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That 80's Show! – The Politics, Film, and Television of the Reagan Years

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Gable Hackett
May 2016

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Dr. Elwood Watson
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Keywords: Reagan, History, Politics, Entertainment, 1980's, Cold War

ABSTRACT

That 80's Show! – The Politics, Film, and Television of the Reagan Years

by

Gable Hackett

The 1980's were a transformative era for the United States of America. The nation had been through a very tumultuous and difficult period following the Kennedy assassination, the Vietnam War, Watergate Scandal, and recession that had plagued the late 1970's. The fortieth President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, sought to alter this direction by bringing the United States back into a conservative renaissance. He accomplished this in part by using his history in and knowledge of Hollywood. Films and television shows were used by President Reagan to paint the image he had of a better America. A return to classical, conservative family values, a strong, effective military, and the strong opposition and denunciation of communism all became synonymous with the 1980's and with Ronald Reagan. He left office as one of the most popular and successful Presidents in the history of the country and cast a shadow upon the American political scene that is still seen today.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A week before he left office in 1989, President Ronald Reagan attended a ceremonial dinner held by a Catholic group, the Knights of Malta, in New York City. The black tie affair was to honor the president for his defense of pro-life views concerning abortion. The master of ceremonies had had too much wine and decided to give some impromptu remarks thanking the president for this service in defending human life that begins as “feces” (He meant fetuses). The inebriated speaker told the audience they were all “feces” at one time as was President Reagan. We were all “feces” at one point in our lives. After the dinner and subsequent return to Air Force One for the return flight to Washington, the President sat down with his aides and staff. With the incredible timing and wit that President Reagan was renowned for, he said, “Well, that’s the first time I’ve flown to New York in formal attire to be told I was a piece of shit.”¹ This was but one of many examples that showed the wit of the fortieth President. His humor and experience as an actor in the golden age of Hollywood would allow him to use modern cultural references in film and television to great political means. He provided a template for future presidents and leaders to follow in an age where entertainment and government policy would become intertwined.

The 1980’s were a decade of change both globally and domestically for the United States. Following the 1960’s and 1970’s, Americans had grown disillusioned and were hungry for a fresh outlook from their leaders in Washington. The failures of the Vietnam War and the disillusionment from the 1960’s had led to many citizens feeling unpatriotic. Inflation was rising

¹ Robert M. Collins. *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: University Columbia Press, 2007), 2.

quickly under the administration of President Jimmy Carter. The Cold War was entering into its fifth decade. A new take on government was needed. That inspiration would be found in an unlikely source. The former governor of California, Ronald Reagan, believed he could be that source of hope and change for the nation. The man had humble roots from the Midwest where he got his start at a small college and eventually became a movie star in the golden age of Hollywood. Unlike many politicians in history, Reagan did not get involved in politics until the midpoint in his life. His rise was a rapid one though. "The nation's woes called for nothing less than a man who could turn the tide of history and renew the American spirit. In California, there was such a man."² That man would become the fortieth President of the United States, Ronald Wilson Reagan.

Reagan has become synonymous with the decade of the 1980's. His links to Hollywood were quite evident throughout his presidency. The president fully embraced films, television shows, and the rise of cable news networks that made this decade unlike any other that the American people had seen. The signature grace and charm President Reagan exuded was grandfatherly in nature. *Newsweek* said, "Few men in our history have been held in such warm regard."³ Perhaps it was this aura that made his references to the movies and television shows of the decade more memorable. Ronald Reagan would masterfully use quotes from films to paint the image he desired in a listeners head.

The image and desire of President Reagan was very simple. He demanded a return to classical, conservative family values. He believed that the 1960's had corrupted America. Liberal

² Dinesh D'Souza. *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 35.

³ Collins. *Transforming America*, 1.

views and policies had led the United States down a path that had resulted in a poor receding economy, a lost war with 50,000 casualties in Vietnam, and a lack of patriotism and pride among the citizenry. He was able to tap into these feelings of loss and failure and inspire a nation to do more. By the time he left office in 1989, the country and the world were in very different places. The campaign slogan upon which he ran in 1980 was to “Make America Great Again.” At the very least, President Reagan would leave office having Americans feeling that he had succeeded. A resurgence of pride, a strong economy, and the end of the Cold War were just but a few highlights of what the 1980’s and the Reagan administration had in store for the country.

With the help of Hollywood, Ronald Reagan would bring about a revolution of sorts. Liberal politics, since 1933, had held power in Washington. With the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, a conservative wave of policies and thinking swept the country. Using nostalgia in films like *Back to the Future* to idealize the 1950’s was one of several ways in which this return to conservative, classical values can be seen. *Top Gun*, *Red Dawn*, and *Rambo* all glorify the military and show the power of Americans against impossible and usually communist odds. *Star Wars* had people dreaming of space exploration again and the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union had to be defeated just as Darth Vader.

Television shows like *Family Ties* (1982-1989) and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) painted an image of families coping with the challenges of the day. A young, conservative teenage boy feuding with his former hippy, liberal parents in *Family Ties* showed that the new younger generation would be a conservative one. *The Cosby Show* had a wealthy, elite African American family living in New York City. No longer were African Americans struggling like in *Samford and Son* (1972-1977). Just like *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), they had “moved on up” and been

given opportunities that many believed would never come to minorities. Along with television and film, music was used at times to give the American people a feeling of patriotism and pride.

In recent years, a multitude of books have been written on President Reagan and the 1980's. I have used many of these books to contrast and compare the opinions of liberals and conservatives and their thoughts on "The Great Communicator". David Sirota, nationally syndicated newspaper columnist, Democratic political spokesperson, and author of *Back To Our Future: How the 1980's Explain the World We Live in Now – Our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything* (2011). It looks at how the greed and narcissism of the 1980's decade has led the United State politically, socially, and culturally to where it stands today. This aims its view at politics through the lens of cultural methods, primarily film and television. In a book similar to Sirota's, Robert M. Collins' *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (2007) also takes aim at the figure of Ronald Reagan and his unmistakable influence on the decade. Using ideological conservatism combined with political pragmatism, Collins believes that Reagan ended the Cold War, limited the size of the federal government (in certain areas), and brought inflation under control.

Richard Reeves' *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (2005) takes an in depth look at the administration of the United States fortieth president as well as his personal life. Reagan's history in Hollywood was formed during a conservative revival in the 1950's. A staunch anti-communist, Reagan gave birth to a new form of hyper patriotism. He does omit a few things that deserve to be covered but does tells many tales that are hard to believe. MSNBC personality and former White House and Congressional staffer Chris Matthews looks at the political aspect of Reagan in his book *Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked* (2013) and

paints the picture that despite their ideological differences, both Tip O’Neill, Democratic Speaker of the House, and President Reagan were able to compromise and guide the nation.

Goals of the Study

I will examine how shows and films of the period were used and portrayed by the Reagan administration. They had a strong, pronounced effect on all Americans. *Top Gun*, for example, was so popular that the United States Navy set up recruiting stations at movie theaters and signed up inspired moviegoers as they left the show. *Wall Street* (1987) told Americans it was okay to make money and that greed was a good thing. To have money and success is the American dream. The *Rocky* saga (first film released in 1976) painted an unflattering image of African Americans portraying them as more talented but not as hard working, determined, and tough as the white Rocky Balboa. This journey back into the 1980’s will require some back-story about the man who led the nation in this transformative decade: Ronald Reagan. By looking at Reagan’s life, it is easier to understand and relate to the 1980’s and how he viewed the problems that faced the nation. Decisions and policies of his administration will be more clear and the cultural and societal shifts will make more sense.

In the first chapter, I will give the background of President Reagan and how he ascended the political ranks to become Commander-in-Chief. His history as an actor, spokesperson for General Electric, and his foray into politics that led him to become Governor of California during the progressive, liberal movement in the 1960’s. The second chapter will focus on television shows such as *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* and how they tackled issues such as civil rights. Films like *Back to the Future* (1985) and the *Rocky* saga also approach civil rights and it was not always a bright, uplifting message. The return to a classical, conservative, family values driven society was Reagan’s ultimate goal and films like this painted that picture. Unfortunately, it was

not inclusive for the many different types of ethnicities that make up the citizens of the United States. In the third and final chapter, I will confront Reagan's greatest accomplishment: The massive military build-up that he instituted and the cultural shift in the public opinion of the military following Vietnam. Movies like *Top Gun* (1986), *Rambo* (1982), and *Red Dawn* (1984) all glorified the armed forces and drove up sagging recruitment numbers for the differing branches of the United States' military. The draft had ended in 1973 as the Vietnam War ended.

Who was Ronald Reagan? What did he do for his country? What was happening in the United States and the world in the 1980's? Why were films and television such a vital part of his administration's plans and policies? The chapters that follow address these questions so that readers may have a better understanding of the role that Hollywood and television can have on the nation. By looking at politics, culture, and society, this transformational era will be understood in a more full and complete way. To do this, we must first understand who the Great Communicator was, where he came from, and the path that led him to the White House.

CHAPTER 2

BACK TO DUTCH'S FUTURE

The fortieth President of the United States was born on February 6, 1911, in Tampico, Illinois to John Edward “Jack” Reagan and Nellie Wilson Reagan.⁴ Jack thought his son looked like a little fat Dutchman and the nickname stuck. This is where Reagan’s ever so famous nickname “Dutch” originated. Ronald’s family moved in and out of several towns throughout his childhood but finally settled down in Dixon, Illinois. His father opened a shoe store and young Ronald ended up attending Dixon High School where he excelled academically, socially, and athletically. Jack was an avid Roman Catholic but also suffered from alcoholism, which had a profound impact on Ronald growing up. One such incident that occurred was when a young Ronald had to drag his passed out father inside from the snow.⁵ Reagan’s mother was a member of the Disciples of Christ and she would raise her son in that particular sect of Christianity. Both of Ronald’s parents were strong supporters of the Democratic Party and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Ronald Reagan played several sports including football and basketball at Dixon High School. Reagan was active in school plays and recitals as well as being the student body president. During the summer months when school was out, he found work as a lifeguard for six summers on the treacherous Rock River at Dixon’s Lowell Park. According to several newspaper accounts, Reagan was credited with saving seventy-seven people from drowning.⁶ Currently,

⁴ “Ronald Reagan.” *Biography.com*, A&E Television Networks, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/ronald-reagan-9453198#related-video-gallery>.

⁵ Romesh Ratnesar. *Tear Down This Wall: A City, A President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2009), 38.

⁶ “Ronald Reagan Timeline.” NPR 2015, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/obits/reagan/timeline.html>.

there is a campaign to save the bathhouse that he worked at in an effort to preserve this early aspect of his childhood, with a statue of a young Ronald Reagan in his lifeguard uniform.⁷

Reagan graduated from Dixon High in 1928 and continued his education at Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois. Reagan continued to stand out both socially and athletically in college. He played football, was president of the student body, a member of the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity, joined the debate team, and participated in several plays. His major of economics however, was not what he focused on as he ended up with a “C” average.⁸ The football scholarship by which Reagan was accepted to the university did not cover all of his expenses. He made up for this by washing dishes at the fraternity house as well as the female dormitory houses across campus. “He also had an early taste of politics: while still a freshman he made a dramatic oration on behalf of Eureka students who were striking to restore classes that the school administration had eliminated because of financial strains caused by the Great Depression. After the strike, the college president resigned.”⁹

After graduating from Eureka College, Reagan took a job as a sports radio caster with WOC in neighboring Davenport, Iowa. Reagan’s energetic personality and smooth voice created excitement among listeners and he soon found himself with a promotion to Des Moines, Iowa with WHO, a local radio affiliate of NBC. “By 1936, he was earning a substantial salary with his recreations of Chicago Cubs baseball games and his sportscasts of Big Ten football.”¹⁰ While

⁷ Ted Gregory, “Reagan sculpture to showcase presidential hunk in trunk,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 9, 2014, accessed January 2, 2016, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-02-09/news/ct-reagan-swimsuit-statue-dixon-20140209_1_boyhood-home-rock-river-ronald-reagan-memorial-highway.

⁸ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

⁹ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

¹⁰ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

traveling with the Chicago Cubs for Spring Training, Reagan ran into a Hollywood agent and took a screen test for Warner Brothers. Warner Brothers' studios offered Reagan a two hundred dollar a week contract which he accepted. Reagan starred in fifty-two films spanning from 1937-1957. "His breakthrough film was *Knute Rockne—All American* (1940), the story of Notre Dame's legendary football coach. Rockne was played by the actor Pat O'Brien, who secured the small but vital role of George Gipp for his friend Reagan. Gipp is a talented but rakish football player who becomes terminally ill. In the movie version, Gipp on his deathbed tells Rockne: "Sometime, Rock, when the team is up against it, when things are wrong and the breaks are beating the boys, ask them to go in there with all they've got and win just one for the Gipper. I don't know where I'll be then, Rock. But I'll know about it, and I'll be happy." After he went into politics, Reagan sometimes quoted Rockne's words to rally his own followers. He told the story so often in his presidential campaigns that reporters accompanying him gave Reagan the nickname of 'The Gipper'."¹¹

Reagan met his future wife on the set of one his movies, *Brother Rat*. He married actress Jane Wyman on January 24, 1940. She was quite successful herself and was nominated for a couple of Academy Awards, one of which she won for best actress. They had a daughter, Maureen, in 1941, and later adopted a son in 1945 by the name of Michael. In what was a clear sign of things to come, Reagan was elected to the position of President of the Screen Actor's Guild for five consecutive terms and testified as a friendly witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.¹² This committee had several writers blacklisted because of communism causing them to lose jobs during the Red Scare of the late 1940's and 1950's. As

¹¹ Miller Center, "Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency."

¹² NPR, "Ronald Reagan Timeline."

Jane Wyman's career flourished, Reagan's began to come to an end. He struggled to regain the popularity of his early movies and this caused a strain to the young actor's marriage. The strain caused a rift to grow and widen among the young couple and, in 1949, after just nine years of marriage, the two divorced.

A mere three years following the divorce, Reagan remarried. This time, the marriage stuck. It was to actress Nancy Davis. This marriage would prove to last and as Reagan would state many times later on, was the best decision he ever made. Nancy gave up her acting career to marry Reagan, a fact that he never forgot and for which he always seemed to be thankful. Following his divorce and poor popularity amongst movie goers, his optimism seemed to gain a boost from his new marriage. The couple had two children: Patricia Davis in 1952 and Ronald Prescott who was born in 1958.¹³

Reagan gained much needed experience while working as the spokesperson for General Electric. He was the host and part owner of the *General Electric Theatre*. General Electric sent the dashing Ronald Reagan across the country speaking to thousands of workers in hundreds of plants and facilities. Thomas Evans, a Republican and friend of Reagan said, "Ronald Reagan developed a vision of America during his GE years. He learned to reduce his views to a few simple precepts and, as he entered politics, he went over the heads of party leaders, using the banquet circuit and television to present his powerful message. Opposition leaders often responded by coming to him to stop the flow of questions from their constituents."¹⁴ This experience that he gained during his tenure at GE directly led to many of the policies the future

¹³ NPR, "Ronald Reagan Timeline."

