



Review: [Untitled]

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Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years. by Haynes Johnson
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be one of the most difficult topics to be addressed in any comprehensive Middle East peace negotiations. By providing evidence on how Jews and Palestinians currently live—together and separately—in Jerusalem, this book hints at the types of practical and political issues that will need to be resolved in the future. Although its primary audience is likely to be scholars concerned about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the volume should also be of interest to those interested in ethnic power relations or in comparative studies of mixed urban settings.

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Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years by Haynes Johnson.
New York, W.W. Norton, 1991. 524 pp. \$24.95.

Washington Post national affairs columnist Haynes Johnson, a skillful writer and a perceptive reporter, has written a sorrowful and highly critical account of American public life in the 1980s. Although virtually all of Johnson's characters and topics will be quite familiar to any regular newspaper reader, Johnson more than succeeds in his goal of portraying Ivan Boesky and Oliver North, just like Wedtech and fraudulent televangelism, as related chapters—not disparate events—in recent American social history.

At one level, Johnson's unifying theme is as stark as it is depressing. The 1980s, he emphasizes, was an "ethical wasteland" (p. 371) and "an age of illusion when America lived on borrowed time and squandered opportunities to put its house in order" (p. 13). American life became "self-indulgent and imitative" as "entertainers became public leaders and . . . celebrities, not pioneers, scientists, or artists, became cultural heroes" (p. 461). The news media, "preoccupied with scandal," turned more and more toward "celebrity journalism in which entertainment masks as news" (p. 469) and the American people increasingly seemed "to withdraw from public affairs and distance themselves from public questions" (p. 468).

Despite the inclusiveness of Johnson's societal indictment, however, at a second level *Sleepwalking Through History* is primarily concerned with the cultural and political significance of Ronald Reagan's eight-year presidency. Reagan's election may indeed have reflected "a marriage of the New Right with the New Rich" (p. 21), but to Johnson, Reagan's importance was in large part accidental, not preordained. "Two events," Johnson writes, "transformed Ronald Reagan from a politician of dubious credentials and public achievements into a mythic figure in American life" (p. 153). "First and incomparably foremost was the assassination attempt" on 30 March 1981, which in Johnson's view served to "elevate Reagan into a place in the affections of his fellow citizens that he never lost during his years as president." The shooting, Johnson asserts, "strongly affected his ability to dominate Congress and win passage of his . . . legislative programs, and produced a strange

yet not surprising suspension of public judgment on his presidential actions and policies that continued” (p. 153) until Reagan left office. Four months later, in August 1981, Reagan’s new-found stature was further strengthened, Johnson argues, by his success in breaking the strike called by the nation’s air traffic controllers. “Had the assassination attempt and the controllers’ strike come late in his term,” Johnson argues, Reagan “would never have been able to forge the commanding national presence that gave his presidency such power and force, for better or worse” (p. 154).

Such an analysis may or may not be as persuasive as it is provocative, but it accurately captures the energetic style of interpretation that Johnson offers. *Sleepwalking Through History* may be at its best in Johnson’s deft portraits of the Iran-contra probers and their principal suspects, but he also convincingly surveys the many sins and excesses of the Boesky and Milken-style Wall Street investment bankers. Johnson is exceptionally proper and commendatory in acknowledging the contributions made by earlier books that have surveyed one or another part of his comprehensive story, and if he errs at all it is in his occasional tendency to overstate the historical preeminence of the Reagan period. Many observers of the 1960s, for example, might take issue with Johnson’s assertion that “the eighties were the most important years since World War II” (p. 13). Nonetheless, *Sleepwalking Through History* is a top-notch journalistic achievement, and few readers will likely quarrel with Johnson’s concluding observation that “America’s greatest test in the nineties lies not beyond its borders . . . but within” (p. 464).

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Roosevelt: The Party Leader 1932–1945 by Sean J. Savage. Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1991. 232 pp. \$25.00.

It is a delight to have a doctoral dissertation become a readable and enlightening work, as this author proves that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was “one of the most successful and effective party leaders in American history” (p. 187).

FDR attained at least two major goals—conversion of a disorganized and conservative-oriented party into a highly organized, liberal democracy and making the Democrats an enduring majority in Congress with long-time control of the presidency.

Starting in 1920, FDR sought unsuccessfully to make the party a liberal, functioning institution. Within two years of his race for New York’s governorship in 1928, which he won by 25,000 votes, FDR created a viable liberal party upstate, a permanent press bureau, and addressed rural and urban issues.

FDR’s selection of James A. Farley to head the Democratic State Committee was an ideal choice. He attained Roosevelt’s organizational goals and with the