Part I

RONALD REAGAN’S PRE-PRESIDENTIAL LIFE AND CAREER
Chapter One

REAGAN’S EARLY YEARS

FROM DIXON TO HOLLYWOOD

John Sbardellati

This opening essay covers the period from Reagan’s childhood through his days in Hollywood. It draws upon Reagan’s two memoirs and puts them in conversation with the more critical accounts formulated by his many chroniclers. The significance of this period of Reagan’s life can be found in the core themes that animate these works: his rise to stardom and the evolution of his public image, the development of his talents for communication, the link between his role as film industry leader and spokesman and his anticommunist politics, and his political trajectory from New Deal liberal to staunch conservative.

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born on February 6, 1911, in Tampico, Illinois. He would describe his childhood years in nearby Dixon as “one of those rare Huck Finn–Tom Sawyer idylls” (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 18). In Dixon, Reagan was imbued with the values of small-town America. From his outdoor adventures playing “Cowboys and Indians” to his courtship of the pastor’s daughter, Reagan described his formative years as blissful, despite his family’s relative poverty. From his Protestant mother, Nelle, Reagan would inherit his sunny disposition as well as his penchant for performing. His father, Jack, an Irish Catholic shoe salesman, struggled with alcoholism but still managed to impress upon the young Reagan the value of hard work. During the Depression, Jack would find employment as a New Deal administrator for the Works Progress Administration, but the lesson drawn by Reagan years later was simply that people “wanted work, not handouts” (Reagan, 1990: 68).

Reagan’s biographers have complicated this rosy self-portrait of his upbringing. As Robert Dallek writes: “Reagan’s attachment to old-style American virtues was not simply the product of his small-town beginnings and schooling. It was also part of a national upsurge during the 1920s of uncritical allegiance to familiar verities” (1984: 5). Garry Wills notes the irony of Reagan’s likening of the atmosphere of his boyhood to that of Mark Twain’s novels, given that these works abound in themes
of “superstition, racism, and crime.” Wills points out that Reagan’s parents moved to Tampico amid a wave of racial violence, that the family’s constant relocating must have made for a rootless upbringing for Ronald and his brother, Neil, and that Jack’s drinking and Nelle’s ardent commitment to temperance—a hallmark of the Disciples of Christ, to which she belonged—exacerbated the religious divide in the Reagan household (1987: 9–31). Lou Cannon depicts the young Reagan as a confident and optimistic boy who played football, who saved several lives as a lifeguard, and whose extracurricular activities at Eureka College included sports, the theater, and leading a student strike. Yet Cannon also notes that Reagan tended to romanticize many aspects of his childhood. His father’s alcoholism and the family’s frequent roaming presented “hard boyhood lessons of emotional survival,” which ultimately rendered him “a loner.” Furthermore, Cannon asserts that Reagan’s amiability masked his deep ambitions and his occasional manipulative tendencies: “His genial demeanor and genuine modesty shielded a hard, self-protective core that contained both a gyroscope for maintaining balance and a compass pointing toward success” (1991: 172, 182–183).

The compass pointed toward a career in acting; but, for Dutch Reagan (as he then preferred to be called), broadcasting was the place to start. Proximity to Chicago made radio the more realistic field in which to make his name, but after striking out in the windy city, Reagan managed to land a sportscasting gig with station WOC (World of Chiropractic) in Davenport, Iowa, in 1932. Dutch would later work for four years at its sister station, WHO, in Des Moines. In his memoirs, Reagan explained that he got his foot in the door through a combination of perseverance, luck, and (especially) ability to perform on the spot during an impromptu audition. He was covering several sports but was especially known for announcing baseball games for the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox. He called these games from Des Moines, where he received terse descriptions of the action via telegraph. This re-creation process required him to draw upon his fertile imagination and, by necessity, gave a largely fictional character to his broadcasts. Reagan especially savored telling the story of the time when the wire went dead in the ninth inning of a tied game between the Cubs and the St. Louis Cardinals. Unwilling to admit the technical problem to his audience, he stalled by having the batter foul off pitch after pitch, for almost seven minutes of air time. This anecdote, which he repeats in both memoirs, serves as a parable of his quick-wittedness, though one may wonder how much the story itself was invented, since in his first memoir Reagan has Augie Galan as the batter (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 78–79) but claims in his second that the hitter was Billy Jurges (Reagan, 1990: 73).

