At a black-tie dinner party at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in February 1991, nearly 1,000 guests celebrated the 80th birthday of Ronald Reagan. Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of England, proclaimed that like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Reagan had had "a rendezvous with destiny. Thank God you were on time." President George H.W. Bush, who was then conducting the war in the Persian Gulf, sent a congratulatory videotape. "They'll get you on Mount Rushmore yet," he predicted.

A quarter of a century after he left office, Reagan remains a polarizing political figure. To his conservative admirers, H.W. Brands reminds us, Reagan restored faith in America's greatness, shrank government by cutting taxes and regulations and sped communism on the way to extinction. To liberal critics, Reagan undermined the New Deal's social safety net, legitimized hostility to government and committed an impeachable offense in the Iran-Contra scandal.

In "Reagan," Brands, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Andrew Jackson, provides a lively and lucid narrative of the life of America's 40th president. He provides a detailed account of Reagan's less-than-stellar acting career in Hollywood, his tenure as head of the Screen Actors Guild and his "long march across the political spectrum," from domestic liberal, international isolationist and Democrat in the 1930s to conservative-internationalist Republican in the '60s.

Brands sticks pretty close to conventional wisdom about Reagan. He agrees that Reagan built an emotional wall around himself: With the exception of Nancy Davis, his second wife, he did not allow anyone to get too close. Reagan "preferred action to reflection, moving ahead to contemplating the past," Brands writes. "He almost never admitted making mistakes," in no small measure because doing so "required the kind of retrospection he disliked."

Although his conservative ideology shaped his view of political issues, and he did not depart from his core values in his public rhetoric, Brands' Reagan was a pragmatist, who was willing to cut deals with liberals. Faced with the overwhelming popularity of Social Security, he abandoned attempts to reform it. And he proved willing to raise taxes — and to tolerate large federal deficits.

Brands also agrees with other historians that Reagan was rarely interested in the details of governing. As governor of California and as president of the United States, Brands writes, Reagan was "a terrible manager, unwilling to fire people, unable to keep track of what was being done in his name. If he had been the chief executive of a large corporation, those would have been damning failures." That said, Brands maintains that those very qualities were "essential to his success" as president because they allowed him to distance himself from initiatives that failed.

Surprisingly, Brands uses the Iran-Contra scandal as a case in point. Because he remained in the dark, Brands indicates, Reagan could convince himself that weapons had not been traded for hostages and money had not been diverted to assist Nicaraguan rebels (in violation of the Boland Amendment). With no fingerprints and no smoking gun, Oliver North and John Poindexter took the fall; "there was little chance" that Reagan would be prosecuted.

Perhaps. But it is true as well, as his diary makes clear, that Reagan did know that the release of hostages was predicated on the delivery of weapons to the Iranians. Politicians on both sides of the aisle and a sizable majority of Americans, moreover, believed that the White House had orchestrated a cover-up, with the president himself a party to the conspiracy. And Iran-Contra left Reagan's administration, his foreign policy and his reputation in tatters.

Brands is surely right, however, that Reagan was the most persuasive political communicator since Roosevelt, and that his rhetoric resonated so well with audiences, not because he was an actor, but because he believed wholeheartedly in what he said about the "exceptionalism" of American democracy and the American people. Many Americans disagreed with him; virtually no one disliked him. It helped a lot, Brands indicates, that Reagan's message was so easy sell: "He asked nothing of the people, neither the soaring sacrifice of John Kennedy's inaugural nor the quotidian adjustments sought by Carter. He promised Americans the gift of tax cuts, which he delivered without insisting on conservatism's traditional precondition, spending cuts."

The meaning, the magnitude and the "rightness" of the Reagan Revolution continue to stimulate heated debate, but there is no doubt that it changed America. Although the credit must be shared with Mikhail Gorbachev and many others, Reagan clearly played a substantial role in ending communism and the Cold War. At home, 21st century conservatives, citing Reagan, albeit not always accurately, set the domestic agenda.
In 2016, no doubt, all of them will try to anoint themselves as his rightful heir.

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Reagan

The Life

By H.W. Brands

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