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# Politics among the redwoods

## Ronald Reagan's Bohemian Grove connection

**G. William Domhoff**

**R**onald Reagan is many things to many people—radio announcer, actor, union leader, rancher, governor, and now President-elect of the United States. But to high-level members of the corporate business community he is just another fellow Bohemian—a member of a unique California social club whose yearly retreat into its redwood grove is a major social event on the calendar of the nation's power elite.

Perhaps the dozens of detailed accounts of Reagan's ascent to the White House that are sure to appear in the next few years should explore this little-known affiliation, unmentioned in Reagan's biography in *Who's Who in America*, for the Bohemian Grove has provided the setting for major events in the political careers of three former Republican Presidents and has played a role in making Reagan known on a first-name basis within the small circles of the social and corporate elites. Several of his Bohemian campmates are likely to be major advisers or officers in the new Administration.

The Bohemian Grove is a 2,700-acre campground in a virgin redwood forest on the meandering Russian River, seventy-five miles north of San Francisco. Owned and operated by the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, it

has been host since the 1890s to a three-weekend respite beginning in the middle of July. Members and their guests number anywhere from 1,500 to 1,900 men on the weekends, but as few as 300 or 400 are in attendance during the week—even most of the corporate rich work during the summer, a considerable change since the more leisurely pace that prevailed before World War II.

Bohemian campers are treated to plays, skits, symphonies, band concerts, lectures, and political commentaries by top entertainers, scholars, musicians, and government officials from the local to the national level. They also trap shoot, canoe, swim, drop by the Grove art gallery, and take guided nature tours into the outer fringe of the mountain forest. But mostly a stay at the Bohemian Grove is a time for relaxation and drinking in the modest tents, lodges, huts, bunk houses, and even tepees fitting unobtrusively into the landscape along two or three unpaved roadways that join the few "developed" acres within the Grove.

Bohemian Grove resembles nothing so much as a summer camp for overgrown Boy Scouts, or maybe a collection of university fraternities displaced to an outdoor setting. Herbert Hoover, who became a Bohemian in 1913 and held forth as the encampments' final speaker every year from 1935 until his death in 1964, once called it "the greatest men's party on Earth." It provides a respite from establishment wars and from conflicts with the various activist groups within the underclasses.

One member in four, approxi-

mately, is a major business executive, director, or lawyer within the big-business community that is outlined for list lovers in the annual *Fortune* line-up of the largest firms. Such reasonably well-known multimillionaires as David Packard of Hewlett-Packard, Ray Kroc of MacDonald's, and America's current richest man, Daniel K. Ludwig, are among the business members. There are celebrity members, too—such well-known but fading entertainers as Art Linkletter, Phil Harris, and Ray Bolger, and such traditional writers as Irving Stone and Herman Wouk.

Then there are the associate members, several hundred strong—lesser mortals on the status ladder, but talented men nonetheless who write the skits, act in the shows, sing in the chorus, design stage sets, play in the band or orchestra, and do the paintings and sculptures that are on sale in the Grove gallery. It costs them much less to be members, and most of them come from the Bay Area around San Francisco.

There are no women in the Bohemian Club, and there are no female employes at the Bohemian Grove. Last October, the Club had to defend its employment discrimination at the Grove before California's Fair Employment and Housing Commission. The proceedings revealed something of the atmosphere at the encampments, giving outsiders an insight into the fabled spirit of Bohemia. Corporate lawyer Del Fuller, secretary of the Club, argued that the presence of women would destroy the "intimacy" of the occasion because women would "distract" the more "flirtatious" of the

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men from the concern with just plain fellowship. He explained that the men like to let their hair down and become "boisterous," and that they would be "inhibited" by the presence of women.

Besides, continued Fuller, the men who have to dress up as women for parts in Bohemian plays would be embarrassed to do so if women were present. Under questioning, Fuller added that he had played the part of a wood nymph in the Club's centennial celebration in 1972, wearing wings and a body stocking.

