

# Federalist Center | NEWS

## RONALD REAGAN AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING

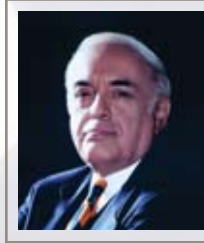


by Donald Devine

A brilliant academic has written a book on Ronald Reagan that claims the former president's "theory of government has little reference to the principles of the American founding." Columnist George Will, reviewing John Patrick Diggins'

new volume, "Ronald Reagan," adds "especially to the wisest of them, James Madison" who taught that "Government's principal function was to resist, moderate or even frustrate the public's unruly passions." The founders created a separation of powers government "to check the demands of the people" whereas ▶ [ PAGE 5 ]

## WASHINGTON POLITICS: NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN



By Robert Novak

I guess I've been in Washington too long. No one seems to remember anything and everyone seems to repeat the same mistakes. I speak at these Federalist schools because I try to look at current events from a historical perspective and I think

some of the ideas I have on the problems facing the nation fit with the Federalist Center's emphasis on the Founders' principles.

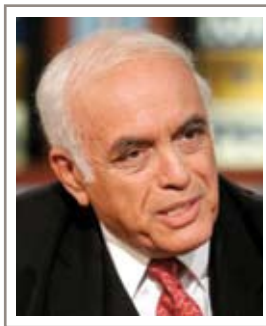
Following the example of their Senate brethren just before I left town, House Democrats will adopt a budget resolution containing the largest tax increase ▶ [ PAGE 2 ]

## ACTIVISTS ATTRACTED TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LEADERSHIP SCHOOL



Interns for congressmen, state legislators and political parties joined students from the University of California campuses at Davis, Irvine and Riverside, from California State University campuses in Fullerton and Long Beach and from Chapman University for our Southern California School in Newport Beach on March 24, 2007.

The school luncheon featuring Bob Novak was a resounding success due to the great efforts of our cosponsor The Lincoln Club of Orange County, which turned out a large and enthusiastic crowd to cheer on and honor the students. ▶ [ PAGE 3 ]



in U.S. history amid massive national inattention. Nobody's tax payment will increase immediately, but the budget resolutions set a pattern for years ahead. The House version increases non-defense, non-emergency spending by \$22.5 billion for the next fiscal year, with such spending rising 2.4 percent in each of the next three years. To pay for these increases, the resolution

raises taxes close to \$400 billion over five years -- about \$100 billion more than what the Senate passed.

It had been assumed the newly majoritarian Democrats in Congress would end President Bush's relief in taxation of capital gains, dividends and estates. What came as a surprise was the simultaneous rollback in Bush-sponsored income tax cuts. This represents Democrats' belief they can politically survive this long-term commitment to bigger government. Here is an audacious effort to raise the banner of fiscal responsibility while increasing spending and taxes.

This Democratic strategy is encapsulated in what Harry Hopkins, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's main man, is alleged to have told a friend at New York's Empire Race Track in August 1938: "We will spend and spend, and tax and tax, and elect and elect." While Hopkins denied ever saying that, those words represented successful Democratic government and political strategy for the next two decades.

2

John F. Kennedy, reclaiming the White House for the Democrats for the first time in eight years, altered the party's pattern in 1961 with massive tax cuts. However, Bill Clinton, taking power in 1993 after 12 years of Republican rule, returned to the Hopkins formula by proposing and passing what then was the biggest tax increase ever. It was "tax" and "spend," but not "elect." The Clinton tax contributed to the 1994 Democratic loss of control of both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years.

Why, then, having just regained congressional control, are Democrats going down this dangerous path again? Indeed, while President Clinton in 1993 had to twist arms for a one-vote margin in each house. Democrats now obediently fall in line for tax increases. Their conduct is explained by faith in the March 20-25 Democracy Corps poll that voters associate Democrats more than Republicans with "fiscal responsibility," 44 percent to 36 percent.

The architect of that impression is Sen. Kent Conrad, the austere Democratic chairman of the Senate Budget Committee. "It restores fiscal responsibility by balancing the budget by 2012," he said of his resolution in Senate debate last week.

Conrad claimed: "We try to keep taxes low." In fact, Conrad is the consummate tax collector who spent the 12 formative career years prior to his 1986 election to the Senate as an assistant tax commissioner and then tax commissioner in

North Dakota. His most recent liberal ratings are 90 and 85 percent by the liberal Americans for Democratic Action. The National Taxpayers Union put him at 17 and 16 percent in 2005 and 2006.

Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, the 37-year-old fifth-termer who is the House Budget Committee's new ranking Republican, has proposed an alternative resolution. It not only retains Bush tax cuts but also proposes deep reductions in spending, protects Social Security payments and runs down the national debt. But why was no such budget resolution proposed during 12 years that the GOP was in the majority? Would the party's leadership support the Ryan resolution if it were in control now? That those questions must be asked undermines Republican credibility and explains why Democrats dare return to tax, spend and elect.

The only two presidents in modern times who have even tried to follow the Founders' principles were Calvin Coolidge and Ronald Reagan, both of whom were much better than liberal academics would ever admit.

The issues in the 2006 election were actually on the side of Republicans. The majority of Americans still pretty much want the government to get out of their way rather than "help" them out. But the enthusiasm for this sentiment was eroded by an enormous increase in the level of government spending and government activity under the GOP. Two issues that were promoted by the president especially undermined the support for Republicans by those who believe in limited government. One was the "Leave No Child Behind" education bill. What has that got to do with federalism? And the other issue was the establishment of a new entitlement for prescription drugs in which they pummeled, and beat, and absolutely dragooned enough Republicans to vote for a program they mostly opposed on principle, keeping the voting open late to wee hours of morning, against all rules, to pass the bill.

The only two presidents in modern times who have even tried to follow the Founders' principles were Calvin Coolidge and Ronald Reagan, both of whom were much better than liberal academics would ever admit.

What is the cause for the Republican Party, to go in these directions: Leave No Child Behind, the new entitlement for prescription drugs, and this war? I submit you can find the source in the Wall Street Journal of September 15, 1997 in an editorial page article by William Kristol and David Brooks. Kristol was then, and now, editor and publisher of The Weekly Standard, and Brooks was one of the editors,



*Charlie Hobbs, Don Devine, Mr. and Mrs. Ken Coulter and Mary Hobbs*



The Federalist Leadership Center schools are based upon the principle that true leadership must rest upon philosophical understanding, specifically upon the federalist thinking of America's founders. The United States can only be successful if these principles--illustrated best by its greatest founding writing, The Federalist Papers--are as viable and central to its leaders and citizens today as they were at the nation's birth.

The luncheon was attended by students and local notables including Lincoln Club leaders Robert Loewen and Wm. Buck Johns, Assemblymen Chuck DeVore, Jim Silva, and Van Tran, and Neil Blais, Councilmember, City of Rancho Santa Margarita.

Prominent members of the community included Charlie and Mary Hobbes, Nancy and Tom Padberg, Frank Singer, Ken and Jo Ann Coulter, David Sparks, Rick Reiff, Michael Merino, Juan Forster, Harry Sahota, and many, many others.

Nick Romero, student leader at California State University at Fullerton and legislative staffer said the school was "simply wonderful. It was an experience of a lifetime and certainly a view one cannot get at any university I have ever been to in California. Keep up the good work."



*Wm. Buck Johns*



*Don Devine and Juan Forster*



Reagan simply blamed government for what was “inherent in democracy itself,” giving in to the peoples’ desires.

The worst thing to say about a democratic politician is that he cannot say “No” to things people should not have. Over 2,000 years ago, the philosopher Aristotle said this is why democracies fail. Since the leaders are dependent on popular votes, the easiest thing is to say “yes” to every desire. But Will says Reagan merely told “people comforting and flattering things they want to hear” and that all of their desires should be solved by government—and this pandering inevitably led to big and bad government.



Professor Diggins of CUNY makes the more detailed argument that the 1980s were actually America’s “Emersonian moment” because Reagan sometimes quoted optimistic phrases from the radical individualist Ralph Waldo Emerson. But it was Reagan’s mother who supposedly was the real culprit, her faith influencing him to write in a 1951 letter that

“God couldn’t create evil so the desires he planted in us are good.” This proves to the good professor and the columnist that Reagan adopted the “Emersonian faith” that “we please God by pleasing ourselves”—we act on our own passions only and they are all good so leaders can say yes to them—a faith ascribed to Reagan based on a few speech phrases and a private letter.

Diggins is not a typical leftist but he has the same rationalistic belief that the Enlightenment made all traditional thinking obsolete. The Founders, being serious people, their principles must be Enlightenment rationalist, not silly Emersonian optimism misled by religion. Diggins describes himself as being somewhere “to the right of the Left and to the left of the Right” but he is an expert on the Left and has the leftist assumption that anyone who believes in individualism and optimism is an Emersonian. To the wise men of the left (as opposed to Leninists) it is either Emerson or Rousseau--or Marx (properly understood), the pure free, optimistic individualist or the pure rational, communal socialist. They miss everything between—including actual capitalism, which is not pure individualism but also corporatism, private beneficence, local government and other intermediate institutions as Adam Smith clearly taught. Diggins mentions that Reagan was very influenced by the free market economist Frederic Bastiat but he just cannot help himself by adding that Marx called Bastiat the “modern bagman of free trade,” as if it is obvious that a rationalist bon mot is enough to dismiss a serious conservative thinker.

To univocal rationalist scholars like Diggins, tradition may simply be dismissed for serious thinkers and the only rational alternative is selfish individualism (see C.B. Macpherson’s “The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism”) as with Emerson. He means a compliment. But Reagan, says Diggins, had a traditional side that made him less successful than he could have been. He was so optimistic about man’s nature because his mother’s religion supposedly rejected the possibility of evil.

But the Christian belief in Reagan’s letter that God created man good ignores that Genesis also depicts evil as being brought to mankind by the Devil after the creation. Reagan’s was not a belief all is good but represented the theological tradition of the

Bible, which is hardly simple optimism.

There is plenty of evil recognized by this tradition although, as with Reagan’s mother, it does teach that God will make it right at the end—but in a kingdom not of this world. But even such limited optimism must be dismissed by pure rationalists as irrational.

To try to make the charge that Reagan was a simplistic theological optimist and the Founders were not—and

Will does not

mention this--Diggins must exclude the Declaration of Independence as an American founding document. Think of that! “Fundamentalists may jump for joy when they see the word ‘God’ in the Declaration and other documents,” says the not very dispassionate professor, but “the founding is not the Declaration but the Constitution,” which does not mention God or tradition. This is the opposite extreme from the Declaration “creedalists” who almost exclude the Constitution. Obviously, both documents are essential to understand the founding principles.

A man who honors Edmund Burke, as does Will, should certainly recognize there is a middle way, a synthesis of the Declaration and Constitution, of tradition and reason, of freedom and order, of optimism and realism. No one recognized this more than Ronald Reagan. In an early speech as president, he summarized his philosophy at some length to his closest ideological kin at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (held this year March 1-3). After listing “intellectual leaders like Russell Kirk, Friedrich Hayek, Henry Hazlitt, Milton Friedman, James Burnham, Ludwig von Mises” as the ones who “shaped so much of our thoughts,” he discussed only one of these influences at length.

It’s especially hard to believe that it was only a decade ago, on a cold April day on a small hill in upstate New York, that another of these great thinkers, Frank Meyer, was buried. He’d made the awful journey that so many others had: He pulled himself from the clutches of “The [communist] God That Failed,” and then in his writing fashioned a vigorous new synthesis of traditional and libertarian thought -- a synthesis that is today recognized by many as modern conservatism.

A man who honors Edmund Burke, as does Will, should certainly recognize there is a middle way, a synthesis of the Declaration and Constitution, of tradition and reason, of freedom and order, of optimism and realism.



now a “conservative” columnist, for the New York Times. Their whole point was that the problem with the Republican Party and conservatism was that they were “anti-government.” Brooks and Kristol asked: how can Americans love their nation and hate their government? They argued that a political philosophy whose principal function is to protect the

people from the government—as the Founders believed—is an anomaly.

How did we change? Everybody knows Theodore Roosevelt, of course. He was the first president to make the break with the Founders. How many of you know, Tom Reed, Thomas Reed, Thomas Brackett Reed? How many of you? Raise your hands—1, 2, 3...4. Well I think the fissure, the division, in the Republican Party and the nation today is between Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Brackett Reed, who represents the old federalist nation. In a book I wrote that was published in late in 1999, *Completing the Revolution*—here is what I said.

