

# The First Principles of Ronald Reagan's Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** *A neo-Reaganite grand strategy offers the surest guide for restoring and sustaining American greatness in the 21st century. It incorporates the principles of the Founding without slighting the perennial imperatives of power and geopolitics. It inoculates us from the pessimism of unrealistic realists, who underestimate the possibility of provisional justice, and the dangerous illusions of idealists, who underrate the obstacles to achieving it in international politics. It can facilitate the expansion of stable liberal democracy and economic prosperity, thereby minimizing the number and gravity of the threats the United States faces. Its commitment to American exceptionalism and American military preeminence not only enhances deterrence, but reduces the blood, toil, tears, and sweat of the wars that the United States must fight. And it contrasts favorably with any other plausible alternative, be it unrealistic realism, liberal internationalism, isolationism, or utopian versions of neoconservatism unconstrained by geopolitical imperatives.*

Few Presidents have surpassed the achievements of Ronald Reagan, the greatest American President since World War II, with FDR his only peer in the 20th century. The remarkable success of Reagan's foreign policy accounts significantly for his lofty ranking, in particular the indispensable role he played in defeating the Soviet Union, an evil, totalitarian empire existentially threatening freedom for more than four decades.

The spectacular revival the United States experienced during the Reagan presidency confounded the gloomy conventional wisdom of the 1970s that lamented the inevitability of America's decline. President Reagan contributed mightily not only to the demise of the Soviet Union, but to the vast expansion of democracy around the world. His economic policies—based

on free markets, low taxes, and less intrusive government regulation of private enterprise—catalyzed three decades of unprecedented economic dynamism and laid the foundation for America's military primacy, on which the robustness of freedom still depends.

A deeper understanding of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy doctrine is essential for three reasons beyond its historical significance.

*First*, many of Reagan's critics and revisionist defenders have distorted his record and the lessons to be derived from it.

*Second*, the contending approaches that Ronald Reagan assailed—unrealistic realism and liberal multilateralism—continue to influence current debates about American grand strategy.

*Third*, Reagan's legacy transcends his times. Ronald Reagan's grand strategy, adapted to the challenges of the 21st century, provides the most prudent framework for America's foreign and national security policy, as well as the standard of measure for judging all candidates for national office.

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After briefly summarizing the precarious conditions that President Reagan inherited, the first part of this essay analyzes the grave defects of the unrealistic realism of Nixon–Ford–Kissinger and the liberal multilateralism of the Carter Administration. The second part sets forth the first principles of Reagan's foreign policy, their application to the paramount challenge of the Cold War, and their felicitous consequences. The third rebuts the errors and distortions, replete in revisionist accounts of Reagan, that subvert the true meaning of his legacy. The fourth explains why the first principles of Reagan's doctrine are valid not only for his time, but for ours as well.

### THE FLAWED ALTERNATIVES: UNREALISTIC REALISM AND NAÏVE MULTILATERALISM

It has become increasingly fashionable in many quarters to take the end of the Cold War for granted. That was not how it looked when Reagan became President in January 1981. The 1970s was a dismal decade: freedom in retreat, collectivism on the rise. The power and scope of government expanded voraciously, stifling the incentives for innovation and growth that had been responsible for the post–World War II economic boom in the United States.

The Arab oil boycott following the Yom Kippur War of October 1973 and the oil shocks of 1978–1979 following the fall of the Shah of Iran exacerbated stagflation (low growth, high interest rates, high inflation), ravaging the American economy. By the final year of the Carter Administration, the economy had plummeted to post–World War II lows, with inflation reaching 12 percent and interest rates soaring to 21 percent. Defense spending had dropped to 4.8 percent of GDP, less than half of the amounts that liberal Presidents Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson had spent to keep the nation secure.

The Iranian takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 epitomized the enervating self-doubt about the credibility and capability of American power. For 444 days, the militant mullahs held 52 Americans hostage, defying and humiliating a Carter Administration that was evidently unable to do anything about it.<sup>1</sup>

What made America's predicament more ominous was that it coincided with the rising power and assertiveness of the Soviet Union. During the 1970s, the Soviet Union engaged in the most massive peacetime military buildup in history, consuming more than one-quarter of its GDP. Correspondingly, Soviet expansionism surged, culminating in the Red Army's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviet dictators were confident that the correlation of forces had changed irrevocably in their favor. Egged on by the Kremlin, a virulently anti-American Third World bloc at the United Nations reached its peak of influence, with American ideals and interests relentlessly under assault.<sup>2</sup>

The flawed strategies of the Nixon, Ford, and Carter Administrations bear major responsibility for the dan-

<sup>1</sup> Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 612–696.

<sup>2</sup> Adam B. Ulam, *Dangerous Relations: The Soviet Union in World Politics, 1970–1982* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 83–144.

gerous and deteriorating strategic situation that confronted Ronald Reagan when he took office in January 1981.

***The Unrealistic Realism of Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger***

Presidents Richard M. Nixon (1969–1974) and Gerald R. Ford (1974–1977) and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger (1973–1977), who served under both, had sought vainly to constrain Soviet power by defining American interests more narrowly while depicting the Soviet threat less menacingly. Nixon and Kissinger devised and implemented a version of *détente*, defined as a more cooperative, less confrontational relationship with a Soviet Union that was presumed to be a traditional nation-state seeking stability rather than a revolutionary enterprise seeking hegemony.

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The Nixon–Kissinger conception of world politics sprang from the classical realist tradition, which takes a dark view of human nature and accepts the inherently anarchic nature of international politics where there can never be a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Based on this fundamental view, realists conceive the limits and possibilities of international politics through the prism of four core propositions.

1. A narrow definition of the national interest, largely divested of moral or ideological content, must drive American foreign policy.
2. International politics will remain primarily a struggle for power and equilibrium rather than a quest for justice.

3. Foreign policy should ignore regime type or ideology in assessing threats or opportunities.
4. Accordingly, it should never aim to transform the domestic nature of states.

As Nixon and Kissinger saw it, domestic constraints made retrenchment necessary as well as prudent. Having won the election of 1968 by a narrow margin, Nixon faced a nation convulsed by the Vietnam War. Even after his landslide reelection in November 1972, Nixon faced a Democratic Congress hostile to increasing defense spending and American military intervention abroad.<sup>3</sup>

The policy of *détente* toward China and the Soviet Union reflected a major shift in the perception of American interest and how to promote it. Ideology, regime type, and the threats associated with them had become, according to Nixon and Kissinger, less important as sources of international conduct when compared to traditional narrower conceptions of the national interest. Whereas previous Administrations had defined the Soviet Union as an implacable revolutionary adversary with unlimited aims and ambitions, Nixon and Kissinger considered the Soviet Union a traditional type of empire, dangerous and expansionist but with limited aims, offering the possibility of achieving durable equilibrium through a mixture of deterrence, trade, and arms control.

