

Ronald Reagan Radio Broadcasts (1976-1979)

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Reagan on Radio: 1975-79

In a daily radio commentary that ran from 1975 to 1979, former California Governor Ronald Reagan used his considerable acting and broadcast talents to build his reputation as “The Great Communicator” and lay the groundwork for a successful presidential run in 1980. These radio commentaries also helped Reagan transition from a national public figure appreciated more for his acting ability than his political acumen into a serious political figure.

Reagan gave 1,027 of these addresses to an audience of 20 to 30 million listeners each week, interrupted only by his initial run for the White House in 1976. A researcher visiting the Reagan Library found that the former governor wrote at least 679 of the commentaries in longhand on yellow legal pads. The manuscripts are currently archived at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California.

In these sharp-edged commentaries, Reagan laid out the political themes that would become all too familiar during his presidency as he banged the drum for what Lee Edwards of the Heritage Foundation has called “a vision of faith and freedom that would restore Americans’ confidence in themselves and their country, reignite the nation’s engines of economic progress, and initiate a winning policy in the Cold War.”

Repetition was a favorite tool of Reagan’s and he used the daily commentaries to drive home his themes over and over again. Reagan’s folksy, informal style connected him with voters in a very personal way.

By listening to the speeches one can easily see strains of “Reaganomics” developing. In his third speech, delivered in January 1975, Reagan railed against intolerable inflation that had jumped from 3.4% in 1972 to 8.8% in 1973 and 12.2% in 1974. Staying true to his principles, Reagan attacked regulations imposed on businesses by all levels of government, “If we had less regulation we could have lower prices.”

A frequent topic of Reagan's was the minimum wage, which he fervently opposed. In a February 1977 speech, Reagan pointed to a rise in unemployment among black teens with every jump in the rate. He advocated a two-tier minimum wage structure with a lower rate for younger workers. Reagan went on to become the only president elected after 1934 who did not sign an increase in the minimum wage.

The foundations of Reagan's staunch opposition to Communism were apparent in many commentaries. Ten years before President Reagan implored Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," commentator Reagan called the Berlin Wall "this ugly affront to all that is humane and decent."

Governor Reagan was nearing the end of his second term when Walter Cronkite of CBS contacted him about doing commentaries from a conservative view twice a week on the "CBS Evening News." A commentary from the liberal side would be given by Eric Sevareid on two other nights. As attractive as a national audience might have been to someone with presidential ambitions, Reagan knew he could not control what aired around his segments and that CBS could cancel his appearances at any time. He turned down that offer.

It was another well-known actor who would later make an offer Reagan could not refuse. The star of TV's "77 Sunset Strip" and "The FBI," Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., told Reagan about radio vignettes on famous historical figures he had been doing for a producer named Harry O'Connor. Zimbalist said O'Connor saw an opportunity for daily conservative commentary. Reagan discussed the suggestion with publicist Peter Hannaford, who then met with O'Connor. Working with Michael Deaver, Governor Reagan's PR advisor, Hannaford assembled a plan to keep Reagan's name and views in front of the public after leaving Sacramento. It included daily radio commentaries produced by O'Connor as well newspaper columns and speaking engagements.

O'Connor had a surprise for his new star when he arrived at the studio for his first recording session in 1975. He assembled a group of Reagan's Hollywood friends to greet him. Among them were Zimbalist, Jack Webb of "Dragnet" and Art Linkletter of "People Are Funny." The program opened with a tease about the topic, then a commercial, the commentary and the closing line, "This is Ronald Reagan. Thanks for listening."

In April 1982, President Reagan started his Saturday radio addresses from the White House. Deputy press secretary Larry Speakes was in favor of Reagan using a familiar medium to speak directly to the people, "Reagan had done a masterful job on his syndicated radio broadcasts when he was out of office from 1975 until the 1980 campaign began, so we expected him to do well on these Saturday addresses."

In radio commentaries delivered both as a potential candidate and president, Reagan used the medium in a way reminiscent of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He also established the weekly radio address as a fixture in presidential communications. Each successor in the Oval Office has continued to deliver the Saturday message.

Since Ronald Reagan left the White House, Republican presidential hopefuls have tried to portray themselves as being in the mold of the 40th president. In anticipation of his 2000 run for the White House, Steve Forbes assembled a network of 100 stations to carry his own daily radio commentaries. Forbes even hired Reagan's radio producer, Harry O'Connor, to oversee his effort.

It would be difficult in today's fragmented media environment to think that one man in front of a microphone could make a difference. But the 1970s were a different time for media consumption with a limited range of options where a "Great Communicator" and national public figure like Reagan could get significant traction. Reagan media adviser Michael Deaver once told the "Los Angeles Times," "In my opinion, Ronald Reagan got elected because he was on the radio every day for nearly five years talking to 50 million people a week."

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.