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## GOP hawks twist Reagan's foreign policy legacy

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Alzheimer's robbed Ronald Reagan of his memory. Now Republican neoconservatives are trying to steal his foreign policy legacy. A de facto peacenik who was horrified by the prospect of needless war, Reagan likely would have been appalled by the aggressive posturing of most of the Republicans currently seeking the White House.

Ronald Reagan took office at a dangerous time. The Cold War raged and Reagan sacrificed much of his political capital to increase U.S. military outlays. But he used the new capabilities created almost not at all.

Reagan's mantra was "peace through strength." Peace was the end, strength the means. He focused his attention on the Soviet Union and its advanced outposts, especially in the Western Hemisphere. Restraining the hegemonic threat posed by an aggressive, ideological Soviet Union led to Reagan's tough policy. Still, Reagan avoided military confrontation with Moscow. Indeed, he routinely employed what neocons today deride as "appeasement."

For instance, Reagan dropped the Carter grain embargo against Moscow. Reagan said he desired to encourage "meaningful and constructive dialogue."

Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement were a global inspiration, but the Polish military, fearing Soviet intervention, imposed martial law in 1981. No American bombers flew, no invasion threatened, no soldiers marched. Reagan did little other than wait for the Evil Empire to further deteriorate from within.

Little other than talk, that is. Reagan wanted to negotiate from a position of strength, but he wanted to negotiate.

Moreover, as my late White House boss, Martin Anderson, and his wife, Annelise, documented, Reagan was horrified by the prospect of nuclear war, which drove him to propose creation of missile defense and abolition of nuclear weapons.

In their book on foreign policy analysts Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke observed: “from 1983 onward, Reagan devoted more of his foreign policy time to arms control than to any other subject.” Norman Podhoretz, the neocon godfather, denounced Reagan for “appeasement by any other name.”

Reagan was willing to switch rhetoric and policy when circumstances changed. He recognized that Mikhail Gorbachev was different from previous Soviet leaders. Reagan worked with Gorbachev despite criticism from his own staffers. Gorbachev later wrote that Reagan “was looking for negotiations and cooperation.” Or, in a word, appeasement.

Of course, Reagan was not a pacifist. But he was cautious in using the military. He usually intervened through proxies to counter Soviet or allied communist influence—an important but limited agenda which disappeared along with the Cold War.

Reagan used the military in combat only three times. The first instance was Grenada, after murderous communists ousted their slightly less hard-line colleagues. Reagan defenestrated the new regime, simultaneously protecting American medical students and eliminating a nearby Soviet outpost. When the job was done Reagan brought home the U.S. forces.

The second case was against Libya in response to evidence that Tripoli had staged the bombing of a Berlin nightclub favored by Americans. It was a simple retaliatory strike. There was no regime change and nation-building.

The third, and sadly disastrous, intervention was Lebanon. The U.S. had few measurable interests at stake in that tragic nation’s civil war, but Reagan sought to strengthen the nominal national government, in truth but one of some 25 armed factions. Washington trained the Lebanese military and took an active role in the fighting. U.S. intervention triggered attacks on both the U.S. Embassy and Marine Corps barracks.

Reagan recognized that he’d erred. He “redeployed” existing troops to naval vessels which then sailed home without fanfare. Because he had the courage to back down, thousands of Americans did not die fighting in another meaningless Mideast war.

Yet neoconservatives denounced him for refusing to occupy Lebanon. Podhoretz charged Reagan with “having cut and run.” President George W. Bush argued that Reagan’s withdrawal was one reason terrorists “concluded that we lacked the courage and character to defend ourselves, and so they attacked us.”

Lebanon was a terrible mistake, but Reagan learned from his errors. More important, he was no global social engineer. Even where he acted militarily he had a narrow objective.

It’s presumptuous to claim to know what Reagan would think today. But he likely would be angry at the attempt to use his legacy to justify a failed foreign policy.

When Ronald Reagan left office the U.S. truly stood tall. George W. Bush more than any of Reagan’s other successors squandered the Reagan legacy.

And Bush did so with a recklessly aggressive policy that ran counter to Reagan's far more nuanced approach in a far more difficult time. Similarly, most of today's leading Republicans, in contrast to Reagan, appear to want strength but not peace.

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