

offers the potential for major private sector involvement in and funding for conservation.

Conservation Strategies for New Zealand is lively, interesting and best of all provocative. For my taste it is a little too provocative in one sense of that word. It is too belligerent. But it is also provocative in the best sense. It sets one thinking.

Reviewed by Nicholas Gruen
Business Council of Australia

(All views expressed here are those of the author and should not be attributed to any organisation with which he is associated.)



Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader

by Dinesh D'Souza

1997, *The Free Press* (a division of Simon & Schuster), 192pp., \$42.00.

ISBN 0-6848-4428-1

D'Souza's thesis is that Reagan was a great president, the most important in the 20th century after Franklin Roosevelt. This is as good a way as any to begin an assessment of Reagan, a task historians seem a little reluctant to undertake. His greatness is not unreasonable to assume, since great events, generally beneficial to his country, occurred while he presided, including the start of the dissolution of the Soviet Union – 'the evil empire,' as Reagan called it, amidst widespread derision for his simplisticism. Yet to

hail Reagan as great is to confront the paradox of his 'ordinariness,' a euphemism in numerous minds for 'inferiority'.

Some of those shying from the paradox have played with the preposterous notion that Reagan's eight years in the White House coincided with a great presidency that lacked a great president. D'Souza briefly canvasses portrayals of Reagan as a man who, 'like Peter Sellers's character Chauncey Gardiner in the film *Being There*, was a cheerful simpleton who had no idea what was going on but happened to be in the right place at the right time and somehow managed to convince everyone that he was in charge.'

Someone was in charge during the eight years Reagan served as governor of California and the eight he was president. No hint of the presence of a Svengali was detected during those 16 years, nor has it been since. Moreover, Reagan's years of high public office were preceded by a lifetime of demonstrated competence and effortful achievement.

'Here was the son of the town drunk,' D'Souza writes, 'who grew up poor in the Midwest. Without any connections, he made his way to Hollywood and survived its cutthroat culture to become a major star.' He also became a major union official, president of the Screen Actors' Guild, and parlayed this office into an entree to Californian political circles – a career strategy so conventional as alone to challenge theories of Chauncey Gardiner guilelessness.

Reagan appears to be quite a strange man, and it may be in his personal strangeness that other writers, probing his character more deeply than D'Souza does in a book that is more political discourse than biography, will find explanations of his capacity for great achievements. D'Souza speculates informatively

about an icy aloofness at the core. Reagan is credited with having made only one close male friend in his life – Robert Taylor, the movie actor – and to have achieved intimacy only with his second wife, Nancy. His children have complained of his remoteness to them, and Reagan has made the strange response of exhibiting photographs of happy family scenes in attempted refutation of such claims.

When you read about it all these years later, Reagan's conduct immediately after being shot and seriously wounded in an assassination attempt in March 1981 is a significant example of strangeness. D'Souza provides the detail but, I think, draws the wrong conclusion from it.

On his arrival at the hospital, Reagan quipped to the doctors, 'Please tell me you're Republicans.' When he opened his eyes again [after surgery] and they asked him how he was feeling, he responded by scribbling on a notepad the old W.C. Fields line: 'All in all, I'd rather be in Philadelphia.' He explained what had happened to Nancy Reagan: 'Honey, I forgot to duck,' the words the boxer Jack Dempsey [used to] his wife when he lost the heavyweight title to Gene Tunney in 1926 ...

To a solicitous nurse who held his hand, Reagan cautioned, 'Does Nancy know about us?'

The unabashedly partisan D'Souza asks rhetorically, 'When has a man taken a bullet in the chest with greater elan?'

Elan? Some would discern instead a frantic tone in this torrent of wisecracking and facetiousness, as if Reagan were seeking to propitiate death – or the gods, or God – with an ingratiating performance. D'Souza explores only scantily Reagan's

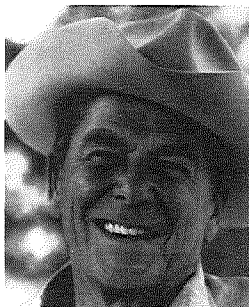
experience of growing up in a household under virtually constant financial stress. The president has never volunteered much about his childhood (Nancy Reagan probably revealed most when she said her husband's family moved frequently). But it is not unreasonable to speculate that the need for frantic propitiation came early into Reagan's life, along with identification of charming performance as protective armour.

This may explain the bare pass marks he earned at his undistinguished university and his great success there as an athlete and social leader. Reagan has always made light of his student experience, saying his best subject was football. But one senses a frantic quality in his extracurricular striving. He was head of the student council and editor of the university yearbook – but, as D'Souza writes, 'seems to have formed no lasting male friendships.'

Reagan was very ambitious, though, astonishing his student contemporaries by predicting he would be earning \$5,000 a year within 5 years of graduation – an awesome amount of money in 1929. D'Souza traces ambition as a consistent force in Reagan's life, not always precisely focused but reflected in an intense desire to take the next step upward and a freedom from anxiety about where it might land him. At the same time Reagan became more and more able to make do with the once-removed emotional life that public performance and official position provided him with.

It is possible that part of Reagan's success as governor and president was due to office being everything he had. One of the most revealing comments on Reagan as president comes from Mikhail Gorbachev, whom D'Souza interviewed: 'I know that Reagan was criticized as having a superficial style, an unwillingness to analyze details.

RONALD REAGAN



*How an Ordinary Man Became
an Extraordinary Leader*

DINESH D'SOUZA

With a leader of such a large scale, several stylistic peculiarities are permissible.'

Reagan was profoundly conscious of the weight of the American presidency and perceived it as a driving force rather than any kind of burden. His indifference to the detail of his work, which some saw as evidence of his incapacity, is presented persuasively by D'Souza as stemming from his taking it for granted that the president would have at his disposal people of requisite skill to attend to the details – in other words, to execute the president's will. Instead of amending drafts of important speeches presented to him by speechwriters, for instance, Reagan sometimes wrote the first draft himself and, losing interest, left it to the writers to give it final shape.

D'Souza takes note of an interesting perception of Reagan by the speechwriter Peggy Noonan, who observed that even when Reagan was not directly involved in White House decisions, they were determined by 'the idea of Reagan.' She did not mean by this that Reagan's theories animated cabinet members and

presidential advisers, but that his presidential persona commanded them. What would Reagan do in the circumstances, what would he want *them* to do? In short, Reagan managed even in the minds of those who worked closest with him to detach his personal nature from his office. He was the president.

D'Souza portrays Reagan as a leader who encouraged colleagues to present different points of view, which he heard out without much comment. When he decided between schools of thought, however, he was clear and confident. After that Reagan expected – took it for granted – that the president's decision would be put at once into effect. Inefficient and recalcitrant aides, such as Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who apparently postured contempt for Reagan, were progressively cut off from participation.

Reagan seems to have been an affable and considerate boss but formed no attachments with members of his cabinet and staff. After they departed from the administration he made no effort to maintain social contact – not even a telephone call. Valedictories were somewhat perfunctory. A job had been done. It was finished. D'Souza attributes this to Reagan's expectation that everybody in public service shared his complete commitment to it.

A third factor in Reagan's putative greatness as a president may have been contributed by his age – 69 when he began his presidency, the oldest man elected for the first time. His character and philosophy, D'Souza judges, were already fully formed.

Reagan was implacably convinced that entrepreneurship and work were the fundamentals of the American way. In elevating them through his policies he embarked on deficit funding practices without

precedent. Tax cuts were necessary in order to revive America's entrepreneurial drive and create jobs; high defence spending was necessary to defeat the Soviet enemy. A phlegmatic writer, D'Souza does less than justice to the intensity of alarm and opposition Reagan's policies aroused among advocates of detente and interventionist government.

During Reagan's eight years, the national debt trebled, the \$1.5 trillion added to it exceeding the entire accumulation of debt that had taken place during the rest of American history. D'Souza is somewhat unreservedly admiring of Reagan as an economic manager:

The inflation rate plummeted during Reagan's first term, averaged 3 per cent during his second term, and remained low under his successors ... the gross national product increased by nearly a third. The stock market doubled in value. Both poverty and unemployment rates declined. The United States reaffirmed its position as the world pre-eminent economy.

