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An examination of two American presidents, Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, and the leadership qualities both men brought to the nation's highest office. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

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Transcript

Roosevelt & Reagan, Qualities of a President

Every four years, the United States elects a president, spurring Americans to evaluate the kinds of qualities they want in a leader. Qualities like determination, conviction, the ability to persuade and inspire. We're going to take a look at two different Presidents-- Theodore Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan-- and examine how they embodied these qualities.

While many presidents have been effective leaders, Theodore Roosevelt had a special knack for leadership. At 42, he became the youngest president in history after President William McKinley, was felled by an assassin's bullet in 1901. Although he inherited the office, Roosevelt was determined to lay out his own agenda directly to the American people. He called the White House his "Bully Pulpit." At the time, “bully” was slang for "wonderful," and a "pulpit" was a preacher’s platform or lectern.

One item on Roosevelt's agenda was to create a domestic program to combat the rising influence of large corporate trusts, like oil and railroads, which were growing at the expense of small business and laborers. Roosevelt called his program the "Square Deal."

THEODORE ROOSEVELT: The principles for which we stand are the principles of fair play and a square deal for every man and every woman in the United States. A square deal politically, a square deal in matters social and industrial.

ELLIS: As part of his Square Deal, Roosevelt promised to break up trusts and increase government oversight. As this political cartoon depicts, Roosevelt acted on his convictions by breaking up the Northern Securities Company, a railroad trust owned by financier J.P. Morgan, among others.

Decades after Roosevelt's presidency had ended, the nation endured a turbulent period that included the Watergate scandal, a stagnant economy, and a perceived weakness in foreign policy. In hopes of better times, Americans elected another dynamic leader, Ronald Reagan, based in part on his ability to persuade and inspire. Reagan reminded Americans that the United States had always been a great nation. He said that the federal government needed to step back, and let the country be great again.
President RONALD REAGAN: In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.

ELLIS: Reagan forged agreements with Congress to stimulate economic growth, curb inflation, and increase employment. He remained committed to cutting taxes and boosting defense spending, despite criticism from some quarters. Reagan, a former movie actor, earned the nickname "The Great Communicator," because of his ability to connect with and inspire Americans.

REAGAN: The poet called Miss Liberty's torch “the lamp beside the golden door.” Well, that was the entrance to America, and it still is. And now you really know why we're here tonight. The glistening hope of that lamp is still ours. Every promise, every opportunity, is still golden in this land.

ELLIS: Reagan was also adept at humor. During his 1984 re-election campaign, opponents questioned if he was too old to lead the nation, bringing this rejoinder during a nationally televised debate--

REAGAN: I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience.