Death of a Salesman and American Leadership: Life Imitates Art

Date: 1994
On Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller
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Death of a Salesman hit the American stage in 1949, catapulting Arthur Miller into the status of the "greats" of American dramatists. While the play was never without its critics, who agreed over whether the play could appropriately be called a "tragedy," whether the writing was a bit stilted, and whether Miller's message about American capitalism and the American dream was a bit garbled, it still was an enormously popular play among theater-goers and critics. All of them seemed to find something of the American creed, and of themselves, in the play.¹

But more than 40 years have passed since the play was written. Should we now view the play as a dated relic of another age, or does it still resonate with the American character? Is the play primarily the personal problem of an aging playwright whose formative years were spent in the Great Depression, and who therefore could never "trust" American capitalism again?² If so, do we have little need to understand Death of a Salesman or come to terms with it? On the contrary, I shall argue that Death of a Salesman still resonates powerfully in American life and culture and that in a fascinating and chilling way life has imitated drama. Willy Loman shares a number of important traits with the most successful American politician of the late twentieth century, Ronald Reagan. To understand American culture and American politics, one must come to grips with the phenomenal success of Ronald Reagan. Arthur Miller's perspective in creating Willy Loman and Death of a Salesman can help us do this.

I. The Similarities of Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan

In the first place, both Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan are salesmen. Both understood that a salesman has got to believe in himself and his product before he can sell it to others. Both were selling themselves and the American dream. Ronald Reagan, of course, was a salesman for General Electric, "living well electrically" while touting the corporation's conservative political agenda. But most of all, as he gave "The Speech" to 250,000 GE employees while traveling all over the country, he sold the American dream.³ And he was selling that both before and after his years as a GE salesman.

After he was dropped by GE, he became a salesman for the conservative ideas of Southern California businessmen, who recognized in him the best spokesman for their ideology that they could find. "A salesman has got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."⁴ So says Charlie, Willy's neighbor, at Willy's funeral. Both Willy and Reagan dreamed the American dream and believed that in America a man could, and should, fulfill himself.

Second, both also had to deny basic points of reality in order to believe in the dream. Willy tried desperately to deny that his sons were failures and that he was failing as a salesman. His son Biff is always about to be a success, about to land a good job. And Willy lies to Linda about the source of his income, telling her the money is coming from sales when in fact Charlie down the street is lending him the money. Throughout the play he is always lying about how important he is and how many "friends" he has. Ronald Reagan, as the son of a failed, alcoholic, shoe salesman, was forced to deny his family's problems from an early age. Ronald Reagan is the adult child of an alcoholic. Yet his father's skills as a raconteur and his mother's encouragement of his acting and entertaining abilities channeled the denials and "stories" into more acceptable outlets than Willy had. As Willy loved telling jokes to highlight his personality,
Reagan loved entertaining others. Denials continued throughout Reagan's life: denying that Hollywood had engaged in a blacklist; denying that the MCA (Music Corporation of America) was involved in bribery and "payola" while Reagan dealt with them as president of the Screen Actors Guild; denying that his tax cuts could be responsible for the mounting federal deficits; denying that his cuts in low-income housing subsidies could be responsible for the rise in homelessness; denying that he sold arms for hostages; and forgetting virtually everything about the Iran-Contra diversion scandal.

To scholars of the Reagan era, one of the most striking features of Reagan the man was his lack of interest in facts, which were often misstated or completely wrong. His view of "facts" was entirely utilitarian, in service to his ideology of the American dream and American foreign policy. Willy too had great difficulty absorbing facts that did not fit the view he wanted to have of himself and his life. The entire play is basically a struggle within Willy's mind between his vision of himself and the painful reality of facts intruding upon his "dream." Perhaps the most painful and poignant moment in the play comes when his son Biff tries to tell Willy that he's not now and will never be the "success" Willy imagines for him. Willy cannot hear him. Actually, in denying basic facts each man was trying to create himself from myth. One was of course more successful at doing this than the other.

