

HERE'S a modern American paradox. If it's difficult after all these years to be too harsh on Ronald Reagan's presidency, that's largely because its worst excesses have been rendered relatively unremarkable by the events of the past three years.

On the other hand, it would be absurd to overlook the fact that in terms of ideology and practice, George W. Bush isn't so much his father's son as a genetically modified variant of the Reagan prototype.

Many of Bush's right-hand men earned their stripes, so to speak, during the Reagan years. Therefore it is not particularly surprising that even the rhetorical devices of two decades ago — the “war against terrorism”, a battle between “good” and “evil” — have been redeployed in recent years.

Of course, the nature of “evil” has changed in the interim. Back in the early 1980s, Reagan infamously described the Soviet Union as an evil empire, and to him communism in all its forms was the main enemy. His version of the “war against terrorism” therefore, involved close collaboration with brutal military dictatorships in Latin America to crush popular rebellions.

In what is just one among innumerable ironies, it also involved the direct sponsorship of terrorist outfits such as the contras, who were infiltrated into Nicaragua from CIA-operated training camps in Honduras in order to destabilize the Sandinista government. They did so chiefly through murder and pillage directed against civilians.

WORLD VIEW

By Mahir Ali

anti-communist crusader.

Reagan's first major political intervention took the form of a 1964 speech in favour of the extremist and divisive Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Two years later he defied expectations by becoming governor of California. After two more years he made his first attempt to secure the GOP presidential nomination. He failed in 1968 and again in 1976, but his perseverance paid off in 1980.

Again unlike Bush, Reagan won his first presidential election by a landslide, against an opponent perceived as weak and irresolute. It has long been rumoured that Reagan's aides

predecessors would have agreed to such terms. But for the advent of Mikhail Sergeyevich, it isn't impossible that the cold war would have ended with a bang rather than a whimper.

Throughout his first term, Reagan adopted a ridiculously gung-ho approach to international affairs, with Margaret Thatcher as an eager accomplice. A British anti-nuclear poster in the early 1980s depicted them in a classic *Gone With The Wind* pose, with the blurb: “She promised to follow him to the end of the world. He promised to arrange it.”

The bleak humour wasn't unwarranted. It was decidedly less funny when Reagan took it upon himself to crack jokes about impending doom, such as this apparently off-the-cuff quip, in 1984, into a microphone that he supposedly didn't know was switched on: “My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you today that I have signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.”

In truth, Reagan's version of Armageddon was fought out in the forests of Nicaragua and the hills of Afghanistan. Much like the contras, the Mujahideen were held up as paragons of gallantry and fortitude, and jihad was touted as a supreme virtue. If the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a crime, it was only compounded by the US-sponsored response, delivered with the assistance of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (Zia-ul-Haq, not surprisingly, was high on the list of Reagan's favourite tyrants).

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That didn't prevent Reagan from positing moral equivalence between the mercenary marauders and the founding fathers of the United States. And his administration went out of its way to keep funding the contras in defiance of congressional restrictions. It conspired to sell arms, sourced from Israel, to the Ayatollahs in Iran as a means of obtaining the release of American hostages held by the Lebanese Hezbollah. Funds from the sale were diverted to the contras.

A couple of heads rolled after the Iran-contra scandal became public, but Reagan feigned ignorance and got away with it. He wasn't, after all, the sort of person whose lack of knowledge in more or less any context strained credulity. Generally, the poor grasp of facts was partly an act; it served to accentuate plausible deniability in cases such as Iran-contra, but was also designed to enhance electoral appeal. Why a substantial section of American voters respond positively to limited intelligence isn't easy to understand, although the likeliest explanation lies in their eagerness to find something to relate to in the candidates on offer. American children are brought up to believe that anyone can grow up to be president. Confronted with the likes of Reagan and Bush, it isn't hard to believe that.

Career-wise, Reagan's trajectory is certainly more intriguing than that of the incumbent. Unlike George Dubya, Ronnie didn't have a privileged childhood. Life was a bit of a struggle until he made a bit of a name as a radio commentator, eventually graduating to B-movie roles in Hollywood — more on the strength of his ability to memorize scripts than a formidable screen presence.

He moved to television before venturing into politics, but the Hollywood phase was crucial in the formation of his character. A self-described "bleeding-heart liberal" who voted thrice for Franklin Roosevelt, he subsequently shifted sharply to the right; as president of the Screen Actors Guild during the McCarthyist wave, he was notorious as an

succeeded in persuading Iran's ayatollahs not to release the Americans held hostage at the US embassy in Tehran before polling day, lest their freedom redounded to Jimmy Carter's credit.

What adds credence to this theory is the fact that the hostages were eventually freed on the day of Reagan's inauguration.

In his inaugural address, the new president declared: "Government is not the solution, it is the problem." Whatever one may make of that as a generalization, it was undoubtedly true of the Reagan administration. Perhaps the accolade could be extended to most other US governments in living memory, but it is particularly applicable to the heirs of Reagan who grabbed the presidency in 2000.

For Reagan and his mob, small government essentially meant cutting taxes for the rich (a practice that has continued under George W.) and easing out of the state's welfare commitments. Inevitably, the rich became richer and the poor felt the squeeze. This doesn't mean Reagan wasn't a big spender: he was responsible for some of the largest deficits in US history. It's just that he didn't believe in wasting money on health or education; instead, he poured cash into further building up America's already formidable nuclear arsenals, as if there was no tomorrow.

That was a particularly dangerous path for someone who believed in Armageddon. Tributes this week have dwelt at length upon Reagan's role in "winning" the cold war. His administration certainly did play a role in precipitating the collapse of the Soviet Union, not least by pushing ahead so far and so fast in the arms race that the USSR, already lagging far behind, couldn't ever hope to catch up. However, until Mikhail Gorbachev came along, it was willing to die trying.

In the US-Soviet arms reduction pacts negotiated towards the end of Reagan's second term in office, Moscow was willing to make proportionately larger concessions than Washington. It is unlikely that any of Gorbachev's

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Quite possibly not. But this is not an aspect of Reagan's legacy that is likely to come under scrutiny in the US. Not in a hurry at any rate. His state funeral on Friday will provide yet another opportunity for paeans and panegyrics. He has already been described as possibly the greatest US president in the 20th century. There has been talk, not entirely in jest, of adding his rugged visage to Mount Rushmore.

"The only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to obtain [their objectives]." Reagan said that. He was speaking of the Soviets, but it seems to be a fairly accurate description of his own administration. And that of his vice-president's son.

Bloodshed in Afghanistan and Nicaragua. Support for extreme-right military juntas in countries such as El Salvador, Bolivia and Pakistan. The gratuitous invasion of Grenada. The attempted assassination of Moammar Qadhafi through the bombardment of Libya. An ideological shift that dragged the political centre several degrees to the right. These are among the images that memories of the Reagan era conjure up, alongside Ronnie's symbiotic relationship with jellybeans, a disarming line in self-deprecation, and a considerably less amusing tendency to confuse cinema with real life.

Reagan once praised his British soulmate as "the best man in England". Thatcher returned the compliment by describing him as a "poor dear" with "nothing between his ears". That's a bit harsh. There was something between his ears.

Reagan was a scar on the face of American democracy. A scar that never completely healed. And now we are stuck with the sequel.

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