Reaganism For Ever?

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

The 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 leverage 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 where '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.)

In presidential elections, recent economic tendencies matter a great deal. Barring a steep slide into a deep recession - which is not materialised. There will be no new choice impossible. 'In his final year, both Reagan's power and personal popularity have declined, yet Reaganism still frames political debate'

Yet 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 identifiable with the conservative wing of his party. A significant candidacy like that of John Anderson in 1980, appealing both to liberal Republicans and centrist Democrats, seems hard even to imagine.

At 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 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.
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.

Bush 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 1968, the Democratic Party is, unfortunately, more on its centre and right than its left.

It is hard to array the Democratic presidential candidates on an ideological axis, but a comparison 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 (7).

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Jackson 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 whom appeared 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 Wallact) populist/racist Right to the Republicans or non-voting.

What does this sketch say about success? 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.
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.

Of 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 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.

Yet 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.