



**STRATEGY
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**THE REAGAN WAY:
USING LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR STRATEGIC SUCCESS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

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In spite of many critics who belittled his style and his presidency, Ronald Reagan is increasingly viewed as a heroic President who fulfilled his vision of restoring peace and prosperity at home and freedom abroad. The thesis of this paper is that Reagan used certain key leadership skills to succeed as President that may be used as a model by other strategic leaders. In examining Reagan's leadership skills, the competencies of strategic leaders identified in the U.S. Army War College Strategic Leadership Primer are used to examine Reagan's "Be" or disposition competencies focused on leader values and attributes; "Know" disposition competencies, focused on leader conceptual, technical, and interpersonal skills; and "Do" action competencies, focused on leader actions, including influencing, operating, and improving. Reagan's competency as a strategic leader revolved around his leadership competencies of a compelling vision, policy direction and leadership, and an extraordinary ability to communicate his vision, influence, and persuade. These skills can serve as a general guide and model for other strategic leaders who are skillful enough to develop and use them.

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THE REAGAN WAY: USING LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR STRATEGIC SUCCESS

It is generally acknowledged that in 1980 Ronald Reagan was elected the 40th President of a dispirited country. According to one leadership authority, Reagan's actions to reverse America's sagging spirits, economic stagflation, and national security priorities serve as an inspiration to leaders everywhere.¹ James Strock writes, "Whether one considers his accomplishments in achieving his vision or his legacy in terms of a changed public discourse, Reagan stands as one of the most consequential leaders of our time."²

The U.S. Army War College Strategic Leadership Primer notes, "Strategic leaders must be experts in their domain and in the bureaucracy and political environment of the decision making process in a democracy."³ The thesis of this paper is that Reagan used certain key leadership skills to succeed as President that may be used as a model by other strategic leaders. The competencies of strategic leaders identified in the Strategic Leadership Primer will be used to examine Reagan's leadership skills. These leadership competencies include "Be" disposition competencies, focused on leader values and attributes; "Know" disposition competencies, focused on leader conceptual, technical, and interpersonal skills; and "Do" action competencies, focused on leader actions, including influencing, operating, and improving.⁴ Present and future strategic leaders may benefit from a study of Reagan's leadership style and skills, skills that may prove a necessity in an increasingly complex and ambiguous strategic environment.

REAGAN'S ENVIRONMENT

The prospects facing The United States in 1980 could scarcely have been worse. Nor did the authorities in the nation's capital have any strategy to improve our situation. We were told, in essence, that we would have to learn to accept these conditions. Learn to do with less gasoline; submit to the ever-rising burden of taxation and the slowdown of the economy; sit by idly while Marxist forces took over one country after another; and hope that through agreements with the Soviets, we could persuade them, by appealing to their charitable instincts, not to exploit our growing weakness. Ronald Reagan, needless to remark, saw all these matters differently.⁵

Edwin Meese III

It is easy to forget the dark days of less than 20 years ago, memorable for gas lines, soaring inflation, the Iran hostage crisis, and Desert One. Unemployment and interest rates were soaring, but the American Spirit was at a long time low. Thanks to The Desert One debacle and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger points out America was just waking up to the fact that its military readiness was poor and unprepared to defend our country and its interests in an increasingly dangerous world.⁶ Weinberger writes that during the Presidential Transition period he was "receiving increasingly discouraging briefings about the Soviet gains in offensive military strength during

the 1970's- and about the losses we had suffered by cutting our defense investment during the same decade by more than twenty percent - loses in readiness, in new equipment, in spare parts, in research and development and, particularly, in the morale of our troops and our youth. These losses were demonstrating almost every day that an all-volunteer system could not work unless it was better led and supported." ⁷

Reagan and his national security team in particular faced a special challenge in addressing these issues, particularly in the context of a faltering economy and low public morale. As Reagan aide Dinesh D' Souza writes, "the nations woes called for nothing less than a man who could turn the tide of history and renew the American spirit ... In California there was such a man."⁸

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

"BE" DISPOSITION COMPETENCIES

At the heart of our message should be five simple familiar words. No big economic theories. No sermons on political philosophy. Just five short words: family, work, neighborhood, freedom, and peace.

Ronald Reagan, 1980 ⁹

Reagan envisioned himself as the champion of the traditional values that made America great. And, in his view, there was no greater value than freedom, which is key to his political philosophy: "All of these things - learning to control the government, limiting the amount of money it can take from us, protecting our country through a strong defense - all of these things revolve around one word, and that word is freedom."¹⁰

In addition to his championed values, Reagan exhibited many character traits that proved essential to his accomplishments as a leader, traits including courage, authority, empathy, grace, discipline, perseverance, and humility.¹¹ His sense of optimism, self-confidence, and talent for happiness were also key traits he developed in childhood, traits strengthened by his spiritual outlook and strong mother.¹² "My optimism," Reagan observed, "comes not just from my strong faith in God but from my strong and enduring faith in man."¹³

Many liberal intellectuals, journalists, and pundits criticize Reagan's leadership ability and his values. In the harsh view of his critics in the intellectual elite, Reagan was a thoroughly inadequate and inept chief executive, passive and disengaged, who attribute Reagan's accomplishments (to the degree there are any), to incredible luck.¹⁴ Reagan is seen as a "B" movie actor who is able to persuade others with his theatrical and oratorical skills, and somehow manages to be in the right place at the right time to achieve political success. According to his elite critics, Reagan cannot be regarded as effective because

he was not that smart and had kooky ideas.¹⁵ Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neil said " he knows less than any President I've ever known," and Reagan's own aides seemed to be constantly trying to protect him from gaffes or issuing clarifications correcting his misstatements.¹⁶

Critics point out Reagan did not exactly live up to his professed family values (he was divorced from his first wife) and did not attend church regularly. Washington Post Journalist and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon cites Reagan's advanced age as President, just days short of seventy when sworn in, as a key factor affecting his abilities, and discusses Reagan's severe hearing difficulties that hindered him in meetings, even after his use of hearing aides.¹⁷

Presidential Counselor Ed Meese dismissed the accounts of critics who saw Reagan as an essentially passive, disengaged figure who was ignorant of the facts or incapable of leading.¹⁸

Reagan was in fact a tough and decisive leader, one of the best I have ever known or seen in action. He had a friendly and nonconfrontational manner, but it was coupled with resolve and strength. Far from being ignorant, he was widely knowledgeable on a host of issues - often much more so than his detractors. And rather than being passive, he was capable of standing his ground against all comers, including self important staffers who occasionally believed they could or should persuade him to substitute their own ideas for his most deeply held beliefs.¹⁹

Meese further discusses Reagan's high personal stamina and toughness, including Reagan's response to the assassination attempt that nearly took his life: "Having been at the President's side through numerous crises and fateful hours of decision, I can testify that he was capable of handling enormous challenges with a calmness and perseverance that were remarkable."²⁰ The public got a glimpse of this inner toughness during the assassination attempt of March 1981, when Reagan faced a life threatening peril with courage and humor.

Presidential aide Martin Anderson notes Reagan's daily schedule and habits reveal a "less is more" approach to the presidency, noting his extremely moderate lifestyle - unusual for a man in his position, and that he paced himself in a very disciplined way, noting Reagan was incredibly organized and totally focused.²¹ Anderson notes that it was Reagan's well-regulated regimen and concentrated decision making that allowed him to stay healthy and get more done than most other modern presidents, while putting in fewer hours at the office.²²

Leadership authority James Strock writes that Reagan's personal traits were critical to his leadership and cites the critical traits as courage - consistently demonstrated throughout his life; authenticity - using his acting skills to communicate this and earn the trust of others; confidence - religious faith undergirded this and Reagan's characteristic optimism; empathy - honed from his work as an actor, allowing him to communicate effectively by focusing on his audience; discipline - including focus on his

audience and concentration on the task at hand; perseverance and constancy; humility; and distance - an unusual combination of approachability and distance allowed Reagan to maintain a strong sense of perspective on his work while retaining his uniquely self-contained personality.²³ White House Correspondent and Historian, Frank Van Der Linden writes of Reagan's essence in his 1981 biography, "This is the essence of the real Reagan...he knows who he is; he knows precisely what he believes; he knows where he wants to take the country."²⁴

"KNOW" DISPOSITION COMPETENCIES

Conceptual Competencies

The troubles we faced, he said, resulted from mistaken government policies, not from any decree of fate or some 'malaise' among the American people. The country and its basic values, he believed, were as sound as ever. If our nation adopted proper policies, he concluded, we could reverse the record of decline in both domestic and foreign affairs.²⁵

Edwin Meese III

Reagan himself defined the challenge of statesmanship in this way: "To have the vision to dream of a better, safer world, and the courage, persistence and patience to turn that dream into a reality."²⁶ From foreign policy initiatives like the Reagan Doctrine to defense initiatives like the Strategic Defense Initiative, to numerous economic and domestic policies such as across the board tax cuts and major tax, welfare, and regulatory reform, Reagan worked hard to conceptualize and implement his beliefs. Caspar Weinberger writes that Reagan produced some extremely creative and imaginative proposals, including plans to secure a balanced budget in California and the Strategic Defense Initiative and believes Reagan "never feared to challenge the conventional wisdom and that is one of the reasons why he was so successful in changing the political agenda of California and then the nation."²⁷

Critics viewed Reagan's conservative ideas as outside the mainstream of prevailing intellectual thought and representing a challenge to their worldview.²⁸ The liberal intellectuals and elites knew many of Reagan's ideas were wrong or simply dumb. How could the Soviet Empire ever collapse or the West actually win the cold war? How could the Strategic Defense Initiative actually work? How could we ever balance the budget with tax cuts and increased defense spending? How could tax cuts bring about increased government revenues? Even many conservatives worried that Reagan lacked the intellectual temperament and administrative skills to give new direction to the country.²⁹ Conservatives liked Reagan personally, but many feared, as Lou Cannon suggests in describing his performance in the 1980 campaign, that Reagan running loose led to a propensity for unverifiable anecdotes and a willingness to say whatever came into his head.³⁰ Reagan's campaign gaffes were numerous, particularly during the 1980 campaign, and included unintentional statements about creationism, Taiwan, and the origins of the Ku Klux Klan.³¹

While many critics and journalists considered him an intellectual lightweight who napped on the job, many of his former opponents now grant him a grudging respect for his accomplishments, including journalist Sam Donaldson and former socialist French President Francois Mitterand.³² Even Senator Edward Kennedy, who opposed virtually every Reagan initiative during the 1980s, told a Yale audience in March 1989, "Whether we agree with him or not, Ronald Reagan was an effective President. He stood for a set of ideas... he meant them, and he wrote most of them not only into public law but into the national consciousness."³³

Reagan was a true visionary who did not let prevailing attitudes impair his quest for a freer, safer, and more prosperous better America, or as he called it, a "shining city on a hill." James Strock writes that Reagan saw his most important leadership role as crafting a compelling vision.³⁴ Strock calls Reagan faithful to this vision and writes that Reagan "ultimately, through a rare combination of decisive action and superior communication skills, came to personify his vision, propelling it with unmatched force."³⁵

Technical Competencies

He had a good general knowledge of government and far more important, a philosophy that informed, or philosophical rudder that guided him in deciding the vast number of issues, large and small that came before him. He read voluminously and quickly; he knew what he wanted to accomplish and he moved steadily and skillfully to reach his goals... he was easy to brief and his memory was phenomenal.³⁶

Caspar Weinberger

In spite of many admirers like his former Secretary of Defense, a major critique of Reagan is that he was too uninterested and detached from the details of government to function effectively.³⁷ Some reporters called Reagan remote and disengaged, while one columnist noted his seven minute attention span, others said he napped at cabinet meetings.³⁸ His aide Martin Anderson drew attention to Reagan's passive management style, calling it an eccentricity, saying he made decisions like an ancient king or Turkish Pasha, passively letting his subjects serve him by waiting until important things were brought to him and only then acting decisively.³⁹ This view of Reagan's disengagement was reinforced when he announced that he had Alzheimer's disease in November 1994.⁴⁰ However, the view that the disease affected Reagan while in office is without merit, since Reagan was frequently examined by doctors during his presidency and there were no traces of mental decline apart from natural aging.⁴¹

While Alzheimer's did not affect Reagan until years after his presidency, his lack of interest in the details of government and his administration were apparent in numerous examples. During the Transition period, Jimmy Carter relates incidents of relaying quite complex information about secret agreements and

other matters to Reagan, who refused to take notes and Reagan didn't even recognize his own Secretary of Housing at a reception for big city mayors, addressing him as "Mr. Mayor."⁴² Nothing illustrates Reagan's detached style and lack of interest in government details better than the Iran-contra affair, which seems to have been transacted without Reagan's knowledge or approval.⁴³ Reagan's aging and hearing problems probably contributed and magnified his apparent disengagement and lack of interest in the many details of government.

Others believe Reagan exercised superb technical skills, in spite of the critics and opponents who sought to portray him as a aging simpleton and intellectual lightweight who was too detached from the daily operations of government to have a lasting impact.⁴⁴ Research scholar and former Reagan White House Staffer Dinesh D'Souza admits this stereotype contains an element of truth, but misses the broader point that Reagan made the critical choices that led to America's victory in the Cold War and restored the economy after a long period of stagflation and indefinable "malaise."⁴⁵ This included Reagan's massive military buildup to counter the Soviet threat and sharp across the board tax cuts to stimulate economic growth, while also supporting restrictive monetary policies as a necessary strategy to curb double-digit inflation.⁴⁶

