
How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life

Peter Robinson

Peter Robinson, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and host of Uncommon Knowledge on PBS, went to work as a speechwriter in the Reagan White House at the ripe old age of twenty-five. At an American Experiment luncheon last fall, he reminisced about his boss, almost nine months before President Reagan's death on June 5.

Mitch mentioned that I was a speechwriter. I should tell you that I had a special task when speechwriting in office. I was the “well” man. When a speech was completed and sent to me, here and there I would insert, “Well.”

On February 6, 2001, my nine-year-old daughter happened to wander into the room during a television segment marking Ronald Reagan's ninetieth birthday. She watched for a moment and then she turned to me and asked, “Dad, is that the president you worked for?” What answer could I give her? I wanted my daughter to recognize that the world that she inhabited was freer and more prosperous because of that old, old man on television. But I also wanted her to grasp my personal debt

to him, to understand all that he taught me—how to work and how to take it easy, how to think and how to use words, how to be a good husband, how to approach life itself. I needed to tell my children how Ronald Reagan changed my life.

In the spring of 1982, I found myself living in a cottage in Oxford, England. I studied at Oxford and then I remained there after I completed my studies for an additional year. I can't reconstruct what I could have possibly been thinking, but the idea was to write a novel. At the end of that year, I had one-half of a novel so bad that even I couldn't stand to read it and no money at all. I wrote letters to everybody I could think of who might be able to give me a lead on a job.

William F. Buckley, Jr. wrote back. That was extremely gracious of him, because I scarcely knew him. He had just been kind enough to encourage me in student journalism at college, and he suggested that I get in touch with his son, Christopher. Christopher Buckley was then writing speeches for vice president George H. W. Bush. I flew from England to Washington, presented myself to Christopher Buckley, and thought that if everything went just beautifully, just perfectly, Christopher might be able to land me a job writing speeches for a member of Congress. Or—for some reason, I had a fixation on this—possibly even writing speeches for the postmaster general. Instead, Christopher Buckley announced that he intended to leave the job in a couple of weeks, his replacement had just fallen through, and he couldn't see any particular reason why I shouldn't replace him myself. Bear in mind that Christopher went on to write seven comic novels. It's hard not to believe that he sensed some amusing possibilities the moment I walked through his door. While I was in the building, though, Christopher wanted me to go downstairs to talk to Tony Dolan, who was then the president's chief speechwriter. While I was talking to Dolan, the telephone rang and it was the campaign of Lew Lehrman, who was running for governor against Mario Cuomo up in New York. Lehrman's campaign wanted a speechwriter. Tony hung up. The next day, he and Christopher Buckley conspired. Christopher told the vice president's

staff that he had found the perfect replacement for himself—me—but that they had better move quickly because Lehrman's campaign wanted to hire me, while Tony told Lehrman's campaign that he had found the perfect speechwriter for them—me—but that they had better move quickly because the vice president's people wanted to hire me. And these were not whoppers, exactly, because as soon as they told them, they became true. Each organization, the Bush staff and the Lehrman campaign, assuming that if the other wanted me, I must be pretty good, both made me offers. Incidentally, they never checked references, they never even asked for a writing sample, which was lucky for me because I had never written a speech in my life. I had high and noble motives, reasoning as follows, that Lew Lehrman might lose the campaign—indeed, he did; it was a squeaker, but he did lose—and that if I went to work for him, I could be out of a job the day after the election. But if I went to work for Bush, I'd at least be safe until November 1984, for two years. So in the interest of job security, I went to work for Vice President Bush. And so it was that at the age of twenty-five, without having written a speech in my life, I ended up in the Reagan White House, which brings me to my qualifications for writing *How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life*. Serving for six years as a speechwriter—eighteen months with the vice president and for four and a half years for the president—gave me the opportunity to conduct a close, continuous study of one of

the largest and most magnificent Americans in the history of the republic. Landing in the White House on a fluke made me conscious that I'd better do just that.

How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life is organized into ten chapters, each of which describes a lesson that I learned from President Reagan. I thought that what I would do this afternoon is discuss a couple of these lessons in some detail with you.

The first lesson is: words matter. In the spring of 1987, I was assigned to write a speech that the president was to deliver at the Berlin Wall. I was told by the senior staff only this: the president would stand near the Reichstag in front of the Berlin Wall, with the Brandenburg Gate rising behind him. He ought to speak for between thirty and forty minutes. He'd have an audience of about 10,000 people and, given the setting, he should talk about foreign policy. That was the total guidance that I received. I flew to Berlin to research the speech. My first stop was at the office of the ranking American diplomat in Berlin, who was full of ideas about what Ronald Reagan should not say. He was nervous about having the president, this crude American cowboy, upsetting his diplomatic applegart and he said, in particular, don't make a big deal out of the Berlin Wall. West Berliners were the most left leaning of all West Germans, they'd gotten used to the wall, just don't have him mention it. That's what I was told. After leaving the diplomat, I was given a ride in a United States Army helicopter over Berlin. Today, there's noth-

ing left of the Berlin Wall but a line on the road that shows where it once stood. In those days, from inside West Berlin, it looked intimidating enough—tall slabs of concrete ringing the city. From the air, it looked incomparably worse because it was possible to see what was on the eastern side—barbed wire, guard towers, dog runs. For some reason, what impressed me most deeply were the long swaths of very carefully raked gravel. The American guide explained that that was there to keep East German guards honest. If any one of those young men was ever tempted to let a member of his family or a girlfriend escape to the West, he'd have to explain the footprints in the gravel to his superior officer. That evening, I broke away from the American party to have dinner with a group of West Berliners. No Americans there but me. We chatted for a few moments, then I told them what I had been told and asked them very simply, "Is it true? Have you gotten used to that wall?" Silence. And I thought at first that I'd committed just the gaffe that the diplomat was afraid the president would commit, I'd been an ugly American. Then one man raised his hand and pointed and said, "My sister lives just a few kilometers in that direction, but I haven't seen her in more than twenty years. How do you think we could get used to that?" They went around the room telling stories. One man described walking to work each morning. He would pass a guard tower. At the top of the tower, a kid with a rifle over his shoulder would peer down at him with binoculars. The

man said, "We share the same history, we speak the same language, but one of us is a zookeeper and the other is an animal and I've never been able to decide which was which." Our hostess, a lovely woman, perhaps in her mid fifties at the time, became angry. She made a fist of one hand and slapped it into the palm of another and said, "If this man, Gorbachev, is serious with his talk of glasnost and perestroika, he can show it by coming here and getting rid of this wall." When I heard that I knew, because I was there to listen with the ears of Ronald Reagan, to see with the eyes of Ronald Reagan. The moment she made that remark, I knew that the president would have responded to it, to the power and to the decency. I returned to Washington. I adapted her remark, writing that line, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." I built the speech around it, had a meeting with the president. At first, he said something about liking the speech. The more of Ronald Reagan you got, the better for writing for him, so I explained that I had learned during my trip to Berlin that they'd be able to hear the speech on the other side of the wall by radio. And, indeed, if weather conditions were just right, they'd be able to hear it as far east as Moscow. I asked: "Mr. President, is there anything in particular you'd like to say to people on the eastern, Communist side of the wall?" The president thought for a moment—I can still see this so vividly in my mind and he said, "No, just that line about tearing down the wall. That's what I want to say to them, that that wall has to come

down." Now, fool that I am, I was a little disappointed. I wanted something fresh from him and all he did was comment on something that was already in the speech. It turned out it was a good thing he did. The speech then went out to staffing for the next three weeks. The State Department and the National Security Council thought that it was naïve, it would raise false expectations, it was crude, it would indeed make him look like an American cowboy. We had a lot of fights over speeches in the Reagan years, but most of them died down. This one didn't. The fighting continued. If anything, it increased in intensity. And with just a few days to go before the president was to deliver this speech, his deputy chief of staff, Ken Duberstein, felt he had no choice but to take the matter back to the president. They were in Italy and Duberstein sat the president down in the garden of a Venetian palazzo, went over all the objections to the speech, showed him that central passage, and had the president take a moment to reread it. I was not present at that meeting, but Ken told me what took place. He and the president talked about it for a moment or two, and then Ken said that Ronald Reagan broke into a grin and said, "Well, Ken, let's just read that line again." A few days later, the very morning of the day that the president was to deliver the speech, the State Department submitted yet another alternate draft. They were still at it on the very morning of the speech. Yet in the limousine on the way to the Berlin Wall, the president told Duberstein he was determined to deliver the

controversial line. Reagan smiled and he leaned across and slapped Duberstein on the knee. “The boys at State are going to kill me,” he said, “but it’s the right thing to do.” That’s Ronald Reagan. It is true that I wrote that speech, but it’s only superficially true. For whom did I write it? Ronald Reagan. Who made it possible? Who overrode the objections of the entire foreign policy apparatus to deliver it? Ronald Reagan. I’m always at pains when I tell that story to make clear that that speech is his. Words mattered to him.

The second lesson: individuals matter. “When history is taught at all nowadays,” George F. Will wrote not long ago, “often, it is taught as the unfolding of inevitabilities, of vast impersonal forces. The role of contingency in history is disparaged, so students are inoculated against the notion that history can be turned in its course by individuals.” Working for Ronald Reagan amounted to a graduate course in just the opposite: the ability of a single man to change the entire world. To serve in the Reagan White House was to see the president overrule his opponents in Congress, in the press, and even quite often on his own senior staff; to enact his economic agenda, cutting taxes, rolling back regulations, controlling the growth of spending; to launch the longest peacetime expansion in American history.

Cabinet Room, 1981. The president is meeting his economic advisory board. On the table is a deal that chief of staff Jim Baker has structured with Tip O’Neill, the Speaker of the House,

and Bob Dole, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. If the president would delay or roll back his tax cuts, Congress will promise to cut spending. They go around the room and several people advise the president to take the deal. His jaw is set. His neck begins to turn red—this is an indication for those who knew him that the President is not happy.

Arthur Burns, a highly distinguished economist, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, at that time our ambassador to West Germany, was at the table. He was such an eminent economist that he would fly back for these meetings. He really laid into the president and argued strongly that the president ought to take this deal. After Arthur Burns finished speaking, Ronald Reagan said, “You know, I really enjoy these meetings of the economic advisory board. They break up my routine and give me an opportunity to discuss my ideas with some eminent thinkers, but it would be a much better use of my time if we discussed something I might actually do.” Then he leaned across to Arthur Burns—this is as best as I can work it out from the sources, an exact quotation—and said, “Arthur, never mention a tax increase in my presence again.”

Another meeting in 1981. This takes place in the Roosevelt Room. The president has just scrapped Jimmy Carter’s negotiating strategy regarding intermediate range nuclear forces. This gets complicated, but what you need to bear in mind is that, under Carter’s strategy, the Soviets would have been permitted to retain in place many of

the intermediate range nuclear missiles they had already placed in Eastern Europe targeting Western Europe. Ronald Reagan replaced that with what was called the zero option, under which, if the Soviets removed and destroyed, dismantled, all of their intermediate range nuclear forces, we would agree never to build any. Zero on their side, zero on our side. Now, notice that in return for our not spending anything in the first place, he was asking them to scrap their investment of tens of millions of rubles. Paul Nitze, the arms negotiator, found this exasperating and said, "Mr. President, that proposal is so radical, I don't even know how to explain it to my Soviet counterparts." Once again, this is a direct quotation: "Well, Paul," Ronald Reagan said, "you just tell the Soviets you work for one tough son of a bitch."

Spring of 1983. The president is having lunch in the Cabinet Room with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He's told the Joint Chiefs that he will discuss anything that they would like. One member of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Watkins, chief of naval operations, mentions that he has never felt comfortable with the American nuclear doctrine of mutual assured destruction, or MAD, which held that although we could do nothing to stop incoming nuclear missiles, if the Soviets struck us, we would promise to strike them back. Two continents wiped out instead of one. Admiral Watkins said that that had always troubled him and he would be very happy if we could find a way to defend the American people rather than promise to avenge

them. What the Joint Chiefs did not know was that ever since he had been governor of California, Ronald Reagan had been receiving briefings from Edward Teller, a brilliant physicist and director of Lawrence Livermore Labs. Teller was one of the first scientists at the upper reaches of the scientific establishment to grasp that some form of strategic defense might become feasible as technology continued to develop. So this was in Ronald Reagan's mind. Admiral Watkins's comment rivets Reagan's attention. He goes around the table and asks the chiefs about some sort of program regarding strategic defense. And although they don't know the importance of what they're being asked, each of them agrees that, in principle, he has nothing against a strategic defense. Six weeks later, Ronald Reagan goes on the air to announce the Strategic Defense Initiative. From lunch in the Cabinet Room to turning nuclear policy upside down takes just six weeks. And because the President knew that this initiative was likely to elicit opposition within his own cabinet, even the secretary of state and the secretary of defense were not given drafts of this speech until forty-eight hours before Ronald Reagan delivered it. In Reykjavik at the summit meeting between Gorbachev and Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev offered Ronald Reagan dramatic reductions in nuclear weapons of all kinds. All he asks in return is that the president surrender the Strategic Defense Initiative. The critical meeting comes, Gorbachev lays this down on the table one more time, makes it clear that he and

his negotiating team are willing to remain in Reykjavik an additional day to work out the details, Ronald Reagan simply stands up and says, "This meeting is over."

In 1992, a year after the Soviet Union has dissolved, I attended a dinner at which former secretary of state Henry Kissinger described the trip he had just made to Russia. Speaking to high officials in the government and military, Kissinger had asked each to name the critical factor in the demise of the Soviet Union. Almost without exception, Kissinger said, they named SDI. The Soviets may have overestimated our technical capacity, Kissinger now says. On the other hand, we didn't have to build a complete version of SDI to make their calculations difficult. If the Soviets no longer knew how many missiles would get through, then they might have had to launch hundreds more to have a chance of success. Hundreds more? The Soviets could never have afforded hundreds more. SDI had thus threatened to deprive the Soviet Union of its capacity to deliver an overwhelming nuclear strike and without that capacity, the U.S.S.R. would have looked a lot less like a superpower and a lot more like one more poor, backward, Third-World country. You can see, says Henry Kissinger, why SDI had them so rattled.

"The great man or woman in history," the philosopher Sidney Cook argues in his book *The Hero in History*, "is someone of whom we can say, on the basis of available evidence, that if they had not lived when they did or acted as they did, the history of their

countries and of the world would have been profoundly different. Their presence, in other words, must have made a substantial difference with respect to some event or movement deemed important by those who attribute historical greatness to them." Does Ronald Reagan fit the description? He does indeed. No one else would have done what he did, and what he did changed the world. But you needn't take my word for it. He was an authentic person and a great person, Mikhail Gorbachev said in a recent interview: "If someone else had been in his place, I don't know if what happened would have happened." There you have his principal adversary all but admitting it. Ronald Reagan was a hero in history.

How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life concludes with lessons that I learned from the president after he left office. In the spring of 1989, I visited him in his new office in Los Angeles. I was having trouble at that point. I missed the White House terribly. I missed the feeling of being in the center of things, I missed the intensity. I missed my friends. And I thought if a little speechwriter like me missed the White House, the president himself must miss it even more. The president and I engaged in a moment or two of small talk and then Ronald Reagan said, "Did you see the newspaper this morning?" I said yes, because over breakfast that morning, I had read the *Los Angeles Times*. One headline: "Star Wars Oversold, Cheney Says." Another headline: "Saw Risk of Impeachment." These were both on the front

page. This was a bad day for Ronald Reagan's legacy, the place of him and his administration in history. The former president said, "I just don't understand it." So I said, "Mr. President, neither do I." And then Ronald Reagan said, "How can a judge determine the outcome of a sporting event?" All the wheels in my mind started turning as fast as they could and as he continued, I finally realized that he wasn't talking about his administration or his place in history. He was talking about the America's Cup. That was the year that the American entry had been a catamaran and a judge back in New York had ruled that the catamaran had violated the America's Cup deed of covenant and had awarded the cup instead to New Zealand. Ronald Reagan said to me, "Well, at least it wasn't a judge I appointed." For eight years, he had been the most powerful man in the world and then left office and set it all down and gone right back to being as ordinary an American as a former president could be. When Ronald Reagan picked up the newspaper, he turned to the sports page.

In the mid 1990s, John Barletta, a Secret Service agent assigned to Rancho de Ciela, the Reagan ranch in the mountains above Santa Barbara, kept a very close eye on the former president. First, Reagan began having trouble controlling the beautiful Arabian horse that the president of Mexico had given him, for many years his favorite mount. So, they had to bring in a much gentler mount. Then the former president had trouble controlling even this gentler

mount. Then he started having trouble—this man who had, at this stage of his life, had been riding for almost six decades—he began having trouble with the tack. Even saddling, cinching up, Barletta said, putting the bridle on, things like that, he was having trouble with. He would stop and stare at the bridle and you could tell he was trying to figure out which way it went. Finally, the day came when Barletta decided that, since he was charged with the president's physical safety, he could no longer permit Ronald Reagan to mount up. He told this to Mrs. Reagan. She thought about it and decided that if she broke the news to her husband, he would think that she was a little over-protective, so she asked Barletta to break the news to him instead. "It was after lunch or dinner that I went down from the Secret Service post that sat on an overlook above the ranch house. I said, 'Mr. President, you know all the problems that we had on the trail today. I really don't think, I really don't think you should ride anymore.' I was breaking up. And he got up, put his hands on my shoulders and said, 'It's OK, John, I know.' "

I conclude the book in a way that may strike you as strange—and I'm still working on this still in my own mind—with a quotation from a book on astronomy.

"A few bright stars in the night sky. To orient the telescope I aimed it at them, marveling as always at their colors. Orange Aldebaran, yellow Capella, blue Vega. As often happens, I was struck by the fact that all these things, unimaginably big or small or

hot or cold as they may be, really are out there.”

Timothy Farris, *Seeing in the Dark*.

Yes, I know, it seems odd to close with a quotation about stars. Yet how often do we find ourselves thinking about historic figures the same way we think about celestial bodies, as distant and impersonal and somehow unreal. Ronald Reagan was born in a town that still stands. He liked to tell jokes and watch old movies. If you visit his ranch, you can see his favorite riding boots standing in his tiny closet, the leather still supple. For that matter, you can see his burro, Wendy, a stubborn, comical looking creature that he seems to have bought simply because he liked the idea of having her around. Wendy is old now, her coat, once gray, has turned almost entirely white and she waddles across her hillside corral slowly and stiffly, but she'll still let you approach to scratch her behind her enormous, floppy ears. She's used to being scratched behind the ears. That's where Ronald Reagan scratched her. The fortieth president of the United States has now departed the narrow confines of the present to take his place in the annals of the nation. From this hour on, we need to remind ourselves that he was no mere force or idea or abstraction. We can aspire to his virtues because he was one of us. Ronald Reagan was a man.

Following his speech, Peter Robinson took questions from his American Experiment audience.

Mitch Pearlstein: *Time* magazine has a cover story this week about the new book, *The Reagan Letters*, which follows on the publication about two years ago now, a year and a half ago, of all the radio commentaries he used to write, the newspaper columns and speeches he used to write. Part of this revisionism is that people are now recognizing that he wrote all the time. He read all the time. Could you speak about Ronald Reagan as the writer, the reader, the intellectual?

Peter Robinson: Chapter five of *How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life* is entitled “At the Big Desk in the Master Bedroom.” Where does that come from? It comes from Ronald Reagan's son, Mike, who told me that his clearest, most vivid memory of his father dates from before he even became governor. They lived in a house in Pacific Palisades. Mike would come home from school, drop his books, run into the big master bedroom, and say hello to his dad. And his dad would be seated at the desk, reading or writing. And Mike said, “I don't mean sometimes, I mean all the time.” From the time that Reagan entered public life, all the way back in the 1940s, he entered public life two ways in that decade. He becomes president of the Screen Actors Guild, serving six one-year terms, and he becomes politically active. In 1948, he heads an organization calling Hollywood for Truman and, as a liberal Democrat—that was what he called himself—campaigns for Harry Truman. From the mid 1940s until 1966, when he became governor, he wrote all his material himself. From

1966 until he becomes president in January of 1981, he continued to write most of his material himself. So, here you have a span of time of some three and a half decades in which Reagan wrote thousands of speeches, hundreds of newspaper columns, and radio talks. He read constantly to work material into these speeches. He thought through his positions in these speeches.

I talked this over with a couple of historians and as best as we could work it out, Ronald Reagan did more writing before becoming chief executive than any president since Woodrow Wilson. Clark Clifford, the former secretary of state, called Ronald Reagan an amiable dunce. From the standpoint of history, who was the dunce?

I knew he wrote a great many letters as president, but I didn't know how many. It turns out that, as president, he wrote some 5,000 letters, almost all of them in his own hand, almost all of them to ordinary Americans. There are very few to secretaries of state and defense. The bulk of these letters are to ordinary Americans. This is telling. Reagan works out his positions before becoming president by giving speeches. His thinking begins to shift, he becomes a conservative during his period of six years as spokesman for General Electric, when he goes to every General Electric plant in the country and speaks to the ordinary workers. So, he's working out his political positions—this is in the '50s and '60s—not by talking things over in faculty lounges, but before an audience of ordinary Americans. What we now know is that after he became president, the way

he handled the isolation that the office imposes on anyone who holds it is that he continued to keep up these conversations with ordinary Americans. He would take ten or a dozen letters that were selected for him as representative of the letters that came in that week to Camp David with him each weekend, always read them, and almost always answered each one. So what you see is some hothead in Moline or Kansas City writes a letter attacking his economic policy. A week later, he goes to his mailbox and there's a letter from the president of the United States, "Dear Joe, let me explain myself," and he does. So he forms his political positions in conversations with ordinary Americans and he keeps up that conversation throughout the presidency.

I gave you a short version of chapter ten, which is on the way that Ronald Reagan understood that individuals mattered. I pondered quite how he could come to the feeling, the belief that he, one individual, could stand up to the Soviet Union and change history. He clearly did believe that. Without any arrogance at all, he felt he could stand up to them and change history. Where did he get this idea? If you consider the main intellectual occurrences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, you've got Darwin telling us that we are all predetermined by our genes, you've got Freud telling us that we're all predetermined by our sexual impulses, and then you've got Karl Marx saying that we're merely bit actors in a kind of cosmic unfolding of history, which itself is unfolding according to predetermined rules. In other words,

these main intellectual occurrences all stressed just what George Will talked about, these vast impersonal forces. How does Reagan get the idea that an individual does matter? I pondered that a great deal and I came to a conclusion. He was born in 1911 in northern Illinois only a few generations removed from the people who busted up the sod with their own teams and mules. Lincoln's family moved to Illinois in 1830, but it wasn't until four or five decades later that northern Illinois took on a fully settled character. Sod houses are replaced with frame houses, brick structures, the railroad tracks are laid. So Ronald Reagan, like so many people here in Minnesota, is very close to that frontier experience, the epoch in American history. Individuals don't matter? You try telling that to somebody whose grandparents came out here and busted up the sod. He was also very close to the Civil War as a living memory. I discovered this when I wrote a speech. He had been talking to some kids and I had a speech about patriotism. In the middle, was a quotation from Lincoln. Reagan stopped and ad libbed and said that when he was a boy in northern Illinois, he had very vivid memories of parades in which the Civil War veterans marched. Now, think about that. He actually saw the people who fought those battles. So Reagan is right there. There are still people around who remember those old engagements.

