the imperative need for this development," he said in his farewell address, "Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources, and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted."

Spoken in the early 1960s. True? Poppycock? Brilliant foresight? Meanderings of a lame duck president? I've no credentials to address these issues. I'll leave it to real reporters and real historians. But it's an easy task to examine the current headlines. Let's flash forward again to 2006.

The Military-Industrial Complex...Plus Congress

While writing the last segments of *Traveling America (IV)*, I came across an article about the cost overruns and shoddy products of the U.S. Coast Guard's upgrade (and almost complete replacement) of its ships, boats, planes, and helicopters.⁵ Even with my skepticism about human nature, I was astounded by the corruption and incompetence of the people involved.

Satire is the only way to deal with this pathetic story. We'll do parody, but it's your tax money that has been squandered. It's one example (I'm afraid) of many, proving the classical inspirational song, "Give me some men, who are foul-hearted men, and I'll soon give you ten thousand more."

⁴ Michael Beschloss, general editor, *American Heritage: The Presidents*, ebooks, New York, 2003, 399.

⁵ Eric Lipton, "Billions Later, Plan to Remake the Coast Guard Fleet Stumbles," *New York Times*, December 9, 2006, A1, A12, A13. The TV show's facts are sourced from this article.

TV Show: "Coming to You Live, From the Ethically Comatose"⁶

[Camera moves into a close-up of the TV program host, who being Diane Sawyer, bears a striking resemblance to Diane Sawyer.⁷ Ms. Sawyer begins her report:]

Ms. Sawyer: "Good evening to all. Tonight we take a look at a government program to replace the U.S. Coast Guard's aging sea and air vehicles. Our guests are a Coast Guard Admiral, two employees of defense contractors, and three members of Congress. Let's begin by setting forth three uncontested facts:

- The Coast Guard is into the fourth year of a modernization program to replace or upgrade nearly all of its ships, boats, planes, and helicopters.
- Thus far, the cost overrun projections to accomplish this task double the original figures.
- Thus far, none of the ships or boats---those that have been built---actually work.

With this background, let's talk to Admiral Thad W. Allen. He took over as Coast Guard boss in May 2006. So, Admiral...."

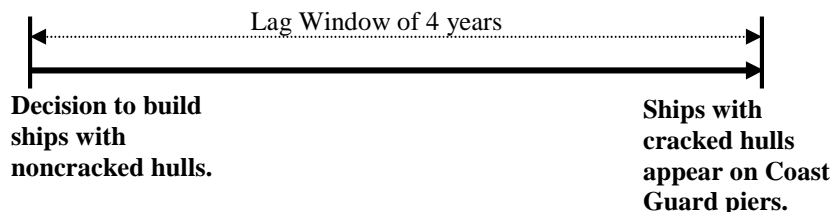
Admiral Allen, "That's right Diane. And your note about my taking over is the reason I bear no responsibility for this program. It started four years ago. I just arrived a few months ago."

Diane, "But you're in charge."

Admiral, "But I've not been in charge long enough to make a difference. You know, The Lag Effect."

Diane, "I've heard about it. Perhaps our viewers do not know about The Lag Effect. Would you be so kind?"

Admiral, "Sure. First, in any complex program such as a multi-billion dollar deal, it takes a long time to fix a problem, or for the problem to even show itself. Here, let me show you the situation with this PowerPoint slide:



⁶ All quotes, unless footnoted, are the creation of the author.

⁷ And who would not want to bear a resemblance to Ms. Sawyer?...Eh, I mean females.

As you can see, there was a time lapse, the Lag Window, between the occurrence of the decision to build ships with noncracked hulls and when ships with cracked hulls were built and then made aware to the Coast Guard. It takes a while for complex problems to surface."

Diane, "But the very essence of ship building is to build a ship with a good hull. Everything hinges on this basic premise. Doesn't America have the ability to build a ship whose hull does not crack?"

Admiral, "Well, I'm new here. Let me turn you over to the contractors for this project, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman. They will explain why the ships' hulls, designed to be noncrackable...cracked."

Diane, "I'd rather talk to the Coast Guard personnel who are responsible for this program, not the contractors."

Admiral, "Eh, well, the Coast Guard pretty much gave up this oversight to the contractors. I discovered in my attempt to overcome The Lag Effect that dozens of positions of joint management teams with our contractors were not filled by the Coast Guard. We had seven inspectors to monitor the work, less than half that was needed."

