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Morning In America

The Leadership of Ronald Reagan

By [Mark Couturier](#)

When Ronald Wilson Reagan ascended the steps of the Capitol to take the oath of office as president of the United States, few realized how this routine but special event would unleash a tidal wave that would roll across history's shores, forever altering the fortunes of the nation and the world. For the commander-in-chief, his first inauguration represented the culmination of a life and career dedicated to the pursuit of a better future for himself, his country, and, ultimately, the entire globe.

Born on February 6, 1911, in an obscure flat in Tampico, Illinois, Reagan learned from an early age that the world held no guarantees, and in order to survive and triumph, he would have to rely on his unbridled optimism, perseverance, and a little bit of luck. His father, Jack Reagan, was an Irish-American Catholic who spent most of his life as a store clerk and failed businessman. The future president, however, never embraced his old man's Roman Catholicism, opting instead for the Protestant faith of his pious mother.

The family moved several times during Ron's early years before settling in the small town of Dixon, Illinois. As a young boy, the Gipper was largely unaware of his exiguous circumstances and enjoyed what he would later remember as an idyllic childhood. However, one less-savory aspect of his earlier years that Reagan would recall vividly was his father's chronic alcoholism, a condition that exacerbated the family's financial straits and was an acute source of embarrassment and shame for all of them.^[1]



"When asked why he thought he could assume the mantle of the presidency since he was 'only' an actor, Reagan replied that he didn't see how anybody *but* an actor could do the job."

While at Dixon High, Reagan landed his first important job as a lifeguard at Lowell Park. All told, he rescued seventy-seven people -- a remarkable accomplishment considering his myopic condition. As a young man, Reagan attended Eureka College, where he received his first taste of political combat he got himself involved in a financial dispute with the school's administration. He also joined the drama club and developed his gifts as a performer and an orator. However, in contrast to these abilities, Reagan's skills as a football player left much to be desired. Yet, rather than discourage him from pursuing his love of the sport, this personal obstacle only made him try harder. While the young lineman was never decisive on the field, he eventually won the respect and admiration of his teammates, a prize of more value than a hundred trophies. Ultimately, this perseverance in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges would make him a bona fide champion in the more important game of life.^[2]

By the time Reagan graduated from college, the Great Depression had hit America with devastating force and shattered countless lives, both financially and physically. While armies of ordinary Americans were searching vainly for work, Ron miraculously found a job as a sports announcer at a popular radio station in Des Moines, Iowa, where he excelled at his task and even once ad-libbed a portion of an ongoing baseball game after the wire was temporarily disabled. Also, like millions of his countrymen, the future president considered himself a staunch Democrat at the time and eagerly imbibed the hopeful words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.^[3]

In the late 1930's, Reagan experienced another turn of good fortune when he went to Hollywood at the behest of an acquaintance. There he became a prolific B-movie actor, starring in such films as *King's Row* and the later-infamous *Bedtime for Bonzo*. During World War II, he served in the military as an intelligence officer attached to a motion picture unit that specialized in making training films for the U.S. Army Air Corps.

When the conflict was over he resumed his film career, but by then his Hollywood star had begun to wane. In the late-forties and -fifties, Reagan held the position of president of the Screen Actors' Guild, an experience that alerted him to the dangers of Communism and impelled him to move to the political right.^[4] The actor also became the host of *General Electric Theater* -- a position that took him to many GE plants across the country, where he gave many speeches that espoused Middle-American values and denounced the New Deal programs of his political role model. By the 1960s, this one-time New Deal Democrat had become a de facto spokesman for the then-growing conservative movement in the Republican Party.

