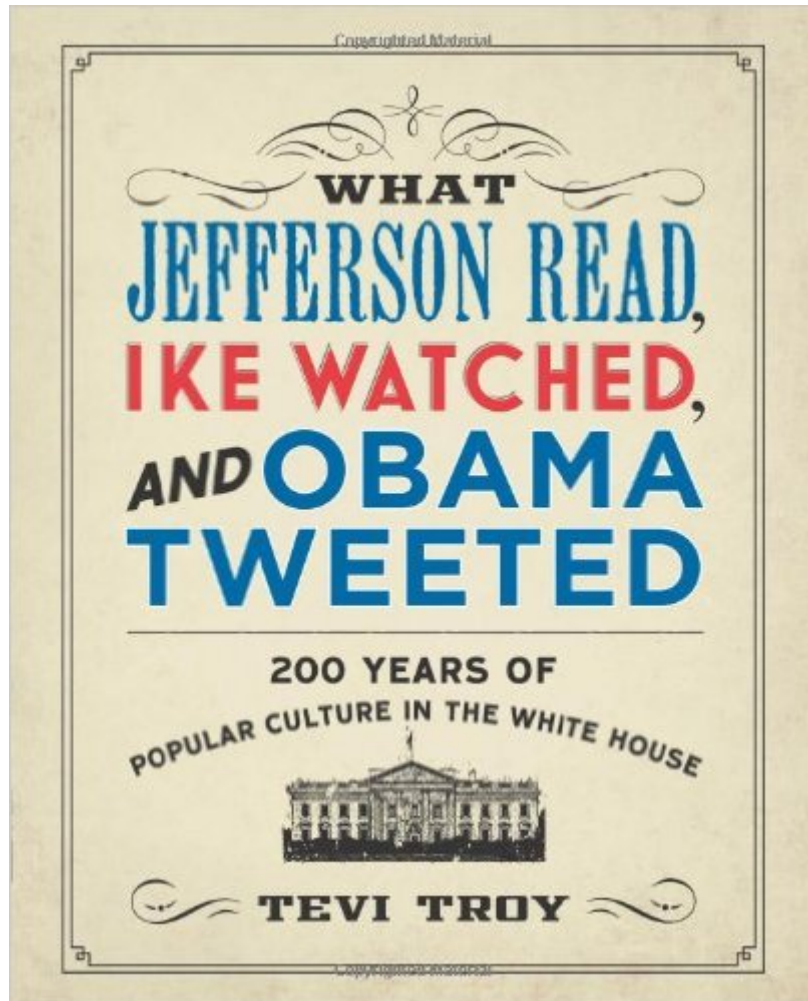


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# What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched, And Obama Tweeted: 200 Years Of Popular Culture In The White House



## Synopsis

From Cicero to Snooki, the cultural influences on our American presidents are powerful and plentiful. Thomas Jefferson famously said "I cannot live without books," and his library backed up the claim, later becoming the backbone of the new Library of Congress. Jimmy Carter watched hundreds of movies in his White House, while Ronald Reagan starred in a few in his own time. Lincoln was a theater-goer, while Obama kicked back at home to a few episodes of HBO's "The Wire." America is a country built by thinkers on a foundation of ideas. Alongside classic works of philosophy and ethics, however, our presidents have been influenced by the books, movies, TV shows, viral videos, and social media sensations of their day. In *What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched, and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House* presidential scholar and former White House aide Tevi Troy combines research with witty observation to tell the story of how our presidents have been shaped by popular culture.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an informative and entertaining book about how popular culture has impacted the Presidency and vice-versa. Ten years ago, Tevi Troy wrote a thoughtful book about intellectuals and the modern Presidency, and now has produced a kind of companion piece that examines our highest office from a different perspective. From well researched analysis of the literary interests of the Founding Fathers (Jefferson's correspondence expressing admiration at how many books John Adams had read, while George Washington arranges a performance of the play "Cato" to inspire his troops at Valley Forge) to amusing snapshots of more recent presidents (Eisenhower refused to

watch any movies with Robert Mitchum, while LBJ had no interest in films, except for a documentary about himself) "What Jefferson Read . . ." provides insight into both popular and political culture across all of U.S. history. Full disclosure, I've known Tevi Troy for years. He brings a unique perspective as both a Ph.D. academic and a former White House staffer who has worked at the highest levels of government. As a result, you get not just an exhaustively researched survey of American history and culture, but also a practical understanding of how government and politics really works. All that and a conversational tone that's easy to read. As summer winds down and we put our beach reading aside, here's a great book to bring you back to substance without sacrificing entertainment value.

