

## **THE PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN AND THE PRESS**

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **Early Life**

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born on February 6, 1911, in Tampico, Illinois. His parents were John Reagan, a shoe salesman, and Nelle Wilson Reagan, a homemaker and occasional shop clerk.

Nelle Reagan loved the theater and took part in many amateur productions. As a result, Ronald Reagan became interested in acting at an early age. The Reagans lived in several small towns in western Illinois. His father moved the family from town to town as he searched for work. Reagan later wrote about his boyhood, "I realize now that we were poor, but I didn't know it at the time".

When he was 9 years old, he and his family settled in Dixon, Illinois, where Ronald Reagan finished elementary school and went to high school. In high school, he played football and basketball and took part in track and swimming metts. He appeared in several school plays and was elected president of the student council during the summers, he worked as a lifeguard.

In 1928, following graduation from high school, Reagan entered Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois. He paid his college expenses with a partial scholarship, saving from the lifeguard job, and many he earned washing dishes at fraternity house.

### **Acting Career**

After graduating from Eureka College in 1932, Reagan became a sports announcer for radio station WOC in Davenport, Iowa. That year, he moved to station WHO in Des Moines, Iowa. He broadcast play-by-play accounts of major league baseball games, and other sports events.

In 1937, Reagan travelled to southern California to report on the spring training season of the Chicago Cubs baseball team. There, he made a screen test for Warner Brothers, one of the largest motion-picture studios. The studio signed him to an acting contract.

Reagan made his film debut in **Love is One the Air** (1937), in which he played a radio announcer. He soon became a star and was know for his roles as a wholesome, likable young man. Altogether, Reagan appeared in more than 50 feature films between 1937 - 1946.

### **Television Star**

From 1954 to 1962, Reagan hosted "The General Electric Theater", a weekly dramatic series on television. He also starred in several episodes in the series, which was sponsored by the General Electric Company. Between television appearances, Reagan toured the country as public relations representative for General Electric. He visited the company's plants and made speeches. In his talks, Reagan stressed such conservative ideas as the importance of free enterprise and the dangers of too much government.

From 1962 to 1965, Reagan hosted and performed in a Western series called "Death Valley Days". He also made commercials for the sponsor, United States Borax & Chemical Corporation, a maker of cleaning products.

### **Family Life**

Reagan met actress Jane Wyman while they both were appearing in Warner Brothers films. They were married in 1940. The couple had a daughter and adopted a son. The marriage ended in divorce in 1948.

In 1951, While Reagan was president of SAG (Screen Actors Guild), he met actress Nancy Davis. Davis had complained to SAG that she was receiving unwanted Communist literature in the mail. They were married on March 4, 1952. The couple had two children.

### **Political Career**

Reagan had long taken an active interest in politics. At first, he held liberal views and belonged to the Democratic Party. In the 1948 presidential election, he campaigned for President Harry Truman, the Democratic candidate. During the 1950's, Reagan's views became more conservative. He campaigned as Democratic supporter of several Republican candidates, including presidential nominees Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and 1956 and Richard Nixon in 1960. In 1972, Reagan became a republican.

Reagan first gained nationwide political attention during the 1964 presidential campaign, when he made stirring TV speech in behalf of the Republican candidate, Barry M. Goldwater. In the speech Reagan attacked high taxed, wasteful government spending, the growth of government agencies, the rising crime rate, and soaring welfare costs. The speech drew record numbers of contributions for the Goldwater campaign.

Reagan first won public office in 1966, when he was elected governor of California. He defeated the state's Democratic governor, Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, by a landslide. Reagan began his term as governor in January 1967. He was reelected governor of California in 1970 and served until 1975. As governor, he made major policy decisions himself but relied on others to handle the details.

## **II. EVENTS OF THE 1970's**

When Reagan became President, the United States faced serious foreign and domestic problems. Relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union had reached their lowest point in years following a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 and early 1980. Reagan strengthened the military systems of the U.S. and its allies in Western Europe. This angered the Soviet Union. The Reagan Administration also increased U.S. involvement in Central America. It gave military equipment to troops fighting Communist-supported

forces in El Salvador and Nicaragua. In 1987, Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev signed a treaty that led to a reduction of certain U.S. and Soviet nuclear arms.

At home, Reagan had to deal with high inflation, a recession, and high unemployment. He won congressional approval of large federal income tax cuts to help stimulate the economy. By the end of his first term, rapid inflation ended, unemployment had fallen, and the economy had made a strong recovery. But federal expenses so greatly exceeded income that budget deficits reached record levels.

### **III. RONALD REAGAN AS PRESIDENT**

#### **The 1980 Election**

In the presidential campaign, Reagan charged that Carter had failed to deal effectively with inflation and unemployment. During the first half of 1980, the inflation rate was about 15 percent, and about 7 1/2 percent of the nation's workers had no jobs. Reagan called for a lowering of the minimum wage law in the case of teenagers to reduce unemployment among young people. To stimulate the economy, he proposed to slash federal income taxes by up to 30 percent. He pledged to boost military spending and to reduce government regulation of business. He also promised to balance the federal budget, claiming that a tax cut would increase economic activity so much that tax revenues would rise, not fall.

Carter argued that Reagan's plans would lead to still more inflation. He also questioned whether Reagan could balance the budget, reduce taxes, and increase defense spending all at the same time. In the election, Reagan defeated Carter and Anderson by a wide margin. He received about 44 million popular votes, Carter about 35 million and Anderson about 5 1/2 million. Reagan carried 44 states for a total of 489 electoral votes, while Carter carried only 6 states and the District of Columbia for 49 electoral votes.

#### **Reagan's First Administration (1981 - 1985)**

##### **Domestic Affairs**

Reagan's first major domestic programs dealt with the economy. In February 1981, Reagan proposed an economic plan that combined

tax cuts with wide reductions in welfare and unemployment programs and in many other areas of the budget. The plan included a large increase in defense spending. Reagan also worked to curb federal agencies that he felt went too far in regulating business. The press called his economic policies as **Reagonomics**. By August, Congress had approved nearly all of Reagan's proposed tax and spending cuts.

IMPORTANT legislation approved during Reagan's first administration included bills dealing with banking, job training, and social security.

An attempted assassination of Reagan occurred in March 1981 in Washington, D.C. Reagan was shot in the chest, but he made full recovery. Three other people, including Reagan's press secretary, Jim Brady, also were shot.

### **Foreign Affairs**

Reagan showed much political skill when he won a struggle with Congress over his defense program. The plan called for a large build-up of missiles, bombers, and other weapons. Reagan insisted that the Soviet Union held a military advantage over the United States. The United States and the Soviet Union held talks to reduce nuclear arms, but they failed to reach an agreement. Reagan then supplied nuclear missiles to U.S. allies in Western Europe. This action further worsened U.S. and Soviet relations.

### **Regan's Second Administration (1985 - 1989)**

#### **Domestic Affairs**

Reagan hoped to reduce the huge federal budget deficit, but slow economic growth contributed to another record deficit exceeding 200 billion dollars in the 1986 fiscal year. In the mid-1980's, Reagan expanded the Strategic Defense Initiative, a controversial research program designed to develop a space-based missile defense system. The press called the program "Star - Wars".

#### **Foreign Affairs**

Reagan met with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev several times during his second administration. In Geneva in 1985, the first meeting led to agreements for educational, scientific, and cultural exchanges.

In 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed a treaty that called for the destruction of all medium-range, ground-launched U.S. and Soviet nuclear missiles.

Reagan suffered a sharp loss of prestige because of sales of U.S. weapons to Iran and use of the profits to help the Nicaraguan rebels. Both activities were secret operations, they became known to the public in November 1986.

The arms sales were chiefly designed to win the freedom of Americans who were held hostage by Lebanese terrorists friendly to Iran. Reagan supported the arms sales. At the time, however, the U.S. had a policy that prohibited the sale of weapons to Iran and other nations considered to be supporters of terrorism. The arms sales led to the release of only three hostages.

The transfer of funds to support military efforts of the contras took place in the mid-1980's. Congress had banned military aid to the contras during that period. Reagan said he knew nothing about the fund diversion. Both that action and the arms sales had been carried out by the National Security Council (NSC), a White House advisory agency.

In 1987, televised congressional hearings into what became known as the Iran-contra affair revealed deep conflict among members of the Reagan Administration. The hearings also exposed attempts by NSC to deceive Congress about the arms sales and contra aid. Later in 1987, Reagan was strongly criticized in a joint report of the congressional committees investigating the affair. Most committee members blame Reagan for failing to meet the constitutional obligation to "take care that the laws be faithfully executed" and said he was chiefly responsible for wrongdoing by his aides.

Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver L. North, an NSC aide, was the person most closely involved with the day-to-day management of the undercover operation. In 1989, a federal jury convicted North of interfering with Congress's investigating of the Iran-contra affair. North was found guilty of helping prepare a false timetable of the events of the affair. The jury also convicted North of altering, withholding, and destroying documents related to the investigation. In 1990, an appeals court overturned North conviction on the

mishandling of documents charge. The court also ordered lower court to reexamine all the evidence used to convict North on the other charges.

#### IV. RONALD REAGAN & THE PRESS

At the age of 69, Ronald Reagan was the oldest man ever elected President.

According to Thomas, Deakin and Cormier (1983), Ronald Reagan had a longer honeymoon than most presidents. The attempt on his life coming so soon after he had moved into the White House produced an understandable brief moratorium and brought him some time, even as his aides spoke of a "safety net for the poor" as social programs were being slashed. He is rigid ideologue and only rarely does he beat a strategic retreat.

In the early days of the Reagan Administration the promise was an open administration. I can only say that will be the day, not only for this administration, but all the others we've covered. Press access to Reagan during his 1980 campaign was extremely limited, more a case of hit-and-run with aides closing in before a reporter could toss a follow-up question. The **modus operandi** (way a person goes about task, way a thing operates) continued at the White House. Then reporters were treated to an affable, genial, nice president-very friendly, seemingly willing to answer any question during brief so-called photo opportunities in the Oval Office. His top aides, Edwin Meese, James Baker, Michael Deaver, all novice to the national government became apoplectic when Reagan would deliver an off-the-cuff answer. Reagan himself could not resist an answer. But it appeared that his aides protectively and perhaps with some smug superiority on their part felt that they should not be questioned, that they were really smarter than he was and that some of his answers were not programmed or screened enough.

According to Jonathan Miller, who was an aide in the White House at the time, "Reagan is like a great race horse that performs well when you have a jockey that knows how to use a whip. If you don't use the whip, he'll just loaf". If the president rarely played the leading role in meetings, his aides found he was even less likely to question the paperwork they sent him. Reagan obligingly read whatever he was given -all of it- at least in the early years.

One aide early on was surprised to find that the president was staying up until the early hours of the morning trying to read all the materials his staff had sent him. "He read indiscriminately," the aide marveled. "If you gave him eight hundred pages, he read every word. He used no judgment". Nancy Reagan finally stepped in and explained that her husband's workload needed to be reduced. Similarly, the staff had to monitor the amount of information they sent him to prepare for press conferences. As former Communications Director David Gergen recalled, "If you gave him too many pages, as good as his photographic memory is, he tries so hard to remember what he read that he sometimes gets mixed up". He was particularly susceptible spokesman Larry Speakes used to joke that "the last thing you put in is the first thing that comes out".

Kondracke (1982) indicated that unlike other presidents, Reagan seldom requested information beyond the briefings and talking points his aides gave him.

According to Moyers (1988), despite his position and power, Reagan often appeared to be living in contented isolation. Nancy Reagan was an inveterate telephone talker, and, in addition to acting as her husband's eyes and ears, she would occasionally put him on the line. But the president rarely initiated unless his staff asked him to. Nor did he keep in touch in other ways with those who were reputedly his oldest friends and advisers, on and off the White House staff.

Even on purely physical terms, Reagan's operating style was passive. Although he had 59 rooms in which to roam in the West Wing alone, he seldom ventured far beyond the Oval Office. In part, it was a necessary fact of life after the 1981 assassination attempt. He attended cabinet and congressional meetings and delivered speeches in the rooms set aside for those activities, but one senior White House official doubted whether, beyond these ceremonial rooms, the press room, and the barber shop, he knew his way around the West Wing complex. He even seemed unsure about the location of most his aides' offices, and he only visited his chief of staff, who worked a few yards down the hall, two or three times a year on special occasions, like birthdays.

Doing a news conference was something of a gamble; it had never been Reagan's favorite medium. Unlike the prepared speeches,

Which he delivered flawlessly, he often responded to questions with misstatement and flubs of one kind or another. His spokesman, Larry Speakes, noted that the president forgot so much in between his infrequent news conferences that prepping him could be like "reinventing the wheel".

