From radio broadcaster to Hollywood actor to union president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) to the president of the United States, Ronald Reagan's ability to weave a memorable story helped progress his career forward. His tales connected with audiences and afforded him a degree of popularity. No small amount of this popularity emanated from his ability to communicate his visions for his community and America by employing works of fiction he consumed throughout his life. The westerns he hailed showcased a culture of victory over foreign and savage threats while science fiction novels promulgated utopian ideals and technological superiority. Fiction and story, especially ones wielded by such a prominent figure, reflect and shape American identity and culture and tend to inform American life. Despite his ability to connect with his audiences, Reagan's approval ratings waxed and waned, as his terms as president were not without controversy. Many Americans were unclear as to who was actually in charge in the White House, as Reagan frequently communicated his visions through allegory and often had few solutions to offer. Reagan's dependence on using fictional stories to convey his political ideals was seen by some as a lack of cognitive reasoning and proof that he could not possibly be the ideological mastermind of his administration's policies.

In *Reagan's War Stories: A Cold War Presidency*, Benjamin Griffin challenges these preconceived and near stereotypical notions. He traces the origins of Reagan’s values and policies by examining how he reacted and utilized middlebrow books to formulate his worldview and lead in office. Griffin's narrative illustrates how fiction can be employed as a valuable and constructive tool to develop nuanced solutions to complex issues. His topical examination of how book genres from classical westerns to techno-thrillers informed Reagan’s values illuminates the best and worst examples of using fictional narratives to campaign and communicate policy. The author works within an expansive source base that includes Reagan’s diary entries as well as extensive interviews of individuals who interpreted his desired policy intent and aided in its formation. Building upon earlier
scholarly work concerning Reagan's ideological war against communism and his desire to re-establish America's faith in the military, Griffin produces an interesting and convincing argument for why narrative helped Reagan succeed in Europe but ultimately fail in the Global South.

One of Ronald Reagan's primary goals while president was to cure the United States of its perceived “Vietnam syndrome” and reestablish America as a military might and bastion of freedom. Griffin's narrative begins with Reagan's 1989 farewell address to the nation in which he delivered a tale about a refugee from Vietnam who is stranded in choppy seas in a leaky boat. He is fortunately spotted by a “young, smart, fiercely observant' sailor on board the aircraft carrier USS Midway” and subsequently saved by the “Freedom man.” The author points out that America's military is purposefully on display in this allegory. The story “improbably features an aircraft carrier, an instantly recognizable symbol of American power,” but Reagan's insertion of the “Midway in particular recalls World War II and America's role in saving the world from fascism and remaking the global order.” Griffin shows that through the “emphasis on the sailor's intelligence, youth, and ability,” President Reagan saw an exponential improvement in the “morale and readiness of the U.S. military” during his term in the White House (pp. 13-14). After such an effectual examination of Reagan's allegorical skill to convey what many believed to be a vanquished “Vietnam syndrome” and successful revitalization of the US military, the remainder of Griffin's book chronicles Reagan's political career as a case study of the complex relationship between popular culture and policy formation.

Reagan's War Stories is most compelling when examining how works of fiction reified Reagan's personal experiences and influenced policymaking. Following the Second World War, Reagan viewed the Soviet Union and communism as an existential threat and increased his political activism. During his tenure as mediator and president of SAG, Reagan denounced the presence of communism in the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU). Postwar Hollywood, like much of America, endured substantial challenges to labor relations. A strike between the CSU and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) was particularly intense as failed mediation resulted in violence along picket lines and CSU members “attacked IATSE members even far from the studio and vandalized their homes.” Griffin notes that such experiences during Reagan's involvement with SAG “opened [his] eyes' to the true nature of communism” (pp. 41-42). According to Griffin, Reagan found further confirmation of his aversion to communism in fictional works. Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon (1940) tells the story of an executed hero of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and focuses on the deceptive nature of communism. Griffin shows that such realistic narratives synched with Reagan's “own beliefs and experiences” and “helped expand his idea of the nature and scope of the threat posed by the Soviet Union” (pp. 44-46). War Stories illuminates how Reagan carried these sentiments with him throughout his political career and their influence in shaping his administration's aggressive stance against the Soviet Union and communism.

It was the same hero worship and technological ideals Reagan found in his reading of Tom Clancy novels that simultaneously reinforced his perception of success and, as Griffin highlights, showcased his nuanced hypocrisy. As Tom Clancy wrote his first novel, The Hunt for Red October (1984), he consciously adopted themes of Reagan's first presidential term and continued to do so in future works. Griffin correctly claims that Clancy's emphasis on the importance of technological superiority convinced Reagan that NATO could win a conventional war against the Soviet Union (p. 11). Griffin's interview with Kenneth deGraffenreid, National Security Council senior director of intelligence programs from 1981 to 1987, shows that while Reagan's policy visions were often caught
up in narrative prose, reading Clancy reinforced “a lot of what we might assumed was in Reagan’s head” (pp. 88-89).

However, further exploration of the connections between military funded technology and the entertainment industry would help fill in the gaps of the promulgation and reception by the public of investment in technological progress. Griffin does mention how the movie *Top Gun* (1986) began a popular culture “nintendization” of conflict and helped establish the possibility that “war could essentially be a video game” (p. 106). Additional examination of the confluence of the military-industrial complex and the contemporary burgeoning video game industry, although reasonably too outside the scope of this work to include more than a cursory analysis, would have strengthened Griffin’s contention that the military became increasingly gamified.

*War Stories* eloquently explains how closer examination of fiction can uncover the origins of policy, how it is sustained, and how narratives can help break down the complexities between culture and policy (p. 9). The book offers a consummate model of weaving together historical narrative with historiography through its tracing of the origins of the influences on Reagan’s political beliefs. Griffin’s work should be welcomed as a much-needed work in military and political scholarship that grants more agency to popular culture as a driver of historical change. While aspects of the influence of fiction on the public perception of a revitalized military could have been further explored to better support his claims, Griffin’s core assertion that allegories serve as a space to consider alternative and inventive solutions is accurate and provides a solid foundation for additional research to build upon.

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