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Review: 'Reagan' Glosses the Political for the Persona

Focusing on the Gipper's Cold War foreign policy moves, the film avoids domestic divisiveness.

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Ronald Reagan deserves his own movie. While his popularity waxed and waned over the course of his two terms, even his staunchest critics can't deny his decisive role in thawing the Cold War and melting Soviet power. Fans of *The Gipper* finally get their wish with *Reagan*, an independently produced, long-gestating passion project starring Dennis Quaid as the actor-turned-president who turbocharged national morale and steered Republicans toward a divisive conservatism that helped define the modern GOP. The result is a political biopic with the heartbeat of a faith-based drama — earnest and aiming to inspire rather than provoke.

The movie is told in flashback as a former KGB officer (Jon Voight) in the present day recollects to a young Russian politician (Alex Sparrow) his profiling of Reagan as a possible threat to communism. Through this conventional framing device (reminiscent of Salieri's awed reminiscences of Mozart in *Amadeus*), the film traces Reagan's political awakening from his stint as an FBI informant against fellow Hollywood actors during the Red Scare to holy crusader against a nuclearized U.S.S.R. (The film draws its inspiration from Paul Kengor's 2006 book *The Crusader*.) Directed by Sean McNamara — whose first industry job was plugging in microphones for the president's 1981 inauguration — *Reagan* unfolds like a superhero origin story. The man's power, the movie seems to say, wasn't his Hollywood-honed ability to communicate with the nation, but rather his ardent evangelical faith which gave rise to a sharply defined sense of right and wrong. While most of America was focused on domestic issues, Reagan was convinced that Soviet communism was an existential threat to freedom everywhere, an odious bully that must be faced eventually. The film sets the stage for an epic battle of wills between the anointed and the accursed, the man of God vs. the godless empire.

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Like many cinematic history lessons before it, *Reagan* succumbs to the temptation of trying to cover a broad range of incidents in a brief time span. While a more gripping exercise might have restricted its scope to a single decisive episode — say, the Soviet's downing of a Korean Air Lines flight they wrongly claimed was a spy plane or the summits with Mikhail Gorbachev — Howard Klausner's screenplay plays like a Greatest Hits compilation



running at 2x speed hood relationship with his deeply religious mother, Nell (Aman dissolution of his first marriage to Jane Wyman (Mena Suvari) and the whirlwind courtship of his true love Nancy (Penelope Ann Miller); there's SAG President Reagan foiling labor leader Herbert Sorrell's plot to gain control of the Hollywood unions; there's Governor Reagan quelling the People's Park protest with the National Guard; here he is losing to Gerald Ford and shellacking Jimmy Carter; and, most gratifyingly, here is U.S. President Reagan adjuring Gorbachev to "tear down this wall."

These individual moments should give special satisfaction to viewers well-versed in Reagan's foreign policy legacy, but the film's lack of dramatic focus will leave the uninitiated feeling bewildered. Although Voight's incessant narration attempts to spackle over the various narrative cracks, there is often a choppy progression from one scene to the next, plodding along toward a preordained conclusion. More crucially, there is no visceral sense of the "evil empire" that Reagan identifies as the supreme enemy on earth. The entire Eastern Bloc is reduced to a single room in Moscow, where a cadre of wheezy, chain-smoking bureaucrats sit stroking their beards and fretting about this unyielding adversary.

Quaid is one of the rare contemporary actors who can simultaneously project masculinity and vulnerability (see his brilliant turn in *Far from Heaven*, for instance). He has made a good study of Reagan's winsome humor, kilowatt smile, and wrinkled dignity, even with the digital Botox job. (It's a relief when the character's age catches up with the actor's own.) Everyone else tends to fall short in the celebrity look-alike contest, with the possible exception of Dan Lauria as a bulbous Tip O'Neill, the Democrat Speaker of the House with whom Reagan worked across the aisle. The cast is nothing if not eclectic: Kevin Dillon as Jack Warner; Pat Boone as the reverend who prophesies Reagan's ascent to the White House; Lesley-Anne Down as a camp Margaret Thatcher; and for approximately five seconds, former Creed lead vocalist Scott Stapp as Frank Sinatra. Of the assorted supporting players, Mark Moses gathers quiet dignity as Judge William P. Clark, Reagan's National Security Advisor.

Just as *Reagan* leaves no doubt as to the filmmakers' opinion of the man, the timing of the film's release also feels predetermined. Opening wide in the midst of a particularly vicious election year, it may make liberal and conservative alike long for the days when the leader of the free world could make a quip that would cause even his political opponents to crack a smile. ❖

Nathaniel Bell is a Los Angeles-based writer who has been writing for L.A. Weekly and the Village Voice since 2021.



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