

New York Times on the Reagan series controversy: in praise of cowardice

David Walsh
7 November 2003

Executives at television network CBS acted spinelessly this week when they canceled their four-hour miniseries “The Reagans” scheduled to be broadcast November 16 and 18, following protests from the Republican Party and the ultra-right. The program’s liberal producers had dared to include references in the program to Reagan’s well-known indifference to the AIDS crisis and to his wife’s manipulative and demanding behavior.

News of the upcoming series provoked an outcry from right-wing talk-radio hosts, columnists and politicians, none of whom had seen the television film. This social element, which shapes official “public opinion” in America at present, had no great difficulty in forcing CBS to drop the program, which is now set to be aired on cable television’s Showtime network.

A handful of television critics saw the CBS action for what it was: abject cowardice. Brian Lambert, the media critic of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, entitled his comment, “Cowardly CBS pulls ‘Reagans,’ caves in to conservative attack.” Lambert wrote: “There is absolutely no doubt that CBS capitulated to a stunning outpouring of anger from the various kindred elements of what, collectively, can be called the conservative media attack engine.”

Robert Bianco, in a *USA Today* piece headlined, “Cowardly CBS unfair to viewers, not ‘Reagans,’” commented: “Under pressure from conservative groups, CBS has exiled its highest-profile sweeps project, ‘The Reagans,’ to Showtime. In essence, CBS is admitting that it is incapable of handling any subject more controversial than a Hallmark card bromide.”

One would have thought that the capitulation by CBS President Leslie Moonves and his fellow executives to the far right was an act of intellectual and social cowardice difficult to top. The *New York Times*, however, has made a stab at it.

The newspaper’s November 5 editorial, blandly

headlined “CBS Cancels ‘The Reagans,’” doesn’t start with an attack on the right-wing thought police determined to keep the Reagan myth alive or CBS executives for their pusillanimity, but with a criticism of the network for ever having created the series! “It is hard to know,” the editorialists begin, “what CBS was thinking when it decided to order up a less-than-complimentary mini-series about the Reagans at a time when former President Ronald Reagan is failing and his wife, Nancy, is nursing him.”

After suggesting without much conviction that “CBS was wrong to yield to conservative pressure and yank it [the miniseries],” the *Times* returns to its essential hostility to the entire project: “The biopic, a burgeoning TV format, is a notoriously unreliable storytelling medium. Actors made up to look like famous people spout made-up dialogue that often sounds as if it had been written with the primary purpose of keeping viewers tuned in during the sweeps season. It is not difficult to see why people close to Mr. Reagan would be upset that the script quoted him, for example, on the subject of AIDS sufferers as saying, in an invented quotation, ‘They that live in sin shall die in sin.’”

Again, it must be pointed out this comment, or at least the thought behind it, is not so “invented” as all that. Reagan’s authorized biographer, Edmund Morris, writes that the former president once commented about the deadly disease, “Maybe the Lord brought down this plague.”

The *Times* editorial’s basic thrust is to chastise CBS executives for not having come up with a dirty compromise. “But it is also hard to believe,” the editors write, “that CBS was unable to edit the series into a form suitable for broadcasting. It would not have had to be favorable to Mr. Reagan, or even rigidly evenhanded, to be worthy of running. The former president is certainly a suitable subject for public debate.”

The implications of the *Times* editorial are more clearly in a piece by Alessandra Stanley, the newspaper's television critic, "Hollywood Stumbles at Doorstep of Politics." Stanley does not go through the motions of criticizing the right wing. Her theme is the foolhardiness of Hollywood liberals for having tampered with the Reagan myth.

She writes that "CBS has reminded us just how untutored Hollywood people can be when they dabble in politics.... 'The Reagans' to-do is mostly revealing about its makers. Its producers, Neil Meron and Craig Zadan, are gifted.... But when broaching politics, these producers appear to have sacrificed showmanship to self-righteousness, adopting a preachy, liberal agenda that clouds an otherwise smart, entertaining script."

One has no doubt that 'The Reagans' is a poor effort, which does not begin to examine the truly disastrous legacy of the Reagan administration: the smashing of strikes and unions, the destruction of social programs, the vast transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich, the support for death-squad dictatorships all over the world and the incitement of Islamic fundamentalism, among other policies. In her sneering manner Stanley, however, chooses to criticize the program from the *right*, for its "preachy, liberal agenda," i.e., for the mild criticisms made by the CBS series of the rightward lurch in American politics represented by the Reagan years.

She continues: "The producers of 'The Reagans' were so intent on re-examining their subject's legacy that they missed the missile-defense shield surrounding Mr. Reagan, now incapacitated by Alzheimer's disease. He is not just a beloved former president; he is the Moses of the conservative movement."

In other words, any sensible producer or writer would have steered clear of telling the truth, or even a fraction of it, about Reagan and thereby engaging the extreme right in a confrontation. Stanley here reveals the ethos that guides US media and entertainment circles, which can be summed up in a handful of commandments:

1. Never stick your neck out.
2. Always cultivate the rich and powerful.
3. The truth is fine, but not nearly as important as career and income.

Stanley has the same advice as her newspaper's editors, that an even more watered-down version of the Reagan story would surely have placated the right wing. "Handled more delicately," she writes, "the series could have been shown on CBS."

She concludes with this remarkable tribute to Reagan

himself. Neither partisans nor filmmakers are expected to have perspective. But politics requires foresight and common sense. So far, it seems, the only person who managed to apply them in both Hollywood and Washington was the figure behind the whole CBS mess, Ronald Reagan."

The *Times* editorial and Stanley's article taken together have a definite political significance. In their cynical, roundabout fashion—expressing astonishment at CBS for having embarked on an unflattering portrait of Reagan, criticizing the "biopic" as a genre, etc.—the newspaper and its television critic are offering an olive branch to the extreme right. The *Times* is making clear its solidarity not with those whose work has been censored and essentially suppressed as a result of the right-wing campaign, but with those doing the censoring and suppressing.

This policy of conciliating and attempting to establish closer relations with the right wing is not new. It is well known that the *Times* played a critical role in the fabricated scandals beginning in 1992 aimed at destabilizing the Clinton administration. It launched the so-called Whitewater affair, promoted the media frenzy over the Lewinsky sex scandal and served as an apologist for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and his efforts to stage a quasi-judicial coup d'état.

Since the theft of the 2000 election the newspaper has sought to portray George W. Bush as a legitimate political leader and "statesman" and covered up the lies of his administration over Iraq—and continues to support the brutal colonial occupation of that country.

Its cowardly response to the cancellation of "The Reagans" reveals once more the *Times*' contempt for democratic principles and its role as a mouthpiece for reactionary political forces.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact