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Ronald Reagan (1911-2004): An obituary

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The centennial of Ronald Reagan's birth on February 6 has prompted a new round of media mythologizing on the life and career of the 40th US president. In response, the WSWS publishes a political obituary written after Reagan's death in 2004 by International Editorial Board chairman David North. This article originally appeared on the World Socialist Web Site on June 9, 2004.

*His Grace! impossible! what, dead?
Of old age too, and in his bed! ...
'Twas time in conscience he should die!
This world he cumber'd long enough;
He burnt his candle to the snuff;
And that's the reason, some folks think,
He left behind so great a stink."*

—Jonathan Swift, from *A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General*

It was inevitable that the death of Ronald Reagan, when it finally came, would be greeted with an effusion of saccharine tributes to the 40th President of the United States. But nothing could have quite prepared the innocent bystander for the eruption of dishonest, cynical and preposterously stupid propaganda with which the media and political establishment have responded to the death of Reagan. Of course, given the unending stream of bad news pouring out of Iraq and other parts of the real world during the past year, the Bush administration and its friends in the media were looking desperately for some way to change the subject and counter the increasingly depressed and surly mood in the country. The memorial celebrations of the 60th anniversary of D-Day were intended originally to create that diversion. But the timely death of Reagan has provided an even greater opportunity for an explosion of media-sponsored hero-worshipping, flag-waving and mythmaking.

One is compelled to admit that there is nothing quite so awesome to behold as the total mobilization of the American media. Since the announcement of Reagan's death on Saturday, the massive weight of this propaganda machine has been set into motion in what amounts to a vast exercise in historical falsification. The modern media version of the airbrush is being applied to the years of the Reagan administration. The social misery in the United States caused by Reagan's policies; the tens of thousands of lives lost in Central America at the hands of fascist death squads funded illegally by his government; the rampant criminality in an administration that was the most corrupt in 20th century America—all this and other similarly smelly details are being more or less ignored. One reads nothing of his defense of apartheid in South Africa, his funding of countless right-wing dictatorships, or even of his tribute to SS soldiers buried in a cemetery in Bitburg, Germany. The media strives not only to suppress any objective appraisal of Reagan's life and political career, but even to censor reference to the more unsavory elements of his administration's policies.

The aim of this unrelenting propaganda is not only to mislead and

confuse, but also to intimidate public opinion, that is, to foster a sense of political and social isolation among countless Americans who despised Reagan and everything he represented, to create in their minds, if not doubt about their own judgment, then at least a sense of futility about the prospects for dissenting views in the United States.

But the entire affair—the five days of official mourning, the endless media coverage, the spectacle of a state funeral—leaves the country cold. On Monday morning, in the schools, in offices and factories, there was little indication that the citizenry felt that they had witnessed the passing of a great and significant man, that they, as individuals and as a people, had suffered a genuine loss. For those old enough to remember the death of Roosevelt, let alone that of Kennedy, the contrast could not have been starker. Yes, those men, too, were bourgeois politicians and defenders of the existing social order. But Roosevelt and Kennedy had with genuine eloquence given voice, at different stages of their political careers, to the democratic aspirations of the working class and other oppressed strata of American society; and won for themselves an affection that was deeply felt. Real tears were shed when those men died.

But for the great mass of ordinary working people, the death of Ronald Reagan is a non-event. It makes no claim whatever upon their emotions. This is not only because Reagan had been out of the public eye for a decade, since the announcement that he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Too many working people still remember the impact of "Reaganomics" on their lives, which was entirely for the worse. Indeed, among broad sections of the working class he was the most hated president since Herbert Hoover. Even taking into account the support for Reaganism among significant sections of the middle class and more affluent layers of workers, the overwhelming popularity attributed to Reagan was largely of a synthetic character, a myth concocted by the media to endow the policies of his administration with an aura of public approval that they lacked in reality.

As the media repackages history to serve the purposes of the ruling elite, no mention is made of the fact that the 1980s was the decade that witnessed the most bitter episodes of class struggle in the United States since the 1940s. The actions taken by the Reagan administration during its first year in office—the slashing of federal funding for vital social programs and the firing of nearly 12,000 air traffic controllers who went out on strike in August 1981—outraged millions of workers. The social philosophy of the new administration found its most poignant expression in the redefinition of ketchup as a vegetable in order to justify the cutting of federal funds for school lunch programs. In September 1981, nearly three quarters of a million workers demonstrated in Washington to protest budget cuts and the destruction of PATCO, the union of the air traffic controllers. An even larger demonstration took place in Washington in 1983. Virtually every industry was shaken by bitter and often violent strikes as workers fought back against the class-war policies of the Reagan administration.