No more unlikely pair of Bohemians than former liberal Democratic Governor Pat Brown of California, defeated by Reagan in a tough race in 1966, and the conservative editor of *National Review*, William F. Buckley Jr., also testified on behalf of the Club. Brown, who said he had missed only one encampment since becoming a member in 1967, said the presence of women would restrain the men from telling off-color jokes. He praised the Grove gatherings because they gave him the opportunity for close and "very amiable contacts" with men of differing political views.

Buckley testified that "when you enter the Grove, you know you've left something behind. If women were there it would change the nature of the whole experience." His own contribution to the uniqueness of the Grove experience has encompassed several lectures and one harpsichord recital.

**W**hen President-elect Reagan visits this enchanted Grove—he has been a member since 1975 and was a frequent guest before that—he stays at Owl's Nest, one of 130 or so little camps of ten to thirty members in which most of the men gather during their stay. Other campsites have equally strange names—Zack, Stowaway, Woof, Sons of Toil, Cave Man, Mandalay, Toyland, and even Parsonage. Most camps are organized around a small building that serves as a kind of lodge or tavern, often housing a grand piano and an unusual contraption for mixing drinks, and cluttered with photos, drawings, and memorabilia from past encampments. The sleeping quarters are close to the main lodges.

Some camps are noted for special

drinks, brunches, or luncheons. Jungle Camp talks up mint juleps, free for the asking. Halcyon has a three-foot-high martini-maker constructed out of chemical glassware. Poison Oak is remembered for a Bull's Balls Lunch, featuring the testicles from the castrated herds of a central California cattle baron. The specialty at Reagan's camp is a gin-fizz breakfast—about 100 Bohemians from other camps are invited one morning during each encampment for eggs Benedict, gin fizzes, and assorted trimmings.

It is a nice coincidence that Reagan should be a member of a camp named after the owl, for that wise and mysterious bird of the night is, in effect, the totem animal of the Bohemians. Owls with a dizzying variety of expressions peer out from Bohemian stationery, posters, and knickknacks, and appear on the windows of the barroom in the downtown clubhouse. More to the point, each summer retreat begins with a ceremony called the Cremation of

Care, which takes place at the base of a forty-foot Owl Shrine constructed out of poured concrete and made even more resplendent by the mottled forest mosses that cover much of it.

The ceremony is called the Cremation of Care because it involves the burning of an effigy named Dull Care, who symbolizes the burdens and responsibilities these harried Bohemians now wish to shed temporarily. More than 100 Bohemians take part in the ceremony as priests, acolytes, torch bearers, brazier bearers, boatmen, and woodland voices, but despite many flowery speeches they can't get the fire started. Dull Care spits upon their fire, and the perplexed Bohemians must turn to the mighty Owl for advice: "O thou, great symbol of all mortal wisdom, Owl of Bohemia, we do beseech thee, grant us thy counsel," intones the High Priest. An aura of light creates a glow around the Owl's head, and then the big bird reveals its wisdom. The High Priest must light the pyre with the



flame from the Lamp of Fellowship, located conveniently enough on the "Altar of Bohemia" at the base of the shrine.

This extravaganza, whether its participants are fully aware of the fact or not, is an *ersatz* tribal initiation, and the "function" of the ceremony, as sociologists would have it, is to create a sense of cohesion and solidarity among the assembled faithful. The Bohemians try hard to become à Brotherhood; to the degree that they succeed, they may make politics and policy discussion in other settings somewhat easier. Members of an exclusive in-group, social psychologists tell us, have a tendency to develop common attitudes and to be disposed toward compromise on potentially divisive issues.

Reagan's fellow Owls at the Nest are a group to be reckoned with in the corporate world. Only a few other camps can claim the concentration of corporate power that resides in this twenty-two-person campsite. They include the chairmen or presidents of United Airlines, United California Bank, Dart Industries, Carter-Hawley-Hale Stores, Dean Witter Reynolds & Co., and Pauley Petroleum, along with retired chieftains from Pacific Telephone, General Dynamics, and United Airlines. And, of course, several of these campmates sit on each other's boards of directors and on many other boards as well.