¹⁴ Thomas Evans, "The GE Years: What Made Reagan, Reagan," *History News Network*, accessed February 22, 2016, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/32681>.

president would enact during his administration. It also provided a platform off which his already recognizable face would remain the public spotlight.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Reagan, who already had been a part of the cavalry reserves, was called to active duty and commissioned as a second lieutenant. He suffered from poor eyesight, near sightedness to be exact, and as a result was unable to participate in active combat roles. His background as an actor allowed him to narrate propaganda films for the armed forces and he even made several patriotic movies to assist with morale during the war years from 1941-1945. As his acting career continued to wind down, Reagan became more and more active in the political scene. He was a member of the Democratic Party, as his parents had been. After Truman's second term, Reagan chose to support the Republican nominee, former Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe Dwight D Eisenhower. He supported Eisenhower for re-election in 1956 and as the nation's political party allegiances shifted, so too did Ronald Reagan's political allegiance. More frequently, Reagan identified with Republican values over Democratic values.

A Politician is Born

While President Eisenhower, due in large part to his record as a war hero, was able to garner much Democratic support for his presidency, many Democrats returned to support their party's nominee for the election of 1960: John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Reagan however, still a member of the Democratic Party, chose to support the Republican nominee for the presidency in Richard Nixon; a hardliner who fought against the spread of communism, especially in the House on Un-American Activities. Reagan did not care for Nixon but admired his stance against communism, which reminded Reagan of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's stance against Hitler's Nazi Germany. His parents had been staunch supporters of Roosevelt and his New Deal policies that allowed

Americans to maintain hope that the economy would recover. However, it would be the United States' entry into the Second World War that would finally end the Depression. When Franklin D. Roosevelt instituted the New Deal, the federal government inherited power and control over the economy that it had never garnered before. This would lead to the rise of the conservative movement that was against such a large and powerful federal government. It was in this niche that Ronald Reagan would settle and ultimately become the poster boy for the conservative movement in the country. A speech given at the 1964 GOP Convention would set Reagan on a course that would lead him to becoming the ideal Republican candidate. With the political climate shifting, Reagan soon realized he identified more with the new Republican Party rather than what the Democratic platform had begun to reiterate. Reagan believed that government had become too intrusive into citizens' lives and did not agree that this was the federal government's duty. He also wanted a harsher stance on not allowing any further Soviet expansions anywhere on the globe and believed that the Democratic party was not doing enough. It came as no surprise when, in 1962, Reagan officially switched parties. When asked about why he switched from the Democrats to the Republicans, he responded, "I didn't leave the Democratic Party. The Party left me."¹⁵

The Presidential election of 1964 would pit the incumbent Democrat, Lyndon Banes Johnson, against the GOP's Barry Goldwater. It would be this election and in particular, a speech delivered by Reagan in support of Goldwater, that would catapult him onto the national scene as the voice of the new conservative party. In Reagan's speech to the Republican Convention, he set the tone for how he would eventually lead the nation. Communism was the United States government's primary focus and Reagan established just what he thought of the Soviet Union

¹⁵ "Top 10 Political Defections: Ronald Reagan, 1962," *Time*, 2015.

and other communist nations when he said, “We're at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars, and it's been said if we lose that war, and in so doing lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.”¹⁶ Reagan also called for the reduction of government and said that the, “Party (Democratic Party) of Jefferson, Jackson, and Cleveland was going down the road under the banners of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.”¹⁷ These would be two of the main points on which Ronald Reagan’s Republican platform was built.

Following his extremely successful GOP speech, Reagan was convinced by several friends and business owners to run for California governor. The office was held by the Democratic incumbent, Edmund G. Brown or as most knew him, “Pat.” Governor Brown did not expect a tight election either. “When Brown heard Reagan might oppose him, he was at once incredulous and delighted: ‘Ronald Reagan for Governor of California?’ Brown wrote in 1970. ‘We thought the notion was absurd and rubbed our hands in gleeful anticipation of beating this politically inexperienced, right-wing extremist and aging actor in 1966’.”¹⁸ Brown, who had defeated challenger Richard Nixon a mere four years prior, believed he would easily be able to defeat Ronald Reagan as opposed to the other GOP candidate, George Christopher. Brown and his administration, believing that Reagan would be the easier opponent to defeat, were very happy when Reagan defeated Christopher and won the Republican nomination for the California

¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, "A Time for Choosing Speech," *Utexas.edu*, 1964, accessed October 7, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html>.

¹⁷ Reagan, "A Time for Choosing Speech."

¹⁸ Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press), 2004.

governor's race.¹⁹ The race for the governor's office would now begin in earnest and would pit Reagan and Brown.

Brown's campaign painted Reagan as a former actor who had no experience or business running the state of California. He was a "right winger" and Brown believed that he could do to Reagan what President Lyndon Johnson had done to Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election: label him an extremist and unfit for leadership. This attempt failed miserably. Brown then attempted to point out that Reagan had no experience in politics and government. This was also deflected by the classic wit and charm that would make Reagan so famous. He would respond that the "fresh eyes" he would provide would allow him to take a fresh perspective on fixing the problems. When asked just what kind of governor he would be Reagan responded, "I don't know, I've never played a governor."²⁰ Perhaps, more so than any other show of support in Reagan's campaign, was the endorsement of former President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower was a clear moderate conservative and when he backed Reagan, it convinced all Republicans in the state that Reagan was not an extremist nor radical in his views.²¹

A major aspect of the election which would play a pivotal role during the Reagan presidency was his stance on civil rights. Brown attempted to target this as well so that the California voters may see Reagan as an enemy of equality. Reagan had opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 just as Goldwater had on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. "According to Matthew Dallek, "He talked about those elements of civil rights he was for, so his opposition to specific

¹⁹ Miller Center, "Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency."

²⁰ Daniel Kurtzman, "Ronald Reagan Quotes," *About Entertainment*, accessed January 31, 2016, <http://politicalhumor.about.com/cs/quotethis/a/reaganquotes.htm>.

²¹ NCC Staff, "How Ronald Reagan Won His First Election," *Constitution Daily*, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://blog.constitutioncenter.org/2013/06/how-ronald-reagan-won-his-first-election/>

legislation became irrelevant.”²² The major racial debate in California during the 1966 election was a law banning racial discrimination in housing and rental sales. Enacted in 1963, the law was eventually repealed by the voters of California in 1966. The California Supreme Court saw this as unconstitutional and in turn struck down the repeal. Reagan however, promised to repeal the law if elected and Brown promised to create some modifications to it. Reagan benefitted from “white backlash” in the election.²³ Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal’s book *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and Politics* takes a look at how “white backlash, the hostile reaction of white Americans to the advancement of civil rights for racial minorities, causes whites to have fears of losing their position of power in society due to rising immigration.”²⁴ This is no different from what Reagan benefitted from as minorities, specifically African Americans, rose in their position in society to a more even playing field.

The election arrived in November and was a major landslide victory for the former actor. Winning one million more votes and fifty-seven percent of the total vote, Ronald Reagan defeated the incumbent Governor Brown and became the new governor of California.²⁵ Just like the rhetoric during his presidency, Ronald Reagan, in his gubernatorial inauguration speech on January 2, 1967, promised to “reduce the executive branch as much as is consistent with the effective provision of needed governmental services.”²⁶ Governor Reagan believed that the

²² Dallek, *The Right Moment Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*.

²³ David Kopel, “Ronald Reagan’s ‘Extremism’ and the 1966 California Gubernatorial Election,” *Encyclopedia Britannica Blog*, February 4, 2011, accessed October 11, 2015.

²⁴ Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal, *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3.

²⁵ “1966 Gubernatorial General Election Results – California,” *USA Election Atlas*, 2012, accessed October 10, 2015, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?fips=6&year=1966&f=0&off=5&elect=0>.

²⁶ Ronald Reagan, “California Governor Inaugural Address,” January 2, 1967, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed October 11, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/061287d.htm>.

government and its spending should be reduced. However, Reagan proved to shock many Democrats and Republicans alike by his willingness to negotiate and compromise. “He preferred partial victories to, as he put it, ‘going off the cliff with all flags flying.’ His rhetoric remained conservative, and he used student demonstrators and others who objected to his policies as a foil.”²⁷ With a democratic state legislature, Governor Reagan would have to compromise or else he would be a one-term governor and have a poor record concerning executive leadership and the ability to accomplish anything of worthwhile. An example of this “better than nothing” approach to politics and policies would include his wish to cut government spending for every state agency by ten percent across the board.²⁸ When Governor Reagan took over the office, he inherited the worst budget crisis in the history of the state of California. His first budget called for a ten percent reduction in spending in all government departments across the board. This was unrealistic and near impossible to achieve. Several state run programs would not be able to survive the budget cuts and still operate. After realizing this, Reagan redrew his budget proposal and compromised with the state agencies.

Governor Reagan also supported acts that today would be seen as liberal and most certainly non-Republican. He supported the Mulford Act of 1967, which banned the open carrying of loaded firearms in California.²⁹ Not only did Governor Reagan support the bill, but the National Rifle Association did as well. However, when looked at closely, this was in response to the Black Panther Movement’s rise in California. When several Black Panthers took to the streets to

²⁷ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

²⁸ “Profiles of U.S. Presidents: Ronald Reagan – Governor of California,” *President Profiles*, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.presidentprofiles.com/Kennedy-Bush/Ronald-Reagan-Governor-of-california.html>.

²⁹ Peter Weber, “How Ronald Reagan Learned to Love Gun Control,” *The Week*, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://theweek.com/articles/582926/how-ronald-reagan-learned-love-gun-control>.

“police the police” and fight back to the racial injustice, Reagan was quoted saying that he saw “no reason why on the street today a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons.”³⁰ He added that guns were “a ridiculous way to solve problems that have to be solved among people of good will.”³¹ This painted the picture that the NRA and the Governor were for gun ownership rights until minorities were the ones arming themselves. Reagan and gun control would also become a major issue once he was in the Oval Office.

A year later in his tenure as California executive, Ronald Reagan would have another civil rights clash but this time it would be with a young, Communist Party member teaching at UCLA. Angela Davis, who had had a childhood in the American south that had shown her the full blown ways of Jim Crow, was a professor of philosophy and an African American member of the Communist Party in California. In the late 1960’s, she was hired to teach at UCLA. All the while Reagan despised her allegiance to the communists. Many newspapers detailed her membership in the party and as a result, multiple bomb threats from anonymous persons became a normal everyday routine for Davis. The Board of Regents and Governor Reagan attempted to fire her from her position and succeeded. On June 19, 1970, he issued a memorandum declaring that “Angela Davis, Professor of Philosophy, will no longer be a part of the UCLA staff. As the head of the Board of Regents, I, nor the board, will not tolerate any Communist activities at any state institution. Communists are an endangerment to this wonderful system of government that we all share and are proud of.”³² In 1970, she was placed on the FBI’s Top Ten Most Wanted List on

³⁰ Steven Rosenfeld, “Seven Uncovered Quotes That Reveal Just How Crazy the NRA’s Become,” *Salon*, accessed January 28, 2016 http://www.salon.com/2013/01/23/7_uncovered_quotes_that_reveal_just_how_crazy_the_nras_become/.

³¹ Rosenfeld, “Seven Uncovered Quotes That Reveal Just How Crazy the NRA’s Become.”

³² “Angela Y. Davis,” *American RadioWorks*, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/adavis.html>.

allegations and charges of murder of a judge. She was arrested and sent to prison. She spent sixteen months incarcerated for crimes of which she was innocent. Acquitted in 1972, she would fight for rights for prisoners and would eventually teach again at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Despite this, Governor Reagan did make advances in the areas of education. At the time, there was no tuition for students who performed at a high academic level. While attempting to balance the budget, the new governor saw that the government needed more financing available to send students to college. In an address to the state on the matter he concluded, “The problem, briefly, is finances. We face a major deficit and we must find a way to eliminate it. The answer lies with all of us. There are no exceptions. I believe the education sector of our government can and must help in this. Indeed, it has a responsibility to help.”³³ Governor Reagan believed in helping students realize their dreams but knew changes had to be made for the betterment of the state as a whole. Reagan asked the California Board of Regents to impose a tuition on in-state students who had traditionally been given free tuition should their academic scores be high enough. The regents despised the idea that tradition would be ignored but after some compromising, a small tuition was put into place.³⁴

It was Ronald Reagan’s second term as governor for which he is most remembered. Despite some wanting him to run for the presidency after his first term as governor in the 1968 election, Reagan saw that Richard Nixon had a firm grip in the polls and in the minds of most Republicans. Perhaps most surprising was Governor Reagan’s efforts in the areas of the

³³ Ronald Reagan, “Statement of Governor Ronald Reagan on Tuition,” January 17, 1967, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed October 12, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/govspeech/01171967a.htm>.

³⁴ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

environment. Due to his Republican stature and pro-business nature, most people assumed that Reagan would care little about what happened to the environment. He shocked many by appointing a Sierra Club member, Norman “Ike” Livermore, to the position of resource director and founded a Redwood National Park in the state. Livermore, a Republican and treasurer of the Pacific Lumber Company, was also an adamant environmentalist and served Governor Reagan for eight years. Livermore had the right combination of conservative business values and Sierra Club morals to guide Governor Reagan and give him a surprisingly strong record on the environment. Reagan also broke with the Nixon administration when it came to the production of a highway that would cut through the John Muir Trail.

By 1974, Ronald Reagan had run his course as governor of the state of California. However, he remained in the limelight by writing newspaper columns to make sure his voice and presence never left the American political scene. Many asked the former governor if he was eyeing a potential run at the Presidency but out of respect for the current executive, Gerald Ford who had just recently taken over for the Watergate shamed President Nixon, Reagan always dodged a direct response. It was not until the 1976 election rolled around did Reagan come out in opposition of President Ford for the Republican ticket nomination.

