

RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

Ronald Reagan's Noble Causes

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It was the line that brought 5,000 delegates to their feet and produced the loudest ovation when Ronald Reagan spoke to the annual convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) in Chicago on August 18, 1980.¹ It was also the line that produced shrieks of protest and ridicule on op-ed pages and radio call-in shows and in letters to editors. “It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause,” Reagan declared in his VFW speech, referring to U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War.²

Many people agreed with Reagan, including Vietnam veterans who thanked him for recognizing their service, which had too often been unappreciated or scorned. But Reagan also had fierce critics, who derided his embrace of a flawed and failed war and worried about his tendency to say the wrong thing at the wrong time as his campaign for the presidency moved into high gear. Pollster Richard Wirthlin found that the Vietnam comment hurt Reagan's standing with voters and helped turn what had been a 14-point lead in early August over President Jimmy Carter, the Democratic nominee, into a neck-and-neck race for the presidency by Labor Day.³

Reagan's remark that Vietnam was a “noble cause” got the most attention, but the speech was

¹“Ronald Reagan's Remarks to Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention, (VFW), Chicago, Illinois, August 18,1980, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbZGghczhs4&t=4s>, accessed January 18, 2023.

²Ronald Reagan, “Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety,” August 18, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum (hereafter RRPLM), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety>, accessed January 18, 2023.

³Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 480; “Post-Convention Surge,” *Washington Post* (hereafter *WP*), August 20, 1980, A1; “Economic Prospects Give Carter Edge,” *WP*, September 14, 1980, A1.

mainly about national defense, communist threats, and U.S. values and principles. Reagan argued that the United States must restore the balance of power with the Soviet Union, which he believed the Carter administration had allowed to tilt in the wrong direction. He emphasized that his goal was not to start a war, as fearful critics charged, but to protect vital American interests against Soviet challenges. Reagan wanted to reassure voters across the country that he saw military strength as an essential prerequisite to peace. He also charged that a Vietnam Syndrome had made things worse, as painful memories of a war gone wrong had prevented forceful and decisive actions to defend freedom and oppose new communist advances. Reagan had said these things many times before.

The VFW speech was vintage Reagan, but it had an important new twist. For decades Reagan had been a fierce Cold Warrior, but his speech provided a new vision for peace. “I would be willing to negotiate an honest, verifiable reduction in nuclear weapons by both our countries to the point that neither of us represented a threat to the other.” That was the most consequential line because it guided Reagan’s approach to arms negotiations as president and led to an unprecedented achievement—the United States and the Soviet Union agreeing to destroy part of their nuclear arsenals.

Reagan and Carter

The VFW speech was Reagan’s first major address after the Democratic convention in New York, which nominated Carter for a second term. Reagan had followed political tradition and avoided the public spotlight while Carter accepted his party’s nomination and ridiculed Reagan for living in “a make-believe world . . . of good guys and bad guys” in which he would “shoot first and ask questions later.” Carter predicted that a Reagan presidency would bring “an all-out nuclear arms race,” a “radical and irresponsible course [which] would threaten our security and could put the whole world in peril.”⁴ At a news conference, Reagan scoffed at Carter for trying to portray him as “a combination of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Mad Bomber. . . . I don’t think it will sell.”⁵

Reagan made an extended reply in his return to the national stage during a “defense week” of speeches about national security to friendly audiences, including meetings of the VFW and the American Legion. The former organization had taken the unprecedented step of endorsing Reagan, the first time in its 80-year history that it had formally supported a presidential candidate. One of the reasons for the VFW’s endorsement of Reagan was its discontent with Carter administration policies concerning veterans’ employment, health care, and pensions. During the first part of his Chicago address, Reagan accused the administration of “hypocrisy” and “a breach

⁴Jimmy Carter, “Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York,” The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/251732>, accessed January 18, 2023.

⁵“Reagan Acts to Reassure Peking on Ties,” *WP*, August 17, 1980, A4.

of faith” in handling veterans’ issues. He also used the VFW speech to reiterate his well-known call for rebuilding what he saw as America’s declining military strength while rebutting Carter’s caricature of him as a dim-witted warmonger.

