ALL IN

(Herb Brown – Kit Kat – October 20, 2009)

America's first president enjoyed gambling and cards. We know Washington partook in such recreation primarily because of the detailed expense accounts kept by the leader of the Continental Army. Washington kept a separate page titled "Cards and Other Play" where he carefully recorded his wins and losses at cards from the years prior to and during the Revolutionary War. The game of choice was a game called "post and pair," a three-card bluffing game that had some affinities with poker. Washington recorded that he had won 27 times and lost 36 times, coming out to a small profit (just over £6).

Abraham Lincoln was said to have played penny-ante games (not terribly well) prior to becoming an attorney, a Congressman, and later President. Lincoln was surely familiar with poker lingo. Asked whether he would apologize to the British for the capture of diplomats on a Confederate ship, he diverted the question with a poker story. ''Two roughs were playing cards for high stakes,' said Lincoln, 'when one of them, suspecting his adversary of foul play, straightway drew a bowie-knife from his belt and pinned the hand of the other player on the table, exclaiming: 'If you haven't got the ace of spades under your palm, I'll apologize.

Ulysses S. Grant played with junior officers during the Mexican-American War.

Grover Cleveland enjoyed games of 25-cent limit draw poker on Sundays, once joking that while his father had once admonished him against fishing on the Lord's day, "he never said anything about draw poker."

Its rumored that Calvin Coolidge played – one thing for sure he had a 'poker face.' Calvin once said; '"the American people want a sober ass for president.' Then added, 'and I plan to oblige them.'

Franklin Roosevelt preferred to unwind over games of nickel-ante stud. According to presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, the 32nd president sought respite from the stress of the Second World War in games of poker with his cabinet officers. Goodwin tells how Roosevelt would routinely hold "marathon poker games," and once a year administer a special

game on the night Congress was to adjourn. For that game the players followed the strict rule that at the exact moment that the Speaker of the House called the president to say that Congress was adjourning, whoever was ahead at that moment would win the game."

On one such occasion when the call came from the Speaker, and Roosevelt was doing terrible, with his secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau way ahead. "So Roosevelt just took the phone and pretended it was somebody else on the line." The game went on for two-and-a-half more hours until Roosevelt pulled ahead. That's when he arranged for an aide to bring him a phone, and he pretended to take the call from the House speaker signaling the game's conclusion. All was

fine "until the next morning when Morgenthau read in the newspaper that Congress had adjourned at 9:30." Apparently Morgenthau "was so angry that he actually resigned his cabinet post until Roosevelt charmed him into staying.

John F. Kennedy was a poker player, conducting games after hours at the White House. His poker playmates included Presidential press secretary Pierre Salinger, a skilled player who taught JFK much about the game, and VP Lyndon Johnson.

Even George W. Bush was purportedly an avid poker player while an MBA student at Harvard.

Poker may well be a good training ground for the Presidency. In 2005, Andy Beal, a Texas banker, negotiated with a consortium of pros headed by Doyle

Brunson to play an $80 million match, and the World Series of poker generates several hundred million dollars in prize money. Yet neither sum approaches the mind-bending stakes for which the game has been played by generals and presidents.

For them it is poker's art -- its language and lore, its ruthlessly expedient logic and tactics -- that has altered the course of events more than actual tabletop contests.

After several defeats at the hands of aggressive Southern generals, Lincoln put the hard-drinking poker player Ulysses S. Grant in command of the Union Army. Unlike his dithering predecessors, Grant preferred forcing the action: he misrepresented his troops' position and strength, divined his opponents' intentions

and countered with devastating effectiveness. Chattanooga surrounded? Vicksburg refortified? Raise!

North of Atlanta, William Tecumseh Sherman outmaneuvered the Confederate general John Bell Hood. According to Shelby Foote, an officer had informed Sherman that before secession, ''I saw Hood bet $2,500, with nary a pair in his hand.'' Bluffing such a colossal sum in antebellum dollars confirmed Sherman's read of Hood as brave but impetuous; he then reconfigured his troops defensively and put them on highest alert. As if on cue, Hood shattered his army with three suicidal attacks on Sherman's well-dug-in positions. Atlanta fell two days later.

