

"Red or Blue"

by

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I will begin my paper where I ended with, "The Emergence of a New Left," in January, 1998. From George Washington to James A. Garfield, our presidents were right handed. Garfield was ambi-dexterous. Herbert Hoover was left handed. Harry S Truman was a natural lefty but forced to use his right. So was Ronald Reagan. He was converted to the right more than once. Gerald Ford, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton were all natural left. When Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush and Ross Perot ran for the office, all were left handed. The last decade of the 20th Century was the first time Americans did not even have a choice. Bob Dole was left handed as the result of a war injury.

I said the probability is 10 to 1 in favor of having a right handed President in the new millenium, although there were left handed possibilities like Colin Powell. The right handed son of a left handed former president was elected in 2000 and 2004, George Bush,

Then the improbable happened in 2008 for the third time in our history. Both Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain were left handed.

Now I feel more work needs to be done on this topic. Perhaps what has happened is not coincidence but design. Right hand writing was often compusory until the middle the 20th Century. The presidents before Garfield - especially the great ones - may have been left handed and forced by their uninformed parents and teachers to live an unnatural way of life. Their true destiny may have been sweep under the first parents' carpets.

In 2002 I met Douglas Brinkley, the noted presidential historian, at a Theodore Roosevelt Conference in Buffalo. Afterwards , I sent him my Literary Club paper with the hope that he would look into this question. He recently published "The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America." He has published well received books about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John Kennedy, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Regan. He he would be objective in researching the occurrence of presidential handedness before Garfield, especially since Douglas Brinkley is left handed.

However, there is another significant and untraditional way of viewing the presidents that has an impact on how the world views the American Presidency as well as how we view ourselves. Unfortunately, as with left handedness - this view is not noticed or ignored by historians and other academics.

There there are three distinct presidential periods. From George Washington to James Buchanan, or from thr founding of the Republic to the doorstep of the Civil War. From Abraham Lincoln to William Howard Taft, or from the Civil War to the doorstep of World War II. And the current period from Woodrow Wilson to the present. In the first period all our presidents exposed to the world . However, from Lincoln to Taft, a rather solumn era, ten of the twelve presidents were unavailable for inspection with Andrew Johnson, an accidental president, and William McKinley being exceptions. Roosevelt and Taft followed McKinley's new lead with a modest deviations. However, since Woodrow Wilson, Gentlemen, facial hair in the White House has been abandoned and

the traditional forthcoming countenance reigns again.

I should apologize at this time to some of the members of The Indianapolis Literary Club. A few good men have beards and are distinguished looking. When you look at the charter members of this Club who have portraits published in our "Summarized Record, 1876-2003", the five of the seventeen that are included have facial hair. With the exception of our first public librarian, Charles Evans, four have full beards. Charles has a modest mustasch.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to fly in an airplane, drive an automobile, and publish about 500,000 words. He is likely to be the first to use the disposable safety razor, when it hit the market in 1903.

But before I get into the "thick of things" a word about facial hair. Beards are often stalwart looking and suited for some battle fields since they convey an unfriendly disposition, but for diplomacy and leadership, beards may not compliment message of the Republic. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century the world was changing but some countries were slower than others. Here is one observation from a recent book, "George, Nicholas and Wilhelm: Three Royal Cousins and the Road to World War I," by Miranda Carter. She said "George, Nicholas and Wilhelm - or George, Nicky and Willy, as they sometimes called one another - were first cousins, and everything about them was as anachronistic and absurd as their bristling whiskers. All three were ill-equipped by education and personality to deal with the modern world, marooned by history

in positiosns increasingly out of kilter with their era." At least for her and about 82% today's gentle sex, bristling whiskers did not make a impression.

Facial hair grows faster than any other hair on the body, and blond hair grows fastest of all. The average beard grows about 5 1/2 inches a year - or about 30 feet in a lifetime. The longest beard on record was grown by Hans Langseth of Kensett, Iowa. When he died in 1927, his beard measured 17 1/2 feet. I suspect Hans lived a quiet life in Iowa.

