



Reagan's Hope

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Despite doubts about his age, intellect, and political philosophy, Ronald Reagan's message of hope won him the presidency, writes Richard Allsop.

'We have just witnessed the political funeral of Ronald Reagan' opined Tom Pettit of NBC on the night in January 1980 when Reagan lost the Iowa caucuses to George Bush.

It was only a narrow loss, but it was a bad one. Reagan should have had a lock on Iowa because he retained a reservoir of latent support there from his time as a young radio announcer. Bush, on the other hand, had no connection to the state. It was only in the weeks leading up to the Iowa vote that Bush had emerged from a pack of potential Republican nominees. After Bush's stunning win it was hard to see what would stop Bush's momentum in the next big contest, the New Hampshire primary in late February 1980.

The discounting of Reagan in early 1980 was not a new phenomenon. When he had narrowly failed to seize the Republican nomination from incumbent President Gerald Ford in 1976, many



assumed that Reagan's hopes of becoming President had gone. The conventional wisdom was that by 1980 he would be too old to be a serious candidate. This criticism only added a further string to those who had always maintained that his policy positions were too extreme to give him a realistic chance.

The electoral cycle from 1976 to 1980 rarely saw Reagan's polling numbers in a convincing position. For instance, in mid-1978 he was not only behind an increasingly unpopular President Jimmy Carter, but in a hypothetical Republican contest with Ford he trailed by ten points. These figures led *The Washington Post* to conclude that with 'age his greatest handicap' he had only 'a slim chance for the presidency in 1980'. However, in 1980 Reagan went two better than in 1976, winning both the Republican nomination and then the general election in a landslide—taking 44 of the 50 states.

Reagan scholar Craig Shirley's new book, *Reagan Rising: The Decisive Years, 1976-1980*, provides a lucid explanation of how this happened. Shirley has written three previous books about Reagan, including works on the 1976 and 1980 election campaigns. This volume links those two books, taking the story up to Reagan's comeback victory in the 1980 New Hampshire primary. New Hampshire wiped away the embarrassment of the Iowa defeat and set Reagan on course for a string of further primary wins which forced Bush's withdrawal by late May.

There is no doubt that the times suited Reagan. Even by 1976, the combination of the United States military failure in Vietnam, Watergate, and the oil crisis had started to create doubt in the public mind about the role of government. However, the on-going economic malaise of the late 1970s reinforced scepticism of whether governments could be trusted to solve every problem. Certainly, it had become clear that Keynesian economics did not have the answer to the nation's problems, as in the second quarter of 1979 the economy contracted by 2.4 per cent while annual inflation was 13 per cent.

The media began to report on some of the failings of the bureaucracy and the welfare state, such as the dentist who 'unnecessarily pulled all but three teeth of a thirteen-year-old girl because he was compensated on a per-extraction basis'. Then there was the case of taxpayers funding the employment of college students to continually drive the cars of congressional staff around Capitol Hill because 3300 staff were entitled to free parking, but there were only 2465 spaces available.

The shift away from the established big government consensus also began to be reflected in the electoral cycle between 1976 and 1980. There was the Proposition 13 tax revolt in California and clear signs in mid-term elections that Republican voters wanted more lively combatants than the traditional moderate version. Shirley pays significant attention to a primary race in New Jersey where 34-year-old Jeff Bell upset a forty-year liberal veteran 'courtly gentleman' Clifford Case, demonstrating that 'ideology was becoming more important in the Republican Party than experience'.

On the other hand, Shirley also notes a contemporary poll which showed that, when it came to the Presidential contest, sharing policy positions with a candidate was less important for voters than leadership qualities. Incumbent President Carter certainly did not look like a strong leader.

Carter's approval rating slumped to 19 per cent by 1979—and when he attempted to run a six mile race he collapsed four miles into it. The picture of his anguished face provided an awful metaphor for his presidency. As Shirley writes 'Americans now pitied their president. It was devastating.' The President looked weak on a variety of key issues, particularly relations with the Soviets. He suffered from that singular fault of bad leaders, the desire to micromanage, in his case manifested by issuing forms for his staff to fill in to show what time they showed up for work. Shirley comments acridly that 'one would hope the president of the United States would have bigger things on his mind than what time the woman from the steno pool arrived'.

Carter looked extremely vulnerable to a primary challenge from Teddy Kennedy, as voters yearned for a bit of Kennedy magic and imagined that Teddy might provide a last chance to recreate Camelot. However, a combination of some awful campaign performances and the detailed recital of the murky car accident at Chappaquiddick meant the expected surge of support for Kennedy in the Democratic primaries never eventuated. Further, Carter got some benefit in the primary challenge by voters rallying to the President in the initial stages of the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The fact that Carter survived the Kennedy challenge gave him renewed credibility in the eyes of both media and voters.

For many in the Carter camp, the primaries were of more concern than the general election, as his people 'could scarcely believe their good fortune' that Reagan was the Republican frontrunner. They were hardly alone in their assessment. It was not only the political left who underestimated Reagan, nor the liberal Republican establishment, but even some sympathisers from his previous campaigns were no longer on board. This was often because, with a wide choice of potential nominees, they thought other younger candidates might have a better chance of winning both the primary and the general election.

Underestimation of Reagan's qualities and ability was a constant theme. One critic neatly summed up the negative assessments with the comment that 'Reagan has never convinced large enough numbers of Americans that he is smart enough and deep enough to be president'. The problem with that judgement was that it was just not true.

Reagan had spent many years of his life taking long train journeys as he had a fear of flying. On those trips he took along suitcases full of books, magazines and newspapers and read voraciously, particularly on economics and political philosophy. As Shirley points out, when battling Bush for the Republican nomination it was 'the Eureka College-educated movie star from humble origins, not the Yale-educated blue-blood, who was more well-read and thoughtful on political and economic philosophy'. Shirley had earlier described a debate between Reagan and other leading conservatives and described them as 'high-minded men of serious purpose and scholarly thought' but at the same time it was good-natured, 'disagreement without being disagreeable'. In the end, it was Reagan's ability to be serious about serious matters while at the same time not appearing to take himself too seriously which stood out.

However, before Reagan's own strengths propelled him to victory in November 1980 he had, in Shirley's opinion, to overcome one major hurdle. It was not a political opponent, but his own campaign manager, John Sears, who did the most to hinder Regan's chances. Throughout 1979,



Sears did Reagan a major disservice by insisting he keep a low profile, declining numerous opportunities to speak at public forums and appear in the media. Shirley's scathing assessment is that Sears imposed a form of 'paralysis' on the campaign by denying it the use of its best asset, Reagan.

It was only after the shock loss in Iowa that voters began again to see the real Ronald Reagan. This book concludes with the Reagan comeback in the New Hampshire primary, where his triumph in a debate in Nashua (dubbed the Nashua Moment) set him on the path to victory. Having already written a volume on the actual election, here Shirley only provides a brief synopsis of what happened in the rest of 1980.

Reagan had refined his message between 1976 and 1980. It was now a more positive message of optimism and hope. Reagan's message was not only that the United States could be improved—it was that all the world could share in the American dream. This is why there are statues of him in Eastern Europe, and it is why this book explaining his success is such a delight to read in the current benighted political world.