

*“Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor.”*

Ronald Reagan | 1987

## CHAPTER 7 |

# An Exceptionalist Presidency

**T**he 1980s became marked by ideas, moods, and developments opposite those of the two previous decades. While good economic times removed the gloom and doom of the 1970s and created an optimism rivaling the 1920s, new goods and habits like fax machines, cell phones, and “eating out” made business easier and transformed private life. Lower taxes and deregulations made it possible for millions to seek fortunes as entrepreneurs and invest in real estate and the stock market. And novelties like cable TV, the VCR, and video games detached people from old, collective media such as cinema, radio, and the “big three” television networks, turning Americans into more fearless individualists. Thus, the decade offered a culturally broad but—as we will see—politically thin reaction against the post-war era’s collectivist policies. Moreover, the flickering globalization of news and pop culture brought on by CNN and MTV merely foretold the looming information explosion of the 1990s. Indeed, the influx of foreign goods and ideas was still so limited that “the ‘80s” became the last decade when most Americans still belonged to one mainstream culture. Still, mass immigration from Latin America did begin to challenge the nation’s traditional

WASP culture at the same time as crime, drugs, and AIDS plagued the country's big cities, and deindustrialization created a Rustbelt stretching from Boston to Chicago. Clear-sighted observers could thus predict that, even if most acute problems went away, America would never be the same. Still, by voting for the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, Americans at least tried to say, "Not so fast."

## AN AMERICAN LIFE

Author, journalist, and Nixon speechwriter William Safire once called Ronald Reagan a life-size Norman Rockwell painting. And there is plenty of truth to this statement. After growing up in a low-income Midwestern home with an alcoholic father drifting between towns looking for jobs, for him to make consecutive and successful careers as a radio sports commentator, movie star, TV host, and governor before becoming one of America's most influential presidents ever is a truly remarkable—and quintessentially American—story. Next to George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, he is also one of the most studied U.S. presidents. Moreover, friends and foes alike today agree that his background, personality, and careers, plus his unshakable belief in Americanism, are inseparable from his ideological beliefs and political skills to a much higher degree than most other presidents. Three parts of his life story stand out.

First, the Reagan family's struggles during the Great Depression made young Ronald a "Roosevelt liberal." However, his upbringing in small, socially and culturally tight-knit towns frontloaded his mind with traditionalist views and values that—together with his encounter with communists in Hollywood and the insight that he as an actor was "living in a tinsel factory"—put him on track to become a conservative. Also, as Reagan in the 1940s began to view his rise from rags to riches as proof of the U.S. model's supremacy, he concluded that making the New Deal

permanent was as grave a threat to freedom at home as communism was abroad. Thus, Reagan's reaction to LBJ's Great Society became harsh and his political transformation mirrors the distancing of modern liberalism from Americanism. After finally formally changing parties in 1962, he would forever insist that "I didn't leave the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party left me."

A second key to Reagan is his religiosity. Raised in the Disciples of Christ church (whose founder, among other things, had already talked about America as a world savior in the 1830s), he became a steadfast believer in a generic form of Christianity. And amongst the memes inserted in his childhood mind was one about Godless communism being an evil system. Like Dwight Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles, and many others, Reagan thus came to view the post-WWII world as a drama wherein America was God's agent, Russia the Devil's, and the Cold War a holy war between them. In 1957, he defined it as a struggle "between those who believe in the sanctity of individual freedom and those who believe in the supremacy of the state."<sup>240</sup> What's more, Reagan's Christianity blended with his exceptionalist beliefs so completely that he, in due course, became convinced that God had fated him to save the American spirit and help the West "transcend communism."

The third aspect is Reagan's radio, movie, and TV experiences. They trained him to talk smoothly in a mix of highbrow prose and a down-to-earth vernacular and to drive home his talking points with humor and edifying stories. Together with a for many modern discourses' atypical inductive style of reasoning, this led some to think that he was an "amiable dunce" who assumed things without processing them rationally. However, even if Reagan was not a political philosopher, he was a deeply reflective per-

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240. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Spirit of America Festival in Decatur, Alabama," (July 4, 1984) *APP*, accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/261171>.

son who was well-read in many historical, theological, and other subjects. Moreover, as an actor, a promoter for War Bonds during World War II, and a PR envoy for General Electric in the 1950s, he became a first-rate stump speaker and debater. For example, in 1984, he would wave off whether he was too old to seek a second term with an ill-concealed smile and the comment: “I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent’s youth and inexperience.”<sup>241</sup>

