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Introduction

If I had to build a Mount Rushmore of presidential humor, I'd include three people — Presidents Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan. Like presidents before and after them, they used humor to make points, create rapport and build goodwill. Unlike other presidents, they were true masters of the quip, joke and anecdote. And most important, they were willing to turn their humor on themselves.

It's no coincidence that all three are considered to be among the best orators in American history. Abraham Lincoln is known for his Gettysburg Address. John F. Kennedy is known for his Inaugural Address. And Ronald Reagan is known simply as "The Great Communicator" because of his ability to connect with an audience. Humor played a major role in that ability.

A Little Background

Ronald Reagan was the 40th president of the United States, serving from 1981 to 1989. Prior to that he had been a governor of California, a Hollywood movie star and a radio sports announcer. During his presidency, Ronald Reagan increased defense spending, ordered a U.S. invasion of Granada to thwart Cuban influence, and pursued funding for the strategic defense initiative better known as Star Wars. His efforts culminated in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with the Soviet Union. It was the first arms control agreement in history to reduce the nuclear arsenal.

On the domestic side, President Reagan is best known for restoring America's optimism, curbing inflation, improving the economy, and slowing the growth of federal government. His wife Nancy was praised for her Just Say No campaign against drugs.

History will also remember Ronald Reagan for his outstanding sense of humor. It formed a critical part of his bond with the American people.

Was He Really Funny?

Lets clear up one question right now: Was he really funny? Everyone knows presidents have speechwriters. So how much of their humor is scripted and how much is "natural"? President Reagan really was funny. Sure much of his humor was written by others, but no one wrote his famous one-liners on the day he was shot in an assassination attempt. To Nancy Reagan: "Honey, I forgot to duck." To the doctors in

the hospital where he was taken: “I hope you’re all Republicans.” And many of the personal anecdotes that you’ll find in this book couldn’t have been written by anyone else.

He also used a lot of self-effacing humor – a strategy that increased his popularity and helped him defuse specific issues such as his age. When he ran for president in 1980, the media constantly wondered if he was too old for the position. He addressed the issue by poking fun at it. He never missed a chance to laugh about his senior citizen status. And he continued to do so after winning the election. This strategy proved powerful and effective. In 1984, when he ran for re-election, his jokes about his age had so defused the issue that it was barely mentioned – even though he was four years older!

President Reagan also used humor to address a wide array of other issues. These ranged from his relationship with Congress and the press to dealing with Democrats, bureaucrats and Communists. He used many types of humor including jokes, quotes, personal anecdotes and self effacing humor. You’ll find all of them on display in the following pages.

Structure Of This Book

One word about the structure of this book. In the quips section, I’ve tried to arrange President Reagan’s humor into short monologues about a variety of topics. Although the quips come from different speeches, I’ve placed them in an order that creates a beginning, middle and end where possible. In the anecdotes section, President Reagan’s humor is divided into personal anecdotes, general anecdotes and pointmakers.

Whether you’re a historian, politician, teacher, public speaker or just someone who likes to laugh, you’ll find much to appreciate in President Reagan’s humor. So sit back, relax and get ready to grin. Enjoy!