

The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan

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This particular book on Ronald Reagan grew out of a previous book... called the *Rise of the Vulcans*, the history of George W. Bush's war cabinet. During the research of that book I was looking at the careers of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld and found that they had taken part during the 1980s in some secret exercises the U.S. government was doing – although nobody knew about it at the time – about what would happen in the event of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Rumsfeld and Cheney were the heads of two government teams that would fly around the country to practice what would happen if Washington itself was targeted for a nuclear attack, and who would run the country. It got me to thinking about the Reagan administration in the '80s and about what the president was thinking.

I spent about two or three years going through the archives and doing interviews about the Reagan years. What I came out with was quite different from what I originally started with. It turns out that when you look at the archives for the entire second term of his presidency and for four or five years of internal debates within the Reagan administration, that although Reagan is perceived as a great hawk in dealing with the Soviet Union – and he took office with very strong policies in dealing with the Soviet Union – in his second term he was very different from the way he is imagined.

So this book is about Reagan's second term, his dealings with Gorbachev and the fact that the reality of those years is very different from the way people think about Ronald Reagan. A lot of that (perception) is Reagan as a symbol or Reagan in his early years, but not for four of the eight years of his presidency. Those years are almost lost to us now because people react in one way or another to Ronald Reagan as a symbol. I don't have to tell you that he is very much a hero to conservatives and the opposite to liberals. In those last four years of his presidency, however, he was regularly under attack from American conservatives who did not like his diplomacy with the Soviet Union.

I think a representative column was from George Will, a column that twenty years later Will told me was wrong. In '87 or '88 he wrote, "Four years ago, many people considered Reagan a keeper of the Cold War flame – time flies." The contrast to Reagan is from more traditional foreign policy figures. One starting point, I think, is to take Richard Nixon, who visited Moscow in 1986 and met Mikhail Gorbachev, who at that time had been the Soviet leader for about a year.

He recorded his impressions. Nixon liked to compare Soviet leaders, and he found that they were essentially the same. So the quote was, "Brezhnev used a meat axe in his negotiations; Gorbachev uses a stiletto. But beyond the velvet glove he always wears, there is a steel fist." That was the common perception of Gorbachev – that he was charismatic but that Soviet foreign policy was going to be the same. In the same period, Henry Kissinger wrote that Gorbachev and his associates seemed less constrained by the past and more assertive with respect to Soviet power.

In contrast to that Reagan, who was always a cheery and optimistic sort, met Gorbachev and decided that he was, in fact, different from the way he imagined Soviet leaders; that he was an agent for change and represented something different for Soviet foreign policy. They had four summits between '84 and '88 and one more after the election of 1988 when George Bush had just been elected. There was a three-way summit with Reagan, Bush and Gorbachev.

The first one was kind of testing each other out; the second, in 1986, was when they began to talk about the possibility of dramatically reducing the American and Soviet arsenal of missiles and nuclear weapons. They do form some kind of bond – Gorbachev always, in his memoirs, gives great credit to Reagan and that's not just in retrospect. The records show that Gorbachev went back to Moscow in 1986 with a dramatically different view of Reagan than he had the first time.

Having said that, this bond that they formed when they began to do business with each other didn't make the meetings all that easy because Gorbachev was sort of a conventional debater. He would go into these meetings with an agenda; he would have five or six points and would try to stick to the agenda but Reagan was anything but conventional. In these meetings, leaders would come in and as they started with their agenda Reagan would start to tell stories and jokes. He had an endless supply of anti-communist jokes. People would come in and sit down and get ready to talk about the finer points of arms control and Reagan would look at them and say, "What are the four things wrong with Soviet agriculture?" A person would be dumbfounded and then he would

say, “Spring, summer, fall and winter.” He had a joke about someone in Moscow trying to arrange for a plumber and the plumber would say, “I can’t come until 2012,” and Reagan would say, “What was the day, what was the time. Why? Because I’m getting the car fixed in the morning.”

In some ways, Reagan drove Gorbachev nuts. These meetings they had would not be conclusive but at the end of these meetings they would come out and Reagan would be taking a much more sympathetic view towards the Soviet Union back in Washington than others might have liked. The line at the time in Washington was that Reagan was overly enamored of Gorbachev and was too credulous towards Gorbachev.

