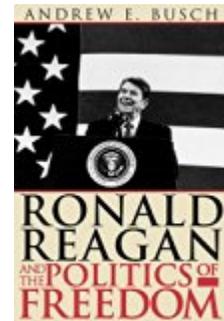


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew E. Busch. *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001. xv + 307pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2053-0.

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Published on H-Pol (April, 2002)



In Defense of the Reagan Years

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Although Ronald Reagan is in his twilight years, a veritable Reagan industry continues to chug along. Studies ranging from Reagan's first California gubernatorial campaign to his life as a whole appear regularly, and it's with little wonder that most of these books tackle Reagan as a biographical character.[1] Among American presidents he has had a quintessential twentieth-century American life—from growing up in a small Midwestern town, to a career in radio, film, and television, to corporate spokesman, to public servant and holder of the nation's highest office. Whether one agrees or disagrees with his politics, Reagan's life makes for fascinating reading. Fewer works these days, however, focus exclusively on the policies Reagan championed. Toward the end of his presidency, a spate of books appeared, often by insiders, which not only attempted to analyze the course of the preceding eight years, but also to place his administrations in historical context.[2] This also helped lead to books examining the post-World War II conservative movement and Reagan's role in this social and political force.[3] But what of the presidential policies themselves? Who, today, tells their stories?

Andrew Busch's *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom* seeks to correct what he sees as a Democratic effort "to redefine the past in order to secure an electoral future" (p. 256), which, in effect, disparages what he says are the quantifiable gains made on virtually every front during Reagan's eight years in office. Busch, a political scientist at the University of Denver, has written a book

that places Reagan at the forefront of America's post-1970s revival, the key to which was the president's emphasis on freedom. Busch's decision to use the concept of freedom as an analytical lens through which to view Reagan's policies helps us understand his actions while he was in the White House while simultaneously obscuring some of the more complex issues that are raised when evaluating the president's policies. Busch argues that in order to understand Reagan on his own terms, we must test whether he succeeded in "promoting the freedom of Americans" in a variety of realms (p. xvii). By promoting an "architecture" of freedom through political, economic, social and cultural, and foreign policy structures (pp. xx-xxi), Busch tells us that Reagan essentially "enhanced the freedom of Americans" (p. xvii). However, although the lens of freedom provides a view into a wide range of policies instituted by Reagan and his advisers, it also serves to keep critics at bay. By accepting Reagan's pronouncements of freedom as well meaning and, as envisioned by Reagan, free of politics, Busch praises policies that others criticize. For example, Reagan's support for making abortions more difficult to obtain, Busch says, increased liberty by protecting the unborn's rights, limiting "undemocratic" judicial fiat, and reinforcing individual responsibility lost during the 1960s (p. 237). Why is this not infringing on the pregnant woman's personal freedom to choose whether she wants a legal abortion? That's a more complicated question, which Busch deals with only at the end of his work. In other words, Reagan might have claimed to act in the name of freedom, but what president does not? And because Reagan spoke frequently about freedom, does that mean that his policies

were not only more effective but more “American” than other presidents? On balance, says Busch, Reagan successfully promoted his agenda of freedom. Nevertheless, the legacies of that freedom are not immediately agreed upon a dozen years after Reagan left office, a point made clear by Busch’s work.

The book’s eight chapters cover the major topics of the Reagan years. Beginning with a summary of Reagan’s rhetoric about freedom, Busch explains how “the Great Communicator” worked to break apart the New Deal coalition and its accompanying faith in big government and emphasis on the group rather than the individual, and instead sought to return the country to an ethic of classical liberalism. This chapter also introduces us to Busch’s style, which not only offers a clear and well-grounded discussion of a variety of topics, but also subtle and not-so-subtle favoritism of his subject. For example, in describing Reagan’s desire to bring America back to a pre-1960s era of traditional values, Busch writes, “he extolled the importance of religion to American life, arguing (like George Washington, John Adams, and many others) that religion was an irreplaceable source of the morality necessary if a free society is to avoid self-destruction” (p. 12). With such a declaration Busch establishes Reagan as one in a line of great presidents and simultaneously sets him apart from his Democratic predecessor, Jimmy Carter. He does not, however, consider whether Reagan’s defense of religion in the public sphere in the 1980s is different from an American president asserting the same thing in the late 18th or early 19th centuries. In chapter two Busch moves on to discuss Reagan’s efforts to narrow interpretations of the Constitution, which the president hoped to use to restrict government to enumerated powers. Individual rights took precedence over group rights, argues Busch, and this helps to explain how Reagan viewed such policies as affirmative action. Busch demonstrates that the more restrictive policy on affirmative action, for example, was a success according to opinion polls and the measurable growth in the black middle class (pp. 29-30). It is not clear, however, how Busch might respond to charges made in the 1980s by such sociologists as William Julius Wilson, who argued that while the black middle class had grown, the consequences of this growth were not entirely positive. Inner city ghettos lost their anchors as manufacturing jobs dried up, more white-collar work moved to the suburbs, and the black middle class followed the jobs.[4]