It seems beards were not popular with all the cave men. Archaeologists have found razorlike objects - animal horns, flint and other stone - in caves, along with their drawings of short bearded and clean shaven men.

The Greeks under of the lefty Alexander the Great and the Romans under the lefty Julius Caesar found little advantage with a beard, when an opponent with a sword firmly held it. To be on the safe side, Egyptian soldiers shaved their heads.

Beards were in style when the Barbarians - the Franks, Goths, Vandals - determined fashion after the collapse of Rome. Conan O'Brien - to some Conan the Barbarian - has just returned to late night TV with a trim beard and high spirits, and may begin to challege the clean shaven left handed Jay Leno and the clean shaven left handed Atlas Hoosier, David Letterman. Keep en eye out for sleepy looking bearded neighbors.

Like us the barbarians' stubby shoots are tougher than cooper wire. But the barbarians were occupied and needed to save time. Shavers these days devote from three to ten minutes

a day, 3000 hours or 125 days in a lifetime. Some in this Club may save enough time to write a book or two. The time spent shaving could be used to inspect. I read somewhere that if it were not for shaving, many men would not be able to recognize themselves.

There are many hair variables: thick whiskers, peach fuzz, guant cheeks, dimples, curly or straight hair. Faces are studded with between 10,000 and 30,000 whiskers and they are growing 15 thousandth of an inch over 24 hours.

I was born in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, a small - about 35,000 people burried in the anthracite coal region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. Hazleton has the distinction of being the highest city in the state at 720 feet above sea level. Looking west on a clear day you may sense Indianapolis, sharing space about 720 feet above sea level.

When I was between the ages of 12 and 15, between 1953 and 1955, I had the distinction to work in my Uncles' Barber Shop. This was a distinction for there were many competing nephews.

My mother is of Italian heritage and her brothers - John and Paul - displayed the family name, Paternoster's Barber Shop, or, in Latin, Our Father. I should note that the coach with the shortened name, Joe Paterno, was just getting ready to take on his pig-skin responsibilities at Penn State University in 1956. This left handed Nittany Lion is still there in Happy Valley, and, as of November 6, he became the first major college coach with 400 victories. It may do no harm for him to attend Our Lady of Victory Church.

At the barber shop, I worked weekends. Haircuts were 95 cents, shaves were 50 cents. Children paid less unless they dared to enter the shop on Friday or Saturday. The weekends were for adults.

There was tV available and this was not common. Many guys lingered. Those were the days of Joseph McCarthy, sports telecast with a few cameras and no reruns and everyone live, everything black and white. The Gillette Company got attention with the World Series and the Friday Night Fights, Graziano and

Marciano, the real Rockies and not the lefty fiction.

Friday the shop opened at 9 a.m. and closed at 1 a.m. After the hair settled and was deposited, and dinner finished, regulars returned to watch the Friday Night Fights and, afterwards, play a friendly game of pinocle for a nickle or so a point. I remember Gillette's Sharpie, the animated parot, not being too greedy and sharing every other round with some fighter in a corner. Commercials informed not dominated.

Working was an educational experience. I learned not to volunteer without reflection. I discovered two "nevers." Never lift the broom when your sweeping the floor. Hair manages to travel in mysterious ways with a little help. Second, never, never never lift their straight razors off the counter. There was little concern about my fingers. These revered instruments received loving care. The straight razors came from Germany or England and had with appropriate care an expected lifetime many would envy. However, like an egg, a drop could be fatal for the razor and me.

One day my Uncle John asked me if I would like to put some coal in the furnace. I was delighted as Teddy Roosevelt often said. My Dad would not let me go near the furnace at home. Then I met his large furnace with no door leading to a great fire. My Uncle owned a three story building with four apartments. His furnace had a partner, a quarter ton hopper that fed pea coal in the flames with a hidden snake. I volunteered and the devouring hidden snake at the bottom of the hopper eagerly awaited my arrival on the appointed hour.



But there was an advantage. I got to explore the storage area and started my undisciplined hobby of collecting, when I discovered these pre World War II disposable safety razors.

Red or Blue. When someone wanted to purchase a package of razor blades, and did not mention the brand, my Uncles would ask, "Red or blue?" By this they meant do want a package of Gillette Thin Blades or Gillette Blue Blades. Blue Blades came out in 1933 at two for a dime. To ease the ravishes of the Depression, the Gillette Thin Blade came out in 1938 at four for a dime.

Red or Blue was a simple distinction not a simplistic one used to explain complicated election results. Red or blue not even defined in William Safire's "Political Dictionary," the 1993 edition. In 1953 there were "reds" and many thought they were under beds. I don't think Joseph McCarthy thought they were Republicans.

The other red blue connection is sometimes used by women. "When you are blue, wear red." The Hoosier, John Dillinger - I'm fairly sure he was left handed - didn't connect with the color."

The safety razor appeared the same month the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk, December of 1903, and in the same year Henry Ford, with capital of \$100,000, founded the Ford Motor Company and Richard Steiff designed the Teddy Bears. The real Teddy was in office.

Soon after, a 1906 photograph of a man few knew became the vehicle for his being known more than any other person - living or dead - by people throughout the world. Today, some argue, his countenance is still number one.

King Camp Gillette, a forty year old bottle cap salesman obsessed with the desire to invent something was the father of the disposable safety razor, perhaps, the original symbol of our throw away society. He was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, reared and educated in Chicago, and forced to become a traveling salesman after his family lost their wealth in the Chicago fire of 1871.

His employer - William Painter of the Crown Cork and Seal Company - detecting his ability and drive - urged him to discover something that could be useful and thrown away. "Why don't you try to think of something like the crown cork, which when once used is thrown away, and the customer keeps coming back for more - and with every additional customer you get, you are building a foundation for profit."

Gillette's quest began with the alphabet, a strategy that would please a librarian. He worked through the alphabet in order to consider every imaginable need of man. Unfortunately, he was not as careful as he could have been and failed - to the

regret of many to stop at "d" and discover disposable diapers. Odd as it may seem now, he didn't find anything in this exercise: no lighters, ball point pens.

Then while shaving one morning, Gillette found his dull razor in need of professional honing. Standing before the mirror, razor in hand, he saw it all - a razor blades made of steel, sharpened on two edges, clamped together by plates and attached to a handle. A razor blade that could be thrown away when dull. This was King Gillette's second "Eureka" moment, and he told his wife their fortune was made.

Actually, he could have seen most of this in reality, because safety razors were already available. As early as 1880 in the United States, the Kempfe brothers came out with a hoe-shaped safety razor, the Star. But the blade was permanent: a short segment of a hollow ground straight razor.

And, the safety razor was not unsung. In 1886, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes declared : "One cannot cut himself... . Dr. Holmes recommended it for all "who travel by land or sea as well as all who stay at home." Moving trains and boats were especially troublesome for straight razor users.

King Gillette invented the disposable idea of the blade. Prior to King Gillette, the goal was to make a blade last. Gillette wanted to make sharp, cheap blades that the owner would not care or desire to keep, and this was not too easy considering the technology available.

With clock springs, brass, hand vices and files and a lot of time - about 11 years - Gillette worked to make wafer-thin

blades. He was discouraged in this quest by machine-shop experts, but, as he later said: "If I had been technically trained, I would have given up on the idea. I would have quit."

But he made progress, especially when he converted a mechanical genius - William Nickerson - to his quest. This was the man who did the impossible. Trained as a chemist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he envisioned machinery that could harden and sharpen the thin steel blades. (Earlier, he developed a light-bulb manufacturing process that Thomas Edison had said was impossible. But I digress). But fate was against William. His genius was shrouded by a family inheritance and his name will never appear on razor packages, Nickerson. Thus a genius and poor pun was lost to posterity.

Before King Gillette got the safety razor established as a product, he needed cash and did get it from a successful investor, John Joyce, a health tonic salesman and later liquor wholesaler. The conditions of Joyce's investment proved his reputation for making money and gaining control over his investment.

