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Ronald Reagan – a tough politician with a sense of humour

Ronald Reagan – twardy polityk z poczuciem humoru

Abstract

Ronald Reagan was one of the few presidents of the United States to enjoy immense popularity not only among his countrymen but also around the world. He was renowned for his remarkable sense of humour, optimism, and self – deprecation. Naturally, these qualities did not prevent him from being a seasoned politician. On the contrary, not only did he rule with a firm hand for two terms but also introduced many changes to American politics, and it is this area of his life that the first part of this article addresses. The second part is a collection of anecdotes, gaffes, and distortions of facts that accompanied him since birth. The third part contains curiosities, such as the president’s famous quotes, a map of the world seen through his eyes, and handwritten notes that were part of his speeches.

Key words: *WOC radio station, Jane Wyman, military service, assassination, Jimmy Carter, Mondale, Mrs. Mitterrand, microphone check, Reaganomics, Soviet Union, quotes, a map, one-liners.*

Abstrakt

Ronald Reagan jako jeden z niewielu prezydentów Stanów Zjednoczonych cieszył się ogromną popularnością nie tylko wśród rodaków, ale również na całym świecie. Zasłynął ogromnym poczuciem humoru, optymizmem oraz dystansem do samego siebie. Oczywiście, te przymioty nie przeszkadzały mu w byciu wytrawnym politykiem. Wręcz odwrotnie, nie tylko rządził twardą ręką przez dwie kadencje, ale również wprowadził wiele zmian w amerykańskiej polityce i właśnie tej sfery jego życia dotyczy pierwsza część artykułu. Druga część to zbiór anegdot, gaf i przeinaczeń, które towarzyszyły mu już momentu narodzin. W trzeciej części znajdują się ciekawostki, na przykład słynne cytaty prezydenta, mapa świata widziana jego oczami oraz odręcznie napisane notatki, które były częścią składową jego wystąpień.

Słowa kluczowe: *stacja radiowa WOC, Jane Wyman, służba wojskowa, zamach, Jimmy Carter, Mondale, Pani Mitterrand, próba mikrofonu, Reaganomika, Związek Radziecki, cytaty, mapa, fiszki.*

Introduction

Ronald W. Reagan – after Dwight Eisenhower – was the second president in post – war United States history to serve two terms. On January 20, 1981, on the steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., Reagan was sworn in as the 40th President of the United States. He was then 70 years old, the oldest president to assume this office in US history. In his inaugural address, he devoted considerable attention to economic problems. He blamed the economic crisis that America was facing on the policies of previous administrations, which consisted of increasing the tax burden while simultaneously increasing public spending. He also criticized the decades – long process of expanding state functions¹. (Bankowicz, p. 24) Ronald Reagan, in his speech, claimed that government was not the solution but the problem. The nation he was to represent had a government – not the other way round and this factor gave a special place among other countries in the world. It had no power except that had been granted to it by the people and this was the finest moment to check and reverse the growth of government which showed signs of having extended beyond the limits of the governed. The president further stated that America could be raised to greatness not by government, but by the concerted work of all its citizens. He also said that he would strive to make America an example of freedom once again and a beacon of hope for those who fought for freedom around the world.

¹ All excerpts selected and translated by the author of this article.

Finally, he announced a decisive opposition to the enemies of freedom reminding that peace was the highest aspiration of the American people. To that end, they would negotiate, make sacrifices, but would not yield – not then, not ever. Their restraint should never be misunderstood and reluctance to engage in conflict should not be misjudged as a lack of will. If any action was needed to preserve national security, they would act. He claimed that his nation would retain sufficient force to prevail if necessary. And knowing that, it would have the greatest chance of not using that force. (*Kadencja Prezydenta Reagana...*, p. 2-5) in this speech, Reagan embodied his entire political philosophy, which he later rigorously implemented. He presented himself as a political conservative who believed in traditional values and wanted to serve America's greatness, and an economic liberal who believed that the economy was the domain of individuals and their free initiative, and that the state's role was solely to ensure the conditions for effective management.

Reagan pursued his electoral platform with incredible dynamism. All of America, became the focus of Reagan's 'conservative revolution'. In the United States, the term 'conservative' denotes fundamental opposition to government intervention in the economy and social affairs. It assumes the independence of individual states and municipalities, and support for the social activities of private organizations, unions, and foundations. In these sectors, American conservatism meant reducing government responsibilities and spending, lowering taxes, balancing the state budget, allowing market forces to operate freely and ceasing to regulate them, reducing bureaucracy, and promoting free trade.

