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Betrayed: Why Reagan Would Be Ashamed of the Neocons

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Alzheimer's robbed Ronald Reagan of his memory. Now Republican neocons 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, with the Soviet Union suffering through the Brezhnev era of stagnant authoritarianism. Moscow's weaknesses, though eventually exposed, were not so evident at the time and Washington faced challenges around the world. Reagan sacrificed much of his political capital to increase U.S. military outlays. But he barely utilized the new capabilities that were created.

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. One could disagree with his specific policies, but not his characterization of the U.S.S.R. as an "evil empire." Moscow had to be contained.

Restraining the hegemonic threat posed by an aggressive, ideological Soviet Union led to Reagan's tough policy toward Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and his immediate successors. Still, Reagan avoided military confrontation—there was no attempt at "roll back," as it was called during the Cold War. He wanted the U.S.S.R. to "lose," but not in a shooting war. Indeed, he routinely employed what neocons today deride as "appeasement."

For instance, during the 1980 campaign, Reagan opposed the Carter administration's insistence on an Olympic boycott—which required acting like the Soviets by threatening to seize the passports of individual athletes who might be tempted to travel to Moscow. Reagan also dropped the Carter grain embargo against Moscow. Reagan recognized the obvious economic and political benefits of allowing trade; he also explained that he desired to encourage "meaningful and constructive dialogue."

Worse from the standpoint of today's Republican war lobby was Reagan's response to the Polish crisis. Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement were a global inspiration but the Polish military, fearing Soviet intervention, imposed martial law in 1981. Again, Reagan's response was, well, appeasement. No bombers flew, no invasion threatened, no soldiers marched. He continued to contain Moscow and challenge its moral foundation. But like Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 and 1956 and Lyndon Johnson in 1968, Reagan did not risk a general war to help liberate Eastern Europeans when they opposed Soviet troops. Indeed, from Reagan came no military moves, no aggressive threats, no economic sanctions. 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. And despite his image as a crazed cowboy and mad Cold Warrior, he negotiated over arms reduction with ... the Soviet Union. For example, he used the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles to win the withdrawal of both nations' weapons.

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. Reagan's concern was evident early. In their [book on foreign-policy](#) [4], 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." Reagan spoke of peace when he addressed Soviet students in Moscow in 1988. Norman Podhoretz, the neocon godfather, denounced Reagan for "appeasement by any other name."

Reagan was willing to switch rhetoric and policy when circumstances changed, in this case, the nature of the Soviet regime. He had no illusions, unlike some observers, that enjoying jazz made former KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who replaced Brezhnev, into a closet liberal. In contrast, Reagan understood that Mikhail Gorbachev was different. A reform Communist, Gorbachev nevertheless humanized the system and kept the military in its barracks. Reagan worked with the Soviet leader, despite heartfelt criticism from his own staffers and fevered denunciations from activists—dissent that Reagan acknowledged in his diary. 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—Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan. It was an important but limited agenda, and disappeared along with the Cold War.

Reagan used the military in combat only three times, and not to impose democracy, rebuild failed states or overthrow dictators. The first instance was Grenada, after murderous Communists ousted their slightly less hardline colleagues. Reagan defenestrated the new regime, simultaneously protecting American medical students and eliminating a nearby Soviet outpost. Most important, when the job was done, Reagan brought home the U.S. forces and allowed the locals to produce nutmegs—and govern themselves.

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

extended bombing, ground invasion or lengthy occupation highlighted by regime change and nation building. Reagan sent the simple message to Libya and other governments: do not attack Americans.

The third, and sadly disastrous, intervention was Lebanon. The United States had few measurable interests at stake in that tragic nation's civil war, but sought to strengthen the nominal national government—in truth, but one of some twenty-five armed factions—and support Israel, which had invaded its northern neighbor. Washington trained the Lebanese military and allied militias and introduced U.S. combat forces. John H. Kelly of Rand observed: “In Lebanon it looked very much as if the United States had taken up arms in behalf of the Christians.” Indeed, the United States took an active role in the fighting; officials were forced to admit that heavy naval bombardments resulted in civilian casualties. Washington's intervention triggered attacks on both the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks.

Reagan recognized that he'd erred. After briefly emphasizing retaliation, he decided not to double down and “redeployed” existing troops to naval vessels, which then sailed home without fanfare. He consciously rejected a policy of Iraq-lite: invasion, occupation and transformation. We all should be thankful that he had the courage to back down. Otherwise, thousands of Americans could have died fighting in another meaningless Mideast war. More enemies would have been created and terrorists would have been activated.

Yet neoconservatives denounced him sharply for refusing to invade and occupy Lebanon. Their criticism continues to this day. Philip Klein of the American Spectator said the withdrawal “sent the message to terrorists that they could attack us and we wouldn't have the appetite to respond.” 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.” Former CIA Director James Woolsey claimed that Iran and Syria saw America as cowards, since “[t]hey saw us leave Lebanon after the '83 Marine Corps bombing.”

Lebanon was a terrible mistake, but, in contrast to the perpetual war lobby, Reagan learned from his errors. More important, Reagan was no global social engineer. He stood on behalf of individual liberty, but saw America's role as the famed “city on a hill.” He advocated increased military outlays for defense of this country, not international social work. Even where he acted militarily, he had a narrow objective. He was willing to adapt his policies to changed circumstances.

It's presumptuous to claim to know what Reagan would think today. But the world is a lot different than when he was in office. He undoubtedly would recognize that the end of the Cold War terminated the most serious threat against the United States. He likely would have been horrified at the self-delusion that went into the disastrous decision to invade Iraq. He probably wouldn't be happy with how Washington's defense policy has kept rich allies as welfare dependents more than a quarter century after he left office. An opponent of social engineering at home, it's hard to imagine him wasting American lives and money for more than a dozen years attempting to turn Afghanistan into a liberal democracy. An advocate of aid to insurgents fighting outside oppressors, he likely would have recognized the risk that local insurgents would

take up arms against American occupiers. He certainly would have worried about Washington's lost credibility, but likely would have recognized that the answer was to make fewer foolish promises in the future, rather than to make good on dumb ones in the past, such as to bomb Syria over its apparent use of chemical weapons.

Finally, he would be angry at the attempt to use his legacy to justify a failed foreign policy. When Ronald Reagan left office, the United States truly stood tall. George W. Bush more than any of Reagan's other successors squandered the Reagan legacy. And the former did so with a recklessly aggressive policy that ran counter to Ronald Reagan's far more nuanced approach in a far more difficult time. In contrast to Reagan, most of today's leading Republicans appear to want strength, but not peace.

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