

Ronnie Obama: Why Democrats Suddenly Love Reagan
Time.com
October 05, 2011
By [Michael Scherer](#)

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President Reagan poses for photographers following his address to the nation on June 15, 1987.

Democrats just can't get enough of Ronald Reagan these days. He is a role model for President Obama, a liberal policy foil in the tax fight debate and a historical marker for campaign strategists. Reagan even gets applause at Democratic National Committee fundraisers. "There's been a clip floating around lately on television talking about this radical guy who made the simple point that a bus driver should be paying lower tax rates than a millionaire," President Obama said Tuesday night at a money event in St. Louis. "And this rabble-rouser was named Ronald Reagan."

Read that again: Ronald Reagan, rabble-rouser. There is sarcasm, to be sure, but don't be shocked if a variation of that phrase shows up at union rallies or on 2012 Democratic National Convention buttons. The Gipper is now a liberal savior.

The television clip Obama referred to was made by an offshoot of the progressive think tank, The Center for America Progress, to help sell the idea of tax reform that raises rates for the wealthiest Americans.

"Ronald Reagan, father of the Buffett Rule," reads one headline on the organization's website, a claim that should earn a few Pinocchios or at least a half-truth rating from the fact-checking websites. Reagan supported closing loopholes for the wealthy as part of a tax reform process that was revenue neutral, or did not increase the total amount of taxes collected by federal government. Obama and Buffett want to close loopholes that will result in a net increase in taxes. But Reagan was clear: The wealthy should pay a higher tax rate than the working class, and while this generally remains the case, there are a select group of ultra-wealthy investors, including apparently Mitt Romney, who are able to pay less.

But the new-found affection for Reagan has less to do with policy than polish. Back in January, I wrote a [cover story for TIME](#) with Michael Duffy about Obama's long and abiding reverence of Reagan's leadership ability and style. A few weeks after the story came out, journalist Ron Suskind spoke to Obama about Reagan. "He was very comfortable in playing the role of President," Obama told Suskind, as the current President described how he had "internalized the fact that my job is not legislator in chief" and learned that "the symbols and gestures matter as much as what my ideas are."

Behind the scenes, the Reagan mystique in Obama world has only grown stronger since then. As I [reported last month](#), an early summer retreat by senior White House staff focused, in part, on how Obama could model his reelection campaign on Reagan's 1984 effort. Obama's current strategy of flying around the country to optimistically fight for a brighter future for America against the intransigence of Congress also carries echoes of Reagan.

Underlying all this Reagan mythologizing is neither policy nor style. It is a dream that Obama can still be the sort of transformational President that Reagan was—a two-term

transformational President. As former White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs told me in January, "Our hope is the story ends the same way."

In practice, that means that Obama will need to retain a lot of the middle of the road, non-ideological mid-western voters that Reagan captured, the people called Reagan Democrats until 2008, when they became Obama Republicans. Polls show they are no longer in Obama's corner, but Obama is fighting to get them back. And so he has adopted the great communicator. He is running for re-election on the Obama-Reagan ticket. Of course, his partner is not the Reagan of historical fact, but the Reagan of popular memory.

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