

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 310. Ronald Reagan and the American Dream

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I've gotta go, Rock. It's alright. I'm not afraid. Sometime, Rock, when the team is up against it, when things are wrong, and the breaks are beating the boys, ask them to go in there with all they've got, and win just one for the gipper.

I don't know where I'll be then, but I'll know about it, and I'll be happy. That Dominic Sandbrook was the death of George Gipp, who originally was a very successful basketball player, then became a football player after his team coach saw him kick football an absolute mile.

He was a great football star, and then very sadly, he got a throat infection and died of it at the age of 25. But the twist in this story, and people may be wondering why we're talking about this rather obscure football player.

The twist, as I'm sure all our American listeners will certainly know, is that actually, that wasn't George Gipp. That was Ronald Reagan playing George Gipp.

Right. And that was original footage, was it, Tom? Yes, it was. That was from the film *Knut Rockney All American*, 1940. That absolutely wasn't you. No, it wasn't me.

Well, you could probably tell it was me, because obviously, it was Reagan. I mean, it's a brilliant impression. But it was Reagan, as he sounded in the 1980s.

The problem is, whenever I think of Reagan, I think of Reagan as president, because he was the first American president that I became familiar with. And we punctuate, you know, not just Americans, all of us, punctuate our lives with the American presidents who were in the background on the news and the newspapers.

And Reagan was the first for me. The Gipper. Yeah. The Gipper. People called him the Gipper. I mean, people called him throughout his political career, people called him the Gipper.

Because before he became president, long, long before he became president, he was a movie star.

Yes. And before he became a movie star, he played a lot of sports.

Yeah, he did. Well, he didn't just... And he was a kind of TV commentator. Well, he was Alan Partridge. Right, he was a radio commentator.

Yeah, he was a radio commentator. Yes. And an extremely successful one. Yes. Hello, everybody.

Welcome to the Restless History. We are embarking on an epic journey through the life of Ronald Reagan. So our last epic journey, Thomas, through the career of Christopher Columbus.

So now another great American. Another great American. Exactly. So, so Reagan has a really extraordinary life, doesn't he? I mean, when you... It allows us to talk about so many different things.

So growing up in the Midwest, the world of the early days of radio, Hollywood, the red scares of the late 1940s, and then obviously going into politics in California, the big governor of California, and then the sort of tumult of the 70s, the rise of kind of populist conservatism.

And then those sort of two terms. And Reagan, I suppose, has... I mean, even... I know you're not a specialist in American history, Tom, but Reagan feels like a really consequential world figure, doesn't he?

In a way that most American presidents, arguably, don't. Well, he's got an airport named after him, hasn't he? Yeah, Reagan National in Washington.

And that's absolutely a measure, I get. Well, no, I suppose it isn't because Ford's got one and all kinds of people have, but it's a big one. I mean... It's a big one. Yeah, it's not the Jimmy Carter

peanut facility.

Is it? I mean... No, and it's not just that. I mean, that sounds a bit like we're sort of being completely frivolous about it, but Reagan is also an ideological load star. So he's one of those figures that Republicans always invoke.

I mean, rather like British conservatives always lay claim to the mantle of Winston Churchill or Margaret Thatcher. Reagan fulfills that role in a way that, you know, among modern presidents, I suppose, only Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, they do for the Democrats, but Reagan stands alone, really, for the Republicans, maybe Abraham Lincoln, I suppose.

My sense growing up in a Europe that was haunted by the shadow of nuclear war, my sense of Reagan growing up was a very negative one, that he was a warmonger, that he was a dangerous cowboy.

Do you remember Spitting Image, which was kind of satirical British TV show involving latex puppets? And there was a kind of running gag about Reagan that he would, you know, he'd be looking for the button to press.

Oh, dear, I've pressed the wrong one. There goes Moscow. And that was a kind of running gag that he just had to press the wrong button and the third world war would break out.

And then suddenly he was kind of meeting up with Gorbachev in Geneva and Reykjavik and kind of even going to Moscow. And the Cold War seemed to be over.

So there was that kind of tension, I think, in the memory that he was a cowboy who was out to, you know, shoot the bad guys and precipitate third world war.

He was a man of peace who wanted to get rid of all nuclear weapons. So there's that ambivalence, I think, which is probably the overriding sense of ambivalence for people outside America.

My sense of Reagan as a president within America is that he was kind of a pretty terrible president in terms of his policy.

But that in his role as a kind of constitutional monarch, which is also a very important part of the president's role, he was superb.

And even people who were very ideologically opposed to him, who hated a lot of what his policies embodied, they liked him. He was a genial man.

He was at moments of extreme stress in American life, particularly of the loss of the space shuttle when it blew up.

The challenger. He was superb at channeling American grief and pride and all the complexities of it. But maybe I'm being a kind of, that's my kind of scenery, European perspective.

That does absolutely capture how a lot of Europeans think about Reagan.

The difference, interesting for me, as somebody who writes a lot about Britain in the same period, the interesting contrast obviously is with Margaret Thatcher, supposedly his great partner and soulmate.

Because they're very different, I would say, in temperament, in style, in tone. I mean, Mrs. Thatcher is so abrasive and so confrontational.

Nobody loved Mrs. Thatcher. I mean, a few did, perhaps. If you were a very hardcore Tory, you would love Mrs. Thatcher. But she was uncompromising in her zeal for conflicts and confrontation. I mean, she loved it.

One of the things that emerges when you sort of study Reagan, the people around him say, the one thing about Ronald Reagan is he hated confrontation.

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Unless it was with the Soviets.

Yeah, and did all that he could. Well, even with the Soviets, you see, the interesting thing is that Reagan is writing in his diary how he'd love to get in a room together with the general secretary and convince him that we mean them no harm and all this kind of thing.

I mean, there is this sort of, that emollience is not just a performance. I mean, well, this is the thing we'll discuss.