In the case of Reagan's gaffes and distortions, Robert Dallek (1984) claimed that the public generally chose to shrug them off. Reagan had a formidable weapon going for him, an impregnable shield that came to be known in Washington as the "Teflon phenomenon". All the reports of flaws in his character of judgment, which would have been severely damaging to the reputation of an ordinary politician, made no lasting impact on the popular perception of this President. The public had made up its mind about Ronald Reagan, and no matter what was written or said about him, the majority of Americans continued to like and support him.

Reagan's advisers, especially those who had been with him a long time, were aware of his casual approach to the truth, and they did all they could to program his various activities. Speeches and other public appearances were tightly structured, and the effort was made to keep the President to his script. This attempt to exercise control even extended to meetings with other government officials within the privacy of the White House. Congressional leaders and Cabinet officers were struck by the fact that they sat down with the President, he invariably made his comments from notes on three-by-five index cards, a practice that dated back to his first run for governor.

According to an anecdote given by Schieffer and Gates (1987), in November 1983, a few days before Reagan left on a trip to Japan, the heads of the big three auto companies were invited to the White House for a talk with the President. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss trade policies, a subject of vital concern to the carmakers, who were feeling the competition from Japanese imports. Hence, they were puzzled when the President began the discussion with remarks that had nothing to do with that or any other relevant subject. But it did not take the auto executives long to figure out what had happened: Reagan had taken the wrong set of index cards to the meeting. One of the participants later recalled that no one had the heart to call the mistake to his attention. Instead, as the

President talked on, the visitors stared at the floor in embarrassment until Reagan himself finally realized he was reading from the wrong notes.

But most members of the White House staff came to realize that such lapses really did not matter. They, too, were aware of the Teflon phenomenon. The public didn't seem to be bothered by any of his blunders, so why should they care? Thus, as time went on, White House spokesmen became almost brazen in their dismissal of questions from reporters who wanted to know why the President had said such-and-such when the facts were otherwise. Once, when asked why the President had "cited" a nonexistent British law in order to discredit arguments for gun control, Larry Speakes breezily responded: "It made the point, didn't it?" By then, Speakes had learned that Reagan had known intuitively for years that it was punchy line and performance that "made the point", not substance or accuracy.

## **V. THE RIGHT-HAND MAN OF THE PRESIDENT - PRESS SECRETARY**

Reagan chose James Scott Brady as White House press secretary, a veteran Republican relations specialist who had been Reagan's press spokesman in Washington during the transition.

In announcing the appointment, Reagan said Brady would have full access to the Oval Office. Brady told reporters he would not lie to them, but that he also might not always respond to questions to which he knew the answers.

Brady, 40 years old at the time of his appointment, was known to Washington reporters as "Diamond Jim", the wry and able former aide to Sen. William V. Roth Jr. Besides working for Roth, Brady had substantial experience in other Washington jobs. From 1973 to 1981 he had served variously as a communication consultant to the White House. Later Larry Speakes was named the Principal Deputy Press Secretary.

When Jim Brady was on deck, he managed to keep the atmosphere light and to deflect hostility. His deputy, Larry Speakes, who presides at news briefings came up through a tough school. He had worked in the White House in the Nixon era as spokesman for Nixon's chief Watergate lawyer. Speakes, White House

Communications Director David Gergen, and the big three advisers huddle every day to decide what story they will feature, what story will land Reagan on the front page in the best light.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

After eight years in office, polls showed that Reagan had left office as popular with voters as when he had arrived in 1980. Ronald Reagan and company, it was fair to say, had been one of America's longest-running hits, and even after its successful stay at the White House had come to an end one couldn't help noticing its almost eerie show business parallels. Like many acts, it had been developed in the backwaters of the after-dinner circuit; as was so often the case with new productions, which are finetuned in regional theaters, it had then been honed in the governor's mansion in Sacramento; and finally when the timing was right, it arrived at the Broadway of politics, the national capital of Washington.

As Mayer and Doyle (1988) said Reagan had travelled a long way, but the trip to the White House had been only one of the actor's journey. He had been back in Hollywood only a month when he got the first feelers about returning to the movies. The suggested role was a natural: a cameo appearance as President Ronald Reagan in a film about White House Press Secretary James Brady.

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