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Death Doctrine

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Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Angola were the three rings of the Reagan Doctrine, the war by proxy, and none turned out well. The former president's support of despots and violent insurgencies guaranteed a future of errant, and deadly, U.S. foreign policy. For all his bluster about the use of military power and his plaintive, post hoc calls to action in Vietnam, President Ronald Reagan was restrained in deploying American troops and even more cautious in committing them to combat. His military forays (in addition to bombing Libya) amounted to two ventures. The first was in Lebanon, where he deployed peacekeeping troops in 1983, only to see 300 of them killed in two separate terrorist assaults. His response was to "cut and run," to use the phrase familiar to his followers but rarely applied to him, actions doubtlessly emboldening politically violent groups in the region who must have reasoned that if Reagan could so easily be dislodged and neutered, then Americans were unlikely to take up the fight against them. Within hours of the Beirut debacle—the second bombing there took the lives of 270 marines—Reagan launched an invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada to depose a leftist leader and protect American students. This action, following policies meant to destabilize the government, was the 135th time U.S. forces had intervened in Latin America and the Caribbean. Supposedly a shot over the bow of Cuba, the message was lost on Castro but was far more successful in diverting the American news media and public from the deadly failure in Lebanon. These two incidents aside, Reagan's preferred method of military intervention was to use other people to do the fighting, and he took aim at Marxist governments with these would-be liberators. With fulsome support, he set out to undo the Soviet puppet state in Afghanistan (and Soviet troops occupying it), the Vietnamese control over Cambodia, the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, and the postcolonial state of Angola. The leaders of the last two were liberators themselves, overthrowing centuries of colonial or neocolonial dictators and appearing to enjoy considerable

popularity and legitimacy. The Cambodian fiasco was a direct consequence of the U.S. war in Indochina, a war in which Cambodia was fully in play. And the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, while clearly a catastrophe of their own making, was one of the reverberations of the 1979 revolution in Iran, another signal event with American fingerprints all over it. In each of these venues, the ideology of rollback was paramount. What came to be known as the Reagan Doctrine—the attempt to overthrow regimes of a pinkish hue by supporting, if not creating, violent insurgencies—grew like a malignancy from the frustrated rollback ideologies of anticommunism's heyday. Unable to commit U.S. troops to such missions because of the failure in Vietnam, Reagan backed the contras in Nicaragua, mujaheddin in Afghanistan, UNITA in Angola, and a bizarre coalition that included the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot in Cambodia to undertake what he was unwilling to do with U.S. soldiers: to overthrow these states and usher in new regimes that would be friendly to U.S. interests and "freedom." What once could be achieved with covert CIA coups, as in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and Congo in 1961, now required a more sizable undertaking, one that would be aided by U.S. covert operations but also demanded very large sums of money, arms, and political legitimacy. These Reagan willingly supplied, sometimes illegally. But like the attempts at rollback in Korea and Vietnam, the consequences of this ersatz intervention were ruinous for the venues of conflict, not least in their human costs. REAGAN'S ROLLBACK The inauguration of Ronald Reagan came at a low point for Americans's sense of their global role. The sting of the Vietnam disaster remained fresh in everyone's memory; only a few years had passed since the shocking sight of Americans and Vietnamese evacuating onto a helicopter from a Saigon rooftop. In Tehran, Americans were seized in November 1979 and held captive by the Iranian revolutionaries until the day of Reagan's swearing-in as president. Meanwhile, Senator Frank Church's hearings about CIA turpitude highlighted a brief but intense period of self-criticism and introspection that the public generally found distasteful. Those events, coupled with what the right wing darkly (and erroneously) warned was decisive Soviet nuclear prowess, left much of America feeling humiliated, set upon, perhaps itching for a fight. In popular films and novels, the itch