



## American Optimism and Historical Parallels

Seeking reelection to the White House in 1984, Ronald Reagan proclaimed, in one of the most effective campaign television spots ever, that “It’s morning again in America.” Donald Trump’s reelection to the White House in 2024, and his promise that America is set to enter a golden age, also stirs a faith among everyday Americans that however bad things seem in our nation, better days are ahead.

*Reagan and Trump were exceptionally effective in articulating a conviction that a better future awaits.* Both men could connect with the average American through their language, authenticity and down-to-earth qualities. Whatever else can be said of either Reagan or Trump, most Americans did not see them as run-of-the-mill phony politicians trying to sell them a bill of goods.

Both men came into office with an electorate in despair that the nation was in decline, with insoluble economic and social problems and foreign rivals supplanting America as the dominant global power. In the 1970s, media, academic and elite pundits concluded without hesitation that Japan had become the new global economic power and that its government industrial policy should be a model for the U.S.

In the 2020s, elites have projected a similar pessimism, intoning that China is ineluctably displacing the United States as an economic and military hegemon. This attitude about American decline is premised on an assumption that all world powers eventually decline and the U.S. is no exception.

### Reagan’s Optimism

Reagan began each of his two terms with high favorability among the voters. In the first weeks of Trump’s second term, President Trump also is enjoying high favorability ratings. Voters believe he is fulfilling his campaign promises. After four years of the

Biden administration, Americans are more optimistic about the future direction of the country. The question is: Will public optimism continue to grow, or is Trump enjoying only a short-term honeymoon period amid the determined opposition of the mainstream media, his political rivals in the Democratic Party, and his opponents deep in the Washington bureaucracy?

Upon leaving office, President Reagan warned of what later would be called the “deep state.”<sup>1</sup> He believed that the administrative bureaucrats, aligned with their friends in Congress, had defeated much of his agenda. Reagan’s lament about deep-state influence is worth recalling as a warning (if it is even needed) to the new Trump administration. More significant than this warning, though, is the optimistic message articulated by Reagan throughout his presidency, which restored Americans’ belief in our nation as exceptional in its creation and future.

### The Carter Malaise

Reagan won election in 1980 at a time when the general public had grown tired of what they perceived as President Carter’s ineptitude in domestic and foreign policy—a perception shared by many about President Biden’s four years.

Carter came into office in 1977 promising to address economic problems and, more importantly, trust in government. His pollster Pat Caddell told him surveys showed that the American people had lost confidence in government’s ability to solve problems. The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and the takeover by North Vietnamese communists of South Vietnam in 1975 had rattled the voters. Soaring inflation combined with unemployment (stagflation) only added to American anxiety.

After three years in office, things had not gotten any better for the Carter administration. Although he had secured a

major diplomatic victory in the Camp David Accords, which effected reciprocal recognition between Israel and Egypt, stagflation persisted, leading Carter to appoint Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve in 1979. Volcker, using draconian interest-rate hikes, finally brought inflation under control, but this success came only later, during the Reagan administration. On the foreign policy front, Carter confronted a hostile Soviet Union, which continued a nuclear arms buildup in clear violation of the SALT I agreement, launched an invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, and pursued an aggressive interventionist foreign policy in Africa and Latin America through proxies. The final straw, in November 1979, was Iranian militants' seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, where they took 53 embassy personnel as hostages.

Carter perceived a crisis of confidence in the public. Instead of seeing this as a failure of leadership, he concluded, after consulting with dozens of academics, politicians and ordinary citizens at the presidential retreat in Camp David, that the nation faced a moral and spiritual crisis.

On July 15, 1979, Carter took to the airwaves. Speaking to the nation in a televised address from the Oval Office, he lamented "a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul of our national will. We can see the crisis in the growing doubt of the meaning of our own lives and the loss of unity and purpose as a nation. The erosion of confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of the nation." He cited polls from Pat Caddell indicating that "a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years."<sup>2</sup>

The press labeled Carter's address the "malaise" speech, although he never used this exact word. Carter correctly noted a crisis of confidence within the public about their economic future and the direction of the country. The lack of confidence had more to do with leadership, however, and Carter's message and tone did not reassure them that things were going to get better.

