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The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism

Paul Kengor, Ph.D.

LEE EDWARDS, Ph.D.: When Ronald Reagan died on June 5, 2004, the highly respected presidential historian Michael Beschloss recalled that after Franklin Delano Roosevelt died in 1945, *The New York Times* predicted that “men will thank God on their knees a hundred years from now that Roosevelt had been president to fight Hitler and Tojo.” It is not too much to suggest, said Professor Beschloss, that Americans would give similar thanks that they twice elected Ronald Reagan, a President who saw the chance to end the Cold War in his own time.

Not everyone agreed with Professor Beschloss’s tribute to Reagan, among them the historian C. Vann Woodward, who before his own death in 1999 had once said of Iran–Contra that he knew of “nothing comparable with this magnitude of irresponsibility and incompetence.” CBS’s Morley Safer said of the late President, “I don’t think history has any reason to be kind to him.”

Well, fortunately for history, Mr. Safer’s not writing it. Brilliant young scholars like Paul Kengor, our guest speaker today, are. Dr. Kengor is an associate professor of political science at Grove City College, the author of two best-selling books, *God and Ronald Reagan* and *God and George W. Bush*. But I happen to know that foreign policy is Paul’s passion, and I think he has written his finest work in *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*.

I’ve studied and written about Ronald Reagan for 40 years, and yet on nearly every page of *The Crusader* I learn something new about Reagan’s lifetime crusade

Talking Points

- As early as 1950, Ronald Reagan was committed to ending the Cold War and liberating the people of the Soviet empire in the captive nations.
- In 1980, there were 56 democracies in the world; by 1990, there were 76; by 1991, there were 91; by 1994, there were 114: a doubling of democracies between the time that Ronald Reagan was elected and 1994.
- It had been Ronald Reagan’s primary intention to break up the Soviet Union; it had not been Gorbachev’s. Reagan got exactly what he wanted; Gorbachev did not get what he wanted. Nonetheless, they ended the Cold War peacefully.
- With confidence and a can-do attitude, Ronald Reagan set out to right the evil of Soviet Communism. The Cold War ended in victory, with not a missile fired.

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against Communism; about his eloquent leadership against the attempted Communist takeover of Hollywood's trade unions after World War II; about his insightful analysis of the aims and weaknesses of the Soviet Union before he entered the White House; about his understanding that Poland could be the wedge that knocked apart the evil empire, and of his close relationship with Pope John Paul II—I had no idea until I read Paul's book that the President and the Pope had met at least seven times; I think that's a new fact that is not generally known—about the central importance of National Security Decision Directive 75 that outlined an American strategy to win the Cold War; about the deep-rooted anger and growing fear within the Kremlin about the Strategic Defense Initiative and other Reagan initiatives which ultimately forced the Soviets to abandon the arms race and end the Cold War at the bargaining table and not on the battlefield.

In *The Crusader*, Paul Kengor skillfully uses the unusual access he had to documents in the Reagan Presidential Library and the archives in the Kremlin to make a most convincing case that it was Ronald Reagan, more than any other world leader, who brought down the Soviet Union and deposited it on the ash heap of history.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the author of this riveting and most important work, Dr. Paul Kengor.

—Lee Edwards, Ph.D., is Distinguished Fellow in Conservative Thought in the B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies at The Heritage Foundation. He is also an adjunct professor of politics at Catholic University of America and chairman of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation.

PAUL KENGOR: I remember sitting in a coffee shop in Grove City almost ten years ago. I was trying to figure out a way to get funding to do research to do this book, to go to the Reagan Library and do the traveling that I needed to do. Lee gave me some suggestions, one of which was a fellow from Pittsburgh named B. Kenneth Simon, who is the founder of the Simon Center here at The Heritage Foundation. Ken was the first to provide a grant for this book. So there are a number of people here at Her-

itage that I think are at least partly responsible for me even starting this in the first place. Thank you.

I'm going to start today with a story that I used to start the book. Stepping out of his house on the morning of August 2, 1928, Ronald "Dutch" Reagan was expecting another scorcher. He walked across the street to the Graybills' house, Ed Graybill, who owned the beach at Lowell Park in Illinois. He would get a ride to Lowell Park to the beach every day with Mr. Graybill.

It was another humid-beyond-any-reasonable-expectation day in the Midwest in Illinois in August. So on this day, a lot of people in Dixon did what they always do in the summer and headed off to Lowell Beach to cool off in the water. On afternoons like that, the person watching over them was Ronald "Dutch" Reagan, this 17-year-old lifeguard. This was a particularly dreadful day; it felt like the sun would never set. Fortunately, it finally did after he spent about 12 hours at the beach. Reagan worked at the beach about 12 hours a day, seven days a week, all summer long for seven consecutive summers.

On this day, after hours on the beach, after the sun had set, a party of four, two boys and two girls, were looking to have some fun. They surreptitiously slipped into their bathing suits downshore and made their way down toward the beach area. Among them was a young man named James Raider from Dixon who wasn't the proficient swimmer that he thought he was.

About 9:30 pm, Ronald "Dutch" Reagan and Mr. Graybill were closing up the bathhouse at the park, getting ready to go home, and they heard splashing in the water: James Raider had been sucked under. The group came running over toward Mr. Graybill and Ronald Reagan, yelling and screaming for help. Dutch Reagan sprinted to the water and dove into the darkness. There was a major struggle in the black water; the witnesses recall splashing, yelling, arms flailing in the air.

Suddenly, a mass of human appendages came in their direction: Reagan with one arm hooked under James Raider's armpit and the other arm digging as hard as he possibly could. Reagan brought Raider to shore, dragged him onto the grass, and started arti-

ficial respiration. The party was no longer in a partying mood; the sense of festiveness was now muted by a sense of horror. They watched, hoped, probably prayed, and eventually Raider responded.

Exhausted, Raider was taken back to his home, given a new lease on life, and Ronald “Dutch” Reagan just drove home with Mr. Graybill and, at some point that night, just went to bed. His parents were probably in bed when he got home.

The next morning, if his parents, Jack and Nell Reagan, asked how his day was yesterday at the breakfast table, Reagan could have said it wasn’t especially unusual. It was the second near-drowning in two weeks.

This early rescue gave Reagan one of his first tastes of notoriety; the front page of the Friday, August 3, 1928, *Dixon Evening Telegraph* carried a top-of-the-fold headline that read, “James Raider Pulled from the Jaws of Death,” about the rescue that evening made by “lifeguard Ronald ‘Dutch’ Reagan.” The newspaper informed readers that it was Reagan’s 25th save.

This was Reagan’s first page-one headline. He shared the top of the fold with a story about King George, who was reportedly enthusiastic about the Kellogg–Briand pact to outlaw war, and along with the customary story on election fraud in Chicago, which was always carried in the *Dixon Evening Telegraph*. This was the first time of many times that Dixonites could open their paper and read about Reagan’s latest heroic exploits. And the *Dixon Telegraph*—this was a small-town newspaper—would keep a running tally of Dutch Reagan’s saves.

Can-Do Willingness. So why mention this? Why am I beginning a talk on Reagan and the end of the Cold War by talking about Ronald “Dutch” “Lifeguard” Reagan? The reason is, I believe it’s not an exaggeration to draw a straight line from Reagan at the Rock River to Reagan at the White House. When Reagan was once asked as President about his favorite job ever, you would think that somebody with the resume that he had might say, “Well, I have my favorite job right now,” or maybe “a certain job in Hollywood,” or maybe “being a radio broadcaster.” He said, “My beloved lifeguarding”—that’s how he put it—“may be the best job I ever had.” For sev-

en summers, Reagan was the rock at the Rock River, and he saved the lives of 77 people from drowning.

I have students who are lifeguards, some of whom have saved people and others who never saved anybody, but Reagan worked this absolutely wretched river: dark, murky. When I took my two sons to the river about four or five years ago, I held their hands very tightly as we stood by this pier because I didn’t want them to go into that thing. Swirling, murky, debris floating down the river—I figured I’d probably never get them back. In fact, swimming there today is banned; that’s how treacherous it is.

And yet Reagan never lost a single save in those seven years. Previous lifeguards had lost people. Ed Graybill’s wife said, “We never had a basket of clothes left behind.”

The object here is not to transform Ronald Wilson Reagan into a political superhero. That’s not what I’m trying to do, nor am I trying to focus totally on these positives to the exclusion of any negatives. But these were very real rescues, and there were more. Reagan notched a number of other saves in the years ahead.

In fact, he returned the year after he graduated from Eureka College and had quit lifeguarding. His buddy was working the beach, and he asked Reagan if he would watch the beach for a few minutes. So Reagan did, and Reagan said, “Would you believe it? Somebody started drowning.” And he had to go in and save him. That was number 78.

There is evidence that he saved a couple of people from a pool in Iowa when he was there working at WHO as a radio broadcaster, and even once when he was governor when they held a reception at the governor’s pool to celebrate the end of the legislative season. A little girl fell in the water off the side of the pool, and Reagan the governor sat there and watched, started tracking in his head exactly how long she was under, and that was it: He sprinted along the side of the pool and dove in with all his clothes on. The guests were a little shocked by that.

All of this, these feats of physical daring, impacted him greatly. This formed an indelible mark on his psyche, and I think that this shaped Reagan not just as a person of immense confidence, but as a Presi-

dent of remarkable ambition, of can-do willingness. That's the point here. This really changed this man and affected him.

When he was President, they called it the "Teflon presidency" because nothing unseemly would stick to him. Walter Cronkite: "I'm amazed at this Teflon presidency! Reagan is even more popular than Roosevelt, and I never thought I'd see *anyone* that well liked. Nobody hates Reagan; it's amazing." Even the Soviet talked about his "Teflon qualities," as they put it, and Teflon coating.

I think you can ascribe this Teflon nature to his confidence as well; it was unshakable. David McCullough, the great historian, says that every President has this hidden intangible that no one really knows about going in, but it ends up being so crucial to what that President eventually does: Lincoln's "depth of soul," as McCullough put it; Truman's character. "What's essential is invisible," says McCullough. With Reagan, I think that invisible crucial trait was his confidence.

Crusading for Freedom. Let me give you some examples of how that confidence related to what he did in the Cold War. As early as 1950, Ronald Reagan was committed to ending the USSR, or at least ending the Cold War and liberating Eastern Europe, liberating the people of the Soviet empire, the so-called captive people of the captive nations. I call the book *The Crusader* because Ronald Reagan referred to it as a crusade—not a religious crusade, but a crusade for freedom, as he put it.

In fact, in 1950 he joined a group formed by General Lucius Clay called the Crusade for Freedom that was committed to that exact purpose and even made ads using his Hollywood persona to make pitches for the Crusade for Freedom. That same year, he joined another group, Dr. Fred Schwarz's Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, which was in particular motivated by the institutionalized atheism of the Soviet system.

Fifty years ago this week, in October–November 1956, what happened? The Hungarian Revolution: 10 thousand, 30 thousand Hungarians yearning for freedom, thinking that maybe under Khrushchev they can get a break. Soviet tanks rolled in and killed 10,000 to 30,000 Hungarians. Ronald Reagan at the

time was the host of "GE Theater" in Hollywood on CBS, 9:00 p.m., once a week. It ran from 1954 to 1962 and was extremely popular. In fact, it passed "I Love Lucy" within just weeks of its debut and was quickly the number one show on TV, and it remained at that top spot for a number of years.

People don't appreciate this: You don't get Reagan without Hollywood in so many ways, one of which was that Hollywood made him enormously popular. It made him a household name. In 1956 and 1957, already two out of every three American homes had a TV set, and those TV sets didn't get 120 channels; most of them in most markets got two. And you'd turn it on once a week, and there would be Ronald Reagan, introducing "GE Theater" and also acting in more of the episodes than any other person who was involved in the show.

Hungary happens in October–November 1956. Ronald Reagan a few weeks later does a "GE Theater" broadcast. When the show ended, he walked out to give his customary goodbye and plug for GE products, and then he added this: "Ladies and gentlemen, about 160 thousand Hungarian refugees have reached safety in Austria. More are expected to come. These people need food, clothes, medicine and shelter. You can help." He told his fellow Americans to send donations to the Red Cross or to the church or synagogue of their choice.

From what I can tell, this was the great communicator's first use of the TV bully pulpit on behalf of Eastern Europeans. He was committed then and there to someday, if he ever had the possibility and he ever got into power, not sitting still if something like this happened while he was President. By the way, his sympathies were shared by a priest in Krakow, Poland, named Karol Wojtyla, who one day, with Reagan, would join him in that. So he believes here that you can liberate the Soviet empire, that you can do this.

In May 1967, Ronald Reagan debated Robert F. Kennedy on national television. CBS broadcast it, and they believed it was watched by about 15 million people. It wasn't really a debate between Reagan and RFK. It was really Reagan and Kennedy against a group of about 20 incredibly rude international students. Total moral equivalency: At one point when Reagan said that the people of China

have never elected their leader, meaning Mao Tse-tung, the students laughed as if that was a ridiculous statement to make.

Reagan, in that debate in May 1967, publicly called for the removal of the Berlin Wall. That was 20 years before the speech at the Brandenburg Gate. In fact, there are about 12 examples of Reagan calling for the Berlin Wall to be torn down publicly before the Brandenburg Gate speech in June of 1987.

Courage to Do What Is Right. The “Time for Choosing” speech that Reagan gave on behalf of Goldwater was October 1964. He took excerpts from that speech and put them in his 1965 book, *Where’s the Rest of Me?* That was his first autobiography, taken from a movie line. Reagan said, in reference to the Cold War:

A policy of accommodation is appeasement, and appeasement does not give us a choice between peace and war, only between fight and surrender. We are told that the problem is too complex for a simple answer; they are wrong. There is no easy answer, but there is a simple answer. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right, and this policy of accommodation asks us to accept the greatest possible immorality. We are being asked to buy our safety from the threat of the atomic bomb by selling into permanent slavery our fellow human beings enslaved behind the Iron Curtain, to tell them to give up their hope of freedom—why? Because we are ready to make a deal with their slave masters.

In the 1970s, in Reagan’s view, this is what détente would do. It was saying the Russians have their sphere of influence; we have ours; we need to learn how to get along; we need to understand that they will always exist, that that’s the Soviet empire; we have our side, and they have their side. Reagan said that is the greatest immorality because it meant accepting the permanent subjugation of the people of Eastern Europe. He also added—again, this is 1964–1965—that a nation which opted for this kind of a course was opting for disgrace. Reagan wrote:

Alexander Hamilton warned us that a nation which can prefer disgrace to danger is pre-

pared for a master and deserves a master. Admittedly, there is a risk in any course we follow; choosing the high road cannot eliminate that risk. But should Moses have told the children of Israel to live in slavery rather than dare the wilderness? Should Christ have refused the cross? Should the patriots of Concord Bridge have refused to fire the shot heard round the world? Are we to believe that all the martyrs of history died in vain?

He wasn’t going to do that. He wanted to become President, first and foremost, for the purpose of undermining Soviet Communism.

Richard V. Allen, who became Reagan’s first National Security Adviser before Bill Clark, was there throughout 1981. He was a foreign policy adviser for Reagan in the latter 1970s. He talks about visiting Reagan in California in January 1977. Allen went there to recruit Reagan because Allen wanted to run for governor of New Jersey. They were talking about foreign policy.

Then Reagan spoke up, and he said, “You know, Dick, my idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose. What do you think of that?” Allen was taken aback by that, and instead of recruiting Reagan to do a commercial for him to run for governor, he joined Reagan’s crusade and signed onto the campaign and committed to trying to win the White House.

The next year, November 1978, Dick Allen, Ronald Reagan, Peter Hannaford, and their wives—Nancy was there as well—went to the Berlin Wall. This was Reagan’s first visit to the Berlin Wall. They watched this East German police go up with an AK-47 and poke some shoppers, make them drop their bags, open their bags: “What do you have in there?” This is just a routine shopping trip in the worker’s paradise, presumably. Reagan was outraged at this, absolutely livid, and when he saw the Berlin Wall, according to Allen, Reagan said, “We have got to find a way to knock this thing down.”

“An Era of National Renewal.” In January 1981, he finally got that chance, he believed. On January 20, 1981, in his Inaugural Address, which he wrote himself, the former Dixon lifeguard set out

a new rescue mission: America. Reagan pledged himself to “an era of national renewal.” We had to restore America to greatness. If you looked at *The New York Times* the next day, that’s what they quoted at the top of the fold: “Reagan Promises an Era of National Renewal.” The line underneath that says, “Fifty-Two American Hostages Flown to Freedom after a 444-Day Ordeal.” It couldn’t have been a better start.

Reagan, when he was being inaugurated that day, had his mother’s Bible open to II Chronicles 7:14, and his mother, Nell, had scribbled in the margin: “A wonderful verse for the healing of a nation.” That’s what he was committed to. Once he believed that America was back on track, in January 1982, he got together his new National Security Adviser, Bill Clark, and his National Security team, and he said, “Gentleman, we’ve been focusing on the economy and the domestic situation in the first year, and now is the time to roll our sleeves up and begin focusing on foreign policy.”

Here, too, was another rescue mission that many thought impossible: The former lifeguard was going to try to rescue the captive peoples behind the Soviet Union. He wanted to liberate them. He wanted to play the role of world savior.

March 1983: The “Evil Empire” Speech. Why did Reagan use such strong language, that biblical language? Everybody knew that the Soviet system took away basic civil liberties, that it was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people. We don’t know how many people were killed in the Soviet Union. I think the *Black Book of Communism* says about 25 million; it could be 40, 50, 60 million.

Those things appalled Reagan, but the other thing that appalled Reagan was this “war on religion,” as Mikhail Gorbachev put it, that the Soviets pursued. Vladimir Lenin wrote to Maxim Gorky in 1913, “There is nothing more abominable than religion.” They compared religion to venereal disease. Lenin called it a “necrophilia.” Marx, who of course had said that religion is the “opiate of the masses,” had also said in a less well-known quote, “Communism begins where atheism begins.”

Communists were brutal to all religious believers: Christians, Jews, Muslims. Solzhenitsyn talks about how nuns were put in special sections of the

Gulag with prostitutes because the Soviet deemed them, in their language, “whores to Christ.” This was an appalling place. The government wasn’t neutral on religion. They didn’t have a separation of church and state; the official position was atheism. That’s not a position of neutrality; that’s a position by the state that there is no God.

