



Robert Carleson--how one man altered the path of history

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Robert B. Carleson shortly after leaving the White House (Courtesy, Susan Carleson)

Robert B. Carleson, a man who was as responsible as anyone for the presidency of Ronald Reagan, passed away late last month. Though his friends and fellow conservatives understood his key role in changing the course of history, he was little known to the general public.

And yet, as his fellow "Reaganaut" Edwin Meese (former Attorney General) declared at a memorial in Carleson's honor April 26, if there had been no Bob Carleson, "there would have been no President Reagan."

My first awareness of Bob Carleson came in the early seventies when, as a news reporter on Capitol Hill, I covered congressional hearings that focused on his leading role in formulating then-California Governor Ronald Reagan's welfare reform program. That was the issue that ultimately propelled Reagan onto his path toward the presidency.

Carrying Meese's point to its logical conclusion, if there had been no Bob Carleson and there had been no President Reagan, then it follows that (1) Americans would have been deprived of its greatest president of the 20th Century. (2) We would not have had what the late Wall Street Journal editor Robert Bartley called "Seven Fat Years" in our economy. And (3) Ronald Reagan would not have had the opportunity--as Margaret Thatcher said--to "end the Cold War without firing a shot."

When Governor Reagan testified on Capitol Hill, Carleson's work so impressed Senate Finance Committee Chairman Russell Long that Carleson ended up advising the Louisiana Democrat on welfare legislation.

The California plan would take hundreds of thousands off the public dole and enable these human beings to get out of the dead-end lives of dependency they, and in many cases their ancestors, had been leading for decades. All of this happened without sacrificing the safety net for those who were truly needy.

The 1971 California Welfare Reform Act (CWRA) did not come without some hard negotiating between Governor Reagan and the Democrat legislature. Bob Carleson--on the governor's negotiating team--knew every nut and bolt in the complex welfare system that had grown out of control over the years. His intricate knowledge enabled him to bargain with the Democrats from a position of strength.

In his book "Governor Reagan," Lou Cannon recounts that Assembly Speaker Robert Moretti arranged for Assemblyman (later Congressman) Phil Burton--a living breathing right out-of-central-casting ultimate "political animal"--to feign angry outbursts and pronounce provisions that Carleson wanted as unacceptable.

But because "Carleson knew more about the welfare regulations than anyone on the Reagan team," writes Cannon, he was able to do some maneuvering of his own that would tie the Democrats in knots.

Speaker Moretti complained that Carleson "would drive the Pope to drink in a couple of weeks." The speaker added, "He [Carleson] would give a 40-page answer to a question that demanded a yes or no, and a yes or no when something

demanded 40 pages." Thus, even in those early days we already had a shining example of California Congressman Dan Rohrabacher's tribute at last month's memorial that "Bob was one of those magic people who knew where to plant the charges to bring down liberal oppression."

But a deal was finally reached, and Cannon writes that "when it became clear that the public saw welfare reform as largely a Reagan achievement, the Democrats tried to downplay its impact by saying that California's declining caseload was the result of an improving economy." Robert Carleson was able to turn that claim on its head. Author-journalist-biographer Cannon says Carleson "was accurate in his observation that California's welfare rolls had increased during prosperous times in the past. He was also right in noting that, after passage of the CWRA, the welfare rolls declined more rapidly than they did nationally."



Gary Bauer

The program was a total success. As Gary Bauer writes in the Weekly Standard, "Over the next three years, the Carleson reform plan produced a decline of 300,000 in the welfare rolls." There were 850,000 fewer persons on the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and general assistance than had been projected under the old system. Meanwhile, aid to the truly needy went up. From this, Bauer concluded, "This was compassionate conservatism before its time." And it was emulated--in varying degrees--by the other 49 states. As Bauer said at the memorial service, Carleson threw himself into his work on CWRA because "Bob loved the poor" who had been condemned to poverty "generation after generation."

The Reagan-Carleson program--by sheer example--had another side effect. It drove the final nail in the coffin of President Richard Nixon's effort to federalize welfare through his Family Assistance Plan (FAP). To Nixon's credit, he later brought Carleson back to Washington to be U.S. Commissioner of Welfare under fellow Reagan loyalist Casper W. Weinberger, then

Secretary of the old Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW).

When Reagan moved to the White House, Carleson headed the transition team at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and then became Special Assistant to the President for Policy Development. In that job, he was able to implement other means of curbing welfare spending, as he had during the Nixon days.

