

PRESIDENTIAL NAME GAMES

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As familiar as we may think we are with the names of the U.S. presidents, a listing of their full names might still provide some surprises. For example, how many of us can name, offhand, the three presidents whose first names are known to few these days? And who among us can rattle off, without consulting a reference, the middle names of Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, and Gerald R. Ford? In this article, we explore the roster of the full names of the U.S. presidents in search of amusement, amazement, and perhaps an occult revelation or two.

The list of the complete names of the 42 U.S. presidents to date contains 111 names formed from 696 letters. A compact way to display this list is as a solid 24x29 rectangle of letters:

G E O R G E W A S H I N G T O N J O H N A D A M
 S T H O M A S J E F F E R S O N J A M E S M A D
 I S O N J A M E S M O N R O E J O H N Q U I N C
 Y A D A M S A N D R E W J A C K S O N M A R T I
 N V A N B U R E N W I L L I A M H E N R Y H A R
 R I S O N J O H N T Y L E R J A M E S K N O X P
 O L K Z A C H A R Y T A Y L O R M I L L A R D F
 I L L M O R E F R A N K L I N P I E R C E J A M
 E S B U C H A N A N A B R A H A M L I N C O L N
 A N D R E W J O H N S O N U L Y S S E S S I M P
 S O N G R A N T R U T H E R F O R D B I R C H A
 R D H A Y E S J A M E S A B R A M G A R F I E L
 D C H E S T E R A L A N A R T H U R S T E P H E
 N G R O V E R C L E V E L A N D B E N J A M I N
 H A R R I S O N W I L L I A M M C K I N L E Y T
 H E O D O R E R O O S E V E L T W I L L I A M H
 O W A R D T A F T T H O M A S W O O D R O W W I
 L S O N W A R R E N G A M A L I E L H A R D I N
 G J O H N C A L V I N C O O L I D G E H E R B E
 R T C L A R K H O O V E R F R A N K L I N D E L
A N O R O O S E V E L T H A R R Y S T R U M A N
 D **W** I G H T D A V I D E I S E N H O W E R J O H
 N F **I** T Z G E R A L D K E N N E D Y L Y N D O N
 B A I **N** E S J O H N S O N R I C H A R D M I L H
 O U S N **I** X O N G E R A L D R U D O L P H F O R
 D J A M E **S** E A R L C A R T E R R O N A L D W I
 L S O N R E **A** G A N G E O R G E H E R B E R T W
 A L K E R B U **S** H W I L L I A M J E F F E R S O
 N C L I N T O N **G** E O R G E W A L K E R B U S H

With the presidents' names thus configured, we can search the field they form for intimations of deeper meanings, something in the manner of a fortune teller scrutinizing tea leaves for signs and portents. Here, the task is to infer some sort of orphic message from whatever words may be

found to have been formed in the rectangle's vertical columns and diagonal rows. (Any words found in the horizontal rows should be ignored, as these were already present in the letter sequence and are therefore not artifacts of the mystic rectangle.)

An incense-aided communion with the rectangle divined one six-letter word, CANNER, and eight five-letter words: ANNUM, ARRAS, EROSE, LOYAL, MALAY, MOLAL, NOVAE and WAGER. This was a disappointingly nondescript haul, but among the 60 or so four-letter words we noted there were, at least, some suggestive associations: MEAT, FOWL, CORN, SOYA; RAMS, ROES, HARE, VOLE, ANTS; HUES, ROAN, ROSE; COED, GRAD, DONS; DUEL, SORE, LAME, DEAD; NAME, RUNE; NITE, NOON; CORD, TIED; IDOL, HELL; NAGS, ROAR and—not too surprisingly—WAGE, TAX'D. As portentous as some of these words may sound, though, it's hard to see how they all might fit together. Especially frustrating is this cryptically cut-off sentence which slants diagonally across the lower left corner of the array: "A WIN IS AS G—" A win is as what—as "good" as something? Perhaps we are meant to keep on reading to the right when we hit the bottom row; in that case, the complete sentence would presumably be something like "A WIN IS, AS GEORGE WALKER BUSH might say, a win." Is this, then, the distilled wisdom of the presidential rectangle—that "a win is a win", i.e., that in the last analysis, a skin-of-the-teeth victory is as good as a landslide? If so, one is left to ponder the undoubtedly profound implications of this seemingly prosaic observation

