



FROM THE GLOBAL WARMING POLICY DIRECTOR



# Ronald Reagan, Freedom's Champion

by Myron Ebell

**F**ormer President Ronald Reagan's passing has prompted innumerable words about his achievements. I cannot add much new, but would like to highlight several points that are of special importance to us at CEI.

The chattering classes—the media, university intellectuals, and the permanent Washington establishment—considered Reagan dim and ignorant because he rejected the conventional wisdom. Everyone “knew” that the West couldn't win the Cold War. Everyone “knew” that inflation couldn't be lowered

without increasing unemployment and vice versa. Everyone “knew” that the modern economy was so complex that it required continual government intervention.

The Left feared Reagan because they saw he was determined to act on his ignorance. They thought he would wreck the world. Instead, he only wrecked theirs. The Brezhnev doctrine that once a country went communist it could never return to freedom is now a quaint memory. And at home, Reagan challenged the domestic liberal equivalent of the Brezhnev doctrine: the idea that the growth of government and loss of freedom could be slowed but never reversed.

Reagan's ability to see through the liberal consensus is, I think, due to two unusual experiences in his life. As president of the Screen Actors Guild, he saw, first-hand, communists try to take over the movie industry. He learned that for communists the end justifies the means; and he also learned that they could be defeated.

With his movie career over, Reagan took a job with General Electric as host of their television show and company spokesman. Visiting and speaking at GE factories and facilities all over the country, he talked to thousands of people in business and industry. He learned that profit-making businesses do a lot of good and could do a lot more if not hampered by over-regulation and high taxes.

For Reagan, these experiences awakened an interest in politics. Disliking air travel, Reagan, during his time with GE, spent long hours on trains reading books on history, politics, and economics. He read about the American Revolution, the Constitution, and economists such as Hayek, Hazlett, and Friedman.

Following his two terms as Governor of California, Reagan from 1975 to 1979 did a daily five-minute syndicated radio broadcast, which he mostly wrote himself. A selection of these published in 2001, *Reagan in His Own Hand*, shows his knowledge about a wide range of issues. And, on the issues that concern CEI, he was right on every count. He knew that the world was not running out of petroleum. He knew that government regulations caused the energy shortages of the 1970s. He thought that the federal government owned far too much land. And he recognized that the Endangered Species Act and land use planning threatened property rights—which he recognized as the basis of our freedom and prosperity.

Because Reagan believed that, “We are a nation that has a government—not the other way around,” he accomplished a great deal as president despite the liberal establishment's unrelenting opposition. He solved the energy crisis by deregulating energy prices. He lowered tax rates from confiscatory levels, thereby giving people incentives to work and save and invest. Contrary to the claim that this resulted in runaway federal deficits, Reagan forced Congress to stop the exponential growth in non-defense federal spending, which was lower as a percentage of GDP when he left office than when he entered.

Reagan also waged war on the regulatory state, perhaps the most serious and least noticed threat to freedom and prosperity—and not coincidentally the focus of CEI's efforts. From 1970 to 1981, the year Reagan took office, the number of pages published each year in the Federal Register increased from around 20,000 pages a year to 80,000. The Reagan Administration beat it down rapidly to 45,000 (under his successors it has climbed slowly back to nearly 80,000).

CEI and other advocates of limited government owe much to Ronald Reagan, not the least of which are two important lessons. First, great things can be achieved in the cause of liberty through dedication, perseverance, and courage. Second, when President Reagan left office in 1989, he reminded his “regiments” that “action is still needed if we're to finish the job.” Unfortunately, since then, we have considerable ground in the cause of restoring government to its constitutional limits. We've got a lot of work to do, and we no longer have Ronald Reagan to lead us. But we should “believe in our capacity to perform great deeds...And, after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.”

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