

#1518 Ronald Reagan, It Turns Out, Was Bad

[00:00:00] Intro 10-5-22

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: Welcome to this episode of the award-winning *Best of the Left* podcast, in which we shall take a look at the life and legacy of President Ronald Reagan, the last transformational US president whose regime we are still living in. Between his neoliberal economics, anti-government ideology, and white supremacist appeal to authoritarians, he did more to shape the last 40 years of the politics of the country and conservative movement, than anyone else.

Clips today are from *Make Me Smart*, *On the Media*, *The Thom Hartmann Program*, *The Real News*, the *Professor Buzzkill History Podcast*, and *The Majority Report*, with additional members-only clips from *Why Is This Happening?* and *The United States of Anxiety*.

By the way, the midterms are right around the corner, so be sure to check out the show notes for our Midterms Minute section, highlighting key races across the country and how to get involved. Today's focus is on tossup House races in [00:01:00] California, New York, and Ohio, and open or new seats that are leaning Democrat or Republican. Remember, voting is not enough, so get involved and help get out the vote.

40 years later, is this the end of Reaganomics? - Make Me Smart - Air Date 12-14-21

KAI RYSSDAL - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: I think we need to define terms, right, because these terms get batted around a lot. So Reaganomics, trickle down, supply side economics. In a nutshell, what are we talking about?

MARK BLYTH: In a nutshell, you're talking about the 1981 Economic Recovery Act. If there's a singular statement of Reaganomics that set, so it had a whole bunch of stuff that was meant to fit together and kind of did, but in a really peculiar way. So the first one was tax cuts for business. There'd been a big campaign in the 70s because of the effect of inflation, saying that investment was lagging, that America needed more capital formation, so big tax

cuts for business. Then there was the whole influence of Art Laffer and the Laffer Curve, and that was equivalent for individual income. So cut the top, the top end of the tax distribution, so that it will trickle down to everybody else. Then there was a whole bunch of other [00:02:00] stuff that was going on in there as well we forget about. Compensating for this, but also blowing out the deficit in Reagan's period was a huge defense buildup. This is the second Cold War. This is the second showdown with the Soviet Union. There was also a lot of action on deregulating business while reregulating labor and particularly the PATCO strike of 1981 with the air traffic controllers, right? So there's a lot of stuff going on there. And then finally, what was going on was Volcker running the Federal Reserve because he jacked up interest rates to, in nominal terms, 20% in order to crush inflation. And that caused a big recession at the same time that Reagan's doing all this stuff, which blows out the debts and the deficit. So you wouldn't think that this would go down well, right? You'd think this would be a footnote in history, but it ended up having real staying power.

MOLLY WOOD - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Why was that, do you think? I mean, it sounds like we are right to identify this as a pivot point for a lot of things that have happened since. Why did it work?

MARK BLYTH: It [00:03:00] worked because he got lucky. I mean, that's the thing about the Gipper, or whatever he was known as. I'm just about old enough to remember. But he really got lucky. And he got lucky in two ways. The first one was that the disinflation of the economy, getting rid of all that inflation, it was really brutal but it was actually done very, very quickly. So inflation dropped and at the same time they deregulated financial markets. Suddenly, there was a tsunami of credit that was available in the economy that really hadn't been available before. And then the third way they got lucky was America's running big budget deficits and also big trade deficits, but they get lucky because when you deregulate finance, interest rates still stay quite high in America vis-a-vis the rest of the world. So Japanese corporates, remember all the big Japanese corporations that were buying Pebble Beach Golf Course and all this nonsense, right? They're getting 2% holding their money at home. They're getting 5% just dumping it in the United States. They're the ones that start to buy the bonds that finance the debt and the deficit. So that's how [00:04:00] Reaganomics gets lucky in the kind of the middle part of the 1980s. Morning in America was definitely helped.

KAI RYSSDAL - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Well, right. No, exactly. And so Reagan goes to the polls in 84. Morning in America. How does what's happening at that really macro level trickle down, pun intentional, to the

average person? What, why even today do you hear people saying, oh, yeah, Reaganomics was great, man. I loved it.

MARK BLYTH: It is, it's a peculiar thing because, I mean, we know that it didn't work. I mean, there's been study after study now that—there's one that you can go just type in the following: “trends and income 1979 to 2020,” done by the RAND Corporation, not exactly a left wing think tank, right? And these guys estimate that \$43 trillion trickled up from the bottom 90 to the top 10%. And pretty much none of it came back down. So when you've got that big disconnect, what explains such a disconnect? I think part of what made Reaganomics work and what made the whole kind of neoliberal revolution, if you want to call it, work, is that it [00:05:00] accords with every day's common sense. So a good example of this is the whole sort of notion that like, well, when you run the government, it's like running like, a household budget. And if you spend too much you need to cut spending. Well, you know, that rather ignores the fact that I don't get to issue my own currency. There's no such thing as Kai Ryssdal bond market. Right?

KAI RYSSDAL - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Not yet.

MARK BLYTH: Nobody in the Wood family is importing emigrants and taxing them for five generations. But because all that stuff accords with common sense, it's an easy sell. And it's particularly credible when the party of business is the one who's selling it. So I think it's the way that—it's not about the facts in the world, it's about the kind of models we have in our head and the way the economy works that made it really work for Reaganomics.

MOLLY WOOD - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: So is it fair to say—as you were talking, I wrote this list, right—so it sounds like you are describing an economic recovery act. Hold on, I have a quick question because I wasn't that old then. What was the economy recovering from?

MARK BLYTH: Oh, great question. It was recovering from the 1970s. [00:06:00] Yeah, the 1970s had two things going on. One was a huge amount of labor militancy across the world, strikes everywhere, right? And this is the high, the point at which labor share of national income had its all-time high. Conversely, the way that business was dealing with this was pushing on in prices. How do you keep paying for higher wages? You push on prices and that was generating the inflation that we saw in the period. Now, if you're a businessman, and you expect to get 5% real rate of return and inflation goes to 10%, you might as well take the money round the back of the house and burn it. And that's what basically brought a huge mobilization of business groups

together in the late 70s to push these ideas, the idea of capital formation crisis, the idea that we need tax cuts to stimulate the economy. This didn't just spring out of nowhere, it came out of a concerted business campaign and reaction to both labor militancy and inflation's effects on profits.

MOLLY WOOD - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Okay, well, that seems super relevant to the moment, but can I, can I do a two-for? Because it seems [00:07:00] like, okay, so, as a result of this recovery act, it seems like we have set the stage for the declining power of labor, which we've seen since in stagnant wages; for the increase in household debt, right?; rising income inequality; fewer rules and more profits for banks; a smaller social safety net; and the rise of the military industrial complex.

MARK BLYTH: I think you just explained the whole thing. That's exactly where it came from. If you're going to set up a tax structure that siphons 90% of it up to the top and doesn't really trickle it down, the only way you're going to have any semblance of maintaining consumption for most people is a massive expansion of credit. And the greatest trick that's ever been played by finance is to tell everybody what they call an asset is actually a liability. Right? So when you model from finance, right, you think that that's a lie about, an asset for them. No, that's a liability, right? So they want the income stream from your payment, that's their [00:08:00] asset. So when banks get big, what it means is they're lending an enormous amount of money to the economy. And we saw what happened with that when it finally became unstuck in 2008. So that's just one part of the story. But yeah, that's exactly right. It all comes out of this period.

