

Ronald Reagan and American Exceptionalism

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Ronald Reagan's earliest explicit view of American exceptionalism was expressed in a speech he gave to the 1952 graduating class at William Woods College in Fulton, Missouri, the same town in which Winston Churchill had told the United States that an iron curtain had fallen across Europe from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic. At this time Reagan had been out of the country on only one occasion, when he had gone to England to make a movie. He hadn't liked England—the food was not good, the people were regimented, and it was too cold.

At the time he spoke at William Woods College, he had nowhere near Herbert Hoover's international experience. He had served in World War II, making training films for the Army Air Corps, at which time he had already made thirty feature films. After the war he returned to his acting career and became president of the Screen Actors Guild, where he negotiated with studio heads on behalf of actors and fought attempts by Communist-infiltrated unions to take over Hollywood. By 1952 he was not getting very good roles. He had married his second wife,

Nancy Davis, a few months before, and his job representing General Electric, which would make him a prominent television personality, was two years in the future.

This is what he said to the graduating seniors: “I, in my own mind, have thought of America as a place in the divine scheme of things that was set aside as a promised land. . . . Any person with the courage, with the desire to tear up their roots, to strive for freedom, to attempt and dare to live in a strange and foreign place, was welcome here.”¹ As he often said, this was a place people could come to be free and to become Americans, a place founded on an idea rather than an ethnic heritage, religion, or race. Lou Cannon, Reagan’s main biographer, points out that Reagan held this view throughout his life and that it never degenerated into a view of American superiority.

Reagan’s view of American exceptionalism is often summarized in a phrase that turns up in many of his speeches—a “city on a hill.” When he uses this phrase, he’s quoting John Winthrop speaking to the pilgrims on the deck of the *Arbella* off the coast of Massachusetts in 1630. But the full quote, which Reagan used in a 1978 radio commentary written in his own hand in the years between his governorship of California and the presidency, emphasizes that because this city is on a hill, it is open to the judgment of others: “We shall be as a city on a hill,” Winthrop says. “The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.”²

In 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States, the concept of American exceptionalism was being challenged. People were periodically waiting in lines to buy gasoline. The economy was in trouble: both unemployment and inflation were high, and growth was slow. It was called “stagflation.” The consumer price index, mortgage rates, the prime lending rate—all were in double digits. Hostages had been held in the American embassy in Iran for over a year.

Worst of all, the country seemed to have lost confidence in its future and its position in the world. An attempt to rescue the Iranian hostages failed. President Jimmy Carter had tried to negotiate with the Soviets on arms control and finally realized, when they invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, that their intentions were not as benign as he had believed. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan postponed indefinitely the Senate's consideration of the second Strategic Arms Limitation Talks treaty.

The general view in the community of academics and pundits was that the Soviet Union was a permanent opponent of the United States, one with whom we needed to coexist indefinitely. Many people thought the economic and political systems of the two superpowers were converging, becoming more like one another. Some of the experts—including experts prominent in the Nixon and Ford administrations—doubted that a political system based on individual freedom and free markets could compete effectively with a centrally controlled economy that could extract resources from its citizenry at will and could override and repress political dissent.

Reagan had no such doubts. He had confidence in the American system and its capability to compete with communism, and he set out immediately upon becoming president to restore the US economy and to persuade the Soviet Union—through an arms buildup—that they could not compete with the United States and that therefore arms reduction—rather than an arms buildup—was in their best interest.

An important part of Reagan's view of American exceptionalism was a rejection of the view that the United States and the Soviets were two apes on a treadmill—that the two systems were different but morally equivalent. It was the American system that freed the individual genius of people and gave people dignity.

Reagan gave many speeches that expressed these ideas, but some of my favorite quotations are those that are the least scripted, where he got away from the reviewers in the Department of State and even the

National Security Council and let the Soviets know what he thought of them.

