

## Ronald Reagan at the National Press Club, June 16, 1966



*Ronald Reagan. International News Photos. National Press Club Archives*

In the week following his first triumph in a campaign for public office—a stunning two-to-one victory in the Republican primary for governor of California—Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) traveled east to confer with the national party chairman, California’s Republican representatives in Congress, and leading industrialists. Not only had Reagan become the favorite in his bid to unseat two-term Democratic Governor Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, politicians and pundits now considered him a major national figure and future contender for the presidency. Feared as an extremist by some, Reagan visited former President Dwight D. Eisenhower at his farm in Gettysburg and gained his support. One day later, Reagan appeared before a capacity crowd at the National Press Club in Washington, where he delivered, in the opinion of a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, a “witty, deft, engaging performance in his debut in one of the capital’s chief forums.”

This period of Reagan’s political ascendancy coincided with the beginning stages of a seismic shift in American politics: the decline of modern liberalism and entrance of the conservative right into the political mainstream. Two years earlier, President Lyndon B. Johnson had trounced conservative Senator Barry Goldwater after a raucous Republican convention split the party into warring factions. Democrats secured resounding majorities in both the House and

Senate. With a clear mandate, Johnson began his new term with the announcement, "We're on our way to the Great Society," invoking the near-utopian vision for the U.S. that would form the core of his domestic policy agenda. "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all," Johnson had stated in a speech earlier in 1964. While emphasizing "it demands an end to poverty and racial injustice," Johnson pledged "that is just the beginning." In the next two years, Johnson pushed through Congress programs promoting civil rights, educational initiatives, health care, wilderness preservation, clean air and water, consumer protection, and support for the arts and humanities. He declared "an unconditional war on poverty" and signed legislation for a Model Cities program, housing reform, public works projects, job training for disadvantaged youth, aid to farmers and small businesses, and legal services for the poor.

Johnson's ambitious agenda created a host of new government bureaucracies and also provoked a backlash. On the left, many condemned the escalating war in Vietnam and criticized Great Society programs for not going far enough. More conservative Democrats switched parties as they blamed liberals for a "cycle of dependency" that led to inflated welfare rolls, increased violent urban crime, and high taxes during an era of rising inflation. Some resented federal civil rights laws that sought to insure racial equality at the local level. Hard-working taxpayers viewed with hostility televised footage of campus protests among seemingly privileged youth who often flaunted sexually permissive lifestyles. Sociologist Daniel Bell has written that a diverse conservative movement unified its factions at this time by focusing its rhetoric on "the theme of moral decay undermining American society and the role of liberalism in creating, if not permitting, that moral decay." Barry Goldwater predicted that Reagan's primary victory in California would be "the first major step in the greatest conservative surge this country has ever seen."

Reagan himself had turned from liberal Roosevelt Democrat to conservative Goldwater Republican during the previous two decades. He developed a strong anticommunist viewpoint in 1946 during a period of labor union struggles within Hollywood when he became convinced that communists had taken steps to control the motion picture industry. During the twilight of his movie career, Reagan joined General Electric as a television host and public relations spokesperson, and gained valuable experience talking with GE workers on his travels to boost morale. While on the road, he honed a speech he gave to civic groups that emphasized the threat to traditional American values of individual freedom and self-reliance from collectivist government at home and communist expansion abroad. During the final weeks of the 1964 presidential campaign, Reagan delivered a version of the speech on television on behalf of Goldwater. Many viewed it as the best speech of the campaign.

Following Goldwater's defeat, conservative politicians and a group of millionaires calling themselves "Friends of Ronald Reagan" funded his gubernatorial campaign. Reagan's political management firm convinced him to temper the apocalyptic rhetoric he employed at times, court the party's moderate

wing, and offer voters an alternative to the Great Society style of government. A team of behavioral psychologists worked with Reagan to take advantage of his image as a “citizen-politician” to offer the vision of a citizen-led “Creative Society,” basing the concept on a slogan devised by a right-wing radio evangelist helping the campaign. The community-based, decentralized Creative Society offered solutions to societal problems with government functioning to coordinate “the creative energies of the people for the good of the whole” rather than to create and administer fiscally irresponsible programs that were likely to fail by their very nature. Reagan elaborated his vision of the Creative Society in his Press Club talk.

Like Lyndon Johnson, Reagan’s Democratic opponent, Governor Pat Brown, during his two terms in office had officiated over a progressive, big government agenda. He expanded California’s freeway system, organized and enlarged the higher education structure into a model system that other states would emulate, and funded a vast water project to serve southern California. Brown supported strong civil rights legislation, expanded welfare, and increased unemployment benefits. He signed a fair employment act, created an affirmative action program and a job training project, and pushed through the legislature a controversial fair housing bill that outlawed discrimination. He then fought hard, though unsuccessfully, to oppose its repeal through a ballot initiative sponsored by realtors. Brown received heavy criticism for his handling of campus demonstrations at Berkeley when the Free Speech Movement formed in the fall of 1964 to protest university rules banning political activity. In August 1965, the Watts section of Los Angeles exploded in riots that resulted in 34 deaths while Brown was vacationing in Greece. During the tough Democratic primary battle, Brown’s opponent, Sam Yorty, the conservative mayor of Los Angeles, gained nearly a million votes as he convinced many Democrats that Brown was soft on crime, in league with leftist dissidents, and out of touch with the concerns of ordinary voters.

Californians had voted overwhelmingly for President Johnson in 1964. Reagan knew that to beat Brown he had to win approximately 25 percent of the Democratic vote. Brown attempted to scare voters by painting Reagan as an extremist, but Reagan’s sincerity, optimism, warmth, and humor, combined with a common sense attitude, marked agility during question-and-answer sessions—in evidence in the Press Club talk—and telegenic appearance won the confidence of many Californians, especially those living in suburbs who shared his critique of big government and support for traditional values.

When he saw that the situation in Berkeley provoked great anger among many of the groups before whom he appeared, Reagan repeated an exaggerated report of a sex and drugs orgy that supposedly had occurred during a dance sponsored by a Berkeley antiwar group. Reagan targeted professors, the university’s president, and Brown for complicity in campus disorders. Reagan’s condemnation of welfare fraud, fair housing laws, ineffective

government, and a pronounced moral decline among youth won the votes of many disaffected Democrats.

Reagan won the November election by a landslide. During his two terms as governor, he slowed the growth of the state's government even as the income tax rate increased to a level higher than had been reached previously in California's history. Reagan worked with legislators to enact a welfare reform act and instituted management reforms to make state's administrative structure more effective. Reagan sought the 1976 Republican presidential nomination but lost to President Gerald R. Ford. In the 1980 election, he soundly defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter and inaugurated a period his followers have named the "Reagan Revolution," as the conservative movement became institutionalized within the upper echelons of the federal government.

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*  
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