The real internal debates in Washington during this period are two: One, just who is Gorbachev? What’s he all about? One line of argument was he was really just a new face with the same old policies and essentially that the Soviet Union was trying to reassert its military power. Inside the United States government the leading proponent of this point of view, very sincere with lots to back it up but turned out to be wrong, was the CIA’s leading Soviet expert whose name was Robert Gates, the current Defense Secretary. Outside it was Nixon, Kissinger and all of them were writing don’t get too enamored with Gorbachev. The other point of view was represented by Reagan and Shultz and people around them. So, that’s just the first question.

The second issue is nuclear weapons and missiles. Reagan actually comes back from the 1986 meeting in Iceland and begins to ask the Pentagon and the National Security apparatus what the United States can do to dramatically cut back its reliance on nuclear weapons? U.S. officials don’t like that so there was tremendous mistrust of Reagan from within the bureaucracies. Again, this is all contrary to the image that everybody has of Reagan, but it shows up over and over again in the files and the bellwether of the mistrust of Reagan that he might be taken in by Gorbachev.

I’ve tried to chronicle in the book Reagan’s unusual friendship with a woman by the name of Suzanne Massie. Suzanne Massie was an author; she co-wrote a book, which later became a movie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*. She loved Russian culture; that was her thing. She was interested in art and literature and in 1984 the National Security Council brought her in to meet with Reagan because the National Security Advisor thought that Reagan was too hawkish in dealing with the Soviet Union and he needed a fuller picture of Soviet life.

Reagan takes a liking to this woman and keeps on inviting her back just to talk about Russian life. They shared an interest in religion in the Soviet Union and Reagan sends a couple of messages to the Soviet Union through her – this is a way of circumventing the bureaucracies and Reagan liked to use informal advisors. They told their people in Moscow to send messages back to Reagan in the Oval Office through Suzanne Massie. What makes her interesting is an indication of how Reagan changes is that by 1987 the National Security Council – the same institution that brought this woman in in the first place – now has different people and starts sending internal memos that I found in the archives that say “keep this woman away from the President because she seems to be giving Moscow’s point of view.” One person said, “Maybe she’s a Soviet agent,” but there’s not the slightest evidence of that. It really tells you that this woman doesn’t change; she’s a constant, her views don’t change. But Reagan’s approach to the Soviet Union changes under Gorbachev.

During this same period in 1987, Reagan has a secret meeting with Richard Nixon. Nixon and Reagan had a long and complicated relationship. Reagan had supported Nixon throughout his presidency right through to the end in Watergate. Then you get to the late ‘70s – and maybe some of you saw *Frost-Nixon*, the movie or play. By the late ‘70s Nixon is trying to rehabilitate himself and sending little notes to Reagan with advice. By the late ‘80s Nixon really represents the sort of conventional view of the Cold War. There’s nothing you can do about the Soviet Union’s fears – it’s permanent. The Cold War is permanent and he begins to criticize the arms control negotiations that Reagan is leading.

This is a dramatic role reversal because during this period if you’re going to classify people as doves and hawks Reagan is the dove and Nixon is the hawk. You look at these memos and you get Nixon telling Reagan, “don’t trust the Soviets; the bear is never going to change.” In this one secret meeting Nixon gets brought to the White House – snuck into the White House – he was brought in by helicopter, they diverted the press and Nixon goes back into the place upstairs in the White House where he hadn’t been since the day he resigned. Nixon recorded his own memo of this meeting which I found hadn’t been published before.

He looks around, he sits down with Reagan and his aides and says, “I hope this meeting isn’t taped” and tries to make awkward jokes about taping in the White House. But the serious part of it is that Reagan asks Nixon for his support in dealing with Gorbachev and Nixon won’t give it to

him. The view of Gorbachev is one part and the other is what to do about America's nuclear power and on both of those you get two points of view within the government. Reagan to my surprise is really of the point of view that Gorbachev represents something different and that it's time for a change in American policy towards the Soviet Union.

In general, my judgment of Reagan is different from the usual one and that goes for both conservatives and liberals. I think there's a stereotype – they're opposing ones but they come down to the same thing. Among conservatives, Reagan is a man of simple virtues; to liberals he was a dunce or he was stupid or something. I don't find any of that convincing and when you look at the evidence you see that he was very shrewd; had all kinds of good instincts. You can't just dismiss him as either an actor or a one-line person.

He very rarely got caught doing something that was Machiavellian, but sometimes you could see that he was deflecting people and deflecting controversy through his jokes. There really was a sense of tactics and a strategy there. And he got Gorbachev right where many other people in Washington could not. Does this matter? It certainly did because by dealing with the Soviet Union in the way that he did he gave Gorbachev the time to proceed with his reforms; that is, Gorbachev in Moscow had resistance of his own.

A more conventional approach in dealing with Gorbachev – a more aloof approach – would have preserved the same Soviet policies. Reagan really deprived Gorbachev of this overwhelming sense of the United States and the West as an enemy and you begin to see Gorbachev change and as he does it undermines the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. When Reagan gives his speech, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," the key words and the real debate was whether he should use the words "Mr. Gorbachev." Because when he gave that speech the leader of East Germany, Erich Honecker, was tremendously threatened because it was a way of saying that it wasn't really East Germany's wall anyway – that the East German government existed at the sufferance of the Soviet Union. After the speech, a few days later, Honecker began sending officials to ask if this was a change in American policy, why didn't we say "Mr. Honecker, tear down this wall?"

What are the implications today? What should we think today of these debates and the events of Reagan's second term? Well, the question of how the Cold War ended, I think, is fundamental to debates on foreign policy today. We've just been through the George W. Bush administration

which seemed to believe, I'm told, that after the fall of Saddam Hussein Iraq would behave very much the way Czechoslovakia or Hungary did at the end of the Cold War. If you look at the events at the end of the Cold War the crucial moments are in 1989 when you get the Berlin Wall coming down and Gorbachev does not intervene. During (research for) this book, I talked to the guy who was then the leader of East Germany, Honecker's successor, who said that on the night the Berlin Wall came down they tried to call Gorbachev. Gorbachev wouldn't come to the phone. This guy had a call from the Soviet Ambassador to East Germany saying, "What are you doing? Send a telegram immediately to Moscow to Gorbachev to explain how he could allow this to happen." Krenze sat and wrote his telegram and a couple of hours later the ambassador who clearly represented the old guard in the Soviet Union called him back and said, "On behalf of Mikhail Gorbachev, congratulations."

The crucial fact is that Gorbachev didn't intervene. Why didn't he intervene? What was he thinking at that time. He wasn't thinking, "Oh, my gosh, the United States has a strategic defense initiative." That's not what motivated him then. What motivated him was that he wanted a completely new relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. It was Reagan's second term and a lot of the work of the summit contributed to that and created the climate for that.

The second, I think, is that the Reagan diplomacy shows us today that high-level diplomacy really has impact if you chose the right time; the right leader. Reagan did not negotiate. His joke was "I keep trying to negotiate with the Soviet leaders and they keep dying on me." During Reagan's first term, there was first Brezhnev and then two other Soviet leaders, Andropov and Chernenko, who died very quickly but Reagan chose the time as soon as Gorbachev took office and in 1985 Reagan sent him a letter and thus begins these very important negotiations.

A third implication, I think, and this applies to the Obama administration almost in reverse, is that you need to distinguish between rhetoric and policies. As a matter of substance and policy you couldn't get two people more different it seems than Ronald Reagan and Obama but the real question is how much does the policy match up to the rhetoric? So even if Reagan is saying, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," he's pursuing policies with the Soviet Union; he's pursuing new arms control agreements over resistance in Washington with the Soviet Union.

Today it's a fair question with Obama – you've got rhetoric of change, you have the appearance of change, but we're sending new troops to Afghanistan, and it's hard for me to really judge what Obama is doing in Iraq; how dramatically it's different from the end of the Bush administration.

It's a fair question and I don't know the answer but it's certainly worth watching how different Obama's policies are going to be from the rhetoric. I guess the most relevant modern day implication I would mention would be nuclear weapons. In the 1980s you had a movement to cut back on or abolish nuclear weapons. Then you get to the end of the Cold War and you have a new drive to do this, and this movement to abolish nuclear weapons is actually led by George Schultz, Reagan's Secretary of State, along with some leaders such as William Perry who was Bill Clinton's Defense Secretary. So the idea of possibly abolishing nuclear weapons is again on the agenda in a way that is an echo of the Reagan administration.

Let me stop there and I'd be delighted to answer your questions.

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