



## REAGAN'S EVOLVING VIEWS ON RUSSIA AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO TODAY

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In March 1983, in a famous speech, Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” By June 1988, he was walking around Red Square arm in arm with Mikhail Gorbachev. What happened to change his views in those few years? This continues to be a matter of speculation to this day.

I am a writer who has spent 40 years studying and visiting Russia. During those years I have been afforded unusual possibilities to meet and know a multitude of Russians in every field and station in life—from the humble to the high—and to closely share their lives in ways that have been unusual for any foreigner. I have several godchildren, have been a witness at weddings, attended funerals and celebrations, and shared with Russians both their joys and their grief. In the Soviet days, I was once told suspiciously by a head of the Soviet desk at the State Department that I was the single American citizen who knew the most Soviet citizens personally – as if it were a crime. Indeed, some Soviet officials thought the same, and I was denied a visa from 1972 to 1983.

I was afforded a unique opportunity to get to know President Ronald Reagan, this still ultimately mysterious president, through a series of meetings which took place during the second four years of his presidency. He surprised me in many ways. One of the most important was to discover what a reserved man this president known as “the great communicator” was – a man who kept his own counsel and his cards close to his chest. Indeed, I was told by his friend Michael Deaver that no one, including his beloved Nancy, ever really knew how he arrived at his decisions. So

although we talked about many things, I cannot tell you definitively how or why his views on Russia evolved. But I can tell you some of the things we talked about.

Many people have asked me how I met the president. It was a long shot, for as the Russian proverb goes, “God is on high and the tsar is far away.” Nothing that has been printed about this has been exactly correct, and I am now in the process of writing my own book to set the record straight.

It is a long story, as everything connected with Russia seems to be, but I shall abbreviate. After long efforts to get my visa back, I was finally able to return at a particularly tense time – just after the KAL crisis.<sup>1</sup> When I arrived as one of the two passengers on the only plane to fly into Moscow from Paris, I found the vast Sheremetevo airport eerily empty except for security personnel. The USA Institute in Moscow had been of help in getting back my visa, and to my surprise I found, as soon as I arrived, that they were very anxious to see me and sent a car immediately. I was greeted by several members of the Institute with a combination of bitter and yet, I thought, desperate rhetoric. Some very heated discussions took place and one high-placed official pounded his desk and warned me ominously, “You don’t know how close war is.” I was suspicious but I could not forget his words. Now we know that he was right – that the autumn of 1983 through the beginning of 1984 is now considered to be the most dangerous period of the Cold War, a time when all U.S. -Soviet relations went into deep freeze. As 1984 began, there were no negotiations whatsoever going on for the first time in 14 years. I knew nothing of this then, but on my way back to the U.S. I had a very strong conviction that I had to see President Reagan – not any bureaucrats. But how?

I finally accomplished this thanks to Senator William Cohen, whom I had known for many years. Senator Cohen called Bud Macfarlane just after he had been named National Security Advisor and suggested that he see me. Macfarlane agreed and I was granted a short interview. I told him that my meetings in Moscow had indicated that there might be a possibility of resuming cultural exchange talks, and I boldly suggested, “Send me. I can talk to them.” I met with Macfarlane

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<sup>1</sup> On April 20, 1978, a civilian airliner, Korean Air Lines Flight 902, was involved in a shooting incident near Murmansk, Russia, after violating Soviet airspace.

again in late October and November of 1983 and submitted several memos to him. Finally, just before Christmas, I was called from the White House and told that they had decided to send me on what was to be a secret back channel mission to explore this possibility. I went to Washington and it was agreed that I was to go to Moscow for 10 days in late January. I know Russians to be very personal people, and before leaving I insisted that I had to see the president personally, if only for five minutes, so that I could look him in the eye, ask him one question and be able to say truthfully to anyone I was to see in the Soviet Union that any message had come from him directly. “Put it on paper” said Macfarlane. A week later I was told to come to the Oval Office and on January 24, 1984 I met President Reagan for the first time, one day after he had made what was called dismissively by the press his “Peace speech.” Instead of five minutes, he stayed to talk for 25. I asked my question: “Mr. President, if you are elected to a second term, will this policy of small steps toward a better relationship be a continuing policy of your administration?” Unhesitatingly he answered, “Yes. If they want peace they can have it.” I flew to Moscow, returning on February 6, his birthday, and was able to tell him that I had been successful and the answer had been yes, they had agreed to begin to talk about cultural exchange. In a signal honor, I was invited to lunch with President Reagan and Macfarlane in the Oval Office. After this, I never expected to see the president again, and as the meetings continued, I thought each meeting would be the last. As it turned out, I would meet with him 22 times over the next four years. Many of these meetings were 90 minutes. To my surprise, the Reagan library has informed me that I had more “face time” with him on this subject than any but his closest advisors. These meetings always took place in the Oval Office with the current National Security Advisor present (I outlasted four). Three times were followed by lunches with President and Mrs. Reagan alone. I was very careful and am proud to say that not a word of what transpired in our meetings found its way into the press until many years after he left the presidency. Indeed, sensing the jealousy and suspicion of some of the men around him, I deliberately trivialized myself. When the press called—and sometimes over a hundred reporters would call in a week—to ask me “What do you talk to the president about?” I would answer demurely, “culture.” Culture is permitted for a woman, and this answer made it possible for them to dismiss me. When later I told Macfarlane he chuckled and said, “It was a great cover.”