“Teddy Roosevelt has become so universally a recognized icon of the Grand Old Party that he now approaches Abraham Lincoln in the level of veneration among all kinds of Republicans. Tom Reed is nearly forgotten.” Tom Reid was a congressman from New York who was Speaker of the House during Roosevelt’s tenure. “Roosevelt’s photograph is found in the offices of literally hundreds of prominent Republicans, Reed’s is in none. As a young boy growing up in a liberal Republican household I looked to TR as one of my personal heroes the puny, sickly youth who became an amateur boxer, a big game hunter and sometime cowboy. The hero who stormed up San Juan Hill, leading his rough riders in the Spanish-American War was the first American president to be a world figure, sending the great white fleet around the world and negotiating the Russo-Japanese peace settlement at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He was the trust buster, the leading progressive and Republican and the friend of the working man. Tom Reed, I knew him only as a not attractive bit player in history books; the ‘Czar Reed’ who exercised dictatorial rule as Speaker of the House of Representatives in the 1890s, the old guard Republican with the bay window caricatured in the famous Nast cartoons.”

“Not much of a contest but let’s look closer. Roosevelt was an imperialist, he called it expansionist, who boomed we are a conquering race, in justifying domination over lesser breeds; a big spender, advocate of growing and intrusive government, advocate of higher taxes, and the founding father of the onerous inheritance tax. And the father of the federal police force. When Congress refused to vote appropriations for new justice department investigators TR managed to evade the legislative will and launch the Bureau of Investigation, later the FBI, on his own authority. He is the real and acknowledged model for the Kristol-Brooks conservatism. Not surprisingly,

amateur historian Roosevelt regarded Jefferson as one of the nation’s worst presidents. Reed, advocate of low taxes, limited government, and personal freedom, with the courage to be anti-imperialist, challenging the popular will at the time of the Spanish-American War. An imperialist America made him heart sick, sick of politics and sick of Washington.

“More than 60 years later in her book *The Proud Tower*, historian Barbara Tuchman wrote ‘Reed’s whole life was in Congress, in politics, in the exercise of representative government with the qualification that for him it had to be exercised toward an end he believed in.’ To his secretary Speaker Reed

wrote: ‘I have tried, perhaps not always successfully, to make the acts of my public life accord with my conscience and I cannot now do this thing,’ this thing being the Spanish-American War. The greatest legislator of his day stunned the political world by retiring from public life in April 1899 at age 59; forgotten, Teddy Roosevelt, his nemesis, an icon of the Republican Party and nation.”

The core of that model [Federalist Founders] still survives today and has been, I would argue, the basis for America’s great success in the world.

When any new president comes into office he has an option of putting up a couple of pictures that he thinks should be up there in a prominent place. When Richard Nixon came in, he put up progressives Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. And I think that was prophetic because the policy of his administration was part Roosevelt, macho imperialism “we’re the strongest power in the world and we can tell the lesser breeds what to do” and part Woodrow Wilson, spreading democracy around the world, not on the basis of U.S. national security interests, but on the basis of the need to make the natives look like Iowa democrats whether they like it or not. The parallels with the George Bush Administration at least so far to date are obvious.

Two models of government face us for the future. One goes to the progressives Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson and explicitly breaks with the Federalist Founders idea of limited and divided government. It is epitomized today by the Kristol-Brooks model of big government conservatism with more and more programs, whether Republican or Democratic. The other goes back to the Founders and Thomas Brackett Reed. The core of that model still survives today and has been, I would argue, the basis for America’s great success in the world.



*Robert Novak is a nationally syndicated columnist and Fox News commentator. This speech was given to the Southern California Federalist Leadership School in Newport Beach on March 24, 2007.*



It was Frank Meyer who reminded us that the robust individualism of the American experience was part of the deeper current of Western learning and culture. He pointed out that a respect for law, an appreciation for tradition, and regard for the social consensus that gives stability to our public and private institutions, these civilized ideas must still motivate us even

as we seek a new economic prosperity based on reducing government interference in the marketplace.

Our goals complement each other. We're not cutting the budget simply for the sake of sounder financial management. This is only a first step toward returning power to the States and communities, only a first step toward reordering the relationship between citizen and government. We can make government again responsive to the people by cutting its size and scope and thereby ensuring that its legitimate functions are performed efficiently and justly.

