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Morality and Foreign Policy: Reagan and Thatcher

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EDWIN MEESE III was the Attorney General of the United States from 1985-88. Prior to that he served as Deputy District Attorney in Alameda County, California; professor of law at the University of San Diego; Governor Ronald Reagan's Executive Assistant and Chief of Staff; Chief of Staff and Senior Issues Advisor for the Reagan-Bush Committee during the 1980 presidential campaign, head of President-elect Reagan's transition team following the November 1980 election; and Counsellor to the President from 1981-85. He currently holds the Ronald Reagan Chair in Public Policy at the Heritage Foundation, and is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution and a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the University of London's Institute of United States Studies. A 1953 graduate of Yale University, Mr. Meese holds a law degree from the University of California at Berkeley, is a retired Colonel in the United States Army Reserve and is the author of *With Reagan: The Inside Story* (Regnery Gateway, 1992).

The following is adapted from speeches delivered by Mr. Meese on June 8 and June 12, 2002, at sea aboard the Crystal Symphony, during the first Hillsdale College cruise, "A Salute to Freedom."

Ronald Reagan revitalized the American economy and began an unprecedented period of economic growth. He rebuilt our armed forces. He restored the spirit of the American people. But most important to our discussion today, he developed a new set of strategic principles to deal with the Soviet Union and the threat of communist imperialism. According to those principles, the United States would oppose rather than accommodate the Soviet Union, insofar as it sought to expand its power and impose totalitarianism around the globe.

The first way in which Reagan took on the Soviet Union – and the basis of everything else – was to defend strongly the moral superiority of

freedom. He rejected absolutely the idea of moral equivalence – the idea, prevalent at the time, and still prevalent today, that there is no moral difference between free government and tyranny. Second, Reagan stood up to Soviet aggression. In 1979 and 1980, before he took office, the Soviets had marched into Afghanistan with virtual impunity. Reagan made it clear, through his discussions with the Soviet ambassador and through other means, that the United States would not allow the Soviet Union to occupy one square foot of additional ground anywhere in the world. And third, Reagan adopted the policy of rolling back communism wherever possible, by supporting freedom fighters in Poland, Angola, Nicaragua and elsewhere around the world.

The public unveiling of Reagan's anti-communist strategy took place 20 years ago today, [on June 8, 1982], when he spoke to the

British Parliament at Westminster Palace. It was in that speech that he announced his battle plan for dealing with communism in the future. Writing about that speech later, he said,

When I came into office, I believed there had been mistakes in our policy toward the Soviets in particular. I wanted to do some things differently, like speaking the truth about them for a change, rather than hiding reality between the niceties of diplomacy.

So he spoke openly about the conflict between the principles of constitutional government and those of communism. In retrospect, I'm amazed that previous national leaders had not attacked the ideas behind Marxism-Leninism in this direct way. We had come to be too worried that we would offend the Soviet leaders if we did so. But Reagan portrayed Marxism-Leninism as an "empty cupboard." Everyone knew this by the 1980s, he believed, but no one was saying it. Being honest about it, he thought, would help the Soviets to face up to their own weaknesses, and to their uncertain future.

Scaring the "Striped-Pants Diplomats"

IT WAS in that speech that Reagan said,

What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long-term. The march of freedom and democracy will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history, as it has left other tyrannies which stifled the freedom and muzzled the self-expression of the people.

As you might imagine, those words scared the heck out of the people whom Reagan used to call "striped-pants diplomats." It was not at all what the State Department would have preferred him to say in such a widely broadcast speech. But honesty was Reagan's way, and it turned out to be effective.

The following year, in March of 1983, Reagan gave a speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in which he said that those who promote the total sovereignty of the state over the individual are the focus of evil in the modern world. This is the speech in which he called the Soviet Union an "evil empire" — again, much to the dismay of the State Department. And in that same month,

and in the same spirit, Reagan declared the importance of the Strategic Defense Initiative — what we know today as Ballistic Missile Defense — and announced his intention to begin to develop it.

There are several other milestones in Reagan's campaign against communism. In October of 1983, at the request of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, the United States used military force for the first time since Vietnam, rescuing nearly a thousand American citizens and putting down an oppressive totalitarian regime on the island of Grenada.

After that there was the series of meetings with Mikhail Gorbachev, beginning in 1985, in which Reagan set forth the understanding that the United States posed no threat to the Soviet Union, but that we would not accept peace at the expense of other peoples' freedom.

The most important of these meetings — which came to be called "summits" — was at Reykjavik in 1986. It was at this meeting that Gorbachev put on the table what would have been the greatest reduction of offensive weapons in the history of the world. But he had one requirement: the United States would have to give up the Strategic Defense Initiative. Reagan already knew that ballistic missile defense was important, and had explained why to the American people. But it wasn't until that moment that he realized how important it was *to the Soviets*. The Soviet Union had been cheating on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty — the 1972 treaty which forbade the Soviet Union and the United States from going beyond a certain level of ballistic missile defense — for 10 or 15 years. But already in 1986, Gorbachev recognized that the United States was eclipsing the Soviet Union in its technological development of missile defense.

Reagan turned down Gorbachev's offer. At the time, the news media, along with many others in our country and around the world, argued that Reagan had made a mistake by not giving in to Gorbachev's demand. But in hindsight, we can say that this was one of the critical moments in the entire Cold War. The Soviets realized the importance of SDI. They also knew, because of Reagan's refusal to give it up — as many Soviet leaders have written since that time — that they would never be able to prevail over the United States.

Following Reykjavik was Reagan's visit to Berlin on June 12, 1987. In his speech that day at the Brandenburg Gate, Reagan reviewed the history of the Cold War. He compared the

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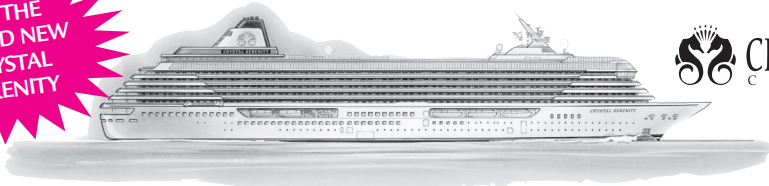
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progress that was taking place in the West with the technological backwardness and privation in the communist world. He suggested that the Soviets themselves may be coming to understand the importance of freedom, noting that under Gorbachev there had been some changes. Political prisoners had been released. Economic enterprises had been permitted to operate with greater freedom from state control. “Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state,” Reagan asked, “or are they token gestures intended to raise false hopes in the West, or to strengthen the Soviet system without changing it?”

“We welcome change and openness,” he continued. “We believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace.” And then Reagan went on to make the challenge that we’ve heard repeated so many times since, and that turned out to be so momentous in the history of Berlin and of the Cold War:

There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

That was in many ways the beginning of the end of the Cold War. From that point on, there was a marked difference in the goings-on within the communist world. Reagan had accurately perceived the weaknesses of the Soviet Union. He had formulated American policy in a way that those weaknesses couldn’t be hidden. He had spoken openly about the immoral reason for those weaknesses. And so, as he pre-

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Photos



The First Hillsdale College Cruise June 1-13, 2002



Hillsdale cruisers Gerald and Marilyn Matt dressed for Medieval Night on the Crystal Symphony



Hillsdale College Vice President for Development John Cervini '74 and his wife Sue muster for the mandatory life boat drill



Cruise speaker Herbert Romerstein signs a copy of his book, The Venona Secrets



Doris Myers, Hillsdale College Trustee J. Eric Plym '63, Ursula Meese, and cruise speakers Edwin Meese III and Midge Decter, seated for dinner in the Crystal Dining Room



Cruise speaker William Rusher discusses the history of American conservatism in the Galaxy Lounge



Hillsdale cruisers at Schloss Cecilienhoff in Potsdam, Germany, site of the 1945 conference attended by Churchill, Truman and Stalin



Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw lectures on "World War Two in Hitler's Mind" at the Rathaus Schöneberg in Berlin, Germany



Hillsdale cruisers return from a tour of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, Russia



Churchill biographer and Hillsdale College Distinguished Fellow Sir Martin Gilbert leads a tour of Horse Guards Parade in London, England



Guest speaker Celia Sandys, granddaughter of Winston Churchill, and Hillsdale College President Larry P. Arnn, at lunch with cruisers at the Selsdon Park Hotel in Croydon, England



dicted at the end of his speech at the Brandenburg Gate, the Berlin Wall – and all it represented – fell. “For it cannot withstand faith,” Reagan said. “It cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.”

Reagan and Thatcher

RONALD REAGAN said that his principles were formed out of his upbringing in middle America. His boyhood was in a poor, but very upright family. He learned religious faith from his mother. He learned friendship and respect toward others, including a strong opposition towards racial discrimination, from his father. He learned the importance of public service, and of neighbors helping each other, from the community in which he lived.

Margaret Thatcher came from a similar, although slightly more affluent background. She learned a great deal from her father’s work as a grocer – particularly the lesson that letting people make their own decisions was vastly superior to government-controlled economic systems. It was this background, she said, that gave her the mental outlook and tools of analysis for reconstructing an economy in England that had been ravaged by socialism.

Reagan and Thatcher were of like mind in world affairs, particularly in regard to dealing with the Soviet Union. Their joint leadership during the Cold War resembled in many ways the collaboration between Roosevelt and Churchill during World War II. But there was one big difference: Churchill knew the importance of United States participation and support of Britain in World War II, and he was tremendously grateful to Roosevelt for his leadership in that war and for his friendship toward Britain. Together, they agreed on most major decisions about international affairs. But concerning a philosophy of government and domestic policy, Churchill did not share Roosevelt’s penchant for centralizing power and regulating the economy. By contrast, Reagan and Thatcher saw eye-to-eye on both international affairs and government generally – particularly on the need for limited government as a protection for individual liberty.

Thatcher wrote about Reagan,

Above all, I knew that I was talking to someone who instinctively felt and thought as I did. Not just about policies, but about a philosophy of government, a view of human nature.

The key element of Reagan’s strategy in dealing with the Soviet Union was NATO. He had exerted his leadership to move NATO policies into line with a more assertive response to the Soviet Union, inaugurating the principle that an attack on one would be an attack on all. He also worked with the other NATO leaders to gain support for freedom fighters in places such as Poland, and to give hope to captive nations. In all of this, Thatcher had a very important role. She was, as she described herself, Reagan’s principal cheerleader in NATO – not only in NATO councils, but also privately as she met with other NATO leaders, and also, perhaps even more importantly, as she met with leaders of the Warsaw Pact. In talking to leaders in Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other places, she explained that the United States and NATO were not threats to the Warsaw Pact, but that they would resist any actions by the Soviets to engage in aggression. In a sense, she was trying in these meetings to create a wedge between the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries and the Soviet Union itself.

Nowhere was Thatcher’s help to Reagan more pronounced than in his dealings with Gorbachev. Reagan had delayed meeting with Soviet leaders until 1985, largely because he wanted the United States to be able to negotiate from a position of strength, and it had taken a few years to build up our military forces to the point where he was in a position to do so. Thatcher agreed with and supported this strategy, whereas other leaders, particularly in Europe, were pressing for Reagan to meet immediately with the Soviet leadership.

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Mrs. Thatcher met with him first. She had studied his statements and his background. She knew of his education and knew that he understood the West better than his predecessors. After she had talked with him and before he had met with Reagan, she shared with Reagan her view that he was “a man that we can do business with.” Her insights helped Reagan greatly in preparing for his first meeting with Gorbachev. She was of critical help also in demonstrating to Gorbachev that she and Reagan were in total agreement. By presenting a united front, she was instrumental in creating the right background for Reagan’s meetings with Gorbachev in Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, D.C., and Moscow.

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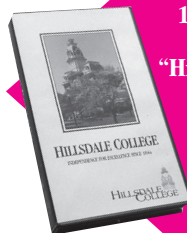
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The close personal and political friendship between Reagan and Thatcher had obvious long-term significance for world history. It also illustrates an important lesson to keep in mind as we navigate the future. It embodied the principles that have characterized the histories of the United States and England. The origins of those principles date back many centuries to a common beginning, and to the fundamental ideas which guide both our countries today – the ideas of freedom and the rule of law.

Thatcher put it well recently when she said – at a Hillsdale event, interestingly enough –

order to be considered truly free, countries must also have a deep love of liberty and an abiding respect for the rule of law.

That is a moral creed to which both Reagan and Thatcher subscribed, and which both preserved. And our world is the better for it.

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