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Ronald Reagan (1911-2004)

*The former United States president stirred feelings of patriotism in America and helped initiate change throughout the world.*

**By Alfred J. Smuskiewicz**

Former United States President Ronald Reagan died on June 5, 2004, after coping with the effects of Alzheimer's disease for several years. At age 93, Reagan lived longer than any other president in U.S. history. During the week-long televised funeral proceedings, world leaders and U.S. citizens alike remembered the two-term president for reviving feelings of patriotism and confidence in the United States. He was also remembered for hastening the end of the *Cold War* (a period of intense rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union following World War II [1939-1945]). In addition, commentators noted that Reagan had broadened the appeal of the Republican Party to include many traditional Democratic voters, including blue-collar workers and Southerners.

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in Tampico, Illinois, a small town about 100 miles (160 kilometers) west of Chicago, on Feb. 6, 1911. He was the second son of John Edward Reagan, an often unemployed shoe salesman, and Nelle Wilson Reagan, a homemaker. The Reagans moved from town to town in western Illinois as John searched for work before the family finally settled in Dixon. There, young Ronald attended high school and worked summers as a lifeguard on the Rock River, which runs through Dixon.

After graduating from Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois, in 1932, where he studied sociology and economics, Reagan headed west to Iowa. His gift as a public speaker and his vivid imagination helped him land jobs at radio stations in Davenport and later Des Moines, where he recreated lively play-by-play accounts of sporting events from sketchy information that he received over a tickertape machine about the contests. A tickertape machine converted and printed data, usually stock prices or news, that was conveyed long distances over a telegraph wire. During a trip to California in 1937 to report on the Chicago Cubs baseball team's spring training, Reagan took a screen test for a motion picture studio. Studio executives liked what they saw and signed Reagan to an acting contract.

*His days in Hollywood*

The contract marked the beginning of a long career in front of the camera. From 1937 to 1964, Reagan made more than 50 feature-length films, mostly as a contract player for Warner Brothers studios. He usually portrayed wholesome, likable characters. One of his most acclaimed performances was as legendary college football player George "the Gipper" Gipp in *Knute Rockne—All American* (1940). In the film, the dying Gipp tells his coach Rockne to "... win just one for the Gipper." This phrase would later serve as a rallying campaign slogan for Reagan the politician. Reagan also received critical praise for his role in *Kings Row* (1942), playing a young man whose legs are amputated. Most film critics consider *Kings Row* Reagan's best work in Hollywood.

In 1940, Reagan married fellow Warner Brothers star Jane Wyman, with whom he acted in several films. The couple had a daughter, Maureen Elizabeth, and adopted a son, Michael Edward. The marriage ended in divorce in 1948. In 1952, Reagan married actress Nancy Davis, who subsequently gave up her acting career. They had a daughter, Patricia Ann, and a son, Ronald Prescott.

Reagan served as president of the Screen Actors Guild, the major union representing film performers, from 1947 to 1952 and again from 1959 to 1960. As union president, Reagan tried to block what he—and many other people at the time—saw as attempts by Communists to infiltrate the motion picture industry. The anti-Communist theme of this battle would have a profound influence on Reagan's political career. Reagan's political viewpoints generally reflected the policies of the Democratic Party during the future politician's Hollywood period. Reagan strongly supported President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933-1945), and the actor campaigned for President Harry Truman (1945-1953) in 1948. However, as his Hollywood career began to wane and he developed a greater interest in world and national events, Reagan's allegiance gradually shifted from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. Reagan later attributed this shift to his growing concerns about the spread of Communism and what he saw as excessive taxes and government regulation.

Reagan got a chance to articulate his beliefs while host of the weekly television series "The General Electric Theater," from 1954 to 1962. Part of this job involved touring the country as the public relations representative of the television show's corporate sponsor, General Electric, a leading manufacturer of electrical products

headquartered in Fairfield, Connecticut. Reagan traveled from town to town delivering speeches about the importance of free enterprise and the dangers of big government.

### *The political spotlight*

Reagan gained a nationwide audience for his political vision in 1964, when he delivered an impassioned half-hour television address on behalf of Republican presidential candidate Barry M. Goldwater. Reagan told his television audience, "This is the issue of this election... whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves." Although President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) crushed Goldwater in the election, many historians credit Reagan's speech with igniting the modern conservative movement in the United States.

The speech also firmly positioned the Hollywood actor in the national political spotlight, and supporters of Reagan's ideas urged him to run for governor of California. When Reagan announced his candidacy for the 1966 gubernatorial race, the incumbent Democratic governor, Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, dismissed Reagan as "only a B-movie actor." Reagan, who defeated Brown in a landslide, was re-elected in 1970 and served until 1975. As governor, Reagan instituted reforms in California's social welfare system and slowed the growth of state spending. He also won the backing of national Republican leaders who were looking for a presidential candidate to carry the conservative banner into the White House. However, Reagan was unsuccessful in his bid to become the Republican Party's nominee for president in 1976. President Gerald R. Ford won the nomination but lost the election to Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter.

By the 1970's, many Americans began to lose confidence in the United States and its institutions, including the government, in the wake of losing the Vietnam War (1957-1975); the Watergate scandal that led to President Richard M. Nixon's resignation in 1974; and a stagnant U.S. economy. Historians suggest that this lack of confidence continued through the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). During the Carter administration, the rate of inflation soared to 15 percent; the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan; and Iranian militants seized 52 U.S. diplomats at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, the capital of Iran, and held them hostage for more than a year. Carter himself spoke to the country about a national "malaise" and a "crisis of confidence." Some academics called for revising the U.S. Constitution to change the nature of the presidency, which, in their view, had become too big a job for any one man.

