Global Economy Podcast – Episode 113

Inside the Reagan White House: Lessons for Today's Politics

Full Transcript

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Fredrik Erixon: Hello everyone and welcome to ECIPE's Global Economy Podcast. My name is Fredrik Erixon and today I am pleased to welcome back to the podcast my old friend, Frank Lavin, who is now spending quite a lot of time promoting his new book that just also has been released in Europe. It is titled Inside the Reagan White House: A Front-Row Seat to Presidential Leadership with Lessons for Today, and it is a delightful read with strong analysis and piercing observations about America, of course, but also U.S. domestic and foreign policy and the world of then and today. The front row seat that Frank has in the title, of course, refers to the fact that he worked in the Reagan White House, starting as a volunteer in Reagan's transition office and staying mostly throughout his two terms in office in various White House positions. After his time in the Reagan White House, Frank has had very senior positions in the Bush administrations, and pursued a business career between government service, which included, among other things, the launch of a successful e-commerce platform in China. Now, Frank is, among other things, a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

Frank, welcome to the podcast.

Frank Lavin: Fredrik, thank you for having me on and thank you very much for your gracious comments about the book. It was an exciting project. I think I tried to capture that moment and tried to draw some general conclusions about U.S. government and U.S. policy formulation and U.S. role in the world. The whole point of writing a book is, of course, to share. So, I'm delighted to share it with you and share it with other friends as well. Thank you for having me on today.

Fredrik Erixon: No, and I am also being honest when I say I think it is a truly delightful read. I certainly learned a lot from reading it. If we try to get to the essence of the book right away, it's not a Reagan biography, nor is it your own biography, but even if you weave together his story and your story.

But my take, Frank, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that what you're doing is that you're searching for the answer what Reaganism was all about. His presidency continues to inspire and elude people to this day. But what would you say is the core ideas and the core impulses that defined the Reagan political projects?

Frank Lavin: That's a great summary, Fredrik, and I sort of endorse your premise that I think it's a mistake to write memoirs or biographies that are so particular to the individual or to the author himself that it's of no appeal to a broader audience. But what you have to do is to say this particular biography or this set of memoirs illuminates some broader points. And so even if you have no particular interest in the 1980s or Ronald Reagan, there's some interesting discussions about what is the point of government or what is the point about U.S. foreign policy? What is U.S. international role? What should we try to do and why should we try to do it? So, I hope that the reader walks away with some kind of elevated sense of decision making and statecraft and so forth.

And to your point about biography memoirs, I alternate chapters in the book. One chapter is about Reagan and the White House and presidential decision making. And then one chapter is about my personal memoirs.

But I would say, I hope I did this. Your personal story, anyone's personal story is rarely a broader interest. So only discuss items in your story that illuminate a broader point or maybe are unusually humorous or revealing in some respect.

But it's not your diary, the point is, and even your family members don't care about your biography and what you did day to day, but they care about where the country is going and what is the point of the White House or the point of the president?

I would say an organising principle for me was presidential leadership. What is Reagan trying to do and why is he trying to do it? And now looking back after several decades, we can maybe be a bit more balanced in our discussion. But I came to the conclusion that presidential leadership, maybe any political leadership, has twin attributes, two pillars.

One is you have to be able to articulate a vision. You have to have a sense of where the country needs to go, what will improve people's lives, what will improve our security. So, you have to have that vision. You have to be able to articulate it.

And the second pillar of leadership is you have to be able to create a consensus for action. You have to be able to garner popular support and in the US system, legislative support that allows you to move ahead.

So, you're always, you're always communicating. You're always trying to invite people to your positions. You're always trying to present your positions in as positive a way as possible.

And you're trying to never be exclusionary. You're trying to never say because this fellow opposed me last year on some major legislation, he's now my enemy or I have disdain for him. Reagan's view is very much the opposite.

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how many times you might've voted against me or spoken against me. I invite you to support me in this piece of legislation or this government initiative.

And you'd enjoy some success if you took that attitude, but I'd also say that's how most of us, or we'd say the more mature of us try to approach life in general, that even if somebody wasn't particularly helpful last year, maybe they can be helpful this year or we can find a way to work again. But the point is don't go through life with a chip on your shoulder or with animosity towards others, even if there'd been a point of difference in the past. So that was, I think a great leadership lesson, a great life lesson from Reagan.

