



U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)
Speech

On the Web:

<http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1571>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131/697-5132

Public contact:

<http://www.defense.gov/landing/comment.aspx>

or +1 (703) 428-0711 +1

Reagan Centennial

Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Ronald Reagan Building, Washington, DC, Tuesday, May 24, 2011

Thank you for that kind introduction. I'm incredibly glad that President Walesa and my very good friend Minister Liam Fox could join us tonight, along with members of congress, the diplomatic corps, and so many other distinguished guests. And I am profoundly honored and humbled to have been chosen to speak about President Reagan's legacy to those who remember him best, an extraordinary group – many friends and colleagues – who served him so well for so long.

So following Liam, I have to say, I had my own interaction with Margaret Thatcher, and during the first Bush administration, Larry Eagleburger and I were sent to talk to her about the reduction of US forces in Europe. On her second visit we sat down, she said won't you take your usual places and we made our presentation she asked very hard and difficult questions. And after the session was over we were walking out and she put her arms around each of us and she said you know, you two are always welcome here as long as I am Prime Minister, but never again on this subject. She later told David Burns that she would refer to us in telephone conversations with President Bush as Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, I always claimed to be Tweedle Dee.

I habitually begin dinner speeches with a few favorite jokes about the foibles of Washington D.C. and its denizens. But it's hard to top the master himself, who once said, "Politics is supposed to be the second-oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first."

His humor was so effective, so disarming, because of its gentle touch that hit a rich array of targets, including himself. In a town full of the thin-skinned and self-important, he was a President who said of his schedule: "I have left orders to be awakened at any time in case of national emergency – even if I'm in a Cabinet meeting." He was – and still is – our country's oldest president, leading him to note: "There are three ages of man; youth, middle-age, and 'You-look-terrific.'"

Speaking of age, I recall a particular meeting in the Oval Office early in November of 1985. As the then-Deputy Director for Intelligence at CIA, I led a team of analysts to brief the President on the situation in the Soviet Union. We began the session by discussing the stresses on the Soviet system and

the corresponding opportunities it presented in his upcoming summit with Mikhail Gorbachev. It was a historic inflection point: the first time, I believe, since the Cold War started, that an American president was told by his intelligence service that internal Soviet problems were so severe, the regime could not survive – though we made no prediction on timing.

I was seated to his left in the Oval Office, and a minute or two into my part of the briefing, a high-pitched screech came out of the president's left ear – a high-pitched noise – and if I could hear it, I knew how painful it must be for him. His eyes got wide. He reached up and adjusted his hearing aid. And I resumed talking. A couple of minutes later, the screeching noise started again. The president, with some disgust, reached up, plucked the hearing aid out of his ear, pounded it in his palm, and as he was putting it back in his ear, leaned over to me and whispered, "It's my KGB handler trying to reach me."

It's altogether fitting that the theme of these Centennial celebrations is "Inspired Freedom, Changed the World." And while President Reagan's domestic initiatives fundamentally changed the politics and government of this country, as Defense Secretary for at least a few more weeks, I'd like to focus my remarks on how he brought that slogan to life abroad.

As most of you here remember, when Ronald Reagan took office, there was little to joke about, or smile about for that matter. In the previous decade we'd seen:

- A collapse in Vietnam, and the deaths of millions across Southeast Asia;
- Stagflation;
- Two energy crises;
- The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan;
- Revolution in Iran, an embassy taken hostage, a failed rescue mission;
- Tens of thousands of Cuban soldiers in Angola and Ethiopia;
- Nicaragua was fast moving into Cuba's orbit and there were Cuban supported insurgencies in El Salvador and elsewhere in the region;
- And by late 1980, a Soviet invasion of Poland was a very real possibility.

When Reagan became President, the Soviet Union seemed ascendant and we were reeling. Some of you here today remember what it was like to work in national security during that time, or anytime during the Cold War – always carrying a heavy burden, always facing an existential threat not just to our country, but to the entire world.

But President Reagan – nearly alone – had the bedrock conviction that the Soviet system was rotting from within, was fundamentally vulnerable, and could be brought down. Remarkably, again mainly alone, he believed it could happen on his watch, not at some undefined future time and he believed this from the very beginning of his Presidency. When I spoke at Notre Dame's commencement last Sunday, I was reminded of how Reagan had stood in that place, that same place, 30 years ago – in 1981, predicting then, and I quote: "The West won't contain Communism, it will transcend Communism...It will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written." Reagan didn't see this upheaval as a vague, sweep-of-history eventuality, but something he could see in his lifetime, and he put policies in place to help make this aspiration a reality.

First, he understood that erasing the impression of U.S. political and military weakness would ultimately reap major diplomatic rewards and strategic breakthroughs. As president, his first priority was to restore America's military strength, given that nearly 15 years of Soviet modernization and cuts in our own defense spending had narrowed, and in some areas erased, America's strategic edge over the USSR. A broad U.S. defense build-up began early in the Reagan administration, with more advanced planes, ships, submarines, combat vehicles, and nuclear weapons added to the American military arsenal – an arsenal that to this day is the backbone of American military power. A particularly bold initiative, courageously backed by our NATO allies, saw intermediate-range missiles placed on European soil to counter the earlier deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles and strengthen our collective deterrent.

Reagan never hesitated to use our military power when necessary. Many remember the 1986 Gulf of Sidra attack on Libya in retribution for killing American soldiers in a Berlin terror attack, but actually the world – and Libya – had discovered Reagan's toughness and resolve as early as August 19th, 1981. Libya had extended its claimed territorial waters by 12 miles to what Qaddafi called the "line of death." That's exactly what it proved to be, when President Reagan sent in the carriers the USS Forrester and the USS Nimitz to assure U.S. freedom of navigation. Two Libyan fighters came out to challenge them. Big mistake. Under Ronald Reagan's new rules of engagement, two F-14 Tomcats, without hesitation, splashed the two Libyan fighters. And so the United States sent a message to Colonel Qaddafi that he would not soon forget – well, not for a few decades at least.

