

HIS
LIFE
AND
LEGEND



REAGAN

MAX
BOOT

PULITZER PRIZE
FINALIST

REAGAN

His Life and Legend

MAX BOOT



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Ronald Reagan at Rancho del Cielo, August 13, 1981.
(RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL FOUNDATION)

To two of the strongest women I have ever known,
my wife, Sue Mi Terry, and my late mother, Olga E. Kagan.
They have done as much to support me as
Nelle and Nancy did for Ronald Reagan.

All men lead their lives behind a wall of
misunderstanding they have themselves built.

—SHERWOOD ANDERSON

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REAGAN



Ronald Reagan's flag-draped casket being escorted on a horse-drawn caisson to the U.S. Capitol, June 7, 2004. (GETTY)

Prologue

Mourning in America

There was almost no one who did not succumb to his magic.

—SELWA “LUCKY” ROOSEVELT

The end came shortly after 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 5, 2004, in the secluded, ranch-style house on Saint Cloud Road in Bel-Air at the end of a winding, bougainvillea-lined driveway guarded by the Secret Service. Outside, the jacaranda trees and jasmine vines were in bloom, the jasmine filling the air with sweet, heavy perfume and the jacaranda bursting in a profusion of purple. But the dying man was not aware of the seasons or the flowers or even his own family. He could no longer recognize his loving wife of fifty-two years—his indispensable, though sharp-elbowed, companion and *consigliere* during his rise from president of the Screen Actors Guild to the president of the entire nation. Nancy Reagan, who had become his devoted caregiver during his protracted, lingering senescence, was now eighty-two and frail. She stood helplessly by, grief-stricken, watching the love of her life fade away.¹

It had been a decade since Ronald Reagan had left the public stage with a poignant, handwritten note announcing that he had become “one of the millions of Americans” who was “afflicted with Alzheimer’s Disease.” “I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life,” he had written, using a cowboy trope that might have been equally appropriate for one of his Western movies. That sunset had finally arrived, producing a darkness, at least as a physical manifestation, that set in just after noon.

Once Ronald Reagan had bestridden the world; now the world had closed in on him. His post-presidential office in a Century City skyscraper—once used, as if biographically scripted, as a set for the movie *Die Hard*—had already been shuttered.² He had long ago been forced to give up visits to his beloved ranch in Santa Barbara, located at a hundred-mile remove from Bel-Air, after he had gotten frantic and disoriented during a drive up. Even swimming—the sport in which he had excelled his whole life, ever since his days as a teenage lifeguard on the Rock River in Illinois—was no longer possible. Because long-term memory is often the last to go for Alzheimer’s patients, he was still reminiscing about working as a lifeguard after he had forgotten everything else; he couldn’t understand how his old aide Michael Deaver, who had heard the stories a hundred times before, could already know all about his teenage feats.³ In his straitened circumstances, he was reduced to the indignity of wearing inflatable water wings while being propped up in the shallow end of the pool by a nurse and a Secret Service agent. He enjoyed using a pool rake to scoop magnolia blossoms out of the swimming pool so much that his Secret Service agents would thoughtfully throw in a few more blossoms for him to take out.⁴

But his pool time had to end after he fell in his bedroom and broke his hip in the first month of 2001. On that occasion he had landed in the same medical facility—St. John’s Hospital in Santa Monica—where, on another floor, his sixty-year-old daughter, Maureen, was dying of melanoma that was now lapping at her brain. He was not aware, not even dimly, that she was there. Nor did he know when she passed away eight months later, in August. He survived his fall, but the general anesthesia used during surgery evidently worsened his dementia. There would be no physical rehabilitation from this injury as there had been after he was shot in 1981. When he returned home, he could no longer go to the park—outings he had once enjoyed, even though he could not understand why so many people recognized him. “How do they know me?” he wondered. He was now confined to a hospital bed in the room that had been his home office. Once a poster boy of ruddy good health, even during his incipient dementia, his broad shoulders and strong swimmer’s legs had been reduced to skin and bones. He would simply lie and silently stare into the distance as the sun streaked across the western sky.⁵

