

REAGAN'S PEACE WITH THE U.N.

By Lou Cannon
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Ronald Reagan has come full circle in his opinion of the United Nations, which he once admired, then opposed and now appreciates as a constructive force in a dangerous world.

To a remarkable degree, Reagan's changing attitudes have reflected the views of his countrymen. When the United Nations was formed in the lingering glow of the U.S.-Soviet alliance in World War II, Reagan was an ardent U.N. supporter. Few went as far as Reagan, a liberal Democrat "one worlder," did in joining the United World Federalists, but war-weary Americans embraced the United Nations' lofty goals of worldwide peace.

This optimism faded rapidly during the Cold War, when Soviet vetoes in the Security Council demonstrated the organization's limited ability to resolve disputes when the superpowers differed. U.S. hopes were rekindled briefly in the 1950s when the United Nations gave moral and military support to U.S. resistance of the invasion of South Korea at a time when the Soviets were boycotting the world body.

The Korean "police action" ultimately led to Chinese intervention and a long and bloody war. It also led to American disillusionment with the war, the Truman administration and the United Nations, sentiments shared by Reagan. He had voted for Harry S Truman in 1948 and, four years later, joined millions of other Democrats by voting for Dwight D. Eisenhower, his first vote for a Republican presidential candidate.

While remaining a registered Democrat for the following decade, Reagan became steadily more conservative and nationalistic. He stopped short of the clamor on the extreme right to "get the U.S. out of the U.N. and the U.N. out of the U.S." But he concluded that wholesale admission of new countries to the United Nations had stacked the deck against the United States.

"We cannot safely rest the case of freedom with the United Nations as it is presently constructed," Reagan said in the 1960s. "Not until reconstruction of this organization puts realistic power in the hands of those nations which must, through size and strength, be ultimately responsible for world order, can we submit questions affecting our national interest to the U.N. and be confident of a fair hearing."

Reagan's behavior as president reflected these views. He named an able and tough-minded conservative, Jeane Kirkpatrick, as ambassador to the United Nations, pulled the United States out of UNESCO, cut off U.S. contributions to the U.N. Fund for Population Activities and encouraged congressional efforts to force U.N. budget reform by withholding U.S. dues.

Reagan's first speech to the United Nations, in 1982, was the most harshly worded address ever delivered to the world body by an American president. He accused the Soviets of tyranny, aggression, atrocities and "ruthless repression" and urged Soviet acceptance of a U.S. "agenda for peace."

But times have changed. Now, Reagan has decided that the United States should praise the United Nations rather than try to bury it, and he has elected to settle U.S. debts. His speech today to the U.N. General Assembly will credit the United Nations for its useful role in resolving regional disputes.

To hear Reagan's spokesmen tell it, the new attitude reflects a change at the world body rather than a change in the president. The explanation ratifies Reagan's conceit that the world changes while he remains forever consistent. He has responded to media compliments that he has grown in office as if they were insults.

Nonetheless, Reagan's approach to the United Nations has matured. In 1984, when he was running for reelection and trying to set the stage for a series of U.S.-Soviet summits, Reagan used the United Nations as the forum to declare that the United States was "ready for constructive negotiations with Moscow."

The emergence of Reagan as a "peace president" who was striving to put the Cold War behind him led inevitably to a new appreciation of the United Nations. The new approach was sealed when the organization helped pave the way for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and then went on to perform constructively in southern Africa and in arranging the Iran-Iraq cease-fire.

So Reagan is back where he belongs. He has not quite returned to the starry-eyed idealism of his salad days as a liberal, but he once more recognizes that the United Nations can be a useful force for peace. That is good for the United Nations and also good for America.

Reaganism of the Week: Asked when he arrived in Houston last Thursday for a meeting with the Discovery shuttle astronauts if he wanted to go up in space, the president said, "I've been there for several years."