



# IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences  
Hillsdale College Hillsdale, Michigan 49242  
Volume 15, No. 6  
June, 1986

## UNDONE BY VICTORY: POLITICAL SUCCESS AND THE SUBVERSION OF CONSERVATIVE POLITICS.

By M. E. Bradford

**Editor's Preview:** Long-time observer of national and regional politics, University of Dallas professor of English, M. E. Bradford, examines the disappointment of Reagan's "friends and followers who cannot understand why so little administrative use has been made of so much success at the polls."

The problem, he suggests, is not unique to the Reagan administration, but can be attributed to the fact that the President has only a few thousand appointments at his disposal. Political realities often dictate that many of these posts go to compromise candidates and political pragmatists. Thus an administration can become indifferent or only partially committed to its executive's philosophy and announced policies. Congressional support, even from members of his own party, is similarly unreliable. Even officeholders who share his views may opt for the preservation of their own political interests over goals such as the reduction of the federal budget and the government bureaucracy.

"Business as usual" will go indefinitely in Washington, Dr. Bradford asserts, unless conservatives who aren't afraid of risking their appointments and their political ambitions are chosen to staff the President's administration.

On many occasions following President Reagan's first and surprising triumph of November 1980, and then again after his landslide reelection of 1984, I have listened to or read from discussions by journalists and historians, political scientists and pundits who took as their theme the line of demarcation, the watershed, in American political history which could be perceived as proceeding from the size and composition of the Reagan electorate. In their affirmation of a doctrine or program radically different from those enforced upon our countrymen by their ostensibly benevolent protectors during the last fifty years these voters gave augury of political transformation, a sea change in the behavior of the American people. However, even though the component parts of the Reagan constituency are still present within the national body politic—"out there"—ready to be called forth when



properly solicited—and though few of the electors who voted for President Reagan have changed their minds concerning the important issues of his two national campaigns, the Reagan presidency has not brought about the "revolution" it seemed, at first, to promise.

This lowering of expectations is apparent not merely to his adversaries or among self-appointed, self-proclaimed authorities but also to his friends and faithful followers who cannot understand why so little administrative use has been made of so much success at the polls. These erstwhile partisans have therefore lost much of their faith in the efficacy of electoral politics, no matter how large the margin of victory their party might achieve; and they are thus disposed to turn away from public questions, toward private, alternative methods of preserving the meaning of their lives. The kind of disenchantment which I detect at every hand implies, of course, no afterthoughts concerning Presidential preference. It is, however, a measure of how different from the incumbent the leaders of his party who come after

him may be, and of how poorly they may be received when they present themselves to a voting public profoundly weary of managerial Presidencies.

But in prologue to anything further I might say about the *gestalt*, the structure of the Reagan Presidency, as a less dramatic phenomenon than what we had expected, I should in fairness admit that its subversion by political success and electoral triumph has not been different in kind from what has happened throughout the modern era to other ambitious administrations not prepared to confront the machinery of government established in Washington, as the prophet Samuel confronted Agag, King of the Amalekites (I Samuel 15: 32-33); or with at least an approximation of such holy rigor. Yet, though this deflation in office is the same kind of attenuation that we have seen before, it has been different in the degree, in the proportions of its unfulfilled promise, as measured against the enthusiasm of its most vigorous partisans. How support of the announced agenda of this government became a disadvantage for those who attempted (or wished) to carry it out by service in appointed office is a checkered story, and too complicated for tracing here. But I can suggest a few of its causes and consequences, using details of recent history—the public record—and a small narrative of my own experience.

The initial problem which faced the Reagan administration in its first term and now is the process it employs to select persons to fill the 6,093 slots available to its immediate disposition. I speak now of people ostensibly committed to carrying out the particulars of the Reagan Revolution. That many of these posts have gone to “pragmatists” and “Reaganites” (those “loyal to the President as a man”—whatever that means—but often unaware of or indifferent to his announced policies) goes without saying. The *Washington Post*, in September 1985, ran a series of articles on conservatives in places of authority which highlighted this distinction between opposing species. The division it describes is present in

#### About the Author

M. E. Bradford is a professor of English at the University of Dallas and the author of five books including his most recent work, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (1985). In addition, he has written over 200 articles and reviews and has contributed to 20 books. His articles on literature, history, politics, and culture have appeared in *Modern Age*, a journal which he serves as a senior editor, *National Review*, *The Southern Partisan*, *Southern Review*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, and *Sewanee Review*. Dr. Bradford is the outgoing president of the Philadelphia Society and currently serves on the presidentially-appointed Board of Foreign Scholarships.

every government—it was a besetting problem of the Carter White House, gave pause to Harry Truman, worried Jack Kennedy, broke the health of Woodrow Wilson, and divided the cabinet of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It is the pervasive strength of the caretaker spirit visible in the selection of personnel for government service that is surprising in the Reagan White House, not the fact that it is present there and has a voice in making prudential decisions. Certainly it has had a powerful effect upon the Office of Presidential Personnel, which, under President Reagan, seems to be for the most part more interested in recommending untroublesome appointments than in suggesting nominees who might, at some cost in controversy, introduce earned distinction and commitment to principle into corners of the government where they have not been heretofore influential; and the same might be argued of personnel selection at lower echelons. Which is to say nothing about determinations of policy such as *follow inevitably* from the choice of staff.

Closely related to the difficulty of the administration in selecting personnel and the softness in policy which is born of a reluctance to put its trust in decisive, high-profile supporters of the President's announced intentions is its corresponding inability to secure Senate approval for appointees to the 584 jobs that require such confirmation. Thus far, White House staffers have not learned the art of translating the powers of the President into votes in support of his nominations; but, more important, there is no evidence of discipline among Senate Republicans (a problem which, to be sure, once troubled Democratic Presidents in dealing with Democratic senators). Indeed, it appears that certain senators feel themselves to be in no way threatened by Reagan's disfavor even if they deny him his choice of government officers needed to implement the doctrines ratified by the nation in his campaigns of 1980 and 1984. The White House staff, especially the political branch, is to blame for some of this dereliction. But their irresponsibility is nothing beside that of the United States Senate itself, which behaves as if it were at liberty, under the Constitution, to cancel the results of two general elections—the clearest expression of popular will given at the polls in our time. When I read of senators—Republicans—who refuse to support a nominee of the President for a post in the Justice Department because the nominee agrees with the President's position, I am reminded of one of the great constitutional crises of the previous century, the contrempts brought on by the refusal of President Andrew Johnson to abide by the provisions of the Tenure of Office Act of March 2, 1867, legislation created by the “Radical Republicans” in Congress to prevent their President from employing the “servants” he required to execute his decisions. The putative moral superiority of the opinions of Senator Mathias can be no excuse for violating the separation of powers provided for by the Framers—and upheld by the Supreme Court when it repudiated Thaddeus Stevens and all of his Jacobin allies. But it is to be expected that the outrages of other eras in-



ected by ideology should be repeated in this, the age of "equality at any price." That is, unless those in authority call a halt and insist that confirmation hearings operate within certain boundaries, and that they proceed with expedition. Otherwise we risk a repetition of the impasse of 1868 which almost destroyed our form of government.



A summary and illustration of both of the distressing patterns I have just described appears in the recent career of a faithful servant of the President. In his first adventure with the Reagan Administration, Mr. Edward Curran, an educator, was appointed Director of the National Institute of Education in the U. S. Department of Education. He did not approach this assignment in a doctrinaire spirit, or with the intention of discontinuing any useful activity of government within his purview. Certainly he exhibited no anterior determination to practice frugality at the expense of the legitimate needs of students, to whose education he had given his adult life. Yet once familiar with the vacuity of the programs sponsored by the Institute, he acted in the spirit of reform promised by his party and wrote to President Reagan recommending that it be abolished, in keeping with the President's public reservations about the continuation of useless activities within the entire department. Secretary Bell, in response to this impolitic honesty on the part of Mr. Curran, discharged him from his post. Thereafter Mr. Curran was assigned to be deputy director of the Peace Corps, where he was once again mistreated for agreeing with his President. This year Mr. Curran came up before a Senate Committee as the President's nominee to be chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Unfriendly senators of both parties, determined to prevent the chief executive from governing with his own people, made a circus of the proceedings—a performance which featured assertions concerning Curran's earlier effort to do away with part of the great Leviathan. *Sunt lacrima rerum.* And Ed Curran, as I speak, is left in limbo. (On November 19, 1985, Mr. Curran's nomination was re-

jected by a tie vote of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee. Republican Senate leadership did little to protect or foster this nominee. His case is an example of the division of spirit which has undermined the Reagan regime and many others that went before it, all of them caught between assigning a first priority to holding ground, to a reactive strategy suited to preserving power as an end in itself, and the opposing view which understands power as valuable only in so far as it is instrumental, prompting an "uncomfortable" Presidency which exists primarily to accomplish its goals.

But the most puzzling and pervasive of all the functional shortcomings of the Reagan administration has nothing to do with the timidity of the Office of Presidential Personnel or the unruliness of Senate Republicans. Instead I turn now to a contradiction between potential and result which occurs *after* capable and loyal people have been appointed and/or confirmed in positions of great importance, to subversion by victory in its most complicated form. Once they are settled in Washington and part of an established government, a terrible transformation in point-of-view and frame-of-reference changes into "something new and strange" otherwise responsible persons. Many of the explanations for this metamorphosis are familiar to most students of contemporary American government—that administrators come to confuse the size, influence, and budget of their department or agency with the interests of the Republic; that they are made defensive by high station and the ponderous machinery of the State; that the kind of prudence which accompanies a sense of achievement lends itself to paralysis and to domination by values accepted as axioms in Washington despite the fact that they are roundly rejected by most of the nation. It is also true that many Reagan appointees sincerely feel that nothing can be done. Inertia often cancels the impact of elections. Yet this calculus only begins to account for the declension which I describe. For most of the Reagan appointees of whom I speak knew full well before they assumed office in Washington that they arrived there as conquerors of an occupied city, a city loyal to defeated and exiled "princes," eager for their restoration and ready at every opportunity to frustrate the "barbarians" now within the walls. They knew, as Reagan supporters, to treat the Capital as a captured place, still infected by an ideological virus planted there more than fifty years ago and nurtured by most of the governments which have controlled it since that time; and they knew the bureaucracy to be made up of their implacable enemies—men and women confident that they are the legitimate government, obliged to absorb and neutralize successive waves of "mere politicians" brought to authority by the accident of election. Even so, for reasons that go deeper than the usual explanations, these realists have often been undone.

The greatest impediment to performance behind the failure of the Reagan regime to change the government delivered into its keeping in a root and branch reforma-

tion is that its constituent members have come to think of the status which they enjoy as theirs *by nature* and not be dint of political labor and popular delegation. Life in Washington, DC causes them to forget why they acquired their offices, and under what conditions. Moreover, while they might wish to pacify their enemies, they have failed to support one another, coveting a respectability offered to them in the environment of the Capital by pretending to be "different from most Republicans" or "most conservatives." The truth is, of course, that such respectability is granted only to those who agree that the Reagan Revolution is no more than a rhetorical device and that only those positions held in common by President Reagan and President Ford can have a place in a responsible Republican government—allowing for small increases, adjustments in fiscal policy, tepid leadership of the Free World in foreign policy and minor tinkering with the War on Poverty. There is a widespread belief among Reagan appointees that only a "soft" style of administration can effect changes which will be accepted because no one notices them until they are in place. According to these worthies, there can be no fundamental assault from the Right on the network of controls by which the State overgoverns almost every detail of our lives. The trouble with this teaching is that it is incongruous as a doctrine for counterrevolution. And the people expected nothing less from elections of 1980 and 1984.

To illustrate the foregoing generalizations, I will tell you the personal story I promised a little earlier. In the small role which I perform as a member of the Board of Foreign Scholarships, I hear (with my eleven colleagues) regular discussions of the budget and outreach of the United States Information Agency, the division of the government which carries out our policy decisions concerning international exchanges of students and teachers and provides a necessary supporting staff. The agency is administered by Reagan loyalists who are known to share in the President's general philosophy. Yet I have heard from these appointed officers of the administration not one word about the need for retrenchment in a time of large public debt. Instead they voice their delight at increases in funding likely to augment the size of their small empires; they often seem to think like the civil servants they are supposed to direct. In treating their activities as ends in themselves, they have left some members of the Board speechless; and other members like myself cynical and ironic. Only Professor Forrest McDonald, a well-known historian and member of the Board, has spoken out plainly and refused to accept their version of things. His direct language has been received by those better accustomed to Washington doublethink with dismay and

outright astonishment. It is true that, other things being equal, there are good arguments concerning the national interest for supporting most of these exchanges at some level of funding. But we must take great care if we and all our compatriots who serve as part of the present regime are not to be reduced to a mere faction.

What I would tell my friends in authority is that to restore the Reagan Revolution, it will above all else be necessary for them to make and confirm some surprising appointments, to translate the still available political inertia into genuine political change. We must all go on the offensive. We must insist on seeing in the place of the caretakers people better suited for garrison duty: men and women who regard the art of governing a state as nothing less than a continuation of the struggle which gave administration into their hands—a winning of the battle to organize—coming after the battle to be elected. Said another way, we must give up our hope of placating the enemy and concentrate instead on deserving the continued support of our oldest friends, on the political obligations to all the parts of the Reagan electorate that must be honored if our victories are to be more than what Lionel Trilling called (when speaking of conservative interludes in the dominant political pattern of his time) "irritable mental gestures," moments of impatience with some part of the grand design, soon concluded by a recovery of "reason" and "even temper."

Moreover, those of us who remember the origins of the hope we once entertained, the faith that politics could make a difference, must learn how to rebuff the adversary when his rhetoric denies priority to the common good—when, in the name of his favorite "god terms" which assume the absolute value of peace, of tolerance, of charity, he sets out to intimidate into silence our better judgment concerning a particular issue. We must continue to play the role of the *vir bonus*, the plain, blunt man, insisting that no component of President Reagan's support should be defrauded of its rightful share of the attention and energy of this government. And we must be clear about the moral superiority of practicing only the kind of loyalty to a President that follows from his announced opinions—as opposed to a loyalty that is empty of meaning and subject to the whims of the moment. For half a century conservatives have had *no* function but to slow down the train, to modify here and there proposals initiated by the Left. We need now to make certain that we are more than an alternate crew for their obsolete engine, and that the destination of our journey is quite different from the one our adversaries had in mind. Only then will our political activity bear fruit and result in something more than "business as usual," mendacity and mere opportunism, in the District of Columbia.



Editor, Joseph S. McNamara. Managing Editor, Lissa Roche. Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. The opinions expressed in *Imprimis* may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its outreach divisions. Copyright © 1986. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the following credit line is used verbatim: "Reprinted by permission from *Imprimis*, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College, featuring presentations at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives and at its Shavano Institute for National Leadership." ISSN 0277-8432.

