

Hot Buttons

Presidential Campaigns and the Century Association



An exhibition curated from the Political Button Collection of **Ellen M. Iseman**



Button, button, who's got the button?

B

uttons have long been visible evidence of the fervor presidential politics ignite in the American psyche. Even in 1789 and 1792, when **George Washington** was elected unanimously, several kinds of brass and copper buttons celebrated his ascension. When he took the oath of office, the first president wore an engraved set featuring eagles with sunburst-like shields on their breasts; thousands of his admirers did likewise.

These were not exactly campaign buttons. They were sewn onto celebratory coats and had little or no effect on the contests. Successful presidential candidates then relied on hard-hitting, totally biased newspapers to tout their virtues and smear their opponents.

By 1828, though, General **Andrew Jackson**'s supporters were destroying tens of thousands of trees to sport wooden buttons and plaques touting "Old Hickory," in commemoration of the day General Jackson supposedly gave his horse to a wounded soldier and strode alongside his men, flourishing a hickory cane. Although backers of incumbent **John Quincy Adams** portrayed the Tennessee hero as a murderous duelist who left a trail of dead bodies in his wake and bedded his wife without bothering to marry her, Old

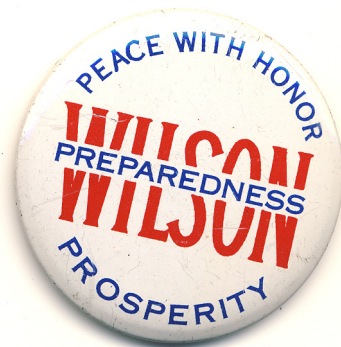
Hickory coasted into the White House, launching an era of personal politics and incidentally founding the Democratic Party.

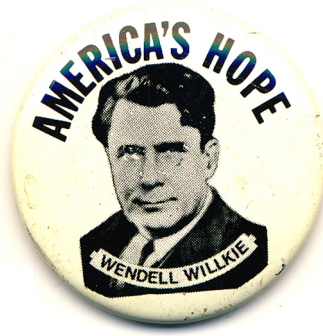
In 1840, the conservative opposition, who tried to invoke the spirit of 1776 by calling themselves "Whigs," decided, in the words of one newspaper editor, to "go down to the people." To oppose New Yorker **Martin Van Buren**, running for his second term, they chose the aging General **William Henry Harrison**.

A Democratic newspaper sneered that Harrison was so old and effete he would be happier in a log cabin with a barrel of hard cider for company. The Whigs turned this insult into an emblem of frontier honesty and honor. No less than five dozen different types of metal and wooden buttons poured from factories, plus numberless ribbons, plates, paintings and flags, all featuring log cabins and barrels of cider. Unmentioned was Harrison's 22-room mansion, which had one of the best wine cellars in the state of Indiana.

General Harrison routed Van Buren, who was dismissed as "a corrupt dandy," and the Whigs' success proved that both sides could make personality more important than issues in presidential politics.

Buttons stressing personality also played a





role in **Abraham Lincoln's** 1860 run for the presidency. When an old friend recalled that Abe had been an expert rail-splitter in his youth, the image stuck. Banners declared him "*Prince of Rails*" and supporters wore "medals" — metal tokens worn in lapels — displaying a split rail or an axe. Thus the Illinois corporate lawyer became a symbol of humble origins, the mystique of the frontier and the dignity of free labor — the perfect man to challenge the Democratic Party's defense of southern slavery.

In 1876, the CENTURY ASSOCIATION got into the game with its first candidate, New York's Democratic governor, **SAMUEL B. TILDEN**. Mudslinging was the order of the day. One button accused Tilden of suffering from "*lo-quendi-Rhoea*" — verbal diarrhea. Sam won the popular vote but the Republicans purchased enough southern electors to make Ohio's **Rutherford B. Hayes** the winner by one vote.

Four years later, another CENTURION, **CHES-TER A. ARTHUR**, ran as **James Garfield's** vice president and ascended to the White House when an assassin cut down the Ohio soldier.

Succeeding him was CENTURION **GROVER CLEVELAND**, who won two terms in spite of admitting he had fathered a son out of wedlock in his youth. "*Ma Ma, where's my Pa?*" the Republicans chanted. But no one had the nerve to put it on a button, and soon the Democrats were replying "*Gone to the White*

House, Ha Ha Ha."

