

# The Autopen

*When You Get a Letter from Somebody Important in Washington, There's a Good Chance It Was Signed by a Very Quiet Machine*

If you have a letter with a recent American President's signature on it, don't count on selling it to send the kids to college. Odds are it's not even worth taxi fare to get them to the train station, because it probably was signed by a mechanical device known as an Autopen. Every President from Kennedy on has relied on the Autopen to help satisfy the enormous demand for his signature. And so have congressmen, senators, and Cabinet officers. According to autograph experts, even Supreme Court justices have recently begun using the device. "Within four or five square blocks [in downtown Washington], you've got more people who need them than anyplace else in the world," says Robert DeShazo, president of the International Autopen Company, the major manufacturer of automatic signature machines.

The idea of creating a machine that can write goes back to the ancient Arabs, but Thomas Jefferson was among the first to invent one that actually worked. He used his "Polygraph" to make copies. As he wrote with one pen, another, mechanically attached to it, created an exact copy. Machines were subsequently developed that could produce signatures in the signer's absence. P.T. Barnum had one, but no one thought of bringing one into the White House until John Kennedy came along.

Kennedy didn't exactly advertise that he was using an Autopen, but autograph collectors soon realized that certain of his signatures could be exactly superimposed on one another—and that meant an Autopen was on the White House premises. When autograph expert Charles Hamilton warned on the *Today* show of the possible "grave consequences" of Autopen use by a President, press secretary Pierre Salinger felt moved to deny there was a signing machine in the White House. But Hamilton subsequently demonstrated that there were at least seven patterns for machine-produced Kennedy signatures. Most of them read "John Kennedy," but there was a "Jack Ken-

nedey" version for friends.

Lyndon Johnson's use of the Autopen was so enthusiastic that Dr. David Wigdor, a specialist in twentieth-century manuscripts at the Library of Congress, says he has never seen a Johnson signature that he was confident was produced by the hand of the man himself. Jennifer Casoni, an Alexandria, Virginia, autograph expert, claims that Johnson even used the Autopen to sign his vice-presidential oath of office.

The Nixon White House also used Autopens extensively. In her book *Best Wishes, Richard Nixon*, Casoni identifies nine "Richard Nixon" mechanical patterns used in the White House, and three "R.N." patterns. Like his predecessors, Nixon was reluctant to own up to Autopen use. Gerald Ford was the first President to do that. According to Paul Carr, who lives in Rockville and has written a book on the Ford signature, the autograph-collecting community was bowled over when Ford responded to signature requests with Autopen facsimiles—and a letter stating what they were.

Carter used the Autopen too, but that doesn't upset autograph collectors as much as the many "secretarial" signatures they claim he sent out. Carter autograph expert Herman Darvick says that presidential secretary Susan Clough "forged his name beautifully." Most modern Presidents have had their names signed by secretaries, but the Carter/Clough signature has turned up in places particularly upsetting to those who collect autographs. "I saw a picture signed by Begin and Sadat," Darvick says, "which was sent to the White House for Carter's signature. Susan Clough signed it for him. The Autopen would have been better—at least it would be his real signature, even if a machine produced it."

While the Reagan White House is reluctant to discuss the Autopen practices of an incumbent President, experts agree that about a dozen patterns are being used to produce the President's signature. There's a "Ronald Reagan," a "Ron," a "Ronnie," and a "Dutch."

Robert DeShazo, who has been manufacturing Autopens since 1942, is almost as publicity-shy as his clients. He explains that the average person has no comprehension of the amount of mail received by prominent public officials and therefore little understanding of the need for a signing device.

From his unpretentious headquarters in Sterling, Virginia, DeShazo ships Autopens all over the world. But one suspects his location in the Washington area is more than coincidence. "Almost every member of the Senate has one," he admits. In the House of Representatives, he says, sometimes four or five members might share a single machine. All told, he estimates that 500 Autopens are scribbling away in Washington.

The Autopen 80, currently the most popular model, looks like a small desk except for the metal arms and springs on the left side of its surface. A pen screws into the end of a metal arm, and with an operator placing paper (or books or hockey sticks or whatever) beneath the pen, the Autopen can produce about 300 signatures an hour. The top of the desk opens up to reveal the revolving matrix that guides the pen. The matrix, which looks a little like a boomerang, is cut according to a signature sample supplied by the customer. It can easily be replaced with another matrix to produce another version of his signature—or somebody else's signature.

—LYNNE CHENEY