

## The Reagan Presidency



**Ronald Wilson Reagan:** was the 40th President of the United States (1981–1989) and the 33rd Governor of California (1967–1975). Before entering politics, Reagan was also a sports broadcaster, a life-guard, a newspaper columnist, a motion picture actor, head of the Screen Actors Guild, a television actor, and a motivational speaker. His speaking style, which was widely regarded as well-delivered and persuasive, which earned Reagan the nickname "**The Great Communicator**" from the media.

- Reagan defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter to win the election of 1980, carrying along the first Republican-dominated U.S. Senate in 26 years.
- His economic policy of **supply-side economics**, popularly known as "**Reaganomics**", is noted for a 25% cut in the income tax, reduction in inflation, reduction in interest rates, increased military spending, increased deficits and national debt.
- His policies at first led to a sharp recession in 1981-1982 followed by a very robust economic expansion starting in '82 — the greatest peacetime economic expansion in U.S. history.
- Reagan's upbeat personality and persuasive speaking style helped in **restoring optimism** to an America that seemed in deep malaise in 1980 following the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the failed Presidency of Jimmy Carter.
- In foreign policy his administration is noted for the vast buildup of the military and change from containment of the Soviet Union to confrontation. The military buildup included new tanks, ships, aircraft, and nuclear missiles. He defended his actions by quoting George Washington "*To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace.*"
- Reagan also proposed an antimissile defense system, the **Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI)**. Nicknamed "**Star Wars**", the SDI would provide a defensive shield against enemy missiles. However, scientists were unable to develop the technology for SDI.
- The cost of keeping up with the vast military buildup and SDI is often cited as one of the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- Domestically Reagan changed the Supreme Court when he nominated Sandra Day O'Connor as a justice in 1981.
- Reagan has often credited with being instrumental in the 1991 downfall of the Soviet Union. Historians have not yet formed a consensus, with some considering Reagan to be a leading figure in orchestrating the collapse of Soviet Communism in 1991; while other historians believe the demise of the Soviet Union, at the end of Reagan's two terms, was simply a coincidence.
- His ability to survive significant scandals (including the **Iran-Contra Scandal**) which resulted in criminal convictions of a number of Administration officials and staff - with relatively high approval numbers, earned him the nickname "The Teflon President".
- Reagan also took direct military action on the island of **Grenada** during a communist inspired uprising which threatened 800 American medical students. Reagan sent in the marines to evacuate the Students. It was a moral lift for the U.S. military after the problems of Vietnam.
- In 1989 the presidency passed to a member of the same party, **George H.W. Bush**. This had not occurred in 60 years.
- Reagan's conservative presidency influenced the culture of the 1980's and in the United States is often referred to as the "Reagan Era".
- Reagan was the only U.S. President to be struck by an **assassin's bullet** (on March 30, 1981) while in office as President and survive. He received a state funeral after his death in Bel-Air, California, in 2004 at the age of 93, after suffering from Alzheimer's disease for a decade.
- Reagan's second term was marked by a sharp improvement in relations with the Soviet Union.
- In 1985, **Mikhail Gorbachev** became the new leader of the Soviet Union and was committed to reform the Soviet government.

## The Reagan Presidency Continued

- Gorbachev called for a policy of **glasnost**—opening Soviet society to new ideas.
- Gorbachev also tried to change the Soviet government moving away from the communist idea of total government control of the economy to a more local and individual planning of the economy.
- He allowed more democracy and encouraged the Soviet people to seek greater change in a policy that became known as **perestroika**.
- Gorbachev knew that the Soviet economy was in trouble and could not afford a new military buildup to match Reagan's buildup of U.S. forces.
- In 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF or the **Intermediate-Range Nuclear Weapons Treaty**. The treaty reduced the number of nuclear warheads in both nations arsenals.

## The Bush Presidency

**George Herbert Walker Bush**, was the 41st President of the United States (1989–1993). Prior to being President he was the 43rd Vice President of the United States under President Ronald Reagan. A decorated naval aviator, Bush is the last World War II veteran to date to have served as President. Bush is the father of the 43rd and current president, George Walker Bush. His father, Prescott Bush, was a United States Senator.

