

The Reagan legacy

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To grasp and hold a vision, to fix it in your senses that is the very essence, I believe, of successful leadership; not only on the movie set, where I learned it, but everywhere.

-- Ronald Wilson Reagan

RONALD REAGAN was a highly effective, visionary leader. He exemplified the kind of leadership which the world sorely lacks today: A leadership driven by a passion for ideals but balanced by a real-world pragmatism which rescues it from fanaticism. Reagan had the power to move people to believe in themselves; to push themselves, to nurture optimism and faith, to believe that tomorrow would always be better than today. He inspired hope.

You don't have to agree with his politics or economics I reject both to acknowledge his extraordinary gifts as a leader. The highly respected authority on leadership, Presidential Scholar James McGregor Burns, whose 1970s tome, titled **Leadership**, still remains the standard text today, is quoted by Associated Press as saying that "I think he (former United States President Reagan) was a great president in the single most important way, which is conviction, strength."

When the most influential liberal magazine in America, **The Nation**, could say in the wake of Reagan's death that liberals should learn something from Reagan, you have to sit up and listen. "Ronald Reagan was a master politician who understood how to package right-wing ideas in appealing forms. Reagan connected as a conservative by displaying an optimism about his ideology and its potential that most right-wing politicians before him lacked," says John Nichols in his piece **Reagan's Politics of Passion**. "Even when Americans did not like the ideas he was peddling they liked Reagan. In the years after the Republican right-winger Barry Goldwater's landslide loss of the 1964 presidential election, many conservatives had doubts about whether they would be able to peddle their programmes successfully. But Reagan did not doubt. He believed. And his faith was infectious and it permitted a new generation of conservatives to feel they were a part of a movement with not just principles but with a future."

Ronald Reagan was an extraordinary leader and should not be casually dismissed by opponents on the Left. How he transformed a ragtag movement, built a momentum for conservative economics and politics including international politics was nothing short of phenomenal. Reagan displayed the quintessential American spirit: faith, confidence, daring, indomitable belief in a sense of mission and a calling and an unquenchable thirst for the ideals of liberty. Sure, there were contradictions and inconsistencies, but such is the case with all great leaders and, indeed, with every human being. We must not let the contradictions define the person.

IRAN HOSTAGE CRISIS

Ronald Reagan became president at a time when America's self-image was at a low ebb, when American pride was shattered by the Iran hostage crisis, when its sense of mission was impaired after the Vietnam War and when the march of Soviet communism seemed irrevocable.

There was the Watergate crisis, the fecklessness of Jimmy Carter's human rights policies. The American economy was in the doldrums, Europe was challenging the U.S. dominance in key technological sectors and people were also worrying about the future being either Europe's or the Pacific's, what with the rise of Japan.

Reagan's remarkable leadership qualities and personality traits would, indeed, have convinced the religiously inclined to say that his ascendancy to the presidency was an act of Divine Providence.

The right-wing **Plain Truth** magazine, which was always fond of Republican presidents, had a special place of honour for America's 40th president and ran an article in the 1980s comparing him with one of Israel's greatest reformers in the Old Testament, King Josiah the 40th King of Israel. Reagan was the

only U.S. president who ended his presidency with a higher rating by the American people than when he started.

But it was in the area of foreign policy where he created the greatest revolution. "We meant to change a nation and, instead, we changed a world," he said in farewell address to the American nation. While it is an exaggeration to say, as fellow right-winger Margaret Thatcher said, that he "won the Cold War without firing a single shot", he certainly pulled the American people away from their isolationist tendencies in the wake of the Vietnam debacle. Before Reagan, public opinion polls had revealed a steady decline in the support of Americans for an activist American foreign policy.

The percentage of Americans wanting to see their country take an activist role in world affairs declined from a pre-Vietnam peak of 79 per cent in 1965 to 53 per cent in 1982. However, by 1986 it had climbed back to 64 per cent. Reagan was able to push the biggest arms build-up and to push his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) deterrence against the Soviet Union, which he had famously dubbed "the Evil Empire".

NO INTELLECTUAL

Ronald Reagan was no intellectual (though he was certainly no fool). When he first went to Washington he was regarded as "the amiable dunce". Two leading neoconservative intellectuals, William Kristol and Robert Kagan, writing in the July/August 1996 issue of **Foreign Affairs** noted that, "Many smart people regarded Reagan with scorn and alarm. Liberal democrats still reeling from the Vietnam War were, of course, appalled by his zealotry. But ultimately he succeeded in transforming the Republican Party, the conservative movement in America and after his election to the Presidency in 1980 the country and the world".

