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Trump and Reagan: Similarities and Differences

By Ambassador Faith Whittlesey

I knew the real Ronald Reagan. In 1976, I was a single mother and young politician who risked everything to support him against Gerald Ford, a sitting Republican president. Four years later I helped deliver the key state of Pennsylvania to President Reagan, then I served beside him in the White House and as one of his ambassadors. He was not the avuncular, subdued great man worn down by age and illness that the media present to us today through a rosy filter of nostalgia. That caricature of Ronald Reagan is one Bill Clinton and even Barack Obama invoke, when it suits them.

I knew Ronald Reagan when TV pundits in the U.S. and Europe presented him as a cold-hearted extremist who was longing to take away food and shelter from America's poor and risk nuclear cataclysm. I was with him when the Rockefeller Republicans dismissed him as a former B-rated movie star and crackpot warmonger. Reagan's supporters were smeared as rubes, nativists, and religious fanatics. Reagan was a man who bucked the GOP "wise men" over and over again, until he won.

Then he restored America's élan, our economy, and brought down the Berlin Wall. Donald Trump's widespread — and bipartisan — support is being explained in the same way as was Reagan's in the European and, regrettably, Swiss media, which accept too quickly the accounts they pick up from U.S. media in New York and Washington.

Ronald Reagan could get angry, although he rarely did. Early in the 1980 campaign, when party regulars at a debate tried to silence him by threatening to turn off his microphone, he confronted them. "I paid for this microphone." They backed away. They weren't used to politicians with backbone and the confidence to stand up to the party elite, even as they were losing across the country and surrendering on every issue — from détente with the Soviet Union to the unsustainable expansion of the welfare state. The Republican party of Nelson Rockefeller and Gerald Ford saw itself as in the business of managing

America's decline, just a little more slowly and prudently than the Democrats would. Ronald Reagan saw another way, and it unsettled some people. But it also mobilized others and resulted in landslide victories for Republicans.

Reagan cleared the way for Lech Walesa and Pope John Paul II to dismantle the Communist empire at its foundation, and he realigned American politics for the rest of the century. His tax cuts and down-sizing of government regulation laid the foundation for a period of great growth and prosperity.

Today, America's two parties no longer share much common ground about what America even is, much less how she ought to be governed. In the past seven years of political and social upheaval, we have seen the repeated abuse of constitutional guarantees and authority by activist judges and an overreaching Executive Branch. We have experienced economic stasis and incoherence in foreign policy. In the process, America's influence has been significantly diminished and friends — like Switzerland — have been mistreated and alienated.

The leading candidate of the Democratic party declares that Americans who belong to the Republican party are her "enemies," while the president issues extralegal amnesties for illegal aliens, and rewards mayors of "sanctuary" cities who flout the immigration laws which he swore to uphold. It isn't surprising — nor should it surprise or alarm Europeans — that large numbers of Americans, of all ages and social and economic classes, are refusing to take direction from the entrenched party and media elites who are rich enough to insulate themselves from the consequences of the cultural chaos the U.S. is experiencing.

Trump speaks to a similar American body politic that is also frustrated and doesn't believe anything any professional politicians say. They believe America needs a president who is not beholden to special interest groups — that is why Trump's self-funding candidacy resonates so well with them. They also want a president

who is committed single-mindedly to the goal of creating prosperity for all Americans, while maintaining traditional values based on the delicate balance between order and liberty. They believe we need a leader who is unwilling to risk our country's future on the social experiment of effectively open borders — not even to please the high priests of anti-Western multiculturalism, or corporate CEOs who profit from cheap labor in a shadow economy, or avoid the (false) criticism that secure borders are based on racist impulses.

They want a man who will protect Americans at every economic level, not merely high-dollar investors with getaway homes on foreign shores. Americans are also war-weary and want a president who promises better care for grievously wounded veterans of the Iraq War Trump repeatedly calls a tragic mistake.

