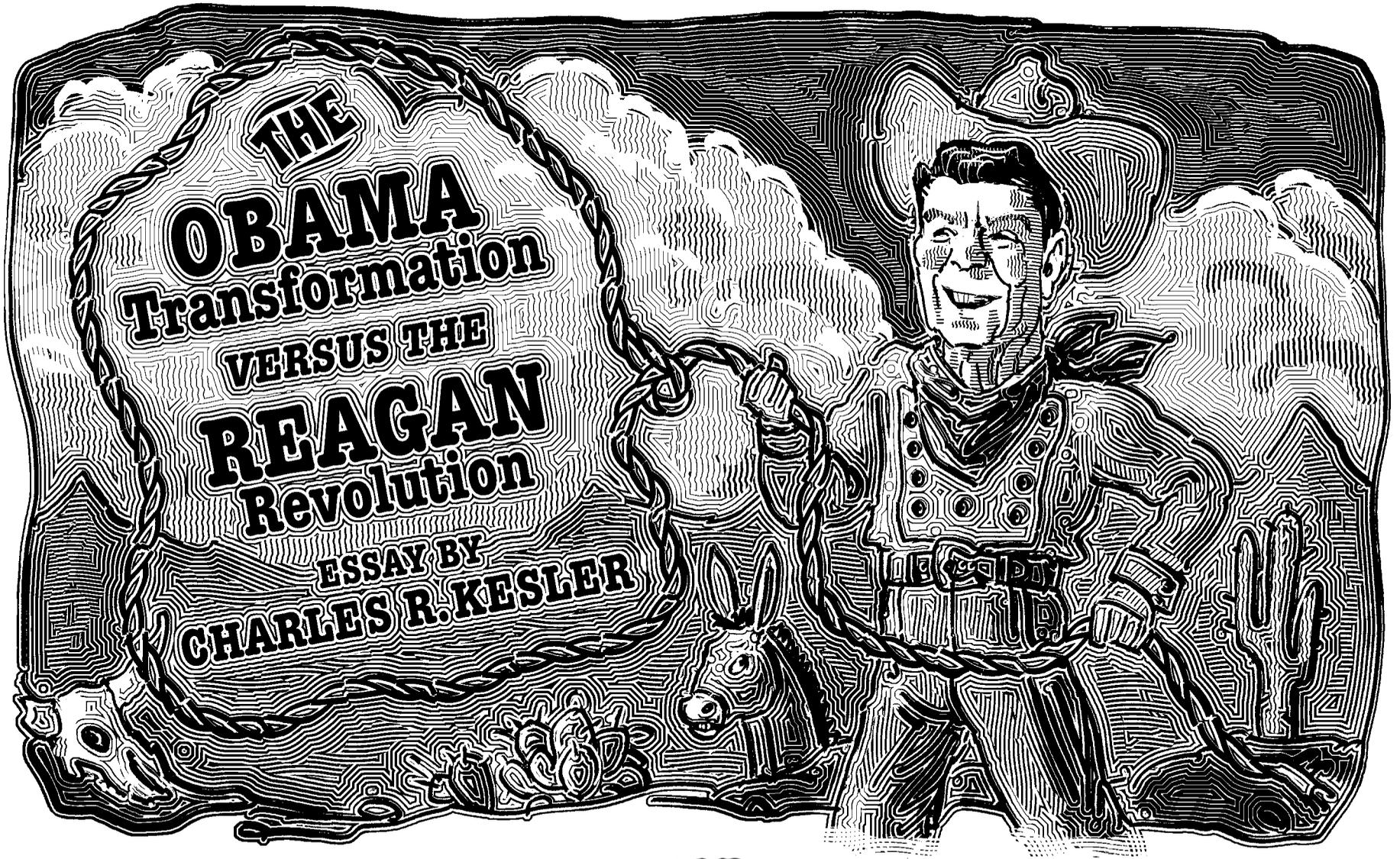


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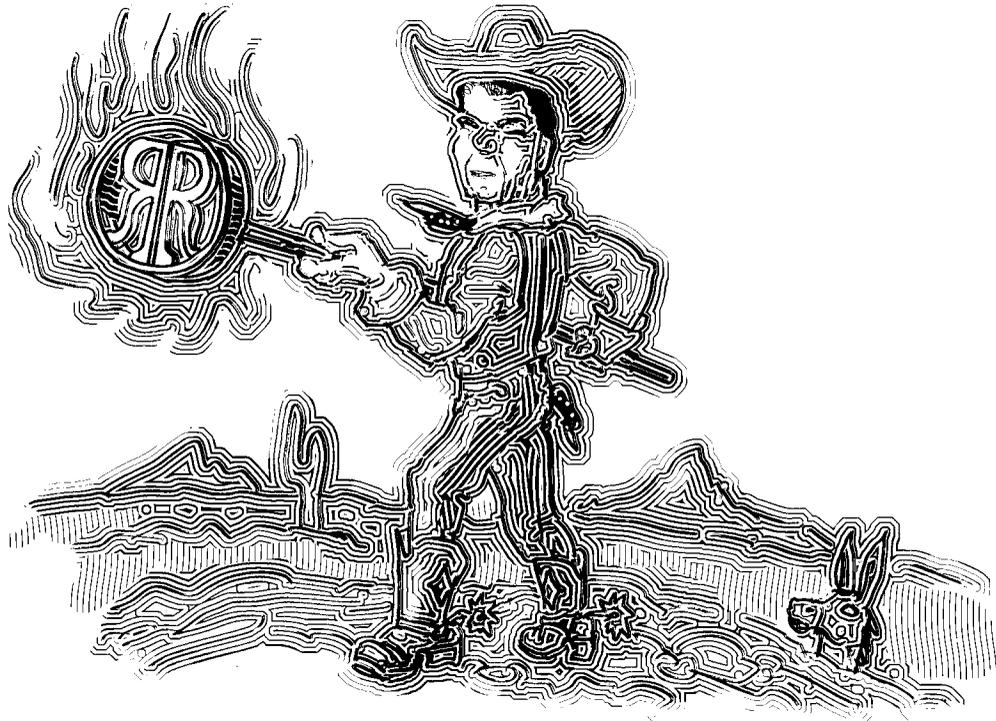
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RECKONING WITH REAGAN

Reagan: The Life, by H.W. Brands.
Doubleday, 816 pages, \$35



SOMETHING ODD IS HAPPENING TO THE legacy of Ronald Reagan. For many who rued his presidency as it was happening, he now stands ten feet tall. Candidate Barack Obama said during his 2008 campaign that Reagan “changed the trajectory of America.” In *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (2008), Princeton historian and Clinton partisan Sean Wilentz places Reagan among the mere half-dozen presidents (along with Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt) who “put their political stamp indelibly on their time.” And yet, that stamp fades with every passing week. Reagan’s shining city upon a hill now has Court-ordered gay marriage, a national health-care entitlement steadily entrenching itself in the federal welfare panoply, and a surveillance system typical less of the nation he led in the Cold War than of the one he vanquished. The more piously Americans invoke Reagan’s name, the more assiduously they demolish his works.

H.W. Brands is the latest to make a case for Reagan’s greatness while holding him at ideological arm’s length. Brands is a professor of history and government at the University

of Texas at Austin best known for his hefty biographies of American political figures including Woodrow Wilson, Ulysses Grant, Andrew Jackson, and Benjamin Franklin. In his long and uneven *Reagan: The Life*, he concludes, as Wilentz did, that Reagan left “a deeper impression on the country and the world than any but a handful of other presidents.” Brands pushes the point to the edge of absurdism, writing that, “in certain respects, Reagan’s accomplishment was greater than [Franklin] Roosevelt’s.”

What a backhanded way he has of arriving at that conclusion! Lecturing at the University of North Carolina last fall, Brands remarked that he had never voted for Reagan, considering him “an intellectually shallow person,” but that today he considers shallowness to have been one of the president’s greatest assets. Others before have claimed Reagan was highly, but not deeply, intelligent. Richard Nixon, grateful for Reagan’s steady support, nonetheless thought him a “lightweight.” House Majority Leader Jim Wright wrote in his diary in the early 1980s: “Appalled by what seems to me a lack of depth, I stand in awe nevertheless of his political skill. I am not sure that I

have seen its equal.” However he might have sounded at a lectern, Reagan had a powerful intelligence that is unmistakable once one reads his prose—especially in the collections of radio addresses, *Reagan: In His Own Hand* (2001), and of letters, *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (2003), edited by Kiron Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson. His writing is lucid and logical, evidence of a lucid and logical mind. Brands sells him short in describing a mere “gift for writing his own lines” and a “magpie’s eye for the glittering tidbit.”

FOR BRANDS, SHALLOWSNESS EXPLAINS the stalling out of Reagan’s movie-acting career after World War II. When television put an end to the B movies he had starred in in his twenties and thirties, his career was simply done. His first wife, Jane Wyman, who won an Academy Award in 1948 for her role in *Johnny Belinda*, divorced him as her own career took off. Brands believes that Reagan “wasn’t temperamentally suited to serious acting,” lacking emotional depth, not to mention animal sex appeal, and that he was reluctant “to share his deepest feelings.” (Like other biographies, this one is too quick to attribute such re-

luctance to the trauma of childhood memories of his father's drinking, Reagan arguably had a better relationship with his father growing up than any of the men who have sat in the Oval Office since.)

There is a second thing Brands wants us to understand about Reagan: even at the height of his powers and popularity, the man was an anachronism—an insight that yields up many truths in the course of the book. Reagan's birth in 1911 is closer to Jefferson's presidency than it is to us. Reagan came to national prominence only in 1964, at age 53, when Barry Goldwater's floundering presidential campaign bought him a half-hour of air time. His speech, "A Time for Choosing," was stirring ("I think it's time we ask ourselves if we still know the freedoms that were intended for us by the Founding Fathers") and witty ("A government bureau is the nearest thing to eternal life we'll ever see on this earth"), but it harked back to an America that antedated the New Deal, and he was still reworking its themes in the mid-1980s. Had Reagan been elected in 1976, he would have been older than FDR had been when he died (age 63), and the oldest president inaugurated since William Henry Harrison, who died a month after taking the oath of office. A decade later, his own budget director, David Stockman, considered him "more ancient ideologically than he was in years." Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev called him a "dinosaur."

ALTHOUGH REAGAN'S CONSTANCY MAY seem hidebound, blinkered, and reactionary to some, it seems loyal, insightful, and courageous to others. In *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (2014), Rick Perlstein is impressed that Reagan was the only Republican on the presidential landscape in the 1970s not to repudiate Richard Nixon after his disgrace. Richard Reeves, in *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (2005), marvels that Reagan stood behind the tight-money policies of Federal Reserve chair Paul Volcker, at a time "when almost every other elected politician in the country—left, right and center—was crying for relief." Reagan was comfortable standing alone—a trait especially rare among politicians. His greatest gift may have been an indifference to whether anyone thought him smart.

Reagan did simplify. Making complicated matters simple is a must for reformers, because the main way incumbents dodge accountability is by making simple matters complicated. As Reagan put it in his 1967 inaugural address as the newly elected governor of California:

For many years now, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to the complex prob-

lems which are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is, there *are* simple answers. They just are not easy ones.

According to Perlstein, "the longing for conservative innocence Ronald Reagan was selling was strong." This is a wrongheaded way of looking at what Reagan represented. Americans had longings, as they always do, but his presidency was built on a diagnosis, not a daydream. The diagnosis was that the American people had put too much faith in government to solve their problems, and that their lack of constitutional vigilance had, predictably, produced a harvest of incompetence and corruption. Its fruits were inflation, crime, anomie, and a devastating lost war.

BRANDS DOES A POOR JOB OF DESCRIBING the political climate of the 1960s and '70s in which Reagan and Reaganism thrived. In fact, the historical backdrop seems scarcely to interest him, and his narrative is often glib. "During the Great Depression," he writes, "many employers unashamedly laid women off first, assuming that their female employees were not the principal breadwinners in their families." Why, at the time, would employers assume anything else? Where, in 1931, was this "shame" supposed to come from? Discussing Lyndon Johnson's decision to withdraw from the presidential race in 1968, Brands explains: "Johnson was haunted by fears of impending mortality, having nearly died of a heart attack in 1955, and he knew enough political history to realize that second terms for presidents rarely end well." Johnson was more likely "haunted"—if that is the word—by the well-informed judgment of Democratic adviser Larry O'Brien that LBJ was on the verge of suffering a 2-to-1 shellacking in the Wisconsin primary at the hands of the antiwar candidate, Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy.

Brands is also wrong to say that "the nation's politics took a sharp turn to the right" during Reagan's presidency. That is one of the paradoxes of Reaganism: while government policies grew more conservative, this was a matter of adjusting to arguments that had been won over the preceding two decades. Politics began its generation-long shift to the cultural left. Certain pivotal episodes in this shift are mentioned only cursorily, if at all. The Simpson-Mazzoli immigration compromise, for instance, passed into law as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, offered a (real) amnesty to be balanced by a (flouted) tightening of border control, altering the demographic and ultimately partisan makeup of the country and destroying the possibility of legislating on immigration for what has now been more than a generation. There are only a

few pages on Democrats' extraordinary blocking of Yale scholar Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court in 1987—in retrospect, the greatest battle over constitutional principle (however scurrilous the arguments made) since the civil rights era. Brands writes of George H.W. Bush's victory over the wishy-washy Michael Dukakis as Reagan left office in 1988 as if it were a cakewalk; in fact, Bush was trailing deep into the pre-election summer. Something about the Reagan Revolution had been unraveling in the course of the Reagan presidency. Perhaps the Bush family was a poor vehicle for pushing forward an insurgency. Perhaps voters were tiring of Republicans' message. Perhaps the resuscitated economy and the country's impending victory in the Cold War left voters feeling that the party had fulfilled its purpose.

THE COLD WAR IS WHAT REALLY GRABS Brands, who started his career as a historian of 20th-century foreign policy. The last third of his book is a long slog through the summits at which Reagan convinced Gorbachev to embrace steep arms reductions. In retrospect, this was when the Soviet Union began to surrender. It is to superpower diplomacy that Brands turns when he wishes us to marvel at Reagan's mastery. The president dominated situations politically without seeming to dominate them intellectually. Brands considers it "scarcely short of brilliant" the way he dragged Soviet leaders before the court of international public opinion after the USSR shot down a Korean passenger jet in 1983. He marvels at Reagan's use of human rights to embarrass Gorbachev. And he notes that Reagan somehow won the battle for the hearts of the world's citizens, even as Gorbachev made himself the darling of the media. How did he manage that?

International affairs probably was the area of his presidency most distant from any kind of dogmatic conservatism. At one point during the Soviet crackdown on the free Polish trade union Solidarity after 1980, Reagan mulled rallying a serious campaign of international sanctions against the Soviet Union. As he did, he showed himself much less solicitous of Big Business than any of his successors have been. "We have labor and the people with us," he said. He was inclined to demand that International Harvester and other companies that did business in the Eastern Bloc simply forgo their profits and sell their tractors elsewhere. Labor unions continued to face difficulties under Reagan's presidency, but it was not because the president—a former leader of the Hollywood actors' union himself—was trying to "smash" them. Reagan expected unions to last forever. He was not indifferent to the deindustrialization and outsourcing that came with



globalization and high technology. He was just blindsided by these things, as everyone else was. Nor was he an unthinking free-trader like the House Republicans who today invoke his name. In negotiations with Gorbachev he instructed his staff: "Trade is for us a major bargaining chip. We shouldn't give it away."

REAGAN'S EAGERNESS TO REACH A nuclear deal with Gorbachev reminded Henry Kissinger of the position of Britain's Committee on Nuclear Disarmament (whose logo is now known universally as the "peace symbol"). When the president traveled to Bonn in 1982, 300,000 marchers were there to greet him, in Germany's largest public demonstration since World War II. Reagan told them: "To those who march for peace, my heart is with you. I would be at the head of your parade if I believed marching alone could bring about a more secure world."

Perhaps this is because nothing was more alien than nuclear annihilation to the values Reagan grew up with in Tampico and Dixon, Illinois. His worldview was that of a middle-of-the-road Midwesterner of the 1920s and '30s. His politics were conservative, but it was a conservatism that antedated the fury of the 1950s and '60s. He swallowed whole a lot of 20th-century superstitions. Brands reproduces a 1951 letter from *Reagan: A*

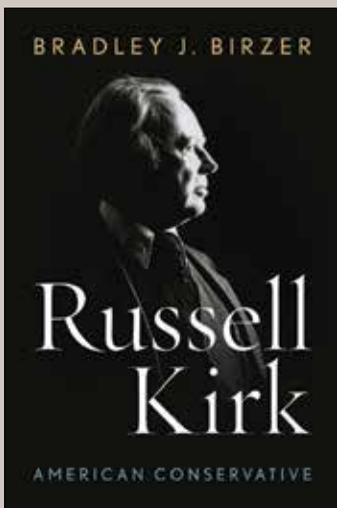
Life in Letters that urges a divorced female friend to have a "healthy" attitude towards sex, while drawing on a popular version of the anthropologist Margaret Mead's studies of Polynesians: "These people who are truly children of nature and thus of God, accept physical desire as a natural, normal appetite to be satisfied honestly and fearlessly with no surrounding aura of sin and sly whispers in the darkness. By our standards they are heathens but they are heathens without degeneracy, sex crimes, psycho-neurosis and divorce."

Ending the Cold War was the great thing Reagan did, but it is a questionable focus for a biography of him, because it was not what the American people sent him to Washington to do. The country that Americans were worried sick over in 1980 was not Leonid Brezhnev's but Jimmy Carter's, and Reagan's domestic achievements now look equivocal and temporary. Their luster held through the Clinton years, but was tarnished by George W. Bush's invocation of them. Governing through executive orders and lawsuits, Barack Obama has eroded the political foundations on which Reaganism was built. America's victory in the Cold War looks increasingly Pyrrhic.

When he came to power, Reagan looked like a radical departure from the liberal consensus of the 1960s and '70s. In retrospect, considering how angry the country was, he may have

been the least radical response on offer. Reagan was conservative only about things to which he had really given a lot of thought. Any issue that hadn't been debated in his youth caught him flat-footed. Again and again in the course of his governorship, he allowed liberal innovations to triumph simply because they were too new to have made it onto his radar screen. In 1967 he signed what can be called without hyperbole the most liberal abortion law in history—largely because, Brands rightly notes, he had at the time "no profound convictions about abortion." He must have felt some misgiving, because he followed his signing with the bizarre warning: "We must be extremely careful to assure that this legislation does not result in making California a haven for those who would come to this state solely for the purpose of taking advantage of California's new law." That same year he signed one of the strongest American gun-control measures. In 1970 he signed one of the most sweeping no-fault divorce laws. It is often noted that Reagan warned California's student protesters in 1970: "If it's to be a bloodbath, let it be now." But the previous year, California had settled a strike at San Francisco State that saw the setting up of the first ethnic studies and women's studies departments. In standing up to the changes of the 1960s and '70s, Reagan hardly did better than governors elsewhere.

IMPORTANT VOICES

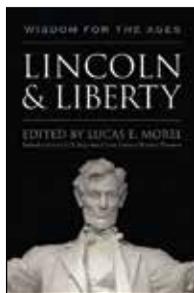


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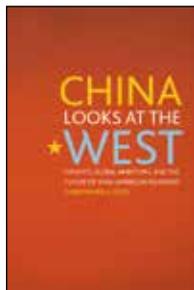
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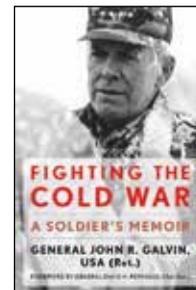
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IF SOME HISTORIES SMELL OF THE LIBRARY stacks, this one can be said to smell of the remainder bookstore out on the highway. Brands, it is true, uses Reagan's rather buttoned-up official diaries, edited by Douglas Brinkley and published in 2007, makes a few archival toe-taps in the minutes of committee meetings, does a limited number of interviews, and extracts long quotes from press conferences and speeches. But he has sourced almost the entirety of the White House part of his story from post-administration memoirs by Nancy Reagan, Donald Regan, Caspar Weinberger, George Shultz, Al Haig, Robert Gates, David Stockman, Peggy Noonan, and Alan Greenspan, with a couple of foreign leaders (Margaret Thatcher and Gorbachev) thrown in. Their accounts date from around 1990, when the Cold War was newly won and the high-tech boom getting underway, so Brands's narrative borrows a bit of hagiographic glow from that time. His theme winds up being management, not history—the *how* of the Reagan presidency, not the *why*. It concerns whether chief of staff Donald Regan should have been allowed to use the White House helicopter to visit Reagan when he was in the hospital recovering from polyp surgery, not whether Americans were more free when Reagan left office than when he came in.

As we consider that question we are brought face to face with something Reagan and the Reaganites understood only very poorly. The 20th-century growth of the federal administrative state was not simply a problem that their movement needed to address, it was the environment in which their movement had to function. Reagan led a bunch of people who had taken office by winning an argument. But taking power was considerably more complicated than taking office. The country's welfare programs were a system of rule that only Democrats had ever mastered. Most Reaganites assumed that, if they could *show* Great Society programs were inefficient, much of the bureaucracy would wither and die. They were wrong. This was an area in which being a "Great Communicator" was insufficient.

Two weeks into his presidency, Reagan called for a "different course" on the economy. "[W]e can lecture our children about extravagance until we run out of voice and breath," he said. "Or we can cure their extravagance by simply reducing their allowance." Reagan was proposing "supply-side" tax cuts as a means to solve two problems at the same time: the tax cuts themselves would help the economy by spurring business, and they would make society more virtuous by breaking its dependence on government welfare programs. Economically, his approach was sophisticated and

worth a try. It was meant to replace failed older models based on the so-called Phillips Curve, which had wrongly posited a permanent inverse relation between inflation and unemployment.

Politically, his approach failed. Reagan's attempt at deep reforms of Social Security in the spring and summer of 1981 terrified his fellow Republicans in Congress; his ability even to limit the program's growth in 1983 can be accounted a major achievement. The federal welfare state, as designed by Democrats, turned out to be not just an administrative system but a political power base. It was alive. It could defend itself even when majorities opposed it. It resisted cuts. When Washington's "allowance" was reduced, it could borrow. A president who had preached fire and brimstone against deficit spending in 1980 left office in 1989 having roughly tripled the national debt.

REAGAN WAS A MAN OF IDEAS, whatever one may think of the ones he had. He was an explainer, not an implementer. Reagan didn't have a Machiavellian bone in his body. That is why he was forced into sharing power with people who understood it better, even if those people did not share the principles that had got Reagan and people like him elected. George H.W. Bush; Bush's henchman, Jim Baker; Reagan's own wife, Nancy; Nancy's consigliere, Michael Deaver—all of these people were more liberal than Reagan. But Reagan didn't share power with them *because* they were liberal. He shared power with them because power had been set up in such a way that only liberals could wield it. Deaver was right to warn Reagan, in the course of urging that he choose Baker as chief of staff: "We're about to embark on something, Governor, that we don't know a lot about."

We can now better understand Nancy Reagan's sway over her husband. In a more sexist and truthful age, it would be possible to say that an ambitious woman is the best instrument ever devised for measuring real power, and that Nancy's aptitudes and experience made her something of a prodigy in that department. The way she rose in Hollywood was the best imaginable apprenticeship for rising in Washington power politics, to put the matter delicately. She knew little about the issues affecting the country and the policies it needed, but she knew how popularity was secured, maintained, and effectively spent. Although her counsel brought her "Ronnie" around to more liberal positions, this, again, is not *because* she was more liberal—when they divvied up the morning newspapers he took the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, she the

rabidly Reaganite *Washington Times*. Nancy was more liberal only to the extent that, in the nation's capital, power was more liberal.

REAGAN HIMSELF FAILED TO SEE THE pseudo-constitutional apparatus that had arisen in Washington over the years to thwart majorities such as his, an apparatus made up of judges and investigative committees. A year after his triumphal reelection, Reagan found himself caught up in the Iran-Contra scandal, an appalling piece of staff adventurism in which arms were sent to revolutionary Iran's mullahs in hopes of freeing American hostages in Lebanon, and covertly funding anti-Communist rebels in Nicaragua. The investigation turned into a redo of Watergate, an opportunistic attempt by the newly empowered Democratic Senate majority to overturn the Reagan revolution by impeachment. This attempt might well have succeeded had not Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North so charismatically made the Reaganite case on the witness stand. The Democrats' lawyer Arthur Liman recalled later that investigative committee chairman Daniel Inouye

made it clear to me that time was of the essence, not because of impending political primaries but because the country would suffer if the presidency remained under a cloud indefinitely. I can remember Inouye's message: The country can afford to remove a president if there is convincing proof of an impeachable offense. But it cannot afford to incapacitate a president by a drawn-out investigation questioning his legitimacy.

In other words, the Iran-Contra investigation was a plan to rescue the country from the "cloud" it had itself created by electing the wrong president.

Many have assumed that Ronald Reagan's revolution would endure not just because he was an excellent, competent, and even an inspired president, but because it seemed to have its roots deep in the American character. That the revolution has failed to stick is a sign that something has been misunderstood. Perhaps the American character has changed. Perhaps it does not shape American government as it once did. The triumph of Reaganism was that, in the wake of war, privation, and scandal, a great leader managed to convince Americans everything would be all right. That is also its tragedy.

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor of the Weekly Standard. He is at work on a book about America in the wake of the 1960s.

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