Conservatism today is thought of by right-thinking people as the result of status envy, economic insecurity, religious zealotry, and xenophobia. The contrary belief is that conservatism appeals to a more profound source of wisdom than can be found in the most accomplished theories of social science or political ideology, for it is derived from the wealth of ingrained knowledge acquired by the accumulated experience and reflections upon that experience of many generations and is, in other words, a personal rather than theoretical form of knowledge. The most apt representative of the quality of the conservative intellect in terms of governance is the late president Ronald Reagan.

That Ronald Reagan has been underestimated by his critics, especially those from the Left, goes almost without saying; but one aspect of their criticism does sting because it is an assertion that Reagan simply lacked intellectual ability, that in the words of a Democratic operative, Reagan was an “amiable dunce.” The persistence of this jibe comes from the fact that progressive thought believes itself to be eminently rational, so much so that people on the Left come to believe that their political positions are what truly reasonable people will believe. As a result, progressive thought reacts by assuming that conservative positions are the result of either capitalist self-interest, malice such as racial prejudice, or simple lack of intelligence. This belief is commonly maintained by the American professoriate, which largely holds left-wing views; this phenomenon has been well documented and is especially observable in liberal arts faculties. One notorious result is the annual rankings of American presidents put out by professors of history, which usually show Roosevelt, Wilson, and Truman in the lead, second only to Washington and Lincoln, with the only modern Republican president on the upper half of the list being Teddy Roosevelt.

The point of this essay is not so much to evaluate the level of intellectual ability of Ronald Reagan, although that point will be covered, as much as to examine those qualities of his mind that made him an effective president. Rather the point is to get at what and how Reagan thought, how he saw the world and comprehended...
it, and what the implications of his intellect are in this sense for conservative governing philosophy. Ronald Reagan was not what is called a “policy wonk,” as he argued his points by means of examples and appeals to common sense. He did not refer to statistics, long-term trends, root causes, charts, graphs, or formulas; rather, his general approach was based on his experience, for he had, as it were, played many roles in his long and active career, and he had learned from all of them. He also had a sense of inner confidence from having seen his beliefs confirmed over time by events that led him often to defy expert opinion in deference to his own hard-won principles.

Not So Dumb After All

The obvious retort to the accusation that a particular president is unintelligent is to reply, “Well, if he’s so dumb, how did he get to be president?” This can be an ineffective response, since time and circumstance have influence in all things, and “dumb luck” in the form of an unexpected confluence of events may serve to get an unqualified man into any high office, including the American presidency. But the next iteration of the question, which applies to Reagan, is “If Reagan was so dumb, how did he get to be a good president, even a great president?” And here the eminent level of success that his presidency enjoyed goes beyond the possibility that time and circumstance enabled him to succeed, especially as Reagan’s time as president spans eight years and a variety of circumstances and events that only an outstanding level of leadership could have dealt with successfully.

But there remains a question about Reagan’s intellectual capacity, since Reagan did not seemingly possess on the manifest level outstanding analytic ability, something that was apparent in Nixon and Carter. Lou Cannon in his comprehensive biography examines at some length the question of Reagan’s intellectual ability, citing many observers who worked with and knew Reagan and who commented on his lack of knowledge of details and seeming passivity when complex discussions of policy were going on; it is reported that his assistants had to resort to anecdotes and concrete examples when making a case for a particular policy to Reagan, who eventually requested that policy options be presented on one page in summary form with bullet points. In this interpretation, however, Reagan’s success remains a mystery, and so Cannon finally relies on the theory of “multiple intelligences” put forward by a Harvard psychologist, in which artistic ability or the ability to get along with others counts as a form of intelligence on a par with mathematical or analytic intelligence, that is, the sort of ability measured by I.Q. tests and at which professors and lawyers excel. Thus, in liberal thinking, the perfect president would be, as in the television show The West Wing, a Nobel Prize winner in economics (like Paul Krugman?).

There is evidence, however, that Cannon and others seriously underestimate Reagan’s analytic abilities, which includes his assessment of the weakness of the Soviet economy: that despite contrary assertions by John Kenneth Galbraith and the CIA, the Russian economy was fragile, not strong. The Washington columnists Evans and Novak, who interviewed Reagan early in his first term, were impressed by the fact that Reagan cited economic theorists Frédéric Bastiat and Ludwig von Mises, of whom Evans and Novak had never heard. While Reagan had signed a bill that provided limited
access to abortion in his term as governor of California, he came to regret it and remained strongly against abortion on demand. He wrote an extended essay against it that contained a series of tightly reasoned arguments, for example that since science did not know when life actually began in the womb, the state ought to err on the side of life; so well argued is his case that Reagan’s essay is used as an example for study in a contemporary logic textbook.4

Reagan’s analytic ability may have been hidden even from close observers by two relevant facts: first, his political manner of projecting an everyman, approachable persona that served to obscure his intellectual analysis of situations. Second, Reagan was seventy years old when he took office as president, and at that age found it necessary to husband his resources, both physical and mental. Thus he would have to shut himself down so to speak at certain points in his day, during extended discussions of policy details, for example, conserving his mental energy for when it was most useful or necessary.5

Even so, the question still remains, how intelligent was Reagan? It seems unanswerable given that there are no results of an I.Q. test or SAT available or that are cited. In Reagan’s case, however, that his intelligence quotient was quite high may be readily inferred from his words and manner of speaking, in particular his penchant for saying witty things. Such ability to make apt verbal jokes spontaneously is cited by Herrnstein and Murray as an indicator, albeit not a quantitative one, of high intelligence.6 Moreover, Reagan put his intelligence to work as an actor and a public figure, professions in which it is a benefit to disguise the mental acuity required to do them well, compared to professorial or journalistic vocations.

In the beginning of his discussion, however, Cannon lights on the true nature of Reagan’s intellectual ability, for when considering complex issues that were surrounded by an obscuring cloud of details, ongoing developments, and contrary opinions, Cannon reports that “it was in the essences that Reagan excelled.”7 This characteristic of Reagan’s intellect allowed him to grasp the essential aspect of whatever issue he was dealing with.

An interesting example of how Reagan concentrated on the essence of the case while ignoring conventional considerations occurred at the beginning of his administration. Before he took office, Reagan, following precedent, began assigning ambassadorships to various friends and donors; among those was the choice of a man named John Gavin as ambassador to Mexico. Gavin was a well-known figure, but not as a businessman or a State Department official; rather, Gavin was known as a darkly handsome movie star who was best known as Janet Leigh’s adulterous boyfriend in Hitchcock’s Psycho. The choice of Gavin was met with instant ridicule and derision; to assign an important ambassadorship to one of his movie friends seemed a perfect reflection of Reagan’s outright ignorance of what is required. The ridicule stopped rather suddenly, however, when other parts of Gavin’s background became known. Besides being a movie actor, Gavin was a businessman who had graduated Stanford University with a degree in South American economics, Gavin’s mother was Mexican, and Gavin himself was fluent in Spanish. In any event, Gavin was confirmed and successfully completed a six-year stint as ambassador. Reagan had seen the essence of the case even as his critics had not.
The Power of the Anecdote

It is often pointed out that Reagan used anecdotes in the form of personal stories or observations about occurrences that would affect people in the normal course of their lives. He often used humor when expressing these, as when he said that it was cheaper to eat money than buy asparagus; this was Reagan’s method of making an issue of the high cost of food in California at the time. Reagan seemed to think in terms of anecdote rather than abstract causes or explanations, so that anecdote was not merely a means of expression to reach a popular audience but also an accurate reflection of Reagan’s basic intellectual processes.

That Reagan would be more impressed by a personal story than a government study is made obvious by his reaction to the AIDS crisis. At a time when health professionals were first becoming aware of a sickness that afflicted homosexual men and, at that time, was invariably fatal, and when the federal agencies were putting out studies on the subject and when segments of the population were clamoring for federal action, Reagan remained unmoved and probably unaware of the crisis. His understanding of the seriousness of the AIDS crisis came about when movie star Rock Hudson spent several days as the Reagans’ guest in the White House, and Nancy Reagan noted that Hudson looked somewhat pale and weakened; the tragic finality of Hudson’s disease was brought home to the Reagans by a phone call from Elizabeth Taylor, who informed them that he was dying from this strange, new infection. It was the death of an old movie friend rather than studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that brought the crisis home to Reagan, who eventually initiated federal action against the disease.

