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**Roger James Johnson**

**Ronald Reagan**  
**and the**  
**Mythology of American History**

DPhil Thesis

Submitted to the University of Sussex

September 30, 2009

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

**Signature**.....

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University of Sussex  
Roger James Johnson, DPhil

Ronald Reagan and the Mythology of American History

Summary

The concept of myth has been central to the interpretation of President Ronald Reagan. This is a complex and ambiguous association. Myth is variously defined, referring to fable and falsehood as well as symbolic narratives of memory and identity. It is also variously applied, to Reagan's character, ideology, communication and legacy. Reagan's relationship to American mythology has been incompletely defined, and is in need of a synthesis which shows the connections between its different facets and processes, while identifying the problems of such an approach. Analysing the extensive literature on Reagan, using his public papers and published writings, and based on original research at the Reagan Presidential Library and at Stanford University, this thesis considers the presence and functions of American myth in Reagan's presidency in five distinct ways. Firstly, I look at the mythic narratives of Reagan's life in his biography. Secondly, I define his own perception of American history. Thirdly, I describe his distinctive, but constrained engagements with national commemoration. Fourthly, I explore the politicised historical interpretations of two central events of his presidency, the end of the Cold War, and the Iran/Contra affair. Lastly, I examine how his presidential library works to define his varied meaning in American history and mythology. The thesis concludes by surveying Reagan's meaning in twenty-first century America, and the tension between his national and partisan symbolism. Reagan built a reputation on his successful appeals to American myth, memory and identity and maintains a charged and contested symbolism. This association and this success have become the definitive factor of his image as his own mythology emerges in American national culture.

### **Acknowledgments**

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Wendy James and Douglas Johnson, for their help, inspiration and tolerance of an unseemly interest in Ronald Reagan. Great thanks are also due to Steve Burman and Clive Webb for their rigorous and valuable supervision. The encouraging environment of the Sussex University American Studies Department, and the support of my friends throughout my postgraduate career, have also been essential to the completion of this thesis.

I am grateful to the British Association of American Studies for granting me the Peter Parish Award, which enabled my research trip to California. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library was a vital resource for much of this thesis, revealing processes behind Reagan's commemoration of the American past, and its own commemoration of Reagan. Specifically, as well as the general White House Office of Records and Management, and Speechwriting collections, the papers of the 1981 Inaugural Committee and of Ken Khachigian were important sources. The staff there, in particular Mike Duggan, were a great help. I also owe thanks to the library's director, R. Duke Blackwood, for agreeing to an interview about the history and nature of his institution. Stanford University's Department of Special Collections also contained crucial material on the history of the Reagan Library. I must thank Margaret Kimball for help in identifying the relevant papers of John Manley and of Robert Byers, and the records of the Stanford University Planning Office. Finally, thanks are due to Edmund Morris, for supplying me with interesting insight into the process of writing Reagan's biography.

## Introduction

### Ronald Reagan and the Mythology of American History

*History is a ribbon, always unfurling. History is a journey. And as we continue our journey, we think of those who travelled before us...Now we're standing inside this symbol of our democracy, and we see and hear again the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely President paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air.<sup>1</sup>*

Ronald Reagan's relationship to American mythology has been a layered association, involving his identity and ideology, his office, and his legacy. It has two fundamental subjects: Reagan's mythologisation of America, and America's mythologisation of Reagan. These, however, are connected in the way that Reagan has become a symbol of American myth; not just contained within it, but embodying its meanings and its processes in twentieth century America. This thesis defines this relationship and emphasises that connection, establishing that while myth is a vital concept for understanding Reagan's presidency and legacy, it has also obscured him. Myth is a recurring concept in the scholarship and interpretation of Reagan, but it has been variously defined and diversely applied, and without attention to how its association with Reagan has affected his historical image. Myth has defined his rhetoric and beliefs, explained his political success, and described his continuing relevance to, and representation in, contemporary America. It is also a pejorative in the political arguments over the nature and consequences of the Reagan presidency. Yet, the extent and implications of the association of Reagan with American myth have not been fully explored. This thesis tests that association, establishing how Reagan interacted with the narratives and rituals of American myth, and how this has informed his interpretation and remembrance.

The closing lines, above, from his Second Inaugural Address indicate the processes and premises of Reagan's relationship with American myth. It is a piece of rhetoric, an example of Reagan's communication with America that appeals to the

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<sup>1</sup> Reagan, 'Inaugural Address', January 21, 1985, *The Public Papers of President Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/12185a.htm> (accessed June 22, 2009).

common symbols of national history. It was also part of a ritual, the occasion of Reagan's swearing in as president, its ceremony and environment heavy with the symbols of national foundation and continuity. It also represents an historic moment; an inaugural address is a conscious point of dialogue between the past and future, and an effort to define a presidency in those terms. It is, as such, a symbolic historical reference point for those looking back on the Reagan presidency. One rhetorician, William F. Lewis, identified a myth as a story of shared symbols that structures an argument and pointed to the Second Inaugural as an example of Reagan's mythic expression. It was "based upon a story of America's origins and its quest for freedom", which communicated a common identity to its audience as well as a moral lesson.<sup>2</sup> Others saw in Reagan's words further implications that support his association with myth. Jon Roper described this passage as typical of Reagan's "historical drama"; it was "a carefully crafted script: scenes from America's past form a classic Reagan montage."<sup>3</sup> This was an allusion to Reagan's Hollywood identity, an essential aspect to his perception as an emblem of American myth.

The comparison of Reagan's rhetoric to a film script also hints at the fictionalisation of history – a recurrent theme in critical responses to Reagan that suits the pejorative meaning of myth as a falsification of history. Wilbur Edel's critique of the Reagan presidency made much of his exceptional "ignorance of history" and "acceptance of fantasy in place of fact". The image of George Washington praying in the snow at Valley Forge provided an example of this. Washington, Edel says, was never known to pray in public, and Reagan was reporting "as fact" a scene taken from a painting.<sup>4</sup> Edel's connection of Reagan's words to national art history raises an interesting aspect to them beyond their inaccuracy. Due to the extremely cold weather of the inaugural weekend, Reagan delivered his address inside the Capitol rather than on its steps. The historical themes he evoked echoed in the Rotunda and the great series of commemorative paintings which encircled him and his audience. The only common subject was George Washington, but the speech and the images both expressed a heroic narrative of American history, of progress, triumph and expansion. Later paintings depicting the discovery, settlement and expansion of the colonial era,

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, William F., 'Telling America's Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 (3) (August, 1987), pp. 282-4.

<sup>3</sup> Roper, Jon, *The American Presidents: Heroic Leadership from Kennedy to Clinton* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 137.

<sup>4</sup> Edel, Wilbur, *The Reagan Presidency: An Actor's Finest Performance* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 1992), pp. 5, 65.



accompanied the Revolutionary scenes. In the 1830s, Congress chose these subjects in an evasion of the politically controversial proposal to celebrate Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans on the walls of the Capitol. As one representative argued: "You must go back until you meet events hallowed by time, and magnified and mystified by antiquity."<sup>5</sup> Contentious recent history was an issue for Reagan, as well, if not one revived in his Second Inaugural. The immediate environment, and more broadly the traditional themes and practices of American memory, supported the mythic narrative which Reagan described in his speech. Reagan's relationship to American mythology was an interaction with existing structures and traditions, and his multifaceted myth is a contribution to those traditions.

While this quotation contributes to the symbolisation of Reagan, it does not represent his own work. The passage, written by Peggy Noonan, was included in the final draft after Reagan's own attempt was considered an overly dry collection of facts and figures. Pollster and political advisor Dick Wirthlin felt the speech needed more "emotional hitting power".<sup>6</sup> Noonan was the central writer of many of the speeches which contributed to Reagan's reputation for lyrical and emotive expressions of America's past, its identity and future, including the Pointe du Hoc address at the commemoration of D-Day, the eulogy for the *Challenger* astronauts, and Reagan's Farewell Address. Here, her words represent the collective effort of Reagan's White House to ensure a visionary and presidential quality to his Second Inaugural. Two decades after he spoke them, these words informed his remembrance. On his death, the CBS anchor Dan Rather – notoriously critical of Reagan during his presidency – remembered him thus:

He understood that, as he once put it, "History is a ribbon always unfurling," and managed to convey his vision in terms both simple and poetic. And so he was able to act as a conduit to connect us to who we had been and who we could be.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fryd, Vivien Green, *Art and Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 42-7.

<sup>6</sup> Wirthlin, Dick, marginalia in memo to Darman, Richard G., "Inaugural Address Draft (1/10/85)" (January 15, 1985), ID# 286397, SP100, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley; a brief account of this can also be found in Noonan, Peggy, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003), pp. 189-91.

<sup>7</sup> Rather, Dan, quoted in 'Reagan: Media Myth and Reality' (June 9, 2004) *FAIR: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1832> (accessed June 22, 2009).

Five years later, the Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who had entered Congress during Reagan's presidency, helped dedicate a commemorative statue to Reagan in the Capitol Rotunda. Reid, noting that the statue stood fittingly in the place where Reagan had begun his second term, quoted Noonan's words, concluding: "President Reagan's travels – from Dixon, Illinois; Hollywood; and Las Vegas to Washington, Berlin and beyond – left as enduring a legacy as anyone who has ever unfurled the long ribbon of our nation's history."<sup>8</sup> Rather and Reid, once critics of Reagan, now remembered him in terms of his rhetorical employment of American myth, and his embodiment of America's mythic connection with its past. This passage, then, indicates the mythic style of President Reagan's rhetoric and historical understanding, their association with his biographical Hollywood identity, the efforts of Reagan's staff to present him in congruence with the mythic quality of his office, and the centrality of his mythic appeal to his presidency. Each of these themes guides this thesis.

The diverse relationship between Reagan and American mythology reveals elements of a definition of "myth". I define "myth" in this context as a commonly recognisable story about the past, which offers explanation of the present and direction for the future.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, American mythology describes stories about the national past that make use of shared national symbols, and indicate American identity and purpose in the present. American mythology is present when Americans remember their collective experience through symbolic stories and images which explain their common identity, and draw instruction from it. With this definition, I can elaborate on the theory and methods employed here in relation to the idea of national memory and identity, and the relationship between mythology and history.

"Remembering the past," argued David Lowenthal, "is crucial for our sense of identity: to know what we were confirms that we are."<sup>10</sup> National memory is the basis of national identity. Memory in this sense must be understood as an analogy, not an extension or repetition of the processes of individual memory. Maurice Halbwachs,

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<sup>8</sup> Reid, Harry, 'Reid, Congressional Leaders Dedicate Statue of President Reagan' (June 3, 2009), [http://reid.senate.gov/newsroom/pr\\_060309\\_reaganstatue.cfm](http://reid.senate.gov/newsroom/pr_060309_reaganstatue.cfm) (accessed September 15, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Henry Tudor's useful survey of myth, its theories and its modern appearance, concluded that it could be described as an "account of the past and future in light of which the present can be understood", and "a fairly ordinary human activity". Tudor, Henry, *Political Myth* (London: Pall Mall, 1972), p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> Lowenthal, David, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.197.

the sociologist who first described collective memory, emphasised that it was external to individuals, sustained in the discourse and practices of groups. It was a process, however, that was informed by, and informed in turn, personal memories.<sup>11</sup> Since Halbwachs, the study of the physical and psychological process of individual memory has advanced to reinforce the analogy with collective memory. Rather than drawing from a consistently maintained store, the mind continually regenerates memories. Collective or social memory can also be understood as a process of “creative construction” developed in “conversation” with the present.<sup>12</sup> This analogy has been extended to describe the structuring of social memory in meaningful narrative sequences, and of the expression of habit-memory in commemorative ritual.<sup>13</sup> Such shared narratives and rituals are manifestations of myth, and it is through myth that memory can inform national identity.

The processes of American memory and its implications for American identity have received important scholarly attention. Michael Kammen’s general history of American memory provides valuable insight into its changing practices, applications and meanings over the course of more than a century.<sup>14</sup> Other scholars have taken a more specific focus, such as Emily Rosenberg on Pearl Harbor and Barry Schwartz on Abraham Lincoln, charting and decoding their subjects’ meaning in national memory through generations of Americans, demonstrating the variance in representations and functions of the past in national life.<sup>15</sup> Such works are valuable here in their theoretical approach, and in their identification of the arenas, processes and themes of American memory, although they do not provide a model. The twenty years since Reagan’s presidency and the five years since his death are simply too short a time to portray the expansive, changing forms and focuses of collective memory in American culture, or, as Schwartz attempts, “the mechanisms sustaining the content of collective memory across time.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, this is a contained study of Reagan’s mythic representations, the mythic representations of Reagan found within political and

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<sup>11</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Thelen, David, ‘Introduction’ in Thelen, David (ed.), *Memory and American History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. ix-xii.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Kammen, Michael, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1991); Also see Kammen, *In the Past Lane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, Emily S., *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Schwartz, Barry, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Schwartz (2000), p. 20.

historical culture, and the intersections between them. The connection is the basis of an emergent national memory of Reagan.

Reagan's mythic representations are straightforwardly defined, and have been already indicated as involving his rhetoric, his participation in commemorative ritual and ceremony, and the ideological and practical foundations behind them. These foundations can be understood using Reagan's published writing, and the White House records of his presidential speeches and commemorative performances. The mythic representations of Reagan are a more diverse category which must be defined through an understanding of how myth and history converge. Myth derives conceptually and linguistically from the Ancient Greek *μῦθος*, which within philosophical discourse stood in counterpart to *λόγος*. The logic, reason and rationality of the latter contrasted the fantastical, the fictional and the absurd of the former.<sup>17</sup> Where a historical representation of Reagan is fictionalised or dramatised, there is the potential of his mythologisation, where there is the suggestion of mythic truth. Mircea Eliade emphasised the distinction between the "true stories" of myth, pertain to explaining reality, and the "false stories" of fable.<sup>18</sup> Though this related to the stories of archaic or "primitive" cultures, it is a useful point here. It is complicated with Reagan, who as an actor and ideologue is so associated with dramatic and fictional stories. When, in his representation, this association becomes the primary aspect of his life or presidency, when it makes him a story or a product of stories, this I interpret as myth.

The dichotomy of *μῦθος* and *λόγος* also makes a distinction between myth and objective, empirical history. In the mid-twentieth century, Ernst Cassirer understood myth as the enemy of reason, a struggle evident in the rise of fascism and the Second World War. However, he believed fascism to have its roots in the philosophies of history laid out by Thomas Carlyle and Hegel.<sup>19</sup> "Systems," suggested Mircea Eliade, which "set out to discover the *meaning* and *direction* of universal History" are mythic in their nature.<sup>20</sup> This is not immediately relevant to Reagan's historiography, which has not been directed by historicist theory. However, in the context of the national idea, where Reagan's life and presidency discovers the

<sup>17</sup> Overing, Joanna, 'The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective', Hosking, Geoffrey and Schöpflin, George (eds.), *Myth and Nationhood* (London: Hustard Co., 1997), pp. 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> Eliade, Mircea, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), pp. 8-10.

<sup>19</sup> Cassirer, Ernst, *The Myth of the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

<sup>20</sup> Eliade (1963), p. 135.

meaning and direction of American history, myth is recognisable. Eliade also addressed historiography as an exercise of mythic thought, seeing in “the *endeavour to preserve the memory* of contemporary events and the desire to know the past as accurately as possible” a mythic concern with origins, memory and identity.<sup>21</sup> This idea has particular relevance to the purpose of historical preservation at the Reagan Library. Others have also noted the pervasive presence of myth in historiography. Elizabeth Tonkin has argued that “historians live by the myth of realism” and that the dichotomy between myth and history is false: “All understandings of the past affect the present. Literate or illiterate, we are our memories.”<sup>22</sup> The narrative form of history, meanwhile, has been subject to the structuralist theory of Hayden White, which sees in the selection and plotting of historical fact an inevitable moral interpretation which might be described as myth.<sup>23</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss argued that historiography “never completely escapes from the nature of myth.”<sup>24</sup>

These ideas about the philosophy of history, its social or national purpose, its subjectivity and relationship to memory, and its narrative form, all help identify mythic aspects within the historical literature on Reagan, but amount to a broad characterisation of myth. Moreover, the general category of Reagan’s historical literature is diverse. Its most overtly mythic branch consists of Reagan’s biography, due to the general narrative imperatives of the form of the life-story, and the specific symbolic conventions of presidential biography. Present in his biography, but more focused in the accounts of his presidency, is the high level of politicised interpretation that informs Reagan’s historical image. Within this partisan discourse, “myth” is a pejorative concept which emphasises the self-serving political bias of countering interpretations of Reagan. Most often, this has been applied to “conservative mythology” of Reagan, the collective efforts of politicians and authors to use a positive historical image of Reagan to vindicate and promote contemporary American conservatism.<sup>25</sup> Conservatives, however, have made similar charges about liberal

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, pp. 135-8.

<sup>22</sup> Tonkin, Elizabeth, ‘History and the Myth of Realism’, Samuel, Raphael and Thompson, Paul (eds.), *Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> White, Hayden, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> Longley, Kyle, Mayer, Jeremy D., Schaller, Michael and Sloan, John W., (eds.) *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America’s Fortieth President* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2007);

mythology of Reagan, propagated in the media and in the academy rather than through political organisations.<sup>26</sup> There are two points here: first that the literature on Reagan's presidency is often more polemic or tribute than history; the second is the pervasiveness of the concept of myth in the discourse on Reagan's presidency, and his legacy and historical image. Historical accounts of Reagan must engage with myth, even where they do not take the mythic form of biography, or make a purposeful political argument. They must respond to Reagan's mythic practice, but also the mythic context of his historical image. To write about Reagan is to write about myth, and consequently, to perpetuate Reagan's fundamental symbolic meaning as an embodiment of American myth. The historical literature will be explored here in regard of these points; it will be considered categorically, and with an eye to demonstrating the pervasive theme of myth in Reagan's interpretation.

A final issue remains. Essentially, why does Reagan demand mythological study above other presidents? Myth and symbolism relate to the presidency in four ways: in image management of a president (or candidate for president) who seeks to present an idealised version of himself to the American people; in the priestly, ceremonial role of the president to officiate over national traditions and ritual; in the symbolic role of the head of state to represent, even embody the nation; and in the retrospective creation of presidential heroes and icons in American culture. None of these processes began with Reagan, and all were observed before his presidency. Image-making has been a conscious aspect of the presidency at least as far back as the first popular campaigns by Andrew Jackson. Individual presidents developed the process with the institutional and technological growth of the news media, from Teddy Roosevelt's and Warren Harding's cultivation of journalists and formalisation of press relations, to Franklin Roosevelt's employment of radio, and the management of his visual image to hide his disability, with the complicity of even hostile members of the press.<sup>27</sup> The presidency of John Kennedy saw the full introduction of television to the White House, while that of Nixon saw the development of the carefully staged

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Bunch, Will, *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts our Future* (New York: Free Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, D'Souza, Dinesh, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Noonan, Peggy, 'Why we Talk About Reagan', *Wall Street Journal* (February 8, 2002), <http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=95001834> (accessed July 13, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> McDonald, Forrest, *The American Presidency: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), pp. 428-47.

“pseudo-event”, such as H. R. Haldeman’s landscaping of Honolulu Airport in advance of the president’s greeting of the returning Apollo 13 astronauts.<sup>28</sup> Reagan inherited such practices and developed them, as his predecessors had done. However, he became the “ultimate media president” and the “Great Communicator” based on his and his staff’s presentation of his presidency through media technologies and institutions.<sup>29</sup> His exceptional reputation in this regard is not because of his skills or innovations, important as they may be, but because of what they represent in terms of his identity as a Hollywood actor. Reagan’s leadership and communication have been defined by the symbolism of America’s two greatest mythic institutions – the presidency, and Hollywood. The narratives of the “dream factory” and Reagan’s “star” persona have made his presidency more than usually descriptive of American myth.<sup>30</sup>

Reagan is also credited with refurbishing the symbolic presidency. As well as restoring the ceremony of the office that Ford and Carter had curtailed, Reagan, some claim, restored American confidence in the presidency.<sup>31</sup> This diminishment was noted by Harold Barger in 1978, who nonetheless emphasised that the symbolic presidency, a mythic image which represented the continuity and character of the nation while raising unrealistic expectations of the man in the office, would remain a vital part of American political culture: “we continue to chase after the idealized and romanticized Presidency, mostly through an attachment to the chief of state image.”<sup>32</sup> Barbara Hinckley, meanwhile, in her study of the symbolic presidency, noted that while Americans claimed Watergate had reduced their confidence in the presidency, they gave no indication of that loss in more general responses to the institution.<sup>33</sup> Her study, moreover, which considers the rhetoric and public activity of Presidents Truman through Reagan, makes no great claim about Reagan’s restoration or

<sup>28</sup> Waterman, Richard W., Wright, Robert, St. Clair, Gilbert, *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 48-51; Reeves, Richard, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 192.

<sup>29</sup> Wright and St. Clair (1999), pp. 53-4.

<sup>30</sup> For identification of the the layered, symbolic identity of the “star”, see Dyer, Richard, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Cannon, Lou, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), pp. 121-2; D’Souza, Dinesh, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 201-2.

<sup>32</sup> Barger, Harold M., ‘The Prominence of the Chief of State Role in the American Presidency’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 8(2) (1978), p. 138. Also see Thompson’s description of the crisis of “illusion” and “despair” in the American presidency, Thompson, Kenneth W., *The President and the Public Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), pp. 9-28.

<sup>33</sup> Hinckley, Barbara, *The Symbolic Presidency: How Presidents Portray Themselves* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 9-10.

reinvigoration of the office's symbolic role. However, with individual style, agendas and circumstances, he operated within the institutional and cultural conventions of the presidency. Hinckley, however, fails to include commemorative events and speeches in her survey of presidential rhetoric and activity. More than any other president, the major events of Reagan's time in office comprised acts of memory, such as the commemoration of D-Day, the visits to Bitburg Cemetery and Bergen-Belsen, and the Statue of Liberty centennial. Americans in the 1980s saw their president at regular intervals, beginning with his inauguration, make prominent statements about the meaning of their shared national memory.

This theme also relates to the final aspect of the mythic presidency – its place in American memory. The mythologisation, even deification, of certain American presidents was a well observed practice before Reagan's presidency. Clinton Rossiter wrote in 1956 that the “final greatness of the American presidency lies in the truth that it is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of American myth.”<sup>34</sup> Thomas Bailey, in his study of presidential greatness, quoted the recently deceased Kennedy before including him in his narrative as a martyr in the pantheon of presidential “cults”: “A Nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.”<sup>35</sup> For some, that the United States has honoured Reagan simply reveals the continued dominance of American conservatism, and particularly the efforts of a small group to make it happen. Will Bunch considered Reagan's elevation in the two decades after his presidency exceptional in its deliberate, political and hasty nature: “this nation has never seen [this] kind of bold, crudely calculated, and ideologically driven legend-manufacturing”.<sup>36</sup> The conservative movement's efforts to commemorate Reagan and promote him as their emblem do seem unprecedented in their organisation and ambition. However, this ideological, territorial claim does not represent the full extent of Reagan's mythologisation. Here, I hope to indicate how Reagan has negotiated with, and become part of, national myth. This, I argue, has involved a general acceptance of some of the achievements attributed to him by his supporters, but focuses on Reagan

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<sup>34</sup> Rossiter, Clinton D., *The American Presidency* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Bailey, Thomas A., *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Bunch (2009), p. 18.



as an emblem and agent of American myth, the storyteller who told the nation that “History is a ribbon, always unfurling...”.

Previous scholarship has identified mythic aspects of Reagan’s presidency, indicating his distinctiveness in this area, but none has synthesised his mythic practice with his mythic representation. Moreover, none has investigated how the interpretative association of Reagan with myth contributes to or reinforces his symbolism. A considerable amount of this literature was produced during the eighties, and thus engaged responsively with Reagan. As well as laying the foundations for future studies, this scholarship was part of his era, representing its interests and ideas as established by its president. A large portion of it represented literary and rhetorical interest in the iconography and narratives that Reagan employed in his speeches.<sup>37</sup> Such interest sought to explain the effectiveness of Reagan’s communication, and was partly driven, as William Lewis noted, by the political question: “How...can he be so popular when he is uninformed, irrational, inconsistent?”<sup>38</sup> This question motivated Robert Dallek’s pre-emptive historical analysis of Reagan’s presidency, which used Richard Hofstadter’s theories of the paranoid style of American conservatism, to explain Reagan’s “nonrational” politics as symbolic and psychological gestures.<sup>39</sup> Reviewing Dallek’s obfuscating analysis, Garry Wills accepted the premise that “symbols have special meaning for Reagan’s administration,” but concluded that “the mystery remains.”<sup>40</sup> Wills made his own effort to explain Reagan in his biography *Reagan’s America* (1987), which remains an influential analysis of Reagan’s engagement with American myth, but which offered a fundamentally symbolic representation of his life.<sup>41</sup> Dallek, Wills and others contributed to a general sense of

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<sup>37</sup> The symbolic narratives of Reagan’s rhetoric are well demonstrated in Erickson, Paul D., *Reagan Speaks: The Making of an American Myth* (New York: New York University Press, 1985); and Lewis, (1987). For analyses of specific speeches see, for example, Moore, Mark P. ‘Reagan’s Quest for Freedom in the 1987 State of the Union Address’, *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (Winter, 1989), pp. 52-65; Rushing, Janice Hocker, ‘Ronald Reagan’s ‘Star Wars’ Address: Mythic Containment of Technical Reasoning’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72 (4) (November, 1986), pp. 415-33. A later and more critical study of the iconography and myth in Reagan’s rhetoric was Combs, James E., *The Reagan Range: The Nostalgic Myth in American Politics* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Lewis (1987), p. 280.

<sup>39</sup> Dallek, Robert, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); also see Hofstadter, Richard, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

<sup>40</sup> Wills, Garry, ‘Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism’ (review), *The Journal of American History* 71(2) (September, 1984), pp. 423-4.

<sup>41</sup> Wills, Garry, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

Reagan's unreality, finding in his presidency the material of myth, as well as its practice.

Reagan's historical imagination is another foundation of his mythological interpretation. Some of this has been highly critical, attacking the amnesiac and distorting qualities of Reagan's historical memory and its political application.<sup>42</sup> Hugh Heclo was more nuanced, providing a valuable analysis of Reagan's "philosophy of history", which describes Reagan's mythic definition and communication of the American past.<sup>43</sup> These studies do not draw any connections between Reagan's understanding and projections of American history and his own mythic representation, and neither do those which look at Reagan in myth. This latter category responds only to the phenomenon of conservative mythology of Reagan, largely seeking only to debunk it.<sup>44</sup> Few have recognised, and none have attended to the non-partisan or leftist mythologisation of Reagan, which, though not so specifically tied to a political movement as conservative myth, still understands Reagan in primarily symbolic terms. This thesis provides a synthesis of the varying aspects of Reagan's relationship to American mythology, considering areas and drawing connections which have been overlooked.

The thesis follows a loose, thematic chronology. The first chapter considers Reagan's pre-political life and its representation in his biography, and the second, his historical thought as expressed during his political career. Chapters Three and Four address Reagan's presidency, firstly its commemorative acts, and then its achievements and failures and their mythic interpretation. Finally, in Chapter Five, I look at Reagan in history and memory at his presidential library. Each part reveals Reagan's relationship to mythology as a definitive factor of his presidency and its meaning, which draws on his specific identity as well as national traditions and ideas.

Reagan's biographies represent a specific category of his literature, and are in turn part of the broader genre of presidential biography. Life-writing as a practice has inherent mythic potential, which is amplified by the symbolic weight of the

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Spitzer, Alan B., *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Wallace, Michael, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Heclo, Hugh, 'Ronald Reagan and the American Public Philosophy', Brownlee, Elliot W. and Graham, Hugh Davis, *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and its Legacies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), pp. 17-39.

<sup>44</sup> As well as Bunch (2009) and Longley, Mayer, Schaller and Sloan (2007), see Dallek, Matthew, 'Not Ready for Mount Rushmore' (Summer 2009), *The American Scholar.org*, <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/not-ready-for-mt-rushmore/> (accessed September 25, 2009).

presidency. Reagan's life-story is thus subject to the mythic imperatives of its narrative form and of the traditions and symbolic conventions of presidential biography. His life explains his presidency, while his presidency is remembered through his life, each process infusing the story with a sense of inevitability, or destiny. The symbolic meaning of the presidency as a representation of America also results in Reagan's life representing and revealing American history, as defined by themes of his leadership. Chapter One makes use of the broad range of Reagan's biography, focusing on its portrayal of his pre-political life, and interpreting it in terms of existing biographical theory. Presidential biography has largely been overlooked as a genre, and while Reagan's life has distinctive characteristics, this study also advances a new model of thinking about how pre-presidential lives are extensions of presidential and American myth.

Chapter Two uses Reagan's speeches and the wealth of his published writings to construct a broad narrative of American history as he understood it. This reconfirms the mythic aspects of Reagan's historical ideas, as established by Hecllo and others, such as his dramatic expression, his fictive style, and his overarching belief in American destiny. Others have explored Reagan's conception and projection of the images and events of America's past to reveal their impact on American politics and on his political success, or to reflect on his psychology and character. I seek to establish the methods and form of Reagan's historical approach, and measure the coherency against its evasions and contradictions. Reagan's favoured stories emphasised a unified national identity, while avoiding evidence and themes of division, and his faith in American destiny. The establishment of Reagan's engagement with American mythology is essential to this thesis, and finding it in his perception, construction and uses of American history argues its intellectual significance for Reagan, without elevating or reducing him to a symbol of America's mythic processes.

This establishment of Reagan's appreciation of both history's stories and processes provides a foundation for Chapter Three, which examines how Reagan's presidency engaged politically with the American past in its commemorative activity. The themes of destiny and continuity in his first inaugural, of division in the national commemoration of recent history, and of unity and American moral identity in the remembrance of the Second World War, are the subjects of this study. Using White House records (and those of Reagan's transition), this chapter lays out the procedural,

political and rhetorical decisions of Reagan and his staff as they responded to and sought to shape the trends of contemporary national memory. This examination reveals that while Reagan operated within the symbolic function of the presidency, its opportunities, constraints and demands, he also advanced it to the point that his engagement with national memory became a distinctive and defining aspect of his presidency.

Reagan's commemorations brought myth to the fore of his presidency and to his subsequent interpretation. Chapter Four demonstrates that beyond this, myth was also a definitive factor in the interpretation of the political achievements and failures of his leadership. Here, I consider the partisan discourse, indicated above, in the commentary and historical literature which has reacted to Reagan and contributed to his mythological identity. The division in this discourse emphasises two "events" of Reagan's presidency: his victory in the Cold War, as argued by conservatives, and the Iran/Contra affair, which revealed to the left the depths of his presidency. The political function of the Cold War argument has so far defined conservative mythology of Reagan, but here it is considered more broadly, as part of an argument about history. The mythological interpretations of Iran/Contra, meanwhile, which treat the event symbolically as a matter of image and truth, and in terms of ideals of American democracy and identity, are given fresh attention here. This chapter argues that partisan division has strengthened Reagan's association with American myth, making him a contested historical symbol.

These themes of Reagan as a partisan and historical symbol are visited in Chapter 5 in terms of his representation by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. I consider this institution historically, charting its creation and development since the beginning of Reagan's presidency. This approach makes use of related collections at Stanford University, where its construction was first planned, and research done at the Reagan Library itself, which though it has no open material on its internal workings, has kept thorough press records of its development. My study reveals the multi-functioned nature of the library – historical, commemorative and political – and argues that these competing purposes coalesce in their mythic treatment of Reagan. However, there is tension in this convergence, where Reagan's presidency is both an indicator of the ideals and narratives of national history, and a vital symbol to contemporary Republican and conservative politics. This tension, which appears in various forms throughout the thesis, is reviewed in the conclusion in relation to

Reagan's meaning in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and of his death and funeral. This final question asks how Reagan might emerge as a national symbol, indicative to Americans of the broad themes of their history and identity, rather than the continuing activity of a particular political party, movement and philosophy. In answering this, I point to the central discovery of the thesis, that Reagan's relationship to American mythology is in itself a mythic idea. Reagan's national meaning, expressed in terms of renewed "optimism", "patriotism" and his identity as the "Great Communicator", is his symbolic representation of American mythic beliefs, narratives and practices.

## **Chapter 1**

### **“An American Life”: Ronald Reagan and Biography**

#### **Introduction**

Reagan's biography acts as an expression and extension of his presidential mythology. It tells his life-story to explain his presidency, while his presidency and its themes determine the narrative and meaning of his life. Biography reinforces the interpretation of Reagan's leadership and representation of America as mythic operations, and affirms the idea of his presidency as an event of mythic importance to contemporary America. In each case, arguments about his national significance move beyond the immediate historic relevance of his presidency and into the personal history of his life. Here they become necessarily symbolic. The events of Reagan's life are told in constant reference to those of his later leadership, while the representative nature of that leadership continues to act upon those events – as the presidency made Reagan representative of his nation, so it makes his life representative of national history. Biography represents a distinct area in which Reagan's relationship to American mythology is expressed and realised. This arises not only from the specific interpretation and remembrance of Reagan, but also from the imperatives and possibilities of the life-story in general. Biographies of Reagan belong to the wider tradition of presidential biography, a genre which displays particular characteristics and problems, resulting from both the symbolic meaning of the presidency, and the nature of the biographical form. The mythic representation of Reagan's life responds as much to him as to the demands of literary representation and to established mythic ideas about the American presidency. This chapter considers Reagan's biography as a distinct field which advances Reagan's relationship to American myth not only through its arguments, but also by subsuming him into a cultural form and tradition peculiarly bound by myth.

Presidential biography has been overlooked as a genre in the fields of both literary criticism and presidential history. Authors who have recognised it have discussed it in terms of the construction and perception of presidential images, but in limited contexts. William Burlie Brown and others have focused specifically on the

campaign biography, and its conformity to an ideal presidential life-narrative.<sup>45</sup> Edward Pessen also approached this narrative of humble beginnings and self-made success, but in terms of its inapplicability to most presidents, rather than its construction and representation in biography.<sup>46</sup> Scott Casper's examination of presidential biography, integrated within a wider American culture of biography, raised interesting points about the significance of such life-stories to the construction of national identity, but this related specifically to the nineteenth century, when, as Casper stresses, biography had different roles and expectations than in the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> A comparably thorough study of twentieth century American biography, much less presidential biography, has not been made, though in a review essay, Glenn Altschuler and Eric Rauchway observed how mythic expectations about the presidential life continue to govern presidential biography.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the wider literature on biography as a literary form contains discussions of its changing but continually problematic nature. These problems often relate to biography's historiographical tensions. The form has ambiguous functions and narrative demands which put it at odds with the ideals of objective, factual history and which allow for the mythic representation of its subjects and the past. As a biographical subject, Ronald Reagan amplifies this process through his established status as a practitioner, symbol and focus of American myth.

This chapter examines how these problems appear in and affect Reagan biographies, in terms of their varying functions and forms. The first section introduces the idea of presidential biography, its shapes and its problems. The presidential childhood is the aspect of presidential biography that has the greatest representational traditions, and this can inform an understanding of how Reagan's early life has been portrayed, promoted and critiqued, in campaign and historical biography. Here, myth exists in the association of Reagan's life with pre-established images of the presidency, and of the American past in general. Related to this is the commemorative purpose of biography. The second section considers how authors have recounted Reagan's life as an act of remembrance that responds to or seeks to inform American

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<sup>45</sup> Brown, William Burlie, *The People's Choice: The Presidential Image in the Campaign Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960).

<sup>46</sup> Pessen, Edward, *The Log Cabin Myth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> Casper, Scott E., *Constructing American Lives: Biography and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Altschuler, Glenn C. and Rauchway, Eric, 'Presidential Biography and the Great Commoner Complex,' *American Literary History*, 16(2) 2004, pp. 363-74.

collective memory. Thirdly, biography has certain creative opportunities, whereby Reagan's life appears in fiction and its traditional American forms, and is received as fiction. Examples of this demonstrate in part the blending of Reagan's life with American culture and its iconography, but also the sensitivity of his myth in the reception of these fictions. The final function of presidential biography to be considered is its operation as national biography, where the president's life reveals American history through experience and association. Reagan's life is rich in historical experience, but not only does this determine specifically themed national narratives, it also demands through Reagan's presidential identity, as mythic actor or Cold War victor, a specific symbolic interpretation of that history.

### Presidential Biography and Reagan's Childhood

Reagan's youth in Illinois during the early decades of the twentieth century has demonstrated to his biographers the roots and future echoes of his presidency, but it also conforms to the conventions of presidential biography and the myth of the presidential childhood. The basis for Edward Pessen's study of presidential lives was to test "the most enduring and the most popular of American myths...that our most exalted leaders, in politics as in business, have risen from the most modest beginnings, owing their success above all to their own ability and their own performance."<sup>49</sup> The campaign trail has long propagated and reinforced this myth, producing biographies which promote their subjects for the office. Campaign biographies represent a small and distinct section of presidential biography, defined by the single purpose of electing a candidate. William Brown called them "propaganda" which appealed to and constructed the American idea of the presidency. Brown considered the choice of a president to be driven by symbolic needs, and that the biographies of candidates represent the effort to meet the symbolic requisites of the office. Campaign biographers "are engaged in the creation of a symbol...they create out of the raw material of a candidate's real life the biography of an ideal citizen of the Republic."<sup>50</sup> The remarkably standard narrative that Brown describes has various aspects relating to ancestry, education, and character, but "no one theme in the entire range...stands out more strongly and consistently than this 'self-made

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<sup>49</sup> Pessen (1984), p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Brown (1960), pp. xi-xiv.



man' ideal."<sup>51</sup> Central to this, meanwhile, is the emphasis on the hardship, real or exaggerated, that the candidate experienced in his youth. This developed in nineteenth century presidential elections where biographers stressed the humble rural origins of their candidates, emerging in the dominant symbol and cliché of the log cabin.<sup>52</sup> In the twentieth century this saw translation, perhaps unsuccessfully, to the roots of Al Smith, whose poor urban environment was compared favourably to that of Springfield, Illinois.<sup>53</sup> Poverty and hardship are the conditions from which the candidate successfully escapes, but are also valuable as indicators of character. The narrative is one that contains both the American everyman experience, and the American dream. The story continues to have relevance on the campaign trail, demonstrated in Bill Clinton's 1992 convention film *A Man From Hope*, and evidenced in the 2008 campaign by Fred Thompson's assertion that "I can out-poor any of them. I grew up under more modest circumstances than anybody on that stage."<sup>54</sup>

Though Reagan's campaigns did not attract the glut of biographical publications that had been standard in the years before television, the "log cabin myth" was still apparent. Only two books were published that could formally be called Reagan campaign biographies. The first is *Where's the Rest of Me?* (1965), written at his transition into professional politics, which must be categorised differently, partly because it was neither written anticipating a presidential run, nor republished to benefit those in 1976 or 1980, but mostly because it is an autobiography. Though ghost-written, by the novelist and screenwriter Richard Hubler, its significance as a personal memoir distinguishes it from the ephemeral and single-minded campaign biography, notably as a lasting source for other biographers. More typical, though still distinctive for its reliance on Reagan's own voice, is Helen Von Damm's *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, which was first published in 1976, then reissued for the 1980 campaign. This fits some of the conventions of the campaign

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>52</sup> This image had such perseverance that a biographer of Rutherford B. Hayes felt the need to emphasise that the brick house of his birth had a log-built extension. Ibid, pp. 53-6; also see Lepore, Jill, 'Bound for Glory: Writing Campaign Lives', *The New Yorker* (October 20, 2008), [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/10/20/081020crat\\_atlarge\\_lepore](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/10/20/081020crat_atlarge_lepore) (accessed August 30, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Cornog, Evan, *The Power and the Story* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 76.

<sup>54</sup> Quaid, Libby, 'Huckabee, Thompson Drop Gloves,' *The Seattle Times* (January 12, 2008), [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/politics/2004121701\\_apsouthernerssquareoff12.html?syndication=rss](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/politics/2004121701_apsouthernerssquareoff12.html?syndication=rss) (accessed February 13, 2008).

biography. Short and promotional, authored by a close subordinate, Reagan's personal secretary, it offers exclusive insight into the candidate's life, character and beliefs. Von Damm does this by constructing a loose narrative around extracts from Reagan's personal letters to create "a fireside chat with the man who may become our next president".<sup>55</sup>

Largely a representation of Reagan's political positions and philosophy, it is also built on essential biographical detail in which the archetype of Brown's "ideal citizen" can be found. There is "a glamor" to Reagan's public perception, built from his Hollywood and political careers, an image of a man "urbane, witty, warm, yet somehow aloof... But there is little in any of this that recalls the poor boy from small-town Illinois."<sup>56</sup> Von Damm's depiction of Reagan's youth, drawing extensively from *Where's the Rest of Me?* as well as from reminiscent letters, emphasises how the challenges and opportunities of his environment laid the ground for later success. Brown describes an ideal youth that combines constructive recreation with a serious attitude to education. In Von Damm, we see Reagan relate the benefits of his experiences hunting and participating in organised sports, and are told of the value he gives to his college education, through which he supported himself by working. Subsequently, his break into radio announcing during the depression is presented as a result of his perseverance, ingenuity and talent. Reagan's life in his campaign biography thus conforms to the genre's conventions.

This demonstrates that even before his attainment of the presidency, Reagan's life faced interpretation in terms of well-established myths about presidential lives. These myths may have singularly practical use in a campaign biography, but their prevalence and persistence also suggests a problem for the historical presidential biographer, who must respond to them even if the purpose of their narratives may not be so straightforwardly defined. Phyllis Auty, a biographer of Tito, has discussed a similar problem in writing the lives of communist leaders, which she defined as a distinct sub-genre that bears comparison with presidential biography. Noting strong similarities in the official versions of different leaders' youths, again emphasising deprived childhoods and commitments to education, Auty noted that "many biographers have to cope with the problem of how to deal with the myth which has

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<sup>55</sup> Von Damm, Helen, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan* (New York: Berkley Books, 1976).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 1-2.

taken over from the real person”.<sup>57</sup> This is a central problem in presidential biography, and particularly the biography of Reagan, where his own specific mythic identity combines with that of the presidency to influence the representation of his life.

For some, this is not a problem, simply because they embrace the myth. In Peggy Noonan’s hagiography, Dixon is a heartland town that “was like a family that functioned well, a place that was peaceful, ordered, reliably affectionate.”<sup>58</sup> This environment allows the young Reagan to make positive character choices despite the less stable circumstances of his family life. Though ordinary, these were also exceptional. His “beginnings were the most modest and lacking of any president of the past hundred years.” “Reagan,” she asserts, “is unique in that his family had no status or standing.”<sup>59</sup> This statement is all the more meaningful for its tenuousness; Nelle Reagan had considerable standing in Dixon’s Christian community. The Hollywood biographer Anne Edwards, whose *Early Reagan* (1987) is still turned to for its thoroughly researched narrative of Reagan’s pre-political life, did not have Noonan’s overt political intention to celebrate Reagan. Presidential myth, though, was central to her account of the young Dutch Reagan, an “all-American boy” coming of age in small-town Dixon, “the backbone of the country”, before breaking free for the sake of his dreams. These quotes came from interviews with Dixon residents, with Edwards at once revealing and reinforcing the strength of belief in the American myths of the small town and presidential roots.<sup>60</sup> The small-town was part of Reagan’s political narrative, as he expressed himself in the rhetoric of the culture wars: “a town where everyone cared about one another because everyone knew one another, not as statistics in a government program but as neighbours in need... No one on Dixon, Illinois ever burned a flag and no one in Dixon would have tolerated it.”<sup>61</sup> Dixon, meanwhile, has become a symbol in its economic and social decline for Reagan’s critics, who indicate Reagan’s harmful policies and uncaring distance from his roots and people.<sup>62</sup> As Alonzo Hamby argued, it was “a measure of [Reagan’s]

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<sup>57</sup> Auty, Phyllis, ‘Problems of Writing a Biography of a Communist Leader’, Friedson, Anthony M. (ed.), *New Directions in Biography* (University Press of Hawaii, 1981), pp. 26-34.

<sup>58</sup> Noonan, Peggy, *When Character Was King* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>60</sup> Edwards, Anne, *Early Reagan: The Rise of an American Hero* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), pp. 16-78.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Dedication of Reagan Library’, C-Span recording, Miscellaneous Audiovisual Collection, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>62</sup> Kleinkecht, William, *The Man Who Sold the World: Ronald Reagan and the Betrayal of Main Street America* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), pp. 1-20.

political skill that he made us believe that he could have been a contented provincial nonentity.”<sup>63</sup> Dixon’s small-town image resonates strongly with national and presidential myth, and thus is a vital part of Reagan’s biography, despite his own youthful efforts to escape it.

By Reagan’s era, American biography had changed considerably since its roots in the nineteenth century, when its social function was more uniformly defined and accepted. Presidential biography, however, still echoed tradition. “Part of a multifaceted effort to create a national identity and culture”, biography had been produced and read for its didactic potential.<sup>64</sup> The presidency was central to this, best represented by the prevalence of George Washington’s life-story, written by Parson Weems and others, as an exemplary narrative for personal and national moral instruction.<sup>65</sup> In the twentieth century, American biography yielded as a means of ideological continuation, to become a more diverse medium under the influences of professional history, psychology and popular culture. Reagan’s biographies display these influences, but they are also guided by American interest in the presidency, which still carries symbolic weight. Altschuler and Rauchway have described in modern presidential biography a “great commoner complex”. This relates to the changing nature and perception of the presidency, which in a “more jaded age” authors are “more likely to criticize and debunk”, but whose increased power and complexity has increased the expectations of its office-holders. Reviewing recent biographies of Presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy, the authors describe how critical political history is still tempered by expectations of the symbolic presidency, causing biographers to seek the idea of the office, representative but extraordinary, within their subjects.<sup>66</sup>

This symbolic weight is apparent in biographers’ efforts to account for Reagan’s presidency in his life-story. They are also complicated by a more general process of modern biography identified by Ira Bruce Nadel, a biographer of Leonard Cohen who explored the theory of his craft. Nadel described the “corrective impulse” of life-writers, which seeks to expose and level existing myths and images of the

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<sup>63</sup> Hamby, Alonzo L., *Liberalism and its Challengers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 341.

<sup>64</sup> Casper (1999), p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, pp. 68-76. Also see Marcus Cunliffe’s discussion of Washington as the “Copybook Hero”. Cunliffe, Marcus, *George Washington: Man and Monument* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958), pp. 17-20.

<sup>66</sup> Altschuler and Rauchway (2004), pp. 363-4.

subject.<sup>67</sup> For him, this was biography's first activity, but the second was "its own unconscious creation of new myths." "Through fact and revision," writes Nadel, "biography strives to demythologize the individual but inevitably, this becomes an ironic effort, since readers replace old myths with new if they read biography uncritically."<sup>68</sup> In relation to Reagan's childhood, this is best represented by Garry Wills's treatment in the first chapters of *Reagan's America*. Wills approached Reagan with an interest in the iconic. His other work has looked at the lives and cultural meaning of Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Richard Nixon, as well as Jack Ruby and John Wayne. His narrative is directed by the close reading of Reagan's own in *Where's the Rest of Me?*, which he describes as "a political campaign waiting to happen".<sup>69</sup> This reading exemplifies the corrective impulse described by Nadel, but is defined by the author's intention to reveal Reagan's presidency, which for Wills is about myth.

Wills takes as his starting point Reagan's memory that his childhood "existence turned into one of those rare Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer idylls...when I learned the real riches of rags."<sup>70</sup> This allusion was echoed later by Von Damm: "Ronald...grew up living the semi-idyllic Tom Sawyerish life of the typical small-town boy."<sup>71</sup> Wills begins by reminding the reader that Mark Twain's world, represented in his "chronicles of superstition, racism and crime," was far from idyllic. This suggestion of Reagan's romanticisation of his own, and America's past, however, is followed by the observation of "a special poignancy in his superficial gesture toward Huck Finn, since there is much of Twain's Mississippi in Reagan's background." Partly a means of diverting the narrative to a portrait of the nineteenth century Mid-Western roots of Jack Reagan, this also allows an exploration of Ronald Reagan's mythic origins. Wills describes the nostalgia of Mark Twain for an old America, combined with an enthusiasm for its progress. Twain's world of the youthful and heroic frontier merged with advancing modernity implicitly reflects the ideological vision of President Reagan. Even as he seeks to deconstruct and debunk them, Wills portrays Reagan as born to the stories and symbols of America, reinforcing his thesis of Reagan's presidency and confirming the presidency's

<sup>67</sup> Nadel, Ira Bruce, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: MacMillan, 1984), p. 9.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pp. 176-8.

<sup>69</sup> Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 343.

<sup>70</sup> Reagan, Ronald, *My Early Life (or Where's the Rest of Me?)* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Von Damm (1976), p. 2.

symbolic hold on the narrative. Anne Edwards also opens with a Mark Twain reference, quoting him: “Among the three or four million cradles now rocking in the land are some which this nation would preserve for ages as sacred things, if we could know which ones they are.”<sup>72</sup> In presidential biography, Reagan’s childhood can be made sacred in retrospect, and even if not reverently represented according to the conventions of presidential myth, it is still invested with national mythic meaning.

### Commemorative Biography

In discussing their craft, biographers have demonstrated unease over its deviation from and distortion of historiographical purpose. Those concerned with the scholarly value of biography disdain hagiography, literally the life-writing of saints, which represents the form’s commemorative potential. Anthony Friedson, introducing the collected papers from the first international symposium on the nature and future of biography, excluded from this conversation the “hagiographers, or their cousins, the political image makers,” whose “conjuring of moral exempla has led to the formulaic harnessing of biography for religious or social ends.”<sup>73</sup> Harold Nicolson described this problem more expansively in terms of his ideal of “pure biography”, which has “no purpose other than that of conveying to the reader an authentic portrait of the individual... Biography is rendered impure when some extraneous purpose intrudes to distort the accuracy of the presentation.” Nicolson was arguing for a rejection of biography’s origins, which was “the desire to commemorate the illustrious dead.” This “instinct” and “passion” had unfortunately been “endemic, and sometimes epidemic... it has infected biography throughout the centuries.”<sup>74</sup> Commemoration is a strong theme of presidential biography, but represents a different process than straightforward political promotion. To some extent, all biography is commemorative, as long as its subject has some place in or claim on collective memory. To narrate a life is to remember it, and to present it to an audience is to ask for collective remembrance. In the case of presidential biography, where the subject is symbolic of national experience and identity, this is particularly relevant. However, here the focus

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<sup>72</sup> Edwards (1987), p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Friedson, Anthony, ‘Foreword: Lifting the Barriers’, Friedson (ed.) (1981), p. ix.

<sup>74</sup> Nicolson, Sir Harold, in Clifford, James L. (ed.), *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism, 1560-1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 198-9.

is on those biographies of Reagan defined by a commemorative purpose, and which make arguments about his place in national memory.

Commemoration can be seen as a purpose of Reagan's official biographies, where the symbolic authority of the presidency imbues the accounts with national significance. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Museum is the prime example of Reagan's commemoration, and carries his official and symbolic endorsement. There, Reagan's life is presented as an American experience, an "American Journey, which can be remembered collectively through the artefacts on display. A similar process is at work in *Ronald Reagan: The Presidential Portfolio* (2001), which was produced with the cooperation of the Reagan Library, and which makes great use of the library's collection of images and documents to produce a similarly authoritative and commemorative effect. The text is by Lou Cannon, and though largely abridged from his previous works, which are admiring but critical, it is a comparatively celebratory narrative. "The greatness of Reagan," he concludes, "was that he held a shining vision of America inside of him, a vision he carried all the way from Dixon, Illinois, to the White House."<sup>75</sup> The book, however, distinguishes itself by offering the reader more than narrative interpretation, but a visual and aural experience of its materials, in its array of images, reproductions of documents and accompanying CD. It is not entirely unique, but a more sophisticated version of similar, unofficial retrospectives such as J.H. Cardigan's *Ronald Reagan: A Remarkable Life*, published in 1995 and reprinted in a commemorative edition after Reagan's death.<sup>76</sup> Again, a sparse and celebratory text is accompanied on nearly every page by images of its subject. These almost all represent Reagan's public life, with the greatest use of promotional Hollywood shots. There is little effort towards candid insight in the images, rather a consistently heroic portrayal which engages with the familiar iconography of American imagination, whether of Hollywood or the presidency. These books are intended to be looked at as much as read, experienced visually and emotionally as much as intellectually. They are commemorative objects in themselves, monuments of remembrance for the home.

Reagan's own efforts to define his place in American historical memory are more ambiguous, as represented by his involvement in the production of his presidential autobiography and his authorised biography. *An American Life* (1990)

<sup>75</sup> Cannon, Lou, *Ronald Reagan: The Presidential Portfolio* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), p. 287.

<sup>76</sup> Cardigan, J.H., *Ronald Reagan: A Remarkable Life* (Kansas City: Ariel Books, 2004).

was ghost-written like his previous memoir, this time by Robert Lindsey, a writer of spy thrillers. Reagan seemed to display a genuine lack of interest in the task. After it was finished, he wrote to President Nixon, commiserating over the effort: “Dick you are so right about that writing a book business. Believe me I don’t want to even attempt another one.”<sup>77</sup> His editor, Michael Korda, later wrote an account of its production, which revealed a certain amount of effort to see Reagan’s book conform to presidential tradition. The editorial team drafted a proposed outline which recommended “that it begin with a memorable opening line something like Nixon’s (‘I was born in a house my father built’), stress his humble origins, and achieve...the simplicity and dignity of [President Ulysses S.] Grant’s prose.”<sup>78</sup> Reagan’s reticence resisted their hopes for introspection on the meaning and national significance of his background. As a memoir of the presidency, the book’s relevance has been superseded by the publication of his diaries, where largely unreflecting observation and detail benefits from its chronicle, rather than narrative form. As autobiography, it is not revelatory or frank and projects a bland self-assurance that yet does not betray a great concern with historical legacy. It is most interesting for Reagan’s consistently asserted belief in the destined path of his life. “Then one of those things happened,” says Reagan in an echoed refrain, “that makes one wonder about God’s having a plan for all of us.”<sup>79</sup> Asides such as this reinforce, in part, his denials of presidential ambition, but they also chime with his frequently expressed belief in American divine destiny. In this way, he allows his life to become part of national history, and more, national purpose.

This lack of great personal interest in the construction of his historical image was also evident in the inception of his official biography, and the appointment and direction of its author, Edmund Morris. This idea, conceived and realised by Reagan’s advisers and friends, including Michael Deaver, Senator Mark Hatfield and the Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, had some precedence. As Morris described his expected role, as “the apparently conservative and scholarly author of a heroic presidential biography,” he would be “an ideal in-house historian to witness and record, à la Robert Sherwood and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the daily drama of a presidency in action.” However, this specific appointment of a biographer during a

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<sup>77</sup> Reagan, letter to Richard Nixon, (January 4, 1991), Skinner, Kiron, Anderson, Annelise, and Anderson, Martin (eds.), *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 820.

<sup>78</sup> Korda, Michael, ‘Prompting the President’, *The New Yorker* (October 6, 1997), pp. 88-95.

<sup>79</sup> Reagan, Ronald, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), p. 70.



president's term was unprecedented, indicating an early concern about Reagan's place in American history and memory, while Morris's identity as a biographer is significant. Morris was chosen on the basis of *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (1979), a dramatic narrative which ends before its subject attains the presidency, and whose strength is in part its ability to find its subject both within the pace of American history but also in his own vision of America. The choice of Morris, "for better or worse, simply a narrative biographer," may have brought unintended consequences, but it must have come with the anticipation that Reagan's life would be told as American myth.<sup>80</sup>

This anticipation was valid. *Dutch* is a presidential biography that embraces its commemorative role. Morris's innovative method of fictionalising his narrative was indicated and explained in the subtitle to the book: "A Memoir of Ronald Reagan". Morris created a narrator who has shadowed Reagan from his youth, rather than just the three final years of his presidency, so that he could remember Reagan's life, rather than merely recount it. Mark Maslan noted this in his analysis of the book, which convincingly argues that Morris's methods appeal to a post-modern concept of national identity: "For Morris, memory is history as a medium of identity, and by inventing memories of Reagan, Morris seeks not so much to teach us about him as to enable us [as Americans] to identify with him."<sup>81</sup> Early on in *Dutch*, Morris expresses his concept of presidential biography: "Presidents, whatever their political symbolism, represent the national character of their era, and if we do not understand our leaders as people, we can never understand ourselves as Americans."<sup>82</sup> While he invents his own memories to allow this understanding, he also seeks it in Reagan's memory. This is sharply introduced in the prologue, which recounts Morris's accompaniment of Reagan in 1990 to his birthplace in Tampico, Illinois. Morris, the historian, corrects the president as he misremembers the details of his earliest days. Then, after witnessing Reagan's quiet shock and quick retreat from the room of his birth, he reflects:

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<sup>80</sup> Morris, Edmund, in correspondence with the author (March 23, 2008). Also see Morris (1999), pp. xxv-xxxii.

<sup>81</sup> Maslan, Mark, 'Telling to Live the Tale: Ronald Reagan, Edmund Morris, and Postmodern Nationalism', *Representations* 98 (Spring 2007), p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Morris, Edmund, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1999), p. xxviii.

Who of us, forced so brutally to confront the nothingness from which we have sprung, would not have turned away as he did, knowing it to be indistinguishable from – indeed identical with – the nothingness that looms ahead?<sup>83</sup>

Morris suggests the fragility of memory as a reliable representation of the past, but also the meaninglessness of the past without memory to explain it. His biography, a constructed memory of a mythic president, represents an attempt to reconcile this problem. By the end, the author has formed a less bleak understanding of Reagan's, and thus America's, ability to cope with the past.

Peggy Noonan also indicated a mythic purpose to the recollection of Reagan's life in the opening chapter of *When Character was King*. This book, though not an official production like *Dutch*, still carries an air of authority based on Noonan's identity as a member of the Reagan administration. The first chapter relates a nostalgic reunion of administration members at the christening in 2001 of the *USS Ronald Reagan*. There is a personal pride in the distinction of this identity – "We were like veterans... We'd been in a war, and we had a leader". Noonan, however, went beyond the sentimental reminiscences of Reagan's staff to firmly associate Reagan's memory with national identity, through the youthful crew of the aircraft carrier and their pride in its name. Influencing the knowledge of America's youth was an expressed purpose of her biography. In the epilogue, she wrote: "The little bodies of children are the repositories of the greatness of a future age. And they must be encouraged, must eat from the tales of those who've gone before."<sup>84</sup> In a radio interview, meanwhile, she explained that her book, which sought to share and communicate her love for Reagan, was primarily a gift to young Americans who did not know him or experience his presidency.<sup>85</sup> Noonan's and Morris's memoirs are remarkably different in style, tone and structure, but they share an assumption about the importance of Reagan's life to American identity, and an understanding of the strength of using commemoration to convey this importance.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, pp. xxix-xxxi.

<sup>84</sup> Noonan (2001), p. 327.

<sup>85</sup> 'Bill Thompson's Eye on Books: Peggy Noonan, When Character Was King', <http://www.eyeonbooks.com/ibp.php?ISBN=0670882356>, (accessed November 27, 2006); for her concern about how the American youth learn about Reagan and the past, also see Noonan, Peggy, 'Why We Talk About Reagan', *Wall Street Journal* (February 8, 2002), <http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=95001834> (accessed July 13, 2009).

Though both books were published before Reagan's death, they each have the air of eulogy to them, a response to his advanced illness and expressed through the authors' accounts of their last meetings with the president – which in the context of their commemorative purposes, take on broader significance. Noonan's is an intimate encounter. Taking her son to meet Reagan (further evidence of her determination to bequeath the young with understanding) she struggles to express her admiration for him in a way he will understand:

So I just looked at him, and then I think an angel whispered in my ear because I remembered the thing everyone understands, old people and little babies and everyone in between. I took his hand and said, "Mr. President, I just came to tell you that I love you. I want you to know that we love you very much."<sup>86</sup>

This is an intensely personal expression of the author, but she also, by using "we," seems to speak on behalf of more than herself – the reader, perhaps, or the nation. This is an inclusive and cathartic remembrance. Morris's meeting is characteristically more distant, but still invested with certain meaning. His final interview with the president was conducted one month after Reagan's public announcement of his Alzheimer's disease. Morris finds an absence in Reagan, remarking, "he had long since stopped recognizing me; now I no longer recognized him." The author instead responds to objects – the original draft of the president's final letter to the American people, a watercolour of Rock River – finding recognition in them, making them symbols of Reagan's lost strength and genius. Later, he records an instance of when Reagan impulsively took a white miniature house from a fish tank – "He takes it home, clenched wet in his fist. 'This is...something to do with me...I'm not sure what.'" The tragic irony of Reagan's vanishing memory prompts the need to preserve his meaning: "I must now retreat from him, closet myself with books and cards and paper, and finish the Life he authorized me to write, nine years before." The final meaning that Morris gives to Reagan's life is based in fiction, revealed in a plot twist, but urged on the reader for its national significance. The reader discovers that the narrator was, anonymously, one of the swimmers whom Reagan had saved from Rock River while working as a lifeguard in his youth. Despite Reagan's last words to him, that "I saved seventy-seven lives. And you know, none of 'em ever thanked me!",

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<sup>86</sup> Noonan (2001) p. 319.

Morris fails to acknowledge his debt and gratitude (because, probably, this creative twist had not yet occurred to him). Instead, he makes it a collective burden and metaphor of Reagan's legacy - "Some day, I hoped, America might acknowledge her similar debt to the old Lifeguard who rescued her in a time of poisonous despair and...carried her 'breastward out of peril.'" <sup>87</sup> Both Morris and Noonan present their biographies as expressions of national memory, converting their personal memoirs into conduits for commemorative, American myth.

### Creative Biography

The issue of fiction in biography is a complex one, though guided by a general rule against the invention of fact. In Reagan's biography, which as well as the innovations of Edmund Morris has seen translation into America's traditionally fictional media, the issue of fiction has both extended and contended with Reagan's myth. André Maurois, who compared the expressive task of biography to that of portraiture, asserted that "under no account has the biographer a right to invent a single fact", while Leon Edel similarly argued that the biographer is "allowed the imagination of form, but not of fact". <sup>88</sup> The assertion of the rule suggests a tension in the nature of representing a life, which according to Phyllis Rose is "as much as a work of fiction – of guiding narrative structures – as novels and poems." <sup>89</sup> This tension is the result of the narrative demands of the life-story, with its clearly defined structure and focus (an individual from birth to death), and the expectations it raises of coherent meaning. Ira Nadel drew on Hayden White's theories of narrative to discuss the unique demands of plot and potential for creative interpretation in biography:

Emplotment provides fact with fictive meaning while gratifying our desire to resolve our own sense of fragmentation through the unity or story of the lives of others – and implicitly our own. The fictive power of "story" provides us with a coherent vision of life. <sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, pp. 666-672.

<sup>88</sup> Maurois, André, in Clifford (ed.) (1962).

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Nadel (1984), p. 7

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

This was made manifesto in 1925 by Robert Littell (in the form of an imagined dialogue between novelist and biographer): “Our job is to make sense: that is the new biography... Of course the imagination distorts anything it touches, but only through imagination can the thing live at all.”<sup>91</sup> This relates to the use of “creative fact” in biography, which describes the selection and shaping of factual detail to give meaning to the overarching story. The creative representation of Reagan’s life relates to these issues of form. However, as a specific subject, Reagan presents opportunities and hazards for his biographers in this respect. As a president, he is part of American cultural iconography and its traditions of fictional representation. As a president fundamentally associated with the production of fiction, in Hollywood film and in political narratives, the question of truthful representation can become a theme of his life. Meanwhile, as a current political symbol, his life and its representation can become political issues in which accuracy is vital. The formal nature of biography, the traditions of American culture, and the particular identity of Ronald Reagan, combine to give his life-story rich potential for creative and fictional representation – and for interpretation as fiction. In the sense of the fable, and of the ambiguity of truth, his mythological association is encouraged.

Reagan’s life has seen representation in media traditionally associated with fiction. *Ronald Reagan: A Graphic Biography* (2007) represents part of the increasing effort to bring non-fiction to the expanding world of graphic literature, reflected in the name of its publisher, Serious Comics, whose other productions have included biographies of J. Edgar Hoover and Malcolm X. Graphic literature relies on coherent visual sequences which in turn allow for a dramatic narrative making use of action and the controlled passage of time. It is thus a form that favours the creative and the imaginative, not to mention the visually effective.<sup>92</sup> It is also thoroughly associated with themes of American myth, best represented by its imperishably prominent superhero genre (with which Reagan had had some connection),<sup>93</sup> but also through its frequent reliance on familiar iconography as a narrative tool. *A Graphic Biography*

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<sup>91</sup> Littell, Robert, in Clifford (ed.) (1962), p. 124.

<sup>92</sup> A useful discussion of the form can be found in McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994).

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, the sequences of Reagan’s televised addresses in Frank Miller’s 1986 recreation of the Batman story, where the president wields Superman as a nuclear deterrent and ABM system, Miller, Frank, *The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 2002). Also see the short-lived parody, which portrayed Reagan and his cabinet as a superhero team battling communists and rescuing POWs. Buckler, Rich, and Arnold, Monroe, *Reagan’s Raiders* 1(1-3), (New York: Solson Publications, 1986-7).

represents the difficulty of reconciling the medium's characteristics with factual biography. The authors avoid dialogue and dramatic sequences in favour of panels which simply illustrate the textual narrative, which is necessarily limited if relatively profuse. The potential of the medium is neglected through concern for the factual objectives of biography. Where the images are inventive, they mostly draw on the traditions and iconography of political cartoons. However, there is one attempt at an original realisation of Reagan's own imagery, in the final page's depiction of Reagan's Farewell Address, where he is seen ascending towards the Shining City on a Hill.<sup>94</sup> A second graphic biography of Reagan is to be released in October, 2009 by Bluewater Productions, who have also produced biographies of the Obamas. Reagan's life is considered suitable for graphic literature, a testament not only to his continuing popular appeal or historical significance, but also his potential for visual, stylised and essentially mythic representation. This affinity, though, is tempered by the factual necessity of biography.

Reagan's representation in film might seem more naturally suitable, but has proved more problematic. In one of his more successful Hollywood performances, Reagan played the role of the footballer George Gipp in the story about the Notre Dame coach, *Knute Rockne: All American*. This biographical portrayal had a renewed legacy during his presidency, which Godfrey Hodgson made the centre-piece in the narrative of his own biographical documentary of President Reagan in 1987. Accompanying the president on a trip to Notre Dame, the filmmaker and student of American politics witnessed "a revelation" as Reagan quoted in his speech his old lines from the film, "...go out and win one for the Gipper." "One secret of Ronald Reagan's political magic," went the commentary, "lies in his knack of mixing a potent cocktail of reality and myth. His gospel is national uplift. But he deftly mixes it with a movie role he played sanctifying the Notre Dame football star of the 1920s".<sup>95</sup> Hodgson's film went on to draw heavily from Garry Wills's thesis about Reagan's embodiment of American myth. This indicates, for one, the prevalence of biography in American culture and myth, and re-emphasises the centrality of film and fiction to

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<sup>94</sup> Helfer, Andrew, Buccellato, Steve and Staton, Joe, *Ronald Reagan: The Graphic Biography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2007), p.102.

<sup>95</sup> Hodgson, Godfrey, 'Only an Actor: Memories of a Reagan Biopic', Hudson, Cheryl and Davies, Gareth (eds.), *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies, Legacies* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 33.

Reagan's own myth. It is perhaps strange, then, that Reagan's life has not been a more common dramatic subject in American film.

Only one attempt has been made, the 2003 CBS miniseries, *The Reagans*. One other TV movie, produced by Oliver Stone, did depict the Reagan administration. *The Day Reagan was Shot* (2001), however, gave little screen-time to the president, focusing instead on Richard Dreyfuss's sympathetic portrayal of Alexander Haig. Other recent presidents have received more attention. Richard Nixon has seen varied representation in Oliver Stone's engagingly paranoid *Nixon* (1995), the nostalgic comedy *Dick* (1999), and the intriguing look at television and the presidency in *Frost/Nixon* (2008). Bill Clinton has been obliquely represented in *Primary Colors* (1995), and will appear as a character in the forthcoming *The Special Relationship*. George W. Bush, meanwhile, was heroically portrayed in *D.C. 9/11: Time of Crisis* (2003) and less so in Oliver Stone's second presidential biopic, *W* (2008). Though all of these have prompted criticism, none was met with the controversial reception of *The Reagans*, even though most were more deliberately and definitively political in their interpretations. The film was commissioned as a love-story, and its central theme is indeed the relationship between Ronald and Nancy Reagan, and the effects of public life upon their family. In this way it resembled more a celebrity biopic than political biography. Its producers, indeed, were experienced in the former, having made TV movies about Judy Garland, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.<sup>96</sup> Scott Casper indicated a change in twentieth century popular American biography towards celebrity lives, more sensational than didactic.<sup>97</sup> In the mid-century, the sociologist Leo Lowenthal conducted a study of such biographies in magazines, concluding that they provided no real "educational" benefit for the reader, no guide for life, but a comforting familiarity in the ordinary tastes and activities of otherwise elevated, glamorous lives.<sup>98</sup> Reagan's life belonged to this tradition as well as presidential biography, evidenced in Laurence Leamer's *Make Believe: The Story of Nancy and Ronald Reagan* (1983), which Gore Vidal scorned for its *Photoplay* style. *The Reagans*, which begins in Hollywood and focuses on the personal relationships and drama of a famous family, continues this.

<sup>96</sup> Rutenberg, Jim, 'Grumbling Trickles Down from Reagan Biopic', *New York Times* (October 21, 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/21/arts/television/21REAG.html> (accessed September 3, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> Casper (1999), pp. 1-2.

<sup>98</sup> Lowenthal, Leo, 'The Triumph of Mass Idols', *Literature, Popular Culture and Society* (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1961), pp. 109-136.

Criticism of the film was largely anticipatory, based on reports of the contents of its script first published in the *New York Times* a month before its broadcast. The criticism developed into a conservative political campaign involving the RNC, Michael Reagan and Patti Davis, and the conservative media watchdog, the Media Research Center, headed by Brent Bozell. The pressure this brought saw CBS edit sections of the film, and shift its broadcast to the cable channel *Showtime*. The complaints surrounded the negative portrayal of Reagan's character in fictionalised scenes, principally one in which he responds to the AIDS crisis with the comment, "they that live in sin shall die in sin".<sup>99</sup> Its portrayals may have had symbolic accuracy, and were certainly not wholly negative, but the film was vulnerable for three reasons. First, its origins were in Hollywood, the classic enemy of culture war conservatives, an issue emphasised by the fact that James Brolin, the starring actor, was married to Barbara Streisand, and that the writers were identified as "openly gay activists" and friends of the Clintons.<sup>100</sup> Secondly, Reagan's condition at the time, near death and defenceless, amplified any slur on him. The final reason related to problems of fiction, film and history. The film warns that it is "a dramatic interpretation of events based on public sources," and that "some scenes and characters are presented as composites."<sup>101</sup> Such caveats did not satisfy Bozell, who suggested that fiction and film had a command over American's knowledge of their history, warning of "history-challenged Americans, those who could watch hysterical 'history' films like Oliver Stone's *JFK* and actually swallow the nonsense", and asking them to "read a book...or please don't bother to vote."<sup>102</sup> Jim Welsh expressed a similar sentiment in an essay about another Hollywood presidential biography, *Jefferson in Paris* (1995). Concerned with the reliance on film for history and biography in "postliterate, media-made America", he asserted that such films were invested with "a whole lot of authority and responsibility".<sup>103</sup> Presidential biography in film has a perceived civic function resulting from its popularity and its power to

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<sup>99</sup> This was based on a quote attributed by Morris, that "maybe the Lord brought down this plague" because "illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments". The scene was deleted from the final cut. Morris (1999), p. 458.

<sup>100</sup> Bozell, Brent, 'CBS Revises the Reagans', *Townhall.com*, (October 26, 2003), [http://townhall.com/columnists/BrentBozell/2003/10/26/cbs\\_revises\\_the\\_reagans](http://townhall.com/columnists/BrentBozell/2003/10/26/cbs_revises_the_reagans) (accessed September 3, 2009).

<sup>101</sup> *The Reagans* (dir. Robert Allan Ackerman, Lions Gate Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>102</sup> Bozell (2003).

<sup>103</sup> Welsh, Jim, 'Jefferson in Love: The Framer Framed', Rollins, Peter C. and O'Connor, John E. (eds.), *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), p. 59.



inform and shape American memory. This is based on its inherent use of dramatic interpretation, which in turn leaves it open to charges of falsehood, whether malicious or irresponsible. In this sense, it is analogous to Reagan's presidency itself.

This has been a commonly made analogy, which has pervaded the interpretation of his presidency, and the biographical accounts of his Hollywood career. The influence of Reagan's acting career has been observed in his presidential performance, image projection and the operation of his White House.<sup>104</sup> Reagan's film career has also been used to understand the substance of his ideology, based on his frequent reference to films in his public rhetoric. This ranged from direct quotations, such as when he dared Congress to send him a tax-raising budget, "Go ahead, make my day!", to self-identification with his past roles as with George Gipp, to the use of science-fiction scenarios as part of diplomacy.<sup>105</sup> Mike Wallace argued that Hollywood "was a major source of the mythic iconography he carried around in his political unconscious."<sup>106</sup> Reagan's Hollywood identity extended beyond his presidency, to become an interpretative device to understand his era. Gil Troy's history of how Ronald Reagan "invented" America in the eighties makes substantial use of film and television narratives to describe the era.<sup>107</sup> In film scholarship, the eighties seem to be a uniquely cinematic age in which politics and Hollywood are inextricably bound under the symbolic image of Reagan.<sup>108</sup> Reagan's pre-presidential life, and its implications of his close relationship with American fiction and mythology, made an impact on the understanding of his presidency. Moreover, his presidency generated a biographical interest in the fictional products of his Hollywood career.

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<sup>104</sup> See Cannon, *President Reagan* (2000), p. 44; Deaver, Michael, *Behind the Scenes* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987), pp. 73-7; Regan, Donald T., *For the Record* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 252-3, 276-7.

<sup>105</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Meeting with Members of the American Business Conference' (March 13, 1985), PPPR, RPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/31385b.htm> (accessed September 20, 2009); Cannon (2000), p. 41.

<sup>106</sup> Wallace, Mike, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 262-3; also see Roper (2000), pp. 137-8.

<sup>107</sup> Troy, Gil, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> For example, see the study of American foreign policy in film in Prince, Stephen, *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary Film* (New York: Praeger, 1992); also, the use of "Ronald Reagan" as a symbolic and iconographic term in Jeffords, Susan, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994); also, the interpretation of Reagan's presidency as a "cinematic effect" in Nadel, Alan, *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

This interest was pursued furthest by the Berkeley political scientist Michael Rogin in his influential essay, ‘Ronald Reagan: The Movie’ (1987), which made a biographical analysis of Reagan through the films he made in Hollywood. Rogin detected an “uncanny slippage between life and film” in Reagan’s Hollywood years and his presidency, and suggests that he “found out who he was through the roles he played on film.” This self-discovery is partly political; Rogin made much of the themes of *Murder in the Air* (1940), its “merging of Communism and Fascism”, its “obsession with intelligence agents”, and most importantly its apparent presaging of the Strategic Defence Initiative. “Are we now being ruled by the fantasies of a 1940s countersubversive B movie?” he asked. However, he goes on to argue that Reagan gained more than ideology and policy from his film roles, but also his persona and sense-of-self. In other films, such as *Knute Rockne: All American* (1940) and *The Hasty Heart* (1950), Reagan was able to “acquire presidential stature” through expanding his persona to something more vulnerable and identifiable.<sup>109</sup> His roles were solutions for his real psychological difficulties. In Rogin’s analysis, these films merge with and even replace Reagan’s own life, childhood and family relationships, giving him a personality, or self image, which can then see him through to the White House.<sup>110</sup> It is Rogin, rather than the president, who discovers Reagan in his roles, and Rogin who conflates life with film as his subject becomes a text to be analysed. He does not make fiction of Reagan’s life, but treats it as fiction. There is a broader political purpose to this analysis. For Rogin, Reagan’s “uncanny slippage” is the embodiment of an ideological tradition of “demonology” and fantasy in American right-wing politics. While seeking to reveal the myths of American “countersubversion” and anti-communism in Reagan’s personal psychology, he mythologises his subject.

The relationship between Reagan and film is also central to *Dutch*. Asked if his biography of Reagan might ever be made into a film, as has been discussed for his first volume of Teddy Roosevelt’s life, Morris responded that “large sections of it already are!”, referring to his presentation of parts of his narrative in the form of film script. He also revealed his initial idea to open the book with title cards:

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>110</sup> Rogin, Michael, *Ronald Reagan: The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 3, 11.

*Random House presents*  
*Dutch*  
*Starring RONALD REAGAN as Himself*  
*With Jane WYMAN – Nancy DAVIS etc.*  
*Written by Edmund MORRIS etc.*<sup>111</sup>

Morris's use of an imagined screenplay, *The Ronald Reagan Story*, was only one of the innovative decisions that surprised and frustrated critics on its publication. The controversy that met *Dutch* never had the targeted political anxiety that *The Reagans* provoked, but it has been more sustained, and more serious in that it represented a rejection by Morris's peers. Fred Greenstein offered a fairly typical response in dismissing Morris's work as an "intellectual embarrassment" which "blurs fact with fiction, substitutes effusion for rigorous analysis, and is riddled with errors," before going on to offer his own précis of Reagan's life and significance.<sup>112</sup> The biographer Anthony Holden, reviewing *Dutch* for *The Observer*, called it "a travesty of the biographer's art."<sup>113</sup> Similarly, another presidential biographer, Joseph Ellis, concluded: "What Morris has done, in my opinion, is a scandal and a travesty."<sup>114</sup> The essential problem was that Morris had broken the fundamental rule of biography, and historiography, by inventing facts. The creation of his narrator included the creation of further characters, his family and friends, who act as alternate observers of Reagan and who are falsely referenced in the endnotes.

Morris's fictions are about observation. His narrator is a self-conscious biographer, revealing to the reader his methods, purposes and difficulties. The reader is engaged with the biographical process, but Reagan is distanced as subject.<sup>115</sup> Morris's invented characters are witnesses to Reagan's life, a "biographical audience". "A performer is not comprehensible unless he is witnessed, unless there's

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<sup>111</sup> Morris, in correspondence with author (September 7, 2008).

<sup>112</sup> Greenstein, Fred I., 'Reckoning with Reagan: A Review Essay on Edmund Morris's *Dutch*,' *Political Science Quarterly*, 115(1) 2000, p.115.

<sup>113</sup> Holden, Anthony, 'It's True, Nancy I Was a Deluded, Dumb Idealist,' *The Observer Review*, October 31, 1999, p.13.

<sup>114</sup> Morris (1999), p. xiv.

<sup>115</sup> This led Morris to overtly focus on himself rather than Reagan. In one interview, for example, Reagan talked about his 1968 presidential run. This subject may have been of interest to the reader, but not to the author, who describes instead surreptitiously reading Lord David Cecil's biography of Lord Melbourne while the president reminisced. "Every observation from 'Edmund Morris'," complained one reviewer, "is space taken away from real people reflecting on real events." Ibid, 641-6; Schulzinger, Robert D., 'Where's the Rest of Him? Edmund Morris's Portrait of Ronald Reagan', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30(2) (June, 2000), p. 392.

a spectator there,” Morris explained.<sup>116</sup> The occasional representation of Reagan’s life in the form of a screenplay reinforces this. A central sequence of *The Ronald Reagan Story* depicts the years 1947-8, a turning point in Reagan’s life which involves his own near fatal bout with pneumonia and the death of his and Jane Wyman’s prematurely born daughter, his appearance before HUAC, and the end of his marriage. The decision to represent this dramatically, using “Hollywood’s most hackneyed narrative tricks” is a response to Reagan’s own cinematic language in his “memoirs and monologues”; the scenes are “authentic as well as cinematic”.<sup>117</sup> However, this authenticity relates to more than Reagan’s memory and self-image. Given Morris’s understanding of presidential representation of national character, the self-realisation through cinema is America’s as well. Morris hopes his readers will understand Reagan, and thus themselves, through a dramatic and fictionalised narrative. The mythic purpose of presidential biography is sought by arguing America’s reliance on imagination and invention to create meaning – a reliance symbolised by the subject, Ronald Reagan. The use of fiction as a method is unique to Morris, but it is a response to the subject of fiction in Reagan’s life, which, as a president, is unique to him. Reagan’s relationship to American mythology complicates his biographical representation. As a practitioner and symbol of myth he is a suitable subject for creative portrayal, but his status as a mythic icon makes such portrayal politically vulnerable, as well as historically unsound, when it strays from accepted fact.

### National Biography

“Of History,” asked Thomas Carlyle, “the most honoured, if not honourable species of composition, is not the whole purport Biographic?”<sup>118</sup> The concept of history as the sum of the actions of great men, which are understood through narratives of their lives, is a long outmoded idea. Yet, biography still acts as representative history. Even where its subjects are not heroic political actors, more obscure lives can indicate and

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<sup>116</sup> Morris, ‘Online Newshour: Reading Reagan’ (October 4, 1999), [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white\\_house/july-dec99/reagan\\_10-4.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house/july-dec99/reagan_10-4.html) (accessed November 27, 2006).

<sup>117</sup> Morris (1999), p. 249.

<sup>118</sup> Carlyle, Thomas, in Clifford (ed.) (1962), p. 80.

symbolise historical social factors.<sup>119</sup> Presidential biography meanwhile is a field which inevitably presents America's history through the lens of the lives of its leaders. If, as Nadel contends, "the principal interest in biography, the reason for its popularity with authors as well as readers, remains its ability to provide meaning for an individual's life, transmitting personality and character through prose," then when it deals with presidents, the interest must surely also be in national life and character.<sup>120</sup> Such a method is employed by Alonzo Hamby in *Liberalism and its Challengers* (1992), where brief biographical treatments of political leaders amount to a synthesis of American history in the latter half of the twentieth century. In this narrative, the subjects – mostly presidents – are presented as the agents of continuity and change in American political culture, but also as symbols of it, typifying the century's themes. As well as sharing psychological and social commonalities, these leaders all "reconciled within themselves both the traditional and the new in mid-twentieth-century American culture."<sup>121</sup> Reagan, an ambitious self-promoter and master of television who nonetheless maintained a steady small-town faith, and who "express[ed] the divided mind of the American people", was no exception.<sup>122</sup> The events and directions of Reagan's life, and those of the other subjects, indicate the trends and themes of American political history, as much as their achievements.

Reagan's life can tell history in another way, simply through the association of his experience. This was expressed by Paul Kengor in his introduction to *The Crusader* (2006), a book which sought to define Reagan's role in achieving victory over Communism:

A professor teaching a course on the twentieth century could tell much of it through Reagan's experiences – from the seven-year-old boy joining a flag-waving crowd welcoming home doughboys from WWI on the streets of Monmouth, Illinois in 1918, to the influenza epidemic that nearly took his mother in 1919, to the advent of radio, to the Great Depression, to the magic of Hollywood's golden age, to the New Deal and the rise of the federal government, to World War II, and on to the Cold War, Communism, the bomb,

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<sup>119</sup> Lepore, Jill, 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography,' *Journal of American Studies*, 88(1) (June, 2001), pp.129-44; also see Strouse, Jean, 'Semi Private Lives,' Aaron, Daniel (ed.) *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) p. 129.

<sup>120</sup> Nadel (1984), p. 155.

<sup>121</sup> Hamby (1992), p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 340.

the Red Menace, and much, much more, all the way through his presidential races and the Cold War victory.<sup>123</sup>

It is not Reagan's involvement in most of these events which make him relevant to them; it is his crowning experience which makes his life a history lesson. Kengor himself did not attempt such a sweeping approach in his biography, *God and Ronald Reagan* (2004), which emerged as a side project from his Cold War study. It is an outlook most evident, though without the same celebratory tone, in *Reagan's America*.<sup>124</sup> "He spans our lives," Wills wrote, "culturally and chronologically".<sup>125</sup> The varied geography and profession of Reagan's life affords insight into the central political and cultural events of the twentieth century, of which Reagan's presidency is the culmination. The resulting narrative, however, is determined by Reagan's experiences, and by the themes of his presidency. The Second World War, for instance, can only be represented in terms of his unusual military experience making propaganda and training films for the US Air Force. For Wills, this was about "illusion", a "war service based on the principled defense of faking things."<sup>126</sup> Reagan's appearance in mobilising films such as *International Squadron* (1941) and *This is the Army* (1942), the exaggeration by the Hollywood media of Reagan's service "off at war", and the general efforts of the Office of War Information to demonize the enemy and celebrate America, provide insight into a discussion of President Reagan's questionable memory of the war and the image-construction of his White House.<sup>127</sup> The representation of America's past is dependent on its being related to Reagan's experience, but also relevant to his meaning.

The representation of national history through Reagan's life involves more than his experience of particular events, but also his personal absorption of myths which define the process and significance of American history. Leon Edel, discussing the principles of his art, claimed that it was the biographer's duty to seek out and

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<sup>123</sup> Kengor, Paul, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. xiii.

<sup>124</sup> Wills's interweaving of Reagan's life with American history was praised by Shirley Leckie in an essay defending biography from its critics, not just because it advanced the form, but because it brought arguments about history and mythology to a broad, popular audience. Leckie, Shirley A., 'Biography Matters: Why Historians Need Well-Crafted Biographies More than Ever', Ambrosius, Lloyd A. (ed.), *Writing Biography: Historians and their Craft* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 12-14.

<sup>125</sup> Corrado, Anthony, 'Back to the Future', *American Quarterly*, 40 (2) (June, 1988), p. 274.

<sup>126</sup> Wills (2000), p. 194.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, pp. 192-201.

unlock the “inner” or “covert myth” of their subject – this is “a part of the hidden dreams of our biographical subjects...lodged in the unconscious.”<sup>128</sup> Such an idea relates to the psychoanalytic developments in biography earlier in the century, but for Edel, a prominent defender of biography as a literary form, it was an empathetic, even poetic approach. Reagan’s biographers, even if they do not consciously follow Edel’s directive, do seek out his “inner myth” but find it rooted in national myth. Wills expresses this best in his treatment of an event during Reagan’s years at Eureka College, where he was involved in a student strike over budget cuts and faculty layoffs. The author’s approach was again essentially corrective, scrutinising Reagan’s own account of the affair and his role in it, as described forty years later in his memoir. Wills found that Reagan’s account was confused and that his role was exaggerated. From this, he drew conclusions about Reagan’s engagement with history:

He had no respect for the density of the real and vivid piece of history he was living through. He converted it into a “historical” symbol, Paul Revere on the ride...Reagan would embody great chunks of the American experience, become deeply involved with them emotionally, while having only the haziest notion of what really occurred. He has a skill for striking “historical” attitudes combined with a striking lack of historical attentiveness.<sup>129</sup>

Reagan’s memory of his own past was defined and expressed mythically, just as was his understanding of America’s past. Wills wrote that “Reagan gives our history the continuity of a celluloid Möbius strip,” and asked, “what happens if, when we look into our historical rearview mirror, all we can see is a movie?”<sup>130</sup> Wills found Reagan in his Hollywood identity, which represented America’s mythological past. This argument was reinforced by Wills’s consistent use of Hollywood films, including Reagan’s own, to indicate and subvert Reagan’s ideology. While *Law and Order* (1953), for example, demonstrated Reagan’s faith in Western individualism, *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) demonstrated the vital role of the federal government in national westward expansion and development.<sup>131</sup> Wills’s use of films as biographical tools resembles Morris’s observance of Reagan’s use of cinematic terminology to describe

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<sup>128</sup> Edel, Leon, *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p.161.

<sup>129</sup> Wills (2000), p. 63.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, pp. 440, 460.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pp. 103-107.

the past events of his life, and the subsequent decision to then represent them cinematically. Both authors find their subject's "inner myth" to be his investment in the symbols and structures of American mythology. That this is found not hidden in Reagan's unconscious, but in the substance of his public performance, is indicative of his peculiar nature as a biographical subject. A consistently public figure, an actor, a politician and a president, Reagan is inextricably linked with national themes. He is representative of American history, not its chronology or its experience, but its role in American life.

Paul Kengor also makes a connection between Reagan's life and American history, and between the covert and overt myths of president and country. This is centred around Reagan's Christian faith, and its importance for understanding Reagan's ideology and actions.<sup>132</sup> In part, the book is a convincing argument that Reagan's religion was a vital and constant part of his life, through which he understood the world and acted. However, it is also treated as a force of history, with Reagan's life as a central story in a mythic American narrative defined by the Cold War. Kengor opens his narrative with the young Reagan at Dixon's First Christian Church on January 20, 1924, in a scene weighted with portent, though unrelated to any significant act or event of Reagan's life. The moment is important because "a continent away...fifty-three-year old Vladimir Ilych Lenin lay near death in an even colder – in many ways – Bolshevik Russia...As Lenin clung to life, twelve-year old Dutch Reagan clung to his hymnal." This, Kengor elaborates, "was the start of a spiritual pilgrimage that would lead that boy in the front pew to a spot in front of a bust of a grim Lenin at Moscow State University sixty-four years later."<sup>133</sup> The dramatic juxtaposition establishes the themes and tone of the biography, where Reagan's faith is continually framed in reference to the atheism and religious oppression of Communism, and his life is plotted in continual reference to his final victory over Communism.

Reagan's religious inheritance is also presented in terms of an American ideological tradition, which further indicates his historical importance. He took his religious beliefs from his mother and her church, the Disciples of Christ, and from a

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<sup>132</sup> Kengor followed this work with two other biographies, *God and George W. Bush* (New York: Harper, 2004) and *God and Hillary Clinton* (New York: Harper, 2007). In this context, it can also be understood as part of a more general argument about the role of Christian belief in American political leadership.

<sup>133</sup> Kengor (2004), p.2.



novel, *That Printer of Udell's* (1903), which prompted the young Reagan's decision to be baptised. These influences provided grounds for an intellectual Christianity which defined for the young Reagan the roles of the individual and the church in society. Kengor also sought to establish another ideological influence, that of the founder of the Disciples of Christ, Alexander Campbell, a nineteenth century proponent of a millenarian, nationalist idea of a missionary American destiny. Kengor quoted Campbell's assertion that the world looked to America for "its emancipation from the most heartless spiritual despotism ever", and that "this is our special mission in the world as a nation and a people". Campbell, he stressed, saw America as "beacon," a "light unto the nations," whose political institutions would provide inspiration for the overthrow of false religion and oppressive tyranny in Europe. Kengor concluded it was "quite likely" that Reagan was introduced to these ideas, which strongly imply, in the context of the author's political argument, the mission of the Cold War. The destiny of Reagan's presidency and triumph over communism is a strong theme of the biography, if not fully asserted. Kengor recounts a scene from his governorship where Reagan prayed with a visiting group of evangelicals. One of the group was overcome by what he identified as the Holy Spirit and was compelled to announce: "If you walk uprightly before Me, you will reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." Kengor leaves this story standing – "Readers can make of this what they will."<sup>134</sup> The author identifies his subject's "inner myth" as his faith in divine purpose, for himself and for America. Kengor lets this sense of destiny infuse his narrative, presenting Reagan's life in terms of his later achievement, in the context of both American and Soviet history. Reagan's life-story becomes an extended history of his presidency, and further, a representative history of his nation, as defined by himself.

### Conclusion

Destiny is a common theme to Reagan's biography, supported by the apparent inevitability of his presidency as it is read backward into his life-story. In *Reagan's America* this is perhaps nothing more than a consequence of the method and form. The presidency is ever-present in the narrative, giving Reagan's life no other purpose or meaning, but this self-conscious and overt hindsight. For other biographers, this

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, pp. 135-7.

ahistorical determinism is explicit. Noonan, denying the idea expressed by Dinesh D'Souza that Reagan was an ordinary man, said "he wasn't like other people. There was some huge kind of destiny playing out within him."<sup>135</sup> Broadly speaking, this was a self-propelling destiny. A recurring dream that Reagan had until his presidency, of visiting a large white house that was for sale at a price he could afford, was "information from his subconscious" that "you can have the White House if you want it."<sup>136</sup> Edmund Morris made typically playful and ambiguous observations of the determined path of Reagan's life. The presidency is hinted at in his early occupations. Briefly a surveyor, "he held the measure by which others more technically versed than he calculated the constructive possibilities of the mound he stood on. It was excellent training for a future president."<sup>137</sup> His performance as a swimmer and a lifeguard prefigured his "cool, unhurried progress through crises of politics and personnel."<sup>138</sup> At one point, while reviewing with a friend in 1986 Reagan's presidency of the Screen Actors Guild, Morris even traces the events of Reagan's career by decade across the stars of the night sky, finally seeming to predict Iran/Contra – "his presidency's heading into a black hole."<sup>139</sup> Beyond such blithe omens, Morris invests his narrative with a strong forward motion in his repeated identification of Reagan with the questing knight Parsifal, the innocent fool: "All his life, Ronald Reagan has ridden a long road dissolving, at the limit of sight, into something scintillant yet ethereal."<sup>140</sup>

The sense that Reagan was pursuing a destiny reinforces the mythic nature of the narratives, tying Reagan, in Kengor's case, to national destiny, and otherwise establishing that Reagan's life has meaning – destiny cannot exist without purpose. Despite the varying purposes, methods and conclusions of these biographies, we can see common mythic representations of Reagan which result from the combined imperatives of the biographical form and the symbolic presidency. Biography is a medium which expresses and perpetuates the mythic conventions of a presidential life. These conventions have been applied to Reagan's life, in support of his candidacy for the presidency, and in support of his presidency as a great one. Biography is a means by which presidents can be commemorated, their lives as

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<sup>135</sup> Noonan (2001), p. 16.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p. 162.

