

What Is a Reagan Conservative?

Paul Kengor Ph.D.

Introduction

Every Republican presidential candidate claims the mantle of Ronald Reagan. This is not surprising. Politically speaking, Reagan was enormously successful and popular. Reagan won the presidency in 1980 by defeating an incumbent in a landslide, winning 44 of 50 states, and then got reelected in 1984 by sweeping 49 of 50 states. In these two elections, he won the Electoral College by a combined margin of 1014 to 62. Few presidents enjoyed such decisive success at the ballot box.

Reagan's presidential success is all the more notable when juxtaposed to his contemporaries. Dating back to Lyndon B. Johnson, modern presidencies had ended in despair. LBJ, who replaced a president who was killed in office, was destroyed by Vietnam, and decided not to pursue reelection. His successor, Richard Nixon, resigned in disgrace and suffered serious mental and physical repercussions. The uninspiring Gerald Ford was unable to win a single election. Jimmy Carter's presidency was vigorously rejected; to this day, one senses his feeling of rejection.

In the other direction, prior to Eisenhower, Harry Truman left office with an approval rating near 20%. He called the White House the "Great White Jail." Among other 20th- century presidents, the job took its toll on Herbert Hoover, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and William Howard Taft; it ruined Woodrow Wilson, to the point of Wilson suffering several crushing strokes while he was president. FDR died in office.

After Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Reagan's vice president and White House successor, won only one term. He was defeated by Bill Clinton, who won two terms but was impeached.

Following Clinton was George W. Bush, who, though likewise winning two terms, faced significant downturns. A December 2006 Gallup poll found that Americans considered George W. Bush the most unsuccessful of modern presidents, with an approval rating even lower than Carter and Nixon. Bush registered the highest disapproval of any president since Truman.

Unlike so many other presidents, Ronald Reagan was not destroyed by the presidency. In fact, Reagan's popularity has only risen, continuing well beyond his tenure in the Oval Office. In that same December 2006 Gallup poll, 64% of respondents judged Reagan an outstanding/above average president and only 10% rated him below average/poor. A Gallup Poll released for Presidents' Day 2011 ranked Reagan the "greatest president" of all time, soundly beating the second-place Lincoln. Gallup began asking the "greatest president" question in 1999. Of the 12 times Gallup has done the survey (as of 2011), Reagan finished first three times—2001, 2005, and 2011—and usually ended in the top three.¹

Many such polls could be cited. A Zogby poll likewise released for Presidents' Day 2011, which asked about presidents since World War II, listed Reagan as the "greatest," with FDR second and Kennedy third.²

More impressive still, Reagan's support transcends the presidency. An extraordinary June 2005 survey by the Discovery Channel and AOL online (which included a remarkable 2.4 million participants) declared Reagan the "greatest American of all time," beating Lincoln and Washington.³

¹ Frank Newport, "Americans Say Reagan is the Greatest U.S. President," Gallup.com, February 18, 2011.

² "Zogby Interactive: Reagan, FDR Top Greatness Poll of Presidents Since World War II," Zogby.com, February 21, 2001.

³ Reagan rates among the top 10 most successful presidents even in surveys of presidential scholars, who self-identify as "liberal" over "conservative" typically by margins of 9 to 1. Starting in 1999, C-SPAN began surveying presidential scholars every 10 years. The 2009 survey by C-SPAN, released for Presidents Day 2009, which included 65 well known presidential scholars, ranked Reagan 10th most successful, knocking Lyndon Johnson out of the top 10, and behind Woodrow Wilson at ninth.

In sum, this is a detailed way of helping to explain why Ronald Reagan has become the gold standard for Republican presidential nominees. What Republican would not aspire to this kind of approval?

But not only would Republican presidential aspirants like to emulate Reagan's political appeal; they also identify with his brand of conservatism. As Republican candidates today jockey for the presidential nomination, they invoke Ronald Reagan: "I believe as Ronald Reagan believed...."

What Did Reagan Believe?

This begs the question of what Reagan believed.

As a Reagan biographer, the questions I am most frequently asked by Republican voters—aside from "Who's the next Ronald Reagan?"—are these: *What would Reagan do if he were president right now? What did Reagan believe?*

Such questions can be difficult to answer, and often would surprise many of those begging a response. For example, would Reagan have endorsed President George W. Bush's attempt to spread Reagan's "March of Freedom" from the former Soviet empire into the Middle East?⁴ Would Reagan have raised the debt ceiling during the debate in the summer of 2012? What was Reagan's position on immigration? Conservatives might be surprised by the answers to some of these questions.

Less difficult is delineating certain core Reagan principles—the underlying thinking that formed the basis of Reagan's political philosophy and even political behavior. In this paper, I have endeavored to share what I call my "Reagan Seven;" that is, seven beliefs that undergirded Reagan's thinking and actions as president and as a public figure. The list is not the "be-all-and-

⁴ On this, see George W. Bush's November 2003 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy.

end-all”; it is not a comprehensive inventory that magically encompasses the entirety of Reagan’s thinking. It does, however, get us closer to the crux of what Ronald Reagan’s conservatism was about, and what his emulators might take to heart.

