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Wednesday, April 5, 10:50 AM EDT

By Maggie FitzRoy, Contributing Writer

Last year, The Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan traveled throughout the U.S. covering politics during the presidential campaign.

As such, she stayed in a lot of hotels and she shopped in a lot of hotel gift shops.

In one shop in West Palm Beach, a kitchen towel caught her eye. Emblazoned on it were the words: "2016. Once we had Bob Hope and Johnny Cash and Steve Jobs. Now they are gone, and we are out of hope, cash, and jobs. Please, Kevin Bacon, don't die."

"I did not buy it," Noonan said with a smile. "But it captured the humor of our time."

Noonan spoke at a packed auditorium on Tuesday during a World Affairs Council of Jacksonville Global Issues Evening at the University of North Florida.

She used a lot of humor during her hourlong presentation, "The Road Ahead: A New Path and Leadership for the U.S."

With eight best-selling books about American politics, history and culture to her name, she kept her audience laughing as she spoke about the country's past five presidents. She has had the opportunity to work for them, or observe them up close as a journalist.

Noonan related how she was a special assistant to President Ronald Reagan from 1984-86, and a speechwriter for Vice President George H.W. Bush in 1988, when he ran for president. She said she had the opportunity to closely observe and interview Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, although not yet Donald Trump.

When it comes to leadership style, Noonan said she could tell a lot about a president's personality by how he carried himself when he entered a room. And she told a series of stories to illustrate her observations.

Reagan was "the last great gentleman of politics," she said. "He spoke softly. He didn't yell. Never lost his temper." He stood when a woman or older person entered the room, she said. "Old school courtesy, and I miss it."

George H.W. Bush was sensitive to others, she said. When the Berlin Wall fell during his presidency, he didn't make any speeches about it.

When officials urged him to, he said he didn't want to rub it in with the Soviet leaders. "He did not want them humiliated," she said. "A humiliated foe is a dangerous foe."

"Clinton was a riveting character," she said. "Confidence and good cheer were part of his power." Many saw him as shrewd and clever, she said. "But his problem was that he was too clever by half."

George W. Bush was Clinton's opposite in some ways, Noonan said. "He has admirers and critics, and I went from being an admirer to a critic." Historical reputations change, however, "and you have to keep an eye on that."

"Obama, he walked into a room with an air of dignity and elegance," she said. There was never a hint of personal scandal about him, but she faults him for "not showing any sign of liking the other side." With Congress, "he didn't play well with other children."

"As for Mr. Trump," 10 weeks into his presidency, "what a long strange trip it's been," she said, quoting The Grateful Dead.

"We've certainly entered new territory."

Running down the list of the five presidents before him, she said she missed the "easy going clarity" of Reagan; the "earnestness" of George H.W. Bush; the "colorfulness" of Clinton; the "personal financial uprightness" of George W. Bush; and the "personal self-confidence" of Obama.

In answering a question from the audience, Noonan said of all the politicians today, she most admires Ohio Gov. John Kasich. She got to know him well during the Republican primaries, and "he's a great guy."

Before Noonan's speech, some World Affairs Council members attended a pre-event reception with her.

"I admire her point of view, and her excellent literary style," said Donna Heffner, who reads Noonan's column every Saturday.



Ann Wingate, Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan, Annie Flipse and Earl Barker meet during a reception before Noonan's World Affairs Council speech Tuesday night at the University of North Florida.



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Edward Cooper, who reads her work online, said he likes the way she lends perspective to individual events. "She relates them to the larger story of what is actually taking place."

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