

Peter Robinson: Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II, the partnership that changed the world. Today, we're in Washington at a conference devoted to that subject. With us today, an eyewitness to the relationship between President Reagan and Pope John Paul II, the former Attorney General of the United States, Edwin Meese III.

Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge. I'm Peter Robinson, a graduate of Yale and the Law School at the University of California at Berkeley. Edwin Meese III served as Legal Affairs Secretary for the newly elected governor of California, Ronald Reagan, from 1967 to 1968, and then as Chief of Staff to the governor from 1969 until Governor Reagan left office in early 1975. From 1981 to 1985, Mr. Meese served in the Reagan Administration as counselor to the president. From 1985 until the end of the administration, he served as the 75th Attorney General of the United States.

Mr. Meese now holds emeritus status as the Heritage Foundation's Ronald Reagan Chair in Public Policy, and emeritus, once again, as a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution. No one knew Ronald Reagan better and this is Ronald Reagan on Attorney General Meese: "If Ed Meese is not a good man, there are no good men." Ed Meese, welcome.

Edwin Meese III: Thank you.

Peter Robinson: Ed, two quotations, both from 1982: one is the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. He's writing after a visit to Moscow: "Those in the U.S. who think the Soviet Union is on the verge of collapse are kidding themselves." The second is Ronald Reagan addressing the British Parliament, also in 1982: "In an ironic sense, Karl Marx was right. We are witnessing today a great revolutionary crisis. But the crisis is happening not in the west, but in the Soviet Union." How did Ronald Reagan see what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. of Harvard University missed?

Edwin Meese III: Well, one of the things is Ronald Reagan went into that study of communism with an open mind, and it was not determined by his ideology, as I suspect that Mr. Schlesinger was at least was somewhat misguided by his own ideology. First of all, most people don't realize that Ronald Reagan was a voracious reader. He liked to study. He had studied the founding. He was very well versed in the Constitution. He was well versed in the Bible. He had an enormous repertoire of information that he used. That's why discussion was given this morning about his speech writing.

Before he would do anything else, before the speech writers would get working, he would give the concept of a speech. And then later on as they went, he edited really based upon all the things that he knew, but one of the things he knew was communism. Because in the 1940s, when he was president of the Screen Actors Guild, as he called it, his union, the Communist Party USA was trying to take over the movie industry because they wanted to use it for propaganda, obviously. And they were infiltrating the various unions – the cameraman's union, the grips' union, stage managers' union – and they tried to also take over the Screen Actors Guild.

And so, Ronald Reagan literally led all of those unions in defeating the Communists. That got him interested in the subject, and he read a great deal about it, both domestic communism, communism theory and also international communism. And so, he had formed his own ideas by the time he became governor and already was talking about these ideas of how do we overcome what was then our enemy in the Cold War.

Peter Robinson: I'm embarrassed to admit this, but the way you put it just now had never occurred to me before. We listened this morning to the panel of Poles talk about what communism was like. Obviously, for Ronald Reagan in Hollywood, in those days, it was not like living in Poland, but he had direct experience of them.

Edwin Meese III: Yes, he did, even to the point where he would come to work in the studios armed because there were threats on his life.

Peter Robinson: A man with a plan. Let me quote your 1992 memoir with Reagan: "Reagan was more than simply anticommunist. He was an anticommunist with a game plan." Can you explain that, Ed?

Edwin Meese III: Well, he actually had a strategy. First of all, he knew that they were vulnerable from an economic standpoint, because so much of all of their national wealth was being put into supporting their military and their aggressiveness around the world. So he knew they were economically vulnerable, but he also had this strong belief that freedom ultimately will overcome oppression. He knew that it's very difficult for any government, even a very oppressive government like the Soviets had, to keep their people under wraps for a long period of time. Ultimately, the human spirit would result in people wanting to be free. He was very sympathetic to the captive nations, particularly because these were not just Russians who happened to have a Soviet form of government, but these were countries that many of them had been free before they had been taken over by the Soviet movement.

Peter Robinson: I want to go back to this point, because it's so basic, and it's the kind of thing that's likely to be forgotten in coming years – that is, the extent to which Ronald Reagan in holding these views and acting on them stood out. Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, the order of the day was detente. When Gerald Ford became president after Nixon resigned, he refused to meet Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn because of fears of offending the Soviet Union.