Reagan’s bid for the Republican nomination in 1976 taught him valuable campaign strategies. While President Ford enjoyed the luxuries that incumbent office holders partake in, Ronald Reagan had to work from the ground up. Attempting to remove a sitting President is never a light task. The Reagan campaign learned first-hand the lessons from their mistakes. This lesson was not learned until Reagan had fallen behind Ford in all polls and lost several of the opening primaries. It was not until the primary in North Carolina that Reagan and his campaign showed signs of life. Winning in North Carolina, Texas, and California, the Reagan team came

into the Republican National Convention in Kansas City with a large amount of momentum that ultimately was defeated by President Ford by the narrowest of margins. It seemed as though the only thing keeping Reagan from achieving victory and the nomination was the fact that Gerald Ford was the standing head of state. The 1976 election results came as no surprise to many analysts. The combination of the Watergate Scandal, Americans coming to terms with the failures of Vietnam, and a weakening economy saw control of the White House fall from Republican hands into the hands of the Democrats lead by President Jimmy Carter of Georgia. With Ford defeated, Reagan was now the heir apparent to the Republican nomination in the election of 1980. Ronald Reagan would be ready.³⁵

Reagan announced his candidacy for the 1980 election in the late fall of 1979. In his announcement speech, the future president laid out what he thought best for the nation; “I believe this nation hungers for a spiritual revival; hungers to once again see honor placed above political expediency; to see government once again the protector of our liberties, not the distributor of gifts and privilege. Government should uphold and not undermine those institutions which are custodians of the very values upon which civilization is founded—religion, education and, above all, family. Government cannot be clergyman, teacher and parent. It is our servant, beholden to us.”³⁶ Reagan’s hopes and views of a return to classical, family values America were now public knowledge. He had been preparing for the announcement ever since his defeat at the hands of President Ford in 1976. From the outset, Reagan had the clear majority of support and backing of the conservatives within the Republican Party. The moderates within the party were concerned

³⁵ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

³⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan’s Announcement for Presidential Candidacy,” November 13, 1979, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/11.13.79.html>.

that Reagan may be too confrontational with the Soviet Union. If the former governor was willing to fire a professor such as Angela Davis for simply being a communist, what would he be willing to do to the center of the communist empire in the Soviet Union? Could another Vietnam be on the horizon or even worse, nuclear war? Despite the moderate concerns, support for Reagan continued to grow. Other contenders for the nomination included Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, Former CIA Director George H.W. Bush, and Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee.

At a point when it seemed as though Reagan had the nomination sewn up, Bush upset him in the Iowa caucus. This upset motivated Reagan to hit the campaign trail hard. As those who had supported him during his campaigns during the California gubernatorial election knew, Reagan shined best when speaking to voters one on one. “Reagan campaigned nearly uninterrupted for twenty-one days in New Hampshire, a display of stamina that quieted concerns about his age. And when he faced off against his rivals in two February debates, Reagan proved a superior candidate.”³⁷ “In an incident that has become legendary in American political history, the moderator of the second debate ordered Reagan's microphone turned off as the candidates and their advisers argued about the debate's format. Reagan, paraphrasing a line from an old Spencer Tracy movie, defiantly responded, ‘I paid for this microphone.’ He soared in the polls and routed all his opponents in the primary.”³⁸ Reagan headed to the industrial car-making center in the United States, Detroit, Michigan, for the GOP convention to accept the nomination for his candidacy in the election of the President of the United States.

At the Republican National Convention in Detroit, Michigan, after accepting the nomination

³⁷ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

³⁸ Miller Center, “Ronald Reagan: Life Before the Presidency.”

for the Presidency, Reagan reached out to the moderates within the party by making his former opponent, George H.W. Bush, his new running mate. In his acceptance speech, the Republican candidate spoke of his goals for the nation. Among the topics were the multiple failures of the Carter Administration concerning the economy, foreign policy, and the size of the federal government. “I will not accept the excuse that the federal government has grown so big and powerful that it is beyond the control of any President, any Administration or Congress. We are going to put an end to the notion that the American taxpayer exists to fund the federal government. The federal government exists to serve the American people and to be accountable to the American people.”³⁹ Ronald Reagan spoke plainly and frankly while gunning for the Democratic President saying,

The Republican Party convenes, presents this platform, and selects its nominees at a time of crisis. America is adrift. Our country moves agonizingly, aimlessly, almost helplessly into one of the most dangerous and disorderly periods in history. At home, our economy careens, whiplashed from one extreme to another. Earlier this year, inflation skyrocketed to its highest levels in more than a century; weeks later, the economy plummeted, suffering its steepest slide on record. Prices escalate at more than ten percent a year. More than eight million people seek employment. Manufacturing plants lie idle across the country. The hopes and aspirations of our people are being smothered. The uncharted course of Mr. Carter will lead surely to catastrophe. By reversing our economic decline, by reversing our international decline, we can and will resurrect our dreams.⁴⁰

In what is viewed as a homage to his parents and Democratic past, Reagan quoted former President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his speech to the GOP saying, “... we must consolidate subdivisions of government and, like the private citizen, give up luxuries which we can no longer afford. ‘I propose to you, my friends, and through you that government of all kinds, big and little

³⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech,” July 17, 1980, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/7.17.80.html>.

⁴⁰ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platforms, Republican Party Platform of 1980 and Election of 1980,” July 15, 1980, *The American Presidency Project*, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25844>.

be made solvent and that the example be set by the President of the United States and his cabinet.’ So said Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his acceptance speech to the Democratic National Convention in July, 1932.’⁴¹

The disillusionment from the 1960’s and the 1970’s weighed heavily on the minds of the nation as a whole as many Americans were looking for a reason to be patriotic and feel happy about their country once again. The hippy movement along with the drawn out engagement in Vietnam had many Americans feeling poorly about the United States. High interest rates, high inflation, and a poor economy had left Americans upset too. When all of these factors were combined, it left a very poor taste in the mouths of both Democrats and Republicans. A resurgence of American patriotism and pride was exactly what the nation was yearning for and Ronald Reagan believed he could give this to the American people.

An Icon is Established

The campaign for the 1980 presidential election began in earnest between current President Jimmy Carter and former Governor Reagan in the summer. An Independent contender, Representative John Anderson of Illinois, joined Carter and Reagan. Reagan enjoyed an early lead over his rivals in the weeks immediately following the Republican National Convention. President Carter, thanks in part to blunders on the part of Reagan was able to narrow the gap between the two major candidates. He also was able to bring in a former aide from his campaign days in California, Stuart K. Spencer, which consulted on political strategies that kept the campaign focused on President Carter’s record and off Reagan. The two candidates had differing views on almost every topic from the environment and foreign policy to the economy and government programs. In what may have been the most decisive moment of the 1980 election

⁴¹ Reagan, “Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech.”

campaign, Reagan and Carter squared off in a debate on October 28, 1980. The former Hollywood actor's grace and charm on the screen and in public had never shown more clear. Many analysts agreed that Carter won the debate from a statistical view but it was Ronald Reagan's smooth demeanor that the American people saw. Reagan's closing remarks are what were most destructive for Carter when he asked the viewers, "Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than there was four years ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was?"⁴² For many voters, the answer was not in favor of Jimmy Carter's administration and their answers were heard in earnest a week later on Election Day.

On Election Day, in 1980, Ronald Reagan ultimately ran away with the electoral vote. Thanks to Independent John Anderson stealing some votes from Carter in liberal states such as New York and Massachusetts, Reagan had a dominating Electoral College win over Carter. Four hundred and eighty-nine votes compared to Carter's forty-nine along with fifty percent of the popular vote to Carter's forty-one percent carried Reagan to the highest office in the land: The Presidency of the United States of America.⁴³ Reagan's question to the American people at the end of the last debate sparked action among voters. Carter's showing in the election was the worst showing by a standing president since the Great Depression. Ronald Reagan became the fortieth President of the United States.

January 20, 1981, was Inauguration Day in Washington D.C. After taking the oath of office,

⁴² Ronald Reagan, "Debate Between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan on October 28, 1980," October 28, 1980, *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed February 20, 1980, <https://reaganlibrary.gov/major-speeches-index/10-archives/reference/15-10-28-80debate>.

⁴³ "1980 Presidential General Election Results." 2012, *USA Election Atlas*, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1980>.

Reagan gave his speech to a gathered crowd of several thousands. He spoke of rebuilding the economy that had been in the worst crisis it had faced since the Great Depression. As was his mantra, Reagan wanted to reduce the size of the government saying,

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price.⁴⁴

The former actor and Hollywood veteran would bring with him new excitement and renewed sense of pride. As President Reagan concluded his speech, he finished with an inspirational quote that stirred Americans. "The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow and so many thousands of others were called upon to make. It does require, however, our best effort and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God's help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans."⁴⁵

The first one hundred days in office were filled with many highs and lows. Among the positive things to happen for the administration was the releasing of the remaining American hostages on Reagan's Inauguration Day. They had been captured and held after the United States' Embassy in Tehran, Iran had been stormed by angry student protestors. The incident had

⁴⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Inauguration Address, 1981," January 20, 1981, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm>.

⁴⁵ Reagan, "Inauguration Address, 1981."

begun after President Carter allowed Iran's deposed Shah to come to the United States to receive cancer treatment. The incident became a major failure of Carter's presidency. When concluded on Inauguration Day in 1981, it ended a standoff that had been ongoing since November of 1979. Unfortunately for the newly elected president, this was done more to insult former President Carter than out of fear of President Reagan. Domestically, Reagan also unveiled a program for economic recovery to Congress that would cut over forty-one billion dollars from Jimmy Carter's budget, and called for a 30% tax cut while building defense expenditures. A common theme throughout the Reagan administration was the term "peace through strength". Just as Theodore Roosevelt had believed in a policy of "speaking softly and carrying a big stick", Reagan would dramatically increase the size and efficiency of the United States military, which had become less than efficient following the failures in Vietnam. Defense and military spending rose tremendously under the Republican president. "Between 1980 and 1985, the number of dollars devoted each year to defense more than doubled, from \$142.6 billion to \$286.8 billion."⁴⁶ Americans were seeing a break from nearly every single policy that President Carter had supported and in the minds of many, they were happy to see that at least the new Reagan administration was attempting to fix the economic quagmire that the United States had fallen into following Vietnam and the Nixon administration.

The first one hundred days were not without their trials and tribulations though. A mere sixty-nine days into his term as President, Reagan was leaving the Washington Hilton Hotel after giving a speech. A lone gunman by the name of John Hinckley made an assassination attempt on the new president's life. Hinckley's deranged thoughts led him to believe that if he were to

⁴⁶ Tom Bowman, "Reagan Guided Huge Buildup In Arms Race," June, 8, 2004, *The Baltimore Sun*, accessed January 26, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bal-te.pentagon08jun08-story.html>.

assassinate Reagan, the actress Jodie Foster would fall in love and spend her life with him. The Secret Service acted quickly, shielding the President from the assassin's bullets and throwing him into the limousine. Reagan wished to return to the medical staff at the White House where he felt more comfortable. Secret Service agent in charge, Jerry Parr, checked Reagan for any wounds. Parr believed he had bruised or broken one of the Reagan's ribs when he shoved the President into the Limousine. After the President began to cough up blood, though, it was clear that the situation was even more serious than originally believed. President Reagan still wished to return to the medical staff at the White House but Parr, in a decision that many experts now say saved the president's life, ordered the motorcade to George Washington University Hospital, which was closer. According to the *New York Daily News*, "Reagan, 70, was struck under the left armpit by a slug that pierced his left lung and came within four inches of his heart."⁴⁷ The famous Reagan wit and charm was even apparent with his life on the line. When First Lady Nancy Reagan arrived at the hospital, the President looked at her as pale and in some shock saying, "Honey, I forgot to duck."⁴⁸ Just before surgery, Reagan looked up at his doctors and said, "I hope you're all Republicans."⁴⁹ In recent years, a debate has ensued concerning the health of President Reagan following the assassination attempt. Some believe that the Alzheimer's disease that the president was diagnosed with five years after he left office in 1994 may have first started showing symptoms during his administration.⁵⁰ Others believe that the

⁴⁷ Bruce Drake, "President Ronald Reagan Is Shot and Wounded," *New York Daily News*, March 31, 1981, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/president-ronald-reagan-shot-wounded-1981-article-1.2160435>.

⁴⁸ Drake, "President Ronald Reagan Is Shot and Wounded."

⁴⁹ Drake, "President Ronald Reagan Is Shot and Wounded."

⁵⁰ Nick Tate, "Reagan Showed Subtle Signs of Alzheimer's While in Office: Study," March 31, 2015, *Newsmax*, accessed January 28, 2016, <http://www.newsmax.com/Health/Health-News/reagan-alzheimer-early-signs/2015/03/31/id/635593/>.

changes in speaking patterns of the Commander-in-Chief may have occurred as a result of the trauma of being shot or even the anesthesia that he was given during surgery.⁵¹

At the time, it was not disclosed just how close Reagan came to losing his life. The reports in newspapers and on television were that Reagan was never in any serious danger but many agree that had the motorcade continued to the White House, the President would have most likely died. Others in the crowd at the assassination attempt were not so fortunate. The Press Secretary, James Brady, was shot in the head and very nearly lost his life. A police officer, Thomas Delahanty and a Secret Service agent, Timothy McCarthy, were also shot but survived the encounter as well. Hinckley was immediately wrestled to the ground after firing six shots. At his trial, he was found “not guilty” by reason of insanity angering many Americans. “After spending twelve days in the hospital, Regan was sent home on April 11, 1981.”⁵²

The attempt on the president’s life had led to some welcome outcomes. For starters, the approval rating that awaited the Commander-in-Chief upon his return was a tremendous 68%.⁵³ The administration decided to take this rating and use it to their advantage as best they could, by pushing a tax cut through to help stimulate consumer spending and revitalize the economy. However, the issue of social security was targeted and an overhaul of the system that was going bankrupt was introduced. The administration believed it could use the strong approval rating to save the New Deal program. Reagan could do what no other president had been able to

⁵¹ Tate, “Reagan Showed Subtle Signs of Alzheimer's While in Office: Study.”

⁵² “Reagan Assassination Attempt,” *About Education*, accessed January 27, 2016, <http://history1900s.about.com/od/1980s/qt/Reagan-Assassination-Attempt.htm>.

⁵³ H.W Brands, “How Reagan’s Brush with Death Got the American Public a Tax Cut,” *Politico Magazine*, accessed January 29, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/reagan-attempted-assassination-tax-cut-117840?o=1>.

accomplish: Fix social security. Cuts were made. However, cuts are never popular when they concern entitlement programs. Millions of senior citizens were relieved when the Senate denied the cuts to social security; the administration lost a large amount of the momentum it had gained following the assassination attempt.

The former Hollywood icon now turned President of the United States was an excellent showman and seemed to love the camera. It would only make sense that Ronald Reagan would continue to have a love affair with the media and films in particular. As his presidency began in earnest following the assassination attempt, it would become clear that this Commander-in-Chief would take these films being produced in the 1980's and spread his message of a conservative, family friendly America and a military dominance that had never before been seen in the history of the planet. He would also take advantage of television shows such as *The Cosby Show* that showcased a wealthy African American family in New York. Reagan's establishment of the Martin Luther King Jr holiday would become scrutinized as many believed it was only done out of appeasement by President Reagan as his stance on civil rights in the country had always been questionable at best. One of the instances where media was used to benefit the Reagan administration came in the Olympic games of 1984.

A major event that occurred during the first term of President Reagan were the 1984 Olympic Games. The games had not been held on United States' soil in many decades and a huge outpouring of patriotism and excitement filled the nation. The games were held in Los Angeles and the beautiful southern California countryside provided an excellent backdrop. The United States dominated the games as well winning four times as many gold medals as the second place finisher, Romania.⁵⁴ The Soviet Union, the United States' most powerful opponent

⁵⁴ Schmoop Editorial Team, "Culture in the Reagan Era," November 11, 2008, *Schmoop University, Inc.*, accessed November 22, 2014, <http://www.shmoop.com/reagan-era/culture.html>.

both in terms of athletics and ideologies, boycotted the games as the U.S. had done four years prior when the games were held in Moscow. The patriotic nationalism that swept the American nation would not have been recognizable five years before. Flags waved from houses and schools and there was a real feeling of pride and recognition in the United States domestically.

President Reagan's administration's saw the 1984 Olympic games hosted by the United States. "The red, white, and blue summer of 1984 found its perfect soundtrack in *Born in the USA*, a chart-topping new album from Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Released a month before the Olympics convened in LA, the record soon became an unavoidable presence on American radio; seven of the album's twelve tracks eventually became Top 10 singles. The title track, in particular, seemed to capture the nationalistic spirit of the moment in its anthemic chorus—'Born in the USA! / I was born in the USA!'—and in the star-spangled imagery of its cover art. Many listeners heard in the music a rock n' roll echo of Ronald Reagan's 'Morning in America'."⁵⁵ This campaign ad that was run during the 1984 election campaign saw the Reagan administration speaking of accomplishments achieved the four previous years. More jobs, stronger defense, and a strengthened economy were among the highlights. The entire album the Springsteen released was dealing with a 1980's American culture. "Many of the songs on *Born in the USA*—'My Hometown,' 'Glory Days,' 'Downbound Train,' and 'I'm Going Down,' in addition to the title track—captured with great poignancy the misery of life in struggling small-town communities where the American Dream no longer seemed attainable. A record associated by many—or even most—listeners with simple flag-waving patriotism actually represented Springsteen's attempt to offer a moving and powerful critique of what he saw as the iniquities of

⁵⁵ Schmoop Editorial Team, "Culture in the Reagan Era."

American society in the 1980s.”⁵⁶ Reagan’s real ability to take media would be seen in the movies of the 1980’s. The man who was a part of Hollywood and made me movies for twenty years would take a liberal haven and use it to his conservative advantage.

The decade of the 1980’s also saw the rise of a powerful new weapon in media: The establishment of twenty-four news networks. On June 1, 1980, Ted Turner founded the Cable News Network or as most viewers know it, CNN.⁵⁷ A task that had never been attempted before, CNN would provide continuous news over the course of the twenty-four day. Many doubted that this would succeed as network evening news and newspapers still dominated in the realm of the journalism profession. The lead story for the new program concerned the attempted assassination of civil rights leader Vernon Jordan.⁵⁸ “In its first years of operation, CNN lost money and was ridiculed as the Chicken Noodle Network. However, Turner continued to invest in building up the network’s news bureaus around the world and in 1983, he bought Satellite News Channel, owned in part by ABC, and thereby eliminated CNN’s main competitor. CNN eventually came to be known for covering live events around the world as they happened, often beating the major networks to the punch.”⁵⁹ The new twenty-four hour news scale meant that there would now be an even more scrutinizing eye on the administration of the president and the president in particular.

⁵⁶ Schmoop Editorial Team, “Culture in the Reagan Era.”

⁵⁷ “CNN Launches,” *History Channel Network*, accessed January 30, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/cnn-launches>.

⁵⁸ “CNN Launches.”

⁵⁹ “CNN Launches.”

Ronald Reagan's rise to power had been a slow journey. He became Governor of California and then the oldest serving President in history, beginning his first term at the age of sixty-nine, after having worked the first half of his life in the media profession. He brought with him an understanding of the media, a charming wit and humor, and the desire to transform the United States into the country he knew and loved while working as an actor. The Hollywood icon was able to masterfully use the media and films of this decade into platforms for spreading his vision of the United States of America. Films such as *Star Wars* (1977), *Rocky* (1976), *Wall Street* (1987), and *Top Gun* (1986) would set the tone for this message. The American people, desperate for a new message of hope and patriotism, whole-heartedly bought into this message. Reagan's campaign message of "Making America Great Again" had successfully caught on with the public. A perfect storm of sorts was being formulated and the nation was about to experience the decade of the 1980's in a way in which no decade had been experienced before.

CHAPTER 3

THE COSBY EFFECT

The theme for the 1981 Academy Awards was “Movies are Forever.” Hollywood had seen the first of their ranks ascend to the highest office in the land. President Reagan had prepared a speech to be given at the ceremony through a pre-recorded tape. The day of the Oscars, Reagan was shot by John Hinckley Jr. According to Michael Rogin, “Hinckley’s act reinforced the President’s interpretation of the power of film. Millions of Americans experienced the assassination attempt over and over again on television. The power of the image confirmed the shooting; it also allowed Reagan to speak to the academy the next night as if the shooting had never happened.”⁶⁰ Hinckley’s assassination attempt had been modeled after a similar plot that occurred in the film *Taxi Driver* (1976). After his recovery from the gunman’s bullet, Reagan spoke to a joint session of Congress. Very eloquently yet commonly, Reagan took his experiences from the assassination attempt, and compared them to the nation. After thanking the millions of Americans that wished him well in his recovery, Reagan wanted to “talk about getting spending and inflation under control and cutting your tax rates. Thanks to some very fine people, my health is much improved. I’d like to be able to say that with regard to the health of the economy’. The President was identifying the recovery of his mortal body with the health of the body politic, his own convalescence with his program to restore health to the nation. Reagan was presenting himself as the healer, laying his hands on the sick social body.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie; And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 4.

⁶¹ Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 4-5.

A Return to Pleasantville, USA

In the fall of 1984, Reagan easily won re-election. “Reagan carries 49 states -- 525 electoral votes to Mondale's 10, and 59% of the popular vote. One fourth of registered Democrats voted for Reagan.”⁶² Reagan had become extremely popular but he wished to continue to instill more conservative values into the United States. To accomplish this, he widely endorsed films such as *Back to the Future* (1985). Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) and Dr. Emmitt Brown (Christopher Lloyd) travel back to 1955 from their time in 1985. There is even a scene in the film where, in 1955, Dr. Brown asks Marty, the time traveler, who is President in the 1980's. Marty replies that Ronald Reagan is the Commander-in-Chief and with shock and doubt, Brown gives a sarcastic reply. Reagan reportedly loved the scene and enjoyed the movie so much as a whole, he referenced it in his speeches to the nation. In one of his State of the Union speeches, he uses the line from the end of the film: “Roads? Where we are going we won't need roads.” This represented the ever bright, growing future for the United States of America. Throughout the film, one sees just how idealized the decade of the 1950's really was for Reagan and his supporters. Teenagers are respectful, clean cut, and shaven. The teenagers of the 1980's however were embracing wild, extravagant hair colors and cuts. Mohawks, dreads, and other types of “rock n' roll” hair were very popular and a trend that many conservatives wanted to reverse.

On July 3, 1985, *Back to the Future* was released in theatres across the United States. In the film, a young high school student named Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) and a quirky local scientist, Dr. Emmett “Doc” Brown (Christopher Lloyd) are thrown back in time following an experiment with a newly invented time machine made out of a DeLorean. “Doc” powers the time

⁶² “Timeline: Ronald Reagan's Presidency,” *PBS*, accessed November 21, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/reagan/2/>.

machine with plutonium stolen from Libyan terrorists wanting a nuclear bomb. When Marty is forced to escape back into 1955 from his present 1985 due to these vengeful, Libyan terrorists, he encounters a surreal, pristine former era. The terrorists correlate directly with the recent hostage crisis that the United States had experienced with Iran. As he shockingly walks around downtown Hill Valley, he notices all the near mythical elements of the 1950's decade. Gas stations that do require self-service are no longer the norm. Attendants quickly rush out to the customer and not only fill up the gas tank but also wash down the car, cleaning the windows and windshield as well as the tires and checking under the hood. Quick, convenient, and efficient service with a smile. As Marty shockingly stumbles around the 1955 version of Hill Valley, he sees a movie theatre. The cinema's 1955 current feature happened to be none other than the Ronald Reagan, Barbara Stanwyck film *Cattle Queen of Montana*. The exact same theatre is showing pornographic films in the 1985 period. The filmmakers went so far as to compare Ronald Reagan himself to representing the old, successful, conservative values of the 1950's.

Republicans and historians have consistently ranked Ronald Reagan among the greatest Presidents to ever have taken the office. His Clint Eastwood "make my day" mentality, a quote that Reagan used when referring to any tax increase Congress may send him in 1985, has become almost legendary in Republican circles. In his book *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now--our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*, David Sirota brings up many intriguing facts and possibilities about how culture was being manipulated by Reagan to accomplish his goals. A description of his book included states: "Today's mindless militarism and hyper-narcissism, Sirota argues, first became the norm when an '80's generation weaned on Rambo one-liners and 'Just Do It' (Nike) exhortations embraced a new religion—with comic books, cartoons, sneaker commercials, video games, and even children's toys serving

as the key instruments of cultural indoctrination. Meanwhile, in productions like *Back to the Future*, *Family Ties* and *The Big Chill*, a campaign was launched to re-imagine the 1950's as America's lost golden age and vilify the 1960's as the source of all our troubles."⁶³ Sirota is saying that the decisions and political moves made by Reagan in the 1980's are directly responsible for many of the predicaments that the United States government is experiencing politically and internationally today. Robert Toplin, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, also blames President Reagan on the economic crisis the United States experienced in 2008 saying, "As the country's greatest modern champion of deregulation, perhaps Ronald Reagan contributed more to today's unstable business climate than any other American. His long-standing campaign against the role of government in American life, a crusade he often stretched to extremes, produced conditions that ultimately proved bad for business."⁶⁴

Conservative Republicans and Ronald Reagan in particular believed that the rebellion and culture of the hippies of the 1960's was directly responsible for the collapse in America's influence internationally and her economic and social struggles domestically. They even believed that it was a divided and torn home front during the Vietnam War that allowed the United States to falter and not give her the will to win the engagement. In 1984, "Two of the top three grossing films were *Back to the Future*, which eulogized the fifties, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, which blamed sixties antiwar activism for losing the Vietnam conflict. Most telling, *All in the Family*'s formula of using sixties motivated youth and progressivism to ridicule fifties-rooted

⁶³ David Sirota, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now--our Culture, Our Politics, Our Everything*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), Inside Cover.

⁶⁴ Robert Brent Toplin, "Blame Ronald Reagan for Our Current Economic Crisis," *History News Network*, September 8, 2008, accessed February 21, 2016, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/53527>.

parents and their traditionalism had been replaced atop the television charts by its antithesis: a *Family Ties* whose fifties-inspired youth ridicules his parents' sixties spirit."⁶⁵ According to Reagans and his conservative allies, had the 1960's not produced such liberal, hippy citizens, Vietnam would have been won and communism cold have been limited to China in Southeast Asia.

Reagan's history with Hollywood clearly allowed him some insight to movie making and script writing. Several movies developed in the 1980's, *Back to the Future*, *Rambo*, and *Wall Street* to name a few, were obviously made with his idea of a return to conservative, Republican values in mind. But how did this combination of movies and politics affect President Reagan?

In his psycho-biographical study *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, Michael Rogin traces Reagan's vision of missile defense back to the 1940 Warner Brothers movie *Murder in the Air*. In this film, Reagan plays a Secret Service agent who prevents a foreign spy from stealing the plans for a powerful new defensive weapon. By being able to stop and destroy any attacking vehicle or missile, this weapon will, according to one of the film's characters, 'make America invincible in war and therefore be the greatest force for peace ever invented'. Rogin's central thesis is that the future president was 'made' in 1940's Hollywood. It is not only that Reagan extensively referred to movies in his later speeches, quoting, for example, Clint Eastwood's famous line 'Go ahead, make my day' from one of the Dirty Harry movies in Congress with reference to his promised veto to tax increases, or stating in July 1985 after American hostages held in Lebanon had been released: 'Boy, I saw Rambo last night.... Now I know what to do next time this happens.' More worryingly, according to Rogin, the President's identity and his conception of reality had been shaped by Hollywood films to such an extent that he was unable to step outside the fictions he had once inhabited.⁶⁶

Rogin firmly believed that Hollywood had had more than an affect on the now Commander-in-Chief. Rogin stated that Hollywood had made Reagan and that he was now projecting the product he had become. The answer is probably that Hollywood did have a major effect on

⁶⁵ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 8.

⁶⁶ Peter Kramer, "Ronald Reagan and Star Wars." *History Today* 49, no. 3, March 1999.

Reagan and Reagan had an effect on Hollywood as well. He had been able to take these films and television shows and use them to his advantage but he would not have been able to accomplish this had he not been a product of Hollywood himself.

Huxtables, Creeds, and Lang's, OH MY!

Ronald Reagan had never had a liberal view on civil rights in the nation. As previously mentioned, Reagan had opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. He had also started his campaign for the Presidency in 1980 in the city of Philadelphia, Mississippi. This was significant for the fact that this was the location of the murder of three civil rights workers in 1964: Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman. Choosing such a site to launch one's campaign for the highest office in all the land is slightly unsettling. "Everybody watching the 1980 campaign knew what Reagan was signaling at the fair. Whites and blacks, Democrats and Republicans — they all knew. The news media knew. The race haters and the people appalled by racial hatred knew. And Reagan knew."⁶⁷ However, one must realize that Reagan and the Republican Party's ability to swoon the former southern democrat states into major conservative, Republican centers was a major reason for his election to the position of Commander-in-Chief. The symbolism for this move was not lost on African Americans and was another portion of Reagan's lack of care on civil rights' issues and matters.

Reagan's stance on civil rights can be seen as far back as the 1964 Presidential election. He supported Barry Goldwater against the incumbent Lyndon Banes Johnson. At the heart of the debate between the two candidates was the recently passed Civil Rights Act of 1964. With the help of an emotional push resulting from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on

⁶⁷ Bob Herbert, "Righting Reagan's Wrongs?," *New York Times*, November 13, 2007.

November 22, 1963, President Johnson successfully passed the Civil Rights of 1964 through Congressional approval. Goldwater had stated he was not a supporter of the new bill and he supported the South's stance on civil rights believing it should be the states' decision. President Johnson knew the passing of the bill would hurt the Democratic Party in the South for years to come and he was exactly right. A political climate change occurred as the heavily democratic south became Republican in what could be called "white backlash". The South, unto this day, is heavily Republican and has consistently voted accordingly. Despite this shifting in the political spectrum, most of the South retained Democrats in statewide offices well into the 1990's.

Reagan may have not begun the political climate switch that began in the 1960's but he was a key player in allowing it to be a possibility. His stance on civil rights and voting rights were well known and showed how the southern states would change political allegiance from Democrat to Republican. Along with the speeches he gave in support of Goldwater during his campaign for the Oval Office, Reagan also benefited from the racial strife in the southern United States. His campaign for the Republican nomination in 1976 against President Ford was struggling and in desperate need for a primary win when the campaign trail hit North Carolina. It was there that Reagan got his first big win. The entire southern region had become a center for many racists that hid behind the cloak of conservatism. It was this campaign that saw Ronald Reagan pick up the mantle from Goldwater and although he lost to Ford, he would set himself up for the next election and gain the nomination in 1980.

