THE REAGAN LEGACY

PROMISE AND PERFORMANCE

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CHATHAM HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
Chatham, New Jersey

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Post Office Box One
Chatham, New Jersey 07928

Portions of chapter 10 are reprinted from Aaron Wildavsky, "President Reagan as a Political Strategist," which originally appeared in *Elections in America,* ed. Kay Lehman Schlozman (Boston, Mass.: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 221-38. Copyright © 1987 by the Trustees of Boston College. Reprinted by permission.

PUBLISHER: Edward Artinian
ILLUSTRATIONS: Adrienne Shubert
JACKET AND COVER DESIGN: Lawrence Ratzkin
COMPOSITION: Chatham Composer
PRINTING AND BINDING: BookCrafters

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

The Reagan legacy.

Includes index.
1. United States--Politics and government--
1981- . I. Jones. Charles O.
JK271.R3317 1988 973.927 88-18137
ISBN 0-934540-71-3
ISBN 0-934540-70-5 (pbk.)

Manufactured in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Introduction

CHARLES O. JONES

The Presidency of Ronald Reagan will be the subject of scores of books. He remains personally popular, and the style and substance of his administration are fascinating. It is not too soon to begin an analysis, understanding that perspectives on him and his performance will change over time. This volume treats major topics regarding this extraordinary administration, providing a review and early assessment of the political, institutional, organizational, electoral, and policy record.

President Reagan closed the gap between the public and its leader. The public has come to feel personally about him, so much so that even his critics feel bad when he is not doing well. We even observe a tendency to blame others for not serving the President well when things go wrong. Oh, there are Reagan haters, but there is an enormous amount of goodwill toward this President. Indeed, were it not for the Twenty-Second Amendment, it is very likely that Ronald Reagan would win reelection to a third term.

In part, the profile of Ronald Reagan that emerges here is, in the words of Anthony King and David Sanders, "one of puzzlement." Possibly no knowledgeable person would recommend an "ex-actor" and "ex-professional after-dinner speaker" as President, or as governor of California for that matter. Thus what King and Sanders report as a view from Europe has credence here too. It should be said, however, that many Reagan watchers create the conditions under which they are assured of being puzzled by the President's performance. For example, they expect little from this actor/President, thus setting themselves up to be overly impressed even with ordinary accomplishments. In predicting and evaluating Reagan's performance, analysts are wont to rely more on his acting career than his political career. He was, after all, the governor of our

most populous state. And a great deal of his after-dinner speaking was at political party fund-raising dinners.

The judgment by many of his critics is that the President is popular enough to win office but not smart enough to manage it well. Some have convinced themselves that the popularity is purely a surface phenomenon—attributable to the actor's winning ways, even perhaps to sympathy for a midwestern kid who made it in Hollywood and now finds himself in the White House.

The chapters in this volume acknowledge this image of popularity without substance, management without intelligence. Yet in seeking to identify Reagan's legacy, the authors are moved to account for significant policy and political developments during his years in office. No President is responsible for all that takes place during his tenure. But he deserves at least as much credit for the good as blame for the bad.

The chapters are organized into four broad parts. Part 1 treats the major policy-making institutions—the Presidency, Congress, the courts, and the bureaucracy. In the lead chapter, Bert A. Rockman points out that Ronald Reagan, like all Presidents, had to solve the problem of controlling that for which he is held responsible. Not surprisingly, therefore, he created an organization designed to shape "basic policy parameters." Rockman also sensibly places Reagan in the context of historical developments, urging the reader to comprehend both the man and the time in which he served—not a simple exercise, to be sure.

The next chapter in this part is by me. It focuses on the relationships with Congress, stressing Reagan's 1980 victory and how it was used to great advantage in getting his program enacted. Reagan's success in 1981 shaped subsequent congressional relationships. The four Congresses, the 97th to 100th, were very different politically. Following the successes of 1981, the three subsequent patterns identified are those of avoidance of hard policy choices, assertiveness by Congress, and survival efforts by the President. Reference is made to a "policy trap" for the successful President—that is, a commitment to early policy goals that restricts subsequent choices.

In his chapter on the White House, Rockman makes the point that organization there is a "nondurable," since it is tailored to the incumbent. In the third chapter in this section on institutions, David O'Brien describes a most durable legacy, that of federal court appointments. He points out that by the time he leaves office, Reagan will have appointed nearly half the lower-court judges, "more than any other President." Media attention was naturally directed to his U.S. Supreme Court appointments, and Reagan's choices there will unquestionably have future impact. But both the number of lower-court appointments and their tested conservatism suggest a far broader effect, justifying the concern of many liberals during earlier campaigns.

The last chapter in part 1 examines President Reagan's impact on the bureaucracy. Peter Benda and Charles Levine identify the President's rather bold intentions: political control of policy formulation and implementation, debureaucratization through devolution and privatization, and administrative cost cutting. They describe how the White House sought to achieve these goals, emphasizing the use of appointments and other controls designed to enforce Reagan's agenda. They also treat the effects of these actions on bureaucrats themselves, most notably on senior civil servants. Among the many lessons learned from this chapter is that redirecting government is no simple task, even for a popular President.

Part 2 treats President Reagan's effect on politics outside the institutions—specifically on political parties, elections, and public opinion. In the first chapter in this part, Paul Allen Beck describes Reagan's role in the revival of the Republican party. Following Watergate, most analysts quite sensibly predicted that it would take the Republican party a very long time to recover. Beck demonstrates that Republicans now are well organized and financed. In fact, he judges that they seem "better positioned than at any time since the New Deal years to become the leading party." That they did not become the majority party during the Reagan years, however, suggests a lost opportunity.

James Ceaser considers a topic of major interest in any study of Ronald Reagan: public reaction to the man and his message. For the "great communicator," tests of public approval are naturally of great interest. Ceaser identifies six periods in the President's standing in public opinion polls: takeoff, decline, restoration, anointment, debacle, and equilibrium. Ceaser stresses not only the approval ratings but the interpretations placed on them. He emphasizes how the President's relationship with the public enabled him to achieve his goals and concludes that since approval is a lag indicator, Presidents are advised to sacrifice a high score today for a positive assessment in the future.

Part 3 deals with public policy. Paul E. Peterson and Mark Rom tackle the domestic scene, logically focusing on fiscal matters. They provide the details on which so many other conclusions in this book are based. Beginning with the deficit, Peterson and Rom outline the major tax and spending policies and their effects on selected groups. They are sensitive to the manifold political implications of these policies throughout the Reagan years and as they affect future administrations. Here, then, is an analysis of the profound effects of the Reagan administration on the domestic agenda.

Foreign policy is the subject of the next chapter in this part. In treating this topic, I.M. Destler finds that he cannot escape "Reaganomics and the legacy of debt." For the impact of the deficit was not confined to our borders. The theme of Destler's chapter is what might be labeled *pragmatic stubbornness*

on the part of Reagan. The President demonstrates impressive persistence in pursuing certain policy goals and yet is willing to cut a deal at some point. As examples, Destler uses the debt, the Strategic Defense Initiative, aid to the *contras,* and the release of the hostages (leading to the Iran-*contra* affair). While Destler acknowledges certain gains from Reagan's style, his judgment on balance is negative.

The final section of the book offers two contrasting perspectives on the Reagan Presidency. The first is a "view from Europe," written by Anthony King and David Sanders. They report an unflattering evaluation of the President from across the Atlantic, yet an acknowledgment that the government and Reagan's policies appear to have worked. "The European view of Reagan was thus somewhat schizoid." King and Sanders provide a most useful review of available poll data regarding Reagan and a comparative analysis with Margaret Thatcher that contributes to an understanding of both leaders. They test Reagan's foreign policy more in terms of whether it led to disaster than whether opportunities were realized. Their conclusion? "World war did not break out. NATO did not disintegrate."

Aaron Wildavsky has written the final chapter. He stresses Ronald Reagan's strategic abilities, questioning whether the President's accomplishments are the result of dumb luck. Wildavsky asks that we consider the status of the Democrats in judging Reagan's political savvy. In 1984 the Democrats were forced to campaign on Republican issues. In Wildavsky's judgment, "Ronald Reagan . . . integrated public policy with political support so as to provide creative policy leadership." He asks that this accomplishment be considered in the context of what he describes as an "antileadership system."

Although this book directs attention to the President, the reader will discover a great deal in each chapter about the politics of the time. President watching is simply a means for keeping track of major national and international issues. All Presidents leave something of themselves behind, to be sure, but whatever that legacy may be, it is fitted into larger, ongoing political developments. No President is forgotten. But all leave town when it is over.

Contents

PART ONE

The Political Institutions

1

The Style and Organization of the Reagan Presidency

BERT A. ROCKMAN

Presidents and the Problem of Organization

In contrast to the streamlined and spartan operations that prevail in the offices of central leaders elsewhere, the U.S. Presidency is a portrait in complexity and gigantism. This condition is born of the unique match between the constitutional independence of the office and the demands of modern government. Whereas prime ministers and their ministerial colleagues rely upon civil servants in the ministries, their party in parliament, and a cabinet to mediate between them, U.S. Presidents are compelled to organize both politics and policy through the White House.

Glancing through any outline of functions performed by the White House and the Executive Office of the Presidency (EOP) suggests a wide variety of activities. Three very obvious ones are (1) those of central clearance, monitoring, and organization; (2) those of political advice, campaigning, and liaison; and (3) those of policy advice, analysis, and review. In reality, there is necessarily a good bit of seepage across White House and EOP roles designed to deal primarily with one or another of these functions. The key, obviously, to a President's organizational success and, therefore, to an important element of a President's political success is to get these functions to mesh together, not only within the White House and EOP but throughout the executive branch. This is no easy task. The competitive nature of American government, a product of the separation of powers and the equally competitive effort on the part of the media, interest groups, and opinion leaders to gain and exploit information about executive decision making, multiplies the effects of diversity.

All governments, of course, are faced with problems of coordination and integration. But these problems are particularly daunting in the United States because in our system there is no regularized apparatus for collectively bargaining a governmental course. A President, simply put, is not a prime minister. He has no government as such, only himself and his associates. The White House, therefore, is virtually driven to be the central political operation for Presidents attempting to advance their political prospects, their political leverage, and their policy goals. Consequently, a President can listen to anyone he pleases or to no one. The ghosts of Washington past—Clark Clifford, Abe Fortas, Bryce Harlow, among others—played important informal as well as formal roles, and even presidential friends such as Charles Kirbo appear to have influenced President Carter, even though they were physically removed from the precincts of Washington.

Presidents themselves rarely rise to the top as team players. Instead, they tend to be entrepreneurs. And, like most entrepreneurs, they have developed a sense of what they think they want, a dulled sense of empathy for what others might want, and frequently have acquired a set of retainers with skills honed chiefly in political salesmanship.

The problems of organization and operating style that a President (indeed, any chief executive in any organization) faces are to be able to find a balance between *what he wants to do* and *what he needs to know.* An implicit assumption here is that if a President knew what he needed to know, he often would not want what he wants. The implication is that a President's real interests can be other than his expressed preferences.[1] This, to be sure, is tricky territory.

Whether any particular system of White House organization can help a President know what he must know is certainly a question that cannot be easily resolved. Richard Neustadt, for instance, sees Presidents as soloists.[2] If, in his view, they do not already know what they need to know or how to intervene in order to get it, no system of organization will suffice. Above all, presidential dependencies on others can heighten the leverage of others over the President. A President who lacks the prudence and instincts to help himself soon will be in need of help from his help.

When a President feels very strongly about what he wants to do and feels relatively unencumbered by what he needs to know, the resulting organizational style is likely to be one of command. But commands go through a chain, and at each level they become subject to increased distortion and operational puzzlement as to what they might conceivably mean. When the puzzlement becomes deep enough and the quest for operational meaning unavailing, implementers tend to sit on their hands and continue doing what it was they had been doing until clarification arises, if it ever does. In other words, even in order to com-

mand *effectively,* a President also needs to know someting about what he wants to do operationally and how he wants to do it organizationally. Yet a President consumed mainly with a need to know ironically will appear to be ad hoc in direction and even paralyzed. To be successful, a President must be a chief—but he also must be a chief executive.[3]

It is evident that Presidents vary a great deal in what they want to do and in their rate of learning about what it is they can do, but they also vary in their need to know and what it is they already do know. Lyndon Johnson, for example, knew a great deal about Congress and legislative strategy but little about policy management or even party politics. Nixon, in contrast, had great diplomatic visions and a taste for the dramatic but little concern for legislative strategy.

In brief, every President comes to office with unique virtues and deficiencies. Like any chief executive officer (CEO), he knows some things and has a talent for finding out about others. But any given President also does not know a lot of things and is dependent on the organizational apparatus around him, the people who fill relevant advisory and organizational roles, and his own sense of curiosity and ideas about what he believes is important to know. Unlike a corporate CEO, a President, by definition, is inevitably an outsider, even when he has had Washington experience or even prior cabinet-level appointment. There is little permanence surrounding him. And that which appears to be permanent—the civil service and subgovernments—often is distrusted.

The role of an organizational system is to compensate for the deficiencies and complement the strengths of the leader at the top. That, ideally, is a system of organization that informs Presidents of what they need to know to help them get what it is they truly want to get. Precisely because what Presidents want to do varies, and because Presidents rarely get to the Presidency without extolling their own unique qualities and desires for change, Presidents typically want a system that is responsive to their command. At the same time, there is a strong tendency for observers detached from the fate of any given President to focus on the organizational problems of Presidents and the Presidency and to look for institutionalized solutions to provide the "help" that the Brownlow Report claimed Presidents needed.[4] The underlying assumption behind enthusiasms for institutionalization is that Presidents are interchangeable or, if they are not, that they more or less ought to be. The tacit premise is that presidential needs have a remarkable continuity, even though Presidents themselves are unlikely to acknowledge that.

From a President's perspective, therefore, institutionalization appears as a constraint in an environment that seems to him already vastly constrained.

Typically, then, Presidents want responsive coordination but not necessarily institutionalization. Not always but often, they also want a form of democratic centrism. They want to have policy and political debates about presidential decision making channeled and immune from public scrutiny, which they perceive as forcing their hand. In the extreme case of Lyndon Johnson, inferences drawn from leaks frequently resulted in decisions that seemed to be perversely taken so as to result in outcomes opposite those inferred by the leak. The assumption that presumably lay behind this was that if the leaker or the press could be rendered less credible, the incentive for leaking would decline.

Whatever the virtues of institutionalization, its liabilities are clear for most Presidents. Presidents want to steer. They do not want to be anchored with the weight of the past. Moreover, each President usually has developed a characteristic style of operation by the time he arrives at the White House. Accordingly, each is remarkably free to make use of the apparatus as he wishes, to reformulate what he desires to do, and to generate for himself a system that is comfortable for him to work through. The last especially does not come easily. Some Presidents go through several iterations until they find a system they think works for them. Of course, a President is freer to do all these things with his entourage inside the west wing of the White House than he is with the departments "out there." That, no doubt, is a source of presidential mistrust of the executive agencies. Whether he would wish it or not, however, he cannot live without them. Congress has mandated their existence and a great deal of their operating law. The linkage between the White House and the operating departments of the executive branch thus becomes one of the central challenges to a President's organizational strategy. Can he optimize what he wants and equally gain what he needs to know?

Although the EOP now contains a variety of organized shops (some, such as the Office of Management and Budget [OMB], are at least medium-size businesses), many change character quickly with presidential transitions.[5] Still, there is, as Sam Kernell points out, remarkable persistency in the creed of presidential organization. The creed, as Kernell notes, emphasizes the value of small staffs and coordination.[6] Sooner or later, according to his argument, Presidents adapt to this idea.

Other organizational creeds are equally powerful. One of them is the value of cabinet government, of delegation, and of interdepartmental coordination at high levels. These aspirations usually are voiced at the outset of an administration, duly recorded, and, after a decent interval, most often duly dismissed in fact if not always in form or rhetoric. Yet, not all the elements disappear. And, in some respects, the Reagan Presidency clearly gave more than lip service to these elements of the organizational creed—a necessity, indeed, for a

President who, more than most, has seen his role as a *chief* rather than as an *executive.*

The Man and the Machinery

Ronald Reagan came to the Presidency as its oldest incumbent. Although his political career as an officeholder was a relatively brief eight years as governor of California, there was little mystery about him. This certainly was in vivid contrast to his immediate predecessor, Jimmy Carter, the former governor of Georgia, about whom little was known or, for that matter, to even a political veteran such as Richard Nixon, the former vice-president, whose transfigurations of style and character were astonishingly frequent, even if never complete. Instead, Ronald Reagan was a political figure of stunning transparency in terms of his core political beliefs and his work habits.

Simply stated, Ronald Reagan believes in a few things with great passion and holds to them uncompromisingly. In presentation of his public self, Ronald Reagan has brought more personal presence to the office than any President at least since John F. Kennedy. Reagan's acting career and speechmaking in behalf of General Electric were excellent preparation, but not every actor has been so at ease with his script. At least during the early stages of his administration when Reagan needed to sell his program of tax and budget reductions, the ability to project the need for change in an environment receptive to change was a helpful quality.

Reagan's projection of self, however, has at least two threads. One is the ability to handle small talk, to provide the disarming one-liner, and to give mellifluently the set speech that portrays the ideas he is firmly attached to. The other thread is the President's vulnerability to facts and the consequent need to distance him from settings in which probing of his knowledge can occur, particularly news conferences. Whatever the cause of Reagan's fragile hold on facts—whether it derives from the firmness of his ideological commitments, from work habits that charitably can be characterized as laid-back, or, probably, from both—these conditions provide unusual challenges to organizing a system that would highlight the President's obvious strengths while compensating for his equally obvious deficiencies.

No system, of course, is safe from failures, even when it is working well. As Paul Anderson suggests, sound processes can have "normal failures."[7] Moreover, it has become increasingly clear that no system of organization is appropriate for all seasons, and certainly not for all Presidents. Presidencies run through cycles, and the problems of both politics and policy they face will change. A major problem, therefore, is whether a style of operation and a system of or-

ganization appropriate to one phase can adapt to another one in which the political and policy demands will be different.

In spite of these inevitable adaptations required in presidential organization, the Reagan White House could be organized around the basic and well-known characteristics of the President's political and policy objectives and his work style. To an extent that is, I believe, remarkable, there has been fundamental constancy to the President's objectives throughout his administration, to the rhetorical instruments he seeks to apply, and to the operative style he employs in decision making. Insofar as objectives are concerned, President Reagan has been committed to a fairly fundamental shift toward a smaller and less extractive government on the domestic side, to a high-spending military apparatus, to reversing established yet fragile toeholds of Marxist regimes in the Third World, and to a political realignment inside and outside of Washington that involves electoral politics but also the planting of committed partisans throughout the federal judiciary and the executive establishment. It is fair, then, to characterize President Reagan in much the same ways one can characterize candidate Reagan: deep ideological commitment to a path that, by the norms of American politics, promises radical change. The commitment to radical change is masked by two features of the Reagan personality, one being the dulcet tones in which the President propounds his vision of change, the other being the remarkably detached style through which the President pursues his goals.

Across the sea, in the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher's most untraditional and un-Tory-like style of leadership gives every indication that she means business, that she knows exactly what she is saying and means very well to follow it up. Mrs. Thatcher is every bit as committed as Mr. Reagan, but far more involved in the operative elements of her agenda, and in developing the means necessary to get it to work. Much like Neustadt's ideal President, Mrs. Thatcher seems endlessly curious and concerned with consequences. Reagan, to the contrary, most often appears more mellow than manic, at least until recent times when things have gone less well for him.

The problem of managing the Reagan Presidency, therefore, can be stated as follows: How can organizational structures, systems, and strategies be developed for a committed Presidency and a detached President?

Even with notable exceptions, it is fair to say that the management of the Reagan Presidency, in the first term particularly, was a success. Of course, organizational success basks in the glow of more generalized political success, and organizational failures are perceived to result in, rather than be the result of, broader political failures. Like football quarterbacks, presidential organization often bears excessive responsibility for outcomes. Yet, presidential organization is often a key element in the ability of a President to achieve his goals,