

# Don't Credit Reagan for Ending the Cold War

By Stephen Zunes | June 16, 2004

Perhaps the most dangerous myth regarding the legacy of the late President Ronald Reagan is that he was somehow responsible for the end of the Cold War.

Soviet-style communism was doomed in part because it fell victim to the pro-democracy movement that was also then sweeping Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia during this same period. No credit can be given to the Reagan Administration, which was a strong supporter of many of these right-wing dictatorial regimes, such as the Marcos regime in the Philippines.

The Soviet Union and its communist allies in Eastern Europe collapsed primarily because their governments and economies rested upon an inherently unworkable system that would have fallen apart anyway. A centralized command economy can have its advantages at a certain phase of industrialization, when large “smokestack industries”—from machine tools to tanks—dominate manufacturing. Such a system could, for a time, make the Soviets a formidable military power, but was totally incapable of satisfying consumer demand. Thus, the old joke that the Soviets were working on an atomic bomb that could fit inside a suitcase: they had perfected the bomb, but they were still working on the suitcase.

Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's famous line in the late 1950s that “we will bury you” was not a threat of war, but a reflection that—over the past few decades up to that time—the Soviet economy was growing faster than its Western capitalist counterparts and was projected to surpass that of the West within a couple of decades.

However, as the new wave of industrialization based upon information technologies took off, the economy of the Soviet Union stagnated. Totalitarian systems cannot survive without being able to control access to information. Cracks in the system were becoming apparent as early as the 1970s. North Korea remains the most centralized communist country in both political and economic terms and it has even taken

some small steps to liberalize its economy. The other nominally communist governments are China, Vietnam, and Laos, whose economies have largely gone capitalist, and Cuba, which has decentralized and democratized segments of its economy.

In a December 2003 interview, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said the fall of the Soviet Union had nothing to do with the arms race. “When it became clear to us that the one-party model was mistaken, we rejected that model,” he said. “A new generation of more educated people started to be active. Then society required freedom, society demanded freedom.”

It was not Reagan's military buildup or bellicose threats against the Soviets and their allies that brought down the system. Instead, such threats possibly allowed these regimes to hold on to power even longer as people rallied to support the government in the face of the perceived American threat.

High Soviet military spending, in part as a reaction to the U.S. military buildup that began in the latter half of the Carter administration, certainly hurt the Soviet economy—as it did (and is still doing to) ours. This was, however, only a minor factor.

The reality is that it was the people themselves who brought down the system.

The most significant case was Poland, where—even before Reagan became president—the communist regime was forced to recognize the independent trade-union movement, Solidarity. This helped expose the lie that the communist governments were “workers' states.” Despite the Polish regime's decision to ban Solidarity at the end of 1981, pro-democracy Poles continued to organize, as did dissidents in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, the Baltic states and elsewhere. Many of these democratic lead-



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ers were openly skeptical of Reagan administration policies. Dissident Czech playwright and later president Vaclav Havel, when asked about Western influences on his movement, replied that he had been more inspired by John Lennon and Frank Zappa than by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

President Reagan's verbal support for democracy had little credibility in many of these countries. For example, while he denounced Poland's martial law regime, he was a strong supporter of the more repressive martial law regime then in power in Turkey, a NATO ally. In challenging left-wing governments in the Third World, Reagan backed insurgents with ties to U.S.-backed dictatorships, and, in the case of Afghanistan, even Islamic fundamentalists.

While Ronald Reagan was certainly capable of inspirational leadership, idealism, and personal charm, the myth that he is responsible for the downfall of communism and the end of the Cold War does a disservice to the millions of Eastern Europeans and others who faced the tanks and struggled against great odds for their freedom. It was not American militarism, but massive nonviolent action—including strikes, boycotts, mass demonstrations, and other forms of ingenious non-cooperation—that finally brought down these communist regimes.

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