

Summing Up the Reagan Era

What really happened to America during the Reagan era? Answering that question will occupy historians for years to come. But now that the decade Reagan dominated has come to a close, statistical data and trends are beginning to provide at least a preliminary answer. Karl Zinsmeister, who makes it his business to find out what numbers are saying, here offers a numerical portrait of America during the 1980s.

by Karl Zinsmeister

For all the academic ink devoted to the subject of revolution, history is rarely discontinuous, rarely an affair of dramatic leaps or breaks. While rhetoric and the emotional environment can shift quickly, the actual workings of a society usually change at about the same rate as the proverbial freight train. Just the same, there are occasional turning points in any nation's life, when the engine crests a hill or enters a deep curve. The train remains a train—momentum intact—but thanks to a thousand small changes in pressure and direction among its moving parts a different hum rises from the tracks.

Since we now find ourselves at the end of a decade, the question naturally presents itself: Were the 1980s such a time for America?

Viewed presidentially, the '80s were one part Jimmy Carter, eight parts Ronald Reagan, and one part George Bush. The decade seems destined to be known, however, as the era of the "Reagan Revolution." Just how revolutionary a time it was depends upon where you set your gaze, but the range of sub-possibilities extends from "More than you might think," to "A

lot less than you've been told."

At its self-proclaimed core, the revolution was a clear underachiever. For an epoch supposedly characterized by its backlash against government spending, government intrusion, and government presence in national life, there was far less action than fanfare. Not a single public housing project was privatized. The sagebrush rebellion didn't pry any western lands out of Uncle Sam's grasp. Zooming farm subsidies and protections cost a total of \$200 billion during the 1980s, by far the highest figure in our history. Enterprise zones, school prayers, and "the anti-communist resistance" in Nicaragua were so real to White House staffers as to have earned their own function keys on the speechwriting computers. But to average Americans they remained just slogans. Not a single tuition or social-service voucher was ever handed to a poor person over the head of a bureaucrat. And not only is there still a Department of Education, it spent one-and-a-half times as much in 1989 as it did ten years earlier.

In fiscal year 1980 the federal budget totaled 22.1 percent of U.S. GNP. By 1989, the figure had dropped all the way to 22.2 percent. No axe job! Not even any whit-

ting! No decrease at all! (For ancient history buffs, the figure was 16.0 percent in 1950.) That's the revenge of the Neanderthal conservatives?

Even on the narrower front of federal taxes, where it is constantly claimed that the Reagan administration made cuts of "irresponsible" proportions, the changes were distinctly mouse-like: Over the decade, the proportion of national output channeled into the federal till went from 19.4 to 19.3 percent (compared with 14.8 percent in 1950). And if state and local taxes are taken into consideration, one can only conclude that during the 1980s the American people took a little more government onto their backs.

Mathematicians in the audience will detect a mismatch between the taxes-in and spending-out figures cited above. That discrepancy is called "the deficit," a definite growth sector and the favorite subject of the policy class during most of the last decade. The federal deficit stood at \$74 billion in 1980, peaked at \$221 billion in 1986, and weighed in at \$115 billion by decade's end. So much for fiscal prudence and other pinched Republican concepts.

Accumulated and metamorphosed over the years like so much sea-bottom silt, federal deficits eventually become federal debt, an increasingly plentiful quantity in America during the 1980s. On New Year's Eve 1979 the national debt stood at \$834 billion. Ten Auld Lang Syne's later it hit \$2.3 trillion. These figures inspired rare harmonic caterwauls from both the right and the left.

Recent U.S. binging, however, appears only routine when viewed against the behavior of other big-spending national governments. The U.S. deficit has lately amounted to a little over 3 percent of GNP. The Japanese—they of the mystical discipline, the sober frugality—were running up tabs half again as large, as of 1987. The



President Reagan sometimes had trouble explaining his budgets to the nation. During his budget speech of April 29, 1982, he couldn't get his red marker to work on his charts.

Canadians, Austrians, and Spanish were also overspending their allowances by a larger portion than the United States, and the Italians, Irish, and Belgians, heaven help them, actually had double-digit deficit/GNP ratios.