So what did we talk about? The answer is a lot. I was amused to read an interview with Frank Carlucci, when he became National Security Advisor, in which he is quoted as saying “President Reagan had this strange relationship with Suzanne Massie. So I said ‘Mr. President if you are going to talk to Suzanne Massie about the Soviet Union I want to be present.’” He then went on to say that what we discussed were innocuous subjects like ‘human rights, the condition of society’ – things like that.

One of the greatest mistakes Americans made over the years was to meld the words “Soviet” and “Russian” into synonyms. Russians never made this mistake, always calling their government “them” and the people “us.” They felt that they had been victimized more than any of the other republics. (In Russia I was asked “Why is it always Soviet sputnik and Russian tank?”) This linguistic blurring blinded us to changes that were taking place.

Ronald Reagan was the first political figure I had ever met who was more interested in what the Russian people thought and why, rather than what Kremlin officials thought. (It is important to note that Reagan had never met a Russian until his second year of the presidency; the first was Ambassador Dobrynin and the second was Andrei Gromyko in March 1984, hardly a cheery, or I may say, representative fellow.) People were what interested Reagan. He was not getting any of this from his advisors. To talk about people was to engage him.

Reagan was an actor and actors don’t necessarily learn only from position papers. He could not exactly call *Inturist* and go walk the streets of the Soviet Union to look around for himself, so I did it for him. I always said I had a “worm’s eye view.” I was on the ground, independent, sharing the lives of Russians, and I came back and told him about my experiences. One story he especially relished was how I had once had the temerity to rent a Russian car, which promptly lost a wheel because the bolts hadn’t been tightened properly. The wheel flew off, the car lurched crazily to a stop on a busy bridge at rush hour and I watched helplessly as the tire rolled away in the distance. I cried for help but cars whizzed by me until I was finally able to flag down one in which there were three military men. They stopped, managed to retrieve my tire and one, a captain, approached me asking in Russian, “Where are you from?” “America,” I answered.

“Well,” he continued, “tell Reagan we aren’t all bad!” (Of course this man had no way of knowing that I could and did tell the president, who laughed heartily.

I believe that in the course of our talks I was able to help him understand the important difference between the Russians as human beings and their government. He collected Soviet jokes. I brought him back the latest every time I came back. I took his invitation to Gorbachev to come to Washington and once brought back a proposal from the Soviet government about Afghanistan, which he sent over to Secretary of State George P. Shultz. (In his book, Shultz stated that every time I saw the President, he sent me to Schultz. He was mistaken. I saw Shultz only four times and the President 22.) The President sometimes called me, and wrote me 10 letters. He liked my book *Land of the Firebird* and sent me a warm message about it while I was working in Leningrad. He took it to Geneva, and I am told by those present at the advance meetings that were held that he came down each morning with a question or a fact gleaned from the book.

I always thought that if they were to meet under normal circumstances, Reagan was exactly the kind of American that the Russians and Gorbachev would like, an American icon, a “cowboy” who was genuine, funny, and patriotic. I worried that perhaps he might be muted by State Department advisors and experts and I wanted him to feel comfortable about just being himself. I tried to give him a sense of the multiple problems faced by the Soviet government and Gorbachev, as well as the hardships, fears, talents and hopes of the Russian people. Most importantly, I wanted him to know that they were not a monolith marching as one toward a glorious Communist future, but a people of vast contrasts and contradictions. I once wrote him an 11 page memo filled with true stories I had experienced to illustrate the contrasts in Russian life and the problems that Gorbachev had to face. I watched the Geneva meeting on television in Leningrad with a group of Russian friends. It was the first time that Reagan had been seen in person on Soviet television. The sight of our president bounding out, hatless and coatless on a cold morning, to greet an apprehensive Gorbachev informally, and then proceeding to put his arm around Gorbachev and escort him inside—a human, brilliant gesture—was an indelible image that had an electric effect on the Russians.

I would say that the most important thing that helped to evolve Reagan's thinking was religion. After his close brush with death in March of 1981, Reagan told Deaver that "the rest of his days belonged to God and that he had a mission." It was once said that Russia was the church and the church was Russia, so I was startled the first time I met Reagan to find that no one had told the President of the United States anything about the historic role nor the lasting power of Orthodoxy on Russian life and the psyche of the Russians—even those who were not religious. At that time of official repression, 55 million Russians were willing to say that they were Orthodox (almost three times as many as were in the Communist party); today 75 percent say so. Reagan was a very religious man who did not wear his religion on his sleeve. Macfarlane confirmed to me how important it was to Reagan to learn that the Soviet Union was not an atheistic state, and that despite all persecution, many of the Russians had courageously refused to give up their ancient religion. Once he learned about this he asked me many questions and we talked about it often. Before his trip to Moscow in 1988, I suggested that he visit the Danilovskii Monastery, which had a very interesting history, both ancient and contemporary. He did so with dramatic results. Early in his meetings with Gorbachev, Reagan asked me point blank, "Why does Gorbachev talk about God so much?" This was at a time when our academics and journalists were saying that this was not important. (When Gorbachev was asked in France whether he had been baptized, he answered, "Yes, isn't everybody?" This very unusual admission by a Soviet leader was not considered worth a line in the *New York Times*.) Later, I had a chance to ask Gorbachev the question that Reagan had asked and got a very interesting and lengthy answer.

At a meeting of Soviet specialists (all male except for me) at the White House before Reagan's trip to Moscow, I spoke up about the vital role in society played by Russian women, who at the time made up 51 percent of the working force of the Soviet population. I suggested that if I were a politician, I would say something about their contributions. Reagan took my suggestion, and his remarks about the importance of the women in the USSR resonated widely.

I always felt that my position was not to act as a reporter and interrogate him on his positions but to respond to his questions. Finally, however, after some 18 meetings, just before Reagan and Gorbachev met at the Reykjavík Summit in 1986, when we were having lunch, I summoned the

courage to ask, “Mr. President, what do you want from the Russians?” Without a moment’s hesitation he answered swiftly and strongly, “I want to get rid of those atomic weapons – every one!” Just before we parted, I told him that Russians always talked in proverbs and that there was one which might prove useful; I taught him “Trust but verify” in both English and Russian. He loved it and repeated it often. Indeed, on December 8<sup>th</sup>, when he and Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the first U.S.-Soviet Treaty to provide for destruction of nuclear weapons and on-site inspections, Reagan repeated the proverb again and Gorbachev asked him, “Why do you use that all the time?” Reagan replied jovially, “Because I like it!”

## **RESPECT**

So what was different about President Reagan’s approach and what is its relevance to today? From the beginning, Reagan, who was always an extremely courteous man, treated Gorbachev with respect, as an equal. He did not scold him as if he were a bad child who didn’t do his homework, but treated him as a partner with whom one could talk and work out problems. Gorbachev appreciated this and later told me, “I thought I was going to meet a dinosaur. Instead I met a *chelovek*” (a real human being). During the past eight years, by not according Russians the respect they feel they merit, we have done a brilliant job of bringing out the worst in them and hardening attitudes.

## **TRUST**

Mutual respect leads to trust, if not necessarily agreement – although it can lay a foundation for it. Reagan uniquely for the first time was able to create an atmosphere of trust between a U.S. President and a communist leader. The importance of this is today was demonstrated by the fact that President Dmitrii Medvedev referred to it specifically in a recent speech at the Foreign Policy association in Washington, saying that “today there is no trust between the United States and Russia.” Personally, I believe that in creating an atmosphere of trust, Reagan helped Gorbachev achieve his steps for liberalization in the Soviet Union by not applying pressures that could have strengthened the Soviet Union’s right wing.

## **OPEN MIND**

Without giving up any of his principles or the national interest of the U.S., Ronald Reagan had the imagination to see beyond the ubiquitous Cold War stereotypes that seem to be set in stone and dominate official thinking in Washington today. For the past eight years there has been a rising chorus of Russia bashing, growing ever more strident. We seem to have fallen into seeing Russia exclusively as an “aggressor” and as “expansive.” We need to get over these stereotypes in a hurry. For starters we need to stop calling President Medvedev, demeaningly, a “puppet.” This is disrespectful. As everything in Russia, the situation is far more complex than our simplifications. Medvedev has been working hard to make his mark and to push for legal reforms. In a country rife with corruption, this is a Herculean task. We need to recognize the efforts that he is making in this direction and not always talk about what is not yet done, but recognize a bit more the steps they feel they have made. There has perhaps never been such an abyss between the way the United States and Russia look at the world as there is today. The fault is not only on their side. While adamantly opposed to the communist regime, and always championing American democratic principles, Reagan was capable of understanding and recognizing the positive contributions the Russian people had made to the world and to take into consideration the many problems they faced, as well as the fact that they have their own national interests which may not always be in agreement with our views. Today, Washington seems to be living in a dream world in which there is only one superpower and others are merely followers of its agenda. Not making room for others, including Russia, and expecting them to be completely satisfied with all existing international economic and political arrangements is unrealistic and will only produce greater resentment toward Washington.

## **STOP LECTURING**

Reagan was a great patriot who always considered the best interests of our nation, yet was able to put aside belligerent posturing and lecturing. He spoke strongly but softly, without waving the big stick. Still today, Russia is always seen as the usual suspect, prone to aggression. Russian actions are perceived as they were in the Cold War years: purely in a negative context, with no inclination to see any justification or motivation for these actions other than “aggressive



imperialistic intentions.” A case in point is the recent imbroglio in Georgia, in which we rushed in with blame without even bothering to consider whether all the facts were in. Nobody seems to want to examine the details that might complicate this customary view of the world, reminding me of the old saying, “My mind is made up – don’t confuse me with facts.” The customary attitude is that Russians are nothing more than “barbarians and aggressors” and that one should not expect anything else from them. We need to emulate Reagan’s good sense and consider carefully: Is the West really more secure with Russia as an aggressive competitor and enemy than as an ally?

### **THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX**

One of problems is that the phalanx of advisors and experts who surround any president often try to prevent him from hearing anything that goes against their own advice and policy views. Reagan had the courage to try to go out of this box to seek what he was missing and to make up his own mind. An excellent example of this was in Geneva, when at their initial meeting Reagan took Gorbachev off for an hour and a half alone, with only translators present. In the hermetically sealed White House atmosphere this was a bold and highly unusual step, but it laid the ground work for their future relations. The fact is that the U.S. policy understanding of Soviet Russia on which the U.S. built its policy actually bore very little, very weak resemblance to the real country. Today, the United States president needs to work to bring the American idea of Russia more in line with the real Russia of today. He may have to take the kind of bold step that Reagan took in Geneva to find out.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Russia was probably one of the most pro-American countries in the world, where both the authorities and the public were ready to follow American recipes for rearranging the economy, looked to the United States as a guru in matters of democracy, and were ready to acknowledge us in matters of internal policy. Today, sadly, Russia is a country with strong anti-American sentiments at all levels of authority and society, a country where doing something to spite the United States sometimes turns into an end in itself – not a rational political choice. We might well ask who lost Russia and why? Who will turn this situation around? And how? Out of our own national interest, the new president needs to chart a new

foreign policy course, a fresh and unbiased view of relations with Russia, one which no longer relies so automatically on Cold War models.

I have just returned from several weeks in Moscow and St. Petersburg and talks with officials on the highest level. I met no anti-American rhetoric and no lecturing. On the contrary, I heard again and again their desire to work with the U.S. – but not always on our terms only. Let's start as Ronald Reagan did, with recognition that we need each other more now than perhaps ever. We have managed to make our relationship work well in space, and now we badly need to make it work better on earth. Reagan left relations on better footing than they had been before, only to have his legacy destroyed almost as soon as he left the White House. I believe we need to take a closer look at what he did and how, as well as add a generous dash of humility to some of our actions. No one is right all the time and no one is wrong all the time. Russia has changed dramatically since its communist ordeal. I have had the opportunity to witness these changes. It is still a nation in active transition and there are still a good many things that not only we, but they, would like to change in their country. If the present Russia is only 20 years old, why always treat them like a woman scorned? Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of President Reagan was, in the words of Senator John Danforth at Reagan's funeral, that "He never changed an adversary into an enemy". In 2001, a British academic said dismissively in the presence of Gorbachev that he had always considered Reagan "rather an intellectual lightweight." Gorbachev countered vigorously: "No you are wrong. President Reagan was a man of real insight, sound political judgment and courage."

To hear such an opinion expressed about a president of the United States by a man once considered an "enemy" gives the new American president something to aim for.