Introduction

Ronald Reagan’s Defining Vision for the 1980s—and America

There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers.
We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right.
RONALD REAGAN, “THE SPEECH,” 1964

Your first point, however, about making them love you,
not just believe you, believe me—I agree with that.
RONALD REAGAN, OCTOBER 16, 1979

One day in 1924, a thirteen-year-old boy joined his parents and older brother for a leisurely Sunday drive roaming the lush Illinois countryside. Trying on eyeglasses his mother had misplaced in the backseat, he discovered that he had lived life thus far in a “haze” filled with “colored blobs that became distinct” when he approached them. Recalling the “miracle” of corrected vision, he would write: “I suddenly saw a glorious, sharply outlined world jump into focus and shouted with delight.”

Six decades later, as president of the United States of America, that extremely nearsighted boy had become a contact lens–wearing, famously farsighted leader. On June 12, 1987, standing 4,476 miles away from his boyhood hometown of Dixon, Illinois, speaking to the world from the Berlin Wall’s Brandenburg Gate, Ronald Wilson Reagan embraced the “one great and inescapable conclusion” that seemed to emerge after forty years of Communist domination of Eastern Europe. “Freedom leads to prosperity,” Reagan declared in his signature
dulcet tones that made fans swoon and critics cringe. “Freedom re-
places the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace.
Freedom is the victor.” Offering what sounded then like a pie-in-the-
sky challenge or a pie-in-the-sky prayer, President Reagan proclaimed:
“General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosper-
ity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: 
Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev,
tear down this wall!”

Another seventeen years later, on June 11, 2004, Ronald Reagan’s 
funeral climaxed a week of Lincolnesque commemorations. Contra-
dicting its own editorial line, the New York Times front page hailed 
Reagan for “project[ing] the optimism of [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, the faith in small-town America of Dwight D. Eisenhower and the vigor of 
John F. Kennedy.” The 2004 Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, 
gushed: “He was our oldest president . . . but he made America young again.” The Massachusetts Turnpike, a central artery carrying hun-
dreds of thousands of opponents now often caricatured, eighties’-style, 
as Chardonnay-sipping, NPR-listening, New York Times–reading, Reagan-
hating yuppie liberals, flashed an electronic sign saying: GOD SPEED 
PRESIDENT REAGAN. The respect and affection millions expressed, be it in silence, tears, or wistful reminiscences, constituted Ronald Reagan’s final gift to the American people. “He brought us all together for one last time, wherever we were,” Reagan’s speechwriter extraordinaire Peggy Noonan wrote.

In the 1980s Ronald Reagan offered his fellow Americans a perspec-
tive, a set of glasses that helped their “glorious sharply outlined world jump into focus.” For some, it was a “miracle” that would see America revive, the Soviet Union falter, and the once seemingly unassailable Berlin Wall fall. For others, Reagan’s vision represented a national my-
opia that was immoral, adolescent, and dangerous. But then as now, 
whether they “shouted in delight” or muttered in frustration, few could deny Reagan’s significance—or the importance of the decade he dominated, as his funeral confirmed.

Reagan’s vision represented his keystone contribution to the 1980s, 
a decade of boom times and boom-time values. Perhaps the biggest 
consumer revolt of the period came in 1985, when the Coca-Cola com-
pany unveiled "New Coke," a sweeter, tangier, more Pepsi-like version of America’s national beverage. Reporters played the grassroots backlash as a modern American Revolution, defending “baseball, hamburgers, Coke,” although some critics simply grumbled that New Coke did not mix well with their rum. When Coca-Cola retreated, Senator David Pryor, an Arkansas Democrat, called old Coke’s resurrection “a very meaningful moment in the history of America. It shows that some national institutions cannot be changed.” This “rebellion” was a quintessential 1980s’ story: in the disproportionate reaction to a minor, symbolic problem; in the application of 1960s’ grassroots tactics to a decadent, consumer culture issue; in the anger of “Reagan country” mobilized against change; in the sweet strains of nostalgia and patriotism mingling with self-indulgence; in the gap between the simple media story line and the messier realities.

The centrality of a soft drink to the identity of both New Coke and Classic Coke advocates reflected America’s epidemic consumerism. New technologies, ideologies, and bureaucracies, along with revolutions in economics, marketing, advertising, and conceptions of leisure, had transformed the cautious American customer, once wary of chain stores, into the 1980s’ sale-searching, trend-spotting, franchise-hopping shopper. Spurred by Reagan’s gospel of progress and prosperity, Americans happily indulged themselves. “God wants you to succeed,” Reverend Robert Schuller preached from his “shopping center for God,” the $19.5 million Crystal Cathedral seating three thousand.

