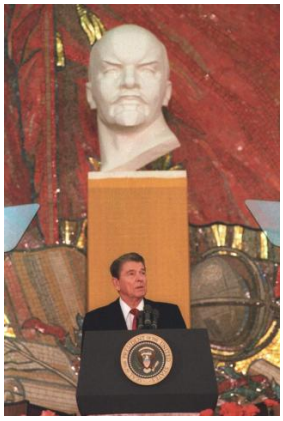
AWESOME stories

Reagan's Address to Moscow State University Students



President Ronald Reagan, addressing students at Moscow State University, on May 31, 1988.
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> *Progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom - freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.*
>
> President Ronald Reagan
> Speaking to Students at Moscow State University
> May 31, 1988

In the middle of final-exams week, during May of 1988, Ronald Reagan visited Moscow State University. Nearing the end of his time as America's leader, President Reagan had gone through a kind of schooling himself.

At the start of his presidency, in 1981, Reagan had called Russia, and the Soviet Union, an "Evil Empire." America's leader despised communism and tried to prevent its spread into other countries. As he once said:

> *We don't mistrust each other because we're armed; we're armed because we mistrust each other.*

Then Reagan met Mikhail Gorbachev, who became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985.

Personal relationships matter in life and in politics. As Reagan got to know Gorbachev, he started to agree with Margaret Thatcher's observation:

> *I like Mr Gorbachev. We can do business together.*

A strong believer in personal relationships—even between world leaders with very different world views—Reagan insisted on meeting Gorbachev in a one-on-one meeting. It took place in a very plain and small boat house in Geneva, Switzerland during November of 1985.

Sitting in two chairs, in front of a roaring fireplace, the two men were alone except for their interpreters (and photographers). On that day they started to build a personal relationship.

From a political and philosophical standpoint, the two could not have been more different:

- Reagan was an avowed anti-communist who believed in capitalism;
- Gorbachev was a "dyed-in-the-wool Marxist."

Despite their ideological differences, the two men liked each other. They were experiencing the benefits of talking "to" people instead of "about" them.

As Reagan and Thatcher worked with Gorbachev, over the years, they observed the Soviet leader's new approach:

- The General Secretary encouraged "openness" (*glasnost*) in his own country.
- He encouraged a restructuring of the Soviet Union's political and economic systems (*perestroika*).

By May of 1988, the President and the General Secretary had progressed far-enough in their relationship-

building that Gorbachev allowed Reagan to speak to Moscow-State-University students. At the beginning of his talk he wishes the students good luck, with their exams, in Russian.

The President gave the students his thoughts on freedom—and how freedom, instead of fear, allows individuals and countries to progress:

> *But progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication. The renowned scientist, scholar, and founding father of this university, Mikhail Lomonosov, knew that. "It is common knowledge," he said, "that the achievements of science are considerable and rapid, particularly once the yoke of slavery is cast off and replaced by the freedom of philosophy."*
>
> *You know, one of the first contacts between your country and mine took place between Russian and American explorers. The Americans were members of Cook's last voyage on an expedition searching for an Arctic passage; on the island of Unalaska, they came upon the Russians, who took them in, and together with the native inhabitants, held a prayer service on the ice.*

A bit later in his speech, Reagan addresses the issue of fear—and how fear of change often stifles growth. He gets there by first quoting Boris Pasternak, a famous Russian author who wrote *Doctor Zhivago*, and then by telling an American story (about Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid):

> *... Boris Pasternak, in the novel "Dr. Zhivago" ... writes: "I think that if the beast who sleeps in man could be held down by threats—any kind of threat, whether of jail or of retribution after death—then the highest emblem of humanity would be the lion tamer in the circus with his whip, not the prophet who sacrificed himself. But this is just the point—what has for centuries raised man above the beast is not the cudgel, but an inward music—the irresistible power of unarmed truth."*
>
> *The irresistible power of unarmed truth. Today the world looks expectantly to signs of change, steps toward greater freedom in the Soviet Union. We watch and we hope as we see positive changes taking place.*
>
> *There are some, I know, in your society who fear that change will bring only disruption and discontinuity, who fear to embrace the hope of the future—sometimes it takes faith.*
>
> *It's like that scene in the cowboy movie Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, which some here in Moscow recently had a chance to see. The posse is closing in on the two outlaws, Butch and Sundance, who find themselves trapped on the edge of a cliff, with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the raging rapids below. Butch turns to Sundance and says their only hope is to jump into the river below, but Sundance refuses. He says he'd rather fight it out with the posse, even though they're hopelessly outnumbered. Butch says that's suicide and urges him to jump, but Sundance still refuses and finally admits, "I can't swim." Butch breaks up laughing and says, "You crazy fool, the fall will probably kill you."*
>
> *And, by the way, both Butch and Sundance made it, in case you didn't see the movie. I think what I've just been talking about is perestroika and what its goals are.*

War, as Reagan stresses, comes about not from the people of countries but from the governments of countries. When people know each other, and work together, they can minimize their fear of each other. In do doing, they can minimize the risks of war:

> *I've been told that there's a popular song in your country—perhaps you know it—whose evocative refrain asks the question, "Do the Russians want a war?" In answer it says: "Go ask that silence lingering in the air, above the birch and poplar there; beneath those trees the soldiers lie. Go ask my mother, ask my wife; then you will have to ask no more, 'Do the Russians want a war?'"*
>
> *But what of your one-time allies? What of those who embraced you on the Elbe? What if we were to ask the watery graves of the Pacific or the European battlefields where America's fallen were buried far from home? What if we were to ask their mothers, sisters, and sons, do Americans want war? Ask us, too, and you'll find the same answer, the same longing in every heart.*
>
> *People do not make wars; governments do. And no mother would ever willingly sacrifice her sons for territorial gain, for economic advantage, for ideology. A people free to choose will always choose peace.*

Known as an upbeat man filled with hope about many things, Reagan ends his speech to the Moscow-University students with these words:

> *We do not know what the conclusion will be of this journey, but we're hopeful that the promise of reform will be fulfilled. In this Moscow spring, this May 1988, we may be allowed that hope: that freedom, like the fresh green sapling planted over Tolstoy's grave, will blossom forth at last in the rich fertile soil of your people and culture. We may be allowed to hope that the marvelous sound of a new openness will keep rising through, ringing through, leading to a new world of reconciliation, friendship, and peace.*

As a result of their hard work, Reagan and Gorbachev not only became friends, they each made a major contribution to positive changes in the relationship between their respective countries.

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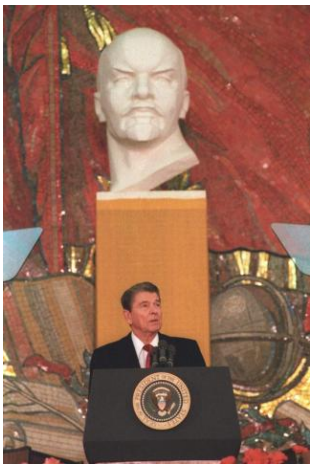
Media Stream



President Reagan Speaks to Students at Moscow State University
Image of President Reagan, addressing students at Moscow State University on 31 May 1988, online via Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Public Domain
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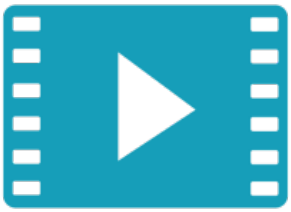

Thatcher, Gorbachev & Reagan - Ending the Cold War
Clip of Charles Moore interview with Peter Robinson for "Uncommon Knowledge," sponsored by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

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