

Past presidents teach us to be wary of words

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 16 June 2023 03:01



Have you ever heard of a politician who is short on words? A terse politician is about as common as a dancing potato, and as unelectable as a vampire who wants to raise taxes.

Surely presidents of the past have something to say about words, right? As surely as more politicians are announcing their presidential candidacies (with lots of words), voices of the past are echoing through the hallowed halls of government.

For the sake of staying apolitical, I won't include any presidential quotes from the past fifty years; rather, I'm going to shed light on some of the words about words that have staying power.

In an 1819 letter, John Adams wrote, "Abuse of words has been the great instrument of sophistry and chicanery, of party, faction, and division of society." In essence, Adams here is railing against the abilities of people, parties and politicians to use words to promote wedges and division. While certainly effective, Adams suggests these messages only do damage to the fabric of the U.S.

Speaking to an audience in Oyster Bay, New York, in 1915, Theodore Roosevelt said, "I have a perfect horror of words that are not backed up by deeds." The meaning here is about as plain as it gets. Teddy didn't mince words, although he gave many speeches throughout his political career. Here Roosevelt basically says, "If you're going to talk the talk, you'd better walk the walk." It's a warning against those who are all talk.

Past presidents teach us to be wary of words

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 16 June 2023 03:01

In a November 1963 Thanksgiving proclamation, President John F. Kennedy declared, "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them." Similarly, Herbert Hoover quipped, "Words without actions are the assassins of idealism." The lesson here is the same as Theodore Roosevelt's above: back up your words with your actions.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "An intellectual is a man who takes more words than necessary to tell more than he knows," while James Madison put it this way: "Philosophy is common sense with big words." In other words, simply stated ideas are better than overwrought bloviations.

As we enter another presidential campaign cycle, I believe we should heed these words about words from former U.S. presidents. Pay attention to what candidates say and measure them against what they have done.

Curtis Honeycutt is an award-winning syndicated humor columnist and author. Connect with him at curtishoneycutt.com.

***'Grammar Guy'
By Curtis Honeycutt
Guest Columnist***