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Reagan's enduring legacy of ignorance

By Rehman Rashid

RONALD Reagan was a charming fellow. He had an ingratiating manner, ruddy cheeks, a pompadour, and a husky, earnest voice he never needed to raise because his audiences hung onto every word for the sheer mellifluous melody of their delivery.

Reagan had that great Presidential Look; so widely since emulated and never matched, not even by Hollywood, much less the White House: the sharply cut dark suits; the ramrod spine and barrel-chested stride. He had the physical stature to make of the presidential podium a platform over which to tower, not a shield behind which to cower.

It was clear why they called Reagan "The Great Communicator". He was so appealing, it didn't matter what he said. He could paint the world as black-and-white, inside-out and upside-down as he pleased, as long as he kept radiating an optimism born of the good and simple convictions of a good and simple man.

It was astonishing how powerful such superficialities were in the dominance Reagan wielded over his country and the world in the 1980s.

On a global scale, of course, Reagan was not alone. Margaret Thatcher and Dr Mahathir Mohamad also came online at about the same time; you could tell the capitalist Free World was in a mood to spin on its heels toward some serious neo-conservative wealth creation after its acrimonious and inconclusive 30-year quarrel with the Left.

In this they had a fatefully kindred spirit in the newly risen, dapperly groomed and historically doomed General Secretary of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reagan's down-home simplicity allowed him to see that the best way to defeat Communism was three-fold:

1. Have enough weapons to vaporise the Soviet Union;
2. Have a "Strategic Defence Initiative" to prevent the Soviet Union vaporising the United States in return; and,
3. Conspicuously spend an awesome amount of money in the process.

The last part was easy. Ideology be damned: The proof of the pudding was in the eating, and boy could America eat. Reagan gave his richest citizens such tax breaks as to have them spend his first term living large and lavish, ushering in the era of "Reaganomics".

It was graced by what was known as "The Trickle-Down Effect": Make your fat cats happy, and they'll be generous and benevolent with the rodents beneath their tables.

Reagan trimmed government and cut taxes. Japan entered the richest phase of its history as American consumers did what they do better than anyone else: Consume. The stock markets reigned supreme. And the US plunged headlong into the red to the tune of US\$200 billion a year to pay for Parts 1 & 2 of the Reagan Art of War.

Reagan took America on a rich, smug, self-confident strut, sending Moscow the message that whatever the Soviet Union had ever wanted or could ever want, from bread to blue jeans to global dominance, America already had, and in such abundance as Communism could never hope to deliver.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was an "Evil Empire", and the Reagan Doctrine's support of anti-Communist movements around the world was underscored by the browbeating of Leftist or otherwise unacceptable regimes in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Grenada was invaded; El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Bolivia

destabilised; Libya and Lebanon shelled, Iran harassed, Iraq supported, and right-wing rebels everywhere funded and armed by the spoils of other wars.

It wasn't Ronald Reagan who ended the Cold War. No one knows exactly what he said to Gorbachev as they strolled through Red Square in Moscow in the late spring of 1988, but it must have been as persuasive as everything else about him, because the General Secretary of the Soviet Union ended up throwing in the Communist towel, ending the Cold War.

Perhaps the world was right to celebrate the ensuing collapse of the Berlin Wall as per Ronald Reagan's famous instructions at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin on June 12, 1987: "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalisation: Come here to this gate! Mister Gorbachev, open this gate! Mister Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

This has since brought a world of change to Europe, the Russian mafia and the English Premier League.

Reaganism's lasting damage, however, was done by the terribly mistaken notion that it was an applicable "doctrine" and not an individual man. Reagan's foreign policy, which instituted the pre-emptive and unilateral exercise of overwhelming might to advance American interests around the world, succeeded on his personal charm. As critics 20 years ago were charging, there was no inherent value in his policies' specious ideological underpinnings, and considerable danger.

Ignored at the time, those critics have been proved right. The world now knows the consequences of Reaganism when essayed by such lesser mortals as those now occupying the White House. From Ronald W. Reagan's success with the "Evil Empire" to George W. Bush's failure with the "Axis of Evil" is a great and shameful decline.

In the giant's wake, only midgets remained.

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