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THE WORST AND THE DUMBEST: PERSPECTIVES ON THE REAGAN ERA

by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers


These two books differ sharply in subject matter and political perspective. Jeff McMahan analyzes recent U.S. foreign policy. Writing from the left, he assailsthat policy for the pain it inflicts on the rest of the world, and for its insistent denial of the right of other peoples to determine their own political affairs. Former OMB director (and current Salomon Brothers managing director) David Stockman, by contrast, concentrates on recent changes in U.S. domestic policy. Writing from the right, his chief criticism of the Reagan administration is that it has not gone far enough in cutting social programs.

Despite such obvious differences, however, the books share certain concerns, strengths, and weaknesses. Both are preoccupied with the issues of continuity and coherence in the Reagan administration — with the degree to which its initiatives mark a real break with the past, and the degree to which they hold together as distinctive policies. Both do a good job exposing the substance of the administration's actions, and an even better one exposing lying as its preferred

Joshua Cohen is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Joel Rogers is Associate Professor of Law at the University of Miami. They are the co-authors of On Democracy (New York: Penguin, 1983), and Inequality and Intervention: The Federal Budget and Central America and The Rules of the Game: American Politics and the Central America Movement, both published in 1986 by South End Press.

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policy instrument for marketing those actions. But both are finally unsatisfying as explanations of the phenomena they assess. One reason for this is that neither author has a plausible view of political conflict in the United States.

Jeff McMahan's central aim is to explain Reagan's foreign policy. To do this, he first deploys a set of "explanatory principles ... [that] ... are in general not novel" to identify the goals of that policy. Essentially, the "principles" consist in observing that the United States is an expansionist power, intent both on the capture and domination of resources (including markets) around the world, and the pursuit of various other objectives such as "national security" that are "only distantly related" to its economic ambitions. The "comprehensive aim" he ascribes to the administration, following from this, is the restoration of American hegemony, or recapture of the position of "global dominance in the economic, military, political, and ideological spheres" that the United States enjoyed during the first two decades after the Second World War.

Many external forces, of course, resist the administration's hegemonic project, and this resistance (and administration actions taken in face of it) structures McMahan's discussion. The key to restoring hegemony is establishing U.S. dominance in the Third World. Since the Soviet Union may be expected to resist such an effort, the project requires the neutralization of the Soviets as a major force in that region. Since European and Japanese allies may be expected to resist the destabilizing effects of an attempt at Soviet neutralization, the project also requires that the United States compels them to "line up at attention and salute" its global design. And even if the Soviets and the allies are neutralized, there remains the problem of resistance in the Third World itself. Accordingly, after a brief clarification of the "explanatory principles" just noted, McMahan first considers Reagan administration policies toward the Soviet Union, then considers the manipulation of allied opinion, and finally considers some "notable victims" of U.S. efforts in the Third World itself.

The sweep of Reagan and the World marks it as a tour de force. With a relatively brief volume, McMahan provides a guide to administration action in a wide variety of arenas, from arms control talks in Geneva to the air war in El Salvador. It is, moreover, an important virtue of the book that this wide-ranging discussion is unified by a definite theory of the purposes and coherence of administration action.

Almost inevitably, however, the book's explanatory claims are
exaggerated. This is not, in our view, because McMahan’s assessment of the broad goals of U.S. policy is wrong. We would certainly agree that the United States is an aggressive and expansionist power, and that the Reagan administration seeks, often violently, to reassert U.S. dominance. The problem, rather, is that there are many different strategies for pursuing this broad aim, and McMahan does not convincingly account for the particulars of the strategy pursued, even though most of his book is occupied with precisely these particular actions. To highlight this problem of relating means to ends, and illuminating the specifics of current policy, we consider McMahan’s discussions of U.S.-Soviet relations and Third World interventionism.

The discussion of U.S.-Soviet relations proposes to explain the administration’s enormous nuclear buildup, which increased the procurement budget for strategic forces a spectacular 182 percent (in real terms) over FY 1980-85.1 McMahan explores the composition of this buildup, and concludes that the administration seeks neither mere parity with, nor superiority over, the Soviet Union, but rather the capacity to “prevail” in a nuclear war—meaning that after a nuclear exchange the United States would be able to continue to function as a political entity while the Soviet Union would not. It is this quest for the ability to prevail, McMahan argues, that explains the administration’s funding of the MX, its deployment of cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe, and its enthusiasm for the “Star Wars” Strategic Defense Initiative.

But what explains the administration’s interest in prevailing in the first place? According to McMahan, administration officials believe that their interventionist project requires this capacity. “Nuclear weapons are regarded [by the administration] as the instruments which make U.S. imperialist ventures possible.” And only an ability to prevail will permit them to blackmail the Soviet Union with nuclear terror, and thus to “carry out” [their] interventions in the third world in comparative safety.” Arguing from general goals (hegemony), via administration beliefs (prevailing as necessary to conventional intervention), McMahan thus arrives at an “explanation” of current policy (a nuclear buildup directed to achieving the ability to prevail).

There are, however, at least two problems with this explanation. First, the beliefs that McMahan ascribes to the administration are, as he indicates, manifestly irrational. The ability to prevail is not a requirement of interventionism, as evidenced by the record rate of U.S. intervention during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, when the United States did not have that capacity. The ability is also next to impossible to achieve, since each escalation of U.S. nuclear terror can be matched by the Soviet Union. And, since it requires plundering resources needed to restore U.S. economic strength, seeking the ability only helps defeat the project of recapturing hegemony. Moreover, it increases the likelihood of nuclear war, and thus the destruction of one important requirement (the existence of a world) of global U.S. dominance. While it is possible that the administration systematically embraces beliefs inimical to its own interests, this seems unlikely. As with any ideological explanation, the plausibility of the explanation rests importantly on the plausibility of the beliefs attributed to the actors whose behavior is “explained” by reference to those beliefs. If the beliefs are manifestly irrational, there is good cause for suspicion about the explanation.

The second objection flows from the first, and concerns the evidence McMahan offers to support his claim that the administration actually believes that prevailing is required for conventional intervention. This evidence is scanty and unconvincing. McMahan does comb the writings and statements of administration figures any advisers, and finds scattered support for his thesis. But it is only scattered, and through the use of other statements by like figures, and number of alternative claims about the real goals of the nuclear buildup could be equally well (that is, poorly) sustained. Most telling, however, the administration’s own behavior conflicts with McMahan’s claims about its views. If, as he argues, the administration thought that the ability to prevail was necessary to intervention, we would expect that it would not intervene until it had that ability. It does not have that ability now, and yet it intervenes, repeatedly, around the world. This intervention, which provides McMahan’s central focus through the rest of the book, is in apparent tension with the earlier argument.

McMahan’s discussion of U.S. intervention, when it does come, has similar problems. He presents an account of some of the instruments of U.S. power—arms sales, “human rights” rhetoric, the new technique of “demonstration elections,” and of course troops—and then discusses their aggressive application to the “notable victims” of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Grenada. He documents or recounts enough atrocities and lies to remind us that current strategies of U.S. interventionism are immoral, corrupt, and almost single-mindedly bent on crushing political freedom. But while this analysis is unobjectionable so far as it goes, it is even less successful than the
nuclear buildup discussion in tying the particulars of administration policies to the broader aim of U.S. dominance.

Part of the problem in the intervention discussion is that McMahan considers only a narrow range of policy instruments. He is thus ill-equipped to make sense of other instances of Reagan policy—for example, the administration's relations with such Contadora nations as Mexico or Venezuela, or its policy toward Costa Rica—which rely less on direct military intervention & covert action than on complicated economic and diplomatic pressures. More troubling than its incompleteness, however, McMahan's discussion stops short of explaining the specific rationality of administration actions. To date, for example, in Central America the Reagan administration has pursued a strategy of "low intensity warfare" rather than outright invasion. Is this because it views this as the most efficient means of reaching its hegemonic goal? If so, for what reason? If not, why not? And, to highlight some of the political stakes involved, what does whatever the answer is tell us about what it is likely to do next? In fairness to McMahan, no one has a complete explanation of these matters, and certainly no one can predict with any precision the administration's future actions in the region. But without at least some greater attention to the details of policy, and the reasons for those details, it is difficult on the basis of the intervention discussion to see how McMahan's "explanatory principles" do much either to explain the policies or to advance political discussion of them, and how they might by changed.

In part, these gaps and weaknesses in McMahan's analysis reflect a deeper problem—his view of U.S. domestic politics. More particularly, McMahan does not seem to have much of a view. He notes a broad rightward turn in U.S. domestic policy, but makes no effort to explain it. He assails the American people for "joyously" supporting U.S. aggression and terror, but offers no evidence for their cheerful sadism. And at no point in the book, apart from the passing references to public opinion, does he offer any account of the domestic political conflicts that provide the context, and often the motivation, for foreign policy initiatives. He has, for example, no discussion of the raging disputes over trade, monetary policy, and the pace and specific direction of U.S. military spending that continue to mark domestic politics in the Reagan era.

This is unfortunate, and weakens McMahan's analysis in obvious sorts of ways. Without some grasp on rising protectionist pressures in America, for example, it is impossible to see just why the administration has gained broad business support for a highly unilateralist foreign policy. Without some view on the concerns of overextended bankers, or successful multinational firms that wish to continue trading with the rest of the world, it is hard to see why some of the worst excesses of that unilateralism (for example, in monetary policy) have been at least partially curbed. Without some analysis of the debate over "industrial policy," and a view of the key actors in the "defense" industry, it is hard to make sense of timing and the enormous domestic appeal of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Without some account of the domestic agenda of the administration, and the sources of domestic opposition to an invasion of Central America, it is hard to see why the administration has pursued a low intensity strategy and not already invaded. And so on. In all these cases, the specific shape of foreign policy has carried the imprint of domestic political conflict and maneuver. Attention to such conflict is essential to an explanation of policy specifics—but it is not to be found in McMahan's broad analysis.

David Stockman's argument in The Triumph of Politics, which on this issue of domestic conflict and maneuver presents a mirror image of McMahan's, is analytically less ambitious, and thus easier to summarize. The purpose of the Reagan revolution, Stockman says, was a "frontal attack on the welfare state." But this attack collapsed almost as soon as it was announced. Taxes were cut, and, in an important "policy breakthrough" the working poor were cut from food stamp and welfare programs. But the big social insurance programs remained largely intact, and the military budget exploded. Together with various "willful act[s] of ignorance and grotesque irresponsibility," these initiatives produced huge deficits, and now taxes will again have to be raised. While it has been a wild ride, we are about to come full circle in American domestic policy. Since Reagan assumed office, nothing significant has changed.

Why did the Reagan revolution fail? Stockman's central thesis is that both ordinary individuals and business elites, organized into limitless numbers of interest groups, continued to demand state subsidies and protections from market forces, and retained the capacity to enforce those demands. Following the political scientist Theodore Lowi, Stockman sees such groups as obstacles to the formulation of clear and coherent policy choices. Divided and particularistic in their demands, they are incapable of and uninterested in forfing a program that serves the broader national interest, and they pose barriers to anyone (e.g., Stockman) who attempts to do so.
Their operation has given rise to a “Second Republic” in the United States, a government that survives by administering discrete benefits to organized groups, but is largely incapable of concerted positive action. For Stockman, the victory of the Second Republic over the Reagan revolution represents the triumph of democracy over the ideological hubris of a “small and politically insignificant set of anti-statist conservatives.”

An additional, fatal barrier to the Reagan revolution was found in the administration itself. The most powerful White House advisers—the ones who had the half-deaf President’s “good ear”—were not the best and brightest of right-wing ideologues, but simply the worst and the dumbest. “Michael Deaver . . . could not tell a budget number from a dinner check.” Alexander Haig’s chief skill was “being a bully.” And at least one briefing by Caspar Weinberger—in which the stakes were $130 billion—was “so intellectually disreputable” and “so demeaning” that Stockman was led to wonder whether the “White House was on Sesame Street.” Much of Triumph is devoted to recounting Stockman’s interaction with such administration figures, and its cumulative force is devastating. Even if only a fraction of what he says is accepted, it is impossible to read this book and still believe that members of this administration, who daily make decisions of tremendous consequence for the welfare of millions, feel either accountable for those decisions, or respect for those affected.

And then there is the Great Persuader himself. Yet another product of the Second Republic, Ronald Reagan is a “consensus politician, not an ideologue” and “had no concrete program to dislocate and traumatize the here-and-now of American society.” For the revolution to succeed it needed an “iron chancellor” at the helm, but Reagan, in addition to being someone who “ignores all the relevant facts and wanders in circles,” was also “too kind, gentle, and sentimental” to lead the way to what Stockman describes as the “New Order.”

Stockman’s book charts his progressive realization of these constraints, and his gradual, and increasingly resigned, appreciation of conventional politics. He remains contemptuous of the “fellas” at the White House, but comes eventually to see such mainstream but (at least in his view) less venal figures as Pete Domenici and Howard Baker—who work constructively within the narrow limits of the possible—as the true statesmen of the Second Republic. After many trips to the woodshed, Stockman settles down to join them in their good work, and devotes himself with new humility to undoing the damage—chiefly the huge deficits—brought on by the failed revolution. Here too he is defeated, but that should not distract us from the moral of his story. The Triumph of Politics, Stockman would have us believe, chronicles the unmaking of an ideologue.

But Stockman’s conclusion—that nothing has changed in the welfare state—shows that he remains an ideologue. Social Security and Medicare have, to be sure, survived largely intact. But they have been cut significantly below the levels projected under prior policies, pressures to cut them (especially Medicare) further continue to mount, and they do not in any case comprise all of what is meant by the “welfare state.” Means-tested programs, for example, and in particular the discretionary grant programs associated with the Great Society, have been cut sharply during this administration; unemployment insurance coverage has reached record lows; regulatory programs have been gutted; civil rights and liberties have been rolled back; unions have been viciously attacked; union density has appreciably declined. If the feeble U.S. version of the welfare state remains recognizable, it is also recognizably weaker than it once was.

Similarly, while Stockman believes Reagan to have been too kind and sentimental to inflict “drastic, wrenching changes” on the domestic population, the fact remains that Reagan has presided over the deepest recession since the Great Depression, continued declines in wages and median family income, and the highest sustained level of unemployment and the greatest level of economic inequality, in the past 40 years. This is a rather high level of pain and trauma, and there is little sign that it is about to drop. With economic growth slowing, we can hardly expect any sharp drops in unemployment. A revenue-neutral tax act, the chief product of the administration’s second term, will do nothing to relieve pressures for further cuts in domestic programs. And the fact that that act breaks sharply with the idea of progressive taxation underscores a more general point that Stockman seems to miss entirely—there has been a shift in the terms of debate in national politics. There are no new wars on poverty on the legislative agenda, no programs of full employment, and none to increase benefit levels in existing social welfare programs. In short, both at the level of existing government programs, and at the level of debate about the appropriate ends and uses of government, the Reagan years have seen a broad shift away from traditional New Deal and Great Society commitments. This may not amount to a policy “revolution” in the sense in which Stockman uses that term, but it does amount to a significant policy change. Stockman’s exclusive focus on the
"failure" of the Reagan revolution obscures the magnitude of that change.

Nor are we willing to concede the degree of incoherence in domestic policies that Stockman rails against. To be sure, the administration plunged ahead with its massive military program after giving away the revenues to sustain it, and this produced massive and, in the view of many, economically dysfunctional budget deficits. But while we would grant Stockman that the specific shape of the military program and the 1981 tax act reflected the many cross-cutting pressures of the Second Republic, those two initiatives also reflected broad consensus among business and political elites that tax cuts for business, and an enhanced U.S. capacity to project force abroad, were appropriate responses to the pressures of an increasingly competitive international environment. However uncreative and unsuccessful they may have been as a response to economic difficulties, they thus had a certain political logic as responses to domestic elite demands. And whatever one's views on the economic effects of deficits, there is also a certain political logic in their creation. In view of the severe constraints on peacetime tax increases (whatever Stockman thinks of the inevitability of such increases), high deficits impose substantial long-term pressures to shrink the welfare state, a third item of broad consensus among the business elites.

Thus if McEwan fails even to examine domestic conflicts and dealmaking, Stockman fails to look beyond such "process" to qualitative change. This obscures the real political lesson to be drawn from recent U.S. politics—which is that not all North Americans are bloodthirsty militarists, nor that organized groups have power, but that the vast bulk of the population is disorganized and hardly present as a force in national politics at all. Largely powerless to resist the costs imposed by elite domination and disagreement, they suffer those costs, as do (more grievously) their counterparts around the world. The "rationality" of the Reagan revolution consists in prolonging this state of affairs, in part by making it ever more difficult for dependent groups to change it, and thus postponing the time when elite actors will themselves be forced to assume some of the burdens of their past mistakes and waste. But this hardly represents a triumph of democratic politics. More plausibly, it signals a stunning defeat.

NOTES

2. McEwan is inconsistent on this point. He credits the "Vietnam syndrome," which of course refers to public opinion, as "a major obstacle to the implementation of the Reagan administration's foreign policy." At the same time, he repeatedly states or implies that the American public endorses the Reagan military buildup, and its brutal interventionist policies. Survey research, however, provides little support for this view. While the Reagan military buildup briefly enjoyed broad popular support, at least since 1982 the public has turned away from increased military spending. It has also broadly opposed the administration's hostility toward the Soviet Union and its sabotaging of arms control, and the brief applause for the Grenada invasion aside strongly opposed its interventionist policies in Central America and Lebanon. See the review of recent trends in public opinion in Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), chap. 1.
3. Lowi's argument is considerably more subtle than Stockman's rendering of it, or our rendering of Stockman's interpretation. For the genuine article, see Theodore H. Lowi, The End of Liberalism: The Second Republic of the United States, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).