Near the end of the 1964 presidential campaign, he made an enormous splash into the political waters of America when he gave a passionate and reasoned speech in favor of the candidacy of Barry Goldwater, an icon of the Right. In the 1966 midterm elections, Reagan rode a conservative tide into the Governor's Mansion of California, where he led effectively and restored confidence in a state racked by tumultuous race riots, sky-high deficits, and alarming waves of violence on college campuses. After serving two terms in Sacramento, Reagan -- by now a beacon of hope for many in a fractured GOP -- challenged the incumbent president Gerald Ford for the Republican Party's nomination in 1976 and almost defeated him. His unexpected showing at the '76 convention in Kansas City, Missouri, marked an unprecedented feat and sounded an ominous warning to those who would dare underestimate him.^[5] Ford ended up winning the contest, but lost in the general election to Jimmy Carter. Four years later, Reagan ran again, this time as his party's nominee. Weary of the double-digit inflation and the general sense of malaise that had permeated the country over the last decade, the American people whole-handedly rejected Carter's leadership and made Ronald Reagan the fortieth president of the United States.

Strengths in Leadership

To many Americans, the Reagan Era symbolizes a shimmering rainbow that appeared over the horizon after the violent storm of the sixties and the drizzle of the seventies. It should be noted here that like all great leaders, the president was by no means perfect. In his pursuit of the big picture, he was often oblivious to the actions of those around him, an oversight that nearly led to the toppling of his administration. Despite this shortcoming though, Reagan managed to avoid the pitfalls of certain of his predecessors and confront the nation's challenges with ambition, a grand vision, skill, powerful oratory, courage, and luck -- all of which combined to forge a record of achievement that continues to astound many of his contemporaries.

This essay will discuss the aforementioned characteristics of Reagan's leadership with the aim of bringing his presidency into sharper focus and facilitating a better understanding of why he was successful as the chief executive of the most powerful nation in the free world. The essay will also delve into his main character flaw and the role it played in his terms in office.

Interior Drive

The core of the president's being consisted largely of a strong interior drive -- a determination to imprint his legacy on the nation as well as the world at large. From early childhood, Reagan's mother imbued within him a personal and heartfelt belief that God had a special purpose for his life. As he went from his modest beginnings in Dixon to being a sports announcer, actor, governor of a large state, and president of the United States, the Horatio Alger-esque tone of his life narrative only strengthened this spiritual conviction. However, it was an event that occurred barely two months into his presidency that could arguably be called the defining moment in his relationship with the Almighty and his outlook on the nature of his existence. On March 30, 1981, the president was leaving the Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. after meeting with a union group when a deranged, twenty-five-year-old man named John Hinckley, Jr. fired six times in his direction with a revolver. One of the bullets entered his left lung and came within an inch of his heart. Miraculously, Reagan survived the ordeal and emerged as a stronger and more determined leader. The experience transformed the commander-in-chief in unimaginable ways and caused him to view his life through a new prism.^[6] Given his age and the serious nature of his wounds, it is very conceivable that the president could have come to a more sober end.

Sense of Mission

If Reagan's interior drive served as the engine for his vehicle of idealistic change, his vision was the steering wheel that guided the country in the direction he wanted to take it. When he entered the Oval Office, the president wasted no time in pursuing his goals of decreasing the size of the federal government, restoring the confidence of the American people, and bringing about the thawing of U.S.-Soviet relations. Regarding the first goal, he made a strenuous effort to cut the bureaucracy in Washington down to size by slashing many of the social programs that had cropped up during Roosevelt's New Deal and Johnson's Great Society. However, as *Time* Columnist Joe Klein points out, the president failed to put so much as a dent in the welfare state.^[7] By the end of his first term, Reagan had learned the important lesson that it is much easier to talk

about shrinking the government than actually doing it. Many federal programs from the New Deal and Great Society eras had become firmly ensconced in the fabric of American life and were virtually impossible to reform, let alone eliminate. One must also bear in mind that throughout much of his presidency, Reagan was forced to work with a Congress controlled largely by Democrats who were not enamored with most of his conservative aims [8]