- From a policy standpoint, Bush pursued moderate policies in both domestic and foreign policy.
- During the final days of the Cold War, he was responsible for managing US foreign policy during the delicate transition of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe from being communist states to being liberal democracies.
- He championed the concept of a **New World Order** where international law and global consensus would replace military and strategic confrontation as a means of accomplishing diplomatic objectives.
- This idea was exemplified during the **Gulf War**, when the US rallied a global coalition to reverse the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq under Saddam Hussein.
- In 1991, Soviet leader Gorbachev and President Bush signed the **Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)** and for the first time, two nuclear superpowers agreed to destroy existing nuclear weapons.
- In the Soviet Union, years of food shortages and a lack of basic consumer goods because of government mismanagement and heavy defense spending led to an impatience among Soviet citizens for changes promised by glasnost and perestroika.
- Thousands marched through Moscow in February of 1990 demanding an end to communist rule. Many of the republics that made up the Soviet Union began demanding independence as well.
- In Poland, the **Solidarity** labor Union had grown in strength and in June of 1989, the puppet government of Poland was forced to hold open elections.



Reagan, left, in one-on-one discussions with Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1985 to 1991.



Vice President Bush, and President Ronald Reagan and Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev at New York City in 1988



Speaking in front of the Brandenburg Gate on June 12, 1987 Ronald Reagan challenged reformist Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, exclaiming: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

## The Bush Presidency Continued

- Democracy began to spread throughout Eastern Europe with long-sealed national borders opening under public pressure and the **Iron Curtain**, that had separated Eastern and Western Europe of 40 Years began to crumble. Gorbachev, unlike prior Soviet leaders refused to intervene with his military and instead encouraged the reform.
- The symbolic end to communism came in East Germany, when on November 9, 1989 the communist government, under pressure from its citizens fleeing to the West, allowed to **Berlin Wall** to be taken down.
- In August of 1991, fearing a loss of their empire, hard-line communists in the government and secret police staged a **coup de tat**, an overthrow of the government. They held Gorbachev captive and ordered soldiers to seize the Kremlin.
- As the world waited anxiously, about 50,000 Russians surrounded the Kremlin to protect it from the soldiers. **Boris Yeltsin**, president of the Russian Republic and a reformer, stood on top of a tank and declared, “Democracy will Win!”
- On August 22 the coup collapsed and Gorbachev was freed and returned to Moscow. The defeat of the coup turned the tide in an unstoppable direction toward democracy.
- Soon all 15 Soviet Republics declared their independence from the Soviet Union.
- Yeltsin outlawed the communist party in Russia.
- On December 25, 1991, Gorbachev announced the end of the Soviet Union and the Soviet flag that flew over the Kremlin was lowered for the last time. **The Cold War and communism in the Soviet Union was over.**
- On May of 1989, students and workers in China held demonstrations calling for more democracy in that country. As protests spread China seemed to be on the verge of revolution.
- On June 3, 1989, soldiers and tanks killed several hundred protesters gathered in **Tiananmen Square** in the center of Beijing.
- World leaders condemned the action but the U.S. did not cut off relations with China and instead pursued a policy of trade to open China to the world. Chinese leaders reformed to economy on the country to be more free market oriented but the government itself is still run under communist rule.
- In 1990, another crisis arose when **Saddam Hussein** sent his army into **Kuwait** in an effort to gain control of the middle east oil supply.
- Bush vowed to “draw a line in the sand” and persuaded a coalition of other nations, including Arab nations in the Middle east, to join in **Operation Desert Shield** to protect the oil field of Saudi Arabia.
- Hussein was ordered to withdraw from Kuwait, and when he refused, General Norman Schwarzkopf led a new mission **Operation Desert Storm**, to drive the Iraqi’s out of Kuwait.
- Massive bombing by the U.S. led to the destruction of much of the Iraqi army and the defeat of Hussein’s forces. Kuwait was liberated and Saddam was allowed to retreat his forces to Iraq without an attack on their home country. Bush had accomplished the mission he had stated to the world, the liberation of Kuwait.