In 1896, a Bostonian named **Amanda Lougee** invented the celluloid campaign button and transformed the genre. Costing as little as a cent, they multiplied by the millions. That year they played a major role in the clash between Republican **William McKinley**, defender of the financial status quo, and Democrat **William Jennings Bryan** with his radical war cry: "*You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.*"

When an assassin felled McKinley in 1901, another CENTURION vice president stepped onto the national stage: **THEODORE ROOSEVELT**. Few people could match his dynamic and explosive personality. In 1904, he handily trounced **ALTON B. PARKER**, who joined the CENTURY within months of his defeat. One historian described Parker's campaign as "catatonic," and noted as proof that he had chosen the oldest vice presidential candidate in American history, eighty-year-old **Henry Gassaway Davis**. How Parker got past the Committee on Admissions remains a mystery.

Roosevelt was succeeded by his protégé, portly **WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT**. Republican buttons played up his weight, predicting he would "*win votes by the pound.*" But Teddy turned on Big Bill in 1912, splitting the Grand Old Party and handing the White House to another CENTURION, Democrat **WOODROW WILSON**; the CENTURY took in Taft as a conso-



lation prize.

In 1932, with the Great Depression darkening the land, Democrats ordered thousands of buttons featuring donkeys as “depression busters” kicking hapless elephants off cliffs. The contest was another intra-CENTURY clash, between **HERBERT HOOVER** and **FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT**. The New York Times once listed Hoover as one of the ten greatest Americans. Now he was pilloried on buttons that declared: “*Cheer up. The worst is over. Only a few more months of Hoover.*” When FDR ran for an unprecedented third term in 1940, the Republicans nominated another CENTURION, **WENDELL WILLKIE**. No fewer than 54 million buttons were soon in circulation. Nothing was sacred — not even Mrs. Roosevelt. Numerous buttons proclaimed “*We don’t want Eleanor either*” and “*Eleanor? No soap!*” But FDR remained unbeaten.

In 1952 and ’56, two more CENTURIONS went head-to-head: **DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER** versus **ADLAI STEVENSON**. The General trounced the Illinois intellectual both times. Some credit goes to the slogan, “*I like Ike,*” which appeared on millions of campaign buttons.

Only one more CENTURION has so far made a race for the White House: Senator **GEORGE MCGOVERN** in 1972. His opponent was **Richard Nixon**, running for a second term. A “*Gay Citizens for McGovern*” in this race was the first button of its kind. Also prominent were boldly feminist denunciations of Nixon. McGovern said Nixon was the most corrupt president in American history. But the man who would join the club in 2008 lost by

twenty million votes.

CENTURIONS turned into mere spectators now, but campaign buttons took another spin in the sun with **Ronald Reagan**. His first campaign projected him on millions of buttons as a virile westerner, complete with cowboy hat. Other buttons told **Jimmy Carter** it was time to go back to his Georgia peanut farm: “*The Reagans are coming!*” For his run in 1984, Reagan’s campaign circulated a button with multicolored blinking lights and a band playing the national anthem.

Do buttons, medalets, and other campaign artifacts play a decisive role in electing candidates? Most of the time, no. But they have made a difference in some races by personalizing a candidate’s appeal, trumping ideologies and party lines. The log cabin that transformed William Henry Harrison, the rail-splitter image that humanized Abraham Lincoln and the cowboy hat that westernized Ronald Reagan show that images can be more powerful than words. When you wear a button with that kind of magic, you can experience the rare pleasure of having an impact on American history larger than your single vote. Of course, the pleasure would be redoubled if your winning candidate happens to be a **CENTURION**.



THOMAS FLEMING is an American historian, biographer, and historical novelist whose first book, *Now We Are Enemies*, was the first re-examination of the Battle of Bunker Hill written in the 20th Century.

Centurions and the Presidency

Name	Years Served	Year Lost	Dates of Century Membership
Samuel J. Tilden		1876	1866-1886
Won popular vote by 3 percent margin but lost in the Electoral College			
Chester A. Arthur	1881-1885		1867-1886
Grover Cleveland	1885-1889		1884-1919
Grover Cleveland		1888	1884-1919
Grover Cleveland	1889-1897		1884-1919
Theodore Roosevelt	1901-1909		1884-1919
William Howard Taft*	1909-1913		1913-1930
Alton B. Parker*		1904	1905-1926
Woodrow Wilson	1913-1924		1913-1930
William Howard Taft		1912	1922-1945
Won popular vote by 100,000 but lost by one vote in Electoral College			
Charles Evans Hughes*		1916	1948-1961
John W. Davis		1924	1921-1955
Herbert C. Hoover*	1929-1933		1919-1964
Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933-1945		1922-1945
Wendell Wilkie*		1940	1937-1944
Dwight D. Eisenhower	1953-1961		1948-1961
Adlai E. Stevenson*		1952	1952-1965
Adlai E. Stevenson*		1956	1952-1965
George McGovern		1972	2008-2010

* Lost to a Centurion

Taken from *Centurions in Public Service* by FREDERIC S. NATHAN, 2010

The Election of 1912

Introduction

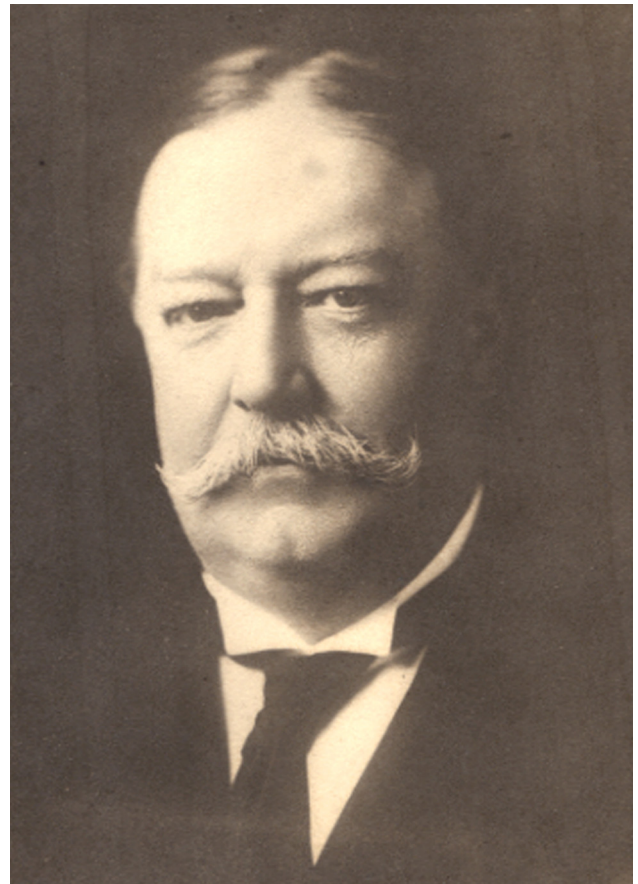
It was a memorable presidential election with four very different candidates: an incumbent Republican President (WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT) who didn't want to win; a second Republican (THEODORE ROOSEVELT) who split the party and caused them both to lose; a passionate socialist (Eugene V. Debs) whose platform was hijacked by both parties; and a Democrat (WOODROW WILSON), who was a former ivy-league college president and never thought he would win until he did. Three of the four candidates were Centurions, and each valued the Club for its strategic location in New York and for its privacy. When they were here, you would see the press outside the Club's doors, waiting for them to reappear and explain to the world what may have been discussed inside. For Roosevelt, a member since 1884 (his father was a member from the 1860s), use of the Club was a matter of convenience whenever he was in the City and away from his Sagamore Hill home at Oyster Bay. For Wilson, who joined the Club in 1904, important decisions were incubated relating to his political future. For Taft, who joined the Club following his presidential campaign defeat in 1912, it was a stop on the way to meet friends in the City and in the northeast.

The Candidates

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT and THEODORE ROOSEVELT

A great American political relationship.

Most historians agree that Taft's presidency (1909-1913) was designed to continue the agenda of his close friend and mentor Theodore Roosevelt (President from 1901-1909), Taft, a native of Ohio and the former Secretary of War, was encouraged by Roosevelt to run for President in 1908, even though he would have preferred a judicial career instead. Always overweight (weighing over 300 pounds) but apparently nimble for his size, he was deeply conservative in his politics and strongly supported by big business. Early in his term, his wife suffered a debilitating stroke which abruptly changed his focus from Washington politics to overseeing her long recovery and finding solace on the golf course.



