

[strength & peace]

## American Realist

Hefting a big stick, using it sparingly

By Doug Bandow

ALZHEIMER'S ROBBED Ronald Reagan of knowledge of the world around him, but his policies continue to shape that world. Even before his death, the scramble had begun to claim his legacy.

Most obviously, George W. Bush has sought to don the Reagan mantle as he advances his foreign policy of global social engineering: aggressive war to impose democracy and preventive war against any country posing the vaguest potential threat to America. "Bush, like Reagan, is waging a battle against evil," writes Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy.

There is a superficial similarity between the two presidents: tough, no-nonsense hawks pushing the U.S. to take on all comers. But the details of their policies are dramatically different.

Ronald Reagan believed in hefting a big military stick, but used it only sparingly. Even as he rejected allied policies, Reagan sought to preserve allied relations. He recognized that circumstances changed and policies failed and shifted course accordingly.

And Reagan passionately believed in the importance of ideas and husbanded rather than squandered America's credibility. When Ronald Reagan left office the U.S. truly did stand tall, a far cry from its status today as an isolated, distrusted giant. President Reagan likely would have been horrified: the

U.S. initiating war on a lie and then finding itself caught in an unnecessary guerilla war that has made the West less secure and America more hated by more people than at any point in its history.

When Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, the Cold War raged unabated. Although in retrospect we know the USSR was weaker than it looked, America faced serious security challenges the world over. Reagan responded by strengthening U.S. military capabilities. And then using them almost not at all.

Instead, he employed a strategy of "appeasement." For instance, even as Reagan moved to bolster U.S. military forces after taking office, he dropped the grain embargo against the Soviet Union. There were obvious economic and political reasons to do so, but Reagan also cited the goal of encouraging "meaningful and constructive dialogue."

Reagan confronted the Soviets in Afghanistan and Soviet clients in Central America, but only indirectly, through proxies. Thus, American aid to the mujahedeen and Contras. He rebuffed the European allies over Nicaragua, but never tarnished transatlantic relationships with dismissive name-calling.

Similar was Reagan's approach to Poland. The Gdansk shipyard electrician Lech Walesa and his Solidarity movement spurred hope of freedom. But memories of prior political awaken-



ings that ended disastrously were revived when the Polish military cracked down in 1981.

Washington's response? "Appeasement." No military action, no threats, not even economic sanctions. Instead, Reagan backed his tough attitude toward the Soviets by allowing private forces stealthily to undermine the Polish communist regime: Pope John Paul II's dramatic moral challenge, financial assistance from U.S. labor unions, and smuggled literature and books from groups including my own Cato Institute.

The Reagan administration was always willing to talk to the Soviets. Of course, President Reagan preferred to negotiate from a position of strength, which caused him to push the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles, despite the opposition of many Europeans. And he succeeded, achieving a deft diplomatic triumph. Three years later, the U.S. and Soviet Union negotiated the withdrawal of both sides' missiles.

Reagan's ultimate goal was always a reduction in armaments. Write Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, authors of the new book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*: "from 1983 onward, Reagan devoted more of his foreign policy time to arms control than to any other subject." Reagan's commitment to radical disarmament was evident in his push for a space-based missile defense and the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons.

The latter objective might have been unrealistic, but it demonstrated that Reagan was pushing not domination through American military power but peace through international co-operation. In 1988, Reagan spoke eloquently about peace as well as freedom in a speech to students at Moscow State University. No wonder Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary* magazine, earlier had denounced Reagan for "appeasement by any other name."

Equally important, Ronald Reagan recognized when circumstances changed and when those changes required the modification of U.S. policy. Again, the Soviet Union—which posed the gravest security threat to America for nearly a half century—offers the most obvious example.

Reagan correctly saw the struggle against communism in moral terms. He challenged what was truly an Evil Empire at its philosophical roots. He also understood the enormous productivity of a free people in a free economic

system and sought to unleash that economic power through tax cuts and deregulation. The entrepreneurial explosion that he helped spark left the decrepit Soviet bloc ever further behind.

But Reagan recognized that Mikhail Gorbachev was different from earlier murderous Communist Party general secretaries. Reagan started with "trust but verify," forming a critical partnership with the one man in the USSR who could keep the soldiers in their barracks. Gorbachev might have hoped to preserve a more humane version of the Soviet Union, but no matter. He ensured that the Cold War ended peacefully. In June 1987, President Reagan stood before Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and demanded: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" And Gorbachev essentially did so, just 17 months later.

Notably, Gorbachev gives Reagan credit. After Reagan's death, Gorbachev wrote in the *New York Times*: "I don't know whether we would have been able to agree and to insist on the implementation of our agreements with a different person at the helm of American government. True, Reagan was a man of the

incumbent left-wing government. Although Grenada posed few security threats, the administration did eliminate a potential Soviet ally in America's backyard while safeguarding Americans who filled the local medical school. Most important, the U.S. went home and left the island to nutmeg production.

