Reagan drew love hearts, Kennedy was obsessed by boats and LBJ sketched three-headed aliens. The doodles of America's presidents reveal what they were really thinking about during summit meetings and in the Oval Office. David Greenberg reports.
Ronald Reagan

Reagan's love for his wife, Nancy, is the central theme of most of his doodles (this page and opposite). Caricatures of people and animals are interspersed with soppy messages to Nancy. The woman in this sketch (bottom centre) is probably his wife too.

There I was doodling away—then I began to think about you.
So-o-o-o-o...

[Handwritten note: ]

NDR

RR
THE RICE HOTEL

"Houston's Welcome to the World"

John F Kennedy

Kennedy's doodles often had a nautical theme. He found time to draw during the height of the Cuban missile crisis (above), reminding himself almost absent-mindedly to 'Blockade Cuba!' A keen yachtsman, he sketched this boat (right) on the evening before he was assassinated.

Management of his spontaneous side. If anything, American presidents are all the more image-conscious, which is perhaps why these drawings are so revealing: they capture the playful, primitive and absurd aspects of presidents, not normally seen in their public pronouncements.

For Franklin Delano Roosevelt, doodles show the passions he had away from the Oval Office. A fisherman, he was keen on drawing boats and fish; as a genealogist, he liked to sketch his family name and crest. His other great leisure pursuit was ordinary-sounding— stamp-collecting. He hauled his vast collection to wartime summits at Yalta and Casablanca in a steamer trunk. He designed stamps for the US postal service, including one in honour of Mother's Day.

While FDR drew the subjects of his hobbies, drawing was Dwight D Eisenhower's hobby. Ike often worked at his easel with the television on. Painting even rivalled another famous pastime for his affection. "I've often thought," he once wrote, "what a wonderful thing it would be to install a compact painting outfit in a golf cart." Ike couldn't bring his easel into cabinet meetings. Instead he would take out his pencil and doodle on his daily agendas, FBI reports, or whatever paper he had before him. He drew still-life objects that were solid, sturdy and unremarkable—rather like Ike himself. On one memo, from June 28, 1954, Eisenhower was clearly preoccupied with the American-backed coup in Guatemala that had just forced the popularly elected leftist president, Jacobo Arbenz, to resign. Eisenhower wrote the words "internal security" and sketched a small flotilla of boats at sea, as if headed southward to restore order. Presiding over it all was a portrait of the president himself as a young man, looking trim, and sporting—as he always did in these self-portraits—a full head of hair.

John F Kennedy's doodles also bear the imprint of cold-war drama. In meetings, JFK was known to radiate an electric energy, which he expressed through his fingers— "drumming the table, tapping his teeth, slashing impatient pencil lines on a pad", as his aide, the historian Arthur M Schlesinger Jr, wrote. On a given page, words like "Vietnam" or even "Iraq" would recur, often encased in sharply drawn rectangular boxes.

During the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, when Kennedy had to stop the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushev from installing missiles 90 miles from American shores, JFK wrote Fidel Castro's name on a piece of White House stationery. He added with a directive (to himself?) to blockade Cuba, and a sketch of a small dinghy that hardly seemed up to the task of keeping Soviet ships from reaching Castro.

Kennedy's boats, however, were not limited to one or two doodles. He drew them...
**Lyndon B Johnson**

The doodles of this president are childlike, with three-headed figures, cats with devil horns and alien faces (below). The drawing on the right, however, may be a combination of Johnson's efforts and the work of someone else — this era was particularly prolific in the White House's doodling history.

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**Doodles show the passions Roosevelt had away from the Oval Office**

Constantly, a favourite model was his own sloop, which he named the Victura — the boat on which he taught Jackie to sail. Of all the doodles in Kennedy's oeuvre, the freest, most elegant-looking is also one of a boat, outlined in four simple lines and gliding on a sea rendered with quick pencil strokes and four little waves. The picture was completed the evening before Kennedy met his death in Dallas.

Kennedy's energy in his doodles is contained; that of his successor, Lyndon B Johnson, is out of control. A man of gargantuan appetites, Johnson ate, drank and smoked with abandon. He would unzip his flies in front of a colleague, show off his penis and say, "Have you ever seen anything as big as this?" The same lack of restraint informs his doodles: violently drawn, scary-looking animals with spiky ears, three heads or multiple legs.

Johnson guarded his doodles obsessively. "On board the presidential jet," the journalist David Halberstam once wrote, "he often doodled as he spoke with reporters, and if he left to talk with someone else and noted a reporter moving to pick up a scrap of presidential doodle, he did not find it beneath him to walk back and snatch it away."

Compared with Johnson, Richard Nixon was downright inhibited. "Any letting my hair..."
down, I find that embarrassing.” he said. This cramped his doodling style. In an unintentional
turn, he once described himself as “a square
doodler” – not only lacking in hipness, but also
prone to drawing “squares and diamonds”. Occasionally he could also turn out a real gem.

Of all the US presidents, Ronald Reagan was perhaps the most comfortable with pencil and
napkin. Early in his life he considered a career as
cartoonist, and he mastered a repertoire of
classic American types circa 1930: the football
player in a stiff-arm pose, the monocled plutocrat,
the rugged cowboy (who always bore a strong
resemblance to Reagan himself). Like his
presidential rhetoric, his doodles evoked a series
of warm associations with an idealised American
past. This was how Reagan saw the world.

Reagan often doodled for his wife, Nancy. His
notes to her – studded with little hearts or tears
to show his sadness at her absence – overflow
with teenage emotion, embarrassing terms of
endearment (“Dear Mommie, Poo Pants”).

Reagan was perhaps the most comfortable with pencil and napkin
George W Bush

Bush has not released any of his doodles, but this note (right), caught by a photographer, reveals how his mind wanders in meetings. Written to the secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, during a UN meeting in 2005, the message reveals a childlike meekness from the all-powerful president of the US.

Dwight D Eisenhower

Drawing was Ike’s hobby (below) and his doodles often revealed what was on his mind. The well-proportioned young man in this sketch (above) is a flattering self-portrait. There is no mention of the Guatemala crisis in the memo, but the clue is in the presidential scribbles, and pictures of gunboats and cute furry animals. When Nancy published some of these in a book of his letters, it was tempting to see the move as a public-relations manoeuvre. In truth, Reagan had always used his doodles as PR. He proudly gave them to friends, colleagues, and “pen pals” who sent him fan letters. By showing off his doodling, Reagan underscored his boyishness and lack of pretension, to offset the tough-guy image he otherwise cultivated.

Previously, the doodle might be said to express the private impulses of the American leader. But with Reagan, even this last remnant of unscripted presidential communication was co-opted by a politician who cannily understood how much, in the modern age, the personal had truly become the political.

Presidents after Reagan have been loath to disclose their doodles. Despite a 1978 law mandating the release of most presidential records, George Bush Sr found a loophole to deem reams of official documentation off limits to the public. Bill Clinton, too, has refused to make any available for publication, and his presidential library in Arkansas, having just opened, has yet to yield any either. The present incumbent has also rejected requests for doodles – surpassing even the paranoid Richard Nixon (who was willing to draw doodles for collectors) in his secretiveness in this respect.

Clinton and the Bushes have had personal details splashed across the newspapers that are far more embarrassing than any silly drawings. But in this age of intense scrutiny, they have failed to learn the lesson from Reagan: that a few sops towards the disclosure of their private business can go a long way towards blunting the desire for inquiries into their public business.

Presidential Doodles, by David Greenberg and Cabinet Magazine, is published by Basic Books, price £14.99. It is available at the Books First price of £13.49 including postage and packing. Tel: 0870 165 8585