

There's Nothing Ordinary About This Man

**Ronald Reagan:
How an Ordinary Man
Became an Extraordinary Leader**

Dinesh D'Souza

Free Press / 292 pages / \$25

**Recollections of Reagan:
A Portrait of Ronald Reagan**

Edited by Peter Hannaford

Morrow / 210 pages / \$24

REVIEWED BY

C. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

The publication of these two books reminds me of one of my fondest unfulfilled projects, a National Center for Biography. There philanthropy would meet scholarship. Historians of an independent mind would lease the *Kultursmog* by accurately chronicling recent American history. Their financial support would not depend on the advances of politically correct publishers. It would come from those capitalist Medicis who are as mindful of their country's achievement as they are of the bottom line. Without fear of one's tenure, and unsuborned by publishers into pumping out still more bilge on the greatness of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Martin Luther King, or Madonna, the solid biographer might essay the life of Jimmy Carter in all its magisterial puniness or that of Richard Nixon without the chains clanking off stage and the Statue of Liberty being blown up by Gordon Liddy.

The conservative perspective on public policy is now regularly on display in our magazines and journals. Biographies recounting how conservative political and intellectual leaders brought us to a

C. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR. is editor-in-chief of *The American Spectator* and most recently co-author (with "Anonymous") of *The Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton* (Regnery).

world without Communism or the Phillips Curve will mainly remain unwritten until one of the tycoons who did so well in recent decades endows such a center. These two books nail down my case. They are worthy efforts at documenting the greatness of Ronald Reagan, but they do not bear the scholarly heft of biography written by full-time historians. Nor can we expect a scholar living in the politically correct despotisms of Harvard or Stanford to commit suicide over mere American history. And so the Reagan epoch is left to a literate public figure, Peter Hannaford, from this magazine's board of directors (Hannaford was also an aide to Reagan in the 1970's), and a seasoned polemicist from the American Enterprise Institute, Dinesh D'Souza.

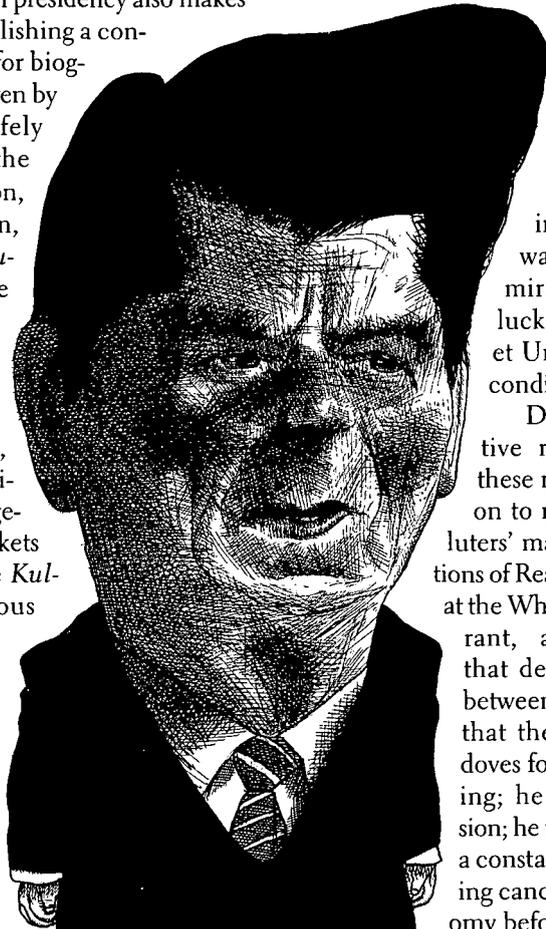
Actually the most scholarly book written on the Reagan presidency also makes my case for establishing a conservative center for biography. It was written by a scholar safely moored at the Hoover Institution, Martin Anderson, author of *Revolution*. Otherwise the reader wishing to assess the Reagan administration's defeat of Communism, revival of America, and encouragement of free markets has to brave the *Kultursmog's* tedious compendiums of error: Laurence I. Barrett's *Gambling With History: Reagan in the White House*, Haynes Johnson's *Sleepwalking Through History:*

America in the Reagan Years, and Sidney Blumenthal's *Our National Daydream: A Political Pageant of the Reagan Era*. These polluters when writing about Reagan frequently lose themselves in unwholesome metaphors, often implying sleep—supposedly the president's—though their superannuated conclusions make clear that it is they who have been at sleep.

The polluters contributing to the *Kultursmog's* tarnished image of Reagan are forever reinforcing each other's prejudices. Thus they took great comfort recently in the consensus arrived at by a panel of historians convened by Arthur Schlesinger to evaluate past presidents. Reagan was esteemed a low-grade mediocrity. None of the scores of observers of Reagan whom Hannaford brings together in his forum on the Reagan presidency would agree. They see him as resolute, far-sighted, courageous, cheerful—for the most part a masterful leader, though Jerry Brown and the other Democrats came around to this sunny appraisal a

bit late. Hannaford's contributors do not share the *Kultursmog's* myths that our much-improved world was the result of miracles, swell luck, and the Soviet Union's doomed condition.

D'Souza's narrative reminds us of these myths as it goes on to record the polluters' many misperceptions of Reagan: he arrived at the White House ignorant, a menace to that delicate balance between East and West that the Liberals and doves found so reassuring; he caused recession; he made the deficit a constantly metastasizing cancer on the economy before sudden luck



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caused economic rebound; he horrified suave Soviets before Marxist-Leninist miscalculation brought on the Communist collapse, a collapse that all progressives anticipated (in private). And, yes, Reagan showed his true treachery with the historically unparalleled Iran-contra atrocity that surely would have gotten him impeached had he not absconded from Washington just in the nick of time for the good of the world. By the way, this is hardly an exaggeration of what many otherwise sane Liberals believe.

Truth be known, when Reagan arrived at the White House the Liberal elites were in a hell of a mess. They prophesied the end of American prosperity. They hymned that “small is beautiful,” and proclaimed an era of “limited growth,” a time when as President Jimmy Carter said the United States and its allies “could use up all the proven reserves of oil in the world by the end of the next decade”—that is to say by now! Reagan urged growth and a military buildup that would bankrupt the Soviet Union. Under Carter American power had withdrawn towards Fortress America. During his presidency Washington flinched and withdrew support when regimes serving our interest were under fire, leaving some—Nicaragua and Iran—overturned and replaced by enemies.

After governing California dramatically if not always effectively, Reagan spent six years refining his thoughts on governance, writing, speaking, and reading the likes of Hayek, Bastiat, Whittaker Chambers, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. As both of these books demonstrate Reagan as president often made decisions quite independent of his aides. Often he stood alone—or in the term of the day, stayed the course—implementing tax cuts, strategic arms reduction (replacing strategic arms limitations), the zero option on intermediate-range missiles, and the Strategic Defense Initiative, of which Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has observed “There was one vital factor in the ending of the Cold War. It was Ronald Reagan’s decision to go ahead with the Strategic Defense Initiative.” Reagan’s attempts to cut government were less successful, though its rate of growth slowed under him.

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Another of his personal inspirations was to label the Soviet Union “an evil empire.” The denizens of the *Kultursmog* (some even lurking in his White House) adjudged the term inflammatory. Yet he stuck by it resolutely. According to the legends of the *Kultursmog*, the Hollywood president was lazy and pliant in the hands of his aides. However, aides came and went; Reagan remained, following his principles and preternatural political instincts. When he deemed it time to retire the term “evil empire,” he did so and set off on an entirely new course with Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet when Reagan’s instincts put him on guard, the charming Mikhail had no more influence on Reagan than anyone else. At Reykjavik the aging president simply walked away from the accommodating Russians who sought one revision Reagan would not give, Strategic Defense. The clouds of anger billowed up high in the *Kultursmog*, but Reagan followed his instincts. A year later Gorbachev was in Washington signing the most obliging treaty the Soviet Union ever negotiated with the United States, the treaty that marked the end of the Cold War.

