

THE AMERICAN STORY

CONVERSATIONS WITH
MASTER HISTORIANS



David McCullough on JOHN ADAMS
Jon Meacham on THOMAS JEFFERSON
Ron Chernow on ALEXANDER HAMILTON
Doris Kearns Goodwin on ABRAHAM LINCOLN
Taylor Branch on MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.
Robert Caro on LYNDON JOHNSON
and More

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN
FOREWORD BY LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS CARLA HAYDEN

Summary: around 2014 author David Rubenstein decided he was going to do something different.

In an effort to help educate Congress on America's rich history, he decided to host a dinner series called "Congressional Dialogues" (38 in total) and interview master historians (and a Chief Justice!) in the Library of Congress.

These vibrant conversations are captured in this beautiful book containing authentic patriotic insights.

This book is unique in both **format** and **content**. The format is an *interview* between David Rubenstein and over a dozen world-class biographers. The content is thought-provoking, raw, sometimes *informal*—making it supremely readable.

It really feels like you're sitting among fellow legislators within the marble halls of the Library of Congress.

The goal? Learn about history from the people who made it.

- What was George Washington's leadership style?
- What were John Adams reading habits?
- How did Ben Franklin approach decision making?
- What character trait did Lincoln try to improve?
- What was Nixon's fatal flaw?
- How did Ronald Reagan get the nickname Dutch?

David Rubenstein



Author bio: [David Rubenstein](#) is a fascinating, patriotic, private equity billionaire. A list of Mr. Rubenstein's accomplishments would be longer than this book summary, but in short:

- Founded The Carlyle Group in 1987 (\$250B AUM)
- Chairman of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
- Former chairman of the Smithsonian Institution
- Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations
- President of The Economic Club of Washington DC

David was married to his former wife Alice Rogoff for 34 years; they divorced in 2017. David and Alice have three grown children.

I was on a conference call with David in April 2021 and the song [! Did it My Way](#) by Frank Sinatra was playing in the background.

David lives in Bethesda, Maryland.

Hi, hello.

This book is hard to summarize for two reasons: 1) Nearly the entire book is interview format (16 interviews to be exact), and 2) the scope of a given interview can be quite broad.

Therefore, I've tried to distill each interview into its most basic elements to help answer two basic questions:

1. **What character traits did this leader embody?**
2. **What made them unique (fun facts!)**

Hopefully this approach allows you to 1) scan the list of people, then 2) extract some useful learnings on people you're interested in (as told by the world-class biographers being interviewed).

George Washington John Adams Thomas Jefferson Alexander Hamilton	Benjamin Franklin Founding Mothers Abraham Lincoln Charles Lindbergh	Franklin D. Roosevelt Dwight D. Eisenhower John F. Kennedy Martin Luther King, Jr.	Lyndon B. Johnson Richard M. Nixon Ronald Reagan John G. Roberts, Jr.
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We start this journey with David Rubenstein interviewing Jack D. Warren, Jr. about **George Washington**, Founding Father and first president of the United States (1789-1797).

George Washington (by Jack D. Warren, Jr.)



Actions over words: his disposition didn't lend itself to gallantry; instead, Washington let his dedicated **actions do the talking**.

Contextual decisiveness: Washington was decisive and made personal, reasoned decisions of high quality. But he didn't always declare this outwardly, especially in the realm of politics, and would go to great lengths to create a mirage of **unbiasedness**.

Long-term thinking: Washington often used the phrase "a century hence" and was rapturously committed to generations forth - he challenges us to **consider our distant posterity**.

Understated: in a time when world leaders were crowned and bejeweled, Washington opted for a **simple black tunic with a white shirt**. The entire western world would eventually follow suit.

Humility: he would deflect praise at every turn while **outwardly declining power** and opportunity offered to him. This trait earned Washington tremendous love and respect.

John Adams (by David McCullough)

On slavery: Adams is the only Founding Father who became president who **never owned a slave** on principle.

Unassuming: Adams was short, not very handsome; his presidency is book-ended by two formidable presences.

Amazing fact: Jefferson and Adams both died on the **same exact day**, exactly fifty years after the Declaration of Independence, on July 4th. Gave me goosebumps.

Honor: Adams loved the quote “**act well your part, there all the honor lies**” from Alexander Pope’s [An Essay on Man](#). This oft written line reveals the depth of Adams’ character.

