

## Chapter 8

# When did the Reagan revolution end?

On June 5, 2004, just as the presidential campaign between Senator John Kerry and President George W. Bush was heating up, Ronald Reagan died. Reagan was ninety-three and had receded from public view over the previous decade as his Alzheimer's disease advanced. Yet, surprisingly, the week of eulogies culminating in Reagan's funeral on June 11, 2004, triggered a national outpouring of emotion. Democrats who had built their careers campaigning against the man and his legacy praised him as an optimistic patriot who helped win the Cold War. Conservatives who had grumbled about Reagan's moderation during his tenure tearfully embraced him as their hero.

There is a commendable American tendency to eulogize presidents in a gracious nonpartisan manner. Senator Richard Nixon mocked Harry Truman as soft on Communism and surrounded by corrupt cronies during the 1952 campaign, but President Nixon presided with dignity over Truman's funeral twenty years later. In 1974 a young Bill Clinton cheered his girlfriend, Hillary Rodham, for helping the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee seek Richard Nixon's impeachment. Nevertheless, in 1994 President Clinton delivered a moving eulogy at Nixon's funeral.

Still, the posthumous praise of Ronald Reagan exceeded the usual mourning rituals for American statesmen. The week-long focus on Reagan and his legacy reinforced Reaganites' claim that his was a monumental presidency. The heartfelt bipartisan tributes illustrated that, in some ways, the Reagan Revolution—as constrained as it was in the 1980s—continued to shape America into the twenty-first century.

Sometimes, doctors can inject contrasting dyes into their patients' bloodstreams or organs to track particular influences, be they malignant or benign. Historians can only envy such scientific precision. Still, it is worth imagining what would appear if a red-white-and-blue colored dye injected into daily American life could track Reaganism's influence since Ronald and Nancy Reagan took their farewell helicopter ride from the Capitol in January 1989.

Whatever ambivalence George Herbert Walker Bush may have had regarding his predecessor, the first Bush administration was in many ways Reagan's third term. Many analysts attributed Bush's come-from-behind victory over Governor Michael Dukakis to the continuing potency of Reagan's magic. Less loftily, Reaganite operatives like Lee Atwater brought their aggressive, experienced, often ideological edge to the campaign. Democrats in 1988 seemed as flummoxed as they did when mounting Walter Mondale's campaign against Reagan's reelection in 1984.

At his inauguration, George H. W. Bush began his delicate dance, trying to distinguish himself from Reagan without disrespecting Reagan. Bush began by thanking the retiring president formally and broadly—but generically and perfunctorily—for “the wonderful things that you have done for America.” However, as Bush spoke, even as he emphasized his “kinder, gentler” approach, Reaganism's echoes resonated loudly. Bush's insistence that “We know what works: Freedom works. We know what's right: Freedom is right,” embraced Reaganesque

capitalism—and anti-Communism. Bush's refusal to rely on "public money alone" to solve social and political problems championed Reagan's anti-government stance. And Bush shared Reagan's populist faith in the people when he claimed that "the wisest thing of all" was to "turn to the only resource we have that in times of need always grows—the goodness and the courage of the American people."

In governing, Bush struggled with many of the items that Reagan had placed on the national agenda. Bush's Reaganesque pledge—"No new taxes"—would haunt him, when he was finally forced, as Reagan had been, to raise revenues due to the continuing, Reagan-fueled, budget deficits. Bush was even less inclined than Reagan to be a social crusader or generate intense controversy. Bush continually disappointed conservatives by following Reagan's tradition of piping in greetings to the "right to life" movement rally and doing little to stop the social and cultural revolutions changing—conservatives said "ruining"—America.

Bush paid a steep political price for the continuing fallout from Reagan's two terms in office. A recession hit, which many reporters deemed to be the natural corrective to Reaganomics. In addition to the dollars and cents of the economy, the economic downturn satisfied the liberal cosmology, whereby America needed to suffer for enjoying so much prosperity.

