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Claremont Institute Precepts: The Rest of Reagan
By John Meroney

Few politicians, especially presidents, have lived as much of their lives in the public eye as Ronald Reagan has. Almost three decades of Reagan's life before he became a candidate for public office are recorded on film. As his presidency recedes deeper into the past, and Reagan himself becomes part of history, it is now finally possible for his career as an actor to be seriously examined.

Not only have historians and biographers missed the full significance of Reagan's Hollywood life, they have largely ignored the importance of the roles he played, and the themes and storylines of his films. On closer examination, many of the themes that resonate in the majority of Reagan's movies -- patriotism, liberty, justice, sacrifice, loyalty, and idealism -- are in keeping with the principles by which he lived his life, and the ones he used to shape the public policy of his presidency.

In all, Reagan made 54 films, portraying characters who were mostly heroes. True, some pictures just don't fit Reagan. In "Santa Fe Trail" and "The Last Outpost" he played Confederate soldiers, even though as president he was fond of quoting Lincoln. In "The Killers," a 1964 film based on the Ernest Hemingway short story, Reagan played an underworld boss. The film is notable mostly because it is the only time he was ever a villain and because it was his last picture. He regretted that he went out on such a note.

It's difficult to call a failure the first MCA actor to win a contract (negotiated in 1941 by Lew Wasserman) worth more than \$1 million. But that is one of the hackneyed accusations leveled against Reagan. He was then getting roles that had been offered initially to the likes of William Holden, John Wayne, and Robert Young. Jack Warner

personally ranked Reagan ahead of James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart as a studio commodity. Even years later, when Reagan turned to television as the host of "General Electric Theatre" on CBS, he was generating higher ratings than Arthur Godfrey, Red Skelton, Perry Como, Jack Benny, and even the powerhouse "Gunsmoke" series. These were not the accomplishments of a professional mediocrity.

Reagan's best-known films are "Knut Rockne All American" (1940), and "Kings Row" (1942). In the former, he plays Notre Dame football star George Gipp. The lines from his deathbed scene -- "Someday when the team's up against it, the breaks are beating against the boys, ask them to go in there with all they've got, win just one for the Gipper. I don't know where I'll be then, but I'll know about it. I'll be happy" -- are almost as well-known as "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

And in "Kings Row," Reagan is playboy Drake McHugh, the only apparently normal character in a small town awash in dark, macabre secrets such as suicide, illegitimacy, and insanity. Even an operation that handicaps Drake for life ("Where's the rest of me?!") doesn't kill his spirit.

"The greatest movie I was ever in was 'Kings Row,' and I think it was the finest part I ever had," Ronald Reagan said in a 1980 interview about his Hollywood years. "I get a kind of naughty pleasure out of the fact that when it first came out, the critics panned it unmercifully, and today it is very often included as one of the ten best pictures of all time."

Reagan loved movies, and his work in Hollywood was as critical to shaping his presidency as practicing law was to Lincoln, or commanding the PT-109 was to JFK. The roles Reagan played are critical parts of his life's work.

But the films that seemed to most profoundly influence Ronald Reagan were made about as far away from Hollywood as one can get. Ironically, he wouldn't have been able to see them were it not for his Hollywood background. During the War, Reagan was an administrator of the Army Air Forces's Signal Corps, and he helped supervise the making of military training and promotional films. That put him in a position to be one of the first to see color footage of Nazi death camps filmed by government combat camera units and processed in Culver City before they was sent to the War Department in Washington.

The films gave Reagan a visual image of evil in the world, and when the war ended, Reagan secretly took a duplicate of one in the event that the day would come when the true horrors of the Holocaust were questioned. "Jews who had tried to make an escape just got mowed down," he said. "The camera just panned along the fence, showing their hands still clutching at the wire."

Ronald Reagan never won an Oscar. But even the most liberal of historians now concede that he did win the Cold War -- or at least played the decisive role in ending it. By any measure, that is a performance worthy of a Lifetime Achievement Award.

John Meroney is an associate editor of The American Enterprise magazine and a 2000 Abraham Lincoln Fellow of the Claremont Institute. This article is excerpted from the

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