On September 1, 1980, standing before a crowd at the Statue of Liberty, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan delivered a speech in commemoration of Labor Day. In this speech, Reagan would include a line that would become an iconic slogan in the American Right, “This country needs a new administration, with a renewed dedication to the dream of America—an administration that will give that dream new life and make America great again!”\(^1\) Those four words at the end “Make America Great Again” would be placed on pins and posters throughout the country and be a rallying cry for Republicans throughout the campaign. Ronald Reagan would win the presidency defeating the incumbent Jimmy Carter with the slogan “Make America Great Again” again at his back.

On November 19, 2012, a filing was made with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office in the wake of Barack Obama’s victory for his second term. Presidential candidate Donald Trump and his lawyers trademarked the slogan “Make America Great Again.”\(^2\) Once again over thirty years later MAGA (short for Make America Great Again) would make its grand return to the political stage. MAGA would be shouted by crowds, embroidered on hats, and displayed on yard signs across the nation. Like Reagan, Trump would win the presidency of the U.S.

Running for the presidency more than three decades apart from each other, both Trump and Reagan would win the presidency with the use of the MAGA slogan. This paper seeks to gain an in-depth view of the usage and evolution of the MAGA slogan and ideology for both the Reagan and Trump campaigns and administrations. Specifically, this paper focuses on three aspects of the usage of MAGA. First, I examine the context for these campaigns to help explain why the slogan Make America Great Again was used to

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draw support. Second, I consider the movements and groups that flocked to the call to Make America Great Again. Finally, I will examine how both Reagan and Trump attempted to Make America Great Again in their respective administrations.

In the recent unprecedented attack on the United States capital, a violent and armed group of insurrectionists rallied around the MAGA slogan. They sought to seize control of the capital, prevent the election certification of President-elect Joe Biden, and keep President Donald Trump in power. The battle for the capital raged for hours and lead to the deaths of several of the insurrections and officers present. This mob had sought to kill and or capture members of Congress and other government officials that they had deemed as traitors, among them Vice President Mike Pence. Rioters chanted “Hang Mike Pence!” and demanded the overturn of the 2020 presidential election. The insurrection was finally dispersed after the D.C. National Guard arrived to reinforce the police and President Donald Trump told the mob in a video posted on Twitter, “So go home. We love you. You’re very special.”

How does this insurrection connect to the history of MAGA and the movements surrounding it? MAGA, like any ideology, slogan, or movement, is not static. It changes with the times, adapts to new trends and situations, changes its orientation to the people who use it and incorporates new information. It is with this understanding that this paper is written - as an effort to know our past, understand our present, and possibly grasp our future. In the next section, I turn to the context of Ronald Reagan’s campaign for President and the legacy of the 60s and 70s. In addition, an assortment of recent crises had appeared that challenged America’s strength and prestige at home and abroad.

The legacy of the civil rights movement, the humiliation from the withdrawal from Vietnam, and a distrust of government post-Watergate scandal all were elements that would play a role in Reagan's campaign’s call to Make America Great Again. The Civil Rights movement had up-ended the long-standing racial hierarchy that had presided over America for a great deal of its history and caused racial resentment throughout the nation, particularly among some white Americans who resented the civil and political rights granted to black Americans. This would leave those people feeling left behind, that their America was in the past. Along with increased racial tensions and resentments, the withdrawal and defeat of the United States in Vietnam had wounded the prestige and image of the nation as well as injured the government’s credibility. This newfound distrust was compounded by Nixon’s Watergate scandal.

The oil crisis of the late 70s, the Iran hostage crisis, the ongoing deindustrialization, and continuing fears from the Cold War added a new sense of destabilization to American politics. The oil crisis of the late 70s resulted in high gas prices that affected citizen's ability to afford fuel, and the fuel shortages created general disruption in the daily life of Americans. The rising cost of living helped Reagan sell his belief to the American public - that he could Make America Great Again and return them to their previous standard of living. The Iran hostage crisis revealed America's weakness, as one of the two world superpowers had its embassy stormed by a mob and its people were taken hostage for over a year. Another issue facing the U.S. at the time of Reagan’s campaign was the loss of industrial and manufacturing jobs that had been the

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9 The American Yawp, Chapter 28.

10 Wilentz, The Age of Reagan, 125.

11 Lepore, These Truths, 680; Locke and Wright, The American Yawp, Ch 28, Sec 8.

12 Zinn, A People's History of the United States 573; Lepore, These Truths, 680.
backbone of the economy for decades. Finally, Cold War anxiety would go on to play a part in the sentiments among the American people. This resulted in Americans heeding Reagan’s call to Make America Great Again.

MAGA for Reagan’s time was an attempt to provide an answer to these events and reclaim a perceived greatness that had existed before. It drew upon the nostalgia of the American public to garner support by promising the public a future that had the glory and prosperity of the past.

Important for understanding Donald Trump’s calls to Make America Great Again are several events in America’s recent past. 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, the Presidency of Barack Obama, the increased influx of migrants from Latin America along with a myriad of other factors contributed to Trump’s calls to Make America Great Again.

Post-September 11, it is safe to say that the mindset of the American people had been shocked and altered. As historian Sean Wilentz puts it, “Now, the feeling was somber and frightened—a common bond caused by trauma, by fury, and also by fear, not just fear that terrorist might strike again at any moment but fear that the world had changed forever and nobody was prepared.” In the views of many, Muslim Americans were now considered at large to be possible terrorists and enemies of America. Donald Trump used these sentiments as one of his axes to Make America Great Again. For example, during his campaign, Trump argued that America needed “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” He would also go on to call for the U.S. to double down on its war on terror in the Middle East.


In general this rendition of MAGA viewed Muslims and Muslim Americans in opposition to America; thus to Make America Great Again one needed to oppose Muslims.

The monumental Presidency of Barack Obama also forms a key reason Trump would revive the use of MAGA in a presidential campaign. As it was shortly after Obama’s victory over Mitt Romney in 2012 that Trump would trademark the slogan Make America Great Again.\(^{19}\) But what was it about President Obama that warranted the use of this slogan? President Obama was the first black president of the United States. At this time, a growing number of racist remarks and provocations were made against then-President Obama.\(^{20}\) Trump would further add to this by spreading the Birtherism conspiracy theory that held Obama was not born in America, was a secret Muslim, and was anti-American.\(^{21}\) As journalist Adam Serwer would state in his article in “To Make America Great Again, to turn back the clock to an era where white political and cultural hegemony was unthreatened by black people, by immigrants, by people of a different faith. By people like Barack Obama. The calls to disavow birtherism missed the point: Trump’s entire campaign was birtherism.”\(^{22}\)

Trump used anti-immigrant rhetoric in his calls to Make America Great Again. He called the alarm about the influx of migrants from Latin American crossing the southern border. In fact, during his rally announcing his campaign for President Trump announced before the crowd, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”\(^{23}\) This attack on migrants from Mexico from the Trump campaign would continue with the claim of the criminality of those seeking


\(^{20}\) Anderson, White Rage, 158, 159.

\(^{21}\) Haberman, Confidence Man, 183.


to enter the U.S. With the otherizing language such as “They’re not sending you,” Trump was able to then place the blame on these groups as reasons America had stopped being great, making the opposition to them a way for the people in the MAGA movement to feels as though they could Make America Great Again. Thus, the issue of the southern border and the migrants who would enter the United States illegally remained one of the key points for those in the MAGA movement. The lack of control over the border was a perceived humiliation and weakness that Trump could use garner support and call for a return to a time in which law was respected and, in this way, Make America Great Again.

For Trump and his call to Make America Great Again these aforementioned factors played a crucial role. From the post-9/11 fear and hatred that had swept America, to the racial resentment of the first black president, to the influx of Hispanic migrants, along with other reasons all played a part in the Trump call for MAGA. The role of racial and ethnic resentment does seem to contrast with Reagan’s version of MAGA which still held to people’s fears and prejudices but still had an economic message to rally the people. These differences beg the question: Which groups and movements were most attracted to the messaging of MAGA?