More significantly, as Wills writes, the story highlights Reagan’s sensitivity to his audience as well as his determination to sustain the make-believe. Wills situates Reagan’s career as sports announcer within the broader field of sports journalism at the time. The profession’s dominant figure was Grantland Rice, whose prose deeply influenced Dutch’s own sports writing. “Rice used overblown language,” writes Wills, “because the surface details of sports engagement were merely the signs of a larger moral epic, in which destiny and free will worked out man’s fate. All the metaphors were justified because sports is itself a metaphor for life.” The facts, in Reagan’s field of journalism, ranked second to the moral. Drama was cherished more than truth—hence the importance of sustaining the illusion, even when the wire has gone
dead. Perhaps most interestingly, Wills suggests that Reagan’s audience was actually complicit in the deception. Reagan’s “visualizing” of the games over the telegraph was well publicized; indeed his listeners often admired his broadcasts for being more exciting than the real games that were played miles away. The key to his success, Wills asserts, rested squarely in his being attuned to his audience’s demand for myth. And, for Wills, this quality directly links radio’s Dutch Reagan with President Reagan, who “concocted his political speeches in terms of the pep talk, using anecdotes and moral examples to draw the nation together, to instill patriotism, without regard for niggling little details about the source or accuracy of his stories” (1987: 137–148).

While covering the Cubs’ spring training in southern California, Reagan maneuvered his way into a successful screen test with Warner Bros. He quickly became “the Errol Flynn of the B pictures” (Reagan, 1990: 89). Yet he did not long remain trapped in second-rate features; before wartime service interrupted his career, Reagan was a rising star, and he would remain proud of his film career, especially for the roles of George Gipp in Knute Rockne—All American (1940) and of Drake McHugh in King’s Row (1942). If Reagan’s later political opponents frequently belittled his acting career, most of his chroniclers have instead depicted him as a talented albeit limited actor, who performed ably in the affable, all-American roles for which he was typecast.

Stephen Vaughn’s (1994) Ronald Reagan in Hollywood offers the fullest account of Reagan’s career as an actor. Reagan arrived in Hollywood in 1937, at a time when the film industry offered audiences escape from the depths of the Great Depression. Several of Reagan’s films played to this escapism by casting him in rags-to-riches stories, though, as Vaughn notes, more than a few of his films depicted class conflict. Reagan came to Hollywood during the golden age of the studio system, when “films bore the mark of the company that made them.” And Reagan’s company, Warner Bros., became known for social problem films. Thus Vaughn writes that many of Reagan’s early films “dramatized social conditions, dealt with crime and its causes, or treated questions of war and peace. From such pictures Reagan’s early screen persona began to emerge” (1994: 30–32).

During the 1930s, Warner Bros. developed a reputation as the New Deal studio. The studio frequently churned out reform-oriented films, and Reagan himself often appeared as a champion of the underdog. Audiences would come to know Reagan in several such guises: “as a crusading reporter, an idealistic lawyer, a tomato farmer who defended the little man against the impersonal forces of society” (Vaughn, 1994: 41). Reagan does not appear to have sought out such roles and, unlike some of his peers, he never articulated a vision of film’s role in reforming society. Nevertheless, some of his movies proved controversial for those who insisted that Hollywood’s fare should be limited to pure entertainment. Vaughn details how the Hays Office, Hollywood’s self-censorship agency, often persuaded Warner Bros. to soften the political messages of their movies. Spotlighting social problems was deemed acceptable by Hollywood’s Production Code so long as the films avoided systemic criticism of American political and social life. Vaughn concludes that the combination of Hays Office pressure and the studio’s own desire to privilege entertainment produced a markedly ambivalent attitude toward social commentary in these pictures. While Reagan’s films “tentatively touched social themes,” he nevertheless “gained a reputation as a liberal” through these roles (52).
Where Vaughn highlights the political aspects of Reagan’s emerging star image, Wills describes Reagan as “the perfect Hollywood chastity symbol, one whose innocence became indistinguishable from ignorance.” Wills argues that, despite their reputation as sex symbols, Hollywood stars, especially those of the Production Code era, were more frequently chastity symbols. The golden rule, as screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz (quoted indirectly by Wills, 1987: 181) put it, was: “In a novel a hero can lay ten girls and marry a virgin for a finish. In a movie this is not allowed. The hero, as well as the heroine, has to be a virgin.” Reagan, of course, was almost always the hero. The movies repeatedly hinted at what could not be shown, and therefore “a kind of snide knowingness was required in the intelligent viewer.” But, by Wills’s account, Reagan was oblivious to much of this “winking lubriciousness.” Indeed Reagan’s prized role came in a film, *King’s Row*, which had to be stripped of all but the most subtle references to the novel’s themes of incest and homosexuality. Wills rather doubts that Reagan himself was ever hip to the “snickering over dirty little secrets” in what he recalled as “the finest picture I’ve ever been in” (Wills, 1987: 180–187).