In "What Jefferson Read..." Tevi Troy provides an informative and fun exploration of the ways that literature and pop culture have influenced American presidents since the Founding and how they, in turn, have influenced the culture. Every page is sprinkled with interesting anecdotes that Troy weaves into an enlightening narrative tracking the changing relationship between presidents and the cultural media (literature, theater, radio, film, television, etc.). Washington inspired his troops with the play "Cato," FDR used radio to broaden support for his policies and popularity, JFK cultivated relationships with intellectuals, celebrities, and journalists to create the image of "Camelot," and so on. Troy also explores the tensions that presidents face when relating to the citizenry. Too little knowledge of the popular culture can make a president appear disconnected and aloof, but engaging with it too much can appear shallow. Likewise, critiquing aspects of the culture can help a president politically (see: Bill Clinton and Sistah Souljah) but it can also backfire (see: Dan Quayle and Murphy Brown). I highly recommend reading the Appendix first, which provides a series of "rules" and "laws" that serve as lessons to presidents derived from the experience of their predecessors (e.g. - "Murphy (Brown)'s Law: If you criticize artists or celebrities, you empower them to criticize you."). I wish I had read this section before hitting the discussion of the relationship between the president and pop culture in modern times as I am sure that I would have frequently referred back to it. Full disclosure: Back in grad school, I briefly volunteered as Dr. Troy's part-time research assistant.

Tevi Troy, the preeminent Presidential historian of our time, has written a fantastic book that is both part history and part sociologic study. In an easy to read engaging format, this book not only explains how Presidents were consumers of books, theater, radio, TV and movies but how their use of these evolving media influenced others and often their own decision making process.

Interestingly, we learn culture is often used as a means to portray Presidents' images and public perception. The book is easy to read but chock full of nuggets of fun facts and trivia. It is a book that is so enjoyable that upon completion makes me want to read again to ensure that I captured all the nuances and detail. How many history books cause that reaction ? Where was this author when I was slogging through all those dull history texts in high school ? I highly recommend this book to anyone even if you have no prior interest in Presidential history.

The book was well researched, comprehensive, yet written in a very interesting style. The extensive list of presidents covered in the book are brought to life in an informative and entertaining way. This book is a very good read.

Tevi Troy has written a most interesting, educational, informative, and enjoyable book about our presidents, and how they related to the culture of their time. Besides all of the above, it is a great read, with a number of surprises. Jack Polinsky  
Kew Gaerdens Hills, N.Y

President Jimmy Carter's public image is largely that of a dour moralizer, even scold. Carter famously upbraided his fellow citizens in a televised speech for a "crisis of confidence" - a move that helped make him a one-term president. But in the privacy of the White House Carter had a lighter side, as a serious movie-watcher. During his single White House term Carter watched an impressive 480 films. That's one of many revelations about the ever-evolving relationship between presidents and popular culture from Tevi Troy in his engaging and comprehensive "What Jefferson Read". Be it radio, television, online, etc., presidents have regularly used the latest forms of communications and pop culture hits to advance their own political interests. Many White House aspirants fell short because they couldn't readily identify with the masses. Ronald Reagan, a former movie star and corporate spokesman, was particularly comfortable in front of the camera. And while John F. Kennedy's 1960 television debate performances were seen as superior to that of Republican rival Richard Nixon, his younger brother Ted was laid low by the same medium. Nearly two decades later the Massachusetts senator's rambling response to a predictable question about why he wanted to be president helped doom his candidacy. In the conclusion of "What Jefferson Read" the author offers advice about incorporating pop culture and governing. "Our national politics has become a competition for images or between images. Presidents must therefore understand popular culture, even if they don't endorse it." Troy's book is a must-read for White House occupants, their advisers, future candidates, academics, political junkies and everyone else interested in the American

presidency.

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