



## Episode 1,290: How Jeff Deist and I Advise a Child Who Wants to Run for President

Guest: Jeff Deist

**WOODS:** All right, well, it's Thanksgiving. Now, of course, we're posturing here. It's like a week before Thanksgiving, but I'm getting all my episodes recorded before I go out of town for that week. But I got a letter some time ago, actually quite a long time ago, and I just haven't gotten to it. It's a letter from a nine-year-old boy. I am going to read it without his name. And he asked me two questions. We're going to talk about the second one today. And it goes like this:

"Dear Mr. Woods, I'm [blankety blank], and I am nine years old. I would like to know about George Washington, because he is my all-time American hero. In your expert opinion, what ideas would George Washington have to make our country better if he were alive today? One other question: what should a nine-year-old do to learn about politics? I am interested in running for president someday. Thank you in advance for your reply. Respectfully, [so and so]. "

So, very sweet letter, right?

**DEIST:** Hmm.

**WOODS:** So I want to talk about what should a nine-year-old know about politics. I feel like, if I could only find the return address — I'm lucky I still have the letter, given some of my organizational skills. I'm lucky I have the letter. If I still had the return address on the envelope, I might be inclined to send him the *Tuttle Twins* series of books, which is a great children's book series that would teach him an awful lot about politics. So if you guys have kids out there, [TomWoods.com/twins](http://TomWoods.com/twins) is where you should go to check out some outstanding books. And Jeff, I'll just say, I know we're getting a little bit on a tangent and we haven't even started, but volume number nine, *The Tuttle Twins and the Fate of the Future*, is an adaptation for children of Rothbard's *The Anatomy of the State*, and it's dedicated to Lew Rockwell. That's hardcore.

**DEIST:** Yeah, yeah, I'm looking forward to that. We're going to have that in our hands here in a few days.

**WOODS:** That's absolutely great. All right, so you know, I want to do the right thing. I want to do right by this nine-year-old boy who wrote me this letter. And the easy thing would be to say: oh, well, there are many fine things to say about politics and running for president. But I think, here you are, at age nine, it's an impressionable and important time in your life. It's also a time when, you know, maybe you're open to hearing different ideas, different

perspectives. So, for a different perspective, I brought on the former chief of staff to Ron Paul, who, although he ran for president, was a rather anomalous candidate in how he probably felt about the presidency itself. So I thought we could maybe tackle this and not so much as an episode for this boy, although maybe he will get something out of it, but rather just the way we might, in the most basic and elementary terms, think about politics versus all the other occupations, all the other institutions in society.

**DEIST:** Well, first of all, I guess it would be good if he asked us instead of his dopey teacher, right, because God knows what he's probably going to get from some public school teacher. But I think the first thing we'd have to do, Tom, is switch off our cynical, anti-political antenna and realize we're talking to a nine-year-old kid here. So maybe we ought to have a little softer treatment. And I don't mind if a nine-year-old is a little bit credulous or even romantic in his vision of politics and what the president does and all that. I think that's fine at that age, even good at that age. We don't need nine-year-old cynics walking around the playgrounds, I suppose.

But I guess, you know, I would suspect — is it a he? Do we know that it's a he or she?

**WOODS:** It's a he.

**DEIST:** Okay, I would suspect that he imagines that presidents go to Washington to help people, when in fact, we might argue that they go to Washington to boss people around and collect trophies and spoils for themselves as part of a political class. But again, we don't want to get off on too cynical of a foot.

So I guess for starters, I'm encouraged that at least he's bringing up George Washington, who's got to be one of the less harmful presidents in American history. I mean, one of the great ideas Washington had, of course, was that he's only going to serve two terms. So that later became actually codified into law, but I think that's an excellent gift from Washington, because otherwise, we'd have these endless FDRs. And the other thing we can say about Washington is what he thought of as a sensible foreign policy — it's, of course, now tarnished with this ludicrous isolationist tag, that is now criticized as unrealistic or something like that. So you know, George Washington isn't the worst hero a kid could have among the presidents, I guess.

If I could sit down with him, I'd probably say, first and foremost, you know, there's an awful lot of important jobs out there, and an awful lot of jobs that help people and do a lot of good. And there's only been 45 presidents, and by the time you're old enough to be president, there's only going to have been about 48 or 49 of them. So, it's a pretty hard job to get, first of all. Even if you said you wanted to be a pro athlete or a rock-and-roll musician or something like that, at least there's a few thousand of those. So we might want to start puncturing that bubble gently a little bit at the outset. But I think it would really be a matter of talking to him about how he sees the president. What does he think the president is and does?