Joe Weis: I would think that your book would be a great movie plot and I'd recommend if you do get the oppor-

tunity, that you have Martin Sheen play the role of the president.

Peter Robinson: Oh, Joe, that's a brilliant idea! There's a section in the book entitled "The UnSheen," in which I'm describing what it's like to be around Ronald Reagan. What I mean by the unSheen is as follows. If you watch the television program *The West Wing*, you get a very good idea for what life in the White House is actually like. It's intense, it's charged with electricity. People are running to important meetings or making important phone calls. But on the television program, when the door to the Oval Office opens, the intensity peaks. Martin Sheen plays the president as if he's agonized, soul searching, there's always one moment in every episode when he gets in a shouting match. Now, it stands to reason, if everybody working for the president is intense, you can figure that the president is the most intense person of all. In the Reagan White House, you'd open the door to the Oval Office and the intensity would not peak. Reagan was serene, gentle. In fact, the door to the Oval Office had a fisheye lens in it and Reagan's personal assistant had to keep peeking through that thing, because people—I did it myself—would be in there with the president and somehow the fire would be crackling away and he had such a gentle manner, you'd just sort of forget you were with the chief executive of the United States of America. He certainly conveyed no impression that he was busy or had anything else to do. So the personal

assistant would have to walk in there to get people the hell out so he could stay on schedule.

Mitch Pearlstein: What have you learned over the last month or two since the book has been out and you've been talking to other folks and running around the country?

Peter Robinson: Kids are interested in Reagan, I'm happy to say. I wrote it with my own children in mind, as that premise made earlier. In a chapter on being at ease with human nature, I talk about his uses of humor. He did use humor to set an audience at ease, to make a point, but he also loved it for its own sake. And watching him, I recognized that, to him, laughter was a kind of profession of faith. He profoundly believed that there was more good in life than bad and that somehow, through the long march of history, God was in charge and things were going to come out all right. He made jokes not only when he was using humor in public, but he made jokes that could have no possible political application whatsoever. I can't think of a single meeting that I had with Ronald Reagan, including meetings in which we just lined up for our picture to be taken, in which he didn't quip with at least one joke. I'll leave you with one of my favorites. When I was still on the vice president's staff and it was a Thursday, the day he had lunch with Ronald Reagan. I had a speech meeting with Bush right after he had lunch with the president. I could not get him to settle down until he told me the joke that the president had just

told him. Now, it's politically incorrect, but that proves a point. Reagan loved a good joke whether it was correct or not. The pope has heart trouble, and like a lot of people who need a heart replacement, he had trouble coming up with a donor. So he calls in the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Casaroli—part of the humor here is that Bush and Reagan both knew Cardinal Casaroli—and then the joke takes off and runs as follows. Casaroli says, "Your-a Holiness, I'm-a gonna tell you what we're-a gonna do." The next morning, *L'Osservatore Romano* publishes the news that the pope needs a heart transplant immediately. A hundred thousand Italians jam St. Peter's Square, looking up at the papal balcony, shouting, "Papa, Papa, take-a my heart! Papa, take-a my heart!" The Pope says to Casaroli, "Very good, but how do I choose one person from among so many?" And Casaroli says, "Holiness, I'm-a gonna tell you once again what we're-a gonna do." And he picks up a pillow and starts to plump it. A moment later, the pope walks out holding a feather. Casaroli walks out next. Casaroli tells the crowd that they need just one moment. He explains to the Holy Father that he's going to drop a feather and the person the feather lands on is going to have the high honor of giving to the Holy Father his heart. The pope releases the feather. And as the feather falls over St. Peter's Square, a hundred thousand Italians begin shouting, "Papa, Papa take-a my heart *Pfft! Pfft!*" (blowing in the air as if trying to keep a feather from landing on him) take-a my heart!" ■