Jimmy Carter gave a speech at Notre Dame in which he talked about overcoming our "inordinate fear of communism," and then this is absolutely the dominant mode of thinking in both parties, Nixon, Carter, and then of course we have Dick Allen's famous account. Ronald Reagan in 1977 is a former governor. He hasn't declared for president yet, and they're talking about foreign policy and Ronald Reagan says, "Dick, would you like to hear my theory of the Cold War?" "Well, of course, governor." "My theory of the Cold War is simple. We win and they lose." The question is what gave him the courage, the insight?

How did he so self-confidently place himself in opposition to the entire mindset?

Edwin Meese III: Well, he wasn't just being facetious as some people have accused him at the time being when that became known, but actually, what he was saying is, "I have a strategy which is not just giving in or allowing a moral equivalency between Marxism and freedom. It is a matter of knowing their vulnerability, both from an ideological standpoint and from an economic standpoint." It was his feeling that they can be beaten, and that freedom can win.

In other words, it was a belief in the system that had been the foundation for American political thought since the 1780s, and he felt that what we knew in this country – our sense of freedom – that ultimately can overcome even at the tyranny of a Soviet Union.

Peter Robinson: You describe the elements of the president's thinking and you write this: "It followed that the United States and the Western world in general should stop retreating before the communist challenge and begin competing in earnest against the Soviets." Again, explain.

Edwin Meese III: Well, it was an idea of competing in a number of ways. It was not to engage in military action, because that's the last thing Ronald Reagan wanted to do or felt it was necessary to do. But to compete in terms of economics, to compete in terms of information, to compete in terms of persuasion of people, to support resistance movements in the communist world, to support leaders like Lech Wałęsa and others like that. In other words, to actually let people around the world know that Marxism-Leninism is not foreordained and is not necessarily going to succeed, but that, in fact, there can be strong nonmilitary, but nevertheless, ideological striking at the sense of patriotism, faith, and that there are a number of ways in which to compete with, and ultimately, overcome the whole communist regime.

Peter Robinson: In terms of the strategic defense initiative (or SDI). You held the first meetings on that subject in your office in the West Wing. Then, in a televised address from the Oval Office on March 23rd, 1983, the president announced the initiative: research that might lead to a system that would enable us to destroy incoming ballistic missiles before they could reach their targets. No longer mutual assured destruction, but actual defense against incoming missiles. How did that fit into the president's game plan?

Edwin Meese III: Well, Ronald Reagan had always said, and this goes back to his days as governor, that a nuclear war could not be won and should never be fought. Because the destruction of any such kind of a conflict would just wipe out not just one nation, but perhaps many nations. And so that's why he felt we must be able to do something better than that. He had met with Edward Teller, for example-

Peter Robinson: The great physicist.

Edwin Meese III: Yes, when he was governor – because Ed Teller was then at the University of California, and he talked with him and others. And that was why, when a group of people who have been working on this – Danny Graham and others – had been working on this idea also, and that's why we had this meeting in my office with some people who were very interested in this subject. As a result, we put together a conference with the governor, then with the president in 1982, with Edward Teller. That led then to his idea of being fleshed out into an actual strategy. The next step was to talk with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Within the military, there's always a lot of competition for budget dollars, so there was some resistance in certain areas of the Pentagon. But Ronald Reagan, as he had them develop a strategic plan for our defense, said, "I want you to also look at the idea of a Strategic Defense Initiative, a ballistic missile defense system."

They came back to him about eight months later with their plan, and one of the things they said was, "As we have looked into it, the Joint Chiefs believe that Strategic Defense Initiative, a way of combating a nuclear war through missile defense, is not only militarily necessary, but it is also morally necessary." And so they really gave him the assurance that he was on the right track with SDI. I might say, if the nation had pursued SDI with the same energy and enthusiasm that he gave it during the rest of his term as president, then I think today we would have a very robust system already deployed and make us a lot safer in view of what's happening around the world with two nations that now have nuclear capabilities, which weren't even contemplated as potential nuclear opponents at that time.

Peter Robinson: North Korea and ...

Edwin Meese III: North Korea and Iran.

Peter Robinson: *The New York Times* called the Strategic Defense Initiative "a pipe dream." Margaret Thatcher had doubts about it at the time, but in her memoirs, she wrote that, looking back on it, "Ronald Reagan's original decision on SDI was the single most important of his presidency." Can you explain what *The New York Times* meant when they referred to SDI as a pipe dream?

Edwin Meese III: Well, *The New York Times* is often wrong, let's put it that way charitably, and they were so wrapped up in this whole idea of détente and also quite frankly, not really believing that the Soviet Communism was as much of a threat. They were part of that détente group that felt that even the moral equivalency ideas were not foreign to *The New York Times*. That was why they just had no confidence in it whatsoever. Now Margaret Thatcher's comment was interesting because basically, the whole idea of a détente – rather, of a hedge – against war and the nuclear balance and those kinds of things, were something that, in Europe, was very much the basic idea and the basic foundation of the defense system at that time. NATO was going to be installing a nuclear or potentially nuclear weapons in Europe to combat what the Soviet Union already had there.

One of the things she was worried about, as I read the materials about her later, was she was worried that somehow this would violate or would degrade that sense of a nuclear balance that was preventing war in Europe. I think the more she learned and as indicated by what you've mentioned there, she really came to understand what Ronald Reagan had in mind.

His idea was that we have technological capabilities that were never thought of one generation ago, particularly the generation that preceded his. Look at all the things that have happened there. Why can't we put that same energy, that same good thinking, that same exploration into something that would really prevent nuclear war in the future?

Peter Robinson: Correct me if I'm mistaken, it was also quite an aggressive move. You can't do something like the Strategic Defense Initiative, the research, unless you have a buoyant economy and technical dynamism of the kind the Soviets could never match.

Edwin Meese III: That's correct, and actually, the strong economy was one of the major strategies that he had in dealing with the whole Soviet movement. You remember when he took office in 1981, we had three major problems in our country: number one, we had the deepest economic crisis we'd had since the Great Depression. Secondly, we had a national security threat, and we were heading to a great deal of the jeopardy potentially. Because on the one hand, we had an increasingly aggressive Soviet Union. They had already captivated a good deal of Eastern and Central Europe. They were operating there, or their satellites were, in Africa. We had a Soviet bastion in Cuba, 90 miles off our shore. We had a Marxist bastion in Nicaragua, which was subverting El Salvador, so our own hemisphere was now under attack. It was really a very serious situation.

That's why Ronald Reagan was so intent of, number one, getting a strong economy. Number two, the other problem is while the Soviets were more aggressive, our military had declined considerably in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Another important thing was to take on the military and build up the military to where we had traditionally been during and since World War II. Then finally, he believed it was necessary to engage the Soviet Union on a moral plane. That's why in the "Evil Empire" speech, he felt that it was as important to raise those issues as it was to do the economic, the military and the diplomatic strategies.

Peter Robinson: Once again, from your memoir "With Reagan": "A vivid example of the Reagan strategy in action was the liberation of Poland. Reagan conducted this effort in concert with Pope John Paul II, himself a native of Poland, whom the president greatly admired." Let me ask a word or two about the relationship between those two men. We've heard that [Ronald Reagan's] father was Catholic, but his mother was a member of a small Protestant denomination, the Disciples of Christ, and although I think everyone around him understood he was a man of faith, he didn't go to church often as president. He said it was because of the disruption of the Secret Service. True enough, but it's also organized religion

seems not to have played a central role in his thinking. But then Ronald Reagan admires and cooperates with, or coordinates actions with, the leader of the most organized denomination that exists. What is it in John Paul II that a Protestant kid from the Midwest appreciates?

Edwin Meese III:

Well, first of all, Ronald Reagan had a very strong faith. He had been involved in church activities as a kid. His mother was very active in her church, and she made sure that he was very active all the way through his high school years before he went to college. He was a very active member of that church. And beyond that, he also was very well read. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible.

Paul Kengor, who was here earlier today, has written about Ronald Reagan and his religious faith. One of the things he pointed out was that Ronald Reagan had more allusions to biblical topics and biblical verses in his speeches than all the other presidents put together. Religion was a very important part of his life. The reason you didn't see much about it was he never wanted anyone to think that he was using his religion for political purposes or that he was showing off how religious he was.

I suspected that the actions of some previous presidents may have had something to do with that aversion to being viewed in that way. But, in any event... it's been very interesting that just within the last month now we have, believe it or not, in the *Washington Post*, copies of a letter that he wrote to Nancy's father as he was dying, to give him a capsule version of his religious faith, hoping that that was something that would be helpful to Loyal Davis before he passed on.

Peter Robinson:

December 13, 1981, General Jaruzelski declares martial law in Poland, cuts off communications with the outside world, arrests 6,000 members of Solidarity, on and on it goes... and the president and Pope John Paul II meet in 1982, as I recall. There's coordination of some kind – solidarity. We know the story. Solidarity regains its legal status in 1989 and in 1990; Lech Wałęsa takes office as president of a democratic Poland. Now, a couple of quotations, once again. Dick Allen (Richard Allen), the president's first National Security Advisor, on the relationship between Reagan and the pope: "This was one of the great secret alliances of all time." Second quotation, George Weigel, John Paul II's biographer: "The claim that the two men entered into a conspiracy to affect the downfall of communism is journalistic fantasy." How do you characterize what took place between the White House and the Vatican, and between those two men? What's the correct way for us to understand it?

Edwin Meese III:

Well, it's interesting that even last night, there was a little bit of a dispute between two of the people who were speaking about just what this was and I think that it's somewhere between Dick Allen and George Weigel. First of all, going back to Ronald Reagan and his religious faith, I think it was that faith which made him admire the pope and particularly this pope. Because you had a very strong person on behalf of his faith, on behalf of his church,... Ronald

Reagan admired him as the leader of his church. So it was natural, I think, for him to admire that kind of leadership.

But beyond that, then what you had was two people, both leaders – one in the secular world, one in the religious world – with parallel interests. When those parallel interests were obvious, as what happened in Poland where they were under attack, then it was logical for Ronald Reagan, particularly with his ideas about defeating communism, to cooperate. I'd say what you have is parallel interests. It was not, as George Weigel says, it was not some deal, or as Carl Bernstein wrote about, it was not an alliance or a new treaty or anything like that. It was two people with interests in common who were cooperating, and as they cooperated, they learned to trust and appreciate and like each other.

Peter Robinson: Now, you sat on the National Security Council for all eight years of the administration. Let me ask a couple of questions.

How many times did you believe there was a credible threat that the Soviets might roll into Poland?

Edwin Meese III: Well, I think there was always that possibility, but I don't remember it at any time, particularly during the year 1981, where that appeared to be an imminent threat.

In other words, the Soviets always had large military forces, and they always were using them to oppress or at least be a threat to a whole number of nations, the Balkan countries and several others. But the idea of an imminent threat of that, I can't remember that being talked about prior to December.

Peter Robinson: Did Ronald Reagan's taking office and the military buildup – of course, he barely begun by 1981 – but did that change the psychology? Was there some sense in which Ronald Reagan's presence would have made the Soviets think twice, from the military point of view?

Edwin Meese III: Well, I think in all probability, the answer is yes-

Peter Robinson: But we don't know.

Edwin Meese III: Of course. What is happening at the present time in the Soviet Union, as you remember, Brezhnev was on his last legs.

And then, you had Andropov and Chernenko and, when it came to whether he would meet with a Soviet leader, Ronald Reagan says, "I want to meet with them, but they keep dying on me." Well, finally, in 1985, he got a live one in Gorbachev, and I think that was very important. Because, at that time, Gorbachev was a die-hard Communist, but he also understood the West better than his predecessors. Therefore, certainly by the time he became General Secretary in 1985, I think he realized that the American military was now going

to be the most powerful military in the world, and it was a force that was enough so that the Soviet Union did not have military superiority, which they essentially had up until that time.

Peter Robinson: One more question about your years on the National Security Council. We read, in this book, that book, and other articles, that it's a kind of impressionism. And I want to ask you to fill us in if you would. Bill Casey with CIA is working with Lane Kirkland at AFL-CIO to make sure Solidarity gets funds, copying machines and so forth. Then, Judge Clark and his successors as National Security Advisors are giving information to the Vatican. They're sharing information with the Vatican, Vatican diplomatic corps head sources we don't have, and former General Vernon Walters acts as a kind of emissary. He visits the Vatican. As I recall, it's in the range of a dozen times. All that happened, so the coordination is constant and at quite a high level. There's a lot going on between the Reagan White House and the John Paul II Vatican.

Edwin Meese III: Yes.

Well, it was a logical follow-up. To do this, to provide the ways in which, without using military force, we could strengthen those forces which were combating Marxism and which were constantly moving towards organizing people in the various countries under the yoke of the Soviet Union. And [they were] organizing resistance and, ultimately, organizing a situation where it would not be possible for the Soviet Union to continue, particularly with their aggression, but let alone just to maintain where they were at that particular time. So it was a way in which to carry out the strategy that Ronald Reagan had – moral engagement, making it very clear through the diplomatic contacts with the Soviet Union that we would not stand for anymore aggression, even if it meant using military force. Now, it was never plainly said it in those words, but it was very clear that we would not take any more aggression such as they had had in Afghanistan and other places. Then thirdly, we would do everything we can to roll back the previous Soviet aggression. That was where the assistance, information assistance, intelligence assistance, information to people, Revving Up, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, all of those kinds of nonmilitary ways in which to provide resistance to the Soviets.

