

Fathers of Our Country

An assessment of all 43 presidents, as dads.

By DANIEL JONES

"ONE OF THE worst things in the world is being the child of a president," Franklin Delano Roosevelt told an aide in 1934. "It's a terrible life they lead."

While this may have been true for the troubled Roosevelt children, who seemed visible to their father only when they were of use to him, I doubt Malia and Sasha Obama would agree. Determined not to repeat the anger and absenteeism of his own father, Barack Obama has by all accounts been a devoted parent, com-

to shape an efficient administration that wasn't undermined by emotional loyalties.

Less illuminating in this regard is the chapter on the bereaved and grieving, where the lesson seems to be that grief can distract — hardly unique to presidents. Still, it's startling to be reminded of just how vulnerable young children were back then, even children of great privilege. James Monroe's only son didn't make it to 3, Zachary Taylor and James A. Garfield lost two children under 4 and Rutherford B. Hayes lost three sons who were 1. The accidental death of Franklin Pierce's 11-year-old boy is so gruesome

FIRST DADS

Parenting and Politics From George Washington to Barack Obama
By Joshua Kendall

Illustrated. 391 pp.

Grand Central Publishing. \$27.

mitted to family dinners, bedtime reading rituals (every Harry Potter book!) and school involvement.

How does Obama do it? How can anyone combine such a brutally demanding job with being a good father? And what does each president's fitness for parenthood reveal about his fitness to run our country?

Joshua Kendall tackles such questions in his anecdote-packed "First Dads: Parenting and Politics From George Washington to Barack Obama." At his disposal are the fatherhood portfolios of every single president, as all 43 have been fathers — 38 of whom had children biologically, the other five by adoption.

Kendall breaks down the field into six categories: the Preoccupied; Playful Pals; Double-Dealing Dads; Tiger Dads; the Grief-Stricken; and the Nurturers. (Obama nestles himself into the last chapter, while Franklin Roosevelt headlines the Preoccupied.)

That first section examines our most work-focused chief executives, whose thirst for power created insecure children who in some cases (Franklin Roosevelt) had to make appointments just to speak to him, and even then he didn't listen. And as George H.W. Bush chased his ambitions, he and Barbara once farmed out the care of their four sons to friends for four months, leading Jeb later to joke ruefully, "At least we weren't put in a kennel."

Kendall is good at linking a president's strengths or failures as a parent to his success or failure at governing, though the correlation is sometimes indirect — Grover Cleveland struggled to form deep bonds with people, including his children, but as president this remove helped him



The Obama family, November 2012.

it's difficult to read about, especially knowing that Pierce had already lost two other sons.

Not all grief, however, proved to be a drag on a president's productivity. William McKinley, whose two daughters died before they were 4, succeeded in office largely because of how energetically he threw himself into his work to flee his pain.

Kendall's book also provides delightful peeks at life inside the White House, a place where you might think nothing could (or should) go unmonitored. And yet, there's Jimmy Carter's middle son, Chip, sneaking onto the White House roof to smoke a joint. (Wait, isn't that place crawling with gun-toting agents?) Later we learn that Chip was simply following in the footsteps of Teddy Roosevelt's rebellious daughter Alice, who also fled to the roof with her cigarettes to puff away.

More than anything, "First Dads" provides a valuable reminder that while an American president may have the clout to launch spaceships and end world wars, that doesn't mean he can get his children to behave, be happy or even return his calls. In fact, when it comes to parenthood — that great, humbling equalizer — the most intelligent and powerful men on earth seem to flounder and fail even more than the rest of us. □

DANIEL JONES edits the *Modern Love* column in the *Sunday Styles* section of *The Times* and is the author of "Love Illuminated."