



What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era

Peggy Noonan

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On the hundredth anniversary of Ronald Reagan's birth comes the twentieth-anniversary edition of Peggy Noonan's critically acclaimed bestseller *What I Saw at the Revolution*, for which she provides a new Preface that demonstrates this book's timeless relevance. As a special assistant to the president, Noonan worked with Ronald Reagan—and with Vice President George H. W. Bush—on some of their most memorable speeches. Noonan shows us the world behind the words, and her sharp, vivid portraits of President Reagan and a host of Washington's movers and shakers are rendered in inimitable, witty prose. Her priceless account of what it was like to be a speechwriter among bureaucrats, and a woman in the last bastion of male power, makes this a Washington memoir that breaks the mold—as spirited, sensitive, and thoughtful as Peggy Noonan herself.

What I Saw at the Revolution: A Political Life in the Reagan Era Details

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OCHUNTER says

This book was every interesting. Before reading this I never thought how important speech writers. What I saw at the revolution daintily opened my eye to this. The most blatant example of this is in chapter 13. The challenger explosion was a tragic moment in history that touched many people. If Reagan said insensitive his career and legal would be ruined, and Peggy needed to make it quick. Reagan even said that he felt like he did them justice. But then he got an avalanche of calls and telegrams thanking him. Through the book she tells her amazing story of being a speechwriter.

Emily says

It's not my political cup of tea, but Peggy Noonan writes an engaging memoir of her experiences working as a speechwriter for the Reagan administration. I enjoyed her style and perspective, even when I didn't agree with her.

My chief problem was that every time Reagan walks into a room, she is just short of describing him as accompanied by rainbows and unicorns. At the same time, I understand that comes from being part of the "Reagan Revolution".

A unique perspective on working for a presidential administration, and an interesting read even if it's not your political leanings.

Michael says

I have a total writer crush on Peggy Noonan. I love her writing style, and I love that she is conservative, reasonable, and not a complete ass toward those with whom she disagrees (a model many people would do well to emulate in this day and age). Noonan was a special assistant--read: main speechwriter--for President Reagan during both of his administrations. I learned an enormous amount about political speech writing: how many hands get into the pie, how much back and forth fighting goes on over each sentence and paragraph, and how tough one needs to be when in the center of power in this country, especially as a woman back before people like Condi Rice and Hillary Clinton. This was a fascinating political memoir that deserves the reputation it's earned over the past two decades. I thought it was great.

What most impressed me was how honest Noonan was about President Reagan's weaknesses, especially during his last few years in office. This is a lady who loves Ronald Reagan, but much of what she said about the things she saw going on in the White House strengthens the argument for those who insist Reagan was just too damn old and disengaged by the end of his time in Washington. She also had a lot of good things to say about the first President Bush, a man who I've long felt didn't get a fair shake by conservatives or liberals (but then again, I'm a moderate New England Republican, so according to most people in the movement, I'm an RINO, too).

I've just realized that, in the past year, I've read three books about Ronald Reagan. Funny how that happened.

Nooilforpacifists says

The woman can write. And she's carrying a torch for Reagan. This book, however, was (I believe) her first, and covers her service at the end of the Reagan years and through the GHW Bush years. Just about anything memorable Bush 41 said, Peggy wrote.

Chrisanne says

Let the record show that I loved Peggy's *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan*.

I read this book because Dana Perino spoke highly of it in *And the Good News Is...: Lessons and Advice from the Bright Side*. And I have 4 things to say:

1: What revolution, Ms. Noonan? There wasn't much in here about any revolution. And maybe it's because I didn't live through it that I didn't get it but I thought the title was misleading and showcased a manipulated government that didn't care much for it's constituents-- just about keeping them.

2: Ms. Noonan is very talented in regards to writing and speaking. I have heard her speak in public and, as mentioned previously, really liked her other book on Reagan. So what was with all of those parentheses? and the random snippets of experiences? and the (seemingly) unfounded admiration of Reagan. Give me proof, positive facts, and solid experiences that provide a foundation for these beliefs. And, if the asides in parentheses take more than a couple of sentences, write a chapter, dedicate a section, do something besides letting the parentheses take up pages of a section.

