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The Best of the Greatest Generation

Presidents Who Fought in the Second World War

By David Gergen
(adapted from a 2004 speech)

It is symbolic and appropriate that the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day is bracketed by the sad death of President Reagan, and now this, Gerald R. Ford's special day in Washington. It seems to me those three go together in a very natural and fitting way because President Reagan and President Ford represent so much of the best of the World War II generation.

The young men and women who served during the 1940's, for whom that was such a defining experience, have given so much to the country over the years, and Tom Brokaw has appropriately called them the "greatest generation." I just found President Reagan dying on the weekend of the sixtieth -- of course we all remember him going twenty years ago to give that wonderful speech about the boys and Point Du Hoc -- and then to have this day with President Ford, it is such a good time to reflect a bit on these two men and what they have come to represent. As Vice President Cheney said, they were rivals earlier in life -- Jerry Ford and Ronald Reagan. In 1976, Dick was serving as the chief of staff to President Ford. I happened to be on the staff and Ronald Reagan came running, as you know, in the primaries straight at Jerry Ford. It was a tough, stiff, often almost bitter election campaign, but always clean.

Jerry Ford won the first seven primaries and then Ronald Reagan caught fire in North Carolina over the issue of the Panama Canal and he won this big victory in North Carolina and then began. You could just hear his hoof beats from behind us in the White House as he made his stretch run, and it was a tough one I will tell you. It came right down to the wire. In this case Smarty Jones won but it was a tough go all the way down. It was a near death experience for us in the Ford entourage and only when we got to the convention in Mississippi did President Ford win the nomination.

By that time President Ford was some 33 points behind Jimmy Carter and simply could not catch up. He made a valiant run to catch Jimmy Carter -- came close -- and one of the great assets he had in the campaign was someone named Dick Cheney. He was his chief of staff, really growing up during those years in his mid-thirties, he did a wonderful job. Many of us came out of those days thinking Dick Cheney one day would make a wonderful president. He had the kind of integrity and solidity -- and anchors in life -- that impressed so many of us who had a chance to work with him, and others.

But Jerry Ford lost that race to President Carter and, as you know, he left the stage very gracefully and his relationship with Ronald Reagan grew over the years. I think that they found that, as in so many instances (just as his relationship with Jimmy Carter grew so much closer over the years), they shared so much more than divided them. What united them was so much greater than what divided them because they were a part of this World War II generation.

Ronald Reagan and Jerry Ford were born essentially two years apart. They both came from the Midwest and they shared common values -- the old fashioned values of thrift, industry, hard work, and a belief in God. They were men of the people and they both had fairly hardscrabble days. But they learned from their family life these old-fashioned values.

When President Ford celebrated his 90th birthday here in Washington last year he talked about the three rules that his mother had taught him that he said had served him well all his life. And they were "work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time." They had served him well all his life and in the same way I think President Reagan had those old-fashioned values that served him well too. So they were men of common values.

They were also, very importantly, men of common sacrifice. When they were young -- when the call came -- they both volunteered for their country. They both wore uniforms; they both took time out of their lives and put themselves in the country's service. And that was true of all World War II presidents and that's what's been so remarkable as you look back at this group.

From John Kennedy through George Bush, Sr., we had seven presidents. They were the World War II presidents -- the men who were lieutenants in the Second World War. Every one of those seven presidents wore a uniform; six of them were in World War II. Only one, Jimmy Carter, was too young to serve in World War II. He was in the Naval Academy when the war ended and he went on to serve honorably, as you know, in the Navy thereafter.

But all of those men were men of common sacrifice and the war for all of them was the defining experience. It's no accident that when John Kennedy was inaugurated he had in his inaugural parade a copy of the PT boat that was sliced in half when he was a captain out in the Pacific. And it's no accident that George Bush Sr. had in his inaugural parade a replica of the Avenger aircraft that was shot out from under him in the Pacific when he went down, the youngest pilot shot down in the Pacific.

What united them was common values and common sacrifice. It really was important that they all gave back. And what also united them, and unites so much the spirit of Ronald Reagan and the continuing vitality of Jerry Ford, is they had a sense of common destiny for the country, a common belief in the future of the country. They had great faith that America's best days were ahead of us.

Now we had lost our way to some extent in the 60's and 70's, and we began to lose faith in ourselves. Always, before that time, there had been a sense that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow is going to be better still. Somehow by the end of the seventies we got into the view, and Pat Caddell told Jimmy Carter this, that yesterday was better than today and today is going to be better than tomorrow. We had a downward slope in our view and Reagan was the man who helped to bring us up again because he had that sense that the country's best days were ahead of us and Jerry Ford had that sense as well. And so what united them then was a common value, common sacrifice, and common belief in the future.

Now when Jerry Ford and Ronald Reagan were in office, of course, they each had times when there were great controversies. They each had times when they seemingly stumbled. All of you here who were around in those days remember so well that Sunday morning thirty days after President Ford took office, eleven A.M. He had an announcement to make to the country; he announced to the astonishment of the country that he had pardoned Richard Nixon and all Hell broke loose. The thunderstorm that you could hear, the thunderclaps that you could hear around the country were deafening. And he had a long time in explaining why he had done that.

President Reagan had his own controversies. Howie Kurch reminded us in the *Washington Post* this morning that there were controversies with the press along the way. As someone who was his first communications director, I had to explain to people, "Listen if some of the facts are off in some of these stories, you've got to understand the power of parables. They're really important in life. There are many of our great speakers who have understood parables. Don't hold this all to the ultimate little bitty, bitty truth." I had to bob and weave sometimes but the president always enjoyed that.

There were controversies then with President Reagan with Marines in Lebanon, with the Iran Contra, and there were other controversies as well for both these presidents. But what again unites them is not only the spirit they brought to the office, but the fact that some years later in the rearview mirror of history, both of them look better and better everyday that goes by.

I think the outburst of nostalgia we've seen in the last 48 hours or so, since President Reagan's death, is a vivid reminder of how much we long for



September 2, 2008: Lieutenant Junior Grade George H. W. Bush, pictured, was shot down over the Pacific sixty-four years ago today. At twenty-years-old, Bush was among the youngest Navy pilots in the Second World War.

the kind of men that they were -- the kind of honor and decency and principle that they came to represent. Lou Cannon has been saying in the past couple of days (he was the first to win the Gerald R. Ford award for his reporting on the presidency and of course he's a wonderful biographer of Ronald Reagan), even quoting the old line about De Gaulle: "De Gaulle was not great because he was in France, De Gaulle was great because France was in him." Because *France* was in *him*. And that's true about both Reagan and Ford, they were both great because America was in them, not because they were here in America but because American was in them.

They represented so much of what is good about us as people. They were men of courage and principle while they were in office. It has been so heartwarming to see in recent years that President Ford's act of pardoning Richard Nixon is now honored. The Robert Kennedy award for courage was given a couple of years ago to President Ford for pardoning Richard Nixon. Now that's a real change in our attitudes as we look back and understand what kind of principle and courage they represented.

Ronald Reagan and Jerry Ford will also be remembered as men of honor and decency. I found President Ford to be the most decent man I've ever met in public life. He was just such a thoroughly nice man, such a thoroughly kind and generous man, and working for both of them was a privilege.

I would recall for you the story that James Cannon told, one of the judges for this. He has written a terrific biography of President Ford. He recalls how President Ford was selected for the vice presidency by Richard Nixon. Richard Nixon had just lost Spiro Agnew and he was looking for a new vice president. Everybody knew that Watergate was already breaking. Everybody knew that there was a good chance that whoever became vice president was going to become president and so it was a big deal who the new vice president was going to be.

Nixon wanted John Connelly. He called down the two people who were running Capitol Hill at the time, they were both Democrats -- Carl Alberts, speaker of the house, and Mike Mansfield, leader of the senate. He called them down to the White House and said, "Gentlemen, I'd like to talk to you about putting John Connelly in the White House." They said, "Nothing doing. We don't trust him. The Senate won't confirm him. We're not going there." And he said, "Well, who do you think I should put in there?" Carl Alberts said, "Jerry Ford." And the president said, "Why?" And he said, "Because we trust him. He's on the other side of the aisle but we can take his word to the bank. He's a man of honor." And Mike Mansfield chimed in the same way. Carl Alberts said later, "That's how Jerry Ford became vice president -- because the Democrats trusted him across the aisle." That's what kind of man he was, trusted on both sides of the aisle.

They were also men of truth, the two of them. Ronald Reagan believed not only in the truths of the day, he believed in some ultimate truths, as did Ford. Truth to Ford was precious. When Jerry Ford went on for his vice presidential hearings for the nomination process, he made a statement that I think represents what he's all about. He said, "Truth is the glue that holds government together." I believe that at the end of the day if you look at the Reagan experience and the Ford experience you will find strong records of public truth-telling.

Was it sometimes selective, as Cynthia suggested? (What was all the candor out there on front everyday?) Not at all. Sometimes the government does need to make some decisions inside, trying to decide what it's up to, how it's going to make it, where it's going to go. The president has divided advice. No administration likes to have all that divided advice on the front, you know, scattered on the pages of *Time Magazine* every week. They want to have a chance to operate sometimes in the quiet and, by the way, that's the way we were in Philadelphia in 1787. That's been typical in history. You know those proceedings were closed in 1787. Sometimes presidents don't like to tell all of the truth, but when they told the truth it was that. You could count on what they said.

I can only remember one or two instances when we had real fights in the Reagan or Ford days about telling the truth. They were both presidents who honored the truth and believed strongly in the press as an important critical institution, and they respected members of that press as fellow professionals. That's extraordinarily important in the White House. Once you start treating the press as second-class citizens, you are on the road to a serious disaster and decline in relationships. It's when you treat the press well and respect the press for the fact that they have to be skeptical, they have to be watchdogs, they don't have to be Rottweilers, but they do have to be strong watchdogs. It serves the public's interest to have strong watchdogs out there. It serves the public's interest for an administration to be straightforward and as candid as Jerry Ford was and Ronald Reagan was. It's in everybody's best interest to have a strong press and straightforwardness in the White House, and they both respected that. I think that's why we look back now upon both of these men as so representative of that World War II generation.

I would just conclude on this point: Henry Adams, who by the light of many is perhaps the best historian we've ever had in America, compared the president to the captain of a ship. "To be successful," he said, "a president must have a helm to grasp, a port to seek, a course to steer." A helm to grasp, a port to seek, a course to steer. Both Reagan and Ford grasped that helm of the presidency, the authority that was given to them by the Constitution, and they enlarged that authority by their own honor and integrity. They had a strong helm. Each of them sought a port. Each of them knew that they were taking office in the midst of storms and they wanted to reach a safe point on the other side. And each of them steered the ship of state with great care, with great diligence, and with, I think, great honesty and honor. I think we look back now and say, "Thank goodness that we had presidents like that." They brought us safely to the other shore.

Jerry Ford did bring the long national nightmare to a happy conclusion. He did restore a sense of honor and trust to the White House which had been so tarnished by the events that preceded his taking office. Ronald Reagan in many ways expanded the boundaries of liberty in this country and abroad. He rebuilt the American presidency. Honor had been restored by Ford but it continued to be a weak institution. People began to wonder whether anybody could govern when Reagan was coming in here in 1980. We had five presidents in a row, after all -- from Kennedy through Carter -- no one had served two terms. No one had made it two terms for five presidents in a row. Everybody asked, "Can we govern ourselves anymore?" There was talk in Washington at that time about Constitutional amendments, changing the Constitution, giving the president a parliamentary-like set of powers, because nobody thought anybody could govern. Ronald Reagan rebuilt the presidency. And, both of these men, I think, gave us greater confidence ultimately in our future. For all that, as representatives of the World War II generation just at a time when we are honoring so many who gave and made sacrifices at Normandy and in the war, this is a good moment to stand back and to thank both Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford for their service.

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