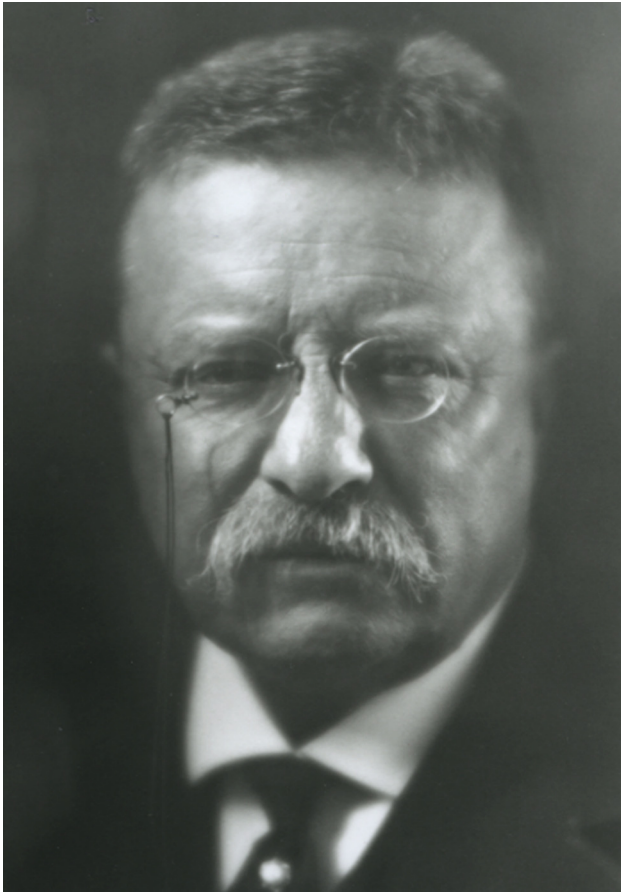
Taft

Roosevelt, the former New York City Police Commissioner, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, "Rough Rider" war hero, New York Governor, Vice President, and President following the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901, was satisfied with Taft's 1908 election, and set off to explore uncharted areas of the globe, this time the inner jungles of Africa. A natural Republican leader, he began to envision new ideas and programs within the less conservative, progressive movement of his party. In early 1912 toward the end of Taft's term of office, Roosevelt met at the Club with his former Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield, a trusted friend from Ohio and the son of former President James Garfield, to discuss Taft's failures as President and the possibility of replacing him in 1912 as a progressive Republican. The great friendship of Taft and Roosevelt was about to unravel.

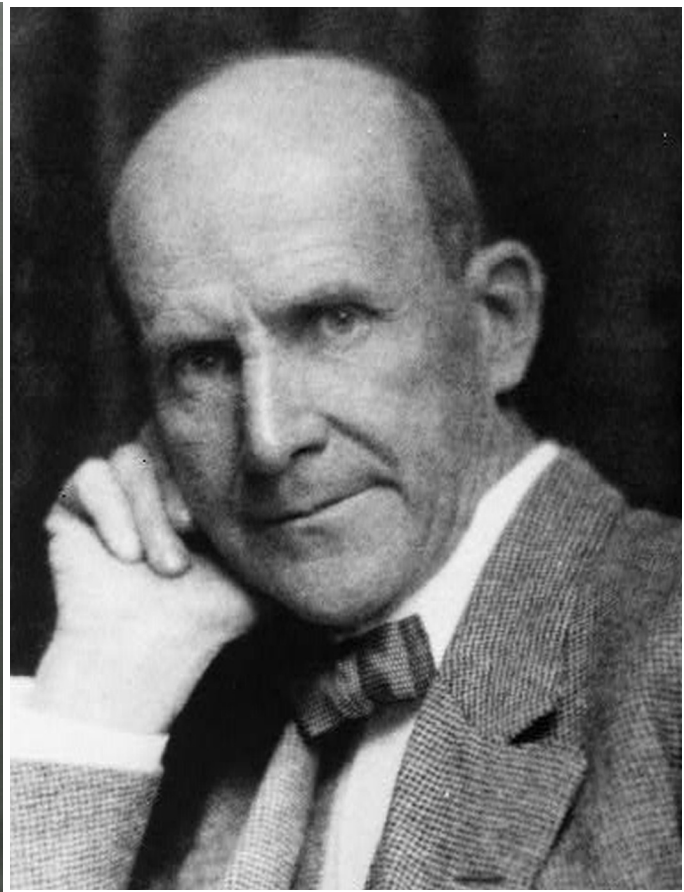
Eugene V. Debs

A sensational orator with a radical message.