If Reagan’s star image was one part liberal and another part chastity symbol, it was likewise drenched in patriotism and anti-fascism. Warner Bros. reacted to the deteriorating international conditions of the late 1930s by taking the lead among Hollywood studios in terms of criticizing fascism and urging national preparedness. The loss of the German market, the Warners’ support for Roosevelt, and their fears about the rising anti-Semitism all encouraged the brothers along this path. In his examination of Reagan’s prewar films, Vaughn draws attention to the prevalence of war-related themes. Reagan’s four “Brass Bancroft” movies, in which he played a secret service agent, featured plots that dramatized the threats of espionage and subversion and “contained veiled criticism of those who would hinder American preparedness.” Vaughn also argues that such themes were implicit in Reagan’s two historic pictures, *Knute Rockne* and *Santa Fe Trail* (in which he played George Custer); these films served as allegories “to promote national unity, patriotism, and military service, and to warn about foreign aggression.” When the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee investigated Hollywood’s alleged interventionist propaganda in September 1941, two of Reagan’s “Brass Bancroft” movies were highlighted as explicit examples of “Hollywood warmongering.” Vaughn argues that the isolationists were correct to suspect interventionist themes in these and other films, but their concerns became moot after Pearl Harbor (Vaughn, 1994: 67, 81, 94, 101).

Although Reagan would remain in southern California, wartime service disrupted his acting career. The motion picture industry had been deemed essential to the war effort, and for a time Warner Bros. succeeded in getting Reagan a military deferment. When his deferments ran out in April 1942, Reagan reported for duty at Fort Mason in San Francisco. Poor eyesight rendered him ineligible for combat service, and instead Reagan was assigned to the Army Air Corps’s First Motion Picture Unit, which operated out of Hal Roach Studios in Culver City. As Lou Cannon has written, Reagan was prone to exaggerating his wartime record. On a few occasions he even “talked about photographing Nazi death camps during World War II” despite the fact that he never left California. Cannon, nevertheless, acknowledges the contributions of Reagan’s film unit to the war effort, especially singling out the production

Vaughn offers the most detailed analysis of the military films Reagan worked on, usually as narrator. Enlistment and instructional films catered to specific military audiences, but some of the films produced at “Fort Roach” had a broader distribution and aimed to improve morale, encourage unity, and also serve as propaganda for the importance of air power to national security. Some of the films that focused on Japan presented racist stereotypes of the Japanese “as fanatical, even inhuman.” Reagan, however, was also involved in other productions, which encouraged religious, ethnic, and racial harmony at home; such was the one Hollywood film he was allowed to make during the war, This Is the Army (1943), which included scenes that attempted to present a dignified image of African American military service but also contained other scenes, which featured white actors performing minstrel numbers in blackface. Yet, as far as Reagan’s star image was concerned, Vaughn argues that his work for the Air Corps film unit and his role in This Is the Army associated Reagan with military service. “No twentieth-century president, with the exception of Dwight D. Eisenhower,” Vaughn writes, “had been seen in uniform by more people” (1994: 104–118, 173).

While Reagan’s prewar career had been promising, after the war he became increasingly disappointed with his roles. He longed to star in “cavalry-Indian pictures,” believing that “the brief post-Civil War era when our blue-clad cavalry stayed on a wartime footing against the plains and desert Indians was a phase of Americana rivaling the Kipling era for color and romance.” He instead appeared in a string of romantic comedies, none of which upset him more than That Hagen Girl (1947), in which he unfortunately played Shirley Temple’s love interest despite being old enough to be her father. Reagan later lamented “that if someone was casting a Western, I’d be the lawyer from the East” (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 233, 264). His sagging career revived when he became host of television’s General Electric Theater from 1954 to 1962, a role that maximized his public exposure, proved financially rewarding, and allowed him to hone his public speaking skills on a company lecture circuit.

Was Ronald Reagan a good actor? Reagan himself was certainly proud of his movie career, despite his frustration with his postwar roles. Wills, however, asserts that Reagan’s talents were suited for “light romantic leading man” roles but that “Reagan was not an actor of depth or intensity.” For Wills, Reagan was perfectly fit for roles in films like Bedtime for Bonzo (1951), “a pleasant romp Reagan served well.” But ultimately, Wills argues, “Reagan failed in Hollywood because he was not satisfied with his proper rung, with the range he commanded, but attempted heavier roles he could not sustain” (1987: 210–211). Cannon, on the other hand, validates Reagan’s pride in his acting record. If Reagan was not an actor of great depth, his “photographic memory and willingness to take direction” suited him well for the quick pace of production in the Hollywood studio system. Through research of several film reviews, Cannon found that critics tended to applaud his performances—for example, Bosley Crowther noted Reagan’s “cheerful way of looking at dames” in The Girl from Jones Beach (1949)—even when the films themselves were panned. Cannon, a reporter who covered Reagan during his years as governor and president, found him
to be resentful of latter-day attacks on his acting credentials. Most significantly, Cannon writes, “acting was not a phase of Reagan’s life but the essence of it. He spent thirty years of his life in Hollywood, and he did not cease being an actor when he left” (Cannon, 2003: 51–61).

 Acting, however, began to take a back seat as Reagan emerged as an important industry spokesman and leader in the early postwar years. Reagan’s leadership of the Screen Actors Guild during a period of labor strife and blacklisting was significant. As his own anticommunism burgeoned, Reagan became a key player in Hollywood’s Red Scare. This would be a pivotal moment, both for the motion picture industry as a whole and for Ronald Reagan’s own political trajectory.

Reagan described himself as a “near-hopeless hemophilic liberal” who “bled for ‘causes’ ” during this period prior to the Cold War. He participated in two organizations that included communists among their members: the American Veterans Committee (AVC) and the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions (HICCASP), which was “pronounced like the cough of a dying man,” as Reagan sardonically put it (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 160, 190). These were certainly left-leaning organizations, but they were increasingly riven by strife between their liberal and communist members. Vaughn asserts that the AVC appealed to Reagan’s idealism; it supported the United Nations, called for international control of atomic energy, condemned colonialism and racism, and advocated for full employment policies. Factionalism would disrupt the AVC, but Vaughn affirms that Reagan remained affiliated at least until 1960 (1994: 162–166). Steven Ross likewise places Reagan among the “Hollywood internationalists” who called for the banning of atomic weapons and criticized American support for Chiang Kai-shek. Reagan in this period appeared to be “a favorite of the Hollywood Communists,” and Ross adds that Reagan’s politics raised the suspicions of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI (2011: 142–143).

Along with such stars as Humphrey Bogart, John Garfield, and Edward G. Robinson, Reagan briefly served as one of the leaders of HICCASP. “Created in June 1945,” Ross writes, “HICCASP united liberals, radicals, and communists in an effort to counter Truman’s Cold War policies with an internationalist vision that called for universal disarmament, support of the United Nations, and a foreign policy based on cooperation rather than conflict with the Soviet Union.” Their unity was short-lived. In July 1946, after Life published an excerpt of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s The Vital Center, which denounced HICCASP as a communist front, liberal leaders of the group called for a resolution that repudiated communism. Reagan sided with the liberal faction, which included producer Dore Schary, actress Olivia de Havilland, and James Roosevelt, son of the recently deceased president. Ross echoes Reagan’s description of the mayhem that broke out when the liberals introduced their anticommunist platform. Screenwriter John Howard Lawson, “the secret leader of the Hollywood Communist Party,” proclaimed (as quoted by Ross) that HICCASP would “never adopt a statement of policy which repudiates communism or endorses private enterprise as an economic system.” Reagan proposed that the dispute be settled by a vote of the full membership, but Lawson squashed the resolution in committee. Frustrated by Lawson’s machinations, Reagan joined the liberal exodus from HICCASP. By 1947 he would find a more comfortable home in Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), an organization whose “brand of liberal anti-Communism