These economic policies brought about a terrible recession as the Federal Reserve's tight money policy took hold. But Reagan stood the course, refusing to support short-term solutions such as unproductive public works projects or ill-defined industrial policy schemes of central planning and economic direction.⁴⁷ Inflation was wrung out of the economy and by late 1982 the economy turned around as Reagan's phased tax cuts began to take effect, creating nearly 20 million new jobs between 1983 and 1989 and resulting in a 15 year economic boom, interrupted only by a mild recession in 1990-91, that continues today.⁴⁸ While the New York Times dubbed his policies 'Reaganomics' and observed that "the stench of failure hangs over Ronald Reagan's White House" the President later remarked that "the best sign that our economic program is working is that they don't call it Reaganomics anymore."⁴⁹

Far from being detached, White House Counselor and later Attorney General Edwin Meese III describes Reagan's management style as a conceptual big picture strategy, where Reagan did not immerse himself in details, but had true vision of what he wanted to accomplish, and how the various components of his policy fit together.⁵⁰ As Meese relates, once Reagan established the goal, he expected others to develop the detailed options to achieve it.⁵¹ Reagan would decide on the plan and leave its implementation to those responsible for carrying it out and hire the best people he could find, give them responsibility, and then turn them loose to act.⁵²

As Defense Advisor Lt.General Daniel Graham, USA (Ret.) indicated "The President is able to sense 'What am I going to need to know?' and asks for the details."⁵³ As his Secretary of Defense and close confidant Caspar Weinberger related, "The various myths about President Reagan and his detached unengaged style, his lack of knowledge or direction - and those similar criticisms spawned mainly by people who did not know him and who had not worked with him, differ grossly from the facts as I have long known them."⁵⁴

Leadership authority James Strock views Reagan as a technically competent and outstanding visionary leader.⁵⁵ Besides his compelling vision, Strock believes the critical elements of Reagan's leadership approach were his decisiveness, his negotiating style, his use of an indirect approach when direct action was foreclosed, his ability to make positive use of failure, and his unerring sense of timing.⁵⁶ In his presidential leadership, Reagan refused to get bogged down in the day to day running of government, instead focusing on the "big picture" important tasks at hand, important decisions, and communicating and persuading others to implement his vision for America.

Interpersonal Competencies

His success at press conferences and on television and political platforms did not depend on memory alone, but on his marvelous ability to communicate and identify with his audiences. He has a genuine and deep interest in people, and he is a warm, decent and exceedingly friendly man, with whom it is a delight to work.⁵⁷

Caspar Weinberger

Reagan's vision and policy leadership were important skills for this strategic leader, but they would have been incomplete without his extraordinary ability to communicate and influence others. Indeed, Reagan largely saw the role of the President as a 'bully pulpit' for his vision and ideas to change America and the world for the better.⁵⁸ In describing this role, Reagan viewed his office as an opportunity for mobilizing public sentiment behind worthwhile causes and noted this power should be used properly and for the right causes.⁵⁹

A major criticism of elites related to this presidential role is Reagan's "unworthy" background as an actor.⁶⁰ According to critics, Reagan could not distinguish between the fictional world of moviemaking and the real world of public policy.⁶¹ Lou Cannon emphasizes this point in his book on the Reagan Presidency, subtitled it "the role of a lifetime." Cannon writes that in campaigning and even governing, Reagan appeared to be an actor, or acting politician, who spent the best years of his life in Hollywood.⁶² Many pundits argue that Reagan was as "acting president" who converted politics into show business, using his acting skills to persuade people and mesmerize the voters, distracting them from important issues.⁶³ In Washington Post Journalist Haynes Johnson's view, Reagan led us to "sleepwalk through

history." ⁶⁴ Critics also complained of Reagan's knack for deflecting criticism, calling him the Teflon President. ⁶⁵

Reagan's admirers note his exceptional communications and interpersonal skills were developed over his lifetime of stage and leadership roles, including his experiences as a sportscaster, leading actor, tenure as President of The Screen Actors Guild, as a national conservative spokesman, and as a successful Governor of California for eight years. His adversaries and negotiating opponents from Gorbachev to Sam Donaldson have acknowledged these interpersonal skills. Reagan's abilities included an awesome personal ability to communicate and relate to people on their level to inform and persuade, often through a personally friendly approach and positive, optimistic message. Caspar Weinberger relates this story about the sheer power of the President's presence:

The President's smile has always seemed to me to have the effect not only of physically lighting the entire room, but even of changing for the better the atmosphere, the discussion, the debate, or whatever else is happening at the moment of the President's entrance upon the scene. Over the years, when seeing him walk onto a stage, take the rostrum at a national convention, walk into a Cabinet meeting or enter a room filled with his legislative opponents, I have never failed to see that magic at work. ⁶⁶

Caspar Weinberger

Reagan believed in personal diplomacy and developed quite a relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev during their summits and meetings. ⁶⁷ In negotiating with Reagan, Gorbachev discovered the President to be an awesome negotiator, proposing and holding firm until the Soviets accepted the zero option INF treaty, which eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons for the first time in history. ⁶⁸ In a series of summits over several years, Gorbachev had sought the SDI program in return for any Soviet reductions, but Reagan held firm, insisting SDI was not on the table. ⁶⁹ In spite of their differences, Gorbachev developed a high regard for Reagan, crediting him for improvements in U.S.- Soviet relations after Reagan left office and telling George Schultz that it was "Reagan who was there when times were really tough." ⁷⁰

Unlike previous U.S. and Western leaders, Reagan took the offensive against communism and sought to rollback communism and Soviet influence through the Reagan doctrine of assistance to anti-Communist freedom fighters. Indeed, President Reagan challenged the world to assign communism to "the ash-heap of history" and directly challenged the Soviet leaders with a famous address at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin by proclaiming: "Mr. Gorbachev tear down this wall!" ⁷¹ Two years later, the wall came down, bringing about the collapse of communist regimes in East Europe and eventually the Soviet Union, thus ending the Cold War.

Henry Kissinger gives Reagan the credit for this great victory noting, "While it was Bush who presided over the final disintegration of the Soviet Empire, it was Ronald Reagan's presidency that marked the turning point."⁷² Lou Cannon also gives credit to Reagan, citing his personal relationship and influence with Gorbachev as perhaps Reagan's greatest contribution as President.⁷³ Dinesh D'Souza is more eloquent, saying what many historians and political scientists are now coming to realize: "In the cold war, Reagan turned out to be our Churchill; it was his vision and leadership that led us to victory."⁷⁴

"DO" ACTION COMPETENCIES

The truth is, Reagan was a very strong leader; more, the strength of his leadership was the vital factor that brought about historic change in Washington and in the world, the ramifications of which continue into the 1990s. A man of lesser conviction and tenacity would have made little headway against the seemingly intractable problems that confronted the nation in 1980, the power of the special interests and the inertia of the huge establishment entrenched in Washington.⁷⁵

Edwin Meese

As chief executive, Ronald Reagan was a visionary and man of action. A forceful strategic leader, Reagan concentrated on leading and molding policy to his compelling vision.⁷⁶ As presidential aide Dinesh D' Souza relates, "Reagan kept his eye on the big picture, seeking to realize his major objectives," and "refused to get bogged down in the day-to-day running of the government."⁷⁷ D' Souza notes Reagan understood that the federal government is such a gargantuan enterprise that if you immerse yourself in its minutiae, you will soon be buried in it, but on issues Reagan cared about, such as arms control and tax policy, he insisted on personally reviewing the fine print.⁷⁸ Yet on most issues, D'Souza relates, Reagan formulated a broad agenda and relied on competent subordinates to carry it out and points out Reagan summarized his management philosophy in an interview with *Fortune*: "You surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere."⁷⁹

Ed Meese writes of Reagan's management style:

Like most successful executives, President Reagan combined both toughness and flexibility...He kept his eye on the main objective at all times- astonishing so, considering the number and complexity of issues involved - and seldom could be deflected from his course. But in determining how to reach his goal, he was willing to listen to different points of view, and to try different methods if the original approach didn't work.⁸⁰

Meese credits Reagan's "firm and often courageous leadership" for successes in reducing taxes, fighting inflation, the defense buildup, handling the air traffic controllers strike, the INF deployment and subsequent treaty, the Grenada operation, the Reykjavik Arms Summit and subsequent agreements, and SDI.⁸¹ Long time Reagan aide Martin Anderson cited Reagan's establishment of strategic priorities as key to his success and indicated Reagan's priorities as national security, number one and economic policy, number two.⁸² Everything else belonged to a different priority and was subordinated to national defense

and economic policy, at least during the early years of his administration.⁸³ As Reagan told Anderson during the 1980 campaign, "If we don't do something about defense and the economy we won't be able to deal with the other problems, but if we can restore the strength of the military and get the economy healthy then everything else will become possible."⁸⁴

Anderson cites Reagan's main management techniques as establish strategic priorities, change tactical priorities, delegation of authority, and negotiation from strength.⁸⁵ Anderson points out Reagan was different from most people in that he actually set priorities: national security was number one and economic policy number two with everything else a lower priority, particularly during the early years of his administration.⁸⁶ On change tactical priorities, Anderson notes while Reagan stubbornly held to his major long range goals, he was as agile and deceptive as a pro football halfback in making his way to those goals and explored every possible means to achieve his ends.⁸⁷ On delegation of authority, Anderson relates Reagan delegated easily, effortlessly and once he delegated authority, he did not interfere as long as that person acted reasonably.⁸⁸

On Reagan's negotiation methods, Anderson notes President Reagan loved to negotiate, a love that was carried over from his days as President of the Screen Actors Guild in Hollywood.⁸⁹ Anderson notes Reagan always asked for more than he was either expecting to get or willing to accept and the fact that he wanted what he demanded, and felt secure and right in those demands, simply added to his relative power in the negotiations.⁹⁰ As Reagan himself once put it "I've never understood people who want me to hang in there for a hundred percent or nothing. Why not take seventy percent or eighty percent, and then come back another day for the other twenty or thirty percent."⁹¹ In 1984, Newsweek columnist Meg Greenfield noted that Reagan makes decisions like a labor negotiator for a workers' union and summed up his negotiating style as: "...the long waiting out of the adversary, the immobility meanwhile, the refusal to give anything until the last moment, the willingness - nonetheless - finally to yield to superior pressure or force or particular circumstance on almost everything, but only with something to show in return and only if the final deal can be interpreted as furthering the original Reagan objective."⁹²

Other attributes noted by Anderson that contributed to Reagan's success included his excellent personal nature and outward behavior toward others, along with his ability to be decisive and make good decisions.⁹³

This is not to say that Reagan was without weakness. His ability to delegate and rely on others to implement his policies sometimes led to difficulties in Washington as it did for many Presidents. In Reagan's case, 'true believer' conservatives vs. moderate 'pragmatists' constantly vied for his attention

and favor for their differing agendas. Yet Reagan seemed to manage the government quite well, in spite of his perceived detached operating style. However, Reagan himself blames the Iran-Contra Affair, his only major foreign policy failure, on his detached operating style: "The way I work is to identify the problem, find the right individuals to do the job, and then let them go to it. I've found this invariably brings out the best in people. They seem to rise to their full capability, and in the long run you get more done...When it came to managing the NSC staff, let's face it, my style didn't match its previous track record."⁹⁴

Reagan admitted to know and approve of the strategic opening and arms sales to Iran, but denied it was a direct arms for hostages swap and there is no evidence he ever knew of the diversion of funds to the Contras.⁹⁵ In his zeal to alleviate their suffering and free the hostages, Reagan overruled both his Secretary of State and Defense, in favor of this covert operation hatched by CIA Director Bill Casey and National Security Council (NSC) Staffer Oliver North.⁹⁶ After much embarrassment and major investigations, the American people forgave Reagan for the blunder and a great foreign policy success, the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, came shortly thereafter.⁹⁷

The elite critique of Reagan's record is harsh. Many critics and intellectuals still refuse to give Reagan credit for ending the cold war, in spite of his INF Treaty and achievements with Gorbachev.⁹⁸ In this view, the Soviet Union collapsed for internal reasons and it is Gorbachev, not Reagan, who deserves the credit, as Time magazine recognized in 1990, when it named Gorbachev "Man of the Decade."⁹⁹ Reagan is seen as a passive witness to these events, once again proving an uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time.¹⁰⁰ Reagan is blamed for the awful deficits of the 1980s, in this view caused by cutting taxes and increasing defense spending, creating what his budget director David Stockman called "two hundred billion dollar deficits as far as the eye could see."¹⁰¹ While the elites acknowledge the prosperity of the 1980s, they insist all that economic prosperity was purchased on credit.¹⁰² Haynes Johnson of the Washington Post writes, "It was an age of illusion, when America lived on borrowed time" and social critics blamed Reagan for the "decade of greed."¹⁰³

Reagan's chief domestic policy failure was his inability to control federal spending and balance the federal budget. The President, however, was able to achieve some relatively minor domestic spending reductions enacted by Congress (he proposed far more) and some reductions in planned defense spending due largely to reductions in inflation and some Congressional cuts.¹⁰⁴ Due to the initial recession and Reagan's defense buildup and tax cuts, deficits ballooned, totaling over 1.5 trillion from 1981 to 1989.¹⁰⁵ However, as Dinesh D'Souza points out, the deficits of the Reagan years corresponded almost exactly with the amount invested by the Reagan Administration in fighting the Cold War.¹⁰⁶ Since America won that war, future generations are saving around \$100 billion a year in real terms than in the

height of the cold war.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, "the man blamed for the deficits of the 1980s is the same person responsible for the surpluses today..."¹⁰⁸ Reagan's final vindication on this issue came in 1999, with the disappearance of the deficit and projected budget surpluses. As Edwin Meese points out, Reagan accomplished his objectives of restoring the economy, while advancing U.S. security and freedom:

