COMMENTARY

Take anyone under 45 to see the Reagan movie



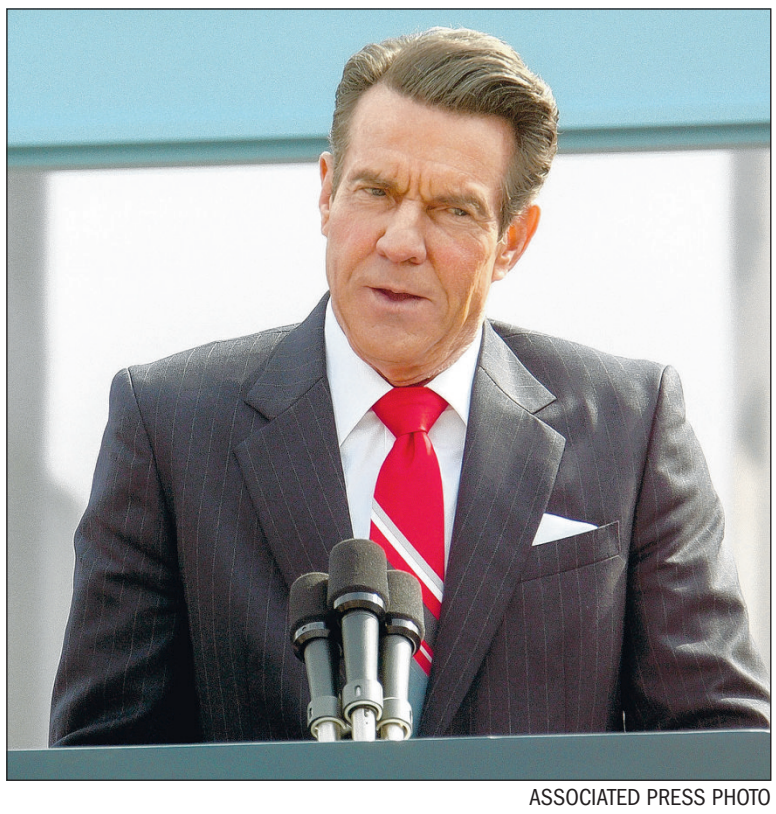
Quin Hillyer

If you have any relatives under, say, 45 years old, I hereby pronounce it your civic duty, by any nonviolent means, to take them to see the movie "Reagan."

As entertainment, the movie is not great but is definitely good. As history, "Reagan" is likewise solid. As an expositor of the right sort of public character, it is very good indeed. As a tribute to one of the greatest Americans of this or any lifetime, it does a more than admirable job, even if it lacks nuance and tends toward hagiography.

And in toto, the act of watching it is 141 minutes well spent. For those old enough to have been adults in the era of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the film is a fine reminder of the remarkable victories for freedom in the 1980s. For those not old enough, it can teach salutary lessons that today's pathetic educational system usually distort and mangle, often with malice aforethought.

Dennis Quaid plays the 40th U.S. president with heart and admirable effort, even if he can't capture the resonant timbre of Reagan's unique voice. The set decorators, costume folks and other visual-detail people do a masterful job recreating exact replicas of real scenes, captured on still or live film, and the dialogue from many of those scenes is word for word as history recorded it.



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

Actor Dennis Quaid is President Ronald Reagan in 'Reagan.'

The movie's Reagan, like the real one as described by so very many of those who knew him, is a singularly resilient, willful and sincere man of good will and of profound insights about the nature of freedom and of ideologies that threaten it. More importantly, he was one of those figures who changed history, for the better, in ways not a single other living soul would have done. What the movie "Reagan" teaches is that history is not just a result of anonymous, impersonal, inevitable "forces," but instead changes through the willpower and choices of individuals.

So, no matter what the leftist narrative now is, the Soviet Union would not have collapsed on its own. It had to be pushed. And it had to be pushed in the right way, with the right touch, with the right safeguards. Without Reagan the man, the Washington consensus was dead set against doing the sorts of things Reagan did, with the depth and width of necessary public support he attracted, without which the Soviets would have survived and maybe triumphed.

Indeed, this theme is so important that it is the main point of the one completely ahistorical part of the whole movie. The filmmakers create a purely fictional device of a young Russian who clearly is a disciple of current dictator Vladimir Putin, asking an ancient spy leader (played by Jon Voight) how the great Soviet Union collapsed. It is the Voight character's account that provides the viewpoint for the story's entire narrative, including the unshakable conclusion that Reagan was the essential driving force behind the Soviets' defeat.

What this film does not do well enough is explain that the Soviets were not just aggressive (which is amply detailed) but evil — which is what Reagan says but what the movie doesn't fully show. For a better sense of just how existentially frightening the Soviets were, several Reagan documentaries are better. (I have seen so many I forget which is good and which isn't, but one of the excellent ones is Citizens United's "Rendezvous with Destiny.") "Reagan" does, however, show the personal qualities that made Reagan so likable, and it details the experiences that molded him and that he himself used proactively to mold his history-making character and career.

Far too many of today's millennials and Generation Z people, and even the younger Generation Xers, have imbibed the idiotic fiction that Reagan was just a trigger-happy cowboy who got lucky, or an amiable dunce who play-acted while the Soviet empire collapsed under its own weight, or an avatar of greed who neither cared about nor did much to help the poor. Even too many of today's young conservatives, alas, pay only glancing tribute, and with more than a little ignorance, to the Reagan legacy. Too many believe Reagan's skill was merely tactical, applied to a certain set of time-specific historical exigencies, rather than understanding that Reagan's principles were timeless and still applicable today.

The movie "Reagan" corrects those miscomprehensions, and it does so in winsomely watchable fashion. Only someone with a barren soul could walk away from it without renewed hope, determination and sense of purpose.

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Trump's right: Louisianans should be able to vote on abortion rights

Donald Trump said so many things that were flat-out false during last week's debate that it feels futile to focus on just one lie — or even on one topic.

Take abortion, the issue that he personally pushed onto the front burner by appointing three U.S. Supreme Court justices bent on overturning Roe v. Wade, and then congratulating himself when the court did so.



Stephanie Grace

When Trump wasn't claiming Tuesday night that Kamala Harris, Tim Walz and other abortion-rights advocates are OK with the "execution" of live-born babies — prompting moderator Linsey Davis to remind viewers that "there is no state in this country where it is legal to kill a baby after it's born" — he was insisting, just as nonsensically, that ending constitutional protection is what "everybody wanted."

"Every legal scholar, every Democrat, every Republican, liberal, conservative, they all wanted this issue to be brought back to the states where the people could vote. And that's what happened," he said.

Except that's not at all what's happened in many states, including Louisiana. To put it simply, people here can't vote, because there's no way for them to get a question on the ballot.

Louisiana has no provision for citizens to gather signatures and put an abortion question — or any question — on a statewide ballot. The only way to get a constitutional amendment before voters here is to convince a supermajority of both houses of the Legislature to put it there.

And given that these are the same people who adopted one of the most stringent abortion bans in the country — one that has no exceptions for rape and incest victims or to protect the pregnant woman's health, and that carries a threat of imprisonment for those providers who cross the line — there's little chance they're about to give their constituents an opportunity to overrule them.

Maybe because they know, on some level, that they've gone too far, even for one of the most anti-abortion states in the country.

Perhaps they've read the polling. A survey for this newspaper taken earlier this year found that 54% of respondents back legalized abortion up to 15 weeks, while 41% oppose.

Surely they've followed results in other conservative states where there have been votes; in every case, when asked, voters have supported more abortion rights, not fewer.

Chances are high that we'll see the same outcome when voters in still more states weigh in on the same day the country chooses the next president — and that the presence of these ballot questions will energize voters who, despite his claim, are not at all happy with Trump's role in all of this.

That's surely why, in a number of these states, opponents are making things difficult.

Ohio was first to try to avert a straightforward up-or-down vote, when legislators attempted to raise the bar for approval ahead of an abortion rights referendum; voters saw through the ploy, rejected the change in rules and then voted to enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution.

Florida voters will weigh in on a six-week ban in November, and state officials, led by Gov. Ron DeSantis, are deploying what opponents call dirty tricks and suppression tactics to defeat the measure.

In the presidential swing state of Arizona, courts sided with Republican lawmakers who wanted to use the term "unborn human being" rather than "fetus" or "embryo" in a state pamphlet about the ballot question, which would add a right to abortion in the constitution.

In Missouri, which has a harsh ban, the state Supreme Court rejected a legal challenge attempting to stop an abortion-rights initiative from appearing on the ballot.

The decision went the other way in Arkansas, which also has a near-total ban, where the high court upheld the secretary of state's rejection of the petition on a technicality.

Just imagine what would happen if abortion-rights advocates had a way to get such a question on the ballot in Louisiana.

What all these politicians know is what Harris said at the debate: that women experiencing miscarriages who can't get care because their doctors are afraid of being arrested don't want this. Nor do children being forced to carry a pregnancy resulting from the rape of a relative or women having to travel far out of state to exercise what had been a constitutional right before Trump got involved.

Even in states like Missouri and Arkansas.

And yes, even here.

Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe if Louisianans did get to weigh in, as Trump said they should, they'd keep the current law in place.

Hey, Louisiana Legislature. There's one way to find out.

Email Stephanie Grace at sgrace@theadvocate.com.

Who's going to watch over our elections this fall?

Election Day is barely 50 days away, and early voting in Louisiana starts Oct. 18. At least 2 million Louisianans are expected to cast their ballots either by voting absentee, voting early or voting on Nov. 5. More than 2.1 million voted in the 2020 presidential contest.



Will Sutton

Those who prefer to vote on Election Day may recognize some of their longtime election commissioners waiting to help them.

But will there be enough commissioners to make sure the traditionally high-turnout presidential election proceeds smoothly?

Election commissioners serve a critical role in our democracy by assisting voters who have questions and by confirming that you are who you say you are before you vote.

They get the job done, no matter what. It's not easy, but those who serve as commissioners do so because they know how important the job is.

"Voting is your right, and no one should have their rights infringed upon or have a terrible experience doing one of the most important things an American citizen has the right to do," shared Rhonda Saylor, director of elections for the Jefferson Parish Clerk of Court.

A 2023 report by the National Conference of State Legislatures summarized the nation's poll worker challenge this way: "Poll workers, especially those with experience, are essential to election administration. However, recruiting and retaining poll workers are longstanding issues that have worsened in recent years. Inadequate pay and partisan balance requirements create a narrow field of qualified applicants, which is further diminished by recent harassment of poll workers."

Calcasieu Parish's Amanda Fontenot Johnson, 57, has been working elections for 25 years — 12 of them as a commissioner in charge. She got $100 a day when she started. Now she gets $200 and an additional $50 for turning in important paperwork. "I love what I do, and I love the community service," she told me. "And I spend the money before I get it."

Calcasieu Parish has 123 precincts. Jefferson Parish has 271, and New Orleans has 349. Those and other populous parishes each have scores of polling locations.

That's a lot of places to ensure voting is accurate.

Calcasieu has about 800 certified commissioners, but it needs another 150 or so. Jefferson has about 1,500 certified commissioners, but they know many are inconsistent; they need about 1,350 they can count on. New Orleans has about 900 certified commissioners; it needs 1,400. East Baton Rouge Parish recently signed up 400 commissioners, and they're expecting 100 more. They need 1,600 for election day.

Poll workers must meet specific legal qualifications. Each must be a registered voter — or, though they can't vote, individuals who are 17 years old and a high school senior. A commissioner can't be a registered sex offender or child predator. And you must like money since this is a paid gig. Check out the election worker flyer and fill out an election worker application.

Commissioners must be certified after taking a class. The process doesn't take that long. There are still a few election commissioner sessions for those willing to serve. Contact your parish clerk of court's office if you'd like to help on Election Day, and reach out to your parish registrar to help during early voting.

There are similar requirements to be a commissioner during early voting, and you must work each day during the weeklong early voting period.

Jean Ann Earl, Calcasieu Parish's co-director of elections, considers election poll work "exciting" and a good way to get involved in the community. Jeannie Aubrey, Orleans' supervisor of elections, reminds people that "the guy working at the poll is your neighbor."

It seems we call each presidential election the most critical election of our time. Regardless of who we support for president, we all should want fair and honest elections. That starts with good, fair and honest poll workers making sure the election goes smoothly. And right now — RIGHT NOW — we need more poll workers to sign up and begin working when early voting starts on Oct. 18 — and on Election Day, Nov. 5.

If you'd like to help, you'll need to make time to learn how to protect all our votes. Johnson has missed only one or two elections, including one for a funeral. She started because "voting is very important to me." After pausing, she added, "It definitely wasn't the $100."

If you decide to serve as a commissioner, you may love it as much as Johnson does. You'll certainly be helping make this election fair and honest.

As Aubry said of poll workers, "We can't do it without them."

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