was apparent: the ambiguity of the Vietnam experience in The Deer Hunter or the manic Dispatches gave way to the Rambo series—in which, in its "cinematic wish-fulfillment fantasy, America gets to go back and finish the war that the bleeding hearts and bureaucrats wouldn't let us win the first time around"—and seemingly critical treatments like Oliver Stone's Platoon that nonetheless conformed closely to the frontier myth. (Rambo was, no less, a captivity narrative, the deepest scar on the national psyche.) At the same time, a new prominence was accorded right-wing evangelicals, reliable anticommunists but with much more visibility in the 1970s and 1980s—partly in response to the 1960s counterculture—and this braced the militant foreign policy wielded by Reagan, with special emphasis on support for Israel as the bulwark against Muslims in the Holy Land. The long obsession with China gradually gave way to a new attention to the "clash of civilizations" in the Middle East. That sentiment in part led Reagan to deploy marines in Beirut and to approve Israel's invasion of Lebanon, a deviation from the longstanding Republican aloofness from Israel's cause and a new alignment with Likud that would prove momentous over the coming years. Far more quietly, Reagan also lent enormous resources to Iraq to turn back Iran's threat to defeat Saddam Hussein, who had invaded Iran in 1980 only to meet surprising resistance and then, by 1982, likely defeat without American help. Reagan's substantial aid to Saddam—$5 billion in financial credits, political legitimacy and cover, crucial military intelligence, and, finally, the reflagging of oil tankers and a small naval war with Iran—saved the Iraqi dictator and enlarged his ambition in the Gulf. Not only had Reagan nourished

Saddam's expansionism, but he made an enemy of Iran (or merely reinforced the regime's convictions regarding the Great Satan). Once Iran recovered from the immensely bloody conflict—nearly one million died—and continued to feel rebuffed by the United States, it began to assert itself against American interests throughout the region. The Reagan Doctrine was applied elsewhere, however. Sensing, perhaps, the sullen public mood, Reagan provided the stirring call to arms, answered not by Americans but by patchwork bands of "freedom fighters," religious extremists, mercenaries, common criminals, genocidaires, and proxies of the old guard. Wars were launched to unseat the left-leaning governments, conflicts that in some cases lasted for more than a decade, leaving each country reeling from the havoc—many thousands (or tens or hundreds of thousands) who were killed, even more made homeless or refugees; economies left in ruins; spillover to neighboring countries; and social disintegration that opened floodgates of disease, criminality, terrorism, and unimaginable waste. The doctrine emerged gradually from a muddle of anticommunist sentiments and exaggerated fears of growing Soviet influence in the third world. Moderates in the State Department tried to cool the fervor of William Casey at the CIA and the likes of Oliver North on the White House staff, though the latter typically won the debate; this policy mishmash led, as they often do, to blunders and dashed expectations. It was only late in his presidency that Reagan laid claim to an operational philosophy of rollback, even as some of its venues were demonstrating the doctrine's unsuitability. But it nonetheless became one of the signature policies of his presidency. "The attractiveness of the Reagan doctrine was, in large measure, its apparent compatibility with these limitations" exacted by the Vietnam experience, wrote one foreign policy veteran in 1989. "This version of globalism would require very little treasure and, even more significant, no American blood at all." It was also rhetorically attractive, as rollback generally is to American audiences. Reagan captured this sentiment neatly in a 1983 speech: "The goal of the free world must no longer be stated in the negative, that is, resistance to Soviet expansionism. The goal of the free world must instead be stated in the affirmative. We must go on the offensive with a forward strategy for freedom." So the old and bitter battle between containment and rollback was joined again, this time with rollback gaining the upper hand. Afghanistan has long been showcased as the trophy of the Reagan Doctrine. Alarmed by growing unrest in its "ally" state, the Soviet Union saw in 1979 what was occurring in Iran "a full-scale revolution" as a danger not only to Kabul but as a mortal threat to the largely Muslim region of the USSR bordering Afghanistan and Iran. The Soviets, with the decrepit, Stalinesque Leonid Brezhnev still in charge, intervened in their typically clumsy and brutal fashion, sending 80,000 troops in at the end of 1979 to occupy the country and to quell a simmering rebellion, which was in part a revolt of countryside traditionalists against urban-based modernizers. The invasion was a fool's errand from the start; some analysts have speculated that the United States even lured the Soviets into Afghanistan by supporting the traditional tribal leaders. This religious, antimodern resistance, the mujaheddin, quickly grew, fighting what seemed to be insurmountable odds but trading on a long history of battling invaders, and was soon joined by Muslims from many other countries in what was heralded as an epic jihad. Reagan was actually a bit half-hearted in supporting the mujaheddin; he was doing little more than Carter did in the final year of his presidency. By 1986, with considerable congressional prompting, Reagan had finally upped the ante with a sizable, mainly covert operation to funnel billions of dollars worth of weapons to the anti-Soviet forces, create training and operations bases in Pakistan (requiring the United States to back the military dictatorship of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq), and provide other logistical support to the rebels. By the end of the decade, the Soviets—who actually sought a way out much sooner, in the early 1980s, but hadn't the

wherewithal to leave and declare victory—were beaten. It was a devastating defeat for the USSR, though hardly the sweeping triumph claimed by Reagan's minions: the U.S. role was important, but defeat was visible before the major U.S. arms shipments came. The collapse of the Soviet Union, which some attribute to the Afghan debacle, was due to a multiplicity of causes in which the Afghan war played only a minor part. More important was what transpired after the Soviets left and American backing dried up: years of chaos and warlordism, a lively export engine supplying the West with opium and heroin, and, by 1996, after years of civil war, the horrifying ascension of the Taliban to power. Reagan never had a plan for a post-Soviet Afghanistan, and the consequences of this sheer neglect were the years of a failed state topped by years of one of the most repressive regimes in memory, one that by 1998 warmly welcomed and hosted Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda headquarters. No one knows how many Afghans died in their resistance to the Soviet Union; the number is in the hundreds of thousands, possibly more than one million, if including civilians and fighters alike. Nicaragua was meant to be another trophy. The United States had dominated Central America for decades and freely intervened in Nicaragua several times; once it had captured the nationalist hero Sandino, the symbolic patron of the revolutionaries who in 1979 overthrew the classic Latin caudillo Anastasio Somoza and created a state that was by turns democratic and intimidating. The outcome rang alarms in Washington because of the fear that another Cuba was in the offing. The Sandinistas appeared to be aiding rebels in El Salvador and were eventually recipients of Soviet assistance themselves. The mood attending U.S. policy in Central America was fractious, and the Reagan team was unremitting in its hostility to the leftists, an attitude emblemized by Jeanne Kirkpatrick's implication that the Maryknoll nuns murdered in El Salvador by the regime's death squads deserved their fate, and, later, by Reagan's backing of the genocidal Ríos Montt regime in Guatemala. Thus commenced from the first weeks of Reagan's tenure an attempt to dislodge the Sandinistas. The Reagan administration essentially created the contras, a ragtag band of opponents of the Sandinistas, who launched violent raids into Nicaragua, sometimes killing civilians, engaging in drug trafficking, and besetting the communities in Honduras where they set up camps. "Hoping to show a wavering rural population that the Sandinistas could not establish effective sovereignty," noted one historian's account of the U.S. objectives, "the contras razed cooperatives, schools, health clinics, and power stations and tortured, raped, and murdered civilians, including foreigners who were helping to rebuild Nicaragua." The Sandinistas were largely incompetent and sometimes doctrinaire rulers, but they were not totalitarians, nor did they threaten neighbors, as Reagan alleged. They were eventually voted out of office—totalitarians generally do not hold elections, of course—and then returned to power by the vote some years later. Unlike some of the other venues of the Reagan Doctrine, "in Nicaragua, aid was to be provided to a resistance that lacked broad support in the population, was led by members of a despised military, and was seen as the creation of the United States." Throughout the 1980s, Nicaragua was plagued by the turmoil created by the contras, isolated and impoverished; Honduras in particular also suffered profoundly adverse effects. Drug trafficking and gang violence were among the furies afflicting Central America after its many years of conflict. The contras' war took 30,000 lives. Angola was the other major venue of the Reagan Doctrine. It had long been a Portuguese colony, and indigenous movements challenged and then upended the colonial order following a coup in Lisbon in 1974. The rebels soon were fighting with each other, but the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) emerged victorious and was widely recognized internationally as the legitimate government. But because it was aided by Cuba and hosted other liberation movements aimed at apartheid South Africa, it

