

Ronald Reagan and the Resurgence of the Puritan Covenantal Tradition: The “City on a Hill” and a Reorientation of the People of the United States into an “Economy of Grace”

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Dedication

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Abstract

When the Puritans first settled in New England on the “city on a hill,” they used covenantal thought as a framework by which to understand their social, economic, political, and spiritual obligations and relationships. This project explores how President Ronald Reagan also rhetorically managed covenantal ideas, or used covenantal form, during the 1980s to morally legitimate his economic policies of limited government, lower taxes, and reductions in welfare spending. I argue that he grounded his policies in an “economy of grace,” which gave the people of the United States the freedom to fulfill their covenantal obligations in a self-serving manner and the faith that God would ultimately protect them from economic disaster.

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Introduction

“The eyes of all people are upon us so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.”

(Ronald Reagan, quoting John Winthrop, during his Presidential Announcement Speech on November 13, 1979)

Though the expression “the separation of church and state” is often used in the United States, the country’s history has made it impossible to exclude religious ideas from the nation’s social, economic, and political spheres. From the country’s founding, religious institutions were the center of life and law for the English immigrants, particularly the Puritans. Several centuries later, things look different; government seems to stand at the epicenter of law, order, and life. Yet I argue that much of what the Puritans believed has been preserved in a moral covenantal framework that is still used today. Elazar (1998, III) states, “Today the resonances are lost on many Americans because the awareness of the covenantal tradition has been lost. Yet the tradition itself persists in more ways than is often recognized” (p. 49). This project explores how the covenantal tradition was revived by President Ronald Reagan and used as rhetorical framework to manage the multi-faceted social, political, religious, institutional, and economic relationships between the people of the United States in regard to economic renewal and economic redistribution. Specifically, I analyze how Reagan wove together a story of covenantal obligations to constitute the people of the United States in a relation to one another materially and spiritually that morally legitimated his economic policies.

The main economic themes that Reagan articulated – freedom from intrusive government, lower taxes, and limited government spending – coalesced around an economic agenda that is known as “Reaganomics.” Yet Reaganomics became more than an economic agenda; in many ways, it described the moral path offered to each U.S. citizen and was a way to revive the moral principles on which the nation was founded. In other words, supporting Reaganomics became synonymous with fulfilling one’s moral obligation as an exceptional “American.” As Bormann (2001) suggests, Reaganomics became a symbolic cue that aroused certain emotions and feelings among a constituted group (p. 6). Accordingly, “hard factual evidence is insufficient in explaining Reagan’s economic agenda” (Kiewe and Houck, 1989, p. 97). Although Reagan fulfilled the imperative task of presenting an economic plan, I argue that the story he disseminated in his discourse clearly made physical economic conditions secondary to or a symptom of the people’s spiritual commitments as individuals and citizens.¹

Reagan revived what had become known as the “American dream”: “a dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman [*sic*], with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams, 1933, p. 415).² Yet as Fisher (1972) points out, the American dream can manifest itself as two dreams or, rather, two cultural myths: a materialistic myth and a moralistic myth. According to Fisher (1972), “The materialistic myth is grounded in the puritan work ethic and relates

¹ This recognition is, in a sense, to dispute those who might argue that Reagan’s discourse was primarily concerned about economic conditions and policy rather than “cultural” matters (Smith, 2007). Although I do not dispute that Reagan spoke about concrete conditions and proposed policies, I object to any tendency to view the economic and the cultural or moral as mutually exclusive. Studies that rely on the simple coding of words fail to capture the rich dynamics of Reagan’s discourse in its larger context and how it is packaged within a larger narrative.

² The phrase “American Dream” was introduced by James Adams during the Great Depression (Perrucci and Wysong, 2008).

to the values of effort, persistence, ‘playing the game,’ initiative, self-reliance, achievement and success” (p. 161) and tends toward a more individualistic perspective in regard to socio-economic concerns. The moralistic myth, on the other hand, is based on “the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” (p. 160) and provides a foundation on which public institutions guarantee economic freedom to all, including the less fortunate. The American dream has been strongly associated with the Republican Party since the 1980s, which has “privileg[ed] individual over communal responsibility” (Rowland and Jones, 2007, p. 427) or, in other words, the materialistic myth over the moralistic myth.³ This study situates the discourse of Reagan as the foundation on which this Republican association rests.

In what follows, I explore how Reagan moralized the materialistic myth and the economic market in the United States by grounding free market policies in a moral tradition. Wills states, “Reagan offers not only a path of entry into such an America, a relic of its reality, but a guarantee of its continued existence into our time. In several senses, he gives us the past as a present. [...] America’s ‘remembered’ self is simplified to resist the endless impingements of disorienting change” (Wills, p. 445). That this simplified depiction of America is offered amid the nonstop exchange of activity and uncertainty of capitalistic economic practices might, at first, seem puzzling. What this project will illuminate, however, is how Reagan used covenantal form as rhetorical tool to reconcile any apparent contradiction between a moral order and limited government

³ Rowland and Jones (2007) argue, however, that Barack Obama’s keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention suggests the possibility of a resurgence of a narrative that balances personal and societal responsibilities that is more accessible to liberal thought.

regarding economic matters. In doing so, Reagan relied on a core morality that closely resembled what the Puritans called the “covenant of grace” to infuse laissez-faire practices with a rhetorically manufactured order and stability that sustain the people’s faith in them.

The Covenantal System

The religio-historical idea of a covenant in the United States and the religious foundations of the country have been most prominently examined by looking at the Puritans and the spread of Puritan influence. The Puritans brought the Christian covenant to New England in the 1600s under the leadership of Massachusetts Governor and Puritan leader John Winthrop after they disagreed with the Anglican Church of England about how faith should be practiced. Winthrop told the Puritans that they “shall be as a city upon a hill” (1630), a “chosen people”⁴ who could fulfill their covenant with God by succeeding in their “Errand into the Wilderness,” a phrase coined by Puritan minister Samuel Danforth (1670). Furthermore, the covenant became a mechanism by which their “errand” became more defined and less uncertain. One of the most important tenets of Puritan belief was that the human condition was inherently flawed; therefore, constant discipline was necessary. The idea of a covenant became the binding force to manage disciplined relationships between God and humans, between the members of the church and church leaders, and between members of civil society.⁵

⁴ As Smolinski (1990) and Stievermann (2009) point out, however, the Puritans’ millennialist beliefs generally did not rest on the idea that New England had replaced Israel as the new “Celestial City” or the “New Jerusalem.” Accordingly, most Puritans believed that that national conversion would still take place in the nation of Israel.

⁵ Although covenant theory is similar to contract theory, there are important distinctions between the two. Unlike compact and contract, which also signify an agreement of mutual and voluntary consent between two or more parties, a covenant has a deeper moral dimension. Whereas compact can have a moral

The Covenant of Grace

For the Puritans, the idea of covenant was more complicated than a single covenant. The Puritans developed and maintained what Miller (1953) calls a “complex machinery of interlocking covenants” (p. 252).⁶ The covenantal components interacted with one another and had to be managed by covenantal actors in ways that allowed the Puritans to maintain their “exceptional” status under God. At the core of Puritan covenantal belief was the “covenant of grace,” the most basic covenant and the foundation of all covenantal obligations. It stressed a spiritual and individualized obligation to God. It emphasized the power of God’s grace and sovereignty as set forth in the Old Testament, particularly the 17th chapter of Genesis in which the Israelites are deemed God’s chosen people (Miller, 1956; Elazar, 1996; Noll 2002), and in the New Testament covenant, particularly focusing on Jesus’ atonement for sin. Elazar (1996) states:

Common to the Christian concept of covenant is that, rather than being a matter of agreement and partnership between God and humanity (or some segment of humanity), it was a unilaterally gracious act on the part of God, a bestowal on

dimension, unlike covenant, its moral dimensions do not take precedence over its legal dimensions. The presence of a “relevant higher authority” (Elazar, 1998, IV, p. 8), usually God, is present as a witness to a covenantal agreement. Furthermore, covenants are thought to be lasting and perpetual, almost timeless, differentiating them from a contract, which has specific time limits and conditions. Beyond the moral dimensions, the terms “covenant,” “compact,” and “contract” have other significant differences. Whereas covenant and compact are public in character, contract is private. Agreements formed by covenant and compact tend to be reciprocal and flexible because their obligations are not limited to the “narrowest contractual requirements” (Elazar, 1995, p. 31). Moreover, although there are important historical, political, and philosophical similarities between covenantal theory and the social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, social contract theory focuses on the will of the people rather than the will of the divine. It addresses the tension between natural society and social order and ultimately rests on the assumption that some natural rights are necessarily given up for civil and political protection that actually extend individual autonomy. Because of obvious space and time constraints, this dissertation will focus on covenant as originally defined and lived by the New England Puritans.

⁶ Noll (2002) also investigates “the system of interlocking covenants” the Puritans navigated.

humanity, whose response was merely one of acknowledging (witnessing, in Christian terminology) God's grace. (p. 26)

The covenant of grace was needed after Adam and Eve betrayed God's orders and failed to fulfill the terms of the original covenant, the covenant of works, as explained in the second chapter of Genesis. They proved that humans cannot act on their own initiatives or behave morally without God's oversight.

As a result, God created a new covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17) in which He demanded not deeds but a simple faith in Christ through the covenant of grace as a way for humans to fulfill their obligation to Him (Elazar, 1996, p. 174; Miller, 1956, p. 61). The linkage between God and humans within the covenant of grace persisted even if there was a single violation of human actions or "works" (Miller, 1954, p. 386). In Genesis 17:7, God states, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (*Holy Bible*, King James Version). By making a covenant with Abraham, God promised that Abraham's descendants would be part of the covenant as well. God reaffirmed this covenant of grace in Genesis with both Abraham's son, Isaac, and Isaac's son, Jacob. God spoke to Isaac after he had moved from Gerar to Beersheba because the leaders of Gerar were afraid that Isaac was becoming too powerful. God blessed him and Isaac built an altar for him. Recognizing that Isaac was blessed by God, the leaders of Gerar went to Isaac and said, "Let there be now an oath betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee; That though wilt do us no hurt, as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace" (Genesis 26: 28-29).

This story illustrates that the covenant of grace was strong enough to withstand individual sin and faltering; God still could choose to bestow grace on people who did not necessarily deserve it. Even after Jacob took away his brother Esau's birthright (Genesis 25) and deceived their father to steal Esau's blessing (Genesis 27), an angel of God name Peniel appeared and wrestled with Jacob and let him live. Jacob states, "[F]or I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32:30).⁷

At the same time the covenant of grace assured the Puritans as a group that they would have constant guidance, the result was "an extreme individualization of the covenant experience and the reduction of humans to very weak reeds in the face of an all-powerful, but hopefully gracious God who sent His only son to save them" (Elazar, 1996, p. 27). The comparison of humans to reeds is expressed in Samuel Danforth's May 11, 1670, Election Day Sermon, *Errand into the Wilderness*, in which he warned humans that they are "reeds shaken in the wind" and powerless in the face of God. Danforth drew from Chapter 11 in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus asked the crowds about John the Baptist, "What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft *clothing* are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet?" (Matthew 11: 7-9; *Holy Bible*, King James version). Danforth explained that Jesus was angry with the

⁷ God renewed this covenant several times in the Old Testament and New Testament. In Exodus 19:5, God renews the covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai: "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth *is* mine" (*Holy Bible*, King James Version). In Jeremiah 31: 31-34, the Lord promises to make a new covenant with Israel, although they broke the covenant he established with them to bring them out of Egypt. The Lord says, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31: 33-34). Here God promises his grace in a time when human hope is futile.

people because they were becoming too focused on material success rather than opening up their hearts to hear the word of God that was being pronounced by the prophet John the Baptist.

Danforth's sermon reflects the message in Matthew 11 when Jesus reminds the people that those who did not listen to John's message of repentance were punished. Danforth urged the people not to make the same mistake. He stated, "Unbelief straitens the graces and power of Christ, and hinders the communication of Divine favours and special mercies." He also reminded people of the importance of being in the grace of God because "[w]e may pray earnestly, but if we ask not in faith, how can we expect to receive any thing of the Lord?" Danforth's sermon, thus, indicates that human action, or what becomes known as the "covenant of works," is not as important as faith. Miller (1954) states, "No man can any longer be saved by fulfilling the law, even should he be capable of it, for the Covenant of Works is not now in force between God and man, and God is not bound to it" (p. 384).

The Covenant of Works

At the same time, however, the covenant of works was, in time, integrated into the covenant of grace. The idea of covenant, after all, implied that humans were entered into a reciprocal relationship with God in which "He has voluntarily tied His hands, willingly agreed to a set of terms" (Miller, 1954, p. 376). Although God could choose to withhold his obligation, the Puritans prepared so that if He chose to grant his grace, they would be ready to receive it. Miller (1954) states,

In order that men should not presume upon the “Absolute Promises” of the Covenant to give over trying, the federal God, who is exceedingly shrewd, perfected the alldroit device of incorporating the Covenant of Works into the Covenant of Grace, not as the condition of salvation but as the rule of righteousness. (p. 384)

In other words, they came to believe that preparation through works should be done because “an inn must be prepared to receive the guest, else He will go to another lodging” (Miller, 1953, p. 64).

Puritan leaders and followers struggled throughout the founding to temper the covenants of grace and works in such a way as to maintain God’s sovereignty but to make human action matter, which was a great source of controversy (Miller, 1954; Elliott, 1975; Jones, 1973). To include a covenant of works into the covenantal scheme meant that the Puritans had to temper their deeply-held Calvinistic belief in predestination: the idea that humans can do nothing to ensure their destiny after mortal death because their fate was preordained by an all-powerful and sovereign God. In a departure from pure Calvinism, then, the covenant of works provided an incentive for humans to obey God’s law rather than letting God’s grace do all the work (Miller, 1954); it “introduce[d] an element of rhetorical relativism into the absolute dogmatism of original Calvinism” (Miller, 1956, p. 69). The covenant of works, in this sense, was more conditional: God would not interfere with human affairs unless the Puritans failed to fulfill their side of the covenant. This understanding of covenant presented a “God who voluntarily consented to a covenant [and] would generally, as a matter of choice, prefer to

work through the prevailing rules” (Miller, 1956, p. 67). Accordingly, the covenant of works implied human choice: Puritans could choose whether to fulfill their obligations not only to believe in God’s grace but to prepare themselves for it through good works. Miller (1954) states, “By dealing through a covenant, God is able to present His case so that no man of unordinary intelligence should continue unconverted, if only on the grounds of self-interest” because “men have of themselves the power to turn their backs upon the grace of God, to refuse to be convinced by the most unanswerable demonstrations, to sneer at the minister and resist faith” (p. 393).

The covenant of works can be further illustrated by the parable of talents in the New Testament (Matthew 25: 14-30, Luke 19: 19-27). The parable teaches a lesson about using one’s earthly existence to prepare for the Kingdom of God. It begins with Jesus giving talents to servants according to their abilities. When he comes back after a long time, Jesus finds that the servant to whom he had given five talents had earned five more talents, but the servant whom he had given one talent had buried it and had not tried to earn any more. Jesus becomes angry with the servant who had not used his talents and, thus, has only one talent to give back to Jesus. Jesus goes on to teach His followers that they must prepare themselves to receive Him and can do so by reaching out to others. He praises the people who used their talents to help others. Jesus states, “Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me” (Matthew 25: 40; *Holy Bible*, King James Version). To the others, Jesus says, “For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick and in prison,

and ye visited me not” (Matthew 25: 42-43). When the people expressed confusion because they had not seen him hungry, thirsty, sick, or naked, Jesus says to them: “Insomuch as he did *it* not to one of the least of these, ye did *it* not to me” (Matthew 25: 45). Ultimately, then, Jesus stresses the importance of helping one another by exercising the covenant of works.

The Church Covenant

Facing an unknown land and determined to fulfill God’s plan for them, the Puritans knew they would rise or fall together. Accordingly, the practice of covenant became a communal rite that was “foreign” to original Puritanism (Miller, 1956, pp. 159-160). Accordingly, the covenants of works and grace were implicated in and adapted to more external political and institutional arrangements (Elazar, 1998, III). Noll (2002) states that the covenantal system “provided an expansive vocabulary for embracing large-scale social, political, and even economic realms” (p. 39). Puritans believed government via religious and political institutions had been proved necessary by Adam’s and Eve’s fall (Miller, 1956). The so-called “separation of church and state” so prevalent in twenty-first century discourse was limited in colonial America. The government and church were considered partners in truth and essentially the same institutional entity (Miller, 1956, p. 46). When the Puritans initially came over to New England they yearned for a church space based, not on geography as in England, but on a covenantal bond of church members whereby the participants could stand with one another and take their oaths and say their prayers (Miller, 1956, p. 158; Noll, 2002, p.138). Accordingly, the “church covenant” was the name for the people’s obligation to the institution of which they were

physical members. Miller (1956) states, “In scholastic language, the congregation were the ‘matter’ but the covenant was the ‘form’ of the church” (p. 158). The people were bound together in anticipation of God’s grace; in celebration if it was received and in anxiety as they waited for its sign.

Although this communal church space helped to nurture a feeling of community at first, different types of covenantal obligations, particularly the covenant of grace and the more structural church covenant and its need for continued membership, began to conflict with one another. Noll states, “The church covenant – mediating between regenerate persons and societies populated with sinners as well as saints – became a focal point for tension in New England” (p. 38). At first, Puritan leaders such as John Cotton were content with having loose church membership requirements (Elliott, 1974, p. 24). They did not require all members to be “visible” saints, which meant that they had been called by the grace of God through regeneration or “saving faith.” It was enough that a “saving remnant” carry the covenant for the rest of the congregation (Miller, 1953). Yet as time went on, the influx of immigration and the onset of attacks on the Puritan doctrine threatened their way of life, the Puritans turned inward. As a result

their society became even more traditional and rigid than the one they had abandoned in England. Isolationism, exclusiveness, and intolerance became the characteristics of the first settlers in their middle and declining years. Proud of their achievement, they wished to witness no changes in their social structure” (Elliott, 1974, p. 27)

Now people had to show evidence of the “morphology of conversion” in order to become full members in the church covenant and be baptized (Pope, 1969, p. 5), which meant that each person needed to show evidence of regeneration.

Restrictions on church membership became so intense, however, that some leaders began to fear that there would be not enough people to carry the covenant into further generations. Accordingly, the emphasis on the covenant of grace was leveraged by institutional realities, namely, the necessity to retain church membership. This came to a head in the Half-Way Synod of 1662, which was called to remedy the problem. It required all Puritan churches to allow children to become participants in what was called the “half-way” covenant if they “owned” the baptismal covenant prepared for them by their parents. Half-way members did not lose their status if they did not experience regeneration. Furthermore, the children of half-way members were allowed to become half-way members as well.⁸

The National Covenant

Another way that the Puritans sought to bind the Puritan community when people were barred from church membership is through a more external covenant, sometimes called the national covenant (Miller, 1956; Noll, 2002, p. 41).⁹ In many ways, the national covenant helped to transcend the tensions that plagued the sometimes contradicting system of covenantal obligations. The national covenant was not spiritual in

⁸ Those who owned the half-way covenant were considered members of the church but were barred from certain sacraments.

⁹ The term “national” used in this sense does not refer to notion of a nation state. The Puritans were still tied to the Crown and were not interested in separation. Accordingly, the use of the term “national” here should be taken to indicate a more secular political and economic communal allegiance rather than a nationalistic one in the modern sense.

the theological sense nor did it depend entirely on an institutional or political structure. Specifically, the national covenant helped to maintain a sense of community and communal obligation when the Puritan church dealt with the ramifications of the Half-Way Synod. Although the half-way covenant ensured continued church membership, it undermined the more internal emphasis on grace and regeneration. According to Miller (1953), the decision of the Synod “meant not a half a way but a double way: the external and the internal covenants, the covenant of the church and the Covenant of Grace, being now so drastically separated, were separately hypostatized” (p. 96). Miller (1953) states that the solution of the half-way covenant “demanded that the church covenant be no longer viewed as a direct manifestation of spiritual conversion, but that it be considered entirely on a par with the national covenant or the covenant of hypocrites” (p. 98). Accordingly, it eased tensions over hypocrisy regarding people who claimed to be in the covenant of grace or wanted to be a church member even if they were unregenerate because it created a sort of middle-ground (Miller, 1953, pp. 95-96).¹⁰

Hence, as the Puritan church covenant became more decentralized and doctrinally-driven, the national covenant became a way to unite the people politically and institutionally in the colony if not in spirit. By creating a covenant that was separate from yet bound to the covenant of grace, the national covenant was able to reconcile individual

¹⁰ The church covenant, then, could be seen as more concerned with the preservation of an external, national covenant rather than the manifestation of the more internal covenant of grace (Miller, 1953, p. 98), a notion with which Puritan leaders who wanted to preserve the purity of the Church vehemently disagreed and fought for decades. Some Puritan leaders, particularly John Davenport, were angry because they believed that it undermined the focus on internal piety and doctrinal obedience and, thus, continued to fight against the half-way covenant.

difference in the name of the whole and transcend the other covenants.¹¹ The national covenant, then, preserved communal allegiance even if certain commitments were broken because it was larger than any one individual. Furthermore, the focus of obligation was not only spiritual but political; it maintained a common bond between the people of a community. Miller (1953) argues that the national covenant is different from the covenant of grace in three major ways. First, the “relation of God to a community is not internal but external” (Miller, 1953, p. 22). As such, the external covenant does not demand the internal pledge of all to saving grace; it can be maintained by a “saving remnant” (Miller, 1953, p. 53). Second, since society as a whole cannot be rewarded or punished in the afterlife for obedience, the national covenant “must perforce contract with the Almighty for external ends” (p. 22). Finally, a society does not have as irrevocable a covenant with God as a person does because the national covenant will be ended if it becomes corrupt, unlike internal covenants, which cannot be broken (p. 22). Thus, the national covenant had moral underpinnings but extended into the more public and secular realm as well.

Despite the differences, the covenant of grace and the national covenant were mediated by the church covenant and continued to operate interdependently, helping to sanctify external obligations and legitimize internal ones. The coalescing of the external with the internal became, in a sense, naturalized into the discourse of New England:

“True theology was so thoroughly articulated in the language of covenant that the

¹¹ It is important to note, however, that at the same time it brought further tensions that had to be worked out because at times it was difficult to reconcile the more internal covenant of grace with an external covenant, and religious leaders worried about the preservation of true piety as people could come into the external covenant without enacting their internal obligations (Miller, 1953, p. 72).

founders [were not] conscious they were talking a peculiar doctrine” (Miller, 1953, p. 23). Although Winthrop did not initially envision covenant as transforming into a “nationalistic conception” (Miller, 1953, p. 25), his Puritan followers and their commitment to the covenantal idea established values and ideas on which the United States was built, albeit sometimes misconstrued and reformulated. Furthermore, the national covenant offered a way for people to carry on their covenantal tradition with other generations and to keep their society alive in the covenantal spirit.¹²

The “Economic” Covenant

The extent to which economic concerns were implicated in each of the aforementioned covenantal obligations cannot be overstated. On March 4, 1629, a charter was approved that transformed the New England Company into the Massachusetts Bay Company. Devout Puritan leader John Winthrop was elected governor of the trading company. He and several other leaders decided that they wanted to take the new charter to New England so they could have more economic and religious autonomy from the Crown, even if the charter’s authority technically rested on the Crown. The charter would give them ownership and governing rights over a large geographic area in New England (Moe, 2003, p. 23). On March 29, 1630, Winthrop and his passengers left for New England on the *Arbella*. Boston became the economic and political center of colony (Moe, 2003, p. 52).

¹² See Noll (2002) and Blouch (1985) for further exploration on how this “national covenant” of the Puritans was re-appropriated during the American Revolution and beyond in a nationalistic way not originally intended by the Puritans. Moreover, as the reader will find out, this dissertation explores how Reagan’s idea of covenant very much evolved into a nationalistic conception that bolstered the United States as *the* “city on a hill” rather than, as Winthrop (1630) stated of New England, “*a* city on a hill” (emphasis mine) that existed among other cities.

From the beginning, the journey had a dual purpose; it was both religious and economic. The Puritans viewed the economic charter, which they had to work together to keep strong, as a symbol of their covenant and belief in God (Miller, 1956, p. 41). Facing an unknown and harsh wilderness, Indian attacks, starvation, and pressure to succeed in their enterprise, the covenant of works took on a whole new meaning and significance; works became imperative for survival. Moreover, labor became a physical manifestation of the Puritans' commitment to the covenant of grace. The Puritans were expected to become "sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God" (Weber, 1930, p. 177). In turn, the Puritans believed that economic prosperity was a sign God's recognition of work done in true piety (Miller, 1953, p. 5). External or economic prosperity, then, represented the strength of the Puritans' internal relationships with God. Accordingly, spirituality and profitmaking became inextricably intertwined.

When the charter was revoked in 1684 after the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony refused the order of King Charles II that they trade only with England (Moe, 2003, p. 72), Puritan faith and dominance in New England were threatened (Pope, 1969; Miller, 1953). For almost sixty years the Puritans had been largely left to their own devices, while the Crown was distracted with internal matters in England (Moe, 2003, p. 62). When the new charter was established in 1691, it ended the colony's independence and autonomy (Moe, 2003, p. 72). Whereas the old charter had ensured Puritan religious, political, and economic control of New England, the new charter stripped away this protective armor from Puritan doctrine, including its covenantal foundation. Economic

activity no longer rested on the moral precepts established by the Puritans. Under the old charter, it had been easier to deny non-church members positions on the court of assistants, the governing body of the charter, an action taken to ensure that goals of the charter and religious composition were homogenized (Moe, 2003, p. 59). Miller (1953) states, “Thus 1689 meant that two obligations were laid upon the New England mind: it had to incorporate into its social theory a fulsome declaration of loyalty to the Crown and to accommodate itself to the idea of toleration” (p. 168).¹³ It became necessary for the Puritans to adapt to the new economic, political, and social conditions. Accordingly, the revocation of the charter coincided with the urgency of the Half-way Synod and the development of the national covenant (Pope, 1969); in order to remain powerful, the Puritans needed to retain people committed to their cause, even if it meant loosening up its doctrinal grip. Moreover, the Puritans began to compete economically with other groups of people and, eventually, among themselves. Commercialism, once considered a great vice, rose in prominence. Whereas the Puritans were taught that “economic prosperity would be not a cause but a result of piety[,...] men were prone to transport cause and effect” (Miller, 1962, p. 5).

Rhetorical Adaptation of the Jeremiad

As social, economic, and political conditions changed, so did the way the Puritan leaders articulated the people’s mission and responsibilities. At first, the jeremiad was the predominant rhetorical form Puritan ministers used to explain and interpret daily occurrences. The jeremiad had “salient, formal characteristics” (Carpenter, 1978) that coalesced around the narrative that the Puritans, and later, the people of the United States,

¹³ The Puritans were not originally Separatists (Miller, 1953, p. 157).

were God's chosen people and therefore had a special mission to fulfill (Bercovitch, 1978; Ritter, 1980; Carpenter, 1978; Miller, 1953; Erickson, 1985; Smith, 1994).¹⁴ Yet this status as the chosen people came with grave responsibility. Early Puritan jeremiads stated in no uncertain terms that if the people failed in their mission, they would be punished by God and dire consequences would fall upon them (Bercovitch, 1978; Ritter, 1980; Carpenter, 1978; Miller, 1953). Jeremiads were reinforced and perpetuated by the Puritans' belief in strict discipline and helped early colonists to gauge their own behavior: if there was a famine or other disaster, it was because the people had disappointed God (Miller, 1956, p. 119). Moreover, although jeremiads often addressed the congregation, they often increased the anxiety that individuals felt about not being among the saved. As Puritan Preacher Jonathan Edwards' jeremiadic sermon *Sinners at the Hands of an Angry God* (1741) warned, "God won't hold them up in these slippery places any longer, but will let them go; and then, at that very instant, they shall fall into destruction" (p. 67).

Yet as time passed, the utility of jeremiads waned and had to "be refurbished" and brought up to date without "let[ting] go the delights of ritualistic condemnation" (Miller, 1953, p. 174). That the jeremiad's practical conclusion was "indefinite declension" for the Puritan church (Miller, 1953, p. 185) created urgency for a new type of rhetorical form. Puritan leaders found that they had to develop messages beyond the lesson of reward and punishment because external conditions in the new world were anything but static (Miller, 1953). Preachers needed to help the Puritans make sense of

¹⁴ Again, note that several scholars take objection to the notion that the New England Puritans thought themselves to singularly be God's chosen people. As Smolinski (1990) and Stievermann (2009) argue, most Puritan leaders still preached that Jerusalem was the true "city on a hill" and the place where the national conversion would take place.

their world and persevere through fires, droughts, plagues, the constant threat of and, finally, the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Charter, Indian attacks, decreasing church membership, and both internal and external attacks on their doctrine (Elliott, 1975, p. 8). As the Puritans became aware that their way of life was being threatened by external factors and scrutinized by outsiders, they altered the jeremiad to tell more favorable stories about themselves.

Scholars recognize this more optimistic and communal discourse as a type of restorative jeremiad (Ritter and Henry, 1992), covenant-affirming jeremiad (Jones and Rowland, 2005), or covenantal-renewal rhetoric (Bostdorff, 2003). Rather than constantly feel under the threat of damnation, this new covenantal rhetoric depicted God as more merciful (Bormann, 2001), reducing the anxiety that the Puritans had about not being saved. Moreover, it helped to extend the covenantal promise to second- and third-generation Puritans and open it up to more people (Miller, 1953; Elliott, 1975; Jones, 1973; Bostdorff, 2003). Rather than emphasize the demons within the Puritan community as typical of a jeremiad, covenantal rhetoric often focused on “othering” and blaming external evils for internal struggles (Bostdorff, 2003; Jones and Rowland, 2005). Accordingly, covenantal-renewal rhetoric can be used to soften the harder edge of jeremiad and to unify the people in times of national crisis rather than condemn them (Bostdorff, 2003).

Covenant as a Rhetorical Form: Managing the Covenantal System

Although significant work has been done regarding the jeremiad and its evolution into covenantal rhetoric, the richness of covenant, itself, as a rhetorical form has been

largely unexplored. The use of covenantal rhetoric has generally been examined more for its style than its function. When its function is examined, the ability of covenant as a unifying mechanism is primarily stressed, as in the national covenant. This tends to oversimplify the sometimes tenuous relationships among covenantal partners and undermine the importance of individual covenantal obligations and faith inherent in the covenant of grace, which was always protected by the Puritans as the core of covenantal system. Accordingly, the depth and complexity of the covenantal system and the recognition of its potential rhetorical power have been lost in translation. In what follows, I argue that recognizing covenant as a rhetorical form allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation its argumentative and interpretative capabilities when used by human actors. To examine covenant as a rhetorical form is to acknowledge it as a mediating tool that reconciles seemingly contradictory goals and constitutes people in roles and relationships with one another in a way that appears to fulfill several covenantal obligations simultaneously, but ultimately provides the opportunity for individual preparation for the covenant of grace as it manifests itself in various social, political, and economic ways as the emblem of true morality.

Miller recognizes that the choices Puritan leaders made about how to put these covenantal “mosaics” (Miller, 1953, p. 132) together constituted a persuasive effort that involved the adaptation of strains of covenantal thought that could be used as a weapon of control and “ascendancy” (Miller, 1953, p. 112). Elazar (1995, 1996, 1998) examines how covenant organizes people into governing structures and institutions. My work, however, explores covenant as an interpretive rhetorical form used by political leaders to

constitute groups of people in order to satisfy certain political, social, religious, and economic exigencies while imbuing their decisions with moral legitimacy. In other words, I attempt to illuminate the rhetorical processes and language at play behind the use of covenantal ideas. Although covenant has been given its due as a theological and historical construct (Miller 1953, 1954, 1956) and a political construct Elazar (1995, 1996, 1998), more probing is needed to explore its rich and dynamic capabilities as a multi-dimensional rhetorical form.

Although the complicated economic conditions and resulting political and institutional changes were often confusing and hard to reconcile with the spiritual core of Puritanism, particularly the idea of grace and predestination (Miller, 1953, p. 309), the Puritans found ways to adapt them with their original cause as the faithful people of a sovereign God by using covenant as a rhetorical form. The Puritans believed that this “series of covenants” (Miller, 1956, p. 61) “succeeded in reconciling all contradictions, smoothing out all inconsistencies, securing a basis for moral obligation, and for assurance of salvation while yet not subtracting from God’s absolute power or imposing upon Him any limitations prescribed by merely human requirements” (Miller, 1956, p. 63). Puritan leaders took pains to make sure to rhetorically frame adaptations as consonant with core covenantal belief. Noll (2002) states,

The central of formal religion throughout the colonies remained the being, prerogatives, and actions of God, although this central affirmation was construed in different ways. Some theological traditions stressed God’s provision of grace

for personal salvation, some God's revealed will as the norm for churches, others God's general will as the foundation for social order [...].

Moreover, Miller (1956) explains, "Only when they could shelter economic and national ambitions under spiritual warrants were they free to pursue them" (p. 123). Ironically, then, they found themselves stretching the integrity of Puritan doctrines such as predestination and the covenant of grace in order to protect them and ensure that covenantal ideas were maintained over time. The Puritans had to make it appear that faith remained at the center of their life in order to fend off attacks from other religious organizations and to reconcile internal disputes between Puritan leaders who had different attitudes on how Puritanism was to react to developments in the new world.

Miller (1953) states,

For [Puritan leader Cotton Mather] as for his contemporaries, the covenant was still the basic conception, and was bound to be the innermost meaning both of nature and of economics. The jolt of external defeat forced him to seek for covenantal reassurances within. [...] Ransacking the federal theology for bits and pieces, he was driven to the furthest of extreme of subjectivism ever to constrict the Puritan mind. He tried to preserve the covenant by atomizing it. (Miller, p. 403)

The result of all these changes was a Puritan belief system and the submission to activities that often were far removed from the original covenant but still drew legitimating force from it.

At the same time that these new adaptations were morally framed, understanding of the original theological covenant was altered in the process, often unconsciously. As Burke (1970) explains, this rhetorical adaptation is an inevitable result of theological concepts, because logology, or “words about words,” is used to interpret theology, or “words about God” (p.1). As such, words about God, “must reveal their nature as words” (p. 2).¹⁵ Burke (1970) states, “There is a sense in which language is *not* just ‘natural,’ but really *does* add a ‘new dimension’ to the things of nature” (p. 8). Accordingly, covenant is a rhetorical form that not only interprets meaning but creates it as well. This study appreciates covenantal form as a choice between competing covenantal ideas, all of which are engrained in history and a conceptual covenantal framework. In this way, covenantal form operates like “a dynamis – a potential fusion of elements that may be energized or actualized as a strategic response to a situation” (Jamieson and Campbell, 1982, p. 146). It can be used strategically to re-appropriate basic covenantal assumptions to current situations and create fitting rhetorical narratives. Lucaites and Condit (1985): “Both content and form of the rhetorical narrative are thus subservient to the demands of the relationship between the specific audience to which it is addressed, the specific context in which it appears, and the specific gain toward which it strives” (p. 94).

Accordingly, this study demonstrates how covenantal form grapples with varied contextual demands and tensions as it moves through time, but has roots that are

¹⁵ As Burke (1970) explains, this does not require anything to be determined about the validity or “truth” about religion itself, but to accept that humans studying it only have words to interpret it: “This investigation does not require us to make any decisions about the validity of theology qua theology.” (p. 2).

grounded in hundreds of years of history and saturation which ensure its overall continuation. The simultaneous durability and flexibility of covenant as a rhetorical form served dual purposes from the beginning. On the one hand, the covenantal framework provided religious leaders with a familiar theological base to use that was acceptable and recognizable to their audiences. On the other hand, however, the covenantal system allowed for the flexibility of people and ideas within it. Ultimately, then, covenant becomes a mechanism to bind people together in stable spaces while it allows for contingency. Like Elazar (1996), I argue that the “dialectic tension between each of these dualities” is an “integral element in covenantal systems, one which provides such systems with the necessary self-corrective mechanisms to keep them in reasonable balance over the long haul, at least so long as covenantal principles continue to inform and shape the polities concerned” (p. 7). Roberts-Miller (2009) states,

The paradoxical nature of the Puritan public sphere – that it was both authoritarian and democratic, hegemonic and individualistic – was the result of Puritan conceptions of how the truth is constituted, how one knows what is and is not true, how language can represent one’s knowledge, and how the self is constituted and converted. (p. 1)

In many ways, then, covenant became the rhetorical form used to tie the Puritans together with a certain amount of durability despite contradictions in Puritan belief.

Roberts-Miller (2009) argues that the Puritans engaged in monologic discourse that made public argument or discourse “a form of combat or display” in which a person participates not to “discover what one believes, but to triumph over others” (p. x). In

other words, they remained unified by demonizing dissent rather than using deliberation to resolve conflict. This is posed in contrast to dialogic discourse: “dialectic or dialogue in which people participate in order to change and be changed. In this view, disagreement is good, as it presents an opportunity to look at things from another perspective, one that one might end up adopting” (p. x). Roberts-Miller argues that the monologic discourse privileged by the Puritans resulted in a flawed public sphere and a “failure of imagination in their models of the mind, argumentation, the self, and language” (p. 4). She concludes that the Puritans were unable “to include opposition in discursively productive ways” (p. 87). Roberts-Miller astutely recognizes that it is hard “not [to] characterize it as hypocrisy” (p. 136) that the Puritans were dissenters from England who did not tolerate dissent. This contradiction, however, can also be viewed as a necessary rhetorical measure taken to ensure the survival of Puritan faith and culture. Although Roberts-Miller makes important points, she demonizes the Puritans and oversimplifies the political, economic, and social constraints they faced. Puritan discourse might not have been “productive” in terms of dialogic deliberation, but that does not mean that significant rhetorical work was not done to harmonize different beliefs into one system.

This is not to say, of course, that monologic discourse is preferable to dialogic discourse or the exploration of diverse opinions and ideas. It is to say, however, that individuals and groups, at times, use rhetoric as a self-protective device and that covenantal form can facilitate this process. At times, Roberts-Miller (2009) acknowledges that the Puritans had different opinions and narratives and, thus, were

forced to deal with conflict. She says, however, that “authorities alternated between denying the existence of these differences or pointing to them as signs of a fallen community” (pp. 126-127) which allowed them to continue to cast Puritan belief “as certain and undeniable” (p. 58). Yet Roberts-Miller does not examine how this certainty was maintained despite significant challenges to Puritan orthodoxy. Whereas Roberts-Miller states that “Puritan ontology and epistemology presume a flat and static world that can be known” (p. 55), this study demonstrates that ontology and epistemology are not “presumed” but “created” and “packaged” in covenantal form. Thus, although the Puritans might not have engaged primarily in dialogic deliberation, it would be presumptive to assume that the rhetorical forms they used were not dialogical.

Leaders as Managers of Rhetorical Form

Beginning with John Winthrop, societal leaders assumed the responsibility of designating how citizens, as covenantal actors, should manage their competing covenantal obligations. Leaders were given the task of managing a system of covenants that came to include spiritual and Biblical requirements, institutional requirements, the economic charter, and more secular, national concerns. Both Miller (1953, 1956) and Elazar (1996) acknowledge the necessity of leadership in order to keep the covenantal tradition and its “texts” alive within the larger community. Accordingly, modern presidents of the United States, as the nation’s “high priest” and “prophet” (Novak, 1992, p. 3) are one of the most important carriers of this tradition. Elazar states (1996), “The political tradition is kept alive by the chain of political leaders and thinkers who utilize the vocabulary to undertake or explain the political acts that shape and direct the body

politic” (p. 7). Yet it is imperative to acknowledge that presidents work actively within this tradition in ways that alter it as well. As Zarefsky (1986) states, presidents choose the definitions and symbols by which the public sees a situation as it now exists, as it has existed, and how it will be projected into the future. Furthermore, presidential discourse is subsequently translated into concrete and material policy and influences the attitudes and votes of the people of the United States. Presidents, then, do not just “explain” political acts; they *direct* the political acts. Asen (2009) states, rhetoric should not be viewed “a distraction from or supplement to public policy, but as constitutive of policy itself” (p. 5). Similarly, Lucaites and Condit (1985) state, “Material gain, whether in the form of a vote, an exchange of goods and services, or an ideological agreement, rests at the core of the rhetorical process” (p. 101).

The way that the president, as a “symbol-using animal” (Burke, 1969), operates within the framework of covenantal ideas and history and uses covenantal form strategically is a rhetorical performance that warrants critical investigation. Burke (1970) states that “language in particular and human relations in general can be most directly approached in terms of action rather than in terms of knowledge” (p. 38). In other words, the use of the concept “covenant” needs to be explored as a type of action rather than as motion, which means it is not merely descriptive but involves human character, motive, choice, and questions of ethics (Burke, 1970, p. 41, p. 174). It is what Burke (1970) would call “dramatistic” (p. 41); it asks the following questions: “‘From what, through what, to what, does this particular form proceed?’ or ‘What goes with what in this structure of terms?’” (p. 39). Human actors answer these questions with the language

choices they make, which, in turn, determines the type of covenantal order or arrangement that is formed between the covenantal actors (Burke, 1970, p. 199).

Fundamentally, then, presidents can constitute the people of the United States within the covenantal tradition using covenantal form in a way that corresponds to their intended goals. Drawing from McGee (1975), who argues that audiences become collectivities through political myths, Charland (1987) explains that an audience is not necessarily universal or unified as humans in general, but that audiences can come to be constituted as groups and subjects “through a process of identification with a textual position” (p. 228). He states that textual narratives, in particular, lead subjects to interpret their roles in any given situation in a particular way. Accordingly, covenant can be used as a rhetorical tool used to constitute the people of the United States into institutional, political, social, and economic relationships. Elazar (1995, 1996, 1998 III, 1998 IV) argues, in an impressive series of four volumes, that covenant is the foundation on which the political institutions in the United States have been erected and people have been organized “under God” (1998, IV, p. 8). Although Elazar (1998, IV) acknowledges that “[c]ovenants can bind any number of partners for a variety of purposes” (p. 8) and “establish different levels of obligation [to] make possible differentiation in rights among those who are covenant partners or those who are partners to different covenants or covenants of different scope” (p. 380), he does not examine how leaders employ language in covenantal form to do so.

To this end, this project examines how presidents operate within the covenantal tradition but can reinterpret covenantal form to best fit the current circumstances, a

process that can be described as hermeneutical rhetoric (Leff, 1997). Leff (1997) explains that hermeneutical rhetoric is about reinterpreting the past or past texts “as equipment for future rhetorical production” (p. 201). Put this way, Leff argues that hermeneutical rhetoric is not just about the rhetor’s production or imitation, but also about how the rhetor interprets usable traditions in order to respond to current situations. Leff states, “And within this practice, the interplay between understanding and production creates an organic connection between the historical text and the new composition: the old text leaves its impression on the rhetor’s product, but the rhetor’s productive act has left its impression on the original” (p. 202). In the same way, presidents of the United States must follow in the covenantal tradition but can reinterpret the tradition in particular cases as they see fit. How presidents choose to use covenantal form, then, has dynamic implications and alters relationships between people.

Rhetorical Work on the Covenant

Much of the other scholarship on presidential covenanting in rhetorical studies focuses on the covenant that the president himself attempts to create with the people of the United States, which is often investigated in terms of the jeremiad. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) illuminate how presidents attempt to covenant with the people of the United States in their Inaugural and Farewell Addresses. According to Campbell and Jamieson, the president does this by reminding the people that he shares with them the same history and communal values and assuring them that he will fulfill the presidential role without usurping the people’s voice or power. In doing so, the president establishes a relationship of trust and a common destiny. For example, in his inaugural, President

Benjamin Harrison “recognized the interdependence of the president and the people”

as composing a covenant when he stated:

The oath taken in the presence of the people becomes a mutual covenant....My promise is spoken, yours unspoken, but not the less real and solemn. [...] Surely I do not misinterpret the spirit of the occasion when I assume that the whole body of the people covenant with me and with each other today to support and defend the Constitution of the Union of the States, to yield willing obedience to all the laws and each to every other citizen his equal civil and political rights. (94)

(Campbell and Jamieson, 2008, p. 34)

Thus, not only does Harrison acknowledge that he and the people of the United States have an obligation to one another, but he also suggests that the people of the United States are inevitably bound to one another as well.

Other scholars have focused on how modern presidents have used the jeremiad to covenant with the people of the United States as well as to remind them that they are a special people who have covenanted with God. Ritter (1980) and Smith (1994) acknowledges the importance of jeremiads in presidential campaign discourse because they help a presidential candidate covenant with the people and position himself as the leader of the chosen people. Similarly, Murphy (1989) argues that the rhetorical strength of the jeremiad as a means of creating identification posed a problem for John F. Kennedy when he was running for president in 1960 because, as a Catholic, he was not considered to be a member of the Puritan-turned-Protestant covenant (p. 269).

Furthermore, as described previously, much work has been done on the way in which the

president unifies the people of the United States around the idea that they are an exceptional people of an exceptional nation and celebrates the nation's most important values by using jeremiadic or covenantal rhetoric (Ritter, 1980; Carpenter, 1978; Miller, 1953; Erickson, 1985; Smith, 1994; Buehler, 1998).

Scholars have also explored how presidents have used the idea of a civil religion, like the jeremiad, to perpetuate notions of American Exceptionalism and use moral values to bring the people of the United States together as the chosen people (Hart, 1977; Marvin, 2005; Gring, 2005; Alley, 1972). Bellah (1967) is widely recognized as popularizing the term "civil religion" and beginning a scholarly debate on the topic.

Bellah states that

there are certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of the American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion. (p. 3)

Hence, Bellah argues that the civil religion appropriates elements common to different religious denominations and creates a way of thinking about people's commonalities rather than differences. In other words, civil religion is more secularized than any one religious doctrine but it persists as a moral code for the people of the United States, however distanced it is from the religious doctrine of one particular religious denomination

There are important differences between the idea of a covenant and the idea of a civil religion, which necessitates deeper investigation even though scholars often treat the covenant as synonymous with civil religion or the jeremiad (Rowland and Jones, 2005; DeSantis, 1999; Murphy, 1989) to the detriment of the rich history and dynamics of covenant. Many scholars have done important work that looks at how the president of the United States helps to create and perpetuate a certain transcendental civil religion in order to establish a national identity for the people.¹⁶ Scholars have been less concerned, however, with *how* this common identity is maintained between self-interested individuals despite major differences among the people of the United States, a question that I take up in this study, particularly in regard to economic differences. Although presidents have the important responsibility of creating and maintaining an identity for all of the people of the United States, they do more than simply bolster a common identity; they also articulate the covenantal ties that bind different relationships – between the president and the people, between the government and the people, between the citizens themselves, and between individuals and God – and ensure that these relationships are maintained over time using covenantal form. Moreover, unlike the concept of civil religion, which describes the general moral values “shared” by the people of the United

¹⁶ Many other scholars have grappled with idea of the civil religion (Herberg, 1955; Pierard and Linder, 1988; Marty, 1974), with several investigating the strategic, and sometimes detrimental, ways in which the concept has been used, particularly by the president. Gring (2005) equates it to a kind of statist religion; while others contend that it becomes nationalism (Alley, 1972; Marvin, 2005) and even a type of idolatry (Richardson, 1974). Hart (1977) stressed the rhetorical dimensions and implications of presidential use of the civil religion. Hart views the civil religion as more of a compact that is created “when God and country kick up their heels rhetorically” (p. 45) which is used to legitimate relations between church and state. Similarly, through an examination of presidential state of the union and inaugural addresses, Beasley (2003) grapples with the idea of a civil religion and comes to the conclusion that the presidents use the concept of civil religion in their discourse to transcend difference and, ultimately, ignore it. She argues that throughout history presidents have pushed citizens to “*principled inaction*” in order to bolster the idea of inclusion without demanding it.

States, covenantal form draws upon a particular religious doctrine that rests on the covenant of grace.

Bostdorff's (2003) essay on how President George W. Bush used covenantal rhetoric in his post-9/11 speeches is perhaps the most detailed illustration of how a president used covenantal form as an argumentative and interpretive tool to make sense out of current events and impress moral obligations onto the people of the United States. According to Bostdorff, rather than create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, Bush used covenant renewal rhetoric rather than the jeremiad to bridge the differences of the people across different generations, creating a national covenant. She argues that just as the Puritans depended heavily on a type of covenantal renewal rhetoric in order to enable new generations of people to share in the covenant that their predecessors had created, Bush used covenantal renewal rhetoric to unite the "greater generation" of World War II heroes with baby boomers and generation Xers by drawing parallels between the 9/11 attacks and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Furthermore, Bostdorff argues that Bush encouraged faith and good works as a way for the people, especially the younger generation, to move past the 9/11 attacks. According to Bostdorff, these good works came specifically in "economic acts of faith" (p. 309). Bush told the people of the United States to work hard as they always had, be consumers, and act "in faith with the nation's covenant" (p. 310).

In doing so, Bostdorff (2003) illuminates how a president can use the rhetorical flexibility of covenant to organize different generations of the people of the United States into a special relationship with one another to achieve a specific goal. Although

Bostdorff's (2003) work begins to examine the "interlocking" system of covenants (Miller, 1953, p. 252), she does not situate it in this framework. Her case study focuses on only two components of the covenantal system: the national covenant and, marginally, the covenant of works. Moreover, it does not probe the deeper moral component that comes with the covenant of grace or how "economic acts" fit into a larger economic covenant that exists in spite of massive economic inequality.

Reaganomics: An Ideal Case Study

An investigation of the way in which Reagan used covenantal form to politically and morally legitimate Reaganomics in the 1980s offers an ideal case study for the critical and theoretical framework I have established. Reagan transformed the relationship between the government, the economy, and the people, a relationship that has been in flux for much of the nation's history. Yet for most of the 20th century, before Reagan took office, Democrats had defined this relationship and made it more acceptable for economic sufficiency to be a "political right" (Piven and Cloward, 1982) that involved a significant amount of facilitation by the government. This idea had its roots in the 1800s with the populist movement, which formed to give voice to the rights and values of the "common people." Walters (1997) states, "Beginning with the populists of the 1880s, reformers called upon the government to solve problems with a boldness that would have appalled their early-nineteenth century counterparts" (p. 18). Populists lobbied the government to secure better working conditions and wages for farmers and laborers, regulate the money supply, and enact anti-trust laws. Populism prepared the way for a political progressivism in the early 1900s that focused on institutional change;

namely the expansion of government into economic realms. Piven and Cloward (1982) state, “Progressive legislation that portrayed government as trustbuster and economic regulator blended images of economy and polity” (p. 107).

Political progressivism eventually culminated in the New Deal policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as he sought to solve the economic problems of the nation during the Great Depression. At this point, there seemed to be no other option than to allow more government regulation of the economy. Roosevelt’s economic policies began a long chapter of Keynesian economics in the United States that lasted until the 1980s. The 1935 Social Security Act has come to epitomize the type of measures that were taken to provide an economic security blanket to wage earners, regulate economic instability, and social programs for the poor. In his 1944 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt put forth an economic plan in the form of a “second Bill of Rights” or “economic bill of rights,” which stressed the equality of “economic security and independence.” In the midst of World War II, he urged the people of the United States to forego economic self-interest and unify as a nation. In stating that “[p]eople who are hungry or out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made,” Roosevelt implied that it was imperative that the government of United States, as a democratic government, be involved in economic matters and assistance to the poor. Roosevelt’s policies established a precedent upon which President Lyndon B. Johnson’s policies could rest, particularly regarding poverty relief. In his 1964 State of the Union Address, Johnson declared that the federal government and the nation would pursue an “unconditional war on poverty,” which resulted in new socio-economic programs.

Reagan, a Democrat-turned-Republican, first entered the national political scene in 1964 with his *A Time for Choosing* speech. He was asked by the Republican Nominee for President Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater to speak on his behalf and to be a proxy for his conservative platform. By accepting, Reagan positioned himself as a leading conservative and part of the rightwing of the Republican Party, a reputation he would carry with him into his presidency. As a junior senator, Goldwater had made a name for himself by speaking out against President Eisenhower's economic policies, which Goldwater believed were too tolerant of the Democrats' dependence on government spending. On April 8, 1957, he addressed President Eisenhower directly in the Senate chamber, telling him that "he was a betrayer of the people's trust and a quisling in thrall to the Democrats' 'economic inebriation.'" According to Goldwater, "[T]he president had embraced the 'siren song of socialism,' 'government by bribe,' [and] 'squanderbust government'" (Perlstein, 2001, p. 33).

Goldwater represented what has been called the "Main Street" Republicans, the more conservative and isolationist faction of the Republican Party, in contrast to the "Wall Street" Republicans who were more tolerant of government intervention into economic matters and were considered to be internationalists (Paulson, 2000, p. 75). In 1964, Goldwater threw his hat into the Republican presidential primary race. Although most people believed Goldwater to be too conservative to win the Republican nomination (Paulson, 2000, p.101), he defeated his significantly more moderate opponents New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Pennsylvania Governor William W. Scranton. Paulson (2000) writes, "The outcome of lasting importance from the 1964 Presidential election is

not that President Johnson was elected, or that Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was defeated by a landslide, but that the Goldwater movement took over the Republican Party from the ground up” (p. 99). Goldwater’s nomination effectually helped to reignite the conservative movement in the United States. Thus, in many ways, when Reagan was elected president in 1980 he was able to enact the ideas that Goldwater put on the agenda in 1964, particularly that government should have limited interference into matters of the economy.

Reagan is often credited for reviving Conservatism in the United States after decades of liberal government policies and Keynesian economics. Accordingly, Lowi (1984) argues, “Reagan’s presidency thus represents the first real conservative confrontation of liberalism nationally since the rise of big government” (p. 31). Unlike Presidents Richard M. Nixon, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Herbert Hoover, and even Calvin Coolidge, Lowi argues that Reagan was steadfast in his insistence that the federal government stay out of people’s lives. As Troy (2008) states,

Politically and culturally, he defined the times. The individualism he celebrated as a national achievement tended to individuate and separate most, even as it spurred some to great achievements that benefited the nation. Ideologically, Reagan’s conservatism reoriented Americans away from big government, triggering a nationwide argument about government’s role, capitalism’s advantages, morality’s relevance, and individual charity’s limitations. (p. 242)

Conservatives praised Reagan for making a “distinction between freedom [from government] and tyranny [under government],” and consistently “understanding and

articulating the crisis of our time” unlike any other leader after World War II (Americans for the Reagan Agenda, 1983, p. 14).

The Reagan Administration’s plan to free the people from government also included reducing government spending, which involved drastically cutting social programs, specifically welfare. The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (PRWRA), which promised to “end welfare as we know it”¹⁷ and was signed into law on August 22, 1996, arguably would not have been possible without the Reagan presidency.¹⁸ Asen (2002) states, “Reagan’s election as the 40th president of the United States represented a turning point in social welfare policy deliberations. Shortly after his inauguration, the president advocated a full-scale retrenchment of the welfare state that culminated in the repeal of AFDC” (p. 68). Although Asen acknowledges that it is difficult to make claims about historical “turning points,” he feels comfortable doing so because the presidents prior to Reagan, though they had at times denounced government intervention into issues of poverty, never “claim[ed] to wish the poor well while they fended for themselves” or “promised to protect the truly needy [while] devis[ing] methods that would distinguish this group from various deviants” (p. 68). According to several critics (Asen, 2002; Joe and Rogers, 1985; Kiewe and Houck, 1989; Karaagac, 2000), the discourse promulgated during the Reagan presidency stigmatized the idea of

¹⁷ On August 21, 1992, presidential candidate and current Arkansas governor Bill Clinton spoke to the Economic Club of Detroit and said, “I believe people on welfare ought to go to work, and I have been doing something about it in our state where we’ve moved 17,000 people from welfare to work, and I have a plan to do even better, to end welfare as we know it, and make it a second chance not a way of life.”

¹⁸ PRWRA replaced the federal welfare assistance program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) that had been in effect since 1935 with Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) block grants. Unlike AFDC, TANF block grants allocated funding to each state based not on the eligibility of assistance in each state but on the amount of federal funds available, gave states more control over funding decisions, and, overall, was more restrictive in terms of who received benefits and the rules those benefactors must follow in order to receive benefits (Asen, 2002, pp. 168-169).

welfare to an unprecedented level, making it “uncompassionate,” even immoral, to help people materially.

The Case Study of Ronald Reagan: A Preview

Thus, in both its discourse and subsequent policies, the Reagan administration challenged the idea that economic rights were political rights to be protected by the government. Since Reagan repeatedly stated that the regulation and distribution of economic resources to United States citizens was not an institutional or government problem, he needed to find a way to disassociate economic challenges, problems, and inequities from the realm of government. Ultimately, then, I examine how Reagan used the covenantal form to shift the atmosphere from one in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s economic policies and Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” were acceptable to one in which there was little need for these measures. Whereas Piven and Cloward (1982) predicted that the Reagan administration would not be able to reverse a several-decade long trend during which mobilized citizens had won government protection in the market (p. 127), I argue that Reagan fundamentally changed the dominant perspective on how people, the government, and the economy were interrelated: he used covenantal form to move the government out and bring God back in. Rather than a political right, economic rights were reframed as the moral reward for a citizen’s fulfillment of their covenantal obligations.

Each of the chapters in this project illuminates how Reagan used covenantal form to morally legitimate his economic policies as existing in an “economy of grace,” which would, in the end, be protected by God but needed to be upheld by the citizens of the

United States. In doing so, the Reagan Administration contrasted its economic decisions and works – or its obligations in the institutional covenant and the covenant of works – as the moral alternative to all other economic works or proposals by other political leaders. Even as Reagan had to present policy plans that did not seem to fit with the core of the covenantal values, he used covenantal form to reconcile any apparent contradictions and make his plan consonant with the people’s vision of the nation as a “city on a hill.”

Moreover, Reagan presented his policies in the “economy of grace” as providing the freedom for the people of the United States to fulfill their covenantal obligations. Having faith in God became one and the same with supporting three major policy initiatives that were necessary for Reaganomics to succeed: limited government, lower taxes, and spending cuts that reduced funding for welfare programs. Chapters Two, Three, and Four demonstrate how Reagan used covenantal form to constitute the people of the United States in certain roles and assign them duties that corresponded to his economic policies, while depicting it as a way for the people to demonstrate their faith and be valued as active citizens of the United States. Accordingly, Reagan presented the fulfillment of the economy of grace as dependent on the people of the United States fulfilling the covenant of works in certain ways, and, subsequently, these specified works became the only way for the people of the United States to demonstrate their faith and commitment to God.

Furthermore, although covenant is generally understood as a communal arrangement and a binding of human beings under God, the idea that the more individual

covenant of grace is at the core of the entire system is often overlooked, leaving the implications of this facet unexamined. Accordingly, this study explores how Reagan, by emphasizing individual faith and works, elevated individualism as the key to economic success and the basis for the entire covenantal system that guaranteed that the United States would remain the “shining city on hill” spiritually and economically. In other words, Reagan legitimated economic individualism on the grounds that it was the only way to preserve the moral foundation of the United States, upon which all economic, social, and political matters were to rest. Thus, although this project explores how Reagan used covenantal form to manage the multi-faceted individual, communal, and institutional aspects of a political body and acknowledges that a larger communal framework of “togetherness” helped him to ease citizens’ feelings of personal anxiety, Reagan made the individualism paramount.

Specifically, in Chapter Two, I explore how Reagan dealt with the economic crisis the country faced when he became president in 1981 by using covenantal form to redefine the problem as a spiritual problem that could be solved through an individual’s reaffirmation of faith. Accordingly, he created a space of epideictic celebration in which the people could exhibit their faith in God and renew their commitment to the covenant of grace and, subsequently, a national covenant, which they had been entered into by their Puritan forefathers more than three centuries earlier. In doing so, Reagan equipped the people to support his call for limited government. He gave the people the opportunity, once again, to embrace their exceptional status and enact their God-given freedom by declaring their independence from government, which he blamed for creating the

economic problems in the first place by conducting works without faith. This renewal of faith in the “economy of grace” that Reagan began promoting when he first started campaigning for president in 1979 set the foundation on which his subsequent economic policies and calls for the people to fulfill certain obligations in the “covenant of works” could be seen as moral and legitimate.

In Chapter Three, I examine how Reagan sought to garner support for tax cuts despite a growing deficit on the basis that the cuts would release more money into the market and reduce inflation. He argued that the government should allow the people, driven by their faith in God, to maintain the market. Rather than seek to eliminate the sense of mystery and uncertainty in the market, Reagan likened it to the mystery and awe of God’s grace and used it as an impetus for human risk and entrepreneurship. Accordingly, Reagan situated the people in a self-correcting and divinely protected “covenantal market space,” which he described as a barrier-free wilderness within which wealth would trickle-around. This covenantal market space, then, operated on the energy produced by the dynamic interaction of the free market and the people’s fulfillment of their covenantal obligations, particularly their faith that God ultimately would extend his grace to His chosen people.

Finally, in Chapter Four, the investigation turns to Reagan’s use of covenantal form to explain to the people of the United States what kind of economic obligations they had to one another, particularly to those who receive welfare benefits. I argue that Reagan provided a covenantal avenue by which the government and the people of the United States could retain the moral high ground and remain covenanted with the “poor among

them” without having to assist them through works or provide material assistance. The only way for the poor to embrace the universal moral psychology and system of work, according to Reagan, was through limiting welfare benefits and requiring people to work. By trapping people in the cycle of dependency, Reagan argued that welfare prevented people from nourishing their spiritual well-being and fulfilling their obligations in the covenant of works, which would prepare them to receive God’s grace. Since God gave each person a “calling” that fit within a divinely-ordered economic system, each person must be left to achieve it and embrace the Puritan work ethic as a way of performing their individual and communal covenantal obligations. Accordingly, Reagan framed his policy goals of cuts to welfare programs and welfare reform as an opportunity for moral rehabilitation that was not premised on fiscal goals but compassion.

Although the case studies in this dissertation jump from the Puritans of 17th and 18th century New England to the presidency of Reagan, it is important to acknowledge that Puritan covenantal thought was embodied in the economic values that were developed by others throughout United States history. These established a fertile foundation upon which Reagan’s covenantal discourse could be received by the people of the United States. Reagan’s discourse, thus, found a home within the popular imagination of the people of the United States because it was an old and familiar story. In many ways, then, Reagan revived the ideals of a time before the Great Depression when government regulation of economic affairs and policies of economic redistribution became necessary. Whereas President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal policies in the 1930s and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s New Society programs in the 1960s challenged the idea

that the people of the United States, with God's help, were the controllers of their own destiny and capitalistic enterprise, Reagan's free market policies of the 1980s resurrected that idea. He used covenantal form to cast the people of the United States as actors in a success story of their own doing despite their economic circumstances.

Chapter Two

Economic Recovery Through Spiritual Awakening: An Epideictic Celebration of Grace

President Ronald Reagan took office on January 20, 1981, with an astounding optimism that boldly challenged the pessimism that had gripped the country during the economic recession of the late 1970s under the administration of President Jimmy Carter. In his Presidential Announcement Speech as a Republican candidate on November 13, 1979, Reagan stated, “I don’t believe that our nation must resign itself to inevitable decline, yielding its proud position to other hands. I am totally unwilling to see this country fail in its obligation to itself.” Reagan likened this “obligation” to a moral imperative for the people of the United States to believe in their exceptional status under God in order to bring about economic recovery. Although the country was in economic crisis, Reagan argued that what ailed the country really stemmed from a spiritual crisis and a lack of faith. Reagan blamed the economic problems on an intrusive government that had questioned the people’s ability to fulfill their destiny and had taken away the people’s freedom to believe in themselves, in each other, and in God. In order to provide a platform for recovery, Reagan returned to and re-appropriated the Puritan idea of covenant, an idea that helped the Puritans make sense of their relationships and obligations and to remain committed to them. Specifically, Reagan located the answer to the nation’s economic woes in the people’s commitment to a national covenant, or the idea that they had the freedom to fulfill their destiny as God’s chosen people, and their commitment to the covenant of grace, or the idea that believers must have faith that God

will always protect them. To do so, Reagan instructed the people to deny government intrusion into economic matters and reject the promise that its “works” would “fix” the economy because to depend on government, according to Reagan, was to fail in one’s moral covenantal obligations. Ultimately, Reagan used epideictic discourse imbued with covenantal ideas to allow the people of the United States to enact their God-given freedom and fulfill their commitment to the covenant of grace.

In this chapter, I first describe the economic context of the early 1980s and explain how Reagan presented the economic problem as a spiritual rather than a material problem. Second, I explain the differences between the jeremiad as a rhetorical form and covenantal renewal rhetoric. Third, I explore how Reagan used covenant renewal rhetoric to call the people of the United States to commit themselves to a type of national covenant. Fourth, I explore how Reagan drew on covenantal ideas to blame the government for creating the economic disaster, bolster the people’s belief in themselves, and encourage the people to declare their independence from government. Finally, I explore the ways in which Reagan used covenantal form to legitimate his governmental policies and the problematic implications of doing this while telling the people that government policy was not the answer to the economic problems.

A Spiritual Renewal as the Foundation of Economy Recovery: Transcending the Material

During the 1980 presidential election between Democratic incumbent President Jimmy Carter and Reagan, the faltering economy was on the minds of most people. The “high cost of living” ranked highest on Gallup Trends “Most Important Problem” list

from 1974 to 1980 (Dolan et al., 2008, p. 35, chart). Inflation, which was approaching 20 percent (Broder, Cannon, Johnson, Schram, and Harwood, 1980), combined with an unprecedented negative economic growth of -0.2 percent (Dolan et al., 2008), made stagflation, “the coincidence of low economic growth and high inflation,” a huge concern (Epstein, 1981, p. 143). By the late 1970s, the Consumer Price Index had doubled (Sawhill, 1982). Epstein states, “By election day, unemployment had risen to over 7.5 percent, the inflation rate was almost 10 percent, and workers’ real wages had fallen almost 3 percent from the year before” (p. 143). Furthermore, “The American dollar was in serious trouble as an international currency. The whole concept of America as the world’s leading power was dissolving” (Broder et al., 1980, p. 9). Not only were the economic conditions and forecasts dire, but the threatening scene was penetrating the psyche of the nation. Yankelovich (1980) stated, “There is no evidence that the American character has changed, but the national mood and outlook have shifted measurably” (p. 14). In 1979, 72 percent of the people in the United States agreed with the statement that the United States is “fast coming to a turning point in history. The land of plenty is becoming the Land of Want” (Yankelovich, 1980, p. 15).

Elazar (1998, IV) states that “it is precisely at times of the greatest crisis in human self-government that the covenant idea resurfaces as a force” (p. 288). The late 1970s offered such a crisis to which Reagan, as a presidential candidate in 1980 and then president-elect, had to respond. True to his campaign promises, Reagan began to tackle the economic recession as soon as he took office. Reagan sought to stop the movement toward future destruction and dealt with the economic strife by reconnecting the people

of the United States to their chosen status in history and reconnecting them to the covenantal obligations they had entered into as a result. According to Reagan, it was not simply an “economic renewal”¹⁹ that was needed but a “spiritual”²⁰ one as well. Only when the spirit was reinvigorated could the economy recover because the two were intertwined. As Condit (1985) points out, leaders cannot simply interpret events in terms of the material conditions of the events themselves; they must interpret them in a way that makes sense to the community. Accordingly, Reagan provided a “noneconomic interpretation of economic ills” (Burke, 1941, p. 204) that offered the people of the United States a solution that they could accomplish by being moral and fulfilling their covenantal obligations.

More than any single economic factor, Reagan argued that the people’s faith in their nation and their relationships with others needed to be repaired. In his First State of the Union, he stated,

A year ago, Americans’ faith in their governmental process was steadily declining. Six out of ten Americans were saying they were pessimistic about their future.

A new kind of defeatism was heard. Some said our domestic problems were uncontrollable that we had to learn to live with the-seemingly endless cycle of high inflation and high unemployment.

¹⁹ February 18, 1981, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery; October 2, 1984, Remarks at Reagan-Bush Rally in Brownsville, Texas.

²⁰ October 8, 1984, Remarks at the Reagan-Bush Rally in Charlotte, North Carolina; January 25, 1984, State of the Union message.

There were also pessimistic predictions about the relationship between our Administration and this Congress. It was said we could never work together.

Well, those predictions were wrong. The record is clear, and I believe that history will remember this as an era of American renewal, remember this Administration as an Administration of change and remember this Congress as a Congress of destiny. (January 26, 1982)

Here Reagan spoke of the atmosphere when he replaced President Jimmy Carter a year earlier and compared it to the renewal that had begun under his leadership.

Not only did Reagan disagree with Carter's economic policies, but, perhaps of more importance, he also found fault with how Carter defined the economic crisis. In the summer of 1979, Carter began to use the word "malaise" to describe the economic failing of the people of the United States (Broder et al., 1980, p. 277). In the midst of the energy and economic crises of the late 1970s, Carter delivered a speech which is often referred to as the "Crisis of Confidence" or "Malaise Speech." He stated,

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.

Reagan rebuked Carter for his use of the word "malaise" and his subsequent diagnosis of the problem, objecting to the suggestion that the people were at fault. Reagan lamented, "In recent months leaders in our government have told us that, we, the people, have lost confidence in ourselves" (November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech).

Whereas Carter called the people of the United States to introspection, Reagan provided an outlet by which the people could regain confidence and faith in their nation and themselves.

From Prophetic Apocalypse to Priestly Celebration

Carter and Reagan, thus, adopted two different leadership roles in regard to what has been come to be known as “Civil Religion in America.” Bellah (1967) describes civil religion as the “genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people” (p. 12). Although it is not a sectarian religion of any kind, it is a collection of morals, beliefs, symbols, and institutions the people of the United States have pledged to uphold. The president is regarded as the head of the civil religion, and that role can take two different forms: the priestly or the prophetic (Marty, 1974; Pierard & Linder, 1988). Marty (1974) states, “The priestly will normally be celebrative, affirmative, culture-building. The prophetic will tend to be dialectical about civil religion, but with a predisposition toward the judgmental” (p. 145). Carter took on a prophetic role by warning the people of the United States of their faults and asking them to be disciplined (Hess, 2003). Reagan, on the other hand, adopted a more priestly role by celebrating people’s values and creating a culture around them.

According to Reagan, the answer to the economic woes was not to be found in challenging the people but in celebrating them. As Diggins states (2007), “[R]arely did [Reagan] ask the American people to take responsibility for their own lives and discipline their desires. Government and its deeds might do wrong, the people and their wants and

wishes never” (p. 16). Thus, as Foley (1990) puts it, “while Carter told the people in his ‘Crisis of Confidence’ speech that they ‘must face the truth,’ Reagan assured them that they could make the truth” (p. 30). Although he might have acted like an “apocalyptic prophet” when talking about government intervention (Ritter and Henry, 1992), Reagan never judged the people of the United States.

Accordingly, the more pessimistic tone and prophetic style used by Carter resembled the Puritans’ use of what became known as the jeremiad, while the more optimistic tone and priestly style used by Reagan reflected the more evolved covenant renewal rhetoric of the Puritans. First used by Puritan preachers in New England in the 1600s, the jeremiad was passed on from one generation to the next and reminded the people through historical narratives that they were God’s chosen people who were destined to achieve great things. The fulfillment of their destiny, however, only came with deep moral obligation and responsibility; if the people fail, they will be punished by God (Bercovitch, 1978; Ritter, 1980; Carpenter, 1978; Miller, 1953; Erickson, 1985; Smith, 1994). Jeremiads tend to be viewed as a mechanism by which Puritan leaders could scare the people back into behaving morally and threaten punishment if the Puritans failed in their mission.

A rhetorical adaptation took place, however, when the Puritans came to New England: the English Jeremiad, which was more about God’s punishment and sin, evolved into a more hopeful rhetorical form (Bercovitch, 1978). Or, as Bormann (1977) suggests, jeremiads were reformed to “fetch good out of evil” and became an “archetypal fantasy type” in which God’s chosen people found rebirth (Bormann, 2001, p. 43). Each

time they survived the wrath of God as it was unleashed onto them in a jeremiad, the Puritans were once again reassured that they could move past their sins, and, of most importance, that they would be protected by God despite their actions. In other words, although the people were tested, they always endured by the grace of God. The Puritans, as such, continue their mission even while their vices are being called out (Miller, 1954, p. 485) and were “sustained through a progression of defeats by a beacon of inevitable victory” (Bormann, 2001, p. 50).

This transition from an emphasis on fear to one of hope was, in part, grounded in the idea of covenant. Puritan faith operated within a system of covenants that were designed between 1600 and 1650 (Miller, 1954, p. 366) “to include human action within the scheme of divine sovereignty” (Jones, 1973, p. 12). Through the notion of covenant, humans entered into a somewhat reciprocal relationship with God in which “He has voluntarily tied His hands, willingly agreed to a set of terms” (Miller, 1954, p. 376). Rather than depict the Puritans as corrupt sinners who needed to be punished by an all-powerful God, then, the idea of covenant bolstered the idea that the Puritans were a people in whom God placed his trust. It nurtured a type of national covenant between the Puritans who, like the Israelites, believed they had been predestined by God for great things and would be protected by Him. The Puritans believed God’s mission was not carried out in England because God had other plans for how His people could achieve their destiny (Miller, 1954); that plan was set in America: “At this very moment the hand of God was stretched forth and the choicest of his saints led out of Egypt to the new land of Canaan, the one place indubitably provided in which a Reformation might not fall

short [...] What was wanting in Europe should be supplied by America” (Miller, 1954, p. 469).²¹²² Thus, a national covenant pushed Puritans to form a communal allegiance with one another because they believed they were called to do so by God.²³

Scholars have recently explored how presidents have used this adapted jeremiad as a rhetorical tool, labeling it a “covenant-affirming jeremiad” or “covenant renewal rhetoric.” Rowland and Jones (2005), building off of the work of Ritter and Henry (1992), argue that “covenant-affirming jeremiads” can be used to recast the genre of the traditional jeremiad so as to maintain the rich symbolism inherent in the jeremiad while imbuing the message with optimism (p. 159). They argue that Reagan’s presidential rhetoric was so powerful because he reaffirmed the basic values of the people of the United States by suggesting that they had not strayed from the covenant it first made with God and each other and, thus, maintained an optimistic mythic vision for the people. Put simply, Reagan’s use of the covenant-affirming jeremiad “provide[d] a means of combining ideological critique with a positive vision of society” (p. 162). They argue that Reagan used covenant-affirming jeremiads to promote three particular stances: that all people were included in the American family, that government action was necessary even

²¹ The Puritans believed that they had a special duty to fulfill God’s plan in New England, after making their way across the ocean because “they believed the Reformation to be a cumulative and still expanding force in the seventeenth century, but were also convinced that in Protestant countries of Europe it had not gone more than half way and could proceed no further until it received guidance” (Miller, 1954, p. 470).

²² It is important to note, however, that several scholars caution that the Puritans did not believe that New England was to replace Israel as *the* chosen nation, which is to temper the claims made by Miller (1953, 1954, 1956) and Bercovitch (1978). Smolinski (1990) and Stievermann (2009) explain that the Puritans leaders generally preached that Israel was still the “Celestial City” and the divinely-designated location of the national conversion at the time of the millennial coming.

²³ Note also that the Puritans’ “national covenant” (Miller, 1953) was more communal than national in scope. Although Reagan constructs a national covenant that is nationalistic in the sense of a nation in comparison to other nations, as this chapter demonstrates, the Puritans’ “national covenant” was more like a self-sufficient community.

though it must be limited, and that the best type of foreign policy was based on liberal internationalism or interventionism.

Similarly, Bostdorff argues that although covenant renewal rhetoric shares many similarities with the jeremiad, it places “more emphasis on God as kindly father and on Jesus as a merciful son” (Bostdorff, 2003, p. 302). Furthermore, she states that covenant renewal rhetoric places more emphasis on external enemies – the English, Indians, Satan, and, of course, witches – than the sins of the Puritans themselves (p. 295). Most important to her analysis, however, is that covenant renewal rhetoric can create an epideictic space of continuity and unification. According to Bostdorff (2003), covenant renewal rhetoric helped to ease the harsher language of the jeremiad and create a space in which the second and third generations could receive the covenantal promise and, thus, carry it on to future generations (p. 295).²⁴ Applying this concept to a modern-day case, Bostdorff argues that President George W. Bush used covenantal rhetoric to rally and unify the nation after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and elsewhere. Specifically, she demonstrates how Bush brought people together in an epideictic occasion by urging younger Americans to uphold the covenant of their elders, many of whom were veterans, and stand together against their common terrorist enemy.

Covenantal rhetoric, as described, fits most appropriately in the epideictic genre of speech because speakers use the occasion to engage the people of the United States in

²⁴ Covenant renewal rhetoric was particularly important to second- and third-generation Puritans on whom first-generation fathers were hesitant to bestow their power (Miller, 1953; Elliott, 1975; Jones, 1973). Owing to a combination of their desire to hold onto power and that they believed that the divine order had been completed and that “[a]ny further discovery would surpass the possibilities of earth and commence the reign of eternity” (Miller, 1954, p. 471), first-generation fathers were eager to use jeremiads to warn their sons of their own declension (Miller, 1953).

a narrative of exceptionalism. According to Aristotle, unlike forensic speeches that judge past events, and deliberative speeches that are concerned with making decisions about the future, epideictic speeches are situated in the present and assign blame or, as in this case, praise (Aristotle, p. 48, 1358b). Covenantal rhetoric seems to be at its best when it fulfills the components of what Condit (1985) calls the “paradigmatic” epideictic act: the speaker defines while the audience is brought to a common understanding and communal definition, the speaker creates a space in which the audience can share, and the speaker creates a display through which the audience can be entertained. Condit states that “through public speaking and hearing of the community heritage and identity” (p. 289) a “community is created, experienced and performed” (p. 291).

Perhaps more than any other modern president, Reagan, the storyteller, felt at home with this type of epideictic discourse in which he could celebrate with the people, bolster the nation’s values, and constitute the people under the banner of American Exceptionalism (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008; Murphy, 2003; Johannesen, 1986; Lewis, 1987; Kiewe and Houck, 1989; Bormann, 2001). In what follows, I illustrate how Reagan allowed the people of the United States to find the pathway to economic recovery through epideictic discourse infused with covenantal thought. Although stemming from the previously outlined work, this analysis departs from it in several significant ways. First, it deals with Reagan’s presidential rhetoric in relation to the economy rather than his post-presidential rhetoric or presidential war rhetoric. Second, not only did Reagan’s discourse reflect the covenant renewal rhetoric or covenant-affirming jeremiads used by the Puritans, he explicitly connected the people of the United States to their Puritan heritage

and gave them the responsibility to act as carriers of the Puritan tradition in their economic beliefs and activities in his re-articulation of a national covenant. Moreover, rather than promote government policies and works, Reagan used covenantal form to promote freedom from government and to create an epideictic occasion and space in which the people of the United States could perform their faith in the covenantal promise. In doing so, Reagan's discourse resembled even more profound intricacies within the Puritans' "complex machinery of interlocking covenants" (Miller, 1953, p. 252; see also Noll, 2002, p. 42), particularly the Puritans' desire to emphasize the covenant of grace over the covenant of works, an idea I develop later. Finally, this analysis appreciates and explores a type of covenantal epideictic rhetoric that focuses less on an optimistic style and communal bond and more on the epideictic occasion as an individual's experience of faith and presence in the moment.

According to Reagan, a spiritual renewal was needed so the people would believe in their capacity to do great things again. Reagan argued that the people of the United States held the key to achieving all of these things: "We need only to believe in each other and in the God who has so blessed our land" (January 26, 1984). Specifically, Reagan's call for the people to believe in each other as a people predestined for greatness reflected the Puritans' commitment to a national covenant while his call for the people to believe in God reflects the Puritans' commitment to the covenant of grace. In what follows, I first show that Reagan re-appropriated and reminded the people of the United States of the covenant that they had entered into as descendants of their Puritan forefathers. Next, I demonstrate how Reagan depicted the government and its "works" as

the obstacle standing in the way of the people's ability to fulfill their covenantal obligations through "grace" and covenantal performance. Third, I examine how Reagan instructed the people to fulfill their covenantal obligations by believing in themselves and embracing their freedom.

Reuniting the People of the United States with their "Chosen" Status and their "Destiny"

In order to place the people of the United States in a moral environment in which they could better remember and renew their covenantal obligations, Reagan dedicated much of the discourse throughout his presidency to reconnecting the people of the United States to the covenantal bonds entered into by their forefathers hundreds of years ago, specifically Massachusetts Governor and the first Puritan Leader in New England John Winthrop. In his Presidential Announcement Speech, Reagan stated, "We who are privileged to be Americans have had a rendezvous with destiny since the moment in 1630 when John Winthrop, standing on the deck of the tiny *Arabella* [*sic*] off the coast of Massachusetts, told the little band of pilgrims [*sic*],²⁵ "We shall be as a city upon a hill" (November 13, 1979). Reagan constantly reinforced this idea of the United States being a "city on a hill"²⁶ and reminded the people of the United States of their chosen status. At a rally in 1984, he stated, "We are a nation under God."²⁷ I've always believed that this

²⁵ Reagan inaccurately labels the Puritans as "pilgrims." The Pilgrims came to the United States on the Mayflower in 1620 and settled in Plymouth.

²⁶ November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech; August 23, 1984, Presidential Acceptance Speech; January 25, 1988, State of the Union; January 11, 1989, Farewell Address.

²⁷ President Dwight D. Eisenhower responded favorably to efforts to include the phrase "under God" into the pledge of allegiance in 1954. Representative Charles Oakman (R-Mich.), introduced a bill to add the phrase and, after Congress passed the legislation, Eisenhower used Flag Day to sign the bill into law on June 14, 1954. Although this phrase has been controversial since because of its alleged violation of the

blessed land was set apart in a special way.” Not only was the nation special, but the people whom God called on to found it possessed a “special love for freedom and courage” (January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta Georgia) and were a “special kind of people” (September 17, 1987, Remarks at the “We the People” Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

Reagan created a connection between the people whom God first elected to fulfill the promise of “America” in the beginning and the current citizens of the United States. For example, in his 1984 State of the Union Address, he stated, “America was founded by people who believed that God was their rock of safety. He is ours” (January 25, 1984). Using God as the common denominator enabled Reagan to gently remind the people that just as God saw the Puritans through their times of trouble, so, too, would He provide a foundation on which the people of the United States could find the strength to combat current economic obstacles and fulfill the national covenant. Reagan’s attitude, thus, was reminiscent of third-generation Puritan preacher Cotton Mather’s “unshakable [...] conviction that God’s people in America were destined for glory on earth and in heaven” (Elliott, 1975, 186). Accordingly, Reagan reminded the people that they, like the Puritans, have already been predestined by God. They must only embrace this “rendezvous with destiny.”²⁸ As Jones and Rowland (2005) state, Reagan believed that

freedom of religion clause of the First Amendment, Reagan remained a steadfast supporter of keeping the phrase in the pledge and also keeping “God” in schools.

²⁸ October 27, 1964, *A Time for Choosing*; November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech; July 17, 1980, Presidential Acceptance Speech; April 24, 1985, Address to the Nation on Federal Budget and Deficit Reduction. This phrase was initially used by Franklin Delano Roosevelt on June 27, 1936, in his Acceptance Speech at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He stated, “There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny.” He then asked them to

the people “need not return to the covenant because in his view [they] had never strayed from it” (p. 161). Accordingly, rather than call for the people to create something new or change course, Reagan called for a renewal of that which had already been established and was innate in the people of the United States. In his Presidential Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention on July 17, 1980, he stated: “The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands,” and “Tonight, let us dedicate ourselves to renewing the American compact.”

Reagan, thus, used the Puritan founding of the nation to set up a narrative of American Exceptionalism that the people of the United States were to continue to uphold in order to fulfill God’s destiny and their covenantal obligations to God, to themselves, and to their Puritan and Constitutional forefathers.²⁹ Reagan heralded the founders of the nation’s Constitution and independence for renewing the nation’s special mission and carrying Puritan ideals into the present. Reagan even explicitly used the word “covenant” to situate the people in their obligations. In his remarks at the “We the People” Bicentennial Celebration, Reagan said,

One scholar described our Constitution as a kind of covenant. It is a covenant we’ve made not only with ourselves but with all of mankind. As John Quincy Adams promised, “Whenever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will be America’s heart, her benedictions and her prayers.” It’s a human covenant; yes, and beyond that, a covenant with a Supreme

join with him in the “war against want and destitution and economic demoralization” and the “war for the survival of democracy.”

²⁹ Note that even though Reagan pulls from covenantal ideas in his creation of a feeling of “American Exceptionalism,” this idea was foreign to the Puritans. Again, their “national covenant” (Miller, 1953) was more communal than national in scope.

Being to whom our Founding Fathers did constantly appeal for assistance.

(September 17, 1987, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

In perhaps his most explicit statement about covenant, Reagan defined the Constitution as less a written document of formal rules and more of a symbol of the living obligation the people of the United States have to themselves, to one another, and to God who has given them the assistance they needed. Thus, the constitutional founders act as a link by which the obligation of exceptionalism is passed from the Puritans to modern people. Reagan argued that “America’s foremost duty” will always be “to constantly renew that covenant with humanity, with a world yearning to breathe free; to complete the work begun 200 years ago, that grand, noble work that is America’s particular calling – the triumph of human freedom, the triumph of human freedom under God” (September 17, 1987, Remarks at the “We the People” Bicentennial Celebration in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

Specifically, Reagan used rehearsal of the promise of this covenant and their exceptional status to assure the people of the United States that economic recovery was certain. In his First Inaugural Address, he stated,

The economic ills we suffer have come upon us over several decades. They will not go away in days, weeks, or months, but they will go away. They will go away because we as Americans have the capacity now, as we’ve had in the past, to do whatever needs to be done to preserve this last and greatest bastion of freedom.

(January 20, 1981)

According to Reagan, the people of the United States had supplied the values that upheld “an economic system that for more than 200 years has helped us master a continent,

create a previously undreamed of prosperity for our people and has fed millions of others around the globe” (July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech). Here Reagan, once again, tied economic recovery back to the obligations of the constitutional founders of the United States, and by extension, to the Puritan founders of New England, to protect and nourish the national covenant.

Moving Beyond a National Covenant: An Epideictic Space of Grace

Although a national covenant represented a more external commitment for the Puritans, it was deeply embedded within the more doctrinal notion of the covenant of grace as part of the Puritan’s “series of covenants” (Miller, 1956, p. 61). The Puritans believed that a “saving remnant” of Puritans carried the covenant for the rest of the congregation and connected all Puritans in a national covenant to their more intimate relationship to God in the covenant of grace (Miller, 1953). Similarly, although the national covenant was important, Reagan seemed to understand that communities were made up of individuals who had to be reached as well. Reagan used epideictic occasions as a way to reaffirm citizens’ spiritual selves and core covenantal values. This more personal aspect of epideictic rhetoric is often overlooked because of its more recognized communal nature, as in in the previously described work done on covenant renewal rhetoric (Bostdorff, 2003; Rowland and Jones, 2005; Ritter and Henry, 1992). Rather than undermine the community-building quality of the epideictic occasion, exploring it as an individualized experience as well reveals how a person can ready themselves to be part of a community by first understanding themselves and their own experience better. Rosenfield (1980) states, “Epideictic, therefore, acts to unshroud men’s notable needs in

order to let us gaze at the aura glowing from within” (p. 135). According to Rosenfield, the epideictic occasion allows a person to embrace not what one desires, but to embrace what one is and then accept it (Rosenfield, 1980, p. 142). He states, “To appreciate a thing for itself necessitates that we have the generosity to let it be, and in so doing we renounce domination or possession of it” (Rosenfield, 1980, p. 142). In other words, people need to open themselves up to the experience of accepting and appreciating rather than demanding certainty.

Interpreted this way, the epideictic experience resembles the idea of the Puritan’s covenant of grace. In the covenant of grace, God grants his followers a gift that asks for nothing in return: “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3: 24, *Holy Bible*, King James Version). The covenant of grace referred to the new covenant that God first created with Abraham (Genesis 17) in which He demanded not deeds but a simple faith in Christ through the covenant of grace as a way for humans to fulfill their obligation to Him (Elazar, 1996, p. 174; Miller, 1956, p. 61) which was renewed by the atonement of Jesus Christ. For the Puritans, however, to be in God’s grace meant that a person had experienced regeneration and had been converted by God from historical faith to “saving faith”: “the free gift of God to a chosen few unattainable by human instruction” (Morgan, 1963, p. 45). The Puritans’ belief in the doctrine of predestination, however, held that God determined whether individual Puritans would be saved or not before they were born, and there was nothing people could do to change their fate. This resulted in the Puritans having extreme anxiety in their daily life over the uncertainty of their future.

Accordingly, the epideictic occasion in which the Puritans renewed their covenantal obligations was also significant because of its focus on the present. Instead of being preoccupied with sins they had committed in the past or whether they would fall to doom in the future, during worship the Puritans could find solace in the present. Moreover, even if they did not know whether they were among God's chosen, they could at least prepare in case they were selected and forge a personal relationship with Him. The element of time as a characteristic of epideictic speeches often is not given due attention. Modern rhetoricians have found fault with what they perceive as Aristotle's privileging of the deliberative and forensic genres over the epideictic and the devaluing of the role of an audience's immediate participation in epideictic speeches (Condit, 1985; Rosenfield, 1980; Murphy 2003). Although Aristotle argues that epideictic rhetoric does the job of "both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future" (Kennedy, p. 48, 1358b), modern rhetoricians object to the notion that it "do[es] not call for any immediate response by the audience" (Kennedy, Introduction, p. 7). Instead, the preferred interpretation of epideictic rhetoric puts the audience front and center and makes them active in the moment. Condit (1985) argues that although the audience might not make judgments in the same way they are called upon to do in deliberative or judicial rhetoric, the way the audience learns about others and themselves in epideictic speeches has a function that is equally as important.³⁰

This focus on the moment was an important rhetorical tactic used by Puritan ministers and by Reagan to remind their respective audiences of their mission. In his

³⁰ See Oravec (1976) for more detail on how she describes the epideictic occasions as a means by which a person "learns about the world" (Condit, 1985, p. 287).

analysis of Puritan minister Samuel Danforth's sermon "Errand into the Wilderness" (1670), Browne (1992) describes how discourse can encourage more active participation by individuals. He demonstrates that the style, the provision of audience enactment, and the way in which Danforth used rhetorical questions invited listeners to become active participants in the dialectical conversation created by the sermon (Browne, 1992). Specifically, Browne (1992) argues that Danforth used his speech "to return to consciousness the experience of arrival" in New England during times of high anxiety and turmoil (p. 95), where "arrival is neither a state nor a past fact, but a possibility set in place, attainable only so long as the faith which made that placement possible is sustained" (p. 95). Similarly, by using epideictic rhetoric more than any other genre, Reagan created a comfortable and stable space in which the people were free from external distractions and economic conditions and, thus, could focus their energy on the celebration of the moment. Reagan created those occasions frequently, making it seem as if the economy were under control, recovery was in the people's hands, and there was no need for the government to intrude with unnecessary works or policy. As Goodnight (2002) states, Reagan's presentation of the economic American Dream "succeed[ed] because the Dream release[d] family members from pain of loss caused by the economic displacements, change, and scattering over which there could be scant control" (p. 209).

The Covenant of Works

The covenant of works also was part of the Puritans' "complex machinery of interlocking covenants" (Miller, 1953, p. 252). Although a national covenant tended to stem from the covenant of grace, the covenant of works existed in an antagonistic

relationship to it if it was not based on the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace generally took precedence over the covenant of works, which referred to human actions done to exhibit dedication to God and belief in His calling. Although it offered an incentive for Puritans to follow God's law, the futility of the fulfillment of works, as evidenced by Adam's and Eve's inability to obey God, proved that the covenant of grace was superior. The covenant of grace is a "contract of mutual obligation, but this time the condition for the moral partner is not a deed but a faith" (Miller, 1954, p. 377). Miller (1954) states that according to God, "In a covenant of works, a man [*sic*] is left to himself, to stand by his own strength; but in the Covenant of grace, God undertakes for us, to keep us through faith" (p. 377). Again, this is similar to the way that Rosenfield (1980) posits that deliberation or argumentation interferes with an epideictic experience. He states,

Wonder is almost antithetical to the calculation needed for argumentation. [...]
From the view of Being, this speech act is a reminder that we owe a debt for the very fact of human being on this earth, an affirmation that our lives are not completely immersed in devising crass means to achieve selfish ends, that there is a quality in human affairs that manages to illuminate our lives in even the darkest times, if only we are prepared to see it. (p. 138)

Unlike a deliberative occasion, in which a specific course of action must be explicitly set out, the epideictic occasion focuses on a feeling. Similarly, the Puritans sought to capture the idea of "Being" or "Wonder" not through works but through a feeling of grace. It was, in fact, the Church of England's preoccupation with hierarchy, rules, relics, and

external acts that was an impetus for the Puritan migration to the new world. John Cotton, one of the most well-known first-generation Puritan ministers, urged more men to come to New England to enjoy the freedom of God's grace and was, subsequently, a staunch advocate of open church membership (Elliott, 1975). In his sermon *The Covenant of God's Free Grace*, he stated, "God accepts at our hands a willing mind, and of child-like endeavors; if we come with child-like service, God will spare us; a father will accept the poor endeavors of the child for the thing itself" (p. 15). Accordingly, the Puritans were encouraged to break free from earthly constraints and return to a state of grace with God.

Reagan offered the people of the United States a similar opportunity. He suggested that they could return to a state of grace by eliminating unnecessary governmental works and deliberation. Just as the Massachusetts Bay Charter became the visible symbol of the Puritan's covenant with God in the new world, Reagan suggested that a vibrant economy, or an "economy of grace," could only stem from the people's renewal or restoration of faith in God and His promise to them. Thus, although he used covenant renewal rhetoric, Reagan pushed beyond the national covenant and more deeply into the covenant of grace and works. Beyond telling them a story about how they had been entered into the national covenant by their forbears, Reagan created their own story and offered them a pathway by which they could have faith and, thus, fulfill the covenant of grace. According, Reagan created a "rhetorical narrative" as defined by Lucaites and Condit (1985): He understood that "the successful completion of a rhetorical enactment

requires more than a simple, textual construction. Rather, it must encourage, and indeed enlist, the audience's active participation" (p. 100).

A Government of "Works" without "Grace"

In order to embrace the covenant of grace and fulfill the national covenant, however, the people of the United States had to reject the notion that the government could solve their economic problems and join with Reagan in rejecting government interference. Whereas Reagan contended that the Carter Administration viewed the people as the cause of the economic crisis and government works and money as the solution, Reagan transposed this relationship. He explicitly stated, "The people have not created this disaster in our economy, the federal government has" (November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech). Reagan assured the people that he would see to it that they "should not suffer the further indignity of being told by the Government that it is all somehow their fault" (July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech). Accordingly, Reagan called upon the people to protect an economic system that had been built on a covenantal foundation from a government which had "ignor[ed] the basic values on which it was built and [betrayed] the trust and good will of the American workers who ke[pt] it going" (July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech).

Reagan placed the blame directly on the government for interfering in the national economy with its unnecessary deliberation, works, and money. He stated,

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has

become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. (January 20, 1981)

Reagan criticized the government's tendency to deliberate nonsensically about complex formulas and policies that promised to systemically fix economic problems without taking into consideration the people of the United States. In his Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention, he argued that President Carter was hiding from the current economic realities and making decisions reactively based on arbitrary numbers and "abstract economic theory" (July 17, 1980). Moreover, Reagan argued that Carter and his administration talked above the people of the United States by "blam[ing] their failures on circumstances beyond their control, on false estimates by unknown, unidentifiable experts" (November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech).

Yet Reagan did not just chastise the Carter Administration for being unable to solve the economic crisis; he pinpointed government actions as the cause of the economic problems. Reagan stated that the Carter Administration had "cooked up" an "indigestible economic stew, one part inflation, one part high unemployment, one part recession, one part runaway taxes, one party deficit spending and seasoned by an energy crisis. It's an economic stew that has turned the national stomach" (July 17, 1980: Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech). By using the verbs "created" and "cooked up," Reagan implied that the Carter administration had played an active role in producing the situation; it had made the decisions to put the wrong ingredients into the economy and, as a result, the people of the United States had a bad taste in their mouths and an ill feeling in their stomachs. Government deliberation, according to Reagan, even represented

malicious intent regarding the economy: “Inflation was not some plague borne out of the wind; it was a deliberate part of the official economic policy, needed, they said, to maintain prosperity” (August 23, 1984, Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas).

Moreover, according to Reagan, the way that the government handled money in conducting its “works” was another cause of the nation’s economic woes. Reflecting on the recession in the early 1980s, Reagan argued that “inflation and high interest rates were caused by government living too well” (October 1, 1984, Remarks at a Question-and-Answer Session at the Economic Club of Detroit Michigan). Near the end of his second term, in his final State of the Union, Reagan reminded the people of a theme he has attempted to promulgate throughout his presidency: “As I indicated in my first State of the Union, what ails us can be simply put: The Federal Government is too big, and it spends too much money” (January 25, 1988). In his First State of the Union, Reagan had criticized a government whose response to the recession was “to pump up the money supply and increase spending” (January 26, 1982). Not only did Reagan suggest that the government was handling money in the wrong way, he indicated that money itself was the problem rather than the solution to the nation’s problems. Reagan stated, “But I just don’t believe the people can be bought with promises anymore that have to be paid for out of the Treasury” (January 26, 1984, Remarks at the Southern Republican Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia).

Ultimately, Reagan suggested that the Carter Administration’s handling of the economic crisis was not only politically damaging but immoral as well. In criticizing the

government for relying on government works and deliberation rather than the people as the solution to economic ills, Reagan reflected the Puritans' concern that a "covenant of grace" be privileged over a "covenant of works" because "[n]o man can any longer be saved by fulfilling the law, even should he be capable of it, for the Covenant of Works is not now in force between God and man, and God is not bound to it" (Miller, 1954, p. 384). According to Puritan belief, if works were done, they should always be done in the name of grace, which was something that could only be generated between humans and God, unencumbered by any institutional demand or imposition. Elazar (1996) states, "The essence of Puritan covenantalism was individual moral reformation more than institutional restructuring, with the latter necessary in their eyes only insofar as it was the key to the former" (p. 233). Accordingly, Reagan stated,

The Congress can give us [policy] tools, but to make these tools work, it really comes down to just being our best. And that is the core of American greatness.

The responsibility of freedom presses us towards higher knowledge and, I believe, moral and spiritual greatness. (January 27, 1987, State of the Union)

Just as the Puritans knew that works would not earn them God's favor, Reagan's economic plans rested not on governmental policies but on the people's faith in themselves, in each other, and, ultimately, in God's grace.

According to Reagan, then, the government had taken away the people's freedom to solve the economic crisis by reaching within themselves and being committed to their covenantal obligations – to each other as a nation and to God as their protector. Reagan recognized this connection: "It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are

proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government” (January 20, 1981, First Inaugural Address).

Ultimately, then, the government took away the people’s ability to believe in their exceptional status, fulfill their destiny, and receive grace. As Reagan first laid out in his *A Time for Choosing* speech, “A government can’t control the economy without controlling the people” (October 27, 1964). Therefore, when government did attempt to control the economy, it violated the divine plan that Reagan laid out:

We are a nation under God. I’ve always believed that this blessed land was set apart in a special way, that some divine plan placed this great continent here between the oceans to be found by people from every corner of the Earth who had a special love for freedom and courage to uproot themselves, leave homeland and friends, to come to a strange land. And coming here they created something new in all the history of mankind – a land where man is not beholden to government, government is beholden to man. (January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta Georgia)

Thus, by reversing the divinely-inspired moral order, the government, according to Reagan, was threatening and undermining the people’s faith in God and His grace. In his speech at the first Conservative Political Action Conference in 1974, Governor Reagan told his audience that their Constitutional freedoms were given to them “by the grace of God, and no government on earth can take them from you” (January 25).

The Creation of an Epideictic Space of Freedom and “Grace”

Accordingly, since the people of the United States could not fulfill their covenantal obligations if government was allowed to intervene in their lives, it was a moral imperative for the people to accept God’s grace and to get government out of the way. According to Reagan, government was needed only when the people did not trust God in the covenant of grace or did not believe in the nation’s destiny as promised by God and carried on by the people of the United States in the national covenant. Reagan’s call for the people of the United States to reject intermediary agents and works in their pursuit of spiritual and economic recovery resembled the Puritans’ spiritual and physical retreat from the Church of England, which they believed still to be too heavily influenced by Catholic papal authority, rituals, and hierarchy. Puritans believed that it was up to each person to save their individual soul on their own, without the interference of priests or family (Peacock, 2000, p. 202). In John Cotton’s sermon *God’s Promise to His Plantations* (1630), he states,

When a man’s calling and person are free and not tyed by parents, or magistrates, or other people that have an interest in him [God] opens a doore there and sets him loose there, inclines his heart that way, and outlooks all difficulties [...] [I]n such a case God tells them, he will appoint a place for them” (p. 13)

For the Puritans, “the relationship between the God persona and the human character was direct and required no intermediary. Indeed, the Puritan preacher portrayed the Catholic dramas with their priests and the pope interceding with God for man as among the most villainous aspects of the vision” (Bormann, 2001, p. 40). This was the beginning of what

Baptists later would call the “priesthood of all believers.” It gave believers the freedom as well as the responsibility to forge a personal relationship with God and exhibit their faith.

Reagan acknowledged and bolstered this idea that faith must be facilitated by freedom: “The responsibility of freedom presses us towards higher knowledge and, I believe, moral and spiritual greatness” (January 27, 1987, State of the Union). According to Reagan, faith and freedom went hand-in-hand: “We cannot break faith with freedom anywhere. This is our heritage and our moral obligation” (January 25, 1985, Remarks at the 1985 Reagan Administration Executive Forum). Moreover, Reagan continually linked economic recovery to the people’s personal recovery that rested on faith and freedom. In his 1985 State of the Union Address, Reagan again attributed a stronger economy to these spiritual values: “Tonight America is stronger because of the values that we hold dear. We believe faith and freedom must be our guiding stars, for they show us truth, they make us brave, give us hope, and leave us wiser than we were” (February 6). Accordingly, Reagan’s call for limited government was legitimated by this association between freedom and faith. He stated, “Through lower taxes and smaller government, government has its ways of freeing people’s spirits. But only we, each of us, can let the spirit soar against our own individual standards. Excellence is what makes freedom ring. And isn’t that what we do best?” (January 27, 1987, State of the Union). Similarly, when speaking about the economic improvements that had taken place since he took office, Reagan stated that the “American dream isn’t one of making government bigger, it’s keeping faith with the mighty spirit of a free people under God” (January 25, 1984, State

of the Union). Ultimately, then, Reagan made faith and freedom a sacred pairing that had to be protected from unnecessary governmental interference.