Moving on to Reagan’s worldview, realizing that his imagination included several dissonant—or at least intricate—parts is crucial. Mentioning five will have to suffice. One, as a Christian, he accepted human nature’s “ethical duality” but presumed its virtuous side (especially a longing for freedom) to be dominant. Two, because he saw freedom as God’s gift to man, anything restricting it was dubious, and democracy was “just a political reading of the Bible.”<sup>242</sup> Three, on the following question, if God, History, or something else directs man’s pace toward the future, Reagan talked endlessly about “America’s destiny” but sounded different when reasoning about the underlying dynamic: “History is no captive of some inevitable force. History is made by men and women of vision and courage.”<sup>243</sup> Four, he thought that people everywhere were the same and that freedom leads to peace. In fact, his whole worldview largely hinged on these two assumptions. In 1982, he told the British Parliament, “It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy.”<sup>244</sup> Fifth, Reagan had a futuristic mindset that

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241. Ronald Reagan, “Debate Between the President and Former Vice President Walter F. Mondale in Kansas City, Missouri,” October 21, 1984 *APP*, accessed November 17, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/debate-between-the-president-and-former-vice-president-walter-f-mondale-kansas-city>.

242. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Spirit of America Festival in Decatur, Alabama,” (July 4, 1984) *APP*, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/261171>.

243. Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” (February 4, 1986) *APP*, accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/254269>.

244. Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” (June 8, 1982) *APP*, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-members-the-british-parliament>.

made him a jarring optimist: “There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect.”<sup>245</sup> Specifically, he viewed technical, medical, and other advances as highways to a near-utopian future where people would live longer, better, and freer lives both on Earth and in Space (which was also one of his favorite topics).

Combined, Reagan’s views and the tendency for daydreaming they created make it possible to question his status as a true conservative, for which, above all, moderation and realism are key. One analyst has instead called him “a rightwing liberal, indeed a progressive.”<sup>246</sup> Indeed, his positions of man and the world’s political functioning come close to the “mature” form of neoconservatism that would flourish in the 1990s and beyond. However, even if Reagan’s views of human nature, the primacy of freedom, and progress must be deemed radical in nature, they don’t seem to have been so in origin. Explicitly, his optimism stemmed more from the Reformation’s idea about humans’ ability to achieve earthly progress through hard work than the Enlightenment’s ideal of man as a freedom-seeking *Homo libertas*. Also, two more things should be noted. First, the optimism of Reagan, as well as FDR, JFK, and many others, can be deemed more of a side quality of Americanism than an intellectual weakness. Two, even if Reagan often allowed himself to be carried away by his own rhetoric, he rarely let his political decisions be decided by wishful thinking.

A swift outline of Reagan’s early political career reveals this last point. After studying the dynamics leading up to LBJ’s 1964 landslide, he moderated the fervor marking his Goldwater speech but continued to give ideological speeches filled with optimism. In other words, he chose mod-

245. Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” (February 6, 1985) *APP*, accessed January 25, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/258923>.

246. Genovese, *Southern Tradition*, 82.

eration over zealotry without giving in to “consensus” and political correctness. And in the late 1970s, this style became unbeatable. In a word, Reagan could transcend the feeling of *malaise* both by style and by policies that would get “government off our backs, out of our pockets, and back to the standards of excellence once envisioned by the Founding Fathers.”<sup>247</sup> Also, since his political imagination was as vivid as his belief in America was strong, his use of exceptionalist themes continued to go further and be classier than anyone’s, including JFK’s. When announcing his candidacy in November 1979, he said: “To me our country is a living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is impossible, proud of its own success, generous, yes and naive, sometimes wrong, never mean, and always impatient to provide a better life for its people in a framework of a basic fairness and freedom.”<sup>248</sup> In addition, Reagan was running at a time when liberal policies were failing on nearly all fronts and the Democrats had a lackluster mouthpiece in Jimmy Carter. So, if pundits had been writing horoscopes, they would have concluded that in front of the 1980 election, all planets lined up favorably for Reagan while Carter’s Mercury was in retrograde.

Nevertheless, after winning the primaries, many expected Reagan to scale back his rhetoric and go for independents in the middle. Instead, he made his RNC Acceptance Speech decisively conservative and filled it with so much patriotic language that he effectually turned the election into a referendum on America’s past *and* future. After blaming Carter and the Democrats for the “unprecedented calamity which has befallen us,” he said:

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247. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Montana Republican Party Rally in Great Falls,” (October 28, 1982) *APP*, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245075>.

248. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination,” (November 13, 1979) *APP*, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/255827>.

They say that the United States has had its day in the sun; that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems; that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities. My fellow citizens, I utterly reject that view. The American people, the most generous on earth, who created the highest standard of living, are not going to accept the notion that we can only make a better world for others by moving backwards ourselves. Those who believe we can have no business leading the nation.<sup>249</sup>

Reagan then turned to history to show that Americans had handled earlier challenges by standing firm in the country's original values. Toward the end, he also promised to restore the Founders' economic system that "for more than two hundred years helped us master a continent, create a previously undreamed-of prosperity for our people," and invited Americans "who have abandoned hope" to join him in a "great national crusade to make America great again!"<sup>250</sup>

During the fall, Reagan continued to "speak American" by expressing belief in Americanism and policies derived from its specific notions; primarily tax cuts and deregulations. He also never stopped hammering Carter for mishandling the economy and foreign policy. Additionally, as a former actor, Reagan excelled in picking the right settings and attuning his message to given surroundings. Such as holding a Labor Day rally in Liberty Park on the Jersey side of New York with the Statue of Liberty as a backdrop. There he mused:

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249. Ronald Reagan, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit," (July 17, 1980) *APP*, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>.

250. *Ibid.*

Through this “Golden Door,” under the gaze of that “Mother of Exiles,” have come millions of men and women, who first stepped foot on American soil right there, on Ellis Island, so close to the Statue of Liberty. These families came here to work. They came to build. Others came to America in different ways, from other lands, under different, often harrowing conditions, but this place symbolizes what they all managed to build, no matter where they came from or how they came or how much they suffered.<sup>251</sup>

Reagan had, at this point, led Carter by a wide margin in most opinion polls since May. However, after the conventions, his lead shrunk and between late August and late October stayed roughly around 5 percent. But, after beating Carter in a debate on October 28 by simply asking voters, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” he pulled ahead again.

In his Election Eve Address, Reagan made his final argument: “Americans today, just as they did two hundred years ago, feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.” He also used two of his rhetorical specialties. First, as he had done for over a decade, he applied the “city on a hill” metaphor for America and its God-given mission:

I know I have told before of the moment in 1630 when the tiny ship *Arabella* bearing settlers to the New World lay off the Massachusetts coast. To the little bank of settlers gathered on the deck John Winthrop said: “We shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have

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251. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at Liberty State Park, Jersey City, New Jersey,” (September 1, 1980) *APP*, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285596>.



undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.”<sup>252</sup>

Second, he demonstrated his understanding of the imaginary power of the Wild West:

Last year I lost a friend who was more than a symbol of the Hollywood dream industry; to millions he was a symbol of our country itself. And when he died, the headlines seemed to convey all the doubt about America, all the nostalgia for a seemingly lost past. “The Last American Hero,” said one headline, “Mr. America dies,” said another. Well, I knew John Wayne well, and no one would have been angrier at being called the “last American hero.” Just before his death, he said in his own blunt way, “Just give the American people a good cause, and there’s nothing they can’t lick.” Duke Wayne did not believe that our country was ready for the dust bin of history, and if we’ll just think about it, we too will know it isn’t.<sup>253</sup>

For younger readers, this last anecdote perhaps needs an explanation. Through over eighty Western movies, in which John “The Duke” Wayne usually played a terse but honest and upright hero, he had become synonymous with the Frontier and everything good it represented: manhood, bravery, heroism, optimism, hope, sweet success for the diligent, and harsh justice for the deprived. Thus, Reagan here not only punctured JFK’s collective take on the Wild West. By evoking Wayne as a friend, he also drew his posthumous endorsement. And he knew exactly what he was doing. When he, a few years later, as president, would open an exhibition on the American cowboy, he explained:

252. Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address ‘A Vision for America,’ ” (November 3, 1980) *APP*, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/285591>.

253. *Ibid.*

This exhibit explores both the reality and the myth of the American West. And both are important. Here are more than the bits and pieces of a rough and gritty life, but the tangible remnants of a national legend. Among the horsehair lassoes and Remington sculptures and Gene Autry songs is a part of our national identity. Tails of Wild West men and women from Kit Carson to Wild Bill Hickok to Calamity Jane to Annie Oakley are woven into the dreams of our youths and the standards we aim to live by in our adult lives. Ideals of courageous and self-reliant heroes, both men and women, are the stuff of Western lore.<sup>254</sup>

To finish, even though the economy and foreign policy were the decisive factors in the 1980 election campaign, Reagan's optimism and exceptionalist rhetoric made him a stronger and, in the end, unbeatable candidate. Proof of this lies in his strong showing among three previously sturdy Democratic but equally sternly patriotic groups: blue-collar workers, Catholics, and evangelicals. The emergence of these "Reagan Democrats" and the partial collapse of FDR's New Deal coalition they created by breaking decisively in Reagan's favor is undoubtedly complex, but that he spoke their political, religious, and emotional jargon better than Carter is clear. Also, Reagan's persona and message made his electoral coattails long. That night, beside the White House, the GOP won thirty-three new seats in the House, twelve new seats in the Senate (flipping the chamber for the first time since 1954), and hundreds of state and local seats and offices across the country.

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254. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Opening of 'The American Cowboy' Exhibit at the Library of Congress," (March 24, 1983) *APP*, accessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262135>.

## THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

After the election, Reagan again surprised pundits by sticking to his homey speaking style. He also continued to utilize impressive, patriotic settings. Being the first president to be sworn in at the West Front of the Capitol, overlooking the National Mall, he opened his Inaugural Address with a historic, exceptionalist walk-through of the scene in front of him:

Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man, George Washington, father of our country. A man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly. He led America out of revolutionary victory into infant nationhood. Off to one side, the stately memorial to Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence. And then, beyond the Reflecting Pool, the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial. Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln. Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery, with its row upon row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David.<sup>255</sup>

This was, of course, a storyteller's (and former radio presenter's) way to invite those who could not attend in person to join in on the occasion. He then turned the whole speech into a patriotic ode by stroking, e.g., what he saw as the ideological carrier wave of U.S. history:

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. *Freedom and the dignity of the individual*

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255. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address (January 20, 1981) *APP*, accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246336>.

have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth. [. . .] It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.<sup>256</sup>

As president, Reagan also—to most commentators' snarky disgust—continued his habit of telling stories and cracking jokes. And even if they frequently sounded to be delivered off the cuff, he often used them purposely to expose and ridicule his enemies. For example, he told Soviet jokes like, “A man puts down money to buy a car and is told that he can take delivery of his automobile in exactly ten years. ‘Morning or afternoon?’ the purchaser asks. ‘Ten years from now, what difference does it make?’ replies the clerk. ‘Well, I have plumbers coming in the morning.’” And on the home front, he assisted in giving “the L-word” a negative connotation with pokes like, “We could say [liberals] spend money like drunken sailors, but that would be unfair to drunken sailors because the sailors are spending their own money,”<sup>257</sup> and that Democrats “are going so far left, they’ve left America.”<sup>258</sup> What effect Reagan’s jokes had on the Soviets is hard to tell, but at home, his jabs helped turning “liberal” into a political mark of Cain. Toward the end of his tenure, the term had become associated with “profligacy, spinelessness, malevolence, masochism, elitism, fantasy, anarchy, idealism, softness, irresponsibility, and sanctimoniousness.”<sup>259</sup>

On a higher level of political import, President Reagan spent much time explaining complex political issues. For example, in his Inaugural Address, he alluded to the inherent tension between freedom and political

256. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

257. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas,” (August 23, 1984) *APP*, accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/261945>.

258. Paul R. Abramson, John H. Aldrich & David W. Rohde, *Change and Continuity in the 1984 Elections: Revised Edition* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1987), 56.

259. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 1995; reprint with a new preface 2017), 246.

power in layman's terms by saying that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem," and "the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government."<sup>260</sup> Wary about Nixon's failure to roll back federal powers, he also applied a dual strategy of reforms and nominations of conservative judges, of which the latter's job—if the former failed to pass—was to contest the "living constitution" and overturn liberal rulings on issues such as busing, affirmative action, and abortions. And in support of both reforms and judges, Reagan delivered rows of speeches hailing the Founding Fathers. He venerated them as saints whose deeds were so far unsurpassed in human history:

This Nation was born when a band of men, the Founding Fathers, a group so unique we've never seen their like since, rose to such selfless heights. Lawyers, tradesmen, merchants, farmers—56 men achieved security and standing in life but valued freedom more. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.<sup>261</sup>

As could be expected, Reagan showed a special appreciation for George Washington. In 1982, when celebrating the 250th anniversary of his birth at Mount Vernon, he said: "We come filled with pride and gratitude to honor George Washington, Father of our Country, knowing that because of what he did, we're free and we're Americans. [. . .] His love was liberty, and his trust was in the people. He believed they were dependable and right-minded and he believed that a leader's responsibility is to bring out their best qualities."<sup>262</sup>

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260. Reagan, "Inaugural Address (January 20, 1981).

261. Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame," (May 17, 1981) *APP*, accessed January 26, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/247548>.

262. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Mount Vernon, Virginia, Ceremony Commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of George Washington," (February 22, 1982) *APP*, accessed January 26, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245206>.

However, because Washington, a Federalist, had been less vocal about limiting the federal government, Reagan most frequently cited Thomas Jefferson. In 1982, for example, he depicted him as an advocate of his own effort to strengthen states' rights and the independence of counties, school districts, churches, and families: "Jefferson said, 'I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves . . .'"<sup>263</sup> Likewise, Reagan persistently evoked the Declaration, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, among other things, to mock attempts to exclude religion from public schools: "The first amendment of the Constitution was not written to protect the people of this country from religious values—it was written to protect religious values from government tyranny."<sup>264</sup> And it worked, sort of. In 1981, 83 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that the U.S. Government should be curbed, and two years later, 79 percent expressed support for Reagan's form of New Federalism. And even if Democrats and the New Class would stop most reforms of the New Deal/Great Society system, he did manage to stage one revolution.

Since only general optimism could break the paralyzing atmosphere of *malaise*, Reagan knew he had to change not only Carter's economic policy but also the public mood. He thus sold his economic reform package as a plan that the Founding Fathers would have approved of. However, even if tax cuts and deregulations aligned with their general view, Reagan's support for "supply-side" theory and free trade stood contrary to Hamilton's budget discipline and neomercantilism. He could thus rarely define or defend these policies with hard historical examples and was instead forced to use the progressives' trick to discuss his goals in broad terms empty

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263. Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Alabama State Legislature in Montgomery," (March 15, 1982) *APP*, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245688>.

264. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the United States Chamber of Commerce," (April 26, 1982) *APP*, accessed January 25, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245327>.

of details. For instance, Reagan stretched his rhetoric thin by associating *laissez-faire* with most people's vague schoolbook image of early America as a low-tax/free-market heaven:

We are changing the direction of America. We're putting her back on the course of hope that was charted by our Founding Fathers. We've begun to handcuff the big spenders, to get the Federal Government off your backs, promote economic recovery, and put you, the people, back in charge of your country again. With your support [ . . . ] we're clearing away the economic wreckage that was dumped in our laps.<sup>265</sup>

Reagan also leaned on Americans' optimism, aptness for experimentation, and large-scale thinking, reassuring them that his economic plan let "the American spirit" loose: "As surely as America's pioneer spirit made us the industrial giant of the twentieth century, the same pioneer spirit today is opening up on another vast front of opportunity, the frontier of high technology."<sup>266</sup>

In time, this strategy would work. However, his decision to combat inflation by first cutting back the money supply led to a recession that hurt millions. For two years, Reagan could therefore only offer cheerleading: "Send away the handwringers and doubting Thomases and bring on the capitalists and entrepreneurs. Once again, free enterprise is breathing life into our economy and we will not tolerate a return to the old ways of profligate spending and taxing that threatened to snuff it out."<sup>267</sup> However, this was not enough since Americans had grown accustomed to govern-

265. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a North Carolina Republican Party Rally in Raleigh," (October 26, 1982) *APP*, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/245014>.

266. Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," (January 25, 1983) *APP*, accessed February 11, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/26310>.

267. Ronald Reagan, Remarks at a Meeting of the National Association of Home Builders," (May 16, 1983) *APP*, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262137>.

mental handouts and perks such as federal unemployment benefits and job training programs. In the 1982 midterms, coinciding with the bottom of the recession, the GOP was delivered a hard blow. And just a few months later, Reagan's 35 percent personal approval rating hit not too far above Carter's all-time low in 1979. At that point, the Reagan Revolution appeared doomed; particularly since the world situation seemed, if possible, even worse.

By 1980, Reagan had spoken blatantly about the Soviet Union for decades. For example, in 1963, he predicted that head-on economic and technological competition with the Soviets would mean victory over communism "based on the belief (supported so far by all evidence) that in an all-out race, our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up the race as a hopeless cause."<sup>268</sup> He had also long dismissed established views of the Cold War with puns like, "Détente—isn't that what a farmer has with his turkey—until Thanksgiving Day?"<sup>269</sup> and dismissed socialism as a form of mental illness: "Communism is neither an eco[nomic] or pol[itical system]—it is a form of insanity—a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature."<sup>270</sup> Thus, when Carter's foreign policy collapsed in 1979 due to the Iranian hostage crisis and a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan looked vindicated. In 1980, he could accuse Carter of "weakness, indecision, mediocrity, and incompetence"<sup>271</sup> and demand a new foreign policy.

