



Stanley Weintraub, Rodelle Weintraub. *Dear Young Friend: The Letters of American Presidents to Children*. Mechanicsburg, Penn.: Stackpole Books, 2000. xiii + 193 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8117-0489-2.

Reviewed by Erik Loomis (Department of History, University of New Mexico)

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## Presidents and their Youngest Constituency

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Stanley and Rodelle Weintraub's *Dear Young Friend: The Letters from American Presidents to Children* provides an interesting look at the people who have held the office of the presidency of the United States and their relationship with their youngest constituency. This book is clearly a labor of love for the Weintraubs, who, according to the book jacket, communicate primarily with their eight grandchildren through e-mail. The Weintraubs argue, "In letters to children, presidents often confided political thoughts and personal feelings that they seldom if ever confessed to their peers" (p. vii). Selecting several letters from most presidents from George Washington to Richard Nixon, the authors attempt, usually with success, to show just that.

The book succeeds in demonstrating that presidents revealed much about their personalities in their letters to children. Andrew Jackson's love for and indulgence toward his many wards comes through strongly, particularly in his repeated disappointment with his foster son Andrew Jackson Hutchings, who suffered four expulsions from college. Harry Truman revealed a great deal about his politics in letters to children, writing to one young man that "The John Birchers are just Ku Klux without the nightshirts and, of course, they don't know what the facts are" (p. 152). Truman also used letters to children to defend the harsh sentences given out to Nazis at Nuremberg, identify what he saw as the major differences between the Democrats and Republicans, and show true appreciation of a high school student who defended his firing of Douglas MacArthur to her classmates. The editors also include many humorous entries such as John F. Kennedy's reply to a boy who wrote to him asking about "the little people" and wanting to know if only the Irish could see them. Kennedy responded, writing that "My little people are very small, wear tall black stovepipe hats, green coats and pants, and have long white beards. They are most friendly, and their message is that all the

peoples of the world should live in peace and friendship" (p. 167). Perhaps most amusing is a 1940 letter from twelve-year-old Fidel Castro to Franklin Roosevelt asking for a ten-dollar bill. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that Roosevelt replied to the request.

While many of the entries reveal much about the personalities and beliefs of American presidents, occasionally some of the authors' selections do not elucidate the personality of the given president as one might wish. In particular, different selections from Theodore Roosevelt may have proven more enlightening. Like many Progressives, Roosevelt took an active interest in children and wrote a great deal concerning their well-being. Roosevelt urged boys to follow his example in the strenuous life, especially his own sons. He was a great supporter of the Boy Scouts and of taking boys hunting and fishing. However, the letters of Roosevelt chosen for this collection do not really let us into this side of Roosevelt's interactions with his children. For example, a letter from Roosevelt to his daughter Ethel concerns mundane family matters and how Roosevelt intervened in a fight between two dogs and a cat. While this letter tells us something about Roosevelt's personality and relationship with his daughter, it does not help us to understand Roosevelt as well as some of his other writings might have. A few other odd selections appear in the collection. For example, Chester Alan Arthur's letter to his son telling him who has his grandfather's watch does not seem particularly important, nor does Abraham Lincoln's uninspired 1858 entry into a young woman's autograph album. One other minor quibble: why are there no letters from some presidents, particularly James Madison? Are there no letters to children from these presidents? Unfortunately, the authors do not explain these omissions.

Despite these few problems, many entries prove quite revealing. Of particular interest are the letters from John Tyler. Tyler, not popularly known today for his intellectual achievements, shows himself as remarkably in-

telligent and well educated. He strove to teach the history and values of republican government to his children, writing them letters concerning the Magna Carta, Hume, and Cicero, among other subjects. The modesty of Rutherford Hayes comes through in a letter to his son, asking him not to boast if Hayes won the 1876 election. The no-nonsense practicality of Calvin Coolidge is quite clear in letters to his son advising him on matters including education, what makes a good man, and budgetary matters. It is when the Weintraubs include good selections from our lesser-known presidents that they achieve their greatest success. The Weintraubs demonstrate a great deal about the characters and personalities of these presidents. Readers will achieve a better understanding of these presidents than they had before reading this book.

The Weintraubs end their book with letters from Richard Nixon, as they identify the period after Nixon as a post-print age. They discuss the increasing importance

of the telephone and computerized communication at the expense of the written letter. This is the most important scholarly issue that the book raises, as historians of the recent past may have more difficulty locating written primary sources of a personal nature than historians of the more distant past.

Overall, the success of *Dear Young Friend* depends a great deal upon the expectations of the reader. The Weintraubs clearly wrote the book for their own enjoyment and it is unlikely that they intended it for an exclusively scholarly audience. This may not be the place to look for analysis of individual presidents or many previously unpublished presidential letters. However, those who enjoy a pleasant and intriguing read or have an interest in the history of the presidency or the history of children will likely find this book highly enjoyable and rewarding.

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