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REVIEW OF BOOKS

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William
Voegeli:
**Tyranny of
the Minorities**

Angelo M.
Codevilla:
**The Original
Fascist**

Steven F.
Hayward:
**Reagan in the
Age of Trump**

Paul W.
Ludwig:
**Delba Winthrop's
Aristotle**

Christopher
Flannery:
**American
Indians**

David
Azerrad:
**Racism &
Anti-Racism**

Joseph M.
Bessette:
**Why Trump Is
Not a Demagogue**

Allen C.
Guelzo:
**Progressives
Unmasked**

Algis
Valiunas:
**Samuel
Johnson**

Christopher
Caldwell:
**Against Dual
Citizenship**



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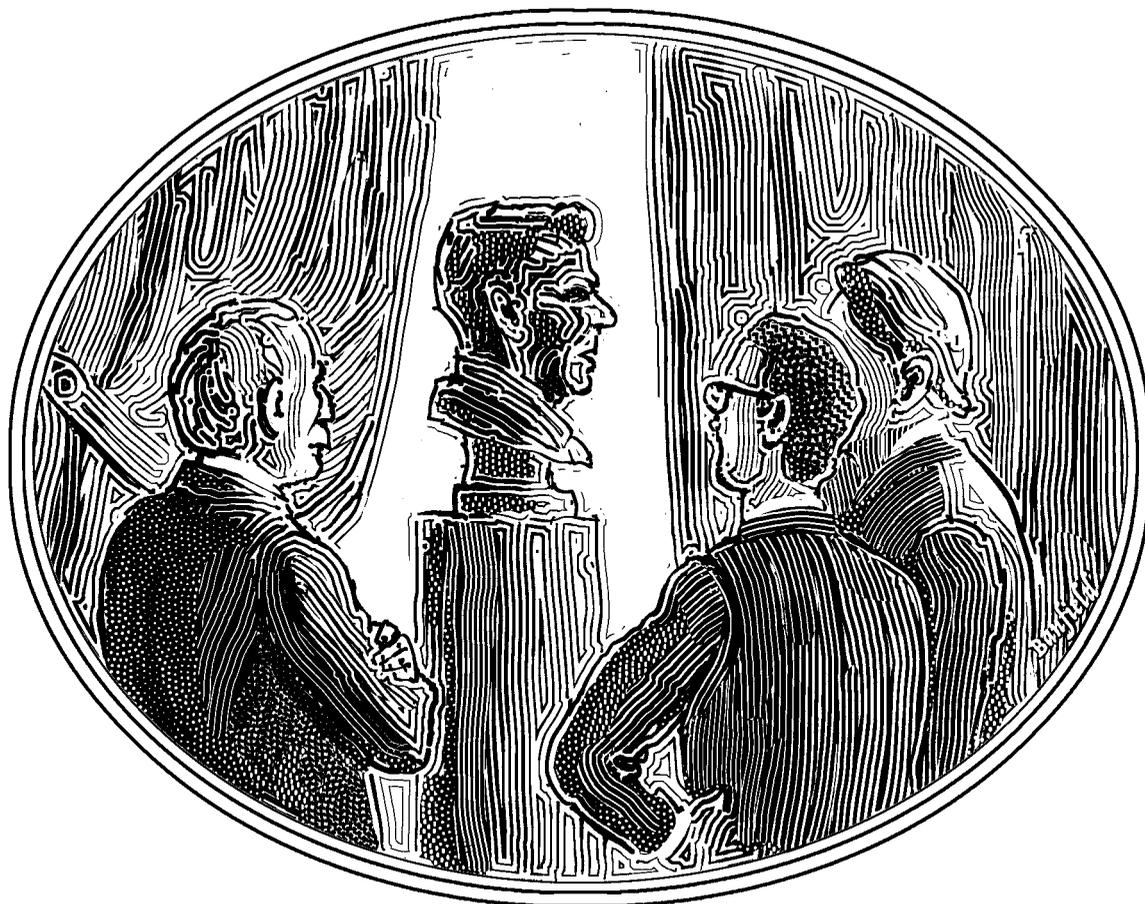
Book Review by Steven F. Hayward

THE RONALD AND THE DONALD

Reagan: The Life, by H.W. Brands.
Doubleday, 816 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper)

Reagan: The American President, by Larry Schweikart.
Post Hill Press, 576 pages, \$35

Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980–2016, by Marcus M. Witcher.
University Press of Kansas, 440 pages, \$39.95



IT HAS BEEN NEARLY 40 YEARS SINCE RONALD Reagan's election to the presidency, and more than 30 since he left office—nearly as long as the interval between Franklin Roosevelt's death and Reagan's First Inaugural. In 2020, half of America's voting age population have no memory of Reagan. But many of the Reagan Administration's younger alumni are still present today, some in prominent positions, such as Supreme Court Justices John Roberts and Clarence Thomas. Michael Barone observed that the high-water mark of the New Deal realignment occurred in the decade after Roosevelt's passing, when Democrats extended their political dominance to the other party under President Dwight Eisenhower, a Republican who governed within the New

Deal's horizon. Likewise, Reagan's most enduring legacy might be the Republican ascendancy in the 1990s when the GOP took the House for the first time in 40 years and extended its electoral success down to state and local offices, especially in the previously Democratic "solid South."

Conservatives, however, grew frustrated by the Republicans' meager accomplishments. Neither the GOP congressional majorities nor the father-and-son Bush presidencies defined big goals and delivered big victories in the post-Reagan era. Not coincidentally, the late '90s and early 2000s saw an intense new scholarly and popular interest in Reagan, whose shadow grew larger with the sweeping triumph of liberal democracy and global

market liberalization after the Cold War. He emerged as a person of hidden depth and skills, which even liberal critics began to acknowledge. Studies of Reagan and the Cold War were especially popular for obvious reasons, along with what might be called Reagan "area studies"—specialized studies of Reagan and civil rights, Reagan and economic policy, Reagan and the judiciary, or Reagan's spiritual life. Notably missing were serious efforts at a complete biography, reflecting the unique difficulty Reagan seems to pose for conventional biography. In any case, during the Obama years the Reagan book boom fizzled.

Meanwhile, after having been an unwelcome insurgent in the Republican Party in the 1960s and '70s, by the 2000s Reagan had

become the GOP establishment. Expressions of fealty became obligatory for any aspiring Republican presidential candidate. How faithfully his acolytes followed his example is a separate question.

DONALD TRUMP CHANGED ALL THAT. Trumpian populism is distinct from Reaganite conservatism in substance as well as style. Even so, Trump in 2016 was in some ways more faithful to Reagan's campaign style than his many GOP rivals who sprinkled Reagan references in their stump speeches. Candidates who professed being a "Reagan conservative" at every opportunity seemed not to have noticed that Reagan seldom used the term "conservative" or even "Republican," except when speaking at GOP gatherings. Like Reagan, Trump grasped that successful electoral appeals transcend ideological schemata, which he revealed with his brazen campaign comment: "It's called the Republican Party, not the conservative party."

Some of today's populist Trumpians, especially among the young, consider Reagan not merely obsolete or irrelevant, but even an object of contempt. For some time liberals have been saying, disingenuously, that the Gipper would not prosper in today's Republican Party, conveniently forgetting that "extremist" was their favorite epithet for Reagan. It is harder to sort out the mainstream Right's cognitive dissonance: residual honor for Reagan, alongside the dismissal of any contemporary lessons or examples from his statecraft or distinctive ideology.

We shouldn't be entirely surprised at this sudden turnabout, while marveling at an irony. When the second and final volume of my *Age of Reagan* appeared in 2009, I attracted criticism from some Reaganites for insufficient celebration of Reagan's triumph. I did indeed criticize some of his domestic policy failures, especially his inability to effect spending cuts, a balanced budget, or a fundamental retrenchment of the administrative state. This was not for lack of trying. Several attempts to curb the administrative state crashed and burned from a combination of congressional opposition, court challenges, and bureaucratic subterfuge. The Reaganites underestimated and didn't fully understand the depth of the problem of the modern administrative state, which in important respects was still taking shape when Reagan took office. (The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, less than a decade old when he arrived in Washington, was still figuring out how to regulate.) One good example of this is the bureaucracy-empowering

Chevron doctrine, which arose from a 1984 Supreme Court case that the Reagan Administration won, expecting it would help tame bureaucratic regulation. The Trump Administration seems to have learned from such Reagan-era disappointments.

OTHER ASPECTS OF REAGANISM HAVE been discarded outright, such as free trade. The North American Free Trade Agreement was largely Reagan's idea, and NAFTA began to take shape under his administration. So did the earliest moves toward trade liberalization with China, which we now regard as problematic, if not a strategic mistake. Reagan was pro-immigration and signed a counter-productive immigration reform act in 1986 that bestowed amnesty on three million illegal immigrants in return for unfulfilled promises to strengthen border security and enforce employment laws, thus setting the stage for the dreary immigration stalemate of the last 30 years that Trump smashed at a stroke.

Nostalgists airbrush conservative disappointments and sometimes intense discontent with Reagan.

Reagan made little headway in reforming entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare, or reducing federal deficits, though it turns out Reagan has the best record of restraining spending growth in the last 75 years. Today, however, neither Trump nor congressional Republicans even pay lip service to spending restraint or a balanced budget, and Trump repeatedly promises to sustain our unsustainable entitlement programs. Old-fashioned Republican fiscal orthodoxy is out of fashion, and arguably died with the retirement from Congress of its last prominent champion, Paul Ryan.

To this list might also be added enthusiasm for the high-tech world of Silicon Valley, which was a pillar of Reagan's broader outlook. Today conservatives are more likely to be suspicious of, or hostile to, Silicon Valley and tech's overpromise. And conservatives today are actively debating industrial policy, with some advocates sounding a lot like Walter Mondale in 1984, whose central planning proposals were unanimously scorned by conservatives.

Above all, Reagan was simply too nice, and didn't effectively fight the Left's consolidation of power in our institutions. Exhibit One is his failure to do anything to save Robert Bork's Supreme Court nomination in 1987 after it became clear that Democrats would embrace any low tactic to keep him off the Court. Reagan never said a word of criticism about the Federal Reserve under Paul Volcker. To the contrary, Reagan was robust in defending the Fed's independence, even when its policy undercut his economic policy and doomed a lot of Republican candidates in 1982. Reagan may have been better at making thoughtful arguments about our political culture—his farewell address in 1989 is an excellent example—and he was very effective in his humorous, often cutting critiques of liberalism throughout his career. But too often he assumed a defensive crouch, trying to explain why his administration's record satisfied liberal demands. The contrast to Trump in these and other domains is plain: the pugilistic Trump never concedes an inch to his critics, and throws back a roundhouse punch every time.

These contrasts between two dominant Republican presidents of their time may begin to change, however, inasmuch as a second generation of Reagan scholarship and revisionism has started to emerge. First, a few brave souls stepped up with full-scale biographies. The prolific H.W. Brands came out with *Reagan: The Life* in 2015, which easily eclipsed the failed *Dutch* (1999) by Edmund Morris, Reagan's official biographer. Brands's book showed a coherent story line and an eye for relevant detail. For example, he describes how Reagan did follow the news media closely and on a daily basis, contrary to widespread opinion at the time, reflecting a more disciplined routine than the media perceived or was willing to give him credit for.

But Brands's narrative offered little context or analysis to provide deeper insight into Reagan or the episode at hand. It failed to capture the full nature and depth of the ideological conflict of the 1980s, which has receded into a gauzy mist in the more bare-knuckle Age of Trump. This was the book's major weakness and disappointment. In it, Reagan became a "pragmatist," a widely believed but nevertheless superficial assessment.

ABETTER UNDERSTANDING OF REAGAN as he understood himself comes to us from Larry Schweikart's biography, *Reagan: The American President*. Above all, Schweikart, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Dayton, understands the unity of Reagan's statecraft, observing



at the outset: “Like the doctor of osteopathy who treats the ‘whole person,’ Reagan envisioned all his actions as achieving multiple aims simultaneously.... Other than perhaps Calvin Coolidge and Franklin D. Roosevelt, no other American president in the twentieth century had such scope to his thinking.” Schweikart doesn’t fall into the trap of trying to find some hidden, “inner” Reagan either, accepting him for what he was: an exemplar of modest but confident World War II-era manliness. Although Schweikart portrays Reagan’s statecraft with sympathy and a deep understanding missing from Brands’s biography, he offers several significant criticisms of what he regards as Reagan’s errors of fact and judgment, useful aids in thinking through how Donald Trump operates and what he means.

