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Foreign Policy Lessons from Ronald Reagan, a Conservative Peacenik

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In a world aflame, the Biden administration risks sleepwalking into two or three catastrophic wars. Leading Republicans are on board. Yet an increasing number of Americans have tired of endless foolish conflicts abroad.

American policymakers should learn from Ronald Reagan. In today's GOP, divided between persistent neocon warmongers and the MAGA crowd's intermittent interventionism, the 40th president is a political artifact. Nevertheless, Reagan's legacy is as relevant as ever. In a far more dangerous world, he practiced a foreign policy of prudence, avoiding the bloody conflicts big and small that deform current U.S. foreign policy.

Reagan saw the Cold War in moral terms, giving some of his rhetoric a martial tone. One analyst cited Reagan's "deceptively simple approach to ending the Cold War and bringing down the evil empire: 'We win, they lose'." Later inveterate hawks claimed the Reagan mantle. For instance, William Kristol and Robert Kagan argued that Reagan "championed American exceptionalism when it was deeply unfashionable. Perhaps most significant, he refused to accept the limits on American power imposed by the domestic political realities that others assumed were fixed."

They pushed endless wars, highlighted by global social engineering, pervasive foreign intervention, and overt military aggression.

Yet Reagan was no Kristol or Kagan. He was prescient in recognizing the Soviet Union's weakness and seeking to exploit Moscow's vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, he greatly feared the possibility of war, especially nuclear conflict. Contra attacks from the left, he was anything but a wild cowboy. Indeed, by today's rhetorical standards, Reagan was a peacenik and an appeaser.

When he was elected in 1980, the Cold War was raging. We now know that the Soviet Union was weaker than often portrayed, but it surely was, as Reagan called it, an "evil empire." Yet his strategy was not primarily martial. For instance, he dropped the grain embargo against the Soviet Union. He had obvious economic and political objectives in doing so, but he also said he hoped to promote "meaningful and constructive dialogue."

Nor did Reagan forcefully challenge the Soviet-inspired 1981 Polish crackdown, involving what Moscow viewed as serious if not vital interests. Reagan did not even impose economic sanctions, leaving the job of undermining Warsaw's communist regime to the Catholic Church, labor unions, and other private groups.

While establishing a position of military strength, Reagan sought negotiation. After NATO's 1983 Able Archer exercise triggered Soviet fears of an American first strike, Reagan realized that it was imperative to establish a dialogue with Moscow. He liked the Soviet leaders no better than before, but he feared the risk of war more. Indeed, a later critique of the neocon takeover of Republican foreign policy noted that "from 1983 onward, Reagan devoted more of his foreign policy time to arms control than to any other subject." His determination to defuse the global nuclear stand-off ultimately led him to pursue missile defense and propose the elimination of nuclear weapons. This commitment horrified some neocons like Norman Podhoretz, the

war-happy editor of Commentary magazine, who denounced Reagan's policy as "appeasement by any other name."

Reagan recognized that Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power dramatically changed the threat environment. He believed Gorbachev could be a partner in transforming the U.S.–USSR relationship, ending the Cold War. The Soviet leader proved to be an uncommon adversary. Had the more conventional Grigory Romanov defeated Gorbachev for Soviet Communist Party general secretary, the regime might have stumbled along, its coercive powers undiminished. Instead, Gorbachev dismantled the worst of the Soviet state.

As Moscow's authority dissipated, Reagan stood before Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and demanded: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Seventeen months later, Gorbachev effectively did so by simply keeping the Red Army in its barracks. Before leaving office, Reagan declared his "evil empire" designation of the USSR to be "about another time, another era."

Gorbachev gave Reagan credit. After the latter's death, the Soviet leader observed: "I don't know whether we would have been able to agree and to insist on the implementation of our agreements with a different person at the helm of American government. True, Reagan was a man of the right. But, while adhering to his convictions, with which one could agree or disagree, he was not dogmatic; he was looking for negotiations and cooperation."

Although Reagan waved a big military stick, he employed it only sparingly. Despite backing the Afghan mujahideen, he did not directly confront Moscow. In fact, Washington's involvement was tame compared to America's role in the Russo–Ukrainian war. Reagan relied on proxies even to undermine Moscow-allied regimes in Central America.

Of course, Reagan was no pacifist, but he used the military only three times. Once was in Grenada, after a hardline communist coup d'état in the Caribbean nation ousted a left-wing government. Reagan's professed justification was weak, but the U.S. had long jealously guarded the Western Hemisphere from Soviet influence. Moreover, after ousting the new regime, American forces returned home and left the island to nutmeg production.

He also retaliated against Libya for its complicity in the bombing of a Berlin nightclub filled with Americans. There was no invasion or attempt at nation-building, just a demonstration that any attack on US interests would reap a severe response.

Reagan's most important use of force, and biggest foreign policy mistake, was Lebanon. To aid Israel, which had invaded its northern neighbor, he intervened on behalf of the minority Christian government in an ongoing civil war with more than 25 combatant groups and ever-shifting alliances. Doing so was beyond foolish, turning Washington into a combatant and resulting in bombings of the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks, and the deaths of more than 300 Americans. At this point Reagan did the only sensible thing: He "cut and run," in the words of Podhoretz, who never found a conflict he didn't want Americans to fight.

In fact, Reagan sensibly recognized that he had made a mistake and courageously changed course. Foreign policy analyst Micah Zenko explained that Reagan made "perhaps the most purposeful and consequential foreign-policy decision of his presidency. Though he never said so explicitly, he ended America's military commitment to a strategic mistake that was peripheral to America's interests."

What else could the U.S. have done? Deeper involvement in a bitter and complex civil war, which raged on for years, would have achieved nothing. Worse would have been Iraq-lite: invasion, occupation, and reconstruction. Washington would have thrust American personnel into

a vicious conflict, fueled terrorist forces, and inflamed the Muslim world—all while the Cold War was still ongoing. In contrast to George W. Bush, Reagan refused to double down on failure. Subscribe Today

Indeed, Reagan's cautious and responsible approach contrasts sharply to that of most of his successors. President George H.W. Bush intervened in Somalia, invaded Panama, and, most importantly, ousted Iraqi forces from Kuwait. (It must be granted, however, that Bush also generally limited his aims, refusing to remake these nations.)

Less restrained was Bill Clinton, who mused that only war allowed presidents to demonstrate greatness, expanded the Somalia mission, and launched an aggressive war in the Balkans, the malign consequences of which persist. George W. Bush invaded Iraq based on a lie, ultimately roiling the Mideast, spawning the Islamic State, and killing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Barack Obama pushed regime change under cover of humanitarian intervention in Libya, leading to more than a decade of violent conflict, terrorist activity, foreign meddling, and international instability. Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden turned Syria's terrible civil war into a proxy contest and backed murderous Saudi aggression in Yemen, in both cases for no serious, or even discernible, American interest. Finally, Biden launched an increasingly fierce proxy fight against Russia involving the latter's direct and serious, even existential, security interests. He also committed the U.S. to fight China over Taiwan, a democratic friend but hardly the sort of vital concern warranting war with a nuclear-armed adversary.

Objectively, Reagan's world was far more dangerous than today. However, bad choices by a succession of administrations have put the U.S. at increasing risk of great power conflict and even nuclear war. Ronald Reagan demonstrated how to manage such threats. He was prepared to act tough. But he was even more determined to seek peace with Washington's adversaries.

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