

Emboldening Domestic Resistance to Communism

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In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union -- one of the great sea-changes of modern history -- we have heard many theories explaining how this earth-shaking event came about. I propose to share with you my own theory, having been a participant in the American side of the conflict at a time of decisive strategic importance. It is my view that the rhetoric of President Reagan played one of the most important roles in the West's victory over Soviet communism. To many, it is counterintuitive that the great conflict of the 20th century should have been influenced so decisively by such a "soft" instrument of power as rhetoric. After all, this was a conflict involving nuclear weapons, blue water navies, reconnaissance satellites, espionage, and guerrilla war. What should words have to do with this? It is precisely because of the importance of the word that I am honored that I should have the privilege of presenting my theory at the nation's premier center for the study of these matters.

In order to appreciate the importance of the role of Presidential rhetoric, it is first necessary to understand the full nature of the Cold War itself.

The Cold War took many forms, including proxy wars, the arms race, nuclear blackmail, economic warfare, subversion, covert operations and the battle for men's minds. While many of these forms had the trappings of traditional conflicts of national interests, there was a dimension to the Cold War that made it unique among wars: it centered around a war of ideas -- a war between two alternative political philosophies.

One dimension of this war was a conflict between two concepts of human nature: -- One was the theory that man has a nature, that it is a moral nature -- in other words, that man is and will always be capable of committing good and evil -- and thus the essence of human life is moral choice.

-- In contrast stood another concept which claimed that man is an empty vessel whose nature is determined entirely by his environment. The problem, therefore, was to determine the right environment -- the right formulae of social engineering to create a "new man."

Another dimension of this philosophical war was a conflict between two concepts of the origin of law, morals and rights.

-- On the one hand, there is the theory underlying Western civilization -- that law, morals and rights are endowed by God or nature, or as it says in our Declaration of Independence, "by the Creator." According to this theory, the only way there logically can be such a thing as inalienable (i.e., unconditional) rights is if those rights -- those "just claims" -- are endowed by a power capable of doing so unconditionally. That is the only way we can enjoy majority rule with minority rights. As we have seen, if those rights are endowed by men, they invariably are subject to conditions: the passions and prejudices of the men occupying power at any given time. So, our system has concluded that only the Creator can endow these rights unconditionally.

-- On the other hand, we have the theory that law, morals and rights come from men or the institutions created by men -- i.e, majority votes, constitutions, or other manifestations of what, in the absence of a higher law, can only be called tyrannies of different sorts, including tyranny of the majority. This is the theory which underlies communism, nazism and the other toxic ideologies of modernity. At root, this theory is nothing more than the doctrine of "might makes right" -- all standards of right and wrong are determined by those with the greatest power -- ultimately, by those with the biggest guns and the greatest will to use them.

With these secular utopian theories as their inspiration, the communists posited that they had to change an imperfect world by making man perfect. Since they believed that man could indeed be perfected by secular means -- since they believe that man, and not God, is the creative intelligence of the universe -- they set out on their revolutionary course with no moral strictures against using any means to achieve their goals. Indeed, according to Leninist morality, their moral code required using any means. Indeed, the Leninist enterprise was the apogee of yet another related doctrine -- that of the end justifying the means.

One of the key means they chose to use was maintaining ideological conformity. Tolerating no dissent in the realm of thought was the prerequisite to creating conformity and military discipline in the realm of action. Having succeeded in using this technique as a method of seizing power, the Bolsheviks then used it as the key element of their internal security system.

Internal security was achieved in this way because ideological conformity institutionalized falsehood as the standard against which deviationism could be measured. It was easier to establish conformity with a falsehood than with the truth, which could have different shades of valid meaning.

This system was analogous to the story of the Emperor's New Clothes: everyone in the court had to proclaim that the naked emperor was wearing beautiful clothes, and they did so out of fear. Anyone who stated the truth could be immediately identified as a deviationist and the threat to the established regime that he in fact was.

In the USSR, the Lie served many purposes:

- it was a test of loyalty (or submission) to the regime.
- It concealed the ruthless methods used by the state.
- It created "enemies" which were used to justify repressive measures.
- It concealed policy failures.
- It concealed evidence which challenged the ideology and thus the legitimacy of the regime.
- It destroyed trust between individuals and among the people as a whole, thus "atomizing" society -- forcing people to live as lone islands not connected normally to other people.
- It served the goals of political socialization and mass mobilization for the purpose of creating the "new man."

When combined with the historical determinism of the ideology which said: "It is futile to resist the forces of history" -- the Lie thus served to disarm and demoralize the people. As Solzhenitsyn explained, the Lie penetrated to the depths of men's souls:

In our country, the lie has been incorporated into the state system as the vital link holding everything together, with billions of tiny fasteners, several dozen to each man. This is precisely why we find life so oppressive....When oppression is not accompanied by the lie, liberation demands political measures. But when the lie has fastened its claws on us, it is no longer a matter of politics! It is an invasion of man's moral world and our straightening up and refusing to lie is also not political, but simply a retrieval of our human dignity.

The Cold War, then, was not only a conflict between East and West, it was in essence a moral conflict -- even within the Soviet empire and within the West -- which, at its heart, took the form of a war between truth and falsehood.

To understand the full nature of the Cold War, one must also understand what the Soviets perceived to be the greatest threats they faced.

The central fact of political life in the USSR was that the Soviet regime feared its own people above all.

It did not fear U.S. nuclear weapons: it knew that these were entirely for deterrent purposes and not for offense. It knew very well that we once had a nuclear monopoly and that during that period we were more anti-communist than at any other time in our history, yet even then we did not use our monopoly to dictate terms to Moscow.

The Soviets did not fear NATO troops forward deployed in Europe. They could well see that these forces were equipped solely for defensive purposes and not at all with offensive capabilities.

So the main threat was an internal security threat. How much of a threat this was to them could be measured by the steps they took to address it: the many elements of the internal security system:

- the Party's monopoly of information and communications (its vast propaganda system).
- its monopoly of education.
- its monopoly of entertainment and culture: books, music, art, film, theater, etc.
- its monopoly of economic power and its control over: employment, promotion, job transfer, production and distribution, and the enforcement of "parasitism" laws.
- the KGB and its various structures, such as block committees and pervasive surveillance.
- the Gulag Archipelago, its "psychiatric clinics" and various less punishments;
- its control over and penetration of religion.
- its control over all internal travel, through the internal passport system and other required documents.
- its penetration of all organized social bodies to prevent them from becoming fronts for organized opposition.

Why, then, was the U.S. seen by the Soviets as a threat?

As George Kennan once said, the Soviets, as communists, hate us not for what we do, but for who we are. It is the fact of our very existence as a democracy that represented a threat. This demonstrated an alternative form of legitimacy as well as an alternative model that proved to be successful.

Above all, American democracy represented a contagious germ that could mobilize internal resistance to the regime. So long as America existed as a democracy and resisted Soviet global advances, we demonstrated that the ideology was false. Thus:

- U.S. military power was essential -- to deter and contain Soviet advances.
- U.S. economic power was needed to sustain our military power.

But the most important power we needed was moral-political power. This was the key index in the Soviets' own assessment of the "correlation of forces" -- their calculus of the strengths and weakness of their adversaries as measured against their own.

The Soviets knew that military and economic strength alone were insufficient to determine the outcome of any conflict. They knew that we lost the Vietnam War, not because of either military or economic weakness, but because of political weakness and vulnerability to North Vietnamese and Soviet propaganda -- i.e., vulnerability to the Lie (see, for example, the almost completely ignored testimony to this effect by the victorious North Vietnamese generals).

Thus, Soviet foreign policy used intimidation and manipulated the truth to compel other states to accept their version of the "truth" as a sign of either loyalty or submission. This was nothing more than the Emperor's New Clothes on an international scale. If the Kremlin could not compel everyone in the "court" actually to utter the Lie, it demanded, at minimum, that the "courtiers" stand silent. This was what we call "Finlandization" -- with all due respect to the Finns, who have a proud tradition of resisting totalitarian aggression. The reality of Finlandization was that the shadow of Soviet power was so great that it compelled the Finns to censor themselves.

