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Source: *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Aug., 1989), pp. 269-286

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the British Association for American Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555182>

Accessed: 11-12-2017 09:54 UTC

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Ronald Reagan's Place in History

DAVID MERVIN

The former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, has observed "I hate to say it about such an agreeable man, but it was sinful that Ronald Reagan ever became President.... I've known every president since Harry Truman and there's no question in my mind that [Reagan] was the worst."¹ This is a severe indictment by a highly qualified observer. Nevertheless it is an opinion that will be challenged here. It will be argued in this article that far from being the "worst" of recent presidents Ronald Reagan, despite his failings, was more effective in office than most who have held the position in the last fifty years. However, as a preliminary to our analysis it may be useful to summarize the apparently formidable case against Reagan.

Reagan, so we have been led to believe, was not very bright. He effectively espoused a handful of simple ideas and broad policy goals, but his understanding of the detail was, it is alleged, alarmingly inadequate. For instance, David Stockman, Reagan's first Director of the Office of Management and Budget, has commented at some length on the President's fondness for anecdotal evidence, his susceptibility to hard luck stories and his apparent inability to understand the ramifications of budgetary policy.² Much has also been made of Reagan's short working days and his inclination for regular holidays.

Given these shortcomings President Reagan, so his critics argue, was obliged to delegate extensively and the policy achievements of his Administration, therefore, should not be credited to the President himself, but to senior staff such as James Baker, David Stockman and George Shultz. On the other hand the Iran–Contra debacle has been partly blamed on a decline in the quality of the President's senior staff in his second term,

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¹ *Man of the House*, (New York: Random House, 1987), 360.

² *The Triumph of Politics* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), 48, 95.

Journal of American Studies, 23 (1989), 2, 269–286 Printed in Great Britain

thereby exposing him to the dangers inherent in a hands-off, disengaged style of management.

Those inclined to a negative view of Reagan's presidency are likely to argue further that after one or two early breakthroughs during the "honeymoon" period little legislation of great significance was passed in subsequent years. Moreover his policy achievements, both at home and abroad, can be presented as being much dependent on good fortune. American public opinion had begun moving in a conservative direction long before Reagan took office and he was able to capitalize on shifts in opinion that were not of his making.³ Similarly fortuitous internal changes in the Soviet Union presented Reagan with unprecedented opportunities for success in the field of foreign policy.

Ultimately a president's place in history is likely to turn largely on the success or failure of his economic policy and on his record in foreign affairs. However, some would argue that the portents for Reagan in these areas are not good. Reaganomics, they suggest, did not produce the desired results and the legacy of bulging budget and trade deficits, foreign indebtedness, the fragility of the Stock Market and the weakness of the dollar all reflect severe structural weaknesses that, arguably, will unhinge the American economy in the near future.⁴

Many observers are equally reluctant to concede Reagan much credit in the realm of foreign affairs. His transformation from scourge of the "evil empire" of Soviet communism at the beginning of his presidency to a "great peacemaker" at its conclusion impressed neither left nor right. Others would claim that the INF treaty, the Summits with Gorbachov and other movements towards detente owe more to what has been happening within the Soviet Union and to the work of men such as Max Kampelman, Paul Nitze and George Shultz than they do to anything contributed by President Reagan. And then, above all else, stands the Iran-Contra affair; an unmitigated foreign policy disaster that humiliated the United States abroad and seriously undermined the position of its president. This debacle seemingly confirmed the worst misgivings of Reagan's many critics leading one to comment at the time:

the Reagan administration is in an appalling and conceivably terminal crisis. The main reason is that the President's aides are incompetent and arrogant. He himself

³ For a discussion of American public opinion in the 1970s see Everett Carl Ladd and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Public Opinion and Public Policy" in Peter Duignan and Alvin Rabushka, eds., *The United States in the 1980s* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

⁴ For a powerful attack on Reaganomics see Peter G. Peterson, "The Morning After," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1987, 43-69.

is incompetent and lazy. All this has been true for six years. But in the past calamitous November the American people have been forced to recognise and come to terms with the fact.⁵

Notwithstanding some journalistic overstatement there is much to be taken seriously in the criticisms of Reagan's presidency outlined above. However, in the interests of balance, an essential requirement of an academic assessment, Reagan's record needs to be considered in context. It is quite pointless to measure the performance of American presidents against absolute standards of executive management or to assess them in terms appropriate to profoundly different, alien, political systems. In Part II therefore we will first touch upon some of the many daunting obstacles to the exercise of presidential power before attempting to delineate realistic criteria of presidential performance against which Ronald Reagan's record will be set in Part III.

