Cowboy images remain a staple of American political discourse. This lesson asks students to analyze two of President Ronald Reagan framed his public image using frontier rhetoric and images to employed those archetypes in two of his most notable speeches—“The City on the Hill” speech of 1974 and his presidential Farewell Address of 1989.
Ronald Reagan and the Cowboy Archetype

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Goals:

- Remind students of the power of mythological archetypes
- Remind students that these archetypes are used widely in popular culture and politics today (they are not oldie moldie things of the past)
- Analyze political speeches from a mythological perspective
- Give students the tools to view popular culture/political rhetoric through the lens of myth
Materials

- Ronald Reagan’s “City on a Hill” speech from 1974
- Ronald Reagan’s Farewell address
- Power point slides
- Questions for discussion
Ronald Reagan

FROM DODGE CITY TO TOMBSTONE...

HIS GUNS WERE THE ONLY LAW!

RONALD REAGAN

LAW and ORDER

Color by Technicolor

DOROTHY MALONE
ALEX NICOL
PRESTON FOSTER
RUTH HAMPTON
Running for Governor of California in 1966
REAGAN
COUNTRY ’84
“You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.

This was true of those who pioneered the great wilderness in the beginning of this country, as it is also true of those later immigrants who were willing to leave the land of their birth and come to a land where even the language was unknown to them. Call it chauvinistic, but our heritage does set us apart.”

-Reagan’s “Shining City on a Hill” speech, 1974
• How did Ronald Reagan exploit the cowboy myth?
• What other myths did Reagan use in his political rhetoric?
• How did Ronald Reagan use the idea of Manifest Destiny?
• What aspects of Turner’s Thesis can be identified in Reagan’s rhetoric?
• What did Reagan himself say about the teaching of American History?
Reagan’s Farewell Address

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiSyGi7IQvk
Other ideas I didn’t have time to put into the presentation!

- “The ghostly visitor” story (another great mythic story)
- Other presidents as cowboys, comparing Teddy Roosevelt, Obama, etc.
- Other “cowboy” activities such as comparing the Wounded Knee massacre to the El Mozote and other massacres in Central America
- The short stories of Annie Proulx
- Films like “Stagecoach”
- Student research projects/presentations