



The February Presidents Portraits in Presidential Greatness

While February is one of the *dead months*, it has made a unique contribution to American history. Of the four U.S. presidents born in February, only the 9th president, William Henry Harrison, failed to produce anything more than a footnote in history. His 32-day presidency and the subsequent presidency of his grandson Benjamin pale in comparison with the historical greatness attributed to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and now Ronald Reagan as his history unfolds on the centennial of his birth.

Presidential Leveling

For generations Americans commemorated the birthdays of arguably its greatest presidents, Washington and Lincoln in February. This all changed in 1968 when Congress passed the Uniform Monday Holiday Act that combined their birthdays into a more generic national celebration, known as *Presidents' Day*.

Many feel that the day should honor the office of the Presidency and all the men that have served as president. Since the change the country has been inundated with the plethora of ads, commercials and public pandering, celebrating the presidencies of anyone of the 43 men who held the office.

As a result, the day has lost much of its symbolic meaning. The patriotic element that revered America's exceptional presidents, Washington and Lincoln, has been submerged in a flood of generic commercial ads. Washington's birthday traditionally included patriotic parades and festivities that reminded people of the greatness of the man and the heroic origins of the nation. Similarly, Lincoln's birthday reminded all Americans of his historic role in the nation's history during its Civil War.

On a darker side, *President's Day* has an aura of *political correctness* that denigrates the greatness of both Washington and Lincoln. Thanks to President's Day the accomplishments of a Millard Fillmore, Warren Harding or a Jimmy Carter receive the same adulation as those of Washington or Lincoln. This reduces the exceptionalism of America's great leaders to a mediocre pack of collectivism.

An Experiment in liberty

Presidential greatness is often defined by the magnitude and depth of events that challenged a president during his term of office. The first of any new organization, let alone a

new nation, deserves a special place for all the challenges that creating something new entails. Historians have written volumes, attempting to categorize the degree of difficulties that the nation's first president endured. It is an indisputable fact that had it not been for Washington, America might never have survived its infancy.

Washington was the dominant military and political leader of his times. He led the colonists to victory over Great Britain in America's Revolutionary War. When the founding fathers first met in Philadelphia to address the struggling colonies' needs, there was a great diversity of opinions, embedded in geography, economics, religion and politics. For five long months, George Washington not only held his colleagues together, but also kept them focused until the Constitution was written and approved.

Therefore it is no exaggeration to call Washington *the father of his country*. It came as no surprise that he was the natural choice to serve as the country's first president in 1789. As the nation's only unanimous choice to serve as President of the United States, Washington developed the forms and rituals of government that have been usually used ever since, such as using a cabinet system and delivering an inaugural address.

Washington swiftly quelled the nascent nation's early internal rebellion, the infamous Whiskey Rebellion in 1796. He presided over a strong, well-financed national government that avoided war and won a modicum of international acceptance. Rightfully, he became the first national icon who was as well known for his exemplar character as he was for his military and political leadership. Washington refused to run for a third term, thus establishing a political tradition that lasted until 1940. After his historic *Farewell Address* where he wisely warned the country against *entangling alliances* abroad, he retired to his Mount Vernon farm where he died in 1799.

A Divided House

While Washington had to contend with the rigors of establishing a new nation, in the wake of a violent revolution, Abraham Lincoln walked into a national hornet's nest that eventually killed over 600,000 of its inhabitants. As the country's 16th president, he successfully led the country through its greatest internal crisis, preserved the Union, and sowed the seeds of liberty for the end of slavery.

Lincoln's humble origins on the western frontier, his extreme height, gangly limbs and homely visage, all marked him as an outsider. Despite his lack of formal education, Lincoln became a successful country lawyer, an Illinois state legislator, and a one-term member of the United States House of Representatives. His unlikely rise to the presidency is a case study in political determination, serendipity and Divine Providence.

Lincoln was truly destined to be a man for the ages and the country's *divided house* gave him the opportunity to test his mettle against the consuming flames of rebellion and disunity. Both slavery and its derivative civil war defined Lincoln's presidency. As early as the 1850s, a time when most political rhetoric focused on the sanctity of the Constitution, Lincoln redirected the people's attention to the Declaration of Independence, which he believed provided the brick and mortar for the foundation of American political values. The Declaration's emphasis on *freedom and equality* for all, rather than the Constitution's pragmatic tolerance of slavery, shifted the internal debate. His Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 led to the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery, eventually making the Declaration more of a reality.

