A REAGAN STYLE ‘REVOLUTION’

President Ronald Reagan and partisans of his administration often talked, with enthusiasm and sincerity, of a Reagan ‘Revolution’ in American politics. There can be no doubt that he had a profound personal impact on the electorate, and a lasting, very significant influence on the federal government as well, especially regarding fiscal policy during his first term, and foreign policy during his second. In retrospect, he was particularly effective in solidifying and confirming the gains of a conservative movement which had been growing in political strength and public appeal since the early 1960s. The campaign of Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater in 1964 ended disastrously for the candidate and for the Republican political right which supported him, in a landslide for President Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats. The experience seemed to many, including liberal media observers, a quixotic and eccentric throwback to a dead conservatism of the past, one which had been overwhelmed at the polls with a reconfirmation of public support for the New Deal legacy of ‘affirmative’, ambitious government. The enormous LBJ victory was followed by passage through Congress of a huge range of new federal programmes, with expansion of the number of government departments dealing with social services matters.¹

With hindsight, clearly the campaign, which gave Ronald Reagan genuine national prominence in political terms, a professional dimension different from though also related to his background as a Hollywood actor, was not a fundamental defeat for conservativism but rather the initial stages of a groundswell. By early 1969, the Republicans, albeit of the more moderate Nixon variety, were in the White House. The executive branch remained in Republican control for the next twenty-four years, save only for President Jimmy Carter’s single term in office. The undeniably conservative Reagan and associates won a sweeping presidential victory in 1980, capturing control of the Senate along with the White House. Steady Republican Congressional gains, and sometime control of the Senate, was followed by majorities in both houses of the Congress in 1994. Both Carter and President Bill Clinton qualify as comparatively conservative Democrats, neither associated with FDR–Truman–LBJ style expansive government. Moreover, the Clinton health policy proposal, the only significant example of old-style Democratic social policy initiatives in
either administration, was stymied almost from the beginning. Goldwater should feel a strong sense of personal satisfaction and vindication in representing the vanguard of change in American politics, a very appropriate state of mind for a senior political figure – or anyone.

The significance of this Republican resurgence is a good deal more clear in the domestic affairs field than in foreign policy. In an earlier era, the Republican Party was more isolationist than the Democratic Party, but that has not been the case for more than forty years, and policy differences are much more visible on domestic than on international matters. The 1952 competition between Dwight Eisenhower and Robert Taft for the Republican presidential nomination brought a decisive victory for not only Eisenhower but also the internationalist wing of the party. Arguably in recent years the Democratic Party has been more the home of isolationism, beginning with the alienation of intellectuals and others as a result of internationalist commitment leading to the Vietnam War, and more recently encompassing those in the labour movement and elsewhere who tend to equate ‘free trade’ with undercutting the position and long-term gains of the American worker.

That is an important but perhaps still debatable proposition; less debatable is the argument that the resurgence of the far right in the Republican Party may have brought greater commitment to unilateralism in international affairs but so far no victory for isolationism. Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon and Ford all pursued arms control agreements with the Soviets, as indeed did Reagan after his initial emphasis on a purely rigid, pro-defence spending, hard line toward the ‘evil empire’. The Committee on the Present Danger, and related conservative individuals and centres of policy agitation, no doubt provided some underpinning to the new hard line in Washington. However, there was no foreign policy revolution comparable to what happened on the domestic front with the ‘supply side’ emphasis on tax cuts, and the elusive goal of using greater economic growth to shrink budget deficits, which came to fascinate many conservatives and rationalized the budget deficits that grew as their party controlled the executive branch throughout the 1980s.²

Ronald Reagan deserves to be remembered as the first President since Eisenhower to complete two terms in office, a major accomplishment, and like that predecessor he was exceptionally adept at public relations, evidenced by the capacity to accomplish relatively long tenure in the White House with strong public support intact. President Reagan’s completion of his terms with broad popularity provided a sense of continuity, and perhaps renewed legitimacy, after two decades of social and political instability and turmoil. His generally high approval ratings in polls over the