



# THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

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## How We Miss Ronald Reagan, America's Optimistic Advocate of Freedom

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On June 5, 2004, Ronald Wilson Reagan died. Had he never been elected president he still would have been content with his full life. He survived an alcoholic father, saved scores of lives as a lifeguard, demonstrated his mental agility and wit as a baseball announcer, served as a union president, battled communist infiltration of Hollywood, proved to be a telegenic master of the increasingly important medium of television, served as governor of the nation's largest state, wrote columns and delivered radio addresses, became king of the rubber-chicken speaker circuit, and motivated millions of people to get active in politics and fight for America's heritage of individual liberty and limited government.

That's not a bad legacy. And it is one that attracted me. As a student at Florida State University I was active in local and campus politics and supported Reagan's insurgent campaign against President Gerald Ford. It was a depressing exercise, until Reagan finally won a primary, seven contests in, taking North Carolina. His next victory was a blowout in Texas. A couple days later he won in Georgia and Indiana. I saved the newspaper with the banner headline, "It's Reagan, Reagan, Reagan."

That wasn't enough to win him the nomination, but it did set him up for the 1980 race after Ford lost in the fall. But I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I was a complete political outsider, without the slightest connection to anyone, and, more important, headed off to Stanford Law School in fall 1976. I proudly put a "Don't Blame Me — I Voted for Reagan" sticker on my car, occasionally triggering an obscene gesture as I drove by. I figured my focus would be surviving life as a One L.

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But I soon got into politics. I ended up as a student senator and regular columnist of the *Stanford Daily* — as well as founder and president of the campus pro-life group, president of the Conservative Student Union, and editor of its quarterly paper, the *Arena*. And some conservative friends and I launched a coup against the squishy College Republican chapter leadership, which

added another presidency to my résumé. I also volunteered for the local county Republican committee and individual candidates, most notably S. I. Hayakawa, who was elected a couple months after I started at Stanford. It became evident that my primary interests were politics and policy, not law. And I gained more than a little notoriety among my classmates, since law school was a small community that leaned left.

In fact, I had decided that I wanted to do something other than law but wasn't sure what. I switched all my classes to pass/fail, started writing for political magazines and major newspapers, and began looking for alternatives to traditional legal practice. Still, I figured I likely would be stuck with law as a career. At the start of my third year in fall 1978 I was unenthusiastically interviewing for legal jobs and finding it difficult to convince anyone why they should hire me.

Then I met Martin Anderson. I'd picked up a research job starting in September with Hoover Institution Fellow Darrell Trent, who later became Deputy Secretary of Transportation under Reagan. I walked into his office for a meeting and found his friend, Martin Anderson, another Hoover Fellow, who had served in the Nixon administration, there as well. I thought it was happenstance, but Anderson later told me that he had been following my articles in the *Stanford Daily* and told Trent he wanted to meet me. I like to tell students that my opportunity in a presidential campaign and the White House occurred because I wrote op-eds in a student newspaper. However improbable that might seem, it happened to be true.

Out of that meeting came an invitation to a reception for Reagan when he spoke on campus, freelance assignments to ghost-write articles and radio scripts for him, and, in the spring of 1979, an offer to join the presidential campaign after I graduated. If you like politics, there is nothing like a presidential campaign, especially a winning run. My first trip was with Anderson and Reagan in a small plane up to Sacramento as the campaign took shape. I made the visit to New York City (my first!) when he formally announced his candidacy. I followed him as he tramped up and down the small state of New Hampshire. And I was on many campaign swings all over the United States. I attended the convention in Detroit, where his triumph over a dozen other Republican contenders was formalized and celebrated.

Exhausted but exhilarated, I made the last campaign trip, which brought us back to Los Angeles after the final rally in San Diego on the night before the election. And I celebrated at the victory party at the Century Plaza Hotel on the evening of November 4. Exit polls told us we were going to win big. The GOP capture of the Senate was an unexpected bonus. The mood was giddy, triumphant, and euphoric. Not bad for a 22-year-old who two years before was helping politicians at the county level. Off I went to Washington, working in the transition and then in the White House.

Of course, no one noticed my arrival. It was Ronald Reagan's journey that shook up the nation's capital. Truth be told, he had few friends there. The Nixon debacle and Ford disappointment left the Republican Party in disarray. Democrats had controlled both houses of Congress for a quarter century. Long-suffering GOP legislators were defeated mentally before the legislative process even began and largely subservient afterward. The permanent government — bureaucrats,

journalists, lobbyists, pundits — rigorously defended its influence and prerogatives and the behemoth agencies upon which it feasted.

Washington, D.C., hadn't much liked Jimmy Carter, who claimed the outsider label. But at least he was a Democrat and kowtowed to the party's most important nostrums. In contrast, Reagan challenged the imperial city's self-serving conventional wisdoms. He eschewed the polite falsehoods that characterized American political discourse. And he knew how to talk to American voters, especially blue-collar workers, who often felt ignored by Republican candidates. His campaign also triggered the migration of many religious traditionalists, particularly evangelicals, into the GOP.

Reagan's journey was a long one, especially in terms of worlds traversed. He first ran for office in 1966, just two years after the destruction of Barry Goldwater and congressional wipe-out. Reagan had to defeat a GOP liberal for the nomination. Two-term Gov. Pat Brown imagined Reagan to be the weaker candidate and hoped the washed-up actor would win. Brown soon realized his mistake. As election day approached, the desperate incumbent ran an ad in which he told an elementary school audience, "Remember, it was an actor who shot Lincoln." Really. Reagan won by a million votes and was easily reelected in 1970.

Nevertheless, the larger political climate looked dismal if not hopeless: Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Congress inaugurated the "Great Society." The Vietnam War came to a hopeless end. President Richard Nixon, a Republican partisan rather than conservative ideologue, cheerfully created new bureaucracies, hiked social benefits, and imposed wage and price controls. He then self-destructed in the Watergate scandal, dragging down scores of Republican congressmen in 1974. Accidental, unelected Gerry Ford lost to Carter in 1976. The former's vice president was Nelson Rockefeller, a modern liberal's liberal who had governed New York state as if he was a Democrat. He was so detested by GOP activists nationwide that Ford dumped him at the nominating convention.

The Cold War raged, with pessimistic Americans worried about U.S. geopolitical losses and Soviet weapons advances. Carter compounded economic and energy problems, essentially nationalizing the flow of gasoline to every community in America, with predictably disastrous results. Stagflation hit hard, as Americans suffered through what was supposed to be economically impossible: low growth *and* high inflation. Carter seemed to blame the American people, sparking talk about a malaise afflicting the country. He proved to be hopelessly naïve in confronting the Soviet Union, expressing shock that Moscow had lied to him about its plan to invade Afghanistan. Imagine, dreary apparatchiks who maneuvered their way into the leadership of the land of murder, dictatorship, show trials, purges, terror, and unremitting repression had the temerity to lie to the American president!

Who among us would have stepped forward at such a time and predicted a new renaissance for America?

Reagan's continuing success only increased hatred of him. After all, he was considered a lightweight by the liberal elite who believed it was indecent for anyone to doubt the efficacy of the ever-expanding state. Sanctimonious, pompous, and vain Clark Clifford called Reagan "an

amiable dunce.” In fact, the joke was on Clifford, one of those Washingtonians who thinks he is the indispensable man — until he ends up in a cemetery filled with once indispensable men. Reagan was perfectly happy to have his opponents underestimate him. Who remembers Pat Brown today?

Admittedly, Reagan was not a fervent policy nerd who focused on detail, like Bill Clinton. But Reagan realized that he “had people” who could flesh out legislation. He possessed and articulated a larger vision of where he wanted to move America. One way he helped detail that vision, contra the Left’s caricature of him, was by reading. For instance, visitors to Reagan’s ranch, now owned by the Young America’s Foundation (YAF), can see the well-worn books lining his walls, including by free-market economists such as Milton Friedman and F. A. Hayek.

Moreover, he read while traveling during the campaign. A number of times he’d hand me an article and ask if I’d seen it. He knew how to put that knowledge to good use. He could be a fearsome debater. He dismantled Bobby Kennedy when they clashed over the Vietnam War. Reagan fearlessly sparred with his friend William F. Buckley Jr. over the Panama Canal. I agreed with Buckley — it should revert to Panama — but thought Reagan held his own against probably the leading intellectual on the right. In fall 1980, Reagan didn’t hesitate to debate John Anderson, the renegade Republican congressman running as an independent. The “amiable dunce” proved to be anything but.

Surely his record also proved that. History offered brutal and complete vindication for him. Look forward a decade after his election and what do you spy? The U.S. enjoying strong economic growth and low inflation. A substantially reformed tax code, reducing income tax rates based on envy. Democrats having lost their third straight presidential election. The Berlin Wall down and one-time Eastern European satellites set free. Vietnam wanting a relationship with Washington. The Soviet Union staggering toward collapse. Maoism as well as Mao Zedong dead and buried in China, with free markets on the rise. Morning in America.