In fact, their essay was titled "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy" and in that election year these neoconservatives were calling for the adoption of Reagan's approach to foreign policy. Ronald Reagan was the American Exceptionalist par excellence. He believed in what scholars call "the Idea of America". That America is a City on a Hill, a special place; that America is a metaphor for freedom, democracy, and human dignity. Ronald Reagan, a conservative Protestant, believed in the Manifest destiny of America; that America was called forth by God to play a special role in the world. This is why he could believe so confidently that the Soviet Union would wind up on the "ash heap of history" when all the learned scholars on the Soviet Union thought the Soviets could only be contained. Reagan believed that they could be defeated.

Says Kristol and Kagan in the 1996 **Foreign Affairs** article: "Victory for American conservatives depends on recapturing the spirit of Reagan's foreign policy. Americans (believe) that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring 'self-evident truths'. It took a passionate devotion to ideology-spurred by religious convictions--to believe that the seemingly invincible Soviet Union could be defeated.

OBSESSION WITH COMMUNISM

This brings us to a key element in Reagan's leadership which also opened up the floodgates of criticism over inconsistency. Reagan was both an idealist and a pragmatist. His obsession was with the defeat of communism. He saw every struggle in the Third World for liberation and against exploitation as being an opportunity for 'Soviet expansionism' and that is why Reagan was seen as one of the greatest enemies of the Third World. Reagan had an affinity for Jamaica Labour Party Leader and 1980s Prime Minister Edward Seaga, for Seaga was also a passionate anti-communist. Jamaica got much help and facilitation from Reagan in the 1980s (he and Seaga came to power at roughly the same time) because Reagan was an intense, single-track Cold Warrior. Anything to keep out the Cubans and Soviets he would do. Seaga exploited that marvellously.

So Reagan supported the Contras who were fighting the Communist government in Nicaragua and his Administration went against Congress in illegally diverting arms to the Contras in the now famed Iran-Contra scandal. Reagan backed the anti-Communist Guatemalan dictator Efraim Rios Montt who led that Central American country through some of the worst human rights abuses of its long civil war. Reagan's Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, famously made a distinction between totalitarian Governments and authoritarian Governments. She openly justified the Reagan Administration's support for authoritarian Governments in Latin America which were killing opponents and suppressing human rights, once they were anti-Communist.

In the Reagan Administration's view, the Soviet Union was, in Reagan's words "the focus of evil in the modern world" and their fellow travellers had to be suppressed at all costs. So it was okay to support dictators in Latin America, Asia and Africa once they were fighting the "totalitarian communists".

Reagan vetoed a sanctions bill against racist South Africa during the last days of apartheid because of Soviet support for the ANC (At home he cut back on programmes which helped black people as he launched his attack against big Government and the welfare state.) Yet the Reagan critics have not always been fair to him. While they note his support for assorted dictators and human rights violators in the world, they fail to point out that toward the end of his second term he gave formal recognition to the Palestine Liberation Organisation, supported Palestinian rights and took a tough stand against authoritarian regimes in Chile and Paraguay. He pushed Governments in South Korea and Pakistan toward democracy and assisted in the removal of dictators in the Philippines and Haiti. By the late 1987 he had removed all the key foreign policy figures of earlier years (He changed six national security advisers).

"How remarkable it is that when this (Reagan) administration left office its foreign policy was the most co-ordinated, successful and popular of any in recent history," says Terry Deibel in the summer 1989 issue of the journal, **Foreign Policy**.

In hindsight, Reagan's massive arms build-up and his tough stance toward the Soviet Union seemed justified and contributed to the demise of the Soviet Empire. Communism was an objective evil; a blot on mankind's inalienable right to freedom of thought and expression. The contribution that Ronald Reagan made to the collapse of the Soviet Empire and communism was a good to humanity, a lasting contribution to Western civilisation. That he did some atrocious things in the process is deplorable, but communism was among the greatest evils of the 20th Century.

The contradictions in the Reagan Presidency are there and quite glaring: The man who preached most about cutting big Government racked up the biggest deficits and never produced a balanced budget in eight years. The Ronald Reagan Building today houses 5,000 employees and is, ironically, the largest building in Washington. He talked freedom but supported dictators. He talked rule of law but subverted his own Congress and was nearly impeached. True. But he accomplished a great deal for America and the world. Not the least of which has been to demonstrate to the world what a marriage should look like in a world that has lost sight of true values. I disagree with his conservative politics and economics, but I cannot help admiring his enormous leadership qualities, his strength of character, his legendary generosity of spirit, humour, and his rugged optimism. He exemplified some of the finest strengths of that America.

May his soul rest in peace.

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