



# Reaganism For Ever?

Reagan is on the wane, badly damaged by Irangate. His presidency has less than a year to run. **David Plotke** looks at what might happen in November's presidential election

**T**he long 1988 presidential campaign seems to have been underway for years, but its main events are yet to come. It is a campaign about success and succession: how should Ronald Reagan's administrations be judged; what comes next?

If Reagan had managed to win passage of a constitutional amendment allowing presidents to serve a third term, he might not be its first beneficiary. To imagine him running once again is to think not only of his continued popularity but of the political weaknesses of the current administration, in which Reagan himself seems not entirely present. (Reagan's approval rating in public opinion polls hovers around 50%, below what he sustained in earlier years.)

Yet those who have opposed the policies of the Reagan administrations face an emerging irony. In the 1980s, many have consoled themselves with the idea that Reagan's popularity has more to do with his personal qualities than with his policies. In his final year, both Reagan's power and personal popularity have declined, yet Reaganism still frames political debate.

**Unhappiness with Reagan doesn't** translate cleanly into support for another course. Why? What has Reagan accomplished?

In foreign policy, the principle of an assertive American political and military role has been firmly re-established. The way is open for the Reagan administration to register a major victory in pressing the merits of its view that in relations with the Soviet Union, high levels of American military spending and a willingness to confront the Soviet leadership are less rather than more dangerous policies. They reduce the scope for Soviet intervention, and increase the likelihood that Soviet leaders will negotiate seriously on arms control. (Thus, the argument goes, putting American missiles into Europe opened the way for an agreement removing both Soviet and American missiles.)

The right wing of the Republican Party may taint this victory by withholding support from the arms control agreements in process, but Democratic support will likely guarantee their ratification. In Soviet-American relations, Reagan's course has gained broad political support, though this support does not mean enthusiasm for continued huge increases in military spending.

In other areas, Reagan has helped reframe debate without getting all he wants. In thinking about Nicaragua, it is easy to focus on Reagan's embarrassments and failures (which are real enough). This neglects the degree to which the argument is cast in terms of whether it is in the interest of the United States to support the Contras. It is assumed, with the exception of

perhaps the left third of the Democratic Party, that this is mainly a tactical issue; insofar as principle is involved, American intervention is acceptable. Thus where a regime has much less legitimacy than Nicaragua's government (for any combination of ideological, ethnic, and religious reasons, eg, Afghanistan or Angola), American support for insurgent forces is accepted.

Reagan has not made Americans dream his dreams, but he has gained a renewed public willingness to use American power widely, to assume that it ought to be used actively. The content of this activism is, if predictable, still complex: supporting democrats against weakened tyrants (Aquino/Marcos), supporting insurgencies against more or less popular leftist governments, in addition to supporting armies and gangsters against popular forces (Haiti). Despite the humiliation of the Iran/Contra affair, and continued fears of Reaganite adventurism, the administration has recast policy debates and marginalised those critics of US power who demand that its use be justified according to very stringent criteria (eg, George McGovern, the victim of Nixon's 1972 landslide.)

**In economic policy, there is little respect** for 'supply side' economics or for other nostrums which floated through the 1980s. Reagan's response to the sharp decline in the stock market in the 1987 crash was taken as painfully inept. Yet whether or not 'by accident' *vis-a-vis* Reagan's policies, the 1980s have been economically good enough to provide broad support for the government in power. There has been wide, sustained economic growth which, despite its severe inequalities and dependence on low-wage labour, has generated a large volume of jobs, with low inflation and rates of unemployment which if still substantial are not perceived as scandalous. In these years, household incomes have - for roughly 3/4 of the population - either increased or held steady. (This prosperity is compatible with declining real wages insofar as there are more workers per household.)

**I**n presidential elections, recent economic tendencies matter a great deal. Barring a steep slide into a deep recession - which would have to begin by summer to have major electoral effects - Reagan's administrations are still perceived as having done a reasonably good job. This - tempered - approval is accompanied, again, by a new political frame: there is great suspicion of claims that government policies (to create jobs, for example) could easily make the current situation better rather than worse. The absolute rejection of government intervention which some Reaganites hoped for never happened, and won't. Yet a new commonsense limits what can be proposed as a reasonable public effort, even while wide support exists for government action to maintain employment and to provide social

services.