Reliance on anecdote rather than formal studies is usually criticized as a deficient argument, as if one relies on anecdote only because better, more organized sources are not available. The assumed superiority of formal, organized, and scientific study is a result of the attempt to make policy decisions based on organized research done in the manner of the social sciences, such as economics or epidemiology. Reliance on what is dismissively called “anecdotal evidence” is seen to be the way an uneducated person makes a case that is either scientifically unprovable or contrary to a scientifically established fact. In short, reliance on anecdote is assumed to be a sign of ignorance. As a result, mere anecdote is discounted, especially when someone uses it to rebut the conclusion of a scientific study, as when a New Englander cites the ferociousness of the last three winters to question the claim of global warming.

Despite the dismissive attitude, however, the use of anecdotal evidence has significant advantages over reliance on formal studies. First, as is observable in the case of Reagan and AIDS, anecdote is a more powerful means of provoking an awareness of the true extent of a situation and thereby motivating corrective action. In the presentation of a formal study, anecdote is often used as a means of bringing the issue home to an audience; statistics on homelessness are dry in themselves, but the story of “Bill,” a homeless man who sleeps under a bridge, can more effectively make the point about poverty. But what of using anecdote not to illustrate the true extent of a situation but as the primary means of understanding an issue in preference to formal studies, which apparently was Reagan’s procedure?

The most important point is not that statistical surveys and scientific studies are boring but that such surveys and studies
can be misleading, because such studies are based on samples taken from the whole. If there is a perceived social issue of, for instance, cancer appearing in people who live near power lines, of the millions of people who live near such lines only a few thousand or a few hundred will be the subjects of a survey. It’s quite possible that the comparatively small sample will not be indicative of the whole, and thus may be misleading. If attention is limited only to cancer victims who live near power lines, the host of possible additional causes must be controlled for family history, diet, or exposure to toxic chemicals. The mathematics of such studies is not based solely on samples, because the results must be manipulated to account for difference in causes by means of regression analysis. This is a statistical method that evaluates which of a range of possible causes of an effect is the most influential, without, however, actually establishing a physical cause-and-effect relationship. The total result is that studies based on surveys and statistics are frequently questionable and must be repeated by different sets of researchers who often come to differing conclusions. Thus, the contradictory results of statistical surveys on the cause-and-effect relationship between certain types of foods and their effect on health; caffeine, salt, eggs, and even fat, for example, have become all but notorious.

Another weakness of surveys and official studies is that despite their appearance of neutrality and scientific truth, they are often tendentious. There are numerous examples of this, in particular in the case of global warming. Studying global warming requires the acquisition and evaluation of a large range of different types of evidence, including longitudinal temperature studies, levels of compounds in the atmosphere, the presence of wind and ocean currents, etc. Thus, reaching overall conclusions about the existence and causes and effects of global warming is extremely difficult, but advocates of reducing carbon emissions have made their claims on the basis of limited scientific evidence presented in an apocalyptic manner. Recently, because of the revelation that some of the evidence regarding global warming has been manipulated in studies from England, the whole issue has had to be reconsidered.

In such cases, anecdotal evidence is more reliable, since it refers to actual experience rather than an abstract study. Reagan famously characterized women who relied on Aid to Families with Dependent Children and other redistribution programs for their living expenses as “welfare queens,” a characterization for which right-thinking people excoriated him. Yet Reagan had a point—that welfare programs such as AFDC were being systematically abused—and made his case by referring to an experiential fact that many people actually knew. They would know the deleterious effect of the availability of free government money from their own observation and perhaps their own experience—for instance, of having stretched out unemployment benefits despite having received an unwanted job offer.

Newspaper accounts of local episodes of welfare fraud or experience of someone who works in a welfare office and other anecdotal evidence provided the evidence for Reagan’s assertion about AFDC. Subsequently, after the program had been operating for several decades and many formal studies had been done, it was then discovered that AFDC had a deleterious effect on family life, on children especially. But long before statistical studies established the point, many people in the United States had already become convinced by “anecdotal evidence,” including
personal experience and a practical understanding of human nature, that it was a program whose unintended consequences were inherently destructive. During the Clinton administration, the AFDC program was eliminated and replaced by a work or an education requirement for assistance, primarily to single mothers. The result has been a decline in illegitimacy rates.11

**Commonsense Morality**

Ronald Reagan’s speeches and attitudes manifested a belief in the divine and in the moral law. References to God and morality are, however, part of the politician’s tool kit, for belief in divinity and morality is still shared by a large majority of citizens. Reagan’s references to divinity and morality were nothing new in politics. Yet the fact that Reagan was not reluctant to refer to God and His law in his own speeches was so obviously sincere that such references did make him stand out from other politicians.12 But granted that he was a sincere religious believer in a form of Protestant Christianity, what were the actual policy consequences in Reagan’s mind; that is, how did he connect his belief in a religiously based traditional American morality to policy?

Reagan was far from explicitly invoking his personal religious beliefs, for he was in fact basing his actions on what is often termed “traditional morality” as it has existed in America, which consists of a notion of fair play, equality, and a deep sense that there is a difference between right and wrong. This traditional conception of values excludes, therefore, the kind of moral relativism that was influential in Reagan’s day and is an even more powerful influence twenty-five years later. This inherent opposition to moral relativism was vividly apparent in his famous characterization of Soviet communism as an “evil empire.” Reagan’s comment was subject to mocking criticism, not only because it was seen as an insult to the Soviet Union, but also because of its implication that there are objective moral standards by which men can judge whether an action is right or wrong, or a thing good or evil. Today, however, the term “evil empire” is often used to characterize the Soviet Union without irony, history having proved the truth of Reagan’s description.

Reagan’s deep sense of traditional morality, especially as it was based on an underlying belief in the Christian faith, cut across both his active opposition to communism and the welfare state policies of redistribution. And while his religious beliefs supported his anticommunism, his opposition to welfare state expansion resulted in an apparent conflict. This conflict was noticeable in the opposition of Christian churches of different denominations to his general policy of limiting welfare costs and eliminating, where possible, the sense of entitlement that availability of welfare programs tends to infuse into its recipients. The Christian church has always possessed as an essential part of its mission an identification with the poor and demanded that its adherents actively assist them, and thus Reagan’s opposition to the expansion of redistributionist programs struck many as “un-Christian” because it showed a harshness in his attitude toward the poor. Yet here as in other instances, Reagan’s approach, while objectionable to right-thinking critics, was correct, or more so than his critics were prepared to acknowledge.

Christian theology advocates not only concern for the poor but also a sense of personal responsibility, but since the
Progressive era in American politics, the emphasis has been on social responsibility, so that entities such as government, the law, and society are in effect the real culprits when illegal or destructive behavior takes place. The Christian churches developed an affinity for this approach to social responsibility, identifying themselves with social justice as their primary concern, focusing on the sins of government and corporations while at the same time vigorously promoting the expansion of welfare programs as the chief means of helping the poor. This trend resulted in reliance on the welfare state rather than private assistance and nongovernmental agencies, and so became a required cause for Christians and the primary means of dealing with poverty and inequality.\textsuperscript{13}

In opposition to this powerful trend in American religion and politics, Reagan relied on his understanding of traditional morality that rested on the notion of personal responsibility; after all, Christians also believe that at the end of life they will stand before their eternal judge and have to give account of themselves. Reagan substituted for welfare state expansion the idea of a “safety net” that was by implication temporary and meant to help people through hard times, not as a permanent solution. The safety net idea also means that the government’s responsibility is not to search out more ways to assist people in need in a manner that results in the inevitable expansion of such programs. Instead, Reagan relied on an expanding economy to provide jobs and the means of individual self-support. Traditional American morality demands that we offer our neighbors a helping hand when required but that we should not do so when they are able to provide for themselves. According to St. Paul, “We used to have it as a rule when we lived among you, that he who did not work should not eat,” a statement that is never acknowledged by Christian advocates of social justice.\textsuperscript{14} It was to this sense of traditional American morality that Reagan was appealing, and replacing “welfare” with the “safety net” is an immensely positive contribution to the policy debate.

