Critchlow, Donald. "Ronald Reagan." *Conservative Moments: Reading Conservative Texts*. Ed. Mark Garnett. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 119–126. Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350001565.ch-015>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 14:28 UTC.

Copyright © Mark Garnett 2018. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ronald Reagan

Donald Critchlow

First inaugural speech, 20 January 1981

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price . . .

We are a nation that has a government – not the other way around. And this makes us special among the nations of the Earth. Our government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed.

It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people. All of us need to be reminded that the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government.

Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work – work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it.

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this

land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth. The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price.

It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government. It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams. We're not, as some would have us believe, doomed to an inevitable decline . . .

We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time when there are not heroes, they just don't know where to look . . . Now, I have used the words 'they' and 'their' in speaking of these heroes. I could say 'you' and 'your', because I'm addressing the heroes of whom I speak – you, the citizens of this blessed land. Your dreams, your hopes, your goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God.¹

Ronald Reagan's inaugural address on 20 January 1981 projected his eloquence and ability to speak to the hopes and dreams of average Americans, following a decade of American economic turmoil, three failed presidencies and apparent decline as a world power. Reagan's greatest strength was displayed on the public podium. He captured the deep patriotism of average Americans, spoke in words simple to understand but eloquent in composition and projected their firm belief that their hopes for themselves, their families and the nation would be realized.

Reagan's speech reflected the fears and the aspiration of Americans in 1981. Reagan achieved a landslide victory in the 1980 election against incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Carter's presidency had been caught in the riptides of history, runaway inflation and rising unemployment, an adventurist Soviet Union taking advantage of American-perceived loss of power and finally rising Islamic militancy seen in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Reagan won the Republican nomination after fighting off primary challenges by George H. W. Bush and other candidates. During the primaries, Reagan made plenty of gaffes and often got his facts wrong, and at times seemed insecure and indecisive. Yet his message for scaling back government, increasing defense spending and restoring America compensated for any weakness on the campaign trail.

In nominating Reagan, the Republican Party confirmed its shift to the right that had begun with Barry Goldwater's nomination in 1964. Reagan's selection of George H. W. Bush, a moderate, as his running mate, signaled to party leaders and the public that he was not a right-wing loon.

The Reagan–Bush campaign knew that if the election turned into a replay of 1976, Reagan would lose. Carter's narrow victory over incumbent

President Gerald Ford was largely due to Carter's ability to win Southern states. If Reagan was going to defeat Carter, Republicans needed to carry the South. In addition, Reagan needed to persuade blue-collar workers that he was not an extremist out to eliminate every federal entitlement program. In his nominating speech for Reagan at the Republican National Convention, Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nevada) emphasized Reagan's record as Governor of California of increasing benefits for the truly needy, increasing funding for education, protecting the environment and initiating welfare reform.

The Reagan campaign understood as well that if they were to win the White House, they needed to win over evangelical Protestant Christian voters who had gone for Carter in 1976. As a result, during the campaign, Reagan hammered on his support for religious liberty and anti-abortion, and his belief in the traditional family. Reagan performed well in debates and gave enough assurance to the public that he could be trusted in a nuclear world. Even with news networks reporting daily on the Iranian crisis when radical Islamist revolutionaries took American embassy workers hostage, the Carter campaign continued to believe until the final few days that they were going to win the election. Carter and his team underestimated Reagan, as so many others had done in the past.

Still, few predicted Reagan's landslide victory on the election night, in which he won 489 electoral votes to Carter's 49, taking 44 states. Reagan carried the South by five percentage points, the Midwest by as much as ten points in some states and the West by nearly 20 points. Blue-collar workers swung heavily to Reagan.

Reagan won the election as an avowed conservative. His campaign rhetoric expressed his conservative principles, and was often heated, at times alarming those on the left. In office he stuck to his core principles of lower taxes, reducing social spending and strengthening national defense. His cabinet choices were mostly conservatives who aligned with his principles.

Much has been made of Reagan the rhetorician. Critics caricatured him as an actor just mouthing words written for him by behind-the-scene powerful interests – wealthy corporate interests – who sought to beguile American voters with social issues, in order to get what they really wanted: tax cuts for themselves. Reagan's opponents labeled him the 'Teflon President', who easily deflected dirt thrown at him by his critics.

No doubt Reagan was a master at public speaking. Reagan had honed his skills in speaking to average Americans as a spokesperson for General Electric in the 1950s, espousing the virtues of capitalism – a featured speaker at anti-communist rallies and Republican events and a successful politician who was elected governor of the most populous state, California. Reagan's affable personality came across on the stage. His rhetoric could be heated, and to his critics, was often over the top. His delivery, though, was natural, his voice calm, and inspiring without being condescending.

The underlying strength of Reagan as a speaker and a politician rested on his core principles, articulated in his First Inaugural Address. He believed

as a conservative that ultimately freedom depended upon citizens, acting as individuals, to better themselves, their families and their communities through voluntary action. This assumption is made clear in the speech, when Reagan declares,

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on Earth.

