

‘Performance Artists:  
The Presidential Leadership Lineage  
from Lincoln to Reagan’

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The Ronald W. Reagan Society  
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Thank you John Morris, President Arnold, Michael Murtagh,  
distinguished guests.

This is my first time at this remarkable institution. I’m honored and  
humbled to be here with you on this occasion.

I’ve read many books about President Reagan. I’ve heard his  
numerous expressions of affection and gratitude for Eureka College  
and the transformational experiences it accorded him.

Nonetheless, nothing compares to actually being here... seeing the  
buildings, walking the grounds, stepping on to the stage in the room  
where young Dutch Reagan found his voice as a public  
communicator....These are treasured moments for anyone who has  
studied Ronald Reagan.

Eureka College laid the foundation for the President Reagan’s life  
project of self-creation and leadership.

President Reagan then served the world as a historic, consequential  
leader.

Now, Eureka College is advancing the Reagan leadership legacy through a new generation, in a new century.

This evening I'd like to offer a few thoughts on the lineage of Ronald Reagan's leadership. The Reagan Fellows here tonight are in the lineage of President Reagan's leadership. So, too Ronald Reagan is part of a lineage of historic leadership. He extended and improvised from the work of others, as artists do.

No leader walks alone.

In particular, I'd like to turn your attention to the connection of Reagan's leadership, with that of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy.

These are, to be sure, a wide-ranging group of leaders. Each represents an aspect of the American experience.

One thing they share is approaching leadership as performance art.

To begin, each was a skilled, serious writer.

### Leaders and Writers

One often sees leaders who are also writers. They have a writer's sensibility. They are in the moment—yet they are not entirely of the moment. They may have eye on the future, shone by a light from the past. They can be at once more engaged than most—yet also apart. One might argue that their engagement is greater when it coexists with reserve, distance.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin interpreted writing as an art:

Work on a good piece of writing proceeds on three levels: a musical one, where it is composed; an architectural one, where it is constructed; and finally, a textile one, where it is woven.

Lincoln was a master of the written word. The Gettysburg Address stands as a classic of poetry and imagination. In fewer than 300 words, Lincoln constructed a taut underpinning for the Union that would emerge from the Civil War. His Second Inaugural, in 1865, was intended to begin the healing process of national unification in advance of the unconditional surrender of the Confederacy.

Theodore Roosevelt looked to Lincoln as an exemplar in many aspects of leadership. He hung a portrait of Lincoln, along with a portrait of his father, in his various offices.

TR took words seriously. He said: “words with me are instruments.” He used language as a tool for change. He wrote history, the better to make it. He evaluated others’ leadership in order to raise the level of his own. TR crafted phrases that we still use a century later: “the person in the arena,” “muckrakers,” and many, many more. Even his letters to his family were written with an eye toward readers in the future. His children would smile knowingly, calling them “posterity letters.”

Franklin Roosevelt took words seriously. He was a wordsmith who brought professionalism into presidential speechwriting. The “New Deal,” “the arsenal of democracy,” “the four freedoms”... “the only thing we have to fear... is fear itself...” these are among his contributions to the vocabulary of American life and leadership.

John Kennedy was a writer. As a young person he had considered a career in journalism. As a politician he strove for eloquence. “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” ... Kennedy’s important speeches were conceived with an

eye toward history, inspired by leaders he admired, notably Winston Churchill.

And Ronald Reagan. Reagan's methodical handwriting style fit well with his care in choice of words.

He was a professional speaker for many years. He drafted his own speeches. By all accounts, he found the discipline of writing valuable in refining his thinking.

Even as a president in the modern era, with a large speechwriting staff, Reagan's voice was unmistakable. He would not hesitate to bring out his editor's pen when necessary to refine points. His speechwriters could turn to years of his writing to find the words needed to convey his thoughts.

This worked because Ronald Reagan knew his own mind.

Reagan was a diarist. Amid the ceaseless clamor and daunting demands of the presidency, he sought perspective in recording his private impressions. He was also creating a first draft for history. Dedicated diarists do not write for themselves alone.

As significant as Reagan's writing was, there is another dimension to his art of leadership: he was an actor.

### Acting Presidents

Ronald Reagan broke through many barriers in his ascent to the highest positions of leadership. His background as a professional actor, while beneficial in some ways, was also one of the greatest obstacles.

Reagan was called the Great Communicator. It was, often, a two-edged sword. He took justifiable pride in his skill as an actor. Yet

many would attempt to marginalize him, in politics, as someone who was reading others' lines, doing others' bidding. There was even a television advertisement in the 1966 California governor's campaign that attempted to link him to President Lincoln's assassin, actor John Wilkes Booth.

Certainly Ronald Reagan's role as an actor was vital to his leadership:

--Reagan was an entrepreneur. He was the farthest thing from being a "company man." As an actor you're only as good as your last performance. It's a precarious profession. You must have a sure sense of your audience: not get too far ahead, not fall too far behind.

--He was notably adaptive. He was constantly evolving. Reagan moved through various, rapidly changing technologies. He communicated with an audience directly in theatre productions here at Eureka. He also adapted to new technologies—radio, motion pictures, television—in which he was required to reach his audience through a medium.