Nixon and Kissinger spoke publicly of removing ideology or regime type as reference points for measuring threats. “We have no permanent enemies,” Kissinger announced in 1969; “we will judge other countries on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology.”<sup>4</sup> This de-emphasis on ideology and regime type inspired Nixon, Kissinger, and Ford

<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), pp. 92–135.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Robert G. Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson: A Life in Politics* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 246.

to improve relations not only with the Soviet Union, but also with China. As Kissinger put it in typically realist fashion, Chinese “leaders were beyond ideology in dealing with us. Their peril had established the absolute primacy of geopolitics.”<sup>5</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger also forecast the end of the bipolar era, with Soviet and American power towering above all the rest. Anticipating the emergence of global and regional multipolarity, they believed that regional surrogates could substitute for American power to maintain equilibrium in key geopolitical regions. The “Nixon Doctrine,” as the strategy came to be known, reflected the Administration’s effort to transform the American role in resisting Soviet aggression from primary to supporting.

Rapprochement with China was a prime example of the Nixon Doctrine in action. Nixon and Kissinger hoped to enlist China’s assistance in containing the Soviet Union, pressuring North Vietnam to accept a peace compatible with U.S. honor, and maintaining geopolitical equilibrium in Asia. In the Middle East, Nixon and Kissinger designated the Shah of Iran as the primary U.S. surrogate. The United States would supply the arms, while the Shah would provide the ground troops and actual military presence to preserve regional equilibrium.<sup>6</sup>

Through arms control, Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger hoped to curb the Soviet Union’s military buildup. Through economic benefits and trade, they hoped to engage the Soviet Union in building a stable international equilibrium in which the Soviets had a stake in maintaining international order rather than undermining it. Through negotiations and agreement, they hoped to change Moscow’s approach to international relations by convincing Soviet leaders that it was in their interest to cooperate rather than compete with

the West. Their conception of détente reflected not only their optimism about Soviet intentions, but also their pessimism about American prospects: By their reckoning, the Soviet Union was on the rise, and the United States was in decline, so increasing cooperation with Moscow was a necessity as well as a virtue.<sup>7</sup>

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Not all of détente was conciliation. When the Soviet Union encouraged Arab countries to attack Israel in 1973, the United States responded vigorously. Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy worked deftly to isolate the Soviet Union in the Middle East. As even Kissinger confessed, however, détente did not stem the dangerous erosion of American power.<sup>8</sup>

Major responsibility for this failure lay in Nixon’s, Ford’s, and Kissinger’s own conception. Their unrealistic realism neglected—to America’s peril—the fundamental importance of ideology, ideals, and regime type as well as power in international politics. International agreements could not tame Soviet ambitions or generate pressure to liberalize so long as the Soviet Union remained a totalitarian state committed to a revolutionary, brutal Marxist–Leninist ideology that called for unremitting struggle against the United States as leader of the free world.

Historian Martin Malia sums it up best: “For the West, Détente was a gradual way to transcend the Cold War; for the East, it was a gradual way to win

<sup>5</sup> Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, pp. 162, 193.

<sup>6</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 298–306.

<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, *Henry M. Jackson*, pp. 245–248.

<sup>8</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 733–761.

it.”<sup>9</sup> Steeped in their historical pessimism, Nixon and Kissinger woefully underestimated both the capacity of the United States to recover from the trauma of Vietnam and the resilience of the American people, who were willing to sustain a vigorous foreign policy when forthrightly alerted to the danger.

### *The Naive Liberal Multilateralism of Carter*

Whereas Nixon, Kissinger, and Ford grounded their foreign policy in a tragic classical realist vision of international politics as primarily a clash of interests and struggle for power rather than a quest for justice, the grand strategy of President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) was anchored in a liberal multilateralist worldview whose core premises are:

1. The belief in a greater harmony of interests among men and states than classical realism deems possible.
2. A belief in the efficacy of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations as arbiters of international disputes.
3. A deep suspicion of power wielded on behalf of traditional, concrete conceptions of the national interests that classical realism deems paramount.
4. A greater willingness than classical realism to contemplate the use of force for achieving humanitarian goals that “the international community” deems legitimate.

President Carter not only elevated human rights to a primary concern for American foreign policy, but treated America’s traditional allies, often democratic ones, more sternly than he treated more repressive enemies of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> For the classic statement of this position, see J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of American Power* (New York: Random House, 1986).

During his first three years, President Carter spurned power politics in favor of engagement with adversaries and a reliance on what Joseph Nye calls American soft power (culture and values).<sup>11</sup> Almost all of his political appointees to the Departments of State and Defense came from the regnant McGovern wing of the Democratic Party, which feared the arrogance of American power more than it feared the danger of Soviet expansionism.<sup>12</sup>

For his chief arms control negotiator, Carter chose Paul Warnke, who blamed the United States, not the Soviet Union, for perpetuating the arms race. For his Secretary of State, Carter chose Cyrus Vance, whom renowned civil rights lawyer Morris Abram described as “the closest thing the United States has ever had to a pacifist” in that position since William Jennings Bryan. Vance once told *Time* magazine that Carter and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev held “similar dreams and aspirations about fundamental issues.”<sup>13</sup>

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Accordingly, President Carter sought to transcend what he called, in his May 1977 speech at Notre Dame University, “our inordinate fear of communism” by conciliating our Communist adversaries to a degree

<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Chalmers Johnson, “Carter in Asia: McGovernism Without McGovern,” *Commentary*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (January 1978), pp. 36–39.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Warnke, “Apes on a Treadmill,” *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 18 (Spring 1975), pp. 12–29; Cyrus Vance, “Man on the Move,” *Time*, April 24, 1978, p. A20; Steven Hayward, *The Real Jimmy Carter* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2004), pp. 157–168.



that even Nixon and Kissinger in their most euphoric moments over détente never imagined. Carter favored, though he did not achieve, the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea. Until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, he continued to take a relaxed view of the escalation of Soviet expansionism in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

Skeptical about the legitimacy and effectiveness of military power in the nuclear age, President Carter strove to achieve large reductions in Soviet–American arsenals not only by formal arms control treaties, but also by unilaterally restraining weapons building in the unrequited hope that the Soviet Union could reciprocate. Accordingly, the Administration, delaying the development and deployment of the Trident submarine, cruise missile, and MX missile, shut down the Minuteman ICBM production site, cancelled enhanced radiation weapons (more commonly known as neutron bombs), and scrapped the B-1 bomber—all programs that Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger had initiated and deemed vital to maintaining the Soviet–American strategic balance. Throughout his presidency, Carter wanted to spend substantially less on defense than Congress was willing to appropriate.<sup>15</sup>

Almost all of the measures that Carter’s apologists, such as National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, invoked as evidence of Carter’s greater firmness toward the Soviet Union—the grain embargo, the boycott of the Moscow Olympic games, the approval of a 5.4 percent increase in the 1980 defense budget—occurred only after the invasion of Afghanistan amidst a difficult fight for reelection. Carter’s born-again hawkishness during the presidential campaign of 1980 contrasts sharply not only with the trajectory of his Administration during his first three years, but

also with his dovish foreign policy inclinations since leaving office. Throughout the presidential campaign of 1980, Carter attempted constantly to portray Ronald Reagan as a warmonger whose policies would provoke a dangerous arms race and possibly war. Thereafter, Carter vehemently opposed President Reagan’s national security strategy in all of its dimensions.<sup>16</sup>

By 1980, the prestige of American power had declined to its lowest point since the 1930s. The Carter Administration’s botched Iran rescue mission of April 24, 1980—too small to succeed, large enough to fail conspicuously—distilled that decline to its essence. Worse, Carter himself shared Nixon and Kissinger’s pessimism about America’s prospects. Following his Camp David retreat in the summer of 1979, the President admonished the American people to overcome their malaise and learn to accept the diminishing capacity of the United States to influence events abroad.

## THE REAGAN DOCTRINE

Ronald Reagan repudiated both the Nixon–Ford–Kissinger policy of détente and Carter’s even more conciliatory version of it. He understood more clearly than anyone else in American politics the evil essence of Soviet Communism and how to defeat it. He also understood more clearly than most of his supporters the vulnerability of the Soviet system to sustained economic, military, moral, and political pressure. His unabashed defense of political and economic freedom also restored the nation’s prosperity, self-confidence, and capacity for world leadership.

The personal attributes and outlook that account for Reagan’s success as a statesman had their genesis in his early years. His moral clarity arose from his religious upbringing under the guiding hand of his mother and her church, the Disciples of Christ, an optimistic but non-utopian denomination of Protestant Christianity

<sup>14</sup> Peter G. Bourne, *Jimmy Carter: A Comprehensive Biography from Plains to Post-Presidency* (New York: Scribner’s, 1997), pp. 385–386.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Glynn, *Closing Pandora’s Box: Arms Races, Arms Control, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 289.

<sup>16</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Advisor, 1977–1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), p. 459.

congenial with his cheerful disposition. Although Ronald Reagan trusted in the inherent decency and collective wisdom of the American people, he also accepted the Christian notion of original sin and its political implications: The danger of evil lurked even in the best of times. So, Reagan insisted, maintaining and expanding freedom required eternal vigilance.<sup>17</sup> Or, as he frequently put it:

Freedom is not more than one generation from extinction. We did not pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States when men were free.<sup>18</sup>

Reagan had firm convictions about foreign policy from the start. He believed the United States should actively maintain a favorable imbalance of power against hegemonic threats that imperil freedom and the national interest. He frequently denounced appeasement of Hitler as “suicidal dogma.”<sup>19</sup> Reagan said of World War II that “never in the history of man had the issue of right and wrong been so clearly defined, so much so that it makes one question how anyone could have been neutral.” Reagan revered Winston Churchill—the archenemy of appeasement—for doing more than any other man “to preserve civilization during its greatest trial.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For a superb general analysis of how Reagan's deep faith informed his politics, see Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Losing Freedom by Installments,” address to the Long Beach Rotary Club, June 6, 1962, Ronald Reagan Presidential Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley (hereafter cited as RRPL), box 43.

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Reagan to Victor Krulak, June 6, 1983, RRPL, Presidential Handwriting File, series 2.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Speech at Westminster Cold War Memorial,” Fulton, Mo., November 18, 1990, RRPL.

After World War II, Reagan concluded that Soviet totalitarianism posed a threat to freedom as odious and menacing as Nazi Germany had under Hitler. “The real fight with this new totalitarianism belongs properly to the forces of liberal democracy, just as the battle did with Hitler's totalitarianism. There is really no difference except for the cast of characters.”<sup>21</sup>

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It was, according to Ronald Reagan, the pessimistic proponents of détente, not the American people, who suffered from malaise. In a series of radio addresses drafted in his own hand between 1975 and 1979 while out of office, Reagan devised a coherent set of ideals that would inform his national security strategy during his presidency.<sup>22</sup> What crystallized as the Reagan Doctrine rested on several core premises transcending the false dichotomy between realism and liberal multilateralism.

1. Reagan considered the Soviet regime a totalitarian state—a malevolent Leninist entity with unlimited aims and ambitions—not a traditional great power, as Nixon and Kissinger deemed it, or a defensive one driven to aggression by the arrogance of American power as Carter deemed it. Like President Harry Truman, the architect of vigilant contain-

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Reagan, “How Do You Fight Communism?” *Fortnight*, 1951, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Reagan in His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America*, ed. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (New York: Free Press 2001), pp. 23–218.

ment, and like the great Soviet dissidents, Reagan believed the root cause of Soviet aggression lay in the Soviet Union's internal structure, in the nature of its regime and ideology. The Soviet Union would remain an existential danger to freedom so long as it was a totalitarian state with no public opinion or checks and balances to limit the ambitions and actions of a small cadre of tyrants running the regime.<sup>23</sup>

2. Reagan believed there were no substitutes for American power—either surrogates or multilateral institutions—to protect vital U.S. interests in geopolitically critical regions. Like all of his Cold War predecessors, he rightly ranked Europe and East Asia as the major power centers of his day, the areas where the absence of freedom and the triumph of tyranny could most menace American ideals and self-interest.
3. Reagan radiated supreme confidence in the moral and practical superiority of democratic capitalism. He insisted that America's greatest days lay ahead, that the American economy could compete successfully with any type of regime, so long as the United States curtailed big government and unleashed the dynamism of the private sector through a combination of deep tax cuts and substantial deregulation.<sup>24</sup>
4. Reagan grounded his grand strategy and his conception of the national interest in a compelling synthesis of power and principle. His staunch commitment to promoting stable liberal democracy when possible and his unremitting public condemnations of the moral evils of Communism put him squarely at odds with unrealistic realists such as Nixon and

Kissinger, who discounted the significance of ideals and regime type. Reagan's emphasis on maintaining the primacy of American military power and his recognition of the ubiquity of evil as well as the potential for good in politics put him squarely at odds with liberal idealists, such as Carter, who discounted these permanent things and exaggerated the natural harmony of interests among men and states.