But that history has no place in the ongoing eulogies to the dead

president. These tributes to Reagan are, in essence, a celebration of the services he rendered to the rich. The overriding goal of his administration was the removal of all legal restraints on the accumulation of personal wealth. The motto of the Reagan administration, like that of the notoriously corrupt government of King Louis-Philippe in 19th century France, was "Enrich yourself." The slashing of the tax rate for the wealthy—from 70 percent to 28 percent—earned for the president the boundless affection of the grateful rich. This massive cut in taxes laid the foundations for the environment of social debauchery and orgiastic celebration of wealth that characterized the 1980s. It was the decade of Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky, Donald Trump (who is now making a comeback), and, of course, the fictional Gordon Gekko, who so famously proclaimed, "Greed is good!"

Reagan is eulogized endlessly as the "Great Communicator." This is the moniker bestowed on him by a media controlled by rich philistines who enjoyed hearing their self-serving platitudes mouthed by the president. The typical Reagan speech was a mixture of hokum, bunkum, flabdoodle and balderdash of the type dished out daily by motivational speakers, along with mashed potatoes and turgid chicken breasts, at countless business luncheons in the Marriotts, Hyatts and Hiltons of America. The same sort of language turned Warren Harding—the 29th President who most resembles Reagan, in both physical appearance and intellectual capacity—into a national laughing stock.

But what sort of man was Reagan himself? Even his most ardent admirers are hard pressed to identify those elements of his personality and character that were in any way unusual, let alone outstanding. His official biographer, Edmond Morris, became so frustrated in his search for the "real" Reagan, the essential man behind the public persona, that he felt compelled to resort to the devices of fiction writing.

The biographer was confounded by the sheer shallowness of his subject. Watch, if you have a chance, Reagan's movies. The pedestrian work of the actor revealed not a trace of creative imagination. The most remarkable feature of his acting was the utter absence of emotional depth. A more sensitive and empathetic man would have found in his own early life—the son of an alcoholic father, reared in the stultifying environment of small town Dixon, Illinois, beneath the shadow of impending financial calamity—sufficient material for dramatic insight into the human predicament. Reagan, however, operated in the realm of the obvious. His acting repertoire consisted of a toolkit of predictable gestures, which he called upon as required by the dramatic situation. If his character needed to express perturbation, Reagan furrowed his brow. Anger was conveyed by the stiffening of facial muscles. He was also able to project a certain amount of boyish charm, at least into the early 1940s. But then, as he entered middle age, Reagan's career had begun to stagnate.

During his first decade in Hollywood, Reagan was, if we accept his own description, a "hemophiliac" liberal and supporter of Roosevelt. He never offered a credible explanation for the dramatic change in his political views, but it seems to have developed as something of a visceral and angry reaction to the decline of his acting career in the late 1940s. The rightward-shifting winds of the period gave him an opportunity to strike back at highbrow "Reds" among directors and screenwriters who had failed to provide him with the roles to which he felt entitled. This was the real emotional background to Reagan's involvement in the anticommunist Hollywood witch-hunts of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Though he publicly denied naming names of suspected members of the Communist Party, it has since been established conclusively that he secretly provided information to the FBI. To Reagan's anger over the failure of his acting career was added resentment over claims made by the Internal Revenue Service on his personal income. These emotions were genuine and deeply felt, and this enabled Reagan to articulate, with a sincerity lacking in all his screen roles, the frustrations and resentments of broader sections of the middle class in the California of the early 1960s.

Notwithstanding his election as governor of California in 1966, his pursuit of the Republican presidential nomination ended in failure twice prior to his success in 1980. But even then, his election to the presidency would have been inconceivable but for the political bankruptcy of American liberalism and the Democratic Party. While the Vietnam War left liberalism and the Democratic Party morally discredited, the worsening economic conditions of the 1970s, eroded the foundations which had sustained the limited social reformism of the Roosevelt administration and his Democratic successors.

During the four years of the Carter administration, the Democratic Party had destroyed whatever was left of its reputation as the party of social progress and reform. While broad layers of the middle class were alienated by inflation, which intensified their resentment of taxes and social welfare programs, the Carter administration adopted an openly hostile attitude toward the working class, exemplified by its invocation of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1978 in an attempt to break the powerful coal miners' strike of 1977-78.

The prostration of the Democratic Party cleared the way for Reagan's election in 1980. But the future successes of this administration would not have been possible without the role played by the AFL-CIO, United Auto Workers, and other trade union organizations in sabotaging the efforts of the working class to resist the assault on their living standards, social interests and democratic rights that followed the inauguration of Reagan in January 1981.

The critical test of the Reagan administration—and, more significantly, the turning point in class relations in the United States—came with the strike of nearly 12,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in August 1981. Ironically, PATCO had endorsed the election of Reagan the previous year, after being told privately that a Republican administration would respond favorably to the union's demands for improved wages and working conditions. However, in accordance with plans that had actually been drawn up during the Carter administration, Reagan announced that he would fire all controllers who did not return to work within 48 hours. There is ample reason to believe that the Reagan administration received assurances from the AFL-CIO that the labor federation would take no action in support of PATCO. There was widespread sentiment among rank-and-file trade unionists for solidarity action to prevent the destruction of PATCO. Had the AFL-CIO ordered industrial action in support of the air traffic controllers, the Reagan administration would have been forced to retreat, thereby suffering a devastating defeat early in its first term.

But demands for solidarity action were rejected by the AFL-CIO. Four leaders of PATCO went to jail, nearly 12,000 air traffic controllers lost their jobs, and the union was destroyed.

This set the pattern that was followed again and again throughout the 1980s. Bitter strikes were fought by coal miners, steel workers, bus drivers, airline workers, copper miners, auto workers and meatpacking workers. In each and every case, the striking workers were isolated by the national trade union organizations, denied any meaningful support, and consigned, deliberately, to defeat. In the meantime, employers throughout the country pursued their strike-breaking tactics with full confidence that they enjoyed the support of the Reagan administration.

By the time Reagan left office in 1989, the American trade union movement, thanks to the betrayals of the AFL-CIO, had ceased to exist as a social movement.

If the success of Reagan's domestic program was largely the product of the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy, what is hailed by the media as the crowning achievement of his international anticommunist program—the precipitous collapse of the USSR—had little to do with the policies of his administration. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, three years after Reagan left office, was the tragic culmination of decades of political betrayal by the Stalinist bureaucracies

that ruled in the USSR and its client states in Eastern Europe.

As subsequent analyses of CIA intelligence reports have convincingly demonstrated, the Reagan administration had no inkling whatever of the depth of the political crisis in the Soviet Union. The infamous “Evil Empire” speech delivered by Reagan in 1983 was based on a grotesque exaggeration of Soviet strength, not to mention a malicious and ridiculous misrepresentation of its global ambitions.

In its absurd trumpeting of Reagan’s visionary leadership of America’s victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the media has ignored the really crucial question that arises from an examination of United States foreign policy in the 1980s. And that is, what accounted for the decision by the United States to dramatically and provocatively increase tensions with the USSR? Since the conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, the United States had sought to avoid confrontation with the USSR. This policy was expanded by Nixon and Kissinger in the early 1970s with the official adoption of “détente” as the basis of US-Soviet relations.

As historians now know, the decision to reverse course and adopt a more confrontational approach to the USSR began in the waning days of the Carter administration, with the decision in the summer of 1979 to provide funding and military support for anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan in the hope of provoking a military response by the USSR. The Reagan administration continued and escalated this bellicose policy.

The change in course had far less to do with ideology than with the deepening structural problems of world capitalism, which had been manifested in the recurring economic shocks of the 1970s. The bellicosity of the Reagan administration arose, in the final analysis, as a response to the deteriorating world-economic position of American capitalism.

Regardless of one’s political attitude toward the policies of the Reagan administration, it is fairly obvious, on the basis of any objective analysis, that its efforts to resolve this crisis had proved manifestly unsuccessful by the mid-1980s. The increasingly frantic and illegal methods employed by the Reagan administration to suppress popular insurgencies in Central America—all in the name of the global struggle against communism—culminated in the eruption of the Iran-Contra scandal in late 1986. The exposure of criminal operations organized by rogue operatives inside the White House, carried out in defiance of laws passed by Congress, left the Reagan administration shaken and bewildered. Reagan’s sole defense against criminal charges was that he did not know what was going on in his own administration. In this instance, the claim of ignorance was entirely believable.

The Democratic Party’s response was typically listless. While there was vague talk of impeachment, the Democrats did little more than hold a few half-hearted hearings, in which Oliver North was permitted to taunt and insult them.

But the Reagan administration had all but run out of steam, and its troubles were compounded by the financial consequences of tax cuts and massive increases in military spending. In the face of unprecedented deficits, which had transformed the United States into a debtor nation for the first time since 1914, the Reagan administration was compelled to raise taxes and return to a more accommodating line with the USSR.

The subsequent collapse of the USSR, which Reagan had certainly not foreseen, was only tangentially related to the policies pursued by the “Great Communicator” in the early 1980s. It is true that the dramatic rise in US military spending contributed to the economic problems confronting the USSR. But there is little evidence that Reagan’s policies were of any particular significance in determining the ultimate fate of the USSR. Rather, the liquidation of the Soviet state was carried out by the bureaucratic elite after it had concluded that this was the only means by which it could defend its material interests in the face of an increasingly restive and hostile working class.

Having made these points, it is not our intention to suggest that Reagan

achieved nothing as president, that he left no legacy.

That is not at all the case. Though Reagan has departed this world, the accomplishments of his administration live on and are observable everywhere: in the staggering growth of social inequality in the United States, in the grotesque concentration of wealth in the hands of a small segment of American society, in the shocking decline of literacy and the general level of culture, in the utter putrefaction of the institutions of American democracy, and, finally, in the murderous eruption of American militarism.

That is the legacy of Reaganism.



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