Furthermore, after Reagan, in his Inaugural Address, only said things

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268. Hecla, "Ronald Reagan," in W. Elliot Brownlee, & Graham Hugué Davis (ed.), *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism & Its Legacies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 27.

269. Jim Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009), 23.

270. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson & Martin Anderson (ed.), *Reagan, In his Own Hand* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 134.

271. Ronald Reagan, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Detroit," (July 17, 1980) *APP*, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251302>.



like “the will and moral courage of free men and women [. . .] is a weapon our adversaries in today’s world do not have,”<sup>272</sup> many assumed that he in foreign policy would “play the game” and curtail his anti-communism. However, a week later, he shocked foreign policy experts, academics, journalists, Democrats, and even Republicans when answering a question about his view of the objectives of the Soviets:

I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now, as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.<sup>273</sup>

And Reagan had not misspoken. After recovering from an assassination attempt on March 30, 1981, he embarked on a three-year-long verbal crusade against communism, paralleled by a blitz of crisp anti-Soviet propaganda. During his first term, he also underwrote his image as an unbending anti-communist by raising the defense budget and sending troops to oust a Marxist regime in the Caribbean nation of Grenada.<sup>274</sup>

272. Reagan, “Inaugural Address,” (January 20, 1981).

273. Ronald Reagan, “The President’s News Conference,” (January 29, 1981) *APP*, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/246569>.

274. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica Announcing the Deployment of United States Forces in Grenada,” (October 25, 1983) *APP*, accessed March 28, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/261906>.

However, Reagan's primary weapon against the Soviets was speeches, and he delivered a first historic one in June 1982 when he—symbolically as the leader of a breakaway colony—in an address to the British Parliament asked the West to aim for political victory in the Cold War. Forecasting that a “democratic revolution was gathering new strength” around the world, he said the present was a historic opportunity “to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, and universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.” At heart, this was no harsher than what every U.S. president since Wilson had said. However, Reagan also concluded that the “march of freedom and democracy [. . .] will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history.”<sup>275</sup> And because many now deemed blunt talk about the Soviets needlessly provocative (as many today shun criticism of Islam), the political, diplomatic, academic, and media worlds gasped.

Reagan had also only started. In March 1983, he again talked about the world situation, this time before the Convention of National Evangelicals. And he this time worried about that so many evangelicals were expressing support for one-sided Western disarmament:

Let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness—pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.<sup>276</sup>

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275. Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament” (June 8, 1982), 2018, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-members-the-british-parliament>.

276. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida,” (March 8, 1983) *APP*, accessed March 29, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262885>.

Given the setting, this escalation of rhetoric from the political categories of free and unfree into the religious realm of good and evil should not have shocked anybody. Nevertheless, it did. After his remark was cabled around the world, an overwhelmingly negative body of reactions—“the worst presidential speech ever;” “outrageous;” “primitive”<sup>277</sup>—started to pore back in. This showed how much political discourse had changed since the 1950s, when such language had been commonplace.

And Reagan was now on a roll. Only two weeks later, he upped the ante with Moscow even further, all the way into space, with his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Missile defense was not a new concept, but after Nixon signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 1972, such systems had been banned and the idea faded from the public’s mind. However, Reagan never gave up on it. Viewing missile defense as a moral and not a military or juridical matter, he considered every idea, however far-fetched, about defending America and other free countries from nuclear blackmail as an ethical responsibility worth exploring. What’s more, SDI added to the arms race and Reagan’s verbal crusade an economic and technical challenge that he (and the Kremlin) knew that the Soviet’s rheumatoid economic and industrial system could never meet. How much its economic and psychological costs eventually contributed to the collapse of communism is debated, but his message was clear:

I know this is a formidable, technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of this century. Yet, current technology has attained a level of sophistication where it’s reasonable for us to begin this effort. It will take years, probably decades of effort on many fronts. There will be failures and setbacks, just as there will be successes and breakthroughs. And as we proceed, we must remain constant

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277. Stephen F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 288f.

in preserving the nuclear deterrent and maintaining a solid capability for flexible response. But isn't it worth every investment necessary to free the world from the threat of nuclear war? We know it is.<sup>278</sup>

And this time, his words really hit the political fan.

