

For Obama and past presidents, the books they read shape policies and perceptions

AS the battle over health-care reform crescendoed last month, President Obama let slip that he was still making time for some side reading. "We've been talking about health care for nearly a century," the president told a crowd at Arcadia University in Pennsylvania. "I'm reading a biography of Teddy Roosevelt right now. He was talking about it."

One of the reasons the country's intellectual class has taken so gleefully to Obama is precisely that, in addition to writing bestsellers, the man is clearly a dedicated reader. During his presidential campaign, he was photographed toting around Fareed Zakaria's *"The Post-American World"*, the it-book of the foreign policy establishment at the time. A year ago, in an interview about economic policy, he told a reporter that he was reading Joseph O'Neill's post-Sept. 11 novel *"Netherland"*, which had recently won the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award.

In a historical sense, Obama follows a long line of ardent presidential readers, paging all the way back to the founders. John Adams's library had more than 3,000 volumes - including Cicero, Plutarch and Thucydides - heavily inscribed with the president's marginalia. Thomas Jefferson's massive book collection launched him into debt and later became the backbone for the Library of Congress. "I cannot live without books", he confessed to Adams. And it's likely that no president will ever match the Rough Rider himself, who charged through multiple books in a single day and wrote more than a dozen well-regarded works, on topics ranging from the War of 1812 to the American West.

Obama's mention of the Roosevelt biography - it turned out to be Edmund Morris's *"The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt"* - may have been a calculated move to convey Teddy-esque toughness and a reform-minded spirit, but it also made clear an interesting notion: Reading lists don't only give presidents a break from the tedium of briefing documents; they can also inform their policies and policies, reaffirming, creating or shifting their views. White House watchers obsess over which aides have the ear of the president, but the books presidents read also offer insight on where they want to take the country - and how history will remember them.

Consider Harry Truman. He was the last

American president not to have completed college, but he was a voracious reader and particularly interested in history and biography, once musing that "the only thing new in this world is the history that you don't know."

Truman's support for establishing the country of Israel - over the objections of his own State Department - has been credited to his boyhood reading, both of the Bible (which he read at least a dozen times) and of the multi-volume history *"Great Men and Famous Women"*, edited by Charles F. Home. The collection featured Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who let the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. Shortly after leaving the White House, Truman was introduced to a group of Jewish leaders as having "helped create" the state of Israel. "What do you mean 'helped create'?" Truman bristled. "I am Cyrus."

Books played an especially significant role in the John F. Kennedy White House. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning *"Profiles in Courage"* - possibly ghostwritten by speechwriter Ted Sorensen - had helped cement his reputation as a big thinker, and the White House's resident intellectual, Arthur Schlesinger, not only recommended books to Kennedy but also penned *"A Thousand Days"*, which posthumously glorified the Camelot era.

But it was a book review, rather than a book itself, that helped launch one of the major policy initiatives of the 1960s. Walter Heller, chairman of Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers, gave his boss Dwight MacDonal's influential 13,000-word New Yorker essay on Michael Harrington's *"The Other America"*, which chronicled poverty in the nation. Inspired by the piece (and feeling vulnerable on the left after pushing for an across-the-board tax cut), Kennedy asked his staff to look into the problem. They came up with a plan for an "attack on poverty", which Heller discussed with the president a few days before Kennedy's fateful trip to Dallas in November 1963.

His successor, Lyndon Johnson - who was influenced by British economist Barbara Ward's *"The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations"*, which he said he read multiple times - turned the attack into a War on Poverty. Future editions of Harrington's book had "the book that sparked the War on Poverty" on the cover, but the *New Yorker* deserves at least

some of the credit.

Richard Nixon - who in his memoirs noted that he read Tolstoy extensively in his youth, even calling himself a "Tolstoyan" - often sought out books with links to the big issues of the day. After a summit with the Soviets, for instance, he bought a copy of Winston Churchill's *"Triumph and Tragedy"* so he could reread Churchill's recollections of the Yalta conference. And leading into his second term, Nixon was reading Robert Blake's biography of British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli and was struck by Disraeli's description of William Gladstone's cabinet as "exhausted volcanoes". The phrase inspired him to call for the resignation of his own White House staff and Cabinet, a move he later described as a mistake.

In his farewell speech to his staff on Aug. 9, 1974, Nixon offered a self-deprecating line: "I am not educated, but I do read books."

Presidential reading backfired on Jimmy Carter as well. In the summer of 1979, with the economy struggling and the presidency shaken

It is unclear whether Carter read Lasch's book, but he was a prolific reader. In February 1977, he took a speed-reading class with his 9-year-old daughter, Amy. This skill helped him read a reported two books a week as president and three to four books weekly in his post-presidency. He has also written 24 books, a record for former presidents.

Despite having been dubbed an "amiable dunce" by longtime White House adviser Clark Gifford, Ronald Reagan loved books, including (there we go again) Morris's works on Theodore Roosevelt. So much so, in fact, that Reagan selected Morris as his official biographer, resulting in Reagan's odd, semi-fictional portrayal in *"Dutch"*, published in 1999. Reagan was the first president to consciously highlight the works of conservative intellectuals, citing Milton Friedman's *"Free To Choose"* and George Gilder's *"Wealth and Poverty"* to advance his economic policy agenda. *The New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar has written that Gilder's book was one of Reagan's favourites and that Gilder

Clinton also devoured mysteries, calling them a "little cheap-thrills outlet."

Clinton's reading affected his approach in the early 1990s to the crisis in the Balkans, a fierce and bloody struggle for control of Bosnian territory that had once been part of Yugoslavia. At the time, the president read Robert Kaplan's *"Balkan Ghosts"* and was struck by Kaplan's description of the region's long-standing ethnic hatreds. The book apparently set him against intervening in Bosnia. A panicky defense secretary, Les Aspin, told national security adviser Anthony Lake that Clinton was "not on board" with their proposals. Years later, journalist Laura Rozen wrote that "some can't hear the name Robert Kaplan without blaming him for the delay in US intervention."

George W. Bush, though perhaps only the second-most-avid reader in his home behind librarian Laura Bush, was a dedicated reader who liked to count the titles he conquered. During his second term, an offhand comment by adviser Karl Rove led to annual competitions to see which of the two would tally the most books. And even though the books Bush and Rove consumed were usually quite meaty - mainly histories (*"A History of the English Speaking Peoples Since 1900"*), cultural works (*"Nine Parts of Desire"*) and biographies (the titanic *"Mao"*) - when the competition became public, derision followed.

"The caricature of Bush as unread died today - or was it yesterday? But the reality of the intellectually insulated man endures," wrote *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. And the revelation that Bush had read Albert Camus's *"The Stranger"* elicited howls from the news media. "George Bush reading a French Existentialist is like Obama reading a Cabela's catalog," sniffed Slate's John Dickerson. Bush was well aware of this contempt, once telling a White House colleague of mine that he was enjoying Juan Williams's book *"Enough"*, on the plight of black America, but preferred to keep it quiet so as to not spoil the book's potential impact on policy debates.

Sneers aside, Bush's reading certainly informed his worldview and policies. *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani observed that Bush "favored prescriptive books" such as Natan Sharansky's *"The Case for Democracy"* and Eliot A. Cohen's

*In a historical sense, Obama follows a long line of ardent presidential readers, paging all the way back to the founders. John Adams's library had more than 3,000 volumes. Thomas Jefferson's massive book collection launched him into debt and later became the backbone for the Library of Congress*

by the Iran hostage crisis, Carter delivered his infamous speech proclaiming a "crisis of confidence" in America. It became known as the "malaise" speech and is widely regarded as a major political mistake. The address, written mainly by adviser Pat Caddell, was inspired by Christopher Lasch's best-selling book *"The Culture of Narcissism"*. Lasch had come to the White House for a dinner about six weeks before the address, and his ideas apparently stayed behind. Two days after the July 15 speech, Carter fired several Cabinet members, adding to the sense of drift that seemed to define the era. (In 1993, during the fourth season of *"The Simpsons"*, Springfield unveiled a Carter statue; the inscription at the base read "Malaise Forever.")

was "the living author Reagan most often quoted."

