

# The Reagans at Sunnylands

For two decades, President Ronald and Nancy Reagan celebrated New Year's in Rancho Mirage as houseguests of Walter and Leonore Annenberg.

JANICE KLEINSCHMIDT / NOVEMBER 30, 2021 / CURRENT PSL, HISTORY



Ronald Reagan, Walter Annenberg, and professional golfer Tom Watson play at Sunnylands.  
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Even seated at a desk and with an American flag behind his right shoulder, President Ronald Reagan looked casual signing the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement on Jan. 2, 1988. Wearing a blue Lacoste cardigan over a white shirt and no tie, he had just spoken with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. After affixing his signature to two copies of the book-sized document, Reagan glanced at his watch and said, "I guess we're due at lunch, aren't we?"

The president was not in his Oval Office or, for that matter, anywhere near Washington, D.C. He was using publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg's home office in Rancho Mirage. Posing for a post-signing photograph with Reagan, Annenberg wore green slacks and a gold cardigan over a yellow shirt — an outfit he was known to wear on his estate golf course. In all likelihood, the two men had played golf that morning and would be heading back out for more.



Nancy and Ronald Reagan found Sunnylands a place to unwind and relax.

Throughout Reagan's two presidential terms, he and his wife, Nancy, spent New Year's holidays at Sunnylands as houseguests of Walter and Leonore Annenberg, bringing presidential pomp and circumstance to the desert. The five-day-long "tradition," in fact, began in 1975 when Reagan was governor of California and continued until 1994, the year the then-former president announced he had Alzheimer's disease.

Daily diaries for the president show that he and Nancy typically arrived at Sunnylands in the afternoon Dec. 29 and departed in the morning Jan. 2. However, on the evening of the trade-agreement signing, the Reagans and Annenbergs attended the opening of the Bob Hope Cultural Center (now McCallum Theatre) in Palm Desert. Five minutes before midnight, Reagan called the White House operator, likely for a wakeup call, as he and the first lady departed Sunnylands at 9:30 a.m. on Jan. 3 and arrived on the White House South Lawn at 4:37 p.m.

Most years, the Reagans stayed at Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles before and after their desert visits. About 15 minutes after Air Force One landed in Palm Springs, they took off in a Marine One helicopter to the lawn of their Rancho Mirage hosts.

The Annenbergs hosted other overnight guests for New Year's celebrations but kept the Reagans for themselves when the year had three nights left. Michael Comerford, Sunnylands house manager from 1974 until Leonore's death in 2009, recalls that, during the intimate dinners on Jan. 29, "Mrs. Annenberg filled them in on who was coming for the weekend. Then, on the 30th, the other houseguests arrived in time for lunch."



The Annenbergs welcome the Reagans on Dec. 30, 1981, with a cake replica of the White House.

On the evening of Jan. 30, the Annenbergs and their distinguished visitors motorcaded to Eldorado Country Club for a private dinner co-hosted by Earle and Marion Jorgensen and William and Betty Wilson — couples with whom the Reagans had long been friends. Successful businessmen, Earle Jorgensen and William Wilson became part of the president's "kitchen cabinet" of informal advisors. In 1981, Reagan appointed Wilson as envoy to the Holy See and in 1984 as ambassador to the Vatican.





Walter Annenberg and Ronald Reagan were great friends and golf buddies.

Dec. 31 marked a big day at Sunnylands but began casually, with guests receiving room-service breakfast based on their requests made the prior evening. The Reagans always stayed in the Yellow Room. "The Yellow Room," Comerford explains, "was allotted to the most important guests because it was airy and bright."

The Annenbergs provided houseguests with a "calendar of events" that offered options to play golf, football, tennis, and backgammon. "[Reagan] golfed every morning, came in for lunch, and then went back for another nine holes in the afternoon," Comerford recounts. "It was not competitive; he was there for relaxation and recreation."

The president and first lady also stretched out on chaises and played backgammon with other houseguests. "He was very personable — easy to get along with and like," Comerford says. "She was very warm and nice. There were media reports that she and Mrs. Annenberg didn't get along, but that was totally untrue."



Ronald Reagan eyes his golf ball while Walter Annenberg sits behind the wheel of their cart.



Ronald Reagan drives over a water hazard on the Annenbergs' golf course.



Among golfers at Sunnylands were Walter Annenberg, Ronald Reagan, professional golfer Lee Trevino, and Secretary of State George Shultz.

In '82 and '83, the Reagans made off-property appearances in the late afternoon of New Year's Eve at Rancho Las Palmas Resort, where they hosted a party for members of the press corps traveling with them.

Sunnylands' main event, a lavish New Year's Eve dinner, began at 9 p.m. The Reagans made their grand entrance after guests had assembled for cocktails at 8:15 p.m. "There was a 'ceremony' when the Reagans arrived at cocktail hour," Comerford reports. "They played 'Hail to the Chief,' and everybody stood up and applauded. Then, a waiter served them their drinks.

"[Reagan] dressed very casual [at Sunnylands], except in the evening he wore a tux," he adds. "He was very jovial at dinner and told wonderful stories."

After dinner, guests danced to music of the Tony Rose Orchestra. "All the furniture was moved out of the atrium and put in a storage van in the gardens area," Comerford says of the process to make space for dining and dancing.

"The first dance was just the Reagans. They were very good dancers. It was like watching something in slow motion. Then he danced with Mrs. Annenberg and she danced with Mr. Annenberg. Then, other guests came onto the dance floor and they would change partners."