Yet instead of simply telling the people to resist government intervention, the way in which Reagan presented his message allowed the people of the United States to embrace their freedom and feel part of the economic solution. He asked them to prepare themselves and be open to receiving spiritual renewal, which, subsequently, would result in economic renewal. Although Reagan identified the government as the problem and the people of the United States and their God as the solution to the economic crisis of the 1980s, the epideictic nature of his discourse allowed the people of the United States to find faith in themselves and God and, thus, fulfill their commitment to the covenant of grace and a national covenant. In other words, they could enact their destiny while listening to him. In a way, Reagan offered the people a space for “regeneration.” Reagan’s focus on epideictic discourse not only allowed the people to celebrate their heritage and freedom, but what Condit, referring to Rosenfield’s (1980) work, calls a “religious level of experience” (p. 287). Unlike the government, Reagan believed in divinely-inspired freedom and faith and provided the people of the United States with occasions to enact it in his discourse. Rosenfield (1980) states, “In sum the celebration that is called for by the epideictic encounter is understanding, the mental activity of free men” (p. 149). In this sense, Reagan’s “epideictic auditor[s are] not asked for a judgment of the present state of the matters, but to be a *theoros* (“witness”) to that radiance emerging from the event itself” (Rosenfield, 1980, p. 140). Moreover, within this space,

the people of the United States were urged to feel exceptional and embrace their status as members of a chosen nation.

Hence, rather than telling the people of the United States that he was going to solve problems through governmental policies and mandates or arrive at solutions through deliberation, Reagan urged them to feel, believe, and have faith. He called on the people of the United States to join with him and reinvigorate “our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God’s help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us (January 20, 1981, First Inaugural Address). Reagan’s ability to make the people feel as if their core values of faith and freedom were being acknowledged and, even more, celebrated in the moment contrasted sharply with his depiction of how the government was defining the issue. Reagan states, “What is real is values. Not artificial numbers. It’s almost as if the economic crisis isn’t real – it’s just that we have been told it is” (July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech). Unlike the government, which diagnosed the causes and solutions of the economic crisis and then talked *at* the people, Reagan did not “tell” the people anything; he shared with them the God-given freedom to enact their commitment to the covenant of grace. Instead of infringing on their sacred duty to fulfill their covenant as did the government, Reagan granted the people the freedom to fulfill their covenantal obligations. In doing so, he demonstrated his understanding that covenants are designed “to allow humans to decide for themselves by which covenants they are bound, which obligations they take upon themselves, and hence, what rights are available to them” (Elazar, 1998, IV, p. 380).

The Interpretive Nature of Covenantal Form

Yet covenantal arrangements also allow for human agency and freedom, and it is essential to remember that covenantal freedom and rights are considered “God-given.” In other words, God still has ultimate sovereignty over covenantal relationships and obligations. Elazar (1998, III) states that “covenantal liberty is not simply the right to do as one pleases, within broad boundaries. Contractual liberty could be just that but covenantal liberty emphasizes the liberty to pursue the moral purposes for which the covenant was made” (p. 43). Thus, freedom was associated with the fulfillment of divine order. Looked at this way, covenantal freedom entailed a great deal of responsibility. As Niebuhr (1969) states, “For in the covenant conception the essence of freedom does not lie in the liberty of choice among goods, but in the ability to commit oneself for the future to a cause and in the terrible liberty of being able to become a breaker of the promise, a traitor to the cause” (p. 223). In the same way, Reagan’s continual references to “freedom” should not be read as the endorsement of chaos and reckless, self-interested behavior. Rather, the type of freedom Reagan defined was the freedom to fulfill God’s plan rather than have their freedom infringed upon by the government. On June 7, 1982, Reagan stated, “Liberty has never meant license to Americans. We treasure it precisely because it protects the human and spiritual values that we hold most dear [...]. These are God-given freedoms, not the contrivances of man” (Remarks Following a Meeting with Pope John Paul II in Vatican City).

For the Puritans, embracing covenantal liberty also meant obeying their magistrates whose authority was believed to be from God. In his famous speech *On*

Liberty, John Winthrop (1645) boldly stated that “liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority; it is of the same kind of liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.” He also contended that since the Puritans had called their leaders to office, the lay people had consented to this moral and political covenantal relationship.

Accordingly, magistrates’ or ministers’ interpretation of God’s word became synonymous with God’s word. Winthrop (1645) stated, “The covenant between you and us is the oath you have taken of us, which is to this purpose: that we shall govern you and judge your causes by the rules of God’s laws and our own, according to our best skill.” Ironically, then, Puritan leaders meddled in the people’s personal relationship with God at the same time they criticized the Catholic Church for the intermediary role that priests played between God and the people. Moreover, they used covenant as a weapon of control and “ascendancy” (Miller, 1954, p. 112) to legitimate and moralize their behavior.

According, much as the Puritan’s suspicion of Roman Catholic clerical authority came to be replaced not by God’s direct word but by His message as interpreted and applied by Puritan ministers, the “God-given freedom” Reagan touted became “freedom” as defined by Reagan. Reagan’s definition of freedom entered his listeners into the same type of dependency that he had warned against. The “freedom” that Reagan offered to the people in covenantal celebration was defined in a way that facilitated their acquiescence to his interpretation of God’s plan, which conveniently legitimated his call for limited government while allowing him to exert his own power as the leader of the national government. Like the Puritan leaders before him, then, Reagan used covenantal form as a tool of authority.

The celebrative nature of Reagan's discourse perpetuated an environment in which the people could more easily accept his message without question or judgment. Murphy (2003) states, "Epideictic rhetoric, then, shapes the world and provides the backdrop of values and beliefs, heroes and villains, triumphs or tragedies against which and through which deliberative and forensic judgments are made in a ceaseless swirl of discourse" (p. 610). In other words, although deliberation and judgment are being made by the participants in an epideictic act, they become obscured by the "ceaseless swirl of discourse." So it was with the people of the United States when they were celebrating with Reagan. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2006) suggest, epideictic messages prepare the foundation of common values on which forensic and deliberative speeches rest (pp. 52-53). Hence, at the same time Reagan uses covenantal form to transcend the economic crisis and promise the people that they have the freedom to make their own decisions, the covenantal relationships and obligations he defines nourish a platform of acceptance for his administration's economic policies whether the people directly endorse them or not. People often privilege their moral identities and values instead of their economic interests (Hazen, 2004, xi), and Lakoff (2004) argues that this apparent inconsistency is nourished by moral framing. Reagan not only offered the people of the United States a moral covenantal framework by which to view the economic disaster but the epideictic occasions to actually "live" within and "experience" this framework as well.

In doing so, he demonstrated that moral or "spiritual" framing through the use of covenantal form can be used to transcend economic matters while economic decisions are

being made by political leaders. Paradoxically, at the same time that Reagan used his discourse to elevate the covenantal values, relationships, and obligations of the people of the United States over governmental policy and “works,” he *was* the government and conducted “works” and made decisions about the allocation of material resources. This is an example of what Piven and Cloward (1982) call the political organization of “particular and elaborate arrangements that concealed the alliance of state and property while simultaneously creating a concrete and visible arena of politics in which democratic rights mattered” (p. 81). They add, “The doctrine of separation [of the government and the economy] was an ideology in the old-fashioned sense of that term – in the sense of ideas that conceal rather than reveal social reality” (Piven and Cloward, 1982, p. 78).

With the dissemination of his covenantal economic vision in the 1980s, Reagan demonstrated one of the problems of presidential rhetoric: it allows presidents “to overpromise and cause disillusion” (Goodnight, 2002, p. 220). Referring to the economic recovery under Reagan, Troy (2008) states, “And yet, the restoration may have been more symbolic than actual. Serious social crises remained unsolved. The Reagan boom did not eliminate poverty, racism, crime, family breakdown, urban deterioration, and a mass epidemic of individual psychic distress” (Troy, 2008, pp. 241-242). Thus, although Reagan restored optimism to the people of the United States and encouraged them to believe in themselves, he enveloped them in a type of false reality and security. This false sense of security and hope was further perpetuated by the epideictic nature of Reagan’s discourse which was iconic of his message of celebration and faith (Leff and Sachs,

1990; Leff, 1992). Reagan, the “Great Communicator,” was a master of creating occasions on which the people of the United States felt the only answer was to join Reagan in his “rendezvous with destiny.”

Reagan never pretended that having the faith to embrace freedom and embark on a simultaneous economic and spiritual renewal would be easy. To do so would be to undermine the urgency and significance of his message, covenantal obligations, and the epideictic occasion (Rosenfield, 1980, p. 140). In Reagan’s *A Time for Choosing* speech on October 27, 1964, in which he established the values he would continue to espouse throughout his political career, he stated: “They say we offer simple solutions to complex problems. Well, perhaps there is a simple answer – not an easy answer – but simple.”

Reagan, however, acknowledged that maintaining one’s moral obligation and commitment to others and to God was perhaps more difficult than relying on the government because you have to reach further within; sometimes having faith in God’s grace and the national promise is harder than enacting works. According to Reagan, although policies might be the easier and more complex answer, they are not the simple, right, and moral answer. Ultimately, however, the answer was simple because it had already been established for them in the covenant (Jones and Rowland, 2005), so all the people had to do was embrace it on the numerous occasions that he provided them.

Ultimately, with the assurance of God’s grace and each other in a national covenant, Reagan equipped the people of the United States to face the economic crisis. At the same time, Reagan attributed the economic problems to the government’s failure to adhere to covenantal values. He called on the people of the United States to fulfill their

covenantal obligations to God and each other by rejecting government intervention.

Ironically, in doing so, Reagan made the endorsement of his economic plans a byproduct of the people's belief in themselves and God.

When Reagan left office, he took great pride in the fact that the "city on a hill" had been renewed and the people had stood up to the government's attempt to destroy their freedom to join with one another in the national covenant and join with God in the covenant of grace. In his farewell address on January 11, 1989, he applauded the people for fulfilling their covenantal obligations:

And how stands the city [on a hill] on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.

We've done our part. And as I walk off into the city streets, a final word to the men and women of the Reagan Revolution, the men and women across America who for 8 years did the work that brought America back. My friends: We did it. We weren't just marking time. We made a difference. We made the city stronger; we made the city freer; and we left her in good hands.

Thus, for one last time, Reagan reminded the people of the great gift of freedom and gave them the opportunity to celebrate it.

Chapter 3

Reagan's Covenantal Market Space: A Bastion for Trickle-Down Economics

The optimism that Ronald Reagan brought to the nation during his presidency was not only consummatory; it also helped to release the necessary energy for a free market system to excel, which Reagan argued was vital to a vibrant United States economy. In a question and answer session at the Economic Club of Detroit, Michigan, on October 1, 1984, Reagan stated, “This new spirit is not only rewarding in its own right; it, too, helps the economy, helps our productivity.” Reagan informed the people of the United States that their newfound “spirit” and faith in their covenantal bonds rested on their participation in the free market and their support of the free market policies he advocated during his eight-year presidency. Reagan argued that reducing taxes and removing government barriers to a free flow of money and economic activity would ensure a prosperous nation. On February 22, 1983, Reagan attributed the “national reawakening” that was taking place to a steadfast belief in the free market system:

It's a realistic belief in the relative and proven success of the American experiment. What we see in America today, in spite of the many economic hardships we're facing, is a renewed faith in the rightness of our [free] system. That system has never failed us. We have failed the system every time we forgot the fundamental principles upon which it was based. (Remarks at the Annual Washington Conference of the American Legion)

In this chapter, I explore how Reagan ties these “fundamental principles” to covenantal values that motivated the economic and spiritual ambitions of one of the nation's first

settling immigrant groups: the Puritans who came to the United States in 1630. In doing so, he reached far back into history to the nation's first economic experiment.

Karier (1997) describes Reagan's economic policies in the 1980s as a series of "experiments" with hypotheses, predictions, and findings. He argues that experiments are necessary because "the current state of knowledge about economic affairs is simply inadequate" owing to unpredictable business cycles and other unexplainable factors (pp. 4-5). In contrast, I argue that Reagan used covenantal form to depict his economic policies as an inherent part of a grand experiment that had been and always would be the first and best option for the people of the United States. Moreover, his economic plan was less about an attempt to control and make predictions about the economy and more about embracing the uncertainty within it.

The reason this uncertainty was productive was because it rested on a foundation of faith that Reagan nourished in his discourse. He argued that the system ultimately would protect and succeed for the people of the United States because it allowed the people and God to fulfill their covenantal obligations to one another. Reagan, thus, created a space, what I call a covenantal market space, in which the people of the United States could exhibit their faith and show their commitment to God through economic works just as the Puritans had. The people's faith, in turn, created the necessary energy for market activity that continued despite hardships. Reagan nurtured faith in this covenantal market space by likening it to a vast wilderness without boundaries. This offered an ideal space and an incentive for the people of the United States to explore, take risks, and become entrepreneurs. Thus, covenantal market space offered ample

opportunity as it protected the people from economic catastrophe because it was perpetual and self-correcting. As long as there was faith, the system could be self-contained and self-sustaining. Within this covenantal market space, Reagan established the morality of the free market and called upon the people of the United States to preserve it economically and spiritually. Moreover, translated into actual economic activity, it was a space in which sharing wealth and trickle-down economics made sense because within the covenantal market space there were no limits to what faith could do.

There has been much popular and scholarly discussion about whether Reagan's economic policies were a success or failure. I argue that the more interesting question and the one that I seek to answer in this chapter is how he made the people of the United States *feel* that his free market policies were morally right and turned something that others initially referred to as "voodoo economics" (Campaigns and Elections) into the nation's "economic miracle" (February 4, 1986, State of the Union). Reagan's discourse encouraged the people to provide the necessary energy to maintain free market activity, which could be viewed as the economic embodiment of covenantal thought and, thus, a moral economic system. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the economic situation that existed when Reagan first became president and of the economic policies that were enacted to combat the ailing economy. Second, I explain how these economic policies were legitimated on a Puritan spiritual foundation that was re-appropriated by Reagan using covenantal form. Third, I explore how Reagan created a covenantal market space and called the people to have faith in it. Next, I illustrate how Reagan described the covenantal market space as a wilderness that was open and boundless so all of the people

of the United States could find a place for themselves within it. Finally, I discuss the implications of Reagan's use of covenantal form to socially construct a space that depended more on faith than economics.

Economic Context

The economic woes that Reagan promised to fix when campaigning became his responsibility when he became president. In 1980, inflation measured by the official Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 12.4 percent (Stone and Sawhill, 1984, p. 13). Moreover, the inflation of the late 1970s had resulted in huge federal budget deficits (Karaagac, 2009, p. 194). Karaagac (2009) states, "President Reagan had become the first chief executive to preside over a federal deficit in the triple billion digits. By October of 1981, the national debt reached the trillion-dollar mark for the first time in U.S. history" (p. 217). On February 18, 1981, in his first major policy speech as president, Reagan addressed a Joint Session of Congress on his program for economic recovery. Specifically, he laid out a four-point plan:

This plan is aimed at reducing the growth in government spending and taxing, reforming and eliminating regulations which are unnecessary and unproductive or counterproductive, and encouraging a consistent monetary policy aimed at maintaining the value of the currency. If enacted in full, this program can help America create 13 million new jobs, nearly 3 million more than we would have without these measures. It will also help us to gain control of inflation.

Reagan's plan was representative of his view that inflation was the "foundation upon which all other issues rested," and it occurred when the government spent too much

money and needlessly interrupted free market activity (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 107-108). Reagan's economic strategy rested on a particular brand of supply-side economics, often termed "Reaganomics," as the way to achieve his economic goals. This was in contrast to the Keynesian policies of the past, which called for a moderate role of government and the public sector in economic affairs. The main idea behind Reagan's supply-side economic proposal was that tax rates were so excessive that they were shrinking revenues. Accordingly, cutting taxes would allow more money into the system and generate a "trickle-down" effect from the affluent to the less wealthy (Lowi, 1984; Schick, 1984, p. 111). Furthermore, reducing taxes would keep money out of government hands and, subsequently, limit its spending. In addition, it would eliminate the unnecessary step of tax collection and the redistribution of money that could be regulated by the free market itself.

Reagan began his first term dedicated to cutting government spending and performing what he called government's "highest duty": "restor[ing] to its citizens taxes oppressively collected" (July 24, 1981, Remarks about Federal Tax Reduction at a Meeting of the House Republican Conference). Reagan "forced through the greatest spending cuts and the greatest tax cut in the history of the republic" in his first few months as president (Hudson and Davies, 2008, p. 7). In 1981, Reagan acknowledged that his administration's proposed budget and tax plans were integrated and overlapping, though technically separate (Brandt, 2009, p. 36, p. 51). On August 13, 1981, Reagan signed HR 3982, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, and HR 4242, the Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA), or "Kemp-Roth," into law. With the Omnibus

Budget Reconciliation Act, the “big winner” was Defense while the “big loser” was social programs (Sloan, 1999). Social welfare programs saw approximately thirty billion dollars in cuts, although several programs, such as Medicaid, food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and Social Security, were exempt because they were thought to be too politically threatening (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 144). Meanwhile, ERTA represented the largest tax cut in history (Sloan 1999, p. 140). What began as a thirty percent across-the-board income tax rate reduction phased in by ten percent over three years ended up as a 23 percent reduction with businesses and investors receiving higher tax breaks than initially proposed (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 144). These legislative acts set the tone of Reagan’s presidency and are representative of the economic policies Reagan endorsed throughout his presidency as he strove to protect the “free market” (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 149-150; Wills, 1988).

Yet “Reagonomics” and, in particular, Reagan’s insistence on large tax cuts despite the increasing deficits, had many critics from the beginning. According to Skinner, Kudelia, de Mesquita, and Rice (2007), Reagan campaigned on massive tax cuts when no one else did because “most considered [it] a fantasy” (p. 183). Reagan not only faced opposition from Democrats but from traditional conservatives who wondered how he planned to enact his seemingly contradictory economic campaign promises in light of the rising level of inflation (Sloan, 1999, Karaagac, 2009). The *New York Times* reported, “But how noninflationary plans can be worked out, given Mr. Reagan’s continued commitment to Kemp-Roth and other deep tax cuts plus his commitment to steep increases in defense spending, remains a mystery” (Silk, October 31, 1980, p. D2). Even

George H. W. Bush, Reagan's Vice President, called Reagan's plan "voodoo economics" when the two politicians faced each other in the 1980 Republican presidential primary campaign (Campaigns and Elections). Reagan continued to face opposition once he gained the presidency from both Democrats and moderate Republicans, but he "threw caution to the wind" (Karaagac, 2009, p. 195). Even Reagan's Budget Director David Stockman became frustrated with Reagan for not cutting spending enough and relying on tax cuts to solve all the economic problems (Karaagac, 2009). Sloan (1999) states, "In his mythical 'magic of the marketplace,' we would all be winners because we could rely on our entrepreneurial talents, feel secure that our hard work would be suitably rewarded, and enjoy the support of our families, churches, and communities" (p. 266).

Reagan's message, nonetheless, gained ground and, as indicated, translated into record-breaking tax cuts. Karaagac (2000) states that "it is almost baffling that Reagan popularized the idea of fiscal conservatism even as his supply-side tax cuts and exploding deficits made mockery of his pledges" (224). Although Reagan's faith in the free market system and dependence on "Reaganomics" might not have made economic sense, his views seemed to become part of the "American" story. In fact, it seemed to be more a result of rhetoric than economics. Skinner et al. (2007) argue that, from the start, Reagan engaged in what they call a "heresthetical" rhetorical campaign, which they define as "messages that redefine political debate and that assemble previously seemingly impossible coalitions" (p. 253). Similarly, Garfinkle (2006) states, "Supply-side economics started out in life more as a political story than a serious economic theory.

And when implemented, it remained so. [...] But the political success of Reagan's supply-side rhetoric captured increasing public support" (Garfinkle, 2006, p. 156). After Reagan addressed the nation on July 27, 1981, about the Kemp-Roth tax reduction, House Democrats who were initially opposed to the bill were inundated with letters and phone calls urging them to support the bill. Ultimately, forty-eight Democratic House members who previously opposed the bill defected to support the president in passage of the bill. Moreover, politicians were overwhelmed with phone calls and letters after each presidential address, with fifteen million more letters landing in Congressional mailrooms for a session (Kernell, 1986, p. 131).

Others acknowledge the important point that, rather than relying on an idea that was mythical or "voodoo," Reagan tapped into something more deeply ingrained in people: values. Lakoff (2004) argues that people use moral frames when viewing the economy, even doing so in a way that actually contradicts their economic self-interest. Moreover, Reagan often appealed not only to morals but also to religious certainties and precepts. A White House aide said that the "economic assumptions of the administration were more like a 'religious debate' than a 'scientific debate;' supply siders saw the validity of their economic doctrine as self-evident. Many of them expressed their convictions with an evangelical fervor more appropriate for a religious crusade than an economics discussion" (Sloan, 1999, p. 117). Moreover, Kiewe and Houck (1991) argue that Reagan was able to justify his call for proportional income taxation over progressive income taxation by basing it on the *Bible* and making proportional taxation morally right and progressive taxation morally wrong. Reagan claimed that proportional taxing was

like the *Bible*'s call for tithing, or giving ten percent of one's income to the church,³¹ as called for in Genesis 28:22: After Jacob receives a vision of God's renewed covenant and accepts it, he states, "and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee" (*Holy Bible*, King James Version). Accordingly, Kiewe and Houck (1991) argue that such a basis for his "theory of taxation" made it very difficult for people to disagree with Reagan's call for proportional taxation because it made them "refute the scriptures, hence God" (p. 17). Moreover, it removed any legitimacy from progressive taxation and depicted it as having a "satanic nature" (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 17).

Specifically, Reagan drew from George Gilder's ideas about how capitalism provided a moral basis for economics. Gilder not only "pioneered the formulation of supply-side economics" by contributing to A.B. Laffer's economic reports in the 1970s and by holding numerous key economic positions, including Chairman of the Lehrman Institute's Economic Roundtable and Program Director for the Manhattan Institute (Gilder Technology Report, 2008), but he also became a dependable source for the moral foundation for Reagan's view on the free market, entrepreneurship, and his policies toward the poor. Gilder argued that capitalism, specifically supply-side economics, and faith went hand in hand: "Capitalist production entails faith – in one's neighbors, in one's society, and in the compensatory logic of the cosmos. Search and you shall find, give and you will be given unto you, supply creates its own demand" (Gilder, 1981, p. 24). Gilder portrays not only the practicality but also the morality of a free market by referencing

³¹ See Reagan's June 19, 1985, Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session With Members of the Chamber of Commerce in Mooresville, Indiana, and December 11, 1985, Remarks During a White House Briefing for Supporters of Tax Reform.

Matthew 7: 7: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock and the door will be opened unto you” (*Holy Bible*, King James Version, see also Luke 11: 9). He argues that the market works best when the delicate balance between risk and security is maintained.

Covenantal Theory and Space

Gilder’s argument provided a strong basis for Reagan’s views. Yet I argue that Reagan went back to the roots of religious tradition in the United States and drew from and re-appropriated Puritan ideas to transform the free market into a covenantal market space. This, in turn, allowed him to highlight the importance of works as a means rather than an end, to explain why uncertainty in the market is a sign of God’s protection and promise, and to transcend the need for certainty. At first glance, it might appear strange to suggest that the covenantal tradition of the Puritans could provide a foundation on which the free market values of risk and entrepreneurship could be celebrated. Originally, Puritans were Calvinistic in the sense that they believed in predestination, the idea that God had foreordained all of the world’s happenings, and there was nothing humans could do to change their ultimate fate. The idea was that God chose which men and women would experience regeneration or “saving faith” and would be welcomed into the Kingdom of God after death. Accordingly, there would seem to be a lack of a clear incentive to engage in economic activity or works of any kind. Yet the idea of covenant actually helped to resolve Puritan anxiety over why they should have any purpose in life if there was nothing they could do to better their destiny (Miller, 1954). The Puritans formulated the covenant between 1600 and 1650 “in order to preserve the truths already

known” (Miller, 1954, p. 366) and to help resolve the major tension over “how to include human action within the scheme of divine sovereignty” (Jones, 1973, p. 12; See also Noll, 2002, p. 38). Accordingly, Miller (1969) states that for the Puritans, the “doctrine of predestination did not have as a psychological consequence the surrender of all volition but rather that it was a powerful stimulus to activity, [and, since] this tremendous exertion [was] being made in a social context, the incentive was therefore strengthened by an awful realization that without it the whole enterprise might fail” (p. 235)

The idea of predestination became controversial in the late sixteenth century and, in particular, became clouded by the ideas of Arminianism and Antinomianism. Arminians, who generally endorsed the idea of free will, attacked the idea of predestination on the grounds of its “ethical absolutism” and that it seemed to be “devoid of any grounds for moral obligation.” Antinomians, on the other hand, adopted the other extreme by arguing that if faith was all that was needed to attain heaven, then God’s laws need not be obeyed (Miller, 1954; Jones, 1973). Miller states that “it was a walking between these two extremes that orthodox Puritans generally pictured themselves” as they waded through the “ambiguities inherent in the doctrines of sanctification and assurance” (Miller, 1954, p. 371).

To be sure, Puritan leaders held different positions on the how much agency to give to human action, and it was a great source of controversy (Jones, 1973; Elliott 1975; Miller, 1954). Through the notion of covenant, however, humans entered into a reciprocal relationship with God. It helped to temper the need to retain God’s absolute sovereignty

with an understanding of how following moral law and acting morally played a part in God's design (Miller, 1954, p. 373). In other words, it created a middle ground between fulfilling the covenant of "grace," God's free gift of salvation, and the covenant of "works," that human action could help the Puritans earn salvation. Hence, although the covenant idea had "its roots in Calvin," the Puritans were able to become "truly human" when entering a covenant because it implied a choice and a deeper obligation to enter into a reciprocal and ongoing relationship (Niebuhr, 1969, p. 222). Covenant, then, rather than being a mechanical or organic construction, allowed the Puritans to make a "promise" to fulfill their end of the bargain (Niebuhr, 1969). Since it was based on faith, however, there was no certainty. At its core was the idea that you could not make anyone do anything because it was about a deeper and more spiritual obligation. Niebuhr (1969) describes this as the moral dimension or "covenant character" that is added to an original or natural contract (p. 222). He states that "the moral requirement and ability of promise-keeping is central to human existence" (p. 223).

During the seventeenth century, covenantal thought began to compete with and replace the more "mechanical pattern" of organic and hierarchical thought (Niebuhr, 1969, p. 219). Elazar (1998, IV) explains that "covenantal thinking is dialectic [because it] offers the world a dynamic model to relate to real life in which change and flux are expected and proper balance the desired goal" (p. 343). On the other hand, according to organic and hierarchical thought, "change and flux represent interference with the ordered path in the pursuit of a single unity" (Elazar, 1998, IV, p. 343). Elazar argues that covenantal thought helped to reconcile these seemingly contradictory viewpoints by

maintaining the sovereignty of a monotheistic God who allowed humans to exist dynamically and dialectically (p. 343; see also Elazar, 1996, p. 7).

Elazar (1998, III) argues that covenants associate spatial and temporal boundaries and dynamic environments (pp. 245-247), but he ignores the ways in which this association is produced rhetorically by people and cultures. To engage this idea entails an exploration of space that is distinct from geometrical or geographical space and, instead, looks at space as created and constituted in social practice (Lefebvre, 1991; De Certeau, 1991). De Certeau (1984) explains that although a “place” is a stable location situated beside or in relation to another stable “place,” “*space is a practiced place*” (p. 117). He states,

A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.” (p. 117)

Similarly, Lefebvre (1991) states, “When we evoke ‘space’, we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so; the deployment of energy in relation to ‘points’ and within a time frame” (p. 12). In other words, space is made; it is a social construction that is defined rhetorically by people and, as such, generates dynamic energy for particular purposes at particular moments. Furthermore, de Certeau (1984)

states that “stories ‘go in procession’ ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them” (p. 125).

Accordingly, covenantal thought provided a particular story that created a space in which Puritans could engage in meaningful acts on earth while still honoring the idea of God’s sovereignty. It was a space where the spiritual and the economic coalesced and offered an important impetus for the Puritans to succeed. Miller (1954) states, “Thus the covenant theory was an extremely subtle, possibly an oversubtle, device within the framework of predestination for arousing human activity; it permitted man to conceive of divine grace as an opportunity to strike a bargain, to do himself a good turn, to make a sure profit” (p. 394). Furthermore, as Miller states, often “works” referred to economic actions that not only ensured Puritan survival in the vast wilderness of New England but provided them with a way to exhibit their internal relationships with God in a physical way. Moreover, in order for the Puritans to succeed in their spiritual mission, they had to succeed in their economic mission as well, which meant maintaining the corporate charter, the Massachusetts Bay Company. The Puritans saw the charter as a symbol of their covenant with God and its fulfillment as a test of their obligation to Him. Furthermore, even if Puritans were already predetermined to be “saved,” there was still reason to exhibit publicly through economic activity what was spiritually present within. For the unregenerate, there was hope that they could be saved, so they “carefully nurtured anything in their own thoughts and conduct that might prove to the workings of salvation” (Haller, 1951, p. 40).

Faith in Reagan's Covenantal Market Space

Reagan's "economic ambitions" for a free market unencumbered by taxes rested on a similar spiritual legitimacy based on a covenantal foundation. He enabled the people of the United States to feel potency, but he reserved the ultimate determination of success for God. Thus, although his message did not derail optimism for predetermined success, it was not strictly Calvinistic in the sense that he allowed for the release of dynamic energy and even uncertainty. In his First Inaugural Address, Reagan stated, "I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do. I do believe in a fate that will fall on us if we do nothing. So, with all the creative energy at our command, let us begin an era of national renewal" (January 20, 1981).³² Similarly, Miller states, "The people of New England could thus survey the past in the light of their tribal covenant, see the course of history coming to a predestined climax in themselves, and yet argue that they were not necessarily fated to follow the pattern into an equally inevitable decline" (Miller, 1954, p. 484). At the same time, Reagan's discourse was Calvinistic in the sense that he never promised that human action or works were the ultimate answer. To do so would be to undermine the sense of mystery and divinity inherent in the covenant of grace and, by rhetorical extension, the free market itself. Reagan's oft repeated phrase that the United States had a "rendezvous with destiny"³³ reflected the space he created between predestined success and conscious effort, or between the covenant of grace and

³² Similarly, in his February 4, 1986, State of the Union, Reagan stated, "History is no captive of some inevitable force. History is made by men and women of vision and courage. Tonight freedom is on the march. The United States is the economic miracle, the model to which the world once again turns."

³³ October 27, 1964, *A Time for Choosing*; November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech; July 17, 1980, Presidential Acceptance Speech; April 24, 1985, Address to the Nation on Federal Budget and Deficit Reduction.

the covenant of works. Although “rendezvous” denotes an agreement between people to meet at a certain time and place, “destiny” denotes an inevitable or predetermined course of events. By juxtaposing those words, Reagan suggested that predetermination and human will exist in a space of negotiated covenantal interaction.

Accordingly, Reagan created what I call a covenantal market space. Like the Puritans, the people of the United States were encouraged to find a balance between accepting their economic predestination and participating in the economic market. Just as Puritans leaders did not tell their congregations that they could “earn” the reward of heaven through works, economic or otherwise, Reagan never assured the United States public of economic prosperity. Yet like Puritan leaders, Reagan assured them that the economic system and the covenantal relationships on which it rested were ultimately good. Reagan suggested that the people’s covenantal obligations demanded that they participate in the market whether they were wealthy or struggling economically. People’s participation in the covenantal market space was necessary to provide the energy to keep market activity alive. It was not necessarily action or inaction, works or grace, but the movement between the two and the energy that was created through the citizenry’s faith in that dynamic space that sustained market activity.

To ensure that faith was the driving force in economic activity, however, Reagan needed to retain a sense of uncertainty or mystery within the covenantal market space. That was the only way to ensure that the free market experiment would continue. In doing so, his discourse reflected that of first-generation Puritans, before economic ambition took over spiritual motives and faith. Eventually, however, the Puritans began

“moving from a sense of mystery to a consciousness of mastery [and soon found that] the two spirits could not live well together” (Boorstin, 1969, p. 111). Reagan, however, avoided such a transition and emphasized the importance of “mystery” and “magic” within the marketplace. At an October 2, 1984, campaign rally, he stated, “We really almost diminish all the things we are when we limit the debate to money and how it’s distributed in our country. We lose a sense of the mystery in men’s souls and the mystery of life” (Remarks at Reagan-Bush Rally in Brownsville, Texas). According to Reagan, faith in the free market despite its uncertainty was the magic that motivated people and created the energy for economic activity. In his 1986 State of the Union, Reagan argued that the “magic of opportunity – unreserved, unfailing, unrestrained” would solve the federal deficit.

Reagan did not discourage progress, profit, or economic goals. Reagan encouraged the people of the United States, like the Puritans, to view their transformation of the “wilderness” into a “garden” through economic works as a way to demonstrate their spiritual mission (Heimert, 1953, p. 362; Nash, 2001, p. 14, 35-37; Johnson, 1654). Yet Reagan’s emphasis was more on the process that occurred within the covenantal market space than on the resulting “garden” or end product. In order to keep people motivated and faithful, the ultimate destination had to remain a mystery. The Puritans, Boorstin (1969) argues, lost this sense of uncertainty: “As the fund of American experience increased, everyday events lost the magic of novelty and the mystery of the unexpected. More and more, life took on the air of the familiar, or even of the banal” (p. 108). In other words, once mastery occurred, the process had less meaning and the

necessity of faith diminished. By emphasizing faith in the process and continuing to tie the spiritual so closely to the economic in the covenantal market space, Reagan avoided what Boorstin (1969) argues led the Puritans to the “undoing of their philosophy” and of core covenantal values (p. 105). Instead of relying on God, “the Puritans saw more and more connection between their own efforts and the product of the soil” so “if one failed to reach his destination, he had to blame himself” (Boorstin, 1969, p. 108). As the “garden” became even more civilized, and humans sought to gain more control, the split between economic works and spiritual faith as well as individuality versus covenantal relationships became even more severe.

Reagan pinpointed government interference, especially in the form of taxes, as another way that the mystery and magic of the market was destroyed. He warned that too much government and structured control undermined faith and drained the productive energy needed in the market. On April 26, 1982, he stated,

But the societies which achieve the most spectacular progress in the shortest period of time are not the most tightly controlled, the biggest in size, or the wealthiest in material resources. They are societies that reward initiative and believe in the magic of the marketplace. (Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the United States Chamber of Commerce)

Similarly, he argued that there was a “simple solution” to economic problems: “Get government out of the way and let free people and a free economy work their magic” (June 29, 1988, Remarks at a Campaign Fundraising Luncheon for Representative Connie Mack in Miami, Florida). Reagan argued that letting the people and the market

interact freely was the best way to prosper. Rather than being controlled by government, Reagan challenged the people of the United States to put their faith in the free market. He stated, “Our economic program is guided by a spirit of free enterprise that encourages risktaking [*sic*], rewards innovation, and involves millions of Americans making their own choices” (January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta Georgia).

