
A Covenant with all Mankind: Ronald Reagan's Idyllic Vision of America in the World

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*I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
counterpart of on the same terms.*

—Walt Whitman

Ronald Reagan's vision of America's role in the world, especially as it was expressed in his presidential speeches, continues to resonate with many Americans. President George W. Bush and Senator John McCain, for example, have celebrated Reagan both as a great man and as a great leader. Each has acknowledged drawing a high degree of inspiration for his foreign policy thinking and actions from Reagan's ideas.¹ Countless other politicians, including Presi-

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¹ President George W. Bush modeled many of his presidential policies and ideas on Reagan. One example can be seen in his remarks at the christening of the *U.S.S. Ronald Reagan*, in which he explained, "We live in a world shaped in so many ways by his will and heart. As President, Ronald Reagan believed without question that tyranny is temporary, and the hope of freedom is universal and permanent; that our nation has a unique goodness, and must remain adequately strong; that God takes the side of justice, because all our rights are His own gifts. . . . So as we dedicate this ship, I want to rededicate American policy to Ronald Reagan's vision of optimism, modesty, and resolve."

Especially during his 2008 presidential campaign, Senator John McCain repeatedly described Reagan as a profound influence upon his foreign policy thought. In a

dent Barack Obama, as well as academics and ordinary citizens, are enthralled by this type of vision. Reagan's popularity might lead many to believe that his foreign policy ideas are well understood, are by now deeply embedded in the American mind, and require little by way of fresh explanation and analysis. Yet it may be that many who have heard his words have not really *listened* to them. They have taken away vague impressions of his rhetoric and have not fully understood the meaning and significance of what he actually said. This may be especially true of those who were captivated by Reagan's ideas and images during his presidency and the waning days of the Cold War.

Reagan's vision of U.S. foreign policy consisted of a complex mixture of ideas about America, politics, and human nature. That mixture was not without paradoxes and internal tensions. At times he even intimated that not very much should be expected of politics. He described human beings as ethically dual, that is, as capable of both good and evil, and he could describe government, including democracy, as a limited enterprise devoted primarily to minimizing disorder. Such opinions recommended relatively modest foreign policy objectives. In his presidential speeches, he often invoked important U.S. strategic, economic, and national security concerns in support of specific goals in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere, but, despite his seeing serious disagreements with other nations, he sometimes stressed that a successful U.S. policy would need to include restraint, flexibility, realism, and openness to dialogue, especially with the Soviet Union. Comments like these suggested that he viewed politics and foreign policy as the art of the possible, not as an attempt to realize some great ideal.

Yet there was another and more prominent aspect of Reagan's

2006 speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library McCain said, "Among those principles we shared with President Reagan was his belief in America's mission to advance our political ideals globally." He also remarked, "A world where our political and economic values have a realistic chance of becoming a global creed was the principle object of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy . . . we should not resent the consequences of our success."

See George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at Christening Ceremony for the USS Ronald Reagan" (Newport News, VA: 3/4/2001), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/03/20010305.html>. Accessed on 27 June 2008; and John McCain, "Speech at Reagan Library" (Semi Valley, CA: 6/23/2006), available at <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/Speeches/a1120e1f-c9bc-4ce0-b2bc-41345eab7295.htm>. Accessed on 16 February 2008.

foreign policy thinking that pointed in a much different, far more “idealistic” and ambitious direction. This part of his vision of America’s role stemmed from a belief that human beings are basically good and entitled to individual liberty and democratic government. Unfortunately, a number of governments around the world were tyrannizing their citizens, depriving them of their rights and the ability to realize their goodness. They needed to be freed from the oppressive yokes of such regimes. Reagan held that the United States had a unique, moral responsibility to advance the global growth of democracy and freedom and that America had a long tradition of pursuing such a foreign policy. As president, he sought to reinvigorate the United States and its citizens with a fervent desire to continue this mission. With America at the forefront, the world would become a better place and might eventually even achieve lasting peace.

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Although Reagan’s foreign policy imagination contained a rich assortment of images, not all of which pointed in the same direction, it was this latter, more optimistic and “idealistic” vision that clearly predominated. It suffused virtually all of his major comments on foreign policy. It is this large and powerful dimension of Reagan’s outlook that will be the subject of this article. A careful examination of his foreign policy vision, including a historical and philosophical analysis of its main components, will show that it had a strongly romantic, even utopian cast. Reagan gave the impression that he was drawing on the views of America’s Founders and probably believed that he did so, but his primary way of understanding America and its role in the world as well as human nature and politics in general differed significantly from that of leading figures in the early American republic. Reagan’s understanding of America’s past was in important ways incomplete and misleading. These shortcomings were not inconsequential. The insights of Irving Babbitt, Claes G. Ryn, and Eric Voegelin will help demonstrate that this dimension of Reagan’s imagination contained dubious elements and serious dangers of which he seemed unaware and which his devotees have not questioned. A more modest and realistic notion of America’s role in the world than the one envisioned by Ronald Reagan may be in the interest of both Americans and non-Americans.

A comprehensive account of the motivations and origins of Reagan’s foreign policy thinking is beyond the scope of this article,

but a few general remarks on the topic may be helpful. During his presidency, it was fashionable, particularly among his detractors, to claim that Reagan had little personal connection to the imagery and ideas in his speeches. On this view, he was an “amiable dunce” enjoying his latest acting role as President of the United States and the script which accompanied it. Scholarship over the last decade has refuted this claim. Another possible explanation—especially for the sentimental aspects of his vision—could be that of political necessity or convenience. Given the context of the Cold War and the conventions in American political rhetoric, Reagan might have felt compelled to use sentimental imagery in order to inspire the public and to be able to pursue foreign policy goals that were actually more realistic. He may, then, not have cared much for this part of his own rhetoric, but thought that only this kind of imagery would really appeal to Americans. A third possibility, the most plausible because so strongly supported by the evidence, is that Ronald Reagan came to the relevant ideas rather early and on his own and that he genuinely and deeply believed in them. This does not have to mean that each of his formulations perfectly expressed his innermost beliefs. Does any human being fully know his own mind? And who can fully articulate what he does believe? Still, a great deal can be learned about where Ronald Reagan really stood from the pervasive and salient themes and frequently repeated ideas and images in his spoken and written statements. Whatever its ultimate origins and motivations, his stated vision of America’s role in the world has enduring appeal, and it urgently needs to be better understood. It is time to listen to Reagan’s words with a more attentive and also more critical ear.

It should be stressed that this article is not intended to offer a general assessment of Reagan’s achievements in foreign policy. The nature of his rhetoric is obviously an important part of his legacy and indispensable to trying to understand what he meant to do, but, because of the complexity and limited transparency of historical circumstances, successful statesmen seldom achieve just what they thought that they were attempting. What they really did becomes clear only in time. Sometimes statesmen of great wisdom and insight are defeated by historical circumstance. Sometimes statesmen of limited, muddled understanding are enabled by circumstance to accomplish great feats.

Ronald Reagan's Foreign Policy Vision: A Summary

*All humans
viewed as good
and friendly,
sharing the
same nature,
hopes, and
dreams.*

In January of 1984, Reagan gave a televised address to the nation on the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. He claimed that underneath the various differences between the two countries was a stronger bond of common humanity. He said, "Just suppose with me for a moment that an Ivan and an Anya could find themselves, oh, say, in a waiting room, or sharing a shelter from the rain or a storm with a Jim and Sally, and there was no language barrier to keep them from getting acquainted. Would they then debate the differences between their respective governments? Or would they find themselves comparing notes about their children and what each other [*sic*] did for a living?"² As far as Reagan was concerned, they would do the latter. The imagined amicable relationship between these two couples was one of his many ways of conveying his sense that all human beings are good and friendly; they all share the same nature, hopes, and dreams.

*All people seen
as desiring
liberty and
democracy.*

He also believed that all people both desired and deserved to live under liberty and democracy. In his Second Inaugural Address, Reagan argued, "Freedom is one of the deepest and noblest aspirations of the human spirit. People worldwide hunger for the right of self-determination, for those inalienable rights that make for human dignity and progress."³ Various governments around the world, however, were undermining global aspirations for human liberty and democratic government by ignoring the will and rights of their peoples. As far as he was concerned, this tension was at the heart of the civil strife and foreign conflicts around the world. On several occasions he claimed that such violence occurred because oppressive governments "got in the way of the dreams of the people." On others he claimed, "People do not make wars; governments do. . . . A people free to choose will always choose peace."⁴ This dichotomy between good people, such as

² Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation and Other Countries on the United States-Soviet Relations, January 16, 1984," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1984 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to June 29, 1984* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1986), 44.

³ Ronald Reagan, "Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985," in *The Greatest Speeches of Ronald Reagan* (West Palm Beach, FL: Newsmax.com Inc., 2001), 216.

⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Address Before the 38th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York, September 26, 1983," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1983 (In Two Books), Book II—July 2 to December 31, 1983* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office,

Jim, Sally, Ivan, and Anya, and bad government, such as the Soviet Union and other tyrannical regimes, is one of the most important images in his imagination.

With this dichotomy in mind, Reagan dedicated himself to promoting freedom and democracy around the world. Perhaps most famously, during his 1982 Address to the British Parliament, he called for a global “campaign for democracy” and declared, “Let us now begin a major effort to secure the best—a crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation. For the sake of peace and justice, let us move toward a world in which all people are at last free to determine their own destiny.” Beyond such general demands, he wanted to advance a number of institutions, including “the system of a free press, unions, political parties, [and] universities,” which, in his mind, enabled “a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.” Because this campaign was meant to secure for the peoples of the world that to which they were naturally entitled, he argued that it was not a manifestation of “cultural imperialism.” Those who thought differently were simply exhibiting “cultural condescension, or worse.”⁵ More than displaying cultural arrogance, opponents of his vision were rejecting one of the noblest parts of America’s past.

He often expressed his belief that the United States had a unique and long-standing moral responsibility to undertake this foreign policy. “Preservation of freedom is the gift of our Revolution and the hope of the world,” Reagan argued in early 1982.⁶ In his autobiography, *An American Life*, he explained, “It was our policy that this great democracy of ours had a special obligation to help bring freedom to other peoples,” and “I’d always felt that from our deeds it must be clear to anyone that Americans were a

1985), 1350; and Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University, May 31, 1988,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1988 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to July 1, 1988* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 687.

⁵ Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament, June 8, 1982,” in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 115, 120, 116-17.

⁶ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the New York City Partnership Luncheon in New York, January 14, 1982,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1982 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to July 2, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 27.

Americans
"a moral
people who . . .
had always
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power only
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good in the
world."

moral people who starting at the birth of our nation had always used our power only as a force of good in the world."⁷ He also warned others about the consequences of abandoning this American mission. In his 1985 Address to the Nation on the then upcoming Summit in Geneva with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, he argued, "Should the day come when we Americans remain silent in the face of armed aggression, then the cause of America, the cause of freedom, will have been lost and the great heart of this country will have been broken."⁸ America's was not the only heart that he feared could break.

He believed the rest of the world was counting on the U.S. In remarks given on July 4, 1984, he explained that, to human beings suffering from tyranny, "America's not just a word; it is a hope, a torch shedding light to all the hopeless of the world." He continued, "You know, throughout the world the persecuted hear the word 'America,' and in that sound they can hear the sunrise, hear the rivers push, hear the cold, swift air at the top of the peak. Yes, you can hear freedom."⁹ During his 1982 Christmas Day Radio Address to the Nation, he read a letter he had recently received from an American sailor on tour in the Pacific. The letter told of an encounter with a sinking boat full of refugees fleeing Vietnam. As the American ship drew closer to the raft, the refugees began to shout, "Hello America sailor! Hello Freedom man!"¹⁰ The refugees were rescued. Reagan concluded his address by explaining that this event was simply the latest confirmation of how oppressed people around the world saw the United States. He felt that America was morally responsible for their liberty and welfare.

This vision of American leadership shaped his understanding of his foreign policy practice. It was the primary motivation be-

⁷ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 265, 588.

⁸ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Upcoming U.S.-Soviet Summit in Geneva, November 14, 1985," in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 250-51.

⁹ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at a Spirit of America Festival in Decatur, Alabama, July 4, 1984," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1984 (In Two Books), Book II—June 30 to December 31, 1984* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1987), 1002.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan, "Christmas Day Radio Address to the Nation, December 25, 1982," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1982 (In Two Books), Book II—July 3 to December 31, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 1643.

hind his mission to “transcend communism,” and to leave the Soviet Union and “Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history.”¹¹ About the message he brought to Europe in the summer of 1982 on how best to deal with the Soviet Union he wrote in his autobiography: “The democracies, I suggested, like the Communists, should adopt a policy of expansionism: We should try to help the new countries of Africa and elsewhere embrace democracy and become evangelists worldwide for freedom, individual liberty, representative government, freedom of the press, self-expression, and the rule of law.”¹² He followed his own advice. In a 1986 Address to the Nation on the then concluded U.S.-Soviet Summit in Iceland, he explained, “We declared the principal objective of American foreign policy to be not just the prevention of war, but the extension of freedom. And we stressed our commitment to the growth of democratic government and democratic institutions around the world.”¹³ He made such comments on U.S.-Soviet relations repeatedly during his presidency.

The democracies “should adopt a policy of expansionism.”

This notion of America’s mission also formed the essence of his understanding of the American role in Latin America and the Middle East. In April of 1983, Reagan explained to a joint session of Congress that congressional observers had recently returned from a mission to El Salvador. They told him that El Salvador’s hold on democracy was tenuous and that many El Salvadorans had been threatened with violence and death if they voted in upcoming elections. But, they explained to him, one elderly woman told those who would threaten her life because she wanted to be free that, ““You can kill me, you can kill my family, you can kill my neighbors. You can’t kill us all.”” Commenting on this noble defiance, Reagan argued that the United States was bound both by interest and morality to come to the aid of such brave human beings.¹⁴

¹¹ Ronald Reagan, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame, May 17, 1981,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1981, January 20 to December 31, 1981* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1982), 434; and Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” in *Speaking My Mind*, 118.

¹² Reagan, *An American Life*, 556.

¹³ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Return from Meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev, October 13, 1986,” in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 312.

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Address on Central America Before a Joint Session of the Congress, April 27, 1983,” in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*, 149.

A few months later, he gave a televised address to the nation about then recent events in Lebanon and Grenada. The Marine barracks in Beirut had suffered a terrorist attack killing over 200 American servicemen, mostly Marines. He acknowledged that many Americans were now questioning the American presence in Lebanon. He said that America's purpose was to help bring peace to that nation, and he warned against a military withdrawal because, "If America were to walk away from Lebanon, what chance would there be for a negotiated settlement, producing a unified democratic Lebanon?" He then related the following story as a way of emphasizing the moral justification for America's presence: "Why are we there? Well, a Lebanese mother told one of our Ambassadors that her little girl had only attended school two of the last eight years. Now, because of our presence there, she said her daughter could live a normal life."¹⁵ Reagan acknowledged that a peaceful Middle East was something that no one then living could recall, but, with resolve and patience, the United States could play a crucial role in creating just such an environment.

Reagan then turned to the events in Grenada. He explained that the small Caribbean island was under martial law imposed by communist insurgents and that a "twenty-four-hour shoot-to-kill curfew" was in effect. Not only was the freedom of all native Grenadians in jeopardy, but, of equal importance, nearly one thousand American citizens—mostly young medical students—were trapped on the island. He explained that surrounding countries simply did not have the capacity to restore liberty to Grenada, and thus the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States and other nations appealed to the U.S. for military assistance. He argued, "These small, peaceful nations needed our help. Three of them don't have armies at all, and the others have very limited forces. The legitimacy of their request, plus my own concern for our citizens, dictated my decision."¹⁶ By most measures, the intervention in Grenada was a success. Nineteen U.S. soldiers lost their lives, but the American medical students were rescued, and the island was brought back into the fold of free, democratic nations.

Later, Reagan reflected further on the U.S. obligation to send armed forces to Grenada and on the broader significance of the vic-

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada, October 27, 1983," in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*, 190, 191.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192, 193.

tory on that island. In an address at the 1985 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) he explained, “We only did our duty, as a responsible neighbor and a lover of peace, the day we went in and returned the government to the people and rescued our own students. We restored that island to liberty. Yes, it’s only a small island, but that’s what the world is made of—small islands yearning for freedom.”¹⁷ In *An American Life*, he explained, “The people of Grenada greeted our soldiers much as the people of France and Italy welcomed our GIs after they liberated them from Nazism at the end of World War II. . . . There were no YANKEE GO HOME signs on Grenada, just an outpouring of love and appreciation from tens of thousands of people—most of its population—and banners proclaiming GOD BLESS AMERICA.”¹⁸ Grenada was for him another link in the chain of American foreign policy successes that reinforced his belief in America’s global mission.

“What the world is made of—small islands yearning for freedom.”

During his presidency Reagan also spoke often about the moral necessity of supporting Nicaraguan freedom fighters in their conflict against the Sandinistas. In his 1985 CPAC speech he placed his desire for continued assistance to the Contras in the following context: “I’ve spoken recently of the freedom fighters of Nicaragua. You know the truth about them. You know who they’re fighting and why. They are the moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance. We cannot turn away from them, for the struggle here is not right versus left; it is right versus wrong.”¹⁹ In *An American Life* he wrote as follows about the growing involvement of the United States in Nicaragua: “In time, the CIA began organizing these freedom fighters into the Contras, a military fighting force that, with our aid and support, undertook the task of bringing democracy to Nicaragua in the same way that the freedom fighters who led the American Revolution brought democracy to our people.”²⁰ Reagan himself rather than his speechwriters had created this analogy between the Contras and the Continental Army of the American Revolution. It shaped his understanding of the American obligation to support

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985,” in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*, 276.

¹⁸ Reagan, *An American Life*, 457. Capitalized text in the original.

¹⁹ Reagan, “Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, March 1, 1985,” in *Speaking My Mind*, 277.

²⁰ Reagan, *An American Life*, 477.

“History has shown that democratic nations do not start wars.”

freedom in Nicaragua and strengthened his commitment.²¹

Reagan believed that pursuing his vision for American foreign policy would contribute substantially to the prospects for peace among nations. In his 1985 Address on the Geneva Summit he defined peace in the following manner: “When we speak of peace, we should not mean just the absence of war. True peace rests on the pillars of individual freedom, human rights, national self-determination, and respect for the rule of law.” He knew this because, “History has shown that democratic nations do not start wars.”²² The United States was proof that this notion was no mere theory. To him it was the most peaceful and democratic nation in the world. It never started wars, and it only fought them when there was no other choice. In his 1986 State of the Union Address he outlined the means he would use to achieve a peaceful world: “We know that peace follows in freedom’s path and conflicts erupt when the will of the people is denied. So, we must prepare for peace not only by reducing weapons but by bolstering prosperity, liberty, and democracy however and wherever we can.”²³ In Reagan’s imagination America’s crowning achievement would be lasting world peace.

Reagan argued that the moral support and assistance that America offered the world began to pay dividends during his presidency. In public speeches and private writings, he marveled at the sheer quantity of new democratic governments that emerged during the 1980s. In his 1987 Address to the U.N. General Assembly, he explained that democracy and freedom were growing in countries like the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Haiti. He remarked that a decade earlier “only a third of the people of Latin America

²¹ In *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, Lou Cannon writes, “According to Peggy Noonan, the famous comparison of the contras to the ragged armies of Continentals who had worn down and eventually defeated a militarily superior British force originated with Reagan, not with the speechwriters. In Reagan’s mind, the description of the contras as ‘the moral equal of the Founding Fathers’ was not an analogy designed to manipulate public opinion but an actual explanation of events.” See Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 317.

²² Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Upcoming U.S.–Soviet Summit in Geneva, November 14, 1985,” in *Speaking My Mind*, 249, 251.

²³ Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, February 4, 1986,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1986 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to June 27, 1986* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1988), 129.

and the Caribbean lived in democracies or in countries that were turning to democracy; today over 90 percent do." As important to him as the quantity of emerging democracies was that the "simple, ordinary people" of the world were leading this "worldwide movement to democracy."²⁴ The Ivans and Anyas of the world were taking action and claiming the rights to which they were entitled.

About the importance of these ordinary people to the global campaign for peace, liberty, and self-government, Reagan remarked:

These simple people are the giants of the Earth, the true builders of the world and shapers of the centuries to come. And if indeed they triumph, as I believe they will, we will at last know a world of peace and freedom, opportunity and hope, and, yes, of democracy—a world in which the spirit of mankind at last conquers the old familiar enemies of famine, disease, tyranny, and war.

For those in the audience representing governments that stood in the way of the realization of such a world, he had the following advice: "Isn't it better to listen to the people's hopes now rather than their curses later?" He then concluded his remarks by saying that, for all of the differences among the nations present, "there is one common hope that brought us all to make this common pilgrimage: the hope that mankind will one day beat its swords into plowshares, the hope of peace."²⁵

The terms upon which a peaceful world could be realized formed the core of the foreign policy vision under examination. Ronald Reagan was strongly prone to sweeping, sentimental, even naïve-looking images and ideas.

But in his presidential speeches Reagan sometimes also stressed specific national security concerns, strategic interests, and openness to negotiation with other nations. In the previously mentioned 1983 Address to Congress on Central America, for example, he stated that the prospect of political instability in countries such as El Salvador and Nicaragua, closer to the United States than many Americans perhaps realized, was a serious security concern. He also warned of the effects upon U.S. foreign trade and military deployment capability should American access to the Panama Canal

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the 42d Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, New York, September 21, 1987," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1987 (In Two Books), Book II—July 4 to December 31, 1987* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), 1058.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1059.

be compromised.²⁶ Especially during his second presidential term, he made substantial progress in negotiations with the Soviet Union towards nuclear arms reduction—despite ideological differences between it and the U.S. In the same address in which he related the story about Ivan and Anya, he explained his openness to U.S.–Soviet negotiations in the following way: “The fact that neither of us likes the other system is no reason to refuse to talk. Living in this nuclear age makes it imperative that we do talk.”²⁷ On occasion, he also spoke of peace in ways that were markedly different from his more rosy statements. In some speeches, he described peace as “not the absence of conflict,” but as “the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means.”²⁸ Yet, although considerations of this more practical, limited type were sometimes on his mind and were sometimes publicly articulated, they tended to recede behind and be subordinated to the kind of imagination that has been described above: the vision of a free, democratic world at peace made possible by American leadership and help.

An Alternative View of American Political Thought and Foreign Policy

Jefferson and Paine frequently invoked.

An analysis of Reagan’s salient foreign policy themes can begin by examining his belief that his ideas represented a long-standing American tradition. During his presidency he repeatedly invoked various figures from the American past—especially Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine—to elaborate his understanding of America’s moral commitment to global freedom and democracy. He often quoted these words from Paine’s *Common Sense*: “We have it within our power to begin the world over again.”²⁹ He used this quotation in order to inspire his audience with a sense of America’s power and ability to transform the world.

²⁶ Reagan, “Address on Central America Before a Joint Session of the Congress, April 27, 1983,” in *Speaking My Mind*, 147.

²⁷ Reagan, “Address to the Nation and Other Countries on the United States–Soviet Relations, January 16, 1984,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1984*, 42.

²⁸ Ronald Reagan, “Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College, Eureka, Illinois, May 9, 1982,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1982 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to July 2, 1982* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1983), 583.

²⁹ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, March 8, 1983,” in *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*, 180.

He referred even more frequently to Jefferson, a man whom he deeply revered. In the Declaration of Independence, which he attributed primarily to Jefferson's mind, he saw both the supreme exposition of America's revolutionary cause and the definitive articulation of the universal rights of all humanity. In a 1988 speech he argued, "A great future is ours and the world's if we but remember the power of those words Mr. Jefferson penned not just for Americans but for all humanity: 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'"³⁰ He often quoted from this passage—particularly the human equality clause—when explaining the universality of American ideals and the moral imperative behind his vision.

Reagan also quoted from John Quincy Adams on several occasions. In his 1986 speech on the then recently concluded U.S.–Soviet Summit Meeting in Iceland, he referred to Adams' 1821 Fourth of July Address: "'Whenever the standard of freedom and independence has been . . . unfurled, there will be America's heart, her benedictions, and her prayers,' John Quincy Adams once said. He spoke well of our destiny as a nation. My fellow Americans, we're honored by history, entrusted by destiny with the oldest dream of humanity—the dream of lasting peace and human freedom."³¹ He used these and other quotations to convey to Americans his sense of how deeply ingrained his own vision was in their history. In his mind, it was the golden cord running through the American foreign policy tradition, from the Founding, through the nineteenth century, through two world wars, to the present.

Reagan here identifies an important strain of thought and imagination in the American past. With different degrees of emphasis and nuance, contemporary scholars such as Robert Kagan, Walter A. McDougall, and Richard M. Gamble have also noted this intellectual and intuitive tendency in American history. Although they draw different conclusions about the theoretical adequacy and representative status of such a vision of America in the world,

³⁰ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, December 16, 1988," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1988-89 (In Two Books), Book II—July 2, 1988 to January 19, 1989* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 1638.

³¹ Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Return from Meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev, October 13, 1986," in *Speaking My Mind*, 316.

they acknowledge that Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams, and, for that matter, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, Timothy Dwight, and a number of other Americans believed strongly in America's future greatness and believed that their nation was special—perhaps even chosen to do or to be something extraordinary in human history.³² But, to paraphrase the twentieth century historian John Lukacs, while Reagan's claims of historical continuity appear to be true, they are perhaps not true enough.³³ He does not seem very sensitive to what another historian, Herbert Butterfield, terms the "unlike-nesses" of history.³⁴ To compare Reagan's foreign-policy vision to the views held by leading early Americans is to notice major dissonances.

It is here helpful to return for a moment to John Quincy Adams and his 1821 Fourth of July Address. In many ways, it embodied the tensions in American foreign policy thought and action during the early decades of the republic. Reagan correctly quoted Adams as claiming that the United States hoped for the global spread of liberty and democracy, and that it would rejoice at each nation's movement in that direction. Further, in a manner similar to Reagan's, Adams described the Declaration of Independence as "the first solemn declaration by a nation of the only *legitimate* foundation of civil government. It was the cornerstone of a new fabric, destined to cover the surface of the globe." About America's

³² Robert Kagan, for example, has argued forcefully for a strong degree of continuity between a neoconservative foreign policy vision, similar in many respects to Reagan's, and that of the earliest days of the American Republic. See "Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c. 1776," *World Affairs Journal* (Spring 2008), available at <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/2008%20-%20Spring/full-neocon.html>. Accessed on 20 May 2008.

