

# Freedom Man:

## The Leadership of Ronald Reagan

*Lou Cannon*

In his seminal book on leadership, Warren G. Bennis wrote that the successful leader must have a guiding vision of the mission to be accomplished and the strength to persist in the face of failure or setbacks. Bennis had business leaders in mind, but his words apply with equal force to political or military leadership.<sup>1</sup> By these standards Ronald Reagan succeeded in the leadership he provided as president of the United States from 1981 to 1989. Despite some gaps in his leadership, Reagan was a transformational president. As Margaret Thatcher observed, Reagan “achieved the most difficult of all political tasks: changing attitudes and perceptions about what is possible. From the strong fortress of his convictions, he set out to enlarge freedom the world over at a time when freedom was in retreat—and he succeeded.”<sup>2</sup>

Much is demanded of American presidents. “No one can examine the character of the American presidency without being impressed by its many-sidedness,” wrote British historian Harold Laski in 1940 when his country’s existence was threatened by the Nazis and anxious for assistance from U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt. “The range of the president’s functions is enormous,” Laski wrote. “He is ceremonial head of state. He is a vital source of legislative suggestion. He is the final source of all executive decision. He is the authoritative ex-

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ponent of the nation's foreign policy. To combine all these with the continuous need to be at once the representative man of the nation and the leader of his political party is clearly a call upon the energies of a single man unsurpassed by the exigencies of any other political office in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

This essay examines the quality of Reagan's leadership using the Bennis template, keeping in mind Laski's extensive description of a president's responsibilities. Let's begin by looking at what Bennis would call the guiding vision of the Reagan presidency. There are competing narratives.

On the Right, the prevailing view is that Reagan came into office determined to rid the planet of the Soviet Union and did so through a military build-up and the Strategic Defense Initiative. This narrative downplays diplomacy and for the most part ignores the constructive impact of Reagan's negotiations with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who is given little credit for what happened. The conservative narrative emphasizes Reagan's anti-communism at the expense of Reagan's passionate view that nuclear weapons should be eliminated.

Many conservatives disapproved entirely of the summitry between Reagan and Gorbachev. George Will called Reagan's dealings with Gorbachev “moral disarmament.” William F. Buckley, the intellectual mentor of the conservative movement, came to the White House to urge Reagan not to sign the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty he had just negotiated. Conservatives waged a national campaign against Senate ratification of this treaty. Establishment Republicans such as Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger joined in questioning the treaty's merits. This anti-ratification campaign is barely remembered because it failed so dismally. Americans simply could not believe that Reagan had gone soft on communism.

The narrative of the Left is convoluted, perhaps because the Left has more problems in coming to terms with Reagan's accomplishments. At least conservatives wanted Reagan to be president. Liberals, on the other hand, saw Reagan as a menace who could lead the country into war. After Reagan became president, the dire view was reinforced by Reagan's description of the Soviet Union as an Evil Empire. Never mind that Reagan used this phrase only once. Liberals were for the most part as uncomfortable with blunt criticisms of the Soviets as conservatives were with discussions of diplomacy.

Since the Cold War did end, followed in a few years by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, liberals have a more difficult task than conservatives in explaining what Reagan accomplished. They often claim that the Soviet Union

collapsed from internal problems and that this would have happened no matter who was president—even though none of them foresaw that this would occur. Another prevailing narrative of the Left is that Reagan came into office as a bristling, anti-communist but softened his approach to the Soviets in his second presidential term.

In fact, Reagan had a consistent approach to the Soviet Union that pre-dated his presidency. He also had a sense of outcomes—or as Bennis would have put it, an enduring vision of what he wanted to achieve.

Reagan rejected as immoral and ineffective the prevailing doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, which he called a “truly mad policy.” Reagan was aware that there had been occasions during the Cold War where one side or the other had been close to a preventive attack because of a misread signal or a flight that strayed into the other nation’s air space. He was haunted by the notion that the two sides could blunder into a nuclear war that would destroy civilization if the policy of mutual assured destruction continued, a fear Gorbachev shared.

In June 1980, after Reagan clinched the Republican presidential nomination, my editors at *The Washington Post* asked me to invite him to a luncheon hosted by our esteemed publisher, Katharine Graham. At the lunch an editor pounced on Reagan’s repeated calls to increase military spending, asking if this would fuel the nuclear arms race. To our surprise, Reagan agreed but added that an intensified arms race would demonstrate that the Soviets did not have the economic capability to compete and would therefore come to the negotiating table.<sup>4</sup>

I cannot emphasize this answer enough. In 1980 before Reagan had even been formally nominated, he envisioned a negotiated end to the Cold War. He had no specific timetable and was not misty-eyed about it. Reagan thought it imperative that the United States enter into negotiation with the Soviets from a position of military and economic strength. But for Reagan the arms race was always a means towards an end. He did not see the Cold War as a permanent condition or the Soviet Union as a perpetual superpower. He viewed the world with new eyes. He practiced what his secretary of state, George Shultz, called “strategic thinking.”<sup>5</sup>

Reagan was always ready to meet Soviet leaders. When he was still recovering from the assassination attempt of March 30, 1981, Reagan wrote Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev a letter calling upon him to get together in the interests of world peace. Nothing came of it. The Soviets went through a series of geri-

atric leaders—Reagan said rather plaintively that Soviet leaders kept dying on him—and a summit did not take place until Gorbachev came to power in 1985.

Reagan and Gorbachev had four summit meetings: first at Geneva, then at Reykjavik, then Washington and finally in Moscow. The Reykjavik summit led to the INF treaty that Reagan and Gorbachev signed in Washington on December 8, 1987. It was the first treaty to reduce U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals instead merely of stabilizing them at higher levels and was the cornerstone of future agreements that made deep reductions in nuclear arsenals and established a once-unthinkable process of mutual inspection. Inspectors from the United States and Russia now routinely examine nuclear facilities on each other country's soil and, under the New Start Treaty signed by President Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin, will do so at least until 2021. The world is not out of the woods on nuclear proliferation, but it is safer today because of what Reagan and Gorbachev wrought.

Reagan's qualities as a presidential leader—most notably his considerable negotiating skills—did not spring full blown, like Athena from the brow of Zeus. They were forged over decades as he followed a unique path to the presidency.

Reagan is the product of a vanished America: the great midlands of the United States before World War I where people felt secure in the physical isolation of our country. Reagan was born in Tampico, Illinois, on February 6, 1911, the younger of two brothers. Their parents were Jack Reagan, a nomadic and alcoholic shoe salesman, and Nelle Reagan, a woman at once religious and theatrical. Ronald Reagan took after his mother. In an early autobiography Reagan described his boyhood as “one of those rare Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer idylls,” but it was in fact lonely and sometimes frightening.<sup>6</sup> In a searing passage, Reagan describes dragging his intoxicated father, who had passed out in the snow on the front porch, into the house on a cold winter night. Ronald Reagan was only 11-years-old at the time and slight of build. Although likeable, he had no friends except his brother because his family never stayed in one place for long. Because of his father's wanderlust, the family moved five times in Illinois before settling in Dixon, where the Reagans moved another five times. Throughout his life, Ronald Reagan displayed an emotional distance from others that Nancy Reagan believes was a byproduct of his itinerant childhood.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, once settled in high school, Reagan was popular with classmates and immensely optimistic about almost everything, as he would be throughout life. George Will has said that Reagan had a “talent for happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

I think Reagan had the ability, characteristic of successful children of alcoholics, to overcome hard memories by developing an idealized personal narrative of the world as he wanted it to be. Without putting Reagan on the couch, I discuss these issues in five books I have written about him, especially *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*.<sup>9</sup> Suffice here to say that Reagan learned early in life the other quality that Bennis found was the test of a successful leader: the strength to persist in the face of failure or setbacks.

That persistence was eased by Reagan's optimism, for he always saw the glass as brimming over with opportunities. Just out of college at a time when 25 percent of Americans were out of work, Reagan persuaded a radio station manager to hire him for a part-time sports announcing job for which better-qualified applicants had been rejected. He struggled but mastered the job and became a popular sports announcer. Later he took a Hollywood screen test and was offered a movie contract, the opening to a career that was then a dream of millions of Americans. As an actor, Reagan displayed a cheerful manner, a cooperative attitude on set and an ability to memorize a script rapidly. Directors valued his punctuality. Moviegoers took a shine to Reagan, who in the words of Garry Wills, often played "the heartwarming role" of himself.<sup>10</sup>

Reagan is the only one of the ten U.S. presidents since Dwight Eisenhower who spent most of his life outside of politics. He was 55 years old when he ran for governor of California in 1966 after having been a broadcaster, actor, president of the Screen Actors Guild, and television host of *General Electric Theater*, for years the leading Sunday night program. Because Reagan had succeeded in all these ventures, he never defined his life by politics and often drew upon lessons from his earlier careers in considering the problems of the presidency. Interviewing President Reagan soon after his first meeting with Gorbachev, I asked what he thought was the most neglected aspect of his biography. Without hesitation, Reagan said it was his negotiations with movie producers on behalf of the Screen Actors Guild. What had he learned from these negotiations? "That the purpose of a negotiation is to get an agreement," Reagan said.<sup>11</sup>

Reagan's political philosophy evolved over time while always retaining certain core values. He was a kind and generous man, if sometimes distanced, and respected by most of his colleagues. Starting out as a Democrat, the political allegiance of his parents, Reagan was at first a New Deal Democrat who idolized Franklin D. Roosevelt. He remained grateful throughout his life to FDR, who gave both his father and brother jobs distributing welfare assistance at the depth of the Great Depression, but as he made money and paid more taxes gradually

become disenchanted with the massive government spending and regulations associated with the New Deal. The last Democratic president he voted for was Harry Truman in 1948. Reagan joined millions of other Democrats in voting for Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 but did not become a Republican for another decade.

In some ways Reagan's change in political philosophy was more incremental than immense. Reagan was never the bleeding-heart liberal that he retroactively confessed himself to be in his autobiography, and he was only briefly the arch-conservative venerated by the Right. In 1952, when still a Democrat, Reagan gave a commencement speech in Fulton, Missouri, he called "America the Beautiful" that he could have delivered with few changes as president.<sup>12</sup> An essential element of Reagan's philosophy in all its guises was a commitment to individual freedom that has led me to call him "freedom man." In his Democratic days the enemy to this freedom was more often than not Big Business. When he became a Republican, the enemy was instead Big Government. But the commitment itself remained constant.

The one important element of Reagan's outlook that *did* change was his understanding of the power of nuclear weapons to destroy civilization as we know it. When he made his national political debut with a rousing speech for Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater on October 27, 1964, Reagan mocked those whom he described as advocates of "better Red than dead." But by the time he became president Reagan had become a nuclear abolitionist who said before the Japanese Diet: "A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought."<sup>13</sup>

Instead of seeking to maintain the dangerous balance of nuclear power with the Soviet Union, Reagan sought to reduce nuclear arsenals and pursued a negotiated outcome to the Cold War. He did so without abandoning his anti-communism. In a historic speech to British parliamentarians in Westminster on June 8, 1982, Reagan crossed out some undistinguished prose that had been written for him about Soviet actions in Poland and wrote in his distinctive, looping hand: "What I am describing now is a policy and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other totalitarian ideologies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the expression of citizens."

Five years later, on June 12, 1987, Reagan famously declared in Berlin in front of the Brandenburg Gate: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gor-

bachev, tear down this wall.” I was there, sitting right below Reagan, and still get a chill listening to recordings of this speech.

For all their despair at his rhetoric, the Soviets who negotiated with Reagan appreciated his leadership qualities. In February 1993, the Princeton Conference on the End of the Cold War brought together leading former U.S. and Soviet diplomats, including Shultz and Alexander Bessmertnykh, the deputy Soviet foreign minister in the last years of the Reagan administration. All credited the end of the Cold War to Reagan and Gorbachev, none more eloquently than Bessmertnykh, who said: “I would say that those two men were very idealistic. They each had their own ideals, which they had tried to follow all through their lives. Their ideals were not similar, but the dedication to those ideals was similar. They both believed in something. They were not just men who could trim their sails and go any way the wind blows ... this is what they immediately sensed in each other, and why they made good partners.”<sup>14</sup>

Bessmertnykh said Reagan handled negotiations well. “He might not have known all the details,” Bessmertnykh said. But, he added:

[Reagan] used little cards when he would come to details. He didn't like the formal part of negotiations.... He would try to rush through this formal part, and then he would throw away the cards and then he would start talking the direct way. I was across the table at all the summits and followed this president for all those years, and I personally admired the man very much. He was a good politician. He was a good diplomat. He was very dedicated. And if it were not for Reagan, I don't think we would have been able to reach the agreements in arms control that we reached later, because of his idealism, because he thought that we should really do away with nuclear weapons. Gorbachev believed in that. Reagan believed in that. The experts didn't believe, but the leaders did.<sup>15</sup>

Reagan firmly believed that U.S. economic success was a prerequisite to an effective foreign policy. He promised as a presidential candidate that he would rebuild U.S. military capability, reduce taxes and balance the budget. His third promise proved unachievable because he kept the other two. When he took office, Reagan did not fully realize how much of the federal budget was devoted to the built-in expenses known as entitlements. When he did realize it, Reagan

showed no desire to take on the essential programs of the New Deal beyond a useful compromise on Social Security. Reagan's critics would say, less kindly, that he was unwilling to compromise his popularity by a re-examination of these programs.