5. Reagan defined the objective of American grand strategy not just negatively as resisting tyranny, but positively as promoting freedom, prosperity, and democratic institutions when possible and prudent. For Ronald Reagan, both ideals—America's dedication to liberty—and self-interest impelled the United States to promote human rights and regime change in the Soviet Union. Yet Reagan also assailed the Carter Administration for selectively and counterproductively applying human rights sanctions more vigorously to America's less dangerous, less repressive authoritarian allies than to its more dangerous, more repressive Communist adversaries. Like Jeane Kirkpatrick, his ambassador to the United Nations, Reagan preferred a stable liberal democratic outcome when possible but would settle for the lesser evil of authoritarianism to avert the greater danger of totalitarianism when necessary.<sup>25</sup>

In January 1981, Reagan came to the presidency determined to defeat rather than merely contain or accommodate the Soviet regime.<sup>26</sup> He succeeded magnificently. Although there are many heroes of the Cold War entitled to acclaim, Ronald Reagan was pivotal.

<sup>23</sup> For brevity's sake, this will reference only two of the finest of the many fine studies: Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Regan Books 2006), and Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan's Secret War* (New York: Crown Books, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary President* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed and compelling account of the genesis and implementation of Reagan's doctrine to defeat the Soviet Union, see Peter Schweizer, *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).



He possessed a unique combination of courage, vision, the ability to inspire, and the political skills to generate overwhelming pressure on the Soviet Union, giving it no plausible option but to capitulate.

President Reagan laid down the gauntlet at his first press conference when he said that Leninist ideology compels the Soviet Union to lie, cheat, and steal to achieve its ultimate objective of global domination. In a commencement address in May 1981, he predicted:

[T]he years ahead will be great ones for the country, for the cause of freedom, and for the spread of civilization. The West will not contain communism, it will transcend communism. We will not bother to denounce it, we will dismiss it as a sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose final pages are now being written.<sup>27</sup>

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From start to finish, Ronald Reagan pursued indefatigably a policy of vigilant containment and ideological warfare against Communism, despite intense opposition at home and abroad. He secured a massive modernization of the American military, doubling the size of the American defense budget, badly straining the Soviet economy, and wiping out the military advantage the Soviets had so painstakingly achieved during the 1970s. Facing down skeptics even within his own Administration and defying the potent nuclear freeze movements that had taken to the streets and intimi-

dated many democratic statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic, Reagan persuaded the NATO allies to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles and Pershing intermediate-range ballistic missiles to counter the Soviet SS-20 missiles in Europe.<sup>28</sup>

Despite intense diplomatic pressure culminating in the Soviet walkout from arms control talks, Reagan persevered, ultimately compelling the Soviet Union to accept his Zero Option as the basis for the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty of 1987, eliminating an entire category of nuclear weapons. Reversing three decades of arms control theology that derided the practicality and desirability of ballistic missile defense, Reagan launched the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which Soviet Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet military feared enough to propose unprecedented concessions to eliminate it.

Facing down the opposition of his own National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, Reagan refused to sacrifice SDI even for Gorbachev's promise of sharp reductions in Soviet nuclear arsenals as a quid pro quo. Reagan's perseverance induced the Soviet Union to make concessions on arms control that it had routinely and cavalierly rejected when the more conciliatory Nixon, Ford, and Carter Administrations had proposed them.<sup>29</sup>

Correspondingly, Ronald Reagan intensified economic pressure on the Soviet regime by cutting American trade and credits to the USSR and collaborating with Saudi Arabia to reduce the price of oil, depriving the oil-exporting Soviets of desperately needed hard currency. In the same vein, the Reagan Administration supported opposition groups resisting Soviet clients in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. President Reagan's National Security Decision Directive 75, signed in the summer of 1983, made changing the Soviet regime,

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<sup>27</sup>Ronald Reagan, "Commencement Address at Notre Dame," May 17, 1981, RRPL.

<sup>28</sup>Originally a skeptic but later a convert to Reagan's approach, Secretary of State George Shultz tells this story authoritatively. George Shultz, *Triumph and Turmoil: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner's, 1993), pp. 463–780.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 879–900, 983–1015.

which it identified as the root cause of the Soviet Union's insatiable ambitions, the object of American grand strategy. President Reagan sought to achieve this goal by applying unrelenting and comprehensive political, economic, ideological, and military pressure.<sup>30</sup>

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Ronald Reagan also employed public diplomacy as a vital dimension of his grand strategy. Addressing the British Parliament in June 1982, he forecast the demise of the Soviet Union:

In an ironic sense, Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis—a crisis where the demands of economic order are colliding directly with the demands of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free non-Marxist West but in the home of Marxism—Leninism, the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup>

Today, these remarks seem prophetic. At the time, however, intellectual elites assailed Reagan's remarks as arrogant, ignorant, and bellicose. Ronald Reagan remained undaunted by such criticism. Speaking before the Council of Evangelicals on March 8, 1983, Reagan shocked the foreign policy establishment once more, calling the Soviet Union an evil empire, to the great joy of imprisoned Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky.<sup>32</sup> "Finally," Sharansky wrote, "the leader of the free

world has spoken the truth—a truth that burns in each and every one of us."<sup>33</sup>

### REFUTING THE REVISIONISTS: REAGAN'S CRUCIAL ROLE IN WINNING THE COLD WAR

Many commentators and liberal academics still deny the obvious: that enormous credit goes to Ronald Reagan's moral clarity, vigilance, and assertiveness for winning the Cold War. According to a revisionist school of thought whose ranks include James Mann, John Patrick Diggins, Jack Matlock, Michael Vaisse, and Beth Fischer, the Soviets fell for internal reasons, with Gorbachev the main hero.<sup>34</sup>

Revisionists consider Reagan's most important, though secondary, contribution his willingness during his second term to abandon the belligerent policies of his first. According to Beth Fischer's variant of this argument, an enlightened and sensible Gorbachev induced Reagan to compromise; this defused the spiraling cycle of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, tension which Fischer blames on the hard-line policy of the early Reagan.<sup>35</sup> According to James Mann and Michael Vaisse, Reagan dissociated from hardliners and switched from a bellicose policy to a more realistic policy of peace.<sup>36</sup>

This revisionist interpretation ill fits the evidence. True, Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher recognized sooner than most other hard-

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<sup>30</sup> National Security Decision Directive (hereafter cited as NSDD) 75, "The US Relations with the U.S.S.R.," January 19, 1983, RRPL; NSDD 11-82, August 21, 1982, RRPL.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Address to the British Parliament," June 8, 1982, RRPL.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals," Orlando, Fla., March 8, 1983, RRPL.

