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CHATTE RBOX

Ronald Reagan, Party Animal

The man who taught Republicans to be irresponsible.

By Timothy Noah

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I've registered as a Republican exactly once in my life. The year was 1980, and Ronald Reagan, who died today at the age of 93, was seeking the GOP nomination for president. Teddy Kennedy was challenging President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination, and in Massachusetts, where I then lived, Kennedy was certain to win the primary. Better to cast my vote where it could do some good—in favor of John Anderson, who at that point was running as a Republican, and who seemed the only candidate capable of denying Reagan the nomination. Reagan was dangerous. He wanted to eliminate vast portions of the government indiscriminately, and he wanted to commit the military to ill-considered interventions abroad.

I couldn't have been more wrong. As an antigovernment crusader and as a warmonger, Reagan turned out to be all bark and no bite. In his [first inaugural address](#), Reagan said:

It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people.

But that didn't happen. As Michael Kinsley has [observed](#), after Reagan's two terms, spending by the federal government was one-quarter higher, *factoring out inflation*, than when he got there; the federal civilian workforce had increased from 2.8 million to 3 million; and federal spending, as a share of Gross Domestic Product, had decreased by one percentage point to 21.2 percent. "If Ronald Reagan and his 'Reaganauts' could only slow down the growth of government spending, not reverse it or eliminate wasteful programs, what hope is there for any other conservative president?" complained the conservative Heritage Foundation soon after Reagan left office. The only major government agency Reagan managed to eliminate was the Civil Aeronautics Board, which didn't have much to do after the Carter administration deregulated the airline industry. Fittingly, the [Ronald Reagan Building](#) on Pennsylvania Avenue, completed 10 years after Reagan left office, today houses 5,000 government employees and is the largest government building in Washington.

In the saber-rattling department, here's what Reagan said in his first inaugural address:

As for the enemies of freedom, those who are potential adversaries, they will be reminded that peace is the highest aspiration of the American people. We will negotiate for it, sacrifice for it; we will not surrender for it—now or ever. Our forbearance should never be misunderstood. Our reluctance for conflict should not be misjudged as a failure of will.

But the only hot war waged during the Reagan administration was to remove a comic-opera Marxist government from the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. The United States retreated from Lebanon after a suicide bomber killed more than 200 American soldiers. It is seldom observed that Saddam's gassing of the Kurds, which George W. Bush rightly denounced prior to the Iraq war, occurred on Reagan's watch. In 1984, when the Reagan administration got its first inkling that Iraq was engaged in chemical warfare, it [chose not to make a fuss](#). The most ambitious foreign intervention during the Reagan administration—the funnelling of aid to the Nicaraguan contras—was done illegally and, after it was discovered, embroiled Reagan's second term in a scandal from which it never recovered.

Reagan can probably claim some credit for ending the Cold War, but his principal weapon, characteristically, was spending—the Soviets bankrupted themselves trying to keep up with the Pentagon's weapons-buying binge through the 1980s. Reagan's greatest achievement in foreign affairs was therefore linked to his greatest achievement in domestic affairs. He taught Republicans that they could be even less responsible than Democrats.

Government spending is not (at least in my view) inherently irresponsible. What is irresponsible is spending money you don't have. Perhaps the most poignant passage in Reagan's first inaugural address is the one expressing what today seems a very old-fashioned Republican concern about deficit spending:

For decades, we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children's future for the temporary convenience of the present. To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals.

You and I, as individuals, can, by borrowing, live beyond our means, but for only a limited period of time. Why, then, should we think that collectively, as a nation, we are not bound by that same limitation?

You know the rest of the story. The [deficit](#), which stood at \$74 billion in Carter's final year, ballooned to \$155 billion in Reagan's final year. In the words of Vice President Dick Cheney, "Reagan taught us deficits don't matter."

Today, what does it mean to be a Republican? It means you can cut taxes indiscriminately and needn't worry about the debt you're piling up. It certainly doesn't mean that you want to shrink the federal government. Indeed, government spending under George W. Bush has increased *faster* than it did under Bill Clinton. Before Reagan, pandering was principally a Democratic vice. Today, it's principally a Republican vice. Ronald Reagan performed that transformation, and it remains his most enduring legacy.

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