For years before President Reagan came to office, there was silence from the West -- our policy of "detente." The Soviets violated arms control treaties and we never protested publicly. The Soviets conducted subversion and proxy wars in Latin America, Africa and Asia and we accepted so many of these as the "inexorable forces of history." Moscow became so confident of American political weakness that finally, it invaded Afghanistan.

It was then that Ronald Reagan was elected. From the beginning, he proved to be the Little Boy in the Emperor's Court. From the beginning, he told the truth -- in spite of massive criticism from the establishment -- diplomatic, media, academic, and corporate. Above all, he demonstrated the courage to tell the truth.

1. Presidential Press Conference

At one of his first press conferences, President Reagan shocked the world by telling a truth that the world had long since decided to suppress: that the Soviets had a different morality than ours. He then added that according to that morality, they could "lie, cheat and commit any crime to further the goals of communism."

The President, of course, was exactly, clinically, correct. Communist morality is different. And this is clear from the classic statement of that morality in Lenin's speech to the Youth Leagues in 1921 -- a speech that was required reading for every Soviet school child. According to Lenin, there are no objective moral standards. As he postulated: whatever helps the revolution is good and whatever hinders it is evil. This is nothing more than a contingent morality, based on the preferences and power calculations of those in office.

What did the President's statement accomplish?

- a) It told the world that there was an elephant in the room which nobody saw or wanted to see.
- b) It combated the main theme of Soviet disinformation and propaganda: i.e., that "We, the Soviets, are not communist any more."

Why this theme?

If the Soviets could persuade us that they are no longer communist, then, by definition, their goals would no longer be unlimited and revolutionary. If, then, their geopolitical goals had become limited, it follows that those goals could be either fully or partially accommodated by the West in the interest of peace.

In the face of the many ways Moscow was conveying this theme, the President reminded the world the truth of the matter.

c) The President's statement was the first step in reconnecting America with the millions of people suffering under communism -- people whom the West had for all practical purposes abandoned for two decades.

2. A Stream of Speeches, Radio Addresses, Reports and Public Statements

Next came a stream of speeches, radio addresses, reports and public statements telling truths about the Soviet empire that had been suppressed for years. The President and the Administration told the truth about:

- Soviet behavior in Poland, Afghanistan, and Central America.-- Soviet human rights violations.
- Soviet arms control treaty violations.
- the Soviet military buildup -- the largest in history.
- Soviet disinformation, propaganda, and covert "active measures."

3. The Modernization of the Freedom Radios and the President's Direct Communication to the Peoples of the Soviet Empire

In early 1982, in response to the crackdown on the Solidarity Union in Poland -- a crackdown that came under threat of a Soviet invasion -- the President launched a new policy intimately related to his strategy of telling the truth. This was the modernization of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Voice of America.

In one sense these radios were one of the greatest threats to Soviet rule. Why?

They were a "surrogate domestic free press" supplying people with information about their own countries. They transmitted the truth and unfiltered information directly to millions of people. This included: domestic news; alternative ideas; their own country's true history, which had been eviscerated and revised as a way of transforming each nation's identity; religious programs; and even music.

All this enabled millions of secret listeners to share with one another their special secret: their knowledge of the truth. Sometimes the mere whistling of a song that could be heard only over Radio Free Europe was a public, yet "secret" signal to others that you were a listener. And when others joined you in whistling the song, or discussing forbidden information, something of a decisive strategic nature happened:

-- People reconnected to one another;

-- Trust could be restored; and

-- Political organization in defiance of the regime could begin.

-- In other words, the radios, as vehicles of the truth, undermined one of the linchpins of the internal security system: the atomization of society.

One aspect of the radios was particularly threatening to the internal security system of the state: they transmitted information instantaneously -- which confounded the regimes' ability to suppress dissent and civil disturbances.

The traditional way by which communist regimes suppressed civil unrest -- demonstrations, strikes, riots -- was by isolating it and cutting off all communications to the affected area. If the rest of the country learned about the event a few weeks later, it mattered little to the regime: the unrest was successfully suppressed and contained.

