



# **THE PARTLY CLOUDY PATRIOT**

---

SARAH VOWELL

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS

## Praise for *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*

---

“Snappy humor goes well with provocative thinking about the politics of connection.”

—*The Kansas City Star*

“Charming, funny, and blessed with a knack for finding absurdities in mundane scenarios.”

—*The Sunday Oregonian*

“An irresistible mix of acerbic wit and semi-apologetic fanaticism.”

—*Austin American-Statesman*

“Her gift is one of cosmic inclusion—allowing the natural collision of intellect and personality, rigorous research and generational quirks, dual obsessions with presidential libraries and Pop-a-Shot basketball.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“Sassy, learned pieces ... [Vowell is] distinctive, excitable, and odd in a good way. Refreshingly, Vowell doesn’t just have opinions; she has beliefs.... A singular mixture of whimsy, honesty, and seriousness.”

—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Vowell reveals herself to be a master at ferreting out the contradictions and hypocrisies that are unique to American democracy.”

—*Time Out New York*

“Her disarmingly breezy style often disguises both the solid craft of her essay building and the richer messages below the shiny surfaces.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Part social commentary and part stand-up comedy routine for the intellectually inclined, this collection of essays ... mines history and current events for insights into American life.”

—*Library Journal*

“You may wish that the engaging Vowell had been your history teacher in high school. She knows her stuff. But, most of all, she loves this country.”

“Part history lesson, part civics primer, *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* is a treasure.”

—*The Virginian-Pilot*

“Her grasp of history and its implication is astounding, and so is the humor with which she imparts it.”

—*St. Petersburg Times*

“A solid thinker with a warm heart and a smart mouth.... It’s a great piece of writing, a sharp example of American goofing, funny and true and fraught with deep contradiction, just like the country.”

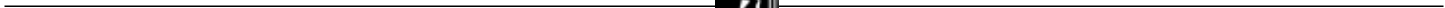
—[Salon.com](#)

“An engrossing take on the suddenly sexy topic of love of country ... a work of humor, nuance, and restrained passion, managing both to discuss America’s flaws and restore readers’ pride in the nation. Vowell puts the reader on notice that, sure, she’s funny, but supporting the quips is a rock-solid knowledge of history. Refreshing, inspiring, enchanting.”

—*Kirkus* (starred review)

“No one in recent memory has been as insightful on the direct pleasures and perils of voting, the misuse of Rosa Parks as a metaphor, the appeal of Canadians, and the relative merits of presidential libraries ... eloquent ... hilarious.... Vowell, like David Sedaris, goes too far, cares too much, and remains a very anxious and extremely funny citizen and shady patriot.”

—*Publishers Weekly*



---

Also by SARAH VOWELL

Take the Cannoli: Stories from the New World

Radio On: A Listener's Diary



SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS  
Rockefeller Center  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020  
[www.SimonandSchuster.com](http://www.SimonandSchuster.com)

Text copyright © 2002 by Sarah Vowell

Illustrations copyright © 2002 by Katherine Streeter

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

First Simon & Schuster paperback edition 2003

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information regarding special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com)

Designed by Jeanette Olender

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Vowell, Sarah.

The partly cloudy patriot / Sarah Vowell.

p. cm.

1. United States—History—Anecdotes.
2. United States—Politics and government—Anecdotes.
3. United States—Description and travel—Anecdotes.
4. National characteristics, American—Anecdotes.
5. Vowell, Sarah, 1969—Anecdotes. I. Title

E178.6.V68 2002

ISBN 0-7432-2352-7

eISBN 978-0-743-23336-1

ISBN 978-0-743-24380-3

0-7432-4380-3 (Pbk)

These pieces first appeared in the following places: “The First Thanksgiving,” “Ike Was a Handsome Man,” “Democracy and Things Like That,” and “Underground Lunchroom” (with support from *Hearing Voices*) on *This American Life*; “The New German Cinema” in *Esquire*; “Pop-A-Shot” in *Forbes ASAP*; “Dear Dead Congressman” in *Open Letters*; “Rosa Parks, *C’est Moi*” in *Time*; “Tom Cruise Makes Me Nervous” and “Wonder Twins” in *Salon*; and “Tom Landry, Existentialist, Dead at 75” in *McSweeney’s*.



---

TO AMY

After every great battle, a great storm. Even civic events, the same. On Saturday last, a forenoon like whirling demons, dark, with slanting rain, full of rage; and then the afternoon, so calm, so bathed with flooding splendor from heaven's most excellent sun, with atmosphere of sweetness; so clear, it show'd the stars, long, long before they were due. As the President came out on the Capitol portico, a curious little white cloud, the only one in that part of the sky, appear'd like a hovering bird, right over him.