Some further revelations of the sequence of full presidential names:

- First in war, in peace, and in the hearts of his countrymen, George Washington is also the first president in an improbably short pangrammatic window in the presidential name sequence. Between the G of "Washington" and the Z of "Zachary Taylor", a distance of 136 letters, all 26 letters of the alphabet can be found. In the shorter window of 81 letters between the Q of "John Quincy Adams" and the Z of Zachary," 24 different letters are present. If Adams' "Quincy" is abbreviated "Q." as it often is, then the two windows shrink to 131 and 76 letters, respectively. Of course, 131 letters is a far cry from *The Beth Book's* record of 65 for a pangrammatic window, but it nevertheless seems remarkable to find such a short window in a letter sequence as prominent as this one.
- Your chances of someday becoming president would appear to be exactly twice as great as the next person's, if your name has an odd number of letters in it and the next person's name has an even number. Of the 42 U.S. presidents, 14 have had full names with an even number of letters, and 28 have had full names with an odd number of letters.
- A so-called "perfect" number is one which is the sum of all its smaller divisors. Between 1 and 696 there are just three perfect numbers: 6, 28 and 496. In the 696-letter presidential name sequence, the 6th letter is in "George Washington," the 28th letter is in "Thomas Jefferson," and the 496th letter is in "Harry S Truman." On the other hand, the fell 666th letter in the sequence—and one should not read any particular significance into the fact—is the first "e" in William Jefferson Clinton."
- If the number of letters in a person's full name is a square number, then that person might be described as being "square-named." In George Walker Bush, the U.S. currently has a square-named president for the first time in more than a century. The other four square-named presidents were George Washington, John Adams, John Tyler, and Benjamin Harrison. (Some might snidely suggest that Bush's 16-letter name is, in fact, squareness squared, but by the same token it can be argued that his name is actually commendably foursquare.)

- Presidents may not be prime ministers, but many a president's name has nevertheless been prime-numbered. No fewer than 18 U.S. presidents have had full names with some prime number of letters in them, which is a startling 43 per cent of the residents. (And what are we to make of the fact that 43 is itself a prime number?)
- In the 24 presidential successions prior to 1908, only once—after the election of 1848—did the outgoing and incoming presidents have the same number of letters in their full names. In the 17 presidential successions since 1908, by contrast, this phenomenon has occurred five times: after the elections of 1908, 1928, 1960, 1968, and 1992. Evidently, we Americans are increasingly inclined to conserve letter counts when changing our presidents.
- As may be seen from the rectangle, the middle names of Hayes, Garfield and Ford are Birchard, Abram and Rudolph, respectively. The three presidents who shunned their commonplace first names in favor of their more colorful or alliterative middle names were Stephen Grover Cleveland, Thomas Woodrow Wilson, and John Calvin Coolidge.

DICTIONARIES: The Art and Craft of Lexicography

This is the title of the second edition of a 477-page book by Sidney Landau. The former editorial director of the North American branch of Cambridge University Press and a lexicographer for some 40 years, he writes with authority about the nuts and bolts of dictionary construction. His main message: the art of dictionary making has been revolutionized in the last 20 years with the creation of large (up to 300 million words!) computer-based corpora of English-language texts, which now provide statistically-valid evidence of contemporary usage. (Citation files, previously relied upon, are biased toward words and usages that catch the eye of readers recruited by the dictionary maker.) Landau emphasizes the constant pressure on the lexicographer to save space, there being far more words to list, define and provide with appropriate illustrative quotations than can possibly be included in a book of reasonable size and price.

To appreciate the contrast between modern lexicography and that practiced a century ago, this book should be read in conjunction with K.M. Elizabeth Murray's classic biography of OED editor James Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words*.

Technical writing is all too often deadly dull, but Landau has managed to inject a modicum of humor. For example, discussing Butterworths' definition of *frog test* ("a test used to indicate pregnancy, in which a frog is used"), he writes "This definition has an engaging simplicity and directness that I find charming. But one wonders how the frog is used. Do woman and frog stare at one another to see who blinks first? (If the woman, she's pregnant.) Is the test positive if the woman's touch turns the frog into a prince?..."

The book is not cheap, being listed for \$69.95 in hardback by the Cambridge University Press (ISBN 0-521-78040-3). The paperback edition, at \$27.95, is a much better bargain (ISBN 0-521-78512-X).