

Obama and Trump in Black and White

WILLIAM BUTTS

LASKAS, Jeanna Marie. *To Obama: With love, joy, anger, and hope.* New York: Random House, 2018. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. x, 401pp. Illustrations. **\$28.00.**

KOSCHAL, Stephen, and CLAREN, Patricia. *Donald J. Trump: A Signature Study & Autopen Guide.* Colorado Springs, CO: Stephen Koschal, n.y. Small 4to. Softbound. 88pp. Illustrations. **\$17.50.**

Two recent titles to cross my desk present such a superb contrast they begged for back to back coverage.

I cannot think of any book-length treatment of an individual U.S. president's correspondence practices in the White House. Even discussion of presidential correspondence practices in general seldom arises. When it does it consists of a few lines, perhaps a paragraph. So, Jeanne Marie Laskas' *To Obama: With love, joy, anger, and hope* represents a true first of its kind. It came about because Barack Obama instituted a letter-writing routine as president that was more ambitious, more democratic and (dare I write it?) more populist than any president had ever attempted.

"Obama had committed to reading ten letters a day when he first took office," writes Laskas, "becoming the first president to put such a deliberate focus on constituent correspondence. "Late each afternoon, around five o'clock, a selection would be sent up

from the mailroom to the Oval Office. The '10 LADs,' as they came to be known – for 'ten letters a day' – would circulate among senior staff, and the stack would be added to the back of the briefing book the president took with him to the residence each night. He answered some by hand and wrote notes on others for the writing team to answer, and on some he scribbled, 'SAVE.'"

Sounds straightforward – but let Laskas briefly recaps presidential mail from day one:

Things started simply enough: George Washington opened the mail and answered it. He got about five letters a day. Mail back then was carried by foot or on horseback or in stagecoaches – not super high volume. Then came steamboats, then rail and a modernized postal system, and by the end of the nineteenth century, President William McKinley was overwhelmed. One hundred letters every day? He hired someone to help manage the flow, and that was the origin of the Office of Presidential Correspondence. It wasn't until the Great Depression that things got crazy.... Constituent mail grew from there, and each succeeding president formed a different relationship with it.... Reagan answered dozens of letters on weekends.... Clinton wanted to see a representative stack every few weeks.... George W. Bush liked to get a pile of ten already-answered letters on occasion....

Laskas gives a memorable portrait of the obscure Office of Presidential Correspondence (OPC) and what a massive effort it was to winnow down the tens of thousands of letters that rain down upon the White House every day to a few ounces of paper put into President Obama's hand every day. Dozens of interns, hundreds of volunteers, reading hundreds of letters apiece every day and coding each one, sorting them by subject matter. The high-level staffer who took the couple hundred letters every day and pared

them down and down until they represented the thoughts and cares of the American public at large.

And just who were these letter writers? Laskas tries to sum it up:

A girl doesn't want her mom to be deported, and can the president please help? A guy finally admits to his wife that he's gay, and now he would like to tell the president. A car dealer writes to say his bank is shutting him down, and thanks for nothing, Mr. President. A vet who can't stop seeing what he saw in Iraq writes a barely intelligible rant that makes his point all the more intelligible: "Help." An inmate admits to selling crack, but he wants the president to know he is not a lost cause: "I have dreams Mr. President, big dreams." A man can't find a job. A woman can't find a job. A teacher with advanced certification can't find a damned job. A lesbian couple just got married, thank you, Mr. President. A man sends his medical bills; a woman sends her student-loan statements; a child sends her drawing of a cat; a mother sends her teenager's report card – straight As, isn't that awesome, Mr. President?

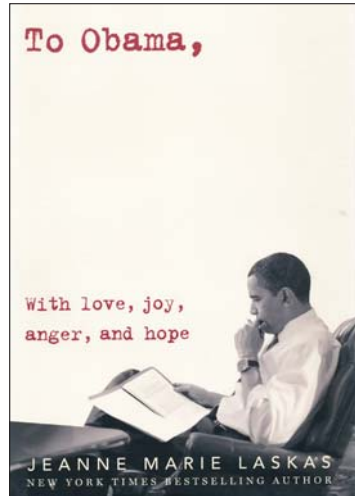
And on and on and on....

