

This Day in History... October 27, 1964

Ronald Reagan Enters National Politics

On October 27, 1964, Ronald Reagan took a campaign speech for Barry Goldwater to a national television audience. His address introduced many Americans to Reagan as a political speaker and helped bring him wider attention.

Reagan's path to politics began long before that broadcast. As a student in Dixon, Illinois, he acted in school plays and took part in student government. At Eureka College, he played football, swam, ran track, appeared in college productions, and served in student leadership. He graduated in 1932 with a degree in economics and sociology. Soon after, he began working in radio as a sports announcer. He later moved to California and built a career in Hollywood, acting in films and hosting television programs. His public speaking experience also grew through work with General Electric and appearances before civic groups.

Reagan's political views changed over time. He had been a Democrat and supported Democratic candidates, including Harry Truman. In the 1950s, he became more conservative and campaigned for Republican candidates Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. He formally changed his party registration in 1962. Reagan often presented his shift as a response to changes in the Democratic Party. By 1964, he was co-chairman of Californians for Barry Goldwater, the Republican nominee for president. He traveled around California speaking on Goldwater's behalf.

The televised address grew out of that campaign work. Republican organizers in California had heard Reagan speak and asked him to deliver a national television appeal for Goldwater. Reagan agreed, and the address was recorded before an audience. It aired on October 27, one week before Election Day. The Reagan Library lists it as a 29-minute, black-and-white televised campaign address. It is now commonly called "A Time for Choosing," though it is also known simply as "The Speech."

Reagan spoke in a measured, serious style. He laid out his own arguments rather than simply repeating Goldwater's campaign slogans. The speech focused on the role of the federal government, taxation, public spending, poverty programs, and the Cold War. Reagan argued that expanding government programs could limit personal freedom and local decision-making. He warned that programs tend to remain in place after they are created, saying, "No government ever voluntarily reduces itself in size." He also described the election as a choice about whether people could govern themselves or should rely on federal officials to plan their lives.

Reagan drew on examples and stories to make those points. He referred to the costs of federal programs and questioned whether added spending would solve poverty.

He also raised concerns about the United States' response to communism and the risks of what he called appeasement. These themes reflected Goldwater's campaign, but Reagan's delivery gave them a personal, conversational quality. Viewers who knew him from movies or television saw a different side: a confident advocate for a particular political outlook.

Reagan later recalled watching the broadcast anxiously and worrying that he had disappointed Goldwater. He also remembered a late-night call from a campaign aide reporting a surge of calls from people pledging money. Accounts of the total raised vary, so it is difficult to state a precise amount as settled fact. The immediate response did show campaign officials that Reagan could attract attention and support beyond California.

Goldwater lost the election to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Reagan, however, emerged from the campaign with a larger political profile. The speech did not create his interest in politics; he had been speaking on political issues for years. But it gave a national audience a concentrated view of his arguments and style. Republican organizers began considering him as a candidate for California governor. In 1966, Reagan won the governorship. His rise from radio announcer and actor to elected office continued over the next decade and eventually led to the presidency.



Issued eight months after Reagan's death



Speeches such as "A Time for Choosing" earned Reagan the nickname, "Great Communicator."



Issued for Reagan's 100th birthday

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