Court of Emperor Akbar, and contributed much to the golden age of Mughal rule. He once declared in court that, in one respect at least, the emperor was even more powerful than the Almighty.

Akbar was appalled; this was blasphemy. On the pain of royal displeasure, Birbal was asked to explain. He was equal to the task. If the public interest warranted, the emperor could, if he so pleased, banish anyone from his empire. None, however, could be exiled from the Almighty's domain, it had no frontiers. The tales of Birbal that have come down from those times are, of course, meant more to regale than to recount historical events with accuracy.

Akbar's great contemporary, Queen Elizabeth I, was certainly not unmindful of attention and praise. One day, accompanied by her retinue, the queen was walking from her palace toward the Thames where the royal boat was moored, when Walter Raleigh solicitously spread his lush velvet cloak across a puddle in the monarch's path. Her Majesty graciously stepped on the cloak and avoided muddying her shoes.

Many believe that this legend, made popular by historian Thomas Fuller, and later embellished by Walter Scott in one of his novels, may be a myth. It does suggest, in any case, that the art of flattery was alive and well in Elizabethan England. Walter Raleigh, poet, courtier and adventurer extraordinary, did become a favourite of the queen, and would acquire lucrative monopolies, vast estates and influential positions.

Instances abound of men and women of eminence and high achievement eager for further honours and recognition, appreciation and praise. George Washington's is a very special place in American history. A eulogy in Congress, after his death, described him as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

He was, by all accounts a man of great dignity -- which inhibited any attempt at familiarity on the part of others --and restraint, of commanding even majestic appearance, with a deeply ingrained sense of duty. To Lord Byron, he was "next only to the divinity," and for Gladstone, he was the "purest figure in history." There is a witticism that he was the last person one "would ever suspect of having been a young man."

Washington is the only president to have been elected by unanimous vote. For health reasons he wished to retire after his first term. Leaders of all political factions, however, dissuaded him. They were apprehensive that without him at the helm, the government would be hard pressed to contain partisan bitterness and sectional divisions. He set the two-term tradition for presidents, which a hundred and fifty years on would become the law of the land through the 22nd amendment.

After his first election, Washington wanted to be addressed by the formal title of "His Mightiness the President of the United States and the Protector of Their Liberties." His vice president and eventual successor, John Adams, preferred something even more grandiose, "His High Mightiness the President, or His Elective Majesty or His Majesty." Congress, however, would not be persuaded, and opted instead for the simple and business-like title of "Mr. President." Memories of imperial rule were perhaps still fresh.

Everyone likes flattery," Disraeli confided, "and when you come to royalty you should lay it on with a trowel.

Christopher Columbus had sought the title of "Admiral of the Ocean and Viceroy of India," and Victor Hugo reportedly hoped that Paris would be renamed after him. Benjamin Disraeli was among the most astute of British prime ministers; he was also a favourite of Queen Victoria, to whom he was "Dizzy." He once explained to Matthew Arnold his technique of dealing with his monarch. "Everyone likes flattery," Disraeli confided, "and when you come to royalty you should lay it on with a trowel." He used a Shakespearean metaphor (As You Like It, Act I, Sc. II, l.112) to convey his message. In King Lear, Shakespeare gives a graphic illustration of the perils and pitfalls of being swayed by soft words and flattery.

Intellectually and academically, Woodrow Wilson was as accomplished as anyone who served as president of the US. He represented