Dwight Eisenhower pulled off a nuclear bluff against Mao over Quemoy and Matsu. He got called,

however, by Khrushchev when a U-2 ''weather plane'' was shot down in Soviet airspace.

John F. Kennedy may have been bluffing with the best hand against Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis, but the planet was fortunate the Soviet premier finally blinked. Now to the Presidents who played a lot of poker.

Harding

Waren G. Harding modestly downplayed his qualification to be President – and his surprise at being elected. He put it in poker terms, “I drew to a pair of deuces and came up with Aces full.”

Though Harding's term lasted less than two-and-a-half years, the 29th president distinguished himself as one of the most ardent and dedicated poker players

among the men who have headed the U.S. government's executive branch. He also played golf, followed baseball and boxing, and sneaked off to burlesque shows (even as President). There was plenty of poker in the White House as cronies appointed to his Cabinet joined him for all-night, highly competitive poker sessions washed down with booze provided by the president's official bootlegger in this era of Prohibition. When playing, Harding would advise his advisors -- sometimes referred to as his "poker cabinet" -- to pay no heed to differences in their status while at the poker table. "Forget that I am President of the United States," he would tell them. "I'm Warren Harding playing with some friends and I'm going to beat the hell out of you."

He liked challenging someone to what he called a cold hand. In that, each player cut the deck once, and the high card won. He is also noted for losing a set of white house china, inscribed for Benjamin Harrison, in a poker game – to a woman no less. She was wealthy socialite Louise Cromwell Brooks.

Truman

Harry S. Truman learned to play cards from his Aunt Ida and Uncle Harry on their Missouri farm back in the 1890s. The first record of his enjoyment of card playing, not specifically poker, is in a letter he wrote to Bess Wallace on February 7, 1911, when he was twenty-six years old. He had just started courting Bess and wanted to tell her all about himself. He was a religious person, he said, but "I like to play cards and

dance . . . and go to shows and do all the things [religious people] say I shouldn't, but I don't feel badly about it."

Although it is hard to imagine that Lieutenant, and later Captain, Truman went through his two years of service during World War I without playing poker, the first clear record of his poker playing is of games played in the early 1920s, when he was a county judge (or, more correctly, county commissioner) in Jackson County, Missouri. Several of his poker buddies told stories in later life about playing poker with Judge Truman. The games were played across the street from the county courthouse, in a room on the third floor of a building at 101 North Main Street in Independence. In about 1924, the poker players decided to become a

club, called the Harpie Club because harmonicas, or French harps, were played at a lighthearted dedication ceremony. Judge Truman was apparently the honorary and unofficial head of the club. There were about eighteen members, mostly veterans of World War I, and also many county employees.

The club met for a poker game usually one night a week. Games had a ten-cent limit with three raises. Truman got immense enjoyment from the games and apparently never took them too seriously. One club member, Bruce Lambert, called him a "chump" who always stayed to the end of a hand. "He wanted to see what your hole card was, and knew that anyone winning from him got a kick out of it. He

accommodated . . . but if he could whip you he relished that too.

Truman came back to a Harpie Club meeting once as President. But things were different. The presidential entourage was there, and club members wouldn't sit down until Truman did. Truman was lucky that night and accumulated a big pile of chips in front of him when a Secret Service man came up to the President, tapped him on the shoulder and said it was time to leave. "The President jumped up hastily," said, 'Good-bye boys,' and shot out the door, leaving all those chips, which were cashable for money. Who took the money wasn't recorded.