Diane, "So, the vendors were monitoring themselves!?"

Admiral, "Yep."

Diane, "Folks, the foxes were looking after the hen house. More later, after this commercial."

[Screen cuts to a feel-good shot of happy workers toiling away in their cubicles for Large Company, dedicated to: Customers, Integrity, Green, and Growth (CIGG). You've seen these ads: They explain how Large Company is dedicated to only the good things in life. The prevailing themes are integrity from Large Company to build trust with its customers. And how important it is for its customers to be in contact with Large Company. To let Large Company know how Large Company is doing.

However, Large Company does not provide a telephone call-back number for its *valued* customers to actually talk with the company. If a personal contract is available, its telephone number is embedded into the zillionth page of the Web site. They don't want your contact or your input. Too much overhead.)

Screen cuts back to Diane.]

Diane, "Eh, you said, 'made aware to the Coast Guard.' So, the Coast Guard was not involved with the details of these operations?"

Admiral, "A few underlings, but their concerns were submerged under the lobbying efforts of the contractors before key members of Congress. Eh, we did have a few whistle-blowers send in memos about the problems, but they were fired and run out of town by project managers.

"Besides, Lockheed and Northrop organized an aggressive lobbying campaign, which outmatched anything the skeptics could come up with."

Diane, "Let's bring Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman into this discussion. ... What do you have to say about this situation?"

[Camera pulls-in to focus on two chairs, in which two public relations (PR) employees of the contractors sit.]

PR # 1, "Not our fault. The plan to build 58 ships with this hull was sound. Sure a few minor problems began to crop up, but that's going to happen in an undertaking of this magnitude"

Diane, "Minor? We're talking cracked hulls! I'll quote some findings of an investigation:⁸

And the contractors failed to fulfill their obligation to make sure the government got the best price, frequently steering work to the subsidiaries or business partners, instead of competitors."

Diane, "We've been told the hull design for many of these crafts was based on a technology called glass-reinforced plastic, and this technology has never been used on a large U.S. war ship.

PR # 2, "A new technology has to start somewhere."

Diane, "True, but a former Northrop executive said:⁹

The company was pushing the plan because (it) had just spent \$63 million to turn its shipyard in Gulfport, Mississippi, into the country's first large-scale composite hull manufacturing plant for military ships.

He said, 'It was a pure business decision.' "

PR # 2, "Ha! Statements like that explain why he is a *former* employee. Anyway, someone has to pay for the new technology, regardless of where it starts. Might as well be the taxpayers. Can't see bothering the stockholders...of which I am one."

Diane, "We have three members of Congress connected to us by satellite from Washington, DC; Rep. Gene Taylor of Mississippi; Sen. Olympia J. Snowe of Maine; Rep. Frank A. LoBiondo of New Jersey. Congresspersons, you are part of a group called the Congressional Coast Guard Caucus. Can you tell us the purpose of this group? That is, other than steering projects to your voters.

"For the record, Maine is home to Bath Iron Works, a major shipbuilder. Mr. Taylor's district is home to Northrop's re-built plastic hull shipyard. Mr. LoBiondo's district is home to the Coast

⁸ Lipton, A1-A12.

⁹ Ibid., A-12.

Guard's national training center, and the Martin testing center for this project is built next to his district."

Congressperson # 1, "Sure we benefit from this project. The money's got to go somewhere. Why not to our voters? And look, of the \$210 million worth of purchasing decisions made in 2004, 30% were done with a low-bid, competitive process. That's 30% more than no competition at all!"

Congressperson, # 2, "Ms. Sawyer, get real. The contractors are in business to make a profit. Politicians are in business to siphon-off contractors' profits for our never-ending campaigns to get re-elected. Plus, contractors love our earmarks for their projects; so do the lobbyists. It's a win-win-win situation for politicians-contractors-lobbyists."

Congressperson # 3, "You bet, it's not without reason earmarks have increased three-fold in the past eight years. So have the number of lobbyists."¹⁰

Diane, "I think the losers are the taxpayers. How does the taxpayer factor into your equation?"