Since the Soviet Union was still perceived as a permanent entity, people foresaw the future either as a forever edgy state of world affairs threatening human extinction by nuclear Holocaust, or a place where atomic weapons were abandoned or controlled by some form of world government (effectively meaning the U.N.). Consequently, for political blockheads, SDI appeared to be what Democratic Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy called a "reckless Star Wars scheme," and an extraordinarily long lineup of detractors both at home and abroad exploded in a litany of criticisms like "a delusion," "a pipe dream," and "a crackpot scheme." And, since nearly all Democrats now wanted a "soft" foreign policy, SDI instantly became a partisan affair. However, Reagan's idea not only tickled Americans' attitude of "If anyone can do it, it is us!" It also offered an alternative to the Damoclean sword of Soviet nukes under which Americans had lived since the 1950s. When polled, Americans thus tended to support it. Also, the conventional picture of dovish Democrats and hawkish Republicans was overturned as conservative SDI supporters now appeared as peace-minded visionaries next to hang-tough liberals arguing for sticking with the MAD doctrine.

Furthermore, Reagan's unforgiving speeches, for a couple of years, seemingly did not affect the Soviets. On the contrary, they ignited what some historians call a Second Cold War. Still, as a master strategist, Reagan knew what he was doing: boxing in the enemy. Moreover,

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278. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security," (March 23, 1983) *APP*, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262125>.

he never deliberately risked war, and in his January 1984 State of the Union, he eventually changed his tone toward Moscow. There were several reasons for this turn. One is that it was an election year, and another is that he had armed the U.S. into a powerful enough bargaining position by then. So, if only Nixon could go to China, Reagan could now go to Moscow! To boot, all he needed to do rhetorically was to move focus from what divided the superpowers politically to what he supposed unified all people: freedom. And after a comparable shift in Moscow the following year when Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet Premier, the tensions between East and West began to ease. But even as Reagan's strategy began to pay off, his attitude remained firm. Before traveling to his first meeting with Gorbachev in 1985, he said that superpower cooperation would not come through appeasement. And these were now weighty words since his firmness the year before had helped him win the most overwhelming reelection victory in U.S. history.

### “MORNING IN AMERICA”

In 1984, Reagan's prime achievement was the economy. For as historically flawed as his sale of supply-side economics and free trade as original parts of American political philosophy was, these policies paid off in the end. After two decades of war, scandal, and misery, as the recession ended and markets went into overdrive, America laced back. And the relief was as much mental as it was material. One scholar writes that “a patriotic hurricane” formed, and since it made landfall just in time for that year's election, Reagan could hit the campaign trail boasting things like: “We came together in a national crusade to make America great again, and to make a new beginning. Well, now it's all coming together.”<sup>279</sup> Appearing

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279. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas,” (August 23, 1984) *APP*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/261945>.

in front of cheering crowds, he could also ignore attacks upon him for being a heartless capitalist and dangerous warmonger and deliver comforting patriotic talks. When visiting Abraham Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois, he said:

In 1861, just before beginning the long train journey east to become President, Abraham Lincoln stood near this spot and spoke to the people of this good town. He said, "A duty devolves upon me which is perhaps greater than that which is devolved upon any other man since the days of Washington." It was the duty of making certain, as Mr. Lincoln would later say at Gettysburg, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and a government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth. Well, ever since taking office, we've worked hard to restore government of the people, to give this blessed land a new birth of freedom and opportunity.<sup>280</sup>

This "rebirth of America" was also made the theme of one of the Reagan campaign's 1984 TV ads. It was part of a series of commercials describing how the U.S. had improved under his leadership and became known as "It's Morning Again in America!" To maudlin music, it shows images of people going to work, a farmer on a tractor, a newspaper boy on his bike, people moving into a new house, a couple getting married, and a man raising the Stars and Stripes at the same time as the narrator explains softly how America was now roaring back:

It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500

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280. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Reagan-Bush Rally in Springfield, Illinois," (November 2, 1984) *APP*, accessed February 13, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/260652>.

young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?<sup>281</sup>

This ad became a hit, but not so much because of its pictures and words as its subtext. Which was that Reagan had returned America to its roots and the serenity of the 1950s; a time when, in popular memory, the country had been at peace with itself, wealthy, well-functioning—and Baby Boomers (by 1984 one of the country's most crucial voter blocks) had been young and happy.