I appreciate that Donald Trump's personality and temperament differ from Ronald Reagan's. There are valid reservations to Trump from reasonable people, as there are to other candidates. But the objections we are hearing from the pundits in the U.S. to Mr. Trump, and which are now being echoed in Europe, are conspicuously similar to those we heard about Ronald Reagan, who was regarded by media groups — incorrectly — as an unsophisticated low-brow and, in foreign policy, uninformed neophyte.

There are many differences between the two men in deportment, background, style, experience, personal history, and, notably, how they approach political opponents, but we should not overlook striking similarities. Reagan was once pro-choice, before experience and reflection changed his mind about abortion on demand. He once favored high immigration, until he saw what it was doing to our country. He was accused of being overly simplistic, lacking substance. Ronald Reagan's stated plan to win the Cold War was stark: "We win, they lose." He made his share of enemies among the powerful — the fiercest being in his own party. In the media, there were legions of critics, full of mockery and vitriol. But, he was a brilliant choice for president.

Like President Reagan, Mr. Trump is an ex-Democrat. In his role as a highly successful entrepreneur, he has contributed to Democratic politicians over the years and even said nice things about some of them — this is taken as a sign of inconsistency. Those who know the current American scene understand that prominent business people today contribute to both parties as a kind of insurance against being singled out by the regulators and enforcers of the big tax and regulatory bureaucracies. For these very individuals and the firms they represent, such contributions and compliments are, sadly, regarded as normal costs of doing business.

Many Americans who support Donald Trump started

as idealistic liberals and Democrats. Many would still be if their original party of choice had not veered so dramatically away from core principles to embrace divisive identity politics and fiscal irresponsibility. In Switzerland and most of Europe there is a fundamental misunderstanding of the forces in the U.S. that have led to the emergence of, first, the so-called Tea Party and, now, Donald Trump. What most supporters of both movements would offer as their ideal definitions of sound governing arrangements and good economic, and immigration, policy quite simply best describe one other country — Switzerland. For instance, among those rallying to Trump, a proposal for a debt brake, such as the Swiss people enacted, would quickly find support.

As an ex-Democrat myself, I believe that the same factors that led me to reject Gerald Ford for Ronald Reagan in 1976 may be at play today. Millions of American voters are coalescing around Donald Trump for a reason. They have lost confidence in a bankrupted U.S. leadership elite. Brash, sometimes bombastic, often changeable, in ways imperfect, but always direct and plain-spoken.

Donald Trump has communicated credibility to that public that engenders trust that he will work hard for them to solve real problems. Like Reagan, Trump has developed a personal bond with millions of Americans. I have no doubt a Trump administration would also prove congenial to Switzerland because there would be an inherent appreciation for Swiss virtues, Swiss business practices, and Swiss sovereignty. I know Donald Trump personally. He values friends.

This article was first published on March 10, 2016, in the Swiss weekly Die Weltwoche. It is reprinted with permission.

The Honorable Faith Whittlesey was Ronald Reagan's Ambassador to Switzerland when Reagan met with Soviet boss Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva, Switzerland in November 1985. When Reagan announced he would meet with Gorbachev, a bunch of leftwingers led by Jesse Jackson, Bella Abzug and actress Jane Alexander went to Geneva to demonstrate against President Reagan.

Faced with this challenge, Phyllis Schlafly organized a group of prominent American women heads of organizations to go to Geneva and show support for President Reagan. Phyllis's group included Beverly LaHaye, president of Concerned Women for America, and longtime Eagle leaders Helen Marie Taylor, Najla Lataif, LaNeil Wright, Elaine Donnelly, Penny Pullen, Dorothy Sheldon, and Kitty Werthmann. We traveled to Geneva and held American-style news conferences. Our counter demonstration was a big success, and President Reagan telephoned me afterward to thank me for doing it.

Please — No Third-Party Candidate

Every four years there is political chatter about trying to run a third-party candidate who will supposedly be more conservative than the Republican nominee. The lesson is the same every time this is tried: third-party candidates do not win because the United States is a two-party country.

The grumblings we hear about Donald Trump are mostly because of his strong stand against illegal immigration and so-called free trade. Party bosses know that if Trump wins and then shuts down illegal immigration it will cost the Democratic Party millions of future votes — and if Trump stops the sellout of American workers through global free trade, the Republican donor class will lose lucrative deals for themselves with foreign countries.

Despite how current immigration heavily favors Democrats, many church leaders who usually lean Republican dislike Trump's strong stance against illegal immigration. They oppose Trump's plan to build a wall and deport illegal aliens. Since Christians have a mission to bring the faith to people of all nations, many church leaders support an immigration policy that puts more people in their pews. Trump's nationalistic tone, to "make America great again," is not something likely to be heard from a church pulpit.

Yet rank-and-file churchgoers overwhelmingly support Trump's views against current levels of immigration and trade. Evangelical voters, in particular, preferred Trump over his rivals in the Republican primaries, and they will surely vote heavily in favor of Trump rather than Hillary in the general election.

Despite the opposition of their members, some church leaders persist in supporting a permissive immigration policy that is closer to Barack Obama than Donald Trump. Two years ago, officials from several conservative Christian denominations met with President Obama and Valerie Jarrett in the Oval Office to express their support for "comprehensive immigration reform," which is the same slogan used by the Senate Gang of Eight in 2013. It means legislation that would grant eventual citizenship to illegal aliens while doing little or nothing to stem the flood of illegal immigrants into our nation — in other words, amnesty.

The immigration issue may be preventing some church leaders from siding with Donald Trump now. While opposition to Trump is expressed in moral terms — even though they had no trouble supporting the divorced Ronald Reagan in 1980 — a real motivation is that church leaders do not want Trump's criticism of immigration.

The last Republican nominee for president, Mitt Romney, stridently criticized Donald Trump earlier this year, and still refuses to endorse him. This should not be a

surprise, because Romney had harshly criticized Trump's statements about immigration during the campaign.

Rev. Luis Cortes, as president of an Hispanic Christian network and nonprofit legal organization that helps immigrants, declared after the White House meeting that "the entire religious community" supports an Obama-style immigration reform package. "For the first time . . . all the major denominations and churches and religious bodies of this country believe that it is a moral imperative that we get immigration reform done," he asserted.

But churchgoing voters indicated otherwise during the Republican primaries, by nominating Donald Trump. Now is the time for church leaders to listen to their own flock on the important issue of immigration. The amount of immigration allowed by a nation is a political matter, not a religious one.

The stunning election results in Austria last month demonstrate that those who try to duck or downplay the immigration issue are headed for defeat. As in the United States, the leaders of both major political parties in Austria ignored the problems caused by immigration. A candidate emerged there named Norbert Hofer, who campaigned on "putting Austria first" despite the media giving him little chance of winning.

On April 24th Austrians voted with a large turnout, and the candidate opposed to permissive immigration won the first round in a stunning double-digit landslide. The two major parties that had echoed failed immigration policies, as Democrats and Republicans here have done, fared so poorly that they failed even to qualify for the upcoming runoff, which the Trump-like Austrian candidate is also expected to win.

Church leaders should recognize that responsibility is just as important as charity. No church would urge people to unlock their doors at night in order to allow anyone in, and we should not persist with open borders to welcome hordes of illegal aliens who include many hardened criminals.

When an unwelcome "neighbor" comes into our home, we "deport" him out of our house, and Trump's leadership on the immigration issue has earned him the support of millions of Democrats and Republicans alike. Loving our neighbor does not mean unlocking our doors to any and all comers.

There will not be a third-party candidate who is as good as Trump on immigration. There will be only two viable candidates to choose from this fall, only one of whom will safeguard our country against immigration, and Jesus will not be on the ballot.

