

# The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister

John O'Sullivan

A review essay by Michael O'Connor

This most interesting book is about the coincidence in time of the US presidency of Ronald Reagan, the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, and the government of British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. All three were seen initially as outsiders; all three became towering figures who, each in their own way, gave the leadership that forced the collapse of the Soviet empire and of Communism.

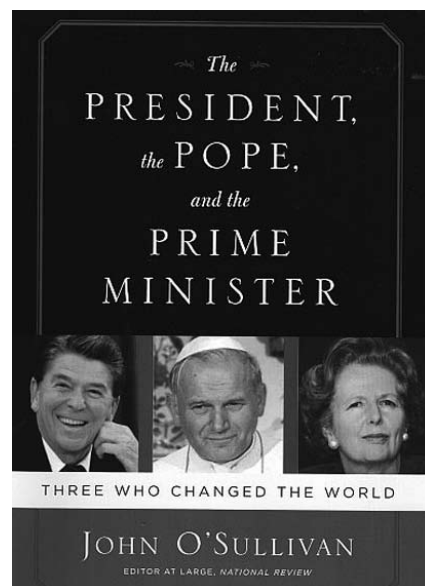
John O'Sullivan is an editor-at-large of the *National Review* and covered the Reagan presidency as a senior British journalist in Washington. He has also been a special adviser to Margaret Thatcher and wrote regularly about Pope John Paul.

O'Sullivan notes that by the late 1970s, Ronald Reagan was regarded as too old and too conservative to be considered presidential material. Thatcher was not only too conservative but, as a woman, was hardly considered at all for the leadership of Britain's Conservative Party. Poland's Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was not only that country's second-ranking cardinal but was regarded as too uncompromisingly anti-communist and theologically conservative to be considered papal material in a church dominated by Italians, by liberalism and *Ostpolitik*.

By the mid-1970s, the West was experiencing a period of economic, cultural and political near despair. A combination of the 1960s cultural revolution (the West's rather than the Chinese version), a fourfold increase in oil prices and stubborn stagflation combining high inflation and high unemployment seemed to have generated a loss of confidence in Western culture and values. The Cold War seemed never-ending with a seeming stability underpinned only by the nuclear warfare strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction among the superpowers. A seriously flawed anti-communist crusade in Vietnam had resulted in the loss of all three Indo-Chinese countries to a particularly unpleasant group of communist regimes.

For many in the West, the choice seemed to lie between an anarchic libertarianism on the one hand and Marxist authoritarianism on the other. The traditional democratic alternative lay with what appeared to be an ageing Hollywood actor and a rather harsh woman. The Roman Catholic Church, of course, was considered to be irrelevant in a Western culture that was increasingly irreligious.

O'Sullivan traces the road to power for each of his principal characters. Reagan had been a highly successful two-term governor of California. He had not sought the



Republican presidential nomination in 1976 out of loyalty to the incumbent, the bland and ineffectual Gerald Ford. But in the intervening years before his election in November 1980 and assuming the presidency in January 1981, Reagan was constantly in the public eye through newspaper columns and radio broadcasts. Later nicknamed 'the Great Communicator' Reagan's folksy and cheerful manner conveyed optimism and hope.

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope in October 1978 when John Paul I, successor to Paul VI, died after only 33 days in office. He was the first non-Italian pope in some 400 years and his Polish colleague, the powerful anti-communist Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, thought he was too young for the job. An orthodox philosopher, the new John Paul II faced serious internal challenges not only from the church's liberals but also from the Marxist-leaning liberation theology movement in Latin America. More significantly, as a Pole who had lived under the totalitarian rule of both the Nazis and Communists for almost 40 years — the whole of his adult life — he had little sympathy for the *Ostpolitik* policy of Paul VI, although he made one of the leading Vatican diplomats of that era, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, his Secretary of State.

Margaret Thatcher became British opposition leader in February 1975 and was elected prime minister after the collapse of the Callaghan Labour government in May 1979. She had been in contact with Reagan for some years and the seeds of their eventual partnership were well sown.

All three leaders were to experience assassination attempts, Reagan and John Paul in 1981, Thatcher in 1984. All are analysed in some detail and O'Sullivan concludes that, on balance, the attempt on John Paul was orchestrated by the Soviet Union, alarmed by the Polish reaction to his first visit in 1979. The attempt was almost successful and the pope was gravely wounded.

