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Remembering Reagan

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday marked not only the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy but the 30th anniversary of the inauguration of Ronald Reagan. And, because this year marks Reagan's centenary, I suspect focus on the Gipper's presidency will continue for some time. You would think this would be good news for the GOP, reminding Americans of a happier time when Reagan was in charge, the way Democrats played FDR's theme song, "Happy Days Are Here Again" at every convention, recalling the heady days of their hero.

Actually, the Reagan centenary is not a good thing for today's GOP because Reagan could not be more different from the temper and tone of today's Tea Party-led GOP. Reagan, like Kennedy, oozed optimism and enthusiasm and confidence. Today's Tea Party seems built more on resentment and anti-elitist tropes of the kind we associate with Dayton, Tennessee or Father Coughlin or the John Birch Society. Reagan said, "It's morning in America." Glenn Beck wants to "take America back," a claim that assumes it has been improperly taken.

Reagan was the first politician to understand that he could give a dog whistle to parts of the conservative base while sending more moderate signals to the rest of the electorate. For example, Reagan did not have a bigoted bone in his body and, working in Hollywood for many years, homosexuality was not for him the kind of barn-burning issue it was for social conservatives. As Governor of California, he resisted having to fire an aide who was brought down by his intra-staff opponents because he was gay. Eventually, Reagan agreed to let the aide go, but that was in the 1960s, before Stonewall. In the White House, Reagan and his wife found ways to signal that they were not homophobic. Meanwhile, Reagan could send a video to an evangelical meeting, they would play it over and over and over, but no one outside the evangelical community would ever see it because the cultural barriers between them and the mainstream culture were still pretty high.

Reagan also was capable of displaying a keen sense of humor that helped him defuse the more divisive parts of his image. When he joked that in his administration, the right hand doesn't know what the far right hand is doing, he laughed. It was a joke. When, during the 1980 presidential debate, Carter was mercilessly pointing out the many inconsistencies in Reagan's record, instead of rebutting the charges, Reagan deftly replied, "There you go again." In 1984, after a rambling response in one debate caused many to question his mental fitness for re-election, at the next debate, Reagan addressed the age issue head-on, promising not to seek any political advantage from his opponent's youth and inexperience. Walter Mondale said that he knew the election was over in that instance, and indeed it was.

Another thing that Reagan had that someone like Palin needs desperately is good handlers. Reagan was getting on in years by the time he ran for the presidency in 1980, and he needed aides who knew the man and his limits. If he did not get his nap in, he was prone to make mistakes by evening. After a campaign manager refused to acknowledge this necessity, Nancy Reagan had to step in and demand that the scheduler include naptime. The campaign manager, having earned Nancy's ire, was soon out the door. Palin is youthful, but she needs someone she trusts who can say to her, "Ya know, Governor, this text seems a little self-referential."

The other problem for Republicans is that they have created such an outsized myth about Reagan, everyone else looks small by comparison. He brought down communism, with a little help from Pope John Paul II, Republicans say, when in fact, communism was collapsing of its own internal lies and contradictions for decades when Havel and Walesa, as well as John Paul II and Reagan, helped kick the last rotten leg out from under the still standing corpse. I would never place Gorbachev's name alongside that of Havel for obvious reasons, but he gets some credit for it all going down peacefully. But, those stubborn facts are no part in the myth. What has Mitch Daniels done to compare with toppling communism?

I hope that in the interests of historical integrity, we will also remember the less flattering parts of Reagan's legacy. He may have been genuinely optimistic, but he was not above stoking racial tensions, invoking "welfare queens" as if a few instances of fraud were responsible for the federal budget problems. More perniciously, Reagan traveled to Philadelphia, Mississippi to give his first post-convention speech and there he invoked states rights but a few miles from where the bodies of James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman had been found.

Still, the Reagan years were not as bad as they might have been if Reagan had been the kind of bellicose conservative his heirs paint him to be. He talked tough about federal spending but did nothing to lower it, sending budget cuts to die on Capitol Hill with nary a protest from the White House. He talked tough about American military might but then invaded Grenada and pulled the Marines out of Lebanon at the first sign of trouble. His legacy was a great deal more mixed than most of his followers care to acknowledge or most of his opponents concede.

The key difficulty for today's GOP is that there is no one who seems to share what Reagan and JFK and FDR shared, that innate optimism about the country, and the ability to share it easily with a roomful of strangers and a television audience. Mike Huckabee has some of it, but it comes with his preacher-baggage which Reagan, America's only divorced president, completely lacked. And the Tea Party crowd is too angry to notice if they have any optimism.

So, let's remember Reagan, the good and the bad, and let's see how the GOP candidates try to appropriate his image and his legacy for their own purposes. So far, there is not one person on the GOP bench who seems to have the strengths Reagan brought to politics.

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