

# The Literary Reagan



# The Literary Reagan:

## *Authentic Quotations from His Life*

Selected and annotated by

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*To my wife Cathy  
and our sons Nick and John—such joy!*



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## PREFACE

**Literary**, *adjective*. Pertaining to letters of the alphabet (*obsolete*)...Of or concerning literature or well-versed in literature...Bookish, pedantic.

**Reagan, Ronald**, *proper noun*. The 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. The adjectival form *Reaganite*, or sometimes *Reaganaut*, connotes a conservative character or approach with overtones of optimism, distrust of state power, and a belief in American exceptionalism.

Ronald Reagan became the 40th President of the United States almost 40 years ago, and ever since he stepped down from the Oval Office and returned to California eight years later, historians, political scientists, and pundits of all stripes began debating the meaning of his presidency and examining the essence of the man.

All modern Presidents undergo reappraisal after their terms in office. Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, was long considered a sort of caretaker, a not very smart or capable President who played a lot of golf, but access to formerly closed administration records a half-century later has changed the minds of historians, who now generally consider him a clear-minded, even visionary, President fully in charge of national policy.

Reagan has undergone a similar reassessment. The old view, exemplified by former Washington lawyer, presidential assistant, and Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford's famous characterization that Reagan was "an amiable dunce," posited that Reagan was a great communicator, to be sure, but one without substance, a former actor who knew the lines others wrote for him, but intellectually an empty suit. Many commentators, especially self-described political liberals, agreed with novelist Norman Mailer's view of Reagan as "the most ignorant president we ever had." Another author, Gore Vidal, snidely joked that the Reagan Library burned down and "both books were lost"—including the one Reagan had not finished coloring.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mailer interview in *Vanity Fair*, January 2007. Vidal quoted in *New York Magazine*, 2 December 1985, p. 33.

Even disregarding these extreme views, the perspective for many years among most liberals and Democrats, even some Republicans, and most definitely public intellectuals (including historians), was that Reagan was never very intelligent, never very curious, and never read much. According to the old narrative, if Reagan had something worthwhile to say, it could not have come from the man himself.

But that perspective has changed forever and is reflected by the continually improving regard historians have for Reagan. Whereas Reagan ranked 25th among U.S. Presidents in a 1996 poll conducted by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. among his fellow historians, a bipartisan polling of scholars in 2000 ranked Reagan eighth. After 2001, the reappraisal really took off with the publication of Reagan's voluminous personal and professional writings that demonstrate he was a voracious reader, a prolific and thoughtful writer, a fully engaged mind with a clear, reasoned, and consistent philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Ronald Reagan died in 2004, but he remains to this day a figure in the political controversies engulfing the United States of America over many core issues, especially those concerning the role, reach, and power of government. Debates rage about his historical significance and legacy, and the books on Reagan by authors right and left published since his presidency would fill a large room, as a visit to the research facilities at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library will confirm. Self-described conservatives with White House ambitions seek Reagan's mantle and often vie with each other to prove who is most Reaganesque. Liberals and conservatives argue with each other and even among themselves over Reagan's positions—not only whether they were effective or wise but even what Reagan really thought about the issues. Many care less about his views as a politician and have sought understanding about the inner man and what he was like.<sup>3</sup>

This book of Reagan's "authentic quotations" from his long life will clarify matters for all the above, for the best source on what Reagan thought, what he believed, and what kind of man he was—is Reagan himself, Reagan unadulterated, Reagan the great communicator of his own ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> See the bibliography for many of the works behind the reappraisal of Reagan.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the ways conservatives disagree about Reagan, see Jacob Heilbrunn's review essay of four biographies of Reagan, "A Uniter, Not a Decider," *The National Interest* (July/August 2007), pp. 79-87.

This idea of “authentic Reagan” has eluded previous attempts at compiling Reagan’s quotations, which largely comprise his remarks prepared by speechwriters. By contrast, this book draws on material revealing the “authentic Reagan” that has emerged only in recent years (see “About Sources” below). Moreover, it transpires that, until he became governor of California, Ronald Reagan was his own speechwriter, essay drafter, and researcher.<sup>4</sup> His official biographer goes so far as to say that “Ronald Reagan remained his own main speechwriter at least through 1980.”<sup>5</sup> With some rare exceptions, almost everything Reagan said and wrote until his entry into elective office can be considered “authentic Reagan”—and as individual entries will show, Reagan often as governor and many times as President would write passages or even an entire speech he cared particularly about.

Once I realized that the vast trove of resources made such a Reagan quotation book possible, and having already published a quotation book on my professional career interest (intelligence), I began to compile and edit this work.<sup>6</sup> This project has been a personal joy.