His well-worn wooden desk, a gift from the Kitchen Cabinet that he had used in Sacramento and at the White House residence, still stood by the window and remained filled with annotated articles and notecards he had been collecting for decades on matters of concern to him. This miscellany included warnings of radicalism on college campuses, the perils of “pot” smoking and of government-provided health care, the virtues of tax cuts, the threats posed by North Vietnam and the Sandinistas, the Communist infiltration of Hollywood and the peace movement, and the horrors of nuclear war. Mixed in, incongruously, among the right-wing literature was an advertisement for Dehner riding boots (“where quality is traditional”)—a reminder of his nonpolitical passion. Here lay one-liners he could deploy (“Summing it all up I’d have to say the whole Iran episode gives me the same feeling as my recent operation”) and collections of his favorite political jokes (“COMMUNISM—You have two cows. The government takes them both and gives you milk. . . . BUREAUCRACY: You have two cows. The government takes both of them, shoots one of them, milks the other, and pours the milk down the drain”).⁶ All of it had long been unread and unused, his mental life having been cruelly sapped and extinguished years before his physical existence followed suit.

The Reagans’ youngest son, Ron, who lived in Seattle, had flown all night from a Hawaii vacation to bid a final goodbye. Their daughter Patti Davis, who had long ago taken her mother’s maiden name in an attempt to escape the unforgiving glare of her family’s spotlight, had driven from her nearby home. Notably missing was Michael Reagan, Ronald Reagan’s adopted son from his first marriage. He had visited the day before, journeying from his home in the San Fernando Valley, but his estranged stepmother, Nancy, had not summoned him this morning to his father’s deathbed. He would not arrive until it was too late.⁷

Now Ron and Patti, loyal and supportive as children could be at such a dire time, stood by with their mother, alongside a doctor and a nurse, watching the patient’s breathing become shallow and labored. Nancy gently stroked her dying husband’s hair while Patti held his left hand and Ron touched a knee. All “murmured words of love and affection,” Ron recalled. Just before the end, the dying president opened his eyes. Both Patti and Ron were astonished to see that they were vividly blue and focused in a way they had not been for at least a year. He looked straight at his wife of more than a half century. Then, Ron noted, “the blue flame guttered and extinguished. His eyes dimmed. With a quiet exhalation, my father settled back onto his pillow and died.”⁸

Nancy Reagan had spent a lifetime perfecting a look of rapt adoration when her husband spoke in public, but the actress's gaze could no longer hold. She was now in tears. Having seen his eyes one last time, she whispered, "That's the greatest gift you could have given me."⁹

The Reagan family did not know what to expect after the demise of the fortieth president. He had been out of the public eye for a decade. Would people still remember him? Would they care that he was dead? The minutes after his demise revealed that he was gone but far from forgotten. News helicopters buzzed the house. So many reporters thronged the streets of the Bel-Air neighborhood that the hearse from the Gates Kingsley & Gates funeral home had trouble getting through. Television networks broke into their programming to announce the news, and newspapers splashed it across their front pages the next morning.

"Reagan Dies at 93" read the banner headline in his hometown newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*: "Popular President Changed the Political Landscape."

The passage of years had been politically if not personally kind to Ronald Reagan. Since his departure from office in January 1989, the world had gone his way. He had called for the Berlin Wall to be torn down, and, less than a year after he left office, it was. (A piece of the wall was proudly displayed at the Reagan Library much as a big-game hunter might mount an animal head on the wall.) He had excoriated the Soviet Union as an "evil empire," and, less than three years after he left office, it—as if magically—dissolved. He had said that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," and seven years after he left office that laissez-faire outlook was ratified by a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, who proclaimed, "The era of big government is over." The president at the time of Reagan's death, George W. Bush, was the son of Reagan's vice president and claimed to be carrying on Reagan's legacy more than his father's.