He pushed through an economic program that spurred economic growth and advanced a national security policy that turned the Cold War tables on the Soviets...including the collapse of the Communist regimes of Europe and the idea of Marxism itself... In combination, Reagan's domestic and foreign policies sparked a worldwide revival of the cause of freedom. Other nations sought to adopt it to their own use. Reagan's program of lower taxes, reduced inflation, and less government intervention became a worldwide recipe for growth.¹⁰⁹

Even Sam Donaldson, a persistent Reagan critic, agrees with this assessment, admitting in an interview that he had been forced to reconsider the merits of the man:

We thought he was a lightweight, and maybe he didn't know everything, but he was a tenacious fellow who knew what he wanted. He reminds me of the Gila monster: when it grabs you, you can't get away. He came to Washington to change the world for the better, and for the most part, he did. I didn't think I would say this, but I miss him. There is no one like him on the scene today.¹¹⁰

Not even an assassin's bullet only two months after his inauguration could stop Reagan from his mission nor damper his positive demeanor. His personal courage was demonstrated in this incident that nearly took his life only two months into his Presidency. "Honey, I forgot to duck" he remarked to his wife and joked to doctors "I hope you are all Republicans" as he was wheeled into surgery to remove the bullet that nearly killed him.¹¹¹ In spite of his advanced age (70) and the seriousness of his wounds, he made a remarkable recovery and was welcomed as a hero when he addressed Congress a month later.

Ronald Reagan became a heroic figure who laid the foundation to win the Cold War, promoted freedom abroad, restored prosperity at home and renewed the American spirit. Presidential researcher Jeffrey Bell highlights the profound difference Reagan made as a strategic leader, placing his achievements above those of any other 20th Century President: "When he took office, Reagan faced a severe economic crisis, an ominous trend in foreign policy, and a decline in national morale. When he left office, the economic crisis was over, foreign policy was on the verge of a historic breakthrough, and national morale was restored."¹¹²

Many academic historians and political scientists are now recognizing Reagan's positive impact and favorable assessments of Reagan have made their way into serious books by top presidential scholars.¹¹³ David McCullough relates that, "Reagan was so often underestimated...As no President since FDR, he demonstrated the power of fixed objectives in combination with extraordinary charm."¹¹⁴

Arthur Schlesinger writes, "Reagan is the triumph of a man who earnestly believed in something...It was his time. I don't think it was a triumph of packaging; it was a triumph of commitment...I think Reagan is proof of the power of conviction politics."¹¹⁵ His controversial biographer Edmund Morris has gone on record saying Reagan was a "great man and great president."¹¹⁶ Truman biographer Alonzo Hamby believes Reagan "revived a sick economy, established a policy course that won the cold war, and uplifted a depressed national spirit with his rhetoric."¹¹⁷

Even Mikhail Gorbachev appreciated Reagan's relationship and support, never endorsing the condescending view of Reagan held by Western critics.¹¹⁸ In an assessment of Reagan, written in 1997, Gorbachev wrote:

Reagan was a man adhering to conservative values. But in real life, he was not dogmatic, but a person ready to compromise. Reagan's merit is this, that he responded to our first step together toward... real disarmament, and - very important - he did not retreat from this agreement and secured its ratification... I know that Reagan was criticized as having a superficial style, an unwillingness to analyze details. With a leader of such a large scale, several stylistic peculiarities are permissible. It did not prevent us from finding a common language.¹¹⁹

As James Strock writes, the most important parts of Reagan's leadership approach are timeless and applicable in virtually any setting and center around use of a compelling vision:¹²⁰

His articulation of and adherence to a compelling vision is the single most important element. His management practices succeed because they were built around accomplishing his vision. His communication skills enabled him ultimately to embody his vision. His personal characters traits combined to demonstrate to one and all that he put achievement of his vision above concern for himself...In the many languages spoken in our world...the word "Reagan" now means one thing: leadership.¹²¹

Today, Reagan's words continue to ring true and inspire while appealing to our noblest virtues, as shown in this passage from his last major public address, delivered in 1992: "And whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone, I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes, not your worst fears, to your confidence rather than your doubts ... May all of you as Americans never forget your heroic origins, never fail to seek divine guidance, and never lose your natural, God-given optimism."¹²²

CONCLUSION

In spite of many critics who belittled his style and his Presidency, Ronald Reagan is increasingly viewed as a heroic President who fulfilled his vision of restoring peace and prosperity at home and freedom abroad. In this sense, he is one of the most influential strategic leaders of our times and we can learn much by studying the lessons of his Presidency and his life.

