

US television network caves in to right wing over Reagan mini-series

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Executives at the CBS television network announced November 4 that they were canceling a two-part series, “The Reagans,” scheduled to be broadcast November 16 and 18. Instead they will license the program’s exhibition rights to cable television’s Showtime (like CBS, a division of Viacom), which has a much smaller audience.

The network’s decision is a direct response to a campaign by right-wing forces in the US enraged by the supposedly uncomplimentary portrait of former President Ronald Reagan presented in the mini-series. This is apparently the first time a major network has ever removed a completed project from its schedule due to political pressure and the threat of an advertising boycott.

Published reports indicate that the criticisms offered by the CBS series are extremely timid. According to *Newsweek*, it “credited Reagan with defeating the Soviet Union, and its central theme is the First Couple’s love affair.” The less flattering portions deal with Nancy Reagan’s manipulative and demanding personality, Reagan’s well-known “hands-off approach” to governing and his alleged indifference to the growing AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. In one scene, Reagan refuses to provide more federal money for AIDS, declaring, “They that live in sin shall die in sin.” The scriptwriter, Elizabeth Egloff, acknowledges the conversation is fictional. However, the former president’s authorized biographer, Edmund Morris, writes that Reagan once commented about the deadly disease, “Maybe the Lord brought down this plague.”

In their press release, CBS executives made the ludicrous claim that “The decision [not to broadcast “The Reagans”] is based solely on our reaction to seeing the final film, not the controversy that erupted around a draft of the script.”

Newsweek notes that before the controversy erupted over the program two teams of lawyers had gone through and approved its script. The producers of the series, Neil Meron and Craig Zadan, point out that every fact (although not every spoken line) is supported by at least two sources. Network executives reportedly “loved” the movie. “They all thought it was brilliant,” according to an unnamed member

of the show’s production team. Co-star Judy Davis told an interviewer last month that the production was neither “malicious” nor a “simple-minded iconic” portrait, but “respectfully critical.”

The right-wing campaign over “The Reagans” follows the same general pattern as other similar efforts, against anti-war critics of the Bush administration such as the Dixie Chicks, for example. A script of “The Reagans” was leaked to the public several weeks ago. This was followed by inflammatory reports on Fox News Channel and right-wing Web sites, aimed at whipping up the extreme right “base” of the Republican Party. These elements, duly fired up, began applying pressure on CBS and threatened to launch a boycott of advertisers.

As part of the pro-Reagan effort Maryland lawyer Michael Paranzino, legislative director and press secretary to former Arizona Republican Congressman Matt Salmon and press secretary to Elizabeth Dole during her short-lived campaign for the Republican presidential nomination in 1999, set up a Web site, boycottcbs.com. The Republican National Committee (RNC) set up its own Web site, SupportReagan.com, to protest the CBS series.

Panic-stricken CBS executives no longer “loved” the film. They now took another look and discovered flaws in the production. Infuriating the producers of “The Reagans,” CBS brass made 18 editing changes in a two-week period in response to the criticisms. One person close to the film told *Newsweek*, “It’s being edited with a machete.” Meron and Zadan, along with director Robert Allan Ackerman and co-stars James Brolin and Davis, have distanced themselves from the network’s action.

Ackerman, who officially quit the project, commented, “What’s disturbing to me is this incredible noise being made about a movie they haven’t seen. That to me is what’s really shocking. It’s baffling.” Brolin’s manager, Jeff Wald, told reporters that criticism of the program was a “hatchet job” and that its producers were “absolutely dismayed” at the right-wing campaign.

Over the past two weeks, as efforts were made to come up

with an edited version that would satisfy right-wing critics, CBS executives firmly denied that there were plans to scrap the series. CBS chairman Leslie Moonves told CNBC October 31, “There are things we think go too far” in the Reagan portrait. He said that “there are some edits being made trying to present a more fair picture of the Reagans.”

That same day the Republican Party increased the pressure. RNC chairman Ed Gillespie dispatched a letter to CBS requesting that “The Reagans” be reviewed for “historical accuracy” by the former president’s intimates. Failing that, Gillespie demanded that the network run a disclaimer crawl at the bottom of the screen every 10 minutes during the film, advising viewers that “the program is a fictional portrayal of the Reagans and the Reagan Presidency, and they should not consider it to be historically accurate.”

As late as Tuesday morning, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, CBS Entertainment chief Nancy Tellem was publicly denying that the network was removing “The Reagans” from its schedule. “There has been no decision as yet,” she told a meeting of industry executives. Asked what the network was examining, she replied, “There are lots of considerations ... We’re editing it. We’re taking this very, very seriously.”

Three hours later CBS announced its craven capitulation to the right-wing campaign.

The decision by Moonves and his associates gives new and richer meaning to the word “spineless.” More significantly, the network’s action underscores the reality that for all intents and purposes the extreme right has a veto over what appears on the US mass media.

The CBS announcement produced no immediate outcry in the liberal media. There were faint mutterings in some quarters about censorship. *Philadelphia Daily News* television critic Ellen Gray commented, “If Hitler had more friends, CBS wouldn’t have aired [its Hitler mini-series] either.”

The episode reveals not only the enormous influence, far out of proportion to its level of popular support, that the ultra-right exercises in US politics and media affairs, it also demonstrates the considerable sensitivity within the political and media establishment to any attempt to puncture the Reagan myth. For two decades this mediocre actor-turned-front-man for the most reactionary sections of the corporate elite has been assiduously built up by the media as a towering political and historical figure.

This myth-making has served a definite ideological purpose—to provide legitimacy to domestic policies that effected a vast enrichment of the ruling elite and the most privileged layers of the middle class at the expense of the broad mass of working people, and foreign policies that

undermined post-World War II international relations and ushered in a new period of militarism and great power conflict.

The American corporate and political elite fears that any deflating of the Reagan myth runs the risk of undermining the credibility of its entire social and political set-up.

The CBS program, produced by tepid Hollywood liberals, could not possibly be relied upon to examine the critical social and political questions raised by the Reagan years, which coincided with a sharp shift to the right by both big business parties—the Democrats as well as the Republicans.

One of the defining actions of the Reagan government was its firing of 13,000 air traffic controllers during the 1981 PATCO strike, initiating a wave of strike-breaking and union-busting. Reagan carried through a massive tax cut for the rich combined with a systematic assault on social programs that offered assistance to the poor, the sick, the homeless, the unemployed and welfare recipients.

In foreign affairs Reagan launched a campaign to destroy the Soviet Union, termed the “Evil Empire.” As part of that effort, the Reagan administration funded and armed Islamic fundamentalists battling the Soviet army in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden. The ultimate political responsibility for the tragic events of September 11, 2001 can be placed at his doorstep, as well as that of the previous Carter administration.

The Reagan years are identified with fanatical anticommunism and militarism, support for various dictators (including Saddam Hussein) and covert wars fought against the people of Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola and other countries. These reactionary efforts culminated in the Iran-Contra affair, which involved a conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people.

Exposure of the Reagan “legacy” threatens not only certain ideological positions of his defenders. The American elite rightly views the policies of the Reagan administration as having encouraged and legitimized their selfish and reckless pursuit of wealth. Reagan is a hero to those who profited from his anti-working class policies and those who have continued to profit from his political and social “legacy.”



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