Like so many political adversaries, Carter underestimated Ronald Reagan. Beneath the folksy manner and the “aw shucks” simplicity was a set of principles that shaped Reagan’s outlook: that international communism posed the greatest threat to U.S. security; that big government limited individual freedom and stifled business innovation; that the American people, if given the chance, would do the right thing; that the United States was an inspiration to those who yearned for freedom around the world. Reagan translated these principles into a detailed critique of the Carter administration in hundreds of scripts he wrote for a daily program of radio commentary during the late 1970s. Those writings had some weaknesses. Reagan sometimes lost sight of facts. He was too quick to generalize from a single incident or an isolated event. But he knew how to interest, inspire, and influence millions of readers and listeners. Reagan may have been an actor, but he became the Great Communicator because he knew how to write as well as read a script.⁶ When he spoke to the VFW, all the ideas and many of the words were his own.

Reagan and Vietnam

Early in his VFW speech, Reagan expressed deep and enduring convictions about the Vietnam War. “A small country newly free from colonial rule sought our help in establishing self-rule and the means of self-defense against a totalitarian neighbor bent on world conquest” was how Reagan described the reason for U.S. support of South Vietnam. Reagan had expressed these convictions since U.S. combat troops had begun fighting in the war. During the CBS News special program, *Town Meeting of the World*, in May 1967, as he and Senator Robert F. Kennedy (Dem.-NY) answered questions from international students, Reagan lauded America’s “long history of non-aggression” and “a willingness to befriend and go to the aid of those who would want to be free and determine their own destiny.” He believed that the United States was doing the right thing in Vietnam, and he more than held his own in the debate.⁷ “Who the fuck got me into this?” Kennedy angrily asked his aides after the program was over. The senator realized that

⁶Chester Pach, “*Top Gun*, Toughness, and Terrorism: Some Reflections on the Elections of 1980 and 2004,” *Diplomatic History* 28 (September 2004): 555.

⁷*Town Meeting on the World*, CBS, May 15, 1967, , C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?428273-1/ronald-reagan-robert-f-kennedy-discuss-vietnam-war-1967>, accessed January 18, 2023; transcript, “The Image of America and the Youth of the World,” CBS, May 15, 1967, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/the-image-of-america-and-the-youth-of-the-world-with-gov-ronald-reagan-cbs-television-and-radio-may>, accessed January 18, 2023.

Governor Reagan was the “clear winner.”⁸

About 450,000 Americans were fighting in Vietnam when Reagan and Kennedy debated the war, and the public was deeply divided over President Lyndon B. Johnson’s war policies. Reagan was an outspoken critic of Johnson’s handling of the war and a self-described hawk who favored stronger military measures to secure a victory.⁹ While liberals and moderates criticized Johnson for relying too much on generals rather than diplomats to end the war, many conservatives like Reagan assailed him for rejecting military advice for more U.S. bombing of enemy targets and for ruling out an invasion of North Vietnam.¹⁰ Reagan also advocated that Congress approve a declaration of war partly so that the federal government would have the authority to restrict antiwar demonstrations, which he believed were “aiding the enemy.”¹¹ Reagan even thought it would be foolish to rule out a nuclear attack. “No one, of course, wants to use those weapons,” he explained, “but the enemy . . . should go to bed every night fearful that we might.”¹²

Reagan repeatedly linked his appeals for stronger military action to protecting U.S. troops. “Once the killing starts, once you ask young men to fight and die for their country,” he argued in 1965, “there’s a moral obligation imposed on the rest of us to turn the full resources of this nation into winning the victory that is causing their deaths as quickly as possible, to bring them home.”¹³ He believed the goal of the U.S. war effort should be very simple. “I think you win.”¹⁴ He did not explain, though, how he envisioned victory in this war.

⁸Letter, Frank Mankiewicz to Reagan, June 5, 1981, folder 4, Box 1, Presidential Handwriting File: Records, 1981-89, RRPLM; Cannon, *Governor Reagan*, 260.

⁹Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 591.

¹⁰“Reagan Urges Escalation to Win the War ‘Quickly,’” *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), September 13, 1967, 5; “The Ronald Reagan Story; or Tom Sawyer Enters Politics,” *NYT*, November 14, 1965, SM 46; “Reagan Favors Viet Invasion If—,” *WP*, September 30, 1967, A1; Ronnie Dugger, *On Reagan: The Man & His Presidency* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 344-47.

¹¹“Reagan Says Declaration of War Might Help Curb Demonstrators,” *NYT*, October 26, 1967, 8.

¹²“Atom Arms Threat Urged by Reagan,” *WP*, December 10, 1966, A16.

¹³“Reagan Cautions Romney on 1968,” *NYT*, November 21, 1966, 24; “Reagan Urges Johnson to Tell Vietnam Facts,” *Los Angeles Times* (hereafter *LAT*), October 21, 1965, 3.

¹⁴“Atom Arms Threat Urged by Reagan,” *WP*, December 10, 1966, A16.

Reagan deplored the North Vietnamese triumph in April 1975 and blamed the South Vietnamese collapse on a Congress unwilling to provide additional military aid. Speaking to the VFW's annual convention only months later, he called the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam more disgraceful "than any single event in our nation's history." He explained the failure in Vietnam in simple and provocative terms: the United States never tried to win and finally "gave up." Then, to a rousing ovation, he asserted that the United States should "never again . . . ask young men to fight and die for their country unless the goal is a complete victory."¹⁵

Reagan did not forget that applause line, and he used it again when he stood before the veterans in Chicago in 1980. This version expressed even stronger criticism of past policy as well as a lesson for the future. "Let us tell those who fought" in Vietnam, he asserted, "that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to let them win." Those defiant words made Reagan a verbal combatant in a struggle over the memory of a divisive war. For Reagan, the widespread belief that the war had been a grievous mistake dishonored those who had served in Vietnam. "They fought as well and as bravely as any Americans have ever fought in any war," Reagan told the VFW audience. "They deserve our gratitude, our respect, and our continuing concern."

"Hooray," exclaimed syndicated columnist James J. Kilpatrick, who praised Reagan for his honesty in lauding an admirable but unpopular war and the U.S. troops who fought in it.¹⁶ Vietnam veteran Tom Carhart agreed with Kilpatrick, thanking Reagan in a letter to the *New York Times* for "honoring those who offered their lives for America."¹⁷

But there was also anger and resentment. Historian Henry Steele Commager castigated Reagan for finding nobility in the Vietnam War, "the most ignoble chapter in our history" since slavery.¹⁸ A searing rebuke came in an op-ed column by Frank McAdam, a marine veteran, who asked, "A noble cause, Mr. Reagan? I would call it a horrible experience." McAdam wondered if Reagan would have seen Vietnam differently if instead of being "a captain who stayed home" during World War II, "he had heard the sound of shots fired in anger and wondered whether he would live to see another sunrise."¹⁹ Beneath a column by Jimmy Breslin about a marine lieutenant whose death in Vietnam shattered his family, the *Los Angeles Times* published a grisly cartoon of

¹⁵"U.S. Is Criticized in Vietnam's Fall," *NYT*, August 19, 1975, 13.

¹⁶James J. Kilpatrick, "For Reagan, the Noble Truth Will Serve Well," *LAT*, August 29, 1980, F11.

¹⁷Vietnam Veteran Grateful to Reagan," *NYT*, September 2, 1980, A22.

¹⁸Henry Steele Commager, "In Their Lust for Victory, Neither Party Looks Beyond November," *LAT*, August 24, 1980, F1.

¹⁹Frank McAdam, "What Price Glory, Capt. Reagan?" *LAT*, August 27, 1980, D7.

a skeleton in combat gear with the caption, “‘Vietnam War was a noble cause.’—Reagan.”²⁰ A Canadian pundit, Lawrence Martin, even stooped to ridicule, insisting that the “noble cause” line emerged from the “deep, deep caverns” of Reagan’s mind and made him sound like the person his handlers most feared—Ronald Reagan.²¹

Reagan refused to retreat in the face of such withering criticism. He emphasized that he had written the passage about Vietnam in the VFW address himself. As one campaign advisor explained, “it was his speech all the way.”²² Reagan also insisted that reporters who were more concerned with sensationalism than facts had ignited the controversy about his remarks.²³ While journalists focused on the disarray in the Reagan campaign, they missed a more important point about the VFW speech that’s clearer from the perspective of several decades.²⁴ Reagan was trying to shift contemporary thinking about Vietnam by encouraging Americans to support the troops or the veterans, whatever their feelings about the war. It was a position from which he never deviated as candidate and as president.²⁵

The Margin of Safety

Reagan’s comments about Vietnam diverted attention from the main theme of the VFW speech – his promise to restore the U.S. margin of safety in the face of aggressive Soviet challenges. Reagan simply loathed communism. “It is a form of insanity,” he had written years earlier, “a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”²⁶ Reagan told the VFW members that it was folly to believe, as did Marxist-Leninists, that communism was the wave of the future. The reality was that the Soviet system was

²⁰Jimmy Breslin, “In Vietnam, More Than a War Was Lost,” *LAT*, August 22, 1980, C7.

²¹Lawrence Martin, “Going Backward: Reagan Being Reagan, Carter Sincere,” *Globe and Mail*, August 30, 1980,

²²“Reagan: No Regrets on Vietnam Statement,” Associated Press, August 23, 1980; “Reagan Campaign Problems,” *NYT*, August 26, 1980, A17.

²³Pach, “*Top Gun*, Toughness, and Terrorism, 554-555.

²⁴“Mr. Reagan Has Spotlight Trouble,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 28, 1980, 23; “Reagan Overhauling His Campaign Style,” Associated Press, August 22, 1980;

²⁵Toby Glenn Bates, *The Reagan Rhetoric: History and Memory in the 1980s* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011), 51-63.

²⁶Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), 12.

“primitive”; the Russian people were trapped “in a backwash of history.” These remarks foreshadowed his famous prophecy in an address to members of the British Parliament in June 1982 that Marxism-Leninism was destined for “the ash-heap of history.”²⁷ Reagan was confident that time was on the side of democracy and capitalism.

But while he envisioned the long-term demise of communism, Reagan worried about the immediate Soviet threat to U.S. security. He repeated in Chicago what he had said frequently on the campaign trail – that the Soviets were conducting “the greatest military buildup in the history of mankind.” Reagan claimed that by outspending the United States on major weapons systems, the Soviets had surged ahead in all but a handful of measures of strategic military strength. Their goal was not defense or deterrence, but victory. Reagan warned that in the next Cold War confrontation, the tables might be turned, with a U.S. president, much like Nikita Khrushchev in 1962, facing “an unacceptable choice between submission or conflict.” Even though defense experts and intelligence professionals often disagreed about the size of the Soviet defense budget and the purposes of Moscow’s military buildup, Reagan was quite sure of the Kremlin’s objectives.²⁸ As he told the veterans in Chicago, the Soviets were using their military might to advance “imperialist ambitions” that were “virtually unlimited.”

Reagan maintained that instead of relaxing tensions, détente had increased them. By 1980, Reagan had become an insistent and influential critic of détente. His arguments were so politically potent that during the contest for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976, he had forced President Gerald R. Ford to excise the “d-word” from his administration’s vocabulary and replace it with “peace through strength.” Reagan’s criticisms of Carter’s policies were even more scathing, despite the president’s abandonment of détente after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Carter, he said, had done nothing to halt Soviet attempts to spread revolution in Africa, subjugate Afghanistan, and instigate civil war in Central America. “Let us not delude ourselves,” Reagan had told an interviewer a few weeks earlier. “The Soviet Union underlies all the unrest that is going on. If they weren’t engaged in this game of dominoes, there wouldn’t be any hot spots in the world.”²⁹ Reagan derided Carter for responding to these brazen Soviet efforts to stir up trouble with “weakness, inconsistency, vacillation, and bluff.”

²⁷“Address to Members of the British Parliament,” June 8, 1982, RRPLM, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-members-british-parliament>, accessed January 18, 2023.

