

RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

A Defining Statement of Modern Conservatism

By Mr. Rich Lowry

The greatest documents in American history never lose their ability to astonish. They deserve, and repay, careful study, and inevitably have contemporary resonances no matter how long ago they were written or uttered.

There's no doubt that Ronald Reagan's "A Time for Choosing" belongs in the top ranks of American speeches. It is among the most significant political speeches ever given by a non-officeholder and non-presidential candidate. It heralded the beginning of the political career of a man who would go on to be a successful two-term president, and is an extraordinarily powerful and cogent expression of a deeply held worldview.

The speech is a definitional statement of modern conservatism. Reagan's core arguments in the speech about the deleterious effects of taxes, deficit spending, and debt defined the Republican agenda for two generations.

He gave us phrases still quoted fondly by conservatives, including "the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they are ignorant, but that they know so much that isn't so," and "a government bureau is the nearest thing to eternal life we'll ever see on this Earth."

It is amazing how well much of it stands up, despite some anachronisms (for instance, the time devoted to agricultural policy), and it still speaks to top conservative concerns. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the speech in retrospect point to areas where conservatives should re-examine their assumptions or freshen up their agenda and appeal.

First, let's consider what holds up, indeed what could be—and is—routinely said by conservative politicians and opinion-makers now.

Reagan spelled out the pressure that our constitutional system was under at the time, for exactly the same reasons as today. He cited voices that maintained that "our traditional system of individual freedom is incapable of solving the complex problems of the 20th century," and noted a speech by the Arkansas Democrat, Senator William Fulbright, arguing "that the Constitution is outmoded." According to Reagan, Fulbright referred "to the president as our moral teacher and our leader, and he said he is hobbled in his task by the restrictions in power imposed on him by this antiquated document. He must be freed so that he can do for us what he knows is best."

The thoroughly technocratic progressive "explainer" website Vox wouldn't begin publication for another 50 years. But Reagan would have been familiar with all of its arguments about our

constitutional scheme supposedly being shamefully inefficient and resistant to large-scale change. These are arguments that define the progressive sensibility. Conservatives have to constantly make the case that the Constitution, as our foundational law, is the only source of government legitimacy; that its dispersal of power is central to the preservation of liberty; and that rather than being archaic, it guarantees rights that are of enduring relevance and importance.

Reagan also decried impending socialism. He cited Norman Thomas, the frequent socialist candidate for president, attacking Barry Goldwater on grounds that if the Arizona senator were elected president, "he would stop the advance of socialism in the United States."

Reagan, of course, agreed, saying of Goldwater : "I think that's exactly what he will do." He continued, "As a former Democrat, I can tell you Norman Thomas isn't the only man who has drawn this parallel to socialism with the present administration." He explained how "it doesn't require expropriation or confiscation of private property or business to impose socialism on a people. What does it mean whether you hold the deed or the title to your business or property if the government holds the power of life and death over that business or property?"

Today, Republicans have more occasion than ever before to warn of socialism. The label used to be rejected by everyone except fringe figures like Thomas. No more. Avowed socialist Bernie Sanders, the Vermont senator, seriously challenged for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016 and has an intense following among young people. Members of the so-called Squad, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib, the most attention-getting members of the freshmen class of House Democrats, are all socialists. Elizabeth Warren rejects the label, but embraces the agenda.

Medicare for All, the Green New Deal and free college for all are far more sweeping proposals for government aggrandizement than anything enacted in the Great Society era that had Reagan worried about the prospect of socialism.

It's still true, as Reagan noted in his speech, that government failures inevitably become the occasion for more government activism. In Reagan's words, "For three decades, we have sought to solve the problems of unemployment through government planning, and the more the plans fail, the more the planners plan." Today, government mis-incentives drive up costs in the areas of health care, housing, and higher education. Nonetheless, the Left argues that the answer is more regulation or a complete government take-over.

Reagan hit on the Left's obsession with inequality, which has become even more pronounced today: "We have so many people who can't see a fat man standing beside a thin one without coming to the conclusion that the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one."

He cultivated a populist, yet optimistic voice. He says the issue in the 1964 election is whether "we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves." This remains a core sentiment across the Right, encompassing conventional Reagan conservatives like Texas senator Ted Cruz and more Trump-oriented populists like Missouri senator Josh Hawley. It will remain a central priority as long as

government centralization proceeds apace, and as the bureaucracy continually absorbs the progressive attitudes of the elite.

Reagan demonstrates in his speech how, even if you reject populist policies, which typically involve more government activism, populism is still the argot of American politics. This is what newly minted Republicans like Abraham Lincoln realized back in mid-19th century. Lincoln had been a Whig all his life and had gotten beaten up by Jacksonian populists for supposedly being on the side of bankers and other well-heeled interests (Whigs were, indeed, in favor of financial capitalism). With the rise of slavery as the dominant issue in American life, Republicans flipped the script and made populist arguments against the plantation owners and “slavocracy” of the South, to great political effect.

Even as Reagan made an appeal to populist emotions, he kept his own rhetorical sights elevated. “A Time for Choosing” is a deeply ideological speech, yet Reagan doesn’t frame our choice as fundamentally between conservatism and liberalism, but between the past and the future, and between decline and progress.

“You and I are told increasingly that we have to choose between a left or right, but I would like to suggest that there is no such thing as a left or right,” he said, in a memorable riff. “There is only an up or down--up to a man's age-old dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order--or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism, and regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.”

This raises an important point. Reagan conservatives over the last 25 years have tended to couch their politics in explicitly Reaganite terms. They tout themselves as the heirs to Reagan or quote his lines as if from a catechism. They have often sounded as if they believe there’s little need to make the argument for conservatism in new, contemporary terms and that associating themselves with Reagan and his beliefs is enough to win the argument, certainly in Republican politics.

The 2016 presidential primary showed the limits of this approach, as Donald Trump, circumventing all the old clichés and tropes, found a new way to talk to Republican voters (for better or worse). But anyone familiar with the actual Reagan would realize that a calcified, overly ideological version of his politics ran counter to the appeal of Reagan himself, who, in the most important speech of his life to that point, spoke of our fundamental choice as up or down.

Reagan’s words about the Cold War are truly inspired and don’t so much foreshadow his rhetoric as president as make it clear that he had exactly the same beliefs set out in exactly the same terms for decades: “We are at war with the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind in his long climb from the swamp to the stars,” he said, “and it has been said if we lose that war, and in doing so lose this way of freedom of ours, history will record with the greatest astonishment that those who had the most to lose did the least to prevent its happening.”

It’s hard to improve on that sentiment. Of course, the Cold War is now history. But the broad approach to national security set out by Reagan is unimpeachable and should characterize any conservative foreign policy worthy of the name. He defends the term, “peace through strength,”

which readers and listeners might be surprised to learn came from Barry Goldwater first, given how closely it's now associated with Reagan. The basic idea wasn't new, stretching back to George Washington.

Reagan's opposition to the U.N., willingness to stick up for flawed allies arrayed against adversaries that are worse, and skepticism of foreign aid are still relevant and will continue to endure.

So, where does the "Time for Choosing" fall down?

The tax, spending, and debt issues so important to Reagan and to conservatives for decades have taken a backseat today—or at least deficit spending and debt have. President Trump has brought other issues to the fore, and pursued a broadly expansionary fiscal policy. It turns out that fiscal conservatives didn't have nearly the clout of social conservatives in the GOP coalition. But the traditional trio of fiscal issues will come back with a vengeance should, say, Elizabeth Warren get elected president. Shock at the ambition of her program of government centralization would bring a swift return of the GOP's small-government predilections, out of sheer partisanship if nothing else.

More problematic in "The Time for Choosing" is the argument—and dire tone—borrowed from Friedrich Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom," asserting that the growth of the state, as such, leads to tyranny, and the tipping point is imminent. "Our natural, inalienable rights," Reagan said, "are now considered to be a dispensation of government, and freedom has never been so fragile, so close to slipping from our grasp as it is at this moment."

This, too, has been standard Republican rhetoric for two generations. The question is whether it is true, or warranted.

The growth in the administrative state has led to a diminishment in self-government. The rise of jurisprudence untethered to the Constitution has done the same. Various regulations crimp individual choices in a way that once was unimaginable—say, if the wrong sort of tortoise shows up on your property—and government rules pile costs atop enterprise and industry that never existed before. The state can and does weigh in heavily against certain sectors of the economy, whether logging in the Northwest or coal-mining in West Virginia.

It is a symptom of our time, though, that even as the government has grown, so has personal liberty, sometimes in deeply unhealthy ways. We have more choices in family structure (or lack thereof), sexual expression, and consumption of entertainment, from the exalted to the low, including a vast amount and variety of pornography. There is less prescription against aberrant behavior, as can be seen in the streets of our major cities such as San Francisco to New York City. There's greater leeway to sell and smoke pot. We now enjoy the freedom even—in theory at least—to pick our own gender and have institutions of government afford every consideration to our choice.

One of the chief conservative victories over the last 30 years is excavating the true meaning of the Second Amendment, and vindicating the individual right to bear arms, another victory for

individual liberty. Indeed, the size of the federal government has grown at the same time conservatives have strengthened their hold on the Supreme Court, raising the prospect of an era of heightened government activism coinciding with a relatively rigorous originalism on the Court, a combination that Reagan wouldn't have foreseen.

The deeper current issue is that, rather than overweening government, it is arguably a toxic individualism—of people disconnected from marriage, church, and workplace, who sink into self-destructive behavior and despair—that is the chief suppressant of human flourishing.

Obviously, this doesn't enter into Reagan's speech because there was no way he could anticipate social trends 50 years in the future. But there's also a swath of American society that doesn't figure at all in the worldview espoused in "A Time for Choosing." It is dominated by the relationship between state and individual. It is this balance that, for Reagan, will determine whether we are rich or free, and the course of human history. Left out is the stratum in between state and individual, namely, civil society, that does so much to determine not necessarily whether we are rich or free, but whether we are happy.

The state of our civil society—family, church, neighborhood, volunteer organizations—was still in robust shape in mid-1960s, and remained so when Reagan was president in the 1980s. Now, it has degraded significantly, and how and whether it can be revitalized needs to be a leading question for conservatives.

In his recent book on Reagan, "The Working Class Republican: Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism," the acute political analyst Henry Olsen attempts to draw a distinction between Reagan and Goldwater on the basis of "A Time for Choosing." Olsen maintains that Reagan still bears the stamp of his erstwhile support of FDR and the New Deal, whereas Goldwater is an old-school, anti-government purist. There's a little something to this. Reagan underscores how he's a former Democrat and says he accepts Social Security, although he wants to add "voluntary features" to the program.

There's still no getting around that "A Time for Choosing" is essentially a libertarian speech. And yet, Reagan sounds themes that resonate beyond individual liberty and self-interest. Reagan's deep and abiding patriotism is unmistakable. In a stirring expression of American exceptionalism, he declared: "If we lose freedom here, there is no place to escape to. This is the last stand on Earth. And this idea that government is beholden to the people, that it has no other source of power except to sovereign people, is still the newest and most unique idea in all the long history of man's relation to man."

This truth entails obligation on the part of men, who, in Reagan's view, are more than a mere collection of economic numbers or even what is visible to us in this world. At the end of the speech, Reagan quotes Winston Churchill for the proposition that "the destiny of man is not measured by material computation. When great forces are on the move in the world, we learn we are spirits--not animals." And more: "There is something going on in time and space, and beyond time and space, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty."

When Reagan discusses the Cold War especially, his keen sense of national honor and his belief that a great cause deserves sacrifice comes through. As Reagan expresses it in his own words, “If nothing in life is worth dying for, when did this begin--just in the face of this enemy? Or should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery under the pharaohs? Should Christ have refused the cross? Should the patriots at Concord Bridge have thrown down their guns and refused to fire the shot heard 'round the world? The martyrs of history were not fools, and our honored dead who gave their lives to stop the advance of the Nazis didn't die in vain.”

In the closing words of the speech, he borrows from both FDR and Lincoln in a finale that soars and heralds his elevated statesmanship to come. “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on Earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.”

The fundamental lesson of “A Time for Choosing” is not that we need another Reagan in the sense of someone exactly replicating his policies and tropes. But we do need national politicians who, like Reagan, have a world-view that they have thoroughly absorbed and thought through, and seek the exalted goals of defending the American nation and liberty.