

**THE EDUCATION OF
RONALD REAGAN**

THE GENERAL ELECTRIC YEARS

and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism

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ONE



A NEW DEALER TO THE CORE

On October 27, 1964, Ronald Reagan delivered his famous, nationally televised speech in support of conservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. David Broder, the dean of the Washington press corps, and his coauthor Stephen Hess, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, later wrote that it was “the most successful political debut since William Jennings Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech in 1896.”¹

Biographers and historians are unanimous in the finding that “The Speech,” as it became known to both admirers and critics, was developed while Reagan toured the country for General Electric during the eight years that he was employed by the company (1954–1962). He served as host of GE’s Sunday-night television show and spent a quarter of his time as traveling ambassador, visiting GE’s 250,000 workers in 139 plants and speaking from civic platforms to the employees and their neighbors in the forty states covered by GE’s far-flung industrial empire.

But during his years with General Electric, Reagan developed more than a set of prepared remarks. He eventually became an integral part of the company’s elaborate political initiative, probably the most compre-

hensive in corporate America. The program extended from the executive suites to GE's employees on the plant floor to the voters in the towns and cities where the plants were located. Reagan later described his experience as "an apprenticeship for public life."

Toward the end of his years with GE, when transcripts of still-evolving versions of "The Speech" were made available to the public for the first time, Reagan felt he had experienced a conversion. He wrote in *An American Life*, "I wasn't just making speeches—I was preaching a sermon."²

Reagan was a self-confessed Democrat and New Dealer when he arrived at GE. After his eight-year "postgraduate course in political science," conducted largely under the aegis of GE's vice president and labor strategist, Lemuel Boulware, Ronald Reagan came to expound on the need to reduce taxes and limit government. He described international communism, as Boulware and GE president Ralph Cordiner did, as "evil." He observed Boulware, who was regarded by many in corporate America as the most successful labor negotiator of all time, and Reagan himself became a knowledgeable negotiator during this period, equally at ease with corporate executives and blue-collar workers. His education stretched well beyond the bargaining table. He became familiar with such diverse thinkers as von Mises, Lenin, Hayek, and the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu. He read and reread the practical economics of Henry Hazlitt. He quoted Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton.

Lemuel Boulware believed that it was not enough to win over company employees on narrow labor issues. They must not only accept the offer but pass on GE's essentially conservative message to others, helping the company to win voters at the grass roots who would elect officials and pass legislation establishing a better business climate. In short, they would become "communicators" and "mass communicators," (Boulware's words)³ as they went through the company's extensive education program. In time, the program would also help to produce a "great communicator."

And yet, for all the recent interest in the Reagan presidency, little has been written about how his change from liberal to conservative, from actor to politician, came about. A veil of secrecy has been drawn over this crucial period of Ronald Reagan's education. Part of the reason for this was Cordiner and Boulware's concern that GE's political efforts might come under attack as violating federal and state statutes that made partisan corporate political activity a crime. They also felt that GE's unions might find Boulware's aggressive negotiating posture—dubbed *Boul-*

warism and still referred to as such in labor-law texts—the basis for an unfair-labor-practice charge.

During this same period, GE's pricing system, especially for the heavy equipment it sold to cities and utilities, was under attack from a Senate investigating committee and federal grand juries sitting in Philadelphia. The investigators and prosecutors maintained that GE used illegal price-fixing and that certain high-ranking executives should go to jail. Civil suits following the federal criminal actions could lead to hundreds of millions of dollars in damages. While Ronald Reagan had no involvement in this situation, some of the litigation extended beyond Reagan's years with the company, as he entered the political arena in California. Neither he nor his mentors saw any advantage in publicizing his connection to General Electric or to the political apparatus they had created while there.

Fortunately, several recent events bring new light to this study of Ronald Reagan's "education": the discovery of a collection of hitherto unpublished papers and a repository of GE corporate documents last published during the 1950s and 1960s; interviews with GE personnel who had been silent until now; and a reexamination of other publications and oral histories that now have a more meaningful context.

Many observers consider the changes in Ronald Reagan during his GE years to be profound. Others see them as superficial and opportunistic. To truly understand Ronald Reagan during and after the GE years, it is important to know what he was like when he came to the company. It is also important to know what the company was like—as later chapters will make clear—at the time when Reagan was an employee. An appropriate point of departure for both inquiries would be 1945, when the country emerged from war and a generation of Americans returned to resume lives that had been interrupted in a way that everyone hoped would never occur again.



When Captain Ronald Reagan, recently honorably discharged from the U.S. Army Air Corps, returned to civilian life on July 11, 1945, he didn't have far to go. His extreme near-sightedness had kept him from combat duty. While his career had been disrupted, his military service had been in Hollywood, making training and motivational films. Industry insiders referred to the duty station as "Fort Roach" after producer Hal Roach,

who had turned his studio over to the government.⁴ Reagan was thirty-four years old when he left the service.

