

Reagan for Beginners. By David Smith and Melinda Gebbie. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing. 1984. Pp. xxi, 191. \$4.95.

Reagan for Beginners is an ambitious book. By interspersing cartoon drawings and photographs throughout the text, the authors present a comic book format that critiques Reagan, his politics, and his predecessors. In addition, the authors offer a Marxist vision as an alternative to Reagan. Whether or not the book succeeds depends largely upon whether the reader decides that the end justifies the means.

The book begins by suggesting that Reagan, contrary to popular belief, did not herald the arrival of an ideological revolution. Rather, the authors assert, Reagan is part of a Western triumvirate which includes Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain and Helmut Kohl of West Germany. In terms of political policies, the book states, Reagan, Thatcher, and Kohl "are virtually carbon copies."¹ After proposing this rather sweeping thesis in three pages, largely dominated by illustrations, the authors add that Reagan closely resembles many of his predecessors.

This bold beginning does not, however, characterize the entire book. The early chapters focus on Reagan's path to the presidency. From relatively modest beginnings in rural Illinois, Reagan achieved fame first as an actor in B-movies. Reagan's principal assets as an actor, the authors suggest, were his "pleasant new face"² and his "near-photographic memory."³ As the book chronicles Reagan's movement from actor, the president of the Screen Actor's Guild, to corporate spokesman for General Electric Corporation, to Governor of California, and finally to president, the emphasis remains upon Reagan the actor.

Reagan the president, the authors assert, is the product of "millionaire kingmakers"⁴ who hired experts to create a more marketable Reagan. With the help of psychologists, speech experts, and public relations firms, Reagan became practically a cult figure, capturing the imaginations of "Republican money men."⁵ One chapter of the book, entitled "The Millionaire Backers," is in fact a mini expose of the wealthy, well-connected individuals, like A. C. Rubel, Chairman of the Board, Union Oil Company, who propelled Reagan to prominence.

Much of the book is spent denouncing Reagan's policies, including Reaganomics with its accompanying woes, the nuclear arms race, and highhandedness in foreign affairs. Reagan is part of a movement which the authors label "post-liberal capitalism."⁶ According to Smith and Gebbie, it was President Carter, not Reagan who initiated this movement away from the social upheaval of the late sixties and seventies.

It is at this point that the authors disclose their startling conclusion. While *Reagan for Beginners* begins as an analysis of the Reagan tenure, it ends as a condemnation of the American two-party system, and advocates Marxist

1. D. SMITH & M. GEBBIE, *REAGAN FOR BEGINNERS* 7 (1984).

2. *Id.* at 31

3. *Id.* at 31.

4. *Id.* at 57.

5. *Id.* at 47.

6. *Id.* at 104.

socialism as an alternative. In a final chapter appropriately entitled "Fast Forward," the authors condemn Democrats as well as Republicans, and even include the U.S.S.R. in the indictment:

The U.S. and the U.S.S.R., Democrats and Republicans, liberals and post-liberals—all alike are implicated in a system of global, life-threatening competition. The principle of this competition is the 'profit-motive,' i.e. the drive to accumulate capital by means of employer-controlled commodity production and exchange.⁷

It seems odd that a book ostensibly dedicated to denouncing the extremes of Reagan's politics would in their stead suggest an equally extremist, albeit unrelated philosophy. While *Reagan for Beginners* is a source of general information about Reagan, its characterization of American politics and world politics as an indistinguishable mass makes it an unlikely book for the true "beginner."

LOLITA BUCKNER INNISS

7. *Id.* at 185.