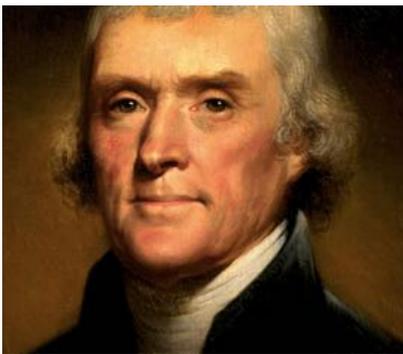


Courage and backbone: Adams sails to France in 1778 with his son (JQA who would later become president) and learns French during the journey! Adams was always willing to say what he felt; he knew how to make decisions.

On his love for reading: he never stopped reading. Adams would eventually go on to sign the Library of Congress into existence. Also, he’d say “you’ll never be alone with a poet in your pocket.” **Always have a book with you.**

On the moves you don’t make: Adams and John Marshall figured out that going to war with France was too costly and risky. However, this decision, though poignant, may have cost him reelection.

Thomas Jefferson (by Jon Meacham)



On working under pressure: At 33 years old he writes the Declaration of Independence **in 4 days**.

The power of the pen: surprisingly, Jefferson didn’t like rhetoric. He actually **hated public speaking** and was said to have a voice that didn’t carry. He preferred persuasive writing which worked out well.

On crafting your own tomb: Jefferson sketched out his own grave marker and epitaph. (April 1744 - July 1826)

Alexander Hamilton (by Ron Chernow)

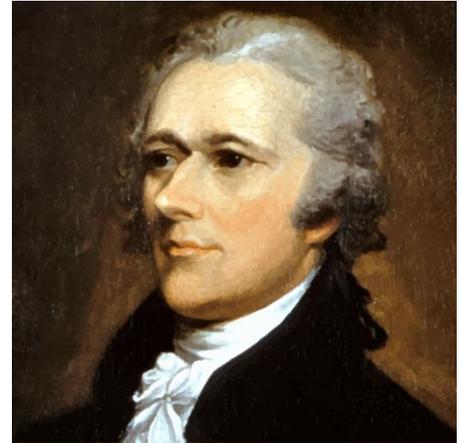
On “radiating genius”: Hamilton had a very strong personal effect on this he met. His reputation grew rapidly.

Self-taught: Hamilton **passes the NY bar** to become a lawyer after only 6 months of self study.

Documentarian: he cobbled together a digest of NY legal precedents and procedures that was so expertly done it became a **crib sheet for 2-3 generations of law students**.

On being prolific: Hamilton died at 49 and left an astounding **32 thick volumes** of personal, political, and business papers! One could consider him a workaholic.

On inspiration for the musical: Ron Chernow’s biography of Hamilton was read by **Lin Manuel-Miranda** while he was vacationing in Mexico. It became the basis for the musical!



Benjamin Franklin (by Walter Isaacson)



Polymath: Franklin was, by all accounts, a true Renaissance Man gifted in many enviable skills.

Early influences: [Daniel Defoe](#), Bunyan’s [The Pilgrim’s Progress](#), and Cotton Mather’s [Essays to Do Good](#) (none of these I know)

On early retirement: Franklin created a successful printing operation in his early 40s and retired early which gave him the freedom to “**create, think, negotiate and charm.**”

On remarkable editing: Ben Franklin edited Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence by replacing the words “sacred and undeniable” with “**self-evident**” (i.e. *we hold these truths to be. . .*)

On electricity: he figured out conservation of charge which Newton hadn’t figured out. Also invents terms positive and negative **charge**, along with **battery**. This led to the invention of the lightning rod which was “**the most important invention of the eighteenth century**” (Isaacson)

On diplomacy: Franklin is an avid printer and sets up a press at Passy, his place in Paris, to publish the American works to win over the French. He prints the Declaration and Virginia Declaration of Rights, and gives a copy to **Voltaire who hugs him** on the steps of the Academie Francaise.

Learning from mistakes: Franklin called his **mistakes “errata”** and he kept a chart of them (love this idea!!), along with how to **make amends/correct** the mistake.

Founding Mothers (by Cokie Roberts)

This unique chapter attempts to fit all “founding mothers” into a single interview. And there’s no one better to interview on the subject than Cokie Roberts.

Cokie Roberts (daughter of House Majority Leader Hale Boggs and his successor Lindy Boggs) is a champion of the unheard voices of women during the 1700s and 1800s, including Martha Washington, Eliza Hamilton, Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison, Mary Todd Lincoln, Julia Grant and Clara Barton.

Despite having no legal or political rights at the time, these women had a tremendous influence on our country’s development. Women would also run political conventions, voter registration drives, campaign planning, run social services, and, eventually, serve in office.



Martha Washington visited her husband’s troops—at great risk—every year during the eight-year Revolutionary War to replenish their food, clothing and spirits. She did all this in addition to running Mount Vernon and raising their grandchildren.



Abigail Adams was a more staunch supporter of breaking ties with England than her husband. She wrote over 1,000 letters to her husband while also raising their children, running the family farm, and fending off British attacks.



Dolley Madison was immensely influential in Washington serving as White House hostess for widowed President Jefferson, and later for her husband.



Mary Todd Lincoln was not particularly well-liked, but her iron will gave much strength to her depression-stricken husband.

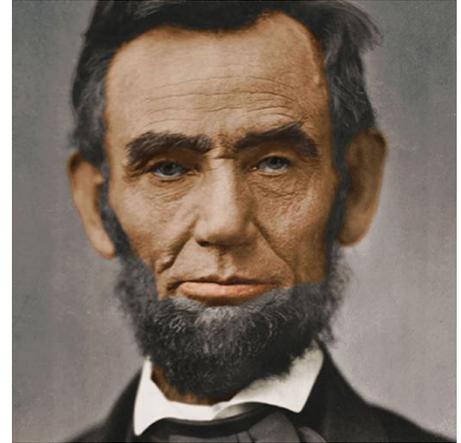


Deborah Franklin, wife of Ben Franklin, ran the postal system and their business while he stayed in Europe for 10 years. Ben didn’t come home for his daughter’s wedding or his wife’s ill health, all of which she managed without a husband.

Abraham Lincoln (by Doris Kearns Goodwin) - Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals* was used to write the screenplay for Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film *Lincoln*.

On knowing where you stand: Lincoln knew he wasn't the likely nominee at the 1860 Republican National Convention. So he says "**Just tell everybody if they can't get their first love, I'm there. I'll be the second love.**" The other nominees (Seward, Chase, Bates) ravaged each other, and the vote peeled off to Lincoln. He also crafted a home state advantage (Illinois). Brilliant strategy.

On humility and unifying with rivals: immediately after his unexpected win Lincoln wrote letters to the rivals he defeated: "**I'm the humblest of all of you. I need your support.**" This unified the Republican party.



On American democracy: In an age of monarchies, Lincoln knew America was a beacon to the world as a **self-governing mass democracy**. If the South was able to secede, it would kill the dream.

On forgetting past resentments: Lincoln nominates Edwin Stanton for secretary of war. Previously, Stanton had excluded Lincoln during some legal work which caused great embarrassment for Lincoln. Lincoln was able to **see past his pride** and hire the right man for the job.

The value of reading and storytelling: Lincoln had **less than a year of formal education**. As a youth, he **read everything** he could get his hands on (e.g. Bible, Aesop's Fables, a Shakespeare play). He often **listened to his father** tell stories with friends—which he'd retell to his little friends.

On writing down mistakes: "He would always write down what he could when something went wrong so he could **learn from mistakes.**"

Personal trait he wanted to improve: "Always **wanting somebody to have a second chance** was one of the weaknesses that he had."

Avoiding brash communications: Lincoln **wrote dozens of "hot letters"** filled with rancor which he intentionally set aside and never sent.

Charles Lindbergh (by A. Scott Berg)



On being really, really good-looking: in addition to his world-class aviation skills, Lindbergh was known for his **dashing good looks** which only contributed to his worldwide fame.

The flight: Lindbergh designed a custom airplane which was built by Ryan Airlines. It held an astounding 450 gallons of fuel which, at 10 miles/gallon, gave Lindbergh a range of 4,500 miles. He flew from NY to Paris (3,800 miles) in 33.5 hours. He became the most famous man on earth.

America First movement: “we talk in politics about a big tent. This was a big tent.”

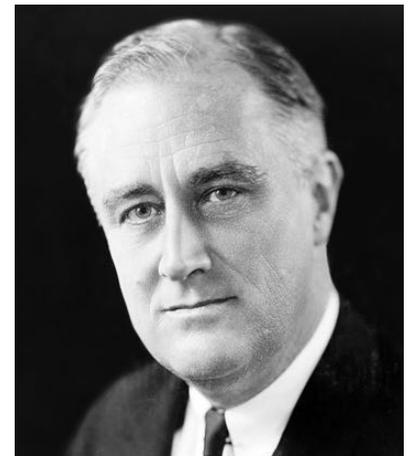
Friction with FDR: Lindbergh outshined FDR and the ensuing jealousy had consequences: “Any company that hires Lindbergh does not get a government contract.” -FDR to private industry

On conservation efforts: Lindbergh felt a bit of guilt for glamorizing aviation which he soon realized **negatively impacted nature**. He became a tree hugger, and an internationally famous one at that.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (by Jay Winik)

Sidebar: *On Hitler:* Early in his life, Hitler had very little status. He shoveled snow, handled baggage, and failed as an artist. He was sent as an army corporal to monitor a National Socialist meeting, and he gets on stage and rallies the crowd. This was his first big break.

