

Ronald Reagan and Race:  
The Evolution of Colour-Blind Conservatism

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*As my time in Washington draws to its close, I've had occasion to reflect on the astonishing journey I've been privileged to make from the banks of the Rock River, to this glorious site overlooking the mighty Pacific. The journey has not just been my own. It seems I've been guided by a force much larger than myself, a force made up of ideas and beliefs about what this country is, and what it could be.*

President Ronald Reagan, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1988

## *Abstract I*

Ronald Reagan was the most influential American conservative politician of the twentieth century. His name gave rise to an 'era' and his politics became an 'ism'. His two sizable election victories in 1980 and 1984 were record-breaking, and yet, to African Americans his victories symbolised 'Mourning in America'.

Historiography presents Reagan as the successor in a history of conservative antagonism toward civil rights progression. To some, his presidency represented the zenith of white backlash hostility. This thesis takes a more nuanced approach; seeking to understand the historical roots and development of Reagan's ideological worldview regarding minority America. In tracing his ideological formulation from his college days in the 1930s, to the end of his presidency in 1989, we see the relationship between Reagan-conservatism and civil rights in a wholly new light.

Overturing our present understanding of Reagan as embodying the 'white backlash' narrative, this thesis argues that his vision of 'colour-blind' conservatism was a distinct historical tradition. Not only did Reagan fail to pursue the backlash politics of Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, but he pulled conservatism in a different direction, fracturing the Republican Party. Reagan's colour-blindness took a broad, universal approach in which the solution to America's racial problems was to ignore race entirely. Consequently, Reagan opposed affirmative action, the expansion of welfare, and many of the Civil Rights reforms of the 1960s. Yet, as liberal consensus dramatically shifted during Lyndon Johnson's presidency toward compensatory forms of justice along group-based lines, Reagan's politics were left outdated and (to some) indefensible.

## *Abstract II*

Ronald Reagan was the most influential American conservative politician of the twentieth century. His name gave rise to an 'era' and his politics became an 'ism'. His two sizable election victories in 1980 and 1984 were record-breaking. However, even at a time of general Republican Party ascendancy – particularly at the presidential level – Reagan was never able to charm minority constituents in the same way he could white America. To African Americans in particular, Reagan's victories symbolised 'Mourning in America'.

Historiography presents Reagan as the successor in a history of conservative antagonism toward civil rights progression. To some, his presidency represented the zenith of white backlash hostility. Rejecting, and moving beyond the tired 'backlash narrative', this thesis seeks to understand the historical roots and development of Reagan's ideological worldview regarding minority America. In tracing his ideological formulation from his college days in the 1930s, to the end of his presidency in 1989, we see the relationship between Reagan-conservatism and civil rights in a wholly new light.

Overturing our present understanding of Reagan as embodying the 'white backlash' narrative, this thesis argues that his vision of 'colour-blind' conservatism was a distinct historical tradition. Rather than pursuing and developing backlash politics in the mould of Richard Nixon, George Wallace, Jesse Helms, and others, Reagan pushed a universalist message – rising tides lifts all boats mentality – that had little room for race. At a time when politics was increasingly becoming segmentational along race and class lines, it was a distinct message that created a split in the Republican Party. Reagan's colour-blindness led him to oppose affirmative action, the expansion of welfare, and many of the Civil Rights reforms of the 1960s. As liberal

consensus dramatically shifted during the Lyndon Johnson presidency toward compensatory forms of justice along group-based lines, Reagan's politics was left outdated and (to some) indefensible. However, eventually Reagan's small government, colour-blind message gained traction – becoming the mainstay of the GOP and then the nation writ large. He shaped the modern United States into believing – for the most part – that a colour-blind post-racial America existed. A myth the country has yet to overcome.

The thesis opens with an extended vignette on the most contentious moment of Reagan's entire relationship toward politics of race – the 'I believe in states' rights' address at Neshoba County, Mississippi. The section investigates the importance of the South in Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign and the internal division within Reagan's team that led to his infamous appearance. I show that contrary to historiographic consensus, there was little immediate uproar to Reagan's address, and the significance of the address has been somewhat overplayed. While inexcusable given the historical context of the fairground – it was the site of three Civil Rights murders in 1964 – the address neatly encapsulated Reagan's attempts to recover sullied conservative principles such as federalism.

Chapter one – *The Emerging Man* – opens with young 'Dutch Reagan' still in college. While he and his family were ardent Franklin Roosevelt supporters, this chapter challenges Reagan's self-mythicised notion of being a 'haemophilic liberal'. As we trace Reagan's journey from sports caster in Iowa to the film sets of Hollywood, we see that his ideological formation took place earlier than historians previously thought. This belief system entrenched itself and became codified at a relatively early age – undermining the conception that Reagan transitioned to conservatism in the 1950s.

In Hollywood, Reagan denounced anti-Semitic attacks and the rise of the modern Ku Klux Klan. Founded in the *liberal* vision that the answer to America's Jim Crow era race problems was colour-blindness, Reagan adopted a belief system that placed primacy on the individual and rejected colour-consciousness as an invidious form of racism. *Ronald Reagan and Race* argues that his worldview became so rigid, that it never meaningfully changed – leaving him appearing more conservative on racial issues later in his life.

In chapter two – *Citizen Politician* – we explore the fascinating and rapidly changing world of sixties politics through Reagan's first gubernatorial campaign. Between 1963 and 1966, Reagan ascended the political ladder in meteoric fashion. Scholars have tended to assume that because Reagan made his political debut at the zenith of the Civil Rights movement, that his opposition to such reform was the reason for his political appeal. That was only part of the story. In California, white backlash – despite the Watts tumult of 1965 – did not define the entire political landscape. *Citizen Politician* shows that the white student unrest at Berkeley was at least as influential in creating a law and order environment that Reagan was able to harness to gain political office.

Another thread of this chapter is the dramatic and important shifting of the political spectrum regarding racial politics in the nation's capital. Huge social unrest had prompted politicians of all stripes to get off the fence and address the glaring racial problems facing the United States. For conservatives concerned about the growth of federal government, they faced a dilemma: embrace an increasingly powerful Washington government to enact Civil Rights change or oppose such legislation and face the consequences. After the Voting Rights Act, President Lyndon Johnson's pursuit of affirmative action dramatically overhauled social policy and race relations. Reagan's rigid ideology, however, was too inflexible to adjust to the changing

political dynamics of 1960s America and he would look to counteract such policies once in power.

*The Creative Society* is the third chapter of this thesis and examines Reagan's actions as Governor of California between 1967 – 1975. Little has been written on the gubernatorial years, save in the context of 'years of preparation' and training for the presidency. In contrast, this thesis shows the contingent nature of Reagan's California tenure by examining the prolonged battle over welfare reform. Unlike the current historiography, I use the 'Creative Society' to show that Reagan was a man of ideas. He offered conservative alternatives to prevailing Great Society liberalism on a range of policy ideas including tax reform, crime, and welfare reform. Where many historians have suggested Reagan's attacks on welfare were driven by racial considerations, I argue his approach to policy was instead led by concerns of big government. Finally, this chapter demonstrates that welfare reform gave Reagan his first opportunity to cement his place as the *de facto* leader of the conservative movement. In successfully passing major welfare reform in his second term, Reagan not only rejected Johnson's liberal agenda, but admonished Nixon's moderate platform too.

The fourth chapter – *Capturing the Nation* – examines Reagan's rise in national politics through the 1968, 1976, and 1980 election cycles. Building on the previous chapter's work on Reagan's conservative vision, this chapter interrogates how his colour-blind agenda battled and successfully captured the Republican Party and the nation. In doing so, the chapter addresses the central paradox that if Reagan was the race-baiting politician critics have claimed, why did his popularity rise, as questions of race diminished? In 1968, problems of race were at the front and centre of national politics alongside the ongoing quagmire in Vietnam. Little known to many, Reagan ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 1968 and unlike Nixon and Wallace

who advanced a strong law and order campaign, Reagan remained surprisingly moderate. At a time when Nixon pursued backlash politics through the Southern Strategy, Reagan pulled the conservative movement in a different direction offering a colour-blind approach.

In sharp contrast to Reagan's actions in 1968, the closely fought primary campaign against President Gerald Ford in 1976 saw Reagan cultivate white backlash over the issue of busing. In tracing the widely unpopular busing cases of the late sixties into the seventies, we see Reagan harness busing to appeal to populist concerns over the rise of big government. Just as busing had faded away from political view, the candidate reprised the issue in Texas to win the state and keep his primary campaign alive. Alongside his use of the 'welfare queen' moniker, we see a backlash side to Reagan that was hitherto hidden.

The final section of *Capturing the Nation* examines the rise of affirmative action and Reagan's victory in 1980. We see Reagan return to a campaign style that – Neshoba aside – was less divisive than his prior presidential run. Focussing on Reagan's actions in the aftermath of the *Bakke* Supreme Court decision of 1978, we see how the candidate appeared statesmanlike and refused to cultivate resentment. Instead, Reagan tapped into conservative messaging about the role of government and this proved remarkably successful in dismantling the Democratic electoral coalition which had endured since the New Deal. Finally, we also introduce key constituents such as the conservative legal interest movement, and the cadre of African American conservative intellectuals who helped provide the grassroots movement that carried Reagan to victory.

Although *Ronald Reagan and Race* is primarily concerned with Reagan's pre-presidency, the final chapter – *Reagan's White House and Black America* – examines his bipolar presidency.

In the first term, the president enjoyed significant success in reordering the economy. Revealing that Reagan cared little for politics of race, except when it intersected with his core concerns (the Cold War and the economy for example), those four years witnessed a series of slights against the African American community that damaged the relationship between Reagan and black America beyond repair.

In response to Reagan's re-election victory and the concurrent deepening apartheid crisis in South Africa, a new social force – the Free South Africa Movement – sparked into life. The group galvanised a swathe of African American interest groups to rebuke Reagan's domestic and foreign policies, culminating a public battle over sanctions. Unlike previous political storms, the president was unable to weather Congressional pressure and his veto of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1987 was overridden. It was a humiliating defeat. Importantly, this prolonged struggle produced two important outcomes in the twilight of Reagan's presidency. Firstly, the coalescing of groups in opposition to Reagan revealed that the president's hostility to African American leadership ironically helped fuel the emergence of the black political class. Secondly, the abandoning of the president by the Republican Party exposed how outdated Reagan's policies were far more meaningfully than anything the Democrats could muster. It was a significant and symbolic defeat, which ushered the beginning of the end for the Reagan presidency.

Dovetailing with the thesis introduction, the thesis conclusion centres upon an extended vignette on the battle over Grove City College. In 1984, the Supreme Court had ruled that the college was in breach of civil rights legislation, but simultaneously narrowed the law in question when handing down the opinion. In response, the Reagan administration closed a series of ongoing investigations into civil rights violations, prompting outrage from grassroots

organisations, and laying the groundwork for another Congressional battle. In-keeping with the thesis, Reagan's defence of federalism and colour-blind individualism saw him oppose civil rights legislation, which was ultimately passed over another veto. The battle typified the fractious relationship between Reagan and minority America. Further, it serves to reinforce a central argument of this thesis: while Reagan was not in the white backlash mould of other conservatives, his individualist worldview was ideologically incompatible with the post-Howard University address liberal tradition that called for group-based compensatory justice.

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## *Abbreviations*

AB	Assembly Bill
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AFDC-U	Aid to Families with Dependent Children – Unemployed Parent Program
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
ANC	African National Congress
APP	American Presidency Project
AVC	American Veterans’ Committee
CBC	Congressional Black Caucus
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CORE	Congress On Racial Equality
CRD	Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice
CREA	California Real Estate Association
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
EGB	Edmund Gerald Brown
ERTA	Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981
FAP	Family Assistance Plan
FreeSAM	Free South Africa Movement
FSM	Free Speech Movement
GE	General Electric
HICCASP	Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences, and Professions
HR	House Resolution
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
LAPD	Los Angeles Police Department

## Abbreviations

NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
NSC	National Security Council
NUL	National Urban League
NWRO	National Welfare Rights Organization
NYT	New York Times
OBRA	Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981
PLF	Pacific Legal Foundation
RRPL	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
SAG	Screen Actors Guild
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
UN	United Nations
USC	University of Southern California Special Collections

## *‘I Believe in States’ Rights’*

On 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1980, two of the most powerful social movements in late twentieth century America – Civil Rights and conservatism – collided. At a rural fairground in Neshoba County, Mississippi, Ronald Reagan uttered a simple phrase – ‘I believe in states’ rights’ – that simultaneously conjured a legacy from the past and the zeitgeist of the present. Sixteen years earlier, three Civil Rights workers – James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner – had been brutally murdered in Neshoba County, a fact Reagan omitted from his address. The activists were shot at close range by Klansmen and their bodies hidden, sparking a massive federal investigation. It was a modern-day lynching that stirred the soul of America. Collectively, these murders alongside other Civil Rights atrocities provided a ‘graphic and emotional appeal’ which helped push transformative legislation over the line.<sup>1</sup> Neshoba’s history was entwined with the nation’s Civil Rights struggle.

If that was Neshoba’s past, its present was Ronald Reagan. A former actor and Governor of California, he was the leader of the formidable and rapidly expanding conservative movement, and the recently declared Republican presidential nominee. He had opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on the grounds of federal overreach and emerged as a conservative stalwart at the zenith of the Civil Rights movement. He attended the annual Neshoba County Fair in August 1980 to launch his presidential campaign as the Republican nominee. It was there that he pronounced his support for ‘states’ rights’ – the ‘hoariest of all southern code words’ according to political scientist Jeremy Mayer – which

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York, 1990), p. 8.

ignited a political firestorm.<sup>2</sup> Reagan's use of 'states' rights' on that solemn ground on that momentous occasion, 'contributed to a controversy that continues to haunt the legacy of the Reagan presidency, as well as the Republican Party and the American conservative movement more generally.'<sup>3</sup>

Given Reagan's presidential campaign was almost entirely focussed on the economy at home and increasing American global strength abroad, a rural county fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, seemed an odd place to begin the final countdown to the election.<sup>4</sup> While the press had focussed on the importance of northern 'Reagan Democrats', the reality was that the South was where the election would be won and lost.<sup>5</sup> President Jimmy Carter had enjoyed strong southern support as the former Georgia Governor in 1976 and won several key southern states by tight margins, including Mississippi by less than two percentage points. Traditionally, the state was seen as a bastion of southern conservative Democratic support, evidenced by the fact that the Republican Party only held one of the six state-wide offices (Senator Thad Cochran), only four of the fifty-two state senate seats, and only four of the one-hundred-and-twenty-one state house seats.<sup>6</sup> However, the economic malaise of the 1970s and the perception of declining global power eroded much of Carter's support across the country, while his indifference to the conservative evangelical movement further undermined him in states like Mississippi.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Reagan's campaign team believed it could attack the president's southern power

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<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Mayer, *Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns, 1960-2000* (New York, 2002), p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Election: Ronald Reagan and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement* (New York, 2014), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Howison described the choice as 'the most unlikely of locations'. For further analysis, see Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Election*, p. 27-29.

<sup>5</sup> Hedrick Smith, 'Reagan is Given Lead in the Electoral Vote', *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1980, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics taken from Ken Klinge (Regional Political Director), 'Memo to Bill Casey (Executive Vice Chairman of Reagan for President) regarding Mississippi General Election Plan', 26<sup>th</sup> June 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Presidential Campaign Papers, Box 253, Folder 'Mississippi', p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> One presidential approval poll placed his approval rating at a meagre 26%. For further details, see question 15, 'CBS News Poll: Omnibus August 1980', conducted August 1980, *CBS News*.

base and win the White House, with one Reagan aide describing Mississippi as 'the prime example of a Deep South state that is ripe to go Republican'.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Mississippi Battleground***

In 1980, Mississippi resembled the nation insofar as inflation and unemployment dominated the campaign agenda, and Reagan consistently led in state-wide polling.<sup>9</sup> Further resembling the country, the Magnolia State was sharply divided along two lines: race and geography. Twice as many African Americans thought Carter was doing an 'excellent' job compared to whites, while nearly three times as many whites thought the president was doing a 'poor' job. Polling showed that Carter led the black vote by a margin of fifty-five percentage points, while Reagan led the state's white voters by a sizable thirty-six points.<sup>10</sup> This was a vital division, which the Californian's political team would seek to exploit to undermine the president's southern stronghold.

Combining the racial and geographic division was the schism between urban and rural Mississippians. Four years earlier, President Gerald Ford had carried the southern part of the state by nearly 33,000 votes, only to lose the north (which included Neshoba) by over 47,000 votes. Neshoba fortified rural Democratic support and this was where Reagan had to make inroads if he wanted to win. Of Mississippi's five congressional districts, it was the third district 'Hills Area North' – the home of Neshoba County – that had been the closest fight for Ford,

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<sup>8</sup> Aide quoted in Lou Cannon, 'Reagan Campaigning from County Fair to Urban League', *Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Survey data taken from Ken Klinge, 'Memo to Bill Timmons on Polling Data for Alabama 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District and Mississippi 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District', 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Presidential Campaign Papers, Box 253, Folder 'Mississippi', p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Carter led black voters by a margin of 67-12 percent, while Reagan led white voters by a margin of 61-25. For further information, see Ken Klinge, 'Memo to Dick Wirthlin on Mississippi Survey Data', 8<sup>th</sup> September 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Presidential Campaign Papers, Box 253, Folder 'Mississippi', pp. 5-8.

losing by just 4,716 votes. The district was 'a mostly rural area', with a black population of thirty-five percent and lay on the frontline of the presidential fight.<sup>11</sup>

An internal campaign memo made clear that Mississippi's Third District was to be the epicentre of the Reagan campaign. The top two target counties in the state – Scott and Newton – were both in the third district and each bordered Neshoba. In 1968, they had overwhelmingly voted for Alabama Governor George Wallace with seventy-seven percent of the vote, yet in 1976, Ford had received just fifty-one percent, costing him the state. The Republican's political operatives for the area – Lee Atwater, Trent Lott, and Ken Klingle – set about their task of researching how Reagan could win the district and the state. Their work revealed many voters who were ideologically aligned with Reagan but struggled to shake the Democrat moniker. This was the opening, which given the right messaging, held the key to victory – 'target the Wallace/conservative Democrat vote.'<sup>12</sup>

The tactics for victory hinged upon building 'a loose organization around "Democrats for Reagan", using fliers on social issues as the basic campaign piece.'<sup>13</sup> Conservative ideology was more efficacious than party identity and the governor's team hammered home an anti-statist message nationally, as well as in the Magnolia State.<sup>14</sup> That said, Reagan's staffers were also expert in the politics of compartmentalisation, and the centrepiece of their campaign strategy to capture the Mississippi heartland was 'a county fair operation', designed to exploit the provincial and local pride of the rural Deep South.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> All statistical breakdown in Ken Klingle, Memo to Bill Casey, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Presidential Campaign Papers, Box 253, Folder 'Mississippi', pp. 1-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Washington Post* columnist Lou Cannon concluded, 'Reagan is known to believe he can wage an effective campaign in all sections of the country, appealing simultaneously to rural southerners and to urban northerners.' See Cannon, 'Reagan Campaigning from County Fair to Urban League'.

<sup>15</sup> Klingle, 'Memo to Bill Casey', p. 6.

Not all in the governor's camp were enthused by the plan, which somewhat resembled Richard Nixon's divisive 'Southern Strategy'. Dick Wirthlin, the senior campaign strategist, had cautioned the Gipper against going to Neshoba when the invite was first extended. In fact, Wirthlin had stressed the case so forcefully, that Reagan 'got so mad at me, he threw his speech papers at me and scattered them all over the bedroom.'<sup>16</sup> One undated campaign memo from Reagan's regional political director, Ken Klinge, urged Reagan to 'cancel Neshoba' on the grounds that it was 'not acceptable politically'.<sup>17</sup> This was likely a reference to the county's sullied past of the 1964 murders and the potential repercussions an appearance would cause. Despite the warnings of even attending the Neshoba County Fair, Klinge's advice was ignored, and Reagan pressed ahead.

Taking to the podium with the crowd chanting 'we want Reagan!', the governor joked that 'I'm speaking to what has to be about ninety percent Democrat.' The audience roared back 'no!' and Reagan quipped, 'I just meant by party affiliation. I didn't mean how you feel now.'<sup>18</sup> That was a tacit acknowledgment of the changing party dynamics of the Sunbelt that would prove to be crucial to Reagan's electoral success. Driving that change both inside and outside the Deep South, historian Joseph Crespino argued, was 'resentment of the liberal social policies that allowed for black advancement', alongside a broad coalition of 'cold warriors concerned about the expanse of the liberal state; with fundamentalist and evangelical Christians worried about liberalism "infecting" Protestant churches; and with parents opposed to school desegregation efforts.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wirthlin quoted in, Craig Shirley, *Rendezvous with Destiny: Ronald Reagan and the Campaign That Changed America* (Wilmington, 2009), p. 394.

<sup>17</sup> Ken Klinge, 'Memo to Bill Timmons', undated, *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 264, Folder '08/03/1980 Neshoba County Fair'.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Speech at Neshoba County Fair', transcript created by author from *YouTube*, recording of speech available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=450DA4AZG6U> (last viewed 14<sup>th</sup> September 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, 2007), p. 4.

However, when Reagan launched into a full assault of Carter's record, the themes were not the 'dog whistle' social issues we might expect if he were race-baiting, but inflation, unemployment, and international decline – entirely typical of his 1980 campaign writ large. As Mayer noted, 'when Reagan did address social issues, he seldom included any with racial implications.'<sup>20</sup> The candidate lambasted 'an inflation rate that they hope might get back down to ten percent after having reached eighteen at the beginning of the year.' The Gipper ominously warned, 'today, our friends don't know whether they can trust us, and certainly our enemies have no respect for us.'<sup>21</sup> The Reagan campaign team laid the nation's economic decline at Carter's feet. The Republican's message in Neshoba was the same as his national one, captivated in the neatly-packaged question he would employ in the televised debate – 'are you better off than you were four years ago?'<sup>22</sup>

Once the applause of the governor's promise of American renewal diminished, he doubled-down his attack on federal government, quipping 'they have created a vast bureaucracy... They have forgotten that when you create a government bureaucracy, no matter how well intentioned it is, almost instantly its primary priority becomes the preservation of the bureaucracy.' Highlighting his experience of welfare reform in California, the Gipper noted how 'that bureaucracy' was to blame for the poverty cycle because recipients were 'so economically trapped that there's no way they can get away.'<sup>23</sup> Here, Reagan's campaigning was reminiscent of his early days in California, evoking memories of his success with the 'Creative Society,' a neatly packaged framework of Reaganism in action, that we will encounter in the pages that

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<sup>20</sup> Mayer, *Running on Race*, p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> Reagan, 'Speech at Neshoba County'.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Presidential Debate in Cleveland', 28<sup>th</sup> October 1980, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-debate-cleveland> (last viewed 19th June 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Reagan, 'Speech at Neshoba County'.

follow. The address in Mississippi was a typical 1980 campaign speech, which encompassed the themes he had built his entire political career on over the past several decades.

From criticising the bureaucracy, the Gipper transitioned into attacking big government, where he uttered the infamous 'I believe in states' rights' line. Contrary to what we might imagine given the context of Neshoba and the sullied history of 'states' rights', there was no immediate uproar to Reagan's address. The *New York Times* noted the Gipper's audience was 'a crowd almost entirely made up of whites' but passed no comment on the topic. The *Washington Post* provided some historical background to the fair as 'a traditional forum for the outpourings of segregationists such as former Mississippi governor Ross Barnett', but again failed to question the use of 'states' rights'.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the *Post* juxtaposed the Neshoba visit to Reagan's appointment with the National Urban League (NUL) the following day, noting the schedule 'reflects the diversity and the difficulties of his approach to the campaign'. Further, the Washington newspaper concluded that the candidate's meeting with the NUL, followed by meetings in Chicago with the editorial board of black publications *Ebony* and *Jet* 'relegated' the Southern Strategy used by previous Republicans to a 'secondary role'.<sup>25</sup> Reagan's highly-targeted reaching out beyond conservative circles gave little sense that a political storm was on the horizon.

It was on 11<sup>th</sup> August, over a week after his Neshoba address, that Andrew Young – a long-standing civil rights activist, close ally of President Carter, and the United States' first African American Ambassador to the United Nations – wrote a scathing op-ed of Reagan in the *New York Times*. Young detailed that 'states' rights' was a doctrine that 'prevented federal

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<sup>24</sup> Douglas Kneeland, 'Reagan Campaigns at Mississippi Fair', *NYT*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. 11; Lou Cannon, 'Reagan Campaigning from County Fair to Urban League', *Washington Post*, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. A3.

<sup>25</sup> Cannon, 'Reagan Campaigning'.

intervention to protect citizens' human rights' and lambasted that the Republican platform 'reads as if it were written by a Klansman'.<sup>26</sup> It was a damning assessment of Reagan and his worldview. Despite the Republican nominee imploring voters to move beyond the 'caricatured conservative' and reaffirming his commitment to the 'protection and enforcement of civil rights', his previous opposition to both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 diminished his appeal to many African Americans, and left black leaders such as Young, acutely wary of him.<sup>27</sup>

Young's criticism was followed by an attack from the President several weeks later. Speaking to the Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Carter argued that conservatives since President Lyndon Johnson had put a 'screeching halt' on Civil Rights progression under the moniker of 'states' rights', and he warned the audience 'we cannot afford to let that happen again in 1980'.<sup>28</sup> The president later doubled-down on his attack of Reagan's employment of 'states rights' in a noted appearance at Martin Luther King Jr.'s former church. Mustering the symbolic importance of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Civil Rights history, the President lamented that this campaign had, 'seen the stirrings of hate and the rebirth of code words like "states' rights"'. The attack was covered in a piece – 'Carter Suggests Turn to Racism in Reagan Views' – in the *New York Times*, and the challenger was on the defensive.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Young, 'Chilling Words in Neshoba County', *NYT*, 11<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. A19.

<sup>27</sup> Reagan quoted in Douglas Kneeland, 'Reagan Urges Blacks to Look Past Labels and to Vote for Him', *NYT*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. A17.

<sup>28</sup> Jimmy Carter, 'Remarks at the Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia', 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1980, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/philadelphia-pennsylvania-remarks-the-zion-baptist-church> (last viewed 15th January 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Jimmy Carter, 'Remarks at a Meeting with Southern Black Leaders', 16<sup>th</sup> September 1980, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/atlanta-georgia-remarks-meeting-with-southern-black-leaders> (last viewed 15th January 2020); Francis Clines, 'Carter Suggests Turn to Racism in Reagan Views', *NYT*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1980, p. B10.

Supporters came to Reagan's defence arguing that 'states' rights' was not intended as an invocation of southern racist resistance or dog-whistle politics, but a call for the transfer of powers from federal government to the states. In Congress, Trent Lott, who had attended the Neshoba event backed the Republican nominee, while Democratic Governor of Arizona, Bruce Babbitt, defended Reagan with an op-ed in the *New York Times*.<sup>30</sup> Capturing the sentiment of New Federalism which had infused the conservative movement since the Nixon presidency, Babbitt wrote, 'we believe that the [federal] Government, acting in pursuit of many noble goals, has not produced what it promised and is rapidly destroying the power of state and local government to do a better job.'<sup>31</sup> Such was the outcry at Carter's allegations of Reagan's racism, the President was 'pressed by reporters to justify some harsh language' and he walked back his rhetoric, stating he did not believe Reagan was 'a racist in any degree.'<sup>32</sup> The press coverage of Reagan's address and Carter's response, revealed a climate in which charges of racism were more controversial than the incident itself. The lack of newspaper reporting on the latter, helped the Republican challenger move past the incident and press forward toward election day.

On 4<sup>th</sup> November 1980, Reagan overwhelmed incumbent President Carter in a landslide victory. The Gipper swept forty-four states and won the popular vote by over eight million. Crucially, the political strategists' advice to focus on the Sunbelt as a battleground proved successful. Having won the endorsement of local newspapers, including the *Jackson Daily News*, the Republican captured Mississippi by just 11,808 votes, or 1.32 percent.<sup>33</sup> Of the seven

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<sup>30</sup> Lott spoke in defence of Reagan from the House floor on 17<sup>th</sup> September. For further details, see the *Congressional Record*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1980, p. 25770.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Babbitt, 'On States' Rights', *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1980, p. A19.

<sup>32</sup> Carter quoted in Terence Smith, 'Carter Says He Isn't Terming Reagan Racist', *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1980, p. B4.

<sup>33</sup> 'We Support Reagan' editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Presidential Campaign Papers, Box 253, Folder 'Mississippi'.

states that Reagan won by less than two percent, six of them – Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky, and South Carolina – were in the South. In its election post-mortem, the *New York Times* declared the beginning of a new era and ‘the collapse of the Democratic Party’s Old Coalition’.<sup>34</sup> For African Americans who had made tremendous advancements during the New Deal Era, overwhelmingly supported Carter, and witnessed Reagan’s Neshoba address, the conservative Republican’s victory was little cause for celebration. In fact, Reagan’s meagre twelve percent of the African American vote – the lowest since Barry Goldwater in 1964 – was a clear indication of the already strained relationship.<sup>35</sup> As civil rights leader, Jesse Jackson, declared in the wake of the election, ‘a coalition of people, including blacks, Hispanics, women and labor... will be threatened once it is clear what people have got in the Reagan package.’<sup>36</sup>

### ***States’ Rights, White Backlash, and Colour-Blind Conservatism***

Given the context of the Civil Rights murders sixteen years earlier and the synonymy of ‘states’ rights’ with Dixiecrats, racism, and segregation, historians have been near-universal in their condemnation of Reagan. Jeffrey Howison condemned that ‘Reagan ensured that racial politics would remain central to the conservative discourse of the Republican Party’, and noted strategist and conservative commentator Geoffrey Kabaservice concluded, ‘Reagan’s ascension meant that the Southern Strategy was fully in the saddle’.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adam Clymer, ‘The Collapse of a Coalition’, *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1980, p. A1.

<sup>35</sup> Statistic provided in Timothy Thurber, *Republicans and Race: The GOP’s Frayed Relationship with African Americans, 1945-1974* (Lawrence, KS, 2013), p. 377.

<sup>36</sup> Jesse Jackson quoted in Sheila Rule, ‘Blacks, Reacting to Vote, Seek Way to Keep Gains’, *NYT*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1980, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Election*, p. 28; Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (Oxford, 2013), p. 361.

The Neshoba address has drawn particular historiographic attention precisely for Reagan's use of 'states' rights' as evidence of conservative backlash politics. Crespino alleged that the language was 'not a part of his regular campaign speech', adding 'reporters following Reagan could not remember him using the term before'. But as biographer Craig Shirley has observed, 'ever the Jeffersonian Republican, he had used the phrase "states' rights" for years, North and South, East and West'.<sup>38</sup> Contrary to Crespino's contention, 'states' rights' *had* emerged as a campaign issue prior to Neshoba in the entirely different sphere of environmentalism and land usage as part of the debate surrounding the 'Sagebrush Rebellion'.<sup>39</sup> 'On states' rights', the *New York Times* wrote, 'Mr. Reagan's feelings fit into a seamless web of anti-Government, pro-business sentiment.'<sup>40</sup>

Historians and journalists have not only taken Neshoba in isolation, but as fitting within a larger pattern of behaviour in which Reagan is part of a tradition of hostility and antagonism between conservative politicians and Civil Rights advancement.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Crespino, Dan T. Carter, and Kenneth O'Reilly, have all sought to explain Reagan's remarks, honing in on and interpreting the use of 'states' rights' as an axiomatic crystallising moment in the codifying of the relationship between white backlash voters resisting civil rights progression and the conservative movement.<sup>42</sup> Crespino observed that 'Reagan invoked a mantra that had sustained

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<sup>38</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, p. 1; Shirley, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, p. 403.

<sup>39</sup> Howell Raines, 'States' Rights Move in West Influencing Reagan's Drive', *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1980, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Howell Raines, 'Reagan Words Often Conflict with Strategy', *NYT*, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1980, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Writing in the *New York Times* recently, Maureen Dowd claimed that Reagan's Neshoba address was part of a strategy in which 'Republicans have brandished the same old narrative to try and scare their way to the White House. Their candidates were presented as the patriarchs, protecting the house from invaders with dark skin.' For further reading, see Dowd, 'Trump, Not So Statuesque', *NYT*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2020, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/opinion/sunday/trump-statues-2020-reelection.html> (last viewed 22nd July 2020).

<sup>42</sup> For further reading on Reagan's politics of racial division, see Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, pp. 1-3; Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, pp. 55-68; Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, pp. 137-214; Stanley B. Greenberg, *Middle Class Dreams: The Politics and Power of the New American Majority* (New York, 1995), pp. 39-49; and Kenneth O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* (New York, 1995), pp. 355-378.

a generation of southern segregationists', while Carter concluded that Reagan's 'genial demolition of affirmative action' was well within the conservative hostile tradition that included; 'Barry Goldwater's vote against the Civil Rights Bill of 1964... Richard Nixon's subtle manipulation of the busing issue' and 'George Bush's use of the Willie Horton ads'. Kenneth O'Reilly, a prominent scholar on the modern presidency and civil rights, suggested 'he [Reagan] saw political fortune in continuing Nixon's southern strategy of pitting white Americans against the 'special interests' and pleadings of African Americans.'<sup>43</sup> Most pointedly, historian Manning Marable, the author of the Pulitzer Prize winning work, *Malcolm X*, argued that Reagan's evocation of 'states' rights' in Neshoba was evidence that 'the "ideological glue" of Reaganism was racism.'<sup>44</sup>

In sharp contrast to the racial backlash narrative, this thesis strives to broaden and complicate our understanding of the fortieth president's relationship to the politics of race. I seek to recover and comprehend the larger context for his Neshoba address, captured best when he told Mississippians: 'I believe in people doing as much as they can for themselves at the community level and at the private level. And I believe that we've distorted the balance of our government today by giving powers that were never intended in the Constitution to that federal establishment'.<sup>45</sup> In broadening our perspective, we overturn the historical orthodoxy and see that far from courting the backlash politics of other conservative contemporaries, Reagan pursued a 'colour-blind' politics that was outside the backlash politics mould, but promulgated a new, optimistic, more individualistic *modus operandi*. That is not, however, to suggest that colour-blindness in the long term was any less damaging to African Americans for Reagan's

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<sup>43</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, p. 1; Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, p. 9; O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano*, p. 359.

<sup>44</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Jackson, MS, 2007), p. 176.

<sup>45</sup> Reagan, 'Speech at Neshoba County'.

ideology was – whatever his motive – in reality deeply problematic and harmful for minorities, based as it was on the arrival of a post-racial America that did not exist.

Since Alan Brinkley's noted 1994 essay, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', historical inquiry into the American Right has enjoyed a transformative revival.<sup>46</sup> Previously, right-wingers were either hidden from view, ignored, or caricatured. Typifying such sentiment, Richard Hofstadter famously described 'pseudo-conservatism' as 'a profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and its ways.'<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Brinkley thought conservatism was an 'orphan' within scholarly circles, and suggested that academics had failed to adequately explain the electoral success of the Republican Party at the presidential level (the GOP won five of six elections between 1968-1988), and the arrival of mass conservatism that seemed to characterise much of the 1980s.<sup>48</sup>

Initially, historians gave rise to the 'backlash thesis' as the catalyst for conservative success. It was the notion that the New Right was a reactionary movement to the prevailing counterculture of sixties radicalism and the New Left. Particular emphasis was placed on the mobilising power of racial politics as integral to conservatism's rise. This first wave, typified by Dan T. Carter, Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall, and Ronald Formisano, combined to provide a top-down narrative that saw the Southern Strategy as part of populist backlash against the breaking down of the colour line.<sup>49</sup> In Carter's study *The Politics of Rage*, he outlined how 'moments of racial

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Brinkley, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', *American Historical Review*, 99:2 (1994), pp. 409-29.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), pp. 43-44.

<sup>48</sup> Brinkley's description of conservatism as an 'orphan' in his essay, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', p. 409.

<sup>49</sup> For the top-down racial backlash theory, see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York, 1995); Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race and the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, 1996); Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes in American Politics* (New York, 1991); and Ronald Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 1991).

crisis' precipitated 'a growing white backlash' that created opportunities for George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan to pursue a 'political transformation' of national scale.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Edsall and Edsall underpinned their study by suggesting, 'race has been the most critical, and the most powerful, in effecting political change' which, 'those at the top of the "top-down" conservative coalition' have 'encourage[d] and nurture[d]'.<sup>51</sup> This swathe of study, however, was problematic because – like Hofstadter before them – it was disinclined to take conservative *ideas* seriously.

A second wave of historians including Lisa McGirr, Kevin M. Kruse, Matt Lassiter, and Joseph Crespino, sought to correct the narrative in numerous ways. Firstly, whether it be Orange County, Atlanta, or Charlotte, these rich, localised histories challenged the top-down narrative.<sup>52</sup> As Kruse explained in *White Flight*, 'compelling as this traditional interpretation of massive resistance has been, it suffers from a focus that stresses the words and deeds of top-level politicians over the lived realities of everyday whites.'<sup>53</sup> For these new historians, a broad grassroots movement – not elected officials in Washington – was the engine of the conservative machine.

Secondly, this new generation not only de-emphasised the top-down narrative, but McGirr in particular, laid the foundations for the de-centring of the South in the story of conservatism's growing popularity. As McGirr explained, it was places such as the relatively wealthy, white, middle-class suburbanites of Orange County, California, which demonstrated 'a broader

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<sup>50</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, p. 466.

<sup>51</sup> Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>52</sup> For the importance of the grassroots conservatism and local, rather than national stories, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, 'The Suburban Origins of "Color-Blind" Conservatism: Middle-Class Consciousness in the Charlotte Busing Crisis', *Journal of Urban History*, 30:4 (2004), pp. 549-582; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2007); and Crespino *In Search of Another Country*.

<sup>53</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, p. 7.

conservative matrix evolving in the Sunbelt and the West that eventually propelled assertive and unapologetic conservatives to national prominence.<sup>54</sup> Sean Cunningham and most notably Elizabeth Tandy Shermer have subsequently led the charge in pursuing a nuanced tale of Sunbelt conservatism's rise devoid of the racial backlash thesis.<sup>55</sup> Crucial to the Sunbelt's development, Shermer contended, was 'how state power was deployed', highlighting the tremendous power of business in the region. 'These businessmen', Shermer continued, 'worked in the trenches of policymaking, they crafted the growth and investment statecraft that freed the South and Southwest'.<sup>56</sup> Particularly in the southwest – southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas – the place where Reagan forged his political identity and emerged as the head of this new movement, it was largely business and economics, alongside race, that drove the political agenda.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps more significantly, the sunbelt's emergence advanced a conservative agenda that was forward-looking, optimistic, and appealing to the electoral masses. As McGirr delineated, new south-western conservatives saw themselves 'as a modern force', which 'jettisoned older unpalatable ideas (of anti-Semitism, biological racism, and anti-Catholicism for example).'<sup>58</sup> Similarly, historian Robert Mason in his study on the Republican Party, noted the importance of a positive embrace of new, supply-side economics by Republicans between 1978-1980, as crucial to their electoral success. For Mason, 'supply-side ideas helped to dramatize the significance of the shift taking place within the party, seeking to refashion its conservatism in

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<sup>54</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> See Sean Cunningham, *Cowboy Conservatism: Texas and the Rise of the Modern Right* (Lexington, 2010); Sean Cunningham, *American Politics in the Postwar Sunbelt: Conservative Growth in a Battleground Region* (Cambridge, 2014); and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>57</sup> See Byron Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race, and Partisan Change in the Postwar South* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); and Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 18.

a more appealing form.’<sup>59</sup> Crucial to conservatism’s revitalised success was the refurbishing and recovery of conservative *ideas*. Sunbelt politicians, including Reagan, wanted to reburnish ideas of federalism and ‘states’ rights’ from their sullied reputation as something positive and uplifting.

Led by historian Jennifer Burns’ excellent study on Ayn Rand, intellectual historians have shown that even the most elite forms of twentieth century conservatism were dependent on grassroots support to mobilise ideas.<sup>60</sup> Yet as Burns noted in her critique of George Nash’s study, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, one area that is yet to be given serious study is the interaction of conservative ideas and the politics of race. Burns suggests (for intellectual historians at least), ‘in many areas Nash’s rendition of events needs to be revised. This is glaringly obvious in his treatment of race, where Nash elides the most urgent questions.’<sup>61</sup>

Here, I seek to add to the historiographical fold by interrogating conservatism’s most important politician, Ronald Reagan, and examining how his right-wing ideas impacted his relationship to race. For all the numerous, and indeed overwhelming studies of Reagan, few take him seriously, even less think him to be a man of ideas, and none have adequately investigated his relationship to race.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (New York, 2012), p. 253.

<sup>60</sup> For reading on intellectual conservatism’s reliance on grassroots to disseminate it’s ideas, see Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York, 2009); Michael Kimmage, *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); and Jennifer Burns, ‘The Three “Furies” of Libertarianism: Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, and Ayn Rand’, *Journal of American History*, 102:3 (2015), pp. 746-774.

<sup>61</sup> Jennifer Burns, ‘Review: In Retrospect: George Nash’s “The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945”’, *Reviews in American History*, 32:3 (2004), p. 457.

<sup>62</sup> Reagan biographies are numerous, but informative and detailed works include Anne Edwards, *Early Reagan: The Rise to Power* (New York, 1987); Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 1991); Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003); Thomas Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of his Conversion to Conservatism* (New

The only serious study of Reagan and race is Nicholas Laham's *The Reagan Presidency and the Politics of Race*. Akin to my own argument, the author suggests 'Reagan's civil rights policy was not determined by his need to play the race card, but by his own genuine belief in colorblind justice and limited government', which Laham notes, 'formed the two core principles of his conservative agenda.'<sup>63</sup> However, my study differs in several important ways. Firstly, my work is primarily concerned with Reagan's pre-presidency compared to Laham's narrow focus on the White House years. This is important because this thesis seeks to trace the origins of Reagan's colour-blindness, rather than just stating that it existed. Secondly, in providing a broader historical lens we gain a greater understanding of why Reagan's colour-blindness endured when public policy was shifting away from this historical orthodoxy. Thirdly, Laham's study was constrained by the fact that he undertook his research shortly after the Reagan Library opened and before all materials were available, which naturally made for a more limited study.

My study traces the impact of racial politics on Reagan, and Reagan's impact on racial politics, over the course of his adult life – from leaving Eureka College in 1932 to the end of his presidency in 1989. This ambitious project, which spans the entirety of the New Deal era and the rise of the conservative 'Reagan Era', advances four interrelated arguments to overturn our thinking of the modern conservative movement, and its relationship to politics of race.<sup>64</sup>

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York, 2006); Michael Schaller, *Ronald Reagan* (New York, 2010); H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, 2015); Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016); and David Byrne, *Ronald Reagan: An Intellectual Biography* (Lincoln, NE, 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Laham, *The Reagan Presidency and the Politics of Race: In Pursuit of Colorblind Justice and Limited Government* (Westport, CT, 1998) p. xiii.

<sup>64</sup> For literature on the 'Reagan Era', see Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980* (Roseville, CA, 2001); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York, 2008); Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (eds.), *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies* (New York, 2008); and Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York, 2015).

The overarching argument, driving much of the thesis, is the centrality of Reagan in advancing a vision of 'colour-blind' conservatism as a distinct ideological tradition from the prevailing backlash politics of the Wallace-Nixon years.<sup>65</sup> I define 'colour-blindness' as an ideological concept which argued that to treat people differently for any reason based upon their race was viewed as inherently racist in itself. The idea was founded in the history of Jim Crow, which defined and subjugated African Americans based upon their race (what colour-blind adherents such as Reagan would see as the insidious impact of colour-consciousness), and indeed was the prevailing liberal wisdom of post-World War II America until the early 1960s. The idea of colour-blindness as a remedy to America's racial problems, however, diminished in the mid-sixties. Instead, colour-consciousness gathered pace with President Johnson's Howard University address, and became mainstream political thought under the Nixon presidency with affirmative action and the Philadelphia Plan.

Whereas Wallace, Nixon, Helms, and other contemporary conservatives of the 1960s and 70s engaged in segmentational politics and courted the white vote through backlash politics, I argue Reagan offered an alternative which sharply divided the Republican Party, most notably over welfare reform and affirmative action. While these two issues have historically been controversial – red meat to the conservative base as evidence of the embodiment of covert racism – Reagan, as we later see, exploited both to his advantage in unexpected ways. Further, both of these wedge issues cemented his place as the leader of the conservative faction of the

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<sup>65</sup> While there is an extensive sociological literature on 'colour-blindness', there is little material which deals with colour-blindness as a historical study. For historical literature, see Lassiter, 'The Suburban Origins of "Color-Blind" Conservatism'; Matthew Lassiter, 'The "Color-Blind" inversion of Civil Rights History', *Revue française d'études américaines*, 113 (2007), pp. 65-69; Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Jennifer Delton, 'In Praise of Colorblind Conservatism', *Washington Post: Made By History* (online), 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018, available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/10/09/praise-colorblind-conservatism/> (last viewed 26<sup>th</sup> June 2020); and Justin Gomer, *White Balance: How Hollywood Shaped Colorblind Ideology and Undermined Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, 2020). The sociological literature on 'colour-blindness' is extensive, but perhaps the best starting point can be found in, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, 2003).

GOP, and eventually both he, and colour-blind ideology, became the mainstream of the party and the nation more broadly.

However, this was in itself problematic because Civil Rights advocates had moved away from colour-blindness as a solution to America's entrenched racial problems and by the time of Reagan's political ascent were calling for compensatory actions of group-based politics. As I later discuss, the sudden arrival of affirmative action – termed by political scientist Peter Skerry as the 'affirmative action state' – in the mid-sixties presented a severe challenge to the status quo.<sup>66</sup> With Reagan rejecting such measures, he further stressed the already strained relationship between the GOP and African Americans.

Reagan's 'colour-blindness' introduces the second major element of this thesis: rather than considering him as the independent variable whose ideology shifted over the years, I contend that his devotion to colour-blindness remained relatively unchanged. Instead, there was a massive exogenous shifting of social policy concerning politics of race throughout the 1960s, which left Reagan's unchanging worldview appearing outdated and (to some) unjustifiable. Relatedly, I challenge the most prominent prevailing notion of Reagan's upbringing: that he was a 'haemophilic liberal' and shifted rightward as a reaction to the Civil Rights movement and argue that in his younger years his political formation was far more complex. Reagan did not meaningfully 'become conservative'. Rather, the public policy world shifted significantly leftward under Johnson's Great Society, but Reagan's ideological core had already crystallised, leaving him too inflexible to adjust to a new political milieu.

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Skerry, 'Borders and Quotas: Immigration and the Affirmative-Action State', *Public Interest*, 96 (Summer 1989), pp. 86-102.

As historians and sociologists including Hugh Davis Graham, Gareth Davies, and John David Skrentny have argued, it is important to recognise the historical distinctiveness of the Great Society in relation to the broader American reform tradition, and in relation to traditional notions of federal authority.<sup>67</sup> With the New Deal, what strikes one immediately is its universalist character, promoting individual citizenship constructed freedom in a classical non-discrimination sense. As Graham outlined in his landmark study, *The Civil Rights Era*, the Jim Crow era had been characterised by colour-consciousness and therefore, 'fighting discrimination with counter-discrimination' was 'illogical and illiberal', and notions of colour-blindness developed.<sup>68</sup> While the Great Society started out that way too, by 1965 the Johnson administration and the Civil Rights movement were promoting particularist rights claims based on ideas of compensatory justice. That, it will be argued in chapter two, presented a difficulty for conservatives committed to more individualistic conceptions of freedom and suspicious of the muscular use of state power to advance group rights. Reagan's attitudes to the politics of race were heavily framed by these larger considerations.

The third major argument is that Reagan, unlike his current presentation in the literature, was a man of ideas. This is most profoundly explored in the third chapter, which examines Reagan's devotion to 'The Creative Society'; a tightly packaged agenda of ideas surrounding criminal justice reform, overhaul of the tax system, and most expressly, welfare reform. In California, where Reagan served two terms as governor between 1967 and 1975, we see how the governor employed the Creative Society to reject the prevailing liberalism of Johnson's Great Society and offer a viable conservative alternative.

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<sup>67</sup> For reading on Great Society reforms relating to Civil Rights and the American political tradition, see Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*; Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence, KS, 1996); John David Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action: Politics, Culture, and Justice in America* (Chicago, 1996); and Shep Melnick, *Between the Lines: Interpreting Welfare Rights* (Washington, DC, 1994).

<sup>68</sup> Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, pp. 5-6.

Most pointedly, I use Reagan's repeated attempts at wholesale welfare reform in California to examine how he sought to enact Reaganism into policy for the first time. Since the Newburgh controversy of 1961, race and welfare were intractably tied in the national consciousness, and thus when Reagan declared he would reform welfare in his first inaugural address, scholars and contemporaries have interpreted such action as part of the broader conservative backlash. Conversely, I show that the governor's desire for welfare reform was not driven by racial considerations as we might expect, but rather directed by his concerns over the size and role of government – an issue he had been thinking about since the mid-1930s. I also use the battle over welfare to complicate the broader story of the contingency of the conservative movement in California in the 1960s, showing that it was not the unstoppable force of nature that we might think. Finally, I show that with the failure of Richard Nixon's national attempts at welfare reform through the surprisingly liberal Family Assistance Plan, the Creative Society gave Reagan his first genuine opportunity to cement his place as the *de facto* leader of the conservative movement.

Although this thesis is primarily concerned with Reagan's pre-presidency, the final major contribution of this thesis is found in the chapter on the Gipper's performance in the White House. In carefully examining the understudied battle over sanctions against the apartheid government of South Africa, we see that Reagan's obstinacy to pursue a policy of 'constructive engagement' helped fuel the growth and development of the African American political class in the United States. A direct result of Reagan's re-election in 1984, the launch of the Free South Africa Movement was the final step in the maturation of the Civil Rights movement. The group galvanised a broad coalition of peoples and interests from grassroots to political elites, to unite and inflict the most significant foreign policy veto override in the twentieth century. It

was a symbolic and powerful rebuke by African Americans, the culmination of decades of hostility between Civil Rights, Reagan, and the conservative movement writ large.

Together, these arguments produce a nuanced and intricate approach to Reagan's complicated, and often strained, relationship with racial politics. Overturning current historiography, this thesis will show that Reagan's worldview dated back to his days as a Roosevelt Democrat in the 1930s and crystallised in the late 1940s. Rather than a visceral reaction to the rise of Civil Rights in the 1950s and 60s, it was entirely conceivable to Reagan, that his opposition to progressive advancement was grounded in both his resolute devotion to individualism, encompassing a classical liberal Lockean view of the state, *and* a colour-blind adherence to Rooseveltian universalism. To that end, he supported elements of the New Deal while opposing the group-based legacy that liberals carried forward with the Great Society. Importantly, historians who see Reagan fitting and expanding the Southern Strategy are wrong when they suggest his politics was grounded in backlash appeal. It was not because of race that he opposed the reforms of the 1960s, but a *product* of a philosophical worldview that was incompatible with group-based collectivism.

# I

## *The Emerging Man*

*I was a near hopeless haemophilic liberal. I bled for “causes”; I had voted Democratic through the 1948 election... The story of my disillusionment with big government is linked fundamentally with the ideas that suddenly sprouted and put forth in the war years.<sup>1</sup>*

– Ronald Reagan, *Interview with Congressional Quarterly*, July 1967 –

### ***Introduction***

Amid the ‘cheerless, desperate days’ of the Great Depression – the greatest crisis to hit the United States since the civil war – a young man named Dutch Reagan was searching for his place in the world.<sup>2</sup> ‘Dutch’, as he had been known all his life, would not use his given name ‘Ronald’ until his late twenties. While Ronald Reagan would become one of the most influential figures of the late twentieth century, in the summer of 1932, Dutch, aged just twenty-one, was one of forty-five students graduating Eureka College in rural Illinois. Unsure of his future and the ominous words of Eureka president Clyde Lyon still ringing in his ears – not to let the seemingly dour future ‘bully them into non-achievement’ – Dutch left the cosseted halls of Eureka behind and stepped into the outwardly broken world of adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

The Depression had ravaged the Reagan family, the Midwest, and the country. Unemployment stood at twenty-three percent, representing twelve million desperate jobless workers, compared

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Presidential Preview 6: The Public Record of Ronald Reagan’, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *Congressional Quarterly*, p. 1307.

<sup>2</sup> Description of the depression in Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (London, 1990), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Clyde Lyon quoted in Anne Edwards, *Early Reagan: The Rise of an American Hero* (London, 1987), p. 112.

to just over one million workers just three years earlier.<sup>4</sup> The Reagan family – Jack, Nelle, and his brother Neil – were struggling, with Jack unable to hold a permanent job. The family survived on Nelle’s income of \$14 per week. In retrospect, the depths of despair in the summer of 1932 was an important turning point in the Depression decade. On 7<sup>th</sup> June, Reagan’s graduation day, a thousand miles away in Florida, the governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, won the Democratic primary, cementing his status as front-runner heading into the convention weeks later.

Roosevelt was everything his political opponent Republican President Herbert Hoover was not, and everything Reagan aspired to be. He was charming, charismatic, and most-importantly, he conveyed hope. Only weeks after Reagan’s graduation, Roosevelt broke with tradition and flew to Dutch’s home state of Illinois to accept the Democratic nomination in person. On a ‘humid, sweaty’ July night in Chicago, Roosevelt ascended to the podium and gave a rousing address in which he declared, ‘this is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms’. Promising to ‘constitute ourselves prophets of a new order’, the New Yorker advocated a generational change of politics, dedicating himself to ‘a new deal for the American people.’<sup>5</sup>

Reagan would later reflect on this tumultuous period and declare, ‘I was a child of the Depression, a Democrat by upbringing and very emotionally involved.’<sup>6</sup> Dutch was a devout Roosevelt supporter in these early years, yet, just four election cycles later he cast a Democratic vote for the final time (Harry Truman in 1948). Decades later, it would ironically be Reagan’s 1980 presidential victory that unequivocally symbolised the end of the New Deal Era.<sup>7</sup> While

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics taken from Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Description of the evening taken from Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 119; Roosevelt quoted in ‘Text of Governor Roosevelt’s Speech at the Convention Accepting the Nomination’, *NYT*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1932, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Reagan quoted in Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. xiii.

engaging little with race directly, Reagan's subsequent attitudes to the politics of race cannot be understood without the New Deal context this chapter provides. The following pages weave an interrelated narrative of how Dutch's worldview formed during the 1930s and 1940s, amid the political turbulence and transformation associated with the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War Two.

Substantial scholarly attention has been paid to comprehending the formation of Reagan's worldview. As the most ideological president to occupy the Oval Office, the task is an important one. Biographer Craig Shirley contended that 'Reagan continued to evolve' throughout his political life to the end of his presidency. However, most other studies suggest his conservative worldview crystallised earlier than that, placing emphasis on the 1950s and 1960s. For example, writer Thomas Evans – author of an entire work on the role General Electric played in Reagan's maturity – concluded it was in the 1950s that 'Reagan came to expound on the need to reduce taxes and limit government'. Similarly, historian Iwan Morgan argued, 'an avowed liberal when the New Deal order was at its peak in the 1930s and 1940s, he journeyed rightward within the emergent conservative movement of the 1950s.' Conversely, Pulitzer-nominated biographer H. W. Brands suggested the transformation began a little earlier, noting 'Pearl Harbor proved the starting point for Reagan's long march across the political spectrum.'<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, I argue that Reagan's ideological 'conversion' – I complicate the premise below – took place much earlier than previously thought and was essentially complete by the 1948 elections. This places Reagan's political maturity in a wholly original light: in reality, the entire

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<sup>8</sup> Shirley, *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980* (New York, 2017), p. 300; Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* (New York, 2006), p. 4; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. xiii; H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, 2015), p. 53.

debate about when Reagan turned to the Right is based on a false premise. Rather than seeing him as a figure on a fixed political spectrum who ‘transitioned’ to conservatism, I consider him the independent variable, with the world shifting around him. Consequently, when public social policy shifted significantly leftward through presidential administrations adhering to New Deal and latterly Great Society dogma, Reagan’s unchanging worldview left him looking conservative without any meaningful change to his political philosophy.

### ***The Depression and the New Deal***

The period immediately before the Depression was enjoyable for Dutch Reagan. He graduated Dixon High School in the summer of 1928 and followed his high school partner, Margaret Cleaver, to Eureka College. Despite the family struggling for money, Dutch managed to finance college through a combination of savings, deferred payments, and scholarships making him one of the select few to enter tertiary education.<sup>9</sup> Reagan’s college years are especially challenging for historians due to the scarcity of evidence. The best account of the period remains writer Anne Edwards’s work, *Early Reagan*. Edwards, a prolific biographer, started as a Hollywood screenwriter, working in the film industry at the same time as Reagan, although she does not appear to have known her subject. While her work is detailed and relies on a series of interviews with Reagan’s early associates rather than archival study, so much reliance on one source inevitably makes detailed analysis difficult. One issue these years does bring to the fore is the ethos of Eureka College, which as we will soon see, shows traces of the colour-blindness that characterised Reagan’s later credo.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Hannaford, the long-time Reagan advisor and confidante, noted that Reagan paid \$51 in cash on entry and financed the remaining \$45 of fees through ‘deferred/notes/scholarships’. For further reading, see Hannaford, *Reagan’s Roots: The People and Places That Shaped His Character* (Bennington, VT, 2016), appendix B, p. 135. Meanwhile, Anne Edwards noted that, Reagan ‘was one of only 8 percent of the Dixon High School graduating class of 1928 who had gone onto college.’ For Further reading, see Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 97; Iwan Morgan estimated that Reagan was in the 2% of high school graduates who went onto further education, see *Reagan*, p. 13.

Dutch adjusted to life at Eureka quickly. In his first year, he took classes in English Literature, Rhetoric, and History, joined the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity, and involved himself in college football.<sup>10</sup> A small liberal arts college, Eureka's student body was overwhelmingly white and working-class. Edwards described the college as 'segregated', with the students sharing 'the same faith and similar socio-economic background[s]'.<sup>11</sup> That is not to say the college courted segregation like its southern counterparts. To the contrary, it was founded by anti-slavery Disciples of Christ in 1855, hosted Abraham Lincoln a year later, and 'was only the third college in America to admit female students on a par with males and there was no bar on admitting African Americans.'<sup>12</sup>

Eureka's egalitarian college life was grounded in the Christian tradition of treating all equally before God, which led to 'a strict moral code that held the "Roaring Twenties" at bay.'<sup>13</sup> Not only did this mean that the typical alcohol-fuelled parties of many students' college experiences were non-existent at Eureka, but more importantly, the strict moral code instilled a work ethic and a sense of working for his subsidies – an early form of 'workfare' which became a credo that characterised Reagan's later life. For students like Reagan who received financial aid, they were 'required to work' for their subsidies. This meant students staffed 'traditional areas – the cafeteria, library, research, etc.', but also 'did the heavy maintenance of heating and other services' including harvesting during the fall semester for which the school tailored teaching hours appropriately.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, it was this work incentive that later infused his position on welfare – you received nothing for free, and it was only temporary to relieve the immediate

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<sup>10</sup> Reagan's class list can be found in Hannaford, *Reagan's Roots*, appendix B, pp. 135-145.

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York, 1987), p. 89.

burden. Eureka's disciplined style imparted Dutch with a belief to treat all, regardless of their station, with dignity and respect.

The national mood, like Dutch Reagan's, was high in 1928. Since the turn of the twentieth century, nearly thirty years of 'barely punctuated economic growth' was 'capped by seven years of unprecedented prosperity'.<sup>15</sup> The feeling of optimism was encapsulated by the Republican choice for president: Herbert Hoover. He achieved national acclaim by gaining success wherever he went; as a mining engineer, international businessman, food administrator during the First World War, and latterly an 'exceptionally influential' Secretary of Commerce for successive Republican presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. Such was national exuberance in August 1928, Hoover – a man who had 'never known failure' – stated, 'we in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land.'<sup>16</sup>

For all of Dutch's happiness in his freshman year of 1928 and national optimism, dark days were on the horizon. The American experience was not uniform; the Midwest region had struggled economically even before the Great Depression hit. Reagan's class intake was below the expected 250 students because 'rural overproduction' by farmers led to plummeting prices in the agricultural heartland of the Corn Belt, affecting both farmers and shop owners alike, meaning many students simply could not afford college.<sup>17</sup> The shortfall of admissions damaged Eureka, resulting in several class options being cut from the teaching syllabus. Soon, however,

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<sup>15</sup> David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in the Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 2001), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Description of Hoover as 'exceptionally influential' by Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 11; writer Sherwood Anderson described Hoover as a man who had 'never known failure', for further reading, see *ibid*; Hoover statement found in *ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> For further reading on the crisis, see Morgan, *Reagan*, pp. 13-14.

Midwestern pain was overwhelmed by national disaster, as unprecedented financial carnage befell the United States.

As Reagan returned to leafy, quiet Eureka for his sophomore year, the national financial system was on the verge of collapse. After many months of turbulent stock market activity, labelled an 'orgy of mad speculation' by Hoover, pressure finally gave way and the market collapsed in October 1929.<sup>18</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> October, over 6 million trades saw some \$4 billion wiped off the value of companies. The panic continued the following day, with a record nearly 13 million trades causing a further \$9 billion in losses. Then on 'Black Tuesday' (29<sup>th</sup> October), some 16.5 million trades decimated what was remaining of the market. By the time the markets settled several weeks later, approximately \$26 billion, or a third of the entire value of the September market had evaporated.<sup>19</sup>

While the Midwest's long economic struggle had insulated the region from the shock of the Wall Street crash, it did little to prevent the depression from seizing and crippling the economy further, affecting both the Reagans and Eureka. Midwestern agrarian society struggled as wheat prices collapsed from \$1.35 a bushel in 1929 to 76 cents by the summer of 1930. The Reagan family was not immune to the suffering. Nelle Reagan wrote to Dutch for financial help, and he managed to send her \$50 from his savings accrued over several summers working as a lifeguard. Meanwhile Reagan's father, Jack, was one of the millions of unemployed, so he 'threw all his energy into volunteer work for the Democrats, convinced that if Hoover could be beaten and the Democrats returned to power, the country would pull out of the Depression.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hoover quoted in Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> All statistics taken from Kennedy's sweeping account, for further information see *ibid*, pp. 34-41.

<sup>20</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, pp. 106-111.

Dutch's remaining college days were not easy, but they were enjoyable. While the family, like millions of others, struggled financially, young Dutch immersed himself within a world of extracurricular activities based around sport and drama. Through such activities, he took forward important life lessons – 'a talent for acting, a capacity for public speaking, and a projection of confidence that emanated from self-belief.'<sup>21</sup> In as far as his Eureka years provide an understanding of Reagan, these life lessons alongside the importance of treating all equally are as far as Eureka can take us.

As Dutch transitioned into adulthood, we start to see a clearer picture of the man emerging. Between graduating Eureka in 1932 and moving to Hollywood in 1937, Dutch developed and so too did his worldview. In the following pages, I advance two arguments that, I believe, cast doubt on the best-known Reagan claim of this era: that he was a 'haemophilic liberal'. I make the case that his time spent working in radio exposed Dutch to profoundly different, more conservative, circles than his time at Eureka. Under the influence of firebrand conservative H.R. 'Hal' Gross, Dutch was subjected to a wide range of ideological worldviews, which profoundly influenced the young and malleable Reagan. Secondly, employing historian Gary Gerstle's model of the 'protean character' of the New Deal, I show Reagan was attracted by Roosevelt's inspirational leadership and the emergency nature of the New Deal, but as the second wave arrived in 1935-36, the New Deal was a different beast entirely and it is plausible that Reagan was already having doubts about this progressive model of government.<sup>22</sup> These two broad arguments complicate our current understanding of Reagan's worldview as a diehard Rooseveltian Democrat. That being said, there is still a lack of substantial archival evidence for this time, meaning all analysis and judgment should be treated with caution.

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<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> For further reading, see Gary Gerstle, 'The Protean Character of American Liberalism', *American Historical Review*, 99:4 (1994), pp. 1043-1073.

### *From Illinois to Iowa*

A few months after Dutch had graduated from Eureka, Franklin Roosevelt defeated Herbert Hoover in a landslide, doubtless delighting the ardently Democratic Reagan family. Claiming 42 states, Roosevelt had a mandate for change, and he delivered in spectacular fashion. Once inaugurated on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1933, Roosevelt demonstrated to the people his decisive leadership. He signed or instituted a sweeping range of reforms within his first hundred days – creating a yardstick against which all subsequent presidents have been measured – including; the Emergency Banking Act (9<sup>th</sup> March), the repeal of prohibition (13<sup>th</sup> March), removal of the gold standard (19<sup>th</sup> April), the Federal Emergency Relief Act (12<sup>th</sup> May), the Securities Act (27<sup>th</sup> May), and the National Industrial Recovery Act (16<sup>th</sup> June).<sup>23</sup> In the first hundred days of his presidency, Roosevelt launched his New Deal, ‘a revolution in government’ – awesome in both scale and breadth of reform.<sup>24</sup>

It was not just Roosevelt’s urgent policy-making that attracted Reagan; he was also captivated by the president’s model of empathetic leadership. At the heart of Roosevelt’s style were his fireside chats, which became a staple of his presidency and explained in simple terms why the federal government acted as it did. As historian William Leuchtenburg in his 1963 classic study, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, outlined, ‘In his fireside chats, he talked like a father discussing public affairs with his family in the living room.’ Reagan bought into FDR’s paternalism, describing in his 1990 memoir, how the fireside chats ‘made an indelible mark on me during the Depression’, creating the impression that ‘as far as Dutch was concerned,

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<sup>23</sup> For reading on Roosevelt’s first hundred days, see Anthony Badger, *FDR: The First Hundred Days* (New York, 2008); Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, chapter 5; and Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton, 2014), pp. 25-26.

Roosevelt was his family's savior.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps most importantly, the young Reagan, like many, was probably drawn to FDR's personification of 'the state as protector.'<sup>26</sup> While Reagan may have respected many other presidents, and ideologically was most-aligned with Calvin Coolidge, he admired Roosevelt.

Just as FDR's first hundred days began the process of transforming the nation, Dutch Reagan's life was similarly about to change. Reagan's first job was sports caster for WOC Radio in Davenport, Iowa, approximately seventy miles west of his hometown of Dixon, Illinois. Dutch spent the 1932-33 football season calling college games, beginning with Minnesota's 21-6 victory over Iowa. WOC relayed the game through National Broadcasting Company (NBC) affiliate WHO Radio in Des Moines, Iowa, which transmitted the game across the Midwest, giving Reagan a sizable platform. The *Chicago Tribune* critic wrote, '[Reagan's] crisp account of the muddy struggle sounded like a carefully written story of the gridiron goings-on and his quick tongue seemed to be as fast as the plays.' So successful was Dutch in his four trial games that his boss, Pete MacArthur, offered him a staff announcer role on one hundred dollars a month – 'a king's ransom' in 1932.<sup>27</sup>

Dutch was not, however, gaining widespread notoriety in Davenport. Upon announcing his permanent role, a local newspaper incorrectly declared, 'Edward (Dutch) Reagan' as the new commentator. In the column, the paper surmised, "'Dutch" may not read commercial blah like a circus ballyhooer, but he speaks the king's English intelligently and understandingly.'<sup>28</sup> Just three months into his first adult job, Reagan was transferred by MacArthur to the NBC affiliate,

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<sup>25</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), pp. 330-31; Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life* (New York, 1990), p. 169; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 21

<sup>26</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, p. 331.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> 'Radio Scraps 'n' Sensations', *Quad City Times* (Davenport, Iowa), 26<sup>th</sup> February 1933, p. 17.

WHO Radio, in Des Moines. He was given the plum job of chief sports announcer, which doubled his salary and transformed his social standing overnight.

Des Moines was a bustling metropolis compared to Davenport. With a population of over 142,000, it was the largest city in Iowa (double the size of Davenport) and served as the state capital. For Dutch, not only did the radio station give him a bigger platform, making him a local celebrity, it gave him the political atmosphere he craved. As Edwards described, young Dutch ‘was on a first-name basis with Iowa’s top politicians as well as with the stars whom he met in his work.’<sup>29</sup> Meeting such local political luminaries exposed Reagan to a wide range of influences, but it was closer to home – at his radio station – that Dutch received his first meaningful political education.

At WHO radio, Reagan likely had his first serious exposure to conservative political views, for he found himself working under two super-conservative Republicans: H.R. Gross and Voith Penberthy. Gross later ran for the Iowa governorship, before serving Iowa’s third district in the House of Representatives from 1949 to 1975. He became known for his ‘tight-fisted approach to fiscal matters and his strong isolationist views on foreign policy’, accruing the nickname ‘watchdog of the Treasury’.<sup>30</sup> Gross was a much more flinty conservative than Reagan ever became, and was someone who was probably highly sceptical of the New Deal. Penberthy, meanwhile, served the Reagan presidency working in the General Services Administration.<sup>31</sup> These two men ‘sharpened’ Reagan’s political knowledge and encouraged his reading of

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<sup>29</sup> Statistic in Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 131; *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Winston Williams, ‘H.R. Gross is Dead’(Obituary), *NYT*, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1987, p. 23.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1982’, *United States Government Printing Office*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC, 1983) p. 844.

political literature – a trait he maintained throughout his life – as ‘whenever Penberthy or Gross made a point, he sought answers from books and articles.’<sup>32</sup>

Dutch’s time in Des Moines, while not being as formative as his years in Hollywood, undoubtedly honed his political thinking. According to Morgan, Reagan developed an ‘encyclopaedic knowledge of political facts and figures’ which informed his worldview.<sup>33</sup> Four years in Iowa matured and educated Reagan in ways that equal time at Eureka had not.<sup>34</sup> Life in radio gave Dutch his first experience of fame and introduced him to how public messages were crafted and refined. Iowa also gave Reagan a glimpse of his own capabilities, providing the first meaningful interactions with people who challenged and broadened his politics. What mattered most, however, was the satisfaction of learning that he had the capacity to attract a large audience and to influence their thinking – albeit, in the first instance, about sport.

The narrative of Reagan’s political odyssey in Roosevelt’s first term has three complications. The first concerns the importance of separating the personal admiration for FDR already discussed from the policies he advocated beyond the emergency actions of the first hundred days. Reagan deeply admired Roosevelt on a personal level, telling his daughter Maureen in 1960, he was ‘very emotionally committed to FDR’.<sup>35</sup> Dutch viewed the emergency support of labour, banking, and farming amongst others in the first hundred days as vital in saving the nation. Reagan considered the president’s actions as necessary ones which protected all Americans. Further, he believed those initial steps were not about appealing to different segments of society, but rather restoring the economic baseline that enabled individuals to thrive and succeed – the rising tide lifted all boats. If there was any truth to Reagan’s

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<sup>32</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 150.

<sup>35</sup> Reagan quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 21.

retrospective characterisation of himself as a ‘haemophilic liberal’, which is doubtful, it was in the earliest days of Roosevelt’s presidency.

Secondly, the New Deal was neither a dogmatic ideological agenda, nor a monolithic policy programme.<sup>36</sup> Contrasting the universalist agenda of the first wave, Roosevelt’s second wave was typified by passage in 1935 of both the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act. In doing so, the New Deal created a new system of ‘social rights’, enshrining pluralism into the national fabric which shifted the political paradigm and became the enduring legacy of Roosevelt’s presidency. In short, ‘the federal government expanded enormously’ in FDR’s first term.<sup>37</sup> We have no direct evidence of Reagan’s contemporary reaction to this change, but it could not be surprising, if he viewed it with ambivalence in a context where he has been exposed to conservative thought to a far greater degree than Dixon.

Either way, Roosevelt’s 1936 presidential campaign was the zenith of New Deal liberalism in terms of rhetorical boldness and its challenge to capitalism, and a far cry from the political credo that Reagan had supported so enthusiastically four years earlier. The first wave of legislation constituted ‘FDR’s call for “bold, persistent experimentation” to meet the great emergency at hand.’ The second wave, arguably more profound and certainly more enduring, ‘converted emergency programs into ongoing obligations of the national government’.<sup>38</sup> As Roosevelt boldly outlined in his attack on ‘economic royalists’ when accepting his party’s re-nomination, ‘Government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which are protection of the family and the home, the establishment of a

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<sup>36</sup> Gerstle, ‘The Protean Character of American Liberalism’.

<sup>37</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, pp. 332-33.

<sup>38</sup> Milkis, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Economic Constitutional Order, and the New Politics of Presidential Leadership’, in Milkis and Jerome Mileur (eds.), *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism* (Amherst, 2002) p. 41.

democracy of opportunity, and aid to those overtaken by disaster.’<sup>39</sup> This was what political scientist Sidney Milkis termed, ‘the economic constitutional order’.<sup>40</sup> Part, although not all of this revolutionary new order, was a massive investment in public infrastructure which, ‘helped justify the new role of the state in American life, legitimizing – intellectually and physically – what has come to be known as Keynesian management of the economy.’ With public works as an example of this massive new federal state, between 1933 and 1939 two-thirds of federal expenditure was public works programmes – a 1,650 percent increase on the second half of the 1920s.<sup>41</sup>

Thirdly, as far as it is possible to understand Reagan’s political allegiance in the mid-thirties, it is best characterised as contextual rather than ideological. His support for the New Deal was contingent on his belief that the Depression constituted an enormous human emergency, rather than any broader faith in activist government. A crucial aspect of the shifting political dynamic was welfare. Roosevelt declared in his 1935 State of the Union message, ‘continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre’. Continual dependence on welfare created a sense of entitlement, that to Roosevelt was a ‘violation of the traditions of America’.<sup>42</sup> *That*, was the New Deal that Reagan remembered and admired, writing in his memoir, ‘many of the relief programs FDR instituted during the Depression were necessary measure during an emergency, but I remain convinced that it was never his intention... to make giveaway programs that trapped families forever’.<sup>43</sup> Reagan would go on to appropriate much of Roosevelt’s language, particularly about welfare

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<sup>39</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, ‘Acceptance Speech for the Renomination for the Presidency’, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1936, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/acceptance-speech-for-the-renomination-for-the-presidency-philadelphia-pa> (last viewed 13th July 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Milkis, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Economic Constitutional Order’, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Building a New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 3; statistic in *ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Roosevelt, ‘Annual Message to Congress’, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1935, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/annual-message-congress-3> (last viewed 18th March 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 134.

reform, with the purpose of creating and self-sustaining the (false) premise that he was Roosevelt's ideological heir. However, the other and more enduring welfare legacy of the New Deal was its commitment not just to emergency action but a permanent social safety net: not just freedom from hunger but as Kennedy put it – 'freedom from fear'.<sup>44</sup>

Such reflective statements by Reagan require caution because they involved a strong element of myth-making. Under the stewardship of H.R. Gross, Dutch Reagan was becoming increasingly sceptical of the different beast the New Deal had become by the time of Roosevelt's re-election campaign in 1936. It was perfectly plausible that Reagan supported the President's inspirational leadership and emergency programmes but disapproved of what the New Deal had become. Lois Ulrich, a colleague at WHO, highlighted Gross' growing influence on Reagan by suggesting cracks in his perceived liberalism were emerging; 'Gross was winning Dutch over. He was still a Democrat, or claimed to be, still as enthusiastic about Roosevelt as when I first met him, but he had begun to talk about government moving too heavily into people's lives.'<sup>45</sup>

The anti-statist, individualist conservative was slowly emerging. Nonetheless, despite developing mixed feelings about the New Deal by the time of Roosevelt's re-election, Reagan's suspicions were not enough to detach him from FDR or the Democratic Party. His doubts do, however, raise serious questions that he was ever a 'haemophilic liberal'. Instead, a better characterisation of Dutch in the mid-thirties, is that he held broadly conservative – patriotic, Midwestern, small town values – but not especially ideological views. Ultimately, Reagan rationalised his ideology by suggesting that he never fully divorced himself from his early

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<sup>44</sup> For further reading, see Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*.

<sup>45</sup> Ulrich quoted in Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 143.

Rooseveltian fervor, stating in his memoir, ‘I’m not so sure *I* changed as much as the parties changed.’<sup>46</sup> The reality for politician Reagan was both politically expedient and ironic: he eulogised Roosevelt and immersed himself within the heritage of FDR’s great political character, whilst actively seeking to undo the enduring collectivist elements of his legacy.

### ***Hollywood, World War II, and the first President Reagan***

In February 1937, spurred by a growing desire to work in the booming film industry, Dutch Reagan travelled with the Chicago Cubs to their spring training camp, taking place between 12<sup>th</sup> February and 15<sup>th</sup> March at Santa Catalina Island. This was the second year that Dutch, the sports newscaster, had travelled as part of spring training, reporting back to the listeners across the Midwest ahead of the baseball season. While in southern California, Dutch used a friend, Joy Hodges, to arrange an interview and signed on with Bill Meiklejohn agency. The agency arranged a screen test with Warner Bros., who were looking for a replacement for Ross Alexander, an actor who had committed suicide in January 1937.<sup>47</sup> Despite a self-described ‘terrible’ screen test, Jack Warner gambled on Reagan, and he was offered a seven-year incremental contract, with a one-year option starting at \$200 a week.<sup>48</sup> Dutch – delighted at the news – replied to his agent, ‘Sign before they change their minds’.<sup>49</sup> His final day at WHO Radio was Friday 21<sup>st</sup> May, and he would start at Warner Bros. on 1<sup>st</sup> June, leaving Iowa and the nickname ‘Dutch’ behind. Ronald Reagan was born.

At the time Reagan joined the Warner Bros. studio, the company was enjoying something of a revival. It was one of the ‘big five’ studios, and despite enduring severe losses between 1931

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<sup>46</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 134.

<sup>47</sup> Note – ‘Warner Bros.’ is the preferred styling of ‘Warner Brothers’.

<sup>48</sup> Reagan described his test as ‘terrible’ in a newspaper article he wrote just weeks later. For further reading, see Reagan, ‘The Making of a Movie Star’, *Des Moines Sunday Register*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1937, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Reagan quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 24.

and 1935, the company had since returned to tidy profits. Harry Warner controlled the financial operation from New York, while brother Jack ran the production company in Los Angeles.<sup>50</sup> Reagan was joining an in-house cast that included James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart, and Bette Davis. However, he was not to join the A-list immediately – he had to learn his trade making B-movies. They were ‘shot in three weeks, last about one hour, and were put on double bills with A-movies to draw audiences to studio-owned theatres.’<sup>51</sup>

Although Hollywood’s allure and trappings were seductive and captivating for the twenty-six-year-old Reagan, he initially struggled in the Golden State. Working in the B-movies hardly afforded him status and the transient nature of producing the hasty B-films made it difficult to form friendships. Consequently, Reagan moved his parents out to Hollywood as soon as he could, renting them a flat on Sunset Boulevard, while many of his fraternity brothers, hoping to replicate Reagan’s ‘success’ in the motion picture industry, also followed him westward.

In his early Hollywood days, the struggling actor spent his free time with Hodges – the two first met working for WHO Radio, before Hodges moved to Los Angeles and remained lifelong friends – where the pair, according to Hodges, ‘discussed politics more than any other subject... he loved anything and everything about government, history and politics.’<sup>52</sup> We know little of Hodges’ politics in this period, except she ran for Universal City mayor – a small region covering most of the Hollywood studios – in 1939, only to have her platform described as ‘fluffy’ and withdraw in the face of defeat to Mischa Auer.<sup>53</sup> Along with his acting career,

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<sup>50</sup> For a brief oversight of Warner Bros., see *Morgan, Reagan*, pp. 25-28.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Hodges quoted in Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 173; brief description of Hodge’s career and life-long friendship with Reagan found in ‘Obituary: Joy Hodges, 88; Helped Reagan Start Acting’, *NYT*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2003, p. B8.

<sup>53</sup> For scarce information on Hodges’ campaign, see ‘Politics Rend Hollywood’, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1939, p. 25; ‘Auer is Mayor’, *The Minneapolis Star*, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1939, p. 15

Hodges sustained and encouraged Reagan's political interests (later, she would be invited to the White House on numerous occasions, once being seated beside Mikhail Gorbachev).<sup>54</sup>

Whatever his attitudes to the New Deal might have been by the latter 1930s, he was clearly not conservative, for he joined a range of liberal groups in the late-thirties and early-forties. The most prominent of these were the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of Arts, Sciences and Professions (HICCASP) and the American Veterans' Committee (AVC). He would also later join Cold War group, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Yet neither can we characterise Reagan as a liberal during his Hollywood years. His strong support for Roosevelt led many of his hardcore liberal friends to believe he was one of them, but even before the United States entered the Second World War, the actor disagreed with them over the place of communism in American society. When Reagan was invited to communist meetings he declined.<sup>55</sup> With the spectre of war on the horizon, Reagan was increasingly equating support for totalitarianism, whether fascist or communist, as anti-American.

Reagan's political concerns were amplified and reinforced by developing friendships within the film industry. Acting friends George Murphy and Dick Powell were prominent supporters of the Republican Party, and they introduced Reagan to Justin Dart, Goodwin Knight, and Charles Crook. Dart was a key Republican fundraiser and helped back Knight's successful gubernatorial run in 1953 (he was also a prominent newspaper publisher), while Murphy, a close friend of Reagan's, became a Senator for California in 1965. Even though Reagan remained a Roosevelt supporter, backing him in every presidential election, this cadre

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<sup>54</sup> For reading of Hodges and Gorbachev's interaction, see 'Obituary: Joy Hodges', *The Daily Telegraph*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2003.

<sup>55</sup> For the impact of leading anti-communist Father Coughlin on the nation, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982).

undoubtedly in Edwards' view, 'brought his thinking closer to the Republican view'.<sup>56</sup> Yet, it would be Reagan's experience in the war itself and the immediate aftermath, that codified his political philosophy, giving it a sharpened definition which it had previously lacked.

On 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941, imperial Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, throwing the United States into World War Two. For Reagan, his four years in the motion picture industry from 1937 to 1941 had witnessed steady and prolonged career advancement. In 1940, he starred in the tragic role of football star George Gipp in *Knute Rockne, All American*. The audience were shocked as Gipp contracted a fatal illness, leaving Reagan to utter his most famous film line, 'win one for the "Gipper"'. The line and name evoked images of American heroism and were successfully employed in his later political career. The film met with outstanding reviews with the *New York Times* labelling it, 'one of the best pictures for boys in years.'<sup>57</sup> Like many of Reagan's early roles which projected an all-American brave persona, in typical and heroic 'good versus evil' storylines – a role he attempted to reprise in his memoir title *An American Life* – the extended metaphor of a young man dying fighting for a cause, was not lost on audiences staring down the prospect of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Reagan, like many bigger headline actors, was part of Warner Bros. public drive to muster anti-fascist sentiment.

Once the full-scale American war effort was launched, Reagan was called to the Army Air Corps, having signed for the Army Reserves several years earlier. His poor eyesight prevented him from seeing combat duty, resulting in his serving in an Air Corps film unit, based around the Hollywood studios. While his wartime years never saw him leave American soil, the experience left a profound mark. Ed Meese, a lifelong aide and an Attorney General in the

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<sup>56</sup> Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 228.

<sup>57</sup> Bosley Crowther, 'The Screen', *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1940, p. 24.

Reagan White House, stated that the actor's experience making wartime propaganda films, 'gave him almost a religious view of America – something holy and worth dying for.'<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, it was not just America's role in the world that changed for the Gipper during the war; for the first time, he witnessed and developed a sense for racial discrimination in the United States. The armed services were segregated throughout the Second World War, having to wait until President Harry Truman's 1948 executive order to establish integrated units.<sup>59</sup> Reagan's branch of the forces, the Army Air Force, used black soldiers 'reluctantly', training them in 'separate but equal' facilities.<sup>60</sup> The best-known of the Gipper's wartime films, Academy Award winning *This is the Army* (1943), written by Irving Berlin, starred Reagan and Murphy, and featured a 'small but prominent' role for heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, who 'punches away on the screen without the slightest camera fright' according to the *New York Times* review.<sup>61</sup>

How might wartime service be said to have influenced Reagan's view about race? The first context within which we learn anything about the Gipper's attitude to race is in his off-screen role of narrator for the wartime propaganda film, *Wings for This Man* (1945). The short, ten-minute film told the story of the Tuskegee Army Airfield – the first to train African Americans and produce a flying unit for the war. This exposed Reagan to racial inequality in the armed forces. The Gipper's script contained lines alluding to the racist barriers overcome by the pilots: 'there was misunderstanding and prejudice to be cleared away', he narrated, adding that 'they

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<sup>58</sup> Meese quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> For the full executive order, see Truman, 'Executive Order 9981 – Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services', 26<sup>th</sup> July 1948, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-9981-establishing-the-presidents-committee-equality-treatment-and> (last viewed 18th March 2020).

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 174.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Screen', *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1943, p. 11.

fought lies, they fought heartbreak and won.’ The Gipper concluded with the message that ‘it was never easy for these men, they were pioneers, and no pioneer has it easy.’<sup>62</sup>

*Wings for This Man* pushed the boundaries of wartime America, situating the pilots within a colour-blind society that some liberals were just beginning to advocate at this time. FDR was a liberal, but he – like most liberals at this time – had no interest at all in this agenda. In fact, many of Roosevelt’s policies disproportionately supported white men and were ‘crafted and administered in a deeply discriminatory manner.’<sup>63</sup> Historians Harvard Sitkoff and Patricia Sullivan have shown Roosevelt’s apathy to the African American struggle, with Sullivan describing how FDR ‘did not confront’ the ‘southern wing’ of his party ‘that enforced a caste system’ over fears of electoral realignment.<sup>64</sup>

At that time, Reagan was more sensitive than the president on racial questions. Foreshadowing Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech from the 1963 March on Washington, Reagan told viewers of *Wings for This Man*, ‘you can’t judge a man by the color of his eyes, the shape of his nose’. The Gipper never referred to the pilots by their race, they were simply ‘pilots’ or ‘Americans’. This colour-blind outlook was most prominent during the commissioning scene of the film, as each man received his medal, Reagan defiantly concluded, ‘here’s the answer to Adolf and Hirohito, wings for this man... wings for these Americans.’<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Quotations taken from YouTube subtitle. For further information, see ‘Wings for This Man’, produced by *Department of Defense (YouTube)*, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8Xjnl7TNus> (last viewed 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020).

<sup>63</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2006), p. 29.

<sup>64</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978); Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>65</sup> Reagan, ‘Wings for This Man’.

The decision to portray a colour-blind society was a deliberate one according to historian Stephen Vaughn. *Wings for This Man* not only ‘placed blacks in the mainstream of American life’, but importantly, it also implied that federal government had a role in achieving colour-blind equality.<sup>66</sup> The most explicit reference to this path toward racial freedom was in the relationship of the airfield to the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), which was founded by Booker T. Washington, one of the nation’s foremost civil rights advocate in the early twentieth century. A beautifully shot cross-cut scene contrasted Reagan’s reading of the words on Washington’s gravestone, ‘he lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry,’ with images of the pilots learning the mechanics of flying and reading textbooks. It was a powerful reminder of the liberating power of education, if African Americans would just be given the chance to succeed.<sup>67</sup>

Ideologically, Washington’s notion of achieving racial equality through education, industry, and economic self-reliance, was akin to Reagan’s own credo. However, Washington remains controversial because he did not directly fight Jim Crow – he accommodated to it instead. The Gipper would later advocate for such measures as California governor, as part of his black capitalism project within his Creative Society reforms. This was the path that Civil Rights advocates including King prescribed in the early days of the movement, reforms based on a colour-blind outlook to remedy the injustices of Jim Crow. In the nation’s capital, as historian Julian Zelizer showed, there were very few white leaders who supported the nascent civil rights movement during wartime. As Zelizer argued, Congress was the source of particular obstinacy – ‘the short-term effect of World War Two on Capitol Hill was to set back progress on civil

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<sup>66</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Wings for This Man’.

rights for almost a decade'.<sup>68</sup> Reagan was, therefore, *ahead* of mainstream opinion of racial progression during World War Two. Not until the 1960s, when liberal thought shifted toward compensatory forms of justice, did Reagan's unchanging outlook appear dated and conservative.

Influenced by his wartime experience, once the war was over Reagan spent a significant amount of his time working with the American Veterans' Committee – a liberal group founded in 1943 to support returning veterans. Demonstrating a consistency of his racial views, the Gipper claimed he chose the AVC because, he 'observed that more than forty [other] veterans organizations' continued army policy of discrimination and were 'highly intolerant of color, creed and common sense.'<sup>69</sup> The Gipper's first major address for the AVC also marked his final occasion in uniform – a neat ending of one chapter of his life and the beginning of another.

Speaking at a ceremony on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1945, 'United America Day', to honour Japanese American war hero, Sergeant Kazuo Masuda, a feat more remarkable for the recent issue of internment, Reagan lamented, 'Blood that has soaked into the sands of the beaches is all of one color. America stands unique in the world – a country not founded on race, but on a way and an ideal. Not in spite of, but because of our polyglot background.'<sup>70</sup> These words could just have easily been spoken by President Reagan in the White House forty years later, indicating that what we know of his early racial attitudes closely resemble his later views. The event was described by a local newspaper as 'a plea for civic unity and tolerance of American minority

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<sup>68</sup> Julian Zelizer, 'Confronting the Roadblock: Congress, Civil Rights, and World War II', in Kevin Kruse and Stephen Tuck (eds.), *The Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2012), p. 44.

<sup>69</sup> Reagan quoted in Edwards, *Early Reagan*, p. 300.

<sup>70</sup> Reagan quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 45.

groups'.<sup>71</sup> The war had left an indelible mark on Reagan, and heading into 1946 and post-war America, he would continue to speak on issues of racial inequality.

His intervention came against a backdrop of disturbing neofascist attacks on Jewish and minority communities. The attacks constituted a 'wave of violence' and, though concentrated in the South, also included the Los Angeles area where twenty-seven attacks were recorded in the summer of 1946.<sup>72</sup> The *Ventura County Star-Free Press*, a widely circulated paper in Los Angeles, likened the Ku Klux Klan to Hitler and warned that it was 'dangerous to ignore [the] Klan', while a special report in the *Los Angeles Times* warned of a 'revival of Klan activities in this area'.<sup>73</sup> Reagan, wanting to do his part to stop domestic fascism and again demonstrating his personal anti-racism, agreed to take part in a radio programme called 'Operation Terror', which was part of a broader series called 'It's Happening Here', organised by a group called 'Mobilization for Democracy'.<sup>74</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> September 1946, 'Operation Terror' was broadcast for the first time, stirring support and controversy. Even though the address was not written by Reagan, the strength of the rebuke was powerful. The Gipper likened the Klan to 'crack pots' with 'sick minds' and 'puny souls' who threatened the nation as the 'Reich Führer' did. Reagan lamented 'the hatred of my fellow men because his skin is more generously endowed than mine with pigmentation.' Having listed the growing number of racist attacks that took place across the nation, the Gipper warned, 'are

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<sup>71</sup> 'Council for Civic Unity Holds Rally', *The Pomona Progress Bulletin*, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1945, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 22; statistic in 'Bowron Slaps Kenny for Charges on Klan', *Valley Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1946, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Drew Pearson, 'It's Dangerous to Ignore Klan Activities', *Ventura County Star-Free Press*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1946, p. 8; 'Inquiry Links Ex-Kleagle to Revival of Klan', *Los Angeles Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1946, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Details of the radio programme can be found in Reagan's FBI file. For further information, see 'FBI Report on Ku Klux Klan Radio Broadcast Program', *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 1, Folder 'FBI Files: Ronald Reagan'.

these just isolated cases of mob hysteria? Not on your life.’<sup>75</sup> He argued it was a co-ordinated attack on the nation, and it would take a co-ordinated campaign to beat this internal enemy.

Noticeable in Reagan’s response to the crisis was his proposed solution. In his closing statement, the Gipper urged the public to ‘join with those civic organizations which are laboring to bring about better understanding and unity among the different elements to our society without regard to race or creed or color.’ Just as Jim Crow has been defined by its colour consciousness, the solution, Reagan believed, was a colour-blind campaign driven by the grassroots, rather than governmental action. ‘Equality of opportunity must be something that we live, not just speak about’, he had exhorted earlier in the programme.<sup>76</sup> What is remarkable and arguably unique about Reagan was his consistency; he could have just as easily uttered these words forty years later as president. What changed was the context: in 1946, it left him a racial progressive; by the 1980s, it made him a conservative.

Reagan’s attitude toward race was largely unchanged throughout his adult life, anchored by a commitment to universal rights. Interesting to note was the Gipper’s suggestion to how the Klan should be tackled – ‘Klan inspired acts can be stopped by you’, Reagan stated. For him, true power lay in the people, as he told listeners, ‘a community that is aware of the threat to its people and security by bigoted terroristic groups is a community whose citizens will be protected from such acts.’<sup>77</sup> In many respects, Reagan’s reliance on the people was antecedent of his populist conservatism of his political life – it shunned strong government, viewed all citizens as equal, and saw political power grounded in people rather than institutions.

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<sup>75</sup> For transcript of Reagan’s address, see ‘FBI Report on Mobilization for Democracy’, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1946, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 1, Folder ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

The radio programme stirred controversy. Fletcher Bowron, the Mayor of Los Angeles, attacked Mobilization for Democracy for ‘an obvious effort to throw fear into the hearts of many persons who are receiving the full protection of the law.’<sup>78</sup> The mayor went further, attacking Reagan and the programme as the product of ‘misguided leftist motion picture actors’, and pushed for a grand jury investigation of the group.<sup>79</sup> While an investigation by local forces did not take place, the radio address gave rise to enough suspicion that it drew the interest of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>80</sup>

Although Reagan’s political odyssey was far from straightforward, the cracks in his Democratic Party support were undoubtedly showing by the end of the war. Just as the New Deal had massively expanded the state, so too did the Second World War. The expanse of federal government as a result of the war was huge. Gross Domestic Product increased from \$92 billion in 1939 to \$223 billion by 1945, while federal government expenditure increased from \$5.9 billion in 1939 to a wartime high of \$97 billion in 1944 – of which defence spending ballooned from a pre-war total of \$1.5 billion to a high of \$94.6 billion, constituting ninety-eight percent of all federal expenditure.<sup>81</sup> The number of government employees increased from 1.6 million in 1940 to 2.6 million by 1950, suggesting a permanency to social change brought about by the war, while labour union membership increased from a 1939 level of 9 million workers to 14.8 million by 1945.<sup>82</sup> Further, massive overhaul of the federal tax system

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<sup>78</sup> Bowron quoted in ‘Bowron Slaps Kenny’.

<sup>79</sup> Bowron quoted in Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, p. 172.

<sup>80</sup> There is extensive reporting of the radio address in Reagan’s FBI file. For further reading, see ‘FBI Report on Ku Klux Klan Radio Broadcast Program’.

<sup>81</sup> All figures taken from Susan Carter (ed.), ‘Part C – Economic Structure and Performance’, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennium Edition (Cambridge, 2006). For GDP figure, see ‘Table Ca1-8: Aggregate Measures of Economic Activity, 1929-2002’, in ‘Part C – Economic Structure and Performance’; for aggregate federal expenditure and defence spending, see ‘Table Ca74-90: Gross Domestic Product, by Major Component, 1929-2002’.

<sup>82</sup> All figures taken from Susan Carter (ed.), ‘Part B – Work and Welfare’, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Millennium Edition (Cambridge, 2006). For statistics on number of government employees, see ‘Table Ba668: Major Industrial Groups of Labor Force Participants, 1910-1990’; for union member numbers, see ‘Table Ba4783: Union Membership, 1880-1999’.

saw Middle America start paying federal income tax for the first time. The White House consistently pushed tax reform to help finance the ever-expanding war effort, resulting in the transformative Revenue Acts of 1942 and 1943. Back in 1940, federal income tax accounted for just sixteen percent of all tax collection at every level of government, yet by 1950, this figure had vaulted to fifty-one percent. The landmark outcome was that ‘federal government came to dominate the nation’s revenue system.’<sup>83</sup> The impact of World War Two was simply unprecedented. The new and expansive federal state had changed in one way or another almost every American life – Pandora’s box had been opened.

In concert with the massive cultural and socio-economic expanse of federal government, the war also brought increased presidential powers. The War Powers Act (1941) gave Roosevelt huge power to aid the war effort by reorganising various federal agencies and government corporations during the conflict. This was supported by the Second War Powers Act (1942), which included powers to acquire land, increase government contracting, and repealed the confidentiality of census data that led to Japanese American internment.<sup>84</sup> While Reagan did not disagree with the transitory need to expand the state during wartime, the notion that this change in government was temporary was illusory. Political culture had ‘fundamentally changed’ as ‘increasingly insecure populations, built large-scale welfare states in response to the economic collapse of the 1930s and world war in the 1940s.’<sup>85</sup>

Reagan’s Democratic Party support was soured by his short, explosive time with the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions

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<sup>83</sup> For statistics and further reading, see W. Elliot Brownlee, *Federal Taxation in America: A Short History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Washington, DC, 2004), p. 116.

<sup>84</sup> For further reading on implications of War Powers, see Paul Koistinen, *Arsenal of World War II: The Political Economy of American Warfare* (Lawrence, KS, 2004).

<sup>85</sup> Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, p. 24.

(HICCASP). The group formed in 1945 to ‘unite progressives of every ilk in support of domestic reform and peaceful cooperation abroad with the Soviet Union.’<sup>86</sup> Initially, the Gipper was involved only peripherally, ‘sending in a check when they solicited funds’, but ‘just following the war [in June 1946] I was appointed to the Board of Directors.’<sup>87</sup> Reagan’s tenure, however, was short-lived, two meetings to be precise.

At the first meeting, the board debated the need for a public condemnation of communist activity in Hollywood. James Roosevelt, son of the late president, proposed that the organisation should adopt a statement of policy because of accusations that HICCASP was a front for communist activity (there were many communists in the group, including the hierarchy). Even though the motion was ‘debated quite heavily’, no agreement could be made and a sub-committee, including Reagan, was convened to produce a draft for the following meeting. At the second meeting, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1946, Reagan’s statement denouncing communism was ‘overwhelmingly defeated’, with noted communists including John Howard Lawson, Dalton Trumbo, and Artie Shaw speaking against the motion.<sup>88</sup> That evening, the Gipper and nine other high profile anti-communists led by actress Olivia de Havilland resigned by telegraph.<sup>89</sup>

Reagan’s explosive time in HICCASP left him in suspicious that communism was a problem in the United States, and in Hollywood in particular. It was not, however, the end of his platform to change the mood within the industry. Another one of his affiliations, the Screen

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<sup>86</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 46.

<sup>87</sup> Reagan quoted from court testimony in ‘Jeffers v. Screen Extras Guild’, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1955. For transcript, see *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Jeffers v. Screen Extras Guild (I)’.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Incident discussed in FBI memo in Reagan’s file. For further reading, see ‘Ronald Reagan Summary Memorandum’, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1951, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 1, Folder ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’.

Actors Guild (SAG), gave him another chance and its political leanings were more closely aligned with his own. His years in power at SAG would also present opportunities to focus his efforts toward racial equality in Hollywood.

### ***The Screen Actors Guild***

In March 1947, Reagan became president of the Screen Actors Guild, the only American president to have led a labour union. Formed in 1933, the Guild was part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), whose ‘sole purpose’ was ‘to advance the economic welfare of its members and handle their union affairs.’<sup>90</sup> Having joined the board in July 1941, after a wartime interregnum, Reagan became vice-president in September 1946, and stepped in as president several months later.<sup>91</sup> With little other professional work to occupy him due to his waning film career, the Gipper immersed himself in the detail of SAG (in sharp contrast to his political presidency), and undertook extensive lobbying on behalf of the film industry. This included a meeting with President Truman on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1949, to urge the State Department to push the British government to undo its decision to impose film quotas and freeze American funding, which had been taken in a desperate attempt to save its own industry.<sup>92</sup> The role was expansive, varied, time consuming, and required a delicate balance of tact and vision; it was near-perfect training for his later life in politics.

The Gipper’s time as president of SAG was consumed by the Hollywood Red Scare. The Guild was, by Hollywood’s standards, a conservative union and counted Reagan, Murphy, Nancy Davis, and Olivia de Havilland as board members. When the Guild was faced with massive

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<sup>90</sup> Reagan, ‘Statement by President Ronald Reagan Regarding Disciplinary Procedure’, February 1950, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Screen Actors Guild Minutes 1949-50’.

<sup>91</sup> Reagan’s path to the top of SAG detailed in Morgan, *Reagan*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>92</sup> Incident detailed in ‘Board Meeting Minutes’, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1949, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Screen Actors Guild Minutes 1949-50’, p. 2.

strikes in 1945-46 that nearly crippled the industry beyond repair, over ninety percent of members voted to continue working.<sup>93</sup> Such were the personal threats to Reagan at this time by members of other unions, Warner Bros. arranged for the Burbank police to provide him with a firearm, which he carried religiously for several months.<sup>94</sup> SAG also demonstrated its conservative credentials in the aftermath of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), which restricted the power of the unions writ large. The law declared that all officers of labour unions must sign a non-communist affidavit, the Guild's membership went further and 'passed a rule that all board members [not just the officers] must also sign' the declaration.<sup>95</sup>

While such acts made Reagan extremely popular with the members he represented, they also marked the unequivocal cutting of ties between the Gipper and the Hollywood left. As we will shortly see, it was not so much that Reagan's views were changing, as much as the changing political environment – rising communist concerns in Hollywood stoked by the backdrop of Richard Nixon's House Committee on Un-American Activities. It would be too much to suggest that the Gipper was a hardcore conservative – after all, in the immediate postwar period he joined the ADA, a Cold War liberal body and brainchild of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Reagan was, in reality, well within mainstream political opinion on civil rights akin to politicians such as Hubert Humphrey (then-Mayor of Minneapolis, becoming a Minnesota Senator in 1949). For 'vital center' liberals such as these, communism was fully as deadly an enemy as for conservatism.

The national mood was also changing. Ecstasy of victory in World War Two – winning on two fronts in Europe and the Far East – was swiftly replaced in the national consciousness by a

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<sup>93</sup> Figures taken from Reagan's court testimony in 'Jeffers v. Screen Extras Guild'.

<sup>94</sup> Ronald Reagan and Richard Hubler, *Where's the Rest of Me?* (New York, 1965), pp. 171-175.

<sup>95</sup> For reading on steps taken by the Guild, see Reagan's court testimony in 'Jeffers v. Screen Extras Guild'.

concern of communism and leftist politics writ large at home and abroad. The return of postwar ‘abundance’ coincided with a conservative turn in the 1946 elections. It was interpreted across the political spectrum as ‘proof’, historian Alan Brinkley argued, ‘that there was no longer any need for the “socialism” of the New Deal’.<sup>96</sup>

The challenging of New Deal assumptions, moulded in the furnace of nascent Cold War conservatism, created a ‘Cold War anti-statism’ that ‘overwhelmed the social democratic promise of the early postwar years.’<sup>97</sup> However, such anti-statism was fuelled as a response to prevailing statism: ‘in war, what goes up seldom comes down.’ Scholars focussed on this period have shown how disappointed conservatives were that the ‘temporary’ wartime state kept growing as a result of the Cold War. Conservatives viewed the emerging warfare state with concern because ‘the rise of the national security state necessarily entailed economic and political adaptations that could undermine the very traditions and institutions that had made America great.’<sup>98</sup> This changing mood, at the grassroots and elite levels, was the beginning of a ‘conservative populism’, that had profound implications for future decades, but was initially felt most acutely in the studios of Hollywood.<sup>99</sup>

After the 1946 midterm elections, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) honed-in on Hollywood. With numerous reports citing AVC, HICCASP, and the film industry generally as a source of subversive behaviour, conservatives on the committee saw this as an

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<sup>96</sup> Brinkley, *Liberalism and its Discontents* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), p. 97.

<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York, 2004), p. xv.

<sup>98</sup> Aaron Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, 2011), p. 30; Michael Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, revised edition (Ithaca, NY, 1998), p. 165.

opportunity to attack and damage the progressive left as a whole. Reagan, once suspected of being a communist, actively distanced himself from these groups following the war.

Yet nothing proved his patriotism more to authorities than his work as an FBI informant. The Gipper met repeatedly with the agency throughout the 1940s, detailing suspected communist activity and influence in Hollywood – such was his use, that he was detailed as ‘T-10’ on all reporting.<sup>100</sup> Reagan was approached as early as 1941; a letter from the director, J. Edgar Hoover, instructed a local agent to ‘contact Ronald Reagan’.<sup>101</sup> Hoover’s initial concern was over fascist sentiment in the film industry. In November 1943, the Gipper ‘had gotten into an argument over some anti-Semitic remarks at a party’, thus provoking the agency to interview him. As opinion and national focus changed, so too did the relationship, leading to a long and fruitful association.<sup>102</sup> The most notable informant meeting took place at Reagan and Wyman’s home in April 1947, where the Gipper described his turbulent time in HICCASP and named communist sympathisers.<sup>103</sup>

Reagan’s credentials were verified by other informants, who described him as ‘sincere in his efforts to keep radical members out of controlling positions’ in SAG, and along with George Murphy, were ‘definitely anti-communist’.<sup>104</sup> The presidency of the Guild and his public split from HICCASP, made Reagan a prime candidate to appear before HUAC as it continued its investigation into subversives in Hollywood. The Gipper was subpoenaed along with 42 other Hollywood luminaries, including Gary Cooper, Walt Disney, Charlie Chaplin, and Jack

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<sup>100</sup> For further reading, see ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Ronald Reagan Summary Memorandum’, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1951, p. 7.

<sup>102</sup> ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’.

<sup>103</sup> For further reading about the meeting see, ‘Memorandum from Special Agent in Charge to FBI Director’, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1947, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 1, Folder ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’, p.1; ‘Ronald Reagan Summary Memorandum’, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1951, p. 8.

<sup>104</sup> FBI source T-9 quoted in ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’; ‘Memorandum from D. M. Ladd to FBI Director’, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1949, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 1, Folder ‘FBI Files: Ronald Reagan’, p. 7.

Warner to name but a few. Reagan, however, was one of the few alongside George Murphy, Disney, and Cooper, to be called as ‘friendly witnesses’, thus cementing his credentials with fervently anti-communist Americans.

The HUAC hearings took place in late October 1947, chaired by conservative firebrand J. Parnell Thomas, a Republican from New Jersey, who once believed that the New Deal had ‘sabotaged the capitalist system’.<sup>105</sup> In his opening remarks, Thomas warned, ‘it is only to be expected that such elements [communist subversion] would strive desperately to gain entry to the motion-picture industry, simply because the industry offers such a tremendous weapon for education and propaganda.’ At the time, over 85 million Americans attended the movies each week. The congressmen’s remarks revealed his own prejudices as he boldly declared that communists already had ‘considerable success’ in achieving influence in Hollywood.<sup>106</sup>

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1947, Reagan appeared before HUAC. Appearing on the same day as his friend Murphy and his predecessor at SAG, Robert Montgomery, the Gipper’s testimony was strikingly balanced for a friendly witness. Likely out of a mixture of personal decency and a desire not to burn the already-damaged bridges with his more liberal friends, the Gipper affirmed that ‘certain members of the Guild were communists’, but he refused to name names. He also took time to stress that he did not want to see the Communist Party banned in America, arguing ‘we have spent 170 years in this country on the basis that democracy is strong enough to stand up and fight against the inroads of any ideology.’ Further, he cautioned against red hysteria, warning, ‘I never as a citizen want to see our country become urged, by either fear or

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<sup>105</sup> Thomas quoted in Stefan Kanfer, *Tough Without a Gun: The Extraordinary Life of Humphrey Bogart* (London, 2011), p. 90.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas quoted in ‘Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry’, *Committee on Un-American Activities in the House of Representatives*, Eightieth Congress (Washington, DC, 1947), p. 2.

resentment of this group, that we ever compromise with any of our democratic principles'.<sup>107</sup> After less than an hour, Reagan's time before the committee was finished. He had given a calm, measured account of himself and SAG, that was reflected in the *New York Times*' front-page coverage of his testimony the following day.<sup>108</sup>

Despite Reagan's measured evidence, the HUAC hearings led to full-scale panic across the nation. Later refusals to testify by ten Hollywood actors and screenwriters, led to charges of contempt of Congress and imprisonment. Among these was Dalton Trumbo, one of the highest paid writers in Hollywood, who clashed with Reagan during his time at HICCASP. As a result of the subsequent imprisonments and entire public furore, industry revenue fell by twenty percent. The incident gave rise to the Hollywood blacklist, which by the early 1950s featured over 200 actors, writers, and directors who refused to comply with HUAC.<sup>109</sup> Notwithstanding his initial strong performance before the committee, Reagan, by his own admission, privately 'regretted' his handling of the prolonged affair.<sup>110</sup> For a man fundamentally devoted to freedom and individual liberty, he refused to fight the blacklisting, showing – as Iwan Morgan puts it – 'the first manifestation of the trait displayed as governor and president to believe sincerely in something that he wanted to be true while adapting to the contrary reality.'<sup>111</sup>

Contrary to his 'regret' over the blacklisting, one area that Reagan impacted and improved during his tenure as SAG president was racial equality. In the immediate postwar years, the African American community in Hollywood was divided over which road to take toward equality. On the one hand, the nascent Civil Rights movement, led by the National Association

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<sup>107</sup> Reagan's testimony in *ibid*, pp. 214-218.

<sup>108</sup> See, Samuel Tower, 'Hollywood Communists "Militant," But Small in Number, Stars Testify', *NYT*, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1947, p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Statistics taken from Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 52.

<sup>110</sup> Reagan quoted in an FBI report, for further information, see, 'FBI Files: Ronald Reagan'.

<sup>111</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 53.

for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), wanted strong reforms and the removal of racist stereotypes of 'Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima'. Black actors, on the other hand, feared that the removal of such roles would see them disappear from the screen entirely. The row became heated when NAACP head, Walter White, tried to install a bureau in Hollywood in 1946, only for him to be publicly rebuked by leading figures including Hattie McDaniel, Clarence Muse, and Louise Beavers who called White's plan, 'a new type of streamlined gangsterism'.<sup>112</sup>

With studios exploiting the division, SAG became a vital powerbroker navigating a route for both sides. As with most things Reagan negotiated in his life, change was slow and incremental: evolution, not revolution, was the strategy of choice. Under the Gipper's leadership, the Guild 'supported black demands for more dignified parts', but were 'unwilling to go as far as White and the NAACP' in their demands.<sup>113</sup> The reality was the climate of negotiations had been marred by the HUAC hearings, and a broader economic downturn in the industry. Consequently, the majority of the Gipper's tenure (late 1947 until early 1952), witnessed little meaningful development for the prospects of black actors.

In part, glacial-paced change for black actors was a result of the Gipper's immediate postwar focus being on anti-Semitism in the industry. Even though Reagan had placed his head above the parapet with the 'Operation Terror' radio address in 1946, progress for Jewish and black actors alike ran aground because of Reagan's incremental negotiating style and the sheer amount of energy and focus that was diverted elsewhere because of mass strikes and labour disputes. The status quo Reagan oversaw was, however, more revealing when viewed in the

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<sup>112</sup> Beavers quoted in Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, p. 176.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 175.

context of the emerging Civil Rights movement. As calls for racial equality gathered momentum in the early 1950s, demand for change increased, yet SAG continued to tread a slow, cautious path. Reflecting Reagan's attitude toward race more broadly, the Guild was left looking less and less progressive as time passed, and Civil Rights impetus advanced.

Despite brief interludes of rhetorical fierceness, including writing an AVC article in February 1946 criticising police violence against African American veterans in the South as fascist stains on America, the Gipper's more characteristic incremental push for change would have seriously damaging, long-lasting, political consequences.<sup>114</sup> Unchanging in his approach to race, his gradualism increasingly made him seem to be reactive, rather than proactive, on racial equality as pressure for black progress became stronger in American politics and society. In the meantime, Reagan had done more to nail his colours to the mast than liberal figures including Adlai Stevenson, and non-ideological characters such as a young John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Emblematic of Reagan's approach was his performance in *Storm Warning* (1951). Starring alongside Ginger Rogers and Doris Day, Stuart Heisler's film noir thriller focussed on Rogers' portrayal as a New York model, struggling to adapt to life in a quiet southern town, having witnessed a brutal Klan murder. Reagan, playing the role of Burt Rainey, the county prosecutor, teamed up with Rogers to tackle the Klan. The film was set up through a dramatic and provocative trailer which detailed, 'behind this burning cross, behind the loopholes in the law, behind their cowardly hoods, they hide a thousand vicious crimes!' Then, the camera cut to a fully robed Klan member staring directly into the shot, uttering the ominous words, 'I am a member of Ku Klux Klan, just one of thousands in a vast secret network that sells hate in

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<sup>114</sup> Article mentioned, but not discussed in any detail in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 46.

hundreds of cities and towns, wherever ignorance and fear spawn bigotry, I am there.’<sup>115</sup> Reagan, the swashbuckling hero who protects Rogers, the law, and Christianity from perversion denounced the Klan as ‘a bunch of hoodlums dressed up in sheets’. While at the film’s climax, the Klan, thinking they’ve bested Reagan confront him in front of a burning cross, only for Reagan to defiantly retort, ‘It will take more than these sheets you’re wearing to hide the fact that you’re mean, frightened little people or you wouldn’t be here desecrating the cross.’<sup>116</sup>

Albeit scripted, Reagan’s role and the film writ large served as a powerful, politically pointed condemnation of the Klan, which at the time threatened national revival, having enjoyed an upsurge of activity in the latter 1940s. In an era in which there were relatively few political films or television dramas, *Storm Warning* served as a rare motion picture allegory of the dangers of pervasive racism. However, the film met with mixed reviews. The *New York Times*’ review praised Warner Bros. for the ‘social crusade’ and Reagan’s ‘fearless young prosecutor’ role, but lambasted the film as ‘lacking in real substance or depth’ and described Reagan’s performance as ‘pat and pedestrian’.<sup>117</sup> Although shown in the Deep South, advertisers were cautious. In Alabama, for instance, the film was advertised in local newspapers as ‘a drama about the Ku Klux Klan, telling what happens in a little town when a girl accidentally witnesses a murder.’<sup>118</sup> However, as Stephen Vaughn outlined, the film ‘did nothing to enhance the image of African-Americans’ because ‘there were no black characters in it.’<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Transcript taken from ‘Storm Warning Trailer’, *YouTube*, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE5Tmkv-CM> (last viewed 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Reagan quoted in Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, p. 177.

<sup>117</sup> Bosley Crowther, ‘The Screen in Review’, *NYT*, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1951, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Lily May Caldwell, ‘Screen menu offers comedy, musical, drama, Western’, *The Birmingham News*, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1951, p. 88.

<sup>119</sup> Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, p. 177.

Eventually, even Reagan's SAG was not immune to calls of change. His final year of his first term in office (he would serve a final term in 1959), was dominated by need for reform within the Guild and the industry as a whole. A meeting of the Negro Employment Committee (a subcommittee of SAG) with senior Guild executives on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1952 galvanised Reagan's union into action. Black actors called attention to 'the seeming exclusion of the Negro in motion pictures', leading the board to convene a special committee chaired by the Gipper to investigate the problem and 'press on the issue of better and more jobs' with the studios.<sup>120</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> April, the special committee met and agreed upon the framing of a letter to be sent to studio leaders demanding a meeting to confront racist industry practices.

The studios responded by engaging with HICCASP to organise a conference on 'equal rights for Negroes in the entertainment industry'.<sup>121</sup> Black actors in the Guild, knowing the reputation of HICCASP as a hive of communist activity, immediately organised a letter of public response, utilising the biggest names in black Hollywood to draw attention to the dispute. Those who signed the letter included Louise Beavers (*Imitation of Life*, 1934), Lillian Randolph (*It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946), and perhaps the greatest of all, Hattie McDaniel, whose role as 'Mammy' in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), saw her become the first African American to win an Oscar. In a damning statement, released on 13<sup>th</sup> June 1952 in support of Reagan and the Guild's position, the letter alleged, 'the communists seek to use the Negroes solely to advance the subversive purposes of the Communist Party, namely to overthrow the Government of the United States and to degrade our nation into slave state under the whip of the Kremlin.'<sup>122</sup> The powerful statement's evocation of slavery and the Cold War was not lost on the public – black

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<sup>120</sup> 'Minutes of the Board of SAG', 7<sup>th</sup> April 1952, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder 'Screen Actors Guild Minutes, 1952-53', pp. 1-2.

<sup>121</sup> For further reading, see 'Minutes of the Board of SAG', 30<sup>th</sup> June 1952, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder 'Screen Actors Guild Minutes, 1952-53', p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Statement entered Guild minutes, see 'Minutes of the Board of SAG', 30<sup>th</sup> June 1952, pp. 1-2.

freedoms were American freedoms, and all were at stake.<sup>123</sup> Such was the interest generated by the rebuke, it was covered by the *Los Angeles Times* and entered into the Congressional Record by local representative, Clyde Doyle, but failed to gain traction outside of motion picture circles.<sup>124</sup>

The back-foot response of the leading studios was to organise a meeting with SAG and the Negro Employment Committee for 21<sup>st</sup> July, in what was hoped to be ‘a first step on the Guild’s long-range program to aid the negroes in the motion picture industry.’<sup>125</sup> At that meeting, the studios were told that ‘the “horse and buggy” days... had long since passed, and with it went the caricature and stereotype role for Negro actors.’ Reagan’s Guild argued that industries of baseball, intercollegiate sports, professional football, and public relations firms had all managed to successfully integrate roles without demeaning African American workers, and the motion picture industry needed to follow suit.<sup>126</sup> However, widespread strikes stalled negotiations for the remainder of the year.

With action on racial equality being taken industrywide stymied, the Guild examined its own in-house policies and developed its own practices to further racial equality. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 1952, Reagan’s tenure as SAG president ended after an unprecedented five consecutive years in the role. At his final meeting as president in this tenure – he would serve one final emergency term from 1959-1960 – the board agreed to a ‘Statement of Policy’ to improve working

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<sup>123</sup> The relationship between Civil Rights and the Cold War is a growing subdiscipline, but the best exemplar of this work remains Mary Dudziak’s, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000).

<sup>124</sup> ‘16 Negro Members of Actors Guild Disavow Meeting on Equal Rights’, *Los Angeles Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1952, p. 2; ‘Leading Negro Artists Declare Against Communism: Extension of Remarks of Hon. Clyde Doyle’, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1952, *Congressional Record - Appendix*, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, vol. 98:11, p. A4234.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Minutes of the Board of SAG’, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1952, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Screen Actors Guild Minutes, 1952-53’, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Discussion of 21<sup>st</sup> July meeting found in ‘Report by William Walker at the Annual Meeting of the Screen Actors Guild’, within ‘Minutes of a Special Meeting of Board of SAG’, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1952, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Screen Actors Guild Minutes, 1952-53’, p. 1

practices for black actors. Measures included calling for the removal of ‘comedy or servant roles’, pushing for greater opportunities, and wider diversity of roles available – all suggestions that according to the *Los Angeles Times* had the support of ‘the heads of major studios’.<sup>127</sup> Actor Bill Walker, best-known for his later role as Reverend Sykes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), described the policies as ‘a real and honest step’ of improvement.<sup>128</sup>

Highlighting that America’s global ambitions and image were fundamentally tied to domestic black liberation, the policy declared, ‘In a critical world period, when the democratic credo is under fire from our communist foes, it becomes increasingly important that the expanding role of our Negro citizens in the community of this nation be adequately portrayed in the entertainment arts.’<sup>129</sup> SAG’s position, striking a careful balance between advocating American ideals abroad while seeking to modify them at home, was part of the challenge historian Mary Dudziak outlined in her ground-breaking study *Cold War Civil Rights*. While Dudziak’s thesis combats the assumption that the Cold War was detrimental to civil rights progression, the historian also acknowledged how the global ideological struggle ‘left a very narrow space for criticism of the status quo’, which in turn promoted ‘a particular vision of racial justice’ within ‘discussions of broad-based social change’.<sup>130</sup>

Tied to the ‘narrow space’ SAG operated in was the prevailing wisdom of colour-blind efficacy. ‘If writers, producers, directors and casting agents would consider the Negro artist primarily as an artist,’ the Guild argued, actors would ‘be given consideration for casting in any roles which his ability permits’. The Guild reinforced their colour-blind aspirations by

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<sup>127</sup> ‘Screen Actors Approve TV Commercials Strike’, *Los Angeles Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1952, p. 20.

<sup>128</sup> Walker quoted in ‘Report by William Walker at the Annual Meeting of the Screen Actors Guild’.

<sup>129</sup> ‘Statement of Policy by Screen Actors Guild’, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1952, *Wisconsin Historical Society*, Stephen Vaughn Papers, Box 3, Folder ‘Screen Actors Guild Minutes, 1952-53’.

<sup>130</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, p. 13.

asking studios to make casting decisions, ‘without the necessity of emphasis on Race.’<sup>131</sup> The key emphasis on a colour-blind model undoubtedly had Reagan’s support, but it was not just him, it was reflective of the broader wisdom that the best way to overcome race was to ignore it – a strict meritocratic approach that disregarded race and class entirely. The problem with such an approach, however, was illuminated by Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish sociologist as early as 1944. In his classic work, *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal outlined how the United States was ‘a white man’s country’, with a legacy of slavery and racism that stretched back several hundred years – ‘that is the situation even today’ he warned, ‘and will remain so in the foreseeable future.’<sup>132</sup> Problems of race were not going to be easily overcome, they reached into the heart of the nation, and three hundred years of bigotry would take more radical actions than mid-century politicians, on either the left or the right, could easily contemplate. For the time being, Reagan’s colour-blind meritocratic solution was well within mainstream thought as the best solution to America’s race problem.

This narrow vision of change probably suited the fervently anti-communist Reagan perfectly. He wanted change and supported black actors pursuing equality, but that could not be at the expense of American global ambition, because he believed absolutely in the primacy of American exceptionalism, telling a gathered crowd of graduating students at Fulton College, Missouri, in 1952,

It has been said that American is less of a place than an idea... and I believe that to be true... It is nothing but the inherent love of freedom in each one of us... It is simply the idea, the basis of this country and of our religion, the idea of the dignity of man, the idea that deep within the heart of each one of us is something so God-like and precious that no individual or group has the right to impose his or its will upon the people.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> ‘Statement of Policy by Screen Actors Guild’.

<sup>132</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), p. 52

<sup>133</sup> Reagan, ‘America The Beautiful: Commencement Address’, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1952, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Ronald Reagan Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder ‘Speeches and Writing – Pre-1966’, p. 9.

Colour-blind individualism, anti-communism, and small government were collectively the three tenets of Reagan's ideology. They were foundational to every decision he took and every speech he gave, and perhaps saw their greatest rhetorical depiction in his presidential farewell address almost forty years later. They allowed for a narrow pursuit of equality for all, that seemed progressive by the standards of 1930s and 40s America but would look rigid and inflexible amid the rapidly changing exogenous environment of the Civil Rights era. To him, they constituted a coherent worldview that changed very little, if at all, post-1945. It was what justified, in his mind at least, the 'Reagan paradoxes' of supporting Roosevelt and opposing his legacy, supporting liberty and condoning Hollywood censorship, and denouncing racists but doing little to undermine racism. These paradoxes only compounded and developed as Reagan's life progressed and he faced further and greater challenges, but what remained unchanging through the years was his guiding ideology.

### ***General Electric, Conservatism, and the Political Arena***

In November 1952, Reagan vacated the SAG presidency and found himself without purpose for the first time in his life. After a tortuous period of dwindling film work, speaking engagements in Las Vegas, and whatever means would pay the bills, he joined General Electric (GE) in 1954, where he stayed for the next eight years. The prevailing historical narrative concluded that these years, which coincided with the emergence of a broad and factional conservative movement, transformed Reagan and the nation. This understanding is wrong. As this chapter has consistently argued, the Gipper's ideology, which biographer Lou Cannon concluded was 'centrist and unexceptional for the time', crystallised significantly earlier than this period.<sup>134</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to consider these claims and address why my

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<sup>134</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003), p. 101.

interpretation is more useful in analysing the relationship between conservatism and the Civil Rights movement.

Reflecting in his autobiography, *An American Life*, nearly thirty years after he left GE, Reagan reminisced, ‘for eight years, I hopped around the country by train and automobile for GE... Along the way, I met more than 250,000 employees... Those GE tours became almost a post-graduate course in political science for me... by 1960 I had completed the process of self-conversion.’<sup>135</sup> In keeping with a lifelong habit of telling a good story, if not always adhering to the strict truth, the Gipper was myth-making retrospectively about his political journey. Reagan the conservative Republican presented his views as the outcome of a journey that has brought him to the truth, and that involved a degree of reinvention.

Thomas Evans, author of *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, opened his book with Reagan’s reflections, focusing the reader on the importance of these eight, seemingly formative years of the Gipper’s life. In contrast to my own suggestion that Reagan was seldom devoutly liberal, Evans wanted to understand ‘how his change from liberal to conservative, from actor to politician, came about.’ For him, the answer lay in ‘this crucial period of Ronald Reagan’s education’ – his GE years.<sup>136</sup>

Evans cited the Gipper’s campaign for Truman in 1948 – something Morgan suggested marked the crest of ‘Reagan’s liberalism’ – his ‘vigorous’ support of Civil Rights advocate Hubert Humphrey, and his support of Helen Gahagan Douglas in her 1950 senate campaign against Richard Nixon, as evidence that Reagan was yet to transition to conservatism.<sup>137</sup> However, one

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<sup>135</sup> Reagan, *An American Life*, pp. 128-134.

<sup>136</sup> Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, p. 5.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 11-38; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 59.

suspects that the Gipper's support for Douglas, of the famed acting family, was at least in part derived from Hollywood-based loyalty. Reagan's support of Truman, meanwhile, was probably grounded in the consideration that the president's politics were, in Cannon's estimation, not of the same progressive agenda as the mid-thirties New Deal.<sup>138</sup> For Reagan was never a liberal in the myth-making mould he suggested in his later life, rather, his support for the Democratic Party was fluid – he was still a registered party supporter, while voting for Dwight Eisenhower twice.

Fundamental to Evans' thesis was Lemuel Boulware, GE's vice-president of employee relations, community relations, public relations and Reagan's 'mentor'.<sup>139</sup> Boulware was formidable. A superb negotiator in labour relations with a clear worldview – anti-communism, small government, and anti-unionism – described by Evans as, 'an ideology that set out in some detail what America should be and a methodology that prescribed how these goals could be achieved', that contemporaries labelled 'Boulwarism'.<sup>140</sup> Noted in conservative circles, Boulware helped found *National Review* in 1955, and he undoubtedly helped Reagan sharpen his ideological rationale. But, importantly, the foundations of the Gipper's ideology were not just in place by the time he joined GE in 1954, they were resolute. If you were to identify an ideological mentor for Reagan, the argument could be made for H.R. Gross – his boss at WHO radio – as it could for Boulware. Moreover, Reagan's political worldview was more personal – a product of his Midwestern rural upbringing – and, therefore, these 'mentors' were not shaping his attitudes so much as they gave him a language that he used to express ideas that he already held.

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<sup>138</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 101.

<sup>139</sup> Boulware's progression through GE explained in Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, p. 38.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

For other students of Reagan, such as historian Iwan Morgan and writer Rick Perlstein, the key to the Gipper's philosophical change in the 1950s was taxation.<sup>141</sup> In contrast to the assessment that Reagan left the Democratic Party because it was too liberal, Perlstein contended, 'if anything, the Democratic Party by the time he became a Republican was more conservative than it had been in 1948'.<sup>142</sup> Perlstein's interpretation is problematic because he simplified Reagan's relationship between party and ideology, equating them as one and the same. For the Gipper, the two were related but distinct issues. His philosophy was more important than his party affiliation. This explained why he demonstrated bipartisan pragmatism throughout much of his gubernatorial and presidential life. Reagan made concessions that furthered the broader agenda in the long run, while remaining steadfast and obdurate on certain core areas, such as South African apartheid sanctions, even in the face of opposition of his own party.

This is not to say that Reagan's GE years were inconsequential – they were highly significant – just not in the context of his developing worldview. The many weeks and months travelling the country, over the course of nearly a decade, sharpened his communication skills beyond measure. Not just the delivery of a speech, but reading the crowd, learning when to insert a joke and when to move on, pace, tone of delivery, all important but to an extent unteachable, intuitive qualities were honed. The GE experience also gave Reagan plenty of down-time, he refused to travel by plane and therefore spent huge amounts of time on trains, traversing the country reading. It was during this time Reagan found literature that reinforced and expanded his own thinking; Friedrich Hayek moved to the University of Chicago in 1950, helping his classic work, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), gain influence in American society. The classical

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<sup>141</sup> Morgan described high taxes as 'the single most significant factor that precipitated this deviation', while Perlstein asked, 'What had changed? One crucial factor was his views on the subject of taxation'. For further reading, see Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 59; Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York, 2014), p. 374.

<sup>142</sup> Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge*, p. 374.

liberal work was also serialised by one of Reagan's favourite publications, *Reader's Digest*, further broadening its impact outside of the academy. Henry Hazlitt, author of the best-selling *Economics in One lesson* (1946), worked for twenty years as a columnist for *Newsweek*, writing articles spreading the conservative gospel, while William F. Buckley, with Boulware's support launched *National Review* in 1955.<sup>143</sup> Their impact was immeasurable, providing in the words of Morgan, 'an intellectual foundation' for his pre-existing ideas.<sup>144</sup> As the Gipper immersed himself within the expanding world of conservative literature, his own thoughts gained clarity. A comparison of his 1952 'America the Beautiful' and his 1962 'Losing Freedom by Instalments' speeches emphasised this maturation.<sup>145</sup> By the end of his GE career, infused with years of training, Reagan was primed for public life.

### ***The Emergence of a Movement***

The 1950s, while not formative for Reagan, were tremendously important for the re-introduction of conservatism onto the national stage. Since the disastrous Hoover presidency, the man and the ideas he represented – individualism and laissez-faire government – had become, in the words of noted liberal critic Richard Hofstadter, 'outlandish and unintelligible'.<sup>146</sup> Acclaimed journalist and writer Godfrey Hodgson declared in his 1976 study *America in Our Time*, that a 'liberal consensus' across both parties governed the postwar decades, pushing the New Deal agenda.<sup>147</sup> Hodgson's study was, however, 'inescapably a

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<sup>143</sup> For examples of Hazlitt's writing in the 1950s, see 'For Whom the Tax Bell Tolls', 29<sup>th</sup> March 1954, *Newsweek*, p. 72; 'Fourth Dimension', 28<sup>th</sup> November 1955, *Newsweek*, p. 94; and 'High Taxes vs. Yield', 17<sup>th</sup> June 1957, *Newsweek*, p. 94.

<sup>144</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 66.

<sup>145</sup> To compare speeches, see Reagan, 'America The Beautiful: Commencement Address'; and Ronald Reagan, 'Losing Freedom by Installments: Address to the 78<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Fargo Chamber of Commerce', 26<sup>th</sup> January 1962, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Ronald Reagan Subject Collection, Box 1, Folder 'Speeches and Writing – Pre-1966'.

<sup>146</sup> Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, 1973), p. 373.

<sup>147</sup> Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon – What Happened and Why* (New York, 1976).

product of its time'.<sup>148</sup> Subsequently, scholars have produced magnificent studies ranging from Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, to Kim Phillips-Fein's *Invisible Hands*, which have charted the prolonged and enduring strength of the conservative movement, even throughout what historians had previously thought of as a liberal ascendancy.<sup>149</sup>

The 1950s have generally been viewed as the turning point for the conservative movement. As historian Jennifer Burns outlined, during this decade the movement became 'bona fide... self-aware, self-assured, and bent on social and political change'.<sup>150</sup> It was at this time, with the publication of magazines such as *Human Events* (1944), *The Freeman* (1950), and *National Review* (1955), movement conservatism gained a populist character that 'transformed conservatism from the sensibility of a few disgruntled elites to a mass political philosophy, and from a personal or cultural creed to a political movement.'<sup>151</sup> However, this was no organic, spontaneous combustion into life. Alongside the New Deal years that witnessed Reagan's rise in radio and film, a conservative intellectual movement had 'suffered' but endured.<sup>152</sup>

Walter Lippman's seminal work, *The Good Society* was published in 1937, which launched a meeting of conservative scholars a year later for the 'Colloque Walter Lippman' in Paris. This meeting was an early predecessor of the Mont Pèlerin Society, founded in 1947 by Friedrich

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<sup>148</sup> Mason and Morgan, 'Introduction: Reconsidering the Liberal Consensus', in Mason and Morgan (eds.), *The Liberal Consensus Reconsidered: American Politics and Society in the Postwar Era* (Gainesville, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>149</sup> The wealth of literature on the enduring strength of the conservative movement is too great and diverse to name in a single footnote, but for excellent examples, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, 2009); Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2016); Kevin M. Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2007); and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013).

<sup>150</sup> Burns, 'In Search of a Usable Past: Conservative Thought in America', *Modern Intellectual History*, 7:2 (2010), p. 487.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 483.

<sup>152</sup> Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, p. 2.

Hayek to discuss the future of classical liberalism, and counted among its founding members Frank Knight, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and Karl Popper. Hayek had gained widespread attention for *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), while von Mises had published *Bureaucracy* a year later. This intellectual inheritance was carried into the 1950s by Friedman's essay *Neo-Liberalism and Its Prospects* (1951), Russell Kirk's doctoral thesis *The Conservative Mind* (1953), and Ayn Rand's most famous work, *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957.

As the latest iteration of conservatism developed in the 1950s, it was faced with the challenge of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954, a young Christian minister from Georgia called Dr Martin Luther King Jr. led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and in September 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower sent federal troops to Arkansas to protect the Little Rock Nine. The two huge social forces of conservatism and Civil Rights collided and formed an enduring symbiosis – changes in one provoked change in the other. These two social movements, perhaps the most powerful and enduring of twentieth century American history, form the spine for the rest of this complex, nuanced, and utterly compelling narrative.

### ***From 'Win the War' to 'Win the Peace'***

This chapter has charted the story of Reagan's pre-political years in the formulation of his political philosophy. Graduating from college and entering adulthood in the year that Roosevelt won his first presidential victory served as a natural starting point. The dearth of archival material on his earlier life was unquestionably a challenge, which meant greater reliance on

secondary material, than would otherwise have been the case.<sup>153</sup> That being said, it was important to provide this context to give a sense of Reagan's Midwestern roots which, I believe, infused his conservative political philosophy. Those years also helped to provide a foundation to undermine Reagan's greatest self-proselytised myth of the era, one which historians have been unduly accepting of: that he was a 'haemophilic liberal'.

Life for Reagan, and the establishment of his worldview, really began while he worked at WHO radio in Des Moines. H.R. Gross challenged and informally educated Dutch on Republican politics and conservative thought, stimulating his political appetite. From Iowa, the rollercoaster of fame and film juxtaposed with war and the Red Scare would have had an incalculable impact on anyone – Reagan was no exception to this. The original interpretation of Reagan's thought – particularly pertaining to race – throughout these years, lay in the timing and the extent of his ideological formulation and crystallisation. For the historian, racial politics served a singularly unique tool in charting the simultaneous moulding and solidifying of his worldview, while tracing the shifting political spectrum around him. The Gipper was a racial liberal throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, but, as the nascent Civil Rights movement developed – *Brown*, Montgomery bus boycott, and Little Rock – his unchanging political credo left him appearing more and more conservative as time passed, and expectations increased.<sup>154</sup>

Understanding Reagan's approach to race presents difficulties, because, in common with most public figures during the period he left few traces. Stephen Vaughn suggested, 'there is little

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<sup>153</sup> The author was graciously granted permission from Joanne Drake, Chief Administrative Officer of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, to view privately-held material – college essays – written by Reagan during his time at Eureka. While fascinating, they suggested little about a coherent and sustained approach to the world.

<sup>154</sup> Supported by Stephen Vaughn who argued 'Reagan was a liberal on racial matters' in the late 1940s, but as SAG president, 'when placed against the activities of the civil rights movement during this period he was at best a moderate.' For further information, see Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood*, pp. 172-180.

evidence that he had any clear theory about the origin of economic underpinnings of racism, unlike John Howard Lawson [a writer and one of the Hollywood Ten, whose argument with Reagan led to him resigning from HICCASP], who tied bigotry to wealth and society's economic structure.<sup>155</sup> Reagan's failure to see entrenched, systemic racism, and to fully recognise the nature and scale of the problem faced by the United States, was a result of his devout, unwavering, colour-blind individualism, and reflected the larger context in which there was no pressure to think these issues through. This worldview would later have a profound impact on African Americans in national life, as Reagan's vision of conservatism gathered momentum across broad swathes of the political landscape, blocking the rise of affirmative action and extensive welfare programmes.

Attacking Reagan's colour-blind approach as Guild president, Vaughn continued, 'perhaps little progress could have been expected from a strategy that so relied on the benevolence of producers and censors. Hollywood executives', Vaughn outlined, 'saw equal rights, one suspects, as they did communism, that is, as an economic rather than a moral issue.'<sup>156</sup> Conversely, Reagan saw racism as a moral, not an economic problem. Consequently, he saw no need for remedial solutions whether in Hollywood, or measures such as affirmative action and welfare dependency in his later life. Therefore, his colour-blindness – grounded in individual morality – created an outlook in which people had to take personal responsibility for their behaviour. Individuals, not society, institutions, or the state, had to act as agents of change.

However well-intentioned, it was clear that Reagan's ability to enact change was stifled by the Red Scare. The Gipper's efforts to promote racial equality were sporadic and left in the wake

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p. 180.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 180-181.

of dizzying acceleration of racial progression elsewhere – *Brown*, Little Rock, formation of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In this regard, Reagan was in the political mainstream; most politicians were astonishingly inert on race until 1963, making the Gipper's trajectory typical, if not *better* than most.

One underlying theme of this chapter, which becomes a reoccurring theme of the thesis writ large, was how Reagan's efforts for African American advancement were – to him at least – entirely disconnected from his need to tackle communism. Unable to see the transnational implications of racial subjugation, this blindness first emerged within the context of the motion picture industry, but the issue later reappeared in his campaign for the California governorship, and his approach to the presidency, where he became embroiled in controversy regarding South African sanctions. It was particularly pertinent therefore, that in one of Reagan's racially-liberal highlights – the film, *Wings for This Man* – he paid homage to Booker T. Washington. The educationalist captured Reagan's approach to race better than any black leader during the Civil Rights era – evolution, not revolution.

Next, we uncover Reagan's formal entry in the political arena amid the growing Civil Rights movement between 1963 and 1966. In doing so, we chart a complex course through the tumult of liberalism's zenith and the epoch of the Civil Rights era, characterised by the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965); as well as conservatism's 'rejection of "collectivism" in all its forms, including federal regulations, the welfare state and liberal political culture' and the resulting emergence of 'a color-blind discourse of suburban innocence that depicted residential segregation as the class-based outcome of meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism.'<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 35; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, p. 1.

# II

## *Citizen Politician*

*I believe the great danger in violating any individual's constitutional right is the precedent that it establishes... I am opposed to those provisions of the Rumford Act which invade the individual's right to the disposition of his property.<sup>1</sup>*

– Ronald Reagan, *Meet the Press*, September 1966 –

*This racial situation that we have in the United States is probably the number one domestic problem that we have... Now I supported the Rumford bill... I think its repeal would be disastrous.<sup>2</sup>*

– Governor Pat Brown, *Meet the Press*, September 1966 –

### ***Introduction***

On 6<sup>th</sup> November 1962, incumbent California Governor Edmund 'Pat' Brown won in a tight race against former Vice-President Richard Nixon, which the *New York Times* labelled, 'the most closely watched election of the year'.<sup>3</sup> Symbolising the tragedy and triumph of politics, a disconsolate Nixon declared the end of his political career, while Brown biographer Ethan Rarick claimed the governor 'cherished' this victory more than any other. For Brown, it vindicated his first term's progressive 'vigor and accomplishment' featuring massive expansion of the public university system, unprecedented infrastructure investment, and huge

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan, 'Transcript of Meet the Press with Robert Abernathy', 11<sup>th</sup> September 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder '66 Campaign Debate (Issues and Answers / Meet the Press)', p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Brown's response to Reagan's comment. For full transcript, see *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Wicker, 'Gain for Kennedy Program Seen in Results of Congress Election', *New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 1.

liberal victories on a civil rights, social welfare, and state-wide tax increases.<sup>4</sup> Reporter Richard Bergholz declared Brown to be ‘riding the crest’ of a Democratic wave that presaged more liberal reform in California over the next four years.<sup>5</sup>

The ascendant liberal impulse in California was not confined to the governor’s office. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that voters ‘gave Brown a solidly Democratic Legislature to work with’ (52 of the 78 Assembly seats and 29 of the 40 Senate seats), and furthermore, ‘gave him virtually his entire slate of state-wide officers’ too.<sup>6</sup> At the congressional level, California delivered results that ‘surpassed even the most optimistic of Democratic aspirations’, with long-serving Republicans Gordon McDonough, Edgar Hiestand, and John Rousselot all defeated. Hiestand and Rousselot, moreover, were prominent members of the extreme right-wing group the John Birch Society, and their defeats underscored the lack of conservative sentiment in California. Such was the liberal fervour, the only Republican victory of note in the Golden State was the re-election of Senator Thomas Kuchel – a ten-year incumbent and GOP whip – who resided at the liberal end of the Republican spectrum.<sup>7</sup>

Nationally, the 1962 midterm elections had delivered a liberal hammer blow to conservative Republican aspirations. The Democratic Party won four additional Senate seats, taking their total to 68, providing a ‘whopping majority’ not seen since 1938. The architect of the Democratic Senate campaign, Indiana Senator Vance Hartke exclaimed, this was ‘the greatest off-year sweep in 30 years’.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile in the House, the Republican gain of a single seat marked in the *New York Times*’ estimation, ‘a remarkable midterm election success’ for the

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<sup>4</sup> Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Bergholz, ‘Brown Leads, Kuchel Wins’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics in ‘State Returns’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bergholz, ‘Nixon Concedes Election to Brown’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Democrats Keep Hold on Congress’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1962, p. 1; Vance quoted in *ibid.*

Democrats, largely attributable to President John Kennedy's handling of the previous month's Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>9</sup>

The president seized the opportunity afforded him by the midterms, including on civil rights, where he had thus far been exceptionally cautious.<sup>10</sup> Most notably, he finally moved on housing discrimination, an area where earlier promises had hitherto yielded no action. Signing Executive Order 11063, he declared the 'operation of housing-and related facilities from which Americans are excluded because of their race, color, creed, or national origin is unfair, unjust, and inconsistent' with the Constitution.<sup>11</sup> Several weeks later, three thousand miles away in California, Governor Brown followed the president's lead. During his second inaugural address, he declared racial equality a moral crusade to 'redeem [Abraham] Lincoln's promise that man would be forever free' and urged the legislature 'to strengthen and extend existing law against discrimination in housing.'<sup>12</sup> The governor was endorsing assemblyman William Rumford's forthcoming housing bill, which sought to ban racial discrimination in the sale or rental of private housing.

In 1964, Californians overwhelmingly supported Lyndon Johnson, the most pro-Civil Rights president in history, and they also passed an amendment to the state constitution overruling Rumford's fair housing bill. It was a Civil Rights paradox, one that illustrates the complex nature of 1960s Californian politics. A further two years later, an unprecedented and stunning overhaul of the political climate saw the governor defeated by Ronald Reagan, and the national

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<sup>9</sup> Wicker, 'Gain for Kennedy Program Seen in Results of Congress Election'.

<sup>10</sup> For Kennedy's complete lack of interest in civil rights up until this point, see Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, 'Executive Order 11,063 – Equal Opportunity in Housing', 20<sup>th</sup> November 1962, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-11063-equal-opportunity-housing> (last viewed 30th March 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Brown, 'Second Inaugural Address', 7<sup>th</sup> January 1963, *California State Library*, available online at <https://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/32-Pbrown02.html> (last viewed 27th March 2020).

liberal coalition was near collapse. The central research question of this chapter is why the sudden shift? What changed? This seeming contradiction between support for Johnson and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Reagan and Proposition 14 nullifying the Rumford Fair Housing Act, is what I am going to try and explain.

Lisa McGirr, Timothy Thurber, and Matthew Dallek contended race was fundamental to the Gipper's victory in 1966. Conditions for Reagan's win, they argued, were forged in the backlash against the extension of equal rights, backlash against the wave of crime that swept California, and backlash against the expansion of social welfare programmes. McGirr suggested, 'rising African-American militancy led to a growing white backlash, from which Reagan profited by playing to white racism.' Likewise, Thurber concurred Reagan's victory was 'a case in point' of how Republicans benefitted from 'racial conflict'. Similarly, biographer Iwan Morgan noted that the Gipper's campaign benefited from dog whistle campaigning with 'a strategy that had strong racial subtext without being openly racist.' Dallek, meanwhile, argued that Reagan's victory was ground-breaking because, 'for the first time, the conservatives learned how to push the right button on key issues, from race and riots to war and crime.'<sup>13</sup>

Reagan's first electoral victory unquestionably owed much to a wave of social discontent that responded in part to the Watts unrest of 1965, which undoubtedly swelled racist sentiment in ways that benefitted Reagan. It is misleading, however, to suggest that racial backlash sentiment single-handedly was behind his sweeping victory, let alone that he actively cultivated

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<sup>13</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton, 2015), pp. 203-204; Thurber, *Republicans and Race: The GOP's Frayed Relationship with African Americans, 1945-1974* (Lawrence, KS, 2013), p. 261; Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), p. 92; and Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York, 2000) p. xi.

the backlash. This is where scholarly orthodoxy falls down. The Gipper needed a broad swathe of Californians to win the governorship and he achieved this by harnessing *broader* frustration with Great Society liberalism. Attuned to subsequent events, historians mischaracterise the political mood of 1966, where backlash was real, but did not define the entire landscape. Just weeks before his gubernatorial victory, a survey of Californian voters found that more agreed with Brown's stance on Civil Rights than Reagan's – this was not George Wallace's Alabama.<sup>14</sup>

It was resentment at government activism in general that yielded a new conservative western populism that carried Reagan to power in 1966 and would later fuel his three attempts at the White House. In contrast to historian Mark Brilliant's assessment that Reagan exploited a divisive 'Southwestern strategy' to capitalise on fragmentation in the Democratic coalition of minority groups, this chapter concurs with historian Jonathan Bell, who finds that 'the Republican anti-government message that had seemed quaint in 1958 now had resonance after nearly eight years of a massive expansion of state capacity in higher education, transportation, welfare provision, water projects, and a myriad of other programs'.<sup>15</sup> The concurrent stories, therefore, of Reagan's transition from actor to governor, and California's transformation from liberal heartland to conservative fortress, were both rooted in the profound exogenous shifting of the political spectrum in Washington. Critical to the shifting tectonic plates that Reagan's victory underscored, and this chapter explains, was an unprecedented level of government activism in social policy in Washington, together with widespread cultural upheaval, manifest

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<sup>14</sup> When asked, 'In general, whose stand in the field of civil rights is closer to your own thinking – Brown or Reagan's?' 36% agreed with Brown, 33% with Reagan, and 31% were undecided. For further reading, see 'Poll Shows Only 33% Support Rumford Act', *Los Angeles Times*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1966, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> For further reading, see Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York, 2010), p. 6; Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia, 2012), p. 235.

on its West Coast not just with the Watts riots, but – just as significant – with student action in Berkeley.

### ***Black Rights in the Golden State***

In late 1962, California liberals were basking in Governor Pat Brown's re-election glory. At his inaugural ball, a gleeful Brown joked, 'if Dick Nixon had won you'd be sitting here listening to Roy Rogers and Ronald Reagan!'<sup>16</sup> The governor's stellar victory in 1958, reinforced in 1962, encouraged the sense that the good times of liberal dominance in the nation's newly declared most populous state were here to stay.<sup>17</sup> The large election victory was reinforced by figures showing that Democrats significantly outnumbered Republicans, that liberal racial attitudes were growing, and that JFK was widely popular. Against that backdrop, says Dallek, housing reform 'now seemed the perfect moral issue for the administration to tackle.'<sup>18</sup>

Brown had attempted housing reform in his first term, but he was unable to overcome the power of the private homeowner, which accounted for seventy percent of housing in the state.<sup>19</sup> In 1961, Brown had established the Governor's Advisory Commission on Housing Problems, which resulted in a damning indictment of California housing. In Northern California, for example, over 350,000 new homes had been built with fewer than one hundred bought by non-whites. The racial divide was 'so complete it might as well have been decreed by law, as it was

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<sup>16</sup> Brown quoted in Arthur Wood, 'Crowd and Stars Open Stops at Inaugural Affair', *The Sacramento Bee*, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1963, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> According to Ethan Rarick, California declared itself the largest state in the nation on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1962, see Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Although we do not have detailed polling data on racial attitudes in California in early 1963, when asked 'Your opinion on Government spending to educate Negroes and Minorities', 49% agreed it was a good idea compared to 42% who disagreed. While the same poll found 58% of people identified as Democrats, compared to 39% Republican, and 62% approved of Brown's performance. For further reading, see questions 2,10, and 15, California Poll 63-02, conducted in July 1963, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6302> (last viewed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020); Dallek, *The Right Moment*, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Statistic of 70% taken from 'Foes Move for Cut in Fair Housing Funds', *The Fresno Bee*, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1963, p. 4.

in the Deep South.’<sup>20</sup> Advisor Edward Howden – the state’s first head of the Fair Employment Practices Commission and leading Civil Rights advocate in the administration – urged Brown to ‘forge ahead... until all such essential guarantees of equal treatment and opportunity have become law.’<sup>21</sup>

Brown was much more committed to addressing racial inequalities through public policy than was President Kennedy, and has been described by his biographer as ‘one of the good guys’ in ‘the fight against racism and anti-Semitism’.<sup>22</sup> His first term had involved the landmark measure of the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Commission, he had launched a study into housing inequality, and he had subsequently backed extensive protections against housing discrimination. The latter measure had failed in the conservative-dominated State Senate Committee on Governmental Efficiency and Economy. But, undeterred and in a confident mood following his re-election, on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1963, the governor sent a heartfelt ‘Statement on Human Rights’ to the legislature in which he beseeched politicians to ‘pass legislation to eliminate discrimination in the private housing market in California.’<sup>23</sup>

Crucial to any housing reform would be Democrat William Byrum Rumford, the bill’s main sponsor in the state assembly. Rumford was a former chemist from Berkeley and one of just four black assembly members. He was first elected in 1948, doubling the assembly’s African American contingent, and in his first year, he sponsored a bill to desegregate the National Guard. He later shepherded the Fair Employment Practices Act – the headline Civil Rights

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<sup>20</sup> Statistics and quote in Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 259.

<sup>21</sup> Howden quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 177; for reading on Howden, see Carl Nolte, ‘Obituary: Edward Howden’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2008, available online at <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Edward-Howden-first-head-of-state-Fair-13165047.php> (last viewed 7th April 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 258.

<sup>23</sup> Brown quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 178.

policy of Brown's first term – through the legislature. He was experienced, deeply personally committed to reform, and was a key ally of the administration, all of which made him the ideal person to lead a renewed charge for change.<sup>24</sup>

On 27<sup>th</sup> March 1963, Assembly Bill (AB) 1240, 'the Rumford Act', was introduced into the legislature. It sought to extend the ban on discrimination based on race in the sale or rental of private property, and followed the example set by President Kennedy's November 1962 Executive Order. Rumford's first legislative obstacle was the assembly Committee on Governmental Efficiency and Economy. Unlike the usual quiet, empty committee hearings, 'Nearly 400 persons listened to the arguments in a packed hearing room', Richard Rodda of the *Sacramento Bee* reported. Speaking on behalf of the bill, state Attorney General Stanley Mosk boldly argued, 'Integration is a fact of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It will come as surely as tomorrow.' As sociologist John David Skrentny illuminated in his work on affirmative action, to talk in terms of 'integration' was bold in 1963, for 'desegregation' was the language of choice, with policy makers focussed on removing formal, legal barriers, rather than on an active promotion of integration.<sup>25</sup> Robert Wyman of the Citizens League for Individual Freedom countered, 'It is not possible to legislate immorality, bigotry or hatred out of the minds of men... A man's home is his castle.'<sup>26</sup>

If that was just one reaction, a more worrying sign of a forthcoming struggle came from Rumford's own hometown, Berkeley. The college town was home to the golden child of the state's impressive university system and was, therefore, one of the most liberal places in the state, if not the nation in the early 1960s. Yet, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1963, the city voted by the narrow

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<sup>24</sup> For Rumford's detailed biography, see Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 261.

<sup>25</sup> Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action: Politics, Culture, and Justice in America* (Chicago, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Initial legislative battle described in Richard Rodda, 'Housing Bill Goes to Assembly Floor', *The Sacramento Bee*, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1963, p. 6.

margin of 22,720 to 20,323 to reject a similar anti-discrimination housing ordinance. Importantly, the vote had been sharply divided along the colour line – over ninety percent of black residents voted in favour, with sixty-three percent of whites voting against.<sup>27</sup> Given the vote had attracted ‘national and international attention’ and stirred ‘a record 82 percent of the 52,936 registered voters’ to take part, it was an embarrassing and foreboding setback.<sup>28</sup> It demonstrated the *hostility* of even self-identifying liberals to residential integration during this period, motivated largely by fears about the value of their property.

Despite liberal domination of the lower chamber, Rumford had further cause to worry when he was forced into two concessions before an assembly floor vote; the first exempted ‘four unit dwelling places’ where ‘one [was] occupied by the owner’; the second reduced punishment by eliminating misdemeanour arrests and replaced it with contempt of court charges.<sup>29</sup> The changes were enough for the lower chamber, where the ‘watered-down version’ of AB 1240 passed by a vote of 47-25. However, as the *Los Angeles Times* coverage noted, that was no cause for celebration, given that ‘a similar measure was killed in a Senate committee at the 1961 session following Assembly approval.’ Further, the bill was rapidly attracting stern opposition, based on the claim that ‘the Rumford bill would remove the constitutional right of a property owner to do what he wants with his property.’<sup>30</sup> It was analogous to arguments that business owners had made earlier in the twentieth century, placing the seller’s rights above the buyer’s: the seller had the freedom to choose who they sold to, but the buyer did not necessarily have the freedom to buy what they wished.<sup>31</sup> Moving into the more conservative Senate, the bill’s success hung on a knife edge.

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<sup>27</sup> Statistic in Brilliant, *The Color of American Has Changed*, p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> Vote detailed in Gene Sherman, ‘Berkeley Resolved to Face Racial Issue on Housing’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1963, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Phillips, ‘Easing of Housing Bias Measure is Slated’, *The Sacramento Bee*, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1963, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Jerry Gillam, ‘Fair Housing Bill Passed in Assembly’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1963, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (New Haven, 2019).

Weeks of delay prompted criticism from Governor Brown, a CORE sit-in in the Capitol rotunda, and the intervention from Vice-President Johnson. That was enough to persuade the Senate Committee on Governmental Efficiency and Economy to allow the bill to go to a vote.<sup>32</sup> It was the final day of the legislative session and at 11:25pm, just thirty-five minutes ahead of the midnight deadline, a vote was called. By a margin of twenty-two (all Democrats) to thirteen (eleven Republicans and two Democrats), and just one vote above the fifty percent threshold required in the senate, the bill was passed.<sup>33</sup> The amendments were swiftly agreed to in the assembly and the AB 1240 was transferred to a relieved Brown minutes before the midnight deadline to make its way into law. It was no longer possible to discriminate in the sale or rental of private property along the colour line. The fair housing battle had seemingly been won.

Liberal Democrats were delighted with the act's passage; demonstrators who had camped for weeks in the rotunda broke into song, while Rumford embraced a fellow legislator with tears flowing.<sup>34</sup> Brown, thankful that his legislative agenda remained intact, hailed the 'historic step' toward racial equality that gave 'every Californian the right to live where he pleases.'<sup>35</sup> Returning home that evening, Brown's press secretary, John Burby, beaming with pride told his wife, 'do you realize that our kids may very well grow up in a culture that's really color blind?' Rumford's passage was a sign that, in Burby's words, 'liberalism was... rolling, man'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Description of committee in Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 263.

<sup>33</sup> Rarick described the committee as a 'killing field for liberal legislation'. See, *California Rising*, p. 266.

<sup>34</sup> For reading on the celebrations, see Rarick, *California Rising*, pp. 266-67.

<sup>35</sup> Brown quoted in Daryl Lembke, 'Legislature OKs Fair Housing Compromise', *Los Angeles Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1963, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Burby quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 183.

### *Suburban Awakening*

The passage of the Rumford Act vindicated Brown's confidence that Californians 'respect tradition but scorn the status quo'.<sup>37</sup> Waiting in the wings, however, was a spectre that endangered all his liberal coalition had achieved. The act threatened the homogeneity of the expanding, overwhelmingly white, middle-class suburbs that housed nearly ninety percent of all Californians, who, more than the residents of any other state, enjoyed the post-war boom of the American economy.<sup>38</sup> The forthcoming battle over housing rights was 'a story that localized the national battle over civil rights'.<sup>39</sup>

The fight against the Rumford Act was led by L. H. 'Spike' Wilson, President of the California Real Estate Association (CREA). His association was well-organised and well-financed, with over 40,000 members and 171 local real estate boards providing the foundations for an effective grassroots campaign.<sup>40</sup> CREA had fought against government regulation for years, and Wilson had testified against AB 1240 at the first assembly committee hearing in March 1963.<sup>41</sup> Even though CREA was unable to prevent Rumford's passage into law, it had already established a sophisticated campaign of leaflet drops and advertisements. One emotively-charged advert, a 'Property Owners' Bill of Rights', argued for 'the right to occupy and dispose of property without government interference', warning that anything to the contrary was 'a springboard for further erosion of Liberty.'<sup>42</sup> The Rumford Act had not threatened property rights in any sense of redistribution, but merely shaped how property owners disposed of their property at their

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, 'Second Inaugural Address'.

<sup>38</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 205; statistic taken from Brown, 'Second Inaugural Address'.

<sup>39</sup> Becky Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago, 2013), p. 326.

<sup>40</sup> Statistics in Brilliant, *The Color of American Has Changed*, p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> Rodda, 'Housing Bill Goes to Assembly Floor'.

<sup>42</sup> CREA, 'Property Owners' Bill of Rights', *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder 'Housing (1/2)'.

time of choosing. CREA wanted to retain the private right to discriminate, free from government legislation.

As Wilson outlined in an interview with the *San Francisco Examiner*, CREA's ultimate aim was 'to bring the issue to a vote in the 1964 election to determine whether it should be the law in California.'<sup>43</sup> Given the association had rather remarkably won the Berkeley ordinance, but lost the state-wide legislative battle, the plebiscite gambit must have unnerved liberals. As the battle for a referendum on Rumford developed and Brown's frustration grew, he admonished CREA as 'bigots', leading a 'hate binge which began more than thirty years ago in a Munich beer hall.'<sup>44</sup> Brown's remark was of the same liberal tradition as Richard Hofstadter's remark that Goldwaterite conservatism was akin to a 'paranoid style' – a movement grounded in 'the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy'.<sup>45</sup> Both men exemplified the difficulty that metropolitan liberals had in taking the new western populist conservative movement seriously.

As CREA met in late September 1963 for its annual convention, spirits in the group were high. Reflecting the post-war boom, between 1956 and 1963, one-third of all new housing in the nation and one-fourth of all new jobs created in the country were in California. According to James Downs, the head of the nationwide Real Estate Research Corporation, it was an unparalleled period of 'super prosperity' for California.<sup>46</sup> This gave CREA substantial authority. Such was the association's growing success, their mobilisation over Rumford

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson quoted in Brian Taylor, 'Realtors Plan Equal Rights Law Advisory Committee', *San Francisco Examiner*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1963, p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> The governor quoted in 'Brown Likens Rumford Act Foes to Nazis', *Los Angeles Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1964, p. 56.

<sup>45</sup> Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1967), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Statistics and Downs quoted in Tom Cameron, 'Realtors Told State has "Super-Prosperity"', *Los Angeles Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1963, p. 31.

gathered the attention and opposition of the NAACP, CORE, and the United Civil Rights Committee, all of whom protested the luxury Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, where the CREA convention was being held.<sup>47</sup> Both the Civil Rights activists and CREA were steadily mobilising their own grassroots campaigns ahead of the expected battle over the Rumford Act in a state-wide referendum.

Amid the growing protests and controversy, Ronald Reagan stepped into the political arena. His life was at a crossroads in late 1963. The previous year he had left GE, wanting to move into politics. He was fuelled by his own admission his movie career ‘was coming to a close’.<sup>48</sup> His limited speaking and acting engagements, most notably as host of *Death Valley Days*, did not fulfil Reagan, and left him plenty of free time to pursue other interests. Only in his early fifties, he still believed he had plenty to contribute and, given his longstanding proclivity for politics, there was little doubt which road he would follow. Reagan had started to develop a political profile, campaigning for Truman’s presidential campaign in 1948, and Nixon’s gubernatorial race in 1962, but Reagan’s issues were mainly national and international concerns – the rising spectre of communism. The housing issue enabled him to step into wholly different world of state-level politics, one he was arguably less suited to.

On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1963, before a packed hall of over five thousand delegates, Reagan was invited to address the CREA annual convention. Capturing his and the association’s political philosophy, the actor warned, ‘government is growing and individual freedom [for sellers] is shrinking.’ The Gipper charged that the Rumford Act was proof of the expanding state, which ‘invades private property rights with the backing of bureaucratic regulations’ and he opposed

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<sup>47</sup> Over 500 protestors gathered at the Biltmore hotel. For further reading, see Tom Cameron, ‘Realtor Asks Public Vote on Fair Housing’, *Los Angeles Times*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1963, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> H. W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, 2015), p. 128; Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 138.

legislation ‘which infringes on the private rights of the individual.’<sup>49</sup> Reagan was supporting the rights of owners to discriminate on the basis that government had no right to legislate in the sphere of private property. But this revealed the glaring inconsistencies in his philosophy.

Reagan advocated a colour-blind outlook based on individual freedom, but that narrow interpretation of freedom privileged whites above all others. The right of African Americans wanting to own their home in whatever neighbourhood they wanted, was in Reagan’s mind, secondary to the owner’s right to discriminate. Believing in the power of the individual for uplifting good, the Gipper could not comprehend anyone’s worldview that was prejudicial, for he had been strictly raised to treat all equally. In his naïve and romanticised memory of his upbringing, his only experiences of racism in his youth were people targeting African Americans because of their race, thus he believed that colour-consciousness was the problem.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, he thought the solution to a post-Jim Crow, post-racial America was a strict adherence to colour-blindness by state actors, not private owners – a notion supported by liberals including Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney Young until the early 1960s. However, Reagan’s view was equally problematic because a post-racial United States did not exist. To break down the colour-line, which commonplace racially restrictive covenants reinforced in California, the state had to intervene. Reagan could not see this. Instead, he focussed on the use of state power as grotesque, rather than on the abusive practices it sought to correct.

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<sup>49</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Retiring Realtor Chief Attacks Housing Statute’, *The Sacramento Bee*, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1963, p. 57.

<sup>50</sup> In his memoir Reagan wrote, ‘I’d grown up in a home where no sin was more grievous than racial bigotry’. But as Morgan points out, ‘Dutch grew up without bigotry but his awareness of racism was confined to the few examples he encountered rather than the everyday reality of it.’ For further reading, see Reagan, *Reagan: An American Life* (New York, 1990), p. 150; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 6.

The Gipper told his audience that ‘I believe that the right to a personal possession is at the very basis of individual freedom’.<sup>51</sup> That did not easily reconcile with a political philosophy which prioritised the right of the individual sellers *and* buyers. Such was Reagan’s preoccupation with growing government that it obscured all other considerations. It was a gaping shortcoming which exposed the paradox of colour-blind conservatism: he could be attuned to instances of individual racism, which he found abhorrent, but he could not understand entrenched, systemic, racism which subjugated anyone who was not white. It was a glaring limitation he never reconciled, and as we will see in later chapters, infused the conservative movement and the nation with profoundly damaging consequences for people of colour.

Interestingly, Reagan was seemingly unconcerned that his appearance at the convention in support of CREA’s opposition to Rumford might appear racist. This implied either an extreme naivety to appearance, or a desire to exploit the moment’s housing backlash for political gain. Likely, he viewed the situation as a matter of defending the principles he had outlined back in 1962 during an address entitled ‘Losing Freedom by Installments’. In that speech, the Gipper warned as he had throughout his GE employment of the dangers of big government. Reagan warned of ‘high flown phrases’ such as ‘freedom from want’ that provided a cover for ‘Federal Government laying its hand on housing, health, farming, industry and education.’<sup>52</sup>

By attacking the growth of government, Reagan was occupying and sublimating the language of freedoms and rights that the Civil Rights movement and liberalism more broadly had employed for a generation. For the Gipper, progressives had corrupted Rooseveltian ideals of universal justice and it was therefore up to conservatives like Reagan to defend their conception

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<sup>51</sup> Reagan, ‘Interview with Alex Drier’, 29<sup>th</sup> August 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder ‘B7T: Housing (1/2)’, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Reagan, ‘Losing Freedom by Installments’, p. 4.

of individual freedom. Appropriating freedom was, in Morgan's estimation, the 'organizing principle of his emergent conservatism', which 'was essentially the message on which Reagan built his political career' – the fair housing battle underlined this struggle.<sup>53</sup>

Despite Reagan's speech at the CREA annual convention, he undertook no subsequent campaigning work on behalf of the group. Instead, he co-chaired the 'Goldwater for President' campaign in California. Occasionally, though, that role entailed underlining his hostility to Rumford, as when he agreed to speak at the Young Republicans of California convention in February 1964. At the meeting of over a thousand delegates, the group gave 'speedy approval' to revocation of Rumford, after which Reagan delivered the banquet address. His pre-prepared speech highlighted the growing threat to western freedoms by lamenting American appeasement of communism abroad. In doing so, Reagan aligned himself with an increasingly fervent embrace of a limited conception of individual freedom that was opposed to collectivism in any and all forms. Within this Cold War context, whether internal erosion came from federal government or an external attack from the Soviet Union, any minor loss of freedom, Reagan believed, would incrementally lead down a road to totalitarian rule.<sup>54</sup>

The same month as Reagan's address to Young Republicans, CREA achieved the milestone of 500,000 signatures required to put Proposition 14 on the November ballot. The initiative was not technically a repeal of the Rumford Act, but rather amended the state constitution to include the passage: 'Neither the State nor any subdivision or agency thereof shall deny, limit or abridge, directly or indirectly, the right of any person, who is willing or desires to sell, lease or rent any part or all of his real property, to decline to sell, lease or rent such property to such

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<sup>53</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 67.

<sup>54</sup> Don Thomas, 'Young GOP Cool to Officers' Pledge', *Oakland Tribune*, 16<sup>th</sup> February 1964, p. 1.

person or persons as he, in his absolute discretion, chooses.’ In essence, Rumford would be nullified.<sup>55</sup> As soon as Proposition 14 found its way onto the November ballot, the conservative *Los Angeles Times* editorial team came out in support of CREA, writing, ‘one of man’s most ancient rights in a free society is the privilege of using and disposing of his private property in whatever manner he deems appropriate.’<sup>56</sup> The *Times* echoed sentiments of conservatives across the state in narrowly arguing individual property rights – for those seeking to dispose of property, rather than acquire – mattered above all.

Opponents of CREA viewed Proposition 14 as a referendum on racial progressivism in California. With tensions gathering ahead of election day, a bipartisan coalition formed to defeat the ballot initiative. Speaker Jesse Unruh warned success of CREA would ‘sow the dragon’s teeth of hate and suspicion’, while the *New York Times* traced the substantial links between radical right-wing groups and the repeal campaign, including the White Citizens Councils of Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>57</sup> Reflecting the national split in the party, moderate and liberal Republicans joined the fight opposing their presidential nominee, Goldwater. In October 1964, over two hundred Republican leaders including Caspar Weinberger, chair of the Republican State Central Committee, declared ‘the passage of this initiative would be a severe blow to the efforts of responsible leaders who are attempting to solve our racial problems.’ Further, liberal Republican Senator Thomas Kuchel boldly proclaimed passage of Proposition 14 would, ‘mock the American Constitution and American conscience.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Amendment quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 193.

<sup>56</sup> Times Editorial, ‘Decision on Housing Initiative’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1964, p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Unruh quoted in *ibid*, p. 195; Wallace Turner, ‘Rightists in West Fight Housing Act’, *NYT*, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1964, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Weinberger and Kuchel quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 195.

Reagan seemed unconcerned that while he publicly supported Proposition 14 on constitutional grounds – akin to his and Goldwater’s opposition of the Civil Rights Act of the same year – they were on the same side as racists and segregationists who displayed ‘naked bigotry’.<sup>59</sup> With his unwavering support of Goldwater and Proposition 14, Reagan had firmly tied his ideological colours to the mast in a state where fifty-seven percent of the population were registered Democrats, President Johnson had an eight-point lead over Goldwater, and one poll showed that ninety-seven percent of Californians labelled Civil Rights the most influential reason for their presidential vote.<sup>60</sup> Reagan’s political aspirations and future depended on a good result in the November elections.

### ***The Liberal Epoch***

The political world that had led John F. Kennedy to embrace the housing executive order in November 1962, was subsequently radically remade by events in the summer of 1963. Weeks of racial strife in Birmingham, Alabama, spread to over a thousand demonstrations in two hundred cities, across thirty-six states, constituting the greatest racial crisis since the Civil War. For a White House that became ‘inured to the sight of white segregationists attacking black demonstrators’, Kennedy was forced to make a much *firmer* break with the status quo than he would have wished.<sup>61</sup> The escalation of violence from Birmingham in 1963 to Selma in 1965, inaugurated a period of extraordinary drama and contention. This brought calls for racial equality to the front and centre of national politics, for the first time during the Cold War era. As a result of the civil unrest in Birmingham in June 1963, polling data showed over half of Americans thought questions of race were the biggest problem facing the country – a radical

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<sup>59</sup> Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 187.

<sup>60</sup> For further reading, see questions 1, 3, and 8, ‘California Poll 64-06’, conducted in October 1964, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6406> (last viewed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>61</sup> Statistics in Bryant, *The Bystander*, p. 1; Bryant quoted in *ibid*, pp. 3-4.

change from the usual Cold War or economic concerns.<sup>62</sup> After the events of Birmingham, it was all but impossible for the White House or members of Congress to remain on the side-lines of the Civil Rights struggle.

On 10<sup>th</sup> February 1964, the House passed a fiercely debated Civil Rights bill, meaning conservatives in the Senate could avoid the nation's number one issue no longer.<sup>63</sup> Reflecting the prevailing wisdom that 'fighting discrimination with counter-discrimination' was 'illogical and illiberal', the House bill was colour-blind.<sup>64</sup> Globally, the premise had also gathered momentum; as Africa decolonised, 'non-discrimination was quite suddenly a world right', that transcended national boundaries too.<sup>65</sup>

With a House bill passed, conservatives in the Senate were confronted with the overwhelming challenge of choosing between their ideas of racial progression and their philosophy of government. The worldview of small government and leaving racial matters to the states had evidently failed in the wake of Birmingham. Even the most ardent of conservatives – Senators Everett Dirksen and Barry Goldwater – were divided by the problem and chose opposing sides of the debate. As part of the story detailing the massive shift of federal government policy between 1963 and 1965, conservatives faced two massive questions: the role of government in national life and the notion of compensatory justice.

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<sup>62</sup> 52% of Americans answered 'Racial problems' as the biggest issue facing the country. For further information, see question 3, 'Gallup Poll: 1963-0677', conducted September 1963, *Gallup Organization*.

<sup>63</sup> A March 1964 survey showed when asked what the biggest problem facing the country was, 34% of respondents choose 'racial discrimination', followed by communism (11%), and international problems (10%). For further information, see question 2, 'Gallup Poll - 688', conducted March 1964, *Gallup Organization*.

<sup>64</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York, 1990), pp. 5-6.

<sup>65</sup> John David Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), p. 3.

‘Throughout history’, Goldwater via his ghost-writer L. Brent Bozell wrote in 1960, ‘government has proved to be the chief instrument for thwarting man’s liberty.’ His book *Conscience of a Conservative* helped popularise and familiarise many with his political positions, foremost of which was his nervousness about growing centralised government. Typifying conservatives’ concern, he asked ‘How did our national government grow from a servant with sharply limited powers into a master with virtually unlimited power?’ Washington government, he believed, had become ‘a Leviathan, a vast national authority out of touch with the people’.<sup>66</sup> The Civil Rights bill he now faced sharpened his thinking that the role of federal government in national life was too great and had to be curtailed.

Goldwater’s belief that the proposed Civil Rights bill was a stretch too far, was grounded in his core conviction in ‘the sanctity of individual freedom.’<sup>67</sup> The Arizonan, a member of the NAACP, believed limited governmental power in the form of ‘valid federal laws’ could be asserted to protect individual rights. Importantly, however, he believed that such protections as would be afforded in the new bill were a matter for the states under the Tenth Amendment.<sup>68</sup> Paradoxically, it was this worldview that enabled Goldwater to endorse voting rights for minorities by voting for the Civil Rights Act of 1957, yet oppose the omnibus bill now before him without seemingly perceiving this as contradictory. In this respect, western populism was different from contemporary conservative ideology typified by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who opposed *Brown v. Board* as well as the reforms of the late 1950 and 1960s. Goldwater’s hostility to the Civil Rights bill was grounded in his opposition to the expanding ‘leviathan’, not his hostility to African Americans.

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<sup>66</sup> Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (New York, 1960), pp. 16-20.

<sup>67</sup> William Link, ‘Time Is an Elusive Companion: Jesse Helms, Barry Goldwater, and the Dynamic of Modern Conservatism’, in Elizabeth Tandy Shermer (ed.), *Barry Goldwater and the Remaking of the American Political Landscape* (Tucson, 2013), p. 247.

<sup>68</sup> Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservative*, pp. 32-33.

Reagan, like Goldwater, was fiercely protective of small government individualism. The Gipper's devotion to liberty conveniently lent on Locke's social contract, which 'teaches that government is founded on a necessary loss of freedom, not on the *enhancement* of liberty.'<sup>69</sup> Reagan was operating within a milieu of Goldwater's book and John Stormer's *None Dare Call it Treason*. Stormer's work – a favourite of the John Birch Society – falsely claimed that government was overrun with communists and 'tapped into a vein of conservative alarm that was still very much present in the early 1960s'.<sup>70</sup> To differing degrees, both works promoted the notion that expanding, centralised government was profoundly antithetical to the American tradition. In 1962, the Gipper had given an address – 'Losing Freedom by Installments' – which excoriated the premise of strong Washington government.

I do not equate [communism and socialism], but I do suggest that these two philosophies do have one characteristic in common, that is collectivism. They seek the answer to all problems of human need through government. The liberals' campaign for more and more participation by the Federal Government in areas heretofore the province of the state, community and individual. The only common denominator needed to win their support of any legislation is the extent to which it will increase the power and authority of central government.<sup>71</sup>

Reagan and Goldwater's public justification for their opposition to the Civil Rights Act was thus grounded in concerns of federal government expansion. It was the same analogous argument Reagan used in education, where he argued, 'only with local control can Americans be assured that their children will receive the finest education possible with safeguards against ideological or political indoctrination.'<sup>72</sup> The consequence of their opposition, however, was an alliance with Southern Democrats who unabashedly founded their opposition to Civil Rights in race. The political consequence of this coalition, regardless of motive, was 'a gulf between

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<sup>69</sup> Gary Wills, *A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government* (New York, 1999), pp. 297-298.

<sup>70</sup> For a brief summary of Stormer see, Neil Genzlinger, 'Obituary: John A. Stormer', *NYT*, 18<sup>th</sup> July 2018, p. B13.

<sup>71</sup> Reagan, 'Losing Freedom by Installments: Address to the Annual Meeting of the Fargo Chamber of Commerce', 26<sup>th</sup> January 1962, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C35, Folder 'RR: Pre-1966 Speeches', p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Reagan, 'News Release on Education', 4<sup>th</sup> April 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C35, Folder 'Local Control'.

conservatives and blacks that has never healed.<sup>73</sup> Reagan's colour-blind, individualistic, small government conservatism was incompatible with what he perceived as the centralising statism of the Civil Rights bill. It was a profound ideological objection that stayed with him to the end of his life.<sup>74</sup>

For the limited number of conservatives such as Goldwater and Reagan who did oppose the Civil Rights bill, survey data highlights just how marginal they had become, and how little political capital there was to be gained. An April 1964 survey revealed that nearly three-quarters of Americans favoured the bill, and a February poll showed over half of Americans thought the Johnson administration was pushing racial integration either 'not fast enough', or 'about right'.<sup>75</sup> Nonetheless, the Goldwaterites wielded a great deal of power in Congress and could still prove a stumbling block for the omnibus bill, and Senate leaders therefore worked out a compromise package that might appeal to the chamber's spectrum of opinion.

After weeks of negotiations, Senate leaders agreed on a resolution that addressed conservatives' concerns and that had a chance on the floor. Approved on 13<sup>th</sup> May 1964, the result was a compromise package of '70-odd amendments that required the complete re-writing of a substitute bill for HR 7152.' The proposal centred upon two key features; reducing the authority of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to 'mandate deference to state' authority, and secondly to 'strip the EEOC of its prosecutorial role.'<sup>76</sup> Reflecting the

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<sup>73</sup> Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003), p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> Reagan's memoir omits any mention of the Civil Rights Act, probably a reflective choice amid a vastly different political environment to avoid raising the issue. However, he outlined 'the relentless expansion of the federal government' as a key reason of his support for Goldwater. For further reading, see Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), p. 139.

<sup>75</sup> When asked about the Civil Rights bill, 70% were supportive and 30% opposed. For further reading, see question 5, 'Louis Harris & Associates Poll – April 1964', conducted April 1964, *Louis Harris & Associates*; When asked about the rate of progression by the White House, 30% thought 'too fast', 15% 'not fast enough', and 40% believed 'about right'. For further information, see question 4, 'Gallup Poll - 684', conducted February 1964, *Gallup Organization*.

<sup>76</sup> Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 147.

national nature of the Civil Rights problem, these profound changes mitigated exposure of northern and western states, helping to bring moderate Republicans on board. The Dirksen-Humphrey compromise (named after Republican leader Everett Dirksen and Democratic majority whip Hubert Humphrey) was met with approval by the *New York Times*, which noted the amendments were specifically ‘aimed at easing the task of breaking the Southern filibuster.’<sup>77</sup>

The second hurdle for Senate leaders who wanted enough support to overcome the conservative filibuster was the removal of any notion of compensatory justice. Critical to gathering the sixty-seven votes was the debate surrounding Title VII, encompassing the EEOC, employment discrimination, and quotas. In contrast to an Illinois Fair Employment Practice Commission ruling of 5<sup>th</sup> March 1964 that invalidated an employment exam on the grounds it failed to consider ‘inequalities and differences in environment’, Humphrey assured the Civil Rights bill would be colour-blind and contain no such measures.<sup>78</sup> Rejecting conservative concern over quotas, Humphrey categorically stated, ‘Contrary to the allegations of some opponents of this title, there is nothing in it that will give any power to the Commission or to any court to require hiring, firing, or promotion of employees in order to meet a racial “quota” or to achieve a certain racial balance.’<sup>79</sup>

Despite Humphrey’s efforts, the notion of quotas was a concern not easily dismissed. A *New York Times* editorial reinforced the senator’s argument, and lambasted ‘the misrepresentations by opponents of the civil rights legislation’, who the paper argued, ‘are at their wildest in discussion of this title.’ Further the *Times* reassured readers, ‘it would not, as has been

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<sup>77</sup> E.W. Kenworthy, ‘Civil Rights Bloc Reaches Accord on Amendments’, *NYT*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 1964, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Illinois ruling quoted in Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 149.

<sup>79</sup> Humphrey quoted in ‘The Civil Rights Act of 1963’, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1964, *Congressional Record – Senate*, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, vol. 110:5, p. 6549.

suggested, require anyone to establish racial quotas; to the contrary, such quotas would be forbidden as a racial test.’<sup>80</sup> In a final attempt to persuade conservatives and moderates alike, Humphrey pushed the colour-blind intent of the bill to the limit when, speaking on the Senate floor on 4<sup>th</sup> June, he reiterated, ‘the express requirement of intent is designed to make it wholly clear, that inadvertent or accidental discriminations will not violate the title... the respondent must have intended to discriminate.’<sup>81</sup>

Splitting the conservative vote, Humphrey’s reassurance was enough to get Dirksen and the majority, but not all, of Senate Republicans on board. On the 10<sup>th</sup> June 1964, for only the second time in thirty-five years, cloture was put to a vote. Cloture passed by 71-29, a margin of four votes. As Senator John Williams of Delaware – a rock-ribbed conservative, more so than Dirksen – whispered ‘Aye’ for the sixty-seventh vote, Humphrey ‘raised his arms in silent exultation’ – it was done!<sup>82</sup> After eighty-two working days, 63,000 pages of the *Congressional Record*, and ten million words, the filibuster was broken.<sup>83</sup>

Importantly, conservatives had been divided on the Civil Rights Act. While certain conservatives including Dirksen and Williams in the Senate, and William McCullough in the House were persuaded to prioritise racial justice over their concerns about the role of government, others including Goldwater and Reagan were not. Goldwater was notably one of just six Republican senators to vote against the bill, the others being Norris Cotton (NH), Bourke Hickenlooper (IA), Edwin Mechem (NM), Milward Simpson (WY), and John Tower (TX). Meanwhile of the thirty-five Republicans to vote against the final House bill, it is notable

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Civil Rights Bill - V’, *NYT*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1964, p. 32.

<sup>81</sup> Humphrey quoted in, ‘The Civil Rights Act of 1963’, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1964, *Congressional Record – Senate*, 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, vol. 110:5, pp. 12723-24.

<sup>82</sup> Humphrey described in Todd Purdum, *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties, and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (New York, 2014), p. 303.

<sup>83</sup> Statistics taken from Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 151.

that thirteen were northern or western GOP members. Perhaps a foreboding sign of the beneath the surface western populism developing in California, five of those thirteen – Allen Smith (CA-20), Delwin Clawson (CA-23), Glenard Lipscomb (CA-24), Bob Wilson (CA-36), and Patrick Martin (CA-38) – were from the southern counties of the golden state, that provided the suburban warriors described by historian Lisa McGirr, who became the mainstay of Reagan’s grassroots support. Residents of these districts ‘feared that such changes would impinge on their affluent white havens and would undermine their prosperity’ and believed ‘these new federal laws overstepped the bounds of the Constitution’.<sup>84</sup> Reagan would appeal to both concerns in his gubernatorial campaign.

### *A Time for Choosing*

A mere two weeks after Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, Barry Goldwater, the most prominent Republican opponent of the act, accepted his party’s nomination for the presidency. As Goldwater had outlined in *Conscience of a Conservative*, for him, ‘the problem of race relations, like all social and cultural problems, is best handled by the people directly concerned.’ The Arizona senator eschewed ‘the engines of national power’ – federal government – and promoted ‘states’ rights’. Any other alternative, he warned, ‘enthrones tyrants and dooms freedom.’<sup>85</sup>

Emphasising both Goldwater’s concern over the role of the federal government and his momentary capture of the party, concerns of diminishing ‘freedom’ won a central position in the party platform. In his acceptance speech, the Arizona Senator cited ‘freedom’ twenty-three times – by contrast, Nixon would mention the word a mere nine times, four years later. For

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<sup>84</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp. 182-84.

<sup>85</sup> Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, p. 38.

Goldwater, Johnson was leading the nation ‘to stagnate in the swampland of collectivism’. Like CREA and Reagan in California, Goldwater declared ‘the sanctity of private property the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society.’ It was a powerful mobilising tool, which Goldwater reinforced with the first guiding principle of the party platform – ‘every person has the right to govern himself, to fix his own goals, and to make his own way with a minimum of governmental interference.’<sup>86</sup>

The senator’s convictions were deeply felt, but also politically expedient in the wake of the Civil Rights Act’s passage. The convention could not avoid the elephant in the room – race. Only 14 of 1,308 delegates were African American – the lowest total in the party’s history, and for the first time since the Civil War, the southern states offered no black delegates.<sup>87</sup> Goldwater’s position on race and the end of the Eisenhower fudge had torn a chasm in the party, which was split between Rockefeller liberals and Goldwater conservatives.<sup>88</sup> Emblematic of the party divide, a Civil Rights march outside the convention hall gathered 40,000 supporters, with people carrying ‘Goldwater for Fuhrer’ signs – a march attended by liberal Michigan Governor George Romney. In contrast to the 1960 election where Richard Nixon managed to secure a third of the black vote, this time, both parties struggled to hold their disparate political coalitions together.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Goldwater, ‘Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in San Francisco’, 16<sup>th</sup> July 1964, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-san> (last viewed 2nd April 2020); ‘Republican Party Platform of 1964’, 13<sup>th</sup> July 1964, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1964> (last viewed 2nd April 2020).

<sup>87</sup> Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> The ‘Eisenhower fudge’ reflected the complex, incoherent, and largely indecisive civil rights policies of the administration. Historian Timothy Thurber concluded that the president ‘rarely acted’ on civil rights matters because of congressional pressure. While ‘Eisenhower took several important steps, most notably at Little Rock, that advanced racial justice’, Thurber explained that ‘the more important story of the 1950s was the chasm between the president and African Americans.’ For further reading, see Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, chapter three, particularly pages 94-95.

<sup>89</sup> For details of march, see *ibid.*

Throughout the presidential campaign Goldwater rallied against federal government activism, which was politically catastrophic for minority relations. As historian Leah Wright Rigueur outlined, ‘Goldwater’s notion of individualism worked so long as citizens had the benefit of equal treatment under the law.’ The problem however, was ‘as second-class citizens’ explicitly but not exclusively in the South, ‘blacks were systematically denied equal rights and thus could not accept – or even consider – the senator’s principles.’<sup>90</sup> The Arizona Senator’s public reasoning for his opposition to the Civil Rights Act never fully engaged with such arguments or concerns. By the time of the election, Goldwater could not shake the impression that his position was akin to southern defence of Jim Crow. A *New York Times* editorial reinforced this sentiment, noting, despite his ‘early fervor for extending civil rights’, Goldwater ‘has tended by implication to equate civil rights with civil violence, to the unconcealed delight of those who seek to slow the Negro’s progress’.<sup>91</sup> The paper’s claim was somewhat unfair, given that as recently as 1962, Kennedy had presented Civil Rights protests purely in law and order terms, as had Eisenhower at Little Rock. Goldwater’s position was subject to circumstance insofar as since the Birmingham crisis in 1963, such a position was untenable, and liberals had started to present Civil Rights in avowedly moral terms.<sup>92</sup>

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1964, Goldwater went down in a landslide defeat. He claimed just six states, five of which were in the Deep South – Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina – and his native Arizona. The senator lost the popular vote by over fifteen million, the

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<sup>90</sup> Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton, 2015), p. 45.

<sup>91</sup> Editorial, ‘The Issue: Civil Rights’, *NYT*, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1964, p. 42.

<sup>92</sup> As Martha Derthick outlined in ‘Crossing Thresholds’, these incidents constituted a ‘synergy of national actions in support of social reconstitution’ in which ‘Federalism as a constitutional principle was sharply devalued’. ‘Long-established understandings of what was proper and permissible’, Derthick continued, ‘were cast aside.’ In essence, when these numerous crises hit the United States, it became hard to think of a trade-off between civil rights and states’ rights: moral claims were non-negotiable. For further reading, see Derthick, ‘Crossing Thresholds: Federalism in the 1960s’, *Journal of Policy History*, 8:1 (1996), pp. 64-80. Author quoted in ‘Crossing Thresholds’, p. 73.

largest margin in history, and won only six percent of the African American vote – another historic low.<sup>93</sup> Despite putting on a brave face in his press conference, telling his party to stick by his conservative philosophy, the size of his defeat could be read no other way than a national rejection of conservatism.<sup>94</sup> As Tom Wicker reported on the front page of the *New York Times* the following morning, ‘Mr. Johnson’s triumph [gave] him the “loud and clear” national mandate he had said he wanted’.<sup>95</sup>

The one bright spark for conservatives in an otherwise dim couple of months, was the breakthrough performance of Ronald Reagan. On 27<sup>th</sup> October, the Gipper gave an address on behalf of Goldwater, which was popularly known as ‘A Time for Choosing’. The speech was the culmination of years of practice at GE, refining his themes, and honing his remarks. To those who knew Reagan, the central theme of the dual threat of encroaching government and communism was an enduring feature of the actor’s remarks. Captivating the audience with optimism in the face of despair like one of Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats’, the Gipper argued, ‘there is only an up or down – up to a man's age-old dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order – or down to the ant heap [of] totalitarianism’.<sup>96</sup>

Unlike the sweeping and occasionally dour rhetoric of Goldwater’s acceptance address, Reagan’s talk was laden with statistics that favoured his argument. Take for example the way

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<sup>93</sup> Goldwater’s defeat by 15,951,287 votes has only subsequently been surpassed by Richard Nixon’s victory in 1972 and Ronald Reagan’s win in 1984; for reading on Republican presidential candidates and the black vote, see Michael Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote* (London, 2007), pp. 39-60. Note – Thurber estimates the GOP share of the African American vote as 38% in 1956, 32% in 1960, 6% in 1964, and 12% in 1968. For further details, see Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, pp. 76, 130, 202, and 280.

<sup>94</sup> Goldwater thanked ‘the more than 25 million people... who not necessarily voted for me but they voted for a philosophy that I represent, a Republican philosophy that I believe the Republican Party must cling to and strengthen in the years ahead.’ For further reading, see ‘Transcript of Goldwater’s Concession and News Conference in Phoenix, Ariz.’, *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1964, p. 20.

<sup>95</sup> Tom Wicker, ‘Johnson Swamps Goldwater and Kennedy Beats Keating’, *NYT*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1964, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Reagan, ‘Address on Behalf of Senator Barry Goldwater: “A Time for Choosing”’, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1964, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-behalf-senator-barry-goldwater-time-for-choosing> (last viewed 2nd April 2020).

in which both men excoriated the growth of federal government and its relationship to the economy; Goldwater spoke of ‘We Republicans seek a government that attends to its inherent responsibilities of maintaining a stable monetary and fiscal climate, encouraging a free and a competitive economy’. By contrast, Reagan employed clear, sharp, statistics to support his case; ‘today, 37 cents of every dollar earned in this country is the tax collector’s share, and yet our government continues to spend \$17 million a day more than the government takes in.’<sup>97</sup> Goldwater did not use statistical evidence once in his acceptance address, and only made a singular reference to someone other than himself – a passing mention of Abraham Lincoln. In comparison, Reagan employed supporting figures on over fifty occasions and referenced numerous individuals from Fidel Castro to Senator William Fulbright, Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Stalin. The difference not only gave the sense that Reagan’s argument was based in analysis – however much his statistics were tailored to his argument – but that he was more outward looking; it was not about him, but his way of viewing the world that mattered. The overarching message was the same. However, Reagan’s blend of smooth anecdotes about his Democratic Party supporting past, his Republican present, and the nation’s future, weaved with carefully chosen evidence, was a more effective way of communicating their message.

‘The dramatic success of Ronald Reagan’s broadcast’, founding editor of *National Review* Frank Meyer wrote, ‘is both evidence that it is possible to make conservative principle understandable and an example of a way of doing it.’<sup>98</sup> The journal was popular with those on the right and central to the mainstreaming of conservatism alongside another right-wing periodical, *Human Events*. So impressed were *Human Events* editors, they published Reagan’s speech in full, citing it as ‘one of the highlights of the past campaign’, noting it was ‘a brilliantly

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<sup>97</sup> Goldwater, ‘Address Accepting the Republican Nomination’; Reagan, ‘A Time for Choosing’.

<sup>98</sup> Frank Meyer, ‘Principle and Heresies’, *National Review*, vol. 16:52 (29<sup>th</sup> December 1964), p. 1145.

persuasive statement of conservative views’, that should ‘provide inspiration and instruction for conservatives for years to come.’ Reagan had captured the right-wing imagination, showing conservatives their potential and perhaps their future.<sup>99</sup>

While his appearance electrified the base, his speech did little to shift the national picture. Analysis of ‘A Time for Choosing’ was omitted from both the *New York Times* and journalist Theodore White’s *The Making of the President 1964*. While political adviser Stephen Hess and journalist David Broder famously described the address as ‘the most successful national political debut since William Jennings Bryan’ – a quote that has infused the subsequent literature, giving the sense of an immediate impression – this conclusion was made retrospectively after Reagan’s gubernatorial victory, appearing in a publication of 1967.<sup>100</sup> Contrary, therefore, to the belief that Reagan instantaneously captivated the nation after the November election, there was little to suggest that the national picture was a bright one for conservatives as 1965 and Johnson’s second term came into view, except in Reagan’s native California, and even then finding hope required some digging.

### ***California’s November Paradox***

On the same day that California overwhelmingly elected Lyndon Johnson as president by a margin of 4.2 to 2.9 million votes, it *passed* Proposition 14 by an even larger margin of 4.5 to 2.4 million votes.<sup>101</sup> It was a Civil Rights paradox; supporting a liberal Civil Rights president and opposing a state housing bill in near-equal measure. California polling data showed that

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<sup>99</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘A Time for Choosing’, *Human Events*, vol. 24:48 (28<sup>th</sup> November 1964), p. 8.

<sup>100</sup> For the original quote, see Stephen Hess and David S. Broder, *The Republican Establishment: The Present and Future of the G.O.P.* (New York, 1967), p. 253; for examples of its infusion into the literature, see Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan’s First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, 2004), p. 68; Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York, 2000), p. 59; and J. David Woodward, *Ronald Reagan: A Biography* (Santa Barbara, 2012), p. 55.

<sup>101</sup> Richard Bergholz, ‘Johnson Elected by Landslide Vote’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1964, p. 1.

just three percent of voters thought Johnson was pushing ‘too hard’ on Civil Rights and only two percent thought Goldwater would handle race issues ‘well’.<sup>102</sup> The key was that Proposition 14 addressed *de facto* segregation, while thus far Johnson had only proposed to address *de jure* segregation. Californians, therefore, supported Civil Rights in 1964 because – for the most part – the issue did not seem to directly affect their everyday lives. The Rumford Act represented the first presentiment that it *might* affect them in the future, and the reaction against that prospect was swift.

African Americans were victims of a strange dichotomy in which Californians – broadly Democratic and tremendously supportive of Johnson’s Civil Rights platform – opposed the Rumford Act. Proposition 14 was clear evidence of Nicolaides’ ‘national becoming local’ thesis, yet McGirr’s rationale that the repeal was evidence of ‘the strong potential of the “white backlash”’ is not wholly accurate.<sup>103</sup> The vast majority of Californians, many of whom were far more liberal than Proposition 14’s leaders, including Reagan, publicly argued that this was not a question of race, but one of positive rights of property and admonishing the growth of the state. In the age of Bull Connor – the Alabama politician synonymous with racist police brutality – Californians employed abstract notions of the state and white property rights, to avoid the appearance of racism. As one resident wrote to Brown, ‘your rights end where my property begins’.<sup>104</sup>

At the broadest possible level, the power of ‘property rights’ as a rhetorical tool for mobilising white voters was extremely potent. In one of, if not *the* most liberal state in the nation, voters

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<sup>102</sup> For further reading, see questions 9 and 12, ‘California Poll 64-05’, conducted in August 1964, *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6405> (last viewed 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>103</sup> Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, p. 326; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 133.

<sup>104</sup> Daniel HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley, 2010), p. 54.

were galvanised in huge numbers to reject – whatever the reasons may have been – the breaking down of the colour line. Proposition 14's passage was a powerful and symbolic rebuke of Civil Rights advancement. Historians must, however, treat Proposition 14 with care by ensuring that it is not merely treated as an indicator of racial tolerance, but viewed as a complex tale of political identification.

After the result Brown was furious, he scolded his voters boldly declaring, 'a majority of whites in the state don't want Negroes living in the same neighborhood with them.' He could not see beyond the 'hateful bigots of the Munich beer hall', and his continued support of Rumford was a moral decision that later cost him dearly. After leaving office he reconsidered and concluded, 'I don't think Proposition 14 was essentially an anti-black vote. It was essentially the freedom to use your own property.' The actual source of the defeat, he suggested was 'anti-government telling you what you had to do with your property... It was part of the revolt against too many government controls.'<sup>105</sup>

For the governor, defeat on Proposition 14 was severely damaging and potentially career threatening. As the national battle for Civil Rights and housing rights continued, Proposition 14 was challenged in the courts and remain lurking in the background of his second term. A major takeaway from the early Proposition 14 debate and 1964 decision was the fluid and balanced-on-a-knife-edge nature of politics in California. Contrary to its reputation, politics in the state was highly unpredictable.

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<sup>105</sup> Brown's initial quote in Brilliant, *The Colour of America Has Changed*, p. 204; Brown's later views in Edmund G. Brown Sr., *Years of Growth, 1939-1966: Law Enforcement, Politics, and the Governor's Office* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 526

Unbeknown to Brown at the time, the growing cracks of the liberal coalition had been papered over by Johnson's landslide victory. As historian Matthew Dallek observed, 'fair housing was a turning point that liberals failed to notice.'<sup>106</sup> The governor, along with other liberals in the state, felt that individuals like Reagan were anti-communist zealots who would be overcome in time, just as Goldwater had been defeated. This was a mistake; 'anti-Prop 14 leaders failed to detect a distinction between these two types of Prop 14 supporters – the one unabashedly racist, the other doggedly principled.'<sup>107</sup> The missed turning point around Civil Rights was not exclusively a Californian problem, but took place at the national level too. The growth of federal government engineered by the White House after 1964, with Johnson transiting from a colour-blind Civil Rights Act to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, reinforced conservatives' arguments that government was growing beyond its traditional bounds.

### ***'Freedom Itself is Not Enough'***

If the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had forced conservatives to choose between racial justice and constitutional principles, the following year's Voting Rights Act sharpened their dilemma. Whereas the Civil Rights Act already presented too sharp a challenge to limited government principles for the most rock-ribbed conservatives, the Voting Rights Act went still further. Requiring federal registrars to register black votes in districts with suspiciously low rates of black enrolment, the Voting Rights Act was a massive challenge to traditional federalism, far exceeding the bounds of the Civil Rights Act; as Hugh Davis Graham wrote, the 1965 act was 'both radical in design and extraordinarily effective'.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Dallek, *The Right Moment*, p. 61.

<sup>107</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of American Has Changed*, p. 205.

<sup>108</sup> Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 171.

The White House had been preparing a new Civil Rights bill since its romping victory in November 1964, but events in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965 hastened the Voting Rights Act's arrival.<sup>109</sup> A mere week after the Pettus Bridge attack in which Alabama state troopers ferociously attacked peaceful Civil Rights protestors, President Johnson addressed a special joint session of Congress and delivered one of his most memorable speeches entitled 'The American Promise', which was made famous for his declaration, 'We Shall Overcome'. Steeping the Civil Rights protests in the long American tradition of 'Lexington and Concord', Selma was, in the president's words, an occasion where 'history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom.' Proving to be a combination of idealism and traditionalism, Johnson's voting rights address also marked a significant challenge to long-standing federalism by announcing provisions to the new bill that would 'provide for citizens to be registered by officials of the United States Government if the State officials refuse to register them.'<sup>110</sup> While enjoying a new liberal domination of Congress for the first time in a generation, conservative opponents remained steadfastly cautious of Washington action which might impinge upon traditional federalism – a notion given some credence by the consideration that unlike the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the voting rights bill was driven by the president, not Congress.<sup>111</sup>

Given the outrageous behaviour of the Alabama authorities, conservatives' concern about expansive federal government were almost irrelevant compared to those visuals. It was very difficult – near impossible – to oppose a muscular, but tightly focussed, piece of legislation

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<sup>109</sup> Shortly after his victory, Johnson wrote to Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, 'to begin the complicated task of drafting the next civil rights bill' that would 'secure, once and for all, equal voting rights.' For further reading, see Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-69* (New York, 1971), pp. 160-61.

<sup>110</sup> Lyndon Johnson, 'Special Message to the Congress on Voting Rights', 15<sup>th</sup> March 1965, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-the-american-promise> (last viewed 13th July 2020).

<sup>111</sup> Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, pp. 169-173.

akin to the Civil Rights Act of 1957 which Goldwater had supported. The formidable Arizonan was no longer in Congress (he would return in 1969), and on 25<sup>th</sup> May, a ‘desultory southern filibuster’ was broken, paving way for the passage of Voting Rights Act the following day by a margin of 77-19.<sup>112</sup> Unlike the Civil Rights Act which had witnessed a smattering of conservative Republican resistance, the single vote against the new act in the Senate from outside the Deep South was Senator John Tower of Texas. The other three conservative Republican senators still in Congress who had opposed the 1964 Act – Cotton (NH), Hickenlooper (IA), and Simpson (WY) – all voted for the 1965 bill. Campaigning in California, Reagan opposed both the 1964 and 1965 Acts because he felt they contained ‘legislative flaws and faults’, which he felt made them ‘unconstitutional’.<sup>113</sup> On the one hand, this showed how the strength and mainstream nature of liberal impulse in the first half of 1965; President Johnson enjoyed a seventy percent approval rating and the bill had seventy-six percent favourability.<sup>114</sup> But it also reflected the marginality and disarray of the conservative movement in Washington in the wake of Goldwater’s presidential defeat.

Within two months, however, the Johnson White House had revoked thirty years of liberal adherence to colour-blind orthodoxy and promulgated a profound shift in public policy toward notions of compensatory justice that would infuriate and empower conservatives for a generation. On 6<sup>th</sup> August, Johnson made a special trip to the Capitol Rotunda, where he declared ‘today is a triumph for freedom’ and signed the Voting Rights Act. For the president, however, ‘it [was] not enough just to give me rights’, the act was merely the first step in achieving more. As ‘the last of the legal barriers tumbl[ed]’, Johnson urged ‘the struggle for

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p. 171.

<sup>113</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Reagan Challenge to the President’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1966, p. 18.

<sup>114</sup> Johnson had a 70% approval rating, with 18% disapproving in May 1965. For further information, see question 2, ‘Gallup Poll: 1965-0711’, conducted May 1965, *Gallup Organization*; the Voting Rights bill had 76% favourability and 16% unfavorability. For further reading, see question 6, ‘Gallup Poll: 1965-0708’, conducted March 1965, *Gallup Organization*.

equality must now move toward a different battlefield.’ That struggle, he believed, would be fought ‘through expanding programs already devised and through new ones to search out and forever end’ racial inequality.<sup>115</sup> In those short sentences, the president presaged a hugely controversial federal upheaval in social policy that departed from consensus political tradition in prescribing further federal solutions to social problems *and* promoting compensatory justice as a remedy for racial inequality. It implied a radical departure from the reassurances his now-Vice President had given about compensatory justice in discussions over the Civil Rights Act a year earlier.

A few weeks earlier, President Johnson had travelled to Howard University, a historically black college, where he delivered the commencement address and envisaged further civil rights advances. Carefully crafted by Labor assistant secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan – recent author of the highly controversial Moynihan Report on black poverty – and White House aide Richard Goodwin, Johnson’s address symbolised that more was to come from his administration, and quoted former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, ‘it is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.’<sup>116</sup> At a time when Civil Rights activist Whitney Young was calling for a ‘black Marshall Plan’, Johnson was resistant to quotas, telling an audience in November 1963, ‘we are not going to solve this problem by promoting minorities’.<sup>117</sup> However, a combination of social unrest, a focus on black poverty, and the influence of aides such as Moynihan and Goodwin, left the president with little doubt that some form of change *was* needed.

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<sup>115</sup> Johnson, ‘Remarks in the Capitol Rotunda at the Signing of the Voting Rights Act’, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1965, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-capitol-rotunda-the-signing-the-voting-rights-act> (last viewed 3rd April 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Johnson, ‘Commencement Address at Howard University: “To Fulfill These Rights”’, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1965, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-howard-university-fulfill-these-rights> (last viewed 6th April 2020).

<sup>117</sup> Johnson quoted in Bill Becker, ‘Minority in West Seeks Job Gains’, *NYT*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1963, p. 22.

Johnson's vision for affirmative action, as he told the graduates at Howard University was profound. 'It is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity', the president warned, 'all our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.' While Johnson did not outline any specific programme, at the same time, his commitment that 'we seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result', was daring in principle.<sup>118</sup> It was a stark philosophical departure, which alongside Executive Order 11246 – requiring non-discrimination on the grounds of 'race, creed, color, or national origin' in federal government employment, federal government contractors and sub-contractors, and in federally-assisted construction contracts – bolstered affirmative action practices.<sup>119</sup> Signed in September 1965, the Executive Order represented a crossing of the Rubicon for the White House. Together, Johnson's Howard address and Executive Order vaulted 'radical implications for group entitlement and societal obligations' to the forefront of policymaking, which threw down the gauntlet to those ardent conservatives who had fiercely fought for their limited vision of government amid the overwhelming climate of change.<sup>120</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, given the hostility compensatory justice would later amass from white constituencies, immediate conservative reaction to Johnson's Howard University address was conspicuously absent. There was no coverage of the president's address in either *Human Events* or *National Review* throughout 1965. Johnson's use of federal government to push for black voting rights was not dissimilar to the GI bill and New Deal programmes which had pursued a form of affirmative action for white, male, heterosexuals between 1933-1965, the difference

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<sup>118</sup> Johnson, 'Commencement Address at Howard University'.

<sup>119</sup> Lyndon Johnson, 'Executive Order 11246 – Equal Employment Opportunity', 24<sup>th</sup> September 1965, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-11246-equal-employment-opportunity> (last viewed 14th July 2020).

<sup>120</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 71.

here was the explicit nature of the White House's encouragement.<sup>121</sup> That being said, there was a wealth of critical coverage on the Voting Rights Act, with the editors staking a position akin to Reagan.<sup>122</sup> Characteristic of the dilemma facing conservatives ahead of the 1964 Civil Rights Act vote, the debate over Voting Rights reified the dilemma. Effusively capturing such sentiment, one *National Review* article concluded 'in this Voting Rights Bill, however desirable the ends pursued by most of its supporters, we have chosen tyrannical means that will remain to plague us long after the last illiterate is enrolled.'<sup>123</sup> Given Reagan had written articles for the publication at this time, we can reasonably infer he would have been consuming this material and absorbing much of its contents to reinforce his own worldview, which was already crystallised around the limited role of government.<sup>124</sup>

The Howard University address was a significant first step on the road away from colour-blindness that characterised and undermined Johnson's second term. Signalling a sharp departure from the historical orthodoxy, the president challenged 'the cherished values of individualism', which instigated 'powerful countercurrents [sic.]' that had endured for so long.<sup>125</sup> Before 1965, equalising opportunity had been viewed almost wholly in terms of removing formal obstacles to political participation, hence the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Even the most liberal supporters of the Civil Rights Act and the subsequent Voting Rights Act, such

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<sup>121</sup> For reading on use of federal government to benefit white, heterosexual, males, see Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2005); or Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2009).

<sup>122</sup> Essays in *National Review* for example, included 'Amendment by Civil Disobedience', *National Review*, 17:14 (1965), pp. 268-69; 'Is There a Constitution?', *National Review*, 17:16 (1965), pp. 312-13; 'Must We Repeal the Constitution to Give the Negro the Vote?', *National Review*, 17:16 (1965), pp. 319-22; and 'Government Unlimited', *National Review*, 17:34 (1965), pp. 712-13.

<sup>123</sup> 'Government Unlimited', p. 713.

<sup>124</sup> Reagan's first publication in *National Review* was a letter to the editor in 1962 concerning repudiation of Robert Welch. In 1964, he was a contributor on a key roundtable examining the direction of conservatism in the wake Goldwater's heavy defeat. For further reading, see 'To the Editor', *National Review*, 12:10 (1962), p. 177; and 'The Republican Party and the Conservative Movement', *National Review*, 16:48 (1964), pp. 1053-78.

<sup>125</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 71; Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 174.

as Hubert Humphrey, actively reassured conservative colleagues that compensatory justice was not a consideration or at stake with these bills. Yet starting at Howard University, the White House engineered a significant swing in policymaking contrary to the American individualist tradition, that proved ‘a rare event in America: a radical shift in national social policy.’<sup>126</sup>

This change had profound implications for both the liberal coalition and the direction of the country, beginning in perhaps the most unlikely of places – California. Since the late 1950s, the Golden State was along with New York the epicentre of liberal America, providing the ‘blueprint’ for ‘great impulses of the day’. Mapping national Civil Rights developments onto the rapidly changing world of Californian politics, we rigorously uncover how ‘the Golden State emerged as a civil rights vanguard for the nation’ *and* became central to the right’s transition from ‘far outside the boundaries of respectable politics’ in the early 1960s to influence the ‘national scene’ by the end of the decade.<sup>127</sup>

### ***Race and the 1966 Gubernatorial Campaign***

On 11<sup>th</sup> August 1965, a mere five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, a series of events began that, according to one historian, ‘shook the Republic to its foundations.’<sup>128</sup> Marquette Frye and his brother, young African Americans, were stopped by a white police officer under suspicion of driving under the influence of alcohol and resisted arrest. Almost fatefully, Frye’s mother witnessed the event from her apartment, rushed to the scene, and tried to intervene. An unexpected scuffle broke out and the arresting officers radioed for assistance. By the time assisting officers arrived, over two hundred predominately African

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<sup>126</sup> Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, p. 3.

<sup>127</sup> Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 2; Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 5; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Randall Woods, *Prisoners of Hope: Lyndon B. Johnson, the Great Society, and the Limits of Liberalism* (New York, 2016), p. 11.

American residents were on the streets witnessing the struggle. As all three Fryes were arrested, the disturbance took on a life of its own and the police were forced to retreat. The event escalated rapidly as people rioted, looted, and attacked law enforcement across the Watts area of Los Angeles in the city's largest urban disturbance until the 1992 Rodney King riots.<sup>129</sup> In the words of James T. Patterson, it was the beginning of 'a turning point in a year of turning points.'<sup>130</sup>

A huge mobilisation of law enforcement saw more than sixteen thousand national guardsmen dispatched to the ten-block area. After five days, thirty-four deaths, and thousands of arrests, the rioting subsided.<sup>131</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* described a 'holocaust of rubble and ruins not unlike the aftermath in London when the Nazis struck'. Perhaps, the most telling aspect of the damning editorial for liberals was its title, 'Brown, Who Tried to Help Negro, One of the Worst Hurt by Riots'.<sup>132</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the riots, many Californians blamed Governor Brown, a criticism compounded by the fact that he was in Greece at the time of the crisis.<sup>133</sup> As one disgruntled 'former Democrat and a new Republican' wrote to Brown, 'this trouble stems from your administration'; for the incident at Watts, damaging as it was, was simply the final straw in a growing litany of civil unrests in California – the good times of 1963 were gone.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Incident initially described in '1,000 Riots in L.A.', *Los Angeles Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1965 (late edition), p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> James Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America* (New York, 2014), p. 190; for further reading on Watts, see Rarick, *California Rising*, pp. 314-340; and Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Johnson, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Laws that Changed America* (Boston MA., 2005), pp. 338-341.

<sup>131</sup> Statistics taken from Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 226.

<sup>132</sup> Drew Pearson, Editorial: 'Brown, Who Tried to Help Negro, One of Worst Hurt by the Riots', *Los Angeles Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1965, p. 32.

<sup>133</sup> General sentiment was typified by one letter the governor received which unequivocated, 'You are to blame! What the hell were you doing in Greece?' For further reading, see 'Letter to Governor Brown', author unknown, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1965, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 501, Folder '2: Watts Riots'.

<sup>134</sup> 'Letter to Governor Brown', author unknown, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1965, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 501, Folder '2: Watts Riots'.

In the years from 1964 to the gubernatorial election of 1966, California was beset by social unrest, for Watts was only one of two acutely disruptive issues, with the second centring on student protest in Berkeley. Matthew Dallek and Lisa McGirr contend that Reagan capitalised on racial unrest as a primary method to win the California governorship.<sup>135</sup> Conversely, this section stresses that it was the overwhelmingly white Free Speech Movement at Berkeley which put the failures of Brown's liberal agenda into especially sharp relief. Reagan's most vociferous and successful rhetorical attacks were aimed at the white middle-class Berkeley students, not the working-class African American residents of Watts. Further, I will show that it made little sense for Reagan to race-bait, for that constituency was safe, whereas he needed a broad coalition to win the governorship. The softening of racial hostilities was one effort in a broader, managed, transition of 'tempering his political dogma in an effort to attract followers of all ideological leanings.'<sup>136</sup> In a California context, this meant reaching out to moderates more than anything else. Consequently, it is easy to exaggerate the centrality of Watts to Reagan's victory. Most likely, student protest at Berkeley did at least as much to undermine the liberal coalition and carry Reagan to power.

### *Social Unrest*

Across the United States the rise of the New Left – a coalition of free speech activists, anti-Vietnam war protests, sexual liberation, and fragments of the Civil Rights movement – was starting to transform the political landscape.<sup>137</sup> The issue of protests was particularly acute in

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<sup>135</sup> Dallek stated, 'Reagan saw the explosion [Watts riots] there as a way to blame Brown for the breakdown of order in the cities.' For further reading, see Dallek, *The Right Moment*, p. 187; while McGirr's accepts 'Campus upheaval and the rise of the New Left' were important issues in Reagan's ascent, the professor emphasised the primacy of 'Rising African-American militancy led to a growing white backlash, from which Reagan profited by playing to white racism.' As we shall see, Reagan's response was more nuanced than this, and racial upheaval was not the primary concern of Californian voters. For further reading, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp. 203-204.

<sup>136</sup> Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>137</sup> For reading on the New Left, see Rebecca Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley, 1999); Simon Hall, *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements of the*

the Golden State, where liberals in the mould of Governor Brown were attacked from the left and the right for simultaneously doing too much and too little with regard to many issues. In the same vein as Watts, Brown was framed as a political leader who was failing to quell radicalism, and as he admitted in November 1965, ‘Nowhere have the protests been more evident than here in California.’<sup>138</sup> As the battle for the governorship developed, student protest became a more prominent campaign theme than Watts, but the origins of this unrest antedate both Watts and even the vote on Proposition 14.

The heart of the state’s problem was student activism at the Berkeley campus of the University of California; a problem that grew so large, it was the centrepiece of the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest report of July 1970. The report traced all significant student protest dating back to President Kennedy’s March 1962 address at Memorial Stadium and concluded Berkeley was ‘the scene of a series of civil disorders that have transformed the life of the city and the University.’<sup>139</sup> In reality, Berkeley’s impact was much more profound.

In the Fall semester of 1964, student activism at Berkeley sprang into life. Fresh from the ‘Freedom Summer’ when significant numbers of Berkeley students had travelled to the Deep South to work as part of the Civil Rights movement, they looked to continue their protests on campus, only to find the university administration shutting them down. Over the course of the fall semester the situation escalated as students called for greater liberalisation of rules on campus political activity, until by early December, a fully-fledged ‘Free Speech Movement’ (FSM) was born. Led by ‘angry and articulate philosophy major’, Mario Savio, major rallies

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1960s (Philadelphia, 2005); and Kenneth J. Heinemann, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement at American Universities in the Vietnam Era* (New York, 1993).

<sup>138</sup> Brown, ‘Remarks by the Governor on Visit to U.S. Marine Recruiting Depot’, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1965, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder ‘Ed: Campus Unrest’.

<sup>139</sup> ‘Statement: President’s Commission on Campus Unrest’, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO157, Folder ‘Education – Campus Unrest – President’s Commission on (1/3)’, p. 1.

gathered over five thousand students and made the front-page of major newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>140</sup> Over the course of twelve hours, students blocked classrooms, lecture halls, and effectively shut down the university, forcing over three hundred campus police to intervene. As staff were told to go home by university leadership, almost one thousand students were dragged away from the protest and arrested. The *San Francisco Chronicle* described the ‘seizure of Sproul Hall’ – the major administrative headquarters of the university – as ‘the most dramatic act of the campus Free Speech Movement’.<sup>141</sup> As Rarick suggested, ‘for a world that had yet to experience the turbulent decade that was to come, it was a shocking scene’, not just for the existence of the protest, but more importantly where they were taking place, at ‘one of America’s most prestigious universities’, funded by the California taxpayer.<sup>142</sup>

Initially, Governor Brown seemed unconcerned by the student protests. In fact, when challenged over an earlier Free Speech protest in 1961, he had welcomed them, telling an audience, ‘I say thank God for the spectacle of students picketing... The colleges have become bootcamps for citizenship – and citizen leaders are marching out of them.’ Even as protests gathered and continued throughout 1965, the governor maintained his principled position, writing to a concerned resident, ‘Let us be proud that here in America we can tolerate this small but very vocal minority.’<sup>143</sup> Brown again underestimated his opponents, as he had done with Proposition 14, and failed to realise how the unrelenting nature of student activism was eroding his support among the general public. He appeared out of control, reflected by a January 1965 poll, which showed ninety percent of voters had heard of the FSM protest, of which three-

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<sup>140</sup> Description of Savio in Dallek, *The Right Moment*, p. 85; for front page coverage, see Daryl Lembke, ‘UC Student Rebels Open New Sit-in’, *Los Angeles Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1964, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> For further reading of the major protest, see Daryl Lembke, ‘UC Student Rebels Open New Sit-in’; Ron Fimrite and Don Wegars, ‘Strong’s Ultimatum: Police Wade into Massed Students’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1964, p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> Rarick, *California Rising*, p. 293.

<sup>143</sup> Brown, ‘Clipping of Speech on Education’, June 1961, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder ‘Ed: Campus Unrest’; Brown, ‘Letter to Mrs Cook’, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1965, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder ‘Ed: Campus Unrest’.

quarters of voters disapproved.<sup>144</sup> Brown was perceived at least in part as the man responsible for it all.

As events escalated at Berkeley across the winter of 1964 into 1965, Reagan was approached by conservative Californians urging him to run for the governorship in 1966. The mid-sixties California Republican Party was a dearth of talent against liberal leviathan Brown, with a process of ‘self-consuming fratricide’ leaving the party bitterly divided between conservatives and moderates.<sup>145</sup> Potential candidates – William Knowland, Goodwin Knight, and Richard Nixon – were all tarnished by infighting, and liberal Republican Senator Thomas Kuchel had little interest in leaving Washington. If the party wanted success, it needed a new face – evidenced by the victory of freshman Senator, and Reagan’s friend from their acting days, George Murphy.

On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1964, Reagan contributed alongside George H.W. Bush, John Davis Lodge, Russell Kirk, and Gerhart Niemeyer, to a *National Review* election post-mortem entitled, ‘The Republican Party and the Conservative Movement’. Unlike the other contributors, Reagan ever the optimist, reflected, ‘we lost a battle in the continuing war for freedom, but our position is not untenable.’ The Gipper praised the winning of twenty-six million votes, not the forty-three million losses. For him, ‘Our job beginning now is not so much to sell conservatism’, for he believed it a viable alternative philosophy of government, but to represent and articulate the views of ‘forgotten America – that simple soul who goes to work, bucks for a raise, takes out insurance, pays his kids’ schooling... and knows there just “ain’t no such thing as a free

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<sup>144</sup> For further reading, see questions 19 and SQ3Q19, ‘California Poll 65-01’, conducted in January 1965, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6501> (last viewed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>145</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 131.

lunch.”<sup>146</sup> In this context, events at Berkeley played as a perfect issue for Reagan, much more so than Watts. For the contender believed in the conservative cause and thought that millions more Americans were willing to join if they could be persuaded, not through scare tactics, but with a positive affirmation of what America was, and what it could be.<sup>147</sup> It was an opportunity, like McCarthyism, to present liberalism as elitist, and conservatism as a movement for the blue collar worker.

Reagan was approached by a powerful cadre of conservative businessmen led by Holmes Tuttle. A ‘soft-spoken entrepreneur’, Tuttle had made his money backing Ford Motor Company, and was, in Lou Cannon’s estimation, ‘Reagan’s shrewdest and most influential contributor.’ Tuttle gathered Henry Salvatori (founder of Western Geophysical Company, an oil firm), Leonard Firestone (tyre manufacturer), and Leland Kaiser (a retired investment banker) together to form ‘Friends of Ronald Reagan’ – the foundational stone of the Reagan campaign. United, they shared ‘a fervent belief in the efficacy of the marketplace’ and the ‘conviction that Reagan was uniquely inspirational.’<sup>148</sup> The major act of Friends of Ronald Reagan, aside from providing the seed money, was hiring political public relations firm Spencer-Roberts to run the Reagan campaign; they hired the researchers, ran the day-to-day organising, selected the county chairmen, and organised the Gipper’s schedule.<sup>149</sup> By June 1965, Friends of Ronald Reagan had gathered forty-two prominent supporters many of whom

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<sup>146</sup> Reagan, ‘The Republican Party and the Conservative Movement’, *National Review*, vol. 16:48 (1<sup>st</sup> December 1964), p. 1055.

<sup>147</sup> In the same article, Reagan wrote, ‘Our job beginning now is not so much to sell conservatism as to prove that our conservatism is in truth what a lot of people thought they were voting for when they fell for the cornpone come-on.’ See, *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 132-134.

<sup>149</sup> Role of Spencer-Roberts provided by Lyn Nofziger in Bancroft Library, *Issues and Innovations in the 1966 Republican Gubernatorial Campaign* (Berkeley, 1980) pp. 15-20

dated back to Reagan's acting days, and formed an exploratory campaign based on the singular notion, 'Will the people control the government or will the government control the people?'<sup>150</sup>

Yet outside of conservative circles, and perhaps even for some conservatives, Reagan was a bizarre, even comical choice for governor. As time passed and the campaign developed, the Gipper was inundated with political barbs ranging from being a know-nothing actor to a right-wing extremist. Mocked by the establishment, an editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* quipped, 'let us agree that if Mr. Reagan's gallant performance as an amateur politician who decides to run for Governor remained unconvincing, it was, in the final analysis, not his fault. It was simply a fragrant example of mis-casting.'<sup>151</sup> The governor's opinion of Reagan ranged from writing to one constituent that he was a failed actor who 'doesn't worry me', to calling him an 'ultra-extremist'.<sup>152</sup> For Brown's campaign team, the real Republican threat lay not in Reagan, but former San Francisco Mayor and liberal Republican George Christopher. The mayor had a solid record and his mainstream politics was more in tune with the state's diverse ideological population. Survey data from March 1966 showed that Christopher appeared a much tougher battle for Brown, leading in a head-to-head poll 52-37, while the same poll showed a Reagan-Brown battle tied at 44-44.<sup>153</sup> Consequently, believing Reagan to be a political lightweight, a Brown politico told the same paper a couple of days later, 'Christopher is tough... It would be easier to polish off Reagan in November.'<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> A.C. Rubel, 'Letter from Friends of Ronald Reagan', date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder 'RR: Friends of (1/2)'.

<sup>151</sup> Arthur Hoppe, 'Ronald Reagan for Prince of Denmark', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1966, p. 45.

<sup>152</sup> Pat Brown, 'Letter to Lewis Miller', 10<sup>th</sup> December 1965, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 743, Folder '743-9 Correspondence Re: Reagan'; description of Reagan as 'ultra-extremist' in 'Reagan Challenge to the President'.

<sup>153</sup> For survey data, see questions AQ9 and DQ9, 'Cal Poll: 6602', conducted March 1966, *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6602> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020).

<sup>154</sup> Brown aide quoted in Sydney Kossen, 'Pat Likes Reagan', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1966, p. 34.

As the Berkeley campus protests morphed through 1965 from Civil Rights protests to anti-Vietnam concerns, Reagan homed in on the students to make ‘the mess at Berkeley’ a core concern of his early campaign.<sup>155</sup> On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1965, Reagan attacked the university students before a speech of the United Republicans of California convention, and continued the attacks through the campaign, lamenting ‘When some Americans are being killed, free speech has to stop short of lending aid and comfort to the enemy.’<sup>156</sup> The Gipper identified Berkeley as home to ‘a minority of malcontents, beatniks, and filthy-speech advocates’ who enjoyed drug-fuelled orgies ‘so vile that I cannot describe them to you.’<sup>157</sup> As late as June 1966, well over a year after his attacks on Berkeley began, the candidate lambasted the ‘shameful things that have been going on at the University of California’.<sup>158</sup> Reagan’s sustained attack on the Berkeley students was evidence, that political capital could be mined from capitalising on public concerns of unrest without gathering criticism of stoking populist rhetoric.

There was nothing distinctively conservative about this approach, inasmuch as this was very much the time of Cold War consensus, and it was not until 1967 that there was significant opposition to the war among liberals. At the same time, the issue had particular promise for Republicans, allowing them to make the case that they were prepared to defend Main Street, and not just Wall Street. Connecting the Free Speech Movement explicitly to anti-war dissidence, linked what might have appeared to be abstract, conservative, anti-communist rhetoric with the very real situation in Berkeley. According to Stuart Spencer, head of Reagan’s advising firm Spencer-Roberts, Berkeley was a ‘*sub rosa* emotional issue with people’ which

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<sup>155</sup> Reagan quoted in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 271.

<sup>156</sup> Carl Greenberg, ‘Reagan Attacks ADA’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1965, p. 3; Reagan quoted in Carl Greenberg, ‘Reagan Asks ‘Girl’ to Speak Out’, *Los Angeles Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> April 1966, p. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Reagan, ‘Ronald Reagan Speaks Out on the Issues: Academic Freedom’, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C30, Folder ‘Handouts: Issue Statements’.

<sup>158</sup> Reagan quoted in Tom Wicker, ‘Reagan Shuns Image of Goldwater in Coast Race’, *NYT*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1966, p. 38.

Reagan ‘escalated... into an issue and it started showing up in the polls.’<sup>159</sup> The Gipper lambasted students who protested, believing they should be expelled by the university and he called for the first tuition fee charge for students; it was not he argued, the state’s place to subsidised such debauched behaviour.

Central to Reagan’s Berkeley attack was Clark Kerr, the president of the University of California system, of which Berkeley was the crowning glory. The president, like Reagan, had previously worked as a labour negotiator, before transitioning into education. The Gipper claimed it was Kerr’s ‘lack of leadership’ and Brown’s ‘indifference’ that allowed the protests to swell and student behaviour to descend into Caligulaean depravity.<sup>160</sup> By contrast, the Berkeley students would have made the opposite argument; that it was Kerr’s intransigence and unwillingness to accept that he had made mistakes that escalated the protests. Such was the developing animosity between the two men, one of Reagan’s first acts as a Regent of the University of California, a role that came with the governorship, was to push for Kerr’s removal. The UC Berkeley president, who had overseen the golden age of the university, was removed at Reagan’s instruction by a vote of 14-8 on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1967, just three weeks into the Gipper’s tenure – a powerful symbol to voters that Reagan intended to exorcise Brown’s men.<sup>161</sup> To conservatives, Kerr represented more than the university, he embodied liberal elitism itself. He had developed a friendly relationship with Brown and, many viewed that alongside the governor, Kerr was ultimately responsible for student activism.

No sooner had Reagan’s campaign focussed on Berkeley in the north, when the Watts riots rocked California in the south. By August 1965, Reagan was firmly established as the leading

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<sup>159</sup> Stuart Spencer, ‘Developing a Campaign Management Organisation’, in *Issues and Innovations in the 1966 Republican Gubernatorial Campaign* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 31.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Discussion of Kerr’s removal, see Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, pp. 275-277.

candidate for the Republican nomination.<sup>162</sup> Only days prior to the attack, the Gipper had been asked whether an actor had the skills to be governor, to which he quipped, ‘Gee, and I never played a governor [before]!’<sup>163</sup> This was not the first time Reagan employed comedy to disarm an opponent, but his sunny optimism helped alleviate tensions surrounding the allegation that he was an extremist demagogue. Perhaps surprisingly, Watts also helped dismiss the firebrand accusations.

In the immediate aftermath of the August unrest, ‘Reagan didn’t jump on it and milk it’, according to Stu Spencer, the Gipper was in the fortunate position that Californians placed the blame squarely at Brown’s door without having to fan the flames. Watts firmly enshrined in the public consciousness the responsibility and perceived softness of the administration; as one Los Angelean asked Brown, ‘How much longer are you going to subsidize and coddle vicious criminals with our hard-earned dollars?’<sup>164</sup> Watts was one of Brown’s major re-election problems as it would be near-impossible to create a winning message, based on a political record that was now being blamed for so many of the state’s problems – he could not lay the blame elsewhere after eight years in the governor’s mansion.<sup>165</sup> Unlike Watts, which exposed the fact that the Great Society was not, in the words of cynics, an efficacious ‘riot insurance program’, Reagan saw the real political benefit in attacking Berkeley. Significantly, as Spencer recalled when asked about the campaign, ‘He really pointed to campus unrest... He kept pounding it. That was the overriding issue’.<sup>166</sup> Similarly, a later interview with Frederick

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<sup>162</sup> A poll of candidates for the Republican nomination had Reagan leading on 26%, Kuchel on 19%, and Murphy on 13%. For further reading, see question AQ9, ‘California Poll 65-03’, conducted in July 1965, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6503> (last viewed 13<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>163</sup> Transcript of ‘Ronald Reagan Interview at the Comstock Club’, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1965, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C30, Folder ‘Book 1(1)’.

<sup>164</sup> ‘Letter from Los Angeles Resident to Governor Brown’, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1965, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 501, Folder ‘501-2 Watts Riots’.

<sup>165</sup> Bell, *California Crucible*, p. 235.

<sup>166</sup> Spencer quoted in Cathleen Decker, ‘Watts Riots Shift State to the Rights’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015, p. 3.

Dutton, a member of Brown's campaign team, reiterated Spencer's thinking, for Dutton, 'The biggest single reactive word in California then was not "blacks" or "Watts" or "Vietnam", it was "Berkeley."' <sup>167</sup>

Reagan's team was acutely aware of the political damage Berkeley was inflicting on the governor and consistently pushed the candidate further down that road. As a memo late in the campaign noted, 'Berkeley and Higher Education are one of the public's greatest concerns, Brown cannot be allowed to, at this late date, pre-empt the role of saving the university from the radicals'. <sup>168</sup> This meant Reagan had to control the news cycle regarding Berkeley and did so by reaching out to the then-head of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Stokely Carmichael. The candidate telegrammed Carmichael imploring him not to speak at a scheduled rally, warning 'your appearance at Berkeley campus so soon before the election will stir strong emotions and possibly do great damage to both parties.' <sup>169</sup> The public announcement of Reagan's reaching out to Carmichael achieved the team's aim of controlling the news – featuring in the *Los Angeles Times* – and gave the impression of statesmanlike conciliation. <sup>170</sup> Behind the scenes, however, such was public sentiment around Berkeley, a memo to Reagan about the university campus noted, 'if the disorders boil into public prominence again, before the election, on balance it would be good for our campaign.' <sup>171</sup>

Even when violence broke out in Watts for a second time in March 1966, Reagan's approach was not racially inflammatory. For the candidate, Watts was the result of 'politicians – mayors

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<sup>167</sup> Dutton quoted in DeGroot, 'Reagan's 1966 California Campaign', pp. 443-43.

<sup>168</sup> 'Memo to Ronald Reagan', 12<sup>th</sup> October 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder 'Ed: Campus Unrest', p. 2.

<sup>169</sup> Reagan telegram to Stokely Carmichael quoted in Lyn Nofziger, 'News Release', 18<sup>th</sup> October 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C33, Folder 'Ed: Campus Unrest'.

<sup>170</sup> 'Reagan Urges Carmichael Not to Speak at UC', *Los Angeles Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> October 1966, p. 25.

<sup>171</sup> 'Memo to Ronald Reagan', 12<sup>th</sup> October 1966, p. 1.

and governors and pundits of the poverty program’ – a striking contrast to his stigmatisation of the Berkeley students.<sup>172</sup> The Gipper’s solution, analogous to many of the problems he saw facing California, was a new public-private partnership he characterised as the Creative Society. For Reagan, ‘too often we criticize wasteful government welfare without demonstrating the effectiveness of the alternative... In my opinion, a Republican businessman’s committee should also be formed, and direct action taken so that government does not become the sole source of rebirth and life for the community of Watts.’<sup>173</sup> Reagan’s constructive approach – a precursor to Nixon’s ‘black capitalism’ programme – tacitly acknowledged a real economic problem, laying the foundations for the black capitalism projects he would launch as governor. The response was also in sharp contrast with Proposition 13 whereby Reagan said nothing substantive about the importance of African Americans being able to purchase property. Watts, therefore, showed Reagan’s problem-solving capabilities rather than any racial animus or exploitation that Brown might have expected.<sup>174</sup>

Reagan harnessed the idea of jobs creation – what would later become his black capitalism project – and suggested that from the uprisings in Watts, ‘Republicans have an opportunity to begin again with the Negro community.’ Writing to the chairman of the Los Angeles County Republican Central Committee, the candidate urged his fellow Republicans to ‘join together in a program designed to help the innocent victims’ to support the ‘many responsible negroes [who] have been displaced from their jobs and need employment.’ Significantly, in contrast to where conservatives had traditionally employed private enterprise as a means of expounding their own rights to the detriment of African Americans, the Gipper argued that ‘encouraging

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<sup>172</sup> Reagan, ‘News Release: Watts’, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C34, Folder ‘66 Legal Affairs: Watts’ p. 1.

<sup>173</sup> Reagan, ‘Statement of Ronald Reagan: Watts’, date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C34, Folder ‘66 Legal Affairs: Watts’.

<sup>174</sup> Brown repeatedly labelled Reagan’s philosophy ‘untenable’. For example, see Brown, ‘Letter to Raymond Karpus’, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1966, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 750, Folder ‘750-13 Correspondence Re: Reagan’.

self-sufficiency and private enterprise' could be part of the solution, not the problem.<sup>175</sup> During the campaign, Reagan did not just rely on reactionary appeals, but actively offered solutions to the problems that beset the African American community, and sought to harness the Republican Party in doing so.

Social unrest writ large, but specifically the constant drip-effect of student protest at Berkeley, undermined Brown's re-election campaign. The Watts uprising unquestionably tore at the racial fabric of the state and created a potent fear among white voters that became a powerful element of the 1960s, one that endured beyond black militancy. However, it was Berkeley that Reagan hammered repeatedly not Watts, which in Thurber's mind meant 'social disorder was not reducible to race'.<sup>176</sup> The unrest at Berkeley and Watts combined, as Brilliant surmised, were 'on a list of factors contributing to Brown's loss', and served as a clear symbol of the discontent in California that suited Reagan's challenge to the incumbent liberal regime.<sup>177</sup>

### ***The Final Days***

On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1966, with the charge to the gubernatorial finish line in full swing, the California Supreme Court reignited a firestorm by declaring Proposition 14 unconstitutional. The impact of the decision was an important factor in shifting Reagan-Brown head-to-head polling from a deadlock in April to a seventeen-point Reagan lead by June.<sup>178</sup> Overturning a lower court ruling, the stunning 5-2 decision ruled that Proposition 14 violated the Equal Protection Clause

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<sup>175</sup> Reagan, 'Letter to D. Parkinson', date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C34, Folder '66 Legal Affairs: Watts'.

<sup>176</sup> Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 261.

<sup>177</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 225.

<sup>178</sup> The April head-to-head survey had Reagan on 44.4% and Brown on 44.2%, the June poll placed Reagan on 53% and Brown on 36%. For further reading, see question DQ9, 'Cal Poll 6602', conducted April 1966, *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6602> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020); and question 3, 'Cal Poll 6604', conducted June 1966, , *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6604> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020).

of the Fourteenth Amendment. Author of the decision, Justice Paul Peek, stated even in cases involving a ‘private party’, which *Reitman v. Mulkey* did, the Court ‘must not close our eyes and ears to the events which purport to make the final act [discrimination] legally possible’.<sup>179</sup> In one decision, five justices overturned the votes of four-and-a-half million Californians. As well as disturbing the conservatives who had supported Proposition 14 in their masses, the decision also unearthed ‘the less expected groundswell of discontent from traditional Democrats, the once core elements of Brown’s constituency.’<sup>180</sup> The gubernatorial race was a fiercely close contest and the housing battle now dominated the run-in to election day.

Managed properly, the re-emergence of Proposition 14 would carry Reagan over the line, but he needed to be careful. In the Republican Primary battle a couple of weeks earlier, his opponent, liberal San Francisco Mayor George Christopher, had obliterated the Gipper at a debate before the National Negro Republican Assembly. Lyn Nofziger, Reagan’s Press Secretary who attended the event, claimed Christopher was ‘needling him a little bit and trying to put him over in the corner as being a redneck racist.’ This infuriated Reagan, who stormed out of the debate, muttering under his breath to get ‘those sons of bitches!’<sup>181</sup> The event was widely covered in the state’s newspapers with the story focussed on Reagan’s weak defense of his opposition to the Civil Rights Act.<sup>182</sup> The Gipper was asked how African Americans could defend his stance on the act, which he labelled ‘a bad piece of legislation’, prompting an unknown quip from Christopher, which resulted in Reagan’s outburst. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, the response from liberal Republicans politicians, seeking to admonish

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<sup>179</sup> Peek quoted in Gene Blake, ‘Prop. 14 Killed by State’s High Court’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1966, p. 1.

<sup>180</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 221.

<sup>181</sup> Description by Nofziger in with Bancroft Library, *Issues and Innovations in the 1966 Republican Gubernatorial Campaign*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>182</sup> For newspaper coverage, see ‘A Shouting Reagan Stalks Out’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1966, p. 1; Paul Beck, ‘Reagan Blames GOP Rivals for Negro Meeting Outburst’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1966, p. 3; ‘Reagan Says “Demagogic Inferences” He is Racist Sparked Walkout at Parley’, *Sacramento Bee*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1966, p. 12; and ‘Christopher in “Bigot Talk” Denial’, *Oakland Tribune*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1966, p. 2.

Reagan's wider philosophy through his Civil Rights stance, was typified by another candidate, William Penn Patrick, who concluded, 'It's very difficult to defend an indefensible position. Let the dead be buried.'<sup>183</sup> Liberal Republicans felt that Reagan's position on Civil Rights was indefensible, would wreck the party, and they had finally caught him out. It was the first and only time Reagan walked out of a debate in his entire political career.

As the Gipper explained to the press a couple of days later, 'other candidates implied that I was a bigot or racist. This touched a nerve, because I abhor bigotry in all its forms.'<sup>184</sup> For Reagan, bigotry and racism were moral problems that reflected the individual and he found this attack to be deeply personal, writing many letters refuting the claims.<sup>185</sup> Given he viewed racism as an individual character flaw, allegations against him frustrated him more than any other claim.<sup>186</sup> However, this also blinded him to structural racism because he refused to engage with the idea that racism might manifest itself in non-individualist forms. His colour-blindness together promoted individual empowerment and spurned collective action. In doing so, it both elevated personal instances of racism in his consciousness and buried calls for group-based solutions such as welfare programmes and affirmative action measures. It created and reinforced a stubborn self-rationalisation: Reagan saw his individualism as having universal reach, and was persistently unable to see how racism and class impeded individual aspiration.

As the battle against Brown intensified and Reagan gathered the Republican nomination for the governorship, he faced increased scrutiny over his political positions and personal actions.

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<sup>183</sup> Patrick quoted in 'A Shouting Reagan Stalks Out'.

<sup>184</sup> Reagan quoted in Dave Hope, 'Even Nice Guy Gets Mad', *Oakland Tribune*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1966, p. 31.

<sup>185</sup> For example, see Reagan, 'Letter to Jack Rudder', 9<sup>th</sup> May 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder 'Christopher, George (2)'.

<sup>186</sup> Reflecting in his memoir, Reagan stated 'the myth about myself that has always bothered me most is that I am a bigot who somehow surreptitiously condones racial prejudice.' For further reading, see Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 401.

Reagan's tightrope approach between his support for Proposition 14 and the care not to be painted as a racist or extremist, was typified by his response to Bishop Gerald Kennedy, the Methodist leader in Los Angeles. Concerned by Brown's portrayal of Reagan as an extremist, on 28<sup>th</sup> July he wrote to the Bishop:

I would not knowingly patronize a place of business that discriminated because of race or religion. I would have no hesitation in regard to selling my property to someone of another race. On the other hand, I do not believe government can have the precedent established of interfering with the individual's right to disposition of his property. I believe this right is beyond majority rule.<sup>187</sup>

For Reagan, the issue of housing probably had little to do with race. His primary concern, instead, was government infringement on the rights of the individual, as evidenced by the battle over private property. As the Gipper ruminated on this dichotomy, he concluded, 'we confuse what is moral or immoral with what is legal or illegal.' Reagan did not dispute that housing discrimination was an 'immorality', but 'I don't believe that a group of people, by majority rule, can infringe on the right of the individual to control and disposition of his own property.'<sup>188</sup> The Gipper's position remained unchanged from his initial opposition, which drew on a particularly narrow conservative constitutionalism which was antithetical to Brown's expansive agenda.

Yet it was not simply California that was sailing on the winds of change. Since the liberal landslide of November 1964, urban unrest and the escalation of war in Vietnam had eroded national support for Johnson's progressive coalition. The president's approval rating had collapsed from seventy-one percent in January 1965 to forty-four percent in October 1966.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Brown wrote that Reagan was 'inexperienced with an untenable political philosophy' and that 'he represents the extreme right-wing of his party.' For further reading, see Brown, 'Letter to Raymond Karpus'; Brown, 'Letter to Floyd Scott', 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1966, *Bancroft Library*, EGB Papers, Box 750, Folder '750-14 Correspondence Re: Reagan'; Reagan, 'Letter to Bishop Kennedy', 28<sup>th</sup> July 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder 'Housing (1/2)'.

<sup>188</sup> Reagan, 'Interview with Alex Dreier', 29<sup>th</sup> August 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder 'B&T: Housing (1/2)'.

<sup>189</sup> For further information see, question 1, 'Gallup Poll 1965-704', conducted in January 1965, *Gallup Organization*; and question 13, 'Gallup Poll 1966-0735', conducted in October 1966, *Gallup Organization*.

Meanwhile, the number of people who rated the heavily-Democratic Congress as ‘excellent’ or ‘pretty good’, fell from seventy-one percent in December 1965 to fifty-four percent a year later.<sup>190</sup> The Democrats suffered a shellacking in the 1966 midterms, losing three Senate seats, forty-seven House seats, and eight governorships – bringing to an end one of the most activist congressional sessions in history.

Back in California, Brown’s problem was his failure to recognise how far the political environment had changed since the Proposition 14 defeat. He still viewed all who opposed his Civil Rights positions as one and the same; it was a mistake which Brilliant eloquently summarised – ‘Reagan’s strategy, they believed, was drawn from Machiavelli rather than Locke.’<sup>191</sup> Conversely, the Gipper’s approach – fuelled by a Lockean devotion to individualism – was a positive embrace of the aspirational, white, middle-class wanting to fulfil the American Dream of owning property, but ignored the aspirational black middle-class which could not own property where they might have wanted due to restrictive covenants. Nonetheless, the polling for Brown was ominous; a late August poll showed opposition to the recently reinstated Rumford Act held a nineteen-point lead over those favouring keeping it on the books – it was a foreboding result that only pointed in one direction for November.<sup>192</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

On 8<sup>th</sup> November 1966, Reagan stepped into the arena and at the first time of asking won the governorship of the most populous state in the nation. As Californians went to the polls in their

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<sup>190</sup> For reading, see question 5, ‘Louis Harris & Associates Poll: December 1965’, conducted December 1965, *Louis Harris & Associates*; question 4, ‘Louis Harris & Associates Poll: December 1966’, conducted December 1966, *Louis Harris & Associates*.

<sup>191</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 224.

<sup>192</sup> When asked, ‘Your opinion on keeping Rumford Act as Law’, 56% opposed and 37% favoured keeping the act. For further results, see question 27, ‘California Poll 66-05’, conducted in August 1966, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6605> (last viewed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

millions, the Gipper encapsulated the excitement at the prospect of victory and the agony of waiting for the result to be confirmed as the ‘longest day in the world’.<sup>193</sup> In the three years since his political emergence for the California Real Estate Association, the Golden State and the nation had endured unparalleled political trauma and upheaval. The seismic shockwaves of Kennedy’s assassination, the violence of the Selma to Montgomery marches, and the passage of the most sweeping Civil Rights legislation in history sent waves rippling across the country, landing on California’s shores.

Led by liberal giant Pat Brown, California was amid its own Civil Rights revolution in 1963. Buoyed by his triumphant victory over Nixon, the governor initiated a sweeping range of reforms that centred upon housing. However, Brown underestimated the scale of suburban revolt at this unprecedented level of government activism, and his flagship policy ran aground. Brown’s liberal dreams were further left in tatters when public unrest ripped the state’s social fabric. The disadvantaged largely African American community of Watts and the privileged white Berkeley students represented alternative ends of the socio-economic spectrum, but their united discontent was a hammer-blow to Brown’s credibility and fractured the liberal coalition, creating a window of opportunity for conservatives in a heretofore progressive state.

Together the Civil Rights revolution, Proposition 14, and social unrest brought together a cauldron of discontent that fuelled Reagan’s gubernatorial win over Brown. The near million vote margin of victory represented a staggeringly rapid rise which the Democratic governor underestimated throughout; he was unable to take the former B-movie actor and the man he considered an intellectual lightweight seriously. The *Los Angeles Times* described Reagan’s victory as one which ‘vaults him into national political prominence’, while the *New York Times*

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<sup>193</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Reagan Votes, Waits’, *The Desert Sun*, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1966, p. 1.

agreed and noted that the scale of Reagan's victory would have 'its bearing on the 1968 national campaign'.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, the Gipper's win reflected a fracturing of the Democratic base that would have generational ramifications for the national picture. This was Reagan's first electoral victory, and despite the magnitude of what followed, this win arguably remained his most impressive.

Critical to conservatives' overturning of the political landscape was their messaging about the growth of government and the social unrest which was tearing the fabric of the nation apart. McGirr and Brilliant have argued this stunning overhaul was at least in part produced by conservatives destroying the New Deal coalition through politics of race – promulgating the 'white backlash' theory. For example, McGirr concluded 'the high correlation between opposition to California's Fair Housing Act and support for Reagan lent credence to the supposition that Reagan's support could be attributed at least partially to "white backlash."' Similarly, Brilliant concluded that 'Rumblings of discontent that had been registering on civil rights seismographs since passage of the Rumford Fair Housing Act had coalesced into an electoral earthquake.'<sup>195</sup>

Unquestionably white backlash is a sizable part of the narrative, but it was not the whole story. Reagan exercised his political advantage through appeals to growing concerns over increasing governmental activism at the federal and state level. It was a colour-blind allure that focussed more on Berkeley than Watts and on Lockean rights, rather than racist wrongs. In characterising Reagan as a part, or occasionally the leader, of a conservative backlash grounded in racial appeals, historians have misconstrued the larger picture; Reagan's colour-blind

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<sup>194</sup> Richard Bergholz, 'Reagan Triumphs!', *Los Angeles Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1966, p. 1; Lawrence Davies, 'Reagan Elected by Wide Margin', *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1966, p. 26.

<sup>195</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 209; Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 224.

individualism, as we will see in the next chapter, was a distinct conservative tradition, separate from the backlash promoted by Nixon, Wallace, Helms, and other contemporary conservative figures.

As Reagan delivered his victory address from the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles – the place he launched his political career with the CREA address in 1963 – he asserted, ‘they turn to us not because we are Republicans but because we offered an alternative to Big Brother government’. Reagan assured voters that his approach in the years ahead was ‘the best government is that government kept closest to the people’, he was to act as ‘the servant not the master’ – reflecting the widespread antipathy toward liberal largesse.<sup>196</sup> He gave rise to a western populism that struck a chord across California, and would eventually find favour across the nation. For the time being, however, the self-styled ‘Citizen Politician’ had to prepare for the most challenging role of his life.

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<sup>196</sup> Reagan, ‘Ronald Reagan Victory Statement’, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1966, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C32, Folder ‘Election Night’.

# III

## *The Creative Society*

*We have come to a crossroads – a time of decision – and the path we follow turns away from any idea that government and those who serve it are omnipotent. It is a path impossible to follow unless we have faith in the collective wisdom and genius of the people. Along this path government will lead but not rule, listen but not lecture. It is the path of a Creative Society.<sup>1</sup>*

– Governor Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, January 1967 –

### *Welfare Politics and the Creative Society*

Governor Ronald Reagan faced a myriad of problems upon entering office in 1967. In northern California, despite having peaked between 1964 and 1965, Berkeley students continually protested free speech and the ongoing war in Vietnam, the aftermath of the Watts riots continued to roil southern California, and the entire state was sharply divided by Proposition 13, overturning the Rumford Act. Though Reagan campaigned on reducing the size of the state, there was no obvious mandate to do so; an April 1967 poll showed only one in ten Californians approved of him because of his support for reduced government expenditures, while a national poll found that half of voters considered themselves ‘middle of the road’ in political terms.<sup>2</sup> The novice governor’s challenge would be made more difficult by a Democratically-controlled legislature. Within his own fractured party, Reagan presided over disunity, with liberals and conservatives battling for the soul of the California GOP. The

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address’, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1967, *California State Library*, available online at <http://governors.library.ca.gov/addresses/33-Reagan01.html> (last viewed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For further reading, see question 2, ‘California Poll 67-02’, conducted in April 1967, *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6702> (last viewed 15<sup>th</sup> April 2020); 48% of those surveyed described themselves as ‘Middle of the road’, for further information, see question 22, ‘Louis Harris & Associates Poll: June 1967’, conducted June 1967, *Louis Harris & Associates*.

executive team was noticeably ideologically-split between conservative Reagan, and liberal Lieutenant General Robert Finch, while Senator Thomas Kuchel, effective head of the liberal wing of the party, lambasted conservatives as ‘recklessly determined to control our party or destroy it’.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps above all, Reagan confronted a political class that considered him a lightweight.<sup>4</sup> Certainly in California, where public opinion was complex, the key to political success for a conservative like Reagan had to include reaching out to moderates, many of whom still supported President Johnson.

Striking a balance, Reagan delivered a statesmanlike inaugural address. He spoke of crime, telling those with ‘a grievance’ – tacitly legitimising, at least some Watts residents and Berkeley students – to ‘seek redress in the courts or Legislature, but not on the streets.’ He recognised that ‘problems remain to be solved and they challenge all of us.’ Reagan believed the answer to the state’s troubles lay in offering a positive way forward, one ‘worthy of our generation and worth passing on to the next’.<sup>5</sup> The governor offered an alternative vision of the future, a conservative future, encapsulated in his campaign theme – the Creative Society – that promised to unleash individual spirit, meeting California’s, and ultimately the nation’s challenges.

The brainchild of W.S. McBirnie, a conservative pastor removed from the gubernatorial campaign for his ties to the extremist John Birch Society, the Creative Society was conceived as a rhetorical device for the campaign trail. McBirnie believed Reagan needed ‘a program which fires the imagination of the voters in order to overcome your lack of governmental

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<sup>3</sup> Kuchel quoted in Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York, 2013), p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> During the campaign, Lou Cannon described how ‘Democrats dismissed him as a fading star who had been upstaged by a chimpanzee in *Bedtime for Bonzo*.’ For further reading, see Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003), p. 116.

<sup>5</sup> Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address’.

experience’ – something which proved a constant battle during the election. Drawing upon recent Democratic presidential successes of the New Deal, Fair Deal, New Frontier, and Great Society, the Creative Society ‘could be *more* than a slogan’. Differentiated from the dour, scare-mongering tactics of other Republican campaigns, the Creative Society reflected Reagan’s ‘positive approach which would liberate the latent ingenuity of the most creative of all our citizens’, in the hope to offer ‘true self government’.<sup>6</sup> Given Reagan had already faced criticism he was politically inexperienced and an intellectual lightweight, this new programme sought to offer philosophical depth to his ideas.<sup>7</sup> Yet interestingly, the governor made little attempt in his inaugural address to diffuse notions of hard-right politics. Instead, he warned that unless ‘we have honest government at a price we can afford’, California’s ‘problems will go unsolved’.<sup>8</sup>

The national political agenda remained dominated by President Johnson and his Great Society agenda, even if both were rather embattled following a disastrously bad mid-term election. Scholars have identified the complex character of Great Society liberalism, and this chapter will accomplish something similar for the American Right – i.e. it will identify and analyse the complex relationship between conservatism and Reagan’s Creative Society.<sup>9</sup> While this philosophical agenda called for change in major policy areas including crime, tax reform, and education, I use welfare politics – ‘another of our major problems’ Reagan lamented – to show his efforts to square the circle; to articulate a conservative vision that exploited the green shoots of right-wing recovery in his state, without scaring voters who supported Johnson (in

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<sup>6</sup> Note – italics added for emphasis. For reading, see W.S. McBirnie, ‘Letter to Ronald Reagan’, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1965, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box C31, Folder ‘The Creative Society’, pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Governor Pat Brown stated Reagan was ‘inexperience’ in an interview with journalist Bill Boyarsky. For reading, see Boyarsky, ‘Brown Accuses Reagan’, *San Mateo Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1966, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address’.

<sup>9</sup> For reading on the relationship between liberalism and the Great Society, see Sidney Milkis and Jerome Mileur (eds.), *The Great Society and the High Tide of Liberalism* (Amherst, 2005); Bruce Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston, 1995); and Martha Derthick, ‘Crossing Thresholds: Federalism in the 1960s’, *Journal of Policy History*, 8:1 (1996), pp. 64-80.

California, over sixty percent did so), but might be wooed by a suitably positive conservative message.<sup>10</sup> He called this attempt to thread the needle, the Creative Society.

Despite the wealth of challenges facing the governor and the tumultuous state of California in 1966 and 1967, there is a surprising lack of tailored historical inquiry on this political vision. The Creative Society appealed because of discontent with Great Society largesse that most profoundly expressed itself in the explosion of welfare rolls.<sup>11</sup> However, historians have ignored Reagan's approach because they find it impossible to think of the former actor as a man of ideas, or they have misconstrued the motivations of the governor's approach – this chapter addresses that gap in the historiography.

Initially, Godfrey Hodgson argued that the mid-1960s witnessed the heyday of governmental reform and activism typified by what he termed 'the liberal consensus'.<sup>12</sup> More recently, a surge of historical inquiry into conservatism launched by Alan Brinkley has produced vast swathes of literature, leaving Kim Phillips-Fein to ask 'whether there is anything left to study in the history of the Right.'<sup>13</sup> However, much of this literature paid little attention to ideas, as opposed to strategizing and prejudice.<sup>14</sup>

Two notable exceptions that focussed on Reagan and ideas were provided by John Patrick Diggins and David Byrne. Diggins concentrated on Reagan as a problem-solver, driven by a

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<sup>10</sup> Reagan, 'First Inaugural Address'.

<sup>11</sup> For figures on the growth of welfare, see James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1980* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 157.

<sup>12</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time: From World War II to Nixon – What Happened and Why* (New York, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> A wave of study into conservatism was launched by Brinkley's essay, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', *American Historical Review*, 99:2 (1994), pp. 409-429; Phillips-Fein, 'Conservatism: A State of the Field', *Journal of American History*, 98:3 (2011) p. 723.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the origins of the new conservatism, and the transformation of American politics* (New York, 1994); and Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2007).

political philosophy that enabled him to be, ‘the great liberating spirit of modern American history, a political romantic impatient with the status quo.’<sup>15</sup> Byrne, meanwhile, embarked upon the central challenge to ‘disprove the notion that Reagan was stupid and elevate him to the rank of an intelligent, thinking person. His ideas need to be studied.’<sup>16</sup> However, Diggins’ work was problematic insofar as he failed to unpack the evolution of Reagan’s intellectualism and was overly reliant on secondary sources. Byrne’s study was equally problematic because he concentrated heavily on Reagan’s religiosity for his political credo, rather than seeking to uncover the roots of a philosophical worldview. Instead, this chapter employs extensive archival evidence to show the tangible foundations of Reagan’s public policy philosophy.

Studies of Reagan in this period can chiefly be classified into two distinct areas; those analysing his election win, and larger biographies. Matthew Dallek’s study, *The Right Moment*, exemplified the former, providing a detailed account of Reagan’s rise in Californian politics. His victory, Dallek boldly proclaimed, ‘marked the arrival of the Right in postwar American politics’, in contrast to the historical consensus that pointed to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential bid. *California Rising*, a study by Ethan Rarick on Pat Brown, similarly lauded Reagan’s impact, concluding ‘the anti-government rhetoric with which Reagan attacked Brown became the animating force of American politics.’<sup>17</sup> Dallek’s study however, much like Kurt Schuparra’s work, ends with the election and does not explore the vast challenges Reagan faced in implementing his conservative agenda.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, little work on Reagan and the rise

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<sup>15</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York, 2006), p. xvii.

<sup>16</sup> David T. Byrne, *Ronald Reagan: An Intellectual Biography* (Lincoln, NE, 2018), p. xi.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan’s First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York, 2004), p. ix; for reading on the influence of Goldwater on the American right, see Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia, 2013); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, ‘Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater’s Early Senate Career and the De-legitimization of Organized Labor’, *Journal of American History*, 95:3 (2008), pp. 678-709; and David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton, 2010); Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley, 2006), p. 382.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement, 1945-1966* (New York, 1998).

of the Right has focussed in detail on his concrete performance as governor of the nation's largest state.

Larger biographical studies of Reagan are numerous, verging on overwhelming. However, even the richest of biographies frames the gubernatorial years through the prism of his later career, rather than in its own terms. H. W. Brands' *Reagan* provided a detailed and compelling narrative, although it lacked deep analysis, while Iwan Morgan's study is perhaps the most historically balanced and rigorous effort. However, Morgan relegated the Creative Society to a single paragraph in an otherwise outstanding work. For him, Reagan's vision in California at least never transitioned out of a useful campaign tactic.<sup>19</sup> No academic has written substantially on the Gipper's gubernatorial years pertaining to the Creative Society or politics of race.

The most detailed account of Reagan's Sacramento years remains Lou Cannon's *Governor Reagan*; Cannon was a journalist in the Californian capital during this period. However, like Morgan, he saw the Creative Society as simple rhetorical shorthand for 'more individual freedom and less government', rather than a programmatic guiding principle to be implemented.<sup>20</sup> Despite Cannon being largely sympathetic to his task, describing Reagan as 'an enormously gifted' politician, the journalist never took the ideas behind the man seriously as an intellectual endeavour. For him, 'Reagan... was no intellectual, nor did he pretend to be.'<sup>21</sup> This chapter does not claim to the Gipper being an intellectual, but rather seeks to treat his ideas seriously and contextualise them within the context of the period. In this case, I interrogate the effectiveness and coherency of the Creative Society as source of the governor's conservative agenda.

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<sup>19</sup> Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York, 2015); Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), pp. 90-91.

<sup>20</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003), p. 173.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140.

Broader histories of California highlight the context within which both Reagan and the larger conservative movement were reacting. Jonathan Bell's rich study of California in the growth of the national liberal movement, explored Reagan's role in raising 'anti-government, antitax rhetoric' in the development of the culture wars 'that seemed to define the political zeitgeist of the late 1970s.' Mark Brilliant's work on ethnic diversity in California placed the Gipper at the heart of a racial backlash, noting 'Reagan courted Mexican American voters by pitting bilingual education (which he supported) against school desegregation through busing (which he opposed).'22 Continuing from the previous chapter, this piece will argue that despite Proposition 14 and Watts bringing race to the heart of Californian politics, neither the Creative Society nor Reagan's welfare reform agenda were about race. The governor's approach in each case was shaped by philosophical considerations, and by a backdrop in which government was growing rapidly, far beyond its New Deal bounds.

This chapter's core focuses on the relationship between California and the conservative movement. Having been explored in meticulous detail over the past twenty years, Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors*, remains the single-most influential work. McGirr believed that the increasing rightward trend in California was also the nation's story, on a march that culminated in Reagan's presidential ascent in 1980. Yet, borrowing from historians Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer's argument, this chapter highlights the difficulty Reagan faced in enacting his Creative Society vision; showing both the enduring strength of programmatic liberalism in the Golden State (even if the 'brand' was tarnished), and the contingent nature of conservative support.<sup>23</sup> This chapter goes further, arguing not only was it the strength of

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<sup>22</sup> Bell, *California Crucible: The Forging of Modern American Liberalism* (Philadelphia, 2012), p. 274; Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> McGirr argued, California conservatism was 'not only about the making of the modern American Right but also about the forging of the late twentieth-century United States.' While Schulman and Zelizer noted that in the 1970s, 'the rise of conservatism was not inevitable nor was it automatic.' For further reading, see McGirr,

conservatism that Reagan sought to bolster by showing its political viability through his new agenda, but it was the direction of conservatism itself he looked to shape.<sup>24</sup> Yet, given the size and strength of liberal support in California, the governor's task would not be easy. His role required him to be a governing idealist: push his ideologically driven Creative Society agenda as far as possible, but be pragmatic enough in the face of Democratic opposition to negotiate, and appear reasonable.

The most interesting angle of this chapter lies in its uncovering of how the Gipper sought to enact Reaganism in policy form for the first time.<sup>25</sup> Of all policy areas, social welfare provides the most innovative angle of approach to understand Reagan's Creative Society reforms. There are two broad interrelated reasons for this. Firstly, it was a 'hot button' issue in the mid-to-late 1960s. Unprecedented government expansion and the changing social perception that welfare was increasingly tied to politics of race vaulted welfare into the national limelight. As historian James Patterson outlined, by the end of the decade 'two dramatic developments changed the face of American poverty and welfare', there was 'a fantastic drop in the number of poor and a stunning enlargement of social welfare programs'. Typifying the perceived bureaucratic Great Society largesse was expansion of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Created by Franklin Roosevelt in 1935 as part of the Social Security Act, the president intended the programme to be residual, established as a 'widows' pension', but by the 1960s, it was a different beast entirely – expanding from three to eleven million people in the space of a decade and tripling in cost between 1964 and 1967.<sup>26</sup> As historian Gareth Davies illuminated, this

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*Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001), p. 5; Schulman and Zelizer (eds.), *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), p. 3

<sup>24</sup> Historian Donald Critchlow noted that a key question during the late 1960s was whether conservatism was 'an aberration or the start of a sustained movement'. For reading, see Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the Republican Right Rose to Power in Modern America* (Lawrence, KS, 2011), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> I define 'Reaganism' as a pronounced blend of beliefs in small government, fervent anti-communism, reduced taxation, and most-importantly in the context of this thesis, a devotion to colour-blind individualism.

<sup>26</sup> Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 157; number of claimants on p. 171; tripling of cost taken from Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 158.

expansion took place ‘at a time of unparalleled prosperity and economic growth’, revealing a paradox that was swarmed upon by conservative critics.<sup>27</sup>

Another key factor for increased polarisation of the social welfare reform was a fundamental shifting of social perceptions. Edward Berkowitz’s detailed study *America’s Welfare State* noted, ‘Well into the 1950s, the typical welfare grant went to an old person who had worked his entire lifetime’, yet by the sixties, ‘welfare became an unpopular, highly controversial program, populated by “chiselers”. The typical welfare family now contained black children living in a house where the father was not present.’<sup>28</sup>

An early flashpoint was the Newburgh controversy of 1961, where a New York city cut welfare provisions as a direct attack on the influx of African American migrants coming from the Deep South. The city manager, Joseph Mitchell, was outraged at his city’s changing demographics and described the recent arrivals as the ‘dregs of humanity.’ For Mitchell, such entitlements were antithetical to America’s tradition. Declaring that ‘it is not moral to appropriate public funds to finance’ such things as ‘illegitimacy’, he cut payments to newly arrived unmarried mothers.<sup>29</sup> It was a national scandal that made Newburgh infamous. The *New York Times* reported, ‘no little town ever got so famous so fast except Little Rock’, for the small New York town had made ‘a declaration of war on the welfare state [which] thrust this drowsy Hudson Valley community into national prominence.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 158; ‘Who Really Wants the Great Society?’, *National Review*, 17:4 (1965), pp. 50-51; Roger Freeman, ‘Phoney Baloney in Welfare Spending’, *National Review*, 17:38 (1965), pp. 823-826.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State: From Roosevelt to Reagan* (London, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Davies describes the Newburgh controversy in, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>30</sup> A. H. Raskin, ‘Newburgh’s Lessons for the Nation’, *NYT*, 17<sup>th</sup> December 1961, p. SM7.

Since Newburgh, welfare has been fundamentally tied to politics of race by historians such as Dan T. Carter and Thomas Edsall, who view welfare as a proxy issue for the larger issue of race. Edsall concluded ‘coded language – a language of “groups,” “taxes,” “big government,” “quotas,” “reverse discrimination,” “welfare,” and “special interests”’ was critical to the rise of conservative populism culminating in Reagan’s two presidential terms.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, when Reagan made welfare reform via the Creative Society a cornerstone of his inaugural address, declaring ‘welfare is another one of our major problems’, scholars assumed, because of Newburgh, that a race-baiting agenda lay behind his plans.<sup>32</sup>

For Mark Brilliant, the Gipper not only adhered to the well-known Republican Southern Strategy but pioneered his own prototype; ‘The Southwest strategy was a variation on the Southern strategy, but with a Latino twist. The Republicans, led by Reagan in 1966 and Nixon in 1968, also tried to court a traditionally Democratic constituency, Latinos, by supporting bilingual education, which they subsequently pitted against desegregation.’<sup>33</sup> In contrast to Brilliant’s assessment that Reagan pioneered Republican race-baiting strategy, and Carter and Edsall’s claim that the Gipper used welfare as proxy for race, this chapter suggests Reagan’s deployment of welfare arose from his broader social philosophy which demanded small government. Further, Reagan was not only devoid of the racial backlash approach that characterised many contemporary conservatives of the period, but his colour-blind conservatism led the way toward a different future that rejected explicit backlash politics.

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<sup>31</sup> Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, 1996); Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, 1992) chapter 10 – ‘Coded Language’ pp. 198-214.

<sup>32</sup> Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address’.

<sup>33</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 233.

To support this approach, I now introduce the second related factor behind the use of social welfare to examine the Creative Society. For Reagan, welfare reform symbolised collectivism and dependency that was antithetical to his individualistic colour-blind outlook. Reducing the size of the state, of which welfare was an integral part, lay at the heart of his speeches *prior* to Newburgh, and later found prominence in his gubernatorial campaign, which again historians have misinterpreted. For Reagan, any growth of government was to be avoided because he equated growing government with decreased freedom, analogous to Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* or Lockean liberalism. The Gipper outlined this in his 1952 'America the Beautiful' address, when he described 'America is less of a place than an idea... It is nothing but the inherent love of freedom in each one of us... no group can decide for the people what is good for the people so well as they can decide for themselves.' Concern of government growth was also why he opposed increased social security in 1961, which he warned 'was never intended to supplant private savings, private insurance pension programs of unions and industries'. Any expansion, he warned, was a 'further encroachment on these individual liberties and freedoms'.<sup>34</sup>

The governor's view on welfare was consistent with a philosophical outlook that had crystallised well before he entered California politics, and well before race became central to the politics of welfare. Biographer Craig Shirley argued Reagan 'remains one of the most fascinating figures of history and the American presidency, in part because he was a constantly evolving individual', concluding 'his worldview in 1964 was not his worldview in 1980'.<sup>35</sup> In the case of welfare politics, this is not so. Rather, it was *because* Reagan was ideologically

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<sup>34</sup> Reagan, 'America the Beautiful: Commencement Address at William Woods College', 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1952, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Ronald Reagan Subject Collection, Folder 'Speeches and Writing – Pre-1966', p. 9; Reagan, 'Ronald Reagan Speaks Out Against Socialized Medicine', 17<sup>th</sup> June 1961, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Ronald Reagan Subject Collection, Folder 'Speeches and Writing – Pre-1966', pp. 5-8.

<sup>35</sup> Shirley, *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980* (New York, 2017), p. 331.

consistent from the 1940s prior to the Civil Rights epoch, we can see his vision of welfare as being devoid of racial considerations. Instead of being grounded in racial appeal, he considered himself in the mould of former president Franklin Roosevelt as someone promoting ‘opportunity’ rather than ‘entitlement’ politics – he rallied against the Great Society, not the New Deal.<sup>36</sup>

For Reagan – the eternal optimist of the power of the human spirit – welfare shackled human ingenuity. Paraphrasing Franklin Roosevelt in his California inaugural address, the Gipper declared, ‘we are not going to perpetuate poverty by substituting a permanent dole for a paycheck. There is no humanity or charity in destroying self-reliance, dignity and self-respect – the very substance of moral fiber.’<sup>37</sup> It was not merely political calculation to quote Roosevelt; rather, we learned in an earlier chapter that the governor was a genuine admirer of the president. Reagan considered himself Roosevelt’s true ideological heir, rejecting the perceived perversion liberalism had become under Johnson. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this association. Equally, however, it was deeply problematic, inasmuch as Reagan had a much more limited view of the state’s role: for people to succeed, he believed, unlike FDR, that government needed to leave them alone.

A Creative Society draft paper outlined the possibility for a new right-wing conception of politics to carve out its place in the world that otherwise seemed devoid of a conservative future. With Hooverism dismissed as intellectually vacuous, and the perceived moderation of

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<sup>36</sup> Davies concentrates on the changing liberal approaches to government and welfare in *From Opportunity to Entitlement*.

<sup>37</sup> In his 1935 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt declared ‘continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.’ Reagan’s address was remarkably similar on welfare dependency and clearly influenced by his political idol. For further reading, see Reagan, ‘First Inaugural Address’; and Roosevelt, ‘Annual Message to Congress’, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1935, *APP*, available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14890&st=&st1=> [last accesses 30<sup>th</sup> July 2018].

Eisenhower rejected by firebrands such as William F. Buckley as ‘measured socialism’, the Creative Society offered a new alternative to the government-laden social philosophy of the Great Society.<sup>38</sup>

The Creative Society must first, in terms of goals, forsake certain of the now empty abstractions of our forefathers. When laissez faire individualism devolved into the exploitation of man by man, it was necessary that some form of regulation be adopted to establish a competitive climate in which individual freedom was again meaningful. Then, when the great depression drained the nation, and in the absence of other responsible solutions, it was necessary that government intervene to assist the nation in gaining vitality. But today, after the nation has regained its vitality, we continue to use schemes of the past that are now ill adapted to present realities. As unrestrained economic individualism proved to be a grand ideal incapable of application to contingencies, so has unrestrained governmental power.<sup>39</sup>

The position paper called for the breaking with conservative orthodoxy of the Gilded Age such as unfettered *laissez-faire* attitudes and accepted that government has basic social obligations in times of emergency such as the first hundred days of the Roosevelt administration. However, it also suggested the reversal of Great Society social policy by attacking the idea that programmes conceived as *emergency* measures can form the basis for long-term social policy in an affluent era. The paper called for a reversal of New Deal liberalism. The governor did not see his position as an attack on the poor, or as an issue to rouse the sentiments of his base. Instead, Reagan thought the Creative Society would unlock a new world of opportunity for Americans whose vitality, he believed, had been sapped by post-New Deal collectivism.

Sustaining his attack on the Great Society, Reagan’s vision for government also called for a resurgence in federalism that soon came to characterise much of Nixon’s 1968 campaign platform. Seeking to redistribute governmental power and invoke the classical liberal spirit of ‘such men as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau’, the new conservative agenda was intended to counteract the perceived uncontrollable growth of Washington and Great Society politics.

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<sup>38</sup> Looking ahead to Eisenhower’s re-election, Buckley wrote ‘The Republican program was at best one of measured socialism.’ For further reading, see Buckley, ‘Reflections on Election Eve’, *National Review*, 24:2 (1956), pp. 6-7.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Creative Society’ Draft Paper, p. 3.

McBirnle claimed this new conservative counter-model would ‘bypass the tired old stereotypes of Right-Wing vs Left-Wing’ and shape a new political force Republicans could ‘unite’ behind.<sup>40</sup> The Creative Society was both bold and boundless. Crucially, it was positive and optimistic, providing a silver bullet to the ideological problems of the Californian Republican Party and conservatism more broadly.

While large on generalities, the position paper on the Creative Society’s foundations was short on specifics; reflecting a political philosophy rather than a programmatic manifesto.<sup>41</sup> During the campaign, Governor Brown had attacked Reagan’s lack of detail, quipping, ‘he bought the advice that he should not define his Creative Society in too much detail. The people might not like it or the philosophy of its author.’<sup>42</sup> However, ambiguity on the campaign trail was important, both providing flexibility in policy formation and appealing to Reagan’s burgeoning political style of dealing in ‘big picture’ politics. The Gipper had not run for the California governorship to work at the edges: he was too ambitious for that. The governor’s vision to transform his state and the nation instead resembled the way that Robert LaFollette and other early twentieth-century Progressives had used the state as a testing ground for larger ideas, a ‘laboratory of reform’.

Prior to the New Deal, the states had been the leaders in policy innovation, where they could experiment without risk of damage to the rest of the country. Threats of economic collapse in the 1930s and war in the 1940s had required a serious reconsideration of such devolution of power, prompting the rise of a strong, centralised state. Few governors since the Progressive

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10; McBirnle, ‘Letter to Ronald Reagan’.

<sup>41</sup> Detail was conceived once Reagan won the election, releasing a series of white papers in the first eight months of the governorship focusing on policy areas including taxes, social welfare, education, human rights, law and order, and quality of life (environmental concerns). For further reading, see ‘White Papers of the Reagan Administration’, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box RS22, Folder ‘Creative Papers (4/4)’.

<sup>42</sup> Brown quoted in ‘Brown Blasts Reagan Plan’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1966, p. 12.

Era had thought in such terms – instead nearly all reformist energy in American government had been located in Washington, DC. However, conservatives since the Roosevelt’s New Deal had been concerned by the prospect of an ‘autocratic Leviathan’ and by the 1960s, faced a vastly more centralised state than anything that had occurred under FDR.<sup>43</sup> Contrary to Martha Derthick and Shep Melnick’s contention that conservatives stopped making state leadership arguments, the following pages show how Reagan reacted against such change.<sup>44</sup> For a new generation of conservatives, typified by Reagan and Nixon, sought to implement a new federalism which called for a major reordering of the federal system of government – prompting a subsequent revival of the states.<sup>45</sup>

Even though conservatives were united in their desire to reshape intergovernmental relations, within that context, they pursued vastly different visions of the future. Emphasising the conservative disunity, Timothy Conlan suggested Nixon wanted ‘more effective and efficient government’, while Reagan – fuelled by the pursuit of public-private partnerships that characterised the Creative Society – pursued ‘a reduction of governmental initiative at every level.’<sup>46</sup> However, by comparison to other conservatives and liberals who had lost confidence in the capacity of states to lead, Reagan still believed in the entrepreneurial power of government outside of Washington, making him an outlier in a period which shunned state power as a byword for segregation and other Civil Rights brutalities. Consequently, the Creative Society called for Reagan, and the New Right, to transform the political landscape and reclaim power subsumed by the nation’s capital.

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<sup>43</sup> James Patterson, *The New Deal and States: Federalism in Transition* (Princeton, 1969), p. 194; Martha Derthick, ‘Crossing Thresholds: Federalism in the 1960s’, *Journal of Policy History*, 8:1 (1996), p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> See Derthick, ‘Crossing Thresholds’; Martha Derthick, *Keeping the Compound Republic: Essays on Federalism* (Washington, DC, 2001); and R. Shep Melnick, *Between the Lines: Interpreting Welfare Rights* (Washington, DC, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> For reading on the ‘New Federalism’ revival, see David Walker, *The Rebirth of Federalism: Slouching Toward Washington* (Chatham, NJ, 1995); Timothy Conlan, *New Federalism: Intergovernmental Reform from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC, 1988); and Michael Reagan, *The New Federalism* (New York, 1972).

<sup>46</sup> Conlan, *New Federalism*, p. 1.

The Creative Society was, therefore, Reagan's first expression of political philosophy to be implemented in policy form. It was a bold effort to transform the political-intellectual landscape and provide a viable alternative to Great Society dominance. Contrary to popular belief, it was not grounded in backlash politics, but was an effort to refurbish conservatism that had been sullied by McCarthyism and Birchism, and been dismissed by liberals. Reagan sought to make it stand *for* something – something *liberating*, and full of promise for ordinary Americans. Writing in the *National Review* in 1968, William Rusher, a founding member of the magazine wrote, “‘The Creative Society’ is not just a flip conservative riposte to the Democrats’ but, ‘a radically different approach to the whole vexed question of government’s proper role in the affairs of free men.’<sup>47</sup> This chapter explores this undiscovered turning point in the formation of the New Right as a robust, vigorous, and most-importantly, ideologically viable political movement in postwar America.

### ***Relief Check to Paycheck***

During the mid-1960s, ‘welfare’ primarily referred to all public assistance programmes (for single mothers, the blind, the aged, and the disabled), but when Reagan’s inaugural address made ‘welfare’ reform a priority, he narrowly targeted Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – using welfare as shorthand. As previously outlined, there were three reasons that welfare became a ‘hot button’ issue in the 1960s: the changing function of the programme; cost; and race. The first two of these three reasons fit the governor’s overall pitch particularly well. There is no evidence that the governor was particularly drawn to welfare by racial considerations, although it is impossible to be sure of this – it is hard to prove a negative. As the following pages interrogate each of the three factors outlined above, the larger story of why welfare reform both appealed to Reagan as an issue to cement his conservative credentials,

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<sup>47</sup> William Rusher, ‘Much Good Sense No Bomfoggery’, *National Review*, 20:32 (1968), p. 809.

and yet at the same time, proved immensely difficult to implement also emerges. In examining the protracted struggle for reform, we see that in contrast to notion of the Golden State leading the rightward charge, liberal ideas of social obligation endured, highlighting the complex and turbulent state of California politics.

The Gipper's ascent in California politics coincided with the huge national expanse of AFDC. Between 1965 and 1969, AFDC rose by nearly fifty percent.<sup>48</sup> Simultaneously, conservative perception – one not borne out by statistical analysis – was that welfare rewarded irresponsible behaviour. Forty percent of the public consistently believed that poverty was a result of 'lack of effort' on the individual's part, reinforcing the notion of the 'underserving poor'.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, confronted with a ballooning state deficit and an expanding welfare programme he was fundamentally opposed to, Reagan believed it made sense for him to attack AFDC spending with the full might of his administration's power.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1967, the governor delivered a major statement on welfare to the legislature, outlining the need to radically alter programmes including AFDC. Confidently addressing Californian politicians, the Gipper noted, 'a welfare program, to be successful, should aim not at getting people into the program but at seeing how many people can be made self-supporting so that they no longer need the program.' To help remove people off the welfare rolls, Reagan employed the Creative Society's mantra of public-private partnerships and created a 'Governor's Job Training and Placement Council' with the specific goal of 'finding jobs in private industry for those among us who want to work but who have lacked the training or

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<sup>48</sup> Statistic taken from Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty*, p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> Surveys taken in 1965 (the zenith of liberal sentiment) show a consistent level – approximately 40% - of Americans who believed poverty was a result of lack of effort. For further reading, see question 31, 'Gallup Poll: 721', conducted December 1965, *Gallup Organization*; and 'Gallup Poll: 745', conducted May 1967, *Gallup Organization*.

opportunity.’<sup>50</sup> As Edward Berkowitz noted, there was nothing radical in the welfare-work idea, President Kennedy had enacted such measures in 1962.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, Reagan’s plan was praised in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as a move to tackle the problem ‘where families have been on one form or another of the public dole for three and even four generations.’<sup>52</sup> Asked by the press about his jobs programme to reduce the number of welfare claimants, the governor responded, ‘the difference in our approach to rehabilitation and to the idea that welfare was set up to help people help themselves, not just to perpetuate them in idleness for the rest of their lives.’ The governor doubled-down and forcefully added, ‘I take issue with anyone who does write these people off and who says that there is no way to salvage and make them useful.’<sup>53</sup>

This six-step programme shifted emphasis onto the private sphere, showing there was an alternative to Johnson’s ‘apply government to every problem’ approach. But it also crucially tapped into Reagan’s belief in the power of the individual, and his conviction that anyone could thrive, if given the chance to do so. This outlook was both optimistic and naïve in equal measure. The premise that jobs alleviated poverty was one solution to unemployment, but it obscured the larger, deeply entrenched systemic problems of 1960s America. For as one Californian would later explain to Reagan in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, ‘we would pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but we have no boots’.<sup>54</sup>

Harnessing public hostility to the undeserving poor, Reagan also unveiled another major welfare-related initiative: a state-wide investigation into welfare fraud. ‘Cheats’ were the real

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<sup>50</sup> Reagan, ‘Statement of Governor Reagan on Welfare’, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1967 [01/01/1967 – 04/01/1967]’, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> See Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Reagan: Welfare Efficiency Goal’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1967, p. 10.

<sup>53</sup> Reagan, ‘Press Conference Remarks’, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P1, Folder ‘Press Conference Transcripts – 07/05/1967, 07/11/1967, 07/18/1967, 07/25/1967’, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Californian quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 101.

problem, Reagan warned legislators; ‘I want it closely understood, that this administration will work toward more effective enforcement of laws’ governing welfare abuse, because, ‘The truly deserving must not be short-changed because of welfare chiselers and cheats.’<sup>55</sup> It was a popular position to take; a national study revealed Americans thought poverty was a result of ‘lack of effort’, rather than ‘circumstance’, by a greater than two-to-one majority – a sentiment typified by the *Los Angeles Times*’ coverage which declared ‘Provide Jobs, Not Handouts’ and the *San Francisco Chronicle* calling Reagan’s plan ‘commendable’.<sup>56</sup>

In July 1967, Reagan fulfilled a campaign pledge and launched the first in a series of fact-finding conferences on welfare fraud. Proving the centrepiece of his first-term agenda, the administration was explicitly asking the question of who a ‘worthy’ welfare recipient was and who was not. Nationally, the same debates were also in full swing as part of the administration’s proposals as part of the Social Security Amendments package.<sup>57</sup> Opening the conference, the governor outlined ‘our aim is to make certain that the truly deserving on the welfare roles [sic] are not shortchanged by those whose only claim to a welfare check is a dislike of work.’ Despite the governor’s announcement, ‘we have no intention of making this investigation a witch-hunt’, that is exactly what it became.<sup>58</sup> Work colleagues, neighbours, and even family members informed on those they suspected of defrauding the state.<sup>59</sup> The Health and Welfare Agency produced several stock letters thanking Californians for their help in reporting suspected fraud,

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Gallup Poll’, May 1967; ‘“Provide Jobs, Not Handouts”, Reagan Urges’, *Los Angeles Times*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1967, p. 3; ‘Reagan’s Plans for Welfare’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1967, p. 38.

<sup>57</sup> For reading on the national picture, see Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 160-61.

<sup>58</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks of Governor Reagan to Fact-Finding Conference on Welfare Fraud’, 10<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder ‘Health & Welfare Agency (2/4), 1967-68’, pp. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> Dorothy Lawson reported that her daughter, Kathleen Layne, had been receiving payments fraudulently concerning one of Kathleen’s children. The matter was investigated by the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services, but no evidence was available in the archives on the outcome of the investigation. For further reading, see David E. Fulbright, Program Deputy Public Inquiry and Appeal Section, ‘Letter to Mrs Dorothy Lawson’, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1971, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder ‘Health & Welfare Agency (2/4), 1967-68’.

with one letter template even going as far as asking for further information from the informant to help with prosecution.<sup>60</sup>

The initial investigation took twelve months, involved five state-wide public hearings, and produced few tangible results in terms of calculating the amount of fraud committed, or the cost to the taxpayer. Nonetheless, of those cases that were investigated, fifty-five percent were due to ‘unreported income’, while an additional forty percent were due to ‘family composition’, meaning an ‘unreported man in the home’.<sup>61</sup> California was not alone in pursuing man-in-the-house rules, as Melnick illustrated, other liberal states including New York pushed this agenda too, leading to a series of legal battles throughout the late sixties, which the states usually won.<sup>62</sup> Feeling somewhat vindicated, Reagan commissioned further investigations into welfare fraud, tying the report’s initial recommendations to the state’s welfare reform bill. A subsequent January 1970 study reported that sixteen percent of cases sampled contained fraud, resulting in \$60 million of taxpayers’ money awarded fraudulently to AFDC recipients in 1969.<sup>63</sup> Given the prominent nature of Reagan’s welfare reform agenda, this evidence gave the governor strong support to reform and reduce AFDC, which he blamed as the primary reason for the spiralling cost of the state’s welfare bill.<sup>64</sup>

Herein lies the second major motivating factor for welfare becoming a ‘hot button’ issue: cost. Entering government, Reagan was faced with a fiscal crisis and so his administration harnessed a mantra provided by McBirnie, the architect of the Creative Society – ‘Rule less and more

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<sup>60</sup> See ‘Suggested Reply’, date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder ‘Health & Welfare Agency (2/4), 1967-68’.

<sup>61</sup> State Social Welfare Board, ‘Report on Welfare Fraud’, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO19, Folder ‘Welfare Fraud’, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> See Melnick, *Between the Lines*, pp. 88-90.

<sup>63</sup> Fraud Review Panel in the Department of Social Welfare, ‘The Recipient Fraud Incidence Study’, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P39, Folder ‘January 1970’.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Address on State of the State’, date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder ‘Health & Welfare Agency (1/4)’, p.1.

cheaply'.<sup>65</sup> The conservative governor claimed that the \$5 billion state budget and \$500 million annual deficit were the largest of any state in the nation's history and that they had to be tackled immediately.<sup>66</sup> The costs were hardly surprising given California's populace *was* the largest in American history. Reagan charged William P. Clark, a Stanford graduate who became one of the Gipper's longest serving and most trusted advisors, later working in the White House as National Security Advisor, with managing the deficit reduction programme.<sup>67</sup> Notably, the administration's bifocal approach for tackling the financial goliath was interestingly different from Reagan's presidential approach; it was grounded in old-fashioned conservatism: tax increases and welfare cuts.<sup>68</sup>

Action to counteract California's ballooning budget deficit was swift and decisive. The proposed 1967-68 state budget was cut by \$127 million or 2.5 percent, the largest single reduction in the state's history. The brunt of the cuts, an eye-watering \$50 million of savings, or forty percent of total reductions, was to be borne by the Health and Welfare Agency.<sup>69</sup> A memo from Spencer Williams, administrator for the agency, to Reagan's Cabinet Secretary, Win Adams, revealed that the primary proposal to achieve the ambitious target was to 'eliminate "unemployment" classification for AFDC', immediately cutting nearly 200,000 Californians from the welfare rolls.<sup>70</sup> Even though President Johnson had himself decried

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<sup>65</sup> McBirnie, 'Letter to Ronald Reagan'.

<sup>66</sup> 'Report to Californians: The First Eight Months of the Reagan Administration', date unknown, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box RS131, Folder 'First 8 Months '67'', p.7.

<sup>67</sup> Reagan's first Executive Secretary (Chief of Staff equivalent) was Phil Battaglia, but he resigned amid a sex scandal in August 1967. The incident strangled the early days of the administration, creating problem after problem for the new administration, it was only with Clark's appointment that Reagan managed to get a grip on the legislative process and initiate change. For further reading, see Paul Kengor and Patricia Clark Doerner, *The Judge: William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan's Top Hand* (San Francisco, 2007), p. 68.

<sup>68</sup> Clark, 'Memo: White Papers of the Reagan Administration', 21<sup>st</sup> February 1968, *RRPL*, Box RS22, Folder 'Creative Papers (4/4)', p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> Statistics taken from 'Report to Californians', pp. 7-9.

<sup>70</sup> Spencer Williams, 'Memorandum to Win Adams', 1<sup>st</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder 'Health & Welfare Agency (1/4), 1967-68', p.1.

welfare dependency, the scope of the cuts represented a damning admonishment of White House failure.

The third and final factor behind welfare's prominence in the public consciousness was race. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family*, published amid the aftermath of the Watts crisis, vaulted race and welfare into the spotlight by examining the structural relationships between poverty and minority communities. Moynihan's background was in sociology, receiving a PhD from Tufts University. Something of a 'maverick', the Assistant Secretary of Labor had long been interested in the relationship of social structures and race.<sup>71</sup> For those on the left, Moynihan's suggestion of a 'tangle of pathology' analysis linking the 'deteriorating' structure of black families – out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families – with rising joblessness and poverty was victim shaming. Yet as Davies pointed out, Moynihan's intention had been to find solutions to racial problems rather than undermining them.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, the report fuelled a divisive and explosive debate on the conceptions and roles of race, gender, and poverty in America.<sup>73</sup>

In California, Reagan consistently portrayed his first-year proposed welfare cuts in terms of breaking the dependency cycle, rather than as an attack on the recipients. He told reporters when launching his proposals, that 'welfare programs, as we have known them in the past, tend really to perpetuate poverty...we hope to change this approach – to give people the opportunity and the responsibility of earning their own living.'<sup>74</sup> This was consistent with his colour-blind

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<sup>71</sup> Description of Moynihan in Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 67.

<sup>72</sup> For excellent discussion of the Moynihan Report, see James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama* (New York, 2010); Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 66-68; and Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Reagan quoted in Richard Rodda, 'Establishment of Job Council is Proposed by Reagan', *Sacramento Bee*, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1967, p. A8.

outlook that sought to improve the lives of all Californians on welfare by putting them into work. In Watts for example, a trial employment program had already begun, under the supervision of industrialist, Chad McClellan. Using a \$90,000 private donation, McClellan created an employment centre, which he claimed found 18,000 black Californians jobs in the proceeding years.<sup>75</sup> Initially, it seemed that Reagan's 'relief check to paycheck' approach would gather momentum and was a constructive method to both avoid a repeat of Watts and reduce the state's welfare programmes.

On 19<sup>th</sup> July 1967, Reagan met with a group of minority leaders to discuss African American employment and welfare.<sup>76</sup> The meeting divided African American leaders in the state. Both the NAACP and the Urban League were excluded, as both had previously criticised the governor's attack on welfare. NAACP regional director, Leonard Carter, dismissed Reagan's conciliatory tactics, reminding Californians, 'It began during his campaign for that high office when he skilfully exploited the racist overtones of Proposition 14 and affixed these same racist overtones to welfare'.<sup>77</sup> Prompted by Carter's admonishment of the governor, the press pushed Reagan on his welfare cuts. One reporter directly challenged the governor, 'how do you reconcile your desire to help the Negroes with your cutting out from the budget of the seven or six anti-poverty centers?' The governor's response was found wanting. In his reply, he conceded, 'Those were an experiment that were put into effect prior to our administration', and he suggested that such a programme was inefficient because 'they were handling a small

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<sup>75</sup> Information on the Watts trial programme is limited, for a brief overview, see 'Reagan's Plans for Welfare' or Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 263.

<sup>76</sup> 'Eighteen California Negro Leaders Meet with Reagan', *The San Bernardino County Sun*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> Carter quoted in 'Negro Leaders Criticize Meeting with Governor', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 11.

fraction between them of the load, that it didn't make sense.<sup>78</sup> It was hardly a ringing endorsement of the positive impact of his Creative Society vision for African Americans.

By contrast, the governor was much more comfortable defending his welfare reductions and jobs programme in universalist terms – the notion that rising tides lifted all boats. When asked about jobs and minorities as it related to his comments on welfare in his inaugural address, Reagan responded, 'I said in there that while the program involving H. C. McClellan to find jobs, productive jobs for the future in the private sector of the economy was aimed at all who had need of those jobs. It certainly would especially help those minority groups who have higher percentage of unemployment than others.'<sup>79</sup> In essence, the governor was outlining the framework for what would become one of his biggest drives of his governorship: black capitalism projects. Later in his tenure, in co-ordination with the Nixon White House he would go on to specifically target jobs as a remedial solution to the cycle of minority poverty. At this stage however, the governor focussed his early attempts on promoting employment writ large, as a method to overcome the poverty cycle.

### *First Term Struggles*

The apparent success of the numerous fraud investigations was welcome news in an otherwise bleak first term for Reagan's welfare reform programme. As biographer Lou Cannon explained, the Gipper's troubles started before he even entered office, 'He gave good speeches, but he had trouble getting his government off the ground or finding others to help him do it.' This was unsurprising given Reagan's lack of governmental experience and his choice to fill positions largely with young men such as Phil Battaglia as Executive Secretary (Chief of

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<sup>78</sup> Exchange in 'Press Conference Transcript', 18<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P01, Folder 'Press Conference Transcripts – 07/05/1967, 07/11/1967, 07/18/1967, 07/25/1967', p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Reagan, 'Press Conference Transcript', 10<sup>th</sup> January 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P01, Folder 'Press Conference Transcripts – 01/11/1967, 01/17/1967, 01/24/1967', pp. 17-18.

Staff).<sup>80</sup> Born in 1935, Battaglia was just thirty-two when he became Reagan's right-hand man. Something of a prodigy, he had been accepted to the University of Southern California's Law School programme aged just twenty, after only two years of undergraduate studies. But his fall was as swift as his rise; he resigned only months into the gubernatorial role, amid accusations of homosexuality.<sup>81</sup> Given that, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported, Battaglia 'helped fashion most of Reagan's Creative Society program', the scandal stalled administrative momentum and crippled the first year's agenda.<sup>82</sup>

Personal scandal, however, was probably less damaging than Reagan's inability to find a suitable State Finance Director. With the huge responsibility of preparing the state budget, then the seventh largest in the world, and defending it in the legislature, the absence created a massive void in Reagan's team.<sup>83</sup> At least three men had turned down the role: legislative analyst Alan Post; Richard Krabach, the Ohio state finance director; and Dudley Browne, executive director of aerospace firm, Lockheed.<sup>84</sup> With less than a month before the first budget was to be presented, the Gipper's kitchen cabinet found Gordon Paul Smith, a financial consultant who 'knew little about the state budget and even less about the legal authority of the job.'<sup>85</sup> Smith's last-second arrival to the executive team and his inability to meaningfully grasp the state's fiscal position, made intricate financial matters such as welfare reform near-impossible.

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<sup>80</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 175.

<sup>81</sup> Battaglia biography in *ibid*, p. 176.

<sup>82</sup> Ray Zeman, 'Battaglia Resigns as Reagan's Aide to Practice Law in L.A.', *Los Angeles Times*, 29<sup>th</sup> August 1967, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 179.

<sup>84</sup> For reading on the struggles to find a state finance director, see *ibid*, pp. 180-81.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, p. 182.

The first year was embarrassingly devoid of meaningful welfare reform, even though this was Reagan's signature issue. The governor's favourability numbers fell to thirty-one percent and the newspapers claimed that Reagan had failed on a further sixteen major issues in the first twelve months. Such abject statistics left advisor and Press Secretary Lyn Nofziger to surmise, 'we were not only amateurs, we were novice amateurs.'<sup>86</sup> As 1968 came into view, the Battaglia scandal, the urgent need to initiate tax increases, and Reagan's inability to find a state finance director left his welfare reforms in serious jeopardy. Consequently, the governor was inundated with criticism from political foes including Pat Brown, who called his performance 'dismal', and moderate former Republican governor Goodwin Knight, who refused to give Reagan a public showing of support.<sup>87</sup> Soon, things would get worse: the government would face significant division within its executive team over welfare cuts too.

On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1967, Spencer Williams, the head of the Health and Welfare Agency, penned a vital memo in the battle over welfare reform that was about to engulf the administration. Williams' background was in law, serving as county counsel for Santa Clara County for twelve years prior to running for the state attorney general position in 1966, losing to Democratic incumbent, Thomas Lynch. At that point he was offered a role by Reagan and he joined the administration.<sup>88</sup> Charged with the task of finding \$50 million of welfare savings, he submitted eight proposals to Win Adams, the Cabinet Secretary. Highlighting the size of AFDC, Williams noted, 'if the decision is made to press for elimination of an entire program in order to obtain significant cost reductions, the only program that, in my opinion, can be considered in this

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<sup>86</sup> For further reading, see question 1, 'California Poll 68-01', conducted in January 1968, *University of California - Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal6801> (last viewed 21<sup>st</sup> April 2020); Richard Rodda, 'Assembly Demos Find Reagan's First Year Lacking on 17 Points', *Sacramento Bee*, 21<sup>st</sup> December 1967, p. 6; and Nofziger quoted in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 184.

<sup>87</sup> Brown and Knight discussed in 'Brown Calls Reagan's First Year Dismal', *Sacramento Bee*, 21<sup>st</sup> December 1967, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Detail on Williams in Bob Egelko, 'Spencer Williams Obituary', 18<sup>th</sup> January 2008, *SFGate*, available online at <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Spencer-Williams-dies-judge-and-member-of-Gov-3231907.php> (last viewed 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2020).

context is AFDC-U classification.<sup>89</sup> In this regard, the Creative Society *was* welfare reform, and its success or failure would rest very heavily on the ability to overhaul AFDC.

Outside of wholesale elimination, Williams's top three proposals all centred on AFDC. The first, 'eliminate "unemployment" classification for AFDC' would require the removal of parental unemployment as a basis for eligibility for aid. It would affect over 30,000 families, including 118,850 children, and 174,500 people overall. In total, it would save the state a fraction over \$25 million – half the amount Reagan had demanded. The second option, 'disqualify stepfather families for AFDC', would discontinue granting of aid to families where a stepfather was present. This would impact 9,900 families and 56,000 Californians in total, saving the state a meagre \$6.6 million by comparison. The third proposal was to 'limit AFDC grant to a maximum of \$400 for any family for AFDC'. This was expected to impact 2,200 families or 8,300 people, and again have modest state savings of just \$179,300.<sup>90</sup> The obvious implication of Williams's proposals was that the swiftest method of reductions would be to eliminate AFDC.

However, Williams took great lengths to express that following such a path would be neither easy nor politically expedient. The department head wrote of the 'tremendous program and political implications', by which he meant it would require serious legislative changes, which was far from guaranteed given the Democrats controlled Sacramento. Additionally, Williams noted, the imposition of these three criteria would affect an estimated 238,800 Californians of which forty percent were African American. Williams was strongly against the cuts and

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<sup>89</sup> Note 'AFDC-U' was a specific programme for unemployed parents, related to the broader AFDC welfare package. See, Williams, 'Memorandum to Win Adams', 1<sup>st</sup> November 1967.

<sup>90</sup> All statistics taken from attachment to Williams memorandum.

concluded his memo, 'I feel compelled to state that serious repercussions must be anticipated... they will undoubtedly stimulate further criticisms of the Administration.'<sup>91</sup>

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November, following Williams's dissent, other cabinet officials followed suit, igniting widespread internal debate about the cuts required. Earl Brian, the Executive Secretary of the State Social Welfare Board wrote to Bill Clark – the ideologue behind the cuts and Reagan's executive secretary – in protest at the proposed measures. Brian rebuffed the administration's position on welfare fraud and stated that increased welfare rolls were in fact a result of increased awareness about the programmes from social workers and doctors, who recommended patients to apply for support. This was part of a larger national pattern, in which 'a much larger percentage of those eligible for benefits now chose to apply for them.'<sup>92</sup> Brian further warned that enacting the proposals mentioned 'would be unwise from a public relations point of view, and it would prove extremely difficult to try to get legislation passed.'<sup>93</sup> AFDC cuts laid bare tensions between the varying factions within the administration.

On 8<sup>th</sup> November came the most damning and outspoken criticism of all. Ken Hall, the assistant legislative liaison for the governor, penned a stinging memo to Adams in which he unleashed a brutal assessment of the administration's position. 'No one has adequately considered the pros and cons', he decried before continuing, 'I do not feel that all alternatives in this area have been investigated', leading to the conclusion, 'these recommendations are the equivalent of "throwing the baby out with the bath water"'.<sup>94</sup> Hall's condemnation was dramatic, a testament

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<sup>91</sup> All figures taken from *ibid.*; for Williams' conclusion in full, see p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Melnick, *Between the Lines*, p. 73.

<sup>93</sup> Brian, 'Letter to Bill Clark', 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder 'Health & Welfare Agency (1/4) 1967-68', p. 1.

<sup>94</sup> Hall, 'Memorandum to Win Adams', 8<sup>th</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO8, Folder 'Health & Welfare Agency (2/4), 1967-68', p.1.

both to the ideological fervour with which Reagan's team pursued reform in its earliest days, and to the sheer narrow-mindedness and inexperience with which it sought to achieve its task.

Wholesale elimination of AFDC was simply unacceptable for Hall, who painstakingly outlined five reasons for his position. The first two were strictly political. Firstly, 'it is not possible to legitimize these reductions in terms of a decreased workload'. Secondly (and perhaps most-importantly), 'legislation to accept the elimination of AFDC-U would not pass the legislature.' The third and fourth problems were both political and moral considerations. Removing the entire programme, he argued, would harm 120,000 children, sarcastically adding that, 'I cannot believe that all of these 120,000 children are undeserving.' Fourthly and significantly for this study, Hall noted 'the majority of the impact of elimination of AFDC-U would be to the minority communities.'<sup>95</sup> Finally, he concluded, 'elimination' of the programme should be considered only as 'a last resort', once less dramatic measures had been carefully considered and found wanting.<sup>96</sup> The stunning rebuke from the assistant legislative liaison provided a shocking moment of clarity, one that might help save the administration from political disaster.

If the administration wanted to avoid another political calamity, wholesale removal of an important welfare programme seemed an unusual route to take. During Reagan's first year, America had endured one of the worst summers of race riots in living memory, albeit California had avoided the scenes that had damaged numerous other states. Given Hall's warning of the repercussion the welfare cuts would have on minority communities, the risk of fanning the flames seemed an unnecessary gamble. At this juncture, it is worth taking a moment to consider

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<sup>95</sup> 'AFDC-U' (Aid to Families with Dependent Children – Unemployed Parent Program), was a subsidiary of the main AFDC programme.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

Reagan's attempts to reform AFDC in California within the highly charged environment of the 1960s.

Powerfully buttressing Hall's arguments, from Louisiana's 1960 removal of black single mothers from the welfare rolls, to New York's 'Thirteen-Point Welfare Plan' of 1961 – race and welfare had become inseparable discourse.<sup>97</sup> Nationwide, the states had entered an arms race to reduce welfare, many of them employing racial discrimination as a barrier to welfare.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, California under Reagan's predecessor had not had the same inclinations. Brown had not attempted significant welfare reform since July 1961, when he signed AB 5, which gave welfare rights to retired non-citizens. As he described it, they included 'long-term residents of this state who have contributed greatly to the progress of California during their working lives.'<sup>99</sup> Brown did not have to confront the question of race and welfare, nor did he worry about expanding welfare rolls – for he believed the booming Californian economy could cope with the strain. Having inherited what Melnick described as 'one of the most liberal AFDC programs in the country', Reagan was left to pick up the bill.<sup>100</sup>

Added to the melting pot of racism and discrimination was media distortion. Less than half of AFDC recipients were African American, yet the changing media narrative of the underserving poor meant that in 1964, blacks featured in twenty-seven percent of welfare news stories, compared to seventy-two percent of coverage just three years later.<sup>101</sup> This misrepresentation arguably contributed significantly to national racial tensions of 1967-68. While racial unrest

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<sup>97</sup> For reading on the 1960s welfare backlash, see Ellen Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present* (Berkeley, 2005), pp. 116-121.

<sup>98</sup> For reading on welfare reform and racist criteria at the state level, see Michael K. Brown, *Race, Money, and the American Welfare State* (Ithaca, 1999); and Michael Katz, *The Underserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>99</sup> Brown quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 169.

<sup>100</sup> Melnick, *Between the Lines*, p. 124.

<sup>101</sup> Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, p. 117.

simmered in California throughout this period, there was no repeat of the Watts riots of 1965, in part because Reagan met with leaders from the NAACP and the Urban League to diffuse tension before it boiled over.<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere in the nation, unfounded suspicions of black exploitation of welfare amplified the voices of racist demagogues, including George Wallace, whose 1968 presidential campaign gained significant traction in the South – the place where blacks benefitted most from Johnson’s expansion of welfare.

On 9<sup>th</sup> November 1967, tensions in Reagan’s cabinet exploded into life. Having swelled in the preceding days, division in the administration over welfare reform reached its zenith forcing Reagan to chair a cabinet meeting to tackle the issue head on. The governor was told the basic facts regarding AFDC by John Montgomery, the Director of Department of Social Welfare, and Williams, Head of Health and Welfare. The programme affected 800,000 Californians, the increasing number of recipients was a result of growing unemployment, and sixty-two percent of all recipients were female. Interestingly, forty percent of AFDC recipients were African American, which was less than Chicago or Detroit (approximately seventy-five percent), but as Reagan noticed, ‘Still, it is four times their percentage of population.’<sup>103</sup> A later study presented by Williams in April 1968 showed AFDC accounted for forty-five percent of total cash grant expenditure, of which African American recipients comprised twenty-eight percent of all claimants.<sup>104</sup> As discussions continued, the cabinet approach an impasse divided by those who wanted to press ahead – Reagan, Clark, Nofziger – and those who opposed. It was not just

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<sup>102</sup> For example of the simmering state of race relations, see ‘Seaside – the Next Watts?’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1967, p. 22; for details of Reagan’s meeting with African American leaders, see Earl Behrens, ‘Reagan’s Message on Racial Tensions’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup> Reagan’s assessment that African Americans constituted approximately 10% of the population was reasonably accurate. The last national census (1960), recorded the ‘percentage of non-white’ population as 8%. For further reading, see Table 13 ‘Summary of Population Characteristics for the State’, *1960 Census of Population*, vol. 1: part 6 ‘California’ (Washington, DC, 1961) p. 3; for further reading of Reagan’s comments, see ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO23, Folder ‘Governor’s Cabinet November 1967 (2/3)’.

<sup>104</sup> Williams, ‘Report on Welfare: Problems and Progress’, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO24, Folder ‘February 1968 Cabinet Meeting Minutes (1) – June 1968 Cabinet Minutes (2)’, pp. 3-8.

welfare at stake, but this divide reflected a broader disagreement within Reagan's administration over its direction.

In contrast to the evidence Williams and Montgomery presented, the governor then unloaded a diatribe on the problem that had damaged his first year in government. 'Without exception', Reagan began, 'the evidence is that the overwhelming majority of welfare workers are of a philosophy that is contrary to ours. They go out and actually recruit people to get on welfare. Absolutely no philosophical belief in rehabilitation down on local social worker level.' As Berkowitz illuminated, this was not the case; since 1962, rehabilitation once 'so alien to the spirit of the Social Security Act, gained acceptance as a goal of social policy' as lawmakers transitioned the ADC programme into AFDC and from a widow's pension into a programme which encouraged mothers into the workforce.<sup>105</sup>

The Gipper then continued, somewhat bizarrely, by suggesting the state-controlled welfare programme in place was designed to help Washington government grow. 'The prevailing philosophy', Reagan lambasted, 'is, in fact, to make it financially impossible for the local level to handle welfare, so that the Federal Government will come in and take over.'<sup>106</sup> Since its origins in the ADC programme of the New Deal, AFDC had been wholly transformed into a massive welfare programme, that was true. However, there was no evidence that the purpose of this change was to centralise power in Washington. Yet, this expansion of welfare was so antithetical to Reagan's conception of America as a small government, individualist state, that he vociferously defended his erroneous position despite the reasonable, fact-driven arguments of the moderates in his administration. The outburst created an untenable impasse which ended

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<sup>105</sup> Berkowitz, *America's Welfare State*, p. 94.

<sup>106</sup> Reagan quoted in 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 9<sup>th</sup> November 1967, p. 4.

the meeting shortly thereafter without an agreed resolution. It was a rare, uncharacteristic show of ideology over pragmatism. Reagan's explosion reflected both the importance of the issue at hand, and his wider frustration with the difficult he had had in staffing his administration and advancing his agenda.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November, calmer heads prevailed and the deadlock in cabinet was broken. Staring down the barrel of a huge potential increase in welfare costs, the choice Williams presented was stark and clear: 'Should we proceed to other revenue sources for existing programs; or should we cut back, and where?' Reagan, deeply concerned, lamented to his cabinet, 'We took on legislation – now we have to ask "Can we afford it?"'<sup>107</sup> The administration had backed itself into a corner by placing such importance on welfare reform; if they dropped their headline proposal they looked weak, and if it was defeated in the legislature they appeared incompetent. It was an unenviable choice.

Recognising the dire situation, the Gipper instructed his team to prepare for a legislative battle. 'I am not averse to getting kicked with some of these proposals', he told his cabinet, for Reagan's solution (one he employed throughout his public life when in a tough spot) was to turn to the public for support. 'Just remember,' the Gipper charged, 'people in the street outnumber the people on welfare'. The task now was to 'convince the legislators that they are not committing suicide by taking a firm stand.' The governor sensed it was a gamble, concluding 'it will be terrible if we get defeated', but believed it was a principled stand to 'prove to our own people our own resoluteness'. Seldom did Reagan take such hard-line positions; he usually negotiated well, compromising where necessary. He generally governed

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<sup>107</sup> Williams and Reagan quoted in 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 14<sup>th</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO23, Folder 'Governor's Cabinet November 1967 (2/3)', p. 1.

as an idealist not an ideologue, and on the infrequent occasions he did draw a line in the sand (for example over South African sanctions as president), it ended badly for him. Reluctantly, the cabinet fell into line behind the governor, thus concluding one of the first major internal battles of the administration. It seemed that Reagan had managed to escape a tight squeeze; not only had he forced his will over his cabinet, but importantly, the entire disagreement was kept out of the press and his administration presented a united front to the world.

These two arduous and lengthy cabinet meetings resulted in a memo from Williams to Reagan the same day as the second meeting. The headline legislative proposal was to ‘limit the grant to AFDC and AFDC-U families to be the amount that would be earned under full employment at the minimum wage prescribed by Federal and State law.’ The memo noted that ‘this would amount to \$275 per month’ – a reduction for thirty percent of families, by an average of \$70 per month. However, achieving this would be no straightforward task, in fact, it would be near impossible. As Williams outlined, the proposed change would not only require legislative approval in Sacramento – dominated by Democrats and liberal Republicans – but importantly, ‘would require amendments to existing Federal law’ too.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, Williams ended his memo to Reagan with the caveat, ‘it is anticipated that support of several of these measures could well be in a losing cause’. Given the calamitous first year that the governor had endured, we might initially be surprised that Reagan was willing to spend political capital on losing issues. Yet significantly, as the governor had emphasised in the cabinet meeting, Williams grounded the administration’s obstinacy ‘on economic as well as philosophical grounds.’<sup>109</sup> It is revealing that Reagan’s ideological determination overwhelmed the voices of moderation; the governor clearly felt welfare reform was a matter of such importance, that a stand had to

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<sup>108</sup> All figures and Williams quoted in, Williams, ‘Memo to Reagan: Report on Social Welfare Legislation Programs to Affect Certain General Fund Savings’, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO23, Folder ‘Governor’s Cabinet November 1967 (2/3)’, p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Williams, *ibid.*, p. 2.

be taken, even if it meant defeat. Given California's liberal bent, Reagan's position was nothing short of futile – he was willingly steering his ship toward the rocks of defeat.

Weeks later, and with the budget that encompassed this new proposal only days away, State Finance Director Smith warned his cabinet colleagues, 'If we don't get this, the budget will sink.'<sup>110</sup> Everything for the 1968-69 fiscal year depended on welfare. On 5<sup>th</sup> February, with the cornerstone of his Creative Society – welfare cuts – on the line, Reagan submitted his budget proposals. Totalling a fraction under \$5.7 billion, it marked a 7.1 percent increase on the previous year, and included no tax increases, but a notable \$216.1 million property tax relief item the governor had agreed with Speaker Jesse Unruh.<sup>111</sup> Despite chiselling away at AFDC, Reagan's budget proposal on welfare for 1968-69 still soared at over \$450 million, an increase of 11.4 percent on the previous year.<sup>112</sup> Interestingly, and perhaps in recognition of the political difficulties cutting AFDC represented, the Gipper's budget statement made no mention of specific cuts, rather he preached in generalities about the need to end the 'continued practice of overspending'.<sup>113</sup>

The budget was met with widespread condemnation. The newspapers led the charge, highlighting that Reagan, the supposed fiscal conservative, had proposed the 'largest ever proposed budget by any governor of any state', with Tom Goff of the *Los Angeles Times* alluding to the governor's ideological tendencies by observing that 'he rejected any new increases in taxes to support the massive spending program, but he insisted that major cutbacks

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<sup>110</sup> Smith quoted in 'Special Cabinet Meeting Minutes: Budget Briefing', 1<sup>st</sup> February 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO24, Folder 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes, February 1968 (1/2)', p. 1.

<sup>111</sup> Statistics taken from 'Proposed State Budget as Seen in Capsule Form', *Los Angeles Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1968, p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> Proposed welfare total was \$456,048,100. All statistics taken from Reagan, 'Annual Budget Message to the California Legislature', 5<sup>th</sup> February 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder 'Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1968 [01/01/1968-03/14/1968]', p. 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

in the rate of welfare and Medi-Cal spending are essential'.<sup>114</sup> Having been skewered by the press, Reagan opened his first cabinet meeting post-budget with a mixture of sarcasm and frustration; 'Well, here we are – you spend-thrifts that recommend record breaking budgets – and on page 3 they complain about the cuts we made. Can't win.'<sup>115</sup> There was no escape for Reagan as Speaker Unruh soon doubled-down on the criticism by accusing the administration of 'again playing the shell game with facts and figures' on welfare.<sup>116</sup> Privately, Reagan lamented Unruh's reaction. Knowing the power and influence the speaker wielded in Sacramento, Reagan told his colleagues, 'Jessie [*sic*] already says we have submitted an "out-of-balance" budget.'<sup>117</sup>

The journey to a passable budget would be long and difficult. Reagan had very little political capital due to bungling of the state finance director position, the Battaglia controversy, and – to further add to the mix – the previous November, the state supreme court granted an injunction against administrative cutbacks of Medi-Cal on the grounds that it required legislative change.<sup>118</sup> If there was a way to demonstrate legislative and governmental inexperience, Reagan found it. Further adding to the criticism that the governor lacked control over his administration, three regents of the state university system resigned in response to Reagan's proposed cuts in education spending. He had been in office barely a year and had suffered a sharp rebuke and series of reverses.

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<sup>114</sup> 'Reagan's Massive Budget', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1968, p. 1; Goff, 'Reagan Asks Medi-Cal, Welfare Cuts to Balance Books', *Los Angeles Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1968, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> Reagan quoted in 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 6<sup>th</sup> February 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO24, Folder 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes, February 1968 (1/2)', p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Unruh quoted in 'Unruh Charges "Shell Game" on Medi-Cal Funds', *Los Angeles Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1968, p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> Reagan quoted in 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 9<sup>th</sup> February 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO24, Folder 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes, February 1968 (1/2)', pp. 1-3.

<sup>118</sup> For newspaper summary, see Eric Malnic, 'Democratic Unit to Call for Audit of Medi-Cal', *Los Angeles Times*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1967, p. 3.

By the time Reagan and the legislature agreed a budget in late June, only \$14.4 million of the proposed \$50 million of welfare savings were made. This was a significant comedown from the governor, and he took little solace that \$8.2 million of those savings came from his proposed AFDC reductions.<sup>119</sup> The battle over AFDC had come at the expense of the broader welfare war. Rolls continued to expand at a rate of 40,000 people per month because the governor had been unable to negotiate substantive reforms with the legislature.<sup>120</sup> Moreover, the little gains Reagan had achieved came at great cost. Budget Director Smith, incapable of getting to grips with the budget or the legislative process, resigned his post, effective on 30<sup>th</sup> March. As the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out, he was the sixth highly placed Reagan official to resign in the space of the first year, reflecting the catastrophe of ‘learning on the job’ in politics.<sup>121</sup> The entire debacle of presenting substantive welfare reform and failing to gain political headway against the Democratic legislature concluded, what Lou Cannon termed, ‘the most difficult period of the governorship’.<sup>122</sup>

The disastrous budget was a tough defeat, but it also provided vital lessons that stayed with him and marked a turning point in Reagan’s governorship. Budget Director Smith was replaced by Caspar Weinberger, a moderate and experienced politician who had previously served as the Chair of the California Republican Party. Politically, Reagan turned away from his strongest ideological impulses and began to practice the art of negotiation and compromise. This was not a rejection of his Creative Society vision – Reagan still believed ‘the aim of welfare should be self-sufficiency’, analogous to Roosevelt’s fear of the ‘subtle narcotic’ – but he also moved towards accepting that ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’.<sup>123</sup> The single biggest lesson

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<sup>119</sup> Martin Smith, ‘Reagan: Cut Welfare by \$29 Million’, *Sacramento Bee*, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1968, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Statistic in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 350.

<sup>121</sup> Tom Goff, ‘Smith Resigns as Finance Director’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1968, p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 253.

<sup>123</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1968, p. 2.

the governor took from this first year debacle was that change can be extraordinarily quick in the right circumstances, but when the situation is against you, such as when faced with an opposition legislature, it was better to get some of what you wanted, than nothing at all. Further gains could always be achieved later. In the case of welfare, his opportunity came at the beginning of his second term.

### ***The Family Assistance Plan and the Split in the Republican Party***

In November 1970, Reagan won a second term to the California governorship, defeating powerful Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh comfortably. Such was the ease of victory, that television network NBC called the result for the Gipper only twenty-two minutes after polls closed, with an expected fifty-five percent of the vote.<sup>124</sup> As *Los Angeles Times* political reporter Tom Goff speculated, if Reagan held larger political ambitions, which a tentative White House bid in 1968 confirmed he did, the Gipper now needed to show his legislative nous – something Goff concluded, ‘he has hitherto largely spurned’. The reporter suggested the governor should ‘accomplish those major goals on which he campaigned successfully in 1966 and again this year’ and listed ‘a major overhaul of the welfare program’ as an ideal candidate.<sup>125</sup>

By the time that Reagan made his second major effort at welfare reform, early in his second term, the broader political environment had been transformed in ways that boosted his chances of success. Following an unprecedentedly rancorous eighteen months of vituperation, polarisation, racial violence, and political assassinations, the 1968 federal elections returned a Republican, Richard Nixon, to the White House after eight years of Democratic dominance.

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<sup>124</sup> NBC prediction detailed in Richard Bergholz, ‘Reagan Re-elected to Second Term’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1970, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Goff, ‘Reagan Facing Severest Test as Governor’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1970, p. 1.

For conservatives, such as the editors of the *National Review*, Nixon's victory appeared to be liberalism's knell. Looking ahead to his predicted win over liberal Senator Hubert Humphrey, the editors praised the candidate, noting, 'He is freed of the subservience to doctrinal middle-of-the-roadism that made Mr. Eisenhower so-never mind.'<sup>126</sup> Yet contrary to burnishing his conservative credentials, the general direction of the reform impulse in the early months of the Nixon administration was surprisingly progressive. It was the combination of the conservative movement of 1968 and the subsequent continued vitality of liberalism in government that would prove so politically profitable for Governor Reagan in his second term.

The causes that gained surprising new momentum in Washington after 1968 included school desegregation, bilingual education, environmental reform, disability rights, feminism, and native American rights. The reasons for this momentum lie beyond the scope of the current thesis, but owed much to Democratic control of Congress (the same phenomenon of divided government that had undone Reagan during his first term), and something to Nixon's desire to develop a dramatic programme that would wrong-foot his enemies.<sup>127</sup> Welfare embodied this Republican reformist agenda.<sup>128</sup>

Welfare was already controversial because of its expansion and changed character, but notions of guaranteed income departed in new and more fundamental ways from the programme of 1935, accentuating the difference between the emergency New Deal welfare state that Reagan had endorsed, and the contemporary welfare state. Shortly after becoming president, Nixon

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<sup>126</sup> 'Nixon for Prez.', *National Review*, 20:44 (1968), p. 1097.

<sup>127</sup> For reading on Nixon's record, see Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York, 1994); Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*; Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*; and Iwan Morgan, *Nixon* (New York, 2002).

<sup>128</sup> For reading on Nixon's 'liberal' welfare agenda, see Vincent Burke and Vee Burke, *Nixon's Good Deed: Welfare Reform* (New York, 1974); Brian Steensland, *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America's Struggle Over Guaranteed Income Policy* (Princeton, 2008); and Scott Spitzer, 'Nixon's New Deal: Welfare Reform for the Silent Majority', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 42:3 (2012), pp. 455-481.

advanced a guaranteed income plan, the concept for which had recently gained limited acceptance across a broad swathe of both political parties.<sup>129</sup> Specific proposals were developed by Johnson holdover and now chief domestic advisor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who described guaranteed income as ‘an idea whose time has come.’<sup>130</sup>

On 8<sup>th</sup> August 1969, Nixon spoke to the nation via television address to announce this headline domestic policy. The Family Assistance Plan (FAP) was envisaged as an extraordinary liberalisation of the welfare state, and a replacement for AFDC, which ‘would be done away with completely.’<sup>131</sup> FAP guaranteed a minimum \$1,600 to every family of four, with government assistance being staggered until a maximum \$3,920 was reached, bringing families above the official poverty line.<sup>132</sup> At a time when Reagan was trying to reduce the welfare state in California, Nixon’s proposal was larger than anything that had come before. It would make no difference in states with generous welfare payments such as California, but an enormous difference in the South, prompting a major battle with southern Democrats. Most importantly, however, FAP laid the foundations for a colossal clash between Nixon and Reagan.

Despite the president’s claims the new system would ‘effect of the transformation of welfare into “workfare”’ – a system both philosophically appealing and politically viable –

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<sup>129</sup> Academic discussion of the Family Assistance Plan is sizable. While many possibilities for detailed analysis and discussion exist, examination of FAP in this context will be largely limited to the division the programme created within the Republican Party. Yet, for reading on the programme more generally, see Steenland, *The Failed Welfare Revolution*; Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty*; Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*; Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*; Irwin Unger, *The Best of Intentions: The Triumph and Failure of the Great Society under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon* (New York, 1996); Joseph E. Hower, “‘The Sparrows and the Horses’”: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Family Assistance Plan, and the Liberal Critique of Government Workers, 1955-1977’, *Journal of Policy History*, 28:2 (2016), pp. 256-289; Alice O’Connor, ‘False Dawn of Welfare Reform: Nixon, Carter, and the Quest for a Guaranteed Income’, *Journal of Policy History*, 10:1 (1998), pp. 99-129; Felicia Kornbluh, ‘Who Shot FAP? The Nixon Welfare Plan and the Transformation of American Politics’, *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture*, 1:2 (2008), pp. 125-50.

<sup>130</sup> Moynihan quoted in Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 212.

<sup>131</sup> Nixon, ‘Address to the Nation on Domestic Programs’, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1969, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-domestic-programs> (last viewed 22nd April 2020).

<sup>132</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 213-14.

conservative critics seized on FAP as guaranteed income.<sup>133</sup> Nixon's proposal became a favoured punching bag of *National Review*, which frequently contained articles criticising the administration.<sup>134</sup> One article for example concluded, 'when stripped of rhetoric about "workfare" and "family assistance," the Nixon welfare plan emerges as an extension of the present non-system.' Such was the *Review's* fury, the article claimed the president had betrayed the voters who elected him, and urged, 'the defeat of this welfare scheme.'<sup>135</sup> Conservatives' hostility to FAP was grounded in the notion of guaranteed income. It was unpalatable to anti-welfare crusaders like Reagan, because not only was Nixon continuing along the Great Society tracks, he believed, but FAP would actively *enlarge* the welfare rolls. As the 'zenith of the entitlements revolution', what Nixon had expected to be the great unifier, was rapidly becoming the great divider.<sup>136</sup>

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1970, Reagan delivered a dagger to FAP's heart. Shortly after the House passed Nixon's amended plan as HR 16311, Reagan released a statement in which he declared, 'After careful and extensive study, I have decided to oppose the so-called Family Assistance Plan'. Despite its liberal character, FAP embodied 'negative income tax' principles that had enjoyed support from some conservatives including economist Milton Friedman, on the grounds that its simplicity would allow much of the bureaucratic apparatus of welfare to be removed, and because it gave recipients some financial incentive to work. But Reagan favoured not work incentives, but work *requirements*: he thought welfare should be provided without strings to the 'truly needy' (the 1935 model), but the remainder should be forced into the workforce –

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<sup>133</sup> Nixon, 'Special Message to the Congress on Reform of the Nation's Welfare System', 11<sup>th</sup> August 1969, *APP*, available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2194&st=&st1=> (last viewed 26<sup>th</sup> July 2018).

<sup>134</sup> For examples of *National Review* criticism of FAP, see 'Deeper and Deeper Still', *National Review*, 22:11 (1970), pp. 292-93; 'The Plan Nobody Loves', *National Review*, 22:49 (1970), p. 1330; 'Nixonology: Centrism', *National Review*, 22:51 (1970), p. 1383; 'Dump FAP', *National Review*, 23:23 (1971), pp. 624-626; and 'FAP Con Game?', *National Review*, 24:8 (1972), pp. 206-07.

<sup>135</sup> 'Deeper and Deeper Still', p. 293.

<sup>136</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, p. 211.

the principle for which had been established by the 1967 Work Incentive program (WIN) amendments. As the governor outlined, ‘the bill actually contains work *disincentives* which make it possible for a recipient to have a higher income by remaining on welfare.’ Further, Reagan recognised that FAP would result in massive increases in welfare spending, claiming it would add an estimated 2.8 million recipients in California alone. Thus, FAP was hardly the diminished role of the state the Creative Society demanded.<sup>137</sup>

Reagan’s attack on Nixon’s headline proposal exposed division in the Republican Party not seen since the Goldwater-Rockefeller days of 1964. Having been stressed by the 1968 presidential election, in which Reagan made a tentative run undermining Nixon’s conservative credentials, this disagreement on welfare reform strained the relationship to near breaking point. *National Review* carried an article in July 1970, ‘Protracted Republican Conflict’ which detailed the Nixon-Reagan fissure extensively, while the *New York Times* also carried Reagan’s rejection of the president’s plan.<sup>138</sup> The Gipper crusaded against FAP, challenging guaranteed income in a television debate in which he quipped, ‘I believe that the government is supposed to promote the general welfare, I don’t believe it is supposed to provide it.’<sup>139</sup> For Reagan, FAP did nothing to address his central principle about the permanency of the government programme, nor the impact that had on the size of the state. As he bemoaned to a reporter shortly after making his statement against FAP, ‘welfare has always been to work itself out of existence. Not to become something to permanently institutionalize this poverty.’<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Reagan, ‘Statement on HR 16311’, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P11, Folder ‘Press Releases – May 1970’, pp. 1-2.

<sup>138</sup> ‘Protracted Republican Conflict’, *National Review*, 22:27 (14<sup>th</sup> July 1970), pp. 718; Warren Weaver, ‘Reagan Attacks Plan’, *NYT*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1970, p. 24.

<sup>139</sup> Reagan quoted in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, pp. 352-53.

<sup>140</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Press Conference Transcript’, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P03, Folder ‘Press Conference Transcripts – 04/28/1970, 05/05/1970, 05/13/1970, 05/19/1970’, p. 1.

Writer Rick Perlstein, in his chronicle of modern conservatism, characterised the relationship as one in which Reagan's consistent pulling from the right antagonised the president.<sup>141</sup> This understated the inherent tension at play. Nixon profoundly believed as White House incumbent he led the party and the conservative movement, albeit in a fashion analogous to Eisenhower's accommodation of the right. However, Reagan's open opposition to Nixon's key domestic reform, akin to Goldwater previously, demanded 'a choice not an echo'. While the growing conservative movement had been sceptical of Nixon's 'pragmatism and his internationalist centrism', it had accepted him in 1968. Yet, as journalist Carl Rowan quipped, 'imagine someone telling you twenty years ago that a Republican President would ask the Federal Government to guarantee a minimum annual income to every family. You would have laughed your informant out of town.'<sup>142</sup> FAP was simply a step too far and Nixon was not the conservative president right-wingers thought he would be.

Within the larger context of series of disputes between Nixon and the New Right, FAP, along with other liberal moves by Nixon, gave Reagan a tremendous opportunity to become conservatism's figurative leader. With the conservative movement there for the taking, the Creative Society acquired a new political function, and started to become a stepping-stone to the presidency. If Reagan could prove that his colour-blind conservatism worked in practicality, as well as in principle, by passing his own sweeping welfare legislation in California, the Creative Society would not just repudiate liberal positions of the Great Society legacy, it would renounce the moderation of the Nixon years too.

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<sup>141</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, 2008), pp. 70-95.

<sup>142</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 211; Rowan quoted in Marissa Chappell, *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 65.

### *California's Welfare Reform Act of 1971*

Fresh from his re-election victory and firmly established in the national spotlight as a leading conservative figure, Reagan was no longer the stumbling 'citizen politician' of his early Sacramento days. His defiance of Nixon over FAP and a tentative presidential run in 1968 'brought conservatism more to the fore'. Reporter Tom Goff had the sense that if Reagan harboured bigger ambitions, now was the time to prove himself with 'a major overhaul of the welfare program'.<sup>143</sup>

As Nixon's FAP plan suffered painful defeats in successive congressional sessions, Reagan seized his opportunity to expound the virtues of his conservative agenda. Once again making welfare the cornerstone of his inaugural address, the Gipper urged California and the nation to 'turn away from increasing reliance on government,' and instead promote an individualist spirit dependent on the 'common sense of the people.' Reagan believed collectivism was a disastrous road, and he turned his thoughts to how his own state could overcome the welfare goliath.

Mandated by statute and federal regulation, welfare has proliferated and grown into a Leviathan of unsupportable dimensions. We have economized and even stripped essential public services to feed its appetite. Now the economic downturn has brought us to the moment of truth we have avoided for too long a time... In the coming meeting with the legislature eight days from now, I shall propose restructuring welfare – to eliminate waste and the impropriety of subsidizing those whose greed is greater than their need. The present confusion must be replaced with a program designed to save, rather than destroy, California's greatest resources – its people – a program that will maximize human dignity and salvage the destitute.<sup>144</sup>

As previously stated, Reagan felt he had to get a grip on welfare; its numbers were growing by 40,000 recipients a month, in large part due to the eleven-month recession from December 1969 to November 1970.<sup>145</sup> Entering his second term, the *San Francisco Chronicle* noted Reagan's challenges as 'a state financial crisis' and 'the grim prospect of partisan struggle'.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 107; Goff, 'Reagan Facing Severest Test as Governor'.

<sup>144</sup> Reagan, 'Second Inaugural Address of Governor Ronald Reagan', 4<sup>th</sup> January 1971, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P18, Folder 'Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1971 [01/01/1971-04/30/1971]', pp. 2-9.

<sup>145</sup> Statistic in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 350.

<sup>146</sup> Sydney Kossen, 'Sacramento's Back in Action', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1971, p. 1.

Nonetheless, welfare had to be tackled. His solution was a ‘workfare’ scheme that built on the WIN reforms of 1967 and later resembled what Nixon advisor (and later Chair of the Federal Reserve), Arthur Burns, and the traditionalists in the White House had recommended to the president.<sup>147</sup>

On 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1971, Reagan launched his second term’s legislative priority in unorthodox fashion. Democratic legislative heads, James Mills (Senate President) and Bob Moretti (Assembly Speaker), had taken the unprecedented step of denying Reagan’s request to address the legislature. They claimed the rationale for this was to prevent the Gipper talking in his usual generalities. Cannon, however, asserted the real motivation lay in the potent nature of welfare reform ‘and they didn’t want to give Reagan a platform.’<sup>148</sup> It was a petulant and naïve strategy, described by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as ‘partisan discord’, that allowed the governor to do what he liked best: talk to the people directly.<sup>149</sup> Unusual for a statement of this magnitude, Reagan’s television address took place not in the state assembly, but from a town hall in Los Angeles. An early precursor to the ‘I paid for this microphone’ moment of the 1980 presidential campaign, this address was advertised as ‘The Speech the Legislature Didn’t Want to Hear’ and attracted substantially higher television ratings than it ordinarily would have. Reagan started the negotiations with momentum.<sup>150</sup>

More unusual than the venue was the nature of the governor’s speech, for it was broad on both themes *and* detail, which attracted the praise of the *Los Angeles Times* as a ‘sweeping’ attempt at reform.<sup>151</sup> Reflecting an important stage in Reagan’s growth, the speech contained all the

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<sup>147</sup> Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 199-200; Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*, p. 134.

<sup>148</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 351.

<sup>149</sup> Earl Behrens, ‘The Hassel Over Reagan Talk Grows’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1971, p. 9.

<sup>150</sup> For full detail, see Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, pp. 348-351.

<sup>151</sup> Tom Goff, ‘Reagan Offers 70-Point Plan to Cut Welfare Expenditures’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1971, p. 1.

hallmarks of a typical Reagan address – attacking AFDC growth and lamenting welfare fraud – but importantly, it also included more than seventy proposals aimed at pulling California away from the fiscal precipice.<sup>152</sup> The governor asserted welfare was costing the state more than three-and-a-half billion dollars per year, ‘leading us into sure bankruptcy’ in the next twelve months unless the situation was rectified.<sup>153</sup> Most of the seventy proposals were concerned with reforming AFDC and Medi-Cal (the state version of the federal Medicaid programme), toward workfare. More akin to WIN than FAP, Reagan wanted a programme which served as ‘a form of compulsion, as an obligation on the part of the poor to the community, and as a form of deterrent.’<sup>154</sup>

Reagan outlined four basic premises to his reform package that aimed to cut \$850 million off the \$3.5 billion annual bill. The four steps involved: increasing assistance to the ‘truly needy’; requiring those ‘who are able to work to seek work’; reducing Medi-Cal benefits to ‘equal footing with the health care benefits’ to those who worked; and ‘strengthen[ing] family responsibility as the basic element in our society’ – broken homes, Reagan suggested, cost the taxpayer more than the heteronormative family unit.<sup>155</sup> The proposals were conservative through and through. Not only did the plan seek to reduce welfare writ large by breaking the cycle of dependency, but it encouraged moral family stability. Catching conservatives’ attention, the *National Review* concluded, ‘the Reagan plan may be a great piece of wisdom, or it may be a futile effort... one thing is sure: It ain’t the Family Assistance Plan.’<sup>156</sup> Reagan had his conservative credentials and this plan burnished them. The task at hand was to overcome the hurdle where he previously fell; getting it through the legislature.

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<sup>152</sup> For reading, see Reagan, ‘Speech by Governor Ronald Reagan’, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1971, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P18, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1971 [01/01/1971-04/30/1971]’.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> Berkowitz, *America’s Welfare State*, p. 135.

<sup>155</sup> Reagan, ‘Speech by Governor Reagan’, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1971.

<sup>156</sup> ‘Waaaait a Minute’, *National Review*, 23:11 (1971), p. 301.

Initially, it seemed the stalemate that engulfed the governor's first term would repeat itself. For several months various portions of Reagan's proposals were held up in committee, leaving the site of discussion to the newspaper pages, rather than the Senate floor. The Republican State Central Committee defended Reagan, claiming 'the Governor's comprehensive program to put a rein on California's run-away welfare and Medi-Cal programs would actually increase aid to the genuinely needy.' By contrast, Democrat Assemblyman, John Burton, responded, 'the governor's winning smile and smooth huckstering will be overcome by the glaring revelation of the inequalities and boobytraps hidden in his program.'<sup>157</sup> By June, the situation for the governor's reforms looked bleak, as the Democrat-dominated Senate Health and Welfare Committee slowly strangled bill after bill, leaving Reagan furious. The situation was so perilous that the *Los Angeles Times* declared the governor's proposals 'dead'.<sup>158</sup>

With Reagan's hopes for substantive welfare reform hanging by a thread, his only chance for success was dependent on two factors: a softening of his own position, and reciprocity from the legislature. With not just his reputation in California but the nation at stake, Reagan agreed to accept modifications of the proposed welfare bills in early May in order to attract 'broader support' and 'regain momentum'.<sup>159</sup> It was a marked contrast from his ideological 'all or nothing' approach of the first term. The ball was now in the Democrats' court. Vital to the passage of any proposed welfare reforms was new Assembly Speaker Bob Moretti, a 'brash and energetic' politician and the youngest speaker in California history. In Unruh's absence on the campaign trail in 1970, Moretti hardened his leadership credentials by becoming Reagan's

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<sup>157</sup> Both quotes in Richard Rodda, 'Solon Burton Calls Reagan Welfare Plan "Lopsided"', *Sacramento Bee*, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1971, p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Tom Goff, 'Senate Committee Kills Reagan Program for Welfare Reform', *Los Angeles Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1971, p. 1.

<sup>159</sup> For reading, see Hall (Secretary of Human Relations Agency), 'Memo to Reagan', 6<sup>th</sup> May 1971, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO27, Folder 'Cabinet Issues: May 1971 (2/2)'.

most vocal legislative critic, fuelling personal animosity before any policy battle had even arrived.<sup>160</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1971, to the astonishment of many Sacramento politicians, Moretti reached out to Reagan with an offer of talks. The young speaker proposed, ‘that we set aside our personal and philosophical disagreements’, and warned, ‘if we do not act...the people of California will properly hold us all accountable’.<sup>161</sup> The motivation for Moretti’s action, effectively offering a parley just as the Gipper’s headline plan seemed doomed for a second time is intriguing. The speaker was ‘ambitious’, ‘a deal maker by inclination’, and as the youngest speaker in history he was eager to prove his mettle – with Reagan on the ropes, he thought that now was a good opportunity to assert his political power.<sup>162</sup> However, the governor’s position was not as fragile as we might think; two-thirds of Californians thought he was doing a ‘good’ or ‘fair’ job, and the primary reason for that was his position on welfare.<sup>163</sup> The governor, with little to lose and everything to gain, agreed to a private meeting designed to work out the overarching direction of welfare reform and leave the detail to their advisors – Moretti hated specifics almost as much as Reagan.

The meeting between the two men was a battle; of wills, of competing visions, and of patience. The one-on-one reputedly descended into a shouting match, but both men were determined to come out with some form of deal as they were too ambitious to walk away empty handed.<sup>164</sup> After five days of discussion, broad brushstrokes were agreed and Reagan got almost

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<sup>160</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 354.

<sup>161</sup> Bob Moretti quoted in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 355.

<sup>162</sup> For characterisation of the speaker, see *ibid*, and Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 108.

<sup>163</sup> 67.5% of Californians thought Reagan was doing a ‘good’ or ‘fair’ job, while of the reasons for that approval, ‘Welfare cutbacks’ was mentioned by 9.7% of respondents, followed by ‘Firm on the riots at Berkeley’ (3.9%), and ‘effort to balance the budget’ (3%). For further reading, see questions 3 and 4, ‘Cal Poll: 7101’, conducted February 1971, *UC Berkeley*, available online at <https://sda.berkeley.edu/sdaweb/analysis/?dataset=cal7101> (last viewed 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020).

<sup>164</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 357.

everything he wanted: a form of residency requirement, tighter eligibility checks, bureaucracy was to be streamlined, and no guaranteed minimum income.<sup>165</sup> A further six days of negotiations by respective lieutenants hammered out details, and in late July, at a joint news conference, the two men announced an agreement had been reached.

Reagan, employing his years of negotiating experience at the Screen Actors Guild undoubtedly got the better of his young opponent. The governor conceded little in negotiations, except for a small tax increase and an appropriation for family planning services – a price worth paying – while Moretti, metaphorically battered and bruised, described the experience as ‘the toughest I’ve ever been in.’<sup>166</sup> The detail revealed the extent of Reagan’s victory: unlimited exemptions (a major source of expenditure) were eliminated, eligibility verification checks were introduced reducing fraud significantly, a personal property limitation meant claimants could no longer be asset rich and cash poor and claim benefits, AFDC was to be capped at a flat rate meaning no more incremental gains for larger families, and (the cherry on Reagan’s cake) a three-pronged welfare work programme was to be introduced.<sup>167</sup>

Signed on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1971, the Welfare Reform Act was the preeminent achievement of Reagan’s eight years in Sacramento. Once enacted, the number of AFDC recipients in California fell twenty-one percent from 1,663,564 to 1,311,919. While Reagan gained the credit for the decline, he was also the happy victim of circumstance as Californian’s welfare demand also naturally coincided with a drop in baby-boom births, and widened access to

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<sup>165</sup> ‘Report: Welfare Reform Act of 1971: Eligibility Factors’, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO105, Folder ‘Welfare – HR 1 (4)’, p. 1.

<sup>166</sup> Moretti quoted in Tom Goff, ‘Reagan, Key Democrats Reach Basic Agreement on Welfare’, *Los Angeles Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1971, p. 19.

<sup>167</sup> ‘Report: Welfare Reform Act’.

abortion which Reagan had signed.<sup>168</sup> Further good news saw an estimated one-and-a-half million people saved from joining welfare, instead using workforce placement provisions which quadrupled, while 42 of California's 58 counties reduced their property taxes, in part, because they were spending less on welfare. Overall, eighty percent of welfare recipients had their grants increased, funding to the 'truly needy' increased by forty-three percent, and over \$2 billion was returned to the California taxpayer.<sup>169</sup>

The result brought Reagan widespread acclaim; the *National Review* lavished praise on the governor concluding, "Will it [welfare reform] be known as the Reagan Revolution? Or will Mr Nixon co-opt it, as the saying goes? Perhaps Mr Kissinger should prepare to travel to Sacramento", while the *New York Times* noted Reagan had achieved measures for which he 'campaign vigorously'. The *San Francisco Chronicle* commended Reagan and Moretti for 'a good result out of what looked like a bloody legislative battle and fiscal catastrophe.' Historian Iwan Morgan described the feat as 'Reagan's greatest achievement as governor because it largely embodied his preferences over those of the Democrats.'<sup>170</sup> After several years of desperation and near disaster, Reagan had his landmark victory. It was the product of quixotic idealism and Machiavellian compromise, tactical gamble and political opportunism, and whilst not perfect, it was a product. A tangible product that he could use to burnish his conservative credentials and later campaign on.

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<sup>168</sup> Statistics in Department of Benefits Payments, 'Report on Numbers of Persons on AFDC', *Hoover Institution Archives*, Peter Hannaford Papers, Box 12, Folder '12-12 Collected Research – Welfare 1974-76'; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 109.

<sup>169</sup> Statistics in Reagan, 'Forward to California's Blueprint', *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 7, Folder 'Gubernatorial – California's Blueprint for National Welfare Reform', p. ii.

<sup>170</sup> 'Reagan the Revolutionary', *National Review*, 23:37 (1971), p. 1075; 'California Legislature Approves Welfare Reform Bill After Compromise with Reagan', *NYT*, 12<sup>th</sup> August 1971, p. 24; 'A Workmanlike Welfare Bill', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1971, p. 32; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 108.

However, not all shared the joy of the negotiated result. Assemblyman Willie Brown, who later became San Francisco's first African American mayor, criticised 'They're no such things as savings', implying that Reagan's cuts were going to hurt Californians. Similarly, Alan Post, the legislative analyst who was once considered for the state finance director role by Reagan, 'deplored the governor's cut in welfare' and lambasted 'someone's going to have to pay for it, and I assume that's going to be local government.'<sup>171</sup> Despite these protests, both Reagan and the Democratic leadership pressed ahead with the welfare package. Such was the act's success and influence, it later became the basis for President Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare reforms. Reagan's success was magnified by Nixon's failure; FAP was eventually abandoned by the president ahead of the 1972 campaign, having failed to pass Congress twice. Back in California, Reagan's welfare reforms provided an emboldened platform from which he could launch his own campaign for the White House.

### ***Conclusion***

Across his eight years in Sacramento, Reagan made welfare reform a priority. His two inaugural addresses boldly, perhaps too boldly, proclaimed that he would pursue welfare reform as a priority, and examination of his cabinet meeting minutes proved that to be the case. However, Reagan's experience of tackling welfare was a painful, but necessary, learning process. He stumbled at every turn throughout the first term and looked set for failure in the early days of his second term too. Yet, thanks to a significant miscalculation and tactical gamble by his Democratic opponents – not the first time or the last that he would be underestimated – he managed to achieve his aims and passed sweeping welfare reform.

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<sup>171</sup> Brown and Post quoted in 'Post: Cannot Live with Reagan Cuts', *Sacramento Bee*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1971, p. 2.

Importantly, his universalist approach was profoundly different from those who excoriated welfare earlier in the decade; the Gipper's plan of 1971 was not Newburgh of 1961, Senator Russell Long of 1967, or even Richard Nixon of 1969. Reagan's vision of the nation that found expression in the Creative Society was colour-blind. Above all, the governor's anti-welfarism was anti-government, he sought reforms to roll back the state, and to a considerable extent achieved this – it was perhaps his only significant achievement in California.

While it is important to consider the Creative Society as a rhetorical attack on Johnson's welfare programmes – a favoured pastime of Reagan – we must also view the Creative Society as something more. Not just a slogan, it was a direct assault on the then prevailing wisdom of the liberal largesse. Like Roosevelt and Johnson, Reagan believed 'welfare was as harmful to those who received it as it was to the taxpayer'.<sup>172</sup> The difference, however, was that Great Society liberals felt that state was crucial to creating a society in which welfare was unnecessary; arguably, Reagan has a much more limited view of the state's role: for people to succeed, government needed to leave them alone.

To an extent, Reagan's argument concerning the role of the state has been hidden because of the intricate and indivisible relationship between race and welfare. The obscurity of his colour-blind conservatism was arguably furthered by the timing of his emergence onto the political scene at the zenith of Civil Rights movement. As a result, contemporaries and scholars assumed Reagan's opposition to welfare was grounded in opposition to race, not to the underlying fundamentals of the role of the state – this chapter has taken the opposing view.

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<sup>172</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 349.

Reagan's vision of those few 'truly needy' that did need welfare was undoubtedly grounded in conservative idealism centered upon the image of self-reliant, two-parent, heteronormative family unit. It was an idea that infused a larger western conservative populist message about small government that also included education and taxation. Reagan's colour-blind anti-statism sought to return California and ultimately the nation to a mythical land of equal opportunity that was devoid of gender, race, or classist considerations. It was a vociferous defence of the American political tradition that played well to California's growing suburban warriors, the next question was how that message would play on the national scene.

# IV

## *Capturing the Nation*

*I don't think anyone could deny that because of this heritage of prejudice which the Senator referred to, there has been, and among our minority groups, a greater percentage who did not go on through our educational system – did not qualify themselves for the better jobs, and so therefore there perhaps is a higher percentage who find the army or the military a suitable job and a good job in the face of lack of opportunity in other lines.<sup>1</sup>*

– Governor Ronald Reagan, Debate with Senator Robert Kennedy, May 1967 –

### ***Introduction***

On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1967, just months after his gubernatorial inauguration, Ronald Reagan debated with Senator Robert Kennedy about the challenges facing the United States and the world. The conversation focussed on the two issues, Vietnam and Civil Rights, that lay at the heart of the nation's division.<sup>2</sup> The quagmire of Vietnam abroad, and social unrest at home, precipitated a sustained decline of faith in government. From a historic high of seventy-seven percent in October 1964, trust in government fell to forty-five percent by 1968.<sup>3</sup> Like a poison, hatred coursed through the country's veins, leaving historian Michael A. Cohen to surmise,

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan quoted in, 'Transcript of "The Image of America and the Youth of the World" Debate with Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and Gov. Ronald Reagan', 15<sup>th</sup> May 1967, *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library*, available online at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/the-image-of-america-and-the-youth-of-the-world-with-gov-ronald-reagan-cbs-television-and-radio-may> (last viewed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Polling throughout 1967 showed Vietnam to be the foremost problem the country faced. A January poll had 55% selecting it as the number one problem, while an October study had it first with 48% of the populace. For further information, see 'Gallup Poll', conducted January and October 1967, *Gallup Organization*.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed polling breakdown, see 'Public Trust in Government: 1958-2017', 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017, *Pew Research Center*, available online at <http://www.people-press.org/2017/12/14/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/> (last viewed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

‘everyone was angry’.<sup>4</sup> Yet Vietnam was just one tile in a mosaic of problems that produced a dire picture of the United States in the later 1960s.

In the context of foreign affairs and Vietnam, it was not obvious Reagan had much to contribute, exception in relation to campus unrest, given his role as Governor of California. Consequently, when Reagan agreed to go head-to-head with Kennedy, the charismatic star of the anti-Vietnam Democratic left, this seemed like an encounter fraught with peril. *Newsweek* suggested the televised meeting would be ‘the first eyeball-to-eyeball test of the two men who may well meet on the road to the White House’ in 1968.<sup>5</sup> The intense build-up somewhat resembled the fervour that preceded Muhammed Ali’s heavyweight fight against Zora Folley a few weeks earlier, both attesting to the new centrality of television to American discourse. Fifteen million people tuned into watch the debate unfold, expecting the two men to spar over Vietnam and domestic unrest.<sup>6</sup>

The governor’s performance was as accomplished as Ali’s knockout victory had been. Both politicians were pressed by students repeatedly on foreign policy, and they disagreed fervently with each other. Yet, the most striking difference was not on policy, but rather the way the politicians dealt with the students. While Kennedy endorsed their critique of American involvement, Reagan went on the offensive, rebuffing Kennedy with fact-laden detail.<sup>7</sup> The senator was left metaphorically battered and bruised. After filming had finished, a furious Kennedy, aware of his poor performance, stormed away from his chair and snapped at an aide, ‘who the fuck got me into this?’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division* (New York, 2018), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Gene Kopelson, *Reagan’s 1968 Dress Rehearsal: Ike, RFK, and Reagan’s Emergence as a World Statesman* (Los Angeles, 2016), p. 203.

<sup>6</sup> Statistic in *ibid*, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> Analysis quoted in *Newsweek*, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1967, pp. 26-7.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy quoted in Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003), p. 267.

Conversely, Reagan's performance was something of a revelation. The heated debate had forced television network CBS to truncate its broadcast for fear of protests at the students' anti-American rhetoric, yet the governor spoke in a language of unity.<sup>9</sup> After an accomplished performance, and in typical Reagan fashion, he closed with an optimistic endnote. Removing the frown from his forehead and smiling with his characteristic nod, he concluded, 'the highest aspiration of man should be individual freedom'.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting on the positive messaging and sunny optimism of the performance, Cohen argued 'nearly two decades before he ran for re-election as president with the slogan "morning in America," Reagan understood that he had to temper even his dark ruminations with a sense that better days lay around the corner'.<sup>11</sup> That next corner, however, was sooner than the Gipper might have expected. The *New York Times* observed of the debate, Reagan's 'willingness to participate as a specialist in international affairs is not likely to diminish talk over his political ambitions.' This impressive performance in May 1967 was the first step of a projected 1968 presidential campaign.<sup>12</sup>

With less than two years of political experience, however, it proved too great a challenge. Undeterred, the Gipper tried again in 1976, and finally succeeded at the third attempt in 1980. That, in part, is the story of this chapter: how Reagan converted himself from 'this "B-movie actor" who had somehow stumbled into the governorship of California' – to quote Frank Mankiewicz, Senator Kennedy's press secretary – into the protagonist of the conservative movement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Report of CBS fears in Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Reagan quoted in, 'Transcript of "The Image of America"'.  
<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *American Maelstrom*, p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> 'TV: Dialogue with London Students, Kennedy and Reagan on Answering End', *NYT*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1967, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Mankiewicz, 'Nofziger: A Friend with Whom it was a Pleasure to Disagree', *Washington Post*, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2006, available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2006/03/29/nofziger-a-friend-with-whom-it-was-a-pleasure-to-disagree/e1ec267d-5f15-4896-ab5f-bbf88efc656f/> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

Iwan Morgan argued Reagan's rise in conservative circles was, at least in part due to a white backlash, arguing the Gipper 'proved himself the most successful racial-backlash politician in US history before entering the White House.' Political scientist Thomas Schaller, going further, presented Reagan as the logical end to a linear progression of conservative backlash pursuit; the 'Southern Strategy invented by Barry Goldwater, accelerated by Richard Nixon, and perfected by Ronald Reagan.'<sup>14</sup> It is true that Reagan was able to exploit the backlash, even as he avoided the cranky negativism of the Birchers or the Wallaceites, or even of conventional GOP conservatives such as Gerald Ford. However, harnessing backlash directly was a rare departure for him, most explicitly expressed in his 1976 campaign when he deployed the 'welfare queen' stereotype, from an otherwise upbeat personality.

In contrast to Morgan's assessment, this work constructs a broad view of what the Gipper offered where racial politics was concerned. Through three election cycles – 1968, 1976, and 1980 – we see Reagan engage to varying degrees with issues of law and order, busing, and affirmative action to show how his optimistic brand of colour-blind conservatism asserted itself on the national picture by appealing to both the conservative movement writ large, and the ordinary voter. In doing so, I argue Reagan employed colour-blind conservatism as a philosophical tradition that was distinct from backlash conservatism. The profound consequence of that assertion forces this chapter to overturn the broader discussion of conservatism's rise throughout its pivotal years from 1968 to 1980 and consider an undiscovered fresh new dimension to the rise of the American Right.

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<sup>14</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 241; Schaller, *Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win without the South* (New York, 2006), p. 4.

Historians have traditionally seen race as integral to the national ‘rightward turn’ after 1968, culminating in Reagan’s political victory of 1980. Dan T. Carter argued in a revised edition of his study, *The Politics of Rage*, ‘the fervor that drove the Goldwater and Reagan agenda was always interwoven with racial attitudes, assumptions, and fears’. Similarly, Thomas Edsall and Mary Edsall saw race as crucial to conservatism’s success, arguing ‘race as a national issue over the past twenty-five years [1965-1990] has broken the Democratic New Deal “bottom-up” coalition’, which they concluded left ‘those at the top of the “top-down” conservative coalition’ to foster resentment that could be exploited. That resentment, historians Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields’s recent work, *The Long Southern Strategy*, argued, enabled the GOP ‘to capitalize on white racial angst, which was not in short supply in the South.’ The broad consensus was that white backlash politics undermined the southern Democratic coalition, giving rise to a racially divisive modern conservative movement.<sup>15</sup>

The top-down model was rejected by a new wave of historians (Maxwell and Shields proving a notable exception). Lisa McGirr, for example argued, ‘this New Right jettisoned white supremacy and staunch segregationism in favor of philosophy of individual rights’, and by southern and urban historian, Matthew Lassiter, who outlined ‘suburban strategies developed in the Sunbelt South, not a Southern Strategy inspired by the Deep South and orchestrated from the White House.’ For this new generation – McGirr, Lassiter, and Joseph Crespino – it was a story that rejected how the United States became ‘southernized’ or how the South became ‘Americanized’, for them the two were always one and the same. As Lassiter and Crespino outlined in their provocative introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ‘the

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<sup>15</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Baton Rouge, 2000), p. 8; Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991), pp. 5-6; Maxwell and Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (New York, 2019), pp. 2-3.

“southern strategy” thesis is popular and ubiquitous precisely because it reduces a complex phenomenon of national political transformation to another familiar story of southern white backlash.<sup>16</sup> This chapter provides a new dimension to this story by illuminating the alternative that Reagan offered.

Conservatism rose in national popularity while at the same time questions of race diminished in importance. Where Lassiter and Crespino contend that political realignment was grounded in ‘racial and class ideologies of white suburbanites’ to ‘a national white backlash against civil rights’, I find that the national consciousness became dominated by economic concerns of decline and malaise, not ongoing thoughts of Civil Rights progression.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, while historians have focussed and developed a complicated backlash thesis explaining the state of the nation in 1968, this does not sufficiently explain the roots of Reagan’s appeal in the very different political climate of 1980. This chapter drives through a decade of tumultuous conservative ascent to show how the Gipper embodied a can-do spirit that was antithetical to the resentment thesis, and was instead grounded in small government aspiration that consolidated his position as the leader of conservative movement and captured the hearts and minds of the nation.

### ***Law and Order – A Tale of the 1968 Election***

Despite Reagan’s successful capture of California in 1966, he initially appeared a strange and unlikely figure for the Republican ticket just two years later. A damning *New York Times* editorial found him a weak choice for California, let alone the nation, describing him as

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<sup>16</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton, 2015), p. xiii; Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Sunbelt Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2006), p. 6; Lassiter and Crespino (eds.), *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lassiter and Crespino, *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, p. 16.

‘innocent of experience in government, and his speeches suggest he is equally innocent of knowledge.’ Expressing similar sentiment of Reagan’s dearth of political talent, noted columnist Emmet Hughes described the Gipper’s gubernatorial victory in *Newsweek* as one which ‘dramatizes the virtual bankruptcy, politically and intellectually, of a national party’.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Reagan’s debate with Kennedy changed everything. Tom McCall, the Republican Governor of Oregon, praised the Gipper’s performance in the national press, ‘The other night on television he was terrific; he made Bobby Kennedy look sick.’ McCall believed his California counterpart was the ‘hottest political property in the country’, concluding, ‘I can’t help but believe he’s going to be a strong contender here.’<sup>19</sup> Similar praise abounded from Jim Rankin, the hawkish editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. For Rankin, Reagan’s performance was ‘frightening’ because ‘he says the “right” things with a boyish earnestness that is truly disarming’. The Gipper presented a positive face of conservatism, marking a sharp departure even from his earlier years and certainly from other conservative contemporaries. For Rankin, the debate performance put Reagan ‘in a good position to get it [the nomination]’ and gave him momentum that ‘can swing the Republican nomination for the presidency’.<sup>20</sup>

With the nation sliding into chaos and President Johnson’s approval ratings plummeting, new opportunities presented themselves for the right to make political headway.<sup>21</sup> However, the Republican field was sharply divided between the moderate faction, led by Governor George Romney of Michigan, and conservatives led by former Vice-President Richard Nixon. Adding

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<sup>18</sup> ‘California Primaries’, *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1966, p. 46; Hughes quoted in Gerard DeGroot, *Selling Ronald Reagan: The Emergence of a President* (London, 2015), p. 248.

<sup>19</sup> McCall quoted in Warren Weaver, ‘Oregon GOP Sees a Shift to Right’, *NYT*, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1967, p. 54; and ‘The Public Record of Ronald Reagan’, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *Congressional Quarterly*, p. 1306.

<sup>20</sup> Rankin, ‘Close Up – Bobby, Ronald Face the Students’, *Atlanta Constitution*, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1967, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> From a January 1964 high of 77%, Johnson’s approval ratings fell to 40% by August 1967. For further information, see ‘Presidential Approval Ratings’, *Gallup Organization*, January 1964 – August 1967.

unpredictability to an already turbulent environment, Alabama's George Wallace loomed in the shadows as a potential third-party candidate. In this context, it mattered that Reagan was Reagan – upbeat, positive, hopeful, and visionary – not a relic of the gloomy conservative past of Goldwater, Wallace, or Jesse Helms. With a small, but not impossible window of opportunity, press secretary Lyn Nofziger and multimillionaire backer Tom Reed, encouraged the Gipper to investigate a presidential run.<sup>22</sup> Somewhat cautiously, Reagan agreed to an exploratory committee and the wheels for a presidential campaign were in motion.

### *The Long Hot Summer of 1967*

Two days after Reagan modestly told reporters ‘if the Republican Party came beating at my door, I wouldn’t say “get lost fellows”’, the first in a series of nationwide riots erupted in Buffalo, New York. The worst of the long hot summers which transformed the election had begun.<sup>23</sup> Between June and August, 163 riots devastated the country.<sup>24</sup> In Newark, five days of devastating riots saw twenty-six dead and hundreds injured, whilst in Detroit, forty-three people died and over one thousand were injured.<sup>25</sup> It was comfortably the most devastating social unrest in a generation, forcing the president to deploy military personnel from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne – the first such measure to calm a riot since 1943. Such was the extent of the social unrest, the president spoke live from the White House and confessed, ‘we have endured

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<sup>22</sup> Reed was something of a conservative luminary, a friend of *National Review* editor Bill Rusher and F. Clifton White, the New York mastermind of Goldwater’s 1964 campaign.

<sup>23</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘The Public Record of Ronald Reagan’.

<sup>24</sup> Statistic in Julian Zelizer, ‘Introduction to the 2016 Edition’, in ‘The Kerner Report’, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Princeton, 2016), p. xiv. For further reading on ‘The Long Hot Summer’, see Steven Gillon, *Separate and Unequal: The Kerner Commission and the Unraveling of American Liberalism* (New York, 2018); Flamm, *Law and Order*, pp. 83-123; Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008); Malcolm McLaughlin, *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (New York, 2014); Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; Timothy Thurber, *Republicans and Race: The GOP’s Frayed Relationship with African Americans, 1945-1974* (Lawrence, 2013); Mark McLay, ‘The Republican Party and the Long, Hot Summer of 1967 in the United States’, *The Historical Journal*, 61:4 (2018), pp. 1089-1111.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 2005), p. 83.

a week such as no nation should live through: a time of violence and tragedy.<sup>26</sup> Pain and destruction had rocked the country to its core.

The political damage for the White House lay in both the riots themselves and where they took place. The overt racism of Wallace's Alabama was obvious to all, but the events of Newark and Detroit opened the nation's eyes to deeper, structural roots of racial inequality, revealing a nationwide problem. As a cornerstone of Johnson's War on Poverty, Detroit was supposedly one of the 'model cities' that would lead the nation into the twenty-first century and beyond. If Motor City, a place crucial to the national doubling of the black middle class in seven years had failed, then the War on Poverty faced serious questions.<sup>27</sup>

The blame game began as soon as the fires ended. Race lay at the heart of the problem. Capturing how the unrest had divided an already fractured nation, Tom Hayden (co-founder of Students for a Democratic Society and Newark resident) wrote, 'to the conservative mind the riot is essentially revolution against civilization, to the liberal mind it is an expression of helpless frustration.'<sup>28</sup> Conservatives were quick to lay the blame at Johnson's feet; the *National Review* observed, 'it is no longer possible to kid ourselves with the hope that bussing a few thousand black children to white schools, adopting open housing laws, and filling the pork barrel with anti-poverty dollars will induce our peculiar problem to fade away.'<sup>29</sup>

Elites within the Republican Party were similarly swift to lay the blame at the feet of liberal opponents. Senator Everett Dirksen, who had been crucial in the passage of the Civil Rights

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<sup>26</sup> Lyndon Johnson, 'The President's Address to the Nation on Civil Disorders', 27<sup>th</sup> July 1967, APP, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-address-the-nation-civil-disorders> (last viewed 19th July 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Statistic in Flamm, *Law and Order*, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> Hayden quoted in Flamm, *Law and Order*, p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Permanent Insurrection', *National Review*, 19:31 (8<sup>th</sup> August 1967), p. 835.

Act, held a press conference in which he alleged ‘mounting evidence’ pointed to a larger communist conspiracy.<sup>30</sup> The Republican Coordinating Committee, the party’s highest policy-making body formed in the aftermath of the Goldwater defeat, denounced that the president, ‘has totally failed to recognize the problem.’<sup>31</sup> In the months that followed, the body would recognise the importance of economic inequality to the debate over race, stressing the ‘special difficulties’ for African Americans in the job market. For the time being, however, the committee – like most Republicans and conservatives – saw political advantage in heightening tensions and pressing home the message that the White House had lost control of the situation.<sup>32</sup>

Segregationist George Wallace led the race-baiting charge. Multiple newspapers across the nation carried stories suggesting the riots only played into the governor’s hands, with a New Jersey paper concluding, ‘the beneficiary of the seething racial hatred is likely to be George Wallace’, and warned, ‘the 1968 backlash could be brutal.’<sup>33</sup> In the Republican camp, former Vice-President Richard Nixon vehemently followed suit. At a speech at Bohemian Grove on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1967, he argued the United States was ‘reaping the whirlwind for a decade of growing disrespect for law, decency and principle’. Continuing the attack, Nixon lamented ‘our opinion-makers have gone too far in promoting the doctrine that when a law is broken – blame society, not the criminal.’ The answer he offered was a tough stance on crime, calling for a ‘national crusade’ for ‘law in a nation whose people lack character.’<sup>34</sup> Nixon and Wallace’s pointed and

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<sup>30</sup> Dirksen quoted in Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 240.

<sup>31</sup> ‘GOP Statement on Keeping Order’, *NYT*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Republican Coordinating Committee quoted in Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 242.