“When the war was over,” television journalist Tom Brokaw wrote, “the men and women who had been involved, in uniform and in civilian capacities, joined in joyous and short-lived celebrations, then immediately began the task of rebuilding their lives and the world they wanted.” He was emphatic in his appraisal of them: “This is the greatest generation any society has produced.”⁵

Not content simply to take life as it came, Ronald Reagan, like many returning veterans, became active in civic affairs. As he returned to his job at Warner Brothers, he joined the left-leaning American Veterans Committee and was on the board of the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences, and Professions. He was concerned about the threat posed by the atom bomb that had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He believed HICCASP had been formed as “a support group for President Franklin D. Roosevelt.”⁶

In 1947, Reagan was elected president of the Screen Actors Guild, the actors’ union. He joined other leaders of AFL-CIO unions in opposing Republican-sponsored “Right-to-Work” legislation. At the same time, he “took the initiative in organizing for the state of California the Labor Committee for Truman.”⁷ His prominence in the Screen Actors Guild continued, and he was elected to four more successive one-year terms as president of the union in the years before he came to work for General Electric.⁸

Reagan campaigned for Democrats. In addition to President Harry Truman in 1948, he vigorously supported civil rights advocate Hubert Humphrey, and in 1950 he backed Helen Gahagan Douglas in her quest for a U.S. Senate seat from California (against Richard Nixon). Although he supported war hero Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican candidate for president in 1952, it was as a “Democrat for Eisenhower.” He called himself a “liberal Democrat” and a “New Dealer to the core.”⁹

What was it in his background that led to these political leanings and, for that matter, his ability to go out on the hustings and campaign for candidates who felt as he did? Reagan’s first recorded public speech might be an appropriate starting point for understanding his political inclinations and his natural gifts. Former president Gerald Ford once observed that Ronald Reagan “was one of the few political leaders I have met whose public speeches revealed more than his private conversations.”¹⁰

Image has been suppressed




FIGURE 2 At the Truman White House on April 1, 1949, waiting to see the president are Hollywood labor leaders and Truman supporters (*left to right*) Roy Brewer of the International Alliance of Stage Employees; Kenneth Thompson, the first executive secretary of the Screen Actors Guild; Ronald Reagan, president of the guild; and Dick Walsh, international president of IATSE. Walsh introduced the motion at the AFL-CIO convention the prior spring to endorse Truman for reelection. Reagan campaigned as part of Labor for Truman.

Source: Screen Actors Guild Archives, Los Angeles, California.

There is some irony in this subject matter because as a gubernatorial candidate in 1966, and later as California's governor, Reagan gained popular support from his criticism of Governor Pat Brown's handling of the student protests at Berkeley. Reagan's first public address occurred in the course of another protest on another campus at another time, almost four decades earlier, when he himself was a student.

"Dutch" Reagan (as he was then known) entered Eureka College in 1928. The college had been founded in 1855 and was the major institution in the town that bore its name. Like many farm belt communities, Eureka, Illinois, was already suffering the economic downturn that would soon engulf the entire country in the Great Depression.¹¹

Reagan "fell head over heels in love with Eureka," as he later wrote, and regarded it as "another home."¹² He soon learned that many of his

fellow students did not share his enthusiasm. In an economy move, college president Bert Wilson announced that he planned to drop several courses, making it difficult for some of the undergraduates to amass enough credits to graduate. Wilson met the ensuing controversy head-on by offering to resign. The board of trustees rejected his tender, giving him, in effect, a vote of confidence.

The students disagreed. Thanksgiving vacation was beginning, and instead of traveling home for the holiday, they held a mass meeting in the largest hall available, the college chapel.¹³ The student leaders chose freshman Dutch Reagan, who had only been on campus for two months, to speak for them. It was almost midnight when young Reagan rose. He had been briefed by students far more familiar with the issues than he was, but Reagan's persuasive speaking style was all his own. At the end of his remarks, the audience "came to their feet in a roar," endorsing a motion which would have been extreme even in the 1960s: "We, the students of Eureka College, on the 28th of November, 1928, declare an immediate strike pending the acceptance of President Wilson's resignation by the board of trustees."¹⁴

The vote was recorded as "unanimous." Many of the students saw it as a protest against Wilson's "domineering personality and his outmoded rules governing student behavior." In any event, they felt strongly enough about it to lay their academic careers on the line. When the students returned from the delayed Thanksgiving break, all but six (two of whom were Wilson's daughters) refused to attend class. The strike attracted national attention. A press headquarters was set up for the reporters who arrived from all over the country.

On Thursday, December 6, the United Press reported a rumor "that the school would be moved to Springfield," causing consternation among the local merchants. The Alumni Committee pleaded "for a quick end to the turmoil." The students refused to budge, and the next day President Wilson resigned. An acting president was named. Wilson's changes were abandoned, and the college adopted a more liberal code of student behavior—permitting college dances, among other things. By Monday, the "campus had returned to its usual routines."

