

Rewriting Ronald Reagan

How the Media Have Worked to Distort,
Dismantle and Destroy His Legacy



A Special Report from the Media Research Center

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As the nation prepares to pay tribute to former President Ronald Reagan on the 100th anniversary of his birth, it is amazing to consider that his success at turning the U.S. away from 1960s-style liberalism was accomplished in the face of a daily wave of news media hostility. The media's first draft of history was more myth than reality: that Reagan only brought the nation poverty, ignorance, bankruptcy, and a dangerously imbalanced foreign and defense policy.

The Media Research Center has assembled a report documenting the "objective" national media's most biased takes on President Reagan, his record and his times:

- I. Reagan the Man:** Reporters often agonized over why the American public liked Reagan, that they couldn't see through the White House spell and see Reagan in the contemptuous light that the media did.
 - II. The Reaganomics Recovery:** Reagan's policies caused a dramatic economic turn-around from high inflation and unemployment to steady growth, but the good news was obscured by bad news of trade deficits, greedy excesses of the rich, and supposedly booming homelessness.
 - III. Reagan and National Defense:** Ronald Reagan may have won the Cold War, but to the media, the Reagan defense buildup seemed like a plot designed to deny government aid to the poor and hungry, and was somehow the only spending responsible for "bankrupting" the country.
 - IV. Reagan and Race:** Using their definition of "civil rights" – anything which adds government-mandated advantages for racial minorities is "civil rights" progress – liberal journalists suggested that somehow Ronald Reagan was against liberty for minorities.
 - V. The Reagan Legacy:** The media painted the Reagan era as a horrific time of low ethics, class warfare on the poor, and crushing government debt.
- EXTRA: Reagan, Slammed by Celebrities.** Ronald Reagan's long Hollywood career earned him no credit among celebrities, who ridiculed him and even inserted anti-Reagan jokes into everyday entertainment programming.

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BY BRENT BAKER, TIM GRAHAM,
AND RICH NOYES

As America marks the 100th anniversary of Ronald Reagan's birth, stories abound of the man and the President — his leadership and vision, his humanity and optimism, his deep love of country and belief in the power of freedom. But any measure of his accomplishments has to begin by noting his unique placement in history as a firmly conservative president arriving at the end of an era dominated by liberalism — in both parties. Everything he accomplished he did by the force of his personality and words, aiming to pick up easily embarrassed moderate Republicans as well as conservative Democrats. Everything he changed he managed to do against a daily wave of news media hostility to his agenda.

Think of everything Reagan did, and then add: He did it all before Fox News. He did it all before the Rush Limbaugh phenomenon. He did it all before the instant battle cry of his defenders could hit the Internet. He did it all before C-SPAN caught on and people could enjoy the game of watching entire speeches and debates and then observing how the network tricksters discombobulated them into liberal hatchet jobs. He did it all when the only conservative regular on the big networks was ABC's George Will, who appeared once weekly as a panelist on *This Week with David Brinkley*.

In the prologue to his book on Reagan, Dinesh D'Souza captured the flavor of how Reagan was greeted by the Washington establishment. Everything Reagan sought to accomplish seemed ludicrous and uneducated to the long-standing liberal consensus. Tax

cuts would be wildly inflationary. A foreign policy based on the radical notion that Communism should be put on the ash heap of history was dismissed as a bellicose fantasy too dangerous for the nuclear age. At the end of it all, Reagan was the wise man, and all his detractors – Democrats and ersatz Republicans, political scientists and economists, ‘Sovietologists’ and journalists – were the dummies.

The media’s first draft of history was more myth than reality: that Reagan only brought the nation poverty, ignorance, bankruptcy, and a dangerously imbalanced foreign and defense policy. The Media Research Center has assembled a report documenting the “objective” national media’s most biased takes on President Ronald Reagan, his record and his times:

I. REAGAN THE MAN

While most Americans appreciated Ronald Reagan’s love of country and common sense conservatism, the media elite scorned him as either a showman fooling his audience, or a dunce who was unfit for high office. As the media told the story, Reagan was an airhead living in a fantasy world, a mesmerizing Music Man fooling the public with a phony bill of goods, a man who was cruel or uncaring to poor people and a puppet for the greedy rich. Reporters often agonized over why the American public liked Reagan and could not see through the White House spell and share the media’s contemptuous view of him.

■ “Pretty simplistic. Pretty old-fashioned. And I don’t think they have much application to what’s currently wrong or troubling a lot of people....Nor do I think he really understands the enormous difficulty a lot of people have in just getting through life, because he’s lived in this fantasy land for so long.”

– **NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw speculating on Reagan’s values in *Mother Jones*, April 1983.**

■ “The mission that Reagan has embarked upon has nothing to do with his personal charm. He has set out to reverse the course of American government that was charted by Franklin Roosevelt. If F.D.R. explored the upper limits of what government could do for the individual, Reagan is testing the lower limits. Reagan’s opinions and policies would be enough in another time to have protesters marching in the streets, or worse. And yet something about Reagan soothes and unites – even though the effects of his programs may repel.”

– **Essayist Lance Morrow in the July 7, 1986 *Time* magazine cover story, “Why Is This Man So Popular?”**

■ “So I think [Ronald Reagan] is going to have to pass two or three tests. The first is, will he get there, stand in front of the podium, and not drool?”
– **ABC White House reporter Sam Donaldson on a planned Reagan press conference, NBC’s *Late Night with David Letterman*, March 18, 1987.**



■ “The Acting President: Ronald Reagan and the Supporting Players Who Helped Him Create the Illusion That Held America Spellbound”
– **Title of 1989 book by Bob Schieffer, CBS News Chief Washington Correspondent, and Gary Paul Gates, co-authors of *The Palace Guard*.**

■ “They [Reagan and Thatcher] quickly formed a bond that overcame their differences of age, gender and – many whisper – IQ scores.”
– ***Washington Post* reporter David Broder, May 27, 1989.**

■ “To the self-indulgent age of the ‘80s and to the characters that gave it special flavor at home – Oliver L. North and Ronald Reagan, Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Arthur Laffer and his curve, the Yuppies and the leveraged buyout dealmakers – good riddance.”
– **Former *Washington Post* editor Haynes Johnson, December 29, 1989.**

■ “Reagan’s approval ratings never put him in the top rank of most popular Presidents; that was always a myth. And his confectionary, heavily scripted presidency tended to lead the country backward.”
– ***Newsweek* Senior Writer Jonathan Alter, December 31, 1991 news story.**

■ “[Bush] is about to make matters worse by hauling out Ronald Reagan at the Republican convention. Reagan has become a symbol of what went wrong in the ‘80s. It’s like bringing the Music Man back to River City, a big mistake.”
– ***Newsweek* reporter Eleanor Clift on *The McLaughlin Group*, August 1, 1992.**

■ “I think the best evidence I can give that we do a lousy job covering politics is to look at the politicians: Ronald Reagan was President of us for eight years – Ronald Reagan! Reporters should have been writing for the entire eight years of his reign that this man was gone, out of it....He should have been covered as a clown.”
– **NBC reporter Bob Herbert during a panel discussion at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism in Fall 1992, as reported in a June 21, 1993 *National Review* article by Stephanie Gutmann. Herbert is currently a *New York Times* columnist.**

■ “All of us who covered the Reagans agreed that President Reagan was personable and charming, but I’m not so certain he was nice. It’s hard for me to think of anyone as nice when I hear him say ‘The homeless are homeless because they want to be homeless.’ To my mind, a President should care about all people, and he didn’t, which is why I will always feel Reagan lacked soul.”

– **UPI White House reporter Helen Thomas in the July 1993 *Good Housekeeping*.**

■ “In the plague years of the 1980s – that low decade of denial, indifference, hostility, opportunism, and idiocy – government fiddled and medicine diddled, and the media were silent or hysterical. A gerontocratic Ronald Reagan took this [AIDS] plague less seriously than Gerald Ford had taken swine flu. After all, he didn’t need the ghettos and he didn’t want the gays.”

– **CBS *Sunday Morning* TV critic John Leonard, September 5, 1993.**

■ “I was a correspondent in the White House in those days, and my work which consisted of reporting on President Reagan’s success in making life harder for citizens who were not born rich, white, and healthy saddened me. My parents raised me to admire generosity and to feel pity. I had arrived in our nation’s capital [in 1981] during a historic ascendancy of greed and hard-heartedness.”

– ***New York Times* editorial page editor (and former Washington Bureau Chief) Howell Raines in his 1994 book *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*.**

■ “Let’s not debate his presidency, but his passing. As opposed to a man like Reagan, Nixon is, was highly regarded as a genuine statesman with a first-class mind.”

– **Bryant Gumbel, April 26, 1994 *Today*.**

■ “How much did Reagan fool the American people and how much did he simply play into their wishes? Were they misled by the nature of his campaigning or were they led into ways they wanted to go? Was Reagan sort of a modern Pied Piper? It’s my instinct about it that he very successfully delayed the apprehension of reality by this country for about a decade. He made people feel that things were better than they were, that the external dangers were greater than they were.”

– **Former PBS anchor Robert MacNeil in the 1995 Liz Cunningham book *Talking Politics: Choosing the President in the Television Age*.**

■ ***Time*’s Jack White:** “And he was extraordinarily lucky in that he wasn’t brought down by the Iran-Contra scandal.”

Columnist Charles Krauthammer: “Oh, come on.”

White: “...It verged on treason. He was extraordinarily lucky on that. He tried to turn the clock back on civil rights. There’s a whole history of problems with this guy that some of us don’t join you in the view that he’s the most successful presidency.”

Krauthammer: "...He ushered in the collapse of the Soviet empire, which is the greatest achievement of the last 50 years."
Newsweek Assistant Managing Editor Evan Thomas: "He had kind of an intuitive idiot genius."

– September 25, 1999 *Inside Washington*.



■ "Good morning. The Gipper was an airhead! That's one of the conclusions of a new biography of Ronald Reagan that's drawing a tremendous amount of interest and fire today, Monday, September the 27th, 1999."

– NBC co-host Katie Couric opening *Today* before an interview with Reagan biographer Edmund Morris, who actually wrote that President Reagan was "an apparent airhead." He told Couric, "He was a very bright man."

■ **Co-host Bryant Gumbel:** "Well, later on this morning we're going to be talking on this President's Day about this presidential survey. Who would you think finished first?...Of all the Presidents when they did first to worst. Oh c'mon, you would know."

Co-host Jane Clayson: "Ronald Reagan."

Gumbel, dropping his pen: "First?!?!"

Clayson: "Who was it?"

Gumbel: "No! Reagan wasn't even in the top ten. Abraham Lincoln. Maybe you've heard of him."

– Exchange on CBS's *The Early Show* about C-SPAN poll of historians which ranked Reagan 11th, February 21, 2000.

■ "I used to say I thought if you were down on your luck and you got through the Secret Service, got in the Oval Office and said, 'Mr. President, I'm down on my luck,' he would literally give you the shirt off his back. And then he'd sit down in his undershirt and he'd sign legislation throwing your kids off school lunch program, maybe your parents off Social Security, and of course the Welfare Queen off of welfare."

– ABC's Sam Donaldson, who covered the White House during the 1980s, on *Good Morning America*, June 11, 2004.

■ "Reagan, like just about every other actor who ever passed through Hollywood, had a very hard time viewing sex as something to repress. This genial hedonism would later express itself in Reagan's embrace of supply-side economics. Tax cuts would pay for themselves, he told himself, and when they didn't, he left to his two White House successors the drudge work of reducing the huge budget deficit."

– Former *Newsweek* reporter and *U.S. News & World Report* editor Timothy Noah in a *Washington Post* book review, March 29, 2007.

II. THE REAGANOMICS RECOVERY

Few now remember that 1979 and 1980 were the nation's worst economic years since the Great Depression. Reagan saved America from Jimmy Carter economics: he brought inflation down from 13.5 to 4.1 percent; unemployment, from 9.5 to 5.2 percent; the federal discount rate, from 14 to 6.5 percent. Under Reagan, the number of jobs increased by almost 20 million; median family income rose every year from 1982 to 1989. It was the greatest peacetime expansion in American history. Charitable giving more than doubled, to more than \$100 billion in 1988.

But the media elite's first drafts of history ignored the good news and highlighted the bad news. In a study of almost 14,000 network stories on the economy during three one-year time periods – July 1 to June 30 in 1982-83, 1984-85, and 1986-87 – Virginia Commonwealth University professor Ted J. Smith III found that as the economy improved, the amount of network TV coverage shrunk and grew more negative in tone. The ratio of negative to positive stories aggressively increased even as economic indicators improved, from 4.9 to 1 in 1982-83 to 7.0 to 1 in 1986-87. When an economic indicator grew better, the networks began covering it less so they could focus more on unhealthy economic signs. For instance, as the unemployment rate fell from 10.6 percent to well under 6 percent by 1987, the number of stories on employment plunged by 79 percent while reports on the growing trade deficit soared 65 percent and stories on the homeless jumped by 167 percent.

The media had a theory to prove: Reaganomics was a dramatic failure.

■ “But I thought from the outset that his ‘supply side’ [theory] was just a disaster. I knew of no one who felt that it was going to work, outside of a small collection of zealots in Washington and at USC – Arthur Laffer, Jack Kemp. What I thought quite outrageous was the business community, which for years carped and complained that it could never get a President sympathetic to its needs, finally got its champion, Ronald Reagan. Then, to its horror, it discovered that he was actually going to press ahead with supply side – a theory whose disastrous consequences businesspeople began desperately to prepare for, but did not publicly warn the rest of the country about. They knew it simply could not work. But what they did was look to their own little life raft and not to anyone else's.”

– **Tom Brokaw in an interview in *Mother Jones*, April 1983.**

■ “As a practical matter, the homeless won't get very far unless they can persuade a Republican to break with Ronald Reagan's policies – or elect a Democrat.”

– ***Newsweek* senior editor Tom Mathews in the March 21, 1988 issue.**

■ “Underlying Flaws in Economy Mar Legacy of Reagan Years: Despite Successes on Inflation and Jobs, Problems of Deficits, Productivity, Wealth, Savings and Other Indices Cloud Outlook for Future”

– ***Washington Post* headline, November 13, 1988.**

■ “After eight years of what many saw as the Reagan administration’s benign neglect of the poor and studied indifference to civil rights, a lot of those who lived through this week in Overtown seemed to think the best thing about George Bush is that he is not Ronald Reagan....There is an Overtown in every big city in America. Pockets of misery made even meaner and more desperate the past eight years.”



– **ABC’s Richard Threlkeld reporting from a section of Miami where there had been riots, on *World News Tonight*, January 20, 1989.**

■ “As this decade comes to a close, the United States has the highest rate of poverty in the industrial world, 32 million poor people and no one knows exactly how many of them are hungry and homeless. So that ‘shining city on a hill’ of which President Reagan spoke in his farewell address remains to these Americans a mirage and will remain so until we come to see them – men, women and children – as people like us.”

– **Bill Moyers after PBS’s re-airing of 1982 CBS Reports “People Like Us,” June 20, 1989.**

■ “Largely as a result of the policies and priorities of the Reagan Administration, more people are becoming poor and staying poor in this country than at any time since World War II.”

– **Bryant Gumbel on NBC’s *Today*, July 17, 1989.**

■ “It now seems the time has come to pay the fiddler for our costly dance of the Reagan years.”

– **NBC’s Bryant Gumbel talking about a deal to raise taxes, *Today*, May 9, 1990.**

■ “Okay, Democrats are certainly not without blame, but I believe the S&L crisis lands right at the Republican door. It was the magic of the marketplace that took off the regulations....Oh, Ronald Reagan and the magic of the marketplace was the theme of the ‘80s. Greed in this country is associated with Ronald Reagan.”

– ***Newsweek* reporter Eleanor Clift on *Face the Nation*, July 29, 1990.**

■ “We wanted everything but the pain of paying for it. It began with a promise from a new President....In a decade [the] deficit more than tripled. How? Ronald Reagan ran for President promising Americans more while asking for less: the Reagan Revolution.”

– **Tom Brokaw on NBC *Nightly News*, October 5, 1990.**

■ “In America in the 1980s, what former President Reagan and those who support him call the Reagan revolution put more money in the pockets of the rich. We already knew that. But a new study indicates that those who did best of all by far were the very richest of the rich.”

– **Dan Rather on CBS *Evening News*, March 5, 1992.**

- “For ten years Ronald Reagan taught us there was a free lunch. ‘Folks,’ he said, ‘we’re going to cut your taxes and we’re going to spend like there’s no tomorrow and you don’t have to pay for it.’ Folks, we’re now paying for it and it’s bitter medicine....We’re going to have to raise taxes to get some sort of fairness here....For ten years the great wizard sold us that idea, that we could grow our way out of the deficits and we bought it, and we didn’t.”
 – **Sam Donaldson on *This Week with David Brinkley*, October 7, 1990.**
- “The boom years following World War II saw the U.S. economy take off, giving rise to the growth of the great American middle class. The rising standard of living meant homes, cars, TVs, college for the kids – all in all, a piece of the American dream. But in the Reagan years, economic erosion set in, so much so that the middle class now finds itself in ever-deepening trouble.”
 – **Bryant Gumbel on *Today*, January 22, 1992.**
- “It is often said that Ronald Reagan’s big budget cuts declared war on the poor. The most that can be said of George Bush is that he declared a cease-fire.”
 – **Lisa Myers on *NBC Nightly News*, May 7, 1992.**
- “Senator, don’t you believe, a lot of people do think that the ‘80s were an excess, which a lot of people got richer and people got poorer, and it’s now fair to redress that balance?”
 – **Sam Donaldson to Robert Dole on *This Week with David Brinkley*, Feb. 21, 1993.**
- “In the greedy excesses of the Reagan years, the mean income of the average physician nearly doubled, from \$88,000 to \$170,000. Was that warranted?”
 – **Bryant Gumbel to Dr. Richard Corlin of the American Medical Association, March 31, 1993 *Today*.**
- “Reagan got his taxation program through, which was to cut taxes to the bone. Mr. Clinton’s going to get his program through, which is to raise taxes to the sky. And let us hope, Cokie, that it doesn’t turn out to have a similar fate. What Reagan did was destroy the economy!”
 – **Sam Donaldson on *This Week with David Brinkley*, March 28, 1993.**
- “There’s no question it was the Reagan tax cuts that led to the deficit.”
 – **CBS Washington Bureau Chief Barbara Cochran on *C-SPAN’s Journalists’ Roundtable*, September 23, 1994.**
- “The trouble is that Ronald Reagan left us with the check. He may not remember all this, but he left us with a \$3 trillion debt.”
 – **San Francisco Examiner Washington Bureau Chief and *America’s Talking* host Chris Matthews on *Good Morning America*, January 4, 1995.**

■ “Our viewers remember from ’80, from 1980 to 1988, Ronald Reagan said he could cut taxes, increase defense, and still balance the budget. The deficit under Ronald Reagan doubled. The debt tripled, and home mortgage rates were 12 percent. It didn’t work then. Why would it work now?”

– **Meet the Press** host **Tim Russert** to **GOP** presidential candidate **Steve Forbes**, **September 24, 1995**.

■ “The legacy of the Reagan administration will be with us for years. The deficit under Reagan totaled more than a trillion dollars. Someday we’re going to have to pay those bills. As officials look to cut spending and taxes at the same time, we can’t afford another round of voodoo economics....I remember that campaign slogan one year ‘It’s morning again in America.’ Well, it may have been morning for some, but for a lot of people in this country it’s become a nightmare.”

– **CBS 60 Minutes** correspondent **Ed Bradley** in an **April 28, 1996** speech to **Benedictine University in Illinois**, aired **May 11, 1996** on **C-SPAN**.

■ “If there is any President who does not deserve credit for our current economic prosperity it is Ronald Reagan. The latter part of the 1980s will go down as one of the most poorly-managed, economically reckless fiscal periods in American history.”

– **PBS To the Contrary** host **Bonnie Erbe**, **February 28, 1998** syndicated column.

■ “By persuading Congress to approve sweeping tax cuts for the wealthy while slashing welfare benefits and other social services like the federal housing assistance program, Reagan was blamed for a huge surge in the nation’s poor and homeless population.”

– **Associated Press** reporter **Beth Fouhy**, **June 9, 2004**.

■ “At the end of his presidency, a great many people thought he’d made the wealthy wealthier and had not improved life particularly for the middle class.”

– **Peter Jennings** on **ABC’s Good Morning America**, **June 10, 2004**.

■ “Before Reagan, people sleeping in the street were so rare that, outside of skid rows, they were almost a curiosity. After eight years of Reaganomics – and the slashes in low-income housing and social welfare programs that went along with it – they were seemingly everywhere. And America had a new household term: ‘The homeless.’”

– **Reporter Kevin Fagan** in the **June 10, 2004 San Francisco Chronicle**.

III. REAGAN AND NATIONAL DEFENSE

Ronald Reagan may have won the Cold War by forcing the Soviet Union to realize that it could not compete financially or technologically with a revitalized United States. But to the American media, the Reagan defense buildup seemed like a plot designed to deny government aid to poor and hungry people. It was seemingly the only spending that caused the budget deficit, even bankrupted the country. Cranking up spending on supposedly unworkable new ideas like a national missile defense system was "absolute nonsense," as ABC's Ted Koppel told Phil Donahue in 1987.

A 1985 Los Angeles Times survey of reporters found out how McGovernite liberalism dominated the press: 84 percent of reporters and editors supported a so-called "nuclear freeze" to ban all future nuclear missile deployment; 80 percent were opposed to increased defense spending; and 76 percent objected to aid to the Contra rebels fighting for democracy in Nicaragua. One side of this debate had an eye on permanent "peaceful coexistence." The other side had an eye on victory.

■ "The Reagan Administration has made a bad situation worse in two ways: first, by convincing the Soviet leaders that the U.S. no longer accepts military parity as the basis for relations with Moscow; second, by challenging the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, calling the USSR an 'evil empire' doomed to fail."

– **Time's Strobe Talbott on pre-Olympics U.S.-Soviet relations, May 21, 1984 issue.**

■ "Reagan, as commander-in-chief, was the military's best friend. He gave the Pentagon almost everything it wanted. That spending, combined with a broad tax cut, contributed to a trillion-dollar deficit...Social programs? They suffered under Reagan. But he refused to see the cause and effect."

– **Tom Brokaw over video of homeless people on December 27, 1989 NBC News special, *The Eighties*.**

■ "The [Reagan] administration spun the nation out of its torpor with such fantasies as supply side economics, the nuclear weapons 'window of vulnerability,' and the Strategic Defense Initiative."

– **U.S. News & World Report Senior Editor Harrison Rainie, January 1, 1990.**

■ "Ah yes. The dreaded federal deficit, created, for the most part, by the most massive peacetime military buildup in America's history."

– **Reporter Jim Wooten on ABC's *Nightline*, January 29, 1990.**

■ "Some say Ronald Reagan won the Cold War by spending so much on defense that the Kremlin went bankrupt trying to keep up. That won't wash. During Reagan's presidency the United States itself became a bankrupt country."

– **Commentator (and former anchor) John Chancellor on the November 20, 1990 NBC *Nightly News*.**

■ “When you talk about the spending during the Reagan years on defense, you’re talking about absolute abdication of responsibility to domestic policy and issues in this country, and it’s totally without regard to the fact that these people were spending hundreds of dollars on toilet seats, not even this advanced technology.”

– *Washington Post* reporter **Juan Williams** on *Inside Washington*, **January 19, 1991.**

■ “The Reagan-Bush years took America from the heights of a rich creditor nation down to a pit of the world’s worst debtor nation. The reason was weapons purchases. No other expense came close.”

– **ABC 20/20** co-host **Hugh Downs** in an **ABC Radio** commentary, **March 18, 1991.**

■ “The Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War ended almost overwhelmingly because of internal contradictions and pressures within the Soviet Union and the Soviet system itself. And even if Jimmy Carter had been reelected and been followed by Walter Mondale, something like what we have now seen probably would have happened.”

– *Time* Editor-at-Large **Strobe Talbott** on *Inside Washington*, **September 21, 1991.**

■ “People who want to give Ronald Reagan the entire credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union ignore the fact that the Soviet economy was collapsing and the Reagan Administration covered it up...The CIA concealed what was happening over there so they could keep the defense budget over here high.”

– *Newsweek’s* **Eleanor Clift** on *The McLaughlin Group*, **January 15, 1994.**

■ **Thomas Friedman**, *New York Times* reporter and columnist: “Governor, I’m kind of a foreign policy wonk, and it scares the bejesus out of me to have someone as President of the United States, Commander-in-Chief, and finger on the nuclear button who is such an outsider to Washington and American foreign policy.”

Lamar Alexander: “Well, did Ronald Reagan scare you, Tom?”

Friedman: “He sure did.”

Alexander: “Did he? He didn’t scare me. I thought he was the best national defense and Commander-in-Chief and foreign policy President we’ve had since Eisenhower.”

Friedman: “Ask 245 Marines in Beirut about that.”

– **Exchange** on *CBS’s Face the Nation*, **March 5, 1995.**

IV. REAGAN AND RACE

One common media-elite attack on Reagan's domestic policy was the notion that Reagan was waging a "war on the poor," which was often a shorthand way of suggesting a war on black Americans. Using their definition of "civil rights" – anything which adds government-mandated advantages for racial minorities is "civil rights" progress – liberal journalists suggested to less sophisticated readers and viewers that somehow Ronald Reagan was against liberty for minorities. But it often grew worse, with inaccurate psychoanalysis which suggested Reagan was somehow gunning for blacks, encouraging bitter white supremacists by speaking of color-blindness.

Perhaps because they take all their race cues from liberal activist groups, the media ignored how blacks actually prospered in the Reagan years. Even the liberal Joint Center for Political Studies estimated the black middle class grew by one-third from 1980 to 1988, from 3.6 million to 4.8 million. In addition, black employment from 1982 to 1987 grew twice as fast (up 24.9 percent) as white employment. Real black median family income rose 12.7 percent from 1981 to 1987, 46 percent faster than whites. But reporters evaluated Reagan based on the evaluations of liberal friends, not hard data.

■ "I'm kind of surprised at President Reagan, because based on his personal history in Hollywood, I'm surprised he has not been an advocate of civil rights....I had heard that he was very open minded, broad minded person, that he cared about human rights....But the record is abysmal."

– CBS News correspondent Lesley Stahl on Howard Cosell's *Speaking of Everything*, April 10, 1988.

■ "At the same time, some experts said, years in which the Reagan administration questioned the value of racial quotas and affirmative action made speaking out against such programs acceptable. This, they contend, made it easier for racists to openly express their attitudes. Groups like the Klan and the Skinheads have both begun targeting the young for recruitment."

– Kirk Johnson in *The New York Times*, August 27, 1989.

■ "The right gets away with blaming liberals for their efforts to help the poor, but what the right is really objecting to is the fact that the poor are primarily black. The man who sits in the White House today opposed the Civil Rights Act. So did Ronald Reagan. This crowd is really fighting a retroactive civil rights war to prevent the people they dislike because of their color from achieving success in American life."

– PBS's Bill Moyers in an interview with *Washington Post Magazine* reporter Eric Alterman, September 1, 1991.

■ “The gap between white and black [life spans] has remained stubbornly wide, and it increased sharply during the Reagan years, when many social programs that helped minorities were slashed.”

– **Time magazine staff writer Christine Gorman in her article from September 16, 1991, “Why Do Blacks Die Young?”**

■ “We keep looking for some good to come out of this. Maybe it might help in putting race relations back on the front burner, after they’ve been subjugated for so long as a result of the Reagan years.”

– **Bryant Gumbel on the Los Angeles riots, April 30, 1992 Today.**



■ “The Republicans, for 25 years, have seldom avoided the temptation to play the race card politically in this country....In the '70s, Ronald Reagan, and the late '70s, he ran for President in 1980 talking about welfare queens, associating the Great Society programs with minorities, and with waste, and with crime in the streets. There has been a consistent impulse, Willie Horton was just a continuation of that, to use this issue to divide people.”

– **U.S. News & World Report Senior Writer Steven Roberts on Washington Week in Review, May 8, 1992.**

■ “Emboldened by a sea change during the Reagan-Bush era, conservatives scolded, ‘it’s all your fault.’ Dismissively this camp insisted that what blacks need are mainstream American values – read white values. Go to school, get a job, get married, they exhorted, and the family will be just fine.”

– **Newsweek General Editor Michele Ingrassia, August 30, 1993.**

■ “In the wake of the somewhat new hostilities bred in the Reagan '80s, how do you assess the state of race relations in this country today?”

– **Bryant Gumbel to National Urban League President Hugh Price, July 28, 1994 Today.**

■ “The sad truth is that many Republican leaders remain in a massive state of denial about the party’s four-decade-long addiction to race-baiting. They won’t make any headway with blacks by bashing Lott if they persist in giving Ronald Reagan a pass for his racial policies....It’s with Reagan, who set a standard for exploiting white anger and resentment rarely seen since George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door, that the Republican [Party]’s selective memory about its race-baiting habit really stands out.”

– **Time’s Jack E. White in a column posted on Time.com on December 14, 2002.**

V. THE REAGAN LEGACY

While most media reports acknowledged at Reagan's death the warmth and charisma of the man, and his powers as a "Great Communicator," they did not note the strenuous attempts to rebut him by the array of powerful communicators known as the national media elite. The most notable omission in all the gracious obituaries and histories is the media's own aggressive role in attempting to define the Reagan era down. Reporters, editors, and anchormen fought Reagan's policies tooth and nail, built a scandal industry to taint Reagan with the "sleaze factor" (which they quickly dropped in the 1990s), and often dismissed him personally as a dangerously bellicose and ignorant man still lost in his old movie roles.

The hostility didn't end when Reagan left office either. The media continued to paint the Reagan era as a horrific time of low ethics, class warfare on the poor, and crushing government debt. Even after he left office, Ronald Reagan's legacy was still a juicy target for liberal journalists, who blamed his administration for everything from flammable pajamas to sexual harassment in public housing.

■ **Don Regan:** "What's the bottom line of the Reagan Administration? It's a great record."

Lesley Stahl: "Bottom line: largest deficits in history, largest debtor nation, can't afford to fix the housing emergency or the drug crisis."

– Exchange on *Face the Nation*, May 15, 1988.



■ "President Reagan was unfair to the poor."

"He was a rich man's President."

"He had a negative view on women's rights."

"He was unfair to blacks."

"He didn't know what he was doing."

"He was unfair to the middle class."

"He was unfair to old people."

– Statements people were asked to agree or disagree with in *Washington Post/ABC News* poll released June 30, 1988.

■ "I think it's a dangerous failure at least in terms of programs. A mess in Central America, neglect of the poor, corruption in government....And the worst legacy of all, the budget deficit, the impoverishment of our children."

– *U.S. News & World Report* Editor Roger Rosenblatt summarizing the Reagan record during CBS News GOP Convention coverage, 1988.

■ "I think there is a question mark on the domestic policy: I think he left an uncaring society...a government that was not as concerned."

– UPI White House reporter Helen Thomas on *CBS Nightwatch*, December 30, 1988.

■ “And so it goes with President Bozo...coming to the end of his eight-year reign, and reign it has been, no matter how it rained on the poor. The hell with the poor, it’s their own fault; we all feel that way.”

– ***Boston Globe* Associate Editor and long time reporter David Nyhan, in a December 28, 1988 column.**

■ “I predict historians are going to be totally baffled by how the American people fell in love with this man and followed him the way we did.”

– **CBS’s Lesley Stahl on NBC’s *Later with Bob Costas*, January 11, 1989.**

■ “He talked about being proud of what’s happened with the economy, about the millions of new jobs that have been created. And as I listened to that, I also thought one out of five babies born in the United States are born into poverty. There are hundreds of thousands of people in this country now that are homeless, have no place to live. I wonder, how does your father reconcile that in his mind? How does he reconcile those two things?”

– **CBS *This Morning* co-host Harry Smith to Maureen Reagan on January 12, 1989, the morning after President Reagan’s farewell address.**

■ “In 1984, he would win again. It did not seem to matter that the deficit was growing; homeless families were in the street; and real wages were declining. Reagan’s campaign team turned the whole first term into a movie, featuring the Americans with restored faith. In 1984, Reagan had persuaded the majority of Americans that it was morning again in America.”

– **Liberal historian Garry Wills narrating the PBS documentary series *Frontline*, January 18, 1989.**

■ “The borrow-and-spend policies that Ronald Reagan presided over have bequeathed to his chosen successor a downsized presidency devoid of the resources to address long neglected domestic problems.”

– **Reporters Michael Duffy and Richard Hornik in *Time*, February 20, 1989.**

■ “Analysts will also recognize that Ronald Reagan presided over a meltdown of the federal government during the last eight years. Fundamental management was abandoned in favor of rhetoric and imagery. A cynical disregard for the art of government led to wide-scale abuse...Only now are we coming to realize the cost of Mr. Reagan’s laissez-faire: the crisis in the savings and loan industry, the scandal in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the deterioration of the nation’s nuclear weapons facilities, the dangerous state of the air traffic control system – not to mention the staggering deficit.”

– **CBS reporter Terence Smith in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, November 5, 1989.**

■ “In the 1980s the minimum wage has really lived up to its name. Since it was last raised to \$3.35 an hour in 1981, inflation has eroded its purchasing power by 27 percent. Meanwhile, the Reagan era became famous for skyrocketing maximum wages as greed became fashionable throughout the land.”

– *Time* Associate Editor **Richard Lacayo**, **November 13, 1989.**

■ **Bill Moyers:** “When it comes to visuals, do you miss Ronald Reagan?”

CBS’s Lesley Stahl: “Well, I guess as a television reporter yes, but as an American citizen, no.”

– **Exchange on PBS’s *Bill Moyers: The Public Mind*, November 22, 1989.**

■ “The decade had its highs (Gorbachev, Bird)...
...and the decade had its lows (Reagan, AIDS)”

– ***Boston Globe* headlines over ‘80s reviews by the paper’s columnists, December 28, 1989.**

■ “By ‘selling the sizzle’ of Reagan, as his aide Michael Deaver put it, the administration spun the nation out of its torpor with such fantasies as supply-side economics, the nuclear weapons ‘window of vulnerability,’ and the Strategic Defense Initiative.”

