

## Chapter 4 Narrative Criticism

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## TELLING AMERICA'S STORY: NARRATIVE FORM AND THE REAGAN PRESIDENCY

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By 1980, America had lost its sense of direction. Economic troubles, a series of foreign policy failures, and corruption in its government had created a national malaise. Then Ronald Reagan came onto the scene with a vision of America that reinvigorated the nation. His great skills as a communicator and his commitment to fundamental ideals were just what the nation needed. We were once again proud to be Americans.

This familiar and well accepted story follows the pattern of many political success stories in which the hero rescues the country from a time of great trouble. This story is special, however, in that Reagan is said to have accomplished the feat through the power of his speaking and, eventually, to have been brought down when that power failed him. After more than five years in office, Reagan was still referred to as "the Western world's most gifted communicator."<sup>1</sup>

Objection to Ronald Reagan did not originate with the discovery of the Iran arms deal, however. Despite Reagan's consistent popularity and continuing praise for his speaking,<sup>2</sup> there has been a substantial segment of a critical public who not only remained unpersuaded by the President, but were offended by his

passive manner. What is seen by his supporters as clear direction has been attacked by opponents as "ideology without ideas."<sup>3</sup> While it has been noted that Reagan has provided a renewed sense of confidence and security in the country, expressions of fear about his ineptitude or his willingness to risk war have been frequent. Despite his continuing high levels of approval, a whole genre of literature against Reagan has developed.<sup>4</sup> What makes these books a genre is not just that they share a common opposition to Reagan and his policies, but also that they share a common approach to their criticisms. Reagan is accused repeatedly of being unrealistic, simplistic, and misinformed. Ronald Dallek, for example, claims that Reagan's anti-Communist foreign policy is "a simplistic and ineffective way to meet a complex problem."<sup>5</sup> He explains Reagan's repeated policy mistakes as a manifestation of his psychological make-up and concludes that his ideology and policy-making are "nonrational."<sup>6</sup> The sense of these criticisms is epitomized in the mocking tone of a *New Republic* editorial that, in the course of bemoaning Reagan's historical ignorance, comments that: "Ronald Reagan has never let the facts get in the way of a good story."<sup>7</sup>

Similar themes recur frequently in the scholarly evaluation of Reagan's rhetoric. His effectiveness is widely recognized, but while Reagan is praised by some for his strategic prowess and for his ability to inspire the American public,<sup>8</sup> others find his success problematic. How, it is asked, can he be so popular when he is uninformed, irrational, and inconsistent?<sup>9</sup> The dominant explanation has been that Reagan manipulates his language, his strategy, or his style to make himself and his policies appear to be attractive.<sup>10</sup> While the power of rhetoric to affect appearances has been demonstrated amply, this insight provides only a partial explanation for the nature of Reagan's rhetoric and the response to it. It does not account satisfactorily for the differences in perception and judgment among Reagan's various audiences, for the difference between support for Reagan and support for his policies, or for the fact that journalistic and scholarly analysis debunking his competence and sincerity was largely irrelevant through most of his presidency.

The purpose of this essay is to account for the distinctive reputation, style, and effect of Ronald Reagan's discourse by providing a consistent and sufficiently comprehensive explanation for the contradictory perceptions of his speaking and for the related paradoxes of this "Great Communicator's" presidency. To construct this account in terms of his discourse requires an explicit awareness of the distinction between a "rational" and a narrative perspective.<sup>11</sup> Narrative theory can provide a powerful account of political discourse, and it is essential for explaining Ronald Reagan's rhetoric, for it is the predominance of the narrative form in Reagan's rhetoric that has established the climate of interpretation within which he is seen and judged.

The frequency of Reagan's story-telling has been widely noted<sup>12</sup> and some perceptive commentaries have demonstrated his consistency with dominant American myths,<sup>13</sup> but what remains to be emphasized is that story-telling is fundamental to the relationship between Reagan and his audience. Stories are not just a rhetorical device that Reagan uses to embellish his ideas; Reagan's message is a story. Reagan uses story-telling to direct his policies, ground his explanations, and inspire his audiences, and the dominance of narrative helps to account for the variety of reactions to his rhetoric.

There is general agreement about the course of the Reagan presidency—the story of his ascendancy has now become the story of his rise and fall—but explanations differ. Those who have criticized Reagan using the standards of

technical reasoning and policy-making are likely to contend that his rhetoric is simplistic, untrue, or irrational and to lament the lack of public response to his patent deficiencies.<sup>14</sup> They are likely to explain Reagan's successes as being the result of rhetorical manipulation and to explain the Iran/'contra crisis as being the inevitable result of his continuing lack of realism.<sup>15</sup> Those who listen to Ronald Reagan as a story-teller are likely to emphasize Reagan's character and to praise him for providing vision, reassurance, and inspiration to the American public. They are likely to see Reagan as having struck a responsive chord and to explain the Iranian crisis as a weakening of Reagan's previously strong grasp on public leadership.<sup>17</sup> Reactions diverge because listeners perceive Reagan and his speeches differently, and because they apply different standards of judgment to what they perceive.

This essay will (1) explicate the varieties of narrative form active in Reagan's discourse to help explain his presidency and the reactions to it; and (2) discuss some of the moral and epistemic consequences of Reagan's use of narrative, and of the narrative form itself.

#### NARRATIVE FORM IN REAGAN'S RHETORIC

Reagan tells two kinds of stories that differ in scale and purpose, but that work together to establish the dominance of narrative form in the creation and in the interpretation of his rhetoric. *Anecdotes* define the character of an issue at the same time that they illustrate, reinforce, and make his policies and ideas more vivid. *Myth* structures his message.

Anecdotes are the quick stories, jokes, or incidents that are the verbal counterpart of the visual image. The anecdote is intended to spark interest, and its meaning is established in reference to some larger frame of understanding that is either specified within a discourse or assumed in an audience. In this way, the story of Albert Einstein's difficulty in understanding the 1040 form<sup>18</sup> defines a relationship to the tax code—given a belief that complexity is likely to be the reflection of excessive bureaucracy and that government ought to be accessible to all citizens without requiring special expertise. Similarly, Reagan's story of the Supreme Court decision that, he says, prevented New York children from playing in their cafeteria<sup>19</sup> defines a relationship to the issue of school prayer—given a belief that religious belief is a necessary part of moral order and that people ought to be able to act in private without governmental restriction. In both these instances, a simple story carries a clear message to those whose experience leads them to accept the story as either true or as true-to-life and whose values lead them to accept the moral. As one would expect, Reagan uses anecdotes more often when speaking to audiences that are expected to be uniformly Republican or conservative.

Myth informs all of Reagan's rhetoric. In the broad sense in which it is used here, myth refers to "any anonymously composed story telling of origins and destinies: the explanations a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do, its pedagogic images of the nature and destiny of man."<sup>2</sup> Reagan's myth applies not to the origin of the world, but to the origin of America; not to the destiny of humanity, but to the destiny of Americans. It is a simple and familiar story that is widely taught and widely believed. It is not exactly a true story in the sense that academic historians would want their descriptions and explanations to be true, but it is not exactly fiction either. As Jerome Bruner wrote of myth in general, "its power is that it lives on the feather line between fantasy

and reality. It must be neither too good nor too bad to be true, nor must it be too true.<sup>21</sup> Myth provides a sense of importance and direction and it provides a communal focus for individual identity.

### AMERICA IN THE STORY

Reagan never tells the whole of his American story at any one time, but the myth that emerges in his speeches is familiar and easily stated:

America is a chosen nation, grounded in its families and neighborhoods, and driven inevitably forward by its heroic working people toward a world of freedom and economic progress unless blocked by moral or military weakness.

Reagan portrays American history as a continuing struggle for progress against great obstacles imposed by economic adversity, barbaric enemies, or Big Government. It is a story with great heroes—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt—with great villains—the monarchs of pre-Revolutionary Europe, the Depression, the Communists, the Democrats—and with a great theme—the rise of freedom and economic progress. It is a story that is sanctified by God<sup>22</sup> and validated by the American experience.<sup>23</sup> All the themes of Reagan's rhetoric are contained in the mythic history—America's greatness, its commitment to freedom, the heroism of the American people, the moral imperative of work, the priority of economic advancement, the domestic evil of taxes and government regulation, and the necessity of maintaining military strength. The story fulfills all the requirements of myth—it is widely believed, generally unquestioned, and clearly pedagogical. And Reagan tells the story extremely well. His message is always clear, his examples are chosen well, and his consistent tone of buoyant optimism and unyielding faith in progress complements the picture of continuing success that is proclaimed in the myth. Finally, it provides a focus for identification by his audience. Reagan repeatedly tells his audiences that if they choose to participate in the story, they will become a part of America's greatness.

Reagan's version of the course and direction of American history pervades all of his rhetoric, but he tells his story most clearly on those occasions when he intends to be most inspirational. The character of the myth and the moral implications that he draws from it can be seen clearly in Reagan's Second Inaugural Address.<sup>24</sup>

The key to understanding the Second Inaugural is to see it as a story. Like all of Reagan's rhetoric, the logic of the speech is a narrative logic that emphasizes the connection between character and action, not a rational logic that emphasizes the connections between problems and solutions. In this speech, Reagan establishes the identity of America and the American people, that identity establishes the direction for America's story, and the direction implies the actions that should be taken. By making intelligible the *public* identity of the audience members (as American), the narrative makes those who accept this identity accountable to a system of values and virtues that are used as standards against which to judge policies.

The center of the speech is itself a story. Reagan describes "two of our Founding Fathers, a Boston lawyer named Adams and a Virginia planter named Jefferson." Though they had been "bitter political rivals," Reagan told of how "age had softened their anger" as they exchanged letters and finally came together to the extent that "in 1826, the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence,

they both died. They *Ai\*A* i

..leu ui juiy." The cosmic harmony of this story is <sup>of each others</sup> ~~perfect~~ keeping with the mythic frame of the speech, and the "important lesson" ~~that~~ Reagan draws from the story is perfectly in keeping with the dominant ~~theme~~ there. Reagan concludes his story with a quotation from one of Jefferson's letters to Adams recalling their mutual struggle "for what is most valuable to man, his ~~right~~ of self government." In this story America represents a single message for all ~~the~~ and for all people. History has been transformed into a lesson that transcends ~~the~~ contingencies of circumstance.

For Reagan, America's meaning is to be found as much in the future as it has been in the past. Seeking to perfect the ultimate American goal of ~~ind-~~ individual freedom, he says, will guarantee peace and prosperity: "There are no limits to growth and human progress, when men and women are free to ~~follow~~ their dreams"; "Every victory for human freedom will be a victory for ~~world~~ peace." Progress toward freedom is tied directly to economic progress by ~~linking~~ unrestrained individual action to economic productivity: "At the heart of our efforts is one idea vindicated by 25 straight months of economic growth: ~~freedom~~ and incentives unleash the drive and entrepreneurial genius that are the core of human progress." The powerfully future-oriented, forward-looking perspective is summed up in his conclusion: America is "one people, under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom he has placed in the human heart, called upon now to ~~pass~~ that dream on to a waiting and a hopeful world."

The only impediments to the fulfillment of this dream that Reagan ~~identifies~~ are those that America imposes on itself.<sup>25</sup> For a time, said Reagan, "we ~~failed the~~ system." We suffered through times of economic and social stress because "we yielded authority to the national government that properly belonged to the ~~states~~ or to local governments or to the people themselves." These were temporary ~~diff-~~iculties, however. By renewing our faith in freedom "we are creating a nation ~~once~~ again vibrant, robust, and alive." The other great risk that Reagan identifies is military weakness. "History has shown," he states, "that peace does not ~~come~~, nor will our freedom be preserved, by good will alone."

Reagan's Second Inaugural is based upon a story of America's origins and its quest for freedom. In it, Reagan shows the dire consequences of being ~~distracted~~ from the quest and the rewards and potential glory of regaining faith and ~~direc-~~tion. He defines the values that are needed (unity, freedom, strength) and he ~~sketches~~ the future and calls upon Americans to dedicate themselves to living ~~this~~

#### The Audience in the Story

In the same way in which Reagan's stories give meaning to America, they ~~define~~ what it means to be an American. The narrative form offers a special kind of ~~iden-~~tification to Reagan's audience because each auditor is encouraged to see ~~himself~~ or herself as a central actor in America's quest for freedom. To accept Reagan's story is not just to understand the course of an American history that is enacted in other places by other people, it is to know that the direction and outcome of ~~the~~ story depend upon you. Proper action makes the audience member into a hero; inaction or improper action makes the listener responsible for America's decline. The narrative logic that defines the nature of heroism in Reagan's rhetoric was the central theme of his First Inaugural Address.<sup>26</sup>

America is defined as the greatest country in the world. It "guarantees ~~indi-~~vidual liberty to a greater degree than any other," it is the "last and greatest

vision of freedom," and, consequently, it has "the world's strongest economy." To be heroes, the audience members must act in ways that will contribute to America's goals. The narrative defines their virtues—determination, courage, strength, faith, hope, work, compassion—and Reagan identifies their character.

In his most explicit and extensive consideration of heroism, Reagan makes it clear that America's real heroes are its ordinary people—the factory workers and the farmers, those who market goods and those who consume them, those who produce ("entrepreneurs" are given special mention here as elsewhere), and those who give to others.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of the American hero is epitomized in the story of Martin Treptow, "a young man . . . who left his job in a small town barbershop in 1917" to serve in WWI. "We're told," said Reagan, "that on his body was found a diary" in which he had written: "America must win this war. Therefore I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone." The character of the individual and the values that he holds are defined by their contribution to America's struggle. If the audience accepts Reagan's description of the nature of that continuing struggle, then they will be encouraged to accept the same kind of values, actions, and commitments that Treptow accepted in his struggle. In this case, Reagan's use of anecdote defines the character that best fits his story of America. World War I is taken to exemplify America's struggle for freedom against hostile forces; Treptow exemplifies the common man; the dedication of the soldier exemplifies the dedication to country and the fighting spirit that are necessary to prevail in the struggle; and the diary entry exemplifies the commitment to act upon these principles (work, save, sacrifice, endure) and the attitude that is appropriate to the fight ("cheerfully"). Significantly, the story is presented as true, but the primary sense of its accuracy is that it represents a larger truth. "We're told" is a weak claim to factuality, but the application of the story in a Presidential Inaugural is a strong claim to moral legitimacy.

Reagan's definition of American heroism is primarily, but not exclusively, economic. The key to heroism is effective action in the ongoing struggle to achieve freedom and prosperity. Reagan encourages identification on the ground of a general commitment to the America of his story and discourages distinctions based on differences in politics or interests.<sup>28</sup> The stories he tells as President feature the audience members as Americans rather than as members of different political parties, and *Time* magazine supports the sharing of this perception when it cites as typical the comment by "a retired brewery worker from San Antonio" that "He really isn't like a Republican. He's more like an American, which is what we really need."<sup>29</sup>

#### Reagan in the Story

Some of Reagan's critics have attempted to portray him as a dangerous man, seeing him either as a demagogue<sup>30</sup> or a warmonger.<sup>31</sup> Other critics have marveled at his ability to retain his role as a critic of government even after he became its symbolic head and have worried about his detachment from the policies of his own administration<sup>32</sup> or about his lack of accountability.<sup>33</sup> Such criticisms, however, fail to take account of the nature of the public perception that is encouraged by the narrative form.

To understand the response to Reagan it is necessary to see and understand Reagan-in-the-story, not Reagan-the-policy-maker or even Reagan-the-speaker. Since the story is the dominant mode through which the political situation is

interpreted, Reagan will not be perceived or judged as a politician or a policy-maker or an ideologue unless that is the role that is defined for Reagan as part of the story. In the story that emerges through his speeches, however, Reagan plays two roles that have succeeded in encompassing the perspective of his critics. As a character in the story, Reagan is a mythic hero. He embodies the role of the compassionate, committed political outsider; he is the active force that has arrived to help right the prevailing wrongs and to get things moving again. As the narrator of the story, Reagan is portrayed as simply presenting the nature of the situation. There is no artifice and no threat in this style of realistic narration; Reagan-as-narrator just presents things as they are.

Reagan's character has been a dominant focus among those who attempt to explain the impact of his rhetoric. One explanation for Reagan's success is that he has "character"—that is, he projects an image of "manly effectiveness."<sup>38</sup> Reagan is said to be "the political embodiment of the heroic westerner,"<sup>31</sup> both in his appearance ("tall, lank, rugged"<sup>36</sup>) and in his character traits ("honesty and sincerity, innocence, optimism, and certainty"<sup>37</sup>). He is compared with other Presidential heroes such as Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Franklin Roosevelt, whose virtues were those of the visionary and the man of action.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, he is said to contrast with the "softer" Democratic candidates who have opposed him. Reagan has been able to establish the perception of his competence through "tough talk, vigorous promises, and his emphasis on immediate solutions."<sup>39</sup> Reagan's opponents are said to have been pushed by the contrast into appearing "impractical, ineffectual, and effete."<sup>40</sup> Such descriptions reveal Reagan's success in establishing himself as a variation on a dominant type of American mythic hero—strong, aggressive, distant, in control, and in Reagan's case, able to see the situation clearly and to explain it to a confused public.<sup>41</sup>

The most familiar form of attack on Reagan's character attempts to reveal a true Reagan behind a constructed mask. "Character" becomes a criticism of Reagan when he is accused of playing a role as he did during his movie career. The criticism appears in a number of related forms—he is said to be a "performer," a "host," an "image," to be playing a "game of cultural make-believe," or to be "using" his role to manipulate the public and to more effectively pursue his political or ideological or personal goals.<sup>42</sup> This use of "character" as artifice will succeed as a criticism only if Reagan is perceived as constructing a fictional persona. It cannot succeed if his persona is seen as matching or expressing his "real" character. The criticism of Reagan as an artificial creation, however, neglects his role as narrator of the story. Reagan's story, and his role in the story, are presented as a realistic and sensible portrayal of the normal and ordinary course of events. The combination of Reagan's calm demeanor,<sup>43</sup> his frequent reference to familiar situations to explain complex or threatening events,<sup>44</sup> and his reliance on American commonplaces<sup>45</sup> combine to create an air of reassuring certainty that has suggested to some commentators that Reagan would be more aptly compared with Harding or Eisenhower than with Theodore or Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>46</sup>

If criticisms of Reagan's character are not adjusted to fit the story, they are likely either to be dismissed or to be reinterpreted—sometimes with unexpected results. The charge that to elect Reagan was to risk war, for example, was unsuccessful for Carter in the 1980 presidential election and for Gerald Ford in the 1976 California primary because these attempts at criticism were perfectly consistent with the strong character that Reagan had established in his story and with the story's assumption that strength is a necessary precondition of peace. From

the point of view of the story, Reagan's emphasis on increases in weapons, his assertion of the need to stand up to the Soviets, and his willingness to risk war in pursuit of the higher goals of freedom and democracy reinforced his repeated declaration that "peace is the highest aspiration of the American people," and that he, personally, wanted nothing so much as a peaceful world.<sup>47</sup> The result was that, in both of these elections, the charges made against Reagan did more harm to the accuser than to Reagan. In 1976, Ford's ads were even used by the Reagan campaign.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Reagan can continue to use "government" as a character in his stories and to oppose himself and his audience to the Federal government after being President for more than one full term because Reagan's role in the narrative situation is to give meaning to the country and its government; he and his vision may inspire and shape policy, but he is not held responsible because designing the particulars of policy will not be seen as his role from within this perspective.

The dominance of the story is also revealed by those occasions in which Reagan's character has been called into question. In the first debate with Walter Mondale during the 1984 presidential campaign, his advisors attempted to prepare him with sufficient information and detail, but this tactic was unsuccessful because it did not accord with the character of Reagan in his own story. In the second debate, his advisors resolved to "let Reagan be Reagan."<sup>49</sup> The failure of this attempt to alter Reagan's "character" to meet the demands of his critics and the success of his return to his "normal" style in the second debate confirms the acceptance of Reagan's story and of his role in it. In the *Iran/contra* affair, Reagan's apparent willingness to deal with an archetypal enemy and to compromise his previously firm stance against terrorism seemed completely inconsistent with the character he had established. There seemed to be only two "rational" explanations (from the point of view of the story): either that Reagan was not responsible for the actions or that his character had changed. Hence, one response to the crisis has been to question Reagan's control over his subordinates and another has been to inquire into his mental and physical health. Neither of these explanations, however, is consistent with the story's image of presidential leadership. The story can encompass Reagan's critics, but it is vulnerable to his own inconsistencies.

Reagan's story encourages his audience to see America as a chosen nation leading the world to freedom and economic progress, to see Reagan as a friendly well-motivated leader and as a narrator of the American story, and to see themselves as heroes in the unfolding drama of American greatness. In Reagan's rhetoric, the nature of the world, his policies, his values, his character, and the character of his audience are defined together by the story that he tells. The consequences of this reliance on narrative form need to be considered carefully.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF REAGAN'S USE OF NARRATIVE FORM

In a 1984 review essay on "Narrative Theory and Communication Research," Robert L. Scott observed that despite the suggestive correspondences between narrative forms and rhetorical functions, "no rhetorical critic . . . has pressed along the lines suggested thus far by narrative theorists."<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Walter Fisher proposed a theory of human communication based on narrative. Fisher argued that traditional investigation of communication was regulated by the "rational world paradigm," which presumed that rational communicators managed a world that "is a set of logical puzzles which can be resolved through



appropriate analysis and application of reason conceived as an argumentative construct."<sup>51</sup> Fisher found this approach to be more incomplete than wrong. Specifically, he objected to its inability to grasp the manner in which symbolization is a universal though non-rational characteristic of human nature, and to its imposition of ideological restrictions upon the process of moral choice. In contrast, Fisher offered the "narrative paradigm," which presumes that humans are essentially story-tellers who act on the basis of good reasons derived from their experience in a world that is "a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation."<sup>52</sup>

The distinction between narrative and "rational" forms of consciousness is well grounded in the literature of narrative theory. Drawing from the texts of history, literature, and anthropology, these theorists have shown that narrative is a distinctive and distinctively important means of giving meaning to events. The important question for political discourse parallels Hayden White's inquiry into historical narrative: "With *what kind of meaning* does storying endow political events?"<sup>53</sup> The answers provided by narrative theorists suggest that narrative is a fundamental form of human understanding that directs perception, judgment, and knowledge. Narrative form shapes ontology by making meaningfulness a product of consistent relationships between situations, subjects, and events and by making truth a property that refers primarily to narratives and only secondarily to propositions; narrative form shapes morality by placing characters and events within a context where moral judgment is a necessary part of making sense of the action; and narrative form shapes epistemology by suggesting that all important events are open to common sense understanding.