Whatever his motivation, Reagan never once in eight years submitted a budget that paid for all the programs he thought necessary. In this he followed in the footsteps of FDR, who as a presidential candidate in 1932 promised in a Pittsburgh speech that he would balance the budget. Instead, FDR launched the New Deal with its attendant massive increases in government spending. When FDR sought reelection, Republicans cited the Pittsburgh speech and assailed him for fiscal inconsistency. FDR asked his speechwriter, Sam Rosenman, how he should respond. "Deny you were ever in Pittsburgh," Rosenman advised.<sup>16</sup>

For Reagan the fiscal equivalent of denying he was in Pittsburgh came early in his presidency. He had through his powers of persuasion and the political skill of White House chief of staff James Baker pushed his tax cuts and budgets through Congress. But the tax reductions did not provide the speedy economic bounce that supply-side economists anticipated. Instead the nation plunged into deep recession in July 1981, deepening the economic crisis he had inherited. When Reagan took office, Americans were suffering from double-digit inflation, with the Consumer Price Index registering 11.3 percent in 1979 and 13.5 percent in 1980. The prime rate, the lowest rate for commercial borrowing, was 21 percent.<sup>17</sup>

But Reagan had inherited along with economic problems part of the solution in Paul Volcker, whom President Jimmy Carter had appointed chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Carter had pressured Volcker to impose credit controls, which failed and were soon scrapped. Reagan told Volcker to do what he thought was right. In their stubborn defiance of polls and politics, Reagan and Volcker proved kindred souls. Volcker, with Reagan's backing, proposed to strangle inflation by reducing the money supply and forcing up interest rates. This strategy also pushed up joblessness and bankruptcies, driving Reagan's approval rating to the low point of his presidency.

Undeterred, Reagan gave a convincing demonstration of leadership. As the recession worsened, he vowed to stay the course. "Our administration is clean-up crew for those who went on a non-stop binge and left the tab for us to pick up," he said on January 14, 1982, when surveys by his pollster Richard Wirthlin



put his approval ratings in the mid-thirties. “The recession hurts. It causes pain. But we’ll work our way out of it.”<sup>18</sup>

It was not easy. Reagan was picketed, editorially vilified and pressured by GOP leaders who worried their party would be routed in the 1982 midterm elections. “Volcker’s got his foot on our neck, and we’ve got to make him take it off,” Senate leader Howard Baker told confidantes.<sup>19</sup> But Reagan, again thinking strategically, looked beyond the elections. He continued to back Volcker and in 1983 reappointed him Fed chairman. It was a vote of confidence in the man whose firmness had rescued Reaganomics, which during the recession had become a term of derision. As the economy rebounded in November 1982, Reagan repeatedly observed, “They don’t call it Reaganomics anymore.”

The recession was followed by the most powerful economic recovery in U.S. history. The recovery began in November 1982 and lasted for 92 months to July 1990, when President George H.W. Bush was in the White House. The economy grew by a third. The stock market almost tripled in value. Nearly 20 million new jobs were created. The unemployment rate, 7.6 percent when Reagan took office and 9.7 percent at the height of the recession, dropped to 5.3 percent. The poverty rate increased a percentage point to 15.2 percent from Reagan’s inauguration through the recession, then declined to 12.8 percent at the end of his presidency.

As for inflation, the rate was 13.5 percent when Reagan was elected and 4.8 percent when he left office—and continued to fall after that. It is an enduring Reagan economic legacy, for annual inflation has never risen above 3.8 percent from 1992 to the present day.

Against these achievements must be weighed the national debt, which soared during the Reagan presidency from \$1 trillion to \$2.6 trillion with a corresponding increase in federal budget deficits. But that’s not the full story. With the Soviet military threat diminished after the Cold War ended, Reagan’s successors cut the U.S. military budget by 23 percent. That enabled President Clinton and a Republican Congress led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich to balance the budget for the first time since the Eisenhower years.