Buttressing this commonsense is a recognition of the dual problem of huge budget deficits and severe trade imbalances. Whatever the real relation between the two problems, it is easier to attack the first through spending cuts than to find simple means of dealing with the second - letting the dollar fall is not enough when goods remain overpriced for their quality. Was the growing deficit tolerated partly as a means of creating political obstacles to expanding government activities? Or is the deficit instead (from a Reaganite perspective) mainly an economic problem with some benign unintended consequences for social and economic policy? The first is probably partly true; in either case, Reagan's legacy will not only frame debate but directly constrain spending in the next few years.

**W**hat about the social issues, so-called, which have inspired the religious Right? Measured by the far Right's own statements of maximal objectives, there have been few Reaganite successes, especially in changing laws. And Reagan's failure to nominate a Supreme Court justice committed to the political and constitutional agenda of the far Right seems to mark a decisive limit to current far-right efforts. Yet the Right's standards are so high as to obscure real shifts. While basic policy changes have been modest - poor enforcement of civil rights law, but no profound changes in it; hostility to feminism, but few legal changes - the terms of discussion have shifted in favour of the Right. Reagan's opponents have been a little lucky, spared what might become really terrible political defeats by the sectarianism and obduracy of a far Right which has trouble compromising or even recognising partial victories.

The abortion issue is a troubled example. The full programme of the far Right - illegalising all abortions - has zero prospects. Less than a fifth of the population favours it. Nonetheless, public opinion has become less supportive of a women's right to choose, and somewhat more willing to accept restrictions on the availability of abortion. A very strong majority exists for keeping abortion legal under some conditions (especially for medical reasons and in cases of rape or incest); poll data also show only minority support for the current legal situation. The paper majority in favour of restricting abortion rights is just that, however, and likely to remain politically imaginary because the far Right has no intention of compromising its basic position or even its tactics enough to do serious business with those who view abortion as acceptable only under specified conditions, but who fear that the far Right will make any form of choice impossible.

In sum, fully Reaganite visions have not materialised. There will be no new

era of unfettered market relations, militant cultural conservatism, and ever-increasing assertions of American power against the Soviet Union and various forms of national and social radicalism. If this was to be the Reagan revolution, it didn't happen.

Yet there was a Reagan transformation - a deep shift in political priorities, a refocusing of public discourse - in both foreign and domestic policy. It has not been enough to satisfy the leaders of the far Right, who complain incessantly about the betrayals committed in the name of pragmatism. Though their complaining provides a certain amount of political comfort, to trust it as an honest report misses how far to the right Reagan has taken the country.

**If Reagan has succeeded in changing some** policies, modifying the direction of institutions, and framing debate, the next question arises: who succeeds Reagan? Will we have Reaganism without Reagan, or a sharp break?

The political forces interested in turning Reaganism into a durable regime, centred in the Republican Party, can be viewed both as signs of what has happened, and as combatants in the conflicts now underway.

The long-anticipated demise of liberal Republicanism seems really to have happened in presidential politics. No one is running to the left of Robert Dole (Senate minority leader, from Kansas), who well into the 1970s was clearly identified with the conservative wing of the party. A significant candidacy like that of John Anderson in 1980, appealing both to liberal Republicans and centrist Democrats, seems hard even to imagine.

**A**t the same time, far-right Reaganites are hopeless as presidential candidates (though not in state and local races). The three contenders - Jack Kemp (a member of Congress from Buffalo, New York); Pierre DuPont (yes, that family, now as always running Delaware); and Pat Robertson (never elected to office, an articulate television preacher) - will be lucky to survive the first primaries. Even choosing one of them as a vice-presidential candidate carries major risks - risks which Dole or Vice-President Bush may be tempted to run in order to sustain the mobilisation of the substantial constituencies these candidates represent.

George Bush and Robert Dole are credible successors, positioned slightly to the left of Reagan while claiming (and intending) fidelity to his vision and policies. They are strong candidates, with a good chance of winning if (a) the decline in the stock market and the trade deficit do not trigger a major recession; (b) no dramatic episodes undermine the quasi-detente emerging with the Soviet Union; and (c) the teeming mini-scandals which surround the administration do not condense into a single major scandal. It will take no

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miracles for these conditions to be met, in which case Bush or Dole can draw on the political assets generated by: relative economic success, peace (ie, few Americans directly at war), social order (ie, gross inequities but no riots), and their very impressive resumes and evident capacity to stay afloat in top-level national politics.

**B**ush has a better chance of winning the Republican nomination than does Dole, although the vice-president has a large capacity for self-destruction. Dole would do much better in attracting Democratic votes, but it is hard to imagine him running effectively with a far-right candidate for vice president, especially as his personal attitudes and family life (his wife, Elizabeth Dole, was secretary of transportation and is a highly effective politician) seem suspiciously modern.

