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Generation Reagan

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By Deroy Murdock

I have five words to say to Ronald Wilson Reagan: Thank you for my career.

Like so many in American public life today, I might be in another line of work entirely if not for the message and magnetism of Ronald Reagan. From operatives who manage campaigns, to the candidates they elect, to the think-tank scholars who advise them, to those of us in the commentariat who chatter about it all, today's political landscape is populated by thousands of us who heard Reagan's clarion call in our teens and twenties and still follow it. While neither as visible as the economic renaissance that he unleashed, nor as dramatic as the breaching of the Berlin Wall that he engineered, Reagan's initiation of an entire generation of young, professional free-marketeers remains among his most enduring legacies.

In my case, I heard Ronald Reagan's radio commentaries every weekday morning on KABC-AM as I got ready to go to Paul Revere Junior High School and Palisades High School in Los Angeles. Monday through Friday, as I donned my sneakers and Ocean Pacific shirts, former California governor Reagan proposed solutions to the energy crisis, rampant inflation, Soviet hegemony, and the overall national funk that bedeviled America and Earth in the late 1970s. I soon decided this man should replace Jimmy Carter in the Oval Office. I began volunteering for the Reagan for President campaign in October 1979, about a month before the candidate officially entered the race.

At that time, I wrote for my school newspapers, and started to compose the brand of scathing opinion pieces that pay my rent today. Even then, my op-eds were fueled by the beliefs and principles that I distilled from Reagan's radio remarks and campaign speeches, plus the ever-enlightening pages of National Review.

THE ORIGINAL MEET-UPS

I was lucky enough to shake Ronald Reagan's hand twice and found myself in adoring crowds at some of his journey's brightest spots: the evening he accepted the 1980 GOP nomination (I had traveled by train from L.A. to the Detroit Republican Convention with scores of exuberant Youth for Reagan delegates), the night he greeted supporters at Los Angeles' Century Plaza Hotel after winning the White House, and the morning of January 20, 1981, when he first was inaugurated. I participated in an informal White House birthday greeting the College Republicans arranged in February 1983, the 1984 GOP Convention, and President George H. W. Bush's swearing-in, which I attended so I could wave to the departing ex-president as his helicopter left Capitol Hill and flew west toward the Golden State.

Late Thursday night and into Friday morning, I saw the lights inside the Capitol's windows glow, as if they exuded Ronald Reagan's warmth from within. I was honored to join 104,683 others who

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traveled to the Capitol Rotunda to say goodbye and thank you to our hero. Along with the 106,000 who paid their last respects at the Reagan library and the countless thousands more who lined the streets of Washington, D.C. and southern California for their last salutes, I was fortunate to be a part of Ronald Reagan's final landslide.

So many of us have him to thank for the countries he liberated, our nation he fortified, and even for the work we do every day.

"It's not just the fact that Reagan won the Cold War and turned the economy around, it's that we have built lives around this movement," says David Ridenour, president of the National Center for Public Policy Research (NCPPI), a Washington-based free-market think tank. "There are kids now who wouldn't exist but for the fact that all these connections were made. We met people from far reaches of the country who we never would have met...This is a real personal loss, as if he were a member of the family, even though I've never talked to him. That's how profoundly this is affecting all of us."

David's wife, Amy, who he met in the political trenches in the 1980s, also is pained to lose one of the men at the center of her life.

"I became CEO of a conservative organization after working on Reagan's 1980 campaign," she says. "Morton Blackwell, my boss there, suggested me when a new foundation was being set up, the NCPPI. Without that, I have no idea where I'd be. And I probably wouldn't have met my husband, and a couple of my kids wouldn't have been born."

Consider Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform and tireless free-market activist. Norquist also chairs the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project which persuaded Congress to rename Washington National Airport as Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. It recently launched an effort to place President Reagan's face on the \$10 bill and/or the dime.

If memory serves, I met Norquist at a Young Americans for Freedom convention in Boston in late August, 1981, just before I started 12th grade. That was an exciting month for the Reagan Revolution. On August 5, President Reagan fired members of PATCO, the Professional Airline Traffic Controllers' Organization, a labor union that illegally walked out on its public duties. At his beloved Rancho del Cielo near Santa Barbara, President Reagan on August 13 signed his historic, \$749 billion tax-rate cut. And, atop those accomplishments, two U.S. Navy F-14s blew a pair of Libyan fighter jets from the skies over the Mediterranean on August 19. Muammar Qaddafi's Soviet-made SU22s should not have attacked American aircraft during a naval exercise.

"I came down in '81 with the College Republican National Committee. I was active in the Reagan campaign in '80," Norquist remembers.

"There are quite a group of people in D.C. or in politics to this day who got involved because of Ronald Reagan's commitment to principle. We deliberately put Reagan's pictures on all the recruitment tables for the College Republicans. Prior to my being executive director and Jack Abramoff being chairman, they had this dancing elephant with a champagne glass and the slogan 'The Best Party in Town,' as if you join the Republican party the way you join a fraternity."

Norquist thought they could do better.

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"We threw all of that stuff out and got pictures of Ronald Reagan, posters of Soviet military parades, and stuff from [independent Polish labor union] Solidarity reminding people that they should be for Ronald Reagan because of the Soviet threat and the economic deterioration under Carter. The kind of people who would join the Republican party by coming to the sign-up table with Ronald Reagan and posters based on principle were different College Republicans than the guys who wanted to sign up and go party. So, Ronald Reagan was the face of recruiting the Reagan Republican party, keeping all of us involved, and bringing in thousands and thousands of young people. Today, if you go to state legislators, if you go to congressmen, even senators, most Republicans in elected office today came into office in the wake of Reaganism."