Born in Indiana in the mid-nineteenth century, Debs left high school before graduation to work on the railroad, first as a grease cleaner of the wheels of steam engines and soon as a fireman, even as he completed business school courses at night. Here, and over ensuing forma-



Roosevelt



Debs

tive years, Debs forged two powerful, lifelong themes: the unrewarded life of workingmen and the enduring value of the American small town community. Joining the rising national labor movement and surviving its Darwinian struggle against political bosses, capitalists, and industry, including the Pullman rail car strike of 1894, Debs became the clarion voice of industrial unionism and American socialism, and was revered by thousands of working people. He was a regular presidential candidate in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920.

WOODROW WILSON.

An academic leader uneasy with people and politics

Born in Virginia and raised under the strict eye of a Presbyterian minister father, Woodrow Wilson early on developed personal traits of being cautious, uncompromising, and unforgiving that later clouded his brilliant academic and political careers. With an undergraduate degree from Princeton University (where he was a fine debater), a year of studying law at the University of Virginia, and a PhD degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1883, he worked as a lawyer in Atlanta before beginning a college teaching career in the northeast. By 1902, he had become president of Princeton. At a dinner at the Century in 1904, George Harvey, editor

of *Harper's Weekly*, convinced Wilson to enter the political arena and run as a Democrat for the governorship of New Jersey, which he won in 1910, inaugurating his future rise in the national Democratic Party.

The Campaign and Election of 1912

*"My hat is in the ring, the fight is on,
and I am stripped to the buff."*

(Roosevelt in early 1912)

*"It is hard, very hard...to see a devoted friendship
slipping away like a rope of sand."*

(Taft on Roosevelt in 1912)

Taft was heartbroken by news of Roosevelt's decision to run. But by early June in Chicago as the Republican Convention began, he had organized a battalion of delegates and operatives to assure — no matter what — that votes would go in his favor on behalf of the party's traditional conservative platform. It helped that the influential statesman ELIHU ROOT, former Secretary of State under Roosevelt (and a Centurion), whom Taft could trust, became chairman of the convention. Also helpful were Roosevelt's delegates who realized that they didn't have sufficient votes to win and angrily refused to vote at all. Taft became the Republican Party candidate.



Wilson

Roosevelt was convinced that his bid for the presidency was a moral duty to redress conservative limitations of the Taft administration. He arrived at the Chicago convention to crowds, confetti, and high optimism. Presenting a reformist platform against political machines, industry's grip on Washington, and the unfair conditions of American workers, he was stunned by Taft's nomination and his own defeat. He and his supporters quickly re-gathered in Chicago's Orchestra Hall, where a new Progressive Party was formed with him as its candidate. Answering a reporter who asked for his thoughts on the momentous split taking place in the Republican Party, he responded prophetically, *"I'm feeling like a bull moose!"* Naturally, the newly minted Progressive Party soon became known as "The Bull Moose Party."

A month earlier, the Socialist convention took place in Indianapolis. Debs chose not to attend because of a Socialist Party policy schism between radical and democratic tactics in labor issues, but his candidacy appeared on the first ballot, and he easily won, mainly because of his stature as great orator and ability to find compromise among his party's radical factions.

The Democratic Party chose Baltimore as the site of its convention, which also was held in June. Wilson decided to stay at his seaside home at Sea Girt, New Jersey. For days,

telegraph wires at Sea Girt hummed with discouraging messages of delegates grappling in Baltimore with their own versions of an emerging national progressive platform. Wilson, often in his pajamas and beyond despair by the number of ballots being taken, almost conceded defeat; on the forty-sixth ballot, however, he won the nomination.

The four month campaign that followed can best be viewed as four private trains criss-crossing America, each with a mail car (for brochures and bunting), a coach car for the press and campaign operatives, a sleeping car for the Presidential candidate, and an observation car that opened to a platform in the back for hundreds of "whistle-stop" speeches. Sensing defeat, Taft chose to campaign as little as possible. Roosevelt, ever enthusiastic, attracted crowds across the country, but leaving his train for an auditorium speech in Racine, Wisconsin, while standing in an open car and waving to crowds, he was shot in the chest by an assassin. Insisting that he was all right, he gave the speech (including the immortal line *"It takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose."*).

He soon discovered that the bullet had gone through a fifty-page speech in his pocket as well as his glasses case, saving his life, although it entered his chest. Twenty exhausting speeches a day, even surviving an assassin's bullet, weren't enough, and he lost the election to Wilson.

Looking back, Wilson's win can be attributed to his strong support from southern conservatives who were assured that Jim Crow laws against blacks would be continued, and from western border states that aligned with the South. It also is true that the combined number of Taft's and Roosevelt's votes would have defeated Wilson anyway, which argues for viewing Roosevelt's split of the Republican Party in 1912 as a strategic political mistake.

