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## **A Return to Pointe du Hoc: The Ideas that Defined President Reagan’s Approach to the World and Why They Still Matter Today**

*By David Petraeus and Vance Serchuk*

*“You [Rangers] all knew that some things are worth dying for. One’s country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it’s the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man. All of you loved liberty. All of you were willing to fight tyranny, and you knew the people of your countries were behind you.”*

-President Ronald Reagan, Normandy, France, June 6, 1984

Ronald Reagan knew the power of words and he knew the power of ideas.

From a bluff overlooking the windswept shores of Normandy in June 1984, Reagan delivered one of the defining speeches of his presidency—one whose words and ideas reverberate to this day. The focus of his remarks was the American Rangers who 40 years earlier had scaled the heights of Pointe du Hoc—the majestic promontory overlooking the English Channel where the American President then stood, but which on D-Day in 1944 had bristled with German fortifications.

As the highest point between the Allied landing zones at Omaha Beach to the east and Utah Beach to the west, Pointe du Hoc was decisive terrain for the Normandy invasion—and the fighting for control of it was fierce. Of the 225 Rangers who began the assault up the 100-foot cliff, only 99 would still be capable of bearing arms by the time their mission was complete two days later.

In paying tribute to the members of the Army’s 2nd Ranger Battalion, Reagan recalled in moving terms the valor, resolve, and tenacity of those Americans who came ashore four decades earlier in northern France. However, his remarks at Pointe du Hoc were intended to be more than just a stirring peroration to what the Rangers and their fellow soldiers had accomplished on D-Day. From the epochal events that had taken place 40 years earlier, Reagan distilled what he considered to be enduring lessons about the nature of the world and America’s place in it—principles that he believed remained as urgent in his own time as they had been on that gray summer morning in June 1944 when, as he described it, “the air was dense with smoke and the cries of men, and the air was filled with the crack of rifle fire and the roar of cannon.”

Three and a half decades have passed since Reagan took the podium at Pointe du Hoc. Yet far from being a relic from a vanished past—memorializing a battle from an even more distant era—

the words and ideas Reagan put forward at Normandy carry renewed relevance for the challenges that our nation confronts today. As Americans commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day this month, it is worth revisiting Reagan's remarks from that summer day in 1984 for the profound wisdom and insight they continue to offer.

### **The Moral Dimension of American Power**

The first and most fundamental of the ideas put forward by Reagan at Pointe du Hoc concerned the moral dimension of American power. From the opening line of his speech, Reagan made clear that what took place on June 6, 1944 was more than just a colossal battle—an epic clash of armies vying for supremacy, as militaries have done for millennia. What was at stake in Normandy that day, Reagan explained, was something far greater: the fate of freedom itself, with the future of Western civilization hanging in the balance. “For four long years, much of Europe had been under a terrible shadow,” he said. “Europe was enslaved, and the world prayed for its rescue. Here in Normandy the rescue began. Here the Allies stood and fought against tyranny in a giant undertaking unparalleled in human history.”

For Reagan, the moral justness of the Allied cause was what imbued the martial combat on D-Day with transcendent significance. It was also, he suggested, the key to understanding the countless feats of heroism by individual soldiers that day—and the only way to make sense of the terrible sacrifices they endured.

Addressing the surviving veterans assembled before him, Reagan asked: “Why did you do it? What impelled you to put aside the instinct for self-preservation and risk your lives to take these cliffs?” The answer he provided was simultaneously simple and profound. “The men of Normandy,” the President argued, “had faith that what they were doing was right, faith that they fought for all humanity, faith that a just God would grant them mercy on this beachhead or on the next... You were here to liberate, not to conquer, and so you and those others did not doubt your cause.”

Thus we arrive at the first “big idea” put forward by Reagan in his remarks at Pointe du Hoc—an insight as powerful as it is, in a way, counterintuitive. Contrary to the propaganda of dictators and totalitarians then and now, it was precisely America's commitment to a set of ideals and principles greater than narrow self-interest that not only gave meaning to its hard-won victory at Normandy, but provided its soldiers with a source of strength on the battlefield itself. The fact that the boys of Pointe du Hoc knew they were fighting not for blood and soil, but for democracy—their own and that of others—was a strategic advantage they held against the Nazis as they threw themselves against the cliff face and began the liberation of Europe.

Today, authoritarian ideologies are once again ascendant on the world stage, chipping away at the democratic gains that swept the planet over the previous 40 years. Like their predecessors throughout history, the latest generation of strongmen insist that it is only by concentrating overwhelming power in the hands of a single leader that a society can be strong and successful, and that checks and balances, an independent judiciary, rule of law, a vigorous free press and civil society—all of these are debilitating liabilities, a fatal recipe for gridlock and stagnation that render a nation incapable of unifying around a common purpose.

To Reagan, it was self-evident that such arguments were false. He understood that, while dictatorship often gives the outward appearance of being all-powerful and hyper-competent, its foundations are often brittle and barren. Democracy, by contrast, invariably looks fractious and feckless, but it has repeatedly shown itself to be surprisingly resilient and resourceful.

Indeed, were Reagan with us today, he would undoubtedly direct our gaze once more to Pointe du Hoc and urge us to take from the events of that day 75 years ago renewed faith in the capacity of democracy—“the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man”—to prove itself morally and strategically superior to tyranny.

Rather than react to today’s resurgent authoritarianism with despair or resignation, Reagan would surely look upon it with a calm eye—relishing the competition and the chance to prove once again that our way of life is right and true, and that the dictators are wrong. And he would insist, correctly, that in order to do so, Americans need not sacrifice our own best values and traditions; rather, we need only to remember what they are and rededicate ourselves to them.

We have scaled these heights before, and we can do so again.

### **The Difference Between Democracy and Dictatorship**

If one of Reagan’s purposes at Pointe du Hoc was to answer those who doubted the capacity of democracy to prevail over dictatorship, a second was to respond against a similarly pernicious idea: namely, that there is little practical difference between these two forms of government, at least when it comes to the carnage of war.

Of course, by 1984, there were few in either the U.S. or Europe who questioned the moral necessity of the fight against Hitler that had occurred 40 years earlier, despite the dreadful human toll it entailed. But the same could not be said when it came to the containment of the Soviet Union and the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe. On the contrary, from the onset of the superpower contest between Washington and Moscow in the late 1940s, there were those who argued on both sides of the Atlantic that the United States and the USSR were more alike than either side cared to admit. Both deployed hundreds of thousands of troops into the heart of Europe. Both nations amassed doomsday arsenals that, if unleashed, meant the obliteration of humanity. Both engaged in various forms of skullduggery in what was then called the Third World, including the propping up of unsavory regimes.

Carried to its rational conclusion, this school of thought suggested that the entire Cold War and associated arms race was not only costly and dangerous but pointless. Rather than continue to court atomic Armageddon, the better approach was for Americans to step back from the defense of Western Europe, and for the Western Europeans to seek some kind of nonaligned status as a buffer between the superpowers. As an anti-nuclear placard in West Germany during Reagan’s first term put it: “Better neutral than dead.”

Reagan firmly rejected these arguments and the moral equivalence they implied between American and Soviet power—drawing on the events of June 6, 1944 to demolish their logic. As he explained, “There is a profound, moral difference between the use of force for liberation and

the use of force for conquest”—a distinction that had been obvious to the boys of Pointe du Hoc who came ashore to rescue Europe from tyranny, but that applied with equal force to the American troops who had remained on the continent after the defeat of Nazi Germany to keep the liberated nations of the West from being overrun by communist dictatorship.

For that reason, Reagan argued, there was no legitimate comparison between the American military in Western Europe and the Red Army to the east. The latter had marched to Berlin but then stayed on as an occupation force—“uninvited, unwanted, unyielding,” the President observed. By contrast, American servicemembers were in Europe “for one purpose—to protect and defend democracy. The only territories we hold are memorials like this one and graveyards where our heroes rest.”

The moral clarity that Reagan applied to the exercise of American power in the world has today fallen out of fashion. America’s ongoing efforts in the greater Middle East, for example, are justified almost exclusively in realpolitik terms: to thwart extremists from conducting terrorist attacks against Americans. To some, the notion that the United States should aspire to a higher purpose in its foreign policy is a sort of naive and hazardous do-goodism—prone to mire the nation in a swamp of costly and futile “nation-building” activities. To others, any claim by the United States of moral high ground is laughable hypocrisy—invalidated by a long litany of sins, from Guantanamo Bay to Abu Ghraib, not to mention America’s domestic failings.

As Reagan understood, however, both views are mistaken. The United States is not a perfect society. But whatever our flaws and failings, American power remains the vital bulwark for freedom and democracy worldwide. Nor should Americans fall prey to the fallacy that we are not much different from our adversaries, or that we ought to judge our own behavior against their standards. The fact is that there is such a thing as right and wrong in the world, as well as good and evil, and the starting point for any effective American foreign policy must be to tell the difference between the two.

### **The Importance of Allies and the Imperative of Western Solidarity**

Third, Reagan in his remarks emphasized that the United States did not act alone on D-Day. The American boys of Pointe du Hoc crossed the English Channel on *British* landing craft and scaled the cliffs on ladders borrowed from the *London Fire Brigade*. Across the beaches of northern France the Allied forces of a dozen other nations joined the United States in the largest amphibious assault in history.

The courageous contributions of these other countries on June 6, 1944, was, for Reagan, more than just a way for diverse nations to pool their collective resources against a common enemy and thus distribute the burdens of battle. Rather, the shared sacrifice at Normandy spoke to a deeper and more consequential truth.

“The Royal Winnipeg Rifles, Poland’s 24th Lancers, the Royal Scots Fusiliers, the Screaming Eagles, the Yeomen of England’s armored divisions, the forces of Free France...”—this “rollcall of honor with names that spoke of a pride as bright as the colors they bore” was invoked by Reagan at Pointe Du Hoc to illustrate several related precepts in which he believed ardently: that

there is natural kinship that exists among free nations; that their solidarity is the prerequisite for the survival of liberty everywhere; and that a military alliance among the Euro-Atlantic democracies is therefore indispensable to world order.

Thus for Reagan, America's commitment to European security arose not merely by a calculus of military exigency, but from a genuine feeling of shared destiny. It was the conviction that both sides of the Atlantic are part of a thing called the West, which for Reagan was neither an empty slogan nor a bloodless abstraction nor a technocratic invention. Rather, the West was something organic, natural and right—forged on the battlefields of history and sustained through fidelity to common values and traditions. Political leaders were responsible for nurturing Western unity and giving it expression through institutions like NATO, but the success of these endeavors reflected the fact that they grew out of something that was already there.

Most immediately, for Reagan, this meant a full-throated repudiation of the perennial American temptation to withdraw from involvement in overseas controversies in favor of retrenchment on our own continent. “We in America have learned bitter lessons from two World Wars,” he observed at Pointe du Hoc. “It is better to be here ready to protect the peace than to take blind shelter across the sea, rushing to respond only after freedom is lost. We've learned that isolationism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments with an expansionist intent.”

This did not mean that the transatlantic partnership was free of discord or controversy in Reagan's time. On the contrary, as at present, relations between the United States and Europe were roiled by no shortage of disagreements, some of them quite heated. Barely six months before Reagan crossed the Atlantic to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, the continent had been gripped by the largest public protests since World War II, as hundreds of thousands from London to Stuttgart demonstrated against Washington's proposed deployment of Pershing missiles.

Yet amidst inevitable differences of outlook and opinion, Reagan never lost sight of the larger reality that he articulated so forcefully at Pointe du Hoc. “We are bound today by what bound us 40 years ago, the same loyalties, traditions and beliefs,” he explained. “We were with you then; we are with you now. Your hopes are our hopes, and your destiny is our destiny.”

Thus we arrive at another of Reagan's “big ideas” that remains true today—and indeed, the proper starting point for any modern grand American strategy too. While there is ample room for disagreement about how the Euro-Atlantic community of nations should respond to assorted global threats and challenges, we must always remember, as one scholar of Reagan has put it, that “the well-being of the world depends, above all, on the sensible pursuit of common aims by the United States and free European peoples.” By contrast, dissolution of the transatlantic alliance would be an invitation to global disaster.

