

## *Farewell to the Gipper*

On Friday of the week this is written, they'll bury my president. He was the first man I ever voted for in a presidential election, in 1984. I was nineteen, and profoundly grateful for the opportunity to cast my ballot for someone I really believed in.

I fondly recall the glorious verbal bloodbaths my friends and I perpetrated on each other just about every day in high school, normally with him as the main subject of debate. Usually those arguments pitted me – the young “Christian right” extremist – against three or four of my agnostic or atheist or Jewish friends. The discussions were a marvelous form of recreation, but tinged with real frustration. After all, I had been too young to vote for Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. So the first Tuesday in November, 1984 was a delicious day. The first Saturday in June, 2004 was a bit more somber: Reagan was dead.

What I always appreciated about Mr. Reagan was his ideas: crisp, clear, correct, and often obviously Christian. They were ideas like:

- The Soviet Union was an “evil empire.”
- When it comes to international relations, it may be nice to be loved, but it's more important to be respected.
- “Government is not the solution to the problem; government *is* the problem.”
- Capitalism can be cold, but not nearly so cruel as communism.
- The taxpayer's money belongs to the taxpayer.
- It's wrong to kill babies before they're even born.
- Our freedoms come from God, not from our government.
- America really is, or at least can become, what our Pilgrim Fathers envisioned: a “shining city set on a hill.”

I still believe it all, too. If I preach against America's sins a little too bitterly, it's because I love America so deeply, and am so personally disappointed by our collective failures. I'm a patriot who's also a preacher. And at heart, I'm still the Reagan Republican today that I was when I was nineteen.

Of course, that was then. I've got a couple extra decades of experience layered on top of my ideology. I've come to see enough about Republicans to know that if there were no Democrats, the strong, the smart, and the rich would virtually enslave the weak and the poor in America within a single generation. (Don't get too hopeful of my soon switching parties, though. I'm equally sure that, if there were no Republicans, the Democrats, many of them with all the best intentions, would have America turned into an essentially socialist and totalitarian state – a new Soviet Union – within a single century.) To put that simply, Republicans and Democrats need each other, to balance out our excesses.

I'm reasonably sure that by the time I turn eighty (if I live that long, and if Jesus waits that long to return), there will be a pretty strong consensus among historians that, just as Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the greatest president of the first half of the twentieth century, Ronald Wilson Reagan was the greatest of the second half. What's so bizarre about that, of course, is that the two men held almost exactly opposite political ideas.

Here's how I understand that mystery. What made them both stand above their peers was not their politics. It was their unflappable confidence that the basic idea of America is good, that the certain destiny of America is success, that the ultimate author of American liberty is God, and that free men make better workers and warriors than enslaved men do. In short, they believed in America with such fierce faith that they made their countrymen believe, too. Each was a president who lifted an entire nation almost entirely on the fulcrum of his own confidence in America.

This Independence Day, I pledge never again to dwell on America's many sins without dwelling equally on our country's manifold blessings and virtues. This Fourth of July, as I thank God for Ronald Reagan's life and legacy, I pray once more: may God bless America!

Grace & peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'CJ' or similar, written in a cursive style.