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*William F. Buckley Jr.*

# An Intuitive President

When Henry Kissinger went to Washington last week to address a group of academicians at what he thought was a closed meeting, he spoke of Ronald Reagan and his administration in terms he would not have used addressing a Republican rally. But if you listened carefully to everything Kissinger said, and weighed it comprehensively, you would find him much more shocking to academicians than to Reaganite loyalists.

Just to clear the air, Kissinger said he was in no way "indebted" to Reagan—in the sense, let us say, that Kissinger would be bound to acknowledge being indebted to Richard Nixon. He went on: moreover, if you meet Reagan and talk with him briefly, you wonder how he managed to be elected governor of California, let alone president of the United States.

One can hear the academic audience purring at this point, but it did not anticipate what was to come.

Kissinger went on to say that, in fact, Reagan had dominated the politics of California for eight years, had dominated the political life of the United States for six years and, not inconceivably, could go down as one of the most significant presidents of the century.

How can this be?

Because, Kissinger explained, the apparent limitations of Reagan totally disguise an intuitive grasp he has not only for priorities, but also for technique.

Here, Kissinger later explained, is a man who managed to change his entire staff without a ripple of change in policy, so clearly did he himself dominate policy; a president who clearly outwitted the Soviet Union through 1983 and 1984 on the matter of deploying theater weapons in Europe. When Mikhail Gorbachev arrived in Geneva, it was widely conjectured that he would "eat" Reagan alive. But Reagan's intuitive wit, his sense of what to get into, what not to get into—what academicians might call his reticulative sense of order—ended him up dominating the summit. And just as Gor-

bachev now believes that by threatening a summit cancellation because of Libya he will embarrass Reagan, quite the contrary is likely: Gorbachev will lose, and Reagan gain.

Now what got reported from all the above over ABC was mostly the business about how Kissinger wondered that Reagan ever got elected governor of California, let alone president of the United States. Nothing was said about the subtleties of Kissinger's extemporized remarks, let alone his statement to the academicians that they suffer as a class because academicians tend nowadays to be either job-seekers or revolutionaries. They are, accordingly, not attempting to carry the load, to help public figures to conceptualize problems with clarity.

As an example, take Nicaragua. Reagan is here genuinely handicapped by his rendering of the problem. Either the problem is grave enough to bring U.S. action, or it is not. If it is, \$100 million is a meaningless antitoxin; if it is not, then we have no business helping the contras at all. The academic class tends to ignore refinements in stating the question.

One notes from Ronald Reagan Jr.'s amusing and deft piece in Playboy magazine that, alongside the son-reporter, hiding outside the summit room in Geneva was presidential historian Edmund Morris, with the same numinous notepad on which he has written the first part of the best biography ever done on Theodore Roosevelt. It is Kissinger's implicit point that Reagan deserves a biographer of the subtlety of Morris.

But between now and the consolidation of Reagan's reputation in America's history, commentators need to be cautious. Last year, Jack Kemp's press aide John Buckley (a nephew) bunted a question about Kemp (Wasn't he too stupid to be president?) by citing Reagan (They said Reagan was too stupid to be president). What emerged in many news stories was merely: Kemp Aide Says Reagan Too Stupid to Be President.

Ronald Reagan is a very unusual man, with unusual habits of mind and manner. Three months ago, a retiring and shy editor was asked by a friend after a testimonial dinner whether she had been apprehensive at the prospect of sitting for 2½ hours next to the president of the United States. "Well," she said, "as a matter of fact I was. But as soon as he sat down, he turned to me and said, 'Priscilla, do you want to hear what I said to Gorbachev?'"

You wonder how such people as that can get elected governor of California. But then you think about it for a while, and you find yourself wondering how come, the last time the voters were consulted on the matter, that man won only 49 states.