Gillette was President of his company but his title did not reflect his authority, although his product was popular beyond expectation. Within half a century, the Gillette Company paid out nearly \$144,000,000 in dividends; and after his double edge blade patent ran out, there were 340 different safety razors waiting to use disposable blades.

Wars were a boom for the disposable safety razor. In World War I, King Gillette had a visionary idea: Give a Gillette

safety razor to every soldier, sailor and marine. His Company came up with the idea of selling the razor to the U.S. government and allowing the government take the credit for presentation. Four million Gillettes were purchased and the habit was shaving was regimented. Some soldiers were saved by the safety razor kit's ability to stop a projectile, and others had to be told to take the wrapping off the blade before using for better results. Many were spared the difficulty of stuffing beards quickly into tight gas masks.

Gillette faced a serious problem in 1921: his basic patents expired and an invasion was on the horizon. In addition to the flood of domestic foes, Japanese manufactures had thousands of safety razors - no doubt less expensive and smaller - positioned in a Chicago warehouse. The Gillette Company met this crisis by bringing out a new razor, a one dollar model. The company made more money the year after the patent expired.

Then Wrigley picked up one million to use as chewing gum premiums. Another company picked up two million for premiums for a new shaving cream. Then they were given away with coffee, tea, spices, pocket knives and overalls.

World War II was another boom on all sides. A good idea travels fast when the alternative - straight razors - were hard to condend with under the working conditions. Twelve million U.,S. servicemen were more regimented.

By the time I started working in Paternoster's Barber Shop, Gillette sold more than 246 million razors and 24 billion blades. Billion was not a common word in the 50's. And I was

familiar with the King Camp Gillette image: modest mustache, wing collar, stick pin and wavy black hair.

The King was dead then. He moved to California and lost money in poor real estate investments, lost money on date orchards, and, after selling off some stock, he lost his title as president of the Gillette Company. When he died in 1932, he had about \$1,000,000.

A reflection from King Gillette about his role: "... if by any possibility razor blades could be constructed and made cheap enough to do away with honing and stropping and permit the user to replace dull blades with new ones, such improvements would be highly important in the art." He was right.

King Gillette also said: "We waste our lives acculating wealth." More about this later.

Herbert Hobver, the lefty president, named one of his White House dogs Gillette.

Along with the Spirit of Sinclair Lewis, let us go and make a visit.

"His name was George F. Babbit. He was forty-six years old now, in April 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter, nor shoes, nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay."

... "Furiously he snatched up the tube of shaving cream, furiously he lathered, with a belligerent slapping of the unctuous brush, furiously he raked his plump cheeks with a safety razor. It pulled. The blade was dull. He said, "Damn - oh - oh - damn it!"

He hunted through the medicine cabinet for a packet of new razor blades (reflecting, as invariably, "Be cheaper to buy one of these dinguses and strop your own blades.") and when he discovered the packet, behind the round box of bicarbonate of soda, he thought ill of his wife for putting it there and very well of himself for not saying "Damn." But he did say it, immediately afterwards, when with the wet and soap slippery fingers he tried to remove the horrible little envelope and crisp clinging oil paper from the new blade.

Then there was the problem, off-pondered, never solved, of what to do with the old blade, which might imperil the fingers of his young. As usual, he tossed it on top of the medicine-cabinet, with a mental note that some day he must remove the fifty or sixty other blades that were also temporarily piled up there."



Unknown to Babbit, in the very year he reflected on the green issue of disposal, the movement for providing a safe home for these threats was in progress. Pullman cars had a slot in the wall of the men's washroom. Slots were provided in home medicine cabinets. The original blade package and dispensers of these objects were redesigned to keep them.

H. L. Menken offered a spiritual solution: "put them in the collection plate."

I'll digress with a science and maybe fiction thought: The DNA particles on the sealed blades stored in homes and other interesting places await technology to decode, explore, speculate on who did it belong to and what were the circumstances. Some TV commentator may someday say: "We have recently learned Theodore Roosevelt shaved here from the DNA on the blade, and we believe he may have shot something in the vicinity. Reporting to you from Turtle Creek."

