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## Ronald Reagan, 1911-2004

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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Over the last twenty-four hours much has been made of the connections between former President Ronald Reagan and Sport. As is typical of many American politicians Reagan associated himself with the symbols of victory and those who achieved it. Unlike some, President Reagan's associations with sport were real and in many key ways a determinant of his personal political style.

From nearly the beginning of his sport's career Ronald Reagan showed the magical and creative style that marked his time in public life, first as actor and then as President, the most significant and convincing role he ever played.

His athletic career lasted through high school and college where he was a three-sport athlete. The significant and formative part of his sports career followed his college days when he took a job as a part-time sports reporter in Davenport, Iowa, and then moved to a full-time position at WHO Radio in Des Moines.

At WHO Reagan got his first important education in myth formation and creative dissembling. Reagan loved to tell the story of his job as Cubs play-by-play announcer working from Teletype machines to recreate Cub games. One day the machine broke down and Reagan was proud to say that he didn't miss a beat. He simply made up the facts of the game and put them into their proper frame. Over the long haul of his political career he became a master of this form.

Time and time again he would simply pull fictitious numbers and facts from the air to illustrate some point he was trying to make. He did this with such alacrity and frequency that reporters simply couldn't take the time to track all these bogus references. Reporters also felt they might be viewed as nitpicking if they began to call the Great Communicator on his repeated fictions.

The public believed him because they trusted him. His credibility quotient was so high that even if he didn't have his facts right, people believed that he was essentially right on his main point and so they didn't care about the technical reality of what he said.

The baseball-broadcasting job prepared him for his next great role in myth making and communication. Although not a great actor, Reagan was a prolific one. Part of his genius was that he was able to put together film roles that spoke to basic social myth wrapped in sports myth. Two of these roles stand out. In 1940 he took the role of George Gipp in "The Knute Rockne Story." Playing in tandem with Pat O'Brien, Reagan was able to wrap himself in the Notre Dame football mystique, tie his image to the inspirational genius of Rockne, and rewrite the character of George Gipp as that of an all-American boy.

George Gipp was by all accounts an uncontrollable force prone to alcohol and the decadent life. Reagan's Gipp showed no signs of such behavior. Instead he was the great American athlete dying young, whose tragic end provided inspiration to his teammates via his legendary coach at a critical halftime moment. "Win One for the Gipper" was the most memorable line from the film, and became a watchword throughout the Reagan Presidency. It was evoked repeatedly, often for no apparent reason, but always with affect.

Of nearly equal interest, if not as memorable, was his 1952 role as Grover Cleveland Alexander, "Old Pete," in "The Winning Team." By this time Reagan's political ambitions and career were well set as he had taken a starring role in the purge of Communists before the HUAC investigations of Hollywood's film industry. He was about to launch his right wing lecture tours on behalf of the General Electric Company and the free enterprise system in corporate boardrooms and high school assembly halls.

Again the rewriting of a key moment was critical. In the twilight of Alexander's career during the 1926 World Series after winning game two and game six, "Old Pete" was called upon to save game seven in relief. By many accounts Alexander was so badly hung over, and perhaps still a bit tipsy when arriving at the ballpark, that he had been sleeping in bullpen. Alexander himself turned this story into a tale for the stage intimating that he always pitched better when he had a hangover.

This would not do for a great American baseball hero in a Ronald Reagan role. In the Reagan portrayal of Alexander, he is a totally reformed alcoholic who is suffering from myopia, an illness he will overcome with the help of his wife, played with virginal charm by Doris Day. With grit and determination, the aging Alexander/Reagan came in and saved game seven in dramatic fashion and in the process saved the Series for the Cardinals.

As Reagan moved into the politics of the Screen Actors Guild and then on to public politics he mastered the arts of image and myth. As president he created new roles for himself as World War II hero and patriot, some of these spun out of WWII films. In one such role Reagan took on the task of liberator of the death camps, once telling the visiting Prime Minister of Israel that as President he was so deeply committed to Israel because of his experience at the death camps. No doubt the PM was impressed until he was later informed that Reagan had not been anywhere near Europe during the War.

The myth that Reagan most effectively wrapped around himself was one of the oldest and most fundamental of American myths. In his closing statement in his first debate with Jimmy Carter, Reagan quoted the seventeenth century governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop. Reagan most effectively resurrected Winthrop's image of America as "The City on the Hill," morphed into America as the great democratic experiment serving as light of the world.

As was so often the case with Reagan it was quite simply the perfect phrase for that moment in history as he called on Americans to feel good about themselves once again and seize the role of world leadership. The world was ready, Reagan was ready, and America was ready. The long night of the Iranian hostage crisis was about to come to an end and Ronald Reagan would return his nation to that historic and mythic place on the Hill. He would do battle with the Evil Empire, but more importantly America would reassume its rightful place in the world under his leadership.

The Great Communicator is gone but his mythic persona will live forever.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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