KAI RYSSDAL - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Alright. So let's, let's keep going chronologically here and, and talk about how the mindset shifted, right? So, Reagan, 1980- 81, '84 goes Morning in America, Clinton gets elected in '92, and then in '96 Clinton says, "the era of big government is over". Reagan has, almost from the grave at that point, I mean, he was still around, but he has co-opted, maybe the most liberal president since, like, FDR.

MARK BLYTH: Absolutely. And exactly the same thing happens in Britain five years later when Mrs. Thatcher declares that Tony Blair is her best pupil. Right? So what is it about these center left parties that they got trapped in this kind of right wing economic box? Well, part of it was because there were real benefits. If you think about Walmart's slogan from a few [00:09:00] years ago, "the prices keep falling," why? Because it's all made in China. So if you think about your real wages, what you can effectively buy, if the prices of stuff is falling, and essential wages are going up even though no one's giving you a pay

rise. So there were certain benefits from integration, globalization, etc., that kind of masked the inequality that was there. But Clinton himself got stuck, because when he came in, you'll remember he wanted to do two things. First one was a stimulus, just like Biden, much smaller. The second one was a BTU tax, an actual thermal tax on, basically, energy use, the first green tax. And what happened was, Alan Greenspan essentially sat him down and said, Don't even think about it. Because if you do, I'll jack up interest rates, you'll have a recession, and you're done. And that's explicitly what was said to Clinton, '92-'93. And he backed away from that, very quickly had no other ideas, was regarded as a lame duck president, and then mounted the campaign in '96, which got him back into power. But in a sense, he had no agenda [00:10:00] and his instinct was to cooperate. So what did he cooperate on? Welfare reform. So you end up with the irony that this two term Democratic president is the one who not only "the era of big government is over", in the same speech as "we are ending welfare as we know it".

MOLLY WOOD - HOST, MAKE ME SMART: Which is where we should probably acknowledge the baked-in racism in these policies, right? That all of the rhetoric and even welfare reform ultimately targets people of color, and in Reagan's case, pretty explicitly.

MARK BLYTH: Well, there was the famous metaphor that Reagan bandied around of the "welfare queen", who was living off of benefits by having excess children and driving around in a Cadillac. And there was no doubt that the, let's say, the cosmetic on that one was not a White person. Right? That was absolutely true. And you see this with criminal justice in the period all the way through to the Willie Horton saga, the whole thing. So yeah, I mean, there's always been [00:11:00] a racial undercurrent to these reforms. And why do you push on that one? Because it's an easy target. You push on that one because essentially, that community is captured by the Democrats. And if you push on that one, you'll get, you'll get support for it in many quarters. But it's very hard for that community to push back.

The Democracy We Think We Live In - On the Media - Air Date 8-9-19

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: Racism of the powerful: once the stuff of old boy networks and silent oppressive infrastructures, is lately out in the open. But it has a long sordid history, even in the White House. Consider this conversation between President Richard Nixon and then-California Governor Ronald Reagan covertly taped by the disgraced president in 1971. The

two were discussing a U.N. vote in which delegates from African countries had gone against American interests, voting to recognize the People's Republic of China, not Taiwan, as the legitimate holder of the U.N. seat.

[CLIP]

RICHARD NIXON: [00:12:00] Yeah.

RONALD REAGAN: To see those, those monkeys from those African countries, damn them, they're still uncomfortable wearing shoes.

RICHARD NIXON: Haha. [END CLIP]

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: In case you missed, that Reagan called the African delegation "monkeys" who were "uncomfortable wearing shoes." As revealed in The Atlantic last week by presidential historian Tim Naftali, that snippet had for years been withheld by the National Archives, apparently to protect Reagan's privacy presumably because he was unaware that the conversation was being recorded. To Atlantic staff writer Adam Serwer, Reagan's remark was not only racist and condescending but emblematic of a certain 'just between you and me' white supremacism that persists to this day at the highest levels of government and continues to contaminate American democracy. Adam, welcome back to OTM.

ADAM SERWER: Thanks for having me.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: Now one reaction to the recording, and it was mine, was [00:13:00] like duh. Is it such a revelation that Reagan ascribed inferiority to blacks?

ADAM SERWER: I don't think it's surprising but I do think it's important to have on the record in part because there is a kind of historical amnesia and nostalgia about the extent to which white supremacy has been a governing doctrine of the United States, for most of the history of the United States until 1965. You know, this idea that somehow we're very far removed from this and you know the sentiments expressed by the current President Donald Trump are something new and terrible is actually false.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: The context was not domestic racial turbulence, it was geopolitical.

ADAM SERWER: Communist China, the People's Republic of China had spent a lot of money and time trying to woo African States to its side and using a lot of propaganda to criticize the United States for hypocrisy on civil rights and colonialism. And all of that paid [00:14:00] off and it paid off in part because Nixon and Reagan were incapable of seeing these African nations as states with interests of their own and politics of their own. This idea that only white people are fit for self-government is something that has plagued American democracy since its inception and continues to today.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: In The Atlantic this week you looked at a piece published in Horace Greeley's New York Tribune. Now Greeley was a Republican, which at the time was the party of Lincoln and the Democrats were actually the avowed racists. This piece was almost exactly a hundred years before the Nixon-Reagan phone call and the echoes are kind of eerie.

ADAM SERWER: Greeley, who had been a staunch Republican, an abolitionist, but who was a conservative wealthy northern Republican, his newspaper published an exploration of the Reconstruction government in South Carolina, where at the time I believe black people had a [00:15:00] majority in the state. The article, without fully endorsing racist white Democrats' perception of the Reconstruction government, basically substantiated it by saying that black people were too ignorant and too debased to really govern the state and that giving them the vote was a disaster and that it would be best if the status quo ante returned where wealthy white men were controlling the state and its politics. And that helped usher in a backlash against Reconstruction in the north, which led to Greeley running against Grant on a platform of ending Reconstruction. And Greeley's doctrine that the government should not interfere on behalf of working people, interfering on behalf of industry, which it had done for a very long time, was perfectly fine, turned that version of the Republican Party towards the one that it became today.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: So the party of Lincoln was substantially becoming the party of Greeley [00:16:00] with increasing calls for disenfranchisement of newly enfranchised black voters and the marginalization of freed men. You know, it kind of sounds like the modern day Republican strategy of suppressing the black vote and dismantling what's left of the welfare state. Is it a fair comparison?