**What about alternatives to Reaganism?** It isn't 1984, when Democratic prospects seemed so grim from the start. To perceive openness is not just wishful, it is not necessary to walk once again through a depressing story toward a familiar conclusion. (How familiar; After 1964, only one Democrat has been elected president.)

Still, it is a difficult situation. Some problems are structural. Demographic changes have been strengthening the most Republican and weakening the most Democratic parts of the country for several decades, and with modest exceptions they are still underway. A clear sign of these processes: there is no viable Democratic candidate for 1988 (and probably not even for 1992), from California, Texas, or Florida, the large states which typify recent social and economic development. In economic and social terms, there has been a decline in previously Democratic constituencies (except for the very poor, whose ranks have recently expanded.)

These broad tendencies do not wholly determine the outcome in any particular year, of course, especially when any Republican candidate will have real liabilities. Yet the limited Democratic prospects are suggested by the apparent decision of perhaps the three potentially strongest Democratic presidential candidates. Senators Sam Nunn of Georgia and Bill Bradley of New Jersey and Governor Mario Cuomo of New York have all declared themselves non-candidates (although Cuomo may be willing to be anointed). Each decision has its particularities, but taken together the common absence of these strong candidates amounts to a judgment of the quality of the opportunity presented by 1988.

This judgment might be wrong, but it will take some luck for the Democrats to make it. By and large, Democrats from right to left have not used the Reagan years well. They have notably failed to frame more than fragments of the alternative course which was widely recognised to be necessary after

Carter and Mondale were trounced: a post-New Deal liberalism which would restate historic commitments to welfare social policy, define a more restrained role for the direct use of public power, and encourage a new model of economic development. Most of the 'rethinking' which has occurred has focused on what were already modest egalitarian commitments; thus the claimants to 'new' ideas within the Democratic Party are, unfortunately, more on its centre and right than its left.

It is hard to array the Democratic presidential candidates on any single axis, but a composite image of their economic, foreign, and social policies would look like this (starting on the left and moving rightwards): Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson (20); Illinois Senator Paul Simon (10); Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis (15); Missouri Congressman Richard Gephardt (5); ex-Governor of Arizona Bruce Babbitt (2) and Tennessee Senator Albert Gore (7).

The numbers refer to rough shares of the Democratic primary electorate, as of the beginning of 1988 - and are of course volatile. Note that more than 40% of Democratic voters are undecided, a figure which is reasonably interpreted as a negative judgment of the quality of the group as a whole. Including the absent candidates it might look like this: Jackson; Simon; Cuomo; Dukakis; Bradley; Gephardt; Babbitt; Gore and Nunn.

**J**ackson and Simon are now firmly in the domestic tradition of New Deal liberalism, with Jackson recalling its most aggressively populist moments. Dukakis, Gephardt and Babbitt are vaguely 'neo-liberal', although with modest exceptions (many of which disappeared in the debacle of Gary Hart's campaign), neo-liberal has turned out to mean less liberal rather than new. By historic standards, Gore is a southern liberal; he is now on the right/centre of a party which has lost most of its (George) Wallaceite populist/racist Right to the Republicans or non-voting.

**What does this sketch say about succession?** First, there is no hidden Left; to the left of Jesse Jackson's campaign there is nothing of significance in presidential politics. This will allow Jackson to continue to move toward the Democratic centre without much fear of losing his current support.

Yet even a more centrist Jackson candidacy is, for much of the party, problematic. To some extent this is simply a matter of 'racial discomfort'. Sometimes it reflects a calculation that racism within the electorate makes him an impossible choice. There are other issues, though. While Jackson's success comes from his ability to fuse two political identities - black interest-group politics and radical democratic politics - yet *both* are problematic in 1988.

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Claims that 'if Jackson were not black, he would be recognised as the front-runner' are doubly wrong: (1) if Jackson were not black - whatever that could mean! - he would not be the front-runner, because he would probably have significantly less support than he now has from black voters; (2) his actual political positions are far to the left of those of most Democrats at this time (and also to the left of most blacks, which gives him a good deal of room to manoeuvre while retaining black support). It is wishful to view the 40% of Democrats who decline to make a choice among the six declared candidates as likely to provide him with enough support to even approach a majority of the Democratic vote - and this is known by all the candidates, including Jackson.

