



# Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s

*Michael Schaller*

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At the height of Ronald Reagan's popularity in July 1986, *Time* Magazine wrote glowingly of how he had "found America's sweet spot." Reagan seemed a "magician who carries a bright, ideal America like a holograph in his mind and projects its image in the air." Not since journalist Theodore White rhapsodized about "Camelot" in the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination had a president been spoken of so reverently. And indeed, Reagan seemed to know just what America wanted to hear. In the 1980 campaign, energized by Jimmy Carter's problems, the Republican nominee downplayed his own conservative economic and social ideas to call for a restoration of national strength and pride. "This is the greatest country in the world," he declared, "we have the talent, we have the drive, we have the imagination. Now all we need is the leadership." Government, he said time and again "is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." Reagan pledged to bring Americans a "little good news" and during the next eight years, through recession and recovery, cold war and detente, success and scandal, he forged a powerful bond with the public. His popularity appeared so unrelated to actual achievements and so undiminished by failure that Colorado Representative Pat Schroeder dubbed him the "teflon president."

While much has written about the Reagan presidency by "insiders" and journalists, *Reckoning with Reagan* is the first historian's account of the period, providing a brief but comprehensive and non-polemical overview of what exactly took place while Reagan was in charge. Schaller, the acclaimed author of *Douglas MacArthur*, *The American Occupation of Japan*, and *The United States and China in the Twentieth Century*, presents a lively account of the Reagan years, analyzing the origins and consequences of the Reagan administration's domestic and foreign policies, and weighing the former president's great personal and political popularity against the effects of his economic, social, diplomatic, and strategic decisions. Showing how an illusion of national strength, prosperity, and global power was created at a time when these were in fact declining, Schaller discusses all aspects of the Reagan revolution, including Reaganomics, the rise of political Christianity, the drug war, changes in the American family, relations with the Soviet Union, terrorism, and the end of the Cold War. Writing in a straightforward and lively style, Schaller brings to light a host of complex issues--from supply-side economics to the appeal of televangelists; from the secret foreign policies of the Iran/Contra adventurists to Reagan's days of "Evil Empire" and the eventual detente with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Much more than an account of Reagan the *man*, Schaller offers us a fascinating evaluation of the Reagan *phenomenon*, providing an accessible introduction for Americans struggling to understand the illusory and actual impact of the Reagan administration on the 1980's and on years to come.

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