

Reagan in his own words

Ronald Reagan. *The Reagan Diaries*, edited by Douglas Brinkley. New York, HarperCollins, 2007.

Review by Gil Troy

At the risk of sounding insensitive, Ronald Reagan's death did wonders for his historical reputation. Since the week-long, coast-to-coast funeral festivities in June 2004, the public discussion about America's 40th president has shifted dramatically. Once dismissed as an "amiable dunce," Reagan is now hailed as a shrewd, silver-tongued, substantive orator. Once mocked as a "Good Time Charlie," he is now appreciated as an optimistic leader who restored American patriotism and self-confidence. Once derided as a lazy, incompetent, borderline senile chief executive who dodged impeachment after the Iran-Contra scandal by pleading ignorance, he is now remembered as the presidential superhero who triggered the 1980s' boom, rebuilt America's military capacity, revived American conservatism, defeated Great Society liberalism and won the Cold War.

Ronald Reagan's successors as president have helped bolster his standing in the presidential stock market, unintentionally. By lacking what he pooh-poohed as "the vision thing," George H.W. Bush failed to excite America and failed to win re-election after one term in office. Bush's failure made Reagan's big-picture governing seem all the more appealing by comparison. By acting inappropriately in the Oval Office itself, Bill Clinton increased Americans' appreciation in retrospect for Reagan, an old-fashioned Midwesterner who squirmed during sex scenes in modern movies and so revered the White

House he never removed his suit jacket in the Oval Office. Moreover, with a Democrat in office throughout the 1990s promoting "peace and prosperity," it was much harder for liberals to criticize Reagan for seeking the same in the 1980s. And by governing with a heavy hand ideologically while stumbling in Iraq militarily, George W. Bush made Ronald Reagan appear more flexible, pragmatic and effective. Today, many Bush critics like to forget how harshly they criticized Reagan, to emphasize that *this* Republican conservative is beyond the pale.

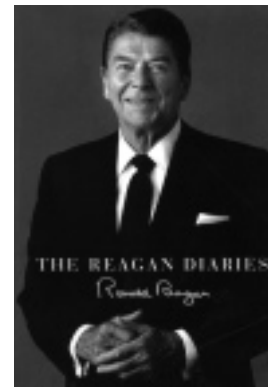
The Reagan Diaries, ably edited by Douglas Brinkley, will help the Reagan revival by illustrating Reagan as a far more engaged President with a more supple mind than his detractors assumed. Love him or hate him, agree with his policies or not, it is difficult to put the book down without being impressed by Reagan's wit, his balanced perspective on life, the many hats a president wears and his involvement with the big governing issues of his day. To those who believe that the Alzheimer's disease that he acknowledged in 1994 hit while he was still President, the diary entries from the end of his administration in 1988 and January 1989 are as coherent and pithy as the first one when he entered the White House in January 1981.

The nearly 800-page book offers only highlights of the five fat volumes of Reagan's diaries, written in his characteristic scrawl. Visitors to the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley,

California, who have pored through Reagan's speech draft files and the "Presidential Handwriting Files" preserving every paper he personally scribbled on, will recognize both the small, surprisingly delicate handwriting recreated on the inside cover, and the robust approach to governing now immortalized in these pages.

Readers looking for headline-generating revelations will have to look elsewhere. Douglas Brinkley admits that the entries "are prosaic, not grandiose. The power of the diaries is in their cumulative effect." Depending on one's perspective, Ronald Reagan was either remarkably transparent or remarkably opaque. Ronald Reagan's wife Nancy would complain in her autobiography that her beloved "Ronnie" was like a brick wall; even she found it difficult to access his innermost thoughts. The diaries suggest that there was nothing to hide. After decades in the public eye as both Hollywood celebrity and leading California politician, the public man and the private man were one.

The diaries are most important as snapshots catching Ronald Reagan in the act of being himself. Born in Tampico, Illinois, in 1911 and raised mostly in the larger but still small town of Dixon, Illinois, Reagan really was a golly-gee whiz, aw shucks Midwesterner. Feeling "homesick" for old friends after five months in the White House, he admitted he "was surprised to find my back tingled a bit" when he visited some at a dinner. Having never met a cliché he did not like, lacking the Northeastern intellectual's



cynical, critical, self-consciousness, Reagan blithely recorded, on October 5, 1981, the universal sentiment, "I hate Mondays." He noted on February 2, 1988, that on this Ground Hog Day "Puxatawny Phil didn't see his shadow — Spring will be early." When he attended the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey

pray for his soul and that he would find his way back to the fold."

Reagan expressed sympathy for Hinckley's parents, calling them "parents of the boy with the gun," when he received — and accepted — an apologetic mailgram from them. Reagan was tougher on the assassins of

and Michael, and two with Nancy, Ron Junior and Patti Davis — who rejected her father's name and her mother's parenting even more intensely. All were adults during the presidency, yet Patti and Ron in particular seemed still to be in the throes of adolescent rebellion. The diary is filled with banal reports of the Reagan children's comings and goings, peppered with sharper asides about various tiffs.

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Circus, the most powerful man on earth was really "impressed," exclaiming, "It really is the greatest show on earth." And after sustaining a near-fatal chest wound from John Hinckley's gun on Monday, March 30, 1981, barely two months into the presidency, this most non-reflective, non-process-oriented Californian reported, "Getting shot hurts."

The assassination attempt brought out other dimensions of Reagan's private side. He was not a regular churchgoer, even before the blanket Secret Service protection that followed him everywhere provided him with a great excuse to stay home on Sunday. Still, Reagan had a deep, direct and simple faith in God. "Whatever happens now I owe my life to God and will try to serve him in every way I can," he wrote during his convalescence. As a committed Christian who believed in sin and salvation, forgiveness and repentance, Reagan struggled to forgive Hinckley, the shooter. "I realized I couldn't ask for Gods [sic] help while at the same time I felt hatred for the mixed up young man who had shot me," he wrote in his first diary entry after the shooting. "Isn't that the meaning of the lost sheep? We are all Gods [sic] children & therefore equally beloved by him. I began to

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat than he was on Hinckley, although even after that outrage, Reagan's language was typically subdued: "I'm trying not to feel hatred for those who did this foul deed," Reagan confessed on October 6, 1981, "but I can't make it."

Always staying in character, Ronald Reagan truly loved his wife, okay, his second wife, Nancy — although, in fairness, Reagan was shocked when his first wife Jane Wyman dissolved their marriage and always described that trauma in the passive tense, saying "I was divorced." The diary is filled with sweet nothings about "my sweetheart," including confessions with a properly prudish touch that the White House "seems lonely as h — I when I know she isn't here." Reagan was furious, and felt guilty, about the "bum rap" his controversial wife endured from what Reagan termed, in a rare lapse into vulgarity, "a few bitchy columnists." Canadians will be particularly interested to discover that when the Reagans were "quartered at Rideau house" in Ottawa, Reagan deemed it "a truly magnificent old mansion — except that Nancy & I were in separate rooms — 1st time in our marriage."

It seems that the intensity of the bond between Ronnie and Nancy Reagan excluded their children. Reagan had two children from his first marriage, Maureen

The tumultuous relationship between Patti and both Reagans is well known; the diaries show great tension between Ron, Jr., and his parents too. One perennial flashpoint was the Secret Service protection. Ron, Jr., resented the loss of privacy.

Especially, after the assassination attempt, Nancy was desperate for even more intense coverage for her loved ones. In May 1983, while President Reagan was struggling over "the budget & the MX vote plus the interference with Presidential authority in international affairs" — meaning congressional oversight of Reagan's moves in Nicaragua and El Salvador — Nancy called "very upset." Ron had surprised the Secret Service with news that he was popping off to Paris. "I don't know what is with him. He refuses to cooperate with them," Reagan noted, then added: "I'm not talking to him until he apologizes for hanging up on me."

Reagan's strong small government conservative ideology emerges clearly as well. After one "long Cabinet meeting on policy planning," Reagan exclaimed: "We really found out why we came here. We saw and heard the impossible management structure of government. It is by any standard a cumbersome, costly incompetent monster."

Reagan believed that individuals had personal obligations to help the poor, but questioned society's collective obligation to assist. He frequently sent personal cheques and encouraging notes to people in trouble. Sometimes, he heard about their plight from the poignant letters they sent to the White House.

Sometimes, he learned about them from the newspapers or from acquaintances. “It was a lump in throat call for me,” Reagan sentimentally — and probably quite literally — noted after speaking to one recipient, who initially did not cash the one hundred dollar cheque Reagan sent, to keep it as a souvenir. Reagan promised to send back the cancelled cheque so the person could have the money and the memento.

On social issues Reagan was equally definitive, writing: “How anyone could deny that the fetus is a living human being is beyond me.” After a meeting with Republican congresswomen, Reagan revealed his hopelessly old-fashioned and self-satisfied approach to feminism and many other issues: “We (our admin.) have already done more to correct inequities than any other admin. before us,” he insisted. Then he added a particularly 1950s touch: “A couple of the gals are pretty aggressive sounding.”

In fact, Reagan was remarkably impervious to criticism. Former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney once observed admiringly that Reagan entered office as a man in his 70s, with a thicker skin and less to prove than younger leaders. Such self-confidence in a democratic leader is good; bullheadedness is not. Reagan rarely learned from criticism, or even took it as legitimate. He dismissed critics as “demagogues” and liars. Reagan confessed to “getting a real hang up on the press.” He frequently called reporters a “lynch mob” and felt they did “a trashing job” on him.

During the Iran-Contra scandal Reagan chided reporters rather than being self-critical or angry about what his subordinates had done. “The press continues to harp on the Iran situation to the point of writing & broadcasting pure fiction,” he complained. Reporters during an Iran-Contra-scandal-related news conference “were out for blood — every Q. had a sharp barb.” Ever the performer seeking approval, Reagan added in one of many reviews of his performances he chronicled: “Our gang seems to feel ‘I done good.’”

Although a true believer, Reagan

was also a shrewd politician who knew when to compromise and then try to declare his ideology vindicated. As a result of his compromises “some of our pure ultra conservatives deserted.” But Reagan wanted to get the job done. Explaining one of his concessions in rejecting an “unreasonable” conservative critique, Reagan wrote: “The tax increase is the price we have to pay to get the budget cuts.”

Reagan was particularly agile — and remarkably effective — in dealing with the Soviets. Reagan was a staunch anti-Communist who found Soviet Communism particularly repellent. When he visited the Soviet embassy in Washington, relatively early in his tenure, he noted: “There’s a strange feeling in that place — no one smiles.” Reagan recognized the Soviets’ structural weaknesses long before most experts did. As early as November 1985, he wrote, “The Soviet U. is an ec. Basket case & among other things there is a rapidly spreading turn by the people to religion.” Reagan was shrewd enough to try flattering the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, explaining when they met “that we were the two nations that could destroy or save the world. I figured they nurse a grudge that we don’t respect them as a superpower.” The diary shows how step by step, warm relations with the new Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, and then a reforming Soviet Union, developed.

Reagan put great stock in nurturing warm personal chemistry with world leaders. Many who remember the friction between Reagan, the down-to-earth American capitalist, and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the sophisticated Canadian social democrat, will be surprised to hear of Reagan’s positive first impression. “Discovered I liked him,” Reagan wrote. “Our meetings were very successful. We have some problems to be worked out having to do with fishing, energy & environment but I believe we’ve convinced them we really want to find answers.” Over the years, the tensions with Trudeau grew. At world summits, Trudeau and French

president Francois Mitterand often frustrated Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher with their “nitpicking,” and their more socialist and Europeanist orientation. Reagan sensed that Trudeau “leans toward outright nationalization of industry.” During one confrontation at the May 1983 summit that Reagan witnessed between Trudeau and Thatcher, Reagan recorded gleefully: “I thought at one point Margaret was going to order Pierre to go stand in a corner.”

Reagan was thrilled when Brian Mulroney became Prime Minister, improving both the personal and political chemistry. “He’s a super fellow,” Reagan wrote after his first meeting with Mulroney. “We got along fine & will continue to do so.” Reagan was thrilled as the friendship developed, boasting, “I have to believe US-Canadian relations have never been better & certainly not at the leader level. Brian M. & I have really established a warm personal friendship.” When Mulroney ran into political “trouble...based on pol. attacks that he’s beholden to me & the U.S.,” Reagan responded. “We’re trying to find some things to bolster him,” the President admitted.

Scholars will continue to debate the merits of Ronald Reagan and his presidency. *The Reagan Diaries* will not determine what caused the 1980s boom, how equitably prosperity was distributed, which social programs should have been cut and which should have been kept, or who won the Cold War. But the *Diaries* do offer the texture of the times, a wealth of insights and the challenge to take Reagan seriously as perhaps the most influential president since Franklin Roosevelt, rather than all too quickly dismissing simplistic, politically motivated caricatures of him.

Gil Troy, professor of history at McGill University, is the author of the critically acclaimed Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s (Princeton University Press, 2005) and Hillary Rodham Clinton: Polarizing First Lady (University of Kansas, 2006).