

Family Values In the White House

Countless books have portrayed the lives of those chosen by the American electorate to occupy the White House, rent-free, for four-year intervals. There is hardly an aspect of the family lives of the 43 past presidents that hasn't been dissected and scrutinized, yielding battalions of tomes, texts, exposes and doctoral theses. But this being October, one month before when elections are customarily held, a further demographic glance at the presidential families might seem justified. This is a time in American history when family values have become a transcendent issue, deemed by many to be more important even than national security.

Forty-three men, not all elected to the presidency, have occupied the White House (or its residential equivalent): One resolute bachelor (Buchanan) and 42 married. (Grover Cleveland had also begun his presidency as a bachelor but married Frances Folsom in the second year of his term.)

The resolutely single president, James Buchanan, had been engaged to Ann Coleman of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 38 years prior to his elevation to the Presidency; sadly, though, she died of an overdose of laudanum (opium) and Buchanan never entertained thoughts of marriage again.

Four of the 42 married presidents were childless (Washington, Madison, Jackson and Polk). Interestingly, three had married widows (Martha Washington and Dolley Madison) or divorcees (Jackson). Rachel Doleson Jackson had been married to Lewis Robards but she misinterpreted the Virginia legislative right to divorce as an actual divorce. Her subsequent marriage to Jackson was thus transiently bigamous until she obtained a legal separation in 1793.

James Polk's childless marriage may possibly be ascribed to a childhood medical event. At age 17, suffering from severe abdominal pains, he was taken to the office of Dr. Ephraim McDowell in Danville, Kentucky. In 1812, when neither anesthesia nor aseptic surgery were known, McDowell operated on Polk, using brandy as an anodyne. Some history texts claim that Dr. McDowell removed gall stones, but recent inquiries indicate that he extracted bladder stones. When incising through the perineum, Dr. McDowell may have inadvertently interrupted the tubular pathways carrying semen, thus rendering Polk sterile. The surgery was otherwise successful and Polk went on to an eminent career as congressman, Speaker of the House and this nation's eleventh president, the first born in North Carolina.

Six of the 42 married presidents were married twice (Tyler, Fillmore, Harrison, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson and Reagan.) The second marriages of Fillmore, and Reagan were childless while Theodore Roosevelt's second marriage yielded five children, Benjamin Harrison's second marriage produced one child, and John Tyler's second marriage resulted in seven children (in addition to the seven children born to Letitia, his first wife.)

And the wives of the Presidents? The wives of Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Jackson had been previously married. The wives of Wilson, Harding and Kennedy survived their husbands' deaths and were subsequently married. Some of the

presidents, including Cleveland and Wilson were married while living in the White House. Three presidents became widowers while in office: Tyler, Benjamin Harrison and Wilson. And six former first ladies are still alive: Elizabeth Ford, Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush.

Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson, Hannah van Buren, Ellen Arthur and Alice Roosevelt died before their husbands assumed the presidency. Jane Wyman was divorced from her husband, Ronald Reagan, before his election to the presidency.

And the known children of the first 43 presidents? Ninety male and 62 female babies were born to those elected to the White House, a total of 152 offspring. The male:female ratio was 1.45, substantially greater than the general newborn 1.05 ratio in this nation. Of the first ten presidencies (Washington through Tyler), there were an average of 4.6 offspring per president. In the next ten presidencies (Polk through Garfield), there were an average of 3.9 offspring per president. In the next ten presidencies (Arthur through Hoover), there were an average of 3.0 offspring per president. In the final 12 presidencies (Franklin Roosevelt through George W. Bush) there were 3.1 offspring per president.

Can anything be concluded from these meager statistics? The fecundity of those elected to the Presidency seems to have diminished since the office was established in 1789; the number of children per American family has gradually decreased in the 22 decades since Washington's inauguration, for a variety of cultural and medical reasons including a drastically reduced infant mortality rate leading to more prudent family planning. The presidential fecundity may be little more than a reflection of a general trend. The increasing stress of the office must also be considered. And as a corollary observation, the deeper significance of which will require a more intensive scrutiny, namely: Presidents aligned with the Republican party are more fertile than Democrats.

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Disclosure of Financial Interests

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