Reagan's competency as a strategic leader revolved around his leadership competencies of a compelling vision, policy direction and leadership, and an extraordinary ability to communicate his vision, influence and persuade. These skills can serve as a general guide and model for other strategic leaders who are skillful enough to develop and use them.

Leaders and managers of all types will also benefit from studying and using the related Reagan management techniques identified by Martin Anderson: establish strategic priorities, change tactical priorities, delegation of authority, and negotiation from strength.¹²³ In sum, strategic and military leaders will benefit from the study and use of Reagan's leadership skills as a model, a leadership approach that has been called "timeless and applicable in virtually any setting," for throughout the world, the word "Reagan" now means leadership.¹²⁴

word count = 6225

ENDNOTES

¹ James M. Strock, Reagan on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Great Communicator (Rocklin, CA: Prima 1998), vii.

² Ibid.

³ Strategic Leadership Primer (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, 1998), 4.

⁴ Ibid, 57-58.

⁵ Edwin Meese III, With Reagan: The Inside Story Washington D.C. (Regnery Gateway 1992), XIV-XV.

⁶ Casper Weinberger, Fighting For Peace (New York: Warner Books, 1991), 35.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ D'Souza, 35.

⁹ Strock, 23.

¹⁰ Ibid, 28.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

¹² Dinesh D'Souza, Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 39.

¹³ Ibid, 37.

¹⁴ D'Souza, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid, 14.

¹⁶ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁷ Lou Cannon, President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 35.

¹⁸ Meese, 14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²¹ D' Souza, 204-205.

²² Ibid, 205.

²³ Strock, 230-231.

²⁴ Frank Van Der Linden, The Real Reagan (New York: William Morrow, 1981), 27.

²⁵ Meese, XIV-XV.

²⁶ D'Souza, 228.

²⁷ Weinberger, 11-12.

²⁸ D'Souza, 18.

²⁹ Ibid, 22.

³⁰ Cannon, 68.

³¹ Ibid.

³² D'Souza, 228, 239.

³³ Ibid, 228.

³⁴ Strock, 34.

³⁵ Strock, 37.

³⁶ Weinberger, 11.

³⁷ D'Souza, 15.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Strock, 151.

⁴⁰ D'Souza, 15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 16.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Dinesh D'Souza, "Birthday Remembrance...and Appreciation", The Washington Times, Feb. 11, 1999, commentary page.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ "The Failing Presidency," The New York Times, Jan. 9, 1983, p. 1.
- ⁵⁰ Meese, 24-25
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Van Der Linden, 18.
- ⁵⁴ Weinberger, 11.
- ⁵⁵ Strock, 13.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid, ix.
- ⁵⁷ Weinberger, 11.
- ⁵⁸ William K. Muir, Jr., The Bully Pulpit: The Presidential Leadership of Ronald Reagan (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992), 7.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 17.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Cannon, 37.
- ⁶³ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 17.
- ⁶⁴ Haynes Johnson, Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years (New York: Norton, 1991).
- ⁶⁵ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 18.
- ⁶⁶ Weinberger, 10.
- ⁶⁷ Cannon, 790-791.
- ⁶⁸ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 188-191.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, 188-189.
- ⁷⁰ Cannon, 791.

⁷¹ Frederick J. Ryan, Ronald Reagan: The Wisdom and Humor of the Great Communicator (San Francisco: Collins, 1995), 33.

⁷² D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 196.

⁷³ Cannon, 791.

⁷⁴ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 197.

⁷⁵ Meese, 15.

⁷⁶ Strock, 13.

⁷⁷ D' Souza, Ronald Reagan, 242-243.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Meese, 20-21.

⁸¹ Ibid, 15-20.

⁸² Anderson, 283-284.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 283-284.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 284.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 285.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Meese, 15.

- ⁹⁵ D' Souza, Ronald Reagan, 246.
- ⁹⁶ Weinberger, 372.
- ⁹⁷ D' Souza, Ronald Reagan, 248.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid, 13-14.
- ⁹⁹ "Man of the Decade," Time, Jan.1, 1990.
- ¹⁰⁰ D'Souza, Ronald Reagan, 14.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid, 13.
- ¹⁰² Ibid.
- ¹⁰³ Johnson, 13.
- ¹⁰⁴ Weinberger, 67.
- ¹⁰⁵ D' Souza, The Washington Times.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁹ Meese, XV.
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- ¹¹² Jeffrey Bell, "Man of the Century," Human Events, Dec. 31, 1999, p. 1.
- ¹¹³ Paul Kengor, "Reagan Among the Professors," Policy Review, Dec. 1999 & Jan. 2000, p. 23.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid, 26.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid.
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¹²⁰ Strock, 233.

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¹²² Ryan, 206.

¹²³ Anderson, 283-284.

¹²⁴ Strock, 233-234.

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