

# PRESIDENTIAL

## Millard Fillmore

### Teaching the obscure presidents

#### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Welcome to the Millard Fillmore episode. With me for this week's podcast is my colleague T. Rees Shapiro, who's a fantastic education reporter here at The Washington Post.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Hello, folks.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, this is going to be fun. Just his background for everyone listening -- I asked you to help me out with this episode because I've been really interested, since starting this podcast, in the question of how all of these American presidents are actually taught in U.S. history classes. In particular, what the long-term effect is on not only which presidents we think are great, but the ones that we sort of immediately write off as unmemorable because we just never even had to learn a single thing about them.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yeah, so I remember when I asked if I could help you out with this, which was really exciting, I was hoping maybe to talk about, you know, one of the seminal figures of history. You said, 'How about Millard Fillmore?' And I had to stop for a second and say, 'Who?' Which I think is sort of our collective feeling about President Millard Fillmore. He's our most forgettable president, maybe.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I can't tell you how many people -- when they hear I'm doing a podcast about presidents -- have said, 'What in the world are you going to do for episodes on the totally obscure presidents, like Millard Fillmore?'

Every single time, it's like Millard Fillmore is the example people give of the president that they can't imagine I could have anything interesting to talk about for an episode.

So, what we're going to do for the next half hour, though, is explore the question of, well, one: Are there actually some interesting and important lessons to learn about Fillmore's presidency? And then, also, kind of the broader question: How do we teach presidents today in American history classes?

I'm Lillian Cunningham.

T. REES SHAPIRO: I'm T. Rees Shapiro.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And this is the 13<sup>th</sup> episode of 'Presidential.'

T. REES SHAPIRO: Let's roll.

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Do students today even learn Millard Fillmore's name? Now, I'm not even asking anything about him, but just the name Millard Fillmore.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Well, obviously, it varies school to school and state to state. But, in most cases, not really.

There's been this push to standardize a lot of the curriculum across the country, and that's called the Common Core. More than 40 states around the country have adopted the Common Core, and part of what it does is it's changed the way that we teach history in classrooms. It relies less on memory recall -- like, tell me who is the 13<sup>th</sup> president of United States -- and more on: 'If I give you a fact about him or a fact about the era in which he was president, can you then tell me what powers does he have as president? Analyze what he would have been able to do with what was placed in front of him.'

But they do not necessarily teach them all the names or expect them even to remember all the names, because they can just say, 'Go Google that.' So, that is very interesting, and that's something that's definitely happening.

In Virginia, which has separate standards than the Common Core, early on in elementary school, they do want students to be able to identify presidents and they talk about them by name. But do we expect collectively a student in third grade, by the time they reach high school, to remember who is Millard Fillmore? I mean, probably not, right? If as adults and professionals we can't remember who he is, how can we expect high schoolers? So, yeah, it is this very interesting transition that we've made in education.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Away from, like, concrete facts.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yeah, I mean: In the power of the Internet and Information Age, what's the point of someone wasting brain space on trivial facts, right? And it's sort of sad that we consider a trivial fact to be, 'Can you name all of the 44 presidencies?' But Millard Fillmore gets left out.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, so even though previous generations were more likely to have memorized the names of presidents at some point in their schooling, it turns out that by the time they got to college, they were just as bad at remembering the American presidents as college students today are.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yeah, so there's actually a guy who studies this specifically, and he's a professor at Washington University in St. Louis. His name is Henry Roediger, and he's been tracking this over time, generation after generation of college students.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, I called him up, and I asked if he could comb through all the data that he has, specifically, on Millard Fillmore and our collective memory of him.

