

## ***YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT***

**By Michael Ventura**

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James Baldwin said that Nazism thrived not because most Germans were evil but because most were spineless. One cowardly compromise after another, succumbing to the bluster of bullies, quickly created a climate in which the rare act of courage, however splendid, became futile. Cowardice proved infectious, contagious. Taking a stand against the dark storm, individuals might have redeemed themselves, but their nobility disappeared with barely a trace; the Nazi anti-culture created a kind of collective immunity to anything redemptive. Only rampant destruction and total collapse would finally cleanse that corrosive atmosphere, so that new beginnings could be made and genuine values could again take root.

Is that what is happening to us? Perhaps.

Or let's just say my fillings itch when a television network takes orders from a political party: a TV miniseries, probably as second-rate as most, canceled out of fear. Fear of what? Of nothing specific. Yet of something pervasive. That's the nature of the disease.

CBS canceled *The Reagans* because of an unspecific fear of a pervasive meanness, a nastiness, a mercilessness toward anything that contradicts one faction's image of itself. It is not enough anymore for the far-right Republican Party to be in power; now they demand the right to control how others see them. The CBS answer could have been: Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, Truman, Ike, the Kennedys, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and even George W. Bush have been depicted, flatteringly and unflatteringly, in many TV and feature films; what makes Ronald Reagan so special? But the far right has sanctified Reagan, and will not have his sainthood questioned. Intolerance is the right's mode of operation, rage is its engine, fear is its weapon -- a weapon that only works on cowards. What fundamental insecurity, what virulent anxiety, what holy terror, makes rightists such braying bullies? Cowards don't ask such questions.

Especially cowards in high places. CBS Chairman Les Moonves made the decision to pull *The Reagans*. Moonves is in charge not only of the network's entertainment division, but of CBS News, CBS Sports, UPN, King World syndications (which distributes *Oprah*), and the 39 TV stations owned by Viacom (CBS's parent company). That seems a lot of power. Yet Moonves couldn't say *No* to the Republican Party. That is an enormous political and cultural fact.

Political: Off-the-record comments indicate Viacom didn't want to jeopardize relations with state and federal lawmakers, from whom Viacom constantly seeks favors; so, contrary to the notion of corporate-run politics, the Republicans now have a major corporation running scared.

Cultural: We may be entering an era in which mass culture is *directly* the servant of politics -- a first for the United States.

Put the two together: What happens if corporations, in order to achieve their agenda of profit and dominance, take on the *cultural* agenda of the far right in order to please Republicans? Until now only Rupert Murdoch's Fox empire has openly taken sides in our culture wars. If this becomes standard corporate practice ("the price of doing

business," as they say) our atmosphere could resemble Germany's in the early 1930s, when, one by one, the major cultural venues gradually kowtowed to the Nazi Party, allowing no other visions to reach mass circulation. Then think of the far right's cultural agenda: a fundamentalist Christian state; the rights of women, gays, and nonwhites severely curtailed and controlled; creationism taught as fact in public schools; history, science, and art subject to ideological whims. What if that also becomes the corporate agenda? Most people in America, after all, work directly or indirectly for corporations that demand economic obedience; what happens if they begin also to demand right-wing ideological purity, in order to curry favor with the dominant party?

Nothing less is at stake when, for the first time, a political party is allowed to dictate what may be broadcast on the public airwaves.

*The Reagans* was first commissioned by ABC. ABC let it go because, they said, "It was very soft, not controversial in the least." CBS picked it up. Anybody who's worked in television knows that not a single script gets the green light until it's been pawed over by a coven of executives, network censors, and sponsors' reps. CBS Chairman Les Moonves is a micromanager famous for reading every script for show under his command, though he now claims to have known nothing of the production that was to have been his sweeps-month centerpiece. No one in the industry believes him. Thus *The Reagans* went through the usual exhaustive TV vetting process, and was deemed ready and fit for public consumption. Then *The New York Times* ran a piece that focused on the show's portrayal of Nancy as a control freak and Ronald as an aging president showing the first symptoms of Alzheimer's. Republican flacks on talk radio and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News banshees took to the warpath -- though not a single one of them has, as of this writing, seen the film or read a complete script. Their uproar made its way to the desk of Les Moonves. Calling the film "unbalanced" -- as opposed to all the "balanced" material on CBS -- he canceled the broadcast. Yet in his official statement of cancellation Moonves admitted that "the producers have sources to verify each scene in the script."

Pause at that. History is, in essence, an evaluation of sources. As any shelf of history books easily proves, the same sources can lead to different conclusions from different historians. There is never "the" truth; there is always "a" truth, a conclusion drawn from sources. It is precisely this eternal condition that the far right abhors. They insist that their conclusions are "the" truth, and there is room for no other. (The far left is guilty of the same syndrome, but, not being in power, they're not worth an argument. Anyway, they're so happy to argue with one another, it would be bad manners to interrupt.) Be that as it may, according to Moonves, his decision to cancel "was based solely on our reaction to seeing the final film, not the controversy that erupted around a draft of the script." But no network has ever canceled a sweeps-month centerpiece two weeks before airtime for any reason, so no one in the industry takes Moonves at his word. He chickened.

Good news: The right has proved that these so-called Chairmen of Everything soil their drawers when faced with human beings who are willing to go the distance for their beliefs. Progressives need to remember that.

Bad news: You can't improve on William Butler Yeats' "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity." Passionate intensity is wonderful in love and art, and disastrous in politics. Politics at its best is the cool art of compromise -- "the art of the possible." The right's passionate political intensity is matched on the left by Ralph Nader and his Greens, who have endangered the welfare of

millions of powerless people by an abhorrence of compromise that is a mirror image of the far right's (as Nader's petulant inflexibility mirrors that of Bush). Going the distance for your beliefs doesn't have to mean intolerance for the beliefs of others. If it does, democracy is doomed.

Those who pay for Showtime (another Viacom subsidiary) can see a version of *The Reagans* early in 2004. Robert Greenblatt, Showtime honcho, promises the version he broadcasts "will contain the essence of [the filmmakers'] vision." Anyone who's worked in film and TV knows those are fighting words. In movie-talk, Greenblatt is promising that *he* will define "the essence" and edit accordingly.

Put plainly: *The Reagans* has effectively been banned by the far right -- a victory that has rightists salivating for their next fight, to see just how much mass culture the Republican Party can directly control. That is very different from conservative *artists* making conservative *art*, as they have every right to do, be it pop or highbrow. We're seeing with *The Reagans* the first round of the fight for and against *politically controlled* culture. It's going to be quite a fight, and, if intolerance wins, then, as Clint Eastwood gets to say in Don Siegel's *Coogan's Bluff*, "You won't believe what happens next, even while it's happening."

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