Lincoln's Legacy

Lincoln believed in a strong central government that became even more necessary with the outbreak of war in 1861. A man of strong leadership, Lincoln recruited leaders of both parties, his veritable *team of rivals*, for his cabinet and pressured them to cooperate. He closely supervised the war effort, especially the selection of top generals. Lincoln believed the Constitution was a contract that the South could not void without the expressed approval of the other signatories. His vigorous exercise of unprecedented war powers, including the arrest and detention, without trial, of thousands of suspected secessionists, inadvertently made him a forerunner for the big government presidents of the 20th century.

Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* is one of the most often quoted speeches in history. It was delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863. In his succinct and prescient document in 272 words, and three minutes, Lincoln asserted the nation was born, not with passage of the Constitution, but with the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which was *dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal*.

On April 14, 1865, five days after the end of the Civil War Robert E. Lee surrendered to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Lincoln attended a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre in Washington where disgruntled actor John Wilkes Booth shot him in the head and he died. Historians speculate that had Lincoln finished his second term, the country could have avoided the racial and political divide that has plagued it since his assassination. As the nation's first martyred president, Lincoln's memory has spawned a hagiography that has filled libraries with innumerable dissections of his contributions to history.

A Return to Greatness

Since 1865 it has taken 23 presidential administrations before anyone even approximated the stature of Washington or Lincoln. To a nation battered by Vietnam, damaged by Watergate and humiliated by the hostages in Iran, Ronald Wilson Reagan, who also was born on February 6th, held out the promise of a *return to greatness*, a return to the premise that America would *stand tall* again.

While Reagan did not have to face the extreme historic challenges of launching a new nation amid a sea of European predators, or rescue a divided country from its internal forces of destruction, he did face two uniquely different kinds of wars, namely the Cold War and the Culture War. According to author Peggy Noonan's 2001 biography of Ronald Reagan, *When Character was King*, his indefatigable optimism defined his character and his presidency. More a habit of mind, his optimism sprang from the deep confidence in the power and the future of American ideals.

Reagan strongly believed in American exceptionalism, the idea that America was created for a historic purpose, making him the mirror image of Barack Obama. He believed government should care for only those people who through no fault of their own, could not help themselves. He believed in a providential plan of God's grace that put the continent here to serve *as a beacon* to shine the light of freedom on the oppressed and enslaved peoples of the world.

The Great Communicator

Born in Tampico, Illinois Reagan graduated from Eureka College in 1932. He then moved to Iowa as a radio broadcaster and then to Los Angeles in 1937 where he became a movie star. As a young man he had listened to Franklin D. Roosevelt's and his *fireside chats* and had been impressed with the president's incurable optimism. Much of the idealism of the New Deal but none of its class warfare tactics helped to form his political convictions. As a New Deal Democrat, he got his first taste of politics in action as the president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in Hollywood where he saw first-hand the tactics of the communists to take over the movie industry.

Reagan remained a Democrat until he became a spokesman for General Electric in 1962. Like the legendary Phoenix, Reagan rose from the ashes of the Goldwater debacle in 1964 to lead the party toward what Roosevelt had called a *rendezvous with destiny*. During the next 16 years he parlayed his nominating speech at the 1964 Republican National Convention into two terms as Governor of California, two failed attempts at the presidential nomination before finally capturing it in 1980.

Many historians agree that Reagan practiced a conservatism that melded ideology with the constraints of politics. He clearly revived faith in the American legacy of freedom and honor. As president he motivated the people to revisit America's founding principles. His fluent and optimistic tones quickly earned him the appellation as *The Great Communicator*, which he quickly attributed to content rather than speaking ability.

Reagan's economic policies were founded on the twin pillars of supply-side economics and a classic laissez-faire philosophy. As a result Reagan's policies, later termed *Reaganomics*, stimulated the economy with large, across-the-board tax cuts, launching the country's first economic boom since the 1920s. They have been a benchmark of the Republican Party since the 1980s.

The Final Pages

One of Reagan's greatest accomplishments was his role in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Ever since his days as the president of SAG, Reagan never trusted the communists. He was well versed in their philosophy of world domination, as proclaimed in the writings of Marx and Lenin. He knew that the Soviets still held as their main objective a world revolution that would result in a universal communist state. Reagan also realized their philosophy was based on atheism and moral relativism.

Reagan firmly believed that Moscow was the locus of evil in the world. This led him to give a controversial speech in Orlando, Florida in 1983 where he described the Soviet Union as the *focus of evil in the world and an evil empire*. This bold statement enraged the Soviets and their sycophantic press in America. Reagan's speech was immensely popular among the subjugated behind the Iron Curtain.

By the early 1980s, the USSR had built up a military arsenal, surpassing that of the United States. This was largely due to the sanctimonious posturing of President Jimmy Carter. Reagan's missile defense plan, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was the final straw in the Soviet coffin. The Soviets knew they could never compete with American technology. Ridiculed by Senator Ted Kennedy and the partisan press as the fantasy-driven *Star Wars*, SDI forced the communists to compete in an arms race that eventually bankrupted them and led to their final collapse in 1991.

The Walls of Jericho

Reagan's religious faith was enigmatic. His father was an apathetic Catholic who left the religious education of his two children to his wife, Nelle, a deeply devout Disciple of Christ. What is little understood is that Reagan had a deep sense of the prayerful presence of God. His writings and personal reflections revealed a man who *talked to God all the time*.

Even though Reagan was a Presbyterian, Catholicism seemed to envelope him, especially when he became president. His older brother Neil was a Catholic. In the White House he was surrounded with Catholics such as CIA Director William J. Casey, speechwriter Tony Dolan, Secretary of State Al Haig,

Ambassador Vernon Walters, and others. Their strong anti-communist feelings solidified their bond like a religion.

On one issue Reagan was even more Catholic than many Catholics and that was abortion. As Governor of California, he had regrettably signed an abortion bill because of California's political realities. Abortion was the linchpin of the Culture War and Reagan always knew that unborn children were living human beings deserving of respect and protection. He agreed with Mother Teresa *the greatest misery of our time is the generalized abortion of children*.

On March 30, 1981, Reagan almost died at the hands of a crazed assassin, John Hinckley. He was certain God had spared his life for a larger purpose. His thoughts were reaffirmed in June when the Reagans dined with Mother Teresa, who told him that she and her sisters had *stayed up for two straight nights praying for you after you were shot*. She believed that he had *suffered the passion of the cross and had received grace*...

In June of 1982, Reagan had an even more powerful encounter with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. Their shared hatred of communism and their mutual near assassinations had provided them with a common bond that transcended their religious differences. The pope was overjoyed when Reagan became the first president to extend official diplomatic recognition to the Vatican, a move long resisted by previous presidents.

On their close brush with death, only six weeks apart, both agreed that God had spared their lives for a special mission, which they came to see as the defeat of godless communism. They agreed that the Polish Solidarity movement *could be the wedge to bring the Iron Curtain crashing down like the Walls of Jericho*.

Reagan lived longer than any other American president. He spent his final years in seclusion, coping with the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. In a handwritten letter, 10 years before his 2004 death, he phrased his demise in Reaganesque terms. *I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life*. With characteristic optimism and humility he reaffirmed his belief that for America *there will always be a bright dawn ahead*. An underhanded tribute to his legacy is the *Reagan antithesis*, Barack Obama's brazen attempt to repudiate every aspect of the *Reagan Revolution*.



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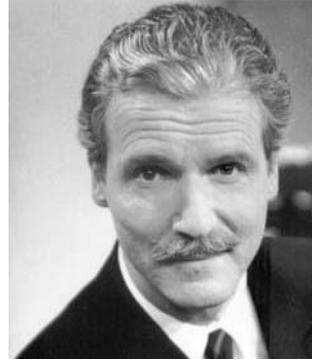
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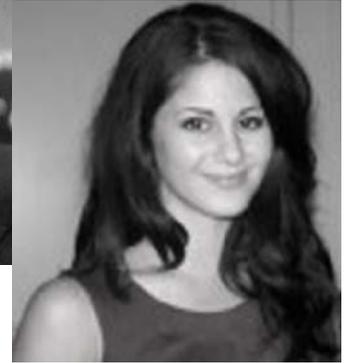
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Be kind to one another, and merciful, generously forgiving one another, as also God in Christ has generously forgiven you.