

## WITH REAGAN: THE INSIDE STORY

Edwin Meese III

Regnery Gateway/362 pages/\$24.95

reviewed by JOHN VON KANNON

A wise Milwaukee businessman once told me why Tommy Thompson was a much better governor of Wisconsin than his predecessor Pat Lucey. "I like Pat. He's a good friend. But he wasn't a very good governor. He thought he had to understand everything about state government, and then work the process. Tommy Thompson knows that the first role of a governor is to set policies. His second role is to be the main cheerleader for those policies." My friend's interpretation, however, is open to a glib and persuasive criticism: Shouldn't our leaders know all the details?

That such criticism has been leveled so relentlessly at Ronald Reagan is what prompted former attorney general Edwin Meese to write *With Reagan*. After a constant barrage from the left—combined with an almost absolute silence from the Bush White House—we seem to have forgotten how rotten things were in the 1970s, and how dramatically they improved in the 1980s, and Meese sets out to make that plain. He reminds us of 1979: 13.5 percent inflation, a 21.5 percent prime rate, high unemployment, a crippling tax burden, gasoline shortages, and a general national malaise. The 1980s, by contrast, witnessed the longest peacetime expansion in America's history, with *growth* under Reagan equalling the *entire economy of Germany*. The thousands of nuclear weapons that in 1979 were pointed at us from a hostile power now belong—thanks to Reagan's defense

buildup—to a country that is neither hostile nor powerful. The Reagan presidency, in the phrase of Washington analyst Burton Yale Pines, "repealed the 1970s."

The case should be an open-and-shut one, but *With Reagan* will not get rave reviews. As Bob Tyrrell explains in *The Conservative Crack-Up*, the major media simply ignore conservative ideas and attempt to discredit conservative spokesmen, all the while complaining about Republican "sleaze campaigns." *With Reagan* is a cut above the condescending, I-knew-better-than-Reagan screeds so many of his colleagues have written, but Meese's loyalty and effectiveness as a Reagan advocate will only make him a more tempting target for the collection of liberal forces Tyrrell refers to as the *Kulturismog*.

Meese describes a White House that did not back down in the face of criticism, but he also gives us a revealing description of what he labels "the greatest domestic error of the Reagan administration," the TEFRA tax increase of 1982. Shortly after the 1981 tax cuts, in response to congressional and media calls to lower the deficit, seventeen congressmen, senators, and executive branch personnel—including David Stockman, Jim Baker, Dick Darman, and Ken Duberstein—began a series of meetings. The Gang of 17 worked out a proposal that became the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (TEFRA). It promised to bring in \$98 billion in taxes over three years and to cut spending by \$280 billion over the same period. Congress passed the tax increase and ignored the spending cuts. Here was a

cautionary example of what happens when process overtakes policy.

The result was higher taxes and a higher deficit:

Spending for fiscal year 1983 was some \$48 billion higher than the budget targets and no progress was made in lowering the deficit. Even tax receipts for that year went down—a lingering effect of the recession, which the additional business taxes did nothing to redress. . . . The TEFRA compromise. . . was a complete departure from our tax-cutting mandate, failed to reduce the growth of government spending, did not decrease the deficit, and divided the President from some of his most ardent supporters.

Ronald Reagan learned from this experience. George Bush didn't and hasn't. He too raised taxes in exchange for budget cuts that never materialized. He named—and, worse, retains—Richard Darman, one of the architects of Reagan's tax disaster, to orchestrate his deal with Congress. Darman's handiwork in 1991 hurt the economy even more than it did a decade earlier.

In late 1979 George Bush spoke at a large Republican women's gathering in Indianapolis that had become one of the early "cattle shows" for aspiring presidential nominees. All of the Republican candidates except Reagan spoke. (Reagan, however, won the straw poll.) I was there as publisher of *The American Spectator* and nervously introduced myself to Bush. "Ooh," he stammered, "that's a real egghead magazine." Then, hurriedly pointing me toward his factotum, "Do you know Jimmy Baker?"

Since then, Bush has become a friend of *The American Spectator* (due more to the charm of its editor-in-chief, I suspect, than to an appreciation of its "egghead" worldview). Yet his comment has always struck me as highly suggestive, not of his intellectual capacity, but of his tendency to undervalue the role of ideas in politics and governing. That Ronald Reagan did *not* make that mistake was a large part of his success, as Meese makes clear. And while Meese's book was written to set the record straight on the Reagan years, it also provides important lessons that it may already be too late for Bush to learn from. □

John Von Kannon, former publisher of *The American Spectator*, is vice president and treasurer of the Heritage Foundation.

## THE GREAT ONE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JACKIE GLEASON

William A. Henry III

Doubleday/321 pages/\$22.50

reviewed by DONALD LYONS

There are cycles creators go through. First they die, in an atmosphere of sentimental tribute.

After a while, there comes stage two, the unmasking biography that details every bender, fight, and betrayal. After another while, in stage three, a more balanced account appears, and attention begins to shift back to the work. (In many instances today, of course, the cycle starts to work during the subject's lifetime. It is hard to imagine a tell-all posthumous biography of Norman Mailer that will tell much new.) With Jackie Gleason, we are at stage two.

Poor Jackie was born in Irish Brooklyn in 1916 to battling parents—a feckless and alcoholic father who vanished when Jackie was 10 and was never seen again; and an anxious, worn mother who then got a job making change at a BMT subway station, where she had to stand for her whole shift in a booth neither heated in winter nor cooled in summer. The job barely kept the two in a small, dismal apartment. Gleason himself recalled their dwelling as “just a round table and an icebox and a bureau that everything went into. The light bulbs were never very bright and the rooms were always bare. But she was a good mother, and things were very pleasant, with a lot of affection.” William Henry scolds Jackie for letting his exhausted mother fix their suppers unaided all those evenings ago, but he also refuses to let Jackie rose-tint his mother's character. “Perhaps,” he grants, “the careworn,

drunken, and angry woman was also gentle, intuitive and kind.” But Henry ain't really buying it.

He cites Gleason's “deep distaste for any psychoanalytic speculation, especially when it involved other members of his family. In the world in which he was raised, to criticize one's relations . . . was an unpardonable breach of taste.” Gleason “largely eluded meaningful discus-



sion of his relationships with his parents.”

Jackie Gleason was, after sordid years as a comic in sleazy clubs and as a minor player in films, to come into his own in the postwar springtime of television, nursery of such loud, raucous, angular characters as Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and Lucille Ball (to name the best). In September 1952, CBS gave Gleason a variety hour, on which the most success-

ful recurring sketch was “The Honeymooners,” a tough comedy about four tough Brooklynites: Ralph Kramden, a fat busdriver; his peppery, bright wife Alice; and upstairs neighbors Ed Norton, a goofily lovable sewer worker, and his sane wife Trixie. Gleason was Ralph; in the classic shows Audrey Meadows was Alice; the sublime Art Carney was Ed; Joyce Randolph was Trixie—let the Muses sound the four names forever. Only in October 1955 did Gleason extract “The Honeymooners” from the context of his other, often inspired character sketches (the Poor Soul, Reggie van Gleason III, etc.) and begin the thirty-nine immortal black-and-white half-hour episodes. For the rest of his TV career, Gleason tried to recapture these glories of 1955-56.

The frequent thrust of the episodes was Ralph's effort to better himself and give Alice a better life; this would involve deceit, misunderstanding, and anger, but always final, resolving forgiveness and love. The programs remain, to this day, the jewel in the crown of American television—a dream marriage of artists and historical moment (the Glorious Fifties). Henry bestows lavish praise on “The Honeymooners” (“great dramatic art . . . heightened reality”) but seems to think Gleason should have taken his art elsewhere: “Gleason did not aspire . . . to dark and unsettling art. Throughout his career, he remained a happy-endings man.” Henry notes that “Jackie Gleason never let himself get drawn into discussions of the larger implications of Ralph Kramden's yearning for recognition” or “the larger meaning of Alice Kramden's unyielding insistence on her equality” or the “political agenda in his depiction of the poverty and thwarted materialism of the working classes.” He contrasts Sergeant Bilko's dealings with race relations to the refusal of “The Honeymooners” to acknowledge “the ethnic stew that was Brooklyn” (do stews melt?).

In all this, Henry misses the boat—and he misses it twice. In the first place, it was precisely Gleason's cultural and religious and personal inhibi-

Donald Lyons is a writer living in New York.