**The Quotations.** In this present collection of more than 1,500 quotations, the substance reflects Reagan’s interests, concerns, and bugaboos. He provides the most quotations on matters he deems of huge import for America and its future (Cold War, Economy), on those that were significant to him personally (Faith & Religion), on subjects he was proud of or admired (America & Americans, the Military), and on things he virulently opposed (Communism) or that consistently bedeviled him (Congress, Democrats, the Media). Each category opens with a reflection on and synthesis of what I believe was Reagan’s views on that subject, as

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<sup>4</sup> See Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2003), p. 108. See also the Miller Center’s interview with longtime political consultant Stuart Spencer, November 1981, at [millercenter.org/scripps/archive/oralhistories/Reagan](http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/oralhistories/Reagan). Reagan himself says “Until I got to the White House, I wrote all of my own speeches.” *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 342. It may seem problematic to cite this partly fictional “memoir” in a book of authentic Reagan quotations, but Morris did some unique research that I have used selectively and with great care.

<sup>6</sup> My earlier quotation book, published under my pen name at the time, Charles Lathrop, is *The Literary Spy: The Ultimate Source for Quotations on Espionage & Intelligence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

evidenced by the quotations that follow. Readers, of course, are invited to make up their own minds.

Reagan engaged with nearly every issue or topic of significance in American life, and the reader must note not only the scope and range of these quotations but their consistency over time. While it is true that Reagan sometimes evolved in his thinking on a particular issue (see his quotations under “Education” and note the sea-change in his view over the federal role), overall he did not change his basic views very much from his mid-thirties (that is, in the 1940s) half a century forward through his presidency and beyond. The late Martin Anderson, who had served as one of Reagan’s economic advisors and was an insightful scholar of Ronald Reagan, said that “the further back I go in looking at Reagan, the [more I see that] there is no change in his views. It just doesn’t happen.”<sup>7</sup> Reagan himself noted in 1979 that “I am what I always have been and I intend to remain that way.”<sup>8</sup>

This book demonstrates this truth, that Reagan’s views were extremely consistent over time, arguably more so than those of any other major political figure in modern American history. If Reagan’s ideas sometimes seem repetitive, it’s because he was being true to a set of core beliefs that he maintained with little change over his long life.

It must be noted that, solely for the ease of the reader, Reagan’s writing occasionally has been polished just a bit. Reagan often but not absolutely consistently used his own shorthand in his notes, diaries, and other handwritten drafts, and in almost all cases I have expanded this shorthand strictly in the sense that Reagan meant, so that “Cong.” becomes “Congress,” “pol.” is “political” or “politics” as the context dictates. In any possible case of ambiguity, the original has been left verbatim. I have tried to preserve Reagan’s emphasis on certain words and phrases that he conveyed usually with underlining; I’ve used italics in these cases. Obvious spelling and punctuation errors have been corrected, and I’m confident Reagan would have approved.

In this regard, a special note must be made of Reagan’s old-fashioned and quaint use in his diaries of “h--l” for “hell,” “d--n” for “damn” (itself short for “damned”), and so forth. These have been expanded into the

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<sup>7</sup> See Martin Anderson’s December 2001 interview with the Reagan Presidential Oral History Project of the University of Virginia’s Miller Center at [millercenter.org/scripps/archive/oralhistories/Reagan](http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/oralhistories/Reagan).

<sup>8</sup> See the quotations under “Self-Awareness.”

course words Reagan knew well, and used orally on occasion (though not in the presence of ladies), and it is hoped the delicate reader will not be too shocked.

**About Sources.** I have benefited from several trips to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California; like all presidential libraries, it is part of the U.S. government's National Archives and Records Administration. Most of the quotations in this book can be found in the holdings of the Reagan Library, particularly in the Pre-Presidential archives that contain, *inter alia*, valuable material written by Reagan in his own hand. In these files, for example, can be found the radio addresses Reagan composed himself in the mid to late 1970s; these were commentaries broadcast as many as five times a week over most of a five-year period, with breaks when Reagan was campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976 and after he announced himself as a presidential candidate in November 1979. Everyone close to Reagan knew, and all scholars must recognize on the basis of the original drafts, that Reagan himself wrote the radio addresses.<sup>9</sup>

The immense amount of letters Reagan wrote in his lifetime—some 10,000 by one estimate, and about 500 a year in the period 1975-80—are another trove of “authentic Reagan.” Though of course less substantive than the hundreds of radio commentaries, the letters provide little windows, over a greater span of time, into how Reagan thought about the great issues of his time and, perhaps more important to him, about people.