Here are those seven:

- Faith and freedom
- Sanctity and dignity of human life
- Faith-based optimism
- American exceptionalism
- Reduce taxes and the size of government
- Anti-communism
- Belief in the individual

Here, I will offer a somewhat brief examination of each of these seven and what they meant to Ronald Reagan and his conservative philosophy. The categories are not air tight, often overlapping, but they provide key contours that define what we frequently refer to as “Reagan conservatism.”

Faith and Freedom

Conservatives today constantly talk of “freedom,” almost as if it were a one-word synonym for conservatism, or a slogan for the movement. They do so in an almost trite way.

To invoke freedom alone is a mistake. Freedom by itself, isolated, is more synonymous with libertarianism, not conservatism. For the conservative, freedom should never be decoupled from faith. Freedom not rooted in faith can lead to moral anarchy. Freedom without faith is the Las Vegas Strip, not the City of God. Faith infuses the soul with a sanctifying grace that allows

humans in a free society to love their neighbors, to think about more than themselves. We aspire to our better angels when our faith elevates our free will.

Genuine freedom—or, at least, the Christian conception of freedom⁵—is not license. To a practicing Christian, freedom cannot be practiced without faith. Without the rock and rudder of faith, freedom can become confused, perverse, and can even lead to the destruction of freedom for others.⁶

In Scripture, however, Galatians 5:13-14 states: “For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use your freedom as opportunities for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The great conservative thinker Russell Kirk, in his 1974 classic, *The Roots of American Order*, spoke of “ordered liberty.” Kirk talked of the need for “inner order” by American citizens before they and their countrymen and country could successfully govern through “outer order.” Ordering ourselves *internally* was critical to the nation’s *external* order. The nation’s first president, George Washington, argued the same, stressing the need for citizens to self-govern themselves before they could self-govern their nation.

Ronald Reagan believed this wholeheartedly. He felt that only through God could one achieve wisdom; only through God could America’s leaders achieve wisdom. One of Reagan’s favorite images was that of George Washington kneeling in the snow in prayer at Valley Forge,

⁵ Professor Regis Martin of Franciscan University often states that Christianity is less religion than revelation. If so, then a believing Christian will perceive the Christian conception of freedom as genuine freedom.

⁶ Ronald Reagan, of course, was not Catholic, but he was very close to Pope John Paul II, both personally and ideologically, including in this conception of the relationship between faith and freedom. John Paul II articulated this relationship in his March 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*Gospel of Life*), sections 18-20.

which Reagan called the “most sublime image in American history.”⁷ Washington kneeling in prayer, said Reagan in a radio address in December 1983, “personified a people who knew it was not enough to depend on their own courage and goodness; they must also seek help from God, their Father and their Preserver.”⁸

It was God, Reagan maintained, “from whom all knowledge springs.”⁹ “When we open ourselves to Him,” Reagan told a group of public-school students, “we gain not only moral courage but also intellectual strength.”¹⁰ The light of faith enlightens the intellect and our reason. Reagan had expressed this sentiment for years, long before the presidency.¹¹

Such a divine source, Reagan reckoned, ought to be tapped.

Quite the contrary, Reagan was earnestly afraid of what happens to free, democratic societies when they scrap religious faith. To that end, one of Reagan’s best speeches, and arguably the most forgotten, was an October 1988 address marking the bicentennial of Georgetown University. “At its full flowering, freedom is the first principle of society; this society, Western society,” Reagan told students at Georgetown. “And yet freedom cannot exist alone. And that’s why the theme for your bicentennial is so very apt: learning, faith, and freedom. Each reinforces the others, each makes the others possible. For what are they without each other?”

⁷ Reagan, “White House Ceremony in Observance of National Day of Prayer,” May 6, 1982. Reagan often invoked this image. Among many other instances, see: Reagan, “Proclamation 5017 – National Day of Prayer, 1983,” January 27, 1983.

⁸ Reagan weekly radio address, December 24, 1983.

⁹ Reagan weekly radio address, May 12, 1984.

¹⁰ Reagan, “Remarks at the National Forum on Excellence in Education,” Indianapolis, Indiana, December 8, 1983.

¹¹ In the 1960s, Reagan said this as governor, specifying Jesus as part of the equation: “[T]he answer to each and every problem is to be found in the simple words of Jesus of Nazareth.” Among the 1980s examples, see: Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast,” February 4, 1982; Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters,” January 30, 1984.

