

The Legacy of Ronald Reagan: a centenary summing-up

By

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About 1938 a failed and aging British politician turned hack writer, engaged on a history of Britain, said of the coming of Alfred the Great that the English of the Ninth Century nearly succumbed to the marauding Danes. He continued: “That they did not was due - as almost every critical turn of historic fortune has been due – to the sudden apparition in an era of confusion and decay of one of the great figures of history.”

The career of Ronald Reagan, born just 100 years ago, astounded many. Even Winston Churchill, as he penned those lines, could hardly have foreseen a career which more-or-less began with “Bedtime for Bonzo” would culminate in Bedtime for Communism.

Mark Steyn wrote it was not that Reagan was a nice guy, a great communicator or had a self-deprecating sense of humour: “Even politics attracts its share of optimists; likeable men, and most of them leave no trace – like Britain’s ‘Sunny Jim’ Callaghan, a perfect example of the defeatism of Western leadership in the 1970’s ... under cover of ‘détente’ the Soviets gobbled up more and more real estate across the planet from Ethiopia to Grenada. It wasn’t just left-of-centre Western Hemisphere politicians who went along with this. So did most conservative leaders.” But he understood things men of greater education failed to understand. Overarchingly he understood that Communism was evil: “a sad, bizarre chapter in human history.” Millions live in freedom today because he acknowledged that simple truth. To the horror of many diplomats and statesmen, he not only saw it was an evil empire, but said so. His grasp of factual information, put to the test, astounded many. But with this went an understanding that politics, at the level he was playing the game, is not all matters of dry economics and administration.

One castigated his philistine ignorance because, speaking at the Berlin Wall, he missed an opportunity to show his sophistication by quoting the poet Robert Frost on walls (Frost wrote, in a completely different context, “good fences make good neighbours.”) He could have given a mature, nuanced, non-judgemental reflection on the nature of walls and the beauty of Frost’s poetry. But all Reagan said was: “Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

In 1984 I reviewed a book on the totalitarian state created by Lenin, and ended by asking: where was the anti-Lenin to actually create the praxis to undo this monstrous thing? Little did anyone know he was just hitting his stride. Communism seemed to be the future, sooner or later, inevitable as the tide. I was in London, and watched scores of thousands of CND marchers under Labour leader Neil Kinnock demanding an end to (Western) nuclear weapons. Little did any of us know Reagan was on the way to ending the Cold War and setting Eastern Europe free. It was as unlikely as Alfred, a lonely fugitive in the marshes of Somerset, rising to splendid and heroic kingdom.

To give an example of Reagan's thinking outside the envelope, in 1980 an Advisory Council on National Space Policy was created under the chairmanship of science-fiction writers Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle and their wives, with publisher Jim Baen and a group of astronauts and other aerospace and computer personnel. They reported to the National Security Advisor. Reagan listened to them – to science-fiction writers! - and on 23 March, 1983 adopted the Strategic Defence Initiative as policy. The Soviet Union tried to match it, collapsed, and communism, which had taken 100 million lives, fell as nothing has fallen since Satan.

Like many other initiatives of his term of office it shows this old man, much of whose life had been spent in the phony glitz and value-free make-believe of Hollywood, to be a clear, original, moral and valiant political thinker. The stakes were so high as to be literally unimaginable. If things went wrong there were perhaps 50,000 nuclear weapons waiting. But they didn't go wrong and the greatest of all shadows was lifted from mankind. Nuclear arsenals today are a fraction of what they were.

“Reagan understood it is the peace-makers, above all, who earn a place in history.” Not my words, or the words of the peaceniks I saw marching in 1984, but Mikhail Gorbachev's.

One detractor has posted on a weblog that Reagan “was lucky enough to be occupying the chair when a sclerotic system fell of its own weight.” Yeah, like Churchill was lucky enough to be occupying the chair when the sclerotic Third Reich collapsed under its own weight, and Alfred and Charlemagne were lucky enough to be occupying their thrones when the sclerotic barbarians were beaten back.

It was somehow fitting that Reagan should have been wounded by a deranged assassin's bullet, for never again could his physical courage be doubted. After that the bravery with which he faced his final terrible illness should have surprised no-one. It is worth recording, by the way, that one of

the achievements of which he was most proud was saving 77 lives as a teenage lifeguard.

Had Reagan been remembered only as the man led the West to bloodless victory in the Cold War, that would be an achievement staggering enough. But his domestic achievements equalled his foreign ones. He rescued America from major economic problems as well as a profound spiritual malaise and launched it on the longest uninterrupted economic boom of modern times, with more than 20 million new jobs created in about a decade. He left America so much the greatest economy in the world that all the other major powers combined did not equal it.

Simultaneously building defence and cutting taxes came at the price of a budget deficit – small enough in today’s terms, but huge at the time. His prescription of economic growth to cure this was not only sound, it was the only possible one. We see that most clearly today as we contemplate the catastrophes once again wreaked by socialist economics.

Reagan’s achievements were such that only the willfully blind can doubt his genius. His heart and values were simple, but few minds came sharper and his detractors underestimated him at their peril.

There is a story that when US Ambassadors were about to depart on new postings, he would have them in for a chat, finally asking them, in a vague, polite way with as gesture at a large wall-map: “Mr Ambassador, where’s your country?” Woe betide any who did not indicate the one that lay between Mexico and Canada!

Reagan had luck. As if there was some miraculous intervention in human affairs, a galaxy of great people suddenly came forward: Pope John Paul II, Margaret Thatcher, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel – an ill-assorted band almost reminiscent of the ramshackle alliance for good in *The Lord of The Rings*. From the Soviet Union came Alexandr Solzhenitzyn and Andrei Sakharov, as well as two Communist Party apparachiks at least who saw change was the only alternative to complete disaster, and who, to judge from their actions and writings, were men who genuinely desired the good and survival of humanity. All played their part. But the ultimate geopolitical responsibility was Reagan’s.

When an objective history of the 20th Century is written, Ronald Reagan will be recognized as standing on a high pinnacle of greatness. We remember John Bunyan’s Mr Valiant-for-Truth:

My Sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my Courage and my Skill to him that can get it. My Marks and Scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his Battles who now will

be my Rewarder ... So he passed over, and all the Trumpets sounded for him on the other side.
