

Lost Memories: Unpacking the Reagan Myth (before it spreads)

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If we don't want to be roofied by the next political predator, let's get real about the "great communicator"

Upon the death of Ronald Reagan seven years ago in June, mainstream media created a fake, soft-focus biography of the first celebrity president. Even today it's common to hear politicians, including President Obama, voice deep respect for his communication skills, overall performance and impact on the country. It's as if millions of people have been dosed with a drug that makes you forget years of greed, debauchery, and abuse - the political equivalent of Rohypnol.

You could call this movie *The Reagan Hangover: Dude, Where's My Country?* And wonder, can the American people, apparently hung over since the 80s, gradually remember what transpired during that wild extended date with the aging film and TV star? Unfortunately, it's a gross out flick. The lesson: be careful in the future about bedding down with anyone who claims the 40th President as a role model.

Mitt Romney, for example. Last week the candidate from central casting allegedly channeled the dead president during his announcement speech, robotically repeating sentiments expressed in the Gipper's 1980 campaign kickoff. Phrases recalled Reagan's views on state's rights, American exceptionalism, and government as the problem, seasoned with Reaganesque optimism about the nation's future. Unless the public recovers its real memory such clumsy seduction could work. Many people already see Obama as another Jimmy Carter, a disappointing and compromised big government liberal. Killing Osama hasn't changed his overall image.

During an early June presidential pre-announcement on Fox News, Tea Party darling Michelle Bachmann used Reagan like a club. Prompted by Roger Ailes' sock puppet Sean Hannity, she said Obama "can't get away from his failed report card on dealing with the economy and job creation. President Reagan had created a million jobs a month. President Obama saw 38,000 jobs created in this recovery." It's nonsense. But as Tim Dickinson establishes in his *Rolling Stone* story "Fear Factory," Fox is a new type of political operation, a giant soundstage created to mimic a news organization and disguise GOP propaganda as journalism.

Fox protégé and contributor Sarah Palin brings up Reagan incessantly. During her recent bus tour, for example, Alaska's Fame Monster talked about her hero's 1980 visit to Liberty State Park. "He spoke of the Americans who passed through Ellis Island and whose first glimpse of their adopted country was the grand statue in New York's harbor," she gushed.

“He talked about our shared values and the common thread of the American dream across an endless mix of backgrounds.”

Reagan as diversity advocate. Classic Sarah, twisted, fact-free and catnip for her base.

Myths of a Not-So-Great Communicator

For most Republicans, calling forth “Dutch” Reagan is like bowing before a religious icon – part faith, part ritual. He’s the GOP Uber-President, The One who supposedly rolled back government and ended the Cold War, the likeable conservative “change agent” par excellence. An even broader public accepts the equally deceptive notion that he was a “great communicator” and a “straight shooter” who, at worst, didn’t know all that was being done in his name. Hearing such descriptions, it can feel like we’re being sucked into a parallel universe where things are slightly, creepily different, sanitized and airbrushed.

The myth-making began as soon as he left the building. CBS reporter Anthony Mason covered news of his death in 2004 by asserting that Reagan “had an uncanny ability to make Americans feel good about themselves.” Absolute hype, but central to the idea that he had bonded uniquely with the masses. Dan Rather piled on by claiming he wasn’t just the great communicator, “he was also a master at communicating greatness.” Rather is always a contender for the Pointless Overstatement Award.

What really happened? In the 1980s US politics continued its gradual merger with show business. Now it looks like a form of reality TV, a 24/7 series where celebrities like Palin and Donald Trump compete for the title of America’s Top Political Predator. The process was just underway in Reagan’s time and he was well trained for it. One-liners could change history. Fatuous banalities passed for a philosophy and ex-cathedra statements masquerading as arguments – “government is the problem” comes to mind – burrowed deep into the nation’s psyche. Reagan and company were especially adept at using reporters and cameras as props, ignoring the occasional tough questions while sticking with the “line of the day.” Journalists adapted, beginning to think in terms of narratives and story lines.

He did know how to stay on message. But what was it? Basically, Reagan put a smiley face on free market extremism. In this neo-Darwinism world it was everybody for themselves. He also taught many a media gatekeeper that the truth was no longer so important. As Dick Cheney put it in his Reagan eulogy, “He showed us that words change things more than acts.”

Another way to explain it is that he said one thing and did another. For example, Reagan insisted that a balanced budget was one of his priorities. Yet by the time he left office a combination of lower tax revenues and higher spending for the military sent the deficit through the roof.

Was He a Straight-Shooter?

Related to Reagan’s vaunted communication chops is the assumption that he was honest and principled. The record, however, shows rampant corruption on his watch, and not just the constitution-shredding outrage known as Iran-Contra but a modern record for the number of indicted officials. By the end of his second term, at least 138 administration officials had been convicted, indicted or investigated for misconduct or criminal activity. Many have been forgotten, some were “rehabilitated” by the two Bushes.

Did Reagan know what was happening and simply ignore it? Or was the early onset of Alzheimer's a convenient tool for his "advisors?" When I met the man in 1980, he was already having distinct senior moments. The press corps teased him about it with trick questions - but never informed the public. Either way, it was more a matter of being oblivious than straightforward or especially clean.

Though much lying was done on his behalf, Reagan did utter some clear falsehoods of his own. On invading Grenada, for instance, he claimed that the OAS pleaded for intervention. The pleading actually came from the US. He once also claimed that the Russians had sprayed toxic chemicals over Afghanistan. It turned out to be pollen-laden feces dropped by honeybees over Laos and Cambodia.

A Man of the People?

Another myth is his relative popularity. The most popular president ever upon leaving office, the media has claimed. Taking that cue, some have pressed for a monument and other forms of recognition. But Bill Clinton's approval rating when he left office was higher. Same for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and that was after three-and-a half terms and a world war.

Was Reagan one of the most popular presidents, of the 20th or any century? Actually, he ranks about the same as most post-World War II leaders. An average approval rating of 52 percent puts him behind Kennedy (70 percent), Eisenhower (66), George H.W. Bush (61), Clinton (55) and Lyndon Johnson (55). During his first term Reagan's popularity frequently dipped below 50 percent, and slipped to 46 during Iran-Contra. His personal high was 68 percent, three points below Clinton's. The 19th century may have suited him best.

What about likeability? He certainly had that, right? Yes, in a weird grandpa way. But while it's impossible to know his real personality - even his son Ron says he was inaccessible - the official likeability numbers aren't significantly different than for other presidents, including Jimmy Carter. And plenty of people thought at the time that he was dangerous, a cowboy who talked grandly about a Star Wars defense.

Nor was he especially optimistic, or a promoter of "old time values," as The New York Times and others have insisted. Let's face it: He ran a union busting administration and unleashed a war on the poor. Not an especially compassionate conservative. Back in 1964, he joked about the fact that 17 million people went to bed hungry each night. "Well, that was probably true," he said, "they were all on a diet." Two years later he called unemployment insurance "a pre-paid vacation for freeloaders." And let's not forget his "bombing starts in ten minutes" joke about the Soviet Union before a presidential TV address.

Speaking of compassion and communication, he didn't mention AIDS publicly until 1987. By that time the disease had killed at least 19,000 people in the US alone. While public health professionals pressed for education and prevention, Reagan moralists like Education Secretary Bill Bennett insisted on limiting the response to abstinence.

Reagan appealed mainly to private rather than public interests. Where were the calls to service, common effort, shared sacrifice or anything that extends beyond gratification of the individual? Nowhere to be found. Instead, his world view led to a celebration of selfishness, a green light for a new wave of conspicuous consumption. So, we should at least give him credit for making the 1980s the Decade of Greed.

The Cold War Closer?

Even if you take away honesty, popularity and compassion, didn't he end the Cold War? People like Cheney go as far as to claim it was his courage and perseverance alone, a deep insult to the courageous men and women throughout the Communist bloc who risked their lives. Reagan risked nothing, except a record deficit that took a decade and a Democratic president to eliminate.

He had no idea that the Soviet regime would collapse. According to George Kennan, "the suggestion that any United States administration had the power to influence decisively the course of a tremendous domestic political upheaval in another great country on another side of the globe is simply childish." Kennan thought that US militarism strengthened Soviet hard-liners, delaying rather than hastening the change.

Asked whether Reagan's military spending or "evil empire" rhetoric helped open up the country, Aleksandr Yakovlev, a close advisor to Gorbachev, said "it played no role. None. I can tell you that with the fullest responsibility. Gorbachev and I were ready for changes in our policy regardless of whether the American president was Reagan, or Kennedy, or someone even more liberal."

If anyone should get credit for the changes in Eastern Europe and the USSR during the late 1980s, both positive and questionable ones, it's Gorby and those he set loose. Despite all the tough talk from Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, nothing significant happened until the Soviet Union had a reform leader.

What Really Happened

From the start of his political career Reagan was an unapologetic voice for the wealthy, the greedy and the lucky, a corporate shill who apparently thought Medicare threatened civilization. Many of his current disciples secretly agree. Yet he is called a man of the people. Both the merging of show business and politics that his rise to power represented and the contradictions within his message were anticipated by Hollywood in the late 1950s when a TV star named Lonesome Roads (young Andy Griffith in a wonderful film debut) became an amoral kingmaker in the film *A Face in the Crowd*. Think Glenn Beck with a guitar and drawl.

So, what's the Reagan record? Secret wars, scandals, tax cuts for the rich, greater debt, and slashing the social safety net. Just for starters. Reagan functionaries pushed for structural adjustment programs, an international prescription that combined deregulation, privatization, an emphasis on exports, and cuts in social spending. Much of the same was also applied at home. By deregulating the savings and loan industry, his regime paved the way for a financial meltdown and a bailout that cost taxpayers hundreds of billions. Plus, the table was set for a long-term deregulation push that exacerbated the recent economic crisis.

As poverty and homelessness surged, Reagan defended his record with this insight: "One problem that we've had, even in the best of times, and that is the people who are sleeping on grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice." Pretty cold, right?

The hallmark of Reaganomics was, of course, tax cuts. In 1981 he spearheaded one of the largest in US history. Heavily weighted toward the wealthy, it widened inequality. As his budget director David Stockman later admitted, the intended effect was to starve the

government and justify cuts in spending - except on corporate welfare and the military. Some things haven't changed. On the other hand, he also supported four tax hikes in his first term and a corporate tax increase in 1986.

Reagan's team rewrote antitrust laws and oversaw an unprecedented merger binge. The way his chief enforcement official, William Baxter, viewed it, "There is nothing written in the sky that says the world would not be a perfectly satisfactory place if there were only 100 companies." There's a "free market" vision. The nation's trade gap hit new records, while the environment deteriorated and the EPA budget was cut by half. Countless regulations were discarded or revised based on pseudo-scientific conclusions. There's more but you get the point.

Criminal Intent and Big Lies

The biggest myth about Reagan may be the claim that he was a reluctant warrior eager to make peace, and not a celluloid cowboy and knee-jerk imperialist who supported dictators and death squads, illegally pursued secret wars, and backed Islamic radicals destined to turn against the US.

Is this exaggeration? Let's start with General Efraim Rios Montt, who carried out a near holocaust against Indians and peasants in Guatemala. He was condemned around the world. Yet Reagan visited the dictator in 1982, and afterward said he was getting a "bad deal" over human rights abuses. And let's not neglect Saddam Hussein, whose regime was actively assisted by the US with weapons components, military intelligence, even ingredients for making biological weapons. So much for democracy and non-proliferation.

In El Salvador, election fraud and the murder of anyone who dissented led to civil war. Reagan responded with unlimited money, military and training that led to torture and paramilitary death squads. CIA and other US personnel played active roles. The outcome was a least 75,000 civilian deaths, the thwarting of social change, and more wealth for the oligarchy.

As for secret wars, do we really need to go farther than Nicaragua, under vicious attacks for years by Reagan's proxy army, the Contras? It was all-out, though largely covert combat directed from DC, and aimed at destroying the government, burning down schools and clinics, mining harbors and dropping bombs. Reagan called his thugs freedom fighters, one of many linguistic subversions. Plus, we had "arms for hostages," the Secret Team and other off-book covert ops.

Although the idea of backing Islamic fighters in Afghanistan dates from the Carter era - Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor and initially part of Obama's brain trust, has taken credit - the government went all-in during the Reagan's time. Outcome: More than a million dead, three million disabled, five million refugees, the rise of a medieval regime, and a generation of hostile fundamentalists, originally trained and armed by the US.

Is all this just ancient history? Not if people continue to accept the fantasy that Reagan was a benign, small government, John Wayne type with compassion and deeply held principles. Not if they believe that those currently exploiting his false bio will somehow restore his imaginary legacy. At times like these doesn't someone need to shout, "Wake up. You were totally screwed by that guy."



It matters because the political establishment and most media have been worse than soft on the man once known as Ray-Gun. They've been marketing a fake, possibly one of the big lies since the Cold War. According to Joseph Goebbels, the monster who coined the phrase, "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The lie can be maintained only for such time as the State can shield the people from the political, economic and/or military consequences of the lie."

The shielding was pretty effective until the financial meltdown, and the deception persists. So, if we don't want to be roofied by another political predator in the future, let's get clear on what happened in the past. When Reagan was in charge government grew—along with the deficit, taxes rose - except on the rich, secret wars raged, corruption reigned, violations of human and civil rights were widespread, and the president was a stone-cold diva who didn't seem to care. Wake up and re-smell the 80s.

This is what Romney, Palin, Bachmann and the gang want to bring back? They must be on drugs. Fortunately we can just say no. As Gil Scott-Heron sang, we don't need no Re-Ron. The last one was bad enough.

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