

Reagan versus the intellectuals

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AS Samuel Johnson once remarked, we more often need to be reminded than to be instructed. That pithy observation helps us take the proper measure of Dinesh D'Souza's newest book, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*.[†] It must be conceded at the outset that, from a strictly scholarly or historical standpoint, this is not a trailblazing book. There are no new discoveries here, no startlingly original interpretations, few fresh facts. Nor is such a slim volume meant to preempt or compete with the massive authorized Reagan biography currently being written by Edmund Morris, or even with the earlier biographical efforts of Lou Cannon, Laurence Barrett, Ronnie Dugger, Garry Wills, et al., or the score-settling memoirs too numerous to mention. Indeed, given its light and accessible touch, a touch reminiscent of the book's subject, it is more like an extended essay than a standard biographical or historical study.

And yet, D'Souza has made an extremely useful contribution not only to our understanding of Ronald Reagan and his presidency but of the American past and present. He has accomplished this by doing what historians do best, when they are on their game: presenting the flow of ideas and events in a larger perspective that reveals their ultimate direction and deeper meaning. If his book is more a boldly stroked sketch than a detailed portrait, so much the better.

Such a book may be especially necessary to redirect our thinking in the case of Reagan, a president who, from the start, has elicited an appalling level of unconcealed loathing from the liberal scribes who keep the tablets of our civilization and who had already drafted the "story" on him long before it

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had run its remarkable course. Even before the 1980s were finished, catch phrases such as “decade of greed,” “smoke and mirrors,” and “new Gilded Age,” along with images of an avaricious, aggressive, corrupt, ignorant, and bumbling administration, had become engraved in the pages of standard history textbooks and fixed in the minds of most educated Americans as the principal “story” of the era. So effective has this spinning of the past been, with its relentless minimizing of Reagan’s truly astonishing record, that even his fellow Republicans, beginning with the “kinder and gentler” George Bush, have come to accept it, if only by silent assent.

Hence Reagan, the bold and canny politician whose opponents always underestimated him to their later regret, the winner of the Cold War and restorer of national self-confidence and economic health, is in danger of being underestimated by history. D’Souza wrote his book to remind us that it was Reagan, not his clever detractors, who turned out to be right about the vulnerability of the Soviet Union, right about the preconditions of economic recovery, right about the resiliency of the American spirit, right about everything that mattered, about which the “wise men” were consistently wrong, in ways they have never fully acknowledged.

ONE of the most satisfying features of D’Souza’s book is its collection of quotations from learned fools, all of whom were certain, with an arrogance bordering on contempt, that they understood the world better than a dim bulb like Reagan. We are treated, for example, to the collective wisdom of Seweryn Bialer, John Kenneth Galbraith, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Paul Samuelson, James Reston, Lester Thurow, Strobe Talbott, and Stephen Cohen, all of whom lectured the public about the growing strength of the Soviet economic and political system in the early 1980s. All of these men concluded that the Soviet regime was much too firmly entrenched to be effectively challenged. Those who thought otherwise, as Reagan did, were (in the words of Schlesinger) “wishful thinkers” who were only “kidding themselves,” and indeed, were endangering the very survival of the planet. When the Soviet Union collapsed a few years later, they were of course stunned. Schlesinger marvelled that “no one foresaw these changes,” conveniently forgetting that Reagan had foreseen them and had been ridiculed for predicting them.

Again and again, D’Souza reminds us that Reagan was the target of a level of venom that we have not seen before or

since, and that all his major achievements had to surmount a level of opposition, particularly from intellectual elites, that frequently lapsed into the worst sort of mendacity, name-calling, and wanton destructiveness. More importantly, he reminds us of Reagan's response to such abuse: a combination of tenacity, optimism, and jaunty humor that proved largely unstoppable, precisely because it contrasted so sharply with the bitter bile of his opposition.

But this might seem to imply that Reagan's success was a question of style, the triumph of amiable temperament over feeble intellect. That is a view that D'Souza rightly rejects. Such a view is merely a variant on the theme of condescension, hiding behind a cynical view of modern American politics as stage-managed unreality. It was not only the style but also the content of his policies, and the values they embodied, that made him so successful.

AN excellent example of these qualities can be found in D'Souza's account of Reagan's decision to deploy Pershing and Tomahawk missiles in Europe to counter the threat of Soviet SS-20s. It is easy to forget the courage Reagan showed, in the face of a vast international peace movement, and much domestic uneasiness, in following through with the decision to deploy the missiles. It was a key move, in retrospect, toward the ultimate defeat of the Soviet Union. Perhaps even more controversial, and (we now know) just as consequential, was his insistence upon moving ahead with the development of a strategic missile defense, a move that apparently unnerved Soviet leaders even more than it did nervous American pundits.

Equally illuminating is D'Souza's reconsideration of Reagan's domestic record. D'Souza records the sophisticated resignation and impotence that passed for economic wisdom in the stagflation-ridden 1970s. Michael Blumenthal, Jimmy Carter's treasury secretary, dithered that the era's double-digit inflation was "caused by a number of factors that act together and interact in strange and mysterious ways," while Lester Thurow opined, that to cure inflation, the United States would need "some good luck." It was widely believed that the U.S. economy could no longer compete with the fearsome Japanese unless it adopted an "industrial policy," formulated by just such savants as Blumenthal and Thurow. Reagan had the temerity to think the nation's problems could be solved, without reversion to a centrally directed economy, through a combination of intelli-

gent monetary policies and bold tax reforms. Again Reagan had to brave cheerfully the howls and jibes of his "betters," including opportunists in his own party. One remembers how badly undercut Reagan was by his own budget director, David Stockman.

As this example should suggest, it is not only the Democratic or liberal opposition that comes away from D'Souza's treatment with egg on its face. No political or ideological faction is spared. The impulse to underestimate Reagan has been almost universal. There is hardly a major conservative figure that does not turn up in these pages, saying something embarrassing or dismissive about Reagan. One emotion clearly motivating the composition of this book was anger, directed at Reagan's ungrateful and improvident political heirs, who seem determined to fritter away his legacy without deigning even to acknowledge it.

ONE hopes this book will help rectify that problem somewhat, and awaken a sense of gratitude that Reagan clearly deserves. And perhaps, too, some will hear in this book an echo of the familiar words from Reagan's most famous movie: *Knute Rockne, All American*, where he played the dying George Gipp. Present-day Republicans could do far worse than concentrate their wandering and feckless minds on the worthwhile task of winning one for the Gipper.