

Peter Robinson:

Welcome to this conference, "Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II: the Partnership That Changed the World." Let's set the scene. By the late 1970s, the Soviet Union had been in existence for more than six decades— and controlled Eastern Europe for more than three. In the Soviet Union itself, a Gulag imprisoning hundreds of thousands. In Eastern Europe, communist regimes that relied on secret police, their own armed forces, and tens of thousands of troops of the Red Army that were stationed in strategic positions throughout the continent. Of course, in Berlin, a wall, armed guards, barbed wire, dog runs.

Then, in October 1979, a Polish archbishop named Karol Wojtyła was elected supreme pontiff. Appearing on the balcony at St. Peter's to offer his first blessing as John Paul II, the new pope said this: "Be not afraid." Again, in the late 1970s, the Warsaw Pact had achieved a huge advantage in conventional forces. The Soviets had deployed hundreds of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Eastern Europe within easy range of Paris and London. A limited, coastal force only a few years before, the Soviet navy was now capable of projecting power anywhere in the world. Soviet aid had enabled the North Vietnamese to humiliate the United States, and the Soviets had trained and supplied Cuban forces that were active in Angola, East Germans advisors who were active in Ethiopia, and local guerrillas in Nicaragua.

Then, in November 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected. "Would you like to hear my theory of the Cold War?" Reagan asked an aide. "My theory of the Cold War is simple. We win and they lose."

Karol Wojtyła and Ronald Reagan. During our conference today, we'll speak often about all that they had in common. Both men grew up in obscurity; and each experienced his full share of suffering, including, of course, assassination attempts. But here at the outset, it might be useful to note that each man possessed the first of the cardinal virtues: courage.