3: It was incredibly enlightening (If you're reading Uncle Brad, stop now). I came away from the book loving Reagan as a person but really cynical about the political process. It makes me want to know who really calls the shots and roll my eyes when people rhapsodize about that era. Politics are a mess and I'm pretty sure those Constitutional Convention-ers didn't want party-heads and chiefs-of-staff to run policy. Cause we don't vote for those.

4: The tone comes across as expressing an unhealthy obsession with Reagan the person. Just saying.

Courtney says

I wish I could say that I enjoyed this book, but I found Peggy's tone to be quite angry and harsh. Yes, she has interesting stories to tell, but they're often lost behind overt insults hurled at many of her colleagues.

I did, however, love this one quote so much that I transcribed it from the audiobook:

There are, I think, two kinds of serious political activists: those who are impelled by love and those who get their energy from hate. Those moved by love - for America, for the poor, for freedom - often contribute to the debate. Those moved by hate - for liberals, for conservatives, for the rich, for America's sins - make the process ugly. They cannot engage in honorable debate because they cannot see the honor on the other side.

They're like diggers who will never reach the treasure because they're too busy throwing the contents of their shovels at each other to get to the gold.

traci says

So the words "I'm going through a bit of a Peggy Noonan phase" have probably never been spoken, until now, but I'm going through a bit of a Peggy Noonan phase. Maybe it's because there are very few books written by female speechwriters about being a female speechwriter. And yes, she's a crazy loon these days, but Peggy Noonan circa 1985 is actually kind of inspiring. For one, she didn't do what she didn't want to do. The first lady asks you to write a speech, most speechwriters would be like "sure, fine." She said no. For another, she writes the memos I only dream of writing. And finally, she's a tremendously gifted writer.

So if you like tremendously gifted writing, memos, and female speechwriters, this is a really fascinating read. Oh, yeah, Reagan is there too, but he played a supporting role to Peggy, her ego, and her incredible speeches.

Ann says

I have to give it two stars for being able to finish it, as well as getting some insight into someone on the right's worldview and whatnot, but I can't possibly forgive someone for painting Reagan to be anything but a monster, so.

Blaine Welgraven says

In her excellent chronicle of life as Reagan's chief speechwriter, Noonan notes, "when people who can't write try to write they often can't tell they're not good. In fact, they often think they're pretty close to wonderful, and they're genuinely hurt, and often suspicious, when told otherwise."

Thankfully for the political reader interested in a well-written, entertaining, and oft-poetic narrative, Noonan decidedly provides the antithesis to her description. She is a writer bar none, and one can't help but keep turning the pages; moreover, Noonan has something that I've found truly rare--the ability to see past the fog of myriad details and the plethora of contrasting viewpoints--and really, really nail the main themes of a moment in history. It's what made her such a vital part of cementing Reagan's now almost unquestioned political legacy, and a grand part of what makes this book such a terrific read.

Kressel Housman says

Peggy Noonan, as I'm sure many of you know, was one of Ronald Reagan's speechwriters. I received her memoir as a gift some 20 years ago with the inscription, "Look how far this gal from Farleigh Dickinson went!" That was sweet, sort of like saying, "If she could do it, imagine what you can become," but I didn't

know quite what to make of it since the person who wrote that inscription was someone who'd made a career of bashing the Reagan administration. I was 19 or 20 then, and had spent my teenage years believing that protests were cooler than parties and professing the attitude that President Reagan was evil incarnate. The person who gave me book was a veteran protestor from the 60's – the coolest of the cool. Why was he encouraging me to read Peggy Noonan?

I've long passed my "radical" stage, but I am still more Democrat than Republican, so I still had an aversion to the book. But that wasn't the only or even the main reason. The book was the only tangible remnant I had of the person who gave it to me. Who needed a reminder of him? The only reason I happened to take the book off the shelf and read it after all these years was that I didn't have time to go to the library and pick up anything from my to-read list. And now, I'm very glad it worked out that way.

With that introduction, I think you can imagine that at times, reading this book was painful for me. It brought me right back to the 80's, reminding me from the other side of the ways that I was wrong. Oh, if I had only spent more time being blissfully unaware of politics like other teens, instead of adopting positions that were necessarily ignorant! That's not to say that the book has made me any more politically conservative than life itself has already made me. I don't agree with Noonan 100% on every issue. But her adoring portrait of Reagan has certainly made me like him. She paints him as basically a populist who cared about the welfare of the average American and who had some very conservative attitudes about morality. He was a Democrat turned Republican, and led many other Democrats with him. The trouble, she said, was that much of his staff wasn't populist; they were elitist. She blames most of the problems that arose on Don Regan, Chief of Staff in the second term. Boy, does she have an axe to grind about him!

It would take too long to describe how each and every issue raised in the book affected me. So I'll just say this: at the beginning of the book, Noonan states that there are several types of White House insider memoirs. Some adopt so serious a tone that they're lifeless. Hers is definitely not that; it's very human. Another variety she mentions is "They Should Have Listened to Me, the Fools!," a trap she falls into quite a bit herself. But heck, she can write! The very last epilogue, added after the fall of Communism, uplifted me like a good political speech. And now I'm in the mood to read the other side of the story. Can anyone recommend anything good on Mikhail Gorbachev?

Rhonda Perkes says

After visiting the Reagan Library, I seem to be obsessed with all books Reagan. Especially written by Noonan, and a review would be redundant. I'll leave it at this.... it's not as good as "When Character was King", but it made me love Noonan even more!

Bart says

This book, written 23 years ago, is filled with poise beyond its writer's years, even when she is score-settling, and it makes you wonder what wisdom its author will uncover in the decades to come. All these years later, we can say: quite a lot.

What I Saw at the Revolution is larger and more autobiographical than the books Noonan has often written since. It is denser in every way. It is rewarding and enjoyable and at times a touch too heavy. There are moments, as well, when a reader can feel Noonan clench her fist and punch the air triumphantly as she imagines what one of the witling editors of her president's speeches will think of seeing himself made infamous in print. It's a writer's innocent conceit never to realize such witlings do not read about themselves, or anything else. Noonan comes closest to this realization here:

. . . there's an odd thing about writing as an art: The critical faculty often fails. When people who can't paint try to paint they can usually step back when they're done, smile a rueful smile, and admit that painting's not their talent. But when people who can't write try to write they often can't tell they're not good. In fact, they often think they're pretty close to wonderful, and they're genuinely hurt - and often suspicious - when told otherwise. (p. 77)

The book's most interesting pieces are those in which the wide-eyed young presidential speechwriter discovers her hero, the President of the United States of America, is a bit of an empty vessel, a professionally trained actor, a pleaser of rooms:

He really always played himself; the vivid have no choice. That's why he seemed both phony and authentic. Because he was. He was really acting but the part he played was Ronald Reagan. (p. 158)

That observation has aged well. It's a tribute to Noonan that the very pop-pom shakers who today clip a sentence of hers here or there for their Republican rallies would regard that passage as such apostasy. Lucky for them, revelations like that happen far too deep in the pages of this considering book; they needn't ever be disabused of their love for her and Him.

But Noonan would never be loyal as they wished her to be because she is a writer, an employer of perfect words like *tropism*, and not a publicist. Or as she puts it:

A writer can do anything for his side but write for it. You either take whatever talent you have and let it lead you where it leads you, or you harness it to a political viewpoint and let political considerations decide what you do and do not write, do and do not see. In which case you are a partisan and a polemicist, but not a writer. You have to decide what you are. (p. 324)

Noonan knows by the end of this book exactly what she is, and she captures it in this tiny phrase: . . . *my curiosity has grown bigger than my awe.*

Josh says

Peggy Noonan is a talented speechwriter and provided grand words for several Republican Presidents (this book, from the early 90s, covers Reagan, as well as George H. W. Bush briefly). This is her story, working as a writer during the Reagan era, as she helped to feed lines to the great communicator – my remark, not hers. Noonan's voice, as read from the page, often sounds broad, thematic, and softly patriotic. Her brilliance lies in being able to identify the big themes of the day, the helpful conservative principle at play, and merging both with melodiously inspiring simple language that could make most anyone sound great.

My first worldly memory was that of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster in 1986. I was fascinated by the space program, rockets, and otherworldly exploration. My father had previously applied for the astronaut

teacher program that lost its lead on that terrible day in January. Though as a six year old, I may not have listened closely to the President's address, his wonderfully memorable words are well known to me now: "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them – this morning, as they prepared for their journey, and waved goodbye, and slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God." It was Peggy Noonan who, while quoting the poem "High Flight," helped Reagan to find his voice and such words in the midst of a national tragedy.

Despite having a copy of "What I Saw" in my collection for over ten years, I chose to listen to the book's abridged audio version only recently. I sought convenience over totality this time; but, it might not have been the best decision for the material. Despite Noonan's comforting voice, genuinely reading her own text and adding personality to the stories of home and career, either far too much substance was removed in the abridgement, or this is a pretty short book. Either way, it was a little tough to keep up with Noonan's hurried pace, as she leaped through decades of interesting topics and issues in just a few hours. Her life and work, up to 1993 of course, was assembled into a summary of a few stories, with significant holes left uncovered.

Noonan liked and admired Reagan, but despite working in the White House, she had a tough time getting to know him closely. This is a curiously common observation of Reagan by the people who did "know" him. A handful of brief personal stories about his conversations and other simple interactions with Noonan all sounded heartfelt and meaningful; or perhaps this was just her crafty gift of writing at play again. Noonan's relationship with other staff members – who she called the "mice" – was often difficult. Her delicately selected wordings were frequently misunderstood during the sausage-making speech-editing process. Annoying managers, clerks, and some immediately forgotten state department personalities, sounded less than helpful.

On the other hand, Noonan probably had a closer relationship with George H. W. Bush during his 1988 presidential campaign than she did with the 40th President. Not knowing too much about her earlier adventures in writing before tuning in, I did not expect this Bush component from a subtitled work "A Political Life in the Reagan Era." I suppose he was the Gipper's Vice President after all.

Noonan seems to express discomfort that she, just an unassuming writer, often provided the words – or a script – for those people who are intended to be our far-seeing leaders providing us direction. It was interesting to hear of a few instances where the relationship between "leader," staff, and country was blurred. She ponders the difference between the act of speechmaking and that of writing the speech. Noonan reconciles this vocational peculiarity with the acceptance that ownership of the speech inevitably becomes that of the leader. It is the speaker finally, who chooses or directs the topics – and often more – discarding what they dislike.

Yeah, this book was ok, I guess. Like any other amateur Republican activist and armchair pundit, I love learning about Reagan. Except, it would have been preferable if Noonan could have incorporated excerpts of some of her historic Reagan and Bush speeches into the book, not just a few simple words and phrases. Thankfully the internet filled in some of the gaps for me. Where in her tale is the policy substance and meaty ideas of the Reagan revolution to be found? In another book I suppose. Perhaps I should double check the dusty hardcover edition on the shelf and compare it to the audio version. Nah, it's time for a pirate adventure story, Michael Crichton style!

Paula says

Very much written in her voice as I have heard it in her columns and on TV. Was interesting that she had critiques, often biting, of many people she worked for and with, except for Ronald Reagan. She saw him in something of a sycophantic way.

I did like reading the behind the scenes at White House as lived by a person of great writing talent with extensive literary and historical knowledge. Her fights to keep the poetry in speeches while meeting policy and political objectives were fascinating, the review/revision process intriguing.

Some jarring racial and especially gender statements/observations, and phonetic dialect place this very much as a book of the late 1980s which it is.

Some quotes: "For our politicians and our poor, two groups with a special interest in the illusory..." I found this denigrating to the poor. Page 137 paperback 20th Anniversary

Reagan quote on Social Security: " Social Security is not part of the deficit: it's funded entirely by its own fund...So no, we won't lower Social Security to reduce the deficit." p146

About Reagan: "A woman who knew him said, He lived life on the surface where the small waves are not deep down where the heavy currents tug. And yet he has great powers of empathy." page 151

Her description of picture of President and aides watching Challenger explosion. "Only on the face of Reagan do we see horror, and pain."

Noonan strove to understand Reagan and get his voice, to know him (she never felt she did). Her Challenger speech is remarkable (in its rhetoric, speed of writing to delivery, and getting through pretty unscathed by committee), and she knew Reagan would understand the quote from High Flight having grown up when memorization was part of education and having lived through WWII.

A favorite quote: "Pure democracy is a constant argument, an unending tug of war over what is right and how and whether to achieve it." page 250

Though-provoking quote: "[Don] Regan's fall was savage...[but] he survived, and this is what I learned from watching: All defeat is a collaboration. And as usual, Don Regan wouldn't cooperate." page 294

On writing: "...if you had seen those drafts, you would have seen clots of ideas on clean paper, globs of heroic awkwardly phrased. Write, comb it out, rewrite, keep combing. You love that little phrase and you keep keeping it in, but it doesn't connect with anything anymore and it doesn't matter if it has a kind of half-eloquence. 'We must kill our little darlings, ' said Mary McCarthy. page 308

Cogent quote: "...when men in politics are together, testosterone poisoning makes them insane." page 323

J says

Loved her conversational, positive tones and inclusive style.

This memoir is the coming-of-age story for Noonan's political life and covers her work in the White House as a speechwriter for Regan and Bush (#41). She is a true original, so her mind and writing sometimes goes to surprising places. Not always cookie-cutter "Republican" and a bit anti-establishment. Very comfortable with the messy bits of herself and life in general. But ultimately, she seemed in line with all the major issues

that I noticed. Her original voice gives her arguments more weight and authenticity - especially in the areas of the sanctity of life and individual liberty vs. big government. It feels like she wrestled with these issues and based her positions on profound understanding and compassion for others. She also worked for Dan Rather and CBS early in her career and has an affection for liberals - even when disagreeing with their politics. Her view of conservative ideals is very inclusive & positive. Love that!

I was a little shocked to read about her liberal college days (and a mention of casual drug use). She also has strong feminist tendencies and a major subcurrent of the book was her trying to knock down walls for herself as a woman. Very hard noised at times. She seemed unsure about marriage, when back to full-time work while nursing and ultimately divorced her husband. :-(

Long chapters are divided by paragraphs with extra space in between and sometimes asterisks. In some sections, the paragraphs seem almost like free form thoughts - interesting but rambling and random. Kind of crazy and unpredictable. She has a 'comfortable' relationship with grammar - not always adhering to correct standards for paragraph indentations and punctuation. (I wonder if this mirrors a speechwriter's standard for writing).

Very interesting look inside the functioning in the White House, the articulation of Reagan politics and the experiences of a woman in the 1980's male-dominated political arena.

Lots of references to being Irish Catholic. She generally has a good impression of the Church, except when she doesn't. She isn't afraid to openly criticize bishops and other church officials she disagrees with, but it usually seemed to be slightly grey areas - never issues of dogma.

Lots of eerie similarities to "And the Good News Is...: Lessons and Advice from the Bright Side" by Dana Perino - a memoir by the first female Republican White House press secretary, who worked for Bush (#43).

While this book deals with the articulation of Reagan's political messaging, the memoir itself is not as politically oriented as I expected. Noonan describes various political arguments as they relate to the story, but I never got the sense that this book was intended to convert readers to her political positions. She has a comfortable relationship with her politics - being able to articulate her own beliefs beautifully and being unphased if others disagree. She is definitely a political professional, who is use to the jostling of debates and the free flow of ideas.

I loved her insight into the disappearance of "locals" - ie local standards and cultures. She states that no one has beliefs now; we are more comfortable acting as commentators on beliefs held outside ourselves. Many of the trends and political issues she highlights seem relevant today. It is amazing that she wrote this back in the 1980's!