All this is so, but questions remain about whether America over-mortgaged itself, and the growing scar of poverty will have to be examined in the course of further assessment of the Reagan presidency.

Reagan was committed to the belief that American democracy was objectively good. The boldness and forcefulness with which this ordinary man dealt with the Soviets is truly astonishing. He ended the Reykjavik summit preemptorily when Gorbachev held out for too many concessions over America's Strategic Defence Initiative — the possibly mythic Star Wars program, which hastened the Soviet Union's bankruptcy by luring it into defence expenditures it

could not afford.

D'Souza, a White House policy adviser at the time, reports that Gorbachev asked as he was taking his leave of Reagan the following day, 'What else could I have done?'

Reagan replied relentlessly, 'You could have said yes.'

His aloofness, his acceptance that the power of his office far exceeded his personal power and his settled

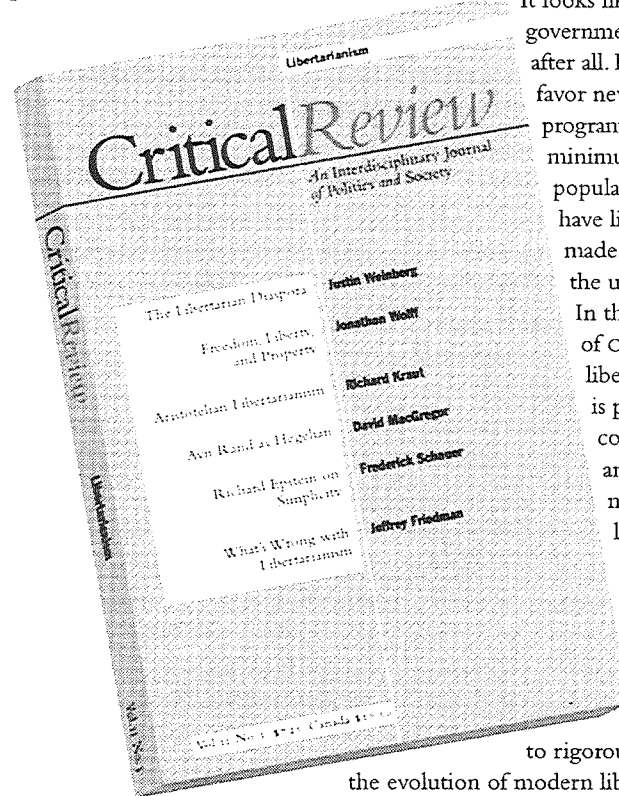
positions on essential matters are important elements in Reagan's claim to greatness. His presidency also invites close examination of the increasingly complex nature of the institution of the American presidency, which, deriving all its power from the people, seems to offer the chance of greatness to a remarkable array of individuals.

Reviewed by Frank Devine.

What's wrong with libertarianism...

...And how to fix it

"An exciting corner in the marketplace of competing ideas...stimulating and provocative." —Israel M. Kirzner



It looks like the era of big government isn't over after all. Politicians who favor new government programs and higher minimum wages are as popular as ever. Nor have libertarian ideas made real progress in the universities. Why? In this special issue of CRITICAL REVIEW, libertarian philosophy is put through a complete overhaul and tune-up. Every major version of libertarianism—self-ownership, Objectivism, Aristotelianism, and free-market economics—is subjected

to rigorous scrutiny, and the evolution of modern libertarianism is examined to see why it has not fulfilled its potential. A must-read for anyone who takes libertarianism seriously. Also available: a new special issue devoted to F.A. Hayek.

Single issues \$10. 1-year (4-issue) subscriptions: \$29 U.S., \$35 foreign, \$15 students with copy of ID; add \$15 for foreign air mail. Check/m.o./Visa or MC no. and exp. date to CRITICAL REVIEW, P.O. Box 10, Dept. 308L, Newtown, CT 06470; fax (203) 270-8105; email info@criticalreview.com; www.sevenbridgespress.com