

OPINION

The Ronald Reagan I Remember

He was no hero for blacks, workers or the poor

BY RON DANIELS



The airways were filled with praise and accolades for Ronald Reagan this month on the 100th anniversary of his birth.

I have a different set of reflections and perspectives on his legacy.

My recollections of him are mostly negative. Frankly, he seemed like a very amicable person and I admired the remarkable love affair between him and his adorable wife Nancy. My reactions have to do with policy not personality.

The Reagan I remember did more damage to civil rights and the culture of rights for working people and the poor than any president in the latter half of the 20th century. He was no hero or iconic figure for blacks, workers or poor people.

The Reagan I remember launched a vicious and calculated assault on race-based remedies like affirmative action and other initiatives emanating from the civil rights movement.

He was the first president to use the "bully pulpit" of the presi-

dency to declare affirmative action and race-based remedies "reverse discrimination" and "black racism." He not only deprioritized civil rights enforcement, his Attorney General Edwin Meese actually used the power of his office to file lawsuits on behalf of whites who were allegedly harmed by affirmative action programs.

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He declared war on "welfare queens" and "food stamp cheats," cleverly citing examples of indi-

viduals guilty of violating the rules of these programs who just happened to be black. Despite the fact that there were always more whites than blacks on welfare and food stamps, the racial subtext of the Reagan assault played to the misconception that these were "black programs," which combined with civil rights laws and affirmative action initiatives, were encroaching on rights and well-being of whites.

Under the guise of reducing the size of government to provide relief for taxpayers, his goal was to dramatically reduce or eliminate social safety net programs.

The Reagan I remember advo-

them with non-union workers.

In an era where capital flight, plant closings and globalization were beginning to take their toll on organized labor, Reagan basically sent an unambiguous message on behalf of the economic elite that labor had better get used to working for the wages, benefits and conditions offered by the bosses or else face losing jobs all together. He ushered in an era of corporate dominance of unions and workers, the effects of which we are still reeling from today.

Reagan claimed to have never seen racism. Therefore, it is understandable that he generally opposed civil rights legislation. He once remarked that "If an individual wants to discriminate against Negroes or others in selling or renting his house, it is his right to do so."

The Reagan I remember was so oblivious to negative racial attitudes towards blacks, or so he wanted to pretend, that he went to the Neshoba County Fair in Mississippi, near the site where four civil rights workers were murdered in 1964, to launch his campaign for president in 1980.

He delivered a ringing endorsement of "state's rights" and railed against government dictating unpopular policies to the states. Without a doubt, this was a calculated extension of Richard M. Nixon's "southern strategy" and a blatant appeal to white voters, large numbers of whom held racial animus towards blacks.

Perhaps, the pundits, analysts and commentators had amnesia about this "darker side" of Ronald Reagan. Or perhaps they, like so many Americans, even those who were hurt by his policies, were deceived by his pleasant smile and charming demeanor.

Ronald Reagan never received an Academy Award as a B rate actor, but he deserves one for his performance as President of the United States. Apparently, he fooled a lot of people!

Dr. Ron Daniels is a distinguished lecturer at York College City University of New York.

cated dramatic tax cuts and deregulation to "stimulate" business, so-called "supply side economics." His director of the Office of Management and Budget later admitted this approach was essentially a "trickle down economic" scheme to further enrich the wealthy.

As Rev. Jesse L. Jackson characterized it, Reagan's sleight of hand was "reverse Robin Hood" where he took from the poor and gave to the military and the rich.

The Reagan I remember was a pro-big business, anti-labor hardliner hell bent on destroying unions as the guardian of the aspirations of working people. When the air traffic controllers union went on strike to demand more controllers and better working conditions, Reagan demanded that they return to work or be fired. When they refused, true to his word, he fired more than 11,000 affiliated controllers and replaced



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