

**EVOCATIVE MYTHOLOGY:
CONSTRUCTING REAGAN THE COLD WARRIOR IN PUBLIC MEMORY,
1980-2012**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction of Ronald Reagan's memory in the public sphere since his departure from the Oval Office in January 1989. Using a wide array of sources including collections of television news clips, speeches, op-ed pieces, and two Reagan biographies, this paper argues that the dominant framing of Reagan is a discursive formation of what I call evocative mythology – a series of grand myths enveloping Reagan that arouse instincts about the national ethos of the United States. The purpose of this paper is twofold: the first half introduces and explains the paradigm of evocative mythology, primarily relying on the notion of myth from Roland Barthes, and the second half addresses the myth that Reagan won the Cold War, analyzing this conditioning of public memory that has occurred over the last twenty years. In both cases, I argue that admirers of Reagan, those who now consider him to be something of an American Saint, consistently and consciously construct Reagan through a lens of evocative mythology.

There is something about that old man, something beyond the specific actions or triumphs you can point to, something that brings tears to their eyes, all those who knew him. They see an end coming and they look back and think: *He was a giant*. He was our giant, a giant of history, we know that now, and we wish we could put our arms around him and rock him to sleep.- Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan*, 14.

INTRODUCTION

The 1980 presidential election marked the actualization, rather than commencement, of a multifaceted, cross-class reimagining of American conservatism that began sixteen years earlier with Barry Goldwater and his humiliating run for the U.S. presidency¹ – the nadir of the nascent New Right. A former Democrat and ex-union leader emerged in that fateful 1964 campaign to beseech his new Republican allies to vote for Goldwater in a speech titled, "A Time For Choosing." At the time political pundits criticized Goldwater as radical, outside the scope of possible debate,² yet the élan of Reagan and his mellifluous and charismatic rhetoric powerfully captured what C. Wright Mills had entreated the New Left to do for the country and its sociological imagination, by merging personal troubles into broader views of public issues.³ The kind of history Mills had in mind with the term was excavated, critical, longitudinal, yet a

¹ Barry Goldwater won only six Southern States, losing by an astounding sixteen million votes. See Mike Davis, "The New Right's Road to Power," *New Left Review* 128 (July-August 1981), 9, for a short account of Goldwater's failure.

² Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, (New York, Hill and Wang, 2001), xi-xvi and 501-504 for Reagan's "Time for Choosing."

³ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 8.

sociological imagination is *not* inherently left leaning.⁴ The 1964 visceral performance of this middle-aged man, Ronald Reagan, attests to that, and within two years he easily won the 1966 California gubernatorial election by campaigning on vows to curb the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and disenroll “those bums” on welfare.⁵ Indeed, political commentators in 1964 mistook the defeat of Goldwater as the triumph of liberalism when the contrary was true: these events bespoke underlying shifts in and challenges to what might be called the New Deal consensus of American politics.⁶ It was through a sociological imagination that Reagan became the most formidable U.S. politician since Franklin Delano Roosevelt,⁷ and provided the ideological scaffolding for the reinvigoration of American Exceptionalism—a political moment that rehabilitated the Republican Party and allowed them to seize the political frontier after the downfall of Richard Nixon only six years earlier. What Reagan came to emblemize by 1980 was an alluring sense of longstanding patriotism that vividly situated the individual in a selective, masculine reading of American history. It was thus a *reimagination* that took place not merely, or even principally, in the nexus of Washington but rather permeated the entire American heartland.

If the 1960s New Left had asked Americans to disavow, even deracinate, their previous acceptance of imperialism, racism, sexism, and homophobia, to actively *disinherit* that family line,⁸ then by the word *reimagination*, I suggest a conscious struggle to stymie the postmodern collapse of binaries, an effort by Reagan to save the most troubling aspects of 1950s modernity.⁹ He accomplished this feat by reclaiming the family line and bolstering hegemonic masculinity¹⁰ into a broad conservative consensus remembered today, and discussed then, as the “Reagan Revolution.” In context of the Carter years, when a tocsin that predominant power systems¹¹ were exploiting new arrangements of consumer politics and the declining power of the nation-

⁴ Mills defined the sociological imagination as “the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society” (7). He emphasized the ability to immerse oneself in alternative perspectives and thereby shift vantage points, but that ability alone does not produce left-leaning views. It immediately raises the question of authority and authenticity—in other words, *who* is articulating a position, how, and at what point in time? Black conservatives, such as Thomas Sowell who lived in poverty as child, have just as “valid” a perspective on race relations as, say, W.E.B Du Bois (despite their divergent views). The same unsettling truth holds for the women, such as Phyllis Schlafly, who vigorously campaigned against the Equal Rights Amendment.

⁵ Jeffery Kahn, “Ronald Reagan Launched His Political Career Using the Berkeley Campus as a Target,” *UC Berkeley News* 8 June 2004 < http://www.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2004/06/08_reagan.shtml>

⁶ See Craig Shirley, *Rendezvous with Destiny: Ronald Reagan and the Campaign That Changed America* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), 8-9.

⁷ Reagan idolized FDR after all. Without a doubt when Reagan used the populist slogan, “rendezvous with destiny,” he was referring to a speech FDR gave at the 1936 Democratic National Convention. See Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, (New York, Harper Perennial, 2008), 2.

⁸ John C. Landreau, “Queer Intersubjectivity: Doing and Undoing Masculinity in Women’s Studies,” *Men and Masculinities* (2011), 11.

⁹ The ideals of 1950s modernity were rooted in fixed, unequivocal oppositions that were easily recognizable and uniform: communism/anticommunism, male/female, proper/hooligan, right/wrong. Even if these binaries were illusory, as Stephanie Coontz demonstrates in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and The Ideological Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), the perception of truth was powerful; it had deep rhetorical appeal for American voters.

¹⁰ The definition of hegemonic masculinity comes from Frank Barrett who defines it as “a man who is independent, risk-taking, aggressive, heterosexual and rational” in “The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the U.S. Navy.” *Gender, Work, and Organization Journal*, 3.3 (2007): 129-142.

¹¹ The term “power systems” is vague but generally conveys the institutionalized practices of American-style capitalism—deregulated market transactions, concentrated holdings of wealth — as well as the layout of the American government (Executive, Legislative, and Judicial), the American Military Establishment, and the American household.

state to control market structures, what Ernest Mandel and Fredric Jameson identified as the emergence of “late capitalism,”¹² the defeatist aura of circumscribed (*circumcised*) American power gave Ronald Reagan the political will to articulate, embody, and finally reproduce what Lauren Berlandt calls a “national fantasy,” or a popular construction of national identity that prominently figures in the way people lead their daily lives.¹³ Susan Jeffords has chronicled this “national fantasy” as it took place during the Reagan presidency, using as her cultural template popular Hollywood films such as *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2* (1985), *Rambo III* (1988), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Die Hard* (1988) among others, to demonstrate how Reagan’s image and rhetoric corresponded to popular representations of remasculinized, “hard” (muscular), male bodies.¹⁴

Yet this moment of reimagination in 1980 is not my principal concern here, although it has become a topic of historical and popular interest in recent years.¹⁵ Rather this essay will address the dynamic continuance of Reagan’s mode of *reimagination* in public discourse through the curious act of reimagining Reagan himself. It is the story of, by, and for Reagan that Peggy Noonan describes in the epigraph, the *something* that she struggles to define regarding the man that directs homage to Reagan, welcoming and accepting his visible presence in contemporary media. What Noonan is remembering, or rather feeling, the redolence of Reagan that she cannot quite define is a discursive formation of what I shall be calling evocative mythology – a series of grand myths enveloping Reagan that arouse instincts about the national ethos of America.¹⁶ My argument is that admirers of Reagan, those who now consider him to be something of an American Saint, consistently and consciously construct Reagan through a lens of evocative mythology. I examine this Reagan ritual in public discourse as it plays out on TV, in presidential speeches and in panegyrics that Reaganites compose.

This paper limits its study to one prominent myth, Reagan as the Cold Warrior, the president and man who secured victory for the United States against the Soviet Union. This does not suggest at the outset that the mythology of Reagan can be confined to the Cold War, but it does mean that Reagan not only constructed his own masculinity and presidential tone based on presumptions of Carter’s perceived weakness and even touted femininity,¹⁷ but that the “victory” of the Cold War *remasculinized* America in the eyes of the ebullient New Right and alacritous neoconservatives – Reagan was (and still is) seen as the man who ended the so-called Vietnam syndrome. The power of mythology, however, does not exist in isolation; it is intersectional with values of race, gender, class, and sexuality exploding, sometimes as clearly as bolides across the night sky, sometimes prudently through coded language and thought, but never without a much broader context and use of knowledge and power in public memory and national history. Throughout this paper, I analyze hagiographic Reagan biographies by Peggy Noonan and Dinesh D’Souza along with collections of television news clips, speeches, and op-ed pieces, which all serve to enlarge the canon. Of course, this is partly a result of how and where political myths come to be; representations are never simple, never easily located, but constantly shaped and reshaped in a fragmentary construction of social and political meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

¹² Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, (London: New Left Books, 1972); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

¹³ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and The Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Craig Shirley *Reagan’s Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign That Started It All* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

¹⁶ The paradigm of evocative mythology will be discussed in detail in the next section.

¹⁷ John Mihalic of *The Wall Street Journal* went as far to say, “Once in office, he [Carter] lost no time revealing his true feminine spirit. He wouldn’t twist arms. He didn’t like to threaten or rebuke... we’ve already had a “woman” president: Jimmy Carter.” This apt quote comes from Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 10.

When using the word myth, I primarily draw on two interrelated notions—one derived from the work of historian Peter Novick, the other from literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes. By myth, I do not mean to suggest the conventional sense of truth or falsity, but rather the way Novick discusses it in his magnum opus, *That Noble Dream*, quoting Bronislaw Malinowski, “[Myth] is not merely a story told, but a reality lived...It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and enforces practical rules for the guidance of man [sic].”¹⁸ Myth functions through the *feeling* of legitimacy it induces to validate, elevate and sustain a version of truth, explained in another way as the marshaling of public consent to a sole frame of knowledge; or in Novick’s words, “its epistemological foundation.”¹⁹ From a structuralist viewpoint, Claude Lévi-Strauss offered this eloquent description: “the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a (real) contradiction.”²⁰ Perhaps more tendentiously, the myth of Reagan follows the sentiment of Edward Said in *Beginnings*: Reagan as a construction made to fit the image in a conservative mind of a man whose moral sense of American righteousness—the *American* work ethic, culture, duty, love of country, family, religion—dwarfed even that of John Winthrop in his oft-quoted description of America as the “city upon a hill.” Indeed, I would go as far to say that the myth of Reagan was an ideological project inaugurated in the aforementioned *reimagination* of American conservatism that Reagan himself was acutely conscious of, and that his contemporaries—whether the Tea Party, Fox News, or former members of the Bush Cabinet—propagate today for social and party cohesion, or in Gramsci’s sense, for the reproduction of spontaneous, rational consent. Yet the question remains: how does myth as *form* actually appear? How does it function? And how will we, in Justice Potter Stewart’s well-known aphorism, “know it when we see it”?

To answer these questions, I rely on Roland Barthes and his famous essay, “Myth Today,” from his book *Mythologies*. At the beginning of his discussion, Barthes defines myth as a *type of speech*, a system of communication defined by its intention instead of literal fact. It has a social usage that is not limited to written discourse—mythical speech can, and should be found in other places, such as photography, film, TV, and news reporting. Therefore it has historical limitations, and more importantly, it seeks (and here Barthes may have been anticipating Derrida)²¹ to *naturalize* what is not natural by reworking already established material.²²

The main crux of Barthes’s argument extends beyond this type-of-speech analysis. Barthes principally understands myth in a paradigm of Saussurean semiology, employing the classic “signifier-signified-sign” formulation (a semiological system).²³ Except (and this is the confusing part), Barthes argues that myth primarily functions in a peculiar *second-order*

¹⁸ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3. I borrow all of these quotes from the brilliant work Novick accomplished in explaining the myth of “historical objectivity.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

²¹ In one of his few instances of clarity, Derrida explained deconstruction in an interview: “one of the gestures of deconstruction is not to naturalize what isn’t natural, to not assume what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural.” *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofma (2002, Park City, UT: Zeitgeist Films, 2002) DVD.

²² Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 108. Barthes early on explicates this same point: “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.”

²³ For all those unfamiliar with semiology, let me elucidate the paradigm and provide an example. In semiology, there are two relational terms, a signifier and signified, such the case that a signifier is typically material while the signified is conceptual. The third component, the sign, emerges in the interplay between the two. I will borrow an example from Barthes: I have a rose (material object) and my passion (concept); if I use a rose to *signify* my passion, then I have ‘passionified’ rose—it literally carries a message, but also exists outside of that relationship. The rose (signifier), passion (signified), and passionate rose (sign) relay a precise meaning in a particular moment, while still retaining other meanings outside of that relationship. In this sense, a rose could also signify love or death and nevertheless passion. “Myth Today,” 111.

semiological system that is built on the first-order, where the “sign” of the first-order becomes the “signifier” in the second-order. Barthes clarifies this relationship with a diagram (which I reproduce below) and renames the aforementioned terms: in the first-order semiological system, sign is called *meaning*; in the second-order, sign becomes a signifier called *form*. Because there is no overlap for signified, it is simply called *signified* in the first-order and *concept* in the second-order. Finally, the sign that works and thereby produces myth is called *signification*. See Table 1 below for further clarification.

Table 1

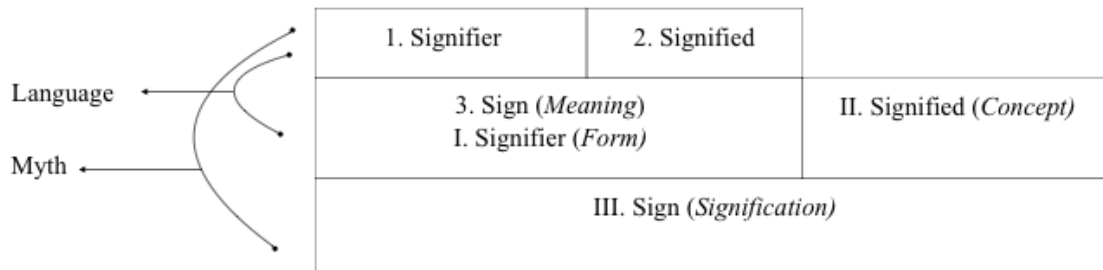


Diagram reproduced from Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, page 113

The paradigm of semiology as shown above posits a struggle between *meaning* and *form*; when one is full, the other is empty yet it is *not* suppression by one over the other but temporary impoverishment. Form puts meaning at a distance, tames its fullness and richness.²⁴ The best explanation comes from Barthes himself:

The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there. It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth.²⁵

As meaning and form supplant each other in what appears an interminable battle, parts of the image are lost or disordered. *Concept* (the second signified) then implants “a whole new history,” between meaning and form, and a new set of intentions intrude that are less concerned with actual reality than a certain reading or perspective of reality. Barthes emphasizes the character of concept as unstable, formless; it retains coherence and unity *only* due to its function.²⁶ This means that concept can take shape in a wide variety of ways: it can be a whole book, or a single phrase or word. Concept then operates as a sort of *distortion*; it intervenes offering new historical narratives, what Barthes called *gestures*, changes the way meaning appears in the context of form and then disappears.²⁷ That final act redefines meaning and produces signification— together, this amalgam of terms is myth.