You've been testing people's ability to remember presidents' names for more than 40 years now, right? It looks like your research started --

HENRY ROEDIGER: I started in 1973, actually. It's pretty amazing that we get exactly the same data for the early presidents in 1973, '74, that we got in 2009. For Millard Fillmore, only 8 percent of the people in our studies can recall him.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That is to say, when they do this one study where they ask people to write down the names of all the presidents they know, only 8 percent actively remember Millard Fillmore's name and think to write his name down.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Eight percent. That's it? But when they show people Fillmore's name on a list and they ask if he was president, the numbers jump in that case, at least -- it goes up to 65 percent. When they see his name and are explicitly asked if he was president, they say, 'Yes, I recognize him as a president.'

HENRY ROEDIGER: And that's actually very low -- the average recognition rate for the presidents is about 80 percent. So, Fillmore's one of the lower ones. Not the very lowest, but one of the lower ones. And even when people recognize him as president, they're not very confident.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: I thought I saw, too, in your study that people were far more confident that Alexander Hamilton had been president than Fillmore.

HENRY ROEDIGER: Right, the recognition rate was higher actually for Hamilton, who, of course, never was president. So, 71 percent of the people thought Alexander Hamilton was president, perhaps because he's on the \$10 bill.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: More people may think Hamilton was president than Fillmore, but Fillmore isn't actually at the very, very bottom of the list. That honor goes to Chester Arthur, who - - seriously -- only 5 percent of people could name him as a president.

T. REES SHAPIRO: So, how come Fillmore does better than Arthur?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Professor Roediger said that it's probably just because of Fillmore's slightly more unusual name.

T. REES SHAPIRO: That makes sense.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Millard Fillmore -- even if you haven't heard it very many times, if you do hear it it's at least a bit more memorable. There's also that comic strip that had Mallard Fillmore, the duck, which also helps kind of keep the Millard Fillmore name in some popular circulation.

OK, so you spoke to a number of teachers about how they teach or don't teach Millard Fillmore, right?

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yeah, it was really interesting, actually.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: We're going to come back to this later, too, but were they all like, 'Of course we don't teach Millard Fillmore'?

T. REES SHAPIRO: The good news is: When I did sort of this informal poll asking local teachers and administrators in Fairfax County, for example, 'Can you tell me about how you teach the presidency of Millard Fillmore?' None of them said, 'Who?' They all knew, which is great.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That's a good sign. That's a very good sign.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Some really great educators in Virginia. But they did note that it's just something that they have to contend with in their daily work. They have a very strict schedule that they have to adhere to, so they don't necessarily want to waste time in their classroom in order to teach a president whose significance on our quilt of history in the United States is sort of a very small patch, right?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Alright, well is Fillmore correctly considered insignificant and unmemorable? Let's take a look at the story of this vice president, born in the 1800, who went on to become president himself in 1850 after President Zachary Taylor died in office. For this, I spoke with the historian and biographer Jean Baker, who's an expert on 19<sup>th</sup> century politics.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Tell me about how he grew up -- what his family background was and his upbringing in New York.

JEAN BAKER: Millard Fillmore, who was one of our more invisible presidents, grew up in upstate New York, and it was a hardscrabble early life. His father had owned land outside of Buffalo, New York. And, at least as far as I'm concerned, this is not good farming territory. He had been unable to pay his taxes, and the land had been claimed. And he was determined -- this is his father -- that his son have a better life than he had had.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, the father arranges for Millard Fillmore, when he's a teenager, to apprentice for a cloth-maker in Buffalo, New York. But this basically amounts to indentured servitude. The cloth-maker actually paid Fillmore's family in order to have him as a worker. Fillmore is mistreated, he's worked nearly to death. And after a few years, he saves up the little money he can and buys his freedom from this cloth-maker master, then walks home 100 miles to his poor family's farm. The only thing Millard Fillmore has read growing up is the Bible -- up until he's 17 years old, when he buys himself a dictionary to help with his vocabulary.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: He wants so much to be better educated that he starts taking some adult classes, apprentices for a lawyer and eventually, after studying really hard, passes the bar and becomes a lawyer himself. After a while of working in law, he moves into local politics.

