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Power Sources: General Electric and Other Generals at the White House (Book Review)

Gary L. McDowell
University of Richmond, gmcdowel@richmond.edu

Power sources

General Electric and other generals at the White House

GARY L. MCDOWELL

Thomas W. Evans

THE EDUCATION OF RONALD REAGAN

The General Electric years and the untold story of his conversion to conservatism

320pp. New York: Columbia University Press. $31; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £19.

978 0 231 13860 4

John Patrick Diggins

RONALD REAGAN

Fate, freedom, and the making of history

512pp. Norton. £16.99 (US $27.95)

978 0 393 06022 5

Richard Reeves

RONALD REAGAN

The triumph of imagination

592pp. New York: Simon and Schuster. Paperback, $16.

978 1 4165 3191 3

John O'Sullivan

THE PRESIDENT, THE POPE, AND THE PRIME MINISTER

Three who changed the world

448pp. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing. $27.95.

978 1 59698 016 7

Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at Ronald Reagan's lying in state, Washington DC, June 9, 2004

On June 9, 2004, Ronald Reagan made his final journey to Washington, DC, the city he had vowed to transform when he arrived as the nation's fortieth President nearly a quarter of a century before. His death four days earlier, after a decade of decline into Alzheimer's, while not unexpected, still shocked and saddened the United States. Americans turned out in force to pay their last respects to the man who had transformed their nation and the world. The crowds on that steamy summer day, six to eight deep along Constitution Avenue, waited hours to pay tribute as the caisson bearing the President's coffin passed by, accompanied by the symbolic riderless horse with Reagan's boots backwards in the stirrups.

These were not simply tourists who happened to be in town, but people from across the country. As the huge crowd swelled and sweltered, one veteran of the Reagan Administration wondered aloud, "Where were these people when we needed them?". In fact, they had always been there, during Reagan's eight often tumultuous years in the White House. From his routing of the incumbent Jimmy Carter in 1980 to his crushing defeat of Walter Mondale in 1984, to the dark clouds of the Iran–Contra scandal, to his departure from the Presidency, in January 1989, with an astounding approval rating of 68 per cent, Reagan was always, in his own way, the people's President. He believed in them, he trusted their judgement, and he routinely spoke directly to them over the heads of the great and the good, who never were willing to give him his due.

An "amiable dunce" was how one prominent member of the ruling class had dismissed him, a mere pawn in the hands of strong advisers. Most of all, this politically unsophisticated cowboy and his primitive views of the Soviet Union put the world at risk of nuclear Armageddon. Reagan was not kidding when he said Communism was unnatural and would in time be extirpated from the world, that the Soviet Union was the "evil empire", and that Marxism and Leninism would wind up on "the ash heap of history". When asked his view of how the Cold War would end, he was blunt: "We win, they lose". He meant it, and polite political society shuddered nervously.

Since the end of his Presidency there have appeared collections of his letters and his early writings, not least the drafts in his own hand of the many radio broadcasts he made during the interregnum between his tenure as California Governor and his campaign for the Presidency. And his White House diaries (reviewed on p3) confirm what the earlier works suggest: this was no dunce, no mere pawn, no reckless cowboy. Reagan had read widely and thought deeply about the major problems confronting the world, and the opinions he held were his own.

What was it that turned this former liberal Hollywood star (Reagan once described himself as a liberal bleeding heart "hemophiliac") into an ardent anti-Communist, a devotee of small government, low taxes and a strong military, and a tireless defender of traditional American values who would become the gravitational centre of modern conservatism? For some, the temptation to find the real Reagan in nothing more substantial than the reflection of others is simply too great to resist. Thomas W. Evans, who reveals much new information, in *The Education of Ronald Reagan*, about the eight years Reagan was a national spokesman for the General Electric corporation (a time the future President would himself later describe as his "post-graduate education in political science" and his "apprenticeship for public life"), ultimately succumbs to that temptation and attributes many – indeed, nearly all – of Reagan's political ideas to the influence of his boss at GE, Lemuel Boulware. In many ways, Evans's is more a book about Boulware and the corporate culture of the company than it is about Ronald Reagan.

