When a Supreme Court vacancy opened up in 1981, President Reagan chose Sandra Day O'Connor, an Arizona appeals court judge. Unlike many Supreme Court justices, O'Connor had broad political experience. Appointed to a state senatorial vacancy in 1969, she successfully ran for the seat and became the state senate's first woman majority leader in 1972. O'Connor won election as a superior court judge in 1974 and was later appointed to the court of appeals.

O'Connor’s nomination was opposed by the Moral Majority because she had supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), and had refused to back an anti-abortion amendment, or criticize the decision in Roe v. Wade. Others, however, praised her legal judgment and conservative approach to the law. As a moderate conservative, she quickly became an important swing vote on the Court, between more liberal and more conservative justices.

Why do you think that O’Connor supported the Equal Rights Amendment?

Reagan’s secretary of the interior, James Watt, increased the public land that companies could use for oil drilling, mining, and logging. Watt’s actions angered environmentalists, as did the EPA's decision to ease regulations on pollution-control equipment and to reduce safety checks on chemicals and pesticides.

In 1983 the economy began to recover. By 1984, the United States had begun the biggest economic expansion in its history up to that time. The median income of families climbed steadily, rising 15 percent by 1989. Five million new businesses and 20 million new jobs were created. By 1988, unemployment had fallen to 5.5 percent, the lowest in 14 years.

Reagan Wins Reelection By 1984, the economic recovery had made Reagan very popular. Democrats nominated Jimmy Carter’s vice president, Walter Mondale. He chose as his running mate Representative Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman nominated to run for vice president for a major party. Instead of arguing issues with his opponent, Reagan emphasized the good economy. In an overwhelming landslide, he won about 59 percent of the popular vote and all the electoral votes except those from Mondale’s home state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia.

Shifting the Judicial Balance

Reagan did not apply his conservative ideas only to the economy. He also tried to bring a strict constructionist outlook to the federal judiciary. Reagan wanted judges who followed the original intent of the Constitution. He also changed the Supreme Court by nominating Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman on the Supreme Court.

In 1986 Chief Justice Warren Burger retired. Reagan chose the most conservative associate justice, William Rehnquist, to succeed him. He then named Antonin Scalia, a conservative, to fill Rehnquist’s vacancy. In 1987 his attempt to put Robert Bork on the Court led to a bitter fight in the Senate. Democrats saw Bork as too conservative and blocked his confirmation. Reagan then nominated Anthony Kennedy, a moderate, to become the new associate justice.

Reading Check Explaining What is supply-side economics?
Reagan Oversees a Military Buildup

**MAIN Idea** President Reagan began a massive military buildup to weaken the Soviet economy and deter Soviet aggression.

**HISTORY AND YOU** Do you remember President Eisenhower’s warning about the military as he left office? Read to learn how President Reagan sought to use military power to defeat the Soviets.

Reagan also adopted a new foreign policy that rejected both containment and détente. He called the Soviet Union “an evil empire.” In his view, the United States should not negotiate with or try to contain evil. It should try to defeat it.

**“Peace Through Strength”**

In Reagan’s opinion, the only option open to the United States in dealing with the Soviet Union was “peace through strength”—a phrase he used during his campaign. The military buildup Reagan launched was the largest peacetime buildup in American history. It cost about $1.5 trillion over five years.

Reagan believed that, if the Soviets tried to match the American buildup, it might put so much pressure on their economy that they would be forced to reform their system or it would collapse. In 1982 Reagan told students at Eureka College that Soviet defense spending would eventually cause the Communist system to fall apart.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“...The Soviet empire is faltering because rigid centralized control has destroyed incentives for innovation, efficiency, and individual achievement. But in the midst of social and economic problems, the Soviet dictatorship has forged the largest armed force in the world. It has done so by preempting the human needs of its people and in the end, this course will undermine the foundations of the Soviet system.”

—from A Time for Choosing

The United States also tried to stop nations from supporting terrorism. After Libya backed a terrorist bombing in Berlin, the United States launched an air attack on Libya on April 14, 1986. The raids killed 37 and injured about 200.

Reagan’s military buildup created new jobs in defense industries. Supply-side economists had predicted that, despite the spending, lower taxes combined with cuts in government programs would generate enough growth to increase tax revenues and balance the budget. Tax revenues did rise, but other programs were too popular for Reagan to cut significantly. As a result, the annual budget deficit went from $80 billion to over $200 billion.

**The Reagan Doctrine**

Reagan also believed that the United States should support guerrilla groups who were fighting to overthrow Communist or pro-Soviet governments. This policy became known as the Reagan Doctrine. This doctrine led to involvement in places as geographically diverse as Africa’s Angola, Middle America’s Nicaragua and Grenada, and the Middle East’s Afghanistan and Lebanon.

**Aid to the Afghan Rebels** Perhaps the most visible example of the Reagan Doctrine was in Afghanistan. In late December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support a Soviet-backed government. The Soviets soon found themselves fighting Afghan guerrillas known as the mujahadeen.

President Carter sent about $30 million in military aid to the Afghan guerrillas, but Reagan sent $570 million more. The Soviets were soon trapped in a situation similar to the American experience in Vietnam. As casualties mounted, the war strained the Soviet economy, and in 1988 the Soviets decided to withdraw.