JEAN BAKER: In those days, at that time, politics was a real avenue for advancement. A lot of poor young boys used it, and so did Millard Fillmore. He was in the New York legislature in the 1820s. He then moved on to Congress, where he had four terms as a congressman. He didn't stand out, but he had a very stolid kind of temperament and he didn't offend many people. He didn't attract many people either.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Could you tell me a little bit more about Millard Fillmore's character? If I

knew nothing about him and I were about to walk into a room and meet him for the first time...

JEAN BAKER: What he looked like -- I can tell you that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, what he looked like, how charismatic he was.

JEAN BAKER: You know, this is the 1840s. It's not 2016, where we know even the size of these presidential hands, so to speak. We don't know a lot about him. And that's a problem when people try to talk about presidents other than the founding fathers and Andrew Jackson. You get into these lesser-known presidents, and they are in part lesser known because they didn't leave a whole lot of letters that we have. And we really don't know much about them.

People -- when he was in Congress -- hardly noticed him. He was not the author of any legislation to speak of. And he led a very temperate life. He married a woman whom he had known from the Buffalo area -- Abigail. And I think she proved, as many wives do, a really beneficial influence on him. She, in many ways, gentrified this guy who had really grown up as the son of a failed farmer.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Do you have a sense of what's helping his political climb? I mean, is he good at working with people? What is facilitating his rise?

JEAN BAKER: Well, clearly he's able to communicate to his district. He had a real string of successful elections to Congress. But, you know, there's very little that stands out about Millard Fillmore except for this -- his physical appearance. He was a very impressive-looking guy. He was handsome. He was tall. And that, I think, was what made him stand out in many ways, more than any of his political ideas.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Queen Victoria reportedly said he was the most handsome man she had ever met. And some people today have pointed out -- on the Internet, of course -- that Millard Fillmore bears a striking resemblance to the actor Alec Baldwin. Google it. Decide for yourself.

But, as for his political ideas, they're essentially just a reiteration of the Whig party platform at the time. So, as a Whig, this means he supports internal improvements. He's pro-business. The one issue, though, where divergent opinions are starting to emerge in the Whig party is slavery. The most famous Whig in New York back then was William Henry Seward, who was strongly, adamantly antislavery. But Fillmore actually positions himself in contrast to Seward as a real moderate on the issue. Fillmore is only mildly antislavery.

It's actually Fillmore's moderation and his lack of strong views that are precisely why he ends up as vice president on Zachary Taylor's presidential ticket in 1848. The Whig party needs to win New York state, because that's really important in the presidential election at the time, but they also want someone who's not going to offend Southern voters too much.

JEAN BAKER: In some ways, it seems to me he represents the idea that extremes are not good. Here's a sort of mediocre guy who becomes a weak politician and, in a period of American history when there was this idea that you needed sectional balance, Fillmore became an attractive candidate.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Taylor and Fillmore win the election and take office in 1849. But as you heard in the previous episode, in July of 1850 Zachary Taylor dies, leaving Fillmore to take up the

presidency.

This is now the second time in U.S. history that a vice president ends up commander-in-chief after a death in the White House.

JEAN BAKER: The important thing -- in terms of Millard Fillmore -- is that he's an accidental president. We've only had about six of these, when the president dies or is he is assassinated. And I think a guy who came from his background and all of a sudden you're the president of the United States -- I think it was quite a shock to him. He does indicate that.

He also had done very little as vice president. Vice presidents in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were seldom heard from. They presided over the Senate -- and there are some references to Fillmore while he was presiding over the Senate and how he was very fair-minded, in terms of the way that he called on senators and interpreted the rules. In any case, the fact that you're accidental and the people really haven't voted for you and you've been in this office in which nothing really is expected of you...I think it's one of the reasons why Millard Fillmore is so invisible in terms of our understanding of modern presidential politics.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: OK, so what does he actually do in office as president? Well, the one really notable thing that happens on his watch is the Compromise of 1850, which was already brewing in Congress at the time of Taylor's death. To understand the Compromise of 1850, though, it's basically necessary to back up again to the Mexican War, which took place under President Polk. That's when the U.S. gained more than 500,000 square miles of Mexican land. (Basically all of California and then also a lot of the land that's between California and Texas.)

