

A tribute to Ronald Reagan

ON the morning of Ronald Reagan's death, I was strolling across the University of California's Berkeley campus. I wasn't aware that Reagan was on his deathbed, but he was on my mind none-the-less. As I passed Berkeley's historic Sproul Plaza, I remembered his quote as governor during the heyday of Berkeley's anti-Vietnam War protests when he bellowed, if it takes a "bloodbath" to pacify UC's campuses, "let the bloodbath begin." In the years that followed, American police officers beat and gassed protesters not only in California, but across the US, with students shot dead in Jackson, Mississippi and Kent, Ohio. Reagan, however, lived on for over three more decades.

Reagan's death was as Orwellian as his presidency, with the corporate media engaged in an orgy of adoration – not of the real Reagan, but of a mythical character they were constructing literally before our eyes. Yes, Reagan did come off as a kind old grandfatherly man. but by all accounts, Adolph Hitler was also kind – to dogs and Aryan children. But Hitler's ultimate legacy isn't that of a kind dog-lover, and Reagan's legacy shouldn't be that of a kind old man.

He was no grandfather to Nicaraguan children. In 1981 he launched a covert US war against Nicaragua, whose government Reagan ignorantly termed as "Marxist." Under his command, we financed, armed and trained a mercenary band of terrorists known as the

A TRIBUTE TO RONALD REAGAN / 2

"Contras." US Government documents that have since become public detail how the Contra terrorists targeted schools, health clinics, public utilities and public transportation as well as elected officials (from 1981 to 1984 they murdered 910 government officials and over 8,000 civilians). They bombed doctors' offices, blew up school buses, destroyed electric plants and killed police officers, elected officials and patriotic Nicaraguans who supported their elected government. Under Reagan, the US mined Nicaragua's harbors and ordered the CIA to blow up several of that country's largest fuel depots, ironically arguing later that the Inter-American Development Bank shouldn't loan money to Nicaraguan fishermen since that nation didn't have adequate fuel for its fishing fleet.

A Congressional intelligence report documented that Reagan's Contra army, which Reagan equated as "the moral equivalent of our founding fathers," had "raped, tortured and killed unarmed civilians, including children." The report also documents that "groups of civilians, including women and children, were burned, dismembered, blinded and beheaded" by the Contras, whom Reagan dubbed "freedom fighters."

The US Congress, for its part, was so disgusted that it cut off all funding for Reagan's "freedom fighters." Undeterred, the Reagan administration covertly raised funds for the Contras by selling weapons to the US's official enemy, Iran, as well as aiding the Contras in illicit narcotics shipments to US-based drug dealers. This fiasco has historically been termed the "Iran Contra Affair." The Contra War ended in 1989, with a fed up Nicaraguan population finally crying "uncle" and voting a US-supported government into office. The war cost Nicaragua more than 50,000 lives and left the Nicaraguan economy and infrastructure in shambles – a state in which it remains today.

Reagan's treason in Iran

The Iran Contra Affair wasn't Reagan's first contact with Iran, however. In 1979, when Jimmy Carter was running for re-election, Iranian students were holding over 50 Americans hostage with the approval and support of Iran's fundamentalist government. Candidate Reagan sent an envoy to meet with the Iranians during his campaign, allegedly arranging for Iran NOT to release the hostages until after the US presidential election, leaving Jimmy Carter seeming powerless and humiliated in the face of a foreign enemy (This is best documented in Gary Sick's book, "October Surprise: America's Hostages in Iran and the Election of Ronald Reagan," published by Random House's Times Books).

The ultimate payoff for the Iranians was the Iran-Contra arms deal and a general hands-off approach to Iran during Reagan's presidency. By any definition, this deal was treasonous. Reagan's team conspired with a hostile enemy of the US, encouraging it to maintain hostility against the US while further endangering the lives of the American

hostages, whom Iran ultimately released on the first day of Reagan's presidency.

After conspiring with the Iranians, however, Reagan also double-crossed them, selling weapons to their enemy, Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The Reagan administration continued to sell not only conventional weapons, but also biological and chemical weapons components to Iraq even after it was documented that they were using banned chemical weapons against their own Kurdish population and the Iranians. The Reagan administration also worked to thwart international condemnation of Saddam's regime. The Iran-Iraq war cost over a million lives, with the Reagan administration supplying weapons to both sides.

Osama bin Reagan

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, the Reagan administration ordered the CIA to build an army of fundamentalist warriors to drive the Soviet Union out of that country. Among the leaders they recruited, armed and trained, was Osama bin Laden. The Afghani members of this army evolved into the Taliban; while the foreign fighters recruited primarily in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia later became al Qaida. These bastard sons of the Reagan foreign policy are the Gipper's ultimate legacy. I'll remember him more for his role in laying the groundwork for September 11th than I will for his kindly smile.

Reagan will also be remembered quite well in El Salvador and Guatemala – especially on the Day of the Dead, when folks go to cemeteries to remember their deceased ancestors. In El Salvador, Reagan armed and trained a brutal military linked to psychotically violent death squads responsible for killing tens of thousands of Salvadorans. In 1982 Reagan reported to Congress that the Salvadoran government was making strides in improving its human rights record. American newspapers, which during the Reagan era still carried some news critical of US puppet governments, reported during the same week that Salvadoran troops massacred, in one village alone, 700-1,000 people, mainly women, children and elderly folks who didn't think they needed to flee. A week later, the same newspapers carried reports of institutionalized rape and torture carried out by US-armed Salvadoran forces. Then there was the rape of American nuns at the hands of Salvadoran troops trained at Fort Benning, Georgia, at the School of the Americas. By the end of the Reagan presidency, approximately 70,000 Salvadorans were killed.

Next door in Guatemala, a 1982 coup brought Rios Montt, a member of a California-based evangelical Christian church, to power. Reagan gave his blessing to the coup, restoring US military aid cut under Jimmy Carter. Montt proceeded to declare a state of siege, launching the hemisphere's most brutal contemporary war against indigenous people. Montt's genocidal "Scorched Earth" campaign resulted in the destruction of 400

A TRIBUTE TO RONALD REAGAN / 4

Mayan villages and the deaths of 100,000 people (some estimates range up to 200,000), with surviving Maya-Catholic residents resettled into strategic "Model Villages" under the theological control of evangelical Christian missionaries.

People in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala entered the 1980s with hope. Reagan killed that hope. That, along with a decade of unspeakable horror, is Reagan's legacy to the people of Central America, who only knew him as a brutal butcher, never as a kind old man.

Reagan also was a friend to the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, vetoing a bipartisan congressional bill that would have enacted sanctions against that government. He also backed the totalitarian junta in Argentina and attempted to normalize relations with the murderous Pinochet regime in Chile – both governments that have since fallen to popular democratic movements. He also expressed support for the brutal Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines.

The pied piper of Armageddon

Reagan's foreign policy wasn't just marked by the coddling of dictators. His administration also put forth a bizarre and quite terrifying proposition that nuclear war could be winnable. This was an insane scorecard, where if a few of us survived, while none of them survived, then this technically would be a victory, marred only by nuclear winter.

This Strangelovian proposition, of course, put the Soviets on edge. Hence, we have since learned, when the comic old Gipper cut loose one of his zany one-liners in front of an open microphone, stating that he just declared the Soviet Union "illegal" and that we would "begin bombing in five minutes," the USSR went into high alert, activating its nuclear arsenal and damn near ending life on earth as we know it. Anti-nuclear activist, Dr. Helen Caldicott called Reagan "the pied piper of Armageddon." Under his watch we had the largest anti-war demonstration (Nuclear Freeze) in American history, with between 700,000 to 1.2 million people gathering in New York's Central Park to denounce his policies.

Reagan was equally destructive back home where his tax cuts for the richest Americans set the pace for a draconian upward redistribution of income while gutting government programs for jobs, housing, health and education. He cut the school lunch program, famously declaring that ketchup would suffice as a vegetable in school cafeterias. At protests we chanted "Ketchup is a condiment – Reagan is a vegetable."

The stench of urine

It was under Reagan's watch that the streets of America's cities began to stink of urine

as the term "homelessness" entered the American lexicon. The economic miracle celebrated last week on network TV was known at the time as the "Reagan Recession." The rich got richer, a lot richer. And many in the middle class suddenly became poor for the first time in generations. Millions of Americans continue to live on the streets or in their cars. We now have the "working homeless" and "homeless families" joining the legions of despair. This is all Reagan's legacy.

Perhaps the area where he differed most from his predecessor was in regards to the environment. Jimmy Carter actually had an energy policy. He mounted solar collectors on the roof of the White House and began an earnest push toward mandating the use of renewable energy while setting mileage standards for automobiles.

In 1979 Carter made the ultimate mistake – being honest. In contrast to the irresponsible consequence-free consumerism that followed in the Reagan-Bush-Clinton-Bush era, Carter warned Americans that the party needed to end – that we would have to live collectively as adults and face the consequences of our actions.

In contrast to our current terminal SUV-laden childish "I'm an American and I can drive anything I damn please" culture, Carter warned, "We can't go on consuming 40 percent more energy than we produce. When we import oil we are also importing inflation plus unemployment." Carter went even further, questioning the whole economic, environmental and cultural impact of conspicuous consumption itself. In his "Malaise Speech" on July 15th, 1979, Carter warned, "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose."

With this speech, Carter challenged the very ethos of the upcoming Reagan Revolution – greed, irresponsibility and living for consequence-free immediate gratification, the world be damned. Carter told Americans that we had to live responsibly, and this, along with Reagan's Iran treason, was his ultimate downfall. Carter proposed capping oil imports at 1977 levels, cutting oil usage 50% by 1990 and engaging in an unprecedented peacetime spending plan to develop alternative fuel sources, with the goal of producing 20% of our energy from solar sources by the year 2000.

Gutting reality

One of Reagan's first acts in office was to order the working solar panels removed from the roof of the White House. He then scrapped the rest of Carter's energy plan, never

A TRIBUTE TO RONALD REAGAN / 6

replacing it with one of his own. Americans went on a 25-year spree, buying larger and more powerful cars, building more and more roads to drive them on, all while starving mass transportation coffers. The result is the global climate change and oil wars and energy insecurity that we are now seeing. Take a deep breath. Reagan's legacy is all around us.

Ultimately, the Reagan presidency undermined American culture, legitimizing greed as an acceptable value. He promised to shrink government but instead gave us record deficits driven by tax cuts to the wealthy and corporations coupled with increases in military spending. He allowed Savings and Loan administrators such as Neil Bush to loot their own banks, ultimately costing us almost a trillion dollars. He set back conservation efforts and the fight against global warming by 25 years, all but guaranteeing an environmental calamity. He had no qualms about taking the food out of the mouths of poor children. He poisoned our judiciary with ideologically-driven reactionary judges such as Antonin Scalia, ultimately leading to George W. Bush's appointment to the White House.

Reagan transformed us from a mature nation responsibly planning for our future into a hedonistic band of overgrown toddlers on a credit card high. He got reelected because it's more fun to spend than to save, and easier to pillage than to conserve. This culture of selfishness and irresponsibility is Reagan's true legacy. He not only poisoned our environment, he poisoned our national ethos. Most of our current problems, including the imbecile now in the White House, have their roots in the Reagan presidency.

May he rot in hell

We shouldn't allow the corporate media to engage in unchallenged historic revisionism. Looking at the media's celebration of Ronald Reagan's life gives credibility to Gore Vidal's argument that we are now living in the United States of Amnesia. No, Reagan was not a great man and we were not always at war with Eurasia. Don't be afraid to speak the truth and articulate history as you remember it or credibly learned it.

Ronald Reagan was one of the most destructive Americans ever to live. Generations will suffer because of his actions. Don't be afraid to speak to this reality. Tell it to the folks at the water cooler. Blast it out over the internet to all of your friends. Shout it loudly from atop of the nearest building: Ronald Reagan was a mean heartless bastard. May he rot in hell!