

# Feature

# Ronald Reagan: Death Valley Rerun

By Glenn Walton

In two months' time, the president-elect of the United States may very well be Ronald Reagan. If polls are correct, the Republic nominee and former star of television's **Death Valley Days** will soon occupy that powerful chair in Washington that of late has been so shaky: no president since Eisenhower has served for two full terms. Like no candidate before him since the dawning of the video age an inattentive generation ago, Reagan is the product of television, which rescued him from a fading movie career and recorded his metamorphosis from Borax salesman to political candidate. Since his success is due almost entirely to clever exploitation of the boob tube's control over the minds and morals of that great Silent Majority (Dante's term for the dead) that determines elections, it would do to reflect on the way the media, especially the visual media, run our political shows.

In one important respect, we live in an age of decline. People hardly read anymore; instead, the average consumer spends several hours each day being lulled by a lively little electronic box into buying the products of Exxon and Procter and Gamble. Media candidate Reagan himself is no great reader, **The Reader's Digest** being his favorite literature, and he much prefers to curl up in front of the box for an episode of **Little House on the Prairie**, that tribute to an imaginary American past. This is entirely appropriate in a democratic age, and the people who run presidential campaigns know a winner when they see one: Reagan is easy-going, charming, and still, at 69, quite without gray hair (although at least one coeval actress has commented that she noticed a bit of silver in the presidential head-to-be, way back in the forties). The candidate, who appears trim and healthy, has assured the nation that at the first sign of senility he will resign.

Officially the campaign doesn't start until the Labour Day before the November election,

but in reality it is perpetual. Ronald Reagan has been running for president since 1964, when a socko speech in the last waning days of the disastrous Goldwater campaign firmly established him as successor to the soon-to-be defeated darling of the American right. His effect on television was electric, and no wonder. Reagan had spent years selling his sponsor's product on **Death Valley**, and if he was a second-rate actor, he was a first rate adman. The transition to politics was effortless (Reagan had his apprenticeship as president of the Screen Actors Guild in the early 50's) and 16 telegenic years later, Reagan is within grasp of the big prize, a Man Whose Time Has Come, as we are told. The coronation in Detroit in July by a united Republican party was the last major obstacle short of going to the polls, a triumph of publicity over substance, and it seems a better bet than not that, come November, he will smile and wave his way into the ranks of Jefferson, Lincoln and Wilson.

Some political conventions are better staged than others. Their purpose, of course, is to present a candidate to the television nation, preferably in prime time, with a minimum of discussion and dissent. They are scripted and tightly controlled events, with time allowed weeks beforehand for 'spontaneous demonstrations.' The Republicans are better at it than the Democrats, having a more narrowly-based party. Sometimes, as at the 1972 Democratic convention, the delegates insist on discussing the issues, with disastrous results. The attention span of today's videoman is short, and the television tries less to be interesting than to put as little strain upon the viewer's mind as possible (the control for new shows being screened in Hollywood before special audiences is a Mister Magoo cartoon). The monetary effect is everything. Thus the proliferation of talk shows without talk, except of the small kind, and the



schools, a practice rightly declared illegal under the U.S. constitution (which foresaw a separation of church and state) by the Supreme Court. But right wingers have never respected that body much. Right now they are trying to change the constitution to prohibit abortions. This attempt by a group of people who decry the increasing 'interference' of the government in people's lives is the best example of exactly that practice they condemn.

'Government interference' for them is of course interference in the right of business to do exactly as it chooses, and the Republicans do not support calls for more stringent safety controls in industry. Reagan, with his boundless confidence in the American people, thinks business can be left to impose its own

He says he will protect the environment, but wherever business and the public interest clash, business wins; the 55 mph speed limit, a major gas saving measure, is opposed in the Republican platform, for obvious reasons.