Shopping became the great American religion, with advertising jingles uniting Americans through a common liturgy. Loudmouths in stadiums would shout “Tastes great,” echoing a popular Budweiser commercial for light, spelled lite, beer. The Pavlovian crowd would respond: “Less filling!”—round after round after round. Malls sprouted like mushrooms across the landscape, creating huge, homogenized, artificial environments, killing off main streets and helping franchises gobble up individual entrepreneurs. And Americans became more obsessed than ever with having the latest, the hottest, the best—an obsession exemplified by the craze for cherubic-faced Cabbage Patch dolls, the must-get gift of Christmas 1983 that arrived with a birth certificate and hospital papers.
Reagan’s rhetoric made this prosperity patriotic—and transcendent. To the millions who happily began to view the world from his perspective, Reagan’s “vision thing” was more than a perception game or an exercise in image-making. A surprisingly nimble politician, Ronald Reagan understood the alchemy of leadership, especially in the modern world. More than anything else, and transcending all the president’s half-steps and hypocrisies, missteps and muddles, Reagan’s all-American outlook defined his times. Reaganism was liberty-laden but moralistic, consumer-oriented but idealistic, nationalist but individualistic, and consistently optimistic. Cataloguing Reagan’s attributes is not enough; they must be seen in action and understood in context. Reagan’s vision, this gift, demands that the two stories be told together, chronicling Ronald Reagan and America in the 1980s, the decade he dominated and helped define.

In Search of Reagan:
The Greatest President Since FDR?

Nearly a quarter of a century after Ronald Reagan’s inauguration, Americans still have trouble discussing Reagan intelligently, objectively, reasonably. He seems easier to lionize, or demonize, than analyze. Reagan’s near-canonicalization in June 2004 celebrated a Churchillian leader, an extraordinary character who saved America, shrinking government, restoring pride, triggering prosperity, and winning the cold war. Nevertheless, most academics and liberals charge that “Mr. Magoo,” this “amiable dunce,” ruined America, unleashing the evil genie of mass selfishness, while shredding the social safety nets Democratic presidents from Franklin Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson had so carefully woven. Even as hundreds of millions worldwide heard Baroness Margaret Thatcher toast a “great president, a great American, and a great man, who, as former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said, enters history “with certainty and panache,” even while hundreds of thousands clogged the freeways of Los Angeles and the streets of Washington to salute the flag-draped coffin, others condemned Ronald Reagan’s insensitivity to blacks, gays, women, and the poor. Contra-
dicting its obituary, the New York Times editorial page condemned Reagan’s—and his successors’ “simplicity, which expresses itself in semi-detached leadership and a black-and-white view of the world.”

Like him or hate him, the funeral coverage confirmed that Ronald Reagan was the greatest American president since Franklin D. Roosevelt—using the Time man-of-the-year standard of “the person who most affected the news and our lives, for good or for ill.” Reagan’s combination of visionary rigidity and tactical fluidity reinvigorated the presidency. His Hollywood-slick, small-town faith in America as a shining “city upon a hill” restored many Americans’ confidence in themselves and their country. Gradually, remarkably, despite being underestimated, Reagan helped shift the terms of the debate in America. As the political scientist Aaron Wildavsky would note after Reagan’s successful 1984 reelection bid against Walter Mondale: “If Mondale was so smart, and Reagan so dumb, why did the Democrats campaign on Republican issues?” Nostalgia for Reagan’s courtliness and firmness elevated the fortieth president’s standing in polls assessing chief executives. Even the great liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., recently ranked Reagan with Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Theodore Roosevelt as “forceful and persuasive presidents” who “impose[d] their own priorities on the country,” despite “the absence of first-order crisis.”

Not only were Reagan’s prosperity-filled, budget-busting, government-bashing, nation-building, image-making, morale-boosting, flag-waving, cold war–ending eight years defining, but Reagan and Reaganism still influence the White House, Washington, the United States, and the world. Reagan’s first Democratic successor, Bill Clinton, ran for reelection in 1996 with the Reaganesque boast that “the era of big government is over,” while the issue of cutting taxes was the central domestic motif for the two Bushes, who followed Reagan. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Americans enjoyed what we should call the Ronald Reagan–Bill Clinton presidential boom, the Paul Volcker–Alan Greenspan Federal Reserve boom, or the high tech–information age–sixties kids–reach-their-earning-potential–baby boom boom. And we are well into the second decade of Germany’s peaceful reunification—part of a worldwide post-Communist democratic and capitalist revolution—
remembering that it was Reagan who challenged Gorbachev to “tear down” that wall.

All over, signs abound that, for better or worse, we live in a Reaganized America. We see it in America’s emergence as the world’s only superpower, and in the capitalist resurgence in the United States and abroad. We see it in how Reagan’s Sun Belt conservatism continues to shine—or cast a shadow—in the courts, the Congress, and state capitals. We see it in the continuing cultural conversation about our values and souls. We see it in the blurring of popular and political culture, as prime-time television shows model themselves on White House life and create a fictional president more popular than the actual incumbent, as stars queue up for political runs to join California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in politics, and as presidents and their wives play the fame game like Hollywood celebrities. We see it in the polarizing effect of simple, visionary doctrines such as George W. Bush’s war on terrorism, which galvanized most Americans while alienating an articulate, passionate minority. We see it in the new economy, the cutting-edge technologies, the growth in service jobs rather than manufacturing, and the debate over the gap between the richest and the poorest. We see it in the conspicuous spending that continues to consume so many of us and the unwillingness of too many of us to help the less fortunate. We see it in the continuing battles over the issues that brought Reagan to power: abortion, affirmative action, the budget, Social Security, taxes. And we see it in the sentimental patriotism that he helped revive, as evidenced by America’s resolve during the Gulf War, the country’s unity-in-pain after September 11, and our ever-kitschier national celebrations.