At the Washington hearings I covered in the early seventies, the California plan was alternately praised and damned. The opposing witnesses included the usual suspects among the welfare state careerists whose own political fortunes and financial well-being depended on how quickly and thoroughly the welfare state could be expanded. You could say--as one Reagan cabinet member would later put it--there was "lots of money in poverty."

Finally, there was the crowning achievement: the 1996 Welfare Reform Act. That legislation--encompassing Carleson's idea of scrapping the New Deal program altogether and replacing it with block grants to the states--was passed by the Congress elected in 1994--the first Republican-dominated Congress in 40 years. Carleson was asked by House Ways and Means Chairman Bill Archer and others on the Hill to assist them in guiding the bill through the rough seas of the legislative meat-grinder.

President Bill Clinton vetoed it twice. But in that election year, his then-political adviser Dick Morris told Clinton he would lose his bid for a second term in the White House if he did not sign the third version of the legislation into law. The other side of that coin was that Bob Dole--Clinton's Republican opponent--wanted to deny the Democratic president another opportunity to sign it, precisely because it would weaken Clinton politically, and give Dole a better shot at winning.

As Ronald Reagan repeatedly said, there is no end to what you can accomplish as long as you don't care who gets the credit. Accordingly, as Ed Meese observed at the memorial, it was decided to let Bill Clinton take credit even though he had "again and again" opposed meaningful welfare reforms.

That national law expired a few years ago, but Democrats in Congress have blocked any renewal or updating of the legislation, so the same rules have been kept in place until some kind of consensus is reached on a bill that can be passed. Obviously, the Democrats' game plan is to leave the system open for instant destruction whenever they regain control on Capitol Hill.



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That would be a disaster for America's economy. As Congressman Rohrabacher said, without Bob Carleson's welfare reform, the country today "would be in a catastrophic economic situation." The old pre-Carleson welfare system--which powerful welfare statisticians would like to revive--would by now have "damaged our whole economy."

After the 1996 law had time to become fully effective, there were reports that transit bus drivers in poor inner city neighborhoods saw dramatic increases in ridership. That was because these people who had previously been downcast and resigned to hopelessness had something meaningful in their lives: a new self-confidence. Instead of the welfare check, they had a paycheck--money that was theirs because they had earned it. The very atmosphere was electrifying. The effect was psychological and a matter of pride, as well as monetary advantage.

Finally, the human side of Robert Carleson: I met him for the first time as we both attended the Washington Wednesday meetings of Paul Weyrich and Grover Norquist. He wouldn't talk much, but when he did, he asked penetrating questions--usually dealing with welfare-related issues--which cut to the heart of the discussion at hand and elicited answers that left us with new important information.

At first, I wondered who this modest and unassuming man was, and when we had a one-on-one conversation, I immediately recognized his name and what he had done for the Reagan Revolution. I was super-impressed. Here was someone who had engineered the most successful rollback of the New Deal something-for-nothing culture, and had changed the course of history. Yet, chances are not one in ten people on the street recognized his name, in part because despite his tremendous accomplishments, there was not a pompous or self-aggrandizing bone in his body. He was most generous in encouraging others, even to the point of having kind things to say about a controversial column I had written.

At the memorial in the Rotunda of the Ronald Reagan Trade Center, former Solicitor-General Theodore "Ted" Olson consoled Carleson's lovely wife Susan and sons Eric and Mark and daughter Susan that they were not alone in understanding all too well that we are "never prepared for death's sting and the loneliness and pain that it brings." Olson lost his wife Barbara in the 9/11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon.

Bob Carleson, Olson continued, was a man of "decency, wit, and ideas"--truly a human "symbol of decency and kindness."

For all his accomplishments, this humble but brilliant man simply believed he was doing his job, and--as Gary Bauer observed--believed that "God was there when the country was founded."

"Bob Carleson just loved America," said Bauer. Turning to the widow of the good family man, he added, "And Susan, he loved you."

Susan Carleson is carrying on her husband's good works in the private sector, stepping into his shoes as CEO of the American Civil *Rights* Union, which works to protect all the rights of Americans, including rights that are ignored or opposed by the left-wing American Civil *Liberties* Union--i.e. First, Second, Eighth, Tenth, and Fourteenth amendments.

Mark and Eric Carleson also paid moving personal tributes to their father.

And this from Meese: "If Ronald Reagan were here, he would say, 'Thank you, Bob Carleson, for serving our country.' We say--Thank you for being a friend."

For American taxpayers and welfare-to-work clients, a Biblical quote would be appropriate as applied to Robert Carleson: "Well done, thou faithful servant."



Edwin Meese

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