

Ideological offspring follow Reagan's ideals

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As he slipped Friday into the California sunset after 200,000 Americans had paid their respects, many of whom adored him, there's little doubt the grand ideas of Ronald Reagan live.

In George W. Bush.

And in young Americans such as Jason Shepherd of Kennesaw, who with his seventh grade class watched Reagan leave office in 1989. Shepherd, an aide to Georgia Insurance Commissioner John Oxendine, has on his wall a framed campaign button --- "Reagan: Let's make America Great Again." On his desk is a piece of the Berlin Wall.

"I got married back in March to a young lady who grew up on the other side of the Berlin Wall," says Shepherd. "In 1987, as an 11-year-old, I had no idea that Reagan's demand to tear the wall down would eventually free another 11-year-old to come here, meet me and then be foolish enough to actually marry me. A piece of that wall is on my desk, as a paperweight."

Reagan touched the young --- never more vividly than in his conversation with the nation following the 1986 Challenger space shuttle explosion. "I want to say something to the schoolchildren of America who were watching the live coverage of the shuttle's takeoff," he said. "I know it's hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of

taking a chance and expanding man's horizons.

"The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The Challenger crew was pulling us into the future, and we'll continue to follow them."

No national call for grief counselors. Instead, from tragedy, an explanation, a grand idea, and the dream.

Without question, Bush is the heir to the Reagan legacy. His practical conservatism is different. His willingness to spend, and to abide the growth of government, offends the fiscal conservatives who heralded the Reagan Revolution.

But we are, in important respects, a very different nation. When Reagan took office, according to the Tax Foundation, 19.8 percent of income tax filers paid no income tax. The estimate for this year is that a third won't and 44 percent of the U.S. population is outside the income tax system altogether. Likewise, the percentage of people who look to government for income has grown, too.

The nation is, therefore, less amenable to a direct assault on government's spread. For conservatives, day-to-day governing by Reagan's ideas requires more creativity. Education is one example.

"If you serve a child a rotten hamburger in America," said Reagan in 1988, "federal, state and local officials will investigate you, summon you, close you down, whatever."

But if you provide a child with a rotten education, nothing happens, except that you are likely to be given more money to do it with."

jwooten@ajc.com

Effecting change over the opposition of entrenched bureaucracies, a reluctant public and a media disposed to view anything other than perpetual funding increases as malfeasance requires a different approach. Bush's No Child Left Behind law is Reagan's philosophy creatively applied. It's un-Reaganesque in its higher spending and expanded federal presence in the affairs of state and local government. But there's a certain brilliance in its devices.

It demands standards and accountability and gives choice to poor parents whose children are in failed public schools. It unleashes two forces: parents and competition. It's brilliant in its subtlety --- and it will take the nation in the direction Reagan wanted.

"His ideas, so clear, were never simplistic," Margaret Thatcher observed at his funeral Friday. His critics never got that, either because they feared them or didn't understand them.

Bush, applying those ideas to a different time, will push them further. And after him, another generation of conservatives.

"There are a lot of us," says Jason Shepherd, "who are the ideological children and grandchildren of Ronald Reagan, our current president included."

"When the sun sets tonight off the coast of California," eulogized President Bush, "a great American story will close."

A story, yes. But there are sequels to come from "the ideological children and grandchildren of Ronald Reagan."