From a Reagan-watcher's point of view, Justin Dart of Dart Industries is the most important member of the camp, for he is probably Reagan's closest friend and political sponsor within the business establishment. No stranger to the Grove, Dart has been a Bohemian since 1951, and he has played a central role through the years in introducing Reagan to other business leaders, whether Bohemians or not.

Mandalay Camp, perched on the hillside about 100 feet above the Grove floor and housed in beautiful redwood buildings whose sleeping quarters are called Condemned Row, is one of the few camps that tops Owl's Nest in overall corporate connections. However, the chairmen and presidents it boasts from General Electric, Bankers Trust, Bank of America, and Utah Mining and Construction (now merged with General Electric) have retired from their offices in the past five or six years, so Mandalay is no longer the unequivocal Number One it used to be. Nonetheless, there are still Stephen D. Bechtel Jr., chairman of Bechtel Construction, Richard P. Cooley, chairman of Wells Fargo Bank, and Jack K. Horton, chairman of Southern California Edison, among others.

Two Reagan intimates also reside at Mandalay, which is known among Bohemians for its gin-and-lemon-juice drink, its Welsh Rarebit dinners, and

plush furnishings well beyond what other camps have to offer. One of these friends is lawyer William French Smith of the Los Angeles firm of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher. The other is George P. Shultz, vice chairman of Bechtel Construction Company and a secretary of both labor and treasury during the Nixon Administration.

Smith, who along with Dart is Reagan's closest social friend with wide connections throughout the entire range of the power elite, is a quintessential interlocking overlayer. He serves as a director of Pacific Lighting, Pacific Telephone, Pacific Mutual Life, and Jorgensen Steel, but also finds time to be a regent of the University of California, a member of the executive committee of the California Roundtable, and a member of the advisory board for the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University, from which Reagan will draw several foreign policy advisers. Shultz, who became a top Reagan adviser only after the Republican convention, is somewhat more modest in his affiliations, serving as a director of Morgan Guaranty Trust, Sears Roebuck & Co., the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and that favorite *bete noire* of Reagan's ultra-right supporters, the Council on Foreign Relations, which has about thirty-five members in common with the Bohemian Club.

Another prominent Republican at Mandalay who came to be a Reagan adviser is former President Gerald R. Ford. A close friend of Leonard K. Firestone of the tire manufacturing fortune, Ford was Firestone's guest at Mandalay several times before becoming a member of the Bohemian Club in 1977.

**H**ill Billies is another camp with a strong core of business executives, and it is the camp of the Vice President-elect of the United States, George Bush. The corporate parallels between the Bush and Reagan camps are instructive. Reagan rubs shoulders with the chairman of United Airlines, but Bush can lay claim to being a chum of the president of Eastern Airlines. Reagan's camp has the chair of United California Bank.



but the Hill Billies include among their twenty-three members the president of the Bank of America. The president of Dean Witter Reynolds may be at Owl's Nest, but the first vice president of Blyth Eastman Dillon is under the Hill Billies' tent. When it comes to overall corporate connections, however, Hill Billies seems to have the edge, for it houses executives and directors from General Motors, Southern Pacific, Westinghouse Electric, B.F. Goodrich, Morgan Guaranty Trust, Mutual Life Insurance of New York, Superior Oil, and Metromedia.

One other member of Hill Billies, aside from Bush, recently appeared in the news: Alden W. Clausen, president of the Bank of America, was nominated by Jimmy Carter to be the next head of the World Bank. According to press reports, Carter's aides approached George P. Shultz to clear Clausen's acceptability should Reagan win the forthcoming election. Reagan gave his approval, but it is not recorded whether he was chagrined to learn from a member of Mandalay that someone from Hill Billies had gained Carter's nod instead of one of his fellow Owls.

The guest list of about 400 for each year's retreat only adds to the impression that the Grove is a playground for the powerful. Among the guests at Owl's Nest in 1980, for example, was Charles F. Luce, chairman of Consolidated Edison of New York, hosted by Edward Carlson, chairman of United Airlines. Also at Owl's Nest was William E. Simon, former Secretary of the Treasury and now a Reagan adviser, invited by Justin Dart. Guests at Mandalay included Donald M. Kendall, chairman of Pepsico and a Nixon intimate; Reginald Jones, chairman of General Electric and an adviser to Carter, and Walter B. Wriston, chairman of Citicorp and an adviser to Reagan. David Rockefeller, chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank, stayed at Stowaway as a guest of William A. Hewitt, chairman of Deere & Co. Willard C. Butcher, president of the same Chase Manhattan, was at Cave Man with John E. Swearingen, chairman of Standard Oil of Indiana. Robert D. Stuart Jr., chairman of Quaker Oats, was at the Isles of Aves with Reagan adviser Caspar Weinberger, a vice

president at Bechtel Corporation and a director of Quaker Oats.

Simon at Owl's Nest and Wriston at Mandalay were not the only Reagan advisers on the 1980 guest list. Campaign chairman William Casey, a Wall Street lawyer, was staying at the Parsonage, a guest of Darrell M. Trent, himself an academic adviser to Reagan. Senator Paul D. Laxalt, at one point in charge of keeping Reagan from saying anything off the cuff, dropped in at Mandalay as the guest of a retired Anheuser-Busch executive, John Flanigan. Jack Kemp, the tax-cutting member of Congress who urged

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## Big boys hang out at the Hill Billies'

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Reagan to appeal to blue-collar workers in the North, was at Toyland, the guest of George Lenczowski, a political scientist of the University of California, Berkeley, who also serves as an adviser to a Reagan-oriented think tank, the American Enterprise Institute.

Although Republican dignitaries usually outnumber Democrats at the Grove, they do not necessarily outrank them, especially when there is a Democratic administration. Secretary of the Treasury G. William Miller was a guest in 1979, staying at Mandalay courtesy of Edmund W. Littlefield, retired chairman of Utah Mining and Construction. Sol Linowitz, Carter's top negotiator on the Panama Canal Treaty and the Israel-Egypt talks, also attended, camping at Wayside Log with Glenn T. Seaborg, former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. In 1980, the Secretary of Energy, Charles W. Duncan, was in residence at Lost Angels, the camp of the Los Angeles branch of the power elite. He was the guest of the only Bohemian in Carter's Cabinet, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown.

**H**ow much does all this matter? What difference does it make that a socially chummy corporate community likes to do some

drinking and joking with lots of Republicans and a few Democrats in rustic little campsites in the California redwoods? After all, the official motto of the club is "weaving spiders come not here," and most members agree that 80 per cent of those in attendance are so overwhelmed by the fine food, strong drink, and sterling entertainment that they couldn't remember the details of a new policy or a diabolical conspiracy from one day to the next even if they had tried to plan one. The Bohemian Grove is not a place of power in the sense of attempting to formulate new policies. Corporate board rooms, charitable foundations, and such discussion groups as the Conference Board, Committee for Economic Development, Business Council, Business Roundtable, and, yes, even the Council on Foreign Relations, are the institutional settings for those kinds of activities.

But if the Bohemian Grove is not a place of power, it is nonetheless a place where powerful people congregate, and as such it has provided the setting for new developments in Republican politics at the Presidential level ever since 1927, when Herbert Hoover was sitting by his tent in Cave Man camp just as President Calvin Coolidge made his cryptic announcement, "I do not choose to run for President in 1928." And it was then that the Hoover campaign began. "Within an hour," Hoover wrote in his memoirs, "a hundred men—publishers, editors, public officials, and others from all over the country who were at the Grove—came to my camp demanding that I announce my candidacy."