Chapter three outlines how Reagan strengthened such democratic institutions as the presidency and po-

litical parties, and how these efforts, combined with the White House exhorting citizens to be patriotic again, helped bolster American confidence in itself and its position in the world. Here Busch shows his strength, citing sources ranging from a patriotic song by head-banging rockers Twisted Sister (“We’re Not Gonna Take It”) to Reagan’s efforts in the mid-1980s stumping for GOP candidates (pp. 53, 64). Busch acknowledges that Reagan took less interest in the day-to-day management of the government than other presidents, which he says is a strength since Reagan was not “overwhelmed with details, as Carter had been” (p. 60). The weaknesses that such a style produced, including Iran-Contra and the savings and loan crisis, are covered in a paragraph each in the entire book. In fact, Busch says, these weaknesses mostly served as ideological fodder for academics like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who mistakenly tend to evaluate Reagan as one of the mediocre presidents.

Another strong chapter is Busch’s analysis of Reagan’s economic program. Reagan’s perspective on the economy had been shaped by studying classical free-market thinkers like Smith, Ricardo, Friedman, and Hayek, and also his time spent as an actor, during which he was in the ninety-one percent income tax bracket (p. 78). The quandary Reagan faced, therefore, was how to increase economic freedom while simultaneously ensuring that the economy grew as rapidly as possible. Busch argues that Reagan succeeded in cutting this Gordian knot, and marshals impressive statistics illustrated by charts and tables that explain how the middle class shrank, but only because everyone’s income actually increased. (p. 100) Despite Busch’s certainty, however, there is little agreement among economists about what really happened to income in the 1980s. For example, a 1997 Congressional Budget Office study notes that between 1979 and 1997, “The average income of households in the highest quintile was 50 percent higher in 1997 than in 1979, while that for the bottom fifth of households was nearly 4 percent lower. Because of substantial movement of households among quintiles, however, those changes do not indicate whether particular households became better or worse off over the period.”[5] Of course, this study blames the Democrats as much as the Republicans, but the point is that economists have not reached a consensus regarding the 1980s.

Chapter five discusses the federal deficit. During the 1980s the deficit grew from \$74 billion in 1980 to \$221 billion in 1986, after which it fell to \$152 billion by 1989. (p. 119) The federal debt tripled, from one trillion to three trillion dollars. Busch seeks to answer two questions re-

garding the deficit: what were its sources, and can the deficits of the 1990s be traced to Reagan-era policies. Unfortunately, Busch prefaces the chapter by letting Reagan off the hook, noting that in 1981 he said “I did not come here to balance the budget— not at the expense of my tax cutting program and my defense program.” (pp. 119-120) In other words, Busch seems to accept Reagan’s prioritizing of tax cutting and increased defense spending as a sign of “strengthening liberty” (p. 120). In perhaps more than any other chapter, Busch seems to rush to Reagan’s side, defending his simultaneous tax cuts and defense spending increases while foisting the blame for the deficit on the Great Society. Tax policies, Busch says, were revised to take more money from the rich and give breaks to the bottom 50 percent of all earners. Defense spending, while increasing steadily until the middle of the decade, grew only slightly after 1985, and it never represented more than twenty-nine percent of the GDP, a figure far lower than any defense budget of the 1950s or early 1960s. So what caused the deficit? Domestic spending, specifically programs launched in the New Deal and expanded during the Great Society, was the source. Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, housing assistance, and other programs that fed off of and encouraged a culture of entitlement were the real culprits. Reagan’s efforts to control this spending led to a series of cuts that were the largest in US history, which, says Busch, required “more political courage and more social sacrifice than any spending reductions accomplished thereafter until 1996.” (p. 136) How these cuts affected individuals is not addressed by Busch, except to say that the actions advanced the position that “citizens are entitled to keep what they earn as a matter of moral justice, and that the private sector rather than the government is the primary engine of prosperity and progress in a free society” (145). While those who earned enough to live a comfortable life would probably agree that such policies ultimately expressed economic freedom, others that depended on government assistance to help them start down the path towards freedom might think differently.