earned the enmity of America's right wing, which preferred the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), headed by Jonas Savimbi, which had been aided by South Africa. When Reagan came to the White House, a deadly civil war was still under way, complicated by South Africa's recalcitrance over neighboring Namibia, which it controlled. The rollback advocates in the administration chafed at congressional restrictions that limited aid to Savimbi, who became the "freedom fighter" par excellence in southern Africa; the ban was finally lifted—partly due to promises of diplomacy—and tens of millions of dollars in aid flowed to UNITA. "Under the guise of 'constructive engagement,' the United States improved diplomatic and economic relations with South Africa," wrote scholar Michael McFaul, "tacitly sanctioning and circuitously subsidizing South African operations in Angola." So the lethal aid to Savimbi was not only about fighting a communist-tinged state (Angola had Soviet aid and advisers as well as Cubans) but about serving as a guarantor of South Africa's security. The diplomatic track, which eventually did get South Africa out of Namibia in exchange for a withdrawal of Cubans from Angola, was opposed by the rollback partisans, who actively disrupted diplomacy to support South Africa's military incursions into Angola. Savimbi himself was revealed as an authoritarian with a deplorable record of human rights violations; as an obituary in 2002 put it, "for the past ten years, using the proceeds of smuggled diamonds from eastern and central Angola, he fought an increasingly pointless and personal bush war against the elected government in which hundreds of thousands of peasants were killed, wounded, displaced, or starved to death." The Reagan aid to UNITA merely prolonged the civil war, delayed the resolution of the Namibian impasse, and resulted in colossal human losses—as many as 1.2 million dead and 1.5 million displaced. As is always the case with the Reagan Doctrine, some of the worst consequences took place after he left office. Afghanistan, Nicaragua, and Angola were the three rings of the Reagan Doctrine (Cambodia was "a minor element of a secondary issue"), and none turned out well. Each place suffered continuing civil war, social dissolution, and large-scale suffering as a consequence of the actions of the American-backed insurgencies. The U.S. culpability varied greatly from case to case. It seems fairly clear that the scale of misery in Afghanistan would not have differed much with an absence of U.S. support for the mujaheddin; whereas in Nicaragua and Angola, U.S. meddling was directly correlated to the high civilian tolls. The ill effects of U.S. intervention, including the extraordinary numbers of casualties, weigh heavily in the history of American foreign policy. REAGAN AND THE REAGAN DOCTRINE What the American public made of these surrogate wars varied according to the political salience of the specific country and recent events. In general, Americans held slightly favorable attitudes toward supporting aid and arms, particularly if compared with sending U.S. troops. But when asked (in 1986) specifically about economic and military aid to the U.S.-backed insurgents in Angola, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua, only 24 percent supported economic and military aid, with nearly half opposed to any assistance. The ambivalence is partially about involvement in the world generally, with "internationalists" favoring assistance more than those who might be labeled isolationist. A sizable "solidarity" movement in the United States opposing aid to the contras raised the visibility of the war as well as the human costs, and this may account for contra aid being more unpopular than the support of the Afghan rebels and of UNITA in Angola. But contra aid was soiled by illegality (the Iran-Contra scandal) and by the nature of the contras themselves, hardly paragons of rebel virtue, and this was more evident to the American public than the human failings of other Reagan favorites. The Afghan issue was linked directly to bad behavior by the Soviets and hence easier to support. Angola's troubles were remote and difficult to understand, and Americans were at that time viewing South Africa with growing

