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Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism

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Abstract: *“The fall of the [Soviet] empire,” former Czech president Vaclav Havel wrote, “is an event on the same scale of historical importance as the fall of the Roman Empire.” It is true that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev repudiated the Brezhnev Doctrine—that the Soviet Union will use force if necessary to ensure that a socialist state remains socialist—and in so doing undercut the Communist leaders and regimes of Eastern and Central Europe in the critical year of 1989. But why did Gorbachev abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine? One Western leader above all others forced the Soviets to give up the Brezhnev Doctrine and abandon the arms race, brought down the Berlin Wall, and ended the Cold War at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield: President Ronald Reagan.*

Soviet Communism, the dark tyranny that controlled nearly 40 nations and was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 100 million victims during the 20th century, suddenly collapsed 20 years ago without a shot being fired.

In just two years—from 1989 to 1991—the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and Marxism–Leninism was dumped unceremoniously on the ash heap of history. There was dancing in the street and champagne toasts on top of the Brandenburg Gate. And then most of the world got on with living without asking:

- Why did Communism collapse so quickly?
- Why did a totalitarian system that appeared to be so militarily and economically strong disappear almost overnight?

Talking Points

- One Western leader above all others forced the Soviets to give up the Brezhnev Doctrine and abandon the arms race, brought down the Berlin Wall, and ended the Cold War at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield: President Ronald Reagan.
- From his first week in office, President Reagan went on the offensive against the Soviet Union.
- Based on intelligence reports and his own analysis, the President concluded that Communism was cracking and ready to crumble. He took personal control of the new victory strategy.
- President Reagan forced the Soviet Union to abandon its goal of world socialization by challenging the Soviet regime’s legitimacy, by regaining superiority in the arms race, and by using human rights as a weapon as powerful as any in the U.S. or Soviet arsenal.

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- What role did Western strategy and leadership play in the fall—or was it all due, as the Communists might put it, to a correlation of objective forces?

A decade ago, I edited a collection of essays by some of the world's leading authorities on Communism who suggested that a wide range of forces—political, economic, strategic, and religious—along with the leadership of principled statesmen and brave dissidents brought about the collapse of Soviet Communism.

In my essay, I suggested that when Communist leaders in Eastern and Central Europe admitted they no longer believed in Communism, they dissolved the glue of ideology that had maintained their façade of power and authority.

I pointed out that the Communists failed, literally, to deliver the goods to the people. They promised bread but produced food shortages and rationing—except for Party members and the *nomenklatura*.

In this information age, the Communists could not stop the mass media from sustaining and spreading the desire for freedom among the captive peoples.

They promised the people land but delivered them into collectives. They promised peace but sent young men off to die in foreign wars in distant lands.

In this information age, I wrote, the Communists could not stop the mass media from sustaining and spreading the desire for freedom among the captive peoples. Far from being an impregnable fortress, Eastern and Central Europe was a Potemkin village easily penetrated by electronic messages of democracy and capitalism from the West.

Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former national security adviser to President Carter, argued that Marxism–Leninism was an alien doctrine imposed by an imperial power culturally repugnant to the dominated peoples of Eastern and Central Europe. Disaffection was strongest in the cluster of states with the deepest cultural ties with Western Europe—East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary.

Only the sustained use of force, credible terror, and a sense of isolation...could keep the Communist system from collapsing.

Harvard Professor of History Richard Pipes said there were incidental causes of the Soviet Union's dissolution like the invasion of Afghanistan, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the vacillating personality of Mikhail Gorbachev. And there were more profound levels of causation like economic stagnation, the aspiration of national identities, and intellectual dissent. But the decisive catalyst, Pipes said, was the very nature of Communism, which was at one and the same time utopian and coercive.

The political philosopher Michael Novak discussed the long-term effect of atheism—a *sine qua non* of Communism—on the morale of people and their economic performance. Communism, he said, set out to destroy the “human capital” on which a free economy and a polity are based and in so doing sowed the seeds of its own destruction.

Soviet economics, economist Andrzej Brzeski wrote, was fatally flawed from the beginning. Replacing private property rights with state ownership gave rise to a huge class of functionaries committed only to preserving their domains and pleasing their political bosses.

Only the sustained use of force, credible terror, and a sense of isolation, Brzeski wrote, could keep the Communist system from collapsing.

One Leader Above All Others

“The fall of the [Soviet] empire,” former Czech president Vaclav Havel wrote, “is an event on the same scale of historical importance as the fall of the Roman Empire.” And yet what do many historians say about the collapse of Soviet Communism?

