

Handout C: The Reagan Revolution

Introduction:

Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign echoed in many ways the Goldwater campaign of 1964. However, the differences were that Reagan's candidacy and his campaign were better able to defend his principles and the nation was in a place that was more receptive to that message.

Document 1: "Streetgov" TV advertisement for Jimmy Carter, 1980

Source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhKL-mji9UE>

Questions:

1. What is the intended effect of showing people from various parts of California giving their opinion of Reagan?
2. What is implied by these "man on the street" interviews about Reagan's fitness to be president?
3. How do these people portray Reagan as a person?

Document 2: Ronald Reagan Acceptance Speech, 1980

Source:

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/acceptance-speech-at-1980-republican-convention/>

Introduction:

By becoming the nominee of the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan revived Goldwater-style conservatism within mainstream U.S. politics. In response to a stagnating economy and a weakened global strength, the American people were now open to an alternative to the New Deal–influenced paradigm that had long been dominant. In this speech, we see echoes of Goldwater as Reagan calls for a renewal of Founding principles.

Text
With a deep awareness of the responsibility conferred by your trust, I accept your nomination for the presidency of the United States. . . .
Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face three grave threats to our very existence, any one of which could destroy us. We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.
The major issue of this campaign is the direct political, personal and moral responsibility of Democratic Party leadership—in the White House and in Congress—for this unprecedented calamity which has befallen us. They tell us they have done the most that humanly could be done. They say that the United States has had its day in the sun; that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems; that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities.
My fellow citizens, I utterly reject that view. The American people, the most generous on earth, who created the highest standard of living, are not going to accept the notion that we can only make a better world for others by moving backwards ourselves. Those who believe we can have no business leading the nation.
I will not stand by and watch this great country destroy itself under mediocre leadership that drifts from one crisis to the next, eroding our national will and purpose. . . .
. . . People pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to found this nation. Some forfeited their fortunes and their lives; none sacrificed honor.
Four score and seven years later, Abraham Lincoln called upon the people of all America to renew their dedication and their commitment to a government of, for and by the people.
Isn't it once again time to renew our compact of freedom; to pledge to each other all that is best in our lives; all that gives meaning to them—for the sake of this, our beloved and blessed land? . . .
Can anyone look at the record of this administration and say, "Well done?" Can anyone compare the state of our economy when the Carter Administration took office with where we are today and say, "Keep up the good work?" Can anyone look at our reduced standing in the world today and say, "Let's have four more years of this?"
I believe the American people are going to answer these questions the first week of November and their answer will be, "No—we've had enough." . . .
The administration which has brought us to this state is seeking your endorsement for four more years of weakness, indecision, mediocrity and incompetence. No American should vote until he or she has asked, is the United States stronger and more respected now than it was three-and-a-half years ago? Is the world today a safer place in which to live?
It is the responsibility of the president of the United States, in working for peace, to insure that the safety of our people cannot successfully be threatened by a hostile foreign power. As president, fulfilling that responsibility will be my number one priority.

We are not a warlike people. Quite the opposite. We always seek to live in peace. We resort to force infrequently and with great reluctance—and only after we have determined that it is absolutely necessary. We are awed—and rightly so—by the forces of destruction at loose in the world in this nuclear era. But neither can we be naive or foolish. Four times in my lifetime America has gone to war, bleeding the lives of its young men into the sands of beachheads, the fields of Europe and the jungles and rice paddies of Asia. We know only too well that war comes not when the forces of freedom are strong, but when they are weak. It is then that tyrants are tempted. . . .

. . . Let our friends and those who may wish us ill take note: the United States has an obligation to its citizens and to the people of the world never to let those who would destroy freedom dictate the future course of human life on this planet. I would regard my election as proof that we have renewed our resolve to preserve world peace and freedom. This nation will once again be strong enough to do that. . . .

Nearly 150 years after Tom Paine wrote those words, an American president told the generation of the Great Depression that it had a “rendezvous with destiny.” I believe that this generation of Americans today has a rendezvous with destiny.

Tonight, let us dedicate ourselves to renewing the American compact. I ask you not simply to “Trust me,” but to trust your values—our values—and to hold me responsible for living up to them. I ask you to trust that American spirit which knows no ethnic, religious, social, political, regional, or economic boundaries; the spirit that burned with zeal in the hearts of millions of immigrants from every corner of the Earth who came here in search of freedom.

Questions:

1. How does Reagan characterize the current condition of the United States?
2. What does Reagan see as the key for America to return to greatness?
3. What is the Reagan strategy to preserve world peace in the dangerous Cold War era?

Document 3: “Peace Through Strength” ad for Ronald Reagan, 1980

Source:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VXXwyl5G0A

Questions:

1. In this ad, how does Reagan use the examples of Korea and Vietnam to foreshadow the danger Carter’s defense policy is creating?
2. What does Reagan see as the connection between military strength and the likelihood of war?
3. What is as dangerous as actual weakness, according to Reagan?
4. How does Reagan hope history will remember his campaign’s appeal to Americans?