Labor strife in the film industry likewise cultivated Reagan’s anticommunism. Reagan’s first memoir devotes considerable attention to the postwar strikes, which he labeled “unnecessary…jurisdictional squabbles” between the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU). Reagan, as a board member of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG; he would become SAG president in 1947), initially tried to arbitrate the dispute, but soon suspected communist infiltration in the CSU. Reagan came to believe that the strikes were simply the result of communist efforts to foment chaos. “I will say this of the Communists,” Reagan would later write, “they were the cause of the labor strike, they used minor jurisdictional disputes as excuses for their scheme. Their aim was to gain economic control of the motion picture industry in order to finance their activities and subvert the screen for their propaganda.” Reagan helped to funnel SAG’s support to IATSE, led in Hollywood by the anticommunist Roy Brewer. The SAG crossed the CSU picket lines, and the situation grew violent. Reagan witnessed a fire bombing and received anonymous threats. He began to carry a .32 Smith & Wesson. Following in the footsteps of his brother, Neil, Reagan also began informing for the FBI (Reagan appears in FBI files as source T-10). FBI agents encouraged Reagan’s growing fears of the Reds, confiding to him a recent topic at Party meetings: “What are we going to do about that sonofabitching bastard Reagan?” (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 146, 182, 194–201). Ross concludes that this “series of personal threats proved crucial in pushing Reagan into the anti-CSU camp” and in cementing his political conversion to anticommunism (2011: 146–147).

Reagan hagiographers Dinesh D’Souza and Peter Schweizer suggest that these labor struggles foreshadowed Reagan’s ultimate victory in the Cold War. D’Souza writes that, in Hollywood, Reagan did battle with subversives who “were not inhibited by traditional moral constraints and were willing to practice deceit and even violence to further their ideological cause” (1997: 48). Schweizer uses the episode to praise Reagan’s heroism in the face of the insidious communist plan for “the capture of Hollywood’s labor unions…so they could influence the type of pictures being produced.” Schweizer touts Reagan’s bravery in crossing the picket lines. Warner Bros. security chief Blaney Matthews warned Reagan and other stars to lie down on the floor of the bus that passed through the picket line into the studio. Reagan, in this account, refused to be intimidated: “Over the next several days, as he went to the studio lot to attend preproduction meetings, a bus would pass through the human throng of violent picketers, with a solitary figure seated upright inside” (Schweizer, 2002: 7–10). Red Scare revisionists Ronald and Allis Radosh similarly depict Reagan as a pillar of anticommunist strength in a sea of red. They write that the party held a secret meeting at the home of actress Ida Lupino to plot against SAG’s stance in the strikes. Actor and recent party recruit Sterling Hayden was tapped to lead the insurrection. But, when Reagan and actor Robert Montgomery (then SAG president) bravely crashed the affair, Hayden proved no match. Reagan’s leadership blocked the communist attempt to win SAG support for the CSU strike, and for Radosh and Radosh this signaled that the “golden age of the Hollywood Communists had come to an end” (Radosh and Radosh, 2005: 121–122). Schweizer
concurs with Hayden’s judgment that Ronald Reagan served as a “one-man battalion” foiling the communist attempt to take over the industry (Schweizer, 2002: 13).

Several scholars, however, contest this description of Hollywood’s postwar labor strife. Gerald Horne’s (2001) Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950 is the most thorough scholarly treatment of the topic. Horne argues that the CSU was not dominated by communists. Led by the militant Herb Sorrell—“I love to hear the cracking of bones on a scab’s legs,” he once exclaimed—the CSU began its strike during the period when American communists steadfastly honored a wartime no-strike pledge. Often the target of red-baiting, Sorrell in fact “squabbled with the Communists frequently.” For Horne, Sorrell’s CSU offered workers a “model of democratic unionism” as an alternative to IATSE corruption. The latter had deep ties to organized crime, but the Hollywood moguls willingly allied themselves with the mobsters in order to defeat the burgeoning progressive labor movement. The violence that erupted was instigated not solely by the CSU, “clearly not an organization of pacifists,” but also by the private police forces hired by the studios, who, in cahoots with IATSE, followed “a well-defined plan designed to oust CSU” from Hollywood. The balance of power stacked heavily against the democratic unionists, for “the moguls were able to use their influence with the courts and police to overcome CSU” (Horne, 2001: 15–19, 186–207).

Reagan, in Horne’s account, does not appear as the valiant “one-man battalion” who thwarted communism in the Hollywood labor movement. Reagan’s growing contempt for the CSU stemmed not from anticommunism, but rather from his belief that the CSU had threatened his safety, combined with his concern that Sorrell’s strategy for a prolonged strike risked his own career. Reagan fretted that, if audiences “stay away from the box office, I may find myself out of work.” Thus, according to Horne, Reagan’s “opportunism was egged on by CSU harassment,” anticommunism being a motive he latched onto only belatedly. When he testified about these events before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in October 1947, Reagan “displayed his storied talent for invention during sensitive moments.” He appeared baffled, unable to recall key events, and in so doing “exhibit[ed] tendencies that marked his presidency.” Yet, as Horne notes, in his HUAC testimony Reagan “had not expressed the relentless anticommunism that marked a good deal of his public life” (Horne, 2001: 209–214).

