

Ronald Reagan's Hollow Conservatism

In the early 1990s, Republicans turned Ronald Reagan into an icon; they hailed him for "winning the Cold War;" they used his name to put conservatism beyond challenge. But this deification was hollow, a reality that today's thoughtful conservatives, like the Independent Institute's Ivan Eland, recognize.

By Ivan Eland

As usual, at the recent Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), speaker after speaker idolized the stylized image of Ronald Reagan. Unfortunately, humans believe images, which often diverge from reality; that's why advertising on TV works. The same is true in politics.

And since politics depends heavily on selling yourself, accusations from the Left were misplaced that Reagan, as a mere actor, was not qualified to be president. Since William McKinley, the president's main role is that of cheerleader-in-chief (it is another illusion that the charismatic Teddy Roosevelt pioneered the president's use of the "bully pulpit"), using the media to go over the heads of members of Congress to sell his policies to the American public.

Thus, given this relatively recent primary presidential role and that Reagan had been an actor, Reagan was possibly the most qualified man ever to hold the modern presidency. He was an expert at creating an image, that of a conservative, and getting everyone to believe it.

Yet during the last years of his presidency, 1986 to 1988, most conservatives were furious at Reagan for having sold out the movement. Reagan's image, however, benefited from the presidency of Bill Clinton, ironically a man who was in some respects more conservative than the Gipper. During the Clinton presidency, certain Republican operatives dusted off an idolized Reagan image and began using it to attack Clinton.

Reagan is always associated with his rhetorical advocacy of small government. However, during his presidency, average annual government spending increased as a percentage of GDP, whereas under Clinton it was reduced. (In fact, Clinton was the only president since Harry Truman to reduce per capita federal spending.)

Moreover, Reagan came in second among post-Truman presidents in average annual increases in the number of federal civilian employees in the executive branch as a portion of the population, exceeded only by the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson period.

Reagan is most famous as a tax cutter; yet Reagan is last among post-World War II Republicans in reducing average annual taxes as a percentage of GDP. Although he did reduce taxes as a portion of GDP slightly, his spending increases as a percentage of GDP rendered his net tax cuts largely fraudulent.

Thus, he ran big federal deficits, thus tripling the national debt and turning the U.S. from being the largest creditor into being the largest debtor nation. He was number one in post-Truman presidents in increasing average annual debt as a proportion of GDP.

When these uncomfortable facts are noted, Reaganophiles usually then fall back to the position that he had to adopt such ruinous fiscal policies to build up military spending in order to bankrupt the Soviet Union and win the Cold War. The problem with this line of reasoning, and the corollary that especially Reagan's spending on the Star Wars missile defense program made the Soviet Union insolvent, don't square with the facts.

Even senior members of the Reagan administration's national security team, for example, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Frank Carlucci, Cap Weinberger, and Jack Matlock, later admitted that Reagan had no master plan to bring down the USSR. Reagan's close ally, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, also concurred that the Gipper had no goal to topple the Soviet Union.

Nations as powerful as the USSR rarely succumb to foreign pressure, but instead usually change mainly from domestic causes; the Soviet Union was no exception. The Soviet economy had been in big trouble since the late 1970s and got far worse when oil prices plummeted during the 1980s, that is, when Saudi Arabia decided to teach its cheating fellow OPEC cartel members a lesson by driving petroleum prices into the cellar.

Although not in OPEC, oil was about the only thing the Soviet Union sold for hard currency that anyone wanted to buy. Thus, Soviet leaders were willing to elevate a reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev, who attempted to free up the Soviet political and economic system while keeping the communist party in charge. Sovietologists had always predicted that the entire system would collapse if any reforms were made at all.

Gorbachev ignored such predictions at his own peril and also decided to unload the sizeable expenses of maintaining Eastern European loyalty by armed force. As James Mann, who wrote a book on the end of the Cold War, stated, "Reagan didn't win the Cold War; Gorbachev abandoned it."

Why is the Harding-Coolidge period now a better model than the Reagan presidency for today's conservatives to follow? After a disastrous and horrific World War

I, Warren Harding restored the country to “normalcy”, a peaceful policy of military restraint overseas that led to prosperity at home.

Harding shrunk the massive government created to fight World War I to a size below what it was before the war started, the only time in American history that this was accomplished. After Harding died in office, Calvin Coolidge continued Harding’s policies, cutting the federal government in half and maintaining the restrained foreign policy.

The Harding/Coolidge period is probably the only time in American history that the Republican Party, when holding the presidency, actually stood for small government.

Currently, with the American public, especially young people, weary after a decade of two costly military quagmires, the situation is similar to that of popular outrage at the carnage of World War I. Like that prior period, the nation needs to rejuvenate economically by retrenching overseas and returning resources to the private sector.

The Reagan-like model of incurring huge debt by muscle flexing overseas needs to be replaced by a modern-day version of Harding/Coolidge military and fiscal restraint.

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