PS1 for 2/25/88#RETROSPECTIVE ON THE REAGAN YEARS

Are the American people really as interested in politics as the media seem to think? More press persons covered the Iowa primary than covered World War II! The figures were 3,000 for Iowa versus 2,500 for World War II.

During this last year of the Reagan Administration, electronic and TV pundits are vying with each other in writing premature obituaries and political psychoanalysis. Is the Reagan Administration a harbinger of a conservative tidal wave that will generate its own momentum through the 1990s and beyond? Or will it be merely foam on the ocean of history that dissolves when it meets the real world on the shore?

I suggest that Ronald Reagan has turned a decisive corner in American history. Despite many defects and might-have-beens, he has led Americans to adopt changes in attitudes that are fundamental.

The difference between the pre- and post-Reagan eras is that conservatives now know they can win and that they are a majority. Twenty-five years ago, Nikita Khrushchev, presiding over Communism on the march, confidently proclaimed, ""History is on our side.'' History is on the side of conservatives all over the world today, and they know it.

After the massive Goldwater defeat in 1964, conservatives suffered from what was called the Goldwater Syndrome. In their hearts, conservatives knew they were right; but they also ""knew'' they could not win. They believed they were just a remnant of the righteous, waging a holding action against the inevitable takeover by Orwellian totalitarianism in (BF)1984(end BF). But lo, 1984 became the year of the Reagan landslide, and few of the baby boomers who elected him ever heard of Big Brother.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, conservatives meekly beat their

breasts when liberals taunted them that ""the massive Goldwater defeat proved that no one to the right of Barry can ever be elected President.'' No leader sounded a ""certain trumpet'' and the faithful flirted with the likes of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

Then along came Righteous Ron, just as authentically and intuitively conservative as Barry Goldwater. Reagan proved that a conservative can be elected, and that the conservative/profamily ideology is the majority view in modern America. Even the doubting Thomases had to admit this after Reagan's 49-state triumph in 1984.

The result is that all six Republican Presidential candidates are running as conservatives; none is running as a liberal or even as a moderate. To those who suffered through Nelson Rockefeller's well-financed and media-backed campaign to control and take over the Republican National Conventions in 1960, 1964, 1968, and 1976, not to speak of similar efforts by the Thomas Dewey crowd in pre-1960 Republican Conventions, it seems that the whole universe has shifted.

The liberals and moderates have disappeared from sight. The power center of the Republican Party has moved right -- and west -- and the Chase Manhattan Bank crowd can't even field a candidate.

In 1964 the diehard Goldwaterites wore campaign buttons proclaiming ""I'd rather fight than switch.'' Now, it's obvious that all the switching has been done by the liberals. It's a reformation of the whole national approach to solving problems.

Starting with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and flowering under Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, it had become pervasive in our society for politicians to parlay any social ""problem'' into a ""crisis,'' and then promote an expensive federal solution. Invariably, it was, let's set up a new agency, start a new spending program, and build a new bureaucracy.

That's not the first thing people -- or even politicians -- think

of any more. Americans have soured on the whole notion that government can solve our problems. An increasing percentage believe what conservatives have always argued, that government is not working on the solution at all because government itself is part of the problem.

Maybe the federal deficit has had one very good effect. It is very difficult for the liberals to come up with massive new spending bills, much as they would like to, because of the large federal deficits and restraints of Gramm-Rudman.

On top of the general disillusionment with federal omniscience, the Reagan Administration provided a stunning demonstration of the fact that tax cuts promote economic growth and the creation of millions of new jobs in the private sector. That's the best possible way to wage a ""war on poverty.''

There's every reason to believe that conservatism is the wave of the future. Here's hoping we don't blow our opportunities in 1988 by electing politicians who haven't learned how to ""just say no'' to tax increases and big government.