

The Paradox of President Reagan's Leadership

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Ronald Reagan was a larger-than-life individual, a formidable politician, and an important president. But as in all presidents, his character was complex, resulting in a presidency of paradoxes, marked by some great successes and some unfortunate failures. Both Reagan's successes and failures stemmed from his character and style of political leadership. Reagan's broad vision and clear direction made his political ideals appealing. But paradoxically, what made his policy victories possible was his willingness, when faced with political reality, to make pragmatic compromises without seeming to abandon his ideals. This article will examine these paradoxes by analyzing the Reagan administration's transition into office, the contrasting White House staffs of his two terms, and the high and low points of his national security policies.

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Both Reagan's successes and failures stemmed from his character and style of political leadership. Reagan's optimism, geniality, and gracious nature appealed to his opponents as well as his followers¹ (Hecló 2009, 31). The great strength of his optimism stemmed from his conviction that most governmental problems were simple and amenable to simple

1. As Hugh Hecló has observed, Reagan "showed how a politician with honest convictions does not need to slur his political rivals' character, competence, or good intentions" (2009, 31).

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solutions.² But as Elliot Richardson often observed, “we all have the defects of our virtues.”³ The paradox of President Reagan’s leadership was that his certainty about simple problems and faith in simple solutions was the source of his political strength as well as some of his failures.⁴ He projected simple certainty and exuded confidence, but his actions and policies, in important ways, belied his public image.

Reagan’s broad vision and clear direction made his political ideals appealing. But paradoxically, what made his policy victories possible was his willingness, when faced with political reality, to make pragmatic compromises without seeming to abandon his ideals. He is remembered as a tax cutter, but he signed some of the largest tax increases in U.S. history. He is remembered as standing firm against terrorism, yet he withdrew Marines from Lebanon after a terrorist bombing, and he traded arms for hostages. He championed huge increases in defense spending, yet he almost bargained away the U.S. nuclear stockpile. He believed in law and order, but he allowed his White House to break the law by selling arms to Iran and funding the Contras in Nicaragua. He was a staunch foe of communism, yet he led the country to a new understanding of Russia. This article will examine these paradoxes by analyzing the Reagan administration’s transition into office, the contrasting White House staffs of his two terms, and the high and low points of his national security policies.

Transition, Personnel, and Budgets

Because of the fear of seeming to be presumptuous of electoral victory, presidential transitions had traditionally not been undertaken with much serious planning. In recognizing his lack of preparation for the White House, John Kennedy told Clark Clifford, “If I am elected, I do not want to wake up on them morning of November 9 and have to ask myself, ‘What in the world do I do now?’ ” (Schlesinger 1965, 118.). So he asked Clifford and Richard Neustadt confidentially to prepare memos of advice to him about initial steps to take between election and inauguration. At Kennedy’s urging, the Presidential Transition Act of 1963 provided government funding for future transition expenses.

Future incoming presidents used the funds, but Jimmy Carter was the first president to undertake transition planning systematically, with policy planning and personnel operations in Atlanta that moved to Washington after the election. The Reagan transition team, however, took transition planning and operations to an entirely new level of organization. The planning began in April 1980 and involved hundreds of people and scores of task forces under the direction of Richard Allen and Martin Anderson.

2. On Reagan’s optimism, see Patterson (2003, 356-57).

3. The author worked with Elliot Richardson on the National Commission on the Public Service (The Volcker Commission) in the 1980s.

4. In John Sloan’s analysis, Reagan could remain optimistic and serene because he experienced no cognitive dissonance when external events or facts did not conform to his convictions or hopes. “In Reagan’s mind, unpleasant facts could be avoided; contradiction could be denied; anecdotes could overcome facts; movie illusions could substitute for history; unpleasant realities could be blamed on a hostile press” (Sloan 1999, 99). Reagan also continued to tell untrue stories as if they were reality. On Reagan’s untrue stories (or lies, depending on how one interprets Reagan’s intent), see Pfiffner (2003, 28-31, 56-60).

The 1980-81 transition was headed by an elaborate superstructure that included five top-level Reagan supporters and seven deputy directors. Operationally, the transition was directed by Edwin Meese and William Timmons. In contrast to Kennedy, Carter, and Richard Nixon, Reagan established his transition headquarters in Washington, DC, in a large office building several blocks from the White House. The transition telephone directory contained 588 listings, but the number of people involved was probably twice that number. Immediately after the election, transition teams fanned out across the government to establish the new administration's presence in departments and agencies. The transition teams performed several functions, both as rewards for campaign workers and as testing grounds for possible political appointment after inauguration. In order to prepare the new agency appointees, the teams were granted access to all executive branch budget and program files, though personnel files would not be open to them until January 20.

Revolution in Political Appointments

Perhaps the most important aspect of transition planning was undertaken by Pendleton James who was tasked by Ed Meese to organize a process for evaluating and recruiting political appointments for the new Reagan administration. James transformed presidential personnel operations in several significant ways: early preparation, careful vetting, and central control of political appointments. Political appointments are so challenging in the United States because literally thousands of positions are available for presidential designation. Other modern democracies have several hundred political appointees to direct their career bureaucracies. But because of the legacy of Jacksonian democracy and the nineteenth-century spoils system, the United States has thousands: more than 7,000 total, with about 3,000 of those directly in supervisory positions in executive branch agencies, and nearly 1,000 in the White House.⁵

James, who was a professional executive recruiter ("head hunter") in the private sector and had done personnel recruitment for President Nixon, began his planning efforts in April of 1980. Symbol reinforced substance when James was given an Executive Level II (Level I is reserved for the cabinet level) appointment and an office in the West Wing, indicators of how seriously the Reagan administration took the appointments process. James was convinced that both Presidents Nixon and Carter had made crucial mistakes when, in the name of "cabinet government," they told their cabinet secretaries to find the most competent people for subcabinet appointments and the president would appoint them. From the White House perspective, the delegation approach resulted in appointees who were too heavily influenced by Congress and who were more loyal to their cabinet secretaries than to the president. Thus, James insisted on White House control of all political appointments, and loyal Reaganauts insisted on elaborate vetting to ensure the ideological purity of all appointees.⁶ The clarity of Reagan's conservative vision made the recruiters' job easier, but it also excluded some well-qualified Republicans who did not fit their exacting ideological criteria.