But with Reagan, it is, of course, always a performance. He is the politician as performer par excellence. But the key to Reagan, it seems to me, is that he absolutely believes in his own performance.

And to some degree, I mean, one of the interesting things about him when he's a film star is people always say, he's at his best when he's playing himself. I mean, this sort of mirrors with him.

Yes. You know, he has this fantasy image of what a president should be or what an American should be. And he's absolutely determined to play it. But he's never really aware that it's a performance, is he?

He never lets you in on the, he's not like Boris Johnson, who's always winking and joking. Or like Trump.

Drawing, yeah, drawing attention to the artifice. Reagan does an absolute sincerity to his portrayal of himself as the president.

Well, I think also, and again, this is perhaps a kind of foreign perspective on it. But he absolutely embodies so much that defined America in the in the 20th century to a startling degree.

So in his memoirs, he talks about growing up with white picket fences.

Yeah.

In a sense, even though as we'll find out, his upbringing was much more kind of darker than that really. He plays sports at high school.

Yeah.

He does the high school romance. He goes to college. He is a lifeguard.

He becomes a Hollywood actor. It's astonishing the degree to which he has within himself, all these kind of ideals, these visions, these fantasies, these dreams that Americans have always had about themselves and the way that that has served to define America in the eyes of the world.

And he draws on all of that as a politician.

Yeah.

Superbly.

But the question then is, which we've already fencing around, to what extent is it performative? And to what extent is he what he seems to be?

Well, it's a fascinating question, isn't it? With politicians, you could argue that everything is always performative, but that's the point that's not inauthentic.

So I've just got a list of comments here. So this is a screenwriter called Irving Wallace in 1942 describing Reagan as a man who parrots things, shallow and affable. Richard Nixon to Henry Kissinger in 1971, pretty shallow.

And then that's the charge throughout his presidency is that basically he's a kind of a mannequin or he's an actor speaking lines and that people have to give him the scripts.

And the question of as to whether there isn't actually any depth beneath that seeming shallowness is kind of interesting.

That's a fascinating one. And just as a spoiler, I don't think he is shallow.

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I think, I mean, the interesting thing about Reagan about the thing about the scripts, he writes those scripts.

He absolutely believes and as we'll come to in this episode in Hollywood, he was notorious for being, you know, you wouldn't want to sit next to him at lunch because he would just bore you about world affairs and politics.

Which he'd probably picked up from Reader's Digest.

Reader's Digest? Well, that's true, he picked up from Reader's Digest. Yeah, you're absolutely right. Anyway, so let's talk a little bit about about Reagan's background because this actually is a really interesting story, isn't it, Tom?

That's fascinating.

So he's born in 1911, Tampico, Illinois, which one of his biographers, I think it's Bob Spitz describes Tampico as it's basically at the set of a low budget Western.

So he's in the Midwest.

Right. And the whole way through his life, both the settings and the people around him are like people from films.

Yeah, they are. Even his parents are actually to some degree, aren't they?

They are rather stereotypical Jack, Jack, Reagan and Nelly Wilson.

Well, or even before that, I mean, they say they come from Ireland via London, via Peckham, interestingly.

And they go, you know, they become prospectors.

So it's a little house on the prairie, all that kind of stuff.

His great uncles go gold prospecting.

And two of them end up being eaten because they get stuck in a snowstorm.

Who eats them?

The other prospectors.

That's bad form, isn't it?

I'd hope for better from my prospecting comrades.

But the idea of Reagan as a cowboy, I mean, his great uncles died in the wild west at its wildest.

Yeah.

So that is all part of the background.

The funny thing is, even though he sort of dressed up as a cowboy on his ranch, he was always very cross when people go in with cowboy.

And he said, I didn't do many westerns.

He did by seven westerns or something.

But that's a sign of that American iconography, how quickly people associated the two.

And he himself, there are loads of photos of him in a denim shirt kind of on his ranch with a horse.

So he, I mean, he grows up in the Midwest.

Yeah.

Don't you think that a huge part of his appeal is that he embodies an ideal of America that is associated with the Midwest?

Yeah.

It's kind of, it's, it's virtues, it's hardiness.

It's provincialism.

Absolutely.

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Absolutely.

Couldn't agree more.

I think he has a fantasy of America himself.

He has a core of Reagan as an idea of America, I think that he completely believes in.

And it's a very Midwestern idea.

It's not the word of the coasts.

It's not urban or metropolitan.

It's not especially diverse or sort of multicultural or not at all.

Is it?

I mean, I guess we'll talk about Reagan and race a little bit later, but there are not many African Americans in Reagan's early years.

It's a world of small towns.

If you've ever been, for our British listeners, if you've ever been, you know, to some of these places, to Illinois, to Iowa, to Minnesota, I mean, I live for a year in Minnesota.

You are a long way, you're an awful long way from anywhere.

And there are these small towns with enormous, an enormous sense of civic pride.

The kind of thing actually that in Britain, we don't have a torn and we automatically scoff at.

Where people make their own, they don't just make their own entertainment, but they make their own civic culture.

Yeah.

So, you know, Reagan's mother, for example, Nellie will talk a bit more about her in a second, but she is absolutely one of these people who throws herself into the local community.

It's a completely unironic way.

You know, I'm going to join the church.

I'm going to join the amateur dramatic society.

I'm going to do loads of charitable things.

And that's sort of small town world where everybody knows everybody else.

You know, they that that fantasy, if you like, Reagan as a boy completely imbibes that it would never occur to him to question it or to mock it or to do all these things, which is Europeans, we automatically do.

And in his memories of it, there's a, you know, it's the embodiment of all these tales of, I suppose, kind of Mark Twain going back to all that.

The idea of, so he writes about there were woods and mysteries, life and death among more creatures, hunting and fishing, that kind of idea that this is a paradise for a child.

