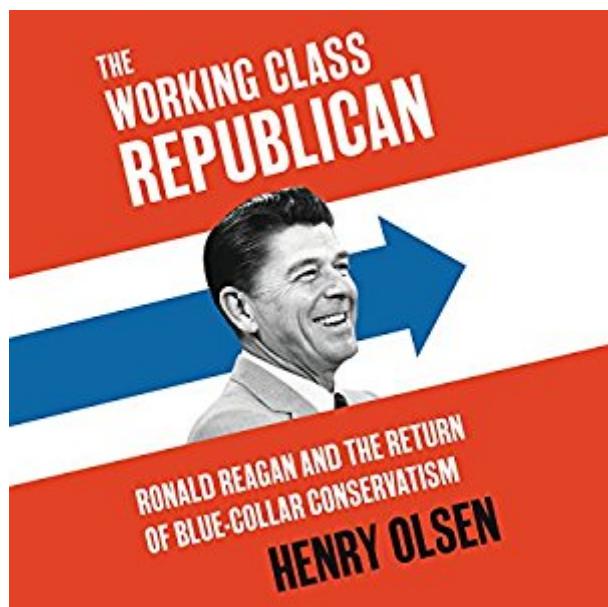


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Working Class Republican: Ronald Reagan And The Return Of Blue-Collar Conservatism



Synopsis

In this sure to be controversial book in the vein of *The Forgotten Man*, a political analyst argues that conservative icon Ronald Reagan was not an enemy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal but his true heir and the popular program's ultimate savior. Conventional political wisdom views the two most consequential presidents of the 20th century - FDR and Ronald Reagan - as ideological opposites. FDR is hailed as the champion of big-government progressivism manifested in the New Deal. Reagan is seen as the crusader for conservatism dedicated to small government and free markets. But Henry Olsen argues that this assumption is wrong. In *Working Class Republican*, Olsen contends that the historical record clearly shows that Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal itself were more conservative than either Democrats or Republicans believe and that Ronald Reagan was more progressive than most contemporary Republicans understand. Olsen cuts through political mythology to set the record straight, revealing how Reagan - a longtime Democrat until FDR's successors lost his vision in the 1960s - saw himself as FDR's natural heir, carrying forward the basic promises of the New Deal: that every American deserves comfort, dignity, and respect provided they work to the best of their ability. Olsen corrects faulty assumptions driving today's politics. Conservative Republican political victories over the last 30 years have not been a rejection of the New Deal's promises, he demonstrates, but rather a representation of the electorate's desire for their success - which Americans see as fulfilling the vision of the nation's founding. For the good of all citizens and the GOP, he implores Republicans to once again become a party of "FDR conservatives" - to rediscover and support the basic elements of FDR (and Reagan's) vision.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book has some good insights, but the author has very odd views on a number of aspects of Reagan's political stances. Particularly strange is his assault on supply-side economics, which he seriously distorts by claiming that the Supply-Siders wanted only to cut taxes on the rich. His attack on Jack Kemp (pages 200, 201) is an example of how far off the author is from reality. The very first paragraph of chapter one has a perfect example of how loose the author is with people and facts. "November 8, 1932, began as any other day, but it ended like no other. Nearly twenty-three million Americans had given Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his Democratic Party one of America's biggest landslides, ending over seventy years of Republican Party rule." Does the author not know that Woodrow Wilson was a DEMOCRAT? In fact Roosevelt became President after exactly TWELVE years of Republican rule. Roosevelt got 57% of the popular vote in 1932. Harding got 60% of the vote in 1920, just 12 years earlier. And four elections since 1932 had larger portions of the vote for the winner: 1936, 1964, 1972, 1984. I just can't trust the author with mistakes of fact and gross distortions of people.

It's certainly true, as Olsen notes that Reagan was not the ideologue that some portrayed him. Having said that, I think that Olsen goes a little too far in trying to align Trump and Reagan. Take their respective views on trade, for example. It is correct that Reagan did make occasional feints to protectionism (as have almost all Presidents) however, in theory and in practice, he was free trader. In announcing his candidacy for the Presidency in 1979, Reagan spoke of the need for a "North American Accord" between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, which laid the ground work for NAFTA, which Trump denounces today. He frequently made statements extolling the virtues of trade and warning against protectionism. Those statements are diametrically opposite of Trump's rhetoric. Regarding entitlement programs, Reagan undertook some serious efforts to control spending in Social Security and Medicare. In the case of Social Security, the system was in crisis in the early 1980s and a bipartisan reform commission recommended increased taxes and benefit cuts that Congress passed and Reagan signed into law. In the case of the Medicare, as Olsen notes, Reagan said he opposed Medicare's creation, although he did say he favored an alternative. The Reagan

Administration had several proposals to slow the growth in Medicare's expenditure trajectory, although some were rebuffed by Congress. Trump, on the other hand, swore off changes during the campaign and, as President, has proposed no changes whatsoever in the spending trajectories of either program. There were concerns about the long term sustainability of entitlement programs in the 1980s but they pale in comparison to those same concerns today. Whatever his views of the concept of entitlement programs, Reagan tried to restrain their growth for the benefit of the nation's fiscal health. Trump, on the other hand, is seems much more concerned about his short term popularity than the nation's long term interests. Finally, Reagan spoke often of the ideological divide on economic issues. He was constantly championing freedom and capitalism. Trump rarely talks about those topics and even if he doesn't self identify as a statist he frequently talks like one on the topics of trade, immigration, infrastructure and entitlement programs. It is popular to apply the label "working class" to something or someone favored, but if the label means a tendency to favor bigger government, it is a much easier fit for Trump than for Reagan.

I came to the Right from the Left and Ronald Reagan helped me get there. I had thought the Left was all about individual rights for ordinary people. Then I found it was about conformity through government control, and not prosperity, but a confining security through government largesse. I didn't want that and couldn't see how it was good for anybody. Reagan said that government was the enemy. The government that governed least governed best. That sounded right to me. I became a Republican. Was Reagan for the working man? He sure was. My husband was a welder, but the way we were taxed in 1979, if he worked overtime he took home less pay for the week because he was suddenly in a higher tax bracket. Reagan called that bracket creep. That kind of thing was crazy, but how else could the nation pay for all of the programs intended to help -- somebody else, not us nor any of the other struggling young families we knew. Reagan said he would reduce government and lower taxes. We would be allowed to keep more of our own money, which we spent, stimulating the economy. That last bit was supply side economics. Reagan understood that and sold it to a majority of Americans, but Olsen misunderstands him and the theory. Strikingly, Olsen says almost nothing about Reagan and the abortion issue. "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation" reiterated what Reagan had said on the topic prior to the 1980 election through Citizens for the Republic. (Oddly, Olsen never mentions that publication, nor Lyn Nofziger, perhaps because the image of Reagan he shaped was counter to that which Olden is trying to form in this book.) One great appeal to us ordinary folk was Reagan's stand on abortion. Olsen suggests Reagan said little

about religion, but he did speak of God and when he used words like "conscience" we understood that as a religious motivation. Working class America was religious and we understood Reagan to be so as well. Oh well. The book is an interesting read, especially for anyone who lived through the 1980s and paid attention to politics. Olsen's point by the end of the book seems to be to allow those who DIDN'T live through the Reagan era to reconcile Reaganism to Trump and Trumpism. Making Reagan into a New Deal Republican means that the Republican Party has been wrong, which means that Trump must be inevitable and right. It's an argument for our era. Yet, Reagan actually was a working class hero, given his childhood. Olsen spells that out well. I don't see how we slap that image onto the current Republican president, but Olsen tries and maybe that is the best reason to read the book. If we can find a way to re-understand the past to accommodate the present, there is political expediency in that. Well, therein is another difference from that older form of Conservatism. We used to despise revisionist history, but now it might be necessary to embrace it. Current political necessity trumps political history.

Henry Olsen has written a book about Ronald Reagan that has serious flaws. In summary, this is a book about Olsen's world view. He chooses the parts of Reagan's philosophy that support his point of view while ignoring the true Reagan vision. Like any book there are some valid points but there are numerous places where Olsen's interpretation of Reagan is wrong. Save your money and research the numerous documents at the Reagan library to learn about the real Ronald Reagan.

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