Ronald Reagan had decades before exceeded the low expectations among naysayers who labeled him, in Clark Clifford's words, an "amiable dunce" and feared he would trigger another world war. While historians continue to debate to what extent he deserved credit for the Cold War's end and the economy's revival—and most cite factors beyond any president's control—he was by the time of his death seen by many as the second most consequential president of the twentieth century, behind only his onetime idol, Franklin D. Roosevelt. As Jane Wyman, Reagan's first wife and the Oscar-winning actress who had starred most recently in the prime-time soap opera *Falcon Crest*, wrote to his second wife, "You can be very proud of the mark that Ronnie has left on history. He has left strong footprints in the sands of time."¹⁰

While Reagan's achievements—helping to end the Cold War and reviving the nation's spirits along with the economy—loomed larger than ever in 2004, many of his failures, rightly or wrongly, had already faded into history. The Iran-Contra affair, when his administration was caught trading arms for hostages with Iran and illegally funneling the proceeds from the weapons sales to Nicaraguan guerrillas, was still the most significant scandal since Watergate, as it would remain until the Trump presidency. But it no longer loomed quite as large after another president—Bill Clinton—had been impeached, a fate Reagan had avoided. The loss of 241 Marines in Beirut in 1983 as part of an ill-conceived peacekeeping mission no longer seemed as dire compared with the far greater losses being suffered by American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

(By 2004, nearly a thousand had been killed, and more were falling every day.) The soaring budget deficits that had resulted from Reagan's tax cuts and defense budget increases paled by comparison with George W. Bush's shortfalls: The federal budget deficit in 2004 was more than twice as large as in 1988. The failure to confront apartheid in South Africa no longer seemed to matter quite as much since that system of white supremacy had collapsed, and the failure to do more to fight HIV/AIDS no longer seemed so catastrophic once antiretroviral drugs made it possible to treat the disease. Other scandals—involving former White House aides and officials from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Justice Department—were all but forgotten. Forgotten, that is, by the cavalcade of mourners, yet these setbacks and failures are remembered by historians whose task it is to contextualize Reagan's historical standing.

Despite his deviations from conservative orthodoxy—he had raised taxes more often than he cut them—the Gipper by that time had become an icon on the right, the only leader who was universally revered in the Republican Party. His many admirers could point to the recent publication of speeches, letters, and radio addresses he had written in his own hand to argue that he was smarter than he had been given credit for. Many liberals still saw him as out of touch, indeed out to lunch. They thought he, reflecting the Republican Party as a whole, had supported brutal allies abroad and exacerbated racial divisions and income disparities at home while favoring the rich with his “trickle-down economics,” setting back the cause of civil rights, and ignoring the plight of AIDS victims. But even they found it hard to hold a grudge against a man with such a disarming personality who had shown such grace and good humor after being shot and who had so stoically submitted to the ravages of Alzheimer's. Although Reagan had decisively won two national elections—the second by one of the largest margins in US history—he averaged only 53 percent job approval during his presidency, below average for US presidents. He had been a polarizing figure. But no longer. By 2002, propelled by gusts of sympathy, he had wafted aloft with a 73 percent approval rating—higher than any modern president other than the martyred John F. Kennedy.¹¹

What most people remembered, more than any policy achievement or failure, was Reagan's good nature, his sense of humor and humility, his optimism, and, of course, his incomparable ability to communicate. As the Reagan White House protocol chief Selwa “Lucky” Roosevelt wrote to Nancy Reagan after his death, “It was a joy to watch him in action—and there was almost no one who did not succumb to his magic.”¹²

That is attested to by the outpouring of condolence letters the former first lady received from politicians, world leaders, entertainers, religious leaders, socialites, fashion designers, journalists, former aides, military officers, Secret Service agents, and waiters and servants. George J. Rubisz, a former butler and chauffeur to the publishing magnate Walter Annenberg, at whose Palm Springs estate the Reagans had luxuriously celebrated every New Year's Eve, wrote, “I went on with a career to serve many world dignitaries, but I never met a man who stood as tall, walked as straight, or spoke such truths as President Reagan.” “When I think of the President, the first thing that comes to mind is his sense of humor,” wrote the redoubtable actor Kirk Douglas. “It was never dull when the President was around.” “Not only was he a truly great man, a great President, but one of the world's finest human beings,” wrote Carol Swanson Price, an heiress who was part of the Annenbergs' social circle and whose husband was Reagan's ambassador to the United Kingdom. Reagan's vice president and successor, George H. W. Bush, confided to

