The Day I Met Ronald Reagan

Sharing Adolescence With America's Conservative Movement

By Hal Stemmler

"Jimmy Stewart."

You know, that lovable guy in the Christmas movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

Actually, it wouldn't be too smart to sign that particular name to the bill for the coffee tray I had just ordered, since Jimmy Stewart really *was* in the hotel with his old buddy Ronald Reagan, and questions might be asked.

"Jay Wasserman."

Not too bright, either, since that was the name of the Northern California media coordinator for Reagan's 1976 presidential primary campaign, and he was nominally in charge of me and a couple of other Berkeley students.

So I signed the bill "Jerry Smith," and the uniformed gentleman floated silently out of the Reagan campaign staff room on the fourteenth floor of San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel. I poured fellow student Terri a cup of rich brew from a stately silver tureen, and we munched on fine pastries.

It wasn't just an addiction to caffeine that prompted my call for room service. I had just met Ronald Reagan, and I felt like celebrating.

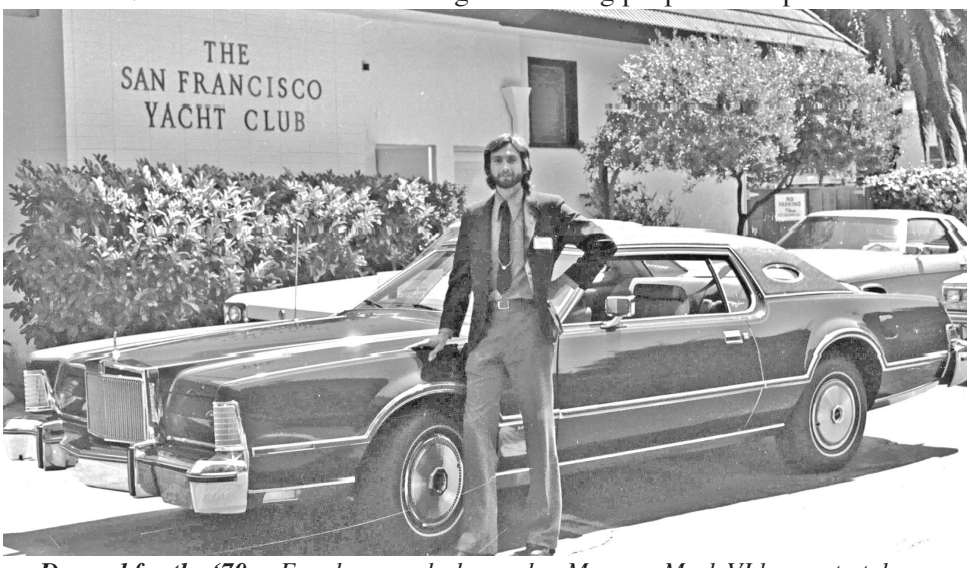
Not that meeting an American president is such a big deal. Probably millions of us have met presidents, whether as acquaintances before their rise to fame, or during the dozens of election campaigns it takes to reach the office, or simply through the chain of coincidence that makes up common, everyday life. Plus, there are usually four or five presidents and ex-presidents wandering around the country at any given time, raising the odds accordingly.

My memories of meeting Ronald Reagan were reawakened in 2004 when, after disappearing from public view for more than a decade, the announcement came that Reagan's body had passed on. His death that November came as something of a shock to me, not because anyone suspected him of being immortal, but because the national outpouring of sentimental reflection on the man and his role in American political life was so out of joint with my own views and experiences. That Ronald Reagan could be remembered for his "optimism" and qualities of "leadership" is only possible if one forces from memory his conflicts with the truth, his gaffes, his service as a tool of social divisiveness, and what eventually became publicly acknowledged as his growing separation from reality.

History is measured with turning points, and a case can be made that Ronald Reagan's accession to the presidency was a turning point in American history. It moved the American political compass so far to the right that the left today clings desperately to a tottering center and all other political thought is hopelessly marginalized as radical. It made visceral public selfishness acceptable, leading to the shameless opinion mongering of the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Fox TV, and all their competitors. It may have delayed for a century such common sense social initiatives as health care for everybody and sensible redeployment of military investment. And it changed forever how communications media would be used in campaigning and presidential leadership.

There was a time early on, however, when such legacies were still the furtive, undefined desires of a relatively small segment of the population, one that cherished the word "conservative," and was growing in size with the American public's general frustration with the "status quo," which Reagan himself famously defined as, "Latin for 'the mess we're in.'" In that time, early on, fell the day I met Ronald Reagan.

Back to that cup of coffee. Sure, I was buzzed that I had met Ronald Reagan. After all, most people who work on political campaigns, particularly presidential campaigns, hope to meet the candidate, to confirm incontrovertibly that this person at the center of the vortex really *does* exist. When all is said and done, all the emotions and motivations that bring people into a presidential campaign are driven by the candidate himself—or herself. With no candidate there is no campaign, no matter whether the volunteers' stated motivation is policy interests, money, concern for the country, fear for our moral degeneration, personal admiration, star worship, or, in my case, college credits.



Dressed for the '70s: *Free box wardrobe, and a Mercury Mark VI loaner to take Nancy Reagan on a date.*

The 1976 presidential campaign was unusual. Not only was the Democratic Party's nomination actively sought by as many as a dozen candidates, but the Republican incumbent had become president thanks to a resignation, not an election, and his vulnerability became evident as his party's right wing groomed their own candidate to mount a serious challenge in the primaries.

With seven campaigns still active in California by late spring, the faculties of journalism and political science at the University of California at Berkeley cooked up a course that would assign one journalism and one political science student to each of the campaigns. Interviews were conducted to fill the 14 slots.

The interview went as interviews do, and I duly displayed what I thought to be the appropriate level of enthusiasm. Then came the trick question.

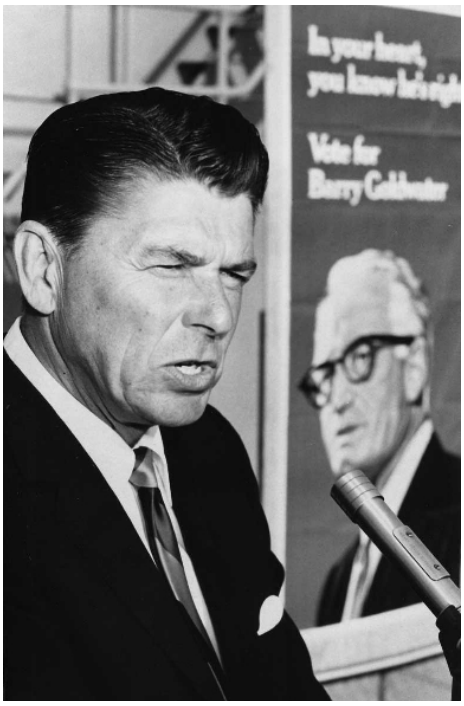
"To which campaign would you like to be assigned?"

I had lived in Berkeley for eight years since choosing not to reenroll for my sophomore year of college. I had focused on mastering such life skills as auto mechanics, bread baking, Piedmont style blues guitar, and getting the most out of Grateful Dead shows. I had only returned to the university after the infamous Watergate scandal climaxed with Richard Nixon's resignation from the presidency in 1974. One might infer I was not naturally inclined to the right, politically speaking.

But surely, if one looks far enough into the past, or deeply enough into one's true soul, some evidence of political balance can be discovered? I thought back to that warm summer's evening in 1964 when taps and Perry Como's sonorous crooning of the Lord's Prayer over the PA system had nestled the boys into their beds at Rodney Kroehler YMCA camp near Hayward, Wisconsin. I lay in my top bunk with a transistor radio hugging my ear, oblivious to the other campers who, I learned years afterward, were likely off somewhere in a circle jerk or engaged in some other tawdry summer pranks that would fuel a later generation of sophomoric frat movies. Through the static I could pick out the words of Barry Goldwater's acceptance speech on the final night of the Republican national convention in San Francisco.

"Extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice....."