He introduced an economic program called Reaganomics, which focused primarily on supply and was intended to address the economic problems of the 1970s. All of this was intended to lead to economic growth. The short – term decline in revenues was to be offset by savings in social programs, and in the long term by increased revenues from the growing national economy. It was significant that the programs most severely reduced were those benefiting the poorest. Food stamps were eliminated, and support for single mothers was significantly reduced. Meanwhile, social programs serving the middle class, such as pensions and health insurance, remained largely untouched. This polarized American society between the poor and the wealthy. However, over time, it became clear that the Reagan administration had achieved success in combating inflation and unemployment. The inflation rate fell from 12.5 percent in 1980 to 4.5 percent in 1988. The unemployment rate fell from 7 percent to 5.4 percent during the same period. 18 million new jobs were created. His election program also included social and moral issues, the so – called Social Issues, such as the rebirth of the American family and the values associated with it, as well as a return to the 'good old morality', namely the promotion of common

morning prayer in schools, actions against pornography, homosexuality, abortion and crime on the streets of cities.

When it comes to international relations, the term 'conservative' denotes an interventionist foreign policy, a 'politics of force', and this term also encompasses the power of the state. Specifically, this manifested itself in the fight against communism, the Soviet Union, which he referred to as the 'Evil Empire', and terrorism, in the reluctance to pursue a policy of détente, as well as in increasing defense spending². (Lösche, 1999, p. 478-479, 486-488) He elevated anti-communism to the status of a fundamental policy principle of his administration. In the first years of Reagan's presidency, US – Soviet relations were at a critical stage, with tensions reaching levels not seen since the Cold War. After imposing martial law in Poland on December 13, 1981, to suppress the Solidarity movement, Reagan imposed economic sanctions on both Poland and the USSR, believing that this move was inspired by Moscow. At the same time, he decided to provide Solidarity with substantial political and financial aid, correctly predicting that this Polish movement would cause many problems for communism.

The American president also aided anti – communist guerrilla groups around the world. He supported the Afghan mujahideen, the Nicaraguan contras, and anti – communist insurgents in Angola. On October 25, 1983, on Reagan's orders, American troops landed on the small Caribbean island of Grenada, removing the Marxist regime there, supported by Cuba and other communist countries. Americans were astonished. It had been a long time since a US president had taken such radical steps.

During the second term, in April 1986, Reagan once again surprised the world with his decisiveness. He then decided to bomb Tripoli. This was intended as retaliation for Libya's support for international terrorism. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi only narrowly escaped with his life. In the second half of the 1980s, US – Soviet relations improved significantly. Mikhail Gorbachev took power in the Kremlin, quickly realizing that the USSR was unable to keep pace with the armament buildup initiated by Reagan. Consequently, disarmament talks were held. Several meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev took place on this occasion. Reagan predicted the imminent collapse of communism. He called on the Soviet leader to tear down the Berlin Wall, saying that by doing so he would forestall the inevitable and thus make a glorious mark on history. (Bankowicz, p. 26-27)

Besides the fact that Reagan pursued a tough policy, none of his predecessors as President of the United States made as many gaffes, distortions of facts, and misquotes as he did. His administration was embroiled in numerous scandals. Reagan's cabinet members, close to him, often left office discredited. Despite this, the American public spared the president and did not hold him

² All excerpts selected and translated by the author of this article.

responsible for his missteps and gaffes. Reagan emerged unscathed from all such troubles. He enjoyed considerable popularity throughout both terms. In his book, Longin Pastusiak (2015, p. 205)³ quotes the famous description of Reagan as the Teflon president. Just as scrambled eggs do not stick in a good Teflon pan, Reagan was immune to the consequences of the various mistakes he frequently made. He also notes that if the ceiling were to suddenly collapse, Reagan, in his dark suit, would emerge without a speck of dust on his shoulder.

The second part of the article presents a collection of selected gaffes, anecdotes, distortions of facts and famous quotes that aims to show the other side of Ronald Reagan, often omitted in traditional narratives.

Anecdotes

Ronald Reagan is remembered for his warmth, charisma, and ability to inspire others. As an extrovert, he easily connected with people, listened attentively to their needs, and demonstrated understanding of their fears and anxieties. He was an exceptionally intelligent and brilliant person with a remarkable sense of humour. Moreover, he maintained a profound sense of self – respect, as evidenced by the very first words of his autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me*, which begins with an intimate scene set in the small town of Tampico, Illinois, on February 6, 1901, that is his birthday. He claims that his face was blue from crying, his butt was red from being spanked, and his father was pale as he said in a trembling voice, “For such a small piece of fat Dutchman, he makes an awful lot of noise” and Reagan continues that these were the first opinions of him, and that his parents “didn’t change those opinions for the rest of their lives”. (Reagan, Hubler, 1965, p. 7) Reagan was given the nickname Dutch at birth, and he used it well into his adult life. From his alcoholic father, Ronald claimed to have inherited a sense of humour, a typically American sense of humour – simple, sharp, and often described in controversial language.

Starting at the age of 15, he took a summer job as a lifeguard in Lowell Park. Rumours circulated that he usually saved pretty girls who were not drowning. He vehemently denied these allegations, claiming he did not wet his swimming trunks unless necessary. Reagan once earned 10 dollars diving into the Rock River to retrieve a man’s false teeth after he had lost them while swimming.

In college, Reagan did not put much effort into his studies. However, one professor once said that even though Ronald never opened a book, he wrote good exam papers. Based on these words, it can be stated that he was a talented, creative and imaginative young man.