ADAM SERWER: I think you can certainly see echoes of that doctrine. You know, there's--one of the things people say is that the parties have switched places. But I would say that it's more accurate to say that who the parties were

in the 1870s, they followed their doctrinal beliefs in unexpected directions. So the Republican Party separated from its working class black base in the South became much more of a party of capitalism and the Democrats who were kind of a party of class war, at least elements of it, were when black voters joined their coalition, they abandoned their racism [00:17:00] and became something else. I think that you can see echoes of this idea that minorities are incapable of sort of objectively evaluating their political choices and rhetoric about black people being on the quote unquote Democrat plantation. In fact, back in the 1870s Democratic newspapers were describing black voters as being on the Republican plantation, that the language is almost identical. But this sort of idea that certain voters need to be excluded from the political conversation because they're too unsophisticated or too easily manipulated by so-called free stuff has really been a part of the political conversation for a long time and still is.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: Now I've got to ask you this, from that one phone exchange between Reagan and Nixon, in your piece you extrapolate a whole narrative of condescension, racism, miscalculation and cynicism, that certainly seems to [00:18:00] scan to me, it all makes sense. The dots all seem to connect, but really rests on a thin reed of evidence, which is a snippet of a phone call. Is the smoking gun tape finally unearthed at the National Archives, is it enough of a foundation to draw the conclusions you've drawn?

ADAM SERWER: Ah, no it's not, which is why I drew on both of their public records. I mean Nixon consciously embraced a strategy of white division in order to win the election. His strategists have spoken at length about that. Reagan endorsed, in 1964, a candidate who opposed the Civil Rights Act and ultimately the Voting Rights Act, which Reagan did as well. You can see throughout their lives, Nixon and Reagan not just saying offensive things but taking actions that reflect the worldview that is expressed in that phone call.

BOB GARFIELD - HOST, ON THE MEDIA: And now comes Trump who is just taking it to a whole new [00:19:00] dimension.

ADAM SERWER: Trump is only expressing in public what many, many American presidents believed in private. And I think it's important for Americans to come to terms with that reality because it's the only way to move on and change for the better.

General Motors Proves Trickle Down Theory Only Works If You Shower With

Gold Water - The Thom Hartmann Program - Air Date 12-3-18

THOM HARTMANN - HOST, THE THOM HARTMANN PROGRAM:

The way that Trump and the Republicans sold us their \$5 trillion tax cut for rich people, with a trillion and a half of it in the first year, borrowing that money from the Federal Treasury in our names, and then passing that money out to the billionaire class in the United States, particularly those billionaires who have funded the Republican party. Invest a few hundred million in the GOP I think the Koch's put in what, 600 million in the last election, maybe 400 million, whatever it was. And they probably got over a billion dollars in tax cuts. That's not a bad return on investment. Buying politicians now in the United States is the best investment you can make.

The billionaires by the politicians and the politicians come out. This really started with Reagan in a big way. Reagan came [00:20:00] out, he was working for, back then the currency was a little stronger, so they were multimillionaires, not billionaires or multi hundred millionaires, but, basically, they owned Reagan and they owned the Republican party at that time. And they said to Reagan, Hey, let's create this thing we call trickle down economics.

Now, interestingly, Warren Harding ran on this same thing in 1920, on trickle down economics. At that time it was called Horse and Sparrow Economics, because in 1910 most people rode horses, they didn't drive cars. And everybody who rode a horse, owned a horse. Knew that horses eat oats. Their digestive systems are not a hundred percent efficient, and so horse poop, horse patties - the sparrows love to go peck through them looking for seeds, for undigested bits of oat that [00:21:00] the sparrows can eat.

And so literally the exact same economic philosophy that Ronald Reagan rolled out as brand new discovery in 1981 was what Warren Harding—or in 1980, when he was running for president—was what Warren Harding ran for president on in 1920. The horse and sparrows theory. That if we feed more oats to the horses, there will be more poop for the sparrows. In other words, put money in at the top. Cut taxes. Warren Harding 1920 ran on the whole idea, you cut the top tax rate from 95%, which is where it was in 1920, down to 25%, which is where it was by 1922. Cut that top tax rate down, and, as a consequence of that, the sparrows are gonna get rich or the sparrows are gonna get a lot more food, and who cares that the horses are getting really, really big. Reagan just said it'll just trickle. If it all trickles down, then we... well, I say we produce a [00:22:00] nation of peons, it should be called a golden shower.

But in any case, this was the philosophy that they were trying to sell. It is not giving money to rich people that builds an economy. What giving money to rich people does is it exacerbates inequality. It makes the rich richer and it makes working class people poorer. That's all it does. The horse and sparrow theory was, shall we say horse poop, and so was trickle down. But the Republicans are still trying to sell trickle down.

In fact, if you go back to 1944, this is David Leonhardt in a great piece in yesterday's New York Times, "American Capitalism Isn't working", and he points out the October, 1944 edition of Fortune Magazine—now this is just before the war is over, just before the war is over, and William B. Benton, he founded Benton and Bowles, which is a major ad agency in the United States throughout the middle of the 20th century. [00:23:00] And, keep in mind, we had just experienced 15 years of depression and war, and Americans were worried that when the war ended, that we'd go back into the depression because the war was this enormous economic stimulus. The federal government was pouring hundreds, in today's dollars, hundreds of billions of dollars into war material. And when, I think it was about 700,000, men came home from World War II at the end of the war, there was concern that they would just be unemployed, the unemployment rate jack back up and we'd be thrown back into a depression.

So Benton writes, "Today victory is our purpose. Tomorrow our goal will be jobs, peacetime production, high living standards, and opportunity." And in fact, that's what they did as Leonhardt points. CEOs took pay packages that they were making 10, 15, 20 at the most, 30 times what their employees were making, which, today, when CEOs are making 10,000 times what their employees are making, it just [00:24:00] seems like, whoa, they did that, really? Yeah, they did that for better part of 50 years, 40 years. And the result of this was that middle class income rose, because the people at the top... by the way, one of the reasons why they were taking low pay packages was because after they made about the equivalent of \$3 million in today's dollars, their top tax rate went up to 95% or 91% I guess it was.

And the result of that was that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and even the very early 1970s, the wages, the income, and the wealth of average working people was increasing faster than the top 1%. They were all going up, but the middle was growing the fastest. In other words, income inequality was actually declining as a result of that high tax rate, and the economy boomed. I mean, it just absolutely boomed. And then came Reaganomics. [00:25:00] The only people you should worry about are the stockholders. Forget about the community. Forget about the customer. Forget about your impact on the nation.

Forget about your responsibility of the institution of the company itself. You can collapse it, you can sell it, you can suck it dry. Doesn't matter, just maximize the value for your shareholders, the investor class, the millionaires and billionaires. That's your only job. And to do that you need to lobby for deregulation, you need to cut taxes. You need to have a union free workplace, and you have to reduce wages. And keep that minimum wage as low as you possibly can.

That was Reaganomics. And since 1979 to today, median weekly earnings have grown a miserly 1/10th of 1% a year. And in fact, Leonhardt writes, the typical American family today has a lower net worth than the typical family did 20 years ago. Life expectancy, shockingly, has fallen in this last decade. We are [00:26:00] in the 40 something year of Reaganomics. 89'. Oh, it's 38 years, 37 years of Reaganomics, and it has devastated the middle class, the working class in the United States, and it continues to devastate our economy.

The Lasting Impact of Reagan's Firing of Air Traffic Controllers (1/2) - The Real News Network - Air Date 8-4-14

JESSICE DESVARIEUX - HOST, THE REAL NEWS NETWORK: Give us some context here. What was the state of the labor movement at the time? What kind of political forces were there in American society? Was labor, were they a prominent power?

JOSEPH MCCARTIN: Labor was a prominent power in 1981. when the air traffic controllers went out on strike 33 years ago yesterday, on August 3rd, 1981, the labor movement was still seen as a central force in American government and politics. Both parties, Republican and Democrat, saw labor that way. It was an important moment in American history, though, because Ronald Reagan was in the first months really still of his presidency.

He'd been inaugurated in January, 1981, and [00:27:00] he was in the middle of rolling out what we call the Reagan revolution. And Reagan wanted to really turn back the clock, you might say, to an approach to American government and politics that was pre-New Deal. Part of that meant reorganizing the relationship between government and the labor movement. The PATCO strike happened at this important turning point in American history, and it left a very profound legacy because, as you say, Ronald Reagan first threatened those strikers to

return to work within 48 hours of their walkout. When they did not, he fired them. Not only did he fire them, he permanently replaced them.

And with that action, he sent a powerful message that many employers, even in the private sector, acted upon after that, and it was a period of getting tough with the union movement that really marked a profoundly important turning point.

JESSICE DESVARIEUX - HOST, THE REAL NEWS NETWORK: It kind of speaks to something that I think a lot of people don't know about is [00:28:00] that PATCO actually supported his candidacy, as well as Republican candidate Nixon at the time. Let's actually first though, roll a clip about what he did in terms of standing up to the unions and what he had to say about the strike at the.

RONALD REAGAN: They are in violation of the law and if they do not report for work within 48 hours, they have forfeited their jobs and will be terminated.

JESSICE DESVARIEUX - HOST, THE REAL NEWS NETWORK: So we just heard Ronald Reagan say that they will be terminated. Joseph, can you break down for us why did PATCO even support Reagan's candidacy?

JOSEPH MCCARTIN: It's a long story in a way. I'll quickly summarize it, but first let me go to something Elliot said. This union had attempted to be formed as early as 1960. It wasn't actually formed until 1968. Shortly after that, Richard Nixon was elected and in the first years of PATCO trying to establish itself as a federal union, it dealt with a Republican president Nixon. And what it found is [00:29:00] that the Nixon administration in the early 1970s was prepared to make deals with unions in order to improve its standing, looking forward to running for reelection in 1972. PATCO was able to get some concessions from Nixon that led PATCO leaders to endorse Nixon in 1972. They actually got their first contract with the federal government under that Republican president. So when Ronald Reagan ran in 1980, PATCO already had a history of being able to negotiate with presidents from both parties.

Reagan of course, opposed the incumbent Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election, and Elliott came to work and worked his first years as an air traffic controller during the Carter administration. Carter was not beloved by air traffic controllers, and his FAA was a very, very tough negotiator with PATCO. It did not concede a lot of the major [00:30:00] issues that Elliot just brought up, and so PATCO basically went to both candidates in both parties and said, who's going to help us the most? And actually Reagan reached out to PATCO. He

wanted a few unions to endorse his candidacy. He saw the air traffic controllers as a union that he could work with. Most controllers were military veterans. Many of them were socially conservative and he felt if any union could be brought into the Republican intent, maybe PATCO would be that union. So he and PATCO basically worked out a deal and he promised that he would do what he could for the union in their negotiation when it came up in 1981.

So it was a deep irony that PATCO did endorse Reagan in 1980. Reagan won. Patco expected big returns from that endorsement, but when the negotiation actually unfolded in 1981, they were deeply disappointed. They decided to strike, but that was a bridge too far for Reagan. He [00:31:00] was not going to tolerate a strike, and that's what led to that terrible conflict.

When American Presidents Go to Trial - On the Media - Air Date 9-9-22

ILYA MARRITZ: You point out in a piece you wrote for Salon in 2014, "After Ford died in 2006, Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan went so far as to say that President Ford," and now I'm quoting her, 'threw himself on a grenade to protect the country from shame.'" And he did it because he thought it would help America to move on. And in some sense, it did. No?

RICK PERLSTEIN: Well, here we are. Is America healed? The proof is in the pudding. I think that one of the problems with that reasoning is that future bad actors in the White House realized that they could get away with crimes. The very next Republican president and his White House decided that they could break the laws with impunity. That's Iran-Contra.

ILYA MARRITZ: Can you just recap for us what we know happened in Iran-Contra and what the illegal activity was?

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah, sure. Congress passed a law it's called the Boland Amendment, and Ronald Reagan signed it that [00:32:00] America could not pass on money to this underground army that was trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. And basically, a group of people led by a gentleman named Oliver North, who was a revered and respected figure on the right now, set up an operation in which they basically raised money by arranging to sell missile parts to Iran. Basically, their proxies in Lebanon, where there was a civil war going on, had taken a series of American hostages, and it was often the case that after we sold them the missiles they wanted, they would just keep the hostages anyway or take more hostages.

ILYA MARRITZ: I mean, it's sort of like a breathtaking foreign policy Rube Goldberg machine. Do this thing over here to make this thing happen over there. I'm actually astonished they were able to carry it out.

RICK PERLSTEIN: And Ronald Reagan actually testified that he didn't have anything to do with the planning of this, he claimed, but he said when he heard it, he thought it was a "neat idea". Killing [00:33:00] two birds with one stone—getting hostages out, supposedly, and fighting communism. Because his public policy was that Russia was going to use Nicaragua as a base to invade America. It was quite explicit about that.

ILYA MARRITZ: So Reagan said he had nothing to do with this. Was there ever good enough evidence to really link him to Iran-Contra?

RICK PERLSTEIN: Well, the real wackiness of this story, people of a certain age will remember this, was that this guy, Oliver North, received immunity to testify. And in one of the most astonishing spectacles, he testified in his Marine dress uniform, made no apologies whatsoever, said he was just a loyal soldier fighting for freedom. And in fact, there was one incident where the actual Justice Department investigators went into his office while he was shredding and asked for documents. And they're like, what are you doing? We're from the Justice Department. And he said something like, Look, you're doing your job and I'm doing mine.

PROSECUTOR: So you shredded some documents because the attorney general's [00:34:00] people were coming in over the weekend.

OLIVER NORTH: I do not preclude that. Part of what was shredded. I do not preclude that as being a possibility. Not at all.

RICK PERLSTEIN: And the fascinating thing about his explanation was that he didn't think he was admitting to wrongdoing. He thought he was admitting to this great stride for freedom and dignity and liberty, fighting the Soviet empire. That's a cognitive pattern on the right that they're fighting for a transcendent good against a transcendent evil. We see this pattern repeating again and again. Richard Nixon saying if the president does it, it's not illegal, or Dick Cheney saying that the vice president's office is a fourth branch of government and the Constitution doesn't quite apply to it in the same way.

ILYA MARRITZ: Let's zoom in on the role of Dick Cheney. In the Ford administration, he's the chief of staff. By the time Iran-Contra rolls around, he is

a member of Congress. He is part of the committee that's investigating Iran-Contra.

