WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #23

In the presidential election year of 1980 President Jimmy Carter's popularity was sinking, and his bid for reelection was in trouble. When the Democrats barely renominated him over his more liberal challenger, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Carter's approval rating was historically low. A mere 21% of Americans believed that he was an effective president. The reasons were clear. Economically, millions of American citizens were feeling the pinch from stagnant wages, high inflation, crippling mortgage rates, and an unemployment rate of nearly 8%. In international affairs the nation blamed Carter for his weak response to Soviet expansion and the Iranian seizure of American diplomats as hostages in Tehran.

Ronald Reagan was the Republican nominee. Even though he had been in the public eye for a longer period of time as a screen and television personality, Reagan seemed, at first, to be a more remote presidential possibility than Carter. Reagan was a small-town boy from Dixon, Illinois, with a gift for gab. He had been a radio sports announcer in Iowa after graduation in 1932 from Eureka College. In 1937 he had gone west to cover the Chicago Cubs' spring training camp and secured a screen test, which led him to a movie career. His most memorable roles were as George Gipp -- "the Gipper," a legendary Notre Dame football player – in *Knute Rockne – All American* and as Drake McHugh, in *King's Row*, his finest role. It might have led to major stardom, but World War II intervened. Commissioned in the U.S. Army Air Force, Reagan served out the war making films for the army.

At first, Reagan had politically been a supporter of the New Deal. While in Hollywood, he became what he later called a "hemophilic liberal" and served as president of the Screen Actors Guild. Reagan kept his Rooseveltian rhetoric, but, during the 1950s, he shifted to the far right on the political spectrum. Repelled by Communist infiltrators in liberal groups, he said: "I was beginning to see the seamy side of liberalism." His developing conservative views were strengthened by his new in-laws, when after his divorce from screen star Jane Wyman, Reagan married starlet Nancy Davis in 1952.

From 1954 until 1962 Reagan eased into television as host of the "General Electric Theater." In 1952, 1956, and 1960 he campaigned, respectively, for Republican presidential candidates, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. Reagan switched his registration to Republican in 1962 and achieved political stardom two years later when he delivered a rousing speech on national television on behalf of Barry Goldwater, who was the Republican nominee in 1964.

Consequently, the Republican right had a new idol whose appeal survived Goldwater's defeat. Those who discounted Reagan as a minor actor and a mental midget vastly underrated the importance of his years in front of the camera. Politics had always been a performing art, even more so in the age of television. Few, if any, others in public life had Reagan's stage presence. Moreover, he had a contagious zest for life and a genuine sense of

humor with his perfectly timed one-liners. Many Americans found him to be likeable and trustworthy. Drawn by wealthy admirers into the campaign for governor of California in 1966, Reagan moderated his strongest rhetoric somewhat and swamped the Democrat incumbent, Edmund "Pat" Brown.

Reagan arrived in Sacramento as the newly elected governor with no clear program for the state. He had promised to reduce taxes but found that state responsibilities mandated under law required higher taxes. He railed against abortions but signed a law that permitted them in cases of rape or incest, or where childbirth would gravely endanger the physical and mental health of the mother – a sizable loophole. During his first term, the welfare rolls in California nearly doubled. During his second term, welfare reform reduced the numbers somewhat but greatly increased the payments of those remaining on the rolls.

From the start of his gubernatorial term Reagan had an eye on the presidency. But in the mid-1970s his rhetoric still seemed too extreme for the mainstream, and his "back-to-basics" speeches provoked jokes from journalists. One reporter wrote, "Ronald Reagan wants to take us back to the fifties, back to the 1950s in foreign policy and back to the 1850s in economic and domestic policy." By the eve of the 1980 elections, however, Reagan had become the beneficiary of a development that made his conservative vision of America more than a harmless flirtation with nostalgia. The 1980 census revealed that the elderly proportion of the nation's population was increasing and moving to the "Sun Belt" states of the South and the West. This dual development – an increase in the numbers of senior citizens and the steady transfer of population to regions of the country where hostility to "big government" was endemic – meant that demographics were carrying the United States toward Reagan's political philosophy.

In the 1970s the nation experienced a major revival of evangelical religion. No longer a local or provincial phenomenon that could be easily dismissed, Christian evangelicals now owned their own television and radio stations. They operated their own schools and universities. A survey in 1977 revealed that more than 70 million Americans described themselves as born-again Christians who had a direct, personal relationship with Jesus.

During the 1960s and 1970s, widely publicized Supreme Court decisions had stirred fundamentalist indignation and, thus, unwittingly helped arouse a political backlash. Among these were rulings for abortion rights, against prayer in public schools, for the right to teach Darwinism, and for narrower definitions of pornography.

The Reverend Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" expressed the sentiments of countless other groups in a new religions political right wing. They said the economy should operate without interference by the government, which should be reduced in size. They wanted the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) legalizing abortion to be reversed. They advocated replacing Darwinian evolution in schoolbooks with the biblical story of creation. They denounced Soviet expansion as a form of pagan totalitarianism. Falwell said, "Our task is <u>not</u> to Christianize America, but to bring about a moral and conservative

revolution." By not focusing on divisive theological questions, he and others sought to use traditional morality to create an interdenominational political force drawing upon millions of evangelical Christians. The moralistic zeal and financial resources of the religious right made them formidable opponents of liberal political candidates and programs. Within a year Falwell claimed over 4 million members, including 72,000 ministers, priests, and rabbis. The Moral Majority's base of support was in the South, and it was stronger among Baptists. But its appeal extended across the nation.

A curiosity of the 1980 campaign was that the religious right opposed Carter, a self-professed born-again Christian, and supported Reagan, a man who was neither conspicuously pious nor even often in church. His divorce and remarriage, once an almost automatic disqualification for office, got little mention. Nor did the fact that as governor of California he had signed one of the most permissive abortion laws in the country. But Reagan became the leader whom the religious right adored and the man for the hour of election. This was a tribute both to the force of social issues and the candidate's political skills. Later, during his first week in office, Reagan gave the anti-abortion March for Life a well-publicized presidential audience. He understood the importance of the movement of the Moral Majority, and he worked with its leaders.

By 1980 Reagan also benefited from the failing fortunes of Carter. The sitting president's reelection campaign was paralyzed by the frustrations of the Iranian hostage crisis, a desperately sick economy, and party divisions within the Democrat party. Voters had rallied around Carter early in the Iranian hostage crisis. But his plans for a rescue attempt failed miserably.

Reagan, who had lost a last-minute try for the Republican nomination in 1968 and had failed to take it away from Gerald Ford in 1976, easily won the nomination of his party in 1980. Reagan's acceptance speech, however, temporarily surprised those in attendance at the nominating convention. This Republican conservative began quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt again and again. He called upon the convention to fulfill FDR's promise. But it was a brilliant political stroke. Reagan's personal admiration for Roosevelt was deep-seated, and he very much needed to reach out to Democrat voters, who were in the majority.

With Carter on the defensive, Reagan remained upbeat and decisive throughout the general election campaign. He reassured the nation in his warm baritone voice, "This is the greatest country in the world. We have the talent, we have the drive....All we need is the leadership." To emphasize his intention to be a formidable international leader, Reagan hinted that he would take strong action to win the return of the hostages. To signal his rejection of liberal policies, he declared his opposition to affirmative action and forced busing and promised to "get the government off our backs." Most important, Reagan effectively appealed to many Americans who felt financially insecure. In a televised debate with Carter, Reagan identified the hardships facing working and middle-class Americans in an era of stagflation and asked them, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?"

On November 4th the voters gave a clear answer. They repudiated Carter, giving him only 41% of the vote. Independent candidate John Anderson garnered 6.6%, and Reagan won with 50.7% of the popular vote. Before the polls had closed on the West Coast Carter conceded the election. In the electoral college Reagan's victory was overwhelming – 489 to 49. Carter carried only six states and the District of Columbia. Moreover, the Republicans elected 33 new members of the House of Representatives and 12 new U.S. senators, which gave them control of the U.S. Senate for the first time since 1954. The New Right's long road to national power had culminated in an election victory that signaled a new political alignment in the nation.