Bush's dislike for the Reagan model of leadership muted America's response when Soviet Communism finally fell. Bush was shrewd in not wanting to gloat, fearing that too much American delirium might trigger a Soviet backlash. But his caution deprived the American people of a defining victory moment. Bush's prudence appeared plodding and amoral when he abandoned the Chinese student protesters crushed by their government during the spring 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. The students took the Statue of Liberty as a model, but Bush was no "freedom man"; he failed the test rhetorically and diplomatically.

Bush's controversial nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court also had many Reagan resonances. Thomas was a model Reaganaut. He and other conservative intellectuals learned how to turn the federal bureaucracy against itself, in his case by fighting affirmative action rather than expanding it when leading the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. An African American, Thomas also represented the wave of young blacks who entered professions like law and medicine, and advanced thanks to affirmative action—whether they endorsed the policy or not. And Bush's nomination of this ideologue reflected an attempt to extend Ronald Reagan's judicial revolution, perhaps the most effective flank in Reagan's multidimensional assault on the Great Society.

The public fight when Thomas's former assistant Anita Hill accused him of sexual harassment incorporated even more Reagan-era themes. As a female black law professor, Anita Hill represented the achievements of feminism and the civil rights movement since the 1980s, along with the growing frustrations. That millions debated what constituted sexual harassment showed how the 1980s' Reagan Reconciliation mainstreamed and integrated certain ideas considered radical before the 1960s. The splashy, flashy, trashy, exceedingly public nature of the televised clash when Professor Hill accused Judge Thomas of inappropriate and vulgar advances furthered the coarsening of pop culture and the let-it-all-hang-out televised populism that characterized 1980s' political culture.

Finally, the 1992 African American riots in Los Angeles added a violent note to this apparent anti-Reagan backlash, harnessing the frustrations of the post-Reagan recession with some of the racial demons the Hill-Thomas hearings had stirred. Even Democrats who blamed Reaganism for what some called the insurrection in Ronald Reagan's California backyard still had to acknowledge that the backlash itself reflected the Reagan years' transformative impact.

The Democratic presidential candidate in 1992 rode to the White House on the wings of the anti-Reagan backlash. In his triumphal campaign, Bill Clinton cleverly put George Bush's less popular, less entrancing brand on defining Reagan programs and accomplishments. Rarely mentioning Reagan's name, Clinton frequently bashed the 1980s as a time of "economic disaster," of America's rich getting richer, of America going from "the world's largest creditor to being the world's largest debtor. The stock market tripled, but wages went down." Clinton also deemed Reaganomics immoral, blasting Republicans as the party of junk bonds, corporate raiders, and Wall Street cheats. Clinton worried that in business schools such as the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, "by 1987, the year the stock market crashed, 25% of the graduating class was going into investment banking—a quarter of the best graduates at one of America's top business schools pursuing high incomes in high finance rather than in the apparently less glamorous work of creating jobs, goods and services to make America richer."

Surprisingly, President Clinton inched closer to the Reaganite agenda than candidate Clinton ever imagined. Shortly after defeating George Bush, Clinton assured the NBC news reporter Andrea Mitchell that he would fulfill his promise to integrate gays into the military. This response was honest, principled, but politically explosive. The controversy highlighted Clinton's distance from military culture, stirred moderate suspicions that Clinton was more radical than he admitted, and contrasted with Reagan's approach of playing to the center, confident that his core supporters had nowhere to go. Eventually, Clinton backtracked. In a different context, his "don't ask, don't tell" policy could have appeared to be progress for gays rather than a pathetic fig leaf covering up a betrayal by a politician many gays supported enthusiastically.

This early gays-in-the-military fiasco, combined with Clinton's failure to enact his sweeping health care reform, propelled

Clinton toward more Reaganesque positions. In the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans achieved a victory that had eluded them in the 1980s. They captured the House of Representatives for the first time since the Eisenhower era forty years earlier.

Two years after a string of Republican repudiations culminated with George Bush's defeat, Republicans were resurgent. The new Speaker of the House and Republican point man, Newt Gingrich, had ambitious plans to govern as a conservative ideologue less accommodating than Reagan. Gingrich and his Republicans offered a "Contract with America" promising to complete the revolution Reagan never fully implemented. The contract promised a balanced budget, tax cuts, welfare limits, support for families, tough anti-crime provisions, distance from any kind of United Nations supervision of American troops, limits on civil suits, congressional reform, and term limits.

Cowed, anxious to secure re-election, President Clinton tacked right. He had already proven to be more fiscally responsible than Reagan himself, achieving a balanced budget, then a budget surplus—achievements that eluded the Republican revolutionary. Clinton declared in his 1996 State of the Union address that the "era of big government is over." He passed a tough welfare reform bill that appalled many of his own White House staffers and depressed the First Lady Hillary Clinton. Coached by his political guru Dick Morris, Clinton ran for re-election as "the good father," reassuring traditionalists with cultural Band-Aids, proposing the V-chip in televisions to limit children's access to inappropriate programs, and school uniforms to encourage discipline.

Stylistically, Clinton mimicked Reagan too. Clinton learned from Reagan the art of spin and the craft of big picture governing. Just as Reagan's sweeping vision and lyrical speeches limited the damage from his many verbal gaffes and minor missteps, Clinton's popular message helped protect him from the many

scandals his indiscreet behavior caused. Ultimately, Clinton survived the Monica Lewinsky scandal in ways that paralleled Reagan's survival despite Iran-Contra.

Like Reagan, Clinton became the peace and prosperity president. Democrats had a harder time mocking Reagan in retrospect as their party became the party of the baby boomers' big economic boom. Fewer Democrats could attribute the inequitable distribution of income that emerged to Reagan, as the big bucks raked in by investment bankers and innovative entrepreneurs became as characteristic of the Clinton 1990s as they were of the Reagan 1980s.

Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, also confounded expectations. The second President Bush distanced himself from the first Bush presidency to embrace Reagan as a political model. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" first sounded like a critique of Reaganite conservatism, implying that the original lacked mercy. But Bush emphasized the conservatism more than the compassion.

In a newly center-right nation, George W. Bush's conservatism was tactical. He attributed his father's defeat in 1992 to the alienated conservative base. Karl Rove, the new president's adviser, believed the 2000 election had been so close because 4 to 5 million conservative Republican evangelical voters chose to stay home rather than voting for another Bush. Rove pushed George W. Bush to out-Reagan Reagan, playing to the Right to mobilize those voters in 2004.

Bush's narrow Electoral College victory and his fragile political footing highlighted a paradoxical result of the Reagan Revolution. Reagan resurrected the center, reviving a broad sense of patriotism and American nationalism. But especially during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies, many Americans feared their nation was dysfunctionally polarized

between the so-called "red" pro-Reagan states and the more cosmopolitan, progressive, "blue" states.

Reagan helped redraw America's electoral map, uniting pro-Republican western states with the once solidly Democratic South. Many of the wedge issues separating "red" from "blue" were the building blocks of the Reagan platform. "Red" Americans favored cutting taxes, continuing to deregulate, outlawing abortion, ending affirmative action, punishing criminals harshly, limiting multilateralism, boosting the military, and managing the effects of the sexual revolution. But the paradox of the Reagan Revolution continued. The Electoral College map exaggerated the differences between the red and the blue states and obscured the warring impulses within so many Americans. The United States would not have had the high divorce rates, abortion rates, crime rates, or governmental growth rates if Americans lived as their states voted. Many red state Americans led far more "liberal" lives and many blue state Americans led far more traditional lives than the media caricatures suggested. Similarly, farmers and entrepreneurs, big business leaders and small business owners overlooked whatever governmental goodies they received when discussions turned toward cutting budgets and ending government support for programs servicing others.

The traumatic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, barely eight months into the Bush presidency, further tied George W. Bush to Ronald Reagan's legacy. Combining the Reagan-Clinton approach of big picture governance, learning from Reagan's focus on anti-Communism, George W. Bush devoted his presidency to prosecuting the war on terror. Unfortunately, President Bush frequently reduced Reagan's nuanced, multidimensional strategy to a heavy-handed, one-dimensional strategy.

Bush romanticized Reagan as more of a swashbuckler than he actually had been. Reagan "didn't say, 'Well, Mr. Gorbachev,

would you take the top three bricks off the wall,” Bush explained in a May 2002 interview about Reagan’s legacy. “He said, tear it all down.” Actually, Reagan’s actions were more temperate than his rhetoric. Reagan never tried knocking down the Berlin Wall, and he negotiated with Mikhail Gorbachev for two years before making his pronouncement.

Some observers argued that even though Bush’s swagger seemed to be channeling Ronald Reagan, September 11 marked the end of the Reagan era. The emergence of terrorism as America’s central national security issue and the monstrous Bush-era deficits steered the country away from the Reaganesque concerns about shrinking big government and defeating Communism. Many Democrats pointed to the financial crash of 2008 as not just the end but the repudiation of the Reagan era. Others pointed to March 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq, as the final end point. Still others insisted that it was November 2006, when the voters rejected so many Republican Congress members as they returned the House of Representatives to Democratic control, that the era of the Republican fight against big government finally seemed finished. And yet, during the 2008 campaign, Ronald Reagan was not only the most frequently invoked modern politician among Republicans, Senator Barack Obama admired Reagan’s commitment to pursuing his particular vision, no matter how wrongheaded.

Historians need more distance from the early part of the twenty-first century before it becomes clearer when the Reagan epoch ended, and what needs to be emphasized in its stead. Still, Americans live in a Reaganized America and can find traces of that contrasting red, white, and blue dye in so much of American public life—and even in Americans’ private lives.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate Reagan’s impact—and continuing relevance in today’s Reaganized America—is to join the millions of tourists who visit Washington, DC. Today, the

capital’s airport is called “Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.” The airport outgrew its original 1941 Art Deco main terminal and added terminals with huge lattice-covered ceilings that evoke 1980s architecture. Continuing the retail revolution that began under Reagan, the airport feels like a shopping mall, with many franchised shops and fast-food chains dominating the food courts.

Driving into the city from the airport’s location in Arlington, Virginia, over the Fourteenth Street Bridge, visitors can see the largest building in Washington, with 3.1 million square feet of space devoted to its unique mix of public and private tenants. The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center opened in 1998 on what had been a parking lot. The building was part of the resurrection of Pennsylvania Avenue, which reflected the 1980s’ broader urban gentrification trends. In an ironic tribute to the man who wanted to shrink government but left gargantuan deficits, when the U.S. General Services Administration finished building the Ronald Reagan building, its \$768 million price tag made it the most expensive building the government had ever built at the time.

Two blocks over is the most famous address in America, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. While the process began with Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan certainly played a role in making the White House loom so large in the American popular imagination. Reagan and his people taught their successors how to use the White House as the great, all-American stage set, offering the perfect backdrop for the bully pulpit. They helped perfect the politics of sound bites and spin that has entertained, informed, alienated, and frustrated a generation of Americans already. Fears of big government did not extend to fears of a powerful presidency. The Reagan era helped push the scales in the constant balance between Congress and the executive toward 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

In the West Wing and the Oval Office, where the president and key staffers work, the daily agenda remains filled with Reagan-era concerns. The constant pressure to cut taxes, the fear of big bureaucratic Great Society programs even after the financial meltdown, the questions about how and what to regulate after two decades of deregulation, the renewed respect for military prerogatives—and budget requests—all bear Ronald Reagan's fingerprints. Similarly, throughout the federal bureaucracy, the ideological diversity of staffers represents a dramatic break from pre-1980 days, when conservatives had more or less abdicated the executive branch to Franklin Roosevelt's New Dealers, John Kennedy's New Frontiersmen, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society warriors against poverty and injustice. Just as the Republican administrations of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and both Bushes had to contend with Democrats at all levels of the bureaucracy, post-Reagan Democratic administrations have to contend with anti-big-government conservatives at all levels.

Moreover, the world of think tanks and lobbying firms that beckon White House staffers and government officials when they finish their tenures is much more elaborate, thanks to the Reagan era. The rise of a conservative "counter-establishment" not only created a permanent Washington presence for Republicans, it also helped Democratic think tanks and lobbyists proliferate. Twenty-first-century Washington is filled with many more analysts, lawyers, government relations specialists, and retired bureaucrats hawking their ideas, pushing their agendas, shilling for their clients, than ever before.

