

# Acting skills shaped Reagan presidency



ONLY THE MOST die-hard movie buffs know that in the late 1940s, former president Ronald

Reagan, who died Saturday at the age of 93, implored filmmaking mogul Jack Warner to portray him as Monty Stratton, an amputee who beat the odds to become a pitcher for the Chicago White Sox.

Warner nixed the idea insisting that "no one ever went to see movies about baseball or cripples." Instead, MGM produced "The Stratton Story" (1949) and hired Jimmy Stewart to play the disabled ballplayer. When the movie proved to be a box office hit, Warner overcame his own objections and produced "The Winning Team" (1952), a biopic of Grover Cleveland Alexander, starring Reagan.

Of the more than 50 movies he made between 1937 and 1964, "The Winning Team" turned out to be one of the few films that stood the test of time. Reagan had gotten the last laugh, just as he had as president of the United States.

Reagan's life paralleled Alexander's in so many ways, but especially in their mutual ability to fool the naysayers.

Grover Alexander pitched for the Philadelphia Phillies from 1911 to 1917. As a rookie, he led the National League with 28 victories. Leading the team to their first pennant in 1915, a year later, "Pete," as he was called by his teammates, hurled 16 shutouts, still a major league record.

When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, Phillies' owner William F. Baker feared that his star pitcher would be drafted and traded him to the Cubs. Alexander, who served as an infantryman in France, survived the war to collect another 128 wins. He also began to drink heavily and suffered from epilepsy, which was sometimes

## COMMENTARY

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mistaken for drunken behavior.

Joe McCarthy, who took over as Cubs' manager in 1926, couldn't tell the difference.

Believing that Pete was "washed up," McCarthy traded him to the St. Louis Cardinals. Once again, Alexander fooled the naysayers, leading the Cards to the World Series with another 21 wins and helped to define the pitching excellence that became a hallmark of the national pastime.

Ronald Reagan was intrigued by Alexander's story for both personal and professional reasons. His unpretentious performance in "The Winning Team" served to validate his own carefully crafted persona as a man who sought to embody team spirit and humanity.

At the same time, Reagan relished his reputation as a "washed up actor" who entered politics to escape the drudgery of hosting TV shows. It was part of the mythology he crafted to reinvent himself.

Hollywood was an excellent apprenticeship for a politician who eventually became the "Great Communicator." Reagan projected sincerity, eternal optimism, and a fervent patriotism, which he wore on his sleeve. All of those qualities were delivered in a cheerful, warm and folksy style, allowing him to win over the affection of millions. The persona was so convincing, though blunted at times by a personal struggle with Alzheimer's during his final years in office, that even his critics seemed to like him.

Somehow Reagan managed to elude the wrath of his political enemies for such disasters as the Iran-contra scandal and the 1983 suicide bombing that killed 241 American military personnel deployed in Beirut as a peace keeping force after the

Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

But where Reagan really had us all fooled was in his ability to end the Cold War. His strident anti-communism seemed to worsen U.S. relations with the Soviet Union. His unbelievable reference to that country as an evil empire destroyed any future hope of detente.

Worse, the so-called "Reagan Doctrine" went beyond the containment policy of previous administrations to actively support anti-communist insurgents wherever they fought. In addition, the desire to outspend the Soviets in the arms race with a science-fiction-like "Star Wars" program appeared like a prescription for nuclear disaster.

Who could have predicted then, that Reagan, the actor, was staging a military build-up to force the Soviets into bankruptcy and, hence, the inability to continue the Cold War? Once again, in 1987, Reagan reinvented himself from a visceral anti-Communist to a peacemaker. That year, he signed, in Washington, a historic treaty with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Two years later, former president Reagan traveled to West Berlin and made a statement that today sounds like more of a request than a demand.

"General Secretary Gorbachev," he said, standing at the Brandenburg Gate, "if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this Gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Who could have predicted then that those words would be prophetic? Later that year, the Berlin Wall came down. Ronald Reagan had changed world history by fooling everyone.

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