
Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader

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How did America's current era of peace and prosperity come about? President Clinton and the Republican Congress both claim credit for the robust health of the economy, yet neither has taken any bold steps that can reasonably be linked to the current boom. When we examine the ingredients of the boom—the taming of inflation, the revival of economic growth, the restructuring of the economy, the reduction of the deficit, the opening of world markets, the peaceful climate

generated by the end of the cold war—we see that, in virtually every case, the turning point came in the 1980s.

Ronald Reagan is the person most responsible for America's economic restoration. He is the secret of our success.

Reagan was an immensely popular president. Elected and reelected in a landslide, he left office in 1989, the most popular president in the second half of the twentieth century. But the intellectuals, the pundits, and the media have blackened his legacy, say-

ing that the 1980s were an era of greed and selfishness; that Reagan's legacy was the budget deficit; that the Soviet Union collapsed under its own weight, not because of the policies of the Reagan administration. All these propositions are dubious, and history will record them as such.

According to his detractors, Reagan was a good-natured ignoramus who used his acting skills to lull Americans into a feel-good trance and to deflect their attention from serious problems. Diplomat Clark Clifford dubbed Reagan an "amiable dunce." Liberal journalist Nicholas Von Hoffman spoke for many in the media when he wrote that it was "humiliating to think of this unlettered bumpkin being our president."

That is now the conventional wisdom, and it is wrong in every respect.

The Reagan Mystery

Since Reagan left office, there have been, on both sides of the political aisle, a number of would-be Reagans: his anointed successor, George Bush; Bob Dole, Newt Gingrich, the Republican presidential hopefuls. Even Bill Clinton on some days is a masquerading Reaganite. None of them has been successful in replicating Reagan's achievements in transforming the landscape of America and the world.

Why haven't Reagan's ideological progeny been able to replicate his success? I begin with a bit of a mystery about Reagan. Although there has been an attack on the Reagan legacy, there has been, oddly, very little corresponding defense from the people who

worked alongside him. In fact, many of the memoirs that have come out of the Reagan administration—by budget director David Stockman, chief of staff Don Regan, top aide Michael Deaver, former secretary of state Alexander Haig—have been critical of Reagan.

So I begin by saying that we should understand why even Reagan's allies have been a little shy to rush to his defense. Reagan is, by any conventional standard, a most implausible leader. Before he entered politics, he was a movie actor. Even as president, he was said to be somewhat detached from the everyday business of government. He was accused by his critics of taking an occasional afternoon nap. He was not a scholar or an intellectual in the conventional sense. One of his star speechwriters, Peggy Noonan, who loves Reagan, says that he is proof that the unexamined life is worth living. His critics and even his allies said some tough and even hurtful things about him. They said he was ignorant, unqualified, asleep at the wheel. Most people would be wounded and go on the defensive; Dan Quayle has spent the better part of ten years trying to rebut the media portrait of him. Reagan made no effort to answer the accusations, and sometimes encouraged them: "They tell me that hard work never killed anyone," he once, famously, said, "but why take the chance?"

Shortly after Reagan was elected, he assembled a group of aides and said to them, "Now I'm president, but I'm not familiar with the schedule, the routines. What time is my first meeting in the morning?"

“The national security briefing is at 7:30,” they said.

“Well, I guess they’ll have to begin without me,” Reagan said. “I’ll be showing up at 9:00.”

For eight years, he put in a conventional nine-to-six day at the office, usually taking home a slender folder of work.

He visited Eureka College, his alma mater, where he was accosted by a reporter, who, seeking to embarrass him, said, “Mr. President, isn’t it true that you graduated from Eureka—not exactly Princeton—with a C average?”

“Yes,” said Reagan. “You know, even now, I wonder what I might have accomplished if I had studied harder.”

Former national security adviser Robert McFarlane captured the Reagan paradox when he said, “He knows so little and accomplishes so much.” From the point of view of the pundits and the intellectuals, this was the Reagan mystery.

Reagan the Visionary

How did a seemingly ordinary man play an important role in the extraordinary events of the 1980s? I’m going to try to answer this question by defining the elements that I think made Reagan successful.

The first is vision: the ability to imagine a world different from the one that is. This is an extremely rare quality. Most of us are captive to the issues of the day. If you asked people in Washington “What’s the most important issue in America today?” most of them would say the Clinton scandal or campaign finance reform. It is difficult

to step outside the current; to develop a different kind of mental picture; to say the country looks like this, but I think it should look like that, and I’m going to move resolutely in that direction. Reagan had this kind of moral imagination, and the most dramatic example was his view of Soviet communism. He predicted many times in the early 1980s that Soviet communism would collapse, and would collapse soon. In 1981 he told an audience at the University of Notre Dame that “the West won’t contain communism, it will transcend communism.” The next year he predicted that freedom and democracy would leave Soviet communism “on the ash heap of history.” He went to the British parliament in 1982 and said the same thing. He repeated the theme in a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983.

At the time, there was complete agreement across the political spectrum—among liberals and conservatives, doves and hawks—that the Soviet regime was here to stay. Reagan was virtually alone in the Western world in saying that there was a fragility at the heart of Soviet communism that would bring it down. I’ve puzzled about how Reagan knew something about Soviet communism that even Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn seemed not to know. In the mid 1980s, Richard Nixon tried to engage Reagan in a serious discussion of Soviet strategy and Marxist theory, but Reagan wasn’t interested. Reagan told jokes about lazy Soviet farmers, and Nixon was taken aback at this flippant attitude on the

part of the leader of the Western world.

Ironically, Reagan's jokes contained deeper insight into the nature of socialism and communism than all the learned treatises published across the political spectrum.

Reagan's jokes, incidentally, were not unique to him. He collected them from the Soviet people themselves. A typical one goes like this: A man goes to the Soviet Bureau of Automobiles to order a car. They tell him he has to pay now, and there is a ten-year wait. The man fills out the forms and pays his money.

"Come back in ten years and pick up your car," says the man in the agency.

"Morning or afternoon?" asks the car buyer.

"It's ten years from now. What difference can it make?"

"Well, the plumber's coming in the morning."

Reagan's jokes were not about the "evil empire," about how wicked communism is; they were about how foolish it is to organize a large economy based on prescription or command. Reagan's strategy was not simply standing tough against the Soviets. It was a counter-intuitive two-step strategy that no one, to my knowledge, either on the left or on the right, supported. It was distinctively Reagan's own. In the first term, 1981 to 1985, Reagan was very tough against the Soviets. The liberals, the doves, were harshly critical of him. Reagan is taking the world closer to nuclear war, they said; the doomsday clock is three seconds from midnight.

In the crucial year of 1983, Reagan did four things. First, he called the

Soviet Union an evil empire. At the time, it was a scandal. The conventional view was this: The Soviets are a superpower, we are a superpower. They have nuclear weapons, we have nuclear weapons. We've got to sit down like adults and work it out.

Reagan's view was that the problem was not the weapons but the fundamental moral difference between the two systems. Basically, they are evil, in Reagan's view, and if you could transform the system, the problem of the weapons would be insignificant.

Second, Reagan deployed Pershing and Cruise missiles in Europe to counter the threat of the Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles.

Third, the United States invaded Grenada—a small country, but for the first time a communist country reverted back into the democratic camp. Before that, we had the Brezhnev doctrine: Once a country goes communist, it remains communist. Grenada was a refutation of the Brezhnev doctrine.

Fourth was SDI, the Strategic Defense Initiative. Reagan announced a kind of Manhattan Project, if you will, to shoot down incoming Soviet missiles—a complete change in U.S. strategic policy.

In his second term, Reagan shifted gears. He began to support Gorbachev. He began to encourage glasnost and perestroika. He began to pursue arms control treaties. Asked if the Soviets were an evil empire, he said no, "that was another time, another era."

Now the hawks, the conservatives, became critical of him. Gorbachev is duping Reagan, they argued. Gor-

bachev may be seeming to sacrifice a pawn, but he has checkmate two moves down the road. William F. Buckley said to Reagan, "For you to change your position on the Soviet Union is like us changing our position on Hitler." George Will: "Reagan has accelerated the moral disarmament of the West by elevating wishful thinking to the status of political philosophy."

In retrospect, we see that Reagan played Gorbachev like a fiddle. Reagan was tough when he needed to be tough and soft when he needed to be soft. This was a distinctive Reagan strategy. Henry Kissinger—no admirer of Reagan—says in his recent book, *Diplomacy*, that Reagan's achievement in bringing about the end of the Soviet empire is the greatest diplomatic feat of the second half of the twentieth century. I think history will support that judgment.

Reagan's own attitude was to take no credit for the collapse of communism. When Gorbachev came to Washington in 1987, he was a media hero. *Time* magazine named him Man of the Decade. Gorbachev would come out of his limousine and shake people's hands; he was greeted enthusiastically. A reporter asked Reagan if he felt upstaged by Gorbachev.

"Good lord, no," he said. "I once co-starred with Errol Flynn."

Reagan the Contrarian

In addition to vision, Reagan had an amazing willingness to go against what the polls said and what the elites said. He had the courage of his convictions. Today, President Clinton and the

Republican leadership both are very much captive to consultants, polls, focus groups. Basically, they want to know what the American people think so they can bring their positions into line with public sentiment. In some ways, that seems appropriate in a democracy, where the leaders are supposed to reflect and enact the wisdom of the American people, but Reagan took a different view. Reagan's view was that he embodied the good sense of the American people: I don't have to consult the American people, I am the American people.

With this confidence, he would act and then ask for the support of the people: My fellow Americans, I bombed Libya yesterday. He wanted popular support, but not necessarily in advance of making a decision. He was willing to endure unpopularity in taking a difficult course—the true test of a statesman.

In 1981 Reagan supported Paul Volcker's very tough policy of squeezing the money supply to wring inflation out of the economy, and it was successful. Inflation went down, but the country went into a deep recession in 1982. Unemployment went up, poverty went up. Sam Donaldson of ABC News confronted Reagan at a press conference: Mr. President, in talking about the continuing recession, you have blamed the mistakes of the past and you have blamed the Congress. Does any of the blame belong to you?

"Yes," Reagan said, "because for many years I was a Democrat."

Reagan used humor as a potent political weapon. Conservative politicians are inherently vulnerable to the

charge of meanness, of being racists and warmongers. Humor is a way to defuse and dispel these accusations. Compare Reagan to Newt Gingrich. Gingrich is a visionary, but he doesn't have—at least not yet—that trademark Reagan sense of humor, that large and inclusive and even self-deprecating sense of humor.

None of this is to say that Reagan was indifferent to polls. When I interviewed Dick Wirthlin, Reagan's pollster, for my book, he told me that Reagan was very interested in polls—not to modify his own position, but to find out where the American people disagreed with him so he could try to change their minds. During the 1982 recession, Wirthlin told Reagan that his popularity had plummeted.

“How bad is it?” Reagan asked.

“It's down to about 40 percent.”

Reagan shook his head and said, “Well, Dick, I wonder if you could arrange for me to be shot again.”

In the 1982 election—a difficult one for Republicans—Reagan and the Republicans adopted the slogan “Stay the course.” In the recession of 1991, a much milder recession, President Bush's strategy was basically to deny it. He would say, in effect, things really aren't that bad. Americans who had lost their jobs or knew people who had lost their jobs thought Bush was out of touch.

“Stay the course” acknowledges that things are bad. It appeals to patience and fortitude. It confers dignity on struggle. It suggests that there is a plan, and light at the end of the tunnel. My point here is that Reagan was not the kind of statesman who believed

it was enough to be right on the merits and he would be vindicated in twenty years. His view was that a democratic leader must be vindicated by the next election, because it's foolish to have sensible policies and then be defeated at the ballot box and have your opponent undo them. Reagan was determined that the economy would turn around—not eventually, but by 1984. And sure enough, in 1983 it did, and it made the 1984 election very difficult for Walter Mondale.

Not only did Reagan steer clear of the polls and short-term popularity, he was almost indifferent to what the pundits, the elites, the media had to say about him. Today's leaders, as far as I can see, are deeply concerned about, and sometimes even obsessed with, what Dan Rather and the New York Times editorial page say about them. Reagan really didn't care. This went all the way back to his days as governor of California, when, week after week, the influential columnist Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle would write bitter attacks on Reagan. Michael Deaver asked Governor Reagan about Caen's attacks, and Reagan's reaction was essentially, What's eating that guy? His assumption was that something was wrong with Caen.

Throughout his career, Reagan operated in the serene confidence that his own views not only were right, but were absolutely right—unshakable by data.

