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Then as Now, America's Security is Tied to the Fate of Free Peoples Everywhere: Reflections on President Ronald Reagan's 1982 Address to the British Parliament

By Mr. Daniel Twining

The world of 1982 looked nothing like the world of today. The Soviet empire and its armies controlled most of Eurasia, from Berlin to Kabul to Vladivostok. Japan, not China, was the rising power in the East. Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia were military dictatorships. Dictators ruled in Brazil, Mexico, and Chile. There was no internet. Soviet power had not yet begun to visibly crack and many Americans believed Moscow was winning the Cold War. Yet Ronald Reagan gave a speech in London that not only foresaw the Soviet Empire's demise and the wave of global democratization that followed, but anticipated many of the challenges Americans confront today from authoritarians wielding new technologies and tools of disinformation, as well as novel threats to peace stemming from strongmen wielding illiberal ideologies.

Reagan's Westminster speech, in which he famously called for the United States to support a global campaign for democracy, is not simply a historical relic or a snapshot of a moment in time. Its themes are highly relevant today – as America looks ahead to a world of great-power competition in which authoritarian challengers are pursuing systematic campaigns to weaken democratic practice and erode democratic alliances. Reagan's words also bear new resonance in our time, as political polarization across the West raises new questions about the democracies' capacity to sustain the rules-based international order built from the ashes of the Second World War and enlarged after the Cold War. And even as America's current president believes global competitiveness stems from hard power, Reagan's words remind us that the universal appeal of America's values – of individual dignity, the open society, and democratic choice – must be central to any successful strategy to navigate the dangers and opportunities of the 21st century.

Democracy on Defense

Democracy feels on the defensive in the world of 2019. Strongmen in previously resilient democracies like Turkey, the Philippines, and Hungary have hollowed out liberal institutions and strengthened executive power at the expense of legislative and judicial checks and balances. Russia is assaulting European democracies from Ukraine to Britain with disinformation designed to weaken the West. China is using state-financed investment to capture and corrupt foreign government officials as part of a policy to expand its strategic and economic footholds in key countries. Free media and human-rights organizations are under attack from neo-authoritarians focused on expanding political power by repressive civil society.

Democracy also felt very much under assault in 1982, when Reagan delivered his Westminster address. In the second half of the 1970s, North Vietnam's communists had overrun Saigon and Soviet armies had invaded Afghanistan. Poland was under martial law, and the Iron Curtain that had fallen across Europe after 1945 was firmly in place. Millions of West Germans were protesting America's efforts to upgrade its missile posture to defend Western Europe from Soviet armies, arguing instead for accommodation with the totalitarian regime in Moscow and risking a decisive breach in the NATO alliance that had kept the peace in Europe since 1949.

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 1982* survey showed a map of the world in which most of Earth's landmass was marked in black for being "not free" -- including nearly the entire territory stretching from the center of Germany to the Korean peninsula and down through China to mainland Southeast Asia, the entire Middle East excepting Israel, all of Africa except Nigeria and Botswana, and most of Latin America apart from the Andean nations and, ironically, Venezuela.¹ America itself, as the most powerful democracy looking out on a world that was mainly unfree, was anything but economically robust -- U.S. GDP actually shrank by two percent in 1982 following the stagflation of the late 1970s and an inflation rate in 1981 that exceeded 10 percent.

Reagan's Optimism

Amidst this gloom, Reagan was optimistic. "Beyond the trouble spots lies a deeper, more positive pattern. Around the world today, the democratic revolution is gathering new strength.... In the Communist world as well, man's instinctive desire for freedom and self-determination surfaces again and again," he maintained.

Now, I don't wish to sound overly optimistic, yet the Soviet Union is not immune from the reality of what is going on in the world. It has happened in the past -- a small ruling elite either mistakenly attempts to ease domestic unrest through greater repression and foreign adventure, or it chooses a wiser course. It begins to allow its people a voice in their own destiny. Even if this latter process is not realized soon, I believe the renewed strength of the democratic movement, complemented by a global campaign for freedom, will strengthen the prospects for arms control and a world at peace.

Standing at that podium in the British Parliament, Reagan made a bold prediction, rooted not in his assessment of the Soviet Union's material power, but in his faith in the aspirations of human beings: "The march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history as it has left other tyrannies which stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people." His words -- as well as those of the naysayers who doubt their currency -- resonate today, as many elites view China as the coming superpower whose success in rapid development through state capitalism and autocratic control will lead it to eclipse America as the world's predominant power.

Reagan's insight was that the people -- of the Soviet empire in his day, and of the Chinese party-state today -- may have different priorities from rulers who stifle individual rights in service to state power. Seven years before the Berlin Wall came down and nine before the Soviet Union

¹ Image on p. 31 of Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 1982*, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Freedom_in_the_World_1982_complete_book.pdf

collapsed, Reagan sensed “an uprising of the intellect and will” against totalitarian rule – characterized by “rejection of the arbitrary power of the state, the refusal to subordinate the rights of the individual to the superstate, the realization that collectivism stifles all the best human impulses.”

The Enduring Quest to be Free

In the United States and other democracies today, polling shows an ambivalence, particularly among young people, about the merits of democracy versus other systems of government. For example, in 2017, 40 percent of Americans surveyed told Pew that “rule by experts” would be a good way to govern the country, and nearly a quarter answered the same way about “rule by a strong leader.”² In India, the world’s largest democracy, 55 percent of people surveyed viewed “rule by a strong leader” as a good way to govern, while 65 percent agreed that “rule by experts” could improve governance.³ The messiness of democratic political processes, as well as political polarization intensified by social media, apparently makes many citizens of democracies at least toy with surrendering freedoms for a strong hand. But those who live under a strong hand in authoritarian states know better.

Of course, in closed societies, public opinion is difficult to measure with accuracy. But as street protests from Armenia to Algeria to Venezuela have shown over the past year, citizens living under autocratic control often crave the basic political liberties that citizens of democracies take for granted. They cannot afford the casual approach to basic rights and freedoms that sometimes seems trendy in free societies where those rights are guaranteed under the law. Citizens deprived of their liberty may have a deeper appreciation of why individual rights are inviolable. Reagan understood this even as he spoke during a period of repressive martial law in Central Europe: “Poland's struggle to be Poland and to secure the basic rights we often take for granted demonstrates why we dare not take those rights for granted.” Those who cherish freedom are often found where it is absent, which is why so many authoritarians today, from Maduro in Venezuela to Putin in the Kremlin to al-Sisi in Egypt, live in fear of their own publics.

The Authoritarians’ Fatal Flaw

The Achilles’ heel of authoritarian regimes is their lack of legitimacy. Reagan understood this instinctively, irrespective of the army divisions they could mobilize or the global reach of their missiles and navies. As he said at Westminster,

From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none -- not one regime -- has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root. The strength of the Solidarity movement in Poland demonstrates the truth told in an underground joke in the Soviet Union. It is that the Soviet Union would remain a one-party nation even if an opposition party were permitted, because everyone would join the opposition party.

² <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/30/global-views-political-systems/>

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/30/global-views-political-systems/>

Today, the Communist Party leaders of China not only refuse to hold any kind of national elections; they have lifted term limits on President Xi Jinping, potentially enabling him to rule the world's most populous country for life. Most authoritarians take a more subtle approach. Iran's hold elections, but only after an unelected body eliminates any candidates who could challenge the theocratic basis of the regime, depriving its citizens of meaningful political choice. Russia holds elections, but opposition candidates are either assassinated, imprisoned, or precluded from running by politicized rulings from a judiciary that answers to the Kremlin.

The national constitutions, and the international commitments of China, Russia, and Iran to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, commit them to uphold these rights – which they do not, just as the Soviet Union did not in Reagan's time. As he put it then, "Chairman Brezhnev repeatedly has stressed that the competition of ideas and systems must continue Well, we ask only that these systems begin by living up to their own constitutions, abiding by their own laws, and complying with the international obligations they have undertaken. We ask only for a process, a direction, a basic code of decency, not for an instant transformation."

Reagan's revolutionary vision of a world safe for democracy everywhere was in that sense evolutionary. But he understood what leaders of the autocracies today, believing themselves empowered by new digital tools of surveillance, do not – that the human craving for individual dignity is more powerful over the long run than tools of authoritarian political control. As he put it,

We cannot ignore the fact that even without our encouragement there has been and will continue to be repeated explosions against repression and dictatorships. The Soviet Union itself is not immune to this reality. Any system is inherently unstable that has no peaceful means to legitimize its leaders. In such cases, the very repressiveness of the state ultimately drives people to resist it, if necessary, by force.

We have seen this resistance, in peaceful forms, play out only recently – in Venezuela against Maduro's kleptocracy; in Russia against Putin's czarism; in Iran, from the Green Revolution of 2009 to the ongoing protests today; and in Algeria, where popular protests led the governing establishment to abandon plans for a physically and mentally incapacitated President Bouteflika to run for a fifth term. And this logic remains the central source of political risk in China, where a dynamic middle-class society will not forever tolerate arbitrary rule by a strongman in a vacuum of checks and balances.

Parallels to China Today

Reagan's confidence that the free world had a better political model than the Soviet Union should inspire Americans today. China's catch-up growth miracle of the past four decades has led many to assume that it will inevitably sideline the United States as the world's leading power. The fact that the Chinese economy had been destroyed by the excesses of Maoism before the late 1970s – just as the Soviet economy was laid waste by the ravages of the Second World War, leading to decades of catch-up growth before economic crisis set in during the 1980s – seems forgotten. China is the latest of the Asian Tiger economies to rise – a trend that started with Japan after 1945, proceeded to South Korea and Taiwan in subsequent decades, and then spread to Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Indonesia. Each of these economies was

governed by a one-party system – until decades of rapid industrialization created a middle class that demanded political reforms, leading to transitions to multi-party democracy.

The great exception to this trend has been China – which has only just entered the middle-income range with a per capita GDP of roughly \$10,000, a level of prosperity at which political reform has occurred in nearly every other Asian nation. Yet China's growth lately has been accompanied not by political opening but by tighter state control of both economy and society and the increasingly personalized rule of President Xi Jinping, who abandoned the Communist Party's habit of rotating power by securing the party leadership's consent to rule without term limits.

The intensification of CCP control over the Chinese people and Chinese business, both state-owned and private-sector, has been accompanied by a rapid slowing of economic growth. China's ratio of debt to GDP is approaching 300 percent, the country is awash in industrial overcapacity, and China's rapidly ageing society means its workforce as a percentage of population is shrinking even as labor rates make China less competitive in mass-manufacturing for export. A country that until recently served as workshop for the world now runs a current account deficit, and Chinese politicians worry about the social instabilities slower economic growth may produce.

None of this would surprise Reagan, who correctly understood that the Achilles' heel of the Soviet Union was a rigid political system that could not meet its people's higher-order needs. As he put it,

In an ironic sense Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis, a crisis where the demands of the economic order are conflicting directly with those of the political order. But the crisis is happening not in the free, non-Marxist West, but in the home of Marxist-Leninism, the Soviet Union. It is the Soviet Union that runs against the tide of history by denying human freedom and human dignity to its citizens.... What we see here is a political structure that no longer corresponds to its economic base, a society where productive forces are hampered by political ones.

Modern China's political structure clearly no longer corresponds to its economic base. Mao Zedong built a Leninist state atop a nation of peasants that had been ravaged by 15 years of war with Japan and a civil war. China today possesses world-class infrastructure, some of the world's most modern cities and biggest companies, and a thriving middle-class population, many of whom travel as tourists outside the country. However, in a 21st century that will be driven by innovation, can the Chinese fully compete when speech and thought are controlled and they cannot access the global internet due to the Great Firewall? How can such a sophisticated society's future be governed by the whims and preferences of one man at the top, without institutions of accountability and transparency?

As he did with the Soviet Union in 1982, Reagan would have looked at China today and seen a country ripe for political change. And he would have assured Americans that we can compete successfully with such a nation because our culture of individual freedom and democratic institutions is a source of strength and dynamism in the face of a repressively rigid superpower competitor.

The Dangers of the Surveillance State

But he would not have underestimated the challenge. The repressive capacity of the modern state is far greater than it was under the absolute monarchs of Europe in the pre-modern age. “If developments like the Industrial Revolution... and the gifts of science and technology have made life much easier for us, they have also made it more dangerous,” said Reagan. “There are threats now to our freedom, indeed to our very existence, that other generations could never even have imagined.” The totalitarian model of the Soviet Union was scary enough – and that was before modern tools of surveillance and social control made possible by the digital revolution became available to authoritarian leaders.

In 2019, facial recognition and gait technology, total surveillance of social media accompanied by a vast state censorship apparatus, closed-circuit video monitoring of all urban spaces, and a social-credit scoring system made possible by big data, allow China’s leaders to control their population and snuff out political challenges to one-party rule before they metastasize. Citizens living under such forms of social control may not even realize what information they have no access to or how they are being surveilled. So sophisticated are the technological possibilities for a state-directed form of social engineering that even George Orwell’s novel *1984* could not have foreseen them. Reagan warned us: “History teaches the dangers of government that overreaches -- political control taking precedence over free economic growth, secret police, mindless bureaucracy, all combining to stifle individual excellence and personal freedom.” Modern China is not immune from this reality, despite its perceived developmental successes.

The Neo-Authoritarian Challenge

Nonetheless, authoritarian competitors to the free world have momentum nearly 40 years after Reagan’s indictment of dictatorship as a political model. The end of the Cold War brought not the end of history but a new era in which democracy has come under assault – from violent extremists, from social media-powered political polarization, and most importantly from the return of great-power competition after a quarter-century in which American primacy was unchallenged. Many are despondent about the future of democracy: Freedom House reports that democratic practice globally has now declined for 17 years in a row.⁴ Authoritarians are innovating. Reagan’s words ring as true today as they did when he uttered them: “Optimism comes less easily today, not because democracy is less vigorous, but because democracy’s enemies have refined their instruments of repression.”

Yet democracies have a long history of lamenting democratic decline. From the earliest days of the 18th century Republic through the Civil War and the rise of German, Soviet, and Japanese power in the 20th century, Americans have feared that their best days were behind them and that new powers would eclipse their standing and way of life.⁵ Reagan was not one of these people, despite having immediately followed a predecessor, Jimmy Carter, who gloomily warned the

⁴ Freedom in the World 2019

⁵ <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/08/declinism.html>

American public one year before Reagan's election as president that "The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America."⁶

Reagan's message in Westminster was different: "[O]ptimism is in order, because day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower." He correctly argued that, earlier in the 20th century, democracies had paid a terrible price for allowing the leaders of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to underestimate their fortitude. They should not make the mistake of doing so again. Nor should Americans underestimate the innate strength that derives from a society of free people determined not to submit to any totalitarian challenger. "So, let us ask ourselves, 'What kind of people do we think we are?' And let us answer, 'Free people, worthy of freedom and determined not only to remain so but to help others gain their freedom as well.'" In the face of a new challenge from an ideological competitor today, Americans must rediscover that fortitude.

No Appeasement

Today, some argue for an accommodation with Beijing that would cede Taiwan and other U.S. allies to its influence, so as to preempt the superpower rivalry they otherwise foresee from the clash of American and Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific. Others maintain that Washington's rivalry with Putin is not a function of the Kremlin's attempts to reconstitute the Russian empire by seizing the territory of neighboring states like Ukraine and Georgia, but rather is a product of Washington's desire to push democracy in Eastern Europe – and that American and Russian leaders should come to a new agreement, as they did at Yalta seven decades ago, recognizing Russia's suzerainty over its near neighborhood.

Reagan was clear that such accommodations with authoritarian competitors yield not peace but the greater possibility of conflict over time – since dictators' revisionist appetites only grow with the eating. "Must freedom wither in a quiet, deadening accommodation with totalitarian evil?" In our time, conceding the international waterways of the South China Sea to China, or the legitimacy of Russia's illegal occupation of Ukraine's Crimea and Donbas regions, would only reward armed aggression in ways that undermine American security – just as President Obama's refusal to enforce his red line against Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria encouraged greater battlefield aggression against free Syrian forces and the Syrian people by the Syrian army and its military patrons in Tehran and Moscow.

America's response in 2019 must be—as it was in 1982--"that armed aggression must not be allowed to succeed, and the people must participate in the decisions of government under the rule of law. If there had been firmer support for that principle some 45 years ago," Reagan said to the children of the Blitz, "perhaps our generation wouldn't have suffered the bloodletting of World War II."

⁶ <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jimmycartercrisisofconfidence.htm>

Parallels: North Korea, China and Venezuela

The Cold War was characterized by divided societies – including the Germanies and the Koreas - that provided a real-world test of competing economic and political models. Those characterized by command economies in which one party monopolized power fared poorly compared to those governed by more liberal norms. “Wherever the comparisons have been made between free and closed societies – West Germany and East Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, Malaysia and Vietnam – it is the democratic countries that are prosperous and responsive to the needs of their people,” argued Reagan.

His prescience was about more than what he called “the decay of the Soviet experiment”: societies ruled by strongmen during his time, including South Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, subsequently went through transitions to democracy when middle classes empowered by capitalist economic growth demanded greater political rights. Economic modernization produced political openings, not just in the European societies of the Warsaw Pact but in Asia too -- notwithstanding all the arguments about “Confucian cultures” and “Asian values” that apologists for dictatorship made during Reagan’s age to explain away what was then the lack of democracy in the societies of the Pacific rim.

Four decades after Reagan, Leninist regimes in China and North Korea continue to monopolize political power. The fact that both are nuclear-weapons states should not deter the United States from speaking out on behalf of the natural rights of their citizens; Reagan correctly characterized as “preposterous” the notion “that once countries achieve a nuclear capability, they should be allowed an undisturbed reign of terror over their own citizens.” As the Trump administration pursues negotiations with the regime of Kim Jung-un to contain and roll back North Korea’s nuclear program, Reagan’s admonition is worth bearing in mind.

The same is true of U.S.-China relations, even though the stakes are sky-high between the world’s existing superpower and the rising one. A China that governs its citizens more justly, including the more than one million Uighurs currently detained in concentration camps in China’s rugged west, will be a better partner in world affairs than one that oppresses its citizens with impunity. Just as the Berlin Wall, “that dreadful gray gash across the city,” was a symbol of Soviet tyranny, so are the vast detention facilities in Xinjiang symbols of autocratic control from Beijing.

Forcibly detaining vast numbers of Chinese citizens in camps is not dissimilar as an abuse of government authority to the North Korean military’s orders to shoot on sight any citizens fleeing across the border into South Korea. At Westminster, with an eye on the Soviet empire, Reagan reminded us that “Of all the millions of refugees we’ve seen in the modern world, their flight is always away from, not toward the Communist world. Today, on the NATO line, our military forces face east to prevent a possible invasion. On the other side of the line, the Soviet forces also face east to prevent their people from leaving.” Then as now, no citizen flees a justly governed democracy.

That fact remains true not just of autocracies wielding nuclear weapons but also of tyrants in our own hemisphere. The Venezuelan crisis of misrule and kleptocracy has produced as many refugees as the Syrian conflagration. Nearly 90 percent of Venezuelans are malnourished, despite having grown up in what was, until the horrors inflicted by Chavez and Maduro, Latin America's richest nation. Reagan's description at Westminster of El Salvador's tribulations eerily parallels the conflict in Venezuela today, as citizens take to the streets to demand the restoration of democracy: "And then one day those silent, suffering people were offered a chance to vote, to choose the kind of government they wanted. Suddenly the freedom-fighters in the hills were exposed for what they really are – Cuban-backed guerrillas who want power for themselves and their backers, not democracy for the people."

Substitute "freedom-fighters in the hills" for Maduro's security forces, including the Cuban-trained "Bolivarian militias," and Reagan could have been describing the standoff today between a Venezuelan public desperate for change and an illegitimate regime reliant on brute repression and foreign sponsorship to remain in power. It cannot endure forever. Quoting a Salvadoran woman saying "You can kill me, you can kill my family, kill my neighbors, but you can't kill us all," Reagan reminded his audience, "The real freedom-fighters of El Salvador turned out to be the people of that country." The same is true in Venezuela, as its people rise together against an oppression fueled by narco-corruption and criminal misuse of the country's energy resources to enrich the Chavista elite.

America is Not Morally Neutral

Throughout its history, the United States has never been a neutral observer in the struggle between freedom and tyranny. A nation founded on its belief in the ability of free people to shape their own destiny cannot be indifferent to the effort of citizens of other nations to do the same. As Reagan argued, "We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings." And not only must Americans remain intellectually and morally committed to this proposition, they must act: "How we conduct ourselves here in the Western democracies will determine" the course of freedom's progress. Democracy is not "a fragile flower" but "needs cultivating"; it does not flourish in the absence of political will to defend and protect it against authoritarian backlash. "If the rest of this century is to witness the gradual growth of freedom and democratic ideals, we must take actions to assist the campaign for democracy."

But support for democracy does not mean promoting revolutionary change in any kind of messianic fashion. It is striking to note that Reagan's vision of democratic progress was evolutionary, even though his belief in universal human freedom was radical. Just as President George W. Bush was caricatured for seeking to "export democracy" through the "barrel of a gun," so Reagan has been occasionally projected as a naïve utopian in his Wilsonian idealism. In fact, it was his supreme confidence in "man's instinctive desire for freedom and self-determination" that convinced him – just as it had convinced previous American presidents, from Wilson to Franklin Roosevelt to John F. Kennedy – that the United States had a national interest in standing on the right side of history. The justness of the cause meant that "we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take concrete actions to move toward them."

Reagan proposed “a crusade for freedom” that “will long outlive our own generation” and “will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation.”

The Democratic Peace

This was no argument for regime change through military force – if anything, the Cold War context of mutually assured destruction reinforced Reagan’s belief in being “cautious about forcing the pace of change.” Reagan understood that a world of more democracies would be a more peaceful world – that security was directly tied to justice: “For the sake of peace and justice, let us move toward a world in which all people are at last free to determine their own destiny.”

He recalled how the democracies did not use their nuclear monopoly following the Second World War for territorial or imperial gain. He admiringly cited Winston Churchill, who argued that to counteract Soviet expansionism it would be necessary to prevent further conflict through “the establishment of conditions of freedom and democracy as rapidly as possible in all countries.” Reagan understood an enduring truth: that a more democratic world is a safer world for America. Polling by the George W. Bush Institute, Penn-Biden Center, and Freedom House shows that two-thirds of Americans continue to understand the link between democracy abroad and security at home.⁷

Allied Solidarity

American leaders today could benefit from Reagan’s understanding that democracy in the world, and the security it generates, is on better footing when democracies act together. His speech is laden with references to “our sister democracies” and the logic of how “free peoples can work together” in a “spirit of cooperation and solidarity.” In the world of 2019, authoritarian revisionist powers like China and Russia pursue policies to divide democracies and weaken allied solidarity; their focus on undercutting cooperation among democracies is another reminder of its strategic value, since American competitors consider it a challenge to their interests.

Reagan was no unilateralist—he was also animated by a vision of an international architecture of support for democracy. In calling for a renewed campaign for democracy, he cited the inspiration of the European party foundations, international gatherings of parliamentarians and judges, and meetings of technical experts on elections from different countries in common efforts focused on “assisting democratic development.” Reagan not only situated his ambitions for a global campaign for democracy in this context, he believed the United States could learn from others, especially European allies, about “how to turn principle into practice and further the rule of law.”

A Contest of Systems

Reagan understood that the Cold War was not primarily a military-nuclear confrontation but a contest of systems pitting market-democracy against totalitarianism. He called the Cold War “a

⁷ <https://www.democracyprojectreport.org/>

competition of ideas and values” that need not end in nuclear Armageddon but could be “conducted on a peaceful and reciprocal basis.” He was confident that in any such contest, universal rights of liberty and individual equality would prevail over those of the Soviet party-state.

Reagan is often associated with the aggressive defense buildup he pursued during the 1980s, which many historians argue outspent the Soviets and convinced their leadership that Moscow could never compete in material power. But Reagan viewed the U.S. relative advantage differently. “Our military strength is a prerequisite to peace,” he maintained. But “the ultimate determinant in the struggle that’s now going on in the world will not be bombs and rockets, but a test of wills and ideals, a trial of spiritual resolve, the values we hold, the beliefs we cherish, the ideals to which we are dedicated.” In a period when another U.S. president approaches geopolitical competition by leveraging the hard power generated by American military supremacy and economic vigor, Reagan’s words are a reminder that the soft power generated by America’s democratic culture was central to the struggle, and ultimately determinative in ending it. Today, U.S. support for freedom and democracy is what dictators from Caracas to Khartoum fear most.

Conclusion: Democracy and Sovereignty

The world of 2019 is dangerous and messy. Thanks to conflicts and state failure in countries like Syria and Venezuela, there are more refugees and displaced people than at any time since the Second World War. Russia and China are projecting their authoritarian values beyond their borders, in a foundational challenge to the American-led world order and the market democracies it has fostered. Many Americans are tempted by arguments to pursue what Barack Obama called “nation-building at home” and what Donald Trump has termed “America First” – even if that means ceding strategic space to authoritarian rivals hostile to U.S. values and interests.

When he delivered his Westminster address in 1982, the world was also dangerous and messy, and many Americans were no doubt tempted by the same impulse to accommodate dangerous autocracies. But in that dark time, when the United States faced a strategic challenger more formidable than any today, Reagan called on his people to have confidence in their creed, or what he called “the great civilized ideas: individual liberty, representative government, and the rule of law under God.” Addressing the same kind of doubts that exist today among relativists who do not recognize that authoritarian competitors are working actively to weaken democratic practice for strategic purposes, he “wondered about the shyness of some of us in the West about standing for these ideals that have done so much to ease the plight of man and the hardships of our imperfect world.”

Most powerfully, Reagan reminded his listeners that “foster[ing] the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, [and] universities” was not any kind of imperial project but was the truest means to allow “a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.” Supporting other nations’ democratic sovereignty is “not cultural imperialism, it is providing the means for genuine self-determination and protection for diversity.” After all,

Who would voluntarily choose not to have the right to vote, decide to purchase government propaganda handouts instead of independent newspapers, prefer government to worker-controlled unions, opt for land to be owned by the state instead of those who till it, want government repression of religious liberty, a single political party instead of a free choice, a rigid cultural orthodoxy instead of democratic tolerance and diversity?

Today, sophisticates on both the political left and right argue that the United States has no business supporting the democratic aspirations of the Venezuelan people, or claim that Iraqis were somehow better off living under Saddam Hussein's police state than they are under freely elected politicians, or maintain that people in China don't care about political liberty because they enjoy the economic kind. Reagan would tell them that they are wrong, and he would be right: "It would be cultural condescension, or worse, to say that any people prefer dictatorship to democracy." The fate of free peoples is linked, and America is safer and more secure when it supports the aspirations for liberty of people beyond its borders.