"After he defeated President Carter, a native Southerner, Reagan led an administration that seemed to cater to Southerners still angry over the passage of the Civil Rights Act after 16 years. The Reagan team condemned busing for school integration, opposed affirmative action and even threatened to veto a proposed extension of the Voting Rights Act (the sequel to the 1964 Civil

Rights Act passed a year later and focused on election participation). President Reagan also tried to allow Bob Jones University, a segregated Southern school, to reclaim federal tax credits that had long been denied to racially discriminatory institutions.”⁶⁸ While President Reagan protested any racial reasons for these policies, the actions themselves would seem to support the alternative view.

President Reagan’s poor record concerning civil rights has several highlights. First, in a racist tone, Reagan referred to poor, black women as “welfare queens.” He appointed people such as Clarence Thomas and William Bradford Reynolds to areas where their decisions hurt the interests of African Americans in the United States. He also wished to modify and alter the Voting Rights Act so that its policies were not as rigid. These were in a long line of instances that seem to support the notion that President Reagan was on the wrong side of history. He mentioned just this, “during a 1989 CBS interview, about his relations with African Americans. ‘One of the great things that I have suffered is this feeling,’ he said, “that somehow I’m on the other side’ of the civil rights movement.”⁶⁹ It would seem that as far as racial minorities in the United States, President Reagan was not on the side of equality. His perceived lack of interest on matters concerning civil rights is still of debate and conversation today.

Another light in which Reagan supporters look at the fortieth President’s stance on racial issues is available as well. His trip to Philadelphia, Mississippi, was concerning states’ rights and was not a reference to the racial strife that had plagued of the South for well over a century.

⁶⁸ Juan Williams, “Reagan, the South and Civil Rights,” *National Public Radio*, June 10, 2004, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1953700>.

⁶⁹ Joe Davidson, “Reagan: A Contrary View,” *NBC News*, June 7, 2004, accessed October 26, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/5158315/ns/us_news-life/t/reagan-contrary-view/#.VkTADr_09sQ.

Also, Mississippi was a state that President Carter had barely won and was destined to be a battleground state. By starting his campaign in Mississippi, Reagan was making a hard push to win the swing state. His stance on states' rights and small, limited government were also of importance. Reagan later wrote, "Because I said I believed states should be allowed to regain the rights and powers granted to them in the Constitution, he (President Carter) implied I was a racist pandering to Southern voters."⁷⁰ Carter and many others attacked Reagan with this information. One point, when Ronald Reagan was playing football at Eureka College, two of his African American teammates were not permitted to stay at a local hotel for the evening. Instead of allowing these men to fend for themselves, Reagan took them home with him to his parents house where they were openly accepted by his parents. It would seem the racism, which tends to be instilled in a person at a young age, did not exist in the Reagan household. Throughout his Presidency, it seemed as though Reagan's appointments of African Americans to important posts was and is viewed as tokens that were not of major significance. However, if he had not made these appointments, he would be seen as bigot and impeding on the rights of minorities everywhere. Examples of this could be the appointment of future African American Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to serve as the Assistant Secretary of Education for the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education. Thomas, who some described as very eager to move up, was viewed as "yes man" that would ignore civil rights issues in exchange for career advancement.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Deroy Murdock, "Reagan, No Racist," *National Review*, November 20, 2007, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/222886/reagan-no-racist-deroy-murdock>.

⁷¹ "Clarence Thomas," *Biography.com, A and E Television Networks*, accessed January 26, 2016, <http://www.biography.com/people/clarence-thomas-9505658>.

Conservative, Republican supporters also point out his refusal to approve sanctions on South Africa during apartheid was not done out of malice towards blacks but was actually done in support. Sanctions would hurt most the millions of blacks living in dire poverty within the nation. It would be the masses that would suffer and not the racist government in place. He worried too that a communist or socialist regime would take power should the current government be weakened. That was a risk that President Reagan, the hardliner against communism, would not be willing to accept. Among the supporters of Reagan in the minority ranks was Hosea Williams, Martin Luther King Jr's top deputy in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Charles Evers, brother to slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. These civil rights activists all gave President Reagan their seal of approval.

There seems to be a lack of evidence to say that Reagan was a racist. However, it is quite apparent that he simply did not seem interested or motivated to help the minority cause of African Americans in the nation. Issues from civil rights enforcement to the violence against black South Africans were not seriously handled by the Reagan administration. A television show that would be counted as perhaps the most popular programming of the decade would paint a more soothing picture of race relations in the country, mainly by ignoring them completely. It would also give America a new representation of African Americans in the nation. This was none other than *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992).

The Cosby Show featured a wealthy African American family living in New York City. The Huxtable family was large and loving of one another. Cliff Huxtable played by comedian Bill Cosby was a successful doctor and his wife, Claire, was a managing partner of a local law firm. They had five children including four daughters and one son. *The Cosby Show* differed from previous shows featuring African Americans in one very important way: The African American

family in this show was wealthy and well off where previous shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, and *Samford and Son* had always depicted African Americans as poor, blue collar, working class individuals struggling to make ends meet. For once, it was the rich African American family that had to deal with the societal issues that faced the youth of the 1980's. *The Cosby Show* was outrageously popular and this included both white families as well as African American homes.

The way in which *The Cosby Show* was able to achieve its success was due in part, to avoiding the topic of racism. To confront this in a realistic manner would threaten the alienation of the show's white viewers and was something the producers of the show were unwilling to follow through on. The show brought up a major aspect of the United States and how it viewed African American and white relations. Many polls at the time showed that white Americans felt that equality had been achieved and that African Americans were now on even ground with their white counterparts concerning employment, home living, and social equality. The show's popular run can be attributed to not making its white viewers feel like a villain. A television show had managed to make many white Americans feel as though race was no longer a major issue in the country and that progress had been achieved. There was no longer any need to maintain affirmative action or other similar programs. David Sirota states that television moved to "what might be called 'the post ghetto' programs. Anchored in aspiration and integration, these were the immediate precursors to *The Cosby Show*'s Obamaesque 'postracialism', serving as 'a bridge between sitcoms depicting the ghetto and those portraying the new black upper

class'.⁷² Since all people were now equal with law to enforce it, there was no longer needs for affirmative action and other civil rights policies.

Perhaps another reason that white Americans found such enjoyment out of *The Cosby Show* was that it formatted African Americans into traditionally white roles. "Between the mid-1970's B.C. (Before Cosby) and the mid-1980's A.D. (After Dr. Huxtable), the total percentage of black characters on television significantly jumped, blacks went from being cast in thirty percent of working class roles to being cast in almost none of those roles."⁷³ The roles were switching to an extent as African Americans stopped being cast as the poor portion of society. The Huxtable family was clearly a part of the upper echelon of society. A doctor and a lawyer living under the same roof making very good money. A nice neighborhood filled with good families. The show fits exactly into the Reagan platform of a return to classical family values in the country. If it happened to be a black family that appeared to be just like a white family, it could only benefit the political machine of Ronald Regan and conservatives everywhere.

Intersecting race, discourses of parenting, education, and family also organize reading formations for *The Cosby Show*. Reportedly, an early plan called for Cosby to play a postal worker, a more typical role for a middle-aged black man in Reagan's United States. But by making both fictional parents professionals and the family distinctively upper middle-class, Cosby and his collaborators have brought into play a whole set of concerns and anxieties of the real upper-middle class, that most desirable of target audiences.⁷⁴

By targeting this portion of society, it both helped and hurt the African American push for equality.

⁷² Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 186.

⁷³ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 182-183.

⁷⁴ Mike Budd and Clay Steinman, "White Racism and The Cosby Show," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006, no. 37, July 1992, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC37folder/Cosby.html>.

The main character of the show, Dr. Cliff Huxtable, played by Bill Cosby, seemed to be the perfect father figure. This flat out rejects the stereotype of African American families having no father figures. He was able to discipline with humor, teach with laughter, and love with the goofy faces; the kind of faces only Bill Cosby can make. The show called for African American men to stay with their families and build the unit up. It however, did not take into account the poor conditions and continuing racism throughout the nation that made it difficult and sometimes impossible to advance and provide for a large family. According to Mike Budd and Clay Steinman, "Bill Cosby was the right pitchman at the right time. He became the model dad not only for whites but also for what many whites (and some blacks) thought that blacks needed. Motivating Cosby's audience is not only the wish to improve or repair their own families but also the wish not to be thought of as racist, or even responsible for others' racism. Praise for the show as 'colorblind' is also flattery for its audience; to like the show is to prove oneself above prejudice."⁷⁵ They continue on by saying, "Cosby's patriarchal role on the show can be seen as an attempt to remediate white stereotypes of absent African American fathers as well as an attempt to model dominant ideals for blacks."⁷⁶

Other television programming that glorified a return to classical, conservative values was the show *Family Ties* (1982-1989). *Family Ties* was a television show that featured the star of *Back to the Future*, Michael J. Fox. The program featured an American family. The parents, Steven and Elyse Keaton, were liberals, activists of the progressive movements of the 1960's, and former hippies. The son, Michael J. Fox's character named Alex Keaton, was a staunch

⁷⁵ Budd and Steinman, "White Racism and The Cosby Show."

⁷⁶ Budd and Steinman, "White Racism and The Cosby Show."

conservative and Republican supporter. This saw the son of liberal democrats and former hippies directly challenged by their hardworking, intelligent, Republican son. This was the exact opposite of a show that had aired in the 1960's/1970's, *All in the Family*. This show sees a hardworking, veteran soldier from World War II, Archie Bunker, struggling to adapt to the changing world around him. He is a bigot and does not respect anyone that is not a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant or WASP. His wife is the stereotypical good natured woman that does what her husband tells her despite his indecent treatment of her and her opinions. They have one child together who marries a college student and hippy. The two are avid supporters of the progressive movement of the 1960's and are spokespersons for feminism and civil rights. Everything that the 1960's said about the conservative 1950's was on display in this show. *Family Ties* took the exact same approach but from a conservative origin.

Many times throughout *Family Ties*, Alex is seen walking or speaking to the portrait of President Reagan he owns. The show frequently speaks to the importance's of the family unit and maintaining classical family values for Americans. The new, younger generation represented by Alex Keaton is the main voice in this effort and President Reagan could not have been more supportive. He said it was his favorite television show on air and even volunteered his acting abilities to appear in an episode. "Most telling, *All in the Family*'s formula of using sixties motivated youth and progressivism to ridicule fifties-rooted parents and their traditionalism had been replaced atop the television charts by its antithesis: a *Family Ties* whose fifties-inspired youth ridicules his parents' sixties spirit."⁷⁷ According to Reagans and his conservative allies, had the 1960's not produced such liberal, hippy citizens, Vietnam would have been won and

⁷⁷ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 8.

communism could have been limited to China in Southeast Asia. Television shows such as *Family Ties* and movies like *Back to the Future* were easier ways of showing this to the nation than through political methods. Television shows were the new ways to American families and Reagan's political machine capitalized on it.

One of the more obvious and intense films that looked at racism in a different aspect and asked for a return to the memorable hard working Americans of the 1950's was *Rocky*. Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone), an immigrant Italian, loses his spot in the boxing ring to a more talented African American and is forced to become an enforcer for a bookie. He is then given a chance to fight the defending heavyweight champion of the world who is in his prime, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers). Apollo comes across as cocky and overly confident. The elements of race are heavily influenced throughout the movie as this is a black man fighting a white man. Through hard work, the right trainer, and true American grit and determination, Rocky manages to train himself into a true "Italian Stallion". In the big 15 round heavyweight championship, Rocky's grueling, "never say never" mentality shocks the crowd and his opponent, Apollo. By the end of the match, Rocky has proven himself a contender and won the girl of his dreams. He fails to win the match but through sequels that Hollywood never cares to make in an effort to garner a quick buck, Rocky beats Apollo, suffers tragic loss, defeats communism and makes a comeback to defy all the experts' opinions of himself. Rocky and Apollo even become best friends after beating each other senseless.

The entire premise for the *Rocky* movies is arguably steeped in racist metaphors. Consistently, a white underdog man that is neither large nor imposing, consistently manages to defeat athletically superior black champions in their prime and he becomes another "great white

hope.”⁷⁸ The message that many white Americans saw was that while the African American may be superior, it is the white man that is willing to put in the hard work and hard work will always outdo talent and ability. The undertones in the film are still the subject of debate among movie critics but the subtle and not so subtle connections are frequently seen by those willing to delve deeper into the movies themselves. The sequels that *Rocky* spawned are even more full of racially charged portrayals and outcomes. The movies were also being released at a time when African Americans were replacing white Americans as the majority in the boxing world.

Rocky II sees the “Italian Stallion” recover from his first bout with Apollo Creed. Apollo, tired of hearing the media bashing his performance against Balboa, demands a rematch with Rocky. Balboa is able to train and marry the “girl next door.” The training process is hard and painstaking but bent on proving he is the best and reaching the top, Rocky fights through. The championship match comes and the rematch is an even bigger spectacle than the original bout. Apollo is once again portrayed as a cocky, overly confident brute of sorts. He is portrayed as a Mohammed Ali type. The only way in which Rocky can win, is by good ole fashioned hard work. Apollo comes across as more about the flash than the actual substance. In an epic final match, Rocky defeats Creed in the final round by knockout. Despite losing his crown, Apollo still finds respect for Balboa and congratulates him by waving Rocky’s arms in the air. Despite the way in which he is portrayed, he is humble after losing his title to the white man. In the end, the old fashioned white way was superior than the flashy African American alternative.

Rocky III, the third installment in the saga that sees a defending champion Rocky Balboa lose his title to a very stereotypical, racist view of an African American in Clubber Lang (Mr. T).

⁷⁸ Sean Crosson, *Sport and Film*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.)

The African American Lang is seen as nothing more than a physical brute who only wants to beat white men (Rocky) into a bloody pulp and take his wife (a white woman) for himself. Rocky, as only celluloid can deliver, manages to come back and defeat the vicious Lang who frequently during the films yells and screams with a nearly primal fervor. The light in which Clubber Lang is portrayed is not flattering and overtly racist. The animalistic intensity that was used to portray Lang is not one of flatter or competitive spirit. Lang has to be held back several times from attacking Balboa and others outside of the boxing ring. He lets out brutish, animalistic screams as he is restrained in scenes.

After losing to Clubber Lang and the death of his trainer Mickey, an unlikely source appears to help the injured and down Italian Stallion. His former rival, Apollo Creed arrives to take over for the recently deceased Mickey. He brings Rocky to a new gym. Only the new gym is used by strictly African Americans. Upon arriving in his three-piece suit, many of the African American boxers in training stop and stare at the privileged white man. Apollo trains Rocky in the new, fast-paced African American style of boxing that Creed was so fond of using during his career. This fusion of a hard working white man with the flashy bravado of the African American proves to be just what Rocky needed. This would be the only way that Rocky would be able to defeat the animalistic Clubber Lang.

