

Reagan years in perspective

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IT is generally considered "bad form" to speak ill of the dead: whatever their flaws and failings, in death everyone should be treated with respect, or at least allowed to rest in peace. Many would say this rule should be applied to the late Ronald Reagan. Now that he has passed away, it would be wrong to criticize his presidency.

But if there is an onus on his critics to remain silent, then the same goes for his supporters. They too should refrain from using his death as an opportunity to engage in blatant propaganda — to tout achievements that were never achieved. When supporters insist on eulogizing a presidency that so little deserved it, the critics have a duty to speak out. Death is not — and cannot be allowed to be — an excuse to indulge in untruths.

There have been many of those over the past few days. Ronald Reagan has been touted as the best thing to happen to America in a very long time — before or since. Here was a president who knew what he wanted, who had his principles and stuck to them. One of those principles was implacable hostility to communism and "the evil empire", which eventually led — so we are told — to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At home, he gave Americans a sense of pride in themselves, and optimism about the future. His supply-side economic policies delivered growth and prosperity. He was the great communicator, the most popular president in history. Enough of the spiel. Probably only two lines in the above paragraph are true: Ronald Reagan was a great communicator, and he did make some Americans feel good about themselves and optimistic about the future. Everything else, though, is at best distortion and at worst, blatant lies.

Take the end of the cold war — supposedly the biggest "achievement" of the Reagan Presidency. In reality, it had very little to do with Reagan. As

after he left the White House was of a leader quite happy to watch TV, have his daily naps, take time off with his wife, a leader with the most minimal grasp of detail. Given the power that goes with the title of US president, even in hindsight it is terrifying to think that a mind such as his held it for so long.

Reagan's supporters fight back with claims that the president focused on basic concepts and principles rather than details. His simplicity is touted as an attribute. The supply-side economic theory that he practised is cited as an example: cut taxes, giving the rich more money to invest, leading to economic growth and benefits for all — simple. George Bush senior, in his pre-Veep days, described that simple, brilliant theory as 'Voodoo economics'. He might have changed his tune later, but the description remained all too apt. Reagan's economic policies benefited only his fat-cat cronies. Ordinary Americans suffered.

Reagan didn't see their suffering. Nor did he see the impact of his cutbacks on social spending, or of his refusal to face up to problems like AIDS. A leader who wore his religion very much on his sleeve, Reagan had little sympathy for the many who didn't fit his white, Christian middle-class America: AIDS victims, homosexuals, blacks, ethnic minorities — for all these groups, talk of "the Reagan-era optimism" is like a cruel joke.

Why does all this matter now? Aside from historical accuracy, what does it matter if his widow (who, for all her faults, deserves immense credit for her unflinching loyalty and service to her husband) and other supporters try to present the Reagan presidency as America's golden era?

Historical accuracy — keeping the record straight — is important. But even more than that, the Reagan years have to be presented as they truly were because they have implications for what is happening in American government today.

Historical accuracy is important.

some analysts had predicted, Moscow's state-controlled economy simply could not keep up in the arms race with the US. Reagan just happened to be on watch at the time. Furthermore, if it hadn't been for his insistence on the fantastical SDI, an agreement to cut the superpowers' nuclear arsenals could have been achieved years earlier.

Ronald Reagan's obsession with communism did, however, lead him to back all manner of anti-communist governments and forces — despite the fact that many had very bloodied hands. Prominent in the list are the Khmer Rouge, Rios Montt of Guatemala, Jonas Savimbe of Angola's Unita and Saddam Hussein. Between them all these groups/leaders hailed by Reagan as "defenders of the free world" were responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths. But so long as they proclaimed to be against communism, Reagan had no problem with their other activities.

The same blinkered obsession led to the Iran-Contra affair — a totally audacious and outrageous violation of not one, but two, Congressional bans: selling arms to Iran, and supporting the South American contras. The scale of the violation is staggering: especially given that it stemmed from the Oval Office. By comparison Clinton's peccadilloes and even Nixon's tapes seem positively mild. It is a miracle that Reagan was never impeached for Iran-Contra — a miracle, or testimony to his "teflon presidency".

When the sordid affair finally came out, the geriatric leader claimed he had no knowledge of what his staff were doing. Both the possible conclusions to be drawn from that defence — either Reagan lied, or his staff were out of control — reflect badly on his leadership. As a Congressional report pointedly observed: "if he didn't know, he should have."

(Reagan could not deny knowledge or responsibility for another shocking policy decision: the invasion of Grenada. Portrayed as a heroic mission to rescue stranded American students, it was in fact just a calculated exercise to deflect attention from the killing of 241 Marines in Beirut.)

In the case of Iran-Contra — given Reagan's pathological hatred of the democratically elected Sandanista government in Nicaragua — the first conclusion above was probably correct: he did not tell the truth. But in many other cases, the president really didn't know what was going on, and did leave important decisions to his staff.

The picture that emerged

But even more than that, the Reagan years have to be presented as they truly were because they have implications for what is happening in American government today. Reagan's two terms' parallels with the current Bush presidency are striking.

Reading through the above (very abbreviated) story of Reagan's two terms, the parallels with the current Bush presidency are striking. The poor-to-nonexistent grasp of detail; the frequent holidays; the pampering to rich campaign backers; the failure to see, let alone empathize with, America's under-classes; the simplistic, blinkered foreign policy — all Bush traits that could as easily belong to Reagan.

Many similarities. The difference between Bush junior and Reagan, however, lies in the impact of their vacuousness, ideological narrowness, kowtowing to rich supporters and so on. Reagan's led to record budget deficits, continued oppression by cruel regimes abroad, widening of the gulf between the haves and have-nots at home, and delayed detente with the USSR. Incredibly serious consequences, but they pale in comparison with the impact of Bush's policies.

In the space of under one term, the 43rd American president has managed to create a new global order. One characterized by unilateral assertion of power, defiance of international law and norms, war, turmoil throughout the Middle East, a growing clash of civilizations, and greatly heightened global terrorism. Should Bush continue on his current course — something the ongoing eulogization of Ronald Reagan is encouraging — both America and the wider world are heading for disaster.

Reagan, even in death, has to be criticized: doing so might just make the American public wake up to the dangers being unleashed by another incompetent and failed president.