Dates for material are occasionally not evident, so in these cases generally I've tried to make a best guess based on context, corroborating events, or proximate archival material. The dates indicated for the material from Reagan's radio commentaries generally reflect when they were taped, not aired (Reagan often taped several in a day), except for those marked with just the month and year, the estimated date of the draft.<sup>10</sup> In rare cases the source remains undated.

In addition to material found in the Reagan Library archives, I made use of the second of Reagan's two autobiographies, *An American Life* (1990). Some might object that Reagan employed a professional writer to

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<sup>9</sup> Cannon, pp. 437 and 544 (footnote 1).

<sup>10</sup> For the circumstances and context of the radio commentaries, see Kiron Skinner, et al, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, pp. xiv-xxiii and 503-504.

help him. But as methodologists and political scientists have demonstrated,<sup>11</sup> the authenticity of Reagan's words—those narratives he really wrote—can be identified with confidence, when compared systematically with the texts for which we have indisputable evidence of his authorship. My own methodology, based on this principle, involved admitting from the 1990 autobiography those passages consistent with that body of acknowledged Reagan provenance as to be without doubt “authentic Reagan,” but only after going through the Reagan letters, diaries, and radio addresses. (Reagan himself says *An American Life* is in his own words, though he had “a great deal of help.”)

The memoirs and oral histories of those who served with Reagan and interacted with him have provided another stream of “authentic Reagan.” I have also benefited from the many scholars and others who have produced histories and biographies that are valuable secondary source materials.

Because not everyone will have the opportunity to visit the Reagan Library and peruse the material there, the reader is encouraged to read the marvelous works listed in the bibliography so as to enjoy the fullness of Reagan's thought as expressed in a way that goes beyond this collection of quotations, as useful as I hope it to be.

In selecting the quotations and placing them into categories, I have tried to reflect Reagan's own interests and passions. Inevitably, my own perspectives influenced my choices, and for that I beg the reader's understanding. Chalk up any omissions to my lack of imagination or my conservative biases, and I bear the responsibility for any errors in transcription or sourcing.

**Acknowledgements.** At the Reagan Presidential Library, I benefited from the assistance of Duke Blackwood and Mike Duggan. I thank also the Provost of The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Dr. Andrew Abela, for offering me a teaching position after my retirement from federal service—an opportunity that allowed me to complete this book and finally get it published. At Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Adam Rummens was the man who made this book possible, for which I am grateful. Because a book like this is all about education, I pledge

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<sup>11</sup> Edoardo M. Airoidi, Stephen E. Feinberg, and Kiron K. Skinner, “Whose Ideas? Whose Words? Authorship of Ronald Reagan's Radio Addresses,” *PSOnline* (July 2007), at [www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org).

that any profits from its sale will go to benefit Catholic University programs and students. My deepest gratitude goes to my wife, Catherine Dujmovic, and our sons Nicholas and John, who tolerate my interests with good humor and *hardly ever* say, “There you go again!”

Nicholas Dujmovic  
Vienna, Virginia



## A IS FOR

- Abortion
- Accountability
- Acting
- Age
- America & Americans
- Arms Control

### Abortion

*Before formally entering politics in 1966, Reagan apparently did not give much thought to the issue of abortion, and he started his political life conflicted on the issue. He then treated it like any issue he wished to learn more about, applying his characteristic focus and diving deeply into the issue, and he came away convinced that abortion is wrong. Despite the potential political benefits of finding accommodation or compromise or a moderate position, he ended up squarely in the pro-life camp. Reagan preferred to side with Mother Teresa than with the supporters of the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision. And he even wrote a short but powerful book about it.*

**See also: Faith & Religion, Self-Awareness**

“I am satisfied in my own mind we can morally and logically justify liberalized abortions to protect the health of a mother. I cannot justify the taking of an unborn life simply on the supposition that the baby may be born less than a perfect human being.”

—Remarks at a press conference on draft legislation liberalizing abortions in California, May 1967. Reagan also admitted his mind was not clear on this issue and he needed more study. His views over time would become more uncompromising.

“I have never done more study on any one thing than on the abortion bill. . . You can't allow an abortion on grounds that the child won't be born perfect. Where do you stop? What is the degree of deformity that a person shouldn't be born?”

—Interview, 1968, in which Reagan explained his signing of a liberal abortion law as governor of California allowing for abortion in cases of rape, incest, or if the physical or mental health of the mother were at stake. Reagan would have vetoed the bill as originally drafted, which allowed

babies in the womb with deformities to be aborted, and later, distressed at the explosion in abortions, claimed he didn't realize that the "loophole" for mental health would be taken advantage of.

"If, with pregnancy, a window appeared in a woman's body so that she could look at her own child develop, I wonder at what point she would decide it was all right to kill it."

—Letter, late 1970.

"Eight years ago, when I became governor [of California], I found myself involved almost immediately in a controversy over abortion. It was a subject I'd never given much thought to, and one upon which I didn't really have an opinion. But now I was governor, and abortion turned out to be something I couldn't walk away from. A bill had been introduced in the California legislature to make abortion available upon demand. . . I did more studying and soul searching on this matter than on any thing that was to face me as governor. . .

I went to the lawyers on my staff and posed a hypothetical question. What if a pregnant woman became a widow during her pregnancy and found her husband had left his fortune to her and the unborn child. Under the proposed abortion law, she could take the life of her child and inherit not half but all of her husband's estate. Wouldn't that be murder for financial gain? The only answer I got was that they were glad I wasn't asking the questions on the bar exam. . .

An abortion is the taking of a human life. In our Judeo-Christian religion we recognize the right to take life in defense of our own. Therefore, an abortion is justified when done in self defense. My belief is that a woman has the right to protect her own life and health against even her own unborn child. I believe also that just as she has the right to defend herself against rape, she should not be made to bear a child resulting from that violation of her person, and therefore abortion is an act of self defense.

I know there will be disagreement with this view, but I can find no evidence whatsoever that a fetus is not a living human being with human rights."

—Radio commentary "Abortion Laws," April 1975. Reagan's view on "abortion as self-defense" becomes less permissive after this.

"I personally believe that interrupting a pregnancy is the taking of a human life and can only be justified in self-defense, that is, if the mother's own life is in danger."

—Letter to Henry Hyde, July 1979.

“My position is that interrupting a pregnancy means the taking of a human life. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, that can only be done in self-defense. Therefore, I agree to an abortion only to protect the life of the mother. . . There is no way I could or would change my position with regard to my opposition to the permissive abortion that is taking place throughout our land.”

—Letter to a columnist who suggested Reagan might change his position on abortion, 11 October 1979. That same day Reagan wrote another letter saying “I am very much in favor of an amendment, if that is what is necessary, to curb the abortion on demand that we have in so much of the country.”

“No, John, I’ve thought it over. I’ve really given serious consideration and I now believe that abortion is murder. . . [throwing glasses down] Listen, John, damn it, I’m running for President, you’re not, and this is my position. Do you get it?”

—To campaign chairman John Sears, who was telling candidate Reagan in December 1979 that regardless of his private views Reagan would have to take a more moderate position. Sears was eventually replaced by William Casey.

“I know that many well-intentioned, sincerely motivated people believe that government intervention violates a woman’s right of choice. And they would be right if there were any proof that the unborn are not living human beings. Medical evidence indicates to the contrary and, if that were not enough, how do we explain the survival of babies who are born prematurely, some very prematurely? We once believed that the heart didn’t start beating until the fifth month. But as medical instrumentation has improved, we’ve learned the heart was beating long before that. Doesn’t the constitutional protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness extend to the unborn unless it can be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that life does not exist in the unborn?”

—Self-drafted portion of his remarks to the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, 31 January 1981.

“My position has not changed. I consider the unborn child a living human being, and an abortion is the taking of a human life. This, in my view, can only be justified, as it always has been within our tradition, in defense of the mother’s life.”

—Letter to a critic in Illinois, 3 August 1981.

“I have not weakened in my belief that interrupting a pregnancy means the taking of a human life. Indeed, the recent hearings in the Congress to establish if possible when life actually begins did nothing but strengthen my conviction regarding this taking of the human life. If experts of every persuasion were unable in those lengthy hearings to determine just when life began, then it seems to me they strengthened our case. If there is that much question, then simple humanity suggests that we opt for life until someone can definitely prove that life does not exist.”

—Letter to an Illinois state legislator, 30 September 1981.

“Final meeting [today] was with pro-life representatives, for planning how we are going to get rid of this abortion monster.”

—Diary entry for 21 January 1983.

“Ended afternoon by calling Mr. and Mrs. Carl Rossow in Connecticut. This couple had adopted 12 children—all as deformed or handicapped babies, the kind who usually are victims of infanticide. I talked to them and to all the children. You could feel the love and joy that is in that household. If ever one needed proof that God has a purpose for each one of us, let them meet the Rossows.”

—Diary entry for 9 March 1983.

“Called a woman in Peoria, Illinois who had wired after the State of the Union [address]. Her complaint was over freedom of choice. She was referring to abortion, and she called herself an ex-Republican who wouldn’t vote for me. I was going to write her and then just on a hunch I phoned. It took a little doing to convince her it was really me. We had a nice talk, and I was right—her problem was abortion. I made my pitch that there were two people’s rights involved in abortion, the mother’s and the unborn child’s. She promised to give that some deep thought. We had a nice visit [and] I think I made a friend.”

