

Death of a Salesman

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WASHINGTON DC, June 10, 2004: When Ronald Wilson Reagan slipped his final grip on that consciousness he had long abandoned, it was as historic an event as the introduction of a new soap powder product, or the retirement of an old one.

First elected Governor on a muted inclination to shoot student demonstrators, Reagan spent his political life as an apostle of reaction, repression and recklessness. Made President by the hostage-taking Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini, then reelected by a marketing program so meretricious it remains a marvel of its kind, Reagan only escaped impeachment over his unconstitutional Iran-financed war in Nicaragua by the lateness of its revelation.

His genial Irish confidence-man's twinkle served him well in movies, as a pitchman, and finally as a deliverer of political homilies almost every one of which was false in some major particular. The unrepentant public liar that Republicans accused Bill Clinton of being, Reagan had already been. His most famous comments were astonishing in their irrelevance: "I paid for this microphone" helped him get nominated in 1980, even though the dispute was over the agreed rules, not the payments; and "Tear down this wall," which was as if Gorbachev had told Reagan to stop imprisoning so many people: none of his business.

"The Great Prevaricator" is his historic title, unrivalled as he was even by Richard Nixon in his dedication to publicizing his dream world and calling it reality. Nixon knew what the truth was and didn't care; whereas Reagan neither knew nor cared. The degenerative series has been completed by Bush Minor, who stands doomed in the words of Brecht. "Who does not recognize the truth, is an imbecile. But who recognizes it, and names it a lie -- that is criminal."

Reagan craved credit for winning the Cold War though his major achievement was that he was standing around when the peoples of Eastern Europe, for reasons of their own, chose economic and political change. His overexpenditure on space warfare gadgetry fleeced a generation of American schoolchildren of adequate disbursements. And he did it with a such a grin.

Equally he sought plaudits for preventing where possible, or rolling back where available, significant social, political or economic progress in America. The real thrust of his punitive and parsimonious "smaller government" mantra was to spend less on ordinary people and more on corporate welfare in the form of tax breaks or military spending. His contempt for the American government is the direct ancestor of Timothy McVeigh's, though Reagan's damage hit all American urban areas, not just Oklahoma City. But he always looked so friendly.

The "Morning in America" mendacity foisted upon voters by his handlers was a call to true Disneyfication of the American melting pot: a white-dominated small-town where our little brown and black brothers knew their places and watched the jobs go to others, meanwhile keeping women of all colors either out of the workplace, or making sure they remained underpaid if employed at all. Insofar as Reagan's patented "optimism of the oblivious" reinforced the well-being of the well-off, he projected the rigidities of the current House and Senate. His pious evangelical chicanery was cynically accompanied by the rollcall of the indicted that was his cabinet and subcabinet. And his most significant military adventure occurred when he ran from the Middle East after losing 225 Marines in Lebanon.

His anti-tax ideology apparently sprang from resentment over owing taxes on the vast sums he was paid for a series of B movies during WWII; his conversion away from the New Deal was cemented by the Democratic Party platform of 1948, which called for full peacetime employment, provision of universal health insurance coverage, enactment of civil rights legislation, and an end to excess defense spending. These things sent Reagan screaming into the night of Republicanism from which he never returned.

Various attempts to keep Reaganism on life support are trotted out at intervals; but its essence is no more complicated than the state of the kid in the treehouse who proclaimed, "Pull the ladder up, George; I'm in." To that extent, of course, economic selfishness as an ideology both long preceded and will long succeed Reagan; but he certainly burnished it well during his stewardship of it.

To those who might protest that this is too harsh an assessment of Reagan, let it be retorted that any squintmindedness here would have to be multiplied several hundredfold to begin to approach his; and that I at least disagree with what he did, whereas he objected to who people were. His disdain was uniformly directed away from the un-poor, the un-black, the un-feminine and the un-old, while he never met a corporation he didn't like.

His accomplishments dust, his legacy ashes, and his influence malign, Reagan's corporeal dissolution need be neither long remarked nor much observed by the 37.5 million Americans who voted against him at their last opportunity, nor by the countless more non-voters in whom Reagan had no more interest than in keeping them discouraged.

Now he belongs to the phages.

--James McCarty Yeager is a Southern Catholic leftist predisposed to disliking jovial old frauds of whatever persuasion.