—Walt Whitman, witnessing Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, *Memoranda During the War*

---

# CONTENTS

What He Said There

The First Thanksgiving

Ike Was a Handsome Man

God Will Give You Blood to Drink in a Souvenir Shot Glass

The New German Cinema

Democracy and Things Like That

Pop-A-Shot

California as an Island

Dear Dead Congressman

The Nerd Voice

Rosa Parks, *C'est Moi*

Tom Cruise Makes Me Nervous

Underground Lunchroom

Wonder Twins

Cowboys v. Mounties

The Partly Cloudy Patriot

State of the Union

Tom Landry, Existentialist, Dead at 75

The Strenuous Life

Acknowledgments

---

# *THE PARTLY CLOUDY PATRIOT*

---

---

## What He Said There

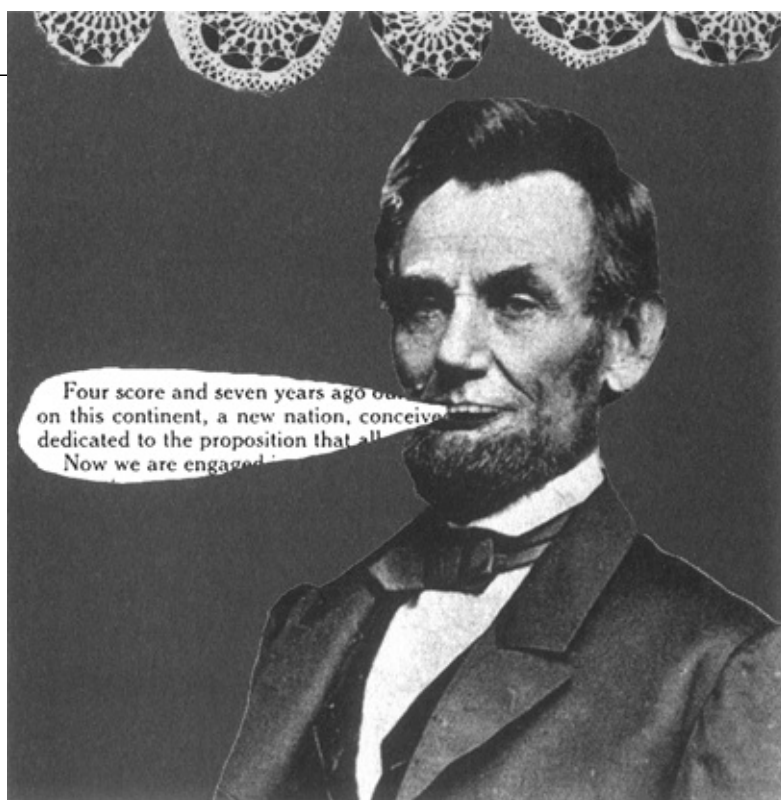
There are children playing soccer on a field at Gettysburg where the Union Army lost the first day's fight. Playing soccer, like a bunch of Belgians—and in the middle of football season no less. Outside of town, there's a billboard for a shopping mall said to be "*The Gettysburg Address For Shopping.*" Standing on the train platform where Abraham Lincoln disembarked from Washington on November 18, 1863, there's a Confederate soldier, a reenactor. "Which direction is south?" I ask him, trying to re-create the presidential moment. When the fake Johnny Reb replies that he doesn't know, I scold him, "Dude, you're from there!" Around the corner, the citizens of Gettysburg stand in line at the Majestic Theater for the 2:10 showing of *Meet the Parents*. Bennett, the friend I'm with, makes a dumb joke about Lincoln meeting his in-laws, the Todds. "Things did not go well," he says.

It is November 19, 2000, the 137th anniversary of the cemetery dedication ceremony at which Lincoln delivered a certain speech. "Four score and seven years ago," Lincoln said, referring to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Always start with the good news.

I could say that I've come to Gettysburg as a rubbernecking tourist, that I've shown up to force myself to mull over the consequences of a war I never think about. Because that would make a better story—gum-chewing, youngish person who says "like" too much, comes face to face with the horrors of war and Learns Something. But, like, this story isn't like that. Fact is, I think about the Civil War all the time, every day. I can't even use a cotton ball to remove my eye makeup without spacing out about slavery's favorite cash crop and that line from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address that "it may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces." Well, that, and why does black eyeliner smudge way more than brown?

I guess Gettysburg is a pilgrimage. And, like all pilgrims, I'm a mess. You don't cross state lines to attend the 137th anniversary of anything unless something's missing in your life.

The fighting at Gettysburg took place between July 1 and July 3, 1863. The Union, under the command of General George Meade, won. But not at first, and not with ease. In the biggest, bloodiest battle ever fought on U.S. soil, 51,000 men were killed, wounded, or missing. I am interested enough in that whopping statistic to spend most of the day being driven around the immense battlefield. Interested enough to walk down a spur on Little Round Top to see the monument to the 20th Maine, where a bookish but brave college professor named Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain ran out of ammo and ordered the bayonets that held the Union's ground. Interested enough to stop at the Copse of Trees—where the Confederate General George Pickett aimed his thousands of soldiers who were mowed down at the climax—and sit on a rock and wonder how many Southern skulls were cracked open on it.



Four score and seven years ago  
on this continent, a new nation, conceived  
dedicated to the proposition that all  
Now we are engaged

I care enough about the 51,000 to visit the graves, semicircular rows of stones with the otherwise forgotten names of Jeremiah Davis and Jesse Wills and Wesley Raikes laid right next to Hiram Hughes. And the little marble cubes engraved with numbers assigned the unknown. Who was 811? Or 775? The markers for the unknowns are so minimal and so beautiful I catch myself thinking of these men as sculptures. Here, they are called “bodies.” There are slabs chiseled MASSACHUSETTS 159 BODIES and CONNECTICUT 22 BODIES and WISCONSIN 73 BODIES.

So I pay my respects to the bodies, but I’ll admit that I am more concerned with the 272 words President Lincoln said about them. The best the slaughtered can usually hope for is a cameo in some kind of art. Mostly, we living need a *Guernica* to remind us of Guernica. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln said of the men who shed their blood, “The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” Who did he think he was kidding? We only think of them because of him. Robert E. Lee hightailed it out of Gettysburg on the Fourth of July, the same day the Confederates surrendered Vicksburg to U. S. Grant—a big deal at the time because it gave the Feds control of the Mississippi. And yet who these days dwells on Vicksburg, except for the park rangers who work there and a handful of sore losers who whine when they’re asked to take the stars and bars off their godforsaken state flags?

The Gettysburg Address is more than a eulogy. It’s a soybean, a versatile little problem solver that can be processed into seemingly infinite, ingenious products. In this speech, besides cleaning up the founding fathers’ slavery mess by calling for a “new birth of freedom,” Lincoln comforted grieving mothers who would never bounce grandchildren on their knees and ran for reelection at the same time. Lest we forget, he came to Washington from Illinois. Even though we think of him as the American Jesus, he had a little Mayor Daley in him too. Lincoln the politician needed the win at Gettysburg and on the cusp of an election year, he wanted to remind the people *explicitly* that they could win the war if they just held on, while *implicitly* reminding them to use their next presidential ballot to write their commander in chief a thank-you note.

Privately, Lincoln has mixed feelings about Gettysburg because he’s certain the war could have ended right here if only General Meade had not let General Lee get away. According to a letter written right

after the battle, Lincoln is “deeply mortified” that “Meade and his noble army had expended all the skill, and toil, and blood, up to the ripe harvest, and then let the crop go to waste.” Because Lincoln is a good man, he does not say this in front of the families who came to the cemetery to hear that their loved ones “shall not have died in vain.” Because he is a good politician, he looks on the bright side. Though I personally suspect that in Lincoln’s first draft, the line about how “it is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced” was simply “Goddamn fucking Meade.”

Abraham Lincoln is one of my favorite writers. “The mystic chords of memory.” “Better angels of our nature.” “The father of waters flows unvexed to the sea.” All those brilliant phrases I’d admired for so long, and yet I never truly thought of him as a writer until I visited the David Wills house in Gettysburg’s town square.

In 1863, Wills was charged by Pennsylvania’s governor to oversee the battlefield’s cleanup and the construction of the cemetery. His house, now a museum, is where Lincoln stayed the night before delivering the address. I walk into the room where Lincoln slept, with its flowerdy carpet and flowerdy walls, with its canopy bed and its water pitcher and towels, and for several minutes the only possible thought is that he was here. There’s the window he leaned out of the night of the 18th, teasing the crowd outside that he had nothing to say. And, this being a sweet old-fashioned tourist trap, there’s a gangly Lincoln mannequin in white shirtsleeves, hunched over a small table, his long legs poking out the side. He’s polishing the speech. The myth is that he wrote it on the back of an envelope on the train, but probably he’s been slaving over it for days and days. Still, he doesn’t finish it until he’s in this room, the morning of the 19th, the morning he’s to deliver it.

To say that Abraham Lincoln was a writer is to say that he was a procrastinator. How many deadlines have I nearly blown over the years, slumped like Lincoln, fretting over words that didn’t come out until almost too late? Of course, the stakes are lower when one is under pressure to think up insightful things to say about the new Brad Pitt movie instead of, say, saving the Union. On the other hand, I’ve whipped out Aerosmith record reviews that are longer than the Gettysburg Address, so where’s *my* mannequin?

Looking at Lincoln rushing to stave off failure, I felt so close to him. Or let’s say I felt closer. My grandest hope for my own hastily written sentences is that they would keep a stranger company on an airplane. Abraham Lincoln could turn a pretty phrase such as “I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind” and put it in the proclamation that *freed the slaves*. Even Mailer wouldn’t claim to top that.

At the Gettysburg National Cemetery, there’s a ceremony every November 19 to celebrate the anniversary of Lincoln’s speech. I sit down on a folding chair among the shivering townspeople. A brass band from Gettysburg High School plays the national anthem. The eminent Yale historian James McPherson delivers a speech he may have written a long time ago to make college students feel bad. Because when he accuses the audience of taking our democracy for granted, there’s a rustling in the crowd. While people who commemorate the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address surely have a lot of problems, taking democracy for granted isn’t one of them. New Jersey’s governor, Christine Todd Whitman, then takes the podium, proclaiming, “Our government doesn’t have all the answers, and it never will.” That is code for “Sorry about that icky photo that shows me laughing as I frisk an innocent black man on a State Police ride-along.”

I sit through all of this, impatient. I didn’t come here for the opening acts. Like a Van Halen concertgoer who doesn’t high-five his friend until he hears the first bar of “Jump,” all I’ve been waiting for is for the Lincoln impersonator James Getty to stand up and read the Gettysburg Address

already. This is what Garry Wills says happened after Lincoln stopped talking in 1863: “The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America.” This is what happened after the Lincoln impersonator stopped talking in the year 2000: The eight-year-old boy sitting next to me pointed at Getty and asked his mom, “Isn’t that guy too short?”

