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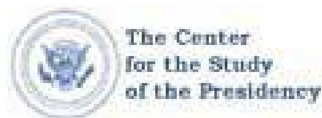

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ARTICLE

The Mixed Legacies of Ronald Reagan

HUGH HECLO

As with all important leaders, Ronald Reagan's legacy is a complex thing. It is a mixture of intended accomplishments and unintended by-products, of actions taken and things left undone. Although partisans push for simple verdicts, the best way of honoring Reagan's memory is to try to offer an honest, well-rounded assessment of his lasting impact on our national political life. I assess the bequest of Reagan's presidency to the future under eight headings of broad public concern: the welfare state, taxation, national security, the presidency, personnel, party politics, political leadership, and the person himself.

Although academia continues to debate Ronald Reagan's place in history, a Reagan legacy industry has been working, with some success, to enshrine the former president's memory in a host of public sites and symbols (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008). The man who fired the nation's air traffic controllers and thundered against the growth of the federal bureaucracy now has Washington's national airport and DC's largest federal office building named in his honor. Recently, conservative activists have borrowed from the evangelical Christian movement and urged each other to be guided by the question "What would Reagan do?" (Heritage Foundation 2008). And even Barack Obama invoked Ronald Reagan in the 2008 presidential campaign as a role model of transformative leadership.

From these and other indications, it would seem that Ronald Reagan is well on his way to becoming an iconographic figure in our politics.

Many academics and liberal groups understandably take a dim view of this development. But the fact of the matter is that ours would be a very dreary political society if citizens did not try to find ways to celebrate their departed heroes. Rather than pooh-poohing the idea of honoring important political figures, we would do better to recognize that there are significantly different ways of doing so.

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One way of honoring is to memorialize a person. We do that by stamping his or her name on physical things—a street, building, piece of currency, and the like. Thus the Reagan Legacy Project, led by Grover Nordquist and his group, Americans for Tax Reform, aims to erect a Reagan monument in every state and to have something named after the former president in each of the nation's 3,054 counties.

Second, we can bestow honor by ritually praising the person who is to be remembered. This involves mounting celebrations, remembrances, or similar hortatory projects. Here, for example, one might think of the commemorations conducted by the Young America's Foundation at Reagan's Rancho del Cielo or the over 40 state governments that have now designated February 6 (the former president's birthday) as "Ronald Reagan Day."

Finally, there is the honor that comes from trying to appreciate a person. By "appreciate" I aim to use the term in its original sense—to evaluate or price out the worth of whatever is under consideration. In this sense, to appreciate does not mean simply to admire or be thankful. It means to be carefully attentive to understand, in a well-rounded way, the significance of someone or something. Applied to any major political figure, such an appreciative effort means striving to take the full measure of a person's presence on the public scene. That is far different from simply rendering a thumbs-up or thumbs-down approval rating.

It seems to me that this third category is the highest form of honor we can bestow on a person. That is because it puts the supreme value on the truth of things. We pay our greatest respect to a person by studiously and honestly weighing what it meant that he or she passed through this troubled world. It is true that Reagan has become an iconographic figure for many people. But this does not deny the value of striving for such an appreciation. Quite the contrary. Properly understood, an icon is not something to be worshipped but something to be seen into, a portal into deeper realities. Ideologically closed minds can have trouble seeing that an icon is not an idol.

Of course, even in the best of circumstances, honoring-as-truthful-appreciation is difficult work. A wise historian once said that "all history is contemporary history" (Collingwood 1994, 202).[1] In other words, you and I cannot avoid seeing the past in light of our present. Humanly speaking, that is the only light we have.

If that is the case in the best of circumstances, offering a fair account of Ronald Reagan's legacy in 2008 is especially difficult. Given that it is scarcely 20 years since he left office, we are only just now entering the middle distance where one can start gaining a reasonable historical perspective. Moreover, Ronald Reagan's memory is now a foil in today's partisan wars. Political activists know that shaping public understanding of the past is an essential part of contending for the future. Any fair appraisal of the Reagan legacy is difficult precisely because partisans on all sides want their listeners to believe

1. Collingwood's elaboration of this observation by Benedetto Croce deserves serious attention. "All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strict sense: the consciousness of one's own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. For even when the events which the historian studies are events that happened in the distant past, the condition of their being historically known is that they should 'vibrate in the historian's mind' that is to say, that the evidence for them should be here and now before him and intelligible to him."

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that the truth of things must always be simple. A complex verdict on any subject is equated with a betrayal of political purpose.

And yet honoring a person by pursuing an honest appreciation necessarily requires the kind of complex thinking that today's ruthless partisanship disparages. The truth is that the political world is complicated. Partisanship aims to reduce to a minimum the number of things a person needs to think about. My aim in this essay is, within reason, to increase that number.

A good way to introduce a healthy complexity into one's thinking is to look more deeply into the initial question: What do we mean by a person's legacy?

By common usage, a legacy is the substance of things passed on. It is an inheritance that is not only handed on to the future but also handles and shapes the future. A person does not need to read learned tomes to understand the complexity of this seemingly simple idea. We experience it in our everyday family relationships, particularly between parents and children. For example, we know that parents are always teaching their children, explicitly by their words and even more importantly by their example. Thus we also know that what children are learning is often not what their parents intended. Likewise parents hand down a legacy for their children not only by what they do but also by what they fail to do, by what they give, as well as by what they withhold. And so the skein of bequeathing grows. It is simply a matter of practical experience and common sense to recognize that the idea of a legacy—presidential or otherwise—is inherently complicated. In other words,

- A legacy may entail something intended as well as unintended.
- It may involve conserving what we have as well as creating something new.
- It may consist of certain material conditions as well as the perception of those conditions.
- It may develop from what is accomplished, from what is unsuccessfully attempted, or from what is simply left undone.

