Rethinking the Reagan supremacy

Historian finds president's legacy problematic

By Glenn C. Altschuler | July 20, 2008

The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008
By Sean Wilentz

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Ronald Reagan "changed the trajectory of America," Barack Obama proclaimed in January. Presiding over a re-energized Republican "party of ideas," Obama opined, Reagan tapped the aspirations and addressed the apprehensions of average Americans, who were hungry for clarity, confidence, and "a return to that sense of dynamism and entrepreneurship that had been missing."

Slammed by Hillary Clinton and John Edwards as a political apostate, Obama maintained that the 40th president was a superb communicator who attracted working-class Democrats to the Republican Party and had a profound impact on politics and public policy. He acknowledged, however, that Reagan's policies were pernicious and, ultimately, unproductive.

Sean Wilentz agrees. A distinguished professor of history at Princeton University, Wilentz is no friend of the Reagan Revolution. He supported Al Gore for president in 2000 and six years later assessed George W. Bush's administration in an essay titled "The Worst President in History?" Like Obama, Wilentz believes that Reagan took ideas seriously; changed conservatism from a cranky critique to an amiable, optimistic, and commonsensical credo; and reshaped the terms in which domestic and foreign affairs were conducted.

"The Age of Reagan" is good, old-fashioned political history, an informative, passionate, and provocative account of six presidential administrations, beginning with a "long prelude," in which a political order crumbled and the Republican right took power, and ending with a "long postlude," when Reagan's legacy began to unravel.

Reagan's greatest domestic achievement, Wilentz writes, was reviving a sputtering, stagflation-ridden economy and legitimizing tax cuts as the principal pillar of social policy. His supply-side economics, however, was not a "soaring success."

Fed chairman Paul Volcker, Wilentz suggests, may have been more responsible for the recovery than Reagan. The economy, moreover, had a slower growth rate than it had had in the 1960s and '70s - and would have in the 1990s. While the proportion of wealth held by the top 1 percent of the population skyrocketed, middle-class incomes stagnated, and the working poor suffered. Tax cuts did not shrink government deficits or increase private investment. And Reagan did not reduce the size of government.

More fundamentally, Wilentz concludes, Reaganomics twisted "the bracing, acquisitive, get-ahead elements" in American free enterprise into "crasser, somewhat callous, and reckless impulses." Prosperity was built on "insubstantial paper transactions, overleveraged credit, and sharp dealing" that sometimes crossed over into illegality. The "main fruits" of deregulation, applied indiscriminately, and an antigovernment mind-set were "bitter": the savings and loan debacle; the junk-bond boom and bust; and procurement scandals at the Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, and the Pentagon.

Wilentz appears, at first, to give Reagan much higher marks for his foreign policy. The president, he says, "deserves posterity's honor" for rejecting outdated dogma, including his own, regarding "the evil empire." His willingness to sign arms-reduction agreements with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and bring the Cold War to an end "is one of the greatest achievements by any president of the United States."

But Reagan's approach was less "a coherent plan" than a "patchwork of policies" that were "sometimes successful, sometimes vacillating, and often disastrous." Reagan lurched between denunciations of detente and substantive negotiations with the Soviets, refusing to give an inch on the deployment and testing of his Strategic Defense Initiative, even when it led to the collapse of the summit in Iceland. Without Gorbachev, Wilentz insists, Reagan would not - and could not - have ended the Cold War. And his political vitality and viability, damaged by the Iran-contra scandal, might well have been "greatly diminished, perhaps destroyed."

The worst tendency of the Reagan administration, Wilentz warns, has had the longest shelf life. "With an arrogance born of ideological zealotry," Reaganites claimed that in a dangerous world the executive branch should take matters into its own hands. In Iran-contra "they established a pattern of disregard for the law as anything other than an ideological or partisan tool." That pattern has persisted in the Bush administration, which has exploited fears about national security to ignore checks and
balances and institutionalize "the unitary theory of the executive" through its judicial appointments.

The Reagan Revolution, Wilentz implies, has been living on borrowed time. It is not difficult to detect his fervent hope that on Nov. 4, 2008, the false dawn of the age of Reagan will give way to what he'd see as a more authentic morning in America.

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