

6-18-2004

Professors on Reagan

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves

Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Professors on Reagan" (2004). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 98.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/98

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Professors on Reagan

Why do you think professors at America's elite colleges and universities disliked Reagan so much?

A colleague of mine who taught at Harvard reminded me that the university refused to invite Ronald Reagan to its 350th anniversary in 1986. It was quite a snubbing for the nation's oldest college to exclude the president of the United States from its festivities. The majority of faculty on many campuses did not care for Reagan, and there are several reasons why.



1. Reagan was a Republican; the majority of professors at elite colleges are registered Democrats or tend to vote Democratic.

2. Reagan was a man of ideas; many professors disagreed with his ideas and did not accept his conservative worldview or share his assumptions about the nature of human beings, society, government, and the best conditions in which ordered freedom can flourish.

3. Reagan used the language of moral absolutes when he called the Soviet Union the "evil empire"; many professors would have said that about Nazi Germany, but not about a communist regime. He also made a priority of aiding anti-communists in Central America; many left-leaning professors sympathized with the pro-Castro Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

4. Reagan as president pursued policies that did not endear him to the higher education lobby. To achieve one of his chief goals -- budget cuts -- he targeted colleges and students. Adding fuel to the fire was William J. Bennett, who could be a harsh critic of higher education. Reagan nominated Bennett to head the U.S. Department of Education, a department both of them wanted to abolish. Bennett was loathe to coddle students. At his first press conference as secretary of education, he endorsed the president's proposal to cut federal financial aid. He said that some students might have to consider "divestitures of certain sorts -- like a stereo divestiture, an automobile divestiture, or a three-weeks-at-the-beach divestiture."^[1]

As the *Chronicle of Higher Education* summarized, "The Reagan era also saw the publication of a major federal report that criticized the state of American education; the first significant efforts to crack down on abuses in student-aid programs ... and the beginning of the culture wars that would roil many college campuses for years to come." Most importantly, perhaps, "Mr. Reagan did succeed in reshaping how the federal government thought about higher education."^[2]

5. And Reagan, when he was governor of California in the 1960s, did not hesitate to criticize the campus disorder at taxpayer-supported institutions such as the University of California-Berkeley. Ironically, one of Reagan's more famous films was *Bedtime for Bonzo* (1951), in which he played a college professor. That hardly helped him as governor. The *Chronicle* notes: "As governor of California, Mr. Reagan played a very active role, battling both student radicals and the state's higher-education establishment. During his gubernatorial campaign in 1966, Mr. Reagan criticized the University of California's handling of student protests of the Vietnam War. Upon taking office, he cut the university's budget by 10 percent. Three weeks later, the university's Board of Regents [Reagan was an ex-officio regent] voted to remove the system's president, Clark Kerr, who had refused to crack down on the protests at Berkeley.... [Reagan] later posted National Guard troops on the Berkeley campus after a demonstration in which one person died in clashes with police officers."^[3]

One of Governor Reagan's more humorous encounters occurred when he went to Berkeley to meet with Clark Kerr. Reagan's car stopped where a group of protestors had assembled. One of them was a shirtless, unshaven young man with long, stringy hair. When Reagan got out of the car, the hippy shoved a sign in his face that read, "Make love, not war." Reagan took one look at him and said, "You don't look capable of either."

Berkeley and Harvard may not have cared for Reagan, but Moscow did. When Reagan went to the Soviet Union in May 1988, one of his best speeches was to students at the University of Moscow. Here is how an American witness, Admiral Edward Rowny, described the event:

"One thousand students, screened by the KGB, assembled to hear the president. They were prepared to be polite but not inclined to be persuaded. Reagan cut his 40-minute speech to 20 minutes, to allow more time for questions and answers. It was a polished, soft-sell sales pitch on the virtues of the capitalist system. His simple eloquence, clarity, and obvious conviction impressed the students. But it was during the question-and-answer period that Reagan won them over. The students found themselves taking part in an extraordinary event: The president of the most powerful nation on earth, the person they had been taught to revile as their archenemy, was giving them a basic course in Civics 101. The students had never heard such a speech....

"The students asked good questions, and Reagan provided equally good answers. When he finished, they gave him a standing ovation."^[4]

Imagine such an intellectually open, engaged reception at Harvard.
(*Question from William C. of Lake Forest, Illinois*)

^[1] "Ronald Reagan Remembered: His Administration Proposed Numerous Cutbacks in Federal Aid, and Stood Watch over the Beginning of the Culture Wars," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 18, 2004, pp. A24-25.

^[2] *Ibid.*, p. A24.

^[3] *Ibid.*

^[4] Edward L. Rowny, "Standing Ovation for Reagan, Moscow 1988," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2004, p. A11.