He got right to it upon taking the presidency, in his first press conference, held January 29, 1981. Reagan noted that day that the Soviets have often repeated that their goal is world revolution and a one-world communist state and that they considered to be moral anything they did to attain that goal. The United States operated, he continued, on a different set of standards. Reagan's statement was his first explicit rejection as president of the idea of moral equivalence between the United States and the Soviet Union, and it shocked the press and the world. Here are his specific words:

I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state. . . . They have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards. I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.³

An important expression of Reagan's views came in his June 1982 speech to the British Parliament in which he talks about "a plan and a hope for the long term—the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people."⁴ But Reagan also talks in this speech about self-determination and fostering the infrastructure of democracy. He does not claim, as President George W. Bush did in his second inaugural

address, that democracy in other countries was essential to our own security or that we would base our relations with other countries on our judgment of how they treated their people.

Reagan gave a speech in March 1983 in which he emphasized the moral distinction between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this speech he called the Soviet Union “the focus of evil in the modern world”⁷⁵—a line he wrote himself. It was a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, in which he encouraged them to take sides on the question of putting nuclear weapons in Europe to oppose those that the Soviets already had in place, aimed at Western capitals. The speech was not widely reviewed in advance in the channels of the US government. In fact, Nancy wanted him to soften it, but he refused, telling her that he wanted the Soviets to know what he thought of them. It was a decision made with full intent.

Reagan’s speech in 1987 at the Brandenburg Gate, on the western side of the Berlin Wall, was another such speech. This one did go through the full review process, and Reagan had to fight to keep the now-famous phrase “Tear down this wall.” He challenged Mikhail Gorbachev, in the name of peace and prosperity, to open the gate and tear down the wall.

In conclusion, Reagan’s personal view was that America was a special place where people could come to be free—a place chosen by God but also accountable—a city on a hill, visible to all, where all could come to be free and become American. Obviously one cannot view Reagan’s vision without also asking about his immigration policy. Reagan’s campaign for the presidency in 1980 included the idea of a North American accord to improve relations among the nations of Mexico, Canada, and the United States. The idea of closer relationships among the nations on the North American continent eventually resulted in the North American Free Trade Agreement, under challenge in the presidential election of 2016. Immigration was an issue in the 1980 campaign, partly because of the Mariel boatlift, in which Fidel Castro permitted close to 125,000 Cubans to leave the island nation on boats bound for the United States.

Mexico at that time was a third-world country bordering a first-world country, and the border was a long one. Many people crossed that border for temporary or permanent work, and many of these lived in the United States without having been legally admitted. The birthrate in Mexico was very high at the time. That has changed in recent years; the birthrate has fallen, and there has been little if any net migration from Mexico to the United States according to recent statistics. But it was a problem at that time, and I'd like to end by quoting a comment Reagan made in April 1980 during a debate with George H. W. Bush, his remaining opponent for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination:⁶

I think the time has come that the United States and our neighbors, particularly our neighbor to the south, should have a better understanding and a better relationship than we've ever had, and I think we haven't been sensitive to our size and our power. They have a problem of 40 to 50 percent unemployment. Now this cannot continue without the possibility arising with regard to that other country that we talked about, of Cuba and everything it is stirring up, of the possibility of trouble below the border, and we could have a very hostile and strange neighbor on our border.

Rather than making them or talking about putting up a fence, why don't we work out some recognition of our mutual problems, make it possible for them to come here legally with a work permit, and then, while they're working and earning here, they pay taxes here? When they want to go back, they can go back and they can cross and open the border both ways. By understanding their problems—this is the only safety valve they have right now, with that unemployment, that probably keeps the lid from blowing off down there. I think we could have a fine relationship.

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Notes

1. Ronald Reagan, "America the Beautiful: Commencement Address" (William Woods College, Fulton, Missouri, June 2, 1952), printed in *Echoes in the Woods* 39, no. 2.2: 8–13. Copy in vertical file at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.
2. Ronald Reagan, "Two Worlds," August 7, 1978, printed in *Reagan, in His Own Hand*, ed. Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (New York: Free Press, 2001), 14.
3. Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference" (January 29, 1981), <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/speeches/1981/12981b.htm> (accessed June 1, 2017).
4. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Members of the British Parliament" (June 8, 1982), quoted in *Reagan's Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster*, ed. Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson (New York: Crown, 2009), 253–54.
5. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals" (Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983), quoted in *Reagan's Secret War* (see note 4), 122.
6. "Republican Debate between Reagan and Bush," April 24, 1980, YouTube, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=YfHN5QKq9hQ> (accessed June 1, 2017).