Being only 15 years old at the time, I couldn't quite understand what Barry Goldwater's statement actually meant. Extremism isn't bad? It's perfectly okay to be extreme? History has confirmed that my youth was not responsible for my confusion. It turned out that *nobody* understood what it meant, but it played into the hands of the opposing campaign of Lyndon Johnson, which redefined standards of political cynicism with its classic television ad featuring the innocent little girl counting the petals of an innocent little daisy until candidate Goldwater's atom bomb exploded right there in our living rooms.



I didn't let that adolescent summer confusion corrupt my sprouting "Conscience of a Conservative" quite yet. During the fall campaign in 1964, my mother, giddy in those days with her success in public speaking with the local Toastmistress Club, learned that Barry Goldwater would make a campaign stop that weekend in Peoria, about 90 minutes from our Chicago suburb. Toastmistress Club had become my mother's most cherished connection to her adopted country. She felt she was valued for her humor and courage in speaking, and for her slight accent, "just enough to make her interesting," as she often quoted a line from Ayn Rand. She was still in awe of the half-hour television speech Ronald Reagan had delivered recently on behalf of Goldwater, and spoke of it often. Since I was having a very successful experience in competitive debate as a high school sophomore, my mother and I were bonding as something of a declamation duo, and she thought it might be fun to go hear a presidential candidate give a campaign speech to a live audience.

To my credit, I was not self-conscious about spending time with my mother. She and I had gone to the drive-in movies in her Soviet-looking Nash Rambler, a flat white, boxy, two-door sedan she had bought with her own money earned as a white-capped Burney Brothers bakery sales clerk in the Park Forest Plaza. We went to see the Beatles movie *A Hard Day's Night*, and we went to the drive-in to avoid the certain hoard of screaming, pre-pubescent girls contaminating theaters across the country. My mom was cool—she never screamed, not once. Only now do suspicions sneak into my memory, asking pesky questions about my mother's true motivation in sheltering me from the Holiday Theater's scene of public, uninhibited, almost sexual, ecstatic screams surging from hundreds of delirious, orgasmic nymphets.

So we went to Peoria and a series of blurry black and white photographs in my album show the tiny candidate with retinue atop a concrete railroad overpass. I recall no details of the candidate or the speech, but there I was in Peoria in 1964, even before some cynical future campaign operative turned the town into a piece of political litmus paper with the famous test, "will it play in Peoria?"

In those days, before presidential campaigns began limiting appearances to television studios and gatherings of

hand-picked and filtered groups of contributors and confirmed supporters, a presidential campaign coming to town could be a major community event. In 1960, thousands of waspy Park Foresters waited over four hours for Richard Nixon to make an appearance at their new-age outdoor mall, the Park Forest Plaza. Can a curious eleven-year-old youngster today watch a national candidate climb out of a limousine and take the stage at the local shopping center? Surely I was moved, for my fourth grade school picture showed me sporting a Nixon-Lodge campaign button from the fall of 1960. The photo mortifies me to this day, both because of the perfectly legible button festering on the spot where my heart should be, and because of the uncluttered look of uncontested confidence brightening my face, like that of a healthy young muskrat knowing the pond will soon be his. To this day I fear my panicked efforts to recall all copies of that awful picture may not have been completely successful, and it will torment me yet again with some spectacular public exposure.

Barry Goldwater *addresses a campaign crowd in downtown Peoria, Illinois in 1964, captured with a black and white snapshot camera.*

So now, was I attending Berkeley to compensate for this past that embraced Nixon, Goldwater, Peoria, and even Ayn Rand? Of course not. I had a mature idea of social truth and order. I was not short on ideas for how our world should be run. But the truth was, I really wanted to be a part of this class, and I didn't want to limit my chances because of petty personal preferences. It was then that I uttered that phrase that has challenged hubris for many a man greater than I.

"I am a professional," I responded glibly. "I am prepared to take on any assignment."

A few days later the class list was posted. I had been assigned to the primary campaign of Ronald Reagan.

Ronald Reagan was no stranger to me, nor to anybody else in California. His thoughtless 1970 sound byte hurled at Berkeley students that "if it's a bloodbath they want, let's get it over with" had seared itself into the collective consciousness of Berkeley students, and countless other students across the country. It was a mean threat, embraced by the well-to-do and their hangers-on, but loathed by students, intellectuals, oppressed peoples, and bleeding-heart liberals. Were there students who wanted a bloodbath? I didn't know any, but no matter. This man was going to start one anyway. While establishment kingpins chortled over a movie actor saying things they wished they could say, for students and young people, this was a public death threat, pure and simple.

Reagan's apparent contempt for the University seemed confirmed by his move to almost double the cost of attending. California's dream of a tuition-free institution had been preserved for almost a century by calling the $112 cost for each of the three terms in a year a fee instead. Reagan pushed through another $100 fee. Today, with public support of "public" universities so severely diminished, it seems almost laughable that a year's tuition at one of the nation's most prestigious universities cost a total of $636, including the new Reagan fee, but that was real money at the time.

There was another dark side to the Reagan fee: all students were declared eligible to borrow that extra $100 each term. You say you can't afford it? Problem solved! We'll lend it to you! For the first time in my life, I had a loan. Oh, what a slippery slope that proved to be! The door to a lifetime of debt was thrown open, and through it walked other college loans, my first credit card, and eventually, car loans and home mortgages! The systematic destruction of the Walden simple life had begun with the Trojan horse of financing a college education. What would Thoreau have said? And thus, the same man who had threatened to kill me and my entire generation had morphed into an insidious loan shark who enslaved us instead in a vicious spiral of credit and debt!

The day I arrived at the San Francisco campaign headquarters of "Citizens for Reagan," the entire fourth floor, including the bathrooms, was covered with a wall-to-wall Kelly green shag rug. The campaign office had nothing in it but a folding table and chair, a telephone, and a boss. Bertha Nelson sat at the table with the green multi-line telephone in front of her. She was a short, heavy-set woman in her late thirties with dishwater hair cut in a Prince Valiant line at the base of her neck, what would later be named a mullet. She had the physical presence of a football coach, and she had wit.

In staff conversations the following week, I mentioned some of my reading about past presidential candidates considered ideological "purists," like Barry Goldwater or

George McGovern, who placed their ideology above the importance of overall party unity. I wondered out loud if Reagan might also be considered a purist. Bertha's response was simple, direct, and eerily prescient.

"No," she said. "Reagan is a populist."

A populist! It took me a moment to appreciate the wisdom of this observation. It turned me inside out to realize that just because I didn't like the man did not mean he wasn't popular! And a populist, by connotation if not by definition, is a leader popular with common people. Could this be? If Reagan was a man of the people, what did that make me?

Bertha proved to be nothing if not consistent. One afternoon during the second week of the campaign I sat next to an attractive blonde woman named Liz and another woman, probably in her late thirties, named Gloria. The radio was tuned to Bill Buckley's program "Firing Line," and Buckley was having fun taking on some second-rate intellectuals in England. Gloria had a long neck, very large brown eyes, and jet black hair. She was a fashion artist without any accounts at the moment, and her affection for Reagan was surpassed only by her utter contempt for then-Governor Jerry Brown. She spoke of the King of Sweden's visit to the Bay Area, remarking that he was very handsome and that she could tell by the thickness of his neck that he was the athletic type. Bertha looked up from her yellow highlight lines on the voter list printouts and muttered four gruff words.

King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden: *nice neck.*

"I don't like kings."

I was the journalism school intern, and I soon met Dave Bonelli, the political science intern. Since I had taken a five-and-a-half-year hiatus after my freshman year in college, I naturally assumed he was younger than I, although in some ways he looked to be my senior. His longish sideburns made an abrupt stop where a Nixon-like jaw, with a promising five o'clock shadow, took over. His thick black hair, neatly trimmed, had already embarked on an early retreat from his forehead. We had a chance to talk at an early headquarters meeting, largely because we seemed to have little in common with the mostly older and better dressed campaign crowd. He told me Reagan had been his first choice, so I respected the mystery. He was pleasant and easy to get along with.