But while Reagan embraced the importance of military strength to protect the United States, he also understood we would never win this epic struggle solely by force of arms, and thus that the USSR needed to be defeated on less conventional battlefields. While countering the Soviets – with varying degrees of fervor and success – had been a common feature of every administration since the end of World War II, under President Reagan this struggle gained new moral energy, purpose, and a sense of urgency.

He spoke blunt truths about the Soviet system and Soviet behavior. Remember the "Evil Empire" speech in 1983? It drove Moscow nuts. No one spoke these truths with more credibility or more eloquence. President Reagan again and again would return to declarations strong and true – making his words, as Margaret Thatcher said, "fight like soldiers" – to give the Soviet leader and the system he was trying to save a final push into history's dustbin.

Those stirring words and his administration's actions, both overt and covert, gave hope to dissidents and millions of others trapped behind the Iron Curtain. One small but telling anecdote: Early in the Reagan administration, Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, continued to stay in touch with CIA director, Bill Casey, about Poland – a cause and a country dear to Brzezinski's heart, and to the heart of the new Pope, John Paul the Second. In one conversation at a cocktail party, Zbig complained to Casey that funding for one of his favorite Polish covert actions had been reduced. Casey asked how much it would take to remedy the problem. Zbig said about \$18,000. The next day, a man showed up in Brzezinski's office, unannounced and unidentified, and handed Zbig a briefcase containing \$18,000 in cash. Brzezinski, more than a little nonplussed, nevertheless passed it to a Polish visitor on his way home – where Lech Walesa and his compatriots put it to good use.

The sum total of these measures, large and small, communicated loud and clear, at home and abroad, that post-Vietnam, post-malaise, America was back – strong and resolute.

And it was on this foundation of strength and truth-telling that Reagan built as we headed into that 1985 briefing I mentioned earlier, a briefing which was held to prepare him for his first meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev at the Geneva Summit. At the time, a number of people – in and out of the administration – were advising that the president’s goal for the summit should be to just to get by – to do what was necessary to survive the encounter with the younger and allegedly craftier Soviet leader.

Well, we all remember how things turned out. After Geneva, Reagan and Gorbachev surely did not become best friends, but they at least became the best of adversaries and, between them, set in motion developments that would ultimately lead to a remarkable turn of events that few would have dared predict during the 1970s: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the liberation of hundreds of millions of people behind the Iron Curtain.

President Reagan always had the courage and strength of conviction to call the Soviets out militarily and morally. But he also had the insight, the sense of the historical moment, to know when it was time to sheathe the sword, soften the tone, and re-engage, even with our most implacable and dangerous enemy.

Reagan’s statecraft was a subtle two-step: diplomatic, economic, and military pressure combined with a willingness to parlay with his Soviet counterpart. He was a number of steps ahead of his critics on both the left and right, some of whom could not make sense of the combination. And, indeed, I believe Ronald Reagan was far more shrewd and in control of events than either his critics or, frankly, many of his supporters thought.

Today, almost 20 years later, 20 years after the Wall fell, we marvel at the different world we live in. It is still a dangerous place, to be sure. In many ways geopolitics are much more complex than when two nuclear-armed superpowers taunted and tested each other. But communism’s demise holds lessons for us even now. They include the enduring value and the broad appeal of freedom – political, economic, spiritual. And the idea that free men and women of different cultures and countries can, for all the squabbling inherent in democracy, come together to get the big things right, and make the tough decisions to deter aggression and preserve their liberty. Another lesson is the importance of sustaining American military power. As President Reagan once observed, “of the four wars in my lifetime, none came about because the United States was too strong.”

These lessons give us reassurance, as each new generation always, at some point, is called upon to make a stand. Our current weariness with conflict – after a decade of war – is understandable and even to be expected. Yet, it is a sad reality that in our time and in the future, as throughout recorded history, there will be those who seek to dominate and intimidate others through violence. We saw this on 9/11. We see it today in Afghanistan, where more perseverance, more sacrifice, and more patience will be required to prevent the terrorists who attacked us from doing so again – though cutting of the head of the Al-Qaeda snake was definitely a big step in the right direction. We see it anywhere nations, movements, or strongmen are tempted to believe that the United States of America does not have the will or the means to stand by our friends, to meet our commitments, and to defend our way of life.

But we must not let weariness cause us to withdraw from the world or diminish our ability to deal with the threats and challenges of tomorrow. As President Reagan said just over a quarter century ago: “It’s up to us, in our time, to choose and choose wisely between the hard but necessary task of preserving peace and freedom and the temptation to ignore our duty and blindly hope for the best.”

There is no way to predict the future, nor can we predict the effect that decisions made today will have a decade or two from now. One thing is clear, though, from history: when America is willing to lead the way; when we live up to our responsibilities and stand with our allies, even in troubling times; when we prepare for threats that are on the horizon and beyond the horizon; and when we make the necessary sacrifices and take the necessary risks to defend our values and our interests – then great things are possible, and even probable for our country and the world.

Anatole France wrote that: “To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe.” That was Ronald Reagan. And so to close tonight I call upon you to share the bedrock belief that fueled Reagan’s optimism and his achievements: That, as he said, “America’s best days are yet to come. Our proudest moments are yet to be. Our most glorious achievements are just ahead.”

Thank you.