



## Reagan's Majority

By Newt Gingrich

*President Ronald Reagan's philosophy, accomplishments, and style framed public policy debates in ways that helped propel Republicans into today's governing majority.*

Ronald Reagan's legacy as a party builder has gotten short shrift. The Republicans were able to win a majority in the House in 1994 for the first time in forty years, and then keep that majority in 1996 for the first time since 1928, because we were close students of Reagan. When House Republicans stood on the Capitol steps in 1994 and announced our Contract with America, we were standing on President Reagan's shoulders. This is not merely a nice phrase. It was true in the issues highlighted, in voter appeal, and in the actual staging of the event.

The issues in the Contract with America were almost entirely derived from Ronald Reagan's speeches dating back into the 1960s. Welfare reform—look at Governor Reagan in 1970 at the National Governors' Conference as the start of a twenty-six-year effort that culminated when President Clinton (having vetoed welfare reform twice) finally signed the welfare reform bill in 1996. Balanced budgets—a thousand Reagan speeches said they were desirable. Tax cuts—they had been the centerpiece of Reagan's economic policies. Stronger defense—again, a key goal of the 1980 Reagan campaign.

The possibility of a Republican majority was a direct result of Reagan's success. In 1974 only 18 percent of Americans identified themselves as Republicans. Some people actually talked about the danger of the party's disappearing. Six short

years later, Ronald Reagan not only won the election by a surprising margin but also carried the Republicans into control of the Senate and helped them pick up thirty-three seats in the House. Thanks to the rise of Reagan Democrats and their conversion into Republicans, by 1994 we had enough candidates and enough potential voters to be competitive for the first time since the Great Depression.

And the Capitol steps event itself was modeled on a similar Reagan event. In 1980, Guy VanderJagt, Bill Brock, and I approached Governor Reagan and his campaign about hosting an event in which every federal candidate in the Republican Party would be given an opportunity to stand with him on key issues. The result was that in late September all House and Senate candidates stood with Reagan in a national event and made news back home explaining how they agreed with the Reagan platform and disagreed with the liberal platform. The result was a stunning upset as six new Republican senators were elected by a combined margin of less than 75,000 votes. The 1994 Contract ceremony on the Capitol steps was drawn directly from that 1980 experience.

But for years before that victory, the group of young activists in the House known as the Conservative Opportunity Society had studied the successes of President Reagan. Here are the major lessons he taught us:

(1) Cheerfulness can get almost anything done. One of President Reagan's great strengths was his commitment to big ideas and his willingness to

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remain cheerful no matter what the difficulties were. It made him likable and approachable and easy to support. Despite being the son of an alcoholic father, entering the job market in the Great Depression, and watching his career in movies fade out, Reagan remained a steadfast optimist. That disposition was a tremendous, politically potent change from the angry pessimism of traditional conservatism.

(2) Beliefs matter. Watching Reagan stand for the same principles from October 1964 through the end of his presidency twenty-four years later was an amazing lesson in the power of consistency. He did not swing back and forth with each flurry of news stories or polling data. Instead, Reagan was willing to define a big vision of a bright future and keep repeating it until the country came to share his vision. Reagan did not change nearly so much as the country changed. Our approach to issues such as welfare reform, tax cuts, balancing the budget, military and intelligence strength, and how to govern as a majority were learned from Reagan.

(3) If you convince the American people, they will convince the Congress. The most successful president since FDR (whom he had studied and supported) at moving the American people and getting them to move the Congress, Reagan understood that Washington would reject his policies, but he also was confident most Americans would support them. In 1994, we received the largest one-party increase in votes in an off-year election in American history (nine million extra votes), while at the same time, the Democrats slid by one million votes. The shift of ten million votes from 1990 to 1994 was not won in Washington. It was won in the precincts of America. Washington then changed in response to that victory.

(4) Ideas can be complex, but the language has to be simple. Reagan advocated the economics of Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich A. Hayek, and Milton Friedman, but he did it in simple language. He was always talking to the American people—not to the elites—and that meant the language had to be grasped by them. He understood Margaret Thatcher's proposition that first you had to win the argument, and then you could win the vote. He was prepared to argue over very complex ideas, but he understood that the argument itself had to be simple. Reagan did not dumb down his speeches or turn them into generalities. Indeed, if you read his best speeches, you will be surprised by how many specifics they include. Our greatest political success in the House may have been in 1996 when we won the argument over reforming Medicare and ran nine

points ahead of the Republican presidential nominee among seniors. That margin was the key to our becoming the first reelected Republican House majority since 1928. It was a Reaganite victory that came from our being very simple and very clear about our message.

(5) Movements defeat candidate-centered campaigns. Reagan started the Republican gubernatorial primary in 1966 behind a popular mayor of San Francisco and won decisively. He took on a sitting president (Gerald Ford) in 1976 and almost won the nomination—something no one has done in American history. In all his campaigns, Reagan relied on a broad movement of activist supporters who surrounded and energized the campaign far beyond the reach of the official campaign structure. It was a very different model from the modern centrally controlled, consultant-dominated system, and while it was far less efficient, it was far more effective.

(6) Perseverance is indispensable in a leader who would change a country. Think of all the years Reagan spent traveling the country talking to large and small audiences. Imagine the years of doing a weekly radio show while Jimmy Carter presided over a decaying economy and diminishing morale. Imagine the four decades' commitment to the defeat of communism, dating back to 1947 when he first encountered Communists in the Screen Actors Guild and began studying what made them favor a totalitarian system. This was a man of enormous patience.

(7) Politics is like vaudeville. No matter how often the entertainer performs, each crowd is seeing him for the first and perhaps only time. This morally obligates the performer to give his best. It was this understanding of a very old tradition that enabled Reagan to be so stunning day after day and event after event. He could take the same cards out of his coat pocket, reshuffle them, and give a speech he had given thirty times but turn it into a sparkling moment for this audience at this moment in this hall. It was that sense of doing your very best in the here and now combined with the depth of thought and preparation behind the cards that made him so powerful a public speaker.

I feel privileged to have supported and worked with President Reagan. I know that without him we would not have had the Contract with America, and we would not have won and kept a Republican majority in the Congress. Conservatives who hope to keep that majority should think long and hard about the lessons President Reagan taught us.