

Reagan made everything seem possible and new

BY DOMINIC PATTEN

Those who grew up during the bleakness of the Great Depression have often spoke about the inspiring presence Franklin Roosevelt had in their lives. Early baby boomers talk the same way about John F. Kennedy and, in this country, later baby boomers have a similar reaction to the early speeches of Pierre Trudeau. After all, there is nothing, except maybe music, that can take you back to the defining points of your life like inspiration can.

For a lot of us across the western world who came of age in the 1980s, that inspiration was Ronald Reagan. Whether we knew it at the time or not, Reagan, with his optimism and force of personality, made everything seem possible and new. Love him or hate him, the Great Communicator defined the era.

A lot of it was because we felt we somehow knew him. Knew him not like a politician, but like we would a celebrity grandfather. I remember walking down the hall at Pauline Johnson Elementary in West Vancouver in March 1981 when they announced over the loud speakers that Reagan had been shot. Just a few months before, it had been John Lennon and now this? We sat in class listening to the reports coming from the radio perched on the teacher's desk.

When I got home that night, I watched the American networks for



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hours, and then I wrote the president a letter. In that irritating manner that keener kids have, I told him that, while I thought he was going to lead us into a nuclear war with Russia, I was very sorry to hear he had been shot

and I hoped he would live.

Two weeks after sending the letter off, I received a reply thanking me for "thinking of Nancy and I during this difficult time." It was, of course, a form letter, but it also came with a Ronald Reagan business card with a drawing of the White House on it. I still have that card.

When I heard of Reagan's death I found myself in my basement pulling it out of an unpacked box from my last move. Drawing on another staple of the Reagan age, punk rock, I also put on X's 1983 album *More Fun in the New World*, just to hear that lyric "it was better before they voted for what's-his-name." Because, of course, it wasn't.

The world I grew up in as a kid was bloodied by the blows of Watergate, Vietnam, hyperinflation, the Iranian hostages and the threat of nuclear war. The United States seemed a paper tiger, shuffling into irrelevance.

It didn't seem much better during

• The Reagan funeral, F18

Reagan's first years in office. Remember, Helen Caldecott warning us, in *If You Love This Planet*, that Reagan was going to lead us into a nuclear war? There was a lot of fear about what type of world Reagan would leave us to inherit. Having said that, in the mid-1980s, an anti-nuclear march, a pro-Sandinista fundraiser or a Rock Against Reagan gig was still one of the best places to meet cute girls.

The posters and placards looming in the background depicted Reagan, sometimes with the United Kingdom's Margaret Thatcher, his partner in crime, as evil and imperialism personified. Through all his trials and triumphs, we still underestimated him. We thought he was that lowest of the low, just another politician.

But Reagan was different; he was a real radical, a dreamer. And his dream was large.

Yes, he had a maddening manner in which complex issues were parsed into simplicity. And how straightforward topics were tied up in bursts of ideological bondage.

I blamed him for the suffering of all those who died or were infected because he willfully ignored doing anything about the plague of AIDS. I, like everyone I knew, laughed at his War on Drugs as yet another shortsighted Reagan solution to a thorny problem.

But when, in 1986, he gave a speech mourning the deaths of the astronauts of the exploded *Challenger* space shuttle, I found myself a waterworks of tears as the dreamer spoke about "touching the face of God."

When Reagan, with his later partner in peace, Mikhail Gorbachev, radically threw out the playbook of the Cold War and the advice of their diplomats, and started seriously talking about ridding the world of nuclear weapons, my heart leapt. That the deal failed was a tragedy, but the dream, the idea that a U.S. president would even consider such an act, was an inspiration.

Reagan changed and challenged the spiteful ogre of history. A few years later, when the U.S.S.R., a truly evil empire if ever there was one, collapsed with exhaustion and horror, I raised my glass in a toast to the man who with his charm, his Strategic Defence Initiative and arms race had psyched the Russians out.

Now that he is dead, eulogies and pundits will, as we move towards Friday's state funeral, proclaim that Ronald Reagan did or didn't win the Cold War.

It won't really matter. Because, as one of America's original chroniclers, Alexis De Tocqueville, poignantly observed, "History is a gallery of pictures in which there are few originals and many copies." Ronald Reagan was an original.

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