

## Reagan

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Next Tuesday Americans vote to replace their President. For 8 years President Reagan has been popular with most of his public, but suffered the unremitting censure of the articulate, upper-middle-class, self-appointed opinion-formers in the universities, the bureaucracies and the media. Who was correct, the wider public or the elite?

The elite gave their hand away when Mr Bush climbed ahead of Mr Dukakis in the opinion polls. They now refer to President Reagan as 'a popular President' who makes the Republican candidate, Bush, appear better than he is. Now that their concern is the incoming President, the elitist-socialist (in US speak: left-liberal) media need the 'coat-tails theory' to belittle Bush, so they praise Reagan.

Those more interested in objectivity should recall 1980, compare their recollections with today, and try to evaluate Reagan's contribution to the change.

In 1979, with reason, President Carter said that the United States was suffering from a 'malaise'. Within the United States, unemployment, inflation and interest rates were high. Internationally, the US had been humiliated by an Iranian Ayatollah, Soviet communism had taken Afghanistan and was expanding its influence in several parts of Africa. United States prestige was low, and the pundits---particularly those within the US itself---were predicting that the loss of influence would be permanent.

Then, President Reagan announced that it was 'morning in America' and Lo! it was morning---or so it seems looking back. Confidence and prosperity have returned to the American people, inflation is down, Communism has stopped expanding and US influence is again high.

Of course, the improvement was not so easily wrought. Nor could it have occurred if the climate of opinion had not already been influenced by a reassertion of liberal democratic values by the great American think-tanks and by some sections of academe. Indifferent to the change, the socialist elite dismissed President Reagan as a bag of wind and a not very talented bag at that. Typically they concentrated on his show

rather than his substance. He was, they said, only a superannuated second-rate actor who fumbled his lines.

They were wrong, even about his rhetoric. Reagan spoke to the American people such as no one had done since F.D. Roosevelt. It was, however, an even more remarkable achievement than Roosevelt's. Roosevelt's people were frightened by depression and war when he promised to lift the burden of their fears. Fifty years later, when Roosevelt's Utopia had proved illusory, Reagan said there is no Utopia and I cannot carry your burdens but I will try not to add unduly to them. In this he struck a chord with ordinary Americans.

Reagan attacked the prevailing nihilism. By assertion, implication and example, he distinguished right personal behaviour from wrong. In particular he helped to re-establish self-reliance and responsibility as virtues. In Australian terms he honoured 'the battler'.

In foreign policy he honoured liberal democracy. When he referred to the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire, a howl went up from the left-liberals---it was OK to call South Africa evil but not the mighty Soviets. But ordinary Americans understood that Reagan was asserting the superiority of the American way of life---that includes democratic capitalism, the rule of law, the absence of state-sanctioned murder and the like. With the blessing of ordinary Americans he made substantial changes to public policy in defence, foreign affairs and economic management---changes that could not have been made if he had not won public support. That is leadership. It begs the question: leadership to what end?

Take security: 8 years on, the world is much safer because President Reagan stood up to the Soviet Union. As the United States increased its defence vote, thus eroding Soviet supremacy, the Soviets became more reasonable. It is true that only Granada has yet been freed from Communism, but the Soviets are on the run in Afghanistan and in 8 years no further nation has fallen to communist control. Only in Nicaragua has communism made any gains. The right-wing dictatorship in Chile and the minority democracy in South Africa have taken steps toward majority government that would not have been taken if the threat posed by Communists outside their borders had not abated. Angola is on the way to self-government.

The SDI (Star Wars) program intends to stop incoming atomic bombs in flight. It is a form of civil defence that might be more effective than bunkers. Before now the United States has relied on the threat of retaliation alone to prevent attack. Of course, the elite-left panned SDI. Turning a remarkable somersault they, in effect, defended the mutually-assured-destruction (MAD) alternative to the SDI. They make three criticisms of SDI: SDI might make a future US President so cocky that he would initiate an attack; it will not work; and the Soviets don't like it. The first defies the record of history: we are safer when the imbalance of power lies with liberal democracies. The jury is out on the second

objection, but Mr Gorbachev's approach to arms negotiations indicates that he, at least, thinks SDI will work. The third is a virtue because it allows the liberal democracies to negotiate from greater strength.

Reagan, like all human beings, has made mistakes. Only two of his mistakes are really important. His failure to get spending cuts through Congress and his own tax cuts have bought prosperity with debt. Although, by Australian standards, that debt is still minor. The incoming President must, however, balance the budget and the foreign account, before the problem does get out of hand. The second possibly serious mistake was to trust Gorbachev beyond the level of prudence at the disarmament table---some observers argue that the free world needs surer means of verification.

Reagan has, nonetheless, been a fine president. In 8 years he has dispelled the US malaise. His nation again commands respect and we are all safer for it. It will be a hard act to follow.

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