

## Reagan's Multifaceted Legacy

Janet Tran, Tony Pennay, and Krista Kohlhausen depict Ronald Reagan as a model of civility in their article “Political Civility in the Age of Reagan” (*Social Education*, January/February 2011). It is certainly valuable to explore the ways in which President Reagan reached out to Democrats, such as Tip O’Neil and to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, so the “Political Civility” article is well worth the attention of social studies teachers. But if teachers want to really understand Ronald Reagan’s political career they need to go beyond his presidency and the events discussed by Tran, Pennay, and Kohlhausen, and to probe his rise to high office, which included his campaigns for governor of California and his record as governor. From the time that he first ran for governor in 1966, and well into his gubernatorial terms, Reagan was a backlash politician who appealed to voter resentments of radical social protest and liberal social policy by verbally attacking student protesters and mocking welfare recipients in terms that were far from models of civility.

In the interests of balance, then, teachers should use the documents Tran, Pennay, and Kohlhausen cite as evidence of President Reagan’s civility and then compare them with documents concerning the remarks that best evoke Governor Reagan’s lack of civility when it came to dealing with student protesters. This was the statement Reagan gave at Yosemite, California, on April 7, 1970, in response to violent student protest at UC Berkeley. In those remarks made at the farmers’ convention, the California Council of Growers, Reagan, referring to student unrest said, “If it takes a bloodbath, let’s get it over with. No More Appeasement.” The statement was so violent and lacking in civility that, according to the *New York Times* report (“Reagan Remark a Campaign Issue,” April 19, 1970), Reagan’s Democratic rival, Assemblyman Jesse Unruh, charged that the governor had “forfeited any right to hold public office.”

Reagan’s “bloodbath” line was so ugly that initially he tried to deny making it, even to his own staff. According to Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, Reagan told his press secretary, Paul Beck, that he had not used the word “bloodbath.” Only after Beck played him a tape of the speech did Reagan end this denial. Though a sympathetic biographer, Cannon noted “Despite the overall success of Reagan’s policies in dealing with campus disorders, his rhetoric was at times excessive. He was at his most inflammatory... when defending his policies before friendly audiences,” like that farmers’ convention, which cheered his “bloodbath” statement—a statement that Cannon termed “irresponsible” (see Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power*, 2003, p. 295).

Students ought to reflect not only on Reagan’s “bloodbath”

remark, but also on his refusal to apologize for it. Reagan told the press,

I didn’t advocate a bloodbath and as a matter of fact I think there’s something neurotic in someone believing that what was a figure of speech ... should be interpreted literally.... My general reaction is much ado about nothing. This figure of speech was inflated with the hot air of campaign oratory.

But Reagan’s critics chided him for holding a double standard, attacking student “militants because they make violent sounding statements but ... excusing” his own violent remarks “as a figure of speech.” One California Assembly critic even suggested that in the wake of the “bloodbath” statement Reagan ought to “be arrested for inciting to riot.” (“Reagan Remark A Campaign Issue,” *New York Times* April 19, 1970)

In two letters, one a few days after the “bloodbath” controversy began and one a decade later, Reagan claimed that he used the word “bloodbath” not as a threat to students but as a way of urging administrators to be ready for the flood of criticism (i.e., the rhetorical “bloodbath”) they would encounter when they took a strong stance against violent campus radicals. Students ought to consult those two Reagan letters (available in *Reagan: A Life In Letters*, Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds, 2003, pp. 191–192) and see whether Reagan’s explanations seem at all credible. But no matter what the verdict on his rationale for his “bloodbath” statement there is no question that the inflammatory Ronald Reagan of 1970 bore little resemblance to the image Tran, Pennay, and Kohlhausen present of a political leader displaying the “ability to reach out and befriend even ardent political adversaries.”