Peter Robinson: If I may, a couple of last questions here: When he visited Washington in 2004 for President Reagan's funeral, Mikhail Gorbachev was asked if Ronald Reagan won the Cold War, and his reply was, "That's not serious." And the article in the Washington post continued, "The changes Gorbachev wrought in the Soviet Union were undertaken," he argued, "not because of any foreign pressure or concern, but because Russia was dying under the weight of the Stalinist system." The Soviet Union just fell in under the weight of its own rotten system and it would have done that if Ronald Reagan had never been born. How do you answer that?

Edwin Meese III: Well, just by looking at the facts, what would have happened, I think if it had not been for Ronald Reagan, the United States having built up its strength and the

other things that had taken place, the Soviet Union might have fallen on the weight of all of its wrongdoing – economic wrongdoing, its military buildup and all that – but it would have taken at least probably two, three, four decades, or may never have happened. Because one of the things that the Soviets and Gorbachev would have done, if he followed his predecessors, was as soon as there was any armed resistance or any popular uprising, he would have called in the troops and put it down.

And so, what Ronald Reagan did was create a situation in which, number one, the Soviets could not continue as they had been, either with aggression or even with captivating the other nations and so on, perpetually. But also, the fact that they were even, that Gorbachev was not able to maintain the Soviet primacy over these other countries, perpetually. That's why I think that if were not for Ronald Reagan, it would have been perhaps several decades before the Soviets would have fallen, or maybe never, because one of the things they would have done is utilize their force then in order to get more funds, more resources and that sort of thing.

They were already working on things technologically with pipelines and other things to improve their economic situation, which Ronald Reagan stopped. And the economic warfare, along with the information warfare and other types of warfare together, I think, was what ultimately led to their demise, the wall coming down through popular resistance in 1989, and then ultimately, the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Peter Robinson: Attorney General Meese, in Rome, in February 1988, had a private meeting with Pope John Paul II. I've already asked you to tell us what happened on the National Security Council. Can you let us in on what you and the pope discussed?

Edwin Meese III: It was a great meeting, the opportunity to meet this great man. And everything that's been said about him is absolutely true from my standpoint, both from what I know about them, but also meeting him. You knew that God had taken care of the church by having a leader such as that to be the pope at that particular point in history, but the opportunity just to talk with him for 15 or 20 minutes was just a great privilege for me. We talked about some of the things that, again, our two countries had in common. And that was, of course, the morality of youth, which was a topic very much on his mind and something that we were concerned about in the Justice Department and elsewhere. We talked about the drug problem in the United States. We also had talked about how some of the Catholic bishops, which you heard a little bit about that last night, I believe, how there were some problems with them in the United States, doing things that were inimical to what Ronald Reagan was trying to do in some of these other areas, in which the pope said, "Well, sometimes even bishops make mistakes." So it was really a great conversation; I remember vividly to this day.

Peter Robinson: Did you walk out of that meeting just as Lutheran as you were when you walked in?

Edwin Meese III: I believe I did, but a Lutheran with great appreciation for the head of the Catholic Church.

Peter Robinson: Last question. Nobody under 30 can remember a single event that we just talked about. So think of your grandchildren; think of your great grandchildren. What do they need to hold onto? Can you sum up Ronald Reagan, what he meant to the country and the world? Can you sum it up in a couple of sentences?

Edwin Meese III: Well, I think they need to hold onto the fact that what our founders of the United States had in mind as the basic principles and the foundation for their thinking – the sense of freedom, the sense of responsibility, those kinds of concepts – are as important today as they were two centuries ago, and will be over the next centuries in the future. They have to know that, but in order to know that, they also have to know our history. History is extremely important. Ronald Reagan had studied history minutely. He was able to incorporate the foundation and the origins of the country into almost everything he did. That's why he was so concerned about appointing judges who would be faithful to the Constitution. It was a part of his being. We have to have young people understand our history, but also understand what freedom is all about. Also, [we need them] to have some idea of what happened during the Cold War, so that they can understand why it was so important to free Poland and the other Captive Nations.

If they have this understanding of history and the perspective on why that's important to the freedom of other peoples in the world, particularly to continuing freedom in this country, I think then they will have the background they need. It's not happening now in our education systems, and I think both at the high school, even the grammar-school level, and also at the higher-education level, this is probably the greatest challenge that we have as far as providing future generations with the basic understanding they need of our history and the principles – both moral and also patriotic foundations – which have gotten us to this particular point in our history in the history of the world.

Peter Robinson: Edwin Meese III, thank you.