

Ronald Reagan: The President Who Never Was

By Marvin D. Jones

Politics, like life, imitates art. The Contragate controversy is a poignant case in point.

The theatre of a once supremely unshakable President tottering under the weight of an unparalleled crisis, the morality play of arrogant men suddenly in deep trouble precisely because of their arrogant use of power, the modern political fable of all the President's men unable to extricate him from the plain lawlessness involved in his handling of the Contragate turbarry, are at once current events and interwoven themes of a continuing drama unfolding daily on the morning news.

Contragate has become a kind of political soap opera combining an inside look at White House infighting - between Reagan and Schultz for one example - with an episode by episode account of international intrigue, and high level lying.

Perhaps the most interesting picture to emerge from this, however, is a picture of Ronald Reagan as he really is. It is a picture of a man who claims, not without some credibility, that he doesn't know what is going on in his own basement, let alone his own foreign policy; who ran on the notion that he would be tough on America's enemies like Iran, and then hypocritically sends them American arms; who proclaimed himself a no nonsense law and order advocate and then cynically presides over a flagrantly illegal NSC effort to supply arms to the Contras; a man who looks like a leader, talks like a leader and then, in Mr. Magoo fashion, waves his administration over a cliff. It is an embarrassing picture of a man who has the image of a President but not the substance.

And for a long time an image, without more, was sufficient. Reagan was so enormously popular because he appeared to be both a person everyone could trust and a person who John Wayne style would deal with our enemies abroad and get government off of people's backs at home. So long as he could maintain this image Americans broadly felt good about things whether they were good or not, and regardless of objective evidence of Presidential bungling. Reagan recognized this and not only pursued a course which emphasized rhetoric over deeds but do so with outrageous success. Cartoonists could thus with biting accuracy, parody the Reagan presidency with a White House organizational chart showing

tiny Departments of Defense and State and so forth all being headed by a giant Department of Perception - whose job it was to manipulate public opinion, and through the magic of Reagan's charisma in tandem with the tacit support of the media (because of Reagan's conservative views) this latter Department worked so well that the American people continued to love and admire Reagan as a great Captain no matter how he misdirected the ship of state.

This is why Reagan could preside over unemployment in excess of 10% (as it reached during his first term), do nothing about it, and still be reelected. This is why Reagan could, in an immoral inversion of priorities, create huge budgets for defense at the expense of the poor, the cities, and social programs and do so with approval. This is why Reagan could engage in broad attacks on civil rights' gains, engage in military adventurism in Nicaragua, disregard arms limitations policies developed and observed by three Presidents before him - bringing everyone closer to nuclear confrontation - and still remain high in the polls. And this is why Reagan could conduct a spy swap and say he didn't; why he could attend a summit in Iceland, refuse to negotiate and then say it wasn't really a summit; and why he could vow to stand tall in Lebanon and then days later withdraw U.S. troops.

In this Reagan is much like the imposter in the Kurosawa film, "Kagemusha." Lord Shingen, a warlord of feudal Japan and a great leader, dies and his followers, to maintain Clan unity find a double for their departed leader in a man who is, ironically, a common thief. The thief, "Kagemusha," poses as the

departed leader and except for the few who conspired the masquerade the rest of the Clan is unaware of either Shingen's death or the switch. No matter what foolishness the double engages in they continue in fierce loyalty to him because he has the appearance of a great leader. Through the alchemy of Reagan's persuasive gifts Reagan too, like Kagemusha, made himself out to be a great leader and so he could do no wrong.

But the myth of Reagan's legitimacy as a leader is being steadily dissolved in the Contragate scandal. The twin talismans of his success - the notions of his integrity and his toughness - are now all but lost in the storm of controversy surrounding his obvious lies about his dealings in Iran and his involvement with illegal arms shipments to the Contras. The great reservoir of trust of the American people in his great leadership and character has largely disappeared and without that he has nothing to clothe himself from scrutiny which, given his substantive deficits, he cannot survive.

Whether or not Reagan is actually forced to resign, which is not unlikely, it is clear that what Reagan represented - a champion of the right, a powerful charismatic figure who almost singlehandedly sold the American people on a wholesale backward march against civil rights

and social programs - he can no longer be. If it has not done so already the Contragate scandal will inevitable not only discredit Reagan, but also call into question many of the conservative policies he espoused. Ironically, scandal will succeed where liberal opposition failed; Reagan's own clumsy use of power will have compromised him in a way his enemies could not.

Like a modern Ozymandias Reagan could once boast of giant influence beyond what most Presidents and other world leaders could ever hope for, an influence seemingly as unalterable as the American love of ap-

ple pie. Yet almost overnight his image was shattered and his influence fragmented. The Reagan presidency may not yet be officially dead, but it is doomed, and it seems not inappropriate at this juncture to suggest an epitaph: Ronald Reagan was engulfed by the shifting sands of history and having covered him the sands stretched far away leaving only memories of his vast empire of influence behind him, as if, a bad dream, he had actually never been.

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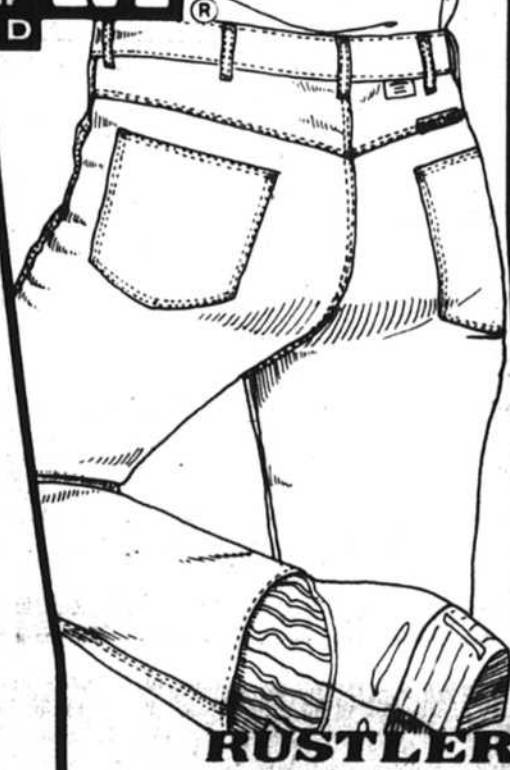
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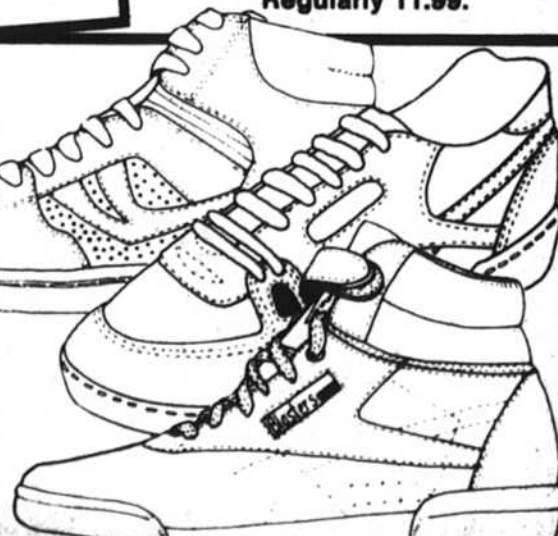
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