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WAR STORIES

The Two Reagans

Which version of the Gipper would Republicans like Obama to emulate?

By Fred Kaplan

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When President Barack Obama starts stepping out on the world stage, trying to strike deals with foreign leaders, a chorus of Republicans and right-wing pundits will implore him to take his cues from Ronald Reagan, who—the popular history has it—brought the Soviet Union to its knees through military strength and iron will.

In anticipation of these urgings, everyone should read [the excerpt](#) in this month's *Vanity Fair* (online edition only) from James Mann's forthcoming book [The Rebellion of Ronald Reagan](#), which reveals that the hard-liners' hero was, in fact, a babbling nut job who was lucky that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, a genuine reformer desperate for Western assistance, was on the receiving end. Mann also shows conclusively that, in the end, Reagan won the Cold War not by standing tough but by offering a gesture of peace.

The lesson that Obama and his team ought to take away from the tale is that Reagan should not be regarded as a model of any sort—and that his Republican champions continue to distort his true legacy.

Much of Mann's story—based on interviews and recently declassified archives—is eye-poppingly hilarious.

In the days before the Washington summit of December 1987, Gen. Colin Powell, then the national security adviser, briefed Reagan on the details of the nuclear-weapons treaty they were about to wrap up—but all Reagan wanted to know was at what point he should give Gorbachev a set of gold cuff links that he'd picked out as a gift.

At their first one-on-one talk, Gorbachev tried to talk substance, but Reagan kept telling interminable anecdotes and anti-Soviet jokes, leading Gorbachev at one point to mutter, "*On boltayet yeshchy*" ("He's babbling again"). The next day, in a larger meeting that included 34 U.S. and Soviet officials, Reagan repeated the performance, causing Secretary of State George Shultz to scold him afterward. "Mr. President, that was a disaster," Shultz said. "You can't just sit there telling jokes."

The following May, in their face-to-face talks at the summit in Moscow, Reagan spent an astonishing amount of time trying to convince a clearly annoyed Gorbachev of God's existence. (The National Security Council's Soviet affairs director, Rudolf Perina, who took notes at the meeting, told Mann, "Reagan thought he could convert Gorbachev, or make him see the light.")

And yet the real dirty secret about Reagan—the one that Republicans would rather not remember or, in many cases, never knew—is that, at heart, he had no stomach for war and detested nuclear weapons. (This point was persuasively made in Paul Lettow's underappreciated 2006 book, [Ronald Reagan and His Quest To Abolish Nuclear Weapons](#), which also noted that Reagan's top aides went to great lengths to keep his feelings on the subject under wraps.)

Mann further discovered, while digging through the Reagan Library's archives, that a key informal adviser to Reagan on Soviet matters was Suzanne Massie, who, along with her husband, Robert Massie, had written the best-sellers *Nicholas and Alexandra* and *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*. In March 1988, Massie delivered to Reagan a plea from Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Union's former ambassador to the United States and an adviser to Gorbachev. Dobrynin wanted it known that many Kremlin officials believed that Reagan still viewed the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" destined to wind up on the "ash heap of history." If his views on this had changed, Dobrynin wrote, "it would be important for the president to state this prior to the Moscow summit."

Two months later, the summit took place. After one of their meetings, Reagan and Gorbachev took a walk through Red Square. A reporter asked Reagan if he still believed the Soviet Union was an "evil empire." Reagan famously replied, "No, I was talking about another time and another era." The next day, at a press conference, he elaborated, marveling at the "profound changes" that Gorbachev had brought into being.

Mann writes that these comments—which were seen as an answer to Dobrynin's plea—strengthened Gorbachev's hand at the Communist Party congress a few weeks later, allowing him to argue that his next round of reforms could be passed, and further steps toward disarmament taken, without any danger.

In his first term, from 1981-85, Reagan escalated East-West tensions, spoke in bellicose rhetoric, and jacked up military spending to 30-year highs. This is the Reagan whom Republican chieftains worship and insist that all subsequent presidents emulate. But in his second term, which coincided with Gorbachev's rise to power, Reagan flipped, making dramatic diplomatic overtures to Moscow and accepting equally dramatic proposals in turn.

Few remember, but many of the Republicans who now tout Reagan's accomplishments pummeled him at the time for "betraying" his followers and their Cold War ideology.

The pressures of those first four years—combined with the spiraling collapse of the Soviet system, which Gorbachev was keen to detect—helped bring Moscow to the table. But if Reagan had kept up his hard line (or if either of Gorbachev's ailing predecessors, Yuri Andropov or Konstantin Chernenko, had lived a little longer), the tensions would only have grown fiercer.

[Ultimately, it was Reagan's reversal](#)—the softening of his rhetoric, the willingness to negotiate, the reassurance of respect that Dobrynin had requested—that opened the way to the crucial rapprochement and the Cold War's finale.

When Republicans tell Obama to act more like Ronald Reagan, a suitable response might be: "Which one?"

*Fred Kaplan writes the "War Stories" column for **Slate**. His book, [Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power](#), is now out in paperback. He can be reached at war_stories@hotmail.com.*

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