"Luck always seems to be with me in games of chance and in politics," Truman reflected. Truman's

favorite poker venue while he was President was the presidential yacht *Williamsburg*. "You know I'm almost like a kid; I can hardly wait to start," he wrote to his wife, Bess, as he looked forward to a poker outing on the *Williamsburg* in the summer of 1946. The President, together with some of his regular poker buddies, and perhaps some special guests too, would typically board ship on Friday afternoon and sail on the Potomac River until Sunday afternoon. Truman liked an eight-handed game best. His cronies joined him around the table. Fred Vinson, secretary of the treasury and later chief justice of the United States, was his favorite poker companion. Other regulars included Clinton Anderson, secretary of agriculture and later a senator; Stuart Symington, a Missourian who served Truman in

several positions, including secretary of the air force. There was always Truman's longtime friend Harry Vaughan, by then his military aide. Future President Lyndon Johnson sometimes joined these games too, his attention focused more on the political talk than on the cards. Truman's young naval aide and later special counsel Clark Clifford organized the games. Clifford had replaced a naval aide who told the President that he didn't drink and didn't play cards. Truman listened to this with interest and very quickly found the man a good job somewhere else. He liked Clifford better; his new naval aide did drink and play cards, the latter so skillfully that he usually won a little money.

Each player started the games on the Presidential yacht with a $500 stack of chips, and if anyone lost it

all, he could get a second $500 stack. About 10 percent of every pot was put in a "poverty bowl," which was distributed $100 at a time to players who had lost their second stack. This was a lot of money in the 1940s, but presumably over time no one ever won or lost very much. Truman once admitted to Bess, following a poker game played on the Fourth of July, 1947, not on the *Williamsburg* this time, that he had lost $3.50. The big winner that night, Truman's chief of staff, Adm. William D. Leahy, won about $40.

Winston Churchill joined in one of Truman's poker games during his visit to the United States in 1946. Churchill and the presidential party were on their way by train from Washington to Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill would tell the world about an "Iron Curtain"

that had descended upon Europe. This night, however, the great man's oratory was about his poker prowess gathered over forty years. Truman was worried about the honor of American poker players, and he and his companions felt they would have to play their best. “When we play poker,” Churchill said, “I think I’ll call you Harry.” “Allright Winston,” Truman replied. Not long after, Churchill said, “Harry, I believe I’ll risk a couple of shillings on this pair of knaves.” But as the game progressed, Churchill lost steadily, and his stack of chips dwindled. After about an hour of disastrous play, Churchill left the room for a moment. Truman told his companions that they’d have to let up. "But, Boss, *this guy's a pigeon*", Harry Vaughan complained. "We'll have this guy's pants before the evening is over." The

players did let up on Churchill some, but not enough to let him go home claiming he had beaten the Yanks.

Truman may have intervened on at least one other occasion to change a player's luck. Sometime in 1951 or 1952 he invited his assistant press secretary, Roger Tubby, to join in a game at the Little White House at Key West, Florida. Tubby was a young man with three children and a modest salary, playing against men with more money to lose and more experience with the cards. Truman noticed that Tubby's losses were mounting. It was his turn to deal. As the hand went on, the players dropped out one by one, until only Truman and Tubby were left in the game. Then Truman folded too, announcing that Tubby had won the sizeable pot. The players turned over their cards, and

Tubby saw the hand that had kept Truman in the game to the end. "He didn't even have a pair," Tubby remembered in a 1977 article. "He had just stayed in the game to make the pot big so I could get back my losses." Or had Truman perhaps stayed in simply because that was what he enjoyed to do? In either case, Tubby's finances improved.

After coming back to Missouri in January 1953, Truman made poker part of his very active retirement Probably only a few of Harry Truman's poker venues are remembered very well today. There are most likely rooms scattered here and there in the Kansas City area where the future or the former President of the United States got together with friends and played poker; and chances are that Senator, Vice President, and President

Truman enjoyed games at quite a few unknown or little known locations in and around Washington, D.C. Truman loved poker for some of the same reasons that he loved politics. There was a vitality in the game that let him share in the lives of people he liked and see them as they really were, underneath whatever formalities they usually had to adopt when they dealt with a judge, senator, President, or former President. There's no record of anyone ever leaving a poker game with Harry Truman feeling unhappy.