Third, Ronald Reagan and Willy Loman also had to fantasize in order to avoid the realities they could not handle and to give themselves the confidence they otherwise would lack. Willy was "well liked" and known all over New England, and at his own funeral his boys would be impressed at how many "friends" would show up (Miller 764, 796). Ronald Reagan moved more than a dozen times during his childhood, and had to learn to survive without close friends. He wanted to play football but was never any good (his eyes were too poor). Yet he was "the Gipper," Notre Dame's great football hero, throughout his political career. His movie career and political career often blended, sometimes consciously as in the above example, and sometimes unconsciously. The "Gipper" was a kind of double fantasy, in that George Gipp himself was a mythical hero based heavily on fantasy. While "Win One For the Gipper," Reagan's favorite movie and political line, probably was said by George Gipp on his death bed, most likely Gipp thought he was talking to his doctor (qtd. in Lippman). In reality, George Gipp was a rather unsavory character who bet on his own games and by today's standards would have been expelled from the sport. But, as with so much of Ronald Reagan and Willy Loman, facts were not allowed to get in the way of the myth. And in another kind of chilling rehearsal for life (politics) imitating art (the movie), the Reagan movie helped make Gipp into "a teflon hero."

Fourth, while both Willy and Reagan wanted to be well liked, and wanted to have the personalities to "win friends and influence people," neither was successful at forming close personal friendships. In both cases, only their wives stood by them, and in both cases their wives tried to protect them and sustain their husbands' illusions in the face of reality. Each man tried to make sure his "Image" presented an air of leadership and success, but both men in fact were more passive than they wanted to appear.

Both men also faced severe problems with their children and denied these problems to themselves and the outside world. Willy's pained relationships with his two sons is one of the basic themes running through Death of a Salesman. With Reagan, his relationship with his adopted son Michael (detailed in Michael's autobiography, On the Outside Looking In) has been extremely strained. His daughter Patti barely has been on speaking terms with her parents since the publication of her autobiography (thinly disguised as a novel) several years ago (Home Front). Both men lacked strong fathers who could nurture them, although their father relationships also contained important differences. In a poignant moment, Willy asks Ben (his older brother) to tell him more about "Dad," who left when Willy was still young, because "I still feel kind of temporary about myself" (Miller 770). Reagan had a much longer relationship with his father, but Reagan's stay in any one place was "kind of temporary." Jack Reagan was also
"footloose." He moved constantly, changed jobs, and was usually a failure as a salesman. In addition, Reagan's father's алкоголism was a source of worry and shame. But Ronald Reagan also described his father as "the best raconteur I ever heard," and this surely must have helped Ronald's own skills as a salesman and storyteller.12

Fifth, both men had brushes with the uglier side of capitalism, and yet seemed unable to recognize or condemn this brutal side. To Willy it was his older brother Ben, who became a millionaire at a young age and kept admonishing Willy: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (Miller 770). Yet Willy constantly wants Ben's approval and is asking him how he managed to be so successful. Willy even views his son Biff's stealing as "initiative."

Reagan was called before a grand jury investigating the seamier side of Hollywood capitalism, the bribery and monopolistic practices of the Music Corporation of America. Its special sweet deals with the Screen Actors Guild while Reagan was president of the Guild and simultaneously getting what looked like kickbacks from MCA nearly resulted in his indictment.13

Later, as President, Reagan was surrounded by corruption, influence peddling, indictments, trials and convictions of his aides and associates—Michael Deaver, Lynn Nofziger, John Poindexter—the HUD scandal, the Savings and Loan scandal and the spectacular corruption of some who became multimillionaires during his era. But throughout his administration and throughout Death of a Salesman neither Reagan nor Willy ever criticized or condemned any actions by these people. As Willy refused to condemn son Biff's stealing or brother Ben's ruthlessness, neither did Reagan condemn the stealings and illegalities of any of his aides. Neither had a moral code of what were fair and unfair practices, what were proper ways to get rich and what were improper ways. To both, the American creed meant success and riches, but how these were obtained neither wanted to examine too closely. Perhaps they did not want to examine this too closely because the truth would have been too painful. To both men America and the American creed seemed to have no place for failure. How one succeeded was therefore not a moral question.

Both the Reagan presidency and Death of a Salesman then are dramas about the power of the American dream and the self-deceptions necessary for the kind of American dream believed. These are both potent forces in American politics and culture. But Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan are obviously not identical. Their differences are too important to ignore.

II. The Differences between Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan

From the beginning, Ronald Reagan had physical traits and a personality that made it more likely that he would succeed in America. His personality was a more marketable commodity, both for Hollywood and in politics. He was physically handsome, meticulous about his appearance and successful at entertaining others. His "self-deprecating humor" was in marked contrast to Willy's braggadocio (Cannon 32). Reagan had the ability to inspire others and to make people feel good about themselves. This allowed others to enjoy being around Reagan and gave him the self-confidence Willy wanted but lacked. Yet, like Willy, Reagan was essentially remote from others and could be highly manipulative (229, 218).

As the "good guy" in so many Hollywood movies, Reagan had a clearer sense of the "bad guy" than Willy had. Demonology—the Sandinistas, the Communists, terrorists, etc., abroad and welfare queens and government at home—served Reagan well both in defining himself and explaining the world to others.14 Willy didn't really know what was happening to him. Death of a Salesman is a desperate search to find out what is killing Willy, and Willy never figures it out. The final "Requiem" scene shows that the remaining characters are divided over what the cause was as well. If Willy had had a scapegoat, or a clearer sense of what was killing him, he could have fought back and found a greater reason for living. But Willy never questioned the social,
economic or political order. Broader institutional forces are more remote from him, given in a system where he's searching for fame, success and the American dream.\textsuperscript{15} Reagan, however, translated his personal values and dreams into politics and was the defender of the American dream from threats both external and internal.

While both Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan had to confront failure, their responses to their failures were different. Like Willy, Ronald Reagan faced career problems with middle age. He was dumped by Hollywood after a string of B-grade movies. Near the end he was even forced to co-star with a chimpanzee in \textit{Bedtime for Bonzo}. General Electric rescued him from obscurity in Hollywood and honed his speaking skills. But he was dropped on 24-hours' notice by the company when \textit{G.E. Theater} was cancelled, and Reagan was forced to take a salary cut in hosting \textit{Death Valley Days}. By 1964 Reagan was in debt and owed back taxes to the U.S. Government.\textsuperscript{16} Willy of course was also falling financially and with age. But here the differences in the two men are too important to ignore. Willy had no one to rescue him, save his neighbor Charlie, who in fact did help. But Willy was too proud to give up his salesman's job (or admit that he had been fired) to work for Charlie. Ronald Reagan, however, was quite willing to accept help and funds from anyone, including wealthy admirers of his conservative views:

A group headed by Justin Dart (Dart Industries; Rexall Drugs; Kraft Foods), Holmes Tutle (a Los Angeles Ford dealer), William French Smith (a wealthy Los Angeles attorney), and A. C. (Cy) Rubel (Chairman of Union Oil Co.) formed the Ronald Reagan Trust Fund to take over his personal finances... (Dye 71)

Willy didn't have anyone to set up the Willy Loman Trust Fund to take over his personal finances. In addition, Reagan was given a ranch. Willy needed one. This difference allowed Reagan never to lose self-confidence (at least for long), while Willy's self-worth was collapsing around him (Dye 72).\textsuperscript{17}

Other differences follow from ones already mentioned. As Willy's psychological condition deteriorates, he is more obsessed with the meaning of life and his place in history than Ronald Reagan. In his struggle, Willy is engaged in a battle with himself. But that is only because he has to be. Willy is not by nature any more introspective than Ronald Reagan. Reagan seeks love less desperately because he is a more successful salesman. He has enough of what he needs. And while Willy is haunted by his failed relationship with his sons, there is no evidence that Ronald Reagan is. Willy, however, in his own failures, must live more through his sons. Ronald Reagan doesn't need to. These differences thus emphasize that through his more obvious and painful confrontations with failure, Willy has been forced to become more introspective than either Willy or Reagan would have desired. But deep down both men were solipsists. Neither was interested in learning from other people. Neither wanted the real world to intrude upon his fantasy world.

Ronald Reagan, in sum, was what Willy Loman wanted to be: well-liked, at least in a superficial way; entertaining without being a bore; successful; handsome; and not fat. Reagan's attributes allowed him to be rescued by wealthy individuals who realized they could use him for their own purposes, as he used them for his own purposes. But Willy had no Southern California businessmen to come to his rescue when he was washed up, abandoned, aging and unsure of his value to society.

III. 
\textit{Arthur Miller's Vision of the Power of the Dream}

Willy Loman committed suicide. Ronald Reagan became President of the United States. Yet this difference hides greater truths. Each believed in the American dream. That Reagan was elected President twice, and was widely liked by the American people during his tenure, ultimately says more about the American people than about Ronald Reagan. Here Willy Loman and Arthur Miller can help us. That Arthur Miller understood the power of the American dream, and the need of
little people to believe in it, helps us later explain the rise and success of Ronald Reagan in American politics when America itself was undergoing a crisis of confidence.

Of course, the American dream has meant different things to different people. Tom Paine ("We have it in our power to begin the world over again"), Franklin Roosevelt and our "rendezvous with destiny" and Martin Luther King ("I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'") all evoke feelings of the New Adam in the New Eden. In this new world the sins, hatreds, unfreedoms and inequalities of other lands can be changed and history can be forgotten.18

But Arthur Miller (through Willy Loman) and Ronald Reagan are focusing on an altered dream: the self-reliant individual, Jefferson's yeoman farmer, gradually became the man who could make a lot of money. And to do that, marketing, salesmanship and image became the road to the dream. The defense of heroic individualism became the defense of competition, capitalist exploitation and, in Reagan, also virulent anti-communism. Willy never examines his values and how these values don't fit with his true, more agrarian personality. While Ronald Reagan mouthed the potent cliches of the business ethic as the ultimate form of freedom, he examined the values in hardly any greater depth than Willy. But he did have the advantage, once he entered politics, of being someone who had spent his life, including his professional life, presenting himself as an image, a role to be seen by others.

The rewards of being successful for both men were to be well liked and to be rich. To be rich for both seemed to mean 1) having a place where they can get away from it all—a ranch or "a little place out in the country" and 2) consuming the products of a bountiful business society. To be rich is thus to be "free" in the two senses above, with the added self-confidence of being admired, a model for others.

Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan share this new, salesmanship understanding of the American dream. Miller's purpose, however, is very different from Willy Loman's and Ronald Reagan's. While he wanted to show the power of this dream, he also wanted to show the dangers, the costs and the emptiness of it. In his autobiography, Timebends, Miller says that in writing the play he had as a motive "in some far corner of my mind possibly something political; there was the smell in the air of a new American Empire in the making ... and I wanted to set before the new captains and the so smugly confident kings the corpse of a believer" (184). He does this in many subtle ways, including letting us know early on that the Loman family is caught up in mindless consumerism ("whipped cheese"), and that these new products disrupt attempts at meaningful human interaction. Miller shows the power of advertising and consumerism, and the contradictions of attitudes toward products in the Loman family by having Willy call his Chevrolet both "the greatest car ever built" and "that goddamn Chevrolet" in the space of only a few minutes, and in Willy's remark that "Once in my life I would like to own something outright before it's broken!" (Miller 765, 766, 777). But while Willy utters these remarks, he still is completely caught up in the pursuit of the dream.

Miller understood the power of the belief in a New Land, a New Eden, where the normal rules and motives for other countries and other peoples would not apply. Even in its competitive, "get rich" meanings, Miller understood the continuing force of the dream in mobilizing and inspiring people.

"Can we doubt," said Reagan in accepting the Republican nomination for president in 1980, "that only a Divine Providence placed this land, this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe freely.... ?" This is Reagan's belief. But where does this belief lead? Is God a white American, willing to countenance the near genocide of millions of the original Americans and willing to sanction the death and slavery of millions of blacks so that the economic system of white America could grow stronger and be "free"? Reagan's encomium to the American dream can be as soaring and inspirational as it is in part because he
never asks or answers these questions, any more than Willy does. Similarly, with American power abroad Ronald Reagan sees only altruism, not imperialism, manifest destiny or messianic causes unwanted by others: "I'd always felt that from our deeds it must be clear to anyone that Americans were a moral people who, starting at the birth of our nation, had always used our power only as a force for good in the world" (qtd. in Wills 3).

