

## The Effect the Literature Reader on the Configuration of Political thought among Presidents of the United States

### تأثير الأدب على تكوين الفكر السياسي

### بين رؤساء الولايات المتحدة



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#### Abstract

The American political context has shown a striking liaison between reading books and the presidents' political decisions. Reading for the American presidents has always been a matter of self-identification, these presidents are heavy readers of literature in its various facets; books, journalism, theater, and alike. In addition, the political decisions in the United States are often driven either from the surrounding events or from influencing powers such as lobbyists, or from soft power like literature or culture. This article explains how important literature is in shaping the global policy in the United States.

**Key Words:** American Policy; Books; Literature; Reading Political Thought;

President.

#### ملخص:

يظهر المشهد السياسي الأمريكي ارتباطاً لافتاً بين قراءة الكتب وبين اتخاذ القرارات السياسية من قبل الرؤساء؛ وتعد القراءة بالنسبة لرؤساء الولايات الأمريكية مسألة تحديد الهوية عبر مر التاريخ، فهؤلاء الرؤساء هم من قراء الأدب على اختلاف صورته: الكتب والصحافة والمسرح وما شابه. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، غالباً ما يتم اتخاذ القرارات السياسية في الولايات المتحدة إما من الأحداث الراهنة أو من القوى المؤثرة مثل جماعات الضغط أو من القوى الناعمة مثل الأدب أو الثقافة. ويلقي هذا المقال الضوء على مدى أهمية الأدب في تشكيل السياسة العالمية في الولايات المتحدة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** السياسة الأمريكية؛ كتب. الأدب؛ قراءة الفكر السياسي؛ رئيس.

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## 1. Introduction

History has shown an influential impact of literature over the political sphere and vice versa. It is obvious that Us political arena is influenced by various spheres, economical, historical, social, and literature, the latest represents a key element in the evolutionary path of politics in the United States.

In speaking of literature it is worth referring to reading as a vital role over the American politics, Presidents of the United States are best known for their devotion to reading, they consider reading as a means of self instruction. Book comes to the top of their reading list, there is no preferable kind of books read by presidents, all categories are welcomed. But to what extent could a literary work affect the political thought and decision of an American President?

The power of the pen leads many presidents change their perspectives toward different issues. Moreover, novels play a crucial factor in turning the political thought of many US leaders; the American presidents are also known for their reading speed, George Washington reads while riding his horse, John Adams has spent an estate in buying books, and John F. Kennedy has developed his capacity of reading from 300 words per minutes (WPM) to 1.200 (WPM) through a speed reading techniques.

For Leaders, reading is in all cases a good element in forming any political thought, but it happens that reading could have very bad results on the political decisions as in the case of George W. Bush and the novel Moby Dick written by Herman Melville in1851. George W. Bush has incarnated the Protagonist of the

novel Mr. Ahab in his purchase of the white whale during his pursuit of terrorism.

## 2. AN ELITE LEADERSHIP

Tevi Troy, the CEO ( chief executive officer) in the American Health Policy Institute and the author of *What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched, and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House* has made a detailed study on the impact of reading on the political thought of some presidents of the United States.

However, the fact of reading too much has put the American presidents in a challenge for many decades, “Do they wish to be men of people or men of higher understanding? (Troy 18) The writer wonders if the presidents of the United States have chosen reading as an option to be well instructed or it is just a way to be elected. But through reading the book and the history of the American presidents one assumes that reading is not just an option, reading is running in their blood, indeed, reading shapes the general intellectual aspect of the whole nation. Tevi Troy assumes that “presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were among the bestread men on the continent. Jefferson, whose personal collection of books became the foundation of the library of Congress, famously said, “**I cannot live without books**” (Ibid). Leaders of the United States have given too much importance to books and consider them as the main source of self- instruction; and it has helped a lot in shaping many important events in the history of the United States. The following examples will illustrate the degree of influence of these books on the political scene and the public opinion alike.

### Uncle Tom's Cabin

A novel written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a social activist who denounced slavery through her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The novel denounced the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which prohibited aids and assistance to runaway slaves; she opposed violence and segregation against black people. She once wrote:

**“I wrote what I did because...I was oppressed and broken hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor of Christianity- because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath”** (1852)

Stowe was aware of the delicate situation of slaves, she shows the bitterness and sufferance of slaves under good masters, so how it would be under cruel ones. And if slavery is wrong under good circumstance, how should it be under harsh conditions. The book achieved great fame and had a strong effect on the American colonies, and when Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe he said **“So you are the little woman who started this great war”** (Sachsaw, Kittrel Rushing, et al 8).

The novel spread rapidly among slaves and anti slavery community, they react soon and the civil war began in 1861 and ended with the abolition of slavery in 1865.

### The Clansman

Not all books have a good impact on the American history; there are some that turned bad on the American society. *The Clansman* was written in favor of racism and urged south colonies to return to slavery, it argued that the blacks are savage and inhuman and must be under control;

otherwise they will kill, rape, and terrorize white people. The book supports the Ku Klux Klan, the racist movement in the United States that calls for white supremacy, white nationalism, and antiimmigration.

Written by Thomas F. Dixon, *the Clansman* is a trilogy that includes *The Leopard's Spots*, and *The Traitor*. The book was published in 1905 and was said to be a reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the anti-slavery novel. (Listverse.com)

### 5. Harry Truman and the Establishment of Israel

Truman's previous reading shaped the most important decision in history, on May 14 1948 the state of Israel was born after just eleven minutes from the founding of the state: **"Truman extended almost immediate recognition to Israel, eleven minutes after the State's founding"** (F. graff 451).

Truman's support for the establishment of Israel was due to his boyhood reading; Truman had opposed his own state department in order that the Jewish dream of their promised holy land comes true.

Michael T Benson assumed that reason behind the decision of Harry Truman of helping the Jews founding their states was due to his reading of the Bible:

**Nevertheless, he noted, one *must* emphasize the religious nature of Truman's decision and the ways his actions diverged from typical policy making. Otherwise, there is no way to explain why Truman did what he did, because his decision to grant recognition is an aberration when viewed within the historical context (Benson 7).**

Truman also called himself Cyrus, Truman's impersonated the Persian King Cyrus who helped the Jews restoring their forefathers' Land; Harry Truman was introduced by Eddie Jacobson at the Jewish Theological seminary in New York as:

**“The man who had helped create Israel, Truman quickly responded, “Helped create Israel? I am Cyrus I am Cyrus” ( Radosh and Radosh 345).**

### **6. *The Balkan Ghost* and Clinton delay to end the crisis in Balkan**

*The Balkan Ghost* a book written by Robert Kaplan (1993), the book depicts the mortal struggles among ethnic groups, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, and Muslims, all living in a continuous anxiety.

Robert Kaplan, an American journalist and writer on political affairs and always reporting news from all over the world describing the lives of people who were world widely unnoticed.

The book *The Balkan Ghosts* has made its way to the reading desk of President Bill Clinton, The image of the Balkan depicted by Kaplan seemed ambiguous and gloomy, it kept Clinton reluctant to interfere in that area to end the struggle. What was understood from the book is that ethnic struggles and the geographic nature of the Balkans will surely make the operation of intervening in danger; so Bill Clinton preferred holding off from the struggle. This delay in the intervention was viewed by the world politician critics as Robert Kaplan's fault. Laura Rosen wrote in her web Salon in 2001, **Some can't hear the name of Robert D. Kaplan without blaming him for the delay in US intervention”** (Laura Rosen Salon.com). Kaplan was astonished from the current situation and told Laura Rosen:

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**When I was writing and finishing ‘Balkan Ghosts’ and having it copy edited, my life experience was this: I had two previously published books, on Ethiopia and Afghanistan, which were reviewed well, and sank without a trace,” he told me. “When I was reporting ‘Balkan Ghosts’ in the 1980s,” he added, “the Balkans were like Ethiopia, an obscure country. The idea that any policymaker would read it, I didn’t even consider. I saw it purely as an entertaining journalistic travel book about my experiences in the 1980s (Ibid).**

This case put the reading of presidents at a stake, New York Times reports on this case:

**“Consider the case of President Clinton and Robert D. Kaplan's "Balkan Ghosts," a book that the writers Richard Reeves and Elizabeth Drew say profoundly shaped the President's thinking on the limitations of intervention in a part of the world where ethnic feuds have deep roots” (nytimes.com).**

Books are really a very dangerous weapon if are not be well understood, the following case is the most dangerous case in the political history of the US presidency, George W.Bush and Moby Dick.

### **7. Moby Dick and George W.Bush**

The novel was written by Herman Melville and published in 1851, this era was well know in the American history by whale industry which began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and continued until 1852.

Melville’s voyages to whaling had inspired him to write about the sea world, captains, crews, and whales. It is said that Moby Dick describes the conflict between good and evil, nature and god, and between death and

life. Until nowadays, the book still has various interpretations what make it a very dangerous novel.

Briefly, the novel is about a white whale who took the leg of a captain called Ahab, the captain decided to travel around the ocean to take revenge and kill the white whale. The book is of great importance either in Literature or in Politics, *Moby Dick*'s value lies in its prior depiction of the Presidency of George Bush. He considered himself the good and saw Saddam Hussein as the most evil in the world.

Bush decided to pursuit Saddam Hussein as Ahab did with the white whale and killed him; the white whale was killed but he took with him all the crew except the narrator who was holding on a wooden coffin and rescued after by another ship. The same thing with George W. Bush who seceded in killing Sadam Hussein but driving all the region into a disastrous chaos.

After the 9/11 attacks on the trade center, Bush decided to punish the doers, and engaged the American army to fight terrorism which was represented in Al Qaida and Sadam Hussein. The war on Iraq led by George Bush cost America the death of more than 4000 young soldiers in the Iraq war, thousands suffered from serious injuries and handicaps and psychic damage. The same thing happened to Ahab when he led the ship and its crew to a horrible destination.

Bush has followed the same steps as Ahab when he wanted to pursuit the whale by creating a long story of revenge and persuaded the audience to invade Iraq to finish terrorism, the same thing happened with Ahab when he persuaded his crew to help him killing the evil. Bush had destroyed the infrastructure of Iraq and killed thousands of innocent people for one purpose is to kill Saddam Hussein. The situation in Iraq has never been



worse as it was after the US invasion. Michael J. Brenner wrote in The Globalist about the case of Ahab and George W. Bush and explained the similarities between them:

**Ahab destroyed himself, destroyed his crew, destroyed his ship.**

**He**

**sacrificed all in the quest – a quest for the unattainable.**

**Like Ahab, the United States is sacrificing its principles of liberty, its political integrity, the trust that is the bedrock of its democracy, its**

**standing in the world as the “best hope of mankind,” and its capacity to**

**feel for others – including its fellow citizens.**

It has become obvious that reading books has a great effect on the political thought and decisions of the American leaderships.

## **8. Conclusion**

The American presidents show a great devotion to reading, they always show up holding a book, and consider them as a matter of self-identification. Reading shapes the policy of the United States, it has a strong relationship with the life of presidents, and it touches the political arena in different ways. But history of the American leaderships has shown that reading for the American presidents can have different outcomes.

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