

The President as The Great Inspirer

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When you think of the most important and successful presidents in American history, who comes to mind? More importantly, why are they the individuals you think of? The names most often given are Washington, Lincoln, and Reagan. But is it because of their mastery of foreign policy, their constitutional expertise, or their ability to navigate bureaucracies? I would argue not. Their names are synonymous with American excellence and leadership because of what they represented and meant to the American people. They are remembered because they inspired. Washington inspired the idea of American independence and self-governance. Lincoln inspired a broken country to reunify around dignity and equality for all (Greene 2023). And Ronald Reagan, as portrayed in the 2024 film *Reagan*, inspired Americans to believe again in optimism, strength, and a moral purpose for their country. The presidency is not simply an office of governance but rather one of great symbolism, meaning, and inspiration for the American people. Presidents who succeed and leave an everlasting legacy are those who inspire and uplift their generation. Their ability to inspire the nation is the very foundation of their strong leadership.

Reagan, starring Dennis Quaid, uses the idea of inspiration as its central theme. The story of Ronald Reagan is explored through a fictional 2011 conversation between a rising star in the Russian government and Viktor Petrovich, an elderly KGB analyst responsible for profiling those who could threaten the Soviets, even decades away. The young

Russian is eager to learn about how the Soviets mismanaged Reagan's rise to power, leaving Russia a shadow of its previous glory. This narration style is critical to the film's argument, as it demonstrates that even America's most formidable enemies cannot rival a nation being led by an uplifting figure. By choosing an enemy as the narrator, the film allows for a powerful statement to be made: even those who had every reason to refute Reagan's influence could not.

It is important to note that this film was in development for many years and was not filmed until the early months of the Biden Presidency; the film comes after nearly two decades of presidents who failed to meet Reagan's standard (Shapiro 2024). While presidents since Ronald Reagan have had their fair share of successes, none have been able to inspire the nation in any lasting way. President Bush, despite a 90% approval rating after leading a grieving nation through September 11th, saw his approval rating fall to 34% upon leaving office in 2009 (Gallup 2024). President Obama, the first African American president in our nation's history, was elected as a unifying figure, keen on improving race relations. Yet, even his powerful message of being a black man leading the most powerful country in the world grew stale, and he saw a decline in American perception of race relations (Jones 2016). Presidents Trump and Biden certainly did not improve Americans' hopes for a brighter future (PBS News 2026). Quaid, in an interview with Ben Shapiro, remarked that this film was needed at this time because the country is starving for a president who can fill that role (Shapiro

2024). *Reagan* is a reminder of what the presidency can be.

This ability to uplift an entire nation does not come from nowhere. To inspire others means you yourself must be rooted in inspiration from a young age. The film makes this argument, spending significant time reflecting on Reagan's upbringing and early career (*Reagan* 2024). Reagan grew up in a small town in Illinois, where his father frequently struggled with work and alcoholism. Although he had a good relationship with his father, it was his mother who established the roots for the man Ronald Reagan would become: "had Nelle Reagan died in the winter of 1918-19--a near-victim of the devastating influenza epidemic that killed millions of healthy, middle-aged mothers around the world--Ronald Reagan very likely would not have become President" (Kengor 2004). His mother's insistence on attending church allowed a young Reagan to learn to speak to a large audience, establish his core beliefs and values, and cultivate the eternal optimism that would come to define his presidency (Kengor 2004). It was through his church that Reagan encountered the book *That Printer of Udell's*, which became the roadmap for his core belief in the triumph of good over evil, and that "heroes live by standards of morality and fair play" (Kengor 2004).

This connection between faith and the capacity to inspire is not unique to Ronald Reagan. Abraham Lincoln relied upon his deep faith during the country's most dangerous crisis. A young Lincoln did everything he could to purchase his own copy of the Bible. It was his faith that guided him to the core

belief that slavery was a sin. He believed "the war was divine retribution for the sin of slavery," understanding that the American people did not just need someone to manage the fight against slavery; the people needed to understand why they had a moral obligation to fight this war (Zeit 2023). By giving people a sense of purpose and belief, he successfully led America through its darkest days.

Reagan's faith was the foundation of his values, but the film argues that his aggressive opposition to communism was also rooted in his youth. Reagan's disdain is traced to hearing a Soviet defector speak at church about life under the Soviet regime, where the defector spoke about how the Soviets had stripped their citizens of their freedom, autonomy, and their ability to practice religion. Reagan understood this as an attack on everything he believed in and committed himself to fighting it for the rest of his life. The line the defector says that most impacts Reagan is that "[f]reedom is only one generation away from extinction" (*Reagan* 2024). These early experiences planted in Reagan the belief that he had been given a divine calling to be placed at this moment in history for a specific purpose. Elliott Kaufman drew a similar parallel with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, arguing that leaders who believe they have a mission from God to serve their people will be more successful than those motivated purely by politics.

It was this sense of true purpose that Reagan carried with him as his Hollywood career faded. Relegated to menial parts, Reagan channeled his energy into serving his fellow actors through the Screen Actors Guild. It was through his efforts with SAG that Reagan came to understand the depth of

the communist takeover of Hollywood. Later, his work for General Electric took him across the country to meet with hundreds of thousands of blue-collar workers. Reagan understood that connecting with the American people meant meeting them where they are, a quality only great presidents can truly grasp. Many recent presidents have tried to create this kind of connection with the regular Americans, but have failed. During the 2024 campaign trail, President Trump was seen working at McDonald's, a stunt many criticized as fake and staged (Brown 2024). President Biden tried to speak with union workers during his 2020 campaign, only to be chastised by several of them. President Kennedy, on the other hand, possessed a natural charisma that drew people to him effortlessly. Reagan was a member of this rare category, and it was his years among working Americans before ever holding office that allowed him to tap into this quality as he made his rise through the echelons of politics.