Ultimately, Balboa comes into the rematch with Lang with revenge on his mind. Looking to regain his title and ride off into the sunset that was retirement, Balboa stated the match would be his last win, lose, or draw. Creed's guidance tells Rocky to allow Clubber Lang to wear himself out and lay back and play a defensive battle. As the match, still in its early rounds continues, Lang becomes more and more uncontrollable. His own coach and support team struggle to keep him under control in between rounds. Rocky goes on the offensive after allowing Lang to wear

himself out. He defeats him quickly and efficiently which seemingly once again proves, the white man's way is superior to the African American method.

Even in *Rocky IV* and *Rocky V*, one sees racism. "The first half of *Rocky IV* further develops the theme of how government intervention in race relations threatens a culture of racial meritocracy."⁷⁹ A large Russian boxer that has no personality and is the embodiment of Reagan's view of the Soviet people and their empire is contained within Ivan Drago in *Rocky IV*. Apollo attempts to fight this man but is brutally defeated and killed during this Cold War battle. The message in this defeat is that despite being an American, a white Russian communist boxer is still superior to any African American in the ring. *Rocky IV* contains a simple message that capitalism is superior to communism, democracy is greater than totalitarianism, and the United States is grander than the Soviet Empire. *Rocky V* shows a Rocky Balboa that has been marred by financial struggles and is no longer a millionaire. Rocky had unknowingly signed his power of attorney over to his accountant that had managed to squander his fortune on poor financial decisions and real estate. Years of taking punches from black men and Russians has taken a major toll on the white man's body. His young protégé, Tommy Gun, is talented and has a promising future. His promoter bares a significant similarity to the real life promoter Don King. Balboa has to defeat the young Gun in a street fight because his mind and ways have been tainted by the money grabbing black promoter. After defeating Gun to the cheers of hundreds of cheering people in the streets, Balboa approaches the wealthy, cocky black promoter. The over confidence exuded from the promoter as he dared Balboa to punch him saying, "Touch me and I will sue." Thinking he had won, Rocky throws a haymaker of a punch throwing the man onto his

⁷⁹ Chris Jordan, *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 83-84.

back. The crowd, ironically lacking any African American diversity, erupts into a cheer. Rocky had stood up to the black man and stopped him from taking what belonged to the harder working white man. The *Rocky* franchise had sent subtle and not so subtle messages throughout its films concerning topics of race and ideological battles. The pressing issue was whether the Commander-in-Chief shared the thoughts and beliefs that these films embraced.

This is not to say that Reagan believed white Americans were superior to African Americans. However, it does say that he firmly believed that hard work would always be better than talent. His policies regarding African American minorities and civil rights left much to be desired especially on the liberal agenda. It is important to note that Reagan's major goals during his tenure were not focusing on civil rights but more on the economy, the Soviet Union, and reducing the size of the federal government. The defeat of the communist ideology was the main priority of this administration.

When it comes to civil rights and Ronald Reagan, the opinions are split between conservative Republicans, which adore Reagan, and the liberal Democrats that loathe him. Many Reagan fans are quick to point out that it was Ronald Reagan who made Martin Luther King Jr. Day a holiday in 1983. However, this was done out of force and appeasement and not willingness. Liberals quickly respond with his voting record against Affirmative Action and his willingness to appeal to white southerners by starting his Presidential election campaign in 1980 in Philadelphia, Mississippi where three civil rights workers had been murdered in 1964 by white supremacists.⁸⁰ Yet still, Republicans do not let this shake their faith in the cornerstone of their party, Ronald Reagan. "Fighting Communism, shrinking government, cutting taxes—these were

⁸⁰ Herbert, "Righting Reagan's Wrongs?."

the issues that Reagan cared about most deeply. But Reagan's top political strategists realized that many Americans, by 1980, felt a passionate anger about government racial policies like school busing and affirmative action, and that the president could use that passion to build support for his own broader objectives.”⁸¹ Movies like the *Rocky* saga that more or less, dehumanize African Americans to a primal level also show that films had not quite caught up to the same civil rights movement that had swept the nation in the 1960’s.

Ronald Reagan’s parents had gone to great lengths to show their son that racism was wrong. Ronald’s father would not allow him to view movies such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) that glorified racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Reagan had said, “In our household my father simply announced that no member of our family could see that picture because it was based on the Ku Klux Klan. And to this day I have never seen that great motion picture classic.”⁸² This seems to glorify a film that Reagan knew was of racist origins and yet also spares him from being associated with the racist overtures of the movie. How could a film that is notoriously racist in its tone and glorifies the Ku Klux Klan be considered a “great motion picture classic”? Critics do agree on how important the film was but it was more for its filming methods and not content. Despite being raised in a way that condemned racism, the debate over Reagan’s efforts or lack thereof to instill more progress on civil rights in the nation rages to this day.

President Reagan’s record on civil rights is quite controversial. It is possible however, that Reagan may have been using the anti-African American sentiment to push his Republican party in the direction of more support for himself, particularly in the south where racism was still very common. “A generation after the Civil Rights Movement ended Jim Crow-style segregation in

⁸¹ Schmoop Editorial Team, “Culture in the Reagan Era.”

⁸² Rogin, *Ronald Reagan*, 10.

the United States, therefore, Reagan perfected a sophisticated and subtle appeal to the prejudices and resentments that motivated some whites in both the South and the North. In doing so, Reagan bolstered the electoral prospects of his Republican Party. More importantly, he managed to channel anti-black prejudice into a broader anti-government politics; by cultivating the impression that federal social welfare programs were mostly wasted on ‘undeserving’ black people, Reagan built support for his own anti-government ideology. To acknowledge that this happened is *not* to argue that Ronald Reagan was himself a racist. Racism was not a central pillar of Reaganism, and the vast majority of Reagan’s supporters were not racists either. But—as top Reagan advisers later frankly acknowledged—the president *did* make a deliberate decision to reach out to the minority of white American voters who were motivated by anti-black sentiment. And that decision had significant political and social consequences.”⁸³ The question then becomes whether or not using racial biases of others to your advantage in turn makes one racist. Of that, Reagan is most definitely guilty.

In conclusion, President Reagan does not have a shining record regarding civil rights. Despite being raised in a home where racism was not a part of life, it seemed as though his tenure as President of the United States was fraught with accusations of racial inequality. Movies such as the *Rocky* saga and television shows like *The Cosby Show* showed that despite the successes of the 1960’s brining about legislation providing for equality, society and the movies and shows that were viewed had not caught up. *Back to the Future* was the message Reagan wished to spread. A strong message advocating for the return of classical family values in the United States. 1950’s America was America at its very finest. This included the racial strife that gripped the country at this time. *Back to the Future* and television shows such as *Family Ties*

⁸³ Schmoop Editorial Team, “Culture in the Reagan Era.”

painted the 1960's as the decade in which the United States fell victim to corruption and decadence from the hippie movement. This led directly to the United States failing in Vietnam and would be the springboard upon which President Reagan would use many movies to accomplish one of his Presidency's main goals: The rearmament and build-up of the United States armed forces in a direct attempt to combat the communistic Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 4

DEFEATING THE “EVIL EMPIRE”

In a commencement speech to Notre Dame graduates in 1981, the president said, “The West will not contain communism. It will transcend communism.”⁸⁴ President Reagan wanted to defeat communism. When the fortieth president’s name is mentioned, his stand against the Soviet Union and relationship with Soviet Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev come to mind. Where Ronald Reagan’s stance on domestic issues such as civil rights and feminism are of debate to this day, one aspect of the Reagan administration which has never been called into question is what President Reagan felt about the communist revolution and the center of its empire, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Reagan had always despised the notion of communism and believed it was evil to its very core. The American military and its support had become lackadaisical and seemingly unpatriotic since the days of Vietnam. President Reagan devised a massive buildup of the armed forces and modernized some of her older weaponry. To accomplish this feat, the administration would not only redirect budgetary funds, it would also have to find new means by which to recruit new military personnel. Hollywood would once again play a major role in the plans of the Reagan administration. If the president’s rhetoric against the communist empire were not enough of an inclination as to where he stood on the opposing ideology, the films that released during his tenure were more than enough to show the American public how they should view the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. According to Dinesh D’Souza, “Critics traced a number of Reagan’s presidential ideas to old movie plots.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Collins, *Transforming America*, 205.

⁸⁵ D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan*, 17.

Robert Collins writes,

At the heart of Reagan's foreign policy lay the rebuilding of America's military might. Defense spending had decreased by over twenty percent (in real terms, adjusted for inflation) over the decade of the 1970's, but from 1981-1989 the Pentagon's yearly budget nearly doubled from \$158 to \$304 billion, as the Reagan administration spent an overall total of \$2.7 trillion for defense. The results included the modernization of both strategic capability and conventional arms; by the mid-1980's the United States had deployed new Trident missile submarines and the new ten-warhead MX/Peacemaker ICBM, three thousand new combat aircraft, a six-hundred-ship Navy, and ten thousand new tanks.⁸⁶

The military would clearly have to become a new symbol after Vietnam. A symbol that did not cause protest or bring images of defeat and failure as it had in Southeast Asia.

"Use the Force." – Obi Wan Kenobi

Ronald Reagan was not opposed to using movie quotes and terms in his speeches. He had a State of the Union speech where he quoted from *Back to the Future*. In a portion of his 1986 State of the Union address, speaking directly to the younger generation, he said, "Never has there been a more exciting time to be alive, a time of rousing wonder and heroic achievement. As they said in the film *Back to the Future*, 'Where we're going, we don't need roads'."⁸⁷ Another major film that Reagan can thank for giving him more than one term to use would be none other than George Lucas' epic, *Star Wars*. The original film had been released in 1977 but had spawned a sequel that was even more popular than the first film. *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in theatres in 1980. It was a massive success that made its leading actors, Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher, and Harrison Ford, even more popular than the first film in the soon to be trilogy. "This

⁸⁶ Collins, *Transforming America*, 197.

⁸⁷ Ronald Reagan, "State of the Union, 1986," *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, February 4, 1986, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1986/20486a.htm>.

was followed by the successful launch of the *Star Wars* video in May 1982 and the film's first appearance on pay-TV in February 1983, which whetted public appetite for the forthcoming release of the second sequel, *Return of the Jedi* in May 1983. When Reagan addressed the nation on March 23, 1983, therefore, 'Star Wars' was on everybody's mind."⁸⁸

Reagan, in what may be his single most famous speech, referred to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as an "evil empire", directly comparing the Soviet Union to the antagonist forces of Darth Vader and his evil Galactic Empire in the *Star Wars* films. This address escalated tensions between the two superpowers. Combined with war game exercises and a Korean Air flight that was shot down by the Soviets a few months following his speech in 1983, nuclear war seemed like a real possibility. In his address given to a large, gathered crowd of evangelical Christians on the Soviet military build-up, President Reagan used the mass appeal of *Star Wars* to his advantage as only skilled politicians can. "In your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil."⁸⁹ The evangelicals loved the speech for its denunciation of the atheistic communists. Not only did Reagan directly refer to communism and the Soviets as evil, he laid all blame on the U.S.S.R. for the nuclear build up. The United States was merely defending herself and freedom while the Soviets spread fear and totalitarianism across the globe. Never mind the fact that the United

⁸⁸ Kramer, "Ronald Reagan and Star Wars."

⁸⁹ Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire Speech," Miller Center, March 8, 1983, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3409>.

States developed the nuclear bomb and had an ample lead in its development. Can one really blame the Soviet Union: The United States' antithesis on subjects from religion, to economic practices to personal freedoms? President Reagan believed one could and should.

Another moment that Reagan used *Star Wars* to his advantage was the development of a nuclear defense system. The system would in essence use satellites to protect United States airspace from the threat of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile or ICBM.

The nickname 'Star Wars' may have been attached to the program for some of its abstract and farfetched ideas, many of which included lasers. Furthermore, the previously released science fiction movie titled 'Star Wars,' caused the public to easily associate this program with new and creative technologies. 'The weapons required included space and ground-based nuclear X-ray lasers, subatomic particle beams, and computer-guided projectiles fired by electromagnetic rail guns—all under the central control of a supercomputer system.' By using these systems, the United States planned to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles while they still flew high above the Earth, minimizing their effects.⁹⁰

Unfortunately for Reagan, this plan proved to lofty for even the United States military. No space defense weapons were ever formulated from the project. However, was *Star Wars* made with Reagan and the Republican party in mind? Were any of the films Reagan so admired and enjoyed a part of a master plan to bring the United States back into a golden 1950's age? According to Peter Kramer, no. "The extreme popularity of a Hollywood film such as *Star Wars* derives not so much from any fixed message it may be said to convey, or any single response it aims to provoke, but from the multiplicity of meanings that can be extracted from it, and from the multiple uses it can be put to. Referring to the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire', or labeling

⁹⁰ Kevin Crowley, "The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI): Star Wars," Cold War Museum, 2008, accessed November 25, 2014, <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/80s/SDI-StarWars.asp>.

Reagan's missile defense program 'Star Wars' are two such uses, which may mobilize any of the meanings previously attached to the film or the term, and may also add new meanings to the existing repertory."⁹¹

The NASA space program had been losing funding and popularity for some time. Long past were the program's glory days when massive Saturn V rockets blasted off in efforts to land men on the moon. The popularity of Apollo 11's 1969 moon landing and the fascination of the world seeing men touch an alien surface seemed to be a distant memory. However, *Star Wars* once again had many people looking to the stars. NASA had been developing a reusable spacecraft that they said would make space flight as routine as commercial aviation had become. In 1981, in the first year of his first term, the space shuttle *Columbia* blasted off from Cape Canaveral.⁹² Millions watched as the world's first reusable spacecraft soared into orbit over the Earth. Not only was the launch heavily viewed, the landing of the new, radical craft was as well. Unfortunately, when pushing the boundaries of exploration, tragedies can happen. The space shuttle program would strike disaster a few years after the *Columbia* launch.

In 1985, NASA was once again fighting for publicity and public interest in their mission. To widen public support, a mission to put the first civilian into space was adopted. Christa McAuliffe was a high school social studies teacher from New Hampshire and after many rigorous examinations, she was selected by NASA to be a part of a space shuttle mission that wanted to put a teacher in space. On January 28, 1986, Christa and the other six crew members of the space shuttle *Challenger*, prepared for launch. Despite frigid temperatures and warnings

⁹¹ Kramer, "Ronald Reagan and Star Wars."

⁹² Gray Creech, "Touchdown! Landing the First Shuttle Mission," NASA.gov, April 5, 2006, accessed February 27, 2016, http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/shuttle/sts1/first_landing.html.

from contractors about the disastrous effects that the weather may have on the shuttle, NASA went ahead with the launch. The launch had already been delayed several times and NASA was more concerned with poor public reaction than they were about the safety of their astronauts. NASA went ahead with the launch. Seventy-three seconds after liftoff, the *Challenger* suffered a catastrophic explosion from its solid rocket fuel boosters causing the craft to break apart. All seven astronauts including Christa McAuliffe perished aboard the ship.

President Reagan addressed the nation about the disaster in a heartfelt speech to the nation from the Oval Office. Space travel, which had become seemingly routine, was once again shown to be dangerous and not for the faint of heart. Americans mourned for the loss of the brave astronauts. CNN, which had been televising the launch on live television, showed just how impactful twenty-four news networks would become on the populace. Millions of Americans watched the horror unfold live. It would be several months before another space shuttle launch was attempted and the American public's faith in NASA took a major blow. Despite the knock to the program, space shuttles would continue to be launched well into the twenty-first century. President Reagan would refocus his efforts against the most important of his political goals: Defeating communism.

"I Must Break You." – Ivan Drago

Reagan made no secret his disdain for the communist ideal and system. He believed it to be evil and a failed system. No movie perhaps shows this better than *Rocky IV*. Even more Reaganesque than the previously mentioned *Rocky* movies. A large, impending Russian boxer invades the heavyweight world straight from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Ivan Drago defeats and kills Rocky's former rival become friend, Apollo, in an exhibition match. "A skeptical media and Rocky's concerned wife believe that fighting Drago would be 'suicide' and therefore

advocate a policy of ‘peaceful coexistence.’ But Rocky adopts the Reaganite philosophy of ‘peace through strength’ when he agrees to fight Drago in Moscow.”⁹³ Rocky makes it his job to seek revenge and come out of retirement to defeat the much larger and much more physically prepared, Drago. “Drago is the machine-made byproduct of the Soviet state, training with a team of scientists and sophisticated computers, and achieving freakish size and strength with the help of steroids. ‘Drago is a look at the future,’ a boastful Soviet official tells American reporters. He declares that Drago's impending defeat of Rocky, ‘Will be a perfect example of how pathetically weak your society has become.’ This was consistent with Soviet braggadocio that was common even as its economic system was collapsing.”⁹⁴

Throughout the film, the emotions and fears of those living through the Cold War are more than prevalent. There is a very real feeling of capitalism and the United States versus communism and the Soviet Union. Naturally, the United States is seen as Rocky Balboa: Small, reserved, and non-aggressive. The Soviet Union however is seen as Ivan Drago: Large, aggressive, full of performance enhancing garbage that is not healthy, and unwavering in their devotion. The small, underdog Balboa manages to go into the heart of the communist empire, Moscow, and go toe to toe with a killer. In the end, the machine that is Drago is defeated and Rocky gives an inspirational speech to the Russian audience that manages to show them that everyone can change and work together. In essence, he was telling the Soviet Union that if they get rid of communism and ended the Cold War, the world was full of possibilities. Why should they fight in the first place? Rocky had already proven that a small, puny American was better than their steroid filled, super athlete. This film was American propaganda personified. “Rocky's

⁹³ Philip Klein, “Rocky IV Turns 20,” *The American Spectator*, November 27, 2005.

⁹⁴ Klein, “Rocky IV Turns 20.”

victory over Drago is a victory of individualism over collectivism and a vindication of the policy of ‘peace through strength.’ It demonstrates the universal appeal of American ideals.”⁹⁵ It was not just American ideals though; it was Reagan ideals.

“I Feel the Need! The Need, For Speed!” – Maverick and Goose

A major film that was instrumental in Ronald Reagan’s presidency was none other than *Top Gun*. This film seeks to glorify the military with tales of adventure, adoration, and sex. Maverick, the smooth talking, unapologetic U.S. Navy pilot ace attends the Navy’s top fighter pilot school and competes against the likes of Iceman (Val Kilmer) and Viper (Tom Skerritt) to become known as the very best fighter pilot in the United States’ Navy. The movie became so wildly popular that the government began to have military recruiters, especially Navy recruiters set up booths and tables directly outside of movie theatres to enlist eager young men into their ranks. “Polls soon showed rising confidence in the military. With Ronald Reagan wrapping military adventurism in the flag, with the armed forces scoring low-risk but high-profile victories in Libya and Grenada, America fell in love with Maverick, Iceman and other high-fivin’ silver-screen super-pilots as they traveled mach two while screaming about ‘the need for speed’.”⁹⁶ Recruitment was no longer a weak point the way it was after the Vietnam War. The film made military combat and service sexy and attractive once again after the failures of Vietnam had caused the military and the government to fall out of favor with the American people.

This went right along with Reagan’s growth of the military and the large defense budget increase he brought with him into office. Reagan was very happy and proud of using films and

⁹⁵ Klein, “Rocky IV Turns 20.”

⁹⁶ David Sirota, “25 Years Later: How *Top Gun* Made America Love War,” *Washington Post*, August 26, 2011.

Hollywood to benefit the nation's military forces as a whole. The former actor become Commander-in-Chief was a movie fan himself for obvious reasons. For anyone wondering if the government really had anything to do with the film *Top Gun*, one needs look no further than to see how much the Pentagon charged and assisted filmmakers to use their aircraft carriers, planes, and bases. "During production, the Pentagon worked hand-in-hand with the filmmakers, reportedly charging Paramount Pictures just \$1.8 million for the use of its warplanes and aircraft carriers. But that taxpayer-subsidized discount came at a price — the filmmakers were required to submit their script to Pentagon brass for meticulous line edits aimed at casting the military in the most positive light. (One example: *Time* magazine reported that Goose's death was changed from a midair collision to an ejection scene, because 'the Navy complained that too many pilots were crashing'.)"⁹⁷ When looking at the film, the Pentagon wanted to know exactly how it could use the film to boost sinking recruitment and once again make it exciting to be a part of the United States' military.

The success of *Top Gun* was quite clear to the Pentagon. "By the time the 1991 Persian Gulf War began, Phil Strub, the Pentagon's liaison to the movie industry, told the Hollywood Reporter that he'd seen a 70 percent increase in the number of requests from filmmakers for assistance — effectively changing the way Hollywood works."⁹⁸ Reagan's administration and the military had made the pains of Vietnam a figment of the past. "*Top Gun* made \$353 million at the box office, and made additional cash for the companies whose swag was associated with the movie — from makers of aviator sunglasses and leather bomber jackets to Pepsi, which ran a

⁹⁷ Sirota, "25 Years Later."

⁹⁸ Sirota, "25 Years Later."

\$2 million promotion campaign offering rebates on *Top Gun* VHS copies with attendant soda purchases.”⁹⁹ *Top Gun* had not only made militarism a popular thing, it had replaced Vietnam and the 1960’s military disapproval with militarism mixed with patriotism.

This hybrid form of militarism was being targeted and sold to children. Video game systems like the Nintendo Entertainment System, Sega, and Atari were all a major economic force in the 1980’s. “No synergized product better actualized the film’s technological allure than its video games. Selling 2 million copies upon its 1987 release and spurring a Sega rip-off called *Afterburner*, *Top Gun* was the best-performing game of the moment, and what a moment it was for video games. *Top Gun*’s video game success was yet another 1980’s milestone for selling militarism to children, maybe even a bigger symbolic achievement than the film itself, considering the video game genre’s martial DNA.”¹⁰⁰ Violent video games that celebrate science fiction fantasy and military fantasy are common throughout retail stores today. Games in the *Call of Duty* franchise and the *Medal of Honor* franchise glorify this sense of militarism and then sell it to young children at a susceptible age. Their origins came from this time.

“As the 1980’s progressed, a kind of logical proof came to define America’s lurch toward militarism. The military is unquestionably awesome. The military is America. Therefore, questioning the military means one is questioning America and if one questions America, they are unpatriotic and unacceptable to the American way.”¹⁰¹ This was done by blaming politics and bureaucrats and not the military for the failures of Vietnam. As a result, the “Legend of the Spat

⁹⁹ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 152.

¹⁰⁰ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 152-153.

¹⁰¹ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 121.

Upon Veteran” ensued. A small portion of *Top Gun* deals with this. Maverick’s father, a fighter pilot in Vietnam, is blamed by the government for failing his mission and the circumstances of his death are kept confidential. Maverick’s mentor, Viper (Tom Skerrit), fought with Maverick’s father during the engagement in question and tells Maverick that his father saved multiple lives but due to a governmental error as to where the battle occurred, kept the dogfight top secret. Politics and bureaucracy are the real problem, not the armed forces. Reagan only excelled this method of thinking when he said that, “It is time we recognize that ours was, in truth, a *noble cause*. We dishonor the memory of fifty thousand young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful.”¹⁰² Reagan stance against communism was so grand, the failures and massive loss of life in the Vietnam War would not allow him to condemn the failed mission. Instead, he blamed politicians and lack of public support as the reason for the defeat at the hands of the Viet Cong.

One film that shows this feeling of political and not military failure was *First Blood* (1982) better known as the *Rambo* series. In the film, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) is a Vietnam veteran who has been spit on by anti-war protestors. He is very critical of politicians in Washington that would not let the troops go do their job and “win.” In *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Rambo is sent back to Southeast Asia to rescue American POW’s that are still being held by Viet Cong troops. Despite Rambo’s Superman like abilities of invincibility, he is crippled by a tormenting fear of internal dissent. He goes against orders by rescuing his comrades in distress and then, after returning victorious against impossible and laughable odds, “he sums up all the 1980’s Vietnam revisionism about spat-upon vets and handcuffed soldiers in one final line: ‘I

¹⁰² Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 112.

want what every other guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything he had wants,' he says. For our country to love us as much as we love it.”¹⁰³ The film directly states that it was the United States’ government that betrayed the military and the American people. Reagan wanted Americans to know that there would never be another Vietnam provided the American public support whatever actions are taking place. The military and country need the people’s unwavering support, or defeats would become commonplace.

Red Dawn, the first ever film to garner the PG-13 rating, premiered in 1984. This new rating was developed specifically so that children under eighteen could watch. 1980’s heartthrobs such as Lea Thompson, Patrick Swayze, Charlie Sheen, and Jennifer Grey star in one of the most violent movies ever released up until that point. The story of several teens from a small Colorado town who are forced to operate a guerilla war against a massive, invading Soviet army. Calling themselves the Wolverines, these youngsters are able to keep the entire might of the Soviet invasion force on edge and deal them several military blows. This film paints an impressive rendering of 1980’s Vietnam-related revisions.

The first of these revisions is the anti-gun-control extremism. “One of the film’s first scenes shows a Soviet thug pulling a gun from an American corpse as the camera pans across a pickup truck bearing a National Rifle Association bumper sticker that reads, *They can have my gun when they pry it from my cold, dead fingers*. Later, the Soviets are able to hunt down American resisters through the secret master list of gun owners that the U.S. government allegedly keeps (one of the longtime conspiracy theories).”¹⁰⁴ The next revision is the desire for revenge on any

¹⁰³ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 119.

¹⁰⁴ Sirota, *Back to Our Future*, 144.

nation that defeated the United States. Incarcerated family members of the Wolverines scream for their children to avenge them after their death. The third revision paints the mayor of the occupied town as being a Soviet collaborator who cares little about his town members and is only out to protect himself. Harkening directly to the belief that politicians, and not the military, lost Vietnam. The fourth revision is that the United States is a military underdog. The Soviets outgun the United States at every turn and only a small, rag tag group of teens can save the most dominant military in the history of humanity.

President Reagan's significant impacts on public policy would undoubtedly include the realm of political economics. His administration's approach to stimulating and then building a strong economy would coin a new term: Reaganomics. The term Reaganomics has become synonymous with the 1980's. Conservatives glorify and attempt to match what they view as the groundwork that lead to the economic boom of the 1990's. Liberals are quick to point out the huge, national debt that the Reagan administration's policies created as denouncing any accomplishments. The effects of Reaganomics are debated today but most contemporaries agree that the Reagan policies on the economy cast a long shadow that stretched into the new millennium. "Moreover, Reagan harnessed growth to a larger ideological crusade – the dismantling of the modern welfare state."¹⁰⁵

One of President Reagan's first actions as Commander-in-Chief was to remove the federal government price controls on gas and oil prices. This was done in response to one of his campaign promises that he would provide regulatory relief for American business.¹⁰⁶ Despite the

¹⁰⁵ Collins, *Transforming America*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ Collins, *Transforming America*, 81.

fact that deregulation was a phenomena of the 1970's, it is popularly associated with President Reagan. According to "historian Richard H.K. Vietor of the Harvard Business School conclusions, the administration initiated further deregulation only in banking and television."¹⁰⁷ Reagan's successes in economics can be seen in two noteworthy areas. The first achievement was Reagan's ending of the Great Inflation that had plagued the Carter administration in the 1970's. The second, major achievement, in what economists call the "Great Expansion", saw an unrivalled period of economic prosperity for twenty years at the end of the twentieth century. Despite the recession that hit the Reagan administration when it took office in 1981, the economy rebounded in 1982 and went on to experience the greatest success in all of United States' history. On the other side of things, there are also two major consequences of the Reagan economic leadership. Primarily, Reaganomics caused the national debt to skyrocket and secondly, the rise in inequality was spectacular. The rich got richer, the middle class shrunk, and the poor got poorer.

"I Create Nothing. I Own." – Gordon Gecko

A film that can really show how the president viewed money and the economy can be seen in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*. Michael Douglass played the film's leading role, Gordon Gekko, who was meant to be a villainous, greedy type. Stone, a staunch liberal filmmaker, intended for Gekko to be the antagonist but Oscar winning performance by Michael Douglass created a sympathetic protagonist.¹⁰⁸ In the films most famous scene, Gekko explains how greed is, for a lack of a better word, good. In what Oliver Stone intended to be a satirical look on how the rich in America keep getting richer, *Wall Street* became a battle cry for Reagan and his

¹⁰⁷ Collins, *Transforming America*, 81.

¹⁰⁸ Collins, *Transforming America*, 93.

constituents. Greed or the free-market system is good and making more and gathering more is going to make you survive and be better. Greed is strength in other words.

Just as Bruce Springsteen intended 'Born in the USA' to be an ironic critique of a fading American Dream, Oliver Stone intended *Wall Street* to be a satirical skewering of free-market excess. But the two artists' audiences—who, by and large, held much more positive views of Reagan and Reaganism than did either Springsteen or Stone—mostly missed the irony and satire. They transformed 'Born in the USA' into a nationalistic anthem by screaming along with Springsteen's proud chorus without hearing his tragic verses. They transformed *Wall Street* into a celebration of no-holds-barred capitalism by cheering for Stone's intended villain, Gordon Gekko. So powerful was the Reagan Revolution that many Americans interpreted cultural attacks against it to be exaltations of it. Bruce Springsteen is one of modern America's greatest songwriters, Oliver Stone one of its most talented filmmakers. As a cultural powerhouse, Ronald Reagan easily trumped them both.¹⁰⁹

President Reagan wanted Americans to be individuals but at the same time have a sense of community. Films like *Wall Street* conveyed this. "Reagan's soaring rhetoric and grandfatherly manner was at odds with the evidence of a new era of callousness, perverse individualism, and material consumption."¹¹⁰ The 1980's were about America separating itself from the rest of the world and becoming stronger. Reagan wanted the average American citizen to once again be proud of his nation and what it stood for and to make money being proud.

