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**A Transformational Conservative?  
Constructing Ronald Reagan's Presidential Legacy, c.1984-1998**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the construction of Ronald Reagan's legacy during his years as President of the United States, and in the period immediately following his departure from office. As the first successful two-term president since Dwight Eisenhower, the Reagan administration had significant opportunities to influence how the public understood his legacy.

Drawing on original archival research and oral history interviews, this thesis demonstrates that Ronald Reagan and his administration were actively seeking to influence his presidential legacy while he was still in the White House. Far from being content to allow historians to appraise his legacy, these actors carefully sought to shape public perceptions of Reagan through a variety of means. Beginning in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal, this thesis first outlines the evolution of this strategy, before exploring its implementation and assessing its successes. The first chapter of the thesis explores the strategy itself, and the following three chapters outline the various ways this strategy was implemented during Reagan's presidency, in broadly chronological order. Doing so allows for a thorough analysis of these projects and their successes and failures. The final chapter uses three case studies of different legacy-building projects in the 1990s to examine how legacy building efforts continued and evolved once Reagan and his administration had left the White House, and how new organisations began to clash with the original legacy builders.

My central argument is that the Reagan administration made a concerted effort to influence his presidential legacy, beginning while Reagan was still in office. What began as a short-term damage control exercise to rehabilitate a wounded president quickly evolved into a project aimed at shaping public perceptions of Reagan and ensuring a positive legacy for the outgoing president. I also argue that this project of legacy building did not stop when Reagan and his administration left office. Legacy building continued, albeit with different tools, well into the 1990s and beyond. If we accept that our perceptions of the past have been influenced by the conscious efforts of a group of concerned individuals, then we ought to have a clear understanding of what they sought to achieve and why. Doing so enhances our understanding of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the broader history of modern American conservatism, and Reagan's ongoing status as a modern conservative icon.

## **Lay Summary**

Ronald Reagan was the 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, and one of the most influential figures in the Republican Party in the twentieth century. This dissertation explores Reagan's legacy and focuses on how our understanding of Reagan's presidency has been shaped by various projects within and outwith the White House.

My central argument is that Ronald Reagan and his administration cared about his future legacy and used a variety of strategies to try and ensure a positive legacy of Reagan for the years following his departure from the White House. What started as short-term damage control gradually evolved into a longer-term effort to carefully craft Reagan's future legacy. This thesis takes a chronological approach to explore the different ways the administration sought to influence public perceptions of Reagan and the outcomes of his presidency. It begins in 1987, at the point when his approval ratings were at their lowest and his legacy, and indeed his position as president, appeared to be in jeopardy. It then charts the evolution of the strategy designed by top White House aides to recover Reagan's image in the short term, while also attempting to secure a longer-term positive legacy.

In terms of specific strategies explored in this thesis, these have been divided into three separate chapters, arranged chronologically. The first explores legacy-building projects in his final year in office, followed by a chapter on the 1988 election campaigns. The last chapter in this section analyses Reagan's final weeks in office, including his Farewell Address and other high-profile public appearances. This structure allows an in-depth analysis of a range of legacy-building projects within the administration and assesses some of their successes and failures.

The final chapter of this thesis considers how these efforts to shape Reagan's legacy continued after his administration was no longer able to exert as much influence on it. Efforts to shape his legacy continued into the 1990s, albeit with different tools. This chapter uses three case studies, Bush's ascendancy to the presidency, the renaming of Washington National Airport, and the Young America's Foundation's purchase of Reagan's ranch, to demonstrate tensions between the original legacy builders and these newer projects aimed at crafting Reagan's legacy.

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## Abbreviations

AP	Associated Press
APP	The American Presidency Project
CR	Congressional Record
GHWBL	George H.W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station
LAT	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
RLP	Reagan Legacy Project
RNC	Republican National Committee
RRPL	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley
WHORM	White House Office of Records Management
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>
YAF	Young America's Foundation

## Introduction

Few United States presidents have reshaped the political landscape as dramatically as Ronald Reagan. In recent years, politicians across the political spectrum have sought to position themselves in relation to the 40<sup>th</sup> US president. Barack Obama once famously stated that Reagan ‘changed the trajectory of America’, while at a 2015 Republican presidential primary debate broadcast from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, Reagan’s legacy was invoked no fewer than 45 times in three hours.<sup>1</sup> During the debate a CNN presenter questioned, ‘how Reaganesque exactly are these Republicans?’<sup>2</sup> Few presidents have succeeded in becoming the standard-bearer for their party in the way Reagan has in recent decades, cementing himself as an icon for future Republicans to emulate.

Midway through Reagan’s second term, however, the picture looked very different. In the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal, following a disappointing performance in the 1986 midterm elections, and amidst growing concerns about Reagan’s physical health, Reagan’s approval ratings were at an all-time low.<sup>3</sup> It was in this context that the administration began exploring ways to revitalise his image. This thesis will demonstrate that what started as short-term damage control evolved into a longer-term effort to shape Reagan’s future legacy. The administration’s initial goal was to rehabilitate a wounded president. However, over time its focus shifted to a concerted effort to secure Reagan’s future legacy, ensuring it would be valued by Republicans for decades to come. Importantly, as the first president to complete two full terms in office since Dwight Eisenhower, Reagan’s presidency had a fixed end date for his administration to work towards. This created opportunities for one of the most thorough and

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<sup>1</sup> John Harwood, ‘Rethinking the Reagan Mystique’, *New York Times*, 14 June 2009, WK1; CNN Reagan Library Debate Transcript, CNN Press Room, 16 September 2015 [accessed 9 May 2022: <https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/09/16/cnn-reagan-library-debate-later-debate-full-transcript/>].

<sup>2</sup> CNN Reagan Library Debate Transcript.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Presidential Job Approval’, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval> [accessed 5 November 2019].

concerted effort to shape public perceptions of a president and his legacy from within the White House.

### **Argument and Rationale**

Most studies of presidential legacy begin once the president in question has left the White House. By contrast, this thesis offers an in-depth study of the construction of Ronald Reagan's legacy during Reagan's presidency. In doing so, I demonstrate the value that the Reagan administration placed on the notion of a presidential legacy. Unlike existing studies, which focus on the post-presidency period and explore projects like presidential libraries, memoirs, and key anniversaries, I have focussed on efforts within the White House. These include the crafting of Reagan's 1988 Legislative Message and final speeches, internal documents such as *The Reagan Record*, Reagan's role in the 1988 elections, and the failed attempt to craft a Supreme Court legacy through the failed nomination of Robert Bork. Doing so underscores just how invested the Reagan administration was in securing a positive future legacy, and also shows more broadly how powerful the White House can be in shaping public perceptions of the incumbent. Between 1986 and 1998, the scope of this thesis, Reagan transitioned from a wounded president facing calls for impeachment to one who Republicans were clamouring to cement as a Republican icon through an assortment of attempts to honour his presidential legacy. This thesis demonstrates the role the White House played in this transformation.

The Reagan administration constantly sought inspiration from administrations that had gone before them, often finding that no other presidential administration had launched such a concerted, thorough attempt to secure a positive future legacy for their respective presidents. Given the shortage of two-term presidents in the twentieth century, many of the projects launched by the Reagan White House were highly original. They often drew on areas where

they felt previous presidents had failed to capitalise on the opportunities that they had to shape their legacy while still in office. Interest in presidential legacy has only continued to grow in the years since Reagan's presidency, and the efforts of the Reagan White House have had important implications for how we understand the legacies of other two-term presidents who have followed him, like George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Understanding the Reagan legacy-builders' efforts is therefore important not just to our understanding of Reagan's presidency, but also to how we interpret the presidencies that have followed, who may well have taken inspiration from the Reagan White House.

To explain the scope of this project, it is important to first establish how this thesis defines presidential 'legacy.' For the purposes of this project, I refer to legacy as the version of Reagan and his presidency that he and his administration consciously sought to portray during his time in office and in the years immediately afterwards. Of course, there are wide-ranging definitions of what Reagan's legacy has ultimately become. Here, however, I am not chiefly interested in establishing *what* Reagan's legacy truly was. Instead, this thesis focuses on the legacy the administration hoped to establish for Reagan. How did these figures want Reagan to be remembered? Why did Reagan's aides invest time and effort into various projects to shape national understanding of Reagan? And, how did these efforts change once the figures responsible for curating Reagan's legacy were no longer in the White House?

Though the primary focus of this project is not to determine exactly what Reagan's *real* legacy was, where possible I have alluded to the areas of Reagan's presidency the legacy-builders sought to emphasise and those they chose to overlook, and how these shifted over the course of Reagan's second term and into the post-presidency period. Narrowing my scope in this way has allowed me to maintain a tight focus on the legacy builders themselves, and their role in how public memory of Reagan has evolved over time. If we accept the premise that our understandings of Reagan, and the office of the presidency, have been impacted by the efforts

of a select group of people with particular agendas, then we ought to have a clear understanding of what those people sought to achieve. This approach contributes to our understanding of Reagan and the post-Reagan years, and to our understanding of the relationship between memorialisation and public memory more broadly.

This thesis makes several arguments. Firstly, it argues that the Reagan White House cared deeply about Reagan's legacy and used the 'accoutrements of the presidency' to try and influence how the public understood Reagan and the successes of his presidency in a number of new and innovative ways.<sup>4</sup> I argue that these efforts grew out of an attempt to rehabilitate Reagan's presidency in the short-term and evolved into a project invested in securing a positive future legacy for Reagan. The key figures within the administration sincerely believed Reagan had been a transformational president and sought to present him as such during his final years in office.

In addition to the fact that Reagan was the first two-term president since Eisenhower, the president's relationship with the press and with the public, and the size of government, had evolved dramatically since the Eisenhower years. The 1980s saw an explosion in demand for cable television, including the founding of CNN, as well as a boom in magazine consumption across the United States.<sup>5</sup> This facilitated new opportunities for legacy-building projects including additional speeches and public appearances in contrast to prior outgoing presidents. Reagan's pollster Richard Wirthlin summed up Reagan's relationship with the press as follows: 'There is no question that how the press reports on the President influences how people feel about the President. People make up their minds on the basis of what they see and hear about him, and the press is the conduit through which they get a lot of that information.'<sup>6</sup> While the

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<sup>4</sup> Steven J. Rosenstone, 'Explaining the 1984 Presidential Election', *The Brookings Review*, 3.2 (1985), 31.

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Wirthlin, quoted in Mark Hertsgaard, *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1989), 6.

Reagan administration was far from the first to have a public relations apparatus, this thesis will demonstrate how the administration worked with the media to try and maximise positive press coverage of Reagan, and how this related to their broader legacy project.

Additionally, I argue that the Reagan administration members were acutely aware of the opportunities created by Reagan's position as a two-term president whose presidency had a fixed end date. The reputation of the Republican Party and conservatism in America was changing significantly, particularly with a growing number of younger voters, and the administration sought to capitalise on Reagan's popularity to solidify that shift however they could.

Though this is a project about Ronald Reagan and his legacy, Reagan himself is often conspicuous in his absence from many of the projects outlined in this thesis. In fact, his wife Nancy Reagan is the one who appears ostensibly more invested in the ensuring a positive legacy for her husband. In her recent biography of Nancy Reagan, journalist Karen Tumulty has argued that, 'Of the two of them, [Nancy] had always been the one more focused on his place in history', while Fred Ryan has stated '[Reagan] was the last guy who cared about this; making sure that his legacy was known and remembered.'<sup>7</sup> Though Reagan seemed very keen to appoint Edmund Morris as his official biographer, and seemed to take a vested interest in helping to design exhibitions for the Reagan Library once he had left office, he did not have an active role in most of the other projects outlined in this thesis. This raises the important question about who these legacy building projects are really for. At 77 years old when he left office, it is perhaps unsurprising that Reagan seemed less interested in his legacy than a younger president who could reasonably anticipate a long post-presidency. Though it is difficult to say with certainty why Reagan was disengaged from this legacy building project, it is reasonable to speculate that his advancing age at the time of his departure from office may have played a

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<sup>7</sup> Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 517.

role, along with an apparent willingness to let his record speak for itself. I argue that the legacy-builders were interested in this project because of the potential to secure a ‘useable past’ to inspire conservatives of the future.<sup>8</sup> I also argue that the projects undertaken by the Reagan White House had the potential to offer inspiration for Reagan’s successors like Bush Jr. and Obama, who have both been able to enjoy much longer post-presidencies.

Legacy-building efforts also played an important role in everyday politics. Though the administration was concerned about longer-term memory of its years in the White House, its efforts to regain power and control instead of acting ‘on the defensive’ had important implications for the day-to-day running of the White House, particularly in 1986-1987. This legacy-building effort was not something that was expected to come to fruition years after Reagan’s departure from office. Instead, ensuring its effectiveness was key to Reagan’s short-term successes as well as the longer-term future of his party.

Another important aspect of the White House legacy project is the role of race in the shaping of the project. References to African Americans are strikingly absent throughout the various projects the White House embarks upon during this period, even in instances where the administration makes concerted efforts to appeal to other racial demographics such as Hispanic Americans or white rural southerners. To understand the fundamental whiteness of the legacy project’s audience, it is important to understand Reagan’s record on issues relating to African American civil rights, which left little scope for positive legacy building. In the 1980 presidential election Reagan received the lowest proportion of the African American vote of any Republican presidential candidate in the history of the United States.<sup>9</sup> Lilia Fernandez has argued convincingly that in the 1980s the term ‘big government’ had become ‘synonymous

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<sup>8</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, ‘The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan’ in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, eds, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219.

<sup>9</sup> Lilia Fernandez, ‘Ronald Reagan, Race, Civil Rights, and Immigration’ in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 185.

with social welfare programs and regulations believed to benefit primarily African Americans’, meaning Reagan and his administration’s opposition to ‘big government’ became closely linked to the creation of divisions between working- and middle-class white Americans and their Black counterparts. Hugh Davis Graham offers a different assessment, arguing that Reagan simply never prioritised issues around race and civil rights, and that this disinterest led to him offering limited concrete policy decisions on such issues during his presidency.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, Reagan failed to appeal to African American audiences throughout his political career, despite efforts in his 1984 re-election campaign to do so. As a result, by 1988 the White House legacy project sought to appeal to predominantly white audiences, or to other minority groups that had previously been supportive of Reagan and his policies.

Finally, this thesis includes a chapter on how legacy construction evolved after the Reagan administration ended. its purpose is to demonstrate that these efforts continued into the 1990s, albeit with different tools. By this point, there were already several competing interpretations of Reagan’s legacy. While the Reagan legacy remained strong throughout the 1990s and beyond, the diversity of projects that emerged in this period offer important insights into the limitations of this sort of controlled legacy construction, as well as the role Nancy Reagan played in trying to continue the work of the White House legacy project.

## **Structure**

In terms of its chronological scope, this thesis begins midway through Reagan’s second term, in 1986. I have chosen this starting point as this was when Reagan’s reputation was at its weakest, in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal where the administration was striving to rehabilitate a severely wounded president. I argue that the administration’s interest in Reagan’s legacy stemmed from this project to revitalise his presidency in the short-term, and that these

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<sup>10</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, cited in Fernandez, ‘Ronald Reagan, Race, Civil Rights, and Immigration’, 191.

origins are especially important to appreciate when we reflect on Reagan's legacy today. However, there are legacy projects which began prior to 1986, namely the planning for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and the appointment of Reagan's official biographer, Edmund Morris, both examined in Chapter Two. I have chosen to include these projects as they are important examples of how Reagan was involved in his own legacy-building efforts, where he often appeared absent in other projects taking place within the White House.

This thesis concludes in 1998, at a point where Reagan had retreated from public life following his diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease and efforts to shape his legacy were no longer taking place within the White House. The 1990s saw a range of projects aimed at influencing Reagan's legacy including the renaming of Washington National Airport as the Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. Within six months of the airport renaming, the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center was dedicated, construction began on the USS *Ronald Reagan* (the first naval vessel to be named after someone who was still alive), and the Young America's Foundation stepped forward to buy the Reagans' ranch in Santa Barbara. This point therefore offers several rich examples of different attempts to craft a legacy for Reagan after his administration no longer had the power to do so. I have included an epilogue addressing Reagan's funeral in 2004, primarily to illuminate the various interpretations of Reagan's legacy that featured in the press coverage at this time. Also, presidential funerals are carefully curated events designed to reflect the president in question's significance and legacy, much like many of the projects outlined in this thesis.

## **Literature Review**

This thesis contributes to several areas of historical scholarship. After falling somewhat out of fashion during the 1980s and 1990s, literature on US presidential history is currently

enjoying a period of renewed interest.<sup>11</sup> Within this literature, there is a growing body of work which explores the notion of presidential legacies, and the roles various actors play in shaping how the world remembers former United States presidents. The publication of several edited collections about presidential legacies in recent years shows a lively interest in this area and demonstrates that historians and political scientists alike are grappling with this aspect of the American presidency.<sup>12</sup> One of the most relevant examples for this thesis is Michael Patrick Cullinane and Sylvia Ellis's 2018 volume, which explores various individuals and groups dedicated to presidential memorialisation and their methods, with each essay devoted to a different method of presidential commemoration. They argue that the public now feels they have a 'stake in the presidency' because it is such a powerful office and the actions of its occupants can have such wide-ranging ramifications, and that this explains why there is now such significant interest in the presidency both among scholars and the public.<sup>13</sup> In terms of presidential legacies, they argue that the consequences of presidents' decisions, intended or otherwise, shape people's memories of administrations and therefore help to construct a legacy.<sup>14</sup> Collectively, these studies demonstrate an array of the methods used to memorialise various presidents, including both physical sites of commemoration and 'prompts' such as anniversaries.

The notion of presidential legacy *construction* is an understudied yet important aspect of presidential history. While there is a lack of book-length projects dealing with the construction of Reagan's legacy, Marcus Witcher's recent *Getting Right with Reagan* offers the closest parallel to this thesis. Witcher argues that in the period following the Cold War,

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman (eds), *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>12</sup> See Balogh and Schulman; Michael Patrick Cullinane and Sylvia Ellis (eds), *Constructing Presidential Legacy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018) and Michael Patrick Cullinane and Clare Frances Elliott (eds), *Perspectives on Presidential Leadership: An International View of the White House* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Cullinane and Ellis, *Constructing Presidential Legacy*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Cullinane and Ellis, *Constructing Presidential Legacy*, 2.

‘Reagan’s legacy took the place of anticommunism as the glue that held the conservative movement together.’<sup>15</sup> He explores the creation of Reagan’s legacy in the 1990s, including how conservatives ‘created the Reagan myth’ to support their own political aspirations. The closest link between Witcher’s work and this thesis is that Witcher is interested ‘more in how conservatives viewed Reagan rather than what Reagan did, or did not, actually achieve.’<sup>16</sup>

In addition, studies of the legacies of several other presidents provide evidence of the viability of this approach to studying the presidency.<sup>17</sup> Michael Hogan explores both the consciously constructed ‘brand’ that John and Jacqueline Kennedy established during their thirty-five months in the White House and the ways in which the tragedy of the incumbent’s death helped to secure the mythology that continues to surround the Kennedys. He considers the pivotal role Jackie Kennedy and her allies played in ‘controlling the way history remembered her husband.’<sup>18</sup> In doing so, he shows how national memory can be altered by the concerted efforts of a handful of individuals dedicated to disseminating a particular narrative, which is central to this thesis. He divides the legacy-building efforts into three categories: written efforts, physical objects such as monuments, and rhetorical endeavours to cement a particular version of Kennedy in the nation’s historical consciousness, making the nebulous topic of the Kennedy legacy manageable.

This project also contributes to scholarship on US conservative politics. Given Reagan’s relative disinterest in this project, it is important to consider what securing a positive legacy for Reagan would mean both to his successors and to the Republican Party more

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<sup>15</sup> Marcus Witcher, *Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Witcher, *Getting Right with Reagan*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Other books dealing with the legacies of specific presidents include Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1960); David Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2004); Michael Patrick Cullinane *Theodore Roosevelt’s Ghost: The History and Memory of an American Icon* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017) and Edward Lengel, *Inventing George Washington: America’s Founder, in Myth and Memory*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.

broadly. William Leuchtenburg's *In the Shadow of FDR* considers what Franklin Roosevelt's legacy meant for his successors, both Democrats and Republicans. He concedes that even direct references to Roosevelt do not necessarily evidence his enduring influence, since some successors cited him 'only ritualistically', using him 'selectively for their own ends.'<sup>19</sup> Leuchtenburg argues that Reagan identified with Roosevelt in a bid to situate himself among the other 'great' presidents, rather than be considered alongside his more recent and less successful predecessors.<sup>20</sup> He deems Reagan's deployment of Roosevelt's legacy largely ritualistic, and this distinction between ritualistic invocation of legacies and sincere engagement with a person's legacy is crucial to this thesis. Though understanding *how* these individuals crafted Reagan's legacy is useful to understanding how public memory is constructed, understanding *why* they did so allows for a more analytical focus. Nicole Hemmer's recent volume *Partisans* argues that during the period immediately following Reagan's presidency, 'the conservative movement he represented began to rapidly evolve.'<sup>21</sup> She argues that as Republicans evoked Reagan's name more frequently throughout the 1990s, their politics increasingly bore little resemblance to Reagan's. Hemmer's book has proved to be a valuable reference point in my final chapter, which explores efforts to cement Reagan's legacy during the 1990s.

A distinction made throughout this thesis is between short-term political image-making and presidential legacy construction, two closely related yet distinct concepts. David Greenberg's *Nixon's Shadow* explores 'image making and authenticity', and how they gained significance within American political culture throughout the course of Nixon's life.<sup>22</sup> Much of the book focusses on Nixon's image before and during his presidency, rather than on

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<sup>19</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), xi.

<sup>20</sup> Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR*, 225.

<sup>21</sup> Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2022), 2.

<sup>22</sup> David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), xii.

perceptions of him in the post-Watergate period, but the chapter on ‘Nixon loyalists’ highlights some of the organised efforts to salvage the president’s reputation. In broad terms, these resemble attempts to influence public perceptions of Reagan in the years immediately following his departure from office, which I will discuss in Chapter Five.<sup>23</sup> This raises interesting questions regarding the distinction between a post-presidential political ‘image’ and a presidential ‘legacy.’ Given that Nixon’s so-called loyalists were responding to an immediate crisis, their endeavours were primarily focused on redeeming Nixon in the public eye, as opposed to thinking about Nixon’s long-term legacy, which is the distinction between these two otherwise similar efforts. Greenberg’s definition and use of the concept of image building has helped to clarify my understanding of legacy building, particularly the distinction between the short-term post-Iran-Contra damage control seen in Chapter One of my thesis and the longer-term legacy building efforts seen elsewhere.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in presidential legacy, material specifically focussed on the construction of Reagan’s legacy remains sparse. Outside of Witcher’s study, Charles W. Dunn’s edited collection is one of the few books that tackles Reagan’s ‘legacy management’ in particular. Hugh Hecllo argues that there are three main ways to honour a person: ‘memorialisation’ via statues and similar projects; ‘praising’ via a particular celebration of the person’s accomplishments; and finally, efforts to ‘weigh the consequences’ of a person’s life, or in other words, to assess their legacy.<sup>24</sup> James Ceaser defines ‘legacy management’ as the act ‘of creating and influencing reputations for political purposes’, arguing that doing so is only worthwhile when the legacy in question remains ‘hard currency in the political marketplace.’<sup>25</sup> This idea is central to this thesis, and to demonstrating its relevance to wider literature on both legacy construction and broader histories of modern American conservatism.

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<sup>23</sup> Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow*, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Hugh Hecllo, ‘The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan’, in Charles W. Dunn (ed.), *The Enduring Reagan* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>25</sup> James W. Ceaser, ‘The Social Construction of Ronald Reagan’, in Dunn, *Enduring Reagan*, 39.

The concerted efforts to cement a vision of Reagan as a transformational conservative had lasting, meaningful implications for the future of both the Republican Party and the United States. Understanding both the extent of these efforts and the motivations behind them will shed light on how we remember the recent past. If we accept that our perceptions of this period have been influenced by efforts of memorialisers or ‘legacy builders’, then it is important to try and unpick these efforts and their influence. *Deconstructing Reagan* explores various aspects of Reagan’s legacy, asking who has manipulated it, how, and most importantly, why. The authors argue that conservatives ‘latched onto’ Reagan because there was no comparable figure at a national level who they could revere in the way they have grown to revere Reagan, offering one plausible explanation for why interest in Reagan’s legacy seems to have been especially heightened compared to his predecessors.<sup>26</sup>

Bunch’s *Tear Down This Myth* explores the construction of the ‘myth’ surrounding Reagan, albeit in a journalistic rather than a scholarly study. Bunch discusses the ‘legend’ of Reagan in relation to presidential primary debates in the 2000s, as a way of demonstrating the extent to which Reagan appears to have become the ‘gold-standard’ for contemporary Republicans.<sup>27</sup> He compares what he considers to be the realities of the Reagan years with the ‘distorted legacy’ that has emerged since Reagan left office, for instance, by discussing Reagan’s record on taxes.<sup>28</sup> This volume shows how Reagan’s image has shifted since he left office, albeit in a later period than the scope of this thesis. The second half of the book deals with Reagan’s legacy, including a chapter on Reagan’s shadow during George HW Bush’s presidency. It claims that Bush’s shortcoming, namely a perceived lack of vision or charisma, did not result in an immediate nostalgia for Reagan, as one might have expected.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Kyle Longley, Jeremy D. Mayer, Michael Schaller and John W. Sloan, *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2007), xi.

<sup>27</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth*, 135.

Scholarship on the Bush administration proved important for this study because of the importance of Bush's election to the White House's legacy-building efforts, as well as the thesis's final chapter on 1990s legacy building. Though this literature is relatively sparse given how recently Bush was in office, John J. Pitney's study of the 1988 election has provided context for examining Reagan's role in supporting Bush's candidacy, which forms the basis of Chapter Three.<sup>30</sup> Herbert S. Parmet's *Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame's *Marching in Place: the Status Quo Presidency of George Bush*, and, more recently, Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry's *41: Inside the Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, have each offered contextual information on Bush's role as Reagan's third term, which forms the basis of the first half of Chapter Five.<sup>31</sup> Duffy and Goodgame argue that Bush was a risk-averse, 'minimalist' president in contrast to Reagan, and that Bush's popularity stemmed from his unwillingness to make bold policy decisions. Though none of these works examine the relationship between Reagan and Bush explicitly through the prism of legacy building, they have provided necessary context to explore the relationship between Reagan's legacy and the Bush administration.

A study of the construction of Reagan's legacy also requires engagement with scholarship on commemoration, particularly of other presidents, as well as broader literature on the debates surrounding the connections between history and memory studies. This literature offers context for exploring the physical sites of commemoration dedicated to Reagan, as well as the efforts of his aides to secure his legacy via other commemorative items such as having Reagan's image added to a dollar bill or coin. Engaging with this literature has strengthened

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<sup>30</sup> John J. Pitney, *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997); Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

the final chapter of my thesis, which examines how the legacy-building project evolved once Reagan is no longer in office.

Specifically, Benjamin Hufbauer's work introduces readers to the history of presidential libraries and their relationship to the notion of the imperial presidency. Presidential commemoration has shifted drastically during the twentieth century, from memorialising 'exceptional presidents' in the nation's capital to 'self-commemoration' by presidents and their supporters at increasingly extravagant libraries and museums.<sup>32</sup> He argues that the highly simplified and sanitised 'Happy Meal version of presidential history' usually presented at these museums means these institutions neglect their responsibility to present a balanced assessment of these individuals and the times in which they lived.<sup>33</sup> Hufbauer presents the newly-refurbished Truman Library's museum as the most objective of all the presidential museums, conceding that the staff designing the more recent libraries, including Reagan's, are often pressured by the families and supporters of the former president to present favourable narratives of their presidencies.<sup>34</sup> Reagan's legacy-builders turned to the precedents set by their predecessors when planning Reagan's presidential library, so a broader understanding of the presidential library system, as well as its role in influencing the way Americans are coming to understand the office of the presidency has provided reference points for this thesis.

The related idea of American civil religion is also important to consider in relation to presidential legacy. Hufbauer characterises this as a 'veneration' for particular events, people and things, for instance the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance.<sup>35</sup> He considers presidential libraries as spaces that each attempt to elevate their respective president within this system. In doing so, they are contributing to the idea of what

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 177.

<sup>33</sup> Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 173.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, 'Spotlights and Shadows: Presidents and Their Administrations in Presidential Museum Exhibits', *The Public Historian* 28.3 (2006), 124.

<sup>35</sup> Hufbauer, 'Spotlights and Shadows', 118-119.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., calls the ‘imperial presidency’, by elevating every person to hold this office to a status worthy of an entire museum in their honour, each one extolling the virtues of their respective president. With this in mind, the efforts of organisations such as the Reagan Legacy Project, discussed in Chapter Five, were clearly designed with the goal of elevating Reagan’s status within this system of national icons including monuments, ceremonies and the presidential libraries.

Niels Bjerre-Poulsen connects the idea of American civil religion to the efforts to add a Reagan monument to the Mall in Washington, arguing that these monuments are ‘supposed to symbolize central ideas and concepts in America's civil religion.’<sup>36</sup> This explains why the Reagan legacy builders of the 1990s sought to have Reagan memorialised on currency, the Washington Mall and Mount Rushmore, each traditionally perceived as commemorative sites inhabited by ‘great’ former presidents.<sup>37</sup> Bjerre-Poulsen argues these efforts to commemorate Reagan form part of an effort to construct a ‘useable past’ for conservatives of the future, even if this means employing a very selective reading of the 1980s.<sup>38</sup> An awareness of this scholarship illuminates why the projects advanced by Reagan’s legacy builders were so significant to them.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, they also provide context for why many of the projects in this thesis ultimately failed.

More broadly, scholarship on the relationship between history and memory has proved useful in refining my approach and strengthening my project’s connection to existing literature. Geoffrey Cubitt outlines ‘history’s turn to memory’ during the late twentieth century, exploring how memory influences the construction of what we call history, how we can make memory

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<sup>36</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, ‘The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan’ in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, eds, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 216.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew Dallek, ‘Not Ready for Mt. Rushmore: Reconciling the myth of Ronald Reagan with the reality’, *The American Scholar*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2009), pp. 13-23: 14.

<sup>38</sup> Bjerre-Poulsen, ‘The Road to Mount Rushmore’, 219.

<sup>39</sup> Hufbauer, ‘Spotlights and Shadows’, 119.

the subject of historical study, and how people have historically understood the relationship between history and memory.<sup>40</sup> This book therefore offers a helpful overview of the various ways in which history and memory interact, and his exploration of collective memory and its transmission offer especially useful theoretical grounding for my project. Furthermore, Marita Sturken argues that ‘cultural memory’, shared memories that exist outside of traditional historical discourse, is essential to the construction of history.<sup>41</sup> Her work analyses ‘the process of history making’, claiming that ‘the writing of a historical narrative necessarily involves the elimination of certain elements.’<sup>42</sup> Therefore, objects, images and representations of the past take on an important role in determining which version or versions of the past are remembered or forgotten. Understanding the theory behind this relationship between history and national memory has been crucial to underscoring the significance of the Reagan legacy builders’ efforts. In endeavouring to shape national memory of Reagan they utilised an array of the ‘technologies of memory’ Sturken lays out in her study in order to represent the past in ways that were most favourable to Reagan, essentially writing history in favour of Reagan’s legacy.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, a study of Reagan’s presidency will naturally be informed by broader scholarship on this period, and by literature on Reagan’s life that touches on questions of legacy and commemoration. Biographical literature, including Reagan’s ‘official’ biography *Dutch*, has acted as both primary and secondary material. Ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the events of Reagan’s presidency has been essential to understanding the achievements that the legacy-builders sought to amplify, and those they sought to gloss over.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, newer biographies often engage with the disparity between Reagan’s image in office and his

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<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3-4.

<sup>41</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 8-9.

<sup>44</sup> For instance, H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, Penguin Random House, 2015); Lou Cannon, *Ronald Reagan: the Role of a Lifetime*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (New York: IB Tauris, 2016); Edmund Morris, *Dutch*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999); Jacob Weisberg, *Ronald Reagan* (New York: Times Books, 2016) and Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents at Home*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1987).

image in the 2000s. Richard Reeves' biography concludes by quoting Steven Weisman, a *New York Times* journalist and member of the White House press corps during the Reagan administration, who remarked on the coverage of Reagan's funeral: 'God, this is impressive. [...] But the man they're talking about is not the President I covered every day.'<sup>45</sup> This observation neatly captures the distortion between the version of Reagan being lauded by Democrats and Republicans alike during his funeral coverage and the reality of the Reagan years, as discussed in the epilogue.

### **Methodology and Outline**

This thesis is grounded in archival material, largely held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and George HW Bush Presidential Library.<sup>46</sup> The papers of key administration members involved in the Reagan legacy projects within the White House proved crucial, including those of Frank Donatelli, Mari Maseng, Kenneth Duberstein, and T. Kenneth Cribb. I have also used the *Congressional Record* alongside these archival documents, to gain a clearer understanding of relevant congressional debates surrounding the Reagan legacy, particularly in the 1990s, as well as resources like *The American Presidency Project* to explore presidential speeches and public statements.

I have also made wide use of newspaper coverage from this period, primarily the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. These large newspapers, along with Associated Press, were most likely to break major news stories, and each one had a 'syndicate of subscribers' who would reproduce the stories in local press after publication in the 'flagship' paper.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, whether or not a story appears on the front page of the *New York Times* offers an indication of how broadly the event was covered in other newspapers and other types

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 490.

<sup>46</sup> Planned research trips to the George HW Bush Library, Hoover Institution, Library of Congress and a follow-up trip to the Reagan Library were all cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>47</sup> Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 155.

of media like television and radio.<sup>48</sup> This material has complemented the archival documents, and allowed for an exploration of public reception of the various legacy building efforts discussed throughout this thesis.

This archival research has also been supplemented by oral history interviews, primarily with members of the Reagan administration. White House staff can broadly be divided into three categories: policy experts (for example domestic and foreign policy experts); process experts, who deal with the day-to-day operations of the White House and implementations of policies; and external relations, who deal with organisations external to the White House (such as the Office of Public Liaison).<sup>49</sup> The majority of the figures in my thesis fall into the latter two categories, and particularly the last category: external relations. As a result, my interviews focussed on staff in the Offices of Public Liaison, Communications and Intergovernmental Affairs. The fact that most of the legacy builders were not policy specialists, but rather communications specialists, has interesting implications for the substance of the legacy project. As we shall see, throughout the project there are numerous occasions where the substance of Reagan's legacy appears at odds with the version presented by Reagan's legacy builders, who are more concerned with their political messaging than with crafting an accurate portrayal of Reagan's policy decisions.

I have conducted interviews with Frank Donatelli (who joined the Office of Public Liaison in 1984, then became Director of the Office of Political and Intergovernmental Affairs from March 1987), Frank Lavin (Deputy to Frank Donatelli and Head of the White House political affairs unit from March 1987), Mari Maseng Will (Director of the Office of Public Liaison, May 1986-July 1987, then Director of the Office of Communications from May 1988)

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<sup>48</sup> William D. Baker and John R. Oneal, 'Patriotism or Opinion Leadership?: The Nature and Origins of the "Rally 'Round the Flag" Effect', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 45.5 (2001), 661-687: 672.

<sup>49</sup> Martha Joynt Kumar, 'White House Staff and Organizations: Ten Observations', in The White House Transition Project, [[http://www.whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/WHTP2017-10\\_Ten\\_Observations\\_on\\_WH\\_Staff-9-6-2017.pdf](http://www.whitehousetransitionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/WHTP2017-10_Ten_Observations_on_WH_Staff-9-6-2017.pdf)] last accessed 21 March 2023], 4-5.

and T. Kenneth Cribb (Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs and the Director of the Office of Domestic Affairs). Each of these figures played an important role throughout the White House's legacy project. I also interviewed Eloise Smith, curator of the Reagan Ranch Center, which offered insights into the purchase and preservation of Rancho del Cielo and the Young America's Foundation's understanding of their role in promoting Reagan's legacy in my final chapter on 1990s legacy building. Doing so has allowed me to enhance some of the arguments I make in relation to archival material, by adding details I have learned from conducting interviews with the authors of some of these documents.

One area where many scholars of the Reagan administration routinely struggle to access sources is with material held by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, as opposed to the Reagan Library. Material held by the Foundation is not subject to the same legal requirements as material held within the presidential libraries. The archives of the presidential libraries are subject to the 1978 Presidential Records Act, which states that presidential records are the property of the US government and must be made accessible to researchers. In contrast, the Reagan Foundation is a privately funded organisation which oversees the Reagan Library's public events programme and funds the museum at the Library. The Foundation also holds collections of archival material which relate to the Reagan presidency but are not subject to the Presidential Records Act, which includes the papers of Nancy Reagan, which I have consequently been unable to access. The Foundation has no legal obligation to provide access to this material to researchers. Nancy Reagan would doubtless have been a more central character in this thesis had these papers been available, and this would make a valuable avenue for future study, particularly in the period between 1994 and 2016 where any usage of Reagan's name or image was overseen by the former First Lady.

This thesis adopts a chronological structure, tracing the Reagan White House's legacy-building efforts as they evolved over time. Chapter One explores the emergence of the first

strategy designed to ‘Campaign for the Reagan agenda’ and charts the evolution of that project between the spring of 1987 and the autumn of 1988. Chapters Two, Three and Four explore the implementation of that strategy by various members of the Reagan administration.

Chapter Two explores the period following the 1986 midterm elections. It demonstrates how the administration used presidential travel as a tool to improve Reagan’s domestic image, as well as Reagan’s role in the early planning for his presidential library and the appointment of his official biographer, Edmund Morris. Finally, it examines an internal set of reports called the *Reagan Record* and T. Kenneth Cribb’s series of speeches titled the ‘Reagan Legacy Project.’ Taken together, these efforts indicate the concerted effort the administration was making to consolidate its achievements and ensure consistent messaging regarding the central achievements of the Reagan years.

Chapter Three covers the 1988 elections, exploring how, and why, securing Bush’s election to the White House, in addition to supporting key Republican Senate, House and gubernatorial races, became such an important part of Reagan’s final six months in office. A strong Republican performance in these various election campaigns was a sure-fire way to limit policy rollback, and potentially advance some of the policies Reagan had begun during his presidency. The Reagan administration threw its weight behind Bush and his counterparts in the House and Senate because aides saw this election cycle – as one *Times* reporter did – as a ‘referendum on the Reagan years.’<sup>50</sup>

Chapter Four is the final chapter on the implementation of the White House’s legacy strategy. It covers the period between Bush’s election and Reagan’s departure from office, examining preparation for Reagan’s final public events, and analysing his public addresses to illuminate how Reagan and his administration understood, defined, and promoted his legacy.

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<sup>50</sup> Julie Johnson, ‘The Reagan Campaign Magic: He Isn’t Running, but He’s Winning’, *New York Times*, 3 November 1988, B19.

These include the Farewell Address, his domestic and foreign policy legacy addresses, and ‘punctuation mark’ events, which focused on major policy shifts that had occurred during the administration.

Chapter Five explores what happened once the Reagan legacy builders left the White House and no longer controlled the legacy. In this period, legacy construction took place outwith the White House, albeit with different tools. It looks at the Bush administration’s time in office, exploring both how far Bush was expected to act as Reagan’s third term, and the extent to which the Reagan legacy limited his abilities to govern effectively. I then move beyond the White House entirely, looking at the efforts of several conservative interest groups and their attempts to craft a ‘useable past’ for the conservatives of the future. I take the renaming of Washington National Airport and the Young America’s Foundation’s purchase of Reagan’s ranch as complementary case studies in order to examine this issue, and to demonstrate Nancy Reagan’s ongoing role in these legacy projects.

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The central argument of this thesis is that the Reagan administration valued Reagan’s legacy and sought to shape how the public understood his legacy both during his presidency and in the years following his departure from office. Though many of these efforts achieved at best limited success, they still demonstrate that former presidents’ legacies have been shaped by the concerted efforts of those around them.

There are several ways in which this thesis makes important interventions in the existing historiography. It is the first in-depth study of Reagan’s legacy to incorporate the period when Reagan was still in office, and the only study to examine presidential legacy construction from the perspective of the White House. It also contributes to scholarship on the modern Republican Party, by illuminating the tensions between different factions all vying to lay claim to Reagan’s legacy once he had left the presidency. Finally, it contributes to

scholarship on historical memory by illuminating how commemoration and legacy building shape public perceptions of the past.

Overall, studying legacy is important as it illuminates how our perceptions of the past can be shaped by individuals with a particular agenda. Historical accuracy was often a secondary concern for these legacy builders, who instead wanted to present a particular version of the past to their audiences. Appreciating the degree to which our understanding of the past is shaped by others gives us a better understanding of how the past has shaped our present moment.

## Chapter One: Establishing a Strategy, 1986-88

During Ronald Reagan's second term as president, he and his aides found themselves in an almost unprecedented political position. As a two-term president whose time in the White House had a clearly defined end date, Reagan was the first president since Eisenhower with such a clear opportunity to shape his own legacy. To appreciate this fully, we must briefly consider Reagan's predecessors. Jimmy Carter lost his bid for re-election in 1980, as did Gerald Ford in 1976. Though he was elected to a second term, Richard Nixon resigned from office before it was complete because of the Watergate scandal in 1974. Lyndon Johnson made the controversial decision not to run for re-election in 1968 amidst the political chaos of the Vietnam War. And, of course, Johnson first assumed the office in 1963 following the tragic assassination of John F. Kennedy. This meant that the Reagan administration had to reach back to the Eisenhower administration before they could find a former president who had successfully completed two terms. Eisenhower was the first president to complete two terms since the ratification of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, which limits presidents to running for a maximum of two full terms (since Truman was the incumbent when it was ratified, he was eligible to run for another term, but chose not to run for re-election). The political landscape and the nature of the presidency had changed dramatically since the Eisenhower years, as had the way in which the president interacted with the media and the public. Combined, these factors gave Reagan and his administration an almost unprecedented opportunity to influence his presidential legacy during his second term in office.

The Reagan administration was acutely aware of the position they were in. In a recent interview with the author Reagan's head of political and intergovernmental affairs, Frank Donatelli, said:

You have to go back almost thirty years to find an example of somebody that we had hoped to emulate, somebody that was as popular at the end of his term as he

was at the beginning of his term. I think we were all anxious for that to occur. Reagan was always somebody that said let's keep our eye on the ball let's continue to do a good job and you know, we'll let the politics take care of themselves [...] I'm sure every President wants to have a positive legacy and there are many elements to that. But I think it was very much on the mind of his staff that we wanted to, you know, bring him safely home after eight pretty turbulent years.<sup>1</sup>

While Reagan's staff were more invested in this issue of legacy and finishing his term on a high note than Reagan seemed to be, it is clear that the administration was keen to ensure a successful end to his presidency, and were linking this short-term damage control to the notion of a longer-term legacy.

In the spring of 1987, the Reagan administration faced an uphill battle. The Republican Party had suffered a series of disappointing defeats in the 1986 midterm elections, including losing control of the Senate for the first time since 1980. The aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal still loomed large, and in January 1987 the 76-year-old president was admitted to hospital for prostate surgery, reviving public speculation about his health. Alongside physical health worries, there were also a growing number of people who believed that Reagan was no longer mentally fit to carry out the office of the presidency. One focus group meeting carried out by the White House showed that a concerning number of participants saw Reagan as 'senile' or 'out of it', and therefore unfit for office.<sup>2</sup> Combined, these issues evoked serious concerns about the remainder of Reagan's presidency. His approval ratings plummeted to 40 percent in late February 1987, down from a high of 71 percent just a year previously.<sup>3</sup>

There were also mounting frustrations within the administration that Reagan was quickly being rendered a lame duck president, politically ineffective as the nation began turning

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC (conducted remotely via Zoom), 8 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Last Ten Months', WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 85, File 555944, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

<sup>3</sup> The lack of two-term presidents in the mid- to late-twentieth century makes finding comparisons tricky, but it is worth noting that two of Reagan's successors, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, both experienced a similar dip in approval ratings during their second term, though Bill Clinton enjoyed relatively high ratings throughout his second term. See 'Presidential Job Approval', *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval> [accessed 5 November 2019].

its attention to choosing his successor. Since the introduction of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, which limits presidents to serving two terms in office, any occupant of the office becomes a lame duck to some degree during the second term, as other political actors become less willing to co-operate and more likely to wait and negotiate with the incumbent's successor.<sup>4</sup> Prior to Reagan, only Eisenhower, and to an extent Richard Nixon, had experienced this phenomenon. When Reagan's pollster Richard Wirthlin wrote to Donald Regan (then Reagan's Chief of Staff) in November 1985 to advise on Reagan's 1986 agenda, he stated that perceptions of Reagan as a lame duck would 'erode' his policy options unless the administration explicitly dealt with that issue in their planning throughout Reagan's second term.<sup>5</sup> He argued that they could still 'take the initiative' and 'succeed in controlling the major political dialogue', and that doing so would limit accusations that Reagan's second term had rendered him politically ineffective. In an interview with the author, Frank Donatelli supported this interpretation, stating that 'I think the feeling was that beginning in late 1986 and into early first half of 1987 the White House was on the defensive, and was very much under siege.'<sup>6</sup> This climate is vital to understanding the origins of the legacy-building efforts the administration undertook during this period.

Additionally, historian David Crockett highlights that there are other issues that limit the political effectiveness of two term presidents, 'large historical forces' which may well be even more detrimental than 'lame duck status.'<sup>7</sup> Crockett cites 're-election hubris, administration fatigue, and leadership failure' as other factors that often impede presidential effectiveness during the second term.<sup>8</sup> When presidents run for re-election the public often

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel P. Franklin, *Pitiful Giants: Presidents in Their Final Terms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2. E-Book.

<sup>5</sup> Richard B. Wirthlin to Donald T. Regan, 'The 1986 Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities' 6 November 1985, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 71, File 393361-395999, RRPL.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author (conducted remotely via Zoom), 8 October 2021.

<sup>7</sup> David A. Crockett, 'The Contemporary Presidency: "An Excess of Refinement": Lame Duck Presidents in Constitutional and Historical Context', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38.4 (December 2008), 707-721: 708.

<sup>8</sup> Crockett, 'The Contemporary Presidency', 707-721: 708.

judges them based on past performance, rather than on a new agenda, a theory known as retrospective performance voting.<sup>9</sup> When a candidate wins re-election in a landslide, as Reagan did in 1984, they may assume they have a mandate for pursuing bold policies, when they did not actually campaign on the issues they set out to implement in their second term.<sup>10</sup> Reagan's 1984 election campaign revolved around the idea that it was 'morning again in America', asking voters 'why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?'<sup>11</sup> Focussing on the previous four years meant there was a lack of clarity regarding what Reagan hoped to achieve in his second term.

Crockett also highlights administration fatigue as a factor in the limited effectiveness of second terms. Burnout and exhaustion are not uncommon in high-stakes jobs such as high-level government positions, which can lead to key advisors resigning and being replaced.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in a recent interview T. Kenneth Cribb (assistant to the president for domestic affairs) cited burnout as an explanation for leaving the administration in its final months, having worked with Reagan since his 1980 campaign.<sup>13</sup> Crockett also highlights broader leadership failures, which may emerge during the first term, but do not emerge as major problems until the second term, such as the Watergate scandal or Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.<sup>14</sup> Importantly, Crockett reminds us that none of these are issues that relate to a president's lame duck status. Instead, all administrations face complex challenges as they transition into a second term in office. In this case, the Reagan administration had an opportunity to influence Reagan's legacy, while also facing these complex challenges.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph A. Pika and John Anthony Maltese, *The Politics of the Presidency*. 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2004) 63; Martin P. Wattenberg, *The Rise of Candidate-Centered Politics: Presidential Elections of the 1980s*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 135.

<sup>10</sup> Crockett, 'The Contemporary Presidency', 707-712: 716.

<sup>11</sup> John J. Pitney, *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 53.

<sup>12</sup> Crockett, 'The Contemporary Presidency', 703-721: 716.

<sup>13</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC, 21 January 2022 (remote interview via Zoom).

<sup>14</sup> Crockett, 'The Contemporary Presidency', 703-721: 717.

This chapter argues that throughout his final two years in office the Reagan White House paid significant attention to consideration of how Reagan would be remembered after his presidency was over, and that this idea of securing Reagan's future legacy was central to several the projects they engaged with during his final two years in office. Rather than trying to retrospectively find parallels between the Reagan administration and its predecessors, I will highlight where the administration drew its inspiration from. Though their situation was largely unprecedented, given the changing media landscape and lack of two-term presidents during the twentieth century, it is still important to explore the administrations the Reagan White House felt could offer worthwhile lessons on how to maximise the potential of the situation.

It is also worth recognising the political and ideological differences between various figures within the Reagan legacy project, and their diverse motivations for participating in such a venture. In a recent interview Mari Maseng Will, reflecting on her years in the White House, observed: 'there were a lot of smart, confident people [in the administration] and we argued a lot [...] Darman and Baker would be more moderate, then sometimes the speech writers would be more conservative, and Ken Cribb would be very conservative and it'd be lots of arguments and internal politics about where a policy would end up.' Maseng concluded however, that ultimately 'the Reagan White House ran like clockwork.'<sup>15</sup> Though many of the legacy builders undoubtedly supported the project out of loyalty to Reagan and his policy decisions, it is also highly likely that support for this project also stemmed from people's individual political aspirations. Many of the legacy builders were significantly younger than Ronald Reagan, and likely to have long careers ahead of them following Reagan's departure from office. A successful legacy project, which cemented some of the policy decisions of the Reagan era, would therefore have benefits for these individuals' career aspirations.

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<sup>15</sup> Mari Maseng Will, interview by the author, Washington DC/Edinburgh, 14 October 2021 (remote interview via Zoom).

Conventional scholarship on the Reagan White House depicts this as a period when the administration was falling apart. John Ehrman argues that the Iran-Contra scandal turned Reagan into a ‘caretaker president’, and that during Reagan’s final two years in office ‘the White House scaled back its ambitions, focusing on maintaining the achievements of the previous six years rather than seeking new programs.’<sup>16</sup> Ehrman claims that Reagan’s chief of staff Howard Baker carried out the necessary damage control that helped Reagan recover his confidence, but that this period was otherwise marred by disappointments, presided over by a lame-duck president who merely consolidated his existing achievements rather than advancing anything new.<sup>17</sup> This chapter will argue that this was simply not the case.

Beginning in March 1987, a group of Reagan’s closest advisors began planning an ambitious programme of events, with a view to ‘revitalizing’ the Reagan presidency in the short term, while also turning their attention to his longer-term legacy.<sup>18</sup> This analysis of the creation of Reagan’s ‘legacy strategy’ begins with Reagan’s newly appointed Chief of Staff Howard Baker’s formation of an advisory group in March 1987, which produced the ‘Campaign for the Reagan Agenda’, launched in May 1987. It will then explore how these goals were modified and refined across the course of Reagan’s final years and months in office, paying particular attention to the revised strategy documents produced during this period. It will also tease out some of the divergences between the various aides involved in the process of assessing what Reagan’s legacy ought to be. In a recent interview with the author, Mari Maseng Will (former White House head of communications) said that the administration broadly agreed on what the president’s legacy should be, and that their central concern in 1987 was that ‘he wasn’t popular.’ She went on to discuss different people close to Reagan who felt

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<sup>16</sup> John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 142.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrman, *The Eighties*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, ‘First Meeting of the Advisory Group’, 4 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 87, file 562955, RRPL.

they also had a stake in convincing Reagan to think more about his future legacy, saying, ‘You have to understand that I had Nancy Reagan in my corner and Duberstein [Reagan’s final Chief of Staff] was close to Nancy Reagan, so we had that perimeter.’<sup>19</sup>

What started as a damage-limitation exercise quickly became more ambitious in its goals, and the ways in which the White House began thinking about Reagan’s legacy are central to this thesis. T. Kenneth Cribb, assistant to the president for domestic affairs and a central advisor on matters concerning Reagan’s legacy, decided that the administration needed to approach these final two years in office as a “campaign” for the Reagan agenda.<sup>20</sup> Understanding how this campaign transitioned from a short-term damage control project into a concerted effort to solidify national memory of Reagan is crucial to appreciating the extent to which ideas of presidential legacy influenced Reagan’s White House.

Furthermore, White House officials were acutely aware that the advances that Reagan had made in both domestic and foreign policy during his first six years in office were far from entrenched. The administration wanted to use its final two years both to advance a bold new strategy, but also to solidify and institutionalise the shift away from New Deal liberalism that had been underway since Reagan assumed the presidency. In 1989 scholars Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle argued that the New Deal ‘died’ with Reagan’s inauguration, describing their study of the decline of New Deal liberalism as a ‘historical autopsy.’<sup>21</sup> Fraser and Gerstle confidently assert that 1981 marked a moment of profound change in American politics, and few would now disagree. However, for the Reagan White House, the significance, and permanence, of this shift was far from assured.

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<sup>19</sup> Mari Maseng Will, interview by the author, Washington DC/Edinburgh, 14 October 2021 (remote interview via Zoom).

<sup>20</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, ‘Campaign for the Reagan Agenda’, March 26, 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, 490581-492673, RRPL.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, ‘Introduction’ in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (ed.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order: 1930-1980*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), ix.

The Republican Party's failure to retain control of the Senate in 1986 instilled a fear that the administration's accomplishments over the previous six years were about to crumble. When Michael Dukakis stated in his 1988 campaign for the presidency that 'the Reagan era is over', Chief of Staff Kenneth Duberstein told the president: 'the opposition party can hardly wait to unravel your legacy.'<sup>22</sup> Duberstein was clearly tying the longevity of Reagan's political legacy to the longevity of the conservative ascendancy more broadly. The group working on revitalising the Reagan presidency included several Republican advisors working outwith the administration, including Edwin Feulner, president of conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation. He wrote in February 1987 that the administration must 'entrench the political reforms and institutionalize the political change advocated by our President', or else it would fail to 'indelibly mark the course of the country.'<sup>23</sup> Feulner spoke of a need to gather momentum in the final two years, lest the advances of the Reagan 'revolution' transpire to be simply a short-term fluke in an otherwise consistent story of liberal dominance.

These comments speak to a central concern of the administration during this period. Acutely aware that they were on the cusp of a transition from New Deal liberalism to charting a new course for the United States, Republicans in the White House were deeply concerned that failure to adequately utilise Reagan's final two years in office would render their efforts over the previous six years futile. Ensuring that the next president was a Republican became a key goal of the administration, and the White House devised extensive strategies based on how best to deploy Reagan in order to maximise Republicans' performance in the 1988 elections.<sup>24</sup> In terms of transitions between presidential administrations, intraparty transitions are often far smoother than interparty transitions, as lower-level political appointees from one

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth M. Duberstein to Ronald Reagan, 'The Last Six Months', August 1, 1988, Mari Maseng Files, Box 5, 'Last Six Months' (folder 2 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>23</sup> From Edwin J. Feulner Jr. (recipient unspecified), 'A Strategy for Institutional Change', February 12, 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 77, File 462263, RRPL.

<sup>24</sup> The extent to which the administration was keen to ensure the candidate was the 'right' sort of Republican will be discussed in Chapter Three.

administration are more likely to stay and assist with the transition.<sup>25</sup> This attention to the future translated into considerations of Reagan's presidential legacy, as well as broader questions regarding what his presidency would mean for the future of the United States.

The efforts of the Reagan White House during these two years are vital to understanding the transition from New Deal liberalism to the era of modern conservatism that commenced during Reagan's leadership. Despite the attempts of Reagan's supporters to portray him as a 'transformational' conservative, in many respects Reagan was far more pragmatic than supporters of the Reagan 'revolution' would like to admit. Although he was rhetorically and ideologically conservative, Reagan's pragmatism in office has often been forgotten, including by the people involved in considering Reagan's legacy during his final years in office. Historian Iwan Morgan has noted that 'a pragmatic tendency to compromise was more evident than conviction-driven consistency in Reagan's fiscal record.'<sup>26</sup> This divergence between Reagan's actual legislative priorities and achievements and the claims of his legacy builders became increasingly apparent by the late 1990s, when conservatives sought to glorify Reagan's record as an ideological tax cutter, overlooking the major tax increases Reagan oversaw in 1982 and 1984.

This pragmatism can be found throughout Reagan's record, and there were many conservatives who felt disappointed by this pragmatism while Reagan was in office. Niels Bjerre-Poulsen convincingly argues that contemporary attempts to present Reagan as the father of the modern conservative movement 'requires a very selective reading of the era.'<sup>27</sup> Many right-wing ideologues felt disappointed by Bush's election in 1988, as they felt Bush was not

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<sup>25</sup> Franklin, *Pitiful Giants*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> Iwan Morgan, *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 119.

<sup>27</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, 'The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan' in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, eds, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219.

conservative enough to further the political developments Reagan had started.<sup>28</sup> Some had been distrustful of Bush at least since his 1980 campaign against Reagan, where Bush had positioned himself as a more moderate candidate.<sup>29</sup> Bush had some serious contenders for the Republican nomination in 1988, including Jack Kemp, whose role in Reagan's 1981 and 1986 tax cutting legislation helped him to position himself as an heir to Reaganite conservatism.<sup>30</sup> Bob Dole made a similar claim. In his role as Republican Party leader during Reagan's second term, he played an important role in enacting the administration's legislation, whereas Bush's role was less immediately noticeable.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, if we accept that our understandings of Reagan and the presidency have been impacted by the efforts of a select group of people with particular agendas, then we ought to have a clear understanding of what those people sought to achieve, and why. Doing so adds nuance to our understanding of Reagan, the post-Reagan years, and the relationship between memorialisation and public memory. The Reagan legacy project helped to bring a coherence to Reagan's policies that they often lacked in reality, which has helped to secure Reagan's status as a conservative icon in the years following his presidency.

### **Context: Iran Contra and the 1986 Midterms**

In November 1986 a scandal erupted in Washington over the revelation that US officials had sold weapons to Iran and had used this money to fund the Contras (right-wing rebel groups) in Nicaragua, despite this being explicitly prohibited by federal legislation.<sup>32</sup> Congress carried out

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<sup>28</sup> Robert O. Self, 'The Reagan Devolution: Movement Conservatives and the Right's Days of Rage, 1988-1994' in Brian Balogh and Bruce J. Schulman (eds.), *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 76.

<sup>29</sup> John J. Pitney, *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 81.

<sup>30</sup> Pitney, *After Reagan*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Pitney, *After Reagan*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Jack F. Matlock, Jr., 'Ronald Reagan and the End of the Cold War' in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies (eds), *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 70.

a formal investigation, which dragged on through the winter of 1986-87, to determine if Reagan and those around him had acted illegally. At best, this scandal made Reagan appear incompetent as Commander-in-Chief, oblivious to what was going on in his own administration. At worst, it painted him as a criminal, and sparked public calls for his impeachment. In late November 1986, a few weeks after the scandal emerged, Anthony Blankley (Office of Policy Development) cautioned that if the president was not 'seen to be once again acting wisely, honestly and forcefully' then national opinion would 'solidify against him', something Blankley believed the administration was unlikely to recover from.<sup>33</sup> Surprisingly, however, at least one member of the administration saw the Iran-Contra affair as a blessing in disguise. Frank Donatelli argued that the scandal prevented the administration from 'coasting on the President's personal popularity' for their final two years.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it created a need for a coherent plan, which evolved into a strategy for institutionalising Reagan's achievements in office. Overcoming this scandal was vital to allowing Reagan to function effectively as president in his final two years in office, as well as ensuring he would be remembered as a successful president in the future.

White House aides were also aware that losing control of the Senate in the 1986 midterm elections would limit Reagan's political effectiveness in his final two years and would exacerbate the extent to which he was a lame duck president. The midterms therefore played a crucial role in long-range strategic planning in 1985 and 1986. Republican strategist Kevin Phillips referred to the likelihood of presidents' parties losing seats during their second midterm election as the 'sixth year itch.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anthony Blankley to Charles Hobbs, '7 Month Plan', 29 November 1986, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, file 490581, RRPL.

<sup>34</sup> Frank J. Donatelli to Howard Baker, Ken Duberstein, Thomas Griscom and Kenneth Cribb, 'Priorities for the Next Two Years', 8 April 1987, WHORM File FG001-POTUS, Box 80, File 520705, RRPL.

<sup>35</sup> Colleen J. Shogan, 'The Contemporary Presidency: The Sixth Year Curse', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36.1, 2006, 89-101: 89.

Though there were some explicit internal discussions of Reagan's 'legacy' prior to the 1986 midterms, these were few and far between until after the outcome of the elections, when Reagan's political situation in the final two years became clearer. In one of the few explicit discussions of presidential legacy that predated the midterms, White House communications director Pat Buchanan wrote:

To a degree greater than almost any other President in the 20th Century, Mr. Reagan came to Washington with an agenda of his own. [...] A careful reading of the organic documents of the Reagan Revolution -- acceptance speeches, the platforms of '80 and '84, the State of the Union address -- provides a fairly complete catalogue of what it was Ronald Reagan said he wished to achieve -- and a fairly complete set of standards against which, historically, he will be judged. [...] These goals should, it seems to me, serve as permanent [sic] reference points for those of us invariably caught up in the day-to-day controversies and distractions advanced as important by antagonists in politics and the press.<sup>36</sup>

He was confident that Reagan had established a clear set of goals against which his legacy would be measured, and as a committed conservative, he wanted to ensure that throughout Reagan's second term the administration used these goals as guiding principles that would offer them direction, while also ensuring the administration remained on a consistent path towards achieving significant political change. He echoed these sentiments in a public speech in February 1986, in which he said: 'whether President Reagan has charted a new course that will set our compass for decades - or whether history will see him as the conservative interruption in a process of inexorable national decline - is yet to be determined.'<sup>37</sup> Clearly this concern that Reagan's presidency would lack long-term significance was something that troubled top-level administration members throughout Reagan's second term. The fear that the nation may return to New Deal liberalism both concerned the administration and drove them to try and maximise Reagan's final two years in office, lest the 1988 election results prove disappointing.

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<sup>36</sup> Pat Buchanan to the Chief of Staff, 'The Political Legacy of Ronald Reagan: Long-term Policy Goals and Organization', WHORM Subject File FG001-POTUS, Box 92, File 578564.

<sup>37</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, 'Pat Buchanan, The Great Right Hope', *Washington Post*, 8 January 1987, C1.

Furthermore, pollster Richard Wirthlin cautioned that losing the Senate in 1986 would force Reagan to rely on his veto as his only major political asset.<sup>38</sup> He argued that failure to retain the Senate would have dire consequences for Reagan's effectiveness and would leave him with very few options in terms of advancing policy in his final two years. Though this is an inescapable fortune for all second-term presidents, there were certainly ways of retaining some political effectiveness in the final two years, and retaining control of the Senate was one of them.

Traditionally, the president's party rarely performs well in the midterm elections, and the Republican majority was already slim before the election (53 seats to the Democrats' 47). Ultimately the Republicans lost eight seats, which disappointed the White House and limited Reagan's political effectiveness.<sup>39</sup> Following the loss of the Senate, Gary Schuster, a former CBS news reporter, wrote a list of suggestions for how Reagan could 'short-circuit mounting lame-duck talk' and ensure consistency in the effectiveness of his presidency, which included suggestions for presidential travel strategies and potential locations for speeches.<sup>40</sup> As we shall see, the midterm results did not stop Reagan from undertaking an ambitious programme of activity in his final two years in office, including sustained campaigning in the 1988 elections on behalf of his successor, George HW Bush, suggesting that the poor results in the midterms did not adversely affect Reagan's reputation among Republicans as a voter-winner.

Another implication of losing the Senate, which would become hugely significant in the summer of 1987, was that this limited Reagan's ability to appoint his preferred Supreme Court Justices. Appointing a Justice to the Supreme Court has lasting political consequences and can often be one of the most enduring legacies of any president. As we shall see, failure to

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<sup>38</sup> Richard B. Wirthlin to Donald T. Regan, 'The 1986 Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities' November 6, 1985, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 71, File 393361-395999, RRPL.

<sup>39</sup> 'Seats in Congress Gained/Lost by the President's Party in Mid-Term Elections', *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/332343/> [last accessed: 12 November 2019].

<sup>40</sup> Gary Schuster to Don Regan and Larry Speakes, 'Re. the 1988 Presidential Year', 19 November 1986, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, file 483088, RRPL.

retain control of the Senate set the stage for one of Reagan's most high-profile defeats, when he was unable to secure Robert Bork's appointment to the Supreme Court. Reagan had the opportunity to change the balance of the Supreme Court with this appointment, something which would have long-lasting implications for his political legacy. This campaign was often framed by journalists as a 'showdown' between a lame-duck president and a Democrat-controlled House and Senate, which worked effectively to shut down Reagan's preferred nominee.<sup>41</sup>

### **The 'Campaign for the Reagan Agenda'**

Iran-Contra occupied much of the administration's attention until the findings of the Tower Commission were released, which had been created by the executive branch in order to investigate the scandal and determine the extent of Reagan's involvement.<sup>42</sup> In late February 1987 the resultant Tower Report cleared Reagan of any illegal activity, though it rebuked the president for devolving power to the extent that he had.<sup>43</sup> Afterwards, Howard Baker assembled a group of nine of Reagan's closest advisors for a series of meetings intended to 'revitalize' the Reagan presidency.<sup>44</sup> Their goal, in Baker's view, was to identify steps in order to ensure 'that the revitalization of the modern American presidency, which Ronald Reagan has begun, does not falter over the Iran affair.'<sup>45</sup> These candid discussions were partly an opportunity to implement damage control. However, they also featured extensive discourse surrounding the post-presidency. T. Kenneth Cribb argued that the administration needed to approach implementing Reagan's objectives as a "campaign" for the Reagan agenda.<sup>46</sup> Though he

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<sup>41</sup> This campaign is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>42</sup> Iwan Morgan, *Reagan: American Icon* (New York, NY: IB Tauris, 2016), 278.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, *Reagan*, 280-282.

<sup>44</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, 'First Meeting of the Advisory Group', 4 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 87, file 562955, RRPL.

<sup>45</sup> Cribb to Baker, 'First Meeting of the Advisory Group.'

<sup>46</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, 'Campaign for the Reagan Agenda', March 26, 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, 490581-492673, RRPL.

lacked a background in campaign politics, Cribb served in the White House for almost all of Reagan's presidency, variously in the Office of Cabinet Affairs; the Office of the Counsellor to the President; the Office of Domestic Affairs; and the Department of Justice, positioning him well for the role of devising this campaign.<sup>47</sup> Cribb was later appointed by the White House to conduct extensive research into establishing what Reagan's political legacy was, a project that ultimately saw Cribb leave the White House to pursue it full time at the Heritage Foundation.

Paul Laxalt, member of the Advisory Committee, who had just stepped down both as Senator from Nevada and as general chair of the Republican National Committee, recommended the campaign begin on 1 May 1987, with the following key goals: reconsolidating Reagan's support base, overcoming the Iran-Contra scandal and the appearance that Reagan was a lame duck president, and 'embed[ding] the Reagan principles in the 1988 Republican candidacy for the President and for the 1988 Republican platform.'<sup>48</sup> The other members of the group that Baker assembled were: attorney general Edwin Meese; Ed Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation who was recruited by the White House to write the strategic plan; pollster Richard Wirthlin; Tom Korologos, a close advisor to Reagan; James Cannon, a White House aide and former journalist, who had also worked for Nelson Rockefeller and Gerald Ford; and Tom Griscom, appointed White House communications director shortly after the advisory group was established.<sup>49</sup>

Reagan's attendance and input at these advisory group meetings were vital, and discussions were deliberately kept 'unstructured' to allow Reagan to take the lead in

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<sup>47</sup> Biographical Note in Finding Aid 'Cribb, T. Kenneth Jr. Files, 1987-1989', Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/textual/smof/cribb3.pdf> [last accessed: 10 November 2019].

<sup>48</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, 'Campaign for the Reagan Agenda', March 26, 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, 490581-492673, RRPL.

<sup>49</sup> Cribb to Baker, 'First Meeting of the Advisory Group', RRPL. On Laxalt as the 'First Friend', see Adam Clymer, 'Paul Laxalt, Senator from Nevada and Reagan Confidant, Dies at 96', *New York Times*, 6 August 2018, Online.

establishing which issues he wanted to keep at the fore in this ‘campaign to institutionalize the Reagan philosophy.’<sup>50</sup> Reagan’s advisors deliberately avoided preparing talking points for Reagan in advance, because they wanted his comments to be honest and unscripted. Cribb was especially keen that Reagan respond to the ideas within the briefing in his own words, suggesting that ensuring this strategy fitted organically with the rest of Reagan’s presidency was important to the overall effectiveness of the group’s plan.<sup>51</sup> In discussions with his advisory group, Reagan stated that his goal was, as Cribb noted, ‘to leave behind permanent changes in the federal government which perpetuate the principles for which he stands and which have received the mandate of the American people.’<sup>52</sup> Within this broad goal Reagan outlined a series of priorities. Regarding domestic policy, these included bringing the budget under control and passing a Balanced Budget Amendment, passing a ‘Line Item Veto Amendment’ and enacting ‘Management Reforms’, in addition to moral issues surrounding abortion and school prayer. In terms of foreign policy, Reagan had two priorities: ‘the moral issue presented by nuclear arms’ and ensuring that the ‘Reagan Doctrine’ had replaced the ‘outworn doctrine of containment.’<sup>53</sup> The Reagan Doctrine was not a term coined by the administration, but by a conservative commentator in response to Reagan’s 1985 State of the Union Address, where he stated: ‘We must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.’<sup>54</sup> Essentially, it argued that anti-communist movements abroad ought to be supported by the United States.

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<sup>50</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Ronald Reagan, ‘Meeting with Advisory Group, May 5 1987’, 30 April 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 76, 447480-448099, RRPL.

<sup>51</sup> Cribb to Baker, ‘Advisory Group Meeting on April 30, 1987.’

<sup>52</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, ‘Development of a Strategic Plan for Remainder of the Term’, 26 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 76, 447480-448099, RRPL.

<sup>53</sup> Cribb to Baker, ‘Development of a Strategic Plan’, RRPL.

<sup>54</sup> Chester Pach, ‘The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36.1 (2006), 75-88: 76.

These issues were broadly in keeping with Reagan's priorities throughout his presidency and were reflected in the strategy that the Advisory Group developed. Though these were policy priorities, as we shall see, Reagan's policy goals became part of his longer-term legacy project. It is also important to note Reagan's involvement at this stage of the legacy project. As we shall see, when it came to implementing many of these plans, Reagan himself is conspicuous by his absence.

The extent to which this advisory group was planning for the future is reflected in the overarching theme they selected for Reagan's final two years: 'Preparing for the Twenty-first Century.' Their strategy was subdivided into three themes, which were determined based on Reagan's aforementioned priorities and refined during subsequent discussions with him: '[Economic] Growth', 'A Safer World' and 'Traditional Values.'<sup>55</sup> These themes reflect what Reagan and his advisors considered to be three major areas of Reagan's agenda: economic growth, foreign policy achievements, and social conservatism. Though these are broad categories, they do offer some insight into the administration's priorities. Based on earlier discussions, the advisors drew up lists of potential priorities covering each of these three areas, including 'permanent' budgetary and tax reform, and 'institutionalizing the Strategic Defense Initiative.'<sup>56</sup> Clearly, ensuring that policy changes introduced in the final two years would last was a priority for the administration, as well as consolidating existing achievements. Though at first glance the lists of priorities drawn up by Reagan's advisors appears rather like a laundry list of possible new policies (this particular list featured 55 potential priorities, subdivided into 'major' and 'other' priorities), the desire to institutionalise change is clear throughout.

Baker's group was not alone in tackling the question of how best to use Reagan's final two years in the White House in institutionalising his presidential agenda. Shortly before the

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<sup>55</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, 'Advisory Group Meeting on April 30, 1987', 30 April 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 76, File 447485, RRPL.

<sup>56</sup> Cribb to Baker, 'Advisory Group Meeting.'

group met for the first time, Frederick Ryan Jr., director of the Office of Appointments and Scheduling, submitted a list of possible events for Reagan to attend over the coming two years. These were not intended as “‘quick fix” gimmicks’, Ryan wrote, but instead to convey a long-term positive message.<sup>57</sup> The events were divided into three central categories, including ‘Commander in Chief Events’, events that ‘only the President of the United States can do’, and events showing Reagan ‘actively engaged in the process of government.’<sup>58</sup> Given Reagan’s poor approval ratings in the aftermath of Iran Contra, and combined with his health scares, reasserting Reagan’s position as a strong leader was vital to improving his prospects for achieving anything during his final two years in office. As noted previously, his approval ratings had fallen to 40 percent by late February 1987, a 31-point decrease from January 1986.<sup>59</sup> Stopping this ‘free fall’ was the administration’s immediate priority, and by April 1987 Reagan’s approval ratings had returned to over 50 percent, suggesting a stabilisation in public opinion.<sup>60</sup> The Advisory Group’s ‘campaign’ had not commenced by then, suggesting that short-term damage control measures, or simply the passage of time, were responsible for improving Reagan’s approval ratings rather than their broader project, and instead that the economy was improving and the impact of Iran-Contra seemed to be fading. However, stabilising public opinion was vital to allowing this project to have any sort of positive impact on Reagan’s long-term image.

The final theme for Reagan’s long-term scheduling was ‘Aggressively pursuing his agenda for the next two years.’<sup>61</sup> This final category suggests that, far from consolidating his existing achievements and simply introducing damage control measures, the White House

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<sup>57</sup> Frederick J. Ryan to Howard Baker, ‘Presidential Events’, 5 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 86, 551107, RRPL.

<sup>58</sup> Ryan to Baker, ‘Presidential Events.’

<sup>59</sup> ‘Presidential Job Approval’, *The American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/presidential-job-approval> [last accessed: 5 November 2019].

<sup>60</sup> Frank J. Donatelli to Howard Baker, Ken Duberstein, Thomas Griscom and Kenneth Cribb, ‘Priorities for the Next Two Years’, 8 April 1987, WHORM File FG001-POTUS, Box 80, File 520705, RRPL.

<sup>61</sup> Ryan to Baker, ‘Presidential Events.’

intended to pursue an active agenda during this period. The 1987 State of the Union address offered some insight into what this agenda might look like. The main priorities included ‘a commitment to a western Hemisphere safe from aggression’, a balanced budget, a streamlined programme of welfare reform, a focus on American ‘competitiveness’ and support for reintroducing school prayer.<sup>62</sup> These goals were largely in keeping with the priorities Reagan offered to his Advisory Committee a couple of months later, suggesting a degree of consistency in Reagan’s aspirations for his final years in office. Despite the various factors limiting his political effectiveness, he nevertheless seemed committed to pursuing a set of goals for the remainder of his presidency. This thesis is primarily concerned with how the administration moved from this list of initiatives into thinking more explicitly about legacy building, which we shall see in the coming chapters. I argue that this legacy-building project had a lasting impact on public perceptions of Reagan, helping to cement his status as the standard-bearer for his party for years to come.

When thinking about ways Reagan could pursue his agenda for the coming years, Ryan encouraged presidential travel outside of Washington, DC, in order to show that Reagan, having been confined largely to the city as the Iran-Contra hearings unfolded, was ‘not tied to the White House’, but was actively advancing his domestic and foreign policy goals.<sup>63</sup> He reasoned that undertaking a programme of travel after remaining in the capital for several months would generate media interest. This interest would help the public to see that Reagan was actively pursuing an agenda, rather than abandoning any attempts to advance new policy during his final two years. Among Ryan’s suggestions were events that would promote Reagan’s agenda on health and welfare reform and economic ‘Competitiveness’, which both

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<sup>62</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union’, January 27 1987, *American Presidency Project*, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-congress-the-state-the-union-1> [last accessed 11 November 2019].

<sup>63</sup> Ryan to Baker, ‘Presidential Events.’

featured as themes in Reagan's 1987 State of the Union Address.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, the theme of 'Competitiveness' did not appear in the list of priorities Reagan set out for his Advisory Group, though related economic issues including the budget did feature prominently.

There was some common ground between Ryan's suggestions and the ideas developed by the advisory group convened by Baker. The agenda for its first meeting was divided into three sections: 'Energizing the Reagan Base', 'Strengthening relations with Congress', and 'Revitalizing the Reagan Presidency.'<sup>65</sup> While the first two sections were primarily relating to damage control and reviving support for Reagan ahead of the 1988 election cycle, the final category took a longer-term view. Within this section Baker proposed discussing a potential agenda of 'unfinished Reagan issues' that would appeal to the American public, 'tactics for regaining momentum' in order to advance Reagan's agenda, and finally 'Preservation of the President's Achievements', in order to avoid the 'erosion' of his achievements and ultimately institutionalise the central reforms of the Reagan administration beyond 1988.<sup>66</sup> The fact that, almost two years prior to Reagan's departure from office, his Chief of Staff was turning his attention to preserving Reagan's achievements indicates both the significance of the shifts that had already occurred during his presidency, and the apparent fragility of these developments. For Reagan's final two years in the White House, cementing the advances of the 'Reagan revolution' was a goal to be held in tandem with advancing his policies further.

These goals continued to shift, and the administration refined these 'wish lists' for the remainder of Reagan's presidency. On December 21, 1987, Richard Wirthlin wrote a list of suggestions for the president in 1988, saying that the administration's priorities for the next year ought to be 'continuing to advance and institutionalize the Reagan agenda' and paving the

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<sup>64</sup> Ryan to Baker, 'Presidential Events.'

<sup>65</sup> Cribb to Baker, 'First Meeting of the Advisory Group', RRPL.

<sup>66</sup> Cribb to Baker, 'First Meeting of the Advisory Group', RRPL.

way for the next Republican president.<sup>67</sup> New initiatives were increasingly unlikely as Reagan's term wound to a close, so Wirthlin's commitment to continuing attempts to advance the 'Reagan agenda' are somewhat surprising. However, given that the administration was committed to ensuring the Reagan 'revolution' would continue into the next administration, it made sense for the Reagan White House to establish priorities that could be passed on to the incoming president. Doing so would achieve a degree of consistency between Reagan and Bush and would ultimately further their goal of institutionalising Reagan's achievements into the 1990s. This idea of institutionalising and cementing Reagan's achievements recurs throughout the top-level strategy documents of this period, as we shall see with the Legislative Message outlined in Chapter Two.

### **Looking Backwards**

In November 1986 Gary Schuster, a former CBS News reporter in the White House press corps, was tasked by the administration with researching the final years of the presidents who knew their terms were coming to an end, specifically Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson. He also included Franklin D. Roosevelt in his study because of the 'obvious comparison' between Reagan and Roosevelt, namely the fact that both men had overseen significant shifts in the political direction of the United States.<sup>68</sup> Of course, many of these comparisons were, at best, imperfect. Nevertheless, it is revealing that the administration commissioned this research from Schuster, so they could seek inspiration from previous administrations despite the limited parallels between Reagan and any of his recent predecessors. In considering these former presidents' final years in office Schuster explicitly stated that he was looking for 'lessons' that might be helpful for those responsible for planning Reagan's departure from office. He observed that both Eisenhower and Johnson advanced legislative plans and remained active

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<sup>67</sup> Memorandum from Richard Wirthlin 'Some Suggestions for the Presidency-1988', 21 December 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 85, File 549780, RRPL.

<sup>68</sup> Gary Schuster to Don Regan and Larry Speakes, 'Re. the 1988 Presidential Year', 19 November 1986, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 78, file 483088, RRPL.

politically, but neither of them was ultimately succeeded by their preferred presidential candidate, a key factor in solidifying any legacy-building endeavours, suggesting that any strategy implemented by the respective administrations achieved limited success.

Schuster assessed the effectiveness of their travels and domestic events they attended in some detail, and the administration and the press later paid close attention to Reagan's travel in his final year in office, especially on the 1988 campaign trail. Schuster concluded that in each case 'careful planning' would have made the final year in office more 'worthwhile', encouraging Reagan to remain in line with the first seven years of his presidency rather than risk a costly misstep at the end. He advised Larry Speakes (White House Press Secretary) and Donald Regan (Chief of Staff) to 'get an issue that President Reagan can ride into the Pacific coast sunset' in order to make him seem politically active.<sup>69</sup> As the subsequent chapters of this thesis will demonstrate, the White House took planning Reagan's final year in office seriously, with considerations of his presidential legacy becoming more explicit as his departure from the White House drew closer.

Following Schuster's study, senior officials in the administration began reflecting more carefully on presidential memory, and how previous administrations had navigated the challenges of shaping national memory of their respective presidents. A year before Reagan left office, they made use of a focus group to discuss these matters, made up of white, middle class, suburban Philadelphians, half Democrats and half Republicans. The findings of this focus group were compiled in a report titled 'The Last Ten Months.'<sup>70</sup> The (unknown) author stated that the administration must not try to 'define the legacy' anew in its final year, but instead could 'add to the legacy' by following several policy recommendations.<sup>71</sup> One of the author's primary concerns was that memory of presidents, at least in the report's focus group, was driven

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<sup>69</sup> Shuster to Regan and Speakes, 'Re. the 1988 Presidential Year.'

<sup>70</sup> 'The Last Ten Months', [author unknown- but it may have been produced by Burston-Marsteller, a PR company, on behalf of the White House], WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 85, File 555944, RRPL.

<sup>71</sup> 'The Last Ten Months', WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 85, File 555944, RRPL.

by personality as opposed to particular policies. Similar to Schuster's earlier study, 'The Last Ten Months' turned backwards towards former presidents in search of inspiration. After asking the focus group to think of the word they most associated with last seven former presidents, it became clear that popular memory of presidents was influenced by personality rather than specific policies. While some were remembered favourably, such as Truman ('feisty') and Kennedy ('young, intelligent'), Nixon was branded 'deceitful', and Carter was 'honest' but 'wimpy.' Importantly, the majority of specific policy recollections were negative rather than positive, including 'LBJ: Vietnam', 'Carter: hostages', and 'Ford: pardoned Nixon.'<sup>72</sup>

The author was concerned at the number of people in the focus group who, when asked what words they associated with Reagan, described him as 'likeable, but "out of it."' <sup>73</sup> The report argued that this attitude was the most 'crucial' thing the administration needed to correct in their final year. The author advised several messages Reagan might promote in his final months in office, and strongly suggested Reagan travel widely to communicate these messages so that the nation 'relearns the power and vigor of the man' and 'his underlying popularity resurfaces.'<sup>74</sup> Given Reagan's age, and the fact that concerns regarding his age had recurred throughout his presidency, a desire to focus on his 'vigor' is unsurprising. In terms of policy, the group broadly agreed on what it thought Reagan's main policy changes had been ('increased the national debt, strengthened the military, cut back on social spending'), but was split along partisan lines as to whether any of these changes were positive or negative. Ultimately, the report concluded that the administration must focus on improving public perceptions of Reagan's image, using a carefully constructed communication strategy, rather than attempt to solidify any particular policy change.

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<sup>72</sup> 'The Last Ten Months.'

<sup>73</sup> 'The Last Ten Months.'

<sup>74</sup> 'The Last Ten Months.'

Like Schuster's earlier study, this report paid particular attention to Truman and Eisenhower, as they were the presidents whose final year in office most closely mirrored Reagan's, though as we have seen, the parallels with Truman were limited given the lack of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment and the fact Truman replaced a deceased incumbent president rather than campaigning for his election (though he was on the ticket in 1944). It argued that 'history has written political legacies far different than the contemporary view of the President in his final year', and tried to grapple with whether the incumbent and his administration could do anything to reconcile this difference between post-presidential legacy and their image during their final year in office. The author concluded that, in the cases of Truman and Eisenhower: 'Both Presidents contributed in their final year to their historic legacies through both words and deeds [...]. But neither President successfully used communications to "define" the Presidential legacy for the contemporary public to understand or for history to write.'<sup>75</sup> It is clear that the author felt Reagan could, and should, use his administration's communication strategy in the final ten months of his presidency to positively influence his presidential legacy, despite a lack of evidence that this had been achieved by any previous administration.

The fact that two reports were commissioned (at least one by the White House) into exploring, in different ways, how former administrations had handled these issues of presidential legacy and maximising their final year in the White House indicates that this was a serious consideration for the Reagan White House. They were in an unprecedented situation and clearly wanted to figure out how best to take advantage of it.

### **More Change in the Right Direction**

In July 1988 Richard Wirthlin, evaluating the efforts of the advisory group, told Ken Duberstein, who had succeeded Baker as chief of staff, that its objectives 'have to a large extent

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<sup>75</sup> 'The Last Ten Months.'

been met.’<sup>76</sup> He felt that the progress made because of these changes was key to the administration achieving its objectives during Reagan’s final year in office. Wirthlin argued that putting a ‘positive and enduring cap on the Reagan Presidency’ should be a central goal of the final seven months of the administration. This was to run alongside the White House’s goal of seeing George H. W. Bush, the vice president and the party’s presumptive nominee since his strong performance in the primaries in March 1988, assume the office of the presidency. Wirthlin proposed a theme that would tie together these two goals of improving Bush’s election prospects and highlighting Reagan’s successes: ‘more change in the right direction.’<sup>77</sup> The theme was intended to allude to the shift in national politics that was marked by Reagan’s election in 1980. The word ‘Right’ was intended to work on three levels: ‘right’ as in correct; ‘right’ in the moral sense (as opposed to wrong); and the political right (the opposite of left-wing politics, that is). Wirthlin deemed 1980 a ‘watershed election’, which marked the end of the New Deal and the beginning of a new political cycle. He hoped that the administration would use this ‘historic shift’ to ‘strengthen the President’ as well as bolstering Bush’s presidential campaign.<sup>78</sup> Wirthlin seemed convinced that this shift was already underway, and that a return to New Deal liberalism was no longer possible. By communicating to people that they were experiencing a shift towards a more conservative political order, he argued that the administration could use this rhetoric of change to elevate Reagan’s significance.

Given Reagan’s relative pragmatism in office, Wirthlin’s attempt to paint Reagan as the architect of a new political order is striking. Reagan’s pragmatism can be seen in both economic and foreign policy decisions made throughout his terms in office. For instance, he proposed a drastic and unpopular overhaul of social security early in his first term, which he quickly backtracked on before appointing a bipartisan commission to ensure the nation’s social

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Wirthlin to Kenneth Duberstein, ‘The Last Seven Months’, 11 July 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 11, Folder ‘Last Seven Months July 1988’, RRPL.

<sup>77</sup> Wirthlin to Duberstein, ‘The Last Seven Months.’

<sup>78</sup> Wirthlin to Duberstein, ‘The Last Seven Months.’

security net remained solvent.<sup>79</sup> To do so, the government raised payroll taxes for workers, which seems out of keeping with the prevailing narrative that Reagan was a president who cut taxes.<sup>80</sup> Robert Dallek also highlights Reagan's negotiations with Gorbachev from 1985 to 1989 as the time when Reagan's pragmatism is most evident.<sup>81</sup> Though historians like Gil Troy argue that Reagan only compromised 'pragmatically on occasion', and this occasional pragmatism should not be taken as an indication that Reagan lacked an 'ideological vision', more recent scholarship has convincingly argued that 'Reaganism was full of contradictions' and 'rhetoric and reality parted ways plenty of times' during the 1980s.<sup>82</sup>

Duberstein refined Wirthlin's ideas into a plan for the last six months of the administration, which he deemed 'critically important in terms of how [Reagan's] Presidency is remembered by history.'<sup>83</sup> Fear that the Reagan legacy would 'be dismantled brick by brick' if Bush lost the 1988 election reverberated through Duberstein's recommendations to the president.<sup>84</sup> Wirthlin stressed the need for Reagan to communicate a vision for the future that would show the Reagan 'Revolution' had made progress, but that there was still more to be done. Duberstein argued that Reagan needed to focus on issues that would appeal to core members of the Reagan coalition, reflect his 'agenda of change', and show that Reagan cared about people, and listed an array of approaches the administration could take to convey this to the public.

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<sup>79</sup> Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (New York, NY: Free Press, Simon and Schuster, Inc. 2009), 60.

<sup>80</sup> Bunch, *Tear Down this Myth*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: the Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xvii.

<sup>82</sup> Gil Troy, *The Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106-107; for recent scholarship, see Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2022), 17.

<sup>83</sup> Kenneth M. Duberstein to Ronald Reagan, 'The Last Six Months', 1 August 1988, Mari Maseng Files, Box 5, 'Last Six Months' (folder 2 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>84</sup> Duberstein to Reagan, 'The Last Six Months.'

## **Conclusion**

The Reagan White House clearly developed a strategy for overcoming the travails it had faced in the winter of 1986 and spring of 1987, which was ambitious in scope and sought to both revive Reagan's presidency in the short term and cement Reagan's legacy in the long term. This jump from short-term damage limitation to attempting to institutionalise Reagan's achievements is especially interesting. It shows that the administration was conscious of the unique position it found itself in and was actively trying to make something of the final two years, rather than succumbing to Reagan's position as a lame duck president. Through tracing the various broad strategies established by the administration during this time, we begin to get a sense of achievements the administration sought to highlight, the policies it hoped to advance, and the groundwork it hoped to lay for the Republican Party for years to come. Two central concerns emerge. Firstly, institutionalising and consolidating Reagan's achievements, particularly in economic and foreign policy, were deemed vital by the White House to ensuring that the 'Reagan revolution' of the 1980s would not grind to a halt with a change in administration. Given that there was no guarantee until November 1988 that the next president would be a Republican, it is unsurprising that ensuring policy shifts undertaken during the Reagan administration were as robust as possible was a priority. Of course, there were limitations to how robust these shifts would be, but securing the election of another Republican president offered one of the clearest ways to safeguard against Reagan's legacy being dismantled. It is telling that Reagan did not just campaign for Bush, but also actively campaigned on behalf of Senators and Congressmen as well, suggesting a desire to strengthen the Republican Party as a whole rather than simply focussing on his successor. This level of campaigning would have likely been unfeasible for many of Reagan's predecessors, who would have been campaigning for their own re-election and therefore less likely to engage in this sort of campaigning to strengthen the Republican Party.

This touches on the president's role as party leader, as Reagan was using his final year in office to strengthen the Republican Party, in a bid to secure his own legacy. Although Reagan succeeded in his primary goal of returning a Republican to the White House, the Republicans saw losses in the House, the Senate, as well as contested state legislatures and governorships.<sup>85</sup>

However, there were other considerations permeating these discussions, namely reviving Reagan's reputation and ensuring his legacy would be viewed favourably by generations to come. These two goals are closely linked and speak to a broad awareness of the potential importance Reagan's presidency could have for the course the United States would find itself on from the 1990s onwards. Though the administration was facing a moment of crisis in the spring of 1987, this forced Reagan's closest advisors to consider what they hoped his presidency would mean for generations to come, and these considerations undoubtedly shaped how Reagan conducted his final two years in office.

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<sup>85</sup> Pitney, *After Reagan*, 168.

## Chapter Two: Implementing the Legacy Project, 1986-88

You asked me, did they do this, do they want, intentionally, to fix the legacy? And that's absolutely the case. [...] While he was alive, nobody wanted to talk. People want to keep the secrets [...] so it doesn't take away anything from Reagan [...]. [H]is popularity is his popularity, and our goal was for no one to really think too much about how unpopular he was relatively in the context of those times.<sup>1</sup>

Mari Maseng-Will, interview with the author

Once the Reagan administration had committed to reviving Reagan's image, with a view to improving the president's longer-term legacy, his aides began various projects in order to implement this strategy in the period between the 1986 midterm elections and Reagan's departure from office in 1989. This chapter examines both the substance of what these people wanted Reagan's legacy to look like and assesses how far these initiatives were innovative or unusual compared to previous administrations. It also addresses the fact that some of these projects failed, demonstrating some of the limitations of this sort of manufactured legacy construction. Examining these projects and their successes and failures allows me to argue just how seriously the administration was taking the idea of Reagan's future legacy.

The context of Reagan's status as a lame-duck president whose political influence was waning is important to understanding some of the tactics the administration implemented in the period between 1986 and 1988. As Daniel Franklin argues, 'leaving presidents are in a constant fight to assert their relevance and preserve their legacy', and this issue was central to the administration's thinking during this period.<sup>2</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, Reagan's political standing had also been weakened by the Iran-Contra scandal, which continued into the summer of 1987, in addition to the Republican Party's loss of the Senate and Reagan's ill-health in late 1986 raising questions about his ability to govern effectively. Richard Wirthlin

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<sup>1</sup> Mari Maseng Will, interview by the author, Washington DC/Edinburgh, 14 October 2021 (remote interview via Zoom).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel P. Franklin, *Pitiful Giants: Presidents in Their Final Terms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 115.

observed that forcing Reagan to rely on his veto as his only major political asset would be problematic, and he stated that Reagan ‘plays terrible defense but excellent offense.’<sup>3</sup> This transition from ‘playing’ defensively to offensively became a key theme throughout this period of the Reagan presidency.

This chapter argues that members of the Reagan administration used their positions within the White House to try and influence how the public understood Reagan and the successes of his presidency in new and innovative ways. Doing so allowed them to address two separate but interlocked issues, Reagan’s lame-duck status and his longer-term legacy. Given the extent to which the presidents’ relationships with the press and with the public had evolved in the almost three decades since the United States had seen a successful two-term president, the Reagan administration had opportunities to influence national discussions in ways their predecessors had not. Frank Donatelli remarked in March 1987 that ‘our overriding goal in this important period must be to show clear and steady progress in the President’s fortunes.’<sup>4</sup> He said that the agenda for this year ought to be “doable”, forward looking, politically sexy enough for his conservative supporters, but realistic enough given the constraints of Capitol Hill.<sup>5</sup> Donatelli indicated an awareness of the political limitations of Reagan’s situation, while also showing a desire to advocate new initiatives in addition to defending and consolidating the administration’s achievements prior to the Iran-Contra scandal. I also argue that the Reagan administration was acutely aware of the historical moment they were living through, and many of them saw these smaller ‘legacy projects’ as opportunities to signal the end of New Deal liberalism and solidify the conservative ascendancy of the late twentieth century.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Wirthlin to Donald T. Regan, ‘The 1986 Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities’ 6 November 1985, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 71, File 393361-395999, RRPL.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Tom Griscom, ‘The Next 100 Days’, 18 March 1987, Frank Lavin Files, Series 2, Box 14, folder: General Strategies, RRPL.

<sup>5</sup> Donatelli to Griscom, ‘The Next 100 Days.’

This chapter explores several projects undertaken by the Reagan administration during the final two years in office, which were all intended to have long-lasting consequences for public perceptions of Reagan's presidency, both negating his lame-duck status in the short term and strengthening his legacy in the future. It begins by examining presidential travel, notably Reagan's visit to Europe in 1987 and delivery of his speech at the Brandenburg Gate. This project acted primarily as an attempt to bolster Reagan's approval ratings in the short-term, which was an essential step in securing a longer-term positive legacy for the incumbent. Though some of the aides involved in this project were likely more interested in damage control than in thinking about Reagan's legacy, this damage control was important in allowing the 'legacy builders' to successfully initiate other projects during Reagan's final eighteen months in office. Furthermore, even though this speech was delivered almost a year and a half before Reagan was due to leave office, analysis of the trip's press coverage offers some insights into the president's lame-duck status and the administration's grappling with over how to 'put the best face' on the president's final 18 months in office.<sup>6</sup>

It also examines Reagan's 1988 Legislative Message, which offers the best indication of Reagan's policy hopes for his successor. Since Reagan could not hope to achieve all he set out in this address in his final year in office, it offers the most concrete example of Reagan setting out a written policy roadmap for anyone hoping to cement Reagan's legacy. Many of the issues outlined in this document were contentious contemporary political issues, including abortion and civil rights, making this an especially noteworthy source for examining Reagan's policy stances and hopes for the future.

One of the major political battles of this period was the administration's failed attempt to appoint Robert Bork to the Supreme Court, and the relationship between Reagan's legacy and the Supreme Court was noted in the press coverage of the nomination contest. The Supreme

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<sup>6</sup> Lou Cannon, 'Writing Reagan's Final Scenes', *Washington Post*, 27 July 1987, A1.

Court had been a talking point in the 1980 and 1984 election campaigns, given the advancing age of many of its members and the potential that created for the successful presidential candidate to appoint new, conservative, judges, and Reagan's interest in securing a Supreme Court 'legacy' had been a talking point throughout the 1980s. During the 1986 midterm elections Reagan made his hopes of changing the balance of the Supreme Court a central campaign issue when stressing the importance of retaining Republican control of the Senate, and so this contest threw Reagan's lame-duck status into the spotlight when he found himself challenged by a Democratic-controlled Senate.

To explore the administration's hopes for what Reagan's legacy might look like, I will outline the significance of the *Reagan Record*, 'a new undertaking to defend and advocate the Administration's achievements', as aide Thomas Griscom put it.<sup>7</sup> This project began in February 1988 and was designed to help Reagan to pursue a 'full agenda' in his final year in office. His advisors were concerned that the 'critical environment of an election year' would mean that Reagan's policies were more likely to come under fire from critics, so the *Record* was created 'to help Administration spokesmen responding to such charges.'<sup>8</sup> I will also explore T. Kenneth Cribb's 'Reagan Legacy Project', which was intended to run parallel to the *Reagan Record* project. Taken together, these efforts indicate the concerted effort the administration was making to consolidate its achievements and ensure consistent messaging regarding the central achievements of the Reagan years.

Finally, the Reagan Presidential Library and the appointment of Reagan's official biographer Edmund Morris offer two examples of Reagan and his aides attempting to influence his post-presidential legacy. Exploring Reagan's role in this aspect of his legacy construction highlights two of the projects where he did play an active role, in contrast to many others where

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<sup>7</sup> Memorandum from Thomas Griscom for Senior Officers, 'The Reagan Record Project', 29 February 1988, WHORM Subject File: FG001-POTUS, Box 84, 545160-548810, RRPL.

<sup>8</sup> Griscom for Senior Officers, 'The Reagan Record Project.'

he was far more absent. It is difficult to say with certainty why Reagan was disengaged from many aspects of the wider White House legacy building project, making it even more important to devote attention to the types of projects Reagan himself deemed significant.

Taken together, these various projects demonstrate a concerted effort from the administration to shift from operating defensively, responding to criticisms, towards a more offensive stance, trying to avoid accepting Reagan's fate as a lame duck whose political significance was rapidly waning. Legacy construction was, at least in part, a strategy to escape lame-duck status. This chapter will demonstrate how and why it became an important project in its own right, ultimately resulting in the restoration of Reagan's popularity in time for his final year in office.

### **Presidential Travel**

Presidential travel offers one way for a sitting president to use 'all the tools at his disposal', as Frank Donatelli put it, to improve his image and approval ratings.<sup>9</sup> Given Reagan's politically weakened state, the success of any legacy-building projects relied on stabilising and improving Reagan's short-term image and reasserting his status as a world leader and major player in the realm of foreign affairs. His Cold War policies were also deemed less controversial at this stage in his presidency than they had been previously. In institutional terms, presidents also have more freedom in the realm of foreign policy than domestic policy, particularly when Congress is controlled by the opposing political party.

Engineering a spike in a president's approval ratings by sending the president outside of Washington DC to attend events or deliver speeches was not an unusual strategy for the White House to implement. Indeed, the Reagan administration was aware of the potential that

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<sup>9</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Tom Griscom, 'The Next 100 Days', 18 March 1987, Frank Lavin Files, Series 2, Box 14, folder: General Strategies, RRPL.

travel offered as an avenue for improving approval ratings and garnering positive press coverage. They had successfully implemented this strategy during Reagan's earlier trip to Europe in 1984, in the summer before his bid for re-election.<sup>10</sup> During that trip, high-profile speeches at the G7 meeting in London and at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day commemorations in Normandy created images of Reagan performing the role of world leader effectively, while distracting the media from focussing on the criticisms his policies were facing during the Democratic primaries. This offered a positive precedent for the administration to work towards in the 1987 trip, as the success of the 1984 trip bolstered support for Reagan at another critical moment during his presidency.

In the summer of 1987 Reagan was due to return to Europe. This time, his trip included a visit to Rome for the 13<sup>th</sup> G7 Summit, an audience with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican City, and two days in Germany visiting Bonn and West Berlin. Frank Donatelli, head of political and intergovernmental affairs, remarked that the domestic policy implications of Reagan's visit to Europe in 1987 were 'just as important' as the foreign policy implications, stating that it offered a chance to 'show the President back on the world stage as a major player.'<sup>11</sup> He added that events that could have a positive impact on domestic audiences should be given 'maximum consideration.'<sup>12</sup> Evidently, the White House was hopeful that an overseas trip could generate a spike in Reagan's approval ratings.

There is clear evidence that Reagan's public appearances during this tour were designed to maximise the domestic impact of these events.<sup>13</sup> One of the most famous speeches Reagan delivered during his second term were his remarks on East-West relations at the Brandenburg

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Margaret Grace Thomson, 'Presidential Travel and the Rose Garden Strategy: A Case Study of Ronald Reagan's 1984 Tour of Europe.' *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50.4 (2020), 864–88: 865.

<sup>11</sup> Donatelli to Griscom, 'The Next 100 Days.'

<sup>12</sup> Donatelli to Griscom, 'The Next 100 Days.'

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks on East-West Relations at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin', 12 June 1987, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-east-west-relations-brandenburg-gate-west-berlin> [last accessed 28 October 2021].

Gate, often known as the ‘tear down this wall’ speech. The crowd who attended the speech was ‘carefully selected’, allowing the administration to limit the risk of opposition to Reagan’s speech or protests against his remarks. The audience was also supplied with hundreds of American flags to wave during the speech, indicating that the administration wanted to ensure that visual and audio recording of the speech showed Reagan receiving support for his remarks, and to stir feelings of patriotism in overseas observers. The speech was delivered at 8am EDT, which allowed the coverage to be broadcast live in the United States on breakfast television.<sup>14</sup> This was not the first time the administration had timed a high-profile speech in this way. In 1984 when Reagan delivered his address on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day at Pointe du Hoc, the timing of the speech was adjusted to ensure optimal breakfast news coverage in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Staging this speech with a pre-selected audience, with predominantly Americans in the front rows, armed with American flags helped to generate patriotic images that adorned the front pages of all the major national newspapers the day after Reagan delivered his speech.<sup>16</sup> The front page of the *New York Times* featuring a photo of a smiling Reagan giving a thumbs up to the applauding crowd, while a large American flag flew in the foreground. The image was captioned ‘Reagan calls on Gorbachev to Tear Down the Berlin Wall’, showing Reagan as a confident and assertive world leader.<sup>17</sup> According to the accompanying article, some members of the administration had hoped to use this speech as an opportunity to make a ‘major policy statement’, but lost out to advisors who wanted to focus on broader questions about East-West relations and Gorbachev’s political stance on the arms race.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front page with the subsequently well-known quotation from Reagan’s

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<sup>14</sup> Helen Thomas, ‘Reagan to Call for Berlin Wall’s End’, *Washington Post*, 12 June 1987, A1.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, ‘Presidential Travel and the Rose Garden Strategy’, 873.

<sup>16</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Challenges Soviets to Dismantle Berlin Wall’, *Washington Post*, 13 June 1987, A1.

<sup>17</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, ‘Reagan calls on Gorbachev to Tear Down the Berlin Wall’, *New York Times*, 13 June 1987, A1.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd, ‘Reagan calls on Gorbachev to Tear Down the Berlin Wall.’

speech, 'Mr. Gorbachev, Open This Gate, Tear Down This Wall', accompanied by a similar photograph of Reagan and his supportive audience.<sup>19</sup>

However, press coverage was not universally supportive of the president's efforts, showing the limitations of the administration's attempts to manipulate media coverage in Reagan's favour. The *Washington Post* coverage was less favourable to the White House, with the front page reading: 'Reagan Challenges Soviets To Dismantle Berlin Wall: Aides Disappointed at Crowd's Lukewarm Reception.'<sup>20</sup> As with the *New York Times*, the front page did feature a photograph of Reagan delivering his speech in front of a cheering crowd and a sea of American flags, along with a second photo of Reagan giving the speech inside the paper accompanying his speech. Reporter Lou Cannon wrote that although the remarks were 'intended as a dramatic capstone' to Reagan's ten days in Europe, his more rousing comments received 'only scattered applause.'<sup>21</sup>

Despite this speech receiving a more lukewarm response than the administration had hoped for, Reagan's tour presented a series of other photo opportunities, which helped to keep Reagan in the headlines while fulfilling his role as head of state. For instance, Reagan's private meeting with the Pope in the Vatican City made the front pages, with a photograph of the two leaders appearing on the front page of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>22</sup> Reagan's discussions about US-Soviet relations with the Pope generated particular interest in the press. Another photo opportunity from Reagan's time in Berlin was his trip to the celebrations of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Berlin. The *Washington Post* featured a second photo of the president in their coverage of his time in Germany, this time standing alongside Nancy and the U.S. Ambassador Richard Burt in front of a large, tiered cake iced with the

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<sup>19</sup> AP, 'Mr. Gorbachev, Open This Gate, Tear Down This Wall', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 June 1987, A1.

<sup>20</sup> Cannon, 'Reagan Challenges Soviets.'

<sup>21</sup> Cannon, 'Reagan Challenges Soviets.'

<sup>22</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, 'President and Pope Meet at the Vatican', *New York Times*, 7 June 1987, A1; 'Papal Greeting', *Washington Post*, 7 June 1987, A1; Jack Nelson and James Gerstenzang, 'Reagan Tells Pope of Arms Pact Hope', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 June 1987, A1.

words ‘Happy Birthday Berlin.’<sup>23</sup> Reagan also made some attempts to speak German during his remarks on this occasion, which garnered some press attention. Though quite a trivial event, these sorts of low-stakes photo opportunities nevertheless offered a means of putting Reagan back into the spotlight and avoiding accusations that he was merely a ‘caretaker’ president biding his time in the White House until the election of his successor.<sup>24</sup>

However, just as coverage of the speech at the Brandenburg Gate had been mixed, press coverage of the remainder of Reagan’s trip was far from universally positive, and in fact raised further concerns about Reagan’s capability as president. Following his appearance at the G7, the *New York Times* reported that Reagan’s performance ‘left the other leaders [...] convinced that he has rather suddenly begun to show his age and lame duck status’ and questioned whether Reagan had the energy and ‘initiative’ to lead the alliance successfully.<sup>25</sup> The report added that the White House had hoped this tour would ‘invigorate’ the Reagan presidency by demonstrating his ability to ‘guide and inspire’ other democratic nations. Instead, Reagan’s attendance at the summit appeared to raise additional questions about the extent to which Reagan could expect to have a successful final two years in the White House. European diplomats expressed concern that Reagan seemed ‘preoccupied and distracted’ during the summit and remarked on the contrast between his appearance in Venice and his attendance at the 1986 summit in Tokyo. Similarly, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the administration had one goal for the 10-day trip, to show that ‘despite the Iran-Contra scandal and his diminished standing at home, the President could still perform as a superstar on the

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<sup>23</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Challenges Gorbachev to ‘Tear Down’ the Berlin Wall’, *Washington Post*, 13 June 1987, A19.