So any person's legacy is a complex thing. Or perhaps better stated, it is a complex of things. To assess it requires pondering, as best one can, that intricate braid of ramifications we are pleased to call history. Such pondering should teach us to approach legacy analysis with a hearty dose of humility. Even our best efforts may not measure up to history's delight in irony and unintended consequences.

For all these reasons, I think it is more realistic to speak of the legacies rather than the legacy of Ronald Reagan—and of mixed legacies at that. Moreover, from what I have been able to learn about the man, I also think that Ronald Reagan would have recognized these difficulties in speaking and writing about him. Among other things, he was an essentially humble man—a man who developed a strong sense of self and powerful convictions but also a man with a very small sense of ego or need to defend it. If asked about his legacy, I think that rather than wanting hagiography, Ronald Reagan would give his cock of the head and that crinkled, twinkling smile and say, "Well, just do your best."

In what follows, I will try my best to draw a sketch of Ronald Reagan's complex legacies. The sketch consists of eight strokes under the headings of the welfare state,

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taxation, national security, the presidency, personnel, party politics, political leadership, and last, but by no means least, a final category called the person.

America's Welfare State

In declaring in his first inaugural address that government is the problem, not the solution, Ronald Reagan meant domestic government. And he meant not only the size of domestic government but its overbearing ambition to run people's lives. As Reagan put it in his famous 1964 endorsement of Barry Goldwater, Americans' fundamental choice was not between the political right or left. Rather it was the choice between up—the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order—or down—to the anthill of centralized, all-controlling government. As he put it in a 1975 interview, "if you analyze it I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism" (Reagan 1975).

In practice Ronald Reagan handed down to the future a combination of rhetorical and financial pressures that did restrain the growth of domestic government. But he and his administration did little to enact—or even prepare the groundwork for—an agenda of limited government. The overall result was to consolidate rather than roll back America's middle-class welfare state. Here we can only briefly summarize how this occurred (Davies 2003).

- The Reagan administration did carry forward the government deregulation that had begun under President Jimmy Carter. But it was deregulation that continued to be justified on grounds of economic efficiency and not a conservative/libertarian philosophy of limited government. And when deregulation produced obvious economic and social problems, as in the savings and loan scandal, reregulation quickly ensued without a nod to any principles of limited government.
- President Reagan's calls for private-sector charitable initiatives to replace government welfare spending remained short-lived rhetoric in 1981-82. Likewise his New Federalism proposals to devolve federal welfare entitlements (Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC] and Food Stamps) to state governments while in return nationalizing Medicare came to nothing.
- Challenged on the "fairness issue" after 1981, the president and his spokesman defended the administration, not on grounds of conservative principle, but by claiming the government was spending more on Food Stamps and other welfare programs.
- On Social Security, Ronald Reagan had historically favored introducing "voluntary features" into the system but quickly learned to avoid the issue as president. In mid-1981, Reagan suffered his first major presidential setback when a political firestorm arose over his proposal to cut Social Security benefits for those early retirees approaching age 62, a proposal based on short-term budget balancing needs rather than any social policy principles. In response, President Reagan signed on to establishing a bipartisan commission that would secure the long-term financial future of the Social Security system with no consideration of privatization or de-welfarizing its redistributive features. The outcome of the 1983 reform was to conserve the government's immense entitlement program by means of enacting future increases in Social Security taxes and the retirement age (Derthick and Teles 2003).

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In short, if there ever was anything resembling a frontal assault on the American welfare state by something that might be called the "Reagan Revolution," that assault had essentially ended by 1982. And even that political/ideological/rhetorical retreat was not enough to prevent major Republican losses in the midterm elections that year. For their part, conservative leaders in 1983 expressed bitter disappointment at Reagan's failure to begin dismantling welfare state entitlements, seeing his first term as "nothing more than a right-of-center vision of the welfare state" and "essentially another Ford Administration" (Meyerson 1997, 6). These conservative critics continued to have a valid point. Rather than teaching Americans anything about a principled commitment to decentralized, limited government, the key to Reagan's 1984 reelection was the scrupulous avoidance of any such substantive issues in favor of mood and personality.

However, the combination of Reagan's fiscal policies and his powerful rhetoric did move the terms of debate toward a generalized hostility to something called "big government." Here the ramifications were typically indirect and paradoxical.

After 1982, the long, post–World War II growth in federal domestic spending as a percent of gross domestic product was halted. But it was not reversed and remained roughly stable at about 18% after 1982 and during the remainder of the Reagan presidency (Steuerle et al. 1998, 66). This limitation was achieved indirectly rather than through any frontal assaults on the major components of America's welfare state. Growth in the domestic government's share of the economy was capped in several roundabout ways.

As President Reagan and at least some of his advisors apparently intended, growth in domestic government was partly constrained by tax cuts that shrank the revenue stream flowing to Washington. But by itself that shrinkage in revenue inflow produced only a small amount of pressure. More importantly, leaving the momentum of huge federal entitlement programs in place along with large increases in defense spending—this together with the constricted flow of tax revenues—was a formula for ballooning budget deficits. These ever-accumulating deficits tripled the national debt between fiscal years 1980 and 1989. And that in turn continued to require more spending on interest payments to cover the federal government's borrowing requirements. The overall result was to put in place an immense budgetary straightjacket. Its continuing inertial force served to squeeze domestic programs with politically weak constituencies and to make any major new domestic program initiatives extremely costly in political terms. Some examples of this legacy are as follows:

- Since they have fallen into that shrinking share of the federal budget known as "non-entitlement discretionary domestic spending," Great Society anti-poverty programs have been continually trimmed down.
- Reagan's deficit pressure laid the groundwork for the 1989 defeat of the new catastrophic health insurance program for the elderly. To avoid increasing taxes or the deficit, Congress had paid for these new benefits by charging costs to the program's better-off beneficiaries. This in turn produced a political backlash that forced Congress to repeal the new program.
- By the same logic Reagan might also be considered godfather to the subsequent defeat of President Bill Clinton's 1993 health plan. This proposed "managed care" system was easily portrayed as another big government scheme designed to benefit the uninsured minority at the expense of the already-insured majority.

