

This summer the world was transfixed by two events: the death of President Ronald Reagan and the transfer of political authority in Iraq from the United States to the new Iraqi government. In the case of the latter the stakes couldn't be higher, and the price paid in lives lost and injured has already been severe. Juxtaposed against this volatile and deadly crucible of Middle Eastern politics came news of Reagan's death. The outpouring of sentiment for the Gipper was heartfelt, if bathed in the glow of nostalgia for an earlier, seemingly happier era in the United States—when the enemy (Soviet-style communism) was clearly identified and symbolically dispatched with the fall of the Berlin Wall, just after Reagan left office.

From the President



These recollections of the Reagan era, however rose-colored, caused me to look for lessons of leadership that might be applied from Reagan's example to the present day. Although I wasn't a fan of many of his policies, I can't help admiring the way he handled himself as a leader.

Timing isn't everything, but it's a lot. Reagan happened to be in office as the Soviet system was beginning to crumble. He sensed the opportunity and seized it. Admittedly, he stood on the shoulders of many others, but the timing of his public attacks on the Soviet system was impeccable, and those attacks provided an extra push that hastened the wall's collapse. Notable leaders become notable when they are confronted with potentially historic events and act on them. Leaders never know when such opportunities will arise, so they must be ready. Reagan was.

Optimism is infectious; try it. Reagan was an eternal optimist—sometimes blindly so, but on balance his spirit of optimism served him well. Research has shown that people who are optimistic tend to be better at coping with adversity and better adjusted in life. Top leaders tend to be optimists too, which suggests that people with a happy perspective on life are more likely than doomsayers and worrywarts to rise to the top. Intuitively, it makes sense. Of course too much optimism can lead to a sanitized view of things that puts one out of touch with the real world—a flaw that Reagan was accused of. But it's better to be positive than negative. Reagan's sunny personality helped him overcome crises and scandals that would have paralyzed a more pessimistic man (such as Richard Nixon).

It's never too late to lead. Much of the focus in leadership studies these days is on the younger generations, but Reagan came into the presidency late in life. He had a full career in Hollywood before running for political office. Although there are obvious parallels between the worlds of film and politics, given the critical dependency of politicians on the media these days, Reagan was not a professional politician. He approached the job of president as someone who had done other things, not as someone who had sought the office all his adult life. This sense of coming of age gave him an authenticity and wholeness. What you saw, like it or not, was what you got. And his robust sense of humor allowed him to defuse tense situations and to poke fun at himself—another sign of being comfortable in one's own skin.

These lessons worked well for Reagan in his day. Even in these more ambiguous times, I suspect that leaders of all political persuasions and from all sectors of society can benefit from his example.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John R. Alexander".

John R. Alexander, president, CCL

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