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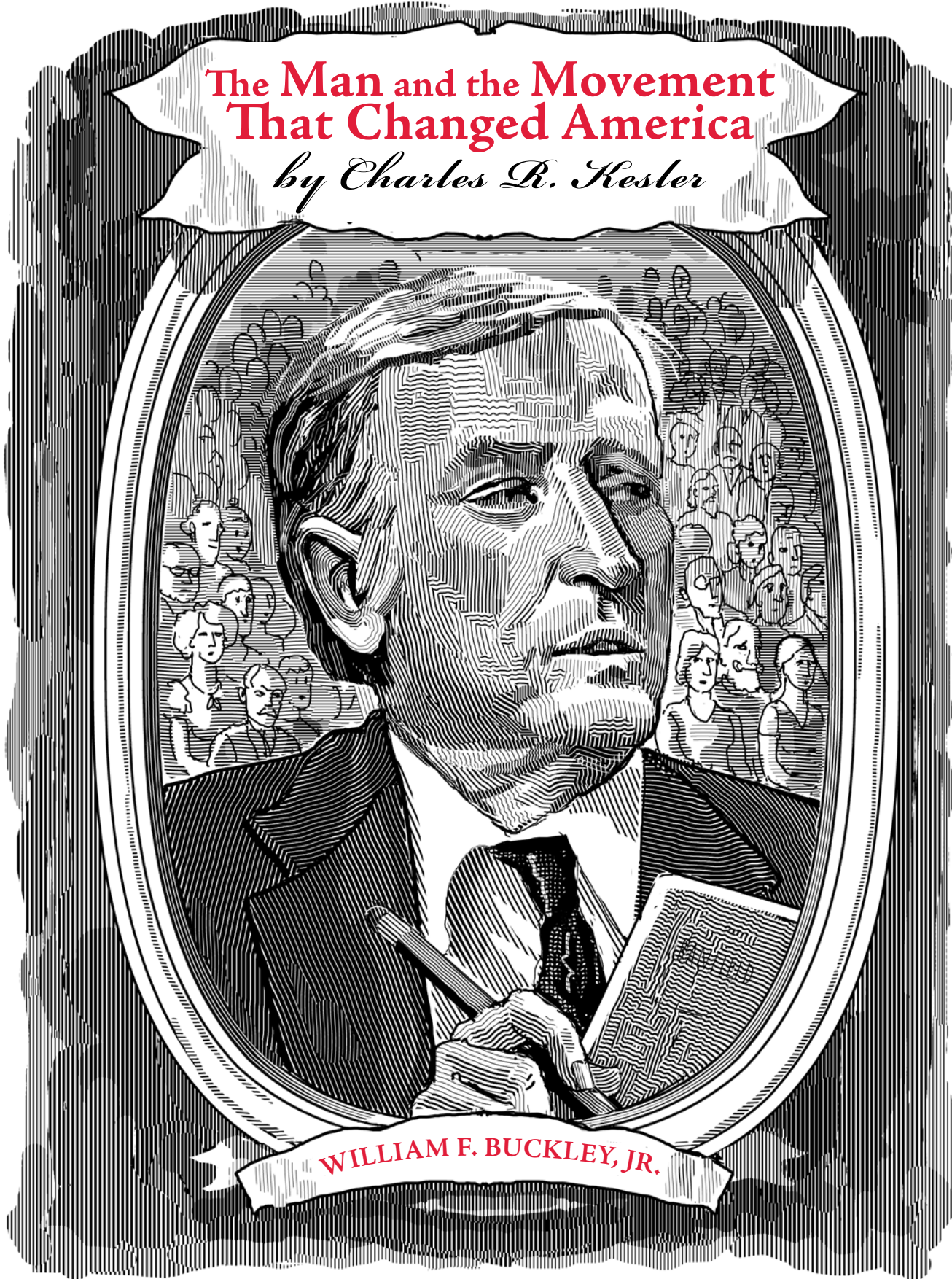
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# FLYING HIGH

Ronald Reagan and the Firing of the Air Traffic Controllers, by Andrew E. Busch.  
University Press of Kansas, 180 pages, \$99.99 (cloth) \$24.99 (paper)



President Donald Trump's whirlwind of early activity reminded Americans what leadership can look like. But effective leadership consists of much more than throwing a lot of executive orders against the wall to see what legally sticks. It requires prudential judgment, assessing what is possible now. Taking big risks with imperfect information is also a key characteristic of real leaders.

Both President George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush, for example, showed glimmers of those qualities. Too often, however, they either backed down in the face of opposition (H.W.'s tax hikes) or made reckless deci-

sions that backfired (W.'s push for Social Security reform without an electoral campaign or mandate). Indeed, their failures—and the similar faults exhibited by GOP nominees John McCain and Mitt Romney—catapulted aggressive leadership to the top of Republican voters' concerns by the time Trump rode down the golden escalator in 2015 to enter the political fray.

Trump surely thinks he knows a great deal about leadership, but the rank and file would benefit from a primer that explains its elements so they can better assess his actions. Andrew Busch's new

book, *Ronald Reagan and the Firing of the Air Traffic Controllers*, nicely fits that bill.

Reagan is the epitome of the modern conservative leader, so it's unsurprising that Busch, now an associate director and professor at the Institute of American Civics in the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, chose him to study leadership in action. The Gipper's decision to fire the striking air traffic controllers in 1981 stands out as the first high-profile executive decision that could have sunk his presidency. Just one midair collision, one fatal airplane crash, and Reagan might have been widely viewed as the shoot-first,



ask-questions-later cowboy his critics claimed he was.

Instead, the early episode proved to be a model of his tenure: the careful planning that preceded his decision, the willingness to take a stand on a clearly articulated principle, the way his actions prior to the strike subtly molded public opinion—all the elements that could be observed in Reagan's later dealings with Congress and the Soviet Union were present here at the outset. As such, it provides a textbook example of how smart, principled leaders behave.

Busch knows many readers aren't old enough to remember the strike, so he starts by expertly setting the scene. He walks us through the creation of the air traffic controllers' union, PATCO, and explains how their prior success in getting their way over the preceding decade encouraged a faction, committed to pushing for unreasonable contract demands, to seize control. Busch then examines Reagan's management style, which rested on the delegation of detail to subordinates while keeping himself sufficiently informed so that he could make the crucial direction-setting decisions. Busch concludes his opening section by detailing the negotiations between PATCO and Reagan's designees, letting the reader see what Reagan himself would have known when he had to make his fateful call.

**T**HE PRESIDENT'S WILLINGNESS TO stand (or fall) on principle was a key element of his leadership. He clearly and publicly stated that he believed in the law that made public employee union strikes illegal. This view was supported by large majorities of Americans. They understood that public employees both acted in the public interest and, by holding a monopoly over the service provided, exerted power that no purely private sector union could duplicate.

That didn't mean Reagan *wanted* a strike or goaded the union into calling one. He authorized his subordinates to make generous financial and non-financial offers to forestall a strike, offers that stretched his preferred financial boundaries. This, though, also helped him in the final instance once a strike was launched. Reagan made it clear to the public that he was willing to go the extra mile to placate the union and prevent the potential danger that would come if the controllers walked off the job. In the event a strike came, Americans would understand it wasn't Reagan's fault.

These moves meant that public opinion was on his side at the strike's onset. It also meant that the decision that surprised insiders—the statement that all striking controllers would be fired if they did not promptly return to their jobs—was not surprising to the public.

Reagan also demonstrated foresight by authorizing extensive pre-strike planning to replace the controllers and prevent a total shutdown of American air travel. His team knew exactly who would be called in to man the air traffic control towers and how a backup system would operate. Nothing could be certain until the event came, but their careful planning ensured they were not caught unawares.

This again helped to mold public opinion. Many flights were canceled, but many others were not. People could also see that their leaders were prudently managing a tough situation rather than flailing about in search of a solution. The public always wants their leaders to, well, lead. Seeing that quality in action reassured them that the skies were safe.

**R**EAGAN WAS HELPED BY THE UNION'S poor leadership. They believed courts would not enforce the law against them despite some past instances of courts doing so. They overread Reagan's generous offers and misinterpreted a purposely noncommittal letter he had written as a candidate, outlining his views on what air traffic controllers deserved in their next contract.

They thought the fear of what could happen in a strike would cause Reagan to fold, as it had caused previous leaders to give in. As a result, they did not try to mold public opinion, instead relying on the raw exercise of power. These serial miscalculations meant they had no cards to play once Reagan laid down the gauntlet.

The fact that public opinion opposed the strikers meant they could not mobilize their normal allies within the Democratic Party. Congressional Democrats were not going to risk their political capital to buck public opinion. There was therefore no countervailing force willing to take up the union's cause. Even most other unions shied away from issuing statements in support of their supposed brethren.

Ronald Reagan's actions serve as a template for leadership because all of their elements are replicable. Enunciation of a clear principle for action means that the action

can be understood when it comes. Prudential preparation means the action is well executed with a minimum of chaos. Being willing to bend to accommodate the opposition means potential opponents have less ability to say that a third way between caving and standing firm exists.

**P**RESIDENT TRUMP OFTEN DISPLAYS these traits, especially on issues he cares about. He has long expressed his principles regarding illegal immigration. His aides carefully prepared the executive orders now being implemented, which is why the border has been so effectively shut down. So far Trump is avoiding the implementation of acts that could be characterized as inhumane, as the separation of child migrants from their parents was in his first term. These are some of the reasons why the public largely supports his actions on the border.

Other actions, though, appear less well thought out. Elon Musk's DOGE is operating in accord with a principle—root out government waste—that has never been clearly defined. It's not always clear that the things he is trying to eliminate or the people he is trying to fire are "waste" rather than essential government functions.

It also appears that DOGE is a jerry-rigged operation with little pre-planning or forethought. Cabinet secretaries are purportedly at war with Musk because they were not brought into the loop on DOGE's activities. Workers are being rehired once it is realized they actually aren't waste and are needed to operate essential programs. Planning doesn't make perfect, but it helps.

Trump's aggressive all-out attack on the progressive state means his administration will be fighting many consequential battles simultaneously. He must win most of these, both in fact and in the court of public opinion, if the administrative state is to be tamed and reduced in size. That means the essential elements of leadership will come into play over and over again during the years ahead.

Andrew Busch's short book provides a template for winning those battles. As such, it should be required reading for Trump's team as they wade into the trenches.

*Henry Olsen is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the author, most recently, of The Working Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism (Broadside Books).*

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