I glance at the kid with envy. He’s at that first, great, artsy-craftsy age when Americans learn about Abraham Lincoln. How many of us drew his beard in crayon? We built models of his boyhood cabin with Elmer’s glue and toothpicks. We memorized the Gettysburg Address, reciting its ten sentences in stovepipe hats stapled out of black construction paper. The teachers taught us to like Washington and to respect Jefferson. But Lincoln—him they taught us to love.

---

# The First Thanksgiving

When I invited my mom and dad to come to New York City to have Thanksgiving at my house, I never expected them to say yes. Not only had they never been to New York, they had never been east of the Mississippi. Nor had they ever visited me. I've always had these fantasies about being in a normal family in which the parents come to town and their adult daughter spends their entire visit daydreaming of suicide. I'm here to tell you that dreams really do come true.

I was terrified we wouldn't have enough to talk about. In the interest of harmony, there's a tacit agreement in my family; the following subjects are best avoided in any conversation longer than a minute and a half: national politics, state and local politics, any music by any person who never headlined at the Grand Ole Opry, my personal life, and their so-called god. Five whole days. When I visit them back home in Montana, conversation isn't a problem because we go to the movies every afternoon. That way, we can be together but without the burden of actually talking to each other. Tommy Lee Jones, bless his heart, does the talking for us.

But my sister, Amy, is coming and bringing her lively seven-month-old son, Owen, along, so the cinema's not an option. Which means five days together—just us—no movies. We are heading into uncharted and possibly hostile waters, pioneers in a New World. It is Thanksgiving. The pilgrims had the *Mayflower*. I buy a gravy boat.

It's lucky that Amy's coming with Mom and Dad. Amy still lives six blocks away from them in Bozeman. She would act as interpreter and go-between among my parents and me. Like Squanto.

Amy's husband, Jay, has decided to stay home in Montana to go deer hunting with his brother. Everyone else arrives at my apartment in Chelsea. Amy and Owen are bunking with me, so I walk my parents around the corner to check them into their hotel on Twenty-third.

"Here we are," says Mom, stopping under the awning of the Chelsea Hotel. There she stands, a woman whose favorite book is called, simply, *Matthew*, right on the spot where the cops hauled Sid Vicious out in handcuffs after his girlfriend was found stabbed to death on their hotel room floor.

"No, Mother," I say, taking her arm and directing her down the block to the Chelsea Savoy, a hotel where they go to the trouble to clean the rooms each day.

It is around this time, oh, twenty minutes into their trip, that my dad starts making wisecracks like "Boy, kid, bet you can't wait until we're out of here." My father, a man who moved us sixteen hundred miles away from our Oklahoma relatives so he wouldn't have to see them anymore, makes a joke on average every two hours he is here about how much I'm anticipating the second they'll say good-bye. I find this charming but so disturbingly true I don't know what to say.

By halfway through the first day, I discover I needn't have worried what we would talk about, with the baby preventing us from seeing movies. When you have a baby around, the baby is the movie. We occupy an entire entertaining hour just on drool, nonnarrative drool. At this stage, baby Owen is laughing, sitting up, and able to roll over. He is the cutest, the funniest, sweetest, smartest, best-behaved baby in the world.

Then there's the sightseeing. First stop, Ellis Island. The thing about going to Ellis Island is that it's



lot like going to Ellis Island. Perhaps to help you better understand the immigrant experience, they ~~make you stand in line for the crammed ferry for an hour and a half in the windy cold. By the time we~~ step onto the island, we are huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

Our great-grandmother Ellen passed through here on her way from Sweden. We watch a video on the health inspections given to immigrants, walk past oodles of photos of men in hats and women in shawls. Though no one says anything, I know my father and mother and sister are thinking what I'm thinking. They're thinking about when we moved away from Oklahoma to Montana, how unknown that was, how strange and lonesome. I read a letter in a display case that says, "And I never saw my mother again," and I think of my grandfather, how we just drove off, leaving him behind, waving to us in the rearview mirror. And here we are in New York, because here I am in New York, because ever since Ellen's father brought her here, every generation moves away from the one before.

It is curious that we Americans have a holiday—Thanksgiving—that's all about people who left their homes for a life of their own choosing, a life that was different from their parents' lives. And how do we celebrate it? By hanging out with our parents! It's as if on the Fourth of July we honored our independence from the British by barbecuing crumpets.

Just as Amy and I grew up and left our parents, someday Owen will necessarily grow up and ditch my sister. And, appropriately enough, it is on this weekend that Owen spends the very first night of his life away from his mother. My parents baby-sit while Amy and I go to a rock show. Owen lives through it, as does she, though she talks about him all night, which I guess is how it goes.

Thanksgiving morning, my parents take Owen to see the Macy's parade while Amy and I start making dinner. Let me repeat that—my mother leaves while I cook. Specifically, cornbread dressing, a dish my mother has made every Thanksgiving since before I was born. To her credit, she has not inquired about my process since she phoned to ask me if she should bring cornmeal in her suitcase. As an Okie, my mom only uses white cornmeal processed by the Shawnee Company in Muskogee. She does not even consider my cornbread to be cornbread at all because I make it with yellow cornmeal and, heresy, sugar. "You don't make cornbread," she told me, in the same deflated voice she uses to describe my hair. "You make johnny cake."

I'm standing at the cutting board chopping sage and it hits me what it means that she is letting me be in charge of the dressing: I am going to die. Being in charge of the dressing means you are a grown-up for real, and being a grown-up for real means you're getting old and getting old means you are definitely, finally, totally going to die. My mother is a grandmother and my sister is a mother and I have decided the dressing will be yellow this year, therefore, well all be dead someday.

"Is that enough celery?" Amy asks, pointing to a green mound on the counter. Is there ever enough celery? Do my parents have more celery in their past than they do in their future? Do I?

I have invited my friends John and David to join us for dinner, and I was a little nervous about how everyone would get along. To my delight, the meal is smooth and congenial. My friends and I talk about the West Nile virus killing birds on Long Island. My father counters with a lovely anecdote about an open copper pit in Butte that filled up with contaminated rainwater and killed 250 geese in one day. There is nothing like eating one dead bird and talking about a bunch of other dead birds to really bring people together.

The next morning, right about the time Owen starts to cry while—simultaneously—my mother jams the bathroom door and my father's on his hands and knees prying it open with a penknife, a cloud passes over me. Once or twice a day, I am enveloped inside what I like to call the Impenetrable Shield.

of Melancholy. This shield, it is impenetrable. Hence the name. I cannot speak. And while I can feel myself freeze up, I can't do anything about it. As my family fusses, I spend an inordinate amount of time pretending to dry my hair, the bedroom door closed, the hair dryer on full blast, pointed at nothing.

Everybody in the family goes through these little spells. I just happen to be the spooky one at this particular moment. When people ask me if I'm the black sheep of the family I always say that, no, we're all black sheep. Every few hours they're here, I look over at my dad, nervously crunching his fingers together. If he were at home for Thanksgiving, he'd be ignoring us and spending all his time in his shop. I watch him move his fingers in the air and realize he's turning some hunk of metal on an imaginary lathe.

The thing that unites us is that all four of us are homebody claustrophobes who prefer to be alone and are suspicious of other people. So the trait that binds us together as a family—preferring to keep to ourselves—makes it difficult to be together as a family. Paradoxically, it's at these times that I feel closest to them, that I understand them best, that I love them most. It's just surprising we ever breed.

The next day, we do the most typical thing we could possibly do as a family. We split up. I stay home cleaning, Mom goes to Macy's, Amy and Owen visit the Museum of Modern Art, and Dad tours Teddy Roosevelt's birthplace. By the time we all reconvene on Saturday evening, my ragged mother becomes so ambitious with her sightseeing that I can tell she's decided that she's never coming back. "Do you guys want to see Rockefeller Center?" I ask, and she says, "Yeah, because who knows when I'll be back again." Ditto the Empire State Building, "because who knows when I'll be back again."

If you are visiting the Empire State Building, may I offer some advice? If you are waiting in the very long line for the very last elevator and an attendant says that anyone who wants to walk up the last six flights may do so now, right away, and you are with your aging parents and a sister who is carrying a child the size of a fax machine, stay in the line for the elevator. But if you must take the stairs, go first, and do not look back; otherwise your parents will look like one of those Renaissance frescoes of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden, all hunched over and afraid.

So we make it to the observation deck, Brooklyn to the south of us, New Jersey to the west, places that people fled to from far away, places that people now run away from, to make another life. It's dark and cold and windy, and we're sweaty from climbing the stairs. It's really pretty though. And there we stand, side by side, sharing a thought like the family we are. My sister wishes she were home. My mom and dad wish they were home. I wish they were home too.

---

# Ike Was a Handsome Man

## Memo

To: Former President William Jefferson Clinton

From: Citizen Sarah Jane Vowell

Re: Presidential libraries fact-finding tour

Mr. President, I'm tired. Who wouldn't be after a decade of sticking up for you? I am looking forward to your presidential library in Little Rock because I am worn-out from defending you. I would like to donate what's left of my faith to some building in Arkansas, where it can be archived in an acid-free box, so I can make a little extra room in my heart and fill it up with trying not to hate your successor. But before relinquishing my duties as your crabby little cheerleader, I scouted out four presidential libraries to help you figure out how to do the job right. Not that you asked me. I just don't want you to mess this up.

We'll begin our tour at the John F. Kennedy Library overlooking Boston Harbor. Partly because your youth and flash have been described as "Kennedyesque," and partly because you yourself have often invoked the comparison, most notably by trotting out that film of you as a teenager shaking JFK's hand, an image of eerie destiny.

I talked to the Kennedy library's curator, Frank Rigg. We agreed that the plainest pleasure of visiting presidential libraries is getting close to the actual stuff of history. For example, the presidential cheat sheet for the pronunciation of a certain German phrase. Rigg tells me, "We have on display in one of the cases in that room the little card on which he's written 'Ich bin ein Berliner' spelled out phonetically. If you watch the film [of his Berlin speech], you can see that just before he gets to the line he looks down at the paper and then looks up and says, 'Ich bin ein Berliner.' I love those little correspondences between an artifact and a piece of film. The most beautiful one comes towards the end of the museum, where we have the video of his tour of Ireland in 1963. As he was leaving, he quoted a piece of poetry that Mrs. De Valera, the wife of the president of Ireland, had recited to him the night before at dinner. He'd written it down on the back of his itinerary."

On the video, Kennedy says that Mrs. De Valera "quoted this poem and I wrote down the words because I thought they were beautiful." Rigg points out how "you see him in the film pick up a piece of paper that he has under a silver jug. It's windy. That's why he has it under there. He picks it up and then he recites the beautiful lines." Kennedy quoted, "'Thus return from travels long. Years of exile. Years of pain. To see old Shannon's face again.' Well, I'm going to try to come back and see old Shannon's face again." Rigg continues, "At the end, he folds it up and you can see the crease. And again it's one of those things where you feel as if you're there in that moment in time."

In this I. M. Pei—designed white box, JFK's life and death unfold primarily on television monitors and video screens. I walk in suspicious. I have never particularly worshiped Jack Kennedy. I mean, he didn't really do anything. Except talk. He spoke of civil rights, but it was Lyndon Johnson who got actual laws passed. And then there's the minor matter of the Cuban Missile Crisis, perhaps the scariest single week in the history of the world. And yet, at JFK's library, I found myself hoodwinked by pretty words. I stood there, transfixed by the film of his Inaugural Address:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.... With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.

“As you may have noticed,” Rigg says, “there are no narrators to our films and our videos. The principal voice is that of John F. Kennedy himself. And we did that very consciously.”

There are also a lot of pretty pictures—home movies of JFK handing a dandelion to John-John, one weirdly evocative filmstrip of the president in which all he does is carry a briefcase and walk to a car. I watch it wondering, Why is this so riveting? He’s taking work home. But I can’t resist him. The man is Medusa: Don’t look in his eyes.

President Clinton, you should milk this in your library. Where the legislative record is perhaps ambiguous, or downright shabby, go for the flashy sound bites. You are such a sweet talker, the Charlie Parker of the press conference Q & A, riffing rhythmically about everything from interest rates to Greece versus Turkey with regards to Cyprus. There are probably too many momentous quotes to sift through, but placing all the State of the Union Addresses on video loops is a good place to start. My personal favorite was the one in 1997 in which you proclaimed, “America is far more than a place. It is an idea—the most powerful idea in the history of nations. And all of us in this Chamber, we are now the bearers of that idea, leading a great people into a New World.” There was one paragraph in your speech at the Oklahoma City bombing memorial service that actually made me want to be a better person. You said, “When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death let us honor life,” And I always thought one of your loveliest moments as president was one of your smallest. Might your librarians dig up a tape of that special you did for the music channel VH1 in your second term called *Bill Clinton: Rock ’n’ Roll President*? There was one scene in which you were flipping through your old records, reminiscing about what music has meant to you. Your face lit up when you spotted a Ray Charles album in the stack. It was a fleeting, seemingly trivial clip, and yet the way you beamed at the cover and said Ray Charles’s name revealed your ability to revere.

I wanted to go to the Dwight David Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, to see how they handle something the Clinton Presidential Center will have to tackle. Which is, if one of the achievements of a presidency is economic prosperity, how can that be displayed without trotting out a bunch of toasters and hula hoops? Without making people seem dumb and materialistic? How do you convey the decency of making people’s lives better? Unfortunately for our project, the way the Eisenhower library deals with this challenge is—they basically ignore it. In fact, you’d barely know the man was president. The exhibit devoted to his White House years mostly consists of heaps of weird but swank gifts he got, like a mosaic desk from the shah of Iran. The museum is great at Eisenhower’s military career. I walk around with its director, Dan Holt, who points out “the original note that Roosevelt and Churchill signed appointing Eisenhower the Supreme Commander.” We pass a documentary in which a corny narrator calls Ike “a military meteor on the rise” and I think, Who cares if he accomplished anything after V-J Day?

There is a lesson to be learned here after all. Mr. President, play to your strengths. Eisenhower’s

greatest achievement was liberating Europe. Your greatest achievement? Balancing the budget. Not a dramatic, I know. They're probably not going to make a Tom Hanks movie about fiscal policy, no matter how inspired that fiscal policy might be. But still, as your White House Web page cheerfully pointed out, your money wrangling did result in the longest economic expansion in U.S. history, the lowest unemployment rate in thirty years, and the most new jobs ever created in a single administration.

In the Eisenhower library, the climax of the visit is D day, in which you turn a sharp corner and, suddenly, you're standing like a soldier on a ship's ramp, facing a Normandy beach. My tour guide, Dan Holt, walks me across "a small mock-up of an LCI (landing craft infantry) and into the photograph that's been called the Jaws of Death, which is the landings at Omaha Beach."

As we trudge across the ramp, we glimpse our buddies ahead of us, slogging through the bloody wet, and the beach so far away In short, this is very effective theater. Which leads me to my next recommendation, Mr. Clinton. What about a similar stage set, only in your library, instead of being a soldier leaving the boat for Omaha Beach, the visitor could walk in the shoes of Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan, as he steps out of a Lincoln Town Car and into the Dirksen Senate Office Building to endorse the Clinton deficit reduction strategy before the Senate Banking Committee!

A word on the people who run these libraries, Mr. President. Fortunately for you, they are very attached to their subjects, very loyal. Their president becomes a kind of mental roommate. And each of the library directors I interviewed spoke of his president with affection, like a mom almost.

Dan Holt praises Ike's correspondence skill: "He was a wonderful letter writer."

And talks up his private-sector prowess: "He was an outstanding businessman."

His book learning: "His grammar was very good."

His looks: "He was a very handsome man."

All the loyalty you would want while you're in office you finally get after you quit. None of the library directors have written kiss-and-tell memoirs and gone on to work for ABC.