Congressperson # 1, "Malarkey! You show me one taxpayer in my district who is not in favor of my getting more jobs and money into their economy. Frankly, they don't care how I do it. They bitch and moan about someone else's Senator or Representative. But not their own: 'That *other* Congressman is unethical; *my* Congressman is crafty.' "

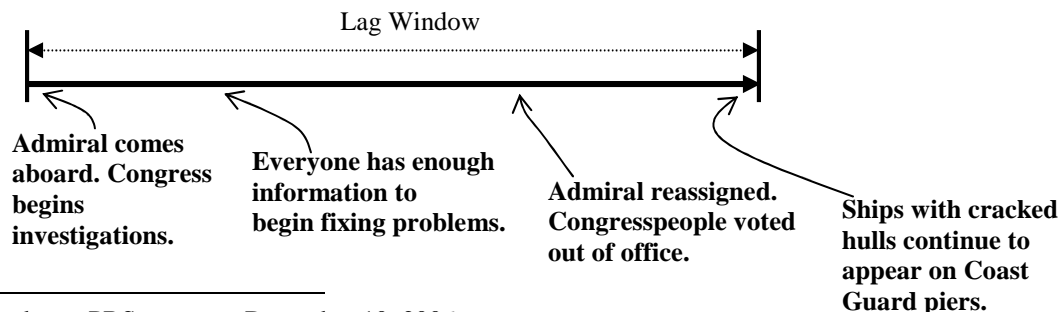
Diane, "Dual standards?"

Congressperson # 2, "Standards? Self-interest is the correct phrase. Besides, if our voters don't like these goings-on, they can vote us out of office. OK, by me; I've got standing job offers from several K Street lobbyist firms."

Admiral, "Ms. Sawyer, I've got to get back to my semi-submerged office to begin damage control. But before I do, I wish to make clear that I will not be able to fix this program."

Diane, "But that's your job! I grant that you did not create this mess, but you are being paid to straighten it out."

Admiral, "No can do. Let me show you another PowerPoint slide:"



¹⁰ Heard on a PBS newscast December 10, 2006.

"You see, by the time I've gathered enough information to know what to do, and after Congress has held its committee hearings, I will have been reassigned. It's the military practice to reassign their officers to a new post just before they become competent in their old post. Plus, this scandal will force some politicians to relocate to K Street. So, nothing will happen. Thus, freeing anyone from taking responsibility for anything. Even more, these problems can be pushed off to future generations."

Diane, "Hmm. What about real oversight? What about meeting specifications or the contractor does not get paid?"

Admiral, "Oh, the contractor could go bankrupt."

Diane, "So?"

Admiral, "Do you know how many contractors America now has who are large enough to do this line of work? Not many. Over the last thirty years, defense contractors have continued to merge and become bigger. For the security, not to mention the prosperity of this great country, America can no longer afford for a large defense contractor to go belly-up."

Diane, " '...this line of work!' You mean building ships with cracked hulls? Building radios for small, open boats---and the radios are not waterproofed? Building millions of dollars of electronic equipment that is taken out of the ships because the Coast Guard did not want it? Constructing patrol boats which, last month, had six of the eight broken down or out of service? Adding equipment onto existing hulls in which tests showed the hulls could not support the extra weight and strain? Using communications equipment that is not properly shielded for classified traffic? Installing cameras intended for a 360-degree surveillance, but have two large blind spots? Building computers for a *warship* that break down because of a power surge?"

"We've run of time. And I hope you viewers have run out of patience with these goings-on. Is this fiasco an exception? Is it symptomatic of a sickness in the system? We were warned about the potential for abuse. As the military-industrial complex grew, President Eisenhower so stated. But he failed to include the possibility of this complex being abetted, even nurtured, by our politicians.

"President Truman knew about these dangers. If he were around, if our government and politicians had the courage and stamina of a Truman to make these billions of taxpayer expenditures subject to the contractors actually meeting specifications, perhaps this country would not be building ships with cracked hulls.

"Unrealistic? Pollyannaish? Send in your views.

To close our program, we have special guests tonight. The Nth members of the Kingston Trio have adopted their "Well it's Hard!" song for this program. Take it away Kingston Trio."