Fredrik Erixon: But Reagan was different from his predecessors. So, I mean, if we go back then, so you joining already during the transition years and you've been spending time on some of the other campaigns before that you'd been active in the college Republicans, and we'd gone through a pretty miserable 1970s for America. We had the Carter administration, which was also economically and foreign policy wise, it wasn't, well, we wouldn't rank it very high in American presidencies. Reagan did not come in and say, let's just continue whatever we're doing. Let's just continue. He came in and say something, said something very, very different. And what was that different that he wanted to bring to America at that point?

Frank Lavin: I think that's a very fair assessment. And I think there were at least two sort of general philosophical elements of his presidency in which he had varying degrees of success. But one was the size of government or the role of government. That government had been on a largely an open-ended expansion for some 40 plus years from the Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deals,

anti-depression initiatives of deficit spending and expanding the role of government to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, where that continued this view that there's, there are problems out there in the country, but a government programme can fix these problems. And all we need to do is allocate resources against them and the problem will get better.

By the way, there's a lot of truth to that premise, I would say, but it's finite truth. And the other element you would see is the 20th century road along is not only is it finite truth, but there are diminishing returns. The more you add, if a school system is giving you poor results and you decide to put more money to that school system, you might get better results, but it's going to taper off. It's going to level off. And then you could also, by the way, you might even get worse results at some point. There might be second order effects or other problems with your spending that doesn't give you any improvement at all and actually causes deterioration.

So, Reagan was the first president. This has been widely discussed among intellectuals and certain people who are right of centre, but Reagan was the first US president to point all of this out and change, really changed the nature of debate that maybe the indirect cost of a new government programme exceeds the benefit of that programme. And so maybe we ought to be more thoughtful about does government need to be bigger or not.

It's still striking in America today that jurisdictions that have lighter tax rates and smaller governments can end up with much better results than jurisdictions that have more expensive government and higher tax rates. So that pillar of Reagan, I think, is something that history will treat him very kindly for.

And the second pillar of Reagan's presidency, the second sort of philosophical element was the Cold War management, where the consensus view of Cold War management was we had to be on the defensive and we had to protect the status quo, that because it's a competition between two heavily armed nuclear powers, that any change in the status quo risked escalation, risked security.

And so the best thing we could do was to keep even with the Soviets and sort of push back when they tried to push us. And we're in this, John F. Kennedy said, long twilight struggle. So, we could not foresee an end to it. And we just had to sort of endure. And Reagan didn't accept that.

Reagan had gone toe-to-toe with communists domestically in Hollywood when he was a union president. He had enormous concern about their behaviour. And his view was, as he said to his staff, we win, they lose.

His view was we have a moral obligation to stand up for liberty and democracy and human rights. And that's going to be a centre part of his presidency. And part of that is going to be improving our military capability.

Part of it is going to be global messaging. Part of it is going to be alliance collaboration and management. Part of it is going to be supporting anti-communist insurgents in the third world.

But in all of these building blocks, and it put enormous pressure on the Soviets. And inevitably, the Soviet Union did collapse, and the world is better off.

Fredrik Erixon: And would you say that's also the closest we can get to Reagan doctrine in foreign policy, which is he's not a status quo individual who comes in. He's not prepared to accept what had perhaps been since—partly since Nixon and Kissinger going into the Carter administration years, which was a realpolitik feeling that no, no, no, just stay in your lane, don't do anything here to disrupt

things. Was Reagan a changemaker who wanted to bring idealism into American foreign policy in order to affect changes?

Frank Lavin: I think that's exactly right, Fredrik. I think Reagan's premise is the highest value we have is human liberty and the dignity of the individual. And totalitarian systems crush that element.

And so, there is a moral dimension to what we're trying to do as well. And that the United States should work with the other great industrial democracies and like-minded nations to collaborate on this project. And don't remember, don't forget, say don't forget that Reagan and his peers were all children of World War II.

