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Rebuilding the Reagan Coalition

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Our topic is “Can We Rebuild the Reagan Coalition?” The short answer is yes. It is possible if we look at how the Reagan coalition was built and the lessons that he taught us on how to put together and sustain a coalition over the years and then use that coalition to accomplish something important. That’s certainly what he did.

Particularly since President Reagan passed away two years ago, I’m often asked by people, “What was he really like?” I would have to say—something that I think is a good lesson for all of us—that his most impressive characteristic to me was his cheerfulness and his optimism. I can’t think of any time, even in some of the darkest days, where he wasn’t essentially cheerful and optimistic about what would happen.

As we talk tonight about rebuilding the Reagan coalition, I recognize that we’ve gone through an election period that the most charitable and optimistic among us would characterize as “mixed,” but I think it’s important to recognize that those things happen even to the most successful Presidents.

Defeat was not unknown to Ronald Reagan at all. His real start in politics occurred in a losing campaign, because that was the Goldwater campaign of 1964. And while Goldwater lost the election for the presidency, that was really the start in many ways of the conservative movement that we call the Reagan coalition. From the end of World War II until 1964, conservatism in America was essentially an intellectual movement. We had the Milton Friedmans, we had the Bill Buckleys, but it was mostly carried out and engen-

Talking Points

The conservative vision for America has been the engine of growth expanding freedom and providing for a better life for our people and their families.

President Reagan never saw defeats as a repudiation of conservative principles. Sticking to those principles, he said, was the way to achieve America’s bright future.

To rebuild the Reagan coalition, the challenge is to:

- 1 Translate the conservative vision into practical projects and ideas that will motivate people;
- 2 Communicate that vision to Americans in terms that will mobilize and motivate them, whether it’s at the polls or working in their local communities for conservative values; and
- 3 Provide the leadership to make conservative values a reality in the states and ultimately have that impact on our federal government.

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dered on college campuses among authors and that sort of thing.

Building the Coalition

In his 1964 campaign, Barry Goldwater and those working with him made it a political movement for the first time. Many of the people who later on would help Ronald Reagan become President got their start in politics as part of the Goldwater campaign. There may even be some people here tonight who had that experience, or people you know.

In that case, we were down perhaps at the bottom in 1964 in terms of electoral strength, but we were rising in terms of enthusiasm—particularly in terms of philosophical commitment. Then, two years later, Ronald Reagan ran for governor of California and won over a long-time entrenched incumbent, and that started to show that it was not only a political movement, conservatism, but that conservative ideas could work out in practice, as he was governor of California.

Nationally, you think of the 1970s. Again, 1974 was a down year for the United States as far as conservatives were concerned as, in virtually every race, a number of candidates who represented conservative views were being defeated. Certainly, in terms of national politics, I can't remember anyone running as a conservative. Interestingly enough, in 1994, nobody ran as a liberal. So a lot happened in that 20-year period. Even at those darkest hours, things were happening.

Between 1975 and 1980, Ronald Reagan and those who were working with him—people around the country, like those who were members of Citizens for the Republic and the new Heritage Foundation and various other groups—laid the foundation. In 1976, Ronald Reagan ran and lost in the primary campaign for the presidency. But again, there was a buildup of enthusiasm, and particularly in 1976, something happened that really did lay, or helped to lay, that foundation for 1980. That was a campaign on philosophical principles rather than on just getting elected.

I must say we do have to thank Jimmy Carter for one thing: He contributed considerably to the 1980 victory for Ronald Reagan. I've often thought that if Ronald Reagan had won the nomination in 1976, he

might well not have won the presidency. But even if he had won the presidency, the foundation had not yet been completely laid, and it was not until 1980 that a combination of misgovernment in the late 1970s and a philosophy of government that Ronald Reagan preached around the country, and was picked up by others and other candidates, resulted in the victory in 1980 for conservative principles.