From his Hollywood background, Reagan was able to gain an edge over other politicians of his era. His career in acting and storytelling allowed him to understand that the modern presidency has just as much to do with image, communication, and performance as it does about policy. This is reflected more nowadays with social media, where some members of Congress have communication teams nearly as big as their policy teams. The idea of an honest performative president did not exist before Reagan. However, Reagan did like to keep his private life out of the public eye, something that was becoming increasingly difficult. As Quaid noted, there was "a private impenetrable space that he always had" (Shapiro 2024). The film acknowledges

this conflict in a touching conclusion where the man who inspired a generation lives his final days quietly on a ranch with his loving wife, suffering from Alzheimer's, and unable to communicate as the "Great Communicator."

Upon entering the Oval Office in January of 1981, President Reagan understood that the fate of the free world rested on his leadership. He was confident in his values and faith and was uniquely committed to fighting America's greatest enemy, communism, with both Republicans and Democrats alike. Reagan believed that the only way for America to defeat the Soviet Union was to embrace its own greatness. Carter's vision of America as a nation in decline had no place in Ronald Reagan's administration, and to succeed, he needed to instill it within the American people (Pines 1989). From the outset, Reagan's presidency was defined by his belief that brighter days lay ahead.

Inheriting a country that "had become very pessimistic in the 1970s" was no small task (Pines 1989). Carter and his predecessors had encouraged the American people to limit the nation's capabilities and global power. Reagan rejected this; he wanted America to be a shining city on a hill, confident that other nations would follow America's example. This reframing of what America means was key to Reagan's ability to inspire the nation. Much like Washington and the founders, who offered a hopeful vision at a moment of uncertainty, Reagan asked his fellow Americans to believe in a better alternative. All they had to do was buy into the vision.

Throughout his political career, President Reagan continuously returned to the idea that the

American people deserve a choice. That theme is most closely associated with his speech on the 1964 Goldwater campaign, in which he first told the country that there was a different and better way forward. Sixteen years later, that same message defined Reagan's performance in the 1980 presidential debate; instead of arguing back and forth with Carter over policy, Reagan looked straight into the camera and said to the American people, "next Tuesday you will all go to the polls and make a decision. And when you make that decision, I think it would be well to ask yourself, are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier to buy things in the store than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country? Is America as respected throughout the world?" (Reagan 2024). By speaking directly to the American people and asking them to trust their own experience, Reagan is keeping them focused on what they believe. As Quaid reenacts this iconic moment in American history, the film shows chefs at a restaurant watching Reagan deliver this line, and a man getting a haircut at a barber shop, smiling at Reagan's words. It sets the tone, suggesting that these ordinary people feel someone in power finally understands their lives. Reagan concludes by saying, "[i]f you don't agree, then may I suggest another choice," serving as a simple invitation to all Americans to believe that something better was possible (Reagan 2024). This is the inspirational president in the most perfect form; the president does not need to tell people what to think, but gives voice to what the people already feel.

What made Reagan truly unique was that his policy and inspirational vision were inseparable.

Within one day of his inauguration, the American hostages in Iran were released, signaling Reagan's projection of strength and conviction (History.com Editors 2009). Reagan's approach, as portrayed in the film, was straightforward: he was going to "start the biggest war of this century and not fire a single shot...fight[ing] it with words" (Reagan 2024). Reagan's presidency became defined by this philosophy. When air traffic controllers threatened to strike, Reagan fired them without hesitation. When advisors urged him not to, Reagan insisted on calling the Soviet Union an evil empire, demonstrating that the American people would not be intimidated. When Gorbachev tried forcing Reagan to give up the U.S. missile defense program, Reagan walked away from the table, refusing to make any concessions. And when he was considering the line that would define his legacy, the "tear down this wall" line, and Secretary of State Schultz urged him not to, he insisted. Reagan believed clarity is power, and that is what the American people deserve (Reagan 2024). Two years after that speech, the Berlin Wall fell, followed by the complete collapse of the Soviet Union, and a new world order.

Viktor's final message to the young Russian is the film's and this paper's message: Reagan brought the Soviet Union down not with missiles or even politics. It was something much greater. Viktor explains that "people will not give their lives for power, or a state, or even ideology. People give their lives for one another, for the freedom to live those lives as they choose and for God" (Reagan 2024). Reagan gave that back to the American people and to the world.

In the current climate in the United States, Viktor's sentiment is being tested. The America of 2026 is fundamentally different from the country Reagan left behind. In the 1980s, the country, both left and right, was united against a common enemy: communism. Today, even with both political parties agreeing that China represents a tremendous threat to America's status as the unipolar hegemon, there has been nothing resembling national unity. The Speaker O'Neill and Ronald Reagan relationship, of being enemies until six o'clock and then Irishmen sharing a beer, is nearly obsolete in today's political environment. O'Neill, visiting Reagan in the hospital after the assassination attempt, whom Reagan allowed as one of the few visitors, speaks to a baseline of collaboration across party lines that has all but disappeared (*Reagan* 2024). Political violence has increased. Trust in institutions has collapsed, leading to the emergence of a loud and frustrating unification of the extreme right and extreme left.

And yet the desire for an inspirational president has never been greater. What the nation is waiting for is a figure who can do what Reagan did but in the twenty-first century. The country needs someone who promotes Washington's value of freedom, Lincoln's value of equality, and Reagan's value of optimism. There is an open field for a figure to emerge, yet no one has proven able to take the steps to become the next great inspiration. But the country needs it now more than ever.

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