

# COMMENTARY

## “Dutch”

**Peter Hannaford**

In a recent letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, Edmund Morris says that he is not greatly interested in the story of Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, “which is already well-documented in the works of Lou Cannon and others.” Had he applied the same standard to Reagan's pre-politics years, he could have spared us the first 300 pages of *Dutch* (*A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* by Edmund Morris, Random House, 1999, \$35, cloth), for those years were well-documented in Anne Edwards' 1987 biography, *Early Reagan*.

This contradiction is symptomatic of the author's ambivalent attitude about his project, the first biography authorized by a sitting president. In television and magazine interviews, Morris has lauded his subject as “great,” “the bravest,” “incorrupt,” but it is hard to find such conclusions in *Dutch*. Indeed, there is a lot of condescension, as in his off-handed treatment of Reagan's years as president of the Screen Actors' Guild, a pivotal period in Reagan's transition from liberal to conservative.

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*Peter Hannaford was closely associated with Ronald Reagan for many years. The latest of his four books about the 40th president is The Quotable Ronald Reagan.*

Morris had been chosen by the Reagans, with the enthusiastic support of key staff members, to document the 40th president's life. Their choice was made on the basis of Morris's only previous book, the widely-acclaimed *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. Fourteen years later he produced *Dutch*. In mid-course he apparently suffered a writer's block. In 1992, he told scholars at the University of Virginia's Miller Center



that Reagan was an enigma, a complete mystery to him. Despite Morris's unprecedented access to Reagan while the latter was in office, he seems unable to sort out the significant from the less significant.

For example, he describes the Reagan visit to a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, where, as it turned out, some German troops were buried, as the “crisis of his career.” On the other hand, he treats the Reykjavik, Iceland, summit as if it were a public relations exercise when, in fact, it was the climactic event of the Cold War, when Rea-

gan trumped Gorbachev once and for all.

Morris gets some things right, such as the succession of events in the 1976 Reagan presidential campaign, but — for all the years spent on the project — he gets his proportions wrong on many aspects of Reagan's life.

A biographer has an obligation to present all the aspects of his subject's life as objectively as he or she can. Granted, no one is completely objective, but the historian must strive for detachment. With this book, Morris goes in the opposite direction. In his never-ending search for some deep psychological secret to Reagan's character, he finds it necessary to insert fictional characters: himself, as if born 28 years before he actually was; a son he never had; and a gossipy columnist schoolmate. Imaginary people have imaginary conversations, write imaginary letters and poems, and participate in imaginary events.

The only hint the reader has that something is up is a coy reference on the dust jacket to what Morris calls “a new biographical style.” If he set out to confuse some readers, he has doubtless succeeded, for the index lists citations of the fictional characters right along with the real ones, with no distinction made. Morris did a prodigious amount of re-

*(Please turn to page 28)*

to less constitutional protection, than pornography, obscenity, topless dancing, flag burning, and other forms of sacrosanct expression. Even libelous speech can't be enjoined in advance. But casual workplace banter *can*, if it offends the right ethnic or racial group! *Aguilar* is a stunning example of Republican judges saluting politically correct fashion in place of the law.

**T**HE COURT'S controversial ruling in *Aguilar* was 4-3; any of the Republican-appointed judges could have altered the result. The issue is not whether boorish remarks are rude and discourteous — they are — or whether workplace harassment violates the law. The Legislature has determined that it does. The issue is whether courts should be able to enjoin an amorphous category of speech that *has not yet occurred*. Remarkably, the majority said “yes,” ignoring decades of precedent. Justices Stanley Mosk, Joyce Kennard, and Janice Brown disagreed and wrote separate dissents. Mosk observed that “[a]mong our most cherished constitutional principles is that

speech — even if offensive — should be protected unless, and until, it produces a demonstrable harmful effect.” Brown’s dissent was characteristically pungent:

I can think of no circumstance in which this court has brushed aside such an important constitutional protection as the right to free speech on the basis of so little analysis or authority .... Indeed, if applied generally, the plurality’s rule would create the exception that swallowed the First Amendment ....

Every age has its fashionable ideas and its disfavored ideas. In the early part of this century, the public was particularly thin-skinned about communism. Courts tried to prohibit and punish the dissemination of communist ideas, but the United States Supreme Court struck down these decisions with a resounding no .... But today this Court reopens the door to censorship with a resounding yes. The Legislature is now free to prohibit the expression of ideas it dislikes, and courts can enforce these prohibitions with injunctions.

None of us on this Court condones ethnic and racial discrimination in the workplace, but the issue in this case is speech, not just discrimination. Speech is un-

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## WHAT YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TOLD ABOUT GUN CONTROL

By WILLIAM E. SARACINO

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**T**he primary election to fill the seat of the late Congressman George Brown is a story the media is steadfastly ignoring. Why? Read on, this is an easy one.

The ballot featured a pro-gun Republican Elia Perozzi and a pro-gun Democrat, state Senator Joe Baca, as well as two anti-gun Democrats, George Brown’s widow Marta and the mayor of San Bernardino running in the open primary. Voters could pick any candidate regardless of party.

Widows have a very strong record

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of winning their husband’s districts. Mrs. Brown lambasted Baca relentlessly for his pro-gun voting record. Her campaign made sure that gun control was *the* issue of the campaign. The voters’ verdict was a 34-32 percent Baca victory over Mrs. Brown. Perozzi received 27 percent with the anti-gun mayor getting 5 percent.

Hmmmm. Even without my abacus it appears that the pro-gun

candidates garnered more than 60 percent of the vote in this heavily Democrat, working class district. You haven’t seen this in banner headlines? Must just be an oversight.

As a note, the NRA and Gun Owners of California made a major effort to get their members in the district to vote. With a total turnout of 39,000, the two pro-gun organizations can identify close to 4,000 of their members who cast ballots. I wonder how moderate Republicans or the media explain this one? Don’t hold your breath waiting to hear.

