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# PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: ILLUSIONS OF GREATNESS

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America warmed itself for the last time to ‘get one for the Gipper’. The meticulously choreographed state funeral for President Reagan gave millions of Americans a nostalgia for sunshine amidst the dark uncertainties of the Iraq war and nagging fears of a world going terrorist mad against America. In his death, as during his days as President between 1980 and 1988, Ronald Reagan made Americans feel good and be hopeful of good times. Ronald Reagan’s greatness as President, if at all, was in exuding warmth and charming even those who saw through his shallowness to suffer him gladly. He soothed a nation that had gone sore to its core, after Vietnam, Watergate and Iran. That he stared down world communism is bombast at best. The record is mixed in regard to the economic policies that he ‘communicated’, famously known as Reaganomics.

To America and the world, Reagan personified ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’ that America is and can be. For a ‘great president’, his pre-presidential career resume was rather skimpy: baseball commentator, Hollywood supporting actor, ideological preacher for General Electric, and two-term California Governor. The locus, though unimpressive, is indicative of the development of Reagan’s show skills and ideological substance before he came to Washington. The goodness of America is in its scope and opportunities for someone like Reagan from humble beginnings in the isolated Midwest to make it to the top, fulfilling the ‘American dream’. What is bad about the American society is the (Republican) emphasis on ideological celebration and material protection of individual success and unrestricted market economy while leaving to their own devices the victims of inequity and inequality in the sharing of the nation’s wealth. Reaganomics, Thatcherism and the so called supply-side economics share the same bad premise and purpose. American ugliness has usually been more external than internal, but whether passive isolationism or active realpolitik, American foreign policy has always tended to reflect what is good and bad inside America. Perhaps no one after Secretary John Foster Dulles (under President Eisenhower) raised the moral and ideological decibels of American foreign policy rhetoric as President Reagan did.

Mr. Reagan became the 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States at the age of 69, the oldest American to take office. This was a major factor in his popularity with the public and even those who opposed his policies could not bring themselves to castigate him as they would have with a younger president. At 69, he was hardly a threat to aspiring Republicans or a source of envy to adversarial Democrats. They could not even make their criticisms stick. He

was the Teflon President, the nation’s grandfather who meant no ill will and could be forgiven for his foibles. His easygoing and laidback acting style was a welcome change after the overserious and detail-driven Jimmy Carter, whose background was in engineering and not acting. In a monarchical democracy, wrote Jennings, the people could cheer the king or queen and damn the government. In Reagan’s America, the people cheered him and damned his staff. Auto-delegation of governmental tasks was inevitable under Reagan, and packaging the President for presentation that began under Reagan has continued with his successors.

Reagan’s great skill in ‘communicating’ is usually attributed to his training as an actor, and his ability to render scripted lines with aplomb and apparent sincerity. He also had another career between acting and politics. After Hollywood and before becoming the Governor of California, Ronald Reagan was the spokesman for General Electric, the giant industrial enterprise. The job had nothing to do with corporate representation but had everything to do with doing a sales pitch for American capitalism. At \$165,000 a year in the 1950s, Reagan’s duties included speaking at GE factories around the country, and introducing the weekly TV show ‘General Electric Theatre’ with his ‘Speech’. It was his own ‘Speech’ that transformed Reagan from hitherto liberal democratic leanings and antipathy to big business (Reagan had been a great admirer of Franklin Roosevelt and considered John F. Kennedy as his favourite President) to become a champion of big business and Republican campaigner. GE’s agenda was to root out the possibility of Americans ever considering alternatives to market capitalism. Although the experiences of Stalin’s communist orthodoxy in the Soviet Union had totally killed the chances of a socialist challenge becoming viable in western democracies (despite early promises in France and Italy), the American big business was not prepared to take any chances.