REAGANITES WITH OPINIONS

The world of opinion journalism teems with recently young Reaganites. Among the more thoughtful and eloquent is my friend, Quin Hillyer, a multiple-award-winning editorial writer and columnist with the Mobile Register and Newhouse News Service. He recalls being drawn to Reagan's appeal while not yet a teen.

"Reagan's steadfastness and his 'unconscious grace' were what had attracted me before my 12th birthday in 1976 to mail in a wrinkled dollar bill and join what then was less the 'Reagan Revolution' than a Reagan insurgency against the established order of politics," Hillyer says, namely ineffective incumbent President Gerald R. Ford. Hillyer persuaded his father to match his \$1 contribution to a Reagan fundraising appeal with a grown-up \$20 bill.

Hillyer volunteered on Reagan's 1980 and 1984 campaigns and also on Capitol Hill while a student at our alma mater, Georgetown University, and later served as a professional staffer until 1996.

"I clearly took the Reagan inspiration with me when I went to work for then-Rep. Bob Livingston (R., La.) when we cut domestic discretionary spending and therefore reinvigorated our economy," Hillyer says. "Bob assembled a Reaganite personal staff in the early- and mid-90s that was dedicated to those ideals. That's one reason why he was such an obvious choice to take over the House Appropriations Committee, because he had such a commitment to Reagan's beliefs."

Richard Minter is the Brussels-based, best-selling author of *Losing bin Laden* and the forthcoming *Shadow War*. He previously was an editorial writer with the *Wall Street Journal Europe*.

"I was in the seventh grade when Reagan was sworn in in 1981, and I had watched his words stir the adults around me for the past two years," Minter says. "I remember Election Day 1980 and election night--a landslide the media reported like a funeral, like a desperate dispatch from an asylum in which the inmates had killed the keeper."

"Reagan made ideas exciting, and he inspired me to become a journalist," Minter continues. "He always seemed to have facts and anecdotes that the mainstream press had missed. That told me that there always would be room in the press for someone who was willing to be dogged and unconventional. After all, Reagan used his philosophy to uncover things that others didn't see."

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As someone who grew up in Greenwich Village in the 1960s, Mark Klugmann wrote last week on NRO: "I was not supposed to be a Reaganite." In fact, he recalls, "My family loved the New Deal and the Great Society. I went to New York City public schools and then an Ivy League college. I was supposed to be a liberal Democrat."

"The Reagan administration was a magnet for philosophically committed young people," says Klugmann. "For those fleeing the liberal culture, Reagan's Washington was a modern Ellis Island."

"At the dawn of the Reagan presidency," Klugmann continues, "my liberal classmates at the Wharton School of Business went to Wall Street to make money (and then to feel guilty about it). Instead, I went to Washington to join the Reagan Revolution (and with no apologies). To hell with the bull market, I said, this is the chance to change the world. I arrived in D.C. without a job, without any contacts, without a resume."

Klugmann volunteered at the White House for nine months. Without wages, he scraped by, so much so that his shoes had holes in them the last two months. He finally landed a salaried position generating public support for Reagan's anti-Communist, pro-freedom policies in Central America. In the second term, he became one of the stewards of Reagan's rhetorical flame: a White House speech writer.

Klugmann now advises "Latin American presidents on how to accomplish free-market reforms and then win reelection." He has pushed privatization and currency stability in Chile and El Salvador, among other places.

"President Reagan showed us the importance of believing in something larger than ourselves," Klugmann says. "With Reagan, we had a cause, and we had a hero to lead us. We miss him."

Floyd Brown is now executive director of the Reagan Ranch--the hideaway where President Reagan rejuvenated himself by relaxing with Nancy, riding horses, and chopping wood. It has been transformed into an educational facility by the Young America's Foundation, a group that arranges speaking opportunities for me and many other free-marketeters. I have known Brown since college as an energetic organizer, rabble-rouser, and one-time fellow national board member of Young Americans for Freedom.

"President Reagan has had more impact on me than any other man," Brown writes in a tribute. "I had the honor of meeting him for the first time when I was 15 years old. The impression he made on me was lasting. I dedicated my life to the ideals for which he fought."

Brown adds: "The power of his success came from his ability to take important conservative ideas and explain them with great clarity...At the Reagan Ranch, we are dedicated to preserving his ideas, and we will inspire future generations with President Reagan's conservative vision for America."

Ronald Reagan even won lifelong converts who originally were skeptical of him.

"I'm a bit embarrassed to say that I was not a Reagan supporter in 1976 or in the primaries in 1980," confesses Cathy Windels, a New York pharmaceutical executive who works with think tanks that promote market-based healthcare reform.

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"My Dad told me for years that Reagan was going to be president, and a great one. I thought he was too conservative to win," Windels adds. After a stint at the Heritage Foundation, she joined the Reagan administration in 1982.

"By being inside and seeing that President Reagan was such a great leader, I realized my Dad had been right, and I had been wrong. This guy was a once-in-a-lifetime president," Windels says. "What was impressive was that, even at a relatively low level, all we political appointees knew exactly what we were supposed to be doing, and that the mission came from what one colleague called (affectionately) 'The stubborn old man in the White House.'"

THE REAGAN GENERATION

While governor, Ronald Reagan answered a letter from a group of New Jersey high-school seniors, as Quin Hillyer reminded me. The letter remains pertinent.

"If I read your generation correctly, you've been turned off by hypocrisy and dirty politics; you yearn for leaders who will be above partisanship and personal gain," wrote the man to whom America bade farewell last week. "Well, your leaders are among you now--presidents, governors, senators and congressmen, supreme court justices--how will you know which ones they are when the time comes to choose?... One generation can change the course of history; can once again insure that this nation will be a shining golden light for all mankind. An older generation hopes with all its heart you'll do this."

This, Mr. President, is what we strive to do today; as ever, with you as our guide.

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