– ***U.S. News & World Report* Senior Editor Harrison Rainie, December 25, 1989/January 1, 1990.**

■ “It will take 100 years to get the government back into place after Reagan. He hurt people: the disabled, women, nursing mothers, the homeless.”

– **White House reporter Sarah McClendon in *USA Today*, February 16, 1990.**

■ “The missteps, poor efforts and setbacks brought on by the Reagan years have made this a more sober Earth Day. The task seems larger now.”

– ***Today* co-host Bryant Gumbel, April 20, 1990.**

■ “We went through a trance with a mesmerizing leader and enjoyed the moment. You remember it was good morning again, morning again in America, and the sun was always coming up. No dark clouds, live for the moment, don’t worry about the debts, don’t worry about tomorrow, don’t worry about paying them off, don’t worry about the long-term future. And I think that’s the legacy....I don’t think I said the most lawless. I think the record is the worst since the Harding years and that’s probably saying about the same thing.”

– **Former *Washington Post* editor Haynes Johnson discussing his Reagan-bashing book *Sleepwalking Through History*, March 12, 1991 *Today*.**

■ “By many measures, the Reagan Administration was a failure. It left us with a huge debt and an unfocused domestic policy. It got us in a moral mess with Irangate and a military disaster in Lebanon.”

– **NBC News President Michael Gartner reviewing Lou Cannon’s book, *President Reagan: Role of a Lifetime* in *The Washington Post*, April 21, 1991.**

■ “It’s been called a legacy of the ’80s, left on the sidewalks of America. An economic lesson about shrinking resources and growing needs in every major city. In Los Angeles, the welfare line starts at dawn and grows all day.”

– **Reporter Richard Roth on the November 7, 1991 *CBS Evening News*.**

■ “The amazing thing is most people seem content to believe that almost everybody had a good time in the ’80s, a real shot at the dream. But the fact is, they didn’t. Did we wear blinders? Did we think the ’80s left behind just the homeless? The fact is that almost nine in ten Americans actually saw their lifestyle decline.”

– **NBC reporter Keith Morrison, February 7, 1992 *Nightly News*.**

■ “You place the responsibility for the death of your daughter squarely on the feet of the Reagan administration. Do you believe they’re responsible for that?”

– **NBC reporter Maria Shriver interviewing AIDS sufferer Elizabeth Glaser, July 14, 1992 Democratic convention coverage.**

■ “The subtext of the recovery-and-healing line is that America is a self-abusive binger that must go through recovery. Thus: the nation borrowed and spent recklessly in the 1980s, drank too deeply of Reagan fantasies about ‘Morning in America’ and supply-side economics. And now, on the morning after, the U.S. wakes up at the moment of truth and looks in the mirror. Hence: America needs the ‘courage to change’ in a national atmosphere of recovery, repentance and confession.”

– ***Time* Senior Writer Lance Morrow welcoming the Clinton presidency, Jan. 4, 1993.**

■ “We have seen in the past, during Reagan-Bush administration days, when huge slashes went through, when entire programs were dismantled, and what ends up being left sometimes in its wake is the sort of vacuum and chaos and even more problems than were there to begin with.”

– ***CBS This Morning* co-host Harry Smith responding to Pat Buchanan’s criticism of the Clinton “Reinventing Government” report, September 8, 1993.**

■ “The number of measles cases in the US plummeted from 27,786 in 1990 to just 2,237 last year. Apparently the epidemic that raged through the preschool population after President Reagan cut funds for immunization has finally run its course.”

– ***Time*’s “Health Report” in “The Week” section, October 18, 1993.**

■ “I don’t shield my politics in this book, as I do in much of my journalism, as I’ve been disciplined to do. The Reagan years oppressed me because of the callousness and the greed and the hard-hearted attitude toward people who have very little in this society, so all of that came together at around age 40 for me.”

– ***New York Times* editorial page editor and former Washington bureau chief Howell Raines on the PBS talk show *Charlie Rose*, November 17, 1993.**



■ “Aren’t you worried that we’re going to go back to the days when Ronald Reagan suggested that ketchup and relish be designated as vegetables?”

– **Katie Couric to Representative Duke Cunningham, February 22, 1995 *Today*. Reagan never suggested that.**

■ “In the corporate takeovers of the 1980s, the Reagan administration was a wallflower at the orgy.”

– **First sentence of *Time* Associate Editor Richard Lacayo’s February 27, 1995 sidebar on Microsoft anti-trust settlement.**

■ “You can look at the economics of Reaganism, for example, or some of the bombast of his foreign policy, and find all manner of flaws in there.”

– **NBC’s Tom Brokaw on PBS’s *Charlie Rose*, May 2, 1996.**

■ “An awful lot of people, Cal, decided during the Reagan years that this could be done painlessly. Remember Ronald Reagan, your old buddy, he used to say, you know, ‘All you’ve got to do is cut waste, fraud, and abuse, cut welfare, cut foreign aid,’ and that’s how you would solve the problem. Reaganism never involved pain for God-fearing, taxpaying, hard-working middle Americans. Now, finally, the Reagan fantasy is coming face to face with reality.”

– ***U.S. News & World Report* Senior Writer Steven Roberts on CNBC’s *Cal Thomas* show, May 16, 1995.**

■ “Although most Americans benefitted, the gap between the richest and poorest became a chasm. Donald Trump and the new billionaires of the 1980s recalled the extravagance of the captains of industry in the 1880s. There were losers. Cuts in social programs created a homeless population that grew to exceed that of Atlanta. AIDS became an epidemic in the 1980s, nearly 50,000 died. Reagan largely ignored it.”

