

6-9-2004

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ScholarWorks Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Ronald Reagan and the Conservative Movement" (2004). *Ask Gleaves*. 95.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/95

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Ronald Reagan and the Conservative Movement

To what extent did Ronald Reagan shape the conservative movement in America? What are its principles?

Ronald Reagan was the most influential American conservative in the twentieth century. And -- he was the longest-serving conservative president in the twentieth century. (He served two terms; the other genuine article, Calvin Coolidge, served one term.) Reagan achieved most of his major goals and in the process influenced public policy debates for a generation.



The genius of Reagan was to unite several different conservative schools of thought and forge them into a political movement. Historian George Nash has written of how the major strands of post-World-War conservatism came about. In the 1950s, there were traditionalists, capitalists, and anticommunists. (1) Traditionalists were the classical conservatives led by Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk; they looked back to Edmund Burke, John Adams, and John Henry Newman for inspiration; many were Roman Catholic or Anglo Catholic. (2) Capitalists were the classical liberals led by Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman; their inspiration could be found in Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and the Enlightenment; many were members of the Mont Pelerin Society. (3) Anticommunists found a voice in Whittaker Chambers and discovered a pit bull in Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy.

When William F. Buckley founded *National Review* in November 1955 -- standing "athwart history, yelling STOP!" -- he pulled together these three early strands of conservatism. No easy task, that, as there were many contrary impulses among the three groups. Classical conservatives tended to champion what Edmund Burke called "right order" and tradition; they focused on virtue. Classical liberals, with different priorities, tended to value whatever fostered wealth creation in a free-market economy; they focused on individual freedom. Anticommunists stressed a strong national defense to deal with the Soviet juggernaut abroad, and tight security to deal with communist sympathizers at home; their values necessitated enlarging the national government, a goal that was somewhat at odds with the classical liberals.

To complicate the picture, in the 1960s there arose the "neocons," mostly former Democrats led by Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, and writers for *Commentary*; many were Jewish intellectuals based in New York City. Finally in the 1970s came the evangelical Christians led by Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell; they tended to be Southern Protestants outside of the mainline churches. Both these groups tended to favor steadfast American support of Israel.

I am painting with a broad brush; the point is that these disparate groups held some ideas in common but also had significant differences. For instance, classical conservatives tended to be more tolerant of strong government than classical liberals. And classical conservatives were wary of the ambitious foreign policy championed by neo-conservatives.

Reagan Dominates, 1964-2004

Nevertheless, Ronald Reagan saw something essential to the American cause in each strand of conservatism. He was attracted to the *ideas* that animated them. From the late 1950s on, he worked with conservative leaders to transform conservatism from an intellectual into a political movement. When Reagan gave his speech ("A Time for Choosing") on behalf of Barry Goldwater's candidacy in 1964, it dawned on conservatives that the former Hollywood actor was the most compelling voice in American conservatism. Although Goldwater lost that election, Reagan won the heart of the Republican party. Sixteen years later -- after riots and Vietnam and Watergate and energy crises and stagflation and a humiliating hostage crisis -- Reagan ran for president. During the 1980 campaign he pulled together all the major strands of conservatism and forged them into a movement that could win at the ballot box. He won the '80 election in a landslide, and the rambling house conservatives built generally held together for the next decade, through the end of the Cold War (1991).

Reagan's great achievement was carried out in the political arena: he pulled together those who were inspired by classical conservatism and those who were inspired by classical liberalism. And make no mistake: the act of political fusion went hand-in-glove with attempts at intellectual fusion. For example, one of the founders of the post-war conservative movement, Russell Kirk, a traditionalist inspired by Burke, increasingly accommodated himself to Adam Smith. Before his career was over, Kirk would even write an economics textbook. Another conservative pioneer, Frank Meyer, self-consciously adopted the "fusionist" label because of his attempts to reconcile freedom and order.

Two writers for *The Economist*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, observe in their book *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (Penguin, 2004) that Reagan achieved his own fusion, selectively appropriating the principles of classical conservatism and those of classical liberalism into a new synthesis. From the former he championed the belief in a transcendent moral order, respect for Western civilization, the legitimacy of old institutions, the force of custom, property rights, and a narrowly defined foreign policy. From the latter he championed individual freedom, equality of opportunity, the rule of law, constitutional government, lower taxes, and less regulation of business. Unifying the two different conservative strands were a fierce love of country and populist streak. It helped politically that Reagan rejected the historical pessimism of the traditionalists, embracing instead a sunny outlook toward the future. He genuinely believed in the limitless good the American people could do -- if they were free. "His was the conservatism not of country clubs and boardrooms, but of talk radio, precinct meetings, and tax revolts."^[1]

Reaganism Survives

It is telling that the best known brand of American conservatism today is not neoconservatism or traditionalism, but Reaganism. Reaganism has shaped the Republican party and -- perhaps more significantly -- even much of the Democratic party; in the early 1990s, shortly after Reagan left office, President Bill Clinton's Democratic Leadership Council adopted a number of Reagan's conservative ideas. It was Clinton who proclaimed, "The era of big government is over." Reaganism has also inspired an entire generation of Republican governors since the 1980s. It was, moreover, the rallying cry in the 1994 Congressional elections that saw Republicans take back the 104th Congress. It remained what Republican candidates for high office aspired to; when George W. Bush ran for president in 2000, both he and challenger John McCain claimed to be the true successor to Ronald Reagan.

In sum, it was Reaganism that shaped domestic and foreign policy in the 1980s and '90s. And it was Reaganism that transformed the Republican party from the minority to the majority party. Reagan-inspired Republicans now control the White House, Capitol Hill, and the majority of governorships and state houses.

"Reaganism has survived," argue Micklethwait and Wooldridge, "because it went with the grain of American culture, tapping into many of the deepest sentiments in American life: religiosity, capitalism, patriotism, individualism, optimism." ^[2] For all these reasons, Ronald Reagan should be seen as the most important American conservative in the 20th century.
(Question from Sven B. of Battle Creek, Michigan)

^[1] John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, "Reaganism," Wall Street Journal, June 8, 2004, p. A16.

^[2] Ibid.