So Reagan said, “This place is evil. It’s not just bad; it’s evil.” A few days after this, he had dinner with Nancy and Stuart Spencer. Stuart Spencer was a political adviser, a political moderate, independent, very good friend of Nancy, and the three of them would often have dinner together. Spencer and Nancy were criticizing Reagan for using this language, for calling it an evil empire. Finally Reagan waved them off and said, “It is an evil empire, and it’s time to shut it down.”

Gorbachev was chosen March 11, 1985. He was 54 years old. Unlike a lot of other Reagan conservatives, I give Gorbachev a lot of credit for what happened here, but I still think there is some misunderstanding as to what exactly he intended. First and foremost, Gorbachev’s principal goal was to hold the Soviet Union together. He didn’t want a Stalinist Soviet Union, but *glasnost* and *perestroika* were all about holding it together. He also wanted the Soviet bloc, Eastern Europe, to remain a part of the Soviet Union.

Read his 1987 book, *Perestroika*, written to the West, published by Harper and Row, a best-selling book. “The goal of perestroika,” said Gorbachev, “is to make the Soviet Union richer, stronger, better; raise it to a qualitatively new level.” He almost mockingly said to Reagan, “So do not rush to toss us on the ash heap of history; the idea only makes Soviet people smile. The idea that our country is an evil empire, the October Revolution is a blunder of history, and the post-revolution period a zigzag in history, is coming apart at the seams.”

Actually, something was coming apart at the seams, but it wasn’t that. “We sincerely advise Americans, try to get rid of such an approach to our country. Nothing will come of these plans.” He was addressing that to Reagan.

Also, Gorbachev to this day speaks very highly of Vladimir Lenin for reasons that I don’t totally understand. Gorbachev was never a dictator, never

a totalitarian, and today considers himself a social democrat—in fact, he says Spain is his ideal form of government. But for some reason, he has always had this love of Lenin. Page 25, *Perestroika*:

The works of Lenin and his ideals of socialism remain for us an inexhaustible source of dialectical creative thought, theoretical wealth, and political sagacity. Lenin's very image is an undying example of lofty moral strength, all-around spiritual culture, and selfless devotion to the cause of the people and to socialism. Lenin lives on in the minds and hearts of millions of people.

With regard to the October 1917 Revolution, he said, "as perestroika continues, we again and again study Lenin's works." Gorbachev said that "the present course" on which he was embarking was a "direct sequel to the great accomplishments started by the Leninist Party in the October days of 1917."

And in case there was any confusion among professors teaching at universities in America at the time, Gorbachev issued a clarification:

There are different interpretations of perestroika in the West, including in the United States. Perestroika does not signify disenchantment with socialism; nothing could be further from the truth. Those in the West who expect us to give up socialism will be disappointed. It is high time they understood this. I want it to be clearly understood that we, the Soviet people, are for socialism. How can we agree that 1917 was a mistake? We have no reason to speak about the October Revolution and socialism in a low voice, as though ashamed of them. Our successes are immense and indisputable.

One more phrase from Gorbachev, a definitive sentence in his book *Perestroika*: "The policy of perestroika puts everything in place. We are fully restoring the principle of socialism, 'From each, according to his ability; to each, according to his needs.'" That's Marx.

What Gorbachev said in the book about the Soviet bloc was almost offensive. Speaking of Hungary in 1956, Poland in 1956, Czechoslovakia in

1968, all examples of thousands of freedom-seeking people being killed, Gorbachev said this: "Through hard and at times bitter trials, the socialist countries accumulated their experience in carrying out socialist transformations," as if the suffering they went through was necessary for the advancement of socialism. And the Soviet bloc today, in the 1980s, according to Gorbachev: "Now we can safely state that the socialist system has firmly established itself in a large group of nations, that the socialist country's economic potential has been steadily increasing, and that its cultural and spiritual values are profoundly moral and that they ennoble people."

Within two years of the publishing of the book, all these people did precisely the opposite of what Gorbachev said that they were going to do in 1987. They threw off those systems. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"**Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall.**" One more thing from *Perestroika*. Gorbachev refers to the Berlin Wall: "West and East Germany are divided by an international border passing, in particular, through Berlin." That's almost a euphemism. It was a concrete wall with barbed wire across the top of it, where the guards in East Germany faced east, not west, and shot hundreds of people who tried to come through.

Caspar Weinberger, who I interviewed for this book, told me, "Make me a promise. You're a teacher. You have audiences of young folks. Any time you ever mention the Berlin Wall, can you ask the audience this question?" I said, "Sure, go ahead." He said, "Ask them in what direction the guards faced."