In fact, many of the same groups that rallied in support of Ronald Reagan also would go on to rally for Trump. Two that stand out are evangelical protestant Christians and white supremacists or nationalists as some of the most staunch and loyal supporters of the call to Make America Great Again. While evangelical Christian support of conservative candidates was and still is a given, the level of reverent support given to Reagan and Trump was exceptional. In the case of Reagan, his support from the evangelicals came from the alliance between the conservatives and evangelical churches. Reagan courted evangelicals and received a solid and continuous base of support for his campaign and administration in return. As he famously said to a group of evangelical ministers, “I know you can’t endorse me. But I endorse you, and what you are doing.”

24 Daniel Hummel, “Revivalist Nationalism since World War II: From ‘Wake up, America!’ to ‘Make America Great Again,’” Religions 7, no. 11 (November 1, 2016): 128.
evangelical support.\textsuperscript{25} Exit polls from 2016 indicated 81 percent of white evangelical protestants voted for Trump.\textsuperscript{26}

White nationalists and supremacists would also heed the calls to Make America Great Again. For Reagan, this can be seen in one of his campaign rallies at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia Mississippi on August 3, 1980. Three key points of this speech related to white supremacy. First, the speech took place only a few miles from where civil rights workers had been lynched and murdered in 1964.\textsuperscript{27} His speech also contained a call for “states’ rights” a commonly used dog whistle for white supremacy, as it calls for more power to be given to the states regarding matters like civil rights.\textsuperscript{28} Finally, the crowd responded to the speech by waving confederate flags and chanting support for Reagan.\textsuperscript{29}

Trump also had ties to white supremacists. One such connection was the endorsement of former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.\textsuperscript{30} In addition, Trump only partially condemned a deadly neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville.\textsuperscript{31} In the days leading up to the attack on the capital, instead of condemning far-right and white supremacist groups, Trump called on one of those groups, the Proud Boys, to “Stand back, and stand by.”\textsuperscript{32} These incidents reveal the appeal of the phrase Make America Great Again to white supremacists.

In the final part of this paper, I will consider the ways Reagan and Trump tried to Make America Great Again while in office. One might first analyze why they ran for the presidency in the first place.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Haberman, Confidence Man, 219.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Haberman, Confidence Man, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Haberman, Confidence Man, 316.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Kathleen Ronayne and Micheal Kunzelman, “Trump to Far-Right Extremists: ‘Stand Back and Stand by,’” \textit{AP} September 30, 2020.
\end{itemize}
Reagan wanted to move beyond the events of the 60s and 70s and to address current and ongoing issues facing America. In contrast, Trump opposed changes that he saw as un-American.

Reagan’s approach to making America great again comes down to two major initiatives: increasing spending on the military and reviving the economy. Over his two terms as president, he would go on to increase military spending massively.\(^\text{33}\) In addition to increasing the size of the armed forces, he oversaw the modernizing of the equipment and investment in multiple projects. Additional military spending, Reagan believed, helped calm the fears the populace had during the Cold War, as well as allowed him to regain the support and confidence of the people after the humiliations in the Vietnam war. In addition, Reagan implemented economic policies called Reaganomics that involved tax cuts across the board, especially to corporations and the wealthy, along with the loosening of business regulation.\(^\text{34}\) The aim of this policy was economic growth that would increase the wealth of all Americans and strengthen the economy.

Trump focused on two policy efforts that can be seen as trying to Make America Great Again. In the Muslim travel ban, President Trump issued an executive order that barred or made travel very difficult for residents of several Muslim-majority countries.\(^\text{35}\) It sought to work as a bulwark to halt immigration from these countries and stop Muslims from coming into the U.S. In addition, Trump called for increased border spending and sought to build a wall to stop migrants from entering the U.S. via the southern border.\(^\text{36}\)

In the cases of Trump and Reagan, fear, perceived weakness, and humiliation along with bigotry helped fuel the calls of MAGA. Those who attended MAGA rallies tended to be religiously conservative and predominantly white. Under Trump policies enacted under the slogan of MAGA included extensive


corporate deregulation, vast increases in military spending, and the exclusion of those who are perceived to not fit in with the idea of a real American. With further research and comparison to other right-wing populist groups, it may become possible to examine the future of the MAGA movement going forward. Analyzing groups and movements that preceded or were contemporary to the MAGA movement, such as Margret Thatcher’s conservatism or the Brexit movement may help in determining the future paths and aspirations of those in the MAGA movement.
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