

Satire and Symbolism: Ronald Reagan through Postcards

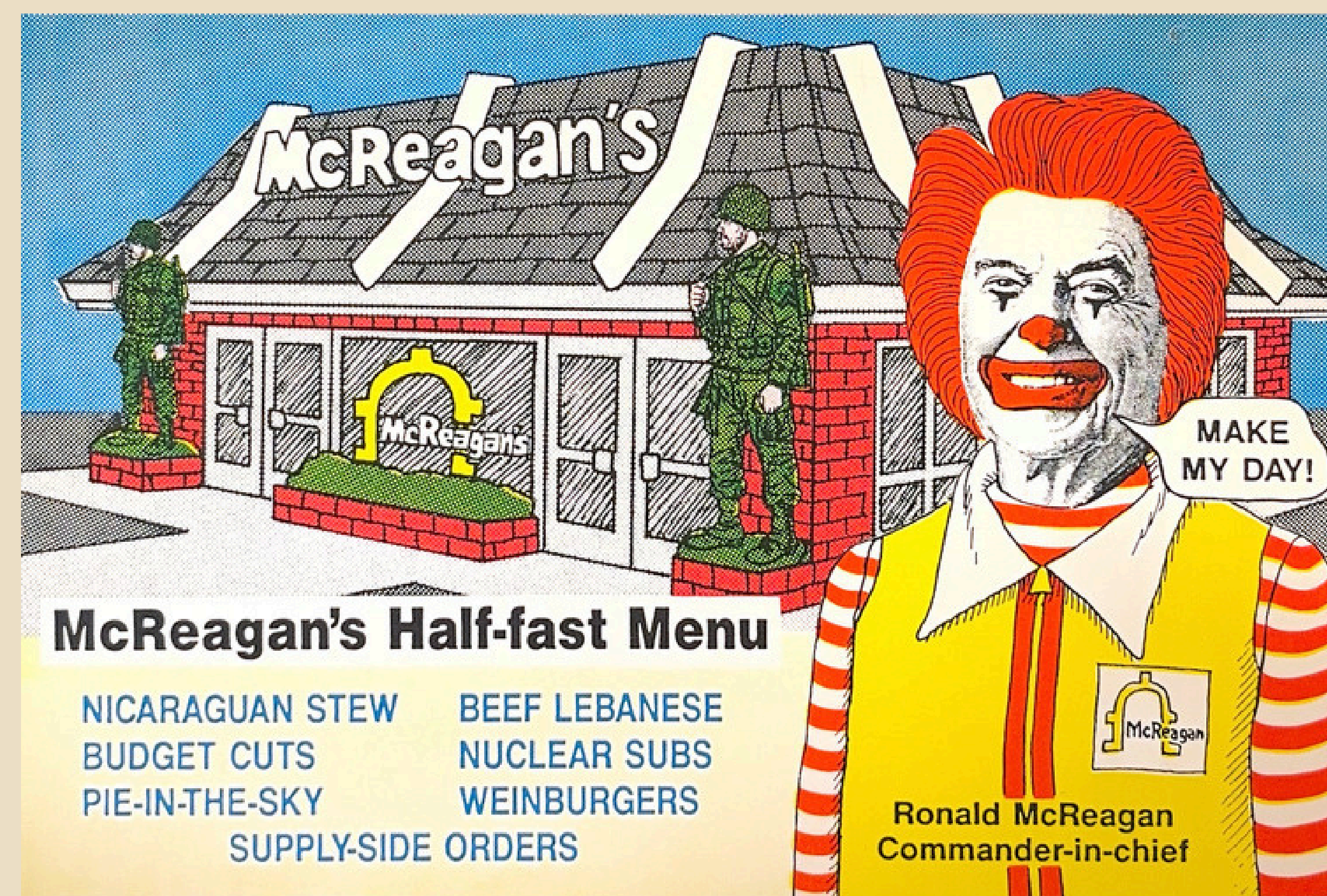
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Introduction:

- Ronald Reagan, who was previously an actor, took office in 1981 and served two presidential terms.
- Studying how the public reacted to Reagan's presidency helps reveal how political power and public opinion operated.
- This project examines the question: How did satirical postcards of Ronald Reagan use visual symbolism to reflect public perceptions of his policies, personality, and media image?
- Satirical postcards receive limited scholarly attention, as a result, smaller scale expressions of dissent remain understudied.

Methodology:

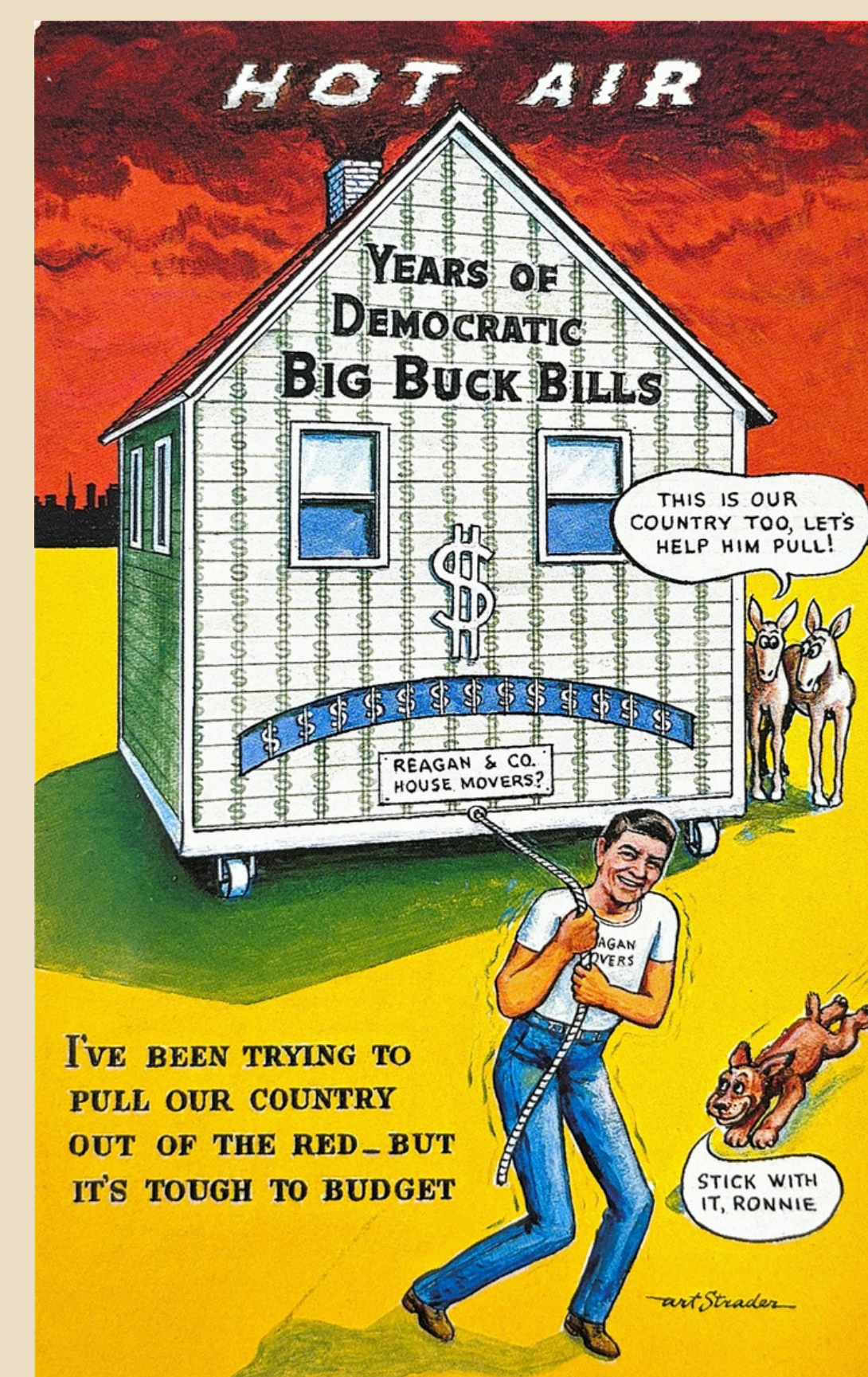
- This research centers on a collection of eight satirical postcards featuring Ronald Reagan, produced in the 1980s.
- I analyzed visual imagery and written text on the postcards using inductive scheme that resulted in three main themes: portrayals of his policies, the language and tone of the cards, and the visual metaphors present.
- I also compared the postcards to one another to identify any reoccurring themes and shared symbolism.
- Secondary sources were used to contextualize my findings within the broader political culture at the time.



