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A Rendezvous with Destiny: Ronald Reagan's Enduring Legacy

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This article was originally posted just after the death of President Ronald W. Reagan. It is republished today in honor of the centennial of President Reagan's birth, yesterday, February 6.

“You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on Earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.” Those words catapulted Ronald W. Reagan onto the stage of national politics. Though the “Great Communicator” has left the scene, his ideas continue to define the political landscape.

Reagan spoke of this “rendezvous with destiny” in a speech delivered to support the lagging campaign of Barry Goldwater in 1964. Though Goldwater was to lose that election in a landslide, Reagan entered the political limelight, connecting with the American people in a way Goldwater and other conservatives had not.



By any measure, Ronald Reagan was an unusually complicated man, driven by unusually simple ideas. His roots in Dixon, Illinois gave him an immediate connection with the values of small-town America. Nevertheless, Reagan — known then as “Dutch” to his friends — had his sights set on a far larger world.

In reality, Ronald Reagan had several careers, all of them successful. His communication skills were first put to work as a radio announcer, but he soon came to the attention of Hollywood, where he developed a big screen career and seemed poised for greatness. All this was interrupted by World War II, when Reagan, ruled unfit for combat due to poor eyesight, was assigned to a film-making unit on behalf of the armed services. After making over 400 films for the national cause, Reagan emerged from the war with his movie career dimmed, but he soon turned to other opportunities.

Ronald Reagan then made his mark as president of the Screen Actors Guild, the leading labor union for actors and actresses. He was later to reflect that experience in the white-knuckled context of labor negotiations, which taught him both patience and determination. Both qualities were to be essential to Reagan's later experience in political office.

Reagan was, up until the late 1950's, an ardent Democrat. As a matter of fact, he would later acknowledge having been a member of several “bleeding heart” organizations for liberal causes. Reagan's worldview began to change when he served as a spokesman for the General Electric Corporation, traveling around the nation speaking to both employees and public citizens. During this period, Reagan reconnected with grassroots America and sensed the need for political leadership that would recover American values, reassert American leadership, and reverse the welfare-state liberalism that then defined national policy.

For most Americans, Reagan's political debut came in the speech made on behalf of Barry Goldwater. Reagan spoke of “a time for choosing” and told the nation of his political transition: “I have spent most of my life as a Democrat. I recently have seen fit to follow another course.”

In short order, that course would take him to the governorship of California. Elected against a cultural tide, Reagan took office and addressed some of the most critical issues of the 1960's, including campus unrest at the University of California's Berkeley campus and an out of control state budget. Reagan was overwhelmingly reelected to a second term, and his prospects for national office seemed to be bright. At the 1968 Republican National Convention, delegates held Reagan in reserve as a potential candidate if front-runner Richard M. Nixon failed in his effort to achieve the nomination.

Reagan's entry into presidential politics came in 1976, when he ran against incumbent President Gerald R. Ford for the Republican nomination, arguing that America needed a change, not only of leadership, but also of vision. Reagan came amazingly close to seizing the nomination, and he instantly became the front-runner for the 1980 Republican nomination when Ford lost to Jimmy Carter in the 1976 race.

Reagan's election as President in 1980 — capped by a landslide decision of the electorate — represented the transformation of America's political terrain, not merely the election of a new chief executive. As a campaigner, Ronald Reagan broke all the rules of conventional politics. He spoke boldly of ideas and resisted his own campaign advisors who counseled him to tone down his campaign rhetoric in order to appeal to nonaligned voters. Reagan saw the equation very differently. He did not want to reach nonaligned voters — he wanted to realign their political vision to match America's present opportunities and challenges. His success in changing the terms of our national debate is often forgotten in the aftermath of his political successes.

As President, Ronald Reagan transformed the world by refusing to believe that freedom and liberty were too expensive to defend. He understood the difference between freedom and oppression and had nothing but disdain for America's elites, who saw the world locked in a perpetual stalemate between freedom and totalitarianism. Reagan refused to accept the world on these terms and was determined to confront the Soviet Union and the threat of world communism. He was determined to force the end of what he courageously called the "Evil Empire," and through a confrontational public policy and a massive buildup of America's military might, he forced the Soviet Union into a public humiliation, as its economy could not sustain an equal military expansion. In the end, the Soviet Union lost political credibility because it could not deliver on its promises, nor make good on its threats. It took the courage of Ronald Reagan to walk away from the Reykjavik summit meeting in 1986, leaving Mikhail Gorbachev to face the fact that he could not deter the United States from its newly assertive military power and foreign policy.