II

An effective president successfully imposes his will, his preferences, his policy choices on what Richard Neustadt has aptly characterized as "that maze of personalities and institutions called the government of the United States."⁶ The difficulties that stand in the way of any president achieving these relatively modest ends are many and substantial. From his first day in office a new president is pitched into a desperate struggle to establish his mastery over what is, by any standard, an extraordinarily undisciplined and decentralized political system.

If he is to be "on top in fact as well as name" a president will have to confront that powerful antipathy towards all forms of authority and leadership that is embedded in the American political culture and conditions both mass and elite behaviour.⁷ Periodically, in times of crisis, these near paranoid attitudes are set aside, but in routine circumstances they place important limits on the exercise of presidential power.⁸

No less formidable are the formal constraints that face all presidents. Thus the constitution provides for a genuinely consequential legislature pathologically disinclined to cooperate with the executive and packed to the rafters with prima donnas infused with a keen sense of their own constitutional importance. Power in the legislature, moreover, is intensely

⁵ *The Observer*, 30 November 1986, 13.

⁶ *Presidential Power* (New York: New American Library, 1964), vii.

⁷ Quoted phrase *ibid.*

⁸ Barbara Kellerman, *The Political Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press), 12.

fragmented; the congressional parties are notoriously weak and there is relatively little scope for centralised leadership. Congress, in other words, is a phenomenally undisciplined co-partner in the public policy making process and gaining its acquiescence or cooperation is the most difficult challenge that the man in the White House faces.

Hardly less daunting are the difficulties that a president is likely to encounter in getting those who work in what is sometimes erroneously referred to as *his* administration to do what he wants them to do. The loyalty of members of his own cabinet is suspect; sub-cabinet appointees are very likely to go their own way and the opportunities for career bureaucrats to thwart a president's intentions are legion.⁹

All in all there is a multitude of obstacles to the exercise of presidential power and it sometimes seems little short of miraculous that any chief executive ever succeeds in achieving major objectives outside of crisis situations. Furthermore no modern president has established complete and consistent mastery over the political system. Some have enjoyed fleeting periods of dominance, but overall presidential success in this regard has been a remarkably rare commodity. The calculation of presidential success or effectiveness is fraught with many difficulties, but in this discussion we will endeavour to deal with this matter by using four criteria, (i) significant public policy change, (ii) policy success, (iii) party legacy and (iv) the state of the presidency. We will first elaborate these yardsticks before applying them to the case of Ronald Reagan.

Every modern president enters office bearing a programme of policy ambitions even if these objectives are couched in broad generalities such as a determination to "get the country moving again" or "to get the government off the people's back." To achieve these aims a president needs first of all a legislative strategy. *Significant public policy change* cannot occur without the agreement of the legislative branch, and the president who fails to establish a productive relationship with the Congress is doomed to failure.

Simply passing bills, however, is hardly sufficient. Presidential success cannot be adequately measured by *Congressional Quarterly* scores that do not differentiate between different sorts of bills. Some legislation is enormously consequential, and some is not. The really successful presidents get bills passed that do much more than merely tinker at the margin and go well beyond the sort of incremental change that most

⁹ See for example Godfrey Hodgson, *All Things To All Men* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), Ch. 3.

presidents are obliged to settle for. Such legislation involves a fundamental reordering of priorities and/or the reversal of long standing policy directions.

A successful legislative strategy, however, will not, by itself, achieve the end of significant public policy change. The legislative process, in the modern age, provides only for the enactment of policies in broad outlines leaving to federal bureaucrats the crucial work of fleshing out legislative frameworks with administrative detail.¹⁰ This provides many opportunities for bureaucratic subversion of the president's intentions, an eventuality he must guard against by developing an adequate administrative strategy. This will require the careful selection of cabinet members and other senior appointees, detailed supervision of the budgetary process and the manipulation of regulatory agencies. By these and other means gains made on the legislative front can be consolidated and built upon at the level of administration.

If a president has both an adequate legislative strategy plus a satisfactory administrative strategy, he may accomplish significant public policy change of the sort seen in Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, FDR's New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. These presidents were successful in challenging long held assumptions, in reordering priorities and in changing the terms of debate to a degree denied to other would-be activists in the White House like Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter.