That it was inevitable. That it happened in spite of and not because of President Truman's historic policy of containment and President Reagan's prudential policy of peace through strength. And the most misleading and untrue of all the conclusions: That the real hero of the Cold War was Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

It is true that Gorbachev publicly repudiated the Brezhnev Doctrine—that the Soviet Union will use force if necessary to ensure that a socialist state remains socialist—and in so doing undercut the Communist leaders and regimes of Eastern and Central Europe in the critical year of 1989. But *why* did Gorbachev abandon the Brezhnev Doctrine?

The one leader responsible more than any other for leading the West to victory in the Cold War is President Ronald Reagan.

We must understand: He was not a liberal democrat but a modern Leninist who was trying to use *glasnost* and *perestroika* to preserve a one-party state with himself as the unelected head. Gorbachev discarded the Brezhnev Doctrine and adopted the Sinatra Doctrine—let the satellite states of Eastern and Central Europe practice Communism their way—for two reasons:

- The Soviet Union no longer possessed in 1989 the military might that it had in 1956 when it brutally suppressed the Hungarian Revolution or in 1968 when it snuffed out the Prague Spring.
- The Soviet Union desperately needed the trade and technology of the West to avoid economic collapse that it knew it would not obtain if it enforced the Brezhnev Doctrine.

There is one Western leader above all others who forced the Soviets to give up the Brezhnev Doctrine and abandon the arms race, who brought down the Berlin Wall, and who ended the Cold War at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield. The one leader responsible more than any other for leading the West to victory in the Cold War is President Ronald Reagan.

“We Win and They Lose”

In 1980, after 35 years of containment, the Cold War seemed to be going poorly for the West. From martial law in Poland and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua and Communist rule in Mozambique and Angola, Marxism–Leninism was on the march.

The Atlantic alliance was seriously strained, some said broken. The Soviets had deployed SS-20s

armed with nuclear warheads and aimed at major European cities. Western European governments wavered in their resolve to counter the Soviets, even on their own soil.

America and the West clearly needed a new strategy. And one was forthcoming, but not from an Ivy League university professor or a Washington think tank analyst or the editor of *The New York Times* but from a one-time film actor and governor.

In January 1977, four years before he was sworn in as the 40th President of the United States, Ronald Reagan told a visitor that he had been thinking about the Cold War and he had a solution: “We win and they lose.”

For 40 years, the United States and the West had been following a policy of containment, *détente*, accommodation. Ronald Reagan decided it was time to stop playing for a tie and seek victory in the Cold War.

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From his first week in office, President Reagan went on the offensive against the Soviet Union. In his first presidential news conference, Reagan denounced the Soviet leadership as still dedicated to “world revolution and a one-world Socialist–Communist state.”

The establishment was appalled at what it called saber-rattling and uninformed analysis. Harvard intellectuals like Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and John Kenneth Galbraith insisted that the Soviet Union was economically strong and militarily powerful—the only responsible policy was a continuation of *détente* leading at some future time to convergence between Communism and democracy.

Reagan did not agree. Based on intelligence reports and his own analysis, the President concluded that Communism was cracking and ready to crumble. He took personal control of the new victory strategy, chairing 57 meetings of the

National Security Council in his first year in the White House.

The President was determined to reassure those who had lived behind the Iron Curtain for nearly 40 years that they had not been forgotten and that a new day of freedom would soon dawn for them. He never tired, for example, of praising the Hungarian people for their courageous stand for freedom and against tyranny in 1956. In October 1981, on the 25th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, he said that the Freedom Fighters' example had given "new strength" to America's commitment to freedom and justice for all people. In his address to the British Parliament in 1982, Reagan described how "man's instinctive desire for freedom and self-determination" surfaces again and again as shown in Hungary in 1956.

He first went public with his Cold War analysis in May 1982 when he declared in a speech at his alma mater that the Soviet empire was "faltering because rigid centralized control has destroyed incentives for innovation, efficiency, and individual achievement."

Reagan directed his national security team to come up with the necessary tactics to implement his victory strategy.

A month later, he told the British Parliament at Westminster that the Soviet Union was gripped by a "great revolutionary crisis" and that a "global campaign for freedom" would ultimately prevail. In memorable language, he predicted that "the march of freedom and democracy...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."

