

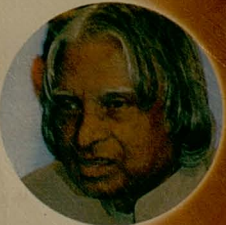
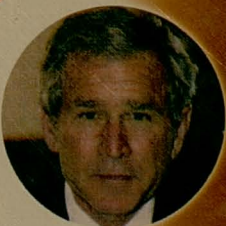
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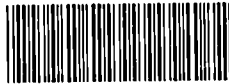
# The Great Leaders

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## OF THE WORLD

Ashwani Bhardwaj

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1008886



**Goodwill Publishing House®**

New Delhi



Published by  
**GOODWILL PUBLISHING HOUSE®**  
B-3, Rattan Jyoti, 18 Rajendra Place  
New Delhi-110008 (INDIA)  
Phone : 25750801, 25820556  
Fax : 91-11-25764396  
Website : [www.goodwillpublishinghouse.com](http://www.goodwillpublishinghouse.com)  
E-mail : [goodwillpub@vsnl.net](mailto:goodwillpub@vsnl.net)

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Printed at :-  
Mahalaxmi Printer  
New Delhi

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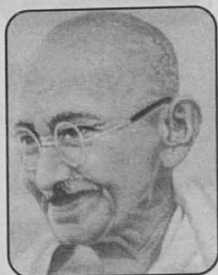
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# APJ Abdul Kalam

## Popular yet Humble President of India

### Simply Profound

“Greatness comes in the cloak of humility”, Samuel Butler once wrote. He may well have been describing Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam. As principal scientific adviser to the Prime Minister, a cabinet-rank post he retired from in November 2001, Kalam was entitled to a palatial bungalow in Lutyens’ Delhi. Yet he chose to occupy two rooms in a Defence Ministry guest house that had been his home even when he headed the DRDO between 1992 and 1999. But such is the irony of fate that by July, 2002 Kalam, a bachelor, moved into the country’s most coveted piece of real estate—Rashtrapati Bhavan.



Kalam, who prefers bush shirts to suits and chappals to shoes, has never been used to other prerequisites of power: formal wear for state dinners. Back in 1980, when the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called him to Delhi to personally felicitate him for putting the country on the world’s space map.

*Boatsman’s son, rocket builder, bomb maker—Kalam is a man with an uncompliated world-view.*

Kalam was in a panic as he owned neither a suit nor shoes. Satish Dhawan, the then head of the ISRO, told him, “You are already wearing the suit of success. So just be there.”

Kalam's suit has been well-earned. Not only was he responsible for building India's first satellite launcher, the SLV3 but in the 1980s he also made the country a missile power by developing the *Agni* and *Prithvi*. His great role in 1998's Pokhran blast came in a decade devoted to weaponising nuclear capability.

If the *Bharat Ratna* in 1997 was a token of the nation's appreciation, the presidential victory is the real thing. For those who ask why Kalam, the question really should be why not. For who can be a better man than a poor boat owner's son, whose sister had to pawn her jewellery to send him to the Madras Institute of Technology for a diploma in engineering.

It must irk Kalam that there are many who say he was nominated entirely because of the religion he was born into. Kalam prays twice a day but religion to him has always been an intensely individual quest. He refers to the Bhagvad Gita as often as he does to the Koran. It was the Gita he quoted when he met reporters in Chennai after his nomination was announced. His spartan study has books on several religious philosophies.



He was there discussing the doctoral thesis of a student when Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee called to inform him of the NDA's decision to nominate him. All Kalam said then was that he was "overwhelmed" by the decision. Though 71, Kalam displays remarkable energy, working late into the night and waking up early to go for a two-hour walk. It is his spartan

habits—he is a vegetarian, teetotaler and has never smoked—that allow him to be constantly alert.

In Kalam's world-view there is no room for complexities. India lost its greatness, he believes, because in the past she became technologically inferior. So to regain it, India must be self-sufficient in science. If that sounds distinctly Nehruvian, Kalam's view on the atom bomb, which he helped build, is vastly different. He believes that such arms deter other nations from attacking or subjugating India and are, therefore, "weapons of peace".

His hobbies are calming : playing the rudra veena and writing poetry. It is this innate pacifism which stood him in good stead when he could not take up an assignment at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, after conservative academics raised questions about his lack of a doctorate degree.

There are no such questions in his native Rameswaram, where his house on Thittakudi's Pallivasal Street is a testament to what Arun Tiwari, the co-author of his biography *Wings of Fire*, calls, "the best example of the meek inheriting the earth".

## People's Prez

In 2002 Freedom was less than formal at the Independence Day reception at Rashtrapati Bhavan, sartorially at least. Much to the relief of the guests, the invitation card didn't carry the lounge suit dress code for the *At Home* on the humid Thursday afternoon, though the host himself, known for his casual intimacy and nervous energy, was in a grey Nehru jacket. Ah, the exigencies of the highest office of the nation. Still President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam was at home—and truly presidential with a personal touch.

Within few months into his presidency, Kalam established himself as a President with a difference, and it is not about his

hair style alone. Or call it the Kalam cult with a growing fan following. He refuses menial help to fetch his shoes; he eats simple vegetarian meals with his fingers and shares them with his personal staff; the President seeks broad bandwidth for speedier Internet connectivity; he runs up flights of stairs with so much ease; an emerging **Chacha Kalam** whose best friends are children—the Kalam lore is turning out to be an engrossing text. “He has covered the 330 acres of the President’s estate on foot,” says an aide in awe.

The People’s President is on the march. Take that image of Kalam in Gujarat. It was a national hit. As he listened to and interacted with the riot victims, the endearing image was of President as friend, healer and counsellor. The humane show even prompted his immediate predecessor to announce how he too had felt helpless during Gujarat riots.

The Gujarat visit lent Kalam what he badly needed: political savvy. It briefly raised hopes among opposition parties that he would be an independent President. When a presidential press release announcing his visit declared that Kalam would “use the opportunity to personally learn about the rehabilitation measures undertaken by the state Government in the wake of recent disturbances”, certain political sections expected the presidency to embarrass the state Government. Some even went to the extent of comparing his visit to Giani Zail Singh’s trip to Golden Temple after *Operation Bluestar* and Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s visit to Somnath against Jawaharlal Nehru’s advice.

Those who thought Kalam would do a Lyngdoh (remember the chief election commissioner’s administration-thrashing tour through the relief camps) were hugely disappointed. There was no public inquisition of officials. When he asked the state government to redress the grievances of riot victims, the manner was truly statesman like. Chief Minister Narendra Modi reciprocated the gesture by describing the presidential visit as one that touched “a chord in every heart”.