

The Republicans Still Cling to a Mythical Ronald Reagan

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Facts are stupid things.

—Ronald Reagan mangling John Adams' "Facts are stubborn things"

We licensed his beguiling forgeries.

—Gary Willis, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home*

February 6 is former President Ronald Reagan's 115th birthday, and the myths about him, many times refuted, continue to misinform far too many Americans. It's time, once again, to tell the truth about America's 40th president.

Rubio, Giuliani, and Romney Wrong on the Iranian Hostages

The GOP presidential candidate who most often compares himself to Reagan is Senator Marco Rubio. In the *American Spectator* (5/19/15) Paul Kengor writes that several of the GOP candidates have "Reagan-like qualities, but Rubio especially strikes me as the closest to Reagan."

In a recent speech Rubio promised that "when I become president of the United States, our adversaries around the world will know that America is no longer under the command of someone weak like Barack Obama, and it will be like Ronald Reagan where, as soon as he took office, the hostages were released from Iran." When Rudy Giuliani was running for president in 2008, he said that the Iranians "looked in Ronald Reagan's eyes, and in two minutes they released the hostages."

During the 2012 presidential campaign Mitt Romney used the same example to insinuate that Obama was not tough enough in foreign policy. The fact checkers at Politifact declared that Romney's pants were on fire then, but Republicans still keep repeating the lie. The Carter administration had done all the hard bargaining for the release of the hostages, and as the Iranians disliked Carter so much, they did not release them until Reagan came into office.

Invade Panama? No. Invade Grenada? Yes.

Reagan talked tough, but those threats were not always matched by decisive action. Even though his advisers encouraged him to do so, Reagan refused to invade Panama to remove dictator and drug trafficker Manuel Noriega. The brutal invasion, which may have caused 3,000 civilian deaths, was undertaken by the first President Bush in December 1989.

Reagan did act decisively in October 1983 when he sent troops to the tiny island of Grenada to rescue American medical students. The UN General Assembly voted 108-9 to condemn the invasion with allies the United Kingdom and Canada opposing. Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Reagan's close friend was "deeply disturbed" by the invasion. She wrote: "This action will be seen as intervention by a Western country in the internal affairs of a small independent nation, however unattractive its regime."

Lebanon, 1983: 241 Marines Killed as Terrorists Gain

Reagan's intervention in the Lebanon's civil war was reckless and ended in unmitigated disaster. Even though Sen. John McCain objected, Reagan ordered the battleship New Jersey to shell Lebanese villages indiscriminately. On October 23, 1983, Hezbollah militants, who had heretofore been fighting Maronite Christians and fellow Muslims, retaliated. They drove a truck bomb into a Marine barracks and 241 soldiers died. Even though then Vice President George Bush declared that "America will not be cowed by terrorists," Reagan pulled out all U. S. forces and the result was a major victory for Hezbollah and Iran. In another area, instead of supporting moderates in Afghanistan, Reagan gave billions of dollars to Osama bin Laden and the radical Islamists who became the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

Gorbachev Gets Credit for the Fall of the Berlin Wall

Much has been made about Reagan's great challenge to the Soviets in 1987: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Reagan traveled to Germany under a barrage of criticism that he was giving away too much to the Soviets. Then House Speaker Newt Gingrich had criticized an earlier meeting between Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev as "the most dangerous summit since Adolf Hitler met with Chamberlain in 1938."

Four days after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, a poll reported in Will Bunch's *Tear down This Myth* showed that 43 percent of Americans believed that Gorbachev was responsible for the wall's demolition. Only 14 percent gave Reagan credit, not surprising as his general approval rating had dropped to 48 percent. For Germans who lived through it, the answer was a more decisive 70-2 percent in favor of the Soviet president.

Reagan Calls for Total Abolition of Nuclear Weapons

When it came to nuclear war Reagan was anything but tough. Soon after seeing the film *The Day After*, a powerful movie about a nuclear holocaust and criticized as peacenik propaganda by conservatives, Reagan sent a telegram to the movie's director stating that the movie had changed his mind about nuclear disarmament. Far too many times Reagan mistook movies for reality—the most famous example was watching footage of the Nazi death camps and then claiming that he had been there—so was this the best man for Americans to trust with negotiating the future of the free world?

Rubio claims that Obama does not know what he is doing (under fire from Christie he soon took it back), but he admires a president whose national security adviser once said that "RR is totally lost, out of his depth, and uncomfortable. He has not enough knowledge or

decisiveness to cut through the contradictory advice that is being offered to him.” This are the word of Richard Pipes at a 1981 National Security Council meeting.

The movie *The Day After* moved Reagan so much that one of his closest advisers Jack Matlock speculated: “I think deep down he doubted that, even if the United States was struck, that he could bring himself to strike another country with nuclear weapons” (*The Nation* 12/10/07, p. 38). Those closest to Gorbachev had the same opinion. Once Gorbachev was participating in war game involving a simulated nuclear attack by the U. S., and later he admitted that he could “not push the button even for training purposes” (ibid.). At this time both Reagan and Gorbachev were courageous peacemakers not cold warriors.

Reagan’s advisers were shocked when at the 1986 Reykjavik Summit, he proposed the total abolition of nuclear weapons. (When President Obama envisioned a world without nukes a 2009 speech, his call for accelerated disarmament was ridiculed by GOP leaders and Reagan’s putative heirs.) As Jonathan Schell states: “So intense was the criticism that the administration sought to hide the truth about Reykjavik, as if it were a disgrace. It is only recently, with the declassification of the transcripts, that the depth of Reagan’s abolitionism has been revealed” (*The Nation*, 1/28/08, p. 24).

Talks with Iranians: Obama Wins While Reagan Lost

Obama has also been heavily criticized for negotiating a deal with Iran, which just led to the removal of 11 tons of 20 percent-enriched uranium from that country. Iran had no weapons grade materials, and international inspectors have just confirmed that Iran has had no plans to build a bomb since 2003. Over 14,000 uranium-enrichment centrifuges are being removed, and *The Economist* reports that “core of the Ark heavy-water reactor, which had the potential to produce plutonium, is being filled with concrete” (1/16/16).

Reagan promised that he would never talk to the Iranians, but Oliver North arranged for arms sales to Iran in hopes of releasing hostages whom Hezbollah held in Lebanon. North used profits from the sales to support rebels fighting the duly elected government of Nicaragua. In November 1986 Reagan announced to the American people that the U. S. had not traded arms for hostages, but he was forced to return to them in March 1987 to admit that his administration had indeed done so. 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. On February 2, 2016, the Rasmussen polls had Obama at 47 percent.

The GOP’s Reign of Error; “Facts are Stupid Things”

The facts about Reagan are just as instructive as the myths. The most significant truth is that is he was just as careless about the facts as his disciples are today. In *There He Goes Again: Ronald Reagan’s Reign of Error*, Mark Green and Gail MacColl documents over 300 errors and misstatements. I think it is safe to say that the Gipper had a record number of these, as well as a great number of corrections by his aides, frantically trying to cover for their bumbling boss. After all, as Reagan once said, “facts are stupid things.”

Green and MacColl were not using the same methodology as Politifact. The former combed Reagan's entire record and published their findings in 125 three-quarter-size pages. Politifact states that we "can't possibly check all claims, so we select the most newsworthy and significant ones," and their analysts choose statements that can be most easily verifiable. Their careful, in-depth analysis is as balanced as it is impressive.

Politifact's ratings range from true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, false, and "pants on fire." Averaging the percentages from the Truth-O-Meter for the seven top GOP candidates (Trump, Cruz, Rubio, Bush, Kasich, Christie, and Carson), their statements were true, mostly true, and half true only 47 percent of the time. That means that means that they were not telling the truth more than half the time.

With a grand total of 5 true statements, Trump, Cruz, and Carson (he has none) bring down the average dramatically. If one removes them from this list, Rubio, Bush, Kasich, and Christie average 65 percent.

With regard to true, mostly true, and half true statements Clinton and Sanders average 70 percent. The Democratic candidates have a total of 2 Pants on Fire—both for Clinton. They are the false claim that ISIS was using Trump in their videos, and "I remember landing under sniper fire" in Bosnia.

Following in the footsteps of Mitt Romney, whose record 19 Pants on Fire were 9 percent of his 2012 campaign statements (Obama had 9 for 2 percent), the seven Republicans have racked up 43 ridiculous falsehoods that account for 8 percent of their total statements.

So far Trump has 17 Pants on Fire and won Politifact's distinction of 2015 Liar of the Year. Here are six "huuuge" bloopers:

- "The unemployment rate may be as high as 42 percent."
- "Crime statistics show blacks kill 81 percent of white homicide victims." This is one lie that drove Dylan Roof to murder nine black church members.
- "I watched in Jersey City where thousands and thousands of people were cheering" as the World Trade Center collapsed. In some versions of this American Muslims are implicated.
- "The Mexican government sends the bad ones over." The fact is that more people are now going back to Mexico than coming.
- "The last quarter, it was just announced, our gross domestic product was below zero." Thanks to the Obama stimulus, the U. S. emerged from the Great Recession in 2009.

The pants of the other candidates are also on fire. Christie gave us this dozy: "Bernie Sanders's plan is to raise your taxes to 90 percent." Lying about Obamacare is a daily occurrence, as Rubio demonstrates: Because of the ACA, "75 percent of small businesses now say they are either firing workers or cutting their hours."

Bush joins all Republicans in trashing Planned Parenthood by saying that it is "not actually doing women's health issues," when in fact it is 97 percent of its efforts. In 1983 Reagan

said “make sure I’m telling you the truth,” but these Republicans are so fact averse I don’t believe that they are capable of doing so.

For being way out there, Ben Carson takes the prize. His statements are mostly false, false, or pants on fire 84 percent of the time. Unfortunately, Politifact does not count his biblical theory that the Egyptians stored grain in their pyramids as a ridiculous falsehood.

Ted Cruz also wants to be the New Reagan

At an Iowa rally Ted Cruz declared that we “need for a Ronald Reagan of the here and now,” and it was clear that he meant himself. One of Reagan’s greatest virtues was that he always worked well with Democratic leaders, but Cruz cannot even get along with his own Senate colleagues, none of whom support him for president.

Cruz is correct to claim that only he has had a consistent anti-immigration stand, one that stands in stark contrast with Reagan granting amnesty to millions after he signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986. Rubio and Bush are closer to Reagan on this contentious issue. In the Google/FoxNews debate on January 28 Bush and Rubio accused each other for changing their minds about undocumented immigrants. An earlier Bush supported citizenship for them, but in a book co-authored with Clint Bolick, they said that they would have to return home and apply from aboard. Rubio has backed away from a 2013 Senate bill he supported that contained a path of citizenship.

In his campaign against immigration reform Cruz misstates the facts dramatically. At the debate preceding the New Hampshire primary, Cruz declared that “in eight years Bill Clinton deported 12 million people. In eight years George Bush deported 10 million people. Enforcing the law. We can do it.” The actual figures are actually much, much lower: 1.6 million for Bush and 870,000 for Clinton. Ironically, the main enforcer has been Obama at 2.4 million deportations, making him unpopular among many Latinos.

Reagan Raised Taxes Seven of his Eight Years and Tripled the Deficit

Republican leaders boast about Reagan’s courage to cut taxes and still grow the economy. What they neglect to mention is that Reagan was forced to raise taxes in seven of his eight years in order to head off huge budget deficits. According to Reagan’s economic adviser Bruce Bartlett, the 1982 Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act, which hit the middle class especially hard, “was the largest peacetime tax increase in American history.” (Even higher, on a per capita basis, than the taxes to finance Obamacare.) Even so, Reagan tripled the national debt, primarily because of huge, unnecessary military expenditures

Writing in *The Nation* (2/22/10), Harold Taggart writes this about the restructuring of social security: “Under Reagan the percentage of deductions increased by 25 percent. In effect, there was a 55 percent tax increase on lower- and middle-class workers. That was the largest tax increase in history and the largest redistribution of wealth upwards.”

In 2014, calling on the name of Reagan, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback won substantial tax cuts claiming that they would lead to great economic growth, which did not

happen. In June 2015 the Legislature reluctantly voted for \$432 million in new taxes, the largest increase in the state's history.

The current GOP presidential candidates have also called for major tax cuts. If any of them are elected president and the promised growth does not occur, will they follow Reagan's example, or will they subject the nation to certain economic disaster?

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