Ronald Reagan

A President’s Vision

“In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.... It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people.”

— First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981

Ronald Reagan won the 1980 presidential election by substantial margins, promising to restore American economic prosperity and military power. Facing double-digit inflation and high unemployment, he sought to decrease spending on domestic programs and deregulate the private sector. Reagan believed free-market government and lower taxes would solve the nation’s economic woes. Cutting taxes, he argued, would encourage spending and restore public confidence. The former actor and radio announcer used his extraordinary speaking skill to promote his policies.

Reagan’s agenda incorporated three central objectives: maintain America’s status as a superpower by increasing military spending, reduce taxes, and submit a balanced budget to Congress. When these objectives proved commendable, he focused on the first two at the expense of the third. As a result, the budget deficit remained high during Reagan’s term in office, and the national debt nearly tripled in size. However, inflation fell, unemployment dropped, and the gross national product nearly doubled. The public credited the economic recovery beginning in 1983 to the president’s policy changes and overwhelmingly elected him to a second term in 1984.

Reagan’s foreign policy was focused on winning the Cold War. He believed that by increasing military spending, the United States could pressure the Soviet Union to seek a mutual arms reduction. The prospect of nuclear war led Reagan to advocate creating a space-based anti-ballistic missile shield. Although his second term was marred by controversies in Central America and the Middle East, the president made inroads in U.S. relations with the former Union. After developing a rapport with the progressive new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the Americans and Soviets signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987, reducing hostilities between the two countries and raising hope for an end to the Cold War.

In 2010, failing health only John F. Kennedy surpassed Reagan in popularity among former presidents.