Ronald Reagan: A Leader of Influence

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Pope John Paul II, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and President Ronald Reagan all began their careers just outside of great leadership positions. Yet, no one imagined that any of the three individuals would climb to the highest positions available within their respective countries leadership hierarchy. As summarized by John O’Sullivan in his book *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three who changed the World*, “[a]ll three had strong personalities, great abilities, and loyal followings” (1). What each of the leaders did with these attributes is what made them such ambitious leaders. However, Ronald Reagan went beyond the expectations of his position of authority as president of the United States. Reagan and his decisions greatly impacted the world and changed world history by implementing the policies of the Reagan Doctrine and Reaganism, the idea of Strategic Defense Initiative, and by ending the Cold War peacefully.

One of the most pronounced problems Reagan had to deal with while in office was the predicament of communism. Reagan wanted to keep the Soviet Union from invading other countries and expanding communism into other parts of the world. The Reagan Doctrine, as defined by O’Sullivan, is “the policy of supporting local guerrillas against Soviet-assisted or Soviet-imposed dictatorial regimes and making the Soviets pay a higher price for the adventurism of the Brezhnev years” (186). The spirit of the Reagan Doctrine was to help assist anti-Communist forces overcome the Communists (276). This type of action was taken in places such as Afghanistan and Central American. One particular instance was Grenada, when Bernard Coard, a communist, overpowered Maurice Bishop, who had established the People’s Revolutionary Government in Grenada. Coard took over and his groups were threatening the lives of American doctors and students that were at the medical school in Grenada. This incident got Washington and London both working on the crisis (217-18). O’ Sullivan states, “If Reagan could do nothing in the Middle East, he could demonstrate the continuing might of the U.S. in the eastern Caribbean” (221-22). Reagan gave the command to act, for he could no longer halt an invasion and risk the lives of the American medical students (221). Since Reagan did not consult the other foreign leaders many of them were discontented with his rash decision, but his decision to intercede saved the lives of several people. After everything was resolved, however, Reagan was applauded for the decisions he made.

Poland, however, was a different situation. Regan believed, along with John Paul, “that Poland was the key to the unraveling of the Soviet empire” (171). The Polish nation was strongly rooted in the Catholic religion; therefore, the pope was one of the chief catalysts involved in the collapse of the Soviet Union (176). Reagan sought to hastily know how to undermine Communist rule in Poland and deter Soviet interference. He knew that the Reagan Doctrine would not work in Poland, and that the change had to come from the internal people of Poland (172). The president relied on Solidarity to be the weapon of choice and he would labor closely with the Catholic leaders in the affairs of Poland.

Reagan built on the previous work of the Carter administration. The Carter administration was assisting Solidarity before the anticipated Soviet intervention that happened in 1980. Solidarity started as a labor union and was used as a weapon to overthrow the government of a country on behalf of the citizens of that country. Solidarity pushed “the limits of free speech and unofficial social cooperation to provide a moral counter-pole of authority.” The Reagan administration did not only continue what the Carter administration started, but they expanded it while also leading the union. Solidarity was not crushed since the Reagan administration kept the hope alive within the union (171-72).

The success of Reaganism, ideology of Reagan’s administration, “pruned the excessive Depression-era financial regulations” (258). It put the American economy back in shape by stabilizing it and eventually weeding out inflation and keeping it out for several years. The information revolution was starting up around the time of Reagan’s terms in office and he noticed and took interest in defeating inflation and removing the barriers of economic innovation. Reagan did this to clear the way for the information revolution. Critics did not notice the change and therefore did not show Reagan in a good light. Reagan was a “confirmed monetarist” and kept with his decision. Inflation was soon beaten less in less than a year and the unemployment rate also dropped due to his actions (259). Next to be dealt with was the “reduction of marginal income tax rates and financial and economic deregulation,” and the lowering of tax rates and to fix a “top income rate of 28 percent.” Reagan did this by adding an antitrust policy in the United States and by abolishing exemptions (260-61). The economy recovered very quickly and was soon booming again and the economy continued to thrive throughout Reagan’s presidencey. The practice of Reaganism became known as neo-liberalism. Reaganisn had helped provide the world with “successful models of free and deregulated economics” (264). Neo-liberalism then replaced Marxism “as the ideology of the future” (266).

Reagan was also known as nuclear disarmer and was very anti-nuclear. This is one of the reasons he pushed to get the Strategic Defense Initiative, also known as SDI, idea put into action. He saw SDI as a chance to reduce nuclear arms globally (236). O’Sullivan declares, “Reagan was impelled toward missile defense because of his strong moral objections to the theory of deterrence known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD)” (238). Reagan felt that if a country could track a missile, they should be able to block it as well. This was the purpose of the Strategic Defense Initiative, to track and destroy threatening missiles before they could become a problem for the nation. Other leaders such as Thatcher argued that it was too expensive to replace nuclear weapons with SDI since nuclear weapons were a cheap type of defense (244-450). Reagans SDI proposal had Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, worried. Gorbachev needed to abolish the idea because the Soviet Union could not compete on the same level as America economically or even technologically and this was a frightening thought for the Soviet nation (249).

The Cold War ended with a sophisticated handshake between Reagan and Gorbachev and Gorbachev’s signature on an arms reduction treaty (290). All of the events during Reagan’s presidency, such as the events in countries such as Grenada and the relationships’ of the president, the pope, and the prime minister all together, led to the ending of an exhausting war. Reagan had won the war when the Soviets could not compete and match the competition of the United States. Gorbachev had then accepted the “zero-zero” option. This meant that all INF missiles would be removed on both sides. The Soviet leader fought against SDI for a long time but in the end he gave up and let Reagan put his theory into work (290). Reagan got his much deserved win finally after the many talks and compromises with the other leaders of the world. He was seen by Gorbachev as a strong and determined man that was almost too smart on the large issues (251). The President had simply outwitted and outlasted the opposition.

Reagan was also a very robust individual. On March 30, 1981 Reagan had an attempt on his life by John Hinckley (67). No one even realized that the president had actually been shot until a nurse in the emergency room noticed a thin slit under his left armpit. Reagan had gone to the emergency room because he was having trouble breathing. Upon arrival to the emergency room the president declared that he would walk in, yet he only made it about twenty yards before collapsing (68). While in the hospital recovering he was still working hard for his country. He was able to achieve what O’Sullivan claims as, “one of the most remarkable legislative victories ever,” he did his by getting a majority Democratic House of Representatives to pass the initial tax cut program that launched what is known as Reaganomics (69). This type of action was almost unheard of, especially since Reagan was a Republican president.

The President picked up many nicknames during his time. He had built a reputation as a cold warrior and the cowboy president. During both of Reagan’s terms the economy was booming and America stood as a force to be reckoned with. Ronald Reagan made an impressive mark on history with his policies of Reaganomics and the Reagan Doctrine, the idea of Strategic Defense Initiative, and by ending the Cold War peacefully. Many felt that Reagan was simply “too American” to gain much success (2). In reality that was exactly what America needed at this time, a president that was “too American.”

Works Cited

O’Sullivan, John. *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2006.