After receiving what the administration said was irrefutable evidence—which actually seems to have been irrefutable evidence—of Libyan complicity in the bombing of a Berlin nightclub filled with Americans, Reagan retaliated in 1986. He neither staged an invasion nor engaged in nation-building. Instead, he sent the clear message that any attack on the U.S. would reap a severe response.

Finally, there was Lebanon. Intervening was one of the worst decisions of his presidency, and the one closest to neo-conservative precepts. In an attempt to aid Israel, which had invaded its northern neighbor, President Reagan committed the U.S. on the side of the minority Christian government in a civil war. More than 300 Americans died after bombings at the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks. At this point Reagan demonstrated how he differed

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right. But, while adhering to his convictions, with which one could agree or disagree, he was not dogmatic; he was looking for negotiations and cooperation." Reagan chose "negotiations and cooperation" even as some conservatives were warning of KGB tricks and disinformation.

Of course, Reagan did employ the military, but only three times in combat. Once was in Grenada, after a hard-line communist *coup d'état* ousted the

from President George W. Bush: he recognized that he had made a mistake, and he changed policy.

Today neoconservatives routinely lump Reagan's retreat from Lebanon with Clinton's withdrawal from Somalia and failure to retaliate for the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and the *USS Cole* in Yemen as "appeasement" that encouraged terrorists. Podhoretz, for instance, denounced Reagan for "having cut and run."

Yet what could the U.S. have done in Lebanon? Half-hearted intervention on behalf of one faction in a tragic but irrelevant civil war had failed; deeper involvement would have achieved nothing. The only alternative was Iraq-lite: invasion, occupation, and reconstruction, which would have inflamed the Muslim world, stoked the fires of terrorism, and forced American soldiers to fight a meaningless guerrilla war 20 years early.

Ronald Reagan, in contrast to George W. Bush, understood that such a policy exceeded America's power and was not in America's interest. So he redeployed the troops on ships that soon sailed for home. That was the Reagan administration's last attempt at nation-building.

Out of this awful mistake we see Reagan's strengths: commitment to an ally, desire to bring a better life to foreign peoples, and pragmatic response to violent reality. His ends did not change, but Reagan readily adjusted the means. He always saw America as a shining city on a hill, an international force for good that could best convince others to seek freedom rather than force a particular form of democratic governance upon them.

Today U.S. foreign policy lies in ruin. America's troops are dying in an unnecessary occupation; America's actions are spurring more terrorists to take up arms; America's credibility is in tatters around the world. The only unity that the Bush administration's aggressive policies have encouraged is between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq against America and among virtually everyone else around the globe against Washington. This is a world very different from the one bequeathed by Ronald Reagan. ■

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*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. The author and editor of several books, Bandow also is a member of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy.*

## At the Pleasure of The President

I was Reagan's man.

**By James G. Watt**

FEW MEN IN HISTORY have known their God-given assignment with the clarity that Ronald Reagan understood his. And fewer still accomplish their assignments with the flair and the impact that he did.

Like many who went to Washington "with Reagan," I had not known him personally, socially, or even politically. And yet instinctively, I tracked with him. For conservatives across the country, he was the personification of long-dormant ideals—the drive for assured freedom, smaller government, lower taxes—and thousands rallied to his cause.

There are many who have been "the president" but only one who can be called "The President." I ran the Department of the Interior with his generous and broad delegation of authority, but I was never my own man. I was always Reagan's man at Interior.

We warriors under his command recognized that this President had received unusual strength to be undeterred by opposition. So we returned a full measure of loyalty, trusting his leadership in what became the Reagan Revolution. He owned our devotion and extended the same—to me, to others, at his own expense, when it was neither deserved nor expected. When resistance rolled in, he was there with an encouraging phone call or a note. He gave direction from the Oval Office or stand-up conversations in the Cabinet room. He defended us in the public arena when the media or members of Congress turned up the political

pressure. He won our respect and carried our Revolution.

My first meeting with Reagan was in the Blair House, where he interviewed me as a possible Secretary of the Interior. After he outlined what he wanted his appointee to do, he looked me in the eye and asked, "Can you and your wife take the personal abuse that will come at you?" By some combination of innocence and ignorance, I answered that we could. Two decades later, I realize that I had no understanding of what this caring, concerned President-elect was alerting me to.

The political hostilities came, just as The President knew they would, and, in addition, I came under personal attack for my Christian commitment. Frequently, I would get a phone call in my office at about 7:30 a.m. from Bill Clark, Ed Meese, or Jim Baker saying something to the effect of, "Jim, I have just been with The President. He has seen what the press is saying and wants you to stand tough and not give an inch." Those calls always seemed to come on my lowest days. They were part of the fuel that kept me going.

That was the warm side of The President. But he was steel as well. I learned how firm his resolve could be on an early September day when I was summoned to the Oval Office.

I was bringing about the massive change that The President had promised the American people during his campaign as it related to the management of