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Pragmatism in the
Reagan Revolution

By Charles L. Heatherly



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POLICY, IDEOLOGY, AND PRAGMATISM IN THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

by Charles L. Heatherly

In 1981, in the Introduction to the Mandate for Leadership volume, The Heritage Foundation's President, Ed Feulner, observed that critics of the Reagan agenda were already trying to draw a red herring across the debate on policy initiatives at the crucial launch phase of the Reagan Revolution. Newspaper columnists and congressional "moderates," who never had supported Ronald Reagan and who took weeks to recover from the trauma of his November victory, were calling for a "pragmatic approach" to foreign and domestic problems and decrying the apparent efforts of "ideologues" to "take over" the Administration's policy machinery.

Pragmatist vs. Ideologue. As observed in Mandate for Leadership in 1981, the supposed battle between "pragmatists" on the one hand and "ideologues" on the other was a mistaken and misleading description of the real debate that was taking place and could be expected to persist throughout the Reagan presidency. The real debate would be between advocates who had some new ideas and new approaches and those who defended the obsolete and unsuccessful ideas of welfare state liberalism.

Unfortunately, many conservatives adopted the pragmatist-versus-ideologue typology and began to warn against the subversion of the Reagan Agenda by the "pragmatists on the White House staff" and in positions of influence elsewhere. True conservatives, in this simplistic view, always eschewed pragmatism, and pragmatists were somehow devoid of ideology.

To this day, the Washington Post editors and liberal columnists frequently characterize the debates within the Administration in these terms, implying that the pragmatists are, of course, the realists, the professionals who know how to "manage the policy process," while ideologues are, by definition and universal assent, interested only in guarding the purity of their abstract ideas and "ultra-right" goals.

You may have gathered from my description of this soap opera of phantom devils and angels that I reject such characterizations as pure nonsense. It is tragic that so many conservatives have been seduced into such crudities as allowing the defenders of high marginal tax rates to get away with calling themselves pragmatists while advocates of lower rates somehow are tagged as ideologues.

It is time to rescue the honorable and useful label "pragmatist" from the misappropriation it has suffered as the misnomer for liberal obstructionism.

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Pragmatists Without Vision. Pragmatism has no party affiliation; it is what all successful politicians practice regardless of their ideology. A pragmatist is simply someone who chooses prudent and appropriate means to achieve a desired end; he chooses a course of action suitable to and proportionate to the ends being sought. In short, a pragmatist wants to be successful and tries to choose the course most likely to be successful, given all the relevant factors in the particular policy arena.

The opposite of a pragmatist is not the ideologue but the fanatic, who pursues a particular goal zealously without regard for other worthy goals that may be harmed by one-dimensional activism. Conservatives should be--and historically have been--pragmatists. They are not fanatics. Liberals can be pragmatists, but all pragmatists are not liberals.

What I am suggesting, of course, is that pragmatism is not only acceptable but required, in the choice of tactics, methods, and timing to be used in advancing policy goals. It is equally true that pragmatism is wholly inadequate as a source of goals and themes for any President who wants to change the direction of governmental policies inherited from the past. A vision of the future must be pursued "pragmatically"; but pragmatists without vision are ill-qualified to manage the enterprise.

Immune from the Lessons of Experience. The history of the conservative movement over the past four decades supports and illustrates this view. Conservatives who grew up with National Review in the 1950s and 1960s will remember James Burnham's trenchant essays on foreign affairs and in particular his landmark book, Suicide of the West. Burnham's critique of liberalism's foreign policy was based on his analysis of liberalism as an ideology, a world view and mind-set which resists the lessons of history and experience. That analysis is valid today; only the players have changed, not the script. Liberalism's resilient optimism and naive faith in the obsolete concept of "containment" remains the fundamental obstacle to realistic foreign policy initiatives.

Similarly, the most incisive critique of collectivist economic policies has come from conservative economists who have applied the most rigorous empirical analysis to government programs and demonstrated that they do not work; they do not achieve their desired ends at an acceptable price in terms of both direct costs and harmful side effects. Unfortunately, as in foreign policy, the contemporary liberal is immune from the lessons of experience and pursues his egalitarian ideology despite the verdict of history.

