

Reagan's Heir?



The passing of Ronald Reagan got me thinking about political leadership then and now. I grew up as a Reagan supporter. In 1975 I helped to bring him to Vanderbilt University, where I had the honor of dining with him. He signed my campus newsletter boosting “Reagan for President”—with a wink, since he wasn’t then an announced candidate. In 1976 I spoke on his behalf in front of student audiences in Washington and attended the convention in Kansas City. I was proud to be part of a Reagan demonstration so boisterous that, it was reported, the networks had to turn down the volume on the television signal.

Although I eventually decided to devote my efforts to advancing a more consistently libertarian cause, I remained a fan of Reagan’s eloquence on behalf of liberty and limited government. I remember these words from his famous speech in 1964:

You and I are told we must choose between a left or right, but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down. Up to man’s age-old dream—the maximum of individual freedom consistent with order—or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.

Some of the tributes to Reagan from all parts of the political spectrum tried to examine his relevance to today’s politics. One popular theme among conservatives was that President Bush is, as Linda Chavez put it, “the true political heir of Ronald Reagan.” James Glassman of the American Enterprise Institute wrote:

Ronald Reagan . . . and George W. Bush . . . have a lot in common. . . .

It was not George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s vice president for eight years and his successor in the White House for four, who carried the torch. It is George W. Bush.

First, like Reagan, the current president adopted a simple, straightforward program and is resolutely pursuing it. . . .

His legacy is in good hands.

But is it? Is Bush indeed the political heir of Ronald Reagan? There’s much evidence that he is not. In his 1981 inaugural address, Reagan said:

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.

It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people. All of us need to be reminded that the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government.

Twenty years later, in his first address to Congress, George W. Bush sounded a different note:

Year after year in Washington, budget debates seem to come down to an old, tired argument: on one side, those who want more government, regardless of the cost; on the other, those who want less government, regardless of the need.

There he was echoing a major campaign speech in which he had ridiculed those with a “destructive mindset: the idea that if government would only get out of the way, all our problems would be solved. An approach with no higher goal, no nobler purpose than ‘Leave us alone.’”

And the two presidents’ policies reflect those contrasting philosophies. Real nondefense discretionary spending fell by 10 percent in President Reagan’s first term. It has risen 25 percent in Bush’s first term. That’s a striking difference: Reagan the most fiscally conservative president of modern times, Bush spending at a faster pace than any modern president except Lyndon B. Johnson. Reagan didn’t abolish the Department of Education, as he had promised, but its budget fell 18 percent in real dollars during his first term. Meanwhile, real spending on the department is up 67 percent under Bush.

Glassman and others suggest that Bush’s aggressive and Wilsonian foreign policy is similar to Reagan’s. But Cato research fellow Jonathan Clarke and former Reagan official Stefan Halper argue in their new book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* that Bush’s foreign policy is in fact a sharp departure from Reaganism. On the use of American force, “Reagan tended to side with the precautionary ‘six tests’ established by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to define when the United States should use force—and when it should not. These tests are a far cry from the force-friendly National Security Strategy published with such neoconservative input and fanfare in September 2002.” Cato senior fellow Doug Bandow, a special assistant to President Reagan, put it this way: “Ronald Reagan believed in hefting a big military stick, but used it only sparingly.” He vigorously engaged the battle of ideas with communism but avoided military confrontation.

Reagan was a religious man and a social conservative, but he never tried to get the federal government into the business of funding religion, as Bush has done with his steady push for “faith-based initiatives.” Reagan’s opposition to California’s anti-gay Briggs Initiative in 1978 stands in stark contrast to the homophobia of the Bush campaign.

Reagan’s presidency was by no means perfect from a libertarian or limited-government perspective. He did not actually reduce government spending or regulation; he launched the war on drugs, and he created a new cabinet department instead of abolishing two as he had proposed. Still, his eloquence on behalf of limited government and his success in slowing the growth of government are sorely missed today.

I met Ronald Reagan. I campaigned for Ronald Reagan. I was inspired by Ronald Reagan. George W. Bush is no Ronald Reagan.

—David Boaz