

Reagan's Mythical America – Towards a Narrative Theory of Prophetic Politics¹

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The dissertation under examination today grew out of the pro gradu process where I researched the US enemy images under Reagan and the pressing need to understand the religious overtones present everywhere one chose to look. Initially I intended to focus on how Reagan combined religion to his politics but new elements kept blending into the work as it progressed. I noticed the importance of civil religious elements and other mythical beliefs as well in creating the justification and legitimation for political decisions. Since any religious experience or feeling is personal it needs a vehicle to be communicable. It needs to be told, narrated, to another. Since I was researching a man nicknamed in this time *The Great Communicator* the approach provided by narratology was highly suitable for my purposes. Reagan was a man fascinated with stories to such a degree that he formulated the goals of his polity in terms of stories and discussed highly complex political issues by turning them into anecdotes.

For my approach I have had to combine theories from numerous fields of academic study. In addition to narratology I have had to gain some understanding of American politics, mythology, political theology and religious studies just to name some, and combine them together. While such a multidisciplinary approach enriches the argument, the mastery of such diverse field of studies is impossible.

For my work I read every speech and written work by Reagan obtainable and the issue I had to confront was how exactly to employ the tools of narratology into such a vast amount of speeches and other types of very heterogeneous material. I chose not to perform my analysis by handling single utterances but by attempting to construct a metanarrative out of the numerous small narratives that abound in Reagan's texts. To do this I had to enter into a dialogic relationship in a bakhtinian sense with the texts and attempt to go beyond the mere semantic level to decipher some of the intentions of the texts. I had to look beyond the stories and to analyze the principles that bind them together, the metastory, so to say. On one hand this is risky, since the "higher meaning" is partially produced by me as a storyrecipient but the mere fact that the stories were told by a political leader attempting to fulfill political goals provided a certain story logic to be used as an interpretive superstructure.

Considerable number of pages has been consumed in this work to establish Reagan as a narrator and to search for insight into HOW precisely he exploited the power of stories for political power. I have drawn theoretical support from the whole scope of narratology from Russian formalists like Vladimir Propp through structuralists like Roland Barthes into the latest multidisciplinary approaches from David Herman and other possi-

ble world theorists. One of the central arguments into my analysis of Reagan's narratives is that the meaning of any narrative is produced in the complex intertextual web of relationships between the narrator, the reader and the knowledge of other texts that both possess. The meaning of the text does not lie in the words on the paper but arises from the interaction of the storyteller and the storyrecipient, laced with whatever intertextuality brings into the equation.

Every text, every narrative gives birth to a mental construction called a storyworld. The story recipient is mentally transported into this storyworld governed by the laws of the story logic. As an example to all those who have read the *Lord of the Rings* the Middle Earth is a storyworld which we populate in our minds with the characters, states and events drafted out by the narrator and our own imagination concerning the matters not mentioned within the text. This is the reader's "license to fill." But we cannot insert into the storyworld anything that is in opposition to the story logic, say cellular phones. We can create highly individualistic storyworlds from the same story, but the narrator guides us in the process and ultimately we cannot violate the logic of the story. The discussion in my dissertation of the entire genre of possible world's theories led into the realization that through the interaction of different texts and interpretative processes a multitude of storyworlds arises from such a web of interconnected stories as Reagan told. In other words each story initiates the creation of a storyworld and thus multiple stories create as many worlds as there are stories. Since all storyworlds are separate mental creations of each story recipient we end up with innumerable storyworlds. If these stories are told in such a manner that they have many common characteristics, the storyworlds can be combined into a construction that I have labeled a storyverse. It is a combination of all storyworlds potentially born out of the reader-narrator interaction.

Stories are not contradictory to each other. Words on the paper do not fight. But the storyworlds created can stand in violent opposition to each other. But they can co-exist very harmoniously as well. They can interact and entice the reader to blend elements together from different storyworlds within the storyverse. The connections be-

tween stories cause the storyworlds to overlap and the overlapping makes the boundaries of the individual storyworlds hard to define and at best semi pervasive. Thus the storyrecipient can, in a long and complex narration be transported even from one storyworld into another without noticing this displacement occurring. Thus the narrator can seduce the story recipient to enter one storyworld and by the skillful narrative manipulation of the storyverse introduce elements from other, even conflicting storyworlds. A gifted political narrator can use certain storylines to ensnare a reader to accept others. One mythical story can bring others to be accepted hook, line and sinker. Thus a storyverse can act as a vessel of political persuasion.

Armed with this understanding of the storyverse I turned my analysis into the realms of politics and religion. In our secular western modern or postmodern world we tend to see that the political world is separate from the religious world. More often that not, however, this is not the case. Especially in the American context the worlds overlap in complex ways. By narratively recreating his mythical America Reagan added some elements of storyworlds as characteristics of the "real world." But there is a connection to be found outside the narratological scope as well. It can be argued that the ultimate function of politics is to harmonize the world with the heavens, and to at least metaphorically bring the Garden of Eden back on to the world. Ever since the days of Jean-Jacques Rousseau the political scientists have discussed the combination of religion and politics in terms of civil religion, public religion or numerous other expressions, all meaning the function of linking the earthly governance to the heavenly one. Carl Schmitt argued that all concepts of political governance are just earthly applications of the divine power. Numerous scholars have seen the importance of treating the country, nation or people themselves as the object people need to believe in for the purposes of strengthening or creating national governance, identity and even integrity. The field of research and theory concerning civil religion is contradictory and full of conflicts on all levels and to a certain sense the multiple versions of civil religions and their drafting within the academic world has almost made the initially fertile field barren. Every version of civil religion is exclu-

sive and applies to only a small segment of the population or some group of individuals. In other words, not all of us are seduced by the same story.

The modern discussion of civil religion can be argued to have started in the late 50's with the theories of Will Herberg. He treated American civil religion as a religious superstructure overarching the traditional Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religions. Civil religion works as a deeper, more foundational feeling of belief which working on another level can easily encompass these institutionalized faiths. In Herberg's definition the object of American civil religion could be summarized as the "American Way of Life." But as numerous theorists have pointed out the American way of life is simultaneously exclusive and elitist. It is built upon the ideals of a small group of wealthy, white men, the Founding Fathers. How to escape this trap and fit for example women, inner-city poor, or people of Hispanic or Native American, or any other origin into this way of living and believing? Again, my answer is the manipulation of the storyverse.

Seen through the lens provided by narratology the object of civil religion should not be seen as a singular concept but rather a dynamic field of contesting, contrasting and even conflicting stories. If the American way of life is narrated aloud in a multitude of different narratives, as Reagan did, each again drafts a blueprint of a storyworld. Certain citizens can accept this story or that as true. All the stories need to narrated so as to have something in common, perhaps only "pursuit of life, liberty and happiness" or the value of democracy. The smallest common denominator for all Americans is practically impossible to find and even if one could find such a thing, it is likely to be too universal to arouse passion, as Barthes argued is essential for a good story. But there are values most people accept as their own. And by telling many stories, some religious, some nationalistic, some mythical, some of "common sense" these uniting factors enable the transportation between storyworlds. And when the essence of the American way of life is narrated in a very intangible and oblique manner in numerous different stories each citizen is able to include and exclude elements to his own liking. This creates an illusion of unity where there is none and the American Way of Life becomes a very fluent concept that theoretically can accommodate highly contradictory ways of

thinking. This results from the vagueness of the concepts and the ability of the storyverse to blur together different storyworlds and dissolve their boundaries. But this leads at best to mere creation of a feeling of togetherness, where people in fact are apart. It creates a sense of the metaphorical melting pot instead of a salad bowl where the ingredients do not blend together. A dynamic and narrative-based version of civil religion as a storyverse constructed of a web of stories offers a tool for identity politics. But is there a way to employ the nationalistic feeling arising from the rejuvenated but insubstantial civil religious belief for other political purposes.

The American way of life as a gateway can take us further into the storyweb of politics. By definition the American way of life is the proper and good way for an American, even an immigrant to live. But there have to be rewards for such correct and proper way for the good citizen to behave. As a reward one can use the American Dream, which is not merely a seaside residence in Malibu, three cars and a swimming pool but includes a less materialistic side as well. This is what Reagan took a lot of time to depict in his political storytelling. He wanted to depict America as the "shining city on a hill" for everyone else in the world to admire and to aspire to. I am tempted to argue that the goal of his politics, as far as story logic is concerned, was to turn the American dream into the American way of life, to turn the dream into reality. Certainly the America of his speeches and narratives was not the USA as we know it, but a mythical, exceptional and untarnished America, America not as it is or was but as it should be.

This idealistic America and fulfilling the potential of the country acted as the pot of gold at the end of the political rainbow. Just to claim that religion plays a role in American politics does not give us anything that has not been said a million times. To argue that for the leadership this religiosity gives a prophetic function adds something new to the discussion, and this is what I have attempted to do. The need to call Reagan's narrative based politicking with a name led to the attempt to point the reader towards a theoretical framework of prophetic politics within the realm of political thought.

The heart and soul of Reagan's political narratives was reformulating and communicating a vi-

sion of a glorious future for America, the fulfillment of the American dream for all. There was a golden period in the mythical past of America when the people lived in harmony and this has been referred to as original sinlessness. But the present day was marred by wrong political decisions made in the recent past. According to the story, every vote cast by the voters, every decision made in the senate, every moment when something would be decided was cast as the time for choosing. To either continue the gloomy if not desperate present or by making the right choice, or to take a step towards the actualization of the glorious future. The ultimate goal of politics was defined so vaguely that each right decision would bring its actualization closer, so the story went. But at the same time due to its elusive and intangible nature the goal moved further like a mirage, shimmering always just outside the reach, beckoning people onward to make one more decision, and then one more. By communicating narratively the fulfillment of the vision as the ultimate goal every moment had additional significance and this allowed the policymaking to avoid stagnation. There was always the next decision to be made.

It has been claimed by Sacvan Bercovich that America has been able to produce a story type of its own. This was the American jeremiad. Jeremiah was an Old Testament prophet who, following the biblical prophetic tradition pointed to the people the error of their ways and warned of the dire consequences if they do not return to the ways of God. Reagan added a new twist to this storyline. For him the future held no threat, but great promise to be actualized by good American behavior, innovations in technology and American military and moral might in a world where America will once again act as the hope of the oppressed and the shining city upon a hill. Reagan's plausibility as a messenger and prophetic spokesman of this glorious future was dependent largely on the eternal optimism that characterized his persona and the fact that he, son of a Midwest poor Irish family, had made it to Hollywood stardom and to the

highest office in the country. He was the American Dream incarnate and proof that anything was possible to anyone in his mythical America. The prophet in this case was part of his message and the mythical figure of Reagan emerged as a by-product of the mythical America.

It was my goal to understand and illustrate how this kind of story can be swallowed by a large part of the Americans and how Reagan seemed to be a Teflon-coated president who could get away with everything. Out of the "amicable dunce" he was called in his time he has emerged as the most respected US president in recent history. His peace through strength policy left the legacy of American military superiority and the highest budget deficits until then. But the legacy remains largely positive, perhaps because of the good feeling towards being an American Reagan created. Even in the latest presidential election the candidates seemed to compete who was the most Reagan-like of them all. The actualization of the glorious American future, nevertheless, is still not here. But the stories Reagan told, a part of the myths of the nation, are still there and new political narrators manipulate them and add new twists into the storylines just as Reagan did in his time. All Politicians tell stories, some with better success than others. Likewise researchers tell their stories and it is ultimately what we do with our material. Since Reagan's narrative policymaking was complex and spanned several decades, the result of analysis spans a substantial amount of pages. This dissertation is my personal contribution into the storyweb of America, one more story to add into the tradition, one more voice to join the narrating.

VIIITTEET

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