### *President of the United States*

Reagan captured the Republican nomination for president in 1980 and mounted a vigorous challenge to Carter in the general election. Reagan borrowed a phrase from colonial leader John Winthrop, Puritan governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600's, when he spoke of the United States as a "shining city upon a hill." He maintained that the nation's best days lay ahead. Reagan's optimism was contagious. "Reagan Democrats"—Americans who normally would have voted Democratic—took a chance with the former actor and California governor. Reagan soundly defeated Carter, carrying 44 states and winning 489 electoral votes.

The optimistic tone of Reagan's presidency was set on the day he was inaugurated, Jan. 20, 1981, when the Iranian militants finally released their American hostages. His cheery confidence even survived an attempt on his life on March 30, 1981, when he was shot in Washington, D.C. He showed wit and sense of humor throughout the ordeal, quipping to his surgeons, "I hope you're all Republicans."

Reagan's positive attitude won him public support, as well as crucial backing in the U.S. Congress, as he worked to institute his controversial policies to roll back the size of the federal government and build up the strength of the U.S. military. During his first administration, Congress passed the largest income tax cut in U.S. history and scaled back the extent of social welfare and other federal programs. Various federal regulations on private enterprise were also reduced. The Reagan administration instituted the largest increase in defense spending in U.S. history and pursued aggressive policies to counter the interests of the Soviet Union, including lending military support to anti-Communist forces in Central America and moral support to the anti-Communist "Solidarity" workers movement in Poland. Reagan also started the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which the press dubbed "Star Wars," a high-technology research program to develop a space-based defensive system against incoming missiles.

Many critics assailed Reagan's early economic policies as harmful to minority groups and low-income families. Part of his economic plan combined tax cuts with reductions in welfare and unemployment programs while increasing defense spending. The media dubbed the economic policy "Reaganomics." However, the U.S. Congress approved the majority of his economic plan in 1981.

A serious recession in 1981 and 1982 derailed Reagan's hopes for a rapid economic turnaround. But soon after, a national economic expansion began that continued into the early 1990's. Still, Reagan's policies led to ballooning budget deficits that affected the nation for several years.

Some critics of Reagan focused on his military buildup, which they believed was dangerous to world peace. However, Reagan defended it, saying "... our aim is to protect the peace by ensuring that no adversaries ever conclude they could best us in a war...."

Reagan won re-election in a landslide in 1984, based largely on the strength of the economic recovery, defeating former Vice President Walter F. Mondale. Reagan carried 49 states and won 525 electoral votes—the most electoral votes ever won by a presidential candidate.

### *Changing the world*

Foreign policy dominated Reagan's second term. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, promising to institute many reforms in the Soviet economic and political systems. Gorbachev also showed a new willingness to negotiate for arms reductions with the United States. In 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which represented the first actual reduction in nuclear arms.

Also in 1987, Reagan issued a bold call to Gorbachev while visiting the Berlin Wall, a concrete barrier erected in 1961 to prevent Germans from escaping Communist East Berlin for democratic West Berlin. Reagan declared, "There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace... Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Although few academics at the time believed the Berlin Wall would fall any time soon, the wall did come down in 1989 in a wave of democracy that swept across Eastern Europe. By 1991, the Soviet Union itself had collapsed. Its Communist Party fell from power after 74 years, and the Soviet empire dissolved into several independent republics. How much credit Reagan deserves for this historic end to the Cold War will likely be debated for decades. Yet many historians likely may side with the assessment of presidential historian and author Michael Beschloss: "Reagan's defense buildup and SDI... pressed Gorbachev, while his economy was collapsing, to make arms deals and improve relations with the West, which contributed to the unraveling of his empire."

Despite Reagan's successes, he faced a crisis during his second term that almost undid his presidency. In 1987, a joint congressional committee investigated the Reagan administration for the sale of weapons to Iran to help win the freedom of American hostages held by Islamic terrorists. The profits of this sale were diverted to fund contra rebels fighting the Communist government of Nicaragua. The arrangement was made despite the fact that the U.S. Congress had passed a law forbidding aid to the contras. Although Reagan claimed he knew nothing about the secret diversion of funds, the "Iran-contra affair" eroded his credibility. Nevertheless, Reagan left office in January 1989 with a 63-percent public approval rating.

*Alzheimer's disease*

In November 1994, the former president disclosed in a hand-written note addressed to the American people that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, a degenerative brain disorder that causes a loss of memory and a failure of other mental abilities. The illness also gradually weakens the patient's physical condition.

When President Reagan died after his long illness, there was an outpouring of affection and admiration—from politicians of both major parties and from regular Americans—that had not been seen for a fallen American leader since the funeral of the assassinated President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Tens of thousands of Americans filed past Reagan's casket in separate memorials in California and in Washington, D.C., some waiting in line for several hours.

Historians agree that Reagan's legacy—like the legacy of all presidents—will long be a subject of discussion. Reagan himself said that the economic recovery and the recovery of American morale were his two greatest accomplishments. Many people will undoubtedly remember Reagan for his optimistic nature. In his letter disclosing his illness, Reagan wrote, "When the Lord calls me home, whenever that may be, I will leave with the greatest love for this country of ours and eternal optimism for its future."

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