

Books

Reagan's Unsung Mentor

Dwight D. Eisenhower was a university president, supreme allied commander in World War II, and leader of the free world. But a provocative new book suggests one of his greatest contributions may have been mentoring Ronald Reagan.

BY ANDREW HENRY

RONALD REAGAN INTENDED his iconic “A Time for Choosing” speech to propel Barry Goldwater into the Oval Office. Instead, the career it launched was his own.

Gene Kopelson’s *Reagan’s 1968 Dress Rehearsal: Ike, RFK, and Reagan’s Emergence as a World Statesman*, focuses on one very special viewer of Reagan’s speech that night: former President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Eisenhower’s reaction to Reagan’s message, as reflected in memoranda of correspondence that other historians apparently overlooked, was galvanic. “Ike calls former colleagues, once in the morning and once in the afternoon,” Kopelson tells Newsmax. “First he says what a fine speech it was. And then a few hours later, what an excellent speech that Reagan made.” Kopelson’s research, centered on Reagan’s presidential campaign in 1968, opens up a new perspective on Reagan, suggesting his relationship with Eisenhower was far more consequential than generally recognized.

So impressed was Ike by the October 1964 speech that he began to think of Reagan as a viable alterna-

tive to the emotionally guarded Richard Nixon.

Kopelson, a physician, historian, and board member of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, details how Eisenhower became coach and mentor to the fast-rising Reagan. They met at least four times, and exchanged letters and phone calls.

Eisenhower was at best lukewarm about Nixon, and apparently thought Reagan could correct the foreign-policy errors of presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

In November 1967, Reagan handily defeated incumbent Gov. Pat Brown, father of current California Gov. Jerry Brown, 58 to 42 percent. Almost from the day he became governor, his operatives began positioning him to one day vie for president.

It was a different political era, when insiders determined political outcomes in the proverbial smoke-filled rooms. In that context, Reagan’s candidacy in 1968 was always a long shot.

Most delegates were required to vote for Nixon on the first ballot. Accord-

ing to Kopelson, scores of delegates informed Reagan’s handlers they were eager to support the charismatic California governor the moment they were free to do so.

Reagan’s strategists believed that if they could just keep Nixon from winning on the first ballot, the momentum would shift and Reagan could capture the nomination.

Eisenhower found himself caught in a bind. Nixon had served as Eisenhower’s vice president, but subsequently lost to JFK in 1960. He’d also lost a race for California governor. Kopelson explains: “Eisenhower said many times, ‘I don’t necessarily think it’s the person who is most qualified who should be the nominee’ — meaning Nixon — ‘but the person who can win’ — ‘meaning, I think, clearly Reagan.

“But with Julie [Nixon] and [grandson] David [Eisenhower] getting married and Nixon flying to Ike to ask for his endorsement, you know, what could he do? So he endorsed Nixon.” □



EISENHOWER



BOOK

Reagan's 1968 Dress Rehearsal: Ike, RFK, and Reagan's Emergence as a World Statesman

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Dr. Gene Kopelson is a cancer physician, a historian and president and board member of the Theodore Roosevelt Association. He also is a Holocaust educator. His past works include myriad writings in the *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal*.



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