

Gil Troy. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 397 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-09645-2.



Reviewed by Donna Binkiewicz

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Gil Troy's lively and ambitious book *Morning in America* claims in its subtitle that Ronald Reagan "invented" the 1980s. Indeed, Reagan loomed large throughout the decade as a powerful political figure as well as a savvy interpreter of American culture. Troy deftly interweaves Reagan's presidency with 1980s cultural phenomena to convincingly show Reagan's influence extended well beyond the White House. Nevertheless, not all of America was "Reaganized" and evidence suggests that certain elements of American culture and society shaped Reagan as much as he shaped them.

Readers should note that this book is not your run-of-the-mill political biography, as Troy offers more than a standard account of Reagan's two terms. His chapters are organized into a thorough year-by-year romp through the 1980s. Readers will enjoy the fast-paced, clever prose and uniquely comprehensive coverage of both politics and culture of the period. This is both a "decade" book (*a la* Bruce Schulman) as well as a presidential study (in the vein of Robert Dallek or Richard Reeves).[1]

Morning in America strives to provide a balanced account of the Reagan presidency. Previous literature on Reagan fell into more polarized camps according to the author's own place in the liberal/conservative spectrum. One glorified the president and the "Reagan revolution" while the other vilified him.[2] Much of the early writing on the Reagan administration came from insiders telling their stories, so those works serve more as primary source material than analytical historical accounts.[3] Troy's middle-of-the-road approach flows from his assertion that the 1980s were "a watershed decade, a time when the Great Reconciliation between Reaganite conservatism and 1960s' liberalism occurred.... Reagan, at heart, was not a revolutionary. He was more a conciliator than a reformer" (p. 19). Reagan may have hoped to put the federal government on a diet, yet he did not overturn 1960s political trends as much as his more conservative allies hoped. "He stayed within the New Deal-Great Society governing status quo, fine-tuning it more than destroying it" (p. 333). Even more surprising, Reagan embodied 1960s social and cultural tendencies by being, for example, the first divorced president and the first

to host a gay couple in the White House. In providing a more complex picture of Reagan, Troy's work moves beyond political motivations and fills a void in the Reagan literature.

This book sweeps through domestic and foreign policy during the Reagan years--and includes one chapter beyond, titled "The Bush Restoration: Kinder, Gentler, but Still Reaganite." Readers will find the familiar tales of supply-side economics, deregulation, and booming defense spending. Troy paints Reagan as affable and optimistic, a visionary, "the Moses of the conservative revolution" (p. 82). Reagan introduced the idea of "'budget subtraction' into the American political mainstream" (p. 81), triggered the welfare debate, and played to Americans patriotic feelings. He was a master at the "poetic politics of symbols" (p. 11). Ultimately, Reagan's "personality, not his ideology, triumphed" as Reagan helped to define the conservative revolution, but left it to his successors to accomplish (pp. 82-83). Troy concludes that "Ronald Reagan's legacy continues to define his country; he remains the greatest president since Franklin Roosevelt" (p. 347).

While Troy gives Reagan much credit for his vision in domestic policy and often portrays the Democrats as the party that had "forgotten how to sing a song that could inspire and unite America" (p. 166), he also illustrates Reagan's shortcomings. Reagan's America saw mushrooming deficits, a significant recession, and redistribution of wealth to the elite while homelessness and poverty deepened. It fostered policies that disregarded African Americans, threatened the environment, and recharged public anxieties about nuclear Armageddon.

Readers looking for a full account of Reagan's foreign policy will find little substance here. Troy mentions Lebanon and Grenada in a few paragraphs that illustrate the president's ability to reframe images by calling the withdrawal of marines from Beirut a "redployment" while he "changed the subject from the carnage in Beirut

by invading the tiny island of Grenada ... greeting the return of American power and exorcising the Vietnam curse" (p. 157). Iran-Contra rates much more coverage in a chapter entitled "Mourning in America," much of it still devoted to domestic politics. After brief coverage of the Reagan-Gorbachev relationship, Troy also advances the notion that Reagan's "mix of saber-rattling and pacifism worked" to win the cold war (p. 341), although most of the cold-war dénouement appears, rightfully so, in the chapter on George H. W. Bush.

