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Review of *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*

By Doug Rossinow. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0231169882

Doug Rossinow's *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* provides a detailed political history of the United States during the 1980s, as well as a comprehensive analysis of the most prominent political figure of the decade, President Ronald Reagan. Rossinow thoroughly documents Reagan's brand of political conservatism, known as Reaganism, by assessing Reagan's policies regarding the economy, foreign affairs, and military funding; moreover, Rossinow notes the key role Reaganism played in transforming American political culture.

Throughout *The Reagan Era*, Rossinow argues that Reaganism, which promoted conservative policies, military supremacy, individual achievement, national pride, anticommunism, and the reduction of government programs (such as Medicare and Social Security), fundamentally altered American government and politics. These alterations, as Rossinow maintains, have largely defined the policies of both conservatives (who generally interpret Reaganism as the gold standard of conservative values) and liberals (who generally aim to contrast the principles of Reaganism) since Reagan's election in 1980. Ultimately, Rossinow believes that the 1980s served as a crucial political decade that provides insight into the politics of the 21st century United States; therefore, Rossinow employs *The Reagan Era* to provide a "critical but reasoned, fact-based, and not merely partisan" analysis of 1980s politics and the Reagan presidency (10). By arguing that understanding "Reaganism is more important than knowing Reagan" (293), the book is intended to serve as a largely unbiased history in direct

response to prior historical examinations of the 1980s that function as either hagiographies or vilifications of Reagan.

Overall, *The Reagan Era* follows a clear organizational scheme and chronologically documents the major events of the Reagan presidency. The introduction outlines the scope, themes, and arguments of the book. The subsequent 15 chapters assume, for the most part, a chronological narrative. The second half of chapter 1, for example, details the events of the 1980 election year, establishes the characteristics of Reaganism, and concludes by elucidating the significance of Reagan's election night victory. Chapters 2 through 6 detail Reagan's first term. At the middle of the book, chapters 7 and 8 briefly break the chronological narrative with a specific focus on the social history of the 1980s. Chapter 9 resumes the chronological narrative by documenting the events of the 1984 election year. The final six chapters (10-15) of the book concisely assess Reagan's second term and the beginning of Bush's presidency. The organization of Chapter 15, however, presents an area for minor critique; the chapter unpredictably transitions from an analysis of economic inequality during the 1980s to a conclusion. While not a detrimental flaw, the lack of a definitive conclusion section hurts the organization of the book. The book does, however, include useful navigational features such as an alphabetical index that lists references and page numbers to key terms and figures.

Rossinow utilizes a variety of relevant sources, including academic works and popular culture, to validate his arguments and indicate the prevalence of Reaganism in the 80s. For instance, Rossinow cites scholarly works from historians (such as Paul Kennedy) and articles published by journalists (such as Thomas Edsall) to bolster his historical analysis. Rossinow relies on newspapers (such as *The New York Times*) to provide quotes, insight, and perspectives from members of the Reagan administration (most notably David Stockman, head of the OMB).

Rossinow also cites speeches from politicians of the 1980s to offer liberal and conservative viewpoints on Reagan's policies; for example, Rossinow quotes senators such as Joseph Biden and Jesse Helms. Rossinow compiles several direct quotes from Reagan himself; for instance, Rossinow includes Reagan's "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (41), declaration from his inaugural speech to illustrate his opposition to big government. Finally, Rossinow ties popular culture into his analysis to elucidate the impact of Reagan's policies on everyday individuals. For example, Rossinow cites the music of Bruce Springsteen and NWA as representations of the negative impacts of deindustrialization on the working class and a majority of the black population in Los Angeles, respectively.

Rossinow covers several notable themes in his analysis of Reaganism. For instance, the notion of patriotism, which Rossinow maintains served as Reagan's most infectious and inspiring trait, is prevalent throughout the book. Rossinow argues that Reagan, due to ardent patriotism, "has maintained the aura of the winner" (9) and has become a symbol of American conservatism. Controversy in foreign affairs serves as another theme; Reagan, according to Rossinow, simultaneously put the U.S. on the brink of war with the U.S.S.R. through confrontational policies in his first term and effectively ended the Cold War with his embrace of denuclearization in his second term. Reagan's support for contra groups in Central America, as Rossinow regularly maintains, was divisive. Overall, reflection on both the positive and negative qualities of Reaganism allows the book to convey a largely non-partisan position. Rossinow also explores the idea of economic inequality; Reagan's supply-side economics, income tax cuts, and promotion of individualism, as Rossinow asserts, effectively increased the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor. Building off the notion that the opulence of the upper-class grew in the 1980s, Rossinow details themes of corruption, particularly in the financial sector. Corruption,

according to Rossinow, directly coincided with the increasing hedonistic and materialistic culture of the 1980s. Hedonism, in turn, promoted individualism through individual pleasure. In essence, Rossinow, by tying together themes of economic inequality, corruption, and hedonism, effectively suggests that Reaganism pervaded American culture.

The Reagan Era is suitable for both academic and general readers. For historians, the book exhaustively covers analytical categories of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, and region. For the general reader, the book provides a succinct overview of the major political events of the 1980s. Chapter 2, “The Agenda,” could sufficiently inform a general reader of the precise intentions and implications of Reagan’s economic policies during his first term. Academic readers, however, would find a detailed analysis of supply-side economics and economic statistics (such as the 17.5 % increase in military spending in 1981 and 1982 included in Reagan’s 1980 budget) to consider within the same chapter.

The Reagan Era offers a detailed history of American politics during the 1980s. The book, despite lacking a definitive conclusion, exhibits an excellent organizational style that follows a mostly chronological narrative. Moreover, the book is suitable for both an academic and a general audience. Overall, Rossinow, by examining themes such as patriotism and corruption, by citing the works of historians and direct quotes from prominent politicians of the 80s, and by referencing popular culture, presents an argument that Reaganism fundamentally transformed American government, economics, politics, and social life. *The Reagan Era* provides a foundation for academics to conduct further research into the prevalence (or the decline) of Reaganism in the decades following the 1980s.

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