\textit{Small Business Economics}

Reagan is famous for reinvigorating classical economics and the free market, a reinvigoration that had a profound influence on economic policy not just in America but also worldwide. His faith in the American system of entrepreneurialism, opportunity, international free trade, and the free market was the most noted aspect of how Reagan thought about things. But in a deeper sense, it is apparent that Reagan did not think in macro-economic terms, that is, in terms of money supply and the federal deficit (which he was forced to ignore during his administration), but rather in terms of what government policies and general economic conditions were necessary for businesses to succeed. In terms of government policies, this point of view means less government regulation; Reagan certainly would have condemned the excessive levels of government regulation now choking business.

Reagan’s economic philosophy did not appear new but rather old-fashioned in contrast to the twentieth century’s emphasis on centralized systems of economic control. Reagan was not unaware of the new thinking, identified with Marx and Keynes, but followed instead such thinkers as von Mises and Friedman, favoring personal freedom as a basic element of economic policy. The political persuasiveness of capitalism, however, varies with the nation’s economic conditions. The problem
is the alternation of “boom” and “bust” that free market economics has never been able to eliminate, as current conditions testify. This phenomenon presents a serious difficulty for democratic politicians who favor free market policies during downturns in the economy, since a lecture on the comparative merits of the free market is likely to be unavailing to people who are unemployed; Reagan himself experienced this difficulty in his first two years as president. It was the effectiveness of Reagan’s free market policies, however, that subsequently revived the economy. In the meantime, the Republicans suffered an overwhelming defeat in the House of Representatives in 1982.

The advantage in Reagan’s belief in capitalist economics is seen in his realization, given the inherent weakness of the Soviet command economy, that after seven decades it was near internal collapse. This encouraged him to make large increases in military expenditures not only to show American resolve but also to engage the Soviet Union in a race of military expenditures. In the end, Gorbachev realized that maintaining the Soviet Empire was simply too expensive; by the 1980s the cost of maintaining the Red Army throughout the empire’s border nations and direct outlays of funds to Cuba, for instance, were crippling the Soviet economy. Reagan brilliantly capitalized on this final development of “late socialism” to hasten the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Actor in the White House: Appearance and Reality

The nature of Reagan’s leadership remains elusive, but such obscurity is often the result when we try to understand the link between a leader’s personality and the historical effects he has produced. In a democracy it is necessary for a leader to be one of the people, to be perceived as a member of the whole nation, yet at the same time distinctive enough in accomplishment or virtue to be able to claim the mantle of leadership—to be, in effect, set apart. (Even Caesar Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors, assumed the title “princeps,” which meant that he was simply the first citizen of Rome rather than “imperator.”)

In the context of a democracy, where the opinion of the people is so important, the effective political leader must create a “persona,” a mask in the original meaning, which he then must project to the public at large. This persona is created by the democratic leader but must also reflect the reality of who the leader is. President Clinton was quite good at this and could not understand why Al Gore was not; but it came easy to Clinton, comfortable both within himself and within his mask of easygoing jocularity. This is not a new phenomenon in American history; Washington designed his own uniforms and made it a point to enact the pose of calmness and purpose, while Lincoln grew chin whiskers and wore a stovepipe hat. In constructing his own persona, Reagan had the advantage of having been an actor, since actors must create a public face role by role; there could be no better training for a politician in this regard.

Reagan’s career as an actor was often used by his ideological opponents, such as Garry Wills, as a point against him because he confused his movie roles with reality, a sure sign, it was thought, of his incompetence. If anything, Reagan’s experience as an actor made him more aware of the difference between reality and appearance. Actors play roles, and this is a deliberate thing, for they must adjust
their appearance, aspect, mannerisms, and outward behavior for each role they play. This requires careful thought at each point and a sense of the difference between who they really are, a professional actor, and who they play, for example, George Gipp, a Notre Dame football hero. In short, acting as a profession may sharpen a person’s sense of reality, that is, his ability to distinguish between appearance and reality. This was of particular help in politics, as Reagan was able to distinguish easily between the “blue smoke and mirrors” of politics on one hand and the realities of American life a president must deal with on the other.

Oddly, this fact became apparent in the manner in which comedians and entertainers tried to imitate Reagan. On the most obvious level, Reagan was easily imitable; a wag of the head and a husky “Well . . .” and you had him; Johnny Carson did the most accurate portrayal of Reagan in this sense. Yet Reagan was not subject to the kind of caricature by which imitators can give insight into character, as Dan Aykroyd did with his version of an oily Nixon or Will Ferrell’s frat boy version of George W. Bush. In fact, the artists of Saturday Night Live did Reagan in an odd way that reflects the point being made here; they posed Reagan first in an avuncular role, with a Girl Scout selling cookies or with Jimmy Stewart reminiscing about Hollywood days, then showed him behind closed doors, at which point the Reagan imitator would bark sharp orders, make demands for action on the phone to the national security adviser, becoming an imperious, no-nonsense leader who demanded immediate action by his staff. The point of the portrayal was the difference between the mask of friendly optimism that Reagan projected and the actuality of what Reagan must have been in order to accomplish what he did as president. But the latter aspect of Reagan’s behavior as president remained a mystery to SNL writers, since memoirs published by his aides suggest that Reagan was anything but harsh and demanding in the manner in which he treated his staff, and was if anything too accommodating; he had a difficult time firing people, including George Regan. So where was the point at which the friendly, reassuring, fuzzy Reagan became the leader who forced seasoned opponents such as Gorbachev and House Speaker Tip O’Neill to give way in pursuit of his policies?

The appreciation of the difference between appearance and reality was what characterized Reagan’s approach to political leadership above all, and he had a better sense of the difference than his critics often had themselves. Thus, a number of well-read liberals have claimed that the recent success of the conservative movement in America has been the result of its use of rhetoric. The issues, they point out, have been described in such a way as to make the case more easily to the general public for the conservative view of specific policies. But this analysis rings false, for it was the manifest failures of liberal policies in economics, foreign policy, and efforts to promote social change that convinced a large part of the general population to turn to a conservative view of things and to conservative solutions. In short, it was the reality of the failure of the liberal welfare state during the Johnson and Carter years that turned public opinion to conservative attitudes rather than the clever devices of conservative rhetoric. Reagan’s appreciation of the realities of how Americans experienced the failure of liberal policies and his ability to express them enabled the former actor to become a great president.
**Policy and Providence**

Liberal and progressive policy making relies on grandiose plans that encompass whole subsets of political reality; planning has been the leitmotif of liberal policy making from the beginning of the Progressive era in the nineteenth century. A more recent aspect of liberal policy making is to predict catastrophe if immediate action is not taken to alleviate a certain problem, for example global warming. The overall assumption is that events, no matter how vast and unpredictable, can be understood by the human intellect and controlled by appropriate human action, even when that requires fundamental changes in society and expanded government control. In contrast, the conservative position is that humanity best deals with matters as they occur day to day, doing whatever can be done to deal effectively with facts on the ground and leaving the ultimate consequences to Providence. The overall assumption is that a godly providence has a concern for mankind and must be relied upon to provide for the condition of humanity ultimately, for the best that human governance can accomplish is to deal with what is amenable to human understanding and control, which is essentially limited. As human experience in the twentieth century has demonstrated, grand designs aimed at perfecting the human condition lead inevitably to disaster both for the lives of individual human beings and for entire societies.