And, you know, that idea that a paradise has been lost is often there in conservatives.

I mean, it's kind of a wellspring for conservatives and in adult life.

But the thing that's fascinating about Reagan is that it's not just, you know, white picket fences, because there is also quite a lot of darkness.

Yeah.

And so his father, Jack, he's from Fulton, Illinois.

As you said, to the Irish background, he's a shoe salesman, which sounds kind of banal.

But actually, at the time, in the sort of 1910s, 1920s, the department store was king.

And to be a salesman in the department store was kind of, I mean, I don't want to oversell it.

It's not a massive deal, but it's not nothing.

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Bob Spitz in his biography of Reagan has the great phrase, he developed a flair for fitting the female foot.

What a thing to have as your avatar.

He's tall, he's charming, he's gregarious.

He's very political, actually.

So the idea that Reagan, I mean, this obviously hangs over Reagan all his career.

The idea that he's merely a puppet or a frontman.

He comes from quite a political family.

And the politics is Democrat.

Yeah, politics is Democrat, very interesting social causes, social issues, you know, minimum wage, welfare, all that sort of stuff.

Jack is, I mean, as an Irishman, he's almost automatically going to be a Democrat anyway, because politics in the late 19th, early 20th centuries is very sort of sectarian.

But yeah, he talks about this at the dinner table.

The cloud, of course, is drink.

So Jack is, there's some questions about whether he's an alcoholic or a binge drinker.

I mean, as if you can sort of separate the two.

He's definitely, I mean, he's definitely a binge drinker and he drinks a lot.

And this, I mean, this is clearly an issue for the family and for young, well, Dutch, as he's called.

It's not called Ronald, is he?

Nobody calls him Ronald at this point.

Everyone calls him Dutch.

Dutch after his hairstyle, a Dutch Bob.

A Dutch Bob, yeah.

But the salient fact about Jack, Reagan and his drinking is that it affects his ability to work.

And so they keep having to move town and their lodgings become kind of poorer and poorer and poorer.

So there's a sense of a downward spiral, even as Dutch is, you know, loving, loving life.

And this is clearly a person with a great appetite for life.

But Jack never loses his principles.

And Reagan remembers, you know, he refuses to let his, say, Ronald Reagan has an elder brother who goes by the nickname of Moon.

What's he called Neil, I think.

Neil, yeah.

I'd choose Moon over Neil, frankly.

I mean, no offense to any Neil listeners.

But Moon listeners will be delighted by that remark.

So Moon and Dutch are not allowed to watch Birth of a Nation, the very racist film when it comes out.

And Reagan remembers, there was no more greed of a senator household than a racial slur or other evidence of religious or racial intolerance.

Tom, your role as Reagan is very good. You were reluctant to do it before we started recording, and I really had to twist your arm and sort of shout out to you to do it.

But I'm glad Ronald Reagan is joining us for this.

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So that I found really interesting reading up about Reagan's childhood was the omnipresent sense that Jack Reagan embodies a very kind of principled devotion to FDR.

Yes.

New Deal, all that kind of stuff.

Very opposed to anything that smacks of racial prejudice, religious prejudice.

And on that topic, of course, it's interesting that he has actually married, he's a Catholic, he's married a Protestant.

Yeah, Nellie Wilson.

And that's very unusual, isn't it?

It is unusual.

And Nellie is not just somebody from a Protestant background.

So Jack is kind of the big man, kind of tall and gregarious and stuff.

And Nellie is more innocent, I suppose, and deeply, deeply religious.

So she joins a church called the Disciples of Christ in 1910.

By the standards of sort of evangelical-ish churches, they are quite...

They're very kind of moderate, aren't they?

I mean, they're just...

But passionately committed.

Yeah.

To good works.

They sound very attractive as sort of brands go.

Christian brands go.

They're a very appealing one, aren't they?

They're devoted to the social gospel.

The aim is that you do a charitable deed every day, which she does.

And she really throws us into a part of the...

Because Jack is off boozing and fitting shoes to the female.

Fitting the female foot.

So she is...

And she goes on the road for the Disciples of Christ.

And she does recitals and she does sort of talks and she reads Christian poetry.

And all of that, undoubtedly, I had not appreciated until really digging into Reagan's background.

I always thought his talk of God was skin deep.

And it's patently obvious that it isn't.

And it's very...

He feels it very young.

Yeah.

Because it's a church where you have full immersive baptism.

But you have to choose to be baptized.

And both Dutch and Moon wanted to have it done very young.

They do.

And she agrees.

And he always holds to it.

Well, he reads a book, which is a sort of Disciples of Christ fictional bestseller called

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That Printer of Udells by Harold Bell Wright.

And there's a...

The hero of that is called Dick Faulkner.

And at one point he comes across his own father, who's an alcoholic, passed out, drunk.

And this obviously made a big impression on Reagan because he has a story.

It's always hard to tell with Reagan, of course, where his own recollections begin and fiction ends.

But he has a story about doing that with his own father.

And clearly this book, That Printer, had a massive effect on him.

Because when he was 11, he went to his mother and said,

Please have me baptized in the Disciples of Christ.

And again, as Europeans, I think in the 1980s, we sort of thought,

Oh, haha, this is all just completely fake and unauthentic and sort of pandering to his constituency.

Not a bit of it.

But he genuinely, all his life, he takes this stuff enormously seriously, that faith element.

So the combination of kind of Jack charming, real hit with the ladies,

you know, a man's man, I suppose you would say, a man who will have a glass of whiskey with you and tell you a kind of funny story.

And then Nelly, really interested in sort of, you know, she's a performer,

but she loves taking the stage and talking to people about good and evil, right and wrong,

you know, the path of Christ.

I mean, you can see them in Ronald, can't you?

And that, again, is the stereotype of Reagan in 80s Europe,

is that he's a person who sees the world in manikin terms, who sees it in terms of good and evil.