Hence, most people felt that America was great again—and so because its proper order instituted by the Founding Fathers had been restored. Their appreciation of Reagan and his policies can be traced in polls and occurrences. For instance, his approval ratings soared to nearly 60 percent, and the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles became a national pageant as “the colors of this Olympics became red, white, and blue [and] the American flag often upstaged the legendary five overlapping rings.”<sup>282</sup> The power of Reagan's rhetoric also showed in that Democrats tried to steal his thunder. As when New York Governor Mario Cuomo, in a keynote address to that year's DNC, tried to refute the president's use of the “city on a hill” thesis by depicting his America instead as a “Tale of Two Cities.” However, this attempt to breathe new life into JFK's old refrain about frontier life as a communal endeavor by stating that “the Republicans believe that the wagon train will not make it to the frontier unless some of

281. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fa8Qupc4PnQ>

282. Gil Troy, *Morning In America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152.

the old, some of the young, some of the weak are left behind by the side of the trail”<sup>283</sup> quickly vanished in the patriotic hurricane.

Furthermore, by winning 59 percent of the popular vote and 525 to 13 electoral votes, Reagan seemed to have ended the political experiment started by the Progressive Movement. That night, he gave a lyric victory speech:

We began to carry a message to every corner of the Nation, a simple message. The message is: Here in America, the people are in charge. And that’s why we’re here tonight. This electoral victory belongs to you and the principles that you cling to—principles struck by the brilliance and bravery of patriots more than 200 years ago. They set forth the course of liberty and hope that makes our country special in the world.<sup>284</sup>

And in his second Inaugural Address, he continued in even more high-brow verse:

We see and hear again the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely President paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair. That’s our heritage, that’s our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender

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283. Mario Matthew Cuomo, “1984 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address,” (July 16, 1984) *American Rhetoric*, accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariocuomo1984dnc.htm>.

284. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a Reelection Celebration in Los Angeles, California,” (November 6, 1984) *APP*, accessed May 31, 2020, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/260741>.



music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—in unity, affection, and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world. God bless you, and God bless America.<sup>285</sup>

Unquestionably, these are only a politician's puffing words after a great victory. However, they did reflect a widely held opinion that America had beaten the odds and resurrected itself. There were many signs from both politics and popular culture that could be interpreted this way. For example, the following year, movies like *Back to the Future* and *Rocky IV* would vault in patriotism and boost the feel-good of the nation even further. As the scale of Reagan's victory began to sink into the minds of analytics, there were also those posing that this second landslide proved that Americans were finally ready to return to the country's original socioeconomic system. Even many Democrats saw it this way and began to abandon liberal rhetoric and look for ways to pursue liberal goals through conservative means. In his Farewell Address four years later, Reagan would therefore be able to look back and point toward a bright future for America:

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.<sup>286</sup>

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285. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address," (January 21, 1985) *APP*, accessed January 30, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/259910>.

286. Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation," (January 11, 1989) *APP*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/farewell-address-the-nation>.

However, besides revitalizing America's economy and reviving its patriotic spirit, Reagan failed in his for the future most significant task—to reverse the “modernizing” of U.S. society at large. In fact, the whole New Deal/Great Society welfare state remained untouched. And it was on Reagan's watch that the mental rot pushing the country away from republican, communitarian, and religious values toward materialism and atomistic individualism really began to undermine American culture. A decade after he left office, a bi-partisan report would reflect on the effects of this process:

We fret about the weakness of our families, but will not make the personal commitments needed to preserve them. We worry about the consequences of out-of-wedlock births, but refuse to condemn them. We deplore the performance of our public schools, but somehow we can't find time the time to join parents associations, attend school board meetings, or even help our children with their homework. We complain about the influence of popular culture on our young people, but as parents we do not try very hard to monitor the programs our children watch and the music they hear. We desert neighborhood associations, and then lament the fraying of community. We elect, and then reelect, leaders for whom we profess mistrust. We say we do not have time for civic life. But, in fact, we enjoy more leisure than ever before. And too many of us spend it watching television.<sup>287</sup>

So, even if Reagan's presidency marked the end of the post-World War II era, it did not become a break with the past. On the contrary, after the Cold War, as the federal welfare state's roots grew thicker and deeper, the U.S. would also step up, not down, its international role. In other words, the welfare-warfare state would not only survive but thrive. And its credit card bill continue to grow.

287. John Kenneth White, *The Values Divide: American Politics and Culture in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002) 11.