ForeWord Reviews

HISTORY

The Making of the Great Communicator: Ronald Reagan's Transformation from Actor to Governor

Kenneth Holden
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A man who helped transform Reagan from actor to governor tells a compelling tale nobody else alive can tell.

Some dismissed him as “merely an actor playing a part,” but a few saw something more in Ronald Reagan. They saw a man of rare character, intelligence, and insight, one who could change California, and the nation. In this memoir, Kenneth Holden shares his memories of helping Reagan rise from a man with ideals and potential to the governor of California in a book that offers behind-the-scenes insights into the life of one of the world’s most powerful men.

Holden, a behavioral psychologist, served in near secret on Reagan’s 1966 gubernatorial campaign. Through their consulting firm, Holden and his business partner helped train Reagan in the ways of high-stakes politics.

The author reveals that, in many ways, great men are as much made as born. He describes the beginnings and reveals the inner workings of modern political campaigns, pointing to the reasons a changing world demanded new ways of researching public opinion and gaining support. Perhaps most poignantly, he provides rare insights into a moment that transformed Reagan’s political life, a moment no one else living can share.

The book begins with Reagan’s early life, from his radio days in Davenport, Iowa (a place that “contained more than enough strangeness … to prepare him for Hollywood”), through his years as an actor. It explores how those experiences made Reagan who he was. Then, after Holden shares how he came to know Reagan, he relates what happened during secret meetings held over a three-day period in Malibu. Those meetings transformed the actor’s struggling campaign, changed Reagan into a politician, and led to his election as California’s governor.

Holden’s writing is vibrant, his pacing strong. He artfully balances tiny details of conversations and decision-making with big-picture political issues. Political analysis blends masterfully with captivating personal narrative. Although the reader sees many of the stark

realities of politics, they gain important insight into Reagan. The reader sees Reagan through the eyes of those who most believed him to be highly intelligent, well studied in political thought, positive, funny, and determined.

The book presents one conservative person's perspective—one that, naturally, views things through a pro-Reagan lens. And no one alive can refute what Holden reveals about those Malibu days. Yet for anyone interested in how an actor became so much more to the world, Holden shares a story not to be missed.

Diane Gardner