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By Steven Levingston

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Reagan and the occult



Ronald Reagan had an interest in lucky numbers and newspaper horoscopes. Less known is that a certain scholar of occult philosophy had a lifelong influence on the 40th president of the United States. **Mitch Horowitz**, editor-in-chief of Tarcher/Penguin and the author of "Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation," reveals the details.

By *Mitch Horowitz*

In spring of 1988, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater acknowledged publicly what journalists had whispered for years: Ronald and Nancy Reagan were devotees of astrology. A tell-all memoir had definitively linked the first lady to a San Francisco stargazer, confirming speculation that started decades earlier when Reagan, as California's governor-elect, scheduled his first oath of office at the eyebrow-raising hour of 12:10 a.m. Many detected an effort to align the inaugural with promising heavenly signs. Fitzwater also confirmed the president's penchant for "lucky numbers," or what is sometimes called numerology.

There was more to the story than the White House let on. In a speech and essay produced decades apart, Reagan revealed the unmistakable mark of a little-known but widely influential scholar of occult philosophy, Manly P. Hall. Judging from a tale that Reagan borrowed from Hall, the president's reading tastes ran to some of the outer reaches of esoteric spiritual lore.

Hall, who worked in the Reagans' hometown of Los Angeles until his death in 1990, attained underground fame in the late 1920s when, at the age of 27, he published a massive codex to the mystical and esoteric philosophies of antiquity: *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*. Exploring subjects from Native American mythology to Pythagorean mathematics to the geometry of Ancient Egypt, this encyclopedia esoterica won the admiration of readers ranging from General John Pershing to Elvis Presley. Novelist Dan Brown cites it as a key source.

After publishing his great work, Hall spent the rest of his life lecturing and writing within the walls of his Egypto-art deco campus in L.A.'s Griffith Park neighborhood. He called the place a "mystery school" in the mold of Pythagoras's ancient academy. It was there in 1944 that the occult thinker produced a short work, one little known beyond his immediate circle. This book, *The Secret Destiny of America*, caught the eye of the future president, then a middling Hollywood actor gravitating toward politics.

Hall's concise volume described how America was the product of a "Great Plan" for religious

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liberty and self-governance, launched by a hidden order of ancient philosophers and secret societies. In one chapter, Hall described a rousing speech delivered by a mysterious “unknown speaker” before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The “strange man,” wrote Hall, invisibly entered and exited the locked doors of the Philadelphia statehouse on July 4th, 1776, delivering an oration that bolstered the wavering spirits of the delegates. “God has given America to be free!” commanded the mysterious speaker, urging the men to overcome their fears of the noose, axe, or gibbet, and to seal destiny by signing the great document. Newly emboldened, the delegates rushed forward to add their names. They looked to thank the stranger only to discover that he had vanished from the locked room. Was this, Hall wondered, “one of the agents of the secret Order, guarding and directing the destiny of America?”

At a 1957 commencement address at his alma mater Eureka College, Reagan, then a corporate spokesman for GE, sought to inspire students with this leaf from occult history. “This is a land of destiny,” Reagan said, “and our forefathers found their way here by some Divine system of selective service gathered here to fulfill a mission to advance man a further step in his climb from the swamps.”

Reagan then retold (without naming a source) the tale of Hall’s unknown speaker. “When they turned to thank the speaker for his timely words,” Reagan concluded, “he couldn’t be found and to this day no one knows who he was or how he entered or left the guarded room.”

Reagan revived the story in 1981, when Parade magazine asked the president for a personal essay on what July 4th meant to him. Presidential aide Michael Deaver delivered the piece with a note saying, “This Fourth of July message is the president’s own words and written initially in the president’s hand,” on a yellow pad at Camp David. Reagan retold the legend of the unknown speaker – this time using language very close to Hall’s own: “When they turned to thank him for his timely oratory, he was not to be found, nor could any be found who knew who he was or how had come in or gone out through the locked and guarded doors.”

Where did Hall uncover the tale that inspired a president? The episode originated as “The Speech of the Unknown” in a collection of folkloric stories about America’s founding, published in 1847 under the title Washington and his Generals, or Legends of the Revolution by American social reformer and muckraker George Lippard. Lippard, a friend of Edgar Allan Poe, had a strong taste for the gothic – he cloaked his mystery man in a “dark robe.” He also tacitly acknowledged inventing the story: “The name of the Orator...is not definitely known. In this speech, it is my wish to compress some portion of the fiery eloquence of the time.”

Regardless, the story took on its own life and came to occupy the same shadow land between fact and fiction as the parables of George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, or young Abe Lincoln walking miles to return a bit of a change to a country-store customer. As with most myths, the story assumed different attributes over time. By 1911, the speech resurfaced in a collection of American political oratory, with the robed speaker fancifully identified as Patrick Henry.

For his part, Hall seemed to know almost nothing about the story’s point of origin. He had been given a copy of the “Speech of the Unknown” by a since-deceased secretary of the occult Theosophical Society, but with no bibliographical information other than it being from a “rare old volume of early American political speeches.” The speech appeared in 1938 in the Society’s journal, The Theosophist, with the sole note that it was “published in a rare volume of addresses, and known probably to only one in a million, even of American citizens.”

It is Hall’s language that unmistakably marks the Reagan telling.

