Remembering Ronald Reagan

by Phyllis Schlafly June 16, 2004

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When Ronald Reagan became President in 1980, conventional wisdom assumed that the Soviet Union's position as a fearsome superpower was permanent. Henry Kissinger had the pessimistic belief that the Soviets had attained such nuclear power that his job, as the Nixon-Ford Russian expert, was just to negotiate the best deal he could for a weaker United States.

Since Reagan's passing, many commentators have paid tribute to his optimistic view of life and how that made him such an engaging personality. In truth, Reagan's optimism was revolutionary; he optimistically believed Communism was doomed, that the Free World would triumph and it was his mission to hasten the day.

Reagan had been in the White House only a little over a year when he gave a landmark speech to the British Parliament challenging the long-held belief about the permanence of Communist rule. He said, "the march of freedom and democracy will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history as it has left other tyrannies that stifle the freedom and muzzle the self-expression of the people."

Reagan thus flatly contradicted all the recognized experts in Soviet affairs who were touting detente and peaceful coexistence with Soviet Communism. Reagan believed that the Cold War was winnable at a time when almost nobody else did.

Reagan had no qualms about criticizing the mistaken policies of his predecessors. He said: "When I came into office, I believed there had been mistakes in our policy toward the Soviets. I wanted to do some things differently, like speaking the truth about them for a change, rather than hiding reality between the niceties of diplomacy." On June 12, 1987, Reagan spoke the words that changed history. Standing at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, President Reagan flung down the gauntlet to Soviet dictator, saying: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!"

These words were Reagan's own, not written or approved by his speechwriters or the State Department. Those words marked the beginning of the end of the vast dictatorship that he had dared to label the "evil empire."

Ronald Reagan's words were not just empty rhetoric. In l983 he had announced his commitment to build an anti-missile defense system to defend American lives against the Soviets' powerful and threatening nuclear weapons. Ted Kennedy dubbed Reagan's plan Star Wars, and tried to ridicule the whole idea of defending the American people against incoming nuclear missiles, but Reagan had common sense on his side.

Reagan steadfastly refused to bargain away his plans to build an anti-missile defense, despite heavy propaganda from the media plus pressure from the Soviets and even from his own State Department. The big test of Reagan's will came at his meeting with Gorbachev in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Gorbachev made all kinds of concessions in a desperate effort to get Reagan to abandon his anti-missile defense plan. But Reagan stood firm and never retreated.

We now know Reykjavik was the moment when Gorbachev realized the Soviets could not win against the United States, and the Soviet Empire began to collapse. It was Ronald Reagan's fortitude and courage that won the Cold War without firing a shot.

During most of Ronald Reagan's life, the media tried to slant public opinion to believe that he was just an actor who was a mouthpiece for the ideas of others. We now have indisputable proof that Reagan developed his own ideas and wrote most of his own speeches. A couple of years ago, a researcher at the Reagan Library in California discovered a treasure trove of the texts of hundreds of Reagan's radio broadcasts delivered during the 1970s before he became President. Written in his own handwriting, mostly on lined yellow pads, these documents show that he expressed his thoughts clearly, concisely and logically, and needed to make very few changes and edits.

These commentaries show that Reagan was a tremendously well-educated man because he was a voracious reader whose own library was filled with books of history, economics and biography, heavily annotated in his own hand. His commentaries referred to hundreds of sources and thousands of facts and figures; he was a one-man think tank.

The commentaries show the development during the 1970s of Ronald Reagan's vision for America of a land relieved of the high-tax burdens of Big Government at home and the threat from Soviet aggression abroad. He developed his belief that Communism had to be defeated, not merely contained.

Reagan restored our faith in our country and its future with his attitude that it's morning in America. He revitalized our economy with his major tax cut that started us on an unprecedented period of economic expansion and job creation.

Referring to himself as an actor, Reagan said: "Speech delivery counts for little on the world stage unless you have convictions, and, yes, the vision to see beyond the front row seats." President Reagan had the vision to see that he could end the Cold War and "build a land that will be a shining city on a hill."