Reagan's Rules for Business

Prior to the 1980 presidential election, the world regarded the United States as a leader in environmental policy and legislation.¹ With overwhelming support from the majority of Americans, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter had helped to push bills such as the Clean Air and Water Acts of 1970 and 1972, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, and the Wilderness Act of 1977, through Congress. The 1970s also saw the introduction of the Environmental Protection Agency, which created and managed the nation’s environmental policies.² However, the economic recession in 1973 and world events during the late 1970s underscored poor economic growth and a crippling dependence on foreign energy. As Americans clamored for more jobs and stronger economic security, environmental regulation became a scapegoat for the poor state of the economy. Ronald Reagan’s landslide victory over Jimmy Carter in the presidential election of 1980 represented a monumental shift in American society away from the environmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s. As the new administration slowly stripped away the progress of its predecessors, it forced the environmental movement to reframe many of its goals and initiatives. Many environmentalists regard this period of time as both the “low point” of the environmental movement, while at the same time, one of its greatest stimulants.³ Under Reagan, the US moved backward on its goals for a more sustainable future, realigning its values and policies with economic progress and sustainable economic growth, while disregarding the negative effects of de-regulation on society and the environment.

The media plays a large role in shaping and manipulating the image and character of presidential candidates. The 1980 election was no different. To the public, Ronald Reagan appeared steadfast and heroic in his advertisements and photo-shoots, usually wearing a cowboy hat and riding a horse. Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, seemed timid, weak, and ineffective, wearing sweaters and cardigans in his interviews. The image of Reagan in advertisements exercising complete control over his natural domain promulgated the historical paradigm of the American landscape as endlessly bountiful, a country still with untapped potential rather than one with a host of environmental problems. In his debates, Reagan used negative public sentiment for Carter’s handling of the 1979 Energy Crisis and the Iranian hostage crisis as fuel to condemn the Carter administration’s strong regulations as an ineffective way to stimulate the economy. Most Americans, frustrated with the economic instability of the past decade, agreed with Reagan and fully supported the phasing out of stringent environmental legislation. However, Reagan did not just relax the regulation of the previous decade, choosing instead to drive “his deregulatory agenda across a variety of government agencies, thereby gutting consumer, environmental, and workplace protection.” Almost single handedly, his administration turned America away from prominent environmental issues, not only nationally but worldwide, steering a course away from caution and towards an era of unimpeded economic growth.

One of Reagan’s first legislative actions as President of the United States reversed Carter’s Executive Order 12264, which restricted the export of hazardous substances by U.S.

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companies, setting a precedent for a series of renovations within the federal government. Reagan quickly disbanded federal grant systems, slashing federal funding for solar research, drastically cutting the EPA budget, and dismantling the Council on Environmental Quality. Solar panels installed on the roof of the White House during the Carter administration were taken down, while Congress, with the blessing of the Reagan administration, reopened the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for controversial oil exploration. The doling out of federally protected land to private ownership groups, perhaps one of the greatest trends during Reagan’s presidency, advanced big business and free market agenda while reducing protected wilderness. Reagan’s rejection of regulation went so far that the ten largest environmental organizations in the US published a book, *Ronald Reagan and the American Environment*, indicting the president for ignoring glaring environmental problems. However, these policies, once set in motion, became difficult to reverse. Reagan had no intention of getting in the way of his economic juggernaut, citing his constituency as the voice that originally pushed for deregulation.

Reagan’s unwavering loyalty to business came to critical national attention in 1984 during the EPA’s Superfund scandal. While endorsing legislation to cut the EPA budget, Reagan also made some administrative changes within the organization, appointing candidates who supported the administration over any environmental movement. However, these changes quickly became a problem when Congress indicted the EPA’s assistant administrator, Rita Lavelle, a Reagan appointee, for the misuse of funds connected to a highly toxic waste site. With

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increasing pressure from Congress, many other EPA administrators resigned. While the state of the economy took precedence over many environmental issues in the 1980s, Americans still cared about increased toxic waste management.\textsuperscript{14} The aftershocks of recent disasters involving chemical spills in Love Canal and radiation leaks at Three Mile Island remained a central part of the social consciousness. However, Reagan opposed any hints of regulation to business, having originally rejected the validity of Superfund, a bill that used federal money to clean up hazardous waste sites.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, in 1981 he refused to sign, (the only nation out of 146,) a United Nations resolution that encouraged parameters for products harmful to health and the environment.\textsuperscript{16} It was only after the media debacle involving Superfund’s misuse that social and political pressure forced Reagan to sign bills on toxic waste management in 1984 and 1986. However, the legislation failed to address deeper issues of over-production and consumption, requiring companies to manage only the “end of the pipe”.\textsuperscript{17} As a result, landfills and incinerators for toxic waste quickly became common, especially in poor communities. Instead of reducing or effectively getting rid of waste, Reagan and Congress allowed companies to hide it in the very places where it was most lethal.

