

Reaganism

It is that modern version -- and warped policies that could be collectively called Reaganism -- that has given us an unfathomable national debt, a wide gulf between the nation's rich and poor, the denial of basic science on energy and the environment, and which was even used to justify an unjustifiable war in Iraq that the real Gipper himself would never undertaken.

Twenty years gone -- but Reagan still matters. About this time one year ago, unceasing Reagan idolatry hijacked the race for the White House. Sometimes it was voiced in the name of policies on immigration or toward Iran that were the exact opposite of what really happened a generation ago. The power of this political fantasy -- expressed mainly, of course, on the GOP side but occasionally even spilling over to the Democrats -- inspired me to begin work on a book about the Ronald Reagan myth.

The result -- "Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future" -- is coming out now from Simon & Schuster's Free Press. (You can purchase the book [here](#) or receive news from the book's Facebook group [here](#)). Here's a publisher-approved excerpt from Chapter One that cuts to the core of Reagan's distorted legacy:

It was Ronald Reagan himself who, as the spotlight faded on his presidency in 1988, tried to highlight his eight-year record by reviving a quote from John Adams, that "facts are stubborn things." The moment became quite famous because the then-77-year-old president had botched it, and said that "facts are stupid things." The tragedy of American politics was that just two decades later, facts were neither stubborn nor even stupid - but largely irrelevant.

Any information about Iran-Contra or how the 1979-81 hostages were released (Rudy Giuliani had falsely claimed during the 2008 race they were freed when "the Gipper" looked Iranian leaders in the eye) that didn't fit the new official story line was being metaphorically clipped out of the newspaper and tossed down "memory hole" - the fate of any information that would have undercut Reagan's image as an all-benevolent Big Brother still guiding the conservative movement from above.

A more factual synopsis of the Reagan presidency might read like this: That Reagan was a transformative figure in American history, but his real revolution was one of public-relations-meets-politics and not one of policy.

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He combined his small-town heartland upbringing with a skill for story-telling that was honed on the back lots of Hollywood into a personal narrative that resonated with a majority of voters, but only after it tapped into something darker, which was white middle class resentment of 1960s unrest.

His story arc did become more optimistic and peaked at just the right moment, when Americans were tired of the "malaise" of the Jimmy Carter years and wanted someone who promised to make the nation feel good about itself again. But his positive legacy as president today hangs on events that most historians say were to some great measure out of his control: An economic recovery that was inevitable, especially when world oil prices returned to normal levels, and an end to the Cold War that was more driven by internal events in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe than Americans want to acknowledge.

His 1981 tax cut was followed quickly by tax hikes that you rarely hear about, and Reagan's real lasting achievement on that front was slashing marginal rates for the wealthy - even as rising payroll taxes socked the working class. His promise to shrink government was uttered so many times that many acolytes believe it really happened, but in fact Reagan expanded the federal payroll, added a new cabinet post, and created a huge debt that ultimately tripped up his handpicked successor, George H.W. Bush. What he did shrink was government regulation and oversight -- linked to a series of unfortunate events from the savings-and-loan crisis of the late 1980s to the sub-prime mortgage crisis of the late 2000s

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 papered over some less noble moments in foreign policy, from trading arms for Middle East hostages to an embarrassing retreat from his muddled engagement in Lebanon to unpopular adventurism in Central America. The Iran-contra scandal that stemmed from those policies not only weakened Reagan's presidency when it happened, but it arguably undermined the respect of future presidents for the Constitution -- because he essentially got away with it. Over the course of eight years, the president that some want to enshrine on Mount Rushmore rated just barely above average for modern presidents in public popularity. He left on a high note - but only after two years of shifting his policy back to the center, seeking peace with the Soviets than confrontation, reaching a balanced new tax deal with Democrats and naming a moderate justice to the Supreme Court. It was not the Reaganism invoked by today's conservatives.

There has always been a place for mythology in American democracy - the hulking granite edifices of the Capitol Mall in Washington are a

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powerful testament to that - but this nation has arguably never seen the kind of bold, crudely calculated and ideologically driven legend-manufacturing as has taken place with Ronald Reagan. It is a myth machine that has been spectacularly successful, launched in the mid-1990s when the conservative brand was at low ebb.

The docudrama version of the Gipper's life story, successfully sold to the American public, helped to keep united and refuel a right-wing movement that consolidated power while citing Reaganism - as separate and apart from the flesh-and-blood Reagan - for misguided policies from lowering taxes in the time of war in Iraq to maintaining that unpopular conflict in a time of increasing bloodshed and questionable gains.

OK -- but it's fair to ask whether the Reagan myth matters as much now that George W. Bush is back at the ranch and President Obama is in the White House. I would argue that it does. Increasingly, the GOP minority in Washington, including 41 senators with just enough votes to derail the administration's proposals, is going to invoke the Reagan myth to continue to justify a tax system that harms the middle class as well as policies that ignore the scientific consensus on climate change. Look at the first major policy debate of the Obama presidency, over the proposed \$825 billion economic stimulus.