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## **“A Time for Choosing”: Reagan’s Conservative Clarion Call**

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It was one of Ronald Reagan’s most enduring speeches, a powerful indictment of big government policies and the deceptive lure of socialism. “A Time for Choosing” eloquently captured the essence of conservative thought. It also launched Reagan’s national political career and foretold the battles he would fight two decades later as president of the United States.

Reagan gave what is now commonly called “The Speech” in 1964, and his words proved prescient. If anything, they are more apt, more stirring, and more necessary to hear today than they were over a half-century ago. He expressed tremendous concern that the government was taking an untenable amount of the country’s income, that it was spending millions more than it took in each day, and that it was transforming America into a welfare state that would trap the poor in poverty rather than deliver them out of it.

Ultimately, he was concerned that many Americans saw “more government” as the solution to their problems, even though history had already shown by 1964 that government actually *was* the problem.

The fundamental question Reagan posed to the national television audience was this: Would the American people choose to be governed by leaders who believed that the free enterprise system, constitutionally limited government, and a strong national defense would allow our country to grow and prosper in peace? Who believed that a rising economy would lift all boats? Or would they choose leaders who promised more of the socialistic nanny state that had already been proven a failure in the U.S. and abroad? A state where government grew bigger, more powerful, and more expensive – and eroded our freedoms in the process – but never solved the problems that it grew to solve?

Perhaps the biggest difference in the political environment of 1964 and that of today is that, back then, the statists who promoted bigger government steered clear of the socialist label in describing their ideology. Not so true today, where many statists actually embrace it. Sen. Bernie Sanders and rising star Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez openly call themselves socialists. Many others in Congress share their enthusiasm for socialist policies, if not the label.

Polls conducted in 2019 even show a growing level of support for “socialism” among Americans – with some polls showing that 35 to 40 percent of the public thinks it’s a positive thing. This is due in large part to politicians who sell big government solutions with the lie that everyone gets what they want at no cost. The only people they say will pay are the super-rich, who only got

rich by making money off the backs of others. This Marxist class-warfare rhetoric of a century ago is still in use today.

Back to 1964. Reagan had been a life-long Democrat and a supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies. But in this speech, given on behalf of Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater as he was about to face President Lyndon Johnson in that year's elections, Reagan explained why he changed his loyalty – and his politics.

Months earlier, Johnson had introduced his “Great Society” proposal, which would create new welfare programs, expand food stamps, give birth to Medicaid and Medicare, get the federal government involved in local education, fund the arts, and create public television, to name some of the biggest programs.

When Johnson told the American people that they must accept a “greater government activity in the affairs of the people,” Ronald Reagan had had enough.

Reagan's speech was a persuasive enumeration of the many failures of the American experiment in big government that had started with President Woodrow Wilson and took off with FDR. He laid out the case why – after so many failures – Americans should reject the path toward this “greater government activity” that Johnson was trying to convince them to accept.

Reagan spoke about how all the government programs to eradicate poverty hadn't solved much of anything: “Well, now, if government planning and welfare had the answer and they've had almost 30 years of it, shouldn't we expect government to almost read the score to us once in a while? Shouldn't they be telling us about the decline each year in the number of people needing help? The reduction in the need for public housing?” He added, “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.”

Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, part of his Great Society, ended up being an utter failure. And so did most subsequent welfare programs. What they *were* successful at doing was creating a reliance on government assistance for millions of Americans. They also created generational poverty, as many children who grew up in households supported by the government eventually became parents themselves and applied the lessons they had learned from their fathers and mothers.

This kind of failure does not come cheap. By the 50th anniversary of “The Speech” in 2014, taxpayers had spent more than \$22 trillion on federal assistance programs for the poor, yet the poverty rate was about the same as it was when the War on Poverty began (it fluctuates year-to-year at around 12 to 15 percent of the population). The War had taken a horrible toll on its unfortunate “beneficiaries,” and on the American taxpayers as well.

In recent years, the U.S. has spent about a trillion dollars a year on federal welfare programs. And about 40 million or so Americans are considered to be in poverty. If we had divided up that \$1 trillion among those 40 million people, we could have given each person about \$25,000 a

year. That's \$100,000 a year for a family of four. It would have been more efficient if we had just written them a check!

But writing them a check would have been no solution either. As welfare benefits grew over time, they increasingly served as a substitute for a working father and husband. More men started to shirk their responsibilities, leaving more and more women as heads of single-parent households. Too often the primary breadwinner for these families became the taxpayer rather than the parents.

The decline of marriage, especially in low-income households, led to even more dependence on welfare programs. In 1963, six percent of American children were born out of wedlock. In 2016, that number was 40 percent. And the cycle of poverty too often becomes self-perpetuating: research shows that children raised in single-parent homes are 50 percent more likely to be poor as adults.

Then, as now, statisticians would rarely admit these failures. Instead, they would create yet another government program they said would solve the problem. Of course, those programs never did.

Even as Johnson was pushing to create two new massive entitlement programs—Medicaid and Medicare—Reagan suggested how we should instead learn from the failings of Social Security, the first massive entitlement program. “And they said Social Security dues are a tax for the general use of the government, and the government has used that tax,” Reagan observed. “There is no fund, because Robert Byers, the actuarial head, appeared before a congressional committee and admitted that Social Security as of this moment is \$298 billion in the hole.”

Today, Social Security's own trustees have warned that, based on current projections, its trust funds will be depleted by 2034. When that happens, Social Security payouts will automatically be cut to track with the actual revenues the program receives (from payroll taxes from current workers, and so forth). Since there will be fewer workers paying taxes into the system than there will be retirees and others taking money out, payments to recipients will need to be cut, regardless of what was promised to them. Current projections show that when the trust funds are depleted, Social Security will be able to pay out only 79 percent of what recipients were promised.

As Reagan was talking about these many failures of government and proposing a better course, he lamented how, rather than having honest debates about the merits of these policies, many on the Left preferred to hurl personal attacks against conservatives who questioned their effectiveness: “Yet anytime you and I question the schemes of the do-gooders, we are denounced as being against their humanitarian goals.”

The same is true today. Conservatives who criticize welfare programs that create generational poverty and permanent dependency on government are regularly vilified by leftist politicians and the media as people who “hate the poor.” When they oppose the government's takeover of health care and one-sixth of the economy—and the resulting loss of personal liberty, skyrocketing costs, and financial instability—they are accused of “not wanting the poor to have health care.” And when conservatives want to incentivize and help people save for their own retirement rather

than give them false hope that they can rely on Social Security, leftists accuse them of “hating the elderly.”

The fact is, conservatives have consistently promoted policy solutions that raise all boats – from individual and business tax cuts, to cutting onerous regulations that burden more than they benefit, to getting government out of health care and the free market back in. Policies like these have paved the way for a growing economy, massive job creation, increased wages for workers, and more affordable health care for families.

Reagan pointed out that all of the new programs Johnson and his allies were proposing came at a huge cost to average American families. Despite the fact that Washington was raking in unprecedented amounts of money from taxpayers, it never seemed to be enough – the government was still regularly spending well in excess of what it received: “Today, 37 cents of every dollar earned in this country is the tax collector’s share, and yet our government continues to spend \$17 million a day more than the government takes in. We haven’t balanced our budget 28 out of the last 34 years. We have raised our debt limit three times in the last 12 months, and now our national debt is one and a half times bigger than all the combined debts of all the nations in the world.”

Washington’s poor fiscal practices haven’t improved in the over five decades since. In fact, they have gotten worse. In 2019, the federal government spends \$2.7 billion a day more than it takes in, and the national debt has grown to \$22 trillion.

That \$22 trillion comes to more than \$65,000 for every man, woman, and child in America. Like any other bill, eventually it has got to be paid, and our children and grandchildren will be the ones who end up paying for it.

In his speech, Reagan also warned about America not only being destroyed from within, but also from without. He was concerned with how much politicians wanted to appease our enemies, which he rightly said only made them more determined, not more willing to come to the negotiating table. He said that statist “have a utopian solution of peace without victory. They call their policy ‘accommodation.’ And they say if we only avoid any direct confrontation with the enemy, he will forget his evil ways and learn to love us. All who oppose them are indicted as warmongers.”

Today, things haven’t changed much. We have heard the Left’s desire for appeasement toward unstable regimes that openly call for the destruction of America. One example is Iran, the world’s largest state sponsor of terrorism. Iran has terrorist funding networks and operational cells working around the world.

The Obama administration adopted an appeasement approach toward Tehran, which led to the U.S. limiting its alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other allies in the region so as not to appear aggressive toward the Islamist regime. The administration’s approach also led to the much-praised (by the Left) 2015 nuclear arms deal that lifted sanctions on Iran, allowing hundreds of billions of dollars to flow back into the country. In return, Iran has not softened its anti-American rhetoric, its provocative behavior, or its destabilizing foreign policy one whit. It did, however, use some of that money to fund more terrorism.

Reagan was a firm believer in “peace through strength” – maintaining a robust military that would make our enemies think twice about engaging us. The wisdom of that approach was confirmed with the success of his strategy to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It is not by happenstance that Reagan devoted so much of “A Time for Choosing” to urge Americans to resist the lure of socialism coming from their own political leaders. He painted a dire picture of what would happen if we blindly accepted their false promises and followed them down the path of a bigger, more intrusive state: “This is the issue of this election. 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.” He continued, “A government can’t control the economy without controlling people. And [the Founding Fathers knew] when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose.”

Fast forward to 2019 and the Green New Deal, the proposal from several congressional progressives for a massive government takeover of our lives and our economy on a scale larger than even the Great Society and the original New Deal that Reagan had criticized in 1964.

The Green New Deal is being packaged by statists as the only way to ensure that climate change doesn’t destroy the entire world in the next 12 years.

First, to put some context on this apocalyptic alarmism, according to any number of scientists, politicians, and the media, the world has been going to end since at least the 1970s.

Back in the 1970s, the media was warning of Armageddon approaching in the form of impending “global cooling” or an “imminent ice age.” Of course, that never happened.

Then in the 1980s, we were told “global warming” was the new threat. By some accounts, New York City should have been under five feet of water a dozen years ago.

When years went by and global temperatures hadn’t gone up as dramatically as scientists had predicted, the term “global warming” was revised to “climate change,” so that any change in temperature – up or down – could be seen as some type of proof that we had to reorder the entire economy of the world to prevent global catastrophe.

The outline of the Green New Deal was released in February 2019. Among its far-ranging proposals are calls to eliminate gas-powered cars and replace them with electric vehicles; to end beef consumption and rid the world of methane-producing cows; and to ground all airplanes, replacing them with high-speed rail (while neglecting to explain how Americans are supposed to get back and forth to Hawaii or to other continents).

Of course, the Green New Deal doesn’t stop at simply proposing to upend America’s transportation systems and eating habits. It also calls for retrofitting or replacing every single home and building in the country to make sure they conform to the new environmental and energy efficiency standards that will be imposed from the lofty heights of Capitol Hill.

As if that weren't enough, the Green New Deal spreads itself far beyond environmental proposals into progressive policies that seek to guarantee that every person in America gets access to free health care, free college, and a free paycheck – even for those “unwilling to work.” For those who *are* willing to work, it states that they should be guaranteed a union job with a “family-sustaining” wage.

Of course, these “extras” expose the real deal behind the Green New Deal. It's not really about climate policy. Research shows the plan will have, at best, a negligible effect on global temperatures. Instead, it is a plan for near-total government control of the American economy and every citizen's life. It seeks to use the issue of the environment to impose a grand vision for a planned society — one with high taxes, less choice, and even more reliance on politicians in Washington.

All in all, the deal is estimated to cost about \$93 trillion. Of course, the cost of the accompanying destruction of the U.S. economy and the living standard of every American citizen is not included in that figure.

Those promoting the Green New Deal are trying to sell the policies in the name of economic security and justice. However, the proposal would produce exactly the opposite of economic security. Policies that take away affordable, reliable power from American families would dramatically increase their costs for heating and cooling their homes, using their appliances and electronics, driving to work, and just keeping the lights on.

Higher energy prices would also mean higher costs for virtually all of the goods people purchase, from groceries and clothing to furniture and automobiles (even those energy-efficient automobiles). Energy is a critical component in manufacturing and transporting goods, and in advertising and selling them to consumers. Increased energy costs are almost always passed directly on to consumers in the form of higher prices for the goods they buy. How is this economic security and justice?

## **Conclusion**

The themes Ronald Reagan explored in “A Time for Choosing” would become the roadmap for his subsequent presidency. As president, he would vigorously fight communism abroad and big government policies at home. He would pass historic tax cuts and slash regulations in an attempt to return power to the people, where he felt it rightfully belonged. His presidential legacy included ending the Cold War, defeating and dismantling the Soviet Union, ending double-digit inflation, and giving the nation the longest period of sustained peacetime economic growth in American history.

Reagan chastised the Left for the ultimate end of their big government proposals, warning they would destroy our freedom and our very way of life: “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. 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.”

Today, despite decades upon decades of proof of their failed programs, the Left continues to promote and perpetuate policies that usurp our freedom, harm our economy, endanger our security, and create an unhealthy dependence on government. Statist policies have given us a porous border and immigration policies that virtually put out a welcome mat for drug dealers and human traffickers. They have erected a government powerful enough to force citizens to buy expensive private products such as private health insurance. They have given us a government that never stops spending more than it takes in; a growing a debt that totals more than \$65,000 for every man, woman, and child; and taxes so high that working-class families live paycheck to paycheck and can't save for their futures.

Reagan admonished the nation, “If we lose freedom here, there is no place to escape to. This is the last stand on Earth.”

Yet government has only grown larger.

As I wrote earlier in this essay, polls show that a large number of Americans are warming up to socialism and rejecting capitalism. One reason for this is that they are not connecting the term socialism to its historical context, such as with the former Soviet Union, or its current context, of which the crushing dictatorships of Venezuela and North Korea are prime examples. These colossal failures of socialism are conveniently ignored or downplayed by the Left and its media allies, and the American people often don't see the results.

The good news is that the polling also shows that the people responding to the surveys really don't seem to understand what socialism actually is. A large majority of those who say they like socialism also say they like free markets and think it would be better if government had less to do with the economy. While initial polling may show that people love the idea of free college tuition, a \$15 an hour minimum wage, and free health care, when they are told even a few details – what it would cost them, how their freedom and their options would be restricted, how bureaucrats in far-off places would be making decisions for them – people polled often turn against such proposals.

What this tells us is that conservatives need to take a few lessons from The Great Communicator himself and develop better messaging about how socialism is a threat to the American way of life. We must also better convey how conservative policy solutions like lower taxes, limited government, a strong national defense, traditional values, and a focus on individual liberty are what have made this nation great—and what will continue to make life better for all Americans.

As Reagan so eloquently told conservatives in 1964, “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny.” Conservatives must continue to heed that call. Those who promote socialism haven't given up on their plans for America, and neither can we. If we are able to succeed in taking a coherent, compelling argument to the American people that spells out why free market, conservative solutions are better for them than the false promises of socialist Utopianism, “we'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth.”