Murderers Should Not Be Allowed to Vote

We do not want convicted murderers and rapists sitting on juries in criminal trials, and we do not want convicted felons to be picking the next leaders of our Nation. Elections are for law-abiding citizens to pick law-abiding leaders, not for criminals to elect fellow criminals.

But Democrats have realized that convicted felons are more likely to vote for a Democrat than a Republican. In Virginia, the number of convicted felons is about 4% of the number of registered voters, which is more than enough to change the outcome in many local and statewide elections.

Our laws recognize that service on a jury and voting are not activities that should be open to anyone and everyone. People who are in our country illegally, for example, should not be voting in elections or serving on juries.

Children who are under age 18 should not be voting in elections or serving on juries. These activities require a level of responsibility possessed by law-abiding adults so their decisions will continue to safeguard our society against our enemies, foreign and domestic.

There is no constitutional right for murderers, rapists, and other convicted criminals to vote in our elections and potentially sway the outcome. Most states properly deny voting rights to persons who are convicted of committing serious crimes, while usually allowing a way for convicted felons to regain their voting rights only if certain conditions are met.

But the highly political Democratic governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, is a lame duck and a close friend of Hillary Clinton. McAuliffe will automatically be out of work in less than two years because Virginia does not allow a governor to run for reelection.

McAuliffe realizes that in order for Hillary to win in November, she must carry Virginia. McAuliffe could then gracefully accept a high-level position in the Clinton Administration after his term ends, or even sooner.

The math is obvious. McAuliffe was elected as governor of Virginia by a margin of only 50,000 votes, despite outspending his Republican opponent Ken Cuccinelli by many millions of dollars.

There are 200,000 convicted felons in Virginia who have not been allowed to vote. By unleashing this voting bloc in time for November, McAuliffe could swing the outcome in Virginia to Hillary, which could push her over the top in the electoral college nationwide.

On April 22nd, Governor McAuliffe issued an unprecedented executive order granting the right to vote to 206,000 convicted felons, including murderers and rapists. He did this without any approval by the Virginia legislature, and in apparent violation of Virginia's state constitution.

The Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates

responded with justifiable outrage. "I am stunned yet not at all surprised by the governor's action," observed William J. Howell, R-Stafford. He pointed out that the Democratic Governor probably aspires to be picked by Hillary Clinton for a Cabinet position if she becomes president, and that McAuliffe has always viewed his governorship "as a stepping stone to a job in Hillary Clinton's cabinet."

Prior Virginia governors thought that such a massive change in voting rights could not be done lawfully by executive order under the Virginia Constitution. But when the goal is to allow murderers and rapists to vote, why let a little thing like a constitution get in the way?

The Governor's shocking order affects juries, too, because he allows persons convicted of serious crimes to serve on them. People tried for murder in Virginia can now face people convicted of murder in the jury box.

Governor McAuliffe even vowed to issue new executive orders repeatedly to expand as much as possible the number of convicted felons, including those who have been incarcerated for violent crimes. Why aren't the feminists expressing outrage at allowing convicted rapists to vote and serve on juries?

Governor McAuliffe also extended voting rights to felons convicted of violent crimes who have not fully paid restitution to their victims for the injuries they caused. The victims of these violent crimes may be dead or unable physically to make it to the polling booths, but the perpetrators of heinous crimes will be able to vote however they like.

McAuliffe declared, "Once you've paid your time, there's no difference to me." But his actions demonstrate his political motive, because he did not restore Second Amendment rights to own guns to felons convicted of non-violent crimes who have "paid their time" because Hillary and other Democrats would not have liked that.

The Virginia legislature was in session the same week that McAuliffe made his unauthorized move by executive order, which thereby circumvented the democratically elected legislature. Hillary immediately applauded McAuliffe's power grab, which illustrates how she would ignore and circumvent Congress if she is given the opportunity to do so in the upcoming presidential election.

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