### A Contrast with Carter

Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan provided a sharp contrast to Carter. Reagan brought to his nomination and presidential campaign a message that things could get better under new leadership. In his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination, he told convention delegates and 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." He blasted the Carter administration for runaway taxes, surging energy prices and inept leadership in confronting the Soviet threat. Earlier in the campaign Reagan told voters, "The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands."<sup>3</sup>

Reagan brought to his presidential campaign a naturally sunny and affable personality. His attacks on the Carter administration (and subtly the Nixon-Ford administration) were pointed but delivered in a measured tone. He needed to assure the voters that his leadership and conservative philosophy of downsizing the government's role in the economy and strengthening the military would bring positive change to the nation.

### Asking 'Are you better off...?'

In accepting his party's renomination, Carter ridiculed Reagan for living in "a make-believe world . . . of good guys and bad guys." Carter warned that a Reagan presidency with its "shoot first and ask questions later" style would bring an "an all-out nuclear arms race," a "radical and irresponsible course [which] would threaten our security and could put the whole world in peril." At a news conference, Reagan responded by mocking Carter's characterization of him as "a combination of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Mad Bomber," adding, "I don't think it will sell."<sup>4</sup>

Reagan's only debate with Carter came in the final week of the campaign, on October 28, 1979. On entering the debate, Carter appeared to have turned the presidential race into a close contest. His campaign and debate strategy was to portray Reagan as a right-wing extremist, a Hollywood actor out of touch with the public, and a man too old for the presidency. This campaign strategy followed a path pursued by every political opponent of Reagan from Pat Brown in California in 1966 through President Ford in the Republican primary in 1976. (Ford's staff, headed by Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, told Ford over and over that the only voters Reagan was attracting were far-right wingers.) Reagan's opponents never learned that underestimating Reagan as a debater and campaigner with appeal to the average voters was a profound mistake.

On the debate stage, Reagan asked voters, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" The voters answered with a resounding "No." On Election Day, Reagan won a huge popular vote and electoral victory.<sup>5</sup> After nearly

20 years of social tumult and negativity, American voters found new optimism about the direction of the country.

Reagan easily won reelection in 1984. His one-minute television spot about “Morning in America” projected once again his optimism. His promise that things could be changed in Washington met the expectation of voters. Reagan left office in 1989 with high approval ratings. American confidence in the future of the country had been restored.

During the Biden presidency (2021-25), the majority of Americans came to believe the country was headed in the wrong direction. *By January 2, 2025, 77 percent of all Americans considered themselves “somewhat dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the direction of the country.*<sup>6</sup> This was not a good sign for Democrats who wanted to keep the White House.

### Lame Excuses and Gaslighting

The Biden-Harris administration tried to reassure American voters that things were not as bad as they believed. At first, Biden administration officials told Americans not to worry about inflation because it was only “transitory.” When inflation persisted, administration officials offered various explanations: price gouging by corporations and supermarkets; only certain prices were higher; or economic shock due to Covid-19 and a supply problem. Democrats praised the millions of jobs that had been created through their spending efforts. As for what many Americans saw as a disastrous open-border policy, Democrats responded that it was not really a problem; or it was a problem caused by the previous administration; or immigrants were the life-blood of the nation and to oppose open borders was racist.

Similar attempts to persuade Americans that President Biden was a first-class world leader and that America was respected throughout the world as never before, all sounded hollow. Americans were told that the withdrawal from Afghanistan was actually a success. Billions of dollars spent on Russia’s war with Ukraine were necessary to protect all of Europe from Russian imperialism. Iranian support of terrorists in the Middle East was downplayed. The Biden administration allowed that Israel had a right to defend itself following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel that killed more than a thousand Israelis, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu really should not be trusted.

On and on it went, with the Biden administration appearing more and more out of touch with the American public.

When Biden officials did not show up to console residents in southwest Ohio following a toxic spill caused by a railroad accident, they left the impression of an administration that claimed to represent the working people of America, but did not. This was followed by other natural disasters—floods, hurricanes and forest fires—in which administration officials appeared phlegmatic to the victims.

### Restoring Optimism

Instead of expressing optimism that things would get better, the Biden administration and the Harris presidential campaign projected a view that many things were actually getting worse in America. Racism, homophobia and hatred of transgendered people were as bad as they ever had been in America. Indeed, they were getting worse because of right-wing extremists. And if Donald Trump got elected, expect dictatorship and fascism.

Although under continual attack by Democrats, the media, prosecutors and judges, Trump conveyed optimism and a natural affability. Although he could be blunt to the point of rudeness, and often appeared to give “stream of consciousness” type speeches, Trump related to the average Joe. There he was in Ohio, North Carolina and Florida talking to disaster victims. There he was buying hamburgers, pizza and beer for folks encountered on his campaign tours. There he was flipping burgers at a McDonald’s and even being driven in a garbage truck. Trump showed up at disaster sites, talking to the victims, promising relief.

He won reelection in a clear victory, winning the popular vote and carrying every swing state. His election was not just because of a weak Democratic opponent, but because American voters said “enough is enough” and because Trump was relatable. The first attempt on his life, when he was shot in the ear by an assassin’s bullet, further humanized him. After being taken to the ground by Secret Service agents protecting him, he stood up immediately with his fist raised to shout, “Fight, fight, fight,” showing he was a warrior and a man of courage.

In his inaugural address, Trump expressed his optimism by promising to fulfill his campaign promises and declaring that the “golden age of America begins right now.”<sup>7</sup> His first few weeks in office have been a whirlwind of activity, leaving his Democratic opponents and the mainstream media appearing discombobulated.

President Trump’s flurry of executive orders has flustered a helpless Democratic party, perhaps most effectively with

regard to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs. The executive orders against DEI programs in favor of a return to “merit-based hiring” have already led companies such as Disney, Google, GM, Pepsi and Intel to either soften or eliminate their DEI programs.<sup>8</sup> Other executive orders bring the fight against DEI to the military. While abolishing such programs entirely, these orders also ban the use of made-up pronouns across the Defense Department and explicitly forbid men from using facilities reserved for women.<sup>9</sup> Yet another executive order bars biological males from female sports in federally funded schools and colleges.

## Gutting DEI, Fraud and Waste

**T**he robust actions of the new administration, with the vigorous aid of business titan Elon Musk, have so far made astounding progress in revealing and eliminating bureaucratic waste. USAID and its \$40 billion budget have been a prime target of Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).<sup>10</sup> The White House recently published a collection of USAID projects as evidence of “waste and abuse.” These include a \$1.5 million DEI grant to Serbia, \$2.5 million for electric vehicles for Vietnam, and \$2 million for sex changes and LGBTQ activism in Guatemala.<sup>11</sup>

The heroic exertions of the DOGE continue to spread throughout the federal bureaucracy.<sup>12</sup> Each day brings new revelations of expenditures to be stopped, such as some \$600 million in DEI training that was eliminated from the Department of Education’s budget.<sup>13</sup> The progress continues to build momentum.

Together with Musk, the Trump administration is driving ever closer to the golden age he promised in his inaugural speech. It is still early, and the Democratic left, while in

retreat, is not defeated. Unexpected events, domestic and foreign, might derail Trump’s agenda. Scores of lawsuits have been launched to challenge executive orders and the DOGE. But for now, Trump’s message of optimism and his promise to fix the nation’s problems have resonated with the voters. His approval rating stands at a healthy 48 percent as of mid-February, and there has been a 19-point positive shift in the voters—now 52 percent—who believe that the country is on the right track.<sup>14</sup>

American optimism has returned. Pray that it continues to rise. We hope it’s morning again in America.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-administration-officials-domestic-policy>; <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-12-14-mn-279-story.html>; <https://www.chicagotribune.com/1988/12/14/reagan-denounces-iron-triangle/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm>. A good summary of the speech is found in <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/jimmy-carter-and-the-malaise-speech>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna27117516>.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/360190/pach-essay-upload-1.pdf?srsid=AfmBOodD-pob2mRDxkMyXMPGkLjxfiF6U8iyDpELvUaNORiKgCIT15>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/are-you-better-you-were-4-years-ago>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1669/general-mood-country.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-heralds-golden-age-promise-filled-inaugural-address-rcna186498>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/07/nx-s1-5288947/trump-dei-disney-pepsi-diversity>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czj3v42m9x0o>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyezjwnx5ko>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/at-usaid-waste-and-abuse-runs-deep/>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/acting-head-social-security-quits-after-clash-doge-over-data-report>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.breitbart.com/education/2025/02/17/education-department-slashes-600-million-divisive-teacher-training-grants/>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://hotair.com/ed-morrissey/2025/02/14/emerson-and-rasmussen-america-has-crossed-the-streams-n3799819>.

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