There were no more protest rallies at Eureka where Reagan could hone his speaking skills, but he became one of the stars of the Dramatic Club, continuing a path he had embarked on at North Dixon High. As one biographer notes, "No microphones were used in those days and Dutch could always be heard. His college reviews repeat the word 'pres-

ence.' He had a way 'of sauntering across the stage' that drew all eyes to him even when he was not speaking."

His "ear for words" and his "startling memory" enabled him to slide by with passing grades and very little effort at Eureka. His major was economics, which he described as an "instinctive science for him." His real interests were extracurricular. In addition to drama, they included debating, football, swimming, and student government.

Although his family was poor—his father was often out of work—both Dutch and his older brother Neil (often called "Moon") went to Eureka. Their mother, Nelle, was determined to give her boys a better life. She insisted that they continue their education after high school, even though only about 8 percent of their classmates did. Moon got a football scholarship, and Dutch arranged for financial aid and a deferment of tuition. Both boys had part-time jobs.

Biographers credit Nelle Reagan with Ronald's early development of significant skills, as well as his moral beliefs and his character.¹⁵ She read *The Three Musketeers* and other adventure stories to her boys when they were very young, and Reagan became a reader well before he started school.¹⁶ (One wonders whether his youthful enthusiasm for the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs—which included the series about Carson of Venus and earthling John Carter who fought the Martian warlords—may have stimulated his interest in a defense shield in space.)¹⁷ He maintained his enthusiasm for reading throughout his life.¹⁸

Nancy Reagan confirms that her husband was a constant reader. In her autobiography, she recalls the "small library" that she and her husband carried in their suitcases when Reagan began his short-lived career as a nightclub entertainer. The owner of the Last Frontier hotel was astonished; he'd never seen an entertainer bring books to Las Vegas before.¹⁹ Reagan's coworkers noticed his reading, too. A consultant in Reagan's first gubernatorial campaign was impressed that his client's personal library "was stacked with books on political philosophy."²⁰ Moreover, Reagan retained what he read. White House staff member David Gergen described the fortieth president's "steel-trap mind" for what he read.²¹ Gergen also noted Reagan's slow reading rate, which he attributed to Reagan's tendency, possibly derived from his years as an actor, to memorize what he read.

Reagan was an equally enthusiastic writer. As early as 1947, a movie magazine observed, "In private life, Reagan is most interested in writing."²²

A recent collection of his speeches contains a chapter giving examples of his writings from 1925 to 1994, although the primary example of Reagan's facility for writing is the collection itself. It contains 670 radio speeches he wrote "in his own hand" in the years between his governorship and the presidency.²³

Anne Edwards, in *Early Reagan*, traces to his mother another major component of Reagan's ability to communicate. "Perhaps the one physical attribute Dutch inherited from Nelle was his voice. . . . a distinctive, mellow voice, tinged with a hopeful cadence—a voice that had a timbre to it that impressed people with the honesty of the words he spoke. Because he believed in himself and his voice so conveyed his confidence, others picked up on it."²⁴

Edwards also credits Nelle with teaching her son how to use his voice. "When trying to be persuasive, he would lower the volume," she writes, "speaking 'barely above a whisper' to win a confidential intimacy, and he instinctively knew just the right moments to raise that volume and lower the pitch for intensity. . . . Dutch's voice had the humility and passion of a true believer, a manly, ingratiating voice made for promises."

Dutch had another, far more famous, model for his manner of speaking. The Reagans were Democrats. Dutch's father worked hard as a volunteer to defeat Herbert Hoover in 1932, and the family often huddled around the radio to listen to *their* candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They were thrilled by Roosevelt's "fireside chats." In a mellow voice and friendly manner, FDR tried to raise the spirits of the nation from the Great Depression into which it had fallen. Throughout his life, Ronald Reagan continued to revere Roosevelt as a communicator and a leader, even after he came to disagree with almost every economic component of the New Deal.

Like FDR, Reagan polished his speaking style on radio. After college, he became a sportscaster on Des Moines radio station WHO. He broadcast Chicago Cubs games. In those days, broadcasters sat in the studio, fashioning detailed narratives of what transpired on the field from a barren line on the Western Union tape. "Single to center," for example, might become two minutes of exciting description.²⁵ The verbal agility necessary to do the job would serve Reagan well on the stump and at the podium in the future.

While no one ever doubted Reagan's ability to communicate, his political opponents and critics later in his career were quick to question his

ability to think. The insights of those who had an opportunity to observe him in office are necessary in order to weigh his performance at that time. One or two are set out here, however, to demonstrate the native skills that he brought to learn and use the information dispensed by Lemuel Boulware and others at General Electric during this crucial period in his education.

