

The Good Fight

President-elect George W. Bush's aides often compare their boss to Ronald Reagan. Some of the time, this is just a defense against the widespread perception that Bush knows little about foreign policy. Reagan, they suggest, didn't know the details either, and look how well he did. More recently, they have been suggesting that Bush will have a management style similar to Reagan's. He will delegate a lot of authority to competent cabinet officers and advisers and concentrate on the big tasks of the presidency, setting forth the broad outlines of his policy vision and selling it to the people.

But, truth be told, the qualities Bush's people talk about are not really the ones that made Reagan a great president. They are more like the qualities that made Dwight Eisenhower a competent president, the genial CEO of America, Inc. What made Reagan the most important and successful American leader of the last fifty years was something very different. It was a quality he shared with Harry Truman: a willingness to fight.

Many people look back on Reagan's first term as if all his legislative achievements, on the economy and on defense and foreign policy, were fore-ordained and all he had to do was smile his engaging smile. But Reagan didn't win a huge increase in defense spending, support for the Strategic Defense Initiative, military aid to El Salvador and the Nicaraguan freedom fighters, and the deployment of intermediate range missiles in Europe by smiling. He fought hard and tenaciously for everything. He spent large amounts of political capital and watched his poll ratings dip. He fought on controversial issues, and sometimes on unpopular ones. He fought when the editorial pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and the three network anchors were against him. He fought when some of the European allies opposed him. He fought when Tip O'Neill and Jim Wright and the Democrats in the Democrat-controlled House and narrowly Republican Senate were on the warpath. He continued fighting when his critics called him a warmonger and an ignoramus, and even when they called him a criminal. At the end of the day, it was Reagan's steel spine, not his folksy humor, that made him great.

Of course, that was the 1980s. A good part of what made

Reagan a fighter was his conviction that the country was headed in a dangerously wrong direction, both at home and in the world, and that fundamental change was needed to pull us back from the brink. This was different from Eisenhower's perception that 1950s America was in pretty good shape and needed a steady hand and sound executive management. Maybe America had the right president for each era. Maybe sometimes you need an Eisenhower just to keep the ship on course more than you need a Reagan to turn it around.

What do we need now? Or, perhaps more to the point, what does President-elect Bush think we need now? The answer will determine his actions and agenda in the first six months of this year, and could well shape the contours of his first term.

It seems fair to say that Bush campaigned more as an Eisenhower than as a Reagan. Believing Americans did not want radical changes, either at home or abroad, he proposed none. Reagan in 1980 scared people, to the point where he had to spend the last few weeks of his campaign assuring everyone he did not intend to blow the whole world to pieces. Bush's campaign from the beginning was

designed not to scare anyone, anywhere, on any issue.

But now Bush is about to become president, and judging by some of his personnel decisions—notably the selection of Donald Rumsfeld to run the Pentagon, Tommy Thompson at Health and Human Services, and John Ashcroft to serve as attorney general—and some of his early policy pronouncements—above all his determination to press ahead with a major tax cut—he shows signs of understanding that his presidency cannot mostly be about continuing to let the good times roll. Maybe the Bush who campaigned as an Eisenhower will govern more like a Reagan. Maybe Bush understands that the country is going to need a fighter in the White House, a leader with Reagan's willingness to challenge a sloppy and irresponsible conventional wisdom and turn things around. Maybe Bush knows that a good management style and the presence of “adults” in the cabinet will not substitute for steely determination in the Oval Office.

Nowhere is the need for basic change, supported by steely determination, greater than in American foreign and

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defense policy. The coming challenges to American security, American principles, and American interests may not be as immediately visible as they were in 1980, but in many ways President Clinton has dug a hole for his successor as deep as the one Jimmy Carter left for Reagan. The need for a radical change of course is clear on at least four issues: the defense budget, missile defense, China, and Iraq.