²⁸Chester J. Pach, Jr., “Sticking to His Guns: Reagan and National Security,” in *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism & Its Legacies*, eds. W. Elliot Brownlee and Hugh Davis Graham (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 86-87.

²⁹Chester Pach, “The Reagan Doctrine: Principle, Pragmatism, and Policy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (March 2006): 79.

Reagan advocated across-the-board increases in U.S. conventional and strategic forces to restore the margin of safety. Even though Carter had boosted defense spending after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan still rebuked him for allowing U.S. military advantages to evaporate and making a “shambles” of national defense. He called for “whatever it takes to be strong enough so that no other nation will dare violate the peace. That is what we mean by superiority, nothing more, nothing less.” Yet Reagan also seemed to desire something more than nuclear sufficiency or strategic parity with the Soviets. “Peace was never more secure,” he recalled, than in the years after World War II when the United States had a monopoly on nuclear weapons. U.S. strategic superiority, according to Reagan, had insured a peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis. He also thought that no one need fear U.S. military dominance. “When we had great strength in the years following World War II,” he exclaimed, “we used that strength not for territorial gain but to defend others.” He was certain that overwhelming U.S. military power was the surest way to preserve peace.³⁰

No one would be surprised when Reagan took decisive action during his first weeks in the White House to expand and improve America’s armed forces. At a time when the new administration was slashing expenditures in scores of federal programs, the defense budget soared by 12 percent in fiscal year 1981, the first installment in a proposed five-year program of \$1.46 trillion to boost both strategic and conventional capabilities. As president, Reagan did what he promised as candidate to restore the margin of safety.

Peace

“Peace” was the title of Reagan’s VFW address, and he said it should be the nation’s highest priority. Political considerations encouraged Reagan to emphasize peace while he called for substantial increases in defense spending. Wirthlin’s polls showed that voters were wary of trusting Reagan as commander-in-chief. Ford had tried to capitalize on this vulnerability four years earlier by airing an attack ad with the ominous closing, “Governor Reagan couldn’t start a war. President Reagan could.” Carter ran similar campaign commercials, including one with a voter concerned about war and peace who thought Reagan as president would be “scary.” Those advertisements infuriated Reagan, and his response was to use the word “peace” 36 times in his 30-minute VFW speech.³¹ He called for peace through strength “so that brave men need not die in battle.”

But what kind of peace? Reagan rejected “peace at any price” or a “peace of humiliation and gradual surrender.” His words echoed his apocalyptic warning as a surrogate for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater in his classic 1964 speech, “A Time for Choosing,” that the erosion of American strength could lead to a disastrous choice between “fight and surrender”

³⁰Pach, “*Top Gun, Toughness, and Terrorism*,” 556-557.

³¹Canon, *Governor Reagan*, 492; Pach, “*Top Gun, Toughness, and Terrorism*,” 558.

in the Cold War.³² Détente, Reagan believed, carried similar risks, including “an unacceptable choice between submission or conflict.”

But Reagan offered voters a more appealing prospect in 1980 than the indefinite Cold War struggle he had envisioned in 1964. Why not strike a deal to reduce U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals so that neither side threatened the other? Peace through strength could be the prelude to security through arms reduction. That was the most important idea in Reagan’s speech.

Reagan had a well-deserved reputation as an arms-control skeptic, but in his VFW speech he held out hope that a different approach to limiting nuclear arsenals could reduce the danger of war. He repeated his familiar criticism that SALT II, which Carter and Leonid Brezhnev had signed in June 1979, was an unequal deal. He had even expressed doubts that a fair arms control agreement could protect peace, but in Chicago he was more optimistic.³³ What he wanted, though, was something very different from SALT, which essentially preserved the U.S. and Soviet strategic arsenals. Earlier in the campaign, he had called for a treaty that would “genuinely limit strategic nuclear weapons,” although he usually made that comment when criticizing the SALT II agreement for favoring the Soviets. In his VFW speech, he went further, imagining significant cuts in both U.S. and Soviet arsenals. Although he did not use the term in Chicago, he envisioned what became known during the Reagan administration as START – Strategic Arms Reduction Talks.³⁴ The goal was a treaty that cut the number of long-range missiles and the warheads they carried to lower the level of nuclear danger.

Negotiating from strength was one of Reagan’s fundamental beliefs. He thought that rebuilding diminished U.S. strategic capabilities was an essential step to persuade Soviet leaders “that true arms limitation makes sense.” He also found a hopeful example of successful negotiations, the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, where persistence in talks that lasted for a decade finally ended the military occupation of that nation. Negotiations with the Soviets were essential, and he believed they would yield results “as long as we remain true to our goals – the preservation of peace and freedom.”

For Reagan, no weapon was more powerful than the American ideals of freedom and justice.

³²Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing Speech,” October 27, 1964, RRPLM, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/reagans/ronald-reagan/time-choosing-speech-october-27-1964>, accessed January 18, 2023.

³³Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 62-63.

³⁴“On the Issues, Ronald Reagan,” *NYT*, March 22, 1980, 8; Ronald Reagan, “Commencement Address, Eureka College,” May 9, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/commencement-address-eureka-college-1/>, accessed January 18, 2023.

“The American success story used to be a shining example, something that other people aspired to,” he told the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations several months earlier. “It was and still can be the American dream. But the world must see that we still believe in that dream.”³⁵ Reagan worried that something had gone wrong during the wrenching war in Southeast Asia, leading to a Vietnam Syndrome that hobbled U.S. efforts to meet communist challenges around the world. Many citizens feared “another Vietnam” and wanted their leaders to refrain from foreign intervention that could further tarnish America’s reputation. Reagan was determined to restore U.S. confidence, pride, and credibility. He believed that Vietnam was a noble cause, and he thought that only by banishing the scourge of Vietnam could the United States again be a beacon of freedom in the world. “Our foreign policy should be to show by example the greatness of our system and the strength of American ideals,” he told the VFW delegates.

At the end of the speech, Reagan called for “a better job of exporting Americanism. . . . I believe it is our pre-ordained destiny to show all mankind that they, too, can be free without having to leave their native shore.” It was a typical Reagan closing. There was always a reason for optimism.

Noble Causes

While the VFW speech provoked considerable comment – especially about Vietnam as a “noble cause” – it still has not received the attention it deserves. There was no live telecast of the speech. Few people other than the VFW delegates saw it. By the end of the presidential campaign, most Americans had forgotten it. It never appears on lists of Reagan’s greatest speeches. It was not even Reagan’s most memorable speech during the campaign of 1980. What made a greater impression was Reagan’s closing statement in his only presidential debate with Carter. In it, he asked the American people: “Are you better off than you were four years ago?”³⁶ The election results demonstrate how a majority of voters answered that question.

Reagan also asked at the end of that debate, “Do you feel that your security is as safe, that we’re as strong as we were four years ago?” Post-election surveys reveal that voters believed that Reagan would do a better job than Carter at strengthening national defense and lifting America’s international reputation, even though they still feared that he was a greater risk for getting the nation into a new war.³⁷ The VFW speech, despite its successes, hardly achieved all its goals.

³⁵Skinner, Anderson, and Anderson, *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, 474.

³⁶Transcript, “The Carter-Reagan Presidential Debate,” October 28, 1980, The Commission on Presidential Debates, <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-28-1980-debate-transcript/>, accessed January 18, 2023.

³⁷William Schneider, “The November 4 Vote for President: What Did It Mean?” *The American Elections of 1980*, ed. Austin Ranney (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute

But what it did show was that Reagan's thinking about peace and security was shifting, moving in a direction that would help to define his presidency. Reagan believed that he never compromised his principles, but he often revised his strategies in pursuit of his goals. We continue to study how one of the most ardent Cold Warriors played a critical – and surprising -- role in ending that intractable conflict. We continue to try to understand how someone so committed to building up the nation's defenses became the first president to sign a treaty – the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces agreement in 1987 – that eliminated an entire category of nuclear weapons. The answers are complex. No single speech or document tells us all we would like to know. But the VFW address provides us with important insights into how Reagan's evolving ideas on national security and arms control led to some of his greatest achievements as president. Reagan was thinking about more than one noble cause in this speech.

for Public Policy Research, 1981), 231-234.