Being a true Reagan supporter had its advantages. During the fourth week of the campaign I overheard Bertha inviting Dave to her house for a party on Saturday night to await the returns from the Texas primary. It's not that I felt left out, but I reminded myself to focus on what I needed to get out of the intern experience. Other factors were involved. When Dave had been assigned to call lists of supporters seeking volunteer chairmen for the campaign, he had become quite discouraged. Bertha laughed when she told me how his very first call had unearthed a violent anti-Reagan crank. Desperate, poor Dave finally called his own mother, whom the campaign was quite pleased to welcome into its ranks. I just couldn't do that to my mother; besides, she lived in Illinois.

Political campaigns, at least as we have known them in our American tradition, bring disparate people together. At one level, campaigns offer rare opportunities for opportunists to rub shoulders with influential people. They are the networkers' network.

Jay Wasserman joined Citizens for Reagan to network. He had been an advertising executive with Proctor and Gamble in San Francisco for seven years, but he had never actually written any copy. He had just told people what to do and when to do it. To me, that sounded a little too good to be real, and perhaps it was. Now, Wasserman said, he was 'between jobs,' so he volunteered to run the campaign's media operation in San Francisco. He did not go into any details with me about how he had been separated from his position, but he had advertising experience, and executive advertising experience at that. He wore blue jeans and a faded Pendleton to the reception marking the opening of campaign headquarters. He complained about having to ride his bicycle downtown from his Nob Hill apartment because of the public workers strike, and, in his thirties, he chafed at being mistaken for a student.

He did appear youthful, at first glance. Jay had longish curly brown hair, blue eyes, and was clean-shaven and tanned. Yet this California formula failed him, for his face barely concealed a pinched, peevish expression reminiscent of a vindictive old banker, or a hemorrhoidal Presbyterian minister. Temporarily softened by youth, that expression quickly surfaced in response to any irritation, and Jay was often irritated. With each appearance, it lingered longer and took a shorter respite, and doubtless would continue to do so until that day—not so far in the future—when that sour grimace would claim his countenance for the duration.

Early in the campaign Jay talked about creating an "issues line" telephone service which could respond to questions phoned in by uncertain voters with taped statements of Reagan's stands on vital issues. That way, anybody could find out where Reagan stood and then could take it or leave it. I reached into my recently acquired treasury of political theories and pointed out that a successful political party and campaign should seek to involve as many people as possible, not to draw rhetorical lines over which none but the most fanatic would want to step. I must have intercepted Jay in a

normally private flight of fantasy, for the idea never came up again.

I found myself one afternoon working next to an airline stewardess who had brought fine Greek delicacies to an earlier meeting. She was slim and trim in a brown dress that matched her beautiful brown hair. She had the slightest frost line along the temples which I would recognize later as the penants of the prime of life. Her big, round, brown eyes were fixed in a tense expression and she seemed constantly to bristle with energy.

I must have slipped into a discussion of issues with somebody because the stewardess suddenly pointed at me and bellowed, "Ohh!! YOU must be the one that doesn't want to be here!"

I laughed at this and did my best to make light of it, but I was pretty surprised to be labeled like that by somebody I hadn't even met before. She insisted on finding out exactly what I was doing there, so I explained the basic mechanics of the course. I had no hope that my explanation would bring us closer in any way.

Perhaps the strangest character I encountered in the campaign was "Dolph" Andrews, the so-called "youth chairman" of Citizens for Reagan. The fact that he was perhaps ten years older than I was the only possible explanation for why his parents could have named him Adolph, a name that became understandably unpopular following World War II. Upon our first meeting, Dolph asked me if I would sponsor him as a speaker on campus at Cal. I tried to put him off, feeling uncomfortable about flaunting my Reagan associations so early in this new relationship. Besides, I questioned this man's grip on reality if he could seriously picture himself talking up Reagan on the Berkeley campus. I said I'd try to set something up, and he countered with a promise to call later in the week.

Sure enough, on Thursday night he called and tried to talk me into posting leaflets around campus as well as running a notice in the campus newspaper, the *Daily Cal*. I began to understand what an extraordinary talent it must be to achieve total obliviousness to other people's discomforts. I reluctantly agreed to run the notice, but Dolph's manner was to probe constantly to see what he could get from others. I had to cut him short when he proposed that I go around ringing door bells at fraternity houses to talk to the guys about Reagan and maybe recruit some volunteers. This was a breath-taking flight of fantasy I couldn't picture even Dolph himself undertaking. I wasn't into the frat scene at the time, so I declined, with such apparent effectiveness that he did not even look at me on my next day in the campaign office.

Instead, he put the squeeze on a slow-talking high school kid, encouraging him to talk up Reagan during the lunch hour. But our lunch hour is only 20 minutes long, the kid said, and we're awful busy eating... I learned that Dolph owned a small pie shop on the Peninsula where he no doubt developed his low, coercive mumble by giving orders to his legions of cooperative teenage employees. A female campaign volunteer made his day by saying he looked just like Michael Caine. His face colored at this unexpected attention and he was struck almost dumb with blushing modesty when somebody else asked him if his pies were any good.

"Well," he stammered, "some people like them."

American presidential campaigns are watched with interest across the globe, and the campaigns often have an international flavor. Our ambassador from beyond the seas was Hubert the Frenchman. Since I had studied French for a year and spent several months in Montelimar the previous summer in a job set up by a Berkeley professor, I engaged Hubert in some French chit-chat. He was a CPA working in the Paris region, and had come to America to get his CPA credential in English. He had studied on his own for some six months and had just passed his exam. He now planned to audit classes in business administration at Berkeley and he was going to pay $100 for the privilege. I was appalled at his generosity and I advised him instead to audit for free, giving him several examples of my friends who had managed the feat quite handily.

We discussed briefly the current situation in French universities, several years after the major campus upheavals of the late sixties. According to Hubert, whose large blue eyes, set behind thick, octagonal, steel-rimmed glasses, contrasted with his ruddy complexion, and whose lids blinked with self-assured good humor, the large companies were pressuring the universities to turn out students better prepared for careers in business. There were already a number of specialized business schools, but these evidently were not meeting demand.

I told Hubert how much I admired the French paper *Le Monde* for its international flavor and its probity, which came through even to somebody like me with limited fluency. Hubert said simply that *Le Monde* was too left-wing for him. That surprised me, since the paper was considered an establishment organ in France, far out-

flanked on the left by several other papers, but I realized that since Hubert had volunteered for the Reagan campaign, I shouldn't be surprised that he was pretty far to the right himself. He told me he had written a letter to *Le Monde*'s editor criticizing an article on the United States and he was quite proud he had received a response. He showed me the curt, single paragraph letter saying the reporter assigned to America, contrary to Hubert's opinion, was indeed qualified, and what's more, was considered to be so by the most unimpeachable authorities. Hubert twinkled his bright blue eyes with glee and promised to send another letter soon.

Behind every great man is a great woman," the old saying goes. With the Reagans, it was different. Nancy came before. Nancy Reagan was coming to town. It was time for a press release.

"We'll call it, 'Nancy Reagan Week,'" Bob Johns announced proudly. Bob Johns was Nancy Reagan's personal advance man who had just driven, in advance, all the stops planned for Nancy's visit to the San Francisco Bay Area. Then president of the California Podiatrists Association, he was a slim, well-tanned man in his fifties with thinning hair combed straight back. He impressed people with his dynamic personality. His eyes weren't large, but they looked that way behind his round, thin-rimmed glasses.

Jay balked at this gratuitous declaration and asked by whose authority a week had been dedicated to Nancy Reagan. Bob was unruffled. His secretary would send us details of the schedule—and he was off. He was a leader of a platoon of ultra-loyal Reagan supporters in California. When Nancy asked him to do her advance work in the Bay Area, Bob simply couldn't let her down, and he said she refused to visit the area at all unless he organized it. The chauffeur who drove Nancy around on the day of her visit had also driven for her during the governorship, and was always available for her.

