



BOOKS

Ronald Reagan, Author

By PAUL KENGOR

KIRON K. SKINNER, ANNELISE ANDERSON, MARTIN ANDERSON, EDITORS. *Reagan, In His Own Hand*. THE FREE PRESS. 549 PAGES. \$30.00

NOT LONG AGO, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Kiron Skinner, stumbled upon a box tossed in among Ronald Reagan's private papers. It turned out to be a treasure chest: It was one of several boxes of handwritten drafts of radio broadcasts, speeches, correspondence, and other documents. From 1975 to 1979, Reagan gave a daily syndicated radio broadcast, a commentary on politics and pol-

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icy. He gave over a thousand of these commentaries. And as the contents of the boxes demonstrated, some 670 were written by Reagan alone, with no assistance. No speechwriters, no ghostwriters, just Reagan.

Reagan researchers (myself included) have dug and dug and never thought we'd find these broadcasts. I was told they didn't exist. But they do, and what emerges from them is a far fuller portrait of the mind of Ronald Reagan than the public has ever had before — and the complete discrediting of the caricature of him as an ill-informed and half-witted actor dependent on others for his lines.

The editors of *Reagan, In His Own Hand* are Skinner and Annelise and Martin Anderson, all three of whom are fellows at the Hoover Institution. Martin Anderson was a key Reagan economic advisor and has done some of the best work on the president. Annelise Anderson was a senior advisor to Reagan's 1980 campaign and served in his Office of Management and Budget.

Of the 670 broadcasts, this book publishes 220, many with photos of the handwritten copy. Included are all abbreviations, misspellings, notes, carats, crossed out lines — everything. Each is roughly 500 words in length. The photos are remarkable. Among them is a picture of one of Reagan's famous 4x6 cards, which contains a speech in itself. What Reagan was able to do with the shorthand, nonsensical mish-mash on this card, in terms of delivering a clear, well-communicated speech, is extraordinary. We only have the copy because one of the book's editors, Martin Anderson, was shrewd enough years ago to retrieve it from the

wastebasket after seeing Reagan fold it in two and pitch it.

First and foremost, *Reagan, In His Own Hand* is a major research document. Perhaps its greatest value is as a primary source for Reagan scholars to mine and apply to their own research. I speak here from personal experience. This could be viewed as another Reagan diary — a contemporaneous memoir of his thoughts from 1975 to 1979, a historically neglected period in Reagan scholarship. This book shows how crucial that period was in focusing and formulating his policy positions for his 1980 presidential run and presidency.

The book shows that much of what happened in the 1980s is traceable to Reagan himself. Second, and more important, is that the book backs its claim — which I first suspected was hype, and I say this as an admirer of Reagan — that the broadcasts show that in the late 1970s he was a “one-man think tank.”

What emerges is the Reagan hardly anyone but Nancy knew, not even many of his own speechwriters — Reagan the writer. The prolific writer.

Nancy Reagan relays: “[H]e was a very, very good writer. All of his ideas and thoughts were formulated well before he became governor or certainly president.” On the writing of the radio broadcasts from 1975 to 1979, she recalled:

He worked a lot at home. I can see him sitting at his desk writing, which he seemed to do all the time. Often he’d take a long shower because he said that was where he got a lot of his thoughts. He’d stand in the shower and think

about what he wanted to write. And then, when he got out, he’d sit down and write....Nobody thought that he ever read anything either—but he was a voracious reader. I don’t ever remember Ronnie sitting and watching television. I really don’t. I just don’t. When I picture those days, it’s him sitting behind the desk in the bedroom, working.

The book provides pages of similar testimony from Reagan assistants Dennis LeBlanc, Barney Barrett, and David Fischer, as well as Mike Deaver, Ed Meese, and William P. Clark.

LeBlanc, a member of the California State Police, was assigned to the security detail of Gov. Reagan in 1971. He was with Reagan during the three-year period after he left the governorship. He was the only aide to travel continually with Reagan during that time, often traveling alone with him. “He was constantly writing,” LeBlanc remembered. “What was amazing to me was the fact that Ronald Reagan never slept on planes when he was traveling. It was the same way when I was with him in the station wagon. It was like — you’re wasting time if you are sleeping. You know, everyone’s got things to do. And his thing to do when I was with him was his writing.”

Shame on those in the press and academe who portrayed the man as precisely the opposite. They were lazy, not Reagan. They lazily accepted an easy caricature that was easily refutable. It appealed to them because it fed their own biases and agenda. If there’s a mystery, an “enigma” about Reagan, it’s that he contentedly allowed this caricature to be developed without caring to refute it — with such

My view is that it was because he was confident and secure enough not to care what critics said about his mind.

This book is also a credit to Reagan's work ethic. Without assistance, and while maintaining the full travel schedule (including a presidential campaign) of a working politician, he wrote 670 essays, some 335,000 words, in just four years. That's about one every other day. A syndicated columnist writing twice weekly will produce perhaps 75,000 words a year — less than Reagan's output, in other words.

The radio transcripts cover just about every policy issue of the day. The detail on taxes is rich. The material on foreign policy is overwhelming, particularly the breadth of countries Reagan analyzed, including the Third World. To give an example of Reagan's range, one roughly 20-page cluster of transcripts (about 3 percent of the total in the book) includes these titles: "Fish," "Apples," "Youth Employment," "OSHA," "Rapid Transit," "Agriculture," "Transportation," "Kettering," "Telescope I," "Telescope II," "Technology," "Phone," "Bugs," "Seal Hunt," "Alaska," "Federal Lands," "Land Planning," and "Property Rights."

Reagan wrote about these topics articulately and persuasively, with precision, and in single drafts with only a few edits. These essays reveal, first and foremost, a communicator of ideas to the ordinary man. "I know a lot of intelligent people who can't write," commented Martin Anderson. "But I don't know any person who writes this well who is not intelligent."

One of the most compelling broadcast scripts is one he titled simply,

"Communism, the Disease," written in May 1975. "Mankind has survived all manner of evil diseases and plagues," wrote Reagan, "but can it survive Communism?" This disease had been "hanging on" for a half century or more. As a result, Reagan felt it imperative to remind us "just how vicious it really is." This especially needed doing

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because the practitioners of communism, like many practitioners of medicine, sometimes came up with euphemisms or "double talk" to "describe its symptoms and its effects." For example, said Reagan, "if you and I in America planted land mines on our borders, ringed the country with barbed wire and machine gun toting guards to keep anyone from leaving the country we'd hardly describe that as 'liberating' the people." This was classic Reagan, on the attack, always speaking candidly, calling evil by its name. "Communism," he added for good measure, "is neither an economic

or a political system — it is a form of insanity.” He then made one of those seemingly wild predictions we’d hear throughout his presidency, mostly greeted by ridicule from his critics: Communism was “a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”

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Aside from radio broadcasts, the book contains 20 other Reagan writings from 1925 to 1994, even some poems and college essays. These include a remarkable find from October 4, 2000, by Martin Anderson. On that day, at Nancy Reagan’s request, he examined the papers in the former president’s desk in his office in Century City, Calif. There, he found a gem: a September 23, 1984, memo written by Reagan, titled simply, “Mr. Minister,” which lays out talking points for U.S. strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union.

As an economist, Anderson was

most surprised by the February 5, 1981, economic speech given by Reagan in New York shortly into the presidency. “It was a major speech,” he recalled. “I remember it well.” Anderson found the handwritten 15-16 page version by Reagan in his own hand. “I never knew he wrote it,” Anderson told me. “I don’t know that any of us knew. The speechwriters I’ve talked to didn’t even know he wrote it.”

Another remarkable speech he wrote circa 1963 states that an arms race would bankrupt the Soviets. That’s a very important find from the viewpoint of historians and presidential scholars. It means that Reagan had the notion as early as 18 years before his presidency began that an “all out race” could kill the Soviet Union. That was his own view. One can’t argue that it came from the people around him.

Thanks to this book, we now also have access to the full text of Reagan’s remarkable March 17, 1980, speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, written by Reagan himself on March 13, 1980, titled “‘State of the Union’ Speech.” I knew of the speech and found quotes from it in newspapers and other documents. This, however, is the first full copy I’ve seen. The lengthy speech broadly lays out what would become Reagan administration policy toward the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

He begins by describing the Soviet Union as “an imperialist power whose ambitions extend to the ends of the earth,” which “has now surpassed us in virtually every type of weapon. The Soviets arrogantly warn us to stay out of their way.” And how have we responded? Reagan takes aim at the

Carter administration: “by finding human rights violations in those countries which have been historically our friends & allies. Those friends feel betrayed and abandoned and in several specific cases they have been.” Attacking the Soviets, Cuba, and Carter policy, he adds: “A Soviet slave state has been established 90 miles off our coast; our embassies are targets for terrorist attacks; our diplomats have been murdered and half a hundred Americans are captives going into the 5th month now in our embassy in Iran.”

In this vintage Reagan speech, the message is clear: The problem is weakness. “May I suggest an alternate path this nation can take,” Reagan then asks, “a change in foreign policy from the vacillation, appeasement and aimlessness of present policy?”

“That alternate path must offer three broad requirements,” assessed Reagan. “*First* it must be based on firm convictions, inspired by a clear vision of, and belief in America’s future. *Second*, it calls for a strong economy based on the free market system which gave us an unchallenged leadership in creative technology. *Third*, and very simply we must have the unquestioned [military] ability to preserve world peace and our national security.” He then details all three, distilling the approach he would take in the 1980s.

Reagan, *In His Own Hand* offers little in the way of interpretation. That was the editors’ intent. Their aim was to “show not tell,” leaving interpretation to other scholars.

The book holds a lesson for presidential scholars: Quit simply reading and citing each other and start digging into primary sources. To know a president, one must do far more than just

read the writings of other scholars who never met the man and, worse, in Reagan’s case, have frequently harbored political biases against him. Also, in Reagan’s unique case, there is a great deal of prepresidential material, far more than for the vast majority of other presidents — itself a telling fact about his intellect.

This book lifts a veil. It offers us a long, careful, extremely informative look. Again, Skinner and the Andersons have shown, not told. Still, the telling needs to be done. If there is fairness in the world and in academe, others will mine this material and begin the telling.

The Eternal President

By KENNETH WEINSTEIN

JOHN PATRICK DIGGINS. *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History*. YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 330 PAGES. \$27.95

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