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One mission of the NCSS is to foster deep and meaningful instruction in the social studies. As social studies teachers, we are supposed to facilitate our students’ entry into the ways of thinking of the historian, the sociologist, the political scientist, etc. It is because of this that I offer criticism of the article by Tran, Pennay, and Kohlhausen’s “Political Civility in the Age of Reagan” (*Social Education*, Jan/Feb 2011). I applaud the authors’ suggestion of the use of primary sources, and the direct provision of two fine ones. I also agree with the authors that a consideration of political civility is important and timely with our students. However, I disagree that a good starting

point is to suggest that any one administration represented an unusually positive tone of civil conduct in national government. To do so presents a foregone conclusion rather than asking students to construct their own opinion from gathering a range of sources. It belies the kind of political science and history thinking that we are supposed to be facilitating. Rather than asking for disciplinary critical processes, it capitalizes on two current media narratives, the polarized nature of our political environment and the lionization of Ronald Reagan. Both of these are problematic.

First, consider the thesis in terms of political science. The polarization of our politics is an open question, not a foregone conclusion. Despite the popular media narrative of the moment, only a few political scientists make the claim (and in limited ways) that today's policy environment is merely hostile and bipolar. Some examples of the complexity of our situation: We currently are experiencing interparty as well as intraparty disagreements. Note the difficulty that the Republican House had in passing extensions of the Patriot Act. We can also observe aisle-crossing efforts continuing on such issues as global warming and healthcare. Also, there is widespread consensus on staying some course in Afghanistan.

Second, consider the thesis in terms of history. It suggests a generalization that things were better in the past and deteriorated to the present condition. Yet we can find cases of a far more toxic environment in national politics in our past. For instance, during the Bleeding Kansas crisis, the environment was so hostile that it was little wonder to people when one senator physically assaulted another on the Senate floor. Moreover, dispute is not necessarily negative. The majoritarian consensus in national politics during the Gilded Age was hardly beneficent, since it was the politics of favors and machines, of privileged classes reinforcing their privileges in comfortable agreement. Populists and then progressives threw a lot of polarizing wrenches into these works and much of what we value in our democracy today came from that more contested environment.

Perhaps more important to the issue of quality historiography is how we defy it when we lionize individuals. Lionization is one of the primary forms of myth making. We have had many proponents of a unifying myths approach to schooling, starting with Noah Webster. Yet the approach is the opposite of history, at least as professional historians define it. Historians tend to scoff at history teachers for our key role in propagating myths instead of history. Instead of gathering as many perspectives on events as we can find and letting individuals construct meaning from a variety of them, mythologizing gives a pre-formed evaluation and even re-makes events in order to make the subject seem better to us. We have done this most thoroughly with George Washington, of course, who never cut down the cherry tree, nor knelt to pray at Valley Forge, etc. We have done it also with many other U.S. presidents who were assuredly less worthy of such fakery. We have done it

with Andrew Jackson, who is never recorded as having done anything other than rhetorically for the sake of the "common man," who caused the first substantial economic panic in our country, and who defied a Supreme Court injunction, an impeachable violation of his presidential oath, thus sealing the doom of thousands of Native Americans (and we keep this man on the \$20 bill!). We have done it with Franklin Roosevelt, who likely took part in goading the Japanese purposefully, out of the public eye, in order to get the American people to favor participation in World War II. Now we are doing it with Ronald Reagan.

Reagan is famous for his public ideological steadfastness. Contrast this with what the article accurately displays as his willingness to compromise when working with policymakers. A very interesting civics project with students would be to compare the rhetorical Reagan with the policymaking Reagan. Some students might conclude that there is irony to his nickname, "the great communicator." If his cooperative actions were at odds with his stand-tough public image, then he was a great communicator of something he was not enacting. This would be an interesting opening to discuss how campaigning and policymaking interact, how public perception and legislating process move one another, and what might be healthy or pathological in these interactions. In addition to the speech in which he uses positive Russian folk-imagery, we could provide our students with the "Evil Empire" speech. The comparison would be a valuable exercise in understanding how political speech functions.

Reagan did raise American morale, the "movement" of which Ted Kennedy spoke, and a well-documented phenomenon. Against this genuine achievement of charismatic leadership, we must set the fact that Reagan proclaimed an agenda of less government while simultaneously expanding the national deficit, the debt, and our military, all in a time of prosperity and peace. Most important, there is Iran-Contra, which has experienced a genuine, 1984-style revision out of commonly known history. Most of my social studies teacher candidates have never heard of it, and they are our future history teachers.

