

## NONFICTION

# Racy Presidential Love Letters: 'I Take a Long, Deep, Wild Draught on Your Lips'

"Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?" collects correspondence sent by the likes of Warren G. Harding, Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt .

By **W. M. Akers**

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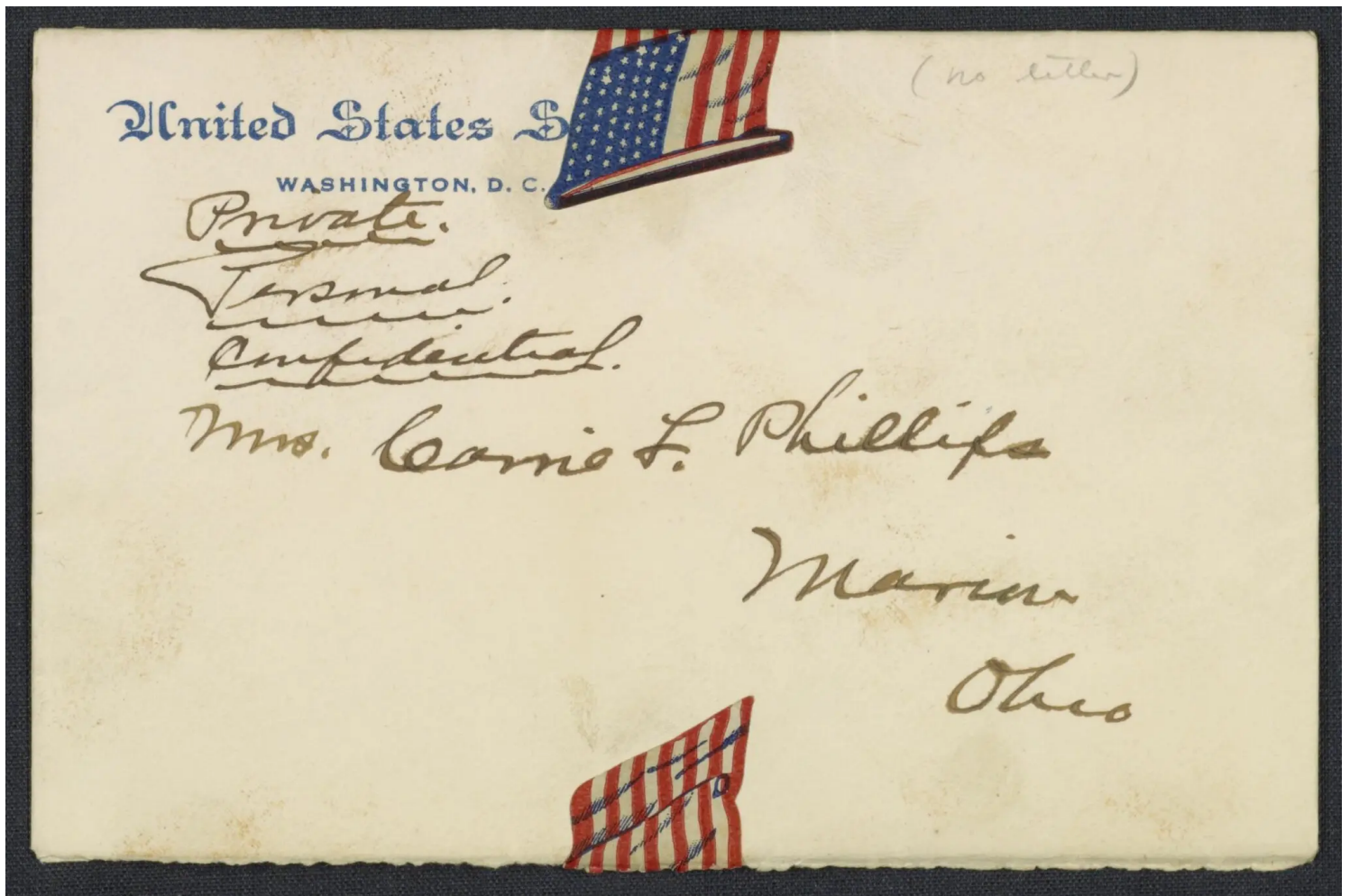
**ARE YOU PREPARED FOR THE STORM OF LOVE MAKING? Letters of Love and Lust From the White House**, by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler

One day in 1904, Grace Goodhue looked out the window. In the building across the street, she saw a man shaving while wearing long underwear and a derby hat to keep his hair out of his eyes. She laughed so loud that he heard her and so, to apologize, she sent him a potted plant. They began trading cheerful letters, back and forth across the street, nearly every day. In one, he thanks her for sharing some candy with him. In another, he invites her on a sleigh ride. In a third, he makes an apology that isn't an apology at all.

"I really didn't mean to call on you last night, but when I saw you sitting in the window, I couldn't help it. If you don't want to tempt me you best keep out of sight."

That young lover was the famously taciturn Calvin Coolidge, who would one day occupy the White House with Grace as his wife, and his notes are part of "Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?," a charming new collection of presidential love letters edited by the husband-and-wife writing team of Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler. Featuring presidents from Washington to Obama writing about courtship, marriage, war, diplomacy, love, lust, loss and eggs — yes, eggs — it answers the question "What does a president in love sound like?" with a refreshing "Just as dopey as anybody else."

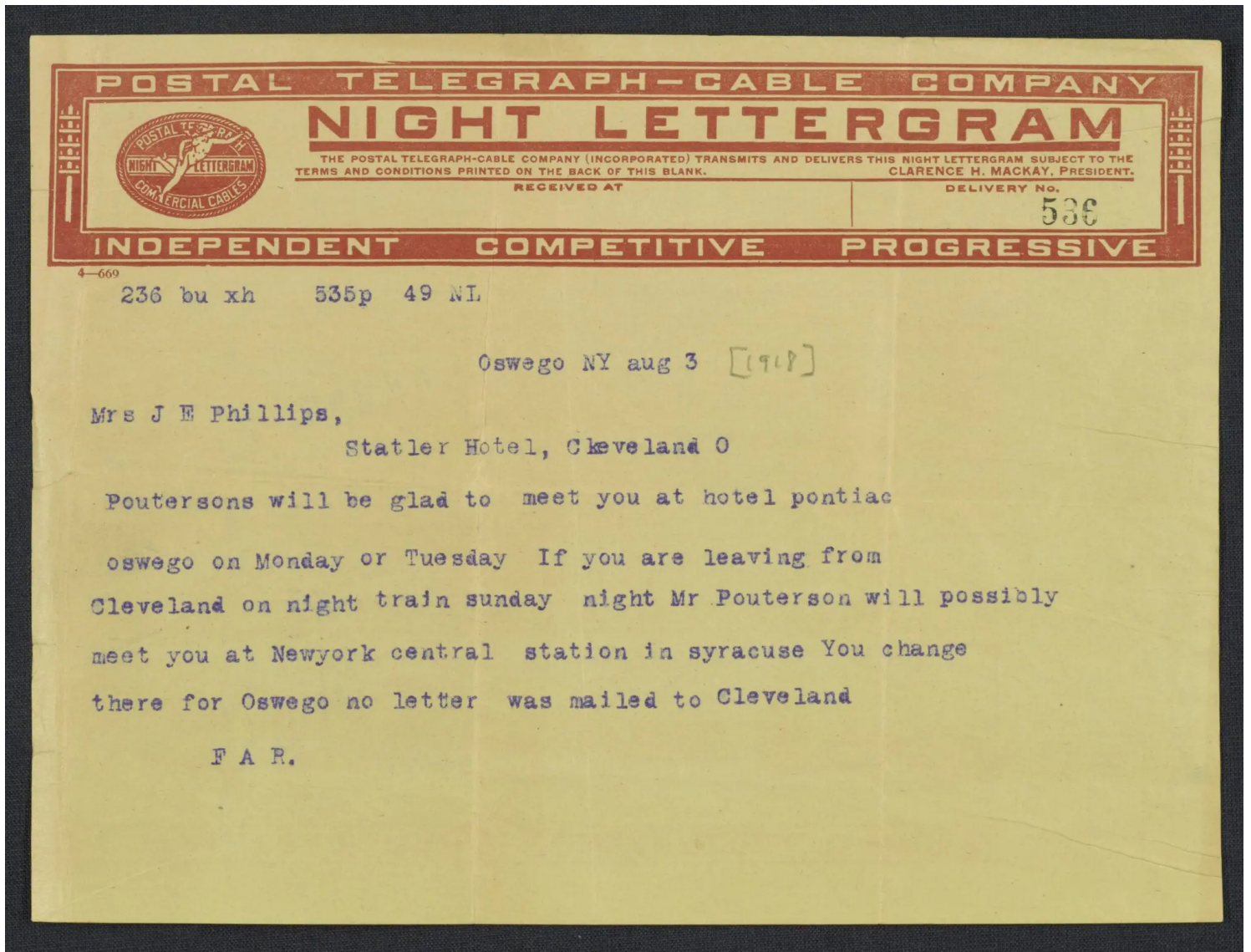
Calvin Coolidge's meet-cute is just one of the book's many revelations. We learn that the famously cruel Andrew Jackson was also an insufferable cheeseball who wrote his beloved the nauseating sentence "May the Goddess of Slumber every evening light on your eyebrows and gently lull you to sleep, and conduct you through the night with pleasing thoughts and pleasant dreams." We hear of Dolley Madison's habit, late in life, of hefting her elderly husband onto her back and romping around the room with him, "whenever she particularly wished to impress him with a due sense of man's inferiority." We are shocked to discover poetry pouring from Richard Nixon's pen. And sometimes we are not surprised at all, as when a young Theodore Roosevelt sends his intended, Alice, an almost incoherently giddy letter that includes an exhortation to exercise.