Jay, however, was still wrestling with "Nancy Reagan Week." I wondered at this surge of conscience in a former advertising executive. Was he able to perceive the presumptuousness of the idea, or was he miffed that he had not thought of it first? We discussed the philosophical implications of autonomously proclaiming a week—one that rightly belonged to all the people—for a single partisan political campaigner. It was an especially bold maneuver in light of the fact that Nancy Reagan would be in the Bay Area barely 24 hours. I was impressed with Jay's sensitivity—and told him so, too. I was attempting to ingratiate myself with him since he had assumed the authority to determine which student volunteers could participate in the Nancy entourage for a day of campaigning in the Bay Area. Was I star struck already? Probably not, but for the hours spent in a San Francisco office calling lists of dowagers and widows to come up with a get-out-the-vote list, I felt I should be there for the fun part of the campaign, too.

But first, there was work to do. A major fundraiser in Chinatown Sunday night would be the kick-off for Nancy Reagan Week, and student labor was needed to service the money. Sure, I signed up, and I volunteered the services of my '*amie speciale*,' Susan. Since I was studying French and had spent the previous summer in Montelimar with *mon amie speciale*—my special friend—I felt entitled to use this sophisticated sobriquet. Can the fact that my *amie speciale* later became my wife and the mother of my children be attributed to such odd courtship rituals as popping champaign corks for an assembly line of Chinese American political donors? Jerry Ford can't have anything like this, I thought, as I scanned the shimmering red and black room full of San Francisco's Asian elite. These people were very comfortable supporting their Republican former governor for president in this strongly Democratic town. China Town in San Francisco was an isolated ethnic enclave, but it was also a popular tourist attraction, and the Reagan campaign appeared to give these successful small business owners a chance to reach out beyond their neighborhood to touch a political image that valued them and their money. As a pretty young woman, clearly better dressed than I was, Susan attracted a number of admirers whose easiest conversation opener was small talk about the candidate. She quickly learned the secret of campaign work: change the subject, smoothly, whenever somebody starts talking politics.

I trace my personal cork-popping technique back to that evening. One does not idly allow a champaign cork to eject itself and careen riotously about the room! Never again! Instead, one soberly, with purpose, twists out the stopper while grasping it firmly in hand, limiting the bottle's song to a mere suppressed gasp as the bubbly launches on its mission, while the other hand is already reaching for the next bottle. With grim satisfaction at evening's end we let our gaze fall upon the fuel tank of the fund raiser, the several hundred empty vessels that had surrendered to our power.

Having thus cheerfully paid my due, I finally got the hoped-for call from Jay Wasserman at 11:30 Sunday night, after the China Town fund raiser. He said I could drive one of the cars in Nancy's entourage Monday morning. I would, however, be required to wear a suit and tie. It took a big gulp to swallow my initial reaction to his pomposity, but then what did I expect? To lounge around with Nancy Reagan wearing a T-shirt? So, I swallowed, and decided this would fun. Sure, said I, I'll get a sport coat. By the way, can

you lend me one?

I guess Jay didn't hear me. So, before retiring for the night, I called a friend to borrow a coat. He left it out on the porch that night, but when I got a good look at it in the morning I found it ripped at the shoulder, covered with food stains, and generally baggy and misshapen. This coat would definitely not make the right impression. I did know one person in Berkeley with an adult job who would probably have a sport coat to lend, but I wasn't certain at what time he left for work in the morning. So, I waited in front of his house until I saw lights, and then found a phone booth to call him. Hah! My place in the parade seemed assured! The coat was several sizes too small, so I compensated by wearing a shirt that was also several sizes too small.

Our first stop was the KGO-TV studio in San Francisco where the AM San Francisco show was in progress with guest George Moscone, the city's popular mayor who would be gunned down by supervisor Dan White several years later. When Nancy Reagan entered the sound stage, we student interns caught a glimpse of her, and then were ushered into the assistant producer's office to watch on a TV monitor.

I was struck dumb by the transformation of Nancy Reagan as she moved from one side of the camera to the other. It was like watching a color picture miraculously appear from a black and white negative. The woman I had seen on the sound stage looked to me like a moving corpse. Her complexion was powdered and pale, her hair tired and brittle, and she was surprising small and frail. I had caught only the briefest look at her eyes, and they looked like cold lumps of coal—clearly alive, partly apprehensive, but mostly vacant, as though the soul was offstage, behind a cold, hard wall.

Seated on the show's faux-classy parlor set, the cameras focused on an entirely different person. All that had been cold was now warm. The cheeks showed a relaxed glow, as though the layer of makeup had reacted to the rays of the set's lighting. Her hair rose elegantly and softly from her high forehead. Her outfit was tastefully prim, sporting an attractive combination of designer hues then in season. And, most remarkably, her dark eyes were now also luminous, serene, and welcoming.

Her air, I thought while watching the television monitor as she answered the softball questions lobbed to her by the bubbly hostess, was understated and decidedly patrician. The hostess was so happy that Nancy Reagan was actually responding to her questions! And didn't we, as TV viewers, feel good that Nancy Reagan had taken time out of her regal day to share her thoughts and experiences with us, the people, as we lounged in slippers with a late cup of coffee in the kitchen, or as we squinted out from under the hairdresser's bulbous dryer, or as we changed diapers for the second time already in the TV room, or as we chafed under the pinching of a shirt and sport coat two sizes too small. The word 'populist' came back to me. It was television that had transformed the spoiled rich girl turned Hollywood studio player into this patrician populist.

Before leaving the Roundhill Country Club at the end of our day, Bob Johns brought Nancy over to the cars to introduce her to the student interns. There was a distant look of surprise in her eyes as she shook my hand. I told her it had been a pleasure driving around with her that day, and I wished her good luck on the rest of the campaign. What was Nancy Reagan really like? What does "really" mean? The rigors of campaigning left no room for her to be anything other than the professional personality she showed at all times. What seemed a revelation to me—that we live two lives, one on camera, and the other recovering from being on camera—she had mastered years ago. Life becomes a glaze of passing faces blurred by their sheer numbers, by their probing or dumbstruck admiring stares. However deeply Nancy Reagan may have looked into my eyes, she could not have recalled what she saw for more than two seconds, for she was already looking into someone else's.

For all her charm and graciousness—the two words used most often by admirers in describing Nancy's presence—Jay reported she was a tough little bitch who knew what she wanted and could come down hard on people who weren't doing their job. He had been riding with Nancy and Bob Johns to the Chinatown fund raiser when Nancy said she'd heard former San Francisco Mayor George Christopher had broken ranks with the Republican traditionalists and come out for Reagan. Why, she demanded, had not the local media coordinator splashed such a prime political trophy all over the front pages? Bob Johns interceded and placated Nancy by pointing out Jay was only a volunteer, not paid staff. Afterward, Jay said, Nancy treated him quite nicely. Still, he did not ride in the same car with Nancy again.

Jay, of course, had not been informed of Christopher's intended endorsement and he cursed the distance between San Francisco and the campaign's state headquarters in Los Angeles. He jumped at his first chance to plug the story the

next morning by casually mentioning the endorsement to the assembled TV crews. Later in the day, Bob Johns contacted L.A., and the veteran Reagan warrior Lynn Nofziger hit the ceiling when he heard that the story had been leaked in San Francisco while he was managing arrangements for a Wednesday press conference in L.A. to break the surprise. Sometimes you just can't win!

Finally, the week before the primary election, Ronald Reagan came to town. I arrived a half hour late to San Francisco's tastefully posh Mark Hopkins Hotel on Union Square. At the large double doors to the Argonaut Room on the mezzanine were posted a matching pair of young, handsome, suited secret-service bouncer types. Little did I realize then that the white wires winding from their ears into their pockets would one day become the fashion statement of the iPod generation. Clearly, these guys were not listening to music.