Nancy, “I loved your man, my President, I really did.”¹³

Ordinary Americans had the chance to show their affection and pay their respects to the late president as memorial ceremonies unfolded with military precision in both Southern California and Washington, DC, over the next week—and they did. The state funeral, the first held since the death of Lyndon Johnson more than thirty-one years before, had been planned for years by the Reagans’ aides in coordination with the Military District of Washington. It was known as Operation Serenade.¹⁴ The week of events made clear that the Reagan administration’s flair for showmanship—for perfect television visuals—had outlived the president himself. A veteran actor always knows how to make a memorable exit, and none did it better than Ronald Reagan.

On Monday, June 7, a formidable motorcade moved the president’s body from the funeral home in Santa Monica to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum amid the ochre-colored mountains of the Simi Valley. More than a hundred thousand people streamed by the casket on its catafalque over the next two days. On Wednesday, June 9, another motorcade took the body to the Point Mugu Naval Air Station, where Air Force One had always landed when the Reagans were heading to their Santa Barbara ranch. From there, it was off to Washington on a 747-200 that carried the designation Air Force One when it was being used by the president. There was a brief moment of panic when, just before their arrival, an unknown aircraft entered Washington’s airspace. With memories of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks still fresh, the Capitol was evacuated, and fighter jets were scrambled. It turned out to be simply an aircraft with a transponder malfunction that was bringing the governor of Kentucky to the funeral. Governor Ernie Fletcher had been lucky not to be shot down.¹⁵

The flag-covered casket was taken by hearse from Andrews Air Force Base to a spot just in front of the Ellipse, within sight of the White House, where it was transferred to a horse-drawn caisson for a solemn procession to the Capitol. No detail was spared in a spectacle that might have been borrowed from a Cecil B. DeMille historical epic. A riderless horse, with the late president’s favorite riding boots reversed in the saddle’s stirrups, followed just behind the caisson while a military honor guard marched alongside. A limousine carried Nancy Reagan, Patti Davis, Ron Reagan, and his wife, Doria, along with two Secret Service agents. The Reagans had temporarily put aside their barely camouflaged animosities and resentments to remember an amiable if remote husband and father who had preached “family values” that, owing to circumstances and personality, he had often been unable to practice. “The four of us got along quite well for those few days,” Patti recalled. “Almost like a family.”¹⁶

But that family was not quite big enough to accommodate Michael Reagan, whose relations with Nancy were so tense that, following one loud altercation, she had insisted on a Secret Service agent being present whenever he visited.¹⁷ For this occasion he was present, but he was riding in a separate car with his wife and two children. Maureen Reagan’s widower, Dennis Revell, who had been bickering with Michael all during the trip east, rode in a third car with his girlfriend.¹⁸

Spectators, in rows three to five deep, thronged Pennsylvania Avenue to catch a glimpse of this melancholy but historic funeral procession, replete with military honor guards and marching bands. Ron Reagan remembered seeing a sign, “Now *there* was a president.”¹⁹ It took three

teams of military pallbearers, working as if in a relay race, to haul the mahogany, marble-lined casket with the embalmed president inside—weighing a total of 750 pounds—up the long steps of the West Front to the Capitol Rotunda to the bier where it was put on display. They had practiced for days on a casket stuffed with sandbags to make sure nothing would be amiss.²⁰ Here, as the flag-covered casket lay in state for the next thirty-six hours, more than a hundred thousand mourners filed past, some waiting many hours for their turn. In a note to Nancy Reagan, the presidential historian Richard Norton Smith wrote that those waiting in line alongside him included “a visitor from Norfolk who had made the trip to Washington for the first time, . . . a middle-aged black mother with three children, the youngest of whom she carried in her arms, . . . military people in uniform, couples pushing strollers, and countless others too young to cast a vote for President Reagan. Their grief was equaled by their gratitude for a life that had become synonymous in their eyes with the nation itself.”

