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Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future

By Will Bunch



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Nearly two decades after leaving office and four years after his death, the legend of Ronald Reagan looms larger than ever over America's political life. Nowhere has that been more evident than in the 2008 presidential campaign, with Republicans - especially presumptive nominee John McCain - appearing to run more aggressively for the Reagan mantle than for the White House itself, and with even Democrats debating how to add some Reagan lustre to their progressive platform. It will build upon existing volume of works about the Reagan presidency, more contemporary news accounts and the work of the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, with interviews with key Reagan scholars and contemporaries, to produce a narrative arc that breaks down the key myths about Reagan and his record, the intentional creation of these myths in the 1990s and 2000s and their role in 21st Century politics, including the Bush presidency, the 2008 election, and beyond



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In an attempt to challenge the legend that has sprung up around Ronald Reagan's presidency over the past decade, Bunch, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, argues that the Reagan myth is dangerous because, unlike other American presidents held up as heroes, like Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson, reverence for Reagan did not emerge organically. Rather, the GOP hatched the Reagan myth, feeding it to the news media for purposes that were essentially partisan in nature... pulling off a maneuver that was unprecedented in American history. The result has been a simplified reconstruction of Reagan, from far from universally popular president to the man who ended the Cold War and spurred unprecedented economic growth. Bunch contends Reagan was responsible for neither, at least not singlehandedly. Instead, he claims that the 40th president's real achievement lay in his ability to compromise, an element of his leadership conservatives have ignored since he left office. Neither Bunch's arguments nor his prose are powerful enough to do more than slightly tarnish Reagan's halo, but his book capably puts into perspective an imperfect but fascinating administration. (*Feb.*)

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Starred Review The Ronald Reagan who won the cold war, cut taxes, shrank the government, saved the economy, and was the most beloved president since FDR is a myth, Bunch says. The cold war fizzled out primarily because of Soviet economic collapse. Reagan cut taxes just once, in 1991, and thereafter raised them yearly. He vastly expanded the government and burdened the economy with enormous deficits. Moreover, his approval ratings were just average, reflecting his divisiveness as a political figure. Bunch also shows that however tough-talking, Reagan was a negotiator who achieved nuclear arms reductions by talking with Soviet leader Gorbachev and got into the Iran-Contra mess because he wouldn't send combat troops abroad. In practice, especially of foreign policy, he was a pragmatist, not an ideologue. The truculent jingoist of the myth was concocted after Alzheimer's silenced the man and the would-be juggernaut launched by the GOP's 1994 election triumph crashed and burned before a Democratic president who shrank government and the deficit, balanced the budget, and even racked up surpluses. Bunch names the leading, venal mythmakers and shames the myth exploiters, too. Anyone interested in America's immediate future should read this book. --Ray Olson

Review

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"Booklist"

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