

Gip, Gip, Hooray!

*A new appreciation of
Ronald Reagan protests
too much*

Jim Sleeper

Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History

By John Patrick Diggins

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In his 1990 memoir *Being Red*, the novelist Howard Fast offered glimpses of Depression-era America that come back to me whenever I try to understand Ronald Reagan. Most of the people Fast knew in the desperate New York City of the nineteen-thirties never locked their apartment doors. When he and a girlfriend slept in Central Park on summer nights (to escape moral strictures as stifling as their bedrooms), they feared not that muggers would attack but that a policeman might walk by. Even the worst waterfront or urban ghetto was safer then. The country was constricted materially and morally, but it was strangely more spacious and hopeful, in ways few Americans have dared recall or imagine—except while under Ronald Reagan's spell.

The differences between a poorer yet safer nineteen-thirties and today aren't fantasies, but an old leftist like Fast might say that daily life in public places was less fearsome, and therefore more open, then because labor militancy directed ordinary people's anger (and violence) against their class enemies, not randomly against one another. Stronger even than union solidarity were ethno-religious sodalities in urban parishes and small-town churches, whose moral authority was reinforced by political machines that policed, provided for, and empowered their poor members in quasi-familial ways. Public schools were blast furnaces of civic-republican patriotism, melding fractious white-ethnic camps into coalitions that sustained racial segregation, yes, but also the New Deal and big victories over fascism and, partly in consequence, over segregation itself.

Order, order everywhere: OBEDIENCE TO LAW IS LIBERTY reads the engraving above a Worcester, Massachusetts, courthouse built before my father's birth there in 1917. Civic-republican order—ideological, religious, political, pedagogical—was internalized so deeply by so many in Reagan's and John Patrick Diggins's respective generations that, even amid family chaos, economic insecurity, organized

crime, and pitched battles between labor and capital, public life felt secure to both of these Irish working-class kids, Reagan in small-town Protestant Illinois, Diggins (now an historian at the City University of New York) in Catholic proletarian San Francisco. Barriers to reform were securely in place, but so were footholds in them for a protest politics that knew what it was fighting. No wonder young Reagan felt comfortable as a Democrat and an actors' union leader during the relatively orderly postwar prosperity of the late nineteen-forties. But soon a glitzier, emptier free-market consumerism would begin to dissolve the order's moral roots, most notably at first in Reagan's Hollywood, but more fatefully across a new, postwar baby-boom generation that in the nineteen-sixties would revolt openly against order and even, for a while, against commercialism itself.

In the sunset of civic-republican order, some of us baby boomers foresaw a liberating, Dionysian dawn. Neither we nor Reagan, who assailed us as governor of California, saw that in sloughing off the bad old repressions we weren't just liberating the better angels of our natures but riding swift market currents that have since turned much of society into a free-for-all: citizens have morphed into customers who, no longer internalizing moral codes, succumb increasingly to road rage, lethal stampedes at store openings, cage fighting, rising violence at sporting events, school shootings, a groping pornification of private lives and public spaces, bread-and-circus entertainments, and myriad addictions, including gambling and, in "public discourse," talk shows and Fox News. People who've been mauled that way may need—or think they need—constant titillation, medication, surveillance amid proliferating mistrust, and protection even from themselves. They can barely remember or even imagine that Americans once internalized moral codes so deeply and widely that they didn't even have to lock their doors. And as Americans lose what Edward Gibbon called "that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command," some of us know the quiet heartbreak he saw in the best of the imperial Romans, who

found their slow slide into post-republican slavery the more painful because they did remember their old freedoms and realized, with Livy, "We have become too ill to bear our sicknesses or their cures."

Enter Reagan, that Hollywood healer of broken hearts, who'd made war movies for a real war that others were fighting, to "respectfully assure" Americans of the nineteen-eighties that they weren't too ill to be cured by his grand pageants. Diggins argues that while Reagan played heavily on Americans' nostalgia for a lost civic-republican order, he really didn't believe in it, being a bit of a Dionysian himself, and that, with his free-market conservatism's blessing, those swift, dark currents of consumer marketing have proved even more disruptive than were the nineteen-sixties to civic-republican order itself.

Diggins explains how dangerous but irresistible Reagan's nostalgia was, especially when coupled with a spirituality that only gestured toward morality: "Turning away from Christianity's idea of the Fall and the doctrine of original sin, Reagan also turned away from the doctrine of...the Federalist authors, who insisted that the republic could not survive without a strong government." Reagan gladly cited John Winthrop's vision of "a city upon a hill" but never his admonition that if Americans succumbed to "carnal lures" they'd become a worldwide embarrassment. Diggins wishes that Reagan had managed to "stop watching old films and read the Federalist Papers or [Tocqueville's] Democracy in America, where the claims of commerce are not simply to be celebrated ... and the trail of the serpent is to be seen in the heart of society and not only in the halls of government."

But Reagan thought he saw a different serpent in Hollywood's dream factories: a Marxism so fantastical and noxious that it blinded him to the commerce that was swiftly dissolving ordered liberty, with help from romantic leftists and liberals. For a movie star, it was easier to blame the rising anomie and violence on Marxist conspiracies and big-government liberalism that coddled people's vices. He

never challenged the conglomerates that had given him his platform but were driving those vices in their rush to maximize profit and market share.

Reagan's obsession with Hollywood liberals and leftists is mirrored in Diggins's own more recent experiences with academic leftists. Bitter resentment at their facile dismissals of republican order tinctures his recent books. In this one he tries a little too hard to rescue Reagan from the left's contempt by likening the former president to Tom Paine and Ralph Waldo Emerson, apostles of a quirky American spirit that time and again has indeed trumped leftist anticipations of doom. But Diggins is too wise to accept Reagan's dreamy blurring of the sharp tension between a moral order that energizes our freedom and an unbridled consumer marketing that degrades it. Reagan hoped that free markets would make the state wither away: He "told the people what they wanted to hear, whereas the framers told them what they needed to know." Diggins also understands that American conservatives like Reagan aren't Burkean stewards of a government that nourishes the virtues of freedom; rather, they're classical, free-market liberals who, like William F. Buckley Jr., cannot reconcile their keening for a sacred, ordered liberty with their obeisance to every whim of unbridled capital.

In an important chapter, Diggins turns with special fury on Reagan's neoconservative cheerleaders, exposing them as the parasitical, hypocritical, delusional, naïve, and profoundly un-American people that they truly are. The neocons thought they saw in Reagan's Hollywood anti-Communism a bellicosity as Manichaeic as theirs, but Reagan indulged them only theatrically, at least when he was paying attention to what they were doing in his administration. By his second term, most neoconservatives and their costly blunders in Iran, Central and Latin America, and the Eastern bloc were gone; but Diggins argues—dubiously, I think—that the sunny but canny Reagan gave them the slip to follow his more humane intuitions and win Gorbachev's trust, not that he was publicly embarrassed into letting the neocons go.

Diggins, driven to Reagan partly by his own antipathy to the left, and determined to save his beguiling American champion from the opportunism of the neocons, misses the possibility that Reagan was an American Augustus, pointing us gently toward slavery while administering a glorious euthanasia to the republican spirit. Reagan drew down the stored moral capital of his "greatest generation," prompting a flush on the cheek of our cherished but dying ideals, all while seeing to our comfortable submission to John Winthrop's dreaded "carnal lures." Unlike Augustus, Reagan remained a believer in the unbelievable—but then he was always an earnest B-list actor. He was not unintelligent or malevolent, but quixotic. Any more of his "morning in America" and people who became Reagan Democrats will awaken to find themselves caught like flies in a web of dubious contracts (mortgage, health care, military) and unending surveillance in which their hero's firm Hollywood handshake, beguiling twinkle, and Emersonian free spirit don't stand a chance.