

Reagan porn

The “liberal media’s” unprecedented 24/7 gushing over a controversial and divisive president caps a quarter-century of fawning.

By Eric Boehlert

The media’s weeklong coverage of the passing of President Reagan has produced some of the most rapturous remembrances in modern times. Given Reagan’s long illness, few expected the gloss to be pierced by examinations of his past as an FBI informant, his support for the apartheid regime of South Africa, America’s covert alliance with Saddam Hussein, or the killing fields of Central America. Nonetheless, the sheer volume of media-stoked adoration has been a bit startling to those who are keepers of the flame of objectivity.

“I think when somebody dies there’s a tendency for the press to view them through rose-colored glasses. It’s only polite,” says Alex Jones, director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University. “But I think they’re doing a great disservice by making this totally positive and uncritical coverage. In fact, Ronald Reagan was a very controversial president, and journalists should be trying to offer something that resembles an honest look back at Reagan’s administration.”

By midweek, a few news organizations, including the Los Angeles Times, New York Times and Washington Post, had at least addressed some of the more controversial aspects of Reagan’s public life. But for the most part, the reports, particularly on the 24-hour news channels, remained uniformly worshipful, as the elaborate funeral cortege, orchestrated after years of planning by Reagan’s old image-makers, marched through the entire week, accompanied by rhetorical flourishes.

“Ronald Reagan is a sort of masterpiece of American magic—apparently one of the simplest, most uncomplicated creatures alive, and yet a character of rich meanings, of complexities that connect him with the myths and powers of his country in an unprecedented way,” trumpeted Time magazine. “He is a Prospero of American memories, a magician who carries a bright, ideal America like a holograph in his mind and projects its image in the air.”

What’s telling is that that passage wasn’t published this week. It comes from a cover story dated July 7, 1986, written by Lance Morrow. The 3,700-word essay serves as a critical reminder that, despite conservative charges of its liberal bias, the press has been fawning over Reagan for years. And this week’s uncritical treatment of the 40th president is a natural culmination of what has been going on for the past quarter of a century.

“The rules were different for him,” notes Walter Pincus, veteran reporter for the Washington Post. “Reagan got all sorts of passes from the press.”

That’s not simply Pincus’ opinion. Reagan’s closest aides were saying the same thing in real time, back in the 1980s. David Gergen, Reagan’s first communications director, is quoted by Mark Hertsgaard in his 1989 book, “On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency,” as conceding, “A lot of the Teflon came from the press. They didn’t want to go after him that toughly.” Gergen added, “There is no question in my mind there was more willingness to give Reagan the benefit of the doubt than there was [for Presidents] Carter or Ford.” And as Hertsgaard says now, “The taming of the media during the Reagan years was mostly self-inflicted.”

Michael Deaver, Reagan’s renowned image-maker, wrote in his memoirs that until the Iran-Contra scandal broke in November 1986, Reagan “enjoyed the most generous treatment by the press of any President in the postwar era. He knew it, and liked the distinction.”

In June 1986, Reagan gave one his more rambling and confusing performances at a press conference, after which aides were forced to “clarify” his comments on everything

from the future of the Challenger space-shuttle program to the status of the SALT II treaty. Yet a White House aide marveled to the Los Angeles Times about “how easy the press was on him,” saying that reporters treated Reagan “almost reverentially.” The aide added: “He’s gone from the Teflon President to the boomerang President. Nobody wants to throw anything at him, because it comes back and hurts them.”

Looking back, former Washington Post political columnist and historian Haynes Johnson says the press, in addition to genuinely liking Reagan as a man, was acutely aware of the charges by conservatives that it had a liberal, unpatriotic bias. And that defensiveness translated into deferential treatment. “The press wanted to bend over backward not to be seen as part of the liberal establishment agenda,” says Johnson. “I was conscious of it myself.”

“Coming out of Watergate, there was a feeling within the press that we’d gone too far,” says Robert Parry, who covered the Reagan administration for the Associated Press and Newsweek. He left the weekly, he says, after it refused to let him aggressively pursue what subsequently became the Iran-Contra scandal. “There was a feeling we should be more respectful on how we [went] about things and there were places we really shouldn’t go.”

Against that backdrop this week’s unprecedented and at times baffling coverage begins to make some sense. “There’s a lot of deification going on. And it’s around the clock,” Johnson remarked.

There’s undoubtedly something moving and necessary about the pageantry of a nationally televised memorial for a president who has died, even if that means broadcasting, for a solid hour, the picture of a 747 sitting motionless on the tarmac at Point Mugu Naval Air Station in California, as cable outlets and the four major networks did on Wednesday. But the vast majority of coverage this week had little or nothing to do with the official service. Instead, television offered up an endless stream of chatter about optimism, communication, leadership and personality—mostly without discussion of the historical record. With such a huge swath of Reagan’s public and private life apparently deemed off limits by the press—from the Wall Street crash of ’87 to Reagan’s often distant relationship with his own children—the coverage after the first 24 hours morphed into a news-free echo chamber. Clips and quotes from Sunday’s coverage were indistinguishable from the ones airing two, three and four days later.

For example, on Monday night, PBS’s Charlie Rose interviewed Reagan’s former secretary of state, George Shultz, who told a lengthy anecdote about how Reagan had once added a few common touches to improve an important foreign-policy speech Shultz was set to deliver. On Tuesday night, Rose’s program aired archival footage of previous guests discussing Reagan, and there was Shultz, from a 2001 appearance, telling Rose the exact same anecdote in the exact same language.

USA Today suggested that this week’s intense coverage simply “reflect[s] America’s fondness for him.” But there seems to be something else at work. After all, President Clinton left office with higher approval ratings than Reagan did, and a USA Today poll last year found that more Americans consider Clinton to be “the greatest” president than think Reagan was.

Does anyone think that if Clinton were to die in the current media climate, his critics and criticism of him would effectively be banned from the airwaves? If anyone does, perhaps they should tune in to CBS, because news anchor Dan Rather told the Philadelphia Inquirer this week that since Reagan was “a twice-elected, two-full-term president, . . . [this] is not the time for a seminar on his strengths and weaknesses.”

It is clear that the conservatives’ attacks on the press for having a liberal bias are once again having the desired effect. And once again they’re working to Reagan’s—and the Republicans’—benefit. The media’s blissful coverage this week “serves a strategic

function,” Parry says. “When the press is under attack for being liberal, the logical response is to prove you’re not.” If ever there’s been a time when the press handed the reins over to the Republican sensibility, it was this week.

The hand-in-glove relationship between Republicans and the media has produced some strange exchanges, such as CNN’s Wolf Blitzer asking Richard Perle, who served as Reagan’s assistant secretary of defense, how much of a “hands-on commander in chief” Reagan was. Perle, reading his talking points, assured viewers that, contrary to what all serious biographers have written about Reagan, “he was very much hands-on.” (It is telling about the range of perspective offered on television this week that neocon Perle followed neocon Paul Wolfowitz, Bush’s deputy secretary of defense, as Blitzer’s guest.)

Around-the-clock coverage like this week’s hasn’t been seen since the start of the Iraq War. According to a search of the Nexis database, by the end of day 3 of the Reagan remembrance, CNN had aired approximately 95 separate segments on the former president. That number is likely to approach 150 by the time Reagan is buried in California Friday night. Meanwhile, the normally space-conscious USA Today devoted 37 articles, columns and letters—along with 40 photos and graphics—to Reagan in its Monday edition alone.

“I’m struck by [the length of] this,” Johnson says. “From the time Jack Kennedy took a bullet in the head [on Nov. 22, 1963] until he was buried at Arlington Cemetery—that was four days of TV coverage. This is a whole week.” President Eisenhower died on March 28, 1969, and his official Washington ceremony was complete three days later.

CNN’s Paula Zahn likened the “public expressions of personal grief” taking place this week with the expressions of grief that followed the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. However, while 9/11 led to a national trauma, television producers have had a hard time finding ordinary Americans outside Simi Valley, Calif., spontaneously choking up about the elderly Reagan’s long-expected death.

“Even my own paper [the Post] had four Reagan stories on the front page” on Monday, Pincus says. “It is the new print imitation of wall-to-wall TV coverage. Even if you run out of things to say, it doesn’t matter.”

Of course, people anticipated that when Reagan died there would be an avalanche of press coverage. As Johnson observes, “Reagan was a consequential figure in our political life. He was a symbol of the conservative movement that has changed our lives for the last two generations.” But, he adds, “that means there’s all the more obligation for the press to sort it out and not to just present deification, but to examine his strengths and weaknesses.”

Early in the week some TV anchors went out of their way to say they would do just that. CNN’s Aaron Brown assured viewers, “Our coverage should reflect all of that, the good days and the bad. Iran-Contra is a chapter, as are the tax cuts. Beirut is as much a part of the story as Berlin. It is a line we will walk carefully and respectfully over the next week.”

Similarly, NBC’s Tom Brokaw said Reagan “was a beloved American leader, but at the same time our journalistic obligation is to put his whole life and his political career in context. The Reagan legacy has some scandals—Iran-Contra, his failure to recognize early on the AIDS epidemic. It’s a very delicate balancing act.”

But the fact is that both CNN and NBC failed in attempting that balancing act and in the end fell off the wire. A search of this week’s transcripts reveals some passing references to Iran-Contra, but nothing approaching a serious discussion of it—or of any other of Reagan’s less-than-rosy scenarios.

In a sense, this week has been the 1980s redux, with the Reagan communication team again providing the press, and particularly TV, with priceless pictures and sentimental narrative lines while appreciative producers and reporters neglect to acknowledge the wholesale media manipulation that is going on. There’s been little or no discussion, for example, of the long planning for this funeral by Reagan’s old political handlers. It’s

morning again in America—on a feedback loop.

“They were fucking brilliant at managing the coverage” back then, recalls William Greider, assistant managing editor for the Washington Post during the first Reagan administration. That artfulness continued this week in subtle ways. For instance, Monday’s viewing of the casket at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley was listed as a “private” family service. Yet it was covered live by multiple cameras, one of which was affixed to the ceiling to capture the dramatic moment when Nancy Reagan laid her cheek on the flag-draped coffin. That “private” image was aired continuously on cable news outlets and appeared the next morning on the front page of dozens of major-market newspapers around the country.

“These people [were] spectacular at P.R. And that’s what this is, terrific P.R.,” Pincus says.

While it’s true that the Reagan White House raised uncritical presidential press coverage to an art, it received a helping hand from a self-conscious press corps. As Hertzgaard wrote, “Relieved by the departure of Jimmy Carter, gulled by false claims of a right-wing popular mandate, impressed by Reagan’s recovery after being shot and seduced by his sunny personality and his propaganda apparatus’ talent for providing prepackaged stories boasting attractive visuals, the Washington press corps favored the newly elected President with the coverage that even his own advisers considered extremely positive.”

“We used to do a fact-checking exercise after his press conferences at AP” says Parry, referring to Reagan’s tendency to manufacture or wildly misstate facts and figures. “And we got such hostility from David Gergen at the White House, and publishers who didn’t like it, that AP backed off and dropped it. That was one of the ways we were not as tough or as skeptical as we should have been.” (In that worshipful 1986 *Time* cover story, Morrow wrote, “Reagan committed so many press-conference fluffs that eventually no one paid that much attention anymore, assuming that that was just the way Reagan was. Who cared? The results seemed to come out all right.”) When covering early developments in the Iran-Contra affair for AP, Parry experienced that timidity firsthand. When he went to *Newsweek* in 1987, “it soon became clear they didn’t want to pursue the Iran-Contra story much at all. They didn’t want another Watergate—that’s the way it was put. The magazine was owned by the Washington Post, and although people look back on Watergate as a crowning achievement, it was a very unpleasant experience to live through, and [publisher] Katharine Graham didn’t want to go through it again. So the feeling at *Newsweek* was, Let’s just take what the White House is telling us, the ‘mistakes were made’ explanation.”

Newsweek wasn’t alone. When the Iran-Contra scandal broke (exposed by a Lebanese newspaper, not an American one), newspaper editors and TV anchors around the country—including CBS’s Rather—cautioned their staffs not to repeat the “excesses” and “mistakes” of the Watergate era, according to a Dec. 5, 1986, article in the *New York Times*. It was almost as if news executives were demanding passive and restrained reporting. Respected, centrist “NBC Nightly News” commentator John Chancellor seemed to speak for many in the national press corps in early 1987 when, breathing a sigh of relief when it appeared the worst had passed for Reagan on Iran-Contra, he said, “Nobody wants [Reagan] to fail. Nobody wants another Nixon.” Although severely damaged by Iran-Contra—he suffered the most precipitous drop in presidential job approval ratings on record—Reagan was able to rebound to the point where his reputation, among the press at least, now borders on sainthood.

The iconic conservative may ultimately be remembered as one of the two or three most important U.S. presidents of the 20th century. And, Hertzgaard notes, “he could have accomplished none of this without the help of the American media.”

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