However, in contrast to his frustrating and often futile attempts to roll back the expansion of government, Reagan achieved an astounding degree of success in regard to his other two goals. To strengthen the nation's defenses, he and his defense secretary Casper Weinberger began a massive military buildup that ultimately resulted in a radical amelioration of the U.S. armed forces, which had suffered an enormous privation in quality and morale in the aftermath of the Vietnam War [9]. Reagan also rejuvenated America's flagging economy by initiating bold economic policies that resulted in a lowering of tax rates, a sharp reduction in inflation, and an unprecedented increase in employment. Indeed, by the time the president ran for re-election in 1984, the U.S. economy was largely free of the "stagflation" that had plagued it in the previous decade. At the conclusion of his first presidential debate with Democratic challenger Walter Mondale, a confident Reagan asked the audience if America was better off than it was four years earlier. Grateful for their deliverance from the feeling of malaise that had permeated much of the 1970s, millions of voters answered this question in the affirmative by handing the Gipper one of the greatest landslide victories in U.S. history [10]

While Reagan often used belligerent language toward America's arch-nemesis, he worked with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to put an end to the decades-long state of hostility that had existed between their two nations. The cornerstone of this effort was the Reagan Administration's pursuit and development of the Strategic Defense Initiative -- arguably the president's boldest and most controversial idea. Throughout much of his life, the Gipper talked passionately about his complete and utter abhorrence of nuclear bombs and the devastation they could bring on entire populations. While he supported -- and worked for -- significant arms reductions with the Soviets, Reagan knew that the only way to completely eliminate such odious weapons was to make them obsolete. He genuinely wanted to do away with the logical -- yet fundamentally irrational -- MAD (mutually assured destruction) doctrine that had governed U.S.-Soviet relations for the past three decades. Thus was born the idea of a space-based defense system that could repel any incoming missiles. At its inception, SDI was ridiculed and attacked from all quarters. Many experts charged that the program was unrealistic, too expensive, unnecessary, or too dangerous. Soviet officials, including Gorbachev, accused Reagan of malicious intentions, despite his repeated assurances that the U.S. would share SDI with the rest of the world, including the U.S.S.R. [11] While the president's missile defense system may well have been as fantastic as his critics claimed, it is also equally possible that SDI was an idea whose time has yet to come.

Skill-set

When Reagan assumed his presidential duties in the cold winter days of 1981, he did so with the invaluable experience he had gained as the governor of a large state for eight years. One of the many ironies of Ronald Reagan was that, despite his decades-long involvement in politics, accusations of being "inexperienced" and "not up to the job" would dog him throughout his career as governor and as president. Much of this criticism was unwarranted and stemmed from the fact that Reagan had been an actor. Indeed, he endured a good deal of ridicule for his association with B-movies -- particularly with a certain film in which he starred alongside a chimpanzee.

The president's enemies also made much out of his laid-back approach to leadership. He was usually a nine-to-five president and was known to doze off during cabinet meetings. Given his age, this work routine was most likely a conscious and rational effort on Reagan's part to conserve his energy. Yet, it should also be noted that the allegations of his critics were not altogether groundless. During his time in Sacramento and Washington, Reagan often displayed an incredible ignorance of vital policy matters. However, with the aid of such skilled policymakers as Edwin Meese, Caspar Weinberger, and George Schultz, this defect did not prevent him from becoming an effective governor and commander-in-chief. In the end, his acquired knowledge of governing and excellent interpersonal skills allowed him to shape world events in a lasting way. Interestingly, the focus on his lack of experience in governmental work seems to have played to Reagan's image as an outsider, or "citizen-politician" -- a term he often used to describe himself [12]

Ability to Communicate

One of Reagan's greatest strengths as a leader was his ability to articulate his vision in a way that inspired his followers and the public at large. When asked why he thought he could assume the mantle of the presidency since he was "only" an actor, Reagan replied that he didn't see how anybody *but* an actor could do the job. While humorous, this quip held a certain truth, for many of the most successful presidents -- FDR and JFK, among others -- were actors as well.

One of the things that set a good leader apart from a bad one is the ability to make you believe that his dreams are your dreams, regardless of any disparities in social and/or economic status that may exist between the two of you. As in the case of John F. Kennedy, a vital element to Reagan's success was his ability to sell himself as a man of the people, someone who convinced ordinary, middle-class Americans that he was "really" one of them. Unlike his popular predecessor, however, Reagan's Everyman pitch was very much rooted in authenticity. As a traveling speaker for GE, he electrified audiences (no pun intended!) with his passionate and persuasive oratory and the rock-solid conviction that served as the backbone of his words. Although Goldwater met with a dismal end at the ballot box in the 1964 election, the televised speech that Reagan had given on his behalf inspired vast legions of true believers on the Right to rise from their nadir and rally around the former Democrat, whose powerful antigovernment message proved indeed to be a choice and not an echo.

Throughout his presidency, Reagan was constantly referred to as "The Great Communicator" -- and for good reason. While he was apotheosized by his followers and placed on a conservative pedestal, the president's oratorical talents and charisma allowed him to connect with working-class Americans for whom voting Democrat had been as natural as breathing. The elections of 1980 and 1984 saw the emergence of the "Reagan Democrats," a significant bloc of voters who defected from the party of Roosevelt and Kennedy to cast their ballots for the Gipper [13]. This phenomenal shift to the GOP by so many blue-collar Americans was unique in many ways -- not the least in that it mirrored the political journey that the president had made several decades earlier. Indeed, one could plausibly argue that the first "Reagan Democrat" was none other than Reagan himself.

Courage

There are three kinds of courage that a leader can display. The first involves showing calm in the face of grave danger. The second is doing what one believes is right regardless of the political consequences. And the third is the courage to confront one's enemies and hold them accountable for their actions. Fortunately for America, Reagan possessed all of these.

When the president was shot on that fateful day in March of 1981, those who were with him have testified that he acquitted himself throughout the crisis with a dignity and charm that was stunning in its seeming ease. Longtime Reagan aide Mike Deaver has recounted how the commander-in-chief refused any assistance when his limousine reached the hospital and walked into the building as though he were on his way to a formal dinner. All told, Reagan got within thirty feet of the emergency room before he collapsed and was carried in. Numerous stories abound of the president's humor and grace in that time of great uncertainty and peril. In one instance, a hospital aide found the leader of the free world on his hands and knees cleaning up a mess he had made on the floor so that others would not be burdened with the task. Nancy Reagan recalled that when she reached her husband after the assassination attempt, the first thing he said to her was, "Honey, I forgot to duck." Arguably the most touching anecdote of the entire incident was when Reagan stared at the doctors who were about to operate on him and said, "I just hope you're all Republicans," -- to which one of them replied, "Today, Mr. President, we're all Republicans." [14]

In his dealings with the Soviets, Reagan demonstrated an extraordinary degree of courage as he worked with Gorbachev to negotiate the final peace of the Cold War. Before and after his elevation to the White House, the president denounced the policy of détente that had been the cornerstone of the Nixon and Ford presidencies and adopted a more truculent stance toward the U.S.S.R. In a speech he gave in Florida during his first term as chief executive, Reagan once described America's Communist counterpart as an "evil empire." And in one of his finest moments as commander-in-chief, he stood in front of the Berlin Wall in the sweltering summer of 1987 and taunted his adversary, crying, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" [15] Such language often invited harsh rebukes from many intellectuals and political opponents -- none of whom, it would probably be fair to say, had ever paid a visit to Solzhenitsyn's gulag archipelago. On the other hand, Reagan's confrontational prose was eagerly devoured by conservatives and blue-collar Americans alike.

Despite his denunciations of Soviet totalitarianism, Reagan worked tirelessly to bring about a rapprochement between the two superpowers and even developed a close personal friendship with his counterpart in the Kremlin. This seemingly paradoxical approach to U.S.-Soviet relations was born out of the president's instinctual knowledge that the most ardent warriors make the best peacemakers. "Peace through strength" was Reagan's philosophy, and he used it whenever he felt it was needed, even when it cost him greatly.

