



Reagan: The Life

By H. W. Brands

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From master storyteller and *New York Times* bestselling Historian H. W. Brands comes the definitive biography of a visionary and transformative president

In his magisterial new biography, H. W. Brands brilliantly establishes Ronald Reagan as one of the two great presidents of the twentieth century, a true peer to Franklin Roosevelt. *Reagan* conveys with sweep and vigor how the confident force of Reagan's personality and the unwavering nature of his beliefs enabled him to engineer a conservative revolution in American politics and play a crucial role in ending communism in the Soviet Union. Reagan shut down the age of liberalism, Brands shows, and ushered in the age of Reagan, whose defining principles are still powerfully felt today.

Employing archival sources not available to previous biographers and drawing on dozens of interviews with surviving members of Reagan's administration, Brands has crafted a richly detailed and fascinating narrative of the presidential years. He offers new insights into Reagan's remote management style and fractious West Wing staff, his deft handling of public sentiment to transform the tax code, and his deeply misunderstood relationship with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, on which nothing less than the fate of the world turned.

Reagan is a storytelling triumph, an irresistible portrait of an underestimated politician whose pragmatic leadership and steadfast vision transformed the nation.

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Editorial Review

Review

“H.W. Brands’ new biography tells the [Reagan] story as well as you could ask for in a single volume. A lucid and witty writer, Mr. Brands lays out the facts in short chapters that bounce along like one of the ‘bare-fisted walloping action’ films that Reagan once starred in. He has a talent for letting his sources speak for themselves. . . . Illuminating. Mr. Brands recounts Reagan’s triumphs and the scandals even-handedly.”

—*The Economist*

“*Reagan* is an engaging study of a man who Brands says defeated Soviet communism and achieved a halfway economic revolution. Drawing on Reagan’s diary, speeches, statements, letters and memoirs, and on interviews with the president’s aides, Brands tells a briskly paced story. . . . Reagan’s legacy continues to fuel the ideas and frame the choices facing his would-be successors, and this astute biography is further evidence that the 40th president continues to cast a long shadow over a still largely conservative political order.” —*The Washington Post*

“Brands is the rare academic historian who can write like a best-selling novelist. Through meticulous research, he recreates decades-old dialogue and puts the reader inside the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room and the house in Reykjavík, Iceland where Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev debated the fate of the world and laid the groundwork for the end of the Cold War.” —*USA Today*

“Superb . . . it is hard to imagine a biography of Ronald Reagan that could be more thorough, evenhanded and insightful.” —*Dallas Morning News*

“A lively and lucid narrative of the life of America’s 40th president. . . . Brands is surely right that Reagan was the most persuasive political communicator since Roosevelt.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Brands’ judicious biography of Ronald Reagan is as much about the art of governing as about the man himself. . . . Reagan emerges as a great but terribly flawed president who managed to reorient government priorities after the exhaustion of liberal administrations and ideas, but one who also burdened the country with enormous debts that his successors had to pay down.” —*Star Tribune*

“Brands’ work draws richly from Reagan’s presidential diaries and other recently released sources that earlier biographers couldn’t tap. . . . His history of the important meetings with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev is detailed and balanced, with the views of both sides given equal weight. These chapters are Brands’ best writing, reinforcing the significance of those arms-reduction efforts and both men’s insistence on ending the threat of nuclear weapons.” —*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Brands’ book stands out in the canon of works on Reagan. . . . With an expert’s talent for synthesizing earlier works, access to previously unavailable sources and new interviews, Brands creates a riveting narrative. His prose flows as smoothly as his subject’s speeches, and his insights provide a fresh look at a transformative president that celebrates his accomplishments but never ignores his blunders. A brilliant example of the biographer’s craft, *Reagan* deftly and boldly provides a balanced portrait of a man whose personality remains elusive but whose legacy continues to resonate.” —*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Readers will be greatly attracted to Brands’ skills as a narrative historian . . . [he] delivers high drama in treating Reagan’s handling of diplomatic affairs, tensions with the press corps and squabbles with Congress.

Few American historians and biographers can compete with Brands as a powerful historical storyteller. Make no mistake, this is a first-rate presidential biography. . . . The definitive biography of Reagan.” —*The Oregonian*

“Brands is an immensely talented writer . . . [Reagan] is a pleasurable read.” —*The Daily Beast*

“A keenly researched book, filled with fascinating stories about a young man who escaped Illinois and an alcoholic father to pursue a dream of fame in Hollywood, eventually playing the role of his life as the leader of the free world.” —*Tampa Bay Times*

“Monumental life of the president whom some worship and some despise—with Brands providing plenty of justification for both reactions. . . . An exemplary work of history.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“A superb biographer writing at the top of his game has found the perfect subject for his narrative skills and profound understanding of the American presidency. Over the years H. W. Brands has produced an extraordinary body of historical and biographical works. This is his masterpiece.” —Doris Kearns Goodwin, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Bully Pulpit*

