

# For inside story, 'Presidents' gets a vote of confidence

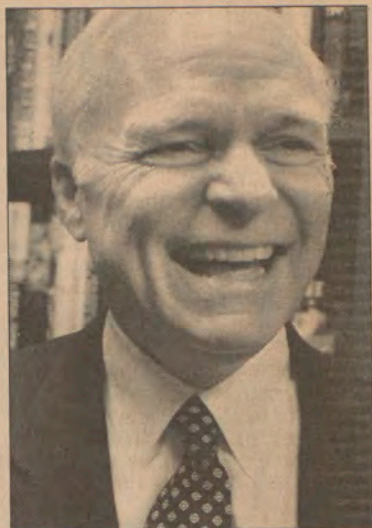
By James Warren  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

**F**orget the hoopla about "The Sopranos" on HBO or "Ally McBeal" on Fox since the best thing on television, as the Nov. 8 **Weekly Standard** purports, is a weird and enriching series on C-SPAN called "The American Presidents."

Starting last March, the cable network has profiled a president each week, usually going to his birthplace or library/museum or some spot associated with him, mustering interesting experts and family members and telling all about the guy's life over the course of two or three hours.

Inevitably, the ones we know little about, like Zachary Taylor, tend to be the most interesting. But even when it comes to well-chronicled ones, such as Woodrow Wilson, idiosyncratic forays, such as into his love letters, are grand surprises.

There are very big-shot historians, such as David McCullough, Robert Remini and Joseph Ellis, along with up-and-comers such as Richard Norton Smith and the extremely controversial Edmund Morris. But there are a plethora of passionate tour guides, curators and park rangers whose lives have been devoted to a particular president and who prove both illuminating and a tad bizarre in their passions.



C-SPAN founder Brian Lamb.

## Magazines

There have been wonderful scenes such as C-SPAN founder Brian Lamb standing in front of a portrait of Grover Cleveland with George Cleveland, his grandson and a lookalike with the same beard and mustache. And when the grandson wound up doing an imitation of his presidential ancestor, one might have been watching "Saturday Night Live."

People around my office have found me looney for referring to so many of these installments and talking about them. But now that I've read David Brooks' "Brian Lamb's America" in the **Weekly Standard**, a very small circulation conservative weekly, I don't feel quite so queer.

"C-SPAN is factual in a world grown theoretical," he writes. "It is slow in a world growing more hyper. It is word-oriented in an era that is visually sophisticated. With its open phone lines, it is genuinely populist in a culture that preaches populism more than it practices it."

"And occupying its unique niche — C-SPAN is funded by the cable industry to cover Congress and public events — it has managed to perform feats of civic education that are unmatched by better-funded institutions, such as the History Channel, PBS, the Smithsonian or the multibillion-dollar foundations."

The presidential series has, of course, its own Web site, namely [www.americanpresidents.org](http://www.americanpresidents.org), which is a treasure trove; you can also check out [www.C-span.org](http://www.C-span.org). It's also a reminder that in an age of media dumbing-down, at least one enterprise happily flouts the accepted wisdom inspired by ratings, consultants and focus groups.

As we wonder who should be our next president, it wouldn't hurt to immerse oneself in those of days gone by. They were, by and large, a more interesting lot and, our current conceits aside, operated in at least as interesting times.

The series continues until Christmas Eve, with Bill Clinton, and surely deserves frequent replay as the current crop of White House aspirants slog through Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and all the rest of the states in the coming year.



# Tragedy should draw families closer



**Ann Landers**

**D**ear Ann Landers: Three years ago, our beautiful 22-year-old daughter was severely injured in an auto accident. "Shawna" was not expected to survive, but she did. After several months in a coma, and two years in a rehabilitation hospital, she is home with us. Shawna is a quadriplegic and dependent on a ventilator, but she is otherwise the same person she always was. My husband, our son and I have

managed to create a life for her.

My concern is my husband's family. They have completely abandoned us since Shawna's accident. They say it is "too hard" for them to be around her and see her "like that," and have not been in contact with us for three years, even though they live less than an hour away. It makes me angry to see my husband and children treated so shabbily. My husband needs their support, and my children have lost their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

I know I cannot change these people, but please tell others who experience this type of tragedy to support those in need. It means so much. It is not easy to explain to Shawna why these family members no longer care about her. She is still the same loving, caring young lady she once was — only her body doesn't work anymore.

It is too late for our family to get back together, Ann, but maybe others will benefit from our sad experience and not estrange themselves from each other in times of need. You can use my name. They already know my feelings. I don't care if they see this in the paper.

*Karen in Troy, Mich.*

**Dear Karen in Troy: I am at a loss to find the words to express my sorrow at the** husband's family has abandoned you. A cold and heartless bunch they are. You have caring friends and neighbors giving you emotional support and their friends are dropping by. Meanwhile, my thoughts and prayers are with your dear daughter — and so are those of readers.

Dear Readers: I promised no more letters for four weeks. Well, the four weeks are over here's another one. The Boston area might skip it.

Dear Ann Landers: Everybody in Elko knows how we met — so this is for the rest of you.

My brother and I, and two female friends, owned a nightclub in Butte, Mont. This was 1949. Right behind ours was a very pretty young, good-looking sailor. I called the waitress and asked if she knew who the pretty girl was. She replied, "I think her last name is the same as mine." I said, "That's great. She won't have to change her name when I marry her." The waitress said, "I was nuts."

A few minutes later, the young girl came to our table, smiling. It seems the waitress was right. She thought it was very nice that I had said that. She thought it was very nice that I wanted to check me out. Well, Ann, here we are, exactly the same as mine, but it was 20 years ago. Months later, we got married. Sept. 2 was our wedding anniversary, and she is still in town.

We have five children, seven grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Oh! One more thing, a few years after we married, she told me, "I'm only 15," and she fazed me.

**Dear Elko: Beautiful — even though you state, it is against the law to marry a minor. I assume she had her parents' permission. That means they must have approved of it. It's a lovely story.**

*Is alcohol ruining your life or the life of someone you love? "Alcoholism: How to Recognize It, How to Conquer It" can turn things around. A self-addressed, long, business-size envelope with a money order for \$3.75 (this includes*

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