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Presidential crimes: Then and now

By Paul Craig Roberts

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Writing for Americans is not always an enjoyable experience. Many readers want to have their prejudices confirmed, not challenged. Emotions rule their reason, and they are capable of a determined resistance to facts and are not inhibited from displays of rudeness and ignorance. Indeed, some are so proud of their shortcomings that they can't wait to show them to others. Some simply cannot read and confuse explanations with justifications as if the act of explaining something justifies the person or event explained. Thankfully, all readers are not handicapped in these ways or there would be no point in trying to inform the American people.

In a recent column I used some examples of Clinton-era scandals to make a point about the media, pointing out that the media and the American people were more interested in Clinton's sexual escapades and in his choice of underwear than in the many anomalies associated with

such serious events as the Oklahoma City bombing, Waco, and the mysterious death of a White House legal counsel.

Reaganphobes responded in an infantile way, remonstrating that the same standards should be applied to "your dear beloved Ray-Gun" as to Clinton. Those readers were unable to understand that the article was not about Clinton, but about how the media sensationalizes unimportant events in order to distract attention from serious ones. Examples from the Clinton era were used, because no question better epitomizes the level of the American public's interest in political life than the young woman's question to President Clinton--"boxers or briefs?"

It is doubtful that journalists and historians are capable of providing accurate understandings of any presidential term. Even those personally involved often do not know why some things happened. I have been in White House meetings from which every participant departed with a different understanding of what the president's policy was. This was not the result of lack of clarity on the president's part, but from the various interests present shaping the policy to their agendas.

Many Americans regard the White House as the lair of a powerful being who can snap his fingers and make things happen. The fact of the matter is that presidents have little idea of what is transpiring in the vast cabinet departments and federal agencies that constitute "their" administration. Many parts of government are empires unto themselves. The "Deep State," about which Mike Lofgren, formerly a senior member of the Congressional staff has written, is unaccountable to anyone. But even the accountable part of the government isn't. For example, the information flows from the cabinet departments, such as defense, state, and treasury, are reported to Assistant Secretaries, who control the flow of information to the Secretaries, who inform the President. The civil service professionals can massage the information one way, the Assistant Secretaries another, and the Secretaries yet another. If the Secretaries report the information to the White House Chief of Staff, the information can be massaged yet again. In my day before George W. Bush and Dick Cheney gave us the Gestapo-sounding Department of Homeland Security, the Secret Service reported to an Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, but the official had no way of evaluating the reliability of the information. The Secret Service reported whatever it suited the Secret Service to report.

Those who think that "the President knows" can test their conviction by trying to keep up with the daily announcements from all departments and agencies of the government. It is a known fact that CEOs of large corporations, the relative size of which are tiny compared to the US government, cannot know all that is happening within their organizations.

I am not particularly knowledgeable about the terms of our various presidents. Nevertheless, I suspect that the Nixon and Reagan terms are among the least understood. Both presidents had more ideological opponents among journalists and historians than they had defenders. Consequently, their stories are more distorted by how their ideological opponents want them to be seen and remembered. For example, compare your view of Richard Nixon with the portrait Patrick Buchanan provides in his latest book, *The Greatest Comeback*. A person doesn't have to agree with Buchanan's view of the issues of those years, or with how Buchanan positioned, or

tried to position, Nixon on various issues, to learn a great deal about Nixon. Buchanan can be wrong on issues, but he is not dishonest.

For a politician, Richard Nixon was a very knowledgeable person. He travelled widely, visiting foreign leaders. Nixon was the most knowledgeable president about foreign policy we have ever had. He knew more than Obama, Bush I and II, Clinton, Reagan, Ford, and Johnson combined.

The liberal-left created an image of Nixon as paranoid and secretive with a long enemies list, but Buchanan shows that Nixon was inclusive, a "big tent" politician with a wide range of advisors. There is no doubt that Nixon had enemies. Many of them continue to operate against him long after his death.

Indeed, it was Nixon's inclusiveness that made conservatives suspicious of him. To keep conservatives in his camp, Nixon used their rhetoric, and it was Nixon's rhetoric rather than his policies that generated Nixon-hatred among the liberal-left. The inclination to focus on words rather than deeds is another indication of the insubstantiality of American political comprehension.

Probably, the US has never had a more liberal president than Nixon. Nixon went against conservatives and established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by executive order. He supported the Clean Air Act of 1970. Nixon federalized Medicaid for poor families with dependent children and proposed a mandate that private employers provide health insurance to employees. He desegregated public schools and implemented the first federal affirmative action program.

Declaring that "there is no place on this planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation," Nixon engineered the opening to Communist China. He ended the Vietnam War and replaced the draft with the volunteer army. He established economic trade with the Soviet Union and negotiated with Soviet leader Brezhnev landmark arms control treaties--SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 1972, which lasted for 30 years until the neoconized George W. Bush regime violated and terminated the treaty in 2002.

These are astonishing achievements for any president, especially a Republican one. But if you ask Americans what they know about Nixon, the response is Watergate and President Nixon's forced resignation.

I am convinced that Nixon's opening to China and Nixon's arms control treaties and de-escalation of tensions with the Soviet Union threatened the power and profit of the military/security complex. Watergate was an orchestration used to remove the threat. If you read the Watergate reporting by Woodward and Bernstein in the Washington Post, there is no real information in it. In place of information, words are used to create an ominous presence and sinister atmosphere that is transferred to Nixon.

Nixon himself had done nothing that justified impeachment, but his liberal policies had alienated conservative Republicans. Conservatives never forgave Nixon for agreeing with Zhou Enlai that Taiwan was part of China. When the Washington Post, John Dean, and a missing segment of a

tape got Nixon in trouble, conservatives did not come to his defense. The liberal-left was overjoyed that Nixon got his comeuppance for supporting the exposure and prosecution of Alger Hiss two decades previously.

The Reagan era is also misunderstood. Just as President Jimmy Carter was regarded as an outsider by the Democratic Washington Establishment, Ronald Reagan was an outsider to the Republican Establishment whose candidate was George H. W. Bush. Just as Carter's presidency was neutered by the Washington Establishment with the frame-up of Carter's Budget Director and Chief of Staff, Reagan was partially neutered before he assumed office, and the Establishment removed in succession two national security advisors who were loyal to him.

When Reagan won the Republican presidential nomination, he was told that although he had defeated the Establishment in the primaries, the voters would not be able to come to his defense in Washington. He must not make Goldwater's mistake and shun the Republican Establishment, but pick its presidential candidate for his vice president. Otherwise, the Republican Establishment would work to defeat him in the presidential election just as Rockefeller had undermined Goldwater.

As a former movie star, Nancy Reagan put great store on personal appearance. Reagan's California crew was a motley one. Lynn Nofziger, for example, sported a beard and a loosely knotted tie if a tie at all. He moved around his office in sock feet without shoes. When Nancy saw Bush's man, Jim Baker, she concluded that the properly attired Baker was the person that she wanted standing next to her husband when photos were made. Consequently, Reagan's first term had Bush's most capable operative as Chief of Staff of the White House.

To get Reagan's program implemented with the Republican Establishment occupying the chief of staff position was a hard fight. I don't mean that Jim Baker was malevolent and wished to damage Reagan. For a member of the Republican Establishment, Jim Baker was very intelligent, and he is a hard person to dislike.

The problem with Baker was two-fold. He was not part of the Reagan team and did not understand what we were about or why Reagan was elected. Americans wanted the stagflation that had destroyed Jimmy Carter's presidency ended, and they were tired of the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union and its ever present threat of nuclear armageddon.

It is not that Baker (or VP Bush) were personally opposed to these goals. The problem was, and still is, that the Establishment, whether Republican or Democratic, is responsive not to solving issues but to accommodating the special interest groups that comprise the Establishment. For the Establishment, preserving power is the primary issue.

The Republican Establishment and the Federal Reserve did not understand Reagan's Supply-Side economic policy. In the entire post World War II period, reductions in tax rates were associated with the Keynesian demand management macroeconomic policy of increasing aggregate demand. The Reagan administration had inherited high inflation, and economists, Wall Street, and the Republican Establishment misunderstood Reagan's Supply-side policy as a stimulus to consumer demand that would cause inflation, already high, to explode.

On top of this, conservatives in Congress were disturbed that Reagan's policy would worsen the deficit--in their opinion the worst evil of all.

Reagan's supply-side economic policy was designed not to increase aggregate demand, but to increase aggregate supply. Instead of prices rising, output and employment would rise. This was a radically new way of using fiscal policy, but instead of helping people to understand the new policy, the media ridiculed and mischaracterized the policy as "voodoo economics," "trickle-down economics," and "tax cuts for the rich." These mischaracterizations are still with us three decades later.

Nevertheless, the supply-side policy was partially implemented. It was enough to end stagflation and provided the basis for Clinton's economic success.

President Reagan's goal of ending the Cold War was also upsetting to both conservatives and the Establishment. Conservatives warned that wily Soviets would deceive Reagan and gain from the negotiations. The Establishment regarded Reagan's goal of ending the cold war as a threat to the military/security complex comparable to Nixon's opening to China and arms limitations treaties with the Soviet Union. President John F. Kennedy had threatened the same powerful interests when he realized from the Cuban Missile Crisis that the US must put an end to the risk of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.

With the success of his economic policy in putting the US economy back on its feet, Reagan intended to force a negotiated end to the Cold War by threatening the Soviets with an arms race that their suffering economy could not endure. However, the CIA advised Reagan that if he renewed the arms race, he would lose it, because the Soviet economy, being centrally planned, was in the hands of Soviet leaders, who, unlike Reagan, could allocate as much of the economy as necessary to win the arms race.

Reagan did not believe the CIA. He created a secret presidential committee with authority to investigate the CIA's evidence for its claim, and he appointed me to the committee. The committee concluded that the CIA was wrong.

Reagan always told us that his purpose was to end, not win, the Cold War. He said that the only victory he wanted was to remove the threat of nuclear annihilation. He made it clear that he did not want a Soviet scalp. Like Nixon, to keep conservatives on board, he used their rhetoric.

Curing stagflation and ending the Cold War were the main interests of President Reagan. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I do not think he paid much attention to anything else.

Grenada and the Contras in Nicaragua were explained to Reagan by the military/security complex as necessary interventions to make the Soviets aware that there would be no further Soviet advances and, thus, help to bring the Soviets to the negotiating table to end the nuclear threat. Unlike the George W. Bush and Obama regimes, the Reagan administration had no goal of a universal American Empire exercising hegemony over the world. Grenada and Nicaragua were not part of an empire-building policy. Reagan understood them as a message to the Soviets that "you are not going any further, so lets negotiate." Some conservatives regarded the

revolutionary movements in Grenada and Nicaragua as communist subversion, but the general concern was that they would ally with the Soviet Union, thus creating more Cuba-like situations. Even President Carter opposed the rise of a left-wing government in Nicaragua.

Today the Western governments support and participate in Washington's invasions, but not then. The invasion of Grenada was criticized by both the British and Canadian governments. The US had to use its UN Security Council veto to save itself from being condemned for "a flagrant violation of international law."

The Sandinistas in Nicaragua were reformers opposed to the corruption of the Somoza regime that catered to Washington's interests. The Sandinistas aroused the same opposition from Washington as every reformist government in Latin America always has. Washington has traditionally regarded Latin American reformers as Marxist revolutionary movements and has consistently overthrown reformist governments in behalf of the United Fruit Company and other private interests that have large holdings in countries ruled by unrepresentative governments.

Washington's policy was, and still is, short-sighted and hypocritical. The United States should have allied with representative governments, not against them. However, no American president, no matter how wise and well-intentioned, would have been a match for the combination of the interests of politically-connected US corporations and the fear of more Cubas. Remember Marine General Smedley Butler's confession that he and his US Marines served to make Latin America safe for the United Fruit Company and "some lousy investment of the bankers." <http://fas.org/man/smedley.htm>

Americans, even well informed ones, dramatically over-estimate the knowledge of presidents and the neutrality of the information that is fed to them by the various agencies and advisors. Information is power, and presidents get the information that Washington wants them to receive. In Washington private agendas abound, and no president is immune from these agendas. A cabinet secretary, budget director, or White House chief of staff who knows how Washington works and has media allies is capable, if so inclined, of shaping the agenda independently of the president's preferences.

The Establishment prefers a nonentity as president, a person without experience and a cadre of knowledgeable supporters to serve him. Harry Truman was, and Obama is, putty in the hands of the Establishment.

If you read Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick's *True History of the US*, you will see that the Democratic Establishment, realizing that FDR would not survive his fourth term, forced his popular Vice President Henry Wallace off the ticket and put in his place the inconsequential Truman. With Truman in place, the military/security complex was able to create the Cold War.

The transgressions of law that occurred during the Nixon and Reagan years are small when compared to the crimes of Clinton, George W. Bush and Obama, and the crimes were punished. Nixon and Reagan would have been impeached if they had started major wars in the Middle East based on lies and used US armed forces to invade or bomb numerous countries without Congressional authorization, or had claimed to be above both Constitution and statutory

law, setting aside habeas corpus and due process and detaining US citizens indefinitely, engaging in torture, spying without warrants, and executing US citizens without due process of law.

Moreover, unlike the Clinton, Bush, and Obama regimes, the Reagan administration prosecuted those who broke the law. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams was convicted, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane was convicted, Chief of CIA Central American Task Force Alan Fiers was convicted, Clair George, Chief of the CIA's Division of Covert Operations was convicted. Richard Secord was convicted. National Security Advisor John Poindexter was convicted. Oliver North was convicted. North's conviction was later overturned, and President George H.W. Bush pardoned others. But the Reagan Administration held its operatives accountable to law. No American President since Reagan has held the government accountable.

Clair George was convicted of lying to congressional committees. Richard Secord was convicted of lying to Congress. John Poindexter was convicted of lying to Congress. Alan Fiers was convicted of withholding information from Congress. Compare these convictions then with James R. Clapper now. President Obama appointed Clapper Director of National Intelligence on June 5, 2010, declaring that Clapper "possesses a quality that I value in all my advisers: a willingness to tell leaders what we need to know even if its's not what we want to hear." With this endorsement, Clapper proceeded to lie to Congress under oath, a felony. Clapper was not indicted and prosecuted. He was not even fired or forced to resign. For executive branch officials, perjury is now a dead letter law.

The destruction of the rule of law and accountable government has extended to state and local levels. Police officers no longer "serve and protect" the public. The most dangerous encounter most Americans will ever experience is with police, who brutalize citizens without cause and even shoot them down in their homes and on their streets. A police badge has become a license to kill, and police use it to the hilt. During the Iraq War, more Americans were murdered by police than the military lost troops in combat.

And nothing is done about it. The country is facing the November 4 elections, and the abuse of US citizens by "their" police is not an issue. Neither are the many illegal interventions by Washington into the internal affairs of other sovereign countries or the unconstitutional spying that violates citizens' privacy. The fact that Washington is gearing up for yet another war in the Middle East is not an important issue in the election.

In the US the rule of law, and with it liberty, have been lost. With few exceptions, Americans are too ignorant and unconcerned to do anything about it. The longer the rule of law is set aside, the more difficult it is to reestablish it. Sooner or later the rule of law ceases even as a memory. No candidate in the upcoming election has made the rule of law an issue.

Americans have become a small-minded divided people, ruled by petty hatreds, who are easily set against one another and against other peoples by their rulers.