Whether or not I judge a president as beneficent is not the point, although I imagine that a conservative ideologue will think it the most objectionable part. Meanwhile, a liberal ideologue would be agreeing with me about Reagan, but would leap to the defense of Kennedy or Roosevelt. Both would be missing the essential point that making anyone into a "Great" figure is a rejection of ethical historiographic and civic-preparation practices. It is re-writing what happened in selective ways in order to steer our society in an ideological direction, rather than allowing each citizen to construct value judgments for her/himself. Our central job as social studies teachers is about process: to get our students to be able to detect the difference between propaganda and good history/statecraft so they can judge for themselves competently. We are

not doing our best job until we enable our students to become citizens who understand and practice Jefferson's injunction: "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance."

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We would like to thank Professor Harman and Professor Cohen for responding to "Political Civility in the Age of Reagan." In the study of history, we look at models all the time, not necessarily as exemplars of a particular trait (one sense of the word model), but as examples to be explored and examined (a much different sense of the word model). It is this second sense of the word model that we feel best describes our approach to history learning in general, and we encourage history teachers at all levels to carefully choose and utilize the models that best suit the purposes of their classrooms.

Professor Harman warns of the "lionization" of characters in history, and to that effect we wholly agree. Embraced as a symbol by diverse peoples and organizations, it is difficult to imagine that President Reagan himself could have endorsed all of these causes. The "lionization" process often says more about the times we live in than it does about the historical figure who has been placed upon a pedestal. Asked to reflect on the legacy of Ronald Reagan, we argued that civil discourse, and Ronald Reagan's ability to create personal friendships with even his most ardent ideological adversaries, both at home and abroad was a valuable piece of his presidential legacy. Given the context of the recent lack of civil discourse between the parties, this strength of President Reagan's seems apropos. In addition, our article credits not only the president but his adversaries as collaborators in creating civil discourse. If we presented the 1980s as a decade of implausible harmony, that was certainly not our intent.

As educators we believe it is essential to separate the conclusions and beliefs of the instructor from the instruction itself. Within limited space provided, we chose primary sources for students and their teachers to examine. Depending on the aims of the instructor, this activity could be done with the documents included with the article, any of the more than 50 million pages of primary sources documents housed at the Reagan Library or any of the hundreds of millions of other documents available in the National Archives and the Library of Congress. One could certainly even use a primary source from Ronald Reagan's gubernatorial years, as Professor Cohen suggests, and examine this same question.

However, our article focuses on the Age of Reagan, a time period loosely surrounding the president's inauguration and lasting through the end of the Cold War. Prior to President Reagan, five consecutive presidents, and for a variety of reasons, did not or could not complete two terms in office. History

textbooks have dubbed this era with discouraging chapter titles such as "The Stormy Sixties" and "The Stalemated Seventies" (Bailey, Kennedy and Cohen. *The American Pageant*. 2008) or equally alarming, "The Crisis of Authority" (Brinkley. *American History: A Survey*. 2008). History without context is void. Professor Cohen's focus on then Governor Reagan's use of a single word during a turbulent era removes California from the canvas of a nation experiencing growing pains, rocked by social protests and troubled by constitutional crisis. As much as the lionization of a president would be a mistake, equally grievous would be to choose one statement during the span of a public servant's career as wholly indicative of their character.

Emphasis on a single word in a politician's speech often diverts citizens from the true issues at hand. In January 2010, President Barack Obama perhaps best diagnosed the decision to fixate and allow a few words out of context to override a Statesman's career and history. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid had used poor taste when describing President Obama as having "no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." The media and members of the Republican Party censured Senator Reid's antiquated language, however, President Obama bemoaned the distracting and inflated frenzy over a non-issue.

Regarding the controversy, President Obama referred to Reid's "inartful language" as a detractor to the real issues at hand. Senator Reid, the president argued was "a good man who has always been on the right side of history". President Obama went on to assert that "the average person, white or black, right now is less concerned about what Harry Reid said in a quote in a book a couple of years ago than they are about how are we going to move the country forward. And that's where we need to direct our attention."

Using that same standard, most people are less concerned with the "inartful language" President Reagan used in 1970, than they are with the intentional civility that existed during the Age of Reagan. The 1980s were not an idyllic time in history. However, even President Reagan's harshest critics must admit there is value to examining his model for working effectively with his adversaries, both foreign and domestic.

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