



Wise & Witty Quotations from America's Presidents: George Washington to Barack Obama

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George W. Bush once said: “You can fool some of the people all the time, and those are the ones you want to concentrate on.” We think he was kidding, but who knows? There is much to be learned from Presidents of the United States—on the Presidency, the constitution, the Bill of Rights, guns, liberty, privacy, freedom, mothers, equal rights, and a myriad of subjects as current and important as in the times they served. Some presidents were eminently quotable—Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Jackson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Bill Clinton and others were less so, like Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, Zachary Taylor and George H.W. Bush. And some had a savage wit, as when Teddy Roosevelt offered: “When they call the roll in the Senate, the Senators do not know whether to answer 'Present' or 'Not guilty.’” When a young reporter, anxious to impress her editor, managed, at a dinner party, to get close to President Calvin “Silent Cal” Coolidge—famous for being a man of few words, she said to Coolidge she had bet her editor she could get at least three words of conversation from him. Coolidge replied, “You lose.” In fact, “Silent Cal” was not always so silent and some of his remarks are brilliant, memorable and are as true today as they were when he was Chief Executive. As George Washington, the first American President noted: “We should not look back unless it is to derive useful lessons from past errors, and for the purpose of profiting by dearly bought experience.” Thomas Jefferson, author of The Declaration of Independence and third President of the United States astutely observed: “The essence of Government is power; and power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse.” And on the same topic: “The means of defense against foreign danger historically have become the instruments of tyranny at home.” Andrew Jackson could be counted upon on the battlefield and for a clever bon mot: “There is no pleasure in having nothing to do; he observed, “the fun is having lots to do and not doing it.” On the other hand, he had an incisive view of the real world: “It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their own selfish purposes.” And ruefully confessed, “I have always been afraid of banks.” And perhaps the most prescient of his remarks, Jackson said, “I weep for the liberty of my country when I see at this early day of its successful experiment that corruption has been imputed to many members of the House of Representatives, and the rights of the people have been bartered for promises of office.” Jackson also noted: “Unless you become more watchful in your states and check the spirit of monopoly and thirst for exclusive privileges you will in the end find that... the control over your dearest interests has passed into the hands of these corporations.” And in case you thought the unpopularity of the United States congress is something new, James K. Polk offered this observation: “There is more selfishness and less principle among members of Congress than I had any conception of, before I became President of the U.S.” Abraham Lincoln, considered the greatest of U.S. Presidents, was wise and he, too, was prescient, noting: “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” But Abe had a wicked sense of humor, often self-deprecating: “If I were two-faced,” he once posited, “would I be wearing this one?” He offered this clever counsel: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” Humor, especially self-deprecating humor, served modern Presidents as well: John F. Kennedy answered critics who said he was buying the election: “I just received the following wire from my generous Daddy: 'Dear Jack, Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide.' Enjoy!

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