After graduating from college, he went to work for the WOC radio station in Davenport, Iowa. Peter MacArthur, the station’s director, had just hired a man

³ All excerpts selected and translated by the author of this article.

as a sports commentator. Reagan tried to convince him that he was better and could cover a game he had not seen but only knew the score, in such a way that listeners would think it was a live broadcast. MacArthur did not believe him and put him to the test. Reagan did indeed demonstrate remarkable abilities in this field. He later transferred to the News Radio 1040 WHO (The Voice of Iowa) station in Des Moines. To save money, the station did not send its reporter to Cubs team baseball games in Chicago. Instead, it had its own telegraph operator, who transmitted basic information about what was happening on the field via Morse code to the Des Moines studio. Based on this, Reagan reported the game, seemingly 'live'. These reports were less accurate, but much more vivid and engaging, because Reagan had to visualize the event and create various stories to make listeners believe they were listening to a live broadcast from the stadium. When telegraph communication was suddenly interrupted while he was 'on air,' he was forced to fantasize for seven minutes, unaware of what was actually happening on the field. However, he continued his 'broadcast' until communication was restored. (Pastusiak, 2015, pp. 206–207) These were the apprenticeship years before Reagan finally achieved skills as Master of the Media. In 1937, he moved to Hollywood, where, at the age of 30, he began his film and television career. Equally important to his political development was his becoming an active union activist, becoming president of the Screen Actors' Union in 1947. In this role, he learned how to negotiate and developed a sense of when to be tough and when to compromise. (Lösche, 1999, p. 481)

Another anecdote about Reagan's first wife, actress Jane Wyman, dates from this time. In February 1948, after eight years of marriage, she filed for divorce, accusing her husband of extreme psychological cruelty. She confided to a friend that she was fed up with having someone in her home who read the newspaper every morning and only pondered who was far left or far right, who was liberal, and who was conservative. Shortly after the divorce, at a party, Gregory Peck approached Jane Wyman and expressed his regret, but she replied that she could no longer participate in that damned film, *King's Row* which defined her life. The film itself tells the story of a group of friends growing up in a small, seemingly idyllic town in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. It explores dark secrets, forbidden desires, and issues like abuse, unhappy marriages, bigotry, and hypocrisy hidden beneath the facade of provincial life, as well as the characters' struggles with love, friendship, and tragedy. It is worth noting that one of the characters is played by none other than Ronald Reagan. Wyman already hated what his White House aides later complained about his fondness for listening to his own voice. If anyone had asked Reagan the time, they would have learned in detail how he had once taken apart his grandfather's pocket watch and put it back together. He loved to answer questions with dictums. Unfortunately, he even resorted to this behaviour in conversations with foreign statesmen, much to their dismay. Moreover, Jane Wyman, a stubborn and ambitious woman, refused to heed Ronnie's advice, that is they would be a perfect couple if she did

him just one favour – stop thinking. Reagan's second wife, Nancy Davis, complied with this wish.

Another one is related to his military service. While filming the war movie *Desperate Journey*, Ronald Reagan received his draft card. As an officer, he was responsible for drill in his unit. Being ambitious, he took his role seriously and drilled the soldiers quite intensively, but only for a while. One day, a group of soldiers came to him and declared they had had enough of drill and would no longer train. They made him aware of one significant fact: in the army, he was an officer and they were ordinary privates, but in life outside the barracks, he was an actor and they were film producers and directors. After the war, the tables would turn, and his acting career would depend on them. The drill at Fort Rochester ended faster than it really started. (Pastusiak, 2015, pp. 207–210)

When Reagan was governor of California, Kim Marcus, a reporter for the Skyline College Press in San Bruno, California, while covering Reagan's speech at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco on January 18, 1978, wrote that his face was covered in thick makeup the colour of browned pancakes. Reagan, outraged by the article, wrote a letter to the editor of the university newspaper explaining: "I have not worn makeup when appearing in films or on television. Please tell Ms. Marcus that I was not wearing makeup during my speech at the Commonwealth Club (I am allergic to makeup). In the interest of fairness, please also tell her that she has a standing invitation to perform a white – glove test on my face the next time she reports on my speech". (von Damm, 1980, p. 27)

in August 1942, Reagan published an article in Photoplay entitled *How to Make Yourself Important*. He wrote about himself and his preferences: "I like swimming, hiking, and sleeping (eight hours a day). I'm pretty good at every sport except tennis, which I simply don't like. My favourite food is steak with onion rings and strawberry shortcake. I play bridge well, I collect pistols, I always carry a penny for luck, and I always knock on wood when I make a wish. I have a car, a cabriolet, which I drive myself. I'm interested in politics and political issues. My favourite books are *Turnabout* by Theorne Smith, *Babbitt*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and books by Pearl Buck, Herbert Wells, Damon Runyon, and Erich Remarque. I'm a Bing Crosby fan. My favourite actress is my wife. I like things green, and my favourite flower is lilac. I love my wife, my child, and my home. I recently built a new house".