RICK PERLSTEIN: The conclusion reached by the majority is that basically the Reagan White House was guilty, guilty, guilty. And the [00:35:00] committee that the minority, the Republicans put together said he was innocent, innocent, innocent. Cheney basically moved along this theory that had been long in the gestation that later became described by legal scholars as the unitary executive theory.

ILYA MARRITZ: So here's that quote from the report that Dick Cheney helped to author. This is a quote that you sent me. "Chief executives are given the responsibility for acting to respond to crises or emergencies. To the extent that the Constitution and laws are read narrowly, as Jefferson wished, the chief executive will, on occasion, feel duty bound to assert monarchical notions of prerogative that will permit him to exceed the law."

RICK PERLSTEIN: You will almost expect a trumpet fanfare as the King arrives in his raiment.

ILYA MARRITZ: Monarchical notions of prerogative. Translate that for me.

RICK PERLSTEIN: It's a bit of a gaslight because it comes from Jefferson in the most anti monarchical, most democratic of the founders. It basically means how dare you [00:36:00] tell the president that he couldn't defy laws about who the United States could fund when it came to military aid?

ILYA MARRITZ: Do you happen to remember where you were or what you were doing when you first read that quote?

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah, I saw it a couple of years ago and I was like, how the heck did I not know that Dick Cheney was responsible for this utterance? In a way, it indicts the media for not digging up this astonishing thing. Although people know about this Minority Report and people have written at length about the evolution of Cheney's ideas about the unitary executive. The word monarchical should raise anyone's hackles when it has anything to do with the United States Constitution.

Ronald Reagan “Terrifying Words - ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to

help.’” - Professor Buzzkill History Podcast - Air Date 5-13-21

JOE COOHILL - HOST, PROFESSOR BUZZKILL HISTORY

PODCAST: At a press conference on August 12th, 1986, US President Ronald Reagan said:

RONALD REAGAN: The nine most terrifying words in the English language are "I'm from the government and I'm here to help."

JOE COOHILL - HOST, PROFESSOR BUZZKILL HISTORY

PODCAST: Reagan summarized his long-held suspicions about the effectiveness and morality of the role of government in [00:37:00] people's lives by saying, as you just heard, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"

This Reaganism certainly sums up his views on government, even though, as I'll show later, the formulation of this quote and sentiment is hugely problematic. And the quote reappears whenever politicians, in the United States anyway, propose new or expanded government, economic or social programs. We're seeing it being employed now in reaction to the Biden administration's infrastructure funding proposals. Reagan-worshipping pundits and media outlets trot this out at such times, investing it with gravity and inherent truth as if it came from the Bible or the US Constitution. Government and government programs make things worse, they argue, and hurt people. You're right to cower in fear whenever the government comes to the rescue, they assert, with all the confidence that comes from being backed up by Reagan.

But where does this statement actually come from? Like so many famous [00:38:00] quotes, it was not coined by the person who gets credit for it. In this case, Ronald Reagan. Researchers here at the Buzzkill Institute as well as heavyweight "experts" such as Josh Shapiro at the Yale Book of Quotations and Garson O'Toole, which is the pen name of former Johns Hopkins computer scientist, Dr. Gregory O. Sullivan, at QuoteInvestigator.com, have studied this extensively and they've reached the conclusion that it appeared in the mid to late 1970s as a bit of folksy wisdom sprouting from places like Readers Digest and humorous columns in newspapers. It may have started as a joke running around the military or large organizations in the 1960s, and, and the joke went like this: "The sentence, 'We are here from headquarters to help you' usually means that your division or part of the organization is about to be given the ax."

But it first started to appear in print in 1973 in a crop production conference [00:39:00] report written by the Crop Quality Council, an American farming organization, and I'm not making that up. According to this council, the crop marketplace was performing very well in the early 1970s. But that "the long arm of government intervention" was making the future analysis of crop prices uncertain. That prompted the report's writer to state, and I quote, "I would like to tell you an appropriate story. The three most unbelievable statements in the world are, one, 'the check is in the mail'; two, 'of course, I'll love you in the morning like I do tonight'; and three, 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help you.'" It seems clear from the tone of this witticism that the phrase had been around at least for a little while.

Senator Edmond Muskie, Democrat from Maine, was reported to have said to a meeting of the US Conference of Mayors in Chicago in early 1976: "The three most common lies are, [00:40:00] I put your check in the mail yesterday; I gave at the office; and I'm from the federal government and I'm here to help you." US Representative John Russo, Republican from Southern California, said the same thing in May, calling these promises the three greatest fabrications of all time. Conservative commentator and columnist George F. Will said essentially the same thing in July, 1976. The same basic idea was uttered during testimony before the US Senate when they were considering "the extension of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act". And it appeared the next year during a hearing on "economic problems of the elderly in Mississippi" in the US House of Representatives.

It had clearly become a well worn observation in political and government circles by the time Reagan said it, when discussing government support to farmers during that 1986 press conference you heard at the beginning. And it appeared throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, especially when right-wing commentators referred to Reagan's political [00:41:00] ideology. Controversial writer and [clears throat] friend of the show, Dinesh D'Souza, used it in his 1997 book, *Ronald Reagan: How an ordinary man became an extraordinary leader*.

But I want to take this discussion a little further and talk about the meaning and utility of this sentiment: the most terrifying words are I'm from the government and I'm here to help. It was, and is, a moronic and childish thing to say and believe. That's right. I'm saying that Reagan was being moronic and childish when he said it with a grin. That George Will, who with his PhD should know better, was moronic and childish when he wrote it in a column. And that the politicians and commentators who are employing it now are being moronic and childish.

It's moronic because even 10 seconds of actual thought makes you realize that being "from the government" could mean [00:42:00] being from the fire department, from Child Protective Services, in the American context it could mean from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency in times of natural disaster, and so many more.

It meant the first responders who saved hundreds during the attacks on September 11th and often gave their lives trying to save more. Are we to be terrified when an emergency medical technician uses the jaws of life to extract us from a wrecked automobile that's crushing us? And perhaps, most appropriately given Reagan's worship of the military, are we supposed to have been terrified when American armed forces help stop a genocidal maniac like Hitler?

And I'm not even including this seemingly endless government corporate bailouts, economic incentives and giveaways to companies to put offices and factories in certain areas, land grants to private institutions, and the ludicrously generous tax breaks given to large corporations and rich individuals in the United States.

These are exactly the kinds of [00:43:00] terrifying government help that Reagan championed during his administration, and that created some of the largest deficits and biggest federal debt levels in our history. Of course, there have been lots of times when governments, including the US government, have done terrible and indeed inexcusable things, allowing slavery and child labor to exist and thrive, helping to wipe out Native Americans and so many more.

But to lump all government, and by extension societal, attempts at improving people's lives as terrifying oppression is not only historically inaccurate, but politically dangerous. Countries and societies have always employed mutual aid in order to survive, literally survive. It has worked sometimes in various ways and has not worked other times in other ways.

But to abandon the idea is to give into anarchy. And that's moronic thinking.

It's childish because, as I've implied, it's an overly simplistic way of looking at the world, how [00:44:00] the world operates, and how we might try to make it operate better.

