

RONALD REAGAN

A P R E S I D E N T ' S V I S I O N

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

TIP O'NEILL, "EPILOGUE: WHAT I BELIEVE" FROM *MAN OF THE HOUSE: THE LIFE AND POLITICAL MEMOIRS OF SPEAKER TIP O'NEILL*. NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 1987.

I began my political career in 1936, on a slogan of "work and wages." Today, more than half a century later, I'm still a bread-and-butter liberal who believes that every family deserves the opportunity to earn an income, own a home, educate their children, and afford medical care.

That is the American dream, and it's still worth fighting for. In my view, the federal government has an obligation to help you along the line until you achieve that dream. And when you do, you have an obligation to help out the next group that comes along.

In recent years, this idea has fallen out of favor. Today, there are those who argue that the way to achieve the American dream is to go it alone. This new morality claims that the young should forget about the old, that the healthy should ignore the sick, and that the wealthy should abandon the poor.

But this is an alien philosophy in our country. While we Americans certainly believe in getting ahead through education, sacrifice, and hard work, we also believe in looking out for the other guy. From our earliest beginnings, we have insisted that the individual human being is of fundamental value, and that even the humblest, meekest person has the right to be treated with dignity and respect.

I often hear successful people talking about the "good old days." Their message is always the same: how wonderful life used to be when we had less government and fewer social programs and people were left to fend for themselves.

But I came of age in those good old days, and I remember very clearly what they were like. When I first entered politics, 50 percent of the population were living in poverty. A full 25 percent of Americans were out of work.

Even if you were fortunate enough to have a job, life was still pretty tough. A policeman worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week. If you were a fireman, you were on duty even longer, and you worked a hundred and four hours a week. The postman delivered mail on Christmas Day. For most people, the work week was six days long—and those were six long days. The only time you saw your family was on Sunday.

For the majority of Americans, health insurance was out of the question. If you became sick, your world collapsed. For the elderly, life was filled with uncertainty and fear. Only a lucky few had pensions, and Social Security was a brand-new idea.

In those days, there was virtually no middle class in America—only a handful of rich people at the top, and millions of poor people at the bottom. Between the two groups stretched a huge and sparsely populated wilderness. The best way to close that gap was to attend college, but only a small percentage of the population could afford to go.

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That was the America I knew in 1936. And despite all the problems we now face, I can never forget how far we have come in fifty years. Today, everyone goes to high school, and close to two-thirds of our young people pursue some form of higher education. And although poverty has certainly not been eliminated, we were able to get the poverty rate down to 10 percent in 1980. Today, virtually all workers have some form of health insurance. Social Security has made it possible for people to retire with a small but steady income. Without this protection, half of the elderly would be living in poverty.

As a result of these changes, our country now has a thriving middle class. We have many other things, too, including housing and job programs, a thriving system of state colleges and universities, and a farm program that has helped make us the greatest agricultural nation in the world.

Even those who are not yet part of the middle class are better off than they used to be. Through the years, our society has accepted a strong role in taking care of those who can't take care of themselves, including the sick, the handicapped, and the elderly. We have provided a safety net for those who need protection.

My critics like to refer to me as the last of the big spenders. Maybe so, but I've always believed in our responsibility as a nation to pay for the health and welfare of the American people. Yes, I've supported higher taxes, but it's those taxes that made possible the tremendous progress we've seen.

Over the years, I've witnessed some miraculous improvements in this country. And above all, I'm proud that I had the opportunity to play a part in helping them along.

Even so, politics wasn't always easy, and there were several critical moments of truth—the teachers' oath bill in 1937, the Vietnam War in 1967, and the Reagan legislative locomotive in 1981—when I felt especially alone, and when even most Democrats stood against me. At those moments, my political future looked bleak. But today I look back at those times with the pride that comes from knowing I did the right thing.

I also look back to that summer day in 1927, when I stood outside the canvas tent at Harvard University. As I watched the privileged sons of America drinking their champagne, I dreamed of bringing my own people—and *all* Americas who weren't born to wealth or advantage—into the great American tent of opportunity.

And while some of the work remains to be done, I must be a lucky man, for so much of my dream has already come true.

QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Who was Tip O'Neill? What position did he hold during Reagan's terms as president?
2. With which ideology did Tip O'Neill identify himself?
3. According to O'Neill, this ideology had fallen out of favor and had been replaced by a "new morality." What was at the heart of this new morality?
4. How was this new morality alien to previous American beliefs?
5. O'Neill suggested that conservatives argued for the "good old days" when governmental power was limited. For O'Neill what were the "good old days" really like in 1936 when he was first elected to Congress?
6. What positive changes does O'Neill point to that occurred during his time in office?
7. How does O'Neill respond to the criticism that he had been "the last of the big spenders" and had supported higher taxes?
8. Explain in your own words how O'Neill's vision of government is different from Ronald Reagan's.

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