

# Ronald Reagan Tribute

## Utah Republican Dinner

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Some elected leaders love policy. Ronald Reagan loved people. It was his passion for people that prompted and drove his interest in public policy. Behind every statistic and every memo or briefing, he saw a face and carefully considered the impact of government in the everyday lives of the American people.

Reagan's longtime friend and close associate, Dick Wirthlin, from Utah, tells of an incident in February, 1984 when he walked into the Oval Office and found the President standing beside his desk looking at a photograph. "Mr. President, what's that you got there?" He asked. Reagan explained that he'd just gotten off the phone with the young man in the photograph. When Dick Wirthlin looked at the photograph more closely, he couldn't help but wince at the haunting image of a little 12-year-old boy who was severely burned and scarred while rescuing his two younger brothers when their families' trailer caught on fire.

Reagan said, "I called this little fella to see how he was doing and to tell him how proud I was of his heroism." Wirthlin responded, "I'm sure he appreciated your call, Mr. President."

Reagan smiled and said, “Dick, at the end of our conversation the youngster said, ‘President Reagan, I sure wish I would have had my tape recorder on so I could remember our call together.’ So I said, ‘Do you have it there?’ He said he did. So I told him, ‘Well, son, turn it on and let’s chat some more.’”

*Did you catch that?* Wirthlin writes. “Let’s chat some more?” The busiest and most powerful man on the planet saying to a little boy, “Let’s chat some more?” That is the language of leadership. That is vintage Ronald Reagan.

Ronald Reagan has been called “The Great Communicator” because of his ability to connect with the American people. He stirred our highest aspirations and our noblest thoughts and dispositions. Here, however, is where his sincerity and his humility shine the brightest. He never sought to draw attention to himself. It was just the opposite – On his desk was a plaque, which read, “...there is no limit to what a man can do or where he can go if he doesn't mind who gets the credit.”

At the end of his presidency, in his unforgettable Farewell Address, Reagan reflected on that title, “The Great Communicator”, which he earned over two decades. He had this to say about it:

“[In my] time I won a nickname, “The Great Communicator.” But I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: It was the content. I wasn’t a great communicator, but I communicated great things, and they didn’t spring full bloom from my brow, they came from the heart of a great nation – from our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in principles that have guided us for two centuries. They called it the Reagan Revolution. Well, I’ll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the great rediscovery of our values and our common sense...”

People and principles were the controlling focus and passion in the life of Ronald Reagan. In his Farewell Address, he urged: “As long as we remember our first principles and believe in ourselves, the future will always be ours.”

The previous president suggested that a great “malaise” had spread over our country (as if our problems at the time were the result of failed citizenship instead of failed leadership). Ronald Reagan, however, spoke of freedom as a condition uniquely received from God, the Creator, of curbing the size and scale of the Federal Government, and how heroes abound throughout America. He explained:

“Those who say that we’re in a time when there are no heroes, they just don’t know where to look. You can see heroes’ everyday going in and out of factory gates... You meet heroes

across a counter, and they're on both sides of that counter...  
Their patriotism is quiet, but deep. Their values sustain our national life."

Ronald Reagan was one of our nation's most effective spokesmen for those values that we hold most dear. Our words and our deeds are our legacy. When we are gone, they are the inheritance we leave to those who can then use what we no longer can. We're blessed to have such a vast treasury of wisdom and guiding expressions of principle left to us by Ronald Reagan. In praising his memory, Lady Margaret Thatcher tenderly declared that as we move forward in the twilight of his legacy, "We have one beacon to guide us that Ronald Reagan never had. We have his example."

Where did his strength and inspiration come from? President George W. Bush offered this stirring tribute and explanation:

And where does that strength come from? Where is that courage learned? It is the faith of a boy who read the Bible with his mom. It is the faith of a man lying in an operating room, who prayed for the one who shot him before he prayed for himself. It is the faith of a man with fearful illness, who waited on the Lord to call him home.

Now death has done all that death can do. And as Ronald Wilson Reagan goes his way, we are left with the joyful hope he shared. In his last years, he saw through a glass darkly.

Now he sees his Savior face-to-face.

And we look to that fine day when we will see him again, all weariness gone, clear of mind, strong and sure, and smiling again, and the sorrow of his parting gone forever.

When the presidency had been peacefully and fully transferred to his elected successor, Ronald and Nancy Reagan flew home to California. The assembled staff and media who accompanied them on that final presidential journey proposed a toast. With the full impact of the Reagan Revolution seemingly before them at the conclusion of his presidency, they called out “Mission accomplished, Mr. President. Mission accomplished.” Reagan could only smile in humble gratitude while later acknowledging that he thought to himself, “Not yet. Not yet.”

