

THE CUTTING EDGE

## The Educational Legacy of Ronald Reagan

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*by Gary K. Clabaugh*

At this writing former President Reagan has just been interred with much pomp, plus hours of nationally televised praise. Some enthusiasts have even proposed carving the former president's countenance into Mount Rushmore.

History will decide whether or not Mr. Reagan ranks as a great, or even good, president. But the indecorous rush to laud his accomplishments featured a conspicuous omission. No one said anything about Mr. Reagan's educational legacy.

What is that legacy? Let's begin with a look at his record as governor of California. While running for the governorship, Mr. Reagan shrewdly made the most of disorder on University of California campuses. For instance, he demanded a legislative investigation of alleged Communism and sexual misconduct at the University of California at Berkeley. He insisted on public hearings, claiming "a small minority of hippies, radicals and filthy speech advocates" had caused disorder and that they should "be taken by the scruff of the neck and thrown off campus—permanently."<sup>1</sup>

Once elected, Mr. Reagan set the educational tone for his administration by

- calling for an end to free tuition for state college and university students
- annually demanding 20 percent across-the-board cuts in higher education funding<sup>2</sup>
- repeatedly slashing construction funds for state campuses
- engineering the firing of Clark Kerr, the highly respected president of the University of California
- declaring that the state "should not subsidize intellectual curiosity"<sup>3</sup>

And Mr. Reagan certainly did not let up on the criticisms of campus protestors that had aided his election. His denunciations of student

protesters were both frequent and particularly venomous. He called protesting students “brats,” “freaks,” and “cowardly fascists.” And when it came to “restoring order” on unruly campuses he observed, “If it takes a bloodbath, let’s get it over with. No more appeasement!”

Several days later four Kent State students were shot to death during a protest rally. In the aftermath of this tragedy Mr. Reagan declared his remark was only a “figure of speech.” He added that anyone who was upset by it was “neurotic.”<sup>4</sup> One wonders if his reaction reveals him as a demagogue or merely unfeeling.

Governor Reagan slashed spending not just on higher education. Throughout his tenure as governor he consistently and effectively opposed additional funding for basic education. The result was painful increases in local taxes and the deterioration of California’s public schools. Los Angeles voters got so fed up picking up the slack that on five separate occasions they rejected any further increases in local school taxes. The consequent underfunding resulted in overcrowded classrooms, ancient, worn-out textbooks, crumbling buildings, and badly demoralized teachers. Ultimately half the Los Angeles Unified School District’s teachers walked off the job to protest conditions in their schools.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Reagan was unmoved.

Ronald Reagan left California public education worse than he found it. A system that had been the envy of the nation when he was elected was in decline when he left. Nevertheless, Mr. Reagan’s actions had political appeal, particularly to his core conservative constituency, many of whom had no time for public education.

In campaigning for the presidency, Mr. Reagan called for the total elimination of the U.S. Department of Education, severe curtailment of bilingual education, and massive cutbacks in the federal role in education. Upon his election he tried to do that and more.

Significantly, President Reagan also took steps to increase state power over education at the expense of local school districts. Federal funds that had flowed directly to local districts were redirected to state government. Moreover, federal monies were provided to beef up education staffing at the state level. The result was to seriously erode the power of local school districts.<sup>6</sup>

As in California, Mr. Reagan also made drastic cuts in the federal education budget. Over his eight years in office he diminished it by half. When he was elected the federal share of total education spending was 12 percent. When he left office it stood at just 6 percent.

He also advocated amending the Constitution to permit public school prayer, demanded a stronger emphasis on values education, and proposed federal tuition tax credits for parents who opted for private schooling. The latter two initiatives stalled in Congress. There were

desultory efforts to promote greater values education, but they eventually misfired because of an obvious lack of consensus on whose values were to be taught.

Mr. Reagan was far more successful in giving corporate managers unprecedented influence over the future of public education. Reagan's avowed purpose was to make America more competitive in the world economy. Corporate executives dabbling in public education had no discernible influence on America's competitiveness, but the influence of big business did undermine the power of parents and locally elected school board members. It also suggested that it was far more important for schools to turn out good employees than to produce good citizens or decent human beings.

In California Mr. Reagan had made political hay by heaping scorn on college students and their professors. Members of his presidential administration repeatedly issued or encouraged uncommonly bitter denunciations of public education. William Bennett, the president's demagogic Secretary of Education, toured the nation making unprecedented and unprincipled attacks on most aspects of public education, including teacher certification, teachers unions, and the "multi-layered, self-perpetuating bureaucracy of administrators that weighs down most school systems." "The Blob" was what Bennett dismissively called them.

Predictably, Bennett made no mention of Reagan's massive cuts in education spending—though he did repeatedly assert that public education was not going to be improved "by throwing money at it." He also scoffed at any suggestion that social ills and poverty limited educational possibilities. He characteristically used name-calling to deprecate that reasoning as "sociological flimflammy."<sup>7</sup> But even as Bennett spoke, 11 million children were living in poverty, 275,000 children inhabited foster homes, and some 100,000 children under age sixteen were homeless.<sup>8</sup>

Three years into Mr. Reagan's first term, criticism of public education reached a crescendo when the president handpicked a "blue ribbon" commission that wrote a remarkably critical and far-reaching denunciation of public education. Titled *A Nation at Risk*, the document charged that the United States risked losing the economic competition among nations due to a "rising tide of [educational] mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people." (The commissioners did not consider the possibility that U.S. firms were uncompetitive because of corporate mismanagement, greed, and shortsightedness.)

After *A Nation at Risk*, the nation's public schools were fair game for every ambitious politician or self-important business boss in the country. The document's publication prompted a flood of follow-up criticism of public education from "blue ribbon" and "high level" national commissions plus reform reports from literally hundreds of state panels.

Most presupposed that the charges made by Mr. Reagan's handpicked panel were true. Oddly, throughout this entire clamor parents' confidence in the schools their children attended remained remarkably high.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile Mr. Reagan was quietly halving federal aid to education.

That sums up Mr. Reagan's educational legacy. As governor and president he demagogically fanned discontent with public education, then made political hay of it. As governor and president he bashed educators and slashed education spending while professing to value it. And as governor and president he left the nation's educators dispirited and demoralized.

Does this sound like a man whose countenance should grace Mount Rushmore? We'll leave that up to you.

### Notes

1. Wallace Turner, "Reagan Demands Berkeley Inquiry; 'Beatniks' and 'Radicals' Scored at G.O.P. Rally" (special dispatch), *New York Times*, May 14, 1966, 14.
2. Turner, *ibid.*, "Gov. Reagan Proposes Cutback in U. of California Appropriation; Would Impose Tuition Charge on Students from State; Kerr Weighs New Post," January 7, 1967, 14.
3. Steven V. Roberts, *ibid.*, "Ronald Reagan Is Giving 'Em Heck; As a Politician, Reagan Is a Great Psychiatrist; Critical Reporters Are Isolated by His Staff," October 25, 1970, p. SM22 (6 pages).
4. *Ibid.*
5. Roberts, *ibid.*, "Half of Los Angeles Teachers Strike for More Aid from State" (special dispatch), April 14, 1970, 31.
6. Joel Spring, *The American School: 1629-2004* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004).
7. These quotes are from a speech, "Lessons from Great Schools," that Mr. Bennett delivered at Notre Dame University and which was reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, November 1988, 122.
8. David Berliner, "Educational Reform in an Era of Disinformation," a paper presented at the meetings of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, San Antonio, Texas, February 1992.
9. *Ibid.*

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*Gary K. Clabaugh, Ed.D., is a professor in the Department of Education at La Salle University in Philadelphia.*