



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 108th CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

Vol. 150

WASHINGTON, TUESDAY, JUNE 8, 2004

No. 79

Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Honoring the Life of President Ronald Reagan”

MRS. FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, on Saturday, our Nation lost a strong leader and the State of California lost an adopted son.

As a citizen, Ronald Wilson Reagan embodied the American dream. He personified the image of California – can-do, risk-taking, cutting-edge. Ronald Reagan was all of those things.

As a President, he unified a country and helped bring an end to the Cold War, the premier struggle of his time in public life.

My fondest memory of President Reagan took place while I was Mayor of San Francisco at a March 1983 dinner the President and First Lady hosted for Queen Elizabeth II in San Francisco. The Queen was thrilled to visit California for the first time and especially pleased to be welcomed by a President from California.

During that trip the Queen quipped at one point that she knew England had exported many traditions to the United

States, but she hadn't realized the weather was one of them.

San Francisco's London-like weather aside, as Mayor I was enormously proud of the wonderful welcome we had provided for the Queen of England.

Growing up in small-town central Illinois in the years leading up to the Great Depression, President Reagan was instilled with the values that would guide him as a person and as a leader. There he learned the importance of hard work and optimism as the key ingredients for success.

It was this optimism combined with his ever-present sense of humor that characterized him best, enabling him to both “fill the screen” and make a stellar entrance wherever he went.

After four years at Eureka College, where he was known as a gritty, though undersized tackle on the football team, he began searching for a job in broadcasting. In 1932, at the height of the Depression, he headed into the job market confident that a job would be his soon.

After several years as a broadcaster covering University of Iowa football games and later recreating Chicago Cubs' games based on telegraph reports, a young Ronald Reagan traveled to California to cover the Cubs' spring training.

It was his first trip west of Kansas City and it nurtured his fascination with Hollywood. While he was there, he used his considerable charm to convince a movie agent to arrange a screen test for him at Warner Brothers Studios.

Before long, he returned to the Midwest, packed his bags and started the quintessential American journey westward in search of opportunity. Of course, he found it as a movie star.

He won many fans through his on-screen charisma. The optimism he inspired was exemplified by his role as Notre Dame football player George Gipp in the film “Knute Rockne-All-American.” Years after Gipp's death, Coach Rockne gave a pep talk to his team urging them to “win one for the Gipper” – one of the

more memorable lines in American sports history.

But President Reagan's greatest impact on the world was as a politician. As a labor leader with the Screen Actors Guild, his roots as an activist were shaped significantly by a deep concern about communism.

Yet despite his strongly anti-communist views, he condemned the unfair smearing of many liberals by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He refused to reveal names publicly, but exposed some people to the FBI privately.

As Governor of California he had a strong record of environmental protection:

- adding 145,000 acres to the state's park system,
- protecting Lake Tahoe from rampant development,
- blocking the construction of dams on the Dos Rios and Eel rivers, and
- stopping the paving of a federal highway through the Sierra Nevada Mountains that would have cut through the John Muir Trail.

He also signed legislation to protect rivers on California's north coast and approved strict car emissions standards that forced the nation's automakers to manufacture cleaner-burning cars. But he lobbied against the Coastal Protection Act approved by voters in 1972 and resisted air pollution controls imposed by the federal government.

Despite his personal opposition to abortion, Governor Reagan loosened an 1872 statute to allow abortion in cases of rape, incest, when a mother's health was at stake, or when there was a high risk that a baby would be born with birth defects. Many states followed Governor Reagan's lead on this important issue.

However, his move to close down mental health facilities in California resulted in widespread homelessness in urban areas. Though he sought to steer the mentally ill into community-based mental health facilities the end result was a spike in homelessness, a problem that we continue to deal with to this day.

While in Sacramento, he generally approached fiscal policy as a moderate, first presiding over a \$1-billion tax increase to balance the state budget and another subsequent increase. He eventually lowered taxes, but in his two terms as Governor, state spending doubled overall and the state's workforce grew by 34,000.

As President, he was a unifier and an optimist. His infectious, upbeat attitude rallied people to his goals. He was extremely successful in passing legislation by joining that optimism with a willingness to compromise with a Democratic Congress.

In his dealings, he was tough, but ready to negotiate. There is no better example of this than his relationship with former Soviet leader Mikhail

Gorbachev. He often used harsh rhetoric in challenging the actions of our Cold War adversary, but it was always backed by his core beliefs.

Once, as he prepared for his first summit with the Soviet leader, he met with a room full of foreign policy advisors, each offering their suggestions about what he should say. After a half-hour of discussion, President Reagan turned to his advisors and said, "Gentlemen, I've been thinking about what I'm going to say to this man my whole life. And I know exactly what I'm going to say."

Gorbachev described Reagan as "a great president, with whom the Soviet leadership was able to launch a very difficult but important dialogue."

His tough negotiating stance yielded some important accomplishments including signing treaties reducing intermediate-range nuclear missiles and limiting strategic arms. These acts of diplomacy combined with his relentless advocacy for freedom played a major role in bringing about an end to the Cold War.

At the same time, Reagan had a tendency to overreach in the area of foreign policy. The invasion of Grenada, the intervention in Lebanon that left American soldiers uncertain of their role and vulnerable to attack, and, above all, the Iran-Contra scandal – were all cases in which the Reagan Administration went too far in seeking to reshape the world.

At home, President Reagan sought to limit the size of government and tap the entrepreneurial spirit of the American people. And though he was famous for cutting taxes, he approved two tax increases during his first term in the White House.

Unfortunately, the tax cuts were coupled with sharp increases in defense spending that resulted in massive deficits. The federal budget finally recovered from those years of deficit-spending during the late 1990s, but the surpluses that were generated disappeared in the blink of an eye under the current administration's fiscal policies.

President Reagan's cuts to public housing, job training, and the broader social safety net were another serious blow domestically. And, as cities and mayors across the country were reeling from the advent of AIDS – no place suffered more than San Francisco – President Reagan failed to act. He would not even publicly comment on the AIDS crisis.

Though people did not always agree with his policies, it cannot be denied that President Reagan redefined politics through his tremendous skills as a communicator. In particular, his ability to define clear goals and persuade others to support those goals earned him the admiration of many Americans.

As we all know, President Reagan suffered from Alzheimer's Disease during the last decade of his life.

As we honor his memory in the days and weeks to come, it is my hope that we will consider what we can do here in Congress to battle this terrible disease.

A good first step would be to approve legislation that supports embryonic stem cell research. This research offers tremendous hope, not only to those who suffer from Alzheimer's, but also the millions of people with cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injuries. What a fitting tribute passage of this bill would be to President Reagan.

In closing, there probably is no American who has more fully lived the American dream from actor to governor to president than Ronald Reagan. Today, we mourn his loss, but recognize that his was a full life.

Thank you for your service to this country, President Reagan.