One of the best lines from the film is when Gordon Gekko states, "I create nothing. I own." Despite playing the antagonist, Michael Douglass' Gordon Gecko became one of the most popular movie villains of all time and it was because of quotes like this. Charlie Sheen's Bud Fox, a good, honest and hardworking individual, is seduced by the glamorous lifestyle that Gecko can provide. Fox slowly becomes corrupt as the tempting and lavish excess provided by his new job lead him down a very slippery slope. When he realizes the error of his ways, he uses

¹⁰⁹ Schmoop Editorial Team, "Culture in the Reagan Era."

¹¹⁰ Daryl A. Carter, "Notes From an In-Between," in *Overcoming Adversity in Academia*, ed. Elwood Watson (Lanham, MD: UPA, 2013), 239.

all the tricks and savvy Gecko gave him to foil Gordon's plans. Fox ultimately wears a wire to stop Gecko in exchange for a reduced sentence for his own white-collar crimes. For movie watchers, *Wall Street* mirrored real life newspaper headlines of corrupt stock traders and investment bankers. Gordon Gecko was a character around which many Americans were able to put a face to the corrupt executives of the decade.

Did these films and television shows fulfill what President Ronald Reagan wished for? Was there really a return to a more conservative and family driven United States of America? And if so, was this America a better and more internationally competitive force in the world of international affairs? The answer to all of these important questions is quite simply, yes. History agrees with me as well. The average United States' citizen had a sweeping sense of patriotism and national pride following the successful invasion of Grenada in 1983 and then the sweeping victories at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic games. The pain and defeat of Vietnam were no longer the defining mood of the generation. The military's large recruiting numbers, reduced inflation, and strong economy proved that, as did Reagan's approval rating. He "left Washington with the highest popular approval rating of any retiring president in the post-war era."¹¹¹ Reagan's dominant reelection campaign in which the incumbent President won forty-nine out of fifty states speaks volumes to his approval and the admiration in which the nation held him. His brush with death at the hands of a would be assassin also made him outrageously popular. He took advantage of this popularity by using movies and television to encourage the American populace and bring about an economic and military revival.

¹¹¹ Collins, *Transforming America*, 241.

Perhaps the greatest aspect of his two terms in office was the special relationship that Ronald Reagan built with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. While his friendship with ally and fellow conservative Margaret Thatcher is of great renowned, it was his bond with Gorbachev that led to world changing developments. When the 1980's began, no one saw an end to the Cold War in the near future if ever. Many political pundits feared that Reagan was too boisterous and vocal about the evils of communism for there to be any substantial progress made between the world's two super powers. Some thought relations would deteriorate further and potentially launch an Armageddon-esque nuclear holocaust. However, despite these fears, the leaders of the United States and Soviet Union would forge a personal relationship based on respect and the desire for peace to begin the process of ending a volatile relationship decades old. The talks that both Reagan and Gorbachev took part in would change American-Soviet relations permanently.

In 1986, President Reagan and Premier Gorbachev met in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik. The two men both came to the table prepared to talk about differing subject. Reagan and the American delegation wished to discuss human rights in the Soviet Union, the emigration of Jews from the U.S.S.R., and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹¹² The Soviets and Gorbachev only wished to discuss disarmament and arms control.¹¹³ The talks were very productive and successful as both nations learned that they could compromise very effectively. A complete elimination on all nuclear weapons was discussed as well. The meeting went well until the discussions stalled when an impasse was reached concerning SDI and the militarization of space. The talks, although technically a failure, provided a strong base upon which more productive discussions were eventually had. A little over a year later in Washington DC, the INF or

¹¹² Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 343.

¹¹³ Reeves, *President Reagan*, 343.

Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty saw the complete elimination of medium range nuclear weapons from both of the super powers arsenals.

In a decade that is full of reminiscing for old time values that the 1950's are so renowned for, the 1980's had a few strong liberal movements that the 1960's were well known for as well. Fulfilling a promise of his election campaign from 1980, Ronald Reagan appointed the first woman to ever hold a spot on the Supreme Court.¹¹⁴ His appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor to the highest court in the United States was a strong victory for the feminist movement that had become a large part of the "hippy 1960's." She went on to a long and successful career. "O'Connor went on to serve on the Supreme Court for a quarter century, where she had a major influence on the court's decisions. As a moderate, she often provided the deciding vote on many of the court's cases. She also helped inspire a generation of women to pursue careers in law—when O'Connor was appointed, thirty-six percent of law school students were women; by the time she retired from the court in 2006 that percentage had risen to forty-eight percent."¹¹⁵

As the election of 1988 approached, President Reagan looked back on his eight years as Commander-in-Chief. His vice president, George H.W. Bush, was busy running for his boss' job in the 1988 presidential election that would pit the Republicans against Democrat Michael Dukakis. Bush was able to ride the successes of President Reagan to a landslide victory and win the office that had eluded him eight years prior when Ronald Reagan had defeated him in the GOP primaries. In his farewell address to the nation, President Reagan reminisced on his time in the White House, the accomplishments that he had brought to the nation, and the work that still

¹¹⁴ "Reagan's Nomination of O'Connor," National Archives, August 19, 1981, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/oconnor.html>.

¹¹⁵ "Reagan's Nomination of O'Connor," National Archives.

lay ahead. He said, “The economy is booming. Long-festering social problems like drugs, crime, and a decline in our educational standards are being dealt with. And for the first time in the postwar era, the Soviet menace shows some signs of relenting. This last development is, of course, so heartening to those of us who have lived through all the brooding terrors of the postwar era. We’re prayerful and hopeful - hopeful that the next generation of Americans will not have to contend as we did with the nightmares of nuclear terror and totalitarian expansionism.”¹¹⁶ President Bush’s administration would see the ultimate collapse of the Soviet Empire and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Both of these events seemed impossible a mere decade earlier when Reagan had taken office.

Rawhide Rides Off Into the Sunset

In November of 1994, former President Reagan announced he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.¹¹⁷ In a letter to the nation, he broke the sad news. “I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life...”¹¹⁸ As he had done so often throughout his life, Ronald Reagan showed extreme grace under pressure. On June 5, 2004, the fortieth President of the United States passed away at his home in Bel Air, California. Nancy Reagan said that it had been four years since he had even opened his eyes as he was bed ridden with the debilitating effects brought upon by the Alzheimer’s.¹¹⁹ His state funeral was watched by millions. His body was flown to Washington for the state funeral and then back to Simi Valley, the site of his

¹¹⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Final Radio Address to the Nation,” *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library*, January 14, 1989, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1989/011489a.htm>.

¹¹⁷ D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan*, 15.

¹¹⁸ Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, (Random House: New York, 1999), 668.

¹¹⁹ Reeves, *President Reagan*, 490.

Presidential Library. This became Ronald Reagan's final resting place. He left behind a legacy that still has not been fully realized. Even confronting death, Reagan's faith in America never faltered. Concluding his final letter to the nation he said, "I know that for America there will always be a bright dawn ahead."¹²⁰

Did the Reagan administration's policies bring about the destruction of the Soviet Union? From the implemented military buildup to a strong economy that would boom even larger in 1990's, many conservative supporters believe Ronald Reagan's administration was the strong base off of which these successes came about. Liberals are not as quick to share this belief. What cannot be understated is just how much Reagan's policies and administration defined the era. Reagan was to the 1980's what Franklin Delano Roosevelt was to the 1930's: A reason to hope and feel patriotic about the nation. The recession that Reagan inherited from the Carter presidency was a thought of the past as the economy was once again strong. The Soviet Union was reeling economically and falling apart from within. The failures of Vietnam were no longer the face of the military and patriotism was stronger than ever. Reagan had succeeded in several of his goals that he had laid before the country when he took office in 1981.

The policies of the Reagan administration led to advanced talks with the Soviet Union that many believed may never happen. The two bitter rivals and super powers came to the negotiating table thanks in large part to the efforts of their two leaders. President Reagan's relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev was one of mutual respect. The president had other strong relationships with other world leaders such as the United Kingdom's "Iron Lady", Margaret Thatcher but it was his friendship with Gorbachev that led to history being made. In his farewell address to the nation he

¹²⁰ Chris Matthews, *Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 370.

said, “We meant to change a nation, and instead, we changed a world.”¹²¹ Among “The Great Communicator’s” achievements in his eight years as head of the executive branch was the lowering of inflation and an economic recovery that went well into the 1990’s. Second, he was able to bring about the end of the Cold War on Western terms. Gorbachev was more important in this regard as he was willing to compromise and saw the future was bleak for the Soviet Union. Another achievement was how the American people were inspired once again. Faith in the government was restored. As Michael Collins says, “Reagan renewed faith in the presidency as an institution. He demonstrated that the presidency remained a powerful political instrument and that the office did not necessarily destroy or overwhelm its occupant. Lyndon B. Johnson had been broken in office. Nixon besieged, Ford befuddled, and Carter overwhelmed. Perhaps, some thought, the job had just gotten too big, the challenges too daunting, the times too complex. Regan proved all that wrong.”¹²² Through television and film, Reagan had been able to “make America great again” or at least he had made Americans feel that America was great again. The “malaise” of the 1970’s which included Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, and sky rocketing inflation were no longer the topics. Instead, *Top Gun*’s Maverick and Ice Man and *First Blood*’s John Rambo were being emulated and recruitment numbers for the armed forces were strong. *Wall Street*’s Gordon Gecko had taught Americans that greed was a good thing because making money was what America was all about. *Back to the Future*’s Marty McFly had travelled through time to reveal to Americans that a return to classical, conservative family values was vital to the country. As the country rebounded during the 1980’s, Americans bought in to what President Reagan was preaching.

¹²¹ Collins, *Transforming America*, 236.

¹²² Collins, *Transforming America*, 237-238.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The 1980's was a period of transformation. Few people would have believed when President Reagan came into office that the world would look so very different just a decade later. Inflation that was out of control, the military was unpopular and out of date in many regards, and the United States felt as if it were hungover from the 1960's and 70's. However, by 1989 the economy was strong, military recruitment was high, and patriotism swept the land.¹²³ The Reagan administration was one of change. The return to what Reagan believed to be the principles of what had made the United States such a great nation in the first place were responsible for this transformation. Films and television were a vital part of this success.

President Reagan has most certainly cast a long shadow upon history. "He ushered in the longest period of prosperity in U.S. history, led the West to victory in the Cold War while reestablishing an international preeminence that many feared had been permanently lost, and changed significantly the way Americans thought about themselves, their government, and their country. He orchestrated the most consequential presidency since that of the twentieth century's other reconstructive leader, young Dutch Reagan's early political idol, Franklin D. Roosevelt."¹²⁴ The economy became even stronger in the 1990's when President Bill Clinton took office, defeating Reagan's former Vice President and incumbent George H. W. Bush in 1992. Almost three decades have past since the Great Communicator left office and he has become a mythological, political giant to the Republican Party. Many pundits and writers call the Republican Party the Party of Lincoln and the Party of Reagan. His name is brought up regularly

¹²³ Collins, *Transforming America*, 4.

¹²⁴ Collins, *Transforming America*, 243.

by politicians seeking to inspire voters to cast ballots in their favor. However, as Dinesh D'Souza said, "There is no point in pining for 'another Ronald Reagan.' Great leaders don't come along very often, and in many ways Reagan was an American original. He isn't returning and there will never be another quite like him."¹²⁵

The films and television that arose during the decade were very telling of the times. The former Hollywood actor turned Governor turned Commander-in-Chief was able to use these films to his advantage. The blending of government speeches with popular cultural references gave many Americans a better understanding of what was taking place. It also painted the image of what Reagan wanted. From *Back to the Future* and its return to the classical, and seemingly mythological 1950's to *Top Gun* and America's new love affair with military and violence, these films provided a template for the conservative message of hope and change that Reagan's administration helped establish. Topics such as civil rights and racial relations are viewed from *The Cosby Show* very differently than they are seen in the *Rocky* saga. The United States' own version of the "stabbed in the back" theory can be seen in *Rambo*. If the government had not been involved, 50,000 American lives would not have died in vain. Reagan wanted a small federal government but a strong one. His passion for democracy and hatred of communism led to the cooling of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States and eventually the end of the Cold War.

The Reagan years had seen many accomplishments. It had seen setbacks as well. However, one cannot deny the impact that Dutch had on the country. America was given a renewed faith in their government that was provided by the Great Communicator. He slowed the growth of the

¹²⁵ Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan*, 264.

federal government in domestic areas (raising it heavily in military budget), saw the beginning of the Soviet Union's demise, and saw the economy do a complete rebound from the inflation laden days of the 1970's and the Carter administration.

In rating Reagan, one can see he had four major successes. First, the economy rebounded and went on to have record growth well into the 1990's. The inflation and poor economy of the Carter administration were a distant memory. Second major accomplishment was the ending of the Cold War. Not only did the Cold War end but it came to a conclusion on Western terms. Third success was how President Reagan reaffirmed Americans faith in the federal government. Ironic that the man who wanted to have small federal government was the one who gave Americans a reason to believe in it again. Finally, Ronald Reagan was able to slow the growth of the federal government. The welfare state did not expand under the Reagan administration but he was unable to get rid of it.

There were significant failures in his two terms as chief executive of the nation. The national deficit tripled under his watch skyrocketing from one trillion dollars to over three trillion dollars when he left office in 1989.¹²⁶ Another shortcoming was his inability to make any progress in healing the nation's racial divide. Many of the country's black leaders felt Reagan was a racist and accused him as such. His refusal of supporting the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Acts of the 1960's did not help this image. Reagan's appointments of African Americans to high positions within the government was seen as appeasement to an extent. He established Martin Luther King Jr Day but this was also viewed as a necessity so as not to upset the African American populace. Racial relations are still poor in the nation today. They have not advanced much past the point where the country stood in the 1980's.

¹²⁶ Collins, *Transforming America*, 238.

In conclusion, Ronald Reagan was unlike any president the nation had seen. The former Hollywood icon rose to the highest office in the land and the most powerful man in the world. He used the captivating power of television and film to showcase his desires and dreams for the country. He inspired a generation to not accept the failures of the past but to right them. I believe Ronald Reagan was to the 1980's what Franklin D. Roosevelt was to the 1930's. He inspired hope and hard work so that Americans could better their lives and as a result, better America. In his closing remarks to the nation as he left office in 1989 he said, "My friends: We did it. We weren't just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger, we made the city freer, and we left her in good hands. All in all, not bad, not bad at all."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Richard Reeves. *President Reagan*, 486.

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