

## WHY REAGAN CAN'T SAVE THE REPUBLICANS

Some time ago *The New Republic* published a spoof about the Bush Dynasty of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Jeb would follow his brother as president for 8 years, then the Bush twins Barbara and Jenna, the first female presidents, would add another 16 years. Barbara Jr.'s greatest legislative achievement was the legalization of drugs and would become known as the finest example of compassionate conservatism. Why should those rich people have to buy their recreational drugs illegally?

With Bush's negative polls in the mid-30s with no hope of recovery, there is no talk, serious or otherwise, about a Bush dynasty. At Republican fundraisers these days it is Ronald Reagan who is held up as the model president. Most of this is misdirected nostalgia because Reagan never fit the conservative Republican mold, especially the one that is current today.

My first memories of Reagan were as a young boy watching GE Theatre in the 50s. I remember him as the nice man with slick hair and a great voice. It was that sonorous voice and the ability to read a script well that convinced some Southern California businessmen that this man would be an effective spokesperson for their conservative causes, primarily virulent anti-Communism and free market economics.

If the U.S. had a split executive, Reagan would have made a much better Head of State than a Head of Government, an office that requires a person much more informed and more attuned to policy detail. R. W. Apple, Jr. recently wrote that Reagan “was not a great president, [but] he was master at projecting a mood; he could certainly rally the country.” But even a good Head of State should stay awake at formal affairs and should not have to say “I don’t remember” so many times.

There was a significant difference between the political agenda of Reagan’s early backers and many of his Republican heirs today: there were no religious or moral issues. Armand Deutsch, an early California supporter, said that “people around Ronnie cared about the economy, the loss of American power around the world. We did not talk about marijuana or gay rights and those things.” Even today Republicans who run for major offices in California consistently lose on these issues.

The Reagans did not attend church, and if they had a religion it was decidedly New Age. The most embarrassing fact about the Reagan presidency is

that the First Lady set her husband's schedule according to the signs of the Zodiac. Of the three ideals of the Republican Right—God, Country, and Family—Reagan was passionate about only one of these.

The achievements of Reaganomics are grossly exaggerated. Remember the promises of supply side economics and its “trickle down” theory? Twenty-two years later the gulf between rich and poor America has widened not narrowed. Adjusted for inflation, the wages of middle class Americans are now falling rather than increasing.

After getting his first tax cut through Congress, the man who taught Americans to loathe liberals, hate taxes and government that they support, raised taxes, not once but several times. Contrary to his pale shadow now in the White House, Reagan had enough sense to realize that his tax cuts did not raise sufficient revenues, but he still produced the second largest budget deficit in history. Other than the fivefold increase in the debt during WWII, the largest increases have come during Reagan's 8 years (\$1.6 trillion) and Bush the Lesser's 5 years (\$2.2 trillion).

The real economic miracle happened in the second Clinton administration, whose budget surpluses have now been squandered by a Reaganite who believes that “staying the course” on the economy and Iraq is somehow a virtue. Polls at the end of their second terms show Clinton more popular than Reagan. I surmise that Americans found that secretly selling arms to our enemy Iran much more alarming than pulling an intern's thong.

There is one major difference between Reagan and Bush. Reagan turned against his hawkish advisors—Perle, Wolfowitz, and Rumsfeld—and decided to negotiate with the Soviet rather than duke it out with them. At the 1986 Reykjavik Summit, Reagan's aids were furious that he and Gorbachev had initially agreed to total disarmament. The deal fell through when Reagan refused to give up Star Wars.

Many people believe that it was Reagan's plan for a space based anti-missile shield that finally made the Soviets say Uncle. Recently released Soviet documents show that Russian scientists calculated that it would not work. Even Margaret Thatcher, Reagan's bosom buddy, agreed with the critics of Star Wars.

The record is now clear that the real reason for the demise of the Soviet Union is the fact that we initiated every single step in the arms race and the Soviet's clumsy economy simply couldn't keep up. (The more money that went to

new weapons meant less prosperity for the long suffering Russians.) It is a significant fact that the alleged threat of Star Wars did not produce an equivalent increase in Soviet military budgets in that area.

Jean Kilpatrick, Reagan's UN ambassador, claimed that it was better to support right-wing authoritarian regimes than Communist totalitarian governments, because the former could change with our help but the latter would never change. But it turns out that Reagan was asking the wrong person when he challenged Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Contrary to Reagan's neo-conservative philosophers, the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies, on the initiative of their own people, collapsed within several years.

No one won the Cold War because Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to end it peacefully and diplomatically. As Vladislav M. Zubok, Temple University historian, states: "It was Reagan the peacemaker, not the cold warrior, who made the greatest contribution to history." Every president from Truman to Reagan should get credit for our firm bipartisan stand against the Soviet Union, even though, tragically, both sides pursued policies that caused millions of unnecessary deaths in the Third World. Reagan stood at the end of the slow economic collapse of a failed ideology and had the good luck of dealing with a pragmatic Soviet leader.

Except for the bombing of Libya, Reagan was not much of a hawk on terrorism either. Far more Americans died from terrorist attacks under Reagan than did under Clinton, and Reagan shipped supplies to Saddam Hussein for the chemical weapons that he used against the Kurds. The Reagan administration also openly supported the terrorist acts against the democratically elected government in Nicaragua. Instead of supporting moderates in Afghanistan, Reagan gave billions of dollars to the radical Islamists who now have an international network and are seeking our destruction.

Even though he raised taxes, Reagan's mantra of "less government, less taxes" has been so ingrained in the electorate that conservative Republicans may destroy the very basis of American civilization as we know it. Public services, schools and universities are now so under funded that they may never recover, and I predict that a united Europe and highly educated, well trained Asians will surpass us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Even though Reagan's instincts were such that he could anticipate some of the dangers of rigid ideology, there are still far too many chilling parallels between

him and our current president. Both are simple minds trying to operate in an increasingly complex world, one that cannot be divided between us, cowardly Europeans, and the Evil Ones. We have made enormous contributions as a nation, but we should never fool ourselves that we somehow are exceptional, and certainly not God's chosen instrument to save the world.