

# Ronald Reagan: Where's the Rest of Him?

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**M**y face was blue from screaming, my bottom was red from whacking, and my father claimed afterward that he was white when he said shakily, 'For such a little bit of a fat Dutchman, he makes a hell of a lot of noise. . . .' 'I think he's perfectly wonderful,' said my mother weakly. 'Ronald Wilson Reagan.'"

Blue face, red bottom, white father: "I have been particularly fond of the colors that were exhibited," announces the author, wrapping himself at birth in the American flag. We are on the first page of Ronald Reagan's autobiography, *Where's the Rest of Me?* "In those early days I was sure I was living the whole life of Reagan," Reagan continues. "It was not until thirty years later that I found that part of my existence was missing."

The missing part of Reagan's existence was his legs, and he lost them in the movie *King's Row*. Some might find that loss troublesome, but it was the making of the actor's career. In his words, "I took the part of Drake McHugh, the gay young blade who cast a swathe among the ladies." Reagan romanced the town surgeon's daughter. When an accident knocked him unconscious, the "sadistic doctor" took his revenge. He "amputated both my legs at the hips." Reagan woke in a hospital bed to speak the line that made him a star: "Where's the rest of me?"

Those five words, Reagan reports, presented him with the most challenging acting problem of his career. He had to become a legless man, or the line would not carry conviction. "I rehearsed the scene before mirrors, in corners of the studio, while driving home, in the men's rooms of restaurants, before selected friends. At night I would wake up staring at the ceiling and automatically mutter the lines before I went back to sleep. I consulted physicians and psychologists; I even talked to people who were so disabled, trying to brew in myself the cauldron of emotions a man must feel who wakes up one sunny morning to find half of himself gone." When at last Reagan climbed into bed to shoot the scene, "In some weird way, I felt that something horrible had happened to my body." Trying "to reach for where my legs should be," and twisting in panic, Reagan delivered in a single take the finest shot of his career. "The reason was that I had put myself, as best I could, in the body of another fellow." But Drake McHugh was

not simply "another fellow," Reagan is telling us. He made a discovery about himself (that "part of my existence was missing") in *King's Row*. Why should the body of a legless man have possessed Reagan so personally, and raised him to stardom?

**R**eagan begins *Where's the Rest of Me?* with his birth, switches to his rebirth in *King's Row*, and then returns to his father. Jack Reagan was a shoe salesman. "He loved shoes. He sold them as a clerk . . . and spent many hours analyzing the bones of the foot." But Jack Reagan failed as a shoe salesman, and his son remembers him "flat on his back on the front porch," passed out from drink. Jack Reagan was an alcoholic. He "never lost the conviction that the individual must stand on his own feet," but he could not do so himself. Jack Reagan survived the depression by distributing relief checks for the WPA.

Like many another self-made man, this son who celebrates family had first to escape his own. How, if your father is a failed shoe salesman, do you avoid stepping into his shoes? The answer *King's Row* provided was: by cutting off your legs. The Christian loses himself as body to find himself as spirit. Reagan was born again in Hollywood, and he consummated his rebirth by relinquishing "part of myself" in *King's Row*. He then reinhabited, as fantasy life for millions, the problematic life of his youth.

*King's Row* was set in "a good town, everyone said. A good clean town. A good town to live in, a good place to raise your children," like Tampico, Illinois, where Reagan was born, or Dixon, where he grew up. Reagan's Hollywood self lifted him from contaminated actuality by restoring an ideal version of his past. Other aspiring stars were rebaptized in Hollywood. They received stage names to replace their own. Reagan had been baptized Ronald, his mother's choice, but he was always called by the nickname his father gave him, Dutch. Dutch Reagan came to Hollywood, and proposed Ronald Reagan as his stage name. "Ronald Reagan, Ronald Reagan," repeated the head man, and the others around the table said it after him. "I like it," the boss decided, and gave Ronald Reagan back his own name. He then played in his first movie, the role he'd left behind to come to Hollywood, that of a popular sports announcer.

"Where did [the doctor] think I lived, in my legs?" scoffed Drake McHugh from his hospital bed. He married and then made his fortune as a housing developer. Ronald Reagan made his fortune and married Nancy Davis, a surgeon's daughter. (He came to their first date on crutches; he had broken his leg.) Had the real Ronald Reagan successfully disappeared into his movie body? "After half a century of contrived appearance, not as a matter of personal deceit but as a necessary mark of his trade" (in the words of the journalist Bob Scheer), perhaps there is no rest of Ronald Reagan.

That would explain the disjunction many see between Reagan's right-wing

political rhetoric and his behavior as governor of California. As a politician in power, it is said, Reagan behaved much like any other. He might speak of paving over Vietnam, punishing welfare mothers, cutting the university down to size, or reducing taxes. In fact he did none of these. He could no more turn an industrial, cosmopolitan nation into Dixon, Illinois, than could any other American. Perhaps Reagan's appeal comes, then, not from what he does in life, but from what he dreams about it. Reagan, writes Scheer, has no idea how ordinary Americans live, for "he never toiled and tilled the land for a living. . . . He knows nothing about the drudgery of getting through an eight-hour factory day, never having done it. But he knows a great deal about the fantasies that run through one's mind while getting through an eight-hour day—fantasies of freedom and flight. He knows about it because the fantasies of ordinary Americans derive in large measure from the movies, television, and corporate advertising, the industries Reagan worked for. . . . Reagan is powerful because he's in touch with forces that grip us all. . . . because—in his Hollywood days—he was present at the creation."

Reagan, however, rejects the view that he remains without legs, floating above the workaday world. An actor spends "half his waking hours in fantasy," he agrees. "If he is only an actor, I feel, he is much like I was in *King's Row*, only half a man." No line better speaks to an actor's condition, writes Reagan, than "Where's the rest of me?" That is why he left Hollywood. As an actor Reagan had lost his "freedom." He was "a semi-automaton, 'creating' a character another had written." Deciding to "find the rest of me . . . I came out of the monastery of movies into the world."

**D**rake McHugh asked "Where's the rest of me?" in 1941. "Five years later, under different circumstances than make believe, I had to ask myself the same question." Reagan answered it by leading the fight against "the Communist plan . . . to take over the motion picture business." Hollywood had presented American myth innocently on the screen; Reagan was one of its vehicles. Now the fight for the American way shattered Hollywood camaraderie and destroyed real lives and careers. Reagan recovered his legs in that struggle.

Reagan wore a gun during his battle against the Communists, to protect himself against Red reprisals. As he puts it, "I mounted the holstered gun religiously every morning and took it off the last thing at night." Pioneer heroism and Indian war had moved from American history into Hollywood fantasy. Shifting from one red enemy to another, Reagan brought frontier individualism back into history again. But that history was still confined to Hollywood, and while it made Reagan president of the Screen Actors Guild, he tells us it cost him his wife.

Reagan's first wife, Jane Wyman, was an actress whose career surpassed his

own. Nancy Davis acted too, but they met when the president of the Screen Actors Guild established she was not the Nancy Davis on a list of Communist sympathizers. Remarriage to the surgeon's daughter signalled the end of Reagan's role in Hollywood and the beginning of his nationwide political presence. He had begun to shift, during the Hollywood Red scare, from New Deal liberal to right-wing crusader. Reagan hosted the "G.E. Television Theatre" in the 1950s, and *TV Guide* called him "the ambassador of the convenience of things mechanical." He also spoke for General Electric around the country against "the most dangerous enemy ever known to man," FDR's welfare state. This defense of freedom meshed perfectly for Reagan with his new family; together they made him whole. The autobiography ends with Clark Gable's reminder: "The most important thing a man can know is that, as he approaches his own door, someone on the other side is listening for the sound of his footsteps." The actor has his legs back; his last sentence is, "I have found the rest of me."

Reagan's evolution was not complete, however, for he had reentered the real world as the enemy of his own and his father's political past. To recover all the rest of him, Reagan discovered as he approached the presidency, he had to incorporate FDR as well. "We have to be willing to be Roosevelt," his adviser Richard Whalen said during the 1980 primary campaign. Quoting FDR twice in his speech accepting the presidential nomination, Reagan cloaked himself in Roosevelt's mantle. To be sure, he quoted the Roosevelt who promised, at the depths of the Depression, to cut government spending and balance the budget. The implication was that Reagan would fulfill the promises offered and betrayed by FDR. At a time of economic and spiritual crisis comparable to the Great Depression, Reagan would restore the old Roosevelt coalition. But Roosevelt had merely offered government relief to middle- and working-class "Forgotten Americans" like Jack Reagan. Ronald Reagan promised them "the ladder of opportunity" instead. The patrician, Roosevelt, did not offer that ladder, did not need it, and could not climb it himself. FDR had no legs.

Roosevelt, like Reagan, lost his legs on the road to the White House. His biographers picture him before he got polio as a rich playboy who did not take life seriously. He acquired presidential stature in the struggle against his affliction. But Roosevelt never got back the use of his legs, and FDR-as-cripple was once a stock figure of right-wing caricature. Reagan now promises not merely to imitate his father's hero, but to surpass him.

Reagan defeated an elected presidential incumbent, the first time that had happened since Roosevelt beat Hoover, and by a comparable landslide. Carter and Hoover were the two engineer-Presidents, out of touch with the country's political coalitions and with its emotional life. Ethnic, blue-collar, and Southern, white Protestant voters, the heart of the Roosevelt majority, gave Reagan their support. Carrying his party into power with him, Reagan promises to end the paralysis of American political life. His victory may signal the first,

long-term electoral reorientation since the New Deal, and usher in a new, governing majority. The fanfare used at Reagan's inaugural was the theme from *King's Row*.

**T**here is, however, a model other than Roosevelt for the restoration of the rest of Ronald Reagan. Reagan perpetuated the frontier tradition by wearing a real gun to fend off Hollywood Reds. He speaks for the intact, self-sufficient individual, and yet imagines detaching and reattaching parts of his body. What sort of revival of the American dream is this confusion between fact and fiction, nature and artifice, acting and action? Perhaps Reagan is the spiritual descendant not so much of FDR as of that old hero of the Bugaboo and Kickapoo Indian campaign, Brevet Brigadier-General John A.B.C. Smith.

"There was something, as it were, remarkable," writes Edgar Allan Poe, "about the entire individuality of the personage in question. He was, perhaps, six feet in height, and of a presence singularly commanding. There was an air distingué pervading the whole man. . . . His head of hair would have done honor to a Brutus; nothing could be more richly flowing, or possess a brighter gloss. It was of a jetty black. . . . The arms altogether were superbly modelled. Nor were the lower limbs less superb. . . . I wish to God my young and talented friend, Chiponchipino, the sculptor, had but seen the legs of Brevet Brigadier-General John A.B.C. Smith."

There was a mystery about General Smith, however. Why was he forever "commenting upon the rapid march of mechanical invention?" When Poe finally penetrated the general's bedroom, he kicked a large bundle on the floor. Making squeaky protest, the bundle proceeded to attach to itself "a very capital cork leg," artificial arms, shoulders, chest, wig, and teeth. The originals had all been lost in the bloody action against the Bugaboos and Kickapoos. Finally, General Smith installed an artificial palate, and his voice resumed "all that rich melody and strength which I had noticed upon our original introduction." Made whole by mechanical invention, General Smith appears to have survived his battles intact. In fact, he does a remarkable job of acting.

Poe's tale anticipates Reagan's not so much because of bad jokes about the actor's age, his youthful hair, or about the need to rub life into his legs. General Smith rather evokes the eerie detachment of the person of Reagan from the punitiveness of his designs. He suggests the manufactured, violent, deadened quality of the actor's promises to make the body politic whole. General Smith, like General Electric, illustrates "the convenience of things mechanical" in the creation of a hero. Poe's story locates Reagan in an exhausted tradition, which yet retains the power to do damage. That squalling, red-bottomed infant grew up to lose his legs "at the hips" and then have them restored. But amputated body parts do not come back to life. "I have found the rest of me," writes Reagan. General Smith, concludes Poe, "was the man that was used up."