Dwight D. Eisenhower made what is thought to be his first general pitch to the Republican establishment with a speech at the Grove in 1950, and then became an honorary member in the same year. It was a short speech, delivered without notes, and it drew applause when Ike declared he didn't see why someone who wouldn't sign a loyalty oath should have the right to teach in a state university.

Before the talk, Eisenhower had lunch at Cave Man with Herbert Hoover and his campmates, most of whom supported even more conservative candidates than Eisenhower. Among those present as a guest was Richard Nixon, who had to wait until

1953, after he was Vice President, to become a Bohemian and a Cave Man. Nixon's memoirs suggest that a serious political discussion took place at Cave Man after the Eisenhower speech:

"After Eisenhower's speech we went back to Cave Man Camp and sat around the campfire appraising it. Everyone liked Eisenhower, but the feeling was that he had a long way to go before he would have the experience, the depth, and the understanding to be President. But it struck me forcibly that Eisenhower's personality and personal mystique had deeply impressed the skeptical and critical Cave Man audience."

Nixon himself launched his first successful Presidential campaign at the 1967 encampment by means of a Lakeside talk not far from the Owl Shrine.

He called this talk "the speech that gave me the most pleasure and satisfaction of my political career"—and one that "in many important ways marked the first milestone on my road to the Presidency . . . an unparalleled opportunity to reach some of the most important and influential men, not just from California, but from across the country." The speech was important because it unveiled a "new" Nixon to the

corporate establishment, a Nixon who had decided to take the high road and rise above his usual anti-communist harangues. His new tack was what he called a "sophisticated" hard line, and apparently it met with approval from the assembled Bohemians.

The Grove also was helpful to Nixon in another way in 1967, for it was there that he and Reagan made a deal calling for Nixon to go first in Republican primaries against the more moderate opposition, with Reagan jumping in only if Nixon faltered. The ubiquitous William F. Buckley Jr. is the source of this story, but Nixon acknowledges in his memoirs that he and Reagan had a "candid discussion of the political situation as we sat outdoors on a bench under one of the giant redwoods."

Little is known about Presidential politics in the Bohemian Grove in the 1970s. Reagan made a speech there in 1974, and Ford made a few remarks on more than one occasion, but the memoirs, off-the-record interviews, and now-it-can-be-told stories that provide such information have yet to appear. That things probably haven't changed, however, is suggested by the following memo from the files of a prominent

Bohemian and corporate leader who has been active in Republican politics for a great many years. The date of the memo is February 25, 1975. It is addressed to the "Management Committee" of his firm, and the "subject" is Senator Howard Baker:

"Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee is very interested in coming to the Bohemian Grove this summer as my guest. He is a very serious potential candidate for the Presidency in 1976 and has been well received throughout the country. Any further details you may wish I will answer orally.

"I believe the guest fee is \$300, his charges at the Club would probably be around \$100, and additional charges at the Encampment would probably be a maximum of \$100. I would not anticipate that the total expenses of the Senator would exceed the sum of \$500.

"I have discussed this with Mr.— and I would appreciate your immediate response as to whether you consider this a worthwhile reimbursable expense, because I must get back to the Bohemian Club immediately."

The record does not indicate what the firm thought of this idea, so there is no implication that Senator Baker had a free ride to the Grove. In any event, last-minute political business kept him from attending in 1975, and his visit was postponed until the next year. But it is the sentiment of the memo that is of interest: Entertaining a Republican Presidential candidate at the Bohemian Grove is viewed by at least one corporate leader as a business expense.

**I**t seems worthwhile to keep an eye out for the Bohemian Connection in understanding both the rise of Ronald Reagan and his forthcoming Presidency, for the Bohemian Grove provides an ideal setting for informal politics, a place to take an off-the-record look at potential candidates and advisers and to gain a first-hand impression of a person's style and personality.

And if George P. Shultz, William French Smith, Caspar Weinberger, and a few other of the many Bohemians who supported Reagan end up in his new Administration, the only question will be whether to hold the July Cabinet meetings at Mandalay, Hill Billies, or Owl's Nest.