--Actors have a total focus on results. Acting all comes together in a product. It works or it doesn't work.

--Actors cultivate heightened powers of observation and listening. Then one attempts to process and translate emotion and information, through one's mind and heart, to an audience.

--Actors prepare for parts. When Reagan was asked what kind of governor he would be, he quipped: I don't know, I haven't played one.

In fact, every leader learns to serve effectively largely from the study of other leaders. One suspects that Ronald Reagan's leadership model, his model of how to be president, was Franklin Roosevelt.

He cast his first vote for FDR. He would vote for FDR each of the four times he was on the presidential ballot.

Reagan's thinking would evolve. He reached a place where he no longer saw Roosevelt as a model of *what to do* as president. Nonetheless he likely continued to see him as a model of *how to play the part*.

It's not a stretch to surmise that Reagan studied Roosevelt in the way an actor studies a character for a role. He had seen FDR in a parade in Des Moines in the 1936 campaign. Reagan's fundamental optimism, his use of humor, his throwing his head back in laughter were recognized by many as reminiscent of FDR.

This troubled many conservatives who opposed FDR's policies. Some overlooked this as an eccentricity of Reagan's. Some dismissed it as a matter of "style."

It also troubled many liberals. They saw President Reagan recasting the FDR legacy toward new ends.

Even in that, Reagan was emulating Roosevelt. In the same way that Reagan attempted to claim FDR's mantle, FDR had sought to recast Lincoln as in line with Democratic rather than Republican ideals.

Reagan was famously asked: how could an actor be president? He responded: how could a person could be president who was *not* an actor?

Yes, Ronald Reagan is the only professional actor to achieve the presidency. He was, however, by no means the first president with highly developed, highly relevant acting skills. In, this, too, Reagan was following a lineage of leadership.

Franklin Roosevelt was a masterful public performer. He not only came to embody his ideals—American ideals. He did so from the challenge of adult-onset paralysis.

FDR is reputed to have greeted the great actor Orson Welles: “Orson, you and I are the two best actors in America!” It would be hard to argue with that.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first modern president. He was a celebrity. He embodied his vision. It was said he was “pure act.” That was apt in more ways than one.

Even when TR was shot in the chest at point-blank range, he played the role he created, insisting on speaking for over an hour before slowing down for medical care. TR called the presidency a “bully pulpit.” His actions gave life to his words.

Abraham Lincoln was a skilled courtroom advocate. He developed persuasive speaking skills over the course of his career. Like Ronald Reagan and John Kennedy, his political career was supercharged by a small number of memorable speeches. So, too, Lincoln came to embody his message, his ideals. His stovepipe hat remains indelibly associated with his public image.

John Kennedy transformed himself into a compelling public personality by dint of determination. His early efforts were poor. He transformed himself into a glamorous, charismatic force. Because of his family’s longtime business and social ties to Hollywood, Kennedy linked Hollywood and politics as never before.

Despite their partisan political differences, did Kennedy’s ratification of glamour in the presidency, bringing Hollywood further into politics, help pave the way for the rise of Ronald Reagan?

## Leadership as Performance Art

It is inspiring and humbling to reflect on the leadership lineage from Lincoln to Reagan here at Eureka College. Not only did Lincoln and Reagan each speak here. They share something important, enduring and universal.

All five leaders we've considered this evening were self-created figures. Theodore Roosevelt overcame physical limitations. He constructed an entire strenuous life on that foundation. Then TR made his experience a metaphor for the national character he sought to raise in the American people.

Franklin Roosevelt overcame the limitations of paralysis. In various ways, this resulted in his becoming the leader we recognize today.

John Kennedy was a sickly youth. He struggled amid an unremittingly competitive environment in his family of origin.

As much as the Roosevelts and Kennedy have to show us about transformation and leadership, their examples also point in another direction. They were the beneficiaries of established names. Where they started from represents a multigenerational achievement in their families of origin.

Lincoln and Reagan represent an additional dimension. Each was self-created as a leader. Yet Lincoln and Reagan were also self-made, in America parlance. Their names are recalled because of what they accomplished. That makes their example universal in a way that even the two Roosevelts and Kennedy cannot entirely match.

And yet, that is not quite right. Lincoln and Reagan were not, in an exact sense, self-made. No one can truly make himself. Though

they did not have family relationships to fall back on, they developed other relationships that guided their lives.

By his own account, the relationships and experiences Ronald Reagan garnered at this very place, at Eureka College, were decisive in the direction of his remarkable career.

No leader, no artist, walks alone. Each builds on the work of others. Reagan's leadership lineage can be seen as reaching back to Lincoln. Now, Reagan's leadership lineage reaches forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Reagan Fellows at Eureka College are a vital part of that lineage. So, too, is the Reagan Society.

It's said that life is short, art is long.

An unspoken yet unavoidable challenge awaits our response: *How will we do our part?* How will we earn our place in the lineage of leadership, meeting the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Lincoln inspired Americans to do in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Reagan in the 20<sup>th</sup>?

Thank you for your service.

Thank you for the honor of being with you this evening.

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