



## Conservatives would do well to resurrect Ronald Reagan's Middle East policy

By Gene Healy

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“What would Ronald Reagan do?”

That's become the go-to inquiry for conservatives on nearly every public policy question, from the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 to corporate welfare in the Sooner State (visit the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs' “Virtual Reagan Wall,” where you can “share your message about what Reagan would do to improve Oklahoma today”!).

When likely 2016 contenders Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., and Texas Gov. Rick Perry squared off for an op-ed duel on the Iraq crisis recently, it quickly degenerated into a rapid-fire “Reagan-off,” with Perry unleashing a hellstorm of Gipper references, roughly one per 100 words.

It's not obvious that channelling a president who left office more than a quarter century ago is the best way for Republicans to craft sound policy for the 21st century Middle East. But if you think the Reagan legacy holds lessons for today, why not start with a question we can actually answer, like: “WDRD?” -- that is, “what did Reagan do” in the region?

The man had a record, after all — and when you look at that record, it's obvious that most of today's conservatives, Perry included, would hate Reagan's Middle East policies.

Perry imagines a reincarnated Reagan who'd bring “moral and strategic clarity” to our Iraq policy. “Strategic clarity,” perhaps; “moral,” not so much.

Reagan's approach to Iraq was ruthless realpolitik: his administration viewed Saddam Hussein as an essential counterweight to Iranian power and backed the dictator in his bloody eight-year war with Iran. Reagan officials took Iraq off the State Department's list of terror-supporting states, reestablished diplomatic relations and shared intelligence that “proved vital to Iraq's conduct of the war.”

In the broader Middle East, Reagan fought a naval quasi-war to keep Gulf shipping open and, in 1986, launched airstrikes on Libya designed to punish without inducing regime change. But after cutting and running from the disastrous peacekeeping deployment in Lebanon in 1984, Reagan decided the wiser policy was to keep U.S. forces over the horizon and our boots off the ground.

Nor did Reagan think uncritical support for Israel served U.S. interests. He pushed for weapons sales to Saudi Arabia despite Israel's vehement opposition, insisting "it is not the business of other nations to make United States foreign policy," and he backed a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. As Haaretz's Chemi Shalev has put it, "if Obama treated Israel like Reagan did, he'd be impeached."

Indeed, at the time, many on the Right, neoconservatives in particular, did hate Reagan's policies in the Middle East. In 1982, Norman Podhoretz decried "the continuing tilt in American policy toward the enemies of Israel." Podhoretz also worried that the Reagan team was too timid about stationing troops in the Arab world, having backed away from their earlier assessment that "it would be necessary to station American ground forces somewhere in the region" to act "simultaneously as a deterrent and a □tripwire'" against the Soviets.

Some of Reagan's policies in the Gulf — like his administration's complicity in Iraqi war crimes — are hard to defend. But his reluctance to put American soldiers in the crossfire isn't one of them.

Reagan later called the deployment of the Marines to Beirut -- where 241 died in a terrorist truck-bombing -- his "greatest regret" as president. As he put it in his 1990 autobiography: "Perhaps we didn't appreciate fully enough the depth of hatred and complexity of problems that make the Middle East such a jungle." But Reagan learned something from that mistake, returning to a policy of "offshore balancing," unburdened by dreams of a miraculous regional transformation.

Conservatives could stand to learn that lesson as well.

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