



*Public Relations & Public Affairs*

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Tim Naftali  
The Atlantic  
600 New Hampshire Ave, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037

SUBJECT: Your Article, "Ronald Reagan's Long-Hidden Racist Conversation  
With Richard Nixon"

DATE OF PUBLICATION: The Atlantic, July 30, 2019

Dear Mr. Naftali,

I read your recent article published in The Atlantic entitled "Ronald Reagan's Long-Hidden Racist Conversation with Richard Nixon". Since I don't know you and am left to speculate on your thought process and motives for using this microcosm in time (approx.. 5 seconds in a 12 minute phone call) to paint a broader negative image of the late President Reagan, I will refrain from addressing that in my comments on your article.

I'm a firm believer in we shouldn't judge those who have come before us, whether they be our parents or our Presidents, by today's standards and values, let alone on one telephone conversation that took place fifty years ago. As a noted historian who is a clinical associate professor of public service at NYU, I would have expected you to add more historical context that probably applied to most, if not all Americans, at the time of this conversation.

Africa has a great heritage. The birthplace of mankind, Africa was being settled by human beings over 12,000 years ago – long before people appeared on several of the world's other continents.

Over the centuries, preceding the birth of Christ, African societies evolved methods of hunting, gathering and social organization. Thereafter came its great kingdoms: the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Kingdom of Mali, with its legendary city of Timbuktu, and other empires that were noted for their scholarship, art, trade and social development.

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The Europeans began colonizing Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Their rule lasted into the early 1960's at which time most of the continent was divided into independent nations.

Africa today has a great, yet unrealized, potential. With its large land mass, its variety of physical features, its broad ranges of minerals and plant life, and most importantly – its people – Africa has the potential to support itself and to make significant international contributions as well.

Unfortunately, rather than understanding and appreciating Africa's great heritage, and more importantly its unrealized potential, much of the American communities' as well as the world's attention had been captured by such calamities as drought, famines and refugee influxes or such political problems as Apartheid and a need for fundamental democratic reforms in South Africa.

In addition, many Americans lack a sense of international historical perspective of what the United States went through in its post-colonial period vis-à-vis what the African nations are going through in their post-colonial period.

Some 80 years after the United States declared and achieved its independence from Great Britain, the United States found itself involved in one of the most bitter, deadly and factionalized civil conflicts with fatality statistics far in excess of any political conflict, to date, on the African continent. Yet today Americans fail to realize that most African nations have been independent less than 75 years...and...at the time of this telephone conversation between Nixon and Reagan, it had only been 20 to 25 years for those African countries who had gained some sense of independence.

We also did not have the access to the volumes of information on our neighbors around the globe that we do today at the click of a computer mouse or the swipe of a finger on a smartphone. National Geographic was probably the only publication that dedicated any substantial media coverage to the African continent and its people with little or no insight on its political environment.

I've shunned the role of spokesperson for the Reagan family as much as others have sought it. I've done so, not out of indifference or timidity, but out of respect for the man, Nancy, Maureen and the rest of the family.

Today, neither you nor I have the time to recreate a blow-by-blow account of the Reagan legacy. Entire books have been written and will continue to be written on this historic figure and what he meant to the world. Some of them on point and others so off the mark they border on fiction.

I am neither an academician nor a historian. I am neither a politician nor a direct blood relative. I was however, a passionate and privileged observer to some of the dramatic episodes, as well as more quiet moments, of the last 25 years of President Ronald Reagan's life.

Mr. Naftali, Ronald Reagan was not a racist! There is a distinct difference between ignorance and a lack of understanding...and...believing one's race is inherently superior to all others!

Over 25 years I witnessed a man who:

- enjoyed a great relationship with his oldest daughter's adopted little girl from Uganda;
- as a father-in-law, taught this kid from Shafter, California that great leaders throughout history are not only able to laugh...they can laugh at themselves...that second only to a good backbone...every great political leader must have a good funny bone;
- had a great relationship with the late President of Mozambique, Samora Machel, who the CIA said the Soviets killed because he was leading his country away from its Marxist-Leninist past;
- as a result of Maureen, enjoyed a similarly strong longstanding relationship with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni who still holds that position today; and
- appointed one of the most talented career foreign service people (Chester Crocker) as the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs from June 9, 1981 to April 21, 1989!

Great leaders don't come along very often, and in many ways, Ronald Reagan was an American Original. There will never be another one quite like him.

As a national and world leader, Ronald Reagan succeeded where countless self-styled wise men have failed because he had a vision for America, he was not afraid to act, he engaged in a dialogue with the American people, and he believed in the good common sense and decency of the American people. When you think about it, this extraordinary success of this otherwise ordinary man from Dixon, Illinois should give us the best reason for hope.

My immediate hope is that you can see your way clear to acknowledge that while by today's standards and values his comments were inappropriate, they regrettably were a reflection of the times more than of the man. I'm confident if he were alive today, he would not make excuses, but would apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Sincerely,

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Cc: Jeffrey Goldberg, Editor in Chief, The Atlantic  
Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute