

# RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

---

## **The Great Communicator and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War<sup>1</sup>**

*By Ambassador Eric S. Edelman*

President Ronald Reagan is known as the “Great Communicator,” a soubriquet that was awarded to him by New York Times columnist Russell Baker, and which stuck despite Reagan’s disclaimer in his farewell address that he “wasn’t a great communicator” but that he had “communicated great things.” The ideas which animated Reagan’s vision were given voice in a series of extraordinary speeches, many of them justly renowned.

Among them are his “Time for Choosing” speech in 1964, his “Shining City on a Hill” speech to CPAC in 1974, his spontaneous remarks at the conclusion of the Republican National Convention in 1976 and, of course, his memorable speeches as President of the United States. These include his “Evil Empire” speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, his remarks at Westminster in 1982, his elegiac comments commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day invasion and mourning the Challenger disaster, and his Berlin speech exhorting Mikhail Gorbachev to “Tear Down this Wall” in 1987, which Time Magazine suggested was one of the 10 greatest speeches of all time.<sup>2</sup>

Curiously, Reagan’s address to the students of Moscow State University during the 1988 Summit with Mikhail Gorbachev draws considerably less attention today despite the fact that even normally harsh Reagan critics hailed the speech at the time and have continued to cite it subsequently. *The New York Times*, for instance, described the speech as “Reagan’s finest oratorical hour” and Princeton’s liberal historian Sean Wilentz has called it “the symbolic high point of Reagan’s visit.... the capstone of Reagan’s presidency, his greatest, if least predictable achievement” that “began a rise in public approval that peaked during his last days in office.”<sup>3</sup>

The speech has special meaning for me because I was in Moscow at the time (although I did not get to attend the event in person) as a mid-level Foreign Service officer assigned to the political

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank James Graham Wilson at the State Department Historical Office for his assistance in preparing this essay. Even where we disagree his unparalleled knowledge of the documentary evidence on the Reagan years has been invaluable.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Nunberg, “And Yes, He Was A Great Communicator,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2004; Ronald W. Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” January 11, 1989 in *Public Papers of Ronald Reagan*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/011189j>; Time Magazine, “Top Ten Greatest Speeches,” [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1841228\\_1841749\\_1841743,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1841228_1841749_1841743,00.html)

<sup>3</sup> “With Lenin Watching,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1988, A30; Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History 1974-2008*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2008) p. 263

section of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Because I had served as special assistant to Secretary of State George P. Shultz a few years earlier I was assigned as his “control officer,” shadowing him as he accompanied the President to their meetings and events.

It was a largely uneventful assignment, punctuated by several moments of sheer terror: I managed to lose track of the Secretary in the Kremlin during the signing ceremony for the finalized Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and had to make my way through unfamiliar hallways and rooms back to the motorcade. I nearly knocked over the President and Mrs. Reagan as I skittered down the long staircase covered in red carpeting at the Kremlin entrance, much to annoyance of the President’s Secret Service protective detail.

Although I didn’t have a seat in the grand hall of Moscow State University--which, according to the Soviet press was “filled to nearly bursting”--I can attest to the impact of the speech, the single most discussed issue of the day in Moscow after the Summit, both among diplomats and the Soviet citizens with whom I met in the aftermath. As Svetlana Savranskaya, a young Russian scholar who was there, has written:

The highlight of the summit was Reagan’s speech to Moscow State University students. For those in attendance, including the author of this chapter, the Cold War ended on May 31, 1988. For us, the graduating class, it was a kind of our commencement address, and we understood that the smiling man who spoke about things close to our heart, like human rights, would not push the button. It was surreal and illuminating like a dawn of a new era—the leader of our archenemy was human, engaging and enthusiastic about the new partnership with the Soviet Union.

Savranskaya was clearly not alone in her response. According to the U.S. Ambassador at the time, Jack Matlock, the President’s remarks were welcomed rapturously. “The prolonged standing ovation he received was probably the most enthusiastic he had witnessed since the demonstration that followed his nomination at the Republican convention.” This would seem to be a remarkable reception for an American President who only six years earlier had called the USSR an “evil empire” and told the British Parliament that Marxism-Leninism was an ideological aberration that would be consigned to the “dustbin of history.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the extraordinary encomia that the speech earned, as well as the reception by its audience, it is worth exploring the magnitude of Reagan’s rhetorical task and accomplishments at Moscow as well as trying to explain the relative lack of enduring attention to this speech. It is also worth asking what, if anything, the speech and its reception teach us about today’s world.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Moscow World Service in English, 31 May 88, found in Public Affairs Office Records. Katherine Chumachenko Files OA 18287, Moscow Summit 1988 (8), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Svetlana Savranskaya, “Bringing Down the Walls: Reagan and Gorbachev,” p. 16 at <https://www.vmi.edu/academics/departments/history/adams-center-for-military-history/reagan-project/>; Jack F. Matlock Jr. *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, (New York: Random House, 2004) p. 302

## The Background

Reagan had assumed office at a crucial and dangerous moment in the history of the Cold War. After more than a quarter-century in which the U.S. had maintained, first, a nuclear monopoly, and then a clear nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, the nuclear balance had shifted towards numerical parity. Moreover, the United States was still recovering from a decade consumed by a costly and damaging war in Vietnam that had divided the nation and put the U.S. at odds with many of its allies around the world.

President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had attempted to execute a complex strategy of linkage and trilateral diplomacy among the U.S., the USSR, and the People's Republic of China in order to extricate the U.S. from the war and contain the Cold War nuclear arms competition. Although successful in ultimately ending the war in Southeast Asia, many critics believed that the Nixon policy of détente had conceded far too much to the USSR. Nixon and Kissinger were also unsuccessful in ending the partisan and generational acrimony that the Vietnam war had produced. Nixon was ultimately forced to resign over the Watergate scandal and his successor, Gerald Ford, sought to continue the Nixon-Kissinger policies of détente with the Soviet Union and opening to China. Ford, however, was unsuccessful in seeking a term as President in his own right, losing the 1976 presidential election to Democrat Jimmy Carter after facing an intra-party challenge from former California Governor Ronald Reagan.

Reagan had been a moderately successful Hollywood actor who had hosted "General Electric Theater" on television and became active in politics in the late 1950s and 1960s. He had come to national political prominence in 1964 when his speech, "A Time for Choosing," was broadcast on national television in the waning days of that year's presidential contest between conservative Republican Barry Goldwater and the incumbent Lyndon Johnson. Goldwater would go on to lose the election in a landslide of epic proportions, but Reagan's speech, combining an appeal to limit the excesses of big government with staunch anti-Communism and an endorsement of Goldwater, would launch his political career as the new leader of the conservative wing of the Republican party.

Reagan was elected Governor of California two years after the Goldwater electoral debacle and instantly became a potential Presidential nominee. He ran a brief campaign for the Republican nomination against Richard Nixon in 1968 but his challenge to Gerald Ford in 1976 was much more serious. Reagan campaigned against Ford as a representative of true commitment to limited government, but his run for office initially foundered. His campaign began to catch fire when he started to articulate a critique of Ford's foreign policy as a one-way street in which the Soviet Union was gaining all of the benefits and the United States appeared to be in a global retreat, including from the Panama Canal, then a subject of negotiation by the Administration. In the end, although Reagan came tantalizingly close to winning the nomination, he failed to dislodge Ford.

Reagan and his allies in the GOP did succeed, however, in shaping Republican foreign policy for the next generation by winning a fight to include a plank in the party platform devoted to "morality in foreign policy." The plank insisted on the importance of standing for freedom in the

world and maintaining American military primacy. At the close of the Republican convention, in a foreshadowing of things to come, President Ford invited Reagan to the podium for impromptu remarks. Reagan, totally unscripted, gave an amazingly articulate account of his concerns about both the decline of freedom and the prospect of nuclear war bringing an end to civilization as we know it, leading many at the convention to develop an instant case of buyer's remorse over having nominated Ford.

Those remarks instantly established Reagan as the favorite for the Republican nomination in 1980 in the event that Ford was not re-elected. Although it might not have been evident at the time, it was also a harbinger of far greater changes to come. As Robert Kagan and William Kristol have noted, "although Reagan lost the battle to unseat Ford, he won the fight at the Republican convention for a platform plank on 'morality in foreign policy.' Ultimately, he succeeded in transforming the Republican party, the conservative movement in America, and, after his election to the presidency in 1980, the country and the world."<sup>5</sup>

After the election, Reagan began to prepare for his 1980 run for the Presidency and to hone his views on foreign policy in a series of radio addresses. The direction of his thinking was revealed in a 1977 conversation with Richard Allen, later his first National Security Advisor, in which he outlined his views of how to wage the Cold War in pithy terms that have become legendary: 'my theory of the cold war is, we win, and they lose.' Reagan acknowledged that some regarded his view as simplistic, but he argued that there was a difference between reducing complex issues to simple terms and being simplistic. At heart his idea went back to George Kennan's formulation at the beginning of the Cold War that "containment" would be necessary to "promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."<sup>6</sup>

Events during Jimmy Carter's Presidency appeared to vindicate much of Reagan's critique of détente. After picking up many of Reagan's themes about human rights and freedom during the 1976 electoral campaign, Carter ultimately pursued a Soviet policy that amounted to a continuation of détente. After initially proposing deep reductions in nuclear weapons as part of the negotiations over a SALT II agreement, Carter ultimately settled for extending limitations on various categories of nuclear delivery systems and warheads. Support for arms control agreements, however, was undermined by continued Soviet adventurism in the Third World,

---

<sup>5</sup>Michael Brenes. "Making Foreign Policy at the Grassroots: Cold War Politics and the 1976 Republican Primary." *Journal of Policy History* 27:1, pp. 93-117: The speech can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSmfldz\\_bA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSmfldz_bA); Robert W. Kagan and William Kristol, "Toward A Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, 75:4, pp 18-32, quotation on pp 19-20

<sup>6</sup> The radio addresses have been collected in Kiron Skinner, ed., *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America*, (New York: Free Press, 2001); Final Edited Transcript, Interview with Richard Allen, May 28 2002, p. 26, *Ronald Reagan Oral History Project*, Miller Center of Public Affairs, Presidential Oral History Project, Charlottesville, Virginia; Mr. X [George F. Kennan], "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, 25:4, pp. 566-582

including in Ethiopia, Angola, and Nicaragua, and culminating in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. After the collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran, when American diplomats were taken hostage, a beleaguered United States appeared to be in full-blown retreat around the world. Concern mounted after a failed hostage-rescue mission appeared to reveal the hollowing out of the US military about which Reagan had been raising concerns. Carter began to increase defense spending in 1978, but it was not enough to save his foundering Presidency.

Reagan faced opposition from a talented array of Republican candidates for the GOP presidential nomination but dispatched them fairly easily. He ultimately chose his most persistent challenger, George H.W. Bush, as his running mate. The 1980 Presidential campaign was one of those rare presidential elections in which foreign policy played an important and perhaps even decisive role. As one leading historian of the Cold War has noted, in 1980, "Carter's foreign policies began to unravel ever more rapidly" and the President went into the election with 82% of the public disapproving of his conduct of the nation's foreign affairs. Although Reagan polled well, the Democrats stirred up persistent concerns that he was untested in national security affairs and might be too aggressive in conducting the nation's foreign relations. This all harkened back to the 1964 Democratic campaign against Goldwater and the successful effort to paint him as an extremist. Reagan, however, dealt effectively with those concerns in the one and only debate between the two candidates and handily defeated Carter on election day.<sup>7</sup>

Reagan believed in peace through strength (both economic and military) as well as the power of ideas – particularly the importance of individual freedom which was the root of his evolution from New Deal liberal to Republican conservative. From the outset, he was determined to strengthen the American economy (which was suffering from double-digit inflation), continue and accelerate the belated Carter defense build-up, and launch an ideological offensive against the Soviet system which, Reagan believed, was doomed to decline.

Reagan sought to consolidate these broad ideas into a broader strategy. As he noted in his diary within two weeks of assuming office:

We need to take a new look at the whole matter of strategy. Trade was supposed to make Soviets moderate, instead it has allowed them to build armaments instead of consumer products. Their socialism is an ec.failure. Wouldn't we be doing more for their people if we let their system fail instead of constantly bailing it out?

Early briefings had convinced the President that the Soviet economy was "a basket case" that was "being held together with baling wire." He wondered "how long the Soviets could keep their empire intact. If they didn't make some changes, it seemed clear to me that in time

---

<sup>77</sup> See Andrew E. Busch, "Ronald Reagan and the Defeat of the Soviet Empire," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 27:3, pp. 451-466; Miroslav Nincic and Barbara Hinckley, "Foreign Policy and the Evaluation of Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 35:2, pp. 333-355; Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 312; Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1989), p. 666

Communism would collapse of its own weight, and I wondered how we as a nation could use these cracks in the Soviet system to accelerate the process of collapse.”<sup>8</sup>

There was good empirical evidence to support Reagan’s instincts that the Soviet economy was stagnating and that imposing costs on the Soviets could lead to a change in policy and behavior. His national security team – with plenty of disagreements and infighting – set about to enshrine the President’s insights into an actual strategy. A series of National Security Council Documents – NSSD 11-82, NSDD 32 and NSDD 75--codified the strategy, which combined economic denial, cost-imposition on Soviet adventurism in the Third World, a vigorous defense build-up and, to the extent possible, encouragement of democratic forces inside the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

There was one aspect of Reagan’s thinking that was not completely captured in the strategy documents – his long-standing concern about nuclear weapons and a deep-seated desire to see them abolished. Reagan had expressed that concern at the Kansas City Republican Convention in 1976. Once he became President, these concerns would be reinforced by the so-called Able Archer episode. A 1983 NATO nuclear command exercise appeared to have raised Soviet concerns that the U.S. meant to launch a pre-emptive nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union. Reagan was appalled that Russian leaders would believe such a thing, but the experience reinforced his already pre-existing nuclear abolitionist leanings<sup>10</sup>.

Reagan’s instinctive insight that the Soviet Union was approaching a systemic crisis was vindicated shortly after he was re-elected to his second term in 1984. After a succession of aged leaders plagued by ill health in the wake of Leonid Brezhnev’s death in 1982, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party. Gorbachev, then 54, had reached similar conclusions. He believed that the Soviet system was in a profound economic crisis and, as he told the Soviet Union of Writers, “we can’t go on this way.” He launched a series of reforms – “perestroika” or renovation, to galvanize the stagnant economy;

---

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Brinkley, ed. *The Reagan Diaries* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 2; Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) pp. 237-238.

<sup>9</sup> The best scholarly account of Reagan’s strategy is Thomas G. Mahnken, “The Reagan Administration’s Strategy Toward the Soviet Union,” in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds. *Successful Strategies: Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014). pp. 403-431; see also Peter Schweizer, *Reagan’s War* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), the NSC documents are available online at the website of the Federation of American Scientists.

<sup>10</sup> The Able Archer episode has drawn increased attention over the past several years and has spawned a growing literature, much of it overtly hostile to President Reagan and his policies. The place to begin is the declassified report of the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which can be found at the website of the National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb533-The-Able-Archer-War-Scare-Declassified-PFIAB-Report-Released/2012-0238-MR.pdf>. The best academic analysis is by Dmitry Dima Adamsky, “The 1983 Nuclear Crisis – Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36:1, 4-41, but see also, Nate Jones, ed. *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, (New York: New Press, 2016); Marc Ambinder, *The Brink: President Reagan and the Nuclear War Scare. Of 1983*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Taylor Downing, *1983: Reagan, Andropov, and a World on the Brink*, (New York: Da Capo, 2018); for the impact on Reagan see Beth A. Fischer, “U.S. Foreign Policy Under Reagan and Bush,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad eds. *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 267-288. For Reagan’s nuclear abolitionism see Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, (New York: Random House, 2005).

and “glasnost” or transparency, in order to promote greater openness and facilitate a critique of the status quo so as to build political support for his reforms. In order to accomplish these ends, he needed a breathing space from the intensifying strategic arms competition with the U.S. As a result, Reagan would find a Soviet negotiating partner who, Margaret Thatcher famously said, “we can do business with.”<sup>11</sup>

Reagan and Gorbachev (with the aid of their extremely capable foreign ministers George P. Shultz and Eduard Shevardnadze) began an intensive round of diplomacy between 1985 and 1988 that eased the tensions that had reached their apogee in the 1983 war scare; produced a landmark arms control agreement; expanded U.S.-Soviet people-to-people exchanges; prompted the release of numerous Soviet dissidents; provided the breathing space that Gorbachev needed to pursue his reform policies; and set the stage for the dramatic events of 1989 and the end of a divided Europe.

Perhaps the most dramatic episode of this entire period was the Reykjavik Summit, during which the two leaders came tantalizingly close to an agreement that would have eliminated the strategic offensive ballistic missile forces on both sides. The agreement ultimately foundered on Reagan’s insistence on maintaining the U.S. ability to develop missile defenses, but it was a testimony to the fact that Reagan’s deep desire to abolish nuclear weapons could have practical consequences for U.S. policy and his own diplomatic efforts. Although the effort failed, and created a brief diplomatic hiatus, it did not inhibit the resumption of U.S.-Soviet arms control diplomacy at a slightly less ambitious level. By December 1987, the U.S. and the USSR had agreed on the INF Treaty at the Washington Summit which many hoped would pave the way for even more progress on arms control at the Moscow Summit in the spring of 1988.<sup>12</sup>

## The Setting

In the wake of the successful Washington Summit, a new factor began to weigh on Reagan’s calculations about his visit to Moscow in the spring – domestic political opposition to Gorbachev. Early in the new year, Reagan was briefed by his national security team about the road ahead to the Moscow Summit. Soviet expert Fritz Ermarth had drafted a short, incisive memo for National Security Advisor Colin Powell the day before, noting that “we need constantly to factor a troubled and uncertain Moscow political scene in to our plans for the next six months or so.” Ermarth warned that despite glasnost, Communist Party politics remained frustratingly opaque. The opponents of reform appeared to be coalescing around Yegor Ligachev, the “second secretary” of the party apparatus. Although Ermarth believed that both

---

<sup>11</sup> For Gorbachev and his role see Archie Brown, “The Gorbachev Era,” in Ronald Grigor Suny, ed. *The Cambridge History of Russia*, Vol. 3, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp.316-351 and Brown, “The Gorbachev Revolution and the End of the Cold War,” in Leffler and Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Vol. 3, pp. 224-266; there is a debate among academics about the relative roles of Reagan and Gorbachev in the end of the Cold War and how much was the result of Reagan’s strategy. In addition to Brown the best discussions are Melvyn P. Leffler, “Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most,” *Texas National Security Review*, 1:3, pp. 77-89 and James G. Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> For Reykjavik and its aftermath see Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation*. A detailed account of the diplomacy is in Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), pp. 285-299.

Gorbachev and Ligachev agreed that the Soviet Union needed a respite in the Cold War with the U.S., he doubted that Gorbachev would have sufficient capital to make “large concessions to speed the process.” Reagan appears to have drawn from this discussion the conclusion that although it was possible that the diplomacy of the next six months could be “fruitful,” it would be best to avoid a replay of the “détente” under Nixon, Ford and Carter.<sup>13</sup>

Ermarth and others had, in fact, detected a real split in the Soviet leadership that would burst forth dramatically on March 13, 1988, when the newspaper *Sovietskaya Rossiya* published an open letter titled “I Cannot Forsake Principles” by Nina Andreyeva, a heretofore unknown chemistry teacher at the Leningrad Technical Institute. The letter was a blistering critique of both glasnost and perestroika and the “new political thinking” championed by Gorbachev. In fact, the letter had been edited in the Central Committee by a team of bureaucrats connected to Ligachev and it was published when Gorbachev and his chief political and ideological aide, Aleksander Yakovlev, were both out of the country. Gorbachev was forced to launch an ideological and political counter-offensive, but would remain under siege from conservative party figures from that point on until the 1991 coup attempt to remove him from power.<sup>14</sup>

As Reagan approached the Moscow Summit, additional progress was made on a main pillar of the four-part agenda that he and George Shultz had established for US-Soviet Relations (Human Rights, Arms Control, Regional questions, and Bilateral issues). Gorbachev announced that Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan would begin in March 1989. The President recognized that Gorbachev’s political problems might limit additional progress on the key issues blocking further progress on arms control; but, as Reagan biographer Lou Cannon has noted, “Reagan had more in mind in Moscow, however, than simply showing up.” The trip to Moscow constituted the “role of a lifetime” and the speech at Moscow State University the “premier performance.”

National Security Decision Directive 305 outlined his objectives clearly. The centerpiece would be his celebration of democratic values and support for the continuation of Gorbachev’s reforms:

My visit to the Soviet Union should not be seen as a dialogue only with the Soviet government, but also as a way of communicating with the Soviet people. I want to emphasize throughout my trip that the democratic values that make our country great are those toward which much of the world – including, we hope, the Soviet Union – is moving. At the same time I wish to make clear that while we welcome promises of reform within the USSR, the policies of the United States and the West toward Moscow must be based on Soviet deeds rather than words.

With limited prospects for additional agreements to be announced at Moscow, this aspect of the Summit galvanized Reagan’s attention. The visit to the USSR would give him an unanticipated platform to expound the themes that had dominated his entire political life. Reagan’s chief speechwriter, Tony Dolan, observed that the speech was “the final flowering of Reagan’s philosophy,” and Reagan agreed:

---

<sup>13</sup> For Ermarth’s memo and Powell’s notes on Reagan’s conclusions see “Memorandum from Fritz Ermarth of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Powell),” in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1981-1988*, Vol. VI, Soviet Union, October 1986-January 1989, p. 683

<sup>14</sup> Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*, (London: Vintage Books, 2010) pp. 504-507

For more than thirty years, I'd been preaching about freedom and liberty. During my visit to Moscow, I was given a chance to do something I never dreamed I would do: Gorbachev let me lecture to some of the brightest young people of Moscow – among them some of the future leaders of the Soviet Union – about the blessings of democracy and individual freedom and free enterprise. On what was for me an extraordinary day I never thought possible, I tried in a few minutes at Moscow State University to summarize a philosophy that had guided me most of my life.<sup>15</sup>

## The Speech

The scene at the university struck more than one observer as positively surreal – Reagan was dwarfed by a full-length revolutionary mural along the wall behind his podium as well as an enormous bust of Lenin looking down at the President. Press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater thought it totally inappropriate, until the humor of the father of the world's first Communist state looking down at Ronald Reagan's backside struck his funny bone.<sup>16</sup>

Reagan faced an enormously tricky task. The INF Treaty and Reagan's apparent embrace, albeit guarded, of perestroika, had already excited a certain amount of criticism from the conservative American commentariat, and he had been treated as an unrehabilitated ideological troglodyte by the Soviet media for years. Reagan could not afford to pull any punches and appear to draw back from his lifelong anti-communist position, but he also needed to avoid coming across as hostile or hectoring to the Russian people. What he delivered, in a speech carefully crafted by speechwriter Josh Gilder, was a rhetorical tour de force, a poetic effort at "subversive seduction" of his audience that was remarkably effective at conveying Reagan's belief that "the cold war was over" and that an information-technological revolution, capable of transforming both East and West for the good, loomed ahead. Russian students got to see the folksy, "avuncular style" that had made Reagan so devastatingly effective politically in the United States – and it translated well.<sup>17</sup>

Reagan began auspiciously by wishing all of the students good luck on their upcoming exams and by asserting that he had received many messages from average Americans asking him to convey a message of peace and goodwill to the Russian people.

---

<sup>15</sup> Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of A Lifetime*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) p. 783-786: The text of NSDD 305 can be found at: <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-305.htm>; Dolan quoted in Bret Baier with Catherine Whitney, *Three Days in Moscow: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, (New York: William Morrow, 2018), p. 255; Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 713

<sup>16</sup> Baier, *Three Days in Moscow*, p. 254

<sup>17</sup> Baier, *Three Days in Moscow*, pp. 255-260 describes the entire event brilliantly; Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War: 1985-1991*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2015) p. 299; Reagan's rhetoric has been the subject of very careful and generally positive scrutiny in B. Wayne Howell, "Ronald Reagan's Address at Moscow State University: A Rhetoric of Conciliation and Subversion," *Southern Communication Journal*, 68:2, pp. 107-120; John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, "Reagan at Moscow State University: Consubstantiality Underlying Conflict," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 10:1, pp. 77-106; I have also found Robert C. Rowland and James M. Jones, "Reagan's Strategy for the Cold War and the Evil Empire Address," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 19:3, pp. 427-463 and Martin J. Medhurst, "Writing Speeches for Ronald Reagan: An Interview with Tony Dolan," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, 1:2, pp. 245-256 very helpful in understanding the context of Reagan's Moscow State speech.

Reagan then moved on from a discussion of the revolution of the past, depicted on the mural behind him, to a discussion of “a very different revolution taking place right now, quietly sweeping the globe without bloodshed or conflict.” Reagan was describing the information technology revolution that would transform the next 30 years of global history. This revolution, Reagan argued, would open up almost limitless opportunities for individuals and create a world “in which there are no bounds on human imagination and the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource.” Moreover, mankind was “breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny.” Nothing was foreordained, however, “the key is freedom – freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.”

The theme of freedom as the key to success in an impending age of information technology and globalization was one that Secretary of State Shultz had been relentlessly pressing on the Soviet leadership during the past several years of diplomatic engagement. But rather than invoke his Secretary of State, Reagan quoted Mikhail Lomonosov, one of the founders of Moscow State University, on the importance of free thought. Reagan had flipped the script on Marxism-Leninism by inverting the relationship between the means of production and the creation of ideas.<sup>18</sup>

Because freedom was the key to this global revolution, governments were incapable of keeping up with the “explorers” of this new era – the entrepreneurs, who needed the freedom to experiment and even to fail. Bureaucracy could only get in the way of this ongoing effort by millions of individuals to make their dreams come true. At this point in the speech, Reagan’s recounting of a woman villager inveighing against bureaucrats brought down the house. “There is a folk legend...that when a baby is born, an angel comes down from heaven and kisses it on one part of its body. If the angel kisses him on his hand, he becomes a handyman, if he kisses him on his forehead, he becomes bright and clever, And I’ve been trying to figure out where the angel kissed you so that you should sit there for so long and do nothing.”

Reagan contended that the power of economic freedom was growing around the world, particularly in the Far East, and that it was being accompanied by the spread of democracy, which had “become one of the most powerful political movements of our age.” He continued by noting that “Democracy is less a system of government than it is a system to keep government limited, unintrusive; a system of constraints on power to keep politics and government secondary to the important things in life, the true sources of value found only in family and faith.”

It was at this point in his speech that Reagan made his most direct effort to connect and identify with the Russian students, as he invoked Dostoyevsky, Kandinsky and Scriabin as a prelude to

---

<sup>18</sup> The text of Reagan’s remarks can be found in the Public Papers of President Ronald Reagan and accessed at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/053188b>; a video the speech and Q and A with students can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lutYGxMWeA>; for Shultz and the Russian leaders on the information revolution see James Mann, *The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan: A History of the End of the Cold War*, (New York: Viking, 2009) p. 298; for additional reflections on Shultz’s crucial role see Walter LaFeber, “Technology and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, 24:1, pp. 12-17.

quoting one of the “most eloquent contemporary passages on human freedom” written by “one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Boris Pasternak”: “...what has for centuries raised man above the beast is not the cudgel, but an inward music – the irresistible power of unarmed truth.” And “Today,” Reagan noted, “the world looks expectantly to signs of change, steps toward greater freedom in the Soviet Union.”

Reagan then turned to the subject of the reforms that Gorbachev had introduced. He noted the resistance to change and the fear that it would only bring disruption and discontinuity, and suggested that sometimes it takes an act of faith, drawing on the climactic scene of the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (which had recently played in Moscow) when the two outlaws are hemmed in on the edge of a cliff. Their only way out is a suicidal fight with the posse that is chasing them or a leap off the cliff into the river beneath them. Sundance refuses and “finally admits, ‘I can’t swim.’ Butch breaks up laughing and says, ‘You crazy fool, the fall will probably kill you.’ And by the way both Butch and Sundance made it, in case you didn’t see the movie. I think what I’ve been talking about is perestroika and what its goals are.” Although Reagan was clearly backing Gorbachev’s course of reforms, it was not an unconditional endorsement, since the President noted that “reform that is not institutionalized will always be insecure.”

Reagan tackled one final theme before wrapping up his speech – that of relations between the American and Russian people. After noting that he and Gorbachev would exchange the instruments of ratification of INF the next day, he drew attention to the fact that the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had begun two weeks earlier. The “constructive cooperation” that had facilitated the agreements on INF and Afghanistan, he hoped, would be carried on to resolve destructive regional conflicts elsewhere in the world, noting that “nations do not distrust each other because they are armed; they are armed because they distrust each other.” Reagan went on to assert that neither the Russian nor the American people wanted to go to war with one another. “People do not make wars; governments do and no mother would ever willingly sacrifice her sons for territorial gain, for economic advantage, for ideology.” Stating what would become academic conventional wisdom in the next decade, he noted “A people free to choose will always choose peace.” Moreover, he assured his listeners, “Americans seek always to make friends of old antagonists.”

Reagan concluded his remarks to the students by noting that:

your generation is living in one of the most exciting, hopeful times in Soviet history, it is a time when the first breath of freedom stirs the air and the heart beats to the accelerated rhythm of hope, when the accumulated spiritual energies of a long silence yearn to break free.... In this Moscow spring, this May 1988, we may be allowed that hope; that freedom, like the fresh green sapling planted over Tolstoy’s grave, will blossom forth at last in the rich fertile soil of our people and culture. We may be allowed to hope that the marvelous sound of a new openness will keep rising through, ringing through, leading to a new world of reconciliation, friendship and peace.

As Secretary Shultz observed, “skeptical at first,” the students “were drawn quickly into the President’s message...this was precisely the message to deliver. And Ronald Reagan delivered it

magnificently.” With his final words Reagan was greeted with a lengthy, standing ovation. Reagan’s former NSC Senior Director for Russia, Jack Matlock, was serving as U.S. Ambassador to Russia during the Summit. He recalls that “it was almost electric the way the speech touched the students there.” Even though the Soviets had attempted to limit the press coverage of the speech, Reagan “made a tremendous impression that went through the media like lightning.”<sup>19</sup>

Scholars who have closely studied Reagan’s rhetoric in this speech have suggested variously that he was appropriating the language of Marxism-Leninism in order to “de-legitimize” and subvert it. Others have suggested that he was attempting to both endorse Gorbachev’s reform effort while maintaining his fundamental, ideological critique of Soviet communism. It seems clear that Reagan, in fact, was doing both, in keeping with the larger design of the “forward strategy of freedom “ and “the continuum of his grander design” toward the USSR that is noted above. As Tony Dolan, his chief speechwriter has said, Reagan was “an excellent thinker. He cared about ideas.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Why It Has Been Neglected and What it Represents Today**

The Moscow State University speech is unjustly one of Reagan’s lesser known speeches, although its relative obscurity can be easily explained. It came at the tail end of the Administration, in the midst of a busy summit that had a number of dramatic, arresting images, including the President’s stroll on the Arbat and Red Square. It came at the outset of the 1988 election season and the Soviets had limited media coverage of the event in the Soviet Union. One year later, the drama of the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall coming down seemed to overshadow the more prosaic stuff of the Moscow Summit. But the recent account in Bret Baier’s superb book on the Summit itself as a key event in the denouement of the Cold War should help to serve as a stimulus to admirers of Reagan to go back and re-examine this remarkable address, in particular in the service of what it might have to say to our present concerns.<sup>21</sup>

Reagan’s address came at the end of the long Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. It represented the beginning of the end of that period. During the course of the Summit, on one of his walk-arounds, Reagan was asked about his earlier comments about the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” He noted that he no longer believed that because “it was a different time, a different era.” The Cold War, as far as Reagan was concerned, was coming to an end.

Reagan’s use of rhetoric and the power of ideas were part of a larger strategy for competing with the Soviet Union and bringing the strategic rivalry to a conclusion. It serves as a reminder that in an era of renewed great power competition, the powerful ideas of freedom and democracy remain a comparative American advantage vis-a-vis our authoritarian adversaries, and that

---

<sup>19</sup> George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years As Secretary of State*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993) pp. 1103-1104; H.W. Brands, *Reagan: The Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 2015), pp. 695-696.

<sup>20</sup> Howell, “Ronald Reagan’s Address at Moscow State University,”; Jones and Rowland, “Reagan at Moscow State University: Consubstantiality and Underlying Conflict,”; Baier, *Three Days in Moscow*, p. 255; Medhurst, “Writing Speeches for Ronald Reagan,” pp. 247-249

<sup>21</sup> Baier’s book reprints the full text of the speech as an appendix.

ideological warfare can be pursued successfully along with negotiations on arms, regional conflicts and human rights if the adversary understands that it needs to change in order to survive.