The next anecdote is related to advertising. Reagan entered into an agreement with General Electric to host a television program called *General Electric Theater*. Under the terms, he was to visit the company's factories for 16 weeks a year. One of his tasks was to speak at company meetings to improve the atmosphere among employees and strengthen employee identification with the company. (Lösche, 1999, p. 482) The other was to effectively promote various General Electric products. From this period comes an anecdote in which one man

told another that he had bought a submarine. His interlocutor was astonished by such an original purchase, asking why. The explanation was simple: Reagan advertised General Electric submarines so well that he decided to have one. (Pastusiak, 2015, p. 210–211)

There was a time when the American press wrote about Reagan's intellectual shortcomings. They claimed he did not read books, did not know history, and mostly watched television. They said he chose books for his library based on the colour of their covers. The following joke was told: "A fire broke out in Reagan's personal library. Both books were destroyed". However, the president himself admitted that he started his morning newspaper reading at the White House with comics.

President Ronald Reagan is identified with the Wild West. He enjoyed appearing in public in cowboy attire. Horseback riding was one of the Reagans' favourite pastimes. President felt proud when compared to a cowboy and saw nothing sarcastic in it. He often said he was proud of his spurs and that there was no better place for a man than in the saddle.

During his first term, the president was surrounded by two circles of advisors simultaneously. The inner circle consisted of the so-called Three, namely James Baker as Chief of Staff, Edwin Meese as a key advisor and official, and Michael Deaver, responsible for public relations. The second circle consisted of those who reported to the Three but did not have direct access to the president. In 1980, Meese established seven committees within the cabinet to tie its members to the White House and avoid the Carter administration's mistake of violent conflicts among the cabinet members. (Lösche, 1999, p. 484) However, all his advisors unanimously agreed that jokes and humour suited Reagan's personality and made him more approachable and likable. Landon Parvin, in addition to writing speeches for the president, also created many jokes for him. There were also some that arose spontaneously, prompted by a specific event. For example, once, while cutting the ribbon at a White House ceremony and waving scissors in the air, the president said, "I practiced cutting the ribbon on Ed Meese's tie all morning today".

In August 1984, Reagan's closest advisor, Michael Deaver, publicly revealed that the president would doze off in his chair during Cabinet meetings. The joke was that one day a sign would be hung on the chair reading, "Ronald Reagan slept in this chair". When the press began to write about it, Reagan said, "I have left orders to be awakened at any time in case of national emergency – even if I'm in a Cabinet meeting".

On March 30, 1981, Reagan was shot with a .22 caliber pistol. The assassin used fragmentation projectiles, but – fortunately for Reagan – they failed this time. Nancy, who was in the White House at the time, was immediately notified of the attack and rushed to the hospital. Seeing his wife's distress, Reagan smiled at her and said, "Honey! I forgot to duck". Reagan was conscious, and as he was

wheeled into the operating room, he joked, "I hope you're all Republicans", to which Dr. Joseph Giordano, a liberal Democrat, replied, "Today, Mr. President, we're all Republicans". The surgery lasted over three hours. The President tolerated it well and recovered remarkably quickly. Doctors removed a bullet from his lung that was about an inch from his heart. After the surgery, Reagan sent a card to his aides at the White House: "Winston Churchill said: There is nothing so exhilarating as the feeling of being shot for nothing". Two hours later, he sent another card: "If Hollywood had cared for me as much as here, I would have stayed there forever". When doctors praised him for being a disciplined patient, he replied, "I have to be. My father – in – law is a doctor". After hearing that three of his wounded colleagues were recovering, Reagan replied, "That's wonderful. Get four bedpans ready, and we'll have a friendly get-together".

Reagan was a pleasant person to deal with. He exuded optimism and a cheerful disposition. No one saw him irritated or reprimanding his colleagues. While his predecessor, Carter, had made it clear to his guest that he was in a hurry and wanted to end the conversation as quickly as possible in order to get back to work, Reagan gave the impression that he enjoyed the conversation and cared nothing more. These conversations, however, were very specific. Statesmen visiting the White House would discreetly complain that the president engaged them in stories, anecdotes, and pleasant conversations. Then, when the scheduled time for the conversation was running out, the president apologized and asked his interlocutors to discuss the substantive details with the secretary of state and the president's close associates. American historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. said of Reagan: "He's like a nice old uncle who comes and all the children are happy to have him. He sits with them and tells them stories. They like him, but they don't take him too seriously". (Pastusiak, 2015, pp. 215–223, 228)

This opinion is confirmed by the words of John Sears, Reagan's 1976 campaign manager, who said of his candidate: "He is not a stupid man. He appreciates the nuances of what is proposed to him. It's just that he's not the originator of ideas...He's not a conceptualizer. He's a borrower and endorser". (Smith, Gebbie, 1984, p. 55) The mentioned authors comment on that: "There is absolutely no question that Reagan has longstanding views which are really his: antagonism to Soviet Russia, faith in capitalism, hostility to 'bleeding hearts' and 'freeloaders'... But the specifics of Reagan's policies are more likely to emerge from his advisors than from the President himself. He has no fixed moorings in any particular program, just a bias in favour of right – wing solution".

