Dec-1985

Editor's Notebook: The Reagan Mystique

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol3/iss3/3

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The Reagan Mystique

Like most presidents before him, Ronald Reagan will be the subject of extensive examination and evaluation. Historians, journalists, political scientists and the American public will play the role of the Monday morning quarterback and the 20/20 hindsight as they criticize, psychoanalyze, vilify and glorify the 40th President of the United States.

Although Mr. Reagan's conservative philosophy and programs have had a profound impact on American society and our relationship with the world, it is this president's mode of operation, his style of leadership, that is most intriguing. President Reagan is without question the most popular chief executive since Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His ability to maintain this popularity despite obvious errors in judgement and ill-advised policy has earned Mr. Reagan the title of the "teflon" president and the respect of his critics who wonder out loud how this man seems to be immune to the normal popular and partisan attacks that all presidents have had to endure in the modern era.

Those who have engaged in the analysis of President Reagan have usually attributed his popularity to his communicative skills. The Great Communicator seems to have the ability to persuade the American people and the Congress to accept his vision of this country and policies that he promotes to achieve that vision. But there is more to the Reagan mystique than the talent for reading cue cards. Ronald Reagan, more than any of his immediate predecessors, has approached his job as president with a whole new set of assumptions about what the American people want from their chief executive.

First of all, Mr. Reagan never really gives the impression that being the president is foremost on his mind. Reagan is more than a casual, laid-back Californian; he is rather a man who refuses to take the day to day mechanics of governance is refreshing. Americans have lived through the intensity of the Johnson administration, the gloom of the Nixon administration, the blandness of the Ford and Carter years. They have seen presidents that were ornery, neurotic, humorless and most of all immersed in their work and their identities as the most powerful men in the world. The sight of a president like Ronald Reagan who looks as if he would be just as happy doing something else and works hard at making the presidency a pleasant experience has made him a hit with a citizenry longing for change.

Mr. Reagan's popularity as a president, however, is not merely the result of bringing a sense of relaxation and pleasantness to the White House. This president has also mastered the traditional values and symbols of American politics - God, country and family. There is not a nationally televised speech or a public appearance where President Reagan does not remind his audience that he stands foursquare behind those basic guideposts of American political culture. Reagan has shrewdly recognized that after years of dormancy, neglect and rejection, Americans were ready for a return to basics.

As a result the President aligns himself with Jerry Falwell and praises for prayer in schools. He harps on the importance of patriotism and brags about the goodness of America (and the evil of Russia) and he uses every opportunity to cast himself as the champion of the family, whether in terms of his opposition to abortion or as an advocate of tax reform. What is perhaps most ironic about the President's use of God, country and family is their apparent absence from his own life. Here is a president who does not go to church regularly, stayed in Hollywood to make movies during World War II, and rarely visits with his children or grandchildren. But the American people do not seem to be bothered by these inconsistencies; they want to see a return to a social and cultural milieu that provides them with a greater sense of security and stability in these unpredictable and unsettling times.

But if there is a critical element in Mr. Reagan's enormous popularity it can be found in his ability to reflect the mood of the American people. President Reagan, like FDR, has the uncanny ability to make the American people feel good about themselves. Reagan not only tells the people what they want to hear, he tells them that everything is O.K. and will get better. Putting on a positive face and talking about a bright future is nothing new in politics, but believing that few things need fixing (especially by government) and actively trying to convince the American public that harboring negative thoughts or concentrating on nagging problems is unnecessary differentiates Reagan from his predecessors. No one really wants to be reminded about the poor, the unemployed, the sick, toxic wastes and the arms race. And so Mr. Reagan obliges and does not tell Americans what is wrong with America or assures them that all will be well in the future. To a country that has been inundated with messages of doom and gloom ever since the assassination of John F. Kennedy, a president who tells the people that we are doing just fine is a welcome blessing. There is however one hitch to this "I'm O.K. - You're O.K." approach. The American people are gradually being lulled into the false belief that, indeed, all is well in the United States and that the problems of poverty, injustice, corporate irresponsibility and nuclear proliferation are somehow not their concern or deserve scant attention.

Ronald Reagan's popularity is without question a political phenomenon of enormous and perhaps lasting implications for America. Although his liberal detractors cringe at his vision of this country and deride the simplistic homilies that he delivers during prime time, this president has not only captured the hearts and minds of many Americans, he may very well be representative of America in the 1980s.

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