He asked his audience to pray that America be guided by learning, faith, and freedom. He quoted Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the 19th- century classic, *Democracy in America*: “Tocqueville said it in 1835, and it’s as true today as it was then: ‘Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is more needed in democratic societies than in any other.’” With a nod to his academic audience, Reagan warned, “Learning is a good thing, but unless it’s tempered by faith and a love of freedom, it can be very dangerous indeed. The names of many intellectuals are recorded on the rolls of infamy, from Robespierre to Lenin to Ho Chi Minh to Pol Pot.”¹²

Reagan contended that one thing that “must never change” for America is that men and women must “seek Divine guidance in the policies of their government and the promulgation of their laws.” They must, he urged, “make our laws and government not only a model to mankind, but a testament to the wisdom and mercy of God.”¹³

Conservatives today constantly quote a particular Reagan remark on freedom: “Freedom is never more than a generation from extinction.... It must be fought for, protected, and handed on.” So popular is this Reagan quote that I own a coffee mug from a conservative foundation with those words etched into the ceramic. Yes, indeed, Reagan said those words, and agreed with them, but Reagan did not want those generations fighting that fight without the guide of faith. Despots might attempt to proceed without faith, but Americans should not. Faith and freedom reinforce one another, each making the other possible.

Reagan felt that *learning* was about learning this crucial relationship. It is telling that many of these Reagan remarks on the bond between faith and freedom were shared with students—that is, with those engaged in the process of learning.

¹² Reagan, “Remarks at Georgetown University’s Bicentennial Convocation,” October 1, 1988.

¹³ Reagan, “Address to the Roundtable National Affairs Briefing,” Dallas, Texas, August 22, 1980.

So, too, learning about and understanding conservatism—especially Reagan conservatism—is about knowing this reinforcing relationship.

Sanctity and Dignity of Human Life

At the heart of that relationship is, of course, the human person. The human person has God and has freedom, and by definition exists. A person is not a person without life. Moreover, without a right to life, there can be no individual freedom or other rights. The right to life is the first and most fundamental of all human freedoms, without which other human freedoms literally cannot exist. “My administration is dedicated to the preservation of America as a free land,” said President Reagan in 1983. “And there is no cause more important for preserving that freedom than affirming the transcendent right to life of all human beings, the right without which no other rights have any meaning.”¹⁴

For Reagan, that right to life began in the womb. Deeper still, it began at conception. As president, Reagan supported a Human Life Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would have inserted into the Constitution these words: “The paramount right to life is vested in each human being from the moment of fertilization without regard to age, health or condition of dependency.” He favored providing every human being—at all stages of development—protection as “persons” with the “right to life” under the 14th Amendment.¹⁵

Reagan’s respect for human life arguably began way back in the 1920s when the young man was a lifeguard for seven summers at the Rock River in Dixon, Illinois. He patrolled the

¹⁴ Here again, Reagan’s thinking was remarkably similar to John Paul II’s in *Evangelium Vitae*, which referred to “the right to life” as “the first of the fundamental rights.”

¹⁵ See: William P. Clark, “For Reagan, All Life Was Sacred,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2004. The 14th amendment (as well as the Fifth Amendment) declares a right to “life,” but Reagan would have gone further by supporting and interpreting that right as a right to life for the unborn.

murky, swift currents from ages 15 through 22. There, in that capacity, Ronald Reagan saved the lives of 77 people. “One of the proudest statistics of my life is 77,” he said many decades later.¹⁶

Generally, these experiences taught Reagan quite a bit about life. A later close friend, Bill Clark, maintained that the lifeguarding instilled in the young man a basic respect for the sanctity and dignity of human life, which later manifested itself not only in President Reagan’s opposition to abortion, but also abhorrence of the prospect of nuclear war and empathy for the suffering citizens behind the Iron Curtain.¹⁷

The right to life was an issue that Ronald Reagan found inseparable from the life of Christ. In a January 1984 speech to religious broadcasters, he said: “God’s most blessed gift to his family is the gift of life. He sent us the Prince of Peace as a babe in the manger.”¹⁸ Like 19th-century clergy who led the movement to abolish slavery, Reagan as a Christian saw himself as duty-bound to fight abortion, which he equated with slavery in terms of moral outrage and deprivation of human dignity. He made that analogy to the National Religious Broadcasters, quoting Jesus Christ in the process:

This nation fought a terrible war so that black Americans would be guaranteed their God-given rights. Abraham Lincoln recognized that we could not survive as a free land when some could decide whether others should be free or slaves. Well, today another question begs to be asked: How can we survive as a free nation when some decide that others are not fit to live and should be done away with?

I believe no challenge is more important to the character of America than restoring the right to life to all human beings. Without that right, no other rights have meaning. “Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of God.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Reagan speaking on *Ronald Reagan: A Legacy Remembered*, History Channel productions, 2002.

¹⁷ Interview with Bill Clark, July 17, 2003.

¹⁸ Reagan, “Remarks, Religious Broadcasters Convention, 1984.”

¹⁹ The quote is Christ’s words. See: Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14, and Luke 18:16.

Together, Reagan assured the religious broadcasters, he and they could convince their fellow countrymen that America “should, can, and will preserve God’s greatest gift”—the right to life. This was a very strong statement that did not escape criticism by pro-choice liberals in the media. In an editorial, *The New York Times* blasted Reagan for this analogy, insisting that the real modern “bondage” was “the law’s refusal to let women decide whether or not to bear a child—until the Supreme Court read this basic liberty into the Constitution.”²⁰

Reagan did not care what the *New York Times* thought, especially given the gravity of the crime at hand. He was undeterred, raising the stakes higher still. In an especially high-profile occasion—his 1986 State of the Union address—Reagan lamented: “Today there is a wound in our national conscience. America will never be whole as long as the right to life granted by our Creator is denied to the unborn.”²¹

Many such manifestations of Reagan’s pro-life convictions could be cited here.²² Yet, one particularly eloquent example has escaped most biographical treatments, and is worth noting:

In a July 1987 speech to pro-life leaders, Reagan began: “[M]any of you, perhaps most, never dreamed of getting involved in politics. What brought you into politics was a matter of conscience, a matter of fundamental conviction.... Many of you’ve been attacked for being single-issue activists or single-issue voters. But I ask: What single issue could be of greater significance?” Reagan said that if one is unsure precisely when life begins, one should err in a

²⁰ Editorial, “Sermon on the Stump,” *The New York Times*, February 3, 1984.

²¹ Reagan, “State of the Union Address,” February 4, 1986.

²² Reagan actually authored and published a book on abortion during his presidency, titled, *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*, with an afterword from Malcolm Muggeridge. (Thomas Nelson Publishers, New York, 1984.) It was the only such published work he did as president. Among many references that tie his religious convictions to his pro-life stance, see his: “Remarks at Kansas State University,” September 9, 1982; “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters,” January 31, 1983; “Remarks Religious Broadcasters Convention, 1984.” “Remarks to the Student Congress on Evangelism,” July 28, 1988; and “Remarks to the Students and Faculty of Archbishop Carroll and All Saints High Schools,” October 17, 1988.

way that protects rather than robs life: “If there’s even a question about when human life begins, isn’t it our duty to err on the side of life?”

Reagan finished with this:

I’d like to leave with you a quotation that means a great deal to me. These are the words of my friend, the late Terence Cardinal Cooke, of New York. “The gift of life, God’s special gift, is no less beautiful when it is accompanied by illness or weakness, hunger or poverty, mental or physical handicaps, loneliness or old age. Indeed, at these times, human life gains extra splendor as it requires our special care, concern, and reverence. It is in and through the weakest of human vessels that the Lord continues to reveal the power of His love.”²³

Here was a warning against the pallbearers of the *progressive* death march, from Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger—who hoped to expunge the gene pool of what she termed “human weeds”—to the euthanasia precipice to which America is being dragged. It starts with the weakest of vessels: the infant in its mother’s womb. The dignity of that infant was, in Reagan’s view, a reflection of the dignity God lent to man.

Faith-Based Optimism

What I have shared on Reagan thus far could typify the thinking of any number of conservative thinkers. But here is another component that uniquely defined Reagan’s brand of conservatism: Ronald Reagan’s unshakable faith-based optimism.

This was traceable to Reagan’s upbringing, and specifically to his mother, Nelle. His mom always insisted, under the worst of trials, that, “God has a plan for all of us,” one that in the end “always works out for the best.” There were always life’s “twists in the road,” but there is also a loving, all-wise God in control, who works everything according to His plans.²⁴

²³ See my op-ed on this, “Remembering Roe: A Forgotten Warning from Ronald Reagan,” January 24, 2011, posted at the website of the Center for Vision and Values. www.visionandvalues.org.

²⁴ See: Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 49, 57, 70, 123.

Long before the presidency, as a 39-year-old movie star in Hollywood, Reagan in June 1950 published a piece called “My Faith” in a Hollywood magazine. He finished the article with a two-verse quote from a poem: “God’s in His Heaven, All’s right with the world.” That conclusion, 30 years before his election as president, was an instructive foreshadowing of his lifelong faith-based optimism.²⁵

Indeed, Reagan spoke of his “God-given optimism.”²⁶ His optimism, he said, came “from my strong faith in God,” a blessing for which he was grateful to God.²⁷

A touching indication of this, applied to others, was a letter that Reagan, as governor, wrote to a New York woman about her handicapped son:

I find myself believing very deeply that God has a plan for each one of us. Some with little faith and even less testing seem to miss in their mission, or else we perhaps fail to see their imprint on the lives of others. But bearing what we cannot change and going on with what God has given us, confident there is a destiny, somehow seems to bring a reward we wouldn’t exchange for any other. It takes a lot of fire and heat to make a piece of steel.²⁸

Addressing her son directly, he added that “things have a way of working out in life, and usually for the best, if we simply go forward doing our best and trusting that God does have a plan.”²⁹ Even a disadvantaged situation might be part of God’s plan. Things often work for the better, even if they look bleak in the short term.