The Reagan Treatment

Ronald Reagan was not an idiot. The need for such a declaration reflects the breadth of opinions about him—and the depths to which the debate can sink. Even his loyal wife Nancy Reagan admitted that her husband constructed a “wall” around himself. And he was remarkably, sometimes dangerously, uncurious. But that does not make Reagan “an apparent airhead,” as his official biographer turned fictional-
ized memoirist Edmund Morris said; nor does it make him uniquely "enigmatic"—an overused term that diverts attention from Reagan’s accomplishments.

Many biographers demonstrate Reagan’s elusiveness by recalling the time Michael Reagan approached his father, who was officiating at the boy’s graduation. Extending his hand, Governor Reagan said: “My name is Ronald Reagan, what’s yours?” Michael may have felt rejected. And psychobiographers can revel in such stunning indifference to one’s child. But there is a more benign explanation. The progressive journalist William Allen White noted that after years in politics, William McKinley “became galvanized with a certain coating of publicity. He lost his private life and his private view. . . . He walked among men a bronze statue, for thirty years determinedly looking for his pedestal.”

Decades as a Hollywood star and a politician conditioned Reagan to retreat into a shell while in public, to play his part without being engaged. The Michael Reagan incident may indicate the coping mechanisms of a celebrity imprisoned within his own “galvanized . . . coating” rather than revealing a uniquely “enigmatic” man.

In fact, Ronald Reagan’s political career relied on his first-class temperament. His light touch, his affable manner, the sparkle in his eyes telegraphed a warmth that belied claims he was a right-wing bogeyman. Without his conservative grounding, Reagan would have floated away; without the image-making, he would have sunk under the weight of his rhetoric. Reagan’s optimism was heartfelt and legendary, springing from his faith in America, the resilient, innocent era that nurtured him, and his storybook rise from the shame of having a drunken, ineffectual father and a religiously iconoclastic mother in small-town USA to Hollywood fame and presidential immortality. Reagan was a great deflector, ready to blame the media, the Russians, or individuals, but rarely taking failures upon himself. When his first wife left him, he said “I was divorced,” dodging responsibility; when the Iran-Contra scandal exploded, he bemoaned the journalistic “lynch mob” that “prevented the remaining hostages from being released.”

Even opponents often succumbed to the Reagan charm. If Lyndon Johnson’s infamous “treatment” entailed hovering, dominating, invading his victim’s space, with an implicit threat reinforcing the physical
intrusion, the Reagan treatment was more subtle, minimalist, Mc-
Luhanesque. This president lured, appeased, and distracted, inviting his
victim into his charmed circle, his can-do worldview, all reinforced
with a well-aimed anecdote or witticism. Reagan believed in getting
people to “love you, not just believe you,” in public and in private. “I
think I gained that knowledge in show business,” he said, “and out on
the road I do my very best to establish a personal relationship—even
with a crowd. It’s easy for me, too, because the truth of the matter is I
do like people.”

Ronald Reagan’s Bully Pulpit

Reagan was a great teacher, an extraordinary preacher, a master of
parables, conveying complex ideas in short, friendly soundbites that
stirred the American soul. Reagan worked his magic as America’s
favorite storyteller, improvising a narrative about the present and the
future rooted in Americans’ mythic past. Although his policies some-
times proved divisive, he is best appreciated as a harmonizer, a fabulist
who reconciled apparent contradictions, a sentimentalist surprisingly
adept at forging unlikely coalitions. And for all the talk about the Rea-
gan “Revolution,” the president often played the pragmatist, not the
ideologue; the politician, not the idealist.

Reagan delighted in Theodore Roosevelt’s “bully pulpit.” Inspiring
the masses while infuriating his critics, he spoke impressionistically,
telegraphically, and sometimes inaccurately. Reagan and his aides
tended to value salesmanship over statesmanship, trusting “the Tal-
ent’s” ability to woo the public. Criticized by women, attacked by
blacks, Reagan’s aides worked harder to “communicate our present
attitudes”—without reconsidering policies.

Reagan’s impressionism worked because he sounded so sincere.
Newsweek’s Meg Greenfield marveled at Reagan’s “gift” of “saying the
most incredible things” credibly. In 1982 Reagan told Chicago school
kids that the British used to hang criminals for possessing guns. Re-
porters jeered. Echoing his boss’s approach, Deputy Press Secretary
Larry Speakes replied: “Well, it’s a good story, though. It made the
point, didn’t it?”
Reagan defended himself from accusations of inaccuracy with his characteristic mix of populism, self-assurance, and good humor. “I have never claimed to be a whiz kid, a robot, a bionic adding machine, or a walking encyclopedia,” he said, using quaint language in the computer age to identify with the masses and mock the elites. With the self-assurance of old age, Reagan impressed other world leaders by shrugging off criticism. He was who he was, Canada’s Brian Mulroney later recalled. Unlike many younger, thin-skinned leaders, Reagan was not a work in progress. The smooth, affable showman enjoyed laughing at himself. When opponents attacked the air force’s costly B-1 bomber, he quipped: “How did I know it was an airplane? I thought it was vitamins for the troops.”

Rather than rethinking liberal fundamentals, Democrats preferred to caricature Reagan as a lucky boob whose public relations elixir bewitched Americans. The result was a series of Reagan “upsets,” from his election in November 1980, through his string of congressional successes in 1981, through his reelection in 1984, and including his managing of Mikhail Gorbachev and the twilight of Communism. Reagan made a career of being underestimated—thanks to the arrogance of Democrats and reporters.