Our discussion in the previous paragraphs was concerned with policy means rather than ends, with process rather than content and there is much to be said for leaving the matter there.¹¹ Given the monumental difficulties of bringing order out of the chaos of the American political system and getting it to produce any sort of policy outcomes one is inclined to stand back and marvel at the accomplishment of those who manage to pull the trick off at all, irrespective of whether the policies produced actually achieve the desired results. Some, however, will regard this as an unduly narrow perspective and no doubt, in the long term, a president's reputation will rest not simply on whether he mastered the

¹⁰ Richard Nathan, "Institutional Change under Reagan" in John Palmer, ed., *Perspectives on the Reagan Years* (Washington DC: The Urban Institute Press, 1986), 128.

¹¹ Especially for students of politics. According to Frederick M. Watkins political science should be "concerned not with the potentially infinite content of all public decisions, but with the process by which those decisions are reached." James C. Charlesworth, (ed.), *A Design For Political Science: Scope, Objectives and Methods* (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1966), 28.

system, but also on whether his policies are perceived to have worked, whether he has achieved *policy success*.

Conclusive judgements in these matters are not possible until many years after a president has left office, and even then the historians are likely to disagree. In addition, there is always the danger, especially relevant in the case of presidents only recently in office, that the political preferences of the analyst will distort his conclusions.¹² Notwithstanding these important problems it is clear that the evaluation of any modern president, the determination of his place in history, will be greatly influenced by overall perceptions of his performance in two principal policy arenas – management of the economy and foreign policy. Ultimately the historians will want to ask what was the state of the economy during and at the end of a particular president's term of office? Were his policies beneficial to the economic well being of the nation? Similarly, in the realm of foreign policy general questions will, in the long run, be posed regarding a president's record in advancing and protecting the interests of the United States in the world. It will be asked, was the position of the country in international affairs strengthened or weakened during the course of the administration under consideration?

Our third criterion is *party legacy*. Presidents are party leaders and temporarily, at least, they represent what the party broadly stands for. As is well known, American parties are loosely structured, and in the modern age presidential coat tails are not what they were. Nevertheless the fates of presidents and their parties remain inextricably entwined. The party of a president who leaves office as a failure is bound to be diminished and damaged. Party candidates for lesser offices will have their political lives made more difficult and the fallout for presidential candidates may well prove fatal. This was the case for Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Gerald Ford in 1976 and Walter Mondale in 1984. By the same token a phenomenally successful president like Franklin Roosevelt did wonders for the fortunes of his party at all levels of the political system.

Finally, in assessing a president it is also appropriate to take account of what a particular incumbent contributes to the institutional well being of his high office—that is, the *state of the presidency*. Does he add to the

¹² The need to guard against this danger is reflected in a recent poll amongst members of the American Political Science Association. This revealed that in assessing Reagan's overall performance in office 71 percent of respondents who were Republicans rated him as Excellent or Good while 29 percent found him to be Fair or Poor. 96 percent of Democrats meanwhile found him to be Fair or Poor, whereas only 4 percent rated him as Excellent or Good. Walter B. Roettger and Hugh Winebrenner, "Politics and Political Scientists," *Public Opinion* (September/October 1986), 41–44.

credibility and stature of the office or does he diminish it? Is the position of the Presidency in relation to its principal competitors in the struggle for power, most notably the Congress, strengthened or weakened during a particular administration? And what of public confidence and trust in the institution as evidenced by the public opinion polls? Thus Woodrow Wilson at the beginning of his first term considerably strengthened the position of the Presidency, but he left it devastated in 1921. Franklin Roosevelt added enormous weight to the Presidency as an institution, whereas Richard Nixon did it great damage. Jimmy Carter inherited a crippled office and arguably weakened it even further.

III

The assessment of a particular president inevitably becomes at some stage a comparative exercise; that is to say we are inexorably drawn into comparing one president with another. However there are many difficulties in such comparative analysis if only because, to state the obvious, every president confronts a unique set of circumstantial variables. Some are blessed with large electoral mandates, whereas others are not; some are reinforced by large majorities in Congress, an important advantage that others lack. Before proceeding to an application of the four criteria discussed in the previous section to Ronald Reagan therefore, it makes sense to summarize the circumstances that pertained as he took office.

Reagan was first elected to the White House by a large margin, but for all that his mandate was distinctly fragile. Neither presidential candidate in 1980 excited the electorate greatly, many voters made up their minds in the closing weeks of the campaign and the result has been widely interpreted as a vote of no confidence in Carter's tenure rather than a positive vote for his opponent.¹³

In 1980 in addition to the Presidency the Republicans also won control of the Senate for the first time for many years. This was a psychologically important victory, but the Republicans failed to win a majority in the House of Representatives. Reagan's position *vis-à-vis* the Congress although strong for a Republican was far weaker than that of Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy or Jimmy Carter.

Reagan moreover came to the White House at a moment when Congress appeared to be in an even more recalcitrant mood than usual. The 1970s

¹³ Everett Ladd, "The Brittle Mandate; Electoral Dealignment and the 1980 Election," *Political Science Quarterly* 96 (Spring 1981).

had been an era of congressional reform involving various changes that led to an even more fragmented and less manageable legislature than before. Furthermore in 1980 public confidence in political institutions had slumped to a particularly low ebb with the president particularly suffering from a large loss of credibility.¹⁴

Reagan's situation in 1981, in other words, was in no way comparable to that of say Roosevelt in 1933 or Johnson thirty years later, a fact that we need to bear in mind as we consider his record in the light of the four criteria discussed in the previous section.

The first criterion was *significant public policy change*. 1981 was a landmark year in the history of presidential congressional relations with the chief executive and his staff manoeuvring brilliantly to seize control of the policy agenda and to bring about major changes of direction in public policy. We observed earlier that the key to a president's success lay in establishing a productive relationship with Congress and in 1981, at least, the Reagan administration was remarkably successful in this endeavour.¹⁵

As we also noted earlier, however, the mere passage of bills does not necessarily signify fundamental change. This will depend on whether the legislation introduced poses a genuine challenge to deeply rooted and long held assumptions. According to one authority the budget act of 1981 was precisely that: it was, "the most important piece of domestic legislation since the Social Security Act of 1935 ... [bringing about] a marked shift in the direction of social spending and fundamental changes in the substance of domestic policy and in American federalism."¹⁶

Even that fiercest of Reagan's critics, Tip O'Neill, has testified to the magnitude of his political rival's early achievements. "In 1981 Ronald Reagan enjoyed a truly remarkable rookie year. He pushed through the greatest increase in defense spending in American history, together with the greatest cutbacks in domestic programs and the largest tax cuts this country had ever seen."¹⁷ Not bad, one might think, for allegedly the "worst" of modern presidents.

Some sense might be made of O'Neill's extravagantly contradictory evaluation of Reagan if it could be shown that a few spectacular early successes were not subsequently sustained. To be sure the Reagan forces have never managed to duplicate the heady successes of 1981. Congress,

¹⁴ John Chubb and Paul Peterson, (eds.), *The New Directions in American Politics* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1985), 21.

¹⁵ See Norman J. Ornstein, (ed.), *President and Congress: Assessing Reagan's First Year* (Washington DC: AEI, 1982), 89.

¹⁶ Nathan, *op. cit.*, 127.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, 341.

in subsequent years, successfully resisted further budget cuts and Reagan has been obliged to accept some increases in taxation. It is also the case that important parts of Reagan's original programme remain unfulfilled. Nevertheless there has been no significant reversal of the new directions in budgetary policy set in 1981 of reducing domestic expenditure, cutting taxes and increasing defence appropriations, as a few simple statistics demonstrate. The top rate of marginal tax was reduced from 70 percent when Reagan took office to 28 percent when he left. In the previous twenty years federal non-defence expenditures had increased dramatically and in 1981 stood at 16.3 percent of GNP, by 1984 however, this figure had dropped to 14.1 and was expected to fall further to 12.9 percent by 1989.¹⁸ Federal grants to state and local governments fell between 1980 and 1985 from 3.4 to 2.7 percent of GNP.¹⁹ Defence spending on the other hand rose between 1980 and 1985 from 5.2 percent of GNP to 6.6 percent.²⁰

Reagan's success in bringing about a change in the terms of the public policy debate is further reflected in the fact that his Democratic opponents have been obliged to accept many of his assumptions about the virtues of tax cuts and the need to economize in domestic programmes. They have had to suppress their natural inclination to initiate new grant programmes and have been reduced to mounting rear guard actions in defence of those that already exist. As the *Congressional Quarterly* reported in 1986:

Six years of retrenchment have forced liberal Democrats into a seemingly permanent defensive crouch. They have had to accommodate the widespread view that the government cannot afford major domestic expenditures and that public support is flagging for the kind of government programs that were a key tool of great society liberalism.²¹

Similarly during the 1988 presidential campaign David Broder of *The Washington Post* made reference to, "the extent to which the prevailing Democratic philosophy incorporates elements of Reaganomics."²²

We noted earlier the need for a president to develop an effective

¹⁸ Joseph Hogan, "The Office of Management and Budget and Reaganomics" in J. D. Lees and Michael Turner, (eds.), *Reagan's First Four Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1988), 118.