Walter A. McDougall and Richard M. Gamble acknowledge this strain of thought, but they also identify many ideas that point in a different direction from, and perhaps acted as a restraint upon, the more expansive notions Kagan and Reagan cite as representative of the American foreign policy past. See Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), and Richard M. Gamble, "Savior Nation: Woodrow Wilson and the Gospel of Service," *Humanitas* Vol. 14, no. 1 (2001), 4-22; "'The Last and Brightest Empire of Time': Timothy Dwight and America as Voegelin's 'Authoritative Present,' 1771-1787," *Humanitas* Vol. 20, nos. 1 & 2 (2007), 13-35; and *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2003).

³³ John Lukacs, *June 1941: Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2006), 9.

³⁴ Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, Reprint (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1968), 10.

political contribution to the rest of the world, Adams claimed, “America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature, and the only lawful foundations of government.”³⁵ Such comments lend credence to Reagan’s claims of historical continuity.

But there is another important part to this speech that Reagan does not mention when he quotes from Adams. Immediately following the comments Reagan quoted above, Adams argued:

But [America] goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from *liberty* to *force*. . . . She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.³⁶

Here Adams appeared to be *rejecting* just the type of foreign policy mission that Reagan suggested was quintessentially American during this period of history. Adams also seemed to be doing so not upon grounds of logistical difficulty or practical inexpediency, but out of deep moral-political concerns. In this instance he argued that an interventionist type of foreign policy should be avoided because it would come at the cost of America’s republican soul.

Another American thinker who voiced similar concerns was Orestes A. Brownson. In *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny*, he argued that American promotion of liberty and democracy around the world would actually produce great disorder in foreign lands unprepared for such institutions. This view was based upon his belief that each state or nation has what he called a written and an unwritten constitution. In the United States, for example, the unwritten constitution is the complex web of historically and organically developed legal precedents and

Type of foreign policy mission favored by Reagan rejected by John Quincy Adams out of deep moral political concerns.

³⁵ John Quincy Adams, “Address of July 4, 1821” in *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Speeches & Papers*, edited by Walter Lafeber (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 44. Emphasis in the original.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 45. Emphasis in the original.

rights, religious and political practices and ideas, and other cultural habits and mores inherited from Britain and the larger Western tradition. According to Brownson, this unwritten constitution was what gave the United States its national identity and made it a truly sovereign entity. The written constitution, in contrast, was an expression of this preexisting sovereign will in which the people give themselves a government. Examples of America's written constitutions were the Articles of Confederation and the 1787 U.S. Constitution.

Brownson held that America's written constitution had been successful because it was in agreement with the nation's unwritten constitution. But, he claimed, it would lead to disaster if other nations, with different unwritten constitutions, tried to adopt it as their own. In *The American Republic*, he wrote:

The constitution of the government must grow out of the constitution of the state, and accord with the genius, the character, the habits, customs, and wants of the people, or it will not work well, or tend to secure the legitimate ends of government. . . . You must take the state as it is, and develop your governmental constitution from it, and harmonize it with it. Where there is a discrepancy between the two constitutions, the government has no support in the state, in the organic people, or nation, and can sustain itself only by corruption or physical force.³⁷

There is another side to Brownson's political thought that bears a closer resemblance to Reagan's main beliefs about America's historical significance, but his important, practically very significant, view of the relationship between written and unwritten constitutions, which had been held intuitively also by the Framers, was absent from Reagan's conception of what U.S. foreign policy and human societies ought to be.

These dissonances are reflective of even deeper differences between Reagan and the leading early Americans. The American Framers put a much stronger emphasis than he did on the ethical duality of human nature. In *The Federalist*, Publius articulated this understanding well in No. 55 when he wrote, "As there is a degree of depravity in mankind, which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust: so there are other qualities in human

³⁷ Orestes A. Brownson, *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny*, edited by Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2003), 93-94.

nature, which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence.”³⁸ John Adams expressed a similar view of the divided nature of the human self. In a letter to his cousin Samuel, he wrote, “‘The love of liberty,’ you say, ‘is interwoven in the soul of man.’ So it is, according to La Fontaine, in that of a wolf; and I doubt whether it be much more rational, generous, or social, in one than in the other, until in man it is enlightened by experience, reflection, education, and civil and political institutions”³⁹ Very few of the Framers were drawn to the belief that goodness was humanity’s natural state or that it could be produced by certain political and social arrangements. Rather, virtue was a possibility that required protracted and often painful effort. The individual had to learn to restrain the lower inclinations of human nature in concrete action. Those who were able to do so were considered people of character and worthy of admiration.

*Reagan
much more
optimistic
about human
nature than
the American
Framers.*

Publius had people of such character in mind when, in *Federalist* No. 57, he argued that a constitutional republic, if it is to function well, requires a preponderance of “men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society.”⁴⁰ The Framers’ view of human nature also led them to believe much more deeply than Reagan in the need for government as a permanent, necessary restraint upon individual and social disorder. In *Federalist* No. 51, Publius wrote, “But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”⁴¹ John Adams is also instructive on this point. In *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, he wrote, “It would be as reasonable to say, that all government is altogether unnecessary, because it is the duty of all men to deny themselves, and obey the laws of nature and the laws of God. However clear the duty, we know it will not be performed; and, therefore, it is our duty to enter into associations, and compel one another to do

³⁸ “Federalist No. 55,” in *The Federalist*, The Gideon Edition, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, edited by George W. Carey (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2001), 291.

³⁹ John Adams, “To Samuel Adams, New York, 18 October, 1790,” in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, edited by George W. Carey (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2000), 668.

⁴⁰ “Federalist No. 57,” in *The Federalist*, 295.

⁴¹ “Federalist No. 51,” in *The Federalist*, 269.

some of it.”⁴² The Framers thought that the common good could emerge only through the efforts of individuals and society at large to restrain their lower impulses while acting upon those of a higher quality. They believed that, without the diffusion of cultural mores and ethical norms conducive to the responsible practice of liberty and constitutional rule, the American republic would ultimately dissolve into either anarchy or despotism.

Reagan was partly aware of and sometimes expressed ideas about human nature and politics similar to those of John Adams and Publius. It is also the case that some prominent American figures just before or after the creation of the republic sometimes made statements that resembled Reagan’s more characteristically optimistic and expansive ideas. Nevertheless, a careful historical comparison reveals considerable tension between Reagan’s vision of America and its international role and the core beliefs of the leading men in the early decades of the United States. Like Reagan, these men did use terms like human nature, liberty, freedom, democracy, constitution, and America, but they gave them a much different meaning. This is because individual ideas—to say nothing about entire systems of political theory—emerge out of and are connected by a general view of life that is largely intuitive. Ideas are conceptual expressions of how we have come to see the world, a process in which the imagination played a central role. The early Americans “saw” reality rather differently than Reagan.

Up to this point, the word imagination has been used sparingly and mainly as a synonym for vision and intuition, and so it is. But the meaning of the word now has to be given further attention. The imagination can be seen as lying at the base of how we perceive reality. The source of the difference between Reagan’s general outlook and the one that predominated in the early American republic can be more clearly seen by attending to the imaginative qualities that informed and structure them. The nature and significance of Reagan’s sentimental predilections can then be more fully appreciated and understood.

⁴² John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, 243-44.

The Imagination: Its Varieties and Their Implication for Politics

For centuries the imagination was regarded in the Western world as a passive mental faculty absorbing and rearranging externally existing wholes and images received through the senses. From the romantic period to the present, however, its role has been reconsidered. Many aestheticians, in particular, have accentuated the *creative* role of the imagination. The contemporary scholar Claes G. Ryn stresses this revised conception of the power of intuition and its importance for understanding politics, while denying any necessary connection between it and romantic emotionalism and dreaming. The imagination constitutes pre-intellectual, intuitive wholes, Ryn argues. Most basically it gives us a general sense of the nature of existence. Intellectual reflection on reality is oriented by that intuition. In "Imaginative Origins of Modernity: Life as Daydream and Nightmare," he writes, "[The imagination] is an active, visionary power, giving a fundamental, if non-ideational, coherence to life. Most generally, the imagination constitutes an overall sense, concrete and experiential, of what life is like. Such intuition precedes thought in the sense of systematic reflection, ideas and definitions."⁴³ People of strong, captivating imagination in the arts and elsewhere pull many others into their view of existence, but their vision can be illusory, even fly in the face of everything hitherto known about human nature, Ryn contends. Whether there is a strong bond between a person's intuition of life and the "real world" depends on the type of imagination.⁴⁴ Sometimes highly appealing imagination flagrantly distorts the terms of human existence and has disastrous consequences.

Ryn is indebted to the early twentieth century scholar Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), who argued that intuitive vision can be of two general types, moral and idyllic (or romantic). Though never moralistic or didactic, the moral imagination is centered in the awareness that human nature is inherently and chronically divided between higher and lower impulses and that a better life requires much moral effort. Human beings are capable of creating decent personal and social circumstances, but, because of their divided nature and weaknesses, they need to have modest expectations. Politics at its best can achieve some nobility—a measure of order,

Moral imagination centered in awareness that man is divided between higher and lower impulses.

⁴³ Claes G. Ryn, "The Imaginative Origins of Modernity: Life as Daydream and Nightmare," *Humanitas* Vol. 10, no. 2 (1997), 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

justice, and civilization—but it has to be a limited enterprise. The kind of imagination that can contribute to this admirable but realistic goal is what Babbitt called “an imagination disciplined to the facts” of existence.⁴⁵ Much of the foreign policy thinking and general political thought of J. Q. Adams, Publius, John Adams, and Brownson can be seen as emanating from the moral imagination.

*Idyllic
imagination
envisions
humans as
naturally
good.*

The idyllic imagination, in contrast, is not held back by any allegations of human perversity or weakness, but invests human nature, liberty, and democracy with very different and marvelous possibilities. This kind of imagination is pervaded by emotional excess and puts forth extravagant dreams unaffected by what is actually known about human beings in history. As Babbitt described it, this is an imagination “free to wander wild in its own realm of chimeras.”⁴⁶ It envisions human beings as naturally good; it is concerned with the mass of humanity more than the individual; it longs for the diffusion of brotherhood, freedom, and equality; and it blames social and political disorder on inefficient or malevolent institutions. Babbitt regarded Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the great pioneer for this type of dreamy imagination. Admitting no enduring depravity in the human heart, this imagination pictures an idyllic future world. The latter is to be brought into being by radically reorganizing society in accordance with the cherished dream. Remove bad institutions, and freedom and general happiness will flourish. Paine’s notion of beginning the world over again is a prime example of the idyllic imagination.

The imagination inspires political views. According to Ryn and Babbitt, different qualities of imagination affect politics differently. The moral imagination can spur people into seeking liberty and political order of a kind that is actually attainable because it does not ignore or minimize the moral and other obstacles to achieving the goal. It can find ways perhaps never before considered for advancing the ethical life of society. The idyllic imagination, although it can be powerful and engaging, sets human beings up for great disappointment; it conjures up dreams that cannot be realized. Promising that a world of brotherhood can be obtained, it ultimately destroys just what it claims to seek. Babbitt explained why idyllic visions of peace, freedom, democracy, and world service are

⁴⁵ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1979), 258.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

liable to turn in practice into justifications for ruthless imperialism, war, and destruction.

A number of twentieth century scholars have drawn similar conclusions about the practical consequences of pursuing “idyllic” intuition. Eric Voegelin suggested that many in the West err when treating constitutional democracy and the good society as synonymous concepts. Like Brownson and, of course, Aristotle, he argued that goodness can inhere in different types of societies and be advanced through various forms of government. He also claimed that some societies—not just their leaders—are not good or otherwise ready for constitutional government. They cannot be made so merely by becoming democracies on parchment. In “Industrial Society in Search of Reason,” Voegelin wrote, “Unconscionable damage to millions of people throughout the world has resulted from ill-considered constitutional experiments modeled after the West.”⁴⁷ Comments like these point to serious theoretical and practical flaws in Reagan’s central vision.

In *America the Virtuous* and in other places, Claes G. Ryn has carefully examined a common contemporary American ideology and political modality that he calls the new Jacobinism.⁴⁸ Like the French Jacobins, the new, American Jacobins see their own country as destined to spread universal principles in the world. According to Ryn, the neo-Jacobins believe that America must play a crucial role in establishing freedom and democracy where they do not yet exist. As described by Ryn, these ideas spring from a quality of imagination quite similar to Reagan’s, though neo-Jacobinism may be ideologically purer and have an even more ambitious and uncompromising agenda for global change.

Ryn has criticized the lack of depth and realism of this kind of dreamy globalism. In *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World*, he contends that it places unwarranted faith in the ability of abstract and sentimental notions of universal liberty and democracy to bring about world peace. Neither are international agreements and institutions sufficient for averting conflict. Belief in them, too, overlooks the most important prerequisites for peace. About these conditions Ryn writes, “in the

⁴⁷ Eric Voegelin, “Industrial Society in Search of Reason,” in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin Vol.11: Published Essays 1953-1965*, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 186.

⁴⁸ See Claes G. Ryn, *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).

long run, political, economic, scientific, and other contacts need to be informed and shaped by a morality of self-control and by corresponding cultural discipline and sensibility." He concedes that this emphasis does not make the achievement of peace among nations easy. Discovering and cultivating the aesthetic, moral, intellectual, and spiritual common ground among different countries and civilizations presupposes a deep knowledge of one's own culture and history as well as of those of others. It also requires an understanding and acknowledgement that there is no single model of the good society; good can be realized in a variety of forms in different cultural and political situations. Whatever the circumstances, there is for Ryn no plausible substitute for moral and cultural effort. He writes, "Peace will not emerge spontaneously. . . . There are no shortcuts, such as narrowly political or economic measures, to creating genuine respect and friendliness among peoples."⁴⁹ But if Ryn is generally correct, the approaches to this goal advocated by Reagan and the neo-Jacobins may be incapable of achieving the objective and may even be counterproductive.

The ideas of Babbitt, Ryn, and Voegelin have been considered here because they draw attention to the importance of the intuitive basis of political ideas and demonstrate the dangers of an idyllic, sentimental imagination. To repeat, Ronald Reagan is not all of one piece imaginatively or intellectually. All people have somewhere in their general intuition about reality elements of both the moral and the idyllic imagination, to use Babbitt's broad general categories. A person can be said to represent the one rather than the other only in the sense that he or she tends to favor and act upon that type of imagination. The argument presented here is not that Reagan is under the sway of the idyllic-romantic imagination and no other and that this term suffices for describing how he sees the world. It has been freely admitted that other influences are discernible within his general outlook on life and politics. Nonetheless, Ronald Reagan's affinity for the kind of sentimental and romantic dreams and images that Babbitt associates with the idyllic imagination is by far the strongest in shaping his view of America's role in the world and inspiring his actions.

⁴⁹ Claes G. Ryn, *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 21, 133.

The Sentimental Imagination and Imperialism

The potential practical consequences of acting on a foreign policy imagination like Reagan's are significant and deserve more attention. Babbitt was interested in the imagination partly because he had detected a change in the imaginative patterns among Americans that explained what he perceived to be an exceedingly important yet poorly understood change in American political thinking. He believed that during his lifetime the intuitive vision of politics and human nature that had predominated among the Framers was being rapidly replaced by a new, idyllic imagination, which he called sentimental humanitarianism. The point that needs to be made is that Ronald Reagan and the typical sentimental humanitarian imagine human nature, politics, liberty, and democracy in much the same way. The sense in which these terms can be said to have been given idyllic content has been explained above and does not require further elaboration.

However, it is worth considering how Babbitt believed that the idyllic notions of sentimental humanitarians became manifest in foreign policy thinking and practice. In *Democracy and Leadership*, he wrote, "We have heard asserted in our own time the abstract right of whole populations to self-determination as something anterior to their degree of moral development. To put forward a supposed right of this kind as a part of a program for world peace is to sink to the ultimate depth of humanitarian self-deception." By self-deception Babbitt meant that the humanitarians misunderstood both the possibilities of politics in the real world and their own motives. He drew their motives out into the open when he explained, "The humanitarian would, of course, have us meddle in foreign affairs as part of his program of world service. Unfortunately, it is more difficult than he supposes to engage in such a program without getting involved in a program of world empire." Babbitt argued that, in practice, the supposedly high idealism of the humanitarians translates into an idealistic or sentimental type of imperialism.⁵⁰ President Woodrow Wilson and his idea that America should go to war to "make the world safe for democracy" offered a particularly good illustration of this brand of idealism.

Reagan had conflicting thoughts on the relationship between his foreign policy vision and empire. He often protested against charges of imperialism in his presidential speeches. In one respect,

⁵⁰ Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 248, 296.

he did not see his vision as imperial because that term meant a foreign policy of land acquisition benefiting one's nation at the expense of other countries and peoples. This is a conventional way of thinking about imperialism. The activities of various past empires carving out colonies around the globe correspond to this notion. Reagan was never interested in acquiring colonies in that sense. No new territory was annexed or added to the United States during his presidency. In supporting democratic movements around the world he also rarely committed the U.S. military to combat. When he did, as in Lebanon and Grenada, it lasted for months, not years, and he deployed a few thousand, not a few hundred thousand, American soldiers.

But is not a different type of imperialism present in the sentimental foreign policy vision described above? It is important that this imperialism finally be drawn into the open. For too long it has been overlooked or ignored, especially by Reagan's admirers.

*For Reagan,
America
"an empire
of ideals."*

In his 1992 speech to the Republican National Convention, Reagan himself actually conceded the imperialism in question, admitting a good deal more than he and many of his listeners probably realized. He said, "There was a time when empires were defined by land mass, subjugated peoples, and military might. But the United States is unique, because we are an empire of ideals."⁵¹ The image of America as an empire of ideals captures the essence of the predominant part of his foreign policy vision, unifying its various images and ideas into a complete and captivating whole. It is a symbol of his strong desire for the global diffusion of a certain way of life. The symbol demands acceptance of certain abstract ideas and the establishment of corresponding political and social institutions. The longing for this new world pervaded his statements on foreign policy in presidential speeches and other writing.

In a 1983 address in which he outlined his vision, Reagan claimed, "It's not an arrogant demand that others adopt our ways. It's a realistic belief in the relative and proven success of the American experiment." About those who were hesitant to undertake his campaign for liberty and democracy, he made the following remarks:

Some people argue that any attempt to do that represents in-

⁵¹ Ronald Reagan, "Empire of Ideals, August 17, 1992," in *The Greatest Speeches of Ronald Reagan* (West Palm Beach, FL: Newsmax.com Inc., 2001), 268.

terference in the affairs of others, an attempt to impose our way of life. Well, it's nothing of the kind. Every nation has the right to determine its own destiny. But to deny the democratic values and that they have any relevance to the developing world today, or to the millions of people who are oppressed by Communist domination, is to reject the universal significance of the basic, timeless credo that all men are created equal and that they're endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. People living today in Africa, in Latin America, in Central Asia, possess the same inalienable right to choose their own governors and decide their own destiny as we do.⁵²

He combined thoughts about the universal significance and sovereignty of the Declaration of Independence, which he referred to in this manner in this speech and in many others, with similar notions about the global importance and authority of the U.S. Constitution.

In a speech given at the 1987 "We the People" Celebration, which commemorated the 200th anniversary of the drafting of the American Constitution, Reagan argued:

One scholar described our Constitution as a kind of covenant. It is a covenant we've made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind. . . . It is an oath of allegiance to that in man that is truly universal, that core of being that exists before and beyond distinctions of class, race, or national origin. It is a dedication of faith to the humanity we all share, that part of each man and woman that most closely touches on the divine.⁵³

In his imagination, the ideas contained in the Declaration and the Constitution were universally applicable. So too were the corresponding institutions and political arrangements, such as those that he mentioned in his speech to the British Parliament and elsewhere. The United States had a mandate, a moral obligation, to make real the possibilities for global political and social order. No one needed to fear American power, because it would only be used to serve the true interests of all and to realize their dreams for the world. This is what Reagan had in mind when referring to America

Ideas in the U.S. Declaration and Constitution viewed as universally applicable.

⁵² Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the American Legion, February 22, 1983," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1983 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to July 1, 1983* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1984), 265-66, 270.

⁵³ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the 'We the People' Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 17, 1987," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1987 (In Two Books), Book II—July 4 to December 31, 1987* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1989), 1042.

Sentimental imperialism.

as an empire of ideals. The image expresses a *sentimental* variety of imperialism, which, as any student of Babbitt will readily recognize, easily transforms itself into a justification for asserting American military might.

Needed: A New Vision for American Foreign Policy

In his last State of the Union Address, Reagan said, "No legacy would make me more proud than leaving in place a bipartisan consensus for the cause of world freedom, a consensus that prevents a paralysis of American power from ever occurring again."⁵⁴ It seems as if he got his wish. The popularity of his vision has not diminished with time. It was mentioned in the introduction to this article that President Bush and Senator McCain have openly acknowledged him as a source of inspiration for their own thinking about foreign policy. Scholars and journalists have also adopted aspects of his worldview and have used them to advocate an interventionist and indeed rather aggressive foreign policy. In a 1996 *Foreign Affairs* article, William Kristol and Robert Kagan argued that America's foreign policy needed to recapture the "moral clarity" of the Reagan years, and that the role of the United States in the world should be one of "benevolent global hegemony." The article was titled, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy."⁵⁵

Obama's foreign policy vision similar to Reagan's.

The enduring appeal of a Reagan-style vision is not confined to members of the Republican Party or to so-called conservatives. Reagan's idea of America as the servant of humanity was foreshadowed by the foreign policy idealism of a Democratic president early in the twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson. President Barack Obama, who has some political ideas very different from those of Bush, McCain, and Reagan, has expressed a view of American foreign policy strikingly similar to Reagan's in its underlying imaginative quality. Obama, like Reagan, has referred to the United States as a "shining beacon on a hill," and, echoing Lincoln, as "the last, best hope of Earth."⁵⁶ During his 2008 presidential campaign,

⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union, January 25, 1988," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1988 (In Two Books), Book I—January 1 to July 1, 1988* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 90.

⁵⁵ William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 75, No. 4 (July/August 1996), 27, 20.

⁵⁶ See "The First Presidential Debate" (Oxford, MS: 9/26/2008), available at <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/first-presiden->

Obama gave a number of foreign policy speeches, including one titled "The American Moment." In this speech he decried parts of the foreign policy of the Bush administration, especially the war in Iraq, but he cautioned Americans against the temptation to "cede our claim of leadership in world affairs," because "such an abandonment of our leadership is a mistake we must not make. America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America."

As Reagan often did in his foreign policy speeches, Obama has sought to inspire his audience with a new sense of national mission abroad. He has reminded his listeners of the supposedly long-standing and noble tradition of U.S. world leadership and identified a number of America's past successes in playing this global role. Further, he has argued that if his vision of renewed American leadership around the world were enacted, extraordinary progress would be within reach on a long list of international problems, ranging from Iraq to global warming. Contemplating the grand possibilities of American leadership, he has propounded an overarching view of the American present that would have resonated not only with Ronald Reagan but also with Thomas Paine: "The American moment has not passed. The American moment is here. And like generations before us, we will seize that moment, and begin the world anew."⁵⁷ These images and ideas, as well as others from public speeches, suggest that in Obama's imagination the United States is still the indispensable nation, necessary for realizing global peace, security, democracy and freedom; it is still the hope of the world. It appears that for him a legitimate American foreign policy will have that inspiration.

Although other developments over the last two decades would deserve attention, the general trend in American foreign policy since the Reagan presidency has been to combine much of his sentimental foreign policy vision with an ever-growing comfort with facets of traditional imperialism. It appears that the part of Reagan's legacy that has been discussed in this article has done much to prepare the American imagination for the tasks of acquiring and maintaining an empire and for accepting a generally intervention-

tial-debate.html. Accessed on 3 December 2008; and Barack Obama, "The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs," (Chicago, IL: 4/23/2007), available at http://www.barackobama.com/2007/04/23/the_american_moment_remarks_to.php. Accessed on 3 December 2008.

⁵⁷ Obama, "The American Moment."

ist mind-set. Reagan helped to sanctify efforts of this kind as lofty expressions of morality. Nevertheless, as other historical figures and scholars suggest, a Reagan-style imagination, no matter how enthralling or popular it may be as rhetoric, will present great dangers, especially when put into practice. Is it presumptuous to suggest that the foreign-policy imagination of one of America's most popular presidents was deeply flawed and should be largely abandoned lest it continue to harm and perhaps destroy American constitutional government and exacerbate tensions and conflicts around the world?

The conclusion reached does not amount to a general assessment of Ronald Reagan. To recognize that Reagan was strongly prone to a dubious form of imagination is not to dispute all of his accomplishments. It is possible to argue that, in the particular historical circumstances in which he and the United States found themselves, his way of imagining the world may in a paradoxical way have helped him to create support for and achieve seemingly commendable objectives. For example, he arguably forced the crumbling of the Soviet Union. But the Cold War also sharply restricted Ronald Reagan's freedom of movement. It stood in the way of any attempt broadly to implement his vision. Hence his foreign policy imagination could not fully reveal its practical ramifications, including its potentially pernicious consequences. But after the crumbling of the Soviet Union the United States was the only superpower. Now the historical circumstances were more favorable for acting out a foreign policy vision of global democracy and freedom. Reagan's foreign policy themes were taken up most especially by the so-called neoconservatives who, because they were well placed in government, the media, think tanks, and academia, could effectively promote them. They propounded an ambitious agenda for spreading American principles in the world.⁵⁸ The Bush doctrine may be seen as an attempt finally to enact the full scope of Reagan's vision. Though Reagan might have questioned particulars of Bush's foreign policy, perhaps the latter can be seen as an example of the practical consequences likely to flow from a Reaganesque imagination.

To formulate a more modest and realistic foreign policy vision is a challenge for what Babbitt called the moral imagination. Though reorienting American political intuition and thought will

⁵⁸ See Ryn, *America the Virtuous*.

be difficult, it is not impossible. Study of the imagination and ideas of the Framing period will be vital to rearticulating the best of the American tradition. A broader and deeper knowledge of that tradition can be creatively applied to the circumstances of the present. Americans also need to become more critically aware of the less admirable aspects of their self-image. Armed with an improved understanding of previous incarnations of the moral and the sentimental imagination, Americans will be better able to seize opportunities for new instantiations of the former and to resist temptations to embrace new manifestations of the latter.