Chapter six argues that Reagan’s policies worked to bolster such critical social institutions as the family, church, and community associations. Busch explains that Reagan relied on four sources to determine his response to social problems: the views of the Founders; the relationship between civic associations and political liberty as articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*; conservative Christians; and neoconservatives. (pp. 152-154) This chapter, however, reflects one of the major predicaments for Reagan and conserva-

tives in general: how to condone a limited government in some realms and an activist government in others without appearing hypocritical. For example, Reagan and his advisers believed that the breakdown of the family could only be countered by a concerted effort that relied upon religion and traditional values, which were best expressed through governmental policies. Reagan’s efforts to integrate religion in civil society through such methods as advocating prayer in school or tuition tax credits for parochial schools are lauded by Busch. For those Americans opposed to ending the separation of church and state, Busch notes, “Naturally, many citizens (especially, but not exclusively, the less religious) resented this rhetorical device, but it seemed to remain powerful for many more.” (p. 159) Busch, therefore, does not really question whether Reagan has, in effect, acted more like an activist Democrat than a conservative Republican in this realm. What matters is that Reagan has stayed true to his principles. Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign led to increased arrests for drug offenders and, says Busch, “almost certainly contributed to changing the bounds of the acceptable in American society.” (159) It’s not clear, however, what might have changed had Reagan and his advisers believed that treatment, as well as enforcement, was a legitimate avenue to curb usage. Such a policy, of course, would have implicitly endorsed the cultural legacy of the 1960s and 1970s, which is exactly what the GOP was battling in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Busch argues that although crack cocaine was introduced in the 1980s and cocaine became the drug of choice among Masters of the Universe on Wall Street, “the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior moved toward greater self-restraint.” (p. 172)

Busch’s discussion of Reagan’s Cold War policies is one of the more convincing chapters of the book. The country was in a tenuous global position when Reagan took office, attributable in large part to pressures from Soviet and Soviet-backed advances combined with America’s post-Vietnam isolationism. Reagan decided to reinvigorate Containment, build up the military to deter Soviet expansionism, and strengthen alliances, particularly with China. Perhaps most important, however, was the administration’s ideological counteroffensive, in which Reagan famously called for a “crusade for freedom,” labeled the Soviet Union an “evil empire,” and described the Cold War in stark terms of good and evil (pp. 196-197). More concretely, Reagan declared economic war on the Soviets, which included attempting to lower energy prices to reduce the Soviet’s income from oil sales (pleasing American voters oblivious to the geopolitical

impetus for the plummeting prices at the pump), pushing the Strategic Defense Initiative in order to recalculate nuclear balances, and exercising the “Reagan Doctrine,” or the policy of aiding anticommunist guerillas in peripheral nations as a way of reversing Soviet expansionism. This helped lead to the invasion of Grenada, increased aid to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, covert aid to the Solidarity movement in Poland, and aid to right-wing fighters in El Salvador and Nicaragua, which led, of course, to Iran-Contra. Busch makes a convincing argument that it is too easy today to see the outcome of the Cold War as inevitable, and that Reagan’s efforts contributed invaluablely to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Busch’s final chapter focuses on Reagan’s efforts at building a coalition that could challenge the Democratic New Deal/Great Society bloc, which was based on egalitarianism rather than liberty and freedom. The growing conservatism of the electorate gives Reagan his opportunity to convince dissatisfied Democrats to forego long-time political loyalties, changes of the heart that, if not lasting forever, last at least a few minutes in the voting booth. This new coalition included the business community, the suburban middle class, working-class ethnics, and white southerners. (pp. 230-231) Busch does acknowledge that “racial conservatism,” or the administration’s opposition to forced busing, affirmative action, and limited federal and judicial power, helped sway white voters. Busch probes no deeper than this, however, leaving the reader to wonder whether Reagan’s distaste for racism is a sufficient explanation for the Republican Party’s position on these and other racially charged issues. In other words, is Reagan’s lifelong opposition to racism enough to explain policies that some critics, then and now, considered proto-racist? The same questions might be asked about women’s rights, gay rights, and abortion rights, which were at the fore during the 1980s. Though one might think the answers to these questions are obvious, we must return to the tension between liberty and individual freedom, on one hand, and societal order on the other. Like other conservatives, Reagan attempted to restrict individual freedom for those Americans whom he thought challenged societal order, a sacrifice he thought was, on balance, correct. This dilemma was made all the more challenging for Reagan himself, since he had been divorced and as governor of California had signed one of the most liberal abortion laws in the country. (p. 174) Busch pursues this question briefly in his conclusion, noting that for “homosexual rights activists, feminist supporters of abortion on demand, and others who conceived of liberty as simply the removal

of any remaining barriers to ‘self-actualization’ the Reagan years could never be satisfactory” (p. 258). It is not clear, however, why these people are advocates of either “self-actualization” or what Busch calls “radical individualism,” but they clearly fall outside the pale of acceptability, thus earning them the dubious distinction of attracting the attention of a government that, on balance, advocates “liberty and freedom.”

Busch has taken on an enormous range of topics in his book, thus giving the reader much to criticize as well as praise. His decision to structure the book by discrete policy topics makes it easy to locate a thorough exposition of, say, economic policy. On the other hand, this structure also leads to artificial boundaries among policies. Thus, the reader is not treated to discussions of, for example, how fighting the Cold War directly affected social policies. Busch’s writing style also expresses his partisanship in subtle and overt ways, in effect pardoning Reagan’s mistakes since his intentions were good. Moreover, one is never really sure whether Reagan thought of these policies as coherently as Busch and other analysts have dissected them. We know that Reagan liked to see the big picture and delegate the details to his aides. But how much of these policies were simply his general ideas, formulated in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, revived in the 1980s, and animated by aides? More than one Reagan biographer has noted that his personality and training as an actor allowed him to commit stories and ideas to memory and then simply recall them on demand, “as if someone had hit the ‘play’ button on a tape cassette recorder.”[6] Alternative sources might have given the reader more insight into how much influence Reagan had in formulating these policies. Busch relies heavily on popular periodicals, secondary literature, and partisan reports. Delving into the archives could confirm or deny Busch’s and other analysts’ position that Reagan was, in fact, the brains behind the brawn of his policies. That, however, might be another book.

Finally, Busch’s writing can be tough to work through. Few individuals appear alongside Reagan, a somewhat ironic comment since the administration was theoretically about the individual first and last. Only the most focused undergraduates will persevere through the entire work, although certainly some sections could prove useful in policy courses. In short, *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom* provides a solid, broad policy analysis of the 1980s, and as long as the reader acknowledges the disposition of the book—“a disposition that is impossible to overlook”—it serves as a useful summary of governmental behavior, and its concomitant contro-

versies, of the 1980s.

Notes

[1]. See Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment*. (New York: The Free Press, 2000); Edmund Morris, *Dutch*. (New York: Random House, 1999); Peggy Noonan, *When Character was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan*. (New York: Viking Press, 2001); and Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*. (New York: The Free Press, 1997).

[2]. See, for example, Martin Anderson, *Revolution*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), Edwin Meese, *With Reagan*. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992), and Peggy Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era*. (New York: Random House, 1990).

[3]. See, for example, William A. Rusher, *The Rise of the Right*. (New York: National Review Books, 1993).

[4]. William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[5]. Congressional Budget Office, *Historical Effective Tax Rates, 1979-1997: Preliminary Edition*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), xiii.

[6]. Lou Cannon, *Reagan*. (New York: Putnam, 1982), 115.

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Citation: Jonathan M. Schoenwald. Review of Busch, Andrew E., *Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Freedom*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

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