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Reagan's America, America's Reagan

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An American Life. By Ronald Reagan. *Simon and Schuster. 748 pp. $24.95.*

President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime. By Lou Cannon. *Simon and Schuster.*

First, a confessional note. Like many other Americans, I originally became aware of Ronald Reagan as a political figure during the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964. Reagan's nationally televised speech near the end of the campaign was a cautionary moment. (Reagan had previously been known to those like me only as a secondary screen actor, and we knew so little about him that we thought his name was pronounced *Ree*gan.) His speech–The Speech, as it came to be known–filled me with political dread. To that time, the Goldwater movement, for all the sectarian enthusiasm it engendered, had seemed an ephemeral phenomenon, the candidate himself an unimposing and altogether lightweight figure. I never doubted that Lyndon Johnson would win the election, and I looked forward, in the wake of the anticipated landslide, to the early demise of "movement conservatism." (If I was not truly a liberal–and friends who were firmly insisted on the point–I was even less what Goldwater partisans defined as a conservative.)

But Reagan scared me. He was Goldwater with luminous intensity, with charismatic appeal. And he was, so far as I could see, equally simple–minded. The Speech–with its references to the threat of an American descent into "the ant heap of totalitarianism" and its anticipation, given further liberal successes, of "a thousand years of darkness"–seemed to me then (and now) so overinflated, so oblivious to the realities of American political life, as to be beneath serious notice. If attention needed to be paid, it was to the speaker's impact, not to the content of what he had to say.

Sixteen years later I voted, with some trepidation, for Ronald Reagan for President. Four years after that, with no reservation at all, I voted for his reelection. And now that he is well into retirement, I look back on his presidency as the most significant–and most successful–of any since that of Franklin Roosevelt.

One individual's changing of his mind about Ronald Reagan, and about the politics he represented, makes no particular difference. Its explanation could be entirely personal. But as the electoral history of our recent past suggests, millions of Americans went through a similar change of mind. That does make a difference, and it cannot be reduced to idiosyncratic terms. If we are to understand contemporary American political history, we need to understand how a figure and a movement very much on the margin of national politics wound up at its vital center. The appearance during the last year of Reagan's autobiography and of journalist Lou Cannon's detailed study of Reagan's presidency offers an occasion for just such an attempt at understanding.

II

Of the two books, Reagan's is the thinner by any measure. It is a disappointment in many ways. It is not clear, to begin with, who actually wrote it. The book offers itself as an autobiography, and the tone is unmistakably Reagan's own, but the autobiographer himself notes in the acknowledgements that "Robert Lindsey, a talented writer, was with me every step of the way. Bob has a way with words that has rightly earned him a reputation as one of our country's most gifted authors." In translation that passage suggests that Reagan spent a lot of time sharing anecdotes and imparting impressions to his collaborator, and then left him to fill in the record of his life and career. That, at least, is the way the book reads. If it does not get us very far inside the personality of its subject, that, one suspects, is because the subject's interior is closed to virtually everyone, including the subject himself.

As for a public record of the Reagan presidency, the book is one step short of uselessness. Its record of political events skates along on the surface, offering little in the way of serious or detailed discussion. Its one ostensible value in that regard is to offer generous excerpts from the Reagan diaries, but these for the most part offer not much more than might be garnered from Associated Press summaries of any given day's highlights, except that that they reflect an Administration slant. Particularly disappointing–and tedious–are the accounts of relationships with the Soviet Union. Here we get long, undigested, and largely uninterpreted exchanges of formal (and pseudo–informal) letters between Washington and Moscow, the presence of which is presumably meant to compensate the reader for the absence of informative analysis.

Yet *An American Life* is not, for all that, entirely without value. For all Reagan's lack of introspection, the book offers suggestive clues to his personality (along with flashes of the political shrewdness that made him so successful a governor and President), and even about the public record, concerning which it is in so many ways disappointing, it occasionally yields insights (in part by what it skimps or passes over entirely). The book's very superficiality, in fact, is in odd ways instructive. Reagan's presidency was better–far better–than is Reagan's book, but around both there lingers a curious air of ambiguity. Enemies of Reagan were baffled and frustrated by his shrewd intuitive hold on the American psyche, even as his friends were confounded by his gaps in knowledge and sometimes appalling naivetea. There is, this book reminds us in its waverings between the beguiling and the soporific, nothing quite so complicated as a simple man.

Lou Cannon has made a heroic effort to penetrate the Reagan mystery. He has made a career, going back to Reagan's California years, of covering his subject, and for this, his third and most ambitious book on Reagan, he has done extensive research and conducted hundreds of interviews. The result is a very good bad book.

It is good because of its diligence, its seriousness of purpose, its dogged effort to be fair–at least in personal terms–to its subject. For Cannon, one gets the sense, Reagan is in political terms a man from Mars, but one to whom he is determined, however great the effort, to do justice.