The book looks closely at several key episodes that didn’t work out, such as immigration reform and Reagan’s Middle East policy. Reagan wasn’t “bamboozled” into supporting immigration amnesty in 1986, for example; he favored it from the outset. Concerning the Middle East, a complicated picture emerges of the administration’s growing realization that Islamic radicalism was a new and potent menace. But the American intervention in Lebanon

from 1982-84 was a fiasco, which later bled into the Iran-Contra scandal that, Schweikart clearly explains, Democrats tried unsuccessfully to turn into a Watergate sequel. He adds an extra dimension here, providing a new appreciation of Reagan’s deregulation of the energy sector, which set the stage for the domestic oil and gas boom of the last decade and a half (all that was needed was new fracking technology to enable the boom) that has had significant strategic advantages for the United States.

In sum, *Reagan: The American President* is a very balanced book that gets the largest questions right. Above all, Reagan’s mistakes “pale in comparison to his magnificent, world-changing successes of defeating the Soviet Union, putting communist ideology on the road to extinction, and reviving a moribund American economy.”

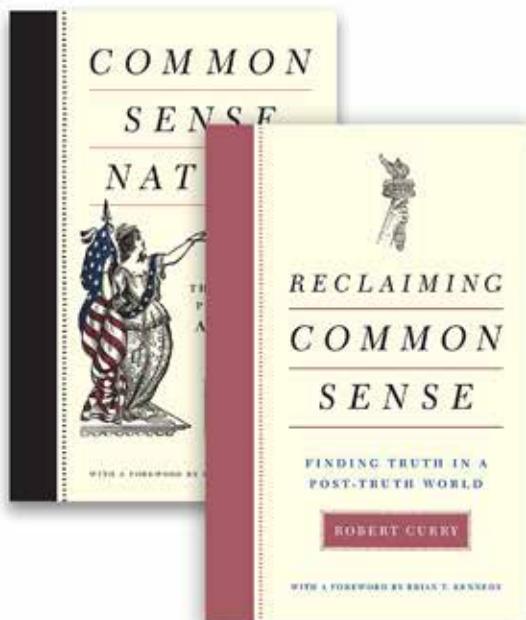
Schweikart offers an appendix arguing that Trump is very similar to Reagan. Most of the comparisons turn out to be superficial, however: both were the oldest presidents at the time of their election; both have an entertainment background and use the media skillfully. The only two divorced presidents, both Reagan and Trump were underestimated by all their opponents and many of their allies. All true and interesting, but any comparison

with Trump can’t square with one of Schweikart’s substantive summaries of Reagan from the beginning of the book: “The Gipper became the new archetype of a Republican as someone who embraced increasingly popular free trade, overseas military involvement, and internationalism.” Trump’s departure from Reagan is never more stark than on these three points.

TO BE FAIR, ONE WOULD NOT EXPECT the biography of one president to provide an extended treatment of contrasts with another. To explore the lasting legacy of Reagan for conservatism at the beginning of the Trump era we have Marcus M. Witcher’s *Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980–2016*. A scholar-in-residence in both the Department of History and the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics at the University of Central Arkansas, Witcher provides a perspective from a member of the generation that came of age after 1989. *Getting Right with Reagan*, copiously researched and smoothly written, signals that we can expect excellent work from him in years to come.

The book offers three main arguments, along with good material about the modern

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conservative movement and detailed narratives of many key episodes in the Reagan presidency. Despite his meticulousness and objectivity in assessing Reagan, some of Witcher's narratives and judgments are slightly off the mark.

First, Witcher notes that there was considerable conservative discontent with Reagan while he was in office, concerning relations with the Soviet Union, fiscal policy, social issues, and more. It is understandable that someone considering Reagan in a time when, as Witcher correctly notes, a "mythical Reagan" has taken wing, might find this friction surprising. But no one who lived through the era, and read the constant barrage of criticism of Reagan in the conservative press, would be surprised at this. His extended account of this discontent is correct and worth highlighting. Many Reagan nostalgists do indeed airbrush the disappointments and sometimes intense discontent with Reagan, and the important lessons thereby provided. In addition to capturing this public dimension of frustration with Reagan's performance, Witcher does an excellent job reconstructing the sharp divisions within the Reagan Administration on issues large and small.

BUT IT IS HARDLY NEWS THAT A STATESMAN'S defects disappear with the passage of time. Anyone who delves into the liberal and leftist journalism of the 1930s can find examples of discontent with Franklin Roosevelt that disappeared from most histories of the glorious New Deal. Conversely, conservatives mostly disdained President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s, but his record has attracted growing admiration from them, beginning with Fred Greenstein's *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (1982). Someday we may see a book, perhaps by Witcher, on liberals' increasing disregard for Bill Clinton. A sequel could trace the similar arc of Barack Obama's reputation.

One big reason why the Reagan balance sheet was so favorable is his undeniable triumph in ending the Cold War, which even Reagan's liberal critics such as Sean Wilentz acknowledge as one of the greatest accomplishments of any American president. Witcher is again generally correct that the mythical Reagan of recent accounts didn't have a master

plan to achieve this result within the compass of a decade, but he settles on an interpretive line that has been in place for some time now. Reagan's Cold War statecraft came in two distinct and somewhat contradictory phases, he argues: the hard-line Cold Warrior for much of the first term, and the near-détentist starting in 1984. The thesis is superficially plausible, but a closer look at the whole complicated scene reveals a consistency, in both rhetoric and deed, that belies this old, establishment-friendly revision.

It comes as no surprise, then, that Witcher's third point reiterates another popular assessment, namely that Reagan "was no conservative ideologue" but rather a "pragmatic" conservative who "flexibly" got things done. Indeed, Reagan was not a rigid dogmatist and represented an idiosyncratic conservatism, as several authors Witcher cites point out. Like journalists who interpreted Reagan through the pragmatic lens while he was in office, historians seem disinclined to analyze Reagan as an example of a statesman's prudence, which sometimes involves striking necessary compromises. The issue of Cold War strategy, like other Reagan turnabouts that raised eyebrows and ire at the time—his concession on taxes in 1982, for example—ought to be understood as instances of the essential discipline that Winston Churchill explains in his classic essay, "Consistency in Politics." Policy reversals, Churchill argued, are justified and even imperative when changing circumstances require flexibility in pursuit of the "same dominating purpose." Many of Reagan's tactical adjustments were in the service of unchanging strategic objectives.

Here and there Witcher's embrace of the "flexible pragmatist" understanding of Reagan is arguably too generous. For example, early on he says, "It was Reagan's flexibility that allowed him to extend the sustainability of Social Security." It is closer to the truth to say that Reagan's handling of Social Security was simply botched from the very first month of his presidency, and he was greatly disappointed when his Hail Mary pass to regain the initiative—the Greenspan Commission—came back with a conventional plan of tax increases and eligibility tweaks to patch up the existing system. It wasn't "flexibility" that led him to embrace that dog's breakfast. It was an outright defeat, and he knew it.

ACOUNTER-FACTUAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENT, then: what might Reagan have accomplished on the domestic front if he had not had to cope with the Soviet Union at what turned out to be the climax of the Cold War? It is not hard to imagine that with his immense talents, and without the need to compromise on domestic spending as a condition of maintaining the defense buildup, he might have made more headway in taming the federal beast. Although Witcher offers a rich account of how Reagan's legacy evolved on the Right in the 1990s, he neglects how much Reagan's policy legacy imposed constraints on the Clinton presidency. This case, previously made by Richard Reeves, Theda Skocpol, and others, suggests that Reagan had a more lasting impact than his conservative critics perceive.

These quarrels with Witcher's handling of Reagan are minor compared to *Getting Right with Reagan's* great strengths. Its central point, compelling and useful, is that with the demise of Communism, "Reagan's legacy took the place of anticommunism as the glue that held the conservative movement together." This was bound to attenuate as the Cold War receded from memory and socialism's popularity began to revive. (Bernie Sanders would have been simply unimaginable during Reagan's time or even most of the 1990s.) In other words, the shadow of Reagan, albeit refracted in sometimes misleading ways, prevented the long-predicted "conservative crackup" based on inherent differences between various kinds of conservatives. After 1989, these differences were festering below the surface, Witcher notes, as "each year the Reagan whom [Republican presidential] candidates invoke looks less and less like the Reagan who won the presidency in 1980." Trump's 2016 victories marked the end to these decreasingly effective efforts. "To Donald Trump's credit, he broke away from the constraints of the Reagan myth," Witcher writes. "It is unclear what the role of the Reagan myth and legacy will be following Trump's unexpected election." As with Reagan, we'll need a second term to get a complete answer to that question.

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