<sup>33</sup> Vera Glaser, ‘George Wallace is Coming on Big’, *The Hackensack Record*, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 14. For further examples see Thomas O’Neill, ‘Politics and People’, *The Baltimore Sun*, 11<sup>th</sup> August 1967, p. 8; and Roy Wilkins, ‘US Riots: Playing into the Hands of Wallace...’, *Los Angeles Times*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1967, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> Nixon, ‘Speech at Bohemian Grove’, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *Richard Nixon Foundation*, available online at [https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2009/07/72967/?fbclid=IwAR3jM2pJHzhilaB\\_jWDA43Y41gyJ69AZ7dgAWPt496Qm84VCh9OeZz7TMDE](https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2009/07/72967/?fbclid=IwAR3jM2pJHzhilaB_jWDA43Y41gyJ69AZ7dgAWPt496Qm84VCh9OeZz7TMDE) (last viewed 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020).

cynical use of racial politics was a way of appealing to ‘a wave of popular middle-class and lower-middle-class resentment against the social changes of the decade.’<sup>35</sup>

By contrast, Reagan had more immediate concerns. Elected in part as a rejection of his predecessor’s handling of the Watts riots, the Gipper was keen to avoid another violent eruption in California. His response was strangely bifocal: a mixture of strong rhetorical condemnation and a willingness to tackle systemic problems of racial inequality through meaningful reforms. At the peak of the crisis, Reagan iterated this duality telling an audience, ‘if there is any good on this ill wind that we can find, it is the understanding on the part of the White and Negro community that we have a great deal in common with regard to opposing these mad dogs.’ Despite the governor drawing a distinction between the ‘good, responsible members of the Negro community’ and the ‘mad dogs’, the distinctive nature in which he described the ghetto violence indicated a racial subtext to his remarks.<sup>36</sup>

Reagan’s worldview profoundly shaped his response to the crisis. On the one hand, his colour-blindness made him unwilling or unable to see the historic legacy of racial inequality; he held the rioter personally responsible for their actions, regardless of background or circumstance. A fitting analogous circumstance was his response to campus violence; lambasting students as ‘hoodlums’ and ‘beatniks’, without acknowledging any legitimate foundation for their grievances. For example, the battle over People’s Park in Spring 1969 saw Reagan impose a state of ‘extreme emergency’ and declared in one press conference, ‘Those who want an education, those who want to teach, should be protected in that at the point of bayonet if

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<sup>35</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>36</sup> Reagan, ‘Press Conference of Governor Reagan’, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P01, Folder ‘Press Conference Transcripts – 07/25/1967’, p. 5.

necessary.’ In sharp contrast to Nixon and Wallace, Reagan’s anger in this period was fuelled by ‘growing campus unrest’, rather than black rioters.<sup>37</sup>

The Gipper also displayed a desire for meaningful action to combat entrenched inequality akin to Johnson’s War on Poverty and other Great Society aims. In California, he met local African American business leaders and pledged a campaign to ‘stimulate grassroots actions aimed at eliminating the basic and real causes of racial tension’, which he thought required ‘emphasis... on employment of minority group members’.<sup>38</sup> For the governor, systemic problems were best tackled through private enterprise and employment – vital tenets of his Creative Society vision – rather than any government programme. In this sense, Reagan’s black capitalism projects tacitly acknowledged inherent systemic racial problems without overtly saying so, thereby straddling a line between Johnson’s War on Poverty and the law and order approach of conservative colleagues.

While cynics such as Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* thought Reagan’s approach characterised handling ‘the race issue with some subtlety, rather than as a blatant racist’, the governor’s approach ultimately proved successful.<sup>39</sup> California avoided a repeat of the Watts riots, enabling the governor to turn thoughts toward a presidential run. By early September 1967, ‘Governor Reagan for President’ campaigns sprung up across the country. Advisor Tom Reed gathered over \$400,000 from wealthy backers and organised for the California governor to give speeches in strategically important states including South Carolina, Wisconsin, Iowa, Texas, Washington, and Oregon. Meanwhile, Press Secretary Lyn Nofziger crafted the

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<sup>37</sup> Reagan, ‘Proclamation on State of Extreme Emergency in Berkeley’, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1969, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO73, Folder ‘Proclamations – Berkeley Riots (1/2)’, p. 1; Reagan quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 105; *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Reagan quoted in Bill Stall, ‘Reagan Told Jobs for Negroes Key to Preventing Racial Strife’, *The San Bernardino County Sun*, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1967, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> Wicker, ‘In the Nation: Frontlash and Backlash’, *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1967, p. 38.

campaign issues, focusing on ‘riots, crime, taxes, Vietnam, and poverty’.<sup>40</sup> These were not, however, exclusively ‘Reagan issues’; Vietnam was *the* issue of the day with half of voters describing it as ‘the most important problem facing the country’.<sup>41</sup>

Herein lies the most interesting part of Reagan’s 1968 campaign: it was surprisingly mainstream. He was not, as Cohen declared, ‘a conservative ideologue in sheep’s clothing’, but presented himself as a problem solver and a deal-maker, telling reporters ‘I’ve never seen the point of holding out forever and winding up with nothing’.<sup>42</sup> In part, this decision was likely driven by Goldwater’s lingering shadow on the political scene. In contrast to McGirr’s contention that ‘it was not the beneficent moderate Republicanism of the eastern establishment... but a western and southern half-sister – of a far more conservative bent’, that characterised the direction of the Republican Party in the late 1960s, historians Nicol Rae and Robert Mason have shown the vitality of liberal Republicans during this election.<sup>43</sup> Against such vitality, at best in this period we can describe Reagan as a conservative idealist, striving to unite the disparate factions of the Republican Party and woo enough independents and moderate Democrats, to produce a winning electoral coalition.

On 28<sup>th</sup> September 1967, the governor launched his presidential campaign with a dedication speech at his alma mater. Reagan’s remarks focussed on the summer’s upheaval, leading him to ask, ‘are the problems of urban ghettos and poverty the result of selfishness on our part or

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<sup>40</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 258; Pamphlet ‘Support Governor Reagan for President’, produced by Ohioans for Reagan, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box GO152, Folder ‘Campaign 1968 (Presidency) [Press Clippings] (1/2)’, p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> 48% of respondents highlighted Vietnam as the biggest problem facing the country when asked ‘What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?’, with civil rights concerns on 11%, and economic problems on 10%. Collected by *Gallup Poll*, conducted between 27<sup>th</sup> October and 1<sup>st</sup> November 1967.

<sup>42</sup> Cohen, *American Maelstrom*, p. 211; Reagan quoted in Alan Otten, ‘Reagan’s Road’, *Wall Street Journal*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1967, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 216; Rae, *The Decline and Fall of Liberal Republicans from 1952 to the Present* (New York, 1989); Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

indifference to suffering?’ ‘No’ was his answer. Instead, he believed the problem was a liberal Washington largesse deviating from American individualist tradition. ‘We have forgotten man’s spiritual heritage’, the governor remarked, ‘we have placed security above freedom and confused the citizen’s responsibility to society with society’s responsibility to the individual.’<sup>44</sup> Reagan’s address was distinctive for its clarity of attack on the Great Society, seamlessly linking poverty, government welfare programmes, and social unrest.

Throughout the final months of 1967, Reagan’s nationwide tour carved out his position in the presidential race. While mainstream on the issues, he was clearly the anti-Great Society candidate and this played well – a Harris Survey saw Reagan beating Johnson by five points.<sup>45</sup> His pitch centred on the evils of big government, rather than the law and order approach espoused by Nixon. The Gipper told South Carolina Republicans, ‘we could not accept the philosophy that big government is the best government’, while he told Wisconsinites, ‘Democrats and independents alike are joining hands with us to protest at the polls what has been going on in their governments.’ The same theme was reiterated to Kentuckians, with whom he quipped, ‘a government program is the nearest thing to eternal life we will ever see on this earth.’<sup>46</sup> His speeches were devoid of racial considerations and there was little mention of the summer riots. Rather, it was government largesse he railed against. As he had employed in California, his distinctive vision for America was based upon his Creative Society – it was

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<sup>44</sup> Reagan, ‘Excerpts from Speech at Eureka College’, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1967 [06/20/1967 – 09/28/1967]’, pp. 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> A head-to-head poll placed Reagan on 46%, Johnson on 41%, with 13% not sure. Collected by *Harris Survey*, October 1967.

<sup>46</sup> Reagan, ‘Speech to South Carolina Republican State Central Committee’, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1967 [09/29/1967 - 12/31/1967]’, p. 1; Reagan, ‘Speech to Wisconsin Republican State Central Committee’, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1967 [09/29/1967 - 12/31/1967]’, p. 1; Reagan, ‘Speech in Louisville, Kentucky’, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1967, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1967 [09/29/1967 - 12/31/1967]’, p. 2.

positive, uplifting, and hopeful that if government could be removed from the backs of the people, they would thrive.

### ***The Kerner Report, King Assassination, and the Road to a Republican White House***

On 1<sup>st</sup> March 1968, racial tensions abounded into the national consciousness once more. The *Washington Post* published a front-page article from a leaked summary of the Kerner Report – an investigative commission to understand the reasons behind the race riots the previous summer – entitled, ‘Racism, Poverty Blamed for Riots’. Quoting directly, ‘America’, the opening line read, ‘is dividing into two societies – black and white, separate and unequal.’ It was a damning indictment of the Johnson administration which etched itself into the national psyche. Diametrically opposed to the president’s criticism of the rioters, the *Post* extensively reported Kerner’s words; ‘The riots are not caused by conspirators, but arise from an “explosive mixture” of pervasive discrimination, poverty, and Negro concentration in the slums. “White racism” is basically responsible for that mixture.’<sup>47</sup>

Predictably, conservatives were outraged. Nixon lamented that the report ‘blames everybody for the riots except the perpetrators’, while segregationist Georgia Governor Lester Maddox complained, ‘I say it isn’t racism...it’s communism. I know it is.’<sup>48</sup> As evidenced by Harvard political scientist Edward Banfield’s notorious book chapter ‘Rioting Mainly for Profit and Fun’ in his study *Unheavenly City*, the political arena was once again heating up over blame for the unrest. Banfield, a prominent critic of federal aid to relieve urban poverty and later Reagan advisor, typified the disconnect for many conservatives between the upheaval and broader social conditions; ‘It is naïve to think that efforts to end racial injustice and to eliminate

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<sup>47</sup> William Chapman, ‘Racism, Poverty Blamed for Riots’, *The Washington Post*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1968, p. A1.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Nixon quoted in Zelizer, *The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, p. xxxii; Lester Maddox quoted in Richard Lyons, ‘Riot Report Sends Out Sharp Shock Waves’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1968, p. 4.

poverty, slums, and unemployment will have an appreciable effect upon the amount of rioting'.<sup>49</sup>

By contrast, Reagan took a softer position on Kerner's findings. In the weeks following the report's release, the governor took a series of meetings across his state with senior leaders of varying minority communities. At first glance, this series of meetings appeared superficial, politically exploitative even, but a speech he gave to the Californian Republican Assembly on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1968 suggested otherwise. Speaking from the historic Claremont Hotel in Berkeley, Reagan charged his fellow Republicans with the task of 'proving' that the 'stigma' of 'white racism' did not exist in their party. In a powerful series of statements, he spoke of how 'I have been learning at first hand from them how our education system has failed them... how our economic system has failed them, failed to extend the bounty that is the right of any of our citizens.'<sup>50</sup> It was a surprising and seemingly sincere acceptance that change was needed.

Given the context of national unrest, racial tension, and the turbulent reception of the report, this speech was the closest Reagan came to recognise and acknowledge the intensely different lived experience of African Americans in national life. It was also the only tacit confession the divine and unique American experience did not endow all equally with opportunity – systemic barriers did perhaps exist for minorities in the United States. The tours to an extent achieved a dual purpose of 'educating Reagan about the problems of minorities and making the public relations point that the governor was reaching out to them'. Showing a deeper sympathy to African Americans than he ever would as president, the governor's engagement, was 'widely

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<sup>49</sup> Banfield, *The Unheavenly City: The Nature and Future of Our Urban Crisis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Boston, 1970), p. 205.

<sup>50</sup> Reagan, 'Speech to California Republican Assembly', 30<sup>th</sup> March 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder 'Press Releases – April 1968', pp. 1-2.

credited for helping to save California from the serious disorders that occurred elsewhere'.<sup>51</sup> It was a rare crack in an otherwise calcified and resolved colour-blind individualistic philosophy.

The logical next question for those seeking to understand Reagan, is ask why did his colour-blindness break in *that* moment? Perhaps his worldview was temporarily impacted by a conversation with one African American who told the governor, 'We would pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, but we have no boots.'<sup>52</sup> This statement challenged his preconceived and rigid worldview that placed problem and solution on the individual. Until this time, Reagan had perceived a world in which racism only manifested in individual perpetrators, requiring individual change. He was blind to the systemic, entrenched, problems which subjugated minorities across a swathe of issues throughout the nation. It was a tunnel-visioned outlook that allowed for change on the micro-level, but shielded macro concerns. Whenever Reagan was challenged over his civil rights record, he refuted claims of broad inaction by detailing specific actions of personal corrective justice – sheltering black high school teammates refused lodging at a segregated hotel, or as president paying a visit to a family whose front lawn had a burning cross planted in it. His state-wide travels undoubtedly challenged that worldview.

This election also presented Reagan with a broader opportunity to tackle a related problem: the growth of welfare. Put forward with characteristic optimism against the dour and divisive national backdrop, the governor saw an opening to break down the cycle of welfarism. In the same sweeping address he tacitly acknowledged the inherently different lived experiences, the Gipper told Republicans, 'you and I have to do something about this [welfare]... It is our responsibility, but at the same time, it is good business. The alternative is to continue to support

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<sup>51</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 263; Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> Quote provided in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 101.

many of them on the dole, to perpetuate their poverty.’<sup>53</sup> Sympathetic to African American problems, Reagan advocated Creative Society public-private partnerships as the solution. He blamed the poverty cycle – a product of gross liberal Great Society excess – for the tearing of the American character, not the individuals. At a time when other conservatives were cultivating backlash, Reagan was offering a positive solution to problems.

On 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968, less than a week after Reagan’s speech at Berkeley, Martin Luther King was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Reagan, who endured a difficult relationship with King (and would later oppose the creation of a federal holiday on King’s birthday), described the assassination as a ‘shocking act of violence’, adding that ‘our nation died a little last night.’<sup>54</sup> As the news filtered into every home in the nation, violence again swept across cities from coast to coast. Over one hundred cities were damaged, thirty-nine people were killed, and thousands more arrested.<sup>55</sup> The brutal assassination plunged the nation deeper into a quagmire of disorder and despair. There was a growing sense that anarchy was imminent. Over half of Americans stated they would be willing to shoot people if a riot broke out, over two-thirds felt police were ill-trained for riots, while over four in five felt that law and order had broken down.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Reagan, ‘Speech to California Republican Assembly’.

<sup>54</sup> Reagan, ‘Memo to the Press on the Murder of Martin Luther King’, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Collection, Box PO8, Folder ‘Press Releases – April 1968’; Reagan quoted in ‘Domestic Issues: Civil Rights’, *Congressional Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1968, p. 986.

<sup>55</sup> Statistics taken from Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, p. 262.

<sup>56</sup> When asked, ‘Would you or a member of your family use your gun to shoot other people in case of a riot or not?’ 51% replied in the affirmative, while only 32% would not. Collected by *Harris Survey*, conducted March 1968; when asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘Law and order has broken down in this country’, 81% of respondents agreed, while 14% disagreed. Collected by *Harris Survey*, conducted August 1968; and when asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘The police forces are not trained to properly handle the [1967 race] riots’, 67% agreed, while 20% disagreed. Collected by *Harris Survey*, conducted during March 1968.

From this collective sense of hopelessness and despair, three related issues emerged. The first, was the sense the Great Society had failed. For ‘no sooner had presidential government reached its zenith, than it imploded’, leading to ‘the collapse of the liberal political order’. The second, was the need for the Republican Party to find a short-term, issue-based strategy that would capitalise on the carnage on the streets and win the White House in November. In this new environment, it was not enough just to denounce rioters or the Great Society, one had to have a positive message too. Finally, the conservative movement needed a broad ideological response to capture the middle-ground vacated by the collapse of the liberal coalition, which most profoundly expressed itself in economic terms through the decline of ‘New Deal philosophy’ with a ‘conservative consensus’ that ‘sought to set the market free’.<sup>57</sup>

Republicans’ short-term response to tumult and anarchy was a potent and effective ‘law and order’ campaign. Nixon, the front-runner by spring 1968, continually courted white middle-class and working-class voters by harnessing a fully-fledged law and order theme throughout the campaign trail. By effectively appropriating the language of the Civil Rights movement, telling supporters ‘the most fundamental civil right is the right to be safe from violence’, he exploited like ‘no other domestic issue’, concerns over crime.<sup>58</sup> Nixon’s entire strategy was ‘not a universal approach’, but presaged on cynical racial segmentational appeals to both white *and* black constituencies. For whites, he offered law and order, and for blacks he advanced ‘classist appeals for minority enterprise’.<sup>59</sup> It was a more pessimistic, divisive, and politically expedient campaign than anything Reagan was willing to offer.

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<sup>57</sup> Milkis, ‘The Political Effects of the Great Society’, in Gary Wolfram (ed.), *The Great Society* (Hillsdale, 2012), p. 11; for Nixon’s embrace of a positive future, see Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement*, pp. 216-18; Hodgson, *More Equal Than Others: America from Nixon to the New Century* (Princeton, 2004), pp. 24-25.

<sup>58</sup> Nixon quoted in ‘Domestic Issues: Civil Rights’, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1968, *Congressional Quarterly*, p. 987; Thurber, *Republicans and Race*, p. 277.

<sup>59</sup> Leah Wright Rigueur, *Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton, 2015), pp. 136-37.

By contrast, Reagan viewed the situation in universalist terms. A speech in Little Rock, Arkansas – a place enshrined in Civil Rights history – less than two weeks before the Republican convention clarified his position. Tackling charges of Republican backlash politics, Reagan rebutted, ‘I realize that when a Republican talks “law and order” there are those who say he is using a code word appealing to the white backlash,’ but he continued, ‘the implication is that we cannot be for law and order and at the same time be for improving the lot of our minorities. This is nonsense.’ For the Gipper, it was possible to be for both law and order *and* the improvement of minority rights and communities, echoing the paradoxical dichotomy many Californians took over Civil Rights advancement and Proposition 14 in 1964. The governor recognised minorities were ‘the principal victims of riots in terms of suffering, death, and economic losses.’ His answer was ‘no man must be above the law and no man beneath it. All men must stand equal before the law, regardless of race, religion or station in life.’<sup>60</sup> For Reagan, solutions lay in private enterprise, employment, and individual equality, not government welfare programmes.

Yet for the Gipper, his speech at Little Rock was too little too late. For months, two distinct problems beset his proto campaign. The first was a severe political miscalculation in the early days of the primary race. Led by financier Tom Reed and Goldwater tactician Clifton White, Reagan’s campaign strategy relied on moderate George Romney remaining the Republican frontrunner. With Romney as a powerful force in the campaign, aides believed the Gipper offered the conservative alternative, and could capture the party from the right as Goldwater had done in the previous election cycle. There was no way to predict what happened next. Romney unwittingly ended his campaign in spectacular fashion when, returning from a visit to

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<sup>60</sup> Reagan, ‘Speech in Little Rock, Arkansas’, 20<sup>th</sup> July 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches – Governor Ronald Reagan, 1968 [05/21/1968-07/31/1968]’, pp. 1-3.

Vietnam, he told reporters, ‘I just had the greatest brainwashing that anybody can get.’ The blunder sank Romney’s campaign in remarkable style, blowing the primary race wide open, and decimated Reagan’s plan before it began.<sup>61</sup>

Had the Gipper acted swiftly, he still could have been the alternative option conservatives desired, but herein lay his second major problem – he was indecisive. Just as the embryonic campaign developed, the governor’s administration was rocked by the Battaglia homosexual scandal, from which, election chronicler Theodore White asserted, ‘the Reagan campaign never recovered.’<sup>62</sup> That is something of a mischaracterisation. The writer correctly identified the incident led the Gipper to ‘withdraw’, but a full campaign was still possible, had he immediately sought to capture the South – a place yearning for a ‘respectable’ brand of ‘optimistic conservatism’ according to historians Earl Black and Merle Black.<sup>63</sup> Yet Reagan equivocated, leaving the door open for Nixon, who unabashedly courted southern conservative support. Promising Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, John Tower of Texas, and John Grenier of Mississippi, that the Supreme Court – the final arbiter of civil rights matters – needed ‘re-interpretation’ with ‘all deliberate speed’, Nixon bought the South and set the stage for the Southern Strategy.<sup>64</sup> The door on Reagan’s first presidential race was quietly closed.

### ***Legacy of the 1968 Election***

On 5<sup>th</sup> November, the nation returned Republican Richard Nixon to the White House with a tight election victory over liberal Senator Hubert Humphrey. The lasting impact of the election was deep, sustained, and profound. Nixon’s use of law and order politics proved a potent

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<sup>61</sup> Romney incident in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, pp. 256-58.

<sup>62</sup> White, *The Making of the President*, p. 36.

<sup>63</sup> Black and Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 206.

<sup>64</sup> White, *The Making of the President*, pp. 137-38.

campaign tool, simultaneously handing him the presidency and signalling ‘an end to the brief era of liberal ascendancy’.<sup>65</sup>

As an effective form of politics, however, law and order’s vitality was ‘short-lived’.<sup>66</sup> It was a response to, not a cause of, white middle-class concerns of the tearing of the national character. In its crudest form, law and order required a strong, centralised state, which was intellectually inconsistent with an ideology promoting small government. As such, it was quickly discarded after the election and it did not re-emerge until 1988.<sup>67</sup> Now the Republican Party accomplished the short-term goal of winning the White House, the conservative movement needed to think bigger if it wanted to establish its ideological dominance on the middle-ground. With the ‘right’ vision, conservatives could capitalise on the failures of the Great Society to change the nation’s ideological tectonics for a generation.

Reagan’s time had not yet come in 1968, but he took confidence from his embryonic presidential campaign. In defeat not all was lost, for he was given the ceremonial honour of formally presenting the motion to nominate Nixon as the party’s nominee for president at the convention. Greeted with rapturous applause as he took to the stage, Reagan spoke of the ‘common bond uniting us’ and encouraged the mission that ‘this great nation cannot stand or survive four more years’ of Great Society policies.<sup>68</sup> Expecting Nixon to guarantee conservatism’s place in the White House, Reagan returned to California to continue his own crusade. There, he continued his battle with the leviathan of liberal government, notably

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<sup>65</sup> Flamm, *Law and Order*, p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> For the reasons behind law and order’s demise, see Flamm, *Law and Order*, epilogue.

<sup>68</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Official Report of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Ninth Republican National Convention’, *Republican National Committee* (Washington, DC, 1968), p. 387.

vetoing more Office of Economic Opportunity grants for welfare and poverty programmes than any other governor in the nation.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, the Gipper maintained his unchanging rhetorical attacks on big government, accompanied with paeans to the power of the American idea to release individual opportunity. Striking a fine balance of denouncing state largesse as ‘the greatest threat to freedom in our lives’, with the promise ‘we are a great people’ on the verge of liberation toward ‘our finest hour’, Reagan distinguished himself in conservative circles from Nixon and Goldwater.<sup>70</sup> We can plausibly see this central preoccupation with enhancing opportunity for ordinary Americans as an element in his New Deal inheritance – even if it now took a profoundly different form.

Meanwhile, the long-term prospects of the conservative movement lay in supplanting the Democratic message of economic equality with a Republican anti-statism. Crucial to this changing discourse was Reagan. His brand of western conservative populism fused individualism, small government, free market economics, anti-communism, and colour-blindness to shepherd conservatives away from their backlash and promote a positive message. In doing so, his conservative vision soon became the mainstay not just of Republican thought, but of national discourse too.

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<sup>69</sup> Statistic taken from Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (New York, 2012), p. 239.

<sup>70</sup> Reagan quoted in ‘Reagan Looks Toward the Presidency’, *International Herald Tribune*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1967, p. 3; Reagan, ‘Speech to Celebrate Independence Day’, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1968, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P17, Folder ‘Speeches Governor Reagan 1968 (3/3)’, p. 10.

### ***Busing and the Road to the 1976 Election***

On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1971, a unanimous Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* infuriated the conservative movement. The issue at hand was busing – ‘the last important issue’, according to political scientist Gary Orfield, ‘to emerge from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the only one to directly affect the lives of large numbers of whites outside the South.’<sup>71</sup> Upholding a lower court ruling, the court declared ‘school authorities are clearly charged with the affirmative duty to take whatever steps might be necessary to convert to a unitary system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated root and branch.’<sup>72</sup> Although an earlier 1968 decision in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* had made the shift not only to desegregate schools, but to actively integrate them, the *Swann* decision brought busing into the national fold.

The result was a huge irritation for President Nixon, who appointed several of the justices with a view to appeasing conservative southern Democrats. In keeping with his Southern Strategy, Nixon wanted Attorney General John Mitchell to find justices where ‘our first requirement is have a southerner’, before continuing ‘the second requirement, he must be a conservative southerner... Third, within the definition of conservative, he must be against busing.’<sup>73</sup> For conservatives, busing was a crucial base-rousing issue at the heart of key concerns including federal versus state power, education reform, and Civil Rights. Despite the contested battle of busing and school desegregation beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and reified a year later with *Brown v. Board II*, for almost a decade following the second decision, conservatives had great success in stifling change.<sup>74</sup> Little progression took place except for

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<sup>71</sup> Orfield, *Must We Bus: Segregated Schools and National Policy* (Washington, DC, 1978), p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Supreme Court decision, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1, p. 15.

<sup>73</sup> Nixon quoted in Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005), p. 255.

<sup>74</sup> Supreme Court opinion cited in Orfield, *Must We Bus*, p. xvi.

brief punctuations of flashpoints such as the Little Rock Crisis of 1957, and the enrolment of Vivian Malone and James Hood from enrolling at the University of Alabama in 1963.

The following pages chart busing's explosive story in the late 1960s into the early 1970s for both Reagan and the conservative movement writ large, culminating in Reagan's exploitation of busing on the campaign trail in 1976. In lighting the touch paper amid a fiercely competitive primary battle with President Gerald Ford, Reagan exposed not only the complex nature of his colour-blindness, but revealed a cynical aspect to his individualism that was rarely so obviously on display. Further, in contrast to his largely race-neutral approach of 1968 and 1980, Reagan employed race-baiting in 1976 by using motifs such as the 'welfare queen' to appeal to southern support, upon which his campaign was dependent – the following pages investigate why.

Scholars have continually developed literature on busing, both as its own historical episode and within a broader narrative of political history. For many years, Gary Orfield's landmark study *Must We Bus*, shaped the historical debate of busing by providing detailed policy analysis with broader contextual exploration. Released in 1978, Orfield's work influenced opinion when he concluded that the matter to integrate 'in a peaceful, beneficial, and lasting way' was still an open and fiercely divisive question. For Orfield, busing failed its political, social, and educational ambitions to achieve racial equality.<sup>75</sup> More recently, Jennifer Hochschild and Nathan Scovronick persuasively argued that desegregation through busing in public schools was contentious because it encompassed a fundamental American paradox of balancing individualism with 'the fact that schools are supposed to equalize opportunities'. Most recently, Matthew Delmont's revisionist work *Why Busing Failed* challenged the dominating narrative, concluding, "busing" failed to more fully desegregate public schools because school officials,

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<sup>75</sup> Orfield, *Must We Bus*, p. 454.

politicians, courts, and the news media valued the desires of white parents more than the rights of black students.’<sup>76</sup>

A good but brief history of busing and the grassroots activism involved is historian Michael Foley’s *Front Porch Politics*. Where he argued that anti-busing campaigns were motivated by racism, rather than an American rejection of big government, I present it as a broader issue for small government conservatives including Reagan. Even though busing had diminished in the national consciousness by 1976, it still mattered in the South, where the Gipper harnessed anti-busing sentiment successfully to win the Texas primary against Ford in 1976, effectively keeping his campaign alive. Such a move, I argue, was part of a broader picture, later including affirmative action, which fed Reagan’s larger narrative that government was too invasive, and thus enabled colour-blind conservatism to gather national popularity.<sup>77</sup>

Busing, like affirmative action and public housing, emphasised the national scale of the problems posed by racial inequality. Delmont illustrated busing’s expansive reach when he concluded, ‘northerners found a palatable way to oppose desegregation without appealing to the explicitly racist sentiments they preferred to associate with southerners.’<sup>78</sup> Affecting the lives of millions of Americans across the nation in a way that no other civil rights issue could, busing became the potent, explosive, racial tinderbox issue of the seventies. More pointedly than analogous debates of housing and law and order, busing persuaded predominately white voters that government was overreaching into their lives, and nowhere was this more accurate than in Reagan’s California. The Golden State faced divisive busing problems, which

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<sup>76</sup> Hochschild and Scovronick, *The American Dream and the Public Schools* (New York, 2004), p. 2; Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Oakland, 2016), p. 21; p. 212.

<sup>77</sup> Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York, 2013), pp. 48-64; description as ‘oversimplification’, see p. 63.

<sup>78</sup> Delmont, *Why Busing Failed*, p. 3.

‘launched California down a desegregation path that was as precedent setting as it was contentious’.<sup>79</sup> This gave Reagan the platform to shape national debate and amplify his conservative voice, garnering political capital and legitimacy as a voice of opposition.

### ***Building the Base: Busing in California***

During the early and mid-1960s, Los Angeles County was, in the words of American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) activists Elaine Elinson and Stan Yogi, ‘as segregated as the Deep South’. Both writers pointed to the racially distinct localities of African Americans in Watts, Latino Americans in Boyle Heights, Japanese Americans in Gardena, and the increasingly white suburbs of the San Fernando Valley to make their case.<sup>80</sup> As we saw previously, despite early 1960s California being a bastion of liberal support, any change to the homogenous white status quo, as Governor Pat Brown’s demise proved, was fraught with risk. Progress was uniquely slow on the issue of housing and integration, and despite the Supreme Court’s 1954 and 1955 decisions, racially segregated housing communities most obviously reflected in segregated schooling.

On 11<sup>th</sup> February 1970, some six-and-a-half years after Mary Ellen Crawford’s initial filing, Judge Alfred Gitelson ruled Los Angeles County was deliberately perpetuating segregation, and must fully integrate all its schools by the 1971-72 school year.<sup>81</sup> This was twinned with another case, *Pasadena City Board of Education v. Nancy Anne Spangler*, wherein the Supreme Court charged discrimination due to segregation in 1976. With a huge front-page spread under

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<sup>79</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reforms in California, 1941-1978* (New York, 2010), p. 236.

<sup>80</sup> Elinson and Yogi, *Wherever There’s a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California* (Berkeley, 2009), p. 152.

<sup>81</sup> For reading on Gitelson’s verdict and the final Supreme Court ruling in *Crawford v. Los Angeles Board of Education*, see ‘Crawford v. Los Angeles Board of Educ., 458 U.S. 527 (1982)’, *Justia*, available online at <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/458/527/> (last viewed 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020).

the banner ‘L.A. Schools Given Integration Order’, the *Los Angeles Times* boldly declared the *Crawford* ruling ‘the most significant court decision on racial segregation outside the South.’<sup>82</sup>

The newspaper felt the *Crawford* decision was profound not just for the integration decision, but because Gitelson directly challenged the prevailing conservative orthodoxy on segregation, integration, and school busing. Smashing the status quo, Gitelson declared ‘Negro and Mexican children suffer serious harm, when their education takes place in public schools which are racially segregated, whatever the source of the segregation may be.’ Dismantling conservative arguments concerning the difference between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation, Gitelson proclaimed, this ‘applies equally to segregation not compelled by law [*de facto*] as when compelled by law [*de jure*]’.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, after the *Swann* ruling, the president argued, ‘I do not believe that busing to achieve racial balance is in the interests of better education. Where it is *de jure*, we comply with the Court; where it is *de facto*, until the Court speaks, that still remains my view.’<sup>84</sup> For conservatives, *de jure* segregation in schools was wrong and illegal, however *de facto* segregation – a legacy of historic housing segregation and income inequality – was not, they argued, to be remedied by busing.

This argument has been termed ‘meritocratic individualism’, based on the ‘populist silent majority rhetoric that neglected deep social divisions and emphasised suburban middle-class’ white concerns.<sup>85</sup> Put another way, the demographic movement away from the cities to the suburbs by whites opposed to public housing, mass transit, and school desegregation, was the

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<sup>82</sup> Jack McCurdy, ‘Program Must Be Started by Next Fall’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1970, p. 1.

<sup>83</sup> Gitelson quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 236.

<sup>84</sup> Richard Nixon, ‘The President’s News Conference’, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1971, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-133> (last viewed 16th August 2019).

<sup>85</sup> Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, p. 53.

defence of the ‘suburban secession’.<sup>86</sup> For conservatives including the California governor, meritocratic individualism resonated because it comported with a worldview based on the power of the individual and a ‘pull-up-by-the-bootstraps’ mentality, rather than relying on the state to provide remedial solutions. However, with neither side backing down, the *Sacramento Bee* predicted busing was likely to become ‘the biggest racial backlash issue in California politics since the mid-1960s furor over the Rumford Act.’<sup>87</sup>

The response of conservative politicians was uniformly condemnatory. Unlike the long hot summers of the sixties or the release of the Kerner Report, the White House and the Gipper were aligned in their damning response to the judge’s decision. Nixon’s Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Robert Finch (who previously served as Reagan’s Lieutenant General) called the decision ‘totally unrealistic’, Reagan decried it as ‘utterly ridiculous’, and Sam Yorty, the conservative Democrat Los Angeles Mayor whose opposition to Rumford aided Reagan’s first victory, predicted ‘the decision would polarize the city’.<sup>88</sup> A week later, the Gipper reaffirmed his condemnation of ‘mandatory busing’, claiming it ‘will shatter the concept of the neighborhood school as the cornerstone of our educational system.’ As with housing, Reagan failed to recognise the systemic nature of the problem his virulent opposition reinforced. He concluded *Crawford* posed a ‘serious threat to the preservation of educational quality’, a policy area in which he held considerable influence, and directed his staff to ‘vigorously oppose – by all legal means – the forced busing of California school children.’<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> For further reading on ‘suburban succession’, see Kruse, *White Flight*, chapter 9.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, ‘New Racial Backlash’, *Sacramento Bee*, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1970, p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> All three men quoted in Elinson and Yogi, *Wherever There’s a Fight*, p. 153.

<sup>89</sup> Reagan, ‘Press Release of the Governor on Forced Busing’, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1970, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Edwin Meese Papers, Box 196, Folder ‘Ed: Busing’.

The governor's hostility to busing was twofold: part ideological, part pragmatic. Philosophical conviction lay in the meritocratic individualist notion that it was not the state's role to involve itself in the decisions of parents and their children's education. Given the endurance and longevity of Reagan's dedication to small government, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity with which he believed busing would not solve racial inequality and white people should, therefore, be free to choose where they schooled regardless of their circumstances. However, this was a singularly obtuse form of colour-blindness: what he could not see was equal black human rights, easily trumped by formally transcendent rights, that in reality were enjoyed only by whites. The governor's position, like his opposition to housing rights, the Civil Rights Act, and welfare, was on the side of backlash, as the *Sacramento Bee* article 'New Racial Backlash' demonstrated.<sup>90</sup>

The second consideration was short-term; 1970 was Reagan's gubernatorial re-election year and opposing busing made good politics in a state that was still predominately white and had a complex legacy of race relations. A Gallup Poll weeks after Gitelson's decision found four-in-five Americans opposed busing. Perhaps more significantly, a *San Francisco Chronicle* poll showed that in California, busing was not only opposed by whites (eighty-eight percent), but also by Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans (ninety-six, seventy-five, and sixty percent respectively).<sup>91</sup> In this sense, 'the Left was not responding to public opinion', but rather 'pushed through an unpopular racial/group-rights agenda'.<sup>92</sup> While it was clear Reagan could not rely on the courts for support, with a groundswell of public support, busing reified many

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, 'New Racial Backlash'.

<sup>91</sup> When asked 'In general, do you favour or oppose the busing of negro and white school children from one school district to another', 14% were in favour and 81% opposed. Collected by Gallup Poll, conducted March 1970; survey published in 'What San Francisco Thinks About Busing', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29<sup>th</sup> August 1971, p. 12.

<sup>92</sup> John David Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action: Politics, Culture, and Justice in America* (Chicago, 1996), p. 5.

of the arguments the Gipper popularised over many years in suggesting that elites, be they Washington politicians or Sacramento judges, were engineering change away from the American small government tradition.

For NAACP regional director Leonard Carter, the governor's opposition to busing was entirely analogous to his position on the Rumford Fair Housing Act. Responding to the governor's denunciation of the *Crawford* decision, Carter charged 'the Reagan Southern strategy is no secret. In 1966 his campaign issue was "forced housing". Today, his campaign issue is "forced busing".'<sup>93</sup> It was a powerful rebuke and a reminder of the governor's open opposition to key policies for African American advancement. Carter's criticism was supported by the ACLU, a body which helped fund Crawford's case, who described Reagan's reaction as 'shot through with error, falsity, and illogic.'<sup>94</sup> Once again, the governor found himself in hot water with elements of California's expanding minority community.

These strong allegations did not escape the Gipper's re-election team. A memo to Ed Meese, the governor's Chief of Staff and foremost advisor alongside Bill Clark, detailed explicitly how opposition to busing was contrary to the intention of *Brown v. Board*, of which Gitelson's decision was a 'logical extension'. Further, the memo crystallised any doubt about the current situation by damagingly concluding, 'Arguments against busing are essentially racist.'<sup>95</sup> Given Reagan's documented sensitivity to allegations of racism (see the George Christopher incident during the 1966 campaign), such criticisms would have been personally painful. The

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<sup>93</sup> Leonard Carter quoted in Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 236.

<sup>94</sup> John and LeRee Caughey, 'Myths about School Integration in Los Angeles', produced by ACLU, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Collection, Box GO74, Folder 'Busing – General, 1970 (1/3)', p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> 'Memo debating reasons for and against Busing', author and date unknown, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Edwin Meese Papers, Box 196, Folder 'Ed: Busing', p. 3.

administration's next step was moving the fight to the more pliable legislature, to push for change to countermand the judge's decision.

On 18<sup>th</sup> February 1970, one week on from Gitelson's decision, Floyd Wakefield, an assembly member representing South Gate district, infamous for its 'Spook Hunters' racist gang, launched a full attack on busing. The assemblyman, described by political scientist Daniel HoSang as 'the standard-bearer of postwar white backlash politics', introduced AB 551, stating 'no governing board of a school district shall require any student to be transported for the purpose of adjusting the racial or ethnic composition of the student enrolment in the public schools without the written permission of the parent or guardian.'<sup>96</sup>

Announcing the proposed constitutional amendment, Wakefield told fellow legislators he discussed the measure with members of Reagan's staff, and 'the feeling is that we're on the right side and that we're together on this issue.' The governor confirmed his support in a co-ordinated press conference later that day, telling reporters, 'I think he's saying very much the same thing we said here.' The Gipper continued, pivoting to the issue toward the public, 'he is asking that the people be allowed to vote on the matter of voluntary versus compulsory busing'. Despite a later warning from California's Deputy Attorney General Jan Stevens the bill 'could well be unconstitutional', Reagan continued his support, telling reporters this was not a question of race, but 'I just don't believe that government has that right' to bus children away from their neighbourhoods.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley, 2010), p. 84; 'Assembly Constitutional Amendment No. 41' (known as AB 551) introduced on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Collection, Box GO74, Folder 'Busing – General, 1970 (2/3)', p.1.

<sup>97</sup> Wakefield quoted in 'Bill Seeks to Forbid Forced School Bussing', *Los Angeles Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1970, p. 27; Reagan quoted in 'Press Conference on Busing', 17<sup>th</sup> February 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box RS129, Folder 'Education: Busing', pp. 2-5.

Ahead of the vote, Reagan repeatedly couched the fight not in terms of race, but one of universality. Utilising the meritocratic individualist argument and consistent with his emphasis on neighbourhood schooling, Reagan implored ‘we should be working harder than anything to make sure that everyone has the right of free choice’. However, Wakefield, unlike Reagan, was a virulent racist, it just happened that the governor’s argument provided a shield of false legitimacy. Wakefield boldly discarded the cover in an interview with the *Washington Post* in April 1970, telling the paper, ‘I have probably talked before 500 or 600 groups over the last years about busing, almost every time someone has gotten up and called me a “racist” or a “bigot”.’ But the picture had changed, suddenly ‘I am no longer a bigot. Now I am called “the leader of the antibusing effort.”’<sup>98</sup> The changing discourse was evidence of a changing segregationist rhetoric which sought to decentre the obvious racial dimension to school desegregation. It was a transformative, changing discourse which ‘led southern conservatives to reject the traditional appeals to populism and racism and instead embrace a new, middle class rhetoric of rights and responsibilities.’<sup>99</sup> Cognisant of the broader change or not, Reagan was at the heart of the battle.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1970, the amendment surmounted the two-thirds threshold, reflecting both rapidly changing discourse and the increasing appeal of colour-blind conservatism. This was part of the process of making respectable and palatable, opposition to racial equality outside of the Deep South by using ‘political culture’ and ‘constitutional law’ to reinvigorate ‘residential segregation as the product of economic rather than racial discrimination.’<sup>100</sup> Akin to the dichotomous result of Proposition 14 and Johnson’s victory in the state less than a decade

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<sup>98</sup> Reagan, ‘Press Conference on Busing’, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1970; Wakefield quoted in John Berthelsen, ‘California Busing Action Is Near’, *Washington Post*, 20<sup>th</sup> April 1970, p. A3.

<sup>99</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, p. 245.

<sup>100</sup> Lassiter, ‘De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth’, in Lassiter and Crespino (eds.), *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, p. 43.

earlier, this was another demonstration that Californians supported abstract notions of Civil Rights progression through *de jure* means, but when it affected their family, when it directly threatened the homogeneity of their suburban lifestyle, the reluctance for *de facto* reform was evident.

On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1970, the day Pasadena and Inglewood schools began busing for integration purposes, Reagan signed the Wakefield bill, ending in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, ‘the most emotional debate of the 1970 legislative session’.<sup>101</sup> Reagan told an assembled audience at the bill signing, ‘no single issue has produced a greater overall expression of deep concern... than that of forced busing.’ For the Gipper, opportunities for African American children could not be improved through affirmative remedies. He went as far as to remind those in attendance, ‘the 1964 Civil Rights Act is very explicit in its denial of compulsory bussing to achieve social balance.’ Instead, the governor suggested funds needed to be allocated to improve the ‘neighborhood school’ children already attended. For him, universalism was a sufficient response to ‘those who charge that opposing compulsory bussing is somehow equivalent to encouraging discrimination.’<sup>102</sup> Reagan’s policy of openly opposing bussing was so successful, historian Mark Brilliant concluded the ‘efforts were mirrored on a national stage’ by President Nixon.<sup>103</sup> In making the firm stand, Reagan cemented his re-election *and* solidified his place as the protagonist of an increasingly powerful conservative movement.

### ***Exploiting the Backlash: The 1976 Republican Primary Election***

From signing the bussing bill in September 1970, to Reagan’s leaving office in January 1975, the political world transformed. In 1970, the Pasadena bussing case commanded widespread

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<sup>101</sup> Jerry Gillam, ‘Anti-Bussing Bill Signed by Reagan’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1970, p. 22.

<sup>102</sup> Reagan, ‘Signing Statement of Wakefield Anti-Bussing Bill’, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1970, *RRPL*, Gubernatorial Papers, Box P23, Folder ‘Releases – Bills Signed and Vetoed 1970 [08/21/1970-09/19/1970]’, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed*, p. 238.

attention, yet by 1975 only sporadic court cases kept an interest in busing alive.<sup>104</sup> In 1970, Nixon seemed comfortable in office, evidenced by his landslide in history in 1972, only for his Watergate-fuelled downfall two years later. For Reagan, the changing dynamics of both issues radically altered his presidential ambitions for 1976.

Watergate lingered over the Republican Party throughout the mid-seventies and changed the primary calculations in the process. Two complete Nixon terms would have yielded an open Republican field, which polling showed favoured the California governor.<sup>105</sup> Instead, he faced incumbent President Gerald Ford, the former Speaker of the House, and a more consistent conservative than his predecessor. As a result of Watergate and Ford's pardon of Nixon, Republicans suffered tremendously in the 1974 midterm elections, losing forty-six house seats, four senate seats, and four governorships including California to Pat Brown's son, Jerry.<sup>106</sup> While dark days endured for the party, they were equally bleak for the nation. Although in decline since the beginning of Vietnam, Watergate ripped a veil of trust away from politics, politicians, and political institutions writ large, which pollster Robert Teeter described as 'unbelievable increases in cynicism toward politics.'<sup>107</sup> Now more than ever, the country was desperate for optimism, a reminder that there would be a better tomorrow. The stage was set for Reagan.

Throughout 1975, Reagan undertook the most active and widespread speaking tour of any potential presidential candidate. Reminiscent of his GE days, the Gipper traversed the country, averaging ten speeches a month, wrote a bi-weekly column which appeared in 226 newspapers,

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<sup>104</sup> 'Pasadena Schools Told to Integrate', *NYT*, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1970, p. 38.

<sup>105</sup> A Gallup Poll of October 1973 (prior to Agnew's resignation) showed Reagan leading the choice for president among Republican voters on 29%, ahead of Rockefeller on 19%, and John Connelly on 16%. For further reading, see George Gallup, 'Reagan Favored for '76', *Washington Post*, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1973, p. H6.

<sup>106</sup> Statistic in Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, pp. 393-94.

<sup>107</sup> Teeter quoted in *ibid*, p. 394.

and gave short effective radio addresses which were broadcast nationally through nearly 300 stations.<sup>108</sup> The former governor was addressing the nation, and these talks provide an unparalleled window into the mind of a notoriously enigmatic figure.

Examination of those radio addresses and speeches reveal two headline public policy positions: one, attack federal government expenditure as evidence of growing government to advocate a reduced state, and two, develop foreign affairs credibility to push for rollback of communism rather than détente. On the economy, Reagan attacked liberal Democratic economic advisor John Kenneth Galbraith, who, the Gipper charged, ‘is obsessed with the idea of central control of the economy’, and lamented Ford’s handling of inflation, which Reagan described as ‘a tax increase – a way government can raise more revenue without raising the rates.’<sup>109</sup> Notably more right-wing in opposition than in government, these attacks were part of the broad transition away from the post-New Deal Democratic focus on economic equality with Republican anti-statism of the eighties and nineties.

Amid the economic downturn of the 1970s, the Gipper repeatedly emphasised the need to reduce government, and most pointedly focussed on welfare, a life-long bugbear, to voice his discontent. He attacked federal government ‘that seems to grow bigger and more centralized’ while leaving the ‘average man... helpless’, and criticised welfare programmes as ‘a trap’.<sup>110</sup> However, the 1976 primary election was unlike his previous campaigns, Reagan actively harnessed public anger and resentment of black welfare recipients through the moniker of the

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<sup>108</sup> Statistics in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 117.

<sup>109</sup> Reagan, ‘Newspaper Column: Galbraith Economics’, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1975, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Collection, Box 35, Folder ‘Economy’, p. 1; Reagan ‘Viewpoint: Inflation as Tax’, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Collection, Box 35, Folder ‘Economy’.

<sup>110</sup> Reagan, ‘Viewpoint: Government – Big vs. Small (1)’, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Collection, Box 35, Folder ‘Foreign Affairs’, p. 1; Reagan, ‘Viewpoint: Welfare Letter’, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Collection, Box 36, Folder ‘President Ford & the GOP’.

‘welfare queen’, exposing a racial consciousness that hitherto was largely absent from his colour-blind outlook.

In 1974, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on Linda Taylor, a forty-seven-year-old arrested for welfare fraud totalling more than \$100,000 per year, using fifty aliases, and in hiding in Tucson, Arizona. The article used the epithet ‘welfare queen’ and described in almost comedic fashion how her twenty-one-year-old husband tipped off the local police because he ‘was angry because she had taken his TV set when she left Chicago.’<sup>111</sup> Yet within two years, Taylor, indicted in November 1974 on twenty-eight counts of fraud, was at the centre of a storm having been referenced by Reagan as a ‘woman in Chicago’ abusing the system through eighty names and thirty addresses – a move historian Julilly Kohler-Hausmann argued was ‘to enhance his political prospects’.<sup>112</sup>

Far removed from pre-Great Society sympathy with welfare recipients, by 1976, nine-in-ten Americans thought ‘the criteria for getting on welfare are not tight enough’, and eighty-five percent believed ‘too many people on welfare cheat’.<sup>113</sup> Reagan’s speeches and radio addresses unquestionably played to such resentments, in fact, the Gipper expounded the myth, reporting ‘she [Taylor] has used 127 names... has 50 social security numbers... and her take is estimated at a million dollars!’ For journalist Josh Levin whose recent work *The Queen* dug into Taylor’s

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<sup>111</sup> George Bliss, ‘Welfare Queen Jailed in Tucson’, *Chicago Tribune*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1974, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Mount, ‘Jury Indicts “Welfare Queen”’, *Chicago Tribune*, 14<sup>th</sup> November 1974, p. 4; Reagan, ‘Viewpoint: Welfare’, *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 14, Folder ‘Ronald Reagan Radio Commentaries – Disc 76 1A’; Kohler-Hausmann, ‘Welfare Crises, Penal Solutions, and the Origins of the “Welfare Queen”’, *Journal of Urban History*, 41:5 (2015), p. 563.

<sup>113</sup> For reading on changing perceptions, see James Patterson, *America’s Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1980* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), pp. 171-184; statistics in Lisbeth Schorr, ‘Piecing together the real women behind Reagan’s “welfare queen”’, *Washington Post*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2019.

story, ‘Reagan implied that Taylor was a stand-in for a whole class of people who were getting something that they didn’t deserve.’<sup>114</sup>

While the Gipper undoubtedly played to racial animosities with the ‘welfare queen’ trope, the larger point he made has been lost amid the furor. Reagan blamed the individual, but that missed the significance of the other institution he blamed – welfare itself. In the same radio address he excoriated Taylor, he also scorned the ‘welfare workers’ who ‘advised’ her to spend money so she could remain a recipient.<sup>115</sup> For the former governor, the institution was as much the problem as the individual, if not greater. As he made plain in another address concerning welfare reform, the country needed to return to a Rooseveltian conception of the state; ‘the concept of welfare’, he told his audience, ‘has always been to provide a basic “helping hand” to those who couldn’t find work or enough work to make ends meet. It was designed as an essentially temporary aid till the family could get on its feet.’<sup>116</sup> Obviously citing Taylor as an example played to the gallery, but it should not be lost that his objections were also part of a long-standing ideological rejection of permanent state aid (which increased the size of government) too. Attacking welfare and its recipients made good politics, harnessing Reagan’s conservative credentials on the populist level, but it was not the case – as journalist Lisbeth Schorr recently claimed in the *Washington Post* – that ‘Reagan set out to tear down supports for poor people’.<sup>117</sup> Rather, he viewed his position as an uplifting one which sought to free people from government programmes.

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<sup>114</sup> Reagan, ‘Viewpoint: Welfare’; Levin, *The Queen: The Forgotten Life Behind an American Myth* (New York, 2019), p. x.

<sup>115</sup> Reagan, ‘Viewpoint: Welfare’.

<sup>116</sup> Reagan, ‘Pointing the Way to Welfare Reform’, 1976, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Collection, Box 36, Folder ‘President Ford & the GOP’, p. 2.

<sup>117</sup> Schorr, ‘Piecing together the real women behind Reagan’s “welfare queen”’.

While Reagan's intended message of reducing the size of the federal government through welfare reduction was lost amid the outcry over Taylor, there could be little doubt about his messaging in his September 1975 address to the Executive Club of Chicago. The 'Let the People Rule' speech, was a revamped version of the 'Time for Choosing' address. Advocating a Jeffersonian view of statehood and in sharp contrast to the prevailing wisdom of the Great Society, Reagan decried 'the belief that government, particularly the Federal Government, has the answer to our ills'. Instead, the Gipper's solution required the biggest transfer of power from Washington to the states in history. 'What I propose', the candidate pronounced, 'is nothing less than a systematic transfer of authority and resources to the states – a program of creative federalism for America's third century.'<sup>118</sup>

Reagan's plan sounded revolutionary; a programmatic agenda for dissolving much of the centralised state. The Gipper estimated \$90 billion of federal expenditure could be saved by devolving welfare, education, housing, Medicaid, transport, and community development to the states, leading to a balanced budget and reduction in federal tax rates of twenty-three percent.<sup>119</sup> The plan was reminiscent of the Creative Society during the Gipper's gubernatorial years. It was further evidence against the prevailing notion Reagan's appeal was founded in backlash politics, instead, he was consistently offering creative (if not always practicable), solutions to the problems of the day.

Curiously, the speech fell flat. The *Chicago Tribune* carried a short piece, which noted 'Reagan presented his first detailed program based on the economic theories he has espoused for more than 13 years', but the speech was not covered by the *New York Times*.<sup>120</sup> In fact, the boldness

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<sup>118</sup> Reagan, 'Let the People Rule Address', 26<sup>th</sup> September 1975, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Peter Hannaford Papers, Box 9, Folder 'Writings and Speeches 1974-75', pp. 1-4.

<sup>119</sup> Reagan, 'Let the People Rule', pp. 1-13.

<sup>120</sup> Neil Mehler, 'Reagan: Cut Spending \$82.4 Billion', *Chicago Tribune*, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1975, p. 3.

of the ideas led those in the Ford camp to write off Reagan as a right-wing crackpot. The president had ‘taken to heart’ Nixon’s advice that the Gipper was ‘a lightweight and not someone to be considered seriously or feared in terms of the nomination.’<sup>121</sup> Such was Ford’s giddy conviction, the only piece the *Times* did carry after Reagan’s address was entitled ‘Aides say Ford has Foiled Challenge by GOP Right’. The paper quoted many right-wingers including Senator Bill Brock of Tennessee, who noted the president’s ‘conservative instincts’ were beyond reproach, suggesting the Gipper had little room to attack Ford’s right flank. One presidential aide went so far as to tell the paper, ‘Reagan is not the symbol of Republican conservatism in the way Goldwater was’.<sup>122</sup> Unable to land a damaging punch in the early stages of the campaign, Reagan’s second presidential run threatened to fall as flat as the first.

As the primary battle began, it initially seemed that a fiercely anti-communist foreign policy platform might provide Reagan with some hope of unseating the Republican President. The challenger attacked Ford’s policy of détente with the Soviet Union and concentrated heavily on the administration’s handling of the Panama Canal over to Panamanian ownership as a ‘symbol’, in Iwan Morgan’s assessment, ‘of America’s post-Vietnam retreat from power.’<sup>123</sup> In one particularly strong rhetorical assault, Reagan lambasted that President Ford ‘has shown neither the vision nor the leadership necessary to halt and reverse the diplomatic and military decline of the United States.’<sup>124</sup> Despite Ford’s exposure to attack on foreign policy, it was not enough; Reagan suffered a string of heavy early defeats – eight in nine states – which left his hopes hanging by a thread.

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<sup>121</sup> Nixon quoted in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 120.

<sup>122</sup> Philip Shabecoff, ‘Aides Say Ford has Foiled Challenge by GOP Right’, *NYT*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 1975, p. 1.

<sup>123</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 121.

<sup>124</sup> Reagan quoted in Jon Nordheimer, ‘Reagan, in Direct Attack, Assails Ford on Defense’, *NYT*, 5<sup>th</sup> March 1976, p. 1.

The Gipper needed to find a new angle of attack and a big win Texas on 1<sup>st</sup> May to stay in the primary fight. A proposal for capturing the Lone Star State concluded, ‘No state is more critical to the Reagan campaign’.<sup>125</sup> According to his research team, the key to unlock the state was ‘forced busing to achieve integration’. Specifically, the candidate was told ‘quality – not quotas – in education should be the theme’, and the message would play particularly well in the developing sunbelt suburbs of ‘Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio’. The former governor obliged with state-wide radio and television adverts striking that note, going so far as to call for a ‘constitutional amendment’ to ‘eliminate school busing’.<sup>126</sup>

Repeating his gubernatorial re-election win, busing proved extremely effective in mobilising suburban support; the governor won Texas by a massive two-to-one margin. Ford’s state campaign chairman, Senator John Tower, attributed the result to ‘Reagan’s successful effort to get George Wallace supporters to crossover from the Democratic primary and vote for him’.<sup>127</sup> While not explicitly race-baiting as Wallace had done previously, Reagan’s willingness to revive busing in his most desperate moment was telling. The approach exploited racial division and white animosity, and kept his slim path to the White House alive.

Texas gave Reagan momentum which saw him capture Georgia, Indiana, and Nebraska in quick succession. The remaining states were split reasonably evenly, although a big win in California gave the challenger hope of getting over the line. Heading into the contested convention, it was remarkably close – Reagan led the aggregate primary vote, but Ford with

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<sup>125</sup> ‘The Texas Campaign/Brief Analysis’, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1976, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Citizens for Reagan Papers, Box 31, Folder ‘Texas’, p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2; Reagan quoted in Linda Pavlik, ‘Reagan Decries Busing’, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1976, p. 4.

<sup>127</sup> Senator Tower quoted in Jon Ford, ‘Carter and Reagan bury the opposition’, *Austin American-Statesman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1976, p. 1.

his 1,091 delegates was desperately close to the 1,130 needed for victory.<sup>128</sup> Backroom discussions gave aides the impression the Gipper was going to lose the majority of the 136 unpledged delegates, so Reagan gambled by naming Pennsylvania Senator Richard Schweiker as his running mate in a bid to woo moderates to his camp. The gamble backfired and Ford, ‘exploiting the advantages of incumbency’, crept over the line.<sup>129</sup> The former California Governor pushed the president to his limits, falling agonizingly short, losing the nomination 1,187 delegates to 1,070.

Reagan’s surprising competitiveness meant the conservative movement could no longer be ignored by establishment Republicans. Growing economic crises throughout the 1970s led to a rise in ‘growing economic preservationism’ that lent credence to Reagan’s long-standing message of government waste and bureaucratic largesse.<sup>130</sup> Ford’s decision to drop moderate Nelson Rockefeller for conservative Bob Dole was indicative of the rightward direction of the party. Between 1968 and 1976, conservatives battled moderates for influence at every turn, and finally, the conservatives were exerting considerable influence over the party. National issues of law and order, and busing, fuelled middle-class white resentment pushing the GOP further rightward. Simultaneously, a struggling economy helped ensure the country was more willing to listen to Reagan, whose position – considering the resignation of Vice-President Spiro Agnew amid charges of corruption and tax evasion, and the Watergate controversy – became increasingly respectable without conceding or compromising on his conservative colour-blind message.

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<sup>128</sup> Statistics in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 124.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, p. 241.

Given Reagan planned to contest an open field and had started incredibly poorly, taking the contest to the convention was a remarkable feat. In the hopes of healing a fractured party, Ford departed from the planned choreography and invited Reagan to speak. The Gipper was sixty-five and had failed to win the presidency for a second time, leading many to believe this was the end of the road, even going as far to term this speech the ‘Farewell Address’.<sup>131</sup> While Reagan was unable to capture the nomination, Morgan suggests that he was ‘the real winner at Kansas City.’<sup>132</sup> As Peter Voss, a Republican at the convention who later served a co-chair of Reagan’s 1980 campaign in Ohio declared, ‘he came onto the platform as a defeated candidate. When he finished speaking, Ronald Reagan was no longer a candidate, he was a hero and the leader of a greater cause.’<sup>133</sup> The only question remaining, was whether the Gipper had another race left in him – Jon Nordheimer of the *New York Times* certainly thought not, for Reagan was ‘too old to seriously consider another run at the Presidency’.<sup>134</sup>

### ***The Rise of the Affirmative Action State and the 1980 Election***

On 12<sup>th</sup> September 1978, two years after his desperately difficult defeat to President Ford in the Republican primary, Reagan was back on the trail campaigning for Bill Clements’s gubernatorial run. The former California Governor was in Texas, a state which revived his earlier primary campaign, in part due to Reagan reprising the issue of busing. Yet by 1978, change was in the air. The decade of the 1970s had witnessed thirty million American jobs disappear (most overseas in manufacturing), almost half the value of the stock market vanished between 1973 and 1975, the price of oil increased ten-fold, and by 1980, inflation, that had

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<sup>131</sup> Peter Voss, ‘Will they say we kept them free? Ronald Reagan, 1976’, *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 36, Folder ‘1976 Campaign – Closing Session Republican Convention’.

<sup>132</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 124.

<sup>133</sup> Voss, ‘Will they say we kept them free?’

<sup>134</sup> Nordheimer, ‘Reagan, on Dias, Spurs Party on’, *NYT*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1976, p. A12.

averaged under three percent across the 1960s, peaked at 13.5 percent.<sup>135</sup> As historian Judith Stein observed, ‘the 1970s was the only decade other than the 1930s wherein Americans ended up poorer than they began.’<sup>136</sup>

In a major address to Clements’s donors, the Gipper urged the party to move beyond ‘those older social issues like the welfare mess, busing, quotas and others’.<sup>137</sup> The problem as Reagan saw it was ‘for too long we Republicans, like most Americans, have approached the political landscape from one direction and seen things in the same way.’ Decrying the traditional fault lines of ‘labor and industry, liberal and conservative, rich and poor, urban and rural’, and with one eye on 1980, Reagan stressed the need to ‘get out of the beaten path and start learning new ways of looking at things’.<sup>138</sup> The presidential campaign had begun.

Rather than seeing the public as ‘stereotyped members of special interest pressure groups’, the Gipper pushed a universalist message of ‘family, work, neighborhood, freedom, and peace’.<sup>139</sup> Unlike President Jimmy Carter who made direct group-based appeals, Reagan’s outlook led him to passionately believe ‘we can go to the black community and the white ethnic neighborhoods with exactly the same message and gain supporters from each community’.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Statistics in Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, 2012), pp. 133, 54, 56, 60.

<sup>136</sup> Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, 2010), p. xi.

<sup>137</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Excerpts from Remarks by the Honorable Ronald Reagan at Bill Clements for Governor Fundraiser’, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1978, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Deaver and Hannaford Inc. Records, Box 14, Folder ‘14-2 Statements by Ronald Reagan 1978’, p. 4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10; *ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Stephen Skowronek described how ‘Lyndon Johnson left in his wake a sectarian politics clinically diagnosed in academic political science as “interest group liberalism”’, that had fundamentally tied Carter to ‘a regime hanging on as an expedience for their clients’. While Hugh Davis Graham similarly saw the Democratic president tied to a fractured constituency, having concluded ‘by the end of his presidency, Carter’s civil rights policies no longer fit the model of a centrist president struggling against the liberal constituencies of his party. By 1980, Carter’s zigzag pattern, harkening first to one set of advisors and then to another, had settled in the civil rights arena into a firm re-election zag that rallied the rights-based core constituencies of his party.’ For further reading, see Stephen Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 361-406, and Hugh Davis Graham, ‘Civil Rights Policy in the Carter

Arguing that ‘it isn’t geographic proximity or even economic class that we look for... They [the voters] live on farms, in city neighborhoods, in suburbs. They attend different houses of worship’, but most importantly Reagan stressed, ‘it’s the way people look at themselves and the world’ that mattered – ‘that is our key to political victory.’<sup>141</sup>

Reagan’s message was deliberately broad in its appeal, based on a universalism he derived from his first political hero, President Franklin Roosevelt. His advisors sought to ‘remake the face of American politics’ which suited his pursuit of colour-blind conservatism.<sup>142</sup> Given successive presidential candidates of both parties (notably Nixon’s Southern Strategy in 1968) viewed politics as being characterised by segmentation, Reagan’s approach was both distinctive in its breadth and a rebuttal of ‘what most experts say is the most difficult problem facing us; that we cannot appeal to blacks and white ethnics because there are separate and conflicting interests involved.’<sup>143</sup> The political calculation by Bill Gavin, a staffer on the 1980 campaign, was that this election presented the opportunity for ‘a political revolution of (F.D.) Rooseveltian proportions’.<sup>144</sup>

The 1978 midterm elections delivered a seismic political blow to the Carter presidency. In Texas, Clements achieved the upset victory few thought possible and won the governorship by fewer than 17,000 votes, or 0.8 percent of the total vote, becoming the first Republican governor since 1874. As the fallout and analysis began, all eyes turned to 1980 and the potential for a generation-defining election. The *New York Times* carried a piece on ‘an apparent

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Presidency’, in Gary Fink and Hugh Davis Graham (eds.), *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* (Lawrence, 1998), pp. 202-223; Reagan, ‘Excerpts at Bill Clements for Governor Fundraiser’, p. 11. For reading on the origins of ‘interest group liberalism’, see Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York, 1969).

<sup>141</sup> Reagan, ‘Clements for Governor Fundraiser’, p. 13.

<sup>142</sup> Bill Gavin, ‘Memo for a Revival of the 1978 RR “Stump Speech” Themes’, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1980, RRPL, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 50, Folder ‘Research – Minorities (2/2)’, p. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at Bill Clements for Governor Fundraiser’, p. 10.

<sup>144</sup> Bill Gavin, ‘Memo for a Revival of the 1978 RR “Stump Speech” Themes’, p. 1.

loosening, blurring and rearrangement of traditional party lines' in the Sunbelt, while noted *Washington Post* writer David Broder commented, 'In 1980 re-election terms, Carter now faces a Republican Party with a significantly stronger grass-roots base and a set of presidential hopefuls with burnished political credentials.'<sup>145</sup> Reagan's performance as California Governor and then his narrow loss to Ford in 1976 had established himself as the *de facto* leader of the conservative wing of the Republican Party, evidenced by polls showing him to have a five-point lead over Ford in December 1978 for the 1980 nomination.<sup>146</sup>

The context of the 1980 presidential election was crisis and decline. Growing economic crisis at home and abroad, the domestic political turbulence caused by the Watergate scandal, and the legacy of Vietnam eroded the traditional regional voting blocs which characterised the New Deal era. This undoubtedly favoured Reagan's 'catch all' colour-blind style and increased Republican chances of forging a new political consensus. A memo circulated to the presidential contender and his senior team (Ed Meese, Martin Anderson, Peter Hannaford, Dick Wirthlin, and Richard Allen) argued 'a new and different type of political thinking is beginning to grow in this country'. The note outlined, 'This thinking has been stimulated by a series of shocks experienced in the decade of the 1970s. Among them have been:

1. The unwinnable foreign war in Southeast Asia
2. The OPEC embargo of 1973 and the ensuing "energy crisis"
3. The tangled web of Watergate and the other revelations of wrongdoing in high places
4. The steady destruction of the value of the dollar, with all its adverse social, economic, and moral consequences
5. Heavy-handed invasions of privacy and the marketplace by intrusive governmental bureaucracies.'<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> William Stevens, 'G.O.P. Victories in Texas Reflect Shift of Party Lines in Southwest', *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. A24; David Broder, 'The Changing Order: Two-Party Rivalry Expands in Big Year for Newcomers', *The Washington Post*, 9<sup>th</sup> November 1978, p. A1.

<sup>146</sup> When asked 'Which one (of the persons on this list) would you like to see nominated as the Republican candidate for President in 1980?', Reagan led on 29%, Ford 24%, and Senator Howard Baker came third on 10%. Collected by *Gallup Poll*, conducted between 1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> December 1978.

<sup>147</sup> John McCloughry, 'Memo to Reagan – The New World of the 1980s', 6<sup>th</sup> June 1980, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Peter Hannaford Papers, Box 1, Folder 'Correspondence 1-2', p. 1.

The country's mood was low. Over half of Americans' felt their quality of life was static or worsened during the 1970s.<sup>148</sup> Reagan's campaign team focussed on this issue, with a memo of February 1980 noting, 'Americans are clamouring for presidential candidates who will boldly and creatively speak out on issues – who will give Americans a hopeful vision of the America of the future.'<sup>149</sup> The former governor fit this description perfectly; he had a vision – the Creative Society – that had been tested in California, he had a greatly underestimated positive outlook, and the Democratic Party was struggling with the collapse of the New Deal coalition precipitated by the rise of the Sunbelt.

The most significant change heading into the 1980 election, however, was the culmination of the above to ensure questions of economic prosperity overcame questions of race in the national consciousness. The zenith of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s had been challenged and overcome by the nadir of economic demise in the 1970s. Malaise had set in, and King's 'we shall overcome' was replaced by Carter's 'crisis of confidence'.<sup>150</sup> This is not to suggest that questions of race were absent in the build-up to November 1980, but they were few and far between. Two major flashpoints, however, stand out. The Supreme Court decision on affirmative action of June 1978, regarding the admission of Allan Bakke to the University of California, Davis School of Medicine. The other, Reagan's speech at the Neshoba County Fair

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<sup>148</sup> Survey data showed that when asked 'All in all, compared to 10 years ago, do you feel the quality of life in this country has: improved, grown worse, or stayed the same?', 39% stated it had improved, compared to 41% believing things were worse, and 16% felt things were the same. For further information, see question 12, 'Resources for the Future Poll: July 1978', conducted between, 7<sup>th</sup> July – 10<sup>th</sup> August 1978, *Bureau of Social Science Research*.

<sup>149</sup> John McClaghry, 'Memo to Reagan – Major Issue Opportunities', 13<sup>th</sup> February 1980, *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 45, Folder 'Reagan Platform and Platform Issues, 1980', p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> 'Crisis of confidence' was made famous by President Carter's 'Malaise Speech'. Considered one of the low points of the Carter presidency, the speech outlined the severe energy and economic problems facing the country. Jimmy Carter, 'Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals: "The Malaise Speech"', *APP*, 15<sup>th</sup> July 1979, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-energy-and-national-goals-the-malaise-speech> (last accessed 3rd December 2019).

in August 1980. These two very different issues illuminate the nature and limitations of Reagan's colour-blindness.

### *The Bakke Decision*

Throughout the 1970s affirmative action bubbled away as a social, political, and constitutional enigma. A heartstring of the culture wars and a 'fault line' of modern American politics, affirmative action was an issue that would not go away.<sup>151</sup> Having ebbed and flowed in the national spotlight, firstly through Johnson's Howard University address, and then Nixon's Philadelphia Plan which Reagan helped to dismantle before it really began, it was Allan Bakke, a thirty-eight-year-old former NASA employee, who returned affirmative action to the national fold.

Having been refused entrance to the University of California, Davis, medical school in successive years in 1972 and 1973, with higher test scores than many successful applicants, Bakke sued the university.<sup>152</sup> 'I am convinced', he wrote to the admissions committee, that some applicants are 'judged by a separate criteria. I am referring to quotas, open or covert, for racial minorities. I realize that the rationale for these quotas is that they attempt to atone for past racial discrimination, but insisting on a new racial bias in favor of minorities is not a just situation.'<sup>153</sup> Lighting the touch paper of quotas, affirmative action, and colour-blindness,

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<sup>151</sup> Historian Gary Gerstle described affirmative action as a programme designed to increase assimilation that resulted in the 'championing of minority group rights'. Consequently, affirmative action became a cornerstone of multiculturalism that 'fought a series of political battles and "culture wars" with them that left America bitterly divided.' Similarly, Kevin Kruse and Julian Zelizer see affirmative action within a fault line of 'crisis of identity' that struck the United States in the 1970s. For further reading, see Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and the Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 342-365; Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York, 2019), pp. 58-64.

<sup>152</sup> Bakke's application included a 3.51 GPA and a 359 MCAT score. By comparison, the average admitted candidate scored 3.49 and 309, while the average accepted affirmative action candidate scored 2.88 and 138. Statistics taken from 'The Case', *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1977, p. 144; and Terry Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (Oxford, 2005), p. 152.

<sup>153</sup> Allan Bakke quoted in Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness*, p. 152.

Bakke ignited the nation's fault lines and began a protracted legal battle with the Regents of the University of California.

California's supreme court ruled in a 6-1 decision for Bakke on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1976. It noted the programme was unconstitutional 'because it violated the equal-protection right of whites' and further concluded that the university had failed to show why 'a program which discriminates against white applicants because of their race is necessary to achieve' the equality objective UC Davis desired.<sup>154</sup> The California Supreme Court, however, went beyond the lower court's decision and ordered Bakke's admission to the programme.<sup>155</sup> While noting 'the university need not make decisions on admissions based solely on the basis of academic grades, and could take into consideration the disadvantaged background of an applicant', the court provided the colour-blind caveat that admissions needed to be 'applied in a racially neutral fashion'.<sup>156</sup>

The verdict was met with outrage. In a fiery dissent, Justice Mathew Tobriner lamented, 'two centuries of slavery and racial discrimination have left our nation an awful legacy, a largely separated society in which wealth, education resources, employment opportunities – indeed all of society's benefits – remain largely the preserve of the white-Anglo majority.'<sup>157</sup> Meanwhile the general counsel for the university, Donald Reidhar, called the ruling a 'tragedy' that would result in 'all-white classes'.<sup>158</sup> He promised the fight would continue and so it did. The regents of the university acquired an injunction of admission until the nation's highest court passed

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<sup>154</sup> 'Chronology of Admissions Dispute', *NYT*, 29th June 1978, p. A22; 'Court Rejects College Plan for Minorities: Backs White Student's Bias Charge Against UC Davis Rejection', *Los Angeles Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1976, p. 5.