There is no doubt that the process of Reagan's "self-conversion" from actor to politician and from liberal to conservative was enhanced by his eight years at the company. Reagan himself suggested that most of that "postgraduate education" came from his being out in the towns where GE had its factories, from speaking to, and hearing from the workers themselves.

He came to understand what were the hopes and concerns of working-class Americans. And it was during those years that Reagan honed the message that would come together in what has become known simply as "The Speech", which he gave to a national television audience in support of Barry Goldwater in 1964, and which launched Reagan's own political career.

As Reagan rode trains across the country (a deep-seated fear of flying kept him on the rails) to meet with the GE employees, he read, thought and deepened his understanding of politics and the proper role of government in American life. There seems no doubt that he and Boulware were in tune when it came to their beliefs as to the details of what "America should be" and even as to the "methodology that prescribed how [those] goals could be achieved". And perhaps Reagan even learned from Boulware the skill that would become a hallmark of his Presidency, the art of capturing "the minds and hearts of the workers by going over the heads of their leaders". But it is too much to suggest, as this book comes close to doing, that without Lemuel Boulware there would never have been Ronald Reagan.

In contrast to Thomas Evans's generally workmanlike account of Reagan's education, John Patrick Diggins has produced, in his *Ronald Reagan*, a book that is (to borrow Diggins's own phrase) "downright confusing". On the one hand, he sees Reagan as "a thoughtful, determined man of character and vision", a politician of "charismatic presence" who, as President, provided "confident leadership", indeed provided "enlightened statesmanship". Reagan, along with Abraham Lincoln, was "politically wise, humane, and magnanimous", both men demonstrating "greatness of soul". On the other hand, Diggins's Reagan will be largely unrecognizable to most. The Reagan here is presented as being "Far from . . . a conservative" in any meaningful sense. Rather, he was "a liberal romantic who opened up the American mind to the full blaze of Emersonian optimism", and who would "take America away from classical conservatism". In his Emersonian enthusiasm, according to Diggins, Reagan "made comfort and pleasure, not conviction and piety, the measure of all things". The end result was that "Reagan did not rescue America from liberalism . . . [but] reaffirmed it, and all its material possessiveness, in the name of higher purposes". Yet he had, Diggins says, "a divided soul": "While Reagan opened the American mind to the material blessings of freedom . . . he allowed it to stay closed to the requirements of moral authority". Again, although he opened the American mind to "its dreams, wishes, and contentment", he "left it closed to duty, wisdom, and conscience". In a sense, the problem with the Reagan of Diggins's imagination is that the historical Reagan is drawn and quartered on the rack of arcane scholarly categories. In fact, Reagan was hardly philosophically disposed; he was never a particularly self-reflective man. He tended to take his bearings from common sense assumptions about the issues that came before him. To understand Reagan one must first endeavour to understand him as he understood himself. And in that, Diggins fails.

It is somewhat ironic that one of the best efforts at finding Reagan should come from a self-confessed liberal, Richard Reeves. But here is an account that takes Reagan seriously, undertakes to understand him as he understood himself, and in the end succeeds in bringing him to life. Perhaps one of the virtues of Richard Reeves's *Ronald Reagan* is its organization. Rather than imposing abstract categories, Reeves lets the story develop chronologically. By doing so, he gives the reader the sense of being on the ground, of seeing how the myriad problems that confront an administration on a daily basis – from partisan political resistance to infighting among those closest to the President – have to be handled. And it shows how certain deeply held views, such as Reagan's unfaltering support of the "freedom fighters" in Latin America, can take on a life of their own – in this case degenerating into the Iran–Contra scandal.

But Reeves's great achievement is to allow the real Reagan to step out of these well-written pages. Where others are all too easily seduced into believing that aides must have been responsible for Reagan's successes, Reeves insists otherwise. Reagan's greatest political gift was his ability to render "a few ideas that he held with stubborn certainty" into "values and emotions" that were able to move a nation.

He was a man not so much of vision as of imagination, "a man who knew what he believed". As a result, he "rearranged American politics". As Reeves concludes, it was not his talented advisers like Caspar