Consequently, even as Americans and Europeans argue over perennial flashpoints like defense spending, it is the responsibility of leaders on both sides of the Atlantic to keep in mind—as Reagan did—the imperative of Western solidarity. For all of the unavoidable frictions and frustrations that are embedded in the transatlantic alliance, we must conduct these debates in the

spirit of a family whose fate is indivisible. This, in turn, requires us to treat each other with respect, to honor and cherish each other's sacrifices and struggles as though they are our own, and above all, to remind ourselves of the many ways we have stood together for over 75 years and why, therefore, we must continue to stand together into the future.

Western unity, it should also be noted, now extends beyond the Euro-Atlantic theater to regions like the greater Middle East, where since the 9/11 attacks thousands of troops from NATO nations have fought and bled alongside Americans in our generational struggle against the forces of Islamist extremism. Reagan's warning at Pointe du Hoc about the danger of retrenchment applies to these battlefields too, as Americans debate whether to withdraw forces from Afghanistan and Syria. Doing so would not only disregard "the bitter lessons of two World Wars" invoked by Reagan at Normandy, but also more recent experience.

### **The Value of American Ideals and Idealism in our Foreign Policy**

Fourth and lastly, Reagan's remarks at Pointe du Hoc invoked an idealism about America that was, in many ways, defiantly ahistorical, even a little irrational. Of the four decades that had passed since D-Day when Reagan spoke, roughly half of those years had been as wrenching as any period in U.S. history—a period that had witnessed the worst domestic unrest since the Civil War, unprecedented military humiliations abroad, the shocking assassination of a succession of national political leaders, and public disillusionment with American institutions that had previously been venerated but were now generally assumed to be feckless and corrupt, if not malevolent.

The reasonable response to these shattering events—and to a certain extent, the response of Reagan's predecessors in the Oval Office—would have been to acknowledge these tragedies, to internalize them, and to trim our sails—adopting a more limited, cautious, and hard-bitten approach about the world and our ability to reshape it.

Reagan's response was radically different. Rather than being consumed by anguish, he simply brushed off the calamities that had befallen the nation. Who are we as Americans? Not Vietnam and Watergate, but Normandy and the Marshall Plan. In this respect, Reagan's greatest gift to the American people was his irrepressible confidence in their capacity for greatness. Simply put, he reminded us of who we really are—and who, he insisted, we had been all along.

As the United States approaches the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are once again in a period of self-doubt. The last two decades, like those of the 1960s and 1970s, have brought a series of traumas: the worst terrorist attack in history, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, a Gordian knot of costly, seemingly unwinnable wars, and a domestic political situation that has spiraled ever deeper into partisanship, recrimination, and dysfunction. Meanwhile, the international dream that appeared so tantalizingly close to fulfillment in 1991—of a universal liberal world order—has cruelly unraveled, replaced by renewed great-power competition and, with it, the nightmare prospect of cataclysmic war. Even technological progress, which once inspired visions of impending utopia, has taken a menacing turn—exacerbating inequality and social divisions, empowering autocrats, and jeopardizing human survival itself.

It is the work of historians to describe a nation's past. But it is the responsibility of leaders to transcend it. Like Lincoln at Gettysburg, Reagan concluded his speech at Pointe du Hoc by urging his listeners not merely to remember the brave soldiers who served and sacrificed so valiantly on the beaches and drop zones of Normandy, but to rededicate themselves to the cause which those soldiers had so nobly advanced.

As Americans prepare to commemorate the 75th anniversary of D-Day, then, a final lesson to draw from Reagan's remarks at Pointe du Hoc is the need not only to memorialize what took place in northern France three-quarters of a century ago, but to marshal that memory in service of the future. None of this is to deny or diminish the severity of the challenges presently facing the United States or their complexity. Rather, it is to insist—as Reagan did—that in the face of the huge and daunting tasks, we can and should draw renewed confidence in what we *can* do as a nation based on remembrance of what we *have done*. We return to the promontory of Pointe du Hoc not only to honor what great Americans overcame there, but to remind ourselves of everything that we still *can* overcome.

“Strengthened by their courage, heartened by their valor, and borne by their memory, let us continue to stand for the ideals for which they lived and died,” Reagan said of the boys of Pointe du Hoc. It is difficult to imagine a more timely or fitting benediction for our own time as well.