

LAUGHING

ALL THE WAY TO THE WHITE HOUSE

☆☆

by Gerald Gardner



Recent U.S. Presidents, from Kennedy to Reagan, have employed humor to present themselves as warm, witty, and wonderful. And each president has had his own style: Kennedy was wry, Johnson was direct and earthy, Nixon was earnest but heavy-handed, Ford was playfully modest, Carter was gently sarcastic, and Reagan is genial with just a whiff of Hollywood.

On these pages are some of the witticisms that the six presidents of the Television Age have used to charm us and to promote their views. As you'll see, no one is immune to a little joshing, be they family, staff member, news reporter, opponent, or *numero uno* himself. See if you can tie the presidents to their laugh lines.

KIDDING THEMSELVES

The most effective presidential humor is self-deprecating. It makes a president appear unpretentious, unimpressed by his mighty office. Try to identify the president who kidded himself with these lines.

1. "It's ridiculous my following Bob Hope on the program. Bob Hope has stage presence, comedy timing, and terrific writers. I'm standing here in a rented tuxedo with three jokes from Earl Butz."
2. "My tax audit is coming out OK. The only thing they've questioned so far is a \$600 bill for toothpaste."
3. (In the Oval Office) "I expect any minute some guard is going to bust in here and say, 'OK you guys, get out of here.'"
4. "Before I begin, could I ask a favor? Would somebody keep an eye on my seat?"
5. "I've been getting some flack about ordering the production of the B-1. How did I know it was an airplane? I thought it was a vitamin for the troops."
6. "It's a great pleasure to be at the Yale Law School Sesquicentennial Convocation. And I defy anyone to say that and chew gum at the same time."
7. "I am a dropout from the Electoral College, because I flunked debating."
8. "I told my staff that I wanted to put on the image of a common man. They said so far I have succeeded very well."
9. "When I was a boy, we used to live over the store. I am still living over the store."
10. "People say a lot of nice things about vice-presidents. But it is like being the best man at a wedding—you never get a chance to prove it."
11. "I watched the Kennedy Inaugural address and I have to admit there were some words he said that I wish I had said. 'I do solemnly swear . . .'"
12. "I have asked Cardinal Spellman how to deal with the question of the Pope's infallibility. And Cardinal Spellman said, 'I don't know what to tell you. All I can say is, he keeps calling me Spillman.'"
13. (To Chevy Chase) "Good evening, I'm the President, and you're not."

KIDDING RELATIVES

Presidents get a lot of mileage out of making jokes about their families—wives, brothers, children, parents, and the rest. See if you can identify the Chief Executive by his wisecracks about his kin.

1. "My brother is doing his share for the nation's economy. He's put the beer industry back on its feet."
2. "I wish my mother and father might have been here to hear that introduction. My father would have enjoyed it, and my mother would have believed it."
3. "I just received a telegram from my father saying, 'Don't buy one more vote than you need. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide.'"

KIDDING STAFF MEMBERS

Even the most faithful of the party faithful are not immune to a little kidding now and then. Can you figure out which president is responsible for each of these quips?

1. "My Secretary of the Interior is back in Washington, strip-mining the Rose Garden."
2. "I am grateful that my vice-president is here. I've done the best I could to find something for him to do."
3. "The other day, when I told [my chief of staff] that I was opposed to dictators, whoever and wherever they are, he asked if he should start packing."
4. "If that plane goes down, Lyndon will have this place cleaned out in 24 hours."
5. "I told my staff I wanted them to prepare a talk for me to make tonight that was funny, and they didn't get around to it."
6. "The Secretary of Defense had us all playing a new game on the panel by my desk—'button, button, who'll push which button.' One brings in my secretary, one summons the head waiter, and the other blows up Siberia."
7. "I've done everything I could to encourage my staff members' families to be stable. If there are some who have slipped from grace, then I'll pray for them."

4. "I see nothing wrong with giving my brother a little legal experience before he goes into private practice."

5. "Art Linkletter has slept in the White House. He slept in the Queen's Room. When my wife's room is being painted, she sleeps there, so you could say that Art Linkletter has slept in my wife's bed."

6. "My daughter surprised me with a beautiful Golden Retriever. The owner of the kennel said, 'Who will the owner be?' She said she wanted to keep it a secret. Well, the owner wanted to know if the dog would have a good home. So she told him the people lived in a big white house with a fence around it. The kennel owner asked if they own or rent. And she said, 'I guess you'd call it public housing.'"

KIDDING THE PRESS

As long as there are presidents and reporters, there will be a testy relationship between them. Identify the presidents who masked their anger behind these veils of humor.

1. "I'm not going to say anything terribly important tonight, so you can all put away your crayons."
2. "There are so many leaks in the White House I feel that I should be talking to the chandelier."
3. "I understand that ABC's been having some budget problems. The news division's already laid off three hair stylists."
4. "You print that story and I just may end up *owning Look* magazine."
5. "Somebody told me that the writer of that article is now free-lancing for *True Romances*."
6. "I've had a lot of setbacks and a lot of problems as you know, and you've been kind enough to make those clear to the American people."
7. (To Dan Rather) "Are you running for something?"
8. "Everyone knows how the *Wall Street Journal* reflects the views of the man in the street—Wall Street."
9. "When a president tells a joke, whether it's funny or not, people in Washington laugh. And my wife just said, 'Yes, everybody except the press.'"

7. "My daughter once asked me, 'Daddy, as an outsider, how do you feel about the human race?'"

8. "I have been presented with this toy donkey for my daughter. My daughter has the greatest collection of donkeys. She doesn't even know what an elephant looks like."

9. "My wife is home and we are having a baby, a boy, in November."

10. "Ladies and gentlemen, Alexandria, Virginia, has been chosen as the first stop of one of the greatest campaigners in America, and I am proud to announce that I am her husband."

11. "I realize my brother was the first choice of speaker tonight. I understand you couldn't afford him."

KIDDING THE OTHER GUY

Humor is a great instrument of attack, especially when aimed at a member of the loyal opposition. Can you identify the president from the target of his humor and the tone of his attack?

1. "Bobby Kennedy is at that awkward age. He's too young to be president and he's too old for that haircut."
2. "That's Governor Carter over there. It's easy to see where he sits. Now if we could only figure out where he stands."
3. "The *Wall Street Journal* has been criticizing Mr. Nixon. That is like the *Osservatore Romano* criticizing the Pope."
4. "I will not make age an issue in this campaign. I will not exploit my opponent's youth and inexperience."
5. "Jerry Ford can't walk and chew gum at the same time."
6. "Jerry Ford played football too long without a helmet."
7. "I hear a lot about Experience. Well, Experience is what Mr. Nixon will have after this campaign is over."
8. "I got an unsigned Valentine, and I'm sure it was from Fritz Mondale. The heart on it was bleeding."

Gerald Gardner described this process of political seduction through laughter in his new book "All the President's Wits" (William Morrow & Co., Inc.).

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Kidding Themselves

1. Ford
2. Carter
3. Kennedy
4. Ford
5. Reagan
6. Ford
7. Nixon
8. Carter
9. Reagan
10. Ford
11. Nixon
12. Kennedy
13. Ford

Kidding Relatives

1. Carter
2. Johnson
3. Kennedy
4. Kennedy
5. Nixon
6. Ford
7. Johnson
8. Kennedy
9. Kennedy
10. Johnson
11. Carter

Kidding Staff Members

1. Reagan
2. Carter
3. Reagan
4. Kennedy
5. Carter
6. Kennedy
7. Carter

Kidding the Press

1. Carter
2. Nixon
3. Reagan
4. Kennedy
5. Johnson
6. Carter
7. Nixon
8. Johnson
9. Carter

Kidding the Other Guy

1. Ford
2. Ford
3. Kennedy
4. Reagan
5. Johnson
6. Johnson
7. Kennedy
8. Reagan

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