



RONALD
REAGAN

A Life

The Editors of New Word City

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Ronald Wilson Reagan *knew* America. He came into office in 1980 - when the national mood was glum and the future looked problematic - and he lifted the country's spirits on a wave of hope, purpose, and unabashed patriotism. In the years that followed, productivity and prosperity increased at home, the Berlin Wall came down, and the Soviet Union collapsed, making the United States the *de facto* winner of the Cold War. Reagan's policies played a part, of course, but it wasn't just his politics that captured the people's hearts. He brought something intangible to the national stage, a sunny optimism, an innate can-do spirit that simply made Americans feel better.

The former film actor's handsome, weathered face, his wry smile, quick wit, and straightforward style all worked to make his audiences feel as if they were being taken into his confidence. Dubbed The Great Communicator, Reagan didn't rely solely on his likeability and worked hard at being an effective leader. Like few presidents before him, he understood the power of symbolism, stagecraft, and the cutting, eloquent, or elegiac sound bite. Put it all together, and here was a man who was able to unite Americans behind his agenda and restore the country's greatness.

Awed By FDR

Ronald Reagan was born on February 6, 1911, in an apartment above a small bank in Tampico, a village in northwestern Illinois. “He looks like a fat little Dutchman,” his twenty-nine-year-old father, John Edward Reagan, quipped of his second son, and the nickname Dutch would remain with him throughout his life.

At the height of the great **potato famine**, the Reagan family had immigrated to the United States from Ireland, after a brief stop in England. Jack Reagan was Irish-Catholic, outgoing, ambitious, charming, and a gifted storyteller. He was also poorly educated and, as his son eventually learned, a heavy drinker. At the time of the future president’s birth, Reagan worked as a clerk in the H.C. Pitney General Store. His goal was to open his own shoe store.

Ronald Reagan’s mother, Nelle Wilson Reagan, was a devout Scotch-Irish Protestant, who enjoyed acting in amateur theater productions. She and Jack Reagan had married in 1904. “While my father had dreams of making something of himself,” Reagan would later write, “she had a drive to help my brother and me make something of ourselves.”

In 1913, the family moved to Chicago, where Jack got a job selling shoes at the Marshall Field’s department store. They lived in a small apartment near the University of Chicago. To turn on the lights, they had to deposit a quarter in a slot in the hallway.

Money was scarce, but Reagan later said he felt no sense of deprivation. The future president would remember his childhood as “a rare **Huck Finn** idyll,” although that wasn’t the whole truth. Nelle took in sewing to supplement her husband’s earnings and struggled to keep the family fed. Their main meal, served at lunch, often consisted of what she called “oatmeal meat” - browned ground beef mixed with cooked oats and smothered in gravy.