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# REAGAN'S AMERICA

WITH A NEW CHAPTER ON THE  
LEGACY OF THE REAGAN ERA

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"FOR EFFORTS  
TO FIND  
MR. REAGAN'S  
'PLACE IN  
HISTORY,'  
THIS BOOK IS  
INDISPENSABLE."

—C. VANN WOODWARD,  
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW



# GARRY WILLS

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# REAGAN'S AMERICA

GARRY  
WILLS



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN

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PENGUIN BOOKS

REAGAN'S AMERICA

This is Garry Wills's sixth book on an American president. The earlier ones dealt with George Washington (*Cincinnatus*), Thomas Jefferson (*Inventing America*), James Madison (*Explaining America*), John Kennedy (*The Kennedy Imprisonment*), and Richard Nixon (*Nixon Agonistes*). Wills is the Henry R. Luce Professor of American Culture and Public Policy at Northwestern University. He is the recipient of the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Merle Curti Award from the Organization of American Historians.

**To Ken McCormick**  
**gentleman, editor, friend**

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# INTRODUCTION

*These wells that shine and seem as shallow as pools,  
These tales that, being too plain for the fool's eyes,  
Incredibly clear are clearly incredible—  
Truths by their depth deceiving more than lies.*

—G. K. Chesterton

The geriatric “juvenile lead” even as President, Ronald Reagan is old and young—an actor, but with only one role. Because he acts himself, we know he is authentic. A professional, he is always the amateur. He is the great American synecdoche, not only a part of our past but a large part of our multiple pasts. That is what makes many of the questions asked about him so pointless. Is he bright, shallow, complex, simple, instinctively shrewd, plain dumb? He is all these things and more. Synecdoche is just the Greek word for a “sampling,” and we all take different samples from the rich store of associations that have accumulated around the Reagan career and persona. He is just as simple, and just as mysterious, as our collective dreams and memories.

He is capacious, surrounding contradictions. Different worlds cohabit the man—“Death Valley Days” and Silicon Valley, Des Moines and the District of Columbia, Sacramento and Eureka. Nor has he simply passed through these places as points of travel—he is still there, at each point. Return him to Eureka College, and he looks instantly at home. He is perfectly suited to the most varying scenes of his life, yet his manner never changes. He is the opposite of a chameleon: environments adapt themselves to him.

He spans our lives, culturally and chronologically. Born in the year the first studio opened in Hollywood, he reached that town just two years after Technicolor did. His second term as President runs through 1988, the two-hundredth anniversary of the ratification of the United States Constitution, and his life spans over a third of that history of constitutional government. His career as a public figure was already a fourth as long as the national government's in the year he went to the



White House. Born eleven years into the twentieth, he is scheduled to leave the White House eleven years from the twenty-first century.

He began his regular radio career the year Franklin Roosevelt delivered his first fireside address. An adult during the Depression and World War II, he has known union crusades and corporate worries, spoken for civil liberties and for red hunting. He has been a Hollywood success and a Las Vegas flop. After two victories by wide margins in California, he went down to two defeats as a presidential candidate. He died for victory as the Gipper and won personal glory in the defeat of Barry Goldwater. We have been through it all with him. The GE "House of the Future" he lived in, and Star Wars for the outfitting of space. War movies, and real war (well, almost) in Grenada. Death from prop six-guns, and John Hinckley's real bullets. Reagan runs continuously in everyone's home movies of the mind. He wrests from us something warmer than mere popularity, a kind of complicity. He is, in the strictest sense, what Hollywood promoters used to call "fabulous." We fable him to ourselves, and he to us. We are jointly responsible for him.

He is aware of his own prototypical status, yet that awareness neither galls us nor discommodates him. It is simply "All-American" in his eyes for him to be all America; so, in his eyes, he is. His vast claims are made in ways that convey modesty, not megalomania. One psychobiographer has tried to trace Reagan's political views and actions to a deep insecurity derived from his father. But what must strike the candid observer is the President's almost preternatural security, the lack of inner division that he maintains despite so much contained diversity.

Self-assurance reassures others, and that has not been the least of Reagan's gifts to us, at a time when the nation needed some reassuring. President Carter had discovered such disorientation in the country, or in himself, that he scolded his countrymen for the crime of "malaise." More voters understood him to be the cause of this complaint than its cure; but there can be no doubt that it was a serious charge to bring against any American. Carter spoke of limits, of lowered goals as well as thermostats, of accommodation with the Russians and other unpleasant realities. That is not only demoralizing in a country that defines itself in terms of growth; it stirs a subtle panic, a claustrophobia, that has haunted the American consciousness all through this century. When the Census Bureau declared the frontier closed in 1890, it seemed to be announcing a doom upon the nation. What would we be without the frontier? It had shaped, conditioned, defined us, said Frederick Jackson Turner in 1892. A frontierless America would be non-

America. So, once the physical line had been removed from our maps of the continent, we had to engage in metaphorical cartography, tracing "new frontiers" of various sorts, inner or outer, microfrontiers in the laboratory, macrofrontiers in space.

Beneath the spacial anxiety expressed in modern America, there is an even deeper *temporal* fear, that of aging. What if the New World should turn out no different from the Old? Progress may be our most important product, but youth is our oldest boast. As we passed through the various "birthdays" of the 1970s and 1980s, a litany of bicentennials, it should have been harder to maintain our political infancy. Yet, if we did *not* maintain it, what were we to make of claims that this alone preserved us from the gentle decrepitude or active corruption of our European forebears? We are now ruled by the oldest written constitution governing in any nation. Our plight resembles that of Mr. Crummles with his Infant Phenomenon, or Mary Pickford doing Pollyanna—we need an indulgent audience to make the act work.

Yet the rebound from malaise was accomplished in what seems, at first, a perverse way. We regained our youth by electing the oldest President in our history. Four years after the electorate had declared that it was worse off than it was in 1976, one could hardly distinguish Ronald Reagan's stunning re-election victory from the flags and gold medals of the 1984 Olympics. The young athletes seemed to draw strength from their aging leader, not the other way around. In the famous exchange after John Kennedy's death, journalist Mary McGrory said, "We will never laugh again," and Patrick Moynihan answered, "No, we will laugh again; but we will never be young again." Reagan's success of 1984 was "big magic" by any measure: he made us young again.

How did he pull it off? It is not enough, I think, to say that he resummons our youth because he remembers it, as if anyone sufficiently old would do. Nor is Reagan like the other old men we have used, paradoxically, to symbolize America's youthful spirit—the wise old birds with white hair who seemed to defy the calendar: Mark Twain, or Thomas Edison, or Henry Ford. Those were progeny of Benjamin Franklin, men remembered for a youthful exploit they enacted or described so as to make it timeless—Franklin walking the streets of Philadelphia with his bulky inadequate bread rolls, Twain's eternal haunting of the youth gangs in Hannibal, Edison with his chemicals in the boxcar, or Ford in his workshop. They spoke for and out of a boyhood legend of themselves, authenticated by the fame and

wealth such boyhoods led them to. Each, besides, was a genius (or was held to be one) who did not speak the language of the specialist, confirming our picture of America as natively shrewd yet naive. They offered us brilliance as an everyday matter, pairing wisdom with innocence.

Reagan has no archetypal boyhood achievement like Franklin's labor at the press or Ford's at the combustion engine. He has neither an author's nor an inventor's originality. He does not even have the warrior's glow that quickened Dwight Eisenhower's foxy-grandpa popularity. The key point is, precisely, that we do not think of Reagan as grandfatherly (no matter how many grandchildren he may have). Though he was only briefly a leading man on the screen, he has since acquired romantic luster in what passes for real life. He did not age gracefully into character roles, like Jimmy Stewart finally playing Lassie's owner's grandfather. Failure at the box office spared Reagan that honorable second and third life of the fading star who still finds work.

But the alternative to such lessened grandeur is normally even worse—to become a fading nonstar, a Sunset Boulevard relic, the frail lacquered icon of an earlier self, as “ageless” and as unconvincing as Mae West. How did Reagan avoid all these traps? He did not age gracefully; he managed somehow not to age at all, at least in symbolic terms. Part of this, of course, is the luck and discipline of physical health. He took good care of himself. But so did Mae West. Reagan, however, was not seen as pampering himself, pickled in adulation for what he did before. He directed his and others' attention from himself to the principle of America as a politically rejuvenating phenomenon. This was accomplished by a mysterious access of Reagan's believing self to our own springs of belief and desire to believe. That is: no one has undergone a more thorough initiation into every aspect of the American legend than Reagan has, and no one has found so many conduits—so many channels, open and indirect, associative, accumulative—for bringing that legend to us in the freshest way. He is the perfect carrier: the ancient messages travel through him without friction. No wonder he shows little wear or tear.

Much of this access derives from Reagan's long familiarity to us in radio, movies, television, and then again on the radio. This is both an obvious and an unexamined fact about Reagan's political life. Early attempts to dismiss him as “just an actor” misfired so badly that more thoughtful attention has not been given to the fact that he *was* indeed an actor, along with everything else. His own first handlers tried to

minimize the importance of his Hollywood days, and so have later analysts of his policies. Reagan, with surer instinct, cheerfully emphasizes what others feared to bring up. He understands that a show-business background is part (though only part) of his political resonance. He was never a boy genius, but he was in the place where legends of boy geniuses were fabricated. He was dying as the Gipper while Mickey Rooney played young Edison.

He is an icon, but not a frail one put away in the dark, not Norma Desmond gone brittle on celluloid, her reality decomposing. He is a durable daylight "bundle of meanings," as Roland Barthes called myth. Reagan does not argue for American values; he embodies them. To explain his appeal, one must explore the different Americas of which he is made up. He renews our past by resuming it. His approach is not discursive, setting up sequences of time or thought, but associative; not a tracking shot, but montage. We make the connections. It is our movie.



PART ONE

HUCK FINN'S  
WORLD





## CHAPTER 1

# Jack

*There warn't no home like a raft, after all.*

*—Huckleberry Finn*

Ann Sheridan writes in the snow, "Happy New Year." Ronald Reagan, over her protests, whisks out the last word: "Happy New *Century*, Dummy!" It is 1900 in Kings Row, and Erich Korngold's music conveys a sugary future.

Mark Twain took a dourer view of the new century. He dated its inception from January of 1901 and realized, halfway through the year, that the nation's lynching rate (eighty-eight so far) would surpass the preceding year's (one hundred and fifteen for the whole twelve months).<sup>1</sup>

Ronald Reagan calls his childhood "one of those rare Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer idylls" (Hubler, p. 18). The Twain novels he refers to are chronicles of superstition, racism, and crime. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in particular, takes place almost entirely at night, as a series of panicky escapes from one horror to another:

I ain't agoing to tell *all* that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them . . . Jim warn't on his island, so I tramped off in a hurry for the crick, and crowded through the willows, red-hot to jump aboard and get out of that awful country. [Ch. 18]

Huck mainly "lights out" in terror, not in joy. "One is bound to remember that at eight Samuel Clemens found a stabbed body on the

floor of his father's office one night, and at nine he witnessed a murder, of which the perpetrator was acquitted. Huck wants to get away from everything rather than into adventure."<sup>2</sup>

Twain already suspected, in 1901, that the twentieth century offered no haven from nightmare. Ronald Reagan's parents moved to his birthplace, Tampico, Illinois, in 1906, during a wave of revivals in the area, a matter of timing that would greatly influence their son's life. But just a month after their arrival, the small village paper ran a lurid tale with three large headlines:

### HANG AND BURN THREE NEGROES

#### MOB AT SPRINGFIELD, MO., REVENGES ATTACK MADE ON WHITE GIRL

Rope Breaks Precipitating Victim Into Burning  
Embers of Pyre Where Two Others Had Preceded Him,  
But Crowd Is Relentless

The man who fell into the fire was retrieved alive and hanged again. The account shows no sense of outrage, or of irony: "The victims were strung to the Goddess of Liberty statues on the electric light tower in the public square at the courthouse."<sup>3</sup> New century or old, the country was still living through Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer dreams, which were never as idyllic as Reagan remembers.

Reagan is not the only person, of course, who has filtered out the darker aspects of Mark Twain's work; but there is a special poignancy in his superficial gesture toward Huck Finn, since there is much of Twain's Mississippi in Reagan's background. His father, Jack, was born, grew up, and married on the Mississippi; in fact, Twain first steamed up the northern Mississippi, past Fulton, Illinois, just one year before Jack Reagan was born there. Like Huck, Jack Reagan was orphaned, had to leave school, and led a drifting life. The Rock River, from whose current Ronald saved many lives, is a tributary of the Mississippi, and it became an important part of the big river's canal system early in this century—a fact that explains Ronald's birth in Tampico. The future President got his first job after college working on the Mississippi, and for a man more improbable than any character to be found in Twain. The Reagans were under the spell of the Mississippi, of all the muddy bright promises it meant to break.

Twain's mood as he approached Fulton in 1882 was one of optimism, induced by a sense of release. He had just revisited his dear