Finally, if we look at the history of social policy over the past three decades we can see the dominant role of liberal ideology as it works its way through our court decisions, our legislative institutions, our educational systems, and our family relations. Conservatism's role has not been to advocate some alternative ideology to guide social policy but to articulate and defend the traditional values of our Judeo-Christian heritage.

In all three policy arenas, we see that throughout recent history conservatism's policy goals have not been a product of "ideology." They are rooted in history, common sense, and empirical analysis.

Feigned Neutrality. The archetype of Reagan Administration "pragmatists," Richard Darman, offered a personal rebuttal to the assumption that pragmatists do not have values or ideological commitments. "A pragmatist," Darman said in a recent Washington Post interview, "is someone who to some extent judges by results...the implication which is inappropriate is sometimes that one is interested in results as if these could be separated from one's values."

Values underlie all policy decisions, liberal or conservative. The values may be implicit or explicit, and may be derived from any number of assumptions and beliefs, but the values are just as real and just as inextricably affected by policy decisions as the more mundane and "pragmatic" tests of policy success employ by "pols" who prefer to hide their values or ideological assumptions behind a mask of feigned neutrality. Liberals recognize that liberalism is out of favor as an ideology, so they attempt to hide behind the cloak of "pragmatism." Conservatives should not participate in this charade.



Not on Meese's Organization Chart. With the ghosts and goblins of ideology hopefully laid to rest, or at least put in perspective, let me turn now to a more concrete dimension of my theme, that of policy management in the executive departments of the Reagan Administration. From the beginning of the Reagan Administration thoughtful conservatives understood very well the institutional realities of the policy process and sought to offer advice and counsel on how to avoid the traps waiting in store for the Administration's appointees.

To illustrate this early attention to realism in policy planning, I will point out that the subtitle of the 1981 Mandate for Leadership volume was "Policy Management in a Conservative Administration." The term "policy management" was chosen to draw a clear distinction from the more familiar but less inclusive term, "policy development." "Policy development" is used in Washington and elsewhere to mean the process of arriving at a policy decision. Once an issue has been "decided" by the President, the policy development process is considered to have been completed. Once the President approves a new policy proposal it goes from "development" to "implementation," which in 1981 became the responsibility of a new decision making group that did not exist on Ed Meese's organization chart on January 20: the Legislative Strategy Group (which was originally chaired by then deputy chief of staff, Richard Darman).

In 1981 the traditional preoccupation with "policy development" was superseded by a new preoccupation--how a new proposal would "fly" on the Hill. Decisions over the "timing" of new initiatives became just as important as the Cabinet recommendations to the President to get a new initiative approved. If the timing is never quite right, the proposal might just as well have never been "developed," no matter how solidly researched or well prepared the proposal in terms of its intended results as government policy. Thus, the LSG achieved effective control over the "Reagan Agenda" by controlling the legislative agenda. This control extended in time to budget strategy as Stockman's influence waned.

Glaring Failures. I will leave it to others to chronicle the evolution and role of the LSG in the Reagan era, a fascinating story to be sure. My point here is to highlight the important difference between "policy development" as it is generally understood and "policy management," which includes three stages:

- 1) Policy development
- 2) Legislative strategy
- 3) Agency implementation

Policy management is, of course, intimately related to questions of "ideology versus pragmatism" or, more accurately, ends and means, since the successful implementation of policy initiatives necessarily involves compromise, not simply within a specific policy theatre that compromises related to the other interests of legislators whose support is needed. And although agency implementation is not thought of as part of "policy development," it is definitely a part of policy management, as rules and regulations and their implementation often shape a policy's impact on the real world, not to mention the agency's crucial role in "selling" Administration proposals on the Hill. Lukewarm support or back-channel opposition by agency appointees will doom almost any proposal that encounters resistance. The lack of attention to coordination of executive branch offices and agencies has been one of the more glaring failures of the White House staff, particularly in the Regan-Kingon era.

Policy development is to policy management what romance is to marriage: one may not necessarily follow the other, and the former may even become something interesting and worthwhile on its own terms. But one is usually left feeling somewhat disappointed that the expectations embodied in the developmental stage have not been fully realized if the full "implementation" is not managed successfully.



A wise man well know in this Capitol Hill neighborhood once remarked that personnel is 90 percent of policy where government affairs are concerned. (It is, of course, 100 percent of policy where electoral politics is concerned.) This is a perceptive commentary on the ramifications of the management style of the Reagan presidency, where management of the policy process is delegated to mid-level White House aides and to agency heads. Once the political personnel of any agency are in place, the policy management function will be run by people with their own interpretations of the Administration's goals and priorities.

Going Native. To some extent this delegation is necessary and desirable, for no enterprise as large and complex as the federal government can be run out of the Oval Office. Conservatives who think all problems would be solved if only the President were personally involved in the everyday affairs of agency business should remember the era of White House micromanagement under Jimmy Carter. The right balance must be found, and much of the policy management process is necessarily decentralized.

Decentralization, therefore, is necessary, but it places a very high premium on personnel selection and very great responsibilities on agency heads to follow the lead of the President rather than "going native" by becoming defenders of their own little fiefdoms and advocates for new schemes to expand their domain.

Despite some notable and conspicuous exceptions (we all have our favorite examples), the Reagan Administration has a comparatively good record in this regard, thanks to

conscientious attention in the Office of Presidential Personnel to the enforcement of quality control standards in the selection of top level appointees and in the clearance process for mid-level appointees. The establishment and enforcement of policy-related standards for political appointments is a marked departure from the time-honored preoccupation with pure patronage as the touchstone for personnel decisions. Patronage, which too easily degenerates into cronyism, is an effective way to pay off campaign obligations, but it is inconsistent with a serious commitment to the advancement of a policy agenda. The two may be somewhat compatible if patronage is an additional criterion, but not if it becomes a substitute for policy-related criteria.

Neglected Stepchild. If there is any area of policy management where "pragmatism" is both a fact of life and a highly developed art form, it is personnel management, which as any government executive knows, occupies from 20 to 40 percent of an executive's time and probably generates 60 percent of his or her headaches.

Every experienced government executive knows that personnel management is the key to policy management in any federal agency, which is why the Administration's critics get so exercised when an agency head is observed taking that task seriously. It means he means business and all bets are off.

Why is policy management at the executive agency so important? Because bureaucracy is the concrete, permanent embodiment of the liberal agenda, and the preservation and expansion of bureaucracy is the foremost priority of liberalism today--whether it be the State Department, the Education Department, or the SBA field structure which has a presence in 100 congressional districts. "Administering" a bureaucracy is a job for career professionals; "managing" it is the mission of the political executive, and bureaucracy cannot be managed without consistent and intelligent attention to personnel management. Regrettably, personnel management remains the neglected stepchild of policy management, to the detriment of the Administration's policy agenda.

If taking policy management seriously means taking personnel management seriously, then we must be clear about the relationship between the political appointees sent by the President to manage executive branch agencies and the career civil servants who comprise the other 99 percent of the agency's work force.

There is considerable misunderstanding of the proper relationship between the political executive and the career professional. I firmly believe that the career professional and political executive have obligations to each other, that their roles and responsibilities are complementary in nature. And, naive as it may sound, I believe the relationship need not and should not be adversarial--even in the extreme case where the policy agenda is radical, such as the proposed closing of an agency or termination of a major program. Accepting an adversarial relationship as legitimate means accepting bureaucratic obstructionism as legitimate, and this we should never do.



A "Secret Plan." Anyone who doubts that defenders of the bureaucracy want to delegitimize political efforts to take control need look no further than the 1986 SBA battleground. During my memorable public hearing before the Senate Small Business Committee on April 28 of last year, an event captured for posterity on C-Span videotape, I

was accused repeatedly of undermining the agency by "destroying morale." I was accused of having a secret plan to "dismantle" the agency by unilateral actions, a plan to accomplish by administrative means what Congress had "refused to allow to be accomplished lawfully." The intended message was clear: I was acting illegitimately, and should be removed.

I can confess now that I was actually somewhat flattered and amused by some of these accusations because they presumed a formidable set of complex plans and sophisticated techniques ready to be employed by a "master dismantler." The truth is far more modest in scope and character: The only powers I had were the traditional ones every agency head utilizes to one degree or another--the power to select his own political appointees and the ability to undertake administrative and procedural changes fully consistent with applicable laws and regulations. With only eleven days to prepare for the job, I can assure you there as no "master plan," only a commitment to work for the President's program through every legitimate means available.