In other words, the Reagan patrimony actually came from the synthesis of Western thought Frank Meyer identified as modern conservatism, including Burke's important contributions. Contrary to the charge, it promised cutting governmental functions but as a means to putting local citizens in control rather than bureaucracies. It was individualism

and freedom but it was also culture, tradition and law. It was neither pure individualism nor pure communalism. Both were part of the deeper synthesis of Western civilization that especially expressed itself in the American experience.

Reagan specifically referred to the founders in another key speech that also escaped Diggins' scholarship—all he had to do was type the name in the Reagan Library search engine—and here he specifically referred to the man Reagan supposedly forgot, James Madison, and the limitations on democracy he supposedly did not understand.

Madison knew and we should always remember that no government is perfect, not even a democracy. Rights given to government were taken from the people, and so he believed that government's touch in our lives should be light, that powers entrusted to it be administered by temporary guardians. He wrote that "government was the greatest of all reflections on human nature." He wrote that "if men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government," he said, "which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed, and next oblige it to control itself."

Led by Madison and Jefferson and others, the authors of the Constitution established a fragile balance between

► CONTINUED | BACK COVER

*Urgent Reply to:*

**Professor Donald Devine**  
**The Federalist Leadership Center**  
**4805 Idlewilde Rd**  
**Shadyside, MD 20764**

*Dear Don:*

I support your program to teach the Founders' Federalist principles to this generation of young Americans. To help in this fight for our nation and its values, I will step forward to help you and the Federalist Leadership Schools. Thank you for teaching our young leaders about the Founders' ideals. To help in the fight, I am also including my generous contribution of:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$10,000 to pay for an entire Federalist Leadership School | <input type="checkbox"/> \$500 to pay for 5 scholarships for student leaders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$1,000 to pay for 10 scholarships for student leaders     | <input type="checkbox"/> \$_____ to the student scholarship fund             |

Please make your check payable to: *Bellevue University Federalist Leadership Center*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

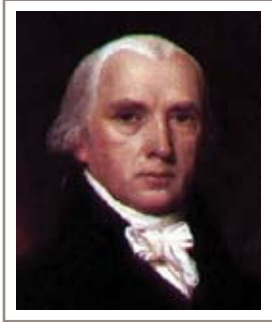
- check enclosed
- Please charge my credit card:  AMEX  VISA  MC

Credit Card Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Contributions to Bellevue University's Federalist Leadership Center are tax deductible under Section 501(c) (3) of the federal tax code.

► DEVINE | CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

the branches and levels of government. That concept was their genius and the secret of our success -- that idea of federalism. The balance of power intended in the Constitution is the guarantor of the greatest measure of individual freedom any people have ever known. Our task today, this year, this decade, must be to reaffirm those ideas. Our Founding Fathers designed a system of government that was unique in all the world—a federation of sovereign states with as much law and decision-making authority as possible kept at the local level. They knew that man’s very need for government meant no government should function unchecked.



We the people—and that is still the most powerful phrase— created government for our own convenience. It can have no power except that voluntarily granted to it by the people. We founded our society on the belief that the rights of men were ours by grace of God. That vision of our Founding Fathers revolutionized the world. Those principles must be reaffirmed by every generation of Americans, for freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.

Is this a starry-eyed optimist who did not reference the founding principles? Reagan specifically emphasized their belief men were not angels and the necessary controls on the people. Is this a man who believed in unchecked satisfaction of the desires of the governed? It is precisely the reverse. President Reagan is the only recent president to say no to popular spending, actually limiting the size of government, by reducing



federal non-defense discretionary spending over his term absolutely by ten percent and even reducing total non-defense spending including entitlements as a share of national wealth from 17.9 to 16.4 percent of gross domestic product.

In a few lucid words Ronald Reagan answered every one of the charges by Diggins and Will, in words easily accessible to them.

How can these two be so far off? Was the man who called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” oblivious to evil in the world? Who are these people writing about?



*Donald Devine was the director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management from 1981 to 1985 under President Reagan and heads the Federalist Leadership Center at Bellevue University.*

*Please visit us at our website [www.federalistleadershipcenter.com](http://www.federalistleadershipcenter.com)*



**BELLEVUE UNIVERSITY**

The Federalist Leadership Center  
4805 Idlewilde Rd  
Shadyside, MD 20764