In fact, Reagan had more depth. Thousands of documents housed in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library prove that Ronald Reagan was a thinker, a writer, an engaged politician. For decades he drafted his own speeches—and he remained his own best speechwriter. Even as crushing presidential workloads reduced him to editing his ghostwriters’ drafts, Reagan often substituted vivid prose for policy jargon, powerful yarns for broad principles, inclusive “we” language rather than distancing abstractions. Similarly, the White House lobbying records reveal the relish with which Reagan did his “homework,” calling up members of Congress, arm-twisting gently, and diligently recording the results.

Reagan’s White House was uniquely positioned to exploit some profound cultural changes. Theodore Roosevelt’s turn-of-the-century bully pulpit had become the late twentieth century’s most formidable sound stage. Democrats such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, Republicans such as Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon,
had expanded, invigorated, and wired the presidency. Dominating the federal government and the media, the president became the focal point of the country, not just its politics. The White House offered one of America’s most effective backdrops; for one who could appreciate its potential, being president was the greatest public role. Reagan brought to this souped-up soapbox an ease with the cameras, a fluidity of formal speech, an ear for popular concerns, an instinct for mass leadership, and an appreciation for the presidency’s public relations power. The 1980s would be Reagan’s decade because Reagan skillfully rode and often took credit for one independently generated cultural wave after another, ranging from the founding of CNN, MTV, and USA Today, to the reign of Dallas and Dynasty on television, and the transition from Walter Cronkite to Dan Rather at CBS News—all of which occurred at the start of Reagan’s administration.

Conservatives bristle at characterizations of their hero’s accomplishments as largely symbolic, especially because it feeds the liberal caricature of Reagan as a snake-oil salesman. But, particularly in the modern American polity, symbolic leadership is significant. Tone counts. The “Rhetorical Presidency” lives and thrives. When many historians talk about the idealism John F. Kennedy inspired in the 1960s, they wax lyrical. Yet when many talk about the song Reagan sang, they turn cynical. Obviously, differences in content remain relevant. But neither liberals nor conservatives should underestimate the modern president’s power to shape the nation’s self-perception and worldview, or the centrality of that mission in molding an administration’s legacy.

Reagan’s Poetic Politics:
Merging Politics and Culture

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the 1980s loom large. During that decade the information age began, spawning a new economy, a new politics, a new culture, a new look, and a new flight from communal concerns to individual lifestyle obsessions. Examining the 1980s illuminates how our contemporary world was shaped—and distorted.
Presidential historians have underestimated the cultural impact presidents have, especially in the modern age. This book builds on this assumption, that to understand Ronald Reagan—and the era he dominated—we need to recognize Reagan’s presidency as a cultural and political phenomenon. More so than his predecessors, and building on the examples of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, Reagan’s brand of leadership partially transcended day-to-day politics and helped shape American culture. Presidents continue to captivate America’s collective psyche, and a president like Reagan, who set out to resurrect the grandeur of his nation and his office, remains especially intriguing.

Armed with his easy grin, his sunny disposition, and an array of anecdotes trumpeting traditional American values, Reagan repeatedly merged culture and politics. Reagan’s boundary jumping entailed more than the occasional Clint Eastwood or Rambo reference that came so easily to the former Hollywood star. In his preference for storytelling over policy-making, in his tendency to paper over divisive issues with unifying themes, in his poetic politics of symbols and images trumping the Jimmy Carter–Tip O’Neill prosaic politics of logrolling and coalition building, Ronald Reagan brought to life the academic notion of “political culture.” Reagan “was a performer in an era when we were only beginning to realize that performing was one of the most important things a presidential candidate could do,” notes Roger Simon of *U.S. News & World Report*. Reagan demonstrated that politics was more than a power game and a question of resource allocation, it often involved a clash of symbols and a collective search for meaning.

Reagan’s gruff political consultant Ed Rollins called his boss “the last American hero.” This label captured the president’s outsized status in many American eyes as well as the nostalgia-laden fear of the complicated present that Reagan tapped into so effectively. Reagan became a hero by helping to restore America’s confidence, which then helped insulate him from some of the vicissitudes that weakened his predecessors—and helped distract Americans from some of his greatest fiascos, including the Iran-Contra scandal. This model of cultural leadership,
with the larger Reagan storyline eclipsing the prosaic and sometimes tawdry details of the Reagan presidency, accounted for Reagan’s “teflon” that so mystified and frustrated his critics.

The Reagan Storyline

Assessing the politics and the culture of the times uncovers a Reagan storyline. It is a simple story, told repeatedly, divided into three parts. The first part tells the sad tale of America in the 1960s and 1970s, a country demoralized, wracked by inflation, strangled by big government, humiliated by Iranian fundamentalists, outmaneuvered by Soviet communists, betrayed by its best educated and most affluent youth. The result was four failed presidents: Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter. Part two has Ronald Reagan riding in to save the day, with a mandate for change. Reagan’s relentless, eloquent, often soaring rhetoric reshaped American horizons, building on century-old ideals, responding to decades-old frustrations, utilizing the challenges of the moment. His revolution, in his telling, lightened the tax burden crushing Americans, cut many regulatory shackles handcuffing American business, and revived America’s military. Just as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration played to the consumer, the businessman, and the worker, Ronald Reagan’s America in recovery played to the citizen, the businessman, and the soldier. The result, part three, was Morning in America—the great party known as the 1980s, when the stock market soared, patriotism surged, the Soviet Union crumbled, and America thrived.

