



RONALD REAGAN'S GREATEST LEGACY: DEFENDERS OF FREEDOM

In 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower proclaimed May 1 as "Law Day" and called upon Americans to "remember with pride and vigilantly guard the great heritage of liberty, justice, and equality under the law [that] our forefathers bequeathed to us." On the first Law Day, President Eisenhower urged Americans to "honor not only the principle of the rule of law," but also all "who actively work to preserve our liberties under law."

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of Law Day, paid tribute to "those courageous, far-sighted individuals who two centuries ago had the faith to believe that men and women could live in freedom under law." "In other parts of the world, Reagan noted, "May 1st is used for a different kind of celebration—a forced, unnatural observance of a system that promises a freedom it systematically denies, proclaims justice while practicing tyranny, and uses what it calls law as little more than a thin veneer for the edicts of a totalitarian elite." "We can and should be grateful to God that such is not true in America," he stressed, that here "law remains the cornerstone of the freedom that we've been given. [But] we bear a solemn obligation to preserve it."

Long before he was president or even governor of California, Reagan spoke of that obligation. In March 1961, he declared, "[F]reedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it on to our children in the bloodstream. The only way they can inherit the freedom we have known is if we fight for it, protect it, defend it and then hand it to them with the well thought lessons of how they in their lifetime must do the same. And if you and I don't do this, then you and I may well spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it once was like in America when men were free."

Reagan knew the fight to protect and defend freedom must occur in the courtroom. In fact, it was his response to attacks on his legislative reform efforts by leftist groups that gave rise to the first freedom-based public-interest legal foundation focused on a range of free enterprise, economic, and property rights issues. Of course, since 1968, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation had battled *pro bono* in court to protect employees' legal rights against forced unionism abuses. Reagan, however, saw the need for a liberty-based legal defense group with a broader focus; so, in 1973, with his full support, Pacific Legal Foundation (PLF) opened its doors in Sacramento.

By the time Reagan ended his weekly radio addresses, which he had begun on leaving the governor's mansion, legal groups similar to PLF had spread across the country. In 1979, in his final radio address before he began his campaign for president of the United States, one titled "Miscellaneous and Goodbye," Reagan began, "The first item is, in my opinion, very serious for all of us and another indication of how far we are

straying from the very basics of our system. The Mountain States Legal Foundation has filed a suit with the federal government claiming that the constitutional rights of several states are being violated..."

Today, the liberty-based law movement, which began with the inspired response of Governor Reagan to the threats to the freedom of individual Americans is alive, well, and thriving. More importantly, from the point of view of Reagan's prime directive of defending freedom, that movement's *pro bono* representation of those who could not appear in the nation's courtrooms otherwise has made history. In fact, many of those clients reached the Supreme Court of the United States and there set legal precedents to benefit all Americans.

On Law Day 2013, America recognizes one of the greatest of Reagan's legacies: public-interest legal foundations dedicated to constitutional liberties and the rule of law.

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