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Reagan's Russia trip should be Obama's roadmap in Cuba

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When staunchly anti-communist Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 — in the 64th year of Communist Party rule in Russia — no one expected that only eight years later he would end his second term by making a friendly visit to Moscow.

But he did, and what he did there should guide President Obama as he prepares to visit to Cuba — the first visit by a sitting president since Fidel Castro's communist revolution in 1959 — on steps the president can take to usher in true freedom for the Cuban people.

There's a difference, of course: In 1980, the Soviet Union and the United States had thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at one another, and Americans feared a clash between superpowers. Reagan's main mission was to prevent those weapons from being used. We don't face such high stakes with Cuba, but Americans do believe that people everywhere deserve to be free, and that's a message worth presenting wherever people lack freedom.

Reagan went to Moscow to negotiate an arms control agreement with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. He could have left it at that — few Americans would have noted an absence of ideological speechmaking during a diplomatic visit. But since his televised 1964 "A Time for Choosing" address on behalf of the GOP presidential nominee, Sen. Barry Goldwater, and before, Reagan had been an evangelist for human rights and economic freedom as universal values, and he didn't want to pass up the singular opportunity to talk about those values behind the Iron Curtain. He made the decision to strengthen Soviet dissidents and vigorously advocate for the American system of free enterprise and limited government against longstanding Soviet misrepresentations.

He stopped in Finland on his way to the USSR and told a crowd in Helsinki, "There is no true international security without respect for human rights. ... The greatest creative and moral force in this new world, the greatest hope for survival and success, for peace and happiness, is human freedom."

He asked “why Soviet citizens who wish to exercise their right to emigrate should be subject to artificial quotas and arbitrary rulings. And what are we to think of the continued suppression of those who wish to practice their religious beliefs?” Obama should ask the same in Cuba.

In Moscow, Reagan met with almost 100 dissidents — “human rights activists and Jewish refuseniks, veterans of labor camps and Siberian exile and the wives and children of some still imprisoned,” according to the Los Angeles Times. He told them: “I came here to give you strength, but it is you who have strengthened me. While we press for human lives through diplomatic channels, you press with your very lives, day in and day out, year after year, risking your homes, your jobs and your all.” He reminded them “it is the individual who is always the source of economic creativity.”

Obama likewise plans to meet with Cuban dissidents, and he should seek to give them similar hope.

Reagan also gave a celebrated address at Moscow State University, one that compares to Obama’s speech to Chinese college students in 2009. Both presidents, both great communicators, outlined values and goals that are not just American but are, or should be, universal. But there were some clear differences in the philosophies they presented.

President Obama eloquently defended freedom in an authoritarian country: “We also don’t believe that the principles that we stand for are unique to our nation. These freedoms of expression and worship — of access to information and political participation — we believe are universal rights.” But he missed the opportunity to emphasize the importance of freedom of enterprise, property rights and limited government as American values. Those are not only the conditions that create growth and prosperity, they are the necessary foundation for personal and political liberty.

Contrast Obama’s remarks with Reagan’s to Soviet students in 1988. Reagan extolled the values of democracy and openness, and he noted that American democracy is not a plebiscitary system but a way to ensure that the governors don’t exceed the consent of the governed: “Democracy is less a system of government than it is a system to keep government limited, unintrusive; a system of constraints on power to keep politics and government secondary to the important things in life, the true sources of value found only in family and faith.”

He tied all of these freedoms to the American commitment to economic freedom as well. Throughout the speech he tried to enlighten students, who had grown up in a communist system, about the meaning of free enterprise:

“Some people, even in my own country, look at the riot of experiment that is the free market and see only waste. What of all the entrepreneurs that fail? Well, many do, particularly the successful ones; often several times. And if you ask them the secret of their success, they’ll tell you it’s all that they learned in their struggles along the way;

yes, it's what they learned from failing. ... And that's why it's so hard for government planners, no matter how sophisticated, to ever substitute for millions of individuals working night and day to make their dreams come true. The fact is, bureaucracies are a problem around the world.”

President Obama said some important things to the Chinese students. But his failure to note the centrality of economic freedom in the American experiment — which he also omitted in a commencement address the year before — could easily lead listeners to conclude that he cares little for economic liberty. He has a chance to dismiss that concern when he speaks to Cubans next week.

Obama might argue that China had already moved toward capitalism by the time of his visit, so it made sense that he focused on civil and political liberties. That's not the case in Cuba, which keeps proclaiming baby steps to opening markets without much actual evidence. There, the president needs to speak directly to Cubans about human rights, political freedom, freedom of expression and the market freedoms that sustain those liberties and bring prosperity. Cuba doesn't need a central plan for capitalism, it just needs to start lifting the restrictions on normal economic activity.

The president should take Reagan's approach, even if it doesn't pay immediate dividends. Cuba's change will be gradual. But that fact doesn't change the necessity — it makes it more imperative — for the leader of the free world to offer Cubans a way forward.

A year after Reagan's Moscow visit and, more importantly, four years after the reformist Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union, peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe ended Soviet control. Two years after that, the Soviet Union itself was dissolved. We don't know how long Cuba's transformation from autocratic state socialism to free-market democracy will take. But the Cuban people would revere Obama if the Castro regime saw a similar dissolution, and if the president's words helped to inspire that transformation.

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