And then I guess at that age, that would be about — what grade would that be? About fifth, at age nine?

**WOODS:** Fourth, I think.

**DEIST:** Fourth, okay. Yeah, you might start — I don't think most kids by fourth have really studied the Constitution at all, but you might start steering him — if he's writing letters to *The Tom Woods Show*, he's probably an advanced kid, so we might start steering him towards it and say, look, you know, if you actually look at the constitution, which is pretty important because we expect presidents to follow the rules, it really doesn't give the president a lot of power. As a matter of fact, there's only four chief powers, which are I guess in Article 2, and those talk about the war-making ability and commander-in-chief — not of the American people, commander-in-chief of the army and navy — and then carrying out the laws of Congress.

So really, when we hear all these presidential candidates — I'm sure he hears about Trump and Hillary Clinton a lot or has heard about them, talking about what they would do or what their policy is, that's not really how it's supposed to be. It's almost as though he was electing someone at his school to represent him on student body or on a sports team is captain or something like that. Their job is to execute the things that Congress tells him or her to do. So that's quite a bit different, I think, than most young kids' idea of the president. They all think that the president is the lawmaker, and the president goes to Washington, D.C. to implement his or her policies, and that's not how it's supposed to be at all.

As a matter of fact, you know, that still kills me. As jaded as I am about politics, Tom, and as jaded as I was during the last few presidential elections, I mean, when people start, *Oh, Trump's policies* — he's not supposed to have policies. I would really enjoy it if somebody would run for president on a platform of executive competence. Wouldn't it be refreshing to say, "Look, I'm going to defer to the legislature. That's not my job. These are the people you elect every two years right there in your own hometown." But we don't hear much of that.

And then I guess maybe I'd asked him what he knows about American history, especially with regard to the presidency. He probably knows a little bit about Thomas Jefferson, you might hope. I bet he doesn't know much about Grover Cleveland or Calvin Coolidge or some of the President's that we might like. But I guess, you know, I'd love to have this kid in front of us for just an hour, take him out to lunch, and see what he thinks. How did he come to write to you, I guess is my question.

**WOODS:** I honestly don't know. I don't know. Now, it could be — my memory is just not what it used to be. There may have been something from his dad in there, but I don't recall anything else in the envelope. So it could be that — well, I hear a lot of stories, Jeff, of parents who listen to *The Tom Woods Show* in their cars, and then the kids recognize my voice, and so if I'm on YouTube or something, they'll say, "Hey, it's Tom Woods," that sort of thing. So it could be that kind of thing. The kid kind of has to endure *The Tom Woods Show*, and then he thinks: well, you know, on second thought, this guy is a historian after all, and I do have a question, so maybe he's the person for me to write to. So maybe that's how it came about.

I want to say a little something about Washington myself, before we go on. And guess it would be that a couple of the things that we know and respect Washington for the most are really things he did *not* do. And your point about serving only two terms is half of what I'm saying, that he did not continue to serve perpetually over and over and over and over, even though he had great support, and he probably could have done so. He decided that two terms was enough. He wanted to set an example for people who followed him that you should relinquish power after a while. So that's one of the cases of that.

The other case of that, of course, is after the war with the British, after the Americans are victorious, he resigns his commission and goes home. This is not the way history usually runs. Normally, he becomes some kind of a dictator or something after that, and he just runs the place. But instead, he resigned his commission, and so we have — it's adapted, the quotation, but the popular version of the famous quotation by King George III about George Washington, when he heard that Washington was simply going to resign his commission and go home rather than take the power he had and seize authority over the country, King George III said — and again, it's adapted, but it was something like, "He truly is the greatest man in the world." And so that's what made him great. It wasn't that he enacted all these different plans and did this and that. It was that he didn't — it was what he didn't do. It was that he did have some sense of what a military leader in a republic ought to do, which is: not seize power. That's one thing.

Then the other thing I would point out is one of the things he's best remembered for is the farewell address, which was not actually delivered as a speech; it was written out. But all the same, the farewell address has a pretty good section in it about how the United States should deal with other countries. And in there, he says, we really should mind our own business. We're lucky that we're over here, and we don't have to get involved in all the wars of Europe. We're lucky we don't have to be dragged into them, so why would we choose to put ourselves into them? One of the blessings we have is that we're free of that. And that's the kind of mentality that I think it would be nice to have our presidents today recall.

**DEIST:** It's interesting how we sleep on how important those two vast oceans on either side of us have been to American history. But yeah, the Washington thing, I hope his dad's not out there, tweeting about absurdly precocious things his kid says or questions. You know, this is the new trend, where we see tweets about, you know, today my nine-year-old said something about Trump or whatever.

**WOODS:** Oh, I don't do that.

**DEIST:** And of course it's always something that the parent obviously made up and inserted the kid's, you know, voice or something. But if I could get him a couple years later, when he's gotten deeper into American history, what I fear is that he's going to be told that, along with Washington, the great presidents, the troika are generally taught as, of course, Lincoln and FDR. And when we're looking at George Washington and what you just said about him, we can say, look, this was a great man. He was a great man who became president. Lots of not-so-great men have become president, and merely becoming president does not bestow greatness upon you, in and of itself. I don't think too many of us would say that Richard Nixon was personally a great man, or that LBJ was. There are some who I think had been great, or maybe not in the sense of being good or just or moral, but they've been great in their achievements. You might even say that about Ulysses S. Grant.

But you know, greatness and goodness are two different things, and so I'd say: well, why do you think that your history teachers, your history books are so interested in Lincoln and FDR? Well, I guess first and foremost is because they become sort of iconic wartime presidents. It's all about war. And the idea that presidents become great, are elevated to greatness in history books as a result of getting the United States through wars I think is a very harmful and noxious idea. And, of course, what happens then, the flip side of that is that history treats the non-activist presidents as footnotes, when in fact, maybe they are the great success stories that we ought to be applauding and reading about.

So I would just try to get as much into his head before he goes into junior high, sort of with the goal of having him not passively accept this barrage of history that he's going to get that's been rewritten, or at least written by the victors. Because there's a lot we could say about Lincoln and FDR, but humility was not the strong point of either, and peace was not the strong point of either. So maybe if we could go back to the playground analogy, we'd say: what would you consider a great leader, one who gets you and other groups into fights on the playground, or one that makes the playground fun and that makes it work and that makes it so that more kids have a chance to do what they want? These are the kinds of things you might say to him.

But, you know, if we could just start getting some little thoughts in the back of his brain about the cult of the presidency, the cult of personality and the idea that, because a bunch of people voted for you, that somehow that makes you great, it just isn't true. So I hope I wouldn't be too jaded with him and that I'd give him a chance to express what he really thinks, and maybe see if there's a kernel in there of self-awareness or doubt about this whole process.

**WOODS:** And, of course, what you need to do to become president is —

**DEIST:** Ugh.

**WOODS:** Well, it's pretty rough. Because you would have to — if you were to just come out and be truly honest with the American public, you would have no chance whatsoever of being elected. The last thing the American public wants to hear is: we're going to have to cut back on a lot of these things we promised you. Or you know, maybe the reason that our country gets attacked here and there is not because we're just awesome and just standing there minding our own business, but maybe some of the things that our government does provokes responses from other countries. And maybe that's what's happening. I mean, forget that, right? You can't have that conversation. You can try, but it's not going to go very far.

So a lot of the things that need to be said you can't say, and a lot of the things that need to be done, you're fighting against people — like let's say I thought that some federal agency needed to be closed down. All of the people in that agency make their livelihoods working there. They earn salaries. They exercise power. And they are going to exercise every bit of resistance they've got to try to shut me down and stop me from doing what I want to do. It'd be immensely frustrating. Now, not to say I wouldn't like to see somebody try. But what I think it tends to do to people is it transforms them. It turns them into something else. They realize that even if they had good intentions, they realize they cannot accomplish the things they wanted to, so they just make excuses in their minds why it's okay for them to just go along with the system after all and be just like everybody else there and really wind up not changing anything. So it's very demoralizing. It's a very demoralizing situation.

**DEIST:** Yes. Well, we might give him an example of someone who I personally think is a great man but wasn't a great president. That's Jimmy Carter. I would say he was a great man, because he was devout, he was a nuclear scientist, and he was a peanut farmer, and I consider all those great achievements in his personal life. But he was not a great president. When you talk about not being able to tell people the truth, forget telling them something terrible about foreign policy. All he did was sit there in a sweater and say: you know, turn your heat down a little bit and wear another layer around the house, because we need to save some energy in this country. And he was absolutely lambasted for just that. I mean,

that's hardly much of a sacrifice compared to World War II or the Great Depression or the Civil War, all these other things in history. So that's funny to me that now we expect this sort of hubris and this self-confidence in presidents.

And so imagine if a candidate today came out and said, "Look, I am the clear-eyed voice of reason. We need to radically and drastically and immediately tackle the entitlement burden this country faces going forward, through cuts and tax increases. We need to drastically cut our military budget, and we need to drastically reduce all kinds of federal agencies and programs, or else the unsustainable levels of debt in this country will drag us down into some kind of terrible economic collapse in the future."

Okay, well, yeah, good luck running on that. But imagine something even smaller. Imagine something even smaller. Here, we've got Kamala Harris, who by all accounts is a likely presidential aspirant in 2020, currently the junior senator from California. She's been talking about how ICE, the immigration people, are KKK and how they should be abolished and this and that. And now that her party, the Democrats, control the US House, well, now they have to deal with the appropriations process. And let me tell you something. I'll take \$100 bet from any of your listeners. Not a penny, not a penny of ICE funding will be cut in the Democratic-run appropriations bills. As a matter of fact, I would wager that ICE funding will be increased, and for a very simple reason: that ICE employees are members of the AFGE, which is one of the biggest federal employee unions, which is very favorable and friendly to Democrats. So for all of Ms. Harris' talk about ICE being the KKK, she won't actually ever vote on a bill that abolishes it or cuts even a penny of its funding.

So this is the kind of thing that, if we explain this in simple terms to a young person, might enable them to start understanding the hypocrisy and the gamesmanship involved in this. And I bet you, even at age nine, he knows that some other kids at school who are two-faced. I bet you he knows some kids who kiss up to the teachers or who say one thing to your face but another thing when you're not around, pretend to be your friend, all this sort of stuff. So even a nine-year-old has a sense of double dealing.

And you know, when it comes to actually winning the presidency or running on a platform that's coherent, look back at Ross Perot, all those charts and graphs he had that showed the unsustainable levels of federal debt. Well, that was true. And of course, he didn't win. Look at Ron Paul, when he told an audience of Republican primary voters, which obviously presumably anyway contains a fair amount of self-styled Christian conservatives, that we ought to follow the golden rule in foreign affairs. He was roundly booed for this, and I think in the South. I think that was in one of the South Carolina debates, if memory serves.

But one of my favorite memories about Ron running for president that just shows the difference between someone telling the truth and actually running on kind of a winning platform was a story I think I told on the Contra Cruise. It was that one night I was over at Ron's condominium in Northern Virginia before a big CNN debate, which was hosted by Wolf Blitzer and which was held on CNN there at the DAR Hall, the Daughters of the American Revolution Hall in Washington. And the debate's just an hour or two away; we're starting to get worried about traffic; we've got to get into town to make sure we're on time. And Ron is in his kitchen, and he's heating up some soup in the microwave. I mean, he's just utterly unconcerned with any sort of debate preparation, because he knows what he's going to say.

**WOODS:** [laughing]

**DEIST:** Meanwhile, imagine probably two days before this debate, I'm willing to bet that Mitt Romney's entourage arrived in a whole floor full of hotel suites in some beautiful hotel in Washington, D.C. And they spent those two days peppering him with questions. They probably had somebody impersonating Wolf Blitzer and trying out different phrases for how they would resonate with Republicans and probably making sure his hair and his eyebrows and his suit and tie were perfectly coifed. I mean, you know, it's a show. Mitt Romney has to go out there and perform like an actor in a show. And the only thing that's a little different with a debate is that the script isn't given to you.

But here's Ron, being Ron. And some people would criticize him for that, that he should have been more of a hardcore debater. But the point is that, you know, Ron could go talk to a group of prison inmates; he go talk to a group of Jewish rabbis, a group of conservative college kids at BYU, a group of liberal college kids at Berkeley or his US House colleagues or his family or anybody else and give the exact same message. So Ron never got tripped up on a question, because he wasn't afraid to answer honestly, even if that meant a lot of people didn't like the answer. And even some people who were maybe thinking about checking out this Ron Paul guy, "Oh, my gosh, but then I heard what he said about foreign policy, and he's not strong on defense." You now, that never worried Ron. And of course, that's why he never stood really a chance of winning. So it would be good to tell a story like that to a young kid and see if they could draw an analogy to other kids in their own life.

**WOODS:** I want to just make a simple point about — the kind of point that, let's say, an agorist might make, distinguishing between politics and every other part of life. Because there is something that's different. When you look at a career as a politician and a career as, say, an architect, an engineer, a professor, whatever, a dance instructor, there's a difference. And that is that the politician's services are — well, it's not a voluntary transaction. That is to say, if I want dance lessons, I go to the dance instructor, I pay money, and I get the lessons. So the dance instructor's happy, because that person has my money, and I'm happy because I have the lessons. And so we're both happy with each other.

