

# LANDSLIDE



The Unmaking of  
the President  
1984-1988

JANE MAYER & DOYLE McMANUS

# *LANDSLIDE*

THE UNMAKING OF  
THE PRESIDENT,  
1984-1988

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Jane Mayer  
and  
Doyle McManus

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*FOR OUR PARENTS*

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# *LANDSLIDE*

## *Prologue*

EARLY ON A SUNDAY morning in March 1987, a gray-haired man wearing only pajamas and tortoiseshell glasses padded down the hall to his study and switched on his computer. It was not yet light outside his Georgetown home, but Jim Cannon hadn't been able to sleep. Now that he faced the blank screen of his computer, he couldn't quite bring himself to write, either. Cannon was still too shaken by what he had learned earlier that weekend while carrying out a confidential mission inside Ronald Reagan's White House.

In the transient world of Washington politics, Cannon had been around a long time, and, at sixty-nine, he was not usually disturbed by the ups and downs of political fortunes. As a former aide to Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, domestic policy adviser to Gerald Ford, and finally as counselor and confidant to former Senate majority leader Howard Baker, he had seen a good stretch of history. By now, not much surprised him. Though not especially well known outside moderate Republican circles, Cannon had earned a reputation as a smart, tough operator. Engaging but unsentimental, he was cool under pressure and decisive when faced with a hard choice.

That was why Howard Baker had turned to Cannon for help a few days earlier. Baker was about to become Ronald Reagan's third chief of staff, and he wanted a wise and trusted aide to scout out the territory before taking over on Monday, March 2. Cannon was already familiar with the White House and the unique landscape of the West Wing — the hushed hallways, the armed Secret Service agents, the tense buzz of fluorescent lights, the complex network of computers and military communications systems, the self-consciously harried occupants, who seemed so captivated by the building's heady promise of history and power. Superficially, little of this had changed since the Ford days, when Cannon himself had an office in the building. But in less obvious ways the Reagan White House was startlingly different. In fact, Cannon had not been at all prepared for what he had found. And so now, on Sunday morning, he was trying to write a confidential memo to Baker, his patron and closest friend in politics, warning him about what he had learned.

Cannon stared at his computer screen for a moment, then pushed back his chair. With professional detachment, he realized that the information

he needed could come from only one source — the United States Constitution. He found a copy on his bookshelf, thumbed through its pages, and began to weigh recent events.

On Friday, February 27, just two days earlier, Donald T. Regan, the president's second chief of staff, had stormed out of the White House in humiliation and anger after having learned that he'd been fired. But the news had not been delivered by the president; instead, Regan heard about it from another White House official, who had himself seen a news report on television. The first public word of Regan's removal had come from Nancy Reagan's office, and Cannon had little doubt that the shrewd First Lady was behind the shake-up.

On that Friday evening, while attention was riveted on the unseemly and irresistible spectacle of Regan's graceless departure, Cannon had quietly slipped into the White House to begin his confidential mission. Baker assumed there would have to be major changes in the staff. But before he made them, he needed to understand how the old White House team had functioned — or not functioned.

At Baker's instruction, Cannon embarked on a series of exhaustive interviews with the members of the White House staff, trying to determine what had gone wrong. It was like interviewing witnesses in a political mystery. For six years, Ronald Reagan had been the most commanding presence in American politics, a president of apparently limitless popularity and success. But for the past four months, ever since the news had broken that he had secretly sold weapons to the government of Iran, his presidency had seemed lifeless, a hollow shell. Reagan had been elected by a forty-nine-state landslide only twenty-seven months earlier, but the polls now showed that his popularity was plummeting. He had been praised for having restored the credibility of the office, but more than half the country thought he was not telling the whole truth about either the arms sales to Iran or the diversion of money to the Nicaraguan contras. More than any recent leader, Reagan had shown an instinctive ability to please the American public, yet he had blundered into a misbegotten set of policies that no one, no matter where they stood on the political spectrum, could support. How, Cannon wanted to know, could this have happened?

Cannon had talked with the president's aides late into Friday evening and through most of Saturday. By the time he returned home quite late on Saturday night, he had been tired, dispirited, and very worried.

