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Teaching American History

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Teaching Reagan

Prior to the TAH class of 2011, the knowledge I had amassed of Ronald Reagan was what I, a rebellious adolescent at the time, remembered of his presidency. Thus, my perceptions of Reagan were less than favorable. To my surprise, I became intrigued with Reagan through the TAH readings. Each of the authors we read seemed to struggle with whether Reagan was an "amiable dunce" or a brilliant politician focused on those issues most important to his notion of a strong America. Given that I had made a number of less than favorable assumptions in line with the "amiable dunce" theory, I was intrigued with the notion of Reagan as a brilliant political strategist. In reading Michael Schaller's Ronald Reagan, I hoped to gain more insight on this dilemma, so that I might portray both perceptions fairly to my students. In reading Del Quentin Wilber's Rawhide Down, I hoped to build on this insight as well as find a few "hooks" to interest my students in discussions of Reagan.

Ronald Reagan by Michael Schaller

In his book, Ronald Reagan, Michael Schaller offers a brief overview of Reagan's life and political career. Because of its length, the book is short on details, instead painting the

president's career in broad strokes. As such, it is difficult to avoid presenting a biased picture of Reagan. Despite the fact that Reagan is a polarizing figure in politics, Schaller does well to include both the positive and negative aspects of Reagan's presidency in his portrayal of the politician.

Throughout the book, Schaller asserts that Reagan perceived himself as a hero in many ways. From his early years as a lifeguard in Illinois, where he was credited with saving 77 swimmers from drowning, to selling arms to Iran to secure the release of 7 hostages in Beirut, Reagan seemed preoccupied at times with his own heroism. This seems tied to his relentless optimism about America as a heroic nation. In Reagan's heroic nation, democracy triumphs over evil communism, and social conservatism is rewarded.

Schaller notes that in his cabinet meetings Reagan would often become glassy-eyed as he read inspirational stories sent to him by admirers, so much so that aides continued on in decision-making without his input. This shaped him as a politician as he latched onto some issues and became passionate about them, but on others, deferred to his 'think tanks'. As speechwriter Peggy Noonan put it, "Taxes and SDI and abortion were issues that captured his imagination. He could see how taxes hurt,...he could see how SDI, with a perfectly directed laser beam, could shoot down a missile,...he could see the fetus kicking away from the needle."

Reagan portrayed an image of "rugged individualism" that sometimes stretched the truth. Reagan embellished his military experience at least twice, regarding having seen or filmed liberation of Nazi extermination camps. While this was untrue, it seemed less a malicious lie and more a deep desire to connect with the American people. Schaller notes, "His connection to

voters transcended specific policies and tapped into a popular will to restore a sense of community, real or imagined, that had been lost since the 1960s."

When Reagan's image was challenged publicly, he could brilliantly spin an interaction with humor, anecdotes, or self-deprecating humor. He used his skills as the 'great communicator' to sidestep issues as well. For example, on his divorce from Jane Wyman, he responded that he did not get divorced, Jane Wyman divorced him. He used this type of reframing to preserve his image more than once, noting that he did not have cancer, his colon did, and that he had not left the Democratic Party, it had left him. These are clear attempts by Reagan to spin issues which might conflict with the personae he wished to project to the public.

From his demonization of communism, to his fiscal and social conservatism, Reagan appealed to Americans on a personal level. He exuded patriotism, optimism and humility in a way that so appealed to voters that he seemed to turn citizens' perception of their own nation drastically. His ability to portray the United States as just as much of a hero as himself may have been flawed, but the nation seemed eager to believe it. Where his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had been honest with Americans about his grave concerns about the nation and where it was headed, Reagan was honest with Americans about his unbridled optimism. Both men seemed to truly believe that it was the right way to communicate with the American people.

The American public did not respond well to Carter's pessimistic message in his "crisis of confidence" speech delivered on July 15, 1979. In his attempt to be honest with the public, he painted a bleak picture of our situation at the time, and of our future if Congress did not support his expanded policies and programs. In stark contrast, Reagan tapped into the public's optimism and in so doing, their desire to trust that we could improve our situation. While tapping their

optimism, however, he also played to their skepticism in saying a bright future included less government, not more. These messages, in tandem, were at the heart of Reagan's success as a politician, and indeed, quite brilliant and largely responsible for his popularity and second term.

In this brief volume, Schaller offers a fair portrait of Reagan. He examines Reagan's complex character by tying quotes from Reagan and those around him to the events that shaped his political career. He outlines those issues Reagan felt most passionately about and provides details on how he advanced and sometimes hindered those causes. Reagan inspires strong reactions from most who hear his name. Schaller's book is a good choice for those looking to examine new perspectives on this complex subject.

Rawhide Down by Del Quentin Wilber

Wilber's Rawhide Down is a riveting book about the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan on March 30, 1980. The most interesting details had to do with the secret service agents' training and response to the assassination attempt. They include ways in which The Secret Service failed, leaving the president vulnerable, and ways in which they succeeded, saving the president's life.

In the early 1980's, changes in secret service training were initiated by the agents themselves, who were growing concerned about not having the skills to cope with increasing assaults on those they were charged with protecting. Secret service agents sought the help of the Los Angeles Police Department's SWAT team and began staging ambushes and attacks to better prepare themselves. One important aspect of that training involves agents learning not to think, but to deliberately put themselves in harm's way to save those they are charged with protecting.

In addition to literally diving in front of bullets, these techniques involve learning to shoot while standing tall instead of from a crouch like FBI agents and police officers so that they might take bullets, not avoid them. This type of training was credited with saving Ronald Reagan's life that day. Agent Tim McCarthy applied his training when he stretched out to use his body to shield the president from the shots fired by John Hinkley. Agent McCarthy was shot in the abdomen as a result.

In addition, secret service agents are required to pass a course in "ten minute medicine". This training may have helped Agent Parr, who pushed Reagan into the limo as the shots were fired, decide to re-route the limousine from The White House, its initial destination, to George Washington Medical Center. At the time Agent Parr did not know if the assassination attempt was part of a coordinated terrorist attack. If it was, the White House was the safest place for the president. On the other hand, Agent Parr needed to assess whether Reagan's symptoms, which included great pain in his side, loss of color and bleeding from the mouth, were life threatening, or the result of having been pushed so forcefully into the limo. Agent Parr's assessment and decision was also crucial to Reagan's survival of the attack.

Wilber's book is full of facts, not only about the assassination attempt, but about the secret service and its history. The secret service's evolution over time from an organization primarily concerned with counterfeiting, to an organization charged with protection of high profile visitors and officials, will be quite interesting to my students. Additionally, there are many personal anecdotes from people who worked in the hospital that day. Wilber details the wide variety of reactions of the nurses and the attending physicians as they learned that the president was in route to their hospital and as they treated him. Additionally, Reagan's relationship with his nurses, the comfort he drew from them, and some of the unusual decisions

they had to make about how to care for their unique patient provide a wealth of anecdotes which should easily capture my students' interest.

Reagan's response to the assassination attempt in the following hours, days, and weeks are emblematic of his character as a president. They are an excellent starting point for discussions about Reagan's great communication skills and his ability to portray confidence and assure the nation under great stress. I think it is worth examining these characteristics in detail, as they are at the heart of the debate of whether Reagan was an "amiable dunce" or a brilliant political strategist. Wilber's book provides plenty of anecdotes to examine as a starting point for this debate.