—Diary entry for 4 February 1984.

“Who are those who would have us believe such children shouldn’t be allowed to live?”

—Diary entry after meeting with the Easter Seal poster child, 14 February 1984.

“My belief [is] that abortion on demand is the taking of a human life unless and until someone can prove the unborn child is not a living being.”

—Letter to liberal activist Norman Lear, 22 May 1984.

“Phoned and addressed about 71,000 Right to Life people down on the Ellipse. . . Met with Right to Life leaders. Thanks to modern science (ultrasound) they have filmed inside the womb a baby being aborted. . . I scheduled a showing for tonight. . . The movie (28 minutes) was most impressive, and how anyone could deny that the fetus is a living human being is beyond me.”

—Diary entry for 22 January 1985.

“You mentioned abortion. Let me state just unequivocally what I feel about it. And I don’t feel that I’m trying to do something that is taking a privilege from womanhood, because I don’t think that a woman should be considering murder a privilege. . . Is the unborn child a living human being? Now, every bit of the medical evidence that I have come across says that it is. Then you’re taking a human life. Now, in our society and under our law, you can only take a human life in defense of your own. And I would respect very much the right of a prospective mother—if told that her life is in danger if she goes through with a pregnancy, then that is an entirely different situation. But until someone can prove medically that the unborn is not a living human being, I think we have to consider that it is.”

—Response to an interview question about Supreme Court nominees and “litmus tests,” 24 June 1986.

## Accountability

*Personal accountability is the combined result of an individual’s basic honesty, humility, desire for justice, and sense of duty. Reagan had all these, and consequently he knew that the buck stopped with him. Other leaders, including quite unfortunately some American presidents, have tried to pass the buck when difficulties arise.*

**See also: Leadership, Self-Awareness**

“Compromising with truth, no matter how trivial, does something to us. The next time it serves our purpose we do it again, and one day we find ourselves in trouble and we’re not quite sure why or how.”

—Letter to his 15-year old daughter Patti, 5 March 1968.

“If I’m going to walk in another man’s shoes, then I should face him one-on-one, so the American people can hear our differing views of the presidency and judge between us.”

—To aides, concerning a debate with President Carter, October 1980.

“I’ll take full responsibility for this gamble.”

—On accepting large deficits because of defense spending in order to win the Cold War, early 1980s.

“No, I’m not going to do that. If it happens—God forbid—I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying here at my post.”

—To briefers of the “continuity of government” plan, which foresaw whisking away the new president to a safe location in the event of a strategic nuclear attack, January 1981.

“The buck stops at my desk. I’m the originator of the whole thing, and I’m not going to deny it wasn’t handled as well as it could be.”

—Response to a reporter’s question about Reagan’s decision to support certain Christian colleges that practiced segregation—a fact unknown to Reagan—in these schools’ efforts to obtain tax exemptions from the IRS, 19 January 1982. He backed away from reversing the policy.

“I want to sit here in the office. Getting into the helicopter is George’s job.”

—Response to aides who wanted the President to leave the White House if nuclear war seemed imminent, June 1982. George is Vice President Bush.

“I have no one but me to blame for the first [debate with Walter Mondale]. I’ve been hearing all those phony figures of his, and I looked to that first debate as a time to rebut. I had crammed like for a final exam and knew I was flat when the debate started. In sports they call it leaving your fight in the locker room.”

—Letter to conservative publisher Nacky Loeb, 26 October 1983. Reagan’s first debate with Mondale was on 11 October, and the second had been on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Reagan accepted Loeb’s criticism of his performance in the first debate and wrote “I hope the second debate made up for it a little.” In any case, he refused to place the blame on staff for “overpreparing” him, as some wanted to do.

“I did not think of the operation [what became the Iran-Contra affair] (and never have) as an ‘arms-for-hostage’ deal, because it wasn’t. Cap [Weinberger] and George [Shultz] had both had experience in prior administrations. I couldn’t ignore their warning that if word about the initiative leaked out, it would be misinterpreted—but I just felt that the opportunities involved justified taking the chance. I didn’t expect the plan to fail, but if it did, I was prepared to take the heat.”

—In his memoir, recalling White House debate over the Iran initiative in early 1986.

“I’ll be damned if I’ll throw somebody else out to save my own ass.”

—To political advisors who were counseling a change in the White House staff, 1987.

“George, I’ll say in public that you opposed it. If it goes wrong, I’ll say I was wrong. The only alternative is to send in troops. . . All those who oppose can go on the record as opposing it.”

—To Vice President Bush during a White House meeting on what to do about Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, 19 May 1988. Bush and nearly all senior administration officials disagreed with Reagan, who planned on withdrawing Noriega’s indictment for drug trafficking in exchange for Noriega’s agreement to leave Panama, 21 May 1986.

## Acting

*All of us have our frames of reference that help us deal with whatever life deals us. In Reagan’s case, naturally enough, it was his career as an actor. Acting enhanced and refined skills that he already had and that would serve him well in politics. Any political leader wants to speak with coherence and confidence, to connect with a crowd, to be able to internalize his or her “lines” (material that can be drawn from memory on “cue” as needed), to stand and physically move without awkwardness, and even simply to anticipate camera angles. Reagan’s acting experience facilitated his leadership abilities and gave him tools that made him the envy of most professional politicians. It’s ironic that Reagan always wanted more serious roles than the lighthearted ones he generally got during his acting career—and look what happened.*

**See also: Heroes, the Media, Politics, Riposte, Self-Awareness**

“Summoning my courage, I walked up to the stage that night, cleared my throat, and made my theatrical debut. I don’t remember what I said, but I’ll never forget the response: People laughed and applauded. That was a new experience for me and I liked it. I liked that approval. For a kid suffering childhood pangs of insecurity, the applause was music. I didn’t know it then, but, in a way, when I walked off the stage that night, my life had changed. . . By the time I was a [high school] senior, I was so addicted to student theatrical performances that you couldn’t keep me out of them.”

—From his memoir, 1990. Reagan was about ten years old or so and very shy when his mother persuaded him to give a dramatic short speech to her church group.

“I’d rather act than anything else.”

—From his weekly letter to the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, 16 April 1937. Reagan’s weekly series chronicled his experiences as a neophyte in Hollywood.

“Why did you hire me?”

—Dejected response to Warner Brothers’ casting director after seeing his first screen test, May 1937. Even so, the studio quickly cast him as the star in his first film, *Love is On the Air*.

“When I first came to Warner Brothers, to the movies . . . well, they threw me to the ‘B’s. I made twenty to twenty-five ‘B’s before I got the part of Gipp in *Knute Rockne – All American*. Thanks to some good advice from a guy named Pat O’Brien, I played those ‘B’s as if they were ‘A’s. You see, the boss only goes by results. If I do a part carelessly because I doubt its importance, no one is going to write a subtitle explaining that Ronald Reagan didn’t feel the part was important, therefore he didn’t give it very much. All my boss knows is what he sees on the film and someday he may look at that particular picture to judge my qualifications for a real film job.”  
—“How to Make Yourself Important,” essay for *Photoplay* magazine, August 1942. Reagan many times in his life quipped about the “B” films, which took only a few weeks to make, that “the studio didn’t want movies good, it wanted them Thursday.”

“Of late there have been ‘gossip items’ indicating you intend to star someone else in this story. Naturally I put no stock in these rumors—I know you too well to ever think you’d break your word.”

—Letter to Warner Brothers executive Jack Warner, 3 May 1950. In this case, Warner did break his word and cast Errol Flynn as the lead in *Rocky Mountain*.

“If this letter gets through, tell all actors in the *free* world about this Siberia of thespians. Day after day in basement rehearsal halls we work and slave, and in the few seconds of quiet between cues we can hear our ulcers growing. Mine is almost big enough to play a supporting part now but it is holding out for pictures.”

—Letter to Nancy Davis while working in television in New York City, 5 December 1950.

“We [in the movie industry] are pretty proud of the fact that our government says in the ideological struggle that is going on in the world, it is the



American motion picture, just showing our store windows in the street scenes with things that Americans can buy, our parking lots, our streets with automobiles, our shots of American working men driving these automobiles, that is holding back the flood of propaganda from the other side of the Iron Curtain.”

—“Motion Pictures and Your Community,” speech delivered to the Kiwanis International convention in St. Louis, Missouri, June 1951.

“I don’t know. I’ve never played a governor before.”

—Self-deprecating response to the question “what kind of governor would you be?” before Reagan’s run for the California governorship, 1966. Reagan came up with this line and used it against the advice of political advisors.

“In my mind, I had agreed to something that would only last until November. . . until I said, ‘Wait a minute! If I win this damn thing, I’m out of show business! I’m in politics!’”

—Remembering his state of mind during the 1966 campaign for governor of California, to biographer Edmund Morris, 4 November 1987.

“While I’m trying to play the ‘Good guy,’ the script is written so that most of the time I feel out-numbered.”

—Letter to his former agent William Meiklejohn on the stresses of “this new part” as governor of California, 31 July 1967.

“I’m proud of having been an actor.”

—Interview, 1968.

