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WHAT THE RIGHT STILL HAS TO LEARN FROM RONALD REAGAN

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A new history of the American right seeks from the first page to alert the reader to what it is not about: the 40th president. But in the end conservatives can't escape Reagan—nor should they.

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"Doc, I'm from the future. I came here from a time machine that you invented. Now I need your help to get back to the year 1985."

"Then tell me, Future Boy. Who's president of the United States in 1985?"

"Ronald Reagan."

"Ronald Reagan? The actor!? Then who's vice-president, Jerry Lewis?"

—Back to the Future

Ronald Reagan walking along the White House colonnade and waving goodbye on his last day in office, January 20, 1989. *Alamy/Wonderstock*.

Matthew Continetti's new history of the American right seeks from the first page to alert the reader to what it is *not* about: "Unlike most other histories of the American Right," Continetti tells us, "this book is not just about Ronald Reagan. In these pages, he is one character among many." Thus *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism* begins not in the 1970s with the presidency of Jimmy Carter, nor with Ronald Reagan's run for the California governorship in the 1960s, nor in the 1950s with the *National Review* editor William F. Buckley. Instead, it starts much earlier. Continetti's point of departure is in the 1920s, before the New Deal, and the American conservatism he traces throughout *The Right* finds early expression in the administration of

Calvin Coolidge. Continetti's readers learn much about the debates over isolationism in the age of Robert Taft. And from these debates now a century old, he skillfully leads us through the pulsing, fractious, improbable story of American conservatism all the way to today's fractured Republican party. In any event, it is technically true that Ronald Reagan is not *the* main character in this book.

And yet the front cover of Continetti's book features the picture of only one man: President Reagan. There we see the 40th president's back, waving as he seems to walk off the scene. Just as Benjamin Franklin pondered, at the Constitutional Convention in Independence Hall, whether the image of the sun hanging over the horizon that was engraved onto Washington's chair was rising or setting, one can ponder whether the silhouette on the cover is intended to evoke the rise or the decline of Reagan's conservatism. But whether his conception of America's purpose and American politics is on the way up or down, it is Reagan, and only Reagan, who appears as the book's embodiment of the American right: not Calvin Coolidge or Bill Buckley.

Continetti describes Reagan as the most successful Republican president since Theodore Roosevelt. This judgement is of course correct, allowing for the fact that Roosevelt was a Republican progressive, whereas Reagan was very much a product of the conservative movement cultivated in magazines like *National Review* and *Commentary*. And Reagan had political skill. He, and only he, could bring together the various factions of the American right and, in the 1984 election, win 49 states. For Continetti, this massive success is the very reason why we should *not* identify Reagan's extraordinary achievements with the ordinary right:

> Reagan's charisma and clarity were something of an exception. His unique political talent led almost every faction of American conservatism to think that he was on its side. To this day, every conservative wants to claim him. The truth is messier. Reagan's presidency was not the inevitable outcome of the conservative movement. His triumph in 1980 was contingent, unplanned, and unpredictable. It was not until he left office that he acquired mythic status. Reagan was one alternative among many.

This of course is true, but contingency is a feature to be found in the rise of every great figure. Lincoln might very well have lost the Republican nomination to William Seward or Salmon Chase, and his re-election was itself contingent, probably due more to Sherman's conquest of Atlanta than to his rhetoric or ideas. Likewise, George VI might have chosen Lord Halifax instead of Churchill as prime minister in 1940. Continetti wisely reminds us, however, that if we miss out on the contingency in Reagan's career we can miss out on the tensions in American conservatism:

> There is not one American Right; there are several. Yes, American conservatives are firm believers in the U.S. Constitution. Yes, they oppose state intervention in the structures that lie between the individual and government, such as family, church, neighborhood, voluntary association, and the marketplace. Yes, they resist the totalitarian Communist regimes of the former USSR and the People's Republic of China. Go further, however, and differences emerge. Fault lines appear. Conservative

> writers and thinkers disagree more than they agree. They comprise a movement defined by a lively debate over first principles. They look for deviation and betrayal. And sometimes they form a circular firing squad.