So 1980 really became the point of proving that conservatism was a national governing philosophy, and it was in that period that things like the end of the Cold War, the economic revival of the United States, and the restoration of the self-confidence of the people made real strides for conservatism in this country.

But the road, even after that, was not always easy. As a matter of fact, as Ed Feulner, the president of The Heritage Foundation, described it, under intense scrutiny and amid fierce criticism, Ronald Reagan signed into law the first supply-side tax cuts. However, within a year, the remnants of the economic catastrophe that was the Carter Administration continued; it took a while to catch up and overcome those problems. Unemployment climbed over 10 percent. The economy was still so poor that the Republicans lost badly—26 House seats in 1982, which could have been a severe setback; but, fortunately, by 1983 the economy kicked in as a result of those tax cuts so that in 1984, as you remember, he was able to campaign by saying, "It's morning in America."

Thank goodness, as Dr. Feulner said, Ronald Reagan stayed the course and did not succumb to some of the ideas, such as cutting back on the tax cuts and other things, that were being urged on him at the time. He understood something that we need to be reminded of today, and that is that conservative principles do work. You just have to keep fighting for them and allowing them to work even in difficult times.

Then, in 1986—and I think this is particularly analogous to the election of 2006—there was another setback. Ronald Reagan traveled some 24,000 miles, making 54 appearances in 22 states, raising \$33 million for Republican candidates. Yet what was the result in 1986? Republicans lost nine of the 12 Senate seats that had been gained as a result of his

landmark victory in 1980. And again, after a brief six years of the Republicans being in the majority in the Senate—they never were in the majority in the House during Ronald Reagan’s entire time as President—they lost that majority in 1986, and during the last two years of his presidency, he had both Houses with a majority of the opposite party.

And yet, as writer Jeffrey Lord recently described it in a column, “Ronald Reagan simply smiled, sat back down behind his desk, and moved on to change America, and not so coincidentally, the world.” In fact, contrary to the last two years of his presidency being just a lame-duck period, it was during that time that he made some of the greatest progress, particularly in foreign relations, in his relationships with Mikhail Gorbachev, in bringing about the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Soviet Union.

Never during his entire political career did Ronald Reagan believe that conservative principles had been repudiated by any of the defeats that he suffered or by the American people. He never believed that he was on the losing side, and even though there were temporary setbacks, he always believed, as he would say, that the future was bright and that we still had great opportunities, and the idea of sticking by conservative principles was the only way to achieve those.

How did Ronald Reagan build the coalition? How did he accomplish the things that he did? Whether it was welfare reform, whether it was criminal justice reform, whether it was improving the operations of government, whether it was halting the explosive growth of government, whether it was being the President who since World War II had done the most to maintain a slowing of the growth of the federal budget, how did he do this? One thing was that he did believe in a definite set of values. Actually, they’re the values that we prize today in the conservative movement: things like individual liberty, limited government, free-market economics, strong national defense, and traditional American values.

Becoming a Leader

Ronald Reagan had always been a leader. He was president of his high school graduating class, presi-

dent of the student body when he was in college, so he was kind of a natural leader. Then he actually enlisted in the Army in the 1930s as a reservist; most people don’t know that. He wanted to ride horses. He was working for WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, and he was a poor kid, but he wanted to ride horses. So he enlisted in the cavalry reserve at Fort Des Moines.

Again, his leadership came through because as a private he took these correspondence courses—they were called the Ten Series in those days—to become a lieutenant. When World War II came around, he was a second lieutenant in the Army Reserve, so he was called up. One thing they found out when he went for his pre-induction physical was that his eyes were bad, so they marked him general duty.

As he said, he was manning a desk at a point of embarkation in San Francisco when the Army Air Corps decided they wanted to make training films. They went through all the 201 files and picked out anybody who had any movie experience. By that time, he’d been in the movies a couple of years. They got Ronald Reagan; they got Clark Gable; they got a lot of guys. He made this training film, *Squadron*, and he learned a lot about leadership there. He again became a leader; he became the adjutant of his squadron.

Then, when he got out of the Army, he went into the movies, and that was when the Communists tried to take over Hollywood to use the films for propaganda purposes. They elected him president of the Screen Actors Guild, and he led that union and other unions there to combat the Communists.

So in some ways, leadership was a natural phenomenon for him, but also he learned a lot. Most people don’t realize that he was a hard worker all his life and he read a lot. If you read the newspapers, you’d never know that because they always kidded him that he had banker’s hours and didn’t work very hard. They didn’t realize he worked hard and read everything we gave him; every night he’d take it home. We actually had to limit the reading because he was very disciplined and would try to read it all, so we had to limit the amount of homework that was brought in by the various sections of the White House.

As a matter of fact, he laughed at himself along these lines when he went to the Gridiron Club back around 1983 and said, “You fellows don’t think I work very hard; they say that hard work never killed anybody, but I say why take a chance?” He kind of defused that, but he really was a very hard worker all the time. He read a lot of things that had to do with leadership and management, and I think those are the ways in which he really was a self-developed leader.

Lessons in Leadership

From his conservative principles, he developed the specific objectives to go after. He also exhibited several very important lessons of leadership that it behooves us to follow today.

Vision. The first was vision: Ronald Reagan had a very distinct vision of where America ought to be going. It wasn’t something that was thought up as a campaign slogan. It wasn’t dreamed up by some public relations firm after taking polls or focus groups. They were values, and they were ideals, and they were a vision that he had developed as a result of his reading and studying all the way back from his days in the movie industry, back in the 1940s after he got out of the Army, where he was president of the Screen Actors Guild and where he saw some of the problems of Communism.

That’s when he started learning about Communism and where he put these ideas into practice, into a set of beliefs. When he became President, he knew from that study how he should deal with the Soviet Union and how he should lead us in foreign affairs.

He also had a vision for the country economically and realized that using free-market principles was the only way in which we could overcome the stagflation that we had, a stagnant economy and high inflation, high unemployment, high interest rates—high in every category except prosperity for the people, which was at an all-time low. It was the idea of sticking with this vision of economic growth through free-market principles.

That is the first lesson that we have to keep in mind. The conservative vision for America is still the one, if you look back in our history, that has been the engine of growth in terms of economic strength for the country, but it has also been the

engine of growth in terms of people’s freedom and in terms of prosperity and in terms of a better life for our people and their families.

Communication. The second thing that he left us as a lesson is the ability to take a vision and then communicate that vision to the American people in terms that they understand so that people can see how it affects them and their families personally. Too often conservatives think in terms of policies, and too often our liberal friends on the other side talk in terms of people. One of the great lessons that I think we have to remember is how to put this in a form that people will remember and recognize that it relates to them.

I think Ronald Reagan had this ability, again, to use his humor. He could take a complex subject and, by putting it into a humorous illustration, make it understandable to people. When he used to talk about the Soviet Union—and he knew that their economic times were bad because they were taking their gross domestic product and putting it all into military and into armaments at the expense of the people in the domestic economy—he could have talked for hours about charts and graphs and percentages and all kinds of economic information, but he used to do it with a couple of stories. That’s something we need to do: communicate our vision in terms that people understand as to how it affects them.

Integrity. A third thing that Ronald Reagan had was tremendous integrity, and that was his conviction and his commitment to his principles. He didn’t waver. He didn’t put his finger in the air or look at the polls to see what his core principles were. Instead, he had a definite bedrock set of principles by which he was guided.

It wasn’t just that he had those principles for himself. He communicated those principles to everybody in his Cabinet and, through the Cabinet, to the members of his Administration. And just to be sure, he would meet with everybody that he appointed—some three thousand appointees—every year in January to start off the New Year by reminding them of what we came up here to do. This was an important part of maintaining the integrity of the Administration and the enduring commitment to why we were here: that it wasn’t for political benefit or self-

aggrandizement, but it was to do something for the people of the United States.

Courage. Another element of this is courage: He had tremendous intellectual and personal courage. One of the first tests when he became President was in the late summer of 1981 when the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization went on strike. There was a situation where prior Presidents had not paid attention, even though going on strike by a federal employee was against the law, but Ronald Reagan said, "This is something that we cannot allow to happen. It is against the law, and I, as the chief executive of this country, must enforce the law." As a result, he gave them 48 hours to go back to work and said, "Those who do not come back to work and continue to defy the law have forfeited their job." Many of them did, some 70 or 80 percent.

Yet he was able to hold firm, and it's interesting he did that despite the fact that the Professional Air Traffic Controllers were one of the few unions that had supported him in the 1980 election. He remained true to his principles there. He had courage even in that situation, with all sorts of dire predictions of what this would do to air travel and that sort of thing. He was able to persevere, and it was that lesson—what he did in the PATCO strike—we later learned had been most impressive to the leaders of the Soviet Union, and they realized that they had someone to contend with when he was negotiating with them later on during his second term.

He did the same thing in Nicaragua. Supporting the freedom fighters in Nicaragua was not a very popular thing in 1981 and 1982, particularly with Tip O'Neill and many of the people in the House. Remember, we had all kinds of Boland Amendments at that time limiting what could be done and what couldn't be done. The Congress didn't want to take the heat in Central America. At the same time, they didn't want to let us go and support the freedom fighters wholeheartedly, so there were all kinds of restrictions placed on what we could do or could not do. Again, Ronald Reagan had the courage not only to persevere, but to explain that to the public through public diplomacy, ultimately resulting in the end of the Sandinista regime and democracy coming to that country.

Perhaps the greatest test of his courage occurred in 1986 in Reykjavik. It was there that Gorbachev, with a very clever ploy, put on the table an agreement to take all of the weapons on both sides—all the nuclear weapons, strategic weapons—and essentially cut them in half: one of the greatest reductions of armaments in the history of the world. Had it gone forward and been successful, there is no doubt that both Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan would have been on the front of *Time* as Men of the Year; they would have been hailed as the greatest peacemakers and so on.

That looked pretty good up until the last morning, when Gorbachev pulled the trigger on the surprise: that the U.S. would have to give up further research on the Strategic Defense Initiative, the ballistic missile defense. Ronald Reagan knew before that how important that was as a means of offsetting the ability of nuclear weapons to cause great damage in the future and how important it was to protect our country; but he was absolutely convinced, when he heard how important it was to Gorbachev, that he knew he was right and that we could not give up this important defensive weapon. And so he walked away from that tremendous deal, which would have held great personal honor, but at the expense of the future security of the United States and, really, the security of the entire world against nuclear weapons.

These are examples of courage. What do we have in terms of courage today? It means the ability to withstand the scorn of the mainstream news media for some of our ideas; or to stand up in states where we have only a few conservatives in the state legislature, but to stand with those people; or to go to the gubernatorial candidates and say, "This is what you have to do in order to be successful in the long run"; or to stick with programs even though it's very tough to get them through, and even though we may lose the first time or maybe even the second time, until ultimately the people understand what it's all about and put them into effect.

This is what is involved in courage: again, to stand by our principles and be public about what we believe is right even though it may not be particularly popular at a particular time.

Persistence. One of the other qualities of Ronald Reagan some called stubbornness; I call it persistence. And he was persistent. In 1981, at the National Press Club, he gave a speech. This was the time when there was a big debate. The Soviet Union had put their intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe, and we were scheduled to put in our nuclear weapons. Ronald Reagan said, "Wouldn't it be better, instead of us putting our weapons in, to persuade the Soviets to take theirs out? Then we'd have a zero-zero balance in terms of intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe."

