

UNDER COVER

Reagan, Patriotism, and Profits

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"Rule reveals the man," asserts the ancient Greek proverb. It is not a comforting thought with which to begin the new administration. Mr. Reagan's innermost view of the world is defined by the official interpretation of the cold war, unreliable even then and not improved by age. In that doctrine, just as there is supposed to be a rough identity between communism and the Soviet Union, so there is presumed to be an identity of interests between capitalism and the United States. The reality, as Mr. Reagan may learn, is more complicated.

In the Polish strike this year America as a *political* society sided with the strikers, since the Polish unions reflected our democratic beliefs and weakened the hegemony of the USSR. American *capitalism*, by and large, was much closer to the Polish Government. Poland is deeply in debt to Western lenders, who worried that disorder would disturb the schedule of repayment. And trade union victories—even over Communist regimes—rouse little enthusiasm in executive suites. In short, there is more tension between patriotism and profit, and between political freedom and private liberty, than Mr. Reagan has recognized. Soon he will have to show us which side he is really on.

Voters in 1980 were evidently exasperated by the decline of America's ability to shape events. Most Americans probably agreed when Reagan called the hostage crisis a "humiliation," and a great many people accepted his view that we ought to support our friends more ardently. Like Mr. Reagan, moreover, most Americans seem persuaded that strengthening the military is the best way to restore our power and prestige.

In Mr. Reagan's rhetoric, military force was defined almost entirely in terms of new, high-technology weapons, as in his frequent criticism of the Carter administration for failing to develop the B-1 bomber, the MX missile, and the like. Possibly these weapons would strengthen our hand in negotiation with the Russians. They would, however, have been *useless* in the crises of the last four years. Would more up-to-date strategic bombers or cruise missiles have kept the shah in power or rescued the hostages or saved Somoza in Nicaragua? Presuming that Afghanistan is not worth a nuclear war—and Mr. Reagan did not think it worth even a grain embargo—would they have kept the Russians out of Kabul?

To the extent that lack of military strength accounts for American setbacks in recent years, we have wanted soldiers more than *thermonuclear weapons*. We have no adequate conventional force in the Middle East because we have no adequate conventional force anywhere. Our forces are watery thin: few and of doubtful quality. We are shuffling in search of a "rapid deployment force," but it is likely to be little more than a token, useful for raids and rescues but too small to change the course of things.

Unfortunately, Mr. Reagan's fiscal aims will probably keep him from expanding our conventional forces. He is committed to cutting taxes, giving the military more strategic weapons, and balancing the budget—a kind of political Ponzi scheme at best. His belief in private liberty, moreover, seems to preclude the draft, and the volunteer military is costly. Even so, we are not spending enough: Salaries are not really comparable to those in similar civilian jobs (police and fire departments, for example). The families of many enlisted men are on welfare. The quality of recruits is low. To get more or better personnel we would need a massive increase in military pay and allowances, something Mr. Reagan's budget cannot stand. On the face of it the Reagan years portend a return to the Eisenhower era, when administration policy emphasized nuclear arms at the expense of conventional forces ("more bang for the buck") and made national liberation war a winning strategy for our opponents.

If Mr. Reagan wants more than a policy of drift, he may find that a system of universal national service offers a way out. Asking *all* young Americans to serve for two years in one of a number of public programs avoids many of the complaints against the draft. In the first place the obligation would fall on everyone, rather than selecting some young Americans to bear the burden of public service. Since national service would include domestic programs, it would be easier to require women to serve without violating conservative scruples. Finally, universal service would also help to reduce the unemployment among black and Hispanic teenagers that Reagan deplored during his campaign.

Mr. Reagan's own proposal for dealing with such unemployment, by creating a "second tier" minimum wage, lowered to encourage hiring unemployed youths, is suspect in intent and effect. The "two tier" system is moved at least as much by hostility to organized labor as it is by compassion for the young. Facing tacit competition from low-wage, if unskilled, youngsters, established workers will respond either by walking more humbly—as business hopes—or by more militant efforts to shut their rivals out.

If Mr. Reagan's compassion is serious and not a mask for union-busting, universal service ought to be attractive. It creates public jobs rather than competing for private ones and it calls all young Americans to public service rather than asking minority youth to accept second-class status as the price of being employed at all. In the process, Mr. Reagan might give us an army adequate to our needs and worthy of our democracy.

All of that presumes, however, that Mr. Reagan's concern for the public good outweighs his belief in the right to private self-seeking. I doubt that it does. Mr. Reagan (and this is even truer of his friends) seems to think of national honor and public spirit as subjects for sentimental speeches but not for shaping day-to-day life, a quick grace before a gluttonous feast. I hope this notion is mistaken, for it hints at an administration more humiliating to us than a hundred Iranian crises.

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