²⁵ Ronald Reagan, “My Faith,” *Modern Screen*, June 1950, 37 and 88.

²⁶ Reagan, Republican convention speech, August 17, 1992. As governor, he wrote a letter to Billy Graham noting his “own optimism based on faith.” Letter is quoted in Helene Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan* (NY: Berkley Books, 1980), 82.

²⁷ Reagan remarks during the dedication of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, California, November 4, 1991.

²⁸ Letter is quoted in Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 86.

²⁹ Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 86.

In another letter he wrote as governor, he told the widow of a slain policeman that no one can be sure of “the why of God’s plan for us.... Whatever God’s plan is for each of us, we can only trust in His wisdom and mercy.... It isn’t given to us to understand—we can only have faith.... [W]e must have faith in God’s plan for all of us.”³⁰

These are just a few of the letters Reagan sent all over the country to everyday people preaching the gospel of “God’s plan.” It was a most optimistic vision.

Finally, another telling indication was Reagan’s favorite parable about the pony in the dung heap.³¹ It was an anecdote about a father with two boys—a pessimist and an optimist. The father placed the pessimist in a room full of new toys. He placed the optimist in a barn with a pile of manure. When the father returned, the pessimist was crying and throwing a fit, complaining that he had no toys to play with. He went to the barn and found the optimist digging doggedly through the pile of manure. When the father asked the optimist what he was doing, the boy replied: “I know there’s a pony in here somewhere!”

That optimist was Reagan. The kid in the manure was Ronald Reagan. It was a parable about himself. As one Reagan adviser told *Time* magazine during the lingering recession of 1982-83, when the stimulative effect of Reagan’s cuts seemed slow in kicking in the economy, “He is absolutely convinced that there will be a big recovery.... He is an optimist. My God is he an optimist!”³²

The aide had unexpectedly touched upon Reagan’s source for that optimism: God.

³⁰ Von Damm, *Sincerely, Ronald Reagan*, 123-5.

³¹ The parable has been shared many times, including by speechwriter Peter Robinson at Grove City College during the February 2010 annual Ronald Reagan Lecture.

³² “How Reagan Decides,” *Time*, December 13, 1982, 12.

American Exceptionalism

Ronald Reagan also personified American exceptionalism, so much so that the dictionary should simply place a picture of Reagan's face next to those two words.³³ He was the preeminent spokesman for an exceptional America.

Reagan glowingly described America as a "beacon" to all of humanity, as "the last best hope," a 'Shining City Upon a Hill.' That nation would shine its light unto men, perched atop a mountain for the world to admire, a model for other nations to emulate. It signaled hope to those "Captive Peoples" behind the Iron Curtain.

Reagan was saying these things publicly three decades before he was elected president. Consider a remarkable June 1952 commencement speech he gave to tiny William Woods College in Fulton, Missouri, which he titled, "America, the Beautiful." There, the 41-year-old Hollywood actor affirmed that America is "less of a place than an idea," a place that resided deep in the souls of men "ever since man started his long trail from the swamps." Stated Reagan:

It [the idea of America] is nothing but the inherent love of freedom in each one of us, and the great ideological struggle that we find ourselves engaged in today is not a new struggle. It's the same old battle. We met it under the name of Hitlerism; we met it under the name of Kaiserism; and we have met it back through the ages in the name of every conqueror that has ever set upon a course of establishing his rule over mankind. It is simply the idea, the basis of this country and of our religion, the idea of the dignity of man, the idea that deep within the heart of each one of us is something so God-like and

³³ See my paper from the April 2011 Center for Vision & Values conference on American exceptionalism. Paul Kengor, "America: 'Shining City ... Last Best Hope,' An Analysis of Ronald Reagan's 'Time for Choosing' Speech and Farewell Address," Center for Vision & Values, April 2011. www.visionandvalues.org.

precious that no individual or group has a right to impose his or its will upon the people so well as they can decide for themselves.

This was stirring enough, but then Reagan went further, telling the young women assembled that day: “I, in my own mind, have thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land.... I believe that God in shedding his grace on this country has always in this divine scheme of things kept an eye on our land and guided it as a promised land.”³⁴

This, of course, is a picture of an exceptional America. Reagan evoked the image again and again until his final days, making no apologies for his passionate love of America.³⁵

Importantly, Reagan’s detractors often did not realize, or simply refused to concede, that Reagan was not arguing that American was without fault. Consider that in his most strident attack on the Soviet Union—his March 1983 “Evil Empire” speech—he actually paused to point the finger inward at America for her past sins as well, especially racism and slavery. America was not perfect. Nonetheless, in Reagan’s estimation America was good, special, unique—yes, exceptional.

