

# Remembering Reagan

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A few days before the 1988 election between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, I attended a rally on the University of California campus where I was enrolled in my last year of college. Although it was reasonably clear by then that Bush was going to win the election, we still held out hope that Dukakis could somehow make a surprise comeback and bring about the end of the Reagan era. One of the speakers at that rally was the mayor of Santa Cruz, the town where the university was located. The mayor, who was probably about 15-20 years older than most of the students in the room, began his comments by saying, "You think you're tired of Ronald Reagan?" After pausing for dramatic effect, he continued, "Well, Ronald Reagan signed my diploma from UC Santa Cruz."

The students burst into applause as the mayor, a well-liked progressive, summarized the feeling of exhaustion and frustration, which a generation of progressive Californians felt towards President Reagan. Between 1967, the year I was born, and 1989, a few months before I graduated from college, Ronald Reagan was a constant presence in California. He had been our governor, our president or a candidate for president for a generation or more. Reagan's extraordinary ability to put Hollywood polish on the politics of the Western version of the far right made him a uniquely Californian political presence; and by 1988 we were anxious to be rid of him.

Today, 23 years after leaving office, almost seven years after his death and 100 years after his birth, Reagan is a legitimate American icon. While all of the elements of his legacy, including winning the Cold War, bringing about morning in America and restoring America to its greatness, can, and indeed must, be challenged, it remains true that in death, Reagan is above reproach.

Much of what Democrats and progressives hate most about the Republican Party, including the class warfare that has shifted enormous amounts of wealth to the rich while economic conditions have gotten worse for most Americans, radical social conservatism and enormous defense budgets that both create massive debt problems and ensure an aggressive and often disastrous US foreign policy, have their origins in the Reagan years. However, Democrats understand that Reagan's enduring popularity means that Reagan can never be criticized and that the rather obvious point that the roots of many of today's problems lie in the Reagan presidency cannot be mentioned, without incurring significant political consequences.

Reagan, of course, is viewed by most Republicans as the father of the modern conservative Republican movement and something of a patron saint of the right wing.

Ironically, if Reagan were around today he would probably be too liberal for many of the Tea Partiers and other radicals who claim to admire him so much.

On the centennial of Reagan's birth, it is clear that one of the most astounding things about Reagan was not his presidency, but his political skills. The scandals that dogged the last two years of Reagan's time in office, the massive deficits that Reaganomics occurred, his complete failure to even recognize issues such as the AIDS epidemic, as well as the lasting impacts of his spending cuts on the social fabric of the US, are as much part of his legacy as his role in bringing the Cold War. The importance of Reagan's presidency cannot be denied, but all of the many problems and scandals of his presidency should not be overlooked. In this context, his political skills are even more impressive.

Many presidents have been polarizing, and even hated. Two of the three presidents who preceded Reagan, Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson, were despised by many Americans, but this feeling was almost more personal than ideological. Johnson and Nixon were centrists who pursued the same unpopular war in Vietnam, but who were both, by today's standards, progressive, or as Michele Bachmann might say, "socialistic" on domestic policies. Americans who hated Johnson and Nixon hated them because of their Vietnam policy and their rather unappealing personalities.

The rancor that people like me felt towards Reagan was ideological, not personal. In this way, Reagan was more like George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who, like Reagan, are polarizing largely because of their ideology. Despite his polarizing political views, Reagan was able to get reelected in a landslide in 1984 and enjoy a reputation that only got better as time went by. Bush, by contrast, was narrowly reelected in 2004, and while Obama may get reelected in 2012, it will not be in a landslide.

This reflects the enormous political skills Reagan had. He was an extraordinary communicator who managed to support reactionary policies while still seeming friendly and personable most of the time. Bush and Obama have not been able to strike this balance. Bush always seemed angry and vengeful when parrying with the media or political opponents, while Obama's air of concern and thoughtfulness has always been strangely off-putting to many Americans.

Today, to a great extent, we live in Reagan's America. The lack of funds to reinvest in our infrastructure, the holes in the social safety net, weakened labor movement, and still-growing gaps between the rich and everybody else are all evidence of this, but rarely is the connection made between these outcomes, which we have grown to accept as normal and the budget cuts, tax policies and attitudes towards the public sector and Reagan. Even in death, Reagan remains largely Teflon.