On overcoming challenges: FDR contracted polio at Campobello, the island in Passamaquoddy Bay. And while he eventually became wheelchair bound, **his hubris and ambition never rested**. He felt fated and destined for greatness (and he thought he could become president like his distant cousin, Teddy Roosevelt).



On FDR's health: FDR serves an unprecedented third term and is elected to his fourth. His health, however, was disastrous: congestive heart failure, chills, incessant cough.

On big dreams and concentration camps: FDR's two big dreams at Yalta (1945): 1) end the war and keep Stalin in it, and 2) create the United Nations. However: “Roosevelt **never gave WWII that higher sense of purpose**,” i.e saving the Jews from concentration camps, compared to Lincoln who, after the Battle of Antietam, put forth the Emancipation Proclamation.

Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower (by Jean Edward Smith)



Decisive: “He never waffled. He never hesitated.”

Likeable: “... the ability to get along with political leaders. Churchill really liked him, as did FDR.” Much of Eisenhower’s success was due to the fact that he was **so damn likeable**, e.g. personable, humor.

Delegation: Eisenhower delegated almost to a fault, Eisenhower trusted his underlings and often pushed decisions onto them.

Mentor: General Fox Conner, who opened up numerous opportunities for young military Ike, was instrumental in Ike’s career.

John F. Kennedy (by Richard Reeves)

Reeves: “A great test of a president, it seems to me, is whether he brings out the best or the worst in the American people. Kennedy brought out the best.”

On legislation: Kennedy didn’t pass a single major bill.

On being terminally ill: we now know Kennedy was a very, very sick man terminally ill with Addison’s disease which caused severe pain every day of his life, mostly in his back. He took cortisone and pain-killers everyday. Side effect: enhanced libido(!)

On mindset: Kennedy “lived life as a race against boredom”

Being productive in the hospital: at age 37—while hospitalized for back surgery—Kennedy wrote ‘Profiles of Courage’ which **won the Pulitzer**. Ted Sorenson offered heavy editing and help.

On taking responsibility: after the Bay of Pigs invasion became a military and diplomatic disaster, **Kennedy took ownership**. His poll numbers went up!

On compassion: **JFK called Coretta Scott King** upon MLK’s arrest. This showed compassion at the urging of JFK’s brother in law Sargent Shriver. Bobby Kennedy was infuriated because he didn’t want JFK to be seen as the candidate of black people.





John Kennedy and Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate on Sept. 26, 1960. Nixon famously declined makeup and looked less vibrant to the TV audience.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (by Taylor Branch)



On MLK's unique first name: Martin Luther King Jr was born Michael, but his father (also named Michael) was so inspired by seeing the birthplace of Martin Luther in Eisleben, Germany that he came home and **renamed himself and his son** "Martin Luther" King (!)

On his first speech: bus boycott in Dec 1955. "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." [thunderous applause]

On peace: Dr. King was the sole recipient of the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 1964 for his efforts in civil rights

Turning point: against many parents' wishes, Dr. King **let 2,000 children join the May 1963 march** in Birmingham, Alabama. The photographs of fire hoses and dogs being turned on small children of color melted emotional resistance to the Civil Rights Movement. Through courage came sympathy.

On party affiliation: Like Lincoln, MLK Sr was a Republican. Most blacks were Republican in 1960. Democrats had been the party of solid South segregation for hundreds of years.

LBJ: "never again will freedom's gate be shadowed by the twin barriers of prejudice and privilege."

On dedication to the craft: biographer Taylor Branch spent **24 years** writing his 2,912-page trilogy on the Civil Rights Movement; the first volume won the Pulitzer.

Lyndon B. Johnson (by Robert Caro)

Instinct for power: LBJ had a knack for sniffing out power. He wanted it. He sought it out. **Inquired about it.** “Who has the most power in the House? The Senate?” Relentless focus.

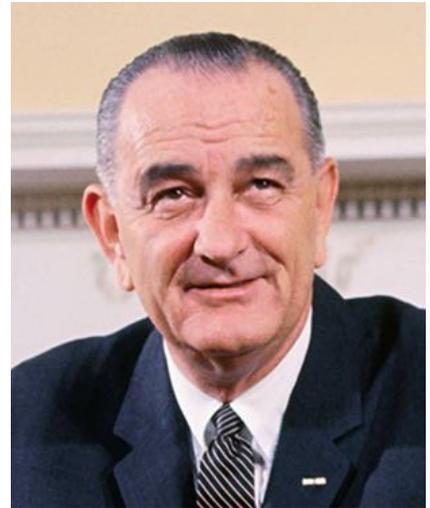
On inviting someone powerful to dinner: LBJ sought out Sam Rayburn, the most powerful man in the house (43rd Speaker). He invites Sam to dinner who ends up adoring LBJ’s wife Lady Bird Johnson who made him **homemade peach ice cream** and very hot Texas chili :) LBJ does the same thing with Richard Russell once he’s elected to the Senate in 1948.

On asking for what you want: “I’d like to be assistant leader,” LBJ asks Richard Russell. Russell just gives him the job.

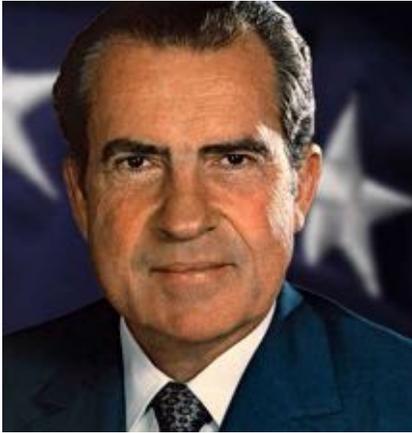
The map is not the territory: the 203 senate committee seats were thought to be ruled by a system of seniority. LBJ thought differently. He sees a chess board, and proceeds to swap & rearrange dozens of senate committee seats, augmenting his power greatly. He does this by convincing senior senate members to give up their seats so the young senators can fight (against Republican policies, e.g. Marshall Plan, etc). He does this **primarily by making phone calls** and brokering seat exchanges.

On reading people: LBJ didn’t read many books, but he was a **great reader of men**. He would tell young staffers: “Read their eyes. Read their hands. What they’re telling you with their hands is more important than what they’re telling you with their lips.”

On work ethic and compassion: LBJ worked hard at every job he had. He was a come-early-stay-late guy. Even when he was teaching English to poor Mexican migrants in Cotulla, Texas, he took the job seriously. **He even made time to teach the janitor** (Tomas Gomez). This provides a glimpse of LBJ’s motivation to carry the torch of JFK’s nascent civil rights ideas to further the Civil Rights Movement.



Richard Nixon (by Bob Woodward)



On the biographer: Bob Woodward is without a doubt the best known, most respected, and most prolific journalist/author of the past half century. **He's written in 19 books, all of which have been a New York times best seller**, 13 of them at number one, a record matched by no other non-fiction writers in history.

On persistence (of Bob Woodward) and keeping secrets: Bob nagged Deep Throat for information which implicated Howard Hunt (one of the Watergate burglary supervisors). **Deep Throat's identity remained a secret for 30+ years** (except to Bob's wife Elsa, whom he told on their 4th date!). Deepthroat was actually Mark Felt who later became #2 at the FBI.

On foreign affairs: Nixon's greatest strength was arguably **foreign policy**. He could get things done. In 1973 he signed the US-Soviet agreements on oceanography, transportation and cultural exchange.

On his fatal flaw: in Nixon's resignation speech, he closed by saying, " always remember, others may hate you, but **those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself.**" Hating was the poison that did him in.

Ronald Reagan (by H. W. Brands)

Nickname: His whole life Reagan had the **nickname Dutch**. Growing up in Dixon, Illinois, the Reagan family was poor so his mom gave him a bowl cut and he looked like a little Dutch boy.

On staying true to your own voice: Ronald Reagan **wrote more of his own speeches** than any other president since Woodrow Wilson (who wrote all of his own speeches).

ON party lines: HW brands boiled it down for his undergraduates at the University of Texas: "in American politics, if you think the government is the **solution**, you're a liberal. If you think that government is the **problem**, you're a conservative."



On charisma: "What Reagan demonstrated is that if you have **stage presence**, if you know how to cultivate television cameras, if you know how to deal with the media, you can go far.... This wasn't the first time, nor was it the last time, but he demonstrated that one liners — soundbites — can take you a long way in politics."

On the power of personality: A lot of Reagan supporters were compelled not by policy or ideology, but by his personality. He was very likeable with a sense of humor. Emphasis on humor: **he used to open nearly every speech with a joke.**

On asking a former president to be your VP: Reagan had a crazy idea to make former President Gerald Ford his Vice President nominee. It was quickly shot down.

On balancing the budget: The national debt **doubles in real terms** under his presidency because while Reagan was able to secure tax cuts, he couldn't get the spending cuts (due to Democrat opposition, eg Tip O'Neill)

Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. (interviewed in person)



On taxi rides that change your life: A chance encounter compelled Roberts toward law. At Harvard, he was originally a **history major** intending to be a historian, but he took a fortuitous cab ride where the driver shared that he too was a Harvard history major. Roberts promptly changed majors.

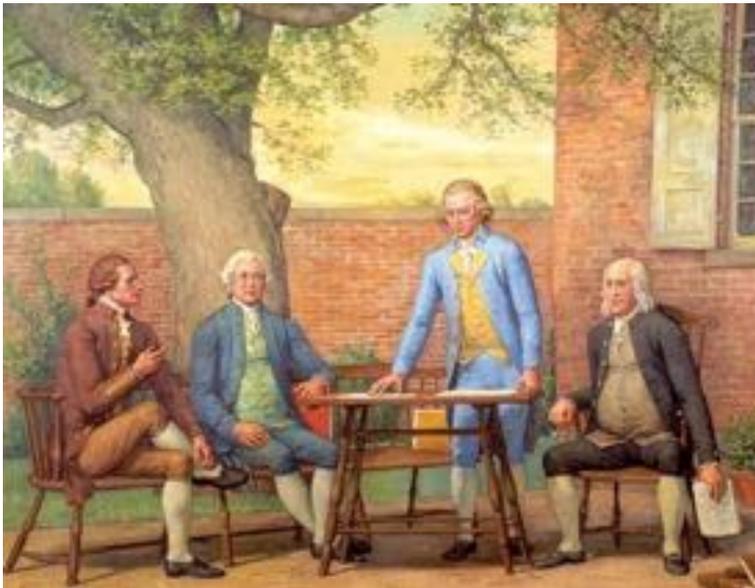
On the Supreme Court Bar: unique bar which Roberts said is “very, very good” and prepares lawyers for the unique experience of arguing a case before the Supreme Court: “in a half an hour there will be a hundred questions and you have to know how to field them.”

On volume: “we review 150 cases a week”—of these, a dozen or so (~8%) get discussed. Of the 9,000 petitions per year, 1% are heard.

Random fun facts I didn't know until reading this book:

- The Revolutionary War was much longer than people think: 8.5 years! The only longer war is Vietnam.
- The entire colonial group that declared independence from Britain was only **2.5m people**, 500k of which were slaves.
- At the National Statuary Hall in the US Capitol, there's a statue of the goddess of history, Clio. She's riding in a chariot with a clock on the side, writing in her book.
- How to write a good hero's journey: “Always keep your hero in trouble.”
- Watch: [John Adams](#), an HBO mini-series
- Washington retired in 1783 when the Treaty of Paris was signed ending the war
- Thomas Jefferson - and the Virginian Presidential dynasty of Washington, Madison and Monroe - would not have been elected without the 1787 Three-Fifths Compromise.

- Both Jefferson and Franklin would start their mornings by **soaking their feet in cold water for a few minutes**. They both lived into their 80s when the typical lifespan was 45-47
- Chernow references [Edmund Burke](#) whom people describes as radiating genius (which he applied to Hamilton)
- When Hamilton's wife Eliza Schuyler joined Dolley Madison for the **laying of the cornerstone for the Washington Monument**, there was a one-term congressman from Illinois in the crowd. His name was **Abraham Lincoln**.
- Ben Franklin is the only person to sign all 3 of America's landmark documents: Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and the Treaty of Versailles.
- Rubenstein knows Isaacson from the [Aspen Institute](#):
- Franklin create the university that's now University of Pennsylvania
- Franklin was fond of a font we now call **Franklin Gothic**.
- Mesmerizing, a system of hypnotic induction named after Frank Mesmer, becomes an interest of Ben Franklin and he stays in France for another two years.
- This picture is in the US Capitol: it's of Hamilton, Wilson, Madison, and Franklin under the mulberry tree, bringing people together



- Reference to Marshall McLuhan (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshall_McLuhan)