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The consequence of all this was to solidify America's existing middle-class welfare state with minimal public education in, or commitment to, principles of limited domestic government. Misreading this fact, Newt Gingrich and his fellow "anti-welfare state" revolutionaries who took over Congress in 1994 were easy political prey. A 1995 shutdown of "big government" and proposed budget cuts allowed President Clinton to portray congressional Republicans as enemies of the government's social safety net, particularly the Medicare system on which parents of the middle class depended. This in turn gave major aid to Clinton's reelection in 1996 and sustained his popularity thereafter. Contrary to what conservative ideologues in Congress, talk radio, and think tanks imagined, there was no Reagan Revolution leading Americans away from dependence on all sorts of social welfare programs orchestrated from Washington. And so, despite the failure of Clinton's grand welfare state initiative in health care, this underlying reality played a huge role in ultimately salvaging the Clinton presidency.

The strongest counterargument to my general theme about a lack of major change in America's welfare state is the issue of welfare reform. I think it is entirely plausible to claim that as both governor and presidential candidate, Reagan's long-standing criticism of the federal AFDC welfare system did help lead the way for the 1996 replacement of this entitlement program with state-based temporary assistance programs having strong work requirements.

However, here, too, the Reagan legacy is more complex than it would first seem.

As president, Reagan never sought fundamental reform of the AFDC system. Instead, in 1988, he signed on to an essentially Democratic bill, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's Family Support Act. This law increased federal spending and obligations on the states to provide welfare clients with training, health care, and transportation services and contained only the barest of work requirements. The actual stimulus for the fundamental 1996 welfare reform came from elsewhere—namely, by granting waivers from federal AFDC rules to particular states, allowing them to experiment with work requirements, benefit cutoffs, and other rules emphasizing personal responsibility.

But this waiver process was essentially an afterthought in the Reagan administration. The authority for waivers to encourage work was broadened through a small provision in the massive 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. Quite outside the purview of the touted 1988 Family Support Act, the first steps toward the radical 1996 reform in federal welfare policy began in 1987. In that year, an obscure White House Board created by Reagan overruled the Department of Health and Human Services and granted New Jersey and Wisconsin extensive waivers to initiate experimental programs containing work requirements and benefit cutoffs. This precedent for waiving standard federal requirements for welfare assistance was eventually extended to over two dozen states in the following years. It was this that quietly established the political and analytic basis for eliminating the AFDC entitlement in 1996.

Taking an overall view of America's welfare state, it is part of Reagan's legacy that neither Americans nor even Republican politicians were ultimately weaned from dependence on big government. Under a Republican Congress, from 1994 to 2006, the number of earmarks for special federal spending projects tripled. Under a Republican

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president and Congress, the first years of the 21st century saw the largest expansion of federal education policy in history as well as creation of a huge new Washington entitlement program for prescription drugs. Surveys found that by 2005 roughly one-third of the Republican coalition deserved the odd label "pro-government conservatives," that is, Republican voters favoring federal government activism on any number of domestic issues (Pew 2005).

There is a final irony flowing from Reagan's nonrevolution in social policy.

Frustrated by the Reagan administration's accommodations, especially on Social Security reform, conservative policy activists outside Congress sought a new strategy to produce "real reform," that is, privatization in Social Security. In the 1990s, they crafted an approach that would have the political allure of holding existing beneficiaries harmless while promising young future retirees a better return through personal investment accounts. This was essentially the proposal on which President George W. Bush squandered what he called his "political capital" after winning reelection in 2004.

As regards any claim of a Reagan Revolution against the welfare state, the legacy problem is obvious. There was no such revolution. As president Ronald Reagan never mounted a frontal assault on the justifications for the federal government's ever-expanding role in retirement income, health care, and all the other components of social welfare. The problem in trying to create such a legacy is that, over the long run, the government tends to do what the people want. Facing economic and social insecurities, people want the things government can do for them, even if in some theoretical way they could do many of those things for themselves. In that sense, given the insecurities they experience in their everyday lives, modern-day Americans seem to want the anthill.

Taxation

In Reagan's own view, changes in federal tax policy constituted a major part of his legacy. As he put it in his memoirs, "With the tax cuts of 1981 and the Tax Reform Act of 1986, I'd accomplished a lot of what I'd come to Washington to do" (Reagan 1990, 335). There is a widespread perception, encouraged by subsequent conservative commentators and Republic on politicians, that by pursuing a vigorous policy of cutting taxes, Reagan unleashed the productive energies that from 1983 to 1989 produced the longest period of continuous economic growth in American history. However, the actual Reagan tax legacy has been a good deal more complicated.

Some things Ronald Reagan wanted have endured. The deep, across-the-board reduction on federal income tax rates of 1981 has remained largely intact. So too has the cut in the top marginal tax rate (70% when he took office, 28% when he left, and now 35%). Likewise, the indexing of tax rate brackets has prevented inflation from automatically pushing taxpayers at all levels into higher brackets. Not least of all, the 1986 Tax Reform Act that Reagan championed did produce a major broadening of the base in the federal income tax by eliminating a mass of tax deductions, exemptions, and credits for special interests, especially business tax shelters. It also removed 6 million low-income

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workers from income tax liability. Since then, more loopholes have crept back into the tax code, but much of the general broadening of the income tax base has endured (Brownlee and Steuerle 2003).

Nonetheless, Reagan's efforts did not change other central features of federal taxation. As a percent of national income, the federal government's role in extracting tax resources from the economy remained essentially unchanged during the 1980s (19.4% in 1980 and 19.3% in 1989). This is because, having in 1981 achieved the largest tax cut in American history, President Reagan in 1982 and 1984 signed some of the largest tax increases in American history to try to cope with the ballooning budget deficit.