<sup>137</sup> Morris (2000), p.54.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, pp. 246-8.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

narratives which can be remembered as collective experiences. Reagan's life is not only remembered by Peggy Noonan as an exemplary legend to guide and inspire future generations, but also by Edmund Morris as a means for Americans to understand how they remember their past, and thus understand themselves. Biography is also a creative form which has seen Reagan represented fictionally and across media, reinforcing him as a cultural icon, but demonstrating the sensitivity with which his memory is guarded. Overall, biography has allowed Reagan's life to become an expression of American history and identity, whether in the positive, heroic terms of Noonan or Kengor, or in the more subtle arguments about American self-imagination put forward by Morris and Wills. Reagan's relationship to American mythology is redefined in biography as one that has been extant throughout his life, while his life becomes part of the Reagan myth. This is the result of the nature of the form, the traditions and cultural meaning of the presidency, but also the contributing factors of Reagan's own, unique presidential identity, as an American leader who represents the national mythic process.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“Call it Mysticism”: Reagan’s Perception, Expression and Use of the American Past**

#### Introduction

Reagan’s perception of the American past has been interpreted in exclusively mythic terms. This has involved speculation about the mechanics of his personal commitment to fantasy and fable over fact, and the symbolic implications of this for American culture. More substantially, such interpretation has considered Reagan’s political success in terms of his contribution to American ideas about its past and future. Hugh Heclo argued that Reagan was a “man of ideas” who “was devoted to advancing not just a political program, party, or even movement, but a philosophy of history”. In some ways an expansion of Paul Erickson’s contemporary rhetorical study of Reagan’s expressions of American destiny, *Reagan Speaks*, Heclo made a valuable case for the historical substance, coherent framework and vital role in his political thinking of Reagan’s “master narrative”. This described thematically an ideology based on faith in the sacramental mission of America, the strength inherent in its founding principles, and the centrality of individual freedom to those principles.<sup>141</sup> These themes are fundamental to Reagan’s historical perception and expression, which are considered here in a new way, in terms of his specific understanding of American history, as a series of events and as a concept. This approach reveals more fully Reagan’s relationship to American mythology and his active involvement in it as he chose stories for, and omitted them from, his narrative, investing them with meaning and argument. This, though, is not a cynical manipulation of the past, but an approach ordained by an understanding of history, which found mythic value in its process and its role in national life.

This chapter follows a roughly chronological narrative of American history which emphasises the consistency of Reagan’s historical interpretation from America’s beginnings to his own experience of the Cold War. His understanding of America’s foundation is represented by his treatment of John Winthrop, the

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<sup>141</sup> Heclo, Brownlee and Graham (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency* (2003), pp. 17-39.

Declaration of Independence and the broader subject of Western history. The Civil War and its legacy of regional and racial division in the twentieth century represent the themes which most challenged the coherence of his mythic narrative of national unity. The cultural disruptions of the 1960s and the Cold War's confrontation with Communism abroad and liberalism at home, finally, were political challenges to which his philosophy of history represented a solution. This method sacrifices a chronological assessment of Reagan's own political development, and in thus treating the expanse of Reagan's expression as a near uniform source, it assumes a thematic consistency to his thought. This is excusable, as a remarkable consistency is apparent and will be demonstrated. However, the political and professional contexts of Reagan's historical expressions are relevant, as are the alterations within them, when they occur.

To some extent, Reagan is treated here as a historian. Each subject is discussed in terms of his methods of selection or omission, his narrative style, his revisions, and his historical argument. This is a problematic idea for various reasons, not least because it is clear Reagan operated under a vastly different set of priorities from professional history. Reagan had a distant relationship to the discipline, and to professional historians. Those in his administration had essentially political functions, such as the historians of Russia, Richard Pipes and Susan Massie, who served partly to educate Reagan, but also to put their knowledge to use in the development or operation of Cold War strategy.<sup>142</sup> Another historian in the White House, Edmund Morris, maintained a professional distance that was reciprocated in the president's polite inscrutability. This relationship did not follow the precedent of that between President Kennedy and his court historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., with its self-conscious awareness of future history.<sup>143</sup> Reagan is also difficult to define as a reader of history, because he rarely spoke specifically about books or authors. Reagan's

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<sup>142</sup> Pipes and Massie represented different kinds of history, and were useful to different aspects of Reagan's Soviet policy. The Sovietologist Pipes took a two year leave from Harvard at the start of Reagan's presidency to work on the NSC, performing an important role in the development of Reagan's early aggressive policies. Massie wrote popular histories of Russian culture and society. Reagan enjoyed her briefings on the beliefs and traditions of the Russian people, but she also served as an unofficial contact with the Soviet Union for cultural relations. On Pipes, see Kengor (2006), pp. 165-73. On Massie, see Brinkley, Douglas (ed.), *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2007), pp. 222, 412; and Massie's own account in Strober, Deborah Hart, and Strober, Gerald S. (eds.), *The Reagan Presidency: An Oral History of the Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 1998), pp. 224-8.

<sup>143</sup> Troy, Tevi, *Intellectuals and the American Presidency* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), pp. 29-33.

literary habits did not find the promotion or scrutiny that has met those of Presidents George W. Bush or Barack Obama. One presidential reading list was released to the *Baltimore Sun* but Reagan declined the suggestion of making the practice regular.<sup>144</sup> Lou Cannon touched on the question of Reagan's reading, and the lack of knowledge about it:

One reason that outsiders underestimated the extent of Reagan's reading was that he often forgot the titles of books, even books he quoted. He also seemed to have a reader's conceit that books were secret, personal treasures: he never cared, as far as I could tell, if anyone else knew that he was a reader.<sup>145</sup>

A more fundamental problem with treating Reagan as a historian lies in the question of sources and authorship. Reagan wrote no histories, and thus examples of his historical thought must be gleaned from a variety of available sources of which the central example is his public speech. In the case of his presidency, his authorship is in question. William Ker Muir, Jr. estimated that the president spoke more than half a million prepared words each year, not including the hundreds of thousands of written messages attributed to Reagan.<sup>146</sup> Such output, of course, depended on a large communications staff headed by around six speechwriters. Moreover, in the speechwriting process, the speech in question would be circulated within the administration to relevant agencies and individuals and receive their input, at the writer's discretion. Though Reagan played a central part in it, presidential rhetoric represented a multi-agented process, and we must ask how far it can describe his own perceptions. This is a problem not fully resolvable except, where possible, with close attention to the construction of individual speeches. Meanwhile, Reagan's presidential speeches cannot be considered removed from his personal beliefs. Firstly, his final editing and input, as well as his willing performance of the speech, indicates his

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<sup>144</sup> The list, from June, 1984, included *The Rise of the Right* (1984) by William Rusher, *The Africans* (1983) by David Lamb, *The Turning Point: Jefferson's Battle for the Presidency* (1962) by Frank Van Der Linden, *The Third World War* (1982) by John Hackett, and *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy* (1984) by Richard Shultz and Roy Gordon. These books certainly seem to reflect Reagan's interests, but there is a suspicious coherency, even a narrative, to the selection especially considering it was released at the beginning of the 1984 presidential campaign. Skinner, Kiron K., Anderson, Annelise and Anderson, Martin, (eds.), *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003). p. 285.

<sup>145</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan* (2000), p. 252.

<sup>146</sup> Muir, William Ker, Jr., *The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992), p. 22.

approval of and seals his ownership of the ideas within. Secondly, the speechwriters were not independently creative. “The Reagan speechwriters,” Muir asserted, “had a clear vision of how to please the president because, before entering the White House, he had written so much himself, good stuff that had inspired them.”<sup>147</sup>

Presidential rhetoric must be treated cautiously, therefore, and with, where possible, an eye to its construction, but it can still represent the Reagan presidency as a multi-agented but coherent institution, with Reagan’s beliefs and ideology as its motive core. This rhetoric, moreover, is not the only source, there is also the “good stuff” that came before. Reagan’s pre-presidential political speeches extend back three decades, and though large gaps exist in the records from his period stumping for General Electric in the 1950s, he maintained remarkably consistent themes until his emergence as a political force.<sup>148</sup> His public speeches following this period, which led him into the governorship, represent an established ideology and an effort to apply it to national politics, and thus where they use or approach historical themes, are valuable sources. Muir, and Thomas Evans, are not alone in referring particularly to Reagan’s 1964 address on behalf of Goldwater, now known as “The Speech”, as a central expression of his ideology, informed by his political development of the previous decade, and informing his speechwriters of two decades later. The latter half of the 1970s represent Reagan’s most productive period in terms of independently articulating his views to a national audience. As well as political speeches, Reagan made regular radio addresses and wrote newspaper articles, later published to redress Reagan’s poor reputation as an intellectual. These writings, as well as the collections of his private correspondence, contain indications of his historical thinking. Such sources contextualise and reinforce his presidential rhetoric and the conclusions drawn from it.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>148</sup> Thomas W. Evans has made the most thorough effort to synthesise the content of Reagan’s public speaking, informal and formal, on the GE circuit, finding the origins of many of the political themes of his speeches in the early sixties. Evans’ focus is on economics and GE management philosophy, but his study gives the impression that Reagan’s historical imagery remained consistent throughout. Evans, Thomas W., *The Education of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

## Foundations

The historian of religion Mircea Eliade wrote that “myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’... Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’”<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, Reagan’s most frequent and important historical references were to America’s foundations, which he invested with vital and continuous meaning for American identity. The most famous example of this is Reagan’s indication and appropriation of John Winthrop, the early Puritan settler of Massachusetts. Reagan confirmed Winthrop’s centrality to his vision in the conclusion of his Farewell Address, when he recalled the phrase “the shining city upon the hill”, which Winthrop had written “to describe the America he imagined”.<sup>150</sup> This phrase has since become reminiscent, even metonymic of Reagan’s political vision.<sup>151</sup> In this, as Reagan’s most famous historical reference, it presents certain comprehensive difficulties, in that Reagan’s meaning has supplanted Winthrop’s, and that interpretations of Winthrop’s rhetoric are coloured with the resonance of Reagan’s. Significantly, “shining city” is not an accurate quote, but an embellishment. Reagan began his use of the phrase quoting Winthrop more or less directly, as here in an early example from 1969:

On the deck of the tiny *Arabella* off the coast of Massachusetts in 1630, John Winthrop gathered the little band of pilgrims together and spoke of the life they would have in the land they had never seen:

“We shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all the people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken

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<sup>149</sup> Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (1963), pp. 5-6

<sup>150</sup> Reagan, ‘Farewell Address to the Nation, ‘January 11, 1989’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1989/011189i.htm>, (accessed March 24, 2009).

<sup>151</sup> It had particular significance during the Republican presidential campaigns of 2008. Michael Reagan demanded that John McCain articulate the “shining city”, explicitly asking for visionary leadership, and implicitly for more conservative leadership. At the convention, Mayor Giuliani declared that “we are the party that believes unapologetically in America’s essential greatness - that we are a shining city on the hill, a beacon of freedom that inspires people everywhere to reach for a better world.” In her debate, Governor Palin echoed this in articulating her and McCain’s shared world-view: “That world view that says that America is a nation of exceptionalism. And we are to be that shining city on a hill, as President Reagan so beautifully said, that we are a beacon of hope and that we are unapologetic here.” Reagan, Michael, ‘Show Us the Shining City on a Hill’, *Human Events* (February 8, 2008), <http://www.humanevents.com/article.php?id=24898> (accessed June 9, 2009); Giuliani, Rudy, ‘Remarks’ (September 3, 2008), <http://portal.gopconvention2008.com/speech/details.aspx?id=43> (accessed June 9, 2009); Palin, Sarah, ‘Transcript of Palin, Biden Debate’ (October 3, 2008), <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/02/debate.transcript/> (accessed June 9, 2009).



and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through all the world.”<sup>152</sup>

During his presidency, and with increased frequency in his second term, this sentiment appeared paraphrased in a wide range of speeches, with the additional adjective.<sup>153</sup> Paul Kengor makes the convincing argument that this represented Reagan merging Winthrop’s words with the original source, the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus compares the city on the hill to a lamp, exhorting the faithful to “let your light shine before men”.<sup>154</sup> Winthrop’s sermon and Reagan’s phrase are frequently held up as central examples of American exceptionalism, and often together as a demonstration of its ideological durability, with Winthrop’s manifesto representing its roots, and Reagan’s celebration its modern appearance. Both overtly Christian, and both prophetic, each suggests the potential exemplary perfection of America – while each man is also associated with its missionary determination.

The meaning of this connection has been variously defined. Kengor sees it made by a tradition within American leadership to perceive America’s providential role. Godfrey Hodgson has recently labelled it a false one, where Reagan’s conception of Winthrop’s sermon is historically wrong, not only in detail but in the central point of the English Protestant’s identity and audience. “In their context and their meaning,” the two expressed ideas “have virtually nothing in common”.<sup>155</sup> In an indirect response to Hodgson, Noam Chomsky has claimed a malevolent commonality. Winthrop began the American idea with suppression of Native Americans, while “the savage murderer and torturer Ronald Reagan...blissfully described himself as the leader of a ‘shining city on the hill’ while orchestrating some of the more ghastly crimes of his years in office.”<sup>156</sup> The character or validity of the exceptionalism espoused is not in question here, however. The significance lies in how Reagan

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<sup>152</sup> Reagan, ‘Eisenhower College Fundraiser’ (October 14, 1969), *Speaking My Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p.42.

<sup>153</sup> The first time President Reagan used the phrase “shining city” publicly appears to have been in 1982 in a speech addressing, suitably, the National League of Cities. Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National League of Cities in Los Angeles, California, November 29, 1982’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/112982c.htm> (accessed June 10, 2009).

<sup>154</sup> Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (2004), pp. 89-92.

<sup>155</sup> Hodgson, Godfrey, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1-3.

<sup>156</sup> Chomsky, ‘The Torture Memos’ (May 24, 2009), <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/20090521.htm> (accessed June 10, 2009).

approached an historical example, and made meaning from it. There are three important points regarding Reagan's appropriation of Winthrop. Firstly, the consistency with which he remained with the theme indicates Reagan's method – the identification and repetition of an image or story. His development of the reference, becoming less specific over the years, suggests an idle connection with the historical detail, even if the connection with the theme remained strong. The second point is the applicability of the image, used by Reagan in varied contexts and to varied audiences. Referring to Winthrop in his speeches to the Conservative Political Action Conference in the 1970s, Reagan aligned his message with the conservative movement, offering it as a reassurance and a call to arms, whether on the issue of limited government or Cold War leadership.<sup>157</sup> A decade later, it could also be applied to a celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s message – “Let all Americans of every race and creed and color work together to build in this blessed land a shining city of brotherhood, justice, and harmony.”<sup>158</sup> Meanwhile, at the centennial ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty, the “shining city” was the beloved haven of the world's immigrants.<sup>159</sup> However, in each case the meaning drew from an assurance of destiny, and of America's continuity, and this leads us to the central point. Reagan's repetition of Winthrop's sermon was an articulation of his belief in American destiny, and an implicit demonstration of its ideological validity – Reagan was simply rearticulating the basis and purpose of America's foundation. His isolation, development, and personalisation of the message, meanwhile, both made it relevant to contemporary issues and connected him personally to it. Reagan's use of Winthrop was constant but renewable, symbolic and fluid. It suggested a reverence for the meaning of America's foundation, but was a recreation of that meaning. It is a fundamental example of Reagan's mythic style of history, not least because of its retrospective effect.

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<sup>157</sup> Reagan's CPAC speeches in 1974 and 1975 both emphasised Winthrop's warning not to deal falsely with God, lest he withdraw His blessing. In the first, Reagan argued that despite government excesses, America still held true in its private enterprise and character; in the second, it acted as a warning not to shirk the responsibilities of world leadership against Communism. Reagan, 'We Will Be As a City Upon a Hill' (January 25, 1974), <http://www.conservative.org/pressroom/reagan/reagan1974.asp>; Reagan, 'Let Them Go Their Way' (March 1, 1975), <http://www.conservative.org/pressroom/reagan/reagan1975.asp> (accessed June 10, 2009).

<sup>158</sup> Reagan, 'Proclamation 5431 -- Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, 1986, January 18, 1986', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11886a.htm> (accessed June 11, 2009).

<sup>159</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at the Opening Ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty Centennial Celebration in New York, New York, July 3, 1986', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11886a.htm> (accessed June 11, 2009).

John Winthrop's speech was a single historical moment that became a symbolic event representing an American ideological continuity. The actual creation of the United States was a series of events that bred real political and institutional continuity as well as certain ideological legacies. However, Reagan was not drawn to the detail of the American Revolutionary War or of the political settlement that followed it, establishing the structure of the United States. Instead, he treated it abstractly, finding meaning not in its events but its ideas and their symbolic historical importance. It was history's only truly successful revolution, "a philosophical revolution that changed the very concept of government," and "the culmination of men's dreams for six thousand years," driven by "this love of liberty, at the heart of our national identity".<sup>160</sup> This perception of the Revolution could be represented by one particular event, and idea, the Declaration of Independence. Writing at the end of Reagan's presidency, Charles Kesler, a protégé of William Buckley, wrote of the symbolic importance of this document in the alignment of American political thought (and in the attainment of electoral success).

Whether invoked rightly or wrongly...the great proposition enshrined at the heart of the Declaration, so touched with the majesty of Jefferson and Lincoln, so alive with the history and destiny of the American people, can still cast a spell on an American audience.<sup>161</sup>

Kesler referred to what he saw as liberalism's distortion and appropriation of the meaning of the document, particularly its claim that "all men are created equal." Reagan, he said, was notable for rejecting the orthodoxy – accepted by conservatives – that the Declaration was a liberal document. Moreover, "his victories and defeats correspond to his success or failure" in appropriating the fundamental American symbol of the Declaration of Independence.<sup>162</sup> There is a suggested comparison with President Lincoln, whose own meaningful relationship to the Declaration drew the attention of both Garry Wills and John Diggins. Wills identified the Gettysburg

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<sup>160</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at the Bicentennial Observance of the Battle of Yorktown in Virginia, October 19, 1981', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/101981a.htm> (accessed April 24, 2009); Reagan, 'We Will Be a City Upon a Hill' (January 25, 1974), [http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/current/america/governor\\_ronald\\_reagan.htm](http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/current/america/governor_ronald_reagan.htm) (accessed April 9, 2009); Reagan, 'Remarks Announcing America's Economic Bill of Rights, July 3, 1987', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/070387a.htm> (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>161</sup> Kesler, Charles, 'Introduction', Buckley and Kesler, Charles, R. (eds.), *Keeping the Tablets: Modern American Conservative Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

Address as an ideological turning point in American history, where a president reached back and altered the foundation of America. By centring American history on the Declaration, with its promise of equality, Lincoln evaded and diminished the compromising language of the Constitution and gave a new shape to American identity. “Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution,” and “undertook a new founding of the nation.”<sup>163</sup> Diggins emphasised that “[w]here Jefferson’s Declaration was a manifesto of separation and dissolution, Lincoln reconceived it as a symbol of national unity.”<sup>164</sup> President Lincoln thus sought not only to rewrite American history, but to recast the identity it fostered in the language of symbolism. The question remains, is a comparison with Reagan justified? Can he be seen to have taken, if not a similarly radical, then at least a similarly active approach to America’s founding in his national leadership?

In some of his presidential reflections on the Declaration, Reagan interpreted its message in terms of the relationship between the individual and government, and its affirmation of the theistic foundations of American political beliefs. Such interpretations represent the conservative re-appropriation of the document to which Kesler referred. This was never, however, at the front and centre of Reagan’s public communication, but would emerge on relevant occasions, particularly around the Fourth of July. Reagan cannot thus be seen to be determinedly redefining the meaning of the Declaration, rather staying on message and applying it to whichever theme was on hand. Moreover, Reagan’s Independence Day messages more often discuss the theme of patriotic remembrance and celebration, a focus on commemoration which suggests his symbolic priorities. Reagan follows Lincoln in his appreciation of the Declaration as a symbol of national unity, and one through which contemporary messages can be made, but there was no argument, only association. The meaning Reagan found in the Declaration can also be seen in another example of his oft-repeated parables. Again, a story recurs over a thirty year period, apparently told from memory, this time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Simply put, the signers waver at the last moment, nervous at the enormity and danger of the act, only to be roused by an unknown elderly speaker in the hall:

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<sup>163</sup> Wills, Garry, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 38-9.

<sup>164</sup> Diggins, John Patrick, *On Hallowed Ground* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 31.

If my hands were freezing in death, I would sign that parchment with my last ounce of strength. Sign, sign if the next moment the noose is around your neck, sign even if the hall is ringing with the sound of the headman's axe, for that parchment will be the textbook of freedom, the bible of the rights of man forever.<sup>165</sup>

This version, from his CPAC speech of 1974, differs in language from that he recounted in 1952, but the tone of the admonition is the same, as is the dramatic twist of the story. The speaker is not just unknown, but has disappeared by the time the delegates turn back from the document, having been inspired by his words to sign. In each case, Reagan is happy to term the story a legend, but leaving the implication that the event may have had mysterious, even divine intervention – though the Declaration, Reagan says, was “miracle enough.” In the 1974 version, the audience is given the roots of the story. Reagan was told it by an unnamed “avid student of history,” though he confesses, “I never researched or made an effort to verify it.” Reagan repeated the story, in a shortened form, for the first Independence Day of his presidency. Amongst the now wider audience who heard it was a South Carolinian minister who wrote to inform the president of the identity of the speaker – John Witherspoon, one of the signers. Reagan wrote back:

I am very pleased to have the more accurate information you have provided. If I use [the story] again or, I think I should say when I do, I'll be pleased to now give full credit and recognition.<sup>166</sup>

It seems that Reagan never did use the story again, at least to a public audience. The theatricality of the story, with its sense of prophecy and destiny, was diminished by the imposition of historical fact.

It is clear, then, that Reagan did not approach the event of the Declaration of Independence with any historical rigour, favouring the needs of drama over sourceable fact. This is reflective of a common and much commented upon trend in Reagan's historical representation. His speechwriter, Ken Khachigian, said that “Reagan has a sense of theater that propels him to tell stories in their most theatrically imposing manner.”<sup>167</sup> Referring to his occasional accounts of fictional Second World

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<sup>165</sup> Reagan (January 25, 1974).

<sup>166</sup> Reagan, letter to Dr. Alf Graham Taylor (August 3, 1981), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 290.

<sup>167</sup> Cannon (2000), pp. 75-7.

War stories as factual events, Reagan justified his ahistorical expression in terms of its moral meaning and “common sense”:

Maybe I had seen too many war movies, the heroics of which I sometimes confused with real life, but common sense told me something very essential – you can’t have a fighting force without an *esprit de corps*.<sup>168</sup>

The Declaration of Independence was thus a story through which he could inspire American morale. The mythic nature of Reagan’s perception of the Declaration goes beyond the style of this rhetorical representation, however. There was a dramatic event laden with meaning and portent, but this was defined by the content of the document. Reagan perceived and valued the importance of this content, understanding America’s foundation in terms of the potential and success of its ideas, but he did not engage with it in an intellectual or political sense. He did not, like Lincoln, try to redefine the political meaning of the document and its place in national ideology. For Reagan, its place in national ideology was not an intellectual issue, but an iconographic one. It was the moment which confirmed America as an idea, and was thus of great symbolic importance. Reagan may have found in the Declaration affirmation of his conservative and Christian values, and may have used it to support them rhetorically, but he did not learn his conservatism from the document, and nor did the document challenge his conservatism. He found no ambiguity in understanding and celebrating the Declaration as the political birth of the United States, even if the Constitution, which “tied up some of the loose ends...a dozen years after the Revolution,” was the document which created its political structure and which informed his political principle.<sup>169</sup> Each performed a role in the mythic narrative of American foundation, which Reagan adhered to first, then used politically.

No discussion of Reagan’s perceptions of America’s historical foundation would be complete without consideration of his relationship to the American West. The West formed a central part of Reagan’s political image and identity, suggesting a brand of conservatism that emphasised independence, toughness, individualism and enterprise. This image was in part an expression of his regionalism, which was most visible in his frequent trips to his Californian home, *Rancho del Cielo*, where for

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, pp. 38-40.

<sup>169</sup> Reagan (January 25, 1974).

almost a year of his presidency he dressed in western attire, rode horses, cut brush, and signed legislation. This environment was more than a backdrop for photo opportunities. It reportedly made Reagan “more ideological” while he was there.<sup>170</sup> It was a fondness complicated by his acting career, and his own participation in the recreation of the West in Hollywood and on television. Richard Slotkin argued that Reagan’s claim to his western image was “based entirely on references to imaginary deeds performed in a purely mythic space.”<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, the Frontier Myth, as recreated on screen, was inherent to Reagan’s presidency, informing his foreign and economic policy. We have seen similar argument from Garry Wills, who used westerns as a means of framing Reagan’s politics and ideology and revealing the contradictions within them. Janet Fireman took the idea further, suggesting that Reagan’s presidency revived and fuelled Western themes across American culture.<sup>172</sup> These ideas all relate to the projection and perception of Reagan’s image, and with the exception of Wills and his interest in Reagan’s inner myth, give little attention to Reagan’s personal interest in, knowledge of and understanding of the historic West.

Slotkin’s point about Reagan’s imaginary deeds was in comparison to the actual frontier experience of his nineteenth century predecessors William Henry Harrison and Teddy Roosevelt. Further comparisons can be made to consider the intellectual and ideological responses of American leaders to Western history. Roosevelt supplemented his western adventurism with scholarly ambition. *The Winning of the West* (1889-96) was the pinnacle of his literary career, and for Edmund Morris was “the first comprehensive statement of his Americanism, and, by extension (since he ‘was’ America), of himself.”<sup>173</sup> Meanwhile, though Woodrow Wilson in his written national histories emphasised the vitality of America’s interdependent political economy rather than the vigour of its individual pioneers, also found in westward expansion “the moral of our history”.<sup>174</sup> In each man’s case the writing of history was an endeavour of political expression and discovery, and their western narratives went on to inform their national policy. For another president, a

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<sup>170</sup> Cannon (2000), p. 465.

<sup>171</sup> Slotkin, Richard, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), p. 644.

<sup>172</sup> Fireman, Janet R., ‘Ronald Reagan and the Mythic West’, *Journal of the West* 34(2) (April, 1995), pp. 91-6.

<sup>173</sup> Morris, Edmund, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 474.

<sup>174</sup> Thorsen, Niels Aage, *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson, 1875-1910* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 145-9.

contemporary of Reagan's, the West had more personal but equally ideological meaning. Lyndon Johnson would speak of the Western landscape and the history that it held. In his 1964 campaign book, *My Hope for America*, he recalled his childhood self contemplating the Texan sky and earth and what they had witnessed: "I remember the men who captured my native soil from the wilderness. They endured much so that others might have much. Their Dream was for the children. Mine, too, is for the child even now struggling towards birth."<sup>175</sup> In his 1965 State of the Union address, he evoked the same theme after asking how he had found the guidance to lead his country – "The answer was waiting for me in the land where I was born."<sup>176</sup> Compared to these presidents who had sought out their ideology in Western history, Reagan might fail the tests of authenticity and curiosity. No writer of history, he did not offer a coherent intellectual interpretation of America's expansion to the West and its political implications. No son of pioneers, he did not inherit what might be called a frontier ideology. However, Reagan invested in western history, and did so beyond the roles he played or coveted on screen.

Books on the American West, and in particular Californian history, took up considerable space on the shelves at *Rancho del Cielo*.<sup>177</sup> Reagan's reading habits are obscure, but it appears that the subject held particular interest for him beyond the practical historical and economic reading he did, which informed his politics and gave substance to his communication. It was a romantic, personal and ideological pursuit that was complemented by his fondness for cultural representations of the west. As a boy, he read Zane Grey and encountered the frontier poems of Robert Service which accompanied him throughout his life.<sup>178</sup> In a letter to Peter Aviles, a young disabled man who had expressed his interest in presidential history, Reagan claimed also to be a "history buff", but one whose main interest was in the history of the West. Expanding on this, he referred to "some historian" who said of the American West that "it was the most unusual march of empire in world history. It wasn't led by the military but by settlers who bet their lives and the lives of their families as they

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<sup>175</sup> Johnson, Lyndon B., *My Hope For America* (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 1-3.

<sup>176</sup> Johnson, Lyndon B., 'State of the Union Address' (January 4, 1965), *USA Presidents*, <http://www.usa-presidents.info/union/lbj-2.html> (accessed September 28, 2009).

<sup>177</sup> Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), (2003) p. 280; also see Kengor (2006), p.399.

<sup>178</sup> Morris, *Dutch* (1999), pp. 626-7.



opened up the West in the face of hardship and hostile Indians.”<sup>179</sup> This suggests Reagan’s lack of interest in both the specific identity of historians, and the development of historiographic discourse about the American West. However broad his reading, what he gained from it was an exceptionalist platitude about Western strength and virtue in its independence from government. The contrary interpretation, of federally enabled expansion, has been central to Western history and was advocated by Wills who claimed that Reagan was unaware of the mythic nature of the western imagery and iconography he adhered to.<sup>180</sup> It is true that he believed in the myths, but not so clear that he did not recognise them as myths. Reagan seemed aware of his romantic infatuation with the fictional west, and what it meant. Wills cites a passage from *Where’s the Rest of Me?* as evidence of Reagan’s mythic historical perception:

I was a “cavalry-Indian” buff. I thought then, and think now, that the brief post-Civil War era when our blue-clad cavalry stayed on a wartime footing against the plains and desert Indians was a phase of Americana rivalling the Kipling era for color and romance.<sup>181</sup>

That he refers to a historical period as “Americana” and frames it in terms of a literary reference is demonstrative of his approach to the era. However, this statement was made in the context of Hollywood in the immediate post-war period, and the debates at the time over what type of movie Americans would respond to. Reagan offers his thoughts on the subject to demonstrate his understanding of the American mood at the time and the stories it favoured, noting that the industry did then turn to this genre (though disappointingly, excluding him).

It is perhaps a consequence of this appreciation that Reagan rarely referred substantially to the historic West in his political rhetoric. Containing no definitive events or texts such as John Winthrop’s speech or the Declaration of Independence, Reagan did not draw specific ideas from the West. This history was indefinite, ephemeral and thematic, and expressed mostly in the context of his image rather than in the subject of his communication. Exceptions to this, such as Reagan’s address at

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<sup>179</sup> Aviles, Peter, letter to Reagan (January 2, 1985), and response (January 28, 1985), RRPL, Presidential Handwriting File Series II: Presidential Records, Box 11, Folder 162 (1/26/85 – 1/28/85), PR007 287180.

<sup>180</sup> Wills, *Reagan’s America* (2000), pp. 103-11.

<sup>181</sup> Reagan, *My Early Life* (1984), p. 205.

the memorial service for the *Challenger* astronauts, were metaphorical appeals rather than explicit claims of continuity. “We think back to the pioneers of an earlier century,” suggested Reagan, “along the Oregon Trail, you could still see the grave markers of those who fell on the way, but grief only steeled them to the journey ahead. Today the frontier is space and the boundaries of human knowledge.”<sup>182</sup> The Old West was recalled non-specifically, and evoked in spirit rather than detail – though still to indicate the moral example of national identity. At one notable event in 1983, Reagan had cause to address explicitly the theme of the West and its meaning. Opening the “The American Cowboy” at the Library of Congress, an exhibition as much about myth and image as about history, Reagan remarked that:

America's heart is on display here. This exhibit explores both the reality and the myth of the American West. And both are important. Here are more than the bits and pieces of a rough and gritty life, but the tangible remnants of a national legend.

The objects on display, both social artefacts and cultural representations, were “part of our national identity,” evoking themes of “integrity, morality, and democratic values.” Further, the president quoted Henry Steele Commager: “Americans, in making their Western myths, were not put off by discrepancies with reality. Americans believed about the West not so much what was true, but what they thought ought to be true.”<sup>183</sup> Here Reagan seemed to acknowledge his own mythic understanding of the West, but defended it by emphasising its moral function, and aligning it with greater national beliefs. This reflection, though, was the product of his speechwriters, who responded to Reagan’s image and interpreted its meaning. Here, Reagan’s perception of the past was a construction of his presidency, based on a largely unspoken mythic discourse.

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<sup>182</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Memorial Service for the Crew of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* in Houston, Texas, January 31, 1986’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/13186a.htm> (accessed 26/7/09).

<sup>183</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Opening of “The American Cowboy” Exhibit at the Library of Congress, March 24, 1983’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32483b.htm> (accessed 26/7/09).

## Division

Each of the above historical references indicated for Reagan themes of common national identity and purpose. They described shared destiny and acted as shared examples, reinforcing national unity. The eras of John Winthrop, the Revolution and of Westward expansion might easily be used to explore themes of religious, regional, political and ethnic division in American history. It is not the purpose here to charge Reagan with a lack of nuance in his historical treatments of these subjects, but considering that unity was a central theme of his historical narrative, we must ask how he dealt with American history where division was paramount. The primary and connected examples of the Civil War specifically and America's racial divisions more generally received evasive responses from Reagan which created contradictions in his mythic expressions. Wilbur Edel complained that "it is hard to imagine anyone dropping in on [Reagan]...and finding him immersed in volume three of Douglas Southall Freeman's biography of Robert E. Lee," a reference to Harry Truman's historical interest.<sup>184</sup> This might be true, but perhaps more because of Reagan's aversion to the subject matter than reading history in general. While the conflicts between the US Cavalry and Indians in the post-war West could represent an era of colonial romance which Reagan wished to recreate, and the exploits of soldiers in the First and Second World Wars could become the basis for expressing national identity to later generations, it was rare that the Civil War was referenced, even less explained by Reagan. This reticence is apparent in a snatch of conversation with Margaret Thatcher caught candidly by attendant reporters' microphones. The Prime Minister questions Reagan on the legacy of division that the war holds in the contemporary United States. Reagan, though, seems unwilling or unable to expand on the war's continued relevance, and simply seems aghast at its carnage.<sup>185</sup> The Civil War did not

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<sup>184</sup> Edel, *The Reagan Presidency* (1992), p. 66.

<sup>185</sup> The conversation is reported as follows:

*Reagan:* ... it is just the phrases such as "mowing men down" that rocks ...

*Thatcher:* But does it still leave this impression on people? Does it still have an effect on how people think, between north and south?

*Reagan:* Well, I think there's been a big change ...

*Thatcher:* Mmm.

*Reagan:* When I was growing up, it still ...

*Thatcher:* Mmm, it still has.

*Reagan:* It still has.

fit into his myth of America, and he was unwilling to reflect on its paramount significance to national identity, which raised issues of regional and racial division.

Unsurprisingly, Reagan's most extensive association with the American Civil War was on-screen. In *The Last Outpost* (also released as *Cavalry Charge*) (1951), he starred as a Confederate officer stationed in the West. The denouement of the film sees the brotherly union of North and South in the face of an Apache attack. *The Santa Fe Trail* (1940) is the more significant film, more successful and cited more often, including by Reagan himself who rewatched the film during his presidency and was proud of the film, despite playing second lead to Errol Flynn.<sup>186</sup> Reagan played the role of a young George Custer, a companion to Flynn's J.E.B. Stuart, on the trail of the abolitionist John Brown in Kansas and Virginia. Reagan acknowledged the historical and chronological inventions of the story, noting that his role paid "less attention to the truth" than his previous portrayal of George Gipp. It did not appear to bother him any more than it did the writer, Robert Buckner, who said he didn't give "a damn about 'strict historical accuracy' if it hamstrings the story."<sup>187</sup> As Stephen Vaughan discusses, the story was an "appeal for national unity" in face of the threat of war, based on themes of military honour and loyalty.<sup>188</sup> This unity is represented in terms of the Civil War, with the friendship between Custer and Stuart presaging reconciliation, while the narrative seeks to absolve the South of its belligerence and rebellion. Its central expression of nationalist sentiment is given to Jefferson Davis, who speaks at the cadets' graduation, while blame for the conflict is placed firmly on Raymond Massey's fanatic John Brown, whose enmity toward the Union and the Constitution is emphasised throughout. The sin of slavery is also absolved through the motives and methods of John Brown. Stuart's assurances that only the South understands the problem and will solve it in its own way and own time are supported by the words of a wide-eyed freed slave rescued from John Brown – "Old John Brown said he's gon' give us freedom, but, shuckins! If this here Kansas is freedom, I

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The leaders then noticed the nearby boom microphones. 'Conversation during press shoot (US civil war; boom microphones; the Falklands)' (June 4, 1982), Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/displaydocument.asp?docid=111335> (accessed April 23, 2009).

<sup>186</sup> RRPL, 'Films Viewed by Ronald and Nancy Reagan', <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/filmsviewed.html> (accessed July 29, 2009); Reagan, letter to Michael Palmer (February 17, 1983), *A Life in Letters*, p. 129.

<sup>187</sup> Vaughan, Stephen, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 89-91.

ain't got no use for it, no sir!'”<sup>189</sup> While such archaic and uncomfortable racial representations do not appear to have marred Reagan's enjoyment of the film, this may have been offset by his own character's rational, if passive, abolitionism, and moreover by his off-screen efforts in SAG to oppose discrimination and protect the interests of Hollywood's black actors.<sup>190</sup>

The themes of America's regional and racial divisions impacted on Reagan's political career even as he personally and cognitively avoided them. His conservative alliance included Southerners who preserved a distinct regional identity informed by memory of the Civil War. In the Reagan Administration, this was represented to an extent by Pat Buchanan, who claimed to have inherited “a belief in the greatness of the Confederacy,” but whose nostalgia for the Old South or the segregated Washington, D.C. of his childhood was tempered by an admiration of Lincoln and a highly qualified respect for the Civil Rights movement.<sup>191</sup> However, a stronger representation of neo-Confederacy was not politically possible, as demonstrated by the withdrawal of the nomination of Melvin Bradford for the chairmanship of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1981. The Texan scholar had received the nomination as a reward for his support during the primaries and to mollify conservative dissatisfaction with Reagan's choice of Sandra Day O'Connor for the Supreme Court. Bradford's historical outlook, which condemned Lincoln and apologised for slavery, offended too many, including the neoconservative Irving Kristol, who led a campaign to quash his nomination. He was quickly replaced for the post by William Bennett.<sup>192</sup> Reagan made no public comment on this, and never engaged with any issue of Confederate memory, but in more general and less overt ways he did make political appeals to Southern history and identity.

This is most famously exemplified by the decision to open Reagan's 1980 campaign with a speech in Neshoba County, Mississippi. The site of the murder of three Civil Rights activists in 1964, Neshoba was a symbol of violent racism and the backlash to Civil Rights legislation. Reagan's speech included an advocacy of states' rights, and a promise to restore them. These comments were specifically added to the

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<sup>189</sup> *Santa Fe Trail* (dir. Michael Curtiz, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1940).

<sup>190</sup> Vaughan (1994), pp. 171-81.

<sup>191</sup> Buchanan, Patrick J., *Right From the Beginning* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1988), pp. 21, 129-131, 301-5.

<sup>192</sup> Bailey, Fred, ‘M.E. Bradford, the Reagan Right and the Resurgence of Confederate Nationalism’, paper delivered at the British Association of American Studies Annual Conference, (The University of Kent, Canterbury, 20-23 April 2006).

stump speech for the benefit of the audience, and the appeal to Southern segregationist sentiment was clear.<sup>193</sup> It does not necessarily describe Reagan's own perception of America's racial division, but his expressed understanding of its history is murky, contradictory and often dependent on his audience. This is all the more apparent when he referred to it in relation to his own life. In a letter to one conservative supporter in advance of his presidency, he explained his departure from the Democratic Party: "I was a Democrat when the Democratic Party stood for states rights... Today it is the party that has changed."<sup>194</sup> Reagan suggests that he made a political stand on states' rights – which in the context of the time of his conversion in the early sixties would mean a stand against Civil Rights. Yet in the aftermath of his election, he claimed to the mother of a young black campaign aide that his dissatisfaction came from another source:

One of the things that disturbed me over the years was my party's indifference to the situation in the South, where blacks were denied their constitutional rights for so long. And, of course, the South was a one-party region, solidly Democrat. It seemed that Washington would do nothing to upset that situation.<sup>195</sup>

Both claims are disingenuous. Reagan did not leave the Democratic Party over its abandonment of "states' rights" or its neglect of African Americans in the South. While he had turned against the active federal government constructed by FDR, this was grounded in issues of tax and regulation, not Civil Rights. His earlier liberal activism against discrimination did not make demands for federal intervention in the South, but involved either an emotive response to the Ku-Klux Klan as a fascist (and essentially foreign) organisation, or the cautious, but positive union action on behalf of black Hollywood actors.<sup>196</sup> Informing the character of all these responses, of course, was his emergent anti-communism, the greatest factor in his shift to conservatism and the Republican Party. His contrasting remarks above suggest a willingness to please his audience. Yet in comparison to the consistency with which he evoked and interpreted other national themes and events, this suggests a real

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<sup>193</sup> Crespino, Joseph, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 1-3.

<sup>194</sup> Reagan, letter to "Philip" (undated pre-presidential), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2003), p. 258.

<sup>195</sup> Reagan, letter to Lucinda Williford (circa 1980), *ibid*, p.37.

<sup>196</sup> Vaughan (1994), pp. 171-81.

uncertainty over where he stood on racial division in America. This correlated with his inability to incorporate its history into his mythic understanding of the American past.

A comment from his debate with President Carter shows a problematic resolution to this difficulty. In response to a question about America's future as a multi-racial society, Reagan responded:

I believe in it. I am eternally optimistic, and I happen to believe that we've made great progress from the days when I was young and when this country didn't even know it had a racial problem.<sup>197</sup>

Like much of Reagan's language, this sentiment was not original. In 1978, in a radio address eulogising the black Air Force General Daniel James, Jr., he referred to James's childhood in Florida, "in an America that had *not* awakened to the fact it had a racial problem".<sup>198</sup> The idea is blithe and confusing. It acknowledges "a racial problem" and implies an appreciation of the civil rights successes of recent decades. His reference to "this country", however, seems exclusive. As Carter pointed out, African Americans were certainly aware of a racial problem in early twentieth century America. The suggestion, then, is that in a strange evasion of the problem just acknowledged, "this country" equates to white America.

The phrase becomes more problematic, considering that Reagan prided his family on its rejection of racial intolerance and discrimination in the Illinois of his youth; it seems unlikely that he would exclude himself from "this country". The comment can be read in relation to another of his epithets, also historically untrue – "We [the Reagans] were opposing bigotry long before there was a civil rights movement."<sup>199</sup> In these statements, Reagan promotes his own anti-racist identity and celebrates progress, but denigrates the Civil Rights movement for being an overdue, recent invention, and absolves white America of responsibility for racial oppression because it had not "awakened" to racial division. These ideas are expressed in an incoherent and inaccurate narrative of twentieth century history, which again alters depending on his audience. Reagan found difficulty in expressing his own opposition

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<sup>197</sup> Reagan, 'The Carter-Reagan Presidential Debate' (October 28, 1980), *Commission on Presidential Debates*, <http://www.debates.org/pages/trans80b.html> (accessed, July 29, 2009).

<sup>198</sup> Reagan, 'General James' (April 3, 1978), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) *Reagan's Path to Victory: Selected Writings* (New York: Free Press, 2004), p. 288.

<sup>199</sup> Reagan, letter to Mrs. L. Smith (August 29, 1984), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2003), p. 339.

to racism, not only because of his political allegiance to Southern conservatives, but because it demanded the recognition of entrenched and definitive division in American history. This is apparent in the vivid contrast between his consistent, constant and coherent mythic narratives of American unity and the fragile, contradictory and rare attempts he made to explain the history of race in America.

### History and Ideology

Reagan approached the events of the past without professional rigour or intellectual curiosity, but with the intuition of an ideologue. We have seen the themes of his ideology in his responses to and expressions of American history. The events of the past informed, confirmed and challenged his conception of an exceptionalist national identity based on the continuity and destiny of the philosophy of freedom. His approach to these narratives, however, was also informed by an ideological conception of history itself. This can be understood in terms of his conservatism, where history holds two conflicting meanings. First, there is history as the past, where it is valued as the repository of tradition. Secondly, there is history as a process, where its implications of progress are distrusted, even resisted. These ideas relate to broad themes in conservative philosophy but can be illustrated by Reagan's own philosophy of history and its applications in his political career.

At the very end of his presidency, Reagan made a rare statement on his beliefs about the role of history in American society. In his Farewell Address, in the "great tradition of warnings in presidential farewells," he cautioned that while his presidency had reinvigorated an optimistic patriotism in America, this had not been "reinstitutionalized." "Those of us who are over 35 or so years of age," Reagan recalled, "grew up in a different America. We were taught, very directly, what it means to be an American. And we absorbed, almost in the air, a love of country and an appreciation of its institutions." This knowledge, gained from family, community, school and popular culture had eroded in modern America since the cultural disruptions of the sixties. For Reagan, the solution to this problem was in how the country related to its past:



So, we've got to teach history based not on what's in fashion but what's important -- why the Pilgrims came here, who Jimmy Doolittle was, and what those 30 seconds over Tokyo meant...

If we forget what we did, we won't know who we are. I'm warning of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit. Let's start with some basics: more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual.<sup>200</sup>

Reagan thus ended his presidency with a nostalgic, traditionalist appeal to lost values and practices. He claimed that the issue had “been on my mind for some time,” but it was the first time he had specifically addressed it.<sup>201</sup> This was resonant with contemporary partisan discourse, and the increasing rhetoric of the “culture wars” that began to dominate political issues in the late eighties. This focused on the use and appropriation of patriotic symbols, and would grow to bring attention to the public representation of history, and its teaching in schools.<sup>202</sup>

It echoed intellectual as well as partisan conservative arguments. The same year, Russell Kirk argued that tradition, “the element of continuity which enables each generation’s wisdom to profit from the wisdom of preceding generations,” was eroding and under attack in all areas of American society and culture, and demanded of conservatives its determined defence and promotion.<sup>203</sup> Two years earlier, Allan Bloom had published *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), which more specifically lamented the abandonment of tradition in education, and its effect on the moral climate of American society. This had informed the attack by William Bennett, Reagan’s Secretary of Education, on Stanford University in 1988, whose rebranding of its core “Western Civilisation” course to “Cultures, Ideas and Values” he described as “an assault on Western culture and Western civilization.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Reagan (January 11, 1989).

<sup>201</sup> The section may have only been included on the prompting of Peggy Noonan, who had urged the president to express some level of regret in order to better capture the audience. Noonan, Peggy, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003), pp. 326-333.

<sup>202</sup> Goldstein, Robert Justin, *Burning the Flag: The Great 1989-90 American Flag Desecration Controversy* (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1998), pp. 73-8; Nash, Gary B., Crabtree, Charlotte and Dunn, Rosse E., *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

<sup>203</sup> Kirk, Russell, ‘The Question of Tradition’ (1989), Scotchie, Joseph (ed.), *The Paleoconservatives* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), pp. 61-65.

<sup>204</sup> Later, Bennett would try to redress the anti-American trends in history textbooks by writing his own positive national histories, such as *The Last Best Hope* (2006). ‘Proposals to Change the Program at Stanford University, 1989’, Smith, Wilson and Bender, Thomas (eds.), *American Higher Education*

Reagan's jeremiad thus added to others which all feared a disconnection to the ideas and practices of the past, and the consequences for the moral character of the nation and its people. This was, though, a theme which had helped define Reagan at the beginning of his political career. While Alan Bloom experienced personally the disruptions on American university campuses which led to the situation he critiqued twenty years later, Reagan was confronting them politically in California. The higher education issues which Reagan addressed as candidate and then governor centred on budget issues and the introduction of tuition fees, and subsequently on law and order on the campuses of the University of California and the state colleges, rather than the substance and methods of traditional education. However, the theme of opposing ideas about knowledge and learning – and, indeed, the importance of American history – seems to have been current throughout. In one confrontation with Berkeley activists demonstrating against his tuition fee plans, he asserted that he would “represent the people of this state” who “do have some right to a voice in the principles and basic philosophy that will go along with the education they provide.”<sup>205</sup> This division over educational “philosophy”, implicitly generational, referred largely to methods of education. Reagan defended discipline and respect for the authority of the institution against the revolutionary, auto-didactic activity on the campuses of Berkeley and San Francisco State.<sup>206</sup> It was also, however, ideological. For Reagan, the loss of discipline was inseparable from the loss of tradition and the ideas held within. In 1969, he described the causes of the chaos:

It began with those who, in the name of change and progress, decided they could scrap all the time-tested wisdom man has accumulated in his climb from the swamp to the stars. Simply call its constricting tradition and morality the dead hand of the past and wipe it out as a discipline no longer binding on us.<sup>207</sup>

Later, Reagan expanded on these thoughts to a significant audience – the readership of *The Pegasus*, the college newspaper of his alma mater, Eureka. The governor

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*Transformed, 1940-2005: Documenting the National Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 178-9.

<sup>205</sup> Reagan, ‘Governor Ronald Reagan’s Remarks to Marchers on the West Steps of the Capitol, February 11, 1967’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/govspeech/02111967a.htm> (accessed April 9, 2009).

<sup>206</sup> Cannon, Lou, *Governor Reagan: The Rise to Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), pp. 280-90; Diggins (2007), pp. 142-4.

<sup>207</sup> Reagan, ‘Eisenhower College Fundraiser’ (October 14, 1969), (1989), p.42.

responded by letter to an article which had criticised the dedication of a field house to the conservative enemy of California's leftist students. Reagan defended himself with an account of the degeneration found on California's campuses, and with reference to his own views on academic freedom and his own experience as a student. Referring to Depression-era Eureka, he insisted: "Never has the past been so open to quest[ion] as it was in that long time ago." However, he went on to argue the importance of the past:

True ed[ucation] is societys [sic] attempt to enunciate certain ultimate values upon which individuals & hence society may safely build. When men fail to drive toward a goal or purpose but drift the drift is always toward barbarism. You have every right to ask the reason behind the mores & customs of what we refer to as civilization. Challenge we can afford. You have no right & it makes no sense to reject the wisdom of the ages simply because it is rooted in the past.<sup>208</sup>

Such knowledge, Reagan argued, was the basis of freedom, in that it ensured the ability to make free choices. This point suggests a nuance to Reagan's understanding of American tradition and its assurance of an American future. American identity, defined by individual freedom and the democratic system and expressed in the stories of American foundation, would survive not only by Americans remembering and adhering to their past, but through their free choice to do so. This choice would affirm at once the meaning and the continuity of the American myth of freedom. In the context of Reagan's belief in American destiny, a divinely ordained national role, this raises a paradoxical problem that is more fully revealed by considering Reagan's understanding of history as a process.

This again relates to a wider framework of conservative thought from which Reagan drew as he defined himself politically. In the mid-century, Reagan's conversion to conservatism coincided with the launch in 1955 of what would become the movement's most influential journal. The *National Review* was conceived as a weapon in battle against the historical process, and over its meaning. Its founder William Buckley, later a close friend of Reagan's, pledged in its first edition to "stand athwart history, yelling Stop". Such a sentiment suggests a concession towards the

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<sup>208</sup> Reagan, 'Letter to the Editor of the *Pegasus*' (March 31, 1971), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2003), pp. 448-9. Also see Reagan's similar advice to young people and America, "for our country and youth are synonymous", Reagan, 'Do right' (February 20, 1978), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2004).

idea that history, as a process, has a discernible direction, even if offered with some irony. Even as the communist is mocked for his “inside track to History,” and even as the task of opposing him is joined with a “considerable – and considered – optimism,” the extent to which the *Review*’s opponents have defined history, or historical trends, is conceded.<sup>209</sup> Buckley was faced with an even greater acceptance of history’s certain course in one of his prospective contributors, Whittaker Chambers. As they discussed the planned journal, Chambers asked him what its purpose would be given that “the West is doomed, so that any effort to save it is correspondingly doomed to failure.”<sup>210</sup> Chambers’ attitude was peculiar, however. The suggestion that communism was inevitable, or that progress equated to history, largely became for conservatives a central point of contention. Buckley wrote in 1970 when the optimism with which he began the *National Review* was beginning to look justified, “friction arises...when two essentially different attitudes toward history are rubbed together.” Those of the Right accepted that history, at least as represented by the twentieth century, was “tendentious,” falling towards monolithic government, the surrender of the self, and indeed, apocalypse. The difference lay in that conservatives met such drift with a happy defiance, while too many others would “submit” to the apparent imperatives of the twentieth century.<sup>211</sup> Such defiance went back to Friedrich Hayek, who in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), offered the idea that the exercise of state planning contained an inexorable trend towards totalitarianism, but did not offer the theory as a statement of inevitability – “if [it] were, there would be no point in writing this”.<sup>212</sup> Indeed, he attacked the “myth” that the increase of state planning and diminishment of competition was not a course chosen out of free will, but the inevitable consequence of technological and industrial advancements.<sup>213</sup> Hayek saw an historical awareness of the emergence of totalitarianism and the defence of the traditions of freedom as the means to prevent or divert the trends he perceived.

Buckley, Chambers and Hayek all provided central texts in Reagan’s intellectual development as a conservative anti-communist. While the *National*

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<sup>209</sup> Buckley, William F. Jr., ‘Our Mission Statement’, *National Review* (November 19, 1955), <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NDJhYTJjNWl0MWFiODBhMDc2MzQwY2JlM2RhZjk5ZjM=>, (accessed March 25, 2009).

<sup>210</sup> Buckley, from ‘*National Review*’s 30<sup>th</sup>’, *The Reagan I Knew* (New York: Perseus Books, 2008), p.180.

<sup>211</sup> Buckley, ‘Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?’, Buckley and Kesler (eds. (1988), pp. 33-4.

<sup>212</sup> Hayek, Friedrich, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 32-41.

*Review* offered affirmative reaction to the issues of the day, Chambers, despite his pessimism, offered in his autobiography, *Witness* (1952) evidence of the religious nature of the Cold War as a conflict of faiths.<sup>214</sup> From Hayek, meanwhile, Reagan gained a model for understanding the threat of totalitarianism within a democratic, liberal government. Connecting these was an understanding of history, reflected in Reagan's early rhetoric that is defined in reference and opposition to the idea of inevitability and of progress as represented by liberals and socialists and which offered an alternative model based on faith in American destiny. In the early sixties, Reagan's political speeches warned of the encroaching socialism represented by the spectrum of federal programmes installed under the New Deal and now embraced by the liberals of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. "We can lose our freedom all at once by succumbing to Russian aggression," he told the Fargo, North Dakota Chamber of Commerce in January, 1962, "or we can lose it gradually by instalments – the end result is slavery."<sup>215</sup> He insisted one could not equate liberals with communists, but his depiction of an America increasingly planned and controlled pointed towards a future where the differences between it and the Soviet Union would be so marginal that accommodation rather than confrontation would be the only course (this, he implied, was the Cold War strategy of some unnamed officials). Such a situation was the basis for his advocacy of Barry Goldwater two years later in the nationally televised address known later to many simply as "The Speech", but titled "A Time for Choosing". The choice was between "up and down – up, man's age-old dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism."<sup>216</sup> The binary choice with which American history was faced still shaped Reagan's thoughts when he stood defeated at the Republican National Convention in 1976 and spoke to the assembled delegates. Here his speech was spontaneously given, though it is clear that its central theme, that of a time capsule he had contributed to for the bicentennial, had been clearly thought through. The concept was of writing a letter to the Californians of the tricentennial, and what they would know when they read it:

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<sup>214</sup> "Economics is not the central problem of this century...Faith is the central problem of this age." Chambers, Whittaker, *Witness* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1953), p. 17.

<sup>215</sup> Reagan, 'Losing Freedom by Instalments' (January 26, 1972), Edwards (1988), pp. 631-44.

<sup>216</sup> Reagan, 'A Time for Choosing, October 27, 1964', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html>, (accessed March 26, 2009).

Will they look back with appreciation and say, “Thank God for those people in 1976 who headed off that loss of freedom? Who kept us now a hundred years later free? Who kept our world from nuclear destruction?” And if we fail they probably won’t get to read the letter at all because it spoke of individual freedom and they won’t be allowed to talk of that or read of it.<sup>217</sup>

Again the current moment is a moment of choice. In a radio address on the same theme later that summer Reagan defined it as between the Republican Party platform of “fiscal responsibility, limited gov[ernment], and freedom of choice” and Congress’ way – “the road to ec[onomic] ruin and state control of our very lives.”<sup>218</sup> Interestingly, the fate of nuclear destruction and the fate of totalitarian subjugation were offered indiscriminately.

Reagan’s autobiography, *An American Life* contains frequent affirmations of his belief, given to him by his mother, “that God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all part of His plan.” A page later, Reagan asserts that he learned from his father “that individuals determine their own destiny; that is, it’s largely their own ambition and hard work that determine their fate in life.”<sup>219</sup> This paradox in Reagan’s perception of his life-story is neither observed nor reconciled. Similarly, Reagan never reconciled the contradiction existing between his rhetoric of choice, and his rhetoric of destiny. In “A Time for Choosing”, Reagan echoed Franklin Roosevelt in offering America a “rendezvous with destiny”, where the nation could exercise the “right to make our own decisions and determine our own destiny.” Here, in the ascendancy of the New Frontier and the Great Society, Reagan offered a choice between the preservation of Lincoln’s “last best hope on earth,” and the onset of darkness.<sup>220</sup> Paul Erickson described this as a “double vision of the future,” an idea which was “as old as the country itself,” conforming to a tradition of American jeremiad which drew equally on the concept of special national destiny and the danger of straying from this path.<sup>221</sup> Ten years later, however, Reagan de-emphasised the cautionary aspect of the myth, concentrating on its promise of destiny. With his political credentials and ambitions established, Reagan spoke to the first annual

<sup>217</sup> Reagan, ‘Republican National Convention, August 19, 1976’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/8.19.76.html>, (accessed March 26, 2009).

<sup>218</sup> Reagan, ‘Shaping the World for 100 Years to Come’, Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan that Reveal his Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), pp. 9-10.

<sup>219</sup> Reagan, *An American Life* (1990), pp. 20-22.

<sup>220</sup> Reagan (October 27, 1964).

<sup>221</sup> Erickson, *Reagan Speaks* (1985), pp. 86-93.

Conservative Political Action Conference when the uncertainty after the failures of President Nixon demanded a new confidence in the conservative movement. In a speech which articulated the prophecies of John Winthrop and the unnamed John Witherspoon, Reagan shared a belief which he would repeat while running for president in 1976, and which would be revived for frequent use in the last years of his presidency:

You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage.<sup>222</sup>

The speech reassured his audience of continued national greatness, and of America's continuing role as the leader of the free world. "We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so," Reagan concluded. The choice of self-destruction was not mentioned here, in favour of a determined optimism based on the inevitability of America's destiny.

This alteration of his message became more pronounced during his presidency. This is apparent in his more frequent affirmations of America's destiny, but also in his responses to Communist determinism. While before he had rejected the teleological certainty of Communism, he had recognised and feared its potential grip on history. As president, he expressed a reversal of the trend. Reagan's speech at Westminster in 1982 has survived, for some, as central evidence of his insight in perceiving the weakness of the Soviet Union and foresight in predicting its collapse.<sup>223</sup> Without the benefit of hindsight, it was a significant argument for adopting a "sense of history" which challenged and rejected Soviet determinism, and instead envisioned a "march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people."<sup>224</sup> Reagan presented this argument for a shift in historical thinking in more certain terms the following year, employing religious concepts for his audience at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals. Presenting Whittaker Chambers' idea of a

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<sup>222</sup> Reagan, (January 25, 1974).

<sup>223</sup> Paul Kengor speaks of Reagan's "foreknowledge". Kengor (2006), pp. 141-5.

<sup>224</sup> Reagan, 'Address to Members of the British Parliament, June 8, 1982', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/60882a.htm> (accessed August 1, 2009).

Communitistic faith that must be met with the strength of true Christian faith, Reagan declared:

I believe we shall rise to the challenge. I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written. I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual.<sup>225</sup>

Reagan was now not simply arguing against Communist teleology, but offering an alternative teleological model. The religious aspect to Reagan's concept of predestined history was central, to the extent that he flirted with the idea of imminent Armageddon.<sup>226</sup> Reagan never addressed the central contradictions to his expressed perceptions of history – that free will was led by destiny, and that his rejection of communistic determinism was undermined by his promotion of religious national determinism. Nor did he address the inconsistencies in the emphasis, tone and meaning of his expressions, where uncertainty turned to certainty and fear turned to optimism. To recall Whittaker Chambers, intellectual coherency was not the central issue here, it was faith. Reagan's understanding of prayer, which was expressed in his autobiography alongside his mother's faith in God's plan, was "to have dreams and believe I could make them come true".<sup>227</sup> Reagan believed in the religious dimension to the Cold War. Faith not only divided the opposing ideologies, but was a weapon in the conflict. As Reagan fought the Cold War, his faith in America's religious mission and its destined outcome grew stronger along with US military spending. The coherency of Reagan's historical perception lay in its mythic foundation, the belief that the past was a story to be applied to the present, to provide direction for the future.

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<sup>225</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, March 8, 1983', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm> (August 1, 2009).

<sup>226</sup> Reagan publicly defended himself on this point, promising that "I have never seriously warned and said we must plan according to Armageddon." He had, however, expressed private concerns that "Armageddon in the prophecies begins with the gates of Damascus being assailed", when tensions escalated in the Middle East. Erickson (1985), p. 85; Reagan, 'Wednesday, May 4', Brinkley (ed.), p. 150.

<sup>227</sup> Reagan, (1990), p. 22.



## Conclusion

Returning again to Reagan's Farewell Address, we have a sense of what he meant when he called for "more attention to American history." He did not mean professional history, to which by qualifying "not what's in fashion," he expressed some disdain. The historiographical process could not, or did not, convey "what's important." Reagan wished America to attend to history in the way that he did. This meant the informal absorption, "almost in the air," of the meaning of the American past through community and intergenerational contact, and through the dramatic expressions of American culture. The subjects he indicated suggest his priorities. The "30 seconds over Tokyo" referenced a movie, which itself recounted a Second World War mission that was mostly symbolic in its purpose. He wished Americans to know "why the Pilgrims came here," an appeal for the continued relevance of America's early inception quickly followed by the misquotation and misrepresentation of John Winthrop. Reagan's perception and representation of the past was ahistorical and sometimes fictional, it was selective, and it was articulated for dramatic effect. It was driven by the priorities of myth. What was important about the past was not what might explain the difficulties and challenges of modern America, but what could be used to overcome them. This, however, meant that the evasion of history incongruous with Reagan's master narrative meant the neglect of contemporary problems it had wrought. As far as Reagan recognised division in American society, he saw it as the result of an abandonment of the values and wisdom contained in and represented by the past. To restore and reconcile America, Reagan hoped to use the stories, words and iconography of the past, interpreted and represented loosely, but valued consistently. As well as specific narratives, he also offered a model of historical process that at once rejected the determinist concept of progress and offered the certainty of destiny. At the least, the success of this idea must be recognised in that it allowed Reagan to think beyond the Cold War, refusing the permanence of Communism or the inevitability of nuclear conflict. Finally, though Reagan spurned common concepts of historical progression, his admonition for America to turn to the past was not a call for regression. Frequent amongst the ideas of the Revolution which Reagan recalled were those of Tom Paine, "We have it in our power to begin the

world over again.”<sup>228</sup> This irked Left and Right alike – Wilbur Edel saw Reagan’s celebration of a deist and proto-socialist as ignorance, George Will as “nonsense”.<sup>229</sup> However, renewal, positive action and advancement were central themes to Reagan’s overarching myth of American destiny – “as long as we remember our first principles and believe in ourselves, the future will always be ours... We meant to change a nation, and instead, we changed a world.”<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Reagan applied this homily to a number of contexts, from the resurgence of the Republican Party to the Geneva Summit. Reagan, letter to Otis Carney (November 1979), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2003), p. 259; Diggins (2007), p. xix.

<sup>229</sup> Edel (1992), p. 68; Will quoted in Wills (2000), p. 355.

<sup>230</sup> Reagan, (January 11, 1989).

### **Chapter 3**

## **“Like the Gettysburg Address”: The Reagan Presidency and National Commemoration**

### **Introduction**

In the commemorative acts of his presidency, Reagan could promote his mythic understanding of America's past in the official rituals of American memory. He did this habitually, confirming myth as a vital characteristic of his presidency. However, the representative and reactive nature of his office placed constraints and presented challenges to his efforts to define American memory in his vision. Here I consider three areas of Reagan's commemoration which reveal the various influences on his actions, decisions and expressions in the realm of national memory. These influences, ranging from the imperatives of presidential tradition, to the varied interests of contemporary American life, to the political and philosophical motives of Reagan and his staff, represent the audience and foundation of the symbolic presidency. Firstly, Reagan's inauguration was a ceremony which recollected America's past through traditional symbol and ritual. Reagan was bound to the traditions of the occasion, remembering national foundation and continuity by echoing his predecessors in performance and word. Still, Reagan indicated in his first presidential act that symbolic memory would characterise his leadership. Secondly, I consider how divisive recent memory challenged Reagan in his first term, in the form of the movements to create a national holiday in honour of Martin Luther King and a Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Washington Mall. Here, Reagan's political identity was consumed by his presidential role. This role demanded that he consecrate national memory and frame it in terms of national unity, rather than pursue divisive political argument. Lastly, Reagan's commemorations of the Second World War in Europe during the middle of his presidency represent his expansion of the presidential commemorative role. His initiation of events to mark the fortieth anniversaries of D-Day in Normandy and VE Day in Germany introduced memory to international statesmanship, and placed the observance of national memory in the control of the White House, where previously the presidential role had been largely passive and

reactive. While the successes and failures of these events depended on their congruence with the interests of national memory, they became definitive acts of his presidency.

The presidential role in commemoration can be defined institutionally and historically. Researching these events in the White House records reveals Reagan's general absence from the decision-making and planning that shaped them. His was a performative role, but based on the interests and actions of a multi-agented presidency. Commemoration became the business of no single individual or department. It covered a range of areas, from advance planning, to communications, to speechwriting, and even, on occasion, the National Security Council. Meanwhile, it frequently came into the jurisdiction of the wider administration, specifically the Departments of State and the Interior. It was also not confined to the executive, often attracting the interest or demanding action of Congress, as well as of private initiative or public opinion. The presidential role was not independent.

While there have been no systematic efforts to reveal the general function of the presidency in national commemoration, the scholarship of American memory has indicated this interdependence. Michael Kammen noted that "the variable role of American presidents as arbiters of tradition" has been overlooked by historians, but his own narrative only offers suggestions.<sup>231</sup> Often, they are on the sidelines with only a potentially symbolic, consecrative role, such as in Calvin Coolidge's enthusiastic but uneventful observation of Mount Rushmore's creation. In the other great presidential commemoration of the 1920s, the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, President Harding presided over the event in a similarly consecrative role. His appearance with President Taft, who was chair of the memorial committee, emphasised a partisan aspect to the celebration of a Republican president, but Harding dutifully articulated a national theme of unity and reconciliation in his address – though one that alienated African Americans, who watched from a segregated audience.<sup>232</sup>

Franklin Roosevelt's "enduring pursuit of the Lincoln image", meanwhile, suggests the active role a president can take to advance a politically beneficial

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<sup>231</sup> Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (1991), p. 613.

<sup>232</sup> Thomas, Christopher A., *The Lincoln Memorial and American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 152-8.

narrative of the past and to appropriate the glamour of its icons.<sup>233</sup> Though Kammen has suggested that the most successful presidents “have been the ones most likely to manipulate, ‘improve’, or even distort their nation’s collective memory,” he has also pointed out that they cannot “reorient a society’s sense of the past without considerable assistance – not to mention the society’s willingness or even desire for reorientation.”<sup>234</sup> This relates also to the sheer length of time involved in the creation of commemorative projects, compared to the relatively short lived presidential term.

Another example of the presidential role and its limitations in commemoration can be seen in President Kennedy’s involvement in the Civil War Centennial. The White House’s intervention in the controversy over segregation during Charleston’s 1961 hosting of the Civil War Centennial Commission represented in part a political stance in support of Civil Rights, but also an equivocal compromise to evade political controversy.<sup>235</sup> Presidents might have political power and will to arbitrate commemorative conflict, but it is used in mind of other political needs and considerations. Finally, Paul Erickson suggested a more esoteric constraint on the president, that “the traditions of our civil religion manipulate each president”, limiting and controlling his “symbolic acts and utterances”.<sup>236</sup> In accordance with the symbolic nature of the office, the president must serve in ritual and rhetoric as a representative of national unity and continuity, themes which must be adopted into his political and commemorative messages. The president thus faces institutional, political and symbolic constraints, even as he may seek to employ the icons of national memory, and the bully pulpit that commemorative leadership provides, to his political advantage.

### Inauguration and Commemorative Tradition

Presidential inaugurations are legal ceremonies which officially confirm presidents to a term in office. They are also national rituals which affirm America’s democratic system and its exceptionalist identity. Robert Bellah identified in 1967 the presidential inaugural as a central ritual of American civil religion, using President Kennedy’s to

<sup>233</sup> Kammen (1991), pp. 448-53, 489-90.

<sup>234</sup> Kammen, *In the Past Lane* (1997), p. 207; Kammen, (1991), p. 452.

<sup>235</sup> Cook, Robert, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), pp. 95-106.

<sup>236</sup> Erickson, *Reagan Speaks* (1985), p. 4.

demonstrate the themes and presentation of America's national religious thought, and myth.<sup>237</sup> Bellah focused on the religious aspect and tone, but I consider inaugurations as presidential commemorations, and commemorations of the presidency. Inaugurations recall America's foundation through the symbol of the presidency, which at the same time represents American continuity. Reagan's first inaugural in January, 1981, demonstrates these themes in its engagement with traditions of the symbolic presidency. As well as providing a legal and commemorative ritual in which new or returning presidents submit to precedent, the inauguration allows the president also to define his own leadership and anticipate his place in history. As expressions of continuity, the ceremonies look to the future as well as the past. Reagan in his first inaugural thus established himself within a general narrative of the presidency through the traditions of the ceremony, but also sought to make use of the overtly historic event to define and distinguish his presidential identity. To a great extent this was a matter of defining the times and its crises, and his solutions and their fundamental ideology. Reagan also, however, significantly characterised his presidency as one attentive to American myth and memory. We have already seen an element of this in his Second Inaugural Address, but here the focus is on his first presidential expression, where Reagan's election represented transition and his leadership could only be imagined and anticipated.

Inaugurations are a combination of rhetoric and ceremonial ritual. At Reagan's, each was significant for both their innovations and observations of tradition. Inaugural ritual has broadly followed the model of George Washington's, with an oath-taking ceremony, a speech, and public festivities, but has altered moderately in certain details, and vastly in scale. The celebration of Reagan's swearing-in in 1981 was eventually costed at an unprecedented \$16.3 million, five times that of Carter's, and increased to around \$20 million in 1985. Inaugural costs steadily increased following Reagan, vastly expanding again in 2009, when \$170 million was spent on Barack Obama's inaugural. Nevertheless, for Haynes Johnson and others, "the costliest, most opulent inauguration in American history" was an

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<sup>237</sup> Bellah, Robert, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 134 (4) (Fall 2005), pp. 40-3. Bellah's theories prompted a later study by Cynthia Toolin, 'American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses', *Review of Religious Research*, 25 (1) (September, 1983), pp. 39-48.

effective indicator of the start of the gilded Reagan era.<sup>238</sup> To cover the costs of its plans, the Presidential Inaugural Committee, chaired by Robert Gray and Charles Wick, raised funds through private donations, the sale of tickets for its many celebratory events, and through merchandising. The marketing of memorabilia demanded that the event be promoted in terms of its historic significance. Though a fairly bland concept when applied to a collectable license plate, this was fully expressed in *A Great New Beginning* (1981), the official book of the event:

[The inauguration] is a shining testament to a system of government that recognizes that its greatness lies in the hearts and the spirit of its people...[It is a] time to reflect on past glories and to hold true to the traditions and customs we share as a people united...[It is] a joyful celebration of the ideals and aspirations that have maintained and sustained the nation through more than 200 years...The Inauguration of Ronald Wilson Reagan...represents a new birth...a time to rekindle not only the ethereal flame of hope and promise, but to assure the reality of accomplishment and deeds realized and to come.<sup>239</sup>

This reflected the dual vision of the inaugural, its attention on both the hallowed past and the glorious future – each connected by the symbol of President Ronald Reagan. This symbol, undefined as yet by any presidential action, was expressed in various ways.

The planners were conscious of the potential symbolism of the inaugural parade, a tradition that had developed from spontaneous accompaniment of President Jackson as he travelled from the Capitol to the White House in 1829. Its first organised examples, for the inaugurations of Presidents Grant and Garfield in 1869 and 1881, were fully militarised events, triumphal expressions of a national identity defined by the Union's victory in the Civil War, which recalled Abraham Lincoln reviewing the troops assembled to defend Washington in 1861. The tradition persevered, but expanded to become a more varied expression of national culture.<sup>240</sup> The political implications of the military aspect became a concern for the committee, and the idea was floated that the parading servicemen substitute their rifles for flags.

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<sup>238</sup> Johnson, Haynes, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), pp. 19-23.

<sup>239</sup> *A Great New Beginning: The 1981 Inaugural Story* (Washington, D.C.: The 1981 Inaugural Book Committee, 1981), p.7.

<sup>240</sup> Boller, Paul F., *Presidential Inaugurations: From Washington's Election to George W. Bush's Gala* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 2001), pp. 176-7; Widmer, Ted, 'So Help Me God', *American Scholar*, 74(1) (Winter, 2005), pp. 29-41.

One chair, Robert Gray was worried about the appearance of Soviet-style belligerence: “It would seem out of place to have tanks or missile launchers in the parade and the governor believes the same about sidearms. We are a patriotic nation not a militaristic one.” Besides the idea’s impracticality, Charles Wick was concerned with the alternative political symbolism of the gesture: “Governor Reagan has stressed military strength, preparedness and morale – peace through strength. This might suggest an emasculation of that strength.”<sup>241</sup>

The Parade Committee also decided veterans organisations would not participate. “Despite my loyalty as a veteran,” the committee chair reported, “I do not envision a rerun of World War II, Korea or Vietnam in this parade.”<sup>242</sup> The committee may have hoped to avoid political provocation – just eight years before, Nixon’s inaugural parade was attended by some 60,000 anti-war protestors. Such exclusions, though, also reflected the plan for “a short, snappy spectacular staged for TV appeal”, and limited to sixty minutes.<sup>243</sup> This direction, which would be familiar to all Reagan’s subsequent commemorations, was presented in terms of democratic symbolism. Gray and Wick announced that they would host a “shared inaugural,” open and accessible to the people. “Some past inaugural celebrations have been labelled ‘people’ events,” they argued, “but realistically that meant the people who could be in Washington, D.C. Television is the way to reach the most people, and most events are being planned with television in mind.” As well as the parade, this applied to the evening’s inaugural balls, images of which would be projected by satellite to signed-up parties across the nation – an “historic first”.<sup>244</sup> This populism countered criticism of the balls’ elitist opulence. The ritual celebrations of the inauguration were planned with deliberate attention to their political symbolism, but this was defined by a wariness of provocative or divisive imagery – a nationalist compromise was sought.

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<sup>241</sup> ‘Inaugural Unit Drops Plans for Military Parade With Flags Only’, *Washington Post* (December 5, 1980), File: Parade Status Reports, Box 38, Office of the Executive Directors, Presidential Inauguration Committee Records 1980-1, RRPL.

<sup>242</sup> Chambers, T.M., ‘Parade Status Report #3’ (December 1, 1980), File: Parade Status Reports, Box 38, Office of the Executive Directors, PICR 1980-1, RRPL.

<sup>243</sup> Chambers, correspondence to governors (December 1, 1980), File: Parade Status Reports, Box 38, Office of the Executive Directors, PICR 1980-1, RRPL.

<sup>244</sup> Gray, Robert K. and Wick, Charles Z., Presidential Inaugural Committee News Release (December 9, 1980), File: Communications (3 of 3), Box 20, Final Reports to the Co-Chairmen, Office of the Chairmen, PICR 1980-1, RRPL.



Just as the parade responded to presidential tradition, incorporated nationalist themes, and projected Reagan's distinctive identity – in its television-friendly format and references to Western history – so did the inaugural address. The conventions of inaugural addresses had changed since the nineteenth century, reflecting the changing nature of the presidential role, and becoming more specifically political and populist, rather than philosophical and reflective. Jeffrey Tulis has identified Woodrow Wilson's articulation of the "legitimizing doctrine" in his first inaugural of visionary and moral presidential rhetoric, addressed directly at the nation: "This is the enterprise of the new day; To lift everything that concerns our life as a nation to the light that shines from the hearthfire of every man's conscience".<sup>245</sup> This determination of presidential leadership as the visionary and moral definition of the nation was revived by Franklin Roosevelt, with his assurance that the "warm courage of national unity" and "old and precious values" would create a "rounded and permanent national life".<sup>246</sup> The model of defining and engaging with the American people continued through the inaugurals of the twentieth century, as well as addressing their problems in terms of national identity and character. Reagan responded to this precedent in his identification of American's problem as the power of the federal government:

The crisis we are facing today...require[s]...our best effort and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God's help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.<sup>247</sup>

Reagan's message related specifically to the times and to his political ideology, but also performed the precedented, mythic role of the inaugural address.

The content of Reagan's speech distinguishes itself from preceding first inaugurals due to its surprising lack of emphasis on foreign policy and the international situation, especially considering the renewed state of Cold War and Reagan's own definitive stances. Where Eisenhower made a call-to-arms, and Kennedy projected a grand imperial vision, Reagan gave but two brief sections,

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<sup>245</sup> Tulis, Jeffrey K., *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 135-6.

<sup>246</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin, 'First Inaugural Address' (March 4, 1933), Remini, Robert V. and Golway, Terry (eds.), *Fellow Citizens: The Penguin Book of Presidential Inaugural Addresses* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 337.

<sup>247</sup> Reagan, 'Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1981/12081a.htm> (accessed September 24, 2009).

mirroring Kennedy's more expansive language, which offered loyalty to America's allies, and peace to its enemies. He also departed from Nixon's and Carter's attempts to address the spiritual crises of the American people – "raucous discord" and "recognized limits".<sup>248</sup> Reagan, instead, addressed Americans as "heroes" whose "values sustain our national life" and whose problems "result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government". Yet in defining the occasion as evidence of American continuity, exceptionalism and destiny, Reagan echoed his predecessors. Reagan began by reflecting that "in the eyes of many in the world, this every-four-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle" in its peaceful transition of power. It represented "the continuity which is the bulwark of our Republic". Kennedy saw his inauguration as "a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change as well."<sup>249</sup> Nixon indicated "the majesty of this moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free."<sup>250</sup> Carter, quoting his old school teacher, expressed the "inner and spiritual strength of our nation" that the ceremony represented: "We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles."<sup>251</sup> Each president, as others had before them, understood the moment of inauguration to represent continuity and renewal, within which the foundations and future of American democracy were recalled.

Where Reagan's address echoed its precedents, it reflected its construction. The chief speechwriter, Ken Khachigian, read an anthology of inaugural addresses in preparation for his task. Khachigian advised the president-elect against citing his predecessors - "Nobody quotes great men quoting other great men."<sup>252</sup> The annotations he made, though, reveal the practical and intellectual process of discovering Reagan's ideology within this canon, finding, for example, the principles of national unity in Jefferson's words, of exceptionalism in Harding's, of efficient and frugal government in Coolidge's, and of anticommunism in Truman's.<sup>253</sup> This also

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<sup>248</sup> Nixon, Richard, 'First Inaugural Address' (January 20, 1969); Carter, Jimmy, 'First Inaugural Address' (January 20, 1977), Remini and Golway (eds.) (2008), pp. 400, 421.

<sup>249</sup> Kennedy, John F., 'First Inaugural Address' (January 20, 1961), *ibid*, pp. 385-6.

<sup>250</sup> Nixon, *ibid*, p. 399.

<sup>251</sup> Carter, *ibid*, p. 420.

<sup>252</sup> Khachigian, Ken, memo to the President-Elect, 'First Draft of Inaugural Address' (January 4, 1981), File: President-Elect Reagan: Inaugural Address, First Draft, January 4, 1981' (1), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>253</sup> The book was *Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1974).

suggests a comprehension of the commemorative nature of Reagan's inaugural address, that it would immediately evoke and belong to tradition and to memory. "It's a magic moment, an historical moment," Khachigian told reporters of the speechwriting process, emphasising Reagan's role in it, and claiming that it was the president-elect who had read the book.<sup>254</sup> This early projection of Reagan's presidential image stressed his connection to the tradition and continuity of American democracy in anticipation of a commemorative ritual which would affirm him as part of national history, future and myth.

Khachigian canvassed advice from a range of other professionals, both from Reagan's Californian circle and his own contacts from the Nixon White House. Dick Wirthlin advised that "visionary addresses describe the lessons of the past to give meaning to the present and hope for the future."<sup>255</sup> Ray Price spoke from experience as President Nixon's "principal collaborator" on his inaugural addresses. In an advisory memo to Reagan, he defined the inaugural as "the supreme sacrament of the democratic system" which "speaks to the moment and to history, to this time and to all time."<sup>256</sup> Another Nixon wordsmith, Dick Moore, gave some more specific advice on how to articulate these mythic themes. Reagan was to break with tradition and speak from the western front of the Capitol, an indication of his roots, and of the "New Beginning". Moore went to see the spot where the speech would be delivered and was struck by its view over the Mall and its presidential monuments. Moore wrote to Khachigian that he was "more convinced than ever that it could add an extra new dimension to the Inaugural Address, both visually and rhetorically." In some

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<sup>254</sup> 'Reagan Polishes his Inaugural Address', *San Diego Union* (January 11, 1981), p. A4, File: 'Inaugural Address 1/20/81' (2), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>255</sup> Wirthlin, Richard B., memo to President-elect Ronald Reagan, 'Thoughts on the Inaugural Speech' (December 12, 1980), File: 'Inaugural Address 1/20/81' (2), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>256</sup> Price, Ray, memo to the president-elect, 'Inaugural Address' (December 11, 1980), File: 'Inaugural Address 1/20/81' (2), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL. Price's advice displayed a Nixonian inheritance that contrasted with Reagan's style. He suggested that the president use the speech to attack the press and the courts, and offered some gloomy language: "We are in what may be a long, gray, time of testing," Price wrote, before imagining the president, or a president, gazing over the Pacific Ocean: "Sometimes...I think of the vastness of it all." Price, memo to the president-elect, 'Inaugural Address (memo #2)' (December 29, 1980), File: President-Elect Reagan: Inaugural Address, First Draft, January 4, 1981' (2), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

suggested language, he had the president call attention to “the spiritual presence of these immortal Americans,” Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln.<sup>257</sup>

Khachigian was impressed, and incorporated the idea into his final draft for Reagan as a closing theme.<sup>258</sup> On the day, Reagan described the “magnificent vista” in front of him and its “shrines to the giants on whose shoulders we stand.” He indicated the monuments and gave illustrations of his forebears’ character and achievements. These were expressive of national identity. Washington, as a “man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly”, reflected Reagan’s understanding of America’s rise to power. Jefferson signified the Declaration of Independence, for Reagan the dramatic birth of American freedom. The Lincoln Memorial offered a more cryptic meaning: “Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln.” This was presumably a reference to Lincoln’s exemplary journey of self-improvement from log cabin to the White House, rather than his troubled engagement with, and ultimate destruction by American division. Reagan followed the mythic panorama to the unseen graves of Arlington, and gave a final story of America’s exemplary past which was his own addition to the speech. “Under one such marker,” Reagan said, “lies...Martin Treptow”, a young American soldier who died in the First World War. The president quoted from Treptow’s diary: “I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.” Treptow was not buried in Arlington, but this was an unproblematic detail for Reagan.<sup>259</sup>

This dialogue with the commemorative architecture of the surrounding landscape was an original expression and indicative of the mythic identity Reagan would bring to the White House. It was not common for new presidents to directly invoke their heroic forebears, but Reagan made three of them central images of his

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<sup>257</sup> Moore, Dick, memo to Ken Khachigian, ‘The Monuments on the Mall’ (December 23, 1980), File: ‘President-Elect Reagan: Inaugural Address, First Draft, January 4, 1981’ (1), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>258</sup> Khachigian was also impressed by Reagan’s response to the commemorative monuments. Recording a meeting with the president-elect as the final draft approached, and after the celebrations had begun, Khachigian noted Reagan’s thoughts on a ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial: “I don’t think I’ve ever been to anything quite like it. That Lincoln Memorial and those columns – it’s such a beautiful place. I’ve never been filled with such a surge of patriotism...” Even as he was telling me this story, his eyes filled up again. He looked at me and said it was going to be hard to keep his eyes dry.” Khachigian, Ken, ‘Meeting with Governor Reagan, Bedroom in Blair House’ (January 18, 1981), File: ‘Inaugural Address 1/20/81’ (2), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>259</sup> Reagan, (January 20, 1981).

address.<sup>260</sup> More significantly, he recalled them through the context of national memory. His address did not present them as historical examples, but as mythic icons. Similarly, while other presidents made references to the sacrifice of soldiers, this was usually in the immediate context or aftermath of war, and in general terms. Reagan honoured an individual soldier dead sixty years, making him representative of a willing, patriotic citizenry on a level with the presidential symbols of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. These concluding images were, for some, indicative of Reagan's Hollywood style. Garry Wills remarked that it was the first inaugural address to have "internal camera directions".<sup>261</sup> Lou Cannon described a "cinematic quality" and emphasised Khachigian's incorporation of a film quote Reagan had mentioned into the speech's closing line: "After all...we are Americans."<sup>262</sup> Reagan elevated national memory in his address, indicating the centrality of myth to his presidency – an idea that his Hollywood identity accentuated and reinforced. At the very start of his presidency, Reagan indicated to Americans his appreciation of the past as a source of mythic iconography and narrative.

### Recent Memories of Division

Americans indicated to President Reagan in his first term their interest in the complex and divisive events of the recent past. As we have seen in the previous chapter, division in American history was not something that Reagan easily reconciled with nationalist myth. As president, Reagan was charged with representing national unity and hoped to foster national optimism. As a politician, he had been involved in these divisions, often associated with one side. By the time of Reagan's election, the movement to commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr. with a national holiday had seen legislation introduced in every session of Congress since his death, and passed in several states. In the week before his inauguration, Reagan was contacted by Senator Harrison Williams who informed the President-elect that he and other senators would

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<sup>260</sup> By Reagan's inauguration, George Washington was overwhelmingly the most evoked, mentioned in fifteen speeches, though mostly in the nineteenth century. Toolin (1983), p. 43.

<sup>261</sup> Wills, 'Reagan and Giantism', *Washington Star* (January 26, 1981), File: 'Inaugural Address 1/20/81' (1), Box 1, Khachigian, Kenneth L.: Papers, 1981 Inaugural, RRPL.

<sup>262</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan* (2000), pp. 74-5.

be reintroducing the legislation that year, and urged him to “give his deepest consideration into taking a leadership role in this matter.” King “embodied and embraced the fundamental principles that are the very basis of America’s national identity,” and Reagan could demonstrate his commitment to all Americans through supporting his commemoration.<sup>263</sup> However, such a demonstration was not forthcoming. Reagan had publicly opposed the idea and would continue to do so until the bill was passed overwhelmingly by Congress in August, 1983. His opposition has been attributed to conservative principle, that “Reagan simply could not see why government workers should have another day off.”<sup>264</sup> However, the president showed sympathy to Jesse Helms’ efforts to expose King’s communist affiliations – subsequent to the bill passing – while writing to Governor Mel Thompson of New Hampshire, an early critic from the right: “On the national holiday you mentioned, I have the reservations you have but here the perception of too many people is based on an image and not reality. Indeed to them the perception is reality.”<sup>265</sup>

Reagan’s reality of Dr King was rooted in the images and perceptions he gained during the 1960s. Reagan had opposed the Civil Rights legislation of the Johnson administration. This position can be aligned with the conservative reasoning of Goldwater, who questioned interpretations of “civil rights” and argued that change, “however desirable, should not be effected by the engines of national power.”<sup>266</sup> There is no evidence that Reagan was an ideological racist, less a segregationist, but there is no doubt over his distrust of federal power in effecting solutions, or that he was a staunch supporter of the tenth amendment.<sup>267</sup> However, other factors were involved in his political responses to the Civil Rights movement. On King’s assassination, Reagan called it “a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they’d break.”<sup>268</sup> After the assassination, and after Robert Kennedy’s, Reagan met privately

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<sup>263</sup> Williams, Senator Harrison A., Jr., letter to President-Elect Reagan (January 15, 1981), RRPL, Bradley, Melvin L.: Files, Office of Public Liaison, Box 1, ‘MLK (Gen. Reference)’ (3) OA09686.

<sup>264</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan* (2007) p. 310.

<sup>265</sup> Reagan, letter to Governor Meldrim Thomson (October 3, 1983), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson *A Life in Letters* (2003), p. 634.

<sup>266</sup> Goldwater, Barry, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 31.

<sup>267</sup> A defence of Reagan’s constitutional interpretation of civil and states’ rights can be found in Busch, Andrew E., *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 27-40.

<sup>268</sup> Mayer, Jeremy D., ‘Reagan and Race’, *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America’s Fortieth President* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2007), p. 84.

with Californian African American leaders with apparently instructive and constructive results. Yet, the same year, during his first presidential run, he was unwilling to dissociate himself too far from the law and order messages of his potential rival, George Wallace, leaving him open to charges of racism.<sup>269</sup> Running for president twelve years later, he objected to the Voting Rights Act (which his administration would unsuccessfully try to water down on its renewal in 1982) on the grounds that it was “humiliating to the South”.<sup>270</sup> Reagan’s image of King was complex. Sympathetic with those who suffered racial discrimination, and relatively active as governor in helping them, he was ideologically opposed to their efforts at a federal level. Moreover, he still defined King’s Civil Rights movement in terms of riots and crime, and aligned himself politically with King’s greatest opponents – Southern conservatives.

After the vote on the King Holiday in August, 1983, which was passed in Congress with such support that Reagan’s threatened veto was impossible, Reagan supported through innuendo Senator Jesse Helms’ attacks on King’s moral character and political allegiances. In response to a question about whether King had been a communist, the president asked: “We’ll know in about thirty-five years, won’t we?”<sup>271</sup> Reagan’s hostility to the national commemoration of his contemporary stemmed variously from conservative sensibility, to his own antipathy to King’s political stance, to allegiance to his most active political base. When the bill was passed, Reagan was required by his office to enact it, and to do so in positive terms. This was not the first time that the president was so obliged. After the passage of the renewed VRA, the president signed it with a statement fully praising the act as a practical and symbolic ensurance of American democracy, and playing down “the differences over how to attain the equality we seek for our people.”<sup>272</sup> Meanwhile, Reagan had made a statement following a commemorative re-enactment of the march on Washington, D.C., conveyed by the White House to Coretta Scott King, emphasising that “the values that were appealed to [at the 1963 march] are shared by

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<sup>269</sup> Cannon, *Governor Reagan* (2003), p. 264.

<sup>270</sup> Cannon (2000), p. 458.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, pp. 459-60.

<sup>272</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks on Signing the Voting Rights Act Amendments of 1982, June 29, 1982’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1982/62982b.htm> (accessed September 24, 2009)

us all,” not just a minority of African Americans.<sup>273</sup> These statements suggested the means by which Reagan could establish King as a central figure in American memory, to make him representative of national ideals and myths. At the signing ceremony on November 2, Reagan celebrated King’s life, but also celebrated America:

As democratic people, we can take pride in the knowledge that we Americans recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it. And we should remember that in far too many countries, people like Dr. King never have the opportunity to speak out at all.<sup>274</sup>

Such language not only made King’s efforts a unified American achievement, affirming King’s own rhetorical claims and obscuring the opposition to the civil rights movement, but defined them as a product of the American system, as opposed to its indictment. In the drafting process of the remarks, there was conscious effort to soften the contradiction of Reagan establishing Martin Luther King Day. Mike Horowitz from the OMB wrote to Ben Elliot suggesting that with some edits, the speech “could assert the President’s basic beliefs while still accordingly full honour to King [sic].” While his suggestions to omit the term “racism” from the remarks were rejected, the idea to change “civil rights” for “equality of rights” was followed.<sup>275</sup> There was a subtle effort not only to de-emphasise King’s politics and the Civil Rights movement, but to align him with Reagan’s conservative, patriotic values. By 1986, when Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was first nationally celebrated, Reagan was, as we have seen, associating King with the “shining city”, but was also urging a young pen-pal that King “was a great man we must always remember.”<sup>276</sup> Reagan had absorbed King, through the commemorative process, into his own mythic narrative of America. Michael Kammen argued that the commemoration of King “filtered” and “depoliticised” his memory, sidelining his critical stances in favour of a bland heroic

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<sup>273</sup> Reagan, ‘Statement on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 27, 1983’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/82783a.htm> (accessed September 24, 2009).

<sup>274</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday, November 2, 1983’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/52884a.htm> (accessed February 2, 2009).

<sup>275</sup> Horowitz, Mike, memo to Ben Elliot, ‘Martin Luther King Day Remarks’ (November 1, 1983), Folder: ‘A38 – MLK (General Reference) (2)’, Box OA9686., Bradley, Melvin L: Files, RRPL.

<sup>276</sup> Reagan, letter to Rudolph Hines (September 26, 1986), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.) (2003).



image.<sup>277</sup> It should also be said that the commemoration also tempered conservative criticism of King, causing Reagan, at least, to discard his political opposition to the Civil Rights movement of the sixties and accept it as part of a celebratory American narrative. The central point here is that Reagan, through his role as an officiator of national commemoration, was led by the momentum of an external memory movement to promote and incorporate an idea about America's recent past, against the wishes of his political base, and even his own instincts. However, according to his reconciliatory role as president, and to the mythic imperatives of his ideology, he did this by emphasising a nationalist theme of unity, defining King as a symbol of that unity and his memory as a means of maintaining it.

The memory of the Vietnam War represented another prominent American division with which Reagan the politician was highly and purposefully associated, but from which Reagan the president had to formulate a narrative of national unity. As John Diggins wrote, it "haunted the American mind in the Reagan eighties," dominating both political and cultural arenas.<sup>278</sup> Responses to the national experience of the war found form in film and literary representations, as well as political debate over both specifically related issues, such as the influx of Vietnamese "boat people" or the emotive and quixotic POW/MIA movement, and the more general formulation and criticism of foreign policy.<sup>279</sup> The story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has become a central example of the vivid but conflicting memory of the war in America. Reagan's role in this story has been variously defined. In the actions of James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior, to stall the project after its design offended conservatives, John Bodnar saw evidence of his binary theory of the conflict between official and vernacular memory. Watt's actions represented "the powerful and dominant interests of patriots and nationalists" and interfered with the expressions of

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<sup>277</sup> Kammen (1991), p. 662.

<sup>278</sup> Diggins (2007), p. 250.

<sup>279</sup> The widespread influence of the Vietnam War in the eighties is reflected in the varied scholarship on its memory and legacy. Cultural analysis of the war's memory in literature and film can be found in Hellman, John, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Trevor McCrisken explores the limiting influence of Vietnam on US foreign policy and the resulting tensions in exceptionalist discourse, *Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy Since 1974* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Other political aspects of the memory of Vietnam in the eighties have been considered, such as Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); also, Kendrick Oliver's specific account America's reconciliation with the memory of My Lai, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Patrick Hagopian provides a thorough account of the war's commemoration in *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

“ordinary people and ordinary emotions.”<sup>280</sup> While Watt has largely represented Reagan’s involvement in the affair, the White House in fact played an important role in seeing the memorial completed over the objections of conservatives.

When Reagan took office, the idea of building a national monument to Vietnam Veterans amongst the “shrines to giants” of the Washington Mall had been approved by Congress and by President Carter.<sup>281</sup> A competition to choose the design of the memorial was completed on May 1, 1981, when the young architecture student Maya Lin’s design was announced as the winner. Her plan for a sunken, reflecting wall met the competition’s criteria in the prominence it gave to the inscriptions of names of America’s war dead, in its “horizontal” coherence with its environment, and its apolitical nature.<sup>282</sup> This last judgement, however, would become seriously contested. One of the first effective public arguments against the memorial was made by Tom Carhart, a veteran, sometime volunteer for the VVMF and unsuccessful entrant in the design competition. At the first Fine Arts Commission hearing on the memorial, Carhart read an emotional statement that denounced the design as a “black gash of shame” which would speak to future generations only of the dishonour and disgrace in which America held her veterans. He also invoked Reagan, aligning himself and the veterans for whom he claimed to speak with the president’s description of the war as a “noble cause”.<sup>283</sup> This characterisation came from a speech Reagan gave to the Veterans of Foreign Wars while on the campaign trail the previous year:

We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we gave way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful, and we have been shabby in our treatment of those who returned. It is time we recognized that ours, in truth, was a noble cause.<sup>284</sup>

This provoked controversy in the heat of an election, but it was consistent with Reagan’s support of the war since its beginning – one that honoured the soldiers and

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<sup>280</sup> Bodnar, John, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.6.

<sup>281</sup> Reagan, (January 20, 1980).

<sup>282</sup> Hagopian (2009), pp. 97-9.

<sup>283</sup> Carhart, Tom, ‘Statement to the US Fine Arts Commission, 13 October, 1981’, *The Vietnam Wall Controversy: Round 3, October 1981 – January 1982*

<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/r3/october/> (accessed January 6, 2009).

<sup>284</sup> Cannon (2003), p. 497.

the cause, if it did not always translate into political support for the war's domestic prosecutors. As governor, Reagan corresponded with soldiers and wore a POW/MIA bracelet.<sup>285</sup> In his interregnum, Reagan reminded his radio listeners of the Vietnam veterans and dead, framing his position on Carter's draft-dodger amnesty in terms of their sacrifice, defending their conduct in the war, and recalling their suffering as prisoners of the Viet-Cong.<sup>286</sup>

Carhart could thus align his protest with the established position of the president, giving it a symbolic authority. His stand prompted a growing clamour of reaction from conservative pundits, politicians and citizens, including a number of veterans, which saw in the design an unwelcome message of national guilt that further denigrated those who fought. Using these terms, the opponents of the memorial might have expected presidential support. Representative Henry Hyde (R., Illinois) acted on this, writing an appeal for intercession to Reagan in January, 1982, signed by thirty-one of his colleagues. The letter stated that the design "makes a political statement of shame and dishonour, rather than an expression of our national pride at the courage, patriotism and nobility of all who served."<sup>287</sup> Hyde received no official White House response. Reagan's support, meanwhile, had also been sought by the memorial's makers and supporters. Before the design had been chosen, the VVMF had failed to gain any promise of Reagan's ceremonial participation, but had enlisted Nancy Reagan to a central role in their fundraising efforts.<sup>288</sup> This fact was offered by Reagan's staff as an assurance of his support for the project in a polite rejection of a request by Senator John Warner (R., Virginia) for the president to endorse the design at a press conference, after the outburst of protest prompted by Carhart in October, 1981.<sup>289</sup>

While Warner, an early booster of the VVMF and central, along with Senator Charles Mathias (R., Maryland), to the memorial's realisation, received this quiet but uncommitted support, the opponents found sympathy from James Watt, who had

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<sup>285</sup> Schweizer, Peter, *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), p. 71.

<sup>286</sup> On Carter's amnesty, see Reagan, 'Pardons' (November 30, 1976), pp. 95-7; on the conduct of American soldiers, see 'Vietnam I' and 'Vietnam II' (February, 1978), pp. 390-3; on POWs, see 'P.O.W' (March 6, 1979), pp. 422-4 and 'Vietnam' (May 29, 1979), pp. 453-4. Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Reagan's Path to Victory* (2004).

<sup>287</sup> Hyde, Henry, letter to President Reagan (January 12, 1982), ID# 044795, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>288</sup> Hagopian (2009), pp. 108-9.

<sup>289</sup> Warner, John, letter to President Reagan (October 27, 1981), stamped 'REGRET, November 24,' with attached note on how to respond, ID# 046293, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

departmental jurisdiction over the issue and an understanding ear to the complaints of Henry Hyde and Jesse Helms. Watt agreed that it would be “a sad day when ‘artistic freedom’ controls what America should stand for.”<sup>290</sup> Watt stalled his department’s approval of the plans, but deferred to the White House, whose position in January 1982 was defined by a National Security Council memo: “a role other than that of a ‘fair arbiter’ by the Executive Branch in the controversy is likely to be a no-win move – inviting attack from either side.”<sup>291</sup> The impasse, however, was resolved in a meeting between the VVMF and its critics, arranged by Senator Warner, which found a compromise in the agreement to include a flag, a sculpture and an inscription in the memorial. The following year, Watt was stalling again, this time over the placement of the new features in the otherwise built and unofficially dedicated site. Special Assistant to the President Jim Cicconi warned that “if a delay in Watt’s decision enhances prospects of renewing the Memorial controversy, we may not be lucky enough to sidestep it a second time.”<sup>292</sup> This is when the White House took an active role in enabling the completion of the memorial, and burying the controversy. A week before Watt’s announcement to delay, Elizabeth Dole, the head of the Office of Public Liaison, had recommended to the Reagan troika that they suggest to Watt he forward three options to the FAC, and leave them with the final decision.<sup>293</sup> This was exactly what Watt did, just days after his public refusal. Patrick Hagopian has revealed the pattern of what happened, involving determined lobbying by the VVMF of the White House, in particular Vice President Bush, the positive action by Meese, Deaver and Baker to influence Watt, and the insistence on keeping the White House’s role a secret.<sup>294</sup>

This demonstrates a White House that was not only conscious of but very interested – to the level of the NSC – in the question of how to commemorate the Vietnam War. This interest, however, did not translate into deliberate argument or action about the commemoration, rather an alert passivity which sought to avoid involvement in a tense symbolic conflict. This position was decided by political

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<sup>290</sup> Watt, James, quoted in memo from Danny Boggs to Martin Anderson, ‘Vietnam Veterans Memorial’ (January 18, 1982), ID# 061357, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>291</sup> Childress, Richard T., memo to William Clark, ‘Vietnam Veteran Memorial’ (January 28, 1982), ID# 061357, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>292</sup> Cicconi, James, memo to Craig Fuller, ‘Vietnam Veterans Memorial’ (January 5, 1983), ID# 117823, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>293</sup> Dole, Elizabeth, memo to Edwin Meese, James Baker and Michael Deaver, ‘Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund’ (January 20, 1983), ID# 117823, PA 002, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>294</sup> Hagopian (2009), pp. 168-72.

considerations. The president could not afford to openly defy an important part of his own political base, who were using his own language and ideas to criticise the memorial, but nor was it a battle worth joining when a majority of Americans rejected Reagan's view of the war, and the memory of Vietnam was informing opposition to his Central American policy.<sup>295</sup> Moreover, the memorial did not necessarily diverge from Reagan's understanding of the war or hopes for how its memory would be represented in his America. While his views on the design are hard to gauge, he did record a meeting with the columnist Jack Kilpatrick, a notable conservative supporter of the project, who wept as he tried to tell Reagan of his experience at the wall's dedication.<sup>296</sup> After his own first visit following the final settlement over the memorial's design, Reagan recorded: "It's quite a place – a very impressive & moving experience."<sup>297</sup>

As well as appreciating the memorial's dramatic nature, Reagan understood its effort to promote national reconciliation over the war through the focus on veterans. At the 1983 Conservative Political Action Conference, just days after Watt had reversed his stance, Reagan addressed an audience which presumably included several who had opposed the memorial design. The president spoke of his "belief that the days of division and discord are behind us and that an era of unity and national renewal is upon us," raising the memorial in evidence. Emphasising the symbolism of its use, at the dedication, rather than its aesthetics, Reagan related an anecdote of some visiting veterans being applauded by some students – a vivid reversal of Vietnam era imagery. "We Americans have learned again to listen to each other," said Reagan, "to trust each other."<sup>298</sup> Here, however, and the following year at the interment of the Unknown Soldier of the Vietnam War where the sentiments and words were repeated almost verbatim, this reunification of the people was framed in terms of the distrust of government and its failures: "We've learned that government owes the people an explanation and needs their support for its actions at home and abroad."<sup>299</sup> Reagan recognised the division the war had wrought and acknowledged

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid, pp. 13, 268-9.

<sup>296</sup> Reagan, 'Friday, November 12, 1982', Brinkley (ed.) (2007), p. 111.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 'Sunday, May 1, 1983', p.149.

<sup>298</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, February 13, 1983', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/21883e.htm> (accessed August 7, 2009).

<sup>299</sup> Reagan, Ronald, 'Remarks at Memorial Day Ceremonies Honoring an Unknown Serviceman of the Vietnam Conflict, May 28, 1984', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/52884a.htm> (accessed January 9, 2009)

its tragedy, but laid blame implicitly on the distant machine of government, rather than on the ideologies which motivate it, or the people who manage it. In this way, Reagan embraced the meaning pursued by the VVMF, endorsing Jan Scruggs's assessment that "a lot of healing went on," but defining the division in terms of the failure of government, and the healing in spite of it.<sup>300</sup> Reagan finally made an official visit to the memorial on Veterans Day, 1984, at the official dedication of the finished monument, and just days after his re-election as president. With a certain magnanimity, Reagan only slightly more specifically addressed the division in America caused by the Vietnam War:

There were great moral and philosophical disagreements about the rightness of the war, and we cannot forget them because there is no wisdom to be gained in forgetting. But we can forgive each other and ourselves for those things that we now recognize may have been wrong, and I think it's time we did.<sup>301</sup>

The writer of the speech, Peggy Noonan, had found her own conversion to conservatism cemented by her experiences amongst the anti-war left, and later wrote of the quiet unease and guilt she perceived in the former protestors.<sup>302</sup> In this sense, the speech is far from a concession of fault or apology for supporting the war, but a suggestion that critics of the war might acknowledge their own part in American division, and their own mistakes. The commemorations of both Martin Luther King and the Vietnam War both challenged Reagan's narrative of American unity. They did not promote national division, but put the spotlight on Reagan's part in it as a political opponent of Civil Rights and supporter of the Vietnam War. Reagan's response to each was defined by his presidential role, which limited him politically. He was lead by his duty as a consecrator of national memory, and the imperative of avoiding controversy and promoting unity. While this role did not allow him to decide the subject or means of national commemoration, it did allow him to define and appropriate it in terms of his political narrative. His success in this, however, is

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<sup>300</sup> That healing did not extend to the rift between the veterans and the government was also suggested at the 1982 dedication at a Capitol Hill forum on the use and effects of Agent Orange. "We don't want money," asserted one veteran to Veterans Administration officials, "we want an admission that you did this to us over there. We don't trust you." 'Vietnam Veterans Vent Fury at VA Over Agent Orange', *Washington Post* (November 13, 1982), p. A9.

<sup>301</sup> Reagan, Ronald, 'Remarks at Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue, November 11, 1984', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/111184a.htm>, accessed January 9, 2009.

<sup>302</sup> Noonan (1990), pp. 15-16.

questionable. On the first national Martin Luther King Day on January 18, 1986, a poll revealed that 56% of African Americans believed the president was a racist, but where only 9% had approved of Reagan's performance in August 1983, 23% now did.<sup>303</sup> Reagan, in his radio address that day, conceded that "our country won't be free until we're all free" but argued that under his presidency, African Americans shared in the country's increasing prosperity.<sup>304</sup> Whether Reagan's increased standing amongst African Americans was due to his symbolic appropriation of Martin Luther King, or broader political reasons, his image was still significantly racially defined. Meanwhile, his presidency failed to convince the majority of Americans that Vietnam was a "noble cause". In 1980, 66% of Americans considered the war "unjustified", and in 1986 the same proportion considered it "more than a mistake, fundamentally wrong and immoral".<sup>305</sup> The public memories of these issues were outside of Reagan's control, and he was positioned against the tide of public opinion. As president, he did not engage in a battle over recent memory – as he might have, were he still a radio commentator and syndicated columnist. Instead, he consecrated and sought to define a consensus that supported his general narrative of American myth, while adapting his rhetoric, and even his views, to the imperatives of national memory.

### The Second World War

The commemoration of the Vietnam War during Reagan's presidency displayed an adherence to traditions in war commemoration. This was quite deliberate in the interment of the Unknown Soldier, which addressed Vietnam in the symbolic conventions of previous wars, an effort complicated by the forensic ability of the armed forces to identify their dead.<sup>306</sup> Benedict Anderson considered the tombs of

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<sup>303</sup> 'Poll Finds Reagan Gains Among Blacks', *Los Angeles Times* (January 18, 1986), [http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-18/news/mn-748\\_1\\_black-americans](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-18/news/mn-748_1_black-americans) (accessed September 20, 2009).

<sup>304</sup> Reagan, 'Radio Address to the Nation on Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black Americans', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/11886b.htm> (accessed September 20, 2009).

<sup>305</sup> Hagopian (2009), p. 13.

<sup>306</sup> Despite the destruction of records relating to the last unidentified American body, his identity was later discovered. 'Casualty of Vietnam War Enters Tomb of the Unknown', *New York Times* (May 29, 1984), p. A14; Hagopian (2009), p. 182.

unknown soldiers to be the most “arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism.”<sup>307</sup> Equally, the placement of a Veterans Memorial amongst the edifices of Washington D.C. had a distinctly nationalist function. The subsequent use of the wall, meanwhile, as a participatory site for personal mourning, expressed a different trend of war commemoration. Its combination of these aspects, the official and unofficial, the national and the personal, represent its commemorative success.<sup>308</sup> President Reagan’s commemorations of the Second World War can be described in these terms as well, where the success of his remembrance of D-Day was based on its effective combination of nationalist themes and the personal experiences of Americans, and the failure of the ceremony at Bitburg Cemetery was the result of its distance from both subjects. This is fundamentally related to the symbolic presidential role, where as chief of state he is a national symbol to which Americans can personally connect.<sup>309</sup> The Reagan White House initiated and maintained control over the commemorative events at Normandy and Bitburg. This point, which makes them extraordinary in the general history of presidential commemoration, is all the more important in that they both became defining moments of Reagan’s presidency. A comparative approach to their causes, purposes and legacies can reveal much about the potential and the limits of presidential commemoration, and how Reagan approached the role.

The commemoration of D-Day responded to current trends in American memory. The Second World War increased in significance as its veterans entered old age, and as its popular image as a victorious and moral war resonated in the aftermath of Vietnam. Bitburg, used here as shorthand for both the wreath-laying ceremony at the German War cemetery and the accompanying visit to Bergen-Belsen, had no such convergence with the broad trends of American culture, responding instead to considerations external to the priorities of both the Reagan presidency and of

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<sup>307</sup> Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>308</sup> These dual trends have defined the scholarship of war commemoration, an overview of which can be found in *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. Introducing the work, T.G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper discuss the contrasting interpretations of the phenomenon seen between the work of those such as Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, and Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), where the political, nationalist function of commemoration is described, and that of Jay Winter who later emphasised the psychological element of public mourning, first in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995). The editors suggest the resulting dichotomy is unhelpful, and seek to explore the interactions between the different processes. Ashplant, T.G., Dawson, Graham, and Roper, Michael, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3-15.

<sup>309</sup> Barger, ‘The Prominence of the Chief of State Role in the American Presidency’ (1978), pp. 127-39.



American memory, and, indeed, to the success of the D-Day ceremony in meeting tradition and setting precedent. Reagan's visit to the Normandy beaches can be seen as part of a tradition of battlefield commemoration. Reagan had already participated in such an event at Yorktown, while previous Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and, of course, Abraham Lincoln had articulated the themes of national identity of the consecrated field of Gettysburg. In that the D-Day commemoration occurred abroad, it was unprecedented, and in that it involved the gathering of several foreign heads of state, it was a uniquely presidential event. However it met the precedent of Gettysburg, where the presence of veterans at the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries underlined presidential expressions of national identity.

"We'd like it to be like the Gettysburg Address," Peggy Noonan was told by various White House staffers as she prepared Reagan's primary speech, to be delivered at the unveiling of the Rangers Monument atop the promontory of Pointe de Hoc.<sup>310</sup> Noonan understood this simply as an instruction for a "tear-jerker", but it suggests the level of expectation that was invested in the speech. The speechwriter was more motivated by the knowledge that the veteran Rangers who had taken the point would be in the audience: "I...knew the veterans would be there, and I wanted justice to be done to them...I wanted to honor them and those that had died beside them as they stormed those cliffs."<sup>311</sup> Reading her speech, Reagan directly addressed these veterans, and translated their experience into one of national themes:

You all knew that some things are worth dying for. One's country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man...The Americans who fought here that morning knew word of the invasion was spreading through the darkness back home. They...felt in their hearts, though they couldn't know in fact, that in Georgia they were filling the churches at 4 a.m., in Kansas they were kneeling on their porches and praying, and in Philadelphia they were ringing the Liberty Bell.<sup>312</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution* (1990), p. 84.

<sup>311</sup> Noonan, quoted in Muir, William Ker Jr., *The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), p. 27.

<sup>312</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at a Ceremony Commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-Day, June 6, 1984', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/60684b.htm> (accessed August 9, 2009).

Reagan had frequently used parables of the Second World War, whether based in reality or fiction, to express himself, or to capture an audience. Here, in the presence of his and America's heroes, with the blessing of their attention and their emotion, and the authenticity of their memories, Reagan could present America with a celebratory understanding of itself. The speech also related the exploits of the Rangers and others in the landings, an aspect which drew only one criticism from the many readers of the original draft. Phil Rivers, the Superintendent of the Normandy American Cemetery, remarked that the speech "is like a B-movie," pointing out that one of the incidents recounted had been enacted in film by John Wayne.<sup>313</sup> His critique was ignored, though it seems he identified something of what made the speech successful.

The second speech of the day, delivered at the American Cemetery, made a further effort to make the soldiers' experience a national one. This was done through the words of Lisa Zanatta-Henn, the daughter of a D-Day veteran whose letter to the president asking if she might attend the ceremony had found its way to the desk of the speechwriter, Tony Dolan. Reagan's speech drew heavily from the letter, which related less of Robert Zanatta's experience of D-Day than his daughter's memory of him, as defined by this experience. "Through the words of his loving daughter," Reagan said, "a D-day veteran has shown us the meaning of this day far better than any President can."<sup>314</sup> The emphasis on this familial bond, and the pilgrimage Zanatta made on behalf of her father (and with the aid of the White House), personalised the national commemoration, combining the official context of the ceremony with one symbolically "ordinary". This was reflected in the American media coverage in the two weeks between Memorial Day and the anniversary which frequently found local veterans whose stories framed the remembrance.<sup>315</sup> Oral history of the war also found substantial expression that year in Studs Terkel's *The Good War*, which set the precedent and the standard for the common use of soldiers' recollections in the "memory boom" that occupied America for the following two decades.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Rivers, Phil, noted remarks (undated), Folder: 'President's Trip to Normandy (7)', Box 161, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research, RRPL.

<sup>314</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at a United States-France Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-day, June 6, 1984', *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/60684b.htm> (accessed August 9, 2009).

<sup>315</sup> Brinkley, Douglas, *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day and the U.S. Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 148-51.

<sup>316</sup> Emily Rosenberg used this phrase, coined by Jay Winter, to describe the upsurge in interest in the Second World War in the 1980s and 1990s, with its frequent emphasis on "witnessing" and its concern

Terkel's ambiguously titled book, however, was a response to "disturbingly profound disrememberance of World War Two," that might have been represented in Reagan's unambiguously advanced narrative of the definitive morality of the war. This was in contrast and response to the difficulty of the Vietnam War in American memory. The commemoration of D-Day was in near concert with the contemporary internment of the Unknown Soldier in the effort to resolve the confusion of American identity and purpose. The Second World War was a "balm for the divisions that had come with the Vietnam War...Remembrance of the unifying 'good war' might sublimate the divisions of the Vietnam era."<sup>317</sup> In the 1984 Memorial Day issue of *Time*, in an article read and annotated by Peggy Noonan, Lance Morrow wrote that "the experience of Normandy...has a kind of moral freshness in the American imagination, a quality of collective heroic virtue for which the nation may be wistful...The morals of sacrifice, so clear then, are more confusing now."<sup>318</sup> Noonan herself "wanted to express the moral dimension of the War, why the West did what it did."<sup>319</sup> In an interview following the Pointe de Hoc ceremony, Walter Cronkite, who as a UP correspondent had accompanied a bombing mission in support of the landings and was now brought out of retirement by CBS specifically for the commemoration, asked the president: "World War II was called a popular war, as opposed to actions we've had recently, Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada. What are the conditions that made that a popular war?" In his answer, Reagan did not elaborate on the comparison, but did reemphasise the war's moral character: "here was a case in which the issues of right and wrong were so clearly defined before we even got into the war, and then we didn't choose to pull the trigger."<sup>320</sup> Though healing was not a specifically stated purpose of the commemoration, it did address the anxiety of the memory of the Vietnam War and its continued effects on American self-perception and purpose.

Bitburg, while it also responded to the resurgent national interest in the war, demonstrated none of the cultural convergences or strategies that made the Normandy trip a successful commemoration. Instead, Bitburg's commemorations responded to

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with identity. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live* (2003), pp. 113-125; Terkel, Studs, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War Two* (New York; Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>317</sup> Ibid, pp. 113-125; also see Adams, Michael C. C., *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p.15.

<sup>318</sup> Morrow, Lance, 'June 6, 1944', *Time* (May 28, 1984), pp. 10-11, Folder: 'President's Trip to Normandy (3)', Box 161, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research, RRPL.

<sup>319</sup> Noonan, quoted in Muir (1992), p. 27.

<sup>320</sup> Cronkite, Walter, interview with Reagan, CBS Morning News, WHNS – London Evening Edition (June 6, 1984), pp. B3-4, White House News Summaries, RRPL.

political considerations. Reagan's remembrance of D-Day, too, was invested with political purpose. Michael Deaver's efforts directed the event towards the re-election campaign of the summer, timing the Pointe du Hoc address to overshadow news of the Democratic Californian primary the same morning, and using footage of the president and the veterans in the campaign film, *A New Beginning* (1984).<sup>321</sup> The State Department and the NSC, meanwhile, employed the event as an expression of foreign policy, a reassurance to European allies and the continuation of a freshly conciliatory stance towards the Soviet Union.<sup>322</sup> These efforts, however, capitalised on the event's setting and themes, while the events of the Bitburg trip were conceived for political purpose. Bitburg had its roots in one of the few controversies of the Normandy ceremony: the reported disappointment of Chancellor Helmut Kohl at his exclusion from the proceedings.<sup>323</sup> Kohl did participate in another ceremony at Verdun later in the year, where he and President Mitterrand made a commitment to the reconciliation and alliance between France and West Germany at the battlefield cemetery where soldiers of both countries were buried. On a visit to the US in November, the chancellor described this event to President Reagan, who agreed that a similar gesture of US-German reconciliation would be appropriate for VE Day in 1985. Reagan understood this in terms of the needs of the Germans, noting that they "suffer a great guilt complex over the Nazi period", and resolving to celebrate "when the hatred stopped & peace & friendship began".<sup>324</sup> Whether Kohl, whose party faced crucial elections the following summer and possibly wished to replicate Reagan's own use of the D-Day commemorations, "manipulated" Reagan or not, it is clear that Bitburg was conceived to address issues of German memory and identity, rather than American.<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, as Richard Jensen indicated, Reagan had to choose between two versions of German identity – one represented by Kohl and the needs of German memory that Nazi rule represented an aberration, and the other broadly represented by Jewish memory, that saw the German people as complicit in Nazi

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<sup>321</sup> Cannon (2000), pp. 424-5.

<sup>322</sup> MacFarlane, Robert, memo to President Reagan, 'Your trip to Europe – annotated agenda' (April 16, 1984), Folder: 'President's Trip to Normandy (2)', Box 161, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research Office, RRPL.

<sup>323</sup> Vinocor, John, 'Kohl's D-Day Snub by Allies Assailed', *New York Times* (May 28, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>324</sup> Reagan, 'Friday, November 30, 1985', Brinkley (ed.) (2007), p. 282.

<sup>325</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr., 'The Rush to Reconcile', Hartman, Geoffrey (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), originally printed in *Wall Street Journal* (May 9, 1985).

atrocity.<sup>326</sup> Reagan chose the former, alienating the latter, but the very existence of a choice suggested that the American president was operating beyond his natural arena of American memory.

The purpose of the commemoration was the political support of an ally, but its themes developed in political response to the controversy that erupted following the announcement in April that the president would be visiting and honouring a cemetery of German war dead during his European trip the following month. The symbolism of such an act, intensified by the discovery that Bitburg Cemetery contained the graves of forty-nine SS soldiers, provoked a month of unabated criticism, domestic and international, that amounted to the biggest political crisis of Reagan's presidency until Iran/Contra. The story is significant for various reasons. It reveals the processes of commemoration and crisis in the new structure of Reagan's second administration; it raises familiar questions about his personal understanding of history; it demonstrates the contemporary perceptions of the Reagan White House as a fundamentally symbolic institution. Here, however, I focus on how in the event of Reagan's own personal decision to hold a commemoration, he challenged the narratives of American morality and unity that had successfully framed his previous commemorative ventures. While at Normandy, the war had been easily expressed and understood as a good fight against an uncomplicated evil. The president's participation at Bitburg threatened to absolve and normalise America's Nazi enemies. Norman Podhoretz argued that Bitburg would be "the grave of the great idea that has given...moral purpose to Mr. Reagan's foreign policy." This was the identification of totalitarian regimes as exceptional and unappeasable. Honouring its soldiers would vindicate Nazi Germany as an "ordinary nation", and weaken Reagan's moral stance against Communism as an exceptional threat.<sup>327</sup> Implicit in this critique was the potential loss of America's exceptionalism, as the reconciliatory equation of American soldiers with their Nazi enemies undermined the central reference point for American moral purpose. Reagan's speechwriters read Podhoretz and other right-wing critics, and received substantial friendly advice from their colleagues that urged the clarification of Reagan's moral stance. Peggy Noonan and William Safire, for instance, advised that Reagan should stress that he still recognised good and evil, and that "it is not

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<sup>326</sup> Jensen, Richard J., *Reagan at Bergen-Belsen and Bitburg* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), pp. 73-4.

<sup>327</sup> Podhoretz, 'The Worst Effect of Bitburg', *The New York Post* (April 23, 1985), Folder: 'Bergen-Belsen Timmons/Ken Khachigian', Box 208, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research, RRPL.

man's job to forgive evil, it is God's."<sup>328</sup> Mark Klugmann suggested Reagan affirm the morality of the occasion by emphasising the modern alliance between the USA and Germany against totalitarianism.<sup>329</sup>

These ideas were expressed in the speech Reagan gave at the Bitburg Air Base – a better location for an articulation of the US-German alliance than the cemetery. However, while to an extent the commemoration specifically sought to raise and resolve the issue of American memory of its enmity with Germany, this raised the extra but vital question of the Holocaust. This was poorly anticipated by Reagan, which is perhaps surprising considering his strongly felt personal connection to the revelation of the Nazi genocide.<sup>330</sup> A trip to Dachau had initially been scheduled, but was abandoned due to second thoughts on the German side, and opposition from Nancy Reagan, reluctant to see her husband subjected to such emotive horror. This neglect brought the most ardent criticism of Reagan, compounded by his awkward press conference justification that the draftees buried at Bitburg “were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps.”<sup>331</sup> A visit to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen was planned in response to the opprobrium, but this did not satisfy the prominent Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who took the opportunity to publicly appeal to Reagan to cancel his Bitburg visit when receiving the Congressional Gold Medal at the White House on April 19: “That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS.”<sup>332</sup> Though Reagan's visit to Bergen-Belsen, and his speech there, did not assuage the hostility of Jewish opinion to his presence at Bitburg, it was a concession to it, and the theme of Holocaust memory dominated both events. Reagan's commemoration became defined by the particular imperatives of Jewish memory, even though American public opinion was predominantly concerned with the president's treatment of the memory of American soldiers, rather

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<sup>328</sup> Noonan, Peggy, letter to Josh Gilder, undated, Folder: ‘Remarks – Lunch at Bitburg Air Force Base, My 5, 1985 (10)’, Box 207, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research, RRPL.

<sup>329</sup> Klugmann, Mark, memo to Josh Gilder, ‘Bitburg Speech’ (April 26, 1985), Folder: ‘Remarks – Lunch at Bitburg Air Force Base, My 5, 1985 (10)’, Box 207, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Research, RRPL.

<sup>330</sup> This was based on viewing films of the newly liberated camps while at the Air Corps First Motion Picture Unit. Morris, *Dutch*, pp. 215-6.

<sup>331</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Question-and-Answer Session with Regional Editors and Broadcasters, April 18, 1985’, *PPPR*, RRPL, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/41885d.htm> (accessed August 11, 2009).

<sup>332</sup> Cannon (2000), p. 513.

than of the Holocaust.<sup>333</sup> The friction between the two priorities was felt in the White House. Marshall Breger, the official for Jewish Affairs, felt “tensions, but not a dichotomy” in representing both the president and the American Jewish community. Pat Buchanan saw a greater division, reminding a visiting group of prominent, dissenting Republican Jews that they were “Americans first”. Their continued opposition caused him to frustratedly write in his notes, and in sight of one of the guests: “Succumbing to the pressure of the Jews”.<sup>334</sup> Though the distinction between Jewish and American identity was not always so meanly perceived, it was significant. While the Holocaust was gaining an increasing place on the American cultural landscape – literally, in the form of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, whose groundbreaking on the Mall took place in October that year – it was not part of American national memory. “The Holocaust is simply too remote from the experience of Americans”, Peter Novick argued, for it to inform American identity in any real way.<sup>335</sup>

Bitburg failed to directly address the concerns of American national memory and identity, as Reagan’s other commemorations had, whether successful or not. It threatened to undermine the narratives that Reagan had previously promoted, by bringing into question the idea of America’s moral identity, and responding to priorities other than those of the dominant interests of American memory, conceding, to some extent, the multiplicity of identities in America. For these reasons it was a failure. Though its initial purpose saw some success in the political support the event gave to Reagan’s ally, Helmut Kohl, it came to represent the difficulty of combining politics with contested and complex historical memory. In this way it became definitive of Reagan’s presidency as an instruction in the issues of collective memory. Afterwards, Elie Wiesel, another symbol of memory, acknowledged that the exchange of words over the issue may have had a positive effect, but expressed a reluctance to talk further about it, and declined the offer to contribute to the literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman’s edited collection, *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*.<sup>336</sup> Hartman considered the affair “a symbolic and symptomatic event with high

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<sup>333</sup> Bole, William, ‘Bitburg: The American Scene’, Hartman, Geoffrey (ed.), *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 76-77.

<sup>334</sup> Cannon (2000), p. 511.

<sup>335</sup> Novick, Peter, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), p. 278.

<sup>336</sup> Francosi, Robert; Shaffer, Brian and Wiesel, Elie, ‘An Interview with Elie Wiesel’, *Contemporary Literature* 28 (3) (Autumn, 1987), pp. 287-300.

visibility, from which much can be learned.”<sup>337</sup> Meanwhile, Richard Jensen called it a “seminal symbolic disaster”, nevertheless concluding his rhetorical analysis by suggesting that Reagan’s speeches were exemplary, containing lessons for public speakers and future presidents.<sup>338</sup>

The success of the D-Day commemoration lay also in its lasting symbolism. Tom Brokaw, a central figure in the memory boom of the 1990s, argued: “I believe that Reagan’s the Boys of Pointe du Hoc speech was the beginning of the rekindled awareness of what we owe the World War II generation. He opened the window, so to speak, so we could all see through it.”<sup>339</sup> It set a precedent for presidential commemoration, followed by Bill Clinton in 1994, George W. Bush in 2004, and Barack Obama in 2009. Clinton’s staff obtained video footage of Reagan’s speeches from the Reagan Presidential Library in preparation for the fiftieth anniversary.<sup>340</sup> Bush’s commemoration of the sixtieth, meanwhile, made explicit reference to Reagan, who had died the previous day. Clips of Reagan at Normandy scattered the televised retrospectives, overshadowing Bush’s own efforts, and more firmly connecting Reagan with the act of commemoration and the event itself. Memory of Reagan became intertwined with the memory of D-Day, and the Second World War, a conflation represented in Douglas Brinkley’s *Boys of Pointe du Hoc* (2005), which told the stories of the Rangers and of Reagan in a single narrative – and which earned Brinkley the invitation to edit Reagan’s diaries.

Bitburg and D-Day were both commemorations which Reagan chose and initiated. This level of control is rare in presidential commemoration, made possible by the events’ international nature. However, this presidential leadership was constrained by the interests and priorities of contemporary myth. At Normandy, this was not a problem, as Reagan’s narrative of the war as an affirmation of victorious exceptionalism dovetailed with prevailing and popular nationalist themes. At Bitburg, Reagan’s unsuccessful attempt to redefine this narrative for incongruous political purposes, and his reactive concession to the demands of Jewish identity, resulted in an incoherence that revealed the political artifice behind the commemoration. Reagan could not realign the politics of memory, but was dependent on and subject to mythic

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<sup>337</sup> Hartman (1986), p.7.

<sup>338</sup> Jensen (2007), p. 132.

<sup>339</sup> Brinkley (2005), pp. 13-14.

<sup>340</sup> ‘Acting Lesson’, *Newsweek* (March 21, 1994), RRPL, Press Clippings, ‘Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Chron. File 1994’.



imperatives outside of his control. Nevertheless, Reagan's initiative, and the extent of both his success and failure to engage and reflect the memory of his times, confirmed him as a distinctly and definitively mythic president.

### Conclusion

After Bitburg, the Reagan presidency did not abandon commemoration, but engaged in only broad, bland celebrations of national memory in a traditionally consecrative role. Reagan represented the presidency at the opening of the Constitution Bicentennial in 1987, which was chaired by the retiring Chief Justice Warren Burger, and which lasted four years.<sup>341</sup> He had a more central, but still performative role in Statue of Liberty Centennial in 1986, a vast celebration organised by Lee Iacocca which rivalled the national bicentennial a decade before. Reagan's involvement further confirmed his mythic distinctiveness. In response, Lance Morrow of *Time* called Reagan a "masterpiece of American magic – apparently one of the simplest, most uncomplicated creatures alive, and yet a character of rich meanings, of complexities that connect him with the myths and powers of his country in an unprecedented way."<sup>342</sup> Mike Wallace, an essayist on American memory, charged Reagan with "perpetuating myth", albeit a "deadly one" about enterprise and immigration.<sup>343</sup> Reagan's commemorative acts demonstrate his conformity to the symbolic traditions of the presidency and the thematic and political constraints that are put upon the office, generally making it passive or cautious in the negotiation of national memory. However, they also show that Reagan took unprecedented initiative in national commemoration, distinguishing his presidency if not always helping it. D-Day and Bitburg became definitive events of Reagan's presidency, and in the landscape of American memory – connecting the two in history. Both events have become the subjects of individual books; Reagan's address at Bergen-Belsen was,

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<sup>341</sup> No study exists of this event except its own report, *We the People: The Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, 1985-1992: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1992).

<sup>342</sup> Morrow, 'Yankee Doodle Magic', *Time* (July 7, 1986), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,144460,00.html> (accessed July 4, 2009).

<sup>343</sup> Wallace, Mike, 'Hijacking History: Ronald Reagan and the Statue of Liberty', *Radical History Review* (37, 1987), pp. 119-30.

indeed, what inspired Morris to become his biographer.<sup>344</sup> Reagan's engagement with the politics of national memory became a central part of his history, and his myth.

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<sup>344</sup> Morris, *Dutch* (1999), p.3

## **Chapter 4**

### **“Historical Fantasies”: Partisan Myth, the Cold War Victory and Iran/Contra**

#### **Introduction**

The politics of commemoration engaged the Reagan presidency and have helped define it historically. While the images and themes of Reagan's performances at Pointe du Hoc, Bitburg and the Statue of Liberty are vital components of his historical image, his presidency and legacy is judged predominantly on its political achievements, failures and consequences. This chapter considers those judgements, and how they respond to and support Reagan's association with myth, in relation to two seminal events of Reagan's presidency, the end of the Cold War and the Iran/Contra affair. As matters of foreign policy, these events are directly related to presidential action, and thus more clearly indicate Reagan and his historical symbolism than broad narratives of America's economic, spiritual and cultural recovery or decline. Moreover, they represent Reagan's greatest perceived achievement in the Cold War victory, and his greatest failure in the Iran/Contra scandal. This symmetry demonstrates the partisan division in the interpretations of Reagan's presidency, while each event relates to the mythic themes of Reagan's presidency and ideology. The Cold War victory, as we have seen, was made part of the narrative of Reagan's life by Paul Kengor, tied to the concept of American destiny in which Reagan believed. Iran/Contra, meanwhile, has been understood in terms of Reagan's televised image, and issues of fiction, deception and reality.

The politicised historical narratives that seek to explain Reagan's presidency introduce a new aspect to his relationship to American mythology. They divide over the consequences of his leadership and thus his broad significance to national and global history, but the divide goes beyond historical issues of cause and effect. The debate over Reagan contains argument over how history should be understood, and the meaning of American history. Reagan's role in the Cold War raises the question of the role of individuals and “greatness” in history against that of wider forces. Iran/Contra implies not only constitutional issues, but broad questions about the nature of American government and democracy, and about the morality inherent in the exceptionalist concept of the American system. Meanwhile, there is a contextual

argument about who in America is responsible for the construction of history. This is an institutional and philosophical battle in the Culture Wars. Conservatives distrust the dominance of the media and the academy in crafting history, while liberals distrust the politicised scholarship of conservative think-tanks, and the political use of history by conservative politicians. These arguments are mostly implicit in the historical literature on Reagan, but his emergence as a contested symbol of and about American history has had a discernible influence on the tone, themes and extent of his historiography. Before considering the specific treatment of the Cold War and Iran/Contra, I will introduce the context of the field, and arena, to which they belong.

### Reagan and Partisan History

The partisan mythologisation of Reagan has complicated his historiography. In 2008, Hugh Heclo felt the need to justify his offering of an objective and mixed assessment of President Reagan's legacies. He did this by defining his analysis in terms of how it might "honor" Reagan: "We pay our greatest respect to a person by studiously and honestly weighing what it meant that he or she passed through this troubled world." Heclo did this in response to Reagan's "iconographic" status as "a foil in today's partisan wars".<sup>345</sup> Meanwhile, Gil Troy felt the need to insist: "Yes, I can write a balanced work about Ronald Reagan without being a rightwing Neanderthal". After publishing *Morning in America*, Troy asked of Reagan historiography, "Why have we done such a lousy job?", concluding that "the intense partisanship emanating from both Washington, D.C. and the academy" made Reagan a forbidding subject for historians.<sup>346</sup> He had not, however, been a forbidding subject for publishers. An extensive literature on Reagan had developed since during his presidency, much of it defined by partisan lines. Scholars such as Robert Dallek and Michael Rogin wrote their contemporary analyses of the president with undisguised disdain for his politics. Towards the end of the decade, journalists published collections chronicling their

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<sup>345</sup> Heclo, Hugh, 'The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38 (4) (December, 2008), pp. 555-6.

<sup>346</sup> Troy, Gil, 'Toward a Historiography of Reagan and the 1980s: Why Have We Done Such a Lousy Job?', Hudson and Davies (eds.) (2008), pp. 228-9.

despair of the Reagan years.<sup>347</sup> Journalists dominated the early accounts of the Reagan presidency after its close. While Lou Cannon, unique in his familiarity with Reagan, largely escaped accusations of partisanship for *The Role of a Lifetime*, Haynes Johnson was, again, openly critical of Reagan and the decline he presided over in *Sleepwalking through History* (1991).<sup>348</sup>

Defences of Reagan were initially found only in the memoirs of his loyal confederates, and the memoir, as we have seen with Peggy Noonan's *When Character was King*, has continued as a central genre for the celebration of Reagan.<sup>349</sup>

Conservative historical argument about Reagan's presidency later found form also in polemic, hagiography, scholarship and, notably, the publication by the Hoover Institution of Reagan's letters and radio addresses. All this was in conscious response to the prevalence of liberal criticism of the president and his policies. Dinesh D'Souza's rehabilitation of Reagan, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (1997), was as much an attack on the "the elite", "the intellectuals," and "the wise men" of the liberal media and academy. In the language of the Culture Wars, he labelled Reagan's detractors "revisionist critics" who viewed history through a distorting ideological lens.<sup>350</sup> The partisan paradigm to Reagan literature still exists, as represented recently by William Kleinknecht's *The Man who Sold the World*, a backlash to Reagan's improved reputation which places the recession at his feet.<sup>351</sup>

This overview of Reagan literature describes the partisan context in which his history has been written. Authors are conscious of Reagan's current importance as a

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<sup>347</sup> For example, see Blumenthal, Sidney, *Our Long National Daydream: A Political Pageant of the Reagan Era* (HarperCollinsPublishers, 1988); Cockburn, Alexander, *Corruptions of Empire* (New York: Verso, 1988); Ehrenreich, Barbara, *The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990); Thompson, Hunter S., *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the '80s* (London: Picador, 1988).

<sup>348</sup> Johnson, Haynes, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

<sup>349</sup> Early defensive memoirs include Anderson, Martin, *Revolution: The Reagan Legacy* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988) and Meese, Edwin III, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992). Since Reagan's death several more have been produced, including Wirthlin, Dick, *The Greatest Communicator: What Ronald Reagan Taught Me about Politics, Leadership and Life* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004).

<sup>350</sup> D'Souza, Dinesh, *Ronald Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p.18. D'Souza was a veteran of the culture wars. He had been an editor of the controversial *Dartmouth Review* before joining the late Reagan White House as a junior policy adviser. He later wrote various provocative attacks on liberalism including *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991), *The End of Racism* (1995) and more recently, *The Enemy at Home: The Cultural Left and Its Responsibility for 9/11* (2007).

<sup>351</sup> Kleinknecht, *The Man Who Sold the World* (2009).

historical symbol, and self-conscious about their own political identity. Stephen Hayward and Sean Wilentz both wrote histories that sought to define *The Age of Reagan*, and each opened with a defence of the value of their work despite their political stances. Wilentz conceded his liberalism and even his personal involvement in part of his narrative, as a witness for Clinton in his impeachment trials and as a supporter of Al Gore's candidacy. He went on to assert his commitment to historical objectivity, his ability to suspend his own beliefs and to judge fairly and, indeed, that the work had challenged and changed his mind on some issues.<sup>352</sup> Hayward, a conservative and, like Dinesh D'Souza, an American Enterprise Institute scholar, admitted in the preface to his first volume that "this narrative is hard on liberals and liberalism" but expressed a hope that it would nonetheless be accepted in the spirit of thoughtful political debate and promised that the second volume would cast a critical eye on conservatism.<sup>353</sup> These authors thus concede that their histories belong to a context of partisan division over Reagan, but plead that their works are distinguished by fairness and objectivity. In other words, they argue that they do not contribute to partisan myths of their subject. However, they do represent an acknowledgment of Reagan's significance as a symbol in contemporary political discourse and make it part of their task to define that symbolism. Moreover, the politicised, partisan contest over Reagan's meaning is a process of myth and counter-myth which reinforces his symbolism. As with interpretations which see Reagan as both an agent and emblem of American myth, the political division over Reagan's relevance has made him both subject and symbol of partisan myth.

### The Cold War Victory

Reagan's Cold War victory is the central story to his conservative mythology. Its central premise is the attribution to Reagan, as the American president and as the leader of American conservatism, of primary responsibility for the fall of Communism and the Soviet Union. In its simplest form, this narrative collapses a drawn out series of related events into one, and appeals to Reagan as both a symbol of American power and of conservative rectitude. Will Bunch has described the

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<sup>352</sup> Wilentz, Sean, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. 9-11.

<sup>353</sup> Hayward, Stephen F., *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980* (New York: Forum, Prima, 2001), pp. vii-viii.

pervasiveness of this narrative in the common televisual juxtaposition of Reagan's 1987 sound-bite, "Tear down this wall!", with footage of the Berlin wall breached in 1989.<sup>354</sup> More expansive narratives involve Reagan's moral confrontation with the Evil Empire, his support of anti-communist regimes and rebels across the world, his military build-up and his uncompromising statesmanship, all leading to a victory represented by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Holding this strategy together was Reagan's vision, expressed to his future National Security Advisor Richard Allen in 1978: "My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple... It is this: We win and they lose."<sup>355</sup> This narrative is an historical argument which seeks to resolve and revise a specific question about Reagan's role. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. represented the generous liberal opinion in giving Reagan credit for "taking Mikhail Gorbachev seriously [and] abandoning his zero-sum fallacy".<sup>356</sup> Essentially, this argued that Reagan's transformation from fiery Cold Warrior to agent of disarmament was a reaction to Gorbachev. Conservatives advanced evidence of the consistency of Reagan's strategy, and argued that it had forced Gorbachev to react.<sup>357</sup> However, in their rhetoric of victory and by infusing this narrative with political purpose, conservatives engaged in partisan myth.

As the Cold War waned in the last years of Reagan's presidency and ended in 1989, Reagan received mixed tributes. When the wall came down, the *Wall Street Journal* asserted that "America's victory in the Cold War was consummated by Ronald Reagan."<sup>358</sup> Morton Kondracke of the *New Republic* labelled Ronald Reagan the right's "easy (and plausible) two-word explanation for how victory was snatched from the jaws of defeat."<sup>359</sup> However, acclamation was gradual, because of conservative disapproval of Reagan's negotiations with Gorbachev and persistent suspicion of the Soviet Union. Richard Viguerie, following the signing of the INF Treaty in 1987, had called Reagan "a useful idiot for Soviet propaganda" in an

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<sup>354</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth* (2009), pp. 23-5.

<sup>355</sup> Schweizer, *Reagan's War* (2002), p. 106.

<sup>356</sup> Schlesinger, Arthur Jr., 'Some Lessons from the Cold War', Hogan, Michael (ed.), *The End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 61.

<sup>357</sup> This interpretation was also advanced in international relations scholarship in Bell, Coral, *The Reagan Paradox: American Foreign Policy in the 1980s* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1989) and Fischer, Beth, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>358</sup> Quoted in Kinsley, Michael, 'Who Killed Communism?', *The New Republic* (December 4, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>359</sup> Kondracke, Morton M., 'The World Turned Upside Down', *The New Republic* (September 18 & 25 1989), p. 28.

extreme example of the broad disappointment with Reagan on the right for his conciliation with Gorbachev.<sup>360</sup> In 1989, President Bush distanced himself from Reagan's legacy of negotiation with Gorbachev while Secretary of Defence Dick Cheney, who warned against those who would "give away their overcoats on the first sunny day in January," had his department prepare a long-term strategy against an aggressive and expansive Soviet Union.<sup>361</sup> Even in 1990, Howard Phillips was warning the Conservative Political Action Conference that that "our leaders are intoxicated with premature self-congratulation which has clouded their judgment and blinded their eyes to ominous reality."<sup>362</sup> As conservatives accepted the finality of the events of these years, meanwhile, they revealed division over the future of American policy, and their conceptions of American purpose and identity.<sup>363</sup> In the immediacy of the end of the Cold War, conservatives undoubtedly appreciated Reagan and the role he played, but it was not until after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, indeed, that of George H.W. Bush's presidency, that conservatives turned to Reagan as a unifying symbol of triumph.

Whether in polemic, political rhetoric or scholarly historical revision, the elevation of Reagan as Cold War victor emerged as a response to the American left. Reagan and his achievement were a symbol of conservatism, and his diminishment by liberal journalists and academics were attacks on this symbol. Conservatives sought to demythologise the left's image of Reagan as a man engaged in fantasy, and promote him as a man of vision and strategy. This effort revolved around the meaning of the Strategic Defence Initiative which was not only, after Rogin, widely attributed to *Murder in the Air*, but received the nickname *Star Wars*, popularised by Ted Kennedy. It was associated with other movie narratives as well. Lou Cannon saw it as an expression of Reagan's fondness for science-fiction jeremiads such as *The Day the*

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<sup>360</sup> Blumenthal, Sidney, *Pledging Allegiance: The Last Campaign of the Cold War* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1990), pp. 38-45. William Buckley was also critical of the INF Treaty, evident in the pages of the *National Review* and in his correspondence with President Reagan, Buckley, *The Reagan I Knew* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), pp. 201-7.

<sup>361</sup> Matlock, Jack, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 313-4; Borger, Gloria, 'The Politician at the Pentagon', *U.S. News and World Report* (October 2 1989) p.25; McEvoy-Levy, Siobhán, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 33.

<sup>362</sup> Corn, David, 'Rift on the Right: Life without the Red Menace', *The Nation* (April 9 1990), p. 484.

<sup>363</sup> See, for example, the disparity in the pages of the *National Interest* between the isolationist views of Pat Buchanan, and the missionary ideas of Ben Wattenberg, each based on a reading of the national character revealed in American history. Buchanan, 'America First – and Second, and Third' and Wattenberg, Ben J., 'Neo-Manifest Destinarianism', Owen Harries (ed.), *America's Purpose* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1991).



*Earth Stood Still* (1951).<sup>364</sup> Garry Wills saw in it Western themes, where it fulfilled Reagan's "narrative requirement that a single hero (or hero nation) save the day by a decisive act," and was "much like the Lone Ranger's silver bullet which he used only to knock guns out of the bad guy's hands."<sup>365</sup> More broadly, Frances Fitzgerald considered it as rooted in old themes of American exceptionalism and identity, particularly as expressed by mid-century western isolationism where "magical, or symbolic, thinking" envisaged sea and air power allowing "America both to pursue its God-given mission abroad and to remain the virgin land."<sup>366</sup>

Conservative responses sought to counter the criticism of SDI's imaginary quality, by establishing its real effects as, in Margaret Thatcher's words, the "one vital factor in ending the Cold War".<sup>367</sup> The argument, however, is problematic, considering that it is based primarily on perception. It is convincing in its point, argued most fully by Paul Kengor in *The Crusader* (2006), that the Soviet Union took the idea seriously enough to fear it and attempt to match it, causing great expense in confidence and resources.<sup>368</sup> However, Reagan's sincere commitment to a \$26 billion system widely regarded as unfeasible, and which never made it out of research stages, has to be addressed. This commitment was demonstrated at Reykjavik, where Reagan showed he did not consider SDI to be a bluff, a bargaining chip or a strategic ploy. Conservatives reconciled this problem in terms of visionary leadership. "Reagan's vision," wrote D'Souza, "proved to be superior to all the strategic machinations of the arms control establishment" while the polemicist Ann Coulter claimed that it "transform[ed] America's mission" as part of Reagan's moral redefinition of the Cold War.<sup>369</sup> In the end, conservatives found Reagan's victory partly in the faith he put and expressed in imagination.

The case for Reagan's victory was also a political response to a Cold War narrative that emphasised the continuity and consensus of American leadership, arguing instead that the end of the Cold War vindicated the conservative movement. Gil Troy summed up the former narrative: "The cold war victory was a joint

<sup>364</sup> Cannon, *President Reagan* (2000), p. 251.

<sup>365</sup> Wills, *Reagan's America* (2000), p. 427.

<sup>366</sup> Fitzgerald, Frances, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>367</sup> D'Souza (1997), p. 173.

<sup>368</sup> Kengor, Paul, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), pp. 175-184, 300-2.

<sup>369</sup> D'Souza (1997), p. 180; Coulter, Ann, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), pp. 164-6.

achievement of all the presidents from Harry Truman through George Bush. It is a tribute to the bipartisan consensus that kept America strong but not too aggressive in the face of Communism.”<sup>370</sup> The historiography of the Cold War has generated varied explanations for its end. Where an American victory is conceded, while Reagan’s role has gained increasing credit over the years, accounts emphasise the consistency of American strategy and institutions over the course of the conflict.<sup>371</sup> The mythic elements of this idea have been indicated by Allen Hunter, who described it as a “vindicationist” national narrative which “claims more than mere triumph” but also that triumph proves the righteousness of American institutions and ideologies.<sup>372</sup>

Conservative responses have treated the argument in terms of American political division. Ann Coulter, whose popular work has sought to define conservative identity, scorned the “liberal” idea that “Harry Truman won the Cold War during the Reagan Administration”, insisting that Reagan’s presidency was the converse and antidote to thirty years of treachery and failure, and the only solution to victory.<sup>373</sup> D’Souza is also insistent on Reagan’s singular role; “the true victor in the cold war...he foresaw it...he planned it, and...he brought it about.”<sup>374</sup> Again, this depended on the reversal of orthodox ideas – the “wise men” of the left and right. The details of this narrative span the breadth of Reagan’s rhetorical, diplomatic, military, economic and covert policies. The connecting theme, however, is that Reagan pursued victory, where others sought appeasement. The notion of Cold War victory was tied to the conservative movement at home, recalling the slogans of old heroes of the right: Joseph McCarthy lambasting Dean Acheson’s and George Marshall’s “retreat from victory”; Barry Goldwater asking the Democratic foreign policy establishment, “why not victory?”<sup>375</sup> While victory differentiated Left from Right, it also galvanised for conservatives the political war at home. In the pages of the *National Review*, where not long before Reagan’s late Soviet policy had been lamented as retreat and

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<sup>370</sup> Troy, *Morning in America* (2005), p. 341.

<sup>371</sup> Gaddis, John Lewis, “The Cold War, the Long Peace and the Future”, Hogan, Michael (ed.), *The End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 21-38.

<sup>372</sup> Hunter, Allen, ‘The Limits of Vindicationist Scholarship’ in Hunter (ed.), *Rethinking the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), p. 2. Siobhán McEvoy-Levy demonstrated the use of this exceptionalist narrative in the rhetoric of both Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. See McEvoy-Levy (2001).

<sup>373</sup> Coulter (2003), pp. 145-166.

<sup>374</sup> D’Souza (1997), p. 133.

<sup>375</sup> Joseph McCarthy, *America’s Retreat from Victory: The Story of George Catlett Marshall* (Boston: Western Islands, 1965); Barry Goldwater, *Why Not Victory? A Fresh Look at American Foreign Policy* (New York: MacFadden Books, 1964).

surrender, the Cold War victory was interpreted in terms of the culture war with the American left.<sup>376</sup> Essentially, the case for Reagan's Cold War victory was made polemically, to distinguish conservative anti-communism from the orthodoxies of containment and détente. D'Souza wrote in the depth of the Clinton presidency, and Coulter at the beginning of the War on Terror, with the mythic purpose of defining their party's identity and entitlement in terms of Reagan's achievement.

The phenomenon of conservative political mythology about Reagan's Cold War role has prompted reaction, but little engagement. "The central and most insidious myths about Reagan and his presidency," stated Sean Wilentz, "concern the ending of the cold war." Wilentz rejected the idea that Reagan had a deliberate strategy which foresaw and implemented the collapse of the Soviet Union, singling out books by Peter Schweizer, *Victory* (1994) and *Reagan's War* (2002), as "spurious revisionist" accounts, which are simply "ex post facto historical fantasies."<sup>377</sup> Despite his reference to "dissolving the Reagan myth", he makes no attempt to engage with Schweizer's claims or scholarship, dismissing it out of hand as politically motivated.<sup>378</sup> This characterises other identifications of conservative myth about Reagan's Cold War victory. Michael Schaller's essay in the collection *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (2007), a book which seeks to restore a "balanced and rational approach" to the historical discourse on Reagan, also fails to engage with the arguments it dismisses.<sup>379</sup> In 1992, Schaller had concluded that Reagan had been largely inconsequential, if not harmful, to the war's peaceful end.<sup>380</sup> His account fifteen years later is more generous, but still negative in its focus on Reagan's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Schaller seeks "balance" with the conservative victory narratives, but again, fails to engage with their arguments, as historical scholarship or as myth.<sup>381</sup> The most recent discussion of

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<sup>376</sup> Tom Bethell argued that "the new conservative agenda is clear. With socialism on the ropes abroad, now is the time to focus on socialism at home." Arch Puddington warned that the end of the Cold War did not mean the end of the Left's determination to weaken America. Bethell, Tom, 'Will Success Spoil Anti-Communists?', *National Review* (March 5, 1990), pp. 38-40; Puddington, Arch, 'Why Aren't These People Smiling?', *National Review* (November 4, 1991), pp. 44-6, 60. I have discussed in more detail the concepts of victory in and after the Cold War in Johnson, Roger, 'Victory and Identity: The End of the Cold War in American Imagination', Christie, Kenneth (ed.), *United States Foreign Policy and National Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 3-19.

<sup>377</sup> Wilentz (2008), pp. 530-1.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid, p. 286.

<sup>379</sup> Longley, Kyle, 'Introduction', Longley, Mayer, Schaller and Sloan (eds.) *Deconstructing Reagan* (2007), p. ix.

<sup>380</sup> Schaller, Michael, *Reckoning With Reagan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 176-8.

<sup>381</sup> Schaller, 'Reagan and the Cold War', Longley, Mayer, Schaller and Sloan (eds.) (2007), pp. 3-40.

the subject is in *Tear down This Myth* (2009) by the journalist Will Bunch. His focus is on political rhetoric by contemporary Republicans and the cultural image of Reagan, rather than historical literature. His discussion rests, like Wilentz and Schaller, on a broad acceptance that conservative arguments that Reagan won the Cold War through his own deliberate and farsighted effort are myth, by virtue of the associated support they provide to contemporary political debates and images. In short, despite the level of reference to conservative mythology about Reagan's victory, there is no effort to engage with its historical arguments, nor demonstrate their mythic process.

The scholarly efforts to make the historical case for Reagan's victory can be distinguished from polemic by their engagement with and advancement of the field by their use of new sources and original interpretations. Such identification is abstract, since they have been generally regarded not to have advanced the field, operating only as myth. This assumption has some validity, but it is also a representation of how the discourse of myth and the historical legacy of Reagan have limited his historiography with political rigidity. The central texts arguing Reagan's victory are Peter Schweizer's *Reagan's War*, and Paul Kengor's *The Crusader* (2006). The two authors are connected. Paul Kengor wrote that his idea for a book revealing Reagan's personal role in the defeat of the Soviet Union stemmed from a conversation with Schweizer about his earlier book, *Victory*, which focused on the covert activity of Bill Casey and the CIA, and particularly the cooption of Saudi Arabia in the economic war on the Soviet Union.<sup>382</sup> Schweizer's *Reagan's War* is also an expansion of his earlier work to emphasise Reagan's individual importance, taking a long view of his anticommunist campaign, starting with his presidency of the Screen Actors Guild. Both authors are fellows of the Hoover Institution, a conservative organisation closely aligned with Reagan, and their histories can be thus understood as part of a broader effort to rehabilitate Reagan's historical status.<sup>383</sup> Each makes the argument that the collapse of

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<sup>382</sup> Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (2004), p. 353; Schweizer, Peter, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy That Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994).

<sup>383</sup> This relationship will be considered historically in Chapter Five, but here it is worth mentioning the Hoover Institution's role in influencing the improved historical reputation of Reagan through the publication of large parts of its Reagan collection by Hoover fellows Martin Anderson, Annelise Anderson (also veterans of Reagan's administration and campaigns) and Kiron Skinner. Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Reagan: In His Own Hand* (2001); *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (2003); *Reagan's Path to Victory* (2004).

the Soviet Union was Reagan's objective when he came to the presidency, which was pursued with deliberate strategy in the White House, and with ultimate success.

Their arguments, based on extensive interviews with key players, as well as newly opened records at the Reagan Library and in the Soviet Union, have value in their revelations. Schweizer demonstrates the overlooked consistency of not only Reagan's attitude towards the Soviet Union, but his unconventional beliefs about how it should be confronted.<sup>384</sup> Kengor provides a more thorough insight into Reagan's presidency, which establishes the administration's covert efforts to undermine the Soviet Union's economy and the integrity of its regime, the coherence of the administration's actions in relation to its ambitious strategic plans, and to some extent the responses in the Soviet Union which demonstrate the success of the administration's efforts to undermine its enemy psychologically. Kengor reveals various other secret efforts to reduce the Soviet Union's cash flow, corrupt its intelligence network and aid its internal enemies, specifically Solidarity in Poland. Central to his argument are the series of National Security Decision Directives developed during Bill Clark's tenure, which set the course of administration Soviet policy. NSDD-75 is identified in particular as the culmination of the planning, and as "revolutionary, turning on its head the doctrine of containment", in its stated ambition to effect internal reform of the Soviet Union.<sup>385</sup> This is important, but Kengor's indication of its "prophetic" nature is not fully convincing. Jack Matlock, Reagan's ambassador to the Soviet Union, also believed NSDD-75 to be important in its redefinition of US policy, but found in it "no suggestion of a desire to destroy the Soviet Union." Indeed, he also condemned the conflation of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a state with the end of the Cold War as a distortion of history in favour of drama.<sup>386</sup>

An overreaching argument is not an indication of myth, but Kengor and Schweizer's scholarship, amounting at least to a valuable gathering and presentation of evidence, is overlooked or dismissed as political myth by historians such as Michael Schaller and Sean Wilentz. This is due to their celebratory tone, their political affiliation and the association of their argument with overtly mythic narratives in political discourse and commemoration of Reagan. It might also relate to

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<sup>384</sup> Schweizer (2002).

<sup>385</sup> Kengor, (2006), p. 166.

<sup>386</sup> Matlock (2004), pp. 52-4, 318.

the mythic forms of their narratives, which are not only selective, ignoring areas which might represent the failures of Reagan's Cold War strategy, in the Middle East and in Iran/Contra, but are also highly dramatic. Kengor places emphasis on a remembered encounter between two Reagan supporters where one, "closely involved with the 1980 campaign," reveals to the other Reagan's real intention "to bring down the Soviet Union," swearing him to secrecy.<sup>387</sup> Reminiscence and drama serve to support the emotive impact of the narrative, but not its evidential basis. Each, meanwhile, takes a biographical approach, emphasising Reagan's character and individual action, a single-minded method which necessarily neglects broader factors in a complex global event. They make an argument for Reagan's greatness, an issue which Stephen Hayward addressed in *Greatness: Reagan, Churchill and the Making of Extraordinary Leaders* (2005). This short book, which unlike *The Age of Reagan* contained no apology for its partisan viewpoint, expressed a defiance of the conventions of academic history and political science. Hayward criticised the academy for its "egalitarian temper" and "reductionist methodology", which overlooked and deprecated concepts of "greatness".<sup>388</sup> Hayward's treatment of the parallels between Reagan's and Churchill's lives, beliefs and actions is a mythic effort to place Reagan in an heroic, historical iconography, or pantheon, but it is also an argument about "the role of great individuals in shaping history" against the emphasis on "subrational or material causes".<sup>389</sup> Further, Hayward stresses that great men are and must be learned from by later generations. The sense that Reagan should be learned from, is palpable in the writings of Schweizer and Kengor. These conservative historians undermine the reputation of their work through their embrace of mythic form and function in their arguments, but they do so gladly because they are engaged in an argument about history itself, in which Reagan is a symbol.

This argument goes beyond partisan lines. John Diggins might be described as a conservative, but his work does not correspond with the polemical or political appropriation of Reagan seen in "conservative mythology". However, Diggins had, before writing *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom and the Making of History* (2007), argued about the nature of history. Diggins criticised the influence of deconstruction and political correctness on American history, believing that the past could yet be

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<sup>387</sup> Kengor (2006), pp. 68-9.

<sup>388</sup> Hayward, Stephen, *Greatness: Reagan, Churchill and the Making of Extraordinary Leaders* (New York: Crown Forum, 2005), p.17.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

appealed to for “truth and wisdom”. Events such as the founding of America, and figures such as Abraham Lincoln, who offered “a redeeming vision for our tawdry times,” could allow for American critical self-awareness without sacrificing a sense of defining principle.<sup>390</sup> Diggins' view correlates with that of his student, David Harlan, who argued:

Just as we each have to rig up our own line to the past, so we each have to populate that past with our own heroes, our own moral and intellectual exemplars – people who can help us say: ‘This is how we mean to live, but do not yet live.’<sup>391</sup>

Diggins offered an unconventional assessment of President Reagan, presenting him within an intellectual tradition of American classic liberalism, and an heir of Emerson. His central comparison, though, was between Reagan and Lincoln, which was not a claim of ideological connection, but symbolic historical analogy which emphasised Reagan's victory over Communism – an accomplishment on a par with Lincoln's over slavery. Both presidents “confronted the moral dimensions of their century's greatest and most momentous political struggles.”<sup>392</sup> Diggins also represented Reagan as a great president based on his victorious struggle against Communism, but where others did so in an effort to vindicate conservatism, Diggins had another purpose. He criticised those who saw Reagan as “an image more visual than real”, but also those who made a legend of him: “To rescue Reagan from many of today's so-called Reaganites may help rescue America from the pride of its present follies.”<sup>393</sup> Diggins turns to Reagan for a confirmation of the continuity of moral leadership and thought in American history, in an exercise which implicitly argues for the restoration of the moral imagination to the historical process. Again, Reagan is doubly mythic, a symbol from which we can draw lessons about the present and future, but also which represents a way of understanding the past. The historical argument about Reagan and his role in the end of the Cold War is one which has been complicated not only by

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<sup>390</sup> Diggins, John Patrick, *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000), pp. x, 14.

<sup>391</sup> Harlan, David, *The Degradation of American History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 126, xxxiii.

<sup>392</sup> Diggins, John Patrick, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom and the Making of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 419.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid*, pp. xvi-xxii.

political division and the myths it creates, but by the argument inherent to that division about the meaning of the American past and its uses.

### Iran Contra

The end of the Cold War was a complex of historical factors which could be symbolically defined through the actions of President Reagan. Iran/Contra was an event which stemmed only from the actions of the Reagan White House, but which engendered complex and varied symbolic representation about American government, history and culture. “Iran/Contra” itself is a symbolic term. Just as “Watergate” came to represent more than the burglary of the DNC headquarters, but the range of Richard Nixon’s use of presidential power to wage internal political warfare, the scandal, cover-up and investigation that ensued, the consequence of Nixon’s downfall and the associated revelations about secret governmental action, “Iran/Contra” represented a broad narrative. Indeed, Watergate was part of this narrative, affecting the interpretation of the scandal – “Irangate” – and the procedure and “ceremony” of the investigation.<sup>394</sup> Reagan himself made the comparison, writing soon after the story broke that the “media looks like it’s trying to create another Watergate”, one of several suggestions that the affair was a manufactured outrage designed to undermine or destroy his presidency.<sup>395</sup>

The premise of the argument for Reagan’s Cold War victory is the coherence of his strategic vision. The strands of Iran/Contra, Reagan’s policies towards the Middle East and Central America, challenge that idea. The Reagan Administration’s Nicaraguan policy was part of this vision in its implementation of the Reagan Doctrine, which promised aid to anti-communists action the world over. The administration cultivated and supported proxy “Contra” armies to hamper and presumably depose the revolutionary Sandinista regime, an ally of Cuba and the Soviet Union, and, in Reagan’s view, a proxy of their policy to export communism throughout the Americas. However, this activity also represented the historical context of US imperialism in the region, a paradigm which prompted international opposition and domestic dissent which, along with the fear of being dragged into a

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<sup>394</sup> Lynch, Michael and Bogen, David, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text and the Iran-Contra Affair* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 98-102.

<sup>395</sup> Reagan (November 12, 1986), Brinkley (ed.) (2007), p. 450.



new Vietnam, resulted in Congress blocking the administration's funding of the Contras with the Boland Amendments.<sup>396</sup> Reagan's policy towards Iran and its wider region represented an even greater disruption of a coherent Cold War vision. Generally, Reagan attempted to define the Middle East and its problems in terms of Soviet expansion. Revolutionary Iran and its religious ideology belied this definition, converging with the US in resisting the Soviets in Afghanistan, but also attacking the US and its ally, Israel, through its proxies in Lebanon. The memory of the Tehran hostage crisis, which ended on the first day of Reagan's presidency, determined Reagan's stance on Iran – irretractably hostile, but desperate to avoid a repeat of the crisis that haunted America, and Carter's presidency, while hostages continued to be taken, piece-meal, in Lebanon.

Iran/Contra speaks of failure. The Iranian initiative, which saw the transfer of arms to the Islamic Republic to secure the release of hostages held in Lebanon and to cultivate a moderate alternative to the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, failed on both counts.<sup>397</sup> The efforts of "The Enterprise", directed by NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, to secure funds and deliver material to the Nicaraguan Contras, represented Reagan's failure to convince Congress and the public to support his war in Central America (and, more generally, the failure to prosecute that war successfully). The Tower Commission, the investigative body ordered by Reagan to investigate the Iranian initiative after the revelation that profits from the arms-sales had been diverted to aid the Contras, concluded that the failure was in Reagan's management style and operation of his staff. The Congressional investigations concluded that it was a constitutional failure of Reagan's presidency (while the minority report argued that the affair represented the overreach of a politically motivated Congress to inhibit the executive). However, Reagan had some success in that the scandal did not destroy or irretrievably damage his presidency, nor define his historical legacy.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> Reagan was conscious of the USA's imperial image, as "the colossus to the north", which kept him from agreeing to send troops south to Nicaragua and Panama. Cannon (2000), p. 291.

<sup>397</sup> Morris tallied the results of the arms-for-hostages deals, calculating: "3 returned, 6 taken, 1 killed, Net Debit: -1" with additional costs of \$31 million and "RR's moral reputation". Morris (1999), p. 621.

<sup>398</sup> See generally, Brinkley, Joel (ed.), *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Random House, 1988); Busby, Roger, *Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair: The Politics of Presidential Recovery* (New York: Macmillan, 1999); Mayer, Jane and McManus, Doyle, *Landslide: The Unmaking of the President, 1984-88* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

Where the dominance of myth has made a historical problem of assessing Reagan's role in the end of the Cold War, the lack of a clarifying mythic meaning has made Iran/Contra a diminished historical subject. D'Souza offered a hopeful forecast that the Iran/Contra scandal "may become a historical footnote that future generations will not even remember."<sup>399</sup> To some extent, this prediction seems to have been borne out; Iran/Contra has generated far less literature since D'Souza's comment than in the years before it.<sup>400</sup> There are various reasons for this, including its diminishing importance as a contemporary event, its lack of consequential conclusion, and the absence of any new relevant material to support new histories. It is also, simply, confusing. It is a story riddled with obfuscation and uncertainty, whose central symbolic hook, the diversion of funds, fails to describe either the greater issues of the White House's actions or Reagan's role in them. This lack of clarity has contributed to its confused symbolic meaning, which also helps explain its decreasing historical significance. Despite its consistent interpretation in symbolic terms since its occurrence, it has failed to impart a clear mythic meaning that correlates with broad national myths, or indeed, increasingly dominant myths of Ronald Reagan.

On its occurrence Iran/Contra attracted considerable attention, which would continue as the scandal played out over the following five years. A common interpretation was that it represented not just the political failure of Reagan's leadership, but the disruption of his mythic command of America. Sidney Blumenthal considered it a failure of Reagan's fantastic ideology, whose revelation would destroy his mythic hold on America. On the release of the Tower Commission Report, the first official investigation into the affair, he asked, "What happens to a magical ruler whose powers fail him?"<sup>401</sup> Garry Wills was reportedly glad that he had finished *Reagan's America* before the scandal broke, because he felt Iran/Contra threatened to damage Reagan's illusory romance with America.<sup>402</sup> Lou Cannon later lyrically summed up the effect of the scandal: "Reagan was no longer the magical sun king, no longer the Prospero of American memories who towered above ordinary politicians

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<sup>399</sup> D'Souza (1997), p. 247.

<sup>400</sup> The most recent publication, by David Abshire, is partly a memoir and partly a discussion of crisis management and second-term presidencies, reflecting the more institutional attention that the affair has received. Abshire, David, *Saving the Reagan Presidency: Trust is the Coin of the Realm* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

<sup>401</sup> Blumenthal, *Our Long National Daydream* (1988), pp. 307-10.

<sup>402</sup> Vann Woodward, C., 'The President – And Us', *New York Times*, January 11, 1987.

and could always expect to be believed.”<sup>403</sup> However, the affair also affirmed the idea of a presidency consumed by fantasy. The affair brought to the fore Reagan’s “ability to disconnect from reality” and his “extraordinary power of self-delusion”, present in the equivocal confession of the speech that, along with a thorough staff shake-up, saved his administration and recovered his poll-ratings – “A few months ago I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.”<sup>404</sup> More than a reflection on Reagan, the layers of deception involved in the affair and its aftermath became symbolic of something greater, in concert with Reagan’s own representation of American fantasy, illusion and spectacle. On the “politics of illusion” that it involved, Anne Wroe called it “the perfect scandal for our morally ambiguous and mixed-up times.”<sup>405</sup> For Michael Lynch and David Bogen, the authors of *The Spectacle of History* (1996), the televised hearings represented a model of the postmodern social and political construction of history, in terms of their purpose to create an official narrative of the events, confronted with fabrication and cover-up, and self-conscious of their own historical significance. Meanwhile, the theatricality of Oliver North’s testimony at the Congressional hearings, combined with his own growing reputation for deception and fantasy, became part of Reagan’s cinematic symbolism. Richard Reeves suggested that “Ronald Reagan might have been cast as Ollie North, the patriot, the hero, all based on a true story – even if it were a true story of lies and deception in places high and low.”<sup>406</sup> Joan Didion described the common understanding between Reagan and North of “what makes a successful motion picture,” which was a “fight against the odds: undertaken, against the best advice of those who say it cannot be done, by someone America can root for.”<sup>407</sup> The Iran/Contra affair both challenged Reagan’s relationship with American mythology, by tainting his public persona crafted from common belief in American symbols, and

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<sup>403</sup> Cannon (2000), p. 657.

<sup>404</sup> Troy (2005), p. 247; Edel, *The Reagan Presidency* (1992), pp. 247-57.

<sup>405</sup> Wroe, Anne, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1991), pp. i-iii.

<sup>406</sup> Reeves, Richard, *President Reagan: The Triumph of the Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 406.

<sup>407</sup> Didion, Joan, *Political Fictions* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 118. Other mythic interpretations of North are offered by Wilentz, who describes North’s use of a mythic Vietnam narrative, and Ehrenreich who more ambitiously sees him as representing an ancient archetype of the “Warrior Caste”. Wilentz (2008), p. 236; Ehrenreich (1990), pp. 251-7. Also see Wroe on the scandal “as cinema” and the CBS drama, *Guts and Glory: The Rise and Fall of Oliver North* (1989).

affirmed it, through its defining themes of patriotism, fabrication, illusion and spectacle.

Iran/Contra also had broader implications about American history and government which spurred its moral interpretation. At its extreme this is represented in the incorporation of the affair into mythic conspiracy narratives which offer a secret history of American power in the Cold War and question the legitimacy of American government.<sup>408</sup> Moral urgency can also be found in the prominent scholar Theodore Draper's rationale for penning his authoritative history of the administration's actions, *A Very Thin Line* (1991), described as a "deed of citizen responsibility."<sup>409</sup> Through telling the story, Draper hoped the reader would glimpse "just how our government really works," warning that if "the story of the Iran-Contra affairs is not fully known and understood, a similar usurpation of power by a small, strategically placed group within the government may well recur before we are prepared to recognize what is happening."<sup>410</sup> Liberals responded to the televised hearings in the summer of 1987 with this kind of civic anxiety. Johnson saw in the televised hearings a "chance to do something rare in modern government: to educate the public about the political process...and to draw lessons that would be learned far beyond the Washington beltway." In this, the hearings – "a televised summer soap opera" – failed.<sup>411</sup> Karp's similar hopes of "a citizenry awakened, revived and riveted" were not entirely dashed:

Perhaps the deep, evident unhappiness with the Iran-Contra hearings, the deep evident bewilderment over so many lies and so little truth; perhaps our reported wish to be governed by those who 'play by the rules,' are signs of a deeper awakening, little sprouts of life in the barren ruins of civic life left by the dying demagoguery of Ronald Reagan.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> For a vivid representation of such a narrative, see Alan Moore's graphic interpretation which lays out the violent, secret history of the CIA's Cold War amidst grotesque, dream-like distortions of American imagery. Moore, Alan and Sienkiewicz, Bill, 'Shadowplay: The Secret Team', *Brought to Light: 30 Years of Drug Smuggling, Arms Deals and Covert Operations That Robbed America and Betrayed the Constitution* (Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books, 1989). Also see Knight, Peter, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 27-30.

<sup>409</sup> 'Theodore Draper, Freelance Historian, is Dead at 93', *The New York Times* (February 22, 2006).

<sup>410</sup> Draper, Theodore, *A Very Thin Line* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), pp. vi-iii.

<sup>411</sup> Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History* (1992), pp. 301-2.

<sup>412</sup> Karp, Walter, *Liberty Under Siege: American Politics 1976-88* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1988), p. 265.

These hopes were later put to the test by David Thelen in his study of public reaction to the hearings, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television* (1996). This was an active, populist work of political science, in which the author, a self-confessed “partisan”, questioned his own dual identity as a scholar and a citizen.<sup>413</sup> Challenging the impressions of media and political elites about a manipulable mass populace, responsive only to entertainment and in thrall to “Reagan’s magic” and “Olliemania”, Thelen demonstrated an engaged citizenry, who both watched the hearings and participated in them, amongst themselves and by making their opinions known to their representatives. Iran/Contra was but a case study here, and a symbol of how an increasingly mediated and self-referential political discourse failed to respond to the complex and varied, but interested demands of the public. The meaning of Iran/Contra, quite beyond its constitutional implications, is defined by dichotomies, where it represents both the failure and success of Reagan’s mythic leadership.

### Conclusion

These politicised narratives compete with each other, and not just in terms of whether or not Reagan’s presidency was a success or failure. Their interpretations of Reagan’s symbolic meaning in a broad national narrative also clash. The Cold War victory narrative is based on Reagan’s articulation of moral clarity and his confidence in American destiny – the ultimate triumph of democracy over communism, of good over evil. To place Iran/Contra at the centre of Reagan’s historical narrative is to emphasise the moral uncertainty of his foreign policy and his disregard of the American democratic system. The former sees Reagan represent the inherent strength of the American system, while the latter emphasises its fragility to the abuse of power, and its disconnection from the American people. The partisan divide over these and other issues, such as in the dual image of Reagan as a champion of American enterprise and as an exponent of American greed, reinforce Reagan’s presidency as a historical symbol for understanding American cultural identity, which is based on Reagan’s articulation of mythic American identity, whether considered sincere and truthful, or manipulative and hypocritical.

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<sup>413</sup> Thelen, David, *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized the Initiative During the Iran-Contra Debate* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), pp. 7-11.

Partisan representations of Reagan's myth complicate Reagan's historiography, where some historians choose to be complicit in their construction, such as Paul Kengor, but also where the weight of Reagan's symbolism either deters historians, as Gil Troy claimed, or where it defines the themes and purpose of their work, as with Hugh Heclo and Sean Wilentz. More broadly, these representations challenge and complicate any development of Reagan as a national icon. In the conservative claim of Reagan's victory is a rejection of liberal and moderate anticommunism and nationalism which failed to defeat the Soviet Union before Reagan's ascendancy. It is an exclusive claim which conflates conservative identity with national identity – distinctly expressed by Ann Coulter: “only authentic Americans loved Reagan”.<sup>414</sup> This demands that Reagan be a divisive symbol in a continuing political battle. Iran/Contra as a symbol suggests political division itself, and, moreover, a narrative of conspiracy, secret war and, in its most extreme, the oppression of the American people. Such themes are compelling and persistent in American culture but for obvious reasons could never form the basis for a popular and publicly articulated American identity. The next chapter considers, in part, how these narratives are represented, and how the problem of Reagan as both a partisan and national myth is approached, in the commemorative, political and historical functions of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

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<sup>414</sup> Coulter, ‘So Now They Think He Was Charming’, <http://reagan2020.us/tributes/coulter.asp>; (accessed July 13, 2007).

## **Chapter 5**

### **“A Sacred Bequest”: Myth and History at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Museum and Library**

#### **Introduction**

The national commemoration of President Reagan has often been understood as a partisan goal, but in its greatest realisation, at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, it conforms and appeals to non-partisan presidential tradition. The prevalence of the former idea was parodied in a 2003 meeting of the Springfield Republican Party, which began by reviewing “our efforts to rename everything after Ronald Reagan”. “All Millard Fillmore schools are now Ronald Reagans,” reported Dr. Hibbert to local members including Montgomery Burns, Krusty the Clown and Bob Dole, and “the Mississippi River is now the Mississippi Reagan.”<sup>415</sup> The portrayal of the commemoration of Ronald Reagan as an ambitious partisan venture, absurd and insidious in equal measure, stemmed from the efforts of the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, founded by Republican activist Grover Norquist in 1997, with the aim of “naming significant public landmarks after President Reagan in the 50 states and over 3,000 counties of the United States”.<sup>416</sup> The project has had some success in this mission, most visibly in the renaming of Washington, D.C.’s National Airport, while it has persistently, if so far vainly, campaigned to see Reagan commemorated further with a presidential memorial on the Mall, and his face on US currency and on Mount Rushmore. This is most certainly a partisan movement, with its roots in the Republican Party and its aims tied to that organisation’s future as a conservative institution. As such, it has received singular attention where the commemoration of Reagan has been studied. Will Bunch described the Legacy Project as a “guerrilla operation” responsible for an unprecedented assault on American memory – “this nation has arguably never seen the kind of bold, crudely calculated, and ideologically driven legend-manufacturing that has taken place with

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<sup>415</sup> Swartzwelder, John (writer) and Kramer, Lance (director), ‘Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington’, *The Simpsons* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Television, 2003).

<sup>416</sup> Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, [http://www.reaganlegacy.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=2](http://www.reaganlegacy.org/main/page.php?page_id=2) (accessed October 21, 2008).

Ronald Reagan.”<sup>417</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulson, meanwhile, has considered the project in terms of its failures and limitations, identifying its dilemma that “the more successful they are in promoting Reagan as a cultural icon, the less he will be able to serve as a political model.”<sup>418</sup> As Reagan, or any president, gains prominence in the broad landscape of American memory, he ceases to have specific political meaning. Both descriptions suggest an inorganic nature to Reagan’s commemoration, that it is either disturbingly exceptional in the way it seeks to control American understanding of the past, or that its political efforts are unmatched to the priorities of national memory. However, neither description suits the Reagan Library at Simi Valley, California. There, both the partisan promotion and nationalisation of Reagan’s memory occur within a commemorative tradition that combines public and private functions.

The Reagan Library is the world’s most important example of Reagan’s commemoration because it represents the integration of his and his supporters’ intentions with the institutions of national government. It carries Reagan’s expressive endorsement in his choice of the library as his burial ground, and in the institution’s operation by the Reagan Foundation, an organisation of Reagan’s key supporters set up in 1985 to build the library. Meanwhile, the existence and maintenance of its archive, the Library’s *raison d’être*, depends on the legislated support of the federal government in the form of the National Archives and Records Administration. It is a site of historical preservation, personal, partisan and national commemoration, and of political activism. The Reagan Library and its multi-faceted nature conform to the traditions of the presidential library system, even as the library promotes Reagan’s individual significance in its historical, commemorative and political functions. This chapter examines these functions and how the tension between them and the interests they serve are reconciled in their common governance by American national myth, and their varied efforts to locate Reagan within it. This institutional study, while belonging to this thesis’s examination of Reagan’s relationship to American mythology, also contributes to the emergent scholarship of presidential libraries, which, though it has raised important issues, has neither focused in detail on the Reagan Library, nor fully addressed the mythic implications of the institutions’ varied functions.

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<sup>417</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth* (2009), pp. 151, 18.

<sup>418</sup> Bjerre-Poulson, Niel, ‘The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan’, Hudson and Davies (eds.), (2008), p. 222.



The chapter's first part deals with the history of the Reagan Library, from conception to dedication. This story, covering the controversial attempt to site the library at Stanford University, and the eventual choice of its Simi Valley location, reveals the tensions in the perceived functions of presidential libraries. It also suggests the varied influences on the direction of the library beyond the intentions of the White House. As well as the demands and expectations of the site and its hosts, the library was subject to the imperatives of tradition and law. The presidential library system had seen haphazard development from its beginnings in Franklin Roosevelt's library, opened in 1941, to its legal establishment by the Presidential Libraries Act of 1955, which received Truman's papers, and to the Presidential Records Act of 1978, which, following the seizure of Nixon's records, decided the public ownership of presidential papers. The system allowed the dual management of the libraries, with its archives owned and operated by the federal government, and the rest of the institution run by the president's private foundation, which also built the institution. This meant the development of the libraries' multi-functioned nature. Though some precedents, such as the museum, were firmly established, there was no definite model for the Reagan Library to follow.<sup>419</sup> The second part of the chapter considers the functions that emerged in Simi Valley, archival, commemorative and political. The archives are considered in terms of their conceptual relationship to American history, the tradition this belonged to, and its emergence in the political fight over Reagan's papers, and what they represented, during the George W. Bush administration. The commemorative function of the library, best represented in the museum, is more overtly mythic. This is the aspect of presidential libraries that has received most scholarly attention. The art historian Benjamin Hufbauer considered the libraries to be essentially part of a tradition of presidential commemoration. Though they represent a shift away from the austere, monumental examples of the Lincoln Memorial or Mount Rushmore, he argued, they are still devoted to promoting and shaping public memory of their presidents, but through new technologies and methods.<sup>420</sup> Though Hufbauer's

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<sup>419</sup> The history of the library system is well represented in the professional and historical contributions to *The Public Historian*, 28(3) (Summer, 2006), which is devoted to the subject. The essays collectively suggest the uncertainty and unpredictability of the libraries' development.

<sup>420</sup> Hufbauer, Benjamin, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Also see, for the attention to the monumental aspects of the libraries, Worth, Robert F., 'Presidential Libraries: Mines or Shrines?', *The New York Times* (April 24, 2002); Span, Paula, 'Monumental Ambitions', *The Washington Post Magazine* (February 17, 2002).

analysis pays little attention to the Reagan museum, focusing instead on Roosevelt, Truman and Johnson, his themes of power, heroism and history can certainly be found in the Simi Valley, and in particular, in the exhibition of Air Force One. The focus on visual and material commemorative processes has neglected the active commemoration of the political function. The vital image of Reagan in the Republican Party since his presidency has seen his library become a platform and agent in partisan politics. This political role developed from one of policy research to one of memory, represented by the library's hosting of the GOP primary debates for the 2008 presidential election. Here, I consider these functions together, in terms of how they locate Reagan within American national memory, and how this converges with or diverges from his partisan identity.

### Creation

The Reagan Library was first conceived in terms of its scholarly potential, but in a context that magnified its political identity and which would raise serious scrutiny of its functions. The question of a presidential library was first brought to the White House on February 24, 1981, barely a month after Reagan's first inauguration, by Glenn Campbell, the Director of the Hoover Institution for War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University, who invited the president to house his library on Stanford campus. Campbell, who had held this position since 1960, was an old associate of the new president. Appointed by Reagan to the University of California's Board of Regents in 1968, Campbell had furthered their relationship by making the former governor an honorary Hoover Fellow in 1975 and receiving his gubernatorial papers into the archive. This affiliation was enhanced by the institution's conservative identity, suggested in Herbert Hoover's chartered purpose for the archive "to protect the American way of life from evil ideologies and to reaffirm the validity of the American system."<sup>421</sup> Campbell pursued this purpose beyond the abstract means of research and publication with the aim of influencing the contemporary political process. This effort that saw it become a resource for policy advice in Reagan's presidential runs of 1976 and 1980, and for personnel in the formation of his

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<sup>421</sup> Abelson, Donald E., *A Capitol Idea: Think Tanks and US Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2006), p.68.

administration. Mikhail Gorbachev would later insist that the Soviet Union had regarded the weighty Hoover publication, *The United States in the 1980s* (1979), as the blueprint for the policies of the Reagan administration, and that it had later proved to be so.<sup>422</sup> In January, 1982, Reagan addressed a reception honouring the Institution in Washington, D.C. “Under the leadership of your director...and with your hard work and diligence,” he told his audience, “you built the knowledge base that made the changes now taking place in Washington possible.”<sup>423</sup>

Campbell’s invitation worked to cement this relationship, and further raise the profile of his organisation. He was sincere in his flattery and explicit in his hopes:

It would dramatically augment and expand the Hoover Institution complex. It would bring a priceless resource of documentary material and Presidential records to an Institution and a University that has been justifiably proud of its association with you as its first and most distinguished Honorary Fellow.<sup>424</sup>

The Hoover director first imagined the library as an extension of his own institution, close in its function and output, and built in the shadow of the Hoover Tower. This plan, though, involved more than the relationship between Hoover and Reagan, but also the relationship between Hoover and Stanford University. Hoover’s autonomy had always ensured it an awkward reception with the rest of Stanford, but its increasing size, wealth and political activity had made its position on campus more controversial. Its attainment in 1980 of real political influence in a conservative presidential administration prompted a backlash from considerable sections of Stanford’s faculty and student body. Professor of Political Science John Manley helped launch a campaign in 1982 to have Hoover investigated over issues of partisan activity, funding and its position within Stanford, with the eye of having it brought under the control of the university administration. As Manley argued in 1983:

The central question should be: Is an institution which finances a large public relations effort to propagandize for a particular ideology, which actively promotes the advancement of particular political candidates, and

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<sup>422</sup> Ableson (2006), pp. 34-35.

<sup>423</sup> Simon, Mark, “The Reagan – Hoover Syndrome,” *The Peninsula Times Tribune* (February 12, 1984), Folder 3, Box 9, Robert W. Byers Papers, SC664 Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Archives.

<sup>424</sup> Campbell, Glenn, letter to Ronald Reagan (February 24, 1981), Folder: Reagan Library 2, Box 1, Proposed Ronald Reagan Library at Stanford: Papers, 1983, SC419, DSC, SUA.

which can lay valid claim to the title ‘leading conservative think tank in the country,’ compatible with a University whose professed values are the non-partisan, non-political, objective search for the truth?<sup>425</sup>

Defenders of Hoover responded with similar accusations of political bias and claims of academic objectivity. The Visiting Hoover Scholar Arnold Beichman expressed this view most thoroughly in the pages of the *National Review*, demonstrating the ideological mix of his colleagues and highlighting the leftist political activity of Stanford Faculty since the Vietnam War.<sup>426</sup> This evoked an earlier era, when Governor Reagan had gained the enmity of California’s campus radicals, and Glenn Campbell had himself confronted anti-war protestors in front of Hoover Tower.<sup>427</sup> This was a conflict of ideology and partisanship, the local politics of university structure and of personal grievances. Disingenuousness and distrust existed on both sides of a political battle about academia. The conflict was also the context through which the first ideas for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library were formed.

An official response from the White House was slow in coming, but in January 1983, Campbell received a letter from the president affirming his interest in the idea, and suggesting that planning for the library get underway.<sup>428</sup> The White House envisaged at this stage a library in three parts: the presidential archive, a museum, and a Centre for Public Affairs, a policy research institute which would run in affiliation with the Hoover Institution. Campbell had secured the agreement of the president of Stanford University, Donald Kennedy, in issuing his invitation. Kennedy, a judicious figure who attracted the resentment of both Campbell and Hoover’s critics, now had to guide the plan through Stanford’s political system. Both Kennedy and Campbell anticipated criticism. The Hoover Institution archivist, Charles Palm, prepared a preliminary defence of the library’s academic value. After emphasising the scope and longevity of the collection’s scholarly importance, he downplayed the role of the museum in the proposed complex: “Some critics have felt that the museums

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<sup>425</sup> Stanford Community Against REagan University (SCAReU?), “Welcome to Ronald Reagan University”, leaflet, Folder 6, Box 9, SC 664, DSC, SUA.

<sup>426</sup> Beichman cited Hoover Fellows such as Sidney Hook and Seymour Martin Lipset as examples of non-conservative and supportive members of a group with almost even numbers of Democrats and Republicans. Beichman, Arnold, ‘Will the Hoover Depression Hit Stanford?’, *National Review*, (February 10, 1984), [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1282/is\\_v36/ai\\_3132855/pg\\_1?tag=artBody;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1282/is_v36/ai_3132855/pg_1?tag=artBody;coll) (accessed November 4, 2008).

<sup>427</sup> Abelson (2006) pp. 69-70.

<sup>428</sup> Reagan, letter to Glenn Campbell (January 13, 1983), Folder: Reagan Library 2, Box 1, SC419, DSC, SUA.

represent little more than mausoleums for enshrining presidents... However there is no inherent reason why the exhibits, in moderation, cannot be as educational as exhibits produced elsewhere on campus.”<sup>429</sup> Glenn Campbell had also sought to reassure Kennedy on this point, stating that “President Reagan is a secure gentleman of great stature and, thus, does not wish to see a museum glorifying his career as President on the scope and magnitude of some of the existing presidential museums.” The museum would represent the presidency, not the life and achievements of Ronald Reagan. At the same time, Campbell addressed doubts over the third branch of the complex, the Center for Public Affairs. He asserted that an offer which excluded one or two parts of the “inseparable whole” would be “unacceptable” to the President.<sup>430</sup>

Days after this letter, on July 21, an appointed Board of Overseers voted to proceed with the project “without further delay”. Kennedy urged that “there is something worse than a little delay, and that is a kind of incendiary situation that results when careful work is not done to structure a sound plan, and in fact, support for it first.”<sup>431</sup> With this in mind he set up an advisory committee to structure such a plan, and consult with faculty over the idea. One reason for caution was the recent example of President Nixon’s attempt to find a home for his own library at Duke University. Manipulative pressure from Nixon’s staff had caused Duke’s leadership to accept the proposal hurriedly and unilaterally, prompting such a backlash from the faculty that not only was the acceptance of the library embarrassingly revoked, but the chairman of the board of trustees was forced out, and the president of the university only narrowly escaped the same fate. On July 25, Kennedy wrote to his counterpart at Duke asking for advice. The professor who had chaired Duke’s Academic Council at the time sent a full account of the affair to the advisory committee, with the warning that it would “give you an idea of the noise that can be generated when Presidential Libraries are considered by an articulate faculty.”<sup>432</sup> Kennedy did not face quite the same circumstances, but the committee was careful to canvass faculty opinion on the library proposal, and respond to it in its report. Many responses were broadly

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<sup>429</sup> Palm, Charles, ‘Academic Considerations’ (May 16, 1983), *Site Planning Workbook: Ronald Reagan Library at Stanford University*, Folder: RRL Library File 1, Box 1, Stanford University Planning Office: Ronald Reagan Library, SC 423, DSC, SUA.

<sup>430</sup> Campbell, Glenn, letter to Donald Kennedy (July 19, 1983), Folder: Reagan Library 2, Box 1, SC 419, DSC, SUA.

<sup>431</sup> Transcript of Board of Overseers Meeting (July 21, 1983), Folder 3, Box 9, SC 664, DSC, SUA.

<sup>432</sup> Weintraub, Roy, letter to Jim Rosse (August 26, 1983), Folder: Reagan Library 1, Box 1, SC 419, DSC, SUA.

supportive of bringing the Reagan papers to Stanford, which were recognised as having both considerable historical significance and relevance to a wide range of disciplines. The dissenting responses, however, were openly partisan and interpreted the library as a monument to Reagan and his politics. As one faculty member put it, the “idea of those thousands of foolish tourists coming to gawk at it, turning Stanford into a Disneyland annex, is most distasteful.”<sup>433</sup>

The committee report was attentive to the political climate and implications of the library, seeing that a decision either to accept or decline it would be viewed as a political act, and even suggesting that the decision be delayed until after the following year’s presidential election.<sup>434</sup> This advice was not followed by the University, but other suggestions in the report were, specifically those concerning the political and memorial aspects of the proposed Reagan Library Complex. Following a Faculty Senate resolution, the Stanford Board of Trustees gave conditional approval to the library on December 13, 1983. The conditions reflected the desire for an academic resource and no more. The museum was to be small, with exhibits drawing only on the archive material rather than personal memorabilia, while the Reagan Center for Public Affairs, if it were to be situated on campus, would have to be integrated into Stanford’s normal academic and administrative structure. The limitations on the museum were accepted by the White House without argument, but the policy centre was more vigorously defended. Meese wrote to Kennedy in March 1984, asserting:

I cannot stress too strongly that President Reagan views this center not as a vehicle to defend or praise his own administration, but rather as an important resource for inquiry into the structure and processes of the American government system.<sup>435</sup>

Meese’s assurance did not resolve the struggle over the proposed centre’s administration and the conditions were soon accepted, with the understanding that the Reagan Center for Public Affairs would operate independently but off-campus, located somewhere in the Bay area.

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<sup>433</sup> Leverton, Denise, letter to Rosse Committee (September 20, 1983), Folder 1, Box 4, John F. Manley Papers, SC428, DSC, SUA.

<sup>434</sup> ‘Report on the President’s Advisory Group on the Ronald Reagan Library, Museum and Center for Public Affairs’, RRL Library File 1, Box 1, SC423, DSC, SUA.

<sup>435</sup> Meese, Ed, letter to Donald Kennedy (March 5, 1984), Folder 3, Box 9, SC664, DSC, SUA.

Dissent met the trustees' decision, and escalated through 1984. Students organised a protest group, SCAReU? (Stanford Community Against Reagan University), warning of the prospect of a "Super Hoover" controlled by Campbell, and registered their disapproval through rallies and letter-writing.<sup>436</sup> John Manley and his confederate, Professor Ronald Rebholz, a Shakespeare scholar, continued to press their case in the Senate. "The problem of the proposed Ronald Reagan Library," argued Manley, "is the problem of the Hoover institution, and the problem of the Hoover institution is that...it is...unmistakably a political organisation."<sup>437</sup> While his colleagues remained largely unconvinced, he was able to keep the issue alive in the local media, particularly through his connection with Mary Madison of the *Peninsula Times Tribune*.<sup>438</sup> Such protest maintained a steady murmur as plans progressed over the next two years, but it was Glenn Campbell who ultimately proved more damaging to the project. In the 1986 Hoover Institution annual report, Campbell wrote that:

it is not only the Hoover Institution that can boast of a 'Reagan connection,' but the entire university...Stanford trustees [chose] to honor President Reagan by locating his library on campus. The location of the library at Stanford and the cordial feelings that location shows toward President Reagan are evidence that the Stanford-Hoover crisis truly was 'the crisis that should never have been.'<sup>439</sup>

This did not simply antagonise the usual suspects, but provoked a unanimous resolution from the Faculty Senate condemning the remarks for implying the university's political support for Reagan. Campbell's position was now also complicated by his new role as Chair of the Reagan Foundation, set up to oversee the project on behalf of the White House, and which included on its board administration figures such as Ed Meese, Michael Deaver, Bill Clark and Martin Anderson.

On April 3, 1987, the Faculty Senate voted to postpone making a final decision on approving the design. This reflected local opposition, and evidence of their growing concern about the impact the library might have on Stanford, both substantially and symbolically. This was not all political, at least not in the partisan or

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<sup>436</sup> Stanford Community Against Reagan University (SCAReU?), "Welcome to Ronald Reagan University", leaflet, Folder 6, Box 9, SC 664, DSC, SUA.

<sup>437</sup> Manley, John, 'Materials for Senate Debate', Folder 5, Box 1, SC 428, DSC, SUA.

<sup>438</sup> This relationship, and the irritation it caused Campbell, is described by Manley in notes he made at the time. Notes, (14 December, 1983 to 19 January, 1984) Folders 1-2, Box 1, SC 428, DSC, SUA.

<sup>439</sup> Madison, Mary, 'Stanford Debate', *The Peninsula Times Tribune* (February 20, 1987), RRL Library File 3, Box 1, SC 423, DSC, SUA.

national sense, but included vocal dissatisfaction from residents over the library's location, and unhappiness with its design.<sup>440</sup> Faculty unease was heightened by the national coverage the story was receiving, whether it was critical of Stanford for accepting the library or critical of them for opposing it on partisan grounds. This national attention may have also influenced the decision of the Reagan Foundation Board of Trustees on April 23, to withdraw their proposal to Stanford, and find an alternative site for the library. The official reason for the turnaround was the separation of the library from the Centre for Public Affairs – something that had been known and agreed upon for three years. It seems highly likely then, that the reportedly “frustrated” trustees felt that weathering the apparently inexhaustible protest, objection and mockery on Stanford campus was too high a price to pay for a project smaller than was initially envisioned. The perception that the library had been defeated by political agitation was widely held, not least amongst its opponents. An elated Dr. Rebholz announced, “It’s one of the few political victories I’ve had in my life.”<sup>441</sup> The story demonstrates some of the varied intentions and perceptions regarding the use and meaning of presidential libraries. The decision to affiliate the library with a university, in the tradition of Kennedy, Johnson, Ford and Carter, represents the intention to define it as a scholarly institution and resource. At Stanford, this definition was pursued at the cost of other functions, as seen in the willingness to limit the size and scope of the museum – deliberately deemphasising its potential as a memorial or monument to Reagan. Equally, the agreement to keep any Reagan legacy think-tank geographically and administratively separate from the Stanford facility was a sacrifice of the political function for the scholarly, based upon the perceived conflict between ideological activism and academic objectivity.

Reagan had no great involvement during this process, leaving the detail to Meese or Campbell. An entry in his diary from March 1983 (over a month before the delaying action of the Stanford Senate) briefly mentions a conversation with Meese, who was on his way to meet with the Foundation Trustees: “They are going to discuss

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<sup>440</sup> Hugh Stubbins, the architect commissioned by the Reagan Foundation, produced a design praised by critics as “a welcome contrast to the overscaled presidential libraries that have been built in recent years”, but which was considered too large and imposing by many at Stanford. Stubbins’ comment that his building would compare well with the “ugly” architecture of Stanford did not help. ‘Stubbins Associates Design’, *Architectural Record* (Vol. 3, October 1986), RRL Library File 3, Box 1, SC 423, DSC, SUA.

<sup>441</sup> Barasan, Mark Z., ‘Reagan Library Won’t be Built at Stanford’, *San Francisco Chronicle* (April 24, 1987), RRL Library File 3, Box 1, SC 423, DSC, SUA.



whether to take [the library] away from Stanford since there are demonstrations protesting it being there. I'm in favour of USC."<sup>442</sup> Reagan, it seems, was personally uncommitted to Stanford, but supportive of an academic site for his library. The next step was to find a less politically self-conscious campus in Southern California. In June, however, the Reagan Foundation was presented with a new option when Donald Swartz, a Ventura County businessman, offered to donate one hundred acres of a property he held just outside of Simi Valley. The donation was apparently made "to recognize [Reagan's] leadership and spirit of volunteerism"; though it is likely Swartz was aware of how a presidential library might enhance the rest of his property.<sup>443</sup> After a visit from the First Lady, the offer was accepted and construction began in November, 1988.

The specific environment of the Simi Valley site would affect the interpretation of the library, and its self-image. It was politically suitable, a city of wealthy white-collar commuters who voted Republican consistently. Part of California's 24<sup>th</sup> District, Simi Valley was and is represented in Washington by the conservative Republican Elton Gallegly, who in November 2008 won his twelfth term in Congress. Speaking of his district in 1991, the same year that the library opened and that the city failed to convict the police officers in the Rodney King case, Gallegly told the *Los Angeles Times*: "It's Reagan Country, my friend. There's no other way to describe it."<sup>444</sup> Simi Valley was also aesthetically and thematically apt. Its surrounding western landscape and history, represented by an old film set in the hills where several Westerns had been shot during Hollywood's heyday, appealed to Reagan. Some environmental objection was raised, relating to the library's development of green belt land, while some objection was political. The former mayor of nearby Moorpark, John Galloway, who led local efforts to curb the project, argued: "In future years, public money should not be spent maintaining a sanitized revision of history. Will the people be permitted to view the paper shredder...or will our attention be distracted to viewing a piece of the Berlin Wall?"<sup>445</sup> This objection,

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<sup>442</sup> Reagan, 'Wednesday, March 11, 1983', Brinkley (ed.), p. 482.

<sup>443</sup> MacNamara, Mark, 'Build One for the Gipper', *Los Angeles* (September, 1989), 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>444</sup> Weiss, Kenneth R., "'Reagan Country' Gets Put on the Map', *Los Angeles Times (Metro Edition)* (October 27, 1991), 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>445</sup> Jajko, Keith M., '...But some believe it shouldn't be here', *The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Special Supplement, The Simi Valley Enterprise* (November 3, 1991), p.32A, 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

and others warning of a “Disneyland West” where “schoolchildren will be bused...and the myth of Reagan will be perpetuated”, focused on the function of the library as a museum and tourist attraction.<sup>446</sup> This was also the aspect that attracted most of Simi Valley to the project, which was anticipated to bring unique educational benefits for local schools, and generate business in the community.<sup>447</sup> The Simi Valley site shifted attention from the scholarly to the popular use of the library.

The dedication of his library, held on November 4, 1991, was not the first such ceremony Reagan had attended. In the first year of his presidency, he had travelled to Grand Rapids, Michigan for the opening of the Ford Presidential Library. A considerable diplomatic retinue accompanied him because the event, with the urging of fellow guests President José Lopez-Portillo of Mexico and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau of Canada and the blessing of President Ford, had become an opportunity for a mini tri-lateral summit.<sup>448</sup> Five years later, in October, 1986, Reagan went to Atlanta for the dedication of the Carter Presidential Library. This trip was made with some reluctance by Reagan’s staff, unhappy with Carter’s criticism of the administration.<sup>449</sup> In each case, Reagan’s presence was defined by political considerations: Ford’s was an opportunity for diplomatic leg-work and the restatement of his economic programme, while Carter’s was a necessary duty of magnanimity and bipartisanship in the approach to the midterm elections.<sup>450</sup> In Reagan’s remarks at both there was a common theme of shared experience and presidential unity, which expressed the broader message of national unity and continuity. It was this symbolic tone which dominated Reagan’s own dedication, a typically well-staged affair, characterised by celebrity and ceremony, where issues of political expediency related only to President George H. W. Bush, still a year away from potential re-election.

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<sup>446</sup> MacNamara, ‘Build One for the Gipper’; Baird, Mary, ‘Letters to the News Chronicle’, *Thousand Oaks News Chronicle* (August 20, 1991), ‘Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Pre-Dedication’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>447</sup> Whitmore, Steve, ‘A Boost to Local Tourism’, *The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Special Supplement, The Simi Valley Enterprise* (November 3, 1991), p. 35A. ‘Presidential Library Dedication 1’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>448</sup> Studder, Steven M., Memo to Canzeri Joseph, ‘Ford Museum Dedication, Grand Rapids, Michigan, September 17-18, 1981’ (September 4, 1981), Folder: ‘Ford Library’, Box 1, Canzeri, Joseph Files, RRPL.

<sup>449</sup> Pat Buchanan detailed several of these criticisms in advance of the ceremony. Buchanan, Pat, memo to the President, (September 17, 1986), ID# 406398, TR170, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

<sup>450</sup> Frederick Ryan suggested that it “would be one of those situations where Ronald Reagan’s magnanimous character would rise above the petty activities of one of his critics,” and would “be another reminder of President Reagan’s graciousness as a political foe.” Ryan, Frederick, memo to Regan, Don, ‘Dedication of Carter Presidential Library’ (July 11, 1986), ID# 404476, TR170, WHORM: Subject File, RRPL.

The Reagan Foundation provided a budget of at least \$500,000 and drew on the skills and connections of board members Michael Deaver and MCA chairman Lew Wasserman to plan the elaborate event.<sup>451</sup> Charlton Heston gave the opening speech, introducing the select audience to the event's main guests – Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush, at that point the largest ever presidential gathering in American history. "Each of these men inherited more than just a constitutional legacy," remarked Heston, "each will be forever wrapped in legend and myth," and each was also "the lineal descendent of Washington and Adams, Jefferson and Jackson, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt. Through them, they are linked to the very birth year of our Republic."<sup>452</sup> The event was self-conscious of its own historicity, the presidents collectively representing the nation's recent past, and symbolising the tradition and continuity of its ancient past. Calling the scene "the nation's profile," Hugh Sidey communicated this heady aura for *Time* magazine: "There was a kind of sad joy on that parched hilltop 2,700 miles west of the real Oval Office. It was a perch of aging eagles. History made, history remembered, history fading."<sup>453</sup> Earlier, the group had toured the building, at one point entering together the museum's Oval Office replica, a moment of poignancy as related by Fred Ryan: "Just seeing the expressions on their faces..." he marvelled, "they walked in and you could tell they each had this look on their faces, remembering something."<sup>454</sup> As spontaneous and mysterious as those memories might have been, there was a clear deliberacy to this historic occasion. When it seemed that Jimmy Carter might be held up in Zambia where he was overseeing elections, Lod Cook, then the Reagan Foundation Director and CEO of Arco, smartly provided him with a corporate jet to carry him to Simi Valley in time.

The crux of the ceremony saw Reagan hand the key of the library to the National Archivist, symbolically passing the library into the ownership of the American people. This gesture was prescribed by the law of the Presidential Records Act, but it matched a theme that Reagan had commonly expressed, significantly at the

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<sup>451</sup> Weiss, Kenneth R., 'Reagan Library to Take Center Stage on a Hill Near Simi Valley', *Los Angeles Times* (3 November, 1991), 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>452</sup> 'Dedication of Reagan Library' (November 4, 1991), C-Span recording, Miscellaneous Audiovisual Collection, RRPL.

<sup>453</sup> Sidey, Hugh, 'A Gathering of Eagles', *Time* (November 15, 1991), p.25, 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>454</sup> Beckland, Laurie, and Feldman, Paul, 'Gathering of 5 Presidents is First in History', *Los Angeles Times* (5 November, 1991), 'Presidential Library Dedication 1', Press Clippings, RRPL.

groundbreaking ceremony for the library exactly three years earlier: “I must say that it is not my Presidency, any more than the White House has belonged to me these 8 years. The Presidency of the United States is a trust – a public trust from the great people of this land.” He went on to make another promise of the library:

What we know best is this: We owe all we have to our forebears who built our land and our government and gave it to us as a sacred bequest. And today, in this stunning setting, we begin to pay our debt to them and to our own posterity by breaking ground for this library that will bear my name.<sup>455</sup>

Here the library was pledged to American history, or rather a mythic idea of the past to which Reagan as president and the people as nation were beholden. The library would serve to honour the nation by adding to its story. This gift to America was complicated, or perhaps enriched, by the Reagans’ request in 1990 to be buried on the site, following the precedent set by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. In one sense this act was the ultimate donation to his country, offering his body to American soil and the ownership of the American people. In another, it represents the ultimate mark of ownership, Reagan’s full personalisation of his library. Either way, it was a recognition and assurance of a mythic or spiritual role to the library, making it, in part, literally a mausoleum and a shrine.

This would not have been possible in the Stanford foothills. The story of the Reagan Library’s conception and creation demonstrates that its function beyond a repository of his records was dependent on more than the wishes of Reagan and his surrogates. The library’s nature would be defined by its location and environment and, moreover, by the intentions and priorities of its hosts. The failure to site the library at Stanford was a result of clashing priorities and perceptions of its function. Broadly speaking, Stanford wanted a prestigious academic resource, Hoover wanted an influential policy centre, and while the White House wanted both of these things, it may also have resented limitations on the commemorative opportunities of the library. This is reflected in the enthusiasm with which the Reagans embraced and symbolically personalised the Simi Valley site. The library at Simi Valley would eventually pursue the commemorative function at the cost of its previous scholarly

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<sup>455</sup> Reagan, Ronald, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Center for Public Affairs in Simi Valley, California, November 21, 1988’, *PPPR, RRPL*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/061287d.htm> (accessed September 27, 2008).

ambitions. However, this was also a response to the needs and priorities of its location, isolated from an academic environment, while suited and encouraged to act as a tourist attraction. Reagan's legacy, and his myth, was subject to external influences.

### Operation

The Reagan Library was dedicated as a complex of three parts: the archive, the museum and the Center for Public Affairs. While the former was to be managed by NARA, and the latter two by the Reagan Foundation, each addressed the historical meaning of Reagan's presidency and how it belonged to the broader narratives of American history. The accumulated papers of Reagan's presidency represent the primary purpose and the rationale of the library. The nature and meaning of this archival function should thus be considered first. The contents of the archive relate specifically, of course, to President Reagan and his administration and thus hold central importance in determining his history. However, the meaning of this purpose extends further, relating to the myth of Reagan, and to national myth. Some of the archive's users have responded to the archive as a symbolic space, and its contents as symbolic objects. Peggy Noonan recalled asking for the originals of some short stories Reagan wrote as a young man:

You sit in the reading room of the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, where they used to make westerns in the brown scrubby hills...As you sit, another scholar is making dry writing sounds. It's so quiet you can hear the pencil on the paper. They give you the young Reagan papers. You hold them in your hand, delicate old papers once white but now beige with age.

It is here in this hallowed space, through this sensational experience, "where you find young Ronald Reagan."<sup>456</sup> Paul Kengor related a similar story:

As I huddled in a remote research room perched high upon a hillside overlooking a balmy, picturesque landscape in Simi Valley, California, an archivist brought over a cart of materials from the Presidential

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<sup>456</sup> Noonan, *When Character Was King* (2001), p.32.

Handwriting File...In Box 9, Folder 150, I met the real Evil Empire speech – and the real Reagan.<sup>457</sup>

The experience of researching Reagan is related in terms of place, both the landscape of the library and the atmosphere of the reading room, and of objects, the material of Reagan's papers. Reagan is found in each. The significance of the surroundings, the temple-like quality of the room – isolated, high and quiet – and the authenticity of the documents, bearing Reagan's own mark, all guide the researcher to finding the true Reagan. Douglas Brinkley, in his introduction to the first edited volume of Reagan's diaries, described a similar experience of Reagan's presence on his first encounter with the books, writing "I was astounded...For a moment, I just looked at them." Later, reading them, "I could almost hear his voice."<sup>458</sup> The diaries are the most important publication to emerge from the Reagan Library, and along with the collections of his letters and radio broadcasts, have contributed to a revised historical opinion of Reagan, his inner-life, his involvement and his ability. Here is suggested an alternative importance to them, as mythic objects which, in their historicity and authenticity, assert in themselves the significance of Reagan. Their presence as artefacts in the museum further attests to this.

The meaning of the collection extends beyond its connection to and evocation of Reagan. It is also relevant to the mythic ideal articulated by FDR when he dedicated his library:

It seems to me that the dedication of a library is in itself an act of faith. To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a Nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgement in creating their own future.<sup>459</sup>

Historical preservation was an act of national preservation. The Reagan Library was the first presidential archive to which the 1978 Presidential Records Act applied. This

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<sup>457</sup> Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (2004), p. viii.

<sup>458</sup> Brinkley, 'Introduction', Brinkley (ed.), *The Reagan Diaries* (2007), pp. ix-x.

<sup>459</sup> Smith, Nancy Kegan and Stern, Gary M., 'A Historical Review of Access to Records in Presidential Libraries', *The Public Historian*, 28(3) (Summer, 2006), p. 83

act identified the records of the presidency as essential historical material in need of federally managed preservation and federally ensured openness. No similar legislation to place congressional or judicial records in public ownership was enacted, though it was proposed in the reports of the Public Documents Commission which led to the PRA.<sup>460</sup> The act gave custody of the publicly owned papers to the Archivist of the United States, who as the head of NARA would oversee their preservation and release, scheduled for five years after the end of the presidency. The act allowed the president certain restrictions on access, to last twelve years after he left office. Of the six categories identified, most are identical to exemptions within the Freedom of Information Act, covering, for example, information relating to national security and personal privacy. Also covered, though, are information relating to appointments and confidential communication between the president and his advisers. It is this latter category, labelled the P5 restriction, which later brought scrutiny to the issue of access to the Reagan archives and presidential records in general.

The issue of limited access to Reagan's papers has affected his historiography and been raised by his historians. Both John Diggins and Sean Wilentz mention in the introductions to their studies of Reagan the inaccessibility of most of his papers, as has Edmund Morris, whose special access only related to Reagan's personal records.<sup>461</sup> This problem may explain the styles of their books, each broad in theme and without great attention to the details of policy process. Richard Reeves, meanwhile, who has made the most systematic use of the available records at the library, noted that the archival research for *Triumph of the Imagination* was "much more difficult" than for his works on Kennedy and Nixon.<sup>462</sup> Wilentz and Reeves both refer to the Bush administration's role in determining access to the Reagan papers. The inauguration of George W. Bush coincided with the lapse of the twelve-year period of Reagan's restrictions. The archivists at the Reagan Library had so far identified and held back some 68,000 documents under the P5 restriction, which were now scheduled for release. The new administration sought to delay this process, using powers granted to incumbent presidents by one of the last executive orders of the Reagan presidency. White House Counsel Alberto Gonzalez ordered the archivist to delay the documents' release three times before, on November 1, 2001, President

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<sup>460</sup> Smith and Stern (2006), pp. 95-6.

<sup>461</sup> Diggins (2007), p. 461; Morris, 'A Celebration of Reagan', *The New Yorker* (February 16, 1998), pp. 50-7; Wilentz (2008), p. 9.

<sup>462</sup> Reeves, *President Reagan* (2005), pp. 543-8.

Bush issued his own Executive Order 13233, “Further Implementation of the Presidential Records Act”. In the new implementation, not only would the former president be able to review requests and withhold releases beyond the initial twelve years, but so would his surrogate, the former vice president and ultimately, the incumbent president. Meanwhile, the researcher wishing to view the document would be obliged to establish in their request a “demonstrated, specific need” for the release of the document. The order, which the White House argued would effect a “much more orderly process” through which “more information” would be released, potentially allowed the president to withhold documents from public access indefinitely.<sup>463</sup>

The White House’s actions attracted protest from the media, from Congress and from historians. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial claimed the order suggested a “secrecy fetish” in the administration; it was a return to a shadowy Cold War model, and an “attack on the principle of open government.”<sup>464</sup> The House Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Efficiency held hearings immediately and its chairman, Representative Stephen Horn (R-CA) introduced a bill the following year, H.R. 4187, “The Presidential Records Act Amendments of 2002”, which sought effectively to revoke the executive order. Meanwhile, multiple plaintiffs including the Washington, D.C. based group Public Citizen, the American Historical Association and the Reporter’s Committee for Freedom of the Press, filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Archivist seeking to overturn the order, on the grounds of it being a violation of the PRA and an unconstitutional use of executive power. Further arguments were put forward in congressional hearings in 2002 by Robert Dallek and Richard Reeves, which advanced historical interpretations of the issue. Dallek voiced patriotic ideals to rival Reagan’s own:

Every president uses history in deciding current actions. The principal victim of President Bush's directive will be himself and the country. The study and publication of our presidential history is no luxury or form of

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<sup>463</sup> Sullivan, T.J., ‘Private Papers’, *Ventura County Sunday Star* (March 3, 2002), ‘RRPL Chron. Files 2002’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>464</sup> ‘A Dark Oval Office’, *Los Angeles Times* (November 6, 2001), p.B12, ‘RRPL Chron. Files 2001’. Press Clippings, RRPL.



public entertainment. It is a vital element in assuring the best governance of our democracy.<sup>465</sup>

Reeves was less earnest in the defence of the historical profession, saying, “I need those papers...this is how I make my living.” Then in the midst of writing *Triumph of the Imagination*, Reeves had sent President Bush copies of his books on Kennedy and Nixon, suggesting that such works might become impossible now. However, he also articulated a public role for himself and other historians: “I do battle for them. President Bush is on the other side of this game.” For him, such history was defined by the conflict between the public’s right to know and the secrecy of power, and this was simply another episode in a story that went back to George Washington’s protection of his own papers from Congress’ prying eyes.<sup>466</sup>

President Obama revoked the order on his first day in office, while issuing his own that maintained the right of review for the incumbent – as established by Reagan. This was a symbolic end to what had been largely a symbolic struggle. The 68,000 documents in question had been released by the White House in March 2002, excluding some personnel files relating to the appointments of still-serving judges. It was the potential of the Bush order, rather than a continuing restriction, which animated the controversy. The documents themselves, when restricted, had essentially symbolic meaning, representing the potential of some vital truth of America’s past, and the centrality of the presidency to American history and self-knowledge. The Reagan archives became briefly the subject and symbol of a contest over the ownership of American history, illustrating the tensions that govern the issue of presidential archives. This is all the more apparent considering that the documents apparently contained no smoking gun or devastating secret. The withholding of the papers and Executive Order 13233 may speak of the reflexive urges of the Bush White House for secrecy and power, but were not a determined effort. Reagan himself, it should be said, cooperated with NARA at every instance after his presidency in the easing of restrictions and the acceleration of the process of release.<sup>467</sup> Meanwhile, the limited access to Reagan’s papers continues to be a

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<sup>465</sup> Dallek, Robert, ‘Testimony before House Committee on Government Reform, April 11, 2002’, <http://fas.org/sgp/congress/2002/041102dallek.html> (accessed, October 4, 2008).

<sup>466</sup> Reeves, Richard, ‘Statement of Richard Reeves: On Presidential Records, April 11, 2002’, <http://fas.org/sgp/congress/2002/041102reeves.html> (accessed, October 4, 2008).

<sup>467</sup> Smith and Stern, (2006), pp. 100-1.

problem simply because of the difficulty of a small number of people processing some fifty million documents. One archivist, Sharon Fawcett, has estimated that it will take more than a century, at the current rate, to see the task completed. This, Fawcett argued, is in part an unintended consequence of the PRA, which based release on FOIA requests rather than systematic processing, and subjected records to more rigorous management.<sup>468</sup> The Reagan archive faces practical difficulties which have been interpreted through symbolic arguments about the meaning and purpose of American history. These difficulties exist despite and, in part, because of an attempt to legislate according to the ideal of open and accessible history that both represents and furthers the American democratic system. The Reagan library in its central function thus responds to and is the product of a mythic idea of the historical presidency as a resource of American self-knowledge.

While the archives represent the library's primary purpose, its most visible function is the Reagan Museum. There, the commemorative and selective representation of history also makes it the most overtly mythic aspect of the institution. The choice of the Simi Valley site removed any conditions on the size of the museum and content of its exhibitions, as well as any concerns over visitor numbers. Instead, attracting visitors has become a key interest of the library. This was only a moderate success in the library's first decade. Though it had welcomed over a million visitors by 1998, averaging about one hundred and eighty thousand visitors a year, it did not reach the popularity of other libraries, such as Johnson's and Kennedy's.<sup>469</sup> Moreover, it could not retrieve the level of interest it received in its first year, and the great majority of visitors were local, thus having less impact than expected on the local economy.<sup>470</sup> Through this period, the library saw three directors come and go. The first director, the former Reagan aide and management specialist Ralph C. Bledsoe, was replaced in 1994 by Richard Norton Smith, previously the director of the Hoover and Eisenhower Libraries, who had been made director of the Reagan Foundation and Center for Public Affairs the previous year. Smith, the "P.T. Barnum of presidential library directors" who believed that "history is too important to be left to historians", reinvented the Reagan Library as a popular attraction. He

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<sup>468</sup> Fawcett, Sharon K., 'Presidential Libraries: A View from the Center', *The Public Historian*, 28(3) (Summer, 2006), pp. 22-3.

<sup>469</sup> Morris (1998), p. 50.

<sup>470</sup> Smith, Brad, 'Reagan Library Joins Tourism Study', *The Star* (Simi Valley: June 27, 1999), 'RRPL Chron Files 1999', Press Clippings, RRPL.

oversaw a renovation of the museum in 1995, updating its technologies as well as its tone – one reviewer described it as “kinder, gentler” and less partisan.<sup>471</sup> Smith left for the Ford Library in 1996, to be replaced by Mark Hunt, who as a professional museum director, sought also to expand the library’s popular appeal. Hunt himself left for the Franklin Roosevelt Museum in 2000. Since then, the library has remained under the directorship of R. Duke Blackwood, brought in from USC for his fundraising skills and education connections, and who, like Smith before him, later became director as well of the Reagan Foundation. Blackwood has talked about being more “aggressive” and “entrepreneurial” than his predecessors, and wanting to “make [the library] more visible, make it more visited, [and] make it more exciting and fun as opposed to a sleepy little museum.”<sup>472</sup> His chief success was in the expansion of the museum in 2004, when the Air Force One Pavilion was opened. This saw a large and sustained growth in visitor numbers, which, of course, coincided with the increased interest following Reagan’s death and funeral.

Because of the changes, both broad and gradual, in the museum’s permanent exhibition, the constant variety of temporary exhibitions, and the fact that it faces a full renovation to meet the centennial of Reagan’s birth in 2011, a full discussion of the museum’s contents will not be attempted here. Instead, I focus on two issues of relative permanence. First, the question of political objectivity in relation to the representation of Iran/Contra, and secondly, the museum’s use of commemorative objects as demonstrated by its exhibition of Air Force One. No extensive data exist on the demographics of the visitors. Reagan expected “ordinary people of all ages, background and political persuasions eager to examine their past and explore a history not always learned in school” to visit the museum.<sup>473</sup> Duke Blackwood, meanwhile, explained that “[we don’t] want to attract a specific demographic, what we want is to create an experience for people that want to come up here... The idea is to present the picture of an icon, and that icon happens to be Ronald Reagan.”<sup>474</sup> A presupposition of the enthusiasm of the museum’s visitors for Ronald Reagan is reflected in his portrayal there. The positive representation of Reagan’s presidency, and the omissions

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<sup>471</sup> Hadley, Scott, ‘Pursuing a Passion for the Presidency’, *Los Angeles Times* (September 19, 1994), ‘RRPL Chron Files 1994’, Press Clippings, RRPL; Schuman, Michael, ‘Shifting Sands’, *Chicago Tribune* (January 10, 1999), ‘RRPL Chron Files 1999’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>472</sup> Blackwood, R. Duke, interview with author, (April 30, 2008).

<sup>473</sup> ‘Dedication of Reagan Library’ (November 4, 1991), C-Span recording, Miscellaneous Audiovisual Collection, RRPL.

<sup>474</sup> Blackwood (2008).

this might entail, were anticipated before the museum's opening, as seen in Moorpark Mayor Galloway's concerns. This was even acknowledged by the museum's designers. "Nothing is going to put the president in a bad light," said one during the very early stages of the plans, referring to the Reagan's own involvement in deciding the exhibits.<sup>475</sup> Anticipating criticism on the unveiling of the museum, another warned, "The exhibits tell the story from the President's point of view. It is not going to be totally objective, nor highly critical." While the Reagans had reportedly asked for the Iran/Contra affair to be "tackled head on", its representation in the exhibit amounted to a few newspaper headings and a two hundred word account.<sup>476</sup>

This scant reference, and its lack of context or interpretation, was frequently remarked upon by journalists and critics. One described it as part of a strategy by the designers, "a self referential revisionist 'history' in service of mytho-political Truth."<sup>477</sup> William Davis of the Christic Institute, a think-tank consistently critical of Reagan's Central American policies, lamented that "the people are further denied their own history. They're not allowed to appreciate what really happened."<sup>478</sup> Others, notably historians, were relatively unconcerned. Douglas Brinkley reasoned that it was simply too early to expect a negative retrospective. "Why start on such a low mark?" he asked. He anticipated that in the future, after the affair had been fully researched by historians, it would receive greater and more honest attention, although with an inevitably pro-Reagan slant. "As long as the viewer understands that," he argued, "I think there's no problem with that." Robert Dallek, meanwhile, was unsurprised that the "Reagan folk" would pass over the incident, but confident that it "doesn't mean the historians will pass over it."<sup>479</sup> This distinction is interesting in the way it relates to the dual function of the library. The myth articulated in the commemorative context of the museum would be countered, or nullified, by the work conducted by historians in the reading room on the other side of the building – provided, of course, the public audience was conscious of each.

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<sup>475</sup> Hefner, Paul, 'Jelly Beans to be Included in Reagan Library Displays', *Simi Valley Daily News* (July 30, 1989), 'RRPL – Museum – 1989-1993', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>476</sup> Weiss, Kenneth R., 'Designers Bracing for Reagan Exhibit Reviews', *Los Angeles Times* (November 1, 1991), 'RRPL – Museum – 1989-1993', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>477</sup> Podolsky, Robin, 'The Ronald Reagan Library Exhibition', *Artpaper*, 11(1) (April, 1992), 'RRPL – Museum – 1989-1993', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>478</sup> The Christic Institute had sought to reveal "what really happened", in part, by producing *Brought to Light*, the fantastic graphic history of conspiratorial US foreign policy. Moore and Sienkiewicz (1989).

<sup>479</sup> Kanakri, Terry, 'Reagan Library Downplays Scandal', *Simi Valley Daily News* (August 14, 1994), pp. 1, 5, 'RRPL Chron Files 1994', Press Clippings, RRPL.

Brinkley has not yet been proved right. While the coverage of Iran/Contra increased after Richard Norton Smith's renovation, it has now all but disappeared from the museum's narrative of the Reagan presidency, receiving no reference in the objects, images or text of the exhibition. Blackwood nevertheless pointed out that in the short film which introduces the exhibition, Reagan is shown in his television appearance taking full responsibility for the affair.<sup>480</sup> While the detail and consequence of Iran/Contra are overlooked, Reagan's presidential acceptance of it is highlighted. Benjamin Hufbauer speculated that this was the result of pressure by Reagan's family and his supporters on the institution.<sup>481</sup> Whether there was direct interference or not, the removal of Iran/Contra from the main exhibition probably corresponded with the reinvention of the museum after Reagan's death in 2004. The fleeting but meaningful representation of Iran/Contra through an image of Reagan in the Oval Office affirming his leadership corresponds with the current methods and themes of the museum. Instead of detailed interpretation, visitors now find Reagan explained through symbols. Film clips, images, quotes and objects indicate and celebrate the meaning of Reagan's presidency through the shared context of national memory and identity. The museum's commemorative nature has been fully realised through the mythic use of its exhibits.

The museum, like any other, is a space designed to impart to its visitors knowledge through its collection. Its subject is specifically defined, and its authority is plain to the visitor, ultimately affirmed by Reagan's gravesite outside. Moreover, it is a national site, whose subject is not just Ronald Reagan, but through him the presidency, and through that America. The objects and representations within it convey knowledge to the visitor about these subjects through the framework of their mythology. Ludmilla Jordanova has written of the process found in museums:

Objects are triggers of chains of ideas and images that go far beyond their initial starting-point. Feelings about the antiquity, the authenticity, the beauty, the craftsmanship, the poignancy of objects are the stepping stones towards fantasies, which can have aesthetic, historical, macabre or a thousand other attributes... The 'knowledge' that museums facilitate has

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<sup>480</sup> Blackwood (2008).

<sup>481</sup> Hufbauer, 'Spotlights and Shadows: Presidents and Their Administrations in Presidential Museum Exhibits', *The Public Historian*, 28(3) (Summer, 2006), p. 124.

the quality of fantasy because it is only possible via an imaginative process.<sup>482</sup>

In the Reagan Museum, such fantasy is generated within the context of pre-understood and shared national myths about American power and history. This is present throughout: in the situation of Reagan's diaries amidst the portraits and paraphernalia of earlier presidents; in the recurring association of Reagan with the Old West; and in the familiar narrative of presidential biography suggested by the reconstruction of Reagan's childhood kitchen. Replicated spaces are a frequent tool of the museum, seen prominently in the recreation of Reagan's Oval Office. While the five presidents may have entered and found personal memories, for the visiting public the room draws on their collective memory. The Oval Office replica has become an established feature of presidential museums. Benjamin Hufbauer wrote of the first example in the Truman Library, describing its resonating symbolic appeal to the American people. Through its mystique as well as its familiarity, the replica is "an empty set, a space for visualizing allegories of American power."<sup>483</sup> It is a metaphor for the presidency, for the solemn purpose of the library, and for the narratives about Harry Truman that the library contains and presents.

The analysis fits the Reagan replica and any of the others, but in the Reagan Library visitors find a similar experience in the exhibition of Air Force One. Here, though, not only is the space authentic rather than a replica, it is also more specifically associated with the events and achievements of Reagan's presidency. Inside, it has been refurbished to replicate his use of it, complete with half-written speeches and jars of jellybeans. Outside, the context of the adjacent displays firmly associates it with the pageantry of Reagan's foreign travel and with his Cold War successes. In the upper gallery of the pavilion, exhibits detail Reagan's foreign trips, his so-called "Flights of Freedom", and present them in a narrative of achieving Cold War victory, year by year. This narrative is continued in various exhibits emphasising the rhetorical, ideological, technological and diplomatic efforts that brought an American victory, each led by Reagan. Air Force One is central physically and thematically to the display. It operates as an object of Reagan's presidency but also a familiar symbol of the modern presidency and of American global power. This particular plane flew

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<sup>482</sup> Jordanova, Ludmilla, 'Objects of Knowledge: A Historical Perspective on Museums', Vergo, Peter (ed.), *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), p.23.

<sup>483</sup> Hufbauer (2005), p.64.

Presidents Kennedy through Bush, Jr., containing within it the history of the latter half of the twentieth century, and thus of the Cold War. Its exhibition in the Reagan Museum does not just confirm him within this quarter of presidential history; it affirms him as its most significant actor. Reagan flew most on the plane, he put it to best use, and with it, he won the war. Recalling Bjerre-Poulson's conclusion that the commemoration of Reagan could only succeed as it transformed him from a partisan icon to a national, cultural one, we can see this process in the Reagan Library and its Air Force One Pavilion.

This, however, must be considered next to the library's third function, the political activity of the Reagan Center for Public Affairs. Unlike Jimmy Carter's active role in the operations of the Carter Center, and unlike Lyndon Johnson's permanent presence at his library, where he used the Oval Office replica as a personal office, Reagan's use of the library and the space set aside for him was largely casual and ceremonial, until his disease removed him from public life completely. The direction of the library's political activity, and thus Reagan's legacy, was left to the Reagan Foundation. Following the library's dedication, the centre was expected to act as the policy unit that had been conceived in the Stanford plans. However, while the museum and archives opened, the office space marked for the Center for Public Affairs remained largely empty. This slow start, combined with the departure of Ed Meese, Bill Clark and Martin Anderson from the board of the Reagan Foundation, left some wondering about the library's commitment to furthering conservative policy.<sup>484</sup> John Herrington, the remaining administration veteran on the board except for Fred Ryan, now Reagan's Chief of Staff, submitted his resignation in response to director Lod Cook's failure to renew his colleagues' appointments. "I had hoped we might structure a public affairs board with their talents, ideals and loyalty that could carry on your legacy," he wrote to the president, "I finally understood...that this is not to be."<sup>485</sup> The subsequent appointment of George Shultz reassured some about the direction of the library and the centre. "My concerns are allayed," said Martin Anderson.<sup>486</sup> Meanwhile, a press release later that year announced the intentions of the Center for Public Affairs. Vowing to reach "back through history and help carry

<sup>484</sup> 'Reagan Policy Unit Sits in Empty Space', *Atlanta Journal* (November 4, 1991), 'RR Presidential Foundation', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>485</sup> Weiss, Kenneth R., 'Associate of Reagan Quits Post', *Los Angeles Times* (January 1, 1992), 'RR Presidential Foundation', Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>486</sup> Weiss, 'Schultz Joins Reagan Foundation Board', *Los Angeles Times* (February 4, 1992), 'RR Presidential Foundation', Press Clippings, RRPL.

the vision of the Reagan years into the future”, the centre promised an extensive publication programme, series of seminars and conferences, and to provide a forum for international and national leaders – a “permanent summit”.<sup>487</sup> This was the vision of John J. Midgley, the political scientist director of the centre. In 1993, however, this scholarly and ideological direction was abandoned by the Reagan Foundation, which on appointing Richard Norton Smith as its director also gave him Midgley’s position. The centre would now focus on an “event-oriented program that would boost library attendance”. Smith explained his own vision to encourage public participation by featuring “real people, interesting practitioners, rather than theorists and academics...I don’t want to remake the Hoover institution,” he said, “I’m more interested in appealing to the general public.”<sup>488</sup>

This new direction took the Center for Public Affairs away from a productive role and towards a passive one, to become a theatre for the promotion of visiting guests. This is not to say it withdrew its sense of political identity, but rather than defining itself a vision of Reagan’s legacy, it let those attending appropriate Reagan’s image and political legacy. From the beginning, it has operated largely as a Republican platform, with Democrats and liberals attending as exceptions to prove the rule. During the nineties, indeed, it seemed to act as a stage for criticism of the Clinton presidency, often by veterans of the Reagan administration. In 1994, General P.X. Kelley, once Reagan’s chairman of the Joint Chiefs, attacked Clinton’s defence budget.<sup>489</sup> Similarly, James Baker repudiated the president for failing to understand or enact the lessons of Ronald Reagan’s global leadership, and Jack Kemp gave a talk entitled “The Relevance of the Reagan Revolution for the 1990s,” a pointed lesson for the current administration.<sup>490</sup> Later, the library became a stop on the trail towards the 2000 Republican presidential nomination. John McCain made two visits, where he emphasised his loyalty to Reagan personally and to his patriotic, conservative values: “For his faith, his optimism, his principles, I will always be grateful to Ronald

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<sup>487</sup> The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, ‘The Ronald Reagan Center for Public Affairs’, press release (May 4, 1992), ‘RR Presidential Foundation’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>488</sup> Lozano, Carlos V., ‘Reagan Library Discards Think-Tank Plan’, *Los Angeles Times, Ventura County*, (October 3, 1993), pp. B1, B9, ‘RR Presidential Foundation’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>489</sup> Daly, Margaret, ‘General Blasts Clinton’, *News Chronicle, Thousand Oaks*, (May 30, 1994), ‘RRPL Chron. File 1994’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

<sup>490</sup> The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, ‘Remarks by James Baker III’ (16/9/94), ‘RR Presidential Foundation’, Press Clippings, RRPL; The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, ‘The Relevance of the Reagan Revolution for the 1990s: Remarks by Jack Kemp,’ (September 29, 1994), ‘RRPL Chron. File 1994’, Press Clippings, RRPL.



Reagan, a genuine American hero.”<sup>491</sup> George W. Bush made his first major foreign policy speech at the library in November 1999, his reputed weakness in that area buoyed by the association with Reagan, which was reinforced by Bush’s companion at the event, former Secretary of State George Shultz.

During the more recent Republican primaries, all of the candidates were awarded the opportunity to appear at the Reagan Library and make the case for their nomination, but in direct competition for the appropriation of Reagan’s image. Two televised Republican debates were hosted by the library. All ten declared candidates gathered there on May 3, 2007, for the first debate of the campaign, but by January 30, only four remained for the final GOP debate before the primaries. Both of these took place within the Air Force One pavilion, the second with the candidates positioned on the upper gallery with the presidential plane behind them. The symbolism of the presidency and the power each candidate sought was thus remarkably apparent during the debate, but it was specifically Reagan’s symbol which most influenced the shape of the debate and the candidate’s rhetoric. One portion of the event demonstrated particularly the importance of the idea of Reagan and its mythic hold on the proceedings. The moderator, Anderson Cooper, directed a question at Governor Mike Huckabee which addressed his views on abortion and judicial appointments. This was asked in reference to Reagan’s appointment of Sandra Day O’Connor and the criticism this got from the Christian right. Cooper supported this by reading directly from Reagan’s diary:

I'm a little too nervous to actually even touch it, but that is Ronald Reagan's original diary. And in it, he wrote by his hand, he said, 'Called Judge O'Connor in Arizona and told her she was my nominee for Supreme Court. Already the flak is starting, and from my own supporters. Right-to-life people say she's pro-abortion. She declares abortion is personally repugnant to her. I think she'll make a good justice.'

“That’s Ronald Reagan’s words from his own book,” Cooper emphasised, “Governor Huckabee, was she the right choice?” Challenged not just with one of Reagan’s positions, but with a physical artefact representing him, Huckabee answered cautiously:

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<sup>491</sup> Bartholemew, Dana, ‘McCain Campaigns in Simi – Using the Presidential Image’, *The Star* (September 30, 1999), p. A1, ‘RRPL Chron. File 1999’, Press Clippings, RRPL.

History will have to determine that, and I'm not going to come to the Reagan Library and say anything about Ronald Reagan's decisions. I'm not that stupid. If I was, I'd have no business being president.

The candidate declined to question or disagree with Reagan while essentially in his presence. Between the four of them, the candidates mentioned Reagan a total of thirty-eight times in this debate, in apparent common agreement with Mitt Romney that the Republican party “has a choice, what the heart and soul of this party is going to be, and it’s going to have to be in the house that Ronald Reagan built.” The resolution of this apparent paradox is that the party could choose the meaning of Ronald Reagan. The debate ended with the question, “Would Ronald Reagan endorse you?” allowing the candidates to define Reagan’s political legacy, and how they represented it. Mitt Romney simply asserted that Reagan would have agreed with him on every particular issue he was supporting that particular day. Ron Paul mentioned previous support that Reagan had given him, and their common positions on monetary policy. John McCain made a more interesting attempt to define Reagan’s legacy as one of character, of sticking to principles and political courage. Huckabee, however, articulated a broad, national idea of Ronald Reagan:

What made Ronald Reagan a great president was not just the intricacies of his policies... It was that he loved America and saw it as a...great nation because of the greatness of its people...It's that spirit that...makes us love our country whether we're Democrats or Republicans. And that's what I believe Ronald Reagan did – he brought this country back together and made us believe in ourselves. And whether he believes in us, I hope we still believe in those things which made him a great leader and a great American.<sup>492</sup>

While the focus that night was on the frontrunners McCain and Romney, many observers gave Huckabee points for style, and some declared him the winner of the debate, a judgement based at least partly on this Reaganesque closer. The Reagan Library thus functions not as an active agent within American national politics, but more as a tool to be used within it. For the Republican party, it is either a stage from which Reagan’s memory can be called up to diminish the opposition, or it is an arena in which they contest the mantle of Reagan and are tested against his memory. In this

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<sup>492</sup> ‘Transcript of GOP debate at Reagan Library’, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/30/GOPdebate.transcript/> (accessed October 9, 2008).

way its political function is also commemorative. As Barry Schwartz said, in the context of Lincoln's memory, "commemoration transforms historical facts...into objects of attachment by defining their meaning and explaining how people should feel about them."<sup>493</sup> This occurs in the museum, and in an abstract way with the archive. In the presidential debates, this happened actively, as Reagan's presidency became an object of attachment whose meaning the candidates competed to explain. Though this was in a specifically partisan context, relating, as Romney said, to the future of the Republican Party, it was a contest which would have national consequence and needed, as Huckabee argued, to be thought of in national terms. The Reagan Library acted as a presidential and thus national symbol, focusing partisan discourse.

### Conclusion

The Reagan Library is part of a national system of presidential libraries, and though, as Paula Span said, "*system* may be too methodical a word" considering the variance in their legal governance and their autonomous styles, it must be asked how much it represents that system and is part of a tradition of presidential commemoration, and how far it can be considered unique within it.<sup>494</sup> As we have seen, Reagan was not the first president to find difficulty in siting his library on a university campus. Only a few years previously the attempt to house the Nixon Library at Duke University had been defeated by unanimous opprobrium from the faculty. Nor has this been the last instance of such controversy. The choice of the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, Laura Bush's alma mater, as the site for George W. Bush's presidential library was confirmed in February, 2008, but only after three years of debate and opposition from both faculty and Methodist leaders, who have a role in the university's administration. Much of the criticism has resembled that seen on Stanford, being levelled primarily at the policy centre component of the library, to be named the Freedom Institute, and the danger that it will function ideologically rather than academically.<sup>495</sup> When built, the George W. Bush Library will break the trend of universities rejecting Republican presidents, and will contain the first university-

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<sup>493</sup> Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (2000), p. 12.

<sup>494</sup> Span (2002), p. 26.

<sup>495</sup> Jaschik, Scott, 'SMU's Deal With Bush', *Inside HigherEd* (February 25, 2008), <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/02/25/smu> (accessed November 26, 2008).

affiliated Republican presidential think-tank. Amongst Democrats, this is a well established tendency, from the Kennedy School of Government, affiliated with Harvard, to the Carter Centre, affiliated with Emory. On Stanford's loss of the Reagan Library, Martin Anderson commented, "President Carter has taken the lead in making the libraries enormously important to scholars... These libraries are beginning to have the role that think-tanks have had all to themselves... What a great opportunity we had – it's gone now."<sup>496</sup> The collapse of the Stanford plan seemed, in the context of the presidential library tradition, to confirm a distinct difference between the options, if not the ambitions, of Republican and Democrat presidents, that has now been defied by President Bush.

The celebratory tone of the museum, and the edited nature of its narrative, is in common with tradition. Despite Lyndon Johnson's assertion at his library's dedication that, "It's all here: the story of our time – with the bark off. There is no record of a mistake, nothing critical, ugly or unpleasant that is not included in the files," reviewers were quick to notice that the museum, at least, was quite the opposite.<sup>497</sup> With many of the exhibits focussing on the achievements of the Great Society, there was almost no mention of the still ongoing Vietnam War. Meanwhile, the rest of the museums have all faced similar criticism for not detailing the failures or unpleasantness over which their subjects presided. Benjamin Hufbauer has explained this in terms of the origins of the libraries as personal projects of the presidents and their supporters, and the control they exert over the institution in its first years or decades.<sup>498</sup> However, a key point here is that this is a temporal phenomenon. When the proprietary and partisan nature of the library's administration passes, new routes are available. Hufbauer points to the example of the Truman Library and Museum where, since a renovation and rededication in 2001, the exhibits now "provide [what] is essentially lacking in nearly every other presidential library: a conviction that it is important to convey that history is contested ground."<sup>499</sup> While this reflects contemporary concerns in museology, it also emphasises that presidential libraries are not static, historical artefacts in themselves. The Reagan Library and Museum belong

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<sup>496</sup> Anderson, Martin, 'Letters to the Editor', *Stanford Campus Report* (April 29, 1987), DSC, SUA, SU Planning Office, Ronald Reagan Library, SC 423, Box 1, File 3.

<sup>497</sup> Hufbauer (2005), p. 99.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid, p. 139.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

to a tradition that is subject to more than, and will outlast, the interests and influences of those who built it and supported it in its first decades.

The Reagan Library can make some claims to distinction, and these largely relate to Reagan's own distinctive presence in contemporary American memory. The hosting of the presidential debates points to how Reagan dominates the discourse and self-image of his party in a way which no other recent president does, and few have historically. The presence of Air Force One is consistent with the iconography of presidential libraries, but represents a claim on history, an increasingly accepted one, that Reagan was the most significant American statesman and president of the Cold War. Reagan's burial at his library was not unusual, nor was his honouring with a state funeral, though one hadn't been seen since Lyndon Johnson's death in 1973. However, the pageantry of his funeral and attention it received, eclipsing that of Gerald Ford three years later, made it unparalleled in recent American history. Reagan's body lay in state at both Simi Valley and the US Capitol, attracting more than one hundred thousand viewers at each site. The final ceremony at the library blended the public and private, the personal and the national, in the imagery of the presidency. Exclusively attended by Reagan's family and friends, it was organised around nationalist and military ritual, while being broadcast to the watching nation. While the library functioned as the personal ground of the Reagans and their grief, it was also a centre of national attention and celebration, and belonged to America. The Reagan Library, in its separate functions, represents the varied development of Reagan's historical, public and political memory. In each case, however, it works to incorporate Reagan into mythic national narratives which speak to American identity through the institution and iconography of the presidency.

## Conclusion

### Reagan in the Twenty-First Century

*The names of some Presidents are invoked by spokesmen of both pol. parties as “men for all seasons,”...epitomizing the greatness of America, Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson etc. Then there are Presidents whose names are brought up in party circles, hailed as great but if...acknowledged by the other party...at all with NOT quite the same enthusiasm.<sup>500</sup>*

Ronald Reagan's relationship to American mythology involves his life, his beliefs and his presidential leadership. It has also involved the contribution of American political and historical discourse. This involvement is more layered and more nuanced than has previously been understood, representing a process greater than his idolisation by his supporters and would-be inheritors. Where Reagan sought to pursue the American dream, his biographers have granted him an exemplary presidential life story, representative of American history. Reagan performed and absorbed the narratives of Hollywood, and his analysts made his presidency the creation and conduit of American fiction and fantasy. President Reagan's singular commemorative engagements made his mark on national iconography and tradition, but also represented his instruction by the imperatives of American memory. They were also instructive, both to later leaders and to academic observers, of the power and meaning of collective remembrance. His communication of an American myth of destiny and moral exceptionalism became the defining factor of his presidency, whether understood cynically or with acclaim. Commentators and historians interpreted the achievements and failures of his presidency in terms of his mythic communication, and also made them representative of greater narratives and meanings of American history. Reagan's official commemoration, meanwhile, in the tradition of presidential libraries, is involved equally with his partisan image as it is with the ideals of historic preservation and its implications for national identity and continuity. The central discovery of this thesis is that Reagan's association with myth - an expansive consequence of tradition, Reagan's own beliefs, and his political and historical

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<sup>500</sup> Reagan, 'President Coolidge' (September 21, 1976), Skinner, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Reagan's Path to Victory* (2004), pp. 72-3.

interpretation - has become a symbolic idea in itself. To respond to Reagan is to respond to American myth.

However, the exploration of Reagan's relationship to American mythology has revealed a consistent problem which demands further attention. This is the tension between Reagan's conservatism and his Americanism, his representation of his nation, and of a specific political ideology and movement. Reagan's perception of the past had broad nationalist themes, but was shaped by the interests of his conservatism and its application to contemporary political issues, at the expense of its internal integrity – in his disregard of America's divisive history, and in the paradox between his rejection of historical determinism, and his evocation of American destiny. As president, the consistency of his political mythology was challenged by the duties of his office to represent the unity of a nation in conflict over its recent past. While responding to widely popular trends in American memory, such as in Normandy or at the Statue of Liberty centennial, allowed Reagan to associate, to some extent, his conservatism with national identity. More contentious issues of memory, such as Martin Luther King Day or the Bitburg visit, forced Reagan to mute his positions and tailor his articulation of the past in recognition of other interests. Meanwhile, this tension exists in the Reagan Library, where Reagan is opened to historical judgement according to the ideals of national history and self-knowledge, commemorated traditionally as part of an heroic presidential narrative, but also maintained as a distinctly Republican symbol. This issue, of how far Reagan is defined by political division and how far he represents a national figure, must be addressed here, and can be illustrated by considering Reagan's presence and meaning in the twenty-first century – in relation to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and in the response to his death in 2004.

The 2001 terrorist attacks on America have helped shape the history of Reagan. In Wilentz's *The Age of Reagan* this occurs outside of the textual narrative, in an evocative use of punctuating double-page images. Opening the narrative is a view of Manhattan, the World Trade Centre centrally placed, on America's bicentennial. Immediately before the epilogue, the reader is confronted with the charred silhouette of the broken towers.<sup>501</sup> Wilentz's use of these images to bookend his narrative is a testament not only to the visual symbolic strength of 9/11, but also to

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<sup>501</sup> Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan* (2008), pp. 12-13, 430-1.

its mythic power in defining recent American history. It does not mark the end the Age of Reagan, but the introduction of its most radical phase, as represented by the Bush presidency's expansion of executive power. The mythic influence of 9/11 on Reagan narratives can be seen even more clearly in the example of Peter Schweizer's *Reagan's War*, though again outside of the text. *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* (2004) is a documentary film based on Schweizer's work, which he praised, beyond its presentation of his argument, as "very moving, very emotional," and "very artful".<sup>502</sup> While the film makes use of his book, it goes far beyond it in scope, presenting a thesis of monolithic evil in the world, named "the Beast", which encompasses all of America's enemies from the First and Second World Wars, through the Cold War, to the War on Terror. Reagan's life and presidency represent not just a historical narrative of how Communist evil was defeated, but also an example of how moral leadership and perseverance may defeat the current threat of "Islamofascism". The film relies on a visual narrative which rarely lingers, weaving footage of Reagan, familiar and recovered, with signifying images of the twentieth century. "History has to be burned into the Imagination," the narrative opens, quoting Thomas Macaulay, "before it can be received by the Reason." Its coda, which dwells on several slow-motion shots of the Twin Towers attack, associates images of Islamic militants with the fascist and communist enemies of the twentieth century. Images of 9/11 and Reagan's war are burned together into the viewer's imagination.<sup>503</sup>

While the film made its own argument, it also became part of a current cultural argument about political film. *In the Face of Evil* was produced in time to meet a new movement of conservative film. Premiered at the first Liberty Film Festival, "Hollywood's first conservative film festival" designed "to celebrate free speech, patriotism, religious freedom and democracy," *In the Face of Evil* also won Best Documentary at the American Film Renaissance festival, established in 2004.<sup>504</sup> These organisations and others, designed to produce as well as promote conservative films, were set up in reaction to the perceived liberal and anti-Christian bias in Hollywood, as well as to the vogue for leftist political documentary, most successfully represented by Michael Moore's attack on President Bush's War on Terror,

<sup>502</sup> Schweizer quoted in Hawkins, John, 'The Peter Schweizer Interview' (February 14, 2005), *Right Wing News*, <http://www.rightwingnews.com/interviews/pschweizer.php> (accessed July 4, 2009).

<sup>503</sup> *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* (Dir: Stephen K. Bannon, Capital Films I, LLC, 2004).

<sup>504</sup> 'The Liberty Film Festival Merges with CSPP', *Front Page Magazine* (June 13, 2006) <http://www.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=3988> (accessed July 5, 2009).



*Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004).<sup>505</sup> *In the Face of Evil* became in July, 2005 a central feature of the Traverse Bay Freedom Film Festival, an ad-hoc event set up in direct opposition to Moore's own Traverse Film Festival.<sup>506</sup> Reagan's narrative, then, not only became shaped in terms of 9/11, but also a means of arguing post 9/11 politics – both in cultural and policy terms.<sup>507</sup>

Peter Schweizer concluded *Reagan's War* with a comment on its contemporary relevance:

Understanding Reagan's struggle and final triumph over communism... provides us with wisdom and hope for the struggles of today and tomorrow. Reagan's hope that we be guided not by fear but by courage and moral clarity is as apt today as it was during the height of the Cold War.<sup>508</sup>

He also made this point to a wider audience in the *National Review*, suggesting Reagan's strategy and leadership as a model for George W. Bush and later comparing the two favourably in terms of political courage.<sup>509</sup> Reagan became a regular reference point for conservatives in their discussions of how to respond to 9/11, and pursue the War on Terror and in Iraq. Other conservative authors on Reagan applied him to contemporary debates in the national media, combining policy advice with moral lessons. Andrew Busch found practical relevance in Reagan's Cold War strategy, while also urging that "we dare not forget what our fortieth president taught us: ...fortune favors the brave."<sup>510</sup> Former White House Counsel Peter Wallison

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<sup>505</sup> Bond, Paul, 'Right Fights Back', *Hollywood Reporter* (June 7, 2005), [http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1000947123](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000947123) (accessed July 6, 2009); Meek, James, 'Invade Their Countries, Kill Their Leaders and Convert Them to Christianity', *The Guardian* (24 September, 2004), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2004/sep/24/festivals> (accessed July 6, 2009).

<sup>506</sup> Rhoads, Cheryl Felicia, 'Traverse City Showdown', *National Review* (June 27, 2005), <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/rhoads200507270755.asp> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>507</sup> Conservative politics and film merged with the creation of Gingrich Productions, run by Newt and Callista Gingrich, which has recently released films about religious faith in America, but whose first project was a documentary about Ronald Reagan and how he "changed history". "Reagan's rendezvous with destiny", Newt Gingrich tells us, "is a reminder that we all face a similar rendezvous", *Rendezvous with Destiny: Ronald Reagan* (dir: Matthew Taylor, Citizens United Productions, 2009).

<sup>508</sup> Schweizer, *Reagan's War* (2002), pp. 284-5.

<sup>509</sup> Schweizer, 'WWRD?', *National Review* (October 15, 2002), <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-schweizer101502.asp> (accessed July 5, 2009); 'Two Hedgehogs in the White House', *National Review* (February 6, 2003), <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NmNkZGNkOWVmYmE4YzFhNGNiMDVhZGIwYjI1YmJkZTE=> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>510</sup> Busch, Andrew E., 'Ronald Reagan and Our War against Terrorism' (October, 2001), *Ashbrook Center*, <http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/oped/busch/01/reagan.html> (accessed July 5, 2009).

argued that President Bush's foreign policy after 9/11 was an extension of Reagan's own.<sup>511</sup> This was just one of several commentaries in the aftermath of Reagan's death which drew connections between Reagan's Cold War and Bush's Iraq War.<sup>512</sup>

President Bush himself made these connections following Reagan's death, equating the War on Terror with America's lengthy, ideological struggle with Communism, and thereby drawing on Reagan's victory as evidence of future victory. "We have confidence in our cause," he said at the opening of the Reagan Library's Air Force One Pavilion in October 2005 "because we have seen the power of freedom overcome the dark ideologies of tyranny and terror."<sup>513</sup>

Bush's increasing use of the Cold War as an historical model for understanding the War on Terror might be seen as a response to decreased confidence in him and the complex and ambiguous military conflicts into which he had led America. As the Iraq War became increasingly difficult and unpopular, conservative voices started to distance Reagan from Bush, where they had previously been celebrated together. "It's not a Ronald Reagan type of idea to ride on our white horse around the world trying to save it militarily," argued Richard Viguerie, "Ronald Reagan won the cold war by bankrupting the Soviet Union. No planes flew. No tanks rolled. No armies marched."<sup>514</sup> Paul Kengor, meanwhile, wrote a series of articles finding lessons for Bush's Middle-East policy in Reagan's Cold War strategy that did not, like the earlier examples, emphasise optimistically the similarities between the two men and their challenges. Instead, Kengor focused on the point that "Reagan found non-militaristic means to defeat the enemy," while "George W. Bush has lost thousands of precious lives and, in the process, has not been able to convince America that victory is in sight."<sup>515</sup> If Reagan had fluid meaning in conservative discourse, his significance to 9/11 was even more disparately understood in wider American

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<sup>511</sup> Wallison, Peter, 'Ideas Have Consequences', *National Review* (July 1, 2004), <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/wallison200407011006.asp> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>512</sup> See for example Gaffney, Frank, 'Let Bush be Reagan', *National Review* (June 7, 2004), <http://www.nationalreview.com/gaffney/gaffney200406070910.asp> (accessed July 5, 2009); Pipes, Daniel, 'Reagan's Early Victory in the War on Terror', *The New York Sun* (June 15, 2004), <http://www.danielpipes.org/1888/reagans-early-victory-in-the-war-on-terror> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>513</sup> O'Sullivan, Mike, 'Bush Recalls Legacy of Former President at Air Force One Dedication', *Voice of America* (October 22, 2005), <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2005-10/2005-10-21-voa16.cfm?moddate=2005-10-22> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>514</sup> Tumulty, Karen, 'How the Right Went Wrong', *Time* (March 15, 2007), <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1599374,00.html> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>515</sup> Kengor, Paul, 'Lessons from Reagan for Bush in the War on Terror', *Townhall* (February 16, 2007), [http://townhall.com/columnists/DrPaulKengor/2007/02/16/lessons\\_from\\_reagan\\_for\\_bush\\_and\\_the\\_war\\_on\\_terror?page=full&comments=true](http://townhall.com/columnists/DrPaulKengor/2007/02/16/lessons_from_reagan_for_bush_and_the_war_on_terror?page=full&comments=true) (accessed July 5, 2009).

discussion. One central strand of thought related again to covert action and the dark undercurrent of US policy. John Diggins summed it up:

Reagan held that morality must become an instrument of the anticommunist struggle... Yet in Afghanistan the CIA supported Islamic “freedom fighters,” whose jihadist followers would later hijack jet airliners and crash them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon... In deserts, mountains, and jungles American morality descended into the heart of darkness.<sup>516</sup>

For some, this narrative is a partisan stick with which to beat the Republicans.<sup>517</sup> This is consistent with partisan uses of presidential symbolism, where historical blame is accorded to past presidents to discredit their successors. Elsewhere, it contains the ambiguous meaning that Diggins suggests. *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007) – in which Reagan is an invisible presence – recounts the US effort to aid the Afghan Mujahidin against the Soviet invasion in an essentially triumphal, happy narrative, yet carries an undertone of helpless foresight. The story, scripted by Aaron Sorkin of *The West Wing*, is about American power, rooted in a pluralist, democratic and moral culture, but entangled in the ambiguous, and ultimately dangerous, branches of its empire.

Reagan has become involved in the 9/11 narrative in other ways beyond those of political lessons or consequences. In a reflection on the second anniversary of the attacks, Larry Kudlow remarked how the reflection on Reagan, his faith and achievements, had helped his response:

Reagan frequently said that America is the “last best hope of man on earth,” and that America has a “pre-ordained destiny to show all mankind that they too can be free.” When I think of these words I get calmer and my anger begins to recede. The sadness of 9/11 gives way to a sense of mission and purpose.<sup>518</sup>

The idea here of Reagan acting as a symbol through which to respond personally to 9/11 can be found in a broader sense, where American culture as a whole responded to the attacks through the image of Reagan. This is expressed in one way by Gil Troy,

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<sup>516</sup> Diggins, *Ronald Reagan* (2005), p. 227.

<sup>517</sup> See, for example, ‘Ronald Reagan Caused 9/11’, *Daily Kos* (May 5, 2005), <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2005/5/6/04211/23788> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>518</sup> Kudlow, Larry, ‘Faith over Fear’, *National Review* (September 11, 2003), <http://www.nationalreview.com/kudlow/kudlow091103.asp> (accessed July 5, 2009).

whose *Morning in America* ascribes to Reagan a pervasive influence over American culture during his presidency and beyond. “Ronald Reagan invented early twenty-first-century America as well as the 1980s,” Troy claims, as seen in “the post-September 11, flag drenched mixture of sentimentality and patriotism” and “the unapologetic and overconfident imperial vision in Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>519</sup> J. David Woodward presents a similar argument in *The America That Reagan Built* (2006), which offers a binary definition of American culture, with Reagan representing traditional “modernism” contrasted by and in conflict with the “postmodernism” of Bill Clinton. 9/11, Woodward suggests, caused the victory of the former over the latter. Reagan provided the foundation for a successful response to catastrophe through the reassertion of the cultural values he represented.<sup>520</sup> Reagan is credited with setting the themes for America’s reaction to 9/11. He is not just a reference point for political argument, but an active agent in American thought and identity that is revived and amplified by tragedy. It is here where we see Reagan mythically defined. There is a further case to be made that has not been fully advanced, which returns us to the interpretations of Reagan as a symbol of America’s cinematic thought and identity. The extent to which *In the Face of Evil* lingers on footage of the World Trade Centre’s destruction makes an unintended association between the perpetual screen presence of both 9/11 and Reagan. Each is experienced through the screen and fundamentally associated with it, to the extent that their cinematic nature directed their mythic meaning. Jean Baudrillard at the end of the eighties spoke of the America that Reagan created in his image, “his euphoric, cinematic, extraverted, advertising vision”, whose filmic artifice concealed real poverty and war.<sup>521</sup> In the aftermath of 9/11, he spoke of the cinematic fantasy of the attacks, suggesting American’s confusion of reality and film.<sup>522</sup> The recreation of Reagan as a cinematic event, as a text to be interpreted, and as a symbol of America’s televisual and media-regulated self-perception is a forerunner of similar treatment of 9/11. In the same way that Hollywood has been understood to have prepared America for Reagan, it has been understood also to have prepared America for the spectacle of the Twin Towers’

<sup>519</sup> Troy, *Morning in America* (2005), p. 333.

<sup>520</sup> Woodward, J. David, *The America That Reagan Built* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), pp.249-50.

<sup>521</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *America* (New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 108-13. Also see Rubenstein, Diane, ‘The Mirror of Production: Baudrillard and Reagan’s America’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (November 1989), pp. 582-606.

<sup>522</sup> Dixon, Wheeler Winston, ‘Introduction’, Dixon (ed.), *Film and Television after 9/11* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), p. 4.

destruction. These symbolic, textual readings of President Reagan and 9/11 both speak of the same contemporary condition of America, and reinforce their iconic, mythic meaning.

In June, 2004, Ronald Reagan's funeral services expressed and implied many of the themes of this thesis, confirming in his commemoration his layered relationship to American mythology. The illustrious speakers at the National Cathedral service in Washington, D.C. on June 11 gave eulogies which celebrated and elevated Reagan's achievements and character, but also his meaning for America. Margaret Thatcher's pre-recorded address claimed that "Ronald Reagan carried the American people with him in his great endeavours because there was a perfect sympathy between them; he and they loved America and what it stands for."<sup>523</sup> The notion of "sympathy" recalls Sidney Blumenthal's use of *The Golden Bough* to describe the "sympathetic magic" which bound the king-like Reagan with his people.<sup>524</sup> The contemporary critic was dubious about the substance of this symbolic link, and considered it under threat from the revelations Iran/Contra, while the reminiscent ally regarded as mutually strengthening and enduring. Each, though, accepted the reality of this bond, investing Reagan with the power of myth, and reinforcing a myth that explained his presidency. Thatcher elaborated on this sympathy, rooting it in Reagan's Hollywood identity: "As an actor in Hollywood's Golden Age, he helped to make the American dream live for millions all over the globe." Moreover, "his own life was a fulfilment of that dream".<sup>525</sup> President George W. Bush repeated this idea in his own eulogy, remarking that in Hollywood, Reagan played "the all-American good guy", and that he did this by "being himself".<sup>526</sup> Reagan was a realisation of an American myth which he had performed and dramatised.

Bush's evocation of Hollywood was also part of a biographical narrative which emphasised and revealed Reagan's presidential qualities. The president praised Dixon as the town which formed Reagan, emphasising its Christian community, but also the "hardship, struggle and uncertainty" that the Reagans' faced. Vice President Cheney, speaking a few days earlier at the ceremony which laid Reagan's body in the US Capitol Rotunda, had also described the formative nature of Reagan's youth in the

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<sup>523</sup> Thatcher, Margaret, 'National Cathedral Funeral Service', *Ronald Reagan: An American President* (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>524</sup> Blumenthal, *Our Long National Daydream* (1988), p. 307.

<sup>525</sup> Thatcher (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>526</sup> Bush, George W., 'National Cathedral Funeral Service' (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

“small town on the prairie”, where his parents had taught him the values of hard work and prayer, preparing him for the immediacy of the Depression, and his distant public office.<sup>527</sup> In the eulogies of a state funeral, Reagan’s early years suggested the themes of the mythic presidential life-story. President Bush went on to echo symbolism that was specific to Reagan’s biographies. His association, for example, of Reagan’s life guarding to his protectorship of America resembled Edmund Morris’s central theme. Overall, a continuing theme was Reagan’s embodiment of America. Dennis Hastert said that his “story and values” were “quintessentially American”.<sup>528</sup> Bush concluded that “through his belief in our country and his love of country, he became an enduring symbol of our country.”<sup>529</sup> Reagan’s Mid-Western roots and Western journey, his professional and historical experiences and his character were expressed through memory as shared roots, experiences and character.

The ceremony also saw representation of Reagan’s historical perception. “The ideology he opposed throughout his political life,” Bush said, “insisted that history was moved by impersonal tides and unalterable fates. Ronald Reagan believed instead in the courage and triumph of free men.”<sup>530</sup> Implicit in this was the paradox between the belief in freedom, and the power of individuals to make their own fate, and the belief in triumph, the inevitable victory of good over evil. Reagan’s religious faith in American destiny was most forcefully expressed in the framing of the National Cathedral service by the words of John Winthrop and the image of the Shining City. Following the opening prayer and bible reading, Sandra Day O’Connor gave a reading of Winthrop’s speech on the *Arabella*. This was then reinforced in the Archbishop of Washington, D.C. Cardinal McCarrick’s reading from the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” Together, these readings expressed Reagan’s faith in the American founding and in Christianity, and implicitly his exceptionalist belief in America’s divine destiny.

Destiny was not overt theme at Reagan’s funeral, but religious faith was. Reverend John Danforth, the former senator and ambassador who officiated the service, sought to articulate the meaning of Reagan’s faith, for him and for America, in the homily. “The Winthrop message became the Reagan message,” he began, collapsing three hundred years of history, and redefining Winthrop’s puritan jeremiad

<sup>527</sup> Cheney, Dick, ‘U.S. Capitol Rotunda Service’ (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>528</sup> Hastert, Dennis, *ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> Bush (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

for the political context of the late seventies, as one of optimism and internationalism. Danforth found a greater meaning in the message's theme of light, as a beacon and as a weapon. Reagan was a "child of light," said Danforth, recalling Reinhold Niebuhr and St. Paul, "he was aglow with it." This light had a new importance for contemporary America, now bereft of it:

You and I know the meaning of darkness; we see it on the evening news...An enduring image of 9/11 is that on a brilliantly clear day, a cloud of darkness covered lower Manhattan. Darkness is real and it can be terrifying...The question for us is what do we do when darkness surrounds us?

The answer was to "walk as children of the light", as Reagan had done. "President Reagan taught us that this is our mission both as individuals and as a nation," one based on faith in the ultimate victory of light over darkness, and life over death.<sup>531</sup> Reagan's imagery, and the religious and nationalist message of destiny and purpose it contained, was invoked for its spiritual and political relevance to a nation at war.

The funeral can also be seen in the context of presidential commemoration. Reagan planned elements of the event himself well in advance of its occurrence, securing its symbolism in, for example, asking Justice O'Connor to read from Winthrop while still in his first term and, of course, in choosing his burial site.<sup>532</sup> Other details were arranged by Nancy Reagan and the US military. It was the First Lady who officially invited the younger President Bush to speak. Bush had come from his own commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of D-Day, where his efforts to frame America's democratic mission and to reconcile with President Chirac had been drowned out in the media by Reagan's death and the recollection of his commemoration twenty years previously. Reagan's image would dominate even more in his speech at the National Cathedral. Bush's role at the funeral was in the tradition of presidential commemoration – ceremonial and passive, but approached with political deliberation. Both he and his Democratic challenger in the 2004 election, Senator John Kerry, suspended overt political campaigning in the wake of Reagan's death, but Bush's presidential duties gave him a platform to assert his leadership, and define his political agenda in terms of American memory. His speech, however,

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<sup>531</sup> Danforth, John, *ibid.*

<sup>532</sup> Associated Press, 'Sun Sets as Reagan Laid to Rest in California' (June 12, 2004), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5144264/> (accessed September 15, 2009).

refrained in the end from direct political rhetoric, only containing unremarkable associations. Reagan “acted to restore the reward and spirit of enterprise”, he “defend[ed] liberty wherever it was threatened”, and when “he saw evil...he called that evil by its name”.<sup>533</sup> These evocations of Bush’s policies and rhetoric were unavoidable for a president who bore close comparison with Reagan anyway, and were bland and downplayed in that respect. In the end, any political boost Bush received from the event was indiscernible. Various reasons can explain this. Firstly, in an interview in Normandy with Tom Brokaw after his speech there, he praised Reagan, but on being asked if he considered himself as a “Ronald Reagan Republican”, he responded, “[I] think of myself as a George W. Bush Republican, different era.”<sup>534</sup> President Bush had no wish to see his own political identity subsumed by Reagan’s.

Meanwhile, Bush had very little need to make a partisan statement – the ceremonial speakers were uniformly Republican or conservative. At the National Cathedral, Bush was accompanied by his father and Danforth, and by conservative Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney of Canada. When Reagan’s body was laid in the Capitol, the speakers reflected the contemporary Republican ascendancy: Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, Senate President Pro Tempore Ted Stevens, and Vice President Cheney.<sup>535</sup> A continuing theme at Reagan’s commemorations, and indeed of previous presidential commemorations such as Roosevelt’s at Gettysburg or Gerald Ford’s bicentennial, was the healing of national wounds and division. The partisan uniformity and the contextual pressure of the election campaign ensured that this was not a theme at Reagan’s funeral. Political division or dissent during the Reagan era was not mentioned, and full voice was given to the central conservative myth of Reagan as the Cold War victor and the “Great Liberator”. Presidents Carter and Clinton were in the audience, and it was reported at

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<sup>533</sup> Bush (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>534</sup> This interview itself echoed the symbolism of the one between Walter Cronkite and Reagan twenty years before. Brokaw was a respected outgoing anchor, firmly associated with D-Day through his books, and perhaps in Cronkite’s shadow as much as Bush was in Reagan’s. ‘Echoes of Iraq War as Bush marks D-Day’ (June 7, 2004), *Dateline NBC* (June 7, 2004), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/5146260/> (accessed September 14, 2009).

<sup>535</sup> The only possible exceptions to this political uniformity were at the family service in Simi Valley, Patti Davis and Ron Reagan, Jr. The latter spoke the following month at the Democratic National Convention, but neither made political comment at the funeral.



the time that Clinton had wished to speak, but had been refused by Nancy Reagan.<sup>536</sup> Ten years previously, at Richard Nixon's funeral, President Clinton's eulogy had necessarily dealt with issues of division and reconciliation, due to both the two men's partisan differences, and Nixon's own divisive reputation. Clinton alluded to Watergate, and asked that America stop "judging President Nixon on anything less than his entire life and career". His achievements and talents were listed, but Clinton made his strongest appeal in terms of national identity. Nixon, from whose "humble roots...grew the force of driving dream", represented America:

President Nixon's journey across the American landscape mirrored that of his entire nation in this remarkable century. His life was bound up with the striving of our whole people, with our crises and our triumphs.

Clinton ended with a brief prayer – "Grant that I may realize that the trifling of life creates differences, but that in the higher things, we are all one."<sup>537</sup> Ironically, because of the memory of division and crisis that Nixon evoked, and because his eulogist represented his opposition, his funeral provided material for a more convincing expression of common national identity than that heard at Reagan's.

Unlike Nixon's, Reagan's was a state funeral which employed the full state pageantry of the US Military and of Washington, D.C., as well as the personalised site of the Reagan Library. The funeral itself commanded full coverage from the television networks, and followed a week's worth of broadcasts of its preparations and of the public attendance as Reagan's body lay in state at Simi Valley and then at the Capitol. Cable news channels devoted themselves to these events, including an hour long shot of the plane holding Reagan's casket waiting on the runway in California, broken only by retrospective footage of the Reagan years and interviews with his confederates. The volume and tone of the coverage drew some criticism that recalled Reagan as the TV president, the actor whose stage-managed leadership bedazzled the media and the American people. Will Bunch noted later that the event was a direct continuation of the Reagan White House's image construction, organised by two former Reagan advance men, Jim Hooley and Rick Aherne. They had been

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<sup>536</sup> According to the Drudge Report and other internet gossip news sites, 'Insider Report: Nancy Reagan Vetoes Clinton Eulogy', *Newsmax.com* (June 13, 2004), <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2004/6/14/10103.shtml>.

<sup>537</sup> Clinton, 'Remarks by President Clinton at Richard Nixon's Funeral' (April 27, 1994), *Watergate.info*, [http://watergate.info/nixon/94-04-27\\_funeral-clinton.shtml](http://watergate.info/nixon/94-04-27_funeral-clinton.shtml) (accessed September 15, 2009).

planning ‘Operation Serenade’, as the funeral was dubbed, and its televising for years.<sup>538</sup> They, amongst other things, ensured that fifty thousand miniature American flags were distributed to the crowds lining the highway at Simi Valley, and that in the Washington procession Reagan’s boots, reversed in the stirrups of a riderless horse, were “left scuffed but not dusty”.<sup>539</sup> Bunch concluded, “the Reagan magic still worked.”<sup>540</sup> While Hooley determined that the funeral would be a “legacy-building event” that established Reagan as “the man who won the Cold War [and] brought back America’s faith in itself”, Bunch saw it reinforce Reagan’s legacy as the centrality of the televised spectacle to American political culture. As Philip James, a Democrat strategist wrote: “In the end Reagan will be remembered most for his sense of political theatre.”<sup>541</sup>

Interpretation of the funeral as a staged and scripted television event contained the greater criticism that it was a false expression of national unity over Reagan’s memory. The television news was, in this view, not only overwhelmed by the manipulative spectacle planned by Reagan’s people, but were self-censoring in their under-reporting of dissent and failure during the Reagan presidency, and in their reliance on Reagan supporters to frame the story. Haynes Johnson suggested this was the result of an insecure media avoiding accusations of liberal bias, a continuation from the Reagan eighties.<sup>542</sup> Meanwhile, the crowds who travelled to watch the procession, view the casket and leave small offerings at the Reagan Library, his boyhood home, or the Hollywood walk of fame, were considered an equally selective representation of America. Bunch referred to these people simply as “red America, a heavily Christian fundamentalist and conservative crew of talk-radio fanatics”.<sup>543</sup> The political make-up of the public mourners, and much less those who participated through the television coverage, can only be guessed at, but it is safe to assume a majority of Reagan voters and their spiritual descendants. Nonetheless, the public grief presented alternative meanings to partisan division. Caryn James, a *New York Times* cultural critic, considered the displays as efforts to “break through” the

<sup>538</sup> Schlesinger, Jacob M., ‘Operation Serenade: Laying Groundwork for Reagan’s Funeral’, *The Wall Street Journal* (June 10, 2004), A1.

<sup>539</sup> Allen, Mike, ‘Reagan Veterans Bring Back the 80s’, *Washington Post* (June 11, 2004), A31.

<sup>540</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth* (2009), pp. 185-91.

<sup>541</sup> James, Philip, ‘Cowboy Dreams’, *The Guardian* (June 11, 2004), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jun/11/uselections2004.usa1> (accessed September 15, 2009).

<sup>542</sup> Boehlert, Eric, ‘Reagan Porn’, *Salon.com* (June 11, 2004), <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2004/06/11/media.print.html> (accessed July 7, 2004).

<sup>543</sup> Bunch (2009), p. 190.

overwhelming media coverage. She also suggested that Reagan's long suffering with Alzheimer's disease touched a personal chord with American families, and that the "huge outpouring of emotion" stemmed from this identification as much as the political.<sup>544</sup>

Considering the 9/11 attacks and Reagan's funeral together attests to his predominantly partisan symbolism. The terrorist attacks provoked a national response which does not compare in scale or in unambiguous expression of unity to that which met Reagan's death.<sup>545</sup> Meanwhile, Reagan provided a practical and emotive symbol in the immediacy of the attacks and in their long consequences, but only to conservatives. As far as others associated Reagan with 9/11, it was in terms of historical cause. Reagan's death garnered full national pageantry and attention, but the apparent unanimity of tribute amongst politicians spoke mostly of the concession of the moment by Democrats to a Republican leadership, rather than a real effort to define Reagan's broadly acceptable national meaning. The Democratic Party's electoral successes since then, however, have put its leaders in a position to frame Reagan's memory.

We have seen Harry Reid's remembrance of Reagan's Second Inaugural as Congress dedicated a statue of the former president in the Capitol Rotunda in June, 2009. This event was the result of the Californian Legislature's decision to replace one of its representatives, the abolitionist preacher Thomas Starr King, in the National Statuary Collection.<sup>546</sup> To a mostly Republican audience, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi stressed Reagan's "bipartisanship and civility".<sup>547</sup> President Barack Obama did not attend, but he also made efforts to explain Reagan's meaning in broadly applicable national terms, both as part of the consecrative duty of the executive office,

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<sup>544</sup> James, Caryn, 'Good Grief: The Appeal of Public Sorrow', *New York Times* (June 10, 2004), <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/10/arts/television/10JAME.html?scp=5&sq=%22reagan%27s%20funeral%22&st=cse> (accessed September 15, 2009).

<sup>545</sup> Comparisons were made however, as expressed by the vivid juxtaposition of images of each in *The Graphic Biography*. Helfer, Buccellato and Staton (2007), p. 9.

<sup>546</sup> This decision, a result of successful lobbying by Republican Representative Ken Calvert, provoked little controversy, but some complaint. Historian Jack Cheevers wrote, "Ronald Reagan is a giant of American history, and his memory needs no further burnishing. Thomas Starr King is a colossus of Californian history, and he deserves better than to be tossed out the back door like yesterday's hash." Cheevers, Jack, 'Preacher who Saved the Union Deserves Statue' (May 31, 2009), *Redding Record*, <http://www.redding.com/news/2009/may/31/preacher-who-saved-union-deserves-memorial/> (accessed September 15, 2009).

<sup>547</sup> Pelosi, Nancy, 'Pelosi Remarks at Ronald Reagan Statue Unveiling' (June 3, 2009), *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS190145+03-Jun-2009+PRN20090603> (accessed September 15).

and on his own terms. During his primary campaign, Obama compared the election America faced to that of 1980, and his own message to that of Ronald Reagan:

I think Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not and in a way that Bill Clinton did not. He put us on a fundamentally different path because the country was ready for it. ... I think...he just tapped into what people were already feeling, which was, we want clarity, we want optimism, we want a return to that sense of dynamism and entrepreneurship that had been missing.

Though he defined the dissatisfaction in 1980 in terms of “the excesses of the 1960s and 70s” and the fact that “government had grown and grown”, his characterisation of what Reagan brought was in entirely broad themes – hope and change.<sup>548</sup> In this historical reflection, Obama also mentioned Kennedy’s election in 1960. More than associating himself with popular, iconic presidents of the past, Obama confirmed Reagan in a non-partisan narrative of American leadership. As president, Obama signed into law the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission Act, a bill introduced by Elton Gallegly of Simi Valley, which prepares for the national commemoration of Reagan in 2011. With Nancy Reagan on his arm, President Obama emphasised Reagan’s relationship with Tip O’Neill.

For all of the deepest of divides that exist in America...the bonds that bring us together are that much stronger... President Reagan helped as much as any President to restore a sense of optimism in our country, a spirit that transcended politics, that transcended even the most heated arguments of the day.

Obama defined Reagan’s presidency for his “ability to communicate directly and movingly to the American people...That was powerful, that was important, and we are better off for the extraordinary leadership that he showed.”<sup>549</sup> The president was required by Congressional Act to honour a political opposite, and as Reagan had done before him with Martin Luther King, Obama did so by interpreting him in national themes which echoed his own image.

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<sup>548</sup> Obama, Barack, quoted in Murray, Shailagh, ‘Obama’s Reagan Comparison Sparks Debate’, *Washington Post*, (January 17, 2008), [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/01/17/obamas\\_reagan\\_comparison\\_spark\\_1.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/01/17/obamas_reagan_comparison_spark_1.html) (accessed September 15, 2009).

<sup>549</sup> Obama, ‘Remarks on Signing the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission Act’, (June 2, 2009), *GPO Access*, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/presdocs/2009/DCPD-200900423.pdf> (accessed September 15, 2009).

Reagan may be emerging as a national symbol which transcends his political identity.<sup>550</sup> The foundation of this symbol is Reagan's faith in, and communication of, national myth. We can expect this theme to be revived when Obama presides over the celebration of Reagan's hundredth birthday in 2011. We can also expect, however, that the specifically conservative message of Reagan's American narrative, such its evocation of a definitive conflict between the individual and the inexorable growth of the state, to be emphasised by Obama's opponents in America's continued partisan division. The centennial may see some resolution of the Republican Party's post-election anxiety over its "nostalgia" for Ronald Reagan.<sup>551</sup> Reagan's political image and its application may be in flux, but this is the nature of myth, adaptable and contested. For his commemorators, biographers and historians, American mythology will remain a definitive concept of Reagan's life, his presidency and his times. This association will remain essential, and Reagan will continue to be measured by it, depending on how American mythology is evaluated. Understanding myth as the manipulative distortion of history reveals Reagan as an emblem of American amnesia, whose degradation of the democratic process through stagecraft and fantasy cast an illusory, televisual veil over symbolic failures like Iran/Contra. Understanding myth as the visionary projection of essential moral truths reveals Reagan as a great leader, whose committed and sincere articulation of American identity and purpose invigorated the country, and achieved victory over its ideological antithesis represented by the Soviet Union. As far as Reagan's presidency demanded of America an awareness of the processes, purposes and consequences of its mythology, it remains a vital and unique moment in American history.

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<sup>550</sup> A recent poll found that while 32% of likely voters considered the term "conservative" a positive descriptor for a candidate, and 29% a negative one, 41% responded positively to the label "like Ronald Reagan", and 25% negatively. 'Voters Turn Negative on all Political Labels except Reagan' (September 11, 2009), *Rasmussen Reports*,

[http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public\\_content/politics/general\\_politics/september\\_2009/voters\\_turn\\_negative\\_on\\_all\\_political\\_labels\\_except\\_reagan](http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/general_politics/september_2009/voters_turn_negative_on_all_political_labels_except_reagan) (accessed September 18, 2009).

<sup>551</sup> Ponnuru, Ramesh, 'Misremembering Reagan', *National Review* (July 9, 2009), <http://nrd.nationalreview.com/article/?q=MTRhYjEwNzAwMDg5YjA3Njg2ZjVjYWY4Mzk5MjIxMDk=> (accessed September 15, 2009).

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