The European press, American journalists, political advisors, and President Carter underestimated Reagan, who proved to be a brilliant opponent during the election campaign and a seasoned politician. The prejudiced belief that the Republican candidate was merely a mediocre actor obscured the fact that Ronald Reagan, thanks to his biography and political career, was perfectly prepared for the presidency. This was also evident in the way the conservative Republican managed to transform his electoral victory (he received 50.7 percent

of the vote, compared to 41 percent for Carter) into a political mandate. (Lösche, 1999, p. 480)

During the campaign, Reagan relied on the slogan of limiting government incompetence. It was: “Get the government off our backs”. He continued: “The government in Washington has accumulated so much fat that if you processed all the fat into soap, you could wash the whole world with it”. Referring to various rumours and leaks, Reagan ironically remarked: “Washington is the only city where sound travels faster than light”. He also declared that the economy was in a depression. Jimmy Carter argued with him, saying it was in a recession. Reagan commented on this dispute over the definition with the following explanation: “If the president wants it, I’ll give him the definition. Recession is when your neighbour loses his job. Depression is when you lose yours. And recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his”. (Pastusiak, 2015, pp. 216-218)

After the election, on November 17, 1980, President Carter invited the president-elect to the Oval Office to brief him on a number of extremely important matters that the incoming president should be aware of. In his memoirs, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, Carter recalls this meeting, stating that Reagan listened to these affairs but did not comment on them or asked no questions. They concerned, for example, the command of nuclear forces in the event of an attack on the United States. He also suggested that Reagan, before assuming office, familiarize himself with the procedures to be followed in the event of a national emergency. He also presented him with top – secret agreements with other countries. Some of these pieces of information were very complex and detailed, and Carter wondered how Reagan could remember it all, but the president – elect claimed to recollect everything very well. The meeting between the two Presidents in the Oval Office lasted almost an hour. “It was a pleasant visit, although I wasn’t sure I had accomplished anything”. (Carter, 1995, pp. 577–578)

Just before Reagan took office, behind-the-scenes negotiations were underway to free American hostages held in Tehran (in November 1979, Iranian students kidnapped 66 US citizens in Tehran, including US embassy staff, in what became known as the Iran hostage crisis. It lasted 444 days and ended with the hostages’ release on January 20, 1981). The outgoing president, Carter, called president – elect Reagan to update him on the current state of negotiations. While Carter spoke with Reagan on the phone, his closest aides were present in the Oval Office. When Carter hung up, Hamilton Jordan asked for Reagan’s reaction. Carter replied, “I briefed him on the hostage situation. He listened the whole time, and when I finished, he asked: What hostages are you talking about?”. (Pastusiak, 2015–219)

During the 1984 presidential campaign, a televised debate took place between the 56 – year – old Democratic Party candidate Walter F. Mondale

and the 74 – year – old Ronald Reagan. Unfortunately for him, Mondale asked Reagan if, at 74, he considered himself too old to hold the most powerful office on the planet. Reagan, seeking re – election, calmly replied: “I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience”. The intelligent, ironic, and simultaneously cynical response was enthusiastically received by voters. (Pastusiak, 2015, p. 226) And that was the moment when the election campaign for the bland Democratic candidate, who had at his side a woman running for vice president, ended in a complete victory for Reagan. The skills a modern president in the second half of the 20th century must have possessed to achieve success include: 1) the ability to distinguish important from unimportant matters and to establish priorities; one must know what he or she wants and have a sense of what is achievable; 2) the talent for compromise and thus building consensus, which means acting pragmatically; 3) building coalitions and gaining majorities within one’s own administration, in Congress, and among the public, which means persuading people, winning them over while simultaneously conveying his or her message and implementing his or her policies. Ronald Reagan acquired these very skills during his long political career. (Lösche, 1999, p. 480–481)

Gaffes and distortions of facts

Ronald Reagan made numerous gaffes and distortions of facts during his presidency. A few of these are outlined below. He often confused and forgot the names of the celebrities he hosted. In 1985, at an official White House reception for the British heir to the throne and his wife, Prince Charles and Princess Diana, Reagan toasted the health of Prince Charles and Princess David; he called Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko an ambassador and addressed Senator Edward Kennedy as ‘Mr. Massachusetts’; mentioned the Hungarian living in Budapest, and inventor of the famous cube, the engineer Erno Rubik, as the example of American free enterprise. At press conferences, he sometimes called journalists by name and gave them the floor, even though they were not even present. He also frequently confused the names of the countries and capitals he visited. While in Brazil, he proposed a toast to Bolivia. Instead of Libya, he said Lebanon. In 1986, Reagan launched an airstrike against Libya as a form of punishment for the country accused of terrorism. The operation was carried out in response to an earlier attack on a Berlin discotheque in which American soldiers were killed. The airstrikes killed 63 people, including members of Muammar Qaddafi’s family. (Lösche, 1999, p. 489)

During the visit of the French president and his wife, Reagan hosted an official reception. As he and Mrs. Mitterrand were led into the hall by the chief of protocol to take their assigned seats at the table, Mrs. Mitterrand suddenly

stopped. She calmly turned her head toward Reagan and said something in French, which he did not understand. The chief of protocol, in turn, motioned for the guests to follow him. Reagan also gestured to move forward, but she spoke something in French again. Finally, an interpreter approached and translated that President Reagan was standing on the dress of the First Lady of France, which prevented her from moving.