There are other domestic accomplishments on which Reagan showed impressive leadership. He carried out his promise to reduce income tax rates for everyone. The marginal tax rate was 78 percent when Reagan took office, 28 percent when he left.

Reagan was the last president to extend the solvency of Social Security. He named a commission chaired by Alan Greenspan that blended Democratic and

Republican proposals, taxing high-income recipients and gradually raising the retirement age. Watching Reagan sign these amendments to the Social Security Act in a White House ceremony on April 20, 1983, House Speaker Tip O'Neill called it "a happy day for America."<sup>20</sup>

Reagan was also the last president to obtain substantial tax reform. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 freed 7 million low-income Americans from paying federal income taxes, beginning a trend in which nearly half the adult population now pays no such tax.

These domestic achievements were obtained despite Democratic control of the House of Representatives throughout the Reagan presidency. But Reagan managed to cobble together a working majority from Republicans and Southern Democrats known as Boll Weevils. He won Boll Weevil support by promising that he would not campaign against any Democrat in the midterm elections of 1982 who voted for his tax and budget bills.

Such pragmatic actions sometimes put Reagan at odds with the Republican Party. Reagan was generally a party loyalist, but he realized that one of the hard tests of leadership is the ability to stand up to one's own side. This did not endear Reagan to other Republicans. The GOP Establishment that now idolizes Reagan fought him when he sought the party's presidential nomination in 1980. At the time Reagan was opposed by the most prominent Republicans of his day: George H.W. Bush, Howard Baker and Bob Dole. The opposition extended across the ideological spectrum of the party. John Anderson, running to the left of Reagan, and Phil Crane, running to his right, also sought the Republican presidential nomination.

Those of us who believe that Reagan was a highly successful president—and I am in that camp—must acknowledge that he sometimes came up short. This was usually in situations where Reagan failed to display the strategic thinking that Shultz extolled. When Reagan thought strategically, he helped end the Cold War, broke the back of inflation, reduced income tax rates and extended Social Security, accomplishments that lasted well beyond his presidency.

When the strategic thinking was lacking, Reagan went astray. This was most evident in Lebanon, where U.S. policy was reactive rather than strategic. Throughout two deployments in Lebanon, the Reagan's administration was deeply divided on the use of troops. Heeding what they saw as the lesson of Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger opposed using ground forces in Lebanon. Shultz believed that U.S. Marines could help advance U.S. diplomacy. Reagan waffled between these two posi-

tions. He was reluctant to put U.S. troops in harm's way but also mindful of opportunities for the U.S. military to make a difference. The situation was exacerbated by Reagan's preference for harmony in his inner circle. He tended to step back from cabinet quarrels, which allowed them to fester. As a result, his administration rarely spoke with a clear—or single—voice on Lebanon.

The context of the deadliest setback of the Reagan presidency was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that began on June 6, 1982. An attempt had been made to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom. Israel blamed the Palestinian Liberation Organization and seized on this as an opportunity to drive the PLO from Lebanon. After inflicting heavy casualties in the bombing of Beirut, the Israeli invasion accomplished its objective with help from the West. In the summer of 1982, some 800 U.S. Marines joined French and Italian military units in overseeing the evacuation of PLO forces from Lebanon. As soon as they were evacuated, Weinberger told Reagan he was concerned for the safety of the Marines. Reagan, over the objection of Shultz, on September 10, 1982, withdrew them to nearby ships. Then on September 14, nine days before he was to assume the presidency of Lebanon, Christian leader Bashir Gemayel was killed during a speech by a powerful bomb. Israeli troops entered West Beirut and stood idly by as Gemayel's militia entered Palestinian refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila and massacred more than 700 people, many of them women and children.

Watching reports of these atrocities on television, Reagan was so sickened that he let his heart rule his head. Over the objection of John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who said Lebanon was "the wrong place" for U.S. troops to be engaged, Reagan sent the Marines back into Lebanon as part of a new multi-national force with the ambitious mission of restoring a strong central government and evacuating foreign troops. There they stayed while Amin Gemayel, the unpopular brother of Bashir, was installed as president of Lebanon, and Syrian ruler Hafez Assad plotted to remove him. Assad had ties to Hezbollah, the radical Shia group that was suspected of killing Bashir and determined to drive the United States from Lebanon.

Hezbollah made its presence known on April 18, 1983, when a delivery van filled with explosives destroyed the U.S. embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people including 17 Americans. This should have led to withdrawal of the Marines, but Reagan, again lacking cabinet consensus, kept them in place as Israeli forces that had occupied most of Lebanon withdrew. After the Israelis pulled back, the Twenty-fourth Marine Amphibious Unit at the Beirut airport came under

near-constant artillery fire from Syrian-backed militia. Then at 6:22 a.m. on Sunday, October 23, 1983, a smiling young man with a bushy mustache drove a stake-bed Mercedes truck through the parking lot of the four-story headquarters building where members of the 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, were sleeping. The truck penetrated the lobby of the building and detonated while the majority of the occupants slept. The force of the explosion ripped the building from its foundation. It imploded upon itself, crushing most of the occupants or trapping them inside the wreckage.

Of the 350 servicemen in the building, most of them Marines, 346 were casualties. The death toll, including those who later died, was 241, the worst loss of U.S. troops in any single incident since the battle of Iwo Jima. Many survivors were permanently injured. Soon afterward, another bomb exploded in West Beirut, bringing down a nine-story building and killing fifty-eight French paratroopers.

Reagan would forever have a hard time coming to terms with the deaths of so many U.S. Marines. Years later, he would remember it as the “saddest day of my presidency, perhaps the saddest day of my life.”<sup>21</sup> Reagan told me that he blamed himself, saying, “Part of it was my idea—a good part of it.”<sup>22</sup> Shultz, a Marine combat veteran of World War II and champion of the second deployment, was also shaken. At a meeting of the National Security Council after the Beirut bombing, he said, “If I ever say send in the Marines again, somebody shoot me.”<sup>23</sup>

Still, it was months before the Marines were withdrawn, and neither Reagan nor Shultz had much to do with it. Armed with the report of an investigative commission that focused on the shocking lack of security at the building where the Marines were killed and with sentiment for withdrawal growing in Congress, Weinberger seized his chance. On Tuesday, February 7, 1984, while Reagan was speaking in Las Vegas and Shultz was out of the country, Weinberger made the case for a pullout to a National Security Planning Group meeting presided over by Vice President Bush, who had met beforehand with James Baker, his former campaign manager. Both were combat veterans of World War II who opposed risking the lives of additional Marines in Lebanon. Reagan’s only part in the decision was to ratify it. Talking to the president over a secure line in Las Vegas, Bush told him the NSPG had agreed the Marines should be “redeployed.” Reagan reluctantly assented. He would never use the word “withdrawal” but also would never again put U.S. ground troops in harm’s way.<sup>24</sup>

In terms both of loss of life and its impact on future U.S. actions in the region, the Lebanon deployment ranks as President Reagan's most serious foreign policy misjudgment. It took little toll on Reagan's popularity, however, because the bombing of the Marine barracks was followed by a crisis in the island nation of Grenada, where a renegade faction of the ruling Marxist party had murdered the country's prime minister and taken control of the government. Encouraged by Caribbean countries, the United States responded by invading Grenada, capturing the prime minister's killers, overcoming Cuban forces that were building a major airstrip, and restoring civilian rule. U.S. casualties were 19 killed and 115 wounded in a force of 5,000.

In terms of political damage, the Iran-Contra affair, more than the Lebanon deployment, affected Reagan. Though often conflated, "Iran-Contra" refers to separate events. During most of the Reagan presidency Iran and Iraq were engaged in a protracted war. U.S. policymakers feared that an Iranian victory would interrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. Under a policy proclaimed by Shultz in 1983 known as Operation Staunch, the United States urged other nations not to sell weapons to either combatant—a move aimed at Iran since Iraq possessed ample Soviet weapons. The CIA was soon flooded with offers from Iranian exiles offering intelligence information in exchange for anti-tank missiles or helicopter gunships.

These offers intrigued William P. Casey, the U.S. director of central intelligence. He was understandably worried about William Buckley, the CIA station chief in Beirut who had been kidnapped on March 16, 1984, and was one of seven Americans held in Lebanon. Casey feared Buckley was being tortured to reveal the names of other CIA agents. Meanwhile, national security adviser Robert McFarlane explored a novel proposal to supply U.S. weapons to a shadowy group of supposed Iranian "moderates" in return for help in securing release of the hostages.