When a cell of internal resistance realized that it could communicate with millions of fellow countrymen, it could add a new possibility to its strategy: it could develop underground lines of communication to the freedom radios and thus to their own people.

This is what happened with the Solidarity Union when it went on strike at the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk. As usual, the regime cut off communications to the city, claiming that "high winds" knocked down telephone lines. But through underground lines of communication, Radio Free Europe learned of the strike and transmitted the news within hours to millions of Poles. The strike was contagious. And within a matter of days the Union had hundreds of thousands of new members. And within weeks, 10 million members: practically the entire working-age population of the country.

It was thanks to the inspiration of Pope John Paul II and his encouragement to his countrymen to "Be not afraid" combined with mass acquisition of the truth that made possible the poetic justice of a workers' movement in the "workers' paradise."

The radios and the messages they conveyed thus served as an expression of our own "solidarity" with the millions suffering under communism. By knowing that they were no longer alone, the radios and their message of truth helped embolden resistance to the regime.

In subsequent years, President Reagan would use the radios to communicate directly to the peoples of the empire. In 1985, in an interview over RFE/RL, the President explained his strategy of emboldening resistance:

"I believe that the principal thing that we in the U.S. and the Western democracies can do to overcome this artificial division of Europe is to stand for the principles of freedom, democracy, rule of law, unconditional individual human rights and governmental legitimacy by the consent of the governed. By standing firmly for these principles and holding our ground both morally and strategically around the globe, we can demonstrate that communism is in fact not the wave of the future, that it can be resisted. By doing so, we show the captive nations that resisting totalitarianism is possible.

"We should learn the lesson that Vladimir Bukovsky, the Russian human rights activist, taught us: he said that each time the USSR commits an act of aggression abroad, it is sending a message to its own people:

'Look, peoples of the communist world, we can invade Afghanistan, shoot down airliners and deliver arms to Nicaragua under the nose of Uncle Sam and not even the greatest imperialist power on earth can resist us. So how can you people even contemplate resisting us?'

"But, if we understand this lesson and succeed in preventing the further expansion of communism, the captive peoples will know that there is hope. What the peoples of East Europe choose to do to achieve their freedom, of course, is their own decision. But it is almost impossible to resist oppression without having access to the truth and without being able to communicate with your fellow man. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty can help the people of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union overcome these problems. They are indispensable -- the closest thing to a domestic free press that outsiders can provide for them."

In that interview, the President also explained how real peace can be achieved and how it requires both telling and facing the truth:

"Totalitarian states do not have the built-in mechanism to popular pressure which compels the governing elite to behave responsibly and to abide by international agreements which their people avidly support. This mechanism of popular pressure, of course, is one of the greatest conflict-resolution mechanisms ever devised by the mind of man and, indeed, if everyone were to comply with the Helsinki Accords and respect the human rights provisions, we would have the prospect of long-term peace in Europe.

"This is because true peace and human rights are not two separate issues. In fact, peace and human rights are indivisible; they are one issue. Because so long as people are not free to speak, worship, or think as they please, they cannot be free to restrain their own rulers from warlike behavior....

"We greatly appreciate the enormous sacrifices the peoples of the East made in the struggle against nazism. But the great hopes for post-war peace proved so illusory because they were based on an unrealistic understanding of what it took to create real peace. People somehow forgot that real peace is indivisible from respect for human rights. Those hopes were also illusory because people were not realistic about the nature of the forces which occupied Eastern Europe at the end of the war.

"There has been a constant tendency for people in the West to indulge in wishful thinking when viewing unpleasant realities of the world. Sometimes we don't like to admit that these realities exist. But the consequences of not facing up to these realities can be as grave as any visited upon mankind. Because when we fail to look at the world realistically, we can fail to understand the strategic ambitions of aggressors."