I ask Holt if he has any advice for the administrators of the new presidential library in Little Rock. "Bigger rest rooms," he says, "and more drinking fountains. But I think you have to have fun. I'm a true believer in that. There have to be bells and whistles."

In the bells and whistles department, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Texas, features a little piece of Disney World in the form of an LBJ animatron. It is a Lyndon Johnson robot, a robot who wears cowboy garb and tells folksy stories. Have you heard the one about the man who goes to a doctor because he's hard of hearing? The doctor advises the man to quit drinking and sends him home. A few days later, the man returns to the doctor's office. He hasn't stopped his drinking. According to the LBJ robot, the doctor scolds the man, asking, "'Didn't I tell you when you were here that you should cut out your drinking if you wanted to improve your hearing?' He said, 'Yes.' 'Well, why didn't you do it?' He said, 'Doctor, when I got home and I considered it, I just decided that I liked what I drank so much better than what I heard.'"

The library's director, Harry Middleton, who is showing me around, turns a corner and says, "As we move into this area, we show some of the correspondence that President Johnson got, some of it quite critical, some of it quite supportive."

One letter hanging on the wall is addressed to Lyndon Johnson from one Frances Mercer of Beverly

Hills, California. She wrote, “Mr. President—you have engaged this country in an act of war, without the consent of Congress. I consider having worked for your campaign one of the most tragic mistakes of my life.”

President Clinton, I am going to hazard a guess that you yourself have received one or two angry letters. The question arises: What are you going to do about all the people who hate your guts, not to put too fine a point on it. What are you going to do about all the aspects of your presidency you’d rather forget about?

I tell Harry Middleton that I heard a rumor that in the initial exhibition at the LBJ library, there was little or no representation of Vietnam and that the president himself came to the library and insisted that that part of the exhibition should be beefed up.

Middleton nods. “To a certain extent that’s true. There was a representation of Vietnam. But nothing that showed the controversy of Vietnam. And when President Johnson walked through the library just a few weeks before it was to open, one of the things that he commented on was that the library did not indicate how contentious that time was. He said to me, ‘That was a very controversial period. We’ve got to make sure that people know that we understand that.’ He said to me, ‘I don’t want another damn credibility gap.’”

“Do you think the people who are in charge of a president’s legacy are more apt to protect him than the president himself would be of his own legacy?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Unless you get a clear direction from the president that he wants it all laid out. In the case of Johnson, I’ve been director here from the beginning. On one occasion when he was concerned that we might be too protective he said to me, ‘Good men have been trying to protect my reputation for forty years, and not a damn one has succeeded. What makes you think you can?’ So we have not tried to do that.”

Mr. Clinton, here’s a list of things you should not whitewash. Before we even discuss the scandals, let’s talk about the ordinary failures: What about one of your key campaign promises, to reform health care? A fiasco. Ditto Waco. Or the 1994 congressional elections, in which the voting public punched Republican names on their ballots with one hand, while using the other hand to give you the finger. I’m not even mentioning all the half-ass policies like Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, or Bosnia or Somalia.

Finally, you *did* have sexual relations with that woman. You have to confront this. I do not know how. What I do know is that if your library’s only exhibits from 1998 are celebrations of the budget surplus and a copy of the Wye River Memorandum between Netanyahu and Arafat, those of us who lived through that excruciating impeachment trial are going to feel cheated. I suppose everyone has a favorite artifact from that era (insert stained dress joke here), but I always thought that gift of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that you gave to your mistress helped me understand you better. Perhaps your exhibition designers can do something with a line or two from “Song of Myself.” No, not “Smile for your lover comes.” The best description of you I’ve ever read was published in 1855:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Mr. President, take heart. Someday, there might be people in this country who think that cheating on your wife and lying about it is not as embarrassing as being one of the presidents who got 58,000 American soldiers killed, not to mention more than 3 million Vietnamese.

Harry Middleton insists, “I think that a library should not proselytize. It should not sugarcoat and

should not distort the facts or the truth in order to hide a controversy surrounding the president. Otherwise, it's just not fair to the public."

---

Meanwhile, in Yorba Linda, California: "First of all, I don't think a presidential library should necessarily bend over backwards to be objective and fair and inclusive of every important telling fact on all sides of the argument."

This is John Taylor, director of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace. It's about a fifteen-minute drive from Disneyland. Just as Harry Middleton of the LBJ library is doing his job according to LBJ's wishes, John Taylor is doing his job the way Nixon would want. He tells me, "People expect presidential libraries to reflect the point of view of the president, the president's family, and the president's institutional advocates."

I am ambling through the museum, past pictures of Nixon, all smiles in China, and one of the other visitors asks a guard, "Where's Watergate?" The guard tells him, "Keep going straight. It's a dark room." And it is, a very dimly lit tunnel chronicling the break-in at the Watergate Hotel through President Nixon's resignation and farewell.

It does take you back. Have I mentioned that Nixon's face on television is my very first memory? Born in the first year of his administration, by the end of it, during the ever-present Watergate hearings on television, I thought *Watergate* was just a regular TV show, like *Bonanza* or *Scooby-Doo*. My mother claims it was unnerving to have a four-year-old always tugging at her hem saying, "Mom, Watergate's on!"