As we keep saying on this show, the supposed wisdom contained in one liners from famous and iconic people almost always overlook, and sometimes they steamroll, the complexities of social, political, and historical realities. If you

have a one line answer for everything, which Reagan almost always did, you're using schoolyard "it's all one way or the other, na na-na na na" rhetoric to address, you know, serious, grown up and complicated problems.

How Ronald Reagan's Regime Led To The Jan 6th Capitol Riot - The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder - Air Date 7-17-21

EMMA VIGELAND - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: You've spent multiple decades studying the right wing in America, so you're a good person to talk to about this. And thankfully you're still sane. And specifically Reagan in your most recent book. Talk about how Reagan specifically targeted people with authoritarian tendencies and how we can see a lot of those shades or I guess the manifestations or the [00:45:00] multiplications in what we saw in the Capitol insurrection now, six months ago.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yes. If I said to you that the Reagan presidential campaign in 1980 targeted people with authoritarian tendencies, you might accuse me of slandering Ronald Reagan.

But in this particular case, I literally have a historical document in which they pretty much say, Let's target people with authoritarian tendencies, right? So the document in question actually, which I read about in *Advertising Age* magazine in an article about his pollster, Richard Wirthlin, in an article about how he strategized for the Reagan campaign and won Advertising Age's Ad Man of the Year, which is goofy and interesting in itself. One of the things that one of this guy Wirthlin's aides told the reporter, was that Reagan supporters "obtain high scores on authoritarianism and a low score on egalitarianism." And then they [00:46:00] also discover basically that European ethnic groups living in large cities followed the same pattern and hence they were a prime target of conversion.

So when, this is a quote that Reagan launched his campaign with "highly visible visits to such neighborhoods." So literally they're like, Let's find people who you know are Democrats, right? Then Democrats then, and then we can turn into Republicans, and the way we're gonna find them is to find these pockets where people are most likely to be authoritarians.

And these were places like South Boston, where there were this terrible controversy of bussing where people basically fought the police to keep their

kids from going to school with black people. Or Cicero, Illinois, which is a formerly all white suburb of Chicago, where Martin Luther King was warned by the county sheriff that he, if he held a housing march there, he'd be committing a suicidal act. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was the most segregated city in America, which was undergoing a very big [00:47:00] reckoning when it came to police violence against African Americans. And this is literally where Ronald Reagan -- we know that Ronald Reagan opened his general election campaign in the summer of 1980 in Neshoba County, which is another great example of a place where you'd find a lot of authoritarians because of course this was where Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were lynched in 1964 for registering African Americans to vote. But this was actually the opening of his primary campaign. And so that's what they did.

And I found something else that was very interesting in this article and it shows basically in the most elegant way I've ever been able to come up with, because this is a, not really a complicated concept, but I've never really found a really elegant way to -- a hammer to really get this across to people -- the devolution of the Republican Party from Reagan to Trump.

Yeah, it's bad enough that a political party is saying, Let's find thugs, so we can, basically turn them into Republicans so we can win a presidential election. That's really [00:48:00] nasty in itself. But the aide who basically explained this to the reporter said Ronald Reagan said he didn't wanna do this anymore, so we stopped going to these places. And I don't really know what he was talking about, because they never, their appeal to authoritarians never really ebbed.

But what's fascinating about that is in this expression of shame, this very admission that what they were doing was something that they shouldn't have been doing.

And I think that the difference between the Ronald Reagan generation that was prospecting for authoritarians, and by that you can include the George H. W. Bush generation, the George W. Bush generation, the Mitt Romney generation, basically all Reagan Republicans up to Donald Trump, was Donald Trump kind of rips off the mask and says we're gonna do this without shame. This is the guy who walks into his debut as a presidential campaign and says Mexico is sending their rapists, and the Middle East too.

So what we have is this subtle double-faced appeal to authoritarians that can hide what it [00:49:00] does and look respectable, to this outright naked appeal to authoritarians. And here we are.

And the thesis I pursue after making that point in this little article of mine is, if you build your political power on a naked appeal to authoritarians, of course things are gonna get outta hand. And I tell a little bit about that history as I see it.

EMMA VIGELAND - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: But part of the misunderstanding about that is, and so well said by you, is a seemingly deliberate sanitizing and misunderstanding of that history, where it's --

RICK PERLSTEIN: We get into the media piece, right?

EMMA VIGELAND - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: Yeah. Look, it's not just the media. I really do think that there are a lot of Democrats from that era of the Reagan era, who want to believe something different about that era of conservative dominance, or at least have some sort of shell-shocked PTSD colloquially. I was not alive during the Reagan era and what's been told to me [00:50:00] is just, oh, he appealed to working class whites, of Italian descent, of Irish descent.

RICK PERLSTEIN: It is optimism.

EMMA VIGELAND - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: Right? And That's just so counterfactual. And so that's, I'm assuming that's a lot of what you write about in your book and what you talk about a little bit or significantly, but not as in depth in, as in your book I presume, in this piece in New York Magazine. If you could just touch upon that chasm in understanding.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Sure. Chris Matthews, formerly of MSNBC, wrote a whole book about what a wonderful, warm, rich relationship these two sons of Irish immigrants, Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neil, had for each other because they had scotch after work and were civil and could pursue negotiations.

And of course, the reason Ronald Reagan pursued negotiations with Tip O'Neill was 'cause Democrats had lots of power. Right? He did it because he had to. So the answer to that story is, if you want to have more civil politics where Republicans have [00:51:00] to respect us, the answer is beat Republicans. It's not be nice to Republicans, right? So this whole idea is, yeah, this sentimental fantasy and, there's a big, because we are a country that has lots of structural nastiness built into it. I think a lot of all kinds of elites, whether they're media elites or political elites, see this part of their job ideologically is tamping down the reality of just how ugly, violent, hateful a lot of our fellow Americans are.

And it's important to be unflinching and understanding the country that we are citizens of.

America's Right Turn with Rick Perlstein - Why Is This Happening? The Chris Hayes Podcast - Air Date 9-1-20

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: I wonder how much you feel like there is continuity between that coalition that Reagan puts together and what we, what, what the right is now.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah. There's a lot of continuity. Right? Right in the middle of kind of researching this was when people were starting to ask the question, how in the world could these so-called Christians be lining up behind someone like Donald Trump? [00:52:00] So, you know, I didn't want anyone to read the book and not understand that there's nothing surprising about the conservative Christians' embrace of Donald Trump. And I have a perfect quote that kind of summarizes that. It's Pat Robertson, right? Who's, you know, the proprietor of the world's first Christian TV network, later runs for president, uh, as a, you know, Christian conservative candidate in 1988 against George H.W. Bush. And in 1978 he specifically says vis-a-vis this, uh, you know, familiar of the Devil, James Earl Carter, "God wants stability. It's better to have a stable government under a crook than turmoil under an honest man". Right? So it's almost like this, this adversion to strong-manism, you know, that's, you know, quite explicit. And, you know, these guys all used to be segregationists. You know, Jerry Falwell, uh, I quoted a 1958 sermon in which he says the Bible commands us to [00:53:00] be segregationist. And that if, you know, the Supreme Court had only read the Bible, they wouldn't have surrendered to this crazy doctrine. The first Christian Right preacher, uh, to speak for Gerald Ford, this guy W.S. [sic] Criswell, said that, you know, that civil rights activists were dying from the neck up. So they were segregationists and they transfer that hate, if anything, uh, they just amplify it towards gays and lesbians. And there's this kind of national conspiracy theory that millions of people believe, you know, certainly a lot of the people who vote against gay rights initiatives in, you know, St. Paul and Eugene and California, and Florida, gay men are recruiting young boys. And one of the other most famous preachers in the Christian Right, this guy named James Robison, said they're recruiting young boys and they're killing them. I mean, it's almost like a cognate of QAnon, right?

And you know, so then you get in the question of what is, how does this [00:54:00] relate to what we're seeing now, you know, in the Republican

convention? I think that all these elements were there, by the way, and all the corporate Right elements of, you know, basically conspiring to eviscerate regulations that keep us safe and healthy. Um, but the front man was different. And the idea that you kind of needed an exemplar of the conservative movement who did not, you know, carry that kind of image of American carnage on the sleeve, was absolutely central to Republican politics, until Donald Trump comes along, in which, you know, there's no front stage, there's no backstage, you know, if we hear the Trump tapes suddenly from the Oval Office, none of us are gonna be shocked about how ugly ambitious he is, right? So suddenly all the people who are flocking to Donald Trump, among Republican office holders, are liberated from that former imperative to keep the ugliness under wraps. So that's the main kind of driving dynamic of how [00:55:00] Trumpism differs from Reaganism.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: Right, I mean, what I always think about is that Reaganism seemed a much more optimistic doctrine, or at least message.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Right. He was optimistic when he cut 80% from the public housing budget. He did it with a smile.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: Well, it's not even a smile, right? It's like, it's an idea that like, you know, the future will be better than the past. And in some ways it's like, Trump's rhetoric tries to ape that - I mean, he literally stole "Make America Great Again" from Reagan - but it's actually like deeply declinist. It's inextricably declinist. Like he can't actually, he doesn't think the future's gonna be better than the past, like...

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah. I talk about how Nixon also believed that, you know, America was in profound decline, but he talks about how he can't say that.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: Right. Exactly. And I don't, you know, I mean, if you look at Trump, he maps his own sort of persecution complex of like, they're ripping us off and everyone's ripping us off, and I'll get in there and they'll stop ripping us off. But it's like, I'm trying to find the right words for what register it's in because it is so different. It just to me is [00:56:00] so much more darker, declinist and dystopic than, even if when the politics or the same sort of animating forces are there, the message that's being projected is so different.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah. Uh, it's completely different. Andrew Marantz in the *New Yorker* today actually has a pretty good essay that kind of gets at a lot of this rhetoric. And it might have something to do with the fact that to kind of tell a credible story about the world from, you know, a kind of reactionary standpoint, you can't really tell it in an optimistic way. Because all these Right-wing policy fixes have been tried and failed. Right?

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: That, that to me is part of what is actually the difference, is that the promise of the big tax cut as the thing that solves a problem is still in the future and actually the timing makes it a plausible story when he runs again maybe in '24. All that stuff is gone now anymore. You can't, there's no plausible, like we've tested all these things.

RICK PERLSTEIN: There's no plausible story, right.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: That, that is what so striking...

RICK PERLSTEIN: And that's what made George Bush so mad. That's why he screamed that this was voodoo economics, cuz he was just[00:57:00] beside himself that this guy could say anything because he was just making something up that, you know, uh, there was no evidence for it or against it.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: Right. And that part is there's a lot of continuity, right? The idea that like the complete sort of bill of goods, like, I'm gonna sell you this bridge, there's there's real echoes there.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah, absolutely. And it's not just the ugly grifter is kind of beneath the surface, that's Ronald Reagan writing, giving one of his radio addresses, you know, which is basically how he made a living before he was president, and saying that we need to repeal what was called the Kefauver Amendments, which was the law that required the Food and Drug Administration to certify that drugs are safe and effective. Right? You cannot look nostalgically back at, you know, Ronald Reagan like David Plouffe was doing the other day and not, you know, look this square in the face, that this was his program.

CHRIS HAYES - HOST, WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?: Yeah, that was the program. I mean, the program, it's amazing in some ways the consistency of the program. It's the message that revolves. But one of the throughlines of your

work, and maybe [00:58:00] this is a good place to end, is just like, the force of Right-wing populism, we'll show them, we'll send a message, those East coast swells, like, that is the stuff, that's the substrate of the whole thing, has been all along, and somehow keeps getting rediscovered in each new era and then re-forgotten, and then re-surprising people that it's still there. When it's just there over and over and over again.

RICK PERLSTEIN: Yeah, yeah. Read some history, right? Yeah, Tim Alberta's recent piece in Politico, when he speaks to a bunch of high school kids and one of them says, "What do Republicans believe?" Because for a generation that kind of came of age post-Donald Trump, the idea that there can be some sort of intellectual content, some sort of consistent program for what the Republicans believe it takes to make the world a better place, simply is not credible. So all there is the angry kind of grunts of rage and resentment.

Why the 'Reagan Regime' Endures - The United States of Anxiety - Air Date 3-7-22

KAI WRIGHT - HOST, THE UNITED STATES OF ANXIETY: You argued that no president since Ronald Reagan has had a more productive first year than Joe Biden, [00:59:00] and yet you also wrote nonetheless, "There's a sense of stuckness that no amount of social spending or policy innovation can seem to dislodge. The question is why?" You say Biden is a prisoner of impossible expectations, and it's got something to do with presidential regimes, not presidential terms. So let's start there, explain that.

COREY ROBIN: Yeah. I think we tend to think of presidents with little more than two years' hindsight or two years' foresight, and the truth of the matter is that presidents operate in the context of these presidential regimes. FDR inaugurated the New Deal regime that lasted until 1980. The characteristic of a regime is that no matter who occupies the White House, Republican or Democrat, they have to speak within the constraints of a broad shared language. Dwight David Eisenhower, when he was elected in 1952, many people hoped, "Oh, he's going to roll back the New Deal", and he didn't.

In fact, he [01:00:00] extended the New Deal. Ronald Reagan was the last transformational leader who had inaugurated a new regime. And since 1980, we've been living in the shadow of that. If you remember Bill Clinton declared the era of big government over. Barack Obama came into office, there was a lot of high expectations of transformation, and very quickly discovered that the rules of Reaganism were still in play. Joe Biden is pretty much in a somewhat

similar situation. I think we had hoped, many people, that it would be different but as we've seen things play out, we could talk more about why and how, the rules of Reaganism have not been overturned yet, and that's what we're living with.

KAI WRIGHT - HOST, THE UNITED STATES OF ANXIETY: Let's talk a little bit about the why and how, I mean not just Biden, but in general. If we can map our history through these regimes, and I think in that piece you list like five of them, so there's not a lot going [01:01:00] back to Thomas Jefferson, what actually shifts a regime? What are the conditions that allow that kind of change?

COREY ROBIN: Two things. One is the regime itself is very, very weak and sclerotic. Think of Herbert Hoover's presidency or Jimmy Carter's presidency, those are two good examples. Hoover was part of this extended Gilded Age regime, Jimmy Carter was part of the extended New Deal regime. Both of these presidents were governing at a moment where the rules were really in freefall and collapse. You could see it in what they were doing. Jimmy Carter was a Democrat, but he appointed Paul Volcker to the Fed, who was a very tight money, kind of Republican-ish, leader of the Fed. Jimmy Carter expanded military spending. All of these things suggested that the New Deal order was coming undone. So that's one-half of it that you need in order for a regime to be toppled. The other half is [01:02:00] you need a president who was elected, fundamentally committed, not just rhetorically, but politically and institutionally to the gutting of that regime. So, Ronald Reagan, again, the one in most recent memory, Ronald Reagan had gone through 20 years of a long march within the Republican Party to transform it into a really fundamentally anti-New Deal policy. It wasn't going to compromise with the New Deal, it was going to shatter it. Likewise, Franklin Delano Roosevelt committed to shattering the Gilded Age order. Abraham Lincoln fundamentally committed to shattering the slaveocracy. People oftentimes think that was just a product of the Civil War. It wasn't. The Republican Party was an abolitionist party. You have to have these two factors. You need a regime that's very vulnerable, and you need a presidency and a party behind him or her that is [01:03:00] committing to shattering that order. Go ahead.

KAI WRIGHT - HOST, THE UNITED STATES OF ANXIETY: Why don't you think, putting Biden in that context, you know, I think a lot of people felt like, I felt like, at least that first pillar that you're talking about was in existence, that it felt like a regime was shattering when we looked at Republican politics in general and the ideas of Reaganism. They didn't even have purchase in the Republican Party anymore, it seemed like. And Joe Biden's rhetoric, at least at

the beginning, was very much, I mean he sounded like FDR. So, what is it that those of us who thought there was a shift coming didn't see that you saw?

COREY ROBIN: I think you were absolutely right about the fragility of the Republican order, and you've given some very good examples. Trump, in many ways, was very similar to Jimmy Carter, that he was scrambling the rules within his own party of what was acceptable and what wasn't acceptable. Remember his big stimulus package that the [01:04:00] Republicans under his leadership passed with those extensive unemployment benefits. It was very transformative in its way. You're absolutely right about that first half. I think the problem is with the second half.

The fact of the matter is, is that Joe Biden, there was a very bitterly fought-out primary, and the Democratic Party, I don't want to say it was the Democratic Party elites, but the Democratic Party made a decision, a fundamental decision, that they wanted to go with the candidate who was more reassuring, who promised, promised that really nothing fundamental will change. That was the nature of that political battle. Now, I know when, after the election, and with January 6th and the pandemic, there was a feeling like, "Well, wait a minute, the rules are really up for grabs now." But the fact of the matter is political parties, in order to become transformative parties, they have to undergo something like what happened with the nomination of Ronald Reagan in 1980, or [01:05:00] FDR. There just has to be a much more fundamental clash where the transformative part of the party comes out victorious, and that just did not in the end happen. The party made a firm decision, it did not want to go that route. And that's where we are.

Now, I don't want to exaggerate this too much because the truth of the matter is, as you said, there are two Democratic senators who have held some things up that might've pushed things, but in a way, I think that more illustrates the point that under an FDR type of regime change order or Reagan, two people can't hold things up. They get swooshed away in the landslide.

KAI WRIGHT - HOST, THE UNITED STATES OF ANXIETY: By the force of history that's coming.

COREY ROBIN: Yes. It's very, very hard to have that kind of resistance. I think, in a way, this is why people are so frustrated because, on the one hand, it seems so within our grasp, it's almost there. And then you have what feels like these two, you know, I [01:06:00] always think of The Princess and the Pea story, these two peapods stopping everything. And why can't they get swept

away? Because the party is not quite there yet. I think it could be, but it's just not there yet.

Final comments on my first debate about Reagan

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today starting with *Make Me Smart* explaining Reaganomics and the impact it had on even future Democratic presidents. *On the Media* looked at Reagan's racism from when we used to make racist policy, but not talk about it publicly as much. *The Thom Hartmann Program* explained "horse and sparrow" economics, or what I like to call "eat shit and be grateful" economics. *The Real News* looked at the famous instance of Reagan firing striking air traffic controllers. *On the Media* dove into Iran-Contra and the arguments made by Dick Cheney that ended up reverberating through the George W. Bush presidency. The *Professor Buzzkill History Podcast* analyzed one of Reagan's most famous quotes about the dangers of the government. [01:07:00] And *The Majority Report* discussed Reagan's explicit targeting of authoritarian voters.

That's what everyone heard. But members also heard bonus clips from *Why Is This Happening?* looking at the Republican politics of aggrievement from Reagan to Trump in the absence of any successful policies to run on. And *The United States of Anxiety* examined American politics through the lens of presidential regimes or eras rather than merely terms.

To hear that and have all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly to the new members-only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at BestoftheLeft.com/support, or shoot me an email requesting a financial hardship membership, because we don't let a lack of funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

And now, just a quick story about the first time I had a debate about Ronald Reagan after learning that he was, in fact, bad. And this was back almost 20 years ago [01:08:00] now. I had only just really started listening to political talk radio, so I probably only knew that liking Reagan was wrong, but couldn't really hold my own in a debate yet.

And I was talking with my girlfriend's grandfather, and he was probably the perfect age to have fallen in love with Reagan, for all the reasons that people did. Then after falling in love with him 20 years after the fact, he tried to explain to me why Reagan was so good. And he focused *entirely* on how he

made people feel. He explained that people were feeling down at the time, and Reagan had a way of making them feel proud of their country again for the first time in a while. And it was the look in his eye that really got me. He was so earnest. You could see almost the pain that he remembered from the time before Reagan and the sort of sense of relief as he described the comfort [01:09:00] that Reagan's words brought to a hurting nation.

And so I looked at him, this kindly old man who was very nice to me, who loved his country and wanted nothing more than for others to love it too. And I screamed in his face: "Facts don't care about your feelings." And then I called him a cock. And from that day forward until the day he passed away at a ripe old age, he voted Democratic.

Okay, the end of the story isn't true. But he really did say that Reagan was good because he made people feel good. And as for the Republican party, remember this was like 2003, 2004. So we had just invaded Iraq. Things were not looking great. As for the Republican party, he said, they're the good guys. That's why he supported them. They made 'em feel good and they're the good guys.

So who knows? Maybe we really were working with similar levels of information after all.

As always, keep the comments coming in at 202-999-3991 or by [01:10:00] emailing me to Jay@bestoftheleft.com.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show, and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio, Ben, Ken and Brian for their volunteer work, helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic designing, web mastering, and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at BestoftheLeft.com/support, through our Patreon page, or from right inside the Apple Podcast app. Membership is how you get instant access to our incredibly good bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content and no ads in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player.

And if you wanna continue the discussion, then join our *Best of the Left* Discord community to discuss the show or the news or basically anything else. Links to join [01:11:00] are in the show notes.

So coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay!, and this has been the *Best of the Left* podcast coming to you twice weekly, thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from BestoftheLeft.com.