Aftermath of the election

Over the next eight years, Wilson led the country through the First World War but failed to win Senate approval for the forward-looking League of Nations. In 1918, Wilson had Debs arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for sedition, and he cruelly refused to pardon him at the end of his presidency in 1920. Newly inaugurated President Warren Harding, however, immediately pardoned Debs in 1921. Also in that year, Harding appointed Taft to be the Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court.

Roosevelt looked in vain to find something worthwhile to do. Even an expedition up the River of Doubt in Brazil in 1913-1914 didn't help. Visiting the Century afterwards, he was described by a Club member as "the loneliest man in the country, struggling to get back somewhere." In Chicago in 1918, Taft happened upon Roosevelt seated alone at a table at a restaurant, and for the first time in many years, they embraced and had dinner together. It is said that everyone in the restaurant cheered.

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The Story of a Family Collection

ELLEN M. ISEMAN
September, 2012

With my family history, the idea of collecting political campaign buttons came naturally. My grandfather, Alfred Frankenthaler, was a Democratic judge in New York in the 1920s and 1930s. His brother, George Frankenthaler, served as a Republican judge and later as the Republican Surrogate of New York County. My mother, Marjorie, who was born in 1922, grew up hearing about her father's campaign efforts (she gave me some of my grandfather's printed campaign handouts, which I keep in a drawer). She became interested in political races and the ephemera that accompanied them.

Mom, as a kid, I think, started collecting political buttons from both parties; her interests ranged from mayoral to congressional to presidential contests. Her earliest item carries a photograph of William McKinley, who first ran for president in 1896. She built the collection gradually, over many years.

Today, it includes scores of buttons for the presidential

campaigns of such candidates as Franklin Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, as well as numerous politicians who tried to win the Democratic or Republican nominations but failed, including Frank Church and Morris Udall. Mom also collected buttons for third-party candidates, including the 1968 presidential running mate of American Independent Party candidate George Wallace, Curtis LeMay, a former head of the Strategic Air Command of the U.S. Air Force.

My wonderfully original, bright mother, who earned a degree from Vassar College and trained as a journalist, first got me engaged in her political button project when I worked on the 1976 Issues Staff of the Carter/Mondale campaign in Atlanta. From then on, I was "hooked"; I picked up buttons, usually free in those days, whenever I could.

I attended several Democratic National Conventions between 1980 and 2008, including the 1984 Convention at the Moscone Center in San Francisco (where Walter Mondale was nominated as the presidential candidate and I had a seat on the Platform Committee). Street vendors and button purveyors inside the convention halls helped to fill my purse with an array of new buttons to bring home to Mom in New York. In her study, we would place the buttons in separate envelopes and file them alphabetically. Then we would store them in shoeboxes.

The collection has grown over the decades. It now encompasses buttons of practically all sizes, shapes, and colors, as well as some lapel pins. Mostly it contains regular campaign buttons—sometimes with vice presidential candidates cited, such as the "Republican Candidates 1912 Taft/Sherman" button—but it also encompasses buttons with humorous commentary. There are also some odd ones in the group—for example, "Nixon's the One" in French, German, Italian, and other languages.

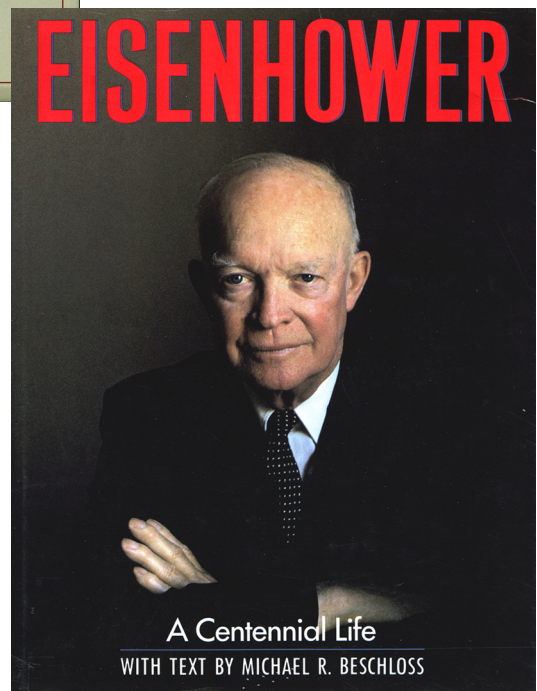
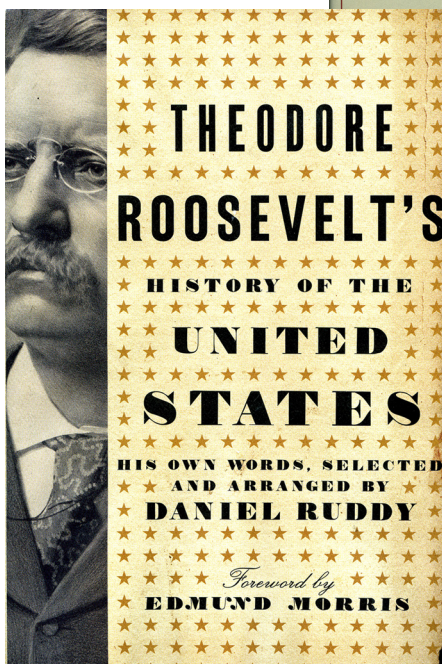
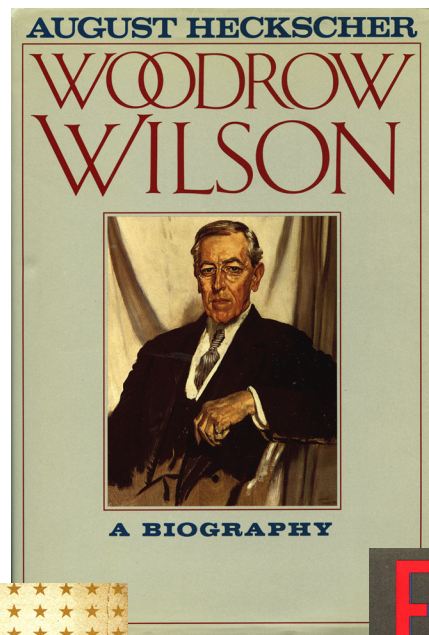
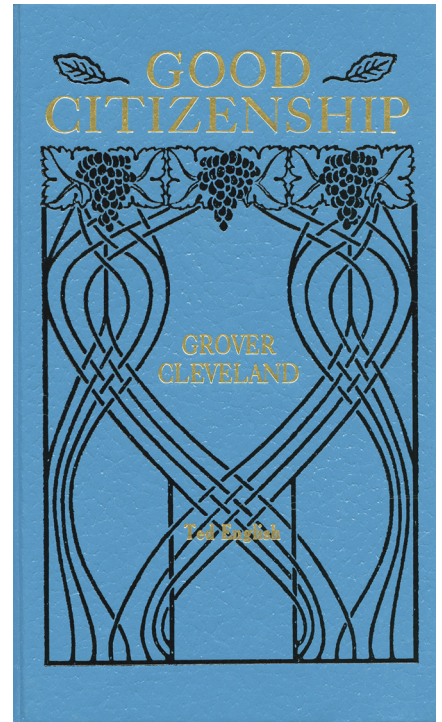
Aside from their political interest, looking at more than a century of political buttons, one can't help but notice the evolution of graphic design in this country.

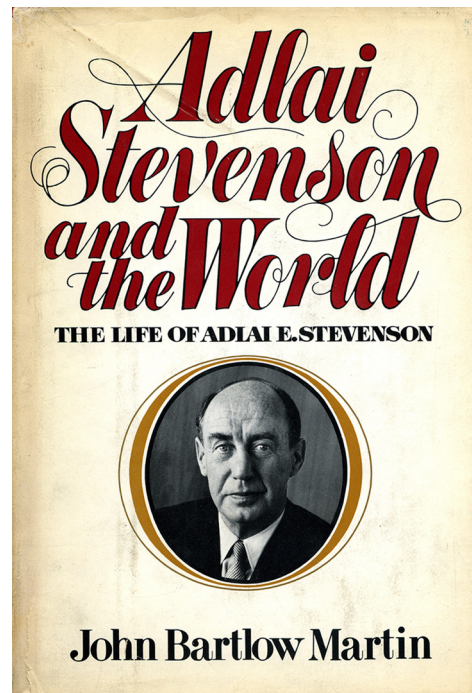
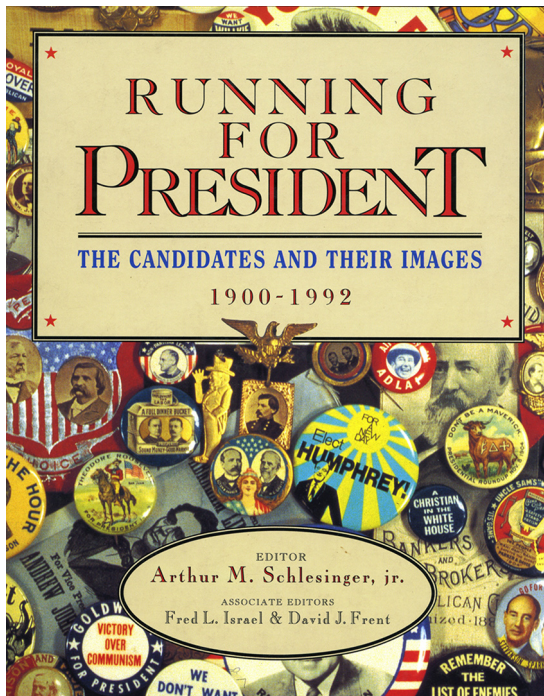
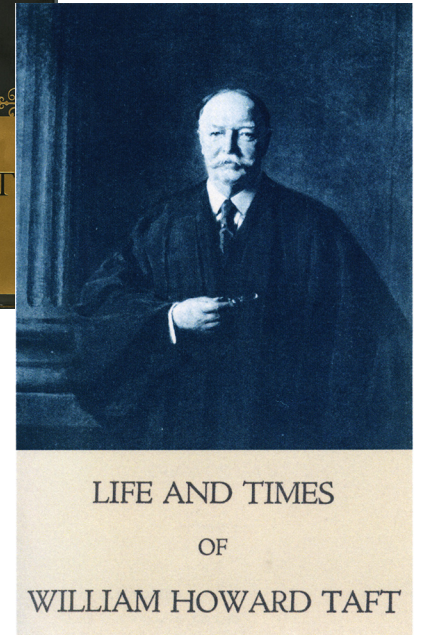
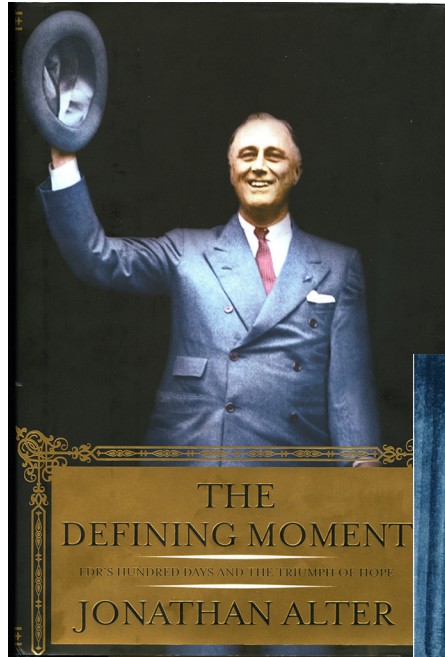
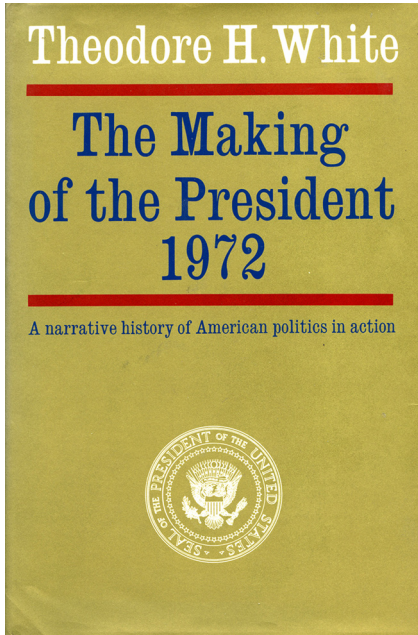
The Ellen M. Iseman political button collection, still in shoeboxes, is in quite good condition. It gets retrieved from the closet every four years for display. To date, I have lent it for exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History, the Cosmopolitan Club, and the Yale Club of New York City.

My mother, now deceased, would be happy to know that button collecting has been passed down to the next generation. Her fourteen-year-old grandson Alex has been conscripted into the project she launched. He recently added "Obama/Biden 2012," "Dogs Against Romney," and "Mitt Romney 2012" buttons, which are included in this display.



A Sampling of **Presidential Books** by Century Association Members





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