

Reagan's greatest gift was vitality of his ideas He communicated a clear, simple view of a complex world

- George P. Shultz

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We have lost Ronald Reagan, but his ideas remain with us, as vital as ever. We can remember the gifts he gave us -- his advocacy of freedom, his contributions to our security, his belief in America and his restoration of our belief in ourselves.

When he took office as governor of California, Reagan took responsibility for a state that was in rocky shape; when he left office, California was golden again.

When Reagan took office as the president of the United States, the country was adrift, inflation was out of control, the economy was in the doldrums, and the Cold War was as cold as it had ever been. When he left office, inflation was under control, the economy was expanding, the Cold War was all over but the shouting and America once again stood tall.

Ronald Reagan brought so much to this country. He started with carefully thought-out ideas and he put them to work effectively. He had a strong and constructive agenda, much of it labeled impossible and unattainable in the early years of his presidency.

He challenged the conventional wisdom: on arms control, on the possibility of movement toward freedom in the Communist-dominated world, on the need to stand up to Iran in the Persian Gulf, on the superiority of market- and enterprise-based economies.

The world learned when Ronald Reagan faced down the air traffic controllers in 1981 that he could dig in and fight to win. The world learned in Grenada that he would use military force if needed.

He did not accept the contention that extensive political opposition doomed an attractive idea. He would fight resolutely for an idea, believing that, if it was valid, he could persuade the American people to support it. He changed the national and international agenda on issue after issue. He was an optimist; he spoke the vocabulary of opportunity. He had a vision of what he stood for and what we aspire to as a nation.

Reagan had, and could express, a clear and simple view of a complex world. Every Sunday he brought acorns down from Camp David to feed the squirrels outside the Oval Office. The squirrels at the White House hadn't had it so good since Ike cleared the area to put in a putting green. Reagan's most endearing aspect was his fundamental decency. He appealed to people's best hopes, not their fears; to their confidence rather than their doubts.

Reagan was a doer, a pragmatist, a man who enjoyed hard physical tasks, as in the ranch work he loved to do. But that brush clearing and fence fixing was a symbol, too; he wanted to be doing it himself because from the land came not only strength and clarity, but a vision -- the vision of the West and the endless horizon.

The American people liked Ronald Reagan and re-elected him in one of the biggest landslides in history because he trusted them and he conveyed to them that they need not be bound, tied down by class, or race, or childhood misfortune, or poverty, or bureaucracy -- they, the people could make something of themselves; indeed, they could remake themselves, endlessly.

But beneath this pragmatic attitude lay a bedrock of principle and purpose with which I was proud to be associated. He believed in being strong enough to defend our interests, but he viewed that strength as a means, not an end in itself. Reagan had confidence in himself and in his ideas and was ready to negotiate from the strength so evident by the mid-1980s.

He was a fervent anticommunist who could comprehend and believe that people everywhere would choose to throw off the communist system if they ever had the chance. And he worked hard to give them that chance. He favored open trade because he had confidence in the ability of Americans to compete, and he had confidence that an integrated world economy would benefit America. He stuck to his agenda.

The points he made, however consummate the delivery, were unmistakably real in his mind and heart. They expressed an American creed: defend your country, value your family, make something of yourself, tell the government to get off your back, tell the tyrants to watch their step. Reagan conveyed simple truths that were especially welcome because "nowadays everything seems so complicated." What he said ran deep and wide among the people.



Reagan as president was a Republican, a conservative, a man of the right. But these labels will mislead historians who do not see beyond them, for Americans could see some of Reagan in themselves. You couldn't figure him out like a fact, because to Reagan the main fact was a vision.

He came from the heartland of the country, where people could be down to earth yet feel that the sky is the limit -- not ashamed of, or cynical about, the American dream. Not far from Ronald Reagan's small hometown of Dixon, Ill. , is Jane Addams' small hometown of Cedarville; not far from Cedarville is Ulysses Grant's small hometown of Galena. And not far from Galena is Carl Sandburg's Galesburg. Reagan had something of them all: his heart going out to the people; his will ready to fight for the country; his voice able to move the nation. And, as Carl Sandburg wrote it,

The republic is a dream.

Nothing happens unless first a dream.

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