They all saw what happened when totalitarian systems gained the upper hand, that they almost by definition are predatory and opportunistic. And there were very few of these fellows who believed in, let's just stay in one country. And communism by design from inception is messianic and believes it has some kind of global purpose to destabilise democratic nations or rickety governments in the third world or even governments that have problems and get them in the communist orbit. That's indeed what Moscow had been doing for several decades.

So, to push back against that and say, our message is better. Our message is we want people to be able to live life as they choose it. We want to respect the dignity of the individual. We want market economics to bring prosperity. We want to connect with like-minded nations, whether it's tourism or educational exchanges or trade. We want to be part of a global community that is win-win and allows everybody to prosper. So that had a strong appeal to much of the world.

And it was a great alternative to a communist vision, which said life is a permanent struggle and filled with friction. And class warfare is an important element of life. And we must all have disdain or contempt for wealthy or successful people. And that's the reason we're poor.

So, we need this element of friction in our everyday life. So, it's an alternative way of thinking.

Fredrik Erixon: And why don't we sort of dig a little bit deeper into that point, because I think it also speaks to the time we are in now, of course, with the orientation of the foreign policy under America right now and what's happening across the world. But one thing which you can observe over time is that a lot of people would think that American foreign policy and the way America thinks about the world has been a linear thing. So, you would say, starting with Woodrow Wilson, you go right up to the 1980s, and you see strong similarities between sort of a moralistic, human-orientated vision expressed by Ronald Reagan.

And you see, well, that's what America has always stood for. But no, it isn't. America has actually had changed its orientation quite many times.

And I would imagine if Reagan now comes in here, just to finish the point, but if Reagan comes in here, you must have been having a lot of fights with foreign policy establishments, with others who basically said, you're a maniac, you're warmongers, you're going to cause frictions that are going to take us into war.

Frank Lavin: Well, that was exactly the line of criticism. There's enormous comfort in the known, and there's discomfort in the unknown. And when you say to the specialists in the field, the status quo is not acceptable, and I want to change, you really bring an enormous amount of discomfort or unease to what people do. You're talking because they've got some degree of comfort in where they are.

So, you're right, some of it was moralism, which also can cause discomfort, and some of it was practical arguments to say, we owe it to ourselves to play to our strengths. And one of our strengths, for example, is our economic power and our technology that we can outpace the Soviets. So why don't we outpace them? Why don't we put them on the back foot? And if we simply have a status quo management approach to foreign policy, what we're really doing is ceding to the Soviets the initiative.

They get to select the target of opportunity, they get to decide the resources, they can decide to allocate them. And there's always going to be a vulnerable target out there. There's always going to be a rickety government or an autocratic government or somebody who's really got problems that the Soviets can exploit.

So, we say, why should we be passive about this and let them pick the target? Why don't we make them the target? Why don't we cause them discomfort and cause them unease and cause them to drain their budget, trying to deal with their problems?

So, putting pressure on the Soviets, I would say made the world a safer place because it forced them to be on the defensive rather than the offensive. But I loved your earlier point, because my view of US foreign policy history was that we've had enormous pendulum swings and it's usually just driven by events, meaning there's always a philosophical architecture to what we're doing. And there's people who say we need to be more moralistic, less moralistic, more realpolitik, less realpolitik, more forward-leaning internationally, more minimalist internationally.

There's always this range, but it's typically an event itself that serves as the catalyst for organisation. So, it was World War II itself, and the enormous damage and destruction done in World War II that led to Cold War architecture. To say, whatever you do, there are predatory nations out there. There are very dangerous nations out there. We've got to find some mechanism of working with the other democracies to have some kind of security apparatus in place to deter aggression. And that was, I think, absolutely the right approach to the Cold War, to say, let's get all of the democracies together through various treaty arrangements.

But as your question suggests, and also in the present day, it somewhat disempowers America because the American voter and American leaders can, I think, with some degree of validity say, look, we don't have the same nature of a problem that we had in the Cold War or World War II, and we just don't need the same security apparatus. So, you've really had a move away from, let's be prepared. I call it in the book, if I may go an extra minute on this, I call it in the book, the two fundamental policy choices a nation faces is, do you want to be a minute early or do you want to be a minute late?

Do you want to be sort of minimalist and wait for something to happen or do you want to be prepared? And there's cost and benefits to either approach. But for most US history, being a minute late was certainly adequate.