But for all its show of evenhandedness, Cannon's book is essentially a brief for the political prosecution. He wants to understand his subject–and like everyone else, he can't help liking him–but he frequently betrays, in the guise of a presumed critique of political process under Reagan, an ideological disdain for Reaganism. The early reviews of the book revealed its bias. Opponents of Reagan loved it–precisely because its show of fairness gave it credibility–while Reaganites, even when conceding its effort to give their hero his due, recognized its essential air of condescension toward the former President. Cannon is not without admiration for Reagan or recognition of his accomplishments, but the net impression he leaves is of a President in over his head and an Administration that failed more than it succeeded. Cannon's conflicted views toward his subject produce odd strains in his analysis and prose. In summary judgment, he is reduced to vaguely disapproving gibberish.

On January 20, 1989, after 2,923 days in the presidency, Reagan flew off without regrets into the California sunset. He left office with a higher public approval rating than any other modern president. Americans felt comfortable with him, if sometimes puzzled by the inconsistencies and paradoxes of the man and his administration. After he was gone, even Americans who had ardently supported Reagan began to wonder if they had understood him as well as they believed. As the Cold War ended and domestic prosperity faded, a debate began about Reagan's conflicting legacies. It is also a debate about the essence and direction of America.

Cannon's analysis is without ballast because it has no historical moorings. One learns from *The Role of a Lifetime* a great many particular things, but is provided no context within which to make more than random sense of those things. Readers will come away from the book unsatisfied because nothing in it gives them a way to render sensible judgment, one way or another, on the conclusions it reaches.

Both these books, in the end, are better on personality than policy. We learn from them far more–certainly more that is dependable–about Reagan the man than about Reagan the President. Best then, perhaps, to start there.

III

The most important fact about Ronald Reagan is that he had the healthiest ego of any President in memory. His only possible competitors on that point are Dwight Eisenhower and Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan had neither Ike's volatile temper nor FDR's tendencies to deviousness for its own sake or flashes of cruelty toward those closest to him. Reagan's was a remarkably well–integrated personality. The nearest thing one finds to a psychological disability in him is his emotional reserve, the psychic distance he maintained toward those around him. As he himself concedes, discussing his childhood difficulty in making close friends, "I think this reluctance to get close to people never left me completely. I've never had trouble making friends, but I've been inclined to hold back a little of myself, reserving it for myself." One suspects that Reagan's difficulties with his children stemmed as much from that habit of reserve as anything else. He loved them, but he could not give as much of himself to them as their various testimonies indicate they so desperately desired. Cannon's interviews with Reagan's friends and associates turned up the same pattern. Those who loved and served him all ran up sooner or later against an impenetrable emotional barrier. He liked almost everyone, but gave of himself fully to virtually no one. He was loyal to his associates and stubbornly defended those under attack, but once they were gone from his daily circle of attention, it was as if they had dropped through a memory hole.

Yet Reagan's instinct to psychic withdrawal is a tendency so widely reported among leaders that it is likely essential to leadership itself. Those upon whom many depend need to husband their emotional reserves, not dissipate them in private encounters. Charismatic leadership often pays the price, and exacts the cost, of absence of personal intimacy.

And in any case Reagan, unlike, say, an FDR, did not withhold himself completely. He had, and has, Nancy. *An American Life* has to be the most uxorious memoir in American public letters. From the dedication onwards ("To Nancy. She will always be my First Lady. I cannot imagine life without her."), the book is full of encomiums to Nancy Reagan so frequent and so effusive they would embarrass except for their transparent sincerity. One envies both of the Reagans their manifest and quite extraordinary fulfillment in each other. (Though it is worth noting that even Nancy occasionally comes up against Reagan's emotional wall: "He lets me come closer than anyone else, but there are times when even I feel that barrier.") Reagan found in his wife a pre–feminist willingness to sacrifice her career to marriage and family as well as a fierce, almost obsessive, protectiveness toward what she perceived as his best interests. For his part, he tendered her total devotion and chivalric courtliness. It's all old–fashioned with a vengeance, and precisely on that count disarmingly charming. One is even tempted to the heretical thought that there are worse ways to construct a marriage.

Be that as it may, Reagan found in his marriage the intimate emotional connectedness otherwise lacking in him. It completed the circuit of his self–confidence (which by all accounts had been wounded in the trauma of his failed first marriage to Jane Wyman) and left him the most psychologically well–grounded of modern American leaders. Reagan's ego never got in the way of his policies. He did not personalize political differences and he did not bear grudges. He was so open and non–paranoid in personal relations that Nancy worried endlessly that his guilelessness would leave him defenseless against those who wished him ill or who simply wanted to use him for their own purposes. With the general public, his projection of strength and of non–egomaniacal self–confidence engendered an enormous sense of trust, even among a great many Americans skeptical or at least uncertain about his policies. People liked him despite themselves. They sensed that he was comfortable with himself and so they were comfortable with him.

Reagan's critics dismissed all this as an actor's tricks. It was all scripted, they said, from the speechwriters' elegant words to the engaging smile, self–deprecatory humor, and jaunty tilt of the head. And so, in some sense, no doubt it was. Reagan, who describes himself in his memoirs as the "Errol Flynn of the B pictures," did play the presidency as a role. All Presidents do that, some better or more believably than others. Ronald Reagan was among the very best. Indeed, recalling such moments as his speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Allied landings at Normandy, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Reagan was unsurpassed at performing the public functions of the presidency. He brought to them an eloquence, emotion (Reagan's was, both for himself and his public, a most misty–eyed presidency), and charm that ennobled the office. His enemies understood that, however much it chagrined them. I recall watching a major Reagan speech on TV in the company of a woman who detested everything he stood for and who considered his presidency a disaster. "Damn him," she said, "he's good."

And he was good not primarily because of his Hollywood skills. He was the real thing, a man whose impression of integrity and grace under pressure held up under scrutiny. It went back to those scores of lives he had saved while a teenage life guard, but it did not end there. No one rehearses for death, and Reagan revealed in the wake of the assassination attempt in the spring of 1981 the depth of courage, character, and wit that lay behind the public persona. This was an authentic man, and Americans thereafter could not be persuaded, despite what his enemies said, that their President had no more substance than did the Wizard of Oz.

Not that he did not sometimes tempt them to the contrary. If his character was not suspect, much else about him was. What Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously said of Franklin Roosevelt–that his was a first–rate temperament but a second–rate intellect–fit Reagan in spades. He was in many ways appallingly ignorant and ill–informed, and he lacked FDR's saving grace of intellectual curiosity. There was much that he did not know, and much that he thought he did know that was not true. It was not wrong for him to hold an essentially simple ideology–most Presidents do–but it did not become him that he could, most of the time, only elaborate it in simplistic, often merely anecdotal, terms.

No one, furthermore, ever accused him of being a workaholic. Cannon's quip that "Reagan may have been the one President in the history of the republic who saw his election as a chance to get some rest" seems only mildly exaggerated. One of Reagan's favorite predecessors was Calvin Coolidge, and Reagan shared not only Coolidge's preference for low taxes and limited government but also his aversion to a long presidential work day.

One result of his less–than–heroic work ethic (which Reagan himself typically made jokes about) was that much of the work of his administration was not only conducted by others but conducted beyond his attention or even knowledge. Reagan offers a reasonable defense of his hands–off management style. Things work best, he suggests, when a leader sets general policy goals and then recruits able people to pursue those goals without excessive interference or second–guessing. And when one compares Reagan's record to that of such a compulsive micromanager as Jimmy Carter, one is inclined to grant Reagan his point. But then, of course, one thinks of a disaster like Iran/contra, where, according to Reagan's own account, his national security apparatus took major policy initiatives without bothering to inform the Commander–in–Chief. A President can't know or manage everything, but Reagan on occasion carried managerial aloofness to the point of abdication of responsibility.

As to Reagan's intellectual powers, Cannon, after endless worrying of the issue, comes to the plausible conclusion that Reagan, though intellectually lazy, was not unintelligent. His intellectual process was more intuitive than analytical, but it was not insufficient to the tasks he faced. Where Reagan failed, it was through inattention and ignorance, not lack of intellectual acuity.

In an odd way, Reagan's unprepossessing intellectual skills worked as much in his favor as against him. Because he was not conventionally bright, his opponents regularly underestimated him. They so delighted in depicting him as a hopelessly shallow and rigid ideologue that, on one public occasion after another, he needed little more than to demonstrate that he was not a bomb–throwing blockhead to win the day. What his critics never understood was that, whatever his limitations, Reagan had extraordinary political judgment. His qualities of character set him apart from his fellows–he was the strong, self–possessed man that most of them only dreamed of being–but he was fully in touch with them. He had Harry Truman's common touch without Truman's commonness. To speak of Reagan's political judgment is to suggest what William F. Buckley, Jr. had in mind when he remarked that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston phone book than by the Harvard faculty. Ronald Reagan had an almost preternatural hold on the middle–American psyche, and most Americans therefore not only dismissed the intellectuals' dismissal of Reagan, but shared with him an amused tolerance for their incomprehension of his tremendous popularity.

Yet in accounting for that popularity, one has to account for the shift in attitudes that made Americans, who had been scared silly by Barry Goldwater, comfortable with Reagan. That shift did not happen overnight (many Americans in 1980 feared Reagan as Goldwater *redivivus*) and it had to do not only with Reagan's less–threatening persona (people always feared with Goldwater that he actually would, as he once jokingly suggested, "lob one into the men's room in the Kremlin"). It had to do as well with political developments between 1964 and 1980 that made Americans more inclined than they had been earlier to listen sympathetically to the Goldwater–Reagan message.

IV

The most important reason for the success of modern American conservatism is the failure of modern American liberalism. People turned to the right in the first place not out of ideological conversion but because after the failure of the left in the 1960s and beyond there was no place else for them to go. Richard Nixon in 1968 was the first beneficiary of the left's collapse, and he was on the edge of putting together a conservative hegemony when he blew it in Watergate. Jimmy Carter stole a moment of glory from Nixon's humiliation in 1976, but his own quasi–distancing from the liberal establishment could not prevent his administration from being other than an inept interlude in the nation's move to the right. Carter's problem, particular policy failures aside, was that he was too conservative for his party's activist wing and not conservative enough for a nation that, in the aftermath of the Great Society, had had enough of liberalism of any sort.

The Great Society, initially a great success, failed in two ways. Liberals intended the cascade of domestic reform in the several years following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 as the extension and perfection of what the New Deal had begun thirty years earlier, and indeed, the Congresses of the mid–1960s, prodded and orchestrated by Lyndon Johnson, produced major legislation at a rate unmatched in American history except possibly during FDR's first term. Yet what seemed liberalism's glorious culmination quickly turned sour. The problems at which the Great Society threw such enormous amounts of money did not go away; in a number of instances, they grew worse. Urban decay accelerated; race relations went from bad to incendiary (nothing so persuaded Americans that their society was out of control as the black riots that became for a time annual rites of summer); and while poverty rates declined for a period, they did so at the cost of many of the poor developing habits of dependency on a vast paternalistic bureaucracy, habits demoralizing in themselves and, in the long run, obstacles to the escape from poverty that the bureaucracy had been created to make possible in the first place. Reagan's homely summary of the Great Society's domestic record is not unfair: "The liberals had had their turn at bat in the 1960s and they had struck out."

And then there was Vietnam (about which Reagan surprisingly says very little), a war conducted by liberals according to liberal ground rules that not only failed to achieve its objectives but that tore the country–and especially the liberal community–apart. The war shattered the widespread consensus that had existed among Americans in the post–World War II era. Opponents of the war, persuaded that its follies could not be explained by failed good intentions or by mere errors in judgment, increasingly viewed it in broad ideological terms as the inevitable result of a hopelessly corrupted system. Behind the decadence of the war, they argued, lay the decadence of the American political economy.

Vietnam radicalized significant portions of American society. Prior to the war, virtually all Americans, whatever their differences, believed in the essential rightness and goodness of the American system. Afterwards, that was no longer true, and for years to come the most important political division in the nation was between those who believed that the American system of democratic capitalism was worth preserving without fundamental change and those who had become morally estranged from that system. Out of the war was born the adversary culture, and that culture–with its view of an America essentially racist, sexist, class–ridden, and militaristic–carried the increasingly dominant

New Politics wing of the Democratic party, spasm by rhetorical spasm, beyond the ken of the American people.

Enter Ronald Reagan, and the conservative critique of American liberalism. In the wake of liberalism's drift into radicalism, the Goldwater/Reagan analysis, which had seemed so overheated and extravagant to most Americans in 1964, took on the air of sober common sense. Maybe it was true, after all, that America was overgoverned and its government overburdened, that the bureaucracy was out of control, that there was a genuine threat of the dynamism of the society being suffocated under the burden of controls from Washington. Maybe, even worse, liberals had lost sight of what America was all about, and that the traditional national ideal of equal individual opportunity was being replaced by notions of equal group outcome, in which advancement according to ability and effort was set aside and where an endless variety of non–complementary groups competed for marginal advantages in a perpetual zero–sum war.

Add to all this the dilemmas of the Carter Administration–stagflation amidst a mounting misery index (inflation plus unemployment) at home, and weakness and equivocation abroad (represented above all by the Iranian hostage crisis)–and it is not difficult to understand how a Ronald Reagan, so politically marginal in 1964, had by 1980 advanced through two highly successful terms as governor of California to the center of national politics.

V

Reagan's achievement was to transform an initially inchoate rebellion against liberalism into a conscious conservative counterrevolution. What began as a triumph of personality brought by the end of the eighties an ideological seachange. By the time Reagan left office, a solid plurality of Americans defined themselves as conservatives, and the substantial advantage Democrats had earlier held over Republicans in terms of party identification had virtually disappeared. Politicians of conservative persuasion eagerly advertised the fact, while those inclined to the left fled from the L–word as from the plague.

Those who minimize the national shift to the right in the 1980s–or even deny that it happened–lack historical perspective. For the last century it has been the dominant assumption of political thought everywhere in the West that ever–increasing government activity was both inexorable and beneficial. The movement from laissez–faire through the regulated welfare state to social democracy or some form of socialism took on the character of social inevitability. Programs of liberal activism were welcomed as fulfilling the mandate of history while periods of conservative retrenchment could only be seen as aberrant interludes, temporary detours along the great path of social progress. The blunderings of the Great Society first alerted Americans to the possibility that modern liberalism rested on a great fallacy: the assumption that since, under conditions of modernity, some increase in government activity was both inevitable and desirable, ever–greater doses of that necessary good thing must be even better. The conclusion followed neither in logic nor in practice, as the collapse of socialism has definitively demonstrated.

But well before the demise of socialism, Ronald Reagan had transformed the terms of debate of American politics. Thirty years ago, the historian Carl Degler labeled FDR's New Deal as the Third American Revolution (after 1776 and 1861–65). The New Deal was revolutionary, in Degler's view, because it transferred essential responsibility for the functioning of the economy from the private sector to the public and taught Americans to look to the federal government as guarantor of economic health and security. Reagan's counterrevolution returned the society to many of its pre–New Deal assumptions. It not only frustrated the left's long–nurtured ambition to expand the nation's modest welfare state into a social democratic redistributive state, it revitalized faith in such traditional and presumably outmoded American traits as individualism, private enterprise, voluntarism, the work ethic, and personal freedom and responsibility.

Put the matter differently. If one thinks of economic plenitude in terms of a great pie, attempts to improve the lot of the average American can take one of two different forms: either cut the slices of the existing pie more evenly, or find ways to expand the size of the pie so that, however unequal the slices, all (or at least most) will benefit. The former view implies a good deal of government involvement and control and focuses on equality of results, while the latter suggests a dominant role for the private and voluntary sector and defines equality in terms of fair opportunity.

Through most of the nation's history, Americans have focused on economic growth and dynamism (bake an ever–bigger pie) and have regarded as alien any preoccupation with equal economic shares. Beginning with the New Deal, however, and accelerating with a vengeance in the 1960s, liberalism became the party of egalitarianism, an egalitarianism defined, moreover, not in terms of the individualism that had always been at the heart of American political discourse but in terms of group outcome. Thus the significance of Lyndon Johnson's famous speech at Howard University in 1965, where he suggested that the traditional American reform goal of an end to discrimination so that individuals might have equal opportunity to advance according to personal effort and ability was insufficient, and that henceforth the goal must be equality "as fact and as a result," measurable, presumably, in terms of parity among racial (and other) groups. Contemporary liberalism's near–obsessive concern with distribution of income–a matter toward which most Americans have been mostly indifferent–reflects that perspective. Liberals give the impression that diminution of income ratios between top and bottom deciles of the population, and between groups defined by sex, race, ethnicity, or whatever, means more to them than growth in prosperity for the population as a whole.

The Reagan Administration rejected the new egalitarianism and the paternalistic mode of governing it presupposed and substituted for it the new (old) paradigm of America as a society of free and equal citizens working commonly in a competitive system that assumed economic progress for all–at least for all willing to work for it–but that had no predetermined notions as to how the shares in that progress ought to be distributed. Reagan's was a program of conservative restorationism: limited government, federalism, reduced government spending, lower tax rates. His rhetoric occasionally seemed to confirm his opponents' suspicions that he meant to do away with the welfare state altogether, but his real end was to rein it in, restrict its growth, and lessen its cultural influence. The safety net, he thought, should not become a crutch.

Even as FDR in the 1930s had attempted to lead the nation toward a more collective social democracy through the force of his personality and the power of his rhetoric, so Reagan used the same tools, and with the same brilliant effectiveness, in his countermarch in the 1980s. In the midst of a depression crisis, Roosevelt managed to transmit to the American people something of his own unquenchable confidence and optimism, and thus to help them regain faith in themselves and their society. He imparted a sense of direction to a rudderless nation, and fashioned a program to give expression to his vision.

So also with Reagan after 1980, with the not insignificant difference that his was a New Deal in reverse. Reagan, too, took a divided and dispirited nation (he had the accurate sense that by the end of the Carter years "America was losing faith in itself") and used his enormous charm and presence to persuade the public that a new beginning was possible. His program of action was far less detailed and comprehensive than that of the New Deal–as would be expected from one who wanted not more government but less–but he pushed his tax cut program through Congress with a flair and skill comparable to that with which FDR put forward his First New Deal. Reagan won the tax fight against heavy political odds and thereby set in motion a process of social and economic revival on the domestic scene that, for all the controversy that surrounded it, most Americans considered a resounding success. (Critics might argue that only the wealthy benefited from the unprecedentedly prolonged Reagan economic expansion, but poll data and election returns alike testify that that is not at all the way the public saw things. If the policies of the Reagan Administration worked against their interests, Americans in the 1980s were among the most self–deceived people in history.)

It may seem odd to emphasize the leadership qualities of a man who, as already noted, was so often disengaged from, and even ignorant of, the policies of his own Administration. On matters peripheral to his central concerns, Reagan was dependent on others and subject to management by them. But as Cannon notes, Reagan saved his energies for particular issues and big moments. And concerning the handful of things that mattered most to him, he believed intensely and could not be budged. Where his attention was focused, he was anything but a weak leader. His geniality covered a hard core of doctrinal insistence.

In substance, Reagan's was a program of middle–class populism, though one largely devoid of populism's characteristic rancorous temper, meanspiritedness, and mood of conspiratorial suspicion. Reagan rallied middle America against the New Class intellectual and bureaucratic elites and against a vision of America that paid scant attention to middle–class values or concerns and that focused instead on the paternalistic duty of the establishment to care for all those people at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder who presumably lacked the capacity to provide for themselves or manage their own affairs. The Reagan constituency wanted an America rooted in self–sufficiency, while the dominant social virtue of the left was *noblesse oblige*. Electoral patterns followed those conflicting social visions: middle Americans voted overwhelmingly for Reagan while as Michael Barone has pointed out in *Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan*, Walter Mondale's best margins in 1984 "came in black ghettos and university towns."

Reagan's blend of personal warmth and ideological edge made him at once a unifying and polarizing political figure. He made a substantial majority of Americans feel better about themselves and their country. In that, he was like Dwight Eisenhower, the other greatly popular Republican President of the postwar era. But unlike Eisenhower, he was no genial moderate; or more accurately, while thoroughly genial, he was not really moderate at all. (He *was* often willing to compromise, but that was a matter of political strategy and personal style, not ideology.) Again, the comparison with Roosevelt suggests itself: in the 1930s, liberals looked on FDR with near reverence, while many conservatives were driven to rage by the very mention of his name; a half century later, Reagan reversed those patterns of appraisal.

Nowhere was Reagan less popular than in the black community, and on no issue more than race did the current differences between conservatives and liberals in America take on sharper relief. Reagan was outraged and hurt by the charge of racism so regularly raised against him. His parents instilled in him early on an abhorrence of racial or religious prejudice, and on that issue he never departed from the liberalism of his youth. But, as on other issues, the definition of what it meant to be a liberal on racial matters changed significantly. As already noted, the new egalitarianism of the 1960s focused on group rights and equal outcomes, and with respect to racial minorities that led in the direction of policies of racial preferences and quotas (always carefully camouflaged, of course, under the benign label of "affirmative action"). To Reagan and most Americans, the new system of racial weighting denied what America was most about–equal individual opportunity without regard to irrelevant group categories–but in liberal newspeak such attitudes became prima facie evidence of racial prejudice. To be racially colorblind, under the new dispensation, was to be suspect on questions of color. The left seemed to suggest that blacks could only advance in group terms and under government aegis, while Reagan conservatives continued to insist that the road to improvement for all Americans was better traveled under terms of individual freedom and individual responsibility.

There can be no reasonable doubt that on this and related matters Reagan captured the rhetorical advantage. He made appeals to traditional American values that, when Goldwater made them, had seemed reactionary and obscurantist, but that by the 1980s, given the intervening failure of liberal alternatives, seemed newly fresh and persuasive. It was FDR's flawed achievement, given the crisis opportunity of the Great Depression, to effect a transvaluation of American ideals, to turn American aspirations in a hitherto alien collectivist direction. Reagan brought Americans to a second naivetea, a rejuvenation of national pride and trust in American exceptionalism, an understanding that the special conditions of the 1930s were just that–a special condition–and not the model on which the nation's future should be fashioned.

Critics insisted that Reagan's vision of America was a hopeless–and probably cynical–excercise in nostalgia. In this view, the campaign ads of 1984 that spoke of "morning in America" invoked a nation that had likely never been and that certainly could not be reconstituted under modern conditions. That was, in some sense, true enough. But it missed the point. Reagan's model was meant not so much as a comprehensive image of reality but as a counterpart to the left's model of America as a social democratic collective. Reagan, after all, knew well enough the blemishes on his preferred America. He had grown up with them in a childhood household that for all his idealized, even idyllic, reconstruction of it, experienced economic insecurity, frequent moves, and the frightening uncertainties of his father's alcoholism. Reagan understood first–hand the shadow on the American ideal, but he also understood that the ideal, for all its shortcomings, was in essential terms preferable to imaginable alternatives and so worth defending against its enemies. He was, as all foreigners immediately recognized, the quintessential American, and Americans rallied to him for just that reason.

In no matter was Reagan more American, for better and for worse, than in the matter of religion. It is a mark of the obdurate secularism of America's intellectuals that the issue of Reagan's religious beliefs has received so little attention. Lou Cannon is entirely typical on this point. He is quite tone–deaf on the matter of Reagan's religious commitments, interested in them only as they treat on the (admittedly intriguing) question of Armageddon, the final confrontation of the faithful against the forces of the Antichrist. But that is but a bizarre footnote to Reagan's deep Christian faith, which readers of his autobiography can ignore only by willful intent or, as is more likely, by a habit of mind (revealed in the silences of most reviewers) that cannot take religious faith seriously on its own grounds.

An American Life is filled with religious references. Time and again Reagan mentions his deep trust in God and his frequent recourse to prayer. He has a powerful and immediate sense of God's providence, of a benign divine plan for his and the nation's life–Reagan's recurring reference to John Winthrop's vision of America as a unique and providential "city on a hill" was no throwaway line. (About his wife's dependence on astrologers, Reagan is discreetly silent.) He suggests that an ulcer developed while he was governor was cured by the power of prayer–his own and that of others for him. Moving excerpts from his diary refer to his concern over the agnosticism of his father–in–law, Dr. Loyal Davis. When Dr. Davis entered the hospital with a terminal illness in 1982, Reagan wrote him a long letter urging him to make peace with God, and he records with relief that just before his death Dr. Davis called for the hospital chaplain.

There are a number of typical American strains in Reagan's religious faith. He appears unconcerned with doctrinal precision, focusing instead on faith–in–action. His beliefs, while deeply fatalistic, are essentially confident and optimistic. He is generally Protestant, but with no strong ecclesiastical attachments. Indeed, in the wake of the assassination attempt and reported further plots on his life, he largely ceased attending church altogether. Like so many of his countrymen, he seemed to find in nature an acceptable substitute for formal worship.

The one thing I missed during our weekends at Camp David was a chance to go to church. But I prayed that God would realize that when I was out in the beautiful forest I felt as if I was in His temple.

As in many other areas, Reagan in religion is a kind of throwback. He displays that vivid providential sense of America as a redeemer nation that most secular historians would imagine to have died early in this century. But in Reagan, and in much of the American heartland, it clearly has not.

VI

Reagan carried his program of "idealistic nationalism" (the phrase is Cannon's) into foreign policy. Because he assumed without argument the justice of the American cause, he was not given to the agonizing over the nation's role in the world that liberals have subjected themselves to ever since Vietnam. That simplified things enormously. Not only did he declare his immunity to the "post–Vietnam syndrome," he displayed it in such enterprises as the Grenada operation of October 1983, an action that no conceivable Democratic Administration would have undertaken.

Liberals have had a good deal of trouble with Reagan's record in foreign and defense policy. During most of his presidency, they looked on that record as his Achilles' heel. They considered his visceral anti–Communism–learned in his days with the Screen Actors Guild–and his talk of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" to be gauche and unnuanced. They nagged at him for his lack of enthusiasm over arms control negotiations and his apparent willingness to spend the USSR into the ground on military weaponry. They berated him for his doctrine of peace through strength, his dismissive attitude toward the nuclear freeze movement, his insistence on the "zero–option" on intermediate nuclear force (INF) weapons in Europe. They thought his opposition to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua likely to lead to U.S. intervention and the making of a Central American quagmire. Talk of the President as Dr. Strangelove was common. After all, for a man who dabbled in speculation about Armageddon . . .

And then came the end of history–or at least the end of the Cold War. And on terms of an American victory. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and of the Communist empire in Eastern Europe came after Reagan had left office, but it was his Administration that had sapped the foundations of both. Some reassessment seemed necessary.

Liberal revisionists have sought refuge in the argument that the collapse of Communism occurred independently of Ronald Reagan, that it was almost entirely the work of Mikhail Gorbachev, who presumably decided quite on his own, and without reference to any external factors, to let go of the Soviet empire and to install *glasnost* and *perestroika* at home. One need not deny the influence of Communism's internal contradictions or of the heroic resistance of dissidents in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe to dismiss such arguments as the bad faith of those whose intricately rationalized anti–anti–Communism placed them–delicious irony–on the wrong side of history. It really was, it turns out, an evil empire and there truly were captive nations. And those who doubt Reagan's role in the collapse of the former and the liberation of the latter need only travel to Eastern Europe, where he is regarded with something akin to reverence.

Not, one must hasten to add, that Reagan is beyond criticism in these matters. He got some things wrong and on others he was right for the wrong reason. He never appreciated the value of nuclear deterrence in keeping the peace, and he appears to have come close at the Reykjavik summit in 1986 to agreeing to a utopian scheme to do away with all nuclear weapons, an agreement that could well have torn the Western Alliance apart. What prevented that agreement was Gorbachev's refusal to go along with further development of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). By all accounts, SDI was critical to Gorbachev's assessment of his inability to keep up with the U.S. in military capability, but Reagan's faith in SDI as a near–absolute nuclear shield seems to have been misplaced. Yet if Reagan never got the uses of SDI precisely right, he was quite correct in pushing its development. (SDI, incidentally, is one of those issues that disprove the view of Reagan as no more than the malleable subject of his managers; as even many liberals concede, on SDI he went stubbornly against the weight of expert opinion.)

Arguable matters aside, Reagan had his share of foreign policy fiascos. There was the embarrassment over his visit to a Bitburg military cemetery in 1985 that contained the graves of Waffen SS troops (an incident to which Cannon gives disproportionate attention and emphasis), the horror of the Beirut bombing in 1983 that cost the lives of 241 marines (which Reagan calls "my greatest regret and my greatest sorrow as President"), and above all, of course, the Iran/contra humiliation.

Both *An American Life* and *The Role of a Lifetime* dwell at length on Iran/contra, but neither offers much illumination. It seems clear that Reagan allowed his emotional concern over the plight of American hostages to lead him into egregious policy blunders (against, once again, the weight of expert opinion, including in this case that of his Secretaries of State and Defense). About the great unresolved question of Iran/contra–did Reagan know of the diversion of funds from the sale of arms to the Iranians to the contras?–things remain uncertain. Reagan insists that he did not, and offers an entry from his diary for November 24, 1986 that seems to confirm his innocence.

After the meeting in the Situation Room, Ed M[eese] and Don R[egan] told me of a smoking gun. On one of the arms shipments the Iranians had paid Israel a higher purchase price than we were getting. The Israelis put the difference in a secret bank account. Then our Col. North (N.S.C.) gave the money to the "Contras.". . . North didn't tell me about this. Worst of all, John P[oindexter] found out about it and didn't tell me. This may call for resignations.

Cannon does not accuse Reagan of lying, but he does offer the suggestion that Reagan was informed of the diversion but forgot about it. In any case, he argues that those who extended aid to the Nicaraguan rebels were undoubtedly carrying out the President's wishes. And on that he is surely correct.

In the end, whatever one thinks of Iran/contra (my own guess is that sober historical analysis will regard it as neither crime nor disaster but simply as political blunder), the overall Reagan record in foreign policy must be regarded as a great success. After Reagan, and in not insignificant part because of Reagan, the Berlin Wall fell. Everything else is footnote.

VII

The ambiguities surrounding the Reagan Administration cannot easily be resolved. The President at his best was a commanding figure: eloquent, decisive, winning, persuasive, and with an almost perfect sense of political pitch. At other times, however, he was utterly the reverse: disengaged, ignorant, confused, seemingly outside the loop in his own Administration–in short, the "amiable dunce" his opponents took him to be. So also with the Administration's overall performance. During the first term especially, it was for the most part unobtrusively efficient–shrewd in strategy, surefooted in tactics. Its most unremarked achievement was to restore–after Watergate and the stumblings of the Ford and Carter Administrations–faith in presidential leadership of any sort. People forget how pervasive prior to Reagan was the notion that America had become ungovernable. Yet on other occasions–Iran/contra of course the most notable–the Administration performed like the gang that couldn't shoot straight. Reagan made a major personnel error in allowing his first term Chief of Staff James Baker to switch jobs with Treasury Secretary Donald Regan early in 1985. Regan was a failure in the White House, and not only or even mainly because of his highly publicized inability to get along with Nancy Reagan. What had been a tight ship under Baker took on alarming quantities of water under Regan.

Reagan's autobiography manifests ambiguities of another sort. Conservatives have spent a lot of time in recent years arguing among themselves as to the relative priority to be given to individual freedom as over against inculcation of moral virtue. Reagan was among those identified with a moderate, or "fusionist," position, one that would absolutize neither libertarianism nor social conservatism but would tack between the two as appropriate in particular circumstances. Many social conservatives suspect that Reagan's heart was always with the libertarians, and on the evidence of *An American Life* they are entirely correct. It is nothing short of astonishing that the issue of abortion–*the* great moral controversy of our time–rates not a single mention in the autobiography. Not one word. One inevitably concludes that Reagan's often eloquent defense of the prolife cause was nothing more than lip service: it could not genuinely have mattered to him. Indeed, on one social issue after another–gay rights, feminism, crime and punishment, pornography, family values–Reagan's book has little or nothing to say, while on the glories of individualism and the curse of government he is endlessly effusive.

A fully adequate conservatism will have to go beyond government–bashing and exaltation of the individual to a richer social vision. It is necessary to point out the follies of Great Society liberalism, but it is not, as social philosophy, sufficient. George Bush's emphasis on voluntarism and his encouragement of the Burkean little platoons that form a buffer and create social space between the solitary individual and the cumbersome state–his much–derided "thousand points of light"–suggest the proper direction. (Would that Bush had, in support of his vision, his predecessor's eloquence.)

But it does not seem right to conclude an evaluation of the Reagan presidency on a negative note. Ronald Reagan did, after all, accomplish the prodigious task of cleaning out the stables, and it is no doubt churlish to complain that he did not make them fully habitable again. The great story line of American history had gone badly awry in the 1960s and beyond; it had lost touch with much of the best that preceded it. Reagan got the narrative back on track, back in conversation with its founding dreams and principles. For that, whatever his flaws, we may be grateful. Thanks to him, we can once again indulge the hope, however unconservative the sentiment might seem, of the story finding a happy ending.

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