

February 7, 2011

www.MRC.org

(Vol. 24; No. 3)

Reagan at 100: Special Commemorative Edition

Although a December 2010 Gallup survey found nearly three-fourths of Americans (74%) now approve of Ronald Reagan's administration, the national news media have never shared the public's positive view of our 40th President. This special commemorative edition of *Notable Quotables*, timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of Reagan's birth, documents journalists' often hostile attitude toward the man, his policies and his legacy.

"Oppressed" By Reagan's "Greed and Hard-Heartedness"

"I was a correspondent in the White House in those days, and my work which consisted of reporting on President Reagan's success in making life harder for citizens who were not born rich, white, and healthy saddened me. My parents raised me to admire generosity and to feel pity. I had arrived in our nation's capital [in 1981] during a historic ascendancy of greed and hard-heartedness."

— *New York Times* editorial page editor (and former Washington Bureau Chief) Howell Raines in his 1994 book *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*.



"The Reagan years oppressed me because of the callousness and the greed and the hard-hearted attitude toward people who have very little in this society..."

— Raines on PBS's *Charlie Rose*, November 17, 1993.

A Clueless President Living in "Fantasy Land"

"Pretty simplistic. Pretty old-fashioned. And I don't think they have much application to what's currently wrong or troubling a lot of people... Nor do I think he really understands the enormous difficulty a lot of people have in just getting through life, because he's lived in this fantasy land for so long."

— *NBC Nightly News* anchor Tom Brokaw speculating on Reagan's values in *Mother Jones*, April 1983.

Ruing Ronald Reagan's "Nightmare" Legacy

"The legacy of the Reagan administration will be with us for years. The deficit under Reagan totaled more than a trillion dollars. Someday we're going to have to pay those bills. As officials look to cut spending and taxes at the same time, we can't afford another round of voodoo economics... I remember that campaign slogan one year 'It's morning again in America.' Well, it may have been morning for some, but for a lot of people in this country it's become a nightmare."

— *CBS 60 Minutes* correspondent Ed Bradley in an April 28, 1996 speech to Benedictine University in Illinois, aired May 11, 1996 on C-SPAN.

"Although most Americans benefitted, the gap between the richest and the poorest became a chasm... Cuts in social programs created a homeless population that grew to exceed that of Atlanta. AIDS became an epidemic in the 1980s, nearly 50,000 died. Reagan largely ignored it."

— From a February 24, 1998 *PBS American Experience* profile of Reagan.

"Some say Ronald Reagan won the Cold War by spending so much on defense that the Kremlin went bankrupt trying to keep up. That won't wash. During Reagan's presidency the United States itself became a bankrupt country."

— Commentator and former anchor John Chancellor on the November 20, 1990 *NBC Nightly News*.

"Reagan, as commander-in-chief, was the military's best friend. He gave the Pentagon almost everything it wanted. That spending, combined with a broad tax cut, contributed to a trillion-dollar deficit... Social programs? They suffered under Reagan. But he refused to see the cause and effect."

— Tom Brokaw over video of homeless people on December 27, 1989 *NBC News* special, *The Eighties*.

Forget the Boom – His Policies Impoverished America

“Largely as a result of the policies and priorities of the Reagan Administration, more people are becoming poor and staying poor in this country than at any time since World War II.”

– Bryant Gumbel on NBC’s *Today*, July 17, 1989.

“It now seems the time has come to pay the fiddler for our costly dance of the Reagan years.”

– NBC’s Bryant Gumbel talking about a deal to raise taxes, *Today*, May 9, 1990.

“The amazing thing is most people seem content to believe that almost everybody had a good time in the ’80s, a real shot at the dream. But the fact is, they didn’t. Did we wear blinders? Did we think the ’80s just left behind the homeless? The fact is that almost nine in ten Americans actually saw their lifestyle decline.”

– Correspondent Keith Morrison on the February 7, 1992 *NBC Nightly News*. U.S. Census Bureau data show that median family income actually rose for all income classes from 1981 to 1989.



Tom Knew from the Start Reaganomics “Was Just a Disaster”

“I thought from the outset that his ‘supply side’ was just a disaster. I knew of no one who felt that it was going to work, outside of a small collection of zealots in Washington and at USC – Arthur Laffer, Jack Kemp. What I thought quite outrageous was the business community, which for years carped and complained that it could never get a President sympathetic to its needs, finally got its champion, Ronald Reagan. Then, to its horror, it discovered that he was actually going to press ahead with supply side – a theory whose disastrous consequences businesspeople began desperately to prepare for, but did not publicly warn the rest of the country about. They knew it simply could not work. But what they did was look to their own little life raft and not to anyone else’s.”

– NBC anchor Tom Brokaw in an interview in the left-wing *Mother Jones*, April 1983.

“Race-Baiting” Reagan Exploited “White Anger”

“After eight years of what many saw as the Reagan administration’s benign neglect of the poor and studied indifference to civil rights, a lot of those who lived through this week in Overtown seemed to think the best thing about George Bush is that he is not Ronald Reagan.... There is an Overtown in every big city in America: pockets of misery made even meaner and more desperate the past eight years.”

– ABC’s Richard Threlkeld on *World News Tonight*, January 20, 1989, reporting from a section of Miami where there had been riots.



“We keep looking for some good to come out of this. Maybe it might help in putting race relations back on the front burner, after they’ve been subjugated for so long as a result of the Reagan years.”

– Bryant Gumbel on the Los Angeles riots, April 30, 1992 *Today*.

“The sad truth is that many Republican leaders remain in a massive state of denial about the party’s four-decade-long addiction to race-baiting. They won’t make any headway with blacks by bashing [Senator Trent] Lott if they persist in giving Ronald Reagan a pass for his racial policies.... It’s with Reagan, who set a standard for exploiting white anger and resentment rarely seen since George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door, that the Republican [Party]’s selective memory about its race-baiting habit really stands out.”

– *Time*’s Jack E. White in a column posted on *Time.com* on December 14, 2002.

Can’t Think of Any Reason for History to Be Kind to Him

CBS’s Morley Safer: “You talk about a vision, and it’s some kind of abstract, vague idea. Did his [Ronald Reagan’s] vision include extraordinary deficits? Did his vision include cutting of the budgets for education and a back of the hand in terms of public education?”

Larry King: “Are you saying, Morley, history will not be kind to him?”

Safer: “No, I don’t think history particularly will be kind.... When it gets down to the substance, I don’t think history has any reason to be kind to him.”

– CNN’s *Larry King Live*, June 14, 2004.

“The Gipper Was an Airhead”

“Good morning. The Gipper was an airhead! That’s one of the conclusions of a new biography of Ronald Reagan that’s drawing a tremendous amount of interest and fire today, Monday, September the 27th, 1999.”

— NBC co-host Katie Couric opening *Today* before an interview with Reagan biographer Edmund Morris, who actually wrote that President Reagan was “an apparent airhead.” He told Couric, “He was a very bright man.”



“Aren’t you worried that we’re going to go back to the days when Ronald Reagan suggested that ketchup and relish be designated as vegetables?”

— Katie Couric to Representative Duke Cunningham, February 22, 1995 *Today*. Reagan never suggested that.

Reagan’s Presidency: On Par With a Deadly Plague

“The decade had its highs (Gorbachev, Bird)...

...and the decade had its lows (Reagan, AIDS)”

— *Boston Globe* headlines over ’80s reviews by the paper’s columnists, December 28, 1989.

Totally Baffled by Reagan’s Popularity

“I predict historians are going to be totally baffled by how the American people fell in love with this man and followed him the way we did.”

— CBS’s Lesley Stahl on NBC’s *Later with Bob Costas*, January 11, 1989.



Ask a Biased Question...

“President Reagan was unfair to the poor.”

“He was a rich man’s President.”

“He had a negative view on women’s rights.”

“He was unfair to blacks.”

“He didn’t know what he was doing.”

“He was unfair to the middle class.”

“He was unfair to old people.”

— Statements people were asked to agree or disagree with in a June 30, 1988 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll.

Let’s Not Forget About Hollywood’s Contempt for Reagan

“Given the things I said about Reagan — that he’s a criminal who used the Constitution as toilet paper — it wouldn’t surprise me if my phone was tapped.”

— Actor John Cusack in the June 1989 issue of *Premiere* magazine.

“I grew up in Los Angeles, in the inner city — you never saw drugs or drive-bys or homeless people or anything like that. All the social programs that were cut as a result of Reagan coming into office and greed just became a hobby.... I remember watching...him say people in America who are homeless are homeless because they want to be. That seemed to be one of the most — and I was a kid — I knew how cruel that was and I would never, you know, ascribe any level of greatness to somebody who would say, you know, if somebody’s hungry in America, it’s because they’re on a diet. Like that, to me, made greedy white men feel good about being greedy white men. He was the kind of the Moses of leading them to feeling good about being greedy white men. So, to me, he wasn’t a great man.”

— Comedian and former CNN host D. L. Hughley on HBO’s *Real Time with Bill Maher*, June 5, 2009.

For many more quotes, read our Special Report, *Rewriting Ronald Reagan*, at www.MRC.org.

Notable Quotables

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Published bi-weekly by the
Media Research Center
325 South Patrick Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314
Telephone: (800) 672-1423

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