Of course, Reagan made mistakes. Intervening in Lebanon may be his greatest blunder, along with the Iran-Contra affair. And he was not responsible for all the good news. But he never claimed to be. He recognized the contributions of others. His ego was secure.

Indeed, he knew he could succeed only with the support of the American people. He believed in freedom and in them. He understood their curiosity, drive, self-reliance, ambition, and ingenuity. He recognized how the U.S. helped bring out the best in its citizens, even pulling the world’s most creative and productive people to America. When he addressed Americans, he spoke from the heart.

His greatest moments tended to be when he instinctively stood by principle against the ever cautious, even fearful federal bureaucracy appalled by the radicalism of someone who dared to praise freedom, criticize totalitarianism, and affirm principle. Consider his speech before Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate in 1987. Peter Robinson, who drafted the remarks, told the story of the bureaucratic firestorm ignited when the draft text urging the Soviets to take down the deadly barrier was circulated to the State Department.

The wall now has been gone longer than it was up. In June 1987, however, few people in or out of Germany imagined that it would ever disappear. And certainly not soon. Reagan was warned that he would look naïve. The Russians would be offended. And so on. He didn't care.

For 26 years the wall had stood as the ultimate symbol of man's inhumanity to man. The communist regime actually created the crime of *republikflucht*, or republic flight, fleeing the so-called German Democratic Republic. Hundreds of East Germans were murdered and thousands were imprisoned simply because they sought freedom.

Ida Siekmann, a 58-year-old, was the first to die when she jumped from her building to the bordering road in West Berlin on August 22, 1961, nine days after the first version of the wall was erected. Two days later a 24-year-old tailor, Guenter Litfin, was the first to be killed, shot while attempting to swim the River Spree. Among the cruelest executions occurred a year later, on August 17, 1962, when East German border agents shot 18-year-old Peter Fechter, a bricklayer, as he tried to climb the wall. They left him to bleed out in full view of residents on both sides. He was the 27th Berliner killed while seeking freedom, a grim scorecard that grew year by year.

On February 6, 1989, almost two years after Reagan's speech — and shortly after he left office — 20-year-old Chris Gueffroy became the last East German to be murdered while seeking to escape the East German open door prison. He was shot 10 times: apparently border guards could never be sure that their work was done. A month later 32-year-old Winfried Freudenberg became the last person to die trying to cross the wall. He was an electrical engineer whose homemade balloon crashed.

For most Washington policymakers, the Berlin Wall was an issue. For Reagan it something much more significant, a fundamental assault on human life, dignity, and liberty. On that beautiful day in Berlin on June 12, 1987, Reagan declared,

*Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe.... Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German, separated from his fellow men. Every man is a Berliner, forced to look upon a scar.... As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind....*

*General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate.*

*Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate!*

*Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!*

In fact, Reagan's most important achievement might have been getting Gorbachev right. Some of his aides viewed Gorbachev with distrust, and right-wing activists called Reagan an appeaser and dupe for negotiating with the Soviet leader. But Reagan recognized a humane core within the

general secretary. Reagan alone could not peacefully end the Cold War. Someone had to keep the Red Army in its barracks, lest reforms end up like Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. Gorbachev was that person. He might have been a reform communist who hoped to save the system, but that was impossible once he foreclosed force as an option. And for that he deserves credit alongside Reagan. Together, they ended communist rule over hundreds of millions of people. November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell, remains the symbolic end of the most monstrous, extensive, oppressive, and deadly social system ever concocted by man.

Today the People's Republic of China appears to be on the march. But Reagan would remind us of America's many inherent strengths. Authoritarian governments can do some things well. And democracies can be messy and inconsistent. Still, there is no substitute for resting government on popular consent and basing the economy on choices made by a free people in the marketplace. The PRC will find that over the long term, free access to information and the opportunity to speak and debate are vital to creating and sustaining a great and modern nation. Tyranny there will ultimately fail, as it did in the Soviet Union.

On November 5, 1994, Reagan released his famous letter to the American people announcing his diagnosis with Alzheimer's, the cruel disease that has robbed so many people of their memories and personalities. The loss for Reagan was particularly poignant, since he lost the ability to appreciate the world that he did so much to help shape. By the end he could not see how right he had been.

Nevertheless, Reagan never lost his faith in the United States. As he told a population that followed his leadership when the challenges facing America appeared to be so dire, "I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life. I know that for America there will always be a bright dawn ahead."

We should remember that today, in the midst of so many trials, which seem paradoxically old and new at once. Reagan believed in himself, but even more so in America. We were grateful when he infused the nation with his optimism 40 years ago. We should remember that optimism as we address equal if not greater challenges today. RIP Ronald Reagan, America's good and faithful servant during a time of great need.

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