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What We Learned Last Week
Ronald Reagan and us.

By Gleaves Whitney

With the burial of Ronald Reagan last Friday, a remarkable week in our nation's recent history drew to a close. The past days were in turn mournful, celebratory, and reflective.

They were also enlightening. Americans who were reading their newspapers and watching their TV's last week learned three things. First, they got a more vivid picture of Reagan the man: I mean the human being behind the actor-governor-president. It turns out that Ronald Reagan was a much more complex and interesting person than even his supporters suspected.

Colleagues and acquaintances who approached Reagan too fast ran head on into his maddening inscrutability. While he seemed always at ease, he was never easy to know. Last week the veil was lifted. Interspersed with the old familiar stories were new ones that cast light on Reagan's inner life as a husband, father, and man of faith. For example, he may not have worn his heart on his sleeve, but there is no doubt that he had heart; it probably surprised many Americans to learn that their 40th president kept personal checks in the Oval Office to give alms to the poor.

Nor did Reagan wear his religion on his sleeve, but there is no doubt about the fervor of his faith. Especially after being shot by a would-be assassin, Reagan believed that he had been spared for a purpose, that God had a plan for him. As the nation heard last week, many of Reagan's close associates witnessed the president silently praying in times of crisis. It is particularly arresting that while lying on a gurney he prayed for his assassin, John Hinckley, before he prayed for his own recovery.

Then there are the love letters, poignant and sweet and inimitably Reagan. A recent book gathered the letters, but seeing Nancy Reagan talk about them no doubt surprised many. She reveals her husband to have been a man of force and intensity. Husbands are joking that their wives now have rising expectations but, alas, they'll never be able to measure up to such an amorous writer as the 40th president.

At the same time Americans were learning more about Reagan the man, they were learning more about Reagan the president. He was executive material, all right, the consummate doer, and he was drawn to the White House not so much "to be" president as "to do" the things that the Constitution and tradition authorized a man with vision to do. Reagan's presidency was chock-full of bold initiatives, the stuff of statecraft. Tax cuts, welfare policy, judicial nominations, national defense — in all these areas Reagan reordered public policy for at least a generation.

How did he do it? Was it just because he was the Great Communicator? We have all heard the quaint stories of his charm at the bargaining table, but essentially Reagan was a leader with the right stuff to make tough decisions. Secretary of State George Schultz likes to point out that the most important thing Reagan did during his first year as president was to fire the air-traffic controllers who were illegally striking. This action telegraphed a message not just to the nation, but to the world: Reagan would not shrink from controversial decisions; he would do the right thing; he would uphold the law.

Last week Americans also learned more about the ideas that inspired Ronald Reagan. The retrospectives on our 40th president were nothing if not lessons in political philosophy. After World War II, Reagan was inspired to fight not just communists, but communism. This is a distinction with a difference. Reagan was drawn to great ideas, and the great idea that took hold of his mind — the strongest antidote

to communism — was what Russell Kirk called ordered liberty. Reagan championed ordered liberty not because it was a concession or a privilege but because it was a God-given right. The human estate would improve in proportion to the march of ordered freedom in souls and in societies, at home and abroad. Reagan was not a political philosopher, of course, but his vaulting achievement was to give wings to freedom. His words revived malaise-weary Americans, encouraged Solidarity workers in Poland, emboldened freedom fighters in Central America, challenged curious students in Moscow, and inspired others too numerous to count — and the world changed.

With the burial of Ronald Reagan last Friday, a remarkable week in our nation's history drew to a close. Or did it? In looking back, have we not been inspired to go forward? In remembering Reagan's life, are we not prouder Americans? Is not our vision clearer? Our step crisper?

One of America's most perceptive historians, Henry Adams, wrote that a successful president needs three things: a helm to grasp, a port to seek, and a course to steer. Reagan had them all. The Constitution and tradition gave him the helm — the authority — to do bold things. His vision of ordered liberty — what he called, after John Winthrop, a "city upon a hill" — was the port he sought. His practical intelligence and practiced leadership — a felicitous combination — gave him a course to steer.

At the end of the 20th century, Reagan led the nation through turbulent waters to the lee shore of the Cold War. In the 21st century, we find ourselves once again on the windward side of history. We are tossed in roiling waters, this time in a war against terrorism. Perhaps the greatest thing Americans learned in recent days is that our great nation brings forth leaders who help us through the storms.

— *Gleaves Whitney is the director of the [Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University](#).*