



We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution is a nationally acclaimed civic education program for upper elementary, secondary, and post-secondary school students that focuses on the history and principles of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. We the People is a program of the Center for Civic Education, whose mission is to promote an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy in the United States and other countries.

The one-hundredth birthday of Ronald Reagan, America's fortieth president, was February 6, 2011. This centennial is a suitable occasion for teaching and learning about Ronald Reagan's contribution to America's constitutional, political, and civic tradition. Thus, the Center for Civic Education and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation have collaborated to produce this lesson. The lesson challenges students to reflect on principles at the core of civic education in the United States, such as constitutional government, the rule of law, popular sovereignty, individual rights to liberty, and responsible citizenship. These principles pervaded the political writings, speeches, and actions of Ronald Reagan. They anchored his leadership of America during two presidential terms, 1981–1989. And they are a lasting legacy to the American people.

## THE LEGACY OF RONALD REAGAN



### RONALD REAGAN (1911–2004)

Fortieth president of the United States

*"No, democracy is not a fragile flower. Still it needs cultivating. If the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy."*

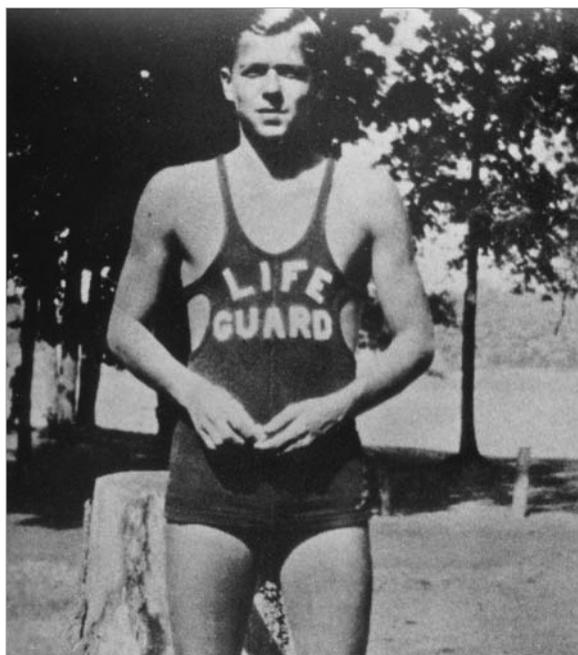
ADDRESS TO MEMBERS OF THE  
BRITISH PARLIAMENT, JUNE 8, 1982

### PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

This lesson traces Ronald Reagan's ascent from obscurity to the pinnacle of political power in the United States. It also examines the constitutional, political, and civic principles associated with the public life of Ronald Reagan before and during his presidency. Ronald Reagan's principles and their consequences are his legacy to America.

When you have completed this lesson, you should be able to

- describe experiences that formed the character and personality of young Ronald Reagan;
- explain Ronald Reagan's rise to the presidency of the United States;
- define and explain Ronald Reagan's principles pertaining to limited government, rule of law, popular sovereignty, individual rights to liberty, free enterprise, responsible citizenship, and presidential leadership;
- analyze and evaluate President Reagan's policies for economic recovery;
- analyze and evaluate President Reagan's policies to end the Cold War;
- Understand Ronald Reagan's legacy to the nation.



► *What personality traits did Ronald Reagan develop during his years in Dixon, Illinois?*

## INTRODUCTION TO RONALD REAGAN

Tampico, a very small town in northern Illinois, is the site of Ronald Reagan's birth on February 6, 1911. He was the second son of Jack and Nelle Reagan. His parents' five-room apartment had neither running water nor an indoor toilet. The family moved often during Ronald Reagan's first nine years, as his father searched for a better job and a nicer place to live. In 1920, the Reagans finally settled down in Dixon, a town of more than 10,000 people, not far from Tampico. Ronald Reagan formed a life-long love of Dixon, the community that cultivated his character. Many years later, he said, "All of us have to have a place we go back to. Dixon is that place for me. There was the life that has shaped my body and mind for all the years to come."

In Dixon, Ronald Reagan's mother encouraged him to participate with her in a local church group that staged readings and plays. His shyness passed away as he discovered a natural talent for public speaking and acting. Nelle Reagan also

transmitted to her son the moral standards that shaped his character and guided his decisions. On Mother's Day in 1985 Ronald Reagan fondly recalled his mother: "She was truly a remarkable woman—ever so strong in her determination, yet always tender, always giving of herself to others. She never found time in her life to complain; she was too busy living those values she sought to impart in my brother and myself. She was the greatest influence on my life."

Ronald Reagan's personality blossomed during four years at Dixon High School from 1924 to 1928. He was a varsity football player and captain of the swim team. He developed his ability in acting by participating in student plays directed by a masterful English teacher, B.J. Frazier. He showed political leadership by becoming president of the student council.

From 1926 to 1932, Ronald Reagan worked during the summer as a lifeguard at Lowell Park, near Dixon. He was an extraordinary lifesaver, demonstrating traits of courage, self-sacrifice, and compassion. He remembered: "One of the proudest statistics of my life is seventy-seven—the number of people I saved during those seven summers."

After graduating from high school, Ronald Reagan enrolled in Eureka College, about one hundred miles southeast of Dixon. He majored in economics and sociology and performed in more than a dozen plays staged by the theater and drama department. He was an athlete, earning varsity letters in football, track, and swimming. He also was a student leader, winning an election to become president of the student body. Among his many interests, Ronald Reagan enjoyed acting most of all and hoped someday to have a career in the movies.

Upon graduation from Eureka College in the spring of 1932, Ronald Reagan worked in the summer as a lifeguard for the last time. In the fall, he found employment in radio, working success-

fully for five years as a sports broadcaster. But he never gave up his dream of becoming a movie star. In the spring of 1937, while visiting southern California, Ronald Reagan went to Hollywood. He took a screen test at the Warner Brothers movie studio, won a contract, and launched a movie-acting career that lasted until 1964.

One of Ronald Reagan's most memorable movies was *Knute Rockne All American*, about football at the University of Notre Dame. He acted the part of Coach Rockne's star player, George Gipp, who tragically died of pneumonia soon after his final football season. Ronald Reagan's portrayal of Gipp brought him the nickname that lasted the rest of his life: "The Gipper."

America's entry into World War II interrupted Ronald Reagan's career in Hollywood. A captain in the United States Army Air Corps, he was assigned the task of producing training films to prepare soldiers for combat. After the war, Ronald Reagan returned to acting in the movies.

In the 1950s, Ronald Reagan turned to television. From 1954 to 1962 he was the host of General Electric Theater, a weekly program with a national audience. Later, he appeared in *Death Valley Days*, a dramatic series about the western frontier in American history. He also became intensely interested in politics, accepting many invitations to make speeches about political issues and policies.

Ronald Reagan's turn to political activity had begun several years earlier, when he was president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) from 1947 to 1952. He served a final term as SAG president from 1959 to 1960. The Hollywood community during those years was filled with political controversy caused by the worldwide conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. It was called the Cold War because the opponents rarely directly engaged in battle. Ronald Reagan was concerned that some people involved in moviemaking sympathized with the Soviet

Union's goal of spreading its communist system of government throughout the world, which the United States opposed. He feared that lofty Soviet claims about government-controlled advancement of social justice "had fooled some otherwise loyal Americans into believing that the Communist Party sought to make a better world."

As president of SAG, Ronald Reagan opposed what he saw as communist influence among the moviemakers. He pointed out that Soviet communism was a totalitarian system in which individual liberty was totally denied and dissent was brutally crushed. He explained, "On the one hand is our belief that the people can and will decide what is best for themselves, and on the other (communist, Nazi, or fascist) side is the belief that a 'few' can best decide what is good for all the rest."

While leading SAG, Ronald Reagan forged his fervent anticommunism and abiding commitment to traditional American principles of constitutional and representative government,



► *How did Ronald Reagan's mother contribute to the development of the future president's character?*

individual liberty, and the rule of law. These political dispositions drove him into the national political arena, attracted favorable public opinion, and fueled his rise to the presidency.

## RISE TO THE PRESIDENCY

Until the age of fifty-one, Ronald Reagan was a Democrat, as his father had been. In 1962, however, he joined the Republican Party. This change in party identity resulted from his growing attachment to conservative political ideas such as strict constitutional limits on the power of government, unfettered freedom of economic enterprise, and ordered liberty. In 1964, Ronald Reagan strongly favored the presidential candidacy of conservative Republican Barry Goldwater and agreed to make a nationally televised speech for him. Although Goldwater lost the presidential election to his Democratic Party opponent Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan won a large following among Republicans, who responded enthusiastically. Ronald Reagan's speech, called "A Time for Choosing," sparked his rapid rise to political prominence and pursuit of America's highest office, the presidency.

Before he could seriously contend for the presidency, Ronald Reagan needed to prove his capacity for executive leadership in government. He won two terms as governor of California, serving from 1967 to 1975. His performance in office attracted national attention. Thus, he decided to seek the Republican Party's nomination in the presidential election of 1976. His opponent was the incumbent Gerald Ford, who had succeeded to the presidency after Richard Nixon resigned in 1974 because of his connection to the Watergate scandal. Gerald Ford barely defeated Ronald Reagan to win the Republican Party nomination. However, after Democrat Jimmy Carter defeated President Ford, Ronald Reagan decided to pursue the presidency again in 1980.



► *How did Ronald Reagan gain the support of the American public and attract national attention?*

The biggest barrier in Ronald Reagan's path to the presidency was public concern about his age. In 1976, he was sixty-five years old. If elected president in 1980, he would be the oldest person to serve in the office. His vitality during public appearances, however, countered the age issue. Another pressing problem was Ronald Reagan's need to maintain contact with the public prior to the 1980 presidential election campaign. He met this challenge by continuing a strategy begun in 1975. Ronald Reagan produced a brief radio program, aired five days each week, to broadcast nationally his views on current events and issues. He also wrote a biweekly editorial published in more than two hundred newspaper opinion pages across the country and presented several speeches each month to audiences across America. Thus, Ronald Reagan built a positive public image among a growing number of voters.

After vigorous competition against several formidable opponents, Ronald Reagan won the Republican Party's presidential nomination in 1980. George H.W. Bush accepted Ronald Reagan's invitation to join him as the Republican candidate for vice president. Ronald Reagan then cam-

paigned against his Democratic Party opponent, the incumbent president Jimmy Carter, and a third-party candidate, liberal Republican John Anderson, who sought the presidency as an independent. Ronald Reagan contrasted his conservatism with the liberalism of his two opponents, claiming he intended to conserve the core principles of America's founders and use them to solve current problems. And he charged President Carter with failure to halt the decline of American power and prestige in the world.

Ronald Reagan blamed President Carter's administration for America's stagnant economy, plagued by high unemployment, rising prices, and a declining standard of living. A main theme of his campaign was to ask the voters if they were better off in 1980 than four years earlier, when Jimmy Carter became president. Ronald Reagan won a landslide victory. Many independents and a significant number of Democrats joined Republican voters in electing Ronald Reagan to be the fortieth president of the United States.

### **PRINCIPLES, PRIORITIES, AND POLICIES OF PRESIDENT REAGAN**

President Reagan's first inaugural address, January 20, 1981, featured confident and inspirational statements about his principles and priorities. The top priority was the serious economic turmoil afflicting America. His proposed solutions would be based upon such conservative political principles as limiting the role of government in the economy and promoting private enterprise. He said,

We are a nation that has a government—not the other way around. And this makes us special among the nations of the Earth. Our government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.



► *What principles and priorities of government did President Reagan discuss in his first inaugural address?*

It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment. . . Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not my intention to do away with the government. It is rather to make it work—work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it.

Only ten weeks into his presidency, President Reagan was shot and seriously wounded by a mentally disturbed man. During and after his recovery, President Reagan renewed his resolve to do good things for his country. He wrote in his diary: "Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will try to serve him; every way I can."

President Reagan was determined to fix the economy. During his two terms as president, he proposed policies to cut taxes and help businesses. In 1981 he signed a law to reduce income taxes and help people save and invest their money. In 1986, he worked with Congress to cut taxes on corporations and individuals. President Reagan also reduced regulations on businesses. He believed that this would help the economy and create jobs.

The economy began to recover. There were sixty straight months of economic growth. More people were able to find work. There were nearly fifteen million more jobs in 1987 than in 1982. People paid less in taxes, but the federal government received more money from taxes. In 1982, for example, the federal government received \$618 billion in tax revenue. Five years later, the amount of federal tax revenue had increased by \$398 billion. This economic recovery produced new wealth for both the government and the people.

