

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

How Ronald Reagan Would Run in 2016

Doug Bandow

December 3, 2015

Every Republican wants to be Ronald Reagan reincarnated. At least that's what the candidates all say. But the fortieth U.S. president probably wouldn't feel comfortable running in the current field. On foreign policy, at least, the contenders appear to be about as un-Reaganlike as possible.

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 place." 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 recognize that China, with many problems to overcome, was well behind America. He certainly 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. And he'd dismiss with a joke the presidential wannabes who act as if the United States was a poor, third-world state cowering before such behemoths as Iran and the Islamic State.

Second, Reagan likely would be skeptical of the GOP mantra of more military spending—always 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 United States is ahead of everyone, accounting for 40 percent or more of the entire globe's military outlays. Add to that the spending by America's Asian and European allies and China and Russia don't look very impressive.

Certainly he would insist on hearing a persuasive rather than conclusory argument why more money was necessary to bolster U.S. security. He would recognize as silly contentions such as that from Jeb Bush that military spending as a percentage of gross domestic product is "way lower than our historical average." Not only have big threats disappeared, but America's

economy today is much, much larger. Reagan likely would find the entire discussion a bit, well, “liberal” in the sense of assuming that more dollars spent is the only way to deliver more security.

Third, Reagan would insist on talking and even negotiating with adversarial regimes, especially that in Tehran. He did so with the worst of the Soviet leaders, the colorlessly repressive Leonid Brezhnev and stylishly brutal Yuri Andropov. Shortly after taking office Reagan advocated "meaningful and constructive dialogue." But he never attempted to use that strength to ‘roll back’ communism, making him an ‘appeaser’ like Dwight Eisenhower, who did not back protesters in East Germany or Hungary, and Lyndon Johnson, who stood by as the Warsaw Pact forcibly ended Czechoslovakia’s ‘Prague Spring.’

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 United States enjoy overwhelming military advantages compared to Iran. So do Israel and Saudi Arabia, both aligned with America.

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 in the Soviet Union. Reagan recognized that the new head of the Soviet Communist Party was, as Margaret Thatcher observed, someone with whom one could “do business.” Gorbachev later observed that Reagan “was looking for negotiations and cooperation." All this peace talk led Norman Podhoretz, the neocon editor of *Commentary*, to denounce Reagan—Ronald Reagan, who sits atop the conservative pantheon—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. He didn’t want to live in a world where the only response to a Soviet nuclear strike would be to incinerate millions of Russians in turn. In contrast, most of the Republican presidential candidates seem to believe that breathing threats and proclaiming toughness are essential elements of manhood. Reagan wanted to be prepared to do what was necessary, but he fervently hoped never to have to do it.

In fact, once elected he seldom used the military. He 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 the crazy communists who had ousted the normal communists in Grenada, where U.S. medical students were potentially at risk. The third instance was the misbegotten intervention in the Lebanese civil war, which turned American personnel into targets. He then 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, Reagan probably would have fewer delusions about past policies. Having backed the Mujahedeen against the Soviet Union, he almost certainly would not have devoted American lives and money in a forlorn attempt to create a new liberal and centralized Afghanistan. Reagan certainly would have recognized that Iraq had turned into a disaster. As a fervent advocate of freedom, he likely would not have been surprised that local insurgents were willing to resist the world’s most powerful nation.

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 President George W. Bush who really squandered the Reagan legacy. Only when Bush shifted course, rejecting the unreflexive hawkishness of Richard Cheney and others, did he finally start exhibiting the sort of nuance which highlighted Reagan’s policies. That is a characteristic completely lacking in the current “bomb ‘em, invade ‘em, occupy ‘em” GOP crowd, other than Senator Rand Paul and, surprisingly, Donald Trump.

Ronald Reagan lived in a different time, so it isn’t easy to superimpose him on today’s Republican presidential race. But he almost certainly would not be advocating what leading conservatives now claim to be a Reaganesque policy. 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. The bloggers, columnists, talk-radio hosts and Fox News would be piling on. And come the first primaries he’d likely end up as political road kill.

As Republicans correctly imagine, there is much we can learn from Ronald Reagan today. But most of the GOP presidential candidates wouldn’t like the lessons. Despite their pretensions, those who most claim to represent Reagan’s legacy are least like him.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan.