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Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II - The End of the Cold War

Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II were men of the same moment. They were both horrified by nuclear war, they both hated communism and the Soviet Union, they both had been shot but survived and they both forgave their assailants. They had also both been superior high school athletes and, curiously, both were actors before becoming the most important players on a world stage.

John Paul II was almost an afterthought after his predecessor, John Paul I, died unexpectedly after less than a month in office. Reagan of course had been a long shot all of his life. Both the president and the pope grew up poor, with no connections, but ended up being two of the greatest men of the 20 th century. They both had winning smiles and indomitable personalities. At his first remarks from the balcony of St. Peter's, the pope made clear what he thought of the Soviets. Reagan of course had been railing against communism for years.

As Washington this week celebrates the visit of Pope Francis, it's worth remember the first time a pontiff and a president worked together. Together with the daughter of a grocer, John Paul and Reagan defeated the greatest enemy to human freedom and dignity which ever existed.

John Paul II who had lost his mother early in life and his father and brother to the ravages of a war torn Poland, was an unexpected successor to Peter. Like Reagan, John Paul II had an optimism and a deep-seated hope that the world could be a better place and that leadership quality was undeniable.

And, most importantly, they both believed they were called by God to do great things for world freedom. Indeed, John Paul II said in 1982 that America was "called, above all, to fulfill its mission in the service ... those indispensable conditions of justice and freedom, of truth and love that are the foundations of lasting peace."

Thomas Carlyle said history is but the biographies of great men and he may have had the likes of Reagan and John Paul II in mind when he uttered that phrase a century before. John Paul II was canonized in 2014 but curiously, while he had two miracles cited , neither was his greatest: the defeat of an "Evil Empire" and the restoration of freedom to millions imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain, including his own native and beloved Poland.

They met many times and Reagan wrote often in his diaries of meeting with the pope to discuss world affairs. The pope, meantime, wrote in his first encyclical that religious freedom was the most important human right, a direct shot across the bow of the Soviets. He also immediately began to demote or ease out church officials who wanted to "accommodate" the Soviets.

Not all presidents and popes get along so well, nor alter history so dramatically. When President John Kennedy visited Pope Paul VI in 1963, he simply shook his hand rather than kissing the ring of the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. JFK, the first Catholic president, was hypersensitive to the false charge that he put his loyalty to the church above his loyalty to the Constitution.

When Lyndon Johnson visited Paul in New York City in 1965 – during the first papal visit to the United States – he gave the pontiff a silver framed autographed photo of himself. Later, he gave the pope a bust of himself. Even Obama has never gone that far.

The first president to meet with a pope was Woodrow Wilson, who had an audience with Benedict XV, but it wasn't until the Grand Alliance between John Paul II, Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that a global strategy to defeat Soviet Communism was enacted which so alter and change the world.

Even during World War II, the concordat signed by Adolph Hitler and the Vatican which simply protected the rights of the church in Germany, opened up the false charge that the Vatican was pro-Nazi. Hence, the Allies and the church never effected a joint agreement against the Axis powers. The concordat was a narrow, self-protecting measure, but was seen by some as limiting the effectiveness of the church in fighting Nazism. The church never got the credit it deserved for being an early critic of Nazi Germany's anti-Semitism.

Though the United States had some sort of relations with the Vatican going back to Washington's time, it was Reagan who formalized diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Reagan sent an ambassador, a move which sparked criticism in some quarters, pleased American Catholics and the head of the Catholic Church, and, more importantly, helped sharpen the alliance.

For Reagan, there was nothing more important that the defeat of the Soviet Union and when it became clear the Vatican was joining in the fight against "Godless Communism," it must have sent shivers up the spines of the old collectivists in the Politburo. Reagan was mounting a counteroffensive against the Kremlin and the addition of the Vatican was crucial.

Karol Wojtyla, as John Paul II was born, may have been more anticommunist than Reagan. He'd grown up in Poland, under the mailed fist of Soviet hegemony. Once he became pope, his first foreign visits was to his homeland, a way of sticking a log in the eye of the Kremlin. He also boosted the strength of Vatican radio so as to overcome Moscow's attempts to jam his broadcasts. His trip to Warsaw was seen by many as the first, renewed shot fired in the war on communism and indeed, renowned historian John Lewis Gaddis said that "when John Paul II kissed the ground at the Warsaw airport on June 2, 1979, he began the process by which communism in Poland – and ultimately everywhere – would come to an end." Maybe. There was still much do be done but no one can doubt the lift in the West's morale from the pope's trip to communist-occupied, but not dominated, Poland.

After the rise of Thatcher in 1979, the rise of John Paul II, also in 1979 and the rise of Reagan in 1980, the economic, moral and military alliance against Soviet communism was complete. Reagan was arming freedom fighters, the Vatican was sending food and medical supplies and Thatcher was firming up European support, calling on them to act like men. Each understood permanent offense. Each understood the psychological advantage of beating an idea with a better idea. Each understood the bully pulpit and each used it to berate and humiliate the threadbare arguments for collectivism.

Eleven years later, a wall fell and the Soviets were consigned to the ash-heap of history.