An envelope addressed to Mrs. Carrie F. Phillips by Warren G. Harding that is marked "Private. Personal. Confidential." Library of Congress

In addition to having perhaps the year's best title — drawn from a letter of Woodrow Wilson's — "Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?" contains what may be the year's best sentence: "If it's sex you're looking for, Warren G. Harding will meet your expectations." Harding provides the book's raciest reading — "I hurt with the insatiate longing, until I feel that there will never be any relief until I take a long, deep, wild draught on your lips and then bury my face on your pillowing breasts," he writes his mistress Carrie Phillips. But aside from the adventures of Jerry and Mrs. Pouterson (Harding's nicknames for his and Phillips's genitals), most of the missives are on the chaste side. History's lustiest letters, sadly, tend to get burned.

The correspondence is grouped thematically, rather than president by president, a choice that makes it hard to fully understand each couple's story. But that structural quibble aside, it is a lovely book, stuffed with romantic details like Harry Truman's declaration that "I've always thought that the best man in the world is hardly good enough for any woman."



A cable from Warren G. Harding to Carrie Phillips. Library of Congress

Oh, and about the eggs. The best letter in the book may be one Franklin Roosevelt wrote to Eleanor in 1942. Though infidelity had effectively ended their marriage decades earlier, the Hooblers note, F.D.R. still wrote to his wife.

“Next year the taxes on \$75,000 [the president’s salary] will leave me only about \$30,000 net and SOMETHING HAS TO BE DONE!” he wrote her. “I do realize that the cost of food has gone up. However, I would suggest that something drastic be done about the size of the portions served. For instance, for my luncheons I have pleaded — when it is an egg dish — for only one egg apiece, yet four eggs for two people constantly appear.”

Listening to F.D.R. fume about eggs is a helpful reminder that historical figures are also human beings: petty, sappy and flawed. Seeing our presidents as lovers does not undo the evil that many of them presided over, but it adds color to characters too often rendered in black and white.

**ARE YOU PREPARED FOR THE STORM OF LOVE MAKING?: Letters of Love and Lust From the White House** | By Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler | Simon & Schuster | 292 pp. | \$28.99

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