



Ask the Presidents

By Cara Bafile

NARRATOR ONE:

The minute her finger released the ENTER button, Penny suspected she'd made a mistake. After checking her Sent folder, she was sure of it. The joke she meant to send to her best friend Abby had gone to her teacher, Ms. Abbington, instead.

PENNY:

It will be all right. I'm sure she'll think it's funny too.... At least I think she will.... I hope she will!

NARRATOR TWO:

Penny didn't have to wait long to find out. Before class the next morning, Ms. Abbington called Penny to her desk.

MS. ABBINGTON:

Penny, I received an interesting e-mail last night. Here it is, right here: "What's the difference between presidents and potatoes? Potatoes are *spuds*. Presidents are *duds*!" Was it from you?

PENNY:

Yes, that's my e-mail, Ms. Abbington. I'm sorry. I sent it to you by mistake. I *meant* to send it to Abby.

MS. ABBINGTON:

Well, the joke *is* an interesting play on words, Penny. But I can't say I *agree* with the words. Do you know what a president actually does?

PENNY:

Not really, but I know it's a pretty easy job. Whenever I see the president on TV, he's either riding in a limo, giving a speech, or getting off Air Force One.

MS. ABBINGTON:

Oh, Penny, there's so much more to the president's job than that. Why, a president...

NARRATOR ONE:

At that moment, the opening bell rang. Mrs. Abbington just smiled as Penny hurried to her seat. But all day long, Ms. Abbington's words echoed in Penny's brain...

MS. ABBINGTON:

...There's so much more to the president's job than that.

NARRATOR TWO:

As soon as she got home from school, Penny went straight to the computer and opened her Internet browser.

PENNY:

I'm going to find out what a president really does. Maybe there *is* more to the job than giving speeches and visiting other countries. Maybe it's even a job I'd like to do.

NARRATOR ONE:

Penny quickly typed "U.S. Presidents" into her search engine.

PENNY:

Hmmm. This looks interesting -- a chat room called *The Virtual Oval Office*. The president's office in the White House is called the Oval Office. I wonder what the Virtual Oval Office is?

NARRATOR:

With her mother's permission, Penny entered the chat room and began to read.

I_LIKE_IKE:

Everyone thinks the 1950's were a simple time, but my term in office was tough. The Supreme Court ruled that black and white students who went to separate schools didn't get the same education. The justices said that black and white students should go to the same schools. But not everyone agreed with the Court's ruling. I had to send soldiers to Arkansas to force officials there to let black and white students go to school together.

MONTY_CELLO:

Good call, Ike! In the Declaration of Independence, we wrote that all men are created equal, and that the government serves all people.

HONEST_ABE:

Right, Tom. A president's greatest duty is to preserve, protect, and defend the nation. During my presidency, a group -- or Confederacy -- of states tried to secede from the United States. I believed the law didn't allow a state to leave the Union and fought a civil war to keep the country united.

GENTLEMAN_FARMER:

I'm proud of you, Abe. As the first leader of the country, I worked hard to set a good example for all the presidents who would follow me. High morals and good manners were the virtues I brought with me from Virginia. Those qualities helped me meet the challenge of organizing the executive branch of a new government.

NEW_DEAL:

Yes, George, We all had hard work to do. I was president at a time when millions of Americans were out of work. The country needed me, a victim of polio, to help it recover from the Great Depression. During my four terms in office, the United States also was a good neighbor to other countries. I helped start the United Nations.

NARRATOR:

Penny couldn't believe her luck. She had stumbled onto a presidents' chat room! Excitedly, she began to type.

PENNY:

What qualities do you think people should look for in a president?

HONEST_ABE:

Dedication to the office is very important. Some presidents have even given their lives for the office.

NEW_DEAL:

Right, Abe! A president must have courage, and not be afraid to do what needs to be done. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

I_LIKE_IKE:

That's true, Franklin. The challenges I faced as president were as great as the challenges I faced as a general. Courage is a must.

PILLBOX_HAT:

A president must remember that he can't do it alone. Working together, a president and first lady can instill pride and patriotism in their country's citizens.

NEW_DEAL:

Bravo, Jackie! I certainly couldn't have performed my duties without my wife, Eleanor. She was my eyes and ears, and a trusted advisor.

NARRATOR:

Noticing some new names in the group, Penny clicked "Who's chatting?" to check them out.

PENNY:

What do you think makes a good president, PT Boat Commander?

PT_BOAT_COMMANDER:

Well, I'm just here with Jackie, but I think every president first should ask what he can do for his country. I helped put a man on the moon! And I established the Peace Corps, an organization of people working to help developing nations and promote peace.

GREAT_COMMUNICATOR:

Well said, Jack! A president must communicate well with Americans *and* with people in other countries. I asked Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall and reunite the city of Berlin and the country of Germany. When he did, that success became part of my legacy.

MONTY_CELLO:

Speaking of legacies, Ron, I made it possible for Lewis and Clark to explore western territories. I helped found the University of Virginia. *And* my books formed the basis of the Library of Congress.

GENTLEMAN_FARMER:

That is an impressive legacy, Tom. Unfortunately, *my* legacy has become the stuff of fables. Cherry trees and wooden teeth, indeed! Does anyone care that I was a good dancer and a fine horseman? Does anyone care about the work I did as president?

PT_BOAT_COMMANDER:

Stop whining, George. The girl asked an important question and she deserves a thoughtful answer. Penny, I think we can all agree that the most important qualities people should look for in a president are...

PENNY'S MOM:

Penny! Penny! Dinner's ready!

NARRATOR:

Penny sleepily lifted her head off her keyboard.

PENNY:

Huh? What? I must have dozed off. I wonder how long I've been sleeping? Did I really talk to presidents? Or was I dreaming?

NARRATOR:

Deciding that she was too hungry to figure it all out, Penny quickly headed for the dinner table. She might have learned the answer to her question, though, if she'd only looked back. Scrolling across her computer screen as she left the room were the words "...*courage, commitment, and communication.*"

