

Study Questions for Michael Flamm, “The Reagan Presidency and Foreign Policy”

1. Why did many Americans answer “no” when Reagan asked them during the 1980 presidential election, “Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our country is safe? That we’re as strong as we were four years ago?”
2. In the 1970s and 1980s, how did liberals and conservatives differ in their views of what America’s role in the world should be?
3. What were Reagan’s overarching principles in his conduct of foreign affairs? How do we see him pursuing (and sometimes compromising) these principles as he dealt with the Soviet Union and other specific diplomatic crises during his two terms in office?
4. What was Reagan’s strategy for hastening the collapse of Communism? What specific steps did he take to shove the Soviet Union into the “dustbin of history”?
5. Why was it difficult for the Reagan administration to formulate a coherent, workable policy against terrorism – particularly in the Middle East?

6. How did Cold War anti-communism shape (and, arguably, distort) American policy in Central America? How did both internal instability and years of American intervention contribute to the suffering of average people in the region?
7. In hindsight, the entire Iran-Contra affair seems like a fiasco that reveals incredibly poor judgment and a cavalier disregard for the law on the part of several Reagan administration officials and even the President himself. How did the administration get involved in this series of ill-advised decisions? Why was Reagan able to emerge from the scandal relatively unscathed (in stark contrast to Nixon and the Watergate scandal)? What explains the public reaction to Oliver North?
8. What roles did Reagan and Gorbachev play in bringing the cold war to an end “without a shot being fired”? What fundamental beliefs did each eventually have to abandon in order to reach an agreement?
9. What legacies in foreign policy did the Reagan administration leave its successors? How did lessons learned during the 1980s shape the formulation of policy after 9/11?
10. Given what you have studied so far this semester, and drawing on what you’ve read in this article on Reagan’s foreign policies, do you believe U.S. foreign policy should aim to spread democracy and fight against tyranny or should it concern itself primarily with defending U.S. national interests and ignore issues of morality and human rights?