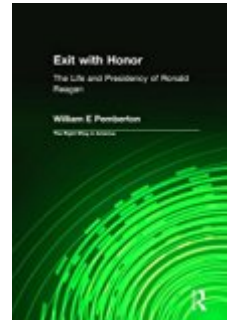


William E. Pemberton. *Exit With Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan.* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. xv + 295 pp. \$47.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7656-0095-0.



Reviewed by Mary C. Brennan

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According to William E. Pemberton in *Exit With Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan*, Reagan was a man of many contradictions. A passive administrator who delegated almost all of his responsibilities to his subordinates, Reagan still set the tone which guided the administration. A fervent anti-communist who dedicated himself to building Fortress America, he also hated nuclear weapons and willingly promised to scrap them all when the opportunity presented itself. A conservative who won office by campaigning against big government and the social-welfare state, Reagan increased the federal bureaucracy and eliminated less of the New Deal framework than he anticipated or liberals claimed. The contradictory tradition continued even after he left office as historians battled over his place in history.

Pemberton offers an insightful, if not entirely satisfying, portrait of Reagan. The author does an excellent job of analyzing some of the Reagan's characteristics that confounded both critics and supporters. Pemberton's chapters on Reagan's youth and early career as well as his discussion of

his transformation into conservative icon are well argued and helpful. Similarly, the author's step-by-step chronology of the events surrounding the Iran-contra scandal provide clear explanations of a very complex situation. Students, non-specialists and the general public would find it very helpful. Pemberton's conclusion manages to bring together much of the information from the book, but raises a number of issues which he doesn't adequately clarify.

Pemberton uses Reagan's early years to explain some of the contradictions which confused friends and foes during his careers. The author begins by trying to separate the myth from the reality of Reagan's life. Drawing on earlier biographies and memoirs, Pemberton briefly discusses Reagan's childhood, his father's alcoholism and his mother's influence. This combination of factors led to an adult with an amazing ability to shape his own version of reality, to detach himself emotionally from people while appearing to be friendly and open, and with a profound gift at storytelling. In addition, he assumed his parents' Midwestern, populist values which he learned to

translate into simple stories that entertained and educated. Honing his skills first in radio and then in Hollywood prepared Reagan well for a political career when circumstances in the country shifted in the 1960s.

Pemberton's chapter analyzing Reagan's growth from an apparently liberal background into a conservative politician is very well done. Although he initially chastises scholars for ignoring conservatism during this period (a fact his own endnotes and bibliography disproves), he goes on to synthesize current historiography very effectively. In the process, he tracks an almost step-by-step trail leading the reader through the shifting political realignments of the second half of the twentieth century. Pemberton shows Reagan's appeal to a white middle and working class constituency threatened by the rapidity of change and declining economic conditions. Reagan's Midwestern background and values combined with his communications skills made him the perfect candidate to voice the concerns of this growing body of disgruntled citizens.

Pemberton's treatment of Reagan's years in Sacramento and Washington, while not necessarily divulging new information, succeeds in revealing the complexity behind Reagan's legendary simplicity. From his first elected office, Reagan took a hands-off approach to government. The values and goals he had been preaching since his days as president of the Screen Actors' Guild set the parameters of his administration; he left the details, including most of the day-to-day operations, in the hands of his subordinates. Pemberton is quick to point out the flaws in this management style. As the author remarks repeatedly, Reagan aides were frequently "reduced to reading body language" to learn what their boss wanted them to do about most issues. In many instances, reading Reagan wasn't that difficult and his most valuable aides—Meese, Baker, and Deaver—were remarkably good at understanding what the president really meant to accomplish.

The style collapsed, however, when Reagan relied on less capable men or refused to follow the advice of his most trusted associates. The Iran-contra scandal resulted from just such circumstances. Reagan ignored the advice of two of his most loyal and trustworthy aides, George Schultz and Caspar Weinberger, who told him point blank not to deal with the Iranian arms traders, and, caught up in his own version of the reality of the hostage situation in the Middle East, blundered into a disaster. Although the president's advisors ably shifted the focus to the changing relationship with the Soviets, even the "Teflon" president got scratched up.

Still, despite the dissatisfaction of conservatives with their unfulfilled agenda, the outrage of liberals at the treatment of the poor and minorities, and the confusion of the public with the scandal, Reagan left office a popular man who left a legacy his political successors could not ignore. In addition to an enormous debt and an unstable situation in the Middle East and the Soviet republics, Bush, Clinton and their successors faced and will face a mobilized, and experienced, conservative movement and a confused, cynical electorate.

Pemberton spends his conclusion "evaluating Reagan." He discusses briefly Reagan's post-presidential career, including the question of when Alzheimer's disease struck the president. Pemberton also analyzes the way historians, scholars and commentators have evaluated Reagan. Trying to be objective, Pemberton includes information from both supporters and critics. Although this might be a noble idea, the result is slightly confusing as the reader attempts to decipher exactly what conclusions the author is making. Pemberton appears to say in the end that Reagan accomplished more and destroyed less than his critics will allow. Reagan shifted the focus of the American people and helped them believe in the American dream again, even though they realized, in a way Reagan did not, that it was an illusion.

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