5. For specific numbers see Patterson (2008, 93-94) and Pfiffner (2011, 116-25).

6. For an insightful analysis of some of the drawbacks of the Reagan approach to personnel policy from a public administration perspective, see Newland (1983, 3-5).

All executive branch appointments that must be confirmed by the Senate (PAS) are clearly presidential appointments, and thus insisting on White House control merely confirmed in practice the formal reality. But James projected central White House control much further down into the executive branch. The Senior Executive Service (SES) was created in 1978, and the law provided that 10% of the 7,000 senior executives could be filled by political appointees. Schedule C appointments were created in 1953 in order for Eisenhower's new Republican administration to be able to place Republican loyalists deeper into the bureaucracy than the senior political positions (that is, at levels GS-15—mid-level management—and below). Technically, both noncareer SES and Schedule C appointments are made by departmental secretaries and agency heads. But of course, if the president wants those appointees to be designated by the White House Personnel Office—and Reagan did—that is the way it will be done.

Reagan's White House loyalists were determined to ensure that appointments in the administration would go to those who were personally and ideologically loyal to Ronald Reagan. To enforce central control and ideological purity, they constructed an elaborate clearance gauntlet, which all nominees had to survive. Sign-offs had to be secured from the relevant cabinet secretary, the White House Personnel Office, political director Lyn Nofziger, counsel Fred Fielding, as well as Martin Anderson on domestic appointments and Richard Allen on national security posts. Before final approval, Meese, Baker, and Michael Deaver also weighed in. Nofziger was particularly concerned with loyalty to Reagan and was not sympathetic to Republicans who did not demonstrate their Reagan loyalty early. "This, damn it, is a *Reagan* administration" (Raines, 1981, B12). Nofziger was also less concerned than James with professional competence. He said that he had a list of six criteria for appointee qualifications. Number six was "are you the best qualified person for the job? But that's only Number six" (Barnes 1983, 130). Thus, the advantage of Reagan's revolution in personnel selection was the assurance of loyalty to the president; the down side was the narrow ideological filters often used and the long delays in getting executives into office. The latter problem has gotten worse in each subsequent presidency.

The Initial Policy Agenda

In addition to elaborate planning and tight personnel control, the Reagan administration set precedents by focusing narrowly on its most important policy objectives in its early months. When President Carter came into office, he had a broad range of policy goals and refused to set priorities among them. This diluted the momentum of his election and confused members of Congress who had to decide how to set the congressional agenda. President Reagan decided to make difficult choices and limited his initial policy agenda to his budget priorities of cutting taxes, increasing military spending, and decreasing domestic spending. This was a big disappointment to many of his supporters who had been drawn to him because of his social agenda, but Reagan's choice of the "rifle strategy" (narrow policy focus) rather than Carter's "shotgun strategy" (pushing many initiatives) worked well in achieving his major priorities in his first year in office.⁷

7. For an analysis of presidential transitions, and Reagan's in particular, see Pfiffner (1996).

The economy had been in the doldrums of “stagflation” during the latter half of the 1970s, with stagnant, low growth yet high inflation (inflation rose to 13.5% and interest rates hovered near 20%). Thus, Reagan focused on the economy during the 1980 campaign. Reagan had been convinced that the “supply-side” approach of cutting taxes would turn around the economy and lead to balanced budgets. So his first priority was to cut taxes.

With speed and singleness of purpose, Reagan focused his rhetoric and policy efforts on the economy. He appointed Congressman David Stockman to figure out the details of tax cuts, military spending increases, and domestic spending cuts. In a series of economic speeches in the spring of 1981, Reagan argued that the nation was facing an economic calamity that only his policies could avert. In the summer of 1981, Reagan demonstrated his skills in governing by convincing Congress to pass the major elements of his budgetary agenda.

Reagan's personal lobbying was essential to his success in Congress. The Democrats had hoped to separate the budget proposals into separate pieces that they could defeat individually. But the Reagan strategy was to package all of the budget proposals into one budget resolution and force an up or down vote on the package as a whole. Since the Senate had turned Republican in the 1980 elections, Reagan focused his efforts on the House and particularly on the 47 conservative Democrats from the South, who were known as the “boll weevils.” Reagan personally called or telegraphed each of them, sent surrogates to their districts to seek their votes on his budgets, and even promised not to campaign against some of them in 1982, if they voted for his budget priorities.

The Omnibus Budget and Reconciliation Act of 1981 made large cuts in domestic, welfare-type programs and increased defense spending significantly (Morgan 2009, 84-85). The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 dropped the top marginal rate on personal income from 70 to 50 percent and overall personal income taxes by about 25 percent. Rosy economic scenarios and “magic asterisks” inserted by Stockman projected the budget moving steadily toward balance. These two major pieces of legislation embodied Reagan's budget priorities and demonstrated the Reagan administration's skill at electoral and legislative politics.

The tax cuts, however, did not bring about the economic growth that the supply-siders expected; the result was a deficit of more than \$100 billion and climbing. Reagan's advisors recognized that, without changes in fiscal policy, the deficit would continue to be unacceptably high. They thus convinced Reagan, despite his resistance, to back the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (TEFRA), which enacted tax increases over the next several years in order to recover some of the revenue lost through the tax cuts of the previous year. TEFRA constituted the largest increase in peacetime taxes in American history.⁸ The projected increase in tax revenue resulting from TEFRA convinced Fed Chairman Paul Volcker to expand the money supply significantly to allow the

8. See Morgan (2009, 98) and Cannon (1991, 234). In his first year as governor of California, Reagan also produced the largest tax increase in California history to that time (Cannon, 1982, 156).

economy to grow.⁹ The combination of a loosened monetary policy and the economic stimulus from increased military spending and tax cuts led the economy to a 92-month expansion beginning in February 1983, the longest economic expansion after World War II, except for the 106-month steady expansion between 1961 and 1969 (Morgan 2009, 102).

President Reagan, who had called for privatizing Social Security in his pre-presidential days, collaborated with Democratic House Speaker Tip O'Neill in 1983 to preserve the fiscal viability of the system into the early twenty-first century. The two political parties were at loggerheads, with the Republicans insisting on no tax increases and the Democrats set against any benefit cuts. When the Social Security Trust Fund was rapidly moving toward imbalance in 1982, Reagan appointed Alan Greenspan to head a commission that proposed benefit cuts and tax increases that would keep the Trust Fund solvent for several decades. Over Reagan's presidency, Social Security payroll tax revenue as a percentage of gross domestic product increased as revenue from personal income taxes decreased (Morgan 2009, 86). Thus, President Reagan's willingness to cooperate with House Speaker O'Neill saved the Social Security system, preserving its fiscal viability for the next four decades (Derthick and Telles 2003, 182-208).

The economic consequences of Reagan's economic policies were mixed. The economy grew and the stock market prospered, but deficits continued to grow, and the national debt tripled from \$1 trillion in 1981 to \$3 trillion in 1989. The national savings rate declined from 7.7% in the 1970s to 2.8% in the 1980s, and the United States changed from being the world's largest creditor nation to being its largest debtor nation (Morgan 2009, 102). From the legislative and budgetary victories of Reagan's first year in office, success with Congress declined steadily throughout the rest of his term, as had the legislative success of most presidents. In 1986, the administration helped pass the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which achieved major improvements in the tax structure by closing loopholes and broadening the base.

In summary, among Ronald Reagan's most impressive achievements were his transition into office, his revolution in personnel recruitment, and the policy victories in his first year. His political appointments process revolutionized personnel recruitment and produced tight White House control of political appointments throughout the executive branch. The ideological vetting of nominees resulted in loyal Reaganauts but excluded many competent Republicans. The thorough vetting also slowed the appointment of subcabinet officials, which resulted in significant gaps in executive branch leadership during his first year in office, a trend that has continued in all subsequent presidencies.

His initial legislative and budgetary success can be attributed to dropping his anti-Washington rhetoric after his inauguration, assiduous courting of members of Congress, moving quickly to take advantage of his election "mandate," and focusing his agenda tightly on his economic priorities. Despite some of the largest tax increases in American history in 1982 and 1983, his consistent rhetoric and large tax cuts in 1981

9. It was Paul Volcker, appointed Fed Chairman by President Carter in 1979, whose sharp contraction of the money supply wrung inflation out of the U.S. economy. And it was Volcker's subsequent expansion of the money supply that led to the long economic expansion in the 1980s. See Iwan Morgan (2009, 98-102) and Sloan (1999, 157, 228).

provided sufficient inoculation so that his reputation as a tax cutter endured. Reagan's economic initiatives reduced taxes but rather than producing the projected deficit reductions, led to a tripling of the national debt.

White House Organization and Management

Ronald Reagan was a big-picture leader who did not enjoy and sometimes did not understand the details of his policies.¹⁰ His great strength lay in setting a strategic direction and delegating to his subordinates the discretion to implement his priorities. His management philosophy was "Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out" (Dowd 1986, 33). The flaw in this formulation was that Reagan was sometimes not skilled at finding out whether his policies were in fact being carried out. Thus, when he had the right people, this approach served him well, but with the wrong people in charge, disaster was possible. Reagan's optimism and unquestioning faith that his intentions would be carried out by his subordinates led to the most important successes of his first term and some of the failures of his second term. The strengths and the vulnerabilities of Reagan's management philosophy were illustrated by the difference between his two terms.

The First-Term Troika

As with all presidents, the shape and role of the Reagan White House staff reflected Ronald Reagan's personality. By all accounts, both friendly and critical, Reagan was extremely passive in his approach to the White House staff.¹¹ He was not, however, passive with respect to the major direction of his presidency or public policy; he was an active administration. But while Reagan set the direction, his aides formulated the policies and carried them out; Reagan was interested only in outcomes and did not want to be bothered with details.¹²

Reagan's intuitive leadership and passivity came together in August 1980 when he chose Baker to be his chief of staff. Baker was not an obvious choice, and his appointment came at the expense of Meese, who had run Reagan's office when he was governor of California and had been expected to get the position. The choice was also unusual because Baker had worked for Gerald Ford who beat Reagan for the 1976 Republican nomination, and had run George H. W. Bush's campaign for the nomination in 1980. The initiative for this inspired choice came not from Reagan but through the maneuvering of Deaver and Stuart Spencer. According to one Reagan aide, Deaver and Spencer presented him with their advice, and

10. Lou Cannon has remarked on Reagan's "extraordinary vision and remarkable ignorance." For instance, Reagan told members of Congress that, "bombers and submarines did not carry nuclear missiles" (Cannon 1991, 291). Reagan also thought that submarine-launched nuclear missiles were not so dangerous because they "can be intercepted. They can be recalled" (Hertsgaard 1988, 279).

11. On Reagan's passivity, see Patterson (2003, 358).

12. For an analysis of the first term White House policy machinery, see Newland (1983, 5-13).

he said “Well, fellas, if you think so” (Patterson 2003, 168). Reagan, of course, deserved the credit for making this brilliant, but nonobvious appointment.

Conservative Reagan backers saw the appointment of Baker, a pragmatic moderate, as a disaster. But Reagan’s insight was that he would need a sophisticated Washington insider to achieve his conservative political and policy goals. Although Baker ran the policy process, office space, and White House personnel, Meese held cabinet rank and the title of “counselor to the president for policy.” Both the domestic and national security policy staff reported to Reagan through Meese.¹³ Deaver rounded out the “troika” of top White House aides in the first term. Deaver, a long-time Reagan aide, was a public relations genius who concerned himself with the public presentation of the president and his personal schedule. Importantly, he was a confidant of Nancy Reagan and liaison between her and the West Wing staff.