David Gergen, who served under a few presidents, tried to categorize Reagan's mental capacity when he worked for him. He began with the premise that exceptional verbal skills indicate a certain kind of intelligence. Gergen examined the concept of "multiple intelligences" promulgated by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner. He believed that Reagan ranked high in "inter-personal intelligence," as contrasted with the "logical-mathematical intelligence," at which lawyers and professors often excel. He quotes from Gardner's book, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*: "effective leaders of institutions and nations lead directly, through the stories and acts they address to an audience." Gergen concludes that "emotional intelligence"—a term used by Daniel Goleman—is a clear fit for Reagan. He cites Goleman's study of 188 companies in the *Harvard Business Review*, which concludes "that the higher up one climbs in the corporate world, the more important emotional intelligence is to effective leadership."²⁶

In Ronald Reagan's conversion from actor to politician, from liberal to conservative, Lemuel Boulware played the role of a teacher. But he was more than that. "Mentor" might be an accurate description, with its four classic aspects of tutor, sponsor, motivator, and role model.²⁷ Sometimes it is hard to calibrate the extent of a mentor's influence in the development of a protégé. It is especially important to understand this process in the case of Boulware and Reagan, for the men worked in close proximity for seven years.²⁸ How did they affect each other? How important was Boulware to Reagan's "postgraduate" education?

Did Ronald Reagan have a role model? There was no film-industry figure or military superior officer that he looked up to in this way, and his father was certainly not one to emulate. An alcoholic and a binge drinker who was often fired as he disappeared from his job for a prolonged period, Jack Reagan's public drunkenness had embarrassed and saddened his younger son on more than one occasion. If there was a void here, it may well have been filled by Lemuel Boulware, who was sixteen years older than his protégé.

As Reagan traveled the country, the affection and admiration he had formed for Boulware was undoubtedly enhanced as he met with Boulware's employee relations managers. These executives, some three thousand whose jobs had been created by Boulware, reported directly to him; their loyalty and enthusiasm for their leader knew no bounds. Reagan also witnessed Boulware's unbroken series of successes as he went over the heads of the union leaders directly to the workers.

At the beginning of this chapter, you read of the reasons why Boulware, Reagan, and others at GE did not comment publicly on their joint experience with the company. Ronald Reagan did not mention Lemuel Boulware's contribution to his political ascendancy until after he had reached the presidency. Then he was generous and emphatic, but primarily in highly personal communications with his mentor.

After the Reagan presidency, historians and political commentators discovered that even their close personal observations of the president were often distorted by a personal trait that few of them had witnessed before, particularly in a public man. Reagan had a sign on his desk that read, "There's no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't care who gets the credit." Reagan truly believed this, and he had sufficient self-confidence not to rush to assert that a particular plan or program attributed to an assistant or colleague was really his.

Such conduct is rare, especially at a time when we witness presidents acting to expand their "legacies," even after they have left office. Consider two quick examples for now. "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" was one of the most famous statements of the fortieth president. The speechwriter who conceived it has written a book about it and his years in the Reagan White House. He came up with the line on his own well before Reagan's visit to Berlin and is justly proud.²⁹ Reagan never told him or the media that he had spoken a similar line in a debate with Robert Kennedy two decades before.³⁰

Another Reagan concept, the Strategic Defense Initiative—invariably attributed to scientist Edward Teller or a general under Reagan's command—was discovered by Reagan in a GE publication in 1962, and he discussed it with his close friend and foreign policy adviser before the 1980 election. Reagan never went public with his early personal discovery of SDI. You will read more about it later.

For all of their brilliant offerings at podiums all over the country, Reagan and Boulware were very private men. Each had many friends

and a handful of influential mentors. Few people really knew them well. It went against their respective natures to broadcast their personal relationships. Ironically, we discover their cherished beliefs not in private conversations, but in the words they uttered, again and again, in public. In Boulware's case, we have his writings and thousands of GE documents to flesh out his beliefs and plans.

But what of Reagan? In recent years, two volumes have been published presenting, respectively, radio talks and letters that Reagan had "written in his own hand." The editors of these books have commented, however, that "nothing has thus far been found in [Reagan's] own hand of the speeches he gave to [GE] employees. . . . It is quite possible that they were his own creations, but we cannot be sure."³¹

In his first autobiography, Ronald Reagan acknowledges that he was part of General Electric's extensive "Employee and Community Relations Program."³² This was the intracompany title given to Boulware's program, the vehicle for Reagan's self-styled "apprenticeship for public life" and his "postgraduate education in political science."³³

A few sharp-eyed observers of the company have speculated about Reagan's exact role at GE. Journalist Rick Perlstein notes that "Reagan was an integral component of the Boulwarite system,"³⁴ but he does not expand the point much further. Labor-law professor David Jacobs observes that "Ronald Reagan had played a role in Boulware's strategy. . . . addressing employee groups as well as consumers,"³⁵ but Jacobs focuses on his own particular legal field. Jacobs *does* go on to describe Reagan's "basic GE speech as a compact and persuasive appeal to conservative policies."

Ronald Reagan's education at GE will be set out in detail in the chapters that follow. But can a mature adult *really* develop a set of beliefs and skills after his years of formal education have long passed? More to the point: Was Reagan's education for world leadership unique—and therefore unlikely or even a charade?