All of this territory essentially becomes the flashpoint for the question of whether slavery should expand in the United States. So, by the time Taylor and Fillmore are in office, Congress is now wrestling with this big question of what to do about slavery. But it's been triggered by this very specific question of: What are they going to do in terms of slavery in these new territories?

Congress is basically going back and forth trying to craft this compromise that makes the North happy and makes the South happy. President Zachary Taylor is not a fan of all this wheeling and dealing and compromise-making, and he thinks that this new territory should just come in as free states.

JAMES MCPHERSON: Zachary Taylor was a southern man of at least partly northern principles. He came very much under the influence of William H. Seward.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: That's James McPherson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian. William Henry Seward, as we mentioned earlier, was the senator from New York who was strongly antislavery. And interestingly, President Taylor, despite his southern roots and the fact that he himself actually owned slaves, was taking some of his cues on this issue of slavery from Seward.

JAMES MCPHERSON: Taylor came under his influence. But because he died before most of the hot-button issues that emerged out of the Compromise of 1850 and the territorial question in 1850, it's hard to say what his impact would have been had he continued to serve out the rest of his term.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What we do know, of course, is what Millard Fillmore ended up doing.

Fillmore decides that, in contrast to his predecessor Zachary Taylor, he is going to support the Compromise of 1850. That was such a controversial, hot-button decision that Taylor's cabinet unanimously resigns when Millard Fillmore takes office.

So what is this compromise that Congress works out? Well, it basically makes the North happy by admitting California as a free state and by banning the slave trade in Washington, D.C. But at the same time, it's appeasing the South by letting the Utah and New Mexico territories decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery; and even more importantly, by enacting a fugitive slave law that basically makes it the government's responsibility to help capture escaped slaves anywhere in the country.

Now remember that Fillmore himself doesn't craft this legislation, of course. It's Congress who does. But as president, Fillmore says he will sign it into law. And that is something that Zachary Taylor was not going to do.

JEAN BAKER: And that is the single contribution, almost, of his administration -- his support in the final passage. Now, I don't know whether Congress would have passed it without him at least tipping his hand and saying that he would support it. I don't know that. I mean, it's a hypothetical kind of question.

But, nonetheless, his administration is tied to that effort in as early as 1850 to work out some sort of a national compromise so that the South, aggressively supporting slavery, will at least stay in the Union and the North will get some sort of its interest agreed to.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Was Fillmore's decision to support this compromise a good thing? That's an interesting question that historians still don't quite agree upon. Some say that it was an earnest attempt to appease both factions and that it did at least help delay Civil War for about a decade. Others, like James McPherson, think that this highlighted Fillmore's lack of strong moral character and that this fugitive slave law, in particular, actually deepened the country's divisions.

JAMES MCPHERSON: Clearly, the decisions -- and consequences of those decisions -- in the 1850s led to enormous crises. What we can learn from that, I guess, is that some decisions have unintended consequences, and if one can beware of the potential for unintended consequences, that is a hallmark not only of good leadership but of common sense and patriotism.

Millard Fillmore was a member of the so-called hunker faction in the Whig Party. That is, they hankered after office. He was a man who was more of a politician than he was a man of any kind of principle. He strongly supported enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law during his two-and-a-half years as president and helped to drive a wedge into the growing schism between North and South -- or between antislavery and pro-slavery factions in North and South. He was a man of relatively weak principles and leadership capacity.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Horace Greeley, who was the editor of The New York Herald, said something similar at the time. He said, "Fillmore lacks pluck. He wants backbone. He means well, but he is timid, irresolute, uncertain and loves to lean."