Biographer Edmund Morris noted Reagan’s fondness for apocryphal tales and his “Dalíesque ability to bend reality to his own purposes.” Yet he added that the president’s stories “should be taken seriously because they represent core philosophy.” This influential (and sometimes inscrutable) president of the late-twentieth century found an illustration of his core belief in America’s purpose within the pages of an occult work little known beyond its genre. Lucky numbers and newspaper horoscopes were not Reagan’s only interest in the arcane.

By Steven E. Levingston | April 30, 2010; 5:30 AM ET

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Fascinating forensic work here. Understanding the derivation of this particular story, and how these kind of folktales come to be adopted into modern society's consciousness more generally, is extremely valuable in developing a cultural-anthropological understanding that we are not terribly different from prior myth-making societies.

Posted by: burstein1 | April 30, 2010 9:22 AM | [Report abuse](#)

This is fascinating, thanks.

I am a Reagan scholar and have been interested in his version of the story for a while, but never knew its origins. Reagan seemed to stop telling the story after 1981, after a minister wrote to inform him that the speaker was John Witherspoon (Reagan's response to the letter can be found in "Reagan: A Life in Letters"). I imagine that he was disappointed to have the mystery removed from the tale - I hope he would be pleased to know he was misinformed!

<http://gipperwatch.blogspot.com/2010/04/speech-of-unknown.html>

Posted by: RogerJohnson1 | April 30, 2010 10:27 AM | [Report abuse](#)

Well, while surprised of the influence of the "occult" on Reagan, I am not surprised considering the myth of "Reaganomics" and its disastrous impact on Main Street America! In retrospect, it is apparent that Reagan never progressed much beyond his indoctrination into "ultra-capitalism" by G.E. with an irrational obsession with the "Evil Empire" of the Soviet Union. Fortunately, the world was most likely saved from a nuclear holocaust by the emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev. However, if we could "swap" George Bush #43 for Reagan, then a nuclear war would even be more likely for Bush believes that god acts through him and any act violence is justified in His Name, just like the Islamic religious wackos on 9/11!

Posted by: kemcb | April 30, 2010 10:42 AM | [Report abuse](#)

reagan was a horrible president. while he was great at giving speeches and rallying his followers, his budget cutbacks crippled government agencies and programs while his taxcuts enriched his friends and the very wealthy. his policies hurt the most vulnerable Americans and put a price tag on freedom that not everyone could afford. so its no big shock to me that he was into astrology and other voodoo nonsense.

Posted by: MarilynManson | April 30, 2010 11:07 AM | [Report abuse](#)

wow! a fascinating and illuminating slice of hidden American history.

Posted by: julie29 | April 30, 2010 12:25 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Ronald Reagan was a senile nut case. He was the architect of voodoo Reaganomic, which did irreparable harm to the US economy and single-handedly killed the so-called middle class.

Posted by: demtse | April 30, 2010 1:09 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Great illumination of one of Reagan's flaws. Scary stuff, when our leadership links policies to a fairy tale version our "destiny".

At least Clinton's flaws were in his pants.

Posted by: Spectator | April 30, 2010 1:11 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Nostradamus predicted that two Rs would take down a wall.

Pretty good, huh?

Posted by: 37thand0street | April 30, 2010 1:23 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Half of America claims to be in telepathic contact with a 2000-year-old undead zombie in the sky, and there's nothing weird about that.

But Ronald Reagan liked to tell ghost stories? Now THAT's weird!

Posted by: 12008N1 | April 30, 2010 1:30 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Ronald Reagan was a senile nut case. He was the architect of voodoo Reaganomics, which did irreparable harm to the US economy and single-handedly killed the so-called middle class.

Posted by: demtse | April 30, 2010 1:33 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Beyond its being "fascinating," the more pressing question is to what extent Reagan's "interest in the arcane" or occult shaped his political "philosophy" and guided his political decisions.

Posted by: TheRadicalSecularist | April 30, 2010 1:47 PM | [Report abuse](#)

>Nostradamus predicted that two Rs would take down a wall.

>Pretty good, huh?

Comments like this show how much misguided belief there is in dead seers (note that the Wall fell after Reagan left office). Many, if not most "predictions" attributed to Nostradamus are recent inventions after the fact to "prove" his ability. I suspect this is one of them.

Posted by: GWGOLDB | April 30, 2010 3:30 PM | [Report abuse](#)

If Reagan were alive today, I bet he would be a Scientologist.

Posted by: ozpunk | April 30, 2010 4:45 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Ronald Wilson Reagan

6 letters in each name

6 6 6

of course, that's meaningless, unless you believe in quackery like astrology, so the prophecy is fulfilled!

Don Regan (Reagan Chief of Staff) spilled the beans on Nancy's astrology fixation after she had him canned. Later Nancy would admit it herself and wrote: "Astrology was simply one of the ways I coped with the fear I felt after my husband almost died... Was astrology one of the reasons [further attempts did not occur]? I don't really believe it was, but I don't really believe it wasn't."

Posted by: malcolmyoung1 | April 30, 2010 5:16 PM | [Report abuse](#)

I wonder if he ever pondered his own name... Ronald Wilson Reagan (666)?

Posted by: Geopolitics101 | May 2, 2010 1:32 PM | [Report abuse](#)

Hmmmm...one of you guys said that Reagan was responsible for the death of the so-called "middle class". Nope, sorry. I was there, and the middle class started to corrode by the mid-1960's. Why? I don't know why, but I know how: we baby boomers expected the American dream--some of us got it, and a lot of us didn't--not matter how hard we worked or how many degrees we obtained. I'm just saying....

Posted by: lilchicken2u | May 4, 2010 1:49 AM | [Report abuse](#)

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