<sup>24</sup> John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 143.

<sup>25</sup> David Hoffman, ‘Reagan’s Role Reduced, Summit Diplomats Report’, *New York Times*, 11 June 1987, A1.

international political stage.<sup>26</sup> Damningly, the report went on to say that Reagan had ‘demonstrated instead that his star is fading abroad as at home.’<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact the trip was not as well-received as it could have been, it is still important to examine the range of different projects the administration undertook to try and strengthen Reagan’s image. In fact, as we shall see, many of the projects the Reagan administration embarked upon during this period are, to some degree, unsuccessful. In this instance, it is clear from both the press coverage the trip received and Donatelli’s correspondence ahead of the tour that the White House had high hopes for overseas travel helping to revive Reagan’s public image. While the trip was widely publicised and his address at the Brandenburg Gate was broadly, if not universally, well-received, his performance at the G7 Summit was deemed lacklustre at best and, at worst, raised concerns about his ability to complete a second term in office. Ultimately, the administration’s use of the Rose Garden Strategy (a strategy whereby incumbents running for re-election embracing the office of the presidency while avoiding overtly campaigning) at this time demonstrates their eagerness to salvage Reagan’s administration, and an attempt to try and improve Reagan’s short-term image to strengthen the legacy projects that came afterwards.

### **The Legislative Message**

One vital means by which to consider Reagan’s policy legacy for the next US president is by examining his 1988 Legislative and Administrative Message, which outlined Reagan’s policy recommendations for his successor. This written message to Congress was delivered on the same day as Reagan’s final State of the Union Address in January 1988 and offered a wide array of policy proposals and priorities for the nation, the majority of which could not have

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<sup>26</sup> Jack Nelson, ‘Reagan Impact Slights on Venice Conference’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1987, A1.

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, ‘Reagan Impact Slights on Venice Conference.’

been enacted in Reagan's final eleven months in office. Therefore, this 42-page document offers a valuable insight into the aspirations Reagan had for the incoming administration and the continuation of his legacy in terms of policy proposals, in other words, a conscious attempt to bequeath a legacy. As a Republican president negotiating with a Democrat-controlled House and Senate this written statement allowed him to outline an agenda listing his aspirations for his final year in office, in spite of the fact he was politically limited by his lame duck status and his party's position as the congressional minority. An aide to Reagan argued that this message would please his supporters, who were hoping for Reagan to 'remain in an aggressive posture in his last year in office.'<sup>28</sup> The fact that Reagan could not have hoped to enact many of these policies during his final year in office tells us that this project was more about Reagan's legacy and looking to the future than about avoiding lame duck status, though the two were closely linked during this period.

The timing of the message is noteworthy as the primary races were not underway yet, so this Message acted as a manifesto for whoever the incoming candidate would be. Rather than guidance specifically for George HW Bush, we can read this document as Reagan's manifesto for the future policy decisions of whoever his successor would be, as well as an opportunity to frame his legacy. Reagan concluded the Message by saying that he hoped the policies he had put forward would 'preserve these same blessings for our posterity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.'<sup>29</sup> This offers an indication of the fact that this message to Congress was intended to offer suggestions for the future; the administration could not hope to achieve everything Reagan proposed before the end of his presidency, so this served instead as a guide to follow for the next generation of Republicans.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Pears, 'Reagan to Seek Reduction on Capital Gains Tax', *New York Times*, 24 January 1988, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald Reagan, '1988 Legislative and Administrative Message: A Union of Individuals', private collection of T. Kenneth Cribb, 39.

The Message was divided into six thematic sections: ‘To Form a More Perfect Union’, ‘To Establish Justice’, ‘To Insure Domestic Tranquillity’, ‘To Provide for the Common Defense’, ‘To Promote the General Welfare’ and ‘To Secure the Blessings of Liberty.’<sup>30</sup> These six categories are listed in the Preamble to the US Constitution, indicating Reagan’s belief that the United States could return to its founding principles, an important theme for the Right during this era, by following the advice Reagan was laying out. Reagan stated that it was a ‘sacred duty’ of the President to ensure that government remained within these constitutional limits and did not infringe upon people’s individual liberties.<sup>31</sup> The Message was prepared by T. Kenneth Cribb, then Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs. He states in a recent interview that the decision to use the preamble to the Constitution in this way was deliberately intended to reflect ‘the President’s belief how important the Constitution was, and how important it was to keep within the limits of the Constitution for the question of freedom and personal liberty.’<sup>32</sup> Cribb went on to argue that the Message offered ‘probably the most emphatic marker there is about President Reagan leaving a policy legacy’ given how many proposals were outlined in the Message which simply could not have been enacted during Reagan’s remaining months in office.<sup>33</sup>

Turning to the substance of the Message, the first item on the list was a ‘balanced budget amendment’, which was of course a rebuttal to the frequent criticisms Reagan had faced about his role in increasing the national deficit. Historian Iwan Morgan has argued that ‘the deficit had become the other red peril at the very moment that America’s confrontation with the original one of communism was coming to a successful conclusion.’<sup>34</sup> The deficit also raised

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message: A Union of Individuals’, private collection of T. Kenneth Cribb.

<sup>31</sup> Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message.’

<sup>32</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC, 21 January 2022 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

<sup>33</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC, 21 January 2022 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

<sup>34</sup> Iwan Morgan, *The Age of Deficits: Presidents and Unbalanced Budgets from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 1.

questions about ‘the legacy of Reaganomics’, and Morgan argues that these debates around Reagan’s fiscal legacy have continued well beyond the Reagan years, offering another insight into the discrepancies between the Reagan legacy project and the reality of Reagan’s record.<sup>35</sup> On this topic, Reagan stated that it was ‘our political system’ which made it ‘extremely difficult to reduce the deficit’ and said that he would be a ‘willing partner’ in working with Congress to achieve a balanced budget amendment in 1988.<sup>36</sup> The political implications of this statement in the context of an election year were clear. As we will see in Chapters Three and Four, Reagan consistently sought to blame Congressional opposition for the budget deficit to minimise criticisms of his administration’s spending policies during his presidency and preserve Republicans’ reputation for responsible fiscal policies.

The Message made regular references to an array of contentious debates and episodes from Reagan’s presidency. After addressing one of his administration’s major shortfalls, he addressed his legacy directly in the second section, ‘To Establish Justice’, noting that ‘one of the most satisfactory legacies of my presidency’ was the work his administration had carried out to ‘restore the foundations of American government’ by ‘faithful interpretation and observance of the Constitution.’<sup>37</sup> He cited his Supreme Court appointments as evidence of this, along with his appointment of judges who were ‘tough on crime.’ He made a thinly veiled reference to the failed nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court when he ‘urged’ the Senate to remember its ‘constitutional duty in the confirmation process’ to support judges who would ‘faithfully interpret’ the constitution. Of course, there are a variety of different ways in which people believe the Constitution must be interpreted, with some advocating for the Constitution to be treated as a ‘living’, malleable document. Reagan also listed a wide range of potential policies relating to domestic, and specifically justice, issues including ‘legal services

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<sup>35</sup> Morgan, *The Age of Deficits*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message.’

<sup>37</sup> Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message.’

for the needy’, ‘restoration of the federal death penalty’, ‘the fight against terrorism’ and ‘prison capacity expansion.’

On foreign policy, Reagan stated that the accomplishments of his presidency could be furthered only by ‘maintaining our strength.’ He advocated increasing the national defence budget and noted that within the ‘constitutional framework’ the President has ‘important independent powers’ in the realm of foreign policy.<sup>38</sup> He argued that while the President was responsible for working alongside Congress to achieve foreign policy goals, it was vital that Congress respect the President’s need for ‘flexibility’ to respond quickly to ‘unpredictable and fast-moving challenges.’ This section seemed to call for an increase in the powers of the President, and seemed critical of the 1973 War Powers Resolution, which was intended to prevent presidents from committing troops to conflicts without congressional approval. There were also concrete attempts to limit presidential power in the realm of foreign policy during the Reagan administration in the form of the 1982-1984 Boland Amendments, which limited US intervention in the Contras in Nicaragua, setting the stage for the Iran-Contra scandal that mired Reagan’s second term. The extent to which Reagan had breached these amendments became a crucial issue in the Iran-Contra scandal, as Reagan continued to supply arms to the Contras in spite of this restriction on his authority to do so.

During his commentary on the ‘general welfare’ of the nation Reagan returned to the theme of looking to the future and thinking more explicitly about his legacy. He stated that his goal was ‘to ensure that my administration leaves a “legacy” of good management of today’s problems, with plans in place to handle tomorrow’s challenges.’<sup>39</sup> Again, this indicates that Reagan was clearly using this document as a means to offer suggestions for future policies that would be in keeping with the so-called Reagan revolution.

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<sup>38</sup> Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message.’

<sup>39</sup> Reagan, ‘1988 Legislative and Administrative Message.’

Press coverage of the Message was relatively limited, appearing in the *Washington Post* but not the *New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times*. It is unclear whether this lack of attention was due to the Message not going as well as planned, or whether any impact of the Message was more for the politicians who would be reading it rather than a manifesto for the public, who would be more likely to engage with the shorter State of the Union address. However, the press did highlight Reagan's 'strong criticism' of legislation to 'combat racial discrimination in schools and other institutions receiving federal funds' within the Message.<sup>40</sup> The legislation in question was the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987, which was a bill stating that any organisation receiving federal funds should comply with civil rights legislation across all of its departments, not just the department receiving financial support. This became contentious as such legislation would potentially broaden abortion access in the United States. It would potentially force organisations such as Catholic hospitals and educational institutions, which had previously been allowed to receive federal funds without providing abortion access, to do so in order to receive federal funding.<sup>41</sup> Reagan vetoed the bill in March 1988. He was reportedly concerned about the 'vague and sweeping nature' of this legislation and its implications for 'intrusive regulation' impacting citizens' day-to-day lives.<sup>42</sup> An amendment to the Bill was made clarifying that entities receiving federal funding did not have to fund or provide abortion access, but that they could not discriminate against women using these services elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> Though this amendment continued to be disputed by the National Organization for Women and other pro-choice groups, Reagan's veto was ultimately overturned by the Senate with broad bipartisan support, with 21 of 48 Republican senators

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<sup>40</sup> Lou Cannon, 'President Extols State of Union', *Washington Post*, 26 January 1988, A1.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh Davis Graham, 'The Storm over Grove City College: Civil Rights Regulation, Higher Education, and the Reagan Administration', *History of Education Quarterly*, 1998, 38.4, 407-429: 419.

<sup>42</sup> Lou Cannon, 'President Extols State of Union.'

<sup>43</sup> Jill Lawrence, 'Senate Passes Civil Rights Bill with Abortion-Limiting Amendment', AP, 29 January 1989.

overruling Reagan's decision (and all 52 Democrats).<sup>44</sup> It is unsurprising that the more conservative social policies of the Message grabbed the attention of the press, though there were many other controversial policy statements contained within the message.

Whether or not Bush saw the Legislative Message as a roadmap to follow is hard to say, but it is clear that Reagan wanted to offer policy suggestions to whoever his successor would be, while also using this message as an opportunity to frame his legacy in some detail, often presenting his legacy as more conservative than the reality. The focus on returning to the values of the Constitution and restoring the powers of the presidency spoke to a particular brand of American conservatism, and also allowed Reagan to blame Congress for the shortcomings of his presidency. It is also worth noting the timing of this Message, at the start of the US primary elections. The Message therefore offered a roadmap to any Republican presidential hopeful that aspired to continue the work that Reagan and his administration had started in the 1980s. As we shall see in Chapter Three, debates over who was the true heir to Reagan's legacy featured heavily in public discourse.

### **Robert Bork and a 'Referendum on the Reagan Revolution'**

The notion of a Supreme Court presidential legacy was still relatively new by the time of Reagan's presidency, and these appointments had become increasingly politicised by the late 1960s. Reagan had the power to change the balance of the Supreme Court with his nomination of Robert Bork in 1987, something which made this appointment more politically consequential than his previous nominees. Bork was being nominated to replace Lewis F. Powell Jr., a Justice who was often the deciding vote in close decisions. Powell tended to vote more moderately, so successfully appointing a conservative to replace him meant Reagan

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<sup>44</sup> 'Senate Vote #487 in 1988 (100<sup>th</sup> Congress), 'To Adopt, over the President's Veto of S.557, Civil Rights Restoration Act' [accessed 19 August 2022: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/100-1988/s487>].

would likely change the balance of the Supreme Court in favour of a constitutional interpretation that right-wing Republican Party and conservative movement politicians were more likely to support. This presented an opportunity for a showdown between Reagan, the lame-duck president, and the Democratic-controlled Senate, which historian Joe Ryan-Hume has branded ‘a referendum on the Reagan Revolution as a whole.’<sup>45</sup> Bork was a controversial choice given his judicial philosophy and career. He was expected to oppose abortion and civil rights legislation and roll back Supreme Court decisions that protected the rights of minority groups across the United States. Reagan’s choice therefore reflects the right-wing social policies of his administration, which were popular among pro-life and other Christian organisations who had thus far been disappointed by Reagan’s lack of progress on social issues including abortion and school prayer.

During the 1980 and 1984 presidential election campaigns, there was much discussion about the impact of a Republican president on the political makeup of the Supreme Court. When Reagan was elected in 1980, five of the nine sitting Justices were over 70 years old.<sup>46</sup> Given the advancing age of several of the Justices, Reagan’s opponents argued that his election would ‘almost certainly’ push the political leaning of the Supreme Court to the right.<sup>47</sup> Reagan made his first Supreme Court appointment in 1981, nominating Sandra Day O’Connor, followed by Antonia Scalia in 1986 after elevating William Rehnquist to the chief justiceship.<sup>48</sup> However, none of these changes risked changing the overall makeup of the Supreme Court in the way that Bork’s did, given his conservative record. As political scientist Richard Hodder-Williams aptly summarised, ‘for liberal activists, Powell was still too conservative [...] for

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<sup>45</sup> Joe Ryan-Hume ‘The 1986 Midterms: The End of the Reagan Revolution?’ in *Midterms and Mandates: Electoral Reassessment of Presidents and Parties*, (eds) Patrick Andelic, Mark McLay and Robert Mason (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 284-307: 297.

<sup>46</sup> Jack Greenberg, ‘A Reagan Supreme Court’, *New York Times*, 15 September 1980, A23.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew E. Hunt, ‘Ronald Reagan and the Supreme Court’ in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 117.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Hodder-Williams, ‘The Strange Story of Judge Robert Bork and the United States Supreme Court’, *Political Studies*, Vol. 36 (1988), 613-637: 614-615.

conservative activists, Powell had too many liberal tendencies.’<sup>49</sup> Successfully replacing Powell with Bork was therefore an especially appealing prospect for the American conservative movement, offering a means for Reagan to ensure his ‘agenda far outlasted his administration.’<sup>50</sup>

This was particularly true in the case of some of the social issues advocated by the Reagan administration, with Powell’s retirement raising questions about the future for civil rights and abortion legislation across the United States. In 1985 Powell had given the deciding vote that blocked a ‘major federal program of aid’ for private religious schools and was also the deciding vote when the Supreme Court had reaffirmed its commitment to the constitutional right to abortion, first established in 1973.<sup>51</sup> The potential appointment of Robert Bork was contentious largely because it threatened these advances in civil rights legislation. During the 1986 midterm elections Reagan made his hopes of changing the balance of the Supreme Court a central campaign issue when stressing the importance of retaining Republican control of the Senate. This was especially true during speeches he gave in the southern states in support of Republican Senate candidates, where Reagan stressed the importance of appointing Supreme Court judges who would ‘be tough on crime.’<sup>52</sup>

Reagan’s status as a lame-duck president, and the Republican Party’s poor performance in the 1986 midterm elections, were both important factors in the process of appointing Judge Bork to the Supreme Court. Reagan’s position as an outgoing president with diminished political power meant he was unable to ‘bring pressure to bear on recalcitrant senators’, noted Hodder-Williams, making the task of achieving a Senate majority significantly greater.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, given the lengthy process of making appointments to the Supreme Court, there

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<sup>49</sup> Hodder-Williams, ‘The Strange Story of Judge Robert Bork’, 616.

<sup>50</sup> Ryan-Hume, ‘The 1986 Midterms’, 297.

<sup>51</sup> Al Kamen, ‘Justice Powell Resigns, Was Supreme Court’s Pivotal Vote’, *Washington Post*, 27 June 1987, A1.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen M. Griffin, ‘Politics and the Supreme Court: The Case of the Bork Nomination’, *Journal of Law and Politics*, Vol 5.3 (1989), 551-604: 556.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Hodder-Williams, ‘The Strange Story of Judge Robert Bork’, 623.

was a risk that if Reagan's first nomination failed then he may not have time to make any successful appointment before the end of his presidency.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, following Reagan's nomination, Bork needed to secure the support of the majority of the Senate in order to confirm his nomination. However, following the 1986 midterms the Republican Party lost control of the Senate, with the Democratic Party having a majority of 55-45 seats. Therefore, to secure Bork's nomination at least a handful of Democratic senators would have to support Reagan's preferred candidate. In line with many other prominent civil rights issues of the era, southern Democrats and moderate Republicans looked to be the more important votes.<sup>55</sup> However, five freshman southern senators had won their respective elections because of support from minority voters, including African Americans, who were unlikely to be supportive of a Supreme Court justice who was unlikely to support civil rights issues.<sup>56</sup> This change in the political landscape between the beginning of Reagan's presidency and its final two years had important consequences for his Supreme Court legacy.

Traditionally, a Supreme Court nomination was unlikely to foster such a partisan division, making this episode especially noteworthy. The significance of this Supreme Court appointment is neatly captured in the *Newsweek* headline, 'Powell's departure from the Supreme Court gives a weakened Reagan a chance at a legacy.'<sup>57</sup> The magazine's reporters wrote that the chance to appoint a new Supreme Court justice 'offered an opportunity to lift [Reagan's] fading presidency out of the Iran-Contra mess.'<sup>58</sup> The *Washington Post* reported that Reagan's appointment of the conservative Robert Bork, alongside 'the resurrection of his old-time conservative economic agenda' were 'parts of an effort to preventing his presidency

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<sup>54</sup> Al Kamen, 'Justice Powell Resigns, Was Supreme Court's Pivotal Vote', *Washington Post*, 27 June 1987, A1.

<sup>55</sup> Griffin, 'Politics and the Supreme Court', 557.

<sup>56</sup> Ryan-Hume, 'The 1986 Midterms', 296.

<sup>57</sup> Ann McDaniel, Margaret Garrard Warner, Howard Fineman and Tessa Namuth, 'Will the Court Turn Right?' *Newsweek*, 6 July 1987 (Vol. 110, Issue 1), 16-18.

<sup>58</sup> McDaniel, Warner, Fineman and Namuth, 'Will the Court Turn Right?', 16.

from fading into the past tense.’<sup>59</sup> Additionally, for the same newspaper, Lou Cannon reported in late July 1987 that Reagan’s aides were in a ‘battle’ over how to ‘put the best face’ on the president’s final 18 months in office.<sup>60</sup> Cannon discussed how Reagan’s Chief of Staff Howard Baker wanted to pursue a ‘limited but big-ticket agenda’ focussing on arms control and budget compromise, in contrast to conservatives who wanted Reagan to ‘draw clear partisan lines’ for the 1988 election and ‘go out fighting.’<sup>61</sup> This press coverage offers a sense of the political climate in which this nomination debate was taking place, and of the significance of this appointment in long-term perceptions of Reagan and the success of his presidency.

Accordingly, the administration invested a significant amount of time and resources into trying to ensure Bork’s place on the Supreme Court, in anticipation of the controversy that would surround this appointment. The Office of Public Liaison devised a media plan for the Bork nomination which included an initial focus on nine key states, circulating a daily compilation of news articles and editorials on Bork to key members of the administration to keep them informed about ‘emerging opinion surrounding the nomination.’<sup>62</sup> They also established a tracking system whereby they would log favourable and unfavourable editorials, columns, letters and news reports about Robert Bork in order to ‘follow the story and initiate responses.’<sup>63</sup> The administration was also aware of a need to generate grassroots support for Bork, as this nomination was likely to be contentious.

A briefing on the Bork nomination was planned for 23 September 1987, a week after the beginning of the Senate hearings to consider Bork’s candidacy. This timing was to allow the administration, noted Rudy Beserra, ‘time to assess the impact of the testimony and rally

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<sup>59</sup> Lou Cannon and David Hoffman, ‘Reagan’s Mood is Uncompromising’, *Washington Post* 6 July 1987, A1.

<sup>60</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Writing Reagan’s Final Scenes’, *Washington Post*, 27 July 1987, A1.

<sup>61</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Writing Reagan’s Final Scenes.’

<sup>62</sup> ‘Media Plan for the Bork Nomination’, 12 August 1987, Carl Anderson Files, Box OA 15050, Folder: Bork-Media Plan (1 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>63</sup> Memorandum from Joe Rodota to David Chew, ‘Tracking of Bork Editorials and Reports’, 24 July 1987, David Chew Files (Operations, Office of), OA 14941, Judge Robert Bork Nomination (1 of 6), RRPL.

the troops.’<sup>64</sup> Attendees at this event included representatives from the business sector and organisations which had publicly supported Bork. Linas Kojelis, special assistant to the president for public liaison, compiled an additional list of potential attendees with an ‘ability to mobilise grass roots support’ in their respective ethnic communities, including Baltic, Czechoslovak, Latvian, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian community leaders, as well as leaders of grassroots groups like Citizens for Reagan, Citizens for America and the Conservative Action Foundation. The administration also expected that Bork would receive ‘unprecedented’ support from the Hispanic community, given the tendency for Hispanic voters to be Catholic and therefore in support of a pro-life candidate, and the administration was ‘pursuing [this] vigorously.’<sup>65</sup> The aim was for these grassroots activists to put pressure on their respective senators to support Bork’s candidacy.

One demographic the administration was especially keen to mobilise was the ‘pro-life’ movement, as successfully nominating Bork to the Supreme Court provided an opportunity, they believed, to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that legalised abortion. They appealed to an array of religious organisations in addition to grassroots projects such as ‘Concerned Women for America’, a conservative women’s organization with over half a million members across the United States.<sup>66</sup> The front page of a Christian Action Council Newsletter from July 1987 announced that ‘Christmas came early for proliferators this year’ as Powell announced his retirement from the Supreme Court, stating that Bork’s nomination marked ‘D-Day for the Pro-life Movement!’ and encouraging their members to write to their senators in support of Bork’s candidacy.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Memorandum from Carl Anderson to Ken Cribb, ‘Bork Event on September 23, 1987’, Anderson, Carl Files, folder: Bork: Office of Public Liaison (1 of 5), Box OA 15050, RRPL.

<sup>65</sup> Memorandum from Rudy Beserra to Carl Anderson, ‘Status Report on Hispanic support for Judge Bork’, Anderson, Carl Files, folder: Bork: Office of Public Liaison (1 of 5), Box OA 15050, RRPL.

<sup>66</sup> Memorandum from Carol Hornby and Charlotte De Moss to Carl Anderson, ‘Summary of constituent activity on the Bork Nomination’, 22 July 1987, Carl Anderson Files, Box OA 15050, Folder: Bork- Office of Public Liaison (2 of 5), RRPL.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Action Line: Christian Action Council Newsletter’, Vol. XI, No. 5, 20 July 1987, Carl Anderson Files, OA 15050 [Bork, Office of Public Liaison] folder 2 of 5, RRPL.

A central aspect of the debate was the question of whether the Senate had the right to reject an otherwise qualified candidate on the grounds of their political leaning or judicial philosophy. Bork's supporters argued that he was the 'heir to a long and noble tradition of responsible judging', which Senator Bob Dole described as 'the principle that judges are supposed to interpret the law and not make it.'<sup>68</sup> Indeed, few were willing to dispute Bork's legal credentials. However, on the other side of the debate, liberal Democrat Senator Ted Kennedy argued on the day Reagan announced his nominee:

Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, school children could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists would be censored at the whim of government, and the doors of the Federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens for whom the judiciary is often the only protector of the individual rights that are at the heart of our democracy.<sup>69</sup>

The debate therefore became one centred around Bork's judicial philosophy and ideology.<sup>70</sup> Though many on the right tried to emphasise Bork's credentials and opposition to 'judicial activism', Norma Viera and Leonard Gross argue that the right 'saw Bork's ascension to the Court as a culmination of the Reagan revolution.'<sup>71</sup>

Andrew Hunt has argued that the Reagan administration was unprepared for the 'well organized and intense resistance from liberals' that the Bork nomination faced, and that they were unequipped to deal with the consequences.<sup>72</sup> In the press, Howard Baker was dubbed 'the quintessential congressional operator' who had faced a 'difficult but manageable task' in ensuring Bork's confirmation.<sup>73</sup> However, those opposed to the Bork nomination successfully

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<sup>68</sup> Damon Root, *Overruled: The Long War for Control of the U.S. Supreme Court* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 78.

<sup>69</sup> Ted Kennedy, quoted in Root, *Overruled*, 78.

<sup>70</sup> Norman Viera and Leonard Gross, *Supreme Court Appointments: Judge Bork and the Politicization of Senate Confirmations* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), vii.

<sup>71</sup> Viera and Gross, *Supreme Court Appointments*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew E. Hunt, 'Ronald Reagan and the Supreme Court' in *A Companion to Ronald Reagan*, ed. Andrew L. Johns (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 125.

<sup>73</sup> James Gerstenzang and Sara Fritz, 'Blame for Bork Debacle Likely to Fall on Baker', *Los Angeles Times*, 9 October 1987, A1.

delayed the start of his confirmation hearings, buying time to prepare a more coherent and substantial campaign against Bork's confirmation.<sup>74</sup> Bork's nomination was announced in July 1987, but the hearings did not take place until September 1987. As Bork's position as the frontrunner was known even before Reagan made the formal announcement, opponents to the nomination began preparing their opposition strategy the weekend before, including drafting Senator Kennedy's aforementioned speech.<sup>75</sup> Bork's nomination was ultimately defeated by 58-42 votes in the Senate, a 'major symbolic victory' for liberals in Reagan's America.<sup>76</sup>

Following the failure of Judge Bork's nomination, the Reagan administration faced further embarrassment as it attempted to find an alternative nominee for the Supreme Court appointment. Reagan's second nominee was Douglas H. Ginsburg, a former Harvard law professor and member of the administration in several different roles. However, it was revealed in the media that Ginsburg smoked marijuana both as a student and later during his tenure as a Harvard professor, leading Ginsburg to swiftly withdraw his candidacy for the Supreme Court.<sup>77</sup> Eventually, Reagan successfully nominated Anthony Kennedy to the Supreme Court, and he was appointed swiftly and without any significant pushback in the Senate or from liberal activists.

The debacle surrounding Reagan's final Supreme Court appointment created additional pressure for Reagan's legacy-builders during an already turbulent period during his presidency. The failure to secure Bork's nomination was another blow to the already weakened administration, creating additional jeopardy for Reagan's future presidential legacy, and heightening the sense that he was a lame duck president with limited political sway.

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<sup>74</sup> Vieira and Gross, *Supreme Court Appointments*, 22.

<sup>75</sup> Vieira and Gross, *Supreme Court Appointments*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Ryan-Hume, 'The 1986 Midterms', 296-297.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew E. Hunt, 'Ronald Reagan and the Supreme Court', 125.

## The Reagan Record and T. Kenneth Cribb's Legacy Project

In addition to broader political opportunities like presidential travel and Supreme Court nominees, the Reagan administration also undertook several smaller projects targeted specifically at influencing Reagan's future legacy. One of the more innovative projects the administration undertook in the later stages of the administration was the preparation of the *Reagan Record*, 'a new undertaking to defend and advocate the Administration's achievements.'<sup>78</sup> This sort of in-depth overview of an administration's policy decisions had not been undertaken by any previous administration, so the rationale behind investing time in a project of this nature is important to explore. Interviewed in 2021, Frank Donatelli described the significance of the *Record* as follows:

You know one thing we take a lot of pride in, we, [Mari Maseng] and us, put out something called the *Reagan Record*. The idea was to put into one handy volume all the accomplishments, which were a lot, of the previous eight years to show we've come a long way from where we were in 1980 when he became president.<sup>79</sup>

The *Record* was a series of research papers focusing on themes including economic growth, trade, education, civil rights, and the environment. The project began in February 1988 and was designed to help Reagan to pursue a 'full agenda' in his final year in office by ensuring coherence in White House messaging and therefore reducing time spent preparing for public appearances and responding to attacks on the administration's record. His advisors were concerned that the 'critical environment of an election year' would mean that Reagan's policies were more likely to come under fire from critics, so the *Record* was an internal document created 'to help Administration spokesmen responding to such charges.'<sup>80</sup> The file was updated and adapted throughout Reagan's final twelve months in office, with additional material regularly circulated by the Office of Public Affairs. Each theme offered a list of highlights of

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<sup>78</sup> Memorandum from Thomas Griscom for Senior Officers, 'The Reagan Record Project', 29 February 1988, WHORM Subject File: FG001-POTUS, Box 84, 545160-548810, RRPL.

<sup>79</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, (conducted remotely via Zoom), 8 October 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Griscom for Senior Officers, 'The Reagan Record Project.'

the administration's successes, along with an outline of the most frequent criticisms the administration had faced in that area and proposed responses. Many of the themes featured a regularly updated selection of statistics pertaining to that topic, that could be used by members of the administration and other prominent political commentators when questioned on Reagan's policies. This project was distinct from the existing 'talking points' documents that had been produced throughout the administration as it was intended to be comprehensive rather than a snapshot of weekly updates on key issues.

The *Record* was intended to ensure coherence among different areas of the administration, and to help rebuff critics of Reagan's presidency during a time when it was especially vulnerable to negative media coverage given the climate of the election year. This sensitivity to attacks on Reagan's image indicates that that leading officials in the administration felt both vulnerable to criticism and willing to try and refute attacks to bolster Reagan's approval ratings in his final year. Members of the administration tasked with preparing the *Record* were advised that some of the issues covered were 'politically charged' and so requests for information and material for the *Record* must be 'handled carefully.'<sup>81</sup> It is clear that the team tasked with preparing this project was aware of the implications of the media becoming aware of the extent to which the administration was thinking about these issues. While some of the projects outlined in this chapter were more directed at Reagan's long-term legacy, the *Reagan Record* was more concerned with limiting Reagan's lame duck status and allowing him to remain politically active until the end of his second term, by reducing distractions created by having to defend his record from attack.

The distribution of the *Record* also demonstrates its significance. It was widely circulated within the administration, and it was also distributed to around seventy other

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<sup>81</sup> Memorandum from Thomas Griscom to Nancy Risque, 'The Reagan Record Project', 29 February 1988, WHORM Subject Files- FG001-POTUS, Box 84, 545160-548810, RRPL.

individuals outside of the administration. This included former presidents Nixon and Ford, former cabinet members and administration personnel, former Reagan campaign officials and advisors, and members of the Bush campaign.<sup>82</sup> This sort of distribution list was not unusual in and of itself, and was similar to the sort of audience that would have received copies of Reagan's speeches and White House talking points.<sup>83</sup> However, a draft of the letter prepared to accompany the *Record* indicated that this project was designed to help rebut 'mischaracterizations and criticisms of the President's policies' in order to pursue 'a full agenda' which would include 'important economic, domestic and foreign policy initiatives requiring public support.'<sup>84</sup> These lines were later removed from the letter, and Kathleen Koch, associate counsel to the President, recommended that references to the election year, and the administration's interest in the election outcomes, ought to be avoided throughout the *Record* for legal reasons.<sup>85</sup> However, these private discussions demonstrate that the administration was very aware of the fact that Reagan was a lame-duck president, likely to be especially open to criticism while equally reliant on other people, namely members of the Bush campaign, to help him defend his presidential legacy.

The relationship between the *Record* and the 1988 presidential election is clear. Speaking in 2021, Frank Donatelli described the importance of the *Reagan Record* when he said, 'Americans are always looking for something new, and so the idea of change normally works for the party out of power, and so, if you're going to counter that, you have to talk about how you've enacted change.'<sup>86</sup> Though the *Record* itself was never made publicly available, administrations were encouraged to refer to it when preparing for public appearances, to ensure

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<sup>82</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Phillip Brady, 'Reagan Record Distribution', 5 May 1988, WHORM Subject Files- FG001-POTUS, Box 92, 580000-582245, RRPL.

<sup>83</sup> Brady to Blakey, 'Reagan Record Distribution.'

<sup>84</sup> Brady to Blakey, 'Reagan Record Distribution.'

<sup>85</sup> Memorandum from Kathleen Koch to Phillip D. Brady, 'Reagan Record Mailing List', 9 May 1988, WHORM Subject Files- FG001-POTUS, Box 92, 580000-582245, RRPL.

<sup>86</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, Edinburgh, 8 October 2021 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

messaging coming from the administration was consistent. Demonstrating that the Reagan administration had achieved its goals was vital to convincing American voters that the current political trajectory the United States was on was the correct one. Two-term presidencies tended to be replaced by the party that had been out of power, and the most recent president to be replaced by their Vice President in a presidential election (excluding those who were initially elected following the death of an incumbent) was Martin Van Buren in 1836.

Two members of the administration, A.B. Culvahouse, Counsel to Reagan, and Alan Raul, associate counsel, expressed concern that the project may need to be changed to make it clear that it was ‘not driven by partisan political concerns’ and that it was within the ‘appropriate official responsibilities’ of an outgoing administration, as there would be legal problems associated with political activity of this kind, namely using White House resources to fund something which could be interpreted as part of a Republican Party presidential campaign.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Lesley Arsht, deputy assistant to the president, expressed reservations about how the project might be perceived by the press. This concern seemed largely unfounded, however, as the *Reagan Record* was not mentioned in any major papers during the months it was published in.

The final chapter of the *Record* offered a concise summary of the most significant achievements of the administration, under the headline ‘A Legacy of Accomplishment.’<sup>88</sup> This nineteen-page chapter featured a single-page summary and one-line ‘highlights of the administration, while the remainder was divided into ‘The Economy’, ‘The Domestic Agenda’, ‘A Government That Works’, and finally, ‘Peace and Freedom.’ Each section had a short summary emphasising that Reagan and his administration consistently worked to achieve the same goals throughout their two terms in office. For instance, the administration’s domestic

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<sup>87</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Thomas Griscom, ‘The Reagan Record Response Service’, 19 February 1988, WHORM Subject Files: FG001-POTUS, box 84, 545160-548810, RRPL.

<sup>88</sup> White House Office of Public Affairs, ‘The Reagan Record’, 13 September 1988, stored on open shelves in Reading Room, RRPL.

agenda was summarised as ‘marked by [Reagan’s] firm commitment to the Constitution and traditional American values.’<sup>89</sup> The theme of continuity was clearly very important, along with an emphasis on demonstrating contrasts between 1980 and 1988.

Ultimately, the creation and distribution of this document demonstrated a concerted effort by members of the Office of Public Affairs to ensure that there was coherence within messaging both from within the White House and from other prominent political figures who may have been asked to offer commentary on political affairs. The climate of an election year and Reagan’s lame-duck status made it even more important that there was consistency in discussions of Reagan and his legacy, to try and avoid a climate where Reagan was being accused of failing to enact key policy decisions. As Frank Donatelli argued, speaking in 2021, ‘that’s why it was important that we be on offense so that we’re not just sitting on our laurels, for the last two years.’<sup>90</sup> The *Record* was intended to minimise distractions and faux pax in the final months of Reagan’s presidency so Reagan could advance new policy decisions unencumbered, as well as to heighten people’s awareness of his existing successes.

In addition to the *Reagan Record*, White House officials began preparations for another project, this time focused explicitly on Reagan’s legacy. T. Kenneth Cribb joined the Chief of Staff’s transition team in March 1987, having worked in various roles within the administration including Counsellor to the Attorney General.<sup>91</sup> Cribb had strong connections with the conservative movement, including with the Heritage Foundation, which is important to note when considering the implications for his legacy project. During his years in office, he was particularly engaged in the subject of Reagan’s legacy, giving several speeches on the subject during his time working for the White House. He stated that in his role as assistant for domestic

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<sup>89</sup> White House Office of Public Affairs, ‘The Reagan Record.’

<sup>90</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, 8 October 2021 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

<sup>91</sup> Announcement of T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr., as a Member of the Chief of Staff to the President’s Transition Team’, 4 March 1987, RRPL [last accessed 19 August 2022: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/announcement-t-kenneth-cribb-jr-member-chief-staff-presidents-transition-team>].

affairs he sought to communicate Reagan's 'remarkable achievements – his "legacy" in domestic, economic and foreign affairs' and considered expanding this into a full-scale project focusing specifically on Reagan's future legacy.<sup>92</sup> In preparation, Cribb and his team collected an extensive volume of material that could be used by the White House for the 'intellectual advocacy' of Reagan's legacy, including books and periodicals from the White House library, collections of newspaper clippings, copies of Reagan's speeches, and research reports commissioned by various departments.<sup>93</sup> This was a detailed and thorough research project, which included a comprehensive search of newspapers from 1984 to 1988 along with an 'explanation of methodology' used to compile the most useful material, lists of bibliographies that the team had researched and retrieved articles from, and special requests for books which had proved difficult to track down.<sup>94</sup> The scope of this project indicates that a significant amount of time and manpower was devoted to compiling the material for this project, suggesting that this was an endeavour worthy of such effort.

Ultimately Cribb decided not to complete this project within the White House and resigned in order to begin a 'writing project' at the Heritage Foundation that was to be focussed on defending Reagan's legacy.<sup>95</sup> He passed the information his team had collated to Mari Maseng, then head of communications, with the hope that the material may prove useful within the communications and public affairs departments. He ultimately left the administration in early November 1988, following the election of George HW Bush to the White House, in order to devote more time to his proposed 'legacy project.' In a recent interview Cribb noted that he

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<sup>92</sup> Memorandum from T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. to Mari Maseng, 'Reagan Legacy', 9 August 1988, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (2 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>93</sup> 'Summary of Resources for Intellectual Advocacy of Reagan Legacy', attached to Memorandum from T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. to Mari Maseng, 'Reagan Legacy', 9 August 1988, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (2 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>94</sup> 'Reagan Legacy Project', undated, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (1 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>95</sup> Memorandum for the Files from T. Kenneth Cribb Jr, 'Reagan Legacy Project', 12 August 1988, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (1 of 2), RRPL.

would not have been able to devote the amount of time to this project that it deserved if he had remained in the administration during these months.<sup>96</sup>

Cribb did speak on the Reagan legacy in his capacity as a White House official, and he delivered a series of speeches on the subject both during Reagan's final year in office and in the years that followed. One example of such a speech, delivered in 1988, credited Reagan's legacy with 'the rebirth of the Republican Party.'<sup>97</sup> Cribb argued that 'whether you favor them or not', Reagan's achievements were 'among the most significant of any of our forty presidents.' He said that Reagan's economic achievements were central to his success in other areas including domestic and foreign policy, and argued that 'to sustain the Reagan legacy of prosperity' it was vital for future Republicans to continue Reagan's economic policies.<sup>98</sup> At the end of his speech Cribb sought to sum up the Reagan legacy in a sentence, and concluded:

Clare Booth Luce [...] said that history affords even great men only one sentence: Lincoln freed the slaves; Churchill saved Western Europe. What will history say about Reagan? We can't know, but it may be that: Against the tides of his century, he reestablished a beachhead for American freedom.'<sup>99</sup>

Though Cribb did not complete his project within the White House, his rationale for maintaining a focus on Reagan's future legacy is important to consider, as it helps to illuminate the short- and long-term goals of these projects. Cribb argued that his focus on legacy had been 'important both to our short-term effectiveness on remaining agenda items and to the long-term acceptance of the President's philosophy of government.'<sup>100</sup> Cribb therefore saw the purpose of the White House's focus on legacy as twofold; bolstering Reagan's short-term approval

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<sup>96</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC 21 January 2022 (remote interview via Zoom).

<sup>97</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb, 'Remarks of T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. on the Reagan Legacy', private papers of T. Kenneth Cribb.

<sup>98</sup> Cribb, 'Remarks of T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. on the Reagan Legacy.'

<sup>99</sup> Cribb, 'Remarks of T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. on the Reagan Legacy.'

<sup>100</sup> Memorandum for the Files from T. Kenneth Cribb Jr, 'Reagan Legacy Project', 12 August 1988, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (1 of 2), RRPL.

ratings was critical to ensuring the longevity of the administration's larger goals. Cribb believed his efforts to be especially important during this period as 'the process of appraising [Reagan's] presidency' would 'accelerate in the final months of his second term.'<sup>101</sup> The administration seemed to believe it was inevitable that Reagan and his record would be subject to intense scrutiny in his final year in office given the heightened press attention presidents receive during an election year, indicating that the legacy was more fragile than anyone cared to admit. This concerted 'campaigning' for Reagan through the crafting of the *Reagan Record* and the preparation for a bespoke legacy project suggest that the administration felt a need to consolidate Reagan's successes in order to communicate them to the public as convincingly and consistently as possible.

### **The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library<sup>102</sup>**

Though monuments and museum exhibitions often come after a president has left the White House, one of the most prominent sites of presidential legacy building begins during their presidency: the construction of their presidential library.<sup>103</sup> The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, in Simi Valley, California, remains one of the most prominent locations where Reagan's legacy is communicated to the public. It is important to note the distinction between the presidential library and the accompanying museum. The Reagan Library is one of thirteen presidential libraries overseen by the National Archives and Records Association, the first having been established by Franklin D. Roosevelt. While the libraries offer a valuable resource for scholars of the American presidency, more than 95 percent of attendees visit these

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<sup>101</sup> Memorandum from T. Kenneth Cribb Jr. to Mari Maseng, 'Reagan Legacy', 9 August 1988, A. Blair Dorminey Files, Box 2, Reagan Legacy Project (2 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>102</sup> Sections of this chapter are forthcoming in Sarah Margaret Grace Thomson, 'The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and the White House Legacy Project, 1984-89' in Marie Alice L'Heureux and Kapila D. Silva (eds), *Reimagining Presidential Legacies: Critical Perspectives on Presidential Libraries and Museums* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas) - forthcoming in 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Unless otherwise stated, for the purposes of this chapter I will use 'presidential library' and 'Reagan Library' to refer to both the library and the museum space.

venues to tour the accompanying museums, which are funded by private donations and are often closely overseen by family, friends, and supporters of the president being memorialised within the museum.

Museums offer an important means by which the American public engages with its history, with one study finding that Americans put ‘more trust’ in history museums than in any other means of learning about American history.<sup>104</sup> Initially, in the planning stage, early estimates for the Reagan Library anticipated 2,000 visitors would use the library’s reading room over the course of a year, while the museum would host, on average, five hundred visitors per day.<sup>105</sup> This estimate proved accurate—approximately 300,000 visitors arrived in its first year, falling to between 150,000 and 200,000 between 1992 and 2002.<sup>106</sup> By comparison, during the same period, the Hoover and Carter Libraries saw around 60,000 - 90,000 visitors per year, while the Kennedy Library saw 175,000 - 300,000 visitors per year.<sup>107</sup> New and updated exhibitions, such as the 90,000 square foot Air Force One Pavilion at the Reagan Library, have generally occasioned a spike in attendance.

Unsurprisingly, the exhibitions found in newly opened presidential museums tend to offer an overwhelmingly sympathetic interpretation of the presidency, given the president and First Family’s involvement in the process. Historian John Bodnar argues that when the presidential library system began in the 1930s, as the government increased its role in regulating people’s day-to-day lives through Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, ‘the government also attempted to influence, and therefore distort, the discussions over how the

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<sup>104</sup> Roy Rosenweig and David Thelen, cited in Jodi Kanter, ‘Character-in-Chief: Performing the American Citizen at Two Presidential Libraries’, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 32.4 (2012): 350.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Basic Facts about the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library’, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, file 312155 (1), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (henceforth RRPL).

<sup>106</sup> Nausheen Husain and Alex Bordens, ‘Keeping up attendance at a presidential library’, *Chicago Tribune*, August 26 2015 [last accessed July 30 2022: <http://apps.chicagotribune.com/graphics/presidential-libraries-attendance/>].

<sup>107</sup> Husain and Bordens, ‘Keeping up attendance at a presidential library.’

past related to the present.<sup>108</sup> The creation of the presidential library system offers one example of this being the case, as it marked a major expansion in government-funded museum programmes. Similarly, Benjamin Hufbauer asserts that ‘the obelisks, temples, and presidential libraries that commemorate presidents are ideologically charged spectacles of history and personality meant to inspire reverence for the presidency.’<sup>109</sup> He also argues that ‘the presidential library is a symptom of the striking expansion of presidential authority.’<sup>110</sup> Reagan and his administration’s role in the planning and construction of his own presidential library are therefore worthy of attention. Reagan was quite disengaged from the process, tending to defer to aides and to Nancy Reagan where possible. However, members of his administration clearly saw value in it, as demonstrated by their repeated invitations to Reagan to be involved in the decision-making process.

Exploring Reagan’s role in this aspect of his legacy construction illuminates the extent to which incumbents and their aides can play a role in their own legacy construction, while also illuminating that Reagan’s aides were more of a driving force behind this aspect of his presidency than he was, at least while Reagan was in office. As we have seen elsewhere, this was another occasion where Reagan appeared content to defer to the efforts of his legacy builders, including his wife Nancy, particularly during the period while he was still in office. A close examination of how the Reagan White House shaped his presidential library will ultimately shine a light more broadly on how critical the role of the White House is in presidential legacy construction.

The potential for Reagan’s involvement in the preparation for the library was already clear within the first few months of his presidency. Marie Allen, a detailee from the National

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<sup>108</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 170.

<sup>109</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 8.

<sup>110</sup> Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples*, 3.

Archive and Records Administration was hired to aid the White House in complying with the Presidential Records Act. She wrote to Director for Presidential Personnel Helene von Damm in April 1981, stating:

Each Presidential Library is an extension of the personality and personal style of the President it honors and memorializes. Archives officials planning the Library could do a more efficient job, and a job more in keeping with the President's wishes, if they could be informed, at an early date, concerning the President's ideas and goals for his Library.<sup>111</sup>

Allen's reasoning illuminates the important role that sitting presidents could play in the development of their respective presidential libraries. She recommended that Reagan meet with several archive officials including Robert Warner, Archivist of the United States, and James O'Neil, Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries. There is no record of such a meeting taking place in Reagan's presidential diary, but Edwin Thomas, Assistant Counsellor to the President, did meet with Warner in June 1981.<sup>112</sup> Warner confirmed that he had discussed preliminary planning for the library with the President, and that Reagan had expressed an interest in locating his library at Stanford University.<sup>113</sup>

Warner also noted that it would be useful for Reagan to visit some of the existing presidential libraries to gain an appreciation of the variation in architectural styles and events programs at the existing libraries. Reagan was due to dedicate the museum of the Ford Library in September of 1981, and Warner suggested that a visit to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library for the centenary of Roosevelt's birth in 1982 would be worthwhile.<sup>114</sup> Though Reagan did travel to the dedication of the Ford Library, he did not take up Warner's suggestion to visit the FDR Library, choosing to instead mark the centenary with a tour of the Roosevelt exhibition

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<sup>111</sup> Marie Allen to Helene von Damm, 'Preparations for Ronald Reagan Presidential Library', 7 April 1981, FE008-01 Library- incumbent president, file 021469, RRPL.

<sup>112</sup> Allen to von Damm, 'Preparations for Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.'

<sup>113</sup> Letter from Robert Warner to Edwin Thomas, 10 June 1981, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Library- incumbent president, 604570 (2), RRPL.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from Robert Warner to Edwin Thomas, 10 June 1981.

at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC.<sup>115</sup> Unsurprisingly, at this early stage in the administration the library did not seem to be one of Reagan's priorities.

Additionally, Fred Fielding, Counsel to the President, raised several concerns regarding Marie Allen's recommendations for the Reagan White House, demonstrating the tensions that could and did occur between the administration and the other organisations involved in the creation of presidential libraries. Fielding noted that the 'primary goal' of records management within the White House was to support the president in carrying out his current duties, 'not to facilitate the management of a future library.'<sup>116</sup> Fielding saw communicating records management responsibilities to be vital at the start of the administration but saw no need for the formal training in record keeping or a separate handbook with guidance as Allen had suggested. Another suggestion of Allen's had been the creation of 'historic events memoranda', which would involve high-ranking members of the administration (potentially selected by the Chief of Staff) to write 'detailed descriptions' of milestone foreign and domestic policy events from their perspective, as they happened.<sup>117</sup> Fielding highlighted that the conflict between whether such memoranda would be considered a personal or an official piece of writing would create issues surrounding confidentiality and the Presidential Records Act, in addition to being a time-consuming task for the administration to undertake on an ongoing basis.<sup>118</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, at this early stage in the administration the library did not seem to be one of Fielding's, or Reagan's, priorities. However, as he entered his second term, and as Reagan's preferred location for the library fell through, the White House became more actively involved in the planning process.

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<sup>115</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at a White House Luncheon Celebrating the Centennial of the Birth of Franklin Delano Roosevelt', January 28 1982 [last accessed July 30<sup>th</sup> 2022: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-white-house-luncheon-celebrating-centennial-birth-franklin-delano-roosevelt>].

<sup>116</sup> Fred F. Fielding to Helene von Damm, 'RE: Preparations for Ronald Reagan Presidential Library', 5 May 1981, Patricia Mack Bryan Files: OA 19246, folder: 'PMB Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (1 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>117</sup> Marie Allen to Helene von Damm, 'Preparations for Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.'

<sup>118</sup> Fred F. Fielding to Helene von Damm, 'RE: Preparations for Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.'

It is important to note that, as Bodnar has argued, ‘the shaping of a past worthy of commemoration in the present’ is a contentious issue, with many competing actors vying for support of particular beliefs regarding the presidency being memorialised.<sup>119</sup> Following Reagan’s re-election in 1984, the planning for the Reagan Library became a three-way collaboration between the White House, the Ronald Reagan Foundation and the National Archives.<sup>120</sup> The Reagan Foundation was formed in 1985 as a private, non-profit organisation to ‘receive and administer funds’ for the presidential library, and to later fund and oversee the associated ‘center for public affairs.’ It continues to play a large role in the financing and running of the library and centre for public affairs, as well as remaining a repository for papers relating to Reagan’s presidency that are not covered by NARA legislation, as outlined in the Introduction to the thesis.<sup>121</sup> Biff Henley, Director of the Office of Records Management, stated in March 1987 that a representative from the White House ought to be involved in the Library planning because ‘someone has to be the President’s spokesman!’<sup>122</sup> Reagan’s personal secretary Kathy Osborne was appointed to the role. Henley stated that the goal of this focus group was ‘to project President Reagan’s interest in providing the facts and historical record of his Administration quickly and accurately to the historical community.’<sup>123</sup>

Osborne, and White House staffers, played an important part in establishing a strategy for the planning and construction of the Library and museum. It seemed to them that the President needed to think carefully about the ‘personality’ of his library, and how this could be achieved through its architecture, location, museum exhibits, and activity within the library

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<sup>119</sup> Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 13.

<sup>120</sup> Biff Henley to David Chew, ‘President Reagan’s Library’, 23 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, file 479792, RRPL.

<sup>121</sup> ‘Articles of Incorporation of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation’, 27 Feb 1985, WHORM Subject File FE001-01 Library, Incumbent President, 292694 (1), RRPL.

<sup>122</sup> Biff Henley to David Chew, ‘President Reagan’s Library’, 23 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, file 479792, RRPL.

<sup>123</sup> Henley to Chew, ‘President Reagan’s Library.’

itself, such as public events programmes.<sup>124</sup> A report was prepared for Reagan, which included a series of case studies exploring all of the existing presidential libraries and posing questions that the Reagan team ought to think about. This report demonstrates some of the issues that the administration needed to consider in the planning and designing of the Reagan Library, and the fact it was commissioned indicates that this was something the administration was willing to invest time and energy into making the best choices.

Firstly, this report suggested that Reagan should first think about whether the library should ‘be an integral part of the community where the President grew up and made his livelihood’ as with the Truman Library, or whether he would prefer association with a university that would help to run an events programme. Reagan was also to reflect on whether he wanted his library to promote research into the American presidency, or whether there was another theme he felt was more significant, such as human rights.<sup>125</sup> The author observed that ‘each library has striven to tell its story in an individual way – some more aggressively than others’, and stated that the most significant factor in deciding the focus of the library would be the President’s own preferences.<sup>126</sup> The report went on to list examples for the Reagan White House to consider when planning the location, architecture and exhibits for his library. Harry Truman used his presidential library almost daily from 1957 to 1967, and his ‘strong personal interest’ in the library played an important part in the decision to locate the library in his hometown and close to other sites which were important to Truman such as his former home and church.<sup>127</sup>

Additionally, the community in which the library was situated could play a significant role in the support the library received from the local community. The Hoover, Truman and

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<sup>124</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library’, May 1984, WHORM Subject File FE008, Box 19, file 205976, RRPL.

<sup>125</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library.’

<sup>126</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library.’

<sup>127</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library.’

Eisenhower libraries all maximised their locations by focussing on their proximity to the respective presidents' birthplaces, and the local population in each town seemed proud to be associated with the president. The Ford Library decided to split the location of their library and museum in order to maximise potential use of the library's collections while locating the museum in a 'convention-minded city' that was 'near a vacation corridor.' Ultimately, the report stated that while an urban setting would generate footfall for the library and museum, 'the emotional location of the library can play a very direct role in its success.'<sup>128</sup> If the local community actively supported the library and it was well-supported in order to run events and generate interest, then people would be willing to travel to a more rural location. Visitor numbers would clearly influence the extent to which Reagan's legacy could be communicated to the general public in future generations, so it makes sense that this would be a relevant concern for Reagan and his administration to consider even at this early planning stage.

In 1981 Reagan was 'pretty well committed' to locating his future presidential library at Stanford University, in part because his gubernatorial papers were already housed at the Hoover Institution on the same campus.<sup>129</sup> The Hoover Institution is a public policy think tank and research centre affiliated with Stanford, which is widely considered to have a conservative leaning (although former directors have sought to dispute allegations that the Institute is a partisan organisation). There did not appear to be any serious consideration of a more sentimental site linked to Reagan's upbringing in Illinois, as we have seen with some other presidential libraries. Instead, Reagan aligned with the several recent presidents that had located their libraries in close proximity to universities, for many of the reasons outlined in the 'Establishing a Presidential Library' report. However, this proposal was not well-received by the academic community at Stanford. Stanford students began distributing badges saying,

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<sup>128</sup> Author Unknown. 'Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library.'

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Robert Warner to Edwin Thomas, 10 June 1981, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Library-incumbent president, 604570 (2), RRPL.

‘Ronald Reagan University?’ at campus football games, organised by a self-proclaimed group called ‘Stanford Community Against Reagan University (SCAReU)’ and accompanied the badges with leaflets asking ‘Does Reagan University SCAReU?? It scares us.’<sup>130</sup> Press coverage of these disputes was relatively widespread, featuring in major national newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post*.

One of the major points of contention was the proposed Center for Public Affairs being overseen by the partisan Hoover Institution rather than by the university, which risked compromising the ‘political neutrality’ of Stanford.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, it was Reagan’s perceived conservative legacy that led the proposal to receive such harsh criticism from more liberal members of the Stanford community, while the conservative backers of this project were outraged that such a proposal would be brought to a halt by partisan opposition to Reagan and his legacy. It was announced on the front page of the *Washington Post* in February 1984 that an agreement had been reached, and that Stanford would be the home of Reagan’s library.<sup>132</sup> However, by April of 1987 the Reagan Foundation revealed that they would not be going ahead with the proposed Stanford location after ongoing grassroots pressure, and would instead seek an alternative site in southern California.<sup>133</sup> The Hoover Institution expressed its disappointment at this development and Chairman John Shepherd wrote to Reagan to reiterate his hope that the Institution could maintain a ‘close association’ with the Library even at its new location.<sup>134</sup>

With the university location a non-starter, the library planners pivoted towards a more sentimental location, in line with the suggestion in the ‘Establishing a Presidential Library’

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<sup>130</sup> Anne C. Roark, ‘Reagan Library Proposal Sparks Debate at Stanford’, *Los Angeles Times*, 31 October 1983, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Jay Mathews, ‘White House, Stanford Reach Agreement on Reagan Library’, *Washington Post*, 15 February 1984, A1.

<sup>132</sup> Mathews, ‘White House, Stanford Reach Agreement.’

<sup>133</sup> David Hoffman, ‘Reagan Library Group Seeks New Site’, *Washington Post*, 24 April 1987, A3.

<sup>134</sup> Letter from John C. Shepherd to Ronald Reagan, 10 September 1987, Patricia Mack Bryan Files: OA 19246, folder: ‘PMB Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (1 of 2), RRPL.

report that suggested seeking a location that seemed to reflect the president's personality in some way. In November 1987 the Reagan Foundation signed a contract to locate the library in Ventura County, with press coverage stating that the Reagans liked the 'unspoiled' landscape which was strikingly similar to the scenery surrounding the Reagans' ranch around 80 miles northwest of the library site.<sup>135</sup> When discussing the Reagan Library, scholar Jodi Kanter argues that 'The library site implicitly associates the former president with the fabled majesty of America, inviting the visitor to pause and contemplate its beauty.'<sup>136</sup> Others have noted the parallels between the library's hilltop location and Reagan's frequent invocation of the 'Shining City on a Hill.'<sup>137</sup> However, though beautiful and scenic, it is important to remember that these ranch landscapes are often unnatural, highly curated, and manmade environments, and therefore far from 'unspoiled', making the rationale for this choice of location somewhat ironic. Ultimately, Nancy Reagan visited the site and approved it, with Ronald Reagan giving his approval 'after flying over it.'<sup>138</sup> This suggests that the new location was not a priority for Reagan, and that he was happy to defer to others when committing to a new location. This new site did generate some controversy given the land was supposed to be preserved as part of a green belt, but ultimately the project secured the necessary approval from the state government in September 1988.<sup>139</sup> The controversy around the potential location of the library shows Reagan's legacy was both valued and rebuked by different communities.

Turning from considering the site of the library to its contents, Reagan played a role in determining the principal exhibits that would be shown in the museum space. Though the president often seemed happy to defer to others when it came to the planning for the library,

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<sup>135</sup> UPI, 'Reagan Library Pact', *Washington Post*, 26 November 1987, p.100; Associated Press, 'Plan for Reagan Library Faces Local Resistance', *New York Times*, 17 February 1988, B5.

<sup>136</sup> Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2016), 42.

<sup>137</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, 'The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum', *Journal of American History*, 95.3 (2008), 786-792: 792.

<sup>138</sup> Associated Press, 'Plan for Reagan Library Faces Local Resistance', *New York Times*, 17 February 1988, B5.

<sup>139</sup> Associated Press, 'Reagan's Library is Edging Closer to Reality', *New York Times*, 4 September 1988, p.32.

the administration clearly invested time and effort into ensuring that the library, and more importantly, museum, would be well-situated and offer an appropriate venue to historicise Reagan's presidency. Reagan stated at the ground-breaking ceremony in 1988 that the library would 'allow scholars of the future to cast their own judgment', but the controversy over the location of the museum indicates just how partisan these projects can be. Indeed, even the early planning of the exhibition spaces reflected the narrow version of Reagan's presidency that would be on show, offering an uncritical observer a far from impartial version of the administration's successes and failures.

Once the site of the library had been agreed upon, the White House then had to navigate exactly what the function of the library would be. There were vast degrees of difference in how active the various presidential libraries' events programs were, and the 'Establishing a Presidential Library' report highlighted that 'the degree of activity in the library can be a function of the personality of the President', citing the Kennedy and Johnson libraries as examples. These libraries sought to be centres of 'discussion and debate', with the Johnson Library working closely with University of Texas faculty to conduct conferences and host speakers. The report argued that the Kennedy Library 'seeks to portray the mood of, at once, contemplation and activity', situated on the harbour and using the building as a way to situate Kennedy and his life within 'the overall story of America.' The Kennedy Library had an active programme of events engaging school children and community groups in addition to the academic community in Boston and beyond. In addition to the Reagan Library and its adjoining museum space, the space also includes a 'Center for Public Affairs.' The initial plans for the Center were highly ambitious, with plans for a group of residential Visiting Fellows on site at the Library, as well as for hosting international conferences and seminars. One draft of the estimated square footage of space needed to accommodate such a center came in at 146,250 square feet and included six tennis courts, two swimming pools and a putting green for

residential researchers' recreational use.<sup>140</sup> There were also extensive plans for residential space for 22 Resident Fellows and a further fourteen 'study units' for conference guests and 40 'scholars offices', essentially forming a think tank that would be sympathetic to Reagan's views.<sup>141</sup> Lack of funding from private donors forced the Foundation to scale back its plans for the Public Affairs Center, which was built on a much smaller scale. However, the initial ambitious plans for the Center reflect at least some desire for the Reagan Library to play an active role in public policy discussions in the years following Reagan's departure from office.

In terms of the Reagan Library's location, Jodi Kanter argues that the library's current location 'encourages the visitor to contemplate the timeless beauty of the 'city on a hill.''<sup>142</sup> A promotional brochure for potential donors to the Library stated that 'the building is expected to project a Western ambience' and includes an artist's sketch that bears a striking resemblance to the Library as it is today.<sup>143</sup> When the Reagan Foundation announced its choice of contractors to build the Library, it stated that the architectural design was 'in the Spanish mission tradition', a popular architectural style for public buildings in California.<sup>144</sup>

Another consideration was the choice of the library's first director, who would be chosen by Reagan and would work closely with Reagan's family and members of the foundation to set the tone' for the 'long-term personality' of the Library.<sup>145</sup> The 'Establishing a Presidential Library' report stated that the Eisenhower Library was 'held back' by an inactive director and foundation members who were content to maintain a modest events programme. In contrast, the Kennedy, Johnson and Ford libraries still maintained close relationships with

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<sup>140</sup> Author Unknown. 'The Ronald Reagan Center for Public Affairs', WHORM Subject Files: FE008-01, box 21, 312155(2), RRPL.

<sup>141</sup> Author Unknown. 'The Ronald Reagan Center for Public Affairs.'

<sup>142</sup> Jodi Kanter, 'Character-in-Chief: Performing the American Citizen at Two Presidential Libraries', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 32.4 (2021), 349-370: 366.

<sup>143</sup> 'The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library' (undated), WHORM Files FE008-01: Library, Incumbent President, Box 21, 406000-405999, RRPL.

<sup>144</sup> The Ronald Reagan Foundation, 'For Immediate Release', 18 October 1988, Bryan, Patricia Mack Files: OA 19246, folder: 'PMB Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (1 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>145</sup> Author Unknown. 'Suggested Steps to Follow in Establishing a Presidential Library.'

the respective First Families, who were very active in fundraising and supporting educational programmes. Finally, the report stated that the directors of the existing presidential libraries had stressed the need for extensive fundraising efforts, as these ‘private foundation funds’ helped to finance ongoing events programmes and helped to promote ‘a lasting interest’ in each of the libraries.

James O’Neill, Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries, prepared a report for the White House in 1981 about the presidential library system to help Reagan with choosing a director, and he noted that the directors of the six existing presidential libraries all had prior federal government experience, though they were not necessarily career civil servants.<sup>146</sup> The Presidential Records Act stated that the National Archives would consult with the president (or a representative from the First Family if necessary) before appointing a director to any presidential library, and O’Neill noted that the role was ‘a busy and exacting one’ particularly in a newly-opened presidential library.<sup>147</sup> The first person appointed to this role was Ralph Bledsoe in 1991, a man some people thought was ‘uniquely qualified’ for the position given his eight years working in the Reagan White House, along with a background working with the National Archive.<sup>148</sup> Former Reagan aide Charles Smith stated that Bledsoe was ‘a bureaucrat, not a politician’ who was appointed to the White House to act as an expert rather than pushing any political agenda, but noted that his prior work with Reagan and those around him was an asset to his appointment. At the start of his time with the administration Bledsoe had been tasked with reviewing the functioning of the National Archives, meaning he was also familiar with how archives operated and with some of the key figures who would later liaise with the Reagan Presidential Library.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> James E. O’Neill to Edwin W. Thomas Jr., ‘The Presidential Libraries System’, 19 June 1981, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, 604570 (2), RRPL.

<sup>147</sup> James E. O’Neill to Edwin W. Thomas Jr., ‘The Presidential Libraries System.’

<sup>148</sup> Kenneth R. Weiss, ‘History’s Gatekeeper: Reagan Library Director Holds Power Over Release of Papers’, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1991, A36.

<sup>149</sup> Kenneth R. Weiss, ‘History’s Gatekeeper.’

Another vital consideration for the White House was the content of the museum space at the Reagan Library. Archival material illuminates discussions with the Reagans about the early plans for the museum space at the Library, including lists of ‘substantive’ issues the administration sought to highlight, alongside a desire to offer insights into the ‘personal “human side” of the Reagans.’<sup>150</sup> In terms of their target audience, Fred Ryan told the Reagans that the museum space of the library would allow them to ‘present a history of your Presidency to future generations.’<sup>151</sup> This reference offers an insight into the intended audience for these legacy-building efforts, and the importance of considering the notion of legacy-building more broadly when we examine museum spaces. Ryan prepared a list of preliminary exhibition ideas for the Reagans to consider together, beginning with ‘Ronald Reagan growing up’, moving to his three presidential campaigns in 1976, 1980 and 1984, and then focussing on various aspects of Reagan’s presidency including ‘economic recovery’, ‘arms control’ and ‘rebuilding our nation’s defenses.’<sup>152</sup> Ryan also suggested some lighter sections including ‘presidential humor’, ‘the Hollywood days’ and noted that a section on gifts from foreign leaders was ‘often a very popular exhibit at other Libraries.’<sup>153</sup> The fact that Ryan was mindful of the popular exhibitions from other presidential libraries that they could emulate suggests that he and other aides were keen to ensure the library would be well-attended by the public.

Ryan concluded that with the Reagans’ input on these potential exhibitions, the White House could then begin working with the designers and curators to ‘consider the most effective ways of presenting the messages in the Library.’<sup>154</sup> As Jodi Kanter has convincingly argued, ‘the presidential museum - not only through its exhibits but also through its setting, architecture, and spatial arrangement - acts out a particular version of the American story in

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<sup>150</sup> Fred Ryan to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, ‘Preliminary Thoughts on Library Exhibitions’, 13 September 1988, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, file 576876755, RRPL.

<sup>151</sup> Fred Ryan to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, ‘Preliminary Thoughts on Library Exhibitions.’

<sup>152</sup> Fred Ryan to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, ‘Preliminary Thoughts on Library Exhibitions.’

<sup>153</sup> Fred Ryan to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, ‘Preliminary Thoughts on Library Exhibitions.’

<sup>154</sup> Fred Ryan to Ronald and Nancy Reagan, ‘Preliminary Thoughts on Library Exhibitions.’

order to dramatize particular ideas about who the president is and what he does.’<sup>155</sup> Therefore, ensuring that the Reagans, and the president’s advisors, approved of the messages that were to be communicated within the museum was an important part of their ability to stake a claim to the version of Reagan’s legacy that was to be displayed at the museum. The firm that designed the museum space, Donovan and Green, valued the Reagans’ input in the project, and Nancye Green met with the Reagans three times per month for eighteen months to prepare the exhibitions, helping them to select photographs and prepare captions for the exhibits. Green said of the experience, ‘it was a memorable experience to enter into a conversation with a president about his legacy.’<sup>156</sup> She also stated that Mrs. Reagan’s hope for the museum was that people would ‘come away with the feeling that they [knew] the Reagans better’, reflecting that this was a collaborative project between Ronald and Nancy Reagan.<sup>157</sup> Richard Norton Smith, director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, acted as a consultant for the Reagan Library project, and felt that the Reagans had ‘an instinctive grasp’ of what sorts of exhibits would appeal to the general public.<sup>158</sup>

As a result, the exhibitions found within the museum space of newly opened presidential libraries offer overwhelmingly sympathetic interpretations of their respective presidencies with failures and controversies rarely mentioned unless a positive spin can be added. One of the most striking omissions from the original design of the Reagan Library was the Iran-Contra scandal, which was not addressed in any of its exhibition spaces. Though an

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<sup>155</sup> Jodi Kanter, *Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>156</sup> See Marcus Witcher, *Getting Right With Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas), 352 (fn. 24).

<sup>157</sup> Kenneth R. Weiss, ‘Designers Bracing for Reagan Exhibit Reviews’, *Los Angeles Times*, 1 November 1991, B1.

<sup>158</sup> Weiss, ‘Designers Bracing for Reagan Exhibit Reviews.’

account of the episode was added to the museum in 2011, this was poorly received and indeed, was branded ‘decidedly modest’ by one reviewer.<sup>159</sup>

Though the exhibitions are broadly factually accurate, they often lack nuance and any acknowledgement of criticisms the administration faced for its decisions. For instance, the 1983 US invasion of Grenada is addressed in a timeline in the exhibition space as follows:

1982-83: Cuba sponsors military buildup in Grenada.  
October 22, 1983: Six Caribbean nations ask U.S. for help in ousting Cubans from Grenada.  
October 25, 1983: U.S. invades Grenada and rescues 800 U.S. medical school students.<sup>160</sup>

This section of the exhibition also includes audio of Reagan’s first address to the nation on the invasion of Grenada. However, nowhere in the exhibition space is it made clear that Reagan’s speech has been abridged. Ten sentences of Reagan justifying his decision to deploy troops have been trimmed out of the audio, to present a more streamlined version of Reagan’s rationale for the invasion. In reality, significant debates regarding the legitimacy of Reagan’s decision to deploy troops in combat without consulting Congress persisted and whether doing so constituted a breach of the 1973 War Powers Resolution or Article 50 of the Charter of the United Nations.<sup>161</sup>

The legitimacy of the aid request from the Caribbean states referred to in the exhibition has also come under scrutiny, and scholars have debated whether the request was in fact orchestrated by the U.S. to support the legality of what was otherwise a unilateral invasion. The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) received the aid request. Gary Williams argues that the OECS leaders ‘were no-one’s puppets’, and were acting pragmatically based on

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<sup>159</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, ‘The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum’, *Journal of American History*, 95.3 (2008) 786-792: 791; Adam Nagourney, ‘What’s a Presidential Library to Do?’ *New York Times*, 12 September 2011, A14.

<sup>160</sup> Author’s own photography of the exhibition space at the Reagan Library, captured August 30, 2017.

<sup>161</sup> Michael Rubner, ‘The Reagan Administration, the 1973 War Powers Resolution, and the invasion of Grenada’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Winter, 1985-1986), 627-647; and Francis A. Boyle et al., ‘International Lawlessness in Grenada’, *The American Journal of International Law*, 78.1 (1984), 172-175.

their lack of military power in allowing the US to intervene. However, historian John Quigley contests this, claiming that the OECS only agreed to issue an aid request once it received assurance that the US would respond favorably.<sup>162</sup> An additional appeal for aid from the British Governor General of Grenada, Paul Scoon, was fabricated to add legal legitimacy to the U.S. presence in the region, something Scoon admitted to in the aftermath of the invasion.<sup>163</sup>

The exhibition signage also reflects the confusion surrounding whether Reagan's primary motive was to rescue American medical students, or whether the presence of U.S. nationals in the region merely provided a justification for use of military force. Deploying 7,000 troops to a small island with a population of 100,000 people suggested that this was never solely intended as a rescue mission, and the extent to which these medical students were ever in danger has subsequently been contested.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, the exhibition space at the Reagan Library presents this episode as simultaneously a triumphant rescue mission and part of Reagan's broader plan to address the issue of 'a communist lake in what should be an American pond.'<sup>165</sup>

Turning to consider the building of the Library itself, the administration was keen to ensure the ground-breaking ceremony for the Reagan Library would take place while Reagan was still in office, as the individuals involved in the project believed it would reflect well on Reagan and his presidency. In fact, initially NARA's Biff Henley thought it might be possible to open the Library the day after Reagan left office, a move which would be 'lauded by historians' as presidential libraries generally did not open until around four to six years after a

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<sup>162</sup> Gary Williams, 'The Tail that Wagged the Dog: The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States' Role in the 1983 Intervention in Grenada', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 61.1, 1996, 95-115: 95; John Quigley, 'The United States Invasion of Grenada: Stranger than Fiction', *The University of Miami Inter-American Law Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Winter, 1986/1987), pp. 271-352: 275.

<sup>163</sup> Gary Williams, 'Shrouded in Some Mystery': The Governor General's Invitation and the 1983 Grenada Intervention', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 44:1, 2016, 142.

<sup>164</sup> Wendell Bell, 'The American invasion of Grenada: a note on false prophecy' *Foresight*, vol. 10.3 (2008), 27.

<sup>165</sup> Gary Williams, *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 52.

president had left office.<sup>166</sup> However, by the end of the administration the Library was expected to open in 1991, still an impressive feat reflective of the administration's interest in the Library's success. The administration also placed stock in Reagan having the largest of all the presidential libraries, at 153,000 square feet (excluding the 90,000 square foot Air Force One pavilion added in 2005).<sup>167</sup>

### **Edmund Morris, Reagan's Official Biographer (1986-89)**

Along with museums and monuments, another important avenue of post-presidential legacy building comes with books written by the former president, members of the administration, and scholars and biographers of the president, all vying to offer their interpretations of the administration's successes and failures, which play an important role in how people remember and understand the individuals being written about. Reagan himself made the unconventional decision to appoint an official biographer during his presidency, and this offers another avenue through which to consider Reagan's investment in his own legacy. The extent to which Reagan's legal team had to negotiate to secure Morris such unprecedented access to a sitting president suggests that unrestricted access was a priority for Reagan. It is therefore worth considering the relationship between Reagan and Morris, to try and illuminate the extent to which Reagan was personally invested in the legacy building that was otherwise being carried out by his aides and advisors.

Reagan requested Morris because of the success of Morris's 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Theodore Roosevelt, despite the misgivings of many of his administration's top officials.<sup>168</sup> Firstly, there were legal consequences to the breadth of access

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<sup>166</sup> Biff Henley to David Chew, 'President Reagan's Library', 23 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FE008-01, Box 21, file 479792, RRPL.

<sup>167</sup> Robert Reinhold, 'Presidents Join Reagan in Dedicating His Library', *New York Times*, 5 November 1991, A16; Elisabeth Bumiller, 'At California Ceremony, Bush Reaches for Reagan Mantle', *New York Times*, 22 October 2005, A15.

<sup>168</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, Edinburgh, 8 October 2021 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

Morris was requesting to the President, namely ‘the questions of waiver of executive privilege and the deliberative exemption to the Freedom of Information Act raised by the attendance of Edmund Morris at certain meetings and his exposure to certain deliberative documents.’<sup>169</sup> One solution that was suggested by Reagan’s legal teams was appointing Morris to a government position, so that divulging information with him would not breach Freedom of Information Agreement regulations. Reagan’s ‘desire to afford Morris this access’, meant that his legal team sought various avenues in order to allow Morris this privileged status in the latter years of his presidency.<sup>170</sup>

It is unclear exactly why Reagan was so keen to appoint a biographer to have such unprecedented access to him as incumbent president. Reagan waived any right to review the manuscript ahead of its publication, suggesting a lack of desire for control in contrast to the carefully controlled messaging emerging from the administration during his administration. It would of course make the work more credible, and this indicates that Reagan had some confidence that the book would not be unfair or hostile towards his legacy.

A letter drafted for Reagan to give to Morris stated that Ronald and Nancy Reagan would meet with Morris monthly, for half an hour, to discuss recent events, for the remainder of Reagan’s presidency. This included at least one visit to Camp David and one to Rancho del Cielo, the Reagans’ vacation home in Santa Barbara. While this may not sound like a lot of time, given the Reagans’ hectic schedules, being afforded regular one-to-one time with the incumbent was a significant privilege. In addition to this, Morris was permitted to attend a wide array of meetings and events at the White House. In a recent interview with the author, Frank Donatelli stated, ‘Morris had tremendous access [during] the whole second term. I mean I saw him in meeting after meeting [...]. He had total access to Reagan.’<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Memorandum for Peter J. Wallison from J. Michael Shepherd, ‘Agreement with Edmund Morris’, 5 August 1986, WHORM Subject Files: FE002-01, Box 5, 453000-459999, RRPL.

<sup>170</sup> Shepherd to Wallison, ‘Agreement with Edmund Morris.’

<sup>171</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, Edinburgh, 8 October 2021 (conducted remotely via Zoom).

In return, Morris was asked that the biography be published ‘at least two years and no later than ten’ after Reagan left office.<sup>172</sup> This timing suggests that Reagan was keen for his official biography to be released relatively quickly, while also allowing enough time for Reagan to publish his autobiography first (which was released in 1990).<sup>173</sup> There were some limitations on Morris’s access to Reagan. He was not given access to any matters relating to national security or any classified material, though he was allowed to receive declassified materials ‘where appropriate.’<sup>174</sup> However, on the whole Morris had an unprecedented amount of time with Reagan compared to other presidential biographers. It is interesting to note that Reagan was apparently most invested in the one legacy project over which he had very little control. Though he could have played a more active role in things like the *Reagan Record* or the location of the Reagan Library, but deferred to aides, the idea that he was entirely disinterested in his own legacy is complicated by his appointment of Edmund Morris.

Unfortunately for the people who conceived of this project, Morris’s eventual book, *Dutch* (1999), was poorly received, and had limited implications for Reagan’s eventual legacy. Instead of producing a conventional biography, Morris wrote a memoir of a fictional contemporary of Reagan based loosely on Morris’s life. The distinctions between fact and fiction are largely unclear, and, most surprisingly, only nine of the 37 chapters are written about Reagan’s presidency.<sup>175</sup> The entirety of Reagan’s final two years in office are condensed into a single chapter, and there is also no mention of milestone events such as the failed attempt to nominate Bork to the Supreme Court or other events which Morris was granted such privileged access to.<sup>176</sup> Readers, academic or otherwise, looking to learn about Reagan’s presidency

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<sup>172</sup> Attachment to memorandum for Peter J. Wallison from J. Michael Shepherd, ‘Agreement with Edmund Morris’, 5 August 1986, WHORM Subject Files: FE002-01, Box 5, 453000-459999, RRPL.

<sup>173</sup> Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

<sup>174</sup> Ronald Reagan to Edmund Morris, Draft of Letter, 5 August 1986, WHORM Subject File: FE002-01, box 5, 453000-459999, RRPL.

<sup>175</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, ‘Review: Reckoning with Reagan: A Review Essay on Edmund Morris’s *Dutch*’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol 115.1 (2000), 115-122: 116.

<sup>176</sup> Greenstein, ‘Review: Reckoning with Reagan’, 116.

would struggle to do so given the unconventional nature of this biography, with alternative volumes such as Lou Cannon's *President Reagan: A Role of a Lifetime* (1991) or Reagan's own volume of autobiography (also published in 1991) fulfilling this role instead. Nevertheless, the fact that Reagan appointed an 'official' biographer against the advice of his administration indicates an interest in his post-presidential legacy that runs counter to his apparent lack of interest in his presidential library and his willingness to delegate control of projects like the *Reagan Record* to his team of legacy builders.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, their final two years in office saw officials in the Reagan administration attempt to combat criticisms that Reagan was a lame duck with little political power by launching a series of projects designed to improve Reagan's political standing in the short term, shifting towards a focus on his longer-term legacy. In the aftermath of the Iran–Contra scandal the administration wanted to demonstrate Reagan's capabilities as a strong and confident leader, as seen in his travels in Europe in the period immediately following the launch of the 'campaign for the Reagan agenda' outlined in Chapter One. Though the success of this tour was debated in the press, this project nevertheless showed the determination of the administration to overcome Reagan's lame duck status.

The failed nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court was depicted in the press as a showdown between the outgoing president and the Senate his party had recently lost control of. It created reminders of Reagan's right-wing political leanings and gave Reagan an opportunity to change the balance of the Supreme Court, potentially one of the most long-lasting consequences of his presidency. Despite being an important campaign point for Reagan in both 1980 and 1984, when this opportunity presented itself the politically weakened administration was not able to successfully counter the resistance generated by liberals in the

Senate. In terms of Reagan's legacy, this defeat was a great disappointment both for Reagan and his administration, and a blow to those hoping to secure a conservative-leaning Supreme Court in the decades following his presidency.

The *Reagan Record* offers valuable evidence of the administration's desire for consistency in its messaging during this period. This need for consistency perhaps reflects a concern surrounding the fragility of Reagan's image and the fact it was likely to face increased scrutiny in the climate of an election. The final two years also saw several projects targeted more explicitly at Reagan's post-presidential legacy, including the early planning for the T. Kenneth Cribb's proposed 'Reagan legacy project.'

An examination of the planning for, and the exhibitions found within the Reagan Library, demonstrates some of the biases present within these attempted legacy projects. It is impossible to create an unbiased museum exhibition, but the exhibitions within the presidential libraries are overwhelmingly skewed by the efforts of the president being memorialised and those around them. Similarly, the appointment of an official biographer indicates a desire to exert some degree of control on how people would perceive Reagan's presidency in the years after his departure from office. Exploring these projects offers compelling evidence of the extent to which the administration was thinking beyond Reagan's tenure in the White House, to consider how he would be remembered by future generations. Reagan's reluctance to engage with these projects, apart from Edmund Morris's biography, is difficult to explain. The evidence shows that Nancy Reagan and other key White House aides were the driving force behind many of these projects, suggesting that they saw a greater value in his legacy than he did.

### Chapter Three: The 1988 Presidential, House and Senate Elections

In May of 1987 Frank Donatelli, White House Director of Political and Intergovernmental Affairs, went to Reagan's Deputy Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein with a proposal. He told Duberstein that he thought the administration should double the size of the Office of Public Affairs from 10 members to 21, in preparation for the White House's role in the 1987-88 election cycle. He argued:

The importance of continuing the Reagan legacy demands a first class political operation. We can best serve our Party, our President, and our country by regaining ideological control of the U.S. Senate, building a veto proof House of Representatives, continuing our gains in Governorships, electing another Republican President and creating a fair redistricting process to honestly reflect the popularity of the Republican cause.<sup>1</sup>

Others in the White House took Donatelli's suggestion seriously, and over the coming months the administration threw its full support behind Bush, along with an array of Republican candidates up and down the ballot paper.<sup>2</sup> Though news reports dubbed Reagan's initial endorsement in May 1988 as 'lukewarm' due to its brevity, on election night the press credited Reagan for his 'strong supporting role' in the campaign. One reporter wrote that Reagan had 'la[id] out [his] coattails for the Bush campaign',<sup>3</sup> another that Reagan's 'campaign magic' strengthened the Bush/Quayle ticket by turning the 1988 election into a 'referendum' on the Reagan years.<sup>4</sup> Even Ed Rollins, campaign manager for Bush's primary contender Jack Kemp

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum from Frank J. Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 'OPA Staff Structure', 9 May 1987, Frank Lavin Files, Series 1, Box 1, Folder: Campaign 1988 Congressional, 2 of 12, RRPL.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Statement Endorsing George Bush's Candidacy for President', 12 May 1988, RRPL, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/051288a> [accessed 19 August 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Maureen Dowd, 'President, in Vintage Form, Relishes his Final Campaign', *New York Times*, 7 November 1988, A1; Steven V. Roberts, 'Reagan Lays Out Coattails for the Bush Campaign', *New York Times*, 25 September 1988, E4.

<sup>4</sup> Julie Johnson, 'The Reagan Campaign Magic: He Isn't Running, but He's Winning', *New York Times*, 3 November 1988, B19.

and former head of Reagan's own 1984 election bid, went on to brand this election 'the greatest baton-pass in the history of American politics.'<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores how, and why, securing Bush's election to the White House, in addition to supporting key Republican Senate, House and gubernatorial races, became such an important part of Reagan's final six months in office. By 1988 Reagan's popularity had been restored, so the context for the legacy building seen in Chapters Three and Four is very different to the defensive purpose seen in Chapter One and Chapter Two. As Donatelli highlighted, the White House saw the elections in 1988 as a key aspect of securing the future of Ronald Reagan's political legacy. A strong Republican performance in these various election campaigns was a sure-fire way to limit policy rollback, and even advance some of the policies Reagan had begun during his presidency. Of course, the administration's success in securing a Republican successor to Reagan reflected its strength (as well as the weakness of the Democratic challenger). The Reagan administration threw its weight behind Bush and many of his counterparts in the House and Senate because aides saw this election cycle – as the *Times* reporter did – as a 'referendum on the Reagan years', and saw these victories as a vital step in solidifying the policy shifts seen during his years in office.<sup>6</sup> Regarding the presidential election, Ken Duberstein told Reagan in August 1988 that if Bush was to lose the election in 1988 'your legacy will be dismantled brick by brick over the course of the next administration.'<sup>7</sup>

The first part of this chapter examines the contest for the Republican presidential nomination, focusing on candidates who tried and failed to position themselves as rightful heirs to Reagan's legacy. Considering Bush's main primary contenders, Bob Dole, Jack Kemp and Pat Robertson, reveals how Bush's role as Vice President allowed him to harness Reagan's

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<sup>5</sup> Memo, Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 7 Nov 1988, 'The President's Political Involvement', Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>6</sup> Julie Johnson, 'The Reagan Campaign Magic: He Isn't Running, but He's Winning', *New York Times*, 3 November 1988, B19.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth M. Duberstein to Ronald Reagan, 'The Last Six Months', 1 August 1988, Mari Maseng Files, Box 5, 'Last Six Months' (folder 2 of 2), RRPL.

legacy in the ways he did. It is also important to consider whether or not it mattered to the Reagan legacy who the candidate turned out to be, as the diversity of these candidates' political stances demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the Republican Party at this time. The remainder of the chapter explores Reagan's involvement in the 1988 presidential, senatorial and House campaigns, as well as the beginnings of the redistricting process (to begin in 1990). In each of these sections, I will show how and why the White House felt these efforts were beneficial to the longevity of Reagan's political legacy.

Frank Donatelli explained Reagan's role in the presidential campaign in terms of 'soft' and 'hard' campaigning.<sup>8</sup> He defined soft campaigning as events and strategies that were not overtly political but had clear political consequences. This included Reagan's attempts to shape the national agenda in Bush's favour in various ways once he had secured the nomination, and to stress the important role Bush had played within the Reagan White House. Reagan also created a number of 'special roles' for Bush in the lead-up to the election, allowing him to project a presidential image and step out of his president's shadow. Exploring these various 'soft' campaign strategies illuminates important aspects of the relationship between this campaign and the Reagan legacy. Firstly, this type of campaigning demonstrated the power the White House could wield during an election campaign when the administration was invested in the election's outcome. It also demonstrates how the national agenda can be shaped by the longer-term political aspirations of those in office. This chapter will demonstrate how some of Reagan's decision-making during this period was directly influenced by improving Bush's election odds, since Bush's election would benefit the longevity of Reagan's major policy initiatives.

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 7 Nov 1988, 'The President's Political Involvement', Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

One of the most valuable forms of assistance Reagan offered Bush during this period was the chance to look ‘presidential’ while not explicitly campaigning. Given how crucial the administration felt Bush’s success was to the Reagan legacy, it is important to explore how they used the ‘accoutrements’ of the presidency to their advantage in achieving this goal. Reagan and his aides were able to orchestrate events and photo opportunities that showed Bush looking statesmanlike, fulfilling public expectations for how the president would look and helping him to forge a political identity outside of his role as Reagan’s vice president. When incumbents run for re-election, they can utilise the ‘accoutrements of the presidency’, as Steven Rosenstone puts it, to stage events designed to improve their re-election chances.<sup>9</sup> Embracing the office of the presidency in this way, while avoiding overtly campaigning, is known as adopting a Rose Garden strategy. Reagan deployed the Rose Garden strategy to excellent effect during his re-election bid in 1984, using presidential travel to improve his re-election prospects.<sup>10</sup> The Reagan administration’s support of Bush, combined with his status as vice president, afforded him valuable opportunities to improve his image in ways not normally afforded to presidential candidates. Even within the White House, Bush was referred to as ‘running for president as a quasi-incumbent’, in the words of one aide, with Reagan referring regularly to ‘the Vice President and I’ in speeches in order to elevate Bush’s importance within the administration.<sup>11</sup>

The remainder of this chapter explores Reagan’s more overt political campaign activities, which included Reagan’s travels on the campaign trail, his role at the Republican National Convention, and, most importantly, defending his record in office against direct attacks from Michael Dukakis, the governor of Massachusetts and the Democratic Party’s

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<sup>9</sup> Steven J. Rosenstone, ‘Explaining the 1984 Presidential Election’, *The Brookings Review*, 3.2 (1985), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Margaret Grace Thomson, ‘Presidential Travel and the Rose Garden Strategy: A Case Study of Ronald Reagan’s 1984 Tour of Europe’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 50.4 (2020), 864.

<sup>11</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Reagan Campaign Assistance’, Undated, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

nominee for the White House. The administration, in consultation with the Bush campaign, paid close attention to the demographics that were critical to the upcoming election, and used this information to plan Reagan's activities on the campaign trail. Each of these types of campaigning is important to recognise. Firstly, they help to underscore Reagan's perceived value as a unifying figure within the Republican Party, which we shall also see in Reagan's role in the various other election races held in 1988. Reagan's approval ratings had improved from their low point in 1987, and this is reflected in the confidence with which the White House deployed Reagan throughout 1988.

The diverse demographics Reagan spoke to on Bush's behalf also help to underscore his widespread, though by no means universal, popularity at this stage in his presidency. This is one area of the legacy building campaign where the distinct lack of appeals to African American voters becomes particularly striking. Reagan campaigned widely across the US, appealing particularly to young voters, hard-line conservatives, and the so-called 'Reagan Democrats' in a bid to bolster both Reagan's image in the winding down of his presidency, while also supporting the Bush campaign. Finally, this sort of active campaigning allowed Reagan to defend his own legacy against attacks from the Dukakis camp, rather than relying on the Bush campaign to do so on his behalf.

Lastly, Reagan's role in the various 1988 Senate, House and gubernatorial elections also deserves attention, as these smaller campaigns formed part of the Reagan administration's effort to cement the conservative shift of the Reagan years. Of course, the administration's success in securing a Republican successor to Reagan reflected its strength, given the presidency is the most high-profile and consequential of all roles contested in a presidential election year. Even so, Reagan took significant interest in the Senate races and several redistricting campaigns. His investment in these contests demonstrated his commitment to

strengthening the party he was leaving behind as well as ensuring the great ‘baton-pass’ of handing the White House over to his deputy.

### **The Contest for the Nomination**

Reagan and his future legacy played an important role in the 1988 presidential election far before he issued a formal endorsement of Bush. National interest in Reagan’s successor was unsurprising. One headline during the primaries asked, ‘Who is Reagan’s No. 1 Son?’ while another, after a decisive win in South Carolina claimed, ‘In Victory, Bush Seems Beneficiary of a Legacy.’<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the reporter Maureen Dowd described Jack Kemp as a ‘Son of [the] Gipper’ and the ‘glamor boy of the conservative set.’<sup>13</sup>

Another journalist, Lou Cannon, argues that ‘many Reagan supporters yearned for a third term that was constitutionally unachievable and settled for the consolation prize of Reagan’s vice president.’<sup>14</sup> It is important to understand, however, that when the nomination process started, Bush was not the heir apparent to the Reagan legacy. During the Republican primaries, debates raged surrounding which of the contenders for the Republican nomination was the most plausible heir to Reagan’s political legacy. It was far from a foregone conclusion that George H. W. Bush, a moderate conservative who had challenged Reagan during the 1980 Republican primaries, would be the one to fill this role. The spectre of Bush’s failed run for the presidency in 1980 loomed large during the early stages of his bid for the 1988 nomination, and in late 1986 Bush was polling behind the Democratic frontrunner Gary Hart, due at least in part to Bush’s proximity to the Iran-Contra affair.<sup>15</sup> Several other candidates –Jack Kemp, Bob Dole, and Pat Robertson among them—could make convincing claims that they were the

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<sup>12</sup> Meg Greenfield, ‘Who is Reagan’s No. 1 Son?’, *The Washington Post*, 14 March 1988 A15; R.W. Apple Jr., ‘In Victory, Bush Seems Beneficiary of a Legacy’, *New York Times*, 7 March 1988, A17.

<sup>13</sup> Maureen Dowd, ‘Is Jack Kemp Mr. Right?’, *New York Times*, 28 June 1987, SM19.

<sup>14</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2000), 755.

<sup>15</sup> John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 27.

true 'heir' to this wing of the Republican Party, indicating that the meaning of the Reagan legacy was, to some extent, open for discussion.

Bush faced several serious challenges for the Republican Party nomination. New York congressman Jack Kemp attempted to appeal to movement conservatives who were unimpressed by Bush's stance as a more establishment candidate.<sup>16</sup> Kemp, who had worked on Reagan's 1966 gubernatorial campaign, ran on the platform of 'the intellectual heir of the Reagan legacy' given his close involvement in Reagan's 1981 tax cuts.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, many viewed Kemp as the 'natural heir' to Reagan's brand of conservatism, and he was supported by conservative figures including journalist Irving Kristol, and prominent conservative congressmen Newt Gingrich and Vin Weber.<sup>18</sup>

Bush was also not the only candidate in the race who could allude to both a long and impressive career in national politics, with values aligning closely with Reagan's, prior to his presidential bid. Bob Dole, a Kansas senator, could make similar claims to Reagan's legacy, given his role as the chair of the Senate Finance Committee early in Reagan's presidency and his later role as GOP party leader, both of which allowed him to drive forward Reagan's policies at a practical level.<sup>19</sup> Dole was also the Senate minority leader during the election campaign itself, and he had already enjoyed a distinguished political career which predated the Reagan years.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, another serious challenger to Bush came in the form of Reverend Pat Robertson, who appealed to the 20 percent of Republican Party supporters who identified as born-again Christians.<sup>21</sup> Bush finished third in the Iowa caucus behind both Dole and

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<sup>16</sup> Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Walsh, 'Kemp Drops Out of Race But Vows to Try Again', *Washington Post*, 11 March 1988, A1.

<sup>18</sup> Maureen Dowd, 'Is Jack Kemp Mr. Right?', *New York Times*, 28 June 1987, SM19.

<sup>19</sup> Pitney, *After Reagan*, 92.

<sup>20</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2000), 601.

<sup>21</sup> Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush*, 28.

Robertson and lost 17,000 votes compared to his performance in 1980, demonstrating that his proximity to the incumbent president was not a sure-fire way of securing the nomination.<sup>22</sup>

Bush's proximity to Reagan as vice-president, however, gave him a claim to the Reagan legacy that none of his challengers managed to achieve. Bush's loyalty to Reagan over the preceding eight years served him well, with his son Jeb Bush – then Florida's secretary of commerce – assuring voters ahead of the South Carolina primary: 'George Bush will never do anything to undermine Ronald Reagan's legacy. He will build on the Ronald Reagan legacy.'<sup>23</sup> Upon dropping out of the race in March 1988, Jack Kemp complained that he was running 'against Ronald Reagan', claiming that Bush's loyalty to the incumbent had allowed him to secure the 'Reagan wing of the party' in a way no challenger could.<sup>24</sup> Kemp went on to endorse Bush's candidacy, telling him 'you can count on Jack Kemp in 1988.'<sup>25</sup> Lance Tarrance, one of Kemp's pollsters, explained that 'the cohesion between Bush and Reagan was more solid than we had anticipated. It didn't break at all.'<sup>26</sup> For a candidate who had initially positioned himself as Reagan's heir apparent, the fact that Kemp failed to secure the nomination has implications for the relationship between Reagan's legacy and the Republican primary race. Proximity to Reagan himself seemed to supersede any ideological affinity with the outgoing President. Bob Dole and Pat Robertson gave similar explanations for their own languishing campaigns, saying that Bush's loyalty to the most popular Republican president of the twentieth century had given him an advantage no other contender could compete with.<sup>27</sup>

Neither Ronald nor Nancy Reagan was especially enthusiastic at the prospect of supporting Bush's candidacy. In her recent biography of Nancy Reagan, journalist Karen

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<sup>22</sup> Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Jeff Owens, 'Bush's son says S.C. primary won't make or break campaign', *The Item*, (Sumter, SC), 19 February 1988, 3A.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Walsh, 'Kemp Drops Out of Race But Vows to Try Again', *Washington Post*, 11 March 1988, A1.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Boyd, 'Kemp, in bid for unity, endorses Vice President', *New York Times*, 29 March 1988, A1.

<sup>26</sup> Walsh, 'Kemp Drops Out of Race.'

<sup>27</sup> Walsh, 'Kemp Drops Out of Race.'

Tumulty wrote that ‘Bush’s campaign dispatched Stu Spencer to convince Nancy that the best way to preserve her husband’s legacy was to elect his vice president.’<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in an oral history with the author, Mari Maseng-Will said ‘I convinced him that [campaigning for Bush] was key to our strategy to revive this legacy, because, as we went through the year, more and more of the coverage would be keyed around campaign events and if he wasn't campaigning for the Vice President he'd be out of the conversation.’<sup>29</sup> Clearly, the issue of Reagan’s future legacy was at the forefront of the rationale for Reagan’s endorsement of Bush.

Voter turnout in the 1988 primaries was uncharacteristically high. For instance, there were 50,000 more voters in the 1988 Republican primary in South Carolina compared to 1980, and a significant number of these voters were made up of Democrats and independents who opted to vote in the Republican primary rather than the Democratic race.<sup>30</sup> One possible explanation for this is that the 1988 presidential election was the first since 1968 where an incumbent was not seeking re-election in either party, so both races were contested by multiple potential candidates.<sup>31</sup> The increased interest in the Republican primaries may well have been due in part to Reagan’s popularity, or due to people being more interested in who Reagan’s successor would be.

Similarly, the Republican Party enjoyed impressively high turnouts in the primaries across the southern states, despite the attempts, on the Democratic side, of Democratic presidential hopefuls Jesse Jackson and Al Gore to emphasise their southern roots.<sup>32</sup> In Georgia the turnout of 400,000 voters was almost double the highest turnout recorded in any other primary race, a record set in 1980 when Bush was competing against Reagan.<sup>33</sup> This offered

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<sup>28</sup> Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 512.

<sup>29</sup> Mari Maseng Will, interview by the author, Washington DC/Edinburgh, 14 October 2021 (remote interview via Zoom).

<sup>30</sup> R. W. Apple Jr., ‘In Victory, Bush Seems Beneficiary of a Legacy’, *New York Times*, 7 March 1988, A17.

<sup>31</sup> Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich et al., ‘“Sophisticated” Voting in the 1988 Presidential Primaries’, *American Political Science Review*, 86.1 (1992), 55.

<sup>32</sup> Newspaper clipping, ‘GOP Southern Comfort’, *Wall Street Journal*, 10 March 1988, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Oreskes, ‘Turnout in South Seen As Boon for the G.O.P’, *New York Times*, 10 March 1988, A28.

one early indication of the national interest in Reagan's successor, as well as the importance of securing the support of voters not formally aligned to the Republican Party. It also reflected the relative decline of the Democratic party, especially in the South, as the 1980s saw fewer people identifying as Democrats and a subsequent rise in independent voters.<sup>34</sup> The role that Reagan's legacy would play in the 1988 presidential race was therefore clear long before Reagan endorsed any particular candidate.

Throughout the contested primary race, Bush remained loyal to the White House, defending the Reagan administration's policy decisions whenever required, a strategy that served him well.<sup>35</sup> Of course, this loyalty meant that Bush was forced to address the administration's shortcomings, in particular the budget deficit.<sup>36</sup> Once Reagan was involved in the campaign, he was able to address such issues directly, but in the meantime Bush was forced to grapple with both the benefits and shortfalls that his proximity to the White House created. One way to illuminate this is by considering the contrasts between the candidacies of Bush, Dole and Kemp, each of whom laid claim to the recent Republican record. However, Bush was the only one with such a strong tie to the White House, and the office of the presidency.

The pitfalls of Bush's close allegiance with the incumbent were clear during the first debate among the Republican presidential candidates in December 1987, when former secretary of state Alexander Haig Jr., an early challenger in the race who ultimately endorsed Bob Dole's candidacy, challenged Bush on his involvement in the Iran-Contra affair. Bush maintained that he was a 'co-pilot' throughout all of the major decisions of the Reagan administration, which of course meant he was forced to address the shortcomings of the Reagan White House as well as its successes.<sup>37</sup> Haig challenged Bush by asking if he was 'in the cockpit

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 26-27.

<sup>35</sup> Marianne Means, 'President Bush?', *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 March 1988, A11.

<sup>36</sup> AP, 'Experts skeptical of candidates' deficit plans', *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 12 June 1988, D11.

<sup>37</sup> David Hoffman and Paul Taylor, 'Presidential Candidates Wrangle on INF, Deficit', *Washington Post*, 2 December 1987, A1.

or in an economy ride at the back of the plane' when Reagan authorised the exchange of weapons for hostages, a question Bush largely avoided addressing.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, it is important to acknowledge the complications that inheriting a legacy can have for presidential hopefuls. Despite Bush's ongoing loyalty to Reagan, the latter's support was most likely due to a sense that any Republican successor as president was preferable to a Democrat.

### **Avoiding a Reagan 'stranglehold'**

When deciding how best to support Bush once he had secured the nomination, the officials in the Reagan administration faced a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, Reagan's final months in office represented their last chance to influence his presidential legacy, so they were keen to promote Reagan and what they saw as his successes in office as much as possible. However, there was a very real risk that Reagan would outshine his vice president, damaging Bush's presidential aspirations and, by extension, the very presidential legacy they were seeking to preserve, given their desire to ensure Reagan's successor would be a Republican. Though this may well have been a problem for any president and vice president, this was especially true for Reagan and Bush. Bush's own campaign team were concerned he lacked charisma and confidence, whereas these attributes came far more naturally to the incumbent. Relatedly, one CNN reporter observed that 'Ronald Reagan's embrace must not be a stranglehold for George Bush', a concern echoed in administration planning materials from this period in both the Bush and Reagan camps.<sup>39</sup> Political consultant and Reagan supporter Alex Castellanos, when writing to Bush's campaign manager Lee Atwater, outlined this problem as follows:

I am more worried about Bush positives, giving voters a place to go when Dukakis negatives hit the roof, because Bush is dog food dogs don't like. He

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<sup>38</sup> Hoffman and Taylor, 'Presidential Candidates Wrangle on INF, Deficit.'

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Walter Goodman, 'Reagan Speech Leaves Bush Some Stage Space', *New York Times*, 16 August 1988, A21.

loses elections. He is vanilla ice cream. There's no taste there. [...] Bush needs some chocolate. He needs to be more than *acceptable*. He needs to be *desirable*. [...] So what does Reagan-Bush do that gives Bush some chocolate? [emphases included in original document].<sup>40</sup>

Clearly, aides working on the Bush campaign saw value in using Reagan's popularity to bolster Bush but were unsure how best to achieve this. They were concerned that Bush lacked Reagan's charisma, and that Bush's impressive political track record would not be enough to win a presidential election which was becoming increasingly focussed on personality politics and candidates' images. In fact, one issue the Bush campaign faced was that the voting public had a tendency to compare Bush to Reagan, instead of to his opponent Dukakis.<sup>41</sup> Direct comparisons between Reagan and Bush tended to reflect badly on the latter, which created a challenge for the Bush campaign to tackle.

Within the White House, staff were acutely aware of the relationship between Bush's election campaign and Reagan's political legacy. Frank Donatelli articulated the importance of these elections to chief of staff Ken Duberstein as follows:

The fate of Republican candidates in this election will determine the course of public policy for many years to come. It will also have a direct impact on the legacy and standing of President Reagan. Victory [...] will be read as another public endorsement of the policy direction of the Reagan years. [...] Thus, even though he is not on the ballot this year, President Reagan's policies will be very much at issue.<sup>42</sup>

Donatelli's observations offer a useful avenue for considering the different motivations for involving Reagan in the 1988 presidential election to the degree that he was. Of course, the Bush campaign's goal was securing the vice president's success by whatever means necessary and available. Meanwhile, the Reagan administration's motivations were tied far more closely

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<sup>40</sup> Memorandum from Alex Castellanos to Lee Atwater, 7 July 1988, 'Putting chocolate in the vanilla', Mari Maseng Files: Office of Communication, Box 10, Last 6 Months, July 1988, RRPL.

<sup>41</sup> Steven V. Roberts, 'Some Fear Reagan Embrace of Bush Could Be Suffocating', *New York Times*, 11 August 1988, A1.

<sup>42</sup> Memorandum from Frank J. Donatelli to Kenneth Duberstein, 'White House Fall Campaign Strategy', 15 June 1988, RRPL.

to the benefits that campaign involvement could bring to the departing president's legacy. Successfully installing a successor to Reagan was a reflection of the strength of Reagan's policy direction.

The White House began its plan of action long before Bush was the confirmed nominee. Christopher Bowman, Republican National Committee director of political operations, was in correspondence with Frank Donatelli (then special assistant to the president for political and intergovernmental affairs) to discuss the 'Presidential Assistance for Margin of Victory' programme in late 1987. This plan ranked 23 states in order of priority for the upcoming election and suggested how best Reagan could support the campaigns in each of them.<sup>43</sup> However, the administration's involvement in the campaign became much more prominent once Bush became the presumptive nominee in May 1988. One simple explanation for Reagan's increased interest in the Bush campaign was that, despite a favourable performance in the primary race, by June 1988 Dukakis was polling ahead of Bush in 'every national political poll', noted Donatelli.<sup>44</sup> It is unsurprising then that Reagan began seeking ways to utilise the White House to strengthen his successor's election campaign.

The relationship between Reagan and Bush is another factor which explains why Reagan campaigned so vigorously for his vice president. Kiron Skinner argues that Bush's loyalty to Reagan in the aftermath of the latter's assassination attempt early in his presidency earned him 'loyalty in return' in the form of increased responsibilities within the administration.<sup>45</sup> Skinner argues that these increased responsibilities, for instance being named chair of the Special Situation Group in the event of future emergencies, ultimately aided Bush's

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<sup>43</sup> Memorandum from Christopher Bowman to Frank Donatelli, 1 December 1987, 'Presidential Assistance for Margin of Victory Program', Franklin Lavin Files, Series IV: Box 20, Folder: RNC (5 of 9), RRPL.

<sup>44</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 7 Nov 1988, 'The President's Political Involvement', Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>45</sup> Kiron K. Skinner, 'Governing During a Time of Crisis: the Reagan Presidency', in *When Life Strikes the President: Scandal, Death and Illness in the White House*, eds. Jeffrey A. Engel and Thomas J. Knock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 258.

White House bid in 1988.<sup>46</sup> However, as we have seen, Reagan was reluctant to throw his support behind his vice president until the culmination of the primary season, once Bush was the presumptive nominee. A more convincing explanation for Bush's unwavering loyalty to Reagan becomes clear when we consider Bush's remarks a few years later, in response to criticism of his own Vice President, Dan Quayle. Bush said 'the job [of Vice President] doesn't lend itself to high profile and decision making. It lends itself to loyally supporting the President of the United States, giving him your best judgement, and then when the president makes a decision, supporting it.'<sup>47</sup>

### **The Presidential Election: Soft Campaigning**

The Reagan White House divided its support of Bush into 'soft' and 'hard' campaigning, with the 'soft' campaign activities demonstrating different ways the Reagan White House supported the Bush campaign without explicitly sending Reagan onto the campaign trail. Donatelli cautioned Reagan that the failures of Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson to install their preferred successors in the White House was due to their contentedness to watch these elections 'from the sidelines.'<sup>48</sup> Reagan had expressed a desire to be actively involved not just in Bush's election bid, but in races up and down the Republican ticket. He tasked Donatelli with offering a list of prospective ways in which Reagan could translate this into concrete goals. Most important of these is the list of activities that Donatelli grouped under the heading 'setting the agenda.' These include various ways in which Reagan was involved in actively influencing the discourse surrounding the election, for example in 'designing the peace and prosperity theme'

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<sup>46</sup> Skinner, 'Governing During a Time of Crisis', 268.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 40.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to the President, 'Presidential Participation in 1988 Campaign Activities', 14 September 1988, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (2), RRPL.

and leading the comparisons between the pre-Reagan and Reagan years.<sup>49</sup> Additional ‘soft’ campaigning that Reagan undertook for Bush included ‘praise of George Bush’ (Reagan spoke favourably of Bush 193 times between the conclusion of the primaries and the election) as well as creating ‘Special Roles for Bush’ such as an address to the UN General Assembly (July), swearing-in the new Education secretary (September) and greeting astronauts from the space shuttle (October).<sup>50</sup> These campaign activities demonstrate the benefits and pitfalls that proximity to the White House can afford presidential candidates. Examining them allows us to understand how the Reagan administration navigated these challenges.

One of the most significant ways Reagan bolstered the Bush campaign was by using the office of the presidency to steer the national conversation around the upcoming elections in ways that favoured Bush’s candidacy. Just over a year before the election Frank Donatelli told Reagan that the best way to secure another four years of a Republican in the White House was to avoid allowing ‘nebulous concepts’ such as ‘yearning for change’ or ‘desire to “try something new”’ to dominate the campaign season.<sup>51</sup> This was exacerbated by the fact that the last time the Republican Party had held the White House for a third consecutive term was in 1928. The issue of continuity versus change was therefore prevalent in the discourse surrounding the election, and the Reagan White House sought to overcome what they believed to be the public assumption that the leadership of the White House should naturally switch parties every four-to-eight years.<sup>52</sup> Reagan needed to help set a national agenda that was favourable to his preferred candidate, and he did so in several ways. In June 1988, Frank

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<sup>49</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 7 Nov 1988, ‘The President’s Political Involvement’, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>50</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ronald Reagan, ‘Presidential Participation in 1988 Campaign Activities’, 14 September 1987, Ken Duberstein Files, Box 3, Folder: 1988 political campaign (2), RRPL.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum from Frank J. Donatelli to Kenneth Duberstein, ‘White House Fall Campaign Strategy’, 15 June 1988, RRPL.

Donatelli articulated the importance of these elections to chief of staff Ken Duberstein as follows:

Our job is to raise the stakes of this election by reiterating that all we have accomplished will be threatened if the Democrats are returned to power. The President more than anyone else has credibility to set the context of this campaign.<sup>53</sup>

Reagan introduced several ‘themes’ to the national conversation, primarily attempting to shift discussions towards ‘peace and prosperity.’ This refrain was clear in Reagan’s address at the Republican National Convention, where he assured the audience that a Bush presidency would help to ensure ‘a future secure with a nation at peace and protected against aggression.’<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, Mari Maseng proposed to M. B. Oglesby that Reagan could deliver a series of paid television addresses in the lead-up to the election. She said that such a series ‘might help determine the values and issues important in the election’ and suggested that an appropriate theme might be that ‘the legacy he wants to leave for the country is freedom – a concept almost all of our policies fit under.’<sup>55</sup>

In addition to reminding the public of the ‘peace and prosperity’ brought about by his eight years in office, Reagan was the first person to demonise Dukakis by publicly branding him as a ‘liberal.’<sup>56</sup> During a speech in Miami on behalf of a Florida GOP Senate hopeful in June 1988, Reagan described Dukakis as ‘a true liberal who, instead of controlling government spending, raises taxes.’<sup>57</sup> Reagan and Bush often referred to ‘the L-word’, suggesting that it was so abhorrent as to be unspeakable, with one newspaper reporter observing Reagan wanted

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<sup>53</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘White House Fall Campaign Strategy.’

<sup>54</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana’, 15 August 1988, RRPL [last accessed 11/2/2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-republican-national-convention-new-orleans-louisiana>].

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum from Mari Maseng to MB Oglesby, ‘Presidential Television Addresses’, 28 July 1988, Mari Maseng Files [Office of Public Affairs], Box 10, Television Addresses, Presidential, RRPL.

<sup>56</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>57</sup> United Press International, ‘Reagan’s Ultimate Insult: Dukakis a ‘True Liberal’’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 1988, A1.

the idea of liberalism to seem ‘too unsavory to enunciate in public.’<sup>58</sup> There was no scope for ‘liberal’ to be a positive term, which allowed Reagan and Bush to foster the increasingly polarised nature of American politics during this period. Furthermore, positioning Dukakis as outside of the mainstream was politically savvy given the context of the Cold War and ongoing tendency of people to associate liberalism with socialism.

Positioning Dukakis as further to the left than he really was suited the Bush campaign, as it helped to turn this into an election driven by opposing ideologies rather than one being contested by two moderate candidates. Encouraging people to perceive Dukakis as an advocate for ‘radical change’ helped the White House to ask people whether they were willing to risk a major departure from the course the nation had been on for the last eight years.<sup>59</sup> A key part of this effort to brand Dukakis as a liberal and a radical departure from Reagan was the suggestion that in particular he would be weak in the realm of foreign policy, an area where Bush had a clearer record as a leader. Reagan also challenged Dukakis’s attempts to position himself as the next Harry Truman, saying ‘if he’s Harry Truman, I’m Roger Rabbit.’<sup>60</sup> *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* was the highest grossing film in the United States in 1988 and was set in 1940s Hollywood, so this remark was likely a reference back to Reagan’s earlier career in acting. Reagan’s position as the outgoing president allowed him to use more combative, and at times humorous, language than Bush, who was still trying to remain somewhat above the party-political fray.

Bush’s campaign manager Lee Atwater was a key player in setting the tone for Bush’s 1988 presidential election bid. Atwater had played an active role in Reagan’s 1984 election bid, and he helped Bush wage a more aggressive campaign than he otherwise would have in

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<sup>58</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 351.

<sup>59</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>60</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at a Republican Campaign Rally in Berea, Ohio’, 2 November 2022 [Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2022: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-republican-campaign-rally-berea-ohio>].

order to appeal to hard-line conservatives. In Bush's words, 'jugular politics – going for the opposition's throat – wasn't my style.'<sup>61</sup> When Reagan issued an enthusiastic endorsement of Bush's candidacy for the presidency shortly after his initial endorsement, Atwater was reported to have said that he was 'on the political equivalent of cloud nine.'<sup>62</sup> This offers an indication of how valuable a strong endorsement from Reagan was to the Bush campaign. As we shall see, Reagan played an important role in convincing the hard-line conservative wing of the party to support his vice president, who continued to face criticisms for his remarks about Reagan in the 1980 campaign. Bush's apparently 'liberal' record was off-putting for some conservative Republicans, who doubted his ability to fully adopt Reagan's brand of conservatism.

Lee Atwater wholeheartedly supported this strategy, and he tasked one of his research aides with finding 'social and cultural "issues"' that the Bush campaign could use to set Bush apart from Dukakis.<sup>63</sup> This strategy helped to shift the campaign from what Byron Shafer has described as 'a race about issues into a race about values', which was useful in a campaign year where no single issue dominated the headlines. Shafer argues that due to this lack of obvious 'issue priorities', the respective parties offered 'orthodox versions of their standard themes' during the 1988 campaign, with the Republican Party focussing on foreign policy and cultural issues while the Democrats spoke to the economy and social welfare.<sup>64</sup> After the election, *Time* reported that this was the first presidential campaign in which 'attacks on an opponent, rather than promotion of one's own agenda [became] the primary target of a presidential campaign.'<sup>65</sup>

In order to support the Bush campaign, Reagan attempted to appeal to specific demographics that were likely to be important in the election. He implemented a programme

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<sup>61</sup> George H.W. Bush, quoted in John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 28.

<sup>62</sup> David Hoffman, 'Reagan Issues Stronger Endorsement of Bush', *Washington Post*, 13 May 1988, A1.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 25.

<sup>64</sup> Byron E. Shafer, "'We Are All Southern Democrats Now': The Shape of American Politics in the Very Late Twentieth Century", in Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *Present Discontents: American politics in the very late twentieth century* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers Inc, 1997), 155-156.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 349.

of events such as White House briefings and high-profile appointments to ensure these demographics were represented within the administration, in attempts to appeal to these voters. Furthermore, he played an important role in convincing the American people that the achievements of his administration were ‘worth preserving’, alongside helping to shape national perceptions of Dukakis as ‘liberal and outside the mainstream.’<sup>66</sup> Doing so helped to make this an election about ideological differences, and White House officials believed this would improve Bush’s election chances. The fact that Reagan’s aides arranged for him to undertake this role reflects his capabilities as a unifying figure for the party, as opposed to the diverse visions for the party seen in the Dole, Bush and Robertson campaigns, along with his broad popularity during his final six months in office. Describing Reagan’s role in unifying the party behind Bush, Herbert Parmet observed that ‘[Reagan’s] blessing [of Bush] had to be passed to his own people.’<sup>67</sup>

Although Reagan undertook an ambitious programme of campaign travel in the weeks before the election, in a bid to appeal to potential voters, his team began planning ways they could appeal to specific voter demographics well before Reagan began actively campaigning. One study of changes in party identification between 1980 and 1988 showed that in May 1980 30 percent of people polled identified as Republicans, and that this increased to 41 percent by May 1988.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, those identifying as Democrats declined from 51 percent in May 1980 to 47 percent in May 1988. This meant the national gap had narrowed from 21 percentage points to just 6 points. The Republican Party had made considerable gains in several constituencies, a victory which Richard Wirthlin recommended that ‘the President need[ed] to

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<sup>66</sup> Author Unknown. ‘Reagan Campaign Assistance’, Undated, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>67</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 337.

<sup>68</sup> Memorandum from Richard Wirthlin to M. B. Oglesby, Mari Maseng and John Tuck, ‘The Last Six Months’, 22 July 1988, John C. Tuck Files, Box 6, Folder: Santa Barbara Senior Staff Meeting July 1988: ‘The Last Six Months’, RRPL, p.12.

address frequently in the fall.’<sup>69</sup> These included young people aged 18-34, but with a particular emphasis on 18- to 24-year-olds; ‘middle income blue collar and white collar workers’, ‘Southern “new” Republicans and “soft” Democrats’ and ‘upper middle class, younger suburbanites.’<sup>70</sup>

As a result, the White House used Reagan to target campaign messages to ‘specific demographic groups and priority states’, primarily seeking to transform ‘Reagan Democrats’ into long-term Republican voters.<sup>71</sup> These demographics included ‘blue-collar ethnic Catholics’ in the north, and ‘traditional Democrat voters’ in the south. In addition to Richard Wirthlin’s research, Frank Lavin, head of the White House political affairs unit, wrote a detailed state-by-state guide about which demographics the administration was hoping to target. Two groups that were not particular to any specific state, but were nevertheless ‘target groups’, were young voters and white rural southerners.<sup>72</sup> To give a few examples of the level of detail Lavin offered, target groups in Florida were listed as ‘Cuban Americans, Jewish Americans, Evangelical Christians, Veterans, Retirees/ [Social Security] recipients.’ Meanwhile, in Illinois the target groups were Polish and German Americans, Catholics and farmers.<sup>73</sup> There is no mention of appealing to African American voters in any of the states outlined in this plan, and indeed African American voters are conspicuous by their absence throughout the strategic planning of the Reagan legacy project. Additionally, there was no mention of the ‘gender gap’, the tendency for women to vote Democratic disproportionately to men regardless of other variables such as class and ethnicity, which is surprising given the level of detailed attention the administration was paying to other demographics.

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<sup>69</sup> Wirthlin, ‘The Last Six Months’, 22 July 1988, RRPL.

<sup>70</sup> Wirthlin, ‘The Last Six Months’, 22 July 1988, RRPL.

<sup>71</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>72</sup> Memorandum from Frank Lavin to Rebecca Range, ‘Target Groups’, 3 March 1988, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>73</sup> Lavin to Range, ‘Target Groups.’

Lavin proposed a range of ways the White House could engage with members of these various groups during the spring and summer of 1988. Within this activity there was a strong emphasis on connections between Reagan and the Republican Party, which created opportunities to promote the Reagan legacy. For instance, he proposed inviting the ‘leadership elites’ from some of these groups to the White House for briefings, sending administration spokespeople to meetings of prominent organisations, and appointing members of those targeted groups to positions within the administration to ensure they were visibly represented.<sup>74</sup> He also proposed working with the Office of Public Liaison to ‘take advantage of Presidential and Administration travel to speak to these key voter groups.’ This became crucial to Reagan’s final few months in office when he undertook his ambitious programme of election travel. However, it is worth acknowledging that this campaign activity was supported by a programme of smaller events within the White House, which were intended to bolster Bush’s election bid.

Finally, as party leader, Reagan also faced the task of healing rifts stemming from a hotly contested primary race, in which many candidates had positioned themselves as his heir.<sup>75</sup> Of course, both parties had seen a contested primary race, and the Democratic primaries tended to be more divisive than those of their Republican counterparts during the mid- to late twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> For instance, the 1968 Democratic primary season was infamously chaotic, with the Democratic National Convention in Chicago taking place against the backdrop of protests against the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy.<sup>77</sup> The 1972 Democratic primaries were similarly contentious, including the shooting of candidate George Wallace, who was paralysed from the waist down for the remainder of his

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<sup>74</sup> Lavin to Range, ‘Target Groups.’

<sup>75</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ronald Reagan, ‘Presidential Participation in 1988 Campaign Activities’, 14 September 1987, Ken Duberstein Files, Box 3, Folder: 1988 political campaign (2), RRPL.

<sup>76</sup> William G. Mayer, *The Divided Democrats: Ideological Unity, Party Reform and Presidential Elections* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 2.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph M. Siracusa, ‘1968 Democratic Convention’ in *Encyclopedia of the Kennedys: The People and Events that Shaped America* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Press, 2014), 178.

life. As a result, incumbent Richard Nixon deployed Secret Service staff to guard Democratic candidates Wilbur D. Mills and Shirley Chisholm, as well as Senator Ted Kennedy, reflecting the security concerns for high-profile political figures at the time.<sup>78</sup>

One of the most significant ways in which Reagan and his administration assisted Bush was in their creation of ‘Special Roles for George Bush’ in the lead-up to the election.<sup>79</sup> There is ample literature on the increasing importance of image in successful presidential leadership. Cultivating a strong image on the campaign trail was therefore vital, as it allows them to demonstrate their capacity for carrying out the office of the presidency. George C. Edwards argues that presidents need to try to lead public opinion, in order to effectively lead government.<sup>80</sup> More recently, Iwan Morgan and Mark White’s volume on presidential image seeks to ‘place more emphasis on the intentional construction of presidential image as an instrument of leadership and historical reputation.’<sup>81</sup> This sort of image-building begins on the campaign trail, and in Bush’s case was heavily influenced by his role in the Reagan White House. When we consider the ‘special roles’ the White House created for Bush, it becomes clear that they were designed either to help Bush appeal to certain voting demographics, or to play to his political strengths.

The majority of these ‘special roles’ centred on American foreign policy, one of Bush’s strengths (and Dukakis’s weaknesses), as well as a highly sought-after attribute in Cold War-era presidential candidates in particular. Mikhail Gorbachev’s visit to the United States in late 1987 helped to strengthen the vice president’s image both as a loyal Reagan supporter and a national leader.<sup>82</sup> A prominent role in an event such as this, generated images that could be

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<sup>78</sup> William Greider, ‘Wallace is Shot, Legs Paralyzed’, *Washington Post*, 16 May 1972, A1. Though Kennedy was not a candidate in 1972, he was afforded Secret Service protection given the assassination of his brothers in 1963 and 1968.

<sup>79</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>80</sup> George C. Edwards, *The Public Presidency: the pursuit of popular support* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1983), 39.

<sup>81</sup> Iwan Morgan and Mark White, “Introduction” in *The Presidential Image: A History from Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump*, ed. Iwan Morgan and Mark White (New York: IB Tauris, 2020), 3.

<sup>82</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, ‘Gorbachev Visit Called Boon to Bush’, *New York Times*, 11 December 1988, 9.

used in subsequent election campaigning materials, something that was already attracting press speculation in December 1987.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, when Reagan returned from his summit in Moscow in June 1988 Bush was there to formally greet the President.<sup>84</sup>

A further opportunity the White House created for Bush was, Donatelli wrote, ‘witnessing the destruction of the first nuclear missile following the ratification of the INF Treaty.’<sup>85</sup> The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty was an agreement signed in December 1987 by Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet General Secretary, banning either nation from owning short- or intermediate-range missiles. The successful negotiation of this pivotal piece of legislation was a major boon for the Reagan administration, as it marked the culmination of prolonged talks, and was the first time either of the superpowers had voluntarily reduced the scale of their nuclear arsenal.<sup>86</sup> The week before signing the treaty, Reagan described it as ‘historic’ and ‘a centerpiece of his presidency.’<sup>87</sup> Allowing Bush to be visible during the press coverage this development generated was a bonus for his campaign. Bush was, notably, one of only two Republican presidential candidates to support Reagan’s signing of this treaty in December 1987 (the other being Bob Dole), allowing him to point to the longevity of his unwavering support of Reagan and his policy decisions.<sup>88</sup>

Another example of such an event came in July 1988 Bush addressed the United Nations Security Council to express ‘compassion’ for the casualties incurred during an incident in which the US had downed an Iranian civilian aircraft, killing all 290 onboard.<sup>89</sup> The US maintained they had been acting in self-defence after failed attempts to communicate with the

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<sup>83</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, ‘Gorbachev Visit.’

<sup>84</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>85</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

<sup>86</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2000), 601.

<sup>87</sup> David Hoffman and Paul Taylor, ‘Presidential Candidates Wrangle on INF, Deficit’, *Washington Post*, 2 December 1987, A1.

<sup>88</sup> David Hoffman and Paul Taylor, ‘Presidential Candidates Wrangle on INF, Deficit’, *Washington Post*, 2 December 1987, A1.

<sup>89</sup> Tom Raum, ‘Bush’s U.N. Speech Seen As Political Address’, Associated Press, 14 July 1988 [last accessed 11 September 2020: <https://apnews.com/deb621dc7896556245e2f70649c36f9c>].

aircraft, an Airbus A300 which was mistaken for an F-14 fighter jet during a skirmish between a US naval vessel and Iranian gunboats.<sup>90</sup> During his speech, Bush implored Iran to ‘share responsibility’ for the tragedy, because Iran had not diverted the civilian aircraft to avoid being in proximity to the fighting.<sup>91</sup>

Bush served as the US ambassador to the UN in the Nixon administration, so returning to this setting created an opportunity for his foreign policy credentials to be discussed in the media. According to Associated Press reporter Tom Raum, the Bush campaign saw this speech as ‘a demonstration of his leadership, compassion and foreign-policy credentials.’<sup>92</sup> Sidestepping reporters’ questions about the electoral dimension of such an appearance, Bush’s chief of staff Craig Fuller refused to say whether the idea for Bush to give this speech originated with the White House, or with Bush’s campaign.<sup>93</sup> However, the White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater reported that Reagan had asked Bush to give the speech.<sup>94</sup> Contemporary press coverage was quick to link this speech to the upcoming election. According to one report, for example, it ‘accentuate[d]’ Bush’s experience in the realms of diplomacy and foreign policy, areas where Dukakis’s record was relatively weak.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, Dukakis had been scheduled to announce his choice of running mate on the same day that Bush delivered his speech at the UN. Though his speech was subsequently delayed by two days, it is nevertheless worth noting that one of these ‘special events’ for Bush was scheduled for a time when the Democrats’ candidate for the presidency was expected to be dominating the headlines.<sup>96</sup> More explicitly, the reporters covering the speech for the *Washington Post* described it as ‘an appearance intended to underscore [Bush’s] diplomatic

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<sup>90</sup> Max Fisher, ‘The forgotten story of Iran Air Flight 655’, *The Washington Post*, 16 October 2013, A13

<sup>91</sup> Tom Raum, ‘Bush’s U.N. Speech Seen As Political Address.’

<sup>92</sup> Tom Raum, ‘Bush’s U.N. Speech Seen As Political Address.’

<sup>93</sup> Raum, ‘Bush’s U.N. Speech Seen As Political Address.’

<sup>94</sup> James Gerstenzang and Cathleen Decker, ‘Bush to Defend Downing of Jet at U.N. Session’ *Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 1988, 20.

<sup>95</sup> James Gerstenzang and Cathleen Decker, ‘Bush to Defend Downing of Jet at U.N. Session.’

<sup>96</sup> Julie Johnson, ‘Bush to Speak at U.N. Debate on Iran’s Plane’, *New York Times*, 14 July 1988, A1.

experience and his campaign theme of vigorously defending American national interests.<sup>97</sup> There was no doubt that this speech was a campaign event rather than one of Bush's usual duties as vice president, and the *Post* journalists went on to describe it as 'an ideal opportunity to exploit a diplomatic mission for political advantage.'<sup>98</sup> Though the political ramifications of this appearance were no secret, it still provides a good example of an occasion when the Bush campaign and the Reagan White House appeared to work cooperatively to create opportunities to strengthen Bush's candidacy, and simultaneously distract from developments in the Democratic campaign.

In addition to tying Bush to the foreign policy achievements of the Reagan administration, the White House assisted Bush by allowing him to fill Reagan's shoes at several high-profile events in the run-up to the election. For instance, the White House arranged Bush's attendance at the landing of the space shuttle *Discovery* on 3 October 1988. This was NASA's first flight since the tragic explosion of the Challenger space shuttle 32 months previously. The tragedy killed the seven crew members on board, including school-teacher Christa McAuliffe, who was recruited through the NASA Teacher in Space Project. McAuliffe was selected from a pool of 11,000 applicants to deliver lessons to school children broadcast live from space. As a result, the launch of the shuttle garnered widespread national attention, and the tragedy was broadcast live into homes and classrooms around the world.<sup>99</sup> One survey suggested that 95 percent of Americans had seen footage of the disaster by the end of the day.<sup>100</sup> Almost three years later, the successful four-day test flight of *Discovery* helped to restore national morale and faith in the U.S. space programme, and 410,000 spectators travelled to Edwards Air Force Base to watch the shuttle's return to earth. This figure was only exceeded at the landing of one

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<sup>97</sup> David Hoffman and Michael J. Berlin, 'Bush Terms Strike at Plane Self-Defense', *Washington Post*, 15 July 1988, A1.

<sup>98</sup> David Hoffman and Michael J. Berlin, 'Bush Terms Strike at Plane Self-Defense.'

<sup>99</sup> Peter H. King, 'Discovery Makes Flawless Landing', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 1988, 1.

<sup>100</sup> John C. Wright, Dale Kunkel et al., 'How Children Reacted to Televised Coverage of the Space Shuttle Disaster', *Journal of Communication* 39.2 (1989), 28.

other space shuttle, the final test flight of the space shuttle Columbia in 1982, which was attended by over half a million spectators, including President Reagan. This sort of ‘feel good’ event, a celebration of the nation’s scientific capabilities and expanding horizons, was an ideal event for Bush to attend. His status as vice president allowed him to justify his presence in a way that his opponent Dukakis simply could not. Bush gave the longest speech at the post-launch reception event, though he promised to, and did, remain apolitical throughout these remarks.<sup>101</sup>

Bush was speaking on behalf of the Reagan administration when he congratulated the astronauts on their successful launch, and he travelled to Edwards Airforce Base in his capacity as vice president, rather than as a presidential candidate.<sup>102</sup> When asked if he would invite Dukakis to the landing, Bush argued that to do so would politicise the event unnecessarily.<sup>103</sup> However, regardless of Dukakis’s non-attendance, press coverage discussed the respective candidates’ stances on the future of the nation’s space programme. Of course, any escalation of the US space programme in the context of the Cold War would draw comparisons with the so-called space race of the 1960s. A heightened interest in space exploration would naturally raise questions about foreign relations and international collaboration, areas where Bush was more experienced than his opponent. Some scientists questioned whether the future of the American space programme lay in collaborating with the Soviet Union.<sup>104</sup> It therefore made sense that the White House assisted Bush in taking a lead in this particular event, as it allowed him to address some of these issues in his capacity as vice president, rather than in the traditional political arena that his opponent was relegated to. Photos of Bush smiling alongside the astronauts with an American flag draped from the side of the spacecraft projected an image

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<sup>101</sup> Peter H. King, ‘Discovery Makes Flawless Landing.’

<sup>102</sup> ‘Back in Space; Bush Applauds Shuttle Liftoff’, *New York Times*, 30 September 1988, D22.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Back in Space; Bush Applauds Shuttle Liftoff’, *New York Times*, 30 September 1988, D22.

<sup>104</sup> Kathy Sawyer, ‘The Future in Space: Hard Choices’, *Washington Post*, 4 October 1988, A1.

of Bush in the role of world leader, in a way that any challenger would have struggled to achieve.

Another way the White House could support Bush's efforts was by allowing him to engage with particular demographic groups that he was hoping to appeal to in his presidential campaign, which would be vital to Bush's campaign success. For instance, a smaller role that the White House helped to orchestrate for Bush was allowing him to swear in Lauro Cavazos as Secretary of Education, the first Hispanic American to serve in a presidential Cabinet.<sup>105</sup> Bush and Dukakis had both made it a campaign pledge to appoint a Hispanic American to their respective cabinets, should they win the election.<sup>106</sup> Unsurprisingly, there was some speculation both in the press and within the Latino community regarding whether Reagan had appointed Cavazos to serve in the final months of Reagan's presidency to bolster Bush's campaign by courting Hispanic voters.<sup>107</sup> Though of course the Bush campaign and the White House denied such speculation, planning material from the Reagan administration illuminates that it was entirely intentional that Bush was given this responsibility.<sup>108</sup>

Close ties to the current administration and unwavering loyalty to the White House can act as both a blessing and a curse to a prospective president. For example, the Midwest experienced widespread crop damage because of a drought in the summer of 1988, an event that became politicised given its proximity to the presidential election. Despite Reagan announcing that 'politics must stop at the parched field's edge', the Reagan White House deliberately sent Bush to the area to assess the damage alongside the Secretary of Agriculture Richard E. Lyng.<sup>109</sup> Farm-belt states would generally have swung to the Republican Party, but

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<sup>105</sup> Author Unknown. 'Cavazos Takes Oath as Education Secretary', *New York Times*, 21 September 1988, B29.

<sup>106</sup> Reuters. 'Senate Unanimously Confirms Cavazos as Education Secretary', *Los Angeles Times*, 20 September 1988, 1.

<sup>107</sup> AP. 'Cavazos Is Sworn In as Education Secretary; First Latino in Cabinet', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 1988, 13.

<sup>108</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, 'The President's Political Involvement.'

<sup>109</sup> Julie Johnson, 'Candidates Gauge the Implications Of the Heartland's Dry Summer', *New York Times*, 17 July 1988, E4.

the drought raised questions about whether or not people would remain loyal to the party currently holding the White House.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Reagan's handling of this crisis in fact had the potential to directly impact on Bush's election chances. There were two previous presidential elections that were similarly affected: 1936 and 1956. Reagan did subsequently visit the region, and one news report from the *New York Times* likened Reagan's visit to the region to Franklin Roosevelt's during his bid for re-election in 1936. This is all the more noteworthy since of course, Reagan was not running in this election, but Bush was. This article therefore highlights the value the reporter was ascribing to Reagan's role, treating him as the candidate campaigning rather than Bush.

Another strategy the Bush campaign employed to apparently good effect was his 'appeals to patriotism and the flag', a technique Reagan had repeatedly used well.<sup>111</sup> A fundamental part of Reagan's legacy was his attempt to revive national morale and create a sense of patriotism among Americans. His attempts to dispel the 'ghost of Vietnam' is evident in his speeches, particularly in his final year in office, and it is telling that Bush attempted to tap into some of this during his own bid for the presidency. Bert Rockman argues that Republican campaign managers intended to 'cultivate the cultural divide', using issues including patriotism, race and crime to Bush's electoral advantage.<sup>112</sup> This was also clear when we consider Atwater's strategy of seeking out moral issues the Bush campaign could use to distance Bush from Dukakis. One voter, when explaining his support for Bush, said, 'it's the patriotism thing, the flag – you know, the Pledge of Allegiance and all that. I'm not sure he'll be able to do much about the deficit, which worries me a lot, but he's patriotic, so I'm sure

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, 'Midwest, Pacific West May Decide Presidency', *Washington Post*, 10 July 1988, 11.

<sup>111</sup> John L. Sullivan, Amy Fried and Mary G. Dietz, 'Patriotism, Politics and the Presidential Election of 1988', *American Journal of Political Science*, 36.1 (1992), 200.

<sup>112</sup> Bert A. Rockman, 'The Leadership Style of George Bush' in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (ed) *The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 8.

he'll try.'<sup>113</sup> The deficit was a major vulnerability for the Reagan administration and something they sought to downplay in debates and discussions in his final year in office. So, it is noteworthy that the voter being interviewed was less concerned with the failures of the outgoing administration than with Bush's patriotism.

### **Hard Campaigning: Reagan Defends His Own legacy**

During the 1988 election cycle Reagan participated in 101 political events on behalf of Bush, 53 of which were outside of Washington, DC, and he attended events in 19 different states, travelling an impressive 27,000 miles on the campaign trail.<sup>114</sup> The administration paid close attention to the voting groups that were critical to the upcoming election, and used this information to plan Reagan's travels. For example, in March 1988 Max Green wrote to Rebecca Range, a fellow Office of Public Liaison aide, to outline various ethnic groups' events Reagan could attend in order to garner support for the Republican presidential candidate among these groups, particularly the Italian American, Hispanic and Asian American communities.<sup>115</sup> Here, we have another example of the Reagan administration actively choosing not to target African American voters, instead prioritising voters from other ethnic backgrounds. Juanita Duggan (special assistant for domestic policy, who worked within the OPL) was tasked with writing a strategy document outlining religious denominations Reagan was popular within in order to establish how the administration could strengthen this support in the lead-up to the election.<sup>116</sup> Finally, pollster and strategist Richard Wirthlin anticipated that if Reagan's sole

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<sup>113</sup> R.W. Apple Jr. 'In Swing Precinct in Modesto, Calif., The Presidency Is Still Up For Grabs', *New York Times*, 30 Oct 1988, 28.

<sup>114</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 7 Nov 1988, 'The President's Political Involvement', Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL; Untitled Memorandum from James L. Hooley to Kenneth Duberstein, 9 November 1988, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, Folder: 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>115</sup> Memorandum from Max Green to Rebecca Range, 1 March 1988, 'Ethnic Events', Franklin Lavin Files, Series IV: Box 20, Folder: OPL (1 of 4), RRPL.

<sup>116</sup> Memorandum from Juanita Duggan to Rebecca Range, 3 March 1988, 'Constituency Events', Franklin Lavin Files, Series IV: Box 20, Folder: OPL (1 of 4), RRPL.

contribution to the campaign was to increase voter turnout in young people aged 24 and under by 5 percent, that ‘could more directly help George Bush win the campaign in the fall than any other single thing the President might do.’<sup>117</sup>

This attempt to appeal to younger voters was also visible in Bush’s choice of Dan Quayle as his running mate. Quayle admitted that he knew Bush ‘went young and right’ in choosing a running mate.<sup>118</sup> This helped make the ticket more appealing to the right wing of the party, whose adherents were less impressed with Bush’s moderate stance, and also helped him appeal to younger Americans. In the final stages of the campaign Reagan was also deployed to try and appeal to ‘hard-core conservatives’, who were sceptical of Bush’s more moderate stance.<sup>119</sup> One party official was quoted in the press as saying, ‘the best thing [Reagan] can do for George Bush is to pull our base together.’<sup>120</sup> Evidently, Bush benefitted from Reagan’s efforts on his behalf. However, it is important to remember that Reagan was not acting altruistically, but instead campaigning for Bush to improve the prospects for his own presidential legacy. Here, we have one of the clearest examples of Reagan actively attempting to shape his own legacy, albeit through following a strategy put together by some of the key figures in the legacy building project, namely Mari Maseng (Office of Communications).

In June 1988 Reagan directed the White House to assess how it could best support the Bush campaign, as it had become clear in national polls that Bush was polling behind Dukakis, even after becoming the Republican nominee. The administration established a series of goals regarding this campaign. First was the need to ‘defend the accomplishments’ of the Reagan administration against attacks during the campaign.<sup>121</sup> Wading into the campaign allowed the White House to tackle some of these criticisms directly, rather than trusting the Bush campaign

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<sup>117</sup> Wirthlin, ‘The Last Six Months’, 22 July 1988, RRPL, 14.

<sup>118</sup> Dan Quayle, quoted in Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 344.

<sup>119</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Campaigns for GOP Ticket, Sen. Wilson’, *Washington Post*, 24 August 1988, A5.

<sup>120</sup> Julie Johnson, ‘Reagan as Campaign Aide: It’s a Public Speaking Job’, *New York Times*, 31 July 1988, E5.

<sup>121</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘The President’s Political Involvement.’

to look after Reagan's legacy and defend it from public attacks. In addition to the political benefits of the election campaign for the future of the Republican Party, travelling on the campaign trail allowed Reagan to defend his own policies and his presidency more broadly, rather than relying on others. As Frank Donatelli observed in 1987 when he was considering Reagan's political strategy for the upcoming year, 'the president will not be seeking re-election in 1988, but his policies will very much be on trial.'<sup>122</sup>

One key appearance during Reagan's campaigning was his speech at the Republican National Convention in August 1988. When Bush formally accepted the nomination at the Republican National Convention, he made it clear that he was not planning to deviate from Reagan's central policies, saying, 'I am your candidate because the most important work of my life is to complete the mission we started in 1980. And how, and how do we complete it? We build on it.'<sup>123</sup> However, Bush's speech at the Convention also demonstrated one occasion where he deviated from Reagan's 'hard-line conservatism.'<sup>124</sup> Bush promised a 'kinder, gentler America', and 'a thousand points of light', in contrast to Reagan's staunch conservatism.<sup>125</sup> White House correspondents Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame argued that this was intended to 'woo' suburban independent voters, by proposing policies designed to support the environment and education.<sup>126</sup>

Bush also stressed the differences between himself and his opponent, Dukakis, in this speech, saying, 'the differences between the two candidates are as deep and wide as they have

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<sup>122</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Howard Baker, 'A Political Strategy for 1988', 17 July 1988, Ken Duberstein Files, Box 3, Folder: 1988 political campaign (2), RRPL.

<sup>123</sup> Bush, quoted in David Mervin, *George Bush and the Guardianship President* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), 29.

<sup>124</sup> Paul J. Quirk, 'Domestic Policy: Divided Government and Cooperative Presidential Leadership' in Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (ed.), *The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 69.

<sup>125</sup> George H.W. Bush, 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans', 18 August 1988, *American Presidency Project* [last accessed 13/02/2021: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/268235>].

<sup>126</sup> Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 28.

ever been in our long history.’<sup>127</sup> This was something Reagan’s advisors and those in the Bush campaign had both recommended earlier in the campaign, as they believed shifting the discussion into one based on ideologies and divisions would aid Bush’s electoral prospects. Turning this into an election of opposing ideologies also helped to maintain Reagan’s image as an ideologically staunch conservative. Rather than drawing attention to his relative pragmatism in office, Bush positioned himself, and by extension the Reagan White House, as being diametrically opposed to Dukakis’s liberal ideals.

Frank Donatelli had discussed the importance of the Republican National Convention with Ken Duberstein over a year in advance, observing, ‘the Republican National Convention in New Orleans in August 1988, offers us our best chance to favorably impact the opinion of the electorate from the end of the primary season through the beginning of the fall election campaigns.’<sup>128</sup> He added, ‘as such, it will be of enormous importance to the RNC [Republican National Convention], our 1988 nominee and the White House.’ At this point the primary process had not yet begun, but Donatelli noted that Reagan would want to ‘be helpful to the 1988 nominee’ but would also want ‘a platform consistent with Administration policy of the last eight years.’<sup>129</sup> The role of the outgoing administration in shaping the policy of the prospective incoming administration is therefore clear. We have seen one attempt at Reagan outlining policy hopes for his successor in Chapter Two with the Legislative Message. In addition, Donatelli felt that the Reagan administration needed to be involved in shaping the convention platform at these early stages to assure that the result was ‘acceptable to all concerned.’ To do so, Donatelli proposed forming a White House working group to liaise with

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<sup>127</sup> George H.W. Bush, ‘Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans’, 18 August 1988, *American Presidency Project* [last accessed 13/02/2021: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/268235>].

<sup>128</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, ‘General Thoughts on 1988 National Convention’, 21 July 1987, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 Republican National Convention, RRPL.

<sup>129</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘General Thoughts on 1988 National Convention.’

the convention organisers to ensure the convention was as advantageous to Reagan and his legacy as possible.

The timing of Reagan's appearance, so as not to overshadow the nominee, was also something that Reagan's staff debated at length. As we have seen elsewhere, the White House turned to Reagan's predecessors to gauge the extent to which outgoing presidents had played a role in the convention, and when they had given speeches in relation to their potential successors.<sup>130</sup> When the White House sought inspiration for their various legacy-building activities, Truman, Eisenhower and Johnson were the most recent presidents who had been in a position to support their potential successor in this way. Johnson did not attend the convention in 1968 due to Humphrey's efforts to distance himself from the incumbent, and Truman's speech was delayed until 1am because there were three ballots to decide on the nominee. Eisenhower spent a day at the convention, gave an early evening speech, then left the next morning, and this was the model the White House decided to follow. Beyond that, Reagan was asked to decide whether he would prefer to give his speech on the first or second day of the convention, and he was presented with pros and cons of either decision. He opted for the first day of the convention, which Donatelli said would secure higher television ratings and would be considered the convention keynote. However, this went against Donatelli's recommendation. Donatelli wanted Reagan to opt for the later slot as he felt that would 'represent our best chance to unify the convention after the platform and credentials have been adopted.'<sup>131</sup> Reagan appeared to prioritise the higher-profile time slot, rather than his role as a unifying figure at the convention.

In July 1988 James Hooley, Assistant to the President and Director of Presidential Advance, began making more concrete plans for the Reagans' attendance at the convention.

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<sup>130</sup> Memorandum for the President from Frank J. Donatelli, 'Convention Program', 19 February 1988, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 Republican National Convention, RRPL.

<sup>131</sup> For the President from Donatelli, 'Convention Program.'

He anticipated that their arrival in New Orleans would be ‘a gala event with full media coverage.’<sup>132</sup> Conscious that Reagan risked upstaging Bush, he suggested creating a ‘unique event’ to welcome the Reagans to the city while avoiding a ‘duplication’ of the event planned for Bush’s arrival, while still drawing attention to Reagan’s arrival. He proposed a Mardi Gras-style afternoon festival in New Orleans, ‘emphasizing a celebration of the Reagan Presidency rather than a farewell.’<sup>133</sup>

In terms of the speech itself, the content aligned closely with many of Reagan’s other speeches during this phase of his presidency, including the familiar rhetoric of the ‘shining city on a hill.’ In terms of Reagan’s remarks about Bush, he made it clear that he believed a Bush presidency was vital to securing the conservative ascendancy which had begun during his administration, stating, ‘without George Bush to build on those policies, everything we’ve achieved will be at risk. All the work, sacrifice, and effort of the American people could end in the very same disaster that we inherited in 1981.’<sup>134</sup> Reagan was clearly positioning Bush as a continuity candidate, and someone who would remain dedicated to pursuing similar policies as Reagan had during his term.

A few months later, as the election campaigning drew to a close, Reagan had an excellent opportunity to deliver speeches reminding voters of his political successes, clearly tying a Bush victory to the longevity of his own political legacy. One reporter described the atmosphere of these final campaign stops as ‘seasoned with nostalgia.’<sup>135</sup> At one, Reagan literally rode into the sunset, waving his Stetson at a rodeo in Mesquite, Texas.<sup>136</sup> He travelled

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<sup>132</sup> Memorandum from James L. Hooley to Kenneth M. Duberstein et al., ‘President and Mrs. Reagan’s Participation at Republican National Convention’, 5 July 1988, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 Republican National Convention, RRPL.

<sup>133</sup> Hooley to Duberstein et al., ‘President and Mrs. Reagan’s Participation at Republican National Convention.’

<sup>134</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana’, 15 August 1988, RRPL [last accessed 11/2/2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-republican-national-convention-new-orleans-louisiana>].

<sup>135</sup> Julie Johnson, ‘The Reagan Campaign Magic: He Isn’t Running, but He’s Winning’, *New York Times*, 3 November 1988, B19.

<sup>136</sup> Maureen Dowd, ‘President, in Vintage Form, Relishes his Final Campaign’, *New York Times*, 7 November 1988, A1

to five states in the final week of the campaign, focussing particularly on California, a state that was expected to be especially critical in the presidential race.<sup>137</sup> Lou Cannon reported, ‘Bush’s support is strongest where Reagan is strongest’, particularly in the South and among younger voters, and a *Washington Post*-ABC poll showed that 91 percent of voters who supported Reagan intended to vote for Bush.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, further tracking data demonstrated that Bush’s margins improved in regions Reagan visited.<sup>139</sup> The benefit of Reagan’s efforts for Bush are therefore clear. However, the benefits of Bush’s success for Reagan’s future legacy remained much more difficult to gauge.

Press coverage suggested that Bush’s identification with the Reagan legacy bolstered his electoral success. Shortly before the election Reagan told voters in California on the days leading up to the election that, although his name was not on the ballot, ‘something else is. A principle. A legacy’, and Reagan asked voters to ‘stand by me’ when they voted.<sup>140</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times* journalist following Reagan, ‘it has been clear that part of Reagan’s motivation has been to help a potential successor who would keep alive his own dreams, hopes and conservative ideals.’<sup>141</sup> Reagan concluded both of his own bids for the presidency in San Diego, adding a further parallel between his presidential ambitions and Bush’s.<sup>142</sup>

### **Senate and House Races**

In addition to installing a Republican to the White House, strong performances in the Senate and House races would also help to solidify the policy shifts during the Reagan years. Reagan played an important role in the other races up and down the 1988 Republican ticket, in part

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<sup>137</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Begins “Last Hurrah” Campaign Swing to Help Bush’, *Washington Post*, 27 October 1988, A29.

<sup>138</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Begins “Last Hurrah” Campaign Swing.’

<sup>139</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Begins “Last Hurrah” Campaign Swing.’

<sup>140</sup> Lee May, ‘“Stand by Me” Reagan Urges State’s Voters’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 November 1988, A1.

<sup>141</sup> May, ‘“Stand by Me”.’

<sup>142</sup> May, ‘“Stand by Me”.’

because doing so would strengthen the longevity of his presidential legacy. To appreciate this, it is important to appreciate the role of the president in party building more broadly. Daniel Galvin argues that presidents bring their ‘prestige and personal influence’ to their ‘party-building projects.’<sup>143</sup> Galvin identifies Reagan’s two main party-building projects as being his efforts to convince Reagan Democrats to become long-term Republican voters, and his efforts in recruiting candidates for elections and ‘preparing for redistricting.’<sup>144</sup>

Reagan used the office of the presidency to attempt to strengthen the Republican Party in an array of ways during his second term in office. One practical example of how Reagan helped to bring ‘Reagan Democrats’ into the Republican Party was his shift away from using the word ‘Democrat’ and instead criticising ‘liberals.’<sup>145</sup> Frank Donatelli made this suggestion in his correspondence with Ken Duberstein when preparing for Reagan’s appearance at the 1988 national convention, and in that speech Reagan only used the word ‘Democrat’ once, when acknowledging that he himself had been a Democrat.<sup>146</sup> Instead, he made more vague references to ‘our friends on the other side.’<sup>147</sup> He avoided criticising the Democratic Party or the attacks made on his legacy at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, instead saying, ‘I’m sorely tempted to spend the rest of this evening telling the truth about our friends who met in Atlanta, but, then, why should I have all the fun?’ He then transitioned into a discussion of his hopes for the future of the United States.<sup>148</sup> Bush’s acceptance speech made two references to ‘liberal Democrats’, but prefacing ‘Democrats’ with ‘liberal’ meant his remarks were clearly not intended as a criticism of the more centrist Reagan Democrats that he

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<sup>143</sup> Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 136.

<sup>144</sup> Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 136.

<sup>145</sup> Memorandum from Frank J. Donatelli to Kenneth M. Duberstein, ‘Coordination Meeting of July 28, 1988’, 27 July 1988, Kenneth Duberstein Files, Box 3, folder: 1988 Republican National Convention, RRPL.

<sup>146</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana’, 15 August 1988, RRPL [last accessed 11/2/2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-republican-national-convention-new-orleans-louisiana>].

<sup>147</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans.’

<sup>148</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans.’

was trying to win over.<sup>149</sup> The convention delegates' support for Reagan was clear, from their chants of 'four more years! Four more years!' during his speech, as he began discussing Bush's contributions to the administration's accomplishments.<sup>150</sup>

Another example of Reagan's support of smaller elections during the 1988 campaign cycle was his role in the Republican National Committee's volunteer recruitment drive in 1988. Potential activists were given letters from Reagan asking them to support the Republican presidential nominee (regardless of who secured the nomination) and Reagan continued to contribute to the volunteer movement by contributing quotes for their newsletters and personalised recognition for volunteers who demonstrated 'exemplary service.'<sup>151</sup> He clearly invested a degree of time and effort into being involved in these elections at the grassroots level, demonstrating his interest in party-building in addition to securing success in the presidential election.

In terms of support Reagan offered to individual candidates in these races, this ranged from endorsement letters and photo opportunities to travelling to various states to make public appearances. Reagan made 20 appearances on behalf of 15 candidates in Senate races, in ten different states, and the White House estimated that these efforts raised \$16.5 million for the 1988 Senate campaigns.<sup>152</sup> Additionally, incumbent Senate candidates were invited to White House events such as bill signings wherever appropriate, 'in order to increase a candidate's visibility and credibility.'<sup>153</sup> Senate candidates were also used as 'greeters' and 'dais guests' during Reagan's visits to their respective states, and acknowledged in his speeches.<sup>154</sup> This suggests that associating Reagan with the various candidates improved their election prospects.

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<sup>149</sup> George H.W. Bush, 'Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans', 18 August 1988, *American Presidency Project* [last accessed 13/02/2021: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/268235>].

<sup>150</sup> Reagan, 'Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans.'

<sup>151</sup> Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 140.

<sup>152</sup> Memorandum from Frank Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 'The President's Political Involvement', 7 Nov 1988, Kenneth M. Duberstein Files, Box 3, 1988 political campaign (1), RRPL.

<sup>153</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, 'The President's Political Involvement.'

<sup>154</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, 'The President's Political Involvement.'

Two years later, Reagan's team sought, in Galvin's words, to 'capitalize on his popularity and graft it onto the party.'<sup>155</sup> One of the major benefits of doing so was that this would strengthen the Republican Party's position in the 1991 redistricting process, which would obviously improve the party's chances of success in the future.<sup>156</sup> Frank Lavin believed that adjusting the congressional district lines would allow the Republican Party to gain 30-35 seats in Congress, without having to spend the estimated \$400,000 it would normally cost to campaign successfully against a Democratic incumbent.<sup>157</sup> Lavin suggested that the White House ought to develop a redistricting plan for each state, which would 'dovetail' with the RNC's. He also suggested exploiting Reagan's status in California for this cause, and suggested that 'photo ops, briefings [and] appointments to boards and commissions' offered other avenues for the White House to support this project.<sup>158</sup> Clearly this was something that the administration saw as a valuable use of Reagan's time during his last year in office, as they redistributed staff within the Office of Public Affairs to put it on a "'wartime" footing' so they could improve Republican performances up and down the ticket.<sup>159</sup> Frank Donatelli emphasized, when proposing the OPA restructuring:

The Reagan legacy will be best protected through election of a Republican President, additional Republicans in the House of Representatives and recapture of the U.S. Senate. In the longer term, reapportionment and redistricting will have a significant impact on the future of our country.<sup>160</sup>

He concluded by making the point that the elections at the end of Reagan's second term would play a 'significant' role in strengthening the party's ability to influence the redistricting

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<sup>155</sup> Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 142.

<sup>156</sup> Galvin, *Presidential Party Building*, 141.

<sup>157</sup> Memorandum from Franklin L. Lavin to Frank Donatelli, 'Redistricting: We Need a Manhattan [sic] Project', 7 April 1987, Frank Lavin Files, Series 1, Box 1, Folder: Campaign 1988 Congressional, 2 of 12, RRPL.

<sup>158</sup> Memorandum from Franklin L. Lavin to Frank Donatelli, 'Redistricting: We Need a Manhattan [sic] Project.'

<sup>159</sup> Memorandum from Frank J. Donatelli to Ken Duberstein, 'OPA Staff Structure', 9 May 1987, Frank Lavin Files, Series 1, Box 1, Folder: Campaign 1988 Congressional, 2 of 12, RRPL.

<sup>160</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, 'OPA Staff Structure.'

process, and that this would be ‘the final major battle of the Reagan Administration.’<sup>161</sup> Therefore, party building and strengthening the Republican Party as an institution were deemed a worthwhile venture by the outgoing administration. It is worth noting that Reagan’s efforts on this front were fairly unsuccessful, as the Democrats actually gained three seats in the House and one in the Senate, despite Bush winning the presidential election comfortably.<sup>162</sup> This suggests the limitations of presidential power and presidents’ abilities to act as party-builders. As with many of the projects outlined in this thesis, this project was ambitious, but ultimately fell short of some of the legacy builders’ overarching goals.

## Conclusion

Reagan played a vital role in Bush’s 1988 bid for the presidency, and Bush being perceived as a faithful disciple of Reagan helped him to secure the White House. Reagan also actively campaigned in support of an array of Republican candidates up and down the ballot paper. In the aftermath of the election, President-elect Bush said from the Rose Garden, ‘I don’t believe there’s a case in modern Presidential politics where a President has worked so hard to help someone else achieve this office.’<sup>163</sup> Bush biographer Parmet argues that the period between the election and Bush’s inauguration ‘gave the nation a copresidency’ in which Reagan ‘held the power but [Bush] the limelight.’<sup>164</sup> This suggests a remarkable level of cohesion between the outgoing and incoming administrations.

Though John Pitney refers to Reagan as being ‘conspicuously absent’ from the presidential campaign, given his early lukewarm endorsement of Bush after the primaries, this

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<sup>161</sup> Donatelli to Duberstein, ‘OPA Staff Structure.’

<sup>162</sup> Byron E. Shafer, “‘We Are All Southern Democrats Now’: The Shape of American Politics in the Very Late Twentieth Century’ in Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *Present Discontents: American politics in the very late twentieth century* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers Inc, 1997), 156.

<sup>163</sup> George H. W. Bush, ‘Remarks and an Informal Exchange With Reporters at a White House Ceremony for President-Elect George Bush and Vice President-Elect Dan Quayle’ 9 November 1988, *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 22 October 2020: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252828>].

<sup>164</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lonestar Yankee* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 357.

was simply not the case.<sup>165</sup> Reagan's popularity was vital political currency throughout the race for the White House, and the administration successfully threw its support behind their preferred candidates in a bid to secure the longevity of Reagan's key policy decisions during his eight years in office. Involvement in the campaign also allowed Reagan to personally defend his legacy from the attacks it faced during election season in some of the speeches he gave during this period, helping him to shift the nature of the campaign from one focused on issues to one focussed on ideologies. His role in demonising liberalism while also attempting to harness the support of Reagan Democrats was especially noteworthy.

This 'final campaign' for Reagan's legacy culminated in a farewell tour of sorts, providing ample opportunities for Reagan to speak directly to the nation about his policy achievements. His address at the Republican National Convention was a 'mighty valedictory', according to Tom Shales of the *Washington Post*.<sup>166</sup> His approval ratings soared during this period, and his approval ratings in October 1988 reached their highest point since 1986, shortly before the Iran-Contra affair came to light.<sup>167</sup>

Reagan's role in the 1988 campaigns went beyond supporting Bush's bid for the White House. Reagan's efforts to transform Reagan Democrats into long-term Republican voters was one important aspect of his party-building efforts during this period. He also used his popularity to encourage people to run in various elections and to bolster the Republican Party's recruitment of volunteers to support candidates. He did so in the hope that he could strengthen the Party's stance in the 1991 redistricting process, which would undoubtedly help to secure the longevity of the policies introduced during his administration. However, it is important to

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<sup>165</sup> Pitney, *After Reagan*, 81.

<sup>166</sup> Tom Shales, 'Reagan's Mighty Valedictory: For the Partisan Throng, a Grand Farewell', *Washington Post*, 16 August 1988, E1.

<sup>167</sup> E. J. Dionne Jr., 'Polls show U.S. Voter Optimism Is Helping Bush in the Campaign', *New York Times*, 13 October 1988, A1.

reiterate that this strategy ultimately failed. Though the Republicans retained the White House, the party's performance across the rest of the ticket was resoundingly disappointing.

Finally, as we shall see in the next chapter, Reagan's participation in these campaigns formed an important part of his programme of legacy-themed events and appearances. The themes Reagan drew out in his addresses on Bush's behalf chimed with the speeches he gave throughout this period, helping to shift the national conversation in directions that favoured Reagan and his legacy while simultaneously reminding the nation of his achievements over the course of the preceding eight years.

## Chapter Four: Legacy building in the last 100 days of the Administration

In August 1988, Reagan's Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein told him 'After the election, we should devote all our energies to putting a positive cap on your Presidency and insuring a permanence to your legacy.'<sup>1</sup> This chapter will explore Reagan's legacy-building efforts in the period between the 1988 election results and Bush's inauguration, when Reagan's legacy was being widely discussed both inside the White House and across the United States.

Reagan's aides reviewed the last three months of Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford and Carter's presidencies, to establish how each of these presidents had utilised their last 100 days in office. Their investigations concluded that the general theme was 'business as usual', with minimal travel and 'low-key' events.<sup>2</sup> However, the Reagan White House did not follow suit. Beginning immediately after the 1988 election, Reagan undertook a programme of trips, speeches and other events designed to leave lasting impressions of his administration. The president and his aides were not seeking to introduce new policy initiatives at this point. Instead, they viewed this as 'a time to recall the accomplishments of the Reagan Presidency and discuss its legacy for the future. A worldwide audience expects such a summing up – and we foresee [sic] a number of opportunities to offer the summation.'<sup>3</sup>

This chapter examines preparation for Reagan's final public events and analyses his public addresses to illuminate how Reagan and his administration understood and promoted his legacy. It sheds light on where Reagan's record diverges from the version of Reagan's legacy put forward by his legacy builders, and argues that the administration saw this phase of

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum from Kenneth Duberstein to the President, 'The Last Six Months', August 1, 1988, Maseng Files (Office of Public Liaison), Box 5, Last 6 Months, (folder 2 of 2), RRL.

<sup>2</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, 'A Few More Thoughts for Post Election Events', 2 November 1988, Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 8, Post-Election Events: Marion Blakey, RRPL.

<sup>3</sup> 'Strengthening the U.S. Leadership Image Abroad: Proposed Public Affairs Initiatives', Maseng Files (Office of Public Liaison), Box 10, Strengthening US Leadership Abroad, folder 4 of 4, RRPL.

Reagan's presidency as vital to securing a positive future presidential legacy, and actively sought opportunities to allow Reagan to address the public to communicate what he believed to be the key achievements from his presidency. The Reagan White House wanted to secure policy permanence and a continuation of what they believed to be the positive trajectory Reagan had set the nation on during his presidency, far more than the statues and commemorative spaces that later organisations like the Reagan Legacy Project fixated on.

This chapter will also highlight a shift away from a proposed focus on Reagan's economic achievements (as seen in the initial legacy planning outlined in Chapter One) towards a much greater focus on Reagan's achievements in the realm of foreign policy. I argue that this shift in focus sprang from changes on the ground, and from a shift in how the administration understood the notion of presidential legacy. When the legacy project was initially conceived in 1987 the administration was grappling with the fallout of the Iran-Contra and was frantically trying to ensure that this would not become the defining moment of his administration. However, the success of Reagan's negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev became a factor that Reagan and his aides were keener to promote by the incumbent's final months in office. In a recent interview with the author, Frank Donatelli explained this shift as follows:

Because of Iran Contra and because of the economic challenges in 1987 there was concern that the economy might sputter in an election year and then, of course, in October of 1987 the Dow fell like 25% in one day, something like that... So, there was a lot of effort made to try to mend the economy, which was successful and then so, as I said, in December of 1987 the treaty on Intermediate Nuclear Forces passed the Senate, so in '88 the decks were kind of cleared at that point.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of structure, this chapter will begin with Reagan communicating his own legacy through speeches during his final months in office, most notably the Farewell Address, alongside the additional foreign and domestic policy legacy addresses he gave during this

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Donatelli, interview by the author, Edinburgh/Washington DC (conducted remotely via Zoom), 8 October 2021. Note- the INF treaty was not ratified by the Senate until May 1988, rather than December 1987.

period, along with several high-profile interviews. Reagan also participated in a series of public appearances that the administration referred to as ‘punctuation mark events’, where Reagan returned to places he had visited early in his presidency to underscore how they had changed during his eight years in office.<sup>5</sup> Doing so will allow me to demonstrate the administration’s focus on policy longevity as part of their legacy-building efforts.

The second half of this chapter focuses on the question of who the administration was trying to target through its legacy building efforts. While the public speeches and appearances were widely publicised and covered in the press, the administration also engaged in several smaller projects that are worthy of attention. The publication ‘Promises Made, Promises Kept’ was prepared by the White House and funded and distributed by the Republican National Committee to communicate their version of Reagan’s presidency and interpretation of his legacy to Republican Party supporters, White House officials and attendees of the Bush inauguration. Finally, I will explore Reagan’s role in the design of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, one of the first physical spaces where Reagan’s legacy would be communicated to future generations who had not lived through the Reagan presidency. Reagan seemed conspicuously absent from the planning of the library and the debates around its location, but the fact the administration persisted with carefully planning and timing its opening indicates that this was deemed an important part of their legacy-building efforts, albeit one that is now a standard feature of the modern presidency.

### **The Domestic and Foreign Policy Legacy Addresses**

In addition to the Farewell Address, the White House prepared two further ‘legacy speeches’ for Reagan to deliver, though they were not publicly referred to as such. The first of these was a domestic policy ‘legacy address’, delivered at the DAR Constitution Hall (funded by the

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<sup>5</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, ‘Events for the Administration’s Final 100 days’, 17 October 1988, Maseng Files (OPL), Box 5, Last 100 Days (folder 1 of 1), RRPL.

Daughters of the American Revolution) to an audience of administration officials on 13 December 1988.<sup>6</sup> The second, referred to internally as the ‘foreign policy legacy address’ was delivered at the University of Virginia on 16 December 1988.<sup>7</sup> Though these speeches gained less media attention than the prime-time Farewell Address, they still form an important aspect of Reagan’s programme of farewell events. Considering the planning for these speeches offers valuable insights into the administration’s hopes for Reagan’s legacy. Press coverage of these speeches was more critical of Reagan than the broadly positive coverage of his Farewell Address, so it is interesting to see which unpopular themes were dropped when it came to drafting the Farewell Address.

Beginning with the domestic policy speech, the speechwriting team considered several possible themes and locations for Reagan to reflect on his domestic policy achievements. One suggestion including capitalising on the third anniversary of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced budget bill and using this to draw attention to Reagan’s economic policies, while another suggested the DAR Constitution Hall would facilitate a link with Reagan’s desire for a future constitutional amendment requiring a balanced budget.<sup>8</sup> Marion Blakey (Special Assistant to the President and Director of Public Affairs) prepared a broad list of talking points to be discussed with Reagan, who was to help narrow down the list to the key themes he wanted the speech to include, to help his speechwriters begin drafting his remarks.<sup>9</sup>

The content of the speech focussed more on the lessons Reagan had learned during his presidency and offered a list of advice to future administrations. It also shared some anecdotes

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks to Administration Officials on Domestic Policy’, 13 December 1988 [last accessed 9 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-administration-officials-domestic-policy>].

<sup>7</sup> ‘Foreign Policy Legacy Address- draft’, 14 December 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication) Box 4, Folder: FP speech UVA, RRPL.

<sup>8</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Mari Maseng, ‘Possible Ideas for President’s Legacy Speech on Domestic Policy’, 17 November 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 2, Domestic Policy Legacy Speech 1 of 3, RRPL.

<sup>9</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Mari Maseng and Marlin Fitzwater, ‘Briefing Materials on Domestic/Social Issues’, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 2, Domestic Policy Legacy Speech 1 of 3, RRPL.

that Reagan would use in the Farewell Address, offering the administration an opportunity to trial some of the content which the president could use in his more high-profile Farewell Address. Reagan also devoted a section of this speech to blaming Congress for the budget deficit that had been generated during Reagan's presidency, a move which was criticised in press coverage. Reagan spoke of an 'Iron Triangle' made up of Congress, the media and special interest groups, that was hampering the efforts of the president to tackle issues like the budget deficit.<sup>10</sup> Charles Freund of the *Washington Post* branded this 'Reagan's Farewell Fumble', stating that Reagan's cautioning about the 'Iron Triangle' was a poor attempt at leaving behind a cautionary message for his successors, while simultaneously passing the blame for his administration's shortcomings onto others.<sup>11</sup> Notably, in his later Farewell Address Reagan avoided ascribing the blame for the deficit to anyone in particular, stating 'tonight isn't for arguments', a response to the negative press coverage generated by his attempts to blame Congress for the mounting deficit.<sup>12</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the Farewell Address also highlighted that it 'contrasted sharply' with the domestic policy speech which 'blamed others' for the rising deficit.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, Reagan did speak more freely about the disappointments he experienced during his presidency during this speech, unlike the consistently upbeat tone of his formal Farewell Address. Reagan spoke of his disappointment at the failure to appoint Robert Bork to the Supreme Court in 1987, suggesting that this issue remained a sincere regret of his administration and would have strengthened the conservatism of his legacy.<sup>14</sup> He also paid lip-service to some of the more right wing social issues that he had failed to advance during his

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<sup>10</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks to Administration Officials on Domestic Policy', 13 December 1988 [last accessed 9 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-administration-officials-domestic-policy>].

<sup>11</sup> Charles Paul Freund, 'Reagan's Farewell Fumble', *Washington Post*, 3 January 1989, A15.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Farewell Address to the Nation.'

<sup>13</sup> Lee May, 'Reagan: "We Changed a World"', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 1989, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks to Administration Officials on Domestic Policy', 13 December 1988 [last accessed 9 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-administration-officials-domestic-policy>].

administration, asserting that ‘the right to abortion is not in the Constitution’ while the right to pray ‘including schoolchildren’ is included.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that the Farewell Address was written to have a slightly broader appeal, while the less high-profile speeches he delivered in the weeks leading up to the final farewell offered opportunities to appeal to the political right.

In addition to this speech on Reagan’s domestic accomplishments, the administration felt it would be worthwhile for Reagan to deliver a standalone foreign policy address. When the White House legacy project began in early 1987, the administration was keen to ensure Reagan’s ‘revitalization of the modern American presidency’ did not ‘falter over the Iran affair.’<sup>16</sup> They therefore actively avoided discussing Reagan’s foreign policy initiatives in favour of promoting themes like Reaganomics and attempting to restore Reagan’s status as a strong leader. However, by December of 1988 Reagan’s popularity had been restored, and relations with the Soviet Union were looking increasingly promising. The administration was therefore pleased to receive an invitation for Reagan to speak at the University of Virginia, where he had been asked to discuss his legacy in the realm of foreign policy. Colin Powell, Reagan’s National Security Advisor, wrote to Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein to argue that ‘a major “legacy” address on this subject [foreign relations] is certainly in order’ and that the University of Virginia was both well-located in relation to Washington DC while also offering a fitting backdrop for the speech since the campus was designed by one of the founding fathers.<sup>17</sup>

In the speech, Reagan drew parallels between Jefferson’s America and his own, claiming that Americans in the 1980s had ‘seen a new populism [...] a Jefferson-like populism

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<sup>15</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks to Administration Officials on Domestic Policy.’

<sup>16</sup> T. Kenneth Cribb to Howard Baker, ‘First Meeting of the Advisory Group’, 4 March 1987, WHORM Subject File FG001, Box 87, file 562955, RRPL.

<sup>17</sup> Memorandum from Colin Powell to Kenneth Duberstein, ‘Speaking Invitation’, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication) Box 11, Folder: UVA, RRPL.

that rejects the burden placed on the people by excessive regulation and taxation.’<sup>18</sup> He used this as an opportunity to segue into what he believed to be the key difference between the Founding era and the 1980s, ‘this time, it’s not just a single nation at issue: It is the whole world where popular government might flourish and prosper.’<sup>19</sup> These parallels were of course forced at best, given the lack of acknowledgement of issues like slavery throughout the speech, and once again reflect the fundamental whiteness of the legacy project’s target audience. When discussing his future legacy, Reagan stated that ‘no legacy’ would make him ‘more proud’ than ‘leaving in place such a consensus for the cause of world freedom.’<sup>20</sup> He spoke of a ‘democratic revolution’, and this theme of supporting freedom was present in many of Reagan’s speeches during this period, along with the idea of restoring American national pride in the armed forces in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and their various deployments during Reagan’s presidency. Of course, this glossed over the notable foreign policy failures of the administration, including the Iran-Contra scandal and the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing.

Reagan also returned to the theme of strong leadership in this speech, and the importance of restoring faith in the presidency. He argued that the United States ‘no longer enjoy[ed] preponderant power’ and as a result ‘America needs strong and consistent leadership, and the strength and resilience of the Presidency are vital.’<sup>21</sup> He stated that America ‘succeeds’ when its people are ‘strong’ and steadfast’, again returning to the theme of individual responsibility. During the following question-and-answer session with students Reagan identified the nation’s renewed strength as his most important foreign policy achievement. He

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<sup>18</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville’, 16 December 1988, RRPL [last accessed 12 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-and-question-and-answer-session-university-virginia-charlottesville>].

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.’

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.’

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.’

stated when asked about his post-presidency that he was ‘going to be active’, speaking about ‘extolling the virtues of line-item veto and a balanced budget amendment’, two issues which had garnered press attention in the final months of his administration. Clearly, this opportunity to speak in front of a relatively supportive crowd of young people, a demographic Reagan had enjoyed growing support from during his presidency, offered him a chance to share his opinions on his achievements in greater depth than could be achieved in the Farewell Address.

In addition to speeches crafted by the White House team, Reagan also gave a prime-time interview on CNN to discuss his presidential legacy. The interviewer, Bernard Shaw, asked Reagan about his strengths, weaknesses, and hardest days as president. While Reagan was prepped for this interview, it still offers a potentially less scripted version of Reagan discussing his own legacy.<sup>22</sup> One interesting question Shaw raised was the idea that ‘if George doesn’t succeed, you’re going to get part of the blame.’ Reagan argued that Bush had formed ‘a part of everything we’ve accomplished so far’ and that he never intended for Bush to ‘sit on the side lines waiting for something to happen to Number One.’<sup>23</sup> This showed Reagan maintaining the stance he had adopted during the 1988 election campaign, showing faith in Bush’s capabilities as a leader and suggesting confidence in Bush’s ability to continue the policies of the Reagan era. This also highlights that even in the final days of his presidency, well after Bush had won the presidency, Reagan was maintaining that Bush would be a continuity candidate rather than someone who would diverge from Reagan’s key policy decisions.

Finally, there was a clear demand for summations of the Reagan years, not just from Reagan himself, but from his supporters and opponents alike. C-SPAN organised interviews

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Briefing for CNN- Bernard Shaw’, 11 January 1989, WHORM Subject File FG001- POTUS, Box 96, Folder 7000340-END, RRPL.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Reagan and Bernard Shaw, ‘Remarks by President Ronald Reagan during Interview with Bernard Shaw of CNN’ Map Room, the White House, Washington DC, MP4, 18:54, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/161354820> [accessed 22 July 2021].

and roundtable discussions with over 40 current and former administration members, politicians, journalists and policy experts. This included members of the White House's legacy-building efforts such as Michael Deaver, Richard Wirthlin, Thomas Griscom and Kenneth Duberstein, among a host of other high profile Republican officials.<sup>24</sup> The co-ordinator of these interviews, C-SPAN's Greg Barker, stated that administration officials were very willing to participate, because 'the key players know what we are doing is worthwhile' and he argued that these people wanted to offer their own 'summation, in their own words' of the administration's accomplishments.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Farewell Addresses: Reagan Communicates His Own Legacy**

One of the most important opportunities Reagan had to shape his own legacy was through the final major speeches he gave during this period, particularly his prime-time Farewell Address to the Nation. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue that 'the farewell [address] occurs during a period in which presidents have greater than usual power to redefine the people and the presidency and by so doing bequeath a legacy to the country.'<sup>26</sup> Reagan and his team clearly attempted to establish the terms of his legacy by carefully crafting his speeches, and in some cases by explicitly offering suggestions for George Bush's incoming administration.

Peggy Noonan, a long-term member of Reagan's speechwriting team, was tasked with helping the President prepare his Farewell Address, and the questions she asked Reagan to indicate that his future legacy was a key consideration in drafting his remarks. In December 1988 she prepared a list of questions for him to mull over before drafting the speech, including

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Holley, 'The "Reagan Legacy"', *C-SPAN Update*, Vol. 6, Issue 51, 26 Dec 1988- 2 Jan 1989, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Holley, 'Greg Barker Planned "Reagan Legacy" Series', *C-SPAN Update*, Vol. 6, Issue 51, 26 Dec 1988- 2 Jan 1989, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, quoted in Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, 'Reagan's Farewell Address: Redefining the American Dream', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 20.4 (2017), 635-666: 639.

‘what was the central lesson of the Reagan Revolution?’ and what he considered to be his greatest success and greatest failure as president. She said the questions were not intended to be ‘weighty and substantive’ but instead ‘very human questions’ that would lead to ‘a very human address.’<sup>27</sup> It was reported in the press that Noonan and Reagan met five times during the preparation of the speech, suggesting that the administration wanted the public to know that Reagan was involved in the writing process.<sup>28</sup>

Around the same time, Richard Wirthlin shared his thoughts on the Farewell Address with Ken Duberstein, stating that ‘as the “cap” to his presidency, this speech must be vintage Reagan.’<sup>29</sup> He said that it should be a ‘value laden emotional celebration’ and must be delivered in a historic location that could be ‘identified with the country’s heritage’ in order to help situate Reagan and his presidency within the broader history of the United States.<sup>30</sup> In addition to asking Reagan to think about his greatest successes and failures, the White House also arranged a post-election study to gauge how the American public felt about these questions. These findings were used to try and establish the ‘public opinion context’ in which Reagan was giving his Farewell Address.<sup>31</sup> Richard Wirthlin found that the participants in the survey highlighted four main achievements of the Reagan presidency: restoring confidence in the United States’ place on the world stage; restoring confidence in the competence of the US government; improving confidence in the government’s ability to solve problems; and finally, restoring a sense of optimism regarding the nation’s future peace and prosperity.<sup>32</sup> Arranging public opinion polling ahead of drafting the speech shows how seriously Reagan’s aides were taking

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<sup>27</sup> Memorandum from Peggy Noonan to Ronald Reagan, 7 December 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 4, Folder: Farewell Address POTUS, RRPL.

<sup>28</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Bids the Nation Farewell’, *Washington Post*, 12 January 1989, A1.

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum from Richard B. Wirthlin to Kenneth Duberstein, 15 Dec 1988, Mari Maseng Papers, Box 9, Folder: RR Farewell, RRPL.

<sup>30</sup> Memorandum from Richard B. Wirthlin to Kenneth Duberstein, 15 Dec 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum from Richard Wirthlin to Ken Duberstein, ‘Public Opinion Context: Farewell Speech’, 16 December 1988, Mari Maseng Files, Box 9, Folder: RR Farewell, RRPL.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum from Richard Wirthlin to Ken Duberstein, ‘Public Opinion Context: Farewell Speech.’

this speech, and how carefully they were considering the various accomplishments he would highlight in his comments.

The tradition of delivering a verbal farewell address is a relatively recent phenomenon (though George Washington and Andrew Jackson gave written farewell addresses). It is important to acknowledge that there was no obligation for Reagan to give a prime-time speech like this, far less a whole set of ‘legacy speeches.’ The rise of radio and television made it easier for presidents to address the nation directly, with Truman and Eisenhower each giving ‘farewell addresses’ to the nation from the Oval Office shortly before the inaugurations of their successors.<sup>33</sup> However, since Eisenhower, the only other president to deliver a standalone farewell address was Jimmy Carter, with Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford choosing to deliver a final State of the Union address instead.<sup>34</sup> Reagan therefore had a choice between delivering a State of the Union address before Congress, or a higher profile ‘farewell address’ before the American people, and opted for the latter, a decision that was noted in the press following the speech. He did not give a State of the Union address in 1989, and instead Reagan’s farewell address was broadcast live on television and radio at 9pm EST on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1989.<sup>35</sup> Though Reagan’s chief strategist Richard Wirthlin initially proposed that it be delivered in a setting which was ‘unique’ to Reagan, it was subsequently decided that Reagan would speak from the Oval Office, following in the footsteps of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Carter.<sup>36</sup>

In making the decision to deliver a ‘farewell address’, the administration decided that Reagan should address the nation in his final speech as president, rather than Congress, and

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<sup>33</sup> Harry S. Truman: “The President’s Farewell Address to the American People,” January 15, 1953. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*.

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14392>.; Dwight D. Eisenhower: “Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People,” January 17, 1961. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12086>.

<sup>34</sup> See ‘State of the Union Addresses Archive’, *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou.php#nixon1973>. [last accessed 5 August 2021].

<sup>35</sup> Ronald Reagan: “Farewell Address to the Nation,” January 11, 1989. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29650>.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum from Richard B. Wirthlin to Kenneth Duberstein, 15 Dec 1988.

this decision is noteworthy when considering the content of the speech itself. There are two motifs that feature prominently throughout the address, which Reagan's speechwriting team felt best captured the 'Reagan years': 'we the people', and the 'shining city on the hill.'<sup>37</sup> By focussing on these phrases, which featured in Reagan's speeches over the years, the central values that he and his staff sought to underscore in this final address become clear. As the administration understood these terms, 'We the people' facilitated a discussion of Reagan's ideas about Americans' individual identity, while the 'Shining City' metaphor allowed him to discuss American national identity.

Wirthlin proposed 'We the people' as a central theme for the speech to capitalise on Reagan's perceived popularity while also reminding people of 'the central role of the individual.'<sup>38</sup> The phrase 'we the people' spoke directly to issues of American identity, and the idea of American exceptionalism. Reagan devoted some time in his Farewell Address to explaining why the phrase 'we the people' made the United States' Constitution unique, stating that this phrase gave the American people power to tell the government what they were 'allowed to do', rather than vice versa.<sup>39</sup> The phrase 'we the people' was used throughout the speech, keeping Reagan's focus on the 'people' he was addressing rather than on his own achievements, though of course many Americans did not share Reagan's view of history or his administration's achievements.

Reagan said in his remarks that he hoped this speech would give him an opportunity to 'connect' with his fellow Americans, thus emphasising his identity as an American citizen. The style of the speech was largely conversational, with informal phrases like 'you know', 'our beliefs' and 'we ourselves' employed throughout, to create a more familiar tone. In doing so, he presented many of his successes as shared victories with the American people. Scholars of

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<sup>37</sup> Wirthlin to Duberstein, 15 Dec 1988.

<sup>38</sup> Wirthlin to Duberstein, 15 Dec 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Farewell Address to the Nation.'

rhetoric Robert Rowland and John Jones argue that in Reagan's version of history, as told in the Farewell Address:

the nation had bounced back as the result of a return to its first principles. Reagan described the arc of his presidency with terms like "recovery," "rediscovery," and "resurgence" as well as the words "new" and "again."<sup>40</sup>

Reagan stated that 'to be an American in the 1980s' was to learn to stand 'again, for freedom' that the nation had 'rediscovered' during his presidency.'<sup>41</sup> The bulk of the speech followed Reagan's preferred format of a series of themes illuminated by anecdotes, often revolving around interactions Reagan had experienced during his presidency. He stated that his two proudest achievements were the nation's economic recovery, and 'the recovery of our morale.' He also boldly declared, 'We meant to change a nation, and instead, we changed a world', indicating that he wanted to present the impact of his administration as having fundamentally altered the United States and its place in the world.<sup>42</sup> Unsurprisingly, the speech culminated by looking to the future, with Reagan asserting that 'If we're to finish the job, Reagan's regiments will have to become the Bush brigades.' Reagan's final weekly radio address returned to this theme of situating the Reagan administration and its accomplishments within a 'far larger story. [...] The hope of human freedom – the quest for it, the achievement of it – is the American saga.'<sup>43</sup>

This speech heavily implied, quite wrongly, that there was a single universal American experience of the 1980s. It is important to consider who the White House legacy building project's audience was supposed to be, and one way to explore this is to acknowledge the communities that were not referenced in the speech. Reagan's speech situated his

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<sup>40</sup> Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones, 'Reagan's Farewell Address: Redefining the American Dream', *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 20.4 (2017), 635-666:645.

<sup>41</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Farewell Address to the Nation.'

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Farewell Address to the Nation.'

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Final Radio Address to the Nation', 14 January 1989 [last accessed 8 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/final-radio-address-nation>].

administration within a very militaristic version of American history, which lacked any sense of racial or ethnic diversity. He argued that ‘we’ve got to teach history based not on what’s in fashion but what’s important -- why the Pilgrims came here, who Jimmy Doolittle was, and what those 30 seconds over Tokyo meant’, glossing over any of the objectively controversial military endeavours the US had engaged in (and indeed the violence of colonial settlement and imperial expansion). There was no mention of conflicts such as Vietnam or Korea, or of the Iran Contra affair, suggesting that the ‘important’ truths he wanted American parents to share with their children formed part of a very particular version of American history. He wanted parents to teach their children ‘what it means to be an American’ and concluded with his famous biblical allusions to the ‘shining city on a hill’, but despite this being a prime-time national address, its audience appeared to be remarkably narrow. The speech was clearly targeted primarily at white, middle-class Americans who had not felt the impact of policy decisions such as Reagan’s poor record on civil rights, the AIDS crisis and the growing gulf between working- and middle-class Americans’ financial situations. The shortcomings of the administration were glossed over, and while an earlier draft of the speech did include a section where Reagan expressed a ‘personal regret in not helping enough [sic] the permanent poor’, it was omitted because Reagan was visibly ‘uncomfortable’ delivering this line.<sup>44</sup>

Press coverage of the Farewell Address was broadly positive, although it did note the divergence between the version of the presidency Reagan presented in his speech and the realities for the incoming administration. The Farewell Address was largely well received, with one reporter describing it as a ‘highly personal farewell laced with gentle remembrances.’<sup>45</sup> David Hoffman of the *Washington Post* reported that the speech ‘offered the vision [Reagan] hopes will be his legacy’ but noted that Reagan had failed to address ‘a host of unresolved

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<sup>44</sup> Memorandum to Mari Maseng from Peggy Noonan, 10 January 1989, WHORM Subject File: SP Speeches, SP 1314[589277], folder 8, RRPL.

<sup>45</sup> Lee May, ‘Reagan: “We Changed a World”’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 1989, 11.

problems that may preoccupy historians who study his stewardship.<sup>46</sup> In particular, Hoffman pointed to the administration's unresolved involvement in the conflict in Nicaragua, lack of progress in protecting the US against nuclear arms, and reluctance to acknowledge failures in the Middle East. Lou Cannon offered a more positive summation of Reagan's 'sentimental farewell tribute', but he also noted Reagan's failure to mention the Middle East during his remarks.<sup>47</sup>

Journalist Charles Paul Freund offered an insightful commentary for the *Washington Post*. He argued that the tradition of leaving office with warnings for the future had 'been a subgenre of presidential speechmaking since George Washington' as presidents have 'sought to distil their years of experience into a political deathbed statement [...] before the public stopped paying attention to them.'<sup>48</sup> This commentary touches on an issue that the administration seemed very conscious of, that the platform of the presidency guaranteed Reagan a degree of attention that a post-president would be unlikely to achieve at future events. The Farewell Address was Reagan's final opportunity to utilise the power of the White House to deliver a message to a global audience, before the world turned its attention to his successor.

### **'Punctuation Mark Events'**

In addition to the legacy speeches, during this period the Reagan administration proposed a list of potential 'punctuation mark' events, focussing on major policy shifts that had occurred during the administration.<sup>49</sup> Sending Reagan back to locations he had visited early in his presidency to demonstrate the extent of the changes which had occurred in the eight years Reagan was in office was intended to highlight the significance of his presidency and its

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<sup>46</sup> David Hoffman, 'President Reagan's Farewell Address: Legacy Includes Unsolved Problems', 12 January 1989, *Washington Post*, A8.

<sup>47</sup> Lou Cannon, 'Reagan Bids the Nation Farewell', *Washington Post*, 12 January 1989, A1.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Paul Freund, 'Reagan's Farewell Fumble', *Washington Post*, 3 January 1989, A15.

<sup>49</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, 'Events for the Administration's Final 100 days', 17 October 1988, Maseng Files (OPL), Box 5, Last 100 Days (folder 1 of 1), RRPL.

achievements. I will compare the planning material for these events with contemporary press coverage, to assess the effectiveness of this strategy.

The planning materials indicate that there were several themes the administration wanted to highlight through these events. Marion Blakey prepared a memo for Mari Maseng (Director of Communications) discussing potential ‘events for the administration’s final 100 days’, suggesting that they considered this to be a distinct phase in a president’s term, much like the first 100 days. Blakey stated that they should highlight Reagan’s staunch support for the military, emphasise the ‘desirability and viability’ of the SDI, and demonstrate the ‘real management improvements’ Reagan had introduced for American citizens on the domestic front, such as speeding up processing for forms and passports.<sup>50</sup> She also suggested some ‘Agenda to Come’ speeches sharing Reagan’s ideas for future development of a selection of policies.<sup>51</sup> Another memo from Blakey suggested promoting the economy, trade, creation of 18 million jobs, and potential ‘patriotic/environmental’ events such as Reagan dedicating Mount Rushmore, which Blakey believed would be ‘an outstanding photo op.’<sup>52</sup> While this is quite an extensive list of potential themes and events, it nevertheless follows the same broad subjects seen in the speeches Reagan delivered during this period, namely restoring national pride (particularly in the military), reducing government bureaucracy, and economic recovery and improved employment rates.

One proposed ‘punctuation mark’ event which materialised following these meetings was Reagan’s speech at the Armed Forces Farewell Salute at Andrews Air Force Base in Camp Springs, Maryland. Blakey had suggested Reagan pay a visit to ‘a major military installation’ in order to pay tribute to ‘the men and women in uniform he has so staunchly supported.’<sup>53</sup> Lou

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<sup>50</sup> Blakey to Maseng, ‘Events for the Administration’s Final 100 days.’

<sup>51</sup> Blakey to Maseng, ‘Events for the Administration’s Final 100 days.’

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, ‘A Few More Thoughts for Post Election Events’, 2 November 1988, Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 8, Post-Election Events: Marion Blakey, RRPL.

<sup>53</sup> Blakey to Maseng, ‘Events for the Administration’s Final 100 days.’

Cannon described the event as ‘an elaborate and unusual farewell ceremony’, indicating that this was not part of the typical programme of presidential events during this period of the presidency.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the *New York Times* featured a photo captioned ‘Pentagon Says Farewell to Reagan’, highlighting that Reagan had received a ceremonial medal for his efforts to ‘build up and restore pride in the nation’s armed forces.’<sup>55</sup>

In Reagan’s remarks, he stated that during his presidency ‘luster has been restored to the reputation of our fighting forces after a time during which it was shamefully fashionable to deride and even condemn service such as yours.’<sup>56</sup> This echoed another of Reagan’s speeches from this period, his speech at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in November 1988. Both speeches focus on the idea that military service should be considered a ‘noble cause’, with the latter arguing that during Reagan’s presidency the veterans of the Vietnam War had been able to ‘take their rightful place among America’s heroes.’<sup>57</sup> Restoring national pride in the military had been one of the central themes of Reagan’s administration, so it is unsurprising that it emerged prominently in some of his final presidential addresses. This speech also effectively reinterpreted Vietnam as a worthy military cause, offering an excellent example of the historical revisionism seen throughout some of these speeches. Similarly, during the Armed Forces Farewell speech he asked the audience to ‘just ask the freedom-loving people of Grenada whether American military power is a good thing or not’, a reference to the Caribbean island invaded by the United States in 1983.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lou Cannon, ‘Reagan Salutes Members of Armed Forces as Pride of America’, *Washington Post*, 13 January 1989, A4.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Pentagon Says Farewell to Reagan’, *New York Times*, 13 January 1989, D18.

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Armed Forces Farewell Salute in Camp Springs, Maryland’, 12 January 1989, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library [accessed 29 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-armed-forces-farewell-salute-camp-springs-maryland>].

<sup>57</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Veterans Day Ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial’, RRPL [accessed 29 July 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-veterans-day-ceremony-vietnam-veterans-memorial>].

<sup>58</sup> Ronald Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Armed Forces Farewell Salute in Camp Springs, Maryland.’

Another anniversary that took place during Reagan's last 100 days was the first anniversary of the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty at the Washington Summit, which was an arms control treaty signed by the US and the Soviet Union to restrict the possession, production or testing of certain classes of nuclear weapons.<sup>59</sup> Gorbachev returned to the US for his fifth summit meeting with Reagan in December 1988, but the visit was cut short as Gorbachev was forced to return to the USSR to deal with the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in Armenia.<sup>60</sup> While this sudden and unplanned departure changed the nature of the remarks both leaders were able to make, both parties still emphasised the strength of Soviet-American relations. Each of these events focussed on foreign policy rather than domestic policy, which reflected that the administration considered Reagan's foreign policy advances to be his most significant achievement by the final months of his presidency.

### **Promises Made, Promises Kept**

Another aspect of the White House legacy project during this period was the publication of 'The Reagan Administration: Promises Made, Promises Kept', a sixty-page booklet written and produced by the White House to communicate the key achievements of the administration. This booklet was a condensed version of the more comprehensive volume the *Reagan Record*, a briefing book on major issues of the administration that was used by the administration throughout Reagan's final year in office to ensure consistency in White House communications. This publication offers some of the clearest examples of the White House legacy builders' version of the Reagan administration appearing at odds with the reality of Reagan's policy record. 'Promises Made, Promises Kept' was issued at the same time as Reagan's Farewell Address, with the first copy being ceremonially presented to the incumbent

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<sup>59</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, 'A Few More Thoughts for Post Election Events', 2 November 1988, Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 8, Post-Election Events: Marion Blakey, RRPL.

<sup>60</sup> Howard Kurtz, 'Grim Gorbachev Leaves Early, Praises Results',

in the Oval Office the day before.<sup>61</sup> The content of this booklet is noteworthy as it offers a longer-form attempt by the administration at ‘highlighting the President’s achievements’, while the distribution of these booklets also offers a valuable insight into who the legacy building effort was intended to influence.

When discussing the project with Mari Maseng, Marion Blakey stated that the ‘presentation booklet’ might be best gifted to Cabinet members and inauguration attendees, with the potential for wider distribution via the Republican National Committee and the White House Media Relations team.<sup>62</sup> Blakey originally requested the funding to produce 1,000 copies of this booklet, so it was not intended to be very widely distributed. She did note elsewhere that if the administration was to print ‘many copies for political purposes’ then they would need to seek external financial support.<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, the Republican National Committee offered to cover the printing and distribution costs on behalf of the White House, in return for permission to print an unlimited number of copies to distribute as they saw fit, suggesting that these were printed primarily for party political purposes.<sup>64</sup> This also suggests that the intended audience for these volumes was always going to be relatively supportive of Reagan compared to a broader cross-section of the American population, as it would be overwhelmingly made up of Republican Party politicians and voters. The purpose of this project was therefore clearly not to win over Democratic or independent Americans, but instead to instil pride in the Reagan administration in the Republican Party of the future, and to assist in setting the Party’s future agenda.

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<sup>61</sup> Schedule Proposal from Mari Maseng to Fred Ryan, 21 December 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 5, Folder: Legacy Booklets 1 of 1, RRPL; Memorandum from Mari Maseng to Ronald Reagan, ‘Presentation of Two White House Publications’, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 5, Folder: Legacy Booklets 1 of 1, RRPL.

<sup>62</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Mari Maseng, ‘Booklet on the Reagan Legacy’, 29 November 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 5, Folder: Legacy Booklets 1 of 1, RRPL.

<sup>63</sup> Memorandum for Mari Maseng from Marion Blakey, ‘A Few More Thoughts for Post Election Events’, 2 November 1988, Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 8, Post-Election Events: Marion Blakey, RRPL.

<sup>64</sup> Memorandum from Marion Blakey to Claire O’Donnell, ‘Booklet on the Reagan Legacy’, 29 November 1988, Mari Maseng Files (Office of Communication), Box 5, Folder: Legacy Booklets 1 of 1, RRPL.

For the booklet, Marion Blakey proposed a narrative format including quotations from the first Inaugural Address to demonstrate Reagan's impact on the nation during his eight years in office, similar to the 'punctuation mark events' Reagan undertook during this period. The booklet told the story of the administration in an informal, conversational style, opening with the narrator discussing the 'unusually warm' weather on inauguration day and pondering whether that was a good omen for the incoming president.<sup>65</sup> Though the volume was titled 'The Reagan *Administration: Promises Made, Promises Kept*', the author maintained a tight focus on Ronald Reagan rather than crediting the wider administration with their apparent successes. The language used to describe Reagan consistently referred to his 'strength' and 'commitment' to various causes, and always places Reagan at the forefront of any achievement, with phrasing like 'President Reagan fought [...] The President pushed ahead [...] President Reagan insisted' repeated throughout discussion of the administration's economic policy.<sup>66</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the volume offers an overwhelmingly sympathetic interpretation of the administration's shortcomings, with the version of events presented sitting in stark contrast to the realities of Reagan's record. One section states that the administration 'took strong, unprecedented measures to counter the public health threat' posed by HIV and AIDS, despite Reagan's slow response to the AIDS crisis being one of the most criticised shortcomings of his presidency.<sup>67</sup> Reagan did not publicly acknowledge the crisis until 1985, by which point 12,000 Americans had lost their lives, and did not establish the Presidential Commission on HIV and AIDS for a further two years, eventually receiving its findings in June 1988.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, 'Promises Made, Promises Kept' glossed over this episode in six sentences, before turning to consider Reagan's 'strong' stance on crime. Similarly, the reader is told that Reagan was

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<sup>65</sup> 'The Reagan Administration: Promises Made, Promises Kept', Folder: Reagan, Ronald W. – Promises Made Promises Kept, RRPL (stored in Reading Room), 2-3.

<sup>66</sup> 'Promises Made, Promises Kept', 9.

<sup>67</sup> 'Promises Made, Promises Kept', 20.

<sup>68</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American Health Crisis: 100 Years of Panic, Planning and Politics* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 169-171.

‘active in the civil rights field’ because the administration ‘equalled or surpassed the number of civil rights cases filed by any prior Administration.’<sup>69</sup> As we have seen, Reagan’s veto of the Civil Rights Restoration Act marked Reagan’s concerted effort to avoid expanding civil rights and abortion access across the United States, a decision which was overturned by the Senate. Additionally, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that Reagan was the first president to complete two terms since Eisenhower, so it would be unsurprising that more cases were filed during a two-term presidency than a one-term presidency.

Unlike Reagan’s speeches of this period (and the version of Reagan’s presidency later presented at the Reagan Presidential Library) this booklet does attempt to address the Iran-Contra scandal, albeit superficially. However, the Iran-Contra ‘episode’ is brushed over as an example of a time Reagan ‘displayed leadership’ by ‘mov[ing] swiftly to get the facts and share them with the American people’ rather than an episode that led to calls for Reagan’s impeachment.<sup>70</sup> In fact, the author devotes the same amount of space to the US invasion of Grenada as they do to Reagan’s role in the Iran-Contra affair (the former being a far more popular use of American military force). Additionally, though the focus of the volume remains on areas of Reagan’s policy widely seen as successful, within a few pages the narrator tells us that ‘Congress refused to reform domestic spending’ and that while ‘it is true that Congress cut back the President’s defense budget’, it was ‘not to spare the deficit.’<sup>71</sup> It is therefore clear that this document was never intended to be read by anyone who may have a critical view of Reagan or his administration, but rather as a ‘feel good’ piece for Reagan’s supporters, to bolster enthusiasm for the outgoing president as his administration came to an end.

Ultimately, while ‘Promises Made, Promises Kept’ was not widely circulated, it still offers a useful insight into at least part of the intended audience of the administration’s legacy

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<sup>69</sup> ‘Promises Made, Promises Kept’, 24-25.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Promises Made, Promises Kept’, 48.

<sup>71</sup> ‘The Reagan Administration: Promises Made, Promises Kept’, Folder: Reagan, Ronald W. – Promises Made Promises Kept, RRPL (stored in Reading Room).

building efforts: Reagan's supporters. The booklet concluded with the reminder that parts of Reagan's agenda were 'still awaiting fulfilment' and that he had left the world 'the challenge to keep the progress of the Reagan years alive and growing.'<sup>72</sup> It even offered a brief list of examples of policies that those hoping to continue Reagan's 'progress' could begin implementing, including a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution and the repeal of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. This conclusion therefore reads like a manifesto for Reagan supporters of the future, laying the groundwork for what Reagan hoped Republicans of the future would strive for while overlooking the realities of Reagan's frequent pragmatism in office.

### **Long-term Legacy Building: Opening the Reagan Presidential Library**

It is important to examine Reagan's remarks at the ground-breaking ceremony for the Reagan Library, as these offer an insight into Reagan's feelings regarding his own legacy. The ceremony took place in November 1988, in the president's final weeks in office, and offered him an opportunity to publicise the project and reflect on his presidential legacy. His Vice President, George HW Bush, had recently secured the presidency in an election branded a 'referendum' on the Reagan years.<sup>73</sup> The ceremony was attended by 400 contributors to the Library along with 650 young people from six high school bands, to perform prior to the ceremony.<sup>74</sup> 'The story that'll be told inside the walls that are yet to be built here', Reagan said, 'is the story not only of a Presidency but of a movement.'<sup>75</sup> Elaborating, Reagan stated that this movement was a movement 'dedicated to the greatness of America and faith in its

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<sup>72</sup> 'Promises Made, Promises Kept', 53.

<sup>73</sup> Julie Johnson, 'The Reagan Campaign Magic: He Isn't Running, but He's Winning', *New York Times*, 3 November 1988, B19.

<sup>74</sup> Memorandum from Teresa to John 'RE: Groundbreaking of the Reagan Library', 17 November 1988, Speechwriting, White House Office of: research files, box 406, RRPL.

<sup>75</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony for the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Center for Public Affairs in Simi Valley, California', 21 November 1988 [last accessed 29 June 2021: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-groundbreaking-ceremony-ronald-reagan-presidential-library-and-center>].

bedrock traditions; in the essential goodness of its people; in the essential soundness of its institutions; and, yes, faith in our very essence as a nation.’<sup>76</sup> This characterisation of the administration is noteworthy for several reasons. The focus on the value of tradition and faith in existing institutions spoke to the administration’s social and cultural conservatism. It glossed over the fractious nature of the 1980s, instead implying that there was one universal American experience of the decade. It was also arguably directed at the questions about US morality that had persisted throughout the 1970s, in part as a response to the Vietnam War. This sentiment was echoed in Reagan’s other speeches of this period, most notably his Farewell Address in January 1989.

Reagan took a somewhat self-deprecating tone in his remarks, insisting that although his name would be on the Library, ‘it is not my Presidency [... it is] a public trust from the great people of this land.’<sup>77</sup> Again, maintaining a focus on ‘the people’ helped Reagan to present his presidency as a shared venture and deflected from the controversies of his administration. However, although Reagan sought not to take credit for the achievements of his administration, he did offer steers for how the audience ought to interpret his presidency. Referring to future evaluations of his legacy, he said:

This library will allow scholars of the future to cast their own judgment on these years, and I would not presume to predict the result of their research. But I have to believe that scholars of good will, upon examining the historical record that will be contained herein, will judge our efforts well.<sup>78</sup>

Clearly, there is a contradiction here between Reagan feigning disinterest in influencing public perceptions of his legacy while also presuming that scholars will arrive at favourable conclusions when evaluating his presidency, and crediting his presidency with forming part of

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<sup>76</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony.’

<sup>77</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony.’

<sup>78</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony.’

a widespread conservative movement. In the later portion of the speech Reagan credited his administration with in-depth intellectual discussions over:

How much government is too much government? How best to expand the frontiers of freedom around the world? How best to pay our national bills? How best to help those who seem to have lost hope? And how to spread our bounties across the globe? How to achieve our national destiny?<sup>79</sup>

This list of rhetorical questions neatly captured many of the accomplishments Reagan spoke about during his other speeches at the end of his presidency, including the Farewell Address. The size of government, strengthening the economy, and restoring national morale were all major themes of the administration. Therefore, even though Reagan stated that he did not presume to tell people how to interpret his presidency, close reading of his remarks tells a very different story.

In addition to his speech at the ground-breaking ceremony, the night after Reagan gave his Farewell Address he gave a speech at a private fundraising dinner for the Reagan Library. A draft of his remarks by his speechwriters described the Library as ‘a place to record what we accomplished.’<sup>80</sup> While this line was removed from the final draft of the speech, it still reflects the idea that the Library was far from an impartial space for ‘young people to learn about our history’ and for scholarly research as Reagan said later in the same speech.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, another challenge the White House encountered as they prepared for the opening of the Reagan Library was competition from external organizations which also wanted to try and communicate Reagan’s presidential legacy to the American public. There were many locations that laid claim to ties to Reagan both during and after his presidency, and the White House was forced to navigate the risk of ‘unofficial’ sites of Reagan legacy building while

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<sup>79</sup> Reagan, ‘Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony.’

<sup>80</sup> ‘Ronald Reagan Library Dinner, Thursday 12 January 1989, draft (Klugmann/ARD, January 9 1989 6.00pm)’, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Speech Drafts, 1981-1989, box 428, folder: RR presidential library dinner, RRPL.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Ronald Reagan Library Dinner Script’, 12 January 1989, Speechwriting, White House Office of: Speech Drafts, 1981-1989, box 428, folder: RR presidential library dinner, RRPL.

preparing for the official Reagan Library. For example, Reagan retained ties with his alma mater, Eureka College, throughout his political career. During his time as Governor of California Reagan had gifted some items to the College, and during his presidency he donated several boxes of books and small items including a baseball cap, a miniature bust and some framed photographs.<sup>82</sup> However, John E. Hilboldt, director of the White House Gift Unit, became concerned that Eureka College may be ‘reading more into these gifts than is intended’ and that the College might separate the books Reagan donated from the rest of the library’s collections to form an alternative ‘Reagan Library.’<sup>83</sup> A representative from Eureka College told the White House of their plans to build a full-scale replica of the Oval Office, a common feature in other presidential libraries.

The question of fundraising for a second, unofficial Reagan Library also had the potential to negatively impact the White House’s efforts in Simi Valley, so the administration contacted Eureka College to clarify the meaning of the proposed gifts to the college, and the limitations of Reagan’s support for their plans for a conference center and museum in Reagan’s honour. Ultimately this issue was resolved relatively swiftly, but nevertheless demonstrates that the White House was not the only establishment with an interest in curating a space of presidential commemoration. Another proposed site of Reagan memorialization came from Senator Pete Domenici of New Mexico, who wrote to the White House in 1985 with a proposal for ‘The Ronald Reagan Museum of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ (in an unspecified location).<sup>84</sup> Counsel to the President Fred Fielding was quick to discourage this venture, noting that Reagan was unlikely to want to have his name attributed to another museum or institution

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<sup>82</sup> Memorandum from John E. Hilboldt to C. Christopher Cox, ‘Eureka College Conference Center’, 5 January 1988, Bryan, Patricia Mack Files: OA 19246, folder: ‘PMB Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (1 of 2), RRPL.

<sup>83</sup> Hilboldt to Cox, ‘Eureka College Conference Center.’

<sup>84</sup> ‘The Ronald Reagan Museum of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’, 6 November 1985, WHORM Subject Files: FE008- Presidential Libraries, Folder 351082 (1), RPPL.

as his focus was on the completion of his presidential library, and another space sharing his name could ‘create confusion in the eyes of the public.’<sup>85</sup>

Of course, in the years following Reagan’s departure from office his legacy remained valuable political currency, and the Reagan Library now stands alongside with an array of other organisations that seek to communicate that legacy with the wider public. These include the Young America’s Foundation, which owns and manages the Reagan Ranch Center in Santa Barbara, Rancho del Cielo (the Reagans’ summer home) and Reagan’s boyhood home in Dixon, Illinois, along with organisations like Grover Norquist’s ‘Reagan Legacy Project.’ The episode at Eureka College demonstrates how the White House sought to control the story and limit alternative sites seeking to capitalise on the Reagan legacy. As we shall see in Chapter Five, this became a serious issue for the original legacy builders once Reagan was no longer in office, when organisations like the Young America’s Foundation clashed with Nancy Reagan over their usage of Reagan’s beloved Santa Barbara ranch.

### **The Transition**

As we have seen, it was very unusual for the White House to pass between an outgoing president and their vice president. In the twentieth century it was also unusual for the office of the presidency to pass between two representatives of the same party, which had important implications for the transition period and the extent to which Bush’s presidency was seen as a third term for Reagan. Between 1928 and 1988 the White House only passed between two elected presidents of the same party on two occasions: between Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, and between John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. On both occasions, the latter president had come to office because of the incumbent’s death, before subsequently securing

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Fred Fielding to Pete Domenici, 11 March 1986, WHORM Subject Files: FE008- Presidential Libraries, Folder 351082 (1), RPPL.

election in their own right, so there was no opportunity for forward planning for the transitional period between administrations. However, Reagan's White House and the team surrounding President-elect Bush were able to plan far more effectively for their transition, given that Reagan's second term in office had a fixed end date for the administration to work towards. Transitions generally involve a significant amount of work, so the opportunity to forward plan in this way was especially significant. While there are always transition teams during this period, the question is whether they can work effectively when the transition is between presidents from different parties.

The transition period was noteworthy to the broader issue of Reagan's legacy for two reasons. Firstly, the fact the White House was transferring between two presidents from the same party meant that a proportion of staff from the previous administration would remain in the White House, aiding in the transition period and increasing potential for a sense of continuity between the Reagan and Bush eras. In terms of staff turnover, Bush retained around twenty percent of Reagan's staff, a higher proportion than some conservatives had anticipated.<sup>86</sup> A more generous estimate from the Heritage Foundation found that around a third of the 'Bush people' had also worked for Reagan.<sup>87</sup> It is difficult to say how typical the twenty to thirty percent figure was given how infrequently the White House passed between presidents from the same party during the twentieth century following an election (with the exception of Nixon's resignation and Kennedy and Roosevelt's deaths in office, the most recent example was the transition between Coolidge and Hoover in 1929). Some figures that Bush retained from the Reagan White House included US Trade Representative Carla Hills; head of the CIA William H. Webster; Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos (appointed during the 1988 presidential campaign); Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady; and Attorney General Dick

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997), 360.

<sup>87</sup> Parmet, *George Bush*, 360.

Thornburgh.<sup>88</sup> The fact Bush kept a proportion of high-ranking members of the Reagan administration indicates a willingness to maintain a degree of continuity between the two administrations, rather than seeking to start entirely afresh. However, during the transition period the head of the Bush transition, Chase Untermeyer, issued a statement banning any appointee from the Reagan White House from holding the same position in the Bush administration.<sup>89</sup> This sent a strong signal to those both within and outside of the White House that the Bush team wanted to be seen as a distinct entity from the outgoing Reagan administration, rather than simply continuing to copy the activity of their predecessors.

The degree of change, in terms of staffing, between the respective administrations did cause some concern for right-wing conservatives who doubted Bush's ability or willingness to continue the 'Reagan revolution' as there was a sense Bush had retained some of the less conservative members of the Reagan administration. Donald Devine was Chairman of the Committee to Save the Reagan Platform, which launched in March 1988 and sought to ensure that the Republican candidate for president would run 'on a sound conservative platform.'<sup>90</sup> They built upon the platform set out by the Heritage Foundation, which was unable to be involved in lobbying during election campaigns.<sup>91</sup> Devine had served as an advisor to Reagan between 1976 and 1985, including four years as Director of the Office of Personnel Management from 1981 to 1985.<sup>92</sup> Prior to Reagan's election, Devine had taken leave of absence from his role as an academic working in political science to work for the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign full time. He was appointed as the campaign's 'deputy director for

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<sup>88</sup> Parmet, *George Bush*, 360.

<sup>89</sup> Martin J. Medhurst, 'Why Rhetoric Matters: George H.W. Bush in the White House' in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush* edited by Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2006), 1-18: 5.

<sup>90</sup> 'Save the Reagan Platform Committee News Conference', C-Span, 18 March 1988 [accessed 16 August 2022: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?1699-1/save-reagan-platform>].

<sup>91</sup> 'Save the Reagan Platform Committee News Conference.'

<sup>92</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Nomination of Donald J. Devine To Be Director of the Office of Personnel Management', 13 February 1981, RRPL [accessed 8 April 2022: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/nominations-february-131981>].

national policy planning and analysis' and taking a sabbatical to undertake this role demonstrated his long-term commitment to supporting Reagan's bid for the White House.<sup>93</sup> He was later dubbed 'Reagan's terrible swift sword of the Civil Service' by the *Washington Post* because of his apparent loyalty to the incumbent in pursuing cuts to the civil service.<sup>94</sup>

In a letter to Bush, Devine wanted to express his concern that Bush had assumed he was guaranteed the backing of American conservatives in the 1988 election, while Devine cautioned that this support should not be 'taken for granted' (indeed, Devine noted that he had previously supported a different Republican candidate in the 1988 primaries).<sup>95</sup> He went on to say that 'an important segment of conservative opinion needs to be reassured regarding the issues you will emphasize' in the election campaign.<sup>96</sup> When announcing the formation of the Committee to Save the Reagan Platform, Devine stressed that 'this is not a Stop Bush campaign. This is not even an anti-Bush movement.'<sup>97</sup> Instead, their stated goal was to lobby the Bush campaign to ensure that Bush continued to appeal to the conservative wing of the Republican Party. This offers one example of the tension between Bush and the more conservative branch of the Republican Party, which did not trust Bush to uphold the Reagan legacy. This reflects a concern among conservatives that they were losing some of the power they had enjoyed during the Reagan administration, and were reluctant to relinquish control of the Reagan revolution to a more moderate member of the Republican Party.

In response to Devine, Bush wrote: 'I have run my 1988 campaign on the principles embodied in those platforms [Reagan's 1980 and 1984 campaigns] and have directed my campaign to use the 1984 platform as the guiding document in organizing the positions we will

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<sup>93</sup> Caryle Murphy, 'The Boss: Donald Devine: The man federal workers love to hate', *The Washington Post Magazine*, April 15, 1984, cover, pp. 10-14.

<sup>94</sup> Caryle Murphy, 'The Boss: Donald Devine: The man federal workers love to hate.'

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Donald Devine to George Bush, 14 April 1988, Bush Vice Presidential Records, VP George Bush, Office of, Subject file (VP Bush), GBPL.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Donald Devine to George Bush, 14 April 1988.

<sup>97</sup> 'Save the Reagan Platform Committee News Conference.'

present to the 1988 Platform committee.<sup>98</sup> While this may have been merely an effort to appease Devine, especially as Devine was writing prior to the election, it provides interesting evidence of a desire for continuity, or at least the appearance of continuity, between the Reagan and Bush administrations. Given that the Republican right was a demographic Bush needed to win round, it makes sense that Bush would attempt to appeal to them in this way. However, if we take Bush's comments at face value, then there did appear to be a desire for a smooth transition between the administrations, at least in terms of overarching policies.

The second reason the transition was important to the Reagan administration was that a smooth transition out of office would benefit Reagan's post-presidential legacy building. Once Bush had secured election in 1988, the transition phase between administrations could begin in earnest. However, the Reagan White House actually began planning for the transition almost two years prior. Fred Ryan, Reagan's post-presidential Chief of Staff, wrote a detailed report on how the Reagan administration had prepared for its departure from the White House. He aptly summarised the unusualness of their circumstances when he stated that 'no President has voluntarily left the White House in nearly thirty years.'<sup>99</sup> He went on to note that 'aides to the interim five presidents never had, for various reasons ranging from assassination to resignation to re-election bids, the opportunity to fully and completely chart a course for the future of that departing president, while he was still in office.'<sup>100</sup> This offers valuable evidence that the administration was aware of the unusual circumstances they were in, and sought to maximise these opportunities by actively planning for Reagan's departure from office. He described the administration's planning as 'meticulous' and credited forty-six people in the acknowledgements, each of whom had contributed to the report by offering recommendations

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<sup>98</sup> George Bush to Donald Devine, 'The Committee to Save the Reagan Platform', 28 April 1988, Bush Vice Presidential Records, VP George Bush, Office of, Subject file (VP Bush), GBPL.

<sup>99</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan', Gray, C. Boyden, Files, OA 45085, Folder: Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush Presidential Library (henceforth GBPL), introduction.

<sup>100</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan.'

for future administrations.<sup>101</sup> The report contained a significant amount of detail, from which models of printers and scanners were purchased for Reagan's office, to how many pre-printed message cards Reagan might need for his office (72,000 in total, including 50,000 'thank you for your support' cards, 6,000 new-born, wedding and anniversary congratulatory messages and 2,000 generic 'get well soon' cards).<sup>102</sup> This was clearly a substantial undertaking, which indicates the importance Ryan and other Reagan supporters placed on ensuring Reagan's transition out of the White House was smooth, and offering advice to future administrations facing these issues- two distinct but interconnected issues.

The report gave valuable insight into the importance the Reagan administration placed on ensuring that his departure from office and re-entry to public life would be as seamless as possible. The transition team began planning for his departure from office when he still had almost two years left in office. Whether this had any connection to the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair is not stated explicitly, but in the context of the broader 'campaign to save the Reagan agenda' which began around the same time, it seems likely the two projects were related. Ryan stated that Reagan himself had asked him to begin looking into the necessary steps for a smooth transition between administrations, so that this issue would not 'distract' him from 'direct[ing] his full efforts at governing the nation' in his final months in office.<sup>103</sup> One of the priorities Ryan highlighted was that it was 'essential to arrive in California with a staff who knew the routines by which President Reagan worked, his values and goals.'<sup>104</sup> This implies that Reagan was planning for a politically active post-presidency, where he would continue to advance the goals he had worked towards during his administration. This is interesting in the context of legacy construction, as many projects relating to the Reagan legacy

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<sup>101</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan.'

<sup>102</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan', 14-15.

<sup>103</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan', introduction.

<sup>104</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan', Gray, C. Boyden, Files, OA 45085, Folder: Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan, GBPL, introduction.

continued into the 1990s, including the opening of the Reagan Library and the publication of Reagan's autobiography.<sup>105</sup>

This report also offered an insight into the relationship between the transition team for President-elect Bush and the outgoing Reagan administration. Ryan detailed the departments that were involved in the transition, along with the external organisations that the administration liaised with including the Reagan Library, the Bush transition team, and the Office of Former President Reagan Staff, who assisted Reagan during his post-presidency. He stated that the priority was to provide 'open communication on the activities of the former president' with the incoming Bush administration, to ensure a smooth transition (though of course when the report was prepared, Bush was not the presumptive inauguree).

There was a growing expectation throughout the second half of the twentieth century that presidents would remain active in civic life during their post-presidential years, in part due to the creation of presidential office space within the presidential libraries, which adds additional significance to Ryan's report. His key recommendation was that any president, even those running for re-election, must appoint a transition planner to 'assist in their dignified return to private life' if the person was unsuccessful in their re-election bid.<sup>106</sup> The annotated copies of Ryan's report held by the George HW Bush Presidential Library indicate that the Bush administration made use of Ryan's project when preparing for their own administration's transition out of office. Patty Presock, Bush's private secretary, made handwritten annotations on her copy of the report, noting that their first priority should be to establish Bush's post-presidential office and identifying a staff and suitable location.<sup>107</sup> She also noted down names of possible candidates to head the transition effort, and ideas for who might finance various

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<sup>105</sup> See Marcus Witcher, *Getting Right With Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019).

<sup>106</sup> Frederick J. Ryan, Jr., 'Report on the Transition of Former President Ronald Reagan.'

<sup>107</sup> Al Kamen, 'Strangest Holdover Yet' *Washington Post*, 28 January 1993, A19.

aspects of the Bush transition, indicating that the Bush administration later found Ryan's efforts useful in preparing for Bush's own post-presidency.

Reagan and his administration wanted to support a smooth transition between administrations so that it would reflect well on his presidency as a whole and allow Reagan to make a swift re-entry into public life. While Bush retained some of Reagan's staff, there was a clear sense that the Bush team wanted to be seen as its own entity rather than a continuation of Reagan's presidency, demonstrating the limitations of such legacy-building efforts once the administration that is invested in the legacy is no longer in power. The Reagan people were attempting to co-ordinate a smooth exit from public life, which would allow Reagan to continue establishing his presidential legacy once he had departed Washington, DC, and adjusting to a period where their legacy project would have to continue, but using different tools.

## **Conclusion**

The legacy building efforts the Reagan administration undertook in its final 100 days in office varied widely in scale, from the prime-time Farewell Address to the much more limited circulation of 'Promises Made, Promises Kept.' When viewed together these various projects demonstrate that Reagan's future legacy was a central concern to his administration during this time. In contrast to other recent presidential administrations, the Reagan White House saw this phase of his presidency as vital to securing his future presidential legacy, and actively sought opportunities to allow him to address the public to communicate what he believed to be the key achievements from his presidency, capitalising on his popularity. The farewell speeches gave Reagan the opportunity to personally articulate what he believed his presidential legacy should be, through a series of high-profile speeches that were widely covered in the media. In these speeches, the administration focused on the themes of restored optimism and national pride, economic recovery, and a strengthened military position. Interestingly, the focus on American

foreign policy which emerges through examination of this period of the Reagan administration contrasts with the earlier planning for the White House legacy project, which focused on domestic policy. It is unclear from the planning material for these various events whether this shift was due to a change in the administration's understanding of presidential legacies, whether it was due to changes on the ground, or, whether it was a response to which of the various legacy projects had been successful thus far.

The programme of smaller events Reagan undertook during this period, such as the visits to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Andrews Air Base, allowed him to draw additional attention to specific themes. Given that presidential travel is always well-covered in the press, sending Reagan to various locations helped to generate positive press coverage of the outgoing administration at a time when the media was turning its attention to his successor.

'Promises Made, Promises Kept' underscores the extent to which the Reagan White House cared about the longevity of their policy achievements and wanted to see Reagan's unfulfilled goals eventually be realised by Republicans of the future, while also offering some of the clearest examples of the legacy project's version of Reagan's presidency diverging with reality. Though they claimed that 'only history will judge the legacy of the Reagan years', the administration made a concerted effort to shape it before Reagan had left the White House. Finally, the project of designing the Reagan Library offered Ronald and Nancy Reagan the opportunity to influence one of the first spaces dedicated to telling the story of their administration. Understanding the role of the White House in the planning of the RRPL, by contributing to decisions around its location and exhibitions, is important. This space would eventually influence how thousands of Americans understood and interpreted the Reagan presidency.

Finally, the plans for the transition period between the Reagan and Bush administrations demonstrated that Reagan was expected to remain involved in some degree of post-presidential

legacy building once he completed his second term, at least as far as having a post-presidential team to help oversee Reagan's memoirs and his assistance with the final exhibition planning at the Reagan Library.

The Reagan White House made a concerted effort to shape how the American public understood Reagan and his presidential legacy, often obscuring the nuances of his presidency in the process. As we have seen, this was a long-term strategy that began well before Reagan's last year in office. However, the period between Bush's election victory and Reagan's departure from the presidency saw attention naturally return to Reagan and speculation about how history would judge the outgoing president. Unlike some of his predecessors who seemed more content to allow the public to arrive at its own judgement, the Reagan administration stepped in to help guide the national discussion in new ways during these final weeks. In doing so, they secured positive headlines for Reagan alongside Bush and steered the national conversation in ways that highlighted Bush's status as the continuation of the 'mission' started by the outgoing president.

## Chapter Five: Post-presidential Legacy Building, 1989-1998

This chapter marks a transition from the Reagan administration's legacy construction, which we have seen throughout this thesis so far, and instead explores how Reagan's legacy was understood and debated in the period following his presidency. Efforts to shape Reagan's legacy have continued long after the Reagan administration left office but were often led by different people and continued using different tools. Though Marcus Witcher has argued that this was a period in which 'Reagan was busy framing his presidential legacy', I argue that, as he was during his presidency, Reagan himself was relatively uninvolved in projects involving his legacy and public perceptions of his years in the White House.<sup>1</sup> Witcher uses the exhibitions at the Reagan Library, along with Reagan's Farewell Address and second volume of autobiography to analyse what Reagan wanted his own legacy to be. Reagan did publish a second volume of autobiography, *Ronald Reagan: An American Life*, in 1990 (written by ghost-writer and former *New York Times* journalist Robert Lindsey), and participated in the planning for and opening of his presidential library. However, I argue that he otherwise opted to enjoy his retirement, leaving the bulk of the planning and fundraising for his presidential library and museum to the staff at the Reagan Foundation, rather than become embroiled in debates surrounding the shaping of his legacy.<sup>2</sup> In 1994 Reagan announced his diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease and retreated from public life entirely.

This chapter on how legacy building continued in the post-presidency period allows for an examination of the period where most scholars begin their explorations of legacy-building, thereby demonstrating the longer-term origins of many of the projects we see emerging in the 1990s. It also allows me to explore the tensions between the original legacy builders and new

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Witcher, *Getting Right with Reagan: The Struggle for True Conservatism, 1980-2016* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Maureen Dowd, 'Where's the Rest of Him?' [review of *An American Life*], *New York Times*, 18 Nov 1990.

organisations seeking to craft a legacy for Reagan, as seen with Nancy Reagan's disillusionment with the Young America's Foundation following their purchase of Reagan's ranch. These tensions represent the original legacy builders losing a degree of control over the Reagan legacy that they enjoyed during the administration and marks a transition into legacy building taking place with different tools. Following Reagan's diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease, responsibility for authorising any legacy projects fell to Nancy. In the words of long-term White House aide Michael Deaver, 'Ronald Reagan's disease made Nancy the custodian of his legacy [...] And it didn't take long for the line to form at her door – a long queue of legitimate and not-so-legitimate Reaganites seeking her powerful imprimatur on various pet projects now that the Gipper could no longer give his seal of approval.'<sup>3</sup>

Including these case studies from the 1990s also connects this thesis to the idea of commemoration as a form of legacy construction, demonstrating the evolving nature of efforts to build a legacy for Reagan. Doing so situates the thesis in relation to recent scholarship on the 1990s such as Nicole Hemmer's *Partisans*, which argues that the 1990s marked the 'collapse' of Reaganism at the very moment people were invoking Reagan's name and legacy more than ever.<sup>4</sup> The splintering Republican coalition lacked a unifying figure, which offers one explanation as to why they sought to bring Reagan back into the spotlight so much during the 1990s, despite the profoundly diverging policy stances among key conservatives at the time.

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In January 1989, the team preparing for the inauguration of 41<sup>st</sup> President George HW Bush faced an unusual problem. Traditionally, the incoming and outgoing presidents and their families would travel together between the White House and the Capitol on the morning of the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael K. Deaver, *Nancy: A Portrait of My Years with Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2022), 13.

inauguration, with their respective vice presidents and families in another car.<sup>5</sup> However, George Bush could not be in two cars at the same time. As a result, Bush travelled with the outgoing president Reagan, while Republican Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska and Democratic Representative Thomas S. Foley of Washington travelled alongside Dan Quayle and his wife on the way to the Capitol. This anecdote demonstrates the ‘so-called Van Buren curse’, offering a reminder of just how uncommon it was for power to transfer between incumbent presidents and their vice presidents.<sup>6</sup> For context, prior to the Reagan-Bush transition the most recent example of a president being immediately succeeded by his vice president had been Martin Van Buren’s succession of Andrew Jackson over 150 years previously. In that time, nine former vice presidents had made bids for the presidency across twelve election cycles (Charles Fairbanks, Hubert Humphrey, and Richard Nixon each ran twice), and the only one to be successful was Richard Nixon in his second bid in 1968, so not as the incumbent vice president.<sup>7</sup>

This context demonstrates how unusual the political situation was following Bush’s election, which both reflects the success of the Reagan White House’s efforts to support Bush’s election bid, and also raises important questions around whether Reagan’s legacy helped or hindered George HW Bush’s time in the White House. Once Reagan’s years in office were over, his legacy builders were no longer able to influence discussions of his legacy in the same ways they had during his presidency. The chapter also examines the idea that Bush was elected to act as a third term of the Reagan administration and questions the extent to which this context impacted public perceptions of Bush and his presidency. This unusual set of circumstances lent

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<sup>5</sup> Maureen Dowd, ‘The 41<sup>st</sup> President: Reagan Packs Up a Presidency and Its Memories’, *New York Times*, 21 January 1989, A1.

<sup>6</sup> John J. Pitney, *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 168.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Statistics Data Archive: Elections’, *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 3 March 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections>].

itself to comparisons between Bush and his successor, so this period offers ample discussion of the nature of Reagan's legacy.

It is important to consider how far Bush was willing and able to deviate from the course charted by his predecessor and establish a distinct political identity outside of his association with Reagan, by examining the course he set out for his administration in his inaugural address and early presidential speeches. I will then turn to the press coverage of the 1992 presidential election campaign, to examine public perceptions of how far Bush was able to step out of Reagan's shadow. Ultimately, I argue that inheriting the Reagan legacy limited Bush's policy options and that four years after Reagan left office his presidency continued to shape public debate, suggesting that the efforts of Reagan's legacy builders had been successful.

Debates about Reagan's legacy appeared throughout the 1992 campaign, and the fact that it was perceived to be valuable currency by presidential hopefuls across the political spectrum offers valuable insight into Reagan's significance as a Republican Party figurehead during this period. The Reagan legacy builders helped to cement public perceptions of the Reagan presidency as marking a significant political shift, one that had lasting implications for his successor.

The second half of this chapter explores legacy building within conservative interest groups and voluntary organisations which emerged across the United States, all claiming to be both promoting and defending Reagan's political legacy. These included the Reagan Legacy Foundation (established by Reagan's son Michael Reagan), the Committee to Save the Reagan Platform, Citizens for America, Americans for the Reagan Agenda and, the focus of this chapter, the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project and the Young America's Foundation (YAF).<sup>8</sup> Specifically, I will explore the Reagan Legacy Project's role in the renaming of Washington

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<sup>8</sup> Not to be confused with the similar organisation Young Americans for Freedom, which was an independent organisation until 2011, when they merged.

National Airport, and YAF's purchase of the Reagans' ranch, both of which took place in the spring of 1998.

I have chosen to focus on these two interest groups for several reasons. They were both reasonably high-profile organisations, both active in the mid-to late 1990s, but with contrasting approaches to the Reagan legacy. Their efforts enjoyed a reasonable amount of media attention, particularly the RLP's effort to rename National Airport. Given that influencing public memory requires getting the public's attention, it makes sense to focus on the interest groups whose efforts were the most visible, as these were the most likely to have some sort of impact on perceptions of Reagan's legacy, positive or negative. This chapter argues that both organisations had very similar aims and objectives to those of the original White House legacy builders. Though the means through which they achieved these goals differed in meaningful ways, both projects were, to some degree, attempting to craft a 'useable past' for the conservatives of the future.<sup>9</sup>

Both the Reagan White House, and the conservative interest groups of the 1990s, were attempting to secure Reagan's place as a central figure in a narrative of conservative ascendancy and ensure that Reagan's legacy was somehow useful for future generations of conservatives. Both organisations also boasted of personal ties to Reagan, creating tension between the original legacy builders and these newer efforts. The significance of these projects therefore stems from their very existence; they demonstrate both that Reagan's legacy was deemed especially valuable for contemporary conservatives in the late 1990s, and that the White House legacy-builders' efforts were able to be developed in new ways and using new tools.

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<sup>9</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, 'The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan' in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, eds, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219.

## 1989: The Inauguration - Bush Sets his Agenda

Bush biographer John Robert Greene observed that Ronald Reagan was ‘a tough act to follow’ for his successor and former vice president.<sup>10</sup> During his bid for the presidency Bush actively campaigned as what journalists Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame have described as ‘the experienced co-pilot’ who ‘took credit for the prosperity of the Reagan era.’<sup>11</sup> As a result, during his presidency this vow of loyalty to Reagan impeded Bush’s ability to fully step out of his predecessor’s shadow. Even once he had assumed the presidency, Bush observed that the ‘opportunities’ open to his administration ‘were made possible by the peace and prosperity that Ronald Reagan left as his legacy.’<sup>12</sup> Bush’s support of Reagan created what Duffy and Goodgame have branded ‘the invisible agenda items of the Bush campaign’ as he was unable to deviate far from Reagan’s policies on the campaign trail.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, this raises the question of how far Bush wanted his presidency to deviate from Reagan’s, both in style and in substance. During his campaign for the presidency he made promises to ‘to make kinder the face of the Nation and gentler the face of the world’ and praised the nation’s ‘thousand points of light’, referring to community organisations across the US.<sup>14</sup> This apparent attempt to soften some of the stances of the Reagan administration drew criticism from Nancy Reagan, who questioned ‘kinder and gentler than whom?’ in response to Bush’s speech at the Republican National Convention.<sup>15</sup> However, by the time the 1992 election campaign was underway Bush was still frequently being positioned by the press in relation to his predecessor, as opposed to in relation to his opponent, Bill Clinton. This demonstrates the

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<sup>10</sup> John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of George Bush* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, *Marching in Place: The Status Quo Presidency of George Bush* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 37.

<sup>12</sup> George Bush, ‘Remarks at the Associated Press Business Luncheon in Chicago, Illinois’, 24 April 1989, The American Presidency Project [accessed 2 March 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/263247>].

<sup>13</sup> Duffy and Goodgame, *Marching in Place*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> George Bush, ‘Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Houston’, *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 2 March 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/266944>].

<sup>15</sup> Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 512.

extent to which Reagan's legacy remained an important aspect of the political debates around national domestic and foreign policy into the 1990s.

Maureen Dowd reported for the *New York Times* that Bush was so keen to assume the presidency that he began using the signature 'The Inauguree' once he had won the 1988 election, and in the three months between his election and assuming the presidency Bush held more press conferences than Reagan had in the preceding two and a half years.<sup>16</sup> It is important, therefore, to address Bush's aspirations for his time in office, and the extent to which he was willing to govern as a merely 'custodial' president following a roadmap laid out by his predecessor.<sup>17</sup> One newspaper report speculated that Bush was likely to 'stress continuity' while still being an 'engaged and activist' president in terms of style.<sup>18</sup> Bush had stated in the weeks leading up to his inauguration that he did not campaign on a platform of 'radical change', so he did not intend to introduce one early in his administration.<sup>19</sup> David Mervin characterises Bush as a 'guardianship president', a conservative 'in the traditional sense of being largely content with things as they were.'<sup>20</sup> He argues that Bush 'lacked both the opportunity and the inclination to be an innovator', believing that being a competent leader was more important than coming to the presidency with a grand ideological vision.<sup>21</sup> Mervin goes on to argue that conservatives found Bush 'irredeemably pragmatic' and were frustrated that he lacked a vision like Reagan's.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, over the course of his four years as president, George Bush referred to a 'vision' 277 times in public speeches. However, on 143 of those occasions he was referring to someone else's vision rather than his own, suggesting that Bush's talk of a vision was a

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<sup>16</sup> Duffy and Goodgame, *Marching in Place*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, 'The 1992 Campaign: Political Memo; Despite Grip on Nomination, Bush Still Gropes for Agenda', *New York Times*, 30 April 1992, A1.

<sup>18</sup> David Hoffman, 'For Bush, an Active Beginning', *Washington Post*, 16 January 1989, A1.

<sup>19</sup> David Hoffman, 'For Bush, an Active Beginning.'

<sup>20</sup> David Mervin, *George Bush and the Guardianship Presidency* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1996), 8.

<sup>21</sup> Mervin, *George Bush and the Guardianship Presidency*, 32-33.

<sup>22</sup> Mervin, *George Bush and the Guardianship Presidency*, 37.

substitute for actually having one.<sup>23</sup> Here it is important to remember the unusual nature of Bush succeeding Reagan immediately after his term as Reagan's vice president. It is unsurprising that people would draw parallels between the two figures, but Bush's loyalty to Reagan undoubtedly heightened the sense that there were parallels to be drawn.

However, though the theme of continuity was clear in Bush's 1989 inaugural address, we must consider the agenda he set out in this speech in some detail, to provide context for the accusations he faced in the 1992 election campaigns that he lacked an agenda both throughout his four years in office thus far, and also for the next potential term. Bush opened with praising the 'wonderful things' Reagan had done during his presidency and spoke of continuity and consistency in policy decision making. He repeated his promises from his address at the Republican Party convention to 'to make kinder the face of the Nation and gentler the face of the world' and he praised the 'thousand points of light.'<sup>24</sup> He stated that he had assumed the presidency at 'a moment rich with promise' and spoke at length of the importance of freedom, 'free markets, free speech, and free elections' for both the United States and the world as a whole, a clear reference to the denouement of the Cold War.

He also focused on themes of morality and personal values rather than material possessions and cautioned that Americans were becoming too materialistic. He stated:

Are we enthralled with material things, less appreciative of the nobility of work and sacrifice? My friends, we are not the sum of our possessions. [...] We must hope to give [our children] a sense of what it means to be a loyal friend; a loving parent; a citizen who leaves his home, his neighborhood, and town better than he found it.<sup>25</sup>

This focus on values was fairly politically neutral and fitted with the theme of unity across the political divide which appeared elsewhere in the speech. After a bitter and divisive presidential

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<sup>23</sup> Catherine L. Langford, 'George Bush's Struggle with the "Vision Thing"' in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush* edited by Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2006), 1-18: 12.

<sup>24</sup> George Bush, 'Inaugural Address', *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 16 February 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/inaugural-address>].

<sup>25</sup> George Bush, 'Inaugural Address.'

election campaign, Bush seemed to be trying to shift the discussion towards one of peace and goodwill, a common strategy following divisive elections. The idea of ‘sacrifice’ was likely an allusion to the prosperity of the 1980s, which also led to a widening of the gap between wealthy and poor Americans across the country, and the prospect of economic downturn. Bush expanded upon these ideas of personal responsibility in his remarks on social policy, including issues of homelessness, addiction, and crime:

We as a people have such a purpose today. [...] There are the homeless, lost and roaming. There are the children who have nothing, no love and no normalcy. There are those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction -- drugs, welfare, the demoralization that rules the slums. There is crime to be conquered. [...] The old solution, the old way, was to think that public money alone could end these problems. But we have learned that that is not so.<sup>26</sup>

The focus on individual personal responsibility was an undoubtedly conservative one, and certainly in keeping with the Reagan administration’s stance on social policies. By implying that personal responsibility was necessary to support people in crises, rather than public funds, Bush sent the message that his government would not be stepping in to offer financial aid to those effected by these issues. Scholar Steven A. Schull argues that Bush did not pursue ‘kinder, gentler’ policies in the realm of civil rights, and instead ‘went beyond Reagan in his efforts to cut back the federal role in civil rights.’<sup>27</sup>

How far Bush would deviate from Reagan’s policies was a topic of discussion on his first full day as president. During a press question-and-answer session Bush was asked about his relationship with Congress, with a reporter asking, ‘don’t you think that what you’re really saying is, you want something different from the Reagan administration?’<sup>28</sup> Bush was quick to deflect this question, remarking ‘I’m saying I’ve just spelled out what I want for the Bush

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<sup>26</sup> George Bush, ‘Inaugural Address.’

<sup>27</sup> Steven A. Schull, *A Kinder, Gentler Racism? The Reagan-Bush Civil Rights Legacy* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 5.

<sup>28</sup> George Bush, Question-and-Answer Session With Reporters, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 2 March 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/247455> ].

administration' but giving no further elaboration or attempt to contrast his plans for the presidency with his predecessor.

The contrast between Bush and Reagan's leadership styles played a large part in the perception that Bush lacked an agenda. Reagan was a natural orator who had arrived in office with a clear ideological agenda and willingness to communicate that to the public. While Bush was undoubtedly politically ambitious, his style of leadership meant he created the impression that he was a reactive, rather than a proactive, occupant of the Oval Office.

Bush oversaw a turbulent four years in American history, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and becoming the first post-Cold War president, resulting in what Russell L. Riley has termed a 'genuinely distinctive' presidency.<sup>29</sup> The context of the end of the Cold War also paved the way for arguably Bush's greatest presidential success with victory in the first Gulf War. However, Riley argues convincingly that this required 'an enormous investment of presidential energy' which was likely diverted from other projects. In terms of domestic politics, the political shifts taking place in this period were seen with Bill Clinton's efforts to campaign as a 'New' Democrat, arguably an example of Reagan's influence spanning the political spectrum. Meanwhile, the economic travails of the period between 1989 and 1993 included a spiralling federal deficit, leading Bush to renege on his famous promise that he would not raise taxes.<sup>30</sup> This context is vital to understanding Bush's performance in the 1992 campaign.

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<sup>29</sup> Russell L. Riley, 'Introduction: History and George Bush', in *41: Inside the Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>30</sup> Hugh Hecl, 'George Bush and American Conservatism', in *41: Inside the Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Michael Nelson and Barbara A. Perry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 66-69.

## The 1992 Campaign

Having explored the themes Bush set to focus on during his first term in office, this chapter will now consider his bid for re-election in 1992. In doing so, I do not plan to simply compare Bush and Reagan's policy decisions, but instead explore how Reagan's legacy influenced public discussions of the 1992 presidential election. Press coverage of the 1992 election campaign demonstrates the extent to which Bush was still unable to evade Reagan's shadow, even after four years in the Oval Office in his own right. In June of 1992 his approval rating was at an all-time-low of 34 percent, and he was accused by those surveyed of 'drifting without clear policies.'<sup>31</sup> He was deemed 'reactive' rather than 'creative' or a 'forward-looking leader', leaving many voters unsure as to what a second Bush term would achieve.<sup>32</sup> Columnist Robert Novak addressed Bush's status as a custodial president constrained by Reagan's legacy when he observed that Bush 'finds himself in the uncomfortable role of heir to an ideological framework – limited government, supply-side economics, social conservatism – that in his heart he seems to spurn.'<sup>33</sup> At least some aspects of the legacy Bush had inherited appeared to sit at odds with Bush's political instincts, demonstrating the challenges of both bequeathing and inheriting a political legacy.

One issue Bush faced was an inability to appeal to the same voter base that Reagan had during the 1980s. As Martin Medhurst has argued, 'the problem was not lack of ideas, but the inability to mobilize those ideas in a coherent and persuasive way.'<sup>34</sup> His support from the moral and religious right, 'a key Republican constituency' was branded by the press as

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Brinkley, 'The 1992 Campaign; Bush in a World Remade: Will the Old Compass Do?', *New York Times*, 25 June 1992, A1.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Brinkley, 'The 1992 Campaign', A1.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Novak, 'Staying the Course to GOP Disaster?', *Washington Post*, 16 August 1992, C1.

<sup>34</sup> Martin J. Medhurst, 'Why Rhetoric Matters: George H.W. Bush in the White House' in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush* edited by Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 2006), 19-36: 20.

‘fragmented’ compared to Reagan’s support in 1980 and 1984, and even compared to Bush’s run in 1988.<sup>35</sup> Another contrast between Reagan’s and Bush’s support base was the ‘virtual collapse’ of support for Bush and the Republican Party among 18- to 30-year-old voters compared to their support of Reagan, which had been seen as a clear sign of promise for the Party’s revitalisation in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> In August 1992 Democratic candidate Bill Clinton was reported to have a 43-point margin (70 to 27 percent) in this demographic compared to his overall 26-point margin.<sup>37</sup> Columnist Robert Novak argued that, ‘Whereas Reagan was always eager to embrace new converts, Bush lives in a constricted political world where old comrades are vastly preferable.’<sup>38</sup>

Of course, it is important to consider the role Reagan played in the 1992 election, and the extent to which he was willing to aid Bush as he had in 1988. Reagan formally endorsed Bush’s bid for re-election in February 1992, which was his first public comment on the Republican Party primaries. The endorsement came as something of a surprise, as it was given in a pre-recorded statement at a dinner sponsored by the New Hampshire Conservative Political Victory Fund, and organisers were unaware that Reagan intended to make an endorsement during his remarks.<sup>39</sup> Reagan was a well-received featured speaker at the 1992 Republican National Convention. However, unsurprisingly, Reagan’s ability to drum up support for Bush was far less successful in 1992 than it had been in 1988. The *Washington Post* reported on the ‘loss of the Reagan mystique’ occurring across the country as Reagan Democrats switched back to supporting Democratic candidates, which would have undoubtedly come as a disappointment to Bush’s campaign.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, ‘The Gipper Tries to Win One More for Bush’, *Washington Post*, 17 August 1992, A15.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, ‘The Gipper Tries to Win One More for Bush’, *Washington Post*, 17 August 1992, A15.

<sup>37</sup> Edsall, ‘The Gipper Tries to Win One More for Bush.’

<sup>38</sup> Robert Novak, ‘Staying the Course to GOP Disaster?’, *Washington Post*, 16 August 1992, C1.

<sup>39</sup> Holmes, ‘1992 Campaign’, A28.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas B. Edsall, ‘The Gipper Tries to Win One More for Bush.’

One of the most revealing ways in which Reagan's legacy remained relevant into the 1990s was through other candidates' attempts to position themselves as the true 'heir' to the Reagan legacy, even when their version of this legacy did not match the reality of Reagan's presidency. In 1992 Bush faced a challenger in the form of Patrick Buchanan, who had served as communications director in the Reagan White House, and who claimed that 'he, not Mr. Bush, [was] the true heir of the Reagan legacy.'<sup>41</sup> Bush's decision to renege on his vow of 'no new taxes' lost him the support of some bedrock conservative Republicans who became disappointed by his moderate stance, particularly in comparison to candidates such as Buchanan.<sup>42</sup> Notably, the pledge not to raise taxes was also a promise, at least symbolically, to remain on the course established by Reagan.<sup>43</sup> This is one example of the reified version of Reagan which conservative Republicans used to critique Bush diverging from the realities of Reagan's own presidency. Reagan was painted as an ideological tax cutter to highlight Bush's shortcomings, all while overlooking Reagan's role in raising taxes and increasing the federal deficit during his own presidency.

In December 1991, Buchanan said that his campaign was 'an opportunity to redefine and reinvigorate American conservatism', a clear contrast to Bush's more moderate brand of conservatism.<sup>44</sup> When asked about his differences with Reagan, Buchanan acknowledged that 'your views cannot be identical to Reagan's because the situation has changed.'<sup>45</sup> He stated that now that the Right was no longer united by the Cold War, national priorities had to shift towards addressing other issues like the budget deficit, which Buchanan argued was a necessary consequence of victory in the Cold War.

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Holmes, '1992 Campaign: Endorsements; Reagan Endorses Bush as 'Best Hope' for Nation', *New York Times*, 9 February 1992, A28.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew Brinkley, 'The 1992 Campaign', A1.

<sup>43</sup> John J. Pitney, *After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 172.

<sup>44</sup> Lally Weymouth, 'Buchanan: Throwing a Hard Right At Bush', *Washington Post*, 22 December 1991, C1.

<sup>45</sup> Weymouth, 'Buchanan: Throwing a Hard Right At Bush.'

Buchanan was far from the only Republican to position himself in relation to the Reagan legacy during this period. Jack Kemp, a member of Bush's own cabinet, was accused by his critics of attempting to establish himself as 'the true heir to Ronald Reagan for the 1996 campaign' as early as 1991 when he broke with the administration's stance on the nation's economic policy.<sup>46</sup> Kemp supported a 'growth package' of tax cuts, while the administration preferred to wait for the economic recovery to take place of its own accord. In the immediate aftermath of Bush's election defeat in 1992 Kemp would be branded the 'GOP heir apparent' by the *Washington Post*, which also highlighted Kemp's tendency to hark back to the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Ronald Reagan when discussing his political aspirations.<sup>47</sup> The *Post's* coverage of Buchanan also stated that 'many conservatives do see a Reaganite quality in Buchanan that they are unable to find in President Bush. As with Ronald Reagan, one gets the sense that Buchanan wakes up in the morning knowing what he thinks.'<sup>48</sup>

Whether or not Bush remained faithful to Reagan's legacy is less important than appreciating that Reagan's legacy remained valuable political currency during this period. Bush formally entered the race for the presidency on 12 February 1992, where he 'returned to the rhetoric of the Reagan era' to position his campaign in relation to Pat Buchanan's.<sup>49</sup> He waited until relatively late to formally announce his candidacy, with one news reporter observing 'it is as though he does not want the lofty business of governing to be contaminated by the grubby pursuit of votes.'<sup>50</sup> As Reagan did in 1984, Bush embraced the Rose Garden strategy by focusing on the issue of governing rather than turning his attention to his re-election bid too soon in the election cycle. Doing so has financial benefits for the incumbent, while also

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<sup>46</sup> Maureen Dowd, 'Washington Memo: For Bush, the Kemp Thing Reappears', *New York Times*, 26 Nov 1991, A14.

<sup>47</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, 'GOP Heir Apparent', *Washington Post*, 4 November 1992, CA19.

<sup>48</sup> Lally Weymouth, 'Buchanan: Throwing a Hard Right At Bush', *Washington Post*, 22 December 1991, C1.

<sup>49</sup> Ann Devroy, 'President Formally Enters Race: Reagan-Era Rhetoric Revived in Bid for Conservative Support', *Washington Post*, 13 February 1992, A1.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Novak, 'Staying the Course to GOP Disaster?', *Washington Post*, 16 August 1992, C1.

allowing them to appear above the political fray and focused on the best interests of the nation. In one of Bush's own accounts of the 1992 election, he stated that in June 1992 'many of my friends and supporters felt that my campaign was in disarray. Part of the problem was I was too darn busy trying to be President.'<sup>51</sup> While such comments are easily made in retrospect, it remains indicative of a strategy whereby Bush would allow himself to use the office of the presidency to remain somewhat above the political fray in the early stages of the campaign.

Bush's lack of a clear political agenda, despite having seemingly inherited Reagan's legacy, continued to cause problems for his election campaign once he had secured his party's nomination. When Bush secured the nomination in April of 1992, a *New York Times* reporter wrote that Bush had still 'not given the rest of America a good reason why he deserves a second term.'<sup>52</sup> During his speech at the Republican Party convention in 1992, Bush tried to present the presidential election as a 'sharp choice' between 'different agendas', attempting to show that he had strong stances in opposition to Bill Clinton's.<sup>53</sup> He credited the 'leadership' of Republican presidents including Nixon, Ford and Reagan with 'the demise of communism', implying that the nation needed another four years with a Republican in the White House in order to guide the nation's foreign policy. He focussed on his foreign policy successes, namely the Gulf War, and his 'mission' to defend American security and 'promote' American ideals overseas.

It is also worth acknowledging the emergence of a serious third-party contender in 1992 in the form of Ross Perot, and the implications this had for the supposed strength of the Reagan legacy. Perot, branded 'a candidate of the angry and the disaffected, the fed-up and the

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<sup>51</sup> George Bush, *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1999), 561.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Rosenthal, 'The 1992 Campaign: Political Memo; Despite Grip on Nomination, Bush Still Gropes for Agenda', *New York Times*, 30 April 1992, A1.

<sup>53</sup> George Bush, 'Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Houston', *The American Presidency Project* [accessed 2 March 2022: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/266944>].

resentful' by the *Washington Post*, announced his willingness to run for president in February 1992.<sup>54</sup> He stated on CNN's *Larry King Live* that he would be open to running for president 'if voters placed him on the ballot in all 50 states.'<sup>55</sup> Support for Perot was swift and widespread, and by June of 1992 Perot was polling ahead of both Bush and Clinton in a *Washington Post*–ABC News poll.<sup>56</sup> The fact that a third-party candidate could garner such support indicates a national dissatisfaction with the political status quo, hardly a ringing endorsement of the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Bizarrely, Perot dropped out of the race on 16 July 1992, but remained involved in the election and by mid-September was being pressured by television networks to formally re-declare his candidacy as he was planning to buy advertising time to 'air his policy views', a move which immeasurably damaged his campaign.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, Perot secured an impressive 18.1 percent of the popular vote, though no electoral college votes. While the presence of a third-party candidate invigorated the election coverage to a degree, it also illustrated the discontent voters felt about the candidates running in 1992. This discontent indicated a rebuke of the Reagan years, given how quickly national interest in party politics appeared to wane after the high point of Reagan's final months in office.

The 1992 election campaign illustrates the malleability of the Reagan legacy, with Bush and Buchanan both making claims to be Reagan's rightful heir, as we have seen already in 1988. Candidates laid claim to Reagan's 'legacy' even when these claims did not align with the realities of Reagan's time in the White House, something which is most clear in discussions around issues of taxation and public debt. Bush failed to establish a clear political identity even after four years in the White House. Ross Perot's candidacy further complicates this picture, as his supporters demonstrate a degree of disillusionment with what Perot depicted as the

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<sup>54</sup> David Von Drehle, 'Can-Do Optimism is Core of Perot's Stump Speech', *Washington Post*, 22 June 1992, A1; Michael Isikoff, 'Perot Drops Out of Presidential Race', *Washington Post*, 17 July 1992, A1.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Isikoff, 'Perot Drops Out of Presidential Race', *Washington Post*, 17 July 1992, A1.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Isikoff, 'Perot Drops Out of Presidential Race.'

<sup>57</sup> David S. Broder and E.J. Dionne Jr., 'Perot Vows to Pressure Candidates on Economy', *Washington Post*, 19 September 1992, A1.

Washington establishment candidates of Bush and Clinton. One interesting critique of Bush's success in harnessing the Reagan legacy comes from long-term *Washington Post* journalist and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, and his son Carl M. Cannon. Their 2008 book *Reagan's Disciple* argues that George W. Bush was a far more convincing heir to the Reagan legacy than his father, despite Bush senior being positioned as the third term of the Reagan administration. Cannon and Cannon argue that Bush 43 'staked the most plausible claim' to be another Ronald Reagan, at least for a time.<sup>58</sup>

### **1997-98: The Reagan Legacy Project and the Renaming of National Airport**

Reagan's legacy remained valuable political currency throughout the 1990s. To appreciate why the substance of Reagan's legacy remained so valuable to contemporary conservatives, and so contested by Reagan's opponents, it is vital to acknowledge the political climate of the 1990s. Nicole Hemmer has characterised this as 'a period of intensifying polarization, where Republicans grew less tolerant of dissension in the ranks and began to view Democrats not as opponents but as implacable enemies.'<sup>59</sup> The Republican Party gained control of Congress in 1994 and maintained this control for twelve years. The media landscape was changing drastically in the 1990s too, with the rise of cable news networks and right-wing talk radio, as well as the early years of the internet.<sup>60</sup>

This changing landscape helped to foster the culture wars, a series of conflicts between liberals and conservatives fought over issues including race, gender, sexuality, and education.<sup>61</sup> With cultural issues and contemporary politics becoming increasingly polarised into battles between two opposing ideological standpoints, it is unsurprising that efforts to celebrate an

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<sup>58</sup> Lou Cannon and Carl M. Cannon, *Reagan's Disciple: George W. Bush's Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy* (New York, NY: Perseus Book Group, 2008), 54.

<sup>59</sup> Hemmer, *Partisans*, 10.

<sup>60</sup> Hemmer, *Partisans*, 8-9.

<sup>61</sup> See Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

icon of American conservatism offered a prime opportunity for confrontation and controversy. Such contests over America's recent past were far from unusual, with museum exhibits such as the planned 1995 display of the Enola Gay (the first aircraft to drop an atomic bomb during the Second World War) generating national controversy.<sup>62</sup>

To understand the rationale behind the types of memorialisation of Reagan that the Reagan Legacy Project was striving for, it is also important to understand the notion of American civil religion. Benjamin Hufbauer characterises American civil religion as a 'veneration' for 'particular events, people and things, for instance the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance.'<sup>63</sup> He considers the presidential libraries as spaces that each attempt to elevate their respective president within this system. We can see that the efforts of organisations such as the Reagan Legacy Project were designed with the goal of elevating Reagan's status within this system of national icons. Niels Bjerre-Poulsen connects the idea of American civil religion to the Reagan Legacy Project's efforts to add a Reagan monument to the Washington Mall, arguing that these monuments are 'supposed to symbolize central ideas and concepts in America's civil religion.'<sup>64</sup> This idea is central to why the Reagan legacy builders of the 1990s sought to have Reagan memorialised in specific ways, including on currency, the Washington Mall and Mount Rushmore. These are each perceived as commemorative sites inhabited by 'great' former presidents.<sup>65</sup> The only other president to have a major international airport named after him at the time of the National Airport renaming debate was John F. Kennedy, whose 600 monuments were cited by the Legacy Project as evidence to support the need for a concerted effort to celebrate and memorialise Reagan.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 276-277.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin Hufbauer, *Presidential Temples: How Memorials and Libraries Shape Public Memory* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 118-119.

<sup>64</sup> Bjerre-Poulsen, 'The Road to Mount Rushmore', 216.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew Dallek, 'Not Ready for Mt. Rushmore: Reconciling the myth of Ronald Reagan with the reality', *The American Scholar*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2009), pp. 13-23: 14.

<sup>66</sup> Lyndsey Layton, 'Renaming of Airport Metro Stop Is Stalled', *The Washington Post*, 19 April 2001, B1.

Importantly, Bjerre-Poulsen observes that these efforts to commemorate Reagan form part of an effort to construct a ‘useable past’ for conservatives of the future, even if this means employing a very selective reading of the 1980s.<sup>67</sup>

There are debates regarding whether civil religion actually exists, or whether it is merely an extension of patriotism. An awareness of this scholarship on civil religion nevertheless offers an avenue for understanding why some of the projects advanced by Reagan’s legacy builders were so significant to them, as well as why they were contested by his opponents. The very fact that there was such opposition to the renaming of National Airport offers one indication as to the perceived implications of renaming projects such as this one. The significance of efforts to shape public memory is aptly summarised by John Bodnar as follows: ‘the shaping of a past worthy of public commemoration in the present is contested and involves a struggle for supremacy between advocates of various political ideas and sentiments.’<sup>68</sup> The debates over whether to name the United States’ national airport after Reagan offer an excellent case study of the role of advocates of various political ideas attempting to ensure that Reagan would be appropriately commemorated, and therefore remembered by future generations.

Legacy-building changed once the original legacy-builders were no longer in control of the message. One illustration of this is found in the Reagan Legacy Project, which was established in 1997 by Grover Norquist, an American conservative political activist and strategist. Prior to founding the Reagan Legacy Project, Norquist had founded an organisation called Americans for Tax Reform in 1985, which opposed increases in tax during and after Reagan’s presidency. Norquist said when he established the Reagan Legacy Project in 1997, ‘if you want to contend for the future, you have to contend for the public understanding of the

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<sup>67</sup> Bjerre-Poulsen, ‘The Road to Mount Rushmore’, 219.

<sup>68</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

past.<sup>69</sup> Norquist evidently felt that he could, and must, influence how people remembered the Reagan years, and that doing so would be beneficial for the future of the United States. This connects directly to the notion of using Reagan's memory to create a 'useable past' for conservatives of the future, a central idea among the White House legacy builders ten years previously. However, Norquist was clearly interested in a particular version of Reagan's legacy. Reagan had demonstrated pragmatism in office which included increasing taxes in order to shrink the national deficit in 1982 and 1984, and overseeing the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which increased taxes on businesses and investors in order to reduce some Americans' personal income tax, policy decisions that Norquist had actively campaigned against.

The timing of the Reagan Legacy Project's formation is significant, as it followed the GOP's failed attempt to regain the presidency in 1996 (though Republicans maintained control of both the House and Senate). The Republicans had already made what they depicted as a turn back to Reagan in their 1994 midterm campaign, where their 'Contract with America' borrowed heavily from Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address, and it was clear that there was a degree of nostalgia for Reagan's leadership among Republicans.<sup>70</sup> The lack of a unifying figure within the party aided this sense of nostalgia for the Reagan years, even though as we have seen, the ways in which Reagan's legacy was being invoked were often very diverse.

To influence public memory and secure a positive legacy for Reagan, the Reagan Legacy Project's ongoing objective has been to put some kind of marker to Ronald Reagan in every county across the United States, along with a larger monument in every state, amounting to about 3,200 separate places of commemoration. Its hope is that placing markers to Reagan across the country will spark conversations about him and why he was significant, particularly among young people who may not have any memories of the Reagan era. Though the majority

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<sup>69</sup> Grover Norquist, quoted in Iwan Morgan, *American Icon* (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 325.

<sup>70</sup> William C. Berman, *From the Center to the Edge: the Politics and Policies of the Clinton Administration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 11.

of their accomplishments thus far comprise of parks, streets, schools and post offices, they also include a missile site in North Dakota, a Medical Center in California, a mountain in New Hampshire, and a bronze bust of Reagan at a McDonald's in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to list some of their more unconventional projects.<sup>71</sup> As far as Norquist was concerned, no act of commemoration was too large or too small to be worthwhile, and the Project encouraged its supporters to target everything from post offices to National Parks in their quest to name things after Reagan. Supporters of the Legacy Project even turned their sights to one of the most iconic places of presidential commemoration, Mount Rushmore, in the late 1990s, wearing t-shirts adorned with the slogan 'Put Ron on the Rock', a move jokingly dubbed 'the Gipper-in-Granite campaign' by a journalist.<sup>72</sup> The array of projects across the United States shows just how devoted some of these legacy-builders were, even those who lacked any meaningful personal connection to Reagan.

The focus of this case study will be one of the earliest and best-known successes of the Legacy Project, its role in the controversial renaming of Washington National Airport in Washington, DC as Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport or 'Reagan Airport' in 1998. Although other large landmarks and monuments were named after Reagan in the late 1990s, including the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington DC and the *USS Ronald Reagan*, none of these events generated anywhere near as much controversy as the renaming of National Airport did.<sup>73</sup> I argue that the renaming of National Airport was controversial primarily because both Democrats and Republicans interpreted this as an overtly partisan act, a celebration of Reagan's conservative politics rather than his service to the nation.

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<sup>71</sup> "Map and Directory", The Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, accessed 6 July 2019, <http://www.ronaldreaganlegacyproject.org/map>.

<sup>72</sup> Lizette Alvarez, 'GOP Tries to Wrap Up an Airport'; Anthony Ramirez, 'Will the Gipper Ever Get a Piece of the Rock?: Monument at a Glance', 11 February 2001, *New York Times*, WK5.

<sup>73</sup> Within 6 months of the airport renaming, the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center was dedicated, construction began on the USS Ronald Reagan, and the Young America's Foundation stepped forward to buy the Reagans' ranch.

The campaigners behind the renaming outlined their motivations when talking with journalists covering their project, as well as at length in the congressional debates that took place to overrule local opposition to the project. This material also offers an opportunity to demonstrate the parallels between the Reagan Legacy Project and their White House predecessors, namely their fervent support of Reagan and his legacy regardless of the realities of his presidency.

The Reagan Legacy Project launched in the spring of 1997, after its founder Grover Norquist learned that there were just twelve bridges, roads and landmarks named after Reagan.<sup>74</sup> When the project launched it lacked any sort of political profile, but gained a much-needed boost when the Republican Governors Association backed a resolution offered by the Governor of Virginia George Allen to rename the airport, which helped to ensure that the bill was introduced to Congress in October 1997.<sup>75</sup> The organisation responsible for National Airport at the time, the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), was opposed to the renaming, with some of its members suggesting alternative people to name the airport after, hence the need for a congressional bill to ensure the renaming would go ahead.

The congressional debates regarding the renaming allow us to examine the goals of the Legacy Project and its supporters, and understand why this campaign became unusually politically divisive. The politically charged nature of the debate demonstrates that, though the people advancing the bill claimed to be honouring Reagan's legacy, they were also using it as a vehicle for their contemporary partisan aspirations. Political scientist James Ceaser uses the phrase 'legacy management' to describe the type of conscious legacy construction for which the Legacy Project was striving. Ceaser argues that legacy management only occurs in 'instances in which [the person's] legacy still counts as hard currency in the political

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<sup>74</sup> Lizette Alvarez, 'GOP Tries to Wrap Up an Airport.'

<sup>75</sup> Mike Allen, 'Ronald Reagan Airport? Republican Governors Back Proposal to Rename National', *Washington Post*, 23 November 1997, A1.

marketplace’, or where the person in question remains ‘politically consequential.’<sup>76</sup> Similarly, I argue that for conservatives in the 1990s seeking to cement the successes of the so-called Reagan Revolution, at least a certain understanding of the Reagan agenda, it was vital that public memory of Reagan was as favourable as possible. The high-profile airport renaming provided them with one way to do this. This sort of large-scale memorialisation generally implies a degree of bipartisan approval of a political figure, as over half of Congress would have to support the bill.

It is important to note that congressional naming bills such as this one were far from unusual, but the degree of opposition this particular bill faced was quite uncommon. Naming bills were usually guaranteed to secure broad bipartisan support, regardless of which party was proposing the renaming. In fact, consistently from the 100<sup>th</sup> to the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress, two-thirds of naming bills put forward were in honour of Democrats, and even in a Republican-controlled Congress these bills consistently passed with the necessary bipartisan support, a fact that was used against the Democrats during the debates in Congress.<sup>77</sup> Representative Bob Barr (R-GA) introduced the bill, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) and Senate Majority leader Trent Lott (R-MS) encouraged all Republican Senators and Congressmen to co-sign the legislation, which ultimately secured 95 co-sponsors in the House and an impressive 39 in the Senate (all Republicans).<sup>78</sup> This bill ultimately secured the votes needed to pass, but only by 240 to 186 votes.<sup>79</sup> Given that there were only 227 Republicans in Congress at the time, this

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<sup>76</sup> James W. Ceaser, ‘The Social Construction of Ronald Reagan’, in Charles W. Dunn (ed.), *The Enduring Reagan* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009), 39.

<sup>77</sup> Representative Schuster (PA). 105<sup>th</sup> Congress (1997-1998): A Bill To Rename the Washington National Airport Located in the District Of Columbia and Virginia As the “Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport”, Congressional Record, Vol. 104.6, H254, <https://www.congress.gov/crec/1998/02/04/CREC-1998-02-04-pt1-PgH247-2.pdf> [accessed 14 July 2019].