This staffing structure served Reagan well during his first term, engineering the great success of his initial policy agenda.¹⁴ The arrangement and its dynamics, however, took a toll on White House staffers because of the passivity of President Reagan in managing his office and policy agenda. Reagan did not concern himself with policy details, and he had an aversion to conflict among his aides. This led to infighting among the staff for primacy, because the president was not likely to step in to make tough decisions or settle staff conflict. Peggy Noonan recounts one aide’s characterization of the White House atmosphere: “I loved it there, but it can be a terrible place. . . . it was backstabbing and knifing each other and anonymous sources killing each other with the gossip. . . . He should have stopped it. And he could have. But he didn’t. It just wasn’t his style to get involved” (1990, 168).

Reagan’s unwillingness to settle disputes among his staffers was exacerbated by his unwillingness to provide specific policy direction, aside from the broad contours of his political philosophy. Donald Regan complained: “In the four years that I served as secretary of the treasury I never saw President Reagan alone and never discussed economic philosophy. . . . I had to figure these things out like any other American, by studying his speeches and reading the newspapers. . . . After I accepted the job, he simply hung up and vanished.” Reagan “laid down no rules and articulated no missions” and thus conferred great “latitude on his subordinates” (Regan 1988, 142-43, 144). According to Martin Anderson, “He made no demands, and gave almost no instructions” (1988, 289). To Stockman, Reagan “seemed so serene and passive. . . . He gave no orders, no commands; asked for no information; expressed no urgency. . . . Since I *did* know what to do, I took his quiet message of confidence to be a mandate” (1986, 76). Stockman observed that, whenever there was an argument, Reagan would smile and say, “Okay, you fellas work it out” (1986, 109).¹⁵

13. See Hedrick Smith (1988, 314-15). Meese and Baker signed an agreement on the division of White House duties between them. The memo is reproduced in Schieffer and Gates (1989, 83).

14. On Reagan’s White House staff dynamics, see the insightful analysis by Sloan (1999, 79-102).

15. From her experience in the White House, Reagan admirer Peggy Noonan remarked on staffers’ struggles to convince Reagan of the merit of their proposals: “the battle for the mind of Ronald Reagan was like the trench warfare of World War I: Never have so many fought so hard for such barren terrain” (1990, 268).

The Second-Term Hierarchy

As with appointing Baker to be his first chief of staff, President Reagan did not take the initiative in making the key staffing decisions for his second term.¹⁶ Baker had tired of running the White House, and Don Regan wanted to be at the center of power. In late November, 1984, after the election, Regan proposed a job-switch to Baker, and after some thought, Baker agreed. Without consulting the president, Deaver convinced Nancy Reagan that the switch was necessary, and she agreed. They kept the change secret, and it was not until January 7, 1985, that they presented their plan to the president. Rather than asking about their reasons for wanting to make the switch or the differing qualifications for the two different positions, Reagan recalled, "When I heard about it, it sounded all right to me" (Cannon 1991, 358). Regan said that the president "made no inquiries" about the proposed change. "I did not know what to make of his passivity" (Regan 1988, 228).

This incident, among others, underscores the paradox that, despite his active agenda, President Reagan tended to be passive about White House personnel and did not seem to understand how important his top aides were to his presidential success. Martin Anderson observed that because of Reagan's passive management style, he was particularly dependent on his personal advisors. "Because he does not actively and constantly search out and demand things, he must rely on what is or is not brought to him. When his staff is very, very good, talented, wise, and loyal, and almost selfless, it works brilliantly. But when his staff is ordinary . . . then mediocrity rules," and "Reagan is helpless" in defending his own interests" (Anderson 1988, 291-292). It must be noted that though Reagan was passive, flexible, and willing to compromise when it came to managing his administration, he was stubborn and unyielding when an issue touched on one of his convictions, such as support for the Contras or his early stance toward the Soviet Union, when even Nancy Reagan could not get him to budge (Sloan 1999, 93).

Thus, the president did not seem to notice the change that came over the White House as his first-term team began to leave, and the White House came to be dominated by Regan. When Baker left for Treasury, he took with him two key aides, Richard Darman and Margret Tutwiler. Meese left the White House to be attorney general. Deaver left for the private sector. Stockman went to Wall Street. Congressional liaison master, Max Friedersdorf, also left as did political director Ed Rollins.

Thus, Regan, under the mantra of "Let Reagan be Reagan," was able to dominate the White House by insisting that he would be the sole conduit to the president. As Reagan recalled, "he resisted having others see me alone and wouldn't forward letters or documents to me unless he saw them first. In short, he wanted to be the only conduit to the Oval Office" (Reagan 1990, 537). Regan's control of the White House succeeded in shielding Reagan from staff conflict, but it also narrowed the range of information and dissenting opinions to which Reagan was exposed. According to Richard Darman, the suppression of conflict among the White House staff did not serve the president well.

16. This analysis is based on the account of Lou Cannon (1991, 553-70).

“Seeing the interplay between us [the first term White House staff], a lot of things happened. First of all, Ronald Reagan learned much more about reality” (Schieffer and Gates 1989, 200).

As chief of staff, Regan did not appreciate the importance of courting members of Congress, feeding the press, or being sensitive to the concerns of Nancy Reagan—at each of which Baker had been a master. Regan always wanted to be in the limelight and take credit for administration successes. Spencer observed that Regan “became a prime minister, he became a guy that was in every photo op, he wasn’t watching the shop. And he surrounded himself with yes people” (Cannon 1991, 721). As Nancy Reagan observed, Regan liked the sound of “chief” but not of “staff” (Cannon 1991, 566). Regan’s domination of the White House culminated in the disaster of the Iran-Contra Affair. The Tower Commission concluded that Regan’s “failure of responsibility” allowed Iran-Contra to occur. “More than almost any Chief of Staff of recent memory, he asserted personal control over the White House staff and sought to extend this control to the National Security Advisor. He was personally active in national security affairs and attended almost all of the relevant meetings regarding the Iran initiative. . . . He must bear primary responsibility for the chaos that descended upon the White House” (President’s Special Review Board 1987, vol. 4, 10-11). After Regan was fired, President Reagan brought in Senator Howard Baker to begin to rebuild the White House staff and recover from Iran Contra.¹⁷

National Security Policy: Disaster and Triumph

Some of President Reagan’s most important legacies arose from his national security policies. His management of the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, his failure of leadership during the Iran-Contra Affair, and his initiative leading to the end of the Cold War provide insights into the strength and weaknesses of Reagan as president. In all three cases, Reagan’s personal concerns and insights overcame his ideological and principled rhetoric. While declaring his unyielding opposition to terrorism and the folly of negotiating with terrorists, Reagan nevertheless withdrew the Marines from Lebanon shortly after the terrorist assault, and he sold arms to Iran in a futile attempt to ensure that U.S. hostages would all be freed. In contrast to his ideological stance against communism, Reagan recognized that Mikhail Gorbachev was a different kind of communist, and worked with him to bring the Cold War to a peaceful end.

Marine Barracks Bombing, October 1983

As the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) withdrew its forces from Lebanon in August 1982, Reagan sent in U.S. Marines as part of a peace keeping force to prevent

17. In the modern presidency, four chiefs of staff have tried to dominate the White House to the exclusion of others: Sherman Adams in the Eisenhower administration; H. R. Haldeman in the Nixon administration; Don Regan in the Reagan administration; and John Sununu in the George H. W. Bush administration. Each of these chiefs of staff resigned in disgrace after doing harm to their presidents (see Piffner 1993).

further violence between Israeli and PLO fighters. Reagan's advisors were deeply split about the wisdom of the move, with George Shultz strongly in favor and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger strongly opposed. White House staffers and Shultz believed that the stability of Lebanon was a vital interest of the United States and that a strong U.S. presence was necessary. Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt that the Marines had no clear military mission and might become entangled in a Lebanese civil war.

By late August the PLO had withdrawn, and Weinberger ordered the troops to return to U.S. ships off shore. However, after the massacres of Palestinian refugee camps at Shatila and Sabra by the Christian Phalange militia as the Israelis stood by, Reagan ordered the troops back to their barracks in Lebanon. In effect, the Marines found themselves on one side (the government's) of a Lebanese civil war. After another year of Israel-Lebanon conflict and a terrorist bombing of the U.S. embassy that killed 18 Americans, a suicide bomber drove a truck into the Marine Barracks in Beirut on October 23, 1983, and killed 241 Marines.

Reagan was appalled at the massacre and was determined that the United States would not be intimidated by the attack. Despite advice from Weinberger to withdraw U.S. forces, he felt that a withdrawal would "strip every ounce of meaning and purpose from their courageous sacrifice" (Cannon 1991, 450). The U.S. invasion of Grenada two days after the Marine bombing gave Reagan some cover and distracted public opinion from the disaster in Lebanon for a while. But after public opinion about the Marines in Lebanon began to change over the next several months, internal pressure, especially from the Pentagon, began to build to play it safe by withdrawing the Marines. Even on February 4, the week before withdrawing the Marines, Reagan referred to withdrawal as "surrender" and declared that staying in Lebanon was dangerous, "But that is no reason to turn our backs and to cut and run. If we do, we'll be sending the one signal to terrorists everywhere. They can gain by waging war against innocent people" (Cannon 1991, 454).

Thus, Reagan stubbornly stuck to his initial argument that stability in Lebanon was essential to U.S. interests and that the presence of Marines was central to that stability, even as he decided to pull them out of Lebanon. His public rhetoric reinforced his oft-declared determination not to give in to terrorists and not to withdraw in the face of fire. But Reagan also had a way of coming to terms with military and political reality—in this case, that conditions on the ground had changed in Lebanon, and there was no clear military mission that could be achieved by the presence of U.S. Marines. So his spokesmen substituted the euphemism of "redeployment" rather than withdrawal when he made his decision to withdraw on February 7, 1984.

The other aspect of Reagan's leadership illustrated by the Lebanon experience was Reagan's unease with infighting among his staff and his unwillingness to step in and definitively settle contentious issues. Reagan had always taken a hard line on terrorism: "Let terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution" (Timberg 1995, 336). Within several weeks of the October 23 bombing of the Marines, Reagan ordered planning for a retaliatory strike in conjunction with French forces. "The first thing I want to do is to find out who did it and go after them with everything we've got" (McFarlane 1994, 267). Robert McFarlane and Shultz strongly favored a retaliatory air strike, but Weinberger

and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General John Vessey felt there was not sufficient intelligence to guarantee that the attack would hit only military targets and might easily kill civilians.

At a November 14 White House meeting, according to McFarlane's recollection, "The President gave his approval for a retaliatory strike to be conducted on November 16. It was a direct, unambiguous decision" (McFarlane 1994, 270). Yet the attack did not take place, because Weinberger, though at the same meeting, did not hear the same message that McFarlane had heard. The secretary of defense thought that he had the discretion to make a judgment based on the latest intelligence and conditions on the ground in Lebanon. He later recalled, "I had a request [from the commander of the Sixth Fleet to strike], but I denied it. . . . I just don't think it was the right thing to do" (McFarlane 1994, 270-71).

In McFarlane's mind, "It was outrageous. Weinberger had directly violated a presidential order." McFarlane recalled that Reagan's reaction to the news that U.S. participation in the attack did not take place was "Gosh, that's really disappointing. That's terrible. We should have blown the daylight out of them. I just don't understand" (McFarlane 1994, 271). Weinberger characterized McFarlane's account as "Myths and canards" and a "chimerical collection of threads . . . woven lies of whole cloth." His recollection was: "I had received no orders or notifications from the President or anyone prior to that phone call from Paris" (Weinberger 1990, 160-61).

The point here is not whether McFarlane or Weinberger had a better grasp of U.S. interests in the Middle East or the best perspective how to protect them. The point is that Reagan was faced with a serious, substantive disagreement within his National Security Council (NSC), and he refused either to make a clear decision or to follow up on his order as commander in chief.¹⁸

Iran Contra

President Reagan's leadership style of setting broad directions and leaving the implementation of policies to his subordinates worked effectively during his first term when Baker, Deaver, and Meese served the president effectively, though from different perspectives. In his second term, however, Reagan let them leave the White House without seeming to appreciate their contributions to his first-term success. With Reagan in charge of the White House, the circuit breakers of the conflicting perspectives of White House staffers were eliminated, and narrower views prevailed. The Iran-Contra Affair demonstrated the downside of Reagan's detached leadership style as well as his vulnerability to the personal fate of individual American hostages.