A different problem concerns Jackson's relations with Jews. Widely-reported anti-semitic episodes in his 1984 campaign are not forgotten, especially as Jackson's efforts to make amends have been clumsy and unpersuasive. The stakes are very high, going beyond the substantial electoral role of American Jews. A candidate who has never won office or directly made public policy, Jackson relies very heavily on a moral authority derived from the legacy of the civil rights movement to present himself as more than an interest group candidate. This makes him very vulnerable to any challenge to his moral character and sincerity. The Republicans, of course, are pleased for Jackson to be prominent in the Democratic campaign, both because of his leftism and his race. (Again, the Democrats are lucky - old fashioned white racism within important Republican constituencies seems to prevent that party from really taking advantage of the political opportunities created by a dual process of massive multi-racial, multi-ethnic immigration on both coasts, and significant socio-economic differentiation within the black population.)

The outline of a Democratic spectrum highlights a second issue, perhaps the central one for 1988. There is a wrenching conflict between two different notions of what coalition (the wide distribution of support makes clear that a coalition is necessary) will be electorally strongest. One course is a centre-right alliance - a Dukakis (president)/Gore (vice-president) ticket, for example. This choice has two claims to wisdom: the usual positional logic of a political spectrum, assuming that the Left will be loyal and reaching out to the Right; and recognition of the impossibility of winning without making inroads into what have been regularly Republican parts of the South and West.

The other course is a centre-left alliance, as in a Dukakis-Simon ticket (or, less likely, Dukakis-Jackson). This choice can claim wisdom in recognising the need for a weakened party to generate the fullest possible mobilisa-

tion of its strongest supporters. It is hard to imagine how any such mobilisation could occur without an energetic, full critique of Reaganism, especially regarding the social inequities which have proliferated in the 1980s. Its danger is regional isolation, even given Jackson's strength in the South.

**O**f the two choices, the second is (debatably) a better bet electorally. Because Republican strength means that all areas of the country are now contested, it makes sense to start with a coalition which can at least be counted on to make a good showing in core areas of Democratic strength. A centre-right Democratic candidacy might simply lose everywhere.

**Making this choice is mainly what the Democratic primary campaign is about, in a context in which the disaster of 1984 serves as a stark reminder of the inadequacy of a style of politics which simply names a series of constituencies and calls them a coalition. Mondale's failure shows what happens to a nostalgic left-liberal politics without programme or vision; thus the Democratic failure to generate genuinely new political or economic ideas (which do not arise simply because they are needed) is all the more painful. Given this vacuum, there will be plenty of fundamentalist declarations of New Deal faith, and a frantic search for issues which promise to cut into the**

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Reagan coalition without dividing Democrats.

This means stressing Reaganite failures in education, or the market and institutional failures which have generated the problem of homelessness, or the ongoing public policy failures which can be summarised as the absence of anything even approaching a family policy in this country. If these issues are not wholly used up for immediate tactical purposes, they may even get some of the steady attention they deserve after 1988.

Rethinking is never easy, and given the stakes, there is always a temptation to hope that rethinking will not really be necessary because a crisis will change everything and break the political power of the current regime. In the US, this is precisely the type of crisis which has not emerged, even though no month goes by without the unfolding of a new 'crisis'.

There is no reasonable way to predict the outcome of the November election if to the usual uncertainties one adds the intense examination of candidates' careers and personal lives which has become a new norm. Even the most promising candidate in June might explode in September when it is revealed that he (and this year it will certainly be a he) slept with one of the Bakkers, or that he was seen with his shirt on backwards at a Grateful Dead concert in 1969. Not to speak of

corruption, etc.

Still, predictions are irresistible. The now-normal presidential politics promises a Republican victory, much less overwhelming than Reagan's, with the Democrats as a strong regional party in the Northeast, upper Midwest, and parts of the Pacific Coast. This is the formula for a stable succession, with Bush or Dole fashioning their own Reaganism to sustain a right-centre regime into the next century.

**Y**et Democratic prospects are much better than they have recently been, and several Democratic candidates could be elected. Perhaps Cuomo (if he enters the race) or Dukakis might be able to combine a critique of Reaganite selfishness with a promise of economic growth convincingly enough to win back some of the traditionally Democratic voters who now routinely vote for Republican presidents, and to persuade new voters that whatever Reagan may or may not have accomplished, Reaganism now means cultural and social stagnation. Seeing normal politics as Republican politics sharpens at least one choice: if the task of those who have opposed Reagan is one of taking advantage of opportunities to avert an otherwise likely defeat, then the appropriate virtues are not caution and patience in waiting to succeed him - as though Reaganism would pass like a dream - but initiative, creativity, and a willingness to risk new approaches.

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