Alas, Reagan expressed this eloquently in his swan song, his “Farewell Address” given from the Oval Office in January 1989, where he explained what he meant all those years with his many reminiscences of a ‘Shining City:’

The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I’ve spoken of the Shining City all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever

³⁴ Reagan, “America the Beautiful,” commencement address, William Woods College, June 1952. Text provided by William Woods University.

³⁵ For a long list of examples, where I cite roughly a dozen incidents between 1968 and 1988, see: Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). Even then, those citations are far from a complete list.

quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

As Reagan's secretary of education, Bill Bennett, later noted, for Reagan, this statement was not only a parting presidential message but a history lesson, a chance to educate Americans about America rather than merely wave goodbye to Americans. It was a teachable moment in American exceptionalism.³⁶

Reduce Taxes and the Size of Government

From a policy perspective, Reagan conservatism is also about reducing the size of government and the level of taxation—or at least wanting and attempting to do so.³⁷

Beginning way back in the 1940s, again as an actor in Hollywood, Reagan had become fed up with the high tax rates, intrusive regulations, and the burgeoning welfare state. The upper income tax rate, begun in 1913, had mushroomed over 90%. Reagan thought the rate so punitive that it discouraged work—including his own. The so-called “B”-movie actor was one of the top box-office draws at Warner Bros. Reagan saw no incentive in continuing to work—that is, make more movies—once his income hit the top rate. He realized who suffered from that choice. It wasn't Reagan; he was wealthy. It was the custodians, cafeteria ladies, camera crew, and working folks on the studio lot. They lost work.

³⁶ Bill Bennett stated this in his February 2011 appearance at Grove City College for the annual Ronald Reagan Lecture hosted by the Center for Vision & Values.

³⁷ The degree to which Reagan actually succeeded in scaling back the size of government is a big debate that I will not address here.

Reagan viewed such rates as punitive, confiscatory—“creeping socialism,” as he put it. In speeches in the 1950s and 1960s, he blasted the tax as “right out of” Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (indeed, the *Manifesto* calls for “a heavy progressive or graduated income tax”).³⁸

He also decried what he perceived as the growing permanency of the welfare state. He came to believe that many of the relief programs that FDR instituted during the Great Depression were “necessary measures during an emergency,” but unfortunately, had “trapped families forever on a treadmill of dependency.”³⁹ Those programs became permanent and held recipients down rather than helping them up. Reagan once had been a proud FDR Democrat, but was exasperated with what the Democratic Party embraced and their expansion of those programs, especially with LBJ’s Great Society in 1965. “I didn’t leave the Democratic Party,” Reagan famously insisted. “The Democratic Party left me.”

By the 1970s, when he was a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan believed that out-of-control spending, regulation and taxes had sapped the American economy of its vitality, and particularly its ability to bounce back after a recession. The economy needed to be freed in order to perform.

The prescription that Reagan recommended rested on four pillars: tax cuts, deregulation, reductions in the rate of growth of government spending and a stable, carefully managed growth of the money supply.⁴⁰ Among the various tax cuts, the federal income tax reduction was the centerpiece. He secured a 25% across-the-board reduction in tax rates over a three-year period (5%-10%-10%), beginning in October 1981. Eventually, through these and later cuts, the upper

³⁸ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (NY: Penguin Signet Classics, 1998), 75.

³⁹ Reagan, *American Life*, 134.

⁴⁰ See: Andrew E. Busch, “Ronald Reagan and Economic Policy,” in Kengor and Schweizer, eds., *The Reagan Presidency: Assessing the Man and His Legacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman-Littlefield, 2005).

income marginal tax rate was dropped from 70%, which Reagan believed was punitive and stifling, to 28%.

It was the largest tax cut in American history, and accomplished working with (rather than against) a huge Democratic Party majority in the House. The *Washington Post* called Reagan's action "one of the most remarkable demonstrations of presidential leadership in modern history."⁴¹

After a slow start through 1982-83, the stimulus effect of the tax cuts was extraordinary, sparking the longest peacetime expansion in the history of the economy. The "Reagan Boom" not only produced widespread prosperity but—along with the attendant Soviet collapse—helped generate budget surpluses in the 1990s. Carter-Ford era terms like "malaise" and "misery index" vanished. Only now, in 2011, has America re-approached similar misery-index levels, reaching a 28-year high.⁴²

Aside from the issue of the effects of the tax cuts, the chief point for this paper is that tax cuts were the very essence of Reaganomics. Reagan conservatism, in the realm of economic policy, is first and foremost about tax cuts.

Anti-Communism

To Reagan, the antithesis of tax cuts and small government is communism. More than that, freedom is the antithesis of communism. As Reagan put it, "Totalitarian communism is an absolute enemy of human freedom."⁴³

⁴¹ As biographer Steve Hayward notes, even when Reagan compromised with Democrats on tax increases in exchange for promised spending cuts (in the year 1982, for example), he "never budged an inch on marginal income tax rates." Reagan understood that not all taxes, or tax increases, are equal.