Reagan and his minions delighted in this tale. They told it so frequently, and so brazenly, that they alienated some fellow Republicans, who occupied the White House from 1969 to 1977. Nixon and Ford administration veterans bristled when President Reagan called the 1970s a “decade of neglect,” a time when “those in charge seemed to be operating under the notion that a weaker America is a more secure America.” “I resent being lumped in with Carter and the Democratic Congresses on this vital issue,” Gerald Ford scolded two former subordinates now working for Reagan in 1984—Vice President George Bush and Chief of Staff James Baker.
This Reagan storyline of decay and renaissance was all the more remarkable given its tenuous relationship to the truth. Ronald Reagan’s two terms were not the eight-year idyll many now recall. Reagan’s revolution was not as dramatic as many now claim, and the morning in America was not as cloud free. Even Reagan’s poll ratings were not that consistently high. In particular, the Reagan recession of 1981 to 1982 generated the most unemployment since the Great Depression; midway through Reagan’s first term, pundits were eulogizing yet another failed administration. Even at the height of the Reagan boom, serious questions lingered about the mounting debt, about the growing gap between rich and poor, about the fraying of Reagan’s vaunted “safety net,” about the threat of Japanese and German economic dominance. And even once Reagan’s poll ratings recovered, pollsters consistently discovered far more affection for the man than support for his policies.

The 1980s: A Meeting of the Man and the Moment

Historians have long pondered the dynamics between historical actors and forces, between, as they used to say, the man and the moment. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wonders what would have happened had the assassin who killed Chicago’s Mayor Anton Cermak in February 1933 hit his target, President-elect Roosevelt, and had the automobile that merely bruised England’s future prime minister crossing Fifth Avenue fourteen months earlier crushed Winston Churchill. Historians are not supposed to play counterfactual games, but one leap prompts another. Suppose Ronald Reagan had wrested the Republican nomination from President Gerald Ford in 1976, and then defeated Jimmy Carter. Would a Reagan presidency beginning in 1977 have been as effective? Reagan would have imposed the same ideas, habits, and personality on a country that was less confident economically, strategically, culturally, ideologically. To the extent that Reagan benefited by playing off Carter, the malaise talk, the Iranian hostage debacle, and the general frustration pent up during the Ford-Carter years; to the extent that a show like Dynasty went into production in 1979 and not in 1975; to the extent that the “USA USA” cheering after the plucky
American team’s surprising Olympic hockey victory occurred in 1980, Reagan may have been lucky to lose in 1976.

Reagan was not the first president to be funny, eloquent, patriotic, or even optimistic. His supposedly malaise-ridden predecessor, Jimmy Carter, sported a million-watt smile and the confidence-inducing slogan, “Why Not the Best?” During the 1977 inauguration, Carter called for “a new beginning, a new dedication without our Government, and a new spirit among us all.” Yet Carter warned, prophetically: “A President may sense and proclaim that new spirit, but only a people can provide it.” Ronald Reagan was not simply lucky in getting the American people to “provide” that new spirit in the 1980s, he was sufficiently savvy to turn whatever coincidences came along the way into his—and America’s—good fortune.

Reagan’s extraordinary skills found fertile soil and the right political climate, at the right time. The economy improved. Deregulation intensified. The baby boomers matured. Corporations became more popular. Soviet Communism imploded. Meanwhile, media attention shifted from liberal suburbanites’ rebellion against the authoritarian establishment and stultifying conformity to conservative suburbanites’ rebellion against big government and high taxes. Ronald Reagan’s message resonated more effectively. His ability to hijack historical forces, and define them, improved.

Reagan’s governing style suited this new society and political culture obsessed with the pursuit of happiness. It was low-impact governing, minimizing demands and mass-producing happy endings. Reagan served out dollops of traditional American fare promising limited government and maximal salvation in modern, media-friendly packages. A politics of postures and images, alternating with a focus on a few discrete issues that engaged him fully, stirred an audience exhausted by the grandiose promises of yesteryear and distracted by Entertainment Tonight. Ronald Reagan was remarkably chipper, even-keeled, friendly, happy to trade jokes and quips. Biographers can deem this persona enigmatic and problematic; most Americans found it alluring and reassuring. Reagan’s compulsive affability fed an optimism that also resonated with Americans, who were desperate for can-do, upbeat
leadership after the traumas of the 1960s and the anxieties of the 1970s. And along with this affability and optimism came a great faith in the American experiment. Ronald Reagan’s old-fashioned patriotism shaped both his anti-Communism and his broad, inclusive, seductive vision that in 1984 would be summarized in the campaign ad celebrating “Morning again in America.”

This optimism and pro-Americanism forged a governing template useful to future presidents from both sides of the aisle. Ronald Reagan taught Bill Clinton and George W. Bush the importance of big-picture governing, of integrating cultural and political leadership, of shaping a transcendent narrative that could insulate the president from the inevitable missteps and even larger scandals and errors. One cannot understand how Bill Clinton survived the Monica Lewinsky scandal, how George W. Bush thrived after September 11, without first understanding Ronald Reagan’s model of presidential leadership.

Unfortunately, the results of this alchemy with the American people were often mixed. There was a sense in the 1980s of “Morning in America,” as the economy soared, the Soviet Union faltered, and American patriotism surged. But there was mourning in America, too, as the social pathologies of crime, drugs, ghettoization, failing schools, family breakdown, and ineffectual immigration policies persisted along with a growing superficiality and selfishness, even hard-heartedness, as the wealthy seemed to reap Reagan’s bounty disproportionately.

Ronald Reagan’s 1980s was the decade of supply-side economics, the Laffer curve, and budget-slashing politics, of tax cuts, regulatory freezes, the Evil Empire, and defense hikes, when arcane talk about balancing the budget and the reconciliation process became regular dinner table fare. “Big government” was the problem, not the solution; it was something to “get off our backs” rather than to protect us or bring into our lives. Liberals, bureaucrats, and special interests were bad; a safety net and entitlements for the “truly needy” were acceptable; businessmen, budget-cutters, and the Moral Majority were good. Thanks to Reagan, and the first Republican Senate since 1954, in fact the first Republican House of Congress in almost thirty years, the Republicans defined much of the political agenda for the coming two decades.
The 1980s: Gilded and Guilty or Renewed and Reaganite?

The Reagan mourning rites revealed that two competing stereotypes shape public discussion of the 1980s. When politicians and pop culture impresarios refer to “the eighties,” they usually mean the vapid, hedonistic, amoral years of America’s new gilded age, when yuppies reigned and greed was good. Perpetuated today in eighties’ parties and in movies such as Adam Sandler’s *The Wedding Singer*, the eighties’ stereotype recalls Wall Street excess and political selfishness; an era when junk bonds and trashy values created deficits “as far as the eye could see” and triggered the multibillion-dollar Savings and Loan crisis. Rogues who defined the times include jailed moguls such as Ivan Boesky and Leona Helmsley; disgraced ministers such as Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. In 1992 Bill Clinton ran for president against this version of the 1980s. “The Reagan-Bush years have exalted private gain over public obligations, special interests over common good, wealth and fame over work and family,” Clinton charged when launching his campaign. “The 1980s ushered in a gilded age of greed, selfishness, irresponsibility, excess, and neglect.”

Yet when Ronald Reagan died, most of the press and public defined the same era as one of renewal and idealism, of national unity and glory. A collective act of national amnesia ignored how reporters mocked Reagan, how Democrats like Senator Edward Kennedy blasted his “unilateral,” militaristic, reckless, and divisive foreign policy, how hundreds of thousands of Europeans protested against the president repeatedly. Most Europeans deemed him, Professor Michael Mandelbaum reported in 1985, “ill equipped for the responsibility that he bears, a kind of cowboy figure, bellicose, ignorant, with a simplistic view of the world pieced together from the journals of right-wing opinion and old Hollywood movies.” Instead, two decades later, one letter the *New York Times* printed recalled “a simpler time . . . when all things seemed possible and Americans felt good about their country.” In eulogizing Reagan, President George W. Bush endorsed the “great man” theory of history, calling the Reaganized eighties “one of the decisive decades of the century as the convictions that shaped the presi-
dent began to shape the times.” Time’s commemorative issue claimed the Reagan era created “an America that is stronger militarily, more dedicated to free enterprise, more mindful of the virtues of self-reliance and more confident in its own powers.” Even Bill Clinton, now an ex-president, said Reagan “personified the indomitable optimism of the American people” and kept “America at the forefront of the fight for freedom for people everywhere.”

Clearly, the political fights of the 1980s persisted into the twenty-first century. “To conservatives, 1980 is the year one,” CNN’s Bill Schneider explained. But Ronald Reagan’s conservative utopia for some created a liberal dystopia for others. “I think the world would have been better off if he had not been President,” the AIDS activist and playwright Larry Kramer told People.

This book tries to go beyond the clashing oversimplifications of both the “eighties’ decadence” and “Reagan renewal” stereotypes. In fact, America would have to wait a decade—and silence the Democratic opposition by electing a Democratic president—for this “eighties”-style cultural revolution to proceed unchecked. In many ways, Bill Clinton’s rollicking, hedonistic 1990s became what many social critics feared Ronald Reagan’s 1980s would be.

To the extent that Reaganism helped paved the way for Clintonism, Reagan succeeded by being trendy rather than countercultural. Despite Reagan’s traditionalism, his faith in individualism and his passive nature mostly furthered the various social and cultural revolutions he disliked. Even while believing they were choosing the old-fashioned way, Americans ratified many social changes by incorporating them into their lives. It was often an unhappy fit, sending indices of social pathology and individual misery soaring, yet Americans were acclimating to many of these problems. Increasingly “the underclass,” the “teen-suicide epidemic,” and “family breakdown” were becoming familiar, static phenomena rather than crises to be solved.

Overall, Reagan’s 1980s accelerated the social solvents he blamed on the 1960s and 1970s. Going from the “Me Decade” to the “Mine All Mine Decade,” citizens in Reagan’s America felt less engaged, less constrained, less interdependent than ever. In the individualism he worshiped, the hypocrisy he embodied, and the politicization of moral
discourse he facilitated, Reagan further undermined the traditional collective mores he so proudly hailed. And as more of a compromiser than a revolutionary on social issues, he continued to institutionalize some of the changes. Most liberals were too busy demonizing Reaganite “greed” and blindly defending the 1960s, big government, and anything Reagan opposed to notice, while most conservatives were simply too busy defending their hero just as blindly.

Nevertheless, throughout the 1980s, and subsequently, critics from the Left and the Right mourned America’s growing “decadence,” and some recognized that Reagan helped leach America’s “social capital,” pollute America’s “social ecology,” and diminish Americans’ sense of citizenship and community. This process of communal fragmentation had been developing throughout the twentieth century, from the hedonism of the 1920s’ flappers to the atomism of the 1950s’ corporate drone. Yet in the 1980s it seemed to have reached the tipping point. After the social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, the process of decitizenization, if you will, seemed more ubiquitous, more blatant, less reversible. That this untrammelled individualism and resulting anomy came wrapped in a red-white-and-blue package, delivered by an old-fashioned gentleman distinguished by his midwestern courtliness and all-American idealism, accompanied by America’s great cold war victory and the world’s turn from flirting with socialism to appreciating capitalism, fed the clashing stereotypes and interpretive confusion.

A Watershed Decade: Where the 1960s and the 1980s Meet

Looking back, then, the 1980s emerge as a watershed decade, a time when the Great Reconciliation between Reaganite conservatism and 1960s’ liberalism occurred. For all the talk about repudiating the New Deal, dismantling the Great Society, and undoing the 1960s’ social and cultural revolutions, many innovations became routinized and institutionalized. The tone changed, Americans overall felt less mopey and less gloomy, less idealistic and more materialistic, but the melodies lingered on, from environmentalism to feminism, from the rights revolution to the continuing revolt against authority. Reagan, at heart, was
not a revolutionary. He was more a conciliator than a reformer, to the frustration of ideologues like David Stockman and to the great relief of many others.

Surprisingly, Reagan’s moderate traditionalism provided cover both for the decadence of the age and for the vitality of many 1960s-style revolutions. Progressives mourned the death of the sixties even as the 1980s consolidated many of the most dramatic lifestyle transformations. Yes, the civil rights movement seemed to falter, but Jesse Jackson ran for president, Michael Jackson dominated the music world, Bill Cosby revived the TV sitcom, Oprah Winfrey became an American icon, and, most important, millions of blacks entered the professions, moved into good neighborhoods, received better educations, and progressed. Even AIDS, the deadly scourge neglected for too long by President Reagan and too many gay leaders, ultimately helped mainstream gay life and highlight America’s scientific wizardry.

The 1960s continues to define the baby boom generation just as the Depression and World War II defined the boomers’ parents. Reagan wanted to confront the legacy of the 1960s. Reagan himself did not realize—and would never acknowledge—just how many aspects of the 1960s he and his comrades either aped or incorporated. From the way the conservative movement mimicked some of the 1960s’ “movement culture,” to the mainstreaming of granola and blue jeans, of Naderism and environmentalism, the 1980s did more to advance the sixties agenda, such as it was, than to dismantle it, especially culturally.

Some of the intensity of the sixties’ movement, combined with the ferocity of the anti-Reaganite opposition, morphed into the 1980s’ identity politics and political correctness. Here, too, a great mystery persists. Even critics usually acknowledge Reagan’s role in resurrecting American patriotism and restoring some American consensus. And yet the 1980s also spawned movements rejecting the fundamentals of American identity, as European postmodernist ideas overran the universities and insinuated themselves into the media, Hollywood, and much of the Northeastern and Californian elite.

At the same time, in the 1980s American capitalism and entrepreneurship rallied. The 1970s’ economic failures—notably in the automobile industry—were repaired in the 1980s. And the technological
innovations that would shape the 1990s’ boom developed in the 1980s. Microwave ovens, videocassette recorders, facsimile machines, and personal computers were beginning to revolutionize the American economy and the American home. The titans of ‘the new economy,’ the Microsofts, MCIs, Sprints, Intels, and Time-Warners, were forming, merging, consolidating, growing.

Reagan’s renewal, such as it was, was not simply economic or political. It was ideological, cultural, and philosophical, too. Reagan’s bedrock faith not just in America, but in God and in a higher purpose to life, recalled the Founding Fathers’ simple, not very ritualistic, deism. While Reagan did not attend church regularly, he said he prayed frequently—and believed deeply. Similarly, Reagan’s anti-Communism was more than reactionary. His embrace of capitalism, democracy, and freedom itself stemmed from a broader philosophy of history. As President George W. Bush recognized in eulogizing Reagan, “The ideology he opposed throughout his political life insisted that history was moved by impersonal tides and unalterable fates. Ronald Reagan believed instead in the courage and triumph of free men, and we believe it all the more because we saw that courage in him.”

