

Why was Ronald Reagan so popular for so long?

Edmund Morris, in *Dutch*, his biography of Ronald Reagan, quotes James Q. Wilson's description of 'Reagan Country'¹: a place made of 'suburban, homogeneous communities of detached houses' inhabited by men and women who are 'middle-class but not highly paid [and] inclined toward a "fundamentalist Protestant individualism"', who share 'a strong, socially reinforced commitment to property', whose politics are 'slightly populist, exclusive of lobbyists and deal makers, conservative but non-partisan'. Their principal cultural rival would be the East Coast and Bay Area liberal intelligentsia. To understand Ronald Reagan's long-lasting popularity, it is important to consider why and how these people made their voices increasingly heard from the mid-sixties until now. To them, he was the "right man in the right place at the right time"; it is therefore necessary to look at his background and rise in politics to analyse this relationship. Another interesting point is how he managed to survive several crises while in office and the mechanisms behind the 'Teflon presidency'. Then, there is the influence of foreign policy and the end of the Cold War. Finally, the aftermath of the 'Reagan Revolution' in America must be taken into account, as well as its echoes in the current administration.

The first half of the 1960s corresponded to the peak in power and influence of the Democratic Party and the liberal current in America culminating with the Civil Rights

¹ *Dutch*, pp.359-360.

Act in the summer of 1964 and the Great Society legislation the next year². Long suppressed minorities were now starting to become assertive: black people via the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), students with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), women through the National Organisation for Women (NOW), or gays in various organisations (which would coalesce into the Gay Liberation Front in 1969)³. The Vietnam War, however, which started in earnest in 1965 with Operation Rolling Thunder (bombing raids against North Vietnam)⁴, triggered an implosion of the left, with the rise of the New Left and a division of American society between the opponents and the partisans of the war. Because of the frustration caused by the slow pace of the reforms, initially peaceful movements spawned violent splinter groups in the second half of the Sixties: the 'Weathermen' out of the SDS, Black Power and the Black Panthers out of the NAACP, and various 'Liberation Fronts' ranging from militant to violent. Race riots broke out all across the United States: Harlem, New York in July 1964 (one killed), Watts, Los Angeles in August 1965 (34 killed), Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan in July 1967 (about 65 killed). From 1965 to 1967, 130 people were killed during riots, with damages amounting to 715 million dollars⁵.

University campuses across the country were rocked by protests against the war, and increasingly against capitalism and the establishment: 'we call for justice, freedom and socialism', claimed SDS leader Mark Rudd in 1968 at Columbia University⁶. 1968 was a catastrophic year for the ruling Democratic Party and the moderate left, beginning with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the assassination of Martin Luther King in April and of

² *America, a Narrative History* pp.1363-1366.

³ Same pp.1384-1400.

⁴ *Twentieth-Century America* pp.183-186.

⁵ *America since 1945*, pp.112-113.

⁶ *Twentieth-Century America*, p.187.

Robert Kennedy in June, the fiasco of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago (because of Mayor Daley's heavy-handed repression of protests)⁷. The reactionary backlash started with the narrow victory of Republican Richard Nixon in the 1968 presidential election; Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, had almost been the Republican nominee in the primaries⁸.

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in 1911; his father was an alcoholic shoe salesman and his mother was a devout born-again Christian. He graduated from Eureka College, not exactly "Ivy League", worked as a sport broadcaster and then started a movie career in Hollywood in 1937⁹. Although a potential star at some point, he was more successful in the Screen Actors Guild, of which he became president¹⁰. Initially he was a New Dealer, and a supporter of Truman; but around 1950 he became increasingly right wing and virulently anti-Communist, campaigning for Eisenhower, Nixon and even supporting an extremist like Barry Goldwater in 1964. Tall, handsome, radiating folksy charm, Ronald Reagan relied on simple, radical ideas and his natural charisma, which appealed to the 'Silent Majority', the lower-middle class outraged by the chaos spreading throughout America and who resented their money being taxed by an ever-increasing welfare state. In 1966, he was elected governor of California, then at the forefront of the rebellion in universities, surrounding himself with a team of advisers who would follow him to the White House, such as Ed Meese or Lyn Nofziger, and implementing a

⁷ *America since 1945*, pp.141-143.

⁸ *Dutch*, p.358.

⁹ *Dutch*, ch.2 'A rainbow on the roof'.

¹⁰ *America, a Narrative History*, pp.1433-1434.

program of harsh repression of protests, tax cuts and decrease in welfare spending, with obvious political success, since he was re-elected in 1970¹¹ (although not in 1974).

The years following 1968 saw the rise of the Right in America, and the further fragmentation of the Left. Nixon, however, could not resist the impetus of the Great Society and the Democrat majority in Congress: between 1968 and 1974, the number of people on food stamps increased from 2.4 millions to 13.5 millions; federal bureaucracies expanded and so did the federal budget deficit¹². He started the disengagement from Indochina, but the bombing raids on Cambodia in 1970 fuelled domestic student protests, brutally repressed (with students killed in Kent State University, Ohio)¹³, and it would be several more years before the last U.S. soldier would leave Vietnam, in March 1973¹⁴. The economy went into 'stagflation' in 1971, and Nixon's response was to increase federal control on prices and money supply. He was lucky to benefit from the prestige of the moon landings after 1969 as well as his diplomatic success in Communist China and the Soviet Union¹⁵. The right wing of the Republican Party, to which Reagan belonged, reluctantly accepted the *détente*; interestingly, in October 1971, Nixon sent him as a special presidential envoy to Taiwan to pacify a fuming Chiang Kai-Shek¹⁶. Reagan was one of the main campaigner for the Nixon-Agnew ticket in the presidential election of 1972, which confirmed the unravelling of the 'McGovern Democrats' and the strength of

¹¹ *Dutch*, ch.25 'Reagan Country'.

¹² *Twentieth-Century America*, p.200.

¹³ *America, a Narrative History*, p.1403.

¹⁴ Same, p.1406.

¹⁵ *America since 1945*, pp. 144-146.

¹⁶ *Dutch*, p.378: "Look, Generalissimo, I don't like this any more than you do," Reagan said [...] "but it had to happen sooner or later, and we're a hell of a lot better off having President Nixon do it instead of Hubert Horatio Humphrey."

the conservative backlash: 520 to 17 electoral votes, 46 million to 28 million popular votes¹⁷!

The scandal of the Watergate and Nixon's resignation on 9 August 1974 durably tarnished the presidential office; Ford's pardon did not help either, despite his best efforts afterwards to restore its integrity. After the oil crisis in 1973, the economy was in the doldrums, unaffected by Ford's moderate measures¹⁸. The fall of Saigon to the Viet Cong in 1975, the recognition of the legitimacy of East Germany and the Soviet takeover of the Baltic States, and ineffectual diplomacy in the Middle East scandalised many Republicans and especially Reagan¹⁹, who challenged Ford, and almost succeeded, in the Republican primaries for the 1976 presidential election, which Jimmy Carter narrowly won for the Democrats. Carter inherited a bad economy, which he nevertheless managed to worsen, although it was probably because of his foreign policy actions that he generated the most discontent. For conservatives like Reagan, the treaty he passed through Congress in 1978 turning over the Panama Canal in 1999 was tantamount to high treason²⁰, an insult to the ghost of Theodore Roosevelt²¹, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was for them the proof of the useless of the 'soft' diplomatic approach (illustrated by the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II)²². The nail in Carter's political coffin, however, was the fiasco of the Teheran hostage crisis in 1979 and 1980:

¹⁷ *America, a Narrative History*, pp.1415-1416.

¹⁸ *Twentieth-Century America*, pp.220.

¹⁹ *America since 1945*, pp.158-159, and *Twentieth-Century America*, p.221.

²⁰ Same, p.189: Reagan, in the 1976 primaries, as the treaty was being debated: 'We built it, we paid for it, it's ours and we're going to keep it.'

²¹ *Dutch*, p.407.

²² *America, a Narrative History*, p.1427.

the humiliation of the United States in front of the world and the botched rescue attempt would not be forgiven²³.

In parallel, the 'New Right' (in response to the 'New Left') had been rising, with the growing influence of the Christian evangelicals in the media and in politics: clergymen like Jerry Falwell, whose 'Moral Majority' or 'Liberty Lobby' was knitting a powerful militancy, or Pat Robertson, fervent in his opposition to Gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) or the Civil Rights movement in general; or women opposed to feminism, like Phyllis Schlafly²⁴. They constituted an extremely motivated and efficient lobbying force, and they found in Reagan their dream candidate: pro-death penalty, pro-life (after his initial moderate support for abortion laws during his governorship, however), staunchly anti-Communist and an ardent Cold Warrior campaigning on promises of more free enterprise and less federal regulation, less welfare, less taxes and a proudly hawkish approach to foreign policy²⁵. He scored a decisive victory in the 1980 (489 to 49 electoral votes, 44 million to 35 million popular votes), carrying a Republican Senate majority on his coattails, and reducing the Democrat majority in the House; a significant factor was abstention, with only 53 percent of the registered voters casting a ballot²⁶. Traditional Democrat supporters in the working class had now become silent. With an optimism mirroring FDR's, he proclaimed in his

²³ *Dutch*, p.407.

²⁴ *America, a Narrative History*, p.1435.

²⁵ *Twentieth-Century America*, ch.13 'Dynamic Conservatism'.

²⁶ *America, a Narrative History*, p.

inaugural address that ‘Government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem’²⁷.

In the White House, he adopted a loose management style, delegating most of the day-to-day exercise of power to a ‘troika’ of two loyal advisers and a Washington insider - Ed Meese and Mike Deaver, and James Baker²⁸ - while setting the general direction and the tone himself. For him, the presidency was a role, charged in symbolism, and leadership was about bold, general ideas: image was capital in this television age. The ‘Reagan Revolution’ was almost as radical as the ‘New Deal’ had been – in the opposite direction: domestically, Reagan pushed his supply-side economic ideas (‘Reaganomics’), slashing taxes and welfare spending, trying to impose free market ideology in the public sector and to decrease the federal workforce^{29, 30}; in foreign policy, he defined the ‘Reagan Doctrine’, pledging aid to insurgents battling pro-Soviet states³¹ and moving decisively against *détente* with a massive defence build-up from 134 billion to 253 billion dollars between 1980 and 1989. With great political skill, he used the economic recovery after 1983 as proof of the success of his policies (although it had more to do with oil prices and external factors)³² despite an ever-increasing budget deficit and turning the U.S., largest creditor nation in 1982, to the largest debtor by 1986³³. He also managed to sidestep the crisis in Lebanon (terror attacks killing 241 U.S. soldiers on 23 October 1983) and to push his support to rightwing guerrillas in Central America by framing his

²⁷ *America since 1945*, p.192.

²⁸ *Developments in American Politics*, ch.4 ‘Presidential Leadership’, section ‘The Reagan White House’.

²⁹ *America, a Narrative History*, p.1438-1439.

³⁰ *Developments in American Politics*, ch.7-10.

³¹ *The Reagan Doctrine*, ch.1, ‘Explaining the Reagan Doctrine’s Origins’.

³² *Developments in American Politics*, pp.222-223.

³³ *Developments in American Politics*, p.224.

policy into a Manichean conflict between the U.S. and the ‘Evil Empire’, the Soviet Union, scoring political points with easy military victories, like the one against Grenada in 1983, or with grand – if unfeasible - designs like the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI, quickly nicknamed ‘Star Wars’) in March 1983³⁴. Surviving an assassination attempt in 1981, in true ‘Teddy Roosevelt’ style, also increased his personal prestige considerably³⁵.

Reagan’s victory in the 1984 presidential election, against Walter Mondale, was even more decisive than in 1980 (59 percent of the popular vote), a momentum he used to push his Tax Reform Act through Congress in 1986³⁶. Whether by anticipation (as Fischer argues³⁷) or by reaction, in 1985 there was a rapprochement with the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev, which would later be considered as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. However, crises started to follow one another in the late Eighties: opposition to the politicisation of the Supreme Court (failure of Reagan’s nominees, Bork and Ginsburg), sleaze in the Administration leading to Ed Meese’s resignation and Mike Deaver’s conviction, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the plunge in the Stock Market, all in 1987³⁸. Amazingly, Reagan managed to escape relatively unscathed from all of these, largely because of his lack of involvement in the actual management of the government. Despite an overall increase in federal budget spending and deficit, in the level of poverty, in the gap between rich and poor, despite his failure to reform the welfare state, to repeal *Roe vs Wade* (pro-abortion decision of the Supreme Court in 1973) or to advance the religious right’s agenda, he still incarnated ‘can-do’ America, the free spirit and rugged

³⁴ *America, a Narrative History*, p.1442-1445.

³⁵ *Dutch*, pp.427-433.

³⁶ *America, a Narrative History*, p.1446.

³⁷ *The Reagan Reversal*, ch.1, ‘Introduction’.

³⁸ *Twentieth-Century America*, pp.247-251.

individualism of the Frontier pioneer he had often acted out in his Hollywood period, eclipsing the New Deal ideology which had permeated previous presidencies³⁹.

The end of the Cold War with the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites after 1989 has been added to Reagan's credit, either because his policies were considered as the cause, or because it justified his foreign policy and matched his vision of the future⁴⁰. His death in 2004 after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease has transformed him into a leading figure in the Republican pantheon. The 'Reagan Era' has shifted American politics firmly to the right, influencing the presidencies of George H. Bush, William J. Clinton, and his ideological imprint is unmistakable in the current Bush Administration (with Reagan Republicans like Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney or previously Richard Perle). The Christian right is even more powerful today, and may be on the verge of victory in its battles against abortion and for the teaching of 'intelligent design', via the Supreme Court. It is likely that if they win, it will be seen in some ways as Reagan's victory, whereas if they fail, it will be Bush's failure.

³⁹ *America, a Narrative History*, pp.1453-1454.

⁴⁰ *Twentieth-Century America*, pp.254-255.

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