

Remarks at a Luncheon Hosted by Artists and Cultural Leaders in MOSCOW
May 31, 1988

As Henry VIII said to each of his six wives, I won't keep you long. [Laughter] But thank you, Vladimir Vasilievich. It's with some humility that I come here today. You here—writers, artists, dramatists, musicians of this vast country—are heirs to the seminal figures in many of the arts as they have developed in the 20th century, Europe and America. I'm thinking of such giants as Kandinski, Stravinsky, Stanislavsky, Dostoyevski, to name a few—men whose vision transformed all of ours.

I've been very impressed with what I've heard just now. For my contribution to this dialog I thought I would deal here briefly with the question whose answer might open up some new insights for all of us. You see, I've been told that many of you were puzzled that a former actor could become the leader of a great nation, particularly the United States. What does acting have to do with politics and statecraft? Whatever possessed the American people to entrust this high office to me? You might feel reassured to know you aren't the first to ask that question. Back in Washington, just about every member of the political opposition has been asking it for the last 8 years, and they're not the first. It's been happening ever since. Almost a quarter of a century ago, I announced that I was going to run for what turned out to be the first public office I ever held, Governor of California. Yes, I had served as president of my union, the Screen Actors Guild. Yes, in that role I'd led a successful strike by the union against the studios. And, yes, I'd campaigned actively for a number of candidates for office, including candidates for President. But I was still known primarily as an actor.

In the movie business, actors often get what we call typecast; that is, the studios come to think of you as playing certain kinds of roles, so those are the kinds of roles they give you. And no matter how hard you try, you just can't get them to think of you in any other way. Well, politics is a little like that, too. So, I've had a lot of time and reason to think about my role not just as a citizen turned politician but as an actor turned politician.

In looking back, I believe that acting did help prepare me for the work I do now. There are two things, two indispensable lessons, that I've taken from my craft into public life. And I hope you won't think it excessively opportune if I use the words of a Soviet filmmaker to explain one of them. He was, after all, one of the world's greatest filmmakers, and so, like so many of your artists, indeed, like so many of you, belongs in a broader sense to all of humanity.

It was during the production of "Ivan the Terrible" when Eisenstein noted that in making a film, or in thinking through any detail of it—which to my mind would include the acting of a part—in his words, "The most important thing is to have the vision. The next is to grasp and hold it. You must see and feel what you are thinking. You must see and grasp it. You must hold and fix it in your memory and senses. And you must do it at once." To grasp and hold a vision, to fix it in your senses—that is the very essence, I believe, of successful leadership not only on the movie set, where I learned about it, but everywhere. And by the way, in my many dealings with him since he became General Secretary, I've found that Mr. Gorbachev has the ability to grasp and hold a vision, and I respect him for that.

The second lesson I carried from acting into public life was more subtle. And let me again refer to a Soviet artist, a poet—again, one of the world's greatest. At the beginning of "Requiem," Anna Akhmatova writes of standing in a line outside a prison when someone in the crowd recognizes her as a well-known poet. She continues, "Then a woman standing behind me, whose lips were blue with cold and who, naturally enough, had never even heard of my name, emerged from that state of torpor common to us all and, putting her lips close to my ear—there everyone spoke in whispers—asked me, 'And could you describe this?' And I answered her, I can." Then something vaguely like

a smile flashed across what once had been her face."

That exchange—"Can you describe this?" "I can"—is at the heart of acting as it is of poetry and of so many of the arts. You get inside a character, a place, and a moment. You come to know the character in that instant not as an abstraction, one of the people, one of the masses, but as a particular person—yearning, hoping, fearing, loving—a face, even what had once been a face, apart from all others; and you convey that knowledge. You describe it, you describe the face. Pretty soon, at least for me, it becomes harder and harder to force any member of humanity into a straitjacket, into some rigid form in which you all expect to fit. In acting, even as you develop an appreciation for what we call the dramatic, you become in a more intimate way less taken with superficial pomp and circumstance, more attentive to the core of the soul—that part of each of us that God holds in the hollow of his hand and into which he breathes the breath of life. And you come to appreciate what another of your poets, Nikolai Gumilev, meant when he wrote that "The eternal entrance to God's paradise is not closed with seven diamond seals. It is a doorway in a wall abandoned long ago—stones, moss, and nothing more."

As I see it, political leadership in a democracy requires seeing past the abstractions and embracing the vast diversity of humanity and doing it with humility, listening as best you can not just to those with high positions but to the cacophonous voices of ordinary people and trusting those millions of people, keeping out of their way, not trying to act the all-wise and all-powerful, not letting government act that way. And the word we have for this is freedom.

In the last few years, freedom for the arts has been expanded in the Soviet Union. Some poems, books, music, and works in other fields that were once banned have been made available to the public; and some of those artists who produced them have been recognized. Two weeks ago, because of the work of the Writers Union, the first step was taken to make the Pasternak home at Peredelkino into a museum. In the meantime, some artists in exile—the stage director Yuri Lubimov, for example—have been permitted to return and to work, and artists who are here have been allowed a greater range.

We in the United States applaud the new thaw in the arts. We hope to see it go further. We hope to see Mikhail Baryshnikov and Slava Rostropovich, artists Mrs. Reagan and I have seen perform in Washington, perform again in Moscow. We hope to see the works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published in the land he loves. And we hope to see a permanent end to restrictions on the creativity of all artists and writers. We want this not just for your sake but for our own. We believe that the greater the freedoms in other countries the more secure both our own freedoms and peace. And we believe that when the arts in any country are free to blossom the lives of all people are richer.

William Faulkner said of poets—although he could have been speaking of any of the arts—it is the poet's privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of our past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man. It can be one of the props, the pillars, to help him endure and prevail. Thank you for having me here today and for sharing your thoughts with me, and God bless you all.

Note: The President spoke at 1:44 p.m. in the dining room at the A. Fadeyev Central House of Men of Letters. He was introduced by Vladimir Vasilievich Karpov, first secretary of the board of the Soviet Writers' Union.

Source: Ronald Reagan: "Remarks at a Luncheon Hosted by Artists and Cultural Leaders in MOSCOW," May 31, 1988. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=35896>.