In chapters that alternate between case studies of a sampling of individual letter writers and interviews with OPM staffers and even President Obama, Laskas explores the back story behind a handful of the more compelling letters. Some are tragic, some heroic, some infuriating, some outrageous – but all are moving in some special way. These in-depth, journalistic essays take us into the lives of the letter writers. They show us how each felt when finally taking pen in hand, their disbelief at actually receiving a handwritten reply. Even at the Executive Mansion itself the effect of Obama's

endevavor was palpable. Comments Laskas, “it sent a message that reverberated throughout the White House, from the lowest-ranking staffer working the scanners over in the EEOB [Eisenhower Executive Office Building] to speechwriters, policy makers, and senior advisors in the West Wing: Mail was important. And if the mail was important, so were the people handling it...”

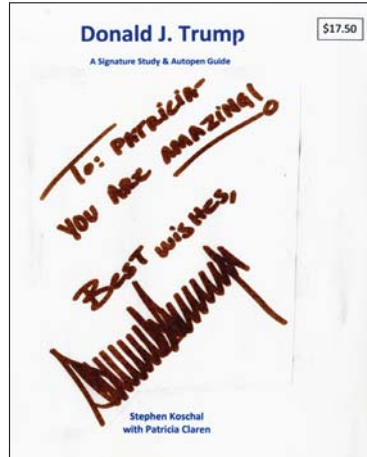
Do the math: Obama didn’t get these ten letters while out of town or traveling, so let’s say he got them, oh, a reasonable 300 days a year. Eight years in office, that’s 2400 days. Ten letters each of those days, that’s 24,000 letters. Laskas doesn’t guess what percentage of these letter writers received handwritten replies, but let’s guess unreasonably low: 10%. That means that over eight years the U.S. president wrote handwritten replies to 2400 average Americans who wrote him at the White House – and perhaps easily double or triple or quadruple that number. And far more of those 24,000 got earmarked for lengthier customized typewritten replies – some even circulated among the cabinet for further opinions. It staggers the mind.

From the autograph-collecting aspect, *To Obama* makes a useful reference tool, though it does not study his signing practices, Autopen usage and the like. It is well illustrated with a healthy assortment of sample letters and their responses between 2008 and 2017. Nowhere else will you find such a generous assortment of unquestionably authentic Autograph Letters Signed and Typed Letters Signed. It will prove a useful trove of exemplars in the years to come as the personal notes addressed here and those from other periods of his life begin to filter onto the market.



Spoiler alert: I'm about to reveal the last sentence of *To Obama*, so skip this paragraph if you so desire. Laskas' closing comment aptly describes the success of this concerted effort for a seated president to keep in touch with his constituents the old-fashioned way: "President Obama still receives five thousand letters a week."

After learning of the hands-on, down-to-earth letter-writing habits of this most approachable, articulate, intelligent, thoughtful and egalitarian of presidents, I admit I wouldn't want to follow this act – in this column or in the White House. If you yearn for a truly heartening read in these dark days of discord and distraction, *To Obama: With love, joy, anger, and hope* makes a refreshing palate cleanser.



For those who collect or deal in Trump material, Stephen Koschal and Patricia Claren's *Donald J. Trump: A Signature Study & Autopen Guide* illustrates a wide array of that stormtrooper signature as well as examples of the known Autopen matrices. Like most Koschal titles reviewed in this column over the years, it is strong in exemplars and light on text – analysis, discussion, comparison. Its usefulness in helping to determine or rule out authenticity is undeniable, although many caveats about the dangers of oversimplifying the process also apply.

The only other sentiment that the Trump signature study brings to mind is a comment often mistakenly attributed to Abraham Lincoln, though I've since learned that it most likely originates with

one of Lincoln's favorite humorists, "Artemus Ward" (Charles F. Browne). Several variations of this quotation circulate widely, and sometimes other likely names are connected to it such as George Bernard Shaw. It's a concise masterpiece of delightfully redundant, innocuously biting, seemingly noncommittal commentary:

"For those who like that kind of a book, it is just about the kind of a book they would like."