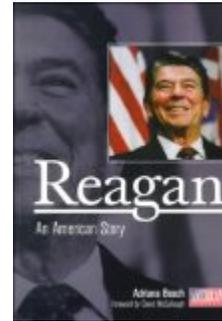


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adrianna Bosch. *Reagan: An American Story*. New York: TV Books, 2000. 348 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57500-140-1.

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Published on H-Pol (February, 2001)



## Ronald Reagan: A Television History

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Adrianna Bosch's well written book was the script for *The American Experience* documentary on Ronald Reagan. A flattering portrayal, Bosch relies on secondary sources and interviews with over fifty close advisors and family members of the fortieth president. Bosch's book is not scholarly, but readers will find a general portrait of Reagan consistent with interpretations by Edmund Morris in *Dutch* and Dinesh D'Souza in *Ronald Reagan*.

A controversial figure in his time, Reagan has escaped the negative historical attention conservatives thought he would receive. In a recent article in the December 1999/January 2000 *Policy Review*, published by the conservative Heritage Foundation, political scientist Paul Kengor describes the recent historiography on Reagan and finds much of it overwhelmingly positive. As he writes, "the treatment of Reagan has been far better than most people would imagine"[1]. Add Adrianna Bosch's book to this list.

Bosch has written a thoroughly charming portrait, meant for a general audience, of Reagan the man and Reagan the president. She is critical of Reagan the man, relying on former administration officials and family members (like youngest son Ron), to discuss his "paradoxes" and his distance from his own children (and from just about everyone else – Reagan's closest friend was wife Nancy). But Bosch celebrates Reagan as president and as leader; indeed, when the *Reagan* documentary ran on *The American Experience*, this author was definitely surprised by the mild treatment Reagan received. There was

little overt criticism of his economic policies and his contribution to budget deficits; there was little criticism of his handling of foreign policy, nothing about the flaws behind the Strategic Defense Initiative or how Reagan's intense anti-communism contributed to prolonging the Cold War. Indeed, the script of the program does not criticize Reagan much at all, and when it does so, the flaws come about as a result, it seems, of Reagan's confusion (his age?), his inept management style (revealed in the Tower Commission report), or some other personal failing (involving his children or ill treatment of long-time advisors). One is tempted to say that Bosch and the producers of *The American Experience* paid the price for close access to family and advisors, but something more revealing comes through in Bosch's portrait of Reagan.

Bosch's understanding of Reagan is revealed in her constant reflection on Reagan's optimism. It is Reagan's infectious optimism which pervades the book. Reagan believed that the economy could turn around; he believed that the Soviets were evil and that communism was, as he said in 1982, "some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written." This optimistic faith in America and its potential, which official biographer Edmund Morris attributes to a deeply personal religious belief, to his small town Midwestern roots, and to an alcoholic father, drove Reagan his whole life.

Scholars like Michael Rogin, and most recently, journalist Frances Fitzgerald, attribute this to Reagan's long career as an actor in Hollywood and his inability to separate, at times, the real world from fantasy, but Bosch

has it more correct. Reagan was a believer in the American dream, a person with a simplistic faith, perhaps, in all that was right and good. It was this optimism which drove him his whole career; it was this optimism which made Reagan's appeals so strong with an American public ready to hear something good about themselves after suffering through Vietnam, Watergate, and the depths of inflation in the 1970s.

Bosch tells historians very little that is not already known about Reagan. The strength of the book lies in its interviews and anecdotal evidence. It is not a deeply researched book, and while Bosch clearly understands the main issues in Reagan's life and presidency, the book's main weakness is separating Reagan from the conservative movement which helped produce him. Bosch's *Reagan* operated in a vacuum, and like every *American Experience* documentary, ideas seem to be missing (ideas are not easy to televise on programs producers want people to watch). While the producers did interview over fifty people for the show, few of them were conservatives (George Will was one exception). Reagan's intense commitment to anti-statism and anti-communism were products of his background in the conservative movement. As Matthew Dallek has argued in *The Right Moment* this anti-communism, at times, bordered on the

extreme (with Reagan soliciting the help of John Birch Society members in California politics during the early 1960s). There is little sense in the book that conservatism, as a movement or an ideology, played much of a role in Reagan's life or in his career. Focusing on Reagan the personality removes him from the realm of ideas, ideas which profoundly shaped his attitudes and policies towards the economy and foreign policy.

Yet, in the end, this is a minor quibble. The book is as it is, a television script on Reagan the person, not just Reagan the conservative. Yet, the criticism reflects what will become the big issue in Reagan historiography, if one can yet speak of such a thing. Until archival sources are open for the Reagan presidency, especially classified foreign policy material, much of what scholars do now, much of the canvass they paint, will be incomplete. It is a danger for any contemporary historian, but one more replete with danger when the figure is as controversial as Ronald Reagan.

Notes:

[1]. Kengor's article is also available on the Internet at <http://www.policyreview.com/dec99/kengor.html>

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

**Citation:** Gregory L. Schneider. Review of Bosch, Adrianna, *Reagan: An American Story*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4898>

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