“Even though the President had been offstage for nearly a decade,” Smith concluded, “he seemed to loom larger and larger with every passing year.”²¹

On Saturday, June 11, under gray, overcast skies, the military pallbearers took the casket out of the Capitol as artillery roared and the familiar cadences of “Hail to the Chief” rent the quiet of a late spring morning. Another motorcade, led by District of Columbia police outriders on motorcycles, bore the body on the five-mile journey to Washington National Cathedral, where nearly four thousand mourners had gathered for a state funeral that was carried live by every television network.

It was evident to onlookers that no formal obsequy had been spared. Foreign heads of state mixed with Hollywood royalty and Washington power brokers in the pews for what a reporter described as “more than two extraordinary hours of thundering organ, swelling chorus, haunting silences, and eloquent prayers.”²² Readings were given by religious leaders of different faiths and by Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, now seventy-four years old, who had been appointed the first woman on the Supreme Court by the man they were now honoring. Eulogies were also delivered by the two world leaders with whom Reagan had been closest—former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, the so-called Iron Lady, who was present in a pew wearing a funereal black hat but speaking on video because of a series of recent strokes, and, from the pulpit, former Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney, another jovial offspring of Eire. They were followed by two Republican presidents named Bush. The soaring stone and stained-glassed heights of the cathedral resonated to “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Amazing Grace,” and “Ode to Joy.” Presiding over the service was former Missouri Republican senator John Danforth, an Episcopalian priest who did not know Reagan well but was struck by the love he elicited from ordinary Americans. “It was a very unifying time for the country,” he recalled. “I think people knew this man was more than a bundle of ideas, or a bundle of policies. He brought out the best in people.”²³

For a man whose image had been meticulously crafted by imagemakers in Hollywood, Sacramento, and Washington, it was a spectacle that would not disappoint those viewers whose historical consciousness had been shaped by the cinematic extravaganzas of the 1950s. The event was of such magnitude that it transcended the ordinary divisions of partisan politics. Once the service ended, the cathedral bell tolled forty times in honor of the fortieth president. Around the world, US military bases staged twenty-one-gun salutes at noon and fifty-gun salutes at dusk. Letitia Baldrige, who had been Jacqueline Kennedy’s chief of staff in the White House, wrote to

Nancy Reagan, “I’ve never seen Washington so wrapped in emotional knots, turning from grief into awe over our U.S. military. Of course much of it was déjà vu for me—remembering JFK’s funeral. . . . All of the pomp and circumstance was perfection, and made us proud.”²⁴

The pomp and circumstance, however, were not quite finished. Or as Reagan liked to say—adapting a famous line from the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, the first “talkie,” which came out when he was still in high school—“You ain’t seen nothing yet.”²⁵

After the cathedral service, the president, back on Air Force One, made his final trip home to California, flying for the last time over a nation that he had idolized and idealized. The final funeral service would come at the hilltop Reagan Library, carefully timed for sunset with a majestic view of the Santa Susana Mountains and the Pacific Ocean in the background, as if this were the closing credits of a John Ford–directed Western. The president’s three surviving children delivered the final eulogies in front of a crowd full of movie-industry titans—including California’s Austrian-accented governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who had enjoyed the kind of movie stardom that had eluded the late president. “Taps” was played by a US Army bugler, and Navy fighter jets flew by in the traditional “missing man” formation. The commander of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Ronald Reagan*, which Nancy Reagan had christened in 2001, presented the folded flag from the casket to her.

Stoic all week, the widow finally broke down and wept in the crepuscular light as she paid her last goodbye to her husband before he was forever lowered into the ground. The epitaph carved on his granite tomb was a typically optimistic and uplifting credo from a speech in 1991:

I know in my heart that man is good
That what is right will always eventually triumph
And there is purpose and worth to each and every life.²⁶

Ron Reagan, the president’s youngest child, would recall nearly two decades later that he and the rest of the family were surprised by the vast throngs that had turned out to see the funeral processions on both coasts. On the final leg of the trip, from Point Mugu to the Reagan Library, a distance of twenty-six miles, the entire motorcade route was lined with rows of well-wishers, many standing on freeway overpasses waving flags or holding signs with messages such as “We love you Nancy.”²⁷ “I had not anticipated this,” he told me in 2017, sitting in his bungalow in Seattle, shaking his head in wonder much as his father might have done. “None of us had. It was just remarkable. You figure many people like him. Of course, it’s going to be kind of a big deal, but . . . wow. We didn’t quite expect the enormity of it.”²⁸

No one did. Who, after all, could have expected that a poor boy from Tampico, Illinois, born in the twilight of the horse-and-buggy era, would come to capture the imagination of a nation and transform the geopolitics of the entire world at the dawn of the tumultuous Computer Age?

Introduction

The Pragmatist

He was a true conservative, but, boy, was he pragmatic when it came to governing.

—JAMES A. BAKER III

Many years have passed since Ronald Reagan's historic funeral and even more since he left office. Yet, while countless books and articles have been produced about one of the most influential presidents of the twentieth century, there is still no definitive biography.

The task rightly should have fallen to the late Edmund Morris, chosen as the president's official biographer and granted unprecedented, real-time access to the White House from 1985 to 1989. But he appeared to be so flummoxed by the complexities of Reagan's character that he produced *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, an experimental, quasi-fictional book that was widely criticized in spite of its acute insights into the president's boyhood. Not a few people I interviewed about Ronald Reagan began by asking, "You're not going to write a book like Edmund's, are you?" No, I'm not. But while this book is strictly factual—I have resisted the temptation to insert myself as a character in Reagan's long life—I harbor some sympathy for the ordeal that this gifted writer went through to understand a man who was always hiding in plain sight. Reagan was often accused of having simplistic views, but he was hardly a simple man.

Ronald Reagan was one of the most famous people in the world from the 1930s onward, but he remained an enigma even to those who knew him, which suggests that his very inscrutability may have contributed to his appeal. He was the most affable of men—always ready with a story or joke, always genial, always polite, always thoughtful on a one-to-one basis that transcended race or class. As a result of his acting experience, he could connect with an audience like few other politicians, yet his own children said they did not know him well. Behind his practiced bonhomie was a glacial reserve that forced the person closest to him—his wife, Nancy—to say that he walled off part of himself even from her. "He was just plain hard to figure out," noted one White House aide.¹ He preached family values, but he was the first divorced man and the only one other than Donald J. Trump to win the presidency. He presided over an often-dysfunctional family and did not know until long afterward that one of his children (Michael) had been molested by a camp counselor or another (Maureen) had been beaten by her first husband. He never knew the names of his children's friends.

He would call aides and acquaintances to comfort them when a parent died, and his aides were slavishly dedicated to him, but he barely noticed when aides left his employ and seldom did anything to buck up their morale while they were working for him. Sometimes, long before the onset of Alzheimer's, he could not remember their names. James A. Baker III, his White House

chief of staff and later US Treasury secretary, told me that Reagan looked on him as just one of the “hired hands,” and even political consultant Stuart K. Spencer—an essential strategist on all four of Reagan’s successful political campaigns going back to 1966—said that he always viewed himself as a “solid acquaintance,” not a real friend of Reagan’s. Spencer felt much closer to former president Gerald Ford in spite of having run only one of his campaigns. Reagan was fundamentally a loner who, by the time of his presidency, had few real friends beyond his wife and two former state police officers who worked with him on his ranch. He would have made, in the words of Spencer, “a pretty good hermit,” yet he was so good-natured that he utterly lacked the resentments and paranoia of presidents such as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Donald Trump.²

Reagan had strong convictions and could be quick on his feet as a speaker, but he lacked intellectual depth or curiosity. His mind was full of finely honed stories and factual nuggets, many of them apocryphal, some of them based on movies he had seen or acted in, others invented by right-wing propagandists. No matter how many times his claims were revealed to be false, he stubbornly kept repeating them. He often bored aides and visitors by reciting the same well-worn tales over and over instead of engaging in the intricacies of policy arguments. When he was working in Hollywood, he drove many associates to distraction with his incessant talk about politics; when he was in Sacramento and Washington, he drove many associates to distraction with his incessant talk about show business. Yet he was seen as more successful in implementing his agenda than such presidents as Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, all of whom would presumably have scored higher on an IQ test. His memoirs were ghostwritten, as were most of his presidential speeches, yet he could be an extremely effective writer in his own right, producing words that were meant to be spoken rather than read.