"Criminality." Although the Committee's staff had spent virtually full time for two to three weeks investigating me and my background prior to the hearing, the hearing itself revealed not one single instance of an illegal or improper use of my authority as Acting Administrator. Nor was one such instance revealed or even seriously alleged in the eleven months and twenty-two days I served as the head of the agency.

Today's Wall Street Journal contains a lucid essay on the op-ed page which discusses the recent tendency for policy debates to devolve into allegations of "criminality" as a method of delegitimizing policy options or policy advocates. This appears to be an expanding phenomenon and even the Senate Small Business Committee is making its own small contribution to this derailment of political discourse.

A Cornerstone Credo. In April 1982 Secretary of Education Terrel Bell asked me to become the Deputy Under Secretary for Management, a job for which I underwent the scrutiny of White House political clearance and the Senate confirmation process. When I took over as head of the Department's Office of Management, I called a meeting of the top officials and told them the following:

I pledge to you I will never ask you to do anything illegal or unethical. But within those parameters I will ask you to implement policies you may not agree with, and you have an obligation as professional managers to help me implement those policies. I will respect your expertise and advice as to means, but I will set the policy goals, subject only to the above caveat: we will always obey the law.

The cornerstone of a professional credo for both political and career managers is respect for the law. Yet, there are many laws, the most important of which is our basic law, the Constitution, which sets out rules for the election of political representatives to make laws and execute laws.

When a President is elected by the people on a platform calling for fundamental changes in both federal programs and the federal budget, his appointees in the executive branch generally will be people who share those goals and who will try to make changes in the way things operate.

Betraying a Professional Responsibility. The desire for changes on the part of political appointees and the tendency of bureaucratic institutions to defend themselves against perceived threats necessarily set up a tension and a potentially adversarial relationship. All this is well understood by political scientists and anyone who has studied large organizations--public or private. The question is, however, is this resistance to the policy initiatives of the President and his appointees legitimate? Do career professionals have the right to obstruct policy and programmatic changes that are lawful or that seek change through lawful means? My conviction is that they do not, and that career managers or employees who do so are not behaving as professionals. They are instead, behaving as political agents and are, in fact, betraying their professional responsibility to be neutral in the political process.

The true professional is one who puts aside his personal views, indeed his or her personal convictions, in favor of assisting in the implementation of changes where those changes are lawful. And "assisting in the implementation" means more than mere passive acquiescence. It means giving honest advice and professional service to help make new policies and procedures work successfully.

Most political executives coming into the bureaucracy in 1981 at the beginning of the Reagan Administration, like President Carter's appointees in 1977, were suspicious of the career staff, who were thought to be "part of the problem, not the solution." However, most political appointees soon learned that there are as many different types of career employees as there are political appointees, that they run the entire spectrum, from the outright, no-holds-barred guerrilla warfare adversary to the most loyal and competent individuals one could hope to find anywhere. I have as much respect for and admiration of the career professional who does a good job as I do for the political appointee who does a good job. Each needs the other to achieve anything worthwhile, and each should respect the role of the other and try to work together in a professional manner.



Moving Character to the Top. In October 1980, as head of the year-long Heritage Foundation project aimed at laying the groundwork for the new Administration's policy initiatives, I co-hosted a meeting at which the man designated to be the Director of Presidential Personnel in the Reagan Administration discussed with us the criteria that had already been established for the selection of political appointees. Those criteria were, in rank order:

- 1) Commitment to the policies and goals of the Reagan Administration;
- 2) Professional expertise in the field;
- 3) Management ability;
- 4) Political skills;
- 5) Character and integrity.

As I reflect upon my experience in the Administration for the past six years, I realize that my view of the relative ranking of those criteria has changed: character and integrity clearly must be at the top of the list, not the bottom.

Character and integrity are of paramount importance in a position of public trust, whether the position is political or career; and not merely in the sense of being honest and above financial temptations, but also in the sense of adherence to certain fundamental values that lie at the heart of our democratic system--truthfulness, honoring agreements, reverence for the law, and an honest day's work for a day's pay.