This event was the climax of the California campaign, and everybody who had participated or hung out at the office would be there. After all, this was the one day when the candidate himself would make a public appearance. The office would still manage the get-out-the-vote work on election day, contacting confirmed supporters who had not already voted, but this was the emotional peak of the effort. Bertha Nelson was standing in the doorway, and only with her nod would entry be allowed. Time froze. Would she finally reject me as an outsider—as an impostor, less than totally faithful to the cause? Once my bag was inspected, she let me in. She gave me a blank look, and then pinned the "RR-Total Commitment" button on my shirt, awarded only to volunteers who sacrificed more than 40 hours in service to RR. Several months later, after bragging about it at a party to someone who collected campaign buttons, I gave my red, white, and blue RR button away. Doubtless, it would be worth something today, but more importantly, I respect Bertha Nelson to this day for sharing it with me, heavy sigh notwithstanding.

People were standing around in small clusters. The Greek stewardess with her beautiful brown hair let down to her shoulders issued a general offer for coffee and chattered on as she poured me a cup from an elegant silver tureen.

"My God, this is just like being on the plane," she moaned.

A little after 8 a.m. the Governor appeared. The volunteers and staff formed an oval and Reagan was guided around by two staffers. He greeted and shook hands with each person. Dolph Andrews looked like he was in church.

I was presented *with an autographed 8 by 10 inch glossy black and white photo of Nancy Reagan in appreciation of my participation in her visit to the Bay Area. When Ronald Reagan was elected President in 1980, I searched desperately for the photo, supposing it might have some value, but I finally concluded it had not survived my two moves since leaving college. I found it easily on the internet, minus the autograph.*

Perhaps it's because I stand almost six foot two, but it is a mystery to me why everything I have seen on television always seems smaller in real life. A little more than a decade later I never really recovered from my trip to Disneyland with my two young sons, where I saw shrunken, off-color versions of all the rides and features I had worshiped in black and white on the daily Mickey Mouse Club after school show in the 1950s. It's a small world, indeed!

And thus it was with Ronald Reagan, too. He was smaller than he seemed on television. Certainly he was not short, but not as large as I expected him to be, and I was very aware of being taller. And while the ballroom we were in was dimly lit, I was still struck by Reagan's monochrome appearance. It was as though he was shot in a sepia tone film, and that sepia image had been holographed to the Mark Hopkins to meet us. His shoes were dark brown, almost black, barely distinguishable from the dark brown, almost black stovepipe trousers that hung loosely from the dark brown, almost black suit jacket, whose generous lapels bracketed a dark brown tie. Reagan was topped off with a dollop of dark brown, almost black hair, greased straight back. The only parts of his appearance that seemed to deviate from the color scheme were his shirt and his face, and these were merely a lighter tone in sepia.

Reagan's face was small, as were the individual features that comprised it. His small eyebrows seemed to bicker with each other, a look that often gave him that 'deer in the headlights' expression when he grew confused in public forums. His nose was small, as was his mouth, and all these features had begun to curl with age. After all, he was already 65, and would become the oldest newly-inaugurated president at age 70 when he eventually took office in 1981.

As for his eyes, I couldn't really say. I believe they, too, were dark brown, almost black. While I had gotten the

impression that Nancy had looked at me, if not into me, I felt no whiff of contact when Ronald Reagan and I shook hands. Perhaps his career as an actor, and as a two-term governor of California, had turned his eyes into objects not to see, but to be seen.

He worked the perimeter, one by one, projecting a formal folksiness with comfortable patter. I don't remember what he said; I don't remember what I said, or who went first. When he reached the top of the oval, he stood and made a few remarks. He assured us, contrary to what had appeared in the morning papers, that he was not planning on starting a war over Rhodesia, today's Zimbabwe, where an insurgency that eventually led to the corrupt government of Robert Mugabe was fulfilling the destiny of overturning the descendants of the colonial order. Starstruck, we all chuckled over those silly papers.

"Of course you're not going to start a war," we all chorused in silent harmony.

"Sometimes it's like shades of 1966," Reagan said.

Wait a minute! Shades of 1966? Wasn't that when Reagan was campaigning against two-term California incumbent governor Pat Brown, and luring right-wing voters with threats against students? If his point was that people were always misinterpreting him, I couldn't help but think he wanted to be misinterpreted.

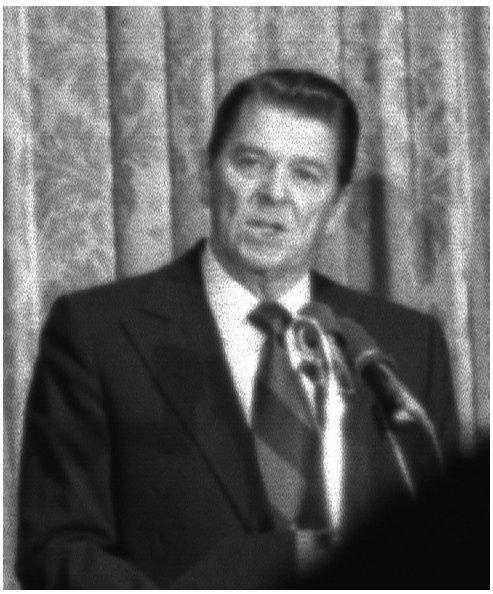
In fact, Reagan went on to a presidency peppered with public utterances, some seemingly off-handed and others quite purposeful, that proved to be surprisingly inflammatory. His pattern was always to claim he was being misinterpreted. When he quipped into a live microphone prior to an interview in 1984 that the U.S. was about to launch an attack against the Soviet Union, we all laughed it off. Did his State of the Union reference to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" really help end the cold war, or was it a needless provocation that extended the conflict? America would grow accustomed to the deepening chasm between the things Reagan said, and that other world known as 'reality.' He finally tarnished his title as the 'Teflon president,' to whom no criticism could stick, when his world and reality collided in 1987 and he was outed for secretly and illegally selling sophisticated military equipment to Iran and then illegally using the proceeds to fund the "Contras" in Nicaragua, the right-wing military groups seeking to overthrow a government perceived by Reagan's administration as leftist.

He also talked about being separated from Nancy. On one of the three rest days he was at home, Nancy had been scheduled for campaigning. It was clear then, and became legendary later, that Reagan was never comfortable when Nancy was not around. Reagan then asked if we were going to the breakfast, and since most of the campaign workers were, he was spared the need for more elaborate comments. One of his entourage stepped into the circle and announced it was time for breakfast.

The morning's most moving moment probably was Hubert's reflection just before meeting Reagan. He never would have guessed, before coming to America, that he would be meeting one of the major candidates for president in this country. Nor would I have guessed that for me, I assured him.

At 9:30 Reagan gave a press conference. He entered the room, mounted the podium, limited his opening remarks to "Good morning," and started taking questions. Asked if he wasn't taking a warlike position on Rhodesia, Reagan had a practiced response.

"Preserving the peace is the name of the game." That has always been this country's policy, he said. He took a dig at Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who, although a Republican, was serving incumbent Jerry Ford, Reagan's opponent in this primary. Kissinger's recent Rhodesian trip, Reagan said, had put us clearly on the side of the black insurgents. We should be "striving to use our position and prestige to head off trouble spots in the world." Another reporter pressed the point, asking to what extent American troops would be used. Reagan accused the man of posing a hypothetical question, like the one that had led to today's misleading headlines, and he said he should never have answered one in the first place. He invoked FDR, who he said often refused to give "iffy" answers to "iffy " questions.