Arguing that historians cannot fully appreciate Reagan through a purely political study, Troy entwines his history of the Reagan presidency with a cultural history of the 1980s. He argues that "Reagan's brand of leadership partially transcended day-to-day politics and helped shape American culture" (p. 11). Accordingly, Reagan's ascension to the White House corresponds with the rise of television's prime time soap operas, such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which "acknowledged this new opulent era" of Ronald Reagan (p. 51). At the same time, the 1980 American Olympic hockey team's miraculous defeat of the Soviet Union revealed Americans' "yearning for a return to patriotism and national 'self-esteem'" that Reagan provided (p. 51). Troy argues the "modern media reflected its own variation of the Reagan reconciliation.... The rise of CNN, MTV, and *USA Today* all demonstrated the vitality of American capitalism. Cable, in particular, profited from Reagan's deregulatory impulse.... Yet Reagan's revolutionaries often targeted these happy byproducts of Reagan's revolution as subversive forces" (p. 131). For example, conservative critics believed MTV polluted youths' minds with inappropriate visual culture, and undermined family values. Reagan's celebrity presidency and championing of business and entrepreneurs also paved the way for Donald Trump and Lee Iacocca's big-businessman celebrity in American culture (p. 132). In 1988 Reagan honored "two hippies turned marketing moguls," Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield,

as "Small Business Person's of the Year" for their Ben and Jerry's ice cream achievement (p. 145). Who better to personify the Reagan reconciliation?

Of course, Hollywood and Reagan had been linked through the president's own acting career. During the 1980s Reagan's anticommunist foreign policy and aggressive patriotism inspired new action films, including *Red Dawn*, *Invasion USA*, *Rambo*, and Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Commando*. Correspondingly, military-themed films prompted Hasbro Toys to bring back G.I. Joe action figures (p. 241). Reagan borrowed from Hollywood the terms "Star Wars" and the "Evil Empire" to discuss his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and the Soviet Union, respectively. Troy also proposes that the George Lukas and Steven Spielberg escapist films and the time travel hit *Back to the Future* were Reaganite entertainment, which suggested a harkening back to simpler times (p. 231). Yet at the same time, readers are reminded of First Lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and its attempt to deal with the drug epidemic of the not-so-simple Eighties. Such realities of crime, drugs, poverty, and even multiculturalism were captured in the 1980s television series *Hill Street Blues*, which "demonstrated the flip side to Ronald Reagan's America" (p. 85).

For the most part, Troy's intermingling of Ronald Reagan and 1980s cultural phenomenon flows smoothly. However, there are times when the juxtapositions are too jarring. More importantly, some cultural developments of the 1980s contradict Troy's notion that Reagan "invented" the 1980s. The soaps *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, in fact, predated Reagan's inauguration, and thus were not directly inspired by his presidency. Troy himself admits that Reagan was "out of sync with many of these social trends" in the Eighties, such as the sexually charged spectacles of Madonna, Michael Jackson, and George Michael (p. 197). While the AIDS crisis mounted, Reagan looked the other way. It seems that President Reagan was not

the only one inventing American culture in the 1980s.

Troy builds his monograph from a wide array of primary and secondary sources on Reagan and the period. He mines publications from the *Boston Globe* to *Rolling Stone*. Intermixed are quotations from cabinet members or congressional papers and television dialogue. Materials from the Reagan Library, including the *Presidential Handwriting File*, which includes a large collection of correspondence and other documentation Reagan took up a pen to comment upon, serve to counter the notion some cling to that Reagan was an "air-head" (p. 7) or a "lucky boob" (p. 9). Troy is an accomplished researcher. That said, the format of the notes is often maddening. Rather than the usual Chicago-style endnotes, this book contains no citations in the text and a hard-to-follow list of citations at the end corresponding to the first two or three words of the quotations or references. There is also no bibliography. Perhaps Princeton University Press wished to limit pages, but I found the lack of clear citations a very poor choice for an otherwise well-done monograph.

Notes

[1]. Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

[2]. Martin Anderson, *Revolution!* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988); and Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King* (New York: Viking Press, 2002) are examples of celebratory literature. More critical views include Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[3]. David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics: How the Reagan Revolution Failed* (New York:

Harper & Row, 1986); or Donald T. Regan, *For the Record: From Wall Street to Washington* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

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