There are a number of examples that buttress the plausibility of Reagan's education, but only two will be referred to here, and those only briefly: Dwight Eisenhower and Winston Churchill. Toward the end of his presidency, Eisenhower was asked to name the ablest man he had ever known. It was a good question for Ike, who had worked with some of the most prominent figures of the twentieth century—Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman, and de Gaulle among them. Eisenhower answered: "Fox Conner."³⁶

As an army major, Eisenhower went to Panama to serve under General Fox Conner in the 1920s. Ike already had a solid service record. He had not obtained the combat command he had sought in the First World War, however, and he felt that a successful military career might be beyond him. While his ability as a drafter of battle plans had already been observed, his academic attainments at West Point were middling.

On his arrival in Panama, the major was impressed with the huge library in the general's home. Conner fostered the younger officer's latent reading habit by starting his protégé with three historical novels, including *The Adventures of the Brigadier Gerard*, the classic fictional treatment of Napoleon's battles.³⁷ Map studies and other readings followed. Ike again went through von Clausewitz's *On War*, the full impact of which had escaped him when he first encountered the book at the Point. He read the memoirs of the great soldiers, including Grant (whose single literary work would become a model for Eisenhower's own memoirs after World War II). Philosophic writers, such as Plato and Cicero, were also part of his fare.³⁸

After the major had read a volume from the general's well-stocked library, the older man would quiz the younger about what he had read, and he and Ike would engage in spirited discussions about military strategy. Conner held firm views about how the next war would be fought—he believed that the Treaty of Versailles virtually insured that Germany would commence a war, that America would be drawn into it, and that the war would be won by a coalition of allies operating under a unified command—and these views became Eisenhower's. By the time Eisenhower had completed his three-year tour in Panama, he had gained a commanding knowledge of strategy, tactics, and military history.³⁹

If there was any doubt about the effect of Conner's tutelage, it was resolved by Ike's performance at the highly competitive Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, after his return from Panama to duty in the states. The designation "Hon. Grad." in the *Army Register*, which applied to the first 10 percent of the class, was a distinction that counted heavily in an officer's future assignments and promotion. For this reason, competition to simply get into the school was intense. Eisenhower finished first among the 244 students in the class.⁴⁰

Fox Conner was more than Eisenhower's teacher. He was a role model as well. A highly respected officer—he was chief of staff to General "Black

Jack” Pershing in France in World War I—he was everything a career soldier should be.

Winston Churchill had selected *his* role model early in life—his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, who might have become prime minister had disease not destroyed his brain and his career. Winston had little doubt as to his inevitable career in politics. But he realized that he knew almost nothing about the operations of the British government. His education at Harrow and Sandhurst (Britain’s West Point) had provided meager fare in this regard. Accordingly, when he was stationed in India in the course of his military service, he had his mother send him records of parliamentary proceedings. He spent years studying these transcripts in the off hours when his cohorts were playing polo or cards.

A random background check would have given Lemuel Boulware some understanding of Reagan’s natural skills in the course of Boulware’s review of the various candidates for the job that Reagan eventually filled. In addition, Boulware might have read speeches that Reagan had given in the years before he came to General Electric, including his endorsements and campaign rhetoric on the hustings for Democratic candidates. There were also the speeches from platforms provided by the liberal veterans’ groups to which he belonged in the late 1940s, SAG membership meetings and industry functions, and local civic groups concerned about communist attempts to take over the film industry.⁴¹

Immediately after his presidency, Ronald Reagan published a collection of his speeches. Other than the speech he gave for Goldwater in 1964, Reagan included only one public address from his prepresidential (in fact, pre-electoral) career. Entitled “Remarks at the Kiwanis International Convention,” delivered in St. Louis, Missouri, on June 21, 1951, Reagan described the offering as his “basic Hollywood speech.”⁴² He explained that: “If you didn’t sing or dance in the Hollywood of my day, you wound up as an after-dinner speaker.”

His editorial comment notes that the object of his basic speech was “to correct some of the misimpressions about the gaudy, bawdy Hollywood lifestyles created by gossip columnists and fan magazines.” In his speech, he points out that the divorce rate in Hollywood is less than the national average; that there are roughly three times as many high school graduates in the industry as in other American businesses; and that over 60 percent of his fellow workers are regular members and attendees of the churches in their communities.

In the course of his remarks, he observes that the Kremlin had focused on American films as “the worst enemy” of communism. He proudly states that “we now have [the Communists] licked” in their attempt to invade the motion picture industry. He sees Hollywood as a bastion of free enterprise, where the heights one can climb are “unlimited,” and success based only on “your ability and your talent.” This, he proclaims, is “the American way.”

While Reagan was unstinting in his efforts to find public platforms to defend his industry, the pre-GE public speech most cited by historians was his commencement address at William Woods College (now William Woods University) in Fulton, Missouri, in 1952. This speech made no attempt to refute the gossip columnists and the fan magazines. Rather, it “revealed his view of America and his philosophy as an American.”⁴³

Reagan received the invitation to speak at William Woods through Dr. Raymond McCallister, a Protestant minister from St. Louis.⁴⁴ McCallister, a fellow Eureka alumnus, had been in the dramatic society and on the debating team with young Reagan, and he now sat on the William Woods board.⁴⁵ Reagan was introduced by Dr. T. T. Swearingen, president of the all-female college.⁴⁶ Of course, Reagan really needed no introduction. His face and his name were known to most Americans, certainly to every one of the thousand people who sat before him.

In front, dressed in black caps and gowns, were the 109 young women of the class of 1952 who were graduating that day. Behind them sat their families. It was a clear day, filled with sunshine. The speaker, wearing an academic gown over a white shirt that displayed his California tan to advantage, was forty-one years old. He was still playing romantic leads in the movies, and the smile with which he began his remarks caused a ripple in the audience.

Ronald Reagan began with a reference to the hymn that was sung at the start of the commencement ceremonies. As a result, the remarks have become known as the “America the Beautiful speech.”⁴⁷ Right from the outset, Ronald Reagan made it clear that this was not going to be conventional commencement fare: “I feel duty bound to inform you that I am going to try to give you some remarks from my mind and heart; but they certainly will not be an address.”⁴⁸

Perhaps Dr. Swearingen had warned Reagan to be cautious. Ronald and Nancy Reagan had arrived in Fulton the night before. Nancy was

pregnant with their first child, Patricia Ann. The guests of honor stayed with the college president, and, after a reception, the Swearingens and the Reagans relaxed in informal talk. In an interview years later, Dr. Swearingen admitted that he “got a lot of flack for inviting [Reagan] to give the commencement address because they had never had an actor before. They thought we were going out of the realm of where you go to get speakers.”⁴⁹

In fact, faculty opposition may have been spurred by two other campus appearances by Reagan within the past year. These were on celluloid. In *Bedtime for Bonzo*, he appeared with Diana Lynn and a precocious chimpanzee; Reagan was cast as a college professor. In *She's Working Her Way Through College*, he costarred with Virginia Mayo. The blonde, leggy Ms. Mayo played a burlesque queen who sought an education. Reagan was cast as a sympathetic pedagogue.⁵⁰

If some of the faculty felt it was inappropriate to have a movie actor at commencement, the students certainly did not agree. Nancy Statton Korchek, a member of the class of '52, has kept until this day a handwritten letter from Ronald Reagan dated April 28, 1952, in response to her invitation to join the local chapter of Phi Beta Kappa. In his letter, Reagan confirms that he will be coming for commencement, although he is “somewhat frightened at the idea that any words of mine can be interesting to you and your classmates.” He gratefully declines her invitation.⁵¹

At the beginning of his remarks, Reagan made it clear that he was proud of America and that “if [he] had a text for anything [he] was going to say, you have heard it in the opening hymn.” He recalled the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the crucial role played by a stranger, who addressed the group but then disappeared from the scene. He observed to the graduates that “you young ladies are getting ready to set foot in [a] man’s world.” He referred to the term “momism,” which had been used to deplore the influence of women on the men in this man’s world, particularly on those young men who had been “unable or unwilling to face the test of war in behalf of their country.”

The speaker took issue with this view. He said that if “women are going to be blamed under the term of ‘momism’ for this group of men who could not meet the test, then certainly credit must be due [and] momism must be responsible for the sixteen million young men who did meet those tests.” He then gave a stirring example—the pilot of a B-17 bomber that had been disabled by anti-aircraft fire, who chose to go down

with the plane rather than abandon the wounded and trapped ball turret gunner. The pilot, Reagan noted, was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

While he had focused on the fight against Hitlerism, the speaker observed that it was only a part of the “same old battle” America had been waging back through the ages. He mentioned the “ideological struggle that we find ourselves engaged in today” and said that he “thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land.”

The fight was not over. At the end of his impassioned speech, Reagan told the graduates: “We need you, we need your youthful honesty, we need your courage, we need your sweetness, and with your help I am sure we can come much closer to realizing that this land of ours is the last best hope of man on earth. God bless you!” The audience rose in a standing ovation. Then many of them rushed forward with their yearbooks, hoping to get his signature.