**Nicaragua and Grenada** Reagan was also concerned about Soviet influence in Nicaragua. Rebels known as the Sandinistas had overthrown a pro-American dictator in Nicaragua in 1979. The Sandinistas set up a socialist government and accepted Cuban and Soviet aid. They then began aiding rebels in nearby El Salvador. The Reagan administration responded by secretly arming an anti-Sandinista guerrilla force known as the contras, from the Spanish word for “counterrevolutionary.” When Congress learned of this policy, it banned further aid to the contras.
President Reagan launched a massive weapons buildup, believing it would weaken the Soviet Union. He also provided aid to Afghan rebels fighting Soviet forces and engaged in a series of meetings with the Soviet leader that produced a nuclear arms treaty (at right).

Aiding the contras was not Reagan's only action in Latin America. In 1983 radical Marxists overthrew the left-wing government on the island of Grenada. In October, Reagan sent in American troops, who quickly defeated the Cuban and Grenadian soldiers. A new anti-Communist government was put in place.

**The Iran-Contra Scandal** Although Congress had prohibited aid to the Nicaraguan contras, individuals in Reagan's administration continued to illegally support the rebels. They secretly sold weapons to Iran, considered an enemy and sponsor of terrorism, in exchange for the release of American hostages being held in the Middle East. These hostages were taken by the Hezbollah terrorist group because the United States was supporting Israel's involvement in Lebanon's civil war. Profits from these sales were then sent to the contras.

News of the illegal operations broke in November 1986. One of the chief figures in the

**Iran-Contra scandal** was Marine colonel Oliver North, an aide to the National Security Council (NSC). He and other senior NSC and CIA officials testified before Congress and admitted to covering up their actions.

President Reagan had approved the sale of arms to Iran, but the congressional investigation concluded that he had had no direct knowledge about the diversion of the money to the contras. The scandal tainted his second term in office.

**Arms Control**

As part of the military buildup, Reagan decided to place missiles in Western Europe to counter Soviet missiles in Eastern Europe. This decision triggered tens of thousands of protesters to push for a “nuclear freeze”—no more deployment of new nuclear missiles.

Reagan offered to cancel the deployment of the new missiles if the Soviets removed their
missiles from Eastern Europe. He also proposed Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) to cut the number of missiles on both sides in half. The Soviets refused and walked out of the arms control talks.

"Star Wars" Despite his decision to deploy missiles in Europe, Reagan generally disagreed with the military strategy known as nuclear deterrence, sometimes called "mutual assured destruction." This strategy assumed that, as long as the United States and Soviet Union could destroy each other with nuclear weapons, they would be afraid to use them.

Reagan believed that mutual assured destruction was immoral because it depended on the threat to kill massive numbers of people. He also knew that if nuclear war did begin, there would be no way to defend the United States. In March 1983 Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). This plan, nicknamed "Star Wars," called for the development of weapons that could intercept and destroy incoming missiles.

A New Soviet Leader In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union and agreed to resume arms-control talks. Gorbachev believed that the Soviet Union had to reform its economic system or it would soon collapse. It could not afford a new arms race with the United States.

Reagan and Gorbachev met in a series of summits. The first of these was frustrating for both, as they disagreed on many issues. Gorbachev promised to cut back Soviet nuclear forces if Reagan would agree to give up SDI, but Reagan refused.

Reagan then challenged Gorbachev to make reforms. In West Berlin, Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of divided Europe, and declared: "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe . . . tear down this wall!"

Relations Improve By 1987, Reagan was convinced that Gorbachev did want to reform the Soviet Union and end the arms race. While some politicians distrusted the Soviets, most people welcomed the Cold War thaw and the reduction in the danger of nuclear war. In December 1987 the two leaders signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. It was the first treaty to call for the destruction of nuclear weapons.

No one realized it at the time, but the treaty marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War. With an arms control deal in place, Gorbachev felt confident that Soviet military spending could be reduced. He pushed ahead with economic and political reforms that eventually led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union.

With the economy booming, the American military strong, and relations with the Soviet Union rapidly improving, Ronald Reagan’s second term came to an end. As he prepared to leave office, Reagan assessed his presidency: "They called it the Reagan revolution. Well, I'll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the great rediscovery, a rediscovery of our values and our common sense."

Identifying What was the Reagan Doctrine?

Vocabulary
1. Explain the significance of: supply-side economics, Reaganomics, budget deficit, Iran-Contra scandal, "mutual assured destruction," Mikhail Gorbachev.

Main Ideas
2. Specifying What political office did Ronald Reagan hold before he was elected president?
3. Explaining How did Reagan aim to change the Supreme Court?
4. Summarizing What was the goal of the U.S. military buildup under President Reagan?

Critical Thinking
5. Big Ideas What was President Reagan’s approach to foreign policy?
6. Organizing Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to list the ways in which the Reagan Doctrine was implemented.

7. Analyzing Visuals Study the political cartoons on page 747. How do the cartoons portray Reagan and Carter?

Writing About History
8. Expository Writing Take on the role of a newspaper editor during the Reagan administration. Write an editorial in which you present your opinion of Reagan’s plans for a military buildup.

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