Although Reagan was attacked by a crackpot, that attempt too was nearly successful. At the time, Reagan was at pains (no pun) to treat his injuries lightly but in fact he lost a great amount of blood and doctors struggled to find the cause.

Thatcher was the target of an IRA bomb, which failed only because of the peculiar structure of the building attacked.

Both Reagan and Thatcher attacked their nations' economic woes by abandoning what they regarded as the failed Keynesian policies of stimulating demand by government. Instead, by using control of the money supply to limit inflation and by stimulating production by massive tax cuts, they generated rapid economic growth with reduced inflation and lower unemployment. Thatcher also confronted what she regarded as the abuse of power by extremist trade unions, most notably the Marxist-led coal miners union.

Reagan also consciously set out to build an American strategic superiority — and to use it. When asked his view of how the Cold War might be affected, his famous one line response was “We won, they lost”. This kind of confrontational approach was anathema to many academic theorists and ‘clever people’ but inspirational to the broader community.

Thatcher's first and critically important strategic challenge came from the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. O'Sullivan is naturally more concerned with the politics, both domestic and international, of the challenge but does not underestimate its importance. For one, it cemented the Anglo-American alliance that had undergone not a few stresses over the past two decades. Reagan who might have been seriously concerned at the effect on US relations with Latin America did not hesitate to support Britain politically, logistically and with intelligence. He understood that aggression such as Argentina's had to be resisted as a matter of fundamental principle. As an aside, the Fraser government's pusillanimous — and benefit-free-response in withdrawing all Australian exchange officers from British units deploying to the Falklands offered a sharp contrast.

In the famous words of Josef Stalin, John Paul had no divisions to deploy against the dictators in Poland. He had no political power with which to confront them. His strategy, which he had pursued against the Nazis and the Communists in Poland, was simply to bypass them. This was not merely a matter of ignoring the authorities; rather the church generated an alternative rather than oppositionist culture that drew the loyalty of the populace.

If few understood what he was up to, the Soviet leadership were not among them. Their alarm — and that of the Polish leadership — was palpable but they could do nothing in the face of a largely united population with powerful and fearless leadership.

All too soon — for the Soviets, the Polish counter-culture led to the formation of Solidarity, an alliance of free trade unions, intellectuals and others that simply neutralised the Polish government. Repression, manifested eventually by

the imposition of martial law, simply did not work in the face of the Pope's leadership, and with material support provided from the West, especially from the United States through organised labour in that country. Ultimately, the government conceded free elections and the communists were destroyed.

Strategically, Reagan sought to outspend the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. At the same time, he also set out to end the nuclear confrontation by abolishing all American and Soviet nuclear weapons. His tool was to be the Strategic Defense Initiative which experts dismissed as unrealistic but which certainly alarmed the Soviets.

It also alarmed Thatcher who was concerned that total nuclear disarmament would leave Europe vulnerable to Soviet conventional superiority. But Reagan knew what he was doing. The new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, admitted to Reagan that the Soviet Union was spending 25 per cent of GDP on the military (his Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze was to admit to 28 per cent and rising) and that this was crippling. Increasingly all but the ‘clever people’ realised that the Soviet Union and its empire was a facade, a Potemkin village. And so it proved in those memorable weeks in 1989.

The book only superficially touches on the question of Gorbachev's contribution to the collapse. It suggests that he was a prisoner of events beyond his control but this assessment is not convincing. All three of the central figures regarded Gorbachev as, to use Thatcher's words, 'someone we can do business with'. Reagan certainly thought so — and did so. History is yet to give an unqualified verdict.

This is a fascinating book, well written and, despite the title, focused on policy and outcomes rather than personalities. Yet the personalities are crucial because of the conviction and leadership they offered. At the time, the criticisms were many, superficial and ignorant. Many of the critics are now honest enough to admit that they were wrong. It would be the height of intellectual dishonesty to do otherwise.

Reagan left office by constitutional fiat, after two consecutive terms, at the beginning of 1989. Thatcher was to be dumped by her own party in November 1990 but John Paul remained in his office until his death in April 2005. Of the three, probably only the pope enjoyed complete authority but all three had offered not only exceptional leadership but had pursued strategies that were driven by genuine conviction. They not only offered hope to their own communities and far beyond but were faithful to the pope's official motto — Be Not Afraid. ♦

*John O'Sullivan, 'The President, the Pope and the Prime-Minister', Regnery Publishing, Washington DC, 2006, Casebound and jacketed, 360pp., \$A39.99.*

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