The Secretary of State at that time said, "Mr. President, they'll laugh at you! Nobody would go for a deal like that." The Secretary of State was right: They didn't go for it then, but Ronald Reagan persisted. One of his persistent actions in support of that was to put our nuclear weapons in; but he still held open the offer, year after year, to the Soviet Union that we were willing to take our intermediate-range nuclear weapons out if you take yours out.

As a result of that persistence, in 1987 he and Gorbachev signed the agreement, the first time that a whole class of nuclear weapons had been removed in the history of this country and in the history of the world. It was persistence there as well as his persistence in seeking for legislation time after time until he got it.

Unity. Finally, one thing that is particularly important today in the conservative movement: Ronald Reagan believed in unity. He didn't believe in unity in the sense of compromising and having the lowest common denominator of beliefs and values, but he did have a sense of unity in saying that nobody who disagrees with him on one point but agrees on other points ought to be cast out simply because they did not agree with him on everything. He was willing to work with people on those things upon which they agreed and leave to others or leave outside the working relationship those things on which they disagreed, so that they could pursue their own paths on those particular matters.

We certainly need that attitude in conservatism today so that, on those things on which we do agree, we can go forward and at the same time not declare to be evil those people who might not agree with us on something else. That does not mean homogeniz-

ing the conservative movement, but it means emphasizing those positions of agreement and, above all, saying that the overall unity is more effective in the long run than trying to emphasize specific differences that can be cast aside when we agree on a common interest that we can all get behind.

Forming a New Coalition

I think we need to apply those lessons today. We need to do that particularly in light of the last election. I say that not in a partisan sense, because conservatism, in many ways, can transcend both parties, but we do know that one party generally will agree with us more than the other.

Why did the Republicans lose in the 2006 election? I would suggest to you it is not because they were conservative, but rather because too many of them, particularly the leadership in both houses, had essentially abandoned the conservative principles on which many of them had run for office. We only have to look at the spending that took place. We have to look at the expansion of government.

When I was in the White House, I was criticized by the press because I once referred to the Department of Education as a bureaucratic joke. Well, it hasn't become any less of a bureaucratic joke over the years, but it sure has become a more expensive bureaucratic joke and certainly is one of the things that should have been eliminated long ago.

The sad thing was in 1982 when we tried to get rid of that department, the same Senators who in 1978 had voted against establishing a Department of Education by 1982 were unwilling to vote to abolish it. Ronald Reagan said, "The nearest thing we'll ever know to immortality is a governmental bureau," and he was right about that. He also knew what government was all about when he said, "You know the government philosophy: If it moves, tax it; if it keeps moving, regulate it; if it stops moving, subsidize it." That's why the principles of limited government are extremely important.

Another thing that I think really hurt the Republicans was this whole business of earmarks, pork-barrel spending, and the fact that they ignored their responsibility to the nation to do the things that the federal government is supposed to do in defense, in foreign policy, in things that are truly national in

character and instead acted more like ward bosses trying to bring home a few benefits for their constituents without looking at how this affected the budget, how this affected the size of the federal government, and things such as that. The Club for Growth did a survey, and the messages are, as to why the Republicans lost, that Republicans failed to deliver on fiscal conservatism; Republicans failed to be the champions of the middle class; Republicans failed to be reformers, particularly on ethical matters; and Republicans became the party of big corporations and big corporation welfare—all of which tended to expand government and certainly increased the spending of government.

I think there is good news and bad news. The good news is that people believe in conservative values. The bad news, unfortunately, is that people do not believe that Republicans adhere to conservative principles anymore. That is one of the most serious reasons, I think, for why they did so poorly in the last election.

An article by a man named John McLaughlin—not the one who appears on television, but a guy who writes a column—said, “It appears that the Republicans have lost their advantage on the philosophical issue of the size of government.” Among the people who voted in this past election, 59 percent favor a smaller government with fewer services, and only 28 percent favor a larger government with many services. Among those who voted for a Republican for Congress, they favor smaller government by a five to one margin. The plurality of voters who voted Democrat: 45 percent of them also supported smaller government. Majorities of independent voters: 68 percent. And those who think the country is on the wrong track: 52 percent favor smaller government.

