

# First Hunters: American Presidents and Hunting

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George Bush on his quail hunt in December seems squarely within the tradition of American hunter presidents. But what to deduce of this pattern? Whatever their motivations, probably most presidents hunted. Perhaps as many as twenty-six of the forty hunted at one time or another in their lives, and the number may actually be higher, as biographers did not emphasize or uncover information about their subject's hunting. Certainly a candidate did not have to be a hunter to win the election, as Woodrow Wilson and others proved. But other presidents saw something useful in promoting the image of themselves as hunters, that such depictions would touch some deep chord in the electorate's psyche. Otherwise they would have, as best as possible, confined their hunting to private moments. Clearly, hunting has served these presidents dually, first as an arena of individual contact with nature, a personal proving ground, a respite from the grind of the presidency, and second as a collection of readily-identifiable, "humanizing" media images, designed to persuade the public that presidents aren't really so different from the "average" American after all. Apparently Americans would feel more comfortable with a president who could "shoot straight," even in times of professed peace, rather than one who might fumble with the trigger. On a more positive note, several presidents argued that it was hunting that had acquainted them with conservationist ideals, with ecological ideas beyond the actual game animal. Assuming that this was more than self-serving rhetoric, perhaps the conservationist impulse owed a great deal to those rod and gun sojourns American presidents took as boys and as men. For the time being, it is unlikely that any president will approach the out-and-out enthusiasm that Theodore Roosevelt had for hunting, but it seems equally improbable that the next run of chief executives will be antihunters. The hunter president image seems too engrained in the American political pattern, too emotionally satisfying to many in the electorate, even despite drops in the hunter percentages nationwide. Presidents will probably continue to exercise their privileges to be "average" Americans and slog out to duck blinds, tramp over quail coverts, and maybe even plink a rodent or two in the name of environmental liberty for all.