

Ronald Reagan's note card collection being published

By Susan Page, USA TODAY

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"When the music of a nation becomes fast, wild & discordant it shows the nation is in confusion." — Chinese Proverb 400 B.C.

* * *

When speechwriter Ken Khachigan sat down with [Ronald Reagan](#) after the 1980 election to draft his first inaugural address, the president-elect pulled out a sheaf of note cards written in his cramped hand of quotes and concepts he wanted to include.

"He had all this stuff he had stored up all these years — all these stories, all these anecdotes," Khachigan recalls. "He had the Reagan library in his own little file system."

Ronald Reagan Library

The Reagan Library found a box of hundreds of note cards on which President Reagan had written things he would use in speeches.

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Hoary jokes. Lines from poems. Stray historical facts. Quotes from the [Founding Fathers](#), famous authors and communist apparatchiks.

When Reagan died, the stacks of cards he had accumulated over half a century were packed in a cardboard box, labeled "RR's desk" and put in storage at the [Ronald Reagan Presidential Library](#) and Museum, only to be rediscovered recently as the library prepared to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Reagan's birth this year.

Edited by historian [Douglas Brinkley](#), a selection is being published Tuesday in *The Notes: Ronald Reagan's Private Collection of Stories and Wisdom*. The cards also are going on display at the [Reagan Library](#) in Simi Valley, Calif.

The book offers a window into the mind of the nation's 40th president. Like the handwritten scripts from his days as a radio commentator in the 1970s — published in *Reagan, In His Own Hand* in 2001 — *The Notes* displays the effort he made behind the scenes to hone his performance as a speechmaker and storyteller driving home a conservative political philosophy.



By Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

Reagan's collection of jokes, facts and quotes offer a window into his mind.

* * *

"If you get up earlier in the morning than your neighbor — work harder — scheme more & stick to the job more closer — stay up later planning to get ahead — you'll leave more money when you die & you'll leave it a lot sooner."

* * *

From his days as a corporate spokesman for GE through his [White House](#) years, Reagan routinely kept a few blank cards tucked in his jacket.

The cards aren't dated, but the stationery has signals indicating when the notes were written: blank cards from the GE years; others with Reagan's name imprinted at the top from his days as governor of California; some emblazoned with White House seals from when he was president.

"If he went out to dinner with somebody in [New York](#) or Sacramento, and in the course of a long dinner, if somebody said a really funny joke or something struck him as humorous or even a political point he thought was salient, he would write it on the note card," Brinkley said.

A card might have 10 items on it, written on both sides.

They are decidedly G-rated: When the punch line of a joke contained even a modest swear word, Reagan would write "h--l" or "d--n."

When he needed an illustrative anecdote and a bit of humor for a speech — and he gave thousands of them over the course of his life — he would leaf through the cards and pluck out some of them, giving "sparkle" to what otherwise might be pedestrian remarks, Brinkley says.

Some of them became familiar parts of his political stump speeches.

Reagan Library researchers have found passages in Reagan's most memorable speeches that are drawn from the cards: a [Winston Churchill](#) quote in the 1964 address that launched Reagan's political career; a joke about paying taxes that appeared in a radio address from the White House in 1983.

* * *

"Of all the men who have died in battle to preserve what we have today 88% wore the uniform of the U.S. Army."

* * *

Reagan's personal library could be the bane of speechwriters who had to confirm a quote or replicate a mathematical calculation.

Through the years, Reagan had told the story of Martin Treptow, a [World War I](#) corporal purportedly buried at [Arlington National Cemetery](#) who died on the front lines in France. On the flyleaf of the diary found on his body, he had written "My Pledge," vowing to persevere as though "the whole struggle depended on me alone."

Reagan wanted to use the story as the dramatic conclusion of his first inaugural address.

The trouble, as Khachigan discovered, was that Treptow was buried in his hometown of Bloomer, Wis., and the details of his diary proved impossible to confirm. Reagan had heard about "My Pledge" in a letter from a friend and written it on a card, but he could no longer locate the letter.

The rhetorical compromise: In the address, Reagan cited the graves of American war heroes buried at Arlington and said "under such a marker" was the body of Martin Treptow. "We are told that on his body was found a diary," Reagan said before relaying the inspirational words.

"If the Reagans' home in Palisades (Calif.) were burning," Brinkley says, "this would be one of the things Reagan would immediately drag out of the house. He carried them with him all over like a carpenter brings their tools. These were the tools for his trade."

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