The man in the Oval Office

Whether he's the Gipper or a miscast actor, it all comes down to what you know about what he's up to

In the current world of politics, a criterion for determining the distinction between liberals and conservatives has recently emerged. It all comes down to an individual's opinion on our man in the Oval Office, Ronald W. Reagan.

If you are in love with the Gipper, and you think that he is the greatest thing to happen to the presidency since Richard Nixon, then you are a conservative and probably very proud of it. On the other hand, if you think that the country would be much better off if Ronnie had remained in Hollywood making "Bonzo" sequels, then you must be one of those liberals.

Unfortunately, this criterion, though widely-used, is not at all valid. It's actually just a matter of who is aware of what Reagan has been doing and who isn't. If everyone really knew and actually thought about what Reagan has been doing, then all liberals and conservatives would be united in their opposition to his handling of the presidency.

Of course, there have been the widely-publicized mistakes, such as vowing not to bargain with terrorists while secretly selling arms to Iran (a crime for which the Reagan administration is currently imposing sanctions on China). However, there have also been other gems in Reagan's presidential policies that slipped by without receiving as much media attention.

For instance, Reagan has been stretching the assigned function of the executive branch to include interpreting the law as well as enforcing it. In fact, he even has a staff of lawyers whose function is to write legal opinions reinterpreting congressional legislation so that Reagan can use it as a basis for his actions.

In the past, these lawyers have determined that the law limiting the amount of aid that the administration could give to the Contras did not apply to the National Security Council. Now, they are reinterpreting the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty so that it will allow testing of "Star Wars" weapons.

The people who drafted this treaty are still around, and they insist that it was intended to restrict that sort of testing explicitly, but Reagan and his lawyers seem to feel that they know what the intent of the treaty really was.

Last year, despite a presidential veto, Congress passed a law that forced the Reagan administration to impose economic sanctions on South Africa until certain demands were met. If, after a year, the situation hadn't changed, the president was required to recommend new sanctions chosen from a list specified by the law.

Now that the year is up, the administration has decided this law is not binding on Reagan because it doesn't include specific penalties for Reagan not imposing new sanctions. In other words, our president doesn't feel that he has to obey the law unless he will be punished for disobeying. There are probably many pre-schoolers who can agree with that attitude.

In a classic example of using the law for convenience, Reagan's State Department recently declared itself to be a "foreign mission." This was done so that a law which prohibits demonstrations within 500 feet of a foreign embassy, mission or ambassador's house could be used to prevent protestors from disturbing Soviet foreign minister, Edward A. Shevardnaze during his visit. Shevardnaze must have felt right at home since similar restrictions are used for similar reasons in Moscow.

When Reagan doesn't get his way, he does not graciously admit defeat, nor does he work toward a solution using the time-honored techniques of political compromise. Instead, he prefers to simply insult his opposition.

With the Bork nomination doomed to failure, a sulking Reagan made disparaging remarks in which he questioned the intelligence of those members of the Senate Judiciary Committee who opposed Bork. Anyone who read the *New York Times* column, written by Sen. Arlen Specter, entitled "Why I Voted Against Bork" can see that his decision was based on a remarkably intelligent, logical thought process that was not influenced by the clamor of the anti-Bork groups.

Reagan's crack about intelligence was specifically intended for Sen. Terry Sanford, a man who has a law degree from the University of North Carolina and was president of Duke University for 15 years. Reagan, in comparision, graduated with a B.A. in economics from Eureka University in Illinois where he maintained a C average. He has admitted that all he really wanted from school was a diploma and has even been quoted as saying that, "There wasn't a chance in the world that the actual subject matter would be important to me." Based on this academic background, it is obvious that Reagan is extremely well-qualified to evaluate the intelligence of his opponents in Washington.

His latest fiasco was last Thursday's press conference. After seven months of getting Reagan's comments in the form of one-liners shouted while he was boarding his helicopter, the press was finally able to ask the president some detailed questions. Unfortunately, there were no detailed answers.

Under repeated questioning, all Reagan would say was that he wasn't going to say if he would be considering increased taxes while discussing the budget with Congress. One thing he was quick to point out, though, was that Maynard Keynes, celebrated economic theorist, did not have a degree in economics.

After 30 minutes, Reagan refused to take any more questions, and the American public, on the verge of panic after a devasting stock market crash, was left thinking, "Huh? . . . What was that?"

In all fairness, Reagan is good at something. The man delivers great, stirring, emotion-filled speeches. In fact, Reagan was persuaded to enter politics after his last-minute endorsement speech for Barry Goldwater brought in over one million dollars in contributions to the campaign.

But, speeches are merely performances, and Reagan performs well because (to quote "Doonesbury") he is "every bit as good a politician as he was an actor." Unfortunately, that might be the only quality that a candidate needs for an election victory.

However, regardless of whether you are a liberal or a conservative, you have to admit that, to handle the responsibilities of the office, a president needs to have a little bit more.

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