Almost as striking as Reagan's one-sided victory was the fact that only 53% of eligible voters cast ballots in the 1980 election. Most of the non-voters were working-class Democrats in the major urban centers. Voter turnout was lowest in poor inner-city neighborhoods. Democrats had lost their appeal among blue-collar workers and ghetto dwellers. Turnout was highest, by contrast, in the wealthy suburbs of large cities, areas where the Republican party was experiencing a dramatic surge in popularity. The core of the Republican party remained the relatively affluent, white, Protestant voters who supported balanced budgets, opposed government activism, feared crime and communism, and believed in a strong national defense. Reagan Republicanism also attracted middle-class suburbanites and migrants to the Sun Belt states, who endorsed the conservative agenda of combating crime and limiting social welfare spending. Suburban growth in particular, a phenomenon that reshaped metropolitan areas across the nation in the 1960s and 1970s, benefitted conservatives politically. Suburban traditions of privatization and racial homogeneity, combined with the amenities of middle-class comfort, made the residents of suburban cities more inclined to support conservative public policies.

This emerging Republican coalition was joined by a large and electorally key group of former Democrats who had been gradually moving toward the Republican party since 1964 – Southern whites. Reagan capitalized on the "Southern Strategy" developed by Nixon's advisors late in the 1960s. Many Southern whites had lost confidence in the Democrat party for a wide range of reasons. But one factor stood out – the Democrats' support of civil rights. When Reagan went to Philadelphia, Mississippi, to deliver his first official speech as the Republican presidential nominee, his ringing endorsement of "state rights" sent a clear message. He validated 25 years of Southern opposition to federal civil rights legislation. Some of Reagan's advisors had warned him not to go to Philadelphia, the site of the tragic murder of three civil rights workers in 1964. But Reagan believed the opportunity to launch his campaign on a "state rights" note was too important. Since 1980 Southern whites have remained a cornerstone of the Republican coalition.

The Religious Right proved crucial to the Republican victory as well. The Moral Majority claimed that it had registered 2 million new voters for the 1980 election. The Republican platform reflected its influence. It called for a constitutional ban on abortion, voluntary prayer in public schools, and a mandatory death penalty for certain crimes. Republicans also demanded an end to court-mandated busing to achieve racial integration in schools, and, for the first time in 40 years, opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. Within the

Republican party conservatism had triumphed.

Reagan's broad coalition attracted the allegiance of another group dissatisfied with the direction of liberalism in the 1970s – blue-collar Roman Catholics, who were alarmed by antiwar protesters and rising welfare expenditures as well as hostile to feminist demands. Many of these were "Reagan Democrats," who had come from the "silent majority" that Nixon had swung into the Republican camp in 1968 and 1972. Many of them lived in heavily industrialized Midwestern states, such as Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, and had been a core part of the old Democrat coalition for three decades. Reagan's victory in 1980 thus hinged on both a revival of right-wing conservative activism and broad dissatisfaction with liberal Democrats. This dissatisfaction had been building since 1968 but had been interrupted by the post-Watergate backlash against the Republican party.

Now in 1980 and 1981 the Republicans were euphoric in their victory celebrations. Filled with a sense of power and destiny, Reagan headed toward the White House with a blueprint for dismantling the welfare state. The new president kept his political message clear and simple at his inauguration on January 20, 1981. Reagan promised "a new beginning." He stated that the "tax system which penalizes successful achievement and keeps us from maintaining full productivity" was the central point of attack, along with federal budget deficits "mortgaging our future and our children's future for the temporary convenience of the present....We must act today in order to preserve tomorrow. And let there be no misunderstanding – we are going to begin to act beginning today." Standing in the way, Reagan believed, was government. He insisted that "Government is <u>not</u> the solution to our problem. Government <u>is</u> the problem."

On that same inaugural day, in a final indignity endured by a well-intentioned but ineffectual President Carter, a plane carrying the American hostages in Iran left Tehran for Algiers moments after the new President Reagan finished his inaugural address. The hostage crisis had not only destroyed Carter's chances for reelection. It also had severely damaged the prestige of the United States in the Middle East and around the world.

In his first year in office Reagan and his chief advisor, James A. Baker III, quickly set new governmental priorities. To roll back the expanded liberal state, they launched a three-pronged assault on federal taxes, social welfare spending, and the regulatory bureaucracy. To prosecute the Cold War, they advocated a vast increase in defense spending and an end to detente with the Soviet Union. To match the resurgent economies of Germany and Japan, Reagan and Baker set out to restore American leadership of the world's capitalist societies and to inspire renewed faith in "free markets."