Reagan's plans for the economy reveal the muddled thinking that has had him constantly apologizing for wildly inaccurate statements all year. He wants to put the economy back into the hands of the private sector (i.e. big business) and reduce government spending, the latter a laudable goal by anyone's standards; bureaucratic bloat is a modern problem that transcends ideological boundaries, and must be coped with. At the same time he proposes to cut government spending, Reagan calls for a tax cut of up to 30%, whose main beneficiaries will be the rich (10% of a million bucks is a hell of a lot more rebate than 10% of ten grand; thus, the rich will get richer, while lower income groups will get a relatively smaller cut of the whole economic pie than before). Not all government programs will be cut: the military stands to gain enormously from a Reagan administration. With falling govern-

ment revenues and increased weapons spending, the social sector will necessarily suffer. Getting rid of social programs will be no easy task; many (if not most) are legally entrenched, and while Reagan no longer supports the conservative view that Social Security is one of the devil's creations, he once did suggest that contribution to that program be made voluntary, a fact repeated with relish by his opponents.

On social issues the candidate is daringly radical. Reagan has opposed all the major social movements of the past decade or so (in fact his opposition to social and economic reform goes way back: he once called the New Deal 'fascist') from the Equal Rights Amendment, to legalized abortion, to gay rights, and so on. Himself a divorced man (a fact totally ignored in the party-sponsored film shown just before his acceptance speech) Reagan appeals to those fundamentalist elements in American society that is quite at odds with alternative lifestyles (an interesting statistic: only 15% of the American population still lives in a 'nuclear family' situation). The indulgence Reagan presumably asks (and should get from the electorate for his own human failings he does not acknowledge, with the result that those failings, like the gray hair, must be covered up).

A press conference by his son's ballet troupe was cancelled by Reagan staff for fear of bad publicity. Since what a person doesn't say often reveals more about them than what they do say, Reagan, by hushing up what are basically irrelevant issues, is indicating that he underestimates the capacity for change and reform of an electorate he, in theory, so glowingly praises. This is the basic hypocrisy of his campaign, and while there is a great longing nowadays for honesty in politics, Reagan, while exploiting that longing, does not satisfy it.



rise of the television commercial as art form. Judged by this standard, the Republican convention was a success. All the balloons fell at the proper time (a fact duly recorded, omen-like, by the networks) the Republican wives smiled ceaselessly through hours of gruelling exposure to the TV lights and no one mentioned Nixon. Nasty party dissenters like Mary Crisp, who supported the Equal Rights Amendment, were whisked out of Detroit before the convention even started. Reagan, as he took the podium to give his acceptance speech, summed up the situation by reminding the cheering delegates that they were using up valuable prime-time.

For someone unused to TV hype (and I'm one — don't own a set) watching Reagan accept the nomination was an education in the art of video politics: those who have seen Robert Altman's film **Nashville** will understand that in America, politics and show business are virtually synonymous, at least as far as the tube goes. The Republicans have chosen well: Reagan's charm will be a formidable weapon in the fall campaign against Carter's brand of analytical seriousness. Reagan is a master at the television speech, and no matter that he is more right-wing than any candidate since Goldwater, that his speeches are full of platitudes, are unspicific: he realizes the viewer's impatience with detail. Instead, all the right political buttons are pushed: family, the moral fibre of the nation, national honour, which is hot stuff in video America.

What is so disturbing about what commentators like to call Reagan's 'vision' (it is less a vision than a picture postcard of pre-industrial

America) is that he sells it so well. He had me half-convinced as he spoke, in his reassuring tones, eyes all a twinkle, of the need to return to the Way We Were (albeit with a superior military establishment) and make things as good again as the average American citizen out there. A large segment of the American population, of course, has always longed for an authoritarian figure to take over the government and set things straight with a firm hand, and in Reagan they perceive that man.

His high-sounding appeal to the Traditional Values That Made America Great is, in itself harmless, being devoid of content (no one seriously interested in reforming the American political system is listened to in videoland) but it obscures the reality of Reagan's politics, which are, in the purest sense of the word, reactionary.

Unlike Carter, Reagan denies all the dissent and re-evaluation of traditional and political and social roles that has gone on since Vietnam and the Beatles.

Only last month Reagan defended American's unsuccessful invasion of Vietnam in the 60s with the accusation that American forces were fighting with one hand tied, that one hand, in the light of the massive manpower and \$100 billion expended on that little Asian country, being presumably the atomic bomb (the use of which Goldwater had advocated. Oh well, as one report that came out of that hold-out had it: 'We had to destroy the village to save it.') This month Reagan even voiced his doubts about the theory of evolution (this before a fundamentalist group in Texas) and supports the return of Christian prayer to public