Reagan's is a view deeply soothing to a nation questioning its self-confidence after Vietnam, Watergate, stagflation and energy crises. The blinders and the fantasies are not only necessary for the laudatory rhetoric; they also do not prepare anyone for failure. Both Willy and Reagan believed; each was an incurable optimist always wanting to paint a "rosy scenario." And the downside of this view is that there is no place for failure. If in the face of such boundless opportunities ("just check the want ads"), a person does not succeed, there must be something wrong with that person. It is this downside that is so hard for Willy to confront, because he believes so strongly in the American dream. Willy is unable to let go of it, unable to change in the face of reality, and commits suicide in the hope that he is helping his family.

Arthur Miller, through Willy Loman, presages the Reagan prototype through 1) emphasizing the power of the capitalist-consumerist-get-rich-and-be-well-liked dream, and the hold it has on the American people. Miller shows us the power of the myth. 2) He also understood the need for selective perception, fantasy and denial, and the tenuous hold on reality necessary for this strident view of the dream. He prepares us for the Reagan denials, misstatements and lies, and the gap between appearance and reality. To both Willy and Reagan, uttering the cliches of success is virtually the same thing as bringing these cliches into actuality. To both, "saying makes it so," and thus they are an evasion of the truth. Arthur Miller helps us understand that Ronald Reagan succeeded not in spite of but because of all his paradoxes and contradictions. As the defender of the little man's dream, he succeeded because millionaires could use him to champion a dream that benefited primarily themselves. If he had been truly committed to helping the little Willys of the nation fulfill their dreams, he would have been dumped by his financial backers. Instead, Reagan was the "sincerest claimant to a heritage that never existed ... —a perfect blend of an authentic America he grew up in and of that America's own fables about its past." As political analysts have written of Reagan: "He had been in some measure the Wizard of Us, a fabulist presiding over a wondrous Emerald City of the mind ... people wanted to believe in it" (Goldman and Mathews 32).

Miller also seems to understand that 3) as pressures on the dream close in, the desire to believe in it will intensify rather than weaken. The American people did not want to hear Jimmy Carter (or John Anderson or Walter Mondale or Bruce Babbitt, etc.) any more than Willy wanted to hear Charlie. A "realist," willing to talk of limits, taxes, sacrifice and mixed motives in a complex world isn't what Willy or the American people wanted to hear. Arthur Miller understood this form of the American psyche and its power.

Surely all writers—political analysts as well as dramatists—recognize the need of people to find meaning in their lives. But Miller understood the particular nature of the American need for meaning. Through giving us Willy Loman, Miller helped us better understand the successful Willy Loman when he appeared on the American stage: Ronald Reagan, the super salesman, everything Willy and our nation of Willys wanted to be. Ronald Reagan understood American fears, hopes, lies, vulnerabilities and the need for optimism better than many political scientists, and he understood the role of the salesman in selling us our dreams better than others did. He had the confidence the rest of us wanted.

But whether we should assess Reagan as critically as son Biff assessed Willy—"He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong" (Miller 797)—is less clear. After a decade of Reagan and Reaganism we have record budget deficits, record trade deficits, increased dependence upon foreign lenders in the world economy, a crumbling infrastructure and, most poignant and ironic of all, a growing gap between rich and poor. It is now harder, not easier, for the little Willys of
society to reach the American dream. To criticize Reagan, we, like Biff, would have to condemn part of ourselves, condemn part of our own dreams, and condemn part of our identity and meaning as Americans. We Americans are a long way from being ready or able to do that. But we should not forget that both Willy Loman and Ronald Reagan embody what ought to be a debate about the essence and direction of America.

Notes
1. For reviews of the play, see Harold Bloom, ed., Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, 1982. For a review of Arthur Miller in general, see Neil Carson, Arthur Miller, 1982. As Carson notes (13) the play ran on Broadway for 742 performances and "transformed Miller's life," elevating him "to a position of prominence where he became exposed to both adulation and criticism of a kind he had not previously experienced."