When I enrolled at Dartmouth, they told me that the mark of a liberally educated person is not to eschew convictions, but to have a mind not wholly made up, a mind that is always

open to new facts. As the facts come in, you modify your beliefs in line with them. I saw with some astonishment that this was not Reagan's view. He had a preexisting set of beliefs, and if you gave him a set of facts that appeared to contradict those beliefs, he wanted a new set of facts. He had a tremendous inner confidence in his convictions.

Reagan the Economist

In the early 1980s, Reagan announced that he was going to cut taxes to energize economic growth and hike defense spending to invite the Soviets into an arms race they couldn't win. His aides warned that if he didn't slash domestic spending at the same time, he was going to get a big deficit. Reagan's reply was basically, So be it. As early as 1981, he declared that he had not come to Washington to balance the budget—not at the expense of his tax-cutting program and his defense program. If we can't balance the budget now, he said, we'll have to do it later.

The wise men of the economic profession across the political spectrum, including Harvard professor Martin Feldstein, Reagan's economic adviser, told him throughout the 1980s that the ballooning deficit would drive up interest rates by competing with private borrowing, would reignite inflation, wreck the economy, choke the recovery. None of this happened. Reagan took the gamble and, amazingly, the deficit seems to have had no disastrous or even negative impact during the 1980s, and suddenly in the 1990s—poof—the deficit disappears. Indeed, we are now

facing a budget surplus! President Clinton comes to the podium, takes a bow, and says he did this—the Democratic Party did this. How? one is tempted to ask. What did you do?

There really are only two ways to reduce a deficit: steep hikes in taxes or huge cuts in spending. Clinton has done neither, so you have to ask what he did to reduce the deficit. The obvious, undeniable answer is nothing.

Two things have balanced the budget. One is the Reagan economic boom that got going around 1983 and has virtually never looked back, driving the Dow Jones industrial average from 800 in 1982 to well over 8,000 in early 1998. That has, of course, been a bonanza for the treasury. Second is gigantic defense savings since the end of the cold war. In real terms, we're spending \$100 billion dollars less every year than before the Berlin Wall fell. These savings, which will accrue indefinitely into the future, are perhaps the single most important reason the budget has suddenly and unexpectedly balanced itself.

So the very man who is blamed for the deficits of the 1980s is, oddly enough, the hidden hand responsible for today's balanced budget.

Reagan the Optimist

Finally, I want to talk about Reagan's infectious and seemingly irrepressible optimism. The mood among conservatives recently has been gloom. Why the pessimism? The Gingrich Republicans came sweeping in, in 1994, and reasoned as follows: Reagan cut taxes, and his policies were instrumental in ending the cold war, but he

did not cut domestic spending or balance the budget, so we're going to do that. Let's look at Medicare, let's look at entitlements. And suddenly—boom—the Republicans run into a brick wall. Their popularity plummets, and they conclude that the American people are not on their side, that the American people have been corrupted by big government. On the intellectual right, there is a corresponding fear that the American people have been corrupted by permissive liberalism. In a sense, this is the message of Judge Robert Bork's recent book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. This makes for a very difficult politics. How can you be a democratic leader when your premise is that the American people are themselves, in a sense, the problem?

Reagan's view was that the American people are fundamentally decent: if you give people freedom, if you allow them to keep more of their own money, they will use this freedom well. They will use it to fashion an American dream for themselves. Reagan's optimism was not simply a feature of his personality; it had a political meaning. It united the two bases of the Republican Party: taxpayers, if you will, and social and religious conservatives. Reagan made the Republican Party the party of both liberty and virtue. Generally speaking, there are three principles in American politics: liberty, equality, and virtue. If you have two, you win.

Reagan coolly conceded the issue of equality to the Democrats. Remember, in the 1980s there was all this rhetoric about the rich getting richer and the poor treading water. Mondale made it

the centerpiece of his 1984 campaign. Reagan didn't even contest that issue. After a Mondale speech on the inequality theme, Andrea Mitchell of NBC News asked Reagan, "What about Mondale's charges?" And Reagan said, "I think he should pay them."

The thing that struck me most when I was rereading Reagan's speeches is that, unlike so many on the cultural right today—Bill Bennett, for example—Reagan never criticized the vices of the American people. In fact, and I've confirmed this with Reagan's speechwriters, I have not been able to find a single speech in which Reagan condemned illegitimacy. Reagan emphasized the better side of our nature, the good side of human freedom.

