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How Margaret Thatcher Helped to End the Cold War

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When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, many in the West had come to believe that the Cold War could not and should not be won, that anti-Communism was morally wrong, and that the future lay in détente between the superpowers and the evolution of democracy into ever-deepening state socialism. By the time she left office, the Berlin Wall had fallen and Eastern Europe was liberated. A year later, the Soviet Union crumbled into the dustbin of history. Democracy and freedom were on the advance.

Prime Minister Thatcher's contributions to this victory were profound. Together with the firm vision of her close friend President Ronald Reagan, the inspiration of Pope John Paul II, and the determination of the oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe and Russia, her courage and leadership were instrumental to democracy's defeat of Communism.

Even before 1979, the Soviet Union derisively described her as the Iron Lady. She proved that, for once, the Communists spoke the truth, turning what was intended as an insult into an honor hailed around the world. As the liberated nations and their friends and allies commemorate the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, her part in this great victory must be remembered with gratitude.

Margaret Thatcher's Vision of "A Real Détente." Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party in February 1975. In a major speech to the Chelsea Conservative Association that July, she set out her vision for British foreign policy and the unity of the West. She expressed her support for

"a real détente" but pointed out that when Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, lectured his population on peaceful co-existence, he proclaimed that this "in no way implies the possibility of relaxing the ideological struggle."

Even more vitally, as Thatcher put it, "throughout this decade of détente, the armed forces of the Soviet Union have increased, are increasing, and show no signs of diminishing." A real détente would be one that "Russia supports in actions as well as words." Instead, the U.S.S.R. was arming while simultaneously deepening its domestic repression. Moscow's behavior had consequences for the policy of the West, because "a nation that denies those freedoms to its own people will have few scruples in denying them to others." Free Europe needed to stand united, field a military strong enough to deter aggression, and work—through NATO—with the United States if it was to prevail in its common purpose: the "pursuit and preservation of liberty."¹

These were the themes that dominated Thatcher's public life, both in opposition and in government, for the next 15 years. She insisted on speaking the truth about the Soviet Union. This was deeply unpopular in many circles, both at

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home and abroad, where her honesty was regarded as dangerous to the effort to develop closer relations with the U.S.S.R. But Thatcher, in keeping with the conviction she had held since her youth, believed that what was truly dangerous was to indulge the worship of the state that had created a tyranny in the U.S.S.R. and a suffocating socialism in Britain itself.

She coupled this clarity of moral vision with a belief in the essential unity of the West, including the U.S., Britain, and Western Europe, and of the vital importance of Western armed strength to peace and security. But her vision was not one of eternal stalemate. Rather, precisely because she believed that the U.S.S.R.'s foundations were faulty, she argued that, if it was contained by the West's arms and confronted by its superior, free economies and the reality of its liberties, the Communist state would eventually be forced to recognize its own failure.

Courage and Leadership, at Home and Abroad. Thatcher took office after the Conservative Party won a smashing victory in the May 1979 general election. The challenges she faced were vast, though Ronald Reagan's 1980 U.S. electoral victory was a vital source of strength. Reagan had first met Thatcher in 1975, and both leaders had immediately recognized that they shared fundamental principles. As leaders of great and independent nations they acted not in union but in concert, ultimately agreeing on the major challenges of the 1980s.

The first such challenge was to redress the strategic balance between the Soviet Union and the West. On December 12, 1979, the NATO alliance decided to deploy cruise and Pershing II missiles in Western Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20 mobile system. This decision was unpopular with many, and it led to years of contentious protests. But with Thatcher's full and courageous support, the deployment proceeded. Eight years later, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which marked the beginning of the end of the Cold War in Europe and vindicated Thatcher's belief in NATO, in the Anglo-American alliance, and in the importance of peace through strength.

The second challenge was to convince democracy's enemies throughout the world that the West had recovered its will not just to defend itself but to resist aggression with force. When in 1982 an authoritarian Argentine junta invaded the Falkland Islands, Thatcher immediately recognized that Britain had to fight back. To surrender the Falklands would be to give in to aggression and to encourage it around the world. Under her inspiring leadership, Britain retook the Islands. This decisive action stunned the Soviets, who never believed the British would resist, and brought democracy to Argentina by destroying the reputation of the junta. The great wave of democratization around the world in the 1980s was launched in part by Thatcher's actions during the Falkland crisis.

The third challenge was to restore economic liberty in the West and to break the perception that Western societies were slowly and inevitably moving toward sluggish bureaucratic socialism. As long as this perception persisted, the Soviet Union could believe that to triumph, it needed only to endure. This problem was especially acute in Britain, which had acquired a terrible reputation as a declining, ungovernable nation dominated by far-left trade unions. By defeating the effort of the coal miners union to bring the nation to its knees in 1984–85 and by launching a far-reaching program of denationalization, she rewrote the narrative of British decline and led the Western economic revival of the 1980s that destroyed the Soviets' last hope.

"I Spotted Him": Thatcher's Vision Vindicated. Like Reagan's, Thatcher's vision was one of hope. Precisely because of her faith in the West, she believed that the Cold War could be won and that the Soviet Union would not last forever—the inhumanity of its system would be its downfall. Even more eagerly than Reagan, she looked for a Soviet leader who recognized that the Soviet system, if confronted by a strong and united West, could never win. She found him in Mikhail Gorbachev. As she wrote:

I always believed that our western system would ultimately triumph, if we did not throw

1. Margaret Thatcher, "Speech to Chelsea Conservative Association (Attacking Detente)," Margaret Thatcher Foundation, July 26, 1975, at <http://www.margarethatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=102750> (September 23, 2009).

our advantages away, because it rested on the unique, almost limitless, creativity and vitality of individuals. Even a system like that of the Soviets, which set out to crush the individual, could never totally succeed in doing so.... This also implied that at some time the right individual could challenge even the system which he had used to attain power.... That is why those who subsequently considered that I was led astray from my original approach to the Soviet Union because I was dazzled by Mr Gorbachev were wrong. I spotted him because I was searching for someone like him.²

Gorbachev wanted to reform the Communist system, not end it. But as Thatcher and Reagan recognized, once Communism began to liberalize, it was doomed. Their faith in liberty brought strength to the West, destruction to the totalitarians, and a peaceful victory in the Cold War.

The Iron Lady. The Soviet leaders recognized Margaret Thatcher as a worthy opponent because she spoke the truth about them. They were right to

do so, and their enmity honored her, as it honored all the Western leaders and Eastern dissidents who resisted Communism. But the steadfastness of the dissidents had to be matched with courage and leadership in the West. It was liberty's fortune that, in Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the world found leaders who shared a vital faith in freedom.

The West must remember how Margaret Thatcher helped to end the Cold War, for her principles are as vital now as they were thirty years ago:

- Seek peace through strength,
- Resist aggression without fear, and
- Believe that any state that limits freedom destroys its own future.

Those are the lessons the West must learn from the Iron Lady.

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2. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (HarperCollins, 1993), p. 452.