18. According to David C. Martin and John Walcott (1988, quoted in Timberg 1995, 339), "It was not unusual for two of the President's closest advisers to come out of a meeting with completely different impressions of what Reagan had decided. . . . Reagan frequently relied on ambiguity to resolve—or bury—the conflicts within his administration. . . . When his advisers gave him conflicting opinions, . . . he frequently failed. The President's involvement in foreign affairs was episodic, anecdotal, impulsive, and rarely decisive." Later, on December 4, the United States did send several jets to bomb Syrian gun emplacements, but the attacks were not successful (McFarlane 1994, 272).

As president, Reagan had spoken out strongly on his unyielding stance toward terrorism. "Let terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution."¹⁹ But the sale to Iran of military hardware in attempts to gain the freedom of hostages demonstrated that Reagan was willing to abandon his own principle of not negotiating with terrorists, reverse his own administration's policy, and even break the law. It also illustrated Reagan's ability to stick with his own vision of reality in the face of facts to the contrary. The diversion of funds to the Contras resulted from Reagan's conviction that the Contras were "freedom fighters" who were helping to protect the United States from the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Reagan's unwillingness to oversee the means his subordinates used to achieve his ends led to the diversion of funds from the arms sales to Iran to aid the Contras when it was forbidden by law.

In 1984 and 1985, seven Americans were kidnapped in Lebanon by Shiite Muslims closely connected to the Iranian leadership. Iran and Iraq were at war, and Iran had a desperate need for military equipment and spare parts to fix its weapons, many of which had come from the United States during the period it supported the Shah. Several intermediaries proposed a deal that would include the release of the hostages in exchange for the United States supplying spare airplane parts and missiles to Iran. Reagan's concern for the plight of the hostages was reflected by NSC staffers, who made arrangements to exchange U.S. arms and spare parts for Iranian intervention to have the hostages in Lebanon released. The hostages deal was also intended to strengthen U.S. ties to "moderates" in Iran, and Israel wanted to open ties to Iran and to support it in its war with Iraq. So Israel agreed to ship arms to Iran, which would then be replaced by the United States. Later, the United States shipped arms directly to Iran.

Reagan had previously opposed negotiating with terrorists, and as late as June 18, 1985, he stated, "America will never make concessions to terrorist—to do so would only invite more terrorism. . . . Once we head down that path, there would be no end to it" (Walsh 1997, 4). In addition, the Reagan administration had initiated "Operation Staunch," a diplomatic effort to stop U.S. allies from sending arms to Iran. For these reasons, in meetings on the hostage deal, Secretary of State Shultz argued that the deal would "negate the whole policy" of not dealing with terrorists. Secretary of Defense Weinberger warned that the deal could violate the Arms Export Control Act, which forbade sending arms to states designated as terrorist. President Reagan, however, was absolutely committed to bring home the hostages and said, "The American people will never forgive me if I fail to get these hostages out over this legal question" (Cannon (1982, 629-31).²⁰ Lou Cannon, in his authoritative book on the Reagan presidency, observed that "Reagan had both the courage and the ignorance to ignore the collective

19. Reagan on January 27, 1981, welcoming home the 52 U.S. hostages from Iran after 444 days in captivity (Timberg 1995, 336).

20. In addition to violating the Arms Export Control Act, the administration also violated the National Security Act that required that when the president issues a "finding" to approve a covert action that Congress must be informed before the action is undertaken, or "in a timely fashion." Congress did not learn of the arms-for-hostages initiatives until they were disclosed in the Lebanese newspaper, *Al-Sbiraa* on November 3, 1986.

wisdom of his experts and follow his own counsel” (Cannon 1991, 631). The Reagan administration’s actions to gain the release of the hostages over the course of several shipments of arms turned out to be futile. Several hostages were released, but three more hostages were captured.

The arms sales to Iran illustrated Ronald Reagan’s ability to deny external realities that did not fit with his own firm convictions and beliefs. On November 13, 1986, after the arms deals had been publicly revealed, Reagan told a national audience, “The charge has been made that the United States has shipped weapons to Iran—as ransom payment for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. . . . Those charges are utterly false. . . . Our government has firm policy not to capitulate to terrorist demands. . . . We did not—repeat—we did not trade weapons or anything else for hostages.”²¹ Several months later, after much convincing by his aides, he admitted, “I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true. But the facts and the evidence tell me it is not.”²²

Although bargaining with terrorists hurt Reagan more with public opinion, the diversion of funds to the Contras was much more constitutionally serious. White House aides, particularly National Security Advisor Admiral John Poindexter and staffer Oliver North undertook to use the “profits” received from the sale of missiles to Iran to aid the Contras in Nicaragua. The problem was that Congress had passed, and President Reagan had signed, a law prohibiting the U.S. aid to the Contras.²³

Despite the law, the administration was committed to continuing support of the Contras. President Reagan told National Security Advisor McFarlane to keep the Contras together, “body and soul” (Draper 1991, 33). NSC staffer North proposed the “neat idea” of using the money received from the sale of arms to Iran to support the Contras by diverting the money from the U.S. Treasury where it should have gone. To carry this out, North and his associates set up secret bank accounts to handle the money.

The secret attempt to fund the Contras was in direct violation of public law and a serious threat to the constitution. The president’s aides decided that what they could not achieve through the public constitutional process (continuing aid to the Contras) they would accomplish through secret, illegal means. There was no doubt about what the law prohibited; there had been a high-level public debate over aid to the Contras throughout the 1980s, and the administration had not been able to convince a majority of the Congress that continued military aid to the Contras in 1985 was essential to U.S. security.

President Reagan’s personal ideological convictions were that the Sandinista government of Nicaragua was a threat to U.S. national security interests and that the Contras should be supported by the United States. There is nothing sinister about these convic-

21. *Washington Post*, July 16, 1987, A15. Quote does not appear in a specific article.

22. *Washington Post*, July 16, 1987, A15. Quote does not appear in a specific article.