⁴² Julie Crawshaw, "Misery' Levels Hit 28-Year High in US," MoneyNews.com, June 17, 2011.

⁴³ Reagan speaking before CPAC, March 1, 1975, Washington, DC.

Here, too, few things so typified Reagan, especially given that the rise and fall of the Bolshevik Revolution and USSR (1917-91) were the bookends of Reagan's life. Communism was the ideology he confronted for a century. A long line of quotes could be marshaled to illustrate the point. A few are worth pondering:

In a May 1975 radio broadcast, given between his years as governor and president, Reagan called communism a "disease." "Mankind has survived all manner of evil diseases and plagues," conceded Reagan, "but can it survive communism?" This disease had been "hanging on" for a half century or more. Reagan wanted Americans to know "just how vicious" communism "really is." For good measure, he added that, "Communism is neither an economic or a political system—it is a form of insanity."⁴⁴

To characterize communism as a disease might strike some as hysterical "commie"-bashing. Yet, in reality, it is hard to find many contagions that have silenced so many lives in such a short time. In the 20th century, probably the biggest killer among diseases was the influenza epidemic of 1918-19, which may have taken 20-plus million worldwide, nowhere near the toll of the "disease" of communism, which took the lives of 100-140 million between 1917 and 1991.⁴⁵

For Reagan, the killing alone by Soviet communists was bad enough. Worse was their goal to expand this deathly ideology worldwide. In 1975, he complained, "The Russians have told us over and over again their goal is to impose their incompetent and ridiculous system on the

⁴⁴ Located in "Ronald Reagan: Pre-Presidential Papers: Selected Radio Broadcasts, 1975-1979," January 1975 to March 1977, Box 1, RRL. Also see: Kiron Skinner, Martin Anderson, and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand* (NY: Free Press, 2001), 10-12.

⁴⁵ The seminal work by Harvard University Press, *The Black Book of Communism*, estimates 100 million dead due to communism. That book, however, severely underestimates the number of Soviet victims, which, in reality, was likely 60-70 million—three times more than the *Black Book* estimated. For instance, Alexander Yakovlev, in his 2002 work, *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia* (Yale University Press), estimated over 60 million dead under Stalin alone. On the influenza numbers, see: Gina Kolata, *Flu: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus that Caused It* (NY: Touchstone, 2001).

world.” In July 1982, as president, he said that the USSR’s “self-proclaimed goal is the domination of every nation on Earth.” He made identical pronouncements in formal speeches, on the stump, in interviews—wherever he had the opportunity.⁴⁶

Thus, Reagan sought to facilitate the end of what he termed an “Evil Empire,” no less than “the focus of evil in the modern world.” That desire, as he himself said, was motivated by his belief that as a Christian he was “enjoined by Scripture” to resist and attack evil wherever it lurked. He saw his confrontation with communism as a spiritual one. He told a Joint Session of the Irish National Parliament on June 4, 1984, that the “struggle between freedom and totalitarianism today” was ultimately not a test of arms or missiles “but a test of faith and spirit.” It was, he said, a “spiritual struggle.”⁴⁷

Reagan had his reasons, ranging from communism’s vast death tolls and expansionary ambitions to its theoretical bankruptcy, its repression of basic civil liberties—religion, conscience, press, assembly, speech, emigration, just for starters.

Nothing stifled freedom more than communism.

Belief in the Individual

Lastly, at the hub of all these Reagan beliefs was Reagan’s core belief in the individual, whether the person in the womb, the person in the Gulag, the person paying taxes, or the entrepreneur who starts a business and generates prosperity. There are many ways to demonstrate this Reagan belief, but one particular series of statements does so in a way that unifies elements

⁴⁶ See, for example: Reagan, “Interview with Reporters from the *Los Angeles Times*,” January 20, 1982; Reagan, “Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College,” May 9, 1982; Reagan, “Remarks, Signing, Captive Nations Week,” July 19, 1982; Reagan, “Interview With Morton Kondracke and Richard H. Smith of *Newsweek Magazine*,” March 4, 1985; Reagan, “Interview With Representatives of College Radio Stations,” September 9, 1985; Reagan, “Question-and-Answer Session With Students at Fallston High School,” Fallston, Maryland, December 4, 1985.

⁴⁷ Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Irish National Parliament,” Ireland, June 4, 1984.

highlighted in this paper. They occurred in a very hot year in the Reagan presidency and the Cold War: 1983.

That year, in February, Reagan issued a formal proclamation declaring 1983 the Year of the Bible. In doing so, he underscored the God-given inalienable rights of the individual.⁴⁸

Reagan greatly admired the Declaration of Independence, borrowing its language incessantly in speeches throughout his public life. One of his stronger such presidential statements came in March 1983, given in his Evil Empire speech:

The basis of those ideals and principles is a commitment to freedom and personal liberty that, itself, is grounded in the much deeper realization that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted. The American experiment in democracy rests on this insight. Its discovery was the great triumph of our Founding Fathers, voiced by William Penn when he said: “If we will not be governed by God, we must be governed by tyrants.” Explaining the inalienable rights of men, Jefferson said, “The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.” The evidence of this permeates our history and our government. The Declaration of Independence mentions the Supreme Being no less than four times.⁴⁹

From Washington to Beijing to Moscow, Reagan constantly touted the three inalienable rights cited by Thomas Jefferson: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. An inalienable right is one that all individuals are born with, that is inherent to one’s being, that cannot be separated from a person; in Jefferson’s famous phrase, these rights were endowed in humans by their Creator. The underlying idea was one that Jefferson had borrowed from an early American philosophical tradition influenced by John Locke and others. Locke had listed the three inalienable rights as life, liberty, and property.

Reagan claimed that the “explicit promise” in the Declaration—that all of us are endowed with inalienable rights—is, in fact, “a principle for eternity, America’s deepest treasure.”

⁴⁸ Reagan, “Proclamation 5018 – Year of the Bible, 1983,” February 3, 1983.

⁴⁹ Reagan, “Remarks, Evangelicals Convention,” 1983.

In an August 1983 address in Atlanta, Reagan quoted a theologian who said that these rights are “corollaries of the great proposition, at the heart of Western civilization, that every... person is a *ressacra*, a sacred reality, and as such is entitled to the opportunity of fulfilling those great human potentials with which God has endowed man.”⁵⁰

This is worth our pondering, especially in understanding Reagan conservatism. To repeat, Reagan considered every person to be a *sacred* reality. This, Reagan believed, was an *eternal* principle. Combining this Reagan belief with Reagan’s belief that human life begins at conception makes his assertion all the more powerful.

At the level of foreign policy, it was obvious to Reagan that when communists unjustly killed their own citizens, they violated God’s inalienable right to life. Reagan took it further, seeing communists’ seizure or infringement on individual liberty and property as added violations of God’s inherent rights to all individuals. To Reagan, the most basic, proper function of government was to protect life, liberty and property. And there was no greater intrusion than a government effort to suppress or try to control one’s freedom to worship God. This violation was an attempt to contain the soul itself.

Again, Soviet communism posed a crucial contrast that Reagan wanted to underscore as a teachable moment, an invaluable civics lesson, if not moral lesson. Reagan did just that in a bold July 1983 speech, where he laid out what he categorized as the two basic “visions of the world:”

Two visions of the world remain locked in dispute. The first believes all men are created equal by a loving God who has blessed us with freedom. Abraham Lincoln spoke for us.... The second vision believes that religion is opium for the masses. It believes that eternal principles like truth, liberty, and democracy have no meaning beyond the whim of the state. And Lenin spoke for them.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the American Bar Association,” Atlanta, Georgia, August 1, 1983.

⁵¹ Reagan, “Remarks, at a Ceremony Marking the Annual Observation of Captive Nations Week,” July 19, 1983.

In Reagan's view, the American Founders had anchored their experiment in absolute truth; the Bolsheviks deliberately established an antithetical model. Alone among other revolutionary movements in history, claimed Reagan in the same statement, "only one so-called revolution puts itself above God."⁵² The Bolshevik Revolution was a uniquely hellish one. These were disputing visions, profoundly different at their very source.

In America, every person was and is a sacred reality. It was a "profound truth," said Reagan, that the "soul," more than the "physical," was "truly important."⁵³ Because they have eternal souls, individuals are incomparably more important than a temporal state. For a non-eternal state to attempt to deny an eternal individual was intolerable and unacceptable.

To Reagan, the individual is always superior to the state; the former is forever, the latter is fleeting.

Conclusion

This is what Ronald Reagan believed. These "Reagan Seven" comprise the essence of Reagan's conservative philosophy. As noted, much more could be said, from extended analysis of Reagan's statements on the family to his warnings about excessive government regulation of business. Nonetheless, these seven get at the real Reagan, helping provide some contours to the mantle that so many Republicans want to claim.

So, when hearing a 2012 Republican presidential aspirant invoking Reagan, consider whether the candidate shares Reagan's faith-based optimism, his belief in the individual, his belief in American exceptionalism, his regard for the sanctity and dignity of unborn human life.

⁵² Reagan, "Remarks, Observation, Captive Nations Week."

⁵³ Reagan, "Remarks, Evangelicals Convention, 1983." Also see: Reagan, "Remarks Religious Broadcasters Convention, 1984."

Is the candidate the pessimistic boy in the room full of toys or the optimist searching for the pony in the dung heap?

If you hear a candidate heralding “freedom,” consider whether the candidate believes that a self-governing nation can govern freely without the vital moral rudder that is faith. Can there be genuine freedom without faith? What did Tocqueville say? Reagan said what Tocqueville said.

This, and more, is what a Reagan conservative would say.