

IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF RONALD REAGAN'S BIRTH

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Speaking about presidents, it is most important to find a balance between myth and reality. Myths are strongly supported by disputes over the place of the individual in history. Sometimes these disputes are aroused artificially. For instance, by claiming Bismarck's birth to be in the 18th century (which is an absurd hypothesis, since he would not be Bismarck then), Germany would not have been unified and we would be ignorant of this historic personality. I believe that the significance of the personality should not be underestimated. Thus Leo Tolstoy wrote that great personalities "are but labels serving to give a name to the event". A Lithuanian historian followed Tolstoy on that. By means of the Google search engine, he created an inventory of the most popular Lithuanian –isms originating from family names¹. Reaganism took the 40th position in the list of –isms, or rather, labels.

When assessing the contribution of great politicians, one should not overlook history and believe that these personalities emerge thanks to their genius as "magic toys which, upon opening the lid on the box, pop out suddenly and befuddle the course of history". One should not disregard the fact that the great personality is great just because he/she manages to represent, direct and administer either the already existing forces and processes, or forces which it helps to boost thereby challenging the ruling powers.

This is particularly true of every great politician. Ronald Reagan is no exception in this case. What makes the 40th US president more distinguished from other exceptions, however, is his formula of perception of authority and power, which he devised and applied in both domestic and foreign policy.

The real authority has advantage over power in the sense that, wanting to use it, one needs less energy, since obedience is nearly automatic. Yet obedi-

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¹ Baranauskas T. Lietuviškieji „izmai“: http://naujienos.istorija.net/2010_01_01_archive.html

ence to authority originates from the perception of its legitimacy, which is based on common values.

Reagan's death in early summer 2004 provoked a critique of his activities; however, it was outshone by the positive assessment of the deceased. An attempt to provide a brief, yet concise, summary of ideas to give an overview of the president's heritage, invites a phrase: he rediscovered America's future and changed the course of the world's history.

Understandably, Reagan could not discover a new future for America all by himself. This is evidenced by the question that still puzzles some scholars, viz., whether he was an honourable and strong leader who advocated interests of common people and combated intellectuals' eliticism, or an appointee of selfish business corporations that put the poor under threat. Is this not the source of a joke that Reagan liked the poor so much that he increased their number by a thousand every day? I have no doubt that, if he had heard this joke, the president would have had a hearty laugh himself. The true implication of this question, however, is not whether he was a puppet or real leader, but what specific existing forces he used to represent.

Of course, at this point one could delve into political, economic, social or even psychological analysis of those forces. For example, following Murray Edelman, one could argue that it is the fear of worsening living conditions that is the driving force which makes people turn the blind eye to language contradicting reality and enthusiastically believe promises to make their conditions better. If convincing, such promises may turn a leader into a hero; the public will identify with his/her hopes and fears and will lay all the blame on his/her enemies (who should be clearly articulated)². Edelman emphasizes that, in Reagan's times, the new leadership strategy based on promises and threats became deliberate and efficient as never before. In fact, Edelman chooses not to foreground a few essential things, namely, the true foundations of this strategy: it is Reagan's personal belief in democratic values, in particular, freedom, opportunity and limited power, as well as aligning the rhetoric that renders these values meaningful with practical political trends.

Much has been written on the president's rhetoric and its features. One need not repeat that, in Lithuania, many a politician, a political reviewer or

² Edelman M. *Politinio spektaklio konstravimas*. – Vilnius: Eugrimas, 2002. – P. 85.

essayist includes in his/her speeches the nimble quotes by US president Reagan albeit forgetting America itself. Currently the most popular ones are those dealing with the government. A reader's brief comment is vivid in my mind: while "considering" the role of Lithuanian actors, showmen and show-women in Lithuanian politics, he/she said something like "I do not want to claim that an actor or a showman is not suitable for politics. They are when they work, not grimace. In this respect US President Ronald Reagan is an excellent example. People did not mistake their man by electing him. A former colleague's sister wrote from America that life improved significantly in Reagan's times. Restaurants full of people. He must have known how to choose good and competent advisors. He hired several emigrants from the Soviet Union to write a 9-page-long text in which the Soviet Union was referred to as "the evil empire". He paid \$100000 US. This was the turning point both in the global way of thinking and in history. This marked the beginning of the fall of the empire".

Scholars would employ a more stereotypical approach to unravel the rhetoric of the „evil empire“, since from the early days of his presidency, Reagan maintained a very firm, anti-Communist and anti-Soviet stance. This policy was consistently implemented in ideological, economic, diplomatic, secret service and other activities. It seems, however, that the greatest influence was made when the president announced a program called the Strategic Defense Initiative as well as his alliance with Pope John Paul II³. Scholars could add, too, that even now, in their memoirs, heads of Soviet intelligence emphasize the decisive influence of the president in tandem with the Pope in the destruction of the foundations of the Soviet system.

In this light, of course, one could question who prepared better ground for the fall of Communism both as a system and a doctrine. Was it the majestic and unite vision of Christian democracy that mobilizes the masses? Or rather, were these the inhibited instincts of man's freedom, religious aspirations, liberal ideas and a plethora of everyday practical clashes with the official reality that ran contrary to common sense and was referred to as Communist?

Lithuanian dissident, Monsignor Alfonsas Svarinskas would say, "In a Urals prison camp, we used to celebrate Academician Sakharov's and President Re-

³ Laurinavičius Č., Sirutavičius V. Lietuvos istorija. Sąjūdis: nuo „persitvarkymo“ iki kovo 11-osios. – Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2008. T. XII. I dalis. – P. 22-23.

agan's birthdays every year. We gathered in a barrack section as a group of prisoners, made half an aluminum half-litre cup of Georgian tea each. Someone would give a toast and we clanged our cups together. I must acknowledge that, in the camp, the aluminum cup clinked better than crystal at large. In 1988, I celebrated the president's birthday in the prison camp in a company with Jew Leonid Lubman, who had already spent 14 years in the Gulag. We did not have tea and only drank hot water, as it was a very cold day in the Urals. At the reception in Washington, I approached Reagan with a request to ask Gorbachov to release the aforementioned prisoner. Later I found out that Lubman was released by Gorbachev's special edict...⁴.

Returning to the balance between the problem of myth and reality mentioned in the beginning, it would be correct to present the American version of its resolution, too. In the eyes of a Lithuanian, a nearly 600-page long Reagan's biography by Lou Cannon could serve as an example in this case⁵. Naturally, it is not the pages that are important. Chapter titles of the biography text divided chronologically (from birth to...) into three parts: "The Rise of Ronald Reagan", "Governor Reagan", "The Pursuit of the Presidency". The titles are brief, realistic and hitting the target: California, Optimist, Lifeguard, Storyteller, Announcer, Actor, Family Man, Politician, Company Man, Visionary, Candidate, Winner, Adversary, Novice, Pragmatist, Conservative, Leader, Survivor, Noncandidate, Regent, Conservationist, Incumbent, Reformer, Salesman, Achiever, Challenger, Contender, Heir Apparent, Debater, President.

⁴ Monsinoras A. Svarinskas. Lageris buvo mano parapija // www.lrytas.lt, 2007 m. rugpjūčio 23 d.

⁵ Cannon L. Governor Reagan. His Rise to Power. – New York: Public Affaires, 2003. – P. vii – viii.