Indeed, several scholars have noted the moderate quality of Reagan’s testimony before the HUAC. Reagan—along with other actors such as Robert Montgomery, Robert Taylor, Gary Cooper, George Murphy, and Adolph Menjou—appeared as a “friendly” witness; but, as Steven Ross argues, Reagan “proved far more liberal than his colleagues.” Reagan even opposed outlawing the Communist Party at this session, insisting “that democracy is strong enough to stand up and fight against the inroads of any ideology” (Ross, 2011: 148–149). Reagan characterized the communist presence in Hollywood as a “small clique” and expressed concern about overreacting: “I never as a citizen want to see our country become urged, by either fear or resentment of this group, that we ever compromise with any of our democratic principles through that fear or resentment” (Cannon, 2003: 99). Thus Reagan did not “name names” or otherwise provide fodder for the committee’s investigation. “Years later,” Cannon writes, “he would obscure his own moderate and politically astute conduct by exaggerating the danger the Communists had posed to the film industry... But at the
time of his testimony, Reagan was sensible and restrained, paying the minimum homage to the committee and to the fearfulness it had created in the film industry’’ (96–99).

On the nature of the communist threat, surely the Reagan of 1947 sounded quite different from the man who would write nearly twenty years later that the “Communist plan for Hollywood was remarkably simple. It was merely to take over the motion picture business. Not only for its profit, as the hoodlums had tried—but also for a grand world-wide propaganda base” (Reagan and Hubler, 1965: 186). In 1947, conservative anticommmunists in Hollywood, most notably the leaders of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), frequently employed such language, often insisting that communists had already succeeded in injecting their ideas onto the screen. By contrast, in his testimony Reagan stressed: “I do not believe the Communists have ever at any time been able to use the motion-picture screen as a sounding board for their philosophy or ideology” (Sbardellati, 2012: 134). Though he acknowledged that the Reds had made attempts, Reagan insisted they had been greatly outnumbered and therefore easily thwarted. Such words, as John Sbardellati argues, undercut the very rationale of the HUAC investigation. The active behind-the-scenes collaboration of MPA members with both HUAC and the FBI brought about the public trials—trials that not only exposed Reds but also besmirched the industry. According to Sbardellati, Reagan was not among Hollywood’s fervent Cold War fighters at this point; he was, rather, a company man dedicated first and foremost to protecting the image of his industry. Reagan’s testimony followed the strategy laid out by Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Johnston’s priority was to guard against the “damaging impression” created by HUAC that Hollywood was a hotbed of communism (Sbardellati, 2012: 133–136).

Lary May asserts that competing forms of anticommunism characterized the clash between Johnston/Reagan and HUAC. May writes that “HUAC represented an older anticommunist tradition that had generated Red Scares after World War I and was centered mainly in small-property, Anglo-Saxon Americans hostile to unions and the new culture of the cities.” Johnston, however, championed a “modern form of anticommunism,” which was rooted in the consensus politics of wartime cooperation between business, government, and labor. Along such lines, middle-class, consumerist culture would replace populist working-class culture; corporate anticommunism would vanquish the deeply rooted “Republican tradition that had sustained hostility to monopoly capital for over a century” (May, 1989: 130, 139–143). Where HUAC’s version of anticommunism existed only as a negative doctrine, Reagan gravitated instead to Johnston’s positive version of anticommunism, which silenced the “nightmare of class conflict” by promising a “utopia of production.” May concludes that “Reagan was a prime candidate for conversion to Johnston’s viewpoint because he too had concluded that the wartime economy and consensus heralded a better day” (May, 2000: 180–195).

