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*Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* explores the relationship between the motion picture industry and American politics through the prism of Reagan's film career at Warner Bros. During the Great Depression, World War II, and the postwar era, the Hollywood film industry served as a "grand, worldwide propaganda base" for those who wanted to use movies to influence attitudes about patriotism, national defense, communism, the welfare state, race, sex, and civil liberties. Reagan thrived in this environment. During his years in Hollywood, from 1937 to 1952, he formed many of the ideas that he later carried into his presidency. Not merely a star, Reagan simultaneously became an articulate industry spokesperson and skilled propagandist, playing an important role in "the battle . . . to capture the minds" of humanity in the struggle against communism. By the time he left Warner Bros. in 1952, Reagan had abandoned his New Deal liberalism and had become a militant anticommunist.

Based on interviews with President Reagan and others, formerly secret FBI files, and material from more than 150 archival collections, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood* is the most comprehensive book on this subject, providing an incisive analysis of Reagan's important formative years.

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IN HOLLYWOOD**  
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*University of Wisconsin – Madison*



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*For Bev and Will*

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## PREFACE

The following pages set out an extraordinary story, that of the rise of Ronald Reagan from an obscure if ambitious youth in the Midwest to a Hollywood star who developed a remarkable talent for politics. Many actors have taken an interest in politics, but Reagan had the ability to take his fascination far beyond anything achieved by other Hollywood personalities. His political apprenticeship occurred during the fifteen years – from 1937 to 1952 – when he worked as a contract player for Warner Bros. Pictures, a period that stretched from the Great Depression, through World War II, and into the first years of the Cold War.

Reagan came to the West Coast in the middle of the Great Depression as a virtual unknown, seeking fame and fortune. These he soon found after signing with Warner Bros. By the time America entered World War II he had already reached movie stardom and had a weekly salary that had risen to heights beyond anything that seemed possible during his boyhood in central Illinois. But he found something more than renown and wealth in Hollywood; he discovered issues – fighting issues, he believed.

And so much of this work is not only about Reagan but also about those issues that changed his life and made a difference, it is fair to say, in the lives of many Americans. By focusing on what has been called the “battle of ideas,” the conflict over what social and political principles actors and movies would represent, and by using Reagan’s career as its focal point, this book explores the relationship between the motion picture industry and American politics. At first blush this may appear an odd topic, given the apparent superficiality of Hollywood in general and of Reagan’s pictures in particular. Yet if one looks behind the films to how they were made and examines the organizations to which Reagan belonged, one immediately sees the influence of politics. Few people associated with movie making during this era doubted the ability of motion pictures to alter attitudes and behavior.

Certainly Reagan was no exception in this regard. For him, cinema was more than society's mirror; it was a platform. As he came to think of himself as more than an entertainer, so he also came to see Hollywood as a "grand world-wide propaganda base." By 1952, he considered himself engaged in a "great ideological struggle" to "capture the minds" of humanity.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible to set out Reagan's political education without showing its close association with the movie industry and especially the Warner Bros. studio, where from the outset the actor found himself immersed in the Warners' own preoccupation with politics. The Warner family had come from Poland at the turn of the century, and the brothers Jack and Harry never forgot their own success in America. During the Great Depression they developed a reputation for being pro-Roosevelt and socially conscious. As Jews, they also became alarmed at what they saw occurring in Nazi Germany. They feared what a Europe dominated by Adolf Hitler might mean and became obsessed with the possibility of subversion in the United States. Often they made their films conveniently topical, and while they were always sensitive to what might hurt the box office, they did not hesitate to use their pictures in ways they hoped might influence opinion – this despite frequent difficulties with censors, pressure groups, and government officials. By the late 1930s, military preparedness and patriotism had become important themes for the Warners. The former notion was controversial before Pearl Harbor, but the Warners discovered that their enemies could not easily object to the latter. Reagan, who at the time was himself a New Deal Democrat, had to find his place within the Warners' scheme of things, and he quickly did so. He could hardly have ignored this introduction to politics.

To be sure, the Warners remained a presence in Reagan's life throughout this entire period, but the actor also had many opportunities outside of the studio to learn about politics. During World War II he worked as a propagandist for the Army Air Force in a unit that Jack Warner lobbied General Henry "Hap" Arnold to establish. Reagan spent the war in California, most of the time stationed at Culver City, thanks in no small part to Warner's influence. Reagan's work in propaganda is interesting, too, because it placed him under the command of Arnold, a leading advocate of American air power. After the war Reagan joined several political organizations, made fewer films, and rapidly became a force in Hollywood politics. The sources from which to study Reagan's activities become richer after 1945 and reveal his metamorphosis from a follower of Franklin D. Roosevelt to industry spokesperson and anticommunist. His emerging conservatism is therefore a theme in these pages. He came into his own with the Screen Actors Guild, where he gained national recognition as president. As a leader in the Motion Picture Industry Council he became an industry advocate, skilled in public relations and public speaking, at ease with crowds, cameras, celebrities, and politicians. Not only did he benefit from Hollywood's publicity, he learned how to use it. He rose to leadership in an industry fueled by money, power, and sex –

a place also of labor violence, anticommunism, economic insecurity, and personal and professional crises. It was an atmosphere hostile to social experiment and political risk-taking.

By examining this period it is the author's hope that the reader will gain greater insight into Reagan's development as a political leader and into Hollywood's place in the American political system. Understanding this early environment and Reagan's success in it shows that later, when he ran for public office, he was often underestimated by those who said that he was merely an actor. Here was the crucible in which began to form many of the ideas that Reagan would carry into the White House a generation or so later. This is not to argue that a direct line necessarily existed between these years and the positions later taken by Reagan as governor and president. After all, almost three decades elapsed between the time Reagan left Warner Bros. and assumed the United States presidency. But one finds in this earlier era that Hollywood divided over many of the same issues that separated Americans during the 1980s – matters involving communism, liberalism, welfare, the revival of patriotism, national defense, the role of Judeo-Christianity in entertainment and politics, women and the family, sexual behavior, anti-Semitism and ethnicity, racism and civil rights, the use of history, and freedom of expression, to name a few. A broad consistency existed between many of the views (although not all) that came to dominate Reagan's early world and those he later espoused as an elected leader. And just as this was a formative time for Reagan, so too was it an important period for Hollywood and its place in society. It was a time when actors aspired to respectability and became sought-after participants in politics. Reagan had much to do with these developments.

This book does not downplay the importance to Reagan of being a movie actor. It is noteworthy that from his days as a youth, steeped in the verities of the Christian Church and small-town life, acting was a way of learning for him. During his screen career, which spanned the years from 1937 to 1964, Reagan made fifty-three feature films. He appeared in forty-six of those pictures between 1937 and 1952, and of those movies, forty-one were made by Warner Bros.<sup>2</sup> He left behind a more visible record before entering elective office than any other American president. Understanding his roles, the public image that the studio created for him, and how his movies were put together reveals a good deal about his early world. But Reagan's Hollywood experiences involved much more than performing in films, and the movies served only as a starting point for this book, which is based on a wide array of sources, including interviews, FBI files released under the Freedom of Information Act, and, most important, materials from more than 150 collections in archives scattered around the country.

A word is in order about the organization of this book. The chapters that follow move forward in a broadly chronological fashion, but they have also been constructed around different themes. As a result, readers will find that

as chapters consider new topics they revisit earlier periods. Chapters 1 through 9 carry the story through the end of World War II. Chapters 10 through 19 deal with the years from late 1945 through roughly 1952.

This work ends in the early 1950s because after that time documentation diminishes sharply. The year 1952 is a logical concluding point for other reasons: that year Reagan married the actress Nancy Davis, ended his association with Warner Bros., stepped down after five consecutive terms as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and soon thereafter went into television as host of a program known as “General Electric Theater.” A little more than a decade later the politics first of California, then of the entire United States, beckoned to him.



During the past eight years I have been fortunate to have had the help of many friends and colleagues in preparing this book. I especially want to thank Merle Curti, the late Frank Freidel, Arthur Hove, Richard S. Kirken-dall, Beatrice Rehl, and K. R. M. Short for reading the entire manuscript and offering valuable advice. Others who read parts of the work and made helpful recommendations were Terry Anderson, Thomas Cripps, Jerry Durham, Ian Jarvie, George Juergens, John Pauley, Janice Radway, Donald Ritchie, and Dwight Teeter. I am also grateful for the encouragement I received in the early stages of this work from Maurice Baxter, Robert Gunderson, Charles Jelavich, Martin Ridge, the late Boyd C. Shafer, and David Trask.

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