

Book Review:

Edmund Morris. *DUTCH*. Random House, 1999. 874 pp.

(This was published in the *CITIZENS INFORMER* many years ago. It appears now because the film *Reagan* is currently being released.)

The biographer's task is to compile the facts, utterances, experiences and accomplishments of a lifetime, and after a thoughtful sifting and weighing of their importance, to draw conclusions and offer insights about that life. By these and many other criteria, *DUTCH* -- the only *authorized* biography of former President Ronald Reagan -- is a strangely flawed and disappointing book. (By the way, it was Nancy Reagan who mistakenly chose Edmund Morris as Reagan's biographer.)

For example, Carlo D' Este's massive *Patton: A Genius for War*, is an excellent example of the biographer's task properly executed. By chronicling some two dozen instances in which General George S. Patton was knocked unconscious playing polo -- when thrown from a horse or suffering blows to the head -- D' Este theorizes that much of General Patton's mercurial temperament in later years may well have been attributable to brain damage resulting from this repeated trauma. (Patton's condition may have been *Pseudobulbar Affect Disorder*.)

In *DUTCH*, however, Edmund Morris has ignored Catherine Drinker Bowen's advice that "*In writing biography, fact and fiction should never be mixed,*" and has even done so intentionally as some kind of "*novel*" *biographical technique*! This New Zealand-born author has reinvented an entirely new boyhood for himself, and has artificially inserted himself into Ronald Reagan's own childhood. Unfortunately, this *novel* technique generates a great deal of confusion, since there is no clear delineation between fact and fiction.

At times, the book also gives the impression of being about author Edmund Morris at least as much as its ostensible subject, America's 40th President. In particular, his use of the *fictitious* young Edmund Morris character is intrusive, and grants this narcissist equal billing with Reagan when recounting their early years. Like most leftist *poseurs*, he is also inclined to offer his own fatuous opinions on complex issues, about which he understands nothing, without marshalling even a hint of evidence in support!

In addition, this former ad-writer nearly gives himself an inguinal hernia trying to impress his literary peers with his erudition -- by including numerous Latin, French and German phrases by page five -- making even the careless reader only too aware of the biographer's intrusive presence. Finally, his professional instincts eventually reassert themselves when he makes a half-dozen or more *not-so-subtle* plugs for his award-winning biography of Teddy Roosevelt.

Morris' worst failing, however, is the fact that his attitude toward his subject is primarily one of contempt, and he reveals an even greater contempt for small-town America, whose values and culture nurtured and shaped the character of Ronald Reagan.

Fortunately, for those of us who loved and admired Reagan, Morris' contempt is front-loaded. Most of the bitchy and snide references are worthy of Gore Vidal -- who is *of course* quoted -- and appear in the book's beginning. Thus, on page xiii of the *prologue*: "*Half an hour later I emerge from the Oval Office, asking myself for the hundredth time, 'How much does Dutch really know?'*"

Additionally, Morris has seized on what he feels to be an apt metaphor for the life of Reagan, the "*innocent fool motif*" from Wagner's *Parcival*. This he hammers home relentlessly throughout the book: ("*...he would retain a certain worldly innocence through adulthood, making at least*

one bookish observer wonder if he were not indeed der reine Tor, the Innocent Fool of medieval legend.") (Most readers won't need to guess who that "bookish observer" might happen to be...)

Edmund Morris must also fancy himself an economist, of sorts, and dismisses so-called "supply-side" economics with a condescending sneer and the label "peculiar." Apparently, in the world of advertising writers masquerading as economists, applying the *Law of Diminishing Marginal Returns* to a nation's tax rates is too *déclassé`* even to consider! Clearly, he is oblivious to the fact that Reagan's radical tax-cuts in 1981 **DOUBLED** U.S. Treasury Revenues by the time Reagan left office in 1989.

The author's contempt for his subject is further evident in his seeming inability to forego telling every embarrassing gaffe ever uttered by Mr. Reagan, such as the time President Reagan addressed Sam Pierce -- his black HUD Secretary -- as "Mr. Mayor." In this Morris reveals an astute eye for the *truly* insignificant detail, perhaps explaining why his biography of Teddy Roosevelt was projected to fill three volumes.

Morris reveals nothing but contempt for the culture of small-town, Mid-Western America, oblivious to the fact that it helped to nurture such a man as Ronald Wilson Reagan. That culture emphasizes religion, thrift, neighborliness, the Protestant work-ethic, self-sufficiency and Christian humility. Morris' contempt is evident in his use of gratuitously snide terms he uses to describe Middle America such as "garish," "ugly," "homely," and "drab," and his characterization of its female inhabitants as "squat" or "walruses."

One can only speculate as to the author's motivations for demeaning the memory and accomplishments of President Reagan. One theory suggests that his intent was to portray Reagan "warts and all," as if this were the biographical equivalent of a Matthew Brady photographic portrait of Abraham Lincoln.

A more plausible explanation is that the book is aimed primarily at an audience consisting of the many Marxist pseudo-intellectuals among our "*literary elite*," whose validation and awards Morris craves, but whose envy and hatred of Reagan are legendary. Most significantly, this book lacks the telling insights into Reagan's character that were lovingly evident in Presidential speechwriter Peggy Noonan's book, *What I Saw at the Revolution*.

To summarize one of her clearer insights: Reagan stayed focused on the truly important issues, and marshalled his excellent judgment and rare political courage in order to resolve problems the left routinely declared to be irremediable. In this approach, he differed from many ostensibly "*brighter*" and more "*sophisticated*" individuals, who agonized over the details of every decision whenever action was warranted. (For Reagan's hapless predecessor, Jimmy Carter, those decisions even included scheduling the White House Tennis Courts. *I'm NOT kidding...*)

It is Reagan, however, who has been thoroughly vindicated by history. For example: Reagan believed that the "*Cold War*" could be won by *peace through strength* and rearmament, not by capitulation, not by appeasement, not by *detente*, and not through "*arms control at any cost*." (The dismantling of the Soviet Bloc and the reunification of Germany is, as they say, *history*.)



The Gipper at the Brandenburg Gate

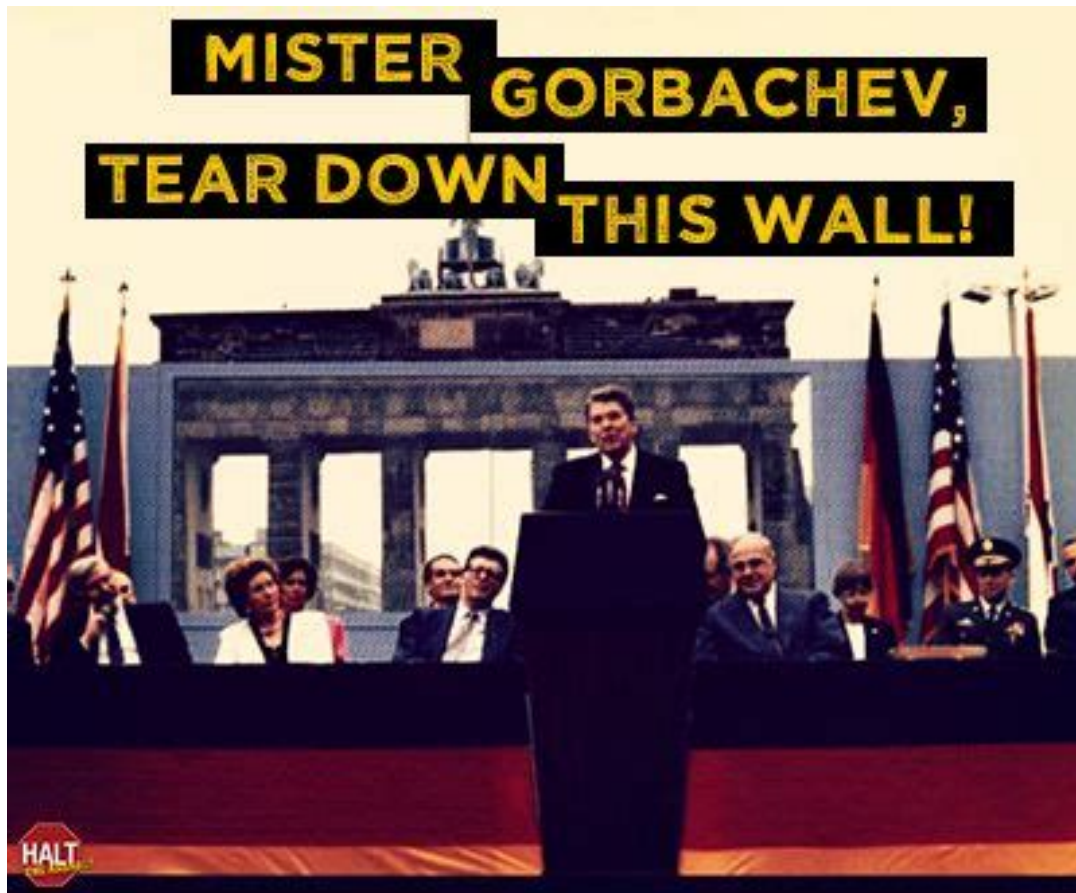
Reagan also preached that **non-inflationary growth** is possible, despite what liberal, "Democrat" economists say, and can bring unprecedented prosperity and opportunity. (He created 22 million new jobs in his eight years as president, and we were still benefiting from the fruits of non-inflationary growth some 15 years later. This ended with the election of Barack Hussein Obama.)

From decades of personal experience, Reagan had warned that members of the **Communist Party of the United States** (CPUSA) were disloyal, traitorous, and **subservient only to the Soviet Union**, not to the U.S. Constitution. (Among many other authors, see academics Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson. ***The Soviet World of American Communism***, Yale University Press, 1998.)

He also recognized that our federal welfare system is routinely abused. Moreover, it **encourages a life of leisure** and vice, and robs people of self-respect. (Even the "Democrats" -- who invented and perpetuated the modern American welfare state -- occasionally give lip service to this principle, if their support of welfare reform in 1996 was any indication.)

Although Morris returns frequently to the "lifeguard role" of Reagan's youth, he seems blind to its significance. A lifeguard is the type of person who, upon sensing danger to an imperiled victim, selflessly dives into the water to rescue them, while everyone else stands around wringing their hands and asking what can be done?

While this biography doesn't acknowledge it -- and its author was clearly *NOT* up to the task -- we owe a debt of enormous gratitude to Ronald Wilson Reagan -- **THE GREATEST MAN OF HIS CENTURY -- who never took his eyes off his charges and won the *Cold War* without firing a shot!**



The Gipper, Changing the Course of History