In Reagan’s role as SAG president during the heyday of the blacklist, his anticommunism flourished at the expense of the civil libertarian impulses that colored his HUAC testimony. As Vaughn demonstrates, Reagan initially greeted the onset of the blacklist with skepticism. Shortly after the conclusion of the HUAC hearings, the producers, in their so-called Waldorf Declaration, announced that communists would
no longer find employment in the film industry. Reagan expressed concerns about a blacklist, and he encouraged the SAG board to pass a statement critical of the producers for meddling with the ideas and politics of their employees. Reagan’s statement was shot down by these other SAG leaders who feared it might appear soft on communism. Vaughn contends that Reagan now “realized that liberalism was becoming a liability.” Reagan soon pushed through a resolution that required SAG officers to comply with the Taft-Hartley Act by signing affidavits affirming they were not communists. He also became one of the leading lights in the Motion Picture Industry Council (MPIC), Hollywood’s new public relations organization, which endeavored, especially, to convince the public that the industry had severed ties with the Reds. Through his work with MPIC, Reagan “emerged as one of the industry’s most effective spokesmen,” and, Vaughn argues, “in the process he became increasingly conservative” (1994: 153–156, 161–162, 182–183).

Just how far right had Reagan travelled? “Though Reagan did not change his party registration until 1962,” writes Garry Wills, “his world and his views were conservative, business-oriented and actively anti-Communist from 1947 on.” Moreover, Wills questions Reagan’s reputation as a moderate during the 1947HUAC hearings, arguing that his supposed “civil-libertarian position” was little more than a guise for “keeping ‘government’ out of the regulation of private industry.” Furthermore, though Reagan repudiated the charge that he had participated in blacklisting, Wills finds that, as informant T-10, Reagan told the FBI that MPIC’s “purpose...is to ‘purge’ the motion picture industry of Communist Party members” (1987: 298–307). Anticommunism, however, spread across Hollywood’s political spectrum in the late 1940s and in the 1950s, and Reagan’s active involvement in MPIC did not automatically place him on the right. In fact, since the Motion Picture Industry Council served as a clearance board for misguided liberals and repentant former communists, its inauguration in 1949 was greeted by the FBI and their conservative Hollywood allies with great skepticism. These conservative anticommunists fretted that MPIC represented a giant “industry whitewash campaign” (Sbardellati, 2012: 149). Politically, Reagan continued supporting Democrats—he backed Harry Truman in 1948, and even supported Helen Gahagan Douglas, the supposed “pink lady,” in her California senate race against Richard Nixon in 1950. Betty Glad, however, claims that Nancy Davis persuaded Reagan to shift his allegiance to Nixon during the race—amid charges that “Douglas would help the communists take over the country”—and, though he would remain nominally a Democrat until 1962, Reagan would support Eisenhower and Nixon in their presidential campaigns (Glad, 1989: 613).

According to some scholars, Reagan’s anticommunism deeply affected his personal life. Nancy Davis is said to have first met Reagan in his capacity as one of Hollywood’s chief clearance officers, though both Wills and Cannon surmise that she could have easily cleared her name of communist connections without having to set up a dinner date with him (Wills, 1987: 218; Cannon, 2003: 76–77). Reagan admirer Peter Schweizer contends that Reagan’s deep commitment to the anticommunist cause destroyed his first marriage with actress Jane Wyman. “His personal war on communism was costing him his wife and family,” Schweizer maintains (Schweizer, 2002: 15). Glad, however, holds that the opposite was true: his divorce, coupled with the decline of his acting career, presented a “midlife crisis,” and, according to this psychological interpretation, the zest that he brought to the anticommunist crusade
was really a form of anger displacement. Reds in Hollywood served as “safe targets” for his emotional wrath, while siding with anticomunist stalwarts suited his “need for identification with powerful figures in his environment” (Glad, 1989: 616–617).

For Thomas Evans, however, Reagan’s move to the right did not occur amid the frustrations of his divorce and career decline in the late 1940s but during the period from 1954 to 1962, when he served as host for General Electric (GE)’s Sunday evening television show and as “traveling ambassador,” speaking to company employees and civic groups across the nation. Evans describes Reagan’s tenure with GE as “his eight-year ‘postgraduate course in political science,’ conducted largely under the aegis of GE’s vice president and labor strategist, Lemuel Boulware.” Evans states that Reagan in these years became an adherent to free market conservative ideology. He likewise absorbed the principles of “Boularism,” which Evans insists “was not a narrow agenda for bargaining with labor” but rather “a methodology” that stressed the importance of communicating conservative ideology “over the heads of union officials directly to the blue-collar workers, their families, and their neighbors” (Evans, 2006: 3–4, 38). Evans makes a compelling case for the importance of Reagan’s immersion in 1950s corporate culture, though, as Ross demonstrates, Reagan began his rightward drift shortly before his work with GE. “By the early 1950s,” Ross writes, “Reagan had participated in a number of anti-Communist groups, but he was not a hardcore conservative.” As late as 1951 Reagan could still be found fretting over the excesses of the HUAC-induced blacklist and criticizing the demagoguery of Joe McCarthy. Ross argues that Reagan’s marriage to Nancy in 1952 marked a turning point when his “middle-ground anti-Communism shifted decidedly to the right.” Dr. Loyal Davis, Nancy’s stepfather, became a model “diehard conservative” for Ronald. And, though he maintained friendships with liberal movie stars, his social circle shifted to the right after the marriage, since “Nancy preferred mingling with conservatives such as Dick Powell, William Holden, and Robert Taylor.” Reagan had also developed his intense hatred for progressive taxation prior to his GE years. Still, Ross agrees with Evans that joining GE in 1954 served as a “key moment in his ideological evolution” (Ross, 2011: 156–160).

If scholars have established Reagan’s Hollywood years as a significant period in his political transformation, they have also identified tentative links between these years and his later presidency. The theme of Reagan’s presidency as a performance pervades Lou Cannon’s (1991) biography, whose subtitle declares that this was his “role of a lifetime.” Acting bequeathed valuable political skills to Reagan. He insisted it taught him empathy, prepared him to face criticism from the press, and to perform on a moment’s notice. In Cannon’s account, Reagan envisioned himself as “the leading man” and left the production to his aides. While Reagan ensured that “the screenplay of his presidency . . . was rooted in the fundamental themes of lower taxes, deregulation, and ‘peace through strength,’ ” he showed little interest in policy details and remained “dependent on cue cards to discuss the most mundane of issues.” Thus Cannon contends that “Reagan thought in terms of performance, and those closest to him approached his presidency as if it were a series of productions casting Reagan in the starring role” (1991: 31–36).

Moreover, Michael Rogin argues that Reagan’s identity was forged in his movie roles. Rogin dwells on the “confusion between life and film,” and he focuses not on
Ronald Reagan the man so much as on “Ronald Reagan, the image that has fixed our gaze.” Rogin highlights one of Reagan’s “Brass Bancroft” films, *Murder in the Air* (1940), in which his secret agent character tries to shield plans for a top-secret defensive weapon from foreign espionage. Rogin suggests that the film’s “inertia projector” foreshadowed the “Star Wars militarization of space” represented by President Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). He likewise roots the resurgent Cold War of the 1980s in the countersubversive mindset created by films such as *Murder in the Air* and the subsequent spate of anticommunist movies produced in the early Cold War (Rogin, 1987: 1–43).

Frances Fitzgerald contends that Rogin’s “thesis seemed plausible to journalists covering Reagan, for by then many of them had noticed that Reagan took some of his best material from the screen.” In his anecdotes, Reagan often confused the movies with real life. Moreover, Fitzgerald suggests that, as president, Reagan frequently summoned the skills he had honed in Hollywood. Since his “Star Wars” program was “beyond the reach of technology,” selling it to the American public required convincing millions to suspend their disbelief. “In that sense,” Fitzgerald proclaims, “the Strategic Defense Initiative was Reagan’s greatest triumph as an actor-storyteller” (2000: 22–23, 38–39). Lou Cannon adds that Reagan’s passion for science fiction films influenced his approach to Gorbachev when they first met at Geneva in 1985. Speaking off the cuff, Reagan told Gorbachev that, if the world were threatened by an alien invasion, he was certain that the United States and the Soviet Union would cooperate. Colin Powell, who later served as Reagan’s national security advisor, believed that Reagan’s overture was inspired by the science fiction classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951); the film appeared to be the inspiration for Reagan’s subsequent unrealistic proposal to share SDI technology with the Soviets. Powell endeavored to keep references to “the little green men” out of Reagan’s speeches, but the president favored this analogy because it appealed to his idealism. Reagan put more stock in the film’s peace message—the movie’s alien preaches that “there must be security for all or no one will be secure”—than in the logic of mutual assured destruction (Cannon, 1991: 40–43, 251).

To Cannon and other journalists covering the Reagan administration, it therefore seemed that the president remained a Hollywood man. Whether such speculative links between Reagan’s movie years and his presidency will motivate future scholarship remains unclear. Nevertheless, attention to his formative years will no doubt continue to captivate those interested in Reagan’s rise to prominence, the cultivation of his communicating skills, the development of his anticommunism, and his gravitation to the right.

**REFERENCES**


FURTHER READING