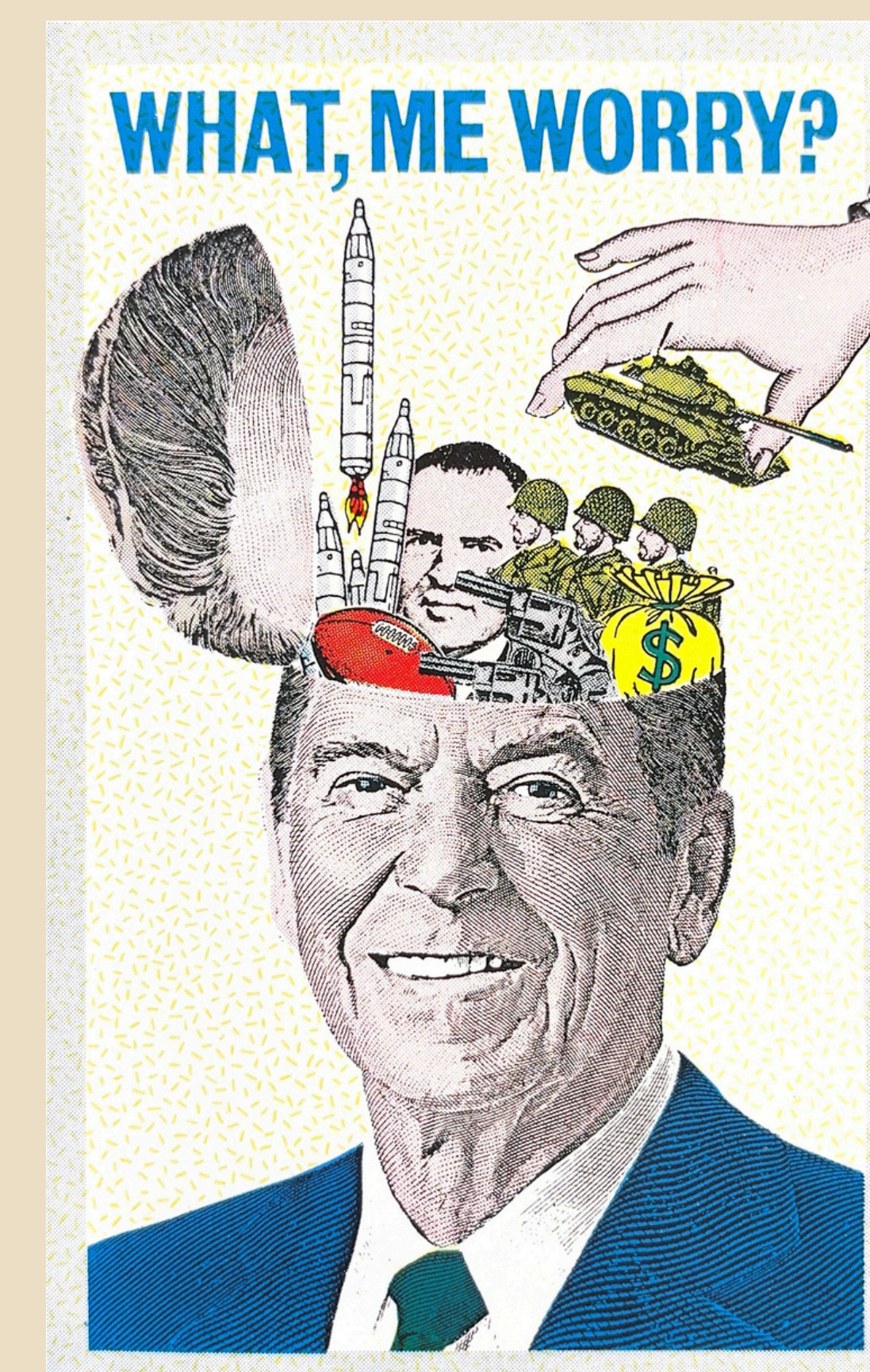
McReagans's Restaurant

Portraying Policies Results:

- The postcard titled "McReagan's Restaurant" portrays Ronald Reagan's policies as items on a fast-food menu, suggesting that his presidency is being packaged and sold to the public.
- The phrase "Supply-Side Orders" is a pun on supply-side economics, commonly known as Reaganomics, which promoted tax cuts, deregulation, and reduced government spending to stimulate business investment and economic growth.
- By reducing supply-side economics to a menu item, the postcard implies that Reagan's economic policy was presented as a simple, one-size-fits-all solution to complex economic issues.
- The menu item "Nicaraguan Stew" references the Iran-Contra affair, in which members of the Reagan administration secretly sold weapons to Iran despite an arms embargo and redirected the profits to support the Contras in Nicaragua.



It's Tough to Budget



What, Me Worry?



Income Bent

Visual Symbolism Results:

- The postcards "It's Tough to Budget" and "What, Me Worry?," use visual symbolism to critique Reagan.
- In the latter, weapons inside his head suggest a presidency dominated by militarism and shaped by military priorities.
- The exaggerated depiction of his head emphasizes the absurdity of this focus, using visual metaphor to critique his priorities.
- In "It's Tough to Budget," the caption frames budgeting as a political struggle, while the money-built house labeled "Years of Dem Big Buck Bills" and the donkeys symbolize Democratic spending.
- The red background represents the deficit, and "Hot Air" critiques partisan exaggeration
- Together, the imagery satirizes Reagan's fiscal agenda and highlights partisan tensions.

Language and Tone Results:

- The postcard "Income Bent," satirically portrays Reagan's economic policies as distorted or unjust through exaggerated and purposefully misspelled phrasing.
- "Endorsements" regarding military policy, such as "Hot Air Force and Entire Pentagonog Squad" and "All Navy Houses of Warship," mock Reagan's prioritization of defense spending.
- Economic focused phrases like "US Banks and Shaving & Loons" and "CIO, Call It Off!" critique his anti-labor stance and the impact of his policies on workers and unions.
- The language employs exaggeration to emphasize the societal and political consequences of Reagan's decisions, creating a satirical and critical tone that delivers pointed criticism playfully.

Conclusion:

Across the samples, visual metaphors and exaggerated language come together to frame Reagan's economic, military, and labor policies as harmful or out of touch, reinforcing a tone of skepticism and dissent. This pattern demonstrates that satirical postcards functioned as an accessible way for critics to express dissatisfaction. Although postcards are often dismissed as simple souvenirs rather than serious political commentary, these examples reveal how everyday visual culture served as a way of ideological contestation. This research is significant because it complicates the popular narrative of Reagan as a universally popular president by revealing how satirical visual culture captured dissent during his presidency.

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