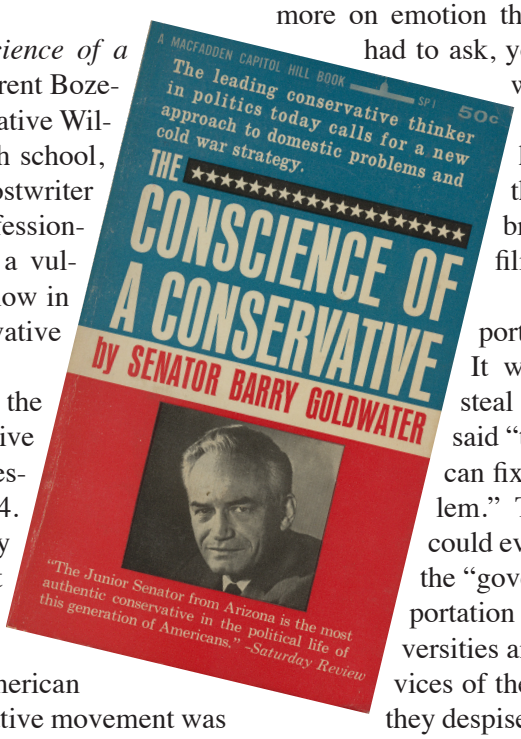


The U.S., he said, could be a power and presence to guarantee against destructive insurrection. Reagan seemed to advocate getting more involved in trouble zones. He condemned past 'hands off' policies in Cyprus and Lebanon. By intervening in these cases, just the guarantee of U.S. military might would be enough, he said. How dangerous this position could be became clear during his presidency, when Lebanon and 300 dead Americans would come back to haunt him.

After a few questions about the primary race, one of the

staff stepped in front of the podium and cut a reporter short by declaring the news conference to be ended. Like a sheepish little boy, Reagan grinned at the interrupted questioner, shrugged his shoulders, and said, " If I don't go now, they'll get mad at me." He quickly left the room.

I read Barry Goldwater's *The Conscience of a Conservative*—ghostwritten by L. Brent Bozell Jr., brother-in-law of famous conservative William F. Buckley—as a teenager in high school, long before I understood what a ghostwriter was, let alone worked as one in my professional career. Ingesting that catechism at a vulnerable age justifies my presumption now in analyzing the mutations of the conservative conscience over the last 50 years.



The 1976 campaign can be seen as the teenage years of America's conservative movement, which sprouted from the gestational run of Barry Goldwater in 1964. A more moderate Republican, Jerry Ford, won the 1976 nomination, but lost to Jimmy Carter. Carter's single term, with its crises of hostages and energy, brought too many shocks to American self-confidence, and Reagan's conservative movement was sent to Washington in 1980.

In my two months of contact with the 1976 Reagan for President campaign, I never met anyone who talked of specific policy changes to be made once the anti-Washington people arrived in Babylon. It was a campaign based on an archetypal narrative, not issues. In a speech to the San Francisco campaign group, Nevada Sen. Paul Laxalt told the story of going to Washington after serving Nevada as governor. He was no longer the number one man, but just another fish in a very large bowl. He became convinced that Washington was an evil place and he became a key figure in persuading Reagan to run for president, appreciating Reagan's potential appeal to voters not just in California, but across the country. Laxalt reasoned that only a governor had the executive experience and the distance from Washington needed to bring about the necessary changes, although he did not delineate just what those changes would be. That was, no doubt, on purpose, because the adolescent conservative movement depended more on emotion than policy to attract adherents. If you had to ask, you wouldn't understand. That emotion was streaked with anger and menace and revenge, but also with a sense of heroism. The people I met thought of themselves as Charles Bronson figures bringing retribution to agents of evil in a film that was approaching its climax.


A young Ayn Rand

That evil perceived by Reagan supporters was given the name "government." It was Reagan's clever, cynical tactic to steal the word in a famous speech when he said "the question is not whether government can fix the problem. Government *is* the problem." They re-branded government so they could eviscerate it. They chose not to recognize the "government" that builds schools and transportation systems, and funds libraries and universities and police departments, and all four services of the military that defend this country. No, they despised a different government—the one that coddles the poor in so many ways, that tells businesses how much they can pollute, the government that flagrantly allows the collapse of public morality, the one that fines you for speeding, inspects the kitchen in your restaurant, tells you how to treat your employees, but most of all, the government that takes your money and gives it to drug addicts, welfare queens, paupers, weaklings, and other people's children.

Reagan championed the individual—not as a member of a society, but as a person outside a society inimical to the individual. Many of those enamored of Goldwater, including myself at the time, saw themselves as true versions of the heroic characters created by Ayn Rand in her novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*: rugged individualists who prevail in a world of weakness by relying on the strength of their convictions, their insistence on personal freedom, and their disdain for appeasers, collectivists, and altruists. Not surprisingly, these characters are powerfully and viscerally attracted to each other, which makes the books fun to read. The teasing combination of philosophy and sex in Ayn Rand novels makes the scenes of foreplay more interesting than the scenes of consummation. It's no surprise that Ayn Rand has enjoyed a renewed popularity in recent years.

Good, in the eyes of conservative true believers, is not a result; it is what is "right," that is, a definition based on faith. For a society to be good, it must be organized around one prime directive: allow the successful to succeed. The heroic pursuit of personal interests will naturally build a society that is good, if those interests are preserved by freedom.

Others—although, perhaps, not everybody—will benefit from the success of the successful. A good society will still have poor, hungry, and sick people. That's regrettable, but that's their problem. If, however, society makes a collective effort to help the weak, the sick, and the elderly, not only is it doomed to failure, it is no longer good, because such efforts, by definition, limit freedom.

Reagan popularized a culture of values, but they were values to be protected, not shared. Such values are most easily understood in three-word tautologies. Government is bad. Freedom is good. Socialism is bad. Private enterprise is good. Welfare is bad. Greed is good. True believers are not concerned with how these simple slogans, when applied to the real world, mutate into social policies with negative consequences for millions of people. They don't acknowledge that protecting values at the expense of people can produce results that range from unintended to pernicious. Opposition to "government handouts" aimed at helping society's weaklings accepts that the children of the poor will also be poor, and will encounter a different system of education than those born into means. Opposing government spending on the elderly means replacing the Medicare system with a voucher payment. If their illnesses cost more, they are on their own. The fact that 40 to 80 million Americans are uninsured or perilously under-insured is unfortunate, but acceptable, and can be handled logically by staying on the insured side of the social divide. Collective action to ease the threats posed by illness to Americans' physical and financial health is condemned as "socialism," another hijacked term that the conservative conscience defines as the destruction of our freedom, and our country. The conscience of a conservative embraces policies of opposition to government action not because they produce a desired result, but because they are right.

Reagan also introduced anger as a substitute for knowledge in American politics. He didn't invent anger, but he made it look charming on television. When he pronounced that government was not the solution, it was the problem, his tone and facial expression connected with the anger of that mass of TV viewers secretly convinced that losers out there were getting breaks they themselves were being denied. A generation of conservatives watched him, saw how public anger could be socially acceptable, and then indulged their own vituperative urges, but, unfortunately, without Reagan's charm. This anger springs from a powerful sense of personal violation inflicted by the society in which we live. During a campaign headquarters discussion of California's 1976 initiative to ban new nuclear power plants, purportedly to make the planet safer in the future, the brown-haired Greek stewardess volunteer erupted periodically with livid declarations that she was being taxed to death now, so why should she worry about future generations?

Anger is difficult to sustain without evil enemies, so political opponents must be viewed as nothing less than devils who would destroy our country. Ayn Rand understood this in her novels, and invented a philosophical and political evil she branded "altruism" as a foil to put her belief in personal liberty in starker contrast. The conservative success in redefining the American political vocabulary includes not only the word "government," but the very name "Washington," and the current use of "liberal" as an epithet. Unlike Ayn Rand's "altruist," the word "liberal" has broader mass appeal and doesn't send honest people running to their dictionaries.

Manipulating public anger tends to lower public intelligence. Angry people are more likely to accept government by platitude and homily: the weight of America's economic and political analysis happens at "the kitchen table;" rich people are re-branded "job creators;" America must cut spending for social services because "we're out of money;" government should be run "like it's a business;" and the federal budget must be balanced "like your checkbook." None of these postulates makes any logical sense. How many conversations at dinner time ever move past grumpy complaints into serious analysis of public policy issues? There is no statistical evidence that adding to the wealth of the wealthy increases overall employment. When people run out of money, it is a fiscal issue; when a government runs out of money, it is a political decision that creates the fiscal reality. Government is not a for-profit business: its mission and funding are completely different. And the federal budget is a completely different organism than a personal checkbook, with the welfare of millions more people affected by its formulation. Yet, a person who is angry is willing to accept the platitudes because they sound sensible on a surface level, and anger both prevents and excuses the person from considering a complicated issue more deeply.