Some of the elements of “The Speech” with which Reagan made his national political debut in 1964 were already apparent: unmitigated patriotism, steadfast anticommunism, effective use of anecdotes and examples, the ability to inspire an audience, and a low-key style. The phrase “the last best hope of man on earth” actually appears at the end of both the 1952 commencement speech and the 1964 national telecast.⁵²

The description of the commencement remarks in the *Fulton Daily Sun Gazette* could well have been a report on “The Speech”: “Reagan spoke in a forceful but unassuming way, and throughout his talk, he told both humorous and serious stories. His friendly manner reflected his screen personality which is known to all who have attended his screen performances.”⁵³

Reagan’s “America the Beautiful” speech was not an untrammelled success. Had the actor not embarked on a political career, the alleged imperfections would undoubtedly have gone unnoticed. But as Reagan entered public life, critics questioned the authenticity of the examples he had cited. In *Sleepwalking Through History*, for example, journalist-author Haynes Johnson quotes Reagan’s version of the events in Independence Hall and then observes: “Such an incident [the intervention of the stranger], of course, never happened. . . . Ronald Reagan seems to have made it up out of whole cloth.” He goes on to say about the B-17 account that no Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded for “any-

thing resembling this story. . . . The story was either the product of Reagan's imagination or a scene he remembered from a World War II Hollywood movie."⁵⁴ Whether myth or reality, the story was a favorite of Reagan's, and he repeated it in a letter to a constituent during his governorship, which was later published in a collection of his correspondence in 1976.⁵⁵

Certain aspects of the "America the Beautiful" speech would have appealed to Lemuel Boulware, although there is no clear evidence that he had read it or read about it. The patriotic theme and the press reports of the effectiveness of the speaker's style would have been attractive to Boulware, even though he probably had no intention, as he planned Reagan's early tours of the plants, of providing a public platform to GE's "traveling ambassador." The anecdotal inaccuracy could have been dealt with by proper instruction and vetting. Boulware was extremely careful about the items issued by his office. They were thoroughly checked and rechecked by his extensive staff. The use of persuasive, commonsense examples would have struck a responsive chord. They were a major part of Boulware's technique.

The legendary "Reagan Luck" was at work with Fulton, the locale of this oft-cited public speech. The actor had a personal connection with the city on which events were to confer a place in history. Fulton was the background for the novel *King's Row*. (The book's author, Henry Bellaman, was a resident of Fulton.) Reagan considered his role in the movie based on the book to be among the finest work he had ever done in films.⁵⁶ A line from the movie—"Where's the rest of me?"—became the title of Reagan's first autobiography.

The city's fame came from more than the renowned novel or Reagan's movie, however. Fulton was also the site, at Westminster College in 1946, of one of the most famous speeches of the twentieth century. It was there that former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, with his host President Harry S. Truman by his side, proclaimed that the Soviet Union had drawn an "Iron Curtain" over the nations of Eastern Europe.

On November 9, 1990, Reagan returned to Fulton for the dedication of a "magnificent sculpture" called *Breakthrough*, by Churchill's granddaughter Edwina Sandys, commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall. (The sculpture actually included a part of the wall.) It had been three years since Reagan's famous call in Berlin: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." In his 1990 remarks, the former president stressed the importance

Image has been suppressed




FIGURE 3 Ronald Reagan is shown after his 1952 commencement address at William Woods College (now William Woods University) in Fulton, Missouri. Entitled “America the Beautiful,” after the hymn sung by the students as he went to the podium, this is the speech most often cited from Reagan’s pre-GE days. He felt that it “revealed his view of America” at that time.

Source: William Woods University.

of Churchill’s classic speech. “The road to a free Europe that began here in Fulton led to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, to N.A.T.O. and the Berlin Airlift, through nine American presidencies and more than four decades of military preparedness.”⁵⁷

Events came full circle on May 6, 1992, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to Fulton to receive an honorary degree. In his speech, Gorbachev did not mention Reagan by name, but he did describe the longstanding Soviet-U.S. conflict as one “presented as the inevitable opposition between good and evil—all the evil, of course, being attributed to the opponent.” This was, inescapably, a reference to Reagan’s famous characterization of the USSR as the “evil empire.” Yet Reagan believed that Gorbachev, in the words of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, was a “man with whom I could do business.”⁵⁸ And the Soviet premier and the American president “did business” together so effectively that the “Iron Curtain,” came down.

Reagan’s first encounter with communists came soon after his return to civilian life. Not long after he joined the board of the Hollywood In-

dependent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences, and Professions, he learned that the organization had become a communist front. He and eleven other prominent board members tried to wrest control and, failing that, resigned. It soon became clear to Reagan that HICCASP and other front organizations were attempting to “take over Hollywood.”⁵⁹

At about the same time, SAG asked Reagan to mediate a dispute between two rival unions. The leader of one of them, the Conference of Studio Unions, was Herb Sorrell, who many people thought was a communist. The CSU went out on strike and brought violence to the studio gates. Reagan witnessed it firsthand—buses overturned, windows smashed, blood in the streets. When Reagan crossed the picket lines, Sorrell called for a boycott of his movies.⁶⁰

The FBI soon came to see Reagan. One of their informants had reported that one member at a Communist Party meeting had asked, “What the hell are we going to do about that son-of-a-bitching bastard Reagan?” The actor received an anonymous phone call, threatening, “Your face will never be in pictures again.” He understood that they planned to throw acid in his face. The Burbank police put a twenty-four-hour guard on his house and insisted that he carry a gun in a shoulder holster.⁶¹