Well, the fact that Fillmore appeased the South by signing into law the Fugitive Slave Act did draw him a lot of criticism in the North. The law essentially required all states, including northern free states, to help capture escaped slaves. It even went so far as to say that ordinary citizens had to

aid in their capture, which, of course, deeply enraged those who were antislavery and wanted no part in being slave catchers. A lot of northerners even protested this by storming courthouses and prisons to free those who had been apprehended.

Now, if we return to the question of how Millard Fillmore is taught today, it's worth noting that, though his name may not come up in classrooms, this Fugitive Slave Act that he signed into law usually does. And for a long time, one of the main tools for teaching about it was the book "Uncle Tom's Cabin," by Harriet Beecher Stowe. That novel came out in 1852 while Fillmore was still in office, and it depicted the life of runaway slaves. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" became the bestselling novel of the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century. I talked with my colleague T. Rees Shapiro about whether this is still a fixture in U.S. classrooms today.

T. REES SHAPIRO: I'd say it's definitely a book that a lot of elementary school students are aware of. It's probably in most school libraries across the country. But you can imagine even just a few decades ago, during the Civil Rights era, to pick up a book like that in a classroom in, like, Atlanta or Birmingham was a lot more profound. Its themes are pretty obvious to kids today –slavery is awful. I mean, [kids today] don't have to read a book to contextualize that in their minds.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Even more than Millard Fillmore's name, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is probably something that comes up in class.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yes, and I'd say that that's definitely a result of its impact at its time. I mean, it was, as you describe, the first major international bestseller by an American author. Abraham Lincoln allegedly told Harriet Beecher Stowe, 'You're the little lady that made this great big war.'

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And where this ties back to Millard Fillmore is it sort of underscores the fact that this Fugitive Slave Law in particular, as part of the Compromise of 1850, became such a polarizing and divisive bill that really, in some ways, this compromise did less to heal any wounds -  
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T. REES SHAPIRO: To compromise --

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: -- between North and South, but actually exacerbated and heightened a lot of the tensions.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Definitely.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: It seems like one of the other reasons that it's fallen off the curriculum in some schools is just because, while it has this very strong antislavery message, it's written by a white author and a lot of the characters are sort of portrayed in very stereotypical ways.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Yeah, it was a book written 170 years ago, and a lot of the thematic issues remain -- that one race can't rule over another. But the writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, obviously stuck to a lot of the language that at the time was common, but that in today's world we'd look at as being a little coarse -- something that you'd feel uncomfortable reading on the page.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: When educators today teach the period of the Civil War, they don't just need to decide whether to teach students about the pre-Lincoln presidents, like Millard Fillmore. And they don't just need to decide whether to read or to just merely mention a book like "Uncle

Tom's Cabin." They also, in many cases, have to decide what in the world to do if their own school's name or campus statues or history in some way is tied to one of the period's more controversial figures.

T. REES SHAPIRO: Millard Fillmore plays a role in what he did -- or didn't do -- to prevent the fracturing of our country and then the figures who came out of the Civil War. So even just locally we have: Jefferson Davis Highway, who is the president of the Confederacy; we have Robert E. Lee High School; we have J.E.B. Stuart High School; we have Washington-Lee High School and even Washington and Lee University in Lexington. There are a lot of places of higher learning, you could say, that have these very interesting histories and their own connections, however tenuous, to these people that we agree now maybe we shouldn't lionize.

I mean J.E.B. Stuart was a confederate general, and yet in Fairfax County, the school remains and the name remains. They've done, over decades, things to change the way that the school was represented. So, for instance, there used to be a gigantic Confederate flag. Well, they removed that, obviously. The mascot used to be a rebel soldier. It's no longer a rebel soldier. That school, specifically, has a large population of minority students -- Hispanics and African-Americans and Asians. And yet, the person whose name is above the door of the school that they enter every day is this person who, if it were up to him, some of those students may have been the children of slaves.