He invented a tradition called the hero in the balcony: during a speech, he would stop and point to someone in the audience as an exemplar of democratic liberty. He would say, Look at this guy, this hero in the balcony. These were not Horatio Alger figures who started out broke and made millions. They were heroes of sacrifice. The guy who jumps in the Potomac River to save someone, or the boys who stormed the beaches at Normandy, these were Reagan's heroes. He would point to them and say, This is a lesson in how you can use freedom well.

The hero-in-the-balcony tradition was so successful that it continued under Bush, and now even, in diminished form, under Clinton. Of course, Clinton's heroes in the balcony are a different breed: the government employee who works on weekends, the twelve-year-old kid who sends in his

allowance to pay off the deficit.

The diplomat Clare Boothe Luce once said that history has no room for clutter and will remember each president by only one line: Washington was the father of the country; Lincoln freed the slaves. Margaret Thatcher said of Reagan that he won the cold war without firing a shot. That's a very worthy epitaph, but I would add this: Reagan also revived the American economy and the American spirit after a period of decline and malaise.

His vision now becomes ours. It is easy for those of us who labor in the political vineyards to get discouraged—there is an old Indian saying: After crossing the mountain, more mountains—but we can take a lesson from his unflinching optimism. We must resolve not to let down our guard, not to give up the fight. We must resolve to pick up where he left off and complete his revolution. We are in this for the long haul. We must stay the course.

After his talk, Dinesh D'Souza talked with members of the audience, including Tim Penny, former Minnesota congressman and an American Experiment senior fellow, and Mitch Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment.

Tim Penny: How do you think Ronald Reagan would have handled the initial episode involving Iraq, and where would his policies have left us now?

Dinesh D'Souza: The only analog I can think of was the hostage crisis, which really predated Reagan. When Reagan came in, he didn't say what he

would do, but he made it pretty clear that it would be drastic, and the Iranians knew this. There is continuing debate over what exactly led to the release of the hostages on inauguration day, but Reagan had sent a clear message that his policy would be very different from Carter's.

It is a mystery to me that Bush, who was Reagan's anointed successor, sat at Reagan's feet for eight years but didn't learn very much. He made a tremendous effort to distance himself from Reagan; that was the meaning of "a kinder, gentler America"—kinder and gentler than Reagan's. I think ultimately that was Bush's undoing with the American people. They voted him in on the premise that if Reagan wanted him, they wanted him. As soon as Bush demonstrated that he was no Reagan, his political strength began to weaken.

Bush fought the Gulf War on what you could call Boy Scout principles: we said that we would get Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait; now we've done that, so it's time to go home. Reagan would have understood intuitively that war changes the nature of the argument.

Think of Lincoln going into the Civil War. Before the war, he said very clearly that he wasn't going to go after slavery in the Southern states; the argument was about slavery in the territories. But once the war was under way, the nature of the debate changed.

Bush made a serious mistake, with the consequence that we face a continuing threat from Iraq, although he deserves a lot of credit for conducting the Gulf War brilliantly to the degree that it occurred. Reagan would not

have felt constrained. He would have taken it all the way.

Mitch Pearlstein: You referred to three pillars of American politics—liberty, equality, and virtue—and Reagan’s relative lack of interest in equality. How did he frame this issue?

Dinesh D’Souza: Let me tell you an anecdote that is not in my book. When Reagan came back from the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, he seemed very happy. His aides asked what he had liked best, and, of all things, he said it was the opening parade: the French delegation with the French flag and French uniforms, the Moroccan delegation looking very Moroccan, and then the Americans. It struck Reagan as he watched that Americans are from all over the world. It was very moving to him. Reagan emphasized equality not as a mathematical principle, but as the openness of the American idea.

In his speech about the city on the hill, he said that we want a big fort to keep out the enemies, but lots of doors and windows so the country remains a magnet for people who want to come here for freedom and opportunity. He had an inclusive vision of America. That is what we are missing today. We are living in good times, but what’s missing is a moral vision that tells you what it means to be an American. Even people who didn’t agree with Reagan felt that emotional and moral tug and respected him for articulating that vision.

Tim Utter: In Hillary Clinton’s book, *It Takes a Village*, she went on and on about the demise of our public

schools. Conspicuously missing was anything about the virtue of private schools, which is interesting because she had sent her daughter to a private school. What was President Reagan’s view of education vouchers?

Dinesh D’Souza: The issue was not at the top of the agenda in the 1980s, but let me try to address the question in the broader context of Reagan’s management style and his approach to issues.

When I worked in the Reagan White House, my view of Reagan was that he was a nice man—someone you would like to have as a neighbor or an uncle—but not an effective leader, because he didn’t seem to be familiar with the wide sphere of activities that a president presides over. On a lot of small issues and some not so small issues, Reagan did very little. Some social conservatives are critical of him for articulating their beliefs on abortion and school prayer but not doing much on those fronts. He essentially left affirmative action untouched.

A debate erupted in the Reagan administration between Attorney General Ed Meese, who basically wanted a color-blind policy, and William Brock, the labor secretary, who wanted to continue affirmative action. What did Reagan do? He did nothing. He left that debate unadjudicated for eight years. He kept his eye on the long ball of history.

There are issues that he thought were fundamentally important. He cared about inflation, the Soviet threat, taxes, Central America. On these issues, he was actively involved. His intuitive insight—though he never

put it this way—seemed to be that if you become an expert on forty-seven areas of public policy, you can't change the world in forty-seven ways. You can change the world in two or three ways. Clinton has a thorough familiarity with a lot of public policy detail but has left a much smaller footprint on the American landscape.

I have been asking myself what a Reaganite agenda for the year 2000 would look like. There are candidates like Steve Forbes who are in some ways trying to duplicate the Reagan success. Not the first time around, when Forbes ran pretty much just on the tax issue, but now by uniting the various coalitions in the Republican Party. But Forbes is making a mistake in trying to duplicate Reagan's success by sounding like Reagan or repeating his themes. Reagan was a tremendous innovator; he transformed the Republican Party in dramatic ways. The Republican Party was the party of balanced budgets and fiscal responsibility, and he made it the party of tax cuts and economic growth.

A Reagan agenda for 2000 might focus on three issues: a flat tax, parental choice in education, and color blindness. That's it. The virtue of Reagan's political strategy was always simplicity. The Contract with America is a very imaginative document, but it is forty-seven different ideas. Reagan's strategy was two or three ideas. If you have two or three ideas, you don't even have to pine for another Ronald Reagan. You simply say this: These are the three things the Republican Party stands for. If you agree with us, you vote Republican. If you don't agree,

vote Democrat.

Bill Wenmark: I wouldn't defend our current president, but you said that he had done nothing to reduce the budget deficit. What about the 1993 tax increase and its effect on the deficit? I felt that I helped more than necessary to reduce the deficit.

Dinesh D'Souza: It is true that the 1993 tax bill advanced by Clinton raised taxes, but not dramatically. If you look at the Clinton administration's own forecasts, you will see that the Clinton team anticipated a very modest reduction in the deficit. This tells you that the balanced budget has come as a total surprise. They were projecting "\$200 billion deficits as far as the eye can see," in David Stockman's famous phrase. My point is that the eye could not see all that far and that these larger forces have had a much greater impact.

A final word about Ronald Reagan. My book is not a hagiography in that it is not simply his accomplishments. I mentioned earlier that when I joined the administration my view was that he was a lovely man, but a flawed leader. In some ways, my book now argues the opposite. As a man, Reagan was not without flaws. He spoke about family values, and he had a wonderful relationship with Nancy Reagan, but a somewhat troubled relationship with his kids. He was an irregular churchgoer. He had very few friends, a fact that is not widely known and is camouflaged by his outward gregariousness. Nancy Reagan says he built a kind of wall around himself, which even she

had trouble scaling.

President Bush has a lovely family that always comes home for holidays. He is a regular churchgoer. He has countless friends. He's a real Boy Scout, and yet as a public leader he was less effective than Reagan.

Michael Reagan, Ronald Reagan's adopted son with Jane Wyman, told me that when his dad was governor of California, he, Michael, was washing cars in a California parking lot. His friends would ask what he was doing washing cars when his father was governor.

Ronald Reagan's view was that his kids should find their own path in life. He treated them fairly, but without the kind of intense partiality that you expect in a parent. Michael Reagan went on to become a successful talk show host in California. During the 1980s, people would call up and complain about budget cuts and blame Reagan for cutting this and cutting that.

"Don't talk to me about Reaganomics," Michael Reagan would say. "I've been living under it all my life." n