The impact of this change in America's international posture is almost impossible to overestimate. During Ronald Reagan's first term in office, communism suffered its first massive and public defeat, as it was pressed back in much of the Third World even as the Soviet Union began to collapse from within. This was not a continuation of detente, but a foreign policy aimed at liberating millions from oppression. The stakes were high, but President Reagan was driven by an absolute confidence in the ultimate victory of hope over despair and freedom over oppression. In the end, the Soviet Union fell more quickly — and more peacefully—than virtually anyone could have predicted.

Ronald Reagan is what specialists in political leadership identify as a "conviction politician." As former White House counsel Peter J. Wallison commented, "Reagan had convictions — not just 'positions,' but principles he believed in and was willing to act upon." As Wallison argues, this separated Reagan from his recent predecessors in office, who had generally attempted to negotiate around many issues rather than to confront and solve them. "Reagan's extraordinary acts of political courage demonstrated that politics had a moral core, and that government decisions could be based on something more solid and enduring than the shifting sands of political expediency."

On the world's stage, Reagan developed an historic partnership with his generation's other great conviction politician — Margaret Thatcher. In an unusual alignment, based on both personality and ideas, Reagan and Thatcher redefined the Atlantic alliance and established Anglo-American leadership in the world. Thatcher understood Reagan's vision and admired his effectiveness as both communicator and statesman. "When we attempt an overall survey of President Reagan's term of office," she reflected, "covering events both foreign and domestic, one thing stands out. It is that he has achieved the most difficult of all political tasks: changing attitudes and perceptions about what is possible. From the strong fortress of his convictions, he set out to enlarge freedom the world over at a time when freedom was in retreat—and he succeeded. It is not merely that freedom now advances while collectivism is in retreat—important though that is. It is that freedom is the idea that everywhere captures men's minds while collectivism can do no more than enslave their bodies. That is the measure of the change that President Reagan has wrought."

Domestically, President Reagan used his incredible communication skills to lead the nation, and he combined respect for the American people with the expectation that Americans should solve their own problems. His most memorable anecdotes usually had to do with some story of government inefficiency or worse. In a line he often used, President Reagan offered that the most frightening words he had ever heard were, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you." Reagan's "less is more" approach to government marked the end of an era of unbridled government expansion, with its accompanying financial constriction. President Reagan restructured the economy through massive tax cuts mixed with encouragement for entrepreneurship and economic expansion.

The transformations that mark Ronald Reagan's life also touch the most basic moral issues of life and death. As the governor of California, Reagan signed one of the most liberal abortion laws of the 1970's. By the time he ran for President in 1980, Reagan had come to see abortion as a moral blight on America's conscience, and he almost single-handedly rebuilt a conservative movement driven by concern for individual liberty, economic freedom, and the sanctity of human life.

Ronald Reagan was a real human being, and it showed. Those who never heard him speak as President, who never observed his speeches and press conferences, are robbed of the opportunity to see this real leader grappling with the most crucial issues of his day. He did so with both humanity and courage, remembering that, in politics, he could afford many opponents but no enemies.

My introduction to Ronald Reagan came as I joined his 1976 campaign for the Republican nomination. I was a 16-year-old campaign volunteer working to distribute literature and serving time on the phone banks used to reach grassroots voters. I was captivated by the clarity of Ronald Reagan's vision, and I resonated with his conservative political philosophy. Admittedly, I was also simply taken by the sheer charisma of Ronald Reagan as a leader.

I was able to see Ronald Reagan in action and in person at Fort Lauderdale's War Memorial Auditorium during the 1976 nomination contest. Accompanied by his devoted wife Nancy, Reagan strode to the podium and delivered, apparently without notes, a political address that — in terms of its ideas — would later lead to his landslide election in 1980. I waited in the rope line for a chance to shake his hand, and then I saw for myself why biographer Edmund Morris would describe Ronald Reagan as "a force of nature." His energy, optimism, and confidence swept through the room like a bracing storm.

History will remember Ronald Reagan as a great President. Americans will remember him as a great friend. In time, monuments will be built, and memorials will be formalized. Yet the greatest memorial to Ronald Reagan is the fact that his ideas still live — and that a generation of younger Americans will not let them die.

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