<sup>33</sup> Natan Sharansky, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 138.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: Norton, 2007); James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War* (New York: Viking, 2009); Justin Vaisse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jack Matlock, *Superpower Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray—and How to Return to Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Beth Fischer, *The Reagan Reversal: Foreign Policy and the End of the Cold War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Vaisse, *Neoconservatism*, pp. 196–197; Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan*, pp. 280–320.

liners—or realists such as former President Nixon and his Secretary of State Kissinger—that Gorbachev was a different type of leader. When circumstances changed during Reagan’s second term, he adjusted his policies—but not the premises underlying them. He responded positively to the changes in the Soviet regime during Gorbachev’s tenure. Ultimately, Gorbachev and the Soviet Union agreed to end the Cold War not on their terms, but on Ronald Reagan’s.

American pressure on the Soviet Union did not abate at any point during the Reagan presidency, despite his view that engaging Gorbachev could facilitate the implosion of the regime. Reagan refused to abandon SDI or the Zero Option calling for the elimination of all intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe; Gorbachev capitulated. American defense spending

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***Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher recognized sooner than most other hard-liners—or realists such as former President Nixon and his Secretary of State Kissinger—that Gorbachev was a different type of leader.***

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continued to rise, peaking at \$302 billion in 1988 (6.6 percent of GDP). The Reagan Administration continued to aid freedom fighters, draining Soviet resources in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Nor did Reagan relent in his assault on the moral legitimacy of the Soviet Regime. In June 1987, over the objection of his so-called more realistic advisers, he called on Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, exco-riating it as the symbol of Soviet totalitarianism.<sup>37</sup>

Reagan’s understanding of himself also demolishes the revisionist interpretation of his motives and policies. Summing up his foreign policy legacy to students

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<sup>37</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Speech Before the Brandenburg Gate,” West Berlin, June 12, 1987, RRPL.

at the University of Virginia on December 16, 1988, he welcomed the improvement in Soviet–American relations but urged Americans to “keep our heads down” and “keep our skepticism” because “fundamental differences remain.” He attributed that improvement to his policy of firmness, not conciliation:

Plain talk, strong defenses, vibrant allies, and readiness to use American power when American power was needed helped prompt the reappraisal that the Soviet leaders have taken in their previous policies. Even more, Western resolve demonstrated that the hard line advocated by some within the Soviet Union would be fruitless, just as our economic success has set a shining example.<sup>38</sup>

Reagan contrasted his policies with the more conciliatory policies of his predecessors during the 1970s:

We need to recall that in the years of détente we tended to forget the greatest weapon that democracies have in their struggle is public candor: the truth. We must never do this again. It is not an act of belligerence to speak of the fundamental differences between totalitarianism and democracy; it is a moral imperative.... Throughout history, we see evidence that adversaries negotiate seriously with democratic nations when they know democracies harbor no illusions about their adversaries.<sup>39</sup>

Reagan hailed the democratic and free-market revolutions that had occurred in the eight years that he was President. He closed his presidency with “a new sense of excitement, even perhaps felt by those who lived in Jefferson’s time: a sense of new possibilities for the idea

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<sup>38</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question and Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville,” December 16, 1988, RRPL.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

of popular government. Only this time, it is not just a single nation at issue: It is the whole world where popular government might flourish and prosper."<sup>40</sup> Secretary of State George Shultz marveled in retrospect at Reagan's foresight:

I recall President Reagan's Westminster speech in 1982—that communism would be consigned to the ash heap of history. And what happened. Between 1980 and 1990 a number of countries that were classified as free or mostly free increased by 50 percent. Open political systems have been gaining ground and there's good reason for it. They work better.<sup>41</sup>

It is hard to see, too, how Gorbachev and a policy of conciliation deserve more credit for ending the Cold War in America's favor than Reagan and his policy of vigilance. The restoration of American power under Ronald Reagan gave the Soviet Union little choice but to take the risk of choosing a reformer such as Gorbachev, who recognized that the Soviet Union could no longer compete against a rejuvenated, self-confident United States unless it liberalized at home and pursued a more conciliatory policy abroad.

Nor was Gorbachev a genuine democrat. He aimed only to reform Communism, not to abolish it. His regime began to implode under the cumulative effect of decades of U.S. containment, Reagan's confrontational policies intensifying American pressure at a critical moment, and the moral contradictions inherent in the Soviet system. Whereas Gorbachev did not intend the breathtaking collapse of Communism that his domestic reforms unwittingly unleashed, Ronald Reagan expected and dedicated his political life to achieving this outcome.<sup>42</sup> True, Gorbachev deserves

credit for decency unique among Soviet leaders, for not resorting to the use of force to stave off the Soviet Empire's demise as all of his predecessors likely would have tried to do. Gorbachev thus rendered an impor-

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***Ronald Reagan's relentless exploitation of Soviet vulnerabilities convinced Soviet leaders that the Soviet Union could not outbuild or outbully the United States as it had done during the 1970s.***

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tant contribution, but one that was secondary to that of the main hero of the Cold War's endgame: Ronald Reagan.

The Soviet archives have vindicated Reagan's assessment: The Soviet Union was indeed an evil totalitarian empire.<sup>43</sup> The Cold War was indeed a moral as well as geopolitical struggle in which the United States was on the right side of history. As Russian President Boris Yeltsin told the U.S. Congress in 1992: "The world can breathe a sigh of relief. The idol of communism, which spread everywhere social strife, animosity, and unparalleled brutality, which instills fear in humanity, has collapsed."<sup>44</sup>

The more conciliatory policies that Reagan's critics proffered as alternatives prolonged rather than hastened the Soviet Union's collapse. Under Nixon, Ford, and Carter, détente elicited nothing but an acceleration of the Soviet Union's military buildup and intensification of its global expansionism. Conversely, Ronald Reagan's relentless exploitation of Soviet vulnerabilities convinced Soviet leaders that the Soviet Union could not outbuild or outbully the United States as

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2006, p. A8.

<sup>42</sup> For an authoritative account of how surprised Gorbachev was by what he unleashed, see Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 328–392.