At a personal level, his biographical accounts have noted that Reagan had developed a mechanism of emotional insularity arising from his troubled childhood experiences under an alcoholic father and an emotionally aloof mother. It has been suggested that beyond scripted performances Reagan was incapable of genuine empathy. He was also a split personality. He is known to have naturally taken to mixing with black boys while growing up at a time when racial mixing was not tolerated, but he could not bring himself to identifying himself with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and President Johnson’s efforts towards affirmative programs favouring African Americans. As well, during the dreadful days of

Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist witch hunt, Reagan did not countenance the strong arm tactics used against Hollywood actors but that did not prevent him from being an FBI informant on alleged communist activities in the film industry. Even as President, it took a while for him to accept that 'acid rain' is not some liberal mumbo jumbo but an actual result of atmospheric pollution. He dismissed AIDS as a problem of homosexual lifestyle and not warranting government resources for research and treatment programs, until his friend and fellow actor Rock Hudson announced that he was afflicted with the disease and he was gay. In a benevolent twist of irony, medical activists are now planning to use the name of President Reagan, the most prominent victim of Alzheimer's, to pressure the Bush administration to allow the use of embryonic stem cells in biomedical research for the purpose of fighting diseases like the Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and the diabetes.

Reagan's political 'greatness' was in uniting the good and the bad in America in the cause of Republican electoral success. He expanded and solidified the American constituency called 'Republican Democrats', a cohort that had already begun to emerge during the 1952 and 1956 elections, in support of Dwight Eisenhower, the World War II hero and the Presidential victor against the more liberally substantive Democratic opponent, Senator Adlai Stevenson. Reagan wooed the Democratic middle and working class voters to vote for him while clobbering away at big government as the nation's biggest problem. His answer during his two terms as President was Reaganomics - the four pronged reductions in income tax, government spending, government regulations and the money supply. He cut income tax by 25% and introduced deregulations in a number of areas, but the claim that tax cuts and deregulation will fuel economic growth is still best described as 'voodoo economics', as President George Bush (Sr) famously put it while running against Reagan for Republican nomination and before becoming Reagan's Vice President. The Clinton administration was more modest in attributing America's impressive economic growth under Clinton's watch more to the electronic revolution than to White House policies. Yet by Reagan's own yard stick, Clinton brought down the budget deficit and started registering surpluses, whereas under Reagan the deficit rose by 86% from the previous Carter administration. For, while reducing

the taxes, Reagan also increased the government expenditure almost entirely in defence. He neglected social programs, while unemployment rose and the minimum wage froze, and for the first time after the war American economic growth began to produce regressive results. The rich grew richer and the poor went poorer. The household incomes of working families stayed stable because women went out to work on menial jobs. Homelessness grew as psychiatric patients were prematurely released from hospitals suffering government cutbacks.

The Reagan followers now claim that it was Reagan's military expansion and economic success that forced the Soviet Union to implode. Between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, it was the former who accelerated the end of the cold war with his rapid disarmament proposals. Reagan, on the other hand, egged on by Pentagon and against the State Department advice, was stubborn in his disbelief of the Soviets and slow to respond until American and world opinion forced him to. As for the collapse of communism, even Gorbachev had less to do with it and for all his catalytic efforts he is least liked in his own country. Nonetheless, Reagan's blind spot on communism led him to disastrous overseas blunders especially Central America. The nadir of Reagan's anti-communist crusade came with the Iran-Contra scandal in 1986, when it was exposed that the Reagan administration had been illegally selling arms to Iran and using the money to supply arms to the fight against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The scandal led to Congressional hearings and the resignation (John Poindexter) and firing (Oliver North) of Reagan's staff, but the Teflon President escaped unscathed though blemished.

In truth, Reagan's greatness is less the result of his achievements than the hype of his faithful fans and their Ronald Reagan Legacy Project to have him memorialized not only in every one of the 3,067 counties in all 50 American states, but also throughout the world, and especially in Eastern Europe which they believe he saved from communism. Outside America, they have so far succeeded only in getting a street roundabout named after him in a small Polish town. The truth also is that there have been and there will be other American Presidents better known and respected in the rest of the world than Ronald Reagan. ■

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