He could be famously stubborn. Yet he was usually willing to compromise and settle for 70 percent of what he wanted to get a deal done. He had a near-photographic memory honed by memorizing movie scripts yet claimed to not recall crucial details of decisions that proved scandalous, whether a deal he made with the Music Corporation of America (MCA) as president of the Screen Actors Guild or his administration’s initiative to sell arms to Iran and funnel the proceeds to the Contras. Sometimes he could make tough decisions when he felt they were necessary—firing thousands of striking air-traffic controllers in 1981, invading Grenada in 1983, bombing Libya in 1986, walking out of the Reykjavik summit later that year rather than trading away missile defense—yet often, as in the aftermath of the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, he was paralyzed by indecision. He was a distant and disengaged chief executive who found it impossible to fire aides, and he was terrible at managing his staff, allowing disagreements and jealousies to fester out of control.

He was a sucker for a hard-luck story and would regularly send a check to ordinary Americans who wrote to tell him of their woes. Yet he propounded economic policies that inflicted real hardship on millions of ordinary people while providing a windfall for the wealthy and exacerbating income inequality. A longtime supporter of Israel and opponent of antisemitism, he upset Jewish groups with his determination to visit a German war cemetery at Bitburg in 1985 even after it was found to contain the graves of Waffen Schutzstaffel (SS) soldiers. Similarly, although he prided himself on his lack of bigotry, he angered African Americans and the LGTBQ community with his apparent indifference to racial discrimination and the ravages of AIDS, respectively. He also prided himself on being an outdoorsman, yet he

aggravated green groups with callous comments about trees causing air pollution and with his appointment of the egregious James Watt to run the Department of the Interior. He professed to be deeply religious and fervently believed in biblical prophecies such as Armageddon (hence his aversion to nuclear weapons), yet as president he seldom went to church, preferring to read the Sunday comics, and never began cabinet meetings with an invocation.

He often expressed his skepticism of the government, but federal spending soared by nearly 70 percent during his presidency and state spending by 120 percent during his governorship of California.³ Even his famous quip “I’ve always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: ‘I’m from the government, and I’m here to help’” was uttered during a press conference in which he announced an *increase* in federal subsidies to farmers.⁴ He ran for president as a “pro-life” candidate who equated abortion with murder, yet as governor of California he did more to legalize abortion than any previous person in US history. He backed the death penalty, but as governor appointed a chief justice who wrote a State Supreme Court decision holding capital punishment to be unconstitutional. And although he supported gun rights, he made California’s gun laws the toughest in the nation and, after his presidency, endorsed an assault-weapons ban.

With all his myriad contradictions and inconsistencies, Ronald Reagan was not an easy man to decipher. One of his closest aides, Michael K. Deaver, confessed, “At times Ronald Reagan has been very much a puzzle to me,” while his longtime secretary, Helene von Damm, wrote that “he was fundamentally a very difficult man to know.”⁵ But his story is worth the historian’s effort because his life sheds such significant light on America’s perilous, if ultimately triumphant, journey through the twentieth century.

His life inevitably is more than the story of one man. It is also the story of a nation’s transformation from rural to urban and suburban; the rise of mass media—first radio, then movies and television—and their role in shaping the American imagination and American politics; the transition from isolationism to interventionism in 1941 and the rise to superpower status in 1945; bitter, often violent labor-management struggles; the Red Scare in the early years of the Cold War; the white, middle-class backlash against the civil rights movement and student radicalism in the 1960s; the growth of the New Right from a marginal movement to a dominant one; the nation’s revival from the nadir of Watergate, Vietnam, and stagflation; and, finally, the Cold War’s perilous final decade followed by a surprisingly peaceful denouement.

Ronald Reagan was, in one form or another, at the center of it all for a half century. It is no exaggeration to say that you cannot fully comprehend what happened to America in the twentieth century without first understanding what happened to Ronald Reagan. To know how we got here—to the America and the world of the twenty-first century—you must chart his lengthy, eventful, and consequential life, whose course was often at odds with the legend that has grown around him.

I am fortunate that Ronald Reagan’s story can now be told as never before because we possess