

Published Sunday, February 6, 2000, in the San Jose *Mercury News*

## Reagan's undeniable influence

*Once-controversial ideas now accepted wisdom*

BY JAMES STROCK

TODAY, former President Ronald Reagan turns 89. Though Alzheimer's disease has muted his voice, his influence is being felt throughout this year's political debates.

Like Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose leadership style Reagan emulated in many ways, Reagan's triumph lies in the extent to which he altered the political dialogue. Even liberal scholars such as James MacGregor Burns, author of an outstanding biography of FDR, concede Reagan's place at or near that of Roosevelt's in the pantheon of 20th-century presidents. In one way or another, all of this year's major presidential hopefuls draw from the Reagan legacy.

Though it seems remarkable now, as Reagan moved toward the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, the Carter White House expressed delight at the prospect of facing a candidate so far from the mainstream.

What were the ideas that made Reagan so controversial?

Convinced that the Soviet Union's political and economic systems were vulnerable, he sought to reduce, rather than merely stabilize, the number of nuclear arms -- but he called for a major increase in arms production as a first step toward negotiations. And within weeks of taking office, he seized diplomacy from the diplomats, forthrightly terming the USSR "evil."

As he fought the socialist idea abroad, he challenged its American variant, liberal orthodoxy, at home. For nearly 50 years -- since the advent of Roosevelt's New Deal, and bolstered by the civil rights revolution -- many Americans assumed that ever-increasing centralization of authority in Washington was essential for a better society.

Reagan rejected this notion. The government, he said, was more often the problem than the solution. The entrepreneur was a better citizen than the bureaucrat. Taxes, regulations and spending all should be cut, returning autonomy to the people in their families and communities or, at least, to governments closer than Washington.

Reagan campaigned continually for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. When his massive defense buildup resulted in record deficits, he adroitly utilized the budgetary shortfalls as a powerful argument against increases in domestic spending and liberal "big government."

Free trade linked Reagan's domestic and international visions, building on America's economic strength, and acting as a solvent against the authority of authoritarian regimes. Taken together, these ideas were not merely controversial; they would unleash rapid and destabilizing change on the nation. Reagan offered traditional values as a reliable ballast amid such change. He celebrated religion and historical notions of character and personal responsibility.

In a time of national self-doubt following Vietnam, Watergate and the Carter era ``malaise," Reagan exhibited a defiantly optimistic view of the American future. He truly saw the nation as ``a city on a hill," made exceptional by the character and values of the American people, who were joined together from across the world by a love of freedom.

To many at the time, this was the ultimate proof of his ignorance and lack of sophistication.

As is the mark of a consequential leader, these nostrums have ceased to be controversial among huge segments of the American people; now they are mere ``common sense."

But, as Dwight Eisenhower said of the largely peaceful world scene during his presidency, ``It didn't just happen."

A generation after Reagan took office, all of the major Republican candidates are clamoring for his mantle. Their party no longer is riven by the contending Rockefeller and Reagan wings; it is a Reagan party.

Thus, supporters of Texas Gov. George W. Bush view him as the new Reagan -- a breath of fresh air from the West, making conservatism attractive to traditionally Democratic voters. Meanwhile, Arizona Sen. John McCain can take heart from Reagan's fearless challenge to President Gerald Ford and to the arrayed power of the Republican establishment.

Even more remarkable, however, is the transformation of Democrats. It was Bill Clinton, the first Democrat elected to two terms since FDR, who announced that ``the era of big government is over."

In 1995 Clinton declared himself and his party to be in favor of a balanced budget and reduced debt, triggering an ongoing race with the Republican Congress to get there.

He acceded to welfare reform that shifted power back to the states and ended federal entitlements.

And he has supported and reappointed Alan Greenspan, the Republican central banker initially selected by Reagan, thus ensuring the continuity of a national economic policy that is essentially conservative.

He stepped around labor and other interest groups to support international trade.

He signed onto the basis for a ``star wars"-style missile defense system.

He has, albeit improbably and with declining emphasis, called for greater personal responsibility and respect for traditional family values, as in his signing of the Defense of Marriage Act.

To be sure, Monica Lewinsky is not the only one who has found Clinton not quite as good as his words. He has on more than one occasion employed Reaganesque language to cloak status-quo intentions. His ``Reinventing Government" did not lead to major reform but seemed intended largely to forestall it.

Clinton and his ``mini-me," Vice President Al Gore, have sought to increase spending in recent years, largely by turning Reagan's budget-deficit stance on its head. While Reagan used his huge deficits as an argument against spending, Clinton-Gore present the elimination of deficits as ``surpluses" and ``windfalls." But even these spending increases tend to be small, at least initially, and are characterized in a way that understates the growth of government entailed.

Presidential hopeful Bill Bradley, positioning himself further from Reagan's policy agenda, nonetheless publicly acknowledges Reagan's leadership approach as his model for the White House.

Just as Richard Nixon finally reconciled Republicans to much of the FDR domestic agenda -- to the point of granting that ``We are all Keynesians now" -- so do Democrats appear to be increasingly reconciled to a dialogue whose terms Reagan defined.

The harder question now is how to update the political dialogue to reflect the remarkable changes of the past 20 years. Those who would lead it -- and they will not be only Republicans -- will have to understand, if not admire, Reagan's approach and accomplishments, just as he understood and respected Franklin Roosevelt's.

Perhaps most significantly, these future leaders may share Reagan's faith in and concern for the American people. He believed unreservedly that his vision was the right one. But, as demonstrated in his personal acts of charity or his sometimes surprising willingness to deviate from ideology in response to an anecdote or incident, Reagan earned the trust of many because he plainly saw politics as about serving others.

In his autobiography, Reagan recalls his flight home to California on Air Force One for the last time in 1989. He was thinking about the families in the homes he saw below and asking himself, ``Were they better off than they were eight years ago? I hoped so."

#####