Before the eighties’ stereotype petrifies, historians sensitive to the complexities must reevaluate that decade. Rather than condemning the eighties as a new Gilded Age when the wealthy partied and the poor languished, rather than worshiping the era as a conservative Golden Age when America united and good triumphed, it is more illuminating to speak of an Era of Good Feelings, when most Americans felt better about themselves and their country, thanks partially to Ronald Reagan. Feelings are ephemeral and idiosyncratic. And the happy mood did not always comport with reality—or prove enduring. Nevertheless, that optimism, trusting that America was following the right track and fulfilling the right ideals, set the cultural tone.
Defining a Decade of Ordinary Life:
Only Yesterday, and Today

Although all historical writing has been described as trying to nail Jello to a wall, writing a book like this is particularly daunting. How can one dare define a decade, a year, a moment in the life of this raucous and wonderful collection of a quarter-billion souls? Reviewing the previous decade from his vantage point in 1931 in *Only Yesterday*, the journalist Frederick Lewis Allen described the “ordinary” day a “typical” middle-class American family, the Smiths, experienced in May 1919. Using the same technique to look at January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan’s inaugural, also proves illuminating. This Mr. and Mrs. Smith would follow a fashion timetable similar to their grandparents’. Mr. Smith’s standard business suit would not change much over the decade, although in 1981 he would never consider wearing a shirt with a different-colored collar. Mrs. Smith would experience more dramatic fashion upheavals. At work, she wore Halston suits to command respect; at home, she might slip into her Calvin Klein jeans, amused by those who objected to fifteen-year-old Brooke Shields cooing in a commercial: “You know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.” CBS had banned the ad.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith would drive to work in Japanese cars, having soured on American gas-guzzlers. In the office, both Mr. and Mrs. Smith would monitor the continuing effects of stagflation, the one-two punch of unemployment and inflation, with soaring interest rates.

The Smiths would struggle home through rush hour traffic, despite leaving considerably after five, and pick up some ethnic variety of take-out food on the way home. Their door would have a double lock—added after a recent rash of break-ins. They would each have a beer—increasingly an imported or domestic specialty brand—or share a bottle of California wine, their pot-smoking days over, although some friends occasionally snorted cocaine at weekend parties. After watching CBS News with Walter Cronkite, they would settle down for an evening of prime-time TV—mostly viewing shows on the three dominant networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC. Lacking a remote-control TV, they would drift off to sleep with the television droning, with the
channel set to their local NBC affiliate, for Johnny Carson’s melange of one-liners, zany antics, and celebrity guests, punctuated by Ed McMahon’s sycophantic guffaws. Hipper and more insomniac couples would have to wait until 1982 before Late Night with David Letterman premiered, in the slot an hour later.

Unlike their grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Smith used birth control to postpone the start of their family, so both could solidify their careers and save for their starter house in the suburbs. Thanks to the great inflation, DINKS like them, double incomes, no kids, were buying simple four-bedroom houses from blue-collar retirees with stay-at-home wives. “The older generation had it easy,” the Smiths often thought, sobered by the $300,000 cost of a house their parents could have purchased decades ago for one-tenth that amount.

About half their friends were married—one couple having recently separated just as the husband finished his medical training. Mrs. Smith worried about her single female friends who despaired about their long-term prospects. Mr. Smith’s bachelor buddies seemed carefree.

If the Smiths voted in the 1980 election, and barely half of their fellow Americans did, they probably voted for Ronald Reagan. However, they were more disappointed by Jimmy Carter than wowed by Reagan, and they briefly considered voting for the independent John Anderson. Mr. Smith wondered if an actor had the gravitas to govern, and Mrs. Smith feared Reagan might be too bellicose with the Soviets and too harsh on the poor. Both voted for their incumbent Democratic congressman to temper Reagan’s Revolution. By January, perceptions of the incoming president shifted, with less talk about his Hollywood background or doctrinaire anti-Communism, and more celebrations of his confidence and patriotism, which seemed contagious. Even if neither would ever fully embrace his program, the Smiths were warming up to this fatherly figure, and happily bid farewell to Carter.

In 1981 these people would still think of Apple as a fruit, not a computer; of “power ties” as electric lines, not fashion statements; of Madonna as a theological figure, not a celebrity; of Sonny Bono as a rock star, not a politician; of The Big Chill as blowing in from Canada, not Hollywood; of “greenmail” as a colorful letter, not a predatory financial tactic; of a secretary, not a fancy tape recorder, as an answering
machine. AIDS would sound like helpers, not a scourge; Iran-Contra would sound like a folk dance with a Mideastern twist, not a scandal; a salad bar would sound like a contradiction in terms; and Boy George would evoke thoughts of the first U.S. president when he was young and menacing cherry trees.

Miami Vice would not sound suitable for polite company. CNN, MTV, ESPN, and VCR would mean nothing, with PC meaning neither a personal computer nor politically correct. Rapping meant communicating intensely or tapping lightly, not chanting rhythmically; a mouse squeaked but did not click; windows broke but did not crash; people wore boots but could not reboot. California Adonises surfed, television couch potatoes didn’t. Trump referred to bridge, not buildings. The Berlin Wall was up, the stock market down. The Supreme Court was all male. And America’s most famous Turners were Ike and Tina, not Ted.

This book examines some of these phenomena that defined millions of American lives, analyzing what stayed constant and what changed—and why. Each chapter will focus on a particular year from 1980 to 1990, emphasizing themes that defined that year. Most chapters begin in a particular location, illustrating the theme while testifying to the nation’s diversity. The resulting portrait shows how Ronald Reagan dominated the 1980s, while also showing that this decade, like so many others in our history, was a time of high drama, great progress, and intense frustration—a time when more people than ever before fulfilled the American dream, but many of us, in true American fashion, from the Left and the Right, realized it was not yet enough—and justifiably demanded liberty and justice and equality and prosperity and meaning and morality and community for all.