<sup>78</sup> Paul Coverdell, S.1575 – 105<sup>th</sup> Congress (1997-1998): A Bill To Rename the Washington National Airport Located in the District Of Columbia and Virginia As the “Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport”, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/senate-bill/1575?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22reagan%2Bairport%22%5D%7D&s=3&r=3> [accessed 20 June 2019].

<sup>79</sup> “A Bill to Rename...”, H252.

was a narrow victory which only saw 18 out of 203 Democrats supporting the bill (along with three Republicans voting against the motion and two not voting).<sup>80</sup> Democrats tried in vain to block or slow down the passage of this bill, which was surprising considering the relative ease with which similar bills had passed in the past, raising the question of whether Reagan was an unusually divisive president. The desire to prevent the bill from passing is shown in what one contemporary journalist described as Senate Democrats ‘switch[ing] from the logical to the far-reaching to try and block the measure’ or gain something from the Republicans in exchange for their support.<sup>81</sup>

The substance of the congressional debates over whether to rename the airport in Reagan’s honour is helpful in understanding the controversy caused by the proposed airport renaming. Importantly, politicians on both sides of the debates claimed to be defending Reagan’s ‘legacy’ with their arguments. Those who supported the bill claimed that the purpose of the renaming was, first and foremost, to ‘honor’ Reagan. Barr argued that ‘the people of this country want their heritage to be remembered and monumentalized on our public buildings’, offering an explanation for the proposed renaming which was more in keeping with bills of this kind.<sup>82</sup> Throughout the debates, Democrats were careful not to dispute Reagan’s record as a public servant, and this was likely due at least in part out of a sensitivity towards the former president’s ongoing struggle with Alzheimer’s disease, which had removed him from the public eye almost four years previously.

However, Republicans were doing more than just discussing honouring Reagan’s service in general. Throughout the course of the debate supporters explicitly listed the aspects of Reagan’s presidency that they felt made him worthy of commemoration. Examining some of these demonstrates which of Reagan’s policy decisions were most valued during the late

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Roll Call 6 Bill Number: H. R. 2625’, 4 Feb 1988 [accessed 16 August 2022: <https://clerk.house.gov/Votes/19986>].

<sup>81</sup> Lizette Alvarez, ‘GOP Tries to Wrap Up an Airport.’

<sup>82</sup> Representative Bob Barr (GA), H255.

1990s. Though most of these comments are somewhat predictable acknowledgements of Reagan bringing ‘prosperity and pride back to America’, his role in ‘the collapse of the Soviet Union and freedom for the captured nations of Eastern Europe’ and ‘pull[ing] the country out of stagflation’, Gerald Solomon (R-NY) included the following observation at the end of his statement of support for the renaming:

Ronald Reagan’s views and his ideas, once considered conservative, now occupy the center, the mainstream, of American politics, and it is represented here in this Congress and in the House and Senate today.<sup>83</sup>

Clearly, Solomon was not supporting this bill solely because of his support of Reagan’s dedication to public service, but rather because of what he saw as the implications of Reagan’s conservatism for the contemporary political moment. With the Republican Party controlling both the House and Senate during this period, this naming bill provided Republicans with a chance to rally behind their former leader and show their appreciation for how his leadership had influenced the political makeup of Congress. The Republican Party lacked a unifying figure, which offers one explanation as to why they sought to bring Reagan back into the spotlight so much during the 1990s.

Conservative columnist George Will branded the phenomenon of efforts such as the Legacy Project as ‘Reaganlust’, reflective of the ‘contemporary agenda’ and the increasing ‘cult of personality’ around Reagan that did little to actually honour Reagan’s achievements in office.<sup>84</sup> This overt celebration of Reagan’s conservatism helped to tie the effort to rename National Airport to the Reagan Legacy Project’s broader goal of bolstering support for Reagan as a means of supporting conservatism in the future. As we saw with the White House legacy project, the version of Reagan’s legacy presented in these debates is often at odds with his policy record. Here we can see one notable example of this divergence, the glorification of

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<sup>83</sup> Representative Gerald Solomon (NY), H248.

<sup>84</sup> George Will (in a 2001 article) quoted in Gregory L. Schneider, ‘Conservatives and the Reagan Presidency’, in Richard S. Conley (ed). *Reassessing the Reagan Presidency* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2003), 68-93: 70.

Reagan's foreign policy, particularly regarding the Soviet Union, despite the 1986-88 arms reduction talks being widely criticised by conservative Republicans while Reagan was in office.

Though comparisons with John F. Kennedy were absent from the congressional debates, Grover Norquist's insistence on drawing parallels between the number of memorials honouring Kennedy and Reagan respectively helped to underscore that, despite claims to the contrary, partisan rivalries played a key role in the efforts to memorialise Reagan. Norquist stated during the media coverage of the renaming campaign:

Ronald Reagan's legacy is at least as powerful as John F. Kennedy's, his greatness is at least as identifiable as John F. Kennedy's, so we should be looking for the same number of things named after Reagan as Kennedy.<sup>85</sup>

The vastly different circumstances under which John F. Kennedy Airport was dedicated, as an attempt to grapple with the devastation of a public assassination of the incumbent, apparently mattered little to Norquist or his supporters, who cited the 600 monuments to Kennedy as evidence that memorialisation of Reagan was somehow lagging.<sup>86</sup> Though this was not discussed during the congressional debates, attempts to bargain by amending the bill to include honours for Robert Kennedy and Franklin Roosevelt did appear, once again shifting the focus of the debates away from Reagan's public service and turning the discussions into partisan bargaining for political heroes from both sides of the aisle. The question of whether a president's greatness can be measured simply by the number and prominence of memorials to them quickly became overshadowed by partisan concerns about what these memorials might mean for future generations.

Arguments put forward by opponents to the bill offer an insight into how and why this renaming was so contentious, both among Democrats and among residents of the local

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<sup>85</sup> Lizette Alvarez, 'GOP Tries to Wrap Up an Airport.'

<sup>86</sup> Lyndsey Layton, 'Renaming of Airport Metro Stop Is Stalled: Board Uninterested, No County Proposal', *Washington Post*, 19 April 2001, B1.

community more broadly. One of the central arguments put forward was that Reagan was renowned for his opposition to federal government interfering in the affairs of local government. The federal government had previously had full control over National Airport, and Reagan was the president who relinquished control of both of the major airports in the District of Columbia area to the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA) in 1986.<sup>87</sup> Republicans were in fact accused by Democrats in Congress of dishonouring Reagan's legacy by effectively overturning this piece of legislation of Reagan's in order to force the renaming to go ahead without the support of an organisation that Reagan supported.<sup>88</sup> The leader of the MWAA opposed the renaming, arguing, 'There is only one national airport, the gateway to the nation's capital, and we think it is important to keep the name [Washington].'<sup>89</sup> Another explanation for local opposition to the renaming, which was covered broadly in the press, was the irony of naming an airport after a president who famously fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981.<sup>90</sup> This understandably played an important role in the opposition to the renaming among airport employees, including members of the MWAA. The local population in the area where the airport is situated was also vehemently opposed to the change. Chris Zimmerman, Chairman of the County Board for Arlington County (where the airport is located) argued that Congress should follow the policy of his county and delay the naming of facilities until five years after the person to be honoured has died. When asked how he felt about renaming National Airport he reportedly said, 'Here we have 11 months left in 1998 and already we have the leading candidate for dumb idea of the year.'<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Congressman Moakley (D-MA), 'Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport', Congressional Record, 4 February 1998, H248 (accessed 1 August 2019: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1998-02-03/pdf/CREC-1998-02-03-pt1-PgS306.pdf>)

<sup>88</sup> Rep. Moran (D-VA), 'Ronald Reagan National Airport', 4 February 1998, Congressional Record, H258 (accessed 2 August 2019: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1998-02-04/pdf/CREC-1998-02-04-pt1-PgH247-2.pdf>).

<sup>89</sup> Skip Thurman, 'Gipper's loyal followers start new Reagan Revolution', 3 January 1998, *Edmonton Journal*, F2.

<sup>90</sup> Lizette Alvarez, 'GOP Tries to Wrap Up an Airport.'

<sup>91</sup> Richard Tapscott, 'Ready for Takeoff: Debate Over Airport's Name', *The Washington Post*, 26 January 1998.

Another argument was that naming what was known as the *national* airport after a controversial Republican president was an overtly political statement, with one Congressman claiming: ‘Republicans are determined to erect a political billboard at the entrance to the Nation in honor of their hero Ronald Reagan.’<sup>92</sup> The airport’s status as the official ‘national’ airport, and its location in the capital city were used by members of Congress to support the argument that the airport should not be named after such a polarising political figure. Compromises were proposed, such as naming the new terminal (opened in 1997) after Reagan but maintaining the airport’s original name, but these were swiftly overruled. There was little that Democrats in a Republican-controlled House and Senate could do to block this renaming, which Bill Clinton swiftly went on to approve, being quite preoccupied with the brewing scandal over Monica Lewinsky taking place at the same time, so instead Democrats were forced to resort to accusing Congress of abusing its power.

Only one amendment to the Bill was successful; the proposal that instead of naming the airport ‘Ronald Reagan National Airport’, it would be named ‘Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.’ There was a prolonged debate over whether Washington National Airport was named after George Washington, or whether it took its name from its location. This caused opponents of the bill to claim that removing the name of one president and replacing it with the name of another was setting a worrying precedent. Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD) claimed it would be a ‘terrible mistake’ to remove Washington’s name from the airport, as it would set a precedent in which ‘whoever is in the majority comes in and changes the name of buildings.’<sup>93</sup> This point was one that both sides took seriously, though the issue turned out to be relatively straightforward to resolve. The proposed renaming had already passed through the Senate with

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<sup>92</sup> Oberstar (DFL-MN), ‘Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport’, Congressional Record, 4 February 1998, H248 (accessed 1 August 2019: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1998-02-03/pdf/CREC-1998-02-03-pt1-PgS306.pdf>)

<sup>93</sup> Edwin Chen, ‘Renaming of Airport Fuels Debate: Partisan bickering takes off over Republican proposal to honor former President Ronald Reagan’, 2 February 1988, Los Angeles Times, pg. OCA5.

the word 'Washington' in the new name, so it was relatively simple to switch the version of the bill in the House to include the word 'Washington' as well. After this switch the name change bill was approved, but it still failed to gain the broad bipartisan support that would have been expected from a bill of this kind. The final vote was split almost exactly along partisan lines: only three Republicans opposed it in the House, while eighteen Democrats supported it. Additionally, in the state where the airport is located, all Virginia Democrats in the House opposed the Bill, while all Virginia Republicans supported it.<sup>94</sup> This is reflective of the increasingly polarised nature of American politics in the late 1990s, but also of the fact Reagan remained a divisive political figure despite attempts to portray this as a non-partisan celebration of his record of public service.

The debates over renaming National Airport are significant because they demonstrate how contentious Reagan's legacy remained in the late 1990s. Democratic resistance to a high-profile celebration of Reagan was unsurprising, but especially unsurprising given the increasingly polarised nature of partisan politics during this period. Democrats bristled at the prospect of endorsing a celebration of Reagan but were particularly resistant to the idea of celebrating Reagan's politics, as opposed to simply demonstrating gratitude for his public service. Meanwhile, in the context of the emerging scandal over Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky, the desire of Republicans to rush an endorsement of one of their recent political heroes through Congress held appeal.

Finally, the speed with which Republicans sought to memorialise Reagan was unusual. It is worth restating that Reagan was still alive during these debates over National Airport, albeit removed from the public eye. Attempting to commemorate a former president who was still alive was a rare occurrence at the time, which makes this case particularly noteworthy and

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<sup>94</sup> Richard Tapscott, 'Congress Votes to Put Reagan's Name on Airport: Action on National Defies Strong Local Opposition', *Washington Post*, 5 February 1998, A1.

explains the resultant controversy. Reagan's biographer Edmund Morris observed in 1998 that 'usually nostalgia comes after a generation', whereas in Reagan's case, this nostalgia seemed to have 'kicked in very soon.'<sup>95</sup> Historian Robert Dallek argued at the time that this apparent national appetite for celebrating Reagan stemmed from a desire for political 'heroes' during a time when the incumbent Commander-in-Chief was facing accusations ranging from perjury to sexual misconduct.<sup>96</sup> Lack of strong leadership helped foster a climate where nostalgia for Reagan became increasingly common among conservatives, and offers one explanation as to why there were so many attempts to commemorate Reagan during this period, along with Reagan's ailing health. At first glance, it is striking to note how many projects to commemorate Reagan emerged in 1998, particularly given that Reagan was still alive, and had retreated from public life almost four years beforehand. Running almost simultaneously to the two projects outlined in this chapter were the building and dedication of the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, DC, and the construction of the USS *Ronald Reagan*, the first US naval vessel dedicated to someone who was still alive, also in the late 1990s. Of course, in addition to these successful endeavours, there was no shortage of failed attempts that took place at the same time, including the campaigns to add Reagan to the Washington Mall, Mount Rushmore, and national currency. However, in the context of the late 1990s, the climate lent itself to an upward surge in support for presidential commemoration, often highlighting the malleability of Reagan's legacy in the process.

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<sup>95</sup> Geraldine Baum, 'Defining and Deifying Reagan: Roads, buildings and an airport are renamed for the ailing statesman', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 1998, A1.

<sup>96</sup> Baum, 'Defining and Deifying.'

### **1997: Young America's Foundation and the Purchase of Rancho del Cielo<sup>97</sup>**

Another, very different, site of presidential commemoration is Reagan's ranch in California. Exploring the purchase and preservation of the ranch as a historical site illuminates another method of presidential commemoration, and highlights some of the tensions between an external organisation, the Young America's Foundation, and the First Family. Nancy Reagan reportedly regretted selling the ranch to YAF as she became concerned about 'how the organization exploited its ownership of Ronnie's favorite place in the world to market itself.'<sup>98</sup> This case study illuminates some of the complications that emerge during the post-presidential years, when the First Family and aides of the president must compete with the interests of external organisations in order to craft a legacy.

In 1974, shortly before the end of his second term as governor of California, Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy visited a 688-acre ranch perched among the Santa Ynez mountains thirty miles northwest of Santa Barbara, California. Though the future president reportedly fell in love with the ranch immediately, Nancy was less enthusiastic, and had to be persuaded that the remote mountaintop location would make a suitable vacation home for the couple.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the Reagans went on to purchase the property, then called Tip Top Ranch, and renamed it Rancho del Cielo: the Ranch in the Sky. In addition to being the Reagans' 'Ranch in the Sky', between 1981 and 1989 Rancho del Cielo earned another nickname: 'the Western White House.' The ranch served as Ronald Reagan's second residence during his presidency and during his years in office the modest ranch house was host to an impressive array of politicians and world leaders. A 'command center' of five or six additional buildings was constructed on the land surrounding the ranch house, allowing the president to carry out his

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<sup>97</sup> Parts of this chapter have appeared previously in Sarah Margaret Grace Thomson, 'A Royal Visit to the Ranch in the Sky', *White House History Quarterly*, Vol. 64 (2022), 110-115.

<sup>98</sup> Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan*, 552.

<sup>99</sup> Steven Barrie-Anthony, 'Home is where his heart was', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 2004, E1-E11.

duties from the remote mountaintop location.<sup>100</sup> This included the installation of a helipad to allow the President to arrive at the ranch on Marine One, and a separate building for Reagan's Secret Service detail. Though most of these structures were removed at the end of the presidency Reagan, like all former presidents, retained a Secret Service detail, so this building remains intact for visitors to see to this day.

In 1994 the former president announced to the world that he had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and would be retiring from public life. Following his revelation, he and Nancy permanently moved to Bel Air, leaving the future of the ranch uncertain. In the years following his departure from office, the future of Rancho del Cielo became part of a larger debate over Reagan's presidential legacy. His departure from public life in the 1990s coincided with a renewed interest in his presidency and its legacy, which became reflected in the efforts to purchase and preserve his former home.

Given its potential significance as a historical site, the first serious attempt to purchase the home was California Governor and Republican Pete Wilson's bid to use \$5 million in federal funds to turn the ranch into a state park in 1996.<sup>101</sup> However, the proposal sparked fierce opposition by locals who opposed the purchase on the grounds that it would be a 'misuse of federal funds.'<sup>102</sup> After this plan fell through, Nancy Reagan prepared the property to be sold privately, including removing all of the Reagans' possessions from the home and shipping them to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California, for preservation. At this point a new buyer, the conservative Young America's Foundation, stepped forward to purchase the ranch, with a view to using the property as part of their ongoing educational programmes.

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<sup>100</sup> Eloise Smith, online interview by author, Santa Barbara/Edinburgh, 8 September 2021, (conducted remotely via Zoom).

<sup>101</sup> Lou Cannon, 'Neighbours Just Saying No to Reagan Ranch Plan: Proposal to Buy Remote Site With Federal Money Is Sidetracked After Opposition in Santa Barbara', *Washington Post*, 3 October 1997, A3.

<sup>102</sup> Cannon, 'Neighbours Just Saying No to Reagan Ranch Plan.'

YAF's fundraising efforts, and their rationale behind saving the ranch, offers an important insight into the relationship between Reagan's legacy and the contemporary conservative movement in the United States. At the time, the executive director of YAF, Marc Short, argued that 'there's a tremendous hunger in the Republican Party and the conservative movement for a Reagan-like leader.'<sup>103</sup> Clearly, lack of a unifying figure within the Republican Party was a motivating factor for YAF's efforts, as it had been for the external organisations seeking to rename National Airport in Reagan's honour. Nancy Reagan, in a decision she would later regret, supported the sale of the ranch to YAF, stating that it was 'comforting' to know that the ranch would be used 'to instill in tomorrow's leaders the lessons of [Reagan's] presidency.'<sup>104</sup> She went on to assist YAF in returning the furnishings of the ranch from the Reagan Library and restoring the home so that it could be displayed as it was during Reagan's presidency.<sup>105</sup> The project also gained the support of several members of Reagan's former White House, some of whom remain involved in the preservation efforts at the ranch, indicating a desire to remain involved in building Reagan's legacy even after the end of their time in the White House. However, the Reagan Foundation found itself competing with YAF while fundraising for projects, both trying to capitalise on their connection to Reagan to further their contemporary aims.<sup>106</sup> Ronald and Nancy Reagan had 'given the legal rights to their names and likenesses' to the Foundation, and Nancy grew to believe YAF was encroaching upon the work of the Foundation to further its political aims.

Purchase of the ranch, and the rationale YAF offered for the purchase at the time, offer one of the clearest examples of Reagan's memory being used to bolster contemporary American conservatism, with a view to securing a positive future for the Republican Party, and

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<sup>103</sup> Associated Press, 'Reagan Ranch to Be Training Site: Conservative Group Acquires Estate for Undisclosed Price', *Washington Post*, 21 April 1998, A10A.

<sup>104</sup> William Booth, 'On Reagan's Peak: For Young Conservatives...', *Washington Post*, 24 April 1998, B1.

<sup>105</sup> Smith interview.

<sup>106</sup> Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan*, 552.

American conservatism more broadly. Furthermore, their purchase and preservation of Reagan's former home has played a modest yet not insignificant role in shaping Reagan's legacy. The preservation of the ranch, and the accompanying Reagan Ranch Center (a small museum in Santa Barbara) offer means by which YAF can seek to influence public perceptions of Reagan outside of their traditional educational programmes, by bringing young people to the Ranch for bespoke Reagan-themed tours. This project also offers an interesting counterbalance to the efforts of the Reagan Legacy Project. While the Legacy Project sought to emblazon Reagan's name in prominent locations to indicate his significance to as many people as possible, YAF's approach to influencing Reagan's legacy is rather different. Importantly, unlike efforts such as the Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, which Benjamin Hufbauer aptly dubs 'the Ronald Reagan legacy factory', access to the ranch was reserved for people already sympathetic to Reagan and his ideals, who are likely to carry these ideals forward in their own careers.<sup>107</sup> This more targeted approach to promoting Reagan's image offered an alternative means through which to achieve the same goal: ensuring a positive legacy for Reagan, which would play a part in strengthening the conservative ascendancy of the late twentieth century.

YAF's rationale for purchasing the ranch was two-fold. Its leaders stated that they 'stepped forward to save President Reagan's Western White House [...] to preserve it as a living monument to Ronald Reagan' as well as 'to pass on his ideas to future generations.'<sup>108</sup> This first idea of preserving the Ranch as an ongoing monument to Reagan, plays an important role in the construction of his legacy. The mere fact that the ranch was purchased to be preserved as a monument makes a statement about Reagan and his significance, at least among the people who sought to ensure the home would be preserved. Though the purchase of the

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<sup>107</sup> Will Bunch, *Tear Down This Myth: How the Reagan Legacy Has Distorted Our Politics and Haunts Our Future* (New York, NY: Free Press, S 2009), 2.

<sup>108</sup> 'About Young America's Foundation.' Young America's Foundation. Accessed 14 July 2019, <http://www.yaf.org/about/>.

Reagans' Ranch in 1998 by the YAF did not generate the same level of controversy as the renaming of National Airport, the \$5.5 million purchase (a figure not disclosed publicly) was funded entirely by donations, including an initial \$1 million fundraiser to secure the property. It was purchased to ensure the Ranch was preserved by people who would appreciate its significance, rather than falling 'into the wrong hands.'<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, this notion that the home could have been purchased by an individual or organisation with some sort of malicious intent reflects the fact that Reagan remained a divisive figure into the 1990s.

YAF describes the ranch as 'uniquely communicat[ing] much about Ronald Reagan that could not be readily gleaned from other sources.'<sup>110</sup> This notion that Reagan can be understood more profoundly by visiting his home is interesting for several reasons. Though the preservation of former presidential homes is not entirely unusual, this home was not intended to act as a tourist attraction. Its remote location, a 29.5-mile drive from Santa Barbara which includes 6.5 miles of single-track, unpaved country roads, makes it remarkably inaccessible<sup>111</sup> This purchase was a costly venture considering the home was impractical for tourism, and therefore was unlikely to ever generate a profit for YAF. Clearly, this purchase was at least in part borne out of a genuine desire to preserve Reagan's former home, and the Foundation's conviction that this was an important piece of history worthy of preservation.

The second idea, using the ranch as part of a wider programme focused around promoting the conservative ideals of a particular president, played less of a role in influencing precisely how the public understood Reagan's legacy, at least in the short term. However, the executive director of YAF, Marc Short, argued at the time that YAF purchased the ranch that 'There's a tremendous hunger in the Republican Party and the conservative movement for a

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<sup>109</sup> 'About Young America's Foundation.' Young America's Foundation. Accessed 14 July 2019, <http://www.yaf.org/about/>.

<sup>110</sup> "Rancho del Cielo," Young America's Foundation, Accessed 14 July 2019, <https://reaganranch.yaf.org/rancho-del-cielo/>.

<sup>111</sup> Lou Cannon, 'Neighbors Just Saying No to Reagan Ranch Plan: Proposal to Buy Remote Site With Federal Money Is Sidetracked After Opposition in Santa Barbara', *Washington Post*, 3 October 1997, A3.

Reagan-like leader.’<sup>112</sup> Lack of strong leadership in the party certainly played a role in the nostalgia for Reagan that emerged in the 1990s, which helped to spark the other efforts outlined in this chapter. This purchase was primarily intended to incorporate the ranch into YAF’s existing educational programmes, which provided ‘training sessions, conferences and seminars’ for high school and college students.<sup>113</sup> This purchase therefore tied YAF to Reagan more explicitly than had been the case before, and put Reagan’s presidency at the heart of their interpretation of the ascendancy of American conservatism throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, some individuals who had been ‘kicked off’ of the board of the Reagan Library reportedly adopted the ranch as ‘a sort of ideological base camp’ where they could advance their own interpretation of Reagan and his legacy.<sup>114</sup>

YAF could boast of an affiliation to Reagan during his presidency, as he invited YAF members to visit the White House during their trips to the capital for the organisation’s annual conferences, but the emphasis on educating young people about Reagan specifically emerged much later.<sup>115</sup> Rancho del Cielo is complemented by the Reagan Ranch Center, a small museum in Santa Barbara which YAF describes as a ‘Schoolhouse for Reaganism’, ironically giving Reaganism a cohesion it did not have in the 1980s.<sup>116</sup> Though far smaller than the main Reagan Library and Museum in Simi Valley, the positioning of a free museum in the centre of Santa Barbara nevertheless offers another means by which YAF could seek to influence public perceptions of Reagan and his legacy.

The development of a programme centred around promoting Reagan’s particular brand of conservatism to a select group of people offered a very different method of ensuring that

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<sup>112</sup> Associated Press, ‘Reagan Ranch to Be Training Site: Conservative Group Acquires Estate for Undisclosed Price’, *Washington Post*, 21 April 1998.

<sup>113</sup> Associated Press, ‘Reagan Ranch to Be Training Site: Conservative Group Acquires Estate for Undisclosed Price’, *Washington Post*, 21 April 1998.

<sup>114</sup> Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan*, 553.

<sup>115</sup> Phil McCombs, ‘Red, Right and Blue: Young Conservatives Gather to Keep the Faith’, *Washington Post*, 21 July 1999, C1.

<sup>116</sup> “Rancho del Cielo,” Young America’s Foundation, Accessed 14 July 2019, <https://reaganranch.yaf.org/rancho-del-cielo/>.

Reagan's memory would be valued by future generations than the efforts seen by the Reagan Legacy Project. Though the Legacy Project's mission is to spark conversations about Reagan, putting his name on things does not necessarily do anything to steer the direction of the resulting conversations people might have about Reagan. Indeed, they may not talk about politics at all. In contrast, the purpose of the purchase of the Ranch was always centred around education; it was intended to offer a space where people could learn about Reagan, his presidency and his values. Though this was also an overt celebration of Reagan's conservatism, as the renaming of National Airport, it failed to generate the immediately divisive response that the airport renaming did. This was likely because this was a much smaller-scale project, which was likely to generate far less attention outside of local news, as well as the fact that this purchase would have virtually no implications for people opposed to Reagan's conservative ideas. However, YAF did find itself in conflict with Nancy Reagan, the custodian of her husband's legacy in his later years, over her concerns with their management of the ranch.<sup>117</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Efforts to mould national perceptions of Reagan and his legacy did not cease when he departed from the White House. Reagan's legacy remained topical throughout Bush's years in the White House, and candidates in both the 1988 and 1992 presidential elections sought to position themselves in relation to Reagan. The press reported that Bush's election was thanks to his close connection to Reagan, but then found Bush lacked a sense of direction as he tried to step out of his predecessor's shadow. The extent to which Reagan's record on taxation and public debt was being obscured in order to depict him as an ideological opponent to increasing taxes offers a valuable insight into the malleability of Reagan's legacy, and into the motivations of

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<sup>117</sup> Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan*, 552-553.

these external actors seeking to capitalise on a presidential legacy that was fundamentally at odds to Reagan's real stances on these issues.

Reagan's formal departure from public life in 1994 coincided with a renewed interest in his presidency and its legacy, which is reflected in the efforts of an array of organisations during the late 1990s. This interest in Reagan and his politics coincided with a moment of disunity for the Republican Party following Bush's failure to retain the White House, with the memory of Reagan's successes in office offering a point around which they could rally. This was in spite of the fact that some of the policies these figures were rallying around were in fact decisions they had openly criticised during his presidency, most notably his stance towards the Soviet Union in his second term. The appetite for Grover Norquist's Legacy Project and the willingness of conservatives to donate to the Young America's Foundation to preserve Reagan's former home reflect a renewed sense of urgency around the importance of securing Reagan's position within the nation's civil religion. In the context of the culture wars, when the United States was becoming ever more polarised, the need for a conservative icon to unite behind had become timelier than ever. The Legacy Project and YAF were not simply picking up where their counterparts in the White House had left off, as there were important differences between an agenda driven by the White House and those driven by forces outside of it. However, to some degree, all these actors were attempting to influence public memory of the Reagan years to help consolidate a new policy direction for the Republican Party. If we accept James Ceaser's argument that legacy construction occurs only when the legacy has value in contemporary politics, then the fact that these efforts have persisted for over twenty years demonstrates that Reagan's legacy remains both valuable and contested in contemporary America.

Moreover, the legacy-building efforts visible in the late 1990s share the same motivations as those of Reagan's White House legacy builders a decade beforehand, and were

all willing to obscure the realities of Reagan's record to suit their own political goals. The Reagan Legacy Project and Young America's Foundation were united by common goals; cementing Reagan's status as a central player in the conservative ascendancy of the late twentieth century, and, relatedly, ensuring that Reagan's memory was something that could be used by Republicans of the future to complete the unfinished business of their predecessors. Though all these projects had broadly the same goals, the means by which they set about achieving these goals differed. Most obviously, Reagan was not personally involved in any of the efforts discussed in this chapter, unlike the White House projects where Reagan had at least some input into these projects. Though both YAF and the Legacy Project (a spinoff of Americans for Tax Reform) could boast of personal ties to Reagan, neither organisation saw Reagan become personally involved with their interpretation of his legacy. As we have seen, this created tension between YAF and the First Family, specifically Nancy Reagan. Furthermore, neither the Legacy Project nor YAF could hope to have the same platform as the White House legacy builders, who had all the powers and privileges of the presidency at their disposal.

Finally, in addition to the airport renaming, the Reagan Legacy Project set its sights on even larger goals in the 1990s, some of which the organisation has yet to fulfil. Ironically, its attempts to put a monument to Reagan on the Mall in Washington, DC, were thwarted by Reagan himself, as he signed legislation in 1986 to prevent the building of monuments on the Mall until 25 years after the person being memorialised has died. However, this did not stop the RLP from turning their attention to two of the other most widely recognised methods of memorialising presidents, Mount Rushmore, and US currency, both of which they initially proposed in the 1990s and continue to actively campaign for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the airport renaming has been followed by campaigns to remove Reagan's name from the airport, and, most recently, Republicans have endeavoured to rename Gravelly Point Park (adjacent to

the airport) after Nancy Reagan.<sup>118</sup> Evidently, Reagan's legacy remains both valued and contested; the great irony being that Reagan himself was so disinterested in trying to shape his own legacy.

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<sup>118</sup> Jenna Portnoy, 'Here we go again: Republicans want to rename Gravelly Point after Nancy Reagan', *The Washington Post*, 17 January 2018.

## Epilogue

God, this is impressive. [...] But the man they're talking about is not the President I covered every day.<sup>1</sup>

Steven Weisman, *New York Times*, 11 June 2004  
(Reporting from Ronald Reagan's funeral)

Ronald Reagan died on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2004, at his home in Los Angeles, following almost a decade afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.<sup>2</sup> He was 93 years old. His funeral marks a natural end point to this thesis. Funerals lend themselves to discussions of a person's significance and legacy, especially high-profile funerals like those for former US presidents. Examining the discussions about Reagan's legacy around the time of his funeral allows me to show which aspects of his legacy the press chose to highlight in their coverage of his life and presidency, and, by their omission, those they chose to overlook. Additionally, planning for the funeral marked another example of conscious legacy construction, like those examined throughout this thesis. Scholarship on presidential funerals is sparse, with the exception of literature on presidents who died in office, where literature is more extensive. Yet, Aaron Lee Shuman has argued that presidential funerals represent, 'in many ways, the [president's] final speech, communicating through ritual what the president wanted to be remembered for.'<sup>3</sup> Similarly, journalist Brady Carlson argues that the presidential funeral is 'the last real chance a legacy-conscious former leader has to grab their nation's full attention.'<sup>4</sup> Considering the preparation for, and press coverage of Reagan's funeral illuminates how Reagan's family and close allies remained involved in his legacy in the years after his departure from office.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 490.

<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Berger, 'Ronald Reagan Dies at 93: Fostered Cold War Might and Curbs on Government', *New York Times*, 6 June 2022, A1.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Lee Shuman, 'Farewell to the Chief: The American Presidential Funeral', MA dissertation, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2021, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Brady Carlson, *Dead Presidents: An American Adventure into the Strange Deaths and Surprising Afterlives of Our Nation's Leaders* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2016), 61.

It is important to note the historical context in which Reagan's funeral took place. The incumbent president, George W. Bush, was facing historically low popularity ratings while his government was 'under siege for the stalemate in Iraq.'<sup>5</sup> Another presidential election was on the horizon, this time a contest between Bush and Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. Campaigning for the 2004 presidential election was suspended during the period of national mourning, including both Senator Kerry and President Bush agreeing not to run any advertisements for 24 hours on the day of Reagan's funeral.<sup>6</sup> It is also important to remember that this was the first state funeral in Washington DC for over thirty years, and the first major public event held in the city since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>7</sup> Concern regarding the risk of another terrorist attack factored into the especially heightened security and planning for Reagan's funeral, which was designated a National Special Security Event by the Department of Homeland Security.<sup>8</sup> This context is crucial when considering the impeccably-timed funeral proceedings, as well as the focus on Reagan's foreign relations achievements seen in the press coverage of his life and legacy.

On the day Reagan died, President George W. Bush gave some of the earliest comments reflecting on Reagan and his legacy. Bush said, 'He leaves behind a nation he restored and a world he helped save. During the years of President Reagan, America laid to rest an era of division and self-doubt. And because of his leadership, the world laid to rest an era of fear and tyranny.'<sup>9</sup> Former presidents were also quick to offer their praise for Reagan's legacy. Gerald Ford said ahead of Reagan's funeral, 'As historians thumb through the pages of the Reagan

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<sup>5</sup> Priscilla L. Walton and Bruce Tucker, *American Culture Transformed: Dialling 9/11* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 131.

<sup>6</sup> 'No Campaign Ads on Day of Reagan Rites', *New York Times*, 8 June 2004, A23.

<sup>7</sup> Though the most recent presidential death before Reagan's was Richard Nixon's in 1994, Nixon opted not to have a state funeral, making the most recent state funeral Lyndon B. Johnson's in 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Meserve and Kevin Bohn, 'Security High for Reagan Funeral', *CNN*, 8 June 2004 [last accessed 12 October 2022: <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/06/07/reagan.security/index.html>].

<sup>9</sup> George W. Bush, 'President's Remarks on the Passing of President Ronald Reagan', 5 June 2004, White House News and Policies [last accessed 24 September 2022: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040605-7.html>].

presidency, they will find a president who was strong at home and effective abroad [...] I think he gave to this country the kind of leadership we needed at home, but also the kind of leadership in beating communism worldwide.’<sup>10</sup> Both Bush’s and Ford’s remarks referred to the end of the Cold War, focussing on Reagan’s strength as a leader and his capabilities in the realm of foreign policy. Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who pre-recorded her remarks to be played at Reagan’s funeral due to her own ailing health, stated, ‘his politics had a freshness and optimism that won converts from every class and every nation and ultimately from the very heart of the evil empire.’<sup>11</sup>

Eulogies in the press offered a similar focus on Reagan’s foreign policy. The *New York Times* coverage of his death stated that Reagan ‘managed to project the optimism of Franklin D. Roosevelt, the faith in small-town America of Dwight D. Eisenhower and the vigor of John F. Kennedy’, running its obituary with the headline ‘Ronald Reagan, 93; Fostered Cold War Might and Curbs on Government.’<sup>12</sup> This headline clearly noted Reagan’s foreign policy achievements and efforts to decrease the size of the federal government as the stand-out episodes in his presidency. The parallels between other popular twentieth century presidents also helped to suggest that Reagan’s presidency deserved to be considered on a par with the presidencies of Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Kennedy.

Pricilla L. Walton and Bruce Tucker have argued that Reagan’s ‘perfectly orchestrated’ funeral ‘signaled his emergence as an iconic figure some said comparable in stature to Abraham Lincoln.’<sup>13</sup> Of course, a presidential funeral lends itself to comparisons between former presidents. It is noteworthy, however, that press coverage was quick to position Reagan among the most highly regarded presidents of recent decades.

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<sup>10</sup> David Mattingly, John King and Chris Lawrence, ‘100,000 file past Reagan’s casket’, CNN, 9 June 2004 [last accessed 12 October 2022: <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/06/08/reagan.main/index.html>].

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Todd S. Purdum, ‘At Rites for Reagan, Soaring Farewells’, *New York Times*, 12 June 2004, A1.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, ‘Ronald Reagan Dies at 93’, A1.

<sup>13</sup> Walton and Tucker, *American Culture Transformed*, 130.

The *Washington Post* coverage of Reagan's death took a slightly different approach, and led with a descriptor of Reagan as a president who 'reshaped American politics.'<sup>14</sup> He was credited as the person who 'reshaped the Republican Party and substantially defined the terms of contemporary political debate during two momentous terms in office.'<sup>15</sup> The coverage stated that 'Reagan's legacy can be seen in the current White House, where his example is revered' along with in the House which had been in Republican control since 1994, and in the Supreme Court, where Reagan's appointees held the balance of power on many issues. As outlined throughout this thesis, these were all issues Reagan's legacy builders paid great attention to.

Bush announced that Reagan's funeral would take place on 11<sup>th</sup> June, but the period between Reagan's death and his funeral involved a number of complex and elaborate stages. The plan for Reagan's funeral was reportedly 300 pages long and many years in the making. Preparations for his funeral began when Reagan left office in 1989, at the request of the Military District of Washington, which oversees state funerals, and Nancy Reagan reviewed these plans annually once Reagan was no longer able to do so.<sup>16</sup> The planning was carried out primarily by the Reagan Foundation alongside a 'small group of Reagan loyalists' which included Michael Deaver, Fred Ryan and Sheila Tate, Nancy Reagan's press secretary.<sup>17</sup> One reporter from the *New York Times* observed that the funeral preparations 'show[ed] that the Reagan camp is still unmatched at turning imagery to its advantage.'<sup>18</sup>

First, his body was moved to a funeral home in his hometown of Tampico, Illinois, before being transported to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. There, his flag-draped casket was viewed by over 100,000 mourners, including Democratic

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<sup>14</sup> David von Drehle, 'Ronald Reagan Dies: 40<sup>th</sup> President Reshaped American Politics', *Washington Post*, 6 June 2004, A1.

<sup>15</sup> Drehle, 'Ronald Reagan Dies.'

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller and Elizabeth Becker, 'Down to the Last Detail, a Reagan-Style funeral', *New York Times*, 8 June 2004, A1.

<sup>17</sup> Bumiller and Becker, 'Down to the Last Detail, a Reagan-Style funeral.'

<sup>18</sup> Caryn James, 'Good Grief: The Appeal of Public Sorrow', *New York Times*, 10 June 2004, E1.

candidate John Kerry.<sup>19</sup> Reagan's body was then flown to Washington, DC on 9<sup>th</sup> June to facilitate a period of lying in-state and the funeral service itself, which took place at Washington National Cathedral. During the final stage of the journey, Reagan's coffin was transferred from the hearse to a horse-drawn caisson for the journey to the Capitol, including a riderless horse. Though the riderless horse is a traditional part of a presidential funeral cortege, one noteworthy adaptation to this tradition was that the horse (named Sergeant York) carried Reagan's own riding boots in his stirrups as an allusion to Reagan's love of horse-riding, provided by Nancy Reagan.<sup>20</sup> Another symbolic change to the traditional presidential funeral was that Reagan's coffin was carried up the steps of the West Front of the Capitol rather than the East Front, reflective of Reagan being the first president to deliver an inaugural address from the West Front. This switch was made partly to allow for larger audiences but also as a nod to Reagan looking towards his roots on the west coast.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Reagan was laid to rest at the Reagan Library at a final ceremony on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2004. Lewis Lapham, writing for *Harper's Magazine*, described the funeral as an event where:

no production value was left to chance, no fond remembrance underexploited or unrehearsed [...] the flag-draped casket placed under the Capitol Dome on the same catafalque that in 1865 had borne the body of Abraham Lincoln, eulogies delivered in the National Cathedral by President George W Bush and Baroness Margaret Thatcher, the burial service timed to the setting of the California sun.<sup>22</sup>

Reagan's final chief of staff, Ken Duberstein, said that the timing and location of the final burial had been chosen by Reagan during his second term. Duberstein said, 'he said dusk is the time to do this. He understood that this would be his closing scene.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> David Mattingly, John King and Chris Lawrence, '100,000 file past Reagan's casket', CNN, 9 June 2004 [last accessed 12 October 2022: <https://edition.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/06/08/reagan.main/index.html>].

<sup>20</sup> Claire A. Faulkner, 'Arlington's Ceremonial Horses and Funerals at the White House', *White House History*, Vol. 19 (2006), 20-39: 38.

<sup>21</sup> Bumiller and Becker, 'Down to the Last Detail, a Reagan-Style funeral.'

<sup>22</sup> Lewis Lapham, quoted in Walton and Tucker, *American Culture Transformed*, 130-131.

<sup>23</sup> Bumiller and Becker, 'Down to the Last Detail, a Reagan-Style funeral.'

Of course, there were critics of the overwhelmingly positive press coverage of Reagan's life and presidency. Howard Kurtz wrote for the *Washington Post* that Reagan was 'a far more controversial figure in his time than the largely gushing obits on television would suggest.'<sup>24</sup> Kurtz went on to say, 'a man's legacy looks very different 15 years after he leaves the White House, and following a long illness that took him out of the political wars.' Similarly, *New York Times* journalist Caryn James noted that Reagan's long struggle with Alzheimer's created 'a poignancy that transcended politics' and reflected a situation that would be common to many American families.<sup>25</sup> Steve Weisman of the *New York Times* remarked in his reporting from the funeral itself, 'God, this is impressive. [...] But the man they're talking about is not the President I covered every day.'<sup>26</sup>

We can see from Reagan's funeral coverage that there was widespread recognition of his significance and attempts to situate him among the United States' great presidents, but also disagreement about the nature of that significance. This raises the question, did the legacy-building project fail? Or, were these discrepancies merely reflective of the differing opinions of the different parties with an interest in Reagan and his legacy? I argue that these variations in how people interpreted Reagan's legacy were to be expected, and do not reflect a failure of the Reagan legacy builders.

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Since 2004, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library has continued to act as the venue for some of the most fervent displays of enthusiasm for the former president. In 2015, the library played

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Kurtz, 'Reagan: the Retake', *Washington Post*, 7 June 2004 [online op-ed].

<sup>25</sup> James, 'Good Grief: The Appeal of Public Sorrow.'

<sup>26</sup> Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 490.

host to one of the Republican Party primary debates, during which Reagan's name was evoked no fewer than 45 times in three hours.<sup>27</sup>

A year later, the Library played host to the funeral of the woman who had been the custodian of the Reagan legacy since Reagan's departure from public life two decades previously: his wife, and former First Lady, Nancy Reagan. Nancy meticulously planned her own funeral, including revising her funeral plan with her Chief of Staff, Fred Ryan, every six months as necessary.<sup>28</sup> The Reagan Foundation did make one amendment to the funeral arrangements by including the playing of 'Amazing Grace' by a lone piper, to mirror the conclusion of Reagan's own funeral and to reflect his love of bagpipe music.<sup>29</sup>

Nancy was buried at the Reagan Library alongside her husband, having taken up the mantle of preserving her husband's legacy at a time when he could no longer be involved in such projects. Nancy had the right to veto uses of Reagan's name and image for over twenty years, essentially making her the curator of the Reagan legacy.<sup>30</sup> Fred Ryan said of Reagan, 'He was not one who was spending a lot of time worrying about his legacy. Even before he had a health problem, [Nancy] was more involved in those conversations.'<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Michael Deaver eloquently noted that 'Ronald Reagan's disease made Nancy the custodian of his legacy.'<sup>32</sup> Nancy's passing therefore marked the moment that the Reagan legacy truly moved

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<sup>27</sup> John Harwood, 'Rethinking the Reagan Mystique', *New York Times*, 14 June 2009, WK1; CNN Reagan Library Debate Transcript, CNN Press Room, 16 September 2015 [accessed 9 May 2022: <https://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/09/16/cnn-reagan-library-debate-later-debate-full-transcript/>].

<sup>28</sup> Bob Colacello, 'Nancy Reagan's Funeral: "God Bless America", White Roses and a Red Adolfo Suit', *Vanity Fair*, 17 March 2016 [last accessed 15 October 2022: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/03/nancy-reagan-funeral>].

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Sobieraj Westfall, 'What Nancy Reagan Chose for Her Funeral: A Love Letter from Her 'Ronnie', Peonies and a Farewell from Her Children', *People*, 10 March 2016 [last accessed 15 October 2022: <https://people.com/celebrity/what-nancy-reagan-chose-for-her-funeral-a-love-letter-from-her-ronnie-peonies-and-a-farewell-from-her-children/>].

<sup>30</sup> Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, 'The Road to Mount Rushmore: The Conservative Commemoration Crusade for Ronald Reagan' in Cheryl Hudson and Gareth Davies, eds, *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s: Perceptions, Policies and Legacies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 217.

<sup>31</sup> Karen Tumulty, *The Triumph of Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 517.

<sup>32</sup> Michael K. Deaver, *Nancy: A Portrait of My Years with Nancy Reagan* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 146.

from something crafted from within his administration and by his loved ones to something crafted by people without a personal stake in Reagan and his legacy.

## Conclusion

Ronald Reagan's legacy was, and remains, valuable political currency across the United States, especially among conservatives and Republicans. This thesis has shown that legacy management, and legacy construction, do not just occur in the post-presidency period. While many scholars begin their studies of presidential legacy once the president in question is no longer in power, this thesis has demonstrated that members of Reagan's administration and his closest allies deemed his presidential legacy to be valuable political currency long before he had even left the White House, with a variety of actors competing to lay claim to the outgoing president's legacy. As John Bodnar has argued, 'the shaping of a past worthy of commemoration in the present' is a contentious issue, with many competing actors offering their own interpretations of the presidencies in question.<sup>1</sup> If we accept that these legacy-building projects help to shape contemporary narratives of the history of an administration, as well as Reagan's legacy itself, then it is important to consider the role of the individuals responsible for designing and overseeing these projects.

Securing a positive legacy for Reagan formed a vital part of the administration's final two years in office. This project was closely interlinked with concerns surrounding Reagan's status as a lame-duck president whose political influence was waning, weakened further by the controversy surrounding the Iran-Contra scandal and the Republican Party's disappointing performance in the 1986 midterm election. The Reagan White House developed a strategy for overcoming the travails it had faced in the winter of 1986 and spring of 1987, which was ambitious in scope and sought to both revive Reagan's presidency in the short term and cement Reagan's legacy in the long term. Through tracing the various broad strategies established by

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<sup>1</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

the administration during this time, we begin to get a sense of achievements the administration sought to highlight, the policies it hoped to advance, and the groundwork it hoped to lay for the Republican Party for years to come.

Ultimately, their final two years in office saw officials in the Reagan administration attempt to combat criticisms that Reagan was a lame duck with little political power or significance, and instead launched a series of projects designed to improve Reagan's political standing in the short term, with an eye on his longer-term legacy as well. Legacy-building efforts also played an important role in everyday politics. Though the administration was concerned about longer-term memory of its years in the White House, its efforts to regain power and control instead of acting 'on the defensive' had important implications for the day-to-day running of the White House.

The administration launched several projects targeted more explicitly at Reagan's post-presidential legacy early in his second term, including the early planning for the Reagan Library and the appointment of his official biographer. Reagan also set out his policy goals for his successor in his 1988 Legislative Message, which offers insights into his aspirations for the years following his departure from the White House. This document presents the closest example of Reagan laying out his policy legacy and hopes for his successor, while the failed nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court served as a reminder of Reagan's right-wing political leanings. It also gave Reagan an opportunity to change the balance of the Supreme Court, potentially one of the longest-lasting consequences of his presidency. The *Reagan Record* offers valuable evidence of the administration's desire for consistency in its messaging during this period, which is reflective of a concern surrounding the fragility of Reagan's image, which was about to come under increased scrutiny in the climate of an election. Finally, T. Kenneth Cribb's 'legacy project' offers further evidence of the explicit discussions around legacy that were taking place within the White House.

The nature of precisely what that legacy was shifted over the course of Reagan's second term, evolving from a focus on Reaganomics to one more geared towards foreign policy and Reagan's Cold War policies. Additionally, once Reagan's approval ratings had improved, the administration was able to act more confidently, and throughout 1988 we see a far more assertive project aimed at guiding Reagan's legacy. As part of this stage of the legacy-building efforts, he played a significant role in the 1988 presidential, senatorial, and congressional elections, primarily because he and his aides (and George HW Bush's aides) believed a strong performance in these elections would act as an endorsement of Reagan's presidency and therefore bolster his future legacy. He actively campaigned in support of an array of Republican candidates up and down the ballot paper, but most significantly for George HW Bush's bid for the White House. This 'final campaign' for Reagan's legacy culminated in a farewell tour of sorts, providing ample opportunities for Reagan to speak directly to the nation about his policy achievements. Reagan's renewed popularity during this period offered important political leverage throughout Bush's race for the White House, and the administration successfully threw its support behind their preferred candidates in a bid to secure the longevity of Reagan's key policy decisions during his eight years in office.

Reagan's participation in these election campaigns formed an important part of his programme of legacy-themed events and appearances in his final months in office. Once the 1988 election cycle had ended, the administration turned its attention to attempting to ensure a permanence to Reagan's policy ideas. In his final weeks as president the administration turned its attention to a range of projects which, when viewed together, demonstrate that Reagan's future legacy was a central concern to his administration during this time. Though all presidents are interested in their legacy to some extent, this thesis has demonstrated that the Reagan White House saw this phase of his presidency as vital to securing his future presidential legacy and was particularly active during this period compared to their recent predecessors. Reagan's aides

actively sought opportunities to allow him to address the public to communicate what he believed to be the key achievements from his presidency, capitalising on his popularity. The project of designing the Reagan Library offered Ronald and Nancy Reagan the opportunity to influence one of the first spaces dedicated to telling the story of their administration. Finally, the plans for the transition period between the Reagan and Bush administrations demonstrated that Reagan was expected to remain involved in some degree of post-presidential legacy building once he completed his second term. This stage of the legacy-building project is particularly interesting as the Reagan White House repeatedly sought inspiration from administrations that had gone before them. Part of the significance of this thesis is that the Reagan administration's efforts created a roadmap for the administrations that have followed them, especially legacy-conscious two-term presidents such as George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The concluding chapter of this thesis shows what happens to legacy building projects once the president being memorialised has left office. By this point, there were already several competing interpretations of Reagan's legacy, which in turn suggests the limitations of this sort of controlled legacy project. Examining the relationship between Reagan's legacy and the Bush presidency offers valuable insights into the significance Reagan's legacy had for contemporary conservatives, which in turn indicates the success of the legacy-building project. Moreover, the legacy-building efforts visible in the late 1990s share the same motivations as those of Reagan's White House legacy builders a decade beforehand. The Reagan Legacy Project and Young America's Foundation were united by common goals; cementing Reagan's status as a conservative icon, and, relatedly, ensuring that Reagan's memory was something that would be used by Republicans of the future to complete the unfinished business of their predecessors. However, there were also tensions arising between the 'official' legacy builders such as former First Lady Nancy Reagan, and third-party organisations seeking to capitalise on the Reagan

legacy for their own political gain. These case studies therefore raise interesting questions regarding who has the right, or ability, to attempt to control a legacy, especially once the figure in question is no longer able to participate in these efforts.

This thesis has made important contributions to several bodies of scholarship. It is the first study of Reagan's legacy to incorporate the period when Reagan was still in office, and the only study to examine presidential legacy construction from the perspective of the White House. It has illuminated the comprehensive nature of the administration's efforts to revive Reagan's image, and shown how this damage control exercise evolved into a concerted attempt to ensure a permanence to Reagan's policies and make sure he was remembered as a transformational president. It has also demonstrated that these legacy-building efforts were complicated once the White House no longer had as much control over how Reagan's legacy was presented, generating tensions between varying parties all vying for their own interpretation of Reagan's legacy. It has therefore made a valuable intervention in scholarship on presidential legacies, in addition to offering a new perspective on Ronald Reagan's presidency. It has contributed to scholarship on the important yet understudied issue of legacy construction, which ties in with literature on memorialisation and commemoration. This project has also contributed to furthering scholarship on US conservative politics, by furthering our understanding of what Reagan and his legacy meant both to his successors and to the Republican Party more broadly.

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In 1991 the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum opened in Simi Valley, California. During his speech at the opening ceremony, the then-80-year-old Reagan said:

Men plant trees even though they do not expect to see their fruition. Well so it is with Presidents. The doors of this library are open now and all are welcome. The

judgment of history is left to you, the people. I have no fears of that for we have done our best and so I say come and learn from it.<sup>2</sup>

This observation reflects Reagan's willingness to step away from the issue of his legacy during his retirement. Over the next three years, his public appearances were infrequent, and in 1994 he announced his diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease and retreated from public life entirely.

However, despite Reagan's apparent indifference towards the subject of his legacy, this thesis has shown that many people both within and outwith the White House were deeply invested in Reagan's future legacy. If we accept that these legacy building efforts have, at least to some degree, helped to shape contemporary narratives of the history of an administration, then it is important to consider the politics of the individuals responsible for designing and overseeing these projects. If the narrative presented to the public is the one that Reagan and his aides wanted to share, with little room for opposing voices or alternative interpretations, then it becomes even more important for audiences to engage critically with presidential communications, and memorialisation efforts more broadly.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the notion of a presidential legacy has remained important to every individual who has occupied the White House to some degree or another. The efforts within the Reagan White House have presented the presidents who have succeeded Reagan with a valuable foundation to build upon when considering construction of their own presidential legacies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Remarks at the 1991 Presidential Library Dedication', C-Span, 4 November 2019 [https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4551159/ronald-reagan-remarks-1991-presidential-library-dedication accessed 6 July 2019].

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