Because faith was the only prerequisite, Reagan appeared to exclude no one from his invitation to the people of the United States to participate economically and spiritually in this covenantal market space. Like the Puritan preachers who used their rhetorical and moral power to encourage Puritans to embrace both the spiritual and economic opportunities in front of them (Haller, 1951, p. 40), Reagan opened up a space where it was “the universal right of all God’s children” to have the opportunities of “free press, free speech, and freedom to worship, vote, and create wealth” (February 6, 1985, State of the Union). He compelled the people to “trust that American spirit which knows no ethnic, religious, social, political, regional, or economic boundaries; the spirit that burned with zeal in the hearts of millions of immigrants from every corner of the Earth who came here in search of freedom” (July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech). Hence, Reagan proclaimed that no person had been exempted from the obligation to fulfill his or her covenantal obligations. He challenged the people of the United States to have faith in the free market despite their fears of uncertainty:

Where others fear trade and economic growth, we see opportunities for creating new wealth and undreamed-of opportunities for millions in our own land beyond.

Where others seek to throw up barriers, we seek to bring them down. Where others take counsel of their fears, we follow our hopes. (January 25, 1988, State of the Union Address)

Reagan made it clear that economic success had as much to do with dreams, hopes, and belief in the free market as specific economic acts. Although certain efforts might fail, dreams and hopes could live on and spur future economic activity. Moreover, Reagan argued that as long the people had faith in one other, citizens would share opportunities and resources with one another in a space free of barriers.

Thus, the only way to “fail,” according to Reagan, was not to have faith in the covenantal market space he defined and not to participate in it. Reagan’s economic policies rested on this idea. In his Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, Reagan stated, “Based on this confidence in a system which has never failed us, but which we have failed through a lack of confidence and sometimes through a belief that we could fine-tune the economy and get it tuned to our liking, I am proposing a comprehensive four-point program” (February 18, 1981). As noted, cutting taxes was a main component of Reagan’s program because it was a way to increase freedom in the market. Although this freedom could sometimes be a double-edged sword, Reagan stated that “[r]educed government-barriers to risk-taking and enterprise” would propel the economy into action once again (February 18, 1981, White House Report on the Program for Economic Recovery). In the same way that people had to understand that they could not control God’s grace because it was a free gift, they were led to believe the same was true of the economic market. What was important was that

the people embraced the dynamic process offered within the covenantal market space and did everything they could to perpetuate it. As participants, the people ultimately would win because their activity generated the energy necessary to keep economic opportunities alive.

In order for Reagan's economic policies to work and for the people of the United States to support his plans, however, he had to persuade them to embrace his message and have faith in this covenantal market space. The people of the United States needed to believe that the market could and should exist on its own without government involvement. In what follows, I describe how Reagan advanced this view by releasing the people of the United States into a vast wilderness in which they could earn both economic and spiritual reward and by removing any barriers inside of it.

Covenantal Market Space as a Wilderness on which to Build Frontiers

By borrowing from early Puritan attitudes about the wilderness as daunting and unknown, Reagan preserved the "mystery" or "magic" of the marketplace. First-generation Puritans believed they were called into the wilderness by God to start a new life and become closer to him (Morison, 1930; Nash, 2001, p. 16). Upon arrival, however, they faced harsh and unfamiliar conditions with no clear guidance on how to conquer them (Haller, 1951). It quickly became apparent that they would have to cooperate in order to go forward in their mission together and to prosper economically and spiritually, an idea that "dominated the Puritan attitude toward expansion and the frontier" (Heimert, 1953, p. 363). Not only was the wilderness an opportunity for material advantage, it was a "sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society" (Nash,

2001, p. 16) and a path to spiritual rebirth (Haller, 1951, p. 108). Haller (1951) states, “There is a certain family resemblance between the process of planting frontier towns and the puritan theories of individual salvation and of church-gathering” (p. 30). Going out into the frontier offered unregenerate Puritans a way to shed the old sins of Adam and pursue personal salvation. In addition, “[i]n withdrawing to New England or to a frontier town, the Puritan could act once more the part of the regenerate man rejecting corporate institutions, could find one more clean slate on which to inscribe his plan for a pure church in a perfect social order” (Haller, 1951, p. 30). That the Puritans were not prepared for the strange wilderness of New England added to the significance of their mission and, in a sense, made it holy. Moreover, because wilderness signified God, “the true Christian [was] not terrified, [but] welcome[d] the chastening and scourging experience in which wilderness (physical or spiritual) must be the scene” (Roberts-Miller, 2009, p. 151).

In many ways, the only option for the Puritans was to fail in their obligation to God or embark on an “Errand into the Wilderness,” in the words of preacher Samuel Danforth (1670). As God’s chosen people, the Puritans had to go out into the wilderness. Danforth (1670) stated,

When men abate and cool in their affection to the pure Worship of God, which they went into the Wilderness to enjoy, the Lord calls upon them seriously and thoroughly to examine themselves, what it was that drew them into the Wilderness, and to consider that it was not the expectation of ludicrous levity, nor

of pomp and delicacy, but of the free and clear dispensation of the Gospel and Kingdome [*sic*] of God.” (p. 43)

Danforth, thus, reminded the Puritans that there was a specific reason they had been called into the wilderness, one that was more about spiritual than economic renewal. At the same time, he encouraged them to believe that if they worshipped God, He would lead them out of the wilderness. Danforth (1670) reminded the Puritans that God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt and “led them through the Wilderness for the space of forty years” (Danforth, 1670, p. 44). Likewise, just as God kept his promise to the Israelites by keeping them “close to him in their long and wearisome passage through the uncultured Desert (Danforth, 1670, p. 44), the Puritans knew that God had a special concern for them as wilderness people. It was during their wanderings that Moses received the Ten Commandments, and God set forth the covenant between God and the people of Israel, as described in Exodus (Chapters 19 and 20). Nash (2001) states, “The Exodus experience established a tradition of going to the wilderness for freedom and the purification of faith” (p. 16).

Similarly, Reagan used the idea of the frontier to merge the spiritual and the economic in the covenantal market space. De Certeau (1984) states that “the frontier functions as a third element. It is an ‘in-between’ – a ‘space between’” (p. 127); “the frontier is a sort of void, a narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters” (p. 127). Furthermore, the appropriation of space “depend[s] on a dynamic distribution of possible goods and functions to constitute an increasingly complex network of differentiations, a combinative system of spaces” (p. 126). In his January 25, 1984, State of the Union

Address, the first and second “great goals” Reagan set forth were to achieve “vigorous economic growth” and “to build on American’s pioneer spirit.” The setting for these goals to take place was on the “American” frontier. Reagan stated, “We can ensure steady economic growth. We can develop America’s next frontier” (January 25, 1984, State of the Union). According to Reagan, proof of the development of that frontier would be seen in “[a] sparkling economy [that] spurs initiatives, sunrise industries, and makes older ones more competitive” (January 25, 1984, State of the Union). This frontier created a covenantal market space that encompassed the economic work that lay before the people of the United States and their obligation to God.

Like the Puritans, Reagan used the frontier to connect the economic mission of the people of the United States to a more spiritual mission. Specifically, he argued that his administration’s proposed tax system rested on “America’s eternal frontier spirit”:

The tax system is crucial, not just to our personal, material well-being and the nation’s economic well-being; it must also reflect and support our deeper values and highest aspirations. It must promote opportunity. Lift up the weak, strengthen the family, and perhaps most importantly it must be rooted in that unique American quality, our special commitment to fairness. It must be an expression of both America’s eternal frontier spirit and all the virtues from the heart and soul of a good and decent people. (May 28, 1985, Address to the Nation on Tax Reform)

Reagan described the frontier as eternal, evoking the notion that the American frontier is not bound by time but waiting to be discovered and its potential realized. It not only represents the economic vitality of the people, but their hearts and souls, suggesting a

higher meaning for economic activity. Thus, reducing taxes and releasing people to build frontiers in the freedom of the wilderness not only freed up money, but released the internal virtues in people as well. Like Haller (1951) says of the Puritans, “The decision to adventure one’s family and estate in the wilderness led [...] to an active and dynamic development of emotional and intellectual experience” (p. 43).

Furthermore, Reagan established the wilderness of the United States as the basis of economic success by using those who first discovered and explored it as authority evidence. He applauded a group of Hispanic business leaders because “[t]heir spirit and energy were reminiscent of Americans of an earlier age when entrepreneurs turned an undeveloped wilderness into a dynamo of freedom and abundance” (September 14, 1983, Remarks and a Question-And-Answer Session with Writers for Hispanic, Religious, and Labor Publications). Moreover, he linked his administration’s economic plan to “that initial course of discovery that [Columbus] set for us so many years ago. We turned a vast wilderness, the most undeveloped land imaginable, into an economic dynamo” (October 8, 1984, Remarks at the Reagan-Bush Rally in Charlotte, North Carolina). Here, Reagan made clear that his policies of less government taxing and spending were consistent with the values of the people who first explored the great wilderness. Thus, the Reagan administration was not mandating a change of policy but clearing the way for the people of the United States to discover and fulfill what was originally agreed upon by God and humans in the covenant of the Promised Land. Furthermore, Reagan suggested that, if the government left them alone, the people could be like the first settlers who tamed a wild land and thrived in it.

A Barrier-Free and Perpetual Covenantal Market Space

It was imperative for the people of the United States to be able to envision themselves as part of the covenantal market space if they were to have faith in it. Accordingly, Reagan made access to the space easy by describing it as barrier-free. Moreover, Reagan argued that once a person was in that open space, opportunities and connections with other people would be unlimited. Economic freedom was the foundation of Reagan's economic policies, and it was ensured by a free market system. He did not believe that people should be told how they could spend their money, and he did not believe that the government should spend the people's money. Rather, Reagan bolstered the idea that the people of the United States should have the opportunity to be able to participate freely in an economic space unencumbered by restrictions. In his February 6, 1985, State of the Union, Reagan stated, "Let us begin by challenging our conventional wisdom. There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect. Already, pushing down tax rates has freed our economy to vault forward to economic growth." By metaphorically equating taxes to the physical "constraints," "walls," and "barriers" in the way of economic success, Reagan associated his tax cuts with the "human spirit" and "progress."

Reagan continuously connected God to economic freedom. The covenant with God was reciprocal: God had given the people freedom so they could fulfill it economically and morally. This fusion was at the core of Puritan covenantal ideas, and Reagan reaffirmed that relationship in his discourse. Accordingly, only humans erected

barriers if they chose not to accept God's covenantal promise. Borrowing from Massachusetts Bay Colony founder and Puritan preacher John Winthrop's description of the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a "city on a hill," in his Farewell Address, Reagan stated,

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and doors that were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still. (January 11, 1989)

Reagan preferred this space to be free of any physical barriers; it was to be a permeable space where activity was unrestricted. Moreover, Reagan stated that the faith expressed by the "will" and "heart" of the people would transcend any physical boundaries that were erected. Reagan visualized the "city on a hill" as being created by economic activity and unencumbered by economic obstacles. His description of it as "teeming" with free ports that "hummed" as well as "windswept" and "open" not only described what he saw but expressed the fluidity he envisioned in the market. Furthermore, according to Reagan, this type of commerce was "God-blessed."

Living in this free covenantal market space, according to Reagan, was the way citizens were to serve God. In his 1987 State of the Union Address, he stated,

The United States Constitution is the impassioned and inspired vehicle by which we travel through history. It grew out of the most fundamental inspiration of our existence: that we are here to serve Him by living free – that living free releases in us the noblest of impulses and the best of our abilities; that we would use these gifts for good and generous purposes and would secure them not just for ourselves and for our children but for all mankind. (January 27, 1987)

By likening it to a “vehicle” that “travels,” Reagan gave the Constitution, one of the cornerstone pieces of authority evidence on which the country was founded, elasticity and movement. Of more importance, however, is that Reagan repeatedly connected his free, open space to the fulfillment of God’s promises. Furthermore, Reagan argued that the best way to serve God was by living free, not only because it was good in its own right, but also because doing so released an energy that would serve the covenantal community. In his January 21, 1985, inaugural address, Reagan called on God to help the United States have the courage to release the energy of the free market: “The time has come for a new American emancipation – a great national drive to tear down economic barriers and liberate the spirit of enterprise in the most distressed areas of our county. My friends, together we can do this, so help me God.” Here Reagan called on a higher power and linked together individuals, the community, God, and the economy into one intimately-connected covenantal promise. Moreover, he indicated that the people could depend on one another in their economic and spiritual mission. As Niebuhr (1969) states, “Covenant was the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through

unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other and for the common laws, under God” (p. 222).

The idea that the covenantal market space was open, a place where people were intimately connected with God and other people, eased the burden of economic failure and inequities, which, in turn, allowed people to find safety in it. Because individual action took place within the dynamic energy of the covenantal market space, no failure was permanent. Moreover, by intertwining the spiritual and the economic, a person could fail economically but still have the reassurance of God’s grace as long as they pursued their covenantal obligations. In other words, it was not so much an individual work that mattered but that they were participating in the process and, thus, exhibiting economic ambition and faith. Furthermore, because people were at different levels economically was no excuse for a lack of effort because the covenantal market space allowed for rapid change and an easy flow of resources. Since the space was open and without boundaries, those with scant economic resources were not barred from entry and, thus, had the potential to become prosperous. Likewise, those who were already prosperous could not be assured of continued success because resources could move freely across the permeable boundaries. Either way, the covenantal market space enabled people to supply the energy needed for the dynamic market to continue.

That time had no boundaries and was not linear or chronological but perpetual assured the people of the United States that one economic mishap would not mark the end of their economic journey. Rather it was the ongoing “experiment,” or journey, that was important. In his 1987 State of the Union Address, Reagan stated,

We're entering our third century now, but it's wrong to judge our nation by its years. The calendar can't measure Americans because we are meant to be an endless experiment in freedom – with no limit to our reaches, no boundaries to what we can do, no end point to our hopes. (January 27, 1987).

The experiment was not limited by boundaries or time; no physical calendar could contain “American” potential. For “Americans,” like the Puritans, the “covenant exempted [them] from the normal operations of cause and effect, and secured [them] upon the pinnacle of ecclesiastical perfection” (Miller, 1954, p. 481). By placing no temporal restrictions on the covenantal market space, Reagan connected the contemporary United States public to the Puritans who started the experiment so many years ago and reminded those presently living that they had an obligation to continue it.

Thus, within the covenantal market space, actions and events did not occur in isolation. This put every human act, whether a success or failure, into a larger framework that was ultimately good. According to Wills (1988), Reagan re-interpreted the “Doctrine of the Fall” in terms of the market:

If the doctrine of the Fall entangles humans in each other's errors, the doctrine of the market disentangles each fumbled attempt toward a finally concatenated good. Modern capitalism lives by a counter-myth to the Fall of Man – one where benign nature makes everything go, miraculously, right. (p. 456)

Given this religious view of the market, according to Wills, Reagan allowed the people of the United States entry into a “sinless product of countless sins and inadvertencies” (p. 456). Moreover, instead of emphasizing personal failure, Reagan emphasized failure as

part of a larger covenantal space and system that made it both universal and temporary. In his Remarks Announcing Candidacy for the Republican Presidential Nomination on November 13, 1979, Reagan stated,

To me our country is a living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is impossible, proud of its own success, generous, yes and naive, sometimes wrong, never mean and always impatient to provide a better life for its people in a framework of a basic fairness and freedom.

Although Reagan conceded that the country could sometimes be “wrong,” his use of the word had a positive connotation. In context, being wrong become part of the country’s vitality. It was something that bound people together in one common, ongoing process and framework that worked. Within the dynamic, free space of the United States, nothing remained stagnant. Reagan stated, “But we’re seeing a new dawn of hope for our people. As the passage says in Psalms, ‘Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning’” (January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta, Georgia). For Reagan, conditions were not irreversible but alive in a dynamic space of hope.

Embracing Entrepreneurship and Risk

Characterizing covenantal market space as an open frontier set up the ideal foundation on which Reagan could ask individuals to take risks in the market. Reagan celebrated entrepreneurs as the “heroes” of economic life (January 20, 1981, First Inaugural Address; May 14, 1983, Address to the Nation on Small Business; May 28, 1985, Address to the Nation on Tax Reform). Reagan applauded “the men and women of faith, intellect and daring who take great risks to invest in and invent our future” (Address

to the Nation on Tax Reform, May 28, 1985). In Proclamation 4829, Reagan stated, “The imagination, skills, and willingness of small business men and women to take necessary risks symbolize the free enterprise foundation of the American economy and must be encouraged” (March 24, 1981, Proclamation 4829, Small Business Week). This cornerstone of Reagan’s economic narrative reflected Gilder’s claim that a capitalist, free-market system is superior to a socialist system:

Socialism is an insurance policy bought by all members of a national economy to shield them from risk. But the result is to shield them from knowledge of the real dangers and opportunities ubiquitous in any society. Rather than benefiting from a multiplicity of gifts and experiments, the entire economy absorbs the much greater risk of remaining static in a dynamic world. (Gilder, 1981, p. 26)

In other words, risk provides human beings with the incentive to participate in the economy and the necessary energy to perpetuate prosperous economic activity. Reagan stated, “Trust the people – that’s the secret weapon. Only when people are free to worship, create, and build, only when they can decide their destiny and benefit from their own risks—only then do societies become dynamic, prosperous, progressive, and free” (April 26, 1982, Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the United States Chamber of Commerce). Reagan’s insistence on tax cuts and limited government spending were based on the idea that both were barriers to personal economic freedom and interfered with human activity in an open frontier of risk and discovery.

Reagan reminded the people of the United States of the importance of economic pursuit in a seemingly unknown space by using Christopher Columbus as authority

evidence: “Columbus challenged the unknown when he sailed westward in 1492. He was a man of vision who saw an opportunity to set down a plan, and then worked diligently to carry it forth” (October 8, 1984, Remarks at a Dedication Ceremony for a Statue of Christopher Columbus). Reagan even designated Columbus Day a national holiday to be celebrated on the second Monday of October each year. He stated, “But his adventurous spirit lives on among us, challenging us to emulation and abiding with us as we too press forward on our voyage of discovery” (October 9, 1981, Proclamation 4873 - Columbus Day). Reagan used Columbus to illustrate that the roles he was asking the people of the United States to assume fit appropriately with the roles of the entrepreneurs who rest at the foundation of economic and spiritual life in the United States.

On American Enterprise Day on October 2, 1981, he insisted that the people of the United States must follow in the footsteps of those leaders who had paved the way and founded the country on economic freedom: “Through their insistence on the free enterprise system, our forefathers unleashed the creative energies of a people” (Proclamation 4866). Reagan encouraged the people of the United States to be daring and aggressive like the first-generation Puritans who “sought an outlet for the creativity and energy and desired relief from an England that they felt was adhering to a corrupted European heritage” (Elliott, 1975, 21). Like John Cotton, who “captured this independent spirit when he sent out his call in 1634 for more men to come to New England” (Elliott, 1975, p. 22), Reagan called on the people to embrace the market spirit. In his Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery, Reagan stated, “As long as we let the forces of the marketplace work without undue interference, the ingenuity of consumers,

business, producers, and inventors will do that for us” (September 24, 1981). Reagan argued the entrepreneurs were so important because their “resourcefulness and resilience are melded with an economic system that allows them to pursue their goals and harness the dynamic forces of the marketplace” (January 3, 1984, Proclamation 5145 - Small Business Week).

Haller (1951) points out that Puritan entrepreneurs “were sufficiently like the successful and innovating business man of the latter-day capitalist economy” (p. 93).

These men had

more-than-ordinary talents of imaginative ambition, specialized knowledge and access to capital and credit to attain personal success. Such men made considerable contributions of planning and managing services, conducted a wide variety of mercantile operations and enjoyed a standard of material wealth and comfort which placed them above the ordinary run of neighbors in this respect.

(Haller, 1951, p. 93)

Yet, Haller (1951) argues, such traits were celebrated not simply because they helped New England prosper economically, but because “they fitted into the Puritan scheme as useful and honorable instruments of the plan for building a civilized Christian community” (Haller, 1951, p. 93). Similarly, Reagan called entrepreneurs heroes not because they reaped material rewards or because they were more skilled than others, but because their faith in the promise of the covenantal market space generated the energy to maintain it. He described entrepreneurs as “the standard-bearers of economic progress and the stalwarts of the energizing forces of the free market” (Proclamation 5145 – Small

Business Week, January 3, 1984) whose “values sustain our national life” (January 20, 1981, First Inaugural Address). Entrepreneurs, according to Reagan, understood that the covenantal promise was not primarily economic but spiritual.

A Space in which Wealth is Created and Trickle-Down Economics Works

By formulating a covenantal market space in the ways described throughout this chapter, Reagan established a “founding narrative” on which judgment could later be rendered (de Certeau, 1984, p. 126) and through which his “comprehensive program” could be legitimated. Specifically, it provided a frame by which the “theory” of “trickle-down” economics could be accepted as both economically feasible and morally acceptable. When the economic market was defined as an open, unrestricted wilderness, there was limitless opportunity for people to create wealth, which, in turn, stimulated the entire economy and all of its participants. Once the barriers were down, money could flow freely from one business to another and from one person to another. From this perspective, money or resources could be seen as belonging to an entire dynamic system rather than to one individual. Thus, not only was the economic system perpetual and self-correcting, but it also was divinely sanctified. Moreover, individual entrepreneurs, the economic system as a whole, and God were all interconnected.

When Reagan spoke about the creation of wealth he focused on its relationship to other people, God, and the economic system as a whole rather than self-interest alone. In his First Inaugural Address, he praised entrepreneurs for having “faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth and opportunity” (January 20, 1981). The juxtaposition of “wealth” and “opportunity” suggests that the production of wealth

creates opportunity for all those with faith in the system. Moreover, according to Reagan, wealth is not produced by human action alone, but by having faith in the “idea” of the free market system. This fosters belief in the interrelatedness of all United States citizens who are united by their faith in the system and in God. Furthermore, in his Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business on May 14, 1983, Reagan explained that the sharing of wealth is what keeps a capitalist, free market system working:

Success comes from when [small business people] can anticipate and deliver what you, the consumer, wants, and do it in a way that satisfies you. As Gilder points out, entrepreneurs intuitively understand one of the world’s best kept secrets: capitalism begins with giving. And capitalism works best and creates the greatest wealth and human progress for all when it follows the teachings of scripture: Give and you will be given unto...search and you will find...eat [*sic*] your bread upon the waters and it will return to you manifold. [*sic*]

Thus, not only did Reagan once again connect individuals within the covenantal market space, but he also cited God as legitimating free enterprise with Scripture. Reagan also used the biblical story of the *Parable of the Talents* to moralize entrepreneurship:

In the Parable of Talents, the man who invests and multiplies his money is praised. But the rich who horde their wealth are rebuked in scripture. True wealth is not measured in things like money or oil, but in the treasures of the mind and spirit. Oil was worthless until entrepreneurs with ideas and the freedom and faith to take risks managed to locate it, extract it, and put it to work for humanity. (May 14, 1983, Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business)

Here Reagan not only assured entrepreneurs that they will be rewarded by God if they take risks, but assured all of humanity that the wealth of entrepreneurs or business people would be used to help them as well.

All of this led to the implication that if people are producing wealth for themselves that their wealth would “trickle-around” or “trickle-down.” Reagan argued that the economic success of one was the success of all in covenantal market space. Once again, Reagan referenced Gilder, who wrote in his book *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) that the “most successful entrepreneurs contribute far more to society than they ever recover. And most of them win no riches at all. They are the heroes of economic life. And those who begrudge them their rewards demonstrate a failure to understand their role and their promise” (May 14, 1983, Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business). Their role, according to Reagan, was to lead the country in entrepreneurship and release a dynamic and contagious energy into the market place. Both the wealth and energy, then, would spur others into action and remind them that they could also become entrepreneurs.

Reagan, thus, preached a “gospel of wealth” like that popularized by Russell Conwell in the 1880s and a “rags to riches” message reminiscent of the short children stories of Horatio Alger. Both Conwell and Alger suggested that it was a lack of faith and creativity and a bad attitude that kept people from succeeding rather than structural barriers or a lack of resources, which helped to moralize the commercialization of society. Conwell, a preacher and academic, began delivering his *Acre of Diamonds* speech sometime in the early 1870s and delivered it about six-thousand times during his life. Conwell argued that it was necessary to have faith in one’s ability and in one’s value

to other people to succeed. Conwell encouraged people to be resourceful and turn what materials they do have into something of use for others. At one point in his speech, Conwell (1887) hypothetically addressed the audience: “You say you have no capital – but you have a jackknife” (p. 529). Conwell (1887) used a story of a man who had lost work but used his knife to make toys, resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars in profit, to illustrate a central point: “There is the whole thing; not in having the machinery or the capital, but in knowing what the people want” (p. 529). Thus, Conwell instilled within people the belief that people were connected in the economy and each individual just had to have faith in their particular place within it.

Similarly, the short stories of Horatio Alger promoted a hopeful message that boys living in large cities could rise to social, economic, and political prominence if they worked hard enough and practiced virtue. The “rags to riches” stories of Alger in the nineteenth century had their roots in early Puritanism and were centered “around the ethical maxims of industry, frugality, and prudence; in short, around the behavioral patterns enjoined by the Protestant ethic. Men living by these rules were likely to be successful; men living in violation of them were certain to fail” (Weiss, 1969, p. 5). Decker (1997) describes Alger’s first and most-read short story, *Ragged Dick* (1868), as a typical “luck and pluck story,” where God bestows his grace or “moral luck” upon white males of middle- and working-class origins and “creates the context in which the display of market pluck is rewarded with a respectable occupation and income” (p. 2). Moreover, within this context economic actors are placed into a dynamic relationship with one another and elevated as symbols of a national economic mythos: “The fact that the

protagonist [in *Ragged Dick*] not only wraps himself in the flag but attempts to sell the clothes off his back to the same customer (at a “reasonable” price) suggests a link between a free country and the free market” (Decker, 1997, p. xx)

Interestingly, Conwell’s speech and gospel of wealth philosophy and Alger’s stories became most popular when economic conditions began to worsen (Decker, 1997). It is likely that fictionalized accounts of success despite the odds reassured the people of the United States that the rapid industrialization taking place could be regulated by the free market rather than government intervention. It is not surprising, then, that Reagan revisited the themes of these stories when calling for a revival of the free market during a time of economic crisis in the 1980s. These ideologies helped nourish the attitude that the federal government was not to be part of covenantal market space. When Reagan interpreted the *Parable of Talents*, he said, “We can find more oil and we can develop abundant supplies of new forms of energy if we encourage risk-taking by thousands and thousands of entrepreneurs, not rely on government to hoard, ration, and control” (May 14, 1983, Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business). In doing so, Reagan equated the government to the slave who hoards his talent and is rebuked by Jesus. According to Reagan, within the self-correcting system in which money and talents flowed from one person to the next and constant discovery was possible, government intervention needed to be limited.

Rather than take money and, thereby, agency, away from the people by taxing them, Reagan argued that the national deficit could be solved by the government reducing its own spending and having faith in the free market and the people of the United States

and their God. In his Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business, Reagan stated, “Governments reduce deficits by controlling spending and stimulating new wealth, wealth from investments of brave people with hope for the future, trust in their fellow man, and faith in God” (May 14, 1983). Thus, to desire government involvement in economic affairs, according to Reagan, was to deny the people of the United States the opportunity to fulfill their obligations in the covenantal market space. Part of the beauty of the space, then, was not that the intended results would be achieved but that faith in covenantal market space would provide a safety net for dynamic market activity.

An Evaluation of the “God Promise”

By establishing the free market system as the nation’s economic security blanket, Reagan relieved his administration from having to answer criticism directed at the legitimacy of his policy proposals. As Karier (1997) states, economic “hypotheses have to be repackaged as confident predictions, sometimes even promises” (Karier, p. 8). Reagan made the ultimate promise: the “God promise.” Once he defined economic actions in a moral framework, he was able to transcend questions of economics. Perhaps that is why many people can look back at the Reagan years with such nostalgia, whether or not his economic policies were ultimately successful. As his son Michael Reagan (1997) stated, “Eight years of Ronald Reagan in the White House proved that supply-side Reaganomics was not voodoo – it was *miraculous*” (p. 7). Accordingly, miracles cannot be explained, but they happen because the people have faith. Reagan assured the people that embracing the covenantal market space was tantamount to accepting God’s grace, mysterious as it may be. Conversely, to question free market activity was to deny God’s

promise. As the Puritans were taught, faithful servants accepted that God reveals only as much truth as He desires while “[e]verything else, including the meaning of our individual destiny, is hidden in dark mystery which it would be both impossible to pierce and presumptuous to question” (Weber, 1930, p. 103).

Thus, Reagan was able to use covenantal form to frame the resulting economic conditions as a product of the reciprocal covenantal obligations between God and the people rather than a product of his economic policies although he “was manipulating the tax code to induce social change at least as much as the Keynesians were” (Sloan, 1999, p. 154). This allowed Reagan to *create* policy and disseminate his ideological views while suggesting that he was only *reflecting* the covenantal agreement. That Reagan’s covenantal market space was a rhetorical and social product rather than an economic “reality” was concealed by the “*illusion of transparency*” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 27):

What happens in a space lends a miraculous quality to thought, which becomes incarnate by means of a *design* (in both senses of the word). The design serves as a mediator – itself of great fidelity – between mental activity (invention) and social activity (realization); and it is deployed in space. [...] Hence a rough coincidence is assumed to exist between social space on the one hand and mental space – the (topological) space of thoughts and utterances – on the other. By what path, and by means of what magic, is this thought to come about? (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 27-28)

The answer to this question, according to Reagan, was the “magic of the market” that was preserved in the covenantal market space he created within which tax cuts and trickle-down economics made sense, at least from a moral standpoint.

Accordingly, growing economic inequalities that resulted from free market policies did not seem to affect the political success of the Reagan administration (Sloan, 1999). Reagan’s nurturing of a covenantal market space within which everyone was welcome and could profit seemed to mask the fact that wealth was not trickling down but a widening income gap was being increased by “Reaganomics” (Sloan, 1999; Krugman; Foley, 1990, p. 45, Hudson and Davies, 2008, p. 2). Foley (1990) states that “85 per cent of Reagan’s 1981 cuts in income and estate taxes, for example, went to those with incomes of over \$50,000 per annum. This became the pattern in the Reagan years” (p. 34). This calls into question Reagan’s assertion that by providing more money to those at the top of the economic scale, more money would reach the people on the bottom. Yet Reagan continued to use his tax policies to reward the people who had the most resources in the first place. Stockman even called Reagan’s 1981 tax cut “a Trojan horse” to bring down the top tax rate (Knickerbocker, 2011, April 24).

Perhaps rewarding people who had the most resources already would not have been as significant an issue if the “wilderness” that Reagan spoke of had been more than a metaphor. What had been a physical reality that offered unlimited natural resources to the Puritans three hundred years earlier did not exist in the 1980s. As Haller (1951) states,

New England was, of course, everywhere sparsely populated relative to available resources, by comparisons with most inhabited and known regions of that day and this. With no great delay or difficulty, and with no sweeping technological innovations, the region continued for two centuries more or less to absorb additional labor and capital as they presented themselves. (p. 28)

As the country grew, however, what was once a land of unlimited resources that were relatively uniformly distributed (Haller, 1951, pp. 28-29) turned into a land of limited resources that were often seized by the people who already had the majority of them. Weiss (1969) states that “the opportunities presented by a virgin continent were an invitation to restlessness and ambition. Men who felled the forests and cleared the fields were quick to sense the possibilities of rising in the world and were prone to disregard moral restraints that might bar the way” (p. 27). In a land of limited resources, people began to compete for resources rather than share them. As a result, many disadvantaged United States citizens wandered in the wilderness while others prospered.

In his first major speech as a politician on October 27, 1964, Reagan quoted Winston Churchill: “And he said, ‘There is something going on in time and space, and beyond time and space, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty’” (*A Time for Choosing*). Reagan began defining this “space” early in his career and continued to do so throughout this presidency. This space spelled out a particular type of duty that was, at once, economic and moral: the people’s embrace of the free market system and their rejection of taxes and government spending meant that they were fulfilling their covenantal duty. In his Remarks About Federal Tax Reduction Legislation at a Meeting

of the House Republican Conference on July 24, 1981, three days before he addressed the nation and only a few weeks before he signed into law the biggest tax cut in United States history, Reagan equated the tax cut to the fulfillment of a covenantal promise. He said,

We pledged that within the year we would not only cut Federal spending that had grown out of control, we would cut taxes that had stolen the hope for a better tomorrow. We made a solemn covenant with the American people, and today we're within striking distance of those goals.

The tax cut, according to Reagan, was necessary to provide the people of the United States with the freedom to have faith again – in God, in each other, and in the market. Moreover, in doing so, Reagan used the covenantal market space he defined as a conduit by which his administration could fulfill its covenantal obligations to God and the people of the United States.

As his presidency and political career were coming to the end, Reagan memorialized his contribution to the United States. When he began his political career in 1964, he told the people of the United States that they had a “duty.” Near the end of his presidency on February 9, 1987, he told the people they had fulfilled it because they had embraced the covenantal market space he provided:

Well, whatever our critics say, I think all of us can be confident that the American people realize – just as I think someday historians will acknowledge – that moving back to concepts like limited government and the free market, as well as respect for the entrepreneur, created one of the most important social and

economic revolutions in our history. (Remarks at the White House Briefing
for Supporters of Welfare Reform)

Ultimately, Reagan left office achieving his goal: the covenantal market story had been
told and “sold” to the people of the United States.

Chapter 4

For the “Welfare” of the People: A Universal Moral Psychology and System of Work

On American Enterprise Day on October 2, 1981, President Ronald Reagan declared, “As the foundation of our economic life, free enterprise depends on and serves every American. It is the enemy of poverty” (Proclamation 4866). Despite every modern president’s commitment to free enterprise, the problem of poverty has continued to exist, and each president has addressed it differently. So it was with President Ronald Reagan, whose dedication to free market activity alone, as examined in the previous chapter, could not ease concerns over the issue of poverty. When Reagan took office in 1981, poverty in the United States was on the rise again after decreasing temporarily in the 1960s and early 1970s (Reisch, 2009). As president, he could not ignore the increasing economic struggles of the poor. At the same time, Reagan could not afford to use federal funds to assist in their care, with inflation skyrocketing and the federal deficit burgeoning out of control. Rather than spend money, Reagan needed to reduce the cost of government. This feat was problematic because he insisted on cutting taxes and increasing military spending³⁴ and did not reform Social Security because it proved to be too politically risky (Brandt, 2009; Sloan, 1999; Karaagac, 2000; Weaver, 2000). Ironically, then, the Reagan administration made cuts in welfare and took away funding for people who economically needed it most.

³⁴ In his remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner on February 26, 1982, he stated, “So, let me be very clear. We will press for further cuts in Federal spending. We will protect the tax reductions already passed. We will spend on defense what is necessary for our national security. I have no intention of leading the Republican Party into next fall's election on a platform of higher taxes and cut-rate defense.”

Reagan legitimated these cuts to welfare by drawing upon a covenantal framework, first established by the Puritans, which allowed him to frame poverty as a moral problem that needed a moral solution rather than an economic problem that needed an economic solution. According to Reagan, welfare reform was necessary in order to restore individualism, unify society, and bring economic relationships back under divine decree. Referring to ways in which the Puritans used covenant, Peacock (2000) states,

To a degree, the covenant may be thought of as a collective defense mechanism – part of the problem, part of the cure – for the confused identity of a whole cultural system in transition. It both promoted and compensated for a newly competitive, less closely intertwined web of reciprocal relations among early modern individuals. [...] It balanced political freedom and divine commandment, solidarity and exclusivity, and self-interest and communal obligation. (p. 218).

In this chapter, I explore how Reagan, too, used covenantal form in his discourse about welfare to balance works and grace, individualism with communalism, and freedom with divine order.

The covenantal arrangement Reagan devised allowed individuals to fulfill their calling by utilizing their special talents while constructing them as part of a universal moral psychology and system of work as a group of individuals who covenanted with one another. Within this moral framework, the people of the United States were given the opportunity to fulfill their moral obligations to themselves, to God, and to the overall community simultaneously. Thus, on the one hand, the “undeserving poor” were rehabilitated as self-sufficient members of society and provided with the opportunity to

find and use their God-given talents in work. On the other hand, the financially stable members of society were freed from the responsibility of providing material assistance to those in need because to do so would be to take away an individual's opportunity to find their talents and put them to use in work. Ultimately, then, the people of the United States, rich and poor, were situated in accord with God's plan. Whereas the previous chapters focused more on Reagan's prescription of U.S. citizens' covenantal obligations to themselves and to God as the "city on a hill," this chapter will delve into how he instructed the people of the United States to covenant with one another regarding the economy and, subsequently, his welfare policies.

In what follows, first, I briefly summarize the history of welfare policies in the United States. Second, I outline the shift in welfare policy that took place under the Reagan Administration. Next, I explain the conservative ideology behind Reagan's welfare views. Fourth, I provide an overview of the covenantal tradition on which Reagan's welfare rhetoric rested. Then, I assess how Reagan encouraged welfare recipients to escape from their dependence on welfare, find their talents from God, and join the rest of society as participants in a universal moral system of work. Finally, I discuss several problematic implications of Reagan's use of covenantal form as a rhetorical tool to reform welfare in the United States in the 1980s.

Welfare Policies Throughout History

The treatment of the poor in the United States has its roots in the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 16th century England. For the most part, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the poor received help through personal charity or local government which used tax

money to build almshouses or provide money to the aged and handicapped (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 15). Moreover, the Second Great Awakening, a religious movement that took place from about 1820 to 1840, celebrated the importance of humans going beyond purely religious concerns to help the poor and mentally ill by running poorhouses and asylums. From the start, assistance to the poor in the United States had always contended with the questions of who deserved help and how to best deliver that help, which depended significantly on how the poor were characterized. As early as the 18th century, society often differentiated between the “undeserving” poor, also called “paupers,” who were thought to be responsible for their poverty, and the “deserving” poor, which usually meant widowed mothers or people with physical disabilities (Katz, 1989; Joe and Rogers, 1989). Rather than provide money to the “undeserving poor,” neighbors thought it was best to help the poor help themselves by providing them with spiritual guidance or pointing them toward employment. Moreover, in the middle to late 1800s, the idea that the poor did not need material assistance but moral encouragement or self-help provided by social workers gained prominence (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 16). Although reformers in the 19th century were initially dedicated to helping the poor help themselves, the hope for rehabilitation turned to disgust and blame as time went by and reform efforts failed. Lower classes full of people who were considered unmotivated, lazy, and lacked piety were labeled “dangerous classes.” Rather than continue to help the less fortunate, the process of “othering,” or blaming them for their social ills became more prominent (Walters, 1997). The “social program” that was endorsed instead was one of Christian

discipline, hard work, and a religious ethic, like that endorsed by Henry Ward Beecher, one of the best known Protestant preachers of the 1800s.

This response to poverty was reinforced by social philosophies like the gospel of wealth and social Darwinism, which emerged in the midst of Gilded Age in the late 1800s, a period of time when industrialization exploded, immigration rose, and urbanization caused major strife, economic distress, and rampant poverty in the cities. The gospel of wealth and social Darwinism instructed people that the best thing they could do to cope with the crises of the time was tend to their own obligations and excuse themselves from the responsibility of attending to the poverty of others. The gospel of wealth was prominently expressed by Russell Conwell in his *Acres of Diamonds* speech and premised on the idea that people could, through effort and a good attitude, create wealth and happiness for themselves regardless of their socio-economic status or lack of material means. In Conwell's view, being poor was an attitude rather than a material condition. In his speech, he stated, "Al Hafed was at once a poor man; he had not lost anything, he was poor because he was discontented, and he was discontented because he thought he was poor" (1887, p. 525). Similarly, William Graham Sumner, a well-known public critic and social Darwinist, used his speech *The Forgotten Man* in 1883 and beyond to argue that assistance to the poor destroyed the opportunities for the hardworking, "independent," "self-supporting," middle-class "forgotten man" to succeed. According to Sumner, the "forgotten man" had been forgotten because the poor were coddled by the wealthy at the "forgotten man's" expense. Accordingly, Sumner argued that coddling the poor undermined a strong work ethic. Social Darwinism, like the gospel

of wealth, contended that poverty was not a structural problem but a problem of “spirit” or effort.

Hence, until the Great Depression, it was commonly assumed that adequate economic sustenance would follow if you worked and had a positive attitude. These conceptions restricted the number of poor people who were considered “deserving” of outside help. Able-bodied men were expected to work, and the “deserving” poor were limited to people with disabilities or to women whose husbands had died. The Federal government, however, took on a new role in the business of poverty relief during the Great Depression, which resulted in mass economic destruction and poverty. Although all but six of the states had Mother’s Pension programs by 1926 for widowed mothers, largely because they were considered “deserving” recipients (p. 16, Joe and Rogers; McCulley, 1989), there was no expansive federal welfare program until a package of policies was passed under the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Administration in the 1930s. The unprecedented economic devastation of the Great Depression resulted in a re-evaluation of what criteria distinguished the “deserving” poor from the “undeserving” poor. Many diligent workers, especially farmers, were left with nothing. The policies of the New Deal, which provided aid to many people who previously would have been labeled “undeserving,” were accepted as necessary measures. Those who received aid could accept it in a less stigmatized manner.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Congress passed the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) in 1933, which enacted emergency work relief programs but also gave cash to the poorest families in the country. In 1935, FERA was replaced with a jobs act

called the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was run by the states and established projects for the unemployed who were receiving relief (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 16-17; Leighninger and Leighninger, 2009). The Social Security Act of 1935, however, was implemented as a more permanent solution to the need for social insurance. It protected people from the loss of income owing to retirement or unemployment and also provided aid to the blind. Initially, there was nothing in the Act that focused on poverty specifically, but Title IV called for the enactment of Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), which provided federal cash payments to children with only one caretaker. The resulting Social Security Act took the shape of a “two-tier system for dealing with poverty and dependence”: the first tier was based on universal entitlements to people who were workers or former workers, while the second tier was means-tested with states having the autonomy to determine “need” (Leighninger, and Leighninger, 2009, p. 142). Unlike providing financial security in retirement, which was thought of as a type of social insurance, providing financial assistance to the poor through ADC was considered welfare (Berkowitz, 1991, p. 91), something many politicians, including Roosevelt, were wary of but endorsed largely out of the political necessities of the time (Berkowitz, 1991, p. 92). Berkowitz (1991) states, “Roosevelt took as his major premise the corrosive effects of welfare on the human spirit, its effect as a narcotic, and saw in social insurance an uplifting rather than soul-destroying program” (p. 91). It was assumed, however, that the need for ADC would decrease as the economy grew stronger. Thus, the expansion of the relatively small program was both unanticipated and problematic.

By the 1960s, however, as the welfare rolls continued to expand, the question of who deserved assistance resurfaced, and the question of how to make recipients self-sufficient was debated. The number of people on welfare and its cost were rising to unprecedented levels (Joe and Rogers, 1985; Berkowitz, 1991). Both liberals and conservatives became alarmed because welfare seemed to be turning into a type of preventable dependency instead of a necessity and welfare seemed to be emphasized more than social insurance (Berkowitz, 1991). The majority of recipients were no longer considered among the “deserving poor” (McCulley, 1989, p. 77). Joe and Rogers (1989) state:

By 1960, the worthiness of the clients on public assistance was beginning to be called into question; 40 percent of all ADC clients were black, and families were staying on for longer periods of time. Racial tensions flared, the public became concerned about family breakdown, and ADC was blamed for encouraging immorality among the poor. Public outrage began to mount. (p. 19)

Accordingly, a consensus formed that the policies that had been in place since the New Deal needed to be assessed and reformed.

President John F. Kennedy called for services directed toward poverty prevention and rehabilitation of the poor, asserting that cash assistance was not a permanent solution (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 19). He endorsed the idea of rehabilitation: that people need to be transitioned from a state of welfare to self-sufficiency and learn the skills to get jobs so they could find security in the “reassurances of the world of work” (Berkowitz, 1999, p. 8). In 1962, a series of amendments were made to the Social Security Act with “two

broad aims[:] to strengthen family life and to move AFDC recipients toward self-support” (McCulley, 1989, p. 79). Moreover, the Kennedy Administration increased grants for community work and called for the federal government to provide a three-dollar match for every one dollar the state contributed to staff training and rehabilitative services (Berkowitz, 1999, p. 109-110).

Yet, in some ways, welfare aid expanded under the Kennedy Administration. In 1961, the Aid to Dependent Children-Unemployed Parents (ACT-UP) was passed, which allowed for assistance to two-parent families if the father of the family agreed to training or work. Congress hoped this would encourage unemployed fathers not to desert their families (McCulley, 1989). In 1962, the name of the ADC program was changed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADFC), which reflected its broadened scope: now two-parent families with dependent children were eligible in cases where the father was unemployed but attempted to get work (Joe and Rogers, 1985). Before 1962, ADFC was reserved for the unemployed and funds were not granted to provide work for people (McCulley, 1989, p. 79, references Rein, 1974, p. 13).

Following the momentum of the Kennedy Administration, President Lyndon Johnson made poverty relief a focal point. In his 1964 State of the Union Address, Johnson declared an “unconditional war on poverty,” which he elaborated in numerous speeches and policy proposals. The Johnson Administration used the Economic Opportunity Act as its main instrument of aid, which included programs such as Upward Bound, Community Action, Head Start, Job Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America, and the Office of Economic Opportunity (Reisch, 2009, p. 157). In addition,

local communities were given grants for community projects that would create employment opportunities and improve the performance and productivity of workers and the conditions under which people worked and learned (Berkowitz, 1991, p. 113). The 1964 Civil Rights Act and the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) were also passed under the Johnson administration, which expanded existing entitlement programs to help implement these new programs (Reisch, 2009, p. 157).

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, poverty declined from 19 percent in 1964 to 11.1 percent in 1973 (p. 164, Reisch, 2009). At the same time, however, AFDC rolls continued to grow. Between 1965 and 1971, the number of AFDC recipients doubled. In 1971, it served 9.7 million people and in 1976 it served 11.5 million people (Joe and Rogers, 1985, pp.22-23). McCulley (1989) argues that there are three main reasons for the increase: 1) population growth and the changing of family patterns in terms of increased divorce, unwanted pregnancies, and women being deserted, 2) the broadening of eligibility, and 3) that welfare agencies viewed recipients more favorably and, therefore, granted assistance with greater leniency (pp. 77-78). Although many liberals focused on the decrease in poverty, conservatives focused on the increase of assistance provided by the federal government and lamented that too many people were receiving assistance rather than working. Although the War on Poverty policies still privileged employment incentives and training over income maintenance (p. 159, Reisch, 2009), conservatives contended that too much federal money was being doled out to the “undeserving” and able-bodied poor.

Reagan's New Direction in Welfare Policy

When Reagan took office in 1981, conditions were ripe for welfare reform. Although liberal proponents of the War on Poverty contended that its policies were, in President Johnson's words, "A hand up, not a handout," conservative critics argued that they encouraged a "cycle of dependency" (Gillette, 1996). The policies of the Johnson Administration's "Great Society" were viewed by conservatives as failed attempts to help the poor that had disastrous effects on the nation's economy, particularly the deficit, and the nation's morale. Conservatives viewed Reagan as their champion who would "fix" welfare. Reagan, after all, had been calling for reform of the federal welfare system for fifteen years. As a spokesperson for 1964 Republican Presidential Candidate Barry Goldwater, Reagan stated,

If government planning and welfare had the answer and they've had almost 30 years of it, shouldn't we expect government to almost read the score to us once in a while? Shouldn't they be telling us about the decline each year in the number of people needing help?

But the reverse is true. Each year the need grows greater, the program grows greater. (October 27, 1964, A Time for Choosing)

By the time Reagan became president sixteen years later, conservatives had gathered even more evidence that the welfare policies championed by the Democrats had little legitimacy and that the policies resulting from the War on Poverty were misinformed.

Reagan's preferences about welfare reform contrasted markedly with his two presidential predecessors, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter, whose administrations had

tried to implement comprehensive welfare reforms but were blocked by Congress.

Nixon had tried to replace ADFC with Family Assistance Program (FAP) which would have combined a guaranteed minimum income with a negative income tax³⁵ on those eligible for the program. In 1977, the Carter Administration proposed the Program for Better Jobs and Income (PBJI), which would have reformed cash-assistance program for low-income families and implemented a major jobs creation program, both of which would replace ADFC, Social Security Income, and Food Stamps (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 22; McCulley, 1989, pp. 83-84). Both Nixon's and Carter's reforms would have increased the federal government's role in cash-assistance programs, broadened eligibility, and implemented a form of a guaranteed income plan. The programs were attacked on several fronts (Weaver, 2000, pp. 68-70). Reagan believed that both were disincentives to work, and he was dedicated to removing both from the agenda (Weaver, 2000, p. 66). Reagan believed that "the guaranteed income, far from preserving work incentives, actually destroyed them. 'What incentive is there for quality or quantity in work or employment if a guaranteed income is created?' [he] asked" (Berkowitz, 1991, p. 134). Instead of cash work incentives, Reagan called for mandatory workfare in exchange for benefits (McCulley, 1989, p. 96; Weaver, 2000, p. 66) with the eventual weaning off of benefits altogether. Reagan believed that allowing people to keep more of their wages

³⁵ The Negative Income Tax, proposed by Milton Friedman in the late 1960s, held that "everyone covered by the plan (which could be everyone in a society or a smaller group, such as families with young children) would be guaranteed a minimum level of income by the government. These benefits would be taxed back at some fixed rate (for example fifty cents on the dollar) for every dollar earned above a certain level until the benefits disappeared. Thus persons covered by the program should always be better off by working more, although an additional dollar of earnings in the income range where income subsidies were being phased out would translate into less than a full dollar of increased income" (Weaver, 2000, p. 57).

while on welfare was not effective in moving people off of welfare and into work (Weaver, 2000, p. 66).

In effect, “Reagan’s reforms did the opposite” of what FAP and PBJI proposed (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 129). Unlike the comprehensive and separate proposed reforms of Nixon and Carter, Reagan’s first major welfare reform victory was passed as part of the 1981 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (OBRA). Overall, the provisions affected AFDC by removing work incentives such as the ability to receive deductions for childcare or transportation expenses, requiring the states to impose mandatory work requirements for those receiving aid, and restricting eligibility for families with jobs by mandating a maximum income ceiling (Weaver, 2000, p. 67-68; Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 129). In effect, 687,000 households out of 3.9 million lost all or part of their benefits, with 408,000 of those households dropped completely. The households most vulnerable to the cuts were those combining work with welfare (McCulley, 1989, p. 87).³⁶ McCulley (1989) states, “Studies that showed that as a result of these changes, welfare recipients who worked would either be marginally better off or not at all better off than those who did not” (p. 87).³⁷ The changes in ADFC benefits reflected Reagan’s belief that welfare benefit should be reserved for families with no other source of income (McCulley, 1989, p. 87) and that work incentives encouraged people to remain dependent

³⁶ Retrieved from Congressional Quarterly Almanac, vol. XXXVII, 97th Cong., 1st sess., 1981, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., p. 461

³⁷ The 1984 Omnibus Deficit Reduction Act reinstated some benefits for working mothers and eased the transition from welfare to work for other people, but only a very small percentage of families who lost their ADFC benefits in 1981-1982 had them reinstated (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 133; Also see McCulley, 1989, p. 88).

on welfare, which marked the first time federal policy was based on this belief (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 46).

As a “new consensus” formed on the importance of work, the Reagan Administration again put welfare reform on the agenda in 1986 and 1987, and was successful in passing the first major welfare reform since the 1960s, the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988. It emphasized the necessity of putting people to work in the labor force for wages and represented a shift in the work orientation of ADFC (Weaver, 2000). Furthermore, FSA called for a shift of federal to state control and objected to programs that involved any increase in the provision of federal funds. It gave states the freedom to experiment with their programs, especially in regard to how to put welfare mothers to work. FSA replaced the 1967 Work Incentives Program (WIN), which never received appropriate funding,³⁸ with the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program that was coordinated by State Welfare Departments (Weaver, 2000, p. 77). States were required to penalize welfare recipients who did not participate in the JOBS program unless the recipients were making a good-faith attempt to gain employment or if their work income exceeded the JOBS incentives. At the same time, states were required to provide provisions for childcare and transportation, and temporary Medicaid for people in the JOBS program (Weaver, 2000, p. 77). Workfare was required for fathers on the ADFC-UP Program. Overall, FSA combined a carrot and sticks approach in an attempt to get people working (Weaver, 2000, pp. 77-78).

³⁸ The Reagan Administration consistently objected to the WIN program because of the significant amount of federal funds that were used. The administration was successful in cutting the program in half (McCulley, 1989, p. 91).

One way the Reagan Administration tried to take the onus off of the government to provide welfare relief but still create jobs was through its private-sector initiatives strategy that encouraged public-private partnerships as a way to solve public needs at the community level. It called on the federal government to transfer its oversight to churches, unions, foundations, and, particularly, businesses that were thought to be more “in touch” with the needs of individuals. In January 1981, the White House began strategic planning and created a Task Force in October 1981 (Berger, 1984). Reagan announced the private-sector initiatives plan during his speech to the National Alliance of Business (NAB) on October 5, 1981. An important aspect of private-sector initiatives was the idea that federal incentives would encourage businesses to use their leadership and management expertise to help other community members, contribute financially to the community, and offer volunteer work and job training that would help people gain the skills necessary for entry into the workforce (“Reagan Panel Seeks Change in Charity Effort,” p. 38). This paired with two programs endorsed by the Reagan Administration, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)³⁹ and the extension of the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit (TJTC), demonstrated the Administration’s belief that private businesses could play a major role in putting people to work and incorporating them into the circle of economic activity. JTPA, approved by Congress in October 1982, provided block grants to states and private business for job training for disadvantaged people, while TJTC,

³⁹ JTPA replaced the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1974 (CETA).

approved by Congress in August 1982, encouraged businesses to hire disadvantaged workers (Ripley and Franklin, 1983, p. 695).⁴⁰

The Conservative Ideology Behind Reagan's Welfare Policy

That Reagan shifted the direction of welfare policy in the United States alarmed many people, particularly liberal politicians. They accused the Reagan Administration of being uncompassionate and balancing the budget on the backs of poor people, especially poor children. They cited the fact that Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and the Food Stamp program had been cut by thirteen percent and child nutrition programs had been cut by twenty-eight percent as evidence (Karaagac, 2000, p. 135). Moreover, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) called his policies “economic Darwinism” (Sloan, 1999). The Reagan’s administration’s rebuttal to this charge was waged primarily on philosophical grounds, and, as I will argue, on rhetorical and moral grounds, rather than economic grounds. Although critics contend that “the administration’s goal of saving money went hand-in-hand with its goal of paring down the welfare rolls” (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 129; see also Stoez, 2009; Weaver, 2000), Reagan used his discourse to downplay the extent to

⁴⁰ I do not mean to suggest that Reagan did not advocate traditional community service in its most basic sense. Inevitably, one of the ways he proposed to help the poor entailed community service and volunteerism. In his Acceptance Speech at the 1980 Republican National Convention, Reagan called on the people of the United States to “pledge to restore, in our time, the American spirit of voluntary service, of cooperation, of private and community initiative; a spirit that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation” (July 17, 1980). Similarly, in an Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery during his first year in office, Reagan heralded the “spirit of voluntarism [seen in] the community charity drive, support of hospitals and all manner of nonprofit institutions, the rallying around whenever disaster or tragedy strikes” (September 24, 1981). He said, “The truth is we’ve let government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of community pride and neighborliness” (September 24, 1981). Still, a thorough textual analysis of his presidential speeches indicates that the type of community “service” that Reagan stressed took the form of the private-sector initiatives, a strategy previously described, and focused on the idea of “helping others help themselves” through work, which will be detailed later in the chapter.

which this was true. Thus, in order to save money and argue that cutting their welfare benefits would lift them out of poverty, Reagan dissociated his plan for welfare reform from economics and associated it with morality. Stricter (2007) states, “By the late 70s and certainly by the mid-1980s – and except for the 1981-82 depression – moralistic ideas did more than economic facts like unemployment to shape public discourse about poverty and economic insecurity” (p. 150).

One recognized way that Reagan used moralistic ideas was by presenting his plan for welfare reform from a framework of fairness. Reagan promised that he would protect the “truly needy” (Zarefsky, Miller-Tutzauer, and Tutzauer, 1984)⁴¹ or “deserving” poor and make the “undeserving” poor become self-sufficient. According to Reagan, however, most of the people collecting welfare benefits were not “truly needy” but were dishonestly collecting welfare benefits. As such, he created a “good vs. evil dichotomy” between different recipients (Kiewe and Houck, 1989, p. 79). Joe and Rogers (1985) state, “To the public, the budgetary goal was couched in terms of a major welfare effort to rid the welfare system of cheaters and return ADFC to its rightful place as a small program serving only the truly needy” (p. 129).⁴² Furthermore, Karaagac (2000) asserts that Reagan’s “rhetoric often focused on alleged ‘welfare cheats,’ a subtle code word for

⁴¹ Reagan used this phrase in many major speeches, including the following: February 18, 1981, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery; July 17, 1981, Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation; September 24, 1981, Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery; January 25, 1983, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union; April 24, 1985, Address to the Nation on Federal Budget and Deficit Reduction; February 4, 1986, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union.

⁴² In his February 26, 1982, Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Committee Dinner, Reagan touted the welfare reform he presided over as governor of California that “got the cheaters and the undeserving off the welfare rolls.”

poor blacks on governmental assistance” (p. 134) and “Chicago ‘welfare queen[s]’ who had bilked the system” (p. 135).

Yet in this chapter I argue that Reagan did much deeper rhetorical work than simply label the “undeserving” poor: he used covenantal form to offer them a pathway to moral redemption through work, which Reagan argued was the only way citizens could fulfill their obligation to one another. Rather than demonize the poor, he recognized that they had within them the same universal moral psychology as the rest of society that would allow them to be rehabilitated. Karaagac (2000) states that welfare

offends many Americans’ sense of the redemptive and almost moral virtue of work, of self-improvement and enterprise. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the “welfare state” subtly contradicts the idea of the rehabilitative possibilities of American society. [...] Welfarism was, for many, an admission of societal failure. (p. 138)

Reagan was adamant that he would not let the people of the United States fail in their duty and turn their backs on the principles upon which the country was founded.

Reagan’s emphasis on work in his welfare rhetoric and policies reflected a particular ideology regarding the question of what to do about the poor and what to make of the “culture of poverty” thesis proposed by liberals. The culture of poverty held that there were valid psychological reasons for poverty that had to be considered along with the accepted biological reasons such as having a physical disability or being a widowed woman. Katz (1989) states, “It placed in a class by themselves those whose behaviors and values converted their poverty into an enclosed and self-perpetuating world of

dependence” (p. 16). In his book, *The Other America* (1963),⁴³ Harrington argued that the poor composed a counterculture in which a different type of people live who cannot and did not think like people in the middle and affluent classes. Thus, Harrington contended that any effort to eradicate poverty through policies and attitudes that do not account for this major difference in both materiality and psychology was bound to fail. Harrington believed governmental intervention was necessary because the economic struggles of some people were fundamentally different than those of others. Harrington argued that the culture of poverty (p. 15) trapped poor people in a vicious cycle and prevented them from helping themselves.

The culture of poverty thesis provided a basis for liberal solutions to poverty and President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty in the 1960s. Beginning mainly in the 1970s, however, a countervailing ideology began to gain ground and picked up momentum in the 1980s and early 1990s. The culture of poverty thesis became the basis for a conservative critique (Katz, 1989, pp. 17-19), perhaps best epitomized by the views presented in George Gilder’s book *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) and Lawrence M. Mead’s book *Beyond Entitlement* (1986), and, later, Marvin Olasky’s book *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (1992). Conservatives used the idea of a culture of poverty as further evidence that the poor needed to help themselves and needed to change because this “culture” was, if anything, the cause of rather than the result of poverty. Thus, in contrast to liberals like Harrington who saw government assistance and material aid as a way to address the culture of poverty, conservatives fixated on returning the poor to the

⁴³ In 1999, *Time* Magazine named Harrington’s book *The Other America* one of the top ten most influential books of the 20th century.

obligations that they had to themselves and to the rest of society. Rather than providing material assistance to those in need, Olasky endorsed the norm of the pre-1800s when “[l]eaders and volunteers both understood, moreover, that the most vital kind of help involved a change in worldview, not just temporary worldly conditions” (p. 30). Accordingly, these conservatives refuted the claim that the problem of poverty could be solved by simply giving the poor more money.⁴⁴

Although conservatives believed that poor people themselves needed to change, the type of remedy they advocated was different than what had been attempted in the past when “[s]ocial workers had tried to adjust the psychology of the individual[, and] economists, assuming away psychological problems, replaced individual pathology with economic rationality” (Berkowitz, 1999, p. 121). Rather than endorse a type of social scientific approach directed at social reformation or an economic approach that “assumed a world in which people responded rationally to economic incentives” (Berkowitz, 1999, p. 121), conservatives believed that moral rehabilitation was needed. For conservatives, this moral rehabilitation could be experienced through work. People could at once fulfill their moral obligations to themselves and to their community by working hard at their job participating in the field of employment.

Conservatives like Mead, Gilder, and Olasky argued that government welfare programs since the New Deal had made people dependent and denied them the

⁴⁴ See Nadasen (2005) for a discussion of how the Welfare Rights Movement in the United States demanded more money for welfare recipients, arguing that rather than needing to be “fixed,” poor people simply needed more resources. Moreover, Ginsberg and Solow (1974) argue that the reason that the War on Poverty policies did not ultimately work or result in large scale welfare reform that solved the problem of poverty was because they were underfunded. They state, “In judging the record of the 1960’s, it is useful to keep mind that a social program is usually better defined by its budget than by the language of the enabling legislation” (p. 216).

opportunity to be rehabilitated out of the culture of poverty. Conservatives argued that policymakers had failed to understand that people shared a morality that made them more similar than different, regardless of their economic situation. They objected to the belief that “the poor were some alien tribe, exotic in culture and motivation, who can be understood only through the channels of credentialed experience” because it “permits a series of new fables to arise, some explicit, most implicit in government programs” (Gilder, pp. 64- 65). Mead (1986) states,

To speak of obligating the poor may sound like an abandonment of the goal of equality in the sense of mainstream income and status for the poor, the traditional aim of social policy. In reality, the lack of standards in programs has probably increased the inequalities in this sense by undercutting the competences the disadvantaged need to achieve status. (p. 12)

He added that taking away economic obligations from the disadvantaged would be to treat them unequally, since equality means providing citizens with the same rights *and* obligations. Furthermore, Mead argued that simply providing benefits to poor people denies them from fulfilling the “more orderly values” in which they believe (p. 12).

Accordingly, if government programs were taken away, poor people would become more aware of their moral obligations and realize that if they altered their behavior, it would bring them in productive concert with the rest of society. He argued that the policies of the War on Poverty failed “because they largely ignored behavioral problems among the poor. In particular, they did not tell their clients with any authority that they ought to behave differently” (p. 49).

The Puritan Covenantal Tradition as Redemption

It was Reagan, however, who translated this conservative ideology into everyday language and a familiar morality that the people of the United States could embrace. As the spokesman for this conservative cause, he used his discourse to instruct the people of the United States on how the poor could be redeemed. A major way in which he did this was by drawing from the covenantal idea of the Puritan or “Protestant” ethic, which informed many of conservative attitudes explained previously. The Protestant ethic generally refers to the idea that God bestows riches upon those who work hard and understands labor as a spiritual undertaking (Miller, 1953, p. 396). McGiffert (1969) states, “Puritanism thus inculcated the code of economic virtues – industry, probity, frugality, sobriety, charity, and the like – that historians call the Protestant Ethic” (p. 85). Upon arriving in New England, all Puritans, regardless of their socio-economic position, were expected to subscribe to the Puritan work ethic and live a life modeled on Christian discipline. That each person find their “calling” was an integral part of Puritan faith. Men were expected to find work and perform it well:

Everyone has a talent for something, given of God, which he must improve.

Although poverty is not a sin if it be suffered for causes outside one’s control, for any to accept it voluntarily is utterly reprehensible. God has so contrived the world that men must seek the necessities of life in the earth or in the sea, but objects of their search have been cunningly placed for the finding. (Miller, 1953, pp. 40-41)

Finding and embracing one's calling was inextricably connected to one's spiritual journey. Elliot (1975) states, "As a renewed emphasis on the theme of Christian duty, the ministers refurbished the idea of the unity of the earthly and heavenly callings. Under the doctrine of the calling every action becomes sacred" (p. 179). The Puritans believed that they could actively perform their faith in their calling (Weber, 1930, p. 158). Work became the conduit by which the Puritans could grow closer to God, understand Him better, and fulfill their obligations to Him (Miller, 1953, p. 5).

Each Puritan's calling was "God's commandment to the individual to work for the divine glory. [It] became connected with a further development of the providential interpretation of the economic order which had begun in scholasticism" (Weber, 1930, p. 160). Unlike other religions, a calling was not just a duty with which an individual had to acquiesce. Although other ascetic denominations like Lutheranism and Catholicism commanded that the faithful must labor, Puritans added "the psychological sanction of it through the conception of this labour as a calling, as the best, often in the last analysis the only means of attaining certainty of grace" (Weber, 1930, p. 178). Essentially, the Puritans believed that they could attain God's favor through working because it was their obligation to God. This belief was rooted in the Puritans' "complex machinery of interlocking covenants" (Miller, 1953, p. 252). The idea of a covenantal system eased the influence of the Calvinistic idea of predestination that was originally at the root of Puritan thought: that God had predetermined whether or not one had been saved and there was nothing a person could do to change their fate. The idea of a covenant of obligations allowed the Puritans, at the very least, to act in ways that could bring them closer to God.

Covenantal thought “transformed Calvinist doctrine from one of rigid predestination to one that emphasized freedom of human will and choice and the human acceptance of obligation and the responsibilities that flow from being obligated” (Elazar, 1996, p. 248).

Integrating the two primary covenants within the covenantal system, the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, was a major way in which the idea of predestination was tempered. In Puritan thought, the covenant of grace was about responding to God’s decision to save or elect you as one of the chosen by nurturing your spiritual relationship with Him through faith, repentance, and prayer. The covenant of works, on the other hand, was the “rule of righteousness” (Miller, 1954, p. 384) that the Puritans had to exhibit in their actions. The covenant of works gave everyday life more meaning and eased concerns about the futility of their actions. In other words, it acted as an impetus for the Puritans to find their calling through work. Moreover, not only did it provide hope that the Puritans could attain grace through works, it also demanded that Puritans who had been granted God’s grace outwardly display it in their works (Weber, 1930, p. 159).

The idea of an individual calling, however, did not violate the Puritan obligation to be bound together in a community of believers. Morgan (1969) states, “The Puritan Ethic whether enjoined by God, by history, or by philosophy, called for diligence in a productive calling, beneficial both to society and the individual” (p. 187). The idea of community and communal obligations was fundamental to Puritan thought and fit with their value of discipline. Having left England together to find a new world where they could worship freely, they pledged that New England would be, as Puritan leader and Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop (1630) stated, a “city upon a hill” that would be

an example to the rest of the world. In a sermon referred to as *A Model of Christian Charity* delivered aboard the *Arbella* on the voyage from England to New England, Winthrop emphasized that the community must bind together to serve God: “Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with Him for this worke. Wee haue taken out a commission.” The Puritans realized that they would be judged by others and God as a community as well as individuals, which meant that it made sense to take actions to allow others to better themselves economically and spiritually. Peacock (2000) states, “Winthrop’s expression of covenant implicitly balanced personal and federal identity since the import of all the other balances was that the well-being of the community was necessary to the individual’s pursuit of happiness” (2000, p. 218).

Accordingly, each Puritan’s calling in work was placed in a web of relationships in which each person’s economic calling fit within a “unified system” of economics and ethics (Weber, 1930, p. 117) and labor was “a characteristic element” (p. 109). The result, argues Weber (1930), was a “systematic rational ordering of the moral life as a whole” that demanded all people fulfill their calling through work (p. 126). Weber (1930) explains, “A man without a calling thus lacks the systematic, methodical character which is, as we have seen, demanded by worldly asceticism” (p. 161). This rational ordering of life infused Puritan morality into every segment of life and imposed disciplinary measures in a way that was distinct from other religions (Weber, 1930, p. 125). Kalberg (2002) describes this organization of life that Weber depicts as “methodical-rational” (p. xxxviii), a seemingly oxymoronic phrase which refers to the ordered process by which economic and aesthetic ambitions were realized through participation in a unified system

of labor that was, at once, unconscious and conscious. In other words, by making the “rational” decision to discipline themselves in their calling, individual Puritans would be granted entry into their specific place in the overall method of communal work predestined by God.

How this communal bond translated into helping Puritans within a community who were in need was complicated. In *A Model of Christian Charity*, Winthrop “specified the articles of the covenant as a practical guide to the reconciliation [of commerce and charity]. In true covenantal style, Winthrop’s discussion emphasized the obligation on the rich to help the poor” (Elazar, 1998, III, p. 22). Winthrop (1630) emphasized the “bonds of brotherly affection” (p. 35) and instructed the Puritans that they must “be willing to abridge [them]selves of [their] superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities, [and] uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality” (p. 48). Yet Winthrop did not advocate unadulterated assistance to the poor. The Puritan belief in hard work, strict discipline, and prosperous commerce and the idea that these virtues went hand-in-hand with piety prevented such a notion. It was not a right of the poor to receive help (Elazar, 1998, III, p. 22), but an act of brotherly love. It was prudent to provide assistance when there were “no other means whereby our christian brother may be relieved in his distress” (Winthrop, 1630, p. 36).

In other cases, however, brotherly love took on an entirely different connotation. If Puritans were thought capable of work, brotherly love translated into the strict doctrine of helping others help themselves. Since such a significant emphasis was put on dedicating one’s life to fulfilling one’s calling, the Puritans were extremely scornful of

entitlement. Although the notion of charity came under scrutiny because it gave poor people something for nothing, it was frowned upon more so because it denied people opportunities to embrace the value of hard work and, subsequently, the reward of strengthening their own piety in the covenant of grace. This allowed the poor to fulfill their own calling physically and spiritually and put them in a relationship with the rest of the community. As such, one's individual journey or individualism became an accepted and important part of the overall communal goal and economic success. Moreover, placed within the framework of the methodical-rational economic order, brotherly love "may only be practised for the glory of God and not in the service of the flesh," and, thus, "assumes a peculiarly objective and impersonal character, that of service in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment" (Weber, 1930, pp. 108-109). Weber (1930) states,

For the wonderfully purposeful organization and arrangement of this cosmos is, according both to the revelation of the Bible and to natural intuition, evidently designed by God to serve the utility of the human race. This makes labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness appear to promote the glory of God and hence to be willed by Him. (p.109)

In other words, to labor in the service of society in general was to fulfill the duty of brotherly love.

Furthermore, the de-emphasis on the importance of material goods and the supposed sinfulness of material acquisition as an end itself undermined the necessity for Puritans to provide people in the lower echelons of society with even the most basic

economic assistance. On the most basic level, the Puritan belief in frugality advised the Puritans not to take more than one's share of material goods. It was thought that if the Puritans adhered to this common precept then there would be enough resources left for the taking by other Puritans of all economic levels. Accordingly, it was believed that if Puritans worked hard enough and had faith, they would be able to take care of themselves. Yet of most significance was the way in which materiality was minimized all together. The Puritans feared that if poor people were given money or material aid without working for it, they would privilege the material over the spiritual and fail to fulfill their calling through work. This was taken to the extreme by the father and son pair of Increase and Cotton Mather, who used religion as a weapon against helping the poor in a way that was very different from Winthrop's "original philosophy" about mutual obligation. Under the Mathers, religion was "redesigned" so "that by its innermost nature it signified a resolution to defend the privileges" of true moral goodness (Miller, 1953, p. 381). The sole focus on internal piety was used as leverage against *material* assistance to the poor because the material was less important than the spiritual; at the same time, it allowed the rich to accumulate material goods.

Puritan leaders constantly stressed that the spiritual was more important than the material. In *A Model of Christian Charity*, Winthrop (1630) instructs the Puritans that what is internal is more important than external. Although he acknowledges that the mouth must be fed, he argues that the Puritan faithful gain more from that which is inside the spiritual body" (p. 45). Puritan leader Samuel Danforth (1670) also reflected Winthrop's message in his speech *Errand into the Wilderness*. He warned the Puritans

that food or manna actually starved the soul and that they were not called into the wilderness by “ludicrous levity, nor of Courtly pomp and delicacy, but of the free and clear dispensation of the Gospel and Kingdome of God” (p. 43). Thus, it was to be that the Puritans labored not to receive material reward but because of their moral obligation to do so. Weber states that “asceticism looked upon the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself as highly reprehensible; but the attainment of it as a fruit of labour in a calling was a sign of God’s blessing” (Weber, 1930, p. 172). Put differently, the Puritans had to submit to “the classic demand that men devote themselves to making profits without succumbing to the temptations of the profit” (Miller, 1953, p. 41).

Reagan’s Covenantal “Human Process”

During his presidency, Reagan drew on these covenantal ideas in various ways to maintain economic and societal order by reconciling material needs with spiritual needs and individual needs with communal needs, so did Reagan. Specifically, Reagan discursively provided the opportunity for the “undeserving” poor to break out of poverty dependence and reunite with the rest of society. Although Reagan adopted the premise of the culture of poverty, he argued that welfare recipients could find their way out of the social psychology of dependence and individual circumstances and into the circle of prosperity by fulfilling their obligations through work. Accordingly, like the Puritan leaders, Reagan invited the poor to be rehabilitated by embracing a universal moral psychology through participation in a system of work. In what follows, I first explain how Reagan invited all United States citizens, rich and poor, to embrace a universal moral psychology of shared opportunities under God. Next, I illuminate the ways that

Reagan instructed all welfare recipients that they could become self-sufficient by embracing their God-given talents and answering His calling for them. Third, I outline how Reagan argued that this would bring them into the “circle of prosperity” and economic activity of the rest of society.

Reagan firmly dispelled the notion that the undeserving poor were different and did not have the same moral psychology as other people. Reagan contended that the reason the poor were in a culture of poverty was because the government had taken their opportunities and failed to treat them as capable human beings. Reagan cautioned, “We’re in danger of creating a permanent culture of poverty as inescapable as any chain or bond; a second and separate America, an America of lost dreams and stunted lives” (February 15, 1986, Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform). Conversely, Reagan promised that his economic recovery program, which included cuts to welfare, “isn’t for one class or group. It’s for all Americans—working people, the truly needy, the rich and the poor” (February 26, 1982, Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner). In doing so, Reagan provided a pathway for a group of people who had been considered “strangers” to join the rest of society. Katz (1989) states that “within cities, poor people have almost always remained strangers. We pass their houses on a train or in a car; read about them as individual cases; study them as abstract statistics; and encounter them asking for help in public places” (p. 6). Reagan, however, presented the poor in a different light: as children of God who shared in a universal moral psychology. After describing the Constitution as a covenant at the “We the People” Bicentennial Celebration, Reagan stated, “It is an oath of allegiance to that in man that is truly

universal, that core of being that exists before and beyond distinctions of class, race, or national origin. It is a dedication of faith to the humanity we all share, that part of each man and woman that most closely touches on the divine” (September 17, 1987).

Reagan suggested that his welfare policies would give the people of the United States the opportunity once again to come together under God and find and share their talents. Reagan stated, “America’s greatest gift has always been freedom and equality of opportunity—the idea that no matter who you are, no matter where you came from, you can climb as high as your own God-given talents will take you” (October 26, 1984, Remarks to Members of the Congregation of Temple Hillel and Jewish Community Leaders in Valley Stream, New York). Just as the Puritans were called to embrace the opportunities God presented to them, Reagan asked the people of the United States to do the same: “Together, we can recreate for every citizen the same economic opportunities that we saw lift up a land of immigrant people, the kind of opportunities that have swept the hungry and the persecuted into the mainstream of our life since the American experiment began” (June 29, 1981, Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)). Reagan argued that the people of the United States did not need the structural bond of government; they were united by more transcendent belief in God and the opportunities He had given to the people of the “city on a hill.”

Reagan argued that the answer to poverty was really quite simple: release people from the grip of government dependence. In his Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner, Reagan praised former President Calvin Coolidge for saying,

“I favor a policy of economy, not because I wish to save money, but because I wish to save people” (February 26, 1982). Reagan, like Coolidge, emphasized the importance of the people of the United States: “People are our most valuable resource; and their imagination and creativity, hard work, and faith—that’s what’ll drive America into the 21st century” (February 23, 1987, Remarks to Members of the National Governors’ Association). He criticized the War on Poverty policies because they resulted in more governmental assistance based on the wrong premises: “Pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into programs in order to make people worse off was irrational and unfair. It was time we ended this reliance on the government process and renewed our faith in the human process” (August 23, 1984, Republican National Convention Presidential Acceptance Speech). Accordingly, Reagan reframed government’s role in poverty relief by taking the emphasis off material aid and placing it on the “human process” by which poor people could learn the value of hard work and share in the opportunities for work available to the rest of society.⁴⁵ He dissociated the amount that his administration cared about poor people from how much material assistance it would provide for them or, in Reagan’s case, not provide for them: “The size of the Federal budget is not an appropriate barometer of social conscience or charitable concern” (October 5, 1981, Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National Alliance of Business).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ See Reagan’s speeches: February 11, 1987, Panel Discussion with Community Leaders on Welfare Reform; October 5, 1981, Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the NAB.

⁴⁶ In his remarks to the New York State Federation of Catholic School Parents, Reagan stated, “But at the root of this spend-and-spend, and tax-and-tax, and borrow-and-borrow philosophy was the belief that solving our social problems was simply a matter of allocating resources rather than exerting moral leadership. There were those who thought, and still do, that by changing man’s material environment we could perfect human nature and usher in a brave new world. So they favored gigantic government programs and social engineering schemes run by a tiny elite of experts” (April 5, 1984).

Although Reagan also applauded Coolidge for his belief that “a nation that is united in its belief in the work ethic and its desire for commercial success and economic progress is usually a healthy nation” (February 26, 1982, Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner), he continuously elevated work ethic and *desire* for commercial success over actual material gain. In referencing the biblical story of the Parable of Talents,⁴⁷ when Jesus tells the story of a man who provides his servants with talents and is most pleased with the follower who has the faith to use and multiply them, Reagan stated, “True wealth is not measured in things like money or oil, but in the treasures of the mind and spirit” (May 14, 1983, Radio Address to the Nation on Small Business). The human process that Reagan described was connected to something higher than material ends. This idea culminated in his administration’s private-sector initiatives, which Reagan stated reflected “faith in the American people” (January 26, 1982, First State of the Union Address). When he introduced this program to the public on October 5, 1981, in his Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the National Alliance of Business (NAB), he explained that it was being instituted because the government could not “meet the total needs of human beings. Something is missing from such an equation. I believe that something is private initiative and community involvement – the kind the NAB exemplifies.”

Reagan clarified that the private-sector initiatives program was not created to offset the budget cuts made to welfare programs as part of 1981 economic packages, but to reinvigorate communities and prompt private businesses to become involved in motivating people to become self-sufficient and find jobs rather than giving handouts

⁴⁷ Matthew 25: 14-30, Luke 19: 19-27, *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

(Berger, 1984). He stated, “Now, we’re not advocating private initiatives and voluntary activities as a half-hearted replacement for budget cuts. We advocate them because they are right in their own regard. They’re part of what we can proudly call ‘the American personality’” (October 5, 1981, Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the NAB). In doing so, Reagan emphasized the human process in which initiative and faith were paramount over material ends. In fact, in the entire NAB speech in which he rolled out the private-sector initiatives program, there was no mention of money or the budget at all, and his administration made an effort to prevent any association between budget cuts and the private-sector initiatives for political, pragmatic, and philosophic reasons (Berger, 1984, pp. 193-194)

In his first major speech as a politician, Reagan set the stage for the “spiritualization” of humanity upon which much of his presidential discourse was based: “When great forces are on the move in the world, we learn that we are spirits – not animals” (October 27, 1964, *A Time for Choosing*). According to Reagan, unlike animals that only needed to nurture their physical bodies with food and water, the people of the United States, needed to privilege their spiritual over material motives. In a re-election rally on October 2, 1984, he stated, “But let me say in closing that even though economic matters are important – well, the old, old saying is true: Man does not live by bread alone. Man lives by belief, by faith in things that are larger than himself” (Remarks at Reagan-Bush Rally in Brownsville, TX). Here Reagan referenced the famous biblical lesson that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; see also Luke 4:4; *Holy Bible*, King James Version) and, thus,

emphasized the essential role of faith. Reagan's messages reflected Samuel Danforth's (1670) message to the Puritans that food or manna actually starved the spirit and that they were not called into the wilderness by "the expectation of Courtly Pomp and Delicacy" (p. 50). Danforth stated,

In the whole Evangelicall History, finde not that ever the Lord Jesus did so sharply rebuke his Disciples for any thing, as for that fit and pang of Worldly care and solicitude about Bread. Attend we our Errand upon which Christ sent us into the Wilderness, and he will provide Bread for us. (p. 52)

Thus, the mission that both Reagan and Danforth laid out for the people was to revolve around constant faith in the "grace" of God.

An Individual Journey: Finding One's God-Given Talents and Being Disciplined

Reagan argued that previous government policies like the War on Poverty policies failed because they misdiagnosed the problem as material rather than spiritual and denied the people the honor and obligation of fixing their own circumstances. He stated, "But our real concerns are not statistical or material gain. We want to expand on freedom, to renew the American dream for every American. We seek to restore opportunity and reward, to value again personal achievement and individual excellence" (February 26, 1982, Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner). Reagan argued that the War on Poverty had turned an "opportunity society" into "a system that perpetuates poverty [in which the] waste of money pales before the sinful waste of human potential – the squandering of so many millions of hopes and dreams" (February 15, 1986, Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare Reform). Wasting human potential was

sinful because Reagan exhibited an affinity for the Puritan belief that “every man won salvation in his profession, and not outside it, [and] God provided a suitable calling for all” (Wyllie, 1969, p. 202). Accordingly, Reagan instructed all U.S. citizens to seek and find their “God-given” talents.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Reagan promised that his policies would defer to God and view “government once again as the protector of our liberties, not as the distributor of gifts and privilege” (November 13, 1979, Presidential Announcement Speech). In other words, Reagan promised to keep the opportunity alive for each person to embark on the spiritual process of self-discovery.

Once the people of the United States found their God-given talents, they had to put them to use through disciplined labor. Like the Puritans whose Calvinistic influence brought a “motive to self-control and thus to a deliberate regulation of one’s own life” (Weber, 1930, p. 126), Reagan called on welfare recipients to become self-sufficient. In his August 1, 1987, Radio Address to the Nation on Welfare, he asked, “Now the question I ask about any welfare reform proposal is: Will it help people become self-sufficient and lead a full life, or will it keep them down in a state of dependency?” For Reagan, this was the most important question to be asked because dependency eroded people’s self-respect.⁴⁹ According to Reagan, the only way people could become self-sufficient was through employment: “We’ve learned, for example, that work is the only genuine path to self-respect and independence” (February 11, 1987, Panel Discussion

⁴⁸ See Reagan’s speeches: January 14, 1982; Remarks at the New York City Partnership Luncheon; January 25, 1984, State of the Union; January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta Georgia; October 26, 1984, Remarks to Members of the Congregation of Temple Hillel and Jewish Community Leaders in Valley Stream, New York; November 19, 1982; Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session During a United States Chamber of Commerce Teleconference on Job Training Programs.

⁴⁹ See Reagan’s speeches: July 9, 1983, Radio Address to the Nation on Economic and Fair Housing Issues; February 11, 1987, Panel Discussion with Community Leaders on Welfare Reform.

with Community Leaders on Welfare Reform). Moreover, Reagan stated that “any welfare system should offer the incentives and tools to escape welfare, not the incentives to remain dependent on welfare” (February 11, 1987, Panel Discussion with Community Leaders on Welfare Reform). Accordingly, Reagan argued that if welfare recipients began to receive material incentives to work in addition to wages, they would miss out on the most important incentive of all: the ability to become self-sufficient and closer to God.

Thus, just as the Puritans considered labor an end itself because it was a way for them to fulfill their spiritual obligations (Weber, 1930), Reagan argued that the “rediscovery of the values of faith, freedom, family, work, and neighborhood” that the United States had experienced while he was president went hand-in-hand with the fact that “[w]e’ve rediscovered that work is good in and of itself” (February 6, 1985, State of the Union). According to Reagan, gaining self-sufficiency through work also entailed a journey of self-examination. A fundamental tenet of Reagan’s beliefs about welfare reform was that poor people just needed “a real job where they could put in a good day’s work, complain about the boss, and then go home with confidence and self-respect” (June 29, 1981, Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the NAACP). He suggested that poor people gained access to their deepest values through work and that the process of becoming self-sufficient brought them to a more spiritual or “soul” level. When talking about the Job Training Partnership Act, Reagan stated, “It is a success because it operates on the principle that people don’t want a handout; they want some

help that will enable them to operate in the world as the independent souls they want to be” (October 2, 1984, Reagan-Bush Rally in Brownsville, TX).

Reagan was careful to clarify that the “self-sufficiency” and “independence” for which he called was not separate from but immersed in the soul’s connection to God. In fact, according to Reagan, only when a person has reached the true spiritual space of self-sufficiency do they ultimately rely on God. In the same way that the Puritans believed that “[o]ne’s energy to perform hard and continuous labor in a vocational calling must come ultimately from intense and sincere belief, and such belief originated from the favoring hand of an omnipotent God” (Kalberg, 2002, p. xxxv), Reagan encouraged the people of the United States to ground their work in God’s grace. In both his 1983 and 1985 National Day of Prayer Speech, Reagan quoted President Abraham Lincoln as saying: “Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us” (January 27, 1983, Proclamation 5017; January 29, 1985, Proclamation 5296). Reagan underscored the idea that self-sufficiency does not exist outside of God but within Him. Similarly, in a speech on September 6, 1988, Reagan praised “God-loving, God-fearing people who believe in certain fundamental principles, principles like self-reliance, taking care of your own and your community, looking within yourself for strength and looking to God for your bearings” (Remarks at the Dedication of the C.J. and Marie Gray Center for the Communications Arts at Hastings College in Nebraska). Here Reagan stated clearly that believing in the values of self-reliance and self-

sufficiency and “looking to God” for guidance were not mutually exclusive but consubstantial.

A “Community” of Individuals Engaged in Methodical Work

At the same time, Reagan also juxtaposed the importance of self-reliance and guidance from God with the idea of “taking care of your own and your community.” Although this idea might seem contrary to what has heretofore been argued about Reagan’s views on welfare, it actually fit quite well into the overall covenantal framework by which he articulated the spiritual and economic obligations the people of the United States had to one another. By basing his claims on the idea that there was a system of work that united the people of the United States under one universal moral psychology, Reagan was able to make these seemingly contradictory notions coalesce. Under this framework, “taking care of your own and your community” meant finding how your God-given talents fit within it and allowing other people to do the same. Thus, the type of community for which Reagan advocated depended on the same type of methodical work that the Puritans used to sustain their economic system and supplement their religious beliefs. As Weber (1930) states, “The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system” in which “[t]he moral conduct of the average man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and subjected to a consistent method for conduct as a whole” (Weber, 1930, p. 117).

According to Reagan, welfare recipients could fulfill their obligations to their community by working and finding their role in this system rather than depending on the

government, and thus other people's tax dollars, to support them. In other words, being individualistic was communal; one's contribution to society was embracing the opportunity to become self-sufficient. In his Presidential Announcement Speech, Reagan stated, "A troubled and afflicted mankind looks to us, pleading for us to keep our rendezvous with destiny; that we will uphold the principles of self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and – above all – responsible liberty for every individual that we will become that shining city on a hill" (November 13, 1979). That Reagan designated individuals as the beginning point of the "city on a hill" instead of the ending point is significant because it positions individuals as the stronghold of the community rather than the community as the stronghold of individuals. Moreover, by associating the traits of self-reliance and self-discipline with morality, Reagan once again bolstered work over dependence as the only way people could fulfill their obligation to God.

Yet the ability of the poor to fulfill their moral obligations depended on the rest of society upholding their obligations as well. Rather than allow poor people to remain stuck in the "cycle of dependency,"⁵⁰ Reagan instructed all United States citizens that they had an obligation to preserve the opportunity for poor people to join the "circle of prosperity": "It's time we welcomed those Americans into the circle of prosperity to let them share in the wonders of our society, and it's time to break the cycle of dependency that has become the legacy of so many Federal programs that no longer work – indeed, some which never did work" (June 29, 1981, Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the

⁵⁰ June 29, 1981, Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the NAACP; August 23, 1984, Republican National Convention Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech; February 6, 1987, Letter to the Nation's Governor's on Welfare Reform; February 9, 1987, Remarks at a White House Briefing for Supporters of Welfare Reform.

Annual Convention of the NAACP). Although Reagan called for United States citizens who were already in the “circle of prosperity” to “share” with others, throughout his discourse he did not suggest that any extraordinary measures needed be taken by the middle or upper-class to help the poor or that material resources had to exchange hands. In other words, dependency on the government was not to be replaced by excessive dependence on other people. In the context of Reagan’s presidential discourse, “sharing” meant allowing poor people the opportunity to embark on the spiritual journey, described previously, of finding their God-given talents, putting them to use, and becoming self-sufficient by the grace of God.

Although Reagan gave an obligatory nod to community service, this type of aid was often reserved for the “deserving poor” and was overshadowed by Reagan’s suggestion that it was more moral for the people of the United States to allow their neighbors to work their way to self-sufficiency. In his First Inaugural Address, Reagan asked, “How can we love our country and not love our countrymen; and loving them, reach out a hand when they fall, heal them when they’re sick, and provide opportunity to make them self-sufficient so they will be equal in fact and not just in theory?” (January 20, 1981). Interestingly, Reagan indicated that United States citizens should help others in an unadulterated manner only when they had a physical infirmity. In the case of the “undeserving poor” who lacked self-sufficiency, Reagan’s instructions were clear: the best help they could be given by others was the opportunity to become part of the universal moral psychology of work through which they could prepare for God’s grace

and, thus, embrace the universal moral psychology that united them with the rest of society.

Releasing the People into the “Freedom” of Work

Thus, the universal moral system of work maintained order and equilibrium in society: each person had a special role to play within it as assigned by God that kept it running smoothly. In his February 4, 1986, State of the Union Address, Reagan stated, “The magic of opportunity – unreserved, unfailing, unrestrained – isn’t this the calling that unites us?” In this way, covenant cleared the way for a “rational reconciliation of commerce” (Peacock, 2000, p. 207). Moreover, Reagan suggested that it was not *what* people contributed to the economic system but that they embraced the opportunity to do so by accepting their calling from God through work. Reagan argued that work “ennobles us to create and contribute no matter how seemingly humble our jobs” (February 6, 1985, State of the Union). Although the job might be “seemingly humble,” it would keep the system of work intact and generate rich internal rewards. Accordingly, Reagan instructed individuals to focus on fitting into the universal moral system that God oversaw rather than worrying about *where* they fit into it. This was, after all, part of an individual’s obligation to answer God’s calling for them. In other words, it fit under a “separate but equal” clause: opportunities had to be equal but the social status or material gains that resulted from equal opportunity would be different for each individual as determined by God. He, alone, had the chance to decide the limits of each person’s potential and did so in a way that brought all of his people into concert with one another.

Thus, although each person had the freedom to excel within this system, their position would fit harmoniously into a larger framework that would serve society. As Winthrop (1630) believed and expressed in the first paragraph of his *Model of Christian Charity*, “God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence, hath soe disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some poore” (p. 34). Winthrop did not deny that there were divinely ordered “fixed” classes (Miller, 1953, p. 398). Similarly, although Reagan argued that each person had been assigned a particular calling and “God-given” talents, he never said that these talents had to be the same or equal. In fact, he often indicated that there was a “level” of performance that God had designated for each person: United States citizens were to “reach as high as their vision and God-given talents take them” (January 26, 1984, Remarks at a Spirit of America Rally in Atlanta Georgia) and “climb as high as your [their] God-given talents will take [them]” (October 26, 1984, Remarks to Members of the Congregation of Temple Hillel and Jewish Community Leaders in Valley Stream, New York).⁵¹ Moreover, Reagan implied that it did not matter how much income a person made because the most important aspect of a job was that it made a person an active member of the larger working community: “You know that a job at \$4 an hour is priceless in terms of the amount of self-respect it can buy. Many people today are economically trapped in welfare. They’d like nothing better than to be out in the work-a-day world with the rest of us” (October 5, 1981, Remarks at the Annual Meeting of the NAB).

⁵¹ See also January 14, 1982, Remarks at the New York City Partnership Luncheon; January 25, 1984, State of the Union.

Furthermore, Reagan's recognition of variance in social status is evidenced in the way he carefully balanced freedom and order. In his October 1, 1984, speech to the Economic Club of Detroit, he stated, "Let us go forward and build an American opportunity society, a society that ensures that every individual will have his or her chance to climb higher, to climb up to the ultimate in individual freedom, consistent with an orderly society, to achieve the fullness of creative human potential." Reagan's juxtaposition of "order," on the one hand, and "freedom" and "opportunity," on the other hand, resembled Winthrop's definition of freedom as he called on the Puritans to exercise it. According to Winthrop, freedom was embracing the opportunities God had laid out for you while appreciating that "the variety and difference of the creatures and the glory of His power, in ordering all these differences for the preservation and good of the whole" (Winthrop, 1630, p. 34). Through love and acceptance of God's plan, Winthrop argued that all of the different parts make up the whole:

Love is bound of perfection, first it is a bond or ligament. Secondly, it makes the worke perfect. There is noe body but consists of partes and that which knits these partes together, giues the body its perfection, because it makes eache parte soe contiguous to others as thereby they doe mutually participate with each other

In the same way, Reagan called on the people of the United States, regardless of difference, to play their part in one larger body or universal moral psychology. In his Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner on February 26, 1982, he said that the people of the United States "come in all sizes, shapes and colors—blue-collar workers, blacks, Hispanics, shopkeepers, scholars, service people, housewives, and

professional men and women. They are the backbone of America, and we can't move America without moving their hearts and minds as well." Accordingly, Reagan instructed them that their "duty" was to "go forward, determined to serve selflessly a vision of man with God."

Ultimately, Reagan suggested that for government to become involved in policies of economic redistribution like welfare was to doubt that God had a master plan and a divine calling for each of his chosen people that could be fulfilled through disciplined work. For other individuals or the government to provide for the poor without expecting them to work or contribute was, in a sense, to "play" God: "We really almost diminish all the things we are when we limit the debate to money and how it's distributed in our country. We lose a sense of the mystery in men's souls and the mystery of life" (October 2, 1984, Remarks at Reagan-Bush Rally in Brownsville, TX). According to Reagan, "If we believe in ourselves and in the God who loves and protects us, together we can build a society more humane, more compassionate, more rewarding than any ever known in the history of man" (January 14, 1982, Remarks at the New York City Partnership Luncheon in New York). Framed this way, Reagan argued that people should not unnecessarily interfere with the universal moral system of work by providing material assistance to others. Moreover, for the people who had been blessed with money, Reagan's message brought the "comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence, which in these differences, as in particular grace, pursued secret ends unknown to men" (Weber, 1930, p. 177).

Covenantal Form as the Moral Carrier of Capitalistic Opportunity for All

The universal moral psychology of methodical work upon which Reagan rested his welfare policies has another name: Capitalism. Weber (1930) states that for the Puritans,

the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism. (p. 172)

Like capitalism, the covenantal system of relationships that Reagan laid out placed the ultimate spiritual and economic onus on the individual. As the Puritans believed, “If an individual does not close the deal when he has the chance, he certainly cannot blame God because it gets away from him” (Miller, 1956, p. 86). Since God gave all of his people talents, there was no excuse for people not to use them in a productive job. People who did not seek work, then, would remain “undeserving” because nothing substantial separated them from middle-class workers except that they chose not to work or to take the individual initiative to accept the universal moral psychology already in place.

Moreover, this individuation of the problem of poverty simplified the issue of welfare and undermined the possibility that larger systemic or economic issues were at play; if an individual continued to be steadfast in work, he or she would be rewarded. As long as it rested upon the moral foundation of the covenant, the individualistic core of capitalism could be viewed as an obligatory and vital component in a system of success:

“Far from urging withdrawal from the world where God Profit kept shop, Puritanism promoted activity in that World” (McGiffert, 1969, p. 85). At the same time, the way in which this individualism was encompassed into the overarching methodical system of capitalism obfuscated the idea that self-interest could be detrimental. Each individual performance was sanctified as a fundamental component of the “whole” of the economic arrangement that Reagan fused together using covenantal form. As Adam Smith (1776) wrote of the individual laborer: “By directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention” (Book 4, Chp. 2, para. 9). When Reagan, like the Puritans, preached that God oversaw the seamless coalescing of the parts and the whole, the “invisible hand” of market capitalism became the hand of God.⁵²

Yet Reagan’s belief that capitalism could solve the problem of poverty rested on a problematic assumption: that every able-bodied person could find work and become self-sufficient. This rested on an even more unlikely assumption: that people would not take more resources from the market than necessary and that employers would treat their employees fairly. It does not take a formal study or require one to take a partisan position to know that these premises are rarely realized in a capitalistic society. Accordingly, even if welfare recipients embraced the universal moral psychology through work, the “circle of prosperity” they were promised might be more accurately described as a food chain: a system in which the working poor, or, at least, their resources, were eaten up by others.

⁵² As Kiewe and Houck (1991) state in regard to Reagan’s economic discourse, “The ‘invisible’ hand may very well be rhetorically shaped” (p. 232).

Foley (1990) states, “Reagan’s cuts had the effect of making the poorest one-tenth of the country poorer still by 10 per cent [*sic*] during his period of office. The generation of new jobs did very little to help this underclass” (p. 35).

Under the Reagan Administration’s welfare reform, a new class was born: the working poor. Many welfare recipients were forced to take low paying jobs under poor working conditions (Piven and Cloward, 1982) and, under OBRA, thirty-five percent of people who had previously been working and receiving public assistance were removed from the program (Stoez, 2009). Moreover, although Reagan vowed to replace welfare with job training and job placement, he did not provide the necessary funds for these programs to run effectively (Weaver, 2000, p. 76). Furthermore, 37 million people in the United States did not have health insurance in 1988 because most of the new job opportunities created by the Reagan Administration’s reforms were low-income jobs that did not provide health insurance but made employees and their families ineligible for the state medical insurance they had received when unemployed (Foley, 1990, p. 35). As a result, many people who were actually living Reagan’s rehabilitation plan found themselves strapped for resources. The way in which Reagan framed people’s spiritual and economic obligations throughout his discourse, however, gave the working poor little rhetorical recourse: regardless of conditions or wages, to complain meant that they did not grasp the spiritual meaning and purpose of work. Reagan and his conservative allies, thus, made it a moral imperative for people to accept the idea that “any job is a good job” (Stricter, 2007, p. 219).

If Reagan is to be applauded for his welfare discourse and policies, it should be for rhetorical mastery and political strategy rather than moral rectitude. Although the Reagan Administration's welfare recommendations were at least, in part, a way to save money and achieve budgetary goals (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 130; Stoez, 2009, p. 171), Reagan cloaked this in moral language and put his economic plans in a covenantal package. During the beginning of his presidency, he attempted to explain that the cuts he was making to welfare programs would funnel through the economy and end up back in the pockets of people who formerly relied on welfare benefits.⁵³ He asserted that fixing the economy in general would solve poverty because inflation itself was the cause of it. Reagan stated that "a strong, growing economy without inflation is the surest, most equitable way to ease the pressures on all the segments of society" (June 29, 1981, Remarks in Denver, Colorado, at the Annual Convention of the NAACP). Similarly, in his Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner on February 26, 1982, Reagan contended that "[by] reducing the cost of government, we can continue bringing down inflation," which was important because inflation was "the cruelest of all economic exploitations of the poor and elderly." He further stated that reducing inflation would "increase the purchasing power of poor families by more than \$250" (February 26, 1982). Yet even if the people of the United States could follow and agree with this line of reasoning, it was not clear why Reagan was making cuts to welfare when other government programs could be said to be equally wasteful or inefficient.

⁵³ Stricter (2007) states, "Economic growth has been America's preferred method of solving poverty; it is politically easier than taking from the rich and giving to the poor" (p. 220).

Rather than engage in detailed explanations or policy specifics to address the question, Reagan took another route: he shifted the emphasis from money and the economy all together. The history of welfare in the United States and attitudes toward the poor provided fertile soil in which Reagan's moral message could grow. Moreover, covenantal form provided an ideal rhetorical and moral carrier for his message. It is important to remember, however, that the covenantal story he told about welfare was one possible moral interpretation of the story about what needed to be done. That it was told as a moral story carries with it the implication that his way was the "right" way. Yet there are other "moral" guidelines and philosophies upon which welfare policies could be based. For example, the Bible also speaks of how Jesus called his follows to sell all of their possessions, "distribute unto the poor," and follow him (Luke 18:22, *Holy Bible*, King James Version). Moreover, at the end of the Parable of Talents, Jesus scolds his followers for not feeding him when he was hungry, giving him a drink when he was thirsty, and giving him clothing when he was naked. When his followers express confusion about when they failed to help him, he answered: "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did *it* not to one of the least of these, yet did *it* not to me" (Matthew 25: 45).

Moreover, rather than draw from the narratives of the gospel of wealth or Christian discipline of the late 1800s, Reagan could have revived the moral and religious message of the social gospel movement. This competing response, expressed through the ideas of people like Walther Rauschenbusch, George Herron, and Washington Gladden emphasized that helping others embodied the spirit of true Christianity (Boase, 1969). In

his book *Christianity and Social Crisis* (1907), Rauschenbusch argued for the need to help one another on the Christian basis of love. Furthermore, George Herron in the *Message of Jesus to Men of Wealth* (1890) argued that true believers in God must disregard self-interest in the name of true brotherhood. Herron stated, “The natural development of our civilization will not unfold the solution of our industrial problems.” Accordingly, advocates of the social gospel believed that structural changes were necessary to remedy economic depravity. Herron stated, “There is no power in abstract truth, either economic, ethical, or theological, to cure our social ills.” In other words, Herron argued that moral precepts would not solve the problem of poverty; hence, people should follow Jesus by sacrificing, doing good works, and becoming an active participant in social brotherhood.

These messages, however, did not fit conveniently with the policies the Reagan Administration endorsed. Instead, the universal moral psychology of work was advertised by Reagan as the economic and moral solution to the problems of welfare. If people labored every day and worked hard, their problems would wane as God took over. Using covenantal form, Reagan described a system and created a constitutive formation in which “God’s people” could fulfill their moral and economic obligations both as individuals and as part of a community by endorsing his welfare plans. Indeed, Reagan provided United States citizens with the discursive opportunity to prosper, but the question remains: at what economic and ethical expense?

Conclusion: Preserving the Covenantal Tradition

Scholars, political analysts, and economists continue to debate the merits of “Reaganomics.” Did President Ronald Reagan’s economic policies usher in the economic boom of the 1990s? Or was President Bill Clinton responsible for the economic prosperity at the close of the 20th century? There is no easy or clear answer. The Reagan administration governed during the first period of economic expansion since World War II, but it failed to reduce the federal deficit or alleviate the high rates of poverty (Sloan, 1999, p. 253). The Reagan administration pushed through the largest tax cuts in history with the Economic Recovery Act of 1981, but it raised taxes a year later with the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982. Reagan ultimately took credit for bringing the people of the United States out of the 1981-1982 recession, but some critics blame his supply-side tax cut coupled with tight monetary policies for causing the recession in the first place (Kiewe and Houck, 1991, p. 150).

The question of whether Reagan ultimately “cured” the economy, then, remains open for future generations to discuss, which will likely continue to be divided along partisan lines. Although I periodically assess the inconsistencies between Reagan’s economic promises and results, the point of this project is not to determine whether Reagan ultimately “fixed” the economy or made the right budgetary decisions, nor is it to argue that Reagan did not present any economic plans to the public. Rather, I argue that Reagan made these questions of secondary concern, even moot in many instances. Accordingly, the purpose of this project is to take a critical look at how he insulated his own economic decisions using covenantal promises and, in a sense, distracted the people

from the material conditions and specifics of his administration's economic policies.

In other words, it explores how Reagan used his discourse to escape accountability for improving economic conditions, which allowed him instead to resolve what he called a moral issue. By establishing the people's faith, participation in the free market, and hard work as the nation's economic security blanket rather than government or money, Reagan created a foundation on which his calls for limited government interference into economic matters made sense, and his administration was rhetorically protected from economic outcomes.

Moreover, by using covenantal form, Reagan made economic recovery process-oriented rather than product-oriented. The focus was on fulfilling one's present economic obligations rather than preparing for or anticipating future policy outcomes or implications. Arguably, this helps to explain the degree to which many U.S. citizens separated their favorable feelings for Reagan the man from policies that plainly contradicted his professed aims (Karaagac, 2000, p. 224). Reagan framed the economic situation so the most important aspect was that people were involved in the "American" covenantal experience, which allowed them to feel morally good about themselves and their country. In doing so, Reagan, the "Teflon" president, transferred the responsibility for recovery from him to the people of the United States. By placing himself within the covenant among the people and God, Reagan assumed a representative role. In his July 17, 1980, Republican National Convention Presidential Acceptance Speech, he stated,

"Trust me" government asks that we concentrate our hopes and dreams on one man; that we trust him to do what's best for us. My view of government places

trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs – in the people. The responsibility to live up to that trust is where it belongs, in their elected leaders. That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact.

Reagan, as such, positioned himself within the covenant of believers who had come together to fulfill a special mission without an artificial or arbitrary intermediary. According to Reagan, the people were to trust themselves and God; to depend too heavily on the government or their president to fix economic ills would be to expose a fatal and faithless flaw in the heirs of God's "city upon a hill."

Using Covenantal Form to Create a Constitutive Narrative

Reagan's use of covenantal form shaped a constitutive narrative around his economic policies. He provided the people in the "city upon a hill" with a "unity of direction" (Lucaites and Condit, 1985) despite economic devastation and difference. In doing so, he demonstrated how political leaders can use covenantal form to manage relationships and assign constituent roles on a moral basis. Lucaites and Condit (1985) state that "rhetorical narratives describe a set of relations contributing to a conflict or problem and ask the audience to participate actively in the interest of the discourse to *bring about* the desired transformation" (p. 100). In each chapter I illustrate the way in which Reagan made participation in his discourse and the endorsement of his economic policies the avenue by which the people of the United States could fulfill their covenantal obligations. In Chapter Two, I show how he called the people of the United States to

uphold the national covenant by enacting their freedom and denying government intrusion into economic matters. Moreover, Reagan created an epideictic occasion in which the people could also prepare themselves to receive spiritual renewal, the first step to economic renewal as an individual and nation. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how Reagan urged the people to exhibit their faith in themselves, in God, and in other people by participating in the free and open covenantal market space he constructed, the success of which was contingent upon tax reduction policies. Finally, in Chapter Four, I describe how Reagan called the people to embrace their God-given talents and covenant with their neighbors by joining the universal moral psychology and system of work, which was predicated upon welfare reform.

In many respects, Reagan's provision of agency to the people of the United States should be applauded. Citizen involvement in politics is important and essential to a democratic nation. Yet there is a difference between claiming to provide agency and actually doing it. Lucaites and Condit (1985) explain that rhetorical narratives often stop short of a resolution (p. 100); even though the people in the narrative are allowed to participate in its creation, they ultimately do not play a large role in making the decisions that determine its ending. So it was with Reagan's covenantal narrative. There was a discrepancy between the amount of governmental power Reagan claimed he was using and the extent to which he exercised presidential discretion in policy matters. Reagan recognized that money or governmental action was important in economic renewal, but he had a particular plan for the allocation of money that he needed the people of the United States to support. Lucaites and Condit (1985) argue that a rhetorical narrative is

“part of a whole and changing world” (p. 101) and, thus, “exists for a purpose beyond its own textuality” (p. 94). Accordingly, while Reagan used covenantal form to create a constitutive narrative that transcended the economic crisis, he also used it to build a case for the particular economic policies he supported during his presidency.

In other words, covenantal form created a veil behind which the Reagan Administration made substantial political decisions that were inconsistent with Reagan’s rhetorical position regarding limited government. Although Reagan argued that the growth of government and its spending had to be curtailed, defense expenditures increased by \$149 billion or 111 percent while he was in office (Ashford, 1990, p. 200). Karaagac (2000) states that the Reagan years left behind a “troubling legacy”:

The canny tactics of Reagan’s selective assault on big government has also created an ironic disjunction between professed belief and policy. Maintaining the fiction that big government is bad, while slashing only those government programs that dole out funds to the urban poor or those who should be working, creates a type of political fiction, and political fiction carries long-term corrosive effects. Herein lies the intellectual weakness of the Reagan vision for scaling back the state. (p. 143)

Thus, Reagan’s decision to remove government meant withholding of resources from certain people and from social and economic programs which itself was a choice that constituted governmental “works.” As such, the laissez-faire economy that Reagan promoted was not organic but covenantal: it was maintained by a particular arrangement of interests, obligations, and relationships which were upheld on moral grounds. Contrary

to the assumption that laissez-faire economics is a natural occurring phenomenon, it is created, and often, rhetorically.

Accordingly, this project illustrates how covenantal form can reconcile seemingly contradictory ideas and imbue them with strategic morality. In Chapter One, freedom was reconciled with a moral order. In Chapter Two, destiny and predestination were balanced with the necessity for deliberate action. In Chapter Three, self-interest was framed as a way for individuals to perform their communal obligations and help those in need. Depending on the exigency at hand, the different components of the covenantal system – the covenant of grace, the covenant of works, the institutional covenant, and national covenant – were fused in dynamic ways. Moreover, each covenantal constellation that was created was ultimately grounded in God’s grace.

The way in which Reagan used covenantal form to embed his message in a moral and covenantal framework, then, made his proposals seem self-evident. Sloan (1999) states, “Reagan did not teach us difficult truths about hard choices in governing because he did not believe there were any. In Reagan’s mind, the eternal truths of individual liberty and limited government had been verified again and again throughout our nation’s history” (p. 265; see also Brandt, 2009, p. 218). Not only were these “truths” verified in history, but they were verified by God. In this way, knowing and perceiving were conflated, “and perceiving mean[t] submitting oneself to the knowledge that God has placed in Creation” (Roberts-Miller, 2009, 54). Although Reagan warned the people about “trust me” government, he used his own discourse to engender it by assuming the responsibility for interpreting God’s plan and positing his policies as the divine conduit to

carry out that plan. Consequently, if truth is to be found in God rather than negotiated, the public sphere that is cultivated privileges monologic rather than dialogic discourse (Roberts-Miller, 2009). Roberts-Miller (2009) states that the “Puritan restriction of rhetoric,” which I have argued was mediated with covenantal form, “goes hand in hand with the sense that one does not deliberate about important matters; instead one determines God’s will” (p. 34). Moreover, a person who dares to question a political or economic matter that is encased in covenantal form, like Reaganomics, risks being exposed as an immoral being or as “an enemy of Christ motivated by hatred of Christian Doctrine” (Roberts-Miller, 2009, p. 21).

Based as it was on moral precepts, Reagan’s discourse often undermined the complexities of policy, particularly economic policy, and “reflected a simplistic view of the nation’s finances” (Brandt, 2009, p. 159). Karaagac (2000) states, “As with so many things about Reagan, after the stirring rhetoric, there was a strange passivity in face of the deeper complexities of political life” (p.138). Yet this simplicity was not just apparent in Reagan’s rhetoric but in his policies as well, which often lacked substance (Karaagac, 2000, p. 139). For example, Joe and Rogers (1985) point out the significant “disparity between intention and achievement” in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 (p. 130). They argue that the basis of the policy change lacked hard evidence and OBRA changed ADFC in complex ways that the administration did not seem to understand or anticipate (Joe and Rogers, 1985, p. 130). Arguably, had discussion been more open, complexities would have risen to the surface before the policy was enacted. Instead, like the Puritans whose use of discourse constrained deliberation and exploration (Roberts-

Miller, 2009, p. 114), Reagan composed messages by first asserting what was true and then using rhetoric to make that “truth” appealing.

A “Congregation” of Individual Ambition and Reward

When leaders establish a platform by which they can propel their own policy plans and ideology with no system of checks and balances, there is reason to be uneasy. Foley (1990) states,

It is the condoned, and even cultivated, disjunction between ideals and reality, between dreams and experience, and between hopes and facts. Reagan’s presidency had a surreal quality in the way that presidential statements and objectives were allowed to prevail over self-evident proof of their implausibility or invalidity. (p. 45)

Yet to situate responsibility in the discourse of Reagan alone is irresponsible. It is also important to inquire into what the people of the United States want from their president. Perhaps people were so ready to lose themselves in Reagan’s discourse because they did not want to face hard choices or shoulder the burden of helping their neighbors in need. Balmer (2008) refers to the people’s delusion in the face of hard truths as “cheap grace.” He states,

The problem of religiously inflected political rhetoric, it seems, lies not so much with politicians but with the populace. We allow politicians to hypnotize with lullabies about faith and morality, and then we fail to take that rhetoric seriously, much less hold them to the principles they articulate so blithely. And when a politician like Jimmy Carter comes along, someone who dares to govern

according to the Christian morality he espoused on the campaign trail, we angrily throw him out of office. (p. 170)

Similarly, Foley (1990) states, “What was most remarkable about Reagan’s outlook, however, was that it was so widely tolerated for so long that it was difficult not to regard the government, and even the public, as being parties to a sort of self-deluding conspiracy of acquiescence” (p. 46).

It might be understandable that some of the people of the United States were content to accept Reagan’s covenantal message. It allowed them to pursue individual motivations and be self-serving in ways that fit appropriately with a divine communal mission. Rather than ask themselves difficult questions and engage in self-examination, these people could discover self-perpetuating truths. Covenantal form helped solve any apparent contradictions between their professed beliefs and actions. Diggins (2007) states, “In the Reagan era, a proud celebration would rule out self-examination, and the American mind would never know itself as long as the people could do no wrong” (p. 16). Moreover, when Reagan did call for self-examination, it was an exercise in reaffirmation. In this sense, the process was tautological; it brought any doubt back to moral certainty.

Reagan used covenantal form in a way that secured a moral scene and future despite the actions that were being taken by the agents upon it (Burke, 1945). Covenantal form helped imbue the scene with stability despite the individual activity was taking place in it during epideictic celebration, market entrepreneurship, and concerted work. Perhaps Reagan should have been more careful to study how history unfolded for the

Puritans. Haller (1951) explains that the expansive frontier on which the Puritans embarked eventually allowed for such diversity in income and economic means that the people's commitment to their covenantal community and sharing dissipated and a new type of individualism emerged:

The Puritans' great failure was in their attempt to maintain social unity through religious orthodoxy. At the beginning they did not doubt that they had the means of discovering the truth, and the power and the duty to suppress deviations from it. But their philosophical method itself tended toward diversity and intellectual individualism, and the condition of frontier life gave the individualist the means of survival. (Haller, 1951, p. 110)

Subsequently, Puritans began to compete for profit at the expense of communal cohesion (Heimert, 1953, p. 363).

As commerce grew, the Puritans came "imperceptibly to derive satisfaction less from their piety than from the wealth which was its visible symbol" (Miller, 1953, p. 5). The relationship between morality and finance was renegotiated between the time of Winthrop's reign and the father-son pair of Increase and Cotton Mather and was symbolized by Cotton Mather's decision to defend the bills of credit and oversee a community that increasingly privileged the operations of finance over piety in a way that was more acceptable and less sinful and displayed a "a smug acceptance of economic inequality (Miller, 1953, p. 308-401). In effect, Mather transformed religion into "simply a resource for man's own well-being" (Jones, 1973, p. 85). Jones (1973) states, "In

Cotton Mather the idea that justification entails sanctification, that means are known by the fruits, became secularized into a kind of moralism” (p. 83).

Accordingly, the covenant of grace became consonant with an individual’s obligations in a “particular faith,” which “as Mather defined it, is an irradiation of the soul, a marvelous persuasion, a comfort which comes at the moment of intense prayer” (Miller, 1953, p. 403). The emphasis on one’s internal journey legitimated external works aimed at material gain because economic success began to be looked at as a way to strengthen piety. Moreover, ironically, if material goods were to be secondary to spirituality, the acquisition and possession of material goods was one and the same with having no material resources. In other words, the dissociation of materiality from spirituality made it justifiable to have material goods in the same way it provided justification for not helping those in need of economic aid.

Although the Puritans faced these complications, Reagan kept this aspect of history out of his production of the “economy of grace.” Reagan used covenantal form as a spiritual cloak for individual economic ambitions. That covenantal ideas were used to justify the pursuit of riches illustrates the flexibility of covenant as a rhetorical carrier of “morality” and “community” in regard to the economy, particularly the system of capitalism in the United States.⁵⁴ In this way, the covenantal community that is rhetorically created and recognized resembles the potential of civil religion in the United States to make “people feel united even when their daily experiences tell them that they are not” (Beasley, 2004, p. 42) and, thus, results in “principled inaction” (Beasley, 2004,

⁵⁴ See Max Weber (1930) for a full discussion of how the Protestant ethic and Puritan values influenced the “spirit of capitalism” in the United States.

p. 111). Beasley (2004) argues that by transcending difference, people can celebrate the idea of inclusion without actually demanding or practicing it.

Although Beasley (2004) looks at how civil religion overlooks important differences in terms of immigration, race, and gender, the same can be said about the distribution of economic resources stretching all the way back to colonial New England and extending into present-day capitalistic practices. By transcending economic differences using covenantal form, rhetorical actors massage rather than solve significant socio-economic problems such as the income gap, corporate corruption, and poverty.⁵⁵ Moreover, Reagan suggested that to envision a society of inequality or difference and, even worse, to use material means to correct it, was to destroy the people's unity in the national covenant and to deny their belief in the grace and protection that God had extended to them.

In this way, it is important to consider whether the covenantal ideal presented by Reagan resembled a contractual agreement rather than a covenantal one. Niebuhr (1969) suggests that there has been a tendency for covenantal agreements to be converted into contractual ones: covenant as "the binding together in one body politic of persons who assumed through unlimited promise responsibility to and for each other and for the common laws, under God" (p. 222) evolves into "laissez faire as the consequent policy and freedom to pursue one's own happiness as motive force, the contract idea of limited obligations" (p. 224). At the same time that a covenantal arrangement implies choice and freedom, it also provides people with the freedom to live communally and fulfill

⁵⁵ This argument is similar to Roberts-Miller (2009) assertion that the Puritan's preference for monologic discourse made solving actual conflict difficult, if not impossible.

obligations to one another, which is why it is based in promise and obedience (Niebuhr, 1969, p. 222). Accordingly, Niebuhr (1969) asks, “Is freedom tolerating each other or living in mutual responsibility to each other?” (p. 225). He suggests that it is more convenient for the people of the United States to define freedom as tolerating each other because it allows them to act in their self-interest. Moreover, as in Reagan’s case, it allows leaders to manufacture a contract and offer it to the people for their consent under the guise of a divinely-inspired covenantal order.

Reagan’s Living Political, Economic, and Rhetorical Presence

Despite the multitude of clashing interests he hoped to simultaneously recognize and unify, Reagan was confident that the people of the United States would fulfill their “rendezvous with destiny” (1979, November 13). Interestingly, this phrase was first used by Roosevelt in his 1936 Democratic National Convention speech, but with a markedly different connotation. Whereas Reagan encouraged the people of the United States to take a more individualistic journey free of government interference, Roosevelt used this phrase to describe a nation that had a moral commitment to rely on government for assistance. Roosevelt stated, “Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference” (June 27, 1936). Years later in his 1944 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt put forth an economic plan in the form of a “second Bill of Rights” or “economic bill of rights,” which equated the economic obligation that the people of the United States had to one another to a moral obligation. He criticized “profits in money or in terms of political or social preferment,” warning the people that any selfish or

individualistic motives stood in the way of winning World War II and continuing as the world's leading power. Ultimately, Roosevelt called for a national service that would act as "an expression of the universality of this responsibility" to serve others in the nation with no discrimination. Roosevelt stressed that the United States would fail in its moral obligation and violate the Constitution if people were left hungry: "People who are hungry or out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

Thus, although Reagan and Roosevelt both called on the people of the United States to move forward in a type of economic covenant with one another using the same phraseology, each president implied a very different set of government and citizenry obligations and relationships. Moreover, although John F. Kennedy used the phrase "city upon a hill" in his January 9, 1961, speech to the Massachusetts General Assembly just before he was inaugurated as president,⁵⁶ it was Reagan who drew heavily on the Puritan covenantal tradition and re-appropriated it in his economic discourse to moralize his economic policies and constitute the people the United States as the moral agents of the covenantal promise to the nation. His use of covenantal form established a lasting framework for Republicans and conservatives to infuse capitalistic practices with morality and, thus, a semblance of doctrinal certainty. Even Democrats have been constrained by the political and rhetorical precedents set by Reaganomics. According to Diggins (2007), "No subsequent politician would ever dare to ask the American mind

⁵⁶ Kennedy (1961, January 9) stated, "But I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier. 'We must always consider,' he said, 'that we shall be as a city upon a hill – the eyes of all people are upon us.' Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us--and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill--constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities."

take a look at itself in the mirror and gaze upon its own shortcomings. Not Bill Clinton, not George W. Bush. Reagan remedied America of all self-doubt. Thus to run against the Reagan legacy is to lose the race before it has begun” (p. 16). For example, Clinton’s promise to “end welfare as we know it” and the subsequent welfare reform of the 1990s, Bush’s faith-based initiatives, and Barack Obama’s extension of the Bush tax cuts in 2010 all rest, arguably, on a foundation that Reagan established.

Of course, it is Republicans and conservatives who hold the banner of Reagan highest. Collins (2012) writes, “Every Republican presidential candidate claims to be the heir to Ronald Reagan’s legacy. For years, Republican partisans have carried Reagan’s memory before them as the ancient Israelites carried the Art of the Covenant” (p. 9B). The 2012 Republican primary election was no exception. Anderson (2011) writes, “The 2012 campaign promises to be an exciting showdown between the competing philosophies of Roosevelt versus Reagan...New Deal versus Trickle Down.” Fueled by criticism of President Obama’s handling of the economic recession that began in 2008 before he took office, Republican presidential hopefuls entered the election season branding themselves as Reaganites.

During the Republican primary debates, the candidates often applauded Reagan and associated their policy positions with the Reagan tradition. Ostermeier (2011) writes, “Although Ronald Reagan’s name will not be on the ballot in 2012, one candidate in the GOP presidential field is behaving as if he would like to be a proxy for the former 40th U.S. President.” A Smart Politics study conducted in November 2011 found that Reagan’s name had been invoked an average of more than five times a debate, which was

more than all of the other presidents combined. Many of these references had to do with Reagan's vision for the country and economic legacy. The candidates called for a national and economic renewal like that which Reagan called for in the 1980s. In the September 22, 2011, debate in Orlando, Florida, Herman Cain stated, "In terms of believing in this nation, Ronald Reagan was the one who said that we are a shining city on a hill. We've slid down the side of that hill." He suggested that he would lead the people of the United States "back up to the top of that hill" with policies that would grow the economy and increase consumer confidence. Similarly, at the CNN-Tea Party Debate on September 12, 2011, former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman said, "We're not shining like we used to shine. We need to shine again" (Tampa, Florida). He told the audience that they could use the same spark provided by Reagan to guide them: "Ronald Reagan would ensure that the light of this country would shine brightly for liberty, democracy, human rights, and free markets."

Minnesota Representative Michele Bachmann and former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum specifically called for a tax plan that resembled Reagan's tax policies of the 1980s and rested on the philosophy of trickle-down economics. At the October 18, 2011, Las Vegas Debate, Bachmann said, "What is provable and what works was the economic miracle that was wrought by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s." She claimed that she would use the same tax plan as Reagan did and also abolish the tax code in order to create jobs. Like Reagan, she argued that cutting and simplifying taxes in the name of supply-side economics would "fuel the fire for this economy again." In the debate on January 26, 2012, Santorum also talked about the need to "have as much money

funneling through this economy as possible” (Jacksonville, Florida). He argued, much like Reagan, that when you increase taxes, people do not invest in ways that help the economy, which is problematic because it is necessary for “people who have resources and wealth [...] to deploy that wealth in the most productive way possible.” The way to ensure this, according to Santorum, was to reduce taxes. He stated, “I take the Reagan approach. Ronald Reagan had a 28 percent top rate. If it was good enough for Ronald Reagan, it's good enough for me.”

It was former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, however, who connected his policies to Reaganomics most closely during the debates. He bolstered the same economic themes popularized by Reagan during his presidency: limited government intervention, lower taxes, and putting people to work. At the November 9, 2011, debate in Rochester, Michigan, he stated, “I think most of us are for tax policies that lead to jobs is because we have had two cycles in my lifetime, Ronald Reagan, and the Contract with America, both of which had the same policy: lower taxes, less regulation, more American energy, and have faith in the American job creator.” Gingrich far outpaced his opponents when it came to referencing Reagan during the debates. By January 24, 2012, Gingrich had used the term “Reagan” fifty-five times in debates or 3.2 times per debate (Silver, 2012).⁵⁷ At the debate at the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, on September 7, 2011, Gingrich mentioned Reagan’s name in the first sentence he spoke. He connected himself to Reagan’s jobs program: “I served during the Reagan campaign with people like Jack Kemp and Art Laffer. We had an idea for job creation. I served as a

⁵⁷ Rick Santorum had used the terms fourteen times, Michele Bachmann eight times, Jon Huntsman seven times, and Rick Perry, Mitt Romney, and Ron Paul each had used the term six times (Silver, 2012).

freshman – or as a sophomore helping pass the Reagan’s jobs program.” Gingrich went on to applaud Reagan’s unemployment plan, stating that “if you took the peak of the Reagan unemployment, which he inherited from Carter, by last Friday, going month by month, under Ronald Reagan, we’d have 3,700,000 more Americans working.” He criticized Obama for not going to the Reagan library to investigate how Reagan was so successful in terms of job creation, citing it as evidence that the president was “committed to class warfare and so committed to bureaucratic socialism.” Gingrich also highlighted how he followed in Reagan’s footsteps regarding job creation, welfare reform, balancing the budget, and cutting capital gains taxes when he was speaker of the house.

Bachmann and Covenantal Form

Although Gingrich explicitly invoked Reagan’s economic policies the most, Bachmann was perhaps the most effective candidate in incorporating Reagan’s covenantal message into her economic discourse. In her speech on January 21, 2011, in Iowa, which was considered to be the unofficial kickoff to her presidential primary campaign,⁵⁸ Bachmann connected the people of the United States to their Puritan ancestors and called on her audience to continue to “preserve the promise of America” by upholding the covenant the nation’s first settlers established. She stated,

Indeed the moment I think before the first settlers arrived, this unique idea was forged in this covenant called the Mayflower compact articulated by John Winthrop [*sic*] as I had said. It was the compelling, moral commandment that was imposed by this covenant on ourselves as the people. [...] And it was the

⁵⁸ Bachmann officially announced her candidacy on June 27, 2011.

obligation of each generation to the next to bequeath to their posterity the inheritance of a greater America than they had known.⁵⁹

Thus, like Reagan, Bachmann gave U.S. citizens the responsibility to uphold the national covenant.

Also, like Reagan, Bachmann used the idea of a national covenant to promote the idea of inclusion despite difference. She placed covenant at the center of national identity and argued that the people of the United States must unify around it like their Puritan ancestors. Bachmann said, “They had different cultures. Different backgrounds, different traditions. But unbelievably they all bond themselves back to this tradition, this covenant, that was contained in the Mayflower compact.” Accordingly, Bachmann called on the people of the United States to uphold the covenant and the equality it represented, which she stated was the value the Puritans revered as most sacred. Moreover, she stressed that equality was present despite economic difference:

It didn't matter their economic status. It didn't matter whether they descended from nobility or whether they were of a higher or lower class. It made no difference. Once you got here, we were all the same [...] Out of that E Pluribus Unum. Out of Many: One. That is the greatness and essence of this nation.

Bachmann contends that in “this land of limitless opportunity,” everyone had the equal “chance to write their own ticket.”

Thus, each citizen also had the individual responsibility to uphold their covenantal duty. Bachmann warned her audience that it was the only way the country to survive and

⁵⁹ Bachmann confused the Puritans and their covenantal tradition with the Pilgrims who came to the United States on the *Mayflower* in 1620 and settled in Plymouth. John Winthrop was a Puritan, not a Pilgrim. He led a group of Puritans aboard the *Arbella* to New England to start the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

endure as an exceptional nation. She asked, “[W]ill we take action now to make sure that we remain the exceptional nation that our parents thought this country was? A covenant nation like John Winthrop wrote just as the Puritans were about to land in Massachusetts Bay.” Bachmann said she was “in love” with the people “[w]ho sacrificed, who built it up, and who through their labor literally filled the trees and clawed through the land and picked the rocks and built the barns and did what had to be done to build up this most magnificent country that the world has ever seen.” She called on the people to continue to exhibit this Puritan/Protestant ethic and to uphold “this great experiment in human liberty.” According to Bachmann, the covenantal fate would be of their “own making”: U.S. citizens could either assume “an entitlement mentality” or embrace “freedom, free enterprise, [and] individual, personal responsibility.”

Similar to Reagan, Bachmann reminded the people of the United States that it was their duty to keep the country moving in the right direction: “you are that self-correcting country, and you are the most important part of what is about to happen in the United States.” Moreover, in the same way that Reagan assured the people that they would ultimately succeed at their task as long as they had faith in themselves and relied on God, Bachmann stated:

I believe as great as a task we have before us in this country, if we once again rely on ourselves before an Almighty holy God. And if we arouse ourselves, if we educate ourselves, if we stand forward to lead. If we fall on our knees and cry out to that most munificent, beneficent creator. We can in our own time, reignite, rejuvenate, reclaim the purpose and greatness of the United States of America.

Ultimately, then, although Bachmann warned the people that the country was in danger, she was optimistic that they would fulfill their covenantal obligations and that the United States would remain the most exceptional nation on the earth: “Because if there is not America, to where do freedom-loving people repair? To where do we go? This is it. [...] I trust you with the challenge.”

What is perhaps most relevant to this analysis, however, is how Bachmann used this covenantal framework to lay the context for the economic policies she proposed throughout her speech. That is to say, she used covenantal form as a veil for delivering substantive policy stances that she wanted the people of the United States to support. Bachmann argued that they had to help solve the “grave” financial situation by supporting tax reform, spending cuts, and deficit-reduction measures. According to Bachmann, the main issues in the United States were the “crushing deficit and bankrupting America and the size and scope of our government, the weakening of our national security.” The “big, overriding, centralized government” had been allowed to purchase private industries and the nation’s largest banks, home mortgage companies, and car companies in America and to take over the student loan industry. Although Bachmann said “the answer is not with our political figures” or office-seekers, she instructed the people of the United States that they could fulfill their covenantal obligations by supporting certain policies. Thus, like Reagan, she connected faith in the covenantal promise to limited government in economic matters. She stated,

It took a great leap of faith for these people to come here. And they were absolutely marvelous because they did not come here for the promise of a federal

handout. They didn't come here for the promise of a welfare payment. They didn't come here for the promise and hope of socialized medicine. They came here for the promise of America. And they came here to live in this land of limitless opportunity.

Bachmann instructed the people that they could show their faith in themselves, God, and the United States by using their "self-correcting power" and voting for a Republican candidate in the 2012 presidential election.

Tea Party Connections

The candidates who drew upon Reagan the most during 2011-2012 Republican primary season, Bachmann and Gingrich, had the strongest connection to the emerging Tea Party in the United States.⁶⁰ Interestingly, the Tea Party Patriots' mission "to restore America's founding principles of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets" (www.teapartypatriots.org) mirrors Reagan's economic themes as highlighted in this project. The Tea Party was born out of "the reaction of the American people to fiscally irresponsible actions of the federal government, misguided "stimulus" spending, bailouts and takeovers of private industry" (www.teapartypatriots.org). On February 19, 2009, CNBC correspondent Rick Santelli launched the Tea Party movement with a six-minute tirade about how the "government [was] promoting bad behavior" (Leahy, 2012, p. 225). In response, about 30,000 people

⁶⁰ In July 2010, Bachmann led other conservative Republicans in forming a Tea Party Caucus in the House of Representatives and delivered the Tea Party response to Obama's 2011 State of the Union. Although Gingrich's connection to the Tea Party is more contentious and has been forged more on the basis of publicity rather than loyalty (Leahy, 2012), he was endorsed by several Tea Party groups and won several Tea Party straw polls during the primary.

in fifty cities gathered at the first tea party on February 27, 2009, to protest the Stimulus bill. This was followed by a larger Tax Day Tea Party on April 15, 2009.

Co-founder of the Nationwide Tea Party Coalition, conservative author and internet journalist Michael Patrick Leahy has argued that the Tea Party is the party of freedom and the protector of the “constitutional covenant” that ensures freedom for all U.S. citizens. In his 2012 book *Covenant of Liberty: The Ideological Origins of the Tea Party Movement*, he states,

From the moment the citizens of a country bind themselves in a constitutional covenant that guarantees the rights of the individual and defines and limits the powers of the government, the battle lines are drawn between the faithful defenders of that covenant and those who seek to corrupt it. (p. 1)

He argues that the Protestant Reformation allowed each Englishman the capacity of “determining for himself his own views on the great covenantal relationships: between man and God, between the individual and the state, and between the individual and his local church” (p. 11). Leahy argues that U.S. citizens had the obligation to protect the covenantal gift that their Puritan ancestors had brought to the United States and restore the damage done by the government in violating this constitutional power. He criticizes former presidents like Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Obama for violating the constitutional covenant by infringing upon free markets and citizens’ free will (p. 91).

Leahy (2012) suggests, however, that conservatives realized in the 1960s that Reagan could restore the nation’s covenantal roots and values. After hearing Reagan’s A

Time for Choosing Speech and watching him campaign for Republican Presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, conservatives decided that Reagan was their “champion, the man who could win” (p. 212). Leahy argues that Reagan took the “city upon a hill” that Kennedy first spoke about and added the “providential and covenantal nature of our republic” to it (p. 213). Moreover, Leahy remarks that Reagan provided a much “different vision from the Kennedy/Johnson/Obama ‘city upon a hill,’” which consisted of government elites imposing their standards and regulations on the U.S. citizens. In contrast, Leahy stresses that the Reagan and Tea Party “city on a hill” allows for freedom and opportunity while expecting people to uphold their covenantal obligations because “subsidizing those who are failing in the market, penalizing those who are competing, is one of the greatest moral dysfunctions of our current society” (p. 249). The true “city on a hill,” according to Leahy, is a nation that fosters economic growth by providing employment, reducing regulations, and encouraging people’s individual economic contributions (p. 257).

“Separating” Church and State with Economics

Although Leahy argues that Reagan’s “city on a hill” was more providential than that of Kennedy, he also says that Reagan “rejected [Winthrop’s] biblical covenant for the more steadfast constitutional covenant” (p. 215) and constantly refers to the Tea Party covenant he describes as “secular.” As outlined, I take a different approach in this project and argue that covenantal values, though secularized through time, retain much of the moral absolutism of Puritan doctrine, especially as packaged in covenantal form. Moreover, although Leahy and other Tea Party advocates might want to “leave the social

issues off the table until the fiscal and constitutional issues [are] solved” (Leahy, 2012, p. 230), this analysis suggests that moral, religious, social, fiscal, constitutional, institutional, and political issues are intertwined in a “complex machinery of interlocking covenants” (Miller, 1953, p. 252). In other words, the “ideological origins of the Tea Party movement” are not only constitutionally-imbedded (Leahy, 2012) but religiously-imbedded as well. Campbell and Putnam (2011) found that “the strongest predictor of being a member of the Tea Party, besides being a Republican, was the desire for a greater role of religion in politics.” They state, “The Tea Party’s generals may say their overriding concern is a smaller government, but not their rank and file, who are more concerned about putting God in government.”

Yet because of the First Amendment’s protection of freedom of religion, conservatives have to frame their religious and moral messages carefully. Whereas the religious and civil realms were inextricably connected for the Puritans, the Constitution mandated a separation between the two realms. This project suggests that covenantal form is a rhetorical tool through which politicians make political decisions based on religious beliefs without appearing to violate the Constitution. Reagan’s use of a covenantal framework became a way to put God in economic matters but not government. By calling for limited government intrusion into the economy, he dissociated the civil and economic realms, which allowed God to “enter” the economic realm without crossing over the line between God and state. In other words, Reagan respected the separation of church and state by creating an “economy of grace” rather than a Protestant government, which helped to shield his infusion of religion into

governmental decisions. In this way, covenantal form was used to transform spatial dimensions, which provides yet another illustration of its moral and rhetorical function.

Looking Forward

Although this project examines how one Republican president used covenantal form and how certain Republican politicians mirrored that use, more investigation is warranted. The claims made in this project about Reagan and covenantal form as an argumentative and interpretive tool provide a foundation on which future studies can build. Although it is evident that Reagan's presidential successors were both constrained and assisted by his economic policy precedents, it is less clear how they interpreted and adapted Reagan's covenantal and economic discourse to meet the exigencies of their time. Moreover, although this project begins to suggest that the use of covenantal form might be a rhetorical tool better fitted to Republican traditions, more analysis is needed to say this with any argumentative certainty. Ultimately, if this project can add to the continuing conversation of morality and religion in politics in the United States and provoke an interest in the constitutive and rhetorical power of covenantal ideas, its "obligation" has been fulfilled.

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