Down Pennsylvania Avenue, on Capitol Hill, Congress and the Supreme Court have also been Reaganized. Although Reagan failed to get a conservative majority on the Court, since the 1980s the Court has been ever more conservative. Court decisions are more indulgent of state prerogatives, more skeptical about minority demands, more likely to side with the executive

branch, and more suspicious of big government programs. The revolution resonates in the lower courts too, where many of the young men and women Reagan appointed became the senior judges. Of course, the judicial respect for precedent preserved much of the revolution Earl Warren's court began in the 1950s and 1960s. But, as in so many areas, the expansion of judicial prerogative that accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s has slowed, often to a crawl.

In Congress, the stylistic and substantive changes continue. Mimicking Reagan's communications revolution on the presidential level, members of the Congress and the Senate spend much more time playing to the cameras, consulting with spin doctors, perfecting their sound bites, and raising campaign dollars year round. Overall, they are also more responsive and more likely to rotate their offices than their predecessors were. Given modern celebrity politics' costs and pressures, many more Congress members and senators are millionaires or celebrities than in the 1960s and 1970s. Thanks to the great tensions between Republicans and Democrats over many Reagan agenda items, the parties are more polarized and many of these legislators are less likely to befriend members of the other party, let alone cooperate together.

All these Washington players are ever-conscious of playing in a world of 24/7 scrutiny, with an intrusive and ubiquitous media. These processes predated Reagan and were independent of him. But Reagan so mastered the media that he remains the gold standard in teaching politicians at all levels how to function. At the same time, Reagan and the conservative movement's assault on the media as automatically leftist has made the media—and Americans—more conscious and defensive about the whole subject of media bias. In response, conservative talk show hosts began carrying the standard in the 1980s—often harshly—and Fox News emerged in 1996 as a populist, conservative counterbalance to CNN.

Even where Ronald Reagan did not necessarily inject a new policy or program, his era marked a turning point in so many realms. The fancy hotels and elaborately redesigned corporate offices lining a newly regenerated Pennsylvania Avenue were rooted in the 1980s. The palatial shopping malls dotting the city—and defining the suburbs—spread during the 1980s.

Within the corporate towers that rose in Washington and now ring the city, especially in suburban Virginia, the Reagan years still define many of the jobs and much of the corporate culture. Service jobs replaced manufacturing jobs. Security analysts and financial gurus proliferated as middle-class Americans plunged into the stock market. Since the 1980s, many of the most senior managers clock longer hours, African Americans and women enjoy wider acceptance, and the pressure to earn ever more to buy ever more has intensified.

Amid all the success stories, the misery of the walking wounded increased in the 1980s. Many of the discouraged Reagan Democrats, union members who lost their jobs through downsizing or company relocations after corporate raiders stripped assets and reconfigured businesses, often curse their one-time hero and regret their vote in 1980—and 1984. In Washington and many other American cities, along with the glorious rise of the black middle and upper classes, the underclass calcified. Millions of Americans, disproportionately black, remain mired in a multigenerational culture of poverty, deadened by drugs, revolving in and out of prison, left behind by the advances in technology and education.

Within the American home, in Washington and elsewhere, trends that shifted in the 1980s continue to affect many Americans' most intimate decisions. The rates of divorce, abortion, crime, illegitimate birth, drug use, and alcoholism, while still at epidemic levels, have started to level off or dip. Like Reagan himself, many more Americans are living much less conventional lives than

their parents, yet nevertheless seek to resurrect their parents' traditional values. Some dismiss this as hypocrisy. Others appreciate what Reagan's secretary of education William Bennett called this "constructive hypocrisy," because at least seeking standards keeps humans grounded while somewhat slowing the rush toward new behaviors and lifestyle.

All in all, love him or hate him, Ronald Reagan's achievements were remarkable. One of the most mocked and underestimated men in American politics became the most influential president since Franklin Roosevelt. He cast an even longer shadow than his presidential record merits because he helped define an era, burning his brand on so many changes he did not specifically initiate or manage. His paradoxical era thus ends in another paradox. People will continue proclaiming the end of the Reagan Revolution—and it will be true—even as they will continue to live in a world shaped and defined by one of the twentieth century's most significant Americans, Ronald Wilson Reagan.

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