

WHERE WE SUCCEEDED, WHERE WE FAILED

Lessons from Reagan Officials for the Next Conservative Presidency

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The coming year will be critical for conservatives in several ways. The fate of the economy will determine whether Ronald Reagan—and conservative economic ideas—are remembered for the stock market crash and the collapse of the dollar, or for leading America from Jimmy Carter's stagflation into the longest peacetime boom in recent history. The November elections will be a referendum of sorts on conservatism—particularly in foreign policy, where all the current Republican candidates are committed to a strong defense, and all the current Democrats to a weak one. And the primaries will determine whether the conservative movement, currently leaderless and running out of political momentum, will gain a standard-bearer who can mobilize millions as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan did.

Equally important, conservatives this year will begin a systematic assessment of the successes and failures of the Reagan presidency. The Reagan administration is the first experiment in conservative government in over half a century. It has suffered many defeats, some self-inflicted, in trying to implement conservative policies, and some of the policies that it has succeeded in implementing have not worked out as intended. At the same time, it has registered a string of impressive policy achievements that could scarcely have been anticipated by Reagan's supporters before the 1980 elections (see "One Hundred Conservative Victories," *Policy Review*, Summer 1987). A wealth of practical experience with government—distilled from the accomplishments, mistakes, and missed opportunities of thousands of Reagan appointees—therefore awaits the next conservative administration.

The following symposium is part of the effort to collect practical advice for conservatives in future presidencies. The participants, all former Reagan appointees, were asked four questions: What was your principal

accomplishment in the Reagan administration? What was your principal disappointment in the policy area where you were most involved? What did you learn about Washington that you did not know before? And knowing what you know now, what would you have done differently?

—A.M.

KENNETH L. ADELMAN



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"All too often conservatives would rather bluster than fight."

My greatest accomplishment sounds modest but, believe me, it's not: avoiding the endless caravan of arms control schemes that would have harmed U.S. interests.

Those outside government cannot imagine the political, diplomatic, State Department-generated, and other pressures to adopt some harebrained "new" scheme to negotiate with the Soviets or to negotiate with ourselves. Had we moved down that road—and we started more times than I

care to recall—we would have ended up with no agreement at best and a bad agreement at worst.

Most arms control concoctions peddled as “new” have actually been around a while and have justifiably been rejected. I am reminded of that wonderful cable in the early 1960s from Dean Rusk to John Kenneth Galbraith, then ambassador to India; Rusk told Galbraith that insofar as the arguments he mustered in an elaborate diatribe on Vietnam were coherent, they had already been considered and rejected.

That’s precisely why any administration needs people with experience in arms control (and I don’t say that about most foreign policy fields). Otherwise, they’ll be easy prey for the professional arms control pushers.

I’ve come to learn there are no new mistakes in arms control. We usually just keep on making the same old ones. Knowing those made in the past helps anyone follow our First Lady’s advice on drugs: “Just say no!”

No Response to Soviet Cheating

My greatest disappointment: We didn’t do anything, really, about Soviet cheating. Not from want of effort but from want of answers. We never really found anything much *to do* about Soviet cheating. That’s the sad truth.

Those outside government may well wonder why, year after year, we reported a pattern of Soviet violations and did nothing about it. We hit the Soviets with prospects of new agreements, and that’s about all. That’s not how normal folks act when cheated by a merchant, for instance; then we sue, get the Better Business Bureau stirred up, at least persuade friends not to patronize the place. We certainly don’t continue patronizing the place ourselves.

We tried—oh, how we tried—to come up with effective countermeasures, but there didn’t seem to be any. Augmenting U.S. military programs, the obvious response, never came forth because the Pentagon wanted to preserve its top priority programs, which were then being mercilessly cut, rather than add new programs as a response to Soviet cheating.

Our sin was one of omission, while Congress’s sin was one of commission. Those on the Hill both sliced the existing military programs and mandated that we stay in arms agreements that the Soviets were violating. That’s shameful.

What did I learn about Washington? Confirmations can be rougher than anticipated. Sure I knew it intellectually, but I did not “see it feelingly,” in King Lear’s marvelous phrase. I do now.

I also learned that all too often, conservatives would rather bluster than fight. Many of our brethren like to be modern Paul Reveres, sounding the alarm about a problem, but then they don’t put together the troops you need to win political battles. The cause hasn’t worked the Congress enough, for example, to get decent funding for the gasping SDI program, even though it would surely have mobilized the nation had we given away one SDI spark plug at the negotiating table.

Should Have Been Franker

What should we have done differently? We all should have been much franker about the real limitations of arms

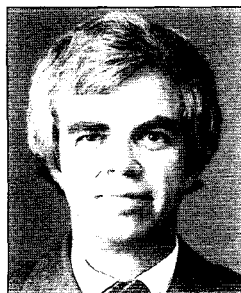
control. We bought the rhetoric, though thankfully not the substance, of the traditional “arms control community.”

We really didn’t come out and explain, with the repetition and directness needed to move public debate, that arms control can do modest good if handled well and enormous harm if handled badly. Arms control has been vastly overvalued and oversold in Western public discourse, including (most painfully) on our watch.

The average American has been inundated with the message that somehow, someday, arms control can or even *will* deliver us from danger. Arms control has often been equated with “peace” by officials who should know better. It is now taken as synonymous with “peace” by publics who should have been told better.

I never really believed Dean Acheson’s comment: “To leave public life is to die a little.” But I do think that to be in public life is to live a lot. None of us, even the grumpiest among us, would have traded the experience. What a time it was!

MARTIN ANDERSON



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“Reaganomics is not perfect, but it is way ahead of whatever is in second place.”

My greatest accomplishment was probably helping to develop and implement President Reagan’s comprehensive economic plan—his five-part program of reduced tax rates, lower growth rates for federal spending, regulatory reform, a sounder monetary policy, and stability and consistency for all aspects of that economic policy.

Reaganomics is not perfect, but it is way ahead of whatever is in second place. From 1982 to 1987, more than 13 million new jobs were created. We have had the longest period of steady peacetime growth—61 consecutive months up to December 1987—in history. Inflation has dropped so low it is no longer a serious public concern. Interest rates are low and steady. The rate of unemployment is now below 6 percent, the lowest level since the late 1970s.

During the last five years, the United States produced \$20 trillion worth of goods and services. Overall, it was the greatest economic expansion in history.