

Remembering Reagan at 100

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Guest commentary

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Today is former President Ronald Reagan's 100th birthday. With Eastern European cities once under Soviet control hoisting Reagan statues in public squares, academic conferences on the Reagan legacy in Prague, Budapest, Washington and elsewhere, and celebratory events in numerous American cities, this may be the biggest presidential centennial celebration in history.

Reagan was an extraordinary American and the last lion of the 20th century. He was also the most beloved president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Reagan came to the White House with a philosophy and an agenda from which he never deviated. He was resolute in his belief in free trade, free enterprise and free people. He saw America as a "tall, proud, shining city, built on rocks stronger than oceans, God-blessed, and free." After Vietnam, Watergate, the malaise of the Carter years and foreign policy humiliation, Reagan's leadership revitalized the institution of the presidency. Confident, unwavering to principle, contagiously optimistic, dignified and focused, the Great Communicator changed the national and international agenda on issue after issue for eight years.

President Reagan defined his presidency by unleashing the economy with tax cuts and deregulation, by rebuilding national defense, by re-establishing American credibility and promoting freedom throughout the world, by moving us and the Soviets away from what he saw as the insane doctrine of Mutually Assured Distribution (MAD), and by restoring national pride.

He lowered the top personal income tax rate from 70 percent to 38.5 percent, dropped millions of low-income people from income tax liability, eliminated thousand of pages of federal regulations, slowed the growth and intrusion of government, fostered policies more for the creation rather than the redistribution of wealth, and started the process which led to the North American Free Trade Agreement. In short, he altered the course of American government set by FDR a half-century before.

During the Reagan administration, real national output increased by 30 percent. And, contrary to partisan rhetoric, research sponsored by the Cato Institute shows the economic gains of the Reagan Revolution to be broad-based with the rising tide of real family income lifting nearly all boats.

Reagan made conservative appointments to the federal judiciary to thwart judicial activism, appointed two strict constructionists of the Constitution to the Supreme Court, and appointed the first woman justice to the court.

Reagan was a leader of extraordinary moral courage. He was unequivocal and daring when, as a president facing re-election, he wrote his celebrated essay, "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation." He fired 11,345 air traffic controllers for staging an illegal strike against the government and banned them from federal service for life. He called the Soviet Union what it was -- an "evil empire." And against repeated attempts by his State Department to dissuade him, Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate and, in anger, shouted his immortal words: "Mr. Gorbachev, open up this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

President Reagan's greatest legacy is the calculated role he played in the implosion of the Soviet Union and ending the Cold War. His dogged pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) as both economic and technological warfare was brilliantly positioned to force the Soviets to abandon their quest for military superiority and to face their economic realities.

He proved prophetic when he declared in 1982 -- nine years before the collapse of the Soviet Union -- that the "march of freedom will leave communism on the ash-heap of history."

Ronald Reagan -- the consummate gentleman of American politics -- was a rare study in character, conviction, and leadership. He made our country stronger, made the world safer, and contributed to the most dramatic spread of freedom in the history of mankind. Loved are the memories; cherished is the legacy.

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