

THE REAGAN REVOLUTION

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Challenges to American power in the strategic Middle East proved even more frustrating for Reagan. During 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon and bombed West Beirut to destroy the bases of Palestinian resistance fighters. Meanwhile, a Christian militia sponsored by the Israelis entered two Palestinian refugee camps and massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians. Although the United States supported the Israeli move into Lebanon, it condemned the massacres and sent 1200 Marines to participate in a 4-nation peacekeeping force. But the Americans soon clashed with Syrian troops and Moslem militiamen allied with Iran, resulting in truck bomb attacks in Beirut that killed 241 American servicemen. Amidst Pentagon objections that the Marines had been deployed for diplomatic purposes instead of military, Congress invoked the War Powers Act for the first time. Although Reagan stipulated that he did not recognize the constitutionality of the law, he agreed to withdraw all troops from Lebanon in 18 months. With the consensus over Middle East policy split for the first time in the Cold War, the President removed the last forces by 1984. By then peace in the Lebanese civil war appeared more remote than ever and American goals unclear.

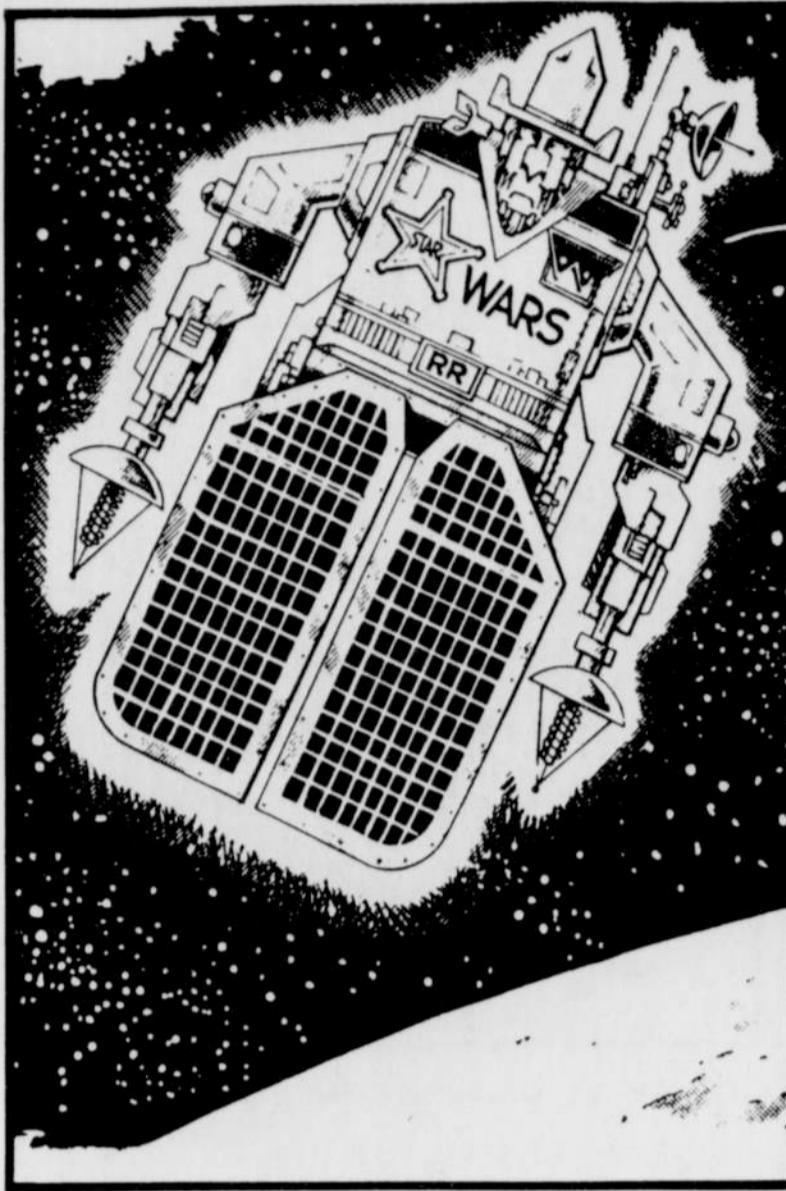
The Reagan administration's Middle East policy centered on the protection of regional oil fields and shipping lanes, support for "moderate" Arab leaders and a steady commitment to Israel's security. But while the United States spent \$4.5-billion a year on military and economic aid to the Israelis, it failed to forcefully address the issue of peace between Israel and the Arabs. Like his predecessors, Reagan seriously underestimated the importance of Arab nationalism and Moslem fundamentalism. When Palestinian youth organized an unarmed uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza territories in 1988, Secretary of State George P. Shultz attempted to start negotiations by proposing an international peace conference. But the conservative Israeli government rejected talks with "terrorists" and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) condemned Shultz's refusal to meet with its leaders. Despite the rebuke, the Secretary refused to consider the use of economic pressure to bring Israel to the bargaining table.