<sup>155</sup> 'Chronology of Admissions Dispute'.

<sup>156</sup> 'A Coast Court Bars Special Admissions', *NYT*, 17th September 1976, p. 87.

<sup>157</sup> Justice Mathew Tobriner quoted in 'Court Rejects College Plan for Minorities', *Los Angeles Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1976, p. 5.

<sup>158</sup> Donald Reidhar quoted in 'A Coast Court Bars Special Admissions', *NYT*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1976, p. 87.

verdict, Bakke would have to wait for a decision. Meanwhile the dispute gained more and more attention with each passing day.

As *Bakke* made its way through the courts, two small, but powerful and vocal, conservative grassroots movements supported his cause. One was the African American intellectual movement, the other was the legal public interest movement. The role of black Republicans in twentieth century political history – ‘simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible: isolated political misfits who provoke extreme reactions’ – has increasingly gathered historical interest.<sup>159</sup> Both Wright Rigueur and Thurber have established the complicated relationship between black Americans and the conservative movement, arguing it was ‘messy at best and at times fragile’. Crucially, in adding nuance and understanding to African Americans’ role in the GOP, both scholars have complicated the prevailing backlash narrative.<sup>160</sup>

There was a minority of black Republicans who ‘joined the Republican Party (or never left it) out of a belief in what they called “traditional” conservatism: anticommunism, free market enterprise and capitalism, self-help and personal responsibility, limited government intervention, and a respect for authority, history, and precedent’.<sup>161</sup> Here, the *Bakke* case tightly fits within the narrative that quotas were a step too far. To that extent, the late 1970s witnessed the emergence of a vociferous black conservative intellectual movement driven by Thomas Sowell, the conservative economist, who actively promoted the need to abandon the fragmented Democratic Party in favour of an individualist ideology that ‘placed the “onus of

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<sup>159</sup> Leah Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican: Pragmatic Politics and the Pursuit of Power* (Princeton, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>160</sup> See Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*; and Timothy Thurber, *Republicans and Race: The GOP’s Frayed Relationship with African Americans, 1945-1974* (Lawrence, KS, 2013).

<sup>161</sup> Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*, p. 7.

responsibility” on African Americans for their economic and social woes’.<sup>162</sup> Sowell wrote of affirmative action in *Commentary* magazine, ‘the message that comes through loud and clear is that minorities are losers who will never have anything unless someone else gives it to them.’<sup>163</sup>

For some, however, opposition to affirmative action in black conservative circles was more profound than the absolutist interpretation of colour-blindness which characterised Sowell or Reagan’s position. This included former Black Panther Party leader, Eldridge Cleaver, a man who fiercely opposed Reagan when Governor of California, but now supported the conservative Republican. Cleaver associated black nationalism and the freedom struggle with the economic and social individualism Reagan promoted, and moreover viewed centralised government as antithetical to securing black freedom. The same argument was made by Clarence Thomas.<sup>164</sup> He would go on to become the Assistant Secretary of Education for the Office of Civil Rights, and later replace Eleanor Holmes Norton as Chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under Reagan. Once appointed a Supreme Court Justice, Thomas later wrote of affirmative action, it was ‘at war with the inherent equality that underlies and infuses our Constitution’.<sup>165</sup>

Parallel to the black intellectual movement, the conservative undertaking was bolstered by a growing public interest legal crusade. Prominent among this new group was the Pacific Legal

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<sup>162</sup> Wright Rigueur, *The Loneliness of the Black Republican*, p. 6. For further reading on of black conservatism, see Corey Robin, *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas* (New York, 2019); Michael Ondaatje, *Black Conservative Intellectuals in Modern America* (Philadelphia, 2010); Peter Eisenstadt, (ed.), *Black Conservatism: Essays in Intellectual and Political History* (New York, 1998); and Angela Dillard, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner Now? Multi-cultural Conservatism in America* (New York, 2002).

<sup>163</sup> Thomas Sowell quoted in, Ronald Reagan, ‘The Bakke Decision’, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1978, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Deaver and Hannaford Inc. Records, Box 14, Folder ‘14-2 Statements by Ronald Reagan 1978’, p. 4.

<sup>164</sup> Corey Robin, *The Enigma of Clarence Thomas* (New York, 2019).

<sup>165</sup> Thomas quoted in ‘Lasting Stigma: Affirmative Action and Clarence Thomas’ Prisoners’ Rights Jurisprudence’, *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 112:6 (1999), p. 1335.

Foundation (PLF), the nation's first libertarian public interest law firm. In the early seventies, the conservative legal movement was – according to historian Steven Teles – ‘outsmarted and undermanned’. Yet, through the culture wars battles of the Equal Rights Amendment and the *Bakke* decision, the movement became a ‘sophisticated and deeply organized network’.<sup>166</sup> It provided another dimension for race-conscious liberals to face in the late 1970s, alongside the growing intellectual movement, and the political colour-blind leadership of Reagan.

Born out of Reagan's Californian conservatism, the PLF was founded in 1973 by Roy Green and Ronald Zumbun – two welfare hawks who had previously helped implement the governor's Creative Society vision.<sup>167</sup> Their new mission was ‘to be a “friend in court” for the taxpaying citizen, the businessman, the farmer’ against government overreach.<sup>168</sup> They were ideologically cohesive with the governor's worldview and as they grew their own influence in the legal sphere, they extended Reagan's colour-blindness influence by association. Highly organised, well-funded, and well-staffed, ‘by the time of *Bakke*, the PLF had won over 80 percent of the more than 150 legal proceedings in which it was involved’.<sup>169</sup> The PLF was vital in stirring a Reagan-style conservative element to the courts that had been hitherto lacking.

While not completely ideologically cohesive, this triumvirate of social, legal, and political leadership made for a formidable opposition. Sowell, Cleaver, and Thomas together encapsulated the dynamic but resolute nature to black conservatism's anti-statist colour-blind agenda which sought to end years of government intervention in the realms of employment and

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<sup>166</sup> Steven Teles, *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for the Control of the Law* (Princeton, 2008), p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> Note – Green headed the California Chamber of Commerce's ‘Welfare Program Department’, and Zumbun served in Reagan's welfare reform task force.

<sup>168</sup> PLF Mission Statement taken from Dennis Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle Over Equality After the Civil Rights Revolution* (Baltimore, 2014), p. 206.

<sup>169</sup> Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action*, p. 207.

education. Together, with the conservative legal public interest movement, they coalesced against the notion of entitlement for compensatory justice in the form of quotas to resolutely oppose affirmative action. Most importantly, the diverse and dynamic colour-blind movement of the late 1970s crystallised to produce a cohesive, pure, and simple message that, in the words of Ira Katznelson, ‘occupied the high ground of color-blind equality.’<sup>170</sup>

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1977, three-and-a-half years after the first court case, Allan Bakke arrived at the Supreme Court for the final battle of his drawn-out dispute with the University of California. In a period when race was not that salient in American life, this was a notable exception. Almost 150 interest groups ranging from the American Bar Association and to the NAACP on the left, to the PLF on the right, submitted a record fifty-eight briefs to the Court.<sup>171</sup> The Carter administration filed an *amicus* brief in support of the University of California and the *New York Times* editorialised against Bakke.<sup>172</sup> The highest profile case since Nixon’s Watergate fight, the *Washington Post* reported that hundreds of people camped all night waiting for a seat in the public gallery.<sup>173</sup> Over ninety reporters scrambled for space in the packed courtroom, while across the street in Capitol Park, hundreds of protestors gathered.<sup>174</sup> Americans captivated to their television screens that evening, watched NBC anchor John Chancellor predict the case would enter ‘the Hall of Fame of great cases which changed the interpretation of the Constitution.’<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 2005), p. 150.

<sup>171</sup> Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness*, p. 153.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Reparation, American Style’, *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1977, p. 144.

<sup>173</sup> Haynes Johnson, ‘Judgment of Generation on Trial’, *Washington Post*, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1977, p. A1.

<sup>174</sup> Warren Weaver, ‘Justice Hear Bakke Arguments but Give Little Hint on Decision’, *NYT*, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1977, p. 1.

<sup>175</sup> John Chancellor quoted in Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness*, p. 153.

The anticipation was perplexing to some. Haynes Johnson writing for the *Washington Post*, captured the colour-blind sentiment seeping out of Reagan's conservative movement and noted, 'what gave the day a special quality was somehow ironic. Passion is not supposed to be a hallmark of these times, and the great racial questions have been decided. Yet here was another case about race that has stirred emotions across the country.'<sup>176</sup> For affirmative action's conservative opponents, it was 'axiomatic that time carried no such heavy claim of guilt or consequence.'<sup>177</sup> Johnson articulated a belief that was becoming consensus in certain quarters – the United States had moved into a post-racial age.

Since the passage of Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s, remedies to tackle *de jure* problems were in place, which conservatives believed was all that was required to provide equal opportunity. Surveys of the late 1970s crystallised this meritocratic individualist consensus. Reaffirming this complex tale of racial behaviour, nine-in-ten Americans supported affirmative action 'provided there are no rigid quotas', while three-quarters of the public would vote against the *Bakke* position taken by the University of California.<sup>178</sup> This seeming contradiction at the heart of the colour-blind model, highlighted the problem that 'Americans took the repugnance of quotas for granted, but rarely if ever did anyone explain why they were bad'.<sup>179</sup> All eyes turned to the court, hoping nine justices would provide a clear answer to the problem successive presidents and congressional sessions had failed to answer – how to implement a

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<sup>176</sup> Haynes Johnson, 'Judgment of Generation on Trial', *Washington Post*, 13th October 1977, p. A1.

<sup>177</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), p. 132.

<sup>178</sup> When asked 'All in all, do you favor or oppose affirmative action programs in industry for ...blacks... provided there are no rigid quotas?' 89% favour and only 5% opposed the measure. Conducted by *Louis Harris & Associates*, collected November 1978; when asked, 'The Supreme Court is about to rule on the Bakke case which will decide whether or not a university can favor the applications of minority students and/or women over other students in order to meet affirmative action goals. If you were on the Supreme Court and had to rule on the Bakke case, would you vote in favor of the principle of affirmative action which would allow universities to favor the applications of minority and disadvantaged students over others, or would you vote against it?', 25% were in favour and 75% opposed the measure. Conducted by *Time Magazine/Yankelovich, Skelly & White*, collected between 30<sup>th</sup> May – 5<sup>th</sup> June 1978.

<sup>179</sup> Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action*, p. 225.

meaningful and effective affirmative action programme devoid of quotas, yet remain within the bounds of the Equal Treatment clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1978, Justice Lewis Powell, a Virginian nominated by Nixon, handed down the opinion. ‘I will now try to explain how we divided on this issue’, Powell noted with a smile, ‘it may not seem self-evident.’<sup>180</sup> The Court, much like the nation was severely torn. The nine justices issued a total of six opinions. Chief Justice Burger joined Powell and justices, Rehnquist, Stewart, and Stevens in the judgment that ruled quotas unconstitutional, struck down the minority admissions programme at Davis, and admitted Bakke to the course. The remaining four justices, Blackmun, Brennan, Marshall, and White dissented this aspect of the opinion, but then joined with Powell in a later part which found affirmative action constitutional in certain circumstances. Further, these justices allowed race to be a factor in the admissions process – a decision that Burger, Rehnquist, Stewart, and Stevens all dissented to. Signifying the division and chaos within the court, Powell was the only justice to agree to the entirety of the opinion, in what was technically a five-to-four vote.

Handing down two nuanced decisions in one bipolar opinion, ‘produced an awkward truce on the issue and left all sides uneasy’.<sup>181</sup> Attorney General Griffin Bell told the White House press corps the result was ‘a great gain for affirmative action’, and Benjamin Hooks, the Executive Director of the NAACP praised the ‘clear-cut victory for voluntary affirmative action’.<sup>182</sup> Others, however, felt the decision was a major setback for civil rights progression. Julian Bond, a civil rights leader from Georgia, condemned the decision as a route to the ‘plateau’ of

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<sup>180</sup> Justice Lewis Powell quoted in Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness*, p. 154.

<sup>181</sup> Kruse and Zelizer, *Fault Lines*, p. 63.

<sup>182</sup> Griffin Bell and Benjamin Hooks quoted in Linda Greenhouse, ‘Bell Hails Decision: Calls Ruling a “Great Gain” – Plaintiff is “Pleased” and Others Express Relief’, *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1978, p. A1.

affirmative action.<sup>183</sup> Justice Thurgood Marshall in a stinging rebuttal charged, this decision was the same shameful action which for ‘most of the past 200 years, the Constitution as interpreted by this Court did not prohibit the most ingenious and pervasive forms of discrimination against the Negro.’<sup>184</sup>

Consternation on the left was met with incredulity on the right. The *National Review* published a series of essays denouncing affirmative action in the mid-to-late 1970s, including ‘Reverse Discrimination: A Brief Against It’.<sup>185</sup> Roger Freeman launched a full-scale defense of colour-blind conservatism and ratcheted up the rhetoric, disgusted that ‘in common language the term racist, which used to mean a person who classifies and treats persons differently according to their race, now is applied to persons who preach and practice color-blindness.’<sup>186</sup> Striking at the heart of changing attitudes toward race, general wisdom until the early 1960s had argued where Jim Crow had been defined by race, the solution was colour-blindness. Government attitudes changed with the Great Society, which believed race-consciousness as evidenced by Johnson’s Howard University address was the answer. Johnson’s actions, however, hastened party realignment and contributed toward the changing political landscape.<sup>187</sup> By contrast, Reagan’s unchanging, rigid, colour-blind outlook aided his rise in the conservative movement and aided the movement’s rise nationally.

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<sup>183</sup> Julian Bond quoted in John Herbers, ‘A Plateau for Minorities’, *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1978, p. A1.

<sup>184</sup> Justice Thurgood Marshall quoted in John Herbers, ‘A Plateau for Minorities’, *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1978, p. A1.

<sup>185</sup> For full reading see Ernest Van Den Haag, ‘Reverse Discrimination: A Brief Against It’, *National Review*, vol. 29:16, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1977, pp. 492-496; ‘Calling the Tune’, *National Review*, vol. 27:29, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1975, pp. 1458-1461; ‘Trickling Down to Harvard’, *National Review*, vol. 28:23, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1976, pp. 661-662; ‘Bakke in a Blue Collar’, *National Review*, vol. 31:1, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1979, pp. 16-17; and Roger Freeman, ‘Uncle Sam’s Heavy Hand in Education’, *National Review*, vol. 30:31, 4<sup>th</sup> August 1978, pp. 947-956.

<sup>186</sup> Roger Freeman, ‘Uncle Sam’s Heavy Hand in Education’, p. 954.

<sup>187</sup> For reading on changing attitudes toward race in the Democratic Party and the dissolution of colour-blind liberalism in the 1970s, see Dennis Deslippe’s excellent study, *Protesting Affirmative Action*, pp. 184-191.

In what the *New York Times* labelled ‘the most significant decision since 1954’, *Bakke*, like its predecessor in *Brown v. Board*, exacerbated existing tensions to breaking point.<sup>188</sup> The decision was the high-water mark of racial division in the Carter presidency. If Reagan were to capitalise on resentment and backlash, his time was now. He refused. On 11<sup>th</sup> July 1978, two weeks after the decision, he crystallised his thoughts in a straightforward question ‘was the court just dodging a political hot potato or was it giving a balanced judgment of the need for the nation’, Reagan asked. His answer was unequivocal – ‘I think it was the latter.’<sup>189</sup>

The path Reagan carved in the aftermath was striking. He paid homage to the grassroots movement that led to this moment, directly quoting both Thomas Sowell and the head of the PLF, Ronald Zumbrun.<sup>190</sup> However, the focus of his remarks lay elsewhere. Demonstrating both compassion and statesmanship, he stood out from a political environment increasingly defined by polarisation. His remarks did not court the extreme right, nor did they ground his appeal in backlash politics. In a measured display of consensus-building, the governor recognised ‘medical school students from non-white minorities in the U.S. continue to be disproportionately small in number in relation to the population’, while also arguing ‘quota systems, furthermore, are alien to the American ideal’.<sup>191</sup> The nuanced response was characteristically consistent with his response as California Governor, where he opposed the quotas of the Philadelphia Plan, but supported black capitalism projects, and was the first governor in the nation to agree as plan with union leaders to eliminate discrimination in the

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<sup>188</sup> Warren Weaver, ‘Guidance is Provided: Medical School Racial Quota Voided, but Advantage for Minorities is Allowed’, *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1978, p. A1.

<sup>189</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘The Bakke Decision’, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1978, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Deaver and Hannaford Inc. Records, Box 14, Folder ‘14-2 Statements by Ronald Reagan 1978’, p. 1.

<sup>190</sup> Reagan quoted Zumbrun who argued, ‘The Bakke decision, by eliminating the condescending and inherently insulting racial quota approach, opens the way to unified public support for constructive solutions to providing equal opportunities to minorities.’ While Sowell noted and Reagan repeated, ‘By and large, the numerical approach has achieved nothing, and has achieved it at great cost.’ Zumbrun and Sowell quoted in Ronald Reagan, ‘The Bakke Decision’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

construction sector. As he had done years earlier, Reagan walked a careful tightrope of pushing his colour-blind beliefs without looking to alienate potential voters.

The Gipper and the court were on the same page in their abhorrence of quotas. Reagan lavished praise on the justices for having ‘found a way out of this apparently irreconcilable dilemma’, and particularly their recommendation of “‘use your judgment” to decide the qualification of each potential college or job applicant’. It was a revocation of the most radical aspect of the Great Society legacy – quotas – and the ruling held that individuals, not society writ large were responsible for progressing the Civil Rights agenda. For Reagan it was a supreme victory for ‘the concept of equal opportunity’. Lending credence and legitimacy to the Gipper’s meritocratic individualist argument, it was not the governor believed the role of federal government to enforce educational equality, that was a local issue. Neatly tying together his classic liberal devotion to individualism, anti-statism, and colour-blindness, the *Bakke* decision vindicated the worldview the governor had espoused for thirty years. Forging a new path forward, the Gipper left his *Bakke* speech on his characteristic optimistic endnote, telling the audience of the need ‘to be fair and apply the concept of equal opportunity. The rest is up to us.’<sup>192</sup>

### ***The Final Ascent***

Reagan launched his third presidential campaign in New York in November 1979, with a wave of transformative forces providing ideal conditions for a Republican challenger. The conservative movement was more powerful and diverse than it had been four years ago. The rise of a new social conservatism, typified by Jerry Falwell’s ‘Moral Majority’, solidified southern conservatism into the Republican camp. Meanwhile, liberalism was in rapid decline;

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 2-4.

President Carter shouldered most of the blame for an inflation rate above thirteen percent, interest rates above twenty percent, and unemployment above seven percent.<sup>193</sup>

While the Gipper faced a surprisingly strong primary challenge from George Bush, 1980 was a moment made for Reagan, for he had been, and continued to be ‘indispensable to conservatism’s political success.’<sup>194</sup> Returning to a proven method of optimism, the Gipper launched his presidential campaign promising, ‘the difference between an American and any other kind of person is that an American lives in anticipation of the future because he knows it will be a great place.’<sup>195</sup> He did not engage in segmentational politics, but spoke in broad brushstrokes of improving the lives of all Americans against Washington bureaucratic largesse.

At its core, Reagan’s message was the same anti-governmentalism he espoused since the late 1940s. Not only was the consistency of that message remarkable, but its effectiveness was extraordinary. Conservative small government had replaced liberal economic equality as the driving force of the middle-class. Such was the impact of the new paradigm; pollsters began tracking the perceived threat of ‘big government’ from the mid-sixties into the seventies and beyond. American’s agreement with Reagan’s message was an indicator of his success and the changing direction of the nation. In 1965, just over a third of Americans viewed big government as the biggest threat to the country’s future, a figure which sailed above fifty percent by Reagan’s presidential inauguration in 1981.<sup>196</sup> Over fifty years since the question, ‘In your opinion, which of the following will be the biggest threat to the country in the future – big

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<sup>193</sup> Statistics in Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 127.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

<sup>195</sup> Reagan, ‘Announcement for Presidential Candidacy’, 13<sup>th</sup> November 1979, *RRPL*, available online at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/11-13-79> (last viewed 7th May 2020).

<sup>196</sup> For statistics on growing fear of big government, see ‘In your opinion, which of the following will be the biggest threat to the country in the future – big business, big labor, or big government?’ In February 1965, the figure stood at 35%, which rose to 46% by July 1968, and stood at 53% in March 1981. For further detail, see ‘Survey February 1965’, ‘Survey June 1968’, and ‘Survey March 1981’, collected by *Gallup Organization*, (last viewed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020).

business, big labor, or big government?', was first asked, Americans are overwhelmingly more concerned today than in the 1960s of the perceived tyranny of big government.<sup>197</sup> This shifting of public opinion represents the most profound changing of social attitudes in a generation.

Within the engineered context of changing attitudes toward government, Reagan's colour-blind conservatism prescribed an alternative to both visceral backlash conservatism and big government liberalism. Across three elections, each augmented by an element of racial politics – law and order, busing, and affirmative action – Reagan's individualistic outlook permeated and shaped national debate, providing an alternative vision of government – a choice, not an echo. The Gipper was remarkably successful in asserting this choice, leading to an era, Crespino and Lassiter claim, was 'dominated by color-blind myths'.<sup>198</sup> It was seldom hard-edged where race was concerned and indeed came to full fruition as matters of race diminished in the national consciousness to a level not seen since at least the 1930s, if not earlier.

The question that remained was how successfully would Reagan implement this colour-blind vision, now he held the keys to the White House? Featuring a remarkable story of African American grassroots resistance to the president, we uncover how a new generation of conservatives undermined Reagan, leaving his politics outdated, and his presidency humiliated.

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<sup>197</sup> A December 2016 study found 67% of respondents chose big government – a sustained and profound increase from previous statistics given. For further information, see 'Survey December 2016', collected by *Gallup Organization*, (last viewed 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

<sup>198</sup> Lassiter and Crespino, 'Introduction: The End of Southern History', p. 7.

# V

## *Reagan's White House and Black America*

*I don't look at people as members of groups; I look at them as individuals and as Americans.*

*I believe you rob people of their dignity and confidence when you impose quotas. The implicit, but false, message of quotas is that some people can't make it under the same rules that apply to everyone else.<sup>1</sup>*

– President Ronald Reagan, Remarks to the American Bar Association, August 1983 –

### ***Introduction***

‘In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.’ These fundamental words of President Ronald Reagan spoken moments after he took the oath of office have been repeated time and again as capturing ‘Reaganism’ – a pronounced blend of beliefs in small government, fervent anti-communism, reduced taxation, and (colour-blind) individualism. As the president looked down the National Mall toward the Washington Monument, delivering Ken Khachigan’s carefully crafted and well-executed inaugural address, he had reached the pinnacle of his political career at the third time of asking. Humbled by the size of the challenge that lay ahead, the Gipper delivered a vintage performance of optimism, simplicity, and distinctiveness. He paid tribute to the decades of work by the conservative grassroots movement that had delivered this moment by pushing against fifty years of expanding centralised government, and reminded the people that ‘the Federal Government did

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks of the President to the 105<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Bar Association’, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1983, *RRPL*, Christina Bach Files, Box 3, Folder ‘Minority Issues’, p. 4.

not create the States; the States created the Federal Government.’<sup>2</sup> That was one of a plethora of lines that confirmed what many had hoped, and many had feared: at least at a rhetorical level, change had come to America.

The size of Reagan's victory – sweeping forty-four states against an incumbent president – was era-defining.<sup>3</sup> Given the huge institutional power at his disposal, all eyes focussed on how the president would enact the anti-statist, individualist, colour-blind reforms he had advocated for forty years. The new administration took the landslide victory as a ‘mandate for leadership’ and change – literally and metaphorically – invoking many of the right-wing Heritage Foundation's policy proposals of that very name.<sup>4</sup> The inaugural address was an exercise in ‘philosophy of government rather than programmatic agenda’, reflecting the president's ambitious view of politics.<sup>5</sup>

Guided by a colour-blind agenda, Reagan sought to remake the political landscape at home and abroad. Labelled by the *New York Times* as ‘the reformer who would reverse the New Deal's legacy’, Reagan's domestic agenda focussed on ‘reducing taxes, curbing federal spending, and rolling back regulations’.<sup>6</sup> In foreign affairs, the administration wanted to restore ‘the margin of safety’ in the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union and counteract the policy of détente

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<sup>2</sup> Reagan, ‘Inaugural Address’, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1981, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address-11> (last viewed 16th January 2020).

<sup>3</sup> For reading see, Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York, 2015); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History of 1974 – 2008* (New York, 2008); and Robert Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The original 1980 Mandate for Leadership produced by the heritage Foundation was 1,100 pages long, containing over 2,000 policy recommendations – ‘a blueprint for grabbing the government by its frayed New Deal lapels and shaking out 48 years of liberal policy.’ Reagan gave a copy to every member of his cabinet and by the end of the first term, the administration had implemented, or attempted to implement nearly two-thirds of the recommendations. For further reading, see Andrew Blasko, ‘Reagan and Heritage: A Unique Partnership’, *Heritage Foundation*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2004, available online at <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/reagan-and-heritage-unique-partnership> (last viewed 16th January 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), p. 242.

<sup>6</sup> Hedrick Smith, ‘Reformer Who Would Reverse the New Deal's Legacy’, *NYT*, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1981, p. B2.

that Cold War hawks charged had allowed communism to spread throughout Africa and Asia.<sup>7</sup> Yet defining a vision for change was harder than implementing that vision, in the complex institutional context of American democracy. Reagan would falter over several matters including Social Security and the abolition of federal departments including Energy and Education. Race presented another policy area among many where turning rhetoric into action was far from straightforward.

Historians seeking to understand the Reagan presidency have often constructed a simplistic and unvarnished view of the Gipper's relationship to race. Kenneth O'Reilly, a scholar of the modern presidency and civil rights, argued Reagan 'saw political fortune in continuing Nixon's Southern Strategy of pitting white Americans against the "special interests" and pleadings of African Americans', and further noted 'those who pretended that Southern Strategy had come and gone with Nixon were forced to admit that Reagan brought it back with a vengeance.'<sup>8</sup> Similar attacks on his record came most pointedly from historian and author of the Pulitzer Prize winning work *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, Manning Marable. In his work *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, Marable asserted 'the "ideological glue" of Reaganism was racism', citing the governor's 1980 Neshoba County address as evidence of 'Reagan's overtly racist stance'.<sup>9</sup>

Further unsophisticated examination of the relationship between Reaganite conservatism and race is found in Robert Smith's work, *Conservatism and Racism, and Why in America They Are the Same*. The author's crude assessment that 'conservatism as an ideology in the United

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<sup>7</sup> Administration quoted in Smith, 'Reformer Who Would Reverse the New Deal's Legacy'.

<sup>8</sup> O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* (New York, 1995), p. 359; p. 350.

<sup>9</sup> Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945 – 2006*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Jackson, 2007), p. 176.

States, whether expressed by intellectuals such as Milton Friedman or William Buckley or politicians such as Barry Goldwater or Ronald Reagan, is the same as racism', presented a straw man approach to a complicated, divergent movement of people and ideas that is not borne out by historical evidence.<sup>10</sup> This was particularly the case with respect to a leader who sought (and gained) broad centrist support, albeit not from African Americans, in challenging the political landscape of the past fifty years.

The president's 'colour-blindness' somewhat resembled that which Martin Luther King had advanced in the early 1960s as his ultimate, utopian vision – a world in which race was invisible. The problem was that Reagan sometimes imagined that such a world already existed, a sleight of hand or delusion which rationalised his administration's failure to address the entrenched legacy of race-based inequality in the United States. Further complicating the picture, it was around the turn of the decade that new sociological literature, such as William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race*, argued that class was now a bigger barrier than race to African American progress.<sup>11</sup> Reagan's obliviousness to race poses a challenge for historians for whom race is of elemental political significance. They have responded to an administration characterised by a lack of salience of racial issues with simplistic and somewhat ahistorical interpretations. This thesis has sought to recover Reagan's unchanging, colour-blind, conservative worldview dating back to the 1940s. Progressive back then, it was left looking old-fashioned and then (for some) indefensible by the rapidly changing exogenous political environment from the 1950s to the 1980s. But, O'Reilly, Marable, and Smith are

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Conservatism and Racism, and Why in America They Are the Same* (Albany, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Wilson's most prominent work on the importance of class rather than race is, William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago, 1978). Additional works by Wilson in this area include; *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987); and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, 1996).

wrong when they associate Reagan with a politics of race that was grounded in backlash conservatism.

Instead, this chapter animates a narrative that the 1980s must be viewed not as a linear story of progression from the Nixon and Wallace pursuit of backlash politics, but as the ascent of Reagan-led colour-blind conservatism. While colour-blind and backlash strands are roots of the same tree, they are very much distinct branches; a notion missed by historian Dan T. Carter, who concluded 'Reagan showed that he could use coded language with the best of them [Wallace, Nixon, Helms]', and Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, who suggested Reagan was key in the development of 'race baiting becomes race burying in the arc of the Long Southern Strategy.'<sup>12</sup>

The enduring *genus* of conservatism is the same – small government federalism – yet, the colour-blindness is not motivated by the same group-based white rights collectivism as its backlash counterpart. To Reagan, and other colour-blind adherents, primacy of the individual was paramount in a fashion more akin to Calvin Coolidge, than Richard Nixon. For the thirty-seventh president, his belief that African Americans were inferior and therefore needed additional help, ironically drove race-specific remedies – affirmative action – which Reagan opposed. Historians addressing the overarching narrative of the 1980s have not only misjudged Reagan when they present him as having shaped his racial agenda in reaction to the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s. They have also missed what was a genuinely important shift in the politics of race, namely the emergence of a colour-conscious black political class, reacting to

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<sup>12</sup> Carter, tracing what he sees as a linear development of antagonistic conservative racial politics from George Wallace to Newt Gingrich (including Reagan). For further reading, see Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge, 1996), p. 64; Maxwell and Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy: How Chasing White Voters in the South Changed American Politics* (Oxford, 2019), pp. 93-94.

the massive barriers to African American achievement that remained palpable in late twentieth century America, and also reaction against Reagan's anti-statist colour-blind agenda.

For those few historians who *have* recognised the complex story of the fortieth president and race, a complicated and paradoxical duality has emerged. While I agree with historian Iwan Morgan's description of the Gipper as 'lacking personal bigotry', I differ from his conclusion Reagan 'proved himself the most successful racial-backlash politician in US history before entering the White House'.<sup>13</sup> Instead, I view Reagan as having benefitted from a backlash without needing or seeking to exploit it. This chapter will further complicate Morgan's thesis with two additional thoughts. The first takes Reagan's worldview seriously by considering policy at face value. In doing so, the stark conclusion reached reveals the president cared little for questions of race, except where it intersected with his core concerns – small government and the Cold War as examples. For biographer Lou Cannon, one of his larger arguments is that Reagan's political strength lay in his laser-like focus on the narrow topics he truly cared about, and race was not one of them.<sup>14</sup> The second additional thought analysed the politics of everything, addressing questions of fairness, expanded inequality, and allegations of racism. Here we see, Reagan removed from backlash politics at a time when civil rights activists pushed programmes, such as affirmative action, which *required* rather than rejected colour-consciousness.

Building on the previous chapter's discussion, this chapter advances two arguments about President Reagan and race. The first, *Reaganism in Action*, examines the growth of economic inequality in his first term through tax cuts, welfare reductions, and budgetary reform, arguing

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 241.

<sup>14</sup> See Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, 2003); and Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, 2000).

that it was encouraged less by any covert racism than – again – by the administration's obliviousness to race. The second and perhaps most interesting issue, *Cold War Decolonisation in Africa*, emphasises that it was in the international arena where the politics of race really exploded into life during Reagan's Administration. In this section, I interrogate the protracted struggle between the president and an emergent African American political class over relations with apartheid South Africa, culminating in the president's biggest foreign policy defeat of his tenure.

The story of African American progress in the 1980s is complex. On the one hand, African Americans consolidated existing gains, such as the growth of a nascent and expanding political class, huge growth in rates of black business ownership, and continual advances in popular culture and the media. Yet on the other, there was the nadir of the drug crisis, increased economic inequality, and rise in violent crime. At the heart of this paradox was the president. In general, precisely because of its lack of interest in race, and easy acceptance of the convenient belief that the United States was a colour-blind society, the Reagan Administration was a bystander.

### ***Reaganism in Action***

There were few surprises in the administration's initial actions: Reagan did what he had promised, i.e. he slashed domestic spending and taxes while accelerating Carter's existing military build-up. Polls revealed a sympathetic American public. A pre-election survey found that thirty-one percent of voters thought inflation was the most important problem facing the country, followed by nineteen percent thinking the economy generally, and the threat of the

Soviet Union third on nine percent.<sup>15</sup> What may have surprised pundits, given the chaotic nature of the president's campaign was the ability to stay on track with his 'tightly focused political agenda'.<sup>16</sup> More so than any president since Roosevelt, Reagan had a clear sense of what he wanted to achieve and seldom deviated from that path.

The following discussion takes a close look at how Reagan's race-indifferent policies drew criticism from the black community, helping to trigger the clash of the White House and substantial proportions of black America. Analogous to the growth of the Sierra Club as a response to the Reagan Administration's perceived anti-environmentalism, the president's policies provoked a backlash which expanded and emboldened the African American political class.

### *Supplanting Equality with Freedom*

Historians and social scientists seeking to understand the Reagan presidency have concentrated on economic reform domestically and the challenge of communism abroad. In both areas, they concur the extent to which the Gipper initially translated campaign rhetoric into policy was remarkable, in part because of the general sense of crisis, in part due to the president's unwavering philosophical consistency. Ideologically, he was unchanged since the 1940s. At the heart of that worldview was a devotion to individualism that was incompatible either with détente, or with big government – or with group-based claims for compensatory justice.

In an earlier chapter, we saw that social welfare reform was the highlight of Reagan's Sacramento years, if not indeed his only significant accomplishment. The question that drove

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<sup>15</sup> Survey on 'What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?', conducted by *CBS News/New York Times Poll*, collected in October 1980.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 242.

considerations then, as they did in 1981, was the weighing of the scales between opportunity and entitlement. Believing himself to be a Roosevelt Democrat and ascribing to FDR's belief that the dole was a 'subtle narcotic', the Gipper fundamentally believed that government should only intervene to help the 'truly needy'. As president too, social welfare reform was a priority. Reagan not only asked questions that 'constitute[d] a coherent ideological attack on the principles that have governed social policy in this country for the last half century', but – more importantly – 'answered' these questions by supplanting notions of 'equality' with ideas of 'freedom' in the government's lexicon.<sup>17</sup> The problem, however, lay in the fact that Reagan's 'answers' for dramatically overhauling the federal government's approach to racial equality were grounded in rhetorical and philosophical preferences that were, as we later see, supported by conservative intellectuals.

On the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> February 1981, sixteen days into his presidency, Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office. Reporting on the state of the economy, the president told viewers that allowing for three feet per person, the seven million unemployed Americans could be represented by a line stretching from Maine to California. Using the medium he knew best – television – the president sold his programme of sweeping reforms to the people before meeting with the Congress. In a developed and sustained critique of the 'uncontrolled government growth' of Great Society politics, the Gipper charged, 'we must act and act now' to 'restore the freedom of all men and women to excel and to create.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lee Bawden and John Palmer, 'Social Policy: Challenging the Welfare State', in John Palmer and Isabel Sawhill (eds.), *The Reagan Record: An Assessment of America's Changing Domestic Priorities* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 177; for reading on the changing nature of government rhetoric, see pages 177-179.

<sup>18</sup> Reagan, 'Address to the Nation on the Economy', 5<sup>th</sup> February 1981, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.uscb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-economy-0> (last viewed 20th January 2020).

At the heart of his programme was spending cuts. Yet, the president emphasised 'our spending cuts will not be at the expense of the truly needy.' Instead, 'we will... seek to eliminate benefits to those who are not really qualified by reason of need.'<sup>19</sup> The Gipper was preparing to engage in the same battles he endured during his governorship with the welfare rights movement of the early 1970s. Then, as now, Reagan believed 'there is no humanity or charity in destroying self-reliance, dignity and self-respect, the very substance of moral fiber.'<sup>20</sup> However, the sustained nature of his 'welfare queen' attacks of the mid-1970s raised questions about racial impact of who was in need, and who was deserving of taxpayers' money.<sup>21</sup>

The president looked to reassure both the public and Congress that there was no race or class element to his motives in a speech to Congress a couple of weeks later. In his first major address to a joint session since he became president, he sought to allay fears of welfare cuts. 'I know', he declared, 'that exaggerated and inaccurate stories about these cuts have disturbed many people', but Reagan assured, 'we will continue to fulfil the obligations that spring from our national conscience. Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us – the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need – can rest assured'.<sup>22</sup> This approach was more akin to the New Deal than the Great Society, which – James Patterson notes – was 'more intrusive and paternalistic' than its predecessor.<sup>23</sup> The Gipper did not want to eliminate welfare programmes (by and large), but to restore them to their 'original purpose' by 'removing from eligibility those who are not in real need.' As with his Sacramento days, the president focussed on means-tested welfare. Programmes such as Aid to Families with

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Brands, *Reagan*, p. 156.

<sup>21</sup> For initial reading on Reagan's use of 'welfare queen', see "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign', *NYT*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1976, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> Reagan, 'Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery', 18<sup>th</sup> February 1981, *APP*, available online at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-program-for-economic-recovery-0> (last viewed 20th January 2020).

<sup>23</sup> James Patterson, *America's Struggle Against Poverty, 1900-1980* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), p. 137.

Dependent Children (AFDC) were brought into the spotlight, with the expectation that 'strong and effective work requirements, will save \$520 million in the next year.'<sup>24</sup>

In February 1981, Reagan brought several reform proposals before Congress, enacted several months later as the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA). OBRA was the most ambitious and largest shakeup of government spending in a generation. Over 200 programmes had their projected expenditure reduced, saving \$35.2 billion in the Gipper's first year and \$140 billion over the following three years.<sup>25</sup> Of the four major elements encompassed in the reforms – reduced rate of growth in federal spending, reduced personal tax rates, regulatory relief, and a commitment to monetary policy – it was federal spending cuts and tax reductions that brought the heaviest criticism.<sup>26</sup>

While the most radical elements of Reagan's reforms were tempered by Congress – such as saving the Work Incentive Program – many government programmes had projected budgets significantly reduced. Among them, schemes which many poorer Americans depended on faced significant changes. AFDC was cut by 14.3 percent, Food Stamps by 13.8 percent, and child nutrition by 28 percent.<sup>27</sup> The reductions were akin to what the Gipper achieved whilst in California. In successfully attacking the discretionary grant and welfare programmes that constituted a legacy of Johnson's Great Society and beyond, there was little doubt that Reagan's first year in office symbolised an overwhelming rejection of entitlement liberalism.

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<sup>24</sup> Reagan, 'Address on the Program for Economic Recovery'.

<sup>25</sup> Figures taken from Iwan Morgan, *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Reagan, 'Message to the Congress Transmitting the Proposed Package on the Program for Economic Recovery', 18<sup>th</sup> February 1981, *APP*, available online at <http://presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-the-congress-transmitting-the-proposed-package-the-program-for-economic-recovery> (last viewed 20th January 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Statistics taken from table 6.1, Bawden and Palmer, *Social Policy*, p. 185.

The supplementary element to the president's reforming of the economic agenda, signed on the same day as OBRA, was the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981. A version of the Kemp-Roth bill, the proposal initially called for a ten percent cut across-the-board for three consecutive years for individual taxpayers. Reagan eventually signed a bill that incorporated a reduction from seventy percent to fifty percent in the top marginal rate, and a more gradual reduction over three years in all other bands. The sweeping reforms were 'a triumph of conservative ideology'.<sup>28</sup>

The motivations for the tax cuts were twofold. On the one hand, Reagan along with the supply-siders in his administration led by Office of Management and Budget Director David Stockman, believed attractive tax rates would incentivise 'increase[d] productivity for both workers and industry', thus bolstering the economy – 'trickle-down economics'. On the other, it was hoped that reducing the federal state would boost state governments, accelerating the aborted federalism programme that Nixon had proposed. 'The taxing power of government', the president warned in his address to Congress, 'must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change', which by implication included racial change.<sup>29</sup> Combined, OBRA and ERTA constituted not only a coherent ideological attack on forty years of bipartisan growth of federal government, but was also the clearest example of what has recently been termed, 'the conservative state'; a 'redeployment' of centralised power to 'privatize' public policy and reorient federal government focus onto national security.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. xvii.

<sup>29</sup> Reagan, 'Address on the Program for Economic Recovery'.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Jacobs, Desmond King, and Sidney Milkis, 'Building a Conservative State: Partisan Polarization and the Redeployment of Administrative Power', *Perspectives on Politics*, 17:2 (2019), p. 461.

The impact of Reagan's economic reforms was substantial. Tax cuts, alongside increased defence expenditure, and the Federal Reserve's desire to aggressively tackle inflation, 'precipitated' the 'deepest recession since the 1930s.'<sup>31</sup> Trimming the fat of the entitlement programmes and the second wave of the double-dip recession meant as 1982 and the midterm elections came into view, many Americans were struggling. Tightening eligibility requirements and increased means-testing meant an estimated 500,000 families lost AFDC support, a further 300,000 had reductions of ADFC support, while over one million people lost Food Stamp eligibility.<sup>32</sup> By the end of 1982, almost a third of Americans 'strongly disapproved' of Reagan's economic policy programme, while his approval ratings fell eighteen points from the beginning of his presidency.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Emergence of the 'Fairness Issue' and Rolling Back the Civil Rights Clock***

Despite Reagan's assertion to the Congress in February 1981 that 'our approach has been even-handed', critics of the administration began a prolonged campaign heading into the midterms that the White House was far from fair in its economic reforms.<sup>34</sup> At the heart of the debate was the notion of 'equality', which fiercely divided political opinion. The 'fairness issue' became a major controversy in Reagan's first two years.<sup>35</sup>

Initial challenges to the president were grounded in terms of rich and poor. House Speaker Tip O'Neill called the reforms 'a program of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich', while House

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<sup>31</sup> Morgan, *The Age of Deficits*, p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> Bawden and Palmer, *Social Policy*, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> 29% of Americans 'strongly disapproved' of Reagan's economic policies in December 1982. At the same time, his approval number was 41% and disapproval was 50%, compared to 59% approval and 24% disapproval at the beginning of March 1981. For further information, see question 107, 'Garth Analysis Poll: December 1982', conducted 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> December 1982, *Penn & Schoen Associates*; question 30, 'Gallup Poll: 1206G', conducted 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> December 1982, *Gallup Organization*; and question 1, 'Gallup Poll: 1170G', conducted 13<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> March 1981, *Gallup Organization*.

<sup>34</sup> Reagan, 'Address on the Program for Economic Recovery'.

<sup>35</sup> Davison Douglas and Neal Devins, 'Introduction: The Pursuit of Equality', in Devins and Douglas (eds.), *Redefining Equality* (New York, 1998), p. 3.

Majority Leader Jim Wright called Reagan a 'rich man's president', and AFL-CIO President, Lane Kirkland, described the policies as 'economic Darwinism, that is, survival of the richest'.<sup>36</sup> The reaction from groups on the left was the formation of a huge coalition of 157 different groups – trade unions, civil rights groups, religious organisations, and social welfare agencies – that came together to lobby and fight against the cuts that would 'wreak great damage to the fabric of this nation.' Director of Americans for Democratic Action, Leon Shull, went as far as to describe the administration's reforms as the 'rape of the American middle class and poor people'.<sup>37</sup>

Reagan's social welfare cuts stimulated a backlash, one of whose elements was a civil rights mobilisation. For such groups, who had feared the worst since Reagan's Neshoba address and had overwhelmingly supported Carter in the election, there was an urgent need to respond to the White House's actions. On 9<sup>th</sup> March 1981, the NAACP led by Benjamin Hooks announced a major campaign to lobby against the proposed tax cuts, that was 'an Alice in Wonderland approach that takes from the poor and gives to the rich', bringing 'despair to millions of people'.<sup>38</sup> The new head of the National Urban League, Vernon Jordan, who replaced Clarence Pendleton because of Pendleton's move to head the Commission on Civil Rights, described the Reagan presidency as the League's 'most difficult challenge in recent years'.<sup>39</sup> Further denunciation of the president's reforms came from Coretta Scott King at a rally of 260,000 on the nation's capital in September of that year.<sup>40</sup> Whilst the White House ultimately had the

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<sup>36</sup> Tip O'Neill quoted in John Sloan, *The Reagan Effect: Economics and Presidential Leadership* (Lawrence, KS, 1999), pp. 255-256; Jim Wright quoted in Hedrick Smith, 'Opposition Forming to Reagan Program', *NYT*, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1981, p. A22; Lane Kirkland quoted in *Time magazine*, 14<sup>th</sup> September 1981, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Leon Shull quoted in Bernard Weinraub, 'National Coalition to Battle Reagan Budget Cutbacks', *NYT*, 28<sup>th</sup> February 1981, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Hooks quoted in 'NAACP Asserts Reagan Budget Profits the Rich at Expense of Poor', *NYT*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1981, p. A16.

<sup>39</sup> Vernon Jordan quoted in Sheila Rule, 'Civil Rights Challenge: Urban League Convention Hints Confusion and Frustration over White House Policy', *NYT*, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1981, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Seth King, '260,000 in Capital Rally for Protest of Reagan Policies', *NYT*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1981, p. A1.

political capital to pass many of the reforms in sweeping measures, it was just the beginning of a rapid, bruising, and terminal decline of relations between the Reagan Administration and minority groups.

While many feared Reagan's economic policies would disproportionately damage the poorest Americans including many from minority communities – a notion later borne out by statistical evidence – a series of events throughout the president's first year stressed the already strained relationship.<sup>41</sup> The following paragraphs carry forward the deterioration between the president and senior black figures to the end of the first term, but it later found a few ways of discomforting the White House – the first effective black mobilisation against the administration would instead be prompted by Reagan's handling of apartheid South Africa. What is interesting about the events that developed a pattern of antagonism and animosity, was that they were seemingly preventable.

The first and perhaps most visible source of division was the lack of black political appointees in the administration. At the cabinet level, Reagan – like Carter before him – appointed only one black cabinet secretary, former New York attorney Samuel Pierce who headed Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Yet, such was the president's lack of interest in HUD, along with departments such as Commerce and Agriculture, he played very little role in appointing the nominee, allowing aides to provide a list of three candidates from which the president-elect chose. The stark lack of interest in the department and the secretary was made abundantly clear in June 1981 when the president failed to recognise his appointee and greeted him as 'Mr

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<sup>41</sup> Statistical analysis by Marilyn Moon and Isabel Sawhill demonstrated that black Americans saw an average decrease in real disposable income across Reagan's first term of 2.6 percent, compared to white counterparts of 0.3 percent decrease. For statistical breakdown see table 10.6 on pages 332-333. For further analysis, see Moon and Sawhill, 'Family Incomes: Gainers and Losers' in John Palmer and Isabel Sawhill (eds.), *The Reagan Record: An Assessment of America's Changing Domestic Priorities* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), pp. 316-346.

Mayor' at a White House function.<sup>42</sup> Immediately below cabinet level meanwhile, the Gipper appointed twenty-four black Americans to office, compared to thirty-eight by his predecessor. 'Critics', according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, 'charge this is a small number' and remained wary of Reagan, with NAACP head Benjamin Hooks saying, 'our opposition to his policies must necessarily continue.'<sup>43</sup>

A second incident early in his administration further soured relations. On 3<sup>rd</sup> February, trying to sell his economic reforms to Congress, Reagan met with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). With the increasing delineation between the parties on race, the CBC was largely a Democratic platform of protest during the Gipper's first term. Indeed, as founding member Representative Ron Dellums outlined in his memoir – 'the black community's distaste for Reagan's ideology was as near to unanimous as that diversity allowed' – hostility to the president helped unify the diverse political group.<sup>44</sup> That and a particularly icy first meeting, where members of the CBC rebuked many of the president's economic reforms, only to be met by a 'hostile and aggressive new administration,' meant the two never met again.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike Carter, who often conferred with the CBC, where Reagan needed advice on matters of race, he turned to the conservative academic cadre of Thomas Sowell, Walter Williams, and Glenn Loury. Sowell, an economist and devout follower of the Chicago School – he received his PhD at the University of Chicago in 1968 – was particularly influential, and published several works on race and social policy. In his most famous piece of the period, his 1975 study

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<sup>42</sup> 'Cabinet Aide Greeted by Reagan as "Mayor"', *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1981, p. A12.

<sup>43</sup> Hooks and statistics quoted in Luix Overbea, 'Black Reagan Appointees Try to Overcome Identity Crisis', *Christian Science Monitor*, 25<sup>th</sup> August 1981, available online at <https://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0825/082537.html> (last viewed 21st January 2020).

<sup>44</sup> Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions: A Public Life from the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power* (Boston, 2000), p. 106.

<sup>45</sup> For reading on the hostile relationship and only meeting between the CBC and Reagan, see Robert Singh, *The Congressional Black Caucus: Racial Politics in the U.S. Congress* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1998), pp. 92-94.

*Race and Economics*, Sowell provided a conservative intellectual rationale for colour-blind government, arguing the failed 'social reforms' of the Great Society years were 'all too apparent and painful.' The economist concluded that rather than alleviating economic and social hardship, activist government had made things worse for minorities.<sup>46</sup> Such fervent and politically convenient rationales left the CBC ostracised at the executive level – another example, they perceived, of blacks being shut out of the White House.

Added to the long-term tension between minority groups and the White House was the appointment of William Bradford Reynolds as the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. Reynolds, a Yale graduate turned lawyer, was a young, vociferous, combative ideologue in the president's mould. Emphasising the administration's belief in a post-racial society, Reynolds claimed ahead of his Senate confirmation that it was 'counterproductive to dwell on the historical background' of race relations.<sup>47</sup> Later regarded as 'one of the most influential and effective members of the Reagan administration', he vehemently opposed affirmative action arguing, 'discrimination on the basis of race is illegal, immoral, unconstitutional, inherently wrong, and destructive of democratic society.'<sup>48</sup> Reynolds viewed the Johnson administration as being outside the liberal tradition of 'equality of opportunity' and frequently penned letters to the national press defending a desire to 'restore Executive Order 11246' (affirmative action as set out by Kennedy in 1962), 'to its original meaning' – no quotas and no hiring targets.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sowell, *Race and Economics* (New York, 1975), p. 204.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Pear, 'Reagan's Choice for Civil Rights Post', *NYT*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1981, p. B10.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds quoted in 'Obituary of William Bradford Reynolds', *The Washington Post*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2019.

<sup>49</sup> For examples see Reynolds, 'Racial Quotas Hurt Blacks and the Constitution', *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1985, p. A22; Reynolds, 'When Race is Irrelevant', *The Washington Post*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1986, p. 21; Reynolds, 'Reagan does well on Affirmative Action', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1986, p. A20. Note all sources also found in *Hoover Institution Archives*, Collection 'Edwin Meese Papers', Box 114, Folder 'William Bradford Reynolds'.

The administration's position was a reaction against bipartisan developments during the 1970s, which 'violated both the letter and spirit of the Civil Rights Act of 1964'.<sup>50</sup>

A controversial figure, Reynolds later explained to the Stanford Law School that the source of his disagreements with civil rights activists was his view that 'affirmative action race and gender quotas (or preferential goals) and mandatory student assignments (forced busing)' had been 'largely counterproductive' and 'perpetuated' discrimination.<sup>51</sup> Such was the opposition Reynolds generated during his tenure, when Reagan nominated him to be Associate Attorney General in 1985 (the third most senior position in the department), more than two dozen civil rights groups lobbied the Senate Judiciary Committee to oppose his nomination. Ralph Neas, the Executive Director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights stated, 'Mr. Reynolds is a rigid ideologue who is the principal architect of what we perceive to be a complex assault on the civil rights laws over the past four years.'<sup>52</sup>

Neas was referring to the administration's defence of Bob Jones University in its legal battle against the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) over federal tax exemptions and racial discrimination. As I will discuss shortly, the battle of Bob Jones was a significant source of embarrassment for the White House and prompted a swift and dramatic policy reversal. Reflecting Reynolds' importance and popularity with the president, upon his defeat in committee, the president noted in his diary 'they couldn't have done what they did without the help of 2 Repubs. Sens. Spector and Mathias. Well there are 2 Sens. I won't have to help

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<sup>50</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, 'The Politics of Clientele Capture: Civil Rights Policy and the Reagan Administration', in Neal Devins and Davison Douglas (eds.), *Redefining Equality* (New York, 1998), p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, 'Address before the Stanford Law School on "Civil Rights: Beyond the Conventional Agenda"', 17<sup>th</sup> February 1987, *Hoover Institution Archives*, Collection 'Edwin Meese Papers', Box 114, Folder 'William Bradford Reynolds', p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Neas quoted in Neil Lewis, 'Civil Rights Groups Gear Up to Oppose Reagan Nominee', *NYT*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1985, p. A14.

campaign.<sup>53</sup> Despite Reynolds' defeat, he proved an enduring figure in the struggle between civil rights activists wanting a colour-conscious activist agenda and an ideological administration determined to press social policy in a different anti-statist direction.

A further point of contention between the administration and civil rights groups was the White House's push for 'a new concept of federalism', that sought to return power to the individual states in an ambiguous return to 'states' rights'.<sup>54</sup> Ever the Jeffersonian, the president genuinely believed in devolving power away from Washington. Yet since the 1970s, 'states' rights' had been sullied by racism leaving many conservatives to abandon the phrase.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, Reagan pressed ahead with his reforms, and highlighted his support for 'states' rights' most notably at the Neshoba County fair in August 1980.

Opposition to this new federalism came from civil rights groups, with Jesse Jackson – the President of Operation People United to Save Humanity and 1984 presidential contender – claiming, 'For black people, states' rights has mainly been states' wrongs.' While the administration sought to allay fears and defended its position as 'in no way intended to discriminate', African American suspicions were hard to assuage. One civil rights activist told the *New York Times* that 'the states have to be practically held hostage at gunpoint to extend basic civil and human rights.'<sup>56</sup> Despite the alarm raised, racial attitudes in the states had changed significantly from the open hostility of previous decades. Analogous to Jennifer Delton's argument on business and race, which stressed the degree to which business leaders had absorbed quite racially sensitive attitudes by the 1980s, going as far as to describe large

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<sup>53</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York, 2007), p. 339.

<sup>54</sup> Sheila Rule, 'Blacks and Reagan's Goal on States' Rights', *NYT*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1981, p. B20.

<sup>55</sup> Martha Derthick, 'Crossing Thresholds: Federalism in the 1960s', *Journal of Policy History*, 8:1 (1996), pp. 64-80.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson and activist quoted in Rule, 'Blacks and Reagan's Goal on States' Rights'.

corporations as 'affirmative action's most credible champions', the states had also made advancements in civil rights progression.<sup>57</sup> Political scientists studying changing racial attitudes since 1972 concluded attitudes toward housing discrimination, segregated neighbourhoods, and interracial marriage became markedly more progressive between 1972 and 1984.<sup>58</sup>

The continued assault on big government by the White House was feared by African Americans who had come to depend on government help. Randall Robinson, the noted founder of TransAfrica and key opponent of the Gipper's South Africa policy, told a fundraiser, 'I'm frightened at the prospect of Ronald Reagan.'<sup>59</sup> So when the administration not only persisted with its new federalism project, but announced in August 1981 that one of the first areas to be transferred to the states would be welfare, particularly Medicaid and AFDC, minority groups saw this as a direct attack. The National Governors Association lambasted the concept as 'unacceptable', noting they lacked the finances to take on such responsibility even with help from Washington through a series of proposed block grants.<sup>60</sup> In reality, the planned move was a back-door method of shifting huge financial liabilities onto the states, that doubtless would have resulted in bigger welfare cuts than even the federal government had planned.

Later in the first term, two debates within the administration – one over whether to create a federal holiday for Martin Luther King's birthday and another concerning the extension of the Voting Rights Act – caused consternation in the black community. The renewal of the Voting

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<sup>57</sup> Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940-1990* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 280.

<sup>58</sup> Between 1972-84, the number of whites agreeing housing discrimination was acceptable fell from 64% to 48%, while segregated neighbourhood support fell from 39% to 28%, and support for a law against interracial marriage fell from 38% to 26%. For further reading, see Lawrence Bobo, Camille Charles, Maria Krysan, and Alicia Simmons, 'The Real Record on Racial Attitudes', in Peter Marsden (ed.), *Social Trends in American Life: Findings from the General Social Survey since 1972* (Princeton, 2012), p. 47.

<sup>59</sup> Robinson quoted in Francis Njubi Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946-1994* (Bloomington, 2004), p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> Drummond Ayres, 'Reagan Plans Welfare Shift to States', *NYT*, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1981, p. A8.

Rights Act of 1965 by Reagan in the summer of 1982 did superficially seem a high-water mark in the relationship between the administration and progressive activists. This was particularly the case when the president gave warm remarks at the signing ceremony, acknowledging 'Yes, there are differences over how to attain the equality we seek for all our people. And sometimes amidst all the overblown rhetoric, the differences tend to seem bigger than they are. But actions speak louder than words. This legislation proves our unbending commitment to voting rights.'<sup>61</sup>

The reality was the complete opposite. The president had openly and proudly opposed the initial act when campaigning for the California governorship nearly two decades earlier, calling it 'unconstitutional'.<sup>62</sup> Not dissimilar to his earlier opposition, the president's 'indifference' to civil rights filtered down through the 'rigidly ideological' Reynolds to create a Civil Rights Division, 'not only uninterested in protecting minority rights; in practice it actively thwarts the efforts of career lawyers and officials still committed to their charge, even harassing some of them.'<sup>63</sup>

Even more than most presidents, Reagan spent little time worrying about staffing agencies he was apathetic about, such as Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Education, and the Civil Rights Division (CRD) of the Department of Justice. The White House entrusted changing regulatory policy through the enforcement agencies – namely Reynolds at the CRD, Clarence Thomas at the EEOC, and Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs at the Department of Labor – rather than leading from the White House directly. Here, says Hugh Davis Graham, the administration was 'moderately successful in curbing civil rights

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<sup>61</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks on Signing the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982', 29<sup>th</sup> June 1982, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-the-voting-rights-act-amendments-1982> (last viewed 22nd January 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Reagan quoted in 'Reagan Challenge to the President', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1966, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> John Herbert Roper, 'The Voting Rights Extension Act of 1982', *Phylon*, vol. 45:3 (1984), p. 188.

regulation', by effectively shifting regulatory strategy 'not through formal, notice-and-comment procedures but through internal policy directives.'<sup>64</sup> Such was the cultural apathy toward civil rights protections among the top echelons of the CRD, that 'in an unprecedented action for middle-level lawyers with normal instincts for bureaucratic survival, nearly a hundred jurists filed a formal complaint that their superiors in the Justice Department were refusing to enforce the law of the land.'<sup>65</sup> This was both a rebuke of the headline actions of the White House, and an even more pointed rebuttal of the bureaucratic politics.

Despite the internal division, the administration managed to agree an extension to the Voting Rights Acts. The *New York Times* reporting on the signing ceremony noted, 'the 25-year extension contained stronger provisions against discrimination than those originally recommended by Mr. Reagan'. The administration had clashed with activists throughout the bill's passage. Initially, administration officials refused to testify on voting rights in the House, followed by the White House seeking a delay in the Senate Judiciary Committee. More substantive arguments flared up over the length of the extension – as Attorney General William French outlined, the administration wanted only ten additional years, rather than twenty-five. But the biggest debate developed over the 'Intent Issue' in section two of the bill; the White House wanted an intent clause inserted over voting procedure: outcomes in themselves, they argued, were not enough to show discrimination. Civil rights activist vehemently disagreed, with NAACP executive director Hooks lamenting, 'We are strongly seeking the unfettered right to vote. All the administration is trying to do is make it much harder for those who are outside who are trying to get in.'<sup>66</sup> Eventually, the White House and civil rights activists agreed

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<sup>64</sup> Graham, 'The Politics of Clientele Capture', p. 106.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Hooks quoted in 'Voting Rights Act Extended', *CQ Almanac*, available online at <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2772/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal82-1164618&type=hitlist&num=15> (last viewed 13<sup>th</sup> May 2020).

to the Dole Compromise, which kept the House version, plus language based upon a 'results test' that focussed on the political process.

The Dole Compromise left all parties unhappy, but an important bill was passed. Hooks, who witnessed the signing lamented afterward, 'blacks have no confidence that the Civil Rights division of the Justice Department will enforce the law'.<sup>67</sup> Only a day prior to the signing, Senator Edward Kennedy gave the keynote address to the annual NAACP convention and called Reagan's team, 'the most anti-civil rights Administration in the modern history of this land', while Margaret Bush Wilson, the chairperson of the NAACP's board, said Reagan had waged an 'ideological war' against the disadvantaged.<sup>68</sup> The episode exposed as well as any in the first term the White House's desire to promote their colour-blind agenda in spite of vigorous and continual protests to the contrary by civil rights groups. The Voting Rights Act extension proved to be another step along the road to direct confrontation between the diametrically opposed factions.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 1983, the president found himself in a quagmire of self-made controversy. As moves in Congress were made to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a federal holiday, the president was asked in his weekly press conference whether he agreed with Senator Jesse Helms' assertion King was a communist sympathiser. The president flippantly responded, 'We'll know in about 35 years, won't we?'<sup>69</sup> The controversy caused global outrage with Soviet press agency Tass (not missing an opportunity to attack the American president) arguing, 'facts show that the Reagan administration conducts a policy of brutal discrimination toward the 25

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<sup>67</sup> Hooks quoted in Howell Raines, 'Voting Rights Act Signed by Reagan', *NYT*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1982, p. A16.

<sup>68</sup> Kennedy and Bush quoted in Sheila Rule, 'NAACP Cheers Kennedy's Attack on Reagan', *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1982, p. A14.

<sup>69</sup> Reagan, 'The President's News Conference', 19<sup>th</sup> October 1983, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-945> (last viewed 22nd January 2020).

million strong population of black Americans.<sup>70</sup> The president was forced to apologise to Coretta Scott King a couple of days later, after it emerged Reagan had sent a letter to former Republican Governor of New Hampshire, Meldrim Thomson, that described King's popularity as 'based on an image, not reality'.<sup>71</sup> A veto-proof majority passage of the bill meant the president had unnecessarily involved himself in controversy, and only at the last moment pragmatically switched position and signed the bill. But to the African American community, the president's private and public attacks on a national icon reinforced long-standing suspicions that he did not care about them, and thus legitimated their concerns that his policy decisions were wedded to personal animus.

A final issue in the first term that symbolised the administration's apathy toward African Americans was the provocative support of Bob Jones University in a lawsuit against its own Treasury Department. In January 1982, the White House reversed an eleven-year-old federal policy of denying tax-exempt status to private schools and colleges that practiced racial discrimination. Bob Jones University had denied admittance of African Americans who were unmarried, on the basis that the Bible prohibited interracial marriage. Under the old Nixon-era provisions, the IRS had begun legal action. The *New York Times* in a fiery article entitled 'Subsidizing Racism', described Reagan's move as not just a 'lack of interest in fighting racial discrimination', but an 'active promotion of it'.<sup>72</sup> Tom Wicker's piece mischaracterised Reagan's White House. There is little doubt fighting discrimination was not a priority for the administration, as evidenced by this blunder, but to suggest an active promotion of racism was false.

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<sup>70</sup> 'Tass Assails Reagan Over Martin Luther King', *NYT*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1983, p. A5.

<sup>71</sup> Reagan quoted in Juan Williams, 'Reagan Calls Mrs King to Explain', *The Washington Post*, 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1983, p. A4.

<sup>72</sup> Tom Wicker, 'Subsidizing Racism', *NYT*, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1982, p. A15.

The public furore to Reagan's position was huge. Senator Edward Kennedy labelled the new regulations 'racist tax subsidies'; NAACP director Hooks lamented, 'it opens the door to every racist element in the nation to discriminate... and do it with a subsidy from the government's pocket'; whilst over one hundred CRD lawyers signed a letter in protest to department head, William Bradford Reynolds, declaring it 'violates existing federal Civil Rights laws'.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, only days later, the administration enacted a complete reversal of its position because of the concern that many Americans viewed the president as racist. In a display of astounding ignorance, it was reported that it had taken three black aides within the White House to warn the president of the 'depth of misunderstanding and misimpressions' that the incident had caused, to reverse Reagan's position.<sup>74</sup>

This incident has often been employed as a microcosm within historiography to assess the racist character of the president, with Dan Carter, Kenneth O'Reilly, and others suggesting it betrayed explicit racism.<sup>75</sup> Others including Lou Cannon, David Whitman, and Raymond Wolters have argued to the contrary that Reagan made the decision purely on regulatory grounds.<sup>76</sup> Either way, this episode shows the White House's general inattentiveness to Civil Rights concerns. The president's tight focus on a narrow range of issues, left him neglecting many African American concerns and reinforced the notion that he was not a president of all the people. After the Supreme Court gave the verdict in *Bob Jones University v. United States* – an eight to one decision against the university – NAACP lawyer Margaret Bush Wilson, encapsulated the

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<sup>73</sup> Kennedy, Hooks, and the Civil Rights Division lawyers all quoted in Aaron Haberman, 'Into the Wilderness: Ronald Reagan, Bob Jones University, and the Political Education of the Christian Right', *The Historian*, 67:2 (2005), p. 244.

<sup>74</sup> Howell Raines, 'President Shifts View on Tax Rule in Race Bias Cases', *NYT*, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1982, p. A1.

<sup>75</sup> See for example Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*; O'Reilly, *Nixon's Piano*; Wilbur Edel, *The Reagan Presidency: An Actor's Finest Performance* (New York, 1992); and Ronnie Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man and His Presidency* (New York, 1983).

<sup>76</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, 2000); Lawrence Barrett, *Gambling with History: Ronald Reagan in the White House* (New York, 1983); Raymond Wolters, *Right Turn: William Bradford Reynold, the Reagan Administration, and Black Civil Rights* (New Brunswick, 1996).

disgust of many in a stinging rebuttal of the president, declaring 'the Supreme Court would not be part of the Administration's effort to turn back the constitutional clock back to the days of separate but equal.'<sup>77</sup>

The Gipper's first term created a litany of events that amplified the hostility between the colour-blind conservative administration and the black community. The immediate response from a burgeoning African American political class was the candidacy of Reverend Jesse Jackson in the 1984 Democratic Party primaries. Jackson was 'the closest thing to Martin Luther King that the Reagan era had to offer', and it was no surprise given the president's undermining of King's legacy, that the civil rights movement chose someone in his mould. Despite Jackson failing in the primaries, the transition from the Voting Rights Act to presidential candidate in one generation was a significant achievement.<sup>78</sup>

For all of Jackson's success as the first black presidential candidate since Shirley Chisholm, the prospect of a Reagan second term remained a huge concern for civil rights leaders. After the double-dip recession of 1982, the president's overall approval figures picked up ahead of the 1984 election to fifty-six percent, triggering the biggest landslide in electoral college history.<sup>79</sup> But, Reagan's share of the African American vote *fell* from the already meagre twelve percent he won in 1980. The nine percent that the Gipper won in his re-election was the worst performance by a Republican presidential candidate since the New Deal, except for

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<sup>77</sup> Bush Wilson quoted in Phil Gailey, 'Bob Jones, in Sermon, Assails Supreme Court', *NYT*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1983, p. A23.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), p. 374.

<sup>79</sup> 56% approval taken as an annual average for 1984, up from 43% in 1982 and 45% in 1983. For further information, see Frank Newport, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Lydia Saad, 'Ronald Reagan from the People's Perspective: A Gallup Poll Review', *Gallup Poll*, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2004, available online at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/11887/ronald-reagan-from-peoples-perspective-gallup-poll-review.aspx> (last viewed 23rd January 2020).

Goldwater's 1964 campaign.<sup>80</sup> The vote 'encapsulated Reagan's dichotomous racial image in the eyes of white America and black America'. Moreover, the result proved African American's rejection of the president's colour-blind policies.<sup>81</sup>

The overarching takeaway from the 1984 presidential election was the entrenchment of racial polarisation. Dangerously for African Americans, the election demonstrated that the Republican Party could win without minority voters – a trend that has continued to this day.<sup>82</sup> Racial polarisation greatly concerned black leaders, for example, Chicago congressman, Gus Savage, stated 'white Americans had voted *en masse* to accept the Reagan philosophy of narrow individualism, me-tooism and greed'. Similarly, NAACP organiser Joseph Madison, saw the result as a white rebuke of blacks 'getting too big for their political breeches.'<sup>83</sup> Madison's response was nonsense: there is no evidence that race played any role in explaining white support for Reagan. The comment was, however, revealing of the racially fractured state of the country and the Reagan presidency. The NAACP, like the CBC which Dellums admitted, 'labored mightily to derail administration policies', no longer engaged meaningfully with the White House – it was a case of mutual incomprehension.<sup>84</sup> As the nation awoke on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1984 to four more years of 'Morning in America', African Americans can have viewed the prospect with little enthusiasm.

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<sup>80</sup> Statistics taken from table 3.1 in Michael K. Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote* (Boulder, 2007), p. 56.

<sup>81</sup> Morgan, 'In Black and White: Ronald Reagan's Image on Race', in Iwan Morgan and Mark White (eds.), *The Presidential Image: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump* (London, 2020), p. 179.

<sup>82</sup> Note George H. W. Bush won in 1988 yet only won 10% of the black vote. Whilst George W. Bush won in 2000 and 2004 with only 9% and 11% of the black vote respectively. Figures taken from Fauntroy, *Republicans and the Black Vote*, p. 56.

<sup>83</sup> Savage and Madison quoted in Morgan, 'In Black and White', p. 180.

<sup>84</sup> Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions*, p. 106.

### ***Cold War Decolonisation in Africa***

Reagan's second term witnessed fewer achievements on the home front than the first, with the Tax Reform Act of 1986 proving a notable exception. The 1986 midterm elections were a disaster and helped explain a second reverse, Robert Bork's failed nomination to the Supreme Court. Perhaps the president's greatest domestic achievement was surviving, albeit barely, the Iran-Contra Scandal. On foreign policy, Reagan saw much more success. The arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet premier in 1985 prompted an unprecedented thawing of relations, resulting in the Reykjavik Summit of October 1986, the famous 'Tear Down this Wall' address in Berlin in June 1987, and the historic Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty signed by Reagan in December 1987. Amid this success, a battle over South African sanctions bubbled away beneath the surface. While its origins lay in foreign policy, the South African apartheid storm became a huge bone of contention domestically, evolving into the biggest racial controversy of his presidency. Reagan's defeat in the battle over sanctions is a little-noticed aspect of the broader pattern of failure of his second term.

### ***Chess or Dominoes?***

On 21<sup>st</sup> November 1984, just three weeks after Reagan's landslide re-election, a disturbance at the South African embassy caught the attention of the national press. Walter Fauntroy, the District of Columbia delegate to Congress, was arrested after staging a sit-in at the embassy alongside Mary Frances Berry (a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights), Randall Robinson (the founder of lobby group TransAfrica), and Eleanor Holmes Norton (the former head of the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). The protest was well-organised and designed to maximise media exposure over the Thanksgiving holiday which began the following day. Having left the planned meeting with South African Ambassador Bernardus Fourie early, Norton informed a waiting press corps who had been pre-

warned of the event, 'they are committed not to leave the embassy until something is done' about the increasing levels of state repression in apartheid South Africa.<sup>85</sup> Fauntroy, Berry, and Robinson were arrested and imprisoned for the evening, the press detailed the incident extensively, and a spark had been lit that would ignite a political firestorm for the Reagan White House.

Further protests followed in the days following Thanksgiving. The arrest of Congressman Charles Hayes on 26<sup>th</sup> November was followed by marches across the nation led by Coretta Scott King, singer Harry Belafonte, and former President Carter's daughter, Amy. The high-profile nature of the protests drew significant media coverage with the sit-ins particularly evoking comparisons to the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. The *Washington Post* went further and not only saw the moment as 'American black leaders reviv[ing] some of their old civil rights protest tactics from the 1960s and apply[ing] them to a new civil rights struggle', but importantly, it lay the cause of the protest as 'the re-election of Ronald Reagan'.<sup>86</sup> Morgan, analysing the significance of the moment, found this 'a way to express their antagonism to his presidency'.<sup>87</sup>

While the wave of protests in late 1984 were a significant rebuke of the president's approach to apartheid, the campaign was also an opportunity to 'express anger against conservatism'.<sup>88</sup> As we shall see, defining itself against Reagan's conservative movement was a popular and effective move, uniting disparate factions of African Americans, the labour movement, students, women's groups, and others. The anti-apartheid movement helped impart energy and

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<sup>85</sup> Norton quoted in 'Capital's House Delegate Held in Embassy Sit-In', *NYT*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1984, p. B10.

<sup>86</sup> Karlyn Barker and Michel Marriott, '1960s Tactics Revived for Embassy Sit-Ins', *Washington Post*, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1984, p. A1.

<sup>87</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 244.

<sup>88</sup> Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p. 374.

visibility to a hitherto flagging African American attempt to combat Reaganism. As CBC member Mickey Leland of Texas explained in 1986 after Congress overcame Reagan's veto, it was 'the greatest victory we have ever experienced'.<sup>89</sup> Rejecting Reagan's conservative vision at home and abroad, apartheid sanctions galvanised the emergence of the black political class.

In understanding the repugnance of African Americans toward Reagan and his South Africa policy, it is important to consider both the immediate context of previous administrations' policies toward the region and more significantly, the history of the Gipper's longstanding and intense opposition to communism. In doing so, we will see both what Reagan was responding to, and why he responded in the way he did.

When Reagan first came into office, he inherited a southern Africa policy that had flip-flopped between successive White Houses, ranging from the racism and indifference of the Nixon administration to the human rights focus of the Carter years. The Nixon White House encapsulated Republican attitudes toward the region as one in which 'in Africa, as in the Third World in general, the Nixon administration was uninterested in local disputes or crises unless they could be directly linked to superpower politics.'<sup>90</sup> To that extent, unlike domestic issues of affirmative action and social welfare reforms, Nixon and Reagan were largely on the same page. Like the Gipper, where Nixon was concerned with South Africa, he believed in protecting American investment by maintaining strong relations with the government in Pretoria.<sup>91</sup> Nixon's apathy to the region, meant that unlike Reagan in the 1980s, it was largely Congress

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<sup>89</sup> Leland quoted in Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, p. 143.

<sup>90</sup> Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, KS, 1999), p. 144.

<sup>91</sup> Roger P. Morris, a National Security Council Africa specialist stated, 'no American president, especially a conservative who lacked interest in Africa, would be willing to jeopardize American investments in southern Africa'. Morris quoted in Robert Kinloch Massie, *Loosing the Bonds: The United States and South Africa in the Apartheid Years* (New York, 1997), p. 233.

that led and pushed for realistic appraisal and protection of American security interests in the 1970s.

Carter, on the other hand, gave human rights' promotion an unparalleled platform. Scholars including John Lewis Gaddis, Peter Schrader, and Joshua Muravchik have all outlined how Carter tried and failed to use liberal international multilateralism to pressure the South African government, headed by Pieter William Botha, to dismantle apartheid.<sup>92</sup> Despite economic sanctions placed on South Africa by Carter, notably through the Export-Import Bank Act renewal in 1978 and the Export Administration Act of 1979, he failed to galvanise international support for his position. This served only to sour relations between the United States and South Africa, while maintaining apartheid rule.

Consequently, Reagan inherited a confused and convoluted foreign policy framework that had been designed to contain the spread of communism in Africa, but – as the successful Marxist Angolan Revolution of 1975 demonstrated – had failed. The challenge for the new White House administration was to implement the rollback of communism in Cold War proxy sites such as southern Africa. Since the 1940s, Reagan's political worldview had envisaged the ultimate global defeat of communist ideology. Decolonisation of friendly, western powers, and the rising of regimes sympathetic to the Soviet Union across southern Africa had hardened that resolve. The Reagan Administration thought 'constructive engagement' – a policy led by the Kirkpatrick doctrine which emphasised friendliness with unpalatable right-wing regimes, would achieve the greater good of global communist rollback.

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<sup>92</sup> For further reading see, John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (Oxford, 1992); Peter Schrader, *United States Foreign Policy toward Africa: Incrementalism, Crisis and Change* (Cambridge, 1994); and Joshua Muravchik, *The Uncertain Crusade: Jimmy Carter and the Dilemmas of Human Rights Policy* (Lanham, MD, 1986).

In seeking to overturn the decades-old government policy of containment, Reagan risked everything. The foundational stone was massive escalation in military expenditure. Throughout the first term, military outlays increased on average by seven percent annually – prompting fears of Soviet retaliation and the escalation of the Cold War.<sup>93</sup> But to the president, the risk was worth it. As he told his National Security Advisor Richard Allen in 1977, ‘my idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple... we win, and they lose.’<sup>94</sup> In Reagan’s mind the Cold War was a zero-sum game and if you were not winning, you were losing.<sup>95</sup> The game had to change. The chessboard stalemate was thrown out for dominoes – in Africa it was felt that if South Africa fell to communism, the rest would follow – it was all or nothing and South Africa was vital.

Reagan’s Cold War agenda was clear. Defying the recent trend of containment, he was ‘the world’s foremost anti-communist’, who entered the national political arena in 1964 warning of ‘those who would trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare state have told us they have a utopian solution of peace without victory.’<sup>96</sup> Prior to that, as host of *General Electric Theater*, he had spent most of the 1950s warning of socialism at home and communism abroad. It was elemental to him as well as elementary. As America’s most ideological president, Reagan’s Cold War attitudes went to the heart of his overall credo.

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<sup>93</sup> Figures taken from Beth A. Fischer, ‘Reagan and the Soviets: Winning the Cold War?’ in Brownlee and Graham, *The Reagan Presidency*, p. 117.

<sup>94</sup> Reagan quoted in Richard V. Allen, ‘The Man who Won the Cold War’, *Hoover Institution*, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2000, available online at <https://www.hoover.org/research/man-who-won-cold-war> (last viewed 27th January 2020).

<sup>95</sup> This is supported by Dan T. Carter, who argued ‘he [Reagan] couched the complex issues of third-world conflicts in the luridly florescent shades of the Cold War – i.e., pro-American authoritarian regimes were good; anti-American totalitarian regimes were bad.’ For further reading, see Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, p. 54.

<sup>96</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. xi; Reagan’s ‘A Time for Choosing’ Address quoted in Brands, *Reagan*, p. 4.

In the political wilderness years from the failed presidential bid of 1976 through to launching his third presidential campaign in November 1979, Reagan hosted a weekly radio show. The brief slots gave an unparalleled platform to craft and shape his political message free from the constraints of elected office. His audience was nationwide, broadcast across nearly 300 radio stations to an audience approximating 30 million people.<sup>97</sup> The weekly message varied from Christmas to welfare, but certain larger themes – perils of big government, communism, individualism – were never far from the agenda. For historians analysing the man, the ideology, and the presidency, these addresses – two-thirds of which are estimated to be solely authored by Reagan – provide an unparalleled window into the worldview of a man who became an ‘-ism’.<sup>98</sup>

The Gipper's radio broadcasts demonstrated three fundamental issues concerning Africa and the spread of communism. The first issue, like his Republican predecessor Nixon, was that he viewed Africa within a framework of wider geopolitics. In one address entitled ‘Africa’, the former California Governor asked, ‘what does the Soviet Union have to say about the African problem?’, before answering, ‘Moscow defines the goal as the use of black power to “strangle the imperialists (that's us) economically.”’ The Gipper had no problem with white minority rule in southern Africa, nor did he take issue with viewing the United States as an imperial power in Africa – ominously warning, ‘the Africa problem is a Russian weapon aimed at us.’<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Edoardo Airoidi, Stephen Fienberg, and Kiron Skinner, ‘Whose Ideas? Whose Words? Authorship of Ronald Reagan's Radio Addresses’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 40:3 (2007), p. 501.

<sup>98</sup> Airoidi, Fienberg, and Skinner undertook a project to investigate the authorship of the addresses and found that of 1,062 total, 679 (63.94%) were confirmed as Reagan, 42 (3.95%) as long-standing speechwriter Paul Hannaford, and 314 (29.57%) undetermined. For further reading see ‘Whose Ideas? Whose Words’, pp. 501-506.

<sup>99</sup> Reagan, transcript of radio programme entitled ‘Africa’, *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 14, Folder ‘Ronald Reagan Radio Commentaries – Disc 76 1A’.

To the extent that Africa concerned Reagan, it was within the context of a staging ground for global powers, the site of a proxy Cold War.<sup>100</sup>

Secondly, the radio transcripts exposed a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Reagan's worldview; freedom and democracy – usually synonymous in the United States – were placed in direct competition with each other. 'Democracy, majority rule', the Gipper argued, 'is a desirable thing for people everywhere. But, on the basis of freedom to vote and choose between rival political parties as we do, democracy is not a common thing', Reagan warned before extolling the virtue of South Africa, a view usually reserved for unreconstructed racist Dixiecrats, for allowing more than one political party.<sup>101</sup> South Africa was far from a model democracy, denying universal suffrage along the colour line, resulting in abject scores in Freedom House's annual report on world freedoms.<sup>102</sup>

As we will later see, Reagan was willing to sacrifice the democratic rights of black South Africans by supporting the apartheid government, in exchange for that regime's support of his administration in the struggle against the Soviet Union. Secretary of State George Shultz noted in his memoir the president's support for the Kirkpatrick doctrine in foreign policy; 'Reagan, a true proponent of democracy and individual liberty, was, at the same time, disposed to give the benefit of the doubt to an anti-communist leader, even if authoritarian and dictatorial.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> This is supported by Reagan alleging that 'Mozambique is the staging area for the terrorist attacks on Rhodesia.' Rhodesia at the time being another white-minority rule government akin to South Africa. Everything was viewed within the geopolitical prism of west versus east, capitalism against communism. For further reading see, radio transcript for 'Africa'.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> South Africa scored 5 on political rights and 6 on civil liberties on a 1-7, where 1 represented the best score and 7 the worst. By comparison, the United States scored 1 and 1, whilst the Soviet Union scored 7 and 7. For further reading see, Raymond Gastil, *Freedom in the World: Political Rights and Civil Liberties 1985-1986* (New York, 1986), p. 35.

<sup>103</sup> Jeanne Kirkpatrick was a political scientist who received her PhD from Columbia in 1968. She taught at Georgetown before gaining a position at the American Enterprise Institute. In 1979, her article 'Dictatorships and Double Standards' brought her to the attention of Reagan's team, where she worked throughout the 1980 campaign as a foreign policy advisor. Throughout the first term, she served as the nation's first Ambassador to

This inherent contradiction exposed that there were limits to the Gipper's notion of political freedom and democracy. Although Reagan's critics would likely argue that this was grounded in race, it conversely reinforced the notion that his colour-blindness was overwhelming and tunnel-visioned. In the face of political repression, Reagan was unable to see the atrocities in South Africa because of his geopolitical fixation on communism.

Thirdly, the Gipper's colour-blindness unmasked the racially insensitive understanding he had of African affairs. Describing the instability of southern Africa in the wake of decolonisation in a manner similar to Nixon, Reagan explained, 'much of the conflict is between people of the same race. Blacks are killing blacks in the guerrilla war in Rhodesia and Angola'. Ignoring the legacy of empire, he continued 'Africa's history is one of tribal divisions and warfare going back over the centuries.'<sup>104</sup> In a separate address on 'Property Rights', the Gipper decried the United Nations (UN) Declaration of Permanent Sovereignty of 1962 as 'anti-colonial measures'. The measures were designed to protect sovereignty of natural resources to prevent former colonial countries using industry to exploit and cripple African economies. Reagan continued his attack lamenting the UN as 'permit[ting] expropriation or nationalization of foreign investment. In short, they sanction the right of theft.' He blamed the decision on 'a voting bloc of 114 nations, mostly ruled by Marxist or military dictatorships' in the 'Third World'.<sup>105</sup> Reagan's statements, while startling in their ignorance, reinforced the notion that he viewed Africa within the zero-sum Cold War mindset that blinded him to the apartheid regime.

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the United Nations. For reading on her work, see Kirkpatrick, 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Foreign Affairs*, 68:5 (1979), pp. 34-45; 'East/West Relations: Toward a New Definition of Dialogue', *World Affairs*, 144:1 (1981), pp. 14-30; and 'Moral Equivalence and Politics Aims', *Society*, 22:3 (1985), pp. 3-8; George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, 1993), p. 1115.

<sup>104</sup> Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1115.

<sup>105</sup> Reagan, transcript of radio programme entitled 'Property Rights', *RRPL*, 1980 Campaign Papers, Box 14, Folder 'Ronald Reagan Radio Commentaries – Disc 76 14-16'.

The Gipper's 1976 radio address on 'Africa' and 'Property Rights' was not the first instance of anger directed toward the UN. A recently released conversation by the National Archives between then-Governor Reagan and President Nixon from October 1971 sparked a wave of interest and discussion on the Gipper's racial views. Reagan telephoned Nixon, incensed that the UN had chosen a Chinese delegation over Taiwan on the issue of Taiwanese independence, which prompted dancing in the chamber from the Tanzanian delegation. When the governor reached the president the next day, he told Nixon, 'to see those, those monkeys from those African countries – damn them, they're still uncomfortable wearing shoes!', prompting a huge laugh from the president.<sup>106</sup>

The release of the tape and the subsequent article by historian and former director of the Nixon Library, Tim Naftali in *The Atlantic*, sparked a huge debate about Reagan's racial views. Bob Spitz, author of *Reagan: An American Journey*, stated 'in all of my very careful research into his private papers, I never found an instance where I felt that Reagan was racist', while journalist Bob Herbert wrote, 'he [Reagan] was elbow deep in the same old race-baiting Southern Strategy of Goldwater and Nixon'.<sup>107</sup> Paul Kengor, author of *God and Ronald Reagan*, descended into crude partisan stereotypes when he commented 'the statement is bad. No question. As you can imagine, it's getting a lot of traction among race-obsessed liberals'.<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, biographer Lou Cannon who understands Reagan as far as it is possible to do so, drew a distinction that 'Reagan was often cavalier in what he said about African nations in

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<sup>106</sup> Incident described in Tim Naftali, 'Ronald Reagan's Long-Hidden Racist Conversation with Richard Nixon', *The Atlantic*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019, available online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/ronald-reagans-racist-conversation-richard-nixon/595102/> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Spitz and Herbert quoted in Morgan Krakow and Tim Elfrink, 'Reagan called President Nixon to Slur Africans as "Monkeys"', *The Washington Post*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Kengor, 'On Ronald Reagan's Racism', *The Spectator*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019.

contrast to what he said about black Americans', and that certainly fits with the historical record and differentiates the Gipper from his Republican predecessor.<sup>109</sup>

Reagan was not of the race-baiting tradition of Goldwater or Nixon; that is one of the great misnomers of conservative historiography. The Bancroft Prize winning historian, Dan T. Carter, in his linear study tracing Republican politics and race from George Wallace to Newt Gingrich stated, 'Reagan showed that he could use coded language with the best of them'.<sup>110</sup> It was ironically his inattentiveness to race, not his colour-consciousness, that led to policies so damaging in supporting apartheid in South Africa. The statement of course was inexcusable and artlessly racist, yet this rare play of the race card was likely the Gipper's way of integrating himself with his immediate audience. Nixon's racial profanities were well-known and frequently used. Reagan's use of racist language was damning and a significant departure from his public positions, but that alone should not define a president; Lyndon Johnson, the country's most progressive civil rights president frequently used pejorative racist language.<sup>111</sup> In the broader picture of South Africa, the incident fortified the argument that for decades, the Gipper viewed Africa through the lens of the Cold War; all else, including dismantling apartheid, was secondary. He was well and truly blinded by his worldview to all things except tackling communism.

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<sup>109</sup> Cannon quoted in Jay Nordlinger, 'Reagan and Race', *National Review*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019, available online at <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/08/ronald-reagan-and-race-richard-nixon-tape/> (last viewed 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020).

<sup>110</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, p. 64; similarly, Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields in their recent study, *The Long Southern Strategy*, argued 'Reagan's appeal to "color-blindness," so emblematic of his administration, was also coded. The "colorblind" message gave white Americans and, particularly, white southerners "a safe route through the minefield of race relations" while rendering the need for federal programs to counteract institutional racism null and void. Race baiting becomes race burying in the arc of the Long Southern Strategy.' Here, Maxwell and Shields encapsulate the flawed understanding of Reagan's credo and failed to make the distinction of colour-blindness as a separate branch of conservatism from the reactionary creed of the 1960s and 70s. For further reading, see Maxwell and Shields, *The Long Southern Strategy*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>111</sup> In appointing Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court, aides were allegedly concerned about the difficulty of appointing an African American, to which Johnson responded, 'when I appoint a nigger to the bench, I want everyone to know he's a nigger.' Johnson quoted in Robert Caro, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York, 1998), p. 441.

South Africa presented a unique challenge for the Reagan administration upon entering office in 1981. The proximity of Marxist Angola to the north-west, increasing questions of Namibian independence, continued international discussion of apartheid, and the escalation of domestic military expenditure in the Cold War arms race made for a potentially explosive situation. The task of finding a path through the obstacles was given to Chester Crocker, an academic who previously served on the National Security Council (NSC) under Henry Kissinger in the early 1970s.

Akin to Reagan's geopolitics prism, Crocker outlined constructive engagement in a *Foreign Affairs* article in 1980, contending 'the real choice we will face in southern Africa in the 1980s concern[s] our readiness to compete with our global adversary.' This meant that compared to Carter – who had outlined his human rights approach in his inaugural address – the new administration would take a pragmatic approach, where 'the US can pursue its varied interests in a full and friendly relationship, without constraint, embarrassment or political damage.'<sup>112</sup> The core of the administration's strategy was a fundamental opposition to economic sanctions and an open dialogue; Reagan did not want to risk isolating South Africa as had happened under his predecessor.<sup>113</sup> Publicly the Gipper affirmed this Kirkpatrick doctrine position, telling Walter Cronkite in his first major interview as president, 'where we have an alliance with a country that, as I say, does not meet all of ours [human rights positions], we should look at it that we're in a better position remaining friends.'<sup>114</sup> Privately he was resolute, telling a

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<sup>112</sup> Crocker, 'Southern Africa: Strategy for Change', *Foreign Affairs*, 59:2 (1980), p. 345; *ibid*, p. 324.

<sup>113</sup> The British government under Margaret Thatcher were informed during the presidential transition, that 'the Reagan administration are likely to be hostile to sanctions'. Britain still wielded considerable influence in the region and the Reagan-Thatcher partnership would be crucial to maintaining stability in the region. For further viewing, see 'Telegram from British Embassy in Washington to FCO London', 13<sup>th</sup> January 1981, *Thatcher Foundation*, available online at <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/127159> (last viewed 28th January 2020).

<sup>114</sup> Reagan, 'Excerpts from an Interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS News', 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1981, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/excerpts-from-interview-with-walter-cronkite-cbs-news> (last viewed 28th January 2020).

gathering of his NSC executives 'we must change the attitude of our diplomatic corps so that we don't bring down governments in the name of human rights.'<sup>115</sup>

The approach initially seemed to work as Reagan and his counterpart P.W. Botha shared a good working relationship. The Gipper wrote to his colleague, 'we are ready to work with you to develop a new, constructive relationship', that was based upon 'our shared concerns for the security of southern Africa' and particularly the 'opportunity to stem the growth of Soviet influence in the region.'<sup>116</sup> At the heart of the connection was the need to tackle communist power and prevent it toppling American-friendly governments including South Africa. In 1983, Botha remarked to Reagan, 'since you became president, the United States has played a more effective role in meeting the communist threat', something which doubtless would have pleased the Gipper and vindicated his preference for 'constructive engagement'.<sup>117</sup>

Despite several years of growing state repression in South Africa, there was initially little meaningful domestic pressure for the White House to change tack. In part this was because domestic attention was focussed on the huge economic changes and double-dip recession the country faced between 1981 and 1983; instead of apartheid, political opponents concentrated their attention on the 'Fairness Issue' and domestic inequalities. Secondly, the administration had a significant amount of first term political capital, and it was not until the 1982 midterms that the Democratic Party inflicted any real damage on the president, picking up twenty-seven seats in the House. But it was not until the adoption of a new South African Constitution in

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<sup>115</sup> Reagan, 'NSC Meeting Minutes', 6<sup>th</sup> February 1981, *The Reagan Files*, p. 4, available online at <http://thereaganfiles.com/1981026-nsc-1.pdf> (last viewed 28th January 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Reagan, 'Letter to Prime Minister Botha', 11<sup>th</sup> June 1981, *RRPL*, African Affairs Directorate NSC Records, Box 16.

<sup>117</sup> Pieter Willem Botha, 'Letter to President Reagan', 1<sup>st</sup> December 1983, *RRPL*, African Affairs Directorate NSC Records, Box 16.

September 1984, just weeks before Reagan's landslide re-election, that the administration's position on apartheid started to face close scrutiny.

### *The Emergence of the African American Political Class*

The new South African Constitution initially seemed a step toward racial equality: the white-only Senate was removed and replaced with a new House of Representatives that permitted 'coloureds'.<sup>118</sup> However, this advance was potentially negated by the introduction of the new role of President, who had the power to delegate issues to different bodies, unilateral power to appoint and remove cabinet members, and the right to adjudicate on disputes between legislative bodies. The president could frame the debate, control the agenda, and decide the outcome.

This denied political rights to black South Africans who were excluded from the political process and plunged the nation into chaos as uprisings in townships across the country – most notably Soweto – gained international news coverage. State forces brutally subdued the uprising through force, killing over two thousand people, and arresting thirty thousand more.<sup>119</sup> Inviting comparisons to the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, the nation was in chaos. Back in 1960, the Eisenhower Administration had been swift to condemn the South African government because of 'increasing criticism about their treatment of racial issues at home and abroad'.<sup>120</sup> By contrast, Reagan believed he could weather the storm of domestic criticism and held firm to 'constructive engagement'.

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<sup>118</sup> For further reading on constitutional changes, see Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*.

<sup>119</sup> Statistics taken from Schrader, *United States Foreign Policy toward Africa*, p. 227.

<sup>120</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 65.

In the United States, the combination of increased South African state repression and the re-election of President Reagan forced anti-apartheid activists to act, or risk both countries regressing further on matters of racial equality. The roots of their activism went back a decade, to the founding of TransAfrica, a foreign policy lobby organisation. The group was the product of a conference hosted by the CBC in September 1976, in which over thirty different African American groups – from churches, the NAACP, the National Council of Negro Women – and unions attended.<sup>121</sup> Randall Robinson, motivated by ‘a unique sense of kinship’ was the first director and officially launched the group on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1977, with the purpose ‘to liberate the black world’.<sup>122</sup> Robinson, like many who joined the transcontinental anti-apartheid movement, experienced an innate racial kinship with those suffering under apartheid. He himself had been raised south of the Mason-Dixon line in a pre-Civil Rights era. South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s was strikingly similar to the American South of the 1950s. With the Botha regime supported by his own government, Robinson decided if change were to happen abroad, it needed to start at home.

TransAfrica's momentum stalled in Reagan's first term but was reignited by Jesse Jackson's campaign for president in 1984. He harnessed the rhetoric of Martin Luther King on questions of foreign policy, including South Africa, giving apartheid a prominence that had hitherto been lacking since the heyday of black activism and anti-colonial impulses.<sup>123</sup> By adopting the language of King, Jackson broadcast to the nation in a more personal and intimate way the horrors taking place in South Africa. Yet Jackson's biggest role was introducing the United States to Desmond Tutu, the South African cleric and anti-apartheid campaigner, as the ‘Martin Luther King of South Africa’.<sup>124</sup> In doing so, Jackson not only codified the relationship

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<sup>121</sup> For further reading, see Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, p. 102.

<sup>122</sup> Randall Robinson, *Defending the Spirit: A Black Life in America* (New York, 1998), p. xiv; *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>123</sup> See, Paulette Pierce, ‘The Roots of the Rainbow Coalition’, *The Black Scholar*, 19:2 (1988), pp. 2-16.

<sup>124</sup> Jackson quoted in Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 557.

between the Civil Rights era of 1960s America with 1980s South Africa, but he injected a political figure into the national debate who was outspoken, unafraid of the White House, and a genuine thorn in Reagan's side.

Tutu was the leading figure in the global anti-apartheid movement. His years of campaigning was recognised in late 1984, when he won the Nobel Peace Prize, prompting a letter of congratulations from the White House. The prize propelled Tutu to such prominence that, unlike other critics such as the CBC whom Reagan simply ignored, he invited the bishop to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue for a face-to-face meeting. The Gipper distrusted Tutu, a self-identified socialist, and previously had labelled him a 'political ignoramus'.<sup>125</sup> In his private diaries, Reagan noted how Billy Graham, a close friend and confidant, 'questions the stature of Bishop Tutu', something that put the president on guard.<sup>126</sup> The meeting in December 1984 was set to be tense, given Tutu had previously characterised constructive engagement as 'immoral and unchristian'.<sup>127</sup>

The meeting was a disaster. In his diary that evening, Reagan in a display of supreme assuredness if not outright arrogance, labelled Tutu as 'naive' because 'We've made considerable progress with quiet diplomacy', which was not the case. Tutu, displaying the tension between the two men, later characterised the president as 'a racist, pure and simple'.<sup>128</sup> Importantly, Tutu's direct and personal challenge of the president's character carried authority because he was a Nobel laureate and being non-American, he was to an extent seen as above the political fold. He brought the anti-apartheid movement to the gates of the White House in

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<sup>125</sup> Reagan quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries: Unabridged* (New York, 2009), p. 408.

<sup>127</sup> Tutu quoted in 'Department of State Briefing Paper on President's Meeting with Bishop Tutu', 6<sup>th</sup> December 1984, *RRPL*, African Affairs Directorate NSC Records, Box 10, Folder 1.

<sup>128</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 404; Tutu quoted in Glenn Frankel, 'Botha Terms Move Harmful', *The Washington Post*, 10<sup>th</sup> September 1985, p. A1.

a way no domestic politician could. In doing so, he gave hope to Jackson, Robinson, and others, that the leviathan of Reagan's ideological rigidity could be overcome.

The most important constituent of the American anti-apartheid lobby was the Free South Africa Movement (FreeSAM). It was founded by Robinson, Fauntroy, Norton, and Berry, when they staged the sit-in at the South African embassy in November 1984. The combination of repression in South Africa, the realisation of four more years of a Reagan presidency, and the evocation of civil rights memories ignited the movement into life. Within days, sit-ins and marches took place in dozens of cities across the country from New York to Seattle, Cleveland to New Orleans. Demonstrations were held outside South African consulates and businesses that sold Krugerrands. Students protested at Harvard, UCLA, Wisconsin, and Northwestern. In the year that followed the initial sit-in, over five thousand people were arrested nationwide.<sup>129</sup>

FreeSAM was the 'explosion' that brought the domestic anti-apartheid movement to life.<sup>130</sup> Building on 'decades of activism' including the work of TransAfrica, the first discernible success was a huge divestment movement.<sup>131</sup> Students, religious groups, charitable foundations all pressurised major investors to divest from South Africa, leading to the withdrawal of billions of dollars in a reasonably short space of time. One of the leading exponents was Harvard University which, in line with the Sullivan Principles of 1978 – the need for companies to adopt non-racial working practices in South Africa – withdrew its funds from a mining company, dropping the business' value by three percent overnight.<sup>132</sup> This was one of many such moves that provided a huge win for the anti-apartheid movement. By 1988, the number of American

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<sup>129</sup> For a detailed account, see Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, pp. 123-37.

<sup>130</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 558.

<sup>131</sup> Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, p. 124.

<sup>132</sup> 'Harvard Sells Stock in Apartheid Protest', *Wall Street Journal*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 1985, p. A1.

publicly owned companies operating in South Africa fell from 274 to 175 in what has been labelled, 'one of the most powerful and visible political divestiture acts in history.'<sup>133</sup>

The groundswell of public support, press coverage, and transnational sense of identity and civil rights struggle was encapsulated when twenty-two members of the NAACP undertook the 'longest civil rights march in history' (from coast to coast).<sup>134</sup> Such support forced Congress and the White House to act.<sup>135</sup> Reagan was caught in a difficult position. The press coverage and divestment movement had eroded the relationship between him and Botha; an NSC status report noted, 'P.W. Botha's response to foreign, including American, criticism has become increasingly testy', with personal relations described as 'chilled'.<sup>136</sup> Yet in a telegram to all African diplomatic posts only weeks earlier, Reagan announced, 'the fundamental basis of our policy vis-à-vis South Africa and southern Africa remains valid and will not be modified.'<sup>137</sup> Reagan maintained that constructive engagement was the best policy. This was doubtless because an NSC report declared, 'without us, they [the South African government] will face self-destructive isolation'.<sup>138</sup> This was Reagan's worst potential fear. If the apartheid government collapsed, he believed a domino effect would sweep southern Africa, leaving the United States vulnerable and boosting global communism.

The president felt he had to do something. The CBC, for so long ostracised by this administration, were key figures in the FreeSAM movement and were leading the charge for

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<sup>133</sup> Julia Puaschunder, 'When Investors Care about Politics: A Meta-Synthesis of Political Divestiture Studies on the Capital Flight from South Africa during Apartheid', *Business, Peace, and Sustainable Development*, 24:5 (2012), p. 31.

<sup>134</sup> March described in Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p. 382.

<sup>135</sup> By January 1985, 68% of the American public favoured the US government putting pressure on South Africa to end apartheid. Survey conducted by *Louis Harris & Associates*, collected January 1985.

<sup>136</sup> 'Southern Africa Status Report', 15<sup>th</sup> July 1985, *RRPL*, African Affairs Directorate NSC Records, box 9.

<sup>137</sup> 'Department of State Outgoing Telegram to all African Diplomatic Posts', 16<sup>th</sup> June 1985, *RRPL*, African Affairs Directorate NSC Records, box 9, folder 3 of 6.

<sup>138</sup> 'Southern Africa Status Report', 15<sup>th</sup> July 1985.

congressional sanctions. Congressman William Gray III, the Chair of the House Committee on the Budget was a powerful and potent foe of Reagan. The president, at risk of facing a heavy congressional battle, signed Executive Order 12532, a restriction of trade, that also condemned the repression in South Africa as 'an extraordinary threat to the foreign policy and economy of the United States', and Executive Order 12535 which banned the import and sale of Krugerrands.<sup>139</sup> Seemingly dramatic given his subsequent stubbornness, Reagan's pragmatic move was pure politics, rather than a change of heart. The administration, as Secretary Shultz outlined, 'hoped to pre-empt a great sanctions battle with Congress' by enacting limited measures, which the White House believed was 'a necessary response to South African behavior and compatible with a continued American presence.'<sup>140</sup> Reagan's concessions were not enough. The relentlessness of FreeSAM and increasing interest from various Congressional factions, made an administration re-elected in a landslide just six months ago, look increasingly vulnerable and the likelihood of a showdown seemingly inevitable.

Gearing up for another institutional battle in 1986, two members of the CBC, Ron Dellums and William Gray, submitted anti-apartheid legislation for debate. Dellums, a Democrat from California, had been campaigning for sanctions since the Nixon presidency, and his bill called for the immediate severing of ties between the two countries in addition to significant economic sanctions. The Gray bill was more moderate and focussed on prohibiting new investment in South Africa.<sup>141</sup> The CBC undoubtedly favoured the Dellums bill, but felt it was unlike to gain support in the Republican-controlled Senate, and so supported the Gray bill out of pragmatism.

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<sup>139</sup> Reagan, 'Executive Order 12532 – Prohibiting Trade and Certain Other Transactions involving South Africa', 9<sup>th</sup> September 1985, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12532-prohibiting-trade-and-certain-other-transactions-involving-south> (last viewed 28th January 2020); Reagan, 'Executive Order 12535 – Prohibition of the Importation of the South African Krugerrand', 1<sup>st</sup> October 1985, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-12535-prohibition-the-importation-the-south-african-krugerrand> (last viewed 28th January 2020).

<sup>140</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, pp. 1117-18.

<sup>141</sup> For detail on the two bills, see Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, pp. 138-142.

On 18<sup>th</sup> June 1986, the Gray bill, backed by the CBC came up for debate. Dellums, in one final effort to pass meaningful sanctions, presented his bill as a substitute amendment, and was granted a one-hour debate, after which it was expected to be rejected and Gray's bill would be presented to the Senate. However, to the amazement of the Democrats present, the Republican House Manager for the debate Mark Siljander – who served on the House Foreign Affairs Committee – failed to call for a recorded vote, and the Dellums amendment passed on a voice vote. Dellums told the *New York Times*, 'I'm still shocked it happened.'<sup>142</sup> It is likely House Republicans were driven by political considerations and did not want to go on record in an election year as being seen to support apartheid, and therefore decided to pass the time-bomb onto the Senate instead, where they thought the bill would be defeated.<sup>143</sup> Emphasising this faith in the Senate, Michigan Representative Siljander commented, 'sanctions are dead, we lost the battle but won the war'.<sup>144</sup> Along with many of the president's supporters, he felt that tougher sanctions made it easier for Reagan to veto the bill, and for the Republican-controlled Senate to kill the matter in committee.

The bill did, however, show the Senate that the House was serious about sanctions, leaving the Senate little choice but to pass its own measures. Foreign Relations Chairman and huge Reagan ally, Richard Lugar, and fellow Republican Nancy Kassebaum put together their own bill, but Lugar warned the House that with the summer recess approaching, there would not be time for both bills. In a move that significantly ramped up pressure on the president, the Foreign Relations Committee met the CBC, and Dellums – showing the pragmatism that typically characterised the president – agreed to an amended bill being put forward. Despite some disappointment his bill would not go all the way, Dellums reflected 'My role has been to

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<sup>142</sup> Neil Lewis, 'Embargo on Trade', *NYT*, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1986, p. A1.

<sup>143</sup> Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, p. 141.

<sup>144</sup> Siljander quoted in Lewis, 'Embargo on Trade', p. A10.

advocate the position of the grassroots movement on behalf of the people of South Africa, and to put that advocacy into legislative form. That is what I have tried to do.’<sup>145</sup>

Meanwhile in the White House, Reagan remained obdurate that sanctions were not the correct approach. Writing to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in June 1986, he noted ‘as you, I remain opposed to punitive sanctions which will only polarize the situation there and do the most harm to blacks.’<sup>146</sup> Grounded in free market thought of Hayek and Friedman, the president believed economic freedom created social and political freedoms and that sanctions would harm black South Africans the most. The position paralleled his response to affirmative action: efforts to help blacks, he believed, ended up hurting them – it was, at best, a convenient position to take. However, Reagan’s message was not being received, he was losing the public relations battle and needed to take his argument to the people directly. Entrusting, as he had time and again in his political life that he was the best spokesperson for his vision, the White House scheduled a major address on South Africa for 22<sup>nd</sup> July to members of the World Affairs Council and Foreign Policy Association.

‘For more than a year now’, Reagan began, ‘the world’s attention has been focused upon South Africa – the deepening political crisis there, the widening cycle of violence. And today I’d like to outline American policy toward that troubled Republic and toward the region of which it is a part, a region of vital importance to the West.’ While reaffirming the geopolitical commitments he held, the Gipper was unequivocal that ‘the root cause of South Africa’s disorder is apartheid, that rigid system of racial segregation’. This marked a change from a previously politically inept comment of South Africa being a ‘black on black’ problem. In his

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<sup>145</sup> Dellums quoted in Nesbitt, *Race for Sanctions*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>146</sup> Reagan, ‘Letter to Prime Minister Thatcher’, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1986, *Thatcher Foundation*, available online at <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/109374> (last viewed 29th January 2020).

strongest statement yet, Reagan condemned the 'widening cycle of violence' and denounced apartheid as 'morally wrong and politically unacceptable', calling for it to be 'dismantled'. However, aligning himself with Thatcher, the speech was marred by the president blaming the ANC for employing 'calculated terror...designed to bring about further repression, the imposition of martial law, and eventually creating the conditions for a racial war.' Going further down the rabbit hole, the president's concluding remarks eschewed the notion that withdrawal was the best policy. He remained committed to constructive engagement and stated, 'it would be an historic act of folly for the United States and the West, out of anguish and frustration and anger, to write off South Africa.'<sup>147</sup>

The immediate response to Reagan's address was uniformly critical. Unsurprisingly, Desmond Tutu was the strongest critic, denouncing, 'your president is the pits as far as blacks are concerned', while Russell Baker – usually a light-hearted columnist – asked in the *New York Times*, 'why is the President soft on Pretoria?'<sup>148</sup> Reporting on the speech, Bernard Gwertzman surmised, 'President Reagan made it clear today that he would rather rebuff Congress than crack down on the Pretoria government.'<sup>149</sup> Similarly, the reaction in Congress was overwhelmingly condemnatory. Senator Lugar confessed, 'I had hoped the President would take the occasion for an extraordinary message to the world. He did not do so.' Meanwhile, liberal Republican Lowell Weicker, looking ahead to the debate over sanctions suggested, 'the President will be repudiated'. Finally, Representative Gray, delivering the official Democratic Party response, called for a 'new policy that dissociates us from apartheid...not cosmetic

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<sup>147</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks to Members of the World Affairs Council and the Foreign Policy Association', 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1986, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-members-the-world-affairs-council-and-the-foreign-policy-association> (last viewed 29th January 2020).

<sup>148</sup> Tutu quoted in 'Tutu Denounces Reagan', *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1986, p. A12; Russell Baker, 'A Matter of No Fact', *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1986, p. A23.

<sup>149</sup> Bernard Gwertzman, 'President's Speech: Rebuff to Congress', *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1986, p. A14.

reforms.<sup>150</sup> Writer Robert Massie attributed the speech to Reagan's 'archconservative voice' that showed how the president's ideology shaped his foreign policy, but realistically, the bipolar address was two voices speaking across each other, reflective of a vastly divided White House.<sup>151</sup>

The build up to the address triggered a major fissure between moderates such as Crocker and Shultz, and conservatives led by Communications Director Pat Buchanan and CIA Director William Casey. Secretary Shultz later recalled in his memoir that 'Casey viscerally and unswervingly opposed all that Crocker and I were doing'.<sup>152</sup> The moderates understood constructive engagement to be a policy of reform *for* South Africa, leading to the dismantling of apartheid through gradual, managed change. Conservatives on the other hand, viewed constructive engagement as a domestic shield for pro-Botha, anti-communist policy.

Crocker alleged that after weeks of careful planning and deliberation, the speech that he had agreed to was altered on the day of the address by Buchanan – 'the president's own South Africa lobby'.<sup>153</sup> Shultz, who had expressed to the president directly his concern over Reagan's image – 'let [South African] blacks know that he understood *their* aspirations for equal political and economic opportunity' – was dismayed by the result. It was a 'polarizing message', and 'key parts of Crocker's and my original ideas were missing.' Crocker later criticised the speech as an 'abuse of logic', highlighting his dissatisfaction with the perceived betrayal at Buchanan's hands.<sup>154</sup> The president himself alluded to the division in his administration, describing Shultz

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<sup>150</sup> Lugar, Weicker, and Gray all quoted in Steven Roberts, 'Reaction in Congress to Speech is Mostly Negative', *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1986, p. A13.

<sup>151</sup> Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 616.

<sup>152</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1116.

<sup>153</sup> Crocker, *High Noon in Southern Africa: Making Peace in a Rough Neighborhood* (New York, 1993), p. 95.

<sup>154</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1122; Crocker quoted in Massie, *Loosing the Bonds*, p. 616.

as 'reluctant' in his support of the unchanging course of action.<sup>155</sup> Reagan's decision to side with the conservatives, rather than take the pragmatic and moderate approach, exemplified how significant South Africa had become. Except for the president himself and the cadre of hardcore conservatives in the West Wing, it was clear that Reagan's obstinacy was damaging himself, splitting the administration, wrecking America's reputation, and placed the White House on course for a bruising autumnal battle with Congress.

On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1986, despite a warning from his Chief of Staff Donald Regan that it would be overridden, Reagan vetoed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act.<sup>156</sup> Writing to the House of Representatives, the president stressed for one final time the geopolitical implications of sanctions. 'No single issue', he warned, 'no matter how important, can be allowed to override in this way all other considerations in our foreign policy.'<sup>157</sup> Framing the issue as he did in zero-sum terms, the president observed, 'we both share an unyielding opposition both to the unacceptable doctrine of apartheid, as well as the unacceptable alternative of Marxist tyranny.'<sup>158</sup> The obdurate nature of Reagan's refusal to concede, even when staring down defeat, was the most powerful evidence of how rigid and inflexible his ideology could sometimes be, despite the evidence of a strongly pragmatic approach. Given the certainty of its defeat, the veto was a raw expression of his political credo.

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<sup>155</sup> Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 622.

<sup>156</sup> Regan had been warned by William Ball that currently, there would be 'major difficulty in getting to 34 [votes needed to sustain a veto] under present circumstances', and to expect a veto override. For further reading, see 'Memo from William Ball III to Donald Regan', 18<sup>th</sup> September 1986, *RRPL*, Alton Keele Files, Box 3, Folder 'South African Sanctions, 1986 (3 of 4)'.

<sup>157</sup> Reagan, 'Message to the House of Representatives Returning Without Approval a Bill Concerning Apartheid in South Africa', 26<sup>th</sup> September 1986, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/message-the-house-representatives-returning-without-approval-bill-concerning-apartheid> (last viewed 29th January 2020).

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

A mere three days after Reagan's veto, the Democratically-controlled House overrode the veto by a margin of 317 votes to 83 – well above the two-thirds majority. Reagan's fate was sealed on 2<sup>nd</sup> October when the Republican Senate passed the bill 78 votes to 21, with a huge 31 Republicans (over half of the caucus) voting against their president. Reagan was defeated. As always, the Gipper looked to put an optimistic spin on things, suggesting 'today's vote was not whether or not to oppose apartheid, but, instead, how best to oppose it and how best to bring freedom to that troubled country.'<sup>159</sup> Notwithstanding the public show of resilience, the veto override was a substantial blow to the administration, and for an issue that mattered so much and was at the heart of his philosophical beliefs, it was nothing short of a disaster.

### ***Conclusion***

The veto override was a watershed moment in American history. It marked just the fifth veto override in forty-eight attempts by Congress and was the first on a matter of foreign policy.<sup>160</sup> Aside from the legislative veto used by Nixon against Congress over the War Powers Act of 1973, this was the first legislation-specific veto override in the twentieth century that compelled a president to act. According to Secretary Shultz, the override represented 'a true erosion of presidential control over foreign policy'.<sup>161</sup> It was ground-breaking. The print media covered the event extensively, with front-page coverage from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, who described the event as the fruition of 'a yearlong congressional revolt against President Reagan'.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Reagan, 'Statement on the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986', 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1986, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-comprehensive-anti-apartheid-act-1986> (last viewed 29th January 2020).

<sup>160</sup> Steven Roberts, 'Law Takes Effect: 31 Republicans Abandon Reagan', *NYT*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1986, p. A8.

<sup>161</sup> Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, p. 1123.

<sup>162</sup> Edward Walsh, 'Sanctions Imposed on S. Africa as Senate Overrides Veto', *Washington Post*, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1986, p. A1.

For African Americans, it was significantly more than that. As the 'yea' and 'nay' votes were cast in the Senate, watching from the gallery was a host of influential leaders including CBC head Mickey Leland, Randall Robinson of TransAfrica, Walter Fauntroy – whose sit-in proved a pivotal turning point – and Coretta Scott King. The *New York Times* captured the warm embrace of Leland and Robinson as the magic number of sixty-seven votes was reached. Civil rights historian Stephen Tuck concluded, 'it was certainly the first time in American history that African Americans had decisively shaped U.S. foreign policy.'<sup>163</sup>

The apartheid-sanctions struggle was a balance of power process; as social activism permeated Congress, activists became politicians and politicians became activists. This was not new of course, but what had changed was the enhanced influence of African Americans throughout all stages and levels of the political process. The CBC were no longer a forum of protest, but a vehicle of change. The social movement of the 1960s had become a political class in the 1980s, and handed Reagan his biggest and most enduring defeat of his presidency – it is telling that of the 748 pages of setting the record straight in *An American Life*, there is not one mention of South Africa. For the new political class, it was a fitting tribute that upon leaving Ellis Island and tasting freedom for the first time in twenty-seven years, Nelson Mandela summoned King's famous phrase, 'free at last'.<sup>164</sup>

For Reagan, the man who had been the standard-bearer of conservatism and the Republican Party for so long, the symbolism of a veto defeat on a matter of foreign policy – traditionally the purview of the president – must have been a bitter loss. The 1986 midterm elections had made many Republican senators elected on the Gipper's coattails in 1980 vulnerable, but the

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<sup>163</sup> Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p. 381

<sup>164</sup> Mandela quoted in Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p. 382.

consideration that a whole swathe of Republicans from across the political spectrum deserted him weakened the president beyond repair. There was a sense that this was not simply institutional conflict, but a generational one. Lowell Weicker confessed, 'today's vote is today's generation saying "no" to the incipient holocaust of our time', while freshman Senator Mitch McConnell lamented, 'I've been with him on every other foreign policy issue. But on this I think he is ill-advised. I think he is wrong'.<sup>165</sup>

Reagan's veto defeat revealed that his narrow conservative vision of prioritising the Cold War over the rights and freedoms of black South Africans was outdated. The new, younger generation of Republicans had moved on, and – according to political scientist Michael Clough – saw real political opportunity in undermining the Democratic Party coalition by appealing to African Americans, something Reagan never did successfully.<sup>166</sup> This veto defeat by his own party was what made the president look so outdated and out of touch with the country; it was what exposed the flaws in his colour-blindness more profoundly than any strategy the Democrats levelled against him. With congressional hearings into the Iran-Contra Scandal just weeks away, and that disaster followed by the failed Bork Supreme Court nomination, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act marked an important reversal for the Reagan presidency.

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<sup>165</sup> Weicker and McConnell quoted in Edward Walsh, 'Sanctions Imposed on S. Africa'.

<sup>166</sup> Michael Clough, 'Southern Africa: Challenges and Choices', *Foreign Affairs*, 66:5 (1988), p. 1071.

# *Conclusion*

## *The Battle over Grove City*

On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1988, Ronald Reagan cemented his place in civil rights history. In vetoing the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987 – more commonly known as the ‘Grove City bill’ – he became the first president to veto a civil rights bill since the unabashedly racist Andrew Johnson in 1866. Ralph Neas, the executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, lamented that the veto would ‘leave a terrible and lasting stain on the Reagan Presidency.’<sup>1</sup> It was a fitting end to the most fractious relationship since the Civil Rights revolution of the 1960s, between the White House and minority America.

The battle over *Grove City* had its origins in the provision of the 1964 Civil Rights Act – Title VI – that bars discrimination ‘on the grounds of race, color, or national origin’ in ‘any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.’<sup>2</sup> As historian Hugh Davis Graham noted, this was ‘the classic, equal-treatment language of non-discrimination’, ubiquitous in 1964 and designed to undo southern segregation – but no more.<sup>3</sup>

Within months of the act’s passage, however, a broader ‘rights revolution’ was underway.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of this revolution were women, who in 1972 succeeded in adding ‘sex’ as a protected category in relation to federal education programmes through Title IX of that year’s Education

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<sup>1</sup> Neas quoted in Julie Johnson, ‘Reagan Vetoes Bill that would Widen Federal Rights Law’, *NYT*, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1988, p. A1.

<sup>2</sup> Provision quoted in Hugh Davis Graham, ‘The Storm over Grove City College: Civil Rights Regulation, Higher Education, and the Reagan Administration’, *History of Education Quarterly*, 38:4 (1998), p. 412.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> For reading on the ‘rights revolution’, see John David Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

Amendments.<sup>5</sup> The 1970s also brought a range of other ambitious anti-discrimination measures that went well beyond the scope of the 1964 act, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments Act of 1974, and the Age Discrimination in Employment Amendments of 1978. Crucially, Hugh Davis Graham observes, they shifted emphasis from punishing past behaviour to preventing future indiscretions. According to Graham, it was a form of ‘social regulation’ that transformed the landscape by broadening the protected classes and requiring an unprecedented level of compliance with the ever-expanding *Federal Register*.<sup>6</sup>

Thrust into this changing landscape was Grove City College, a small liberal arts college affiliated to the United Presbyterian Church. A private institution, it refused to sign an ‘assurance of compliance’ with Title IX because it accepted no direct government funding, and thus believed it remained independent of federal regulations. However, government officials argued that whilst Grove City received no direct funding, several of its students financed their study either through direct government loans or through government-secured backing. Despite the fact that all parties agreed the institution had not engaged in any sex discrimination (half the student body was female), federal education officials concluded the establishment was in breach of Title IX by refusing to agree to the compliance measures and gained a court order to suspend funding to the students involved. The four students (two men and two women) and the college sued the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Patricia Roberts Harris and a lengthy legal battle began.

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<sup>5</sup> Title IX language in ‘20 U.S. Code § 1681.Sex’, *Cornell Law School*, available online at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/20/1681> (last viewed 17th July 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Graham, ‘The Storm over Grove City College’, p. 414.

*Grove City* dealt with sex discrimination, but it also had broad implications for civil rights more generally, and this was understood by black civil rights groups, who followed the litigation carefully. Civil rights advocates were concerned that a ‘narrow interpretation’ of legislation ‘could lead to a similar limited ruling on race discrimination in the Civil Rights Act’ of 1964.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, the legal battle also prompted *conservative* concern over the role of the federal government – recalling the way that conflicting commitments to equality and limited government had divided them at the time of the 1964 act. The President of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, John Phillips, warned the case was ‘a lightning rod’ over ‘the general question of the limits of Federal control’.<sup>8</sup>

Reagan, the *de facto* head of the conservative movement in the late seventies, echoed Phillips. While the conservative leader would not involve himself in the *Grove City* case until after the Supreme Court had given its decision, he had made his philosophical position clear in an analogous case involving Hillsdale College, Michigan. Hillsdale is often seen as a conservatively inclined institution, and like Grove City College, it had refused to adhere to federal regulations on the basis that it did not accept federal funding. Responding to that case in a 1977 syndicated column, Reagan had lambasted the ‘King Kong of bureaucracies by-the-Potomac’ and warned that ‘the bureaucrats’ interpretation of “affirmative action” is a case in point’ of ‘the arrogance of officialdom’. Paraphrasing the Hillsdale President, Reagan stated ‘discrimination isn’t the issue... freedom is.’<sup>9</sup>

In another column a year later, the Gipper continued his attack with an article entitled, ‘Small College Fights Bureaucratic Monster’. ‘Battalions of social engineers’, Reagan warned, ‘spend

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Greenhouse, ‘High Court Backs Reagan’s Position on Sex Bias Law’, *NYT*, 29<sup>th</sup> February 1984, p. A1.

<sup>8</sup> John Phillips quoted in Gene Maeroff, ‘Education: College Challenges Federal Intervention’, *NYT*, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1979, p. C5.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Let’s Give Carter a Chance’, *The Miami News*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1977, p. 13.

all their working hours devising new ways to make schools and college conform to *their* view of what education should be'.<sup>10</sup> For Reagan and many conservatives, federal bureaucracy had no place in privately-funded education institutions. To him, such actions were not about protections for minority classes, but typical of broader concerns over a federal leviathan that was contrary to America's small government tradition.

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 1984, after taking several years to work through the courts and with the political landscape transformed by Reagan's election victory, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Grove City v. Bell*. Justice Byron White handed down the six-to-three verdict, which made three major injunctions. Firstly, Title IX coverage *was* triggered as a result of the students receiving federal funding. However, the court secondarily noted that student funding 'does not trigger institution-wide coverage', meaning not the whole institution had to adhere to Title IX, but just the department receiving the funding. Campaigners feared the ruling allowed scope for the Reagan administration to narrow or 'clarify the scope of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964' because its language was 'almost identical' to that which the Supreme Court had just tapered.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, White stated that 'a refusal to execute a proper program-specific Assurance of Compliance warrants the Department's termination of federal assistance to the student financial aid program.'<sup>12</sup>

It was an unusual decision, which still allowed private institutions to discriminate, so long as any department receiving funding adhered to federal government guidance. In the words of Iwan Morgan, the decision 'narrow[ed] application of federal civil rights laws', something the

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<sup>10</sup> Note – italics added for emphasis. See, Ronald Reagan, 'Small College Fights Bureaucratic Monster', *The Press Democrat*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1978, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> Margot Slade and Katherine Roberts, 'Ideas & Trends', *NYT*, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1984, p. E7.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Supreme Court decision, 'Grove City College v. Bell, 465 U.S. 555 (1984)', *Justia*, available online at <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/465/555/> (last viewed 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020).

White House supported and civil rights advocates had feared.<sup>13</sup> The *New York Times* claimed the decision was ‘the Reagan Administration’s first significant Supreme Court victory in a civil rights case’, while Senator Edward Kennedy warned, ‘if the Grove City decision is allowed to stand, there will no longer be an all-inclusive prohibition against sex, race, handicap or age discrimination in schools, hospitals, state and local governments or any other entity that conducts a federally assisted activity.’<sup>14</sup> For conservatives, the result was a victory over the federal machine, something the president had stressed in his 1980 campaign: ‘We must not allow the noble concept of equal opportunity to be distorted into federal guidelines or quotas which require race, ethnicity, or sex – rather than ability and qualifications – to be the principal factor in hiring or education.’<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the Supreme Court decision, William Bradford Reynolds – the head of the Civil Rights Division (CRD) of the Department of Justice and long-standing antagonist of civil rights groups – instructed the CRD to close many of its investigations into civil rights abuses. As the *New York Times* explained, ‘while the case dealt with sex discrimination, the Reagan Administration interpreted the court’s decision to apply laws against discrimination on the basis of race, age and handicap’ – hugely broadening the scope of the law and the scale of the battle that was to ensue.<sup>16</sup> Other agencies, including the Department of Education, followed suit and within three months, ‘23 civil rights investigations had been closed, the scope of 18 others had been narrowed, and 31 were being reviewed.’<sup>17</sup> Reflecting such enormity, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights – representing 165 groups – claimed the ruling would

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<sup>13</sup> Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (London, 2016), p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> Greenhouse, ‘High Court Backs Reagan’s Position on a Sex Bias Law’; Edward Kennedy, ‘Letter to the Editor: “A Bill to Restore, Not Expand, Civil Rights”’, *NYT*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1984, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Reagan quoted in Graham, ‘The Storm over Grove City College’, p. 417.

<sup>16</sup> Irvin Molotsky, ‘4-Year Fight Ends’, *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1988, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Statistics in *ibid*, p. 419.

‘strip away federal protections against discrimination’ and would look to the more amenable Congress for support.<sup>18</sup>

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives moved quickly to negate the Supreme Court. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 1984, it passed a bill to include entire institutions – rather than simply departments – under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 by a substantial 375-32 vote margin. Leading *conservatives* including Republican Minority Leader Robert Michel, Conference Chairman Jack Kemp, and Policy Committee Chairman Dick Cheney all voted against the president. Indeed, as historian Jennifer Delton demonstrated in her work on corporate America, just as many traditionally-conservative big businesses had accepted the basic premise of the affirmative action state by the 1980s, so too – as this vote showed – had many conservative politicians.<sup>19</sup> The battle over *Grove City* exposed just how much of an outlier Reagan was, even compared to his own party – of the 164 Republicans in the House, only twenty-nine voted with the White House.<sup>20</sup> The vote fractured the party in a manner similar to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, where conservatives had to decide which they valued more – equality, or limited government.

Shortly thereafter the bill moved into the Republican controlled Senate, where it faced an uphill struggle. The White House deployed far more influence in the upper chamber and launched a vociferous defence of the Supreme Court ruling. An internal Department of Justice memo

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<sup>18</sup> Leadership Conference on Civil Rights paraphrased in Graham, ‘The Storm over Grove City College’, p. 419.

<sup>19</sup> A key theme of Delton’s study *Racial Integration in Corporate America* was the importance of big business in the advancement of minority business employment. In one example, Delton writes, ‘the National Association of Manufacturers, a paragon of antiunion conservatism, urged its members to practice fair employment beginning during World War II and opposed the Reagan administration’s attempts to prohibit affirmative action in the 1980s.’ More broadly, Delton argues ‘Although initially sceptical of quotas, large employers of the late-1960s had little difficulty making the transition from color-blind proscriptions against discrimination to color-conscious strategies to hire minorities.’ For further reading, see Delton, *Racial Integration in Corporate America, 1940-1990* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 5-8.

<sup>20</sup> Roll Call Number 2701, ‘Vote on HR 5490 – Civil Rights Act of 1984’, *Congressional Record – House*, 98<sup>th</sup> Congress, 130:14, pp. 18880-81.

outlined the administration's position: 'such legislation runs counter to the most basic principles of Federalism, undercutting everything that this Administration represents and has fought for in terms of reducing Federal intrusiveness and returning to State and local governments the authority and responsibility to deal on their own, with matters having no legitimate federal interest'.<sup>21</sup>

The president charged in a news conference of May 1984, that this congressional proposal 'would open the door to Federal intrusion in local and state government... beyond anything that has ever been intended by the Civil Rights Act.'<sup>22</sup> Akin to Reagan's Neshoba address four years earlier, the position over *Grove City* was one grounded in devotion to federalist principles, countering the centralisation of Great Society liberalism and demonstrative of this White House's efforts to recover previously tarnished elements of conservative ideology. However, much like Reagan's opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this battle over *Grove City* was another occasion in which Reagan's obstinacy proved a roadblock to the expansion of minority rights, and, as the House vote showed, went well beyond the conservative Republican norm.

The ultimate rationale for Reagan's position in the *Grove City* case lay in the classical liberal, anti-statist, individualist outlook that had fuelled his entire political career, even in cases – such as this, and the earlier Civil Rights Act – when it would have been more politic to go with the flow. CRD head Reynolds outlined to a Senate committee the administration's deference to equality of opportunity. 'The non-discrimination principle', Reynolds began, 'embodied in the ideal of a Nation blind to color and gender differences – is at the center of America's historic

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<sup>21</sup> 'Talking Points Re: Grove City Legislation', *RRPL*, Christena Bach Files, Box 1, Folder 'Grove City Case (1/3)', p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Reagan quoted in 'President's News Conference', *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1984, p. A22.

struggle for civil rights. In that tradition', he continued, 'ours has been a profound and unwavering commitment to insure [*sic*] every citizen an equal opportunity to compete fairly... no matter how he or she might be grouped by reason of personal characteristics having no bearing on individual talent or worth.'<sup>23</sup> As this thesis has sought to argue throughout, Reagan's devotion to individualism was so resolute that it became largely incompatible with liberal thought, which since Lyndon Johnson's Howard University address had called for particularist group-based claims of compensatory justice.

It would take nearly four years for the civil rights coalition to produce a Democratic Senate capable of passing a Grove City bill. On 28<sup>th</sup> January 1988, the Senate accepted an amendment from Republican John Danforth of Missouri, which negated stumbling blocks and passed the bill by a sizable 75-14 majority. The renamed 'Civil Rights Restoration Act' finally gained a meaningful chance of becoming law. With Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress and the Reagan presidency into its final year, any Republican resistance would be futile, even absent the degree to which even many GOP *conservatives* now embraced Danforth's bill.

Emphasising the administration's ideological fervour, and the importance of federalism and individualism to Reagan, the administration nevertheless put up a strong rhetorical defense. 'This bill', a press briefing paper warned, 'would seriously weaken the power of states in our federalist system and further extend federal intervention into the lives of ordinary Americans.'<sup>24</sup> Pursuing the vision of an equal opportunity society that was based in a vision of a post-racial America, the briefing paper concluded, 'President Reagan is firmly committed to

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<sup>23</sup> William Bradford Reynolds, 'Statement before the Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitution, United States Senate', 5<sup>th</sup> June 1984, *RRPL*, Christena Bach Files, Box 1, Folder 'Grove City Case (1/3)', p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> White House Issue Brief, 'The Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987', 26<sup>th</sup> February 1988, *RRPL*, Juanita Duggan Files, Box 2, Folder 'Grove City Bill', p. 1.

achieving a society that is truly color-blind, a society in which each individual has equal dignity before the law'.<sup>25</sup>

It was a futile effort. On 2<sup>nd</sup> March, the House passed Danforth's amended Senate bill by a 315-98 majority, forcing the administration into a decision. Two weeks later, the president vetoed the civil rights bill. The main Senate sponsor, Edward Kennedy, called the veto 'a kick in the teeth of civil rights', and further added 'it is the most regrettable and least justifiable of all the Reagan vetoes.' Further condemnation came from Ralph Neas, who called the veto, 'unconscionable'.<sup>26</sup> Even though Reagan proposed a substitute bill – the Civil Rights Protection Act of 1988 – the counter-proposal was, in the words of Lou Cannon, 'so belated and such an obvious public relations gimmick' that Congress ignored it.<sup>27</sup>

On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1988, Reagan's fate was sealed. The Senate passed the bill by 73-24 and the House approved the override by a margin of 292-133, making the Civil Rights Restoration Act law. Reinforcing the notion that – like the battle over apartheid sanctions – the Republican Party was moving on from Reagan, twenty-one of the forty-five Senate Republicans voted against the president. Whilst many conservatives had accepted some form of the affirmative action state, Reagan was not one of them.

In spite of White House arguments that *Grove City* was about federal overreach, those who opposed the president's position saw the battle as one concerning civil rights. Republican Senator Lowell Weicker, a principal co-sponsor of the bill, reflected that Reagan's veto recalled a time when African Americans 'were servants in their own country'.<sup>28</sup> A damning editorial in

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy and Neas quoted in Johnson, 'Reagan Vetoes Bill', p. A14.

<sup>27</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York, 2000), p. 463.

<sup>28</sup> Weicker quoted in Molotsky, '4-Year Fight Ends', p. 26.

the *New York Times* praised Congress for ‘wisely and firmly’ rejecting the White House’s position. Significantly, the editorial lambasted that the battle over *Grove City*, ‘catches the Reagan Administration, once again, on the wrong side of a civil rights issue.’<sup>29</sup>

Yet most damning of all was the paper’s forecast looking ahead to November’s presidential election. The *Times* concluded that Vice-President George Bush’s defence of Reagan was hugely politically damaging, leading to the ominous endnote: ‘He might have gained more stature among Americans had he supported the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln rather than that of Ronald Reagan.’<sup>30</sup> The newspaper suggested that Reagan’s colour-blind opposition to the affirmative action state was completely out of line with the GOP, and would be electorally damaging come November. Importantly, this argument underlines the broader implication that the Reagan Administration’s position cannot reasonably be considered part of the larger ‘backlash’ politics of the American Right because it was not only unappealing by the late eighties, but it was fundamentally unpopular, not least among many Republican conservatives.<sup>31</sup>

## ***Legacy***

As with his career more generally, Reagan’s engagement with the politics of race during the 1980s evidenced a remarkable – even a stubborn – consistency. At Neshoba, early on in the decade, he had excoriated centralised federal government whilst calling for a resurgence of ‘states’ rights’. In response to Grove City, as his presidency drew to a close, he vetoed legislation that would increase the power of federal government to regulate private educational

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<sup>29</sup> ‘Standing Up for Civil Rights’, *NYT*, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1988, p. A26.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> When asked in 1985, ‘Do you think the Administration is more right or more wrong to do away with affirmative action programs?’ 27% responded ‘more right’, compared to 69% ‘more wrong’. For further information see, question 100, ‘Louis Harris & Associates Poll: Roper 31104197’, conducted between 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> September 1985, *Louis Harris & Associates*.

institutions. In both cases, Reagan stressed that his support of federalist principles was not *intended* as a rejection of civil rights advances, but merely an effort to recover sullied conservative positions and rebracket them for a new generation. As Iwan Morgan points out, ‘his reasoning was consistent with longstanding personal opposition to measures that “vastly and unjustifiably extend the power of the federal government”’.<sup>32</sup> As this thesis has sought to show, this ideological commitment to an anti-statist, small government worldview was entrenched – dating back at least to the 1940s – and drove Reagan’s political activities for half a century.

Unacknowledged by Iwan Morgan, Lisa McGirr, and Rick Perlstein, this political outlook crystallised *before* the Civil Rights movement gained national traction and cohesiveness throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and it left him unable to adjust to the profoundly different political milieu of the latter twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> While Reagan consistently recognised that the United States was imperfect, after his anti-Klan *Storm Warning* (1951) acting performance, he never again acknowledged just how imperfect the nation was for minority America.

Reagan’s blindness to the struggles of African Americans and his inability to find a path to a more perfect union was not – as the current historiography suggests – a political calculation to woo white America to his side. The Gipper’s vision of conservatism was not codified in backlash politics along the colour line. Instead, he believed and tried (whatever the results) to find a conservative message that appealed to all – fracturing the Republican Party in the early seventies. The problem was that this vision of a strong, individualist, self-reliant, anti-statist

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<sup>32</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, p. 244.

<sup>33</sup> Iwan Morgan, ‘In Black and White: Ronald Reagan’s Image on Race’, in Iwan Morgan and Mark White (eds.), *The Presidential Image: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump* (London, 2020), pp. 175-192; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001); and Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York, 2014).

nation promulgated a deep distrust of federal government at a time when minorities were looking to such government for help, and when the barriers to equality of racial opportunity in truth remained formidable – something that Reagan’s ideological blinkers prevented him from noticing. Consequently, while Reagan courted unity between conservatives and black America, he oversaw division.

Despite the president actively seeking an image of colour-blindness in the mould described by Justice John Marshall Harlan and Martin Luther King, he could never shake the image held by black Americans, that he was the White House resident for white America.<sup>34</sup> The reforming of the economy, which disproportionately hit the poorest hardest, many of them black, alongside a plethora of needless slights on the African American community, cultivated consistent and unwavering condemnation. Roger Wilkins, the influential Johnson Justice Department official, noted when asked about a newspaper opinion piece he authored, ‘any fair reading of that column would reveal that I had called him [Reagan] an ignorant bigot’. Wilkins later doubled down, ‘and any fair reading of my mind would reveal that this was exactly what I think’.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most influential living African American at the end of the Reagan presidency, sitting Justice Thurgood Marshall, lamented ‘I think he’s down with Hoover and that group. Wilson. When we really didn’t have a chance’.<sup>36</sup> It was a stunning and unprecedented rebuke of a sitting president, symbolic of the racial divide Reagan presided over. Reflecting the contemporary emotions that the Reagan White House injected into the politics of race more

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<sup>34</sup> Reagan appropriated King’s words of ‘content of their character, not by the color of their skin’ in a radio address on civil rights. For further reading, see Reagan, ‘Radio Address to the Nation on Civil Rights’, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1985, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-the-nation-civil-rights> (last viewed 6th February 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Roger Wilkins, *A Man’s Life: An Autobiography* (New York, 1982), pp. 369-370.

<sup>36</sup> Marshall quoted in Stuart Taylor, ‘Marshall Puts Reagan at “Bottom” Among Presidents on Civil Rights’, *NYT*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1987, p. A1.

generally, historians subsequently attacked the president's record, with Manning Marable pointedly concluding, 'the ideological glue of Reaganism was racism'.<sup>37</sup>

The combination of Reagan's narrow colour-blindness, faith in the power of the individual, and rhetorical commitment to a universalism that ignored the practical barriers to minority progress, allowed Reagan to believe that – in the United States – a rising tide lifted all boats. What is more, he believed that in making this argument he was following the *liberalism* of his political hero, Franklin Roosevelt. Accepting re-nomination in 1936, the president had claimed, 'freedom is no half-and-half affair. If the average citizen is guaranteed equal opportunity in the polling place, he must have equal opportunity in the market place.'<sup>38</sup> As far as *that* was concerned, Reagan believed that African Americans had *thrived* under his stewardship. Popular culture was dominated by black artists, led by global superstar Michael Jackson. Oprah Winfrey – who launched her eponymous talk show in 1986 – was on her way to daytime dominance, and the most watched television series of the decade, *The Cosby Show*, focussed on the lives of a black middle-class family. In Reagan's final year in office, a young but dominant basketball prodigy named Michael Jordan would be awarded the National Basketball Association's 'Most Valuable Player' award for the first time. Black unemployment had nearly halved in his eight years, while the percentage of black families defined as middle-class had doubled since the start of the 1970s.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Jackson, 2007), p. 176.

<sup>38</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, 'Acceptance Speech for the Renomination for the Presidency', 27<sup>th</sup> June 1936, *APP*, available online at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/acceptance-speech-for-the-renomination-for-the-presidency-philadelphia-pa> (last viewed 9th August 2020).

<sup>39</sup> Statistics taken from Iwan Morgan, 'In Black and White: Ronald Reagan's Image on Race', in Iwan Morgan and Mark White (eds.), *The Image of the US President: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump* (London, 2020), p. 182.

In the face of such seeming triumphs, Reagan was perplexed that he never charmed and befriended black America in the way he had other constituencies. His raw, unadulterated, narrow, colour-blind view of success is wonderfully illuminated in a conversation with Carl Rowan, the first black president of the Gridiron Club (Washington's most prestigious journalistic organisation). Speaking privately, Reagan lamented to Rowan, 'You never really understood me on this business of racism.... I tried hard to win friendship among blacks, but I couldn't do it.' Rowan, bemused by the president's candour responded, 'And that's why you went almost eight years refusing to talk to acknowledged black leaders of America?' To which the Gipper rebuffed, 'They attacked me at the outset, so I said to hell with 'em.'<sup>40</sup> This episode mirrored an incident in Reagan's first political campaign decades earlier, when San Francisco Mayor George Christopher made allegations of racism.

Marking a sharp departure for a politician who received numerous accusations from being a right-wing extremist to a know-nothing airhead, it is revealing that every time Reagan was hit with charges of racism, he became defensive and adversarial. This seems not to have emanated from any sense of guilt or truth, but rather from a genuine abhorrence of racism, which he had been taught since childhood to regard as a personal moral evil. (He would later recall with evident pride the occasion when his father forbade him from watching the 'racist classic' *Birth of a Nation* (1915).<sup>41</sup>) The irony was, in refusing to engage with such charges, Reagan only lent credence to the allegations, and undoubtedly furthered the racial divide in America.

Ultimately, Reagan's White House years were ones of triumph and disaster. He achieved a major reordering of the economy, albeit he would later have to roll back some of the tax cuts.

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<sup>40</sup> Reagan quoted in Carl Rowan, *Breaking Barriers: A Memoir* (Boston, 1991), p. 322.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan, 'Ronald Reagan's Image on Race', p. 177.

He achieved his biggest goal, defeating the might of the Soviet Union, although the extent to which he personally can claim credit is questionable – the Cold War would end under his successor, George H. W. Bush. The president also endured political disaster – the AIDS crisis, Iran-Contra, and the much-underappreciated defeat over South African sanctions. For the most part, as poet Rudyard Kipling would say, he treated those two imposters – triumph and disaster – just the same. Reagan brought an unwavering hope and optimism to the office that helped him endure political pressure when other presidents would have floundered.

Yet of the many issues and criticisms that befell his presidency, race gnawed away at him more than any other. ‘For all my powers of communication’, the Gipper professed on Martin Luther King’s birthday in 1983, ‘I was never able to convince many black citizens of my commitment to their needs. They often mistook my belief in keeping government [out] of the average American’s life as a cover for doing nothing about racial injustice.’<sup>42</sup> Neither African Americans, nor historians – broadly speaking – have been persuaded by Reagan’s argument. The historical legacy of Reagan’s political career continues to be one in which he was the natural heir, or even master, of conservative backlash politics.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of this thesis has not been to defend Reagan, but rather to show that his policy legacy – which in many instances *was* inattentive to black suffering and racial injustice – was not motivated by racism, but by a stubborn unwillingness to recognise race as a category.

This study has been driven by a desire to take Reagan’s ideas seriously. In doing so, I have traced and explored the emergence, development, influence, and impact of a political credo that placed individualism above all else. While this philosophical outlook was straightforward,

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<sup>42</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks on the Anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Birth’, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1983, in Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (London, 1990), p. 163.

<sup>43</sup> In Morgan’s recent essay, he described his subject as ‘the most successful backlash politician in American history.’ See Morgan, ‘Ronald Reagan’s Image on Race’, p. 177.

the policy legacy was complex. An innate paradox, Reagan opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. When race riots threatened to tear California asunder only days after Johnson signed the latter bill into law, Reagan pursued reconciliation not division. Further, he pioneered black capitalism projects in California before Nixon followed suit on the national stage. Reagan struck the first agreement in the nation between unions and civil rights groups, ensuring black workers would be fairly employed in the construction sector, while at the same time opposing affirmative action. Finally, he infamously demonised the ‘welfare queen’, and yet aggressively pursued reforms that increased welfare payments for the overwhelming majority of California recipients.

Historians have been too quick to accept a caricatured backlash narrative that the above actions contradict. Reagan came of age under the spectre of Jim Crow segregation. He wholeheartedly adhered to the then liberal doctrine that suggested the solution to America’s race problem was to ignore race entirely. Like many issues that struck at the heart of his political credo, Reagan stubbornly refused to shift from this colour-blind devotion to the individual, not the group to which they belong. This worldview increasingly put him at odds with African Americans and the political class as time passed. Unperturbed, Reagan pursued his own course, seeking to enact his vision of America as a less government-reliant, colour-blind, post-racial nation. It is a vision the country is still grappling with today.

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