There are stations in the Watergate gallery where one may listen to the famous tapes, and there are intricate text panels with labels like "What Did the President Do and When Did He Do It." John Taylor says that one of the purposes of this exhibit is that people come here expecting the museum to avoid such a sore subject, and that dealing with it in such an info-packed manner gives them credibility.

According to Taylor, "The most important reason to tell the story is that it happened. It was an amazing outbreak of political passion. The anger that Congress expressed during the Senate investigation in 1973 and the impeachment investigation in 1974. It was passion that had been building probably since the events around the time of Kent State. I think one sees the same effect with President Clinton, who was also a figure about whom there were simmering passions among many conservatives. There was a strong feeling among many conservatives, as we all know, that he "was not legitimate." Or that he had been engaged in activities that had never been fully revealed to the American people. And many of those passions came forth during the impeachment investigations and proceedings in 1998 and 1999."

Offering advice to you and your library director, President Clinton, Taylor says, "I think that it would be appropriate for the Clinton presidential library that there was a political dimension to the Clinton impeachment. And there were people who did not think President and Mrs. Clinton should be in the White House who used the impeachment effort as a way to accomplish that end. Pointing that out is fair comment. We point it out in our museum, and I would think and assume that they would attempt to do so in Little Rock as well."

In fact, Taylor says that one curious effect of the recent impeachment is the way it retroactively colors the Nixon legacy. Even if Nixon looks no better, his enemies don't seem quite as pure. Now, Taylor says, people are more likely to notice the vindictiveness and the sheer partisan glee that are bound to shadow any presidential impeachment.

There's a lot you can crib from the Nixon library, Mr. President. Just substitute the name Clinton for the name Nixon in the following text from the Watergate exhibit: "Nixon himself said he made inexcusable misjudgments during Watergate. But what is equally clear is that his opponents ruthlessly exploited those misjudgments as a way to further their own, purely political goals."

One caution, Mr. President: the Nixon library can sometimes seem a little defensive. In the LBJ library, a visitor's view of history is complicated by the presentation of both sides of the Vietnam dilemma. It's an emotional place, but it still operates within the language of good old-fashioned civility—a president and constituents loudly agreeing to disagree. The Nixon library asks, You want facts? We'll give you some facts! And, oh, by the way, grow up, because you're not going to like any of them.

Recalling the Nixon library's exhibit marking an anniversary of the deaths of four students at Kent State, Taylor asserts, "Thanks to the Neil Young song, thanks to the way that event is generally packaged in the media and in history, one rarely hears about it from the perspective of Richard Nixon. But when you hear President Nixon talking in our presidential forum about what a dark day that was for him, it challenges the prevailing thought that he was callous and unfeeling towards the families of those who had died. In fact, he says in this museum and says in his memoirs that it was the darkest day of his presidency. And he includes Watergate when he makes that calculation. At the same time, however, you also learn, when going through the museum, that President Nixon had to weigh the lives of those four innocent young people against the lives of innumerable South Vietnamese and American soldiers whose lives were saved as a result of the incursion of Cambodia, which was the proximate cause of the demonstration at Kent State, which got out of hand and led to the deaths."

President Clinton, perhaps you're wondering if the Nixon library changed my mind about anything. You're wondering if citizens who shook their fists at your face on TV might someday drop in on a building with your name on it and maybe give you a break.

All I can tell you is that I still think Watergate's a horror and Vietnam was wrong. But I do find it useful to remember that those decisions, even the most deadly ones, were made not by a supernatural monster but by a real man whom we elected, a man who at least believed he was right. And that is not nothing.

In fact, the Nixon and Johnson libraries were my favorite ones to visit *because* they deal with quarrelsome subjects. Once, years ago, I was at the LBJ. I was walking away from a copy of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 toward a photo of a serviceman who had been killed in Vietnam. In the ten seconds it took to walk from that law to that face, a song from a nearby pop music exhibit started playing: "Louie Louie." And I felt like all of America was in that ten seconds: the grandeur of civil rights, the consequences of war, and the fun, fun, fun of a truly strange song.

Mr. President, Americans like contradictions. We elected you, didn't we? So in your library, own up to your failures, but don't stop trying to win us over. In other words, just think of it as running for president forever.



- [download \*The Dark Defiles \(A Land Fit for Heroes, Book 3\)\*](#)
- [Revive: Stop Feeling Spent and Start Living Again online](#)
- [Kurt Vonnegut: The Last Interview: And Other Conversations here](#)
- [read \*\*The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael\*\*](#)
- [Destiny, the Inward Quest, Temporality and Life \(Analecta Husserliana, Volume 109\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [read The Uncrowned King \(The Sun Sword, Book 2\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
  
- <http://www.netc-bd.com/ebooks/How-To-Sell-Your-Way-Through-Life.pdf>
- <http://academialanguagebar.com/?ebooks/Revive--Stop-Feeling-Spent-and-Start-Living-Again.pdf>
- <http://econtact.webschaefer.com/?books/Stormlord-Rising--Watergivers--Book-2-.pdf>
- <http://wind-in-herleshausen.de/?freebooks/Fundamentals-of-Psychiatry.pdf>
- <http://patrickvincitore.com/?ebooks/The-End-of-Doom--Environmental-Renewal-in-the-Twenty-First-Century.pdf>
- <http://xn--d1aboelcb1f.xn--p1ai/lib/The-Simple-Abundance-Companion--Following-Your-Authentic-Path-to-Something-More.pdf>