Ronald Reagan

The greatstoryteller’s story

An excellentnewlife ofAmerica’s 40th president, who died in 2004

Reagan: The Life. By H.W. Brands

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ORE than a decade after his death,

Ronald Reagan still divides people.

American conservatives revere him as

practicallya demigod. He shrankthe state,

rescued the economy and won the cold

war; all Republican candidates must pay

homage. The left dismisses him as malign

and moronic—a B-movie actorwho floated

into the White House on an updraft of

phoney charm, a man who snoozed

during meetings, blew up the deficit and

propped up unsavoury third-world des-

potsfrom Argentina to Zaire.

The truth is more interesting than the

caricature, and H.W. Brands’s new biogra-

phytellsthe storyaswell asyoucould ask

for in a single volume. A lucid and witty

writer, MrBrandslaysoutthe factsin short

chapters that bounce alonglike one of the

“bare-fisted walloping action” films that

Reagan once starred in. He has a talent for

letting his sources speak for themselves.

Theyinclude notonlypoliticiansand Rea-

gan himself, but also his children, who

were as neglected as those of any famous

parent. Invited to speakathisadopted son

Michael’s boarding school, Reagan failed

to recognise hisboyundera mortarboard.

“My name is Ronald Reagan. What’s

yours?” he said. “Remember me?” came

the sad reply: “I’m yourson Mike.”

The book covers Reagan’s acting ca-

reer—a love affair with the camera that

lasted a lifetime. Even his violent films

often carried a simple moral message, such

as that crime did not pay. “This was a criti-

cal matter during the 1930s, when abun-

dant evidence indicated that crime did

pay,” observesMrBrands.

Reagan grewup a Democrat, in the Irish

tradition, before drifting to the right.

Paying income tax at a marginal rate of

around 90% in the 1950s was painful, but

more important was what he learned

about capitalism while working for Gen-

eral Electric (GE). As his film career faded,

he was paid to host a television series

sponsored by America’s biggest industrial

firm and to give speeches at GE factories.

As he toured the country by train, he read

books about economics and history.

Everywhere he went, people told him sto-

ries of government meddling and how it

hurt their businesses. He incorporated

these stories into his act, and eventually

came to realise thathe wasa Republican.

Reagan was 69 years old when he be-

came president—slightlyolderthan Hillary

Clinton will be in January 2017. He was, if

anything, a more experienced politician,

having run for president three times and

served two terms as governor of Califor-

nia. He was lucky in his choice of oppo-

nents: Pat Brown, the sitting governor he

beat in 1966, once described a tsunami as

“the worst disaster since I was elected”.

Jimmy Carter, the sitting president he beat

in 1980, presided over stagflation at home

and humiliation abroad. But there was

much more to Reagan’srise than luck.

He combined a firm belief in small

government with an uncanny ability to

make people like him: “Barry Goldwater’s

doctrine with John F. Kennedy’s tech-

nique”, as he was once described. He gov-

erned more pragmatically than he spoke,

MrBrandsobserves. In California he com-

promised with Democratic lawmakers to

pass a moderate budget, welfare reform

and a bill legalisingabortion.

As president, he raised taxes when he

had to, despite vowingto cutthem. He tus-

sled with Democratsin Congressbuteven-

tually reached deals to patch up Social Se-

curity (public pensions), reform the

immigration system and simplify the tax

code. Modern-day Tea Partiers who hold

Reagan up as an exemplar ofconservative

purity would be horrified at some of the

things he actually did. After leaving the

Oval Office, he even backed a gun-control

bill named in honourofhispresssecretary,

James Brady, who was crippled by an

assassin’sbulletmeantforReagan himself.

Reagan’sforeign policywasstraightfor-

ward. He called the Soviet Union an “evil

empire”, which it was. His strategy for the

cold war was: “We win; they lose.” He

knewthatthe Sovietstate wasrotting from

within, and understood the powerofideas

to hasten its demise. Looking at the Berlin

Wall, he challenged the Soviet leader: “Mr

Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Two

yearslater, joyful crowdsdid justthat.

Mr Brands argues that “the strength of

Reagan’s approach to foreign policy as a

whole was his weakness in policy toward

the Middle East.” He kepthiseye on the big

picture, but misjudged smaller problems.

The killing in places like Lebanon was

about local grievances, both ancient and

modern, and could notbe fitted neatly into

a cold-war template. “It was no coinci-

dence thatthe one presidentto make a last-

ing markon the Middle East was Reagan’s

polar opposite”, Jimmy Carter, Mr Brands

writes. Without his attention to detail, the

Camp David peace deal between Egypt

and Israel would neverhave been signed.

“Reagan: The Life” contains little that

will surprise professional historians, but

lay readers will find it illuminating. Mr

Brands recounts Reagan’s triumphs and

the scandals even-handedly, and con-

cludes that the Gipper’s achievements

were comparable to those of Franklin D.

Roosevelt, the president who led America

most of the way towards winning the

second world war.