Clear and Specific Goals. Political executives owe it to their employees to be absolutely clear about the policy agenda--a clear and specific list of goals and objectives to be accomplished. Career employees have the right to know what is expected of them.

At the program management level, political and career employees need to work together to identify ways of measuring actual success in what they do. Political appointees have the right to ask for "profit and loss information" and career civil servants have a responsibility for providing accurate information on successes and failures.

What do political executives owe to their career employees in exchange for the "team player" loyalty required of the true professional? What are the professional standards for political appointees?

We Will Always Be Outnumbered. On this topic I have become somewhat of a radical and probable heretic. About three years ago, in the spring of 1984 I believe, I sat on a panel at a workshop sponsored by The Heritage Foundation. The panel was focused on the topic, "gaining control of the bureaucracy." (We were ambitious in those days.)

One panel member, who was a White House staff person in the personnel business, made a statement to the effect that the way to "tame the bureaucracy" was to keep expanding the number of political appointees. In my presentation I pointed out that this was not a real answer to the problem because there is no way to overwhelm the career establishment in sheer numbers: we will always be greatly outnumbered. I emphasized quality over quantity and called for more sophistication in how we deal with career staff. My remarks were not greeted with great enthusiasm. I was reminded at the time of what Confucius said: "Man who walks down middle of road gets hit by cars going both ways."

By "quality over quantity," I meant that the political executive must work harder and smarter than the career officials he supervises; he must master the technical and administrative skills needed to implement policy as well as make public speeches; and he must enforce high standards all across the board--holding everyone accountable for results and insisting that all function as an efficient team.

Unfortunately, not all political appointees take their jobs as managers seriously enough. I have come to the conclusion that there are basically two types of appointees: those who believe elections are something you are involved in in order to win control of the government; and those who believe that government is something you do between elections.

I firmly believe--and have always insisted--that political appointees must be held to high standards of honesty, integrity, and professional competence. If a few appointees use their political rank as a crutch to claim an exemption from normal standards of official conduct--in basic competence or basic integrity--supervisors and agency heads need not tolerate such attitudes. It is not easy or pleasant to dismiss appointees, but it can be done--and should be done more often. Career officials must be able to respect their political bosses for their integrity, work habits, and professional standards before they can be expected to admire or emulate their political values.

In my eleven month tenure as Acting Administrator I tried to establish and enforce high standards for my political appointees--standards of integrity, loyalty, and professional competence. Political loyalty to the President is one aspect of basic integrity in a political appointee, and if ever I wavered in meeting that test I would expect to be removed.

The Iron Triangle. I have dwelled on the topic of personnel management at the agency level because it is a much-neglected area of policy management in this Administration as in others. Yet without a strongly motivated agency team loyal to the President, policy management will inevitably degenerate into a business-as-usual attitude, with primary loyalties to the congressional committees which oversee the agency budget and secondary loyalties to the constituent groups who derive direct benefits from the agency's programs. This "iron triangle" of agency managers, committee staff, and client groups is real; it is strong and healthy, and it has Republican as well as Democratic credentials when it needs to employ them.

Control of the bureaucracy will be a perennial problem and never can be fully achieved because the primary loyalty of bureaucracies is to those who feed them, not to those who try to put them on weight loss diets. But we can and should take management of the bureaucracies more seriously than we do, and large benefits could flow from fairly minimal effort in this arena. "Reform 88," for example, achieved only modest results in its management initiatives because it had only modest presidential involvement. OMB put on a good show, but presidential involvement is required if management initiatives are to be taken seriously by the agency heads who must implement them. Let us hope "Reform 96" will be more ambitious.

Cynic, Realist and Pragmatist. The real test of whether conservatives really want to control the growth and purview of the federal bureaucracy will come at that distant moment when conservatives achieve control not only of the White House and Senate, but of the House of Representatives as well, and retain that control for at least eight years--the minimum amount of time it takes to make an impact on a large federal agency.

Now there friends, is a true litmus test for pragmatists: if you think such an event is impossible in this century, you are a cynic. If you think it merely difficult and highly unlikely, you are a realist. But if you think it a prerequisite to the successful enactment of the Reagan Agenda and want to dedicate yourself to achieving it, then you are my kind of pragmatist: a person with a goal that is both important and attainable, and the patience and fortitude to organize all the resources necessary to the enterprise.

