



□ *Our 'Spooky Presidential Coincidences Contest' Winners*

Two co-winners have been declared in our "Spooky Presidential Coincidences Contest." They are Arturo V. Magidin, of Mexico City, Mexico, and Chris Fishel, of Charlottesville, Virginia. You'll recall (Forum, Spring 1992) that John Leavy and a bunch of his computer colleagues in Austin, Texas, became upset when Ann Landers reprinted "for the zillionth time" a list of chilling parallels between the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Abraham Lincoln. Much is often made of this, as though some kind of historical synchronicity, rather than coincidence, is at work. They decided to show how easy it'd be to find similar amazing coincidences between other pairs of presidents, William McKinley and James Garfield, for instance. They presented three pages of examples and challenged readers to come up with their own. We agreed, but told Leavy and his friends, who started it all, that they would have to be the judges.

We received dozens of entries. We also stimulated considerable media interest. At least two newspapers did stories, *Omni* magazine called, and a number of radio stations pursued interviews. The contest seemed to catch the fancy of many people.

"I've gotten my 15 minutes of fame," says Leavy. He and his old University of Texas buddies got together over pizza to judge the entries. "Dozens of radio stations have interviewed me, and I've tried to give

your magazine a plug each time. It's been fun," he says.

Arturo Magidin is a student at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, in Mexico City, where he is about to receive a B.Sc. in mathematics. Here is his entry, including his introductory comments:

I read with delight John Leavy's "Our Spooky Presidential Coincidences Contest."

I would like to point out, however, that spooky coincidences are not limited to one country or place. To prove this, I wish to enter the contest with the following list of 16 spooky coincidences between the lives and deaths of U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Mexican President Alvaro Obregón:

1. "Kennedy" and "Obregón" have seven letters each.
2. Both Kennedy and Obregón were assassinated.
3. Both their assassins had three names (Lee Harvey Oswald and José de León Toral).
4. Each of the assassins died shortly after killing the president.
5. Kennedy was assassinated on the way to a luncheon. Obregón was assassinated leaving a luncheon.
6. Kennedy and Obregón were both married in years ending with the number 3.
7. Kennedy and Obregón both were in their forties when they were killed.
8. Both were in the Army during a major military conflict (Ken-

nedy in World War II, Obregón during the Mexican Revolution).

9. Kennedy and Obregón each had a son who died soon after birth.

10. Kennedy and Obregón each came from a large family.

11. Kennedy had three brothers. Obregón had three sisters.

12. A foreign government refused to recognize Obregón's regime. Kennedy's regime refused to recognize a foreign government. (In Obregón's case, the U.S.; in Kennedy's, Cuba. Amazingly enough, the U.S. government was involved in both cases!)

13. Obregón never lost a major battle. Kennedy never lost a major election.

14. Kennedy and Obregón each had serious injuries during his military career.

15. Obregón died after his second presidential election and before taking office. Kennedy died before his second presidential election and after taking office.

16. Obregón and Kennedy were both concerned with civil rights and social reform.

Coincidence? You decide.

A. Magidin
Mexico City, Mexico

A comment. Before you say, "But Obregón wasn't a U.S. president," recall that we didn't specify that the presidents need be. Frankly, it never occurred to us at the time that we'd get entries involving presidents from outside the United States, but why not? In fact, this point provides an interesting lesson in "coincidence seeking." If the domain from which the entities are selected is not narrowly defined in advance, amazing-sounding coincidences are even easier to find. The fact that this particular set of coincidences also happens to involve John F. Kennedy makes it even better.

Co-winner Chris Fishel, a graduate

student in chemical engineering at the University of Virginia, managed to come up with lists of coincidences between no fewer than 21 different pairs of U.S. presidents. None involved fewer than six coincidences. As a result, he says, "After discovering that lists of coincidences can be devised for pairings as unlikely as Teddy Roosevelt and Millard Fillmore, I think a really challenging contest would be finding a pair of presidents with fewer than five coincidences between them. Keep up the good work in promoting critical thinking."

Here are several of Fishel's listings:

Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson

1. Jefferson lost to John Adams in 1796 but defeated him in 1800; Jackson lost to John Quincy Adams in 1824 but defeated him in 1828.

2. Both were involved in elections decided by the House of Representatives (Jefferson in 1800; Jackson in 1824).

3. Both their predecessors refused to attend their inaugurations.

4. Both served two full terms.

5. Each replaced his original vice-president for his re-election campaign.

6. Both of their second vice-presidents (Clinton, Van Buren) had served as governors of New York.

7. Crowds at Jefferson's second inauguration and Jackson's first inauguration caused considerable damage to the White House.

8. Both their wives died before they became president.

9. Both their wives had 6-letter first names (Martha Jefferson, Rachel Jackson).

10. Both were in debt at the time of their deaths.

11. Each had 6-letter first names.

12. Each had last names that start with "J" and end in "son."

13. Each had a state capital named after him.

*Dwight David Eisenhower
and George Bush*

1. Both have 6-letter first names.

2. Eisenhower was born in Texas and moved to the North; Bush was born in the North and moved to Texas.

3. Both won the nomination by defeating a Midwestern senator named Robert with a 4-letter last name (Robert Taft of Ohio; Robert Dole of Kansas).

4. Each was a moderate Republican who placated the party's right wing by naming a young conservative senator as his running mate.

5. Both had controversial chiefs of staff (Sherman Adams, John Sununu).

6. Both had cabinet nominees rejected by the Senate (Lewis Strauss, John Tower).

7. Both suffered heart problems during their first term.

8. Both had speaking styles that were not known for their clarity (to put it euphemistically).

*Millard Fillmore and
Theodore Roosevelt*

1. Both were born in and died in New York.

2. Both were vice-presidents who took office following the death of the president.

3. Both were married, widowed, and remarried.

4. Both their first wives had first names that began with "A" (Abigail Fillmore, Alice Roosevelt).

5. Four years after leaving office, each ran for president on a third-party ticket.

6. Both of their third-party candidacies won over 20 percent of the vote.

7. Both their third-parties were better remembered by their nicknames than by their official names. (Fillmore ran with the "Know Nothing" American Party; Roosevelt with the "Bull Moose" Pro-

gressives.)

Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan

1. Both were governors of states that they weren't born in. (Wilson was born in Virginia and governed New Jersey; Reagan was born in Illinois and governed California.)

2. Both were married twice.

3. Their second wives had 5-letter first names (Edith Wilson, Nancy Reagan).

4. Their second wives were controversial because of their influence on presidential decisions.

5. Both defeated incumbent presidents (Taft, Carter).

6. Both served two full terms.

7. Both involved the U.S. in undeclared wars in Latin America (Wilson in Mexico, Reagan in Grenada).

8. Both made historic firsts with their Supreme Court appointments. (Wilson appointed Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish justice; Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor, the first female justice.)

9. Both suffered health problems in office.

10. Both have 6-letter last names.

11. Reagan's middle name is Wilson.

12. Special hidden coincidence: Wilson's actual first name was Thomas; thus, both Wilson and Reagan have 6-letter first names.

Magidin and Fishel have each been sent the contest-winner prize, a signed copy of the latest anthology of SKEPTICAL INQUIRER articles, *The Hundredth Monkey and Other Paradigms of the Paranormal* (Prometheus, 1991).

It has been fun, and instructive too, I hope. Thanks to all the readers who submitted entries and other comments.

—Kendrick Frazier, Editor