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Cold War winners and losers

By George Weigel

This past June, as the great and the good gathered in Washington for President Reagan's funeral, Mikhail Gorbachev, last leader of the late, unlamented Soviet Union, had a chat with the Washington Post's Robert Kaiser. In a rhapsodic front-page article, Kaiser suggested that Gorbachev offered a "rigorous historical analysis" of the end-game of the Cold War. I beg to differ.

Fifteen years ago, on the night of November 8-9, 1989, a stunned world watched the breaching of the Berlin Wall --- the symbolic centerpiece of the Revolution of 1989. On this anniversary, it's important to understand that Mr. Gorbachev was talking nonsense when he told Kaiser, "I think we all lost the Cold War..."

Why?

First, in order to keep faith with the past. Soviet communism was the worst political plague in human history. Its lethality was comprehensive: the murderous revolutionary "ethic" of Lenin and Feliks Dzerzhinskii (founder of the Cheka/KGB) was bad enough; its institutionalization in the GULAG camps, an integral part of the Soviet economy, won the Soviet regime the grisly distinction of having killed more human beings than any previous despotism.

To suggest that this monstrosity and the (sometimes not-so-glorious) democracies that finally prevailed over it were both "losers" in the Cold War demeans the sacrifices of the victors and, worse, the memories of those who perished in the camps or had bullets fired into the backs of their heads in the Lubyanka prison and the killing fields of the Katyn Forest.

It's also important to remember who won and who lost the Cold War for the sake of the present. A common trope these days has it that America was "never so united" as during the good old Cold War years. That's not how those of us who were denounced as warmongers remember, say, the 1980s: we remember that a lot of the people now proclaiming that "we were all Cold Warriors" were nothing of the sort. They were appeasers.

And it's no accident that these same people tend to appeasement today, in the face of a new global threat to peace and freedom. Those who told me that I should stop agitating about religious freedom in the Soviet Union because the most important thing was to prevent nuclear winter shouldn't be allowed the luxury of asserting their retrospective fortitude in the face of a great moral and political evil. Why? Because one way they might conceivably re-examine their mistaken notions of the present is to re-visit candidly their fecklessness and misjudgments in the past.

It's just as important to remember who won the Cold War, and how, for the sake of the future. A lot of factors converged to "make" the

Revolution of 1989: western re-armament policy, Soviet economic and financial incapacity, ideological pressure on the Soviet Union and its satellites, the new communications technologies. But the key to the whole business --- the key to understanding why "1989" happened when it did and how it did --- is to remember that Pope John Paul II ignited a revolution of conscience in east central Europe in June 1979.

Here was a case when hard power (the deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles in western Europe) successfully worked hand-in-hand with soft power (the awakened consciences of Solidarity in Poland, Civic Forum and Public Against Violence in Czechoslovakia, Lutheran congregations in Germany, independent Baptists in Romania, and all the rest). That the job got done without the usual 20th century approach to great social change --- mass violence --- seemed a miracle. If it was, it was a miracle of conversion, as changed consciences created a distinctive kind of resistance politics that Soviet power couldn't handle.

"1989" was completed in 1991 by the implosion of the Soviet Union. And it seemed for a moment that a new world order was at hand, with humanity freed from the great power rivalries that had riven the planet since 1914. It wasn't to be.

Yet there are important lessons to be learned from the Cold War and the moral steadfastness that produced its remarkable end-game, whose 15th anniversary we now mark. Learning those lessons begins with remembering who won, who lost, how, and why.

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