An example of this toughness in geopolitical matters was displayed at the summit in Reykjavik, Iceland in December 1986. Reagan and Gorbachev had been on the verge of finalizing what would be the biggest arms reduction deal of the Cold War when the latter pulled the rug out from under the entire effort by saying that he would agree to the groundbreaking treaty on condition that the U.S. government stop SDI in its tracks. Shocked and infuriated, Reagan declared that the program was not a bargaining chip and walked out of the meeting, leaving his Soviet counterpart in a state of stunned disbelief. The easy choice for the president was to accept Gorbachev's terms and bask in the glowing praise from friend and foe alike that would surely have awaited him at home. However, he clung to his faith in SDI and returned to Washington empty-handed, firm in the belief that the Soviets would eventually come around.^[16] A year later, Reagan's intuition was confirmed when Gorbachev requested another meeting and the two leaders returned to Reykjavik to sign the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which resulted in the liquidation of hundreds of deadly ballistic and cruise missiles. It should also be noted that Reagan's efforts to reach out to his enemies was met with vituperative assaults from the hard-liners in his own party as well as those in the emerging neoconservative movement. However, these ideological criticisms failed to faze the president as he moved to shape a changing world for the better in a forceful and pragmatic way.

Luck

While every great leader possesses innate qualities that allow him or her inspire others and influence the course of history, external factors must also play an important role. The protagonist in any epoch requires a substantial dose of luck, and it must be said here that the Gipper had it in spades. From his breakthroughs in radio, film, and politics to his miraculous recovery after the assassination attempt, it is indisputable that Reagan was "lucky" -- though he himself always attributed his good fortunes to the intervention of a higher power. Regardless of how one views the nature of his propitious circumstances, it is an incontrovertible fact that Reagan was a truly blessed man. Also, in the area of foreign affairs, he was incredibly fortunate to have a man like Mikhail Gorbachev as his adversary.

One of the criticisms that is often leveled at Reagan is that he "happened to be at the right place at the right time." This charge mainly refers to the end of the Cold War, but more aptly applies to the situation in American politics. Many conservatives credit Reagan as the leader of their movement, which is usually called the "Reagan Revolution." Yet, this term is highly misleading, given that the right-wing juggernaut that swept the president into power actually originated with the ideological battles that were waged between the conservative and moderate factions of the Republican Party in the early postwar years. Like many Americans at the time, the leadership of the GOP -- based mainly on the East Coast -- were generally favorable toward the New Deal policies of the FDR and Truman Administrations and looked upon the conservatives in their midst as nothing more than "fanatics" and "extremists." An attitude of "Me Too-ism" was all too readily displayed by mainstream Republicans as they sought to capture votes from the hugely popular Democrats. During the 1952 presidential primary, the moderates in the GOP scored a major victory against their ideological counterparts when conservative icon Robert Taft lost his bid for the Republican nomination to General Dwight Eisenhower, who, ironically, was supported by a much younger and more liberal Ronald Reagan.^[17] Twelve years later, the conservatives had their revenge when Barry Goldwater captured the coveted prize at the 1964 convention, but the Arizona senator's often rancorous tone and ideological rigidity throughout the campaign helped to turn a likely-inevitable loss into a cataclysmic defeat. However, by the time the seventies rolled around, the American people had long tired of the paternalism of Washington and proved much more receptive to polemical fulminations about the evils of Big Government. It was at this pivotal moment in history when Reagan entered the consciousness of millions of voters and took advantage of the backlash against the excesses of the New Deal and Great Society programs by turning a once-chastised movement of political pariahs into a national crusade that changed the Republican Party forever.^[18] Indeed, Reagan was certainly fortunate to have jumped into the political arena at this fortuitous moment in American political history.