If we sharpen our focus on U.S. budget figures even further and look toward the supposed heart of the Reagan hit list—social welfare spending—we still see little evidence of any adherence to an anti-bloat diet. Federal spending on Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, health, housing, education, and anti-poverty measures totaled 4.9 percent of GNP in 1960, 7.8 percent in 1970, 11.3 percent in 1980, and 11.3 percent in 1987. Much ballyhooed overhauls of the Social Security and welfare systems, replete with "blue-ribbon" commissions, presidential task forces, and "shadow committee" proposals resulted in the end in two distinct "Poofs!" that could be heard hundreds of miles from the nation's capital. Both reform efforts ultimately carried far more fingerprints of steady-as-she-goes Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan than of the would-be earthquake inducers in the Reagan administration.

The Reagan presidency was not without its effect on the budget, however. Raising spending is a lot easier than reducing it, naturally, and in the area of national de-

fense a notable expansion was accomplished. From its 1980 level of just under \$200 billion, defense spending was increased to slightly more than \$300 billion in the late 1980s (both figures in 1989 dollars). Here too, though, ephemerality was the byword. Defense outlays, which had represented 9.5 percent of GNP in 1960, 8.3 percent in 1970, and 5.0 percent in 1980, bobbed up to a peak of 6.5 percent of GNP in 1986 before dribbling back under six percent again by the decade's end.

People who understand physics claim that entropy is the law of the universe, but in Washington, D.C., inertia dominates. Truth is, the alleged "political realignment" of the 1980s produced relatively minor alterations of policy, and it resulted in almost no lasting change of casts. Following the relatively short-lived dominance of Republicans in the Senate (1981–87), the iron rule of the incumbents (which in Congress means Democrats) reasserted itself. In recent elections, incumbents in the House of Representatives have been victorious in literally 99 percent of their races. (Early in this century it was common for half of all Congressional incumbents to be replaced in an election year. As recently as the late 1940s, about one-fifth got dumped.) Competition has effectively disappeared from national representational politics.

The two lasting political effects of Reaganism are disparate: Party identification has taken a so-far enduring swing toward the GOP, with self-described Republicans even becoming a majority among some young voting cohorts. Among 18- to 29-year-olds, for instance, 52 percent inclined to Republicanism in the first quarter of 1989, versus 33 percent in 1980. (While young voters tend to be comparatively liberal on issues like race and gender, they toe a more conservative line on economics, crime, and foreign policy.) And the Supreme Court, with five reason-

ably solid right-leaning justices, has been transformed from a clearly liberal institution of more than 20 years standing to what most observers describe as a "moderately conservative" one. (The same is true for the federal judiciary generally.) Again, however, the transmogrifying jump was distinctly un-quantum like.

But the federal fisc and Washington are not the nation. In the myriad private universes of America, movement during the last 10 years was much more rapid. Indeed, change ranging between gradual and dizzying was virtually the rule.

For one thing, the pace of technical innovation—which accelerates largely without regard to ditherings beyond the laboratory—continues to defy most people's expectations. Scientific advances initiated in the 1980s include the first higher-temperature superconductivity, the first anomalous indications that nuclear fusion may be possible at sub-stellar temperatures, creation of the first genetically altered animals, and the first field tests of genetically engineered plants.

It must be remembered that personal computers and workstations—of which there are nearly 60 million now in operation—were only invented in the 1980s. Likewise cellular phones (a couple million in motion), laser printers (more than 3 million), any number of new drugs, and a host of other daily-life-changing products. Undoubtedly, though their significance is often hard to grasp at the moment of breakthrough, the advances now sweeping electronics, biotechnology, chemistry and other hard sciences will eventually cause our era to be thought of as an epochal one in human civilization.

The results of these quiet marches can be seen in fundamental indicators like life expectancy. Average life expectation for a child born in the United States was 70.8 years in 1970, 73.7 in 1980, and 75.0 in 1987. With each passing year during the 1980s, average life spans increased 67

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days. (To lay a prominent Reagan-attack to rest, infant mortality rates also continued to improve steadily during this period, falling from 12.6 deaths per 1,000 births to 9.9 in the first eight years of the decade.)

To put improvements of this magnitude in perspective, consider that when my still-living grandmother was born in 1900, U.S. life expectancy at birth was 47.3 years (10 years *below* the current level in India). The nearly 28-year improvement in longevity in her lifetime is more than occurred during the previous 10,000 years of human history.

It takes serious exertion to achieve progress like that, and the United States has spared no expense. In 1980, health expenditures represented 9.2 percent of our Gross Domestic Product. By 1986, they had jumped up to 11.1 percent and are still climbing. We spent \$1,926 on health for every man, woman, and child in the country in 1986—far more than, for instance, the \$831 invested by the Japanese, or the \$1,031 per capita expended in West Germany.

We also poured a lot of money into our education system during the 1980s. Spending per elementary and secondary school student zoomed up 26 percent from 1980 to 1988, and the average salary of public-school teachers rose 23 percent (both figures in constant dollars). Our high-school drop-out rate edged down a couple percentage points—among blacks it was down about a third from 1980 to 1987. And college attendance continued to increase to an all-time high of 55 percent of all high-school graduates in 1986.

It's not clear, however, that all the extra effort improved the quality of education. During the 1980s, employment in school administrative bureaucracies grew two-and-a-half times as fast as employment of instructors. Barely half of all school employees today are full-time teachers. And judging by test results, not all of those teachers are teaching that well. The national average combined Scholastic Aptitude Test score bottomed out at 890 (out of 1600) in 1980. When the figure rebounded to 906 by the mid-1980s, backs were thumped everywhere. But average scores commenced to fall again after 1987. Our best assessment of nationwide educational

competence stood at 903 as the decade ended, compared to an average score of 958 in 1968.

To return for a moment to the subject of life and limb, there is one very troubling 1980s retrogression that must be noted. Life expectancy for black Americans has actually *fallen* since 1984, an unprecedented occurrence. Given the health-care spending surge and all the countervailing technological factors regularly pushing life spans up, only a serious breakdown in the social arena could drag the figure lower. Unfortunately, such a breakdown exists today, in the form of the drug abuse and homicide epidemics which are tragically sweeping black communities across the nation. Jesse Jackson has taken to saying that dope is doing more damage to African-Americans than KKK ropes ever did, and on this critical statistical axis he is literally correct.

But the crime and drug waves which so damaged underclass communities during the 1980s went against society-wide trends. U.S. overall crime victimization crested in about 1979, and fell 14 percent for violent crime, 23 percent for personal thefts, and 28 percent for household thefts in the nine years following. The national trendlines on drug use by high school students peaked at about the same time. The fraction of high school seniors reporting use of an illicit substance within the previous 12 months declined 29 percent from the class of '79 to the class of '88.

Tougher law enforcement during the 1980s may have had something to do with these shifts. There were 29,000 criminal defendants convicted in U.S. District Courts in 1980 (about the same number as in 1970). By 1988 the number had jumped to 43,000. Likewise, the number of federal and state convicts behind bars increased from 316,000 in 1980 to 674,000 eight-and-a-half years later.

If gradual progress was ironically accompanied by a public sense of worsening crisis in the areas of crime and drugs, in another area almost the opposite phenomenon took place. The 1980s were the decade when the family arrived as a political issue. The public saw infant strollers clogging neighborhoods full of baby-

boomers and concluded that the return to traditional family values the president was calling for had actually taken place. Not so. The divorce rate did finally level off in the early 1980s, but that is mostly because the marriage rate had fallen so low. And divorce has stabilized at a level more than double the pre-1970s norm. (Current rates, extrapolated into the future, suggest that half of today's marriages will eventually break up.)

As for the birthrate, it has not risen from the low, less-than-population-replacement level it hit in the mid-1970s. All those strollers you are seeing are just a consequence of the aging of the baby boomers. An entire, large generation has hit the swollen-belly stage, but per couple they are having relatively few offspring (an average of 1.8 per woman, which doesn't even fill the places of mom and dad). Since the mid-1980s, for the first time in our history, the number of childless households in the United States has exceeded the number containing children.

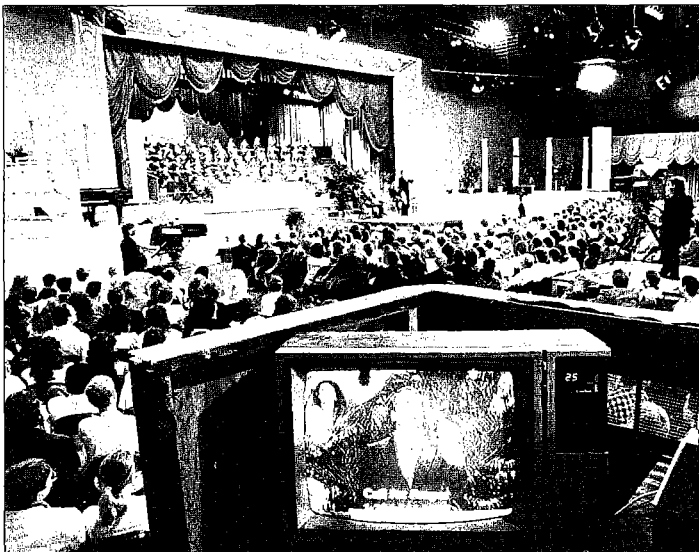
And traditionalism is hardly on a roll. During the first seven years of the 1980s, right in the midst of a supposedly calm and conservatizing era, the number of births out of wedlock soared 40 percent. The astonishing result is that by the end of the

decade one-quarter of all children born in America arrived without benefit of married parents. Literally a majority of them will depend upon welfare payments instead of a contributing father.

The combined result of 1980s divorce and illegitimacy patterns is that 27 percent of all children in this country now live apart from one or both of their parents. (In Japan, 96 percent of all children live in two-parent families. Could broken homes, with known negative effects on "human capital," be part of our competitiveness problem?) An even more frightening fact is this: At *some* point in their childhood, at least 60 percent of all American youngsters born in the 1980s will spend time in a single-parent home.

If family salvation and shrunken government were Reaganisms that just didn't happen, a few other battle cries translated more successfully into reality. While critics worried that greed and self-interest would overwhelm the voluntarism and individual accountability called for by the president, Americans remained very generous during the 1980s. Private giving for philanthropic purposes increased from \$49 billion to \$104 billion in the first eight years of the decade. More than four-fifths of that was comprised of individual donations. Corporate giving also jumped, by 66 percent in seven years. Mutual aid and fraternal cooperation are alive and well in the United States, as further indicated by the jump in national non-profit associations, from 14,726 in 1980 to 21,911 in 1989.

The Reaganites always insisted that the best aid program in the world was economic growth, and of that there was a surprisingly large measure during the 1980s. As this is being written in the waning weeks of 1989 the United States is entering its 85th straight month of economic growth, the second longest expansion since record-keeping



Live from Heritage Village Church near Charlotte, N.C. Scandals have shaken "televangelism," but religious TV viewers increased from 42 percent of Americans in 1980 to 49 percent in 1989.

began in 1854, and one that economist Herbert Stein characterizes as "the longest and strongest *noninflationary* expansion in our history."

In addition to confounding economists of varying hues, this long expansion did nice things to the pocketbooks of American citizens. Median family income, in constant 1988 dollars, stood at \$29,919 in 1980. The decade-opening recession pushed it down to \$28,708 by 1982. Then over the next six years it zipped up to \$32,191. Income per capita, in many ways a purer indicator because it is not distorted by changes in family configuration over time, grew even more strongly: up a total of 17 percent from 1980 to 1988, or an annual rate of 2 percent since the expansion began.

Two percent annual growth sounds unexceptional, until you realize that it would *double* your standard of living in 35 years. For most of human history, an increase in life quality of that magnitude would have taken many generations. Today it is the legacy of a single presidential term.

Growth like that also has a way of eating up surplus labor. Early in the decade the air was full of talk of long-term "structural" unemployment. By late 1989 unemployment was just a bit over 5 percent, and a record 63 percent of all Americans 16 and over were in harness. The raw aggregates too are quite impressive: As of 1979, 100 million Americans were earning a paycheck. In 1989 it was up to 119 million. There has been a whole lot of shaking going on in the world of job creation.

Perhaps the best indicator of the progress made on this front is the fact that unemployment stories almost never show up on news programs anymore. Which is not to say we don't have a serious employment problem in this country. We do. As one Vermont state labor official puts it, "You've heard of the discouraged worker effect; what we're seeing is the discouraged employer effect."

New England, with 13 million residents, had a late-1980s unemployment rate of 3.1 percent. In the Maryland/D.C./Virginia region (home to 11 million), the figure was 3.5 percent. In many areas, grave labor *shortages* exist. Eight different states and such diverse jurisdictions as Raleigh-

Durham, N.C., Burlington, Vt., Providence, R.I., Anaheim, Calif., Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Madison, Wis., Rochester, Minn., San Francisco, Calif., greater Washington, D.C., Boston, Mass., and the huge Nassau/Suffolk counties region on Long Island had late 1980s unemployment rates between 2 and 3 percent (about as low as these things can possibly go given normal job turnover). The minimum wage has become a fiction in many places (pizza deliverers for the Domino's chain are now paid between \$8 and \$12 an hour in the nation's capital), and employers throughout the land are finding it hard to fill positions with qualified workers.

Evidence of the rising prosperity of American private lives in the later 1980s could be seen in everything from skyrocketing housing demand (median sales prices of existing homes up 25 percent from 1985 to 1989) to record moviehouse admissions (\$4.5 billion in 1988 versus \$2.7 billion in 1980) to all-time highs in the fraction of American meals eaten out at restaurants (38 cents of every food dollar in 1987, up from 32 cents in 1980). Forty percent of Americans now attend an art event in the course of a year, 49 percent partake of live sports, 48 percent visit amusement parks. (We now spend the same amount attending cultural events as we do on athletic events. Twenty years ago it was only half as much.) The number of painters, authors and dancers has increased more than 80 percent over the last decade. The number of U.S. opera companies rose from 986 to 1,224 in just the first seven years of the 1980s.

Book purchases are up, national park visits and trips abroad have soared, cable TV hook-ups are climbing, wine sales have jumped, big-ticket athletic shoes are huge sellers. Nearly one out of every five houses now standing in the U.S. was built since 1980. Numbers of motor vehicles and numbers of phones have risen toward saturation (more than one of each for every adult in the country), and video cameras, microwave ovens, personal computers, food processors and other gadgets have come out of nowhere since 1980 to take their places right next to the toaster and other "necessities."

Expanded choices and new services confront even the reluctant consumer. Anyone spinning the FM radio dial in 1989 encountered a great many more stations than he or she did in 1980 (a thousand more nationwide, up 30 percent). New regional and specialty magazines fill every niche from *Organic Farmer* to *PC World*. Just about any item that a person desires can now be purchased from catalogs which slip conveniently through our mailslots every day.

One example of the increasingly riotous variety that bubbled through American life in the 1980s: The number of different fresh fruits and vegetables stocked by the average supermarket tripled in ten years. Visiting Soviet legislator Boris Yeltsin went home raving that the Americans HAVE 30,000 ITEMS IN THEIR GROCERY STORES! The fact that before returning he converted all his lecture fees into hypodermic needles—one of thousands of vital low-tech commodities that Mother Russia has found it impossible to produce in adequate supply—indicates how grotesquely fantastical these material riches must seem to people in countries of low economic creativity.

Perhaps out of frustration, many talented residents of those less creative nations decided to vote with their feet during the 1980s. Nearly 6 million legal immigrants came to our shores during the decade, a little less than half from Asia, somewhat under 40 percent from Latin America and the Caribbean, and most of the rest from Europe. The number of people of Hispanic origin in the United States rose from 15 million in 1980 to 20 million in 1989, and the ranks of Asian-Americans grew from 4 million to about twice that. Measures to draw immigrants from various continents in somewhat fairer relation to the existing make-up of the U.S. population were wending their way through Congress as the '80s drew to a close.

One of the biggest statistical "dud" stories of the 1980s concerned our supposed invasion by illegal aliens. After years of hearing alarmist guessers make alarming guesses, the Census Bureau in 1986 finally undertook an official calculation of the extent of illegal immigration to the United

States. Their best estimate: about 200,000 per year. (This was prior to passage of the Simpson-Rodino bill in 1986, which tightened things up. Presumably there are fewer these days.)

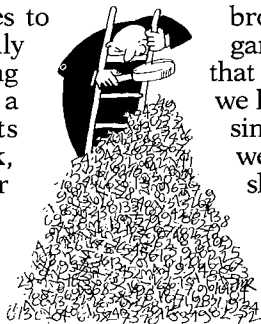
The Census Bureau also attempted to quantify *out*-migration from the country (most of it by foreign-born Americans returning to the country of their birth) and came up with a figure of around 160,000 annually. When the Immigration and Naturalization Service conducted its amnesty program for illegals in the later 1980s, just 1.8 million individuals applied for permanent legal status, confirming that the "undocumented" population in this country is much smaller than the 5 to 20 million figure sometimes bandied about.

A factual survey like this necessarily concentrates on subjects that can be measured and expressed statistically. But many of the most important shifts of the 1980s fell in softer categories, loosely organizable under the topic "cultural attitudes." In the long run, the new cultural thinking that coincided with the Reagan era (I do not wish to make a case here concerning cause and effect) may be more significant to the life of the nation than anything that happened in, say, the governmental or financial realms.

There was, for instance, a pronounced religious revival, with most of the action taking place within evangelical and theologically conservative churches. Even though the total percentage of Americans who attend church weekly is about the same today as it was in 1939—40 percent—the number of persons reporting they watch religious television rose from 42 percent in 1980 to 49 percent in 1989. A network of thousands of religious bookstores has spread across the country. Twenty-five hundred retail stores were members of the Christian Booksellers Association in 1980, versus 3,000 in 1989. If sales figures from such shops were included by the tabulators, religious books by authors like James Dobson, Charles Swindoll, Frank Peretti, Jeanette Oke, Robert Schuller, and Rabbi Harold Kushner would have appeared prominently on U.S. best-seller lists during the 1980s (with around 30 million books sold among them).

In other corners of American culture there has been a pronounced turn toward traditionalism. Our buildings, for instance, are once again being built with columns, ornaments, and gold leaf. On our stages, screens, political podiums, and playing fields, hairy-chested masculinity has roared back as an American ideal. In the music industry, classical recordings began to sell like rock recordings for the first time during the 1980s. Luciano Pavarotti's "Oh, Silent Night" went Platinum (one million or more sales), the Mozart soundtrack for *Amadeus* hit Gold (500,000 or more sales), and other pressings like "Horowitz in Moscow," RCA's "Pachelbel Canon," and Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story" on Deutsche Gramophone are all approaching bullion status. Many of the most influential new pop artists were dubbed "New Traditionalists" because of their affinities for both older musical styles (acoustic instruments have made a big comeback, for example) and older lyrical themes. Love of family and flag, expressions of faith, and praise for independence and hard work were among the favorite songwriting topics of the 1980s.

Conservatism played well in the nation's bookstores as well. Allan Bloom sold around 850,000 copies of *The Closing of the American Mind*, a book which may best be described as a declamation against the 20th century. The two most influential public-policy books of the decade were a defense of supply-side economics by George Gilder and an attack on the Great Society by Charles Murray (the former, *Wealth and Poverty*, sold 114,000 copies in hardbound alone; the latter, *Losing Ground*, 56,000 copies). After 52 weeks on the fiction best-seller lists, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe's conservative critique of urban collapse, continues to sell briskly. Even writers of a usually leftish inclination started behaving uncharacteristically. In 1986, at a Poets, Essayists, and Novelists (PEN) conference in New York, none other than Norman Mailer surprised his audience with a defense of Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz.



On television and in film, too, new values—or at least a new wistfulness for old values—became apparent. Among the movies that American audiences consumed most hungrily during the 1980s were ones like "Chariots of Fire," "Top Gun," "Hoosiers," and "Trading Places"—films that treated religion sympathetically, that frankly admired military values, that celebrated small-town virtue, that were anti-communist, that were pro-entrepreneurial and anti-bureaucratic. Among the most popular television fare was "The Bill Cosby Show," with its full embrace of traditional bourgeois family values (top rated for four of its five full seasons to date), and the attacks on liberalism in criminal justice on "Hill Street Blues" (winner of 25 Emmy awards).

The currents and crosscurrents of the 1980s had their cumulative effect in subtle but significant ways. Toward the end of the decade an extremely average American woman named Anita Folmar, one of many conservative Democrats whom Ronald Reagan had induced to become a Republican, was quoted in an unimportant little newspaper piece praising the president for bringing a "return to morality . . . wearing jeans where jeans should be worn, not all the time." That is about as good a summary of the most important presidency since World War II as we are likely to get. Ronald Reagan—himself more a cultural icon, an embodied idea, than an actual motive force—was important mostly because he presented an *altered picture to America in the 1980s*.

In his own daffy way, Reagan characterized the decade perfectly. He wasn't quite the man he claimed to be, and he, like us, didn't carry through on a lot of his boldest resolutions. Few molds got broken during the 1980s. But Reagan projected an idealized image that was rather different from what we had become used to, and he quite sincerely aspired to fill it. He, and we, deeply wanted us to be the old shining city on the hill.

His was a wishful era. And wishes, we know, are very important.