

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

When Howard Baker became President

To those covering the White House on a routine basis, the recent spate of "shocking revelations" about the limited ruling powers of President Reagan is all old news. It's only noteworthy from the standpoint that controllers of certain powerful media outlets are now trying to make the case for an early departure of Reagan from office, in an effort to pass the mantle of power to Vice President Bush in a way that they hope can diminish the role of a presidential election in November.

To suddenly make big news out of the fact that, for example, Reagan uses cue cards for everything from speeches to cabinet meetings, is only explainable from this point of view. This has been a well-known feature of the President's behavior for many years. It is always amazing to discover that so many Americans still think that President Reagan writes his own speeches, or even more surprisingly, that he has them memorized because he delivers them without looking at notes. The role of the teleprompter is unknown to millions of Americans even now.

Reagan's limitations, exacerbated by poor health and advancing age, are nothing new. They date back to long before he entered politics in the first place, when he was a bad actor even by Hollywood standards. What is eerie about watching an old Reagan movie today is to see how the President's most familiar mannerisms were his acting stock in trade from the beginning.

What this demonstrates is that, in fact, Reagan never was an actor. That is, he could never play any role but

himself. Since his only role was himself, carrying that into politics was easy for him. Whether it was clear to him where his acting left off and his real self took over is debatable from the beginning.

Such limitations aside, the more important issue in Washington today is the growing impact of what is now more clearly recognized as a total change of government that occurred in the fall of 1986.

The impact of the November 1986 mid-term election, when control of the Senate shifted to the Democrats, set in motion a process that has transformed politics in the city. The unprecedented capitulation of the administration, especially on the issue of defense spending and the Strategic Defense Initiative, can be traced to this point.

This is because on Nov. 3, 1986, two crucial events occurred on the same day. First, the election put the Democrats in control of the Senate for the first time under the Reagan administration. Second, within hours after the election results were known, the Iran-Contra scandal broke with the first article on arms-for-hostages dealings by the administration in a Lebanese newspaper.

Despite the importance of prying open the can of worms known as the "invisible government" behind the Iran-Contra mess, its effect on the President was total paralysis. Within four months, by the end of February 1987, the White House underwent a complete transformation with the arrival of Sen. Howard Baker as the besieged President's new chief of staff.

Baker, the consummate political whore of the Eastern Establishment, was given the job by Nancy Reagan, the President's wife, on the promise that he knew how to prevent the Iran-Contra crisis from bringing down the President the way Watergate brought down Nixon.

Baker had played a central role from the Senate side in the demise of Nixon. Reagan, haunted by the specter of all his political accomplishments being wiped out by another Watergate scandal, was desperate. His one role in life and on the screen was the epitome of all-American virtue.

The rude and bombastic Don Regan was no help. He behaved like the Merrill Lynch bull in a China shop. So, Nancy put in the call to Baker.

Baker's demand in exchange for getting the President off the hook was subtly put, but involved his effectively replacing Reagan as President of the United States. It took the form of saying, "I'll save you, but from now on, we do everything my way." Baker brought in two of his personal honchos, Tom Griscom and Ken Duberstein, to top White House posts as part of the transition.

For his part, President Reagan has never recovered from the deep existential trauma of the scandal. For his part, Baker by and large delivered on his promise.

But the key part of the package has been the Baker domestic and foreign policy agenda. The White House has done everything just the way Baker would have it done if he had been put there by popular vote of the masses, instead of installed there by Nancy in the midst of the Iran-Contra crisis.

Baker's Senate voting record and campaign issues in his earlier run for the President confirm this. Working with the State Department and Democratic Congress, Baker has run budget cutting and arms control "his way" from the Oval Office. It is, after all, Howard Baker who winds up Reagan every single morning with a half-hour meeting. So, in the final analysis, it's not merely Reagan's limitations, but Baker's treachery, which explains what's happening in Washington today.