Likewise, despite partisan claims to the contrary, the progressivity of the federal tax system changed little as a result of Reagan's tax policies. Because they pay the largest dollar amounts in taxes, taxpayers at the highest income levels naturally have gained the most from cuts in the top marginal income tax rates. But across the whole range of the income distribution, the effective federal tax rate from the lowest to the highest fifth of families scarcely budged from 1980 to 1991 (Steuerle 1992, 194-96).

Taking a broader view, it seems fair to say that the stimulus for continued economic growth after 1983 came less from tax reductions and more from the huge federal budget deficits produced by Reagan's defense buildup and the maintenance of the large domestic entitlement programs. As noted earlier, these deficits continued throughout the Reagan years to triple the national debt, and this helped keep the economy growing.

Alongside these financial realities, Reagan's unrelenting rhetoric on the harmful effects of federal taxes had important consequences for another kind of reality consisting of political perceptions. Reagan's appeal to and continuous fomenting of anti-tax sentiments helped make any idea of increasing taxes to pay for programs an absolute no-go area for all other politicians. And the powerful, populist appeal of this single-minded message has continued to resonate in every political debate down to the present day. Taking a broad view, I think it is fair to say that Reagan's presidency enhanced Americans' deficit tolerance as well as their tax aversion. Living through the Reagan years, citizens were taught to indulge their already well-developed habit of short-term thinking. Profits from the U.S. trade deficit could be used by foreigners to purchase the federal debt that was financing our budget deficits. Americans could consume and Washington could spend without anyone having to pay their way through higher taxes. Twenty years after Ronald Reagan left office, and with even larger mountains of unfunded debt facing our children, we have yet to face up to that legacy of sunny, short-term thinking (or more accurately, nonthinking) and its dire consequences for our national future (Yarrow 2008).

Although Ronald Reagan always publicly advocated the virtues of a balanced budget, when it came time to choose, holding the line on deficits always lost out to his other priorities. Vice President Dick Cheney was making a political, not an economic, point when he allegedly argued early in George W. Bush's administration that "Reagan taught us that deficits don't matter." Reagan showed that the public does not punish or reward politicians because they increased or decreased the deficit. The red ink did not seem to matter.

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However, there was, and remains, not only a fiscal but also a political short-sightedness in Cheney's lesson drawing. Eventually the growing deficit led to the federal government's 1990 budget crisis. This created the pressures that led to the breaking of the "read my lips—no new taxes" promise that wrecked George H.W. Bush's presidency among Reagan Republicans. The mounting deficit also helped launch the third-party candidacy of Ross Perot. Together, these political reactions in turn probably sheared off enough Republican votes in 1992 to put Bill Clinton in the White House. In this roundabout but not random way, Ronald Reagan was a major force in creating the Clinton presidency. Such are the ironies in assessing a political legacy.

The long view yields a final irony. President Reagan's success in cutting income tax rates and broadening the tax base helped defuse hostility to a federal income tax system that had increasingly become seen as burdensome and unfair. Lower individual rates made the system appear less onerous, and the 1986 reform removing special preferences made it seem more fair. The ultimate consequence was to shore up the political acceptability of our current federal income tax system. By doing so, Reagan helped reduce the chances of any more fundamental tax reforms, such as a flat tax or consumption tax.

National Security

For many years into the future, scholars will be debating Ronald Reagan's legacy in ending the Cold War. That is not an issue I can hope to settle here.

What I can do is identify some long-term implications of Reagan's approach to national security policy. It was a distinctive and remarkably consistent approach throughout his political career. In important respects it flew in the face of the prevailing opinion of the time. But eventually Reagan bent much of that opinion in his direction.

Throughout his political career, Reagan remained almost exclusively focused on the threat to America's security posed by the Soviet Union and its aggressive communist ideology. In three essential ways, Ronald Reagan came to Washington rejecting the Cold War as he found it—and as most experts and opinion leaders thought it must be.

- First, Reagan rejected the notion that America's ultimate response to the communist threat should be containment or detente. The goal was defeat of this enemy and victory for the cause of freedom, which is humanity's as well as America's cause. His critics viewed this commitment to victory as lacking subtlety. Reagan on the other hand viewed communism was an inherently aggressive form of insanity that violated human nature and must one day disappear. The goal was not to manage and coexist with the global Soviet threat. America's goal should be to defeat that threat peacefully.
- Second, Reagan was equally clear that, to preserve peace and the nation's security, the U.S. must have unquestioned military strength. He rejected the consensus that sought an equilibrium of power backed by arms control treaties with the Soviets. Communists' unchanging goal of world domination and disdain for treaty promises meant that peace could be had in only one of two ways: either by surrendering or by making America stronger than its adversary. Reagan opted for peace through superior strength, both militarily and economically.

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- Finally, Reagan rejected the prevailing doctrine of deterrence through Mutually Assured Destruction. As he came to see it, the promise of offensive retaliation to deter a Soviet attack was not a genuine defense. After years of building their military advantage, Russian leaders thought a nuclear war was both possible and winnable. A genuine defense against nuclear attack would protect the American people rather than simply avenge them. Hence Reagan's defense buildup broke with conventional thinking to include the Strategic Defense Initiative, which would render Soviet nuclear weaponry a useless expenditure.

Critics from the center to the left of the political spectrum saw Reagan's expansive defense spending as provocative warmongering that would lead to an exploding arms race. Reagan saw superior military strength, including the new missile defense system, as a way of forcing Soviet leaders to the bargaining table to make real concessions and genuine reductions in nuclear weapons. Contrary to what some people thought, and still think, Reagan did not change course when Gorbachev appeared on the scene. Reagan's goal had always been to reduce nuclear weapons with verifiable agreements, to the point where neither side represented a threat to the other. Late in his second term, Reagan's strategy succeeded in taking a monumental step in this direction. In December 1987, both sides signed the INF Treaty eliminating Russia's and America's intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe. Leading conservatives blasted Reagan's accomplishment as naïve, an act of appeasement, and, as George Will declared, the day America lost the Cold War (Reeves 2005, 446).

It is a central part of Reagan's legacy that the three features listed above were largely the general terms on which the Cold War ended shortly after he left office (Gaddis 1994).

Besides this monumental fact, there were other consequences of Reagan's approach to national security that deserve notice.

Reagan saw that rebuilding American military predominance could only be the reflection of a deeper rebuilding of the American spirit that had become demoralized in the 1960s and 1970s. There first had to be the national will to prevail. And that depended on Americans' conviction that they deserved to prevail. Recalling Americans to that moral rearmament was Reagan's primary teaching achievement in advancing the nation's security. It is what he meant by "bringing America back."

The moral clarity Reagan espoused in fighting communism was an influential precedent for President George W. Bush and neoconservatives in his administration's war on terrorism. Sharp divisions between friend and foe, good and evil, became the watchword. Likewise, Reagan's vision of a global mission in defeating communism was now transposed into a new global mission that strained to the breaking point the caution, modesty, and anti-utopianism that Russell Kirk had commended as the conservative approach to America's duties in the world (Kirk 1953, 424). As Reagan's would-be heir, President George W. Bush after 9/11 pushed past those bounds of conservative restraint, presenting American-backed democracy as a sure antidote to terrorism all over the world.

There were other national security legacies. The Cold War was the lens through which Reagan saw all defense and foreign policy issues, and this produced certain blind spots. Two have had major long-term implications.

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First, the Reagan Doctrine sought to roll back whatever might be seen as communist influence throughout the Third World. This in turn led to American support for brutal regimes and proxy wars that had nothing to do with moral clarity and everything to do with whatever seemed expedient as an anti-Soviet maneuver. The negative consequences were profound.

To support the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, Reagan embraced the murderous government of Rios Montt in Guatemala. To counter communist influence in Africa, the Reagan White House welcomed Angola's Jonas Savimbi and his no less murderous Unita forces. Partly for the same reason, President Reagan rejected sanctions against South Africa's apartheid regime and praised the anti-communist stance of its segregated tribal "republics." Because it had been ousted by the pro-Soviet Vietnamese government, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge found the Reagan administration championing its recognition as a government in exile at the United Nations. With Donald Rumsfeld as his Middle East envoy, Reagan removed Saddam Hussein's Iraq from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and gave the dictator major weapon supplies, not only to protract the brutal war with Iran but also to thwart the pro-Soviet Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad. And in Afghanistan, the trickle of weapons sent to the mujahedeen under President Carter became a massive weapons flow to radical Islamic forces fighting to expel the Soviets.

This brings us to the second major consequence of conflating all threats to American security into a single menace of communist aggression. Reagan was largely blind to the threat of militant Islam. He simply melded Islamic radicalism into communist imperialism. Thus, in 1985 Reagan denounced five countries—Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea, Iran, and Libya—as a united front of terrorist states. In 1986, he pressed Congress for renewed support for the anti-Sandinista "freedom fighters" by invoking the vision of communist Nicaragua becoming a sanctuary for "Muammar Qaddafi, Arafat and the Ayatollah" who would lap America's southern borders in "a sea of red" (Reeves 2005, 313).

Reagan was equally blind to how his administration's actions, supposedly against "leftists," were inadvertently fueling a threat from radical Islamic groups. Thus, as Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon sought to finally eliminate the PLO, Reagan was surprised and reluctantly drawn into backing the Israel invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. Early in September, Reagan defended Sharon's bombing and shelling of Muslim neighborhoods as a response to "leftist militias," an Israeli allegation which the State Department was quickly forced to deny. To Reagan's disgust, Israeli forces then facilitated the massacre of Muslim families in West Beirut. In response, U.S. Marines returned to Beirut as a so-called multinational peacekeeping force to keep a peace that did not exist. From here it was all downhill. With Marine peacekeepers prohibited from using their weapons in what was now a civil war, the U.S. Navy tried to provide offshore support to the Marines' position at Beirut airport by shelling Muslim militias in the Shiite slums and surrounding mountains.

This reality of hostile military engagements in Lebanon was denied by Reagan, lest the 1973 War Power Act should be invoked and signal weakness to the Soviet Union and its Syrian ally. A tight chain of events, unexplained to the American public, now snapped into place. Israel's invasion and occupation of Lebanon, the massacre of Muslims in West

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Beirut, and the U.S. Navy's bombardment of Muslim neighborhoods—all this could now be linked in many Muslims' minds to justify the retaliatory suicide bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in April and October 1983. The same linkage, to which Americans were left oblivious, produced the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985, the subsequent holding of hostages from that flight, their release through secret negotiation with hostage takers in return for Israel's release of 31 Shiite prisoners, and then Reagan's ill-fated attempt to free other American hostages in Beirut through an arms-for-hostages deal, using Iran as the middleman. More on this in a moment.

Certainly it was not Reagan's intention to present the United States as an imperialist, anti-Islamic power. But just as certainly, this was a perception that grew and spread throughout the Muslim world in the 1980s. In the end, the Reagan administration did much to aid the growing cause of radical jihadists in the Middle East.

All this notwithstanding, the benefits of hindsight should not obscure the central point. The threats posed by Soviet communism and nuclear war were in truth the primary dangers to Americans' security in Reagan's day. He successfully answered that historic challenge.

The Presidency

Ronald Reagan's legacy for the institution of the presidency presents its own mixed image.

On the one hand, Reagan revived an executive office that was in a weak, dispirited condition. By 1980, Americans had lived through four traumatic and, as many people saw it, failed presidencies following Kennedy's assassination in 1963. There was also a growing opinion that the presidency might be just too much for one man to handle.

After two terms, Reagan left behind a presidency that was robust and widely admired. One sign is that President Clinton, in trying to revive his own presidency after 1994, allegedly studied videotapes of Ronald Reagan to imitate his bearing, maturity, and aura of command. Vice President Al Gore did the same in preparing to debate George W. Bush in 2000. Unlike his four immediate predecessors, Ronald Reagan left office with almost two-thirds of Americans (64%) approving the way he handled the job, an approval rating slightly higher than the approval rating registered at the end of America's two most popular postwar presidencies, Dwight D. Eisenhower (59%) and John F. Kennedy (58%) (*Wall Street Journal* 2006).

Beyond that, it is widely held that successful presidents lead through exercising their power to persuade. They combine an active, transformative agenda and a positive, uplifting attitude. President Reagan fulfilled that bill of particulars. He brought dignity, confidence, and moral conviction to the office. The vision he communicated helped restore America's confidence in itself. After the string of presidential failures following Kennedy's murder, most Americans saw Reagan's presidency as a success.

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All of this belongs on the positive side of the ledger. Likewise, a good case can be made that President Reagan was successful in the sense of effectively putting his imprint on executive branch operations. This occurred in the first instance by Reagan's being clear on the principles through which he intended to govern. People throughout the bureaucracy "got the message" and policy options involving new domestic spending, more regulations, higher taxes, stinginess with defense programs, or détente with the Soviets tended to fade into the background. This effect of bringing the executive branch into line with presidential preferences was bolstered by more centralized White House control over departmental political appointments, budgets and legislative proposals, judicial appointments, federal regulations, and executive orders.

Alongside these accomplishments in restoring the presidency's public status, there is also a negative side of the ledger. Reagan also passed on a presidency that was more dangerous for our constitutional order, although I am sure that was never his intention. Behind the scenes, Reagan's tenure in the White House gave a sharpened impetus to the idea of presidential unilateralism, that is to say, the use of strictly executive measures to make policy without going through Congress (Shull 2006).

One indicator was a White House strategy, begun in 1985, of using presidential "signing statements" to quietly but consistently expand presidential power. Statements issued as the president signed congressional legislation were now more deliberately crafted to put on the public record the president's rationale for interpreting or even ignoring particular provisions in the law he was signing. The intention was to use the president's challenges to the law as part of the official legislative record, which could then be used in the courts as grounds for defending presidential actions or inactions in executing congressional laws (Pfiffner 2008, 200-201). This little-noticed development in the Reagan administration became a major precedent for far more sweeping assertions of inherent executive power in George W. Bush's presidency.

It was the accidental disclosure of the Iran-Contra affair that played the greatest role in bringing the danger of presidential unilateralism to light. Not only did the surrounding events reaffirm the public perception of big lies in high places, they also showed a tolerance for presidential actions that directly contradicted congressional authorizations and legal statutes.

Media attention to the diversion of funds from Iran to the Nicaraguan Contras was actually a diversion from the central issue.[2] This issue was the illegal activity involved both in supplying the Contras and in selling arms to Iran in the first place. Beginning in the summer of 1984, Reagan and key aides evaded the legal requirements for covert operations laid down by congressional statute as well as by the president's own executive order and National Security Directive. This evasion of the law was then concealed by false or misleading statements given to the public and Congress by the president and his spokesmen.

Similar evasion and concealment then accelerated through covert arms sales to Iran authorized by the president. Such sales were clearly illegal under the Arms Control

2. That the diversion of funds was a deliberate White House strategy to divert attention from the more serious misdeeds is suggested in Oliver North's memoir (North 1991, 7-8).

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Export Act and 1979 U.S. arms embargo against Iran, which designated that nation a supporter of international terrorism. Further requirements for reporting to Congress under the National Security Act were then deliberately violated by senior administration officials.

There was nothing conservative about such disregard for the claims of a constitutional government under law. Nonetheless, the Iran-Contra affair now gave impetus in some Republican circles to expansive claims of inherent executive power, and this too became part of the Reagan presidential legacy. Congressman Dick Cheney and his young aide David Addington led a spirited defense of Reagan's actions. In this view, the primary role in the conduct of foreign policy rested with a presidency enjoying minimal congressional interference. On occasion, the president could even use his prerogative power to "exceed the law" (Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair 1987, 665).

On this reading of events, the Iran-Contra scandal simply represented a partisan effort by congressional Democrats to seize powers that legitimately belonged to the presidency. A new mission was set in motion among a cadre of neoconservatives: to reverse an alleged infringement of presidential power that had occurred following the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal. Some 15 years later, Cheney, now as vice president and with Addington heading his legal team, was in a position to lead the Bush administration's effort to claim inherent executive powers—some of which included imprisonment, surveillance, interrogation, and possibly torture (Savage 2007).

This brings us to an important question. This essay was presented at a symposium under the theme: Was Ronald Reagan a great president? I believe these are words we should use very carefully. Taken alone, greatness simply means to be marked by outstanding merit. However, to be a great president is an inherently constitutional idea. It is to excel in the context of a constitutional office, in this case the office holding the executive power. Office in its original, most meaningful sense—and not the TV show—has to do with obligations to act by virtue of being "positioned" in a certain place. The concept of office is about occupying, not a physical place, but a moral space in the political order.

During his last months in the White House, Reagan observed, "You don't become president of the United States. You are given temporary custody of an institution called the presidency, which belongs to our people" (Reagan 1988). But if you think about it, this is a misleading characterization of the office under our system of government. The institution does not belong to the people, not directly. It belongs to the Constitution, which is the creation of the people.

There are only two promises in the presidential oath: to execute the duties of the office and to safeguard the Constitution. For all his positive contributions to the presidency, Reagan did not demonstrate outstanding merit in the context of the executive office known to the Constitution. Legacies teach things, and Reagan did not teach us well about the executive power in our constitutional order. His zeal for rolling back communist influence in Central America and his personal concern for the hostage situation led Reagan and his aides into the extraconstitutional and illegal activities of the Iran-Contra affair.

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In the end most Americans seemed willing to forgive the Gipper as merely uninformed or forgetful regarding this whole affair. For understandable reasons, they liked the man and were rooting for him. But a constitutionally perilous legacy had been created. In asserting unilateral executive power, Reagan and his officials violated congressional laws and the spirit of the Constitution. And equally clearly, they largely got away with it as a precedent for future years. The American presidency was left stronger, more manageable, and more dangerous.

Reagan's People

Before and during his eight years in the White House, Ronald Reagan carried with him into the public arena major portions of America's next generation of leaders, conservative and otherwise. This easily overlooked matter of personnel is also a part of his legacy.

The courts are an example. By the end of his two terms, Ronald Reagan had not only appointed almost half of all federal judges (as well as three Supreme Court justices). His rigorous judicial selection process, centered in the White House, also had done much to ensure that these judges were people with a reputation for legal conservatism. These almost 400 judges in the federal district and appeals courts were often appointed at a fairly young age and they will be with us for some years to come (O'Brien 2003, 340).

Beyond the obvious example of the courts, it is easy to overlook the fine-grained nature of Reagan's personnel legacy. It consists of quietly shaping the career lines of hundreds of particular individuals over the years. In this group would be Robert Gates, John Negroponte, Colin Powell, Dennis Ross, Paul Wolfowitz, and Jeane Kirkpatrick, to name only a few prominent figures in the realm of foreign affairs. Other career lines in Congress, state governments, think tanks, foundations, and the like would also have to be part of this immense, untold story.

Reagan's most far-reaching bequest in the realm of personnel deserves a few more specific comments.

By choosing him as his running mate (Gerald Ford disdained the offer), Reagan breathed new life into the all-but-expired political career of George H.W. Bush. With only two terms in Congress and two defeats in running for Senate, Bush's own elective record was lackluster and his conservative credentials had long been suspect among the movement's activists, including Ronald Reagan.

After Goldwater's 1964 loss, the political newcomer Reagan publicly challenged Bush's view that conservatives should now make their home in a big-tent GOP. Reagan, like Russell Kirk, saw the 1964 election as a sign that the GOP could be a thoroughly conservative party representing the majority of forgotten Americans (*National Review* 1964). In the years after 1964, George H.W. Bush advanced up the political ladder by retailing his personal contacts. Reagan advanced by wholesaling his personal beliefs. When Bush's son, George W. Bush, ran for Congress in 1978, Ronald Reagan endorsed his opponent in the Republican primary as the truer conservative. And in the 1980 presidential primaries, Reagan defeated Bush senior's brand of a more moderate, main-

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stream Republicanism. As Bush told one of his speechwriters during those primaries, "Jamie, I'm a Republican—isn't that enough . . . I like Barry Goldwater, but stuff like his *Conscience of a Conservative* isn't my thing" (Humes 1997, 177).

As in tapping liberal Pennsylvania senator Richard Schweiker as his running mate in 1976, Reagan behaved as a prudent politician in choosing Bush in 1980. And in choosing Bush's campaign manager, James Baker, as White House chief of staff, Reagan showed he recognized and was not threatened by talented people who were not movement conservatives. The fact remains, however, that Ronald Reagan did not work to secure a succession of conservative leadership for the Republican Party. As Reagan's running mate, Bush obtained the inside track for succeeding the Republican presidential nomination after Reagan left office.

Likewise, young George W. gained his first national political experience in helping with his father's revived political prospects. With Bush's campaign to succeed Reagan, which the family began planning in early 1985, the young George Bush became a senior, full-time advisor working with the brilliant star of Republican political consultants, Lee Atwater. And so it was that a few months after President Bush left the White House in 1993, a new generation of Team Bush had assembled in Texas to launch George W.'s run for the governorship, which in turn became a stepping stone to the White House (Heclo 2003b).

Thus Ronald Reagan, however inadvertently, helped set in motion forces that would eventually produce 12 years of Bush presidencies and a gradual unraveling of the conservative coalition.

Party Politics

As others have ably described, Ronald Reagan used the political materials lying around him to build a conservative coalition that was unprecedented in modern American politics. What was this creative work's legacy for our party system?

Clearly the electoral strength of Reagan's coalition has not been as deep or durable as FDR's Democratic coalition. During the Reagan and Bush presidencies, Republicans never managed to gain full control of Congress, and they lost the two presidential elections of the 1990s. Apparent turning points in 1980 (when Reagan received only 51% of the popular vote) and the 1994 congressional election had more to do with public disgust directed toward Democratic incumbents in the White House and Congress, respectively, rather than with any widespread endorsement of a conservative agenda (although of course winners always claimed such a positive mandate). In 1982, 26 House Republican seats were lost, including 14 freshmen who had just arrived on Reagan's coattails. It was the reelection of three anti-Reagan Republican mavericks (Durenberger, Chafee, and Weicker) that served to keep the Senate in Republican hands. Following his 1984 landslide reelection, President Reagan campaigned for Republicans in 10 Senate races in 1986, including 5 in the South. Democrats won all 10 Senate seats.

In short, the "realigning" election that pundits kept looking for never happened. Nevertheless, Ronald Reagan did bequeath enduring changes to our party system.

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In terms of Americans' identification with a political party, the Republicans now overcame their half century status as a minority party. By the end of the 1980s, Republican party identifiers were, and have remained, roughly equal to Democratic party identifiers. Young white Americans who came of age during the Reagan years have proven to be a distinctively Republican and conservative political generation. Thus, Reagan laid the groundwork for the closely divided, 50/50 electoral nation that we experience today. The more equal division of support between the two parties also brought with it a sharper ideological division. As Reagan had doggedly sought since 1964, the Republicans became a more thoroughly conservative party. And in making the Republican Party a conservative party, Reagan also changed the way Americans saw conservatism. In 1964, it had seemed antiquated, negative, and dangerously radical. By 1988, conservatism was more likely be to seen as Reaganesque—forward-looking, optimistic, and in the mainstream of American values.

At least as significant was the fact that Reagan's conservative coalition offered leaders of evangelical Christians their first sustained entree onto the national political scene since the days of William Jennings Bryan. Grassroots organization and division on cultural issues made the Republicans a more overtly religious party. Activists in both parties found it profitable to emphasize this division and demonize their opponents. In effect, both the Republican and Democratic parties became more effective sorting mechanisms for organizing Bible-believing Americans and more strictly secular Americans into two different camps (Fiorina 2006).

While liberal activists continued to fight against it, Reagan also shifted the center of the Democratic Party toward the pragmatic, if not philosophical, right. Reagan's legacy, again an indirect one, was to supply a competitive advantage to ambitious, young Democratic politicians with more supple personal views. Hence, Bill Clinton could emerge as a "New Democrat" because the Old Democrats could not come up with a plausible alternative to Ronald Reagan.

Political Leadership

Elsewhere, I have written about Reagan's importance for what some call America's public philosophy, and I will not repeat that here (Heclo 2003a). Instead I turn to another part of his legacy that is too often overlooked—Reagan's reaffirmation and elevation of the politician's role in a democracy.

His harshest critics declared Ronald Reagan to be a simple-minded ideologue. By contrast, some who worked with him, such as David Stockman, found Reagan to be "a consensus politician, not an ideologue." For his own part, Reagan often liked to portray himself as an ordinary citizen in office.

The truth of the matter is something larger than these partial views. Reagan's political leadership exemplified the high calling of the politician in a democracy.

Americans want political leaders who are both principled and effective. There is, of course, an underlying tension between these two characteristics. The principled leader is idealistic, straightforward, and firm. The effective leader in our messy democratic system

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is pragmatic, flexible, and at times duplicitous. At their best, democratic political leaders manage that tension without fostering public cynicism. This is what Reagan accomplished and, in doing so, he set a long-term example for other would-be leaders.

Ronald Reagan did not enter politics at age 55 because his ego needed votes or public office. He did it because he believed deeply in certain very important things. And throughout his political career, people seemed to perceive and like this about him. I think this public understanding goes a long way to explain his remarkable appeal even in the most unfavorable circumstances. As his presidency was ending, only Ronald Reagan could have gotten away with the line that "in my heart I don't believe I traded arms for hostages, but the facts say otherwise."

Reagan was what George Will has called a "conviction politician." He effectively communicated and firmly adhered to core principles. But he was also willing eventually to compromise to make partial advances toward his goals. This principled pragmatism irritates those wanting ideological purity. But it is of priceless value for a healthy democracy. As noted earlier, during the 1980s conservative leaders expressed feelings of disappointment and even betrayal when it came to Reagan's choices regarding major issues such as welfare state entitlements and arms control agreements. In truth, Reagan probably did weaken the conservative movement by investing it with governing responsibility. Governing democratically necessarily entails an adulteration of ideological purity. But the gain for our democratic way of life in having such political leadership far outweighs that ideological cost.

The gain is that Ronald Reagan exemplified the high calling of a democratic politician to find the working terms on which government by consent can go forward. This is the essential thing for a diverse people who hope to be self-governing-principled leadership that knows how to mediate, adjust, and continue discovering the basis on which people will live together.

Reagan also showed how a politician with honest convictions does not need to slur his political rivals' character, competence, or good intentions. Instead, Reagan invariably sought to teach listeners how his rivals misunderstood the real problems and what a truer understanding required. Reagan set an example of democratic leadership which is available for other would-be politicians to follow, if they only will.

The Person

As we come to the end of this sketch, the last stroke is possibly the most important. This is because Reagan's legacy is something more than a sum of the parts I have outlined. It is a legacy that has to do with the whole person. Reagan's is an influence that goes very deep because it can evade our consciousness.

In the long term, history does not give points for style. It is not the style but the substance of the man we are talking about here. Reagan's basis for being the so-called "great communicator" was not style. What Reagan communicated to people was that he believed what he said. And what he believed was hopeful. Some have said that Ronald

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Reagan made America feel good about itself. This is true, but it would be wrong to characterize this as a fluffy, feel-good message.

The hopefulness Reagan believed in and communicated was deeply rooted in America's revolutionary and religious tradition. Reagan was a visionary traditionalist, and thus a futurist as well. The old truths were always new because they were forever lifting free people to new possibilities. As he said in his presidential farewell address, what people called the Reagan Revolution was really "The Great Rediscovery—a rediscovery of our values and common sense."

Part of the attraction of Ronald Reagan's life is its paradoxical nature. He recalled citizens to a vision of the traditional virtues in small-town America, to unapologetic patriotism and the simple grandeur of ordinary, free people. And yet Reagan built his career in the modem world of mass entertainment. He emerged from the mass media— and corporate structures of Hollywood and TV. These were precisely the forces tearing at the social, economic, and cultural ligaments of traditional, small-town American life. But Reagan envisioned more basic realities in American life. When he told Americans the good things they wanted to believe about themselves and their nation, this was no subterfuge or political strategy. Reagan did it because he believed that he was—at the deepest level—telling them the truth about themselves.

At the same time, Reagan was also communicating the truth about himself. Within the man there was a basic decency, kindness, hopefulness, and principled toughness. It was what he saw in America, and in this regard I think his legacy will be what he hoped for. "Whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone," he said, "I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes, not your worst fears; to your confidence rather than your doubts" (Reagan 1992).

We puny commentators, offering our historical verdicts so far from the scene of battle, will soon be forgotten. Ronald Reagan will not.

This is because there was an American romance about Reagan's life and an American poetry in his vision. He was an authentic lover who saw heroic, good, noble things at the heart of this nation. He saw and loved the light it shed for freedom-starved people, pilgrims as he put it, "from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home." Out of the depths of who he was, Reagan could envision and tell others what they should continue to believe about America. Of all the things I have discussed, probably the greatest thing Reagan bequeathed was the legacy of his person, an American image that will continue to inspire untold numbers of people. It is as if they will hear that velvety voice saying, in words of the poet Robert Graves,

> *I loved you, so I drew the tides of men into my hands,*
> *and wrote my will across the sky in stars.*

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