“This job is so challenging and so exciting that I haven’t missed my other profession at all.”

—Letter to a young constituent while governor of California, late 1960s.

“Notice that none of them knows what to do with their arms and hands. It’s one of the hardest things to do right when you’re making a speech. The only way to look natural on a stage is to hold your hands and arms in a way that does not feel natural. What you have to do is just let your arms hang by your side, straight down. Then you curl your fingers so that they just cup your thumb. It feels uncomfortable, but you look relaxed and at ease. It’s something I learned a long time ago in Hollywood from an expert on public speaking.”

—To campaign aides, watching a rebroadcast of a debate between Republican presidential candidates, early 1980. Reagan pointed to the video

images of Howard Baker with his hands in his pockets, George Bush with his arms across his chest, and John Anderson with his hands behind his back.

“One thing I learned as an actor was that once the billing is set you don’t pull out.”

—To pollster Richard Wirthlin, who was trying to get Reagan to cancel his scheduled appearance in Neshoba County, Mississippi—where three civil rights activists had been murdered in 1964, August 1980. The actor should have listened to the political advice, as he was criticized severely for that appearance.

“I’m going to say something that I’ve dreamed of saying to an audience like this sometime, in the presence of these wonderful people. If it is true that when the curtain goes up on eternity, all men must approach the gates bearing in their arms that which they have given to life, the people of show business will march in the procession carrying in their arms the pure pearl of tears, the gold of laughter, and the diamonds of stardust they spill on what otherwise might have been a rather dreary world. And when at last all reach the final stage, I’m sure the keeper will say, ‘Let my children in.’”

—To the performers at his inaugural gala, 19 January 1981.

“I’d like to do that scene again—starting at the hotel.”

—Note to a nurse at George Washington University Hospital, after the assassination attempt of 30 March 1981.

“Suddenly I was talking to an audience of profiles. Everyone was watching the boys and their calf. I couldn’t resist, I said ‘You know, I once learned you should never do a scene with kids or an animal.’ It got a laugh—and the audience back.”

—Diary entry for 21 March 1983. Reagan had found himself upstaged at a speaking event at the Agriculture Department by two small boys and their calf (a 4-H project).

“Take it from an ex-actor, there are ways to help with your lines. One way is when you are walking, lying in bed awake, or just sitting around, try to mentally recite your lines. Don’t say them aloud—just think them and see if you can remember them. That, of course, won’t take the place of actually saying and rehearsing them. It will be added to that.”

—Letter to seven-year-old Ruddy Hines, a Washington D.C. child who was Reagan’s pen-pal for four years, 10 December 1984. Some time later,

Reagan wrote Ruddy, “I’m glad you found acting fun, I know I always did even though I was making my living doing it.”

“Thanks for your good letter and that most generous review of my performance in Geneva. I must say I enjoyed playing the part, and the show did have something of a happy ending. Maybe I should say—’tune in next year for the second installment.”

—Letter to old friend and former actor George Murphy on Reagan’s first meeting with Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev, 19 December 1985. Reagan goes on to say, “Seriously . . . it would be foolish to believe the leopard will change his spots.”

“Well, in a few months I’m going to be out of a job and looking for a new one, so I thought I’d start by auditioning here.”

—To Chicago Cubs announcer Harry Carey during a visit to Wrigley Field, late 1988.

“There have been times in this office when I’ve wondered how you could do the job if you hadn’t been an actor.”

—To David Brinkley of ABC News, 22 December 1988.

“I don’t think you can be a performer without liking people. You like the audience, you want to please the audience. . . You can’t always dictate the stage of life upon which you will perform.”

—Interviews of 10 February and 5 May 1989.

“Some of my critics over the years said I became President because I was an actor who knew how to give a good speech. Well, I suppose that’s not too far wrong, because an actor knows two important things—to be honest in what he’s doing, and to be in touch with the audience. That’s not bad advice for a politician, either. My actor’s instincts simply told me to speak the truth as I saw it and felt it. . .

Let me [tell] you how an actor like myself started giving speeches in the first place. If you didn’t sing or dance in the Hollywood of my day, you wound up as an after-dinner speaker. Personal appearances were part of a performer’s life. People wanted to see and hear the actors and actresses of the screen—in the flesh. . . I remember speaking about a plan that was introduced in the United States Senate to license actors. Congress would do the licensing, and only performers who met certain moral standards would be allowed to act in movies. Well, I pointed out there were two United States Senators in prison at the time, and no actors. That always got a laugh.

Gradually, the Hollywood part of my speech grew shorter and shorter, until eventually it was barely an introduction to a speech in which I exposed government's growing unfairness to the citizenry and called for action to make government once again the servant of 'We the People.'"