This is also true; but in a certain sense that makes Reagan more, not less, seminal in his achievements. If Reagan succeeded in holding together the group of geniuses and cranks, intellectuals and public figures that made up the American right that Continetti so deftly brings to life, then that makes Reagan's success not less important to the story of American conservatism but more so. The book that is not only about Reagan thus inspires us to ask of Reagan: what is the source of his success? And what lesson does his success teach the conservative movement today?

In order to answer this question, we must go back even further into American history than does Continetti. By expanding our scope, we can see that Reagan is somewhat less of an aberration than Continetti makes him out to be, and in fact the inheritor of a political tendency that predates even Coolidge. It begins, in fact, with the first Republican president, and the country's greatest.

In his youth, when he was known as the local agnostic, Abraham Lincoln gave his famed Lyceum address, where he pondered how the next generation of Americans could remember the founding ideals of the revolution. Originally, he said, "in the form of a husband, a father, a son or brother, a *living history* was to be found in every family." But, with the death of the Founders and their contemporaries, "those histories are gone, what invading foeman could never do, the silent artillery of time has done."

How, then, to keep alive the vision of the very thing that Americans are charged to conserve? Young Lincoln's original answer was that cold reason alone could perpetuate all that the previous generation had fought for, or as he put it:

> They *were* the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason.

Without relying on commemoration, or imagination, or emotion at all, the younger Lincoln would seem to have each generation of Americans discover for themselves the propositional truths that even Jefferson thought were common to the American mind. "Passion has helped us," Lincoln added, "but can do so no more. It will in future be our enemy. Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense."

But as the Civil War descended and then hundreds of thousands died, Lincoln began to perceive the limits of cold reason. He began to think more biblically, more emotionally, more covenantally. The man who delivered the Gettysburg address was not the agnostic who stood at the Young Men's Lyceum. For Lincoln at Gettysburg, equality and inalienable rights were not merely abstract propositions; as Leon Kass has pointed out, whereas the Founders spoke of

equality as an *a-priori* self-evident truth, Lincoln, by describing it as a "proposition" that we owed "our Fathers," transformed "the intellectual truth of the declaration, something accessible to human reason, into something that Americans must demonstrate through wholehearted devotion." The American idea is indeed an idea. But it is an idea realized in political life by Americans themselves, who must enact it, one by one, individually. That demonstration is how Americans can transform Gettysburg's propositions back into the Declaration's truths.

From here, a fascinating dialectic emerges: the concept of America as an instrument to protect natural rights points to the individual, but the perpetuation of America binds us one another, and also to our fathers who brought forth a new nation dedicated to this idea. And if, as Lincoln seems to have ad-libbed at Gettysburg, it is only "under God" that a new birth of freedom can be attained, it is not only because the assistance of Providence is necessary, but also because Americans need to see themselves as called to a majestic and covenantal purpose.

Framed against this backdrop, Reagan stands in a tradition of Republican leadership whose elements Lincoln could recognize. For just as Lincoln did nearly a century earlier, Reagan's greatest gift was his ability to express simultaneously the individual and social dimensions of American national belonging: the pride in being bound to generations that had fought for equality in freedom, and the political instantiation of that old biblical truth, that each individual is born in the image and likeness of the Author of creation.

To understand Reagan's gift, let us study the moment when Reagan first burst on the political scene. As Continetti tells us, Reagan's emergence coincided with the winding down of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential candidacy:

> [Buckley] told the New York Conservative Party, which he first conceived in 1957 and had helped start in 1962, that despite Johnson's assured victory, "In America there are those who are dragging our feet; resisting, kicking, complaining, hugging tightly to the ancient moorings. What do we cling to? Among other things, the individual, and the individual's role in history." A day later, on October 27, one individual stepped forward.

That individual was Ronald Reagan, who would two years later become governor of California. In defending the liberty of the individual, Reagan also bound individuals together. Just before the 1964 election, Reagan delivered his famous endorsement of Goldwater, "A Time for Choosing," which was about much more than the upcoming election. As Continetti observes, Reagan in this speech didn't emphasize tradition, but progress, which he saw as "identical with the enhancement and expansion of human freedom." Thus, while the American progressive movement saw government, and not the individual, as the engine that would move humanity forward, Reagan saw in statist control a reactionary force that at times "pulled human beings back from the realization of their full potential." As a result, his thinking defied the political divisions of his time. This, for Continetti, is the implication of this striking passage:

> You and I are told increasingly we have to choose between a left or right. Well I'd like to suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There's only an up or down—[up]:

> man's old-aged dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism. And regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.

