

Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan: Similarities and Differences

By Faith Whittlesey

I knew the real Ronald Reagan. In 1976, I was a single mother and young politician who risked everything to support him against Gerald Ford, a sitting Republican president. Four years later I helped deliver the key state of Pennsylvania to President Reagan, then I served beside him in the White House and as one of his ambassadors. He was not the avuncular, subdued great man worn down by age and illness that the media present to us today through a rosy filter of nostalgia. That caricature of Ronald Reagan is one Bill Clinton and even Barack Obama invoke, when it suits them.

I knew Ronald Reagan when TV pundits in the US *and* Europe presented him as a cold-hearted extremist who was longing to take away food and shelter from America's poor and risk nuclear cataclysm. I was with him when the Rockefeller Republicans dismissed him as a former B-rated movie star and crackpot warmonger. Reagan's supporters were smeared as rubes, nativists, and religious fanatics. Reagan was a man who bucked the GOP "wise men" over and over again, until he won. Then he restored America's élan, our economy, and brought down the Berlin Wall. Donald Trump's widespread--and bipartisan--support is being explained in the same way as was Reagan's in the European and, regrettably, Swiss media, which accept too quickly the accounts they pick up from US media in New York and Washington.

Ronald Reagan could get angry, although he rarely did. Early in the 1980 campaign, when party regulars at a debate tried to silence him by threatening to turn off his microphone, he confronted them. "I paid for this microphone." They backed away. They weren't used to politicians with backbone and the confidence to stand up to the party elite, even as they were losing across the country and surrendering on every issue—from détente with the Soviet Union to the unsustainable expansion of the welfare state. The Republican party of Nelson Rockefeller and Gerald Ford saw itself as in the business of managing America's decline, just a little more slowly and prudently than the Democrats would. Ronald Reagan saw another way, and it unsettled some people. But it also mobilized others and resulted in landslide victories for Republicans. Reagan cleared the way for Lech Walesa and Pope John Paul II to dismantle the Communist empire at its foundation, and he realigned American politics for the rest of the century. His tax cuts and down-sizing of government regulation laid the foundation for a period of great growth and prosperity.

Today, America's two parties no longer share much common ground about what America even is, much less how she ought to be governed. In the past seven years of political and social upheaval, we have seen the repeated abuse of constitutional guarantees and authority by activist judges and an overreaching Executive Branch. We have experienced economic stasis and incoherence in foreign

policy. In the process, America's influence has been significantly diminished and friends--like Switzerland--have been mistreated and alienated.

The leading candidate of the Democratic party declares that Americans who belong to the Republican party are her "enemies," while the president issues extralegal amnesties for illegal aliens, and rewards mayors of "sanctuary" cities who flout the immigration laws which he swore to uphold. It isn't surprising--nor should it surprise or alarm Europeans--that large numbers of Americans, of all ages and social and economic classes, are refusing to take direction from the entrenched party and media elites who are rich enough to insulate themselves from the consequences of the cultural chaos the US is experiencing. This frustration parallels the frustration that many citizens in the countries of Europe are feeling as they confront the costs and social consequences of decisions and events that are placing the Schengen Accord under such stress.

Trump speaks to a similar American body politic that is also frustrated and doesn't believe anything any professional politicians say. They believe America needs a president who is not beholden to special interest groups – that is why Trump's self-funding candidacy resonates so well with them. They also want a president who is committed single-mindedly to the goal of creating prosperity for all Americans, while maintaining traditional values based on the delicate balance between order and liberty. They believe we need a leader who is unwilling to risk our country's future on the social experiment of effectively open borders—not even to please the high priests of anti-Western multiculturalism, or corporate CEOs who profit from cheap labor in a shadow economy, or avoid the (false) criticism that secure borders are based on racist impulses. They want a man who will protect Americans at every economic level, not merely high-dollar investors with getaway homes on foreign shores. Americans are also war-weary and want a president who promises better care for grievously wounded veterans of the Iraq War Trump repeatedly calls a tragic mistake.

I appreciate that Donald Trump's personality and temperament differ from Ronald Reagan's. There are valid reservations to Trump from reasonable people, as there are to other candidates. But the objections we are hearing from the pundits in the US to Mr. Trump, and which are now being echoed in Europe, are conspicuously similar to those we heard about Ronald Reagan, who was regarded by media groups --incorrectly -- as an unsophisticated low-brow and, in foreign policy, uninformed neophyte.

There are many differences between the two men in deportment, background, style, experience, personal history, and, notably, how they approach political opponents, but we should not overlook striking similarities. Reagan was once pro-choice, before experience and reflection changed his mind about abortion on demand. He once favored high immigration, until he saw what it was doing to our country. He was accused of being overly simplistic, lacking substance. Ronald Reagan's stated plan to win the Cold War was stark: We win, they lose. He made his share of enemies among the powerful—the fiercest being in his own party. In the

media, there were legions of critics, full of mockery and vitriol. But, he was a brilliant choice for president.

Like President Reagan, Mr. Trump is an ex-Democrat. In his role as a highly successful entrepreneur, he has contributed to Democratic politicians over the years and even said nice things about some of them--this is taken as a sign of inconsistency. Those who know the current American scene understand that prominent business people today contribute to both parties as a kind of insurance against being singled out by the regulators and enforcers of the big tax and regulatory bureaucracies. For these very individuals and the firms they represent, such contributions and compliments are, sadly, regarded as normal costs of doing business.

Many Americans who support Donald Trump started as idealistic liberals and Democrats. Many would still be if their original party of choice had not veered so dramatically away from core principles to embrace divisive identity politics and fiscal irresponsibility. In Switzerland and most of Europe there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the forces in the US that have led to the emergence of, first, the so-called Tea Party and, now, Donald Trump. What most supporters of both movements would offer as their ideal definitions of sound governing arrangements and good economic, and immigration, policy quite simply best describe one other country . . . Switzerland. For instance, among those rallying to Trump, a proposal for a debt brake, such as the Swiss people enacted, would quickly find support.

As an ex-Democrat myself, I believe that the same factors that led me to reject Gerald Ford for Ronald Reagan in 1976 may be at play today. Millions of American voters are coalescing around Donald Trump for a reason. They have lost confidence in a bankrupted US leadership elite. Brash, sometimes bombastic, often changeable, in ways imperfect, but always direct and plain-spoken, Donald Trump has communicated credibility to that public that engenders trust that he will work hard for them to solve real problems. Like Reagan, Trump has developed a personal bond with millions of Americans. I have no doubt a Trump administration would also prove congenial to Switzerland because there would be an inherent appreciation for Swiss virtues, Swiss business practices, and Swiss sovereignty. I know Donald Trump personally. He values friends.