Reagan directed his national security team to come up with the necessary tactics to implement his victory strategy. The result was a series of top-secret national security decision directives (NSDDs).

- NSDD-32 declared that the United States would seek to "neutralize" Soviet control over Eastern and Central Europe and authorized the use of covert action and other means to

support anti-Soviet groups in the region, especially in Poland.

- NSDD-66 stated that it would be U.S. policy to disrupt the Soviet economy by attacking a "strategic triad" of critical resources—financial credits, high technology, and natural gas. The directive was tantamount to a "secret declaration of economic war on the Soviet Union."
- NSDD-75 stated that the U.S. would no longer coexist with the Soviet system but would seek to change it fundamentally. America intended to roll back Soviet influence at every opportunity.

"Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall!"

A subset of the Reagan strategy was U.S. support of pro-freedom forces in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. A key decision was to supply Stinger ground-to-air missiles to the mujahideen in Afghanistan, who used them to shoot down the Soviet helicopters that had kept them on the defensive for years.

The year 1983 was a critical one for President Reagan and the course of the Cold War. In March, he told a group of evangelical ministers that the Soviets "are the focus of evil in this modern world" and the masters of "an evil empire."

The same month, the President announced that development and deployment of a comprehensive anti-ballistic missile system would be his top defense priority. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was called "Star Wars" by liberal detractors, but Soviet leader Yuri Andropov took SDI very seriously, calling it a "strike weapon" and a preparation for a U.S. nuclear attack.

Moscow's intense opposition to SDI showed that Soviet scientists regarded the initiative not as a pipe dream but as a technological feat they could not match. A decade later, the general who headed the department of strategic analysis in the Soviet Ministry of Defense revealed what he had told the Politburo in 1983: "Not only could we not defeat SDI, SDI defeated all our possible countermeasures."

In October 1983, Reagan dispatched 2,000 American troops, along with military units from six Caribbean states, to the island of Grenada to oust a Marxist regime that had seized power. It was the

first time in nearly 40 years of the Cold War that America had acted to restore democracy to a Communist country. The Brezhnev Doctrine was successfully challenged, anticipating Gorbachev's abandonment of it six years later.

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strength, forced Gorbachev over the course of four summit meetings to concede that the Soviet Union could not win an arms race but had to sue for peace.

In addition to the summits, two events stand out in the second half of the Reagan presidency.

- In June 1987, Reagan stood before the Brandenburg Gate and challenged the Soviet leader: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" No Western leader had ever before dared to issue such a direct challenge.
- In the spring of 1988, President Reagan traveled to Moscow and beneath a gigantic white bust of Lenin at Moscow State University delivered an eloquent address on the blessings of democracy, individual freedom, and free enterprise. He quoted the beloved Russian poet Pushkin: "It's time, my friend, it's time." It was clear the President meant it was time for a free Russia.

The following year, the Berlin Wall came tumbling down and Communism collapsed in Eastern and Central Europe. A pivotal event of "The Year of Miracles" came in September when Hungary opened its borders with Austria for more than 13,000 East Germans—the first breaching of the once-impregnable Berlin Wall.

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superiority in the arms race, and by using human rights as a weapon as powerful as any in the U.S. or Soviet arsenal.

"We...Owe Him Our Liberty"

The crucial role of leadership in any war, including a cold one, is demonstrated by the example of Ronald Reagan.

The Soviet dissident Natan Sharansky was in an eight-by-ten foot cell in a Siberian prison in early 1983 when his Soviet jailers permitted him to read the latest issue of *Pravda*, the official Communist Party newspaper.

Splashed across the front page, Sharansky recalled, was a condemnation of Reagan for calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire." Tapping on the walls and talking through toilets, political prisoners spread the word of Reagan's "provocation." The dissidents were ecstatic. Finally, Sharansky wrote, the leader of the free world had spoken the truth—a truth that burned inside the heart of each and every one of us.

The crucial role of leadership in any war, including a cold one, is demonstrated by the example of Ronald Reagan.

Lech Walesa, the founder of the Solidarity movement that brought down Communism in Poland and prepared the way for the end of Communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe, put his feelings about Reagan simply: "We in Poland...owe him our liberty."

So too do the many millions who lived behind the Iron Curtain and were caught up in one of the longest conflicts in history—the Cold War—which, because of leaders like Ronald Reagan, ended in victory for the forces of freedom.

—Lee Edwards, Ph.D., is Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought at The Heritage Foundation and Chairman of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. He delivered these remarks at a meeting of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest.