



No One in Current GOP Field Wears the Reagan Foreign Policy Mantle

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Every Republican wants to be Ronald Reagan reincarnated. At least that's what the candidates all say. But the 40th president probably wouldn't feel comfortable running today.

First, he'd have a good laugh at all the fear-mongering. For instance, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie declared: "I don't believe that I have ever lived in a time in my life when the world was a more dangerous and scary Chris Christieplace."

Reagan lived through World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. He likely would explain that never in its history has America been as secure from existential and even substantial threats.

Reagan almost certainly would see Russia as a challenge more than a threat like the Soviet Union. He would appreciate how far America's Asian and European allies had come over the last quarter century, which gives them the wherewithal to act in their own defense.

Second, Reagan likely would be skeptical of the GOP mantra of more military spending as an answer to invisible, unnamed threats. Reagan sought more Pentagon dollars because he feared America was behind the Soviet Union, an aggressive global antagonist.

Today the U.S. is far ahead of everyone, accounting for 40 or more percent of the entire globe's military outlays, and allied with most of the world's industrialized states. Certainly he would insist on hearing a persuasive rather than conclusory argument why more money was necessary to bolster U.S. security.

Third, Reagan would insist on negotiating with adversarial regimes, especially that in Tehran. He did so with the worst of the Soviet leaders. Shortly after taking office Reagan advocated "meaningful and constructive dialogue."

In fact, one reason Reagan pushed a military build-up was to allow America to negotiate from a position of strength. Which Washington certainly can do now. Not only does the U.S. enjoy overwhelming military advantages compared to Iran. So do Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the ultimate anti-communist understood the importance of people. He dropped the label "evil empire" for the U.S.S.R. once Mikhail Gorbachev took control. Gorbachev later observed that Reagan "was looking for negotiations and cooperation." All the peace talk led Norman Podhoretz, the neocon editor of *Commentary*, to denounce Reagan for "appeasement by any other name."

A similar personality shift occurred in Iran when Hassan Rouhani succeeded Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Reagan almost certainly would have explored the willingness of Tehran to make a deal.

Fourth, Reagan was horrified by the prospect of war. That is what animated his commitment to missile defense. In contrast, most of the Republican presidential candidates seem to believe that breathing threats and proclaiming toughness are essential elements of manhood.

In fact, once elected he seldom used the military. Reagan preferred to rely on proxies when possible, as in Afghanistan and Nicaragua. Twice he employed the armed services in narrow operations—to retaliate for a Libyan terrorist attack on Americans in Berlin and overthrow a brutal Communist junta in Grenada, where U.S. medical students were potentially at risk.

He also intervened in the Lebanese civil war, which turned American personnel into targets. He soon recognized that he had made a great mistake and withdrew U.S. forces. Again, the neoconservatives were horrified: Reagan didn't double down to occupy and transform the country. The ever-truculent Podhoretz complained that Reagan had "cut and run."

Fifth, the latter probably would have few delusions about past policies. Having backed the Mujahedeen against the Soviet Union, he almost certainly would not have devoted American lives and money to nation-building in Afghanistan. Reagan would have recognized that Iraq had turned into a disaster.

And while he would not have been impressed by the competence of President Barack Obama's foreign policy team—who could be?—Reagan would realize that it was Dubya who really squandered the Reagan legacy. Nuance highlighted Reagan's policies but is completely lacking in the current "bomb 'em, invade 'em, occupy 'em" GOP crowd, other than Rand Paul and, surprisingly, Donald Trump.

If Ronald Reagan was running today, his competitors would be denouncing him as a wimpy appeaser, a naïf enthused with negotiation, a president far too reluctant to use America's "superb military," as Madeleine Albright charged of Colin Powell. Bloggers, columnists, talk radio hosts, and Fox News would be piling on. Come the first primaries he'd likely end up as political road kill.

There is much that we can learn from Ronald Reagan today. But those candidates who most claim to represent Reagan's legacy are least like him.

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