distaste, thanks in part to a well-organized anti-apartheid movement on campuses. Those "for" and "against" the policies subsumed under the banner of the Reagan Doctrine tended always to follow political lines, however, and rarely evinced any concerns about the enormous human costs of those wars. Reagan himself marched to an uncertain drummer. While his anti-communist and pro-freedom rhetoric always soared, it was his underlings who agitated for the riskier and violence-prone policies—Casey, North, defense secretary Caspar Weinberger, aide Elliott Abrams, and the like. "In truth, President Reagan's involvement in the doctrine that bears his name was episodic at best," wrote James Scott in the most complete account of the policy. "Most of the time, President Reagan was a spectator to disputes between advisers." He was active only for a short period of time in his second term, long after the conflicts were essentially decided or close to resolution. And soon after, he embraced Mikhail Gorbachev's initiative to end the Cold War, going far beyond what traditional anticommunism (or his right-wing base) would support, or indeed his own tentative steps before. This was done in part to rebuild his presidency after the Iran-Contra scandal shook it so badly. The irony was that the most dicey gambit of the doctrine—the sale of missiles to Khomeini's Iran and the illegal diversion of money for the contras—would be the piece that necessitated a reversal of anticommunist zeal in order to preserve the Reagan presidency and legacy. But the legacy did survive. One of its most resilient features was Reagan's capacity to cast himself in the role of the frontier hero, of course, even as he had no credentials on that score, no military service or anything resembling it, no actual encounter with the American or global frontier in his past life. It was a completely manufactured image. But the rhetoric and the go-it-alone tough talk (burnished by his Santa Barbara ranch with all the trappings) reestablished the frontier myth after its years of hardship with the loss of Indochina and the hostage-taking in Iran. He did so not only by talking about freedom fighters and Moscow's evil empire but also by a specific discourse of betrayal and civilizational conflict. He fit the heroic trope of working outside his own system, which itself was filled with cowards and inert officials, and nimbly used that as a lifelong and popular stance. Few presidents in modern memory mobilized mythic belief as Reagan did, and it was thoroughly imbued with the images and norms of the frontier (so much so that the "shining city on a hill" phrase is often attributed to him by his ideological progeny). His wars were remarkably limited affairs, at least for Americans, if wholly savage. The "bonanza" sprang not only from Reaganomics at home, but Reaganomics abroad—specifically, and fatefully, the global policy reversal on third world development that undermined years of steady success via the building of indigenous industry and human capital, to a "free market" ideology that enabled American corporations to buy and control resources and industries while public industries were sold off and institutions like education and health care were starved of funds. The results of these "structural adjustment policies" were setbacks for much of the third world, Africa and South America in particular. Conflict, poverty, and epidemics in many of these places were outcomes of this intrusive and mendacious ideology. Throughout his political career, Reagan reasserted the American beliefs in global resources being ours for the taking, in military power, and in the intrinsic goodness and prerogatives of America. The Reagan Doctrine combined all of these qualities. He was also a transitional figure of sorts from the multilateralism and global leadership shaped by FDR and Truman, with its emphasis on collective security, containment of communism, and state-led development in the global south, to an ever more unilateralist outlook that renewed the gold rush mentalities of frontier expansionism and gradually recognized a new "savage" in Muslim militants. It is not surprising that the American public was frequently thrilled by Reagan's tough talk and embrace of getting rich. By effortlessly placing these policies in appealing language—

“We have every right to dream heroic dreams,” he said in his first inaugural address—he renewed the moral righteousness that was squandered in Vietnam. That two of his next three successors would aim to emulate Reagan virtually guaranteed that the errand to the wilderness would avidly be pursued. And, like those that came before, the costs would be high.