Reagan later wrote that “I knew from the experience of hand-to-hand combat that America faced no more insidious or evil threat than that of Communism.”⁶² Like Reagan, Boulware also fought communists within the labor movement, as will be developed in greater detail later. Boulware’s position at the bargaining table and elsewhere was simple. He described the blandishments being offered by the communists as “evil.”⁶³

Reagan and Boulware’s opposition to communism was deeply ingrained. Reagan believed, however, that “some members of the House Un-American Activities Committee came to Hollywood searching more for personal publicity than they were for Communists. Many fine people were accused wrongly of being Communists simply because they were liberals.”⁶⁴ And Boulware distributed to GE employees a book entitled *The Road Ahead*, in which author John T. Flynn contended that American Communist Party members were not the real problem. “I insist that if every Communist in America were rounded up and liquidated,” he wrote, “the great menace to our form of social organization would be still among us.”⁶⁵ Both the actor and the executive had had direct, personal experiences with communists in this country; each was deeply concerned about com-

munism as an *international* threat and as a corrosive influence on American economic policy.

Their mutual opposition to communism was not the only potential bond between the two men. Reagan's interest in labor matters ensured that he would watch closely the steps that Boulware would take in labor negotiations. His fascination with labor issues, of course, went back years before his association with GE. One of the reasons Jane Wyman gave for the rift that had grown between her husband and herself as their divorce litigation unfolded was his preoccupation with SAG matters and related political issues. When they married, they had a common focus on their screen careers; Reagan soon seemed more concerned with union issues. She found his constant conversation about the subject a point of increasing irritation.⁶⁶ Richard Nixon once reminded Reagan that they had discussed "labor relations in the motion picture industry" when they first met in 1947.⁶⁷ This was more than a casual interest.

There is an intriguing possibility of a third reason—in addition to their opposition to communism and their deep interest in labor matters—as to why Lem Boulware was interested in Ronald Reagan. In the spring of 1950, two years before she married Reagan, Nancy Davis met Boulware. According to a letter in Boulware's collected papers, the meeting took place at the Arizona Biltmore, and Nancy was with her parents.⁶⁸ Her stepfather, Dr. Loyal Davis, was a devoted conservative. The Davises had a home in Phoenix, where Reagan first met Barry Goldwater.⁶⁹ Nancy adored her stepfather, and her husband came to respect Dr. Davis and his conservative views, as well. One wonders if Loyal Davis might have played a part in Boulware's hiring of the man who, by 1954, had become his son-in-law.

In time, the strong mutual interests of Boulware and Reagan would have a bearing on their relationship. But they may not have been a factor when Reagan was hired, in light of the limited fare the actor was expected to dispense on the GE plant tour. The general likeability he projected on the screen undoubtedly weighed positively in GE's decision to hire him. But the principal factor in his hiring might well have been his willingness to undertake the demanding tour and, frankly, his availability.

There is a dispute as to whether others were considered for the GE job before Reagan. Frances Fitzgerald states flatly that other actors had rejected GE's offer. Anne Edwards writes that others were "considered." Reagan himself maintains that the "package" was created with him in mind.⁷⁰

Reagan's career had not been going particularly well. In the past two years, he had made three movies: *Law and Order*, *Prisoner of War*, and *Cattle Queen of Montana*.⁷¹ The first two had only limited success at the box office; in the third, he did not even get top billing. In the RKO film scheduled for release the following year, he was to receive third billing. He had turned down the few recent parts his agent had sent to him because they were so bad.⁷²

His last job, before the GE offer, was as an emcee in Las Vegas. Although he was to recall in his first autobiography that the act was "a sellout every night" and that the income was welcome during a period when the revenue stream had gone dry, neither he nor Nancy, who accompanied him on the two-week stint, enjoyed the experience.⁷³ Soon thereafter, he felt that he had "hit rock bottom" and told his agent, "Never again will I sell myself short."⁷⁴

Ronald Reagan's frustration at this point had little to do with any political aspirations. He *did* believe that his civic activities revealed a gravitas that was being ignored by producers, who should be giving him more substantive parts. As a biographer noted, "He could not have helped but feel that his potential had never been realized, that the power and charisma he exuded in his [Screen Actors Guild] dealings and in his [speeches] should have been transferred to his image on film."⁷⁵

It would be years before Reagan's true potential would be recognized, and then in a job that had little to do with the movies. He would, in time, be cast as a soldier in a kind of warfare he had never encountered on the screen. Lemuel Boulware was a leader of that ideological combat.

There were many possible reasons why Boulware saw to it that right from the start Ronald Reagan was put on *his* payroll.⁷⁶ He may have been concerned that the company spokesman would espouse his liberal beliefs in the message that he brought to the plants. The actor would bear watching. Or, alternatively, as he considered the talents of GE's new employee, Boulware may have foreseen the role Ronald Reagan could play in GE's political campaign.

But why was politics the business of business in the first place?