¹⁹ Paul Peterson et al, *Federalism Works* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1986), 2.

²⁰ Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 124.

²¹ *Weekly Report*, 9 August, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1797-1801.

²² *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, July 18-24, 1988, 7.

administrative strategy to buttress and expand upon whatever might be achieved on the legislative front. This is especially necessary for Republican presidents who must work with a federal bureaucracy manned largely by Democratic career civil servants. The Reagan forces immediately concentrated the appointments process in the White House and ensured that top level appointments went only to men and women loyal to Ronald Reagan and to the goals he sought.²³ By cutting personnel in the regulatory agencies and the exercise of executive discretion the Reagan administration also substantially undermined the system of regulating business built up over the years by successive Democratic administrations.

Previous Republican administrations failed to turn back the overall thrust of Democratic domestic policies, but Reagan's legislative and administrative strategies in combination have been *comparatively* rather successful. The record is, of course, uneven, but after fifty years of proliferating government programmes and Keynesian economic policies, who can doubt that Reagan has left a conservative mark on the political system? The virtues of limited government and market economics have been reasserted, and many of the central values of the New Deal and the Great Society have been successfully challenged, even though entitlement programmes like social security remain well entrenched. As Martin Anderson has claimed:

What Reagan and his comrades have done is to shape America's policy agenda well into the twenty-first century. The prospects are nil for sharply progressive tax rates and big, new social welfare programs, some of the former mainstays of the Democrats domestic policy agenda. Everyone is for a strong national defense, differing only in the degree and quality of it.²⁴

A second consideration is *policy success*. It was argued earlier that a president's reputation will ultimately rest broadly on his success or failure in two policy arenas – managing the economy and foreign policy. We also noted the invalidity of premature evaluations, such concerns however do little to deter the media pundits. As the 1988 presidential nomination campaigns were getting underway it was widely argued that the yawning budget and trade deficits, plus the stock market crash were conclusive proof that Reagan had failed disastrously as manager of the economy. This was a grotesque oversimplification for two reasons. First, given the

²³ Harold Seidman and Robert Gilmour, *Politics, Position and Power*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 4th Edition, 127.

²⁴ *Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1988), 438. Anderson was one of the "comrades" although also an academic. In any case his judgement stands on its own merits.

complexities of the policy-making process it is as nonsensical to heap the entire blame for failures on a president as it is to accord him all the credit for successes. Second, it was by no means clear, at that stage, that Reaganomics had failed. Some indicators suggested that this might be the case whereas others did not. On the positive side, for instance, Administration spokesmen were able to claim that during the last year of the Carter administration inflation rose to 13.5 percent whereas for the first two months of 1988 consumer prices rose at an annual rate of 3.2 percent. Unemployment in 1980 was 7 percent whereas it was below 6 percent by early 1988. The Dow Jones Average plummeted by 22.6 percent on Black Monday in October 1987, but in April 1988 it was still twice as high as when Reagan took office. For five years since the recession of Reagan's first term the American economy expanded with GNP growing at an annual rate of 4.8 percent during the last quarter of 1987.²⁵ As President Reagan was about to leave office the US Ambassador to Britain pointed out that George Bush, far from inheriting an economy in crisis, would enter office with annual inflation at 4.7 percent, unemployment at 5.2 percent and after seventy-five months of sustained growth and the creation of seventeen million new jobs.²⁶ There are of course many counter arguments, some of which were touched upon at the beginning, but only after the passage of time will it be possible to assess adequately Reagan's record as manager of the economy.

A similar lapse of time will be required before anything remotely conclusive can be said about Reagan's foreign policy, even though he has already been written off in some circles:

Seven years of Ronald Reagan have been designed to make Superpower America feel good and muscular again; to exorcise the ghosts of Vietnam and the humiliations of Iran. America has sought to bounce across the world's stage, reestablishing the possibility of military intervention – Grenada – and the desirability of second hand conflicts – Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Angola. Yet what, towards the end of the era, has it all added up to? ... Internationally, America walks no taller today than it did on the morning that Jimmy Carter left office. Save in one respect. The INF Treaty, the beginnings of a new detente with the Soviet Union, is an achievement with historical resonance.²⁷

The latter sentence is, to say the least, a rather large qualification. An arms control agreement and the onset of a new era of reasonably amicable relations with the Soviet Union surely represent large achievements for

²⁵ *Time*, 4 April 1988, 36–37.

²⁶ *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1988.

²⁷ *The Guardian*, 5 February 1988.

Ronald Reagan, far outweighing the accomplishments of most presidents in the foreign policy arena.

There are no simple explanations for these developments and much depended on factors outside the president's control. Nevertheless it is possible to argue that Reagan was primarily responsible for bringing about a substantial redirection of foreign policy that ultimately proved beneficial to the United States. Under his direction a large increase in armaments occurred and the United States adopted, initially, an uncompromising, bellicose stance towards the Soviet Union and its satellites around the world. This new aggressive posture, it could be claimed, was a major factor in bringing the Soviet Union to the arms control negotiating table and in curbing its expansionist inclinations abroad.

There were, of course, various foreign policy disasters, including incidents such as the ignominious and costly withdrawal from Lebanon, defeats by Congress over South Africa and the Philippines and, surpassing all else, the Iran–Contra debacle. By any standard the last was a massive setback for the President personally and for American foreign policy. Reagan himself appeared to be grossly incompetent with little respect for the law, while the United States was made to look foolish and unreliable in the eyes of the outside world. Furthermore, at the end of the day, the Reagan Administration failed miserably to accomplish one of its principal foreign policy purposes, the unseating of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. As Reagan left office his policy in Central America was in ruins, and United States influence in the region was at its lowest ebb for many years. With that judgement acknowledged, and leaving aside one's personal preferences, it seems likely that, in the long term, the historians will give Reagan's foreign policy fairly high marks.

How does the Reagan Presidency measure up to the standard of *party legacy*? Ronald Reagan won two landslide victories for his party and the Republicans also held the Senate for six out of eight years. These were large achievements and who can doubt that Reagan has contributed massively to the revival of Republican party fortunes? On the other hand it is not possible to speak of an electoral realignment. Realignments involve seismic shifts in the electoral terrain that extend right down through the political system. The Democrats, however, remain firmly in control of the House of Representatives and have reasserted their supremacy in the Senate; they also continue to hold a majority of state governorships and, at the last count, controlled 67 out of 98 state

legislative chambers. Reagan's electoral success, it would seem, was largely personal rather than party based. He failed to carry significant numbers of his party's candidates into office with him and even when he campaigned extensively for fellow partisans in the mid term elections of 1986 the effects of his intervention were slight.

Various extraneous factors help to account for the fact that presidential popularity is no longer easily transferable and it may be that party realignments have become outdated historical phenomena. Reagan's legacy to his party was, for all that, a formidable one. George Bush's election in 1988 was much dependent on Reagan. According to a Washington Post/ABC poll in October 1988 voters approving Reagan's presidency supported Bush rather than Dukakis by a margin of 4 to 1. Bush was strongest, furthermore, in those areas of the country – the Midwest and the South – where Reagan was most popular.²⁸ Unlike many other retiring chief executives Reagan was no millstone around the neck of his party's candidate for the presidency. 1988 is not comparable to 1968, 1976 or 1984.

When Reagan assumed office many observers feared for the future of the American political system, including the *state of the Presidency*. The polls showed that public confidence in political leaders had been substantially eroded; Congress appeared more fragmented than ever; political parties had been chronically weakened and special interests loomed large. The Presidency meanwhile appeared to have become a broken reed. Nixon had resigned in disgrace and his successor had proven to be pathetically ineffectual. Carter entered office with high hopes but was eventually reduced to agonizing in public over his inability to surmount the obstacles to presidential leadership.

As we have seen, Reagan and his staff transformed the situation during his first term. They demonstrated that notwithstanding all the gloom and doom of the late 1970s the political system could be made to work. Congress could be brought to order and the disadvantages of weak parties overcome, given the right type of leadership by the White House. According to Harris polls, public confidence in governmental institutions grew sharply in the early Reagan years, increasing from 22 percent to 38 percent between November 1982 and November 1984.²⁹

There seems little doubt that during the first six years of his administration Reagan did much to restore faith in the American political

²⁸ *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, October 17–23 1988, 36.

²⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, "The Confidence Gap During the Reagan Years," *Political Science Quarterly*, 102, (Spring 1987), 1–23.

system and to repair the credibility of the presidency. What is less clear is how far these gains were negated by the Iran–Contra revelations. Not surprisingly, the public opinion polls after this scandal came to light, showed an immediate and dramatic drop in public confidence in White House leadership. Again, according to Harris, 30 percent of the American people had a great deal of confidence in White House leadership in the fall of 1985 whereas only 19 percent had expressed similar sentiments in December 1986.³⁰ Confidence in the presidency was clearly damaged by Iran–Contra, but it seems that this decline by no means completely offset the important gains made in the earlier years. Irrespective of later disasters, Reagan and his team demonstrated then that the system could be made to work and that the presidency is even yet a viable institution. Very few incumbents pass on the presidency in strengthened and revitalized form to their successors, but Reagan, despite some setbacks, would appear to have joined this select group.