Before the official talks began, Presidents François Mitterrand and Ronald Reagan posed for photographers in the Oval Office at the White House. Looking around the presidential office, Mitterrand asked Reagan if he always had a lot of patience for the press, to which he replied that he had developed it over the years. He explained to his guest that he had become comfortable with cameras while working in Hollywood. He compared filmmaking to being in a war, with long hours of boredom punctuated by a few minutes of fear. Of course, it is important to mention that Mitterrand fought on the front lines during the WW II and was a member of the Resistance.

Reagan often presented film scenes as his own experiences or historical events. For example, during the presentation of the Presidential Medal of Honour, he spoke about an airman who received the award posthumously. He distinguished himself by staying with a wounded, unable – to – jump young gunner instead of parachuting from a bomber. According to Reagan, the pilot told the gunner that they would somehow make it down together. Of course, no historian was familiar with this event. Only later did it occur to him that a similar scene had been shown in a war film. Meanwhile, Reagan vividly recounted to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir how, in 1945, he filmed Jewish prisoners of concentration camps in Germany. Naturally, once again he brought his film impressions to life.

Except for the final years of his presidency, he was wary of the idea of détente in East-West relations. He also projected an apocalyptic vision of what a compromise with the USSR over the Middle East might lead to. He believed that West Berlin, like many other places in the world, could disappear very quickly. He cited Lenin's strategic plan, which allegedly stated that he would occupy Eastern Europe, organize Asian hordes, and advance on Latin America. Meanwhile, the United States, as the last bastion of capitalism, would be surrounded and fall into Lenin's outstretched hands like an overripe fruit. In support of this claim, the Documentation and Research Department of the United States Library of Congress was repeatedly asked to locate the words Reagan attributed to Lenin. Unfortunately, the search yielded nothing. It is believed that the quote may come from a movie script, which is further proof that Reagan quite often confused movie scenes with historical reality.

When it came to radio appearances, Reagan most often read his lines or used a prompter when appearing on television or at large gatherings. Sometimes he had his lines memorized, which, as a former actor, was no problem.

As a veteran radio host, he enjoyed using the medium and delivered his broadcasts quite regularly, usually on Saturdays. Often, the technicians would ask the President for a microphone check. Then Reagan would speak from the heart, from himself, and it was then that his notorious gaffes occurred.

For example, in November 1982, during his second microphone check, he said: "My fellow Americans, I've told you many times about the economic problems and opportunities facing our nation. I'm ready to tell you: 'We're in a hell of a mess.' Then he asked, 'We're not on air yet? Are we?'" Of course, he was already on air.

In August 1984, he said: "My fellow Americans. I'm pleased to announce that I've signed legislation outlawing the Soviet Union. We begin bombing in five minutes" - joking during a microphone check before his Saturday radio broadcast.

Reagan liked to ridicule social programs with stories he presented as true, even though they had nothing to do with reality. For example, in March 1982, he told his audience a story about a young man who emerged from a grocery store holding an orange in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other. He paid for the orange with food stamps and used his cash change to buy the vodka. "That's what's wrong with the food stamp program". (Pastusiak, 2015, pp. 213–220, 223–228)

Conclusion

Ronald Reagan embodied the American myth of the great career of the ordinary man. Everything he achieved in life was due to his hard work and entrepreneurship. This undoubtedly lay at the root of his popularity. He never portrayed himself as any greatness. Americans forgave him when he confused countries or misspelled the names of foreign politicians, because by doing so, he best demonstrated being one of them. He remained an ordinary American and a president for ordinary Americans. On the one hand, Ronald Reagan was a tough and effective politician who did not avoid complex and indisputable decisions. On the other hand, his sense of humour, self-distance and quick wit were significant assets easing tensions and building bridges of understanding. Reagan's terms left a distinct mark on American politics. He made a great contribution to the country's social and political reality. Reagan went down in history as one of the most conservative presidents, and at the same time as one who restored strength and dignity to America.

Appendix

In the last part of the article, as a curiosity, additional famous quotes by Ronald Reagan, a caricature of the world map seen through his eyes, and stacks of

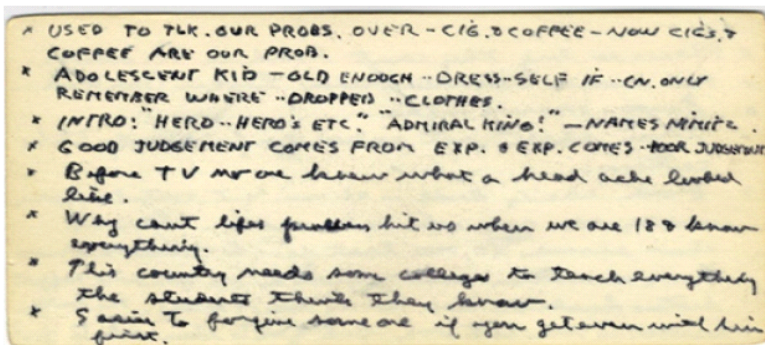
3x5 index cards filled with one-liners, which he kept in his desk to append to speeches are presented.

Additional famous quotes:

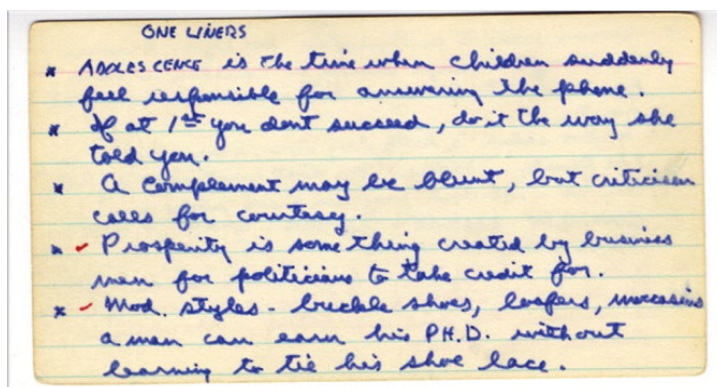
1. "It's true hard work never killed anybody, but I figure, why take the chance?"
2. "I am not worried about the deficit. It is big enough to take care of itself".
3. "Politics is supposed to be the second – oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first".
4. "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'".
5. "Thomas Jefferson once said, 'We should never judge a president by his age, only by his works.' And ever since he told me that, I stopped worrying".
6. "I have only one thing to say to the tax increasers: Go ahead, make my day". – threatening to veto tax – increase legislation after getting his record tax cut to date in 1981. He ultimately followed with two tax increases, though declined to go any further.
7. "Well, I learned a lot... I went down to (Latin America) to find out from them and (learn) their views. You'd be surprised. They're all individual countries".
8. "I don't know. I've never played a governor". – asked by a reporter in 1966 what kind of governor he would be.
9. "Politics is not a bad profession. If you succeed, there are many rewards. If you disgrace yourself, you can always write a book".
10. "You can tell a lot about a fella's character by whether he picks out all of one colour or just grabs a handful". – explaining why he liked to have a jar of jelly beans on hand for important meetings.
11. "We are trying to get unemployment to go up, and I think we're going to succeed".
12. "As a matter of fact, Nancy never had any interest in politics or anything else when we got married".

13. "I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born".
14. "One way to make sure crime doesn't pay would be to let the government run it".
15. "Before I refuse to take your questions, I have an opening statement".
16. "If you're explaining, you're losing".
17. "I have wondered at times what the Ten Commandments would have looked like if Moses had run them through the U.S. Congress".
18. "Government is like a baby. An alimentary canal with a big appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other".
19. "I'm afraid I can't use a mule. I have several hundred up on Capitol Hill". – refusing a gift of a mule.
20. "How are you, Mr. Mayor? I'm glad to meet you. How are things in your city?" – greeting Samuel Pierce, his secretary of Housing and Urban Development, during a White House reception for mayors.
21. "My name is Ronald Reagan. What's yours?" – introducing himself after delivering a prep school commencement address. The individual responded, "I'm your son, Mike", to which Reagan replied, "Oh, I didn't recognize you".
22. "One picture is worth 1,000 denials".
23. "I never drink coffee at lunch. I find it keeps me awake for the afternoon".
24. "A hippie is someone who looks like Tarzan, walks like Jane and smells like Cheetah".
25. "How can a president not be an actor?" – when asked: "How could an actor become president?".
26. "Approximately 80 percent of our air pollution stems from hydrocarbons released by vegetation, so let's not go overboard in setting and enforcing tough emission standards from man – made sources".
27. "Trees cause more pollution than automobiles".
28. "All the waste in a year from a nuclear power plant can be stored under a desk".
29. "What we have found in this country, and maybe we're more aware of it now, is one problem that we've had, even in the best of times, and that is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice".
30. "There is absolutely no circumstance whatever under which I would accept that spot. Even if they tied and gagged me, I would find a way to signal by

