

Ronald Reagan at 100

Being a good man helped him become a great one.

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At the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, in the foothills of the Santa Susana Mountain Range where old Hollywood directors shot Westerns, they will mark Sunday's centenary of Reagan's birth with events and speeches geared toward Monday's opening of a rethought and renovated museum aimed at making his presidency more accessible to scholars and vividly available to the public. Fifty percent of the artifacts, officials note, have never been shown before—essays and short stories Reagan wrote in high school and college, the suit he wore the day he was shot, the condolence book signed by world leaders at his funeral. (Margaret Thatcher: "Well done, Thou good and faithful servant.")

Much recently has been written about who he was—a good man who became a great president—but recent conversations about Reagan have me pondering some things he was not.

He wasn't, for instance, sentimental, though he's often thought of that way. His nature was marked by a characterological sweetness, and his impulse was to be kind and generous. (His daughter Patti Davis captured this last week in a beautifully remembered essay for *Time*.) But he wasn't sentimental about people and events, or about history. Underlying all was a deep and natural skepticism. That, in a way, is why he was conservative. "If men were angels." They are not, so we must limit the governmental power they might wield. But his skepticism didn't leave him down. It left him laughing at the human condition, and at himself. Jim Baker, his first and great chief of staff, and his friend, remembered the other day the atmosphere of merriness around Reagan, the constant flow of humor.

But there was often a genial blackness to it, a mordant edge. In a classic Reagan joke, a man says sympathetically to his friend, "I'm so sorry your wife ran away with the gardener." The guy answers, "It's OK, I was going to fire him anyway." Or: As winter began, the young teacher sought to impart to her third-graders the importance of dressing warmly. She told the heart-rending story of her little brother, a fun-loving boy who went out with his sled and stayed out too long, caught a cold, then pneumonia, and days later died. There was dead silence in

the schoolroom as they took it in. She knew she'd gotten through. Then a voice came from the back: "Where's the sled?"

The biggest misunderstanding about Reagan's political life is that he was inevitable. He was not. He had to fight for every inch, he had to make it happen. What Billy Herndon said of Abraham Lincoln was true of Reagan too: He had within him, always, a ceaseless little engine of ambition. He was good at not showing it, as was Lincoln, but it was there. He was knowingly in the greatness game, at least from 1976, when he tried to take down a sitting president of his own party.

He was serious, and tough enough. Everyone who ever ran against him misunderstood this. He was an actor, they thought, a marshmallow. They'd flatten him. "I'll wipe the smile off his face." Nothing could wipe the smile off his face. He was there to compete, he was aiming for the top. His unconscious knew it. He told me as he worked on his farewell address of a recurring dream he'd had through adulthood. He was going to live in a mansion with big rooms, "high ceilings, white walls." He would think to himself in the dream that it was "a house that was available at a price I could afford." He had the dream until he moved into the White House and never had it again. "Not once."

He ran for president four times and lost twice. His 1968 run was a flop—it was too early, as he later admitted, and when it's too early, it never ends well. In 1976 he took on an incumbent Republican president of his own party, and lost primaries in New Hampshire, Florida, Illinois (where he'd been born), Massachusetts and Vermont. It was hand-to-hand combat all the way to the convention, where he lost to Gerald Ford. People said he was finished. He roared back in 1980 only to lose Iowa and scramble back in New Hampshire while reorganizing his campaign and firing his top staff. He won the nomination and faced another incumbent president.

In Reagan's candidacy the American people were being asked to choose a former movie star (never had one as president) who was divorced (ditto) and who looked like he might become the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. To vote for Reagan was not only to take a chance on an unusual man with an unusual biography, but also to break with New Deal-Great Society assumptions about the proper relationship between the individual and the state. Americans did, in a landslide—but only after Jimmy Carter's four years of shattering failure.

None of it was inevitable. The political lesson of Ronald Reagan's life: Nothing is written.

He didn't see himself as "the great communicator." It was so famous a moniker that he could do nothing but graciously accept the compliment, but he well understood it was bestowed in part by foes and in part to undercut the

seriousness of his philosophy: “It’s not what he says, it’s how he says it.” He answered in his farewell address: “I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: it was the content. I wasn’t a great communicator, but I communicated great things.” It wasn’t his eloquence people supported, it was his stands—opposition to the too-big state, to its intrusions and demands, to Soviet communism. Voters weren’t charmed, they were convinced.

His most underestimated political achievement? In the spring of 1981 the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization called an illegal strike. It was early in Reagan’s presidency. He’d been a union president. He didn’t want to come across as an antiunion Republican. And Patco had been one of the few unions to support him in 1980. But the strike was illegal. He would not accept it. He gave them a grace period, two days, to come back. If they didn’t, they’d be fired. They didn’t believe him. Most didn’t come back. So he fired them. It broke the union. Federal workers got the system back up. The Soviet Union, and others, were watching. They thought: This guy means business. It had deeply positive implications for U.S. foreign policy. But here’s the thing: Reagan didn’t know that would happen, didn’t know the bounty he’d reap. He was just trying to do what was right.

The least understood facet of Reagan’s nuclear policies? He hated the rise of nuclear weapons, abhorred the long-accepted policy of mutually assured destruction. That’s where the Strategic Defense Initiative came from, his desire to protect millions from potential annihilation. The genius of his program: When developed, America would share it with the Soviet Union. We’d share it with everybody. All would be protected from doomsday.

The Soviets opposed this; the Reykjavik summit broke up over it, and in the end the Soviets’ arms spending helped bankrupt them and hasten their fall. Years later I would see Mikhail Gorbachev, who became Reagan’s friend. He was still grumpy about Reagan’s speeches. “Ron—he loved show business!” Mr. Gorbachev blustered. The losses of those years must have still rankled, and understandably. It’s one thing to be outmaneuvered by a clever man, but to be outfoxed by a good one—oh, that would grate.