These characteristics of narrative suggest an explanation for the apparent incongruity of a President with high levels of personal support despite opposition to his policies, and it explains the particular way in which support and opposition to Reagan has been expressed—*Reagan's exclusive and explicit reliance on a single story has dominated the realm of political judgment*. The story is the primary basis for defining the situation, morality is the primary basis for justifying public policy, and common sense is the primary basis for analyzing political issues.

#### Narrative Truth

Reagan's stories are sometimes presented as fictional, sometimes as fact. In either case, their appropriateness to political discourse depends upon their consistency with the historical world of the audience. If the story is not true, it must be true-to-life; if it did not actually happen, it must be evident that it could have happened or that, given the way things are, it should have happened. When narrative dominates, epistemological standards move away from empiricism. History is more likely to be seen as a literary artifact, fiction is more likely to be seen as a mimetic representation of reality, and the two forms "cross" in the historicity of the narrative form.<sup>54</sup> Understanding this shift in perspective is essential to understanding Reagan's rhetoric and the reactions to it.

As Bennett and Feldman found in their examination of story-telling in jury trials, "judgments based on story construction are, in many important respects, unverifiable in terms of the reality of the situation that the story represents."<sup>51</sup> The story becomes increasingly dominant as the empirically defined context for the story becomes increasingly distant from confirmation by either experience or consensus. Bennett and Feldman identify two situations in which "structural characteristics of stories become more central to judgment": (1) if "facts

or documentary evidence are absent," or (2) if "a collection of facts or evidence is subject to competing interpretations."<sup>56</sup> Both of these conditions are typically present in major political disputes.

Even the most obviously fantastic stories make a claim to truth for the order that they impose on a chaotic world. To support the claim that fairy tales give meaning to a child's life, for example, Bruno Bettelheim quotes the German poet Schiller as saying that, "deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life."<sup>57</sup> Events become meaningful in stories and meaning depends upon the significance of the events within the context of the story. As a consequence, the perception of truth depends upon the story as a whole rather than upon the accuracy of its individual statements. Lois O. Mink argues that a historical narrative "claims truth not merely for each of its individual statements taken distributively, but for the complex form of the narrative itself."<sup>58</sup> The "complex form" of a narrative makes isolated events and individual statements meaningful. Mink concludes that "the significance of past occurrences is understandable only as they are locatable in the ensemble of interrelationships that can be grasped only in the construction of narrative form."<sup>59</sup>

The variety of technical terms developed here all lead to a single basic conclusion: somehow we must recognize that stories admit to a dual evaluation. Alasdair MacIntyre studies moral discourse in terms of *verisimilitude* and *dramatic probability*.<sup>60</sup> Fisher uses *narrative fidelity* and *narrative probability* to express a parallel distinction.<sup>61</sup> In other words, each theorist sees narrative credibility (and narrative power) as having both substantive and formal properties.

An examination of the reaction to Reagan's dominant narrative suggests that the two properties are interdependent, and recognizing the reflexive quality of his narrative suggests an explanation for the difference in claims about the truth of his rhetoric: the kind of "narrative probability" established in Reagan's explicitly narrative and mythic rhetoric has affected judgments of "narrative fidelity." Because his story is so dominant, so explicit, and so consistent, political claims are likely to be measured against the standard of Reagan's mythic American history rather than against other possible standards such as technical competence or ideological dogma. In this way, the story's dominance has diminished the significance of claims about Reagan's factual inaccuracies. For example, in the 1984 campaign Reagan claimed that the tax proposal being advanced by the Democrats would be equivalent to adding \$1800 to the tax bill of every American household.<sup>2</sup> The figure was questioned widely, but the charge of inaccuracy never affected Reagan's credibility or popularity. The meaning of the general story was more important than the particular figure. If Reagan's estimate erred by 10% or by 100% that would not affect the meaning of his story—that the Democrats were, once again, offering a "massive tax and spending scheme" that threatened American economic progress—so the error could be dismissed as trivial.

In addition, relying on the internal relationships established in stories to determine the truth discourages direct denial or refutation and encourages the audience to discover their own place in the story. One reason for the lack of success of many of Reagan's critics has been their tendency to attempt to refute Reagan's assertions.<sup>3</sup> Those most successful in confronting Reagan, such as Mario Cuomo, have been those few politicians who offer alternative stories. The argument must be adjusted to the narrative paradigm—for example, by making the "city on a hill" a "tale of two cities"—or it is likely to be seen as trivial or irrelevant.

The stories that have caused the most trouble for Reagan are those which are least in accord with the generally accepted understanding. In a speech to the VFW

during the 1980 campaign, for example, Reagan referred to the Vietnam War as "a noble cause." Despite the approval of the immediate audience, this complicated his national campaign because of its inconsistency with the understanding of Vietnam as an unjust war in which America played an ignominious role.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Reagan's difficulties with the Bitburg ceremony stemmed from his account contradicting the received understanding of America waging war to destroy the evils of Nazi conquest. Neither of these cases resulted in significant damage to Reagan's popularity or credibility, however, because he was able to show that his actions were consistent with his story of America.<sup>5</sup> The distinctiveness of the Iran/contras affair is that Reagan's actions have been interpreted as being inconsistent with Reagan's own story. Trading arms for hostages was not seen as consistent with standing up to terrorism; providing arms to Iran was not seen as consistent with strong opposition to America's enemies. Because it was perceived as being inconsistent with the established story of the Reagan presidency, the effects of the Iranian arms deal have been general and severe.<sup>66</sup> Even a story that is powerfully resistant to outside criticism cannot survive inconsistency with itself.

Reagan's stories are not completely self-contained—if they could not be interpreted as representing real events in the real world they would be vulnerable to charges that they are merely fantasies conjured up by the conservative imagination<sup>67</sup>—but this is a special kind of reality. The basis for accepting the referential value of Reagan's stories is not empirical justification, but consistency with the moral standards and common sense of his audience.

#### Moral Argument

Narrative form shapes interpretation by emphasizing the moral dimension of understanding. As Hayden White says of historical narrative, "story forms not only permit us to judge the moral significance of human projects, they also provide the means by which to judge them, even while we pretend to be merely describing them."<sup>68</sup> White takes the "moral impulse" to be a defining characteristic of narrativity,<sup>69</sup> Fisher uses *moral* argument to distinguish that form of public argument most suited to narrative,<sup>70</sup> and Alasdair MacIntyre makes the connection between narrative, personal identity, intelligibility, and accountability fundamental to his attempt to rescue ethical judgment from what he sees as the sterile standards of enlightenment thinkers.<sup>71</sup> The nature of the narrative form is said to be moral because stories make events intelligible by imposing a temporal order that leads to some end that defines the moral frame of the story and because the nature of the characters and events in the story will be defined with reference to that purpose.

Ronald Beiner explains and exemplifies the moral impulse of narrative in political discourse. "In attempting to define a conception of the human good," he writes, "we tell a story."<sup>71</sup> Not all stories work equally well, but rich and penetrating stories are what we look for in the work of political theorists and in the statements of politicians. The quality of the story will make it more or less effective in disclosing some truth about the human condition. And different stories will suggest different truths, not all of which will be consistent with each other. "For instance," Beiner continues, "if we wish to expound the necessary place of political freedom in a meaningfully human life, we may wish to tell a story about how the union organizers of Solidarity in Poland, against all odds, forced a remote party machine to listen to the voice of the Polish people."<sup>73</sup> Or we may

recall the heroic acts and noble sentiments of the American Revolution as conservative spokesmen like Reagan often do. Or we may reverse the focus and tell of the horrors of repression and segregation in South Africa. The significant point here is that whatever story is told will provide a moral direction and that this is especially true for narratives that are presented as historical fact.

The heavily moral orientation of Reagan's rhetoric helps to account both for the character of his rhetoric and for the character of the response to it. Reagan characteristically justifies his policies by citing their goals, while critics of his policies characteristically cite problems of conception or implementation. Reagan's moral focus has worked well because the shift of emphasis to ends rather than means pre-empts arguments about practicality and because it provides Reagan with a ready response by transforming opposition to policy into opposition to principle. The difficulties of reaching the goal are not ignored, but in this idealistic framework they take on the status of technicalities—potentially bothersome, but not really fundamental to judging policies or people.

The focus on goals has also led to two sorts of criticisms. Reagan is accused of overlooking the impact that means can have on ends,<sup>74</sup> and of assuming that stating the goal is equivalent to its achievement.<sup>75</sup> These tendencies can be seen clearly in the justification and defense that Reagan provides for his policies.

Reagan's justification for the Strategic Defense Initiative in the 1985 State of the Union Address provides a good example of the ways in which a moral emphasis can influence public argument. There is, said Reagan, "a better way of eliminating the threat of nuclear war" than deterrence:

It is a Strategic Defense Initiative aimed at finding a non-nuclear defense against ballistic missiles. It is the most hopeful possibility of the nuclear age. But it is not well understood.

Some say it will bring war to the heavens—but its purpose is to deter war, in the heavens and on earth. Some say the research would be expensive. Perhaps, but it could save millions of lives, indeed humanity itself. Some say if we build such a system, the Soviets will build a defense system of their own. They already have strategic defenses that surpass ours; a civil defense system, where we have almost none; and a research program covering roughly the same areas of technology we're exploring. And finally, some say the research will take a long time. The answer to that is: "Let's get started."<sup>76</sup>

The pattern of response is revealing. While the objections cited by Reagan are primarily pragmatic (expense, Soviet response, time), Reagan's justifications are made in terms of the goals of the program. Reagan does not deny that this program might "bring war to the heavens," he cites the goal of the program as sufficient justification; he does not deny its expense, he invokes the goal of saving lives. The relationship between means and ends is skewed to an exclusive focus on goals as a means of judgment. If the move from practicality to principle is accepted, it makes the policy immune from most objections. From this point of view, the only reasonable explanation for opposition is the one that Reagan cites, the policy must not be "well understood."<sup>77</sup>

The same combination of an exclusive focus upon ends defined within a particular historical narrative has resulted in charges that Reagan "has been pushing his civil-rights policies with a campaign of 'astonishing misrepresentation.'"<sup>78</sup> Reagan's response to such criticisms is that they are the result of "misperceptions" and "misunderstandings."<sup>79</sup> While his critics cite his factual errors and

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what they see as inconsistencies between his statements and the actions of his administration, Reagan relies on the story of his life and his story of America to counter the accusations. When questioned about his negative image among black leaders, for example, Reagan responded with a reference to his character (that is to the character of Reagan-in-the-story): "it's very disturbing to me, because anyone who knows my life story knows that long before there was a thing called the civil-rights movement, I was busy on that side."<sup>80</sup> In his Second Inaugural, he again used reference to the past to make racial equality a part of America's story: "As an older American, I remember a time when people of different race, creed, or ethnic origin in our land found hatred and prejudice installed in social custom and, yes, in law. There is no story more heartening in our history than the progress that we've made toward the 'brotherhood of man' that God intended for us." From the narrative point of view, it is sufficient to have the appropriate character, and to believe in the appropriate goals. The proper results are the consequence of the story's progression.

### Common Sense

Narrative truth assumes a type of knowledge that differs from the knowledge produced within and sanctioned by rational argument. Both Mink and White claim that narrative is the basic medium of common sense.<sup>81</sup> MacIntyre and Fisher identify narrative with the received wisdom of the community and contrast that to the "elitist" and "technical" knowledge of the academic and political establishment.<sup>82</sup> Since narrative makes sense of experience, the sense that is made will be grounded in the presuppositions of those who accept the narrative, and those presuppositions are common sense. Persuasive narratives, then, both express and assume a knowledge that is shared by the community.

The emphasis on common sense is significant for, as Clifford Geertz in anthropology and Alasdair MacIntyre in philosophy have shown, "common sense" is a culturally defined set of rules and expectations.<sup>83</sup> Just as reliance on a common morality de-emphasizes practical and technical concerns, reliance on a common understanding de-emphasizes objections based on claims to special knowledge or expertise. Common sense is so obvious to those who accept it that disagreement with its implications will often seem irrelevant, impractical, or unintelligible. Hayden White notes approvingly that "one of its virtues is the conviction that informs it; agreement with its dicta is the very mark of goodwill."<sup>84</sup> In this way, common sense insulates its claims from alternative conceptions; it consists of an unreflective, self-evidently "true" set of beliefs that are used to make sense out of situations and events. Common sense establishes a transparent realism—a common sense statement is what everyone knows; a common sense judgment is what any sensible person would do.

Reagan's reliance upon common sense as a standard for understanding and judgment has been noted both by commentators and by Reagan himself,<sup>85</sup> and the consequences of the emphasis on common sense on his expression and his analysis are evident in the style, the logic, and the attitude of his rhetoric. In brief, the common sense grounding that is an element of Reagan's dominant narrative suggests a pattern of understanding that parallels Geertz's informal categorization of the "stylistic features, marks of attitude" of common sense.<sup>86</sup> Reagan's rhetoric employs a simple, familiar, and personal style; a logic grounded in practical analogy; and an attitude that offers a singular perspective, unquestioned assumptions, and definitive portrayals.

Reagan's style encourages the perception that political problems are accessible to solution by the common action of ordinary people. Since common sense is "thin," political understanding requires no mysterious or arcane perceptiveness; things are as they appear.<sup>87</sup> The simplicity of apparently complex issues has been a continuing theme in Reagan's rhetoric. In the so-called Reaganomics speech, he declined to present "a jumble of charts, figures, and economic jargon"; his Strategic Defense Initiative was "not about spending arithmetic"; his proposal for Tax Reform was "a simple, straightforward message"; on Nicaragua, "the question the Congress of the United States will now answer is a simple one"; and on arms control, "the answer, my friends, is simple."<sup>88</sup>

One consequence of Reagan's simple style of common sense rhetoric is that he has been subject to charges of being simplistic throughout his political career. In a revealing response to that claim in his Inaugural Address as governor of California, Reagan said: "For many years, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to complex problems that are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is there *are* simple answers—just not easy ones."<sup>89</sup> Much of Reagan's relationship to his audience is contained in this "common sense" observation. The reference to "you and I" places Reagan and the audience together against the unspecified forces that oppose the participation of the people in political decision-making and the reference to "simple answers" opens up the political process. Character and style combine to reinforce the presumption that will and courage, not intelligence or expertise, are required to solve difficult political problems.

Aristotle noted that comparison with the familiar allows us to understand the unfamiliar<sup>90</sup> and the assumptions of common sense move that observation farther: unfamiliar events and complex situations are seen to be "really" like the simple and familiar understandings and beliefs of the group.<sup>91</sup> Reagan often uses a "common sense" logic of practical analogies to explain and justify his policy choices. In his Acceptance Address at the 1980 Republican Convention, for example, Reagan said: "I believe it is clear our federal government is overgrown and overweight. Indeed, it is time for our government to go on a diet."<sup>92</sup> And in his first speech on "Reaganomics," he met his opposition with common sense: "There were always those who told us that taxes couldn't be cut until spending was reduced. Well, you know, we can lecture our children against extravagance until we run out of voice and breath. Or we can cure their extravagance by simply reducing their allowance."<sup>93</sup> In Reagan's 1986 address on Nicaragua, the Nicaraguan government is referred to as "a second Cuba, a second Libya," while the *contras* are said to be "freedom fighters" who are "like the French Resistance that fought the Nazis."<sup>94</sup> By using the daily dilemmas of diets and allowances and the widely accepted evils of the Nazis and Cuba as parallels to current American policy-making, Reagan suggests that what might have been seen as complex and distant problems are amenable to simple and familiar (if not always pleasant) solutions. As he concluded later in the "Reaganomics" speech, "All it takes is a little common sense and recognition of our own ability."<sup>95</sup>

Since common sense is assumed to be "natural," the correctness and universality of the perceptions and judgments that Reagan propounds is also assumed.<sup>96</sup> His is not a carefully weighed reflection involving doubts and reservations; Reagan presents the picture clearly and incontestably and the actions follow naturally from his descriptions. In his Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security (the so-called "Star Wars" speech), for example, Reagan began by stating

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that further defense cuts "cannot be made" and that there is "no logical way" to reduce the defense budget without reducing security. In his description of Soviet power he stated that "the . . . militarization of Grenada . . . can only be seen as a power projection into that region" and that "the Soviet Union is acquiring what can only be considered an offensive military force." The appropriate actions are just as clear: "it was obvious that we had to begin a major modernization program," "we must continue to restore our military strength"; and with regard to his proposal: "Are we not capable of demonstrating our peaceful intentions by applying all our abilities and our ingenuity to achieving a truly lasting stability? I think we are. Indeed we must."<sup>97</sup>

This sense of unquestioned truth explains why the observations of theorists about common sense in general apply so smoothly to Reagan's rhetoric—a "maddening air of simple wisdom" exercises Reagan's critics and "comfortable certainties" reassure his supporters.<sup>98</sup> Since common sense justification relies on doing what any sensible person would do based on what everyone knows to be true, a narrative frame may encourage those within it to see intelligence in practical terms and to emphasize sensibility over intellectual analysis. The differing perspectives help to explain why his supporters can recognize that Reagan is "no rocket scientist" and still respect his intelligence,<sup>99</sup> at the same time that his opponents lament what seems to them to be his obvious intellectual weakness. Technical accomplishment has its place in a common sense perspective—expertise is useful, even essential, in making applications and in completing the details of policy—but one need not be a nuclear engineer or a tax accountant to know that nuclear strength ensures peace or that simplicity brings fairness."<sup>100</sup>

### Consequences for Policy: Incommensurable Frames

Fisher's description of the rational and narrative paradigms neatly summarizes major difference in perspective. From the point of view of the rational world paradigm, a story should be substantively true so that it can be used as evidence by example or analogy, or it should be vivid enough to illustrate the problem or its possible solution. In either case, stories are not considered likely to be able to carry the knowledge one needs to analyze and solve a problem. From the point of view of the narrative paradigm, a story should be a good story judged by internal aesthetic criteria and by external criteria of "fit" with the audience's experience and morality. In any case, it is likely to best express what one really needs to know to get by in the world. The two perspectives clash over standards for evidence and the appropriate basis for judgment.

The rhetorical critic should consider that any discourse can be described differently according to these competing though not contradictory accounts. Furthermore, the critic should consider that different auditors may respond differently to the same message because they are applying these different standards of apprehension.

The incommensurability of these two frames of reference is illustrated neatly in Walter Mondale's attack on Reagan's fiscal policy in the 1984 presidential campaign. In his acceptance address at the Democratic Convention, Mondale called for "a new realism." He challenged Reagan to "put his plan on the table next to mine" and then to "debate it on national television before the American people," and he contrasted Reagan's approach with "the truth" five times including his memorable promise to raise taxes: "Let's tell the truth—Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won't tell you. I just did."<sup>101</sup> Calls for

realism, debate, and truth are fundamental to rational analysis, but they take on a different meaning from within the narrative paradigm.

In the Second Inaugural and in the related speeches that followed,<sup>102</sup> Reagan offered two directions for reducing budget deficits. First, "a dynamic economy, with more citizens working and paying taxes," and second, an amendment that would "make it unconstitutional for the federal government to spend more than the federal government takes in." Both these strategies are grounded in the *telos* of Reagan's narrative. Working individuals tend naturally toward economic success unless blocked by barriers constructed by government. The federal government, on the other hand, will tend naturally toward expansion and will increase taxes and spending unless blocked by a permanent control that is beyond its power to change.<sup>103</sup> From the point of view of the rational paradigm, tax increases are the logical solution because adding revenue would correct the imbalance between income and expenditure. From the point of view of Reagan's story, tax increases are illogical because they would frustrate the individual initiative that is the basis for economic growth and they are immoral because they would violate the natural order by restraining individuals to benefit government. From the rational point of view, a Balanced Budget Amendment is irrelevant because it addresses a principle without dealing with the underlying problem. From the point of view of Reagan's narrative, the amendment is logical because the federal government will never act contrary to its natural character without some outside restraint and it is moral because it is directed toward the quest for individual freedom.

The dispute over tax policy reveals different structures of perception that lead to different policy conclusions. The distinctive character of these differences is that they are defined by Reagan's reliance on narrative form. It is not just the nature of the particular story, but the reliance on story-telling that defines the relationship of those who accept Reagan's rhetoric to a complex of significant issues. A narrative perspective uses consistency with the story as the primary measure of truth, emphasizes moral standards for judgment, and features common sense as the basis for making political decisions.

## CONCLUSIONS

When Reagan is seen as a story-teller and his message is seen as a story, it becomes evident why he was so successful in "re-invigorating" the country—his story gave a clear, powerful, reassuring, and self-justifying meaning to America's public life. And it is evident why Reagan's personal popularity consistently exceeds support for his policies—to accept the story is to see Reagan both as a hero exemplifying the virtues of manly efficacy and as a realistic narrator telling things as they are; it makes sense to rely on Reagan-in-the-story. The reason that charges against Reagan's lack of compassion or his militarism have been ineffectual is that the nature of social justice and peace, and the appropriate means for their achievement, are defined from within his story. The reason that repeated charges of ignorance and factual error have not affected either Reagan's popularity or his credibility is that truth is judged in the context of the story and the story is judged for its fit with popular morality and common sense. In short, Reagan demonstrates the enormous appeal of a narrative form handled with artistry by a major public figure.

Reagan also demonstrates how limiting reliance on a single, unquestioned narrative structure can be when applied to the range of national and international concerns that comprise American political discourse. The effectiveness of Reagan's



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transcendent narrative depends upon establishing the story as the primary context for understanding people and events. Such a self-contained communication form is effective because it is clear, complete, and (therefore) reassuring. In addition to its evident effectiveness, however, such a narrative is also fragile and dangerous.

A dominant narrative structure is fragile because the requirement of internal consistency is permanent, while the ability of people responding to events to maintain that consistency is inevitably partial and temporary. The fragility of Reagan's story became evident in the public response to the *Iran/contra* affair. Since Reagan's character and his actions were perceived as a part of his story and were judged on the basis of their consistency with that story, his credibility was intact as long as he remained consistent. Perceived inconsistency with the standards that he had established, however, was devastating and the effects were immediate and (apparently) lasting.<sup>104</sup>

Reagan's dominant narrative is dangerous because its assertion of permanence assumes both insularity from material conditions and isolation from social commentary. His mythic rhetoric appeals to a tradition of belief and action that lends credence to the virtues and actions that are justified by his historical sense, but the justification is limited by Reagan's limited notion of history. An essential part of Alasdair MacIntyre's consideration of the ethical role of narrative thinking is that "a living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."<sup>105</sup> When Reagan treats American history as a clearly defined set of actions with a clear and constant set of lessons to be applied to present action and future policy direction, he isolates his vision from historical reinterpretation and from current controversy. Reagan's consistency provides his audiences with a clear, simple, and familiar framework within which to encompass complex or unfamiliar problems. Yielding to this enticing vision can be dangerous, however, because the assumption of the story's truth hides its contingent nature and its implicit ideology. Adherence to a single story with a single point of view can make good judgment more difficult by reinforcing the legitimacy of a single set of social stereotypes and by promoting an exclusively American point of view on international problems.<sup>106</sup>

A related danger concerns the role of the public in Reagan's version of America's story. Relying on the (presumably) established moral code and the (presumably) accepted common sense of the American people to establish the legitimacy of the story implicitly denies the legitimacy of either change or challenge with the result that the story's participants are driven to a posture of passive acceptance.<sup>107</sup> Ironically, Reagan's story of an actively heroic American public forces those who accept it into the position of being listeners rather than creators. At most, the individual becomes a participant in a pre-established historical frame.

The application of narrative theory to Reagan's rhetoric also raises some broader questions regarding narrative and political judgment. Fisher's assertion of the moral superiority of the narrative paradigm<sup>108</sup> is not confirmed. Reagan's story-telling does emphasize moral argument and it does act as an explicit counter to technical elitism, but, as just noted, it may also damage public morality. This examination of Reagan's rhetoric suggests that Fisher's reliance on the Aristotelian dictum that "the 'people' have a natural tendency to prefer the true and the just"<sup>109</sup> may be a mystification that requires a more careful examination of the ways in which stories are accepted or rejected. Reagan has shown that powerful appeals can be made to popular belief and popular morality through the narrative form, but the acceptance of his story and the durability of his popularity also

seem to show that there is a preference for clarity over complexity, for consistency over aberration, for positive direction over acceptance of limitations, and for self-justification by the derogation of one's enemies. Goods internal to the story need to be consistent with the moral judgment of the audience, and truths that are accepted within the story need to be consistent with the common sense of the audience, but it is not clear from examining this case in which narrative form is dominant that narrative is likely to provide a morality or truth that is superior to other forms of discourse or to combinations of other forms.

There are other disturbing problems as well. Despite identifying two "paradigms," Fisher assumes that rational and narrative modes of thinking are fundamentally compatible.<sup>110</sup> He argues that considerations of narrative fidelity can subsume the skills and requirements of logic. But this examination of Reagan's rhetoric and the responses to it suggests that the narrative and the rational perspectives can be distinctive and incommensurable. One need not claim that narrative is irrational to distinguish its characteristic form of rationality from that of the "rational world" paradigm. Having made the distinction between these two modes of thought clear, it becomes difficult to accept Fisher's conclusion that narrative offers a superior and fully encompassing alternative.<sup>111</sup>

Americans have listened to Ronald Reagan as President for almost a decade, usually with admiration, but often without agreement. Some have heard poor arguments and marveled at his ability to delude audiences; others have heard good stories and dismissed his errors as trivial. And while the *Iran/contra* crisis has diminished the credibility of Reagan's presidency, it has not altered the forms of understanding through which he is heard. Until the differences in judgment are identified as differences in perspective, there will be little ground for common discussion and little motivation for self-analysis.

#### NOTES

Mary McGrory, ". . . and growls from the training camp," *Des Moines Register*, 6 September 1985, 12A. Paul Erickson begins his book on Reagan with the judgment that, "Ronald Reagan is by far the most persuasive speaker of our time." *Reagan Speaks* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>1</sup>"More Popular Than Ever," *Time*, 12 August 1985, 17.

Sidney Blumenthal, "The Reagan Millennium," *New Republic*, 19 November 1984, 12.

The books cover a range of policies and perspectives, some are explicitly political and were designed to influence election campaigns: Edmund G. Brown, *Reagan and Reality* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Brown and Bill Brown, *Reagan: the Political Chameleon* (New York: Praeger, 1976); Mark Green and Gail MacColl, *There He Goes Again: Ronald Reagan's Reign of Error* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). Others respond to specific issues: Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1982); Strobe Talbott, *Deadly Gambits: The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Fred Ackerman, *Reaganomics: Rhetoric vs. Reality* (Boston: South End Press, 1982); Joan Claybrook, *Retreat From Safety: Reagan's Attack on America's Health* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). Others attempt more thorough or scholarly appraisals of Reagan's statements and policies: Ronald Dallek, *Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Ronnie Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man and his Presidency* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

Dallek, 178.

Dallek, viii.

"Innocence Abroad," *The New Republic*, 3 June 1985, 7.

Martin Medhurst, "Postponing the Social Agenda: Reagan's Strategy and Tactics," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 48 (1984): 262-76; Henry Z. Scheele, "Ronald Reagan's 1980 Acceptance Address: A Focus on American Values," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 48 (1984): 51-61; Bert E. Bradley, "Jefferson and Reagan: The Rhetoric of Two Inaugurals," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 48 (1983): 119-36; Walter Fisher, "Romantic Democracy, Ronald Reagan, and Presidential Heroes," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (1982): 299-310.

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- Richard L. Johannesen, "An Ethical Assessment of the Reagan Rhetoric, 1981-82," *Political Communication Yearbook 1984*, eds[.] Keith R. Sanders, Lynda Lee Kaid, and Dan Nino (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 226-41; C. Thomas Pleston, Jr., "Reagan's 'New Beginning': Is it the 'New Deal' of the Eighties?" *Southern Speech Communication Journal 49* (1984): 198-211; Gregg Phifer, "Two Inaugurals: A Second Look," *Southern Speech Communication Journal 48* (1983): 378-85.
- "David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E. Tutzauer, "Reagan's Safety Net for the Truly Needy: The Rhetorical Uses of Definition," *Central States Speech Journal 35* (1984): 113-19; Richard E. Crable and Steven L. Vibbert, "Argumentative Stance and Political Faith Healing: 'The Dream Will Come True,["]" *Quarterly Journal of Speech 69* (1983): 290-301. In his explanation of Reagan's approach to Soviet-American relations Robert L. Ivie found that "a flawed policy is being perceived as successful because of how it is symbolized." "Speaking 'Common Sense' About the Soviet Threat: Reagan's Rhetorical Stance," *Western Journal of Speech Communication 48* (1984): 40. Sarah Russell Hankins concluded that "the presidential choice in 1980 was an attempt to align the human with the illusion of the heroic." "Archetypal Alloy: Reagan's Rhetorical Image," *Central States Speech Journal 34* (1983): 34. Similarly, Martha Anna Martin wrote that "the cumulative language, if not the reality, suggested that Carter was an 'unfit' leader." "Ideologues, Ideographs, and 'The Best Men': From Carter to Reagan," *Southern Speech Communication Journal 49* (1983): 19. Gary C. Woodward makes a parallel claim about Reagan's populist appeal: "Populism has taken on a cosmetic and ironic purpose . . . pretending to serve the 'public interest', but serving what may be very private interests indeed." "Reagan as Roosevelt: The Elasticity of Pseudo-Populist Appeals," *Central State Speech Journal 34* (1983): 57-8.
- Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs 51* (1984): 1-22.
- <sup>12</sup>See Erickson, esp. chapter 3, "Analogies, Allegories, and Homilies," 32-50; David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 90.
- "Martin Medhurst demonstrates the way in which Reagan employs the theme of America as a nation that was set apart, by God. As he notes, "the theme of a people set apart is . . . a standard topos of civil-religious discourse in America." Medhurst, 270. Both Erickson and Johannesen suggest that Reagan's rhetoric uses the form of the jeremiad and the substance of American civil religion. *Reagan Speaks*, 86-93; Richard Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal*, forthcoming. Janice Hocker Rushing argues that "the mythic milieu of the ['Star Wars'] speech is the transformation of the Old West into the New Frontier," "Ronald Reagan's 'Star Wars' Address: Mythic Containment of Technical Reasoning," *Quarterly Journal of Speech 72* (1986): 417. Perhaps the most notable development of this idea is Gary Wills, *Reagan's America* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).
- "For example, in commenting on Reagan's arms negotiations in Iceland, Anthony Lewis wrote: "Ronald Reagan has never been more breathtaking as a politician than in the weeks since Reykjavik. He has pictured failure as success, black as white, incompetence as standing up to the Russians. And according to the polls, Americans love the performance." Quoted in Thomas Griffith, "Being Too Easy on Reagan," *Time*, 17 November 1986, 88.
- "This has been evident particularly in the response of the press. A *Time* magazine editorial, for example, offered the following explanation: "A frustrated Washington press corps had felt itself ignored by a public that did not want to hear criticism of a popular President. But the sudden and steep decline in Reagan's popularity suggests that all along the public had recognized, in a man it admired, how casually he minded the store, and how willfully he could deny facts or distort them." Thomas Griffith, "Watergate: A Poor Parallel," *Time*, 29 December 1986, 57.
- "As even the *Washington Post* conceded, "this president has given tens of millions of people in this country a feeling that safe, stable times are returned and that fundamental values they hold dear are back in vogue and unashamedly so" (January 22, 1985).
- <sup>17</sup>Since the narrative logic of Reagan's story makes his actions in the arms deal difficult to explain, the dominant response has been to remove Reagan from the story either by suggesting that he had no control over the actions of his subordinates or by suggesting that Reagan himself had changed and questioning his mental or physical health.
- <sup>18</sup>In his campaign speeches, Reagan told the story as a humorous example. In Milwaukee, for example, he said, "Our pledge is for tax simplification, to make the system more fair, to make it easier to understand. Do you know that Einstein has admitted he cannot understand the Form 1040? [laughter]." *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (hereafter, *WCPD*), 8 October 1985, 1381. In his speech to the nation he told the story in slightly different form: "We call it America's tax plan because it will reduce tax burdens on the working people of this country, close loopholes that benefit a privileged few, simplify a code so complex even Albert

- Richard L. Johannesen, "An Ethical Assessment of the Reagan Rhetoric, 1981-82," *Political Communication Yearbook 1984*, eds. J. Keith R. Sanders, Lynda Lee Kaid, and Dan Nino (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 226-41; C. Thomas Pieston, Jr., "Reagan's 'New Beginning': Is it the 'New Deal' of the Eighties?" *Southern Speech Communication Journal 49* (1984): 198-211; Gregg Phifer, "Two Inaugurals: A Second Look," *Southern Speech Communication Journal 48* (1983): 378-85.
- <sup>11</sup>David Zarefsky, Carol Miller-Tutzauer, and Frank E. Tutzauer, "Reagan's Safety Net for the Truly Needy: The Rhetorical Uses of Definition," *Central States Speech Journal 35* (1984): 113-19; Richard E. Crable and Steven L. Vibbert, "Argumentative Stance and Political Faith Healing: 'The Dream Will Come True, [']" *Quarterly Journal of Speech 69* (1983): 290-301. In his explanation of Reagan's approach to Soviet-American relations Robert L. Ivie found that "a flawed policy is being perceived as successful because of how it is symbolized." "Speaking 'Common Sense' About the Soviet Threat: Reagan's Rhetorical Stance," *Western Journal of Speech Communication 48* (1984): 40. Sarah Russell Hankins concluded that "the presidential choice in 1980 was an attempt to align the human with the illusion of the heroic." "Archetypal Alloy: Reagan's Rhetorical Image," *Central States Speech Journal 34* (1983): 34. Similarly, Martha Anna Martin wrote that "the cumulative language, if not the reality, suggested that Carter was an 'unfit' leader." "Ideologues, Ideographs, and 'The Best Men': From Carter to Reagan," *Southern Speech Communication Journal 49* (1983): 19. Gary C. Woodward makes a parallel claim about Reagan's populist appeal: "Populism has taken on a cosmetic and ironic purpose . . . pretending to serve the 'public interest', but serving what may be very private interests indeed." "Reagan as Roosevelt: The Elasticity of Pseudo-Populist Appeals," *Central States Speech Journal 34* (1983): 57-8.
- Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs 51* (1984): 1-22.
- <sup>12</sup>See Erickson, esp. chapter 3, "Analogies, Allegories, and Homilies," 32-50; David Stockman, *The Triumph of Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 90.
- <sup>13</sup>Martin Medhurst demonstrates the way in which Reagan employs the theme of America as a nation that was set apart, by God. As he notes, "the theme of a people set apart is . . . a standard topos of civil-religious discourse in America." Medhurst, 270. Both Erickson and Johannesen suggest that Reagan's rhetoric uses the form of the jeremiad and the substance of American civil religion. *Reagan Speaks*, 86-93; Richard Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal*, forthcoming. Janice Hocker Rushing argues that "the mythic milieu of the ['Star Wars'] speech is the transformation of the Old West into the New Frontier." "Ronald Reagan's 'Star Wars' Address: Mythic Containment of Technical Reasoning," *Quarterly Journal of Speech 72* (1986): 417. Perhaps the most notable development of this idea is Gary Wills, *Reagan's America* (New York: Doubleday, 1987).
- <sup>14</sup>For example, in commenting on Reagan's arms negotiations in Iceland, Anthony Lewis wrote: "Ronald Reagan has never been more breathtaking as a politician than in the weeks since Reykjavik. He has pictured failure as success, black as white, incompetence as standing up to the Russians. And according to the polls, Americans love the performance." Quoted in Thomas Griffith, "Being Too Easy on Reagan," *Time*, 17 November 1986, 88.
- <sup>15</sup>This has been evident particularly in the response of the press. A *Time* magazine editorial, for example, offered the following explanation: "A frustrated Washington press corps had felt itself ignored by a public that did not want to hear criticism of a popular President. But the sudden and steep decline in Reagan's popularity suggests that all along the public had recognized, in a man it admired, how casually he minded the store, and how willfully he could deny facts or distort them." Thomas Griffith, "Watergate: A Poor Parallel," *Time*, 29 December 1986, 57.
- <sup>16</sup>As even the *Washington Post* conceded, "this president has given tens of millions of people in this country a feeling that safe, stable times are returned and that fundamental values they hold dear are back in vogue and unashamedly so" (January 22, 1985).
- <sup>17</sup>Since the narrative logic of Reagan's story makes his actions in the arms deal difficult to explain, the dominant response has been to remove Reagan from the story either by suggesting that he had no control over the actions of his subordinates or by suggesting that Reagan himself had changed and questioning his mental or physical health.
- <sup>18</sup>In his campaign speeches, Reagan told the story as a humorous example. In Milwaukee, for example, he said, "Our pledge is for tax simplification, to make the system more fair, to make it easier to understand. Do you know that Einstein has admitted he cannot understand the Form 1040? [laughter]." *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* (hereafter, *WCFD*), 8 October 1985, 1381. In his speech to the nation he told the story in slightly different form: "We call it America's tax plan because it will reduce tax burdens on the working people of this country, close loopholes that benefit a privileged few, simplify a code so complex even Albert