

■ Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” Speech

Date: March 8, 1983

Author: Ronald Reagan

Genre: speech, address

Summary Overview

President Ronald Reagan’s 1983 “Evil Empire” speech was a pivotal moment in the step towards changing the scope of the United States’ relationship with the Soviet Union, particularly as it pertained to nuclear warfare. The speech, delivered to the National Association of Evangelicals, emphasized moral convictions and established the notion that while the United States held the ethical upper hand, the Soviet Union was not of the same principled caliber. Reagan spoke on topics such as abortion, school prayer, and discrimination, but the real focus of the speech addressed the state of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The speech emphasized the “peace through strength” doctrine so important to Reagan; created a good-versus-evil dynamic between the United States and the Soviet Union, leading to increased public support for Reagan’s efforts; and ultimately played a significant role in the nuclear agreement between the two countries that was finally reached in 1987.

Defining Moment

The Cold War was a period in post-World War II history when the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in political and military conflict. The term Cold War was used because there was no actual large-scale fighting taking place, although tensions and competition between the nations were at an all-time high. When Ronald Reagan assumed the position of president of the United States in 1981, people believed the efforts to contain the Cold War were already falling apart, and fear of nuclear attack was a concern of many. It was believed that the economic and political differences between the United States and the Soviet Union were never to be reconciled, and hope for improved relations between the two nations was not strong. However, as a result of the efforts of Reagan and his eventual Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, the disintegrating relationship between the two nations was improved and hope was resurrected. Reagan’s dedication and perseverance toward alleviating Cold War tensions ultimately proved successful.

Upon defeating Jimmy Carter and assuming the presidency in 1981, Reagan made a promise to the nation to confront the Soviets. Making good on his promise, he devoted himself to “peace through strength,” and made his intentions towards the Soviet Union clear when in 1983 he delivered the famous “Evil Empire” speech to the National Association of Evangelicals. In this speech, Reagan established a good-versus-evil dynamic between the United States and the Soviet Union. He encouraged American citizens to “pray for the salvation of those who live in totalitarian darkness” and assured the people of the United States that they would not fall to a nation devoted to a “legacy of evil.” The speech was thought to cause a chain reaction of events ultimately leading to the successful nuclear arms negotiations between the two nations, the decline of the Soviet Empire, and the end of the Cold War.

Author Biography

Following a successful film career and two terms of service as the Governor of California, Ronald Reagan served as the 40th President of the United States from 1981-1989. Reagan’s “peace through strength” philosophy led to the successful improvement of So-



Historical Document

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
 **COAST GUARD**
FLAG PLOT
INCIDENT MEMO

NUMBER: 04-01

TIME: 1300R

SUBJECT: CUBAN REFUGEES - SOUTHERN FLORIDA

DATE: 24 April 1980

So far 11 vessels are known to have safely made the 90 mile trip across the Florida Straits to Cuba and returned with over 700 refugees to Miami and Key West. One pick up was made from Havana, but it appears that most have been and will be made from Mariel, Cuba. The tempo of the evacuation is increasing and large numbers of U.S. fishing vessels and pleasure craft appear to be involved. Although U.S. policy has not been fully developed, operators will be referred to the Immigration Service for disposition under Immigration laws. Coast Guard officials in Washington met with representatives of the Department of State, Justice, and Treasury and others on the National Security Council on the 22nd and 23rd at the White House to review U.S. policy and will meet again today. In the meantime the Coast Guard has taken a position of responding to distress situations involving units of the evacuation flotilla on a case by case basis while mounting twice daily surveillance flights over the Florida Straits to assess the scope and magnitude of the evacuation. The Miami Operations Center is receiving hundreds of inquiries from boaters who want to make the trip and is telling all such operators

offices of legislators, into executive suites of our business and financial institutions. I want American communities to understand the central importance of elementary education and to overcome the misguided notion, so evident in the distribution of our attention and resources, that it is somehow less important than secondary or higher education. Education is a continuum, lasting a lifetime. Elementary education is its critical beginning.



Glossary

Abigail Adams: the wife and close advisor of the second US president, John Adams, and mother of the sixth US president, John Quincy Adams; she is sometimes considered a Founder of the United States

Amazon: South American river that is the longest river in the world (though that title is disputed); it runs through Brazil, Peru, and Columbia

Berlin Wall: a concrete wall that divided the German city of Berlin from 1961 to 1989

curricula: plural form of “curriculum,” which is the subject matter studied in a school or university

Donner Party: members of a wagon train migrating from the Midwest to California; they were stuck in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the winter of 1846-47 and the surviving members resorted to cannibalism to sustain themselves

Dred Scott: an enslaved African-American man who, along with his wife Harriet, sued for their freedom and that of their two daughters; the lawsuit *Dred Scott v. Sandford* was heard in 1857 by the US Supreme Court and is known as the “Dred Scott decision”

ellipses: plural form of “ellipsis,” which is a series of three dots or periods to indicate an omission in text

Ethiopia: a country in east Africa by the Red Sea

Hercules: a mythical Greek hero who was the son of the god Zeus and a mortal princess named Alcmene with exceptional strength

isosceles triangle: in geometry, a triangle that has two side the same length

Shylock: a moneylender and the principal antagonist in William Shakespeare’s play *The Merchant of Venice*

Document Analysis

During most of the one thousand years that Poland had been a predominately Christian nation, the Catholic Church had supported the state and the state had supported the Church. However, with the imposition of a Communist government after World War II, a government that was officially atheistic, this all changed. When, 30 years later, native son Karol Wojtyla was elected pope, the situation changed again. Pope John Paul II desired to make a visit to his homeland in 1979, and, much to the dismay of the Soviet leaders, the Polish government permitted it. The millions of people who attended the thirty-two services the pope held during his nine-day visit, became more unified in both their faith and their Polish nationalism. The potential strength of the Church became clear to the Communist leaders, and how such influence could be kept in check became their top priority. Nonviolent ways in which to blunt the Church's message and discredit its leaders were considered, on the grounds that use of direct force was too dangerous (in terms of world perceptions). The symbol of John Paul II was too strong to combat, however.

Thus, when Solidarity, with the assent of the Church, organized unrest against the government in 1980, the Communist government had to decide whether or not to directly confront the Church. Most believed that Solidarity would not have arisen without the symbol of John Paul II and the support of the Church. The various plans described in the cable were discussed by Communist authorities but never fully implemented. Although some individual church leaders were harassed or arrested, the government decided that the highest priority was the "resistance of the workers" rather than the activities of the church. The differences between Polish Communist leaders and Soviet leaders are clearly illustrated in the text. A visiting Soviet official, reviewing the Pope's 1979 visit, states that it was unimaginable that the Pope could be invited and given a positive "reception in a Communist country." In response to Soviet pressure, the Polish leader's response is that "the time is not right" to come down on the Church.

As can be seen from some of the points in this document, the church had a much closer relationship with the Communist government of Poland than it had with many other Communist states. Allowing religion classes in schools and the construction of (some) new churches were things that would never be permitted in most other countries of the Eastern Bloc. While not explicitly mentioned in the text, yet understood by the writer and his intended readers, prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia, Poland was the only country in Eastern Europe to be predominately Roman Catholic. This gave it strong ties with Western Europe. Any strong acts against the Church would have international repercussions. Thus, the Polish leaders never pushed the Church too hard.

Essential Themes

There are two basic thoughts expressed in the text: 1) that the Church needs to be controlled by the (Communist) state, and 2) that if the Polish government does not accomplish this, then the Soviet Union may take it upon itself to do so. The United States opposed the Communist government in Poland and needed this information in order to better understand the imposition of martial law. In the slightly more than two years since Pope John Paul II's visit, it had become clear to the Polish leaders that allowing that visit had been a monumental mistake. Speaking a decade later, General Jaruzelski stated that John Paul II's visit had been the "detonator" that led to the eventual fall of the Communist government. Within this document, arguments are given as to why the Catholic Church needed to be brought under control, but it also illustrates the fact that the government did not have the resolve to do this. While several types of surveillance are mentioned, as well as some small steps to take against individual clergy, no mention is made of any plans for large-scale confrontations with the Church.

What seems to have been the reason behind that decision is the threat of Soviet intervention in Polish affairs. Prior incidents such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, were likely in the Polish leaders' minds. They knew that if the Soviets invaded,

ARTICLE XV

1. This Treaty shall be of unlimited duration.

2. Each Party shall, in exercising its national sovereignty, have the right to withdraw from this Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests. It shall give notice of its decision to withdraw to the other Party six months prior to withdrawal from this Treaty. Such notice shall include a statement of the extraordinary events the notifying Party regards as having jeopardized its supreme interests.

ARTICLE XVI

Each Party may propose amendments to this Treaty. Agreed amendments shall enter into force in accordance with the procedures set forth in Article XVII governing the entry into force of this Treaty.

ARTICLE XVII

1. This Treaty, including the Memorandum of Understanding and Protocols, which form an integral part thereof, shall be subject to ratification in accordance with the constitutional procedures of each Party. This Treaty shall enter into force on the date of the exchange of instruments of ratification.

2. This Treaty shall be registered pursuant to Article 102 of the Charter of the United Nations.

DONE at Washington on December 8, 1987, in two copies, each in the English and Russian languages, both texts being equally authentic.

FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

Ronald Reagan
President of the United States of America

FOR THE UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS:

Mikhail Gorbachev
General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU

