

Making the myth, forgetting the man

By Danny Schechter

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In the bad old days of the Cold War, we would learn that a Russian leader died when their TV screens went dark and martial music was all that we heard. Afterwards, their channels filled with non-stop accolades and tributes to a “great proletarian leader.” It was this type of Cold War propaganda posing as news that was held up as an example of the kind of information control the Free World was fighting to overturn – and had, thanks to the brilliance of our 40th President.

Deification like this had its origins in the Church. When a great religious leader died, church organs responded with divine adoration. Scriptures like Hebrews 1:1-3 were recited to bless the departed with glowing language: “He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of is power.”

When word of the passing of former President Ronald Reagan reached American newsrooms on Saturday, they went into a similar overdrive as hagiography displaced journalism. Like praise singers in ancient cultures, our modern day alchemists, went to work transforming a sick and aging political leader into a demi-god.

Suddenly, our news networks resembled religious broadcasters with a Pravda-like, Soviet echo. In many ways this was consistent with the way Ronald Reagan was treated when he was in office. C.T. Hanson, a one-time Washington editor of The Columbia Journalism Review used this frame in an analysis of the same man decades ago, writing then: “The White House Press served with unusual frequency during Reagan’s first two years as a kind of Pravda of the Potomac, a conduit for White House utterances and official image mongering intended to sell Reaganomics.”

The best book written in that period on a most deferential White House press corps was called “On Bended Knee.” Needless to say the Reaganauts praised their captive media. Lynn Nofziger, Reagan’s campaign press secretary said in March 1982, “Overall, I don’t have any real complaints about the way the press covered this administration.”

In his book length assessment of “Presidents and the Press,” Joseph C. Spear showed how the Reagan White House adopted his predecessor Richard Nixon’s trick bag of press

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appeasement, evasion and intimidation to shape opinion and mould public perceptions. Spear called Ronald Reagan's presidency "probably the best staged one in history thanks to his acting abilities and the expertise of his media specialists."

The reporters who were infatuated with Reagan's charisma and appeal during his life remained as infatuated after his death.

Ironically, in keeping with the secrecy Republicans are known for, up until the end, Reagan's own office had been downplaying the President's deteriorating condition. The New York Times reported in its early edition before Reagan's death was confirmed that "his office denied his condition had changed."

When the "Breaking News" broke, television reporters quickly brought us every detail live from the gates of the Reagan ranch. The news anchors rushed back to their studios to fill the air with their personal reminiscences and play by play, while their show producers dipped back into time-worn Rolodexes to book the loyalist footmen and handlers who fostered the Reagan myth in the first place, and now had a chance to give it new legs.

Defying any pretense of diversity in media, Time and Newsweek remade their covers with the SAME photo of Reagan as cowboy. The usually competitive New York Daily News and The New York Post showed the same lack of imagination with cloned front pages. Network specials were cranked up overnight. 60 Minutes dropped a promised segment with Sibel Edmonds, the FBI translator who claims she saw evidence that the government knew of planned terrorist attacks for a special segment by Mike Wallace who introduced himself as "Nancy's friend" before he became a journalist. Dan Rather was called on to introduce a segment on Reagan's funniest bits, as if this was original. CNN's Jeff Greenfield had a similar report the night before. Neither bothered to interview Reagan's skilled Virginia-based joke writer who scripted his every word.

The TV archivists worked over time dredging up old footage as Reagan as hero took over the networks – bumping President Bush's extravaganza at Normandy to CSPAN. Program after program on network after network ran interviews with former Secretary of State and longtime Reagan ally James Baker. Newt Gingrich hailed Reagan on CBS while Sam Donaldson, Cokey Roberts and George Will outdid each other with praise on ABC. NBC did not pre-empt tennis matches for more of the same.

It was all Ronnie all the time, a non-stop Televisual Reaganathon, with nary a negative word or honest assessment. The contra war, the military buildup, the growing inequality, the attack on unions, the alliance with the Islamic crazies -- including Bin Laden -- in Afghanistan, the embrace of Saddam, the crazy SDI star wars systems, the support for white South Africa etc., etc. . . had "disappeared" from view like an Argentinian dissident from the same era. Reagan was reborn again as the quintessential folk hero. It was morning in

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America one more time. Throughout this next week, it will be mourning in America with a planned State funeral.

This all flows out of the widely held perception that Reagan was a popular president because he restored our confidence in a mythic America after the decline of Nixon, the folly of Ford, and the “malaise” of Carter.

The networks clearly wanted some of that popularity to rub off on them as they pandered to the audience with what were essentially apolitical or even anti-political profiles of a master politician who supposedly was popular because of his plainspoken personality. There was little in the coverage that deviated from that self-fulfilling perspective. There was little that explained how constant positive TV coverage of the kind we were seeing constructed and reinforced the image of Reagan as superhero.

Just as Reagan often invented stories that were traced back to movies he saw, many in the public do the same when they respond to him.

Last night, I heard Noam Chomsky on Air America say that educated people tend to be the most indoctrinated, and that the people who convey propaganda have often propagandized themselves first. In short, they believe their own hype.

Website www.Geeze.US dug into his past to reminds us what the TV commentators haven't: “Reagan can be remembered for his consideration of ketchup as a vegetable so as to not require additional expenditures for children's lunches. Neither can we forget ‘If you've seen one redwood, you've seen em all’ to justify the cutting down every standing tree in California. Does anyone want to remember his California Kitchen Cabinet? No thanks. Besides the Beirut loss and the Grenada victory, 52/444 and the Iran-Contra scandal (trading arms for hostages and using the profits from the arms sales to fund the Reagan sanctioned anti-Sandinista CIA death squads), perhaps the most disgusting of the Reagan-as-President legacy was the re-naming of National Airport (DCA) after Ronald Reagan.”

Blogger Steve Gilliard contrasted the way American journalists treat the death of politicians as opposed to the way it is handled in the UK “The British have a tradition: when someone dies, their newspaper obituary tells the truth. Americans like to say something kind about the dead, no matter how scummy they were. Even Nixon got a halo in death, where only Hunter Thompson reminded people of who exactly he was and how the honors given him were, well, wrong.”

The network coverage this weekend achieved its goal: to leave us with a warm and gooeey feeling towards Reagan while erasing our memory of his actual deeds. It is in moments like these that we see the continuity of conservative news coverage and its larger function to re-package politics into the mythology of a triumphant America.

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Ronnie's handlers couldn't have written a better final scene. Cut to credits . . .

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