Shultz and Weinberger, for once in agreement, saw the initiative as a potential trap and urged Reagan to reject it. Weinberger told Reagan that selling weapons to Iran would violate U.S. export law; Shultz said the proposal would "negate the whole policy" of not making deals with terrorists. The secretary of state realized that if hostages became currency, kidnappers would capture more of them. But Reagan was determined to win release of the hostages, vividly imagining the terrible conditions of their captivity. On January 17, 1986, Reagan approved the covert initiative that McFarlane had brought to him, writing in his diary that he had agreed to sell anti-tank weapons to Iran. He had con-

vinced himself that he was dealing with middlemen and not the kidnappers themselves and therefore was not trading arms for hostages.

Nothing good came of this. McFarlane resigned as national security adviser but continued with Reagan's approval to pursue the initiative from home. McFarlane's successor John Poindexter turned over the operational details to Oliver North, a swashbuckling Marine who served on the National Security Council staff. On May 25, 1986, McFarlane, North and a CIA official who spoke Farsi, flew to Tehran from Tel Aviv in an unmarked Israeli 707 loaded with anti-aircraft spare parts. They bore gifts of pistols and a chocolate layer cake decorated with a brass key plus maps for intelligence briefings on Iraq.

The Americans were met by an arms buyer and Iran Revolutionary Guards who unloaded the spare parts, took the gifts and ate the cake. The U.S. delegation spent four days in Tehran without seeing a high-ranking official. The "moderate Iranians" were fictional; the entire operation was orchestrated by the Iranian government.

Reagan was briefly heartened on July 26 when an American hostage was released. But as Shultz had foreseen, the covert arms sale provided more incentives for kidnapping hostages than releasing them. Three Americans were kidnapped in Lebanon in September and October. After 500 anti-tank weapons were delivered to Iran at the end of October, three hostages were freed—and three other Americans kidnapped in January 1987. A year after Reagan approved the arms deal, seven hostages were held in Lebanon. Two of the original seven had died, Buckley from medical neglect.

The Contra part of the affair was an attempt, organized by North and former Air Force officer Richard D. Secord, to divert \$12 million of the proceeds to the Contras, the irregular forces opposing the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. Secord and North, later convicted on relatively minor charges, pocketed a chunk of the proceeds.

Reagan supported the Contras, whom he had once extravagantly compared to the Founding Fathers, but always claimed he knew nothing about the diversion of arms sale proceeds to them. Independent counsel Lawrence Walsh, after an intensive investigation, concluded that there "was no credible evidence that the president authorized or was aware of the profits from the Iran arms sales to assist the contras...."<sup>25</sup> This might have settled the issue if Walsh had reached this conclusion when Reagan was in office, but the independent counsel didn't make this finding until August 3, 1993, when Bill Clinton was in the White

House and Reagan had been out of office for four and a half years and was struggling with Alzheimer's disease.

The Contras were not much of a fighting force, let alone being the Founding Fathers, but the pressure they put on the Nicaraguan government was one of the reasons the Sandinistas held a genuine election, a rarity for a Marxist state. The Sandinistas lost, but the rejoicing was temporary as many returned to office in a different guise. The Iran arms sale was never successful in any respect. The weapons had no discernible impact on the Iraq-Iran War, but the deal wrecked the credibility of Operation Staunch and inflicted heavy damage to Reagan's credibility.<sup>26</sup>

Reagan's decision to send the Marines back into Lebanon and his approval of the Iran arms sales have a common denominator. Although Reagan has been criticized for passive management, it was passion more than passivity that led to Reagan's leadership lapses. Reagan sent the Marines back into Lebanon because of his outrage at the massacres in the camps. He agreed to the arms sales because he desperately wanted to free Americans held hostage in barbaric conditions.

And it was because Reagan was honorably motivated that he was able to survive Iran-Contra. Reagan did many things wrong, Lawrence Walsh said, but he was not "dirty."<sup>27</sup> At First Lady Nancy Reagan's behest, Reagan apologized to the American people for the Iran deal, telling the nation on March 4, 1987: "A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that is true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not."

This less than full-bore apology sufficed. Reagan's approval ratings rose steadily after the speech, freeing him to consummate negotiations with Gorbachev. Reagan left the White House in 1989 with the highest poll ratings of any president who completed his term in office. In Gallup surveys in this century Americans rank Reagan with the martyred Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy as the best U.S. presidents.