¶ Defense: The Clinton administration cut the defense budget so carelessly during the past eight years that now even top Clinton officials admit a crisis is at hand. Senior Pentagon officials, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and outsiders like former secretaries of defense James Schlesinger and Harold Brown all agree that the defense budget needs to be increased rapidly, by as much as \$50-100 billion per year. That kind of money will not be found through Pentagon reform and reorganization, by improved management and procurement practices, or by any other clever money-saving fixes. It will not be found by hastily pulling American troops out of the Balkans, which would have disastrous and ultimately costly effects on the NATO alliance. And, needless to say, the huge funding shortage cannot begin to be addressed merely by fulfilling Bush's campaign promise to increase defense spending by \$4.5 billion a year. That modest proposal was Bush running as Eisenhower. President Bush will have to make a Reaganite commitment to much greater increases in the Pentagon budget, even though this will mean a fight with Democrats, and some Republicans, in Congress, and even though almost every editorial page in the country may oppose it.

¶ Missile Defense: Bush did make clear during his campaign that he intended to build a missile defense system, that he thought the plan devised by the Clinton administration was inadequate, and that a Bush administration would not be bound, as Clinton allowed himself to be, by an obsolete Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. This was the right position to take. We assume he and his advisers know how difficult it will be to make good on these essential commitments now that he is president. Bush will face strong resistance in Congress, not only from liberal and moderate Democrats but also from Republican moderates and budget hawks. And at present, American allies are lined up with Russia and China in their opposition to missile defense. Although there will be room for some clever diplomacy and some smart political maneuvering, this is not an issue that ultimately can be finessed or settled quietly in the back room. It is a big, controversial issue. President Bush will have to make clear, from the very beginning of his presidency, that he will commit every political and financial resource necessary to build an effective missile defense for the United States, its troops abroad, and its allies. If he doesn't put himself on the line, and right away, it will not happen.

¶ China: During his campaign Bush said he considered China a "strategic competitor" of the United States. He was right: The possibility of a Sino-American confrontation is growing, not receding, and such a confrontation may occur

on Bush's watch. If Bush is serious, he must know that dealing with this competitor is no mere matter of tinkering around the edges of Clinton's policy of engagement. There will have to be a wholesale readjustment of U.S. policy in Asia. Friends and allies like Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan must replace China as the main focus of American concerns. Regarding Taiwan, in particular, Bush will have to move quickly to repair the deficiencies in Taiwan's defenses that the Clinton administration refused to address, before China tries dangerously to exploit them. And Bush will have to make clear to the Chinese that they cannot stop the United States from building a missile shield that may eventually defend, say, Los Angeles, from Chinese missile threats. In one way or another, candidate Bush promised to do all these things. President Bush will be told that if he follows through, he may precipitate a breakdown in U.S.-China relations. He shouldn't be intimidated. Such a breakdown could be healthy and would ultimately lead to a much more stable and balanced relationship with China—just as a similar breakdown in relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1980s eventually produced Mikhail Gorbachev. But it will take a lot of guts to stick to the new course. Here again, we hope and trust Bush knows what he's in for.

¶ Iraq: Bush and other Republicans have had a field day criticizing Clinton's disastrous and now failed Iraq policy. But now comes the hard part. Bush inherits a Saddam very much "out of his box," rearming, increasingly confident and aggressive, and benefiting from increased Arab radicalism. At some point, Bush could well find himself confronted by an Iraq armed with weapons of mass destruction. During these past few years, it was relatively easy for congressional Republicans to call for arming and funding the Iraqi opposition. That remains a good idea. But the more sober of Bush's advisers, like Robert Zoellick and Paul Wolfowitz, have recognized that this alone will not do the trick. Some use of American military force, both from the air and on the ground, could well be necessary to bring Saddam down, no matter how wonderfully the Iraqi opposition performs. Whether he chooses it or not, Bush may quickly be faced with the same decision his father had to make in 1990. He has in his cabinet at least one person who counseled inaction the last time. If the crisis comes, Bush, like his father, will not be able to rely only on the judgment of the men and women around him: He will have to act from his own instincts and his own courage.

Most of what Bush has done since his election gives us reason to believe that he is up to these challenges, that he knows there are serious issues to be tackled and is ready to tackle them. But, as he also surely knows, the hard part is just beginning.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol

Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy, edited by William Kristol and Robert Kagan, has recently been published by Encounter Books.