Now, in Sunday's early light, he began to draft his report for Howard Baker. He looked again at the notes he had taken during the two days of interviews. The picture they presented of Reagan's White House was nothing short of astounding.

Cannon later recalled his impressions: "Chaos. There was no order in the place. The staff system had just broken down. It had just evaporated.

There was no pattern of analysis, no coming together. Individual cabinet members were just doing whatever they wanted to do — the ones who were smart had realized that the White House really didn't matter. They could go around the White House, and no one would retaliate.

"I took a look at some of the staff's paperwork and was stunned at their incompetence. They were rank amateurs."

But more chilling than anything else was the portrait these aides drew of the president they served. They spoke with Cannon in confidence; one by one, he recalled, "they told stories about how inattentive and inept the president was. He was lazy; he wasn't interested in the job. They said he wouldn't read the papers they gave him — even short position papers and documents. They said he wouldn't come over to work — all he wanted to do was to watch movies and television at the residence.

"They felt free to sign his initials on documents without noting that they were acting for him. When I asked a group of them, who among them thought they had authority to sign in the president's name, there was a long, uncomfortable silence. Then one answered, 'Well — everybody, and nobody.' "

Sifting through his notes, Cannon couldn't shake his astonishment. He was of course an uninitiated outsider; he'd had only a brief glimpse into the inner workings of an enormously complex organization. But he had seen enough to find the situation frightening — for him, for the party, and for the country.

Cannon reopened his copy of the Constitution and found, almost at the end, what he had been searching for: Section Four of the Twenty-fifth Amendment.

AMENDMENT XXV. SECTION FOUR. Whenever the vice president and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit to the president pro tempore of the Senate and the speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the president is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, the vice president shall immediately assume the powers and duties of the office as acting president.

Cannon stared hard at the provision. It had never been invoked; deceptively simple, it was a straightforward procedure for removing the president from office if he were no longer competent to govern. All it would take would be the agreement of the vice president and a majority of the cabinet. After a good deal of thought, Cannon reached a conclusion that would seem extreme, maybe even bizarre, to those who only knew the Ronald Reagan they saw on television and who hadn't heard all that he had over the past two days. But Cannon wasn't concerned

with public perception; his primary loyalty was to Baker, to whom he felt he owed his unvarnished judgment. So he carefully typed out his first recommendation:

"Suggested priorities, March 1, 1987:

"1. Consider the possibility that section four of the 25th amendment might be applied."

That evening Cannon took the finished memorandum — which included several recommendations for immediate action — to Baker's home in a posh wooded enclave of Northwest Washington for a confidential meeting. Two of Baker's other trusted aides had also been asked to attend: A. B. Culvahouse, a bright young lawyer who had cut short his vacation to take over the next day as the White House counsel, and Thomas Griscom, another transplanted Tennessean who had been Baker's press aide and would soon become the White House's director of communications. Griscom already knew what Cannon thought. He too had been asked to interview the White House staff over the weekend, and he had been similarly appalled. By Friday night, he was so shocked by the stories he was hearing that he kidded Cannon that they should be given medals for even daring to go back to the White House the next morning. The two had exchanged notes on their findings during a late lunch at the Old Ebbitt Grill on Saturday, and although they had thought they were starving, by the time they had realized the magnitude of the crisis they were facing, neither had had any appetite left.

In the privacy of Baker's home on Sunday night, Cannon warned Baker and the others that what he was about to say was extremely serious. Baker assumed his practiced poker face and waited. Sparing no details, Cannon then repeated what he had heard from the president's aides. The man they described, he told Baker, had no interest in running the country. In his estimation, and as the only one in the room who had previously worked in the White House, Cannon told Baker that his first decision should be whether to set in motion the involuntary retirement of the president on the grounds that he was no longer fit to discharge the duties of his office. Such a move could cause a constitutional crisis, Cannon realized. But, he said, if the president was as incompetent as his aides indicated, invoking the Twenty-fifth Amendment could be the only way to serve the national interest.

There was a long, sober silence. During Watergate, Howard Baker had been a senior member of the Senate's investigating committee, and he understood as well as any politician in the country the implications of Cannon's words. But neither Baker nor his aides dismissed the constitutional remedy as beyond the realm of possibility. Instead, after hearing Cannon out, Baker finally said in his Tennessee drawl, "Well, it doesn't sound like the Ronald Reagan I just saw, but we'll see tomorrow."



On Monday morning, March 2, Cannon, Baker, Culvahouse, and Griscom gathered in the West Wing of the White House. They planned to watch the president closely, to determine whether he appeared mentally fit to serve. First they observed him from across the room as he chaired a formal cabinet meeting. Then they accompanied him to one of the weekly "issues luncheons," a free-flowing discussion with members of the White House staff that was also held in the Cabinet Room.

One of Donald Regan's aides guided them to seats alongside the French doors that lined the side of the room and led out to the Rose Garden. But Cannon insisted on four seats at the table; he wanted a closer look at Reagan. The four men deliberately bracketed the president: Baker on his right side, Griscom on his left, and Culvahouse and Cannon directly across from him, so that they could look into the president's eyes.

Reagan seemed relaxed and animated. He swapped a few familiar jokes with Baker. There was the one about the lady from Tennessee who was a stern teetotaler. A friend had protested, "Even Jesus drank a little wine," to which she had replied, "I would think more of him if he hadn't." Everyone laughed. The tension evaporated. Then Reagan reminisced a bit about being governor of California. He seemed so alert and attentive that Cannon began to wonder about everything the White House staff members had told him.

Perhaps Donald Regan's henchmen had exaggerated the president's frailties, he thought. Perhaps they were trying to justify an internal coup, an arrangement whereby the chief of staff would make others believe he had been forced to act as a kind of regent for a disabled president. Could the president they described — the inattentive, incurious man who watched television rather than attending to affairs of state — be the same as the genial, charming man across the table?

What the hell is going on here? Cannon wondered. The old fella looks just dandy.

And, through it all, Ronald Reagan always did.

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# I

## MANDATE



# I

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## *Morning in America*

FOUR MONTHS BEFORE election day, five men gathered in a small conference room at the Reagan-Bush headquarters and reviewed an oversize calendar that marked the remaining days of the 1984 presidential campaign. It was the last Saturday in June, an unusually bearable summer day in Washington, and at ten o'clock in the morning the rest of the office was practically deserted. Even so, the men kept the door to the conference room shut and the drapes screening it off carefully drawn. The three principals and their two deputies had come from around the country for a critical meeting. Their aim was to devise a strategy that would guarantee Ronald Reagan's resounding reelection to a second term in the White House.

It should have been easy. These were battle-tested veterans with long ties to Reagan and even longer ones to the Republican party, men who understood presidential politics as well as any in the country. The backdrop of the campaign was hospitable, with lots of good news to work with: America was at peace, and the nation's economy, a key factor in any election, was rebounding vigorously after a recession. Furthermore, the campaign itself was lavishly financed, with plenty of money for a top-flight staff, travel, phone banks, and television commercials. And, most important, their candidate was Ronald Wilson Reagan, a president of tremendous personal popularity and dazzling communication skills. Reagan had succeeded more than any president since John F. Kennedy in projecting a broad vision of America — a nation of renewed military strength, individual initiative, and smaller federal government.

But even with these advantages, the president's campaign strategists found that something was missing. They couldn't have foreseen the po-

litical predicament that would face Reagan in 1987, but already, in the summer of 1984, this inner circle sensed that the White House was strangely adrift. Ordinarily, to win an election, a candidate needed to show voters some blueprint for the future. The problem, as the president's men were rapidly discovering, was that, for the most part, the Reagan White House had none.

So far, the omission had not made much difference. Until the June 30 meeting, the campaign had pursued a standard Rose Garden strategy, sticking to events that underscored Reagan's presidential stature without being overtly partisan. But the strategists knew that after July's Democratic convention, Reagan would face a determined opponent who would almost surely challenge him to articulate a more definite political agenda. For several days they had been groping for ideas, interviewing cabinet officers, White House officials, and the president himself. Yet they were stumped.