President Reagan's economic policies reflected his conservative principles of limited government and freedom of private enterprise. However, he neither downsized the federal government nor reduced federal regulations of business as much as he wanted. After all, throughout his eight-year presidency, the Democrats were the majority in the House of Representatives, and they tended to oppose the president's policy proposals. The 1980, 1982, and 1984 congressional elections brought a slight majority of Republicans to the Senate. But in the 1986 mid-term election, the Democrats won commanding majorities of seats in both the House and Senate. Thus, during both of his terms, the Republican President Reagan had to negotiate compromises with leaders of the Democrats in Congress to achieve some, if not all or even most, of what he wanted. He was a very able negotiator, who used his enormous popularity with voters to occasionally influence Democrats in Congress to work with him. Nonetheless, President Reagan was never in a political position to achieve all of his economic policy goals.

A big disappointment to some of President Reagan's supporters was the continuation of big budget deficits. The high levels of federal government spending and debt seemed a contradiction of President Reagan's outspoken commitment to limited government. However, much of the increased spending went to building the capacity of America's military forces. National defense and se-

curity, together with economic recovery, was a major priority of President Reagan. He intended to challenge America's Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union, more vigorously than previous presidents had done. And he believed that America needed both economic and military strength in order to win.

### **PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP IN THE COLD WAR**

Long before becoming president, Ronald Reagan claimed the prevailing policies of containment and détente would not bring a satisfactory end to the Cold War. The objective of containment was to stop the Soviet Union from forcibly spreading communism beyond the territories it already ruled or dominated. But the United States would not attempt to push the Soviets out of their established spheres of control in certain regions of the world. In the 1970s, Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter pursued détente, the reduction of Cold War tensions and achievement of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union.

President Reagan strongly disliked détente. In a 1981 news conference, he said, "So far détente's been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims. Their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world communist or socialist state." According to President Reagan, the Soviets considered détente a sign of American weakness and vulnerability. Instead of détente, the president wanted peace through strength by building America's economic and military power. He said, "Our strategy is defensive; our aim is to protect the peace by ensuring that no adversaries ever conclude they could best us in a war of their own choosing."

From a secure position of military and economic power, President Reagan intended not merely to contain Soviet communism, but to reverse its gains and subdue it. He suspected the Soviet Union was not as strong as it appeared to be. And he predicted its collapse if challenged competitively



► *What was President Reagan's strategy for winning the Cold War?*

by America. The president believed the Soviet Union's government-controlled economy could not compete successfully against America's free-market system. So, he started a rapid, large increase in the quantity and quality of America's military technology and weapons and dared the Soviets to match it. The president expected that the Soviet Union's command economy would run out of money and fail by trying to keep up with America's free enterprise system in an "arms race."

As America's military buildup proceeded, President Reagan put forward another policy to complement it. From a formidable foundation of military and economic power, the United States would promote freedom and democracy throughout the world. President Reagan predicted that given a choice, people everywhere, even within the Soviet Union, would reject totalitarian government. This policy, later named the "Reagan Doctrine," was expressed in the president's June 8, 1982, speech in London to the British Parliament. Here are a few examples from that speech:

History teaches the dangers of government that overreaches—political control taking precedence over free economic growth, secret police, mindless bureaucracy, all combining to stifle individual excellence and personal freedom. . .

[I]t is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens. . .

What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history, as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people. . . .

Our military strength is a prerequisite to peace, but let it be clear we maintain this strength in the hope it will never be used, for the ultimate determinant in the struggle that's now going on in the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve, the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated.

President Reagan's Cold War policies were designed to spread freedom and democracy around the world and block the advancement of Soviet communism. The Soviet Union's attempt to keep pace with America's military and technological advances was a significant factor in the decline of its state-run economy and helped to weaken its global strength. In particular, President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative intimidated the Soviet leaders and influenced them to negotiate with him to reduce nuclear weapons.

The United States supported anti-Soviet uprisings by peoples in various places around the world. For example, President Reagan provided material and moral support to the Solidarity movement in Poland. This support brought down the Soviet-backed regime after President Reagan left office and helped to inspire other anti-Soviet rebellions. The final outcome was the collapse of communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe, which brought freedom, democracy, and the end



► *How did the Cold War finally end?*

of Soviet control of this region. With American help, the people of Afghanistan forced Soviet military forces from their country in 1988. One year later, in November 1989, the Berlin Wall—a symbol of Soviet tyranny in East Germany for nearly three decades—was torn down by the German people. This led to the peaceful reunification of Germany in 1990 and the end of communism in Eastern and Central Europe.

In December of 1991, two years after President Reagan left office, the Cold War ended when the Soviet Union was dissolved. President Reagan's prediction of the collapse of Soviet communism had come true. America and its allies had prevailed in the Cold War. President Reagan's policies of preserving peace through strength and promoting the advancement of democracy around the world significantly contributed to this victory.

## LEGACY OF RONALD REAGAN

President Reagan's second term ended in January 1989. In a farewell address, he spoke about his legacy to the people of America. President Reagan said,

The way I see it, there were two great triumphs, two things that I'm proudest of. One is the economic recovery. . . The other is the recovery of our morale. America is respected again in the world and looked to for leadership. . .

They called it the Reagan Revolution. Well, I'll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the great rediscovery, a rediscovery of our values and our common sense. . .

The lesson of all this was . . . as long as we always remember our first principles and believe in ourselves, the future will be ours. And something else we learned. 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.

Many Americans agreed, then and later, with Ronald Reagan's opinion of his presidential legacy. Many others have disagreed. Virtually all Americans, however, have recognized his enormous impact on the world during the 1980s. In an era of crisis, President Reagan made bold decisions, sparking controversy that continues. Conservatives have hailed his vision of America. Liberals have denounced it. The debate about President Reagan's principles, priorities and policies goes on. More than twenty-two years after the end of his presidency, Ronald Reagan still matters very much to Americans.

## REVIEWING AND USING THE LESSON

- 1 What experiences in Ronald Reagan's youth were most important in shaping his character and personality?
- 2 What factors influenced or brought about Ronald Reagan's rise to political leadership in the positions of (a) president of the Screen Actors Guild, (b) governor of California, and (c) president of the United States of America?
- 3 Why did Ronald Reagan strongly oppose communism and socialism?
- 4 What principles and priorities of government did President Reagan discuss in his first inaugural address? Why did President Reagan emphasize traditional American principles of constitutional government?
- 5 How did President Reagan's economic policies exemplify his constitutional principles and values? Explain the relationship between particular principles and policies.
- 6 Did President Reagan's policies lead to economic recovery? What do you think about these policies?
- 7 What were President Reagan's policies for ending the Cold War? What were his reasons for these policies? Find examples of these policies and reasons for them in President Reagan's speech to the British Parliament.
- 8 What were the consequences of President Reagan's Cold War policies?
- 9 What did President Reagan claim as a legacy in his farewell address? What do you think of President Reagan's claims about his accomplishments?
- 10 In your opinion, what is the legacy of Ronald Reagan to constitutional government and responsible citizenship in America today?

## CRITICAL THINKING EXERCISES

Critical thinking exercises for this lesson can be found at [www.civiced.org/reagan](http://www.civiced.org/reagan). These exercises develop intellectual and participatory skills and offer an opportunity to assess students' capacity to develop and defend an argument and to support it with evidence.

## WEBSITES

[www.civiced.org/reagan](http://www.civiced.org/reagan)

Visit [www.civiced.org/reagan](http://www.civiced.org/reagan) to access a full spectrum of resources that will enrich your study of Ronald Reagan and the Constitution.

[www.reaganfoundation.org](http://www.reaganfoundation.org)

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation is the sole non-profit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the legacy of Ronald Reagan and his timeless principles of individual liberty, economic opportunity, global democracy, and national pride.

[www.reagancentennial.com](http://www.reagancentennial.com)

The Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration is a historic, year-long celebration to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of Ronald Reagan's birth on February 6, 2011. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation has planned a worldwide Centennial Celebration to pay tribute to the legacy of the fortieth president through public outreach and education.

[www.ReaganLibrary.gov](http://www.ReaganLibrary.gov)

Administered by the National Archives and Records Administration, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum has served thousands of researchers and millions of visitors since its opening in 1991.

## CREDITS

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This supplemental lesson on Ronald Reagan was authored by John J. Patrick, Professor Emeritus of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the author or co-author of many publications in history, political science, and civic education.



Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration



Center for Civic Education



We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution