

Margaret Chase Smith Library 2016 Essay Contest

SECOND-PLACE ESSAY

Presidential Qualities

by Nick Danby

Each year the Margaret Chase Smith Library sponsors an essay contest for high school seniors. As it was a presidential election year, the 2016 essay prompt asked students to reflect on their ideal candidate for president. We are pleased to feature here the top three 2016 prize-winning essays.

When I was four years old, my father brought home a massive poster of all of the American presidents with their pictures and information about their time in office. Just a few weeks later, I had memorized them all. The benefits of this feat were twofold: not only did it impress my friends and their parents, it also sparked my interest in public service and a career in politics. As long as I can remember, I have loved politics, but more specifically, I have loved improving my understanding of our nation's presidents.

My favorite president has changed over the years. I have gone from preferring Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson. I have always applied, however, the same set of standards, characteristics, and qualities when judging a great president. As the number of candidates vying for nomination in the fifty-eighth presidential election dwindles, many Americans are searching for a candidate who reminds them of Washington, Lincoln, or Roosevelt. Unfortunately, they are consistently turning up duds. The problem is simple: they are searching for exact replicas, not candidates who mirror the qualities of our illustrious leaders. When *The New York Times* asked Senator Margaret Chase Smith what she looked for in a president, she said the obvious qualities were “integrity, intelligence and fairness.” More than 55 years later, the qualities that Senator Smith looked for in a president hold true. As an aspiring politician and young voter, however, I have my own standards for a president.

The president that I would support is someone who welcomes counsel and encourages advice and sticks to his principles to avoid political pandering. I have employed John Adams and Abraham Lincoln—two of my favorite presidents—to highlight these qualities.

The decision-making process in the White House may seem extremely singular, as if the president is the one who makes all of the decisions. However, when referencing the *Plum Book*, the register of the more than 7,000 federal civil service leadership and support positions in both the legislative and executive branches, most people realize that the commander-in-chief is far from alone in making decisions that affect the entire nation. Anyone from the chief of staff to the deputy political liaison adviser for the House of Representatives plays a large part in an effective executive branch. John Adams was a great example of a president who sought a trusted adviser and confidant; he constantly sought the opinion of his wife Abigail. Abigail was his mentor, his confidant, his love, the person he could rely on the most, and he shared all of his successes and failures with her. According to the Adams Family Papers archive (www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/), John and Abigail exchanged more than 1,100 letters from the beginning of their courtship in 1762 to end Adams's presidency in 1801. The letters were filled with intellectual discussions ranging from government to politics to philosophy while providing an account of the Revolutionary War. Margaret Hogan, managing editor of the Adams Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, explained the power of Abigail's counsel when she wrote,

Abigail had never received a formal education, but her access to some of the finest libraries in Massachusetts and her voracious love of reading gave her a wide-ranging knowledge that allowed her easily to serve as John's equal in any intellectual debate. Her place as John's primary political advisor was merely a logical extension of her role as wife and manager of their household in a partnership of equals.¹

Adams sought counsel and advice from others too—he saw his shortcomings and employed other people to work for him. When the Continental Congress turned to him to write the Declaration of Independence, he quietly deferred and gave the assignment to Jefferson, arguably a much better choice.

Abraham Lincoln also acknowledged that he was not always the right person for a specific task. Lincoln surrounded himself with knowledgeable and intelligent people. Lincoln listened to a range of opinions and made decisions based on his own beliefs and preferences in conjunction with what he heard. Lincoln also fully trusted his selected team to carry out the military assignments he gave them. Lincoln's appointment of Ulysses S. Grant as the leader of the Union troops is a good example of this behavior. Lincoln knew that he could not carry out a successful war strategy while leading a divided nation, so he appointed Grant as head of the army because he trusted Grant.

Even on matters not pertaining to the survival of the Union, Lincoln took advice. One of the best-known stories about Lincoln involved an 11-year-old girl named Grace Bedell who “sent him a letter from Westfield, New York, urging him to grow a beard to improve his appearance.” Lincoln responded that he would think about it, but thought it may look “silly.” Lincoln, on

his inaugural train ride to Washington, DC, stopped in Westfield and met with the girl and her father and showed off his newly grown beard.²

Presidents also need unwavering integrity and the ability to stick to their principles regardless of the political climate. Neither Adams nor Lincoln were very popular during their presidencies. Lincoln was faced with the Civil War, and Adams never saved himself from Jefferson's bashing of the Alien and Sedition Acts. After years of historical reflection, however, the two have earned wide praise. Adams was well known for his stubbornness, which his opponents gleefully touted during elections. Stubbornness, however, can also be a devotion to a core set of principles, which seems to be the case for Adams. Adams always seemed to know right from wrong. Even when his cousin Samuel Adams and countless Bostonians were furious at the British troops for firing on an open crowd during the Boston Massacre, Adams knew the right thing to do was to save British men who he believed were innocent. Adams prepared “a complicated defense, and six of the soldiers [were] found not guilty; two others [were] found guilty of manslaughter but escape[d] the death penalty.”³ It is astonishing that Adams, knowing his reputation was on the line, did not back down when the right thing was in question.

Lincoln shows a similar devotion to principles. Lincoln is so well known for his integrity that he garnered the nickname “Honest Abe.” Lincoln's own wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, once commented, “Mr. Lincoln...is almost monomaniac on the subject of honesty.” Such integrity started at a young age when, if he had shortchanged a customer, Lincoln would shut down the store he worked at and walk as many miles as it took to deliver the correct amount of money. In *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*,

Michael Burlingame (1997) contends that all people (friend or foe) knew where they stood with Lincoln and that Lincoln's ability to convey sincerity allowed him to devote his integrity to fighting for noble causes—like preserving the Union. This honesty served him well as commander-in-chief when the Union needed a thoughtful, but moralistic, commander to unite the country. Lincoln was an honest man, but his honesty did not just score him political points, it led to his unwavering resolve and keen judgment.

Although people may disagree on the qualities we most prize in a president, I think we can all agree that someone who recognizes personal strengths and shortcomings makes for the best type of leader. 🐟

ENDNOTES

- 1 http://harvardpress.typepad.com/off_the_page/2008/02/the-romance-of.html
- 2 <http://theweek.com/articles/470072/girl-who-grew-lincolns-beard>
- 3 <http://thelearningprofessor.wikispaces.com/Boston+Massacre>

REFERENCES

Burlingame, Michael. 1997. *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*. University of Illinois Press, Champaign.



Nick Danby
graduated from Bangor High School and is attending Harvard University, majoring in government and history. During

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