

# Why History Will Give Reagan the Last Laugh

By [Anthony Dolan](#)

In office only two weeks Ronald Reagan had his 70th birthday party in the Roosevelt Room of the West Wing just across from the oval office. He walked in with Nancy Reagan, saw the cake and began as his staff knew he would.

"Say, listen, I know some really funny stories about 70-year-old men"- and here he peered down at his wife who was vigorously shaking her head and then added - "but I don't think I'm going to get the chance" -- and the staff began to laugh and Mrs. Reagan nodded emphatically -- "to tell you any of them."

Among the disadvantages of not having Ronald Reagan around for his own centennial is missing the jokes he would have made about it.

"There are three ages of man," Reagan liked to say: "Youth, middle-age, and 'You-look-terrific.'" Another favorite was from Hollywood: "You know you're getting old when you're faced with two temptations and you take the one that gets you home by 9:30."

Reagan's age amused him, as did much else. But Reagan's humor usually had a purpose. The stories he told Gorbachev about Soviet inefficiency he used to sugarcoat a militant, unbending anti-communism.

He also saw humor as a management tool. Having worked on movie sets and managed state bureaucracies, Reagan knew the world class fragility of any communal undertaking. So taking down the temperature of the staff furnace was a first concern. More than a few cabinet members who planned to skewer bureaucratic adversaries in front of the president lost their ferocity of mind as they fished around in the jelly bean jar Reagan had just handed them and laughed at the joke he told to start the meeting.

Policy too. More than might initially seem evident, Reagan's anti-statism and general suspicion of accretions of human power had at its source the same outlook that nurtured his humor. In seeing the human impulse to superintend reality as not only dangerous but amusing he was simply reaffirming that any disposition to laughter is tacit consent to a higher intuition of reality, one that undoes the illusion of human omniscience and sovereignty and the self-deifying impulse of humans that 20th century totalitarianism not only sanctioned but turned into a criminal theology. Reagan liked to quote Whittaker Chambers on the Eden-promise of "Ye shall be as gods" as the root of all human foolishness and a special source of trouble in the modern world. Humor then for him was an implicit assent to the operational paradox of Judaic-Christian meliorism, the one that says only through acknowledgment and acceptance of the permanent intractability of the world and permanent infirmity of humanity can they be altered

for the better. For Reagan, righting a planet that was comically -- no, hilariously -- off its axis would depend not only on human interventions but recognition of those beneficent forces he saw at work in the world and whose power he wanted to tap into.

Against all this, the current White House's attempt to push a Reagan-Obama parallel -- with one broadcast network helpfully calling the State of the Union speech Obama's "Reagan moment" -- becomes more than a stretch.

Of course, presidents tend to invoke successful predecessors. But unlike Reagan, who was amused by human foibles including those of his own administration -- "Sometimes our right hand does not know what our far right hand is doing," he once said -- the current incumbent is unlikely to ever be accused of profligate levity.

Having looked into the bourgeois soul of America and found it wanting, Barack Obama is often admonitory but never amused: Pennsylvania voters who reject him are just guns and church types, Joe the Plumber needs his money spread around, the Cambridge police have a racial problem, doctors not only take out tonsils but amputate legs for the money, an insufficiently enlightened majority of the American public doesn't want a mosque at Ground Zero, and the president presides over White House operatives who aggressively push the line that members of the Tea Party movement are tied to extremist or racist groups.

But if Obama has proven to be Parson Grim, his opponents have yet to figure out that the way to run against him is as a symptom and not the problem. Fred Thompson once called then-candidate Obama, "George McGovern without the experience".

And Obama does fit perfectly into the line of succession since the Cromwellian takeover of the Democratic Party in 1972. Jimmy Carter upbraided us about our thermostats, Al Gore blamed us for the weather, John Kerry indicted American troops in Vietnam and Iraq as Genghis Khans and terrorizers of women and children, Hillary Clinton wanted "a village" raising children and not just parents who might, after all, be like those political opponents whose FBI files she hoarded in the White House basement, and Bill Clinton said only the darkest things about talk radio listeners. Indeed like the Cromwellians who wanted to outlaw mince pies the San Francisco Democrats have banned Happy Meals.

The ultimate goal here is to raise middle class consciousness, and coercive and punitive polices like increasing taxes or making health care decisions or forcing social experiments on the military seek to liberate middle America from its outdated biblical morality, its excessive displays of patriotism, and its general reluctance to hand power over to its betters.

Isaiah Berlin warned in the last century about "the new secular priesthood" in politics. And surely the 20th century's ultimate irony was that those who thought themselves most above the religious impulse proved most susceptible to it.

But while liberalism's decline from a public philosophy to a secular religion means the model for understanding American politics is now religious rather than political, that model itself is a familiar one in religious history. It's that of a religion whose disproven dogmas have lost their hold on the faithful and whose high priests worry that their grip on power and privilege is just as tenuous.

The "anti-nomian" heresy, then, is the tip off to a religion in decline -- the heresy by which those with "the inner light" exempt themselves from the morality they upbraid others for not living by.

Thus, the current chosen ones enjoy a secular heaven of entitlement without accountability and the double standard becomes liturgy. Those who fail to pay taxes are put in charge of the department that collects them, those who defied attempts to reform Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac are now in charge of reforming the crisis they caused, those who added trillions to the debt are suddenly concerned that repeal of Obamacare might run up the deficit, those who say educating children and civil liberties are always priorities mean only when school reform or secret ballots won't jeopardize the power of a political ally.

When Reagan told his anti-Soviet stories and then predicted the USSR's collapse at the height of Soviet power and expansion, he drew guffaws from those who now invoke his name. But while turning 100 would have amused Reagan, I suspect he would chuckle too at seeing his old adversaries -- the Keynesians and socialists -- getting one last chance to prove that "If the government took over the Sahara nothing would happen for three years and then there would be a shortage of sand."

Reagan would have smiled, too, knowing to whom history was about to give the last laugh.

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