I mean, notice that when you go to the store, and you give money and you get something you're buying, the clerk says thank you, and you say thank you. You both say thank you. That's kind of weird. You know, normally, somebody gives you something, you say thank you, the other person says you're welcome. But you both say thank you in these transactions in the store, and that's because you're making both people better off. One side wants the money more, and the other side wants the product more, the toy or the book or whatever. And so you're both better off.

But when Mr. Politician comes along, and he says, "I'm going to help such and such group" — whoever it is, the farmers, the whatevers. It doesn't matter. The college professors, the scientists, whatever it is. "I'm going to help these people." But the only way he can help those people is by going and taking stuff from other people. So there's no double-sided thank you here. One side says thank you, and the other side says, in effect, says, "Hey, you just took my stuff." So there's something screwy about that kind of profession, that the so-called good that you're doing has to come from doing evil to others. Whereas when you are in the marketplace, as long as you're being honest, you're doing good, and you're having good done to you, and this yields us peace in society. Whereas in politics, whether it's the president or some other politician, they're always grasping at other people's stuff, so they can give it, in effect, to their friends, people they think will vote for them. And that's not, I think, a recipe for peace

in society. So that's why I wouldn't encourage it as a profession, because I don't think that kind of behavior is something we should admire.

**DEIST:** Well, even a nine-year-old has a glimmer of getting out from under their parents' tutelage someday. Every nine-year-old knows what it's like to be told, "Well, because I told you to do that," or, "Because I'm your parent." And that's not a very good answer to the question of why they have to do something they don't want to do. Well, government — and unfortunately, government today really does, in most cases, mean the federal government. And the federal government today really does in most cases mean the president and the cabinet — you know, just gets to tell you "because I said so," whether you agree with it or not.

And there really is that sense that, when you get older, you ought to be on your own. You've got to make your own choices and your own decisions. You move out of your parents' house; maybe you go to college; maybe you choose a major; maybe you choose a spouse someday; maybe you decide to move someplace. All these choices, at least for me, when I was nine — and man, do I hope it still is this way for kids, because it's depressing if it's not. But when I was nine, that was exciting to me. The idea that someday I would no longer be under the thumb of my parents — God bless them. They were fine parents — and I would be on my own, that seemed cool. I think we've lost that, the idea that being a grownup and sitting with grownups and talking with grownups and while they read the paper or something was cool and that grownups didn't sort of cater to kids as much. Well, that's a process of becoming an adult.

And I think government, in many ways, like some modern parents, anyway, infantilizes us. It treats us like children, and it takes away our choices, and it puts way, way, way, way too much arbitrary power in the hands of one person. And obviously we can have a month-long podcast on the powers usurped by the president over the 20th century against Congress, but you can at least start to get these concepts into a kid's head. I try to do it with my own kids in a non-dogmatic fashion. But the fact that he even wrote you about this, I suspect, makes him somewhat precocious.

**WOODS:** Well, yeah, I mean, I think anybody who writes a letter to a person they consider to be an authority, at that age, yeah, I think that is — I don't know that I necessarily would have done that at that age. Maybe I did. I can't remember. I was writing letters to the editor of magazines I read by junior high, so maybe I would have [laughing]. I don't know. But yeah, that's right. And also, by the way, he wrote this out in longhand. It wasn't typed in, like I probably would have done at this point, given the ubiquity of computers. He wrote it out, with "Dear Mr. Woods," and, "Respectfully, so and so," you know, kind of like old-timey, respectful, "I'm going to take my time and make this personalized." I thought that was a nice touch, too.

So I think that's about where we're going to leave it. I think part of this episode could very easily have been directed at this person and another part was a little bit probably too advance. But when I was talking in my last bit about society and how we interact with each other and we're all making each other better off, that was kind of directed toward him to get him to think that that's what we like about society, and yet, we do the opposite when it comes to politics. So maybe there's something different about these two realms and different in a way that should make us favor society over politics. So that's that. I don't have any links, because I don't have anything to link to today, because normally I would link to a book or

whatever. But I'll just say happy Thanksgiving to everybody listening, and to Jeff Deist, thanks for your time.

**DEIST:** Yeah, happy Thanksgiving, everybody. And we've got to suggest to Connor, we need a *Tuttle Twins* about the presidents and about the presidency itself.

**WOODS:** That would solve this problem.

**DEIST:** Yes.

**WOODS:** We would just send this book right along.

**DEIST:** Exactly.

**WOODS:** Okay, Connor Boyack, I hope you're listening. All right, thanks again, Jeff.