In foreign policy Ronald Reagan's two years in office have had their moments. In the Middle East the administration has been too insensitive to Israel, but it has had some luck—the oil glut strengthens our hand and that of moderate Arab regimes. We have weathered Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and the war with Iran may be moving Iraq toward the West. On the whole, the American position in the Middle East is stronger than it was two years ago, and Mr. Reagan's belated endorsement of an increase in the gasoline tax can only improve matters.

Elsewhere, the administration's record is bleak. Despite Mr. Reagan's anti-Soviet stance, the administration has offended China and permitted a small, but perceptible warming in Sino-Soviet relations. In this case Reagan's policy seems almost atavistic, a throwback to the 50s and right-wing cant about "unleashing Chang." The administration seems to have acted from anti-Communist motives, which, estranging China, weaken its opposition to the Soviet Union.

In Africa and Latin America we have risked sympathy for unpopular regimes like South Africa and Argentina, presumably because they were reliably anti-Communist, although our vacillations have also suggested that our sympathy is of little material value. In Europe the United States has spoken firmly about the Soviet pipeline. Yet, confronted with European opposition. Mr. Reagan proved unwilling to ask American companies to forgo lucrative sales, and he surrendered to the Europeans in a capitulation as humiliating as Dien Bien Phu. We also imposed sanctions against Poland for its repression of Solidarity and, at the same time, helped refinance Poland's debt. Mr. Reagan pursued his strategy of driving the Soviet Union to disarmament through the pressure of an arms race on the Soviet economy, while at the same time he elected to sell grain to the Russians, thereby reducing the pressure on their economy. In the Reagan administration, what the right hand giveth the left hand, with no apparent purpose, taketh away.

In one respect Mr. Reagan is sticking to his guns; he means, apparently, to defend his military budget against all comers. The public seems to favor cutting back defense in order to reduce the deficit and/or to finance social programs, but Reagan will have none of it. The president is a man who knows how to bend with the political wind—even a light breeze sometimes seems to set off tremors—but in this case he is standing firm. Principle is involved, of course: Mr. Reagan is genuinely convinced that the United States is militarily inferior to the Russians and that he must set the balance right. Yet I suspect that the president also believes that public reticence will be short-lived and that his support for "strong defense" will be a winning card in 1984. After all, the desire to restore America's "prestige" played a major role in electing Mr. Reagan in 1980. Can we have changed so much in two years?

Probably not, although American opinion is ephemeral enough. Without the ayatollahs and the hostage crisis dominating our television screens, we are less sensitive to humiliations. Even so, the majority of Americans probably are eager for greater prestige and even in these austere times are willing to pay a considerable price to defend the imperium.

Mr. Reagan still has his work cut out for him. Prestige is a matter of respect more than of power. It is a measure of one's seriousness of purpose, the willingness to act suitably to one's words, and the determination to use all one's resources—shrewdly—to advance one's aims. Britain was no more powerful for recapturing the Falklands, but Britain's prestige increased dramatically. In the hostage crisis, if Carter had persisted in his pacific policy, he (and with him, the United States) might have won respect for being "too proud to fight." The attempted rescue was worse than maladroit, since it suggested that Carter's previous and subsequent restraint resulted from weakness, not conviction. Powerful bumbler do not win our respect; we honor plucky regimes, like Finland's in 1939, that struggle well against hopeless odds. Prestige is a measure of morals and skill, possessed in the highest measure, as Machiavelli realized, by those who are both lions and foxes. That is a lesson Mr. Reagan has yet to learn.

If Reagan is to have his way in 1983, more and more Americans, including the most patriotic, will need to be persuaded that military spending on a grand scale is how we win prestige and achieve our goals. At an even more fundamental level, Americans need to be convinced that the Reagan administration knows what our goals are. As the polls show, the American public is patient with Mr. Reagan, but patience condescends. The people have lost confidence in Reagan as a moral leader, just as they have come to have well-founded doubts about his knowledge and skill. Before he attends to our prestige, he will first have to establish his own.