



PRESIDENTIAL LIGHTS THAT HAVE FLARED and FAILED THE FIRST OF TWO NOTABLE ARTICLES By CHAMP CLARK SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



IN POLITICS — especially Presidential politics — as in religion, many are called but few are chosen. Nevertheless, the theory that every male American is a President *in posse* has been an inspiration to many a struggling, ambitious boy whose ultimate

achievement fell far short of the White House. Surely, however, human ambition lies at the root of all success, and there can be no higher ambition than a desire to be President of the United States.

While the theory is that every boy in America may be President, it can safely be asserted that only one of the twenty-six Presidents deliberately set out to bag the great office; and that one was Colonel Theodore Roosevelt. When he writes his autobiography, he owes it to an eager and expectant world to tell precisely when the Presidential idea first entered his head and how he consummated the early desire.

Lincoln and Douglas

There is no doubt that Abraham Lincoln began to cherish Presidential ambitions at a very early age — as far back, it is safe to assume, as his first service in the Illinois Legislature. There, he met another young man of tremendous talents, a young man of exceeding ambition — Stephen A. Douglas — who was destined to be his great antagonist, and who also had his longing eyes turned toward the White House. How one of these men, after years of defeat, reached the glittering goal, and how the other missed it, after an unexampled series of victories, remains one of the most thrilling chapters in the annals of the Republic. Their long rivalry is one of the most remarkable in American history, ranking with those of Hamilton and Jefferson, Jackson and Clay, Blaine and Roscoe Conkling.

Everybody about Springfield, Illinois, appears to have known from the beginning of the Presidential aspirations of Douglas and Lincoln; for we are assured that both of them courted Miss Todd, afterward Mrs. Lincoln, and that she gave as one reason why she preferred Lincoln as a husband, her belief that he had a better chance to be President. This may be apocryphal, but it certainly shows that they were being thought of, even in their callow days, for the highest of all political offices. It is undoubtedly true that both were running for President in 1858, as seriously as they were running for United States Senator. Lincoln must have known, when he propounded his crucial question to Douglas at Freeport, that Douglas, confident of his ability to win back the Pro-Slavery faction later on, would answer it with a view to capturing the Senatorship by pleasing the Free Soil Democrats. After that historic debate at Freeport, when friends of Lincoln — Joseph Medill, Long John Wentworth, David Davis and others — denounced him angrily to his face as a fool for asking Douglas the question, and explained in language more emphatic than polite that he had thrown away the Senatorship, Lincoln replied nonchalantly: "The Judge is a dead cock in the pit, so far as the Presidency is concerned!" It was even so. Douglas had won the Senatorship and lost the Presidency that drizzling autumn day. His answer to the Lincoln question was dubbed The Freeport Heresy, and hung as a millstone about his neck at the Charleston Convention in 1860. The Southerners would have none of him. Had it not been for Douglas's historic slip, Lincoln might never have been President.

Questions for Would-Be Presidents

There is much food for thought in these pertinent questions:

How happened it that twenty-six men have reached the Presidency in preference to their eminent and ambitious contemporaries?

If a boy should take it into his head to become President, is there any approved method, better than all others, that he could pursue in order to gratify his heart's desire? Is there any particular vocation that, more than any other or than all others, leads to the White House?

Is the Presidency to be achieved by toiling, scheming, striving, or even by accomplishing great things?

years none was assassinated; whereas in the past seventy years five Presidents have died, and in forty-seven years three have been murdered. All of which tends to enhance the value of the Vice-Presidency, an office regarded with such curious contempt by ambitious men. It is clear, therefore, that there are not now in existence more than fifteen or twenty men and boys destined to be Presidents of the United States.

What road, then, leads to the White House? If one there is, its discovery would prevent much misdirected endeavor, much disappointment, much heart-burning, much misery. Even the briefest examination into the antecedents of the lucky twenty-six, and of some of their rivals — their mental equipment, their vocations and their habitats — will disclose some interesting answers to the foregoing questions.

Reserved for Lawyers and Soldiers

Imprimis, every President except one has been a soldier or a lawyer or both — twenty of them being of the legal profession. We flatter ourselves on being a pacific people; but the facts rebuke us: we are the most belligerent people under the sun. We dearly love a soldier, as others love a lord. Consider 1861, when there were not 20,000 soldiers on United States soil. Four years later, the continent trembled under the martial tread of 2,000,000 of the best soldiers the world has ever seen — some in blue uniforms and some in gray.

Carl Schurz has sagely remarked that "American voters dearly love the smell of gunpowder upon the garments of their Presidential candidates;" and that illustrious publicist might have extended his observation to candidates for all public offices. Hundreds, if not thousands, have owed their seats in House or Senate, in the Cabinet or in gubernatorial chairs to their military records. In fact, his own Major-Generality did more than anything else to make Carl Schurz a Senator of the United States and a Secretary of the Interior.

A war always makes a President or two. The Revolutionary War made Washington President, though he had had considerable experience as a civilian officeholder, and perhaps rendered more service to his country as President of the Constitutional Convention than as General-in-Chief of our armies, or as President. For, had it not been for his vast influence, no constitution would have been agreed upon, and if it had not been absolutely certain that he would be the first President, the constitution would never have been ratified by the States.

His military career during the Revolution, as a very young officer, materially aided James Monroe, also, in his efforts to reach the Presidency. In fact, and notwithstanding his long and conspicuous civil career, Monroe always believed that nature intended him for a great soldier; and while Secretary of State during the War of 1812, he assumed also the duties of Secretary of War, went upon the field and did much to bring order out of chaos.

Aaron Burr, Thomas Hart Benton and Jefferson Davis are three other Americans who led long and distinguished careers in civil life, and brief but brilliant ones in military life. The first was a Lieutenant-Colonel; the last two, Colonels. It was by reason of his military service in 1812 that Colonel Benton wanted to be Lieutenant-General in the war with Mexico. That is a queer and interesting story, in that few realize how near Colonel Benton, of Missouri, came to being President, and fewer still realize



Photograph by Underwood & Underwood.
The Honorable Champ Clark, of Missouri

Or, is a residence in the Executive Mansion purely a matter of accident, chance, luck or predestination?

While all the Presidents have been able men — some very able, and a few really great — it is a matter of common knowledge that frequently the coveted prize does not go to the ablest man of the country or even of the party to which he belongs. Truth to tell, were all the statesmen in America at any one time gathered together — and it certainly would be worth a journey from far lands to look upon that conclave — and were there to be tossed in their midst a golden apple inscribed *To the Ablest*, there would be as big a row as *To the Fairest* provoked among the women of old.

According to the doctrine of probabilities, the chances are that in the next hundred and twenty-four years, we shall have the same number of Chief Magistrates — twenty-six — or, perhaps, a few more than we have had in the period of equal length that lies behind us. I say a few more, because it is interesting to note that more of the later than of the earlier Presidents have died in office. Indeed, during the first fifty-two years of the Presidency no incumbent died, and during the first seventy-six