

Book review

Inside the Reagan revolution

"Who's In Control?"

By RICHARD DARMAN
384 pages, Simon & Shuster

BY STEVE CHARNOVITZ

This is a fascinating book about the Reagan and Bush administrations by one of the few top officials to serve both presidents. It is part memoir and part political commentary. Readers will sharpen their understanding of the opportunities and challenges of presidential power.

Richard Darman, who once taught at the Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, begins his book with a theory of the American political process. Unlike other countries with more polarized populations, the United States has a large political center. Thus, successful presidents need to energize the middle block of electorate and to draw their strength from it. Mr. Darman points to tax reform in 1986 as an example of leading from the center.

The moderating tendency of national politics has two other important implications. First, "the system" will usually prevent extreme policy changes. He sees the 1981 tax cut as a rare exception, and gives some attention to how it happened. He notes that no similarly extreme economic changes occurred during the Reagan administration.

The second implication is that in the absence of a coalition seeking to govern from the "sensible center," there will be stalemate and gridlock. He points to the latter half of the Bush administration and most periods of the Clinton administration as examples.

While crediting the Reagan administration with helping to prevent "America's slide toward a statist, European-style mixed

economy," Mr. Darman declares that the term "Reagan revolution" is a misnomer. After all, federal spending as a share of GDP declined little during the Reagan years. Moreover, Washington increased its intervention in international trade. Government subsidies were also boosted. Indeed, on the morning after he was shot in 1981, Mr. Reagan signed legislation to raise milk price supports.

Mr. Darman writes he tried to prevent Vice President George Bush from making the "Read my lips: No new taxes" promise, but was overruled. As director of the Office of Management and Budget, he was trapped by this impractical promise. The story of the 1990 budget summit is told in detail. Mr. Darman takes a share of the blame for the political flak President Bush endured when he announced that he could agree to new taxes. The book's analysis of how the White House team tripped itself will be useful to anyone who conducts high-profile negotiations.

Despite the initial hubbub, the 1990 budget agreement would have been a political asset for Mr. Bush, if the conservatives, led by Newt Gingrich, had not rallied against it. Mr. Darman suggests that Mr. Gingrich's objection was "purely political," not a matter of principle. Mr. Gingrich was willing to sacrifice Bush's presidency as part of a larger strategy for increasing his own visibility. Mr. Darman was flummoxed by Mr. Gingrich's cynicism and ambition.

The book is devoted mostly to the author's successful initiatives, but he also discusses his unsuccessful attempts to respond to America's cultural problems. In a widely reported speech given in 1986, Mr. Darman examined the topic of "corpocracy." He decried the limited vision of some Ameri-

can chief executives and the systematic underinvestment in research and development.

Three years later, Mr. Darman gave a speech about "Now-now-ism," which was shorthand for "robbing the future to give to the present." He pointed to lagging schools and the tax code's bias toward consumption over investment. But nothing came of it. Mr. Darman and the Bush administration could not deliver a "Domestic Storm" to match the successful and popular "Desert Storm."

Mr. Darman returns to the need for reform at the end of his book. He favors vouchers for education and training. He advocates new forms of employment for older Americans and calls for more policy experimentation.

One of the best parts of the book is Mr. Darman's reflection on the American presidency. To preserve the capacity to govern, he writes, a president "must maintain audience appeal." His act must have entertainment value. He should not be boring.

The book is filled with caricatures of the major players. On Mr. Reagan: He has a "natural analytic facility" which was underused because his "charm, good looks, and memory served to get him a long way without additional effort." On Mr. Gingrich: "Gingrich was inclined to think big. But when it came to initiatives beyond the negativism, he had little more than strong inclinations and bits and pieces of substance that attracted his fancy."

"Who's In Control?" is a well-structured, engaging book. Readers will be rewarded with keen insights into how politics drives policy-making.

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