– **Narrator of PBS *American Experience* profile of Ronald Reagan, February 24, 1998.**

■ “Even without evidence of a direct link to the Oval Office, Iran-contra had portrayed the President as either a figurehead in a rogue government or an impotent and forgetful leader whose lack of attention to detail had finally caught up with him and the nation. To the problems of homelessness, AIDS, the skyrocketing budget deficit, and a frightening arms buildup could now be added a morally suspect foreign policy. And this, from the man who had made a return to an old-fashioned moral ethic central to his national plan.”
– ABC anchor Peter Jennings and co-author Todd Brewster in *The Century*, a book reviewing events between 1900 and 1999.

■ “Reagan turned the country to the right. There was a Reagan revolution, a very conservative revolution, and it was social Darwinism. If you can’t make it, tough. I mean, he did not believe in social welfare and, but at the same time, he did build up our military. He had a secret plan to spend one trillion dollars on new arms when he came in.”
– Former UPI White House correspondent Helen Thomas speaking at a March 3 Newseum session shown by C-SPAN on March 4, 2002.

■ “Most of those who are physically, economically or otherwise disadvantaged, deeply resented and still resent his insistence that government is the problem, not the solution. Severe and continuing cutbacks in government services to the poor and vulnerable resulted, and the gulf dividing rich from poor widened.”
– Former *New York Times* Washington Bureau Chief R. W. “Johnny” Apple in a June 11, 2004 “news analysis.”

■ **Ted Koppel:** “There were some fairly contentious issues and he was a fairly controversial President – we’ve more or less overlooked much of that over the past week. But I suspect as his friends and supporters try to raise to him to the very heights there, and perhaps find a place for him on Mount Rushmore, that some of that controversy and some of the debate will come back.”
Peter Jennings: “No doubt about it.”
– Exchange during ABC’s live coverage of Reagan funeral events about 7:45pm EDT on June 11, 2004.

■ **CBS’s Morley Safer:** “You talk about a vision, and it’s some kind of abstract, vague idea. Did his [Ronald Reagan’s] vision include extraordinary deficits? Did his vision include cutting of the budgets for education and a back of the hand in terms of public education?”

Larry King: “History will not be kind to him?”

Safer: “No, I don’t think history particularly will be kind....I don’t think history has any reason to be kind to him.”

– CNN’s *Larry King Live*, June 14, 2004.

■ “He definitely had an agenda, and was a social Darwinist. ‘If you can’t make it, tough.’ Was, you know, survival of the fittest, this is the whole approach. He appointed people at the head of his, of departments and agencies who were against the premise of the agency. With [Anne] Gorsuch of the EPA, [James] Watt of, to Interior, who wanted to sell all of the Western lands to privatize and so forth. So the whole thing is that he really did think that government was the problem and not the solution, which he said to the very end. At the same time, he, I think, he obviously was well liked, and I think that the poor did not prosper under him at all.”

– **Former White House correspondent Helen Thomas on CNBC’s *Tim Russert*, June 9, 2007.**

■ “Time for *Countdown*’s number two story, ‘Worst Persons in the World.’ The bronze goes to Mike Kilburn, county commissioner of Warren County, Ohio....The commissioners there are rejecting \$373,000 in stimulus money for three new buses and vans meant to get the county’s rural residents to health care and educational opportunities. Kilburn said, ‘I’ll let Warren County go broke before taking any of Obama’s filthy money. I’m tired of paying for people who don’t have. As Reagan said, government is not the answer, it’s the problem.’ Uh, Commissioner Kilburn, Reagan’s dead, and he was a lousy President.”

– **Keith Olbermann on MSNBC’s *Countdown*, April 22, 2009.**

EXTRA: Reagan, Slammed by Celebrities

Ronald Reagan was a joke in much of his old Hollywood home. They worked anti-Reagan jokes into sitcoms, such as this one in a March 12, 1989 episode of *Family Ties*, which featured a conservative Reaganite son and a liberal ex-hippie father who worked at the local PBS station. "Your Dad and I are producing a documentary comparing Reagan's presidency to medieval Europe's bubonic plague," said a co-worker. Dad interjected: "Nine out of ten people prefer the plague." In the years after Reagan left the White House, some stars were at least that harsh – and they weren't joking.

■ "Given the things I said about Reagan – that he's a criminal who used the Constitution as toilet paper – it wouldn't surprise me if my phone was tapped."

– **Actor John Cusack in the June 1989 issue of *Premiere* magazine.**

■ "Just how qualified, how aware is Ronald Reagan about what is going on in the American films today? He has such a dim notion of reality, how much of a hold does he have on fantasy? Out of touch as he is, it's a reasonable bet he would think Woody Allen's *Crime and Misdemeanors* is a documentary about his eight years in office."

– **Larry Gelbart, creator of *M*A*S*H*, in a *New York Times* op-ed, November 6, 1989.**

■ "This drug thing that we're going through now is a legacy of the Reagan years... They steal from the poor and give to the rich. That's the Reagan years."

– **Actor Eric Bogosian on the MTV special *Decade*, December 13, 1989.**

■ "I was 12 years old. Children in junior high school thought [Reagan] was going to drop a bomb. During the 1981 assassination attempt, the news came over the school intercom. Here in the ghetto everybody clapped. I clapped.... At 12 years old I already had a contempt for fascist politics. He was more of a monster than I could imagine at 12 years old."

– ***Boyz n the Hood* director John Singleton in the September 1993 *Playboy*.**

■ "I grew up in Los Angeles, in the inner city – you never saw drugs or drive-bys or homeless people or anything like that. All the social programs that were cut as a result of Reagan coming into office and greed just became a hobby....I remember watching...him say people in America who are homeless are homeless because they want to be. That seemed to be one of the most – and I was a kid – I knew how cruel that was and I would never, you know, ascribe any level of greatness to somebody who would say, you know, if somebody's hungry in America it's because they're on a diet. Like that, to me, made greedy white men feel good about being greedy white men. He was the kind of the Moses of leading them to feeling good about being greedy white men. So to me he wasn't a great man."

– **Comedian and former CNN host D. L. Hughley on HBO's *Real Time with Bill Maher*, June 5, 2009.**

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