

## Chapter 13

# Toward a Historiography of Reagan and the 1980s: Why Have We Done Such A Lousy Job?

*Gil Troy*

*If you can write a nation's stories, you needn't worry about who makes its laws,*  
Dr. George Gerbner, University of Pennsylvania

I finished writing my book *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* in the spring of 2004.<sup>1</sup> I received the copyedited manuscript back in June 2004, giving me my last chance to make substantive changes to the text. Fortunately, my deadline was mid-June, one week after Ronald Reagan's death.

This coincidence allowed me to rewrite the introduction, acknowledging a dramatic tonal shift in the conversation about Ronald Reagan. I first wrote an introduction with academics' contempt for Reagan in mind. The subtext of my words offered a defiant statement, insisting: "Yes, I can write a balanced work about Ronald Reagan without being a rightwing Neanderthal—and more scholars should undertake such efforts." The new and ultimately final introduction sought to reconcile the contempt most academics have for Ronald Reagan with the effusive eulogizing of June 2004, wherein even the *New York Times*' front page article compared Reagan to Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>2</sup>

Studying Ronald Reagan is not for the faint-hearted—or the untenured. Reagan scholarship suffers from two overlapping afflictions, characteristic of today's academic and popular cultures. The intense partisanship emanating from both Washington, D.C. and the academy makes it difficult to assess Reagan calmly, soberly. All too many discussions need to be run through the increasingly tiresome "red" or "blue" litmus test to determine whether one is a Reagan friend playing to conservative red America or a Reagan foe playing to liberal blue America. Reagan's centrality in launching the rise of modern conservatism keeps passions stoked about him, both pro and con.

Paradoxically, President George W. Bush's contentious time in office hardened some assessments of Reagan, with critics blaming Reagan for starting it all. However, some Bush critics softened on Reagan. Forgetting their anger in the 1980s, they partially rehabilitated Reagan to contrast him to their current target, the second President Bush. At the same time, conservatives frustrated with Bush's shortcomings became even more nostalgic for Reagan.

The second affliction has to do with the superficiality beclouding so many discussions of politics, in the media and in too many classrooms. Reagan's death and Gerald R. Ford's death two-and-a-half years later unleashed a cascade of adulatory adjectives describing the two presidents' respective personalities. But simply declaring Reagan "optimistic" or Ford "decent" does not explain how the president interacts with his surroundings or shapes the times. Moreover, in both cases, the funeral coverage precluded any serious criticism of the two presidents, making it harder for historians to do their jobs. As I said of a different ruler when I played Marc Antony in sixth-grade, we should come neither to bury Reagan nor to praise him. Our goal as historians should be to understand Ronald Reagan, his impact and his times.

The partisanship and superficiality fed what I call the Reagan "yuck factor" among scholars or what Professor Alan Brinkley more elegantly termed "the problem of American conservatism."<sup>3</sup> Given the tremendously high percentage of historians who are liberals, and given how many of those who lived through Reagan's time detested conservatives, most veteran historians simply would not consider spending significant time with Reagan. Furthermore, the great expectations surrounding Edmund Morris's disappointing work *Dutch*<sup>4</sup> (1999)—and the millions of dollars Random House invested—inhibited other scholars and publishers from pursuing a project, except in the conservative think-tank world. The next generation of scholars, who grew up in the Reagan era, found it safer to study "conservatism," Republicans, or Reaganite suburbia than to risk being besmirched by studies of Reagan himself.<sup>5</sup> Only now are we starting to see the too-long delayed flow of dissertations and monographs.

As a result, nearly thirty years after Ronald Reagan's election, twenty years after his retirement, Reagan scholarship does not measure up to scholarship regarding other presidencies. Comparing where Franklin Roosevelt historiography was three decades after Roosevelt's inauguration, or doing the same for John F. Kennedy, paints a sobering picture. By 1962, both James MacGregor Burns and Arthur M. Schlesinger had written majestic, multivolume works that remain the gold standards for Roosevelt and New Deal scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, by 1990, Kennedy scholarship was already in a third phase. The eulogies that hailed Kennedy and Camelot combined with the pathographies that exposed him were now yielding illuminating syntheses that actually analyzed him and his presidency. Moreover, the sheer volume of books on Kennedy offered a rich and dense mother lode of tidbits and interpretations.

Surprisingly simplistic stereotypes of Ronald Reagan defined the scholarship in the first two decades after Reagan's inauguration. For starters, many