Chapter 2

Only an Actor: Memories of a Reagan Biopic

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“I thought it was a joke,” said Pat Brown, the admired Democratic governor of California, when they told him that the Republicans were running an actor called Ronald Reagan against him. He was not even a Grade A actor, Brown pointed out. So he didn’t regard Reagan as a strong candidate, though he was all too well aware of any liberal Democrat’s vulnerability in the backlash climate of 1966. So at first he tried to ridicule the idea that a mere actor would run for governor of the most populous state in the Union. Passing two little African American boys, he said, “Who are you going to vote for?” And when the boys started at him in amazement, Brown said, “Well, remember, if you don’t know, it was an actor who shot Lincoln.”

When I interviewed him, Pat Brown readily acknowledged how foolishly he had underestimated Reagan. He said Reagan’s acting experience was a “real plus” in his campaign, and attacking him as an actor had been a bad mistake, “absolutely fruitless,” Reagan was “far superior” on television, and in the end he won “by a cool million votes.”

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When I set out to make a television biography of Reagan, near the end of his presidency, in 1987, I may have half-shared Pat Brown’s opinion, or at least the opinion of those who thought poorly of Reagan’s performance as president. But as I researched his record, as I followed the man and his history round the country, and as I interviewed more than one hundred people who had known him at every stage of his life, from colleagues in the radio station where he worked in Davenport, Iowa, to senior White House staff and cabinet members, his wife, one of his daughters, and some of his closest friends, I began to realize that the verdict might have to be more complicated.

By the time we started work, my view of the man and the president was a little more sophisticated than Pat Brown’s. After all, twenty-two years had
passed. I had watched Reagan at work during at least part of the 1968, 1976, and 1980 campaigns. And, from a distance, I had observed his performance in the presidency.

Yet I must admit that I still came to the task with the eyes of one who, if I had always tried to preserve professional objectivity, had strong sympathies with the New Frontier/Great Society approach and many friends among the survivors of those periods.

I had worked in Washington throughout most of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.¹ I had covered the civil rights movement, from Oxford, Mississippi, to Selma. I had written, with two colleagues, an account of the 1968 presidential campaign.² I had published, in 1976, an ambitious attempt to tell the history of the 1960s and in particular to explain the crisis of the liberal consensus.³ I had also written a book about presidency as an institution.⁴ I was, in a word, thoroughly hooked on the—to me—mysterious paradoxes of the presidency, at once an apparently all-powerful and a persistently impotent institution.

I was not unfamiliar with the new conservatism, and not altogether unsympathetic to many of its ideas. I had covered the Goldwater campaign in 1964 and enjoyed the time I spent with Senator Goldwater in Arizona when I wrote a profile of him. I had always had a number of conservative friends and mentors, ever since I was a pupil of Robert Strausz-Hupé at the University of Pennsylvania. I knew well many people in the Nixon administration, including several in the Nixon White House.⁵ But by the time Reagan became president I was no longer a resident correspondent, necessarily mixing with Republicans and conservatives on a daily basis. I had moved back to London, though I visited the United States frequently, at least four times a year for different lengths of time. I would claim that I never bought into the view that Reagan was a simpleton, a mere cowboy actor. I have always thought that journalists are too quick to assume that politicians are idiots, or at least to underestimate the sheer ability that is needed to get to the top of what Disraeli called “this exceedingly slippery tree.” Still, I cannot deny that, as I began the round of interviews that ended with a long and friendly meeting with Reagan himself, I was no admirer. This is an attempt to record how and why my view of Ronald Reagan, as president and as a man, changed as a result of that exposure to him and to many of those who knew him best.

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Reagan was in many ways, I still believe, a poor president. He could be casual. No doubt it is better to save some time for rest and relaxation than to work half the night checking boxes like Jimmy Carter or Richard Nixon. But Reagan gave too much latitude to a staff of mixed ability. At times—Iran–Contra is the supreme example—he was too laid back for his own good. It can be argued that, if it had not been for the recent trauma of Watergate, he might have been impeached over Iran–Contra. He was ideologically