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Media: Mourning in America

If journalism is history's first draft, the death of Ronald Reagan has caused a step-up in the mass production of falsified history. It's mourning in America. The main technique is omission. People who suffered from the Reagan presidency have no media standing today. It's not cool to mention victims of his policies in, for example, Central America. President Reagan lauded and subsidized the contra guerrillas – extolling them as “freedom fighters” while they terrorized the population in Nicaragua, killing thousands of civilians. And he proudly funneled large-scale support to governments aligned with death squads murdering thousands more in Guatemala and El Salvador.

With all the media-fueled mourning in America, there's been none left for the victims of Reaganite policies in Angola, either. His tireless support for the guerrilla forces of Unita “freedom fighter” Jonas Savimbi deserves much of the credit for making Angola the artificial limb capital of the world. Reagan saw to it that Uncle Sam walked in the bloody footsteps of colonial Portugal and apartheid South Africa to sustain Savimbi's monstrous warfare.

“Every year since the mid-1980s, I have interviewed dozens of displaced peasants who described attacks on their villages by Unita, kidnaping of young men and boys, looting, beatings, and killings, while in hospital beds the rows of mutilated women bore witness to the mining of their fields,” journalist Victoria Brittain wrote in the *New Statesman* magazine a decade ago. “Defectors from Unita told more chilling stories of mass rallies at the headquarters in Jamba where women were burned alive as witches. These were not stories the outside world wanted to hear about Unita, whose leader was regularly received at the White House.” Very warmly. By Ronald Reagan.

Mainstream news outlets encourage us to mourn his passing but not to grieve a whit for his victims.

Reagan lavished big money from the U.S. Treasury on anti-Soviet mujahadeen – “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan who evolved into groupings like Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Yet his supposed idealism rarely gets a critical look through the obit-omit

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media lens. Since he passed away, American media outlets have drowned the country in nonstop veneration for Reagan as a symbol of devotion to principle. There's precious little U.S. media space for the kind of reporting that Agence France Presse provided a few days after he died: "Reagan, determined to check arch-foe Iran, opened a back door to Iraq through which flowed U.S. intelligence and hundreds of millions of dollars in loan guarantees even as Washington professed neutrality in Baghdad's war with Tehran. ... Sales of UH-1H helicopters and Hughes MD-500 Defender helicopters were approved by Washington. Though sold as civilian aircraft, nobody objected when they were quickly converted for military use."

President Reagan was in the habit of telling whoppers. His tales ranged far and wide: to deny environmental degradation, or blithely pretend that widespread human rights violations by U.S.-backed regimes didn't exist, or denigrate low-income people in the United States. Yet now, more than ever, he's being hailed as the Great Communicator.

Promoting huge tax breaks for multimillionaires and large corporations, he presided over an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the already rich at the expense of everyone else. But today's dominant media images present him as a beloved populist hero.

That's media mourning in America.

He's being hailed as a champion of "small government" – yet he vastly increased the size of Defense Department budgets and methodically appointed federal judges who enlarged the intrusive powers of government.

President Reagan spoke out for labor rights in Poland while spearheading anti-union measures in the United States and avidly supporting regimes on several continents that repressed workers and oversaw systematic murders of labor activists. Now, rewritten media history is touting him as a friend to working people.

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He was a president so immersed in anti-gay bigotry and so bereft of non-Hallmark-style compassion that from the time the Centers for Disease Control announced the discovery of AIDS in mid-1981, until 1987, he couldn't bring himself to publicly utter the name of the deadly disease – part of a policy approach that surely cost many thousands of lives. Yet he is being lauded by countless pundits for his sunny disposition.

Reagan thumbed his nose at basic civil rights legislation, including efforts to protect voting rights. In words and deeds, he conveyed disinterest in helping to move the country beyond the curse of racism.

But his media persona endures as a man with a big smile and an even bigger heart.

The mourning in America is overwhelming. But the country is starved for honesty.