dubbed “Hoover wagons.” Seeing the President as uncompassionate and out of touch with reality, the country began to look to Franklin Roosevelt as a new kind of political leader.

“I had little hope of reelection in 1932 but it was incumbent on me to fight it out to the end,” Hoover wrote. “One of Roosevelt’s most effective campaign issues was . . . to allege that I had made the depression and then done nothing about it.”

In the final year of his presidency, Hoover initiated a series of important federal measures to provide food for hungry Americans and to shore up the banking system. But to his critics it was too little, too late. Just fourteen weeks before the national election, thousands of unemployed veterans, with their wives and children, descended upon Washington seeking an early payment of a war bonus. When the Senate failed to pass such a bill, the so-called “Bonus Army” initiated a siege.

Led by the California figure of Roy Robertson, who wore a high leather brace to protect his once broken neck, the protestors staged a “death march” around the Capitol building. Congressmen, trapped inside and fearing for their lives, had to escape through subterranean tunnels. When a riot erupted, and the protestors turned toward the White House, President Hoover authorized the U.S. Army to intervene.

To young Colonel Dwight Eisenhower’s horror, General MacArthur ignored the President’s request that he use peaceable means, and instead sent in cavalrymen with drawn swords, and infantry with bayonets and tear gas. With their temporary huts set on fire, the protesters were run out of the city. When Franklin Roosevelt heard of the rout he said, “This will elect me.”

A bitter Hoover never got over his crushing defeat that year. “Democracy is not a polite employer,” he commented. “The only way out of elective office is to get sick or die or get kicked out.”

And so Herbert Hoover, as he had done at regular intervals all his life, went fishing. Fly fishing was his cherished pastime and a favorite metaphor for American democracy. “All men are equal before fishes,” he liked to say. “I am for fish. . . . But it is too long between bites.”

In more ordinary times, his philosophy of American volunteerism might have helped make him a great president. And to the end of his long life, which lasted into the 1960s, his faith in America never dimmed. “Within the soul of America is freedom of mind and spirit,” he said. “Here alone is human dignity, not a dream, but an accomplishment. Perhaps it’s not perfect, but it’s more full of its realization here than in any other place in the world.”

RONALD REAGAN
1981-1989
An American Dreamer

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in 1911 in Tampico, Illinois, the second son of Jack and Nelle Reagan. He had a difficult childhood. His father was an itinerant shoe salesman and an alcoholic. And in school his undiagnosed nearsighted-
ness held him back until a writing teacher named B. J. Frazier brought out Reagan's native talent. "I was always called on to read [my papers]," Reagan remembered. "Maybe that's where the 'ham' began." Public speaking became Reagan's passion, combined with his own brand of humor and optimism, which helped him overcome his troubles. The caption beneath his high school yearbook picture read, "Life is just one grand sweet song, so start the music."

In 1937, after an initial career as a radio sportscaster, he took a screen test at Warner Bros.' Studio, which led to a seven-year contract. In Hollywood he was cast as the All-American boy, a role he played so many times that he became identified with it. Eventually he appeared in more than fifty feature films, and by 1941 Warner Bros. reported that only Errol Flynn received more fan mail than Ronald Reagan.

During World War II, Reagan served in the army's motion picture unit, narrating training films. But after the war, his film career fizzled and he was increasingly relegated to the nightclub circuit, which he hated. When his wife, the actress Jane Wyman, divorced him in 1948, he entered the lowest period of his life. But Reagan was not Reagan unless he was upbeat. Four years later he married another actress, Nancy Davis, who became his greatest ally and friend. Then, "like the cavalry to the rescue," he said, came a new opportunity—he was offered the job as host of the weekly television program General Electric Theater. Under Reagan it climbed to be the number-one show in its time slot, making him one of the most recognizable men in America. And when he became a part owner of the series, it also made him rich. Selected to serve as the company's national spokesperson, Reagan began traveling to GE factories around the country, where he spoke to employees and at corporate banquets, gaining a valuable political apprenticeship. His speeches were part patriotism, part pro-business pep rally. And though he was a Democrat, his message was becoming increasingly conservative. "I began to talk more and more," he remembered, "of how government had expanded and was infringing on liberties and interfering with private enterprise... It finally grew to the point that one day I came home from a speaking tour and said to Nancy, 'I go out there and make these speeches which I believe—they are my own speeches—and then every four years I find myself campaigning for the people who are doing the things that I am speaking against.' And I said, 'I am on the wrong side.'"

In 1962 Reagan switched political parties and began a rapid ascent in Republican party circles. His televised speech for Barry Goldwater two years later drew more contributions than any political speech in American history. And it established Ronald Reagan as a political force in his own right, with strong support in the business community in southern California. "When I was beset in 1965 by a group that insisted that I had to seek the governorship against the incumbent governor," he later said, "I fought like a tiger not to. Finally, I couldn't sleep nights, and Nancy and I said yes."

Reagan served as governor of California for eight years, making his mark as an aggressive and popular conservative and slowly building a strong financial and political base from which to make his own run on the high office. In his quest for the presidency in 1980, Reagan cast himself as a revolutionary outsider—a crusader out to restore the American way of life.

The country in 1980 was in a profound state of gloom. For more than a year Jimmy Carter had struggled unsuccessfully to free a group of fifty-two American hostages held in Iran. And with the economy in trouble and inflation in double digits, Carter's repeated calls for sacrifice and for lower expectations had left many Americans pessimistic about the future. Ronald Reagan saw his job as teaching Americans how to dream again.
To Reagan, much as it had been to Calvin Coolidge, big government was the enemy of the American way. Reagan’s vision was one of individual enterprise and a return to what he called the self-confident spirit of the founding fathers. When he won the election by an electoral landslide, he called it “the Reagan revolution of 1980.”

Reagan brought to the presidency his well-known sense of humor and the charm that people called “the Reagan magic.” Following an era when Americans had felt threatened and small, Ronald Reagan made them feel big again. Following the release of the American hostages at the very start of his presidency, Reagan turned to his campaign promise to revolutionize American government. He established a strong bond with Congress and obtained impressive legislative victories, including cuts in domestic spending and, at the same time, large-scale tax cuts. And in a striking departure from Jeffersonian policy, he called for an increase in military spending, eventually achieving the largest peacetime buildup in the history of the nation.

Less than three months into his term, in a scene so dramatic it seemed as if out of one of his own movies, Reagan was fired upon and critically wounded by a crazed gunman. The President’s bravery and good humor in the wake of the shooting impressed the nation, and his popularity soared. A sympathetic Congress, acting with bipartisanship, swiftly passed the remainder of his economic policies. But his lengthy recuperation isolated him from the hard work of the presidency. At the White House, staff members began to notice a lack of concentration. Reagan’s workday was limited to nine-to-five, and included an extended midday personal break. National Security Council briefing sessions were kept as short as possible and the President began regularly neglecting his official reading. Reagan saved his energy for what he called “the big picture” and for important public performances, which he pulled off to perfection. Again and again in televised speeches he promoted his vision of the American way—free markets, freedom from government, personal freedoms in general. The antithesis of all this, in Reagan’s mind, was Communism, and in particular this meant the Soviet Union. “Let us be aware,” he said in a 1983 speech, “that they are the focus of evil in the modern world.”

When he pushed for an elaborate, antimissile space shield to protect America from Soviet missiles it became known as Star Wars. “The Strategic Defense Initiative has been labeled Star Wars,” he said, “but it isn’t about war, it’s about peace. It isn’t about retaliation, it’s about prevention. It isn’t about fear, it’s about hope. And in that struggle, if you’ll pardon my stealing a film line, the force is with us.”

Reagan won reelection in 1984 by a landslide. But his second term was plagued with problems. At seventy-three, he was now the oldest president in American history. His hearing was poor, he was battling cancer, and his memory was not what it had been. Then, just three months after his second inaugural, Islamic terrorists hijacked TWA Flight 847 and took thirty-nine Americans hostage. It was Jimmy Carter’s nightmare all over again. Determined to obtain their speedy release, Reagan ended up approving a secret deal: the sale of U.S. missiles to Iran in exchange for the hostages. It was a direct contradiction of his publicly stated policy not to bargain with terrorists, and when news of it leaked out, Reagan went on television to address the nation: “The charge has been made that the United States has shipped weapons to Iran as ransom payment for the release of American hostages in Lebanon; that the United States undercut its allies and secretly violated American policy. . . . Those charges are utterly false. . . . We did not, repeat, did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we.”

But as his own diary proved, Reagan had authorized the sale. To make mat-
ters worse, some of the money raised by selling arms was then illegally funneled to the anti-communist Contras in Nicaragua—a cause Reagan believed in but had been unable to get Congressional support for. When the situation, now called “Iran-Contra,” led to a Congressional investigation, for the first time in his political life the American public did not believe Reagan’s word. It was Nancy who finally persuaded her husband to go back on television and admit the truth.

“A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages,” he said on March 4, 1987. “My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not. What began as a strategical outreach to Iran deteriorated in its implementation into trading arms for hostages. This runs counter to my own beliefs, to administration policy, and to the original strategy we had in mind. There are reasons why it happened, but no excuses. It was a mistake.”

Ronald Reagan was able to put the scandal behind him. And although by the time he left office the national debt had tripled and the gap between rich and poor had greatly widened, a soaring stock market and economic good times for many helped him regain much of his lost popularity. Critics charged he had betrayed Jimmy Carter’s finest legacy—a foreign policy committed to human rights. But others pointed out that the threat of his “Star Wars” program actually helped force a diplomatic breakthrough in U.S.-Soviet relations. President Reagan and Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev held a total of five summits, which culminated in the signing of a historic agreement, the first actual reduction in each side’s nuclear arsenals. It marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War, and it stands as Reagan’s most enduring achievement.

On January 11, 1989, just shy of his seventy-eighth birthday, President Reagan gave his farewell address to the nation. In a way, it was a variation of what he called “The Speech,” the same message he had been giving since his days working for GE. He spoke once again of America as “a shining city,” and described himself a “citizen politician” who had tried to put government back into the hands of the people. “It’s been the honor of my life to be your president,” he said. “They called it the Reagan Revolution. Well, I’ll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the great rediscovery, a rediscovery of our values and our common sense. The way I see it, there were two great triumphs, two things that I’m proudest of. One is the economic recovery . . . the other is the recovery of our morale. America is respected again in the world and looked to for leadership.”