23. The Boland Amendment stated, “During fiscal year 1985, no funds available to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, or any other agency or entity of the United States involved in intelligence activities may be obligated or expended for the purpose or which would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual.” Public Law 98-473, 98 Stat. 1935-37, sec. 8066.

tions (whether they were wise or not), but his concerns set a tone in the White House that led his national security advisors to break the law in order to carry out what they were sure were his wishes. The tone Reagan set was reflected when National Security Advisor Poindexter testified that Reagan was “steadfast in his support of the Contras. . . . I was absolutely convinced as to what the president’s policy was with regard to support for the Contras. I was aware that the president was aware of third country support, that the president was aware of private support.”²⁴ Poindexter was so certain that he said that he “made a deliberate decision not to ask the president so that I could insulate him from the decision and provide some future deniability if it ever leaked out.”²⁵ Poindexter maintained that Reagan “would have approved the decision at he time if I had asked him.”²⁶

On August 12, 1987, Reagan declared, “in capital letters, I did not know about the diversion of funds” (Draper 1991, 570). But it is also clear that Reagan effectively communicated to his staff his wishes about aid to the Contras. The president’s failure to inquire more closely into how his White House staff was carrying out his policies turned out to be a serious problem.

What saved President Reagan from impeachment proceedings, which were of serious concern to John Tower, James Baker, and Nancy Reagan (Cannon 1991, 719, 733, 735), was that there was no evidence that President Reagan knew about the diversion of funds to the Contras before it happened. In addition, President Reagan did not stonewall the investigations, as Presidents Nixon and Clinton had done. He established the Tower Board to investigate the matter; he brought in Special Counsel David Abshire to ensure that there would be no cover-up; and when Howard Baker became chief of staff, there was an exhaustive internal investigation (see Abshire 2005). He refused to claim executive privilege and turned over documents to the independent counsel and congressional investigators. Thus, President Reagan salvaged his presidency from what might have been far worse consequences.

The End of the Cold War

Ronald Reagan’s public rhetoric toward U.S. adversaries was often belligerent, communicating U.S. resolve and willingness to use military force if it became necessary. For instance, in 1968 when North Korea seized the USS Pueblo electronic monitoring ship off its coast, Reagan suggested that the United States should threaten to bomb 68 (the number of U.S. sailors captured) Korean cities, one per hour until the U.S. prisoners were released (Mann 2009, 40). Although his hostile rhetoric continued into the early years of his presidency, his thinking about the Soviet Union evolved as his presidency progressed. He also became increasingly convinced that nuclear war was unacceptable and almost agreed with Gorbachev at Reykjavik to the elimination of nuclear arms from the two superpower’s stockpiles. He later reflected, “Yet there are still some people at the Pentagon who claimed a nuclear war was ‘winnable.’ I thought they were crazy” (Reagan

24. *Washington Post*, July 16, 1987, A17. Quote does not appear in a specific article.

25. *Washington Post*, July 16, 1987, A17. Quote does not appear in a specific article.

26. *Washington Post*, July 16, 1987, A1. Quote does not appear in a specific article.

1990, 585-86).²⁷ His attitude toward the Soviet Union was also to evolve to the point that he and Gorbachev together enabled the Cold War to end peacefully.

Reagan began his administration by shifting the emphasis from the Nixon-Kissinger real politic approach to the Soviet Union as a competing superpower to a much more moralistic focus on good versus evil. In June of 1982 he told the British Parliament that Marxism-Leninism would be left “on the ash heap of history” (Mann 2009, 29).²⁸ With the nuclear freeze movement gaining momentum in the United States, Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as “an evil empire” and characterized the tensions between the Russia and the West as a “struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (Mann 2009, 29). This public rhetoric was accompanied by official national security policy directives, a large increase in defense spending, and the launch of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Reagan’s optimism and belief in simple solutions led him to believe, in the face of many technical problems, that U.S. scientists and engineers could create an impermeable shield that would intercept Russian missiles. His offer to share the future technology with Russia, though likely genuine, was seen by Gorbachev as unlikely to be implemented, even if Reagan was genuine in his intentions. The Russians saw SDI as providing the United States with the capacity to survive a nuclear attack, leaving Russia with no deterrent against a first strike by the United States, and thus destabilizing the nuclear balance.

Yet when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Reagan recognized a significant difference from the previous three Soviet premiers during his presidency. At the Reykjavik summit in October 1986, Reagan and Gorbachev, to the dismay of their top security advisors, almost came to an agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons. The only sticking point was Reagan’s refusal to limit SDI research to laboratories rather than moving to testing and operational development. Although the Reykjavik summit seemed to be a failure, it was actually a turning point between the two leaders, who despite their disappointment in each other at Reykjavik, learned that they had common ideals that might be reconcilable in the future.

American conservatives and realists, however, concluded that Reagan was out of his depth and was jeopardizing U.S. national security by seeking common ground with Gorbachev. After Nixon visited Reagan in the White House, he concluded, “There is no way he can ever be allowed to participate in a private meeting with Gorbachev” (Mann 2009, 54). Ironically, Reagan had opposed Nixon’s policy of détente with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and now Nixon concluded that it was Reagan who was being too soft on communism.

A seeming exception to Reagan’s turn of heart toward the Soviet Union came in his speech at the Brandenburg Gate near the Berlin Wall in June 1987 in which he laid down the challenge: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” Reagan’s demand was made despite

27. Reagan’s abhorrence of the possibility of nuclear war was influenced by his watching a television film, *The Day After*, which depicted the devastation a nuclear war might have caused to the town of Lawrence, Kansas. “My own reaction: we have to do all we can to have a deterrent and to see there is never a nuclear war” (Mann 2009, 41-42). On Reagan’s desire to rid the world of nuclear weapons, see Nash (2009).

28. Much of this section is based on Mann’s analysis.

the objection of those in the State Department who thought it was overly hostile and directly challenging to Gorbachev. But Reagan's speech was made at the same time that he was making consistent policy accommodations, including planning for summits and arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. One of the important functions performed by the speech was to reassure conservatives in the American public that he was still a strong anticommunist and would not be taken in by the Soviets (Mann 2009, 118-20).

Under Gorbachev's leadership, the Soviet Union changed irrevocably. He withdrew Soviet troops from Afghanistan, initiated "glasnost" (political openness) and "perestroika" (economic restructuring), changed his hawkish military leadership, refused to intervene militarily in Eastern Europe, and cooperated with President Reagan to wind down the Cold War. Although Gorbachev did not intend to end the Soviet Union, the changes he set in motion, in combination with economic decay, made its collapse inevitable. The Soviet Union was ultimately brought down by its own internal contradictions, but the timing and lack of bloodshed was made possible by Reagan and his relationship with Gorbachev.²⁹ Those who credit Reagan with unilaterally causing the end of the Cold War tend to see the events in Russia at the end of the Soviet era primarily as reactions to U.S. policy choice, but that perspective overstates the effect of U.S. policy on the Soviets and understates the importance of internal contradictions within the Soviet empire (Wilentz 2008, 246).

At his last meeting with Gorbachev in Moscow Reagan was asked "Do you still think you're in an evil empire?" Reagan replied: "No, I was talking about another time and another era" (Mann 2009, 304). Thus, Reagan's greatest contribution to world peace came not through military confrontation but through his personal aversion to nuclear war and his personal relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev. Reagan is remembered as an ideological anticommunist, and he always remained one. But his ideology, unlike that of his conservative critics, was tempered by his ability to see in Mikhail Gorbachev a different type of communist, one who shared his own fear of nuclear war and with whom he could find common ground.

Conclusion: President Reagan's Mixed Legacies

Just as Ronald Reagan's presidency was marked by paradoxes, so his legacies are mixed: in his individual character, in his policy legacy, and in his constitutional role as custodian of the presidency.

At the personal level, Ronald Reagan was unfailingly gracious and friendly to everybody, from the lowest to the highest. He could put people at ease, and everyone liked him; even his ideological or partisan adversaries recognized his personal charm. As

29. Some believe that United States military expenditures, especially on SDI, were intended by U.S. policy makers to bankrupt the Soviet Union. Although it is true that Soviet military expenditures over the decades undermined its economy, Reagan's policy was not explicitly designed to cause the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. The causes of its economic collapse were many decades in the making. See the arguments in Mann (2009, 247-51).

Peggy Noonan wrote, "Imagine a president with no personal enemies" (1990, 151). But the generic charm that he dispensed on all comers, was not accompanied by personal warmth toward those who worked for him or an evident appreciation of their efforts on his behalf. Ironically, Reagan had few close personal friends, aside from his wife. James Baker noted, "He is the kindest and most impersonal man I ever knew" (Noonan, 1990, 150).³⁰ According to Martin Anderson, Reagan was a "warmly ruthless man" (1988, 288).

In public policy, Ronald Reagan is remembered as a foe of big government, though his hostility to governmental power and spending did not extend to defense spending or national security programs. His antitax convictions remain in the Republican Party as an essential part of his policy legacy, despite his tax increases after 1981. He was highly critical of government welfare, and he was able to cut domestic welfare programs in his initial budget victories of 1981, yet he did not succeed in cutting back the largest entitlement programs, and entitlement spending did not decrease over the 1980s. His pragmatic compromises on Social Security strengthened the system for the ensuing four decades. Thus, his genuine economic policy victories did not fully translate into the consequences that he envisioned.

In foreign policy Reagan succeeded in presenting the United States as strong and unyielding opponent of terrorism and communism. He succeeded in increasing defense spending significantly and strengthening U.S. strategic defense posture. Yet his vision for the SDI was not fulfilled, and his fear of a nuclear holocaust did not lead to major U.S. cutbacks in nuclear weapons. His fear of nuclear war, however, did lead to his working with Gorbachev to reduce Cold War tensions. And his initial hostility toward the USSR was transformed into a productive relationship with Gorbachev that led to the end of the Cold War, an achievement of historic importance.

The success of Reagan's initial policy proposals renewed the presidency by the impressive use of presidential power in the constitutional process. Reagan used his personal political skills at the macro level with public opinion and the micro level in persuading individual members of Congress to vote for his policies. He demonstrated that presidents could command the policy process through skillful politics and the shrewd use of governmental processes. His White House staffers asserted central control of the executive branch in the White House. Reagan also restored the presidency in public esteem after a series of presidencies that were flawed in important ways. But despite these positive executive legacies of President Reagan, in other significant respects he undermined the constitutional separation of powers system and the rule of law.

In trading arms to Iran in an attempt to free hostages, Reagan explicitly approved violating the Arms Export Control Act. In not notifying Congress of his formal presidential finding, he implicitly violated the Hughes-Ryan Act of 1974. These actions undermined the rule of law. In allowing his aides to think that he would approve their funneling of aid to the Contras during the time the Boland Amendment was in effect,

30. Noonan quotes another White House aide: "The people he worked with, they were all interchangeable" (1990, 153). According to his aide, Richard Darman, one of the reasons that Baker left the White House was that "he felt, as the Reagans do make you feel, that you're never really appreciated, and that bothered him. He's human" (Cannon, 1991, 558).

Reagan neglected his oath to “defend the Constitution” and ignored the requirement that the president “take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed.”

Thus, the constitutional legacy of President Reagan includes some unfortunate precedents. His assertions of executive prerogative were echoed when George W. Bush justified the suspension of the Geneva Conventions and habeas corpus and directed the secret interception of U.S. communications without the warrants required by law. In addition, President Bush built on the Justice Department groundwork of Meese and Samuel Alito in using presidential signing statements to claim that the president was not bound by laws deemed to impinge on Article II prerogatives.³¹ As Hugh Hecla has observed, “In asserting 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” (Hecla 2009, 27).

Thus, the paradoxes of Reagan’s presidency remain with us. He was a master at politics, and his optimistic appeals to fundamental values revived the American spirit. He demonstrated that the presidency was manageable. He led the United States toward a different perspective on Russia, and helped pave the way to the end of the Cold War. Yet along the way, he condoned his aides breaking the law and undermined constitutional accountability. In celebrating President Reagan’s impressive achievements, we must also recognize the flaws in his presidential leadership.

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31. For an analysis of the Bush administration’s assertions of executive power, see Piffner (2008). On signing statements, see Piffner (2008, 194-228).

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