2. The play is in many ways autobiographical, for Miller's father, Isidore, lost his business and his fortune in the Great Depression and was blamed by his son for an inability to cope with these changes. See the review of Miller's autobiography, Timebends (1987), in The New Republic, Feb. 8, 1988, 30-34, "All My Sins," by David Denby.

3. These points are mentioned many places, including Lou Cannon, Reagan, 1982, 93.

4. Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman, The Bedford Introduction to Drama, Lee Jacobus (ed.), 797. William Heyen, "Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and the American Dream" in Bloom, supra note 1, p. 51, has said, quoting Leslie Fiedler, that American industry produces "not things ... but dreams disguised as things."

5. Lou Cannon, the journalist who has observed Ronald Reagan the closest over the past three decades, comments in his latest biography of Reagan, "Acting took early hold of him, and never let him go." President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime, 1991, 39.

6. On Reagan denying the Hollywood blacklist, see Victor Navasky, Naming Names, 1980 p. 87; for Reagan's relationship with the MCA, see Garry Wills, Reagan's America, 1988, chapters 28 and 29. For his confused views on taxes and deficits, see David Stockman, The Triumph of Politics, 1986; for the severe cuts in low- and moderate-income housing, see Charles Moore and Patricia Hoban-Moore, "Some Lessons from Reagan's HUD: Housing Policy and Public Service," PS: Political Science and Politics, Mar. 1990, 13-18; for denying that the diversion of funds took place and for forgetting nearly everything about the Iran-Contra scandal, see Newsweek, Apr. 2, 1990, 36 ("A Diminished Ron, a Refurbished Jimmy"). Newsweek reports that "Reagan pleaded loss of memory some 150 times in two days of testimony [at the Poinsett trial]—and he had forgotten the conclusion of his own Tower Commission, that funds were diverted to the Contras." In a chilling parallel with the Iran-Contra scandal, Garry Wills reports (325) that as the Justice Department proceeded with the investigation of MCA and the Screen Actors Guild's favorable treatment of them, "Reagan's strategy was to retreat toward constantly expanding areas of forgetfulness." At one point in his grand jury testimony in 1962, Reagan said, "And all of this, including the opinions of myself, is vague at the Guild on everything that took place for all those years all the way back including whether I was present or not" (Wills 323).

7. David Broder, "Reagan Memoir Fails to Tell All," Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Nov. 23, 1990, editorial page, comments that "Reagan has devoted most of his eight decades to remaking, not the nation or the world, but himself." Sidney Blumenthal, Our Long National Daydream: The Political Pageant of the Reagan Era, 1986, p. xiv, has written, "The essential quality for any actor is to induce in his audience a willing suspension of disbelief ... [he] must also suspend disbelief within himself, giving himself over to the role and the scene. Reagan's grip over the nation partly lay in his ability to maintain his grip over himself. Above all, he was a true believer in his role. He used that role to persuade that willing was doing, that saying something made it so." Michael Rogen, Ronald Reagan, The Movie, 1987, 3, argues that Ronald Reagan
"found out who he was through the roles he played on film."

8. Lippman also reports that after the Notre Dame coach invoked George Gipp's name at halftime, Notre Dame did win 12 to 6, but Army was on the Notre Dame one-yard line as the game ended, and Notre Dame lost the rest of its games that season to finish 5–4 overall. Comments Lippman, "Another few seconds and ... Ronald Reagan might never have become president."

9. The string of "kiss-and-tell" books from Reagan's closest aides, starting with Michael Deaver and continuing through David Stockman, Larry Speakes and Chief of Staff Don Regan, makes this point painfully clear.

10. Nancy, however, was a greater help to Ronald than Linda was to Willy. As an entertainer herself, she better understood the needs of her husband, but both actively intervened to try to defend their husbands. See Garry Wills, "The Man Who Wasn't There" [a review of Lou Cannon's President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime], The New York Review of Books, June 13, 1991, 3–7.

11. Fred Greenstein, "Ronald Reagan—Another Hidden-Hand Ike?" PS: Political Science and Politics, Mar. 1990, 7–13 concludes that Reagan was surprisingly passive and remote from the specifics of politics and policy, although he did have strong general beliefs. He quotes Chief of Staff Donald Regan that Reagan's outgoing personality and infectious likeability are based on a "natural diffidence."