Reagan went on to quote Winston Churchill's admonition that "the destiny of man is not measured by material computations," and thus, "like it or not," people must also confront their duty. With this invocation of the prime minister who faced down Hitler, Continetti explains, Reagan emphasized the importance of "spiritual strength and self-confidence in the battle against the Soviet enemy." But Continetti, somewhat surprisingly, does not adequately attend to the next, and most famous, passage in the address.

> You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we'll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.

Whence did Reagan take this phrase, "rendezvous with destiny?" It came from a man whom Reagan, as *The Right* informs us, admired greatly: Franklin Roosevelt, who used it to describe America as a beacon of liberty in the 1930s amid the rise of fascism and Soviet totalitarianism. The emphasis on a "rendezvous with destiny" calls upon Americans to come together to defend the rights of the individual, and remind them that their country has been called by God to be a beacon—what Reagan, in a reference to the Puritan preacher John Winthrop, called "a shining city on a hill."

Here we have a striking contrast between Reagan, the most successful statesman of the second half of the 20th century, and Churchill, the most successful statesman of its first half. Churchill too spoke of destiny, but whose? He famously described his feelings when he first assumed the premiership thus:

> I cannot conceal from the reader of this truthful account that as I went to bed at about 3 a.m., I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were walking with Destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial. . . . I thought I knew a good deal about it all, and I was sure I should not fail. Therefore, although impatient for the morning, I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams.

The destiny that most concerned Churchill, who quite rightly saw himself as a Great Man of history, was his own. As his biographer Andrew Roberts once quipped, Churchill believed in God, but in his theology God's role was largely taking care of Winston Churchill. Contrast this with Reagan, who spoke not of himself walking with destiny but of "you and I" together having this rendezvous. And sixteen years later, he concluded his acceptance of the Republican nomination by making these themes even more explicit, synthesizing personal freedom and communal belonging:

> The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands. But to do this will take many of us, working together. I ask you tonight to volunteer your help in this cause so we can carry our message throughout the land.
>
> I have thought of something that is not part of my speech and I'm worried over whether I should do it. . . . Can we doubt that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely: Jews and Christians enduring persecution behind the Iron Curtain, the boat people of Southeast Asia, of Cuba and Haiti, the victims of drought and famine in Africa, the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and our own countrymen held in savage captivity.
>
> I'll confess that I've been a little afraid to suggest what I'm going to suggest—I'm more afraid not to—that we begin our crusade joined together in a moment of silent prayer.
>
> God bless America.

To be sure, the coalition that Reagan united was made up of diverse, infighting groups. The same can be said of the movements galvanized by all great leaders in American history. At their best, these leaders ably expressed the essence of the American idea in a way that united the variegated parts of their movements, and made outsiders into insiders. In the 100-year history of the right, only one man has successfully achieved this: an actor, playing the part for which he was born.

Reagan's success as a leader allows us to understand what sets him apart from the other principal individuals described in the book. As Continetti ably illustrates, the battle within the right has largely been a battle about *ideas,* waged by the people who expressed them: hawks and cold warriors vs. isolationists, fusionists who sought to unite free-market economics with social conservatism vs. Catholic traditionalists, the freedom-loving economist Friedrich Hayek vs. the moralist Russell Kirk, the Claremont scholar-provocateur Harry Jaffa vs. everyone else—but in the end a truly successful right will only achieve its aims through *political leadership*, and leadership is about more than ideas. And it should not be shocking that an actor could emerge as such a successful leader. Let us take it from one of the conservative movement's foremost intellectuals, Midge Decter, whom we have just lost and who well understood the power of ideas herself:

> Reagan was . . . sufficiently at ease with himself, and sufficiently distanced from those around him, to be willing to say simple things. And probably never before in the country's history had simple things been more in need of repeated and authoritative saying. Primary among these were that Americans were on the whole a very decent people, that the productive and responsible among them must not be shoved aside for the sake of the willfully unproductive and non-responsible, and that the Soviet Union was an evil empire.

