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# 'Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?' Review: The Passion Wasn't Political

'How it makes all my pulses start,' Woodrow Wilson wrote, 'when I think of having you in my arms again.' Warren Harding was less decorous.

By [Meghan Cox Gurdon](#) [Follow](#)

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Recent lively occupants of the Oval Office have probably put paid to the idea that American presidents, in their private manners and comportment, tend toward restraint and respectability. Still, the idea lingers that the men who held the office in earlier generations were as bloodless and formal as their black-and-white portraits. The 29th president, Warren G. Harding, appears in photographs a stern and beetle-browed model of rectitude. Yet as Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler show in a Valentine's Day-worthy compilation of "letters of love and lust from the White House," Harding was not as buttoned-up as he looked. A saucy

poem he penned for a lover a century ago begins: "I love your poise / Of perfect thighs / When they hold me / In Paradise."

"Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?" gets its title not from a letter of Harding's but from one sent by his immediate predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, to his first wife, Ellen. Wilson was temporarily living away from her and their children in 1894, and the separation drove the future president half-mad with longing. "Oh, sweetheart, sweetheart, my precious, precious darling!" he wrote. "How it makes all my pulses start . . . when I think of having you in my arms again, of being in your arms again—touching your lips,—hearing you say you love me—seeing the burning light in your eyes as we are strained close to each others' embraces!"

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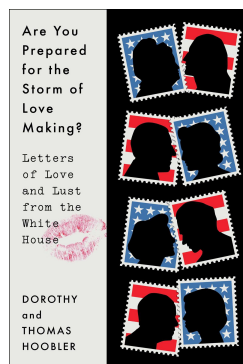
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### Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making? Letters of Love and Lust from the White House

By Dorothy and  
Thomas Hoobler

Simon & Schuster



Wilson and Harding do most of the heavy breathing in this varied (and variously entertaining) assortment of excerpted letters, though a careful reader will see in the decorous prose of 18th-century gentlemen such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson that the hearts of real men beat beneath their stiff frock coats, too. "Tis true I profess myself a votary to Love," Washington wrote to another man's wife in 1758, a few weeks before he was to be wed to

Martha Custis. Six years after Jefferson was widowed, he also was sending ardent notes to a married woman. "You esteem me as much as I deserve," he told Maria Cosway in 1788. "If I love you more, it is because you deserve more."

The Hooblers, prolific husband-and-wife authors of popular history, divide their book into thematic sections and include almost a dozen previously unpublished letters. Some may be of nugatory interest to the general reader (like the dry note William Howard Taft sent in 1882 inviting his future wife, Nellie Herron, to a dance), but others are touchingly illuminating. "How lonesome this room is in your absence," Vice President Millard Fillmore wrote in 1850 to his wife, Abigail. The ailing Mrs. Fillmore was at home in Buffalo, N.Y., and her husband hoped to

divert her with a letter full of gossip and scandal. Three months later, the authors relate, Fillmore took the oath of office after Zachary Taylor's untimely death; three years later, Abigail herself was dead. To read about one president after another, one letter at a time, gives a poignant sense of how brief is the flaring of an individual's love and ambition when set against the sweep of generations.

It is also striking how unguarded many of these men were, as if they forgot that history might come poking through their papers. Perhaps they did forget. Certainly, because letter writing was the principal method of carrying on long-distance conversations before the internet, protective social norms had built up around the privacy of personal correspondence. It was held to be the height of indelicacy to read another person's letters (and remains a federal crime to open them).

History did come poking, of course, and the result is a fuller picture of how these men felt and thought. It turns out that Harry Truman was the same fellow in private that he was in public: modest, humorous, straightforward. Of all the politicians featured in the Hooblers' portraiture, he seems the most fun. Here Truman is in 1911 wooing Bessie Wallace with typical self-deprecation: "You know, were I an Italian or a poet I would commence and use all the luscious language of two continents. I am not either but only a kind of good-for-nothing American farmer."

By contrast, there's a gap between the ruthless Richard Nixon conjured in the public imagination and the vulnerable young beau who wrote of himself as if he were a character in a story in a letter to Pat Ryan in (probably) 1938: "Though he is a prosaic person, his heart was filled with that grand poetic music, which makes us wish for those we love the realization of great dreams, the fulfillment of all they desire." To Jacqueline Bouvier, John Kennedy wrote "almost nothing," the Hooblers observe, before or after their marriage; nor it seems has Barack Obama done much letter writing to Michelle. The Hooblers regret the paucity of letters between the Obamas, a textual failure that denies posterity access, they say with a touch of mawkishness, to "words that passed between them that might give an insight into two of the most interesting people of our time."

It is a shame that the Obamas, the George H.W. Bushes and the Carters are the only relatively recent presidential relationships to figure in “Are You Prepared for the Storm of Love Making?” The Hooblers explain that they were unable to procure letters from others, not least because letter writing went out of favor. “In a digital era of tweets, texts, and emails,” the authors write with regret, “we are unlikely to ever get such an intimate look at our modern presidents through records of private, handwritten letters.” Perhaps we’ll get more detail than we want by other means.

*Mrs. Gurdon, a Journal contributor, is the author of “The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction.”*

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