What Reagan did not introduce to American conservatism is absolutism. The political dogma of 'my way or the highway' has been added by subsequent disciples who choose to ignore that Reagan himself acknowledged the rights and dignity of his political opponents. I worked as a legislative aide in the House of Representatives when Tip O'Neill was Speaker, and little did I realize that period would later be canonized as the halcyon days of cooperation and compromise. Yes indeed, even Ronald Reagan compromised! But for today's conser-

vatives, there is no middle ground. All taxes are bad. All guns are good. Anybody who questions these clear truths is a moral relativist, and Republican officeholders willing to listen to two sides of an issue face, and often lose to, challenges from more absolutist candidates in primary elections. Absolutism transforms the concept of compromise into an exercise of destructive power: do everything we want, and we won't destroy the government today. Agree to our particular program of budget cuts and we won't destroy the country's credit worthiness. In the true believer's world, compromise is bad because the country no longer faces mere problems. Instead, it is combating mortal threats. Mere problems can be treated with solutions. Existential threats, however, demand an all out war against evil. Society is defended not by solving problems, but by finding and destroying those evil-doers who threaten our world.

Today's agents of conservatism combine indulging in anger, kidnapping the vocabulary of government, and dumbing down politics and economics, and then apply this toxic mixture to a population already vulnerable to division. This devolution of American conservatism has accelerated since Reagan's time, culminating in the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump.

If the Reagan years were a pivot in America's political history, the country has slid from pivot to divot. There is widespread anxiety today that the United States has been sucked down a vortex of social separation from which there is no apparent avenue of escape. The American political system finds itself unable to get traction in a rapidly changing social environment. In a single generation we have witnessed the corruption of the information media, the recasting of important issues into hopeless generalities, and historic threats to the competence of the electorate.

The Founding Fathers created the Post Office in 1792 to provide the entire country with low-cost access to information on public affairs, and newspapers were granted a special low rate. An independent press, funded commercially and not by government, grew with the country and came to be acknowledged as a "fourth estate," informing the public to balance and influence the three constitutional branches of government. The staffs of prominent newspapers in cities like New York, Washington, Los Angeles, and others prided themselves on being objective papers "of record," and the earliest radio and television networks competed on a plane of objective journalism to win more listeners and viewers. No longer.

Major commercial media today, whether forced by financial imperatives or plagued by weak leadership, have largely moved away from yesteryear's model of objective reporting and are now more interested in addicting readers, listeners, and viewers by mirroring their inner fears. Some media, like Fox News, are driven by a political agenda. All information is presented to match a defined political perspective, and these media have almost exclusively adopted a conservative viewpoint. A second category manipulates information and reporting to boost ratings, pandering for viewers by peddling politics as entertainment and sport. Thus Cable News Network (CNN), after years of foundering with weak ratings, created the reality TV circus that became the Republican Party nominating process of 2015-16. With a hit on their hands, CNN scheduled one commercially sponsored "debate" after another, complete with frequent commercial breaks selling at 40 times the previous year's average rates. With sets and formats carefully designed to encourage bombast and confrontation, one serious candidate after another found themselves in a strange sea, unable to swim against the current, until a single candidate emerged to claim the island.

Instead of establishing a more intelligent standard for coverage in 2016, public radio and television, our third category of media, parroted their corporate counterparts by focusing on the horse race instead of the problems and policies that government should address. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) reported on a Harvard Kennedy School study that analyzed news coverage from the 2016 primary races and found "journalistic bias" that led to over-coverage of the Donald Trump campaign and under-coverage of Democratic candidates, in particular Sen. Bernie Sanders. While PBS covered the study and the report's observation that "game-centered reporting has consequences," PBS itself fell into the same trap and assigned correspondents full time to evaluate the operations and strategies of the major political campaigns.

One consequence of "game-centered" coverage is it keeps voters under-informed. We do not need to know, for example, that the candidates are in Pennsylvania today seeking certain kinds of voters. Candidates campaign. No news here, and by subdividing the electorate the media itself is being gamed by candidates who prefer their voters to be "under-informed." Instead of publicizing the fears of individual displaced coal workers, for example, the media would better serve the public by explaining the market forces and technological changes leading to the closure of those coal mines and the alternative markets and jobs that will surely follow.

Their best intentions make public radio and television

more vulnerable to some weaknesses in coverage than their corporate competitors. They have been cowed into a false neutrality that often elevates the most banal and outrageous to an equal place with the most reasonable and visionary. Thus, members of the House "Freedom Caucus," or candidate Trump himself, receive extensive air time in the name of "neutral" coverage while they blatantly—and often free from challenge—trumpet falsehoods and flawed logic. And, justifiably proud of their corps of top notch reporters, public radio and television seem to devote more air time to having their journalists interview each other instead of primary source news subjects and news makers. Journalists interviewing other journalists may fill time slots with chatter, but it risks substituting third-party opinions, gossip, and conjecture for real news and information.

Falling short in these ways, the media enables today's 'politics of generalities,'allowing politicians to run campaigns designed to move—not inform—voters. With no coverage of basic information, voters respond to meaningless generalities like "We will end this war on coal!" Voters say they feel they are understood, although no real policies are proposed to address real needs. At the outset of the 2016 presidential campaign both the Democratic and Republican parties presented messages so general that they sounded almost identical: "We need to strengthen the middle class," or "We need to jump-start the economy," and "We need to remove burdensome regulation." These emotional appeals do not even hint at how these goals might be achieved. Only Senator Bernie Sanders advocated specific changes to federal spending and taxation, and he found a responsive audience. Sanders supporters, however, complained that the solutions cheered at rallies were not reported in the media.

The politics of generalities blinds us to the most obvious solutions. Under the generality that "Social Security is going bankrupt and must be overhauled," conservatives imply that an impending shortfall in the Social Security system can be solved only by cutting payments to retirees. In fact, even a modest upward adjustment to the income limit on the ultra-regressive payroll tax, capped at $127,200 in 2017, could easily solve the problem. Billionaires pay the same payroll tax total—$7,886.40 per year—as a person making $127,000–if they pay anything at all after all tax-sheltering schemes have been claimed.

The issue of "income inequality" has succumbed to the politics of generalities. The generality, "We are already paying enough taxes," locks inequality into place and ignores the specific details of who is paying how much, and what is their relative ability to pay a fair share. The politics of generalities portray income inequality as some coincidental, ironic outcome of a natural process when, in reality, it is the intended, measurable outcome of specific public policies. The media has done almost nothing to educate the public about its effects, its history, the policies to blame for it, and policy changes that could reverse the trend. The media's complicity in the politics of generalities makes politicians gun-shy. Taxing all income on the same scale, and raising rates at the top of the scale, would immediately lessen income inequality, but very few political leaders dare to discuss such specific solutions.

The term "income inequality" itself is a euphemism for the fundamental political challenge in today's world: the unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of a privileged few, and the inequalities in influence and opportunity that result. The concentration of wealth is not limited to the United States. Governments in the developed, "democratic" nations are losing influence, let alone real power, over the economies, legal systems, and social questions in their own countries. Instead, real power has followed the undemocratic, unrestricted concentration of wealth into the hands of small, exclusive groups. The ownership class in Putin's Russia inherited its fortunes when Soviet-era enterprises were sold off, and they are referred to in the U.S. as "oligarchs." The ownership class in America, epitomized by the infamous Koch brothers and Donald Trump, inherited its fortunes thanks to a slanted tax code and aggressive legal and banking maneuvers, and they are referred to in Russia as "oligarchs."

