

TEN MYTHS ABOUT RONALD REAGAN'S PRESIDENCY

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Read also "Why Ronald Reagan Can't Save the Republicans"
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RR is totally lost, out of his depth, and uncomfortable. All of this—both the substance and human conflict—is above and beyond him. He has not enough of either knowledge or decisiveness to cut through the contradictory advice that is being offered to him.

--Richard Pipes, notes from a 1981 National Security Council meeting

As the Republican candidates prepare for the 2010 Congressional races, we can expect a lot of talk about Ronald Reagan and how we need to return to his tough economic and foreign policies. Many in the GOP believe that all they have to do win big is to be like Reagan and find a new Ronald Reagan as their presidential candidate.

In his recent book *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future*, Will Bunch tells us what many of us already knew in bits and pieces. Drawing on his book and many other sources, I will lay out ten major myths about President Ronald Reagan, whose birth centenary will be celebrated next year.

Myth #1: Reagan was the most popular president.

Even the liberal media bought this one. ABC anchor Elizabeth Vargas declared that "Ronald Reagan was the most popular president ever to leave office" (6/6/04). Clinton, however, had an approval rating of 66 percent (Reagan was at 63 percent) when he left the White House. By March of 1990 Jimmy Carter (at 63 percent) was more popular than Reagan at 59 percent.

Fairness & Accuracy in Media reports: "Reagan's 52 percent average approval rating for his presidency places him sixth out of the past ten presidents, behind Kennedy (70 percent), Eisenhower (66 percent), George H.W. Bush (61 percent), Clinton (55 percent), and Johnson (55 percent)."

Myth #2: Reagan was the nation's best president.

Will Bunch cites two surveys by professional historians. One led by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. rated Reagan as “average-low” among the 41 presidents. The book *Rating the Presidents* ranks Reagan 26th. A more recent survey, taking in account newly released material on arms negotiations, places Reagan in the top ten, primarily because of the realization that he was passionately committed to the abolition of nuclear weapons, something his cabinet strongly advised against.

Myth #3: The American people supported Reagan's Policies.

A 1982 *LA Times* poll revealed that large majorities opposed Reagan's proposals to reduce environmental, industrial safety, and auto emission and safety standards (49-28%; 66-18%; 59-29%). A 1986 NY Times/CBS poll indicated that 66 percent of Americans supported LBJ's Great Society programs. As Reagan left office with a 63 percent approval rating, 62 percent of the American people reported that the country was “off on the wrong track.”

We are therefore confronted with the paradox that tens of millions of people liked (even loved) Ronald Reagan, and voted for him even though they did not support his policies. I don't have the evidence, but I suspect that hundreds of thousands of votes for George Bush were cast against Gore or Kerry simply on the basis of the “like” factor, or “whom would you rather have a beer with.” For years my father tried to persuade my grandmother to vote for Adlai Stevenson, and she even admitted that she believed in the Democratic platform, but she liked Ike and she voted for in 1952 and 1956.

Myth #4: Reagan was tough on terrorists.

During the GOP presidential primaries, Rudy Giuliani claimed how in 1980 the Iranians “looked in Ronald Reagan's eyes, and in two minutes they released the hostages.” The facts are, however, that Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State Warren Christopher, through a long series of negotiations, had already secured the hostages' release before Reagan took office. Later Christopher reported that the only reason they were not freed earlier was that Iranian authorities were slow in getting them ready to leave.

Working for the Reagan administration, Oliver North did look the Iranians in the eye as he negotiated one of the most cynical and perverse deals in American diplomatic history. Devising a way to get around legal restrictions on providing aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, North took the profits from selling arms to the Iranians and funneled them to the Contras. As Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East, Donald Rumsfeld had already sold arms and chemicals to Saddam Hussein so that he could gas his own people and keep up his war with Iran.

In August of 1982 U.S. Marines were sent to Lebanon as part of a peacekeeping force to mediate between Christian and Muslim factions in that country's bloody civil war. When Hezbollah suicide bombers blew up a Marine barracks killing 229 soldiers and sailors, Reagan "cut and ran," giving the Syrian and Iranian backed militias free reign over large areas of the country.

Some of the weapons sent to Iran were directed to an Iranian group that was sponsoring Hezbollah terrorists in Lebanon. They agreed to release American hostages when the arms were delivered. Initially, Reagan maintained that his administration was not trading arms for their freedom, but several months later he was forced to admit that was exactly what he was doing. The Iran-Contra scandal brought Reagan's approval rating to low of 40 percent with 32 percent of those polled believing that he should resign.

Myth #6: Reagan was tough on dictators and drug lords.

Time and time again Reagan's aids advised him to do something about Manuel Noriega, former Panamanian dictator and drug dealer. Both Alexander Haig and Patrick Buchanan wanted him to invade the country, but he refused. In 1989 the first President Bush invaded Panama where 23 American soldiers and upwards of 4,000 civilians were killed. Noriega is now in a Florida prison, but was it worth this great price?

The risk of civilian deaths, which he said would be a terrorist act in itself, was the major reason why Reagan authorized only two military actions during his presidency: the invasion of Grenada and the bombing of Libya. Reagan's conservative critics and the media labeled him a "pussycat" because of his inability to take strong measures against America's real and unreal enemies. For example, the parents of American medical students in

Grenada begged Reagan to call off the invasion, but 19 American lives were lost in this ridiculous show of force.

Michael Deaver, Reagan's public relations man, doesn't sound like a wuss in his support for the Grenada invasion. Saying that it made for "a good story," Deaver defended the action: "This country was so hungry for a victory, I don't care what the size it was, we were going to beat the shit out of it." Deaver was right: Reagan's approval rating shot up to 63 percent after the Grenada invasion.

Myth #6: Reagan would not give amnesty to illegal aliens.

Edwin Meese, Reagan's Attorney General, wrote a column entitled "Amnesty by any Other Name" for the *New York Times*. He asked his readers to look up the term "amnesty" in Black's Law Dictionary, where it says that "the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act provided amnesty for undocumented aliens already in the country."

Myth #7: Reagan never raised taxes.

Will Bunch reminds his readers that as California's governor, Reagan signed the largest tax hike in the state's history (\$1 billion in a \$6 billion budget) as well as approving a bill legalizing abortions. In an article in the conservative *National Review* (10/29/03) Bruce Bartlett, one of Reagan's economic advisors, states that the 1982 Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act [was] the largest peacetime tax increase in American history." Bartlett goes on to list tax increases for every year from 1982-1987. Economist Paul Krugman sums it up succinctly: "No peacetime president has raised taxes so much on so many people."

Myth #8: Reagan Proved that Deficits Don't Matter.

This was a direct quote from Former Vice-President Cheney in 2002, as said to then Treasury Secretary O'Neal, in response to people such as Bruce Bartlett, who were saying that President George W. Bush would have to raise taxes just as Reagan did. But of course deficits do indeed matter, and that is why Obama is being heavily criticized for his \$1.58 trillion deficit and that is why he is freezing discretionary spending indefinitely, more budget discipline than Bush, Jr. ever showed.

For European Union members to be in good standing, their economies may not run deficits more than 3 percent of GDP. For FY83 Reagan ran a deficit of 5.9 percent of GDP, and for FY09 Obama's deficit was 9.9 percent. During his two terms, Reagan added \$1.67 trillion to the national debt, while Bush, Jr., cutting taxes while fighting two wars, put us back another \$5.3 trillion. Just think of what Reagan's deficits would have been like if he had not raised taxes.

In 2004 Paul Krugman praised Reagan for his pragmatism and good sense: "President Reagan, confronted with evidence that his tax cuts were fiscally irresponsible, changed course. President Bush, confronted with similar evidence, has pushed for even more tax cuts."

Under pressure from the effects of the Reagan myths, Obama has put himself in a real bind. He has promised not to raise taxes on 95 percent of the American people, but this means that he will pile up as much debt in four years as Bush did in eight. "Winning one for the Gipper," Obama should simply bite the bullet and say: "Hey, I'm doing just what Reagan did."

Myth #9: Reagan reduced the size of the federal government.

Will Bunch easily dispels this myth: "Federal spending grew 2.5 percent per year in real dollars under Reagan," and the federal workers grew from 2.8 million to 3 million during his two terms. It is was Vice-President Gore's project of "reinventing government" that allowed Clinton to reduce, as Will Bunch reports, "the government payroll from about 3 million when he took office to close to 2.6 million. . . . Federal spending would fall as a share of GDP . . . from 21.4 percent in 1993 to 18.5 percent in 2001."

Myth #10: Reagan won the Cold War.

Four days after the Berlin Wall came down, *USA Today* asked a cross-section of Americans whom they thought was responsible for the collapse of Communism. A surprising 43 percent said Mikhail Gorbachev and only 14 percent chose Ronald Reagan. For Germans who lived through it, the answer was a more decisive 70-2 percent.

Now that we can correct the false intelligence (was some of it manufactured?) about Soviet weapons build-up, we can see that the \$1.5 trillion in military spending (started under Carter), was wasteful and increased the deficits dramatically.

No one “won” the Cold War because Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to end it peacefully and diplomatically. Reagan’s advisors were shocked when he proposed--in one-on-one negotiations with enemy--the total abolition of nuclear weapons. As Vladislav M. Zubok, Temple University historian, states: "It was Reagan the peacemaker, not the cold warrior, who made the greatest contribution to history."

Every president from Truman to Reagan should get credit for our firm bipartisan stand against the Soviet Union, even though, tragically, both sides pursued policies that caused millions of unnecessary deaths in the Third World. (Reagan did seem to mind the millions of civilian deaths there.) Reagan stood at the end of the slow economic collapse of a failed ideology and had the good luck of dealing with a pragmatic Soviet leader.

Whatever faults President Obama have (and he does have a few), you will never hear him say “I don’t remember,” as Reagan did to the Tower Commission investigating the Iran-Contra scandal. If some say that I’m being unkind to a man on the edge of Alzheimer’s, then I say that Reagan should have resigned for that very reason. One doesn’t keep a likable but incompetent man in the world’s most powerful office.

Although his national security advisors may well criticize him, you would never hear them say that Obama “is totally lost, out of his depth, uncomfortable. All of this—both the substance and human conflict—is above and beyond him,” as Richard Pipes said about Ronald Reagan.