The answer, of course, is east. That's the only barrier or wall I know of in all of human history where they put up a wall to keep people from leaving rather than to keep the enemy from invading. They didn't have to face west; no one was crazy enough to come over from the West. They just had to guard the East.

Which brings us to June 1987, the Brandenburg Gate. Ronald Reagan said, "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Why did Reagan say that? Because Reagan understood that the one person who had the power to tear down that wall was Mikhail Gorbachev, and if he was really the

almost mythological figure canonized by Western hagiographers and Ivy League professors, then he should go and tear down the Berlin Wall.

In May 1988, one year later—we now know this; the documents were declassified in 2000—in the memoranda of conversation from the Moscow Summit, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev were sitting there, one on one, facing one another. Igor Korchilov was the translator, and Reagan asked Gorbachev to his face: “About a year ago I called on you to tear down the Berlin Wall. Sir, would you do that?” And Gorbachev said, “No, I won’t tear down the Berlin Wall. I’m not going to tear that down.” When it happened, he didn’t stand in the way. A few years later, Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and Ronald Reagan, of course, never will be.

Although he didn’t use force to hold the Soviet bloc together, Gorbachev and his lieutenants used force in some of the Soviet Republics in January 1991, which the *New Republic* and *National Review* alike absolutely excoriated Gorbachev for doing. Eduard Shevardnadze resigned and said dictatorship is coming. Boris Yeltsin was outraged.

So does Gorbachev deserve any credit? Yes, of course he does. Why?

One, he ended Article VI in the Soviet Constitution, which guaranteed the Communist Party’s monopoly on political power in the USSR. Gorbachev introduced political pluralism into the Soviet Union. The best book on Gorbachev and one of the most favorable is by Oxford professor Archie Brown. It’s called *The Gorbachev Factor*. Brown points out that it had never been Gorbachev’s initial intention to introduce full-fledged political pluralism into the USSR. That wasn’t his purpose. You know whose purpose it was? Reagan’s. It’s listed in National Security Decision Directive 32 and NSDD 75, and Tom Reed, an influential National Security Council staff member, gave a speech in 1983 talking about how that was their goal. Reagan was on record as trying to accomplish that. Nonetheless, Gorbachev broke the Communist Party’s monopoly on power.

Two, he strongly repudiated nuclear war.

Three, he spurned the idea of global Communism and that Soviets would ever want a one-world Communist state, which thrilled Reagan.

Four, he and Reagan had five summits together and signed breathtakingly superb missile treaties, from START to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, signed in December of 1987, which banished an entire class of nuclear weapons.

Five, his *glasnost* was a huge success in opening up the Soviet Union. I will tell any religious conservative in the United States who wants to begrudge Gorbachev credit for anything that happened in the Soviet Union that the short religious revival that began in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s can be traced to Gorbachev for allowing religious freedom to take place.

Six, these two men ended the Cold War peacefully. For any conservative who doesn’t give Gorbachev credit, you should know that Ronald Reagan gave Gorbachev huge credit; and for any liberal who doesn’t give Reagan credit, you should know that Gorbachev gave Reagan huge credit. So both of them would argue with you on that.

December 1991: The End of the Soviet Union. By December 1991, Boris Yeltsin had already been elected president of Russia in the country’s first free and fair election. On December 18, the Kremlin flag, the red hammer and sickle flag that had flown over the Kremlin for decades, was moved down, and hoisted up to replace it was the flag of the Russian Federation.

Seven days later, on December 25, 1991, Christmas Day, Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as head of what was left of the Soviet Union. He called President George H. W. Bush and said, “Sir, you can have a very quiet Christmas evening. I am saying goodbye and shaking your hand.” And in his speech that night, his resignation speech, Gorbachev said this: “I had firmly stood for the preservation of the Union state, the unity of the country. Events went a different way. The policy prevailed of dismembering this country and disuniting the State, with which I cannot agree.”

It had been Reagan’s primary intention to break up the Soviet Union; it had not been Gorbachev’s. Reagan got exactly what he wanted; Gorbachev did not get what he wanted. But nonetheless, they ended the Cold War peacefully.

So if you look at the tombstone in the cemetery of international history, it will say “USSR, Born October 26, 1917, Died December 25, 1991.” It will probably say “May it not rest in peace” at the very bottom of it. Reagan at that point was in California in his office, and the crusader must have really relished the spiritual significance of this country that had banned Christmas and threw Christians in prison ending on the day that Reagan and the West celebrates the birth of Christ.

After the fall of the Wall, the fall of the USSR, on December 9, 1994, Mike Deaver, who had been Ronald Reagan’s friend for over 30 years, visited him in his office. Reagan, just a few months earlier, had written his letter informing the world that he had Alzheimer’s disease and that he was “riding off into the sunset of my life,” as he called it. He was talking to Deaver. He didn’t recognize him, which greatly saddened Deaver. One thing, though, he didn’t forget about. He took Deaver over to the wall, and he pointed at a picture of the Rock River that was hanging on his office wall. Reagan said, “I saved 77 lives there at that river. That’s the river where I lifeguarded for seven summers. And you know, none of them ever thanked me.”

In fact, though, I would argue that Reagan was more than thanked for those 77 lives. He was rewarded by the self-confidence that this gave to all of his endeavors, everything he did in life, all of his decisions, his decisions until his dying day. And then when he got to Washington, he appointed himself a new rescue mission: to rescue America from the decline of the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam malaise years, and eventually to save the world from the evil of atheistic expansionary Soviet Communism.

Communism in the 20th century killed over 100 million people. If you take the total number of people killed in World War I and World War II, add them together, multiply them by two, only then are you approaching the number of people killed by Communism. The 100 million figure is from the book by Harvard University Press, *Black Book of Communism*, which was conservative. The numbers on Mao were easily higher than they said; the numbers on Stalin were easily higher—and by the way, they published too early, because Kim Jong-il still had two to three million people to starve to death in

North Korea at the end of the 20th century, in the final years.

Reagan decided that it was up to him to play the role of world savior. The numbers bear this out: In 1980, there were 56 democracies in the world; by 1990, there were 76; by 1991, there were 91; by 1994, there were 114. There was a doubling of democracies in the world between 1980 and 1994, between the time that Reagan was elected and the moment that he was pointing out the picture of the Rock River on his office wall to Mike Deaver. In the time he shifted from presidential candidate to ex-President, democracy exploded.

This was one of the great triumphs of the 20th century and for all of humanity, and one of the least remarked upon as well. And for Reagan, it was something that he desired. Few Presidents ever got so much of what they desired, which itself is a remarkable story.

In conclusion, with the confidence and can-do attitude that invigorated him like the waters of the Rock River, Reagan set out to right these wrongs, this evil of Soviet Communism. The extent to which these actual worldwide occurrences matched his incredibly ambitious desires, dating back to 1950, is astonishing. He had said in 1961, “Wars end in victory or defeat.” The Cold War ended in victory, or to paraphrase Reagan from January 1977, “We won, they lost.” It was a victory for which the world was thankful, especially given the tranquil way in which it ended—not a missile fired.

It didn’t start at the Screen Actor’s Guild, or in his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, or with “GE Theater,” or at a Crusade for Freedom rally, or for Goldwater in 1964, or the Berlin Wall in 1978. I think, oddly enough, it all began at a state park in Dixon, Illinois, the site of murky, splashing water, where a young lifeguard named Dutch saved 77 people over seven summers and in the process went on to change the course of more than just a winding river.

Questions & Answers

QUESTION: Don’t you think “crusader” has taken on a wonderful and expansive American meaning beyond the original, limited European-Christian militaristic meaning? Do you think Muslims may

understand better than Christians how successful and committed and fearless crusaders truly were and are? Obviously, you deliberately chose that term “crusader,” and not everyone today would consider that politically or religiously correct.

DR. KENGOR: Yes, and people have said, “Why did you pick this title? You’re trying to be provocative; this is a dangerous, divisive time.” I picked it about 10 years ago when I was reading through Soviet media archives, and I found literally hundreds and hundreds of examples of the Soviets calling Ronald Reagan the Crusader. And the reason why they called him the Crusader is because they saw themselves as a target of this crusade by Reagan.

Again, to make it very clear, Reagan meant crusade in terms of a crusade for freedom, not a religious crusade. He meant crusade in the way that FDR meant crusade. He was appalled at the atheism of the Soviet Union but worked really hard, for example, for emigration for Soviet Jews, who he had no desire to convert to Christianity. He also did everything he could to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan by arming the Muhajadeen, who were Muslims, and his purpose in helping the Muhajadeen was not in any way to convert them, but that they could help in that crusade for freedom by defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan.

So that’s what it means. You can blame it on the Soviets. They started it in the 1980s. And then when I found out later on in the research that Reagan had signed on to two groups with the word crusade in their title in 1950, I was really shocked by that. I hadn’t known that. So that was it. I had a title for the book. Publishers always change whatever title you suggest, but not this one.

I began this research when I was arguing with another professor who was very left of center politically. She was very fair, and she had just written a journal article on Reagan, and she gave him a lot of credit. We were talking about the article, and she even said, “I think Reagan, unlike a lot of my colleagues, deserves a lot of credit for helping to precipitate the collapse of the Soviet Union. However,” she said, “I don’t know that that was his intention; I think that some of what he did eventually caused that, but I don’t know if he intended that from the outset.”

And I said, “No, you’ve got to understand, there are dozens of formal National Security Decision Directives that lay out this very explicit goal, and Reagan’s statements and quotes and statements from people who worked for him. There is no question that this was his intention.” And she smiled and said, “Well, why don’t you show me?” I thought, “Okay, I will,” and that’s how the book began: merely to prove that this was Reagan’s intent.

QUESTION: You’ve spoken about how effective Reagan was in ending Communism in the Soviet Union. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about how effective you think he was in his policies toward Latin America, especially right now where Daniel Ortega stands to possibly win the next election in Nicaragua.

DR. KENGOR: That’s a good question. By 1994, outside of Western Europe, 88 percent of Latin American and Caribbean nations were democracies, 92 percent of South American nations. So the numbers were really high; Reagan was thrilled about that.

This is very important for those who always say the Soviet Union was bound to collapse; it was always an economic failure. It was an economic failure, and yet it expanded in size and proxy states and client states every single decade, beginning in the 1910s. In the 1970s, from 1974 to 1979, 10 or 11 states were picked up by the Soviets as client states or proxy states. The 1980s was the first decade when they didn’t pick up a single country and in fact lost all their countries and imploded. In the book, I give a lot of examples of the economic warfare and so forth that made that happen.

But in Latin America, they eventually had elections in Nicaragua, where Daniel Ortega was defeated, and Reagan was thrilled with what happened there. I think right now, given what’s happening in Nicaragua, he’d be very disappointed.

Richard Pipes, the Harvard professor of Russian History, who worked in Reagan’s National Security Council from 1981 to 1982, is really disappointed in the direction of Russia under Putin. He has said, meaning presumably the Reagan Administration, “This wasn’t what we wanted.” He said, “I’m happy there is no longer a dictatorship there. It’s no longer a communist empire. This is not totalitarianism; it’s

much, much better, but there is a kind of a soft authoritarianism here that troubles me.” I believe that Freedom House recently removed Russia out of the “free” category.

So Reagan would probably have those same kind of thoughts about Nicaragua in particular and would be very upset by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

QUESTION: I know you’ve got another book in the works coming out about Judge Clark, and I wonder what you’re going to do after that.

DR. KENGOR: Yes, I am writing a book on Judge Bill Clark, William P. Clark, who was Reagan’s closest friend and National Security Adviser and absolutely the most crucial adviser in all of this. After that, I’m not going to write a book for a while. I’m going to settle down and try to take it easy.

QUESTION: Would you explain what happened in Iceland, the summit?

DR. KENGOR: Many people have pointed to Reykjavik as being the crucial episode in the end of the Cold War, including Zbigniew Brzezinski. The big thing that happened there was that Gorbachev appeared to offer an incredible concession to eliminate apparently all missiles, all nuclear missiles, in exchange for Reagan giving up SDI, and Reagan didn’t want to give up SDI.

There’s a lot of misunderstanding on this too. I’ve read this a number of times from historians who should know better, who’ve said this was incredibly stupid: Why would Ronald Reagan even need SDI if we and the Soviets gave up all our nuclear missiles? Well, the reason was the same as the reason that Reagan later offered to share SDI with the Soviets.

Reagan never thought he could build an impenetrable, 100 percent effective missile defense. He

chastised liberals. He said, “They criticize me for this, which is odd, because they never argue for 100 percent effectiveness in their welfare programs.” Reagan said, at the very least, if we could build a system that could take down a limited number of nuclear missiles, then this could come in extremely handy for, as he put it, “A Middle East madman, an Asian dictator, a slip-up, a trigger-happy general, or some limited type of missile strike.”

That’s why, even if the Soviets gave up their entire arsenal, Reagan thought that we would still need some type of missile defense system. That was his dream, as he called it, and it had two goals. One was to build missile defense for its own sake, and the other—I don’t know if it was the initial intention, but he later, within a few months if not a year or two, saw it very clearly—was that he thought that it could bankrupt the Soviet economy. The Russians will tell you to a person that it did do that.

As for the argument that Reagan had nothing to do with ending the Cold War, if you say that in Soviet company, to former Soviet citizens or high-level government officials, they will laugh you out of the room. That’s not taken seriously over there; they were convinced that he helped end the Cold War and drove a stake through the chest of Lenin’s empire.

—Paul Kengor, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political science, as well as executive director of the Center for Vision and Values, at Grove City College. He is also a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University. He earned his master’s degree from American University’s School of International Service and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs.

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