This is where I come in. The noble D’Souza places me at the table during a private dinner with the president the week of the INF signing. D’Souza even gives me a historic line. According to D’Souza, the Russian media star was out wowing official Washington while “out of the limelight, Reagan had dinner with a group of conserv-

ative friends, including Ben Wattenberg, Georgie Geyer and Robert Tyrrell.” A momentous question is asked the president by Wattenberg, “Have we won the Cold War?” I leap in and press the point with words my grandchildren might thrive as they reiterate them to their grandchildren, “Well, have we?”

Unfortunately, as my recent published books on our present president make clear, I am at heart a disciple of Herodotus, a historian, indeed a presidential historian. My Herodotusian Oath will not allow me to let D’Souza’s glorious scene stand. I never closed in on President Reagan with the line “Well, have we?” because Wattenberg never preceded me with the question, “Have we won the Cold War?” In fact we were not at dinner with the president but at coffee in the Oval Office between 2:00 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. on December 9. Wattenberg’s question was much vaguer. My question was vaguer still. We did leave the room thinking something epochal had been said. The president had spotted a change in the Soviets that others had missed. “They no longer believe in one-world Marxian domination,” he blandly explained. As we left his presence Geyer noted, “I think we have just heard the announcement of the end of the Cold War.”

Once again the hero of the proceedings was Reagan, not me and not Wattenberg. And by the way Geyer’s name is Georgie Anne, and mine is R. Emmet. I also think D’Souza misreads literature when he compares this remarkable president to “Gatsby,” and I doubt conservative critics of Reagan deserve quite so much of D’Souza’s scorn. Unlike the Liberals who get even more scorn, the conservatives’ criticism was usually based on objective circumstances. Nonetheless D’Souza’s heart is in the right place and he has panted in most of the essential facts. He and Hannaford have reminded us of the achievement and the mystery of Reagan. There is, indeed a mystery about him. How did he manage to stand alone, decide wisely so often, and get so little credit? When my National Center for Biography is established we shall have a better chance of knowing. ❀

Getting Down to That Legacy Thing

**George Bush:
The Life of a Lone Star Yankee**

Herbert S. Parmet
Doubleday / 570 pages / \$32.50

VIEWED BY
Victor Gold

The hot political buzzword going the Washington rounds these days, replacing “vision” as a media favor-of-the-year, is “legacy.” What, for example, will Christie Whitman’s legacy be after she leaves the state house in Trenton in the year 2002?

Don’t laugh. One of Governor Whitman’s friends was actually asked that question by a political reporter, no more than ten days after she won re-election last November. His reply? Nothing the reporter cared to hear. Something along the lines of, “Why don’t we wait a few years to find out?”

Out of the question, of course. Like the novice gardener who pulls up his potato patch every morning to see how the crop is coming along, legacy buffs in the dot-com nineties won’t take “wait” for an answer.

So it is that even as Bill Clinton contemplates the navel of his place in history, the early returns are coming in on the legacy of his predecessor, George Bush. Fortunately for Bush, the first precinct heard from is that of a credible presidential historian rather than, say, a Robert Caro looking for Texas sludge, or a Garry Vills on the prowl for crypto-fascist malignancy. (Not to forget Oliver Stone doing his turn on Iran-contra.)

In *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, Herbert S. Parmet, whose previous books include biographies of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon,

VICTOR GOLD, national correspondent of *The American Spectator*, was co-author of *George Bush’s autobiography*, *Looking Forward*.

offers up a Theodore White-model of instant history which, if not the final word on Bush’s legacy, brings fresh insight to the three *whys* most often asked about his political rise-and-fall: (1) Why, despite telling friends of his “strong reservations” about Bush, did Ronald Reagan pick him as a vice presidential running mate in 1980; (2) Why, despite little personal knowledge of Dan Quayle, did Bush pick him as a vice presidential running mate eight years later; (3) Why, after his unqualified “Read my lips” pledge at the Republican convention that same year, did Bush become party to the Democratic-inspired tax increase of 1990?

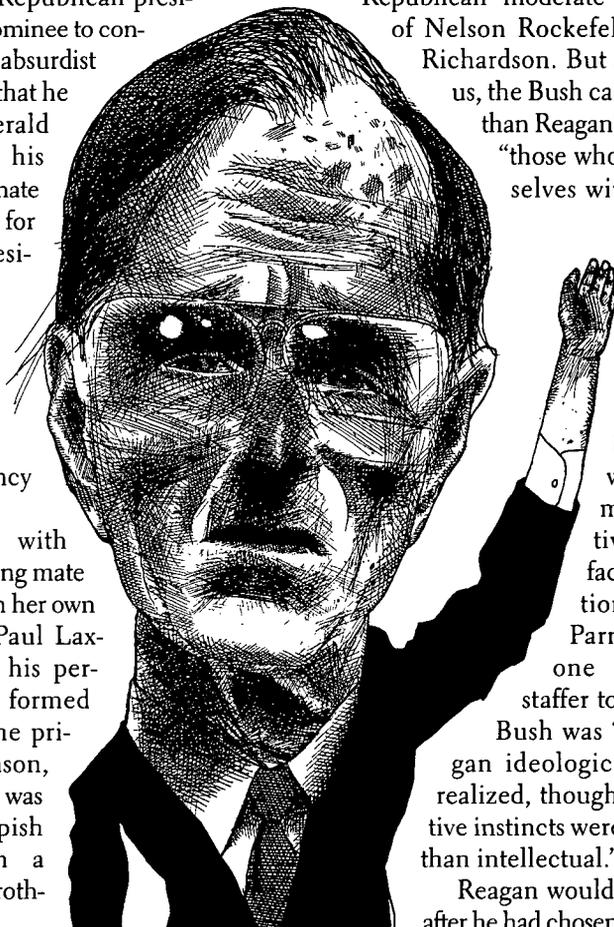
It was no secret at Detroit in the summer of 1980 that Reagan had, as he told one confidante, “strong reservations about George Bush”—strong enough, in fact, to lead the Republican presidential nominee to consider the absurdist proposal that he pick Gerald Ford as his running mate and settle for a co-presidency. Reagan’s problem with Bush—aside from Nancy Reagan’s problem with any running mate other than her own choice, Paul Laxalt—was his perception, formed during the primary season, that Bush was a wimpish “man in a Brooks Brothers suit.”

Reagan was far from alone in that perception. It was one that would follow George Bush throughout his career, despite all evidence that he didn’t fit the Eastern establishment mold seemingly prescribed by his New England birth and education. “After his military service [he] was not about to step into the monotonous routine of daily commutation into New York for eight hours...on Wall Street,” writes Parmet, telling of Bush’s decision to strike out on his own as an oil equipment salesman in Odessa, Texas. Thus was born, in Parmet’s original phrase, the “Lone Star Yankee,” the Ivy League product whose independent taste for chicken-fried steak and pork rinds never failed to amuse a cynical press.

Nor was that the only mixed signal Reagan and others at the Detroit convention got from the general stereotyping the political press applies to presidential candidates. Because Bush had roots in the East—and was running against Reagan, the right-wing favorite—it followed, by media lights, that he was an Eastern Republican “moderate” in the tradition of Nelson Rockefeller and Elliot Richardson. But as Parmet tells us, the Bush campaign, no less than Reagan’s, was staffed by “those who aligned themselves with other members of the new right, also known as ‘movement conservatives.’”

“The Bush inner circle was generally more conservative than its facade of moderation,” writes Parmet, quoting one “movement” staffer to the effect that Bush was “closer to Reagan ideologically” than she realized, though his “conservative instincts were visceral rather than intellectual.”

Reagan would learn this only after he had chosen Bush as his run-



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