For most of the US's history, we had no international territorial ambitions. We had no enemies. We had no treaty allies. We had no military. And so, you save a lot of money, and you keep out of a lot of fights by being a minute late. We're not necessarily going to get involved if somebody attacks us, but we really don't have any international ambitions.

And it was only Pearl Harbour that changed that to say, you know, we better be a minute early. We do need friends. We do need allies. We do need military exercises. We do need a standing army. So, all of these decisions were made on the back of Pearl Harbour to say, let's not be foolish about this. Let's try to be a minute early. And throughout World War II and through the Cold War, that minute early approach really governed government decision making.

Fredrik Erixon: One thing that, I mean, I, as I said, I mean, I really loved reading the book because there are, you know, there are funny stories, you know, you on at least every second page, you're going to laugh a bit, which I always enjoy reading the book. But there's one point which I actually choked on my coffee, not because of what you said, but just as an illustration of how the world has changed or how American politics have changed, which is, I think you say to, I mean, you're talking about the reelection campaign, and then you only have sort of a one sentence or something like that and saying, oh, by the way, we also ran handsomely because we carried 49 states. And then what? 49 states? You carried 49 states in the reelection campaign. I mean, that's unheard of in American politics today that you would have such strong support for a presidential candidate.

So, there must have been something to the man itself, which sort of appealed to a broad audience and sort of went beyond pure policy. They perhaps didn't vote for him because they liked foreign policy or they like inflation busting or economic policy. It was something else to him, right? Which also attracted a lot of people to come to his tent.

Frank Lavin: I think so. And there's a communications theory that governed Reagan's behaviour but does not seem to apply in the same way today. But Reagan's view was, I'm speaking to the entire country, and I want the entire country to be on board to some extent.

I mean, I know this is not realistic, but I want to present my remarks in such a way that make it as easy as possible for people to agree with me, as easy as possible for them to even partially agree with me or even like me, even if they don't agree with me. And that's what life is all about. That's what politics is all about.

It's very different today when we would say the point of political communications is to only speak to your base, only excite your base. So, you might be speaking to 30 or 40 percent of the country, but then you say, well, don't worry, that gets me 30 or 40 percent, but then I will denigrate my opponent. I'll raise such flaws or doubts about my opponent that I'll end up with a plurality, which by the way, I would say tactically that might very well be successful, but it's polarising.

It's corrosive to the body politic and it might leave that victor worse off than if he had gone with a Reagan type approach to speak to the entire nation. So, Reagan never had ill will in his remarks. He never denigrated an opponent.

He loved humour. He loved telling jokes, kind of what we call corny jokes, middle America jokes. And he wanted to be personally as appealing as possible to everybody.

And I think that did pay off because there, as we know, in every society, there's a segment of the population which doesn't really follow day-to-day decisions in government, but can at least read the body language of the speaker and at least say this fellow at least is a pleasant person, you know, and he'll tell a joke and he's sort of genial about it so that he had at least a disposition that allowed people to warm toward him. And I do think that's important in the political figure.

Fredrik Erixon: I think so, too. And I'm going to put you on the spot here Frank. So, what's your favourite Reagan joke? I know mine.

Frank Lavin: Well, he had one which was a joke, but also was sort of a philosophy of life. And I guess really good political humour has an element of truth to it. It's not simply to get some laughs.

But about the two children, the two brothers, one was an incurable optimist, and one was an incurable pessimist. And the parents were concerned about this because they both sort of blindly

upbeat or blindly downbeat. And the doctor said, look, we'll arrange this sort of lesson for each of them to cure them of their sort of chronic, you know, psychological condition.

So, they take the fellow who is an incurable pessimist, says nothing ever works out well, and they bring him to a room full of toys to say, these are all the best toys in the world and they're all for you. And the kid starts crying. Kid just starts crying.

They said, well, what's wrong? What's wrong? We're giving you the best gifts in the world.

And he said, I just know I'm going to end up breaking these and they're not going to work out. And I'm going to be held responsible for breaking these wonderful toys.

So, they said, okay, that test didn't work.

Let's go to the next room where we've got the boy who is the incurable optimist. And we're giving him a room full of horse manure. We just giving him, this is what he gets for his birthday, whatever. He gets a room full of just a terrible by-product here.

And he runs to it with glee, and he starts sort of flinging and throwing and digging in it. And the parents are aghast, and the doctors are aghast, everybody's aghast.

And they sort of say, my son, what are you doing? What are you doing? This is horse manure.

And he said, I just know, I just know with all this horse manure here, there's got to be a pony in here someplace.

So, the point is your predisposition is how you go through life really shapes the outcome of how you look at things. And it was a very funny story.

Fredrik Erixon: Yeah, yeah, indeed. It is very good. And I suppose that, I mean, that was also part of the sunny optimism of Reagan himself, right?

And using that story and coming to presidential leadership, because that's also what your book sort of writes about and what you're also coming back to in the story constantly in the book. And as I say, I mean, it's probably difficult to be a political leader if your only goal is to speak to your own base. I mean, you say, well, these 44% of the population, they are the only ones I'm going to appeal to.

And if that is the restriction, well, you're never going to get to a point of having real leadership, right? Right.

Frank Lavin: I think what the people in that vein are saying is they are so rigid in their policy or the ideology. What is most important to them is just articulate that view, meaning it's not being put forward as to how can we accomplish what we want to accomplish, being forward almost like a sermon. This is what I believe, and you need to believe it too. And I will disparage you if you don't.

You say, well, that doesn't build a popular consensus for what you're trying to do. And it doesn't allow people to move your way.

I mean, nobody was ever insulted into an agreement. So, to say, if you don't agree with me, I will simply denigrate you. I mean, we've got a president now who denigrates the chairman of the Federal Reserve Board.

They say, look, this is an independent agency. This fellow's paid to be an economic steward of sorts. Okay, I understand if you're not happy with it, but why would you publicly chastise him?

And my view is that public disparagement makes it actually more unlikely that the Federal Reserve Board moves Trump's way, because then he looks craven, or he looks expedient. So, he's got to bolt himself down to where he is now and he can't move because Trump is attacking him publicly.

Fredrik Erixon: So, coming to that point, because, and I think it's important because you raised it also already in the introduction, that one thing that prompted you to write the book was the January 6th experience in America. And sort of having seen that spectacle of an outgoing president refusing to accept an election, refusing to take leadership basically over his own tribe and avoid that they were going to do nasty things.

What I'm a little bit surprised to see, because like you, I think there is an ocean between Reagan and Trump. And on one issue that we just talked about is pretty obvious when it comes to the optimism, when it comes to the outlook on America. I mean, the Reagan I watched from afar was a very, very optimistic guy.

He talked well about America. He talked well about fellow Americans. While right now you have a guy in the White House who basically seemed to think that America's just shite unless he is in the office.

And he regularly denigrates fellow Americans, talk badly about them, and doesn't really carry that idea that the country can move to a much better place if we move together and do the right things together.

But that's just sort of one, perhaps my view and perhaps your view. What I'm more surprised about is the number of people who think there is a lineage between Trump and Reagan.

I mean, some of them are going to say, and we've seen this for a couple of years now, people reinterpreting the Reagan policy, for instance, on trade saying, no, no, no, he was a protectionist. Just look at what he was doing against Japan and sort of the threat of Japan at that time. He was a pure protectionist.

Others are going to say, well, on trade he was like Trump or Trump is like Reagan, but peace through strengths, attitudes. Isn't that something which connects Trump and Reagan too? And then you have others.

I don't know if you've read Max Boot's biography on Reagan. And it seems to me that one thing he wants to say in that book is that sort of the type of ideology that Reagan's anti-communism led to sort of the inclusion of racists and political weirdos. And now they are finding a way into the White House again, or at least into the crowds around the president.

What do you make of all this, Frank?

Frank Lavin: Yeah, well, I very much agree with your general approach that Reagan and Trump were not just stylistically quite different, behaviourally quite different. Their view, I think, of America and of America's promise and the nature of politics is quite different as well. And Trump is fundamentally a grievance candidate and a grievance message that things are wrong. And Reagan was fundamentally an aspirational candidate, aspirational that things can be better. So, Trump is governed by yesterday or his view of what yesterday was. And Reagan is governed by tomorrow, that regardless of where you are in life, regardless of what problems you have, tomorrow can be better. And let's think about what kind of policies that allow everybody to get a job, that allow everybody to get out of high school. Let's empower the individual.