From his Farewell Address, we catch a glimpse of what he saw up ahead, he said, “Once you begin a great movement, there’s no telling where it will end. We meant to change a nation and instead, we changed a world”

Today, we live in that changed world. We are a changed nation for the better, but nothing neglected ever remains the same. The past is to

learn from and not to live in. Ronald Reagan reminded us that we need leaders and not labels. Simply calling ourselves “conservatives” is insufficient. We need and should always seek the true essence and substance of conservatism and not merely the appearance thereof. There is a critical difference between statesmen and women who follow a compass and politicians who merely follow a weather vein – always seeking popularity and sacrificing principle to achieve it, if necessary.

The Reagan tax cuts reduced our tax burden by more than 30% and the economy soared. Today, the prime interest rate is about 8%. It was 21% and the government took as much as 70% of a person’s earnings when Reagan took office in 1980. Because of the Reagan Revolution, we have enjoyed “Morning in America” for more than a quarter of a century. But government by itself has little faith in true principles and the industry of the people. It takes inspired and inspiring leaders like Ronald Reagan to keep America on track. He said that the only way to keep government from growing is to quit feeding it.

We must never penalize success in this land of freedom and opportunity. Reagan explained that a heavy tax burden destroys incentive to work, save and invest. High taxes lead ultimately to low government revenue while low taxes in the end produce optimum government revenues. The Reagan Revolution proved that point beyond dispute, even in the midst of a chorus of skepticism from on looking liberals and pundits.

Ronald Reagan also taught us that peace is achieved through strength and not timid negotiations or unprincipled concessions. “Tear down this wall,” he cried out from the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Today, the “Iron Curtain” is but a memory of when communism reigned in Europe before ending up on the “ash heap of history” as Reagan so boldly predicted.

The great conservative mind, Russell Kirk, emphasized that a healthy society is never wholly old or wholly new. Tradition is the means by which a healthy society preserves the wisdom of our ancestors and then applies that wisdom to the new problems which it faces. Tradition is the element of continuity that enables each generation’s wisdom to profit from the wisdom of preceding generations.

Society is a contract, said Edmund Burke. It is a partnership between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born. It is also a contract between God and man. Men who do not look backwards to their ancestors, said Burke, will not look forward to their posterity. If the eternal contract that holds us together in America should be broken, we would be thrown on the meager resources of private and present judgment, having run recklessly through the bank and capital of wisdom that we inherited from our ancestors. Our reservoir of tradition would be drained dry within a few decades if we do not deliberately open up once more the springs of wisdom and

experience that have come down to us through generations of time. We must not exhaust such capital by ignoring the past and calling every mindless alteration “progress” simply because it is “change.”

The Reagan Revolution stands out as a significant deposit of fresh new capital in our nation’s moral bank account. Before he assumed the office of President, Reagan emphasized, “I think our nation and the world need a spiritual revival as never before... I think there is a hunger in this land for a spiritual revival, a return to a belief in moral absolutes – the same morals upon which the nation was founded.”

That is what true conservatism means. Democracy, more than any other form of government, rests upon the assumption of a higher moral law ordained by an authority superior to human wisdom. That is what Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence speaks of as the God of nature and nature’s laws. In contrast, the modern spirit today asserts the universal and absolute supremacy of man and his unrestricted right to subject religion, morals and politics to his own will, passion or caprice. This is fatal to democracy for it stimulates disorder and sets everything afloat and that moral solidarity which makes possible so delicate a government as democracy is broken (Russell Kirk).

The essence of social conservatism is preservation of the moral traditions of humanity. Lincoln said, “What is conservatism? Is it not adherence to the old and tried against the new and untried?” Some

things – indeed the most important things – are always true. Two plus two equals four – always and not just on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays or only in one country and not another.

Electoral success can be deceptive just as material prosperity can for a time mask moral decay and dissolution. Robert Frost wrote, “Most of the change we think we see in life is due to truths being in and out of favor.”

Ronald Reagan knew that absolute truth is not relative and he did all in his power to make sure that those core principles and values remained in and not out of favor. He summed up the spirit and meaning of the American dream in these words:

“Standing inside this symbol of our democracy (the Capitol) we see and hear again the echoes of our past: A general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely president paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American song. It is hopeful, bighearted, idealistic, daring, decent and fair. That’s our heritage; that’s our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender

music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—in unity, affection, and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.”

That is the American song we proudly sing together this evening. We sing it loud and clear and with full hearts – hearts that will forever cherish the memory and legacy of Ronald Reagan.

Thank you for the privilege of sharing these thoughts with you tonight at this beautiful gathering.