IV

So far we have considered some criteria that can be used in the assessment of presidents and then applied these to the Reagan case. That analysis supports my contention that Reagan has been one of the more effective of modern presidents. Any attempt to explain why he succeeded where so others have failed is worth a separate article in itself, but we will conclude by reviewing briefly some of the more important reasons.

The first point to be made is that Reagan, despite some disadvantages and in marked contrast to his predecessor, enjoyed a considerable amount of luck.³¹ Public disillusionment with big government and the thrust of New Deal and Great Society programmes began to set in well before Reagan took office. Keynesian economic policies fell out of favour in the 1970s, and during the same period the public became increasingly nervous about the possibility that the Soviet Union was gaining a military advantage over the United States. The Reagan administration, therefore, was able to exploit currents of elite and popular thinking that had begun their course well before 1981.

Developments within the Soviet Union also presented the Reagan administration with unusual opportunities. In the early 1980s an ageing and decrepit leadership and a weak Soviet economy provided a favourable

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See especially Michael Mandelbaum, “The Luck of the President” in William G. Hyland, (ed.), *The Reagan Foreign Policy*, (New York: New American Library, 1987), 127–46.

context for the first, bellicose stage of Reagan's foreign policy. More recently the accession of Gorbachov and other factors have facilitated arms agreements and detente and opened up the possibility that Reagan may yet go down in history as a great peacemaker.

Luck, although important, does not however account for all that occurred during two four year terms. One of Reagan's great strengths was his sense of vision and his tenacious hold on a few simple beliefs. For most of his life he has been convinced that the scope of government should be as restricted as possible; that taxation is inherently objectionable and that the evil of communism must be vigilantly resisted at every opportunity. Some regard these as excessively simplistic ideas, but they gave the Reagan administration a clear sense of direction, an important quality that other administrations have lacked.³² A quote from one of the former President's otherwise more trenchant critics, Arthur Schlesinger Jr, might be appropriate here:

Reagan is the triumph of a man who earnestly believed in something. And he believed in it in bad times as well as good. He went up and down the country expounding his gospel, and eventually the cycle turned from public purpose to private purpose, and it was his time. I don't think it was a triumph of packaging; I think it was a triumph of commitment. Substantive commitment. Reagan, whatever he did, got where he is by *not* compromising on his convictions whatever the polls said. I think that Reagan is proof of the power of conviction politics.³³

As this quotation suggests, Reagan was one of the most intensely ideological of presidents. On the other hand he displayed a capacity to give way, to compromise when it became necessary to do so. As another commentator put it, Reagan:

demonstrated an unerring sense of just how far to go. This is an invaluable, indeed an essential, political skill. A leader in a democracy must present himself as a person of firm principles. He or she must, however, compromise those principles in order to govern. A leader without any guiding principles is spineless and aimless; one who will never bend them is a fanatic. The successful statesman is the one who can navigate between the two extremes, earning a reputation for being principled but not bull-headed. Mr Reagan has that reputation. His predecessor did not.³⁴

³² David Osborne argues that vision is an essential presidential requirement found in Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan, but missing from Jimmy Carter and Michael Dukakis. "On a clear day, he can see Massachusetts," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, April 25–May 1, 1988, vol. 5, No. 27, 24–25.

³³ Interview "Seeing Daylight," *Playboy* magazine, March 1988.

³⁴ Mandelbaum, op. cit.

Reagan's firm but flexible stances in conjunction with some attractive personal qualities combined to make him exceptionally formidable in the crucial role of dealing with members of the legislature. Paranoid and self-important Congressmen and Senators who remembered being bullied by Lyndon Johnson, glowered at by Richard Nixon and intellectually upstaged by Jimmy Carter responded more positively to Reagan's style. His relaxed, non-specific, congenial, light hearted and unassuming manner put visitors to the Oval Office at their ease and made him an unusually effective negotiator on behalf of his policies.³⁵

The importance of Reagan's modesty in explaining his popularity both with the public and the political elite should not be underestimated. George Reedy has written convincingly about the corrupting, court-like atmosphere of the White House where a president is treated like a quasi-monarch and is surrounded by sycophants only too willing to flatter their master's ego.³⁶ Unlike many of this predecessors however, Reagan appeared to be relatively immune to such blandishments. Even after some years in the White House his feet remained on the ground; as Jeanne Kirkpatrick said, "He doesn't treat himself like a statue of himself."³⁷ Reagan's benign, non-threatening, modest manner is particularly appropriate to an anti authority political culture and a political system where the chief executive can rarely command other political leaders but must constantly negotiate with them.

In the modern age of media politics it is essential that a president perform well in front of a TV camera. In fact very few presidents or presidential candidates have had that skill, whereas Reagan, in set piece situations at least, has displayed outstanding ability in this role. He was rightly dubbed the "Great Communicator" and his exceptional talents in this area enabled him to mobilize popular support behind his policies and to pressure recalcitrant members of Congress into cooperation.

In the past it has been assumed that presidential leadership required a chief executive to immerse himself in the detail of policy-making in the manner of a Wilson, a Roosevelt or a Johnson. The example of Eisenhower, and the subsequent research into his presidency, suggested otherwise and pointed to the advantages of a president acting as a chairman of the board—that is to say, setting the general directions of policy but then delegating the details to his staff. Standing back from the detail has important advantages: it protects the president from the odium

³⁵ See Allen Schick, "How the Budget Was Won and Lost," in Ornstein, *op. cit.*

³⁶ *The Twilight of the Presidency* (New York: New American Library, 1970).

³⁷ Quoted in Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), 306.

that may arise when policies fail, enabling him to preserve his personal popularity and to retain his position as symbolic leader of the nation.³⁸

Ronald Reagan provided further support for such a strategy. In the media he came to be known as the Teflon President, and his readiness to delegate extensively to his staff was one of the strengths of his presidency, although also ultimately a weakness. Cynics might argue that Reagan was always obliged to rely heavily on staff, given his intellectual limitations and a slothful life style. Lou Cannon, however, views the matter more charitably, seeing the inclination to delegate as “a reflection of his belief in the virtues of cabinet government and of his confidence that he could select the managers to carry out his policies. By temperament and training, Reagan was simply not a detail man. Even on issues where he was well informed, Reagan chose conspicuously to focus on the broad goals of what he intended to accomplish and leave the details to others.”³⁹

Given the profound complexity of modern government, the case for delegation stands on its own merits, and there is no doubt that it helps to explain the achievements of Reagan's first term in particular. The success of such an approach, however, is heavily dependent on the calibre of a president's staff. In the early years Reagan was served by some outstanding senior staff, but, as noted earlier, the possible hazards of delegating were dramatically highlighted by the Iran–Contra affair.

Reagan's record, as President has been uneven, of course. Many objectives have not been achieved; compromises have been necessary and in the latter days of his Presidency he sometimes appeared on our television screens to have become a rather pathetic, marginal, almost irrelevant figure. For all that, when his record is taken as a whole and set against that of almost anyone else who has held the office in modern times, he emerges as one of the most effective of recent presidents. He and his aides, particularly at the beginning, achieved an unusual degree of mastery over the political system and used it to move the country in significantly new directions in both domestic and foreign policy. Reagan furthermore gave new life to the Presidency as an institution and contributed much to the revitalization of a battered Republican party. None of this analysis, needless to say, should be interpreted as implying approval of the substance of Reagan's policies; our views on such matters have been treated as irrelevant for the purposes of this exercise.

³⁸ See Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, 375.

Those who remain unconvinced of the thesis advanced here should consider the claims of the other contenders for the title of the most effective president since FDR.⁴⁰ Presumably Nixon, Ford and Carter can be disposed of without discussion, but what of the others? Truman's stature rests largely on his position as an architect of the policy of containment, but, on the home front, his relations with Congress were appalling and his domestic policy achievements negligible. There may have been more to Eisenhower than we thought and, unlike the others, he had no aspirations toward activism in the realm of domestic policy; however, whatever the reasons, conservative Republicans seeking to roll back the New Deal derived little solace from the Eisenhower era. John Kennedy was not in office long enough to fulfil the promise that some believed he possessed, but his positive achievements were very few. Lyndon Johnson mastered the policy-making apparatus for a while and brought about some important changes; however his dominance was remarkably brief, and eventually he was driven from office leaving both the presidency and his party seriously weakened. The American presidency may well have become an impossible office denying anything more than very limited success to all incumbents; nevertheless, according to the criteria elaborated above, Ronald Reagan has been rather more effective than most.

⁴⁰ Sceptics might also refer to Aaron Wildavsky, "President Reagan as Political Strategist," *Society* (May/June 1987), 56–62. The essence of Wildavsky's argument is that Reagan is a "superb political strategist."