4. Speech to the British Parliament

In 1982, in his historic speech to the British parliament, President Reagan shifted the terms of the entire East-West conflict. Instead of mere containment or detente, he proposed a policy peaceful political change in the Soviet empire. Instead of fighting communist tyranny with anti-communism, he proposed

fighting it with a positive alternative: democracy and human rights. Instead of accepting the legitimacy of the Soviet regime as had his predecessors, he challenged it at its very core:

"We cannot ignore the fact that even without our encouragement there has been and will continue to be repeated explosions against repression and dictatorships. The Soviet Union itself is not immune to this reality. Any system is inherently unstable that has no peaceful means to legitimize its leaders. In such cases, the very repressiveness of the state ultimately drives people to resist it, if necessary, by force.

"While we must be cautious about forcing the pace of change, we must not hesitate to declare our ultimate objectives and to take concrete actions to move toward them. We must be staunch in our conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a lucky few, but the inalienable and universal right of all human beings. So states the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, among other things, guarantees free elections.

"The objective I propose is quite simple to state: to foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allow a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means....

"What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term -- the march of freedom and democracy which 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." By challenging the legitimacy of the Soviet regime, once again the President emboldened the peoples of the Soviet empire to resist.

5. The President's Rhetoric and His Military Buildup

In November 1982, President Reagan delivered a televised address to the nation on the defense budget. He outlined the Soviet threat with facts and charts. In doing so, he took one of many similar steps to mobilize a pro-defense consensus by telling uncomfortable truths.

6. Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals

Perhaps the culmination of President Reagan's rhetorical campaign was his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in the spring of 1983. After frankly discussing America's own legacy of evil (passages about which almost no one knows), he branded the USSR as an "evil empire" and the "focus of evil in the modern world."

The speech was received with shock by the establishment. But it was greeted with joy by the oppressed millions of the East.

I personally had ambivalent feelings about this speech. I was glad that the President had told the unvarnished truth. But I was chagrined that by using incendiary adjectives, he left himself vulnerable to Soviet propaganda and therefore political pressure. How?

Soviet strategy in general was to achieve conquest without war. This required disarming the U.S. physically, but first intellectually and psychologically. Part of this strategy involved isolating the U.S. in the world, and then isolating anti-communists, such as Ronald Reagan, within the U.S. A key part of this strategy -- which was the Number One Tactical Objective of Soviet Foreign Policy -- was to compel President Reagan to silence himself, to censor himself and thus to Finlandize America. This was done by a ceaseless Soviet campaign to get the President to "tone down his rhetoric in the interests of peace." A critical element of this campaign was the constant and massive drumbeat of threats and warnings of "unpredictable consequences" that could come from the President's "reckless policies."

The Soviet-sponsored "peace" movement portrayed the President as a "warmonger" and a "nuclear cowboy." It organized massive demonstrations against the President and U.S. policy. By doing so, Moscow put enormous pressure on our allies and on various constituencies within the U.S. to pressure the President to reverse course.

Because of its massive propaganda and political influence apparatus, Moscow had the power to modulate the entire tone of East-West relations. If we spoke the truth, thus mobilizing a pro-defense consensus in the West as well as internal resistance to Soviet rule, Moscow would turn up the atmospheric of tension. If we censored ourselves, we would be rewarded with summit meetings, agreements, a peaceful atmosphere, sweetness and light. This was the Soviet price for peace and quiet: self-censorship.

By using the term "evil empire," President Reagan accomplished one goal, but left himself vulnerable to being accused of gratuitous name-calling and aggravating tensions. It was now easier for Moscow and its fellow-travellers to call the President a warmonger.

I had hoped that the President would deliver another kind of speech -- one in which he would demonstrate clinically and dispassionately the entire record of the Kremlin's behavior at home and abroad. Having been presented with the facts of the entire case, the President's global audience could then attach its own adjectives to Soviet conduct and the President would have been more insulated from being falsely accused of recklessness.

As things transpired, the correlation of forces changed within our government. Soviet propaganda had succeeded in persuading a number of the key figures in the Administration to pressure the President to change his policy. Everyone in the Administration wanted the President to go down in history not as a warmonger but as the man in favor of genuine peace that he truly was. But some wanted him to do this by censoring himself.

In addition, the Soviets may have also succeeded in a covert disinformation attempt. Here, the President may have been persuaded that the Kremlin was allegedly so paranoid about U.S. intentions that it was convinced that the President was preparing to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the USSR under the cover of a major NATO military exercise. I am convinced that this was disinformation: indeed the theme that "the Kremlin is paranoid" has been a time-honored Soviet disinformation theme designed to persuade us to treat Moscow with kid gloves.

The result of all this was that U.S. policy now had to bend over backwards to avoid antagonizing the Soviets. For example:

-- There was no tangible response to the criminal shoot-down of the civilian Korean airliner, KAL-007.

-- We renewed numerous agreements with Moscow that served no discernible U.S. interest other than that defined by a policy of detente; e.g., the Agreement on Housing and Construction Cooperation was renewed just weeks after the Soviets began a carpet-bombing campaign of villages and farmlands in Afghanistan. (The only advantage to America yielded by this agreement? We could gain knowledge of Soviet construction techniques in permafrost areas.)

-- Some self-censorship was put into practice as Administration spokesmen and speech-writers were prohibited from using the same kinds of charts the President had used in his 1982 defense speech to the nation.

-- Finally, the Administration started pursuing and signing a number of U.S.-Soviet agreements for agreement's sake.

During his second term, the President occasionally employed strong rhetoric, such as calling on Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. But since this rhetoric was too often accompanied by policies that appeared to be at odds with it, I feared that the Soviets would perceive us to be weakening and succumbing to their pressure.

Amazingly, however, thanks to the President's earlier policies and his courage to tell the truth, the Soviet regime itself was weakening:

-- Gorbachev faced a crisis in his military-industrial economy, which was unable to keep up with the military and technological advances of the Reagan military buildup (e.g. SDI and stealth technology).

-- That military-economic crisis was aggravated by our policies of denying Moscow sensitive military technology and lowering world oil prices to deprive them of hard-currency.

-- The Communist Party of the Soviet Union faced a crisis of legitimacy: socialism was increasingly seen as a failure, even by the Soviet intelligentsia.

-- The Party also faced a crisis of internal discipline and corruption: the cadres no longer were putting the party's interests above their own -- especially given the temptations of the burgeoning underground economy.

-- The regime was facing the rise of civil society that had been emboldened by the Pope, the Solidarity Movement, President Reagan's truth-telling, and the success of resistance movements in Central America, Africa and Afghanistan.

To blunt the pressures against it, the Soviet regime began a major propaganda campaign to disarm the U.S. (the military glasnost' campaign to "prove" that military secrecy was no longer a Soviet priority" and the campaign to "deprive the U.S. of the `enemy image'" of the evil empire which sustained our defense preparedness).Gorbachev's other major goal was to seek a Western economic bailout.It was because of this vital need for Western economic assistance combined with the need to disarm us psychologically that he was compelled to refrain from the harsh crackdowns on dissent which were needed to keep the regime in power.

Fortunately, though Gorbachev's policies partially succeeded in affecting our perceptions and policies (e.g., our military buildup halted in 1985 and was exceeded by Gorbachev's military buildup), the President never lost sight of the need to keep connected with ordinary people in the Soviet empire.So, for example, his remarks in support of democratic liberty at Moscow State University, during a summit meeting with Gorbachev in 1988, electrified his student audience.

-- He spoke of the freedom to create and innovate.

-- He spoke of the stultification of bureaucracy.

-- He spoke of the self-evident truths in our Declaration of Independence and how freedom is the gift of God.

-- He spoke of the irresistible power of unarmed truth as the indispensable instrument of change and genuine freedom.

Once gain, he contributed to the emboldening of internal resistance to the regime. Perhaps I was too pessimistic in my worries about the reversals of Administration policy that took place.I still believe that the Communists could have preserved their dictatorship at least a little longer -- as the Chinese and North Koreans have -- if they were ruthless enough.

But, as it happened, one man's courage to tell the truth and the courage of millions in the Soviet empire to stand up, to refuse to lie, to take to the streets by the hundreds of thousands, and to reclaim their God-given human dignity, did more than anything else to bring about the most revolutionary historical reversal in our lifetimes.