For Barthes, and for the purpose of this essay, myth operates through this “hide-and-seek” relationship between meaning and form that constitutes itself as a constantly moving turnstile for the production of signification.²⁸ In other words, myth never appears where it should be; it always seems elsewhere, and become defined by its negative identity (“I am not where you

²⁴ Ibid., 116-118

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 119.

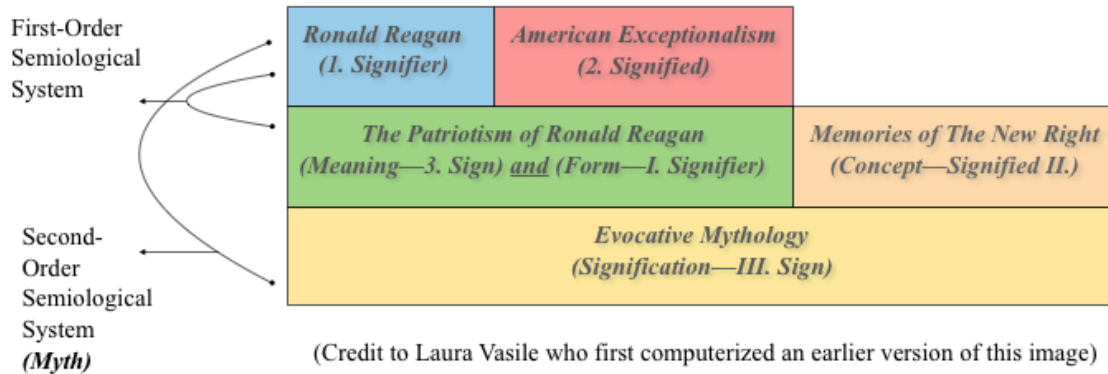
²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ Ibid., 122.

think I am; I am where you think I am not”).²⁹ In an ordinary alibi, such as the case with the police, there must be resolution (either the individual was or was not at the time and place of the crime). But for myth, there will never be resolution; it is instantaneous, promptly appearing, but in the same instant, disappearing. Myth should, as Barthes writes, be thought of as a *perpetual alibi*.³⁰ Below in Table 2 these paradigmatic ideas are applied and very simply related to Ronald Reagan – this is the relationship of evocative mythology.

In this diagram below, *Ronald Reagan* is the signifier and *American Exceptionalism* is the signified and together they unite to create the third term, *The Patriotism of Ronald Reagan*. This all occurs in the first-order semiological system because during his time in office Ronald Reagan grounded his image, habits of discourse, and memory in American Exceptionalism. He inaugurated what Michael Weiler and W. Barnett Pearce call a *ceremonial* mode of public discourse,³¹ where he framed policy problems in terms of cherished values – as a choice between preserving the “last and greatest bastion of freedom” or allowing that noble vision to perish.³²

Table 2



According to Campbell and Jamieson, a ceremonial form of discourse “captures the essence of...mediations that reaffirm and redefine our national identity and values and that instruct the citizenry about the nation’s beginnings as a means to confirm its future.”³³ Instead of explaining policy proposals as complex questions of defining the public good, Reagan took unequivocal, hardline (masculine) approaches. In order to perform these rhetorical gestures successfully, he had to root them in something universal and sacrosanct – the imagined infallibility of the nation. Whether it was inflated bureaucracies, Soviet expansion, or the decline of “traditional” values, Reagan effectively portrayed these circumstances as grave dangers to the heroic and humble nature of the American people. He was “simply a master of the populism.”³⁴

Yet even here, I must pause before proceeding to explain the rest of the diagram because evocative mythology is *already* present in the argument I have offered. Reagan’s line in his 1981 Inaugural Address, “the last and greatest bastion of freedom” is an allusion to Abraham

²⁹ Ibid., 123.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ W. Barnett Pearce and Micheal Weiler, “Ceremonial Discourse: The Rhetorical Ecology of the Reagan Administration,” in *Reagan and Public Discourse in America*, ed. W. Barnett Pearce and Michael Weiler (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 22.

³² I am here reminded of Reagan’s quote from “A Time For Choosing,” “[If] we lose freedom here, there is no place to escape to. This is the last stand on Earth.”

³³ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done In Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 158.

³⁴ Pearce and Weiler, “Ceremonial Discourse,” 20.

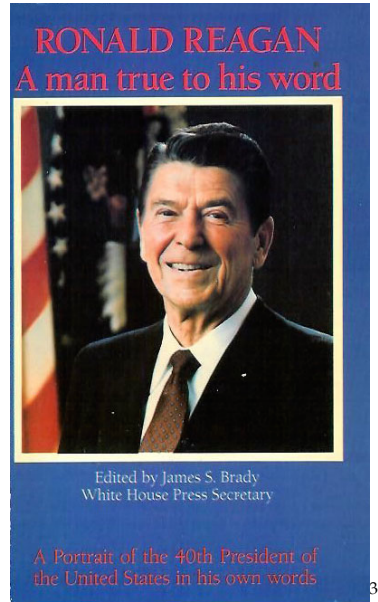
Lincoln's "last, best hope of mankind"³⁵ – but for audience members who either saw Reagan's First Inaugural Address or watched the speech on TV, the ineluctable question of *who* is speaking, Reagan or Lincoln, ensues for the spectator. Is Reagan simply referencing and paraphrasing Lincoln (the earlier part of this sentence mentions, "as we've had in the past" but does not explicitly name Lincoln), or does this rhetorical gesture stand alone as something original? Is Reagan's idiom a form of mimicking so close to that of the first that Reagan becomes in Baudrillard's sense a "hyperreal object," or a "meticulous reduplication of the real" Lincoln that the audience can no longer separate the two?³⁶ Evocative mythology is this apparent *confusion* – for the audience cannot unravel the knot of the speech because the performance of American Exceptionalism is so authentic, so deeply rooted in the psyche, that for all intents and purposes, Reagan *was* Lincoln in that moment.

Still, an obstinate reader might protest: what makes Reagan's rhetorical style different than others? Have not all presidents employed, relied on, and to some extent, tied themselves to American Exceptionalism? *What makes this signifier and signified distinct?* Every President no doubt has political moments of unadulterated patriotism – whether rhetorical gestures, formal ceremonies, or paying lip service to the dead – and each no doubt *tries* to symbolize American Exceptionalism, but that performance must be reliably convincing; the audience must recognize it as true. Reagan possessed the ability to consistently act and entertain notions of sincerity and authenticity about the United States to the point that these performances seemed commonsensical. Few presidents have been able to so readily accomplish this task, but those who have are evocative figures in American history and include Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt³⁷ – and yes, the fortieth president, Ronald Reagan. The paradox, then, is obvious: Reagan utilizes the rhetoric of powerful historical figures (who themselves encircle mythology) to inflate his own projection of power and more closely align his persona with American Exceptionalism. This happens to such a degree that signifier/signified often surface as one entity; they habitually become indistinguishable from each other. If one, for example, glances at the picture of Reagan on the front cover of *Ronald Reagan: A man true to his word* (image reproduced below), the entire meaning is both overt and hidden: the American flag is unfocused in the background as Reagan smiles wide, showing his teeth, and he is perfectly centered with his hair flawlessly combed in his slicked 1950s style, his shoulders broad and eyes sharp. The colors of the title lettering are red, the front cover is blue, and Reagan is wearing white (and his skin, white). Reagan thus literalizes the American flag, which is present, but also obscured; the focus of the piece is Reagan who symbolizes America, and yet America also symbolizes Reagan. A still photograph captures the form, but the meaning can never be found because, as Barthes writes, it is outdistanced in the same moment that form is presented.

³⁵ Frank Austerlühl, *The Great American Scaffold: Intertextuality and Identity in American Presidential Discourse* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), 200.

³⁶ Other scholars and commentators have made the claim that Ronald Reagan was our first hyperreal president. See Diane Rubenstein, *This is Not a President: Sense, Nonsense, and the American Political Imaginary* (New York: NYU Press, 2008), 26; or "Rick Roderick on The Masters of Suspicion [full length]," YouTube video, 48.02, posted by The Partially Examined Life, January 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wetwETy4u0&list=PLNjBZMlrREZ7dhx2TjEuSsc4XIPzIzIbveJ>.

³⁷ Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, 2.



Evocative mythology not only occurs from the *confusion* of signified/signifier, but also maintains its discursive hegemony from the memories of the New Right, the concept or Signified II. in the second-order semiological system. Hagiographic biographies, like those of Peggy Noonan and Dinesh D'Souza, attempt to capture and relay the meaning and form of Reagan's patriotism. Each Reaganite offers a new perspective of those events, "a whole new history," which all at once destabilizes and displaces the original narrative and at the same time re-strengthens the imagery of *The Patriotism of Ronald Reagan*. Just as Reagan evoked mythologized presidents in his speeches, presidential candidates today in the Republican Party have seized hold of his memory to align themselves more closely with American Exceptionalism. All of these overlapping histories and instances of what Amos Kiewe called "the practice of conditioning memories"³⁹ are what I mean by evocative mythology. In the remaining part of this paper, I chronicle the myth that Reagan won the Cold War and demonstrate that the framing of Reagan in public memory adheres to the paradigm of evocative mythology. I take seriously the notion from Antonio Gramsci that history has deposited an *infinity of traces* in our current modes of discourse without leaving an inventory. To begin to understand the present state of American political discourse, it is imperative to compile such an inventory of Ronald Reagan.⁴⁰

REAGAN WON THE COLD WAR

Michel Foucault's sense in his article, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History*, that one be should concerned with beginnings, rather than origins, because the former recognizes disparity and dissension while the later searches for and assumes the exact essence of things can serve as a starting point in explaining the Reagan Cold Warrior myth.⁴¹ There is no exact moment that Reagan supposedly won the Cold War, but rather a series of moments that are now evoked to justify and substantiate this reading of historical events. In this section, I analyze Reagan's address to the National Association of Evangelicals on March 8, 1983, now referred to as the "Evil

³⁸ James S. Brady, ed., *Ronald Reagan: a man true to his word* (Washington, D.C.: The National Federation of Women, 1984).

³⁹ Amos Kiewe, "Framing Memory through Eulogy: Ronald Reagan's Long Good-bye," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 249.

⁴⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* trans. and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 324. Edward Said also memorably makes this point in his famous book, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 25.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 142.

Empire” speech. As a part of this rhetorical cluster analysis, I examine Reagan’s renowned “Bear” commercial for its presentation of the Cold War in his 1984 reelection campaign. Next, I address the media reception of Reagan at the time of his death for his role in the Cold War and how his famous “Tear Down this Wall” speech was eulogized on NBC. Third, I examine the presentation of Reagan the Cold Warrior in two hagiographic biographies, Dinesh D’Souza’s *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* and Peggy Noonan’s *When Character was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan*. Lastly, I conclude by examining the representation of Reagan in contemporary politics, especially U.S.-Russia relations, exploring the ways the construction of Reagan influences the foreign policy initiatives of President Barack Obama.

AMERICA AND THE “EVIL EMPIRE”

Ronald Reagan’s 1983 address to the National Association of Evangelicals adheres to his Manichean view of history, in which “the shining city upon a hill” (America) invariably triumphs over the “evil empire” (the Soviet Union). This rather simple juxtaposition informs the layout of Reagan’s entire speech: he first defines American values, then demonstrates the internal threat posed by “Washington-based bureaucrats and social engineers”⁴² regarding abortion, and lastly explains the threat of the Soviet Union by describing its undisputed, monolithic, anti-American values.

According to Reagan, the foundation of American greatness (read American Exceptionalism) is, “grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers *only* where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted” (emphasis added).⁴³ The word *only* is significant: it expresses Reagan’s entire conception of American democracy as theological, an essential redefinition of freedom itself. A central tenet of Reagan’s philosophy revitalizes an earlier, puritanical perspective that freedom *only* exists in relation to Christianity, to God. He states further, “*Only* through your work and *prayers and those of millions of others* can we hope to survive this perilous century and keep alive this experiment in liberty, *this last, best hope of man*” (emphasis added).⁴⁴ This last line again echoes Lincoln (who is quoted by name at the beginning of the speech, but is not acknowledged here),⁴⁵ and likewise Reagan *himself* from “A Time For Choosing” in 1964 when he concluded his speech with, “We’ll preserve for our children this [America], *the last best hope of man on earth*, or we’ll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness (emphasis added).”⁴⁶ Evocative mythology functions here through a series of circular narrative looping, where words are pulled through time and space and re-layered into a new story that obscures their common origin. It could be diagrammed as Lincoln (L) – Reagan (R) – *Reagan (R)*. In each instance, the rhetorical efforts of Reagan postulate a kind of knowledge of the past by eternalizing history, purifying and extrapolating Lincoln into a distilled, usable version. In the process the voice is dissolved – *who* is Reagan quoting – and the rhetoric shifts from referential to self-referential (L – R to R – R). This obfuscation resembles Baudrillard’s simulacrum, the copy that has lost its original, which allows a certain collapsing of present into past and renegotiation of time and place in the nation’s collective memory. Reagan uses Lincoln’s mythology, only then to be absorbed into its matrix. Toby Glenn Bates recognized

⁴² Ronald Reagan, “Address to National Association of Evangelicals,” (“Evil Empire” Speech), March 8, 1983, edited by Paul Fessler and Donald Roth, *Voices of Democracy*, 2007.

<http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/reagan-evil-empire-speech-text/>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ I would like to thank David Venturo for his invaluable comment in pointing out the origin of Reagan’s phrase. Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” October 27, 1964, *The University of Texas-Austin*, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/reference/timechoosing.html>

⁴⁵ Reagan says in his speech, “I think I understand how Abraham Lincoln felt when he said, ‘I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.’” Reagan mentions this quote in the context of allegedly being asked if he knew that people prayed for the president.

⁴⁶ I would like to thank David Venturo for pointing out the origin of Reagan’s phrase in earlier versions of this paper.

the recursive nature of Reagan's rhetoric when he noted that "[Reagan's] consistency was a remarkably useful tool that was important because it transmitted easily through the media."⁴⁷

The other side of the coin for Reagan's populist redefinition of freedom was a denial of twentieth century American liberalism, which envisions that all freedoms are granted to individuals without the prerequisite of religion. Reagan reverses this formulation and presents Christianity as a precondition for freedom in the United States. "Freedom prospers," Reagan boldly asserts, only "when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged."⁴⁸ Political freedoms – the right to vote, the right to assembly, the right to free speech – as well as economic freedoms – the right to buy and sell goods in an open market, the right to collective bargaining – matter only in the context of an absolute morality bestowed by God. Reagan quotes a number of the Founding Fathers to establish their belief in God and prove this argument while overlooking any serious contradictions, such as Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists professing "a wall separation of Church and State."⁴⁹

In Foucauldian terms, the "general enunciative principle that governs a group of verbal performances"⁵⁰ is what Reagan does *not* have to say in this speech. This is the underlying paradigmatic assumption of American superiority. The constitutive element of this rhetorical device is teleology: Reagan not only frames the origins of America as timelessly Christian, but urges that the country undergo "a great spiritual awakening" in order to continue on its proper, linear path of world leadership.⁵¹ The man, Ronald Reagan (*signifier*), becomes seamlessly entwined with American Exceptionalism (*signified*). All at once Reagan situates his own narrative in a larger story Christianity, recalling America as a Christian nation "in a sort of rapid alteration"⁵² to construct his grand vision of America, smoothing out inconvenient counter narratives,⁵³ and providing a sense of continuity to his own patriotic masculinity (*sign – meaning and form*). At the age of seventy-two, Reagan links his manhood to the "crisis of the American family," siding firmly with the religious right in the so-called "culture wars" that began in 1964 with Phyllis Schlafly, the lady who helped Barry Goldwater secure the presidential nomination that year.⁵⁴ Reagan symbolizes the older national father figure who protects the household that is "[under attack]" from feminists, gay rights activists, and murderous doctors who performed abortions.⁵⁴ Yet he also performs the role of a national priest who rhetorically leads a ceremonial prayer thanking God for America and asking for continued prosperity. This performance of national identity allows Reagan to become inseparable from his words on American values; he then successfully establishes his presidency as a part of American Exceptionalism. In respect to Lincoln, Reagan becomes the last defender of our great nation and enters into the realm of evocative mythology.

This speech might fall in the rhetorical genre of the national father because throughout its entirety Reagan presents himself as the single man defending the nuclear family. As he proceeds, for example, to the issue of abortion he argues that the government has created health clinics that provide "advice and birth control drugs and devices to underage girls without the knowledge of

⁴⁷ Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 12

⁴⁸ Reagan, "Address to National Association of Evangelicals," edited by Fessler and Roth.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* In the speech, Reagan quotes Jefferson, saying, "Explaining the inalienable rights of men, Jefferson said, 'The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.' " Any reading of Jefferson's significant letter though finds no doubt that he assumed a separation between government and religion was codified in the first Amendment. See "Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists," January 1, 1802, *The Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>.

⁵⁰ Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.

⁵¹ Reagan, "Address to National Association of Evangelicals," edited by Fessler and Roth.

⁵² Barthes, "Myth Today," 117.

⁵³ Jeffrey D. Howison, *The 1980 Presidential Campaign: Ronald Reagan and the Shaping of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 81

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

their parents.”⁵⁵ He claims this phenomenon is an encroachment of government that displaces Judeo-Christian values and removes the right of parents to control the sexual lives of their children. This is, however, only one example of the many attempts to “water down traditional values and even abrogate the original terms of American democracy.”⁵⁶ The typology of this speech demands a certain rhetorical action⁵⁷ – in symbolizing the national father, Reagan presents himself as nonnegotiable about the family table. He thus supports and performs the intransigence of the New Right and rhetorically attaches notions of patriotism to insularity. The performance is inherently patriarchal – the national father will not allow doctors to symbolically *immasculinize* him by removing *his* right to control *his* daughter’s sexual conduct. Yet the masculine competitor(s) are not doctors per se, but rather the “Federal Monolith” that represents big government and the amorphous bureaucracy that seeks to displace, or at least curb, male power in favor of previously marginalized groups. It is a rhetorical act because this discourse relates itself to the active regulation and control of disputed bodies; it demands a certain, lively response from those who heed the advice of the national father.

It should be no surprise that Reagan early on establishes himself as the national father figure in an address now commended as the “Evil Empire” speech. What could be more threatening and possibly damaging to American masculinity, and in particular the projection of hard power into world affairs, than the oldest competitor of the United States, the Soviet Union? The critical section where Reagan unites the two competing narratives of his speech, that of religion and the Soviet Union, are reproduced below.

[43] I, a number of years ago, I heard a young father, a very prominent young man in the entertainment world, addressing a tremendous gathering in California. It was during the time of the cold war, and communism and our own way of life were very much on people’s minds. And he was speaking to that subject. And suddenly, though, I heard him saying, “I love my little girls more than anything–” And I said to myself, “Oh, no, don’t. You can’t – don’t say that.” But I had underestimated him. He went on: “*I would rather see my little girls die now; still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God.*” [Applause]

[44] There were...There were thousands of young people in that audience. They came to their feet with shouts of joy. They had instantly recognized the *profound truth* in what he had said, with regard to the physical and the soul and what was truly important.

[45] Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness–pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the State, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, *they are the focus of evil in the modern world*” (emphasis added).⁵⁸

The progression of the “Evil Empire” speech works to construct the masculinity of Ronald Reagan, forming a bond between the national father figure and the audience against the backdrop of Christianity. The rhetorical style, as represented above, seeks to connect the father figure who challenges the federal behemoth with the literal anecdotal father who would rather watch his “little girls” (note the gender) die than succumb to communism (reinforcing hard power and the teleology of Christianity) and Ronald Reagan himself – the storyteller of American Exceptionalism. In the bridging of narratives, *signifier, signified, meaning* and *form* are all present:

⁵⁵ Reagan, “Address to National Association of Evangelicals,” edited by Fessler and Roth.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 22.

⁵⁸ Reagan, “Address to National Association of Evangelicals,” edited by Fessler and Roth.

Reagan performing the role of the national father figure, American Exceptionalism (juxtaposed against the indisputable evil of the Soviet Union), and the anecdotal father who captures the form of masculinity and meaning of American patriotism. The overlap between Reagan and the characters he himself *creates* in the story (of American greatness) is evocative mythology – the people who are never named in the anecdote become the very caricature that the Reagan persona uses to constitute itself. Evocative mythology operates concurrently as it either strengthens or weakens these characters to exploit rhetorical opportunities. Therefore it is the meeting point of Reagan the man and the story of American Exceptionalism *as told by* Reagan himself that empowers evocative mythology.