Now, in the privacy of the conference room, they were expected to draft a strategy. The meeting was highly confidential — the kind of high-level session whose secrets are usually kept forever. But in this case the discussion was tape-recorded, and although the participants intended that the tapes stay secret, they did not. The four hours of tapes capture an exchange that reveals not only the strategists' worry over the unformed agenda, but also — and perhaps more important — the way the president's men viewed their candidate.

"The problem is, we've been talking to everybody at the White House over the past few days — and the Reagan administration fired all its bullets very early and very successfully in the first two years," the tape begins. The speaker was Stuart Spencer, who chaired the meeting and served as the campaign's chief strategist. "All their plans, all their priorities, all their programs. They've run out of ammunition.

"The most striking thing I discovered is that they don't have a god-damn thing in the pipeline," Spencer said. "They don't have an idea."

The two other advisers at the table, pollster Robert Teeter and speechwriter Kenneth Khachigian, readily agreed.

"Days digging around, and we found nothing," Teeter said. "This is a national election. We've got to find something to say."

Reagan had charted an overall direction, of course, one that seemed clear and strong to most of the country in the summer of 1984. But it was more an attitude than a program. Although his administration had accomplished a great deal in its first term, a number of unfinished tasks remained. But most of them had already proven politically impractical then; it made little sense to believe that they could provide an agenda for the second term. As Reagan approached his bid for reelection, his campaign strategists sensed that the White House was running on empty. For the rest of the day they did their best to create a presidential cam-

paigned that would bring Reagan to victory anyway. Journalists would later conclude that its lack of specificity was a stroke of genius, in the great tradition of cautious incumbent campaigns — and it may have been. But the truth, known to few outside the conference room, was that it was not just a strategy of choice. It was also a strategy born of sheer necessity.

The three men around the table that day were eminently qualified for the job. Spencer, the first among equals, was a profane and irreverent political consultant from California who had helped transform Reagan from a B movie actor into a national political figure nearly two decades earlier. Spencer had taken Reagan on as a client during the 1966 California gubernatorial campaign, and, other than assisting Gerald Ford in 1976, he had worked with Reagan ever since. He was now Reagan's oldest and most trusted political adviser — a Westerner who preferred cowboy boots to Gucci loafers and who, more than any other aide, knew how to deal with Ronald and Nancy Reagan in a way that they found entirely comfortable. Spencer ran the meeting; after it ended, he would sell the 1984 plan to the Reagans and, with their approval, to the rest of the campaign hierarchy.

Seated next to Spencer was Khachigian, probably the only top campaign adviser whose office boasted an ARMENIANS FOR REAGAN poster. Khachigian was another Californian; he too had been tested in earlier campaigns. A slight man with bushy eyebrows and a ready smile, he was an eloquent polemicist and a conservative true believer who had served Richard Nixon both in the White House and in exile. Loath to leave Southern California, he had nonetheless written occasional speeches for Reagan since 1980. Throughout the 1984 campaign, he was technically in charge of issues and "opposition research" — the political euphemism for compiling dirt on opponents. But his broader role was to serve as a resident ideologue.

Finally there was Teeter, an unassuming and widely respected political pollster from Detroit who once worked for Gerald Ford. He was gifted not only at crunching numbers but also at divining trends and strategies from long computer columns of voter data. Although Teeter was not the campaign's official pollster, he was one of its most thoughtful analysts, and he added a good deal of intellectual firepower to the campaign.

Together, these three men searched for an agenda that could animate Reagan's quest for reelection. The tapes show that much of the day was spent working through an unusual process of elimination. They considered the many issues that Reagan had championed in the past and, one by one, they discarded them as either irrelevant or too politically risky to fit a winning campaign plan.

One of the first to go was defense spending. Although restoring the nation's military strength had been among Reagan's clearest objectives

in 1980, Teeter warned, "We've got rapidly decreasing numbers there." His polls showed evaporating support for continuing the arms buildup because, as he put it, "the public has this sense that we haven't subjected defense spending to the same kind of scrutiny as other spending." Spencer chimed in that he had been talking with the navy secretary, who told him "horror stories — he says he's found so much crap going on over there, he could run the Navy Department on the cost-of-living increases alone."

Khachigian added Social Security to the list of taboos. Cutting government spending had long been a central goal of Reagan's; he had once even suggested that Social Security ought to be voluntary. But any threat of cutbacks there would be political poison. "We should have the next person who even mentions the word fired," Khachigian said. "Yeah," sighed Teeter. "The group we're hurting worst with is women over sixty-five. For Chrissake," he added, "if Ronald Reagan had any constituency, you would think that would be it, but Social Security is the problem. There's absolutely nothing good to say about it."

Abortion was another unmentionable. "It's one issue we ought not to talk about," said Teeter. "They [antiabortion groups] know where we stand, and we've got a lot of people on the other side."

The Treasury Department was working on a plan for overhauling the tax code, but that was untouchable too. "We have to put it off until after the election," said Khachigian. "It's a question of politics, not policy. If there's any uncertainty about it, it can hurt us." Ironically, several Democrats had charged that Reagan had a secret plan to raise taxes after the election in order to close the widening federal deficit. But the truth was, as his campaign aides knew, that on taxes, as in so many other areas, there wasn't really any presidential plan at all. "We'd have to get five people with brains to sit down and cast a position by the president," Khachigian acknowledged.

In the absence of any new, compelling presidential initiatives to run on, the group toyed with a few of their own. Spencer suggested that perhaps they could have Reagan say something about "acid rain and all that stuff," since he was vulnerable on environmental issues. But Khachigian threw up another red flag. "We're better off without it. If you get the old man going on it, he does 'killer trees,'" he warned, referring to Reagan's embarrassing assertion in 1980 that trees caused pollution.

Instead, Khachigian thought that Reagan might attract women's votes by talking about "wife-beating." He suggested, "You just get the old man . . . so upset, he tells [Health and Human Services Secretary] Peggy Heckler I want you to spend \$30 million on it right now. I don't care where you find it."

"You take it away from poor people," came the answer, prompting guffaws.



Soon their conversation became serious again, and by the end of the day, Reagan's political advisers had fashioned a way to win the election even without the help of a clear blueprint for the future. Despite the policy vacuum, they devised a strategy that would spare Reagan the task of resolving the fundamental question of where to take the country over the succeeding four years. After the election, Democratic nominee Walter Mondale would say he lost because of his evident unease on television in the face of an acknowledged master. But Reagan's landslide had less to do with medium than with message. Reagan won because his skilled campaign team succeeded in framing the election as a choice between the bad old days of what Spencer called "the Carter-Mondale past" and Reagan's own effervescent celebration of the present, which was characterized by good times for most voting Americans. Given that focus, there was little need to think about the future. The overarching theme for this campaign, Spencer thought, would be leadership — neatly placing the spotlight on Reagan's record rather than his plans.

The three men had no doubt that Reagan would agree to their campaign strategy, even though he hadn't helped draft it. Reagan's public image was that of a strong and decisive leader, but the private reality was quite different. The president's political career was in many ways the product of a revolution in American politics, which well before 1984 had turned campaigns into sophisticated marketing operations run by experts more professional than the candidates themselves. Reagan supplied the broad vision and vocal cords. But from the start, Spencer's consulting firm had done the coaching and packaging, marketing him brilliantly to the most media-oriented state in the country and, later, to the most media-oriented nation in the world. In Reagan's view, campaigns were literally their business. They were true professionals; as a candidate, he saw little reason to interfere.

This detachment from the daily decisionmaking suited Reagan's temperament. Unlike most of his predecessors — men like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, who were obsessed with controlling all the facets of power, including the politics that endowed them with it — Reagan was aloof, even disengaged. He had little vanity or curiosity, which enabled him to stay serenely removed from most of the machinations around him. Although they took care to portray him publicly as forceful and vigorous, his campaign advisers saw the other side.

"The president was never really involved in any of the planning or strategy of the campaign," conceded his campaign manager, Edward J. Rollins. "He would make small talk some of the time relative to what was going on with Mondale or [Democratic candidate] Gary Hart. But there was never any real inquisitive effort to get to the nitty-gritty on his part. I don't think he ever focused on it. The truth of the matter is that Ronald Reagan is the perfect candidate. He does whatever you want him to do. And he does it superbly well."