Arab nationalists perceived the United States as a protector of Israeli expansion and as an imperialist force in the Middle East. As a result, Americans found themselves the targets of violent attacks, kidnappings and hijackings. After an elderly American was shot and tossed overboard from an Italian cruise ship in 1985, Reagan ordered Air Force fighters to force the landing of the Egyptian civil airliner carrying the accused terrorists. The President soon accused radical Libya of supporting Middle East terrorism and ordered a trade embargo against that nation. Early in 1986 Reagan deployed massive air and naval forces to challenge Tripoli's assertion of sovereignty over the Gulf of Sidra, a large inlet on Libya's Mediterranean coast. When the United States claimed intelligence linking the Libyans to the bombing of a West German discotheque frequented by American military personnel, Reagan ordered an air attack on Libya, killing 40 people and destroying the family quarters of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. This show of force expressed frustration toward the spread of terrorism but alienated allies on the European continent and in the Moslem Middle East. Nonetheless, in order to further traumatize Gadhafi, the White House conducted a "disinformation" campaign in the American press which suggested that the United States planned further attacks.

While the Reagan administration publicly depicted Gadhafi as a major source of terrorism, it privately held revolutionary Iran responsible. Tying Tehran to the capture of several American hostages in Lebanon by Shiite Moslem extremists, the United States embargoed military shipments to Iran and urged European allies to do the same. But concern over potential Soviet influence in the region and hopes for renewed ties with Tehran led the administration to reevaluate its relationship with Iran. The President, moreover, felt political pressure to win the freedom of the hostages while CIA director William J. Casey desperately sought release of kidnapped Beirut station chief William Francis Buckley, the agency's top expert on counter-terrorism. Using Israeli intermediaries and private arms dealers, National Security Council operatives began to arrange an exchange of American arms for the hostages in Lebanon in 1985. The complex arrangement centered on the sale and transfer of 2000 antitank missiles for Iran's use in the war against Iraq. American officials even accompanied one arms shipment in an unpublicized visit to Tehran. The covert and risky arms deal violated Reagan's public pledge to never negotiate with terrorists. But even news that a tortured and emaciated Buckley had died in captivity failed to deter the President from his efforts to free the remaining hostages. Release of several Americans taken in the hijacking of a TWA airliner in 1985 and subsequent freedom for three of the Beirut captives convinced the administration it was on the right track.

Once a Beirut newspaper leaked details of the bizarre exchange in November 1986 however the Reagan administration denounced the trading of arms for hostages and resumed its hardline policy toward Tehran. As the "tanker war" between Iran and Iraq escalated in 1987, the United States became increasingly concerned with assuring Western and Japanese access to Middle Eastern oil. When Iran refused to accept a United Nations Security Council resolution for a ceasefire, Washington pressed the Soviet Union to support an arms embargo. Not satisfied with the response and fearing increased Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf, Reagan invoked the "Carter Doctrine" to deploy a Navy taskforce of ultimately 40 ships to the strategic waterway. The President initially instructed the Navy to escort 11 Kuwaiti oil tankers which the United States had "reflagged" as American ships.

The risks of a naval presence in the Gulf became clear in May 1987 when bombers belonging to Iraq, Iran's opponent, attacked the frigate *USS Stark*, killing 28 sailors. As Iranian mines continued to damage commercial shipping, Reagan sent 8 minesweepers and a fleet of attack helicopters to the Gulf. Between late 1987 and mid-1988, the United States responded to Tehran's naval provocations by destroying strategic Iranian oil platforms and several of its war vessels. Although Iran bitterly denounced the American presence in its neighboring waters, Reagan repeatedly defended the mission as one befitting a world power responsible for the maintenance of peaceful navigation. Yet the President's ill-defined policy came under fire in July 1988 when the Navy inadvertently shot down an Iranian airliner flying over the Gulf during a minor confrontation involving warships of the two nations. The disaster killed 290 civilians and raised questions about the Navy's ability to carry out sensitive policing operations in an area such as the well-traveled Persian Gulf. One week later, however, Iran announced its desire to seek a negotiated end to the war with Iraq and peace talks soon commenced.