—Reflections on speechmaking from the start of his political career, 1989.

"As I've grown older, perhaps there's always been a little of that small boy inside me who found some reassurance in the applause and approval he first heard at nine or ten."

—From his memoir, 1990.

## Age

*Reagan entered political life when other men are considering retirement. He was nearly 56 when first inaugurated as governor of California, and of course much was made of his becoming president just before his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. Reagan's age typically concerned others, and opponents and the media alike inevitably made his age an issue in every one of his political campaigns. In Reagan's life, the number of his birthdays never seemed either to slow him down or to concern him very much at all. He did not publicly obsess about his age, except to make fun of it, because he privately didn't much care much about it. It's said that "you're as young as you feel," and with Reagan's confidence, physical health, and sunny outlook on life, in a sense he was forever a young man.*

**See also: Optimism**

"Thanks to you, I'm eight years old today."

—Note to his wife on their eighth anniversary, 4 March 1960.

"The rumor about dyeing my hair started when I was governor. My barber told me that after I left his shop people sometimes came in and asked if they could pick up a strand or two of my hair to see if the roots were gray. I'm the first person I know of who was actually happy when gray hair started growing on his head."

—Aside in his 1990 memoir.

"I've already lived 10 years longer than my life expectancy when I was born."

—Letter, 16 March 1971. Reagan was using an updated version of this quip into his second term as President, usually adding "That's a great source of annoyance to a number of people."

“Anyone who talks across the generations in the context of ‘when I was your age’ automatically makes himself one hundred and eight years old.”

—Letter to the editor of his college newspaper, who had asked for Reagan’s reminiscences of Eureka College, 1974.

“Middle-age is when you’re faced with two temptations and you choose the one that will get you home at 9:30.”

—At his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday party, 6 February 1977.

“Someday I’ll show you the picture we keep in the attic which keeps on getting older.”

—Letter to *National Review* editor William F. Buckley, Jr., 24 November 1979. A reference to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

“There’s a chronological age—the number of years between the birth and death of a person. There’s a physiological age also: what is your physical condition, what are your mental faculties, and all. I sometimes would like to ask some of those people how old they say they were if they didn’t know how old they are. Right now I don’t know of anything that I did fifteen or twenty years ago that I’m not doing the same as I did then. . . And maybe there’s a place today for a little maturity and experience.”

—Response to a question about critics suggesting he was too old to run for president, on William F. Buckley’s television program *Firing Line*, 14 January 1980.

“And I’m one of the few persons old enough to remember that.”

—In a Republican primary debate in Chicago, noting that price controls had not worked during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian, 13 March 1980.

“Now you can tell everyone I don’t dye my hair.”

—To nurse Carolyn Ramos in the Intensive Care Unit at George Washington University Hospital, who brushed his hair and helped him brush his teeth the day after the assassination attempt, 31 March 1981.

“With this birthday I finally reached par (72); now the object of the game is to see how many strokes over par I can achieve.”

—Letter to his brother Neil and his wife, 22 February 1983. Turned out to be 21, as in the 21-gun salute he received at his funeral in 2001.

“You know, that brings me to a story—almost everything does. Maybe I’ve told this story to you before, but then you’ll just have to hear it again, because life not only begins at forty but so does lumbago and the tendency to tell the same story over and over again.”

—Quip at a White House ceremony, November 1983.

“What the devil would a young fellow like me do if I quit the job?”

—Response to a journalist’s question, whether Reagan would really commit to serving all four years of a second term or whether he would step down after a year or two because of his age, 14 June 1984.

“I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”

—Defusing the age issue during a presidential debate with Democratic challenger Walter Mondale, 21 October 1984. Mondale laughed with everyone else.

“Off to Bethesda Naval Hospital for my annual check-up. I’m so healthy I had a hard time not acting smug.”

—Diary entry for 8 March 1985. No one would blame him a bit.

“It isn’t true that I don’t trust anyone under 70.”

—Quip at a press conference when asked about the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who was “of a different generation,” 14 March 1985.

“Coming down the coast in the helicopter, I watched for landmarks I remembered and was a little upset when I could locate them and then couldn’t remember their names.”

—Diary entry for 26 August 1986, during a California vacation.

“I’ve been 39 years old 38 times now and still find it most enjoyable, especially when you consider the alternative.”

—Letter to Walter Annenberg, 18 March 1988.

“History’s no easy subject. Even in my day it wasn’t, and we had so much less of it to learn then.”

—Favorite quip to schoolchildren during his presidency.

“Dear Mike: We’ve been saying goodbye to these rooms in the White House where we’ve enjoyed such pleasant living these eight years. I just have to