Weakness in Leadership

Unlike his predecessor, Reagan was not a micromanager. He preferred to avoid getting bogged down in minutiae by issuing orders to his subordinates, who, in turn, would get the tasks done with limited supervision. GOP stalwart Drew Lewis once referred to the president as the Great Delegator -- an apt description. This decentralized management style worked so long as the president was dealing with competent aides who knew him well -- men like James Baker, Mike Deaver, and Edwin Meese. However, all three had departed the White House by the beginning of Reagan's second administration, leaving him with a new and unfamiliar group of people. In November 1986, this chink in Reagan's armor was exposed to the entire world when a Lebanese newspaper reported that the U.S. government had been secretly selling arms to the state of Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages who had been kidnapped by the radical Muslim group Hezbollah. Further investigations revealed that the proceeds from the arms deal had gone to support the Contras, an insurgent right-wing group that was then waging a savage guerrilla war against the left-wing Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. The scandal resulted in the resignation of Casper Weinberger and the indictment of several members of the administration, including National Security Advisor John Poindexter and a military aide named Oliver North.^[19] Although Reagan went on national television to apologize for his role in the affair, his standing with the American public suffered a massive hit -- and one from which he may never have fully recovered from had it not been for the monumental developments that were about to take shape in U.S.-Soviet affairs.

Final Assessment

While professional academicians have tended to rank Reagan lower in comparison to other past presidents in national surveys, his popularity with the American people -- the only group whose opinion he cherished -- has remained solid. Indeed, Reagan's overall standing as a leader seems to have risen with the passage of time. When he left office on January 20, 1989, the Gipper enjoyed a public approval rating of sixty-three percent -- higher than any departing president since FDR. In a 1999 Gallup poll, most adult Americans held the view that Reagan will ultimately achieve a more favorable rating in history than most of his predecessors or successors.^[20] And this consensus seems to have grown since the president's death over two years ago. It is indeed fitting that this sad but inevitable event occurred almost sixty years to the day that Allied forces invaded the beaches of Normandy, France in their quest to save the free world from the specter of totalitarianism. Yet, it should be noted that Reagan's passing also coincided with the 150th anniversary of the birth of the Grand Old Party -- that organization which emerged to oppose the expansion of slavery and produce such national luminaries as Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt... and Ronald Reagan. The integral component to the Gipper's success is that, like all great leaders, he brazenly defied every stereotype and label that was attributed to him, positive or negative.

While it may still be too soon to make a full assessment of the Reagan presidency, this writer is confident that as history continues its analysis of this historical giant, it will not reveal a bellicose ideologue, nor an amiable pushover of limited intellectual acuity, but, rather, a man as complex and as fascinating as the world he helped to shape -- and one whose legacy will forever stand as a shining city upon a hill.^[21]

[1] Lou Cannon, *Ronald Reagan: A Life in Politics*, vol. 1, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 11-14.

[2] *Ibid.*, 20.

[3] Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 60.

[4] Peggy Noonan, *When Character was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2001), 55-56.

[5] Craig Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign That Started It All* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005), 344.

[6] Noonan, *Character*, 193-194.

[7] Joe, Klein, *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 36.

[8] Lou Cannon, *Ronald Reagan: A Life in Politics*, vol. 2, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 196.

- [9] D'souza, *Reagan*, 143.
- [10] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan*, 434.
- [11] Noonan, *Character*, 280-286.
- [12] Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 149.
- [13] D'Souza, *Reagan*, 253.
- [14] Noonan, *Character*, 170-186.
- [15] Ronald Reagan Speeches, "Tear Down This Wall," <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/speech.asp?spid=25>.
- [16] Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2005), 347-354.
- [17] Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001), 9.
- [18] Shirley, *Revolution*, 342.
- [19] Noonan, *Character*, 276-277.
- [20] Lou Cannon, *President Reagan*, xi.
- [21] Ronald Reagan Speeches, "Farewell Address," <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/speech.asp?spid=25>.