Eisenhower

Dwight Eisenhower is regarded as one of the finest poker-playing Presidents. As a boy, Eisenhower learned the game from a frontiersman who had once been a professional gambler. Young Ike befriended this old-

timer who'd also been a scout and hunter. He was "my hero-a great teacher," Eisenhower said. On frequent outings, he taught Ike to hunt, fish, pilot a flatboat, and the rudiments of poker. Although his mentor was illiterate, he knew poker percentages. "Playing for matches," Ike recalled, he drilled "percentages into my head night after night around the campfire, using for the lessons a greasy pack of nickel cards that must have been a dozen years old. I was fascinated by the game," Eisenhower recalled, and "really studied hard." So thoroughly did the old cowboy "drill me on percentages-I was never able to play the game carelessly or wide open. I adhered strictly to percentages." Apparently, Ike learned well. Years later, he wrote that "since many military men know nothing

about probabilities, it was not remarkable that I should be a regular winner.

The man who would later plan and direct the D-Day invasion of Europe became fascinated by poker to the point where he claimed he was incapable of "playing the game carelessly or wide open."

Eisenhower used his poker winnings to good effect, buying his first military uniform after graduating from West Point in 1915 and cashing in a few more chips to buy his future bride a succession of gifts that clearly impressed Mamie, the future Mrs E.

At one of Ike's posts there was a young soldier who kept losing his paycheck. This boy's wife went to George Patton, who then outranked Ike and was the Post Commander. Ike and Patton played against each

other twice a week. But in the other game Ike hadn't realized just how bad the boy'd been hurt but he'd borrowed from everyone and didn't even have grocery money. Now that sort of thing is bad for morale and Patton told Ike he'd have to stop the game. Ike suggested they get the other fellas together and let the boy win his money back first. So they did. As Ike says, "You can't imagine how hard it is to lose to a bad player. But over the course of several weeks we managed to do it." At that point Patton banned poker on the base. And the boy who'd regained his losses came to Ike with a complaint. "This is sure bad luck," the boy said. "They ban our game just when I was getting good."

But Ike concluded, as a career officer, he could no longer play poker with other soldiers. "It was not because I didn't enjoy the excitement of the game - I really love to play" he explained, "But it had become clear that it was no game to play in the Army." He didn't play in military poker games after he was 40.

Although Eisenhower had sworn off poker as a military commander, he resumed the pastime as President. Occasionally, he held stag poker nights in the Treaty Room after dining on wild game. As President, political opponents criticized Eisenhower for devoting too much time to golf. Vice President Richard Nixon, defending his boss, told the media, "If the president spent as much time playing golf as Truman spent

playing poker, the president would be able to beat Ben Hogan.

Johnson

Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th President of the United States, played politics like a game of poker. He was aggressive, cunning and always played to win. Growing up in the vast Hill Country of south central Texas, Lyndon learned both games - politics and poker - from his father, Sam Johnson, a five term state legislator. Sam Johnson encouraged his children to engage in games that required them to think. Dominoes, whist and poker were favorites.

Lyndon supported himself in college by selling women's silk stockings. He also played poker. On one

occasion he got into an argument in a poker game that ended in a fight. Lyndon lost.

After Johnson was elected to Congress, Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, a fellow Texan, took a liking to him. Rayburn invited only a privileged few to join him at the "Board of Education," a hideaway where he and friends would socialize, talk politics and play poker. Vice President Garner, Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Washington Senator Warren Magnuson, and Lyndon Johnson were frequent players.

As President, Johnson continued to enjoy dominoes and poker. His brother tells us, “Lyndon liked to play against people with a big reputation for brains." It was difficult for a guest at the President's Texas ranch to leave without a session at the domino table.

French President DeGaulle, British Prime Minister Wilson and Henry Ford II were some of LBJ's opponents. He beat the head of United Artists, Arthur Krim, out of $200 in an evening of dominoes. Poker games at the White House were also common. Washington Senators Henry "Scoop" Jackson and Warren "Maggie" Magnuson, Clark Clifford, and lobbyist Sam Volpentest were frequent participants.

Nixon

Richard M. Nixon, or Nick," as his Navy buddies called him, was "as good a poker player as, if not better than, anyone we had ever seen," one of them said.

If his success in Washington was rooted in the moves and deceptions crafted at the card table

(Nixon's pretty much acknowledged this to be true), then it stands to reason that his political strategies first took root while stationed in the South Pacific, with the US Navy, in 1942. Suffering from the boredom of life at sea, 29-year-old lieutenant commander Nixon decided to pursue something more mentally challenging (and financially rewarding) than writing letters to his wife Pat and devouring issues of Life magazine. He turned to poker, checking out the games that fellow servicemen played around the clock. Nixon observed the players' strategies and absorbed the game's rudiments. When you consider the intriguing nature of poker, it's hardly surprising that by the time he and his comrades had docked on the island of New Caledonia, Nixon was sufficiently bit by the card-playing bug –

despite being raised as a Quaker and taught that gambling was taboo.

Like almost everyone who's freshly smitten with the game, he found it more interesting than anything else around him. He'd sit on his own, silently contemplating hands, figuring out what to do if he's on an open-ended straight draw after an opponent appears to have been dealt trips on the flop.

According to retired lieutenant James Stewart, 'One day I noticed Nick lost in his thoughts. Finally he asked: "Is there any sure way to win at poker?'" Stewart, already savvy at the game, offered the kind of logical advice that would have been useful back in the loosey-goosey 1940s: only stay in if you are sure you hold the best cards. 'Nick liked what I said. I gave him

his first lessons. We played two-handed poker without money for four or five days until he learned the various plays. Soon his playing became tops. He never raised unless he was convinced he had the best hand.'

Nixon, for the most part, played tight but aggressive and viewed poker as a metaphor, learning life lessons wherever he could. As he wrote in his memoir: 'I found playing poker instructive as well as entertaining and profitable. I learned that the people who have the cards are usually the ones who talk the least and softest; those who are bluffing tend to talk loudly and give themselves away.'

Like everyone who rakes in the bucks at poker and finds it to be mentally stimulating, Nixon made the game the centerpiece of his life. So much so that when

famed airman Charles Lindbergh passed through the South pacific, flight-testing fighter planes, Nixon essentially blew him out. There was more pressing business at hand: a poker game. Nixon would later write that it 'seems incredible that I passed up the opportunity to have dinner with Charles Lindbergh because of a card game. But our poker game was more than an idle pastime, and the etiquette surrounding it taken very seriously'.

Most importantly, Nixon was on a rush. According to varying accounts, he pulled down anywhere from $3,000 to $10,000 during his two-year stint in the Navy. Or else, beyond the all consuming rush factor, maybe he was just following the advice of a drama coach at Whittier College, in southern California, who

insisted: ‘A man who can’t hold a hand in a first-class poker game is not fit to be president.’

Besides, lessons learned at the table surely served him better than a dinner with Lindbergh ever would. Years later, when it came to foreign policy – and its attendant negotiations – President Nixon operated with all the cunning of a card hustler. During potentially tense times, in the midst of his arduous dealings with the Russians and Chinese, he handled foreign leaders as if they were flinty-eyed high rollers at the Horseshoe casino. Poker, Nixon has acknowledged, taught him to control all the tells that come with a big hand and a big pot (or the risk of setting off a nuclear war). In dealing with foreign leaders, he instinctively knew how to modulate his breathing, keep his stomach muscles from

visibly tightening and sublimate any physical tics that would telegraph information.

And regardless of what people think of Nixon's years in office, or his handling of the Vietnam war, he passed his poker requirements with flying colors – and massive stacks of chips. But they were built slowly and steadily without major swings one way or the other. Officers who played with Nixon recall that he routinely finished a night at the tables with a profit of $30 to $60. He was always very controlled, eager to take advantage of competitors who had a little too much to drink. According to lieutenant James Udall, quoted in Nixon: The Education of a Politician, by Stephen Ambrose, '[Nixon] played a quiet game but he was not afraid of taking chances. He wasn't afraid of running a bluff. I

once saw him bluff a lieutenant commander out of $1,500 with a pair of deuces.'

On his return to the States, Nixon used a chunk of his poker winnings to finance his first campaign for Congress

Officially, Nixon gave up playing serious poker in 1946, soon after he was elected to serve in the United States Congress. He thought it looked a little unsavory for a man of his position to be gambling. But he kept playing politics as if it were poker. Unfortunately in his last hand - the Watergate scandal essentially amounted to overplaying a bluff and misreading opponents – he didn't do well.

Obama

So – what about our current President? Barack Obama has called poker a hidden talent and judges himself a pretty good player. He began playing in high school, sometimes with his grandfather and sometimes with classmates.

As a state senator, Obama was a founding member of a poker group. He became known as a cautious player with a good poker face, someone who paid more attention to the game than to the chatter and laughter that accompanied it. "It's a fun way for people to relax and share stories and give each other a hard time over friendly competition," Obama said. "In Springfield, it was a way to get to know other senators - including Republicans."

Obama was a regular at these low-stakes games designed to break up the tedium of long legislative sessions. His analytical mind helped him excel at draw, stud and hold ‘em – as well as the sillier, more luck-based games other players might chose, like ‘baseball. Poker, beer and cigars were staples; Democrats and Republicans, lawmakers and even the lobbyists who Obama rails against dealt the cards and placed their bets.

On most nights, a player might win or lose around $30, participants said. A really big night would mean winning or losing $100. The players rarely talked about legislation. The lobbyists felt strongly that it would break an unwritten rule if they tried to sway the lawmakers during the games, one player said.

By his poker buddies' accounts, Obama is careful and focused. He's not easily distracted and doesn't give away his intentions unless it's to his advantage. When he plays, he plays to win. His opponents say he hated to lose. "He didn't throw his cards or take a swing at anybody, but he wasn't a happy person," said a Democrat from the Chicago suburbs.

Obama studied the odds carefully, friends say. If he had strong cards, he'd play. If he didn't, he would fold rather than bet good money on the chance the right card would show up when he needed it. That reputation meant that he often succeeded when he decided to bluff. "When Barack stayed in, you pretty much figured he's got a good hand," said Larry Walsh, a former senator.

And Obama got teased about his careful style of play. "I used to kid him that the only fiscally conservative bone in his body was what he showed at the poker table with his own money," said state Sen. Bill Brady, a Republican from the central Illinois city of Bloomington. "I said if he would be half as conservative with taxpayer dollars, the state would be a lot better off. .

The traits Obama displayed around the card table those many nights are ones he brings to the White House. And fellow players in the Obama game say Obama's poker skills bode well for a potential leader of the free world.

Not since Richard Nixon has the United States had a dedicated player of its historic national game in the Oval Office.

All of this moved Time magazine to reveal, during the campaign, that John McCain is, by contrast, a manic craps player. And poker players don't call poker gambling. It's a game of skill. Craps is an absurd game of luck...only madmen play craps.

Conclusion

I've been intrigued by the correlation between poker and politics. So were Jerome Weidman and George Abbot when the wrote the musical comedy 'Fiorello,' about the former mayor of New York. These lines are from a song in that musical entitled, "Politics and Poker."

Politics and poker, politics and poker

Shuffle the cards and find the joker

Neither game's for children; either game is rough

Decisions, decisions, like

Who to pick, how to play, what to bet, when to call a bluff

Politics and poker, politics and poker

Playing for a pot that's mediocre

Politics and poker, running neck and neck

If politics seems more predictable

That's because usually you can stack the deck!

Politics and poker, politics and poker

Makes the average guy a heavy a smoker

Bless the nominee and give him our regards

And watch while he learns that in poker and politics

Brother, you've gotta have that slippery hap hazardous commodity

You've gotta have the cards!