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Reagan's Legacy

What is Ronald Reagan's legacy? How do you think future generations of Americans will regard him?

On June 5, 2004, Ronald Reagan had his rendezvous with eternity. This week we recollect what his life has meant to our nation. Since 1980, our 40th president has so dominated politics in the United States that the last quarter century could be called the Age of Reagan.^[1] He was one of the great presidents of the twentieth century.



If that sounds grandiose, recall what our nation was like before Reagan became president. Americans, in the late 1960s and '70s, learned to accommodate themselves to chaos and decline. There were the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. There were the race riots in our great cities. There were legions of youth who neither tuned in nor turned on but definitely dropped out.

America had experienced wrenching reversals since World War II. Our military had been triumphant over the most vicious war machines in human history, that of the Nazis and Japanese imperialists ... only to find ourselves undone by a third-world cauldron in Southeast Asia.

Our economy grew into the world's most prosperous in the 1940s and '50s and '60s ... only to be racked by energy crises, high unemployment, and stagflation in the '70s.

Through moral suasion as much as armed might, America had become the leader of the free world ... only to fall from grace when a president resigned in disgrace. The word "Watergate" entered the vocabulary of Western languages and became synonymous with cynicism toward government and even public service.

All the while, the American elite adjusted its idealism downward, and Jimmy Carter -- the last president of the Age of Decline -- went on national TV to tell Americans they suffered from a malaise of the spirit.

That was the gloomy backdrop when Ronald Reagan sauntered onto the American political stage, confident and grinning and quipping. He not only attracted the spotlight; he illuminated what was good about our country. He told us that we were poised for a new birth of freedom, a veritable Golden Age, if only we believed in ourselves and were true to our Founders' hopes for the republic. That had been his message all along -- in the GE Theater talks of the 1950s, in "The Time for Choosing" (the 1964 speech in San Francisco on Goldwater's behalf), in his impromptu remarks at the Kansas City convention in 1976, in his acceptance speech for the nomination in Detroit in 1980, and in many other speeches on the road to the White House.

Along the way, Ronald Reagan put the romance back into politics. He wooed us and made us believe, once again, that We the People could do anything we set our minds to. We were, after all, Americans. And America was the greatest adventure ever undertaken by the human spirit.

During Ronald Reagan's eight years in the White House, America renewed herself and in the process recast the world. It started at home with the American people, who rediscovered their power as individuals and their pride as a nation. Our economy surged, opening the way to prosperity for millions of citizens. Our national resolve stiffened to take freedom to the farthest corners of the world as we fought the last bloodless battles of the Cold War.

No event symbolizes Reagan's victory over Communism more powerfully than the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The collapse of that obscene barrier -- just ten months after Reagan left office -- became a metaphor for the many barriers our 40th president tried to tear down -- economic, political, geopolitical. The economic barriers had piled up formidably by the late 1970s. The so-called misery index (calculated by adding the unemployment and inflation rates) was at a record high in Carter's term. Reaganomics stood for the deconstruction of all that held back the entrepreneurial talents of the American people -- hence his crusade for lower taxes, less regulation, low inflation, and limited government. Reagan's economic agenda resulted in the creation of nearly 20 million jobs in the 1980s. As a formula for broadening and strengthening the middle class, it shapes economic policy to this day.

Then there were the political barriers. Reagan, himself a former FDR man, knew that countless Democrats were uncomfortable with the leftward drift of their party. On the outskirts of Detroit, for instance, autoworkers known as Macomb County Democrats had little in common with newly hatched McGovern Democrats. Reagan had the vision to reach out to these Democrats and persuade many of them that he understood their hopes and needs. To do so, he had to overhaul the perception that the Republican party was more of an East Coast country club than a Main Street movement. Reagan's gambit succeeded. His great political achievement was to transform the Republican party from the minority party into the majority party that it is today.

Finally there were the geopolitical barriers that endangered world peace. Reagan bristled at a notion of containment that merely agreed to a stalemate with the Soviet Union. Detente it was called. That policy hadn't worked. The Soviets invaded Afghanistan and deployed hundreds of medium-range nuclear missiles aimed at Western Europe. Reagan did not sit passively by while the Soviet juggernaut rolled over the West's good will. He declared that the U.S.S.R. was an Evil Empire and launched an arms buildup that ultimately bankrupted Moscow. The result was the end of the Cold War -- without firing a shot, as Margaret Thatcher likes to point out -- and the 1990s peace dividend.

The legacy of Ronald Reagan lives on in significant ways. The fact that Reaganomics influences economic debate to this day; the fact that Republicans are the majority party; the fact that the United States defeated the Soviet Union -- all justify our calling the last quarter century the Age of Reagan.

Is the epithet justified in the post 9/11 world? Yes -- perhaps now more than ever. It is telling that after September 11th, the American people did not look to resurrect just any past president as a model for George W. Bush. In our national tragedy, we looked to a man we identified as one of our own, to the lifeguard from Dixon, Illinois -- Ronald Reagan. A Google search of past presidents reveals that Reagan's name was summoned more than any other postwar commander in chief. Citizens found reassurance in a leader who soberly assessed the dangers we face, yet who gave us hope:

You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we will sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness. If we fail, at least let our children and our children's children say of us we justified our brief moment here. We did all that could be done.
(Question from Anne D. of Colorado Springs, Colorado)

[1] I am indebted to historian Lee Edwards for suggesting this term.