It may be that on a historical plane, Reagan’s greatest success as president was how he dealt with the stark possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. He began his administration with the realization that the Soviet Union was far ahead of America in the size of its nuclear arsenal as well as in conventional weapons and the number of military personnel. Reagan immediately set out to overcome the Soviet lead in these areas, particularly in the ability to deliver nuclear weapons. He encouraged the German Republic to install new, upgraded missiles on its territory despite warnings and outright threats from the Soviets and despite the quid pro quo demanded by the German chancellor that Reagan speak at a cemetery for Germany’s war dead. Because of these actions, which included the upgrading and production of new nuclear weapons and of missiles to deliver them, Reagan was called a “war monger,” a careless cowboy whose macho John Wayne (the inevitable comparison) attitude imperiled peace and the lives of people worldwide. Nuclear holocaust, it was asserted, was the certain price of Reagan’s assertive policies regarding the Soviet Union. Reagan himself, it was assumed, was completely unaware of the danger of reliance on the established doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD); this, however, was completely false, as he initiated the SDI program to counter the Soviet missile threat.

The consequence of his early policy toward the Soviet Union was not the increased danger of war but, in the end, a tremendous success for peace. How did this happen? It is tempting to think that Reagan won the Cold War by sticking to his guns, by drawing a line in the sand and then watching America’s enemies give up in the face of his strength of character and determination. Yet this is true only in part. For conservatives, the real lesson is not the necessity of clarity of purpose, although this is essential in formulating and executing policy, but first dealing with situations as they are and worrying about far consequences later on. Reagan started with what was apparent to him, that is, the Soviet superiority in arms, and dealt
with it realistically, assuring the Russian leadership that America would not let the Soviets enjoy their lead for very long. As for the consequences, at that point, who could tell? It was the immediate situation that had to be dealt with.

Subsequently, an unforeseen consequence did arise: internal pressures within the Soviet Union forced an attempt at an overall reform of its policies, led by Gorbachev, which led in turn to the collapse of the Soviet system. In this manner, Reagan “won” the Cold War without American military forces firing a shot; it was Reagan’s personal engagement with Gorbachev, however, that led the Soviet leader to realize that the withdrawal of Soviet forces would not be taken advantage of by the United States, thus making the internal reforms of the Soviet Union and mutual drawdown of nuclear missiles possible. Thus, even as Reagan dealt first with the basic fact of Soviet military superiority and the threat it posed to the United States, the final effect, providential it seems now, was the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Who could have predicted it when planners from previous administrations set out their scenarios: estimating the chances for national survival after a nuclear exchange, carefully graded according to the degree of damage and number of mega-deaths; or a series of diplomatic approaches that would lead to détente between the United States and the Soviet Union; or suppressing the “inordinate fear of communism,” which would result in unilateral disengagement from competition with the Soviets. It was Reagan’s recognition of the essential threat posed by the Soviet Union and his forceful resolve to end the era of the “evil empire,” combined with the effects of unforeseeable contingencies—the arrival of a Slavic pope, Gorbachev’s dismantling of Soviet colonialism, differential economic pressures, etc.—that led to the successful completion of America’s forty-five-year mission to overcome the threat from Soviet Communism.

1 Lou Cannon, President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 139.
2 Ibid., 137–38.
4 Reagan’s article “Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation” is included in Stephen Hicks and David Kelley, Readings for Logical Analysis (New York: Norton, 1998), 275–85.
7 Cannon, President Reagan, 134.
8 Ibid., 139–40.
9 Reagan was not merely criticized for his initial inaction; it was claimed in paranoid fashion that it was the policy of his administration to let the disease kill as many homosexual men as possible. Ibid., 814–19.
10 The Bell Curve discusses controlling for multiple variables in the area of human intelligence by means of regression analysis—the problem is to know when to stop considering possible variables, i.e., what variables are relevant (122–24). But the accuracy of regression analysis depends primarily on the validity of the sample on which the analysis takes place.
13 In 1986 the book-length document Economic Justice for All was promulgated as a pastoral letter, a formal declaration, by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. It was widely understood to be a direct challenge to Reagan’s reliance on a free-market approach to economic policies, both domestic and foreign.
14 2 Thessalonians 2:10.
16 Other well-known presidential imitators include Vaughn Meader (Kennedy), Phil Hartman (Clinton), David Frye (Nixon), and Dana Carvey (George H. W. Bush).
18 Cannon, President Reagan, 573–83.