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Reagan doctrine still influencing U.S. foreign policy / His reliance on ideas over force brought to bear during negotiations with Soviets

John Arquilla

For both good and ill, the 21st century world has been profoundly shaped by ideas advanced during the presidency of Ronald Reagan two decades ago -- so much so that the caricature of him as a simple, shoot-from-the-hip cowboy must give way to a far more complex portrait, that of a concept-driven man.

Reagan's basic beliefs were: 1) The world could be made less nuclear; 2) Tyrants are weak, especially when confronted by freedom-seeking people; and 3) Ideas are ultimately more powerful than military force.

From these principles flowed everything else he did, especially his drive for nuclear arms reduction, his strategy of constructive engagement that sought to reform rogue states, and his preference for waging wars of intellect rather than conducting costly, bloody conflicts with soldiers, tanks and planes.

Today, almost every aspect of American foreign policy and national security strategy bears his strong imprint. For example, the notion of helping people in other nations to free themselves -- what came to be called the Reagan Doctrine -- morphed into Bill Clinton's policy of "democratic enlargement" and is now manifested in George W. Bush's effort to win the war on terror by causing regime changes in various recalcitrant countries.

But Reagan's immediate successor, the elder George Bush, rushed matters with his call for a U.S.-led new world order. Clinton strayed from the Reagan Doctrine as well by trying to force the pace of global democratic development with punitive economic sanctions, imposing them on more than half the world's population during his years in office. The younger Bush made the mistake of relying far too much on military force to spread liberal government, and has reaped the whirlwind of war and insurgency.

What has been missing in all these administrations is the Reagan touch, whose hallmarks were the reliance on persuasion rather than coercion, and on constructive rather than destructive engagement. In Central Europe, East Asia and Latin America, where the Reagan strategy has been more consistently adhered to for the past 20 years, freedom has blossomed.

Problems remain, of course. Sometimes countries exercise their freedom to disagree with the United States, as in the case of Venezuela. But the very fact that such opposition can be legitimately manifested should be seen as healthy. It's far better for our democratic soul than situations in which liberty is repressed while terrorism and militancy are allowed to grow attractive, sometimes putting us in the awkward position of having to shore up authoritarian rule in the name of maintaining order in places such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Reagan's deft diplomacy was best displayed in his skillful summitry with Mikhail Gorbachev. Over just a few years, Reagan and Gorbachev replaced the decadeslong U.S.-Soviet antagonism with arms-reduction agreements and laid the foundation for a durable peace based on Russia's willing retreat from the edges of its tattered empire.

Sadly, each of the successors to the Reagan administration stumbled in dealings with Moscow. The elder Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, initially went so far as to speak out

against dissolution of the Soviet Union in his now-infamous "Chicken Kiev" speech. Clinton failed to keep up the momentum on nuclear arms control. And, most recently, Vice President Dick Cheney has gone out of his way to provoke a war of words with Russian President Vladimir Putin that threatens to revive the old rivalry.

Reagan's influence also continues to loom large in military affairs. When he came into office a quarter century ago, one of his principal goals was to restore the confidence and capabilities of the U.S. armed forces, which had been shattered in Vietnam. He did so with a number of initiatives. The centerpiece was to increase the defense budget generously. This was designed to ensure that U.S. forces could fight a protracted conventional war against the Soviets without having to rely on nuclear weapons to bail them out.

And although the Soviet Union winked out of existence 15 years ago, with the Red Army and Navy becoming shadows of their former selves, Reagan's blueprint has been slavishly followed by each of his successors. Indeed, the U.S. military has developed a kind of philosophy of entitlement during the past two decades, which resonates today to the ka-ching of defense spending in excess of \$1.25 billion per day; U.S. military expenditures exceed those of the rest of the world combined.

The worst part of this problem is that huge spending on arms ensures continued dependence on big-ticket conventional weapons -- aircraft carriers, main battle tanks, and advanced attack aircraft. These are neither needed for our survival nor are they effective against the threats now confronting us, or those likely to imperil us tomorrow.

Reagan's military legacy does have some bright spots, though, especially his support for the creation of the Special Operations Command. Formed 20 years ago -- against the wishes of senior Pentagon leadership -- the command is finally taking the lead in the war on terror.

Instead of allowing our special forces to be bogged down in Iraq, President Bush recently signed an executive order authorizing them to deploy in small teams to track down and eliminate al Qaeda cells around the world. We have Reagan to thank for helping to nurture these forces, which we need in order to have any hope of winning this conflict.

Without Reagan's steadfast support for a greatly enhanced commando capability a generation ago, we would now be in this "war to change all wars" with even less ability to come to grips with our wily, networked adversaries.

By now the ironies of Reagan's legacy are clear. While Reagan left us the best blueprints in the realm of statecraft, his successors have strayed furthest from what worked well for him.

On the other hand, while Reagan did less well overall in preparing the military for a new era of conflict, both the elder Bush and Clinton blindly followed the military-industrial policy approach he left for them. And his successors seriously neglected our special operations forces, an egregious error only beginning to be corrected by George W. Bush.

Clearly, it is time, as the football phrase goes, to "reverse field."

Instead of letting Reagan's imprint on foreign policy fade further, a dual passion for arms control and constructive engagement should be rekindled. And then, instead of simply continuing to rubber stamp the Reagan approach to big-ticket defense spending, current and

future presidents should focus more on his decision to nurture small, nimble special operations forces.

Given the proper care, these elite troops will be able to defeat dispersed cells of terrorists and help handle any threats from the balky, old-style militaries that remain among our potential adversaries -- all at a fraction of current costs.

If we take to heart the lessons of Reagan's legacy, there may still be just enough time left on the clock to win this one for the Gipper -- and for ourselves.