Although it irked King Gillette when customers bragged about using the same blade and although the Gillette Company boasted that each blade could provide 20 to 40 shaves, there were many frugal people as well as dinguses. The average life of a blade in 1927 was 8.5 shaves. W. H. Walter in 1926 claimed he used a single Gillette blade for 8 years. There were many other claims, including some from my own father. Depressions and wars do have an influence.

But there were wise guys. One Italian soldier said: "I have to use a new blade every time I shave, for there are no blades made that can stand more than one shave on my beard." His name was Benito Mussolini.

In a grooming article in "Esquire" magazine dated October of this year, the author said: "most blades should be thrown away after four uses." Some are learning the meaning of disposable.

Joseph McCarthy was not the only one interested in conspiracies, when I worked in the barber shop. There you heard: the company has a blade hidden in a vault that would last forever and cost a penny; shaving cream was formulated to dull edges; in a package, the sharp blades are on the top and bottom with dull blades in between; and, sharp blades are made first, and when one is hooked on the brand, the company starts making dull ones. When I wasn't thinking about the hidden Reds, I got to worry about my yet to be first shave.

Disposal safety razors did advance. Thanks to Bic, there are disposable blades in disposable razors since 1974, the year I was honored to become a member of The Indianapolis Literary Club.

However, we should keep in mind that the disposable safety razor is viewed as one of the most important everyday inventions and it is American. It comes in at number 10 and it is followed by peanut butter, the tin can, milk bottle, vacuum cleaner, zipper, velcro, toaster, soft drinks and, number one, thanks to China, toilet paper.

I started collecting safety razors because they are interesting, fun and usually without a left hand bias. There were three basic parts to the instrument: head, the collar and the handle and you could patent them in about a million ways. At the time there were two basic models: the twist to open (TTO) and the sandwich head. Blades had two sided, at least one sharp.

There were adjustables for what was termed the "level of aggressiveness." And, most important, the safety razor was an oxymoron. Although Webster said in 1932 that guards were provided for the blade "to prevent cutting the skin," experience led to a change in Webster's Third in 1966: "A razor provided with a the guard to prevent deep cuts to the skin." Webster did not elaborate on deep, but - in a coal mining area, you view deep as pretty deep.

But for most creative men, safety razors serve in many ways. (show examples)

As a toy: lincoln logs.

As a memory aid: rake, lawn mower.

As a dangerous game like Russian Roulette: Vibro Shave, a 1920s electric. Reminds me of a recent law office commercial on TV: If you or someone you know has died using this product, call... .

As something to impress: "He Man" safety razor.

As a travel companion in you have very tiny hands.

As circumstances change for the worst and you arrive in prison. The lockable safety razor.

As a local favorite: the Indianapolis Barbersol safety

razor.

As a reminder of your station or location in life: the  
Aristocrat or Bostonian.

My long time safety razor was the 1961 Gillette Adjustable,  
the Fat Boy.

The list could go on and on but I must address a serious  
issue.

My draft for this paper included a long piece entitled the War of the Razors. It is a tender mercy that King Gillette did not see what happened after his company began this struggle in 1965 with the Techmatic Razor. It was a new instrument with a cartridge holding a strip blade that could be wound forward and designed to fit one handle. Once the company got control of the cartridge unique to a handle, the company had more control over the price. As with all wars the innocent suffered: a 10 cent easily duplicated blade now could be sandwiched in plastic and sold for as much as \$4. In 1972, The Great War escalated. Two blades were placed in one cartridge and there was a new theory of hair combat. It was called hystersis and it led to competitive hysteria. Hair was now grabbed and held while another blade cut it down. Although this was only a theory, the company claimed the cut was below the skin. This was beyond closeness.

If two blades were devastating, maybe more blades were more devastating. There was a blade race: 3,4,5, and today there are six. I await the mystical and lucky number 7.

When judgments were given - unsubstantiated and inaccurate - they fell on deaf consumer ears. Companies called their new products "systems" and included other supporting materials. The major system were named: TRAC, ATRA, SENSOR, MACK, QUATTRO, FUSION, HYDRO. These systems were updated and refined: power batteries, pivoting heads, friction reducing coatings, lubricating strips, comfort guards and plows to clear the liquids and debris.