The other interesting aspect of the difference between Reagan and Trump is just that, that Reagan was empowering the individuals and saying, we've got to come up with the best way to move our society ahead. Trump is almost 100%, being grievance-based, he's almost 100% exculpatory. All of our problems have nothing to do with us, but foreigners have done this to us through trade or through fraud or through some kind of malevolent behaviour. Foreigners have hurt us, and we're going to push back against foreigners.

So, it's a grievance message with a victimisation message. And that can be quite damaging to the people you purport to help, because you're disempowering them. Instead of telling them, let's find a way.

If this U.S. steel industry is under pressure, let's understand why it's under pressure. And maybe in some states, it's actually growing. In some states, it's shrinking. That suggests maybe it's state laws, state regulations, not somebody dreadful in Korea is trying to hurt us.

So, let's take responsibility for our problems in the first instance. So, it's a very, very different sort of worldview.

And I very much disagree with that Max Boot allegation. I think Reagan wanted as big a tent as possible, we'd say as broad a support base as possible, because absolutely against extremist or political violence. And there were organisations that were conspiracy or adjacent to this conspiracy, the John Birch Society, that he would just disparage and say, I want nothing to do with these fellows, because they're disreputable. So, he broke, I think the John Birch Society famously said that either Eisenhower was a communist or a communist pawn. And said, look, this is a nonsense organisation. It cannot be taken seriously. And it's hurting, it's hurting the entire political discourse about where we're trying to go to push back against communism. So, I don't accept Boot's interpretation at all.

Fredrik Erixon: So, coming back then, and perhaps trying to summarise up, as we move towards the end of the conversation, sort of going to the political leadership lessons from Reagan. So, we've talked about sort of the Reagan political project, I mean, basically having a human centred idea about dignity, human uniqueness, and at least in foreign policy, there was going to be a premium of trying to articulate the idea and trying to get changes to happen for people in other parts of the world.

He had an optimistic outlook, he believed in America, he believed in the future. And that, of course, is also a very, very powerful impulse to have as a political leader.

On technology, I sort of given all the stuff that happened sort of with the space race, and I remember Reagan to be pretty enthusiastic about also the future of technology, or did I understand him wrong on that issue?

Frank Lavin: No, his personal life embodied several technological transitions that forced him to recalibrate, rethink, reposition, respond for his own personal benefit. Going from radio to Hollywood was a big transition, but he's going from an established technology to talking pictures as a new technology, and then going from movies to television is yet another technological shift. So, I think his view that one component of leadership is that society is always changing, society is always in transition, technology is always putting changes upon us but improving our lives.

So, part of that component of leadership is reassurance to say, life 10 years from now is going to be different than life today, but the advantages and benefits we will enjoy will vastly outweigh any kind of dislocation or negative second order effects. So, we should actually think it's a good idea to have

television sets in our room, even if there are social costs or other problems with television, right? But in that basis, it's better off if we have that available to us.

So being positive and reassuring society at a time of change, I think are very important elements of leadership.

Fredrik Erixon: And we also covered a little bit on the Reagan element of trying to communicate with the full country, not just with your own tribe. So that's important too.

But what are the other lessons on presidential leadership you think is important to carry from Reagan into our current times?

Frank Lavin: Well, I think fundamentally the government leadership is not about being reactive and responding to your inbox and simply optimising your preferences within a set of choices. It's about changing the system or altering the choices you're given. But you know, 19th century presidency, the office was small, the budget was small, the country was much smaller, and it was almost a clerical kind of assignment.

And we had moments of great trauma like the U.S. Civil War, but a lot of the day-to-day peacetime was almost clerical. Choices are put in front of you, and you make a choice and then you file it away and go to the next. So, you're really running your inbox.

But with mass communication and mass expansion of the role of government, you are saying, I am speaking to the nation, I am setting the pace of what issues are important and what is our response to these issues and what kind of a country do we want to be 10 years from now, 20 years from now, and how do we get there? And we want a society where everybody has an opportunity to find employment and stand on their own two feet and participate in society. We want a society where everybody can graduate from high school, which is sort of a version of the first point.

We want people to live better, live longer lives, live healthier lives. How can we do that? So those kind of visionary views of society, I think, is what presidential leadership is all about.

Fredrik Erixon: Yep. Indeed, a very important lesson. And of course, just being a decent human being, I suppose, as well, right?

And that is something which I also find pretty interesting, that he could have vicious, substantive differences of opinion with other people, but they did respect him. I mean, you talk a lot about the relationship between Reagan and Tip O'Neill in the book, and there was an element of fundamental decency there, which also extended to these transactional instrumental relations that you need to have.

Frank Lavin: Yeah. And I think in a way, if we go back to these few decades, in a way, there's almost an overcompensation, meaning if two people had really different political views, they should make an extra effort to be gracious and polite and civil in their personal interaction, because they're not trying to dehumanise the individual. In fact, you should try to understand the person who you might have disagreements with. So simply insulting the person and dehumanising him doesn't help anybody.

But unfortunately, we see that, I think, with some degree of prevalence in society today, that nobody seems to have a sense of humour about it. Nobody has the ability to be civil to somebody they have a disagreement with. So, you have nothing, but your existence is 100% defined by your political identity, and you're denying somebody's humanity, I think, unless you respect that person as an individual.

And look, everybody's got their own journey, their own story. If you ask Barack Obama, how did you come to the political views you now hold? Well, part of that, at least, is his own personal story, his own personal journey. But I think I would say the same thing about Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan. Each of them had a journey and experiences and lessons, and they've internalised that. And they also read, and they talk, and they're part of a political process. But at least I think they have respect for the other person's personal journey. I don't hate Jimmy Carter, I don't hate Barack Obama, although I might have real differences with what they're trying to do politically.

Fredrik Erixon: Indeed, that's an important part. It's very important. And of course, unfortunately, it's too often forgotten in contemporary politics today.

Before we close, Frank, do you know which Reagan joke is my favourite?

Frank Lavin: Tell us your favourite Reagan joke.

Fredrik Erixon: Well, many people will have seen it if you looked up Reagan jokes on YouTube, or if you can't remember it. It's the Soviet guy who wants to get a new car. You know that one, right?

Frank Lavin: It is a funny one. That is good. Why don't you tell it, Frank?

Fredrik Erixon: You can tell it better than me.

Frank Lavin: There are different versions of it. But this fellow, finally, car ownership in the Soviet Union is quite rare, quite unusual. This fellow, finally, I think he's 35, 40 years old, he scrapes together enough money to purchase an automobile.

And it's a regulated process in the Soviet Union. He has to get approval to purchase it, he has to go to different ministries and get different forms stamped. And so, it's an elaborate process, like a real estate deed or something.

So, this takes, I don't know, several weeks, he finally gets it. Finally, the last person, and the last person says, it's all done, all your papers in order, the funds are here, it's all perfect, ready to execute. You can come back exactly 10 years from today and pick up your automobile.

And the fellow says, well, morning or afternoon. And the man behind the desk says, well, it's 10 years from today, what possible difference could it make whether it's morning or afternoon? And the customer says, well, I've got the plumber coming in the morning.

Fredrik Erixon: Yeah.

Frank Lavin: It was a great joke about just a needless, pointless bureaucracy, but also the grotesque inefficiency of the Soviet system where you just couldn't get normal consumer goods and let people have sort of normal, happy, productive lives.

Fredrik Erixon: Yeah, indeed, indeed. It captured not just the humorous part of it, but of course, the essential part of communism as well. And the sheer ridiculousness of quite often how the system works.

So, Frank, thank you so much. I should tell people again that your new book is called Inside the Reagan White House: A Front-Row Seat to Presidential Leadership with Lessons for Today.

Frank Lavin: For our final farewell. But yeah, if you're interested in these stories and this discussion, Fredrik, it's been a lot of fun recapturing these moments with you. But please enjoy the book and let

me know. I'm on LinkedIn. I welcome feedback and comments, what you like, what you didn't like, please let me know.

Fredrik Erixon: Thank you so much, Frank. It's been great talking to you.

Frank Lavin: Thank you, Frederik. It's been a lot of fun.