Bill Clinton read widely and often - his favourite authors included Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison and Taylor Branch - and was well aware that presidential reading merited attention in the media and in intellectual circles. As a result, he took steps to flatter intellectuals by touting their books. Clinton once placed Yale law professor Stephen Carter's *"The Culture of Disbelief"* on his Oval Office desk so that reporters would see what he was reading, and they dutifully reported it. Carter was one of a select few who recommended books to Clinton, as did Labor Secretary Robert Reich, Vice President Al Gore and Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott.

*Libraries & Librarian Ship - US Presidential Lib*

Clinton also devoured mysteries, calling them a "little cheap-thrills outlet."

Clinton's reading affected his approach in the early 1990s to the crisis in the Balkans, a fierce and bloody struggle for control of Bosnian territory that had once been part of Yugoslavia. At the time, the president read Robert Kaplan's *"Balkan Ghosts"* and was struck by Kaplan's description of the region's long-standing ethnic hatreds. The book apparently set him against intervening in Bosnia. A panicky defense secretary, Les Aspin, told national security adviser Anthony Lake that Clinton was "not on board" with their proposals. Years later, journalist Laura Rozen wrote that "some can't hear the name Robert Kaplan without blaming him for the delay in US intervention."

George W Bush, though perhaps only the second-most-avid reader in his home behind librarian Laura Bush, was a dedicated reader who liked to count the titles he conquered. During his second term, an offhand comment by adviser Karl Rove led to annual competitions to see which of the two would tally the most books. And even though the books Bush and Rove consumed were usually quite meaty - mainly histories (*"A History of the English Speaking Peoples Since 1900"*), cultural works (*"Nine Parts of Desire"*) and biographies (the titanic *"Mao"*) - when the competition became public, derision followed.

"The caricature of Bush as unread died today - or was it yesterday? But the reality of the intellectually insulated man endures," wrote *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. And the revelation that Bush had read Albert Camus's *"The Stranger"* elicited howls from the news media. "George Bush reading a French Existentialist is like Obama reading a Cabela's catalog," sniffed Slate's John Dickerson. Bush was well aware of this contempt, once telling a White House colleague of mine that he was enjoying Juan Williams's book *"Enough,"* on the plight of black America, but preferred to keep it quiet so as to not spoil the book's potential impact on policy debates.

Sneers aside, Bush's reading certainly informed his worldview and policies. *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani observed that Bush "favored prescriptive books" such as Natan Sharansky's *"The Case for Democracy"* and Eliot A Cohen's

*Supreme Command*, which argued that politicians should drive military strategy. Bush often met with the authors of books that resonated with him. Shortly after his reelection, he had Sharansky in for an hour-long Oval Office meeting to discuss democracy and ways to advance it around the world. Inspired in part by the author, the president went on to outline a global freedom agenda in his second inaugural address. "Not only did he read it, he felt it," Sharansky told *The Post*.

And then came Obama. As a writer, his autobiography helped launch him from relative obscurity to national prominence. As a reader, he made Doris Kearns Goodwin's *"Team of Rivals,"* about Lincoln's Cabinet, into a media-friendly metaphor for his transition to the White House, especially when he selected Hillary Rodham Clinton as secretary of state.

Early on, Obama also cultivated the analogy to Franklin Roosevelt's first 100 days - a period regarded as the quintessential government mobilisation in the face of an economic crisis. In his first post-election interview, on "60 Minutes", Obama noted that he had read "a new book out about FDR's first 100 days." (A spokesman later clarified that the president-elect was referring to two books: Jonathan Alter's *"The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope,"* and "FDR" by Jean Edward Smith.) The move worked: Media comparisons to Roosevelt's first 100 days proliferated.

Obama, like Kennedy and Clinton before him, seems keenly aware of the power of books to shape public perceptions. The world may not be reading, but it is watching - if a book can send a signal you want to convey, totting it as you walk to Marine One or casually mentioning it in an interview can be more effective than delivering yet another policy speech.

Other heads of state have also recognised the power of a book in the American president's hands. At a summit of Western Hemisphere nations a year ago, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela ambushed Obama with a copy of *"The Open Veins of Latin America"* by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, a left-wing tract decrying centuries of European and American exploitation and political domination of the region. Obama still held out hope that his own writing could turn the guy around. "I thought it was one of Chávez's books," the president later quipped. "I was going to give him one of mine." And if another presidential book exchange can't be arranged, *"Los sueños de mi padre"* is available on Amazon for \$11.56. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST