

RONALD REAGAN'S JOURNEY

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

“And in all of that time I won a nickname, “The Great Communicator.” But I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: It was the content. I wasn’t a great communicator, but I communicated great things, and they didn’t spring full bloom from my brow, they came from the heart of a great nation — from our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in principles that have guided us for two centuries. 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.”

From Ronald Reagan’s Farewell Address to the Nation.
January 11, 1989

HE WAS OFTEN KNOWN AS “DUTCH” AND “THE GIPPER,” AND FOR A PENCHANT FOR JELLYBEANS AND COWBOY BOOTS. IN HIS 1984 RE-ELECTION BID FOR THE PRESIDENCY AGAINST WALTER MONDALE, RONALD REAGAN WON BY THE LARGEST NUMBER OF ELECTORAL VOTES OF ANY CANDIDATE IN AMERICAN HISTORY: 525 TO 13. YET IT IS PERHAPS HIS ROLE AS “THE GREAT COMMUNICATOR” THAT IS REMEMBERED THE MOST. ONE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR IS EXAMINING REAGAN’S LEGACY IN A WHOLE NEW WAY, AS HE OUTLINES THE PRESIDENT’S JOURNEY FROM NEW DEAL DEMOCRAT TO CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN.



Dr. Edward M. Yager

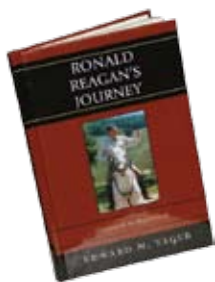
Dr. Edward M. Yager’s new book, *Ronald Reagan’s Journey: Democrat to Republican* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), assesses the influences that provoked Reagan’s transformation, beginning with the core values he acquired during his youth, and their relationship to his later political development. In tracing Reagan’s political development, Yager argues that Reagan’s presidency cannot be fully understood and evaluated without significant attribution to the spiritual, political, and economic beliefs he formed during his journey from Democrat to Republican.

RONALD REAGAN'S



A native Californian, Dr. Yager was in high school and college when Reagan was governor. "As I did more and more reading on Reagan and the Reagan presidency, I discovered that he had two autobiographies — one that was written before his presidency and one that was written afterward — and that many biographies had been written on the former president as well," he said. "Still there were no studies on the reasons why he went from a New Deal liberal to a conservative Republican."

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Dr. Edward M. Yager's new book, Ronald Reagan's Journey: Democrat to Republican

After receiving a WKU summer faculty scholarship grant in 2002, Dr. Yager traveled to California, where he spent a month reviewing archival information at the Ronald W. Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. "The Reagan Library had been open only about ten years, so this book affords me the opportunity to include new information," he said. "I took an analytical approach to my research. I studied primary and secondary sources of information that outline the changes that occurred in Reagan's political development from 1945 to 1962."

Reagan was born and raised in a New Deal home. Everyone in his family was a Democrat. He voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt four times, and he campaigned for Harry S. Truman. But Yager says that from 1945 to 1962 there was a sequential process, including a series of experiences in the 1940s with Communism in Hollywood, in which Reagan's foreign policy views moved him from ambivalence to more of a hard-line view toward the Soviet Union. "His domestic policy views — especially the view that the federal system was out of balance — evolved much more slowly," Dr. Yager explained. "Those changes came later in the 1950s, and as late as 1955 he still considered



President Reagan at a Reagan-Bush Rally in Endicott, New York

himself to be a liberal, New Deal Democrat."

"In my book I have a chapter on each distinctive influence provoking his political development — his perception of the Communist threat; his conviction that United States governmental authority was too centralized in Washington, D.C.; and his agreement with arguments advanced by conservative intellectuals during the 1950s," Yager said. "Reagan also discussed and debated politics with friends and family. In 1966, when he ran for governor, he had a fully developed, coherent, political philosophy as a conservative Republican."

Many people attribute Reagan's remarkable change to Nancy or his father-in-law, but Dr. Yager says that

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Photos courtesy of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

thought is simply not true. "Between 1945 and 1962, Nancy did not have a serious interest in politics."

Still Reagan's reading, arguing, and debating were only secondary causes for changes in his domestic policy views. The primary influence came through his experience with the General Electric Company. "From 1954 to 1962 Reagan served as an ambassador for General Electric," Yager explained. "He visited the plants, met with 250,000 G.E. employees and community groups, and delivered public relations speeches to promote a higher morale. He noticed that quite a few G.E. employees and community groups complained about high taxes and over-regulation by the federal government. Reagan did his own research and writing for his speeches, and he soon began including more domestic policy issues. Thus he gradually moved away from supporting an activist federal government."

As he articulated his new beliefs, he was critical of both political parties. Still, by the conclusion of the 1950s, Reagan found that his views were better received in the Republican than the Democratic Party. He formally changed his party affiliation in 1962. "These were genuine and authentic convictions. The Republican Party at that time

had a conservative wing, but it was relatively small," Dr. Yager explained. "Moderate Republicans dominated the party. The politically ambitious were not likely to take a conservative position."

Reagan saw himself simply as an "engaged citizen who was responding to perceived threats to American freedom," Dr. Yager mused. "He placed the highest value on freedom. He saw himself as a concerned citizen who used his opportunities to identify issues."

Reagan's popularity was due, in large part, to his affable personality. "He was able to convey his beliefs and principles in a civil fashion without being contentious or mean spirited," Dr. Yager explained. "He worked very well with Democrats. He was empathetic. During his presidency many measures passed because of his ability to forge bipartisan coalitions. He worked well with Democrat Tip O'Neill, the Speaker of the House. Finally, Reagan was able to disagree without being disagreeable."



1981 Inaugural Family Photo

RONALD REAGAN'S JOURNEY



The concluding chapter of Yager's book focuses on the journey and its meaning. "It describes the significance of Reagan's political journey for his presidency," Dr. Yager said. "Reagan's role as the Great Communicator is emphasized. These abilities were not merely technique. He invested more time and energy in his speech writing than most presidents."

Reagan was devoted to his message, and he felt it was important to communicate that with the American people and the world. "He used the bully pulpit and was dedicated to his speeches," Yager explained. Reagan delegated much to his advisors and cabinet officials so he could concentrate on articulating his public message. Ironically, this important component of his popularity was perhaps his most controversial, as this division of labor and "lack of oversight" was criticized in light of the Iran-Contra affair.

Without a doubt, Ronald Wilson Reagan was an intriguing figure, and Dr. Yager's book makes him even more so. *Ronald Reagan's Journey* has been reviewed favorably by a variety of professionals who are knowledgeable about the Reagan presidency, and the text will likely

be used in American classrooms in political science courses. Paul Kengor, professor of political science at Grove City College, wrote, "The book is consistently insightful and well-written.... Yager has done a superb job."

Dr. Yager continued his research in the summer of 2006, when he served as an Academic Visitor in a collaborative research project with Dr. Cheryl Schonhardt-Bailey, a Senior Lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Using computer-assisted content analysis, the project examined the speeches of both Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan.

Edward Yager earned his Ph.D. in political science from the University of California at Santa Barbara with an emphasis in American politics, political theory, and public administration. He is currently a professor in the Department of Political Science at WKU, where he has served since 1992. He is the internship coordinator for the department, and has taught courses on the American presidency, American political thought, American national government, political theory, ethics and bureaucracy, and political leadership. ■