His following sentence captures another core principle held by Reagan, that freedom often comes at a cost: 'The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price.'

These two principles, individual voluntary action and the defense of freedom, determined Reagan's view of government. In his inaugural address, he declares that

Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

Reagan expressed a confidence in individuals to decide best what is best for themselves. Government, he declares, is not the solution to the nation's problems. Indeed, government intrusion has caused many of the nation's problems. As a consequence, he calls in his speech for downsizing the government through economic deregulation and returning more power to the states. State governments, he implies, should be laboratories of experiment. Reagan made clear that he was not a libertarian purist who believed that any government involvement in the economy or social welfare was evil. Indeed, as president, he undertook Social Security reform, which raised individual and employment contributions and extended the age requirements for receiving benefits. Under his administration, large block grants for welfare, specifically Aid to Families with Dependent Children, were made to the states. An economic recession early in his first term forced him to agree to raise corporate taxes on two occasions, but he held steadfast to individual income tax reductions. In his second term, he worked with Democrats to simplify the tax system.

He believed that government's primary responsibility was to maintain national security. This entailed a strong, if not superior, military. Throughout the decade of the 1970s and in his presidential campaigns in

1976 and 1980, he assailed Democrats for cutting back on defense spending. In his bid for the Republican nomination in 1976, he attacked incumbent President Gerald Ford for selling out American interests and potentially weakening national defense by turning over the Panama Canal Zone to Panama, ruled by anti-American dictators. He joined defense hawks, including Democrats such as Senator Henry Jackson (D-Washington) and Paul Nitze, in opposition to the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Carter withdrew the treaty from Senate consideration.

Reagan's core ideological principles about strengthening American defense and ensuring American nuclear superiority were evident in his administration's subsequent foreign policy. As president, Reagan pursued a huge military build-up. His order to install medium-range missiles in Europe sparked massive international demonstrations calling for a unilateral nuclear freeze. Reagan's denunciation of the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' raised concerns among his critics that he was placing the world on the edge of a nuclear war. The culmination of his foreign policy came in his second term with the signing of a major and verifiable arms control reduction treaty with the Soviet Union. Reagan's foreign policy set the stage for the end of the Cold War that came in George H. W. Bush's administration.

What is most evident in Reagan's inaugural address and his subsequent administration was his *principled pragmatism*, the capacity to maintain core principles, while achieving political and legislative success without betraying these principles. Reagan's belief that people are best deciding for themselves what is best for themselves entailed minimal government interference in their lives. He held essential to the preservation of a constitutional, representative republic a financially healthy government and a strong, well-prepared national defense to protect the nation. He sought, therefore, lower individual taxes to allow average Americans more freedom to spend their money where they wanted, and a strong military to protect the nation. These were his core principles.

On other matters he proved to be a compromiser. He understood that successful legislation was an act of compromise. Most often in legislation, neither side got fully what they wanted. Sometimes, a principled politician might agree to a legislative bill that was not fully satisfactory, but such a bill might accomplish some of what was being sought and might set the stage for more important bills to come. Reagan's principled pragmatism was evidenced in his political campaigns. When staff and donors brought to him what appeared to be irreconcilable differences, Reagan adroitly found a middle ground that satisfied both sides. He understood that the campaign's purpose was to win office and achieve principled goals.

Reagan's ability to seek legislative compromise had been evident during his governorship when he worked with Democrats to achieve model welfare reform. During his California governor's race against incumbent Pat Brown in 1966, Reagan presented himself as 'citizen-politician' who could bring

common sense to government. His tone was moderate, but his message was solidly conservative.²

After his landslide election victory, he stepped into the governor's office without a great understanding of government. Reagan's faith, as expressed in Goldwater's campaign speech in 1964, 'A Time for Choosing,' that 'the truth is there are simple answers – they're just not easy ones', did not provide a policy agenda or an understanding of the complexities of governing. Most on his 1966 campaign staff did not know much about state government and the legislative process.

The first steps in governing proved difficult for Reagan and his staff. They could not even find a suitable budget director, and when Caspar Weinberger, an experienced California legislator, was proposed, he was shot down by his aide Robert Tuttle because Weinberger was seen as a liberal Republican who had supported Nelson Rockefeller in the California presidential primary in 1964. Reagan and his staff, however, proved to be quick learners. Reagan deferred to his experts, but at executive meetings he zeroed in on the critical issues, kept to his core principles, and showed he was a masterful negotiator. Lou Cannon, who watched the administration first hand, concluded that 'Reagan was simultaneously conservative and pragmatic.'³ Reagan clung to his principles without allowing them to undermine his governance.

Reagan developed a working relationship with the legislature, especially the upper house. He did not try to pretend he was 'one of the boys'. Instead, he developed a strong legislative affairs office – a pattern followed when he became president. Left with a huge state budget deficit by the Brown administration, Reagan agreed to the largest tax hike in state history – 'a breathtaking display of pragmatism', as Cannon put it.⁴ In negotiations with Democratic Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh, Reagan lost on many issues, but took what he could get. After signing the radical tax legislation, Reagan might have been in deep political trouble with voters. After all, he ran on a campaign to lower taxes and shrink government. He deflected the issue by accusing the previous administration of having left the state with a major deficit. Over the next seven years, the California state economy prospered and his administration experienced budget surpluses.

For most of his two terms in office, Reagan faced a Democratic-controlled legislature. One consequence was that he found himself having to sign legislation he did not necessarily agree with, including budget cuts in mental health and an extremely liberal abortion bill. Reagan wanted to veto the abortion bill, but Republican legislators had voted for the bill, and he did not leave them out on a political limb. His greatest accomplishment, however, came in his second term with welfare reform. Reagan won re-election in 1970 against Democratic challenger Jesse Unruh. During the re-election campaign, Reagan promised to reform the welfare system. Winning a decisive second term, Reagan made this a high priority.

Reagan opposed Nixon's proposed Family Assistant Plan, which would have provided, in effect, a guaranteed income for the poor. In a television

debate, Reagan declared, 'I believe that the government is supposed to promote the general welfare. I don't believe it's supposed to provide it.'⁵ Instead, working with Assembly Speaker Bob Moretti, an ultra-liberal from Northern California, Reagan and his team entered into tough negotiations to undertake welfare reform. Negotiations often lasted from morning through night to craft what became at the time a model for welfare reform. The California Welfare Reform raised benefits, decreased eligibility and established a demonstration work program. Within three years, welfare rolls had dropped by nearly 300,000 people.

Reagan carried into the presidency his legislative experience as a governor. He stood firmly on set principles, while remaining pragmatic as to what could be accomplished. As president, Reagan held that it was necessary to compromise to get 75 or 80 per cent of his program, and that this was worth the compromise. Reagan was willing to make legislative compromises, but not in relation to core principles of individual tax cuts and a strong national defense.

The Reagan presidency, while being called the Reagan Revolution by his supporters, came with costs. As president, he did not succeed in every initiative. The belief that tax cuts would spark enough economic growth to enhance revenues proved only partially true. Economic growth did create more revenue, but not enough to compensate for the costs of defense spending. He failed to achieve his campaign promise to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, or his pledge to disband the Department of Education.⁶ Although Reagan cut staffing of regulatory agencies in the Consumer Protection Safety Commission, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, the regulatory state remained intact. In 1982, a national recession forced him to agree to an increase in the corporate tax rate, but this had been preceded the previous year by the largest tax cut in American history. In implementing Social Security reform, Reagan agreed to increased payroll taxes and extending age requirements for receiving benefits. The administration's anti-communist opposition to the pro-Soviet Sandinista regime in Nicaragua created an environment for what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal. As a result, Reagan's two terms as president were not without flaws, mishaps and policy errors that had long-term consequences.

These perceived failures to fulfill his campaign promises have led to a sizeable literature that the Reagan Revolution failed.⁷ Even his apparent success in foreign policy brought heavy criticism from later scholars. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Reagan's liberal critics argue, would have occurred without Reagan because of the inherent weakness of the Soviet Union. Conservative defenders, politicians and journalists tend to emphasize Reagan's ideological purity. Yet, whatever the specific record of the Reagan administration, he achieved much of what he promised in his inaugural address.

His greatest success came in reaching accommodation with the Soviet Union by negotiating a verifiable arms control treaty. He set the stage

for ending the Cold War, which occurred shortly after he left office. He tempered ideological principle, while maintaining core conservative values about the nature of government, the value of a free market in economic development and asserting that freedom is always one generation removed from extinction. He distrusted centralized government without calling for its complete dismantling.

Reagan's immediate legacy after leaving office was having achieved tax simplification, lower income rates for average Americans, economic deregulation and arms control. He did not achieve everything he promised. The 'iron-triangle' of congressional committees, federal bureaucrats and interest groups endured, a fact he lamented on 14 December 1988, shortly before he was to leave the White House.⁸ He had failed to overturn or reform abortion expressed in the *Roe v. Wade* case of 1973. Many of his appointments to the Supreme Court and lower federal courts failed to live up to conservative expectations.

Reagan's successes and his ability to communicate conservative ideas to the larger public made him into an icon of the Republican Party, which became the party of Lincoln and Reagan. His greatest legacy, however, has tended to be overlooked by both admirers and critics: his *principled pragmatism*. Sixty years later, with a highly polarized electorate and many party leaders given more to maintaining ideological principle than the art of politics, Reagan's capacity to compromise, while maintaining core principles, should be recalled. He articulated optimism without seeking perfection in government or humankind. He expressed a deep faith in the American Dream, and he understood that dreams can become reality when acted upon through *realpolitik*.