Today, of course, the age of Reagan has passed. The challenges he rose to confront have changed. And the conservative intellectual Yuval Levin has rightly emphasized the costs of substituting nostalgia for a contemporary political agenda as forward looking as Reagan's was. As much as one might wish it otherwise, Doc Brown's invention from *Back to the Future* has yet to be realized, and there is no going back in time.

Nevertheless, a movement that seeks to conserve must look to the past, and in so doing, it is appropriate to seek guidance from American conservatism's most successful leader, one who was, as Doc Brown reminds us, also an actor, whose statesmanship embraced not only intellect but also emotion. Continetti, at the conclusion of his books, seeks the guidance of two prominent public intellectuals:

> However the future unfolds, conservatives must return to the wisdom of their best minds and advocates. "The proper question for conservatives: What do you seek to conserve?" George Will wrote in *The Conservative Sensibility* (2019). "The proper answer is concise but deceptively simple: we seek to conserve the American Founding." Or as Bill Buckley said in 1970, "I see it as the continuing challenge of *National Review* to argue the advantages to everyone of the rediscovery of America, the amiability of its people, the flexibility of its institutions, of the great latitude that is still left to the individual, the delights of spontaneity, and, above all, the need for superordinating the private vision over the public vision." Buckley's challenge to *National Review* is also the challenge to today's conservatives and Republicans.

These intellectuals were correct that conservatism in America seeks first and foremost to conserve the vision of the American founding, in its simplicity and complexity. But the question that Lincoln asked at Lyceum remains: *how* shall the memory of the revolution and the founding be preserved? Shall this take place, as Will argued in the very same *Conservative Sensibility*, through what he sees as atheism or deism—or, at the very least, a skepticism about faith—as enshrined as the true heart of the founders' vision? Can we do away with emotional appeals to a providential rendezvous with destiny, and rely on the free, autonomous individual alone? That may have been the vision of the young Lincoln as he addressed the Young Men's Lyceum, but it was not the view of the wiser, battle-weary Lincoln at Gettysburg, nor was it the vision that compelled the prophetic Lincoln who, the following year, would deliver his Second Inaugural address. And this skepticism was certainly *not* at the heart of the vision of Ronald Reagan.

Meanwhile, there are those on the "New Right" who attack the aims and impulses of the American conservative movement that helped to shape Reagan's vision, and assault the Founding itself. We are told that the Lockean ideas of the Declaration are irreconcilable with religious tradition and faith, an assertion belied by the eloquence and impact of Lincoln and Reagan's rhetoric. And one role for traditional Jews to play in American conservatism may be to help make the case for the exceptional nature of this country for which Jews have always been grateful. The welcome that Jews received in America from the very beginning highlighted America's uniqueness, how its founders revered the Hebraic tradition, and fused Lockean ideas with the covenantal thought they found in the Hebrew Bible, forging a worldview that saw

Americans as endowed with individual rights but also bound in common destiny. This is the fundamental truth that Lincoln learned after his Lyceum address; it is the one Reagan relied on to defeat the Soviet Union, and it is at the core of the American political tradition.

Finally, the legacies of Lincoln and Reagan remind us of the importance of political leadership. Continetti ably shows how intellectuals—men and women of ideas—were indispensable to the formation of the conservative movement. But the right will not find future success solely through magazines, or podcasts or Substack newsletters, as important as they may be. The achievements of American conservatism, and every social institution it means to protect, will only be safeguarded from a left that seeks their destruction through electoral means. As William Barr has recently reflected, governing like Reagan requires that conservatives can first win like Reagan.

Of course, to learn from Reagan does not mean mimicking his every policy proposal. On defense, tax policy, social policy, the judiciary, immigration, and many other public concerns, we live, some four decades on, in a very different country than the one that elected him. But if we are to exit the narrow electoral divisions of our era, if we are to move beyond the political war of all against all, then the right must find a leader who in his or her own way learns from Reagan's ability to draw the people of America together, and to make them feel that America has a rendezvous with destiny. "It seems unlikely," Decter reflected in 1989, "that American politics will soon again turn up a president so inexplicably and yet so perfectly fitted to the particular moment of his appearance." And for all the importance of the many ideas that Continetti describes in *The Right*, it is the man on the cover who still, to this day, has the most to teach us.