<sup>43</sup> Stephane Courtois, Nicolas Worth, Jean-Louise Panne, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartosek, and Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 1–31.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Richard Pipes, "Misinterpreting the Cold War: The Hardliners Were Right," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (January/February 1995), pp. 154–160.



it had done during the 1970s. Former USSR Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh and other major ex-Soviet officials have cited Ronald Reagan's military buildup—and SDI in particular—as vital initiatives hastening the Soviet Union's benign collapse.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in his magisterial study of the Cold War based on recently released Soviet archives, Cambridge University Professor Jonathan Haslam concludes:

In a critical sense, whether one likes to admit it or not...the Reagan buildup in counterforce systems, the anticommunist zeal within the Reagan Administration, and the obsession with space based defense played a key role in the unraveling of the Soviet security system across the board.<sup>46</sup>

America's victory in the Cold War also owed much to the resurgence of American economic power that Ronald Reagan's policies catalyzed.<sup>47</sup> Reagan rejected Keynesian macroeconomics and traditional Republican fiscal orthodoxy in favor of what is known as supply-side economics, focusing on the way individuals invest their labor and capital in the market. He gave primacy to cutting taxes, reducing the rate of domestic spending, and deregulating the economy rather than to shrinking the size of government or the welfare state.

The downside was a steady growth in deficits because federal spending increased even more than the significant increase in revenues that the Reagan pro-growth tax cut generated. The vastly larger upside of "Reaganomics" was the tremendous economic dynamism it unleashed, lasting for the next 25 years. Between 1983 and 1988, the American economy grew by one-third. Manufacturing grew by 12 percent after

a 10 percent decline during the 1970s. The American economy created 18.5 million new jobs during the 1980s, compared to a net increase of zero in Western Europe.

No President is perfect, and Ronald Reagan was no exception. Although his propensity to delegate and disengage after setting a clear course usually served him well, it sometimes turned out badly. Witness the Iran–Contra scandal, the worst of his Administration and the "perfect storm" of Reagan's managerial shortcomings. Although Reagan rightly considered the Middle East important though secondary in the Cold War, ranking significantly below either Europe or East Asia, and although he established sound geopolitical priorities for the region—preventing either Iraq or Iran from attaining regional hegemony—the implementation of

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*America's victory in the Cold War also owed much to the resurgence of American economic power that Ronald Reagan's policies catalyzed.*

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his policies left much to be desired.

The credibility of Reagan's tough rhetorical stand against terrorism suffered tremendously because of the ill-fated arms-for-hostage deal that culminated in the Iran–Contra scandal. The American intervention in Lebanon in 1982–1984 ended in tragedy when, having completed their mission, 267 Marines were killed in a terrorist attack on their vulnerable Beirut barracks, making a continued American presence in Lebanon untenable. Later, Osama bin Laden invoked Lebanon in his litany of American defeats—Vietnam in 1975, Mogadishu in 1993, the embassy bombings in Kenya in 1998, the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000—leading him to write off the United States as the great but decadent Satan, too irresolute to fight.

Reagan himself was the main culprit for the inconsistencies of his Administration's policies toward the Middle East. On one hand, Reagan vowed to resist terrorism in all of its manifestations; on the other hand,

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Haslam, *Russia's Cold War*, p. 399.

<sup>47</sup> For the most comprehensive and sure-handed account of the Reagan presidency in all its dimensions, see Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution, 1980–1989* (New York: Crown, 2009).



he conceded being a soft touch on the subject of civilian hostages.<sup>48</sup> Even so, Reagan's successes and virtues dwarf any failures and shortcomings. He was, indeed, freedom's champion.

## TOWARD A NEO-REAGANITE FOREIGN POLICY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

The first principles informing the Reagan Doctrine have great salience for contemporary American grand strategy. As a caveat, every historical situation is unique in some way. Important changes have occurred in world politics since the end of the Cold War. Bipolarity no longer characterizes the distribution of world power. Instead, the United States has the capacity to remain the world's paramount military power for decades to come if Americans have the political will and foresight to sustain it.

The world is moving toward some form of unbalanced multipolarity economically, with the United States still the first among not-so-equals, China and India rising, and the European Union and Japan also in the top tier. East Asia has replaced Europe as the world's most important geopolitical region based on population, territory, and economic and military capabilities. The Middle East has risen in significance if not ranking—still behind Asia and Europe—because of the dangerous intersection of Islamic radicalism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the spiraling global demand for the region's massive quantities of oil. For all that, however, the essence of international politics remains unchanged.

Reagan derived his principles from the eternal rather than the ephemeral. He took due measure of the inescapable centrality of power and the constraints imposed by the dynamics of international politics with-

out deprecating the significance of ideals, ideology, and regime type. His Judeo-Christian conception of man, morality, and prudence—right reason about the right things to be done—inoculated him against two perennially dangerous fallacies: a utopianism that exaggerates the potential for cooperation without power and an unrealistic realism that underestimates the possibilities of achieving provisional justice even in the often bleak realm of international relations.

Ronald Reagan's grand strategy rested on a conception of enlightened self-interest that respects the decent opinions of mankind without making international institutions or the fickle mistress of often indecent international opinion the polestar for American action. Six enduring principles emerge from the disciplined study of his foreign and national security policies.

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*Ronald Reagan's grand strategy rested on a conception of enlightened self-interest that respects the decent opinions of mankind without making international institutions or often indecent international opinion the polestar for American action.*

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### 1. *There is no substitute for American power.*

Great statesmen and decent states can reduce and mitigate but never eliminate the danger of war, even in the best of times, because of the irredeemable imperfections of human nature. The anarchical system of international politics, where there is no monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, compounds the severity and frequency of violence and strife. In these ineluctable circumstances, the vindication of America's national interest depends mainly on the capability and credibility of American power. Coalitions of the willing can supplement but can never substitute for American power.

As Reagan and his intrepid ambassador to the U.N., Dr. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, warned indefatigably, multilateral institutions in general and the U.N. in particular

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<sup>48</sup>For an imperfect but important study of Reagan's conflicted foreign policy in the Middle East, see David S. Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

can inhibit the necessary exercise of American power if American statesmen are unwise enough to make them the arbiters of international legitimacy for using force. No nation, no alliance, no international organization can have a veto on American action, particularly those that are organically hostile to American interests and values such as the United Nations or its constituent parts such as the Security Council. The Declaration of Independence calls on American statesmen to show a decent respect for the decent opinions of mankind, not a slavish deference to the indecent opinions routinely emanating from anti-American tyrannies regnant in the U.N. General Assembly.

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*As Ronald Reagan well knew, the problem is not defense spending, but domestic spending, particularly entitlement programs.*

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## 2. A strong defense is the best deterrent.

The greatest dangers to the United States typically arise not from vigilance or the arrogance of American power, but from unpreparedness or an excessive reluctance to fight. Historically, retreat, retrenchment, and disarmament are a recipe for disaster. Consequently, the United States should strive for what Reagan's hero Winston Churchill called "overwhelming power," with plenty to spare for unforeseen contingencies.<sup>49</sup> This posture will deter most aggressors most of the time and defeat them at the lowest possible cost and risk even when the best deterrent sometimes fails.

Confronted with a large budget deficit, Ronald Reagan gave priority to his military buildup, rightly envisaging it as freedom insurance. The restoration of American power during the 1980s not only hastened the Soviet Union's demise, but facilitated what the great Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington

called Democracy's Third Wave: a vast global expansion of liberty, making the United States and the free world more prosperous and secure.

Indeed, Huntington identified a strong correlation between the rise and fall of stable liberal democracy and the rise and fall of American power: Though the greater or lesser prevalence of such regimes was "not exclusively a product of American policy and power, the latter certainly played a role."<sup>50</sup> A similar relationship between American power and stable liberal democracy will likely prevail during the 21st century. American retrenchment and decline will not conduce to stability, but instead will precipitate the spread of various forms of tyranny, imperiling American ideals and self-interest.<sup>51</sup>

Today, the United States must replenish the military capital that Ronald Reagan bequeathed to the nation. For the sake of freedom and security, the United States must remain on the cutting edge of military innovation, deployment, research, and development, keeping well ahead of dangerous rivals waiting in the wings even in times of comparative tranquility.

As Ronald Reagan well knew, the problem is not defense spending, but domestic spending, particularly entitlement programs. The United States now spends on defense only 16 cents of every federal dollar and 4.7 percent of GDP, compared to 52 cents of every dollar and 8.5 percent of GDP during the Administration of President John F. Kennedy. If current trends continue, defense spending will fall to less than 4 percent of GDP—the level of U.S. spending on the eve of Pearl Harbor with the United States isolationist and perilously unprepared.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 253.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey H. Anderson, "Is Defense Spending Driving Our Debt?" *The Weekly Standard*, July 8, 2011.

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<sup>49</sup> Winston Churchill, "Dictators and the Covenant," in Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, Vol. 6 (New York: Chelsea House, 1974), pp. 5717–5721.

This is perilous. The United States can well afford to spend 5 percent to 6 percent of GDP on defense to sustain American military preeminence. This will suffice to deter most threats to America's vital interest most of the time, with ample surplus of power so that we can defeat aggressors at the lowest possible cost and risk when even the best deterrent inevitably fails.

### 3. *Regime types matter.*

A prudent grand strategy accords great weight to regime type and ideology in discerning friends, foes, opportunities, and perils. Not all regimes behave alike. Some are more aggressive or more benign than others. Ronald Reagan distinguished sharply between stable, liberal, democratic regimes on one hand and totalitarian regimes, often animated by messianic, malevolent ideology, on the other. He rightly considered stable liberal democracies more reliable allies, more likely to cooperate, and less likely to fight with one another than with other types of regimes—a conviction consistent with the historical record affirming it.

For Reagan, too, pernicious regime types and ideologies accounted historically for the most menacing threats to the United States, such as the Soviet Union. He thus aimed to transform and liberalize a totalitarian Soviet tyranny responsible for initiating, intensifying, and perpetuating the Cold War.

Today, a neo-Reaganite grand strategy would confront, not deny, the gathering danger of Islamic Fascism, particularly a fanatical Iranian regime determined to develop and deploy nuclear weapons.

Today, a neo-Reaganite foreign policy would envisage a still dangerously authoritarian China as a competitor requiring containment as well as engagement.

Today, a neo-Reaganite foreign policy would give precedence to defending our decent, democratic friends in Eastern Europe, Great Britain, Colombia, Israel, Japan, and India rather than appeasing an increasingly authoritarian Vladimir Putin in Russia, a brutally repressive and expansionist China, or dictatorships in

the Islamic world that loathe the United States for its very essence.

This does not mean that the United States should court enormous risks to establish democracies everywhere, on any pretext. Ronald Reagan did not do that. Like Jeane Kirkpatrick, his ambassador to the United Nations, Reagan sometimes considered the prospects for stable liberal democracy too bleak, America's geopolitical stake in the outcome too limited, to justify active American involvement. Sometimes an authoritarian regime that is less anti-American is the lesser evil if the more likely alternative is a totalitarian regime that is intrinsically anti-American and more difficult to reform.

Typically, Ronald Reagan found much congenial in neoconservatism. Reagan, too, always preferred a stable liberal democratic outcome when the United States could achieve it. Yet a neo-Reaganite approach wisely strikes a prudential balance, recoiling from the reflexive interventionism of some less sober neoconservatives who sometimes underrate the obstacles to establishing stable liberal democracy, just as unrealistic realists more frequently overestimate them.<sup>53</sup>

### 4. *Think geopolitically.*

A prudential grand strategy ranks threats, interests, and opportunities based on the imperatives of geopolitics rather than abstract, vague, and unenforceable principles of cosmic justice. Many realists and liberal internationalists still fail to grasp that American decline is by no means inevitable.<sup>54</sup> Whether the unipolar era is enduring or evanescent depends on how the United States decides to govern itself and defines its role in the world. No nation will dethrone the United States as

<sup>53</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Robert G. Kaufman, "The Perils of President Obama's National Security Policy," *The Foreign Policy Initiative*, n.d., at <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/node/15511>; Douglas J. Feith and Seth Cropsey, "The Obama Doctrine Defined," *Commentary*, July 2011, at <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/the-obama-doctrine-def>.

the world's preeminent military power any time soon.<sup>55</sup> For all nations, however—even a nation as powerful as the United States—resources are finite. So the United States must establish its priorities wisely.

The geopolitical logic that Ronald Reagan employed dictates that containing a still authoritarian China from dominating East Asia has become the greatest long-term challenge for the United States. Eventually, China will face the same reckoning as the Soviet Union did during the 1980s—reform the political system, collapse, or expand—because it will become impossible to reconcile the Chinese Communist Party's dominance with economic dynamism. When that happens, the United States must have in place a credible democratic alliance system and a formidable military deterrent, the way Ronald Reagan did with the Soviet Union, to induce the Chinese leadership to make the same decision as Gorbachev: Give up rather than fight. This strategic logic wisely impelled President George W. Bush to engage a democratic India that shares many American core values and geopolitical interests.<sup>56</sup>

The neoconservative disposition that Ronald Reagan found so congenial in many respects is more right than wrong in its diagnosis of the threats the United States faces and in its policy prescriptions for dealing with those threats. For his entire political life, Ronald Reagan also assailed isolationism, declinism, global retrenchment, American withdrawal, and the fallacy of moral equivalence as geopolitically reckless and morally bankrupt. Yet he recoiled at the unbridled democratic globalism of some less prudent neoconservatives because it risks squandering American resources and morale imprudently on peripheral goals.

<sup>55</sup> For an excellent refutation of the declinist position, see Josef Joffe, *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: Norton, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> For a superb analysis along these lines, see Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for the Mastery of Asia* (New York: Norton, 2011).

As Charles Krauthammer warns presciently, mirroring Reagan's dispositions, the United States could not do everything but must do the most important things: first, prevent hegemony from emerging in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East; then, *to the extent possible*, consolidate a democratic zone of peace in these major power centers where the absence of liberty could prove most perilous. Elsewhere, the United States should vigorously support extending freedom and stable liberal democracy, but not by threat, employment, or commitment of American military power, except in rare instances such as Rwanda where minimal force with minimal risk, with a prompt and certain exit strategy, can avert mass murder or genocide.<sup>57</sup>

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*For his entire political life, Ronald Reagan assailed isolationism, declinism, global retrenchment, American withdrawal, and the fallacy of moral equivalence as geopolitically reckless and morally bankrupt.*

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### 5. Embrace American exceptionalism.

A prudent grand strategy depends on a synergistic combination of economic prosperity at home, the robustness of American military power, and the vitality of the American way of life. Whereas President Barack Obama's grand strategy calls for making government omnipotent at home while making the United States weaker, more humble, and more deferential abroad, Ronald Reagan derided such Carteresque strategy as a recipe for moral, economic, and geopolitical catastrophe. He restored American preeminence not by vastly expanding the public sector, but by constraining it: by unleashing private enterprise, deregulating the econo-

<sup>57</sup> Charles Krauthammer, *Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2004).



my, lowering taxes, limiting the growth of government, spurring innovation in the private sector, embarking on and persevering with a major military buildup, and unabashedly asserting American ideals and self-interest in a way that clearly distinguished between freedom's friends and foes.

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*Like the greatest of American statesmen, Ronald Reagan recognized that the United States must wage war and conduct peace in a way that is consistent with American society and the principles of well-ordered liberty.*

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Ronald Reagan did not consider the United States a perfect nation, but a great, good, and indispensable one. For his entire political life, he championed the traditional notions of American exceptionalism that many today—realists and multilateralists in particular—find so troubling. He emphatically rejected the fallacy of moral equivalence or, even worse, the tendency to blame America first that President Obama frequently has exhibited, most infamously in his Cairo speech of 2009 where he placated Middle Eastern dictators by exponentially exaggerating Islamic virtues and American vices.<sup>58</sup> Or, as Reagan put it himself, summing up his record: “we should stop apologizing for America’s legitimate national interests and start asserting them.”<sup>59</sup> He infused his conception of the national interest with moral as well as practical content.

Like the greatest of American statesmen, Ronald Reagan recognized that the United States must wage war and conduct peace in a way that is consistent with American society and the principles of well-ordered liberty. The seminal expression of his grand strategy toward the Soviet Union (NSDD-75), stipulated accord-

<sup>58</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Reagan, “Remarks at a Question and Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.”

ingly: “US policy must have an ideological thrust which clearly affirms the superiority of US and western values of individual dignity, and freedom, a free press, free trade unions, free enterprise, and political democracy.”<sup>60</sup> This is no less true for our times.

### 6. *Different times call for different strategies.*

The mark of prudential statesmanship is the capacity to discern when changing times require different measures to achieve the same goals. Strategies appropriate for one set of circumstances are often inappropriate for others. Reagan exemplified a standard of prudence that any effective grand strategy must incorporate.

As Reagan frequently observed, the United States could prudently pursue a policy of armed neutrality, avoiding the cost or risk of war outside the Western Hemisphere, when it was weak in the world of the strong and could take the effective operation of the European balance of power for granted; yet the conditions the United faced in the 20th century called for a more vigilant, interventionist, foreign policy. Even before World War II, Reagan opposed the policy of appeasement, and during the Cold War, he considered it imperative vigilantly to contain the Soviet Union while prudently adjusting his tactics (though not his goals) by engaging Gorbachev when the opportunity arose.

Nor did Reagan consider a strategy of containment and deterrence appropriate in all circumstances. On the contrary, he defended the moral and practical wisdom of preemptively using force against certain types of gathering dangers, such as Nazi Germany for reasons his hero Churchill’s words convey best:

If you will not fight for the right when you can easily win without bloodshed: if you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not too costly; you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all odds against you and

<sup>60</sup> NSDD 75.



only a precarious chance for survival. There may even be a worse case. You may have to fight when there is no hope of victory, because it is better to perish than live as slaves.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, the events of September 2001 rudely exposed the inadequacy of deterrence, containment, or ex post facto responses when dealing with the insidious interaction of radicalism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Accordingly, the Bush Doctrine, or any sound grand strategy in Reagan's tradition, treats military preemption as a prudential rather than categorical judgment: weighing the gravity of the danger, the probability of its realization, the availability of alternative means, and the prospects for success.<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSION

A neo-Reaganite grand strategy offers the surest guide for restoring and sustaining American greatness in the 21st century.

It incorporates the importance of the principles of the Founding without slighting the perennial impera-

<sup>61</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 348.

<sup>62</sup> For what the author claims is a Reaganesque defense of the Bush doctrine, see Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine*.

tives of power and geopolitics.

It inoculates us from the pessimism of unrealistic realists, who underestimate the possibility of provisional justice, and the dangerous illusions of idealists, who underrate the obstacles to achieving it in international politics.

It can facilitate the expansion of stable liberal democracy and economic prosperity, thereby minimizing the number and gravity of the threats the United States faces.

Its commitment to American exceptionalism and American military preeminence not only enhances deterrence, but reduces the blood, toil, tears, and sweat of the wars that the United States must fight.

Finally, a neo-Reaganite grand strategy contrasts favorably with any other plausible alternative, be it unrealistic realism, liberal internationalism, isolationism, or utopian versions of neoconservatism unconstrained by geopolitical imperatives.

—*Robert G. Kaufman is a Professor of Public Policy at Pepperdine University and the author of three books, including In Defense of the Bush Doctrine (2007). He is in the research phase of a book titled A Tale of Two Americas: Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and the Future of American Politics.*