

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

Inspiration is what this book is about. Just as success has many fathers, inspiration can come in many forms—a premise personified by that most neglected cohort in American history, the forty-four fathers of the men who became our presidents.

Of all of them, only Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. viewed the presidency as an obsessive aim for one of his sons. Most first fathers motivated their offspring more toward high aspirations than high office. The very examples of their own lives, as with John Tyler Sr., Richard Cleveland, John Coolidge, or Gerald Ford Sr., could serve as inspiration. More frequently, however, ambition was framed by earnest admonitions that only excellence was acceptable. Consider, for example, the letters of Alphonso Taft, the Rev. Doctor Joseph Ruggles Wilson, or the younger John Adams to their favored sons. Many were first sons, the traditional repository of parental expectations.

A call to selfless service came from the elder Theodore Roosevelt to young “Teedie.” In the next century, it would be echoed by Prescott Bush to his own children, and later by George Herbert Walker Bush to his. In some instances a specific career goal was at least implied. Pious John Adams Sr., the “Deacon,” hoped that perhaps his namesake might become a learned Congregational minister. Pragmatic James Buchanan Sr. viewed the law as a sound foundation for success in any endeavor. Zachary Taylor longed to be a soldier like his father. Self-made successes, from Jesse Grant to James Earl Carter Sr., naturally harbored hopes that their most talented sons might expand their enterprises. But by and large specificity was sublimated to the universal goal, “Make something of yourself.”

Of course, the ultimate career choice of every future president would turn out to be public life. However indirect the influence, they had no lack of paternal examples to inspire them. In addition to two presidents, the ranks of first fathers have included several governors, a United States senator, and many legislators, judges, and diplomats. If young Martin Van Buren, our first president to portray himself as a professional politician, wanted to hear heated partisan discourse, he needed only to walk downstairs to his father’s tavern. Spirited political debate around frontier campfires formed vivid childhood memories for most of our nineteenth-century presidents. It was John Truman and Sam Johnson who introduced their

receptive sons to the excitement of all-day picnics, rallies, and torchlight parades—politics as entertainment. Franklin Roosevelt gained his confidence to pursue life in the arena from his father's confidence in him. Ronald Reagan's "gift of gab" was an inheritance from his salesman father. Dwight Eisenhower's freedom to choose his own path stemmed from his father's thwarted ambitions for his own life. Jimmy Carter's political career derived from the belated recognition of his father's unsuspected beneficence. Indeed, inspiration comes in many forms.

Not every first father was granted the years to fully guide his favored son to manhood. Gentle giant Augustine Washington died when George was only eleven. Self-educated Peter Jefferson, the prototype for his son's "aristocracy of achievement," died when Thomas was fourteen. Ambitious Jesse Hoover died when Herbert was only six. The fathers of both Roosevelts died while their sons were at Harvard. At least four fathers of our presidents expired as the result of sheer physical exertion: Andrew Jackson Sr., a weaver turned farmer, in clearing land to which he did not even hold title; the robust Abram Garfield, after fighting a fire that imperiled his homestead; man-of-all-work Jacob Johnson, after heroically saving prominent Raleigh citizens from drowning; diminutive John Anderson Truman, an impatient road overseer, after moving an immense rock himself. Jackson and the estimable Ruddy Hayes died even before their namesakes were born, as did Bill Blythe, the father of the boy who would later be named William Jefferson Clinton. On the other hand, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. outlived four of his nine children.

The rarely recounted stories of such disparate first fathers are often as compelling as those of their famous sons. Their lives encompass the full range of the American experience—from inherited affluence to abject destitution, from heartening success to heartrending failure. Why do we know so little about most of these men? Why have their lives been so overlooked by generations of historians?

Perhaps some of the blame resides with the presidents themselves, in the paucity of their recorded recollections. Overall, they have volunteered a bit more about their fathers than about their mothers, enabling biographers to at least cobble together some semblance of their lives. I am indebted to all these writers, particularly to Jeff C. Young, author of the only prior effort to assemble at least the specifics about each first father within a single set of covers. Indeed, in all of American history, in contrast to the abundance of accounts about first ladies, there have only been five books devoted to presidential parents. The most recent, my

own *Faith of Our Mothers* (2001), stresses two dimensions of that faith—in the limitless potential of their sons, and the deep religious faith of so many of the mothers.

If these mothers had faith, the fathers had hope—for their sons, and for themselves. Beyond the variations of inspiration, perhaps the most pervasively unifying theme of first fathers has been their relentless pursuit of happiness. Of course, this is a quintessentially American theme, espoused originally by Thomas Jefferson. The majority of presidential fathers, rural or urban, rich or poor, successful or not, were really entrepreneurs. Restless, ambitious, and energetic, through choice or necessity, they sought to “make it” on their own. That so many were thwarted rarely diminished their dreams. What was success to Thomas Lincoln? A more bountiful farm, always just over the horizon. To George Harding, a prosperous medical practice; to Rev. Richard Cleveland, finally settling in a supportive parish; to William McKinley Sr., a more productive iron foundry; to John Truman, a successful investment in *something*; to David Eisenhower, the opportunity to finally become an engineer; to Francis Nixon, a lemon grove in the right soil; to Jack Reagan, simply the largest shoe store, outside of Chicago, in Illinois. Why did it never work out?

Whatever the failures or failings of their fathers, the men who became our presidents were rarely critical of them. Whenever voiced, their reflections tended to recall admired examples of rectitude. To the younger John Adams, for example, his father was “the honestest man I ever knew.” Spoken or not, affection was evident. “Silent Cal” Coolidge kissed his equally taciturn father whenever they met.

Nothing in this book is really new, except, one hopes, at least a modicum of insight. I’ve uncovered no previously undiscovered cache of letters, no incriminating revelations of presidential indiscretion. Any titillation is accidental. Then why should you read *First Fathers*? Well, Harry Truman once said that the only new thing in the world is the history we don’t know. It is fine and fitting that our recent popular history is replete with accounts of first ladies and that there are now at least two good books in print about first mothers. But where did the *original* inspiration come from to fire the ambition of the young men who ultimately became our presidents? If you share my curiosity, you are a welcome companion on this voyage of rediscovery—to explore together the most neglected component of our nation’s heritage, history we should know.

And so this book is about forty-four very different men, most of whom have in common only that aim of personal ambition—and the

desire to inspire their offspring. Fortunately, despite the limitations of the literature, we can learn at least something about each of them—a bit more about Ford's two fathers, a bit less about Clinton's. Accordingly, each chapter is really a separate essay, widely varying in length. As you can see, it is all written in a popular (one is tempted to say "pop") style. Fortunately, the lives of so many of these men are intriguing in themselves, even had their sons never ascended to the presidency. Would that we knew more, but thankfully enough records and recollections survive to try to bring these first fathers back to life (only one is still with us), and I hope to justify our journey. Please start wherever you like. See you "In Conclusion."