And this is something that I think isn't entirely wrong.

I think Reagan is very, very prone to seeing the world in terms of good and evil.

And one of the, obviously, his mother's church is a huge influence on that.

But another one is his early love of movies.

And this is a period where you can tell who the good he is because he's wearing a white hat.

And you can tell who the baddies are because they're wearing black hats.

And am I unfair in saying that that essentially establishes his understanding of how the world is?

I don't think you are unfair. I think he definitely has a strong sense that the world is a, you know, his antipathy to communism later in his life.

You know, that is shot through with a very clear sense of there is good and evil.

When he talks about the evil empire, the Soviet Union is the focus for evil in the modern world.

She does in 1983. That's not just speechwriter talking.

That's reflecting his deep sense, which actually he definitely shares with Margaret Thatcher, who also comes from a, by British standards, an unusually sort of God fearing low church kind of Methodist background.

They bond over that because, you know, they, when they're meeting with other kind of world weary, you know, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, these kinds of people,

they probably don't go meter on, probably don't go in for this kind of stuff.

Their moralism marks them out.

And I think a lot of people actually for both, it's true, both Reagan and Thatcher, but even more so for Reagan,

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I think his moralism and his mannequinism in the 1970s are very confused, sort of post-Vietnam period.

A lot of people found that actually,

Yeah, really invigorating to have somebody who stands up and says there's good and evil.

But I think also what they, what people responded to later in Reagan's later career is the sense that he had really walked the American walk.

Yeah.

That he has the high school sweetheart, who's a girl called Margaret Cleaver.

Mugs. Mugs. What a great name.

Mugs. He plays sport.

The basketball team he plays for is brilliantly called the Wiffle Puffs.

Yeah. And a basketball or baseball?

Basketball.

Basketball.

So he's playing basketball, he's played baseball.

But football is his passion.

Football is the sport he really, um...

But he will then go on to play the gipper.

Yeah, of course.

And he makes, he makes his money by being a, serving as a lifeguard.

A lifeguard, yeah.

And that sense of kind of strapping health, high school, all that, you know, everything that not just Americans think about when they think of small town America.

Reagan is living that life.

I'm ironically in a kind of, you know, he loves it.

Yeah.

So people say about him when he's a teenager.

People admire him, people like him.

Nobody really knows him.

Even then, I mean, all through his career, people say you don't know Ron Reagan.

He doesn't share his feelings.

He's, he doesn't have, for example, close male friends.

He has, everybody likes him, but it's, he doesn't have a kind of a soulmate.

I mean, obviously there's mugs.

Um, he loves acting even as a teenager.

He's interested into the church.

I mean, his mother, his, it's interesting.

His parents are kind of, it's later said of him that he makes guest appearances with his own family and his own children because he's always off doing something else.

And that's true of his parents too, isn't it?

Because by the time he's a teenager, his mother is a church.

His father is in the pub or something.

Yeah.

And yet, a bit like with, when we did our podcast about the young Churchill, it's an interesting

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lesson in the power of temperament because Reagan could so easily have been bitter. You know, that his parents were, that he, they were never there. That his father was drinking, that their circumstances were so straightened. But he has this incredible optimism.

Sonliness.

Sonliness.

So his high school yearbook, you write your own motto in your high school yearbook. And his motto is life is one sweet song. So start the music. And for, it is inconceivable that a British teenager would ever write those words.

Yeah.

Would ever write those words.

I mean, it's just at no stage, I think in Britain's history, would anybody have, have said that, that sentence for that laughing.

But Reagan, you know, it's one of the attractive things about him. It's one of the reasons that actually is a pleasure to read about.

Yeah.

Because it's so unusual to have somebody so sunny and optimistic.

Yeah.

And he goes to, he ends up going to a college, doesn't he?

Eureka.

Yeah.

Which is a great name for a college.

Eureka College.

Which again, has a kind of sunniness shot through it. It's very, very, by the, I mean, it's very progressive.

Yes.

Founded by abolitionists.

Disciples of Christ.

Yeah.

And when Reagan goes, there's the orientation day. The guest of honor is a civil war veteran who'd known Lincoln.

Okay.

Yeah.

That sense of, that he's obviously got from his dad and that he gets from, from mugs who's gone there.

And Reagan has to get a scholarship.

I mean, he can't afford to go.

Basically, they kind of chuck out scholarships to everyone because they're that kind of institution.

Yeah.

And he's good at sports.

Well, he's quite good at sports.

He works really hard and throws himself into it.

He's not very good at his academic work, is he?

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He sort of coasts.

Yeah.

Gets season D's or something.

But he's acting.

He's doing his acting with even when he's on the football team, he will impersonate sports casters.

Right.

And he also apparently has a very good impersonation of FDR where he loves FDR, of course. So FDR was about to FDR is not quite yet president, but FDR is the kind of coming man is governor of New York and the Reagan family adore FDR and Reagan all his life thought FDR was the absolute model of a president.

It's only one thing that an affectation he developed at Eureka College, I'm sorry he abandoned is smoking a pipe.

Well, and also the other the other thing that he, of course, abandons is wearing glasses because he's incredibly short sighted.

Yeah.

And I had, I'd never realized that you never see him with glasses.

No, never.

You would never appear in public as president.

I mean, just like he wouldn't appear in public as president without a shirt and tie and a sort of full suit suit.

Yeah.

He doesn't want to look like Jimmy Carter, but that's why he could never be a truly elite to sportsmen.

Right.

In a bit like me.

Yeah.

But Tom, you wear glasses.

We have the natural ability.

Yeah.

Because I just think that with my looks, I can get away with them.

So actually the parallels are quite uncanny because you're also as people will have gauged from that George Gipp business, you're also a brilliant, quite brilliant actor on you.

Yes.

Yes.

Well, it's not for me to say, but very possibly.

Well, I read the feedback on your impersonations on Twitter from our listeners.

For example, what did you do recently?

You did the Sopranos and extraordinary feedback.

I think it's fair to say.

So I could have gone to Hollywood as Reagan ends up doing, doesn't he?

Because he doesn't play sport, so he decides to commentate on it.

Well, we should take a break, Tom, before we get into his sports casting career, because that is a remarkable story.

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Okay.

So we'll see you after the break for some sports casting.

Welcome back to the rest of this history.

We're talking about Ronald Reagan and Tom, it's 1932, the United States is in the depths of the Great Depression, one in four people are out of work, but not Ronald Wilson Reagan, because he is determined to mugs.

His girlfriend has a dream, they'll both be teachers, but he's not really interested in being a teacher.

He likes, he's already interested in the kind of showbiz world, but the world of sport.

So he goes off to sports.

Sports.

Yes.

I'm so sorry.

I'm going to get an S from maths and put it onto sport.

And that's how you speak American.

He goes off to Chicago, doesn't get in, tries to get his foot in the door, but doesn't manage it.

But he ends up through various contacts in Davenport, Iowa, for the Blitney Nade radio station, world of chiropractic, WOC.

So the guy who owns it was BJ Palmer, his father invented chiropractic, apparently.

And they basically give Reagan a trial, sort of off the cuff.

He improvises commentary on a game that Eureka had played against Western state.

And they say, brilliant, you know, they give him the job.

And then he goes off to Des Moines, Iowa, for their sister station, WHO.

And he rises to be their chief sportscaster, doesn't he?

And he's actually brilliant at it.

And the amazing thing is he never does any of the games, well, he can't see any of the games.

There's a famous anecdote that he tells later about, you know, this is coming, the details are coming through, and then it cuts out.

Yeah, for six minutes.

And so he just, for six minutes, he just completely makes it up.

Yeah.

And then when they come back on, so he's been delaying for six minutes and inventing fouls and stuff and describing the background.

And then it comes back on to discover that the batter was out within seconds of the wire going down.

So this is often taken by Reagan's more hostile biographers as sort of evidence of his addiction to fantasy and his sort of dishonesty and artifice.

But almost all commentary like this was done this way.

So basically you would get the wire, telegraph wire, Western Union, and it would tell you what had happened.

You had the crowd noise on a record next to you, and you described what happened.

And of course, the brilliant thing was it had that classic sort of, as a British observer,

that American thing of that love of inflating things.

So you would just make the play as exciting and as dramatic as possible.

I mean, the key to that anecdote was that he didn't want to break the spell.

He didn't want to let light in.

And that I think is, I don't think it's unfair to say that that is pretty key to his character.

Yeah.

I mean, if there's a kind of a heartwarming fantasy, he doesn't want it punctured.

And indeed he goes on to kind of live it.

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right.

So if you think of Boris Johnson doing that, I mean, he would be quite good at it at first, but he would be constantly winking at you and letting you know that it's all a-

Dearing.

Yeah.

That it's all a great joke, and he actually has never seen any of the games.

Because Reagan lives it.

And that's why it's not so much a lie as a kind of exaggerated truth, perhaps, what I might say.

Reagan is a great man for a parable, isn't he, for metaphorical truth, I suppose.

He really believes in that.

So anyway, the baseball is, it's great work, it's great training.

He does it six days a week, he'll do 160 games in a given summer.

And he's talking, isn't he, to listeners?

I mean, that's the other thing.

He can talk to people as though it's a one-on-one chat to a friend.

Yeah.

At a time when Roosevelt is doing his fireside chats to sell the New Deal to people.

So radio is the medium through which you communicate.

And Reagan, he's a local celebrity in Des Moines, so he's the kind of person who is a well-enough-known radio personality that they'll have his picture behind the bar in the local bar.

People say, oh, Dutch Reagan comes here.

And meanwhile, Muggs has gone off to France, hasn't she?

She has.

She's vanished.

She's off the scene.

She's left.

She's off the scene.

Readers of the Sporting News voted him the fourth best sports announcer in the United States.

So he's, this is often told as like a two-bit story.

He's in the middle of nowhere.

But he has millions and millions of listeners across the Midwest.

So I think the Des Moines dispatch said, to millions of sports fans in at least seven or eight Midwestern states, the voice of Dutch Reagan is a daily source of baseball dope.

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That's like, how people talk about you, Tom.

History dope.

Yeah, that's good, isn't it?

Yeah.

History dope.

That's what we should have called the podcast.

Yeah, we should.

But yet.

But so he could easily have done that.

He could easily have done that all his life and gone down as a much, you know, retired in the 1970s or 80s as a much loved local.

Would have been played by Kevin Costner in a mid-90s film.

Maybe he would.

Yeah.

Dutch Reagan, the greatest sportscaster.

Yeah.

But that's not enough for him.

He goes off with the Cubs in 1936 when they're spring training in California.

And then a year later, he goes again and he has a friend that he's met through WHO, he's called Joy Hodges, who's an actress and singer.

And they have dinner and he says, he just comes straight out with it and says, I would love to be in Hollywood.

Yeah, he's in his mid-20s.

Of course he would.

You know, I'd love to.

Of course he would.

And she calls her agent, who's got, who's called Bill Michael John, and her agent meets him and says, yeah, he could do it.

He's tall, he's handsome.

He says, I mean, Reagan does have a magnificent voice.

He has the most wonderful, sonorous, warm voice.

And he's also all his lifeguarding.

He's a very good swimmer.

Yeah.

So he's got the physique.

Yeah.

He is.

He's got everything.

I mean, this agent, Bill Michael John, he basically takes one look at him and he rings Warner Brothers and says, I have another Robert Taylor for you.

And they do a screen test and they offer him a seven-year deal.

Warner's offers contracts, seven years stop, one year option stop, starting \$200 a week, stop.

Yeah.

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And Reagan says, famously, bite the hand off before they change their mind.
That's sort of a nice little bit of self-deprecation, kind of, that he's very good at.
That's quite, that's a lot of money.
I did the conversion.
That's 10.
That's about \$10,000 a week.
It's not bad, is it?
So that's not bad at all.
He's a big enough fellow in the Midwest that WHO thrown him a farewell party and the mayor of Des Moines goes, the state treasurer of Iowa.
Yeah.
So he's not a nobody at all.
And then he goes off to Hollywood.
And by Hollywood standards, he's never a really big star.
So he's got a contract.
If you had a contract with Warner Brothers, you're one of about 100 people of whom maybe 20 to 30 are the big stars and then the 70 others who are the kind of contract players.
So he's always been movie, basically.
Yeah.
And he's always the best friend.
He is always the best friend.
So the Gipper, I mean, the Gipper isn't the lead in the film, is it?
No, he's not.
It's a sad moment when the Gipper dies, but the film is about Knut Rockney.
It's about the coach.
So yeah, he works six days a week, five in the morning till six o'clock in the evening.
But he's lucky because he has a friend because the big gossip columnist of the day, Luella Parsons, who writes for the Los Angeles Examiner, one of the first stable of papers, she is from Dixon, Illinois.
So she takes a real shine to Reagan and boosts him up.
It's the Midwest Mafia.
Exactly.
Exactly.
Yeah.
The Dixon Mafia.
People never talk about them controlling Hollywood, do they?
So yeah, he's doing all these sort of B movies.
So they're about one hour long.
I mean, unbelievably, he plays Custer.
Does he play Custer?
He does.
Opposite Errol Flynn, who's playing Jeb Stewart, and Errol Flynn will then go on to play Custer two years later and they died with their boots on, and Errol Flynn looks much more like Custer.

Reagan's the last person I was.
He doesn't have a beard.
He doesn't have a moustache.
He doesn't have the long golden curls.
I mean, he looks nothing like Custer.
And his personality is always the sort of sturdy, reliable, loyal, decent.
The soul of the American Midwest, that's what he plays.
And Custer doesn't really fit that description.
No, not at all.
At all.
So that's miscasting.
And then he plays a guy who loses his legs, doesn't he?
In King's Row.
That's his most...
Where's...
Oh, where's the rest of me?
Yeah.
So actually, there's two most famous moments both involve him lying down.
They've been dying.
Yeah, kind of throat infection, lost limbs.
Gorbachev had watched King's Row.
Honey!
Yeah.
And so when they met in Geneva, and Reagan was saying to Gorbachev, actually, you know, someone says that I was just a kind of not a very important actor, but I was quite famous.
And Gorbachev said, yes, I saw you when you played somebody who didn't have any legs.
What a bizarre...
Yeah.
Brilliant, isn't it?
I mean, he was...
So the thing with Reagan and acting, I mean, it's...
So many people have poured over this.
He was never a kind of A-list big name.
He was always a supporting actor.
People would sort of say, especially in the 80s, when people were...
His critics would say, he was a terrible actor.
He was a B-movie actor.
I mean, he wasn't terrible, otherwise he wouldn't have got the contract.
But also, he raises his profile in two ways, doesn't he?
So the first is, and this is where the gossip column comes in, that he marries Jane Wyman.
The time they start going out together, their careers are about on a par.
But in due course, I mean, she'll win an Oscar, she'll become...
Which is nominated for an Oscar.
Yeah.

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I think she wins an Oscar in due course after the war.
Oh, you're absolutely right.
You're right.
And I stand...
Because she's got two golden glows and two remies.
Yeah.
So she ends up a massive star.
And I think that becomes part of the problem, because of course, spoiler alert, Reagan and Jane Wyman end up divorcing.
And it's Jane Wyman who wants to do it.
And I think that the kind of disequilibrium between the rabble of their respective careers is part of that.
But Jane Wyman has a very kind of Marilyn Monroe-esque confusion of names, kind of broken upbringing.
And she and Reagan, that's a kind of great partnership, because the gossip columnists can write about it and all that kind of thing.
But they're very ill-suited, though, aren't they, Tom?
They're incredibly ill-suited.
I'm so bored with him, I'll either kill him or kill myself.
She says it one point.
And she's always complaining about his verbal diarrhea.
She says...
What did she say to him at one point when they break up?
It's actually...
I'm just going to try and find the quotation.
I came here hoping you'd changed, but you haven't.
You're still the same loudmouth you were.
Because by this point, Reagan has discovered Reedus Digest, and he just motives his way through it, and he will just repeat it.
And so he's endlessly going on to Jane Wyman about dams in Africa and ocelots and all kinds of stuff.
Is he talking about ocelots?
I don't...
Surely not.
That's the kind of thing you get in Reedus Digest.
He's full of facts.
Everybody always says, and they say this right through to January 1989 when he leaves the White House, they say, the trouble with Reagan is, if you write something down and hand it to him, he will believe it.
I mean, all his aides say it drives them mad that he reads stuff in magazines.
So there's one famous example where he says that trees cause more pollution than people do.
And he's read it somewhere, and some of the Reedus Digest, and he cannot be persuaded that it's not true.

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But the thing that's interesting about Jane Wyman is that she was always a Republican. So Reagan was the liberal, and she was the conservative.

And so actually, you know, along after the divorce, she votes for him in both elections.

And Dominic, here's a link to the Cathars episode, perhaps unexpected.

Oh, okay.

This is unexpected.

So when she died, she was buried in the white robes of a Dominican nun.

So she was a Dominican.

Buried at Red Lushatot.

No, she wasn't.

That would be it.

No.

Well, who knows?

Who knows what truth?

Maybe she was a grand mistress of the Priory of Zion.

Absolutely.

She's completely wrong.

She's very fiery.

She's sort of quite a turbulent character.

Yeah.

So she's typecast as a kind of, you know, she's in screwball comedies.

She's a kind of wisecracking dame, that kind of stuff.

She's a floozy.

She's a floozy is what she is.

And she wants to get out of that and play more complicated, more subtle characterisation.

And she succeeds in doing that.

Reagan never does that.

And I think part of it is that maybe he's a more limited actor.

But I think also it's because actually he can't play more complex characters because he's not a particularly complicated character.

Do you think?

Yeah.

It was that harsh?

I don't think so.

No, I think that's right.

I think lots of people say about him.

He only basically plays himself.

Hal Wallace runs the Warner slate.

So he's in charge of managing the sort of the Warner team.

He says he's not an actor of depth or intensity.

Yeah.

And lots of people basically say, Ronald Reagan will play the best friend, but anything more demanding than that.

Anything more subtle.

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So actually in King's Row, where he loses his legs, he had hoped that would be the springboard to playing more demanding parts.

But that's 1941.

The war intervenes.

And there's a bit of a hiatus in his career because he goes off to join the air corps.

That's when he does a lot of his read, his digest reading, because he's sort of working as a backroom boy.

He's too old really to fight.

He has a dependence by that point, so Jane and they've started a family.

So Maureen and then they end up adopting Michael.

But again, the weird thing, so this is a brilliant comment by Steven Vaughan on Reagan, that no 20th century president, with the exception of Dwight D Eisenhower, had been seen in uniform by more people.

Because he's appearing in all these propaganda films.

Because he's appearing in propaganda films.

So he's kind of playing a simulacrum of an American officer in the war.

Yes, he is.

He does it so brilliantly that it comes to seem indistinguishable from the reality.

Well, I mean, it's Reagan who institutes, for example, saluting when he's president.

He's saluting the Maureen guards and all these kinds of things.

And he's brilliant at it.

And he looks very military.

But he's always quite conscious, I think, that he didn't see action in the Second World War, that actually he spent it behind a desk through no fault of his own, even, I mean, among other things, his shortsightedness means that he would probably have been, found it very hard to get a sort of front line.

Well, I think, I mean, I think when we come to the account of his assassination attempt on him, it will be very clear that Reagan was, you know, was certainly not a coward.

No, no, no, not at all.

I mean, he was a very brave man.

But again, it's this bleeding of reality into fantasy and back again and role playing.

So that kind of becomes indistinguishable.

But one thing, so I talked about the two things that raise Reagan's profile despite the fact that his acting career isn't entirely stellar.

So one is his marriage to Jane Wyman.

The other is that he starts to get into Hollywood politics, doesn't he?

And specifically Union politics.

And again, so Reagan is the only, I think, the only US president to have been a Union leader.

I think that's absolutely right.

Yes.

He comes out of the war and the demand for his kind of parts is drying up, actually, because in the late 1940s, people want more conflicted, grittier films.

And he's just not right for that.

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You know, he's from the late 30s, melodramas.

He doesn't fit.

And he throws himself into the screen actors guild.

He's always been.

I mean, this is, again, this is something that reflects.

His deepest impulses, going back to his, his mother in, you know, when he's growing up in the disciples of Christ, you always join in, you know, you're the person.

So he'd always been the Union rep, the Union monitor from 1938 onwards on most of the films he had done.

You know, he was a Union man and does it well and it's very popular.

Yeah.

He's very popular.

But Union Hollywood Union politics is, is very, very conflicted in the late 1940s.

So the whole series of strikes, the studio bosses are swinging to the right.

So people like Walt Disney, for example, are really, really banging the drum of anti-communism.

And in part because they're very cross about the strikes and they basically want to present the strikes as communist inspired.

There is a key moment from 1946.

It's not the actors themselves.

It is the people who build the sets and, you know, do all the sort of painters and do all the hard graft.

So they'd been represented by something called the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees.

But there's a breakaway union called the Conference of Studio Unions that the sort of the left, the more left-leaning actors are keen to back.

This dispute gets really quite vicious.

So the September 1946, more than a thousand of the sort of painters and decorators and builders and things are fired.

And the question is, who are the actors going to back, the studio bosses or the craftsmen?

And Reagan delivers a big set piece speech in a 6,000-seater stadium to all, you know, the Hollywood actors, basically, in October 1946, in which he persuades them that the strike is being led by communists and they shouldn't get involved.

He gets police protection after that because there's a threat that acid will be thrown in his face.

Exactly.

So it's a very sort of conflicted sort of time of dirty politics.

The House Committee on American Activities are looking into Hollywood, putting pressure on Hollywood, saying, you know, you've made far too many pro-Soviet films in World War II.

There are far too many communist writers.

There's this sort of suspicion of a communist cell within Hollywood and so on and so forth.

And Reagan becomes the president of the Screen Actors Guild in March 1947, at the point at which all this is really, really hotting up.

And he has no doubt whatsoever about his role.

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His role as he sees it is to stand up for the American way, to cooperate with HUAC, cooperate with the FBI.

But, I mean, so he's becoming, I mean, very openly anti-communist, but at the same time, he is very effective at representing the interests of his fellow actors against the studio bosses, right?

And to that extent, he's still very recognizably the disciple of FDR, the admirer, you know, his father's son.

Yeah, he's still voting Democrat.

So he's still voting, he's voted for FDR, he's, I guess, must vote for Truman in 1948.

He's not confrontational with the studio bosses, so he would always cut deals with them.

But he's popular with...

Yeah, with the other actors.

With the other actors who vote, because they see him as effective.

Yeah, you're absolutely right.

They definitely don't regard him as the studio bosses' puppet.

I think there are definitely questions later on about whether he's a little bit too close to his own agency, MCA, it's a really powerful Hollywood agency.

But you're absolutely right.