[Three men appear in front of the camera, each bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the Kingston Trio. But they wear 1960s type clothing, including wing-tips. They have antiquated, non-electric musical instruments---which are not able to drown out competing audibles---thus forcing the singers to actually hold a tune--which they do:]

"The Cracked Hull Blues"

*Oh, it's hard, yes, it's hard, what a kink!
To build a ship that does not sink.*

*The Coast Guard wants its ships to really float,
to guard our coasts with big fast boats.*

*But the hull that it built, it has a crack...
slowing the ship when it needs to tack.*

*And yes, the crack is oh so tiny,
but the ship could go down when it ploughs the briny.*

Harry Truman had the answer: *Contractors get the work if they are low bidders, but they don't get paid for them unless they come up to specifications.*

History Repeats Itself

During World War II, Harry became a respected Senator because of his extraordinary success in exposing cronyism, pay-offs, and incompetence in America's fast growing defense industry. He served on a Senate committee, known as the Truman Committee, which investigated hundreds of defense contractors, factories, and shipyards. Almost without exception, the public, other politicians, the media, even Roosevelt, expressed gratitude for billions of dollars Truman and his staff saved America.

If you think the Coast Guard system is in disrepair, read on to discover what Truman uncovered:¹¹

- Curtis-Wright was exposed for building faulty airplane engines for the combat forces. The Air Corps mounted an advertising campaign in an attempt to diffuse the issue (sound familiar?). As a result of the investigation, a general was sent to prison. (Doesn't happen nowadays.)
- The Glenn Martin Company built B-26 bombers whose wings were not wide enough. Truman asked Martin why the situation was not fixed? Martin said, "...plans were too far along, and besides, (I) already had the contract."! (...exclamation point, courtesy of Your Reporter....)

¹¹ McCullough, 271-283.

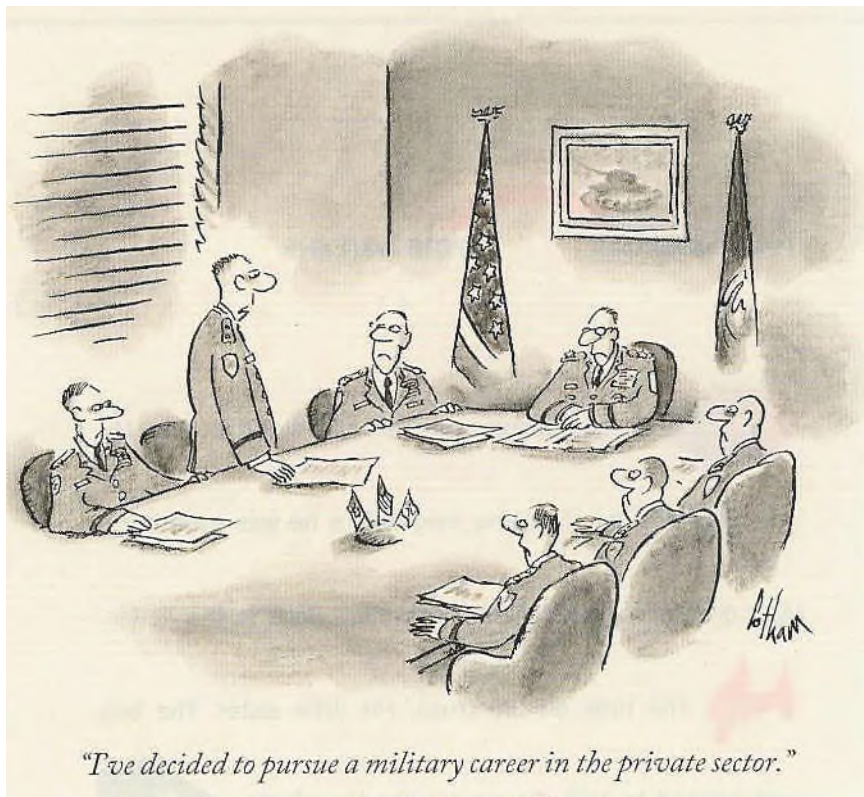
- The United States Steel Corporation and its subsidiary, Carnegie-Illinois Steel, created scores of false reports about the quality of steel plate furnished to the military. In January 1943 a newly-launched ship, the *Schenectady*, broke in half. Unlike today's Coast Guard ships, whose hulls only crack, this ship's hull split into two parts. The Truman Committee discovered at least 5 % of the steel in one mill failed to meet Navy specifications. If, during the steel making process, the composition of the steel was not known, the employees, "...would just make one up for the record book."

Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow: *Beware of the Pendergasts. They are ever on the prowl.*

Your on the Street Reporter

Update on Report

Perhaps this New Yorker cartoon says it all. If not all, certainly some of it:¹²



¹² *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2007, 34. Sorry, I could not make-out the name of the artist. It looks like "Ethan." Whomever it is: As we say in the military, well done!