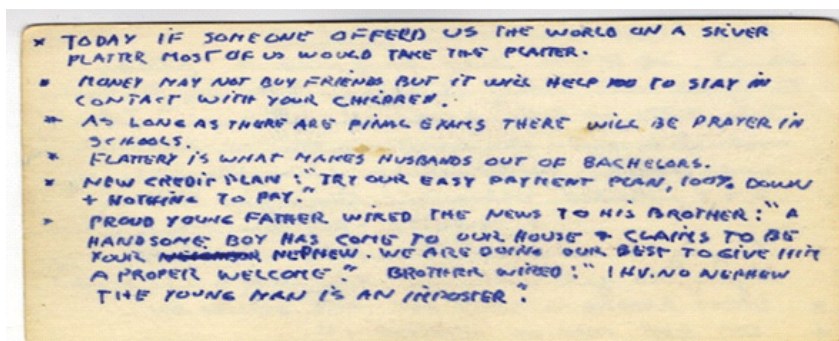
- “Elderly motorist going down a one – way street. The cop asked, ‘Do you know where’s you’re going?’ ‘No,’ the old fellow admitted, ‘but I must be late because everyone else is coming back!’”
- “Congress’ biggest job: How to get money from the taxpayer without disturbing the voter”.
- “Three ways to get something done: Do it yourself; hire someone to do it; or forbid your kids to do it”.
- “Costrophobia: The fear of rising prices”.
- “Today’s kids are studying in History what we studied in Current Events”.



- “Used to talk our problems over cigarettes and coffee. Now cigarettes and coffee ARE our problems”.
- “An adolescent kid: Old enough to dress himself if he can only remember where he dropped his clothes”.
- “Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from poor judgment”.
- “Before TV no one knew what a head ache looked like”.
- “Why can’t life’s problems hit us when we are 18 and know everything?”
- “This country needs some colleges to teach everything the students think they know”.
- “Easier to forgive someone if you get even with them first”.

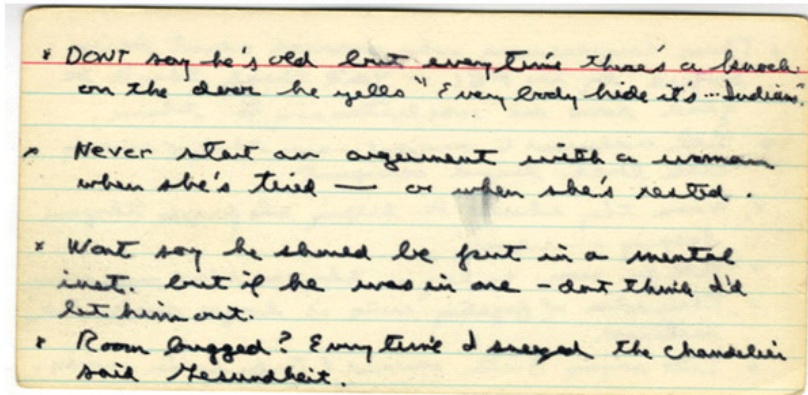


- “Adolescence is the time when children suddenly feel responsible for answering the phone”.
- “If at first you don’t succeed, do it the way she told you”.
- “A compliment may be blunt, but criticism calls for courtesy”.
- “Prosperity is something created by businessmen for politicians to take credit for”.
- “Modern styles – buckle shoes, loafers, moccasins. A man can earn his Ph.D. without learning to tie his shoelace”.

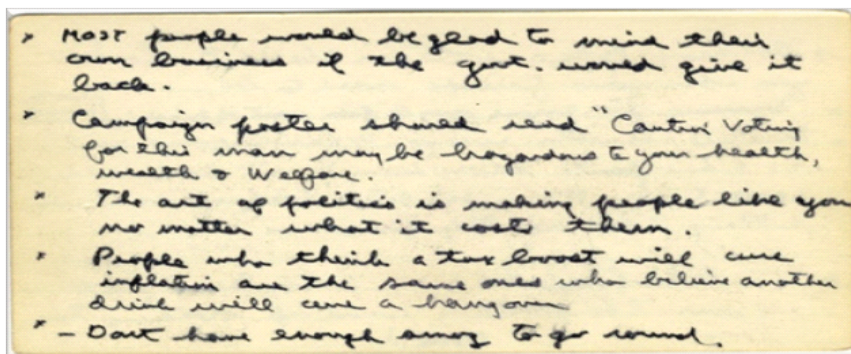


- “Today if someone offered us the world on a silver platter, most of us would take the platter”.
- “Money may not buy friends, but it will help you to stay in contact with your children”.
- “As long as there are final exams there will be prayer in schools”.
- “Flattery is what makes husbands out of bachelors”.
- “New credit plan: ‘Try our easy payment plan – 100% down + nothing to pay.’”

- “Proud young father wired the news to his brother: ‘A handsome boy has come to our house and claims to be your nephew. We are doing our best to give him a proper welcome. Brother wired: ‘I have no nephew. The young man is an imposter.’”



- “Don’t say he’s old, but every time there’s a knock on the door he yells ‘Everybody hide, it’s Indians!’”
- “Never start an argument with a woman when she’s tired – or when she’s rested”
- “I won’t say he should be put in a mental institution, but if he was in one, don’t think I’d let him out”.
- “Room bugged? Every time I sneezed the chandelier said, ‘Gesundheit!’”



- “Most people would be glad to mind their own business if the government would give it back”.
- “Campaign poster should read: ‘Caution: Voting for this man may be hazardous to your health, wealth & welfare.’”
- “The art of politics is making people like you, no matter what it costs them”.

- “People who think a tax boost will cure inflation are the same ones who believe another drink will cure a hangover”. (CBS News, 2025)

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