13. Wills, supra note 6: 322. Wills also concludes (322) that "it seems that Reagan's political career would not have emerged at all if the circumstances of a 1962 investigation had become known at the time; if an indictment of Reagan, seriously considered for months by the Justice Department, had been brought or even publicly threatened; if a civil suit of conspiracy against the MCA had not been settled by a divestiture."

14. One does not appoint master spy and covert operator William Casey as campaign manager unless one has a strong sense of the need for action against "enemies." Michael Rogin, supra note 7, argues that demonology was an essential part of Reagan's persona.

15. Helene Wickham Koon, "Introduction," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Death of a Salesman, 11, says of Willy that he "accepts the world without question and never seeks to better it, who reacts without thought, who substitutes dreams for knowledge, and who is necessarily self-centered because unanalyzed feelings are his sole touchstone to existence." Willy does, however, protest the surrounding of his house by apartment buildings and the loss of sunlight and space that comes with it. He also protests how things are constantly breaking down. But these protests are completely devoid of meaningful human action. He is apolitical.

16. These events are discussed in Thomas Dye's Who's Running America? The Reagan Years, Third Edition, 1983, 69–73 and Garry Wills, Reagan's America, 1988, 338–39. Wills, however, states that "Reagan was financially secure by 1962," which seems not to account for the need for his trust fund to be set up by wealthy benefactors.

17. Dye notes other investments for Reagan as well.

18. The first two men are quoted in Ronald Reagan's speech accepting his party's nomination in 1980, which can be found in Ronald Reagan Talks to America (1983) 77. But Reagan does not quote Martin Luther King. For contested meanings of the American dream, see David Madden, American Dream, American Nightmare (1965), who argues that the American dream comes in an older agrarian and a newer urban form. John Cawelti, Apostles of the Self-Made Man (1965), describes three main competing versions: the first came from a more conservative tradition of middle-class Protestantism and stressed piety and honesty; the second stressed more secular
qualities of initiative, aggressiveness and competitiveness; the third tied individual fulfillment to social progress more than wealth or status, along the lines of Emerson's self-reliant man. Alfred Ferguson, "The Tragedy of the American Dream," Thought (1978) 83–98 explores the "New Adam" in the "New Eden" in greater detail, arguing that the dream now means "it is possible for everyman to be whatever he can imagine himself being" (88). "[T]he wish is father to the fact" (90).

19. William Heyen, supra note 4: 49, speaks of Willy Loman as "an incurable yea-sayer, painting everything rosy, prophesizing empire ... for the Lomans ... He is insatiable. He so much needs to believe in his dream." David Stockman, supra note 6: 385, recounts a story President Reagan would tell of a boy who is an optimist that gets a roomful of horse manure for a Christmas present: "He's delighted. He digs around the room for hours on end. With all that horse manure, he figured there just had to be a pony in them somewhere!" Stockman uses the term "rosy scenario!" to describe President Reagan's constant belief that the nation would "grow" itself out of the deficit problems.

20. John Cawelti, supra, note 25, discusses this in more detail. He notes (217) that "positive thinkers like Norman Vincent Peale and Dale Carnegie seem to accept the American business world wholeheartedly. If it has flaws, they are the result of some failure to assume a positive "attitude." Cawelti argues provocatively (217), however, that "positive thinking is ... a revelation of the failure of the dream," because these books are full of eloquent testimony of anxious, neurotic people and "the failure of the business world to fulfill human needs."

21. To say this is not to say anything as precise as that from Miller we can sense that Ronald Reagan would launch a "war on drugs" while secretly dealing with Manuel Noriega, or condemn "terrorism," while secretly dealing with Iran. Rather, the point is that when these gaps between appearance and truth appear, most Americans will want to believe their leader, especially one who can evoke the symbols of the dream as powerfully as Reagan. If the leader can maintain his self-confidence and affability, even as the truth is (partially) revealed, he will likely survive and be "well liked."


23. See also Sidney Blumenthal, quoted in footnote 6, supra.

Further Information

Works Cited


Citation Information

MLA Chicago Manual of Style

Shockley, John. "Death of a Salesman and American Leadership: Life Imitates Art." Journal of