Certainly the Reagans had many partners from which to choose. In the 1980s, the dinner-guest lists hit around 90. The Annenbergs made it a practice to seat couples at different tables (typically tables of 10), alternating men and women around each. One year, the president sat next to Walter at one table and Nancy sat next to Leonore at another table; the following year, they switched places.

Like the Reagans, many of the dinner guests attended regularly. Celebrities included Bob Hope, Jimmy Stewart, Frank Sinatra, Kirk Douglas, Dinah Shore, Sidney Sheldon, Merv Griffin, Eva Gabor, and John Gavin. Other prominent names on guest lists were Malcolm Forbes, Alfred Bloomingdale, Stanton Avery, and multiple ambassadors and judges. (In 1981, Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor attended.)





Leonore Annenberg dances with Ronald Reagan and Walter Annenberg dances with Nancy Reagan.

Among the political echelon were Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of the Interior William Clark Jr., Attorney General William French Smith, Senator Paul Laxalt, National Security Adviser Colin Powell (in 1988), Secretary of State Alexander Haig (in 1981), and the latter's predecessor, George Shultz. Shultz, in fact, never missed a year from 1982 through 1992 and was seated at one of the tables with Ronald or Nancy Reagan.



The Reagans celebrate New Year's Eve at Sunnylands.

"Shultz and Reagan were buddy-buddy," Comerford says. They often played golf together on the Sunnylands course. A scorecard from a round they played with PGA professionals Tom Watson and Lee Trevino shows Shultz edged out his boss, with a score of 77 versus the president's 98. Watson and Trevino came in with scores of 64 and 69, respectively, on a course with a par of 73. In that game, Reagan never exceeded more than two over par, whereas the secretary shot under par on three holes.

The 1980 guest list is notable for this one-time entry: "President-elect and Mrs. Ronald Reagan." The year 1989 was notable for the end of an era as commemorated on gifts to attendees: brass paperweights into which were carved the presidential seal and "The Reagan Years."

On his entryway table, Comerford displays his paperweight, as well as other memorabilia related to Reagan, such as a photograph of himself flanked by the Reagans and signed by both of them "with our great appreciation & warm regard" and a baseball autographed by Reagan.

"He once asked me what I liked," Comerford says. "I told him, 'I am addicted to baseball.' He said, 'The next time I come, I have something for you.' He brought this baseball."

For the most part, Reagan refrained from spending much time communicating with people beyond the gates of Sunnylands during his stays. When he did make or take official phone calls, he limited them to a few minutes. On Dec. 31, 1981, he placed a call to William and Mae Berlin of Greenwood, Missouri, to congratulate them on their 60th anniversary. In 1983, he called former President Richard Nixon; at seven minutes, it was one of the longest phone calls recorded on the president's daily diary for Sunnylands.

Though the nation's president is never "off the clock," Reagan took advantage of the time he had each year of his terms in office to socialize with friends in a place steeped in beauty.



A Marine One helicopter departs Sunnylands to take Ronald and Nancy Reagan to Air Force One in Palm Springs after their New Year's holiday stay in Rancho Mirage.



## **SECURING THE POTUS**

Though Sunnylands was a walled, private estate of Ronald and Nancy Reagan's close friends who also held official U.S. posts — Walter Annenberg as ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1969 to 1974 and Leonore Annenberg as chief of protocol from 1981 to 1982 — the White House sent an advance detail to Rancho Mirage a couple of weeks before the president and first lady's scheduled visit.

"They walked all through the house," says Michael Comerford, who, as Sunnylands' house manager, was privy to such activity. "The Secret Service were very good and easy to work with, and they gave us lapel pins to identify who could get near the president."

During the Reagans' stay, three large trailers were installed on the grounds.

"One was for White House Communications, one for Secret Service, and one for sharpshooters with night-vision goggles. There were about eight Secret Service agents per shift and about six White House Communications staffers. I don't know how many sharpshooters there were, because they came after dark and stayed outside."

During the New Year's Eve dinner parties, Comerford says, "There were servers for each table, and they lined up in the gallery. There were two Secret Service agents on duty in the service area while we picked up the food, watching everything that was served."

Comerford recalls one year when a woman tried to crash the party as guests were arriving. Though she failed to get past the front door, the Reagans were forced to remain sequestered in their guest room while Secret Service dogs sniffed for anything that she may have planted in the property. Nothing was found, but the incident delayed the president and first lady's entrance to the celebration by a half-hour.

Another year, Nancy's New Year's Eve gown was forgotten in the transfer from Air Force One to the Marine One helicopter.

"She was frantic," Comerford recalls. "She told me, 'Michael, go to the plane and get my dress.' I knew I could not go near Air Force One, which was guarded by Secret Service and Marines from Twentynine Palms. So I asked Secret Service, who found it and brought it. When I took it to her, she said, 'Thank you very much.' I said, 'Mrs. Reagan, you should really thank the Secret Service. I played very little role in getting it to you.'"



**Sunnylands commemorates the Reagan years.**

On a wall in his office, Comerford has framed certificates of appreciation. One reads, "Presented to Michael Comerford, House Manager, in special recognition of your efforts and superior contributions to the law enforcement responsibilities of the United States Secret Service." Another, from the White House Communications Agency, expresses gratitude "for the outstanding manner in which you provided support to the President of the United States during his visit." It goes on to say, "Your unique abilities, coupled with your superb attitude and professionalism, enabled our agency to provide critical communications for the President and the White House staff."- *Janice Kleinschmidt*