THE SOVIET BEAR

As an actor, Reagan understood the power of cinema and the ways in which advertising (he himself was an ad man of the 1950s) could create public demand and mold public confidence. In his reelection bid for the 1984 election against Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale, the Reagan campaign ran what would become a famous political ad for its length, content, and rhetorical strength, titled quite simply, “Bear.” The ad design came from Richard Wirthlin, Reagan’s chief political strategist from 1968-1988, who found in focus groups that underlying fears of the Soviet Union could be worked to bolster Reagan’s political image.⁵⁹ Hal Riney wrote the political ad and his deep voice was featured in “Bear” as well as the more famous ad “Morning in America.”⁶⁰ The ad begins then with Riney’s voice boldly stating, “There is a bear in the woods,” as ominous music begins to play and the camera pans to a bear walking in a forest. The voice continues as the camera follows a bear striding, and a heartbeat thumps loudly and continuously in the background. “For some people, the bear is easy to see,” the voice asserts, “Others don’t see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame; others say it is vicious, and dangerous. Since no one can really know who’s right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear?”⁶¹ The closing line corresponds to a final camera frame of a bear halting to the left side of a plain in the picture, and a man emerging, waiting, on the other side of the scene. As the bear looks up, it takes two steps backwards; the screen goes black, followed by the headliner PRESIDENT REAGAN, subtitled, PREPARED FOR PEACE, with Reagan’s iconic White House photo further below. This stark contrast, the man on one side, the halting bear on the other encapsulates the Cold War father-hunter figure, the challenger who recognizes the *reality* of the bear’s nature.

The words, Soviet Union, are nowhere mentioned in this monologic ad. The power derives rather from its craft and performance. Reagan symbolically becomes the cunning hunter, the man who is unafraid of the bear, and also the strategic, careful, and prepared male that can distinguish the fading threat (“If there is a bear?”) from actual danger. The back step of the bear is crucial for this masculine projection and trajectory to be successful and pleasing. The roaming of the bear throughout the first twenty-one seconds of the ad is juxtaposed with and distinguished by the last five seconds of the bear looking up, seeing *this* man, and then back stepping. The man (Ronald Reagan) causes the untamed animal (the Soviet Union) to stop roaming, to halt, to feel uncertainty, perhaps even fear of the prospect. It is this strong, but distant portrayal of a robust man that speaks to Reagan’s masculinity – elusive, yet we know it’s there, that Reagan has *it*. The man is only a dark shadow, but his figure represents a significant portion of the final scene; he is contrasted perfectly through the lighting, and is unmoving. One of Reagan’s strongest rallying cries became, of course, his unrelenting position on and sense of the Soviet Union that Peggy Noonan discusses below. Reagan just *knew* the Soviet Union was evil as the hunter just *knew* that

⁵⁹ Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric*, 14.

⁶⁰ Stuart Elliot, “Hal Riney: Adman for Reagan and G.M., Dies At 75,” *New York Times* (New York City, New York), March 26, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/26/business/media/26riney.html?_r=0

⁶¹ “Ronald Reagan TV Ad: The Bear” YouTube video, .30, posted by Andre Morgado, November 12, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpwcjmjBgNA>.

the bear could be dangerous. This line is thematically contextualized seamlessly, which in part, fueled the popularity of this ad.

Furthermore, this political schema is advantageous for the development of evocative mythology. Because the bear symbolizes the Soviet Union and the man represents Ronald Reagan, there is a sense of *distance* between the audience and the message. The meaning is ostensibly evident: America needs a strong leader to meet the challenges of the Soviet Union—yet the craft of the ad, the form of its presentation, denotes a *space* for Barthes’s mythology to emerge. The occupation of this *space* is filled with the presumption of fear of the bear. Taken together, even if the audience does not receive the message (and in testing, some pilot groups in fact did not understand what the bear signified),⁶² the savior still arrives at the end of the ad when Reagan’s iconic White House photo appears with the reelection bid lettering. Even for confused audiences, the general message is nevertheless received: if you do not want to be afraid, vote for Ronald Reagan. By employing the archetype of the protective father, the suggestion is unsurprisingly patriarchal. Reagan epitomizes not only the hunter at the end of the scene, but also the national father figure who can protect all Americans. A political ad such as this does more than manufacture a temporary political identity for a candidate; done effectively, this art of representation supports an expansive thesis of who Reagan was. His strong manhood, his unrelenting convictions, his vision and values, all these characterizations work together to create evocative mythology. Thus the interlinking of American-style masculinity and Reagan the man inaugurates evocative mythology into what Weiler and Pearce call the “rhetorical ecology of the Reagan Administration.”⁶³ The most intriguing part of this ad extends into the modern day, as the 2004 Bush campaign used the same style, length, and timing of Reagan’s “Bear” ad to produce “Wolves,” which takes the viewers through a forest of roaming wolves to remind them of the terrorist threat posed by the 9/11 attacks and John Kerry’s weak and foolish track record of proposing cuts to the military budget.⁶⁴ For evocative mythology to function effectively, it requires a recursive discourse, one that reemerges in continuous narrative loops.

REMEMBERING REAGAN: HIS DEATH

The other, second moment in evaluating Reagan the Cold War Hero emerged at his death in 2004, during which TV anchors and stations reviewed the entirety of Reagan’s presidency. In a six minute and ten second clip on NBC on June 6, 2004, correspondent Andrea Mitchell, summarizes NBC’s views on Reagan: “It would take years for history to reach its judgment, but Ronald Reagan’s most important legacy may well be accelerating the end of the Cold War, [The audience sees and hears Reagan’s booming voice] ‘Mr. Gorbachev, Tear down this Wall!’ [Andrea Mitchel’s voice impeccably continues] In a series of historic summits, Reagan, a fervent anticommunist, used a combination of toughness and charm to break new ground with his Soviet counterpart.”⁶⁵ The message, which celebrated Reagan’s ability “forever [to] change” the global and national course of America, was not only hagiographic, but more importantly, it explicitly downplayed and softened the Iran-Contra Scandal, merely stating, “In his second term, Reagan struggled with the Iran-Contra Scandal. In the end, he won over many of his enemies.”⁶⁶ The violation of the Constitution, the clandestine sale of weapons to Iran in order to fund Nicaraguan terrorists who murdered young women, priests, and children⁶⁷ receives a one-word moment—

⁶² Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric*, 16.

⁶³ Pearce and Weiler, “Ceremonial Discourse,” 20.

⁶⁴ “George W. Bush For President 2004 Ad—‘Wolves,’” YouTube video, .302, posted by Campaign Commercials in the US, Jan 1 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s71-Q2XBZg.

⁶⁵ “Reagan Death,” NBC Evening News for Sunday, June 6, 2004, 05:30:40 pm - 05:36:40 pm. Duration: 06:00.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ For a review of the Contras, see Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), chapter 2 “Worthy and Unworthy Victims.”

struggled—in a six-minute review of Reagan’s character and policies. The correspondent retells the most compelling and simplistic versions of Reagan: he is strong, manly, and says what he means and what happens. Notably, when the line on the Iran-Contra Scandal is read, a reoccurring masculine image appears quickly—Reagan at the 1992 Republican Convention. There he is older, more wrinkled, appearing in his elder state almost innocent with Nancy Reagan—which of course is contrasted with the Iran-Contra Scandal sentence and word, *struggled*. His older image prompts nostalgia for his presidency; of course, it was a *struggle*; that is how America became great. How else could Reagan accomplish all his laudable deeds, such as winning the Cold War? As the clip replays Reagan’s most famous statement from his June 12, 1987 speech in Berlin, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,”⁶⁸ there seems to be, as Will Bunch sarcastically commented, “a classic case of cause and effect.”⁶⁹ The Berlin Wall did miraculously come down in November 1989; Reagan declared it, then it happened.

As a propaganda model, the dominance of Reagan’s imagery, which marks a discursive formation of evocative mythology, aligns with Stuart Hall’s notion of encoding/decoding—the audience *actively* decodes the media of Reagan exactly as it was encoded—*reproducing* the ideological framework of Reagan the Cold Warrior.⁷⁰ Those consumers, then, sustain the hegemony of evocative mythology in popular memory. Alongside Reagan’s theatrical skills: his entrance, timing, delivery, cadence, comic relief, and inflection, all these traits create the coded persona of Reagan the Cold Warrior, which in turn relies on and simultaneously reproduces new visions of American Exceptionalism.

CONTEMPORARY BIOGRAPHIES

As populist conservatives and former Reagan staffers, Dinesh D’Souza and Peggy Noonan adopt significant roles in defining the conservative ideology and further shaping the subjectivity of conservatives—how they come to define themselves and embrace a historical view. This makes Dinesh D’Souza’s account of Reagan as the Cold Warrior exceptionally noteworthy, since his interpretation endeavors to present Reagan’s achievements in purely intellectual terms. That is, he writes against the so-called “Liberal Intelligentsia” in favor of “the Dummy,” Reagan, who stood alone and steadfast against the Soviet Union. D’Souza not only deplores the “self-imposed amnesia” about forgetting who won the Cold War, but importantly tries to write a counter-narrative, the real story so to speak. This contrasts with Noonan, who focuses on Reagan as the Cold Warrior only to the extent that the collapse of the Soviet Union involves Reagan’s character—his jokes about the Soviet Union, his toughness, his consistency, boldness in the “Tear Down this Wall Speech”—and what these meant for the man (and of course later to the country).

On the one hand, Dinesh D’Souza writes that Reagan “calibrated,” “predicted” and “intended” to force Gorbachev’s hand;⁷¹ Reagan was the puppeteer who, because he believed forcefully in America, invariably emerged victorious to the amazement of the entire world (and Gorbachev himself). D’Souza disbars the “wise men” of the leftist cabal and their attempt to “cover their tracks, what they say in their articles and textbooks about who won the cold war,”⁷² because these intellectuals are regularly dishonest out of sheer embarrassment. Furthermore, D’Souza re-envision the official conservative history: all at once he embraces Reagan’s appeasement of the Soviet Union in his second term while still admiring Reagan’s assertive anticommunist stance in his first presidential term. This dialectical relationship, Reagan’s “toughness” and then “reconciliation,” produces D’Souza’s synthesis: Reagan was an ordinary

⁶⁸ Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: How The Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 24.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” In *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, 51-61, New York: NYU Press, 2000.

⁷¹ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 194.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 133.

man, but because he believed in simple, unrelenting truths (in this case, the good U.S. *must* prevail over the evil Soviet Union), he was able to persevere and ultimately overcome the Soviets. Besides the tautology of this relationship, D'Souza ascribes Reagan a quality of political sagacity with his decision to fund and develop the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) – in D'Souza's words, "He [Reagan] knew that a limited defense is better than no defense, for the same reason that a bulletproof vest is better than no protection."⁷³ SDI, which D'Souza admits was mocked in the political and economic climate of the 1980s as "Star Wars," becomes Reagan's defining attribute. It was "disarmament through technology rather than diplomacy."⁷⁴ The feasibility of the SDI, D'Souza confesses, was questionable yet Reagan allegedly *knew* this. His tactic was never fully to implement SDI, but rather to frighten, intimidate the Soviet Union to the bargaining table. One of D'Souza's favorite memories is thus Reagan's decision not to consent to the Reykjavik arms agreement with Gorbachev, precisely because it would have ended the SDI program. According to D'Souza, Reagan knew if Gorbachev explicitly asked that SDI be confined to the laboratory, it must deeply matter and strike a point of weakness. Reagan's cowboyesque, macho moment reinforces his strong masculine persona: he ignores his advisors and aides who plead with him to take the deal, and the "consensus of the pundits" was that Reagan lost an opportunity at peace – all these characterizations by D'Souza yield a construction of Reagan, a crafted image of an unrelenting, brilliant, masculine president; one who "knew the cold war was over as early as 1987."⁷⁵ D'Souza thus seemingly complicates our understanding of mythology: instead of mere regurgitation, he employs a familiar argumentation tactic, quote the "liberal" opponent to facilitate reader irritation (he knows, after all, that his audience is predominately conservative readers), and then reassert the anticipated and preferred view. Give the audience what they want. If Reagan is ridiculed for SDI, seize that moment of historic danger, and reformulate it to resurface as its opposite: SDI won America the cold war. As D'Souza writes:

Reagan's main reason for supporting the concept of SDI was that he believed it was immoral for a nation to have an official policy of leaving its citizens defenseless against Soviet nuclear attack. Speechwriter Anthony Dolan told me Reagan never minded when critics called his program 'Star Wars,' a term that made conservative backers of SDI bristle. Reagan knew that the term 'Star Wars' was used with the intention of making the very concept of missile defense seem fanciful. But Reagan was convinced that the American people wouldn't see it that way. Reagan cheerily pointed out that 'Star Wars' reminded Americans of one of their favorite movies – one in which the forces of good conquer the forces of the dark side.⁷⁶

The focus here for D'Souza is twofold: on the one hand, he writes the character of Reagan the Cold Warrior; on the other hand, he controls and minimizes the criticism of "Star Wars." D'Souza does this by *absorbing* the critical language and refashioning it. He seeks to say, of course, Reagan understood the criticism of Star Wars, he was not naïve nor impractical; on the contrary, he actually enjoyed explaining to Americans that SDI could be one of their favorite movies. By addressing the so-called liberal intelligentsia criticism, D'Souza transforms damaged space; he reshapes the historical context of "Star Wars" to empower Reagan the Cold Warrior, rather than weaken him. Yet at the root of this reformulation is still a rehearsal of national history, and it is this ritual that marks evocative mythology precisely because it is *tentative*; it is exploratory in that it attempts to change perceptions, both liberal and conservative. If, previously, conservatives had to acquiesce in political discourse to "Star Wars," they now no longer have to; they are empowered. They have a historical reality to challenge liberal criticism. It is this space, this reshaping of common narratives that permits the discursive formation of evocative mythology: it

⁷³ Ibid., 176.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 177.

unites the character of Reagan alongside the accepted immorality of vulnerability in the Cold War. The greatest country in the world cannot be left defenseless against a nuclear bomb in the same way that Reagan did not really mind the criticism of SDI as “Star Wars.” The merger of SDI into a formulaic rendition of national history reproduces evocative mythology: Reagan (*signifier*) outsmarts Gorbachev to preserve the United States (*signified*) using his brilliant, almost godlike knowledge (*meaning and form*) – this insertion of a rewritten history (*concept*) changes the way public memory is structured. It *distorts* the common impression that Reagan was ignorant and in the process reconstitutes the memory of these events. SDI, a completely unrealistic defense plan, becomes the central tenet of evocative mythology.

On the other hand, Peggy Noonan argues the exact opposite of D’Souza’s acknowledgment of Reagan’s contradictory Cold War behavior: Reagan was *always* critically obstinate on communism, that there was “only one way to do it [beat the Soviets], through strength.”⁷⁷ She writes that Reagan’s philosophy was consistent, hard, uncompromising, “Hold your ground, stand firm, and we’ll get arms reductions.”⁷⁸ Her closing line on the Reykjavik meeting aptly encapsulates her view of Reagan, it deserves to be quoted and read at length:

Gorbachev had misread Reagan. He thought Reagan was sentimental – and Reagan was, in certain circumstances. He thought Reagan made much of personal relations and warmth – and Reagan did, in many circumstances. He thought Reagan believed in God and thought God would guide them; and Gorbachev thought all the unexpected riches he offered would make Reagan think: God must be here. Well, Reagan thought God was everywhere, always. But he thought devils were too. Gorbachev thought Reagan’s vanity would make him accept a deal that the world would greet with the reviews of his life. But Reagan was tougher than he was vain, and he was most of all a patriot. He knew Reagan was old, almost seventy-six now, and tired. And he was. But even old lions are still lions.⁷⁹

Again, consider the form of argumentation that Noonan deploys. It is through *mischaracterization* that Gorbachev understands Reagan – we, the audience, already know the true characterization that Noonan professes to write. The power of her narration does not emerge by arguing that Reagan Won the Cold War; it comes from how she is writing, and in the process, rewriting the certainty of this truth. It seeks to say, yes, Reagan of course won the Cold War, but it is you, conservative reader, who really knew him. The truth thus is already self-evident; it is the reproduction with each passing line, Reagan the affable; Reagan the pious; Reagan the patriot; Reagan the old lion, which provides the momentum of the delivery, the evocation of the man himself, Ronald Reagan, that flashes into sight to structure political reality. It is this *reimagination* by Noonan that consequently shapes and produces evocative mythology. For the Cold War Hero to come fully into being requires evoking all the traits that allegedly made Reagan the president Reagan the man, and carefully producing these presuppositions, as though the audience tangibly knew the fortieth president. The concept then *confirms* and *reinterprets* the way Reagan often presented himself to the public – Reagan (*signifier*) becomes American Exceptionalism (*signified*).

THE OBAMA-REAGAN FOREIGN POLICY

In the contemporary U.S. foreign policy, the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and the American response have become increasingly characterized through evocative mythology. It is both a discursive site and reaffirmation of Reagan the Cold Warrior. In a Fox News Opinion piece on the Russian occupation of Ukraine in February 2014, Kathleen Troia “K.T.” McFarland wrote, “The

⁷⁷ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Penguin Books 2001), 286.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

Obama administration is looking a lot like the Carter administration. Only worse.”⁸⁰ America should not worry though, McFarland reassures her audience in her concluding line, “We survived Jimmy Carter and we will survive Barack Obama. Only one questions remains....*who is the next Ronald Reagan?* (Emphasis added).” The date of the piece was February 28, 2014, but the underlying rhetorical question, *Who is the next Ronald Reagan*, dates to the parting days of Reagan himself and his chosen successor, George H.W. Bush.

Sarah Palin offered this quip in a Fox News interview: “the perception of Obama’s *potency* across the world is one of such weakness....people look at our president as one that wears mom-jeans and equivocates and bloviates. We are not exercising that *peace through strength* (emphasis added).”⁸¹ And the editors of the *National Review* reached a similar conclusion:

President Obama cannot reasonably be expected to come up with [a] strategy. He has been unlearning most of his own ideas about foreign policy as this crisis has developed, and as Henry Kissinger has often pointed out, statesmen don’t have the time to develop new concepts when they are in government. That may be a mercy on this occasion. Fortunately, President Reagan left behind a strategic legacy for his successor to imitate: the policy of strategic and economic competition with the Soviet Union. That strategy, applied today with particular emphasis on energy, would gradually weaken Russia and, within Russia, Putin.⁸²

The effect of these discursive formations provides a certain masculine reading of American history for the Republican Party. In the first example, McFarland flattens history by suggesting that Carter symbolizes Obama, collapsing present into past, and subtly recreates the political landscape of the waning Carter days – economic stagflation, the Iran Hostage Crisis – and ascribes this characterization to Obama in contrast to his alleged opposite, the earlier and stronger Ronald Reagan. More than construct a weak image of Obama, McFarland, like her cohort of conservative ideologues, reinvents an unimpeachable Reagan, a political mask of masculine rhetoric and images, strength, and tough patriotism. This is evident in the second example of Sarah Palin’s rhetoric, who like McFarland constructs Obama’s political identity precisely by what he is *not*; he is not strong, but a “pushover;” he is not a man but impotent, a scared boy who needs to “man-up” and stop wearing “mom jeans.” The rhetorical alternative to Obama’s performance is Reagan’s slogan *Peace Through Strength*, an evocation that does not explicitly name Reagan. The rhetorical effect is to place Palin in line with Reagan because he is the cold warrior and has a masculine, fatherly reassurance. In the third example, *The National Review* assures readers that a strategy was left behind, but the unspoken rule is that Reagan’s policies require a robust and strong hardline approach, something that the effeminate and “equivocating” Obama simply cannot emulate. In such a context, evocative mythology is unconcealed as Reagan’s presence is conjured openly for the audience. Yet, the power of the evocative mythology emanates from its juxtaposition: the *feeling* that Obama the man and his policies are completely different from Reagan. The semiological system of this rhetoric produces a *signifier* (and its opposite), a *signified* (and its opposite), and *meaning and form* (and their opposites): Reagan (*not* Obama), American Exceptionalism (*not* Obama’s foreign policy), and the patriotism of Ronald Reagan (*not* the feminine Obama). Consequently though, this stark contrast that McFarland, Palin, and *The National Review* note must inevitably elapse, just as it did during the Carter Administration, primarily because Obama is Reagan’s mirror opposite.

⁸⁰ K.T. McFarland, “Ukraine, Syria, Iran -- America isn't leading from behind, it's being left behind,” *Fox News*, 28 February 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/02/28/ukraine-syria-iran-america-isnt-leading-from-behind-it-being-left-behind/>

⁸¹ “Governor Sarah Palin on Putin’s Power Grab, Hannity” YouTube video, 8.03, posted by iizthatiiz, March 3 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ef73gh8GLBU>.

⁸² The Editors, “Putin’s Weakness, and Obama’s,” *National Review*, May 2, 2014, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/377060/putins-weakness-and-obamas-editors>

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to delineate how the construction of Ronald Reagan's memory has gained stature in contemporary political discourse. These sites of discursive formations indicate what I have been calling evocative mythology – the grand Reagan Cold Warrior myth in the context of a certain national ethos of America. It is through the curious act of *reimagining* Reagan himself that the so-called Great Communicator's words retain presence on a stage of *ceremonial* discourse. Moreover, I have argued that this myth has gained prominence precisely because it has become commonsense, almost impossible to dismantle without rejecting a whole series of myths that are involved in American Exceptionalism and American manhood. It my hope, however, that if American national history can reconcile the perception of the fortieth president with the reality of his policies, citizens can begin to confront the most important issues of modernity, addressing widespread income, gender, and sexuality inequality, challenging state power, and preventing global conflict. Without first acknowledging the prevalence of evocative mythology in public memory, Ronald Reagan and his simple formulations of American history will continue to be the dominant narrative.

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