The problem is that in many ways people thought the Democrats were equally able as—or in some cases more able than—Republicans to bring about that smaller government. And so Mr. McLaughlin concluded, “Republican leadership must rediscover its core principles and remind voters which party will give them smaller government.”

That is why I say it is time for a conservative resurgence in this country. Again, you can't be guid-

ed by polls, but if you're any kind of a marketer you know that polls are helpful to explain how you can market your core principles. They don't determine what those principles are, but they certainly can help you get those principles across to the people.

All other things being equal, people were asked, which type of candidate for Congress would you be more likely to vote for: a candidate who wants to reduce overall federal spending, even if that includes cutting some money that would come to your district, or a candidate who is willing to increase overall spending on federal programs, grow the federal budget in order to get more federal spending and projects for your district? The answers for this were “cut spending,” over 57 percent; “bring home more projects” was 27 percent.

In other words, by a two to one ratio, people wanted smaller government even though it meant that they would not get the pork, if you will, in their own districts.

Best Days Yet Ahead

I think that the state policy institutions represented here are uniquely positioned to lead the resurgence and the restoration of conservative principles in our political process. The states are where the ideas are. The states are where the action is right now already going ahead.

When the Supreme Court came out with one of the worst decisions in its recent history—the *Kelo* decision, in which they said that local governments can take private property and give it to other private bodies simply because that might increase tax revenues—state think tanks and people at the state level rebelled against that with initiatives, with legislation. Already, in so many of the states, you've protected against that Supreme Court decision: probably one of the greatest popular rebukes of the Supreme Court in the last decade or more.

Likewise in tort reform, that's happening at the state level to a much greater extent than some rather feeble efforts at the federal level. It was welfare reform back during the 1980s and '90s that gave rise to the historic welfare reform program of the federal government in 1996; that all started with the states. When it comes to tax reductions, when it

comes to protection of taxpayers through a taxpayer's bill of rights and things of that kind, that's going on at the state level.

So the examples are there. I could go on, and I know you could add even more, but those are the places, in the states and with the help of state think tanks like your own, where the new ideas are coming forward to put forth the meat on the skeleton of these conservative principles that I talked about earlier.

On the 28th of November, Charles Schumer said to one of the New York newspapers, "Reaganomics is dead." I would say that nobody in a political prognostication has probably ever been more wrong, because you here at this conference, and the people you work with back home, and the legislators you support and work with are all living evidence that Reaganomics is just getting started in terms of what it can bring to this country. Nothing could be farther from the truth than Senator Schumer's declaration. The polls that I just quoted and numerous other polls that have been taken, both before and since, belie his assertions as to what the people want.

The challenge is to groups such as ours, to us at Heritage and to the other think tanks here in Washington, D.C., but more particularly to the state think tanks for the reasons that I mentioned earlier:

- *First*, to translate the conservative vision into practical projects, into legislation, into the

ideas that will motivate people to support the conservative cause;

- *Second*, to communicate that vision to the American people in terms they understand and that will mobilize and motivate them, whether it's at the polls or working in their local communities for conservative values; and
- *Finally*, to provide the leadership to make conservative values a reality in the states of the country and ultimately have that impact on our federal government as well.

That is our challenge. Again, if we turn back to Ronald Reagan and accept the challenge that he gave to the coalition that he founded and which he gives to us, to learn from his lessons and abide by the vision that he had and which continues as the conservative vision today, then I think we will realize what Ronald Reagan, even in the darkest hour, was always convinced of, as we should be today, and that is that America's best days are yet ahead.

—Edwin Meese III served as Attorney General of the United States in the Administration of President Ronald Reagan and is currently Ronald Reagan Distinguished Fellow in Public Policy at The Heritage Foundation. He delivered these remarks on November 30, 2006, at a dinner sponsored by The Heritage Foundation for members of the State Policy Network.