Obviously there's an intellectual decision a lot of schools and universities and high schools have to make. We can't change history, obviously. And what does it mean, then, to even try to erase it by taking these names away? Maybe you can use it as this moment of learning, which a lot of high schools -- I used Stuart as an example -- do. They will talk about him, specifically, and his role in the Civil War more even because his name is on the building.

But I think that there is a pretty decent argument that's being debated among colleges nationwide about: What do we do? Do we try to protect students -- that's sort of the language that they use -- from these these symbols of hate and hatred? Or do we leave them there and acknowledge that this was a really terrible moment of our history, but we can't hide from it. We can't embrace it, but we need to understand it so that it doesn't keep happening.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, Millard Fillmore isn't one of our more divisive historical figures exactly, but I do think it's worth asking the question: What do we lose if we tend to erase his name and his presidency from the way we study the lead-up to the Civil War?

It's not just great people and horrible people who shape our country's history. It's also people who don't have a strong voice. It's people who are moderate. It's people who are trying to find middle roads. It's people who are making concessions -- that are sometimes good and sometimes bad -- who are also shaping this trajectory of America's history.

I asked Jean Baker: What else might we be missing by skipping over the person of Millard Fillmore? Is there anything else that a student of any age could gain from not just learning about his time period but actually learning about him?

JEAN BAKER : Well, I think a couple things. One is the idea that every young boy can rise up and be president. I mean, we have not had many truly poor presidents. Bill Clinton is one. Abraham Lincoln is another. But so was Millard Fillmore. So, I think he represents the possibilities -- his

presidency represents the possibilities. Now, granted, a lot of things had to happen, especially the death of the person who was elected, but nonetheless I think that's one thing we might remember about Fillmore.

The other thing is that as early as 1850 we're beginning to see the real disruption of the Union. He's the last Whig president in our history. The party was not on a very long-term party because it's unable to take a real stand nationally on slavery. It disappears. And what replaces it is, of course, the Republican Party, which was formed in 1854 and stands very strongly on the platform of no slavery in the territories.

There will always be critics of Millard Fillmore, who really feel that he wasn't a very forceful president and did not have a forceful personality. In terms of ending the conversation on Fillmore, I think we might remind ourselves of one thing that he is reputed to have said. He supposedly said, 'May God save the country. The people will not' -- which I think is a harbinger, perhaps, of today's politics.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, it seems that no 'Presidential' episode is complete without some horrible, sad death at the end of it. And, in this case, it's Millard Fillmore's wife and his daughter, who both die only about a month after he leaves office.

His wife dies of pneumonia and his daughter dies of cholera, which is the same thing that we have been seeing for so many others already in our series. But here's one interesting bright positive thing that Millard Fillmore and his wife Abigail did while he was still president -- they built a library in the White House, the first White House library.

And remember back to how Millard Fillmore didn't have any schooling until he was nearly 20 and he started taking some classes as an adult? Well, it was actually Abigail, who was only two-years older than he was, who was his teacher. And they end up eventually getting married. It's pretty remarkable that, of all the presidents to create a White House library, the one who did it was possibly our least educated president. But perhaps that's because he deeply valued and recognized the power of books to help lift a boy out of poverty.

In that spirit, I just want to say that it's been so amazing to learn how many of our listeners have embarked on their own challenge of reading a biography about each president -- and even just how many people have been listening to this podcast -- because you actually do want to learn more about the American presidents than you had a chance to learn growing up.

I just find it really inspiring to see people's desire for knowledge and for self-improvement. And I'm certainly right there with you. So, a few listeners have already actually shared photos with me of their bookshelves full of presidential biographies. And I started thinking that in honor of Millard Fillmore's episode -- since he was self-educated, he started the White House library and yet he is one of the presidents who's actually really, really hard to find a biography of -- what would be really fun would be to share photos of our own bookshelves with presidential biographies. Whether you have one book or you have a hundred books, if you use the hashtag #presidentallibrary, I will look for your photos over the course of this week and I'll share them on our 'Presidential' Instagram account and our Twitter account, so that everyone can check out everyone else's reading list.