

Ronald Reagan: The Anti-Nixon/Kissinger

This February marks the birth centennial of Ronald Reagan. As a Reagan biographer, I'm often asked how Reagan was different from his predecessors, Republican and Democrat, and especially in the area of foreign policy. There were many ways, but here are two of the most fundamental:

First, Reagan actually believed he could win the Cold War. He committed himself to that goal early and unequivocally. To cite just one example, Richard V. Allen, his first national security adviser, recalls a discussion in January 1977, four years before the presidency, when Reagan told him flatly: "Dick, my idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose."

In this, Reagan stood apart from not only Democrats like Jimmy Carter but Republicans like Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and their chief foreign-policy adviser, Henry Kissinger.

But there's another way Reagan was so different from the likes of Nixon and Kissinger in particular. It's a poignant example involving long-persecuted Soviet Jews. It was recently driven home to me, yet again, when I heard newly released comments by Nixon and Kissinger.

Kissinger and Nixon placed detente with the Soviets above all else. Their approach was pure Machiavellian realpolitik. They did not frame the confrontation as good vs. evil, as Reagan did. Their goal wasn't to defeat the Soviet Union. Their prevailing priority was getting along with the Soviets. They pursued that objective at almost any expense, whether keeping Eastern Europeans captive behind the Iron Curtain or keeping Russian Jews from emigrating.

In the early 1970s, pressure had been building on the Nixon administration to lobby the Soviets to ease up on restrictions on Jews. Both Kissinger and Nixon were dismissive. How dismissive? The latest round of released tapes shows Kissinger offering an awful assessment to his White House boss on March 1, 1973.

"The emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union is not an objective of American foreign policy," Kissinger stated coldly. "And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern."

Nixon responded: "I know. We can't blow up the world because of it."

Alas, here is a painfully instructive example of how Ronald Reagan so differed even from intensely anti-communist Republicans of his era. Reagan would have been aghast at these comments. In fact, Reagan was willing to "blow up" negotiations with the Soviets over matters like Jewish emigration.

Reagan hounded Mikhail Gorbachev on this issue. About 10 years ago, the official "MemCons," or Memoranda of Conversation, from the various Reagan-Gorbachev one-on-ones were declassified, from the Geneva to Moscow summits. In these, Reagan repeatedly dug at Gorbachev on emigration of Jews, to the point where Gorbachev snapped at the president.

Such persecuted Russians (Jews and non-Jews) were constantly on Reagan's mind. Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci recalled that the president "would walk around with lists in his pocket of people who were in prison in the Soviet Union." Each time Secretary of State George Shultz prepared to meet with a Soviet official, Reagan pulled out the names—"some of whom we'd heard of but most of whom we hadn't," said Carlucci—and said, "I want you to raise these names with the Soviets." And

sure enough, said Carlucci, "George would raise them and one by one they would be released or allowed to leave."

Reagan advisers confirmed this to me, including Shultz. When I asked Shultz about it, his typical understated expression widened into a giant grin. "Oh, yes," he told me. "He always had that list and never hesitated to give me a few names."

I believe that Ronald Reagan's feelings for Russian Jews might be traceable as far back as November 1928, when his devout Christian mother, head of the Missions Committee at their little church in Dixon, Illinois, brought in a Russian Jew named B.E. Kertchman. Kertchman spoke about persecution he faced. That empathy never left Reagan. Two decades later, in 1947, I discovered Reagan, as a young actor in Hollywood, a liberal Democrat, working with Eleanor Roosevelt to find safe haven for Europe's "Displaced Persons" (mostly Jews) after World War II.

Again, this is a striking contrast with Kissinger-Nixon, but it's more than that.

Reagan was seen as the ultimate Cold Warrior, giving no quarter to the "Evil Empire." Yet, his care for the everyday lives of human beings languishing in the USSR went largely unnoticed. That's too bad, as that concern is a moving testimony of where this president's heart guided him. That's something worth remembering as a nation remembers the life of Ronald Reagan this February 2011.

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