Remember Harold Laski's long list of the functions of an American president? One item on the list is that the president must serve as "the representative man of the nation." Reagan filled this role splendidly, recognizing as he did that his authority was grounded in popular support. On the eve of his election as president in 1980 a radio reporter had asked Reagan what Americans saw in him. Reagan replied: "Would you laugh if I told you that I think, maybe, they see themselves and that I'm one of them? I've never been able to detach myself or think that I, somehow, am apart from them."<sup>28</sup>

It was this feeling of oneness with America that gave Reagan the security and confidence to lead the United States of America. He invested his popularity in his policies. Because he believed in America, Americans believed in him. This in turn enabled Reagan not only to lead our country but to support the cause of freedom across the globe. Many countries became democracies on Reagan's watch. As Thatcher rightly said, Reagan set out to enlarge freedom the world over at a time when freedom was in retreat and he succeeded.

**Lou Cannon** is the foremost biographer of Ronald Reagan. He worked for 26 years on the national staff of *The Washington Post*; a Washington Journalism Review survey identified Cannon as the “best newspaper White House correspondent” in 1985. He is now editorial advisor to *State Net Capitol Journal* in Sacramento, California. Cannon is the author of numerous books and articles on the Reagan, including *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (2003) and *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (1991).

## Notes

1. Warren G. Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1989).
2. Margaret Thatcher, “Reagan’s Leadership, America’s Recovery,” *National Review*, December 30, 1988.
3. Harold J. Laski, *The American Presidency: An Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, New York, 1940), 26.
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5. Interview with George Shultz, Jan. 8, 2014. (All interviews cited in these notes are by Lou Cannon unless otherwise identified.)
6. Ronald Reagan, with Richard C. Hubler, “*Where’s The Rest of Me?*” (New York: Dell Publishing, 1965), 18.
7. Interview with Nancy Reagan, May 8, 1989.
8. Cited by Lou Cannon and Carl M. Cannon in *Reagan’s Disciple: George W. Bush’s Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 1.
9. Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991). (Hereafter referred to as *President Reagan*) See particularly chapter II,



“The Loner,” pp. 172-77. Page numbers cited in this book are from the 2000 PublicAffairs edition.

10. Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1987), 179. This useful book provides a highly detailed account of Reagan's careers in broadcasting, film, and television.

11. Interview by Lou Cannon of Reagan, undated. Quoted in *Ronald Reagan: The Presidential Portfolio* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 27.

12. Commencement address to William Woods College in Fulton, Missouri, June 1952. The speech is an enduring expression of Reagan's belief in American exceptionalism.

13. Ronald Reagan speech to the Japanese Diet, Nov. 11, 1983. Reagan had used this formulation previously and would use it again, but these words had a solemn poignancy when delivered to the parliament of the nation that had suffered from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

14. *Witnesses to the End of the Cold War*, edited by William C. Wohlforth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 8-9. This book in abbreviated form recounts the speeches and exchanges at the conference.

15. Ibid.

16. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 621. FDR had instructed Rosenman to prepare a draft for the 1936 speech that would give “a good and convincing explanation” of what he had meant in Pittsburgh in 1932. Rosenman replied: “Mr. President, the only thing you can say about the 1932 speech is to deny categorically that you ever made it.” That is often short-handed to the version used here: “Deny you were ever in Pittsburgh.”

17. Economic data for the Consumer Price Index is from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. For an overview of Reagan economic data see Peter Ferrara, “Reaganomics Vs. Obamanomics: Facts and Figures,” *Forbes*, Nov. 5, 2011. For an in-depth look at Reagan's economic policies, see William A. Niskanen, *Reaganomics: An Insider's Account of the Policies and the People* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

18. Reagan speech to New York City Partnership, Jan. 14, 1982.

19. William Greider, *Secrets of the Temple: How the Federal Reserve Runs the Country* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 426.

20. Social Security amendments signing ceremony on south lawn of White House, April 20, 1983.

21. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 437.

22. Interview with Ronald Reagan, May 5, 1989.

23. David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 148.

24. For a detailed account of the U.S. deployments in Lebanon and the decision to withdraw the Marines, see "Lost in Lebanon," 339-401 in *President Reagan*.

25. Lawrence Walsh, *Iran-Contra: The Final Report* (New York: Times Books, 1994). Cited in *President Reagan*, 662.

26. My account of the U.S. arms sales to Iran can be found in "Darkness at Noon," 521-579 in *President Reagan*. The subsequent chapter in the book, "Struggles at Twilight," 580-662, examines the investigations into the Iran-Contra affair and Reagan's efforts to regain the trust of the American people.

27. Bob Woodward, *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 170.

28. Interview of Reagan by Dan Blackburn, NBC Radio, October 31, 1980.

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