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The Reagan administration put particular stress on anti-communism in Central America and the Caribbean. During 1980 Cuba's Fidel Castro had permitted 125,000 exiles to go to the United States, but American officials charged that many of the refugees were criminals, mental patients and social undesirables. As relations between Havana and Washington deteriorated, Castro consolidated ties with the Marxist government of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. But when dissident Marxists murdered that nation's prime minister and ruling leaders in 1983, Reagan used the pretext of civil strife to mount an invasion against the Cuban client state. Labeling the operation a "rescue mission" to protect 1000 American medical students, the President sent 4,600 Marines, Rangers and paratroopers to take control of the island in a matter of days. Polls revealed public endorsement of the nation's first military victory in the post-Vietnam era.

In Central America's impoverished El Salvador, the administration faced a more complex challenge. A 1980 military coup had precipitated a guerrilla movement with strong ties to trade union and democratic elements. But while President Carter pushed for a centrist government that adhered to moderate

reforms, he encouraged military and paramilitary units to defeat the guerrilla insurgency. The result was a bloody civil war in which government security forces and vigilante "death squads" accounted for an estimated 30,000 civilian killings between 1980 and 1983. The Reagan administration, fearing a communist revolution, stepped up the Carter military aid program, although Congress attached riders requiring the President to certify human rights progress and democratic reforms. When centrist leader Jose Napoleon Duarte won a 1984 election boycotted by the left but supervised by international observers, Congress approved nearly \$200-million in military aid to defeat the guerrillas who dominated much of the countryside. The flow of American money enabled the Salvadoran government to conduct brutal bombings of peasant villages that reminded critics of the Vietnam War. But by 1987 the conflict had so devastated the Salvadoran economy that Duarte sought to incorporate the rebels into the country's political structure. Nevertheless, the rightwing ARENA party won control of the National Assembly the following year and vowed to crush the widespread insurgency by force.

The Reagan administration directed its greatest vigilance against Nicaragua. Directly upon assuming office in 1981, the President suspended economic aid, claiming that the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega wanted to establish a Marxist state under the influence of Cuba and the Soviet Union. Reagan authorized the CIA to support a rebel army to force the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. When news reports in 1982 described a CIA manual which advocated the kidnapping and killing of Nicaraguan officials, Congress passed the first Boland Amendment to prohibit direct agency activity in overthrowing the Sandinistas. Two years later the legislators learned that the CIA had mined Nicaraguan harbors. In response angry House members adopted a second Boland Amendment and handed Reagan a major defeat. The 1984 measure stipulated that no funds of any military or intelligence agency be used to support military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua.

When Managua protested the mining of its ports to the World Court, the United States boycotted the proceedings. In 1986 the Court ruled that Washington had violated international law by mining and attacking Nicaraguan ports and by aiding the "contra" rebels. The House rejected assistance to the insurgents in 1985 but provided \$27-million in "humanitarian" aid when Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega flew to Moscow seeking financing. Reagan also announced a trade embargo against Nicaragua. With election fears of appeasing communism and deserting the President's "freedom fighters," Congress awarded \$100-million in military and economic aid to the contras in 1986 and lifted restrictions on CIA activity.

Like all Cold War Presidents, Reagan viewed legislative restrictions on his actions as unwarranted intrusions into his constitutional powers. As a result, he sought to bypass Boland Amendment prohibitions on aid to the contras by encouraging financial contributions of \$36.7-million for that purpose from both wealthy Americans and conservative allies such as Saudi Arabia and Taiwan. Meanwhile CIA Director Casey, National Security Advisor Rear Admiral John M. Poin-dexter, and NSC aide Colonel Oliver North (USMC) coordinated a scheme to divert profits from the \$38-million Iranian arms sales to the "freedom fighters" in Central America. Following orders from Casey, North used the President's name and illegal logistical and tactical support from the CIA to establish a private network of men, equipment, corporations and Swiss bank accounts designed to channel military supplies to the contras.

BEYOND LEFT & RIGHT

The renewed focus on domestic concerns in the post-Cold War era initially appeared to offer an opportunity to reconceptualize the American political map. Yet the vast economic changes of the past two decades have proved overwhelming. In addition to the problems of an unskilled underclass, semi-skilled and parttime workers barely survive at the margins of the "post-industrial" information and service economy. In turn, the middle class finds itself squeezed by corporate belt-tightening and the reduced social mobility induced by global competition. Meanwhile only the most affluent benefit from participation in international financial markets that seem to have no relation to the nation's production of goods and services.

Unable to offer solutions and palsied by the financial clout of powerful interest groups and lobbies, politicians on the millennial cusp increasingly resort to futile posturing and symbolic gestures. As a result, millions of Americans respond to deteriorating services, high taxation and government favoritism by rejecting the usefulness of politics and questioning the competence of the state itself. Never before in the nation's history have so many viewed the political system with such cynicism. The very legitimacy of democratic government appears to be at stake.

Contemporary political journalists such as E.J. Dionne, Jr., Thomas Edsell and Kevin Phillips have sought remedies for political gridlock and stalemate. Finding a mixture of "liberal instincts and conservative values," among voters equally distrustful of business and government, Dionne has argued that ordinary citizens support both equal opportunity and equal rights, self-reliance and social concern, personal responsibility and individual rights. He has drawn upon a pre-socialist language of democracy, community and republicanism to outline a revitalized political centrism to express the needs and interests of the nation's "restive majority." In a similar approach, Thomas Edsell has called for a refashioned "insurgency" built on "recognizably legitimate claims for an equal opportunity to participate and to compete." Meanwhile, Kevin Phillips has proposed regulation of financial markets, taxation of exorbitant executive salaries, and containment of lobbyists and campaign contributions as steps toward a "refurbished populism of the center."

By focusing upon equality of opportunity as the central premise of American democracy, these writers provide a reminder that hostility to privilege lies at the core of the nation's republican heritage. Arguing that "liberals" no longer unite ordinary people around economic concerns such as progressive taxation and non-preferential employment, all three seek the recreation of "populist" coalitions to fulfill the common interests of the poor, working class and middle class.

The reassertion of populist politics offers an intriguing way of addressing the despair and cynicism prevalent in American life. Yet it raises questions concerning the ability of the insurgent legacy to address the systemic problems plaguing the nation at the beginning of a century and millennium. Does the nation's heritage of democratic dissidence contain sufficient perspective, rationality and vision to serve as a reference point

and organizing strategy for those seeking to enhance the common welfare? To answer that question a host of additional queries need to be posed.

What are the roles of small enterprise and large corporations in American society? How are the consequences of market risk and failure to be absorbed? What is the legitimate place of centralized government in a complex and multilayered social and economic environment? Can the state act to promote democratic opportunities for ordinary Americans while protecting market and constitutional rights for competitors? What role do professional experts play in the articulation of societal challenges? Can ordinary people be empowered to participate in the consideration of major national issues?

In terms of equity, can democratic politics respond to the impact of technological specialization and computer literacy on equal opportunity? Can the American dream of evenly distributed wealth coexist with market freedoms and the requirements of investment? What specific reforms can meet the desire of ordinary citizens for justice, equality and opportunity without producing systemic favoritism or problems more vexing than the original challenges? How are the potential economic losses associated with global competition or environmental protection to be allocated democratically? Regarding social issues, can Americans learn to accept cultural and ethnic pluralism as a counterpart of equal economic opportunity? Can participation in a diverse global market be reconciled to spiritual identification with locality and a national culture? Will national loyalty prevent Americans from embracing worthy transnational endeavors? Can Americans ever reconcile corporate modes of organization with the traditional spiritual and political values of the nation's heritage?

The questions raised address an insurgent tradition infused with a democratic spirit but frequently defined by narrow economic interests, local and nationalistic perspectives, reflex anxieties over change, and the limits of ethnicity, race and gender. Neo-populists will need to abandon exclusionary tactics to unify a fragmented society behind common goals. Although difficult, the task may be facilitated by the acknowledgment that the central American political debates of the 20th century did not pit ideological liberalism against conservatism. Instead the nation's democratic tradition has been framed by a healthy animosity to concentrated power and elitism, wherever it may be found. If this new century is to produce a vital national politics that defends ordinary citizens against arbitrary power and pursues reasonable goals of justice, fair play and equity, it likely will be one that replicates the most universal features of the insurgent legacy. For political democracy to survive in the United States, Americans must continue to move beyond left and right.

—DAVID HOROWITZ

This article is the conclusion of David Horowitz's book, *Beyond Left & Right: The Insurgent Challenge to the Established Order in 20th Century America*.