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December 1991 Volume 20, No. 12

“Freedom’s Victory: What We Owe to Faith and the Free Market”

Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, Editor-in-Chief, Reader’s Digest

Preview: Last April, Reader’s Digest editor-in-chief and former Voice of America director Ken Tomlinson spoke during the 18th annual Ludwig von Mises Lecture Series on the Hillsdale campus. What has doomed communism, according to Tomlinson, is not just its own internal political and economic contradictions, but the triumph of another vision—a vision of democratic capitalism founded on religious faith.

A few years ago, on a routine visit to a Soviet collective farm, a Russian commissar demanded of one of the laborers in the fields: “How was the crop this year?”

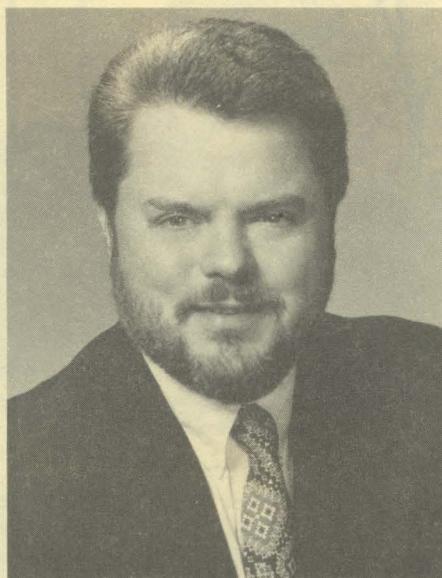
“Oh, we had a fantastic harvest—many, many potatoes. So many potatoes, in fact, that if you piled them up in the sky, they would reach the foot of God!”

The commissar scolded, “There is no God, comrade.”

The laborer retorted, “There aren’t any potatoes either.”

For over seventy years, the Soviet Union has lived the same sort of double-edged lie. The people survived because of their irrepressible sense of humor, as this old and very popular Soviet joke testifies. They also survived because of their equally irrepressible religious faith, which for years has been secretly and steadily nurtured in the underground church movement.

The Soviet people have always understood that the battle against communism is ultimately a moral one. Some Westerners have understood, too. In the June 1990 issue of *Reader’s Digest*, syndicated columnist Robert Novak wrote a memorable article, “I Was Wrong About Communism,” in which he reminisced about the powerful effect reading Whittaker Chamber’s book, *Witness*, had on him, as it had on many of us, in the 1950s.



Chambers, recruited as a Soviet spy in his youth, gave up an illustrious career at *Time* magazine and literally risked his life to testify in the Alger Hiss trials of 1949-50.

In order to understand why he was compelled to do so, Novak, I and many others had to come to grips with the central problem of the 20th century: the spiritual struggle

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between God-given freedom and atheistic communism. Like Chambers, many of us believed that communism would win in the end.

We believed this because we could not imagine individuals as capable of overpowering all the weapons that the omnipotent, total-

itarian state can bring to bear—the sophisticated military strength, the ruthless, organized bureaucracy, the rigged legal system, the confiscatory and punitive powers of the ruling elite—and, of course, the gulag. And, as Novak points out, we saw our pessimism confirmed in 1953 in East Germany, in 1956 in Hungary, and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia.

Well, the last several years appear—at least on the surface—to have proven Novak, Chambers and the rest of us wrong. The Berlin Wall has fallen, the breakup of the Soviet Union is under way, and the winds of freedom appear to be blowing across the globe.

But have we won?

I am afraid that the issue is still in doubt. Soviet-style communism may have lost its power to move men, but we will *not* be able to complete or consolidate the victory of freedom until we defeat the utopian vision of the omnipotent state. The first step is understanding *why* communism has failed.

Communism, like other forms of totalitarian collectivism, presupposes that man is solely a creature of society, and that Heaven on earth may be achieved through more and better central planning. In this vision there is no room for the free responsible individual with a God-given soul. In fact, the truth is just the opposite. Socialism is based on a false view of human nature, and its institutions stifle the very conditions—opportunity, creativity and initiative—that make it possible for societies to prosper. Living in Europe in the 1970s, I found it astonishing to witness the collusion between the social domination of the aristocracy and the economic domination of socialism—forces that merged to stifle initiative and mobility in the marketplace.

Any discussion of the spiritual failure of communism requires looking at its economic and political failure, for they are inextricably

linked. In her remarkably prophetic book, *The Coming Soviet Crash* (1989), Hoover Institution research fellow Judy Shelton revealed how economically vulnerable the USSR had become by the late 1980s. Innovation and productivity do not flourish under the centrally controlled system. Dr. Shelton showed that the Soviet system had finally reached the limits of deficit spending and was on the brink of economic collapse.

At the same time communist nations were sinking, the United States was surging ahead on a wave of remarkable growth and prosperity—fueled in no small part by Kemp/Reagan tax cuts. Our modernization, and particularly the much maligned U.S. missile defense system, the Strategic Defense Initiative, also had a lot to do with bringing matters to a head in the Soviet Union. I have heard President Reagan tell the story many times: Gorbachev tried again and again to block SDI, because he knew that even if the technology behind it were handed to him on a platter, he couldn't afford to develop it.

Finally, as George Gilder, Warren Brookes, George Roche and others have written, Western technology played a key role in ending the hegemony of the state. Radio, television, the computer chip, the fax machine, the satellite—all of these favor freedom over state control, making available to more and more people the truth about totalitarian brutality and central planning's dismal economic failure.

“Free Markets Make for Free Men”

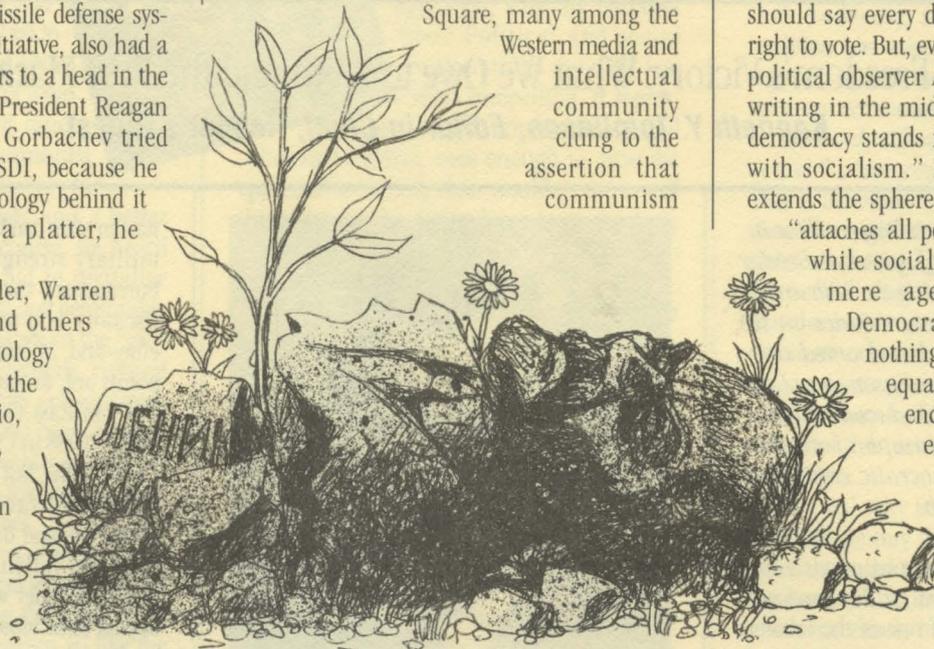
And what about the powerful appeal of the United States itself? For all the talk about equality and the rule of the proletariat in communist nations, the reality is that only a small elite holds the reins of power. Just after

From 1965 to 1968, Kenneth Y. Tomlinson worked as a reporter for the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. From 1968 to 1982, he was correspondent and senior editor for *Reader's Digest*, with two years' duty in Paris. From 1982 to 1984, he served with distinction as director of Voice of America, significantly expanding religious programming as well as bringing greater program focus to such subjects as communism and capitalism. He returned to *Reader's Digest* and in 1991 was promoted to editor-in-chief. *Reader's Digest*, with an estimated readership of 100 million, is the world's largest and most influential magazine. ▲

the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in the spring of 1989, I spoke with a third generation Chinese woman who held a graduate degree from Columbia University. Her reaction to the ensuing massacre was, “You have to understand that *we* cannot allow the peasants to rule China.”

I responded, “I'm glad *we* allow the American version of peasants to rule in the United States, because, you see, I'm the son of a Blue Ridge Mountain farmer—and the grandson of a Blue Ridge Mountain farmer—and the great-grandson of a Blue Ridge Mountain farmer.”

Sadly enough, even after Tiananmen Square, many among the Western media and intellectual community clung to the assertion that communism



Spreading the Word of Freedom

Nearly a hundred years later, his wisdom was remembered. In April of

1945, *Reader's Digest* published a condensation of *The Road to Serfdom*, which quotes Tocqueville's observations and argues against central planning and the statist vision. The condensation of this book by Mises' protege and future Nobel laureate Friedrich von Hayek had an enormous impact, reaching millions of people around the world. Recently, Vaclav Klaus, the brilliant finance minister of post-communist Czechoslovakia, admitted that he was one of them. He had never even heard of *The Road to Serfdom* until the 1960s, when, while studying abroad, a British businessman gave him a copy of the 1945 condensation.

The Voice of America has performed much the same service as *Reader's Digest*, reaching more than 130 million listeners worldwide, people who often have had literally no other source of news and other information that they could trust. Once cut off and isolated, they have found an important measure of freedom via the international airwaves. In the 1960s, President Kennedy charged VOA with this mis-

champions the cause of the peasant while democratic capitalism only exploits him. They fail to realize, as Hillsdale College President George Roche has written, that only “free markets make for free men.”

Over the years, thousands of refugees came to this country from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Latin America. They were certainly not prototypes of success. In fact, they were often personal failures—they came here with no money, no assets and no contacts. They usually started out in menial jobs. Yet once in America, they worked hard, got ahead, and their sons and daughters rose to the top of their class at some of America's best universities. It is a thrilling experience to watch the mechanisms of freedom and opportunity transform the lives of these previous “failures,” and to realize that their success enriches the American culture just as surely as it enriches the American economy.

In the early part of this century, just as Lenin was tightening his grasp on the Soviet Union and demonstrating what *real* exploitation was like to millions of peasants, the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises was writ-

sion: "Make information flow across iron curtains and stone walls. Create an open market of ideas." I think we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.

free market. There was a great deal of opposition from the U. S. foreign service establishment. On at least one occasion, I was called over to the State Department to meet with offi-

the mistaken idea that central planning, as long as we call it something other than communism or socialism, can work. Alexis de Tocqueville, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek did a great service by exposing the dangers of the statist vision; a new generation must carry on their legacy. They will do well to recall the passages that conclude the 1945 condensation of *The Road to Serfdom*:

"Here in the United States, completing and consolidating freedom's victory also means not giving into the mistaken idea that central planning, as long as we call it something other than communism or socialism, can work."

Listen to these responses among thousands from newly freed citizens of post-communist nations:

"The editor of Romania's leading intellectual journal had a metaphor for [VOA]: 'It was as if we lived underwater and we needed reed pipes to breathe. The reeds were radios. Without them, we would have suffocated.'

"...And dissident-turned-president Vaclav Havel stopped by VOA to thank in person the Czech and Slovak service for, in his words, 'helping to bring about the peaceful revolution.' He knew every one of those broadcasters—though he'd never been to America. He knew them by name and voice—from years of listening to VOA."

When I joined VOA in the early 1980s, I wanted to guarantee that its news information services would be at the highest level of professionalism—and I wanted to give its editorials a more hardline focus—one that was openly anti-communist, pro-Western, pro-religious, pro-

specials who were upset about our aggressive editorials and features, particularly those broadcast in Poland. Allegedly, these were interrupting important "diplomatic interplay."

The truth is, however, VOA broadcasts were giving vital support to groups like Solidarity, and they were upsetting the cozy status quo arrangements between U.S. State Department representatives and communist bureaucrats. Without VOA, *Reader's Digest* (which, incidentally, has just begun publishing a Russian edition) and thousands of other such diverse vehicles for open communication, from books to magazines, to television and radio, there simply wouldn't be any free exchange of ideas in the world. And, it is arguable, there would have been no defeat of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Completing and consolidating victory means continuing to spread the word of freedom and supporting political and economic reform instead of the status quo. Here in the United States, completing and consolidating freedom's victory also means not giving in to

"...Benjamin Franklin expressed in a phrase applicable to us as individuals no less than as nations: 'Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety.'

"To build a better world we must have the courage to make a new start. We must clear away the obstacles with which human folly has recently encumbered our path and release the creative energy of individuals. We must create conditions favorable to progress rather than 'planning progress.'

"It is not those who cry for more 'planning' who show the necessary courage, nor those who preach a 'New Order'... It is, indeed, those who cry loudest for a planned economy who are most completely under the sway of ideas that have created... and most of the evils from which we suffer."

"The guiding principle in any attempt to create a world of free men must be this: a policy of freedom for the individual is the only truly progressive policy." ▲

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