Another major environmental concern during the 1980s involved the widespread use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFC’s) and their depletion of ozone levels in the atmosphere. Reagan’s administration refused to acknowledge what scientists and the media were referring to as an “ozone hole” over Antarctica, caused by the use of CFC’s in consumer products, and tried to delay legislation in Congress.\textsuperscript{18} The issue of ozone depletion captivated the American public and

\textsuperscript{14} Dunaway, Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images. 193.
\textsuperscript{15} Dunaway, Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images. 193.
\textsuperscript{17} Dunaway, Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images. 195.
\textsuperscript{18} Dunaway, Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images. 199.
instilled recognition of the environmental degradation caused by increased consumerism. It took yet another media fiasco, in which Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel said that radiation was the personal problem of the American people, to encourage Reagan’s commitment to the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which ordered the discontinuation of CFC’s worldwide.\textsuperscript{19} Throughout Reagan’s tenure in office, pressure built in Congress and American society for changes in environmental policy to curtail pollution, toxic waste, and wilderness encroachment. But as Reagan maintained a firm position on the value of the free market, frustrations boiled over, forcing changes in the environmental movement.

Over the course of Reagan’s presidency, the environmental movement diverged. While Reagan took apart federal regulation designed to protect the environment in favor of greater economic stimulation, membership of environmental clubs such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society sky-rocketed.\textsuperscript{20} However, many grassroots activists and environmentalists quickly became disillusioned with organizational environmentalism in the 1980s due to their bureaucratic tendencies and their ineffectiveness in pushing the environmental agenda in Congress. Activists also became disillusioned with the close ties between economics and environmental policy that predominated in the scientific and legal worlds, and the leniency with which this community met Reagan’s environmental policies.\textsuperscript{21} As a result, radical environmentalism blossomed; a direct response to “mainstream” environmentalism that used direct and sometimes violent action to achieve their goals. Radical grassroots organizations such as Earth First and Greenpeace carried out elaborate and pointed plans to deter the destruction of nature. Monkey-wrenching, protests, direct interference with whaling boats, and other forms of

sabotage all became part of the reactionary movement against Reagan’s administration and his support of big business. However, the evolution of radical environmentalism highlighted the growing divide within the environmentalist movement, and its failure to create a unified voice. Reagan was easily able to dismiss the radicals while keeping the mainstream environmental organizations on a tight leash. It was not until after his Presidency that many Americans realized the extent to which his policies affected the state of the environment. The catastrophic Exxon-Valdez Oil spill of 1989 was the direct result of a push by the Reagan administration for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Explosions at chemical plants including the PEPCON disaster in 1984 and the Phillips disaster in 1989 were tied to Reagan’s de-regulation of safety and environmental standards for private companies. Countless other minor effects of de-regulation such as air and water pollution, destruction of ecosystems, logging, and as well as the looming specter of global warming, pushed a growing, albeit a disparate and leaderless environmental movement into the early 1990s.

Reagan’s legacy as President of the United States perfectly exemplifies the precarious relationship between the economy and the environment. The two forces that push for each movement exist in counterbalance. When there are few jobs and economic instability, the majority will demand an economic renaissance. When there are many jobs and economic stability, the majority will clamor for conservation, sustainability, and preservation. Ronald Reagan entered the Presidency at the peak of the former stage and fully took advantage of his position to advance the nation’s wealth and growth, succeeding tremendously in generating organic growth, GDP, and increased exports. With this growth and renewed stability to the

American people, the American majority recanted on its original position, urging more and more environmental regulation and legislation as the 1980s progressed. However, as proven by Reagan, the economy succeeded when environmental regulation reached its lowest point. But that is not necessarily the sole truth in this complicated relationship. As we move forward in time and recognized ties between the economy and the environment grow stronger, this inverse becomes muddled. Global warming, ecological devastation, peak oil theory, and countless other environmental problems have blatantly adverse effects on the economy, necessitating a balance between preservation and use, regulation and stimulus, and research and production. Reagan’s inability to recognize this balance altered the course of American social and environmental history, putting the US far behind the rest of the world in adjusting to a changing climate, identifying detrimental social and environmental trends, and preserving its natural resources. In an age of rising sea levels, rising temperatures, and higher rates of natural disaster, this balance is as important as ever, and it is time for the US to catch up.
Literature Cited


