

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3128
February 1, 2011

The Classical Virtues of Ronald Reagan

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The best political leaders embody the classical virtues of courage, prudence, justice, and wisdom. President Ronald Reagan had all these qualities and in abundance.

Courage. When he was shot on March 30, 1981, President Reagan seemed to spend most of his time reassuring everyone that he was not seriously hurt, although the bullet had stopped only one inch from his heart and the doctors were very concerned about his substantial blood loss. As he was wheeled into the operating room, he noted the long faces of his three top aides—James Baker, Ed Meese, and Michael Deaver—standing in the hall and asked, “Who’s minding the store?” When a distraught Nancy Reagan made her way to him, he lightly said, “Honey, I forgot to duck.”

Both conservative and liberal commentators lauded Reagan. “The president’s imperishable example of grace under pressure,” wrote George Will, “gave the nation a tonic it needed.” “Everybody knows,” wrote James Reston of *The New York Times*, “that people seldom act in the margin between life and death with such light-hearted valor as they do in the movies. Yet Ronald Reagan did.”

It also takes courage to challenge an enemy like the Soviet Union when the stakes are high. There was vehement Soviet opposition to his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), but the President did not budge. At the Reykjavik summit, when both sides were very close to a far-ranging agreement on nuclear weapons, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev pressed hard for laboratory testing only of SDI. Reagan refused. His steadfast commitment to SDI convinced the Kremlin that it could not win, or afford, a continuing arms race

and led to an end of the Cold War at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield.

Prudence. Rather than dispatching American combat troops to trouble spots, Reagan assisted pro-freedom anti-Communist forces in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. National security analyst Peter Schweizer estimates that the cash-strapped Soviets spent \$8 billion a year on counter-insurgency operations against U.S.-backed guerrillas. The accelerating Soviet losses in Afghanistan demoralized the Kremlin and the Red Army, hastening the collapse of the Soviet empire.

At home, Reagan practiced the politics of prudence by relying upon his “70 percent rule”: If he could get 70 percent of what he wanted in the face of opposition, he would take his chances on coming back and getting the other 30 percent later. He wanted his 25 percent tax cut to take effect immediately in 1981 but agreed to phase it in over three years because the cuts were across the board. He was that rare politician who knew when to bend a little and when to stand firm.

Justice. Although it was not politically correct, President Reagan steadfastly defended the rights of every American—from the moment of conception to that of natural death. For him the sanctity of life was not a slogan but a fundamental principle to be

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3128>

Produced by the B. Kenneth Simon
Center for American Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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honored. When in 1983 he wrote “Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation” (an essay for *Human Life Review* later published as a book), he became the first sitting President to write a book while in the White House.

His Administration sought not only to put America’s financial house in order and rebuild the nation’s defenses but also to put America’s moral house in order by protecting the unborn and allowing God back into the classroom.

Wisdom. President Reagan had the ability to foresee what others could not. In the early 1980s, liberal intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and John K. Galbraith were lauding the economic accomplishments of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Reagan told the British Parliament that a “global campaign for freedom” would prevail over the forces of tyranny and that “the Soviet Union itself is not immune to this reality.” By the end of the decade, as he predicted, Marxism–Leninism was dumped on the ash heap of history.

In late 1981 and all of 1982, when his tax cuts had not yet kicked in and the U.S. economy still lagged, President Reagan reassured his worried aides and counseled them to stay the course. He had faith in the American people, who, if they could be “liberated from the restraints imposed on them by government,” would pull “the country out of its tail-spin.” In the closing days of 1982, America began the longest peacetime economic expansion in U.S. history up to that time, creating 17 million new jobs during the Reagan years.

Ronald Reagan’s trust in the people and his love of freedom were rooted in two documents—the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. From his very first national speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater’s presidential bid in October 1964 to his farewell address to the nation in January 1989, Reagan turned again and again to the wisdom of the Founders. Indeed, more than once, he sounded like one of them.

Reiterating the central role of the American Revolution, the President said: “Ours was the first revolution in the history of mankind that truly reversed the course of government, and with three little words, ‘We the people.’”

We tell the government what to do, he said; it doesn’t tell us. This simple and yet revolutionary idea of “We the people,” he explained, was the underlying basis for everything he had tried to do as President.

Classical Virtues. The President reassured the men and women of the “Reagan Revolution” that they had made a difference. They had made America—that “shining city on a hill”—stronger and freer and had left her in good hands.

The city never shone brighter than when it was led by Ronald Reagan, who exemplified the virtues of courage, prudence, justice, and wisdom.

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