“With characteristic skill and insight, H. W. Brands has painted a compelling portrait of a ubiquitous yet still-misunderstood American. From the Midwest to Hollywood to the pinnacle of power, Reagan was at once enigmatic and effective. Read this great new book to see why.” —Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Thomas Jefferson*

“A superb American historian has brought us a fascinating, judicious, original, and concise biography of one of the most important presidents in American history. It is impossible to understand the late twentieth century without understanding Ronald Reagan, and H. W. Brands here addresses an impressive range of the key mysteries of the fortieth president's epoch and life.” —Michael Beschloss, author of *Presidential Courage*

“Ronald Reagan understood what was best about America, and expected the best for it—which is why he led it so successfully. In *Reagan*, H. W. Brands expresses, with deep, deft, strokes, what will become the accepted view of a great man.” —Richard Brookhiser, author of *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln*

“No one loved a good story better than Ronald Reagan. His own story—synonymous with the American Century and reflected in his political evolution from New Deal Democrat to Washington-phobic conservative—has never been told better. Studded with fresh insights, empathetic and yet constructively critical, it may well be H. W. Brands's finest book. Certainly it confirms Reagan's place as the conservative FDR, a transforming leader whose influence on his country's politics and governance is arguably greater than the day he left the White House.” —Richard Norton Smith, author of *On His Own Terms: A Life of Nelson Rockefeller*

“National treasure H. W. Brands, who gave us the definitive single-volume biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt, completes his biographical *tour d'horizon* of twentieth-century politics with this superb life of Ronald Reagan. In doing so, Brands tracks the paths we wandered through the depression and the Second World War, the battle against communism, and the conservative revolution. How did we get to today's angry, polarized nation? Read Brands's life of Reagan, and find out.” —John A. Farrell, author of *Clarence Darrow* and *Tip O'Neill and the Democratic Century*

About the Author

H. W. Brands holds the Jack S. Blanton Sr. Chair in History at the University of Texas at Austin. A *New York Times* bestselling author, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in biography for *The First American* and *Traitor to His Class*.

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Reagan remembered three things from childhood: that his father was a drunk, that his mother was a saint, and that his ability to make an audience laugh afforded an antidote to life's insecurities and embarrassments.

"When I was eleven, I came home from the YMCA one cold, blustery, winter's night," Reagan recalled decades later. "My mother was gone on one of her sewing jobs, and I expected the house to be empty." Nelle Reagan worked to supplement her husband's earnings. "As I walked up the stairs, I nearly stumbled over a lump near the front door; it was Jack lying in the snow, his arms outstretched, flat on his back." Reagan and his older brother, Neil, called his mother and father by their first names. "I leaned over to see what was wrong and smelled whiskey. He had found his way home from a speakeasy and had just passed out right there. For a moment or two, I looked down at him and thought about continuing on into the house and going to bed, as if he weren't there. But I couldn't do it. When I tried to wake him he just snored--loud enough, I suspected, for the whole neighborhood to hear him. So I grabbed a piece of his overcoat, pulled it, and dragged him into the house."

The boy watched his father during several years and drew inferences. "Jack wasn't one of those alcoholics who went on a bender after he'd had a run of bad luck or who drowned his sorrows in drink," Reagan said. "No, it was prosperity that Jack couldn't stand. When everything was going perfectly, that's when he let go, especially if during a holiday or family get-together that gave him a reason to do it. At Christmas, there was always a threat hanging over our family. We knew holidays were the most likely time for Jack to jump off the wagon. So I was always torn between looking forward to Christmas and being afraid of its arrival."

Jack Reagan's drinking made him an unreliable breadwinner, and the family bounced around Illinois during his younger son's first decade. Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in Tampico on February 6, 1911. The family moved to Chicago when he was two, then to Galesburg, to Monmouth, and back to Tampico. The places passed like scenes outside a car window. Reagan remembered a noisy fire engine from Chicago that made him want to be a fireman. America entered World War I in April 1917, when the family was in Galesburg; the soldiers on the troop trains passing through seemed to a six-year-old to embody adventure and heroism. The war ended in November 1918, with the family in Monmouth, where the celebrations almost overwhelmed the lad. "The parades, the torches, the bands, the shoutings and drunks, and the burning of Kaiser Bill in effigy created in me an uneasy feeling of a world outside my own," he remembered.

The family landed in Dixon when Reagan was nine. The town of ten thousand became his home until he left for college. Jack Reagan pulled himself together a bit, or perhaps Nelle simply put a stop to the serial moves. But as his sons grew into teenagers, they encountered challenges of a different sort. Dixon had few Catholics and disliked most of those. The boys didn't practice their father's faith, but the malignant papism the town bullies saw in Jack Reagan was imputed to them, and they were forced to defend themselves, sometimes with fists. More insidious and less amenable to riposte was the scorn they endured on account of Jack's boozing.

Nelle Reagan explained her husband's weakness in terms intended to elicit the boys' sympathy and understanding. "Nelle tried so hard to make it clear he had a sickness that he couldn't help, and she

constantly reminded us of how good he was to us when he wasn't drinking," Reagan recalled. Nelle was Scots-English by ancestry, to Jack's Irish, and she displayed the proverbial thriftiness of the Scot. Not that she had much choice, given her husband's uncertain earnings. She mended and re-mended Neil's clothes for passing down to Ronnie. She sent Neil to the butcher to cadge liver for a mythical family cat. She filled the stew pot with oatmeal and passed it off as a delicacy. "I remember the first time she brought a plate of oatmeal meat to the table," Reagan recounted. "There was a thick, round patty buried in gravy that I'd never seen before. I bit into it. It was moist and meaty, the most wonderful thing I'd ever eaten."

Nelle schooled her boys in religion, by precept and especially by example. She spent every Sunday at the Disciples of Christ Church and took the boys with her, to Sunday school at first and then to the regular services. She never thought ill of anyone, so far as her sons could tell. "While my father was a cynic and tended to suspect the worst of people, my mother was the opposite," Reagan remembered. "She always expected to find the best in people and often did, even among the prisoners at our local jail to whom she frequently brought hot meals." She preached and practiced the Golden Rule. "My mother always taught us: 'Treat thy neighbor as you would want your neighbor to treat you.'?" She put others ahead of herself, and her sons foremost. "While my father was filled with dreams of making something of himself, she had a drive to help my brother and me make something of ourselves."

In one respect Jack Reagan seemed entirely admirable to his sons. Their youth witnessed the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, which added Catholics, Jews, and immigrants to African Americans as targets of its venom. Jack forbade the boys to see *The Birth of a Nation*, the D. W. Griffith film that made heroes out of the white-robed vigilantes. In vain did Neil and Ronnie point out that all the other kids were seeing the picture and that, anyway, the Klan in the movie was of a different time and place. "The Klan's the Klan, and a sheet's a sheet, and any man who wears one over his head is a bum," Reagan recalled Jack saying.

Reagan told another story that Jack had told him. On the road for work, Jack checked into a hotel where the proprietor assured him, "You'll like it here, Mr. Reagan. We don't permit a Jew in the place." Jack grabbed his suitcase and turned to leave. "I'm a Catholic," he declared. "If it's come to the point where you won't take Jews, then some day you won't take me either." Jack Reagan spent that cold night in his car.

Neil Reagan was socially adept and a good athlete, with little trouble finding a niche after each of the family's moves. Ronnie, two and a half years younger, wasn't so lucky. The frequent relocations left him disconcerted. "I was forever the new kid in school," he remembered with retrospective anxiety. "During one period of four years, I attended four different schools." Neil's grace at sports eluded him. "I was small and spent a lot of time at the bottom of pile-ons in sandlot football games. In baseball, I was forever striking out or suffering the indignity of missing an easy fly ball. I was so lousy at baseball that when our group was choosing up sides for a game, I was always the last kid chosen. I remember one time when I was in the eighth grade. I was playing second base and a ball was hit straight toward me but I didn't realize it. Everybody was looking at me, expecting me to catch it. I just stood there. The ball landed behind me and everybody said, 'Oh, no!'" Decades later the memory still stung. "You don't forget things like that."

Some of his trouble was myopia, which glasses partially remedied, albeit at the cost of his being taunted as "Four-Eyes." He preferred the nickname Dutch, originally for the way Nelle cut his hair. But the damage to his psyche had been done. "I had a lot of trouble convincing myself I was good enough to play with the other kids, a deficiency of confidence that's not a small matter when you're growing up in a youthful world dominated by sports and games. I was always the first to think: I can't make the team. I'm not as good as Jack or Jim or Bill."

In one respect, though, he was as good as the others. Nelle Reagan contributed to the cultural life of Dixon by organizing amateur performances at her church, where participants delivered passages from books, plays, poems, or speeches they had committed to memory. Nelle performed and loved the experience. She encouraged her sons to join her. Neil accepted readily; Dutch required convincing. But she persisted and eventually won him over. “Summoning my courage,” he recalled, “I walked up to the stage that night, cleared my throat, and made my theatrical debut. I don’t remember what I said, but I’ll never forget the response: People laughed and applauded. That was a new experience for me and I liked it. I liked that approval. For a kid suffering childhood pangs of insecurity, the applause was music.”

The music fed his fondness for stories. Reagan was an early reader, with a sticky memory. The tales of the Rover Boys, of Tarzan and Frank Merriwell, provided escape from his father’s drinking and smoothed the rough edges of life for the new kid struggling to fit in. Someday, he dreamed, his world would be like that of the popular, athletic Merriwell. Stories also provided a rare chance to bond with his father, who taught him how to spin a yarn. “He had a wry, mordant humor,” Reagan remembered of Jack. “He was the best raconteur I ever heard, especially when it came to the smoking-car sort of stories.” Nelle took exception to her husband’s bawdy tales, but on this point her son sided with his father. “Jack always made clear to us that there was a time and place for this sort of anecdote; he drew a sharp line between lusty vulgar humor and filth. To this day I agree with his credo and join Jack and Mark Twain in asserting that one of the basic forms of American humor is the down-to-earth wit of the ordinary person, and the questionable language is justified if the point is based on real humor.”

An inspiring teacher encouraged young Reagan’s storytelling. B. J. Frazer informed the students in his ninth-grade English class that good writing should be entertaining as well as informative. “That prodded me to be imaginative with my essays,” Reagan recalled. “Before long he was asking me to read some of my essays to the class, and when I started getting a few laughs, I began writing them with the intention of entertaining the class. I got more laughs and realized I enjoyed it as much as I had those readings at church.”

His stories displayed various motifs. “’Twas the night of Hallowe’en, but nothing was still,” he wrote in one. “The good people went to sleep that memorial”—presumably “memorable”—“Saturday night with the sounds of laughter, running feet, and muffled shouts ringing in their ears. Then they were peaceful, and only then, at twelve o’clock, a gasping, panting roar awakened the town.” The town’s pranksters have been at work in the dark beyond the rail station. “The freight due from the north was vainly fighting to get over a hundred foot stretch of greased track.” Eventually, the engineer coaxes his engine and cars beyond the slippery spot. “But the next morning a greater shock came. The city was transformed, but less beautiful. The telephone poles were artistically draped with porch furniture, signs, and various parts of buggys and wagons. The streets looked like rummage sales, while schools and stores found their doorways piled with representatives of the last nights”—here the sentence ends, short a word or two and an apostrophe. The story concludes with a flourish: “But alas! Except for an occasional chair on a telephone pole, the scene was soon shattered by the respective owners of the collected articles.”

In eleventh grade he crafted a longer tale. “Mark had, with an air of mystery and promise, insisted that I dine with him,” it began. Mark and the narrator are students at Yale—the alma mater of Frank Merriwell—and they are visiting New York City for the day. “Here we were, in one of those little cafes tucked in a cranny just off Broadway, a place without the elegance of famous places, and without the soiled squalor of the Bowery, a place that defied any attempt to classify it.” They overhear two men seated nearby discussing a nefarious plot. “One was a tall dark man with glittering black eyes and a lean hard jaw. His companion, who seemed to do most of the talking, was a swarthy, dark haired man, short and stout with a pointed Van Dyke

beard and a pointed waxed mustache. Suddenly we heard the talkative man hiss, 'Fool! bombs are too bungling. Gas is smooth and silent.' My heart suddenly cross-blocked my liver and my adam's apple dropped-kicked a tonsil." The conspirators depart the restaurant but leave behind a piece of paper, which Mark snatches up. The paper has a diagram of the U.S. Treasury building in Washington. "The word gas seared through my brain like a hurtling meteorite. For outlined in red ink on the map was the complete ventilation system of the Treasury building." Mark and the narrator stare at each other. "We were speechless. It did not seem possible that two mere undergraduates of Yale should stand alone between this gang of maniacs and the horrible tragedy outlined on that soiled paper." But they have to try. They race to the local police station and convey their intelligence to the sergeant, who piles them into his squad car to chase down the plotters. They catch them, only to have the desperate pair laugh in their faces. They are not criminals at all, but fugitives from a mental asylum, as Mark discovers from a newspaper conveniently at hand. "He held before our startled eyes a screaming headline, 'Lunatics Escape. Reward.' Beneath these startling words were photographs of our new found friends. So the honor of 'old Eli' was upheld."

B. J. Frazer headed Dixon High's drama program when he wasn't teaching English, and he encouraged Reagan to try out. Reagan did so gladly, seeking more of that welcome music. By this time he had outgrown a bit of his shyness, not least by discovering a sport, football, that required neither keen eyesight nor particular coordination in those who played the line. Yet the sensitivities of earlier days remained, and performing onstage continued to ease them. "For a teenager still carrying around some old feelings of insecurity, the reaction of my classmates was more music to my ears," he said. The experience grew more habit-forming with each curtain call. "By the time I was a senior, I was so addicted to student theatrical productions that you couldn't keep me out of them."

Users Review

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