Concentration of wealth is not merely an intellectual talking point. It is at the root of today's worldwide human and social problems. One result is the intractable cycle of poverty in otherwise wealthy countries like the U.S. As more income and wealth are funneled by tax codes to the top fraction of citizens, fewer national resources are available to raise incomes and wealth for the vast majority. Diversion of national wealth to the very wealthy leaves fewer resources to create opportunity for the younger populations coming of age across the world. In the U.S., for example, the withdrawal of tax support from public universities has caused tuitions to rise to private school levels, limiting access for lower-income families and causing an explosion of student debt. The situation is still more dire in the developing world. Across the planet, children are approaching an adulthood without educational and entry-level employment opportunities because national resources have been siphoned away from middle and lower income families. The result is fertile

ground for terrorism. Confronting this lack of opportunity, and a closed social system that protects the privileged, young people become fuel for the flames of terrorism practiced by those eager to enlist the disenfranchised—especially young males—into their programs of violence.

The first obligation of wealth is to guarantee that government preserves it. America's system of lobbying and campaign contributions produces tax law and economic regulation that entrenches entrenched wealth. Any legislation that could possibly promote social progress, or lessen the divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots," has no chance even of a fair hearing if the entrenched order perceives it as a challenge. Even problems as obvious as international money laundering fester unresolved because corporations and their lawyers refuse to accept rules so basic as clearly identifying who owns a business. America's special tax treatments for capital gains and real estate dealing are unjustifiable except to those who claim them—the very same people who make certain Congress will not change them.

All pretense of economic or social justice in America's political system was finally abandoned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2008 with its 5-4 "Citizens United" decision equating money with speech, and effectively giving moneyed interests unlimited power to finance election campaigns.

Not only have the oligarchs been granted unlimited financial power over public elections by the Supreme Court, but the electorate itself may be losing its competence to make sound decisions. The most sinister challenge may be the growing complexity of modern life. On a personal level, modern life requires considerable skill and education to finance a house and cars, to manage basic bank accounts, let alone investment accounts or a small business, and to stay right with the IRS. It is no simple matter to market oneself for gainful employment and continually upgrade professional skills to maintain that employment, to shop wisely, to develop and pay for a healthy program of nutrition for a family, to find affordable health insurance, and to support and manage the best possible life-time program of education for children. It is no surprise that people less capable of meeting these challenges fall behind, live paycheck to paycheck, and become locked into a cycle of poverty, or even homelessness. Preoccupation with economics leaves little time for civics. The less successful are also less likely to study and understand civic issues and government, and they are less likely to exercise the duty or privilege of voting. In America's most publicized elections the turnout of eligible voters is barely 60 percent, and in most other elections it is far lower.

The sheer volume of facts and raw data now available through the internet exceeds the capacity of most people to organize or interpret it objectively. What is an informed voter to do? When the media is most needed to help build public understanding of public issues and institutions, it is off pandering to audience segments or desperately developing new business models. The result is a world where very few people understand its fundamental features, like what the Federal Reserve actually does, how local schools are funded, why fuel tax revenues have declined, who does most basic scientific research, how the banking crisis of 2008 came about, how much very wealthy people actually pay in taxes, or even how much they themselves pay. A less informed electorate is one more vulnerable to the influence of political advertising and disinformation campaigns.

The responsibility for educating the electorate of the future lies in part with our public schools. While the application of technology in schools has always lagged behind technology in business, much progress has been made in giving schools the technical tools they need. At the same time, students' acquisition of basic skills is falling behind. I taught English and journalism at two high schools during the last 20 years of my career, and the school newspapers were discontinued at both. Why? They were an expense, an inconvenience at times for administrators, and hyperactive lawyers cringed at any public display of student thinking or identity. At the root, however, was a low priority for the skills of journalism: investigating important topics, interviewing original sources, documenting those sources, and presenting facts in succinct and objective writing. While the national Common Core curriculum includes a cursory naming of some similar skills, very few students leave high school with any exposure to, let alone mastery of, those abilities or experiences. Instead of reporting on meaningful school issues, students have been reduced to wandering the campus with video cameras to ask peers or teachers "what grinds your gears?" or asking them to fill in lyrics on popular songs, so they can show cute clips as part of the morning video bulletin. That's the journalism they see on TV, and little in their education pushes them to go deeper.

The internet's

pervasion of today's school environment poses some ominous challenges. At first blush, the power to place all the documented wisdom of human history literally in the palm of a fourteen-year-old's hand would seem an unmitigated gift to education. The potential is enormous and teachers are working on its development. Meanwhile, I was forced to check 35 cell phones at my desk before administering any kind of test, lest the answers be distributed among friends in real time, or the questions be forwarded to other classes later in the day. Instant access to almost any imaginable factoid threatens to replace, not supplement, the methodical investigation of a field of knowledge. One result: almost no students in my experience with both honors and non-honors classes actually read books, either assigned as outside reading, or even when much of the book was read and discussed in class. The extended narrative that is a novel requires a modicum of time and mental focus that even the most talented students seldom muster. Good students boast of their ability to get by with snippets and summaries from online sources like Sparks notes or Schmoop. Of course I've had students who not only read complete books but also come in to talk to me about them, but they are all the more remarkable in that they stand out so prominently from the norm.

It is possible that many, if not most, of our high school graduates today not only do not, but cannot read anything longer than a brief, simple passage. We are graduating our first classes of young people who have had smart phones through their teen years. Scholars and commentators are raising questions not only about smart phone and social media impact on education, but on brain development itself. Over time, research should supplement the anecdotal evidence we have about early exposure to addictive smart phone use and possible damage to attention span in the developing years. There is no doubt that the interaction with information through smart phone use—let alone the addictive diversions of social media—has replaced much of the traditional school experience of the past. Many students can write more quickly with their thumbs than with all ten fingers because that's their experience. It is fashionable to deride traditional schools as old fashioned, but the social goals and expectations of traditional education—reading, writing, and knowledge of government and history—were developed in part to introduce young people to their civic responsibilities. If those expectations are ignored or abandoned, what will take their place, and what are the implications for the American electorate?

I began this narrative well before 2016, but much of Ronald Reagan's legacy has played out as might have been expected in the election of Donald Trump and the subsequent, chaotic state of American politics. Will the Trump years have the same kind of historical influence? Will that influence contribute to a better nation?

Or will new leaders step up to forge alternatives to Reagan's conservative legacy? Will future generations look back to today and see a time when visionaries emerged from the confusion and division to ignite a new political movement? Certainly, leadership will be necessary for the initiation of a new legacy in these modern times, and new leaders would be well advised to learn from the Reagan experience.

Looking at American history, Reagan's dedication to reducing the role of government was an anomaly. More often, transformational leadership has focused on new roles for government, as championed by Theodore Roosevelt, in different ways by Franklin Roosevelt, and more recently by Robert Kennedy. There is a heritage of government action that can be renewed to fit the future.

Reagan showed the power of shaping the vocabulary of political discussion. Will someone introduce a new political vocabulary that can allow a fresh look at solving problems? We've seen how easy it can be to turn people against certain terms; it's a bigger challenge to reverse that process. Can we move past "economic prosperity" to "economic justice"? From "government" to the idea of "commonwealth"? Champions for the hybrid, "democratic socialism," have found acceptance. If "liberal" has been wounded, can "progressive" still be salvaged? After all, as Reagan himself confidently chirped as a television shill for General Electric in the 1960s, "Progress is our most important product"!

Will the future welcome and support a better informed, more socially conscious, and more civically engaged electorate? Such an electorate cannot be created out of thin air, through an act of will, but must be discovered and lured out of the shadows of indifference and fear created by the media's obsession with wedge issues and identity politics. Will people respond to a universal economic and justice agenda—full employment, because the private sector can't do it alone; health care that won't bankrupt families; making college affordable for all; and taxing ALL income on the same scale?

And will the fundamental goodness of the American people penetrate our political consciousness and support new leadership to champion compassion instead of contempt for those denied advantages enjoyed by others, and for those struggling to preserve their dignity in an increasingly complex society? Will a new consensus dedicate the wealth of the American economy to reaching and benefiting more, not fewer, of its citizens?