He would not have been propelled into that position as the head of the Screen Actors Guild.

Had he not been regarded as a guy who will fight for a better deal for the actors.

The question mark that hangs over him is, you know, he goes and testifies to HUAC and so on and so forth in late 1947.

What he does is it's classic Reagan.

He's brilliant at pleasing everybody, giving everybody.

So he goes in front of the committee and he says, well, there are some communists in Hollywood, but he doesn't name any names.

He says there are communists, but we've got them under control, you know, we'll root them out because he's sort of trying to protect, is simultaneously giving the committee what it wants while also protecting the Screen Actors Guild and protecting the sort of the great majority of actors.

So this is the point at which you have the blacklist of the Hollywood 10.

Those people who won't cooperate with the inquiry, they are put on a blacklist and they can only work under sort of false names and stuff.

Reagan has no interest in standing up for them, which some people do.

He's absolutely not going to go out on a limb to do that.

But he's sort of charted, it's not quite a middle course because his anti-communism is becoming increasingly sort of marked.

But it's not, I think it would be unfair to say he's just a sort of rabid red bait or something.

His later critics sometimes did.

But over the course of the fifties, he is definitely drifting to the right.

So anti-communism is combined with a resentment of the tax burden as he sees it.

Yes.

Because isn't there something that he'd, something to do with he'd expected a tax amnesty after

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the war, which he didn't get.

That's right.

People had had them in World War I, if they, veterans had been able to defray their taxes to the end of the war.

Either he's ready in the Reodus Digester, he's got a very bad accountant who says they'll probably do the same again.

So he doesn't pay his taxes.

And then basically that forces him into the highest possible tax bracket at the end of World War II.

And he's outraged.

He's also, Jane Wyman has asked him for a divorce.

So he's paying alimony to her because she gets the kids.

And his career is starting to go down.

Exactly.

And his career is starting to go down.

Plus, he's sort of hanging around with a lot of actors who are very right-wing.

So Robert Taylor, Robin Montgomery, George Murphy, they're kind of actors of a certain age.

They may be a couple of years older than Reagan.

They kind of look like Reagan.

They sort of sit around having, yeah, yeah, sort of a lot of brill cream.

They sit around drinking scotch and sort of moaning about paying too much tax and, you know, they're swimming pool.

And do you think in Reagan's case, you know, as his career seems to be going down that he's, is his, for the first time, is his politics being bred of resentment, do you think?

He can never understand why his, his film career doesn't work out.

I think he always thinks he was a better actor and he never really got a, it's why he's very prickly later on when people mock his acting.

He doesn't mind doing it himself, but he doesn't like other people doing it.

And I think it's because I can relate to that.

Oh, you're like that about, you know, cricket, history, a lot, a lot of things.

Yeah.

No, I certainly felt a feeling.

Yeah.

No, I think, I think you're right.

I think there's a sense in which life at this point is the first point in his, in his life where he's not getting everything, you know, ambition and hard work and not taking him to the places that he thought they would.

And just to reiterate, I mean, they have taken him a very long way from a very poverty-stricken background and he, he kind of has been living the American dream, but the American dream now is slightly curdling.

Yes.

And so his career, his film career is coming to an end and so therefore the question is, what is he going to do?

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Well, when we come back next time, we'll talk about the one person who he hasn't yet met, who definitely is going to confirm his move to the right, who is not from a poverty-stricken background by any means.

And that is, of course, Nancy, Nancy Davis, who becomes his great sort of soulmate and his partner.

And just before we bow out, Tom, I mean, the lowest point in Reagan's life, he goes to London in early 1940s.

Yes, he does it.

And it's the first, it's the first foreign country he's ever been to, isn't it?

And he thinks it's terrible.

It confirms all his darker suspicions of socialism.

He's shocked by the socialism of Clement Attlee's Britain.

Do you know what he described London as?

A dismal wilderness, Tom.

That's how I feel about London.

So, you know, he had some, had some stakes flown over to the Savoy because he thought the British food was so bad.

And I read...

But to be fair to us, though, that's because we'd been bombed.

Yeah.

But he says to Richard Todd, his co-star at one point, what is rationing?

He kind of can't get his head around it.

He has his stakes flown over, but the fridges in the Savoy apparently didn't work properly, so the stakes all went bad.

Anyway, that confirms all his darkest fears about European-style socialism and socialism.

It's lucky his great-great grandparents didn't stay in Peckham, then, isn't it?

Yeah.

Well, gosh, yes.

A bullet dodged.

That is a bullet dodged.

But we will come back and we will be talking a bit more about Nancy.

We will talk about Reagan's move to work for General Electric, his involvement with the Barry Goldwater campaign in 1964, becoming governor of California, and then his rise to the presidency.

And then after that, we will get on to the presidency, to Gorbachev, to Iran, Contra, all these things.

So, we're looking at three episodes, aren't we?

Oh, definitely, Tom.

Yeah.

At least.

So, if you want to listen to them right now, the great news is that actually you can.

It's a great offer.

You should be selling this in your Ronald Reagan voice.

Do you want to sell it?

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Where can they listen to them, Tom, on which platform?

My fellow Americans, they can listen to it on every platform.

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And if you don't do that, you'll just have to wait, along with the European-style socialists.

Yeah.

That's the Democrat option.

Yeah.

You'll just have to wait.

If you're a bunch of loser commies, you'll just have to go and pay us money.

I see myself very much as the, who am I in this inanity?

Who are you?

Well, you're Nancy.

I'm not Nancy.

I was just about to say I'm not Nancy.

I'm somebody like Lemuel Bulweir of General Electric.

So you definitely want to go and sign up, because honestly, the list of characters with ludicrous and improbable names coming up is not to be missed.

So basically, pile in.

Pile in.

So next time, the life and career of Lemuel Bulweir on the RestisHistory and also a bit of Ronald Reagan.

Goodbye.

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