Then what I had not dream happened. A new startup - L.P.I. founded by the Tomassetti brothers - launched the Titan 6: six blades, a shower hook and - for what may be the first time in the war against hair - a handle reservoir for shaving cream. The system was subsidized by the U.S. military to combat dry shaving conditions present in other wars. War now fed upon war.

The reservoir may be the Trojan Horse in the Great War and there will be no limit to the effect visited upon the innocent guy wanting a simple decent start of the day. What could be hidden in these handles - liquids, batteries and devices? The safety razor may suffer the same fate as the cell phone.

I don't know if we will ever return to the days when - with the exception of untouchable tenured academics - most men shaved at least five times a week to keep 82% of the women happy or quiet. These guys had simple shaving pleasures with their brushes, cups, creams, tonics, styptic pencils or toilet paper thanks to the Chinese contribution to the art of pogonotomy.

Some tried to stop this war with logic and criticism. The logic of irritation and diminishing returns; the satire found in the Onion. This publication predicted the five blade razor in jest when the three blade razor was released. An official of one of the competing companies explained their overall strategy: "When you do something and it works, you keep doing it until it stops working."

I have stopped collecting safety razors except when I get some great rebate or coupon. I never buy replacements because

all my old disposabled are not yet disposed and may last until  
the conflict ends.

Like his blades, there was another side to King Camp Gillette that resulted in such titles as "Utopian Radical Socialist" or - to the uninspired - "crack pot." He had another "Eureka" moment - his first and prior to 1894 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a city 50 miles north of Hazleton. Wilkes-Barre is between Hazleton and Scranton and there I attended King's College. No connect with Gillette. Our brother school is Indiana's Notre Dame, As a 'day hop' - coal region slang for commuter - I traveled 36,000 miles to college to be granted a degree in Economics economically. But I digress again.

While stranded by rain and wind in a Scranton hotel on a cold gray day, Gillette observed man and beast contending with the elements and commerce outside his window. His observation and revelation on this day was documented in his 1894 book, "The Human Drift."

He proclaimed Capitalism a decaying system, and competition was the source of all evil and wasteful. He envisioned one glorious corporation owned by all the people that would eliminate poverty. He envisioned a megalopolis of about 60 million people living in massive circular apartment towers near Niagra Fall, its source of electrical power. People would only work for a term, maybe five years, but their main pursuit would be knowledge, culture, art, brotherhood.

In short, he argued against his means of future wealth and renown. He argued against advertising and his estimated 96 billion images. He argued against competition for products like disposable safety razors determined by the World



Corporation.

He incorporated his idea of a World Corporation in the Arizona Territory in 1910, and he offered Theodore Roosevelt one million dollars to be its first president. Roosevelt declined and Gillette failed to find other financial supporters.

Some believe Gillette was a man with two separate personalities or compartments. Also, you could speculate that he was loyal to his utopia but grounded in the economic and social realities of his time. His actions did not reflect his ultimate goals. He was noted for being a representative of his company and its products.

I don't know the answer, but - if you accept science fiction - he may have been a time traveler and may have seen the future of his invention. He may have returned to resolve things.

My mother always wanted my Uncle John to cut my hair. He was the oldest. When he stropped his straight razor, it was entertainment: snaps like music. He often talked about shaving balloons in barber school. He was an expert on following the contours on the faces that looked like our native Jack Palance. When Hollywood turned him into the portrait of evil, I rode with him alone in an elevator. I stayed deep in the corner.

All should have on their "bucked List" a straight razor shave. The full works. It may not be 50 cents, but, with the way things are going, it may be less expensive than the disposable razor that claimed saving, when doing it yourself.

When you leave the barber shop, my guess is you will be happy

with a face to meet the faces that you meet.

No doubt your first question will focus on what hand King Camp Gillette favored. I believe he was left handed, although it was not noted in his biographies. Of the 96 billion photos of him, I found one showing him offering a safety razor with his left hand. This is evidence enough for me.