

# Ronald Reagan's Political Revolution – Reestablishing Conservatism

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**Abstract:**

This essay explores the political transformation of the United States during the 1980s through the lens of Ronald Reagan's rise and presidency, contrasting his leadership with that of his predecessor Jimmy Carter. It examines how Reagan's communication style, populist rhetoric, and economic philosophy (centered on supply-side economics and limited government) redefined American conservatism and restored public confidence following a period of economic crisis and foreign policy setbacks. Reagan's domestic and foreign policies, include devolution of federal power, tax reforms, and Cold War diplomacy, particularly his evolving relationship with the Soviet Union. This essay considers the cultural and symbolic legacy of Reagan's presidency, including the enduring impact of his slogan "Make America Great Again," later revived by Donald Trump. By evaluating the political, ideological, and rhetorical dimensions of Reagan's presidency, the essay argues that Reagan not re-established conservative dominance but also reshaped the image and expectations of presidential leadership in a media-driven period.

**Keywords:** Republican Party Transformation, Media and Presidential image, Conservative resurgence, American political ideology shift, Crisis of Confidence

Growing up in a family of Democrats and during the Great Depression, Ronald Reagan supported Franklin D. Roosevelt and his economic programs from an early age ("Ronald Reagan: Life Before," 2016). Later, after experiencing some political challenges, Reagan became a successful governor, surprising liberal Democrats and far-right Republicans with his willingness for compromise. As the governor of California, he quickly emerged as a strong conservative candidate for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination. Although Reagan lost to Richard Nixon in

1968 and Gerald Ford in the 1976 Republican Party presidential primaries, he ultimately won the party's nomination in 1980 (HISTORY, 2020, October 14). In the election of 1980, he defeated Jimmy Carter by a landslide, becoming the 40th president of the United States (Primuth, 2016). The landslide victory resulted from widespread dissatisfaction with previous administrations and the rising momentum of the New Right. His famous slogan, "Let's make America great again," in a time of economic crisis and international conflicts, offered hope for Americans who have lost

faith in their country; it also contrasts Carter's "Crisis of Confidence Speech," which intensified the public resentment. In Reagan's presidential term from 1981 to 1989, he gradually restored the country's confidence and repositioned conservatism as the dominant political ideology. Jimmy Carter came into the presidency in the 1970s—a period of economic stagflation, the OPEC oil crisis, and the Iran Hostage Crisis (Jing, n.d.). His leadership was characterized by a lack of decisiveness in economic policies, incompetence in foreign policy toward the Iran Hostage Crisis, and controversies regarding his speech "Crisis of Confidence" ultimately diminished his popularity. Carter's delayed reaction to economic challenges and ambivalent approach resulted in lowering unemployment while increasing inflation (The Balance, n.d.). In the same time period, cultural movements like feminism and youth countercultures were challenging the traditional norms, creating a perception that traditional American values were under threat. This combination of economic crisis and fear of cultural shifts paved the way for conservatism to offer stability and reassertion of traditional values, returning to the misremembered 1950s.

Furthermore, in response to the Iran Hostage Crisis where fifty-three American diplomats were held hostage in Tehran, the internal conflict between the National Security Council's aggressive stance and the Department of State's negotiating stance accumulated and led to a delayed rescue plan. Changing the approach, in April of 1980, Carter ordered Operation Eagle Claw, a military rescue mission that ultimately caused the death of eight American service members instead (Bill of Rights Institute, n.d.). The Iran hostage crisis undermined Carter's approaches toward foreign policy, shaping his administration as weak and ineffective.

In 1979, Jimmy Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech frankly presented the United States' problems—the oil crisis, the unsuccessful war in Vietnam, and, most importantly, people's loss of faith in the country ("Crisis of Confidence," n.d.). Carter's "*Crisis of Confidence*" speech was seen as placing blame on the American people, whereas Ronald Reagan argued that the true problem lay with the American government itself. In some ways, Jimmy Carter's unsuccessful term and the reputation as an ineffective leader inadvertently paves the way for Reagan's conservative movement. Ronald Reagan's victory in the presidential election of 1980, on the other hand, represented an important milestone; a newly ascendant conservative movement achieved several political and policy goals during the 1980s and continued vigorously influencing public discourse in the following decades. Transitioning from Jimmy Carter's administration, Reagan established conservatism as the dominant political focus and gained

widespread public support through a combination of devolution, supply-side economics, rhetorical strategy, and diplomatic foreign policy approach.

Similar to Richard Nixon's method of devolution, Ronald Reagan believed in reducing federal rights by transferring the power to the states (The Seventies, n.d.). On August 3, 1980, Reagan's "States Right" speech at the Neshoba County Fair explicitly outlined this philosophy, particularly in the context of the Civil Rights Movement (Zinn Education Project, n.d.). The Reagan administration's stance on segregation was controversial. He opposed bus-ing for school integration, threatened to veto extensions to the Voting Rights Act, and supported segregated school's access to federal funding (Primuth, 2016). From Reagan's perspective, his primary goal was to encourage Americans' self-sufficiency and to reduce their dependence on governmental programs instead of racial integration. By giving more rights to the southern states and weakening the federal government's rights, Reagan ultimately encouraged the states that supported segregation.

Another example of devolution was to reduce the federal government's budget. Ronald Reagan signed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, which cut \$140 billion in federal funding from 1982-1984 (U.S. Congress, 1981, H.R.3982). In addition, Reagan reduced expenditures for several federal programs, including Social Security, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and federal education programs (Danziger & Haveman, 1981). In total, Reagan's fiscal 1982 budget leads to a reduction of \$44 billion from the federal programs, excluding military spending (Min, n.d.). This represents the end of the New Deal coalition where federal programs received a lot of funding and provided support for the citizens. Reagan's conservative move of reducing federal power through enacting budget cuts also represents the beginning to the budget cuts of the programs for the next 40 years. Reducing government size increases the businesses and corporations' power; in doing so, Reagan reestablishes conservative value back into the political sphere.

Economically, Reagan focused on tax cuts and emphasized supply-side economics. Supply-side economics, also known as Reaganomics, was first expounded by Arthur Laffer in 1940 and later implemented by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s (Niskanen & Moore, n.d.). The theory concentrated on cutting high-income and corporate taxes, with the hope that corporations would reinvest money in workers and facilities, ultimately enabling wealth to trickle down through society. One of the tax cut policies Reagan passed was the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, the most extensive tax-cut program in the post-war period, which reduced the top marginal tax by 20% (U.S. Congress, 1981, H.R.4242). However, this approach sig-

nificantly increased the wealth gap between rich and poor. Companies like US Steel acquired other businesses instead of reinvesting in themselves, ultimately contracting the economy by laying off American workers. The Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 261 found that while the median family income increased by \$4,000 during the Reagan Era, it subsequently experienced a loss of \$1,500 in the post-Reagan years (Niskanen & Moore, n.d.). Under Reagan's administration, the interest rate, inflation rate, and unemployment rate decreased more rapidly than in the periods immediately before and after his presidency; at the same time, the US federal debt also increased. Reagan's economic policies boosted the economy in the short term, but it increased economic inequality and caused more national debt in the long run. These short term victories still helped Reagan project an optimistic and populist image onto the Republican Party. It fundamentally transformed public perception of the GOP from a party constrained by budget balance to one of economic growth and opportunity ("Reaganomics," n.d.). Moreover, Reagan's economic policy can be better described as polarizing, with strong support from wealthy individuals and corporations who benefited from it and strong resentment from low income and working class Americans who highlighted the long-term costs and the inequality they experienced.

In addition to his polarizing economic policies, Ronald Reagan was also known as a great orator because people perceived him as trustworthy. His first inaugural address encouraged Americans to "dream heroic dreams" in support of "national renewal," while his re-election campaign confidently declared it was "morning again in America" (The New York Historical, 2020).

Although Reagan's speech writers and George Will emphasize that his speech blends the previous presidents' messages, his repetition establishes him as the embodiment of those messages. By associating himself with prevalent issues, Reagan created the perception that criticisms of him were equivalent to attacking fundamental American values ("Reaganomics," n.d.). Furthermore, Reagan self-identifies his role as an "outsider" from the start of his campaign. By playing the role of an outsider coming in to "clean up" the country, he manages to avoid typical drawbacks of an incumbent president while making full use of his authority and power (Sloan, 1996). Additionally, the old populism of the early 1900s had feared big businesses, while Reagan redefined populism to mean that the major threat American citizens face in life from the federal government; this was important because Reagan expanded the electoral appeal of conservatism by adding populism (Sloan, 1996). He argued that the liberal policies would foster a big and powerful government, which in turn would restrict individual liberty. Compared with

Carter's frank honesty in exposing the problems, Reagan's sense of humor and friendly communication gained him more popularity. In a time of the external threat of communism and the internal threat of a big government, Reagan emphasized the importance of adhering to traditional American values, further establishing the dominance of conservatism in American politics.

Reagan not only redefined populism, but he also promoted interventionist foreign policy. Reagan's attitude toward the Cold War evolved from an initially aggressive approach to a later diplomatic strategy. For the first few years of his presidency, he significantly increased military defense spending, aiming to achieve technological advances that would prevent the Soviet Union from catching up (Anderson, 1981). In addition to expanding the navy and enhancing technical capabilities, Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in 1982, a US strategic defense system against possible nuclear attacks (Anderson, 1981). Reagan was a supporter of the anti-communism movement and believed that communism was a threat to freedom and world peace. He notably referred to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" (Nash, 1986). In his speech addressing American citizens about the SDI, he emphasized that the US is a preserver of peace rather than an aggressor. In the second half of his presidency, Reagan realized that a solely confrontational approach would not work and instead began pursuing diplomatic engagements. Reagan's developing friendship with Mikhail Gorbachev, the former president of the Soviet Union, also helped him change his perspective toward the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, Reagan was open to negotiations with Gorbachev and hoped for a reduction of military conflicts. His attempts to prove to Gorbachev that American military policy did not pose a threat to the Soviet Union were successful and paved the way for their mutual trust. In 1987, the US and USSR signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons from Europe; this was also the first time when two superpowers agreed to demilitarize ("The INF Treaty," n.d.). Reagan's willingness to direct negotiation with Gorbachev was a turning point in the Cold War, and eventually, in 1989, the forty-five-year war came to an end. In comparison to Jimmy Carter, Reagan's policies and actions were perceived as more competent and favorable. His effective foreign policy improved people's perception of him, further establishing conservatism's dominance.

Reagan's emphasis on reducing federal power, supply-side economics, and the focus on national defense and anti-communism remains central to contemporary conservative thought. Additionally, Reagan's optimism and trustworthy reputation increased his popularity. However,

later on in 1985, the Iran-Contra affair and the Savings and Loan crisis undermined Reagan's trustworthiness by revealing covert operations and financial deregulation that led to significant legal and economic consequences ("Ronald Reagan - Iran-Contra," n.d.). These scandals suggested a pattern of avoiding responsibility and prioritizing political goals over accountability and transparency. Reagan's policies of tax cuts, reduction of the federal government's rights and budget, and nativism are all core values of conservatism as he establishes conservatism's dominance in the political sphere. Furthermore, Reagan's famous slogan, "Let's make America great again," was later transformed into Donald Trump's MAGA movement in 2016, which stands for "Make America Great Again." This nativist movement is based on the belief that it was once a flourishing nation but has since experienced a decline due to perceived foreign influence and internal struggles ("MAGA Movement," n.d.). While Reagan's and Trump's specific policies might differ, their nostalgia for a "better past" and a desire to return to those ideals are very similar and powerful influences of the conservative movement. It remains a topic of debate whether Reagan's accomplishments were the result of his philosophies, his personality, or a combination of both. However, it is quite clear from his presidency that Reagan was not only a skilled communicator of conservative values but also a pragmatic politician deeply committed to his goals (Miller Center, 2016). Aside from his controversial and polarizing policies, some presidents, like Donald Trump, still model themselves after Reagan because his charisma and strong communication skills earned him significant popularity and trust from American citizens. On the other hand, politicians riding a wave of public support may contribute to the damaging side of politics, as their policies might prioritize short-term popularity over long-term stability or equitable outcomes. A president's charisma may influence public perception, but it does not necessarily reflect their problem-solving skills or decision-making abilities. As we have shifted more toward media-driven politics in recent decades, we are seeing more presidents with charisma and great oratory skills. However, it remains uncertain whether these traits can truly translate into effective leadership and governance.

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