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A triumvirate for our time

by [Kenneth Minogue](#)

On *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*, by John O'Sullivan.

The basic moral drive of Western civilization in the twentieth century has been appeasement. The civilization that has come to define what modernity actually is spends a lot of its time apologizing for its sins and accommodating the grievances of complainants. The West—and these days particularly America and the English-speaking parts of it—is where the rest of the world looks for cures for disease, charitable help, technical innovation, and the creation of respect for human rights. One might expect some recognition for such benefits, but everywhere we find complaints about our overbearing ways. What we seem to have done is to teach other cultures how to make capital out of grievances against us they never knew they had because they had previously taken such events as the small change of a violent world. We in the West are scourged for our involvement in slavery, for example, but get no gratitude (nor even recognition) for the fact that we alone abolished it. Again, much of socialist collectivism is the abandonment of Western economic dynamism in favor of allowing electorates to vote themselves rich with other peoples' wealth. The ultimate paradox is that much of this demand for appeasement comes from within Western Civilization itself. What we might usefully call the academico-media complex is loud in its demands that whites should apologize to blacks, Christians to Muslims, the English to the Irish, imperial powers to those they colonized, men to women, and so on. No doubt many regrettable actions were performed by members of these abstract classes, as is true of all human groups, but only among Europeans and Americans do we find this remarkable propensity to beat one's own breast.

Appeasement is the attempt to pacify someone aggrieved, and it usually requires concessions to the aggrieved. If the grievance is genuine, then appeasement might plausibly be thought what any moral agent ought to do, though there is a strong case for following the muscular advice of the Victorian Benjamin Jowett: "never apologize, never explain." To behave better is always best of all. And appeasement recognized as a political vice got its bad name in the 1930s when a set of politicians, not perhaps cowardly exactly, but also not very smart, thought that apologizing to the Germans for the Versailles Treaty and handing them over chunks of other people's territory might pacify Hitler. When in 1956 Anthony Eden in Britain came a cropper in refusing to appease Nasser, the popular view that it's always better to negotiate than to stick to your guns became part of conventional wisdom.

Appeasement became the standard Western response to the world, a moral sickness all the more sinister because it came dressed up as a form of moral generosity. It particularly dominated Anglospheric politics in the 1970s. At this time, a set of rulers who had been elected on radical free market policies were thrown off course by the oil crisis, and they turned into high-taxing

redistributionist Keynesians who thought they could manage economies. None indeed was as disastrous as Edward Heath in Britain (who sold out British sovereignty to a European bureaucracy), but Nixon and Carter in America, Muldoon in New Zealand, and Frazer in Australia all left a lot of trouble behind them. The conventional wisdom explained to them that governments should subsidize the economically incompetent, that there was no option but to accept that half the world should be tyrannized by vicious Communist regimes and that the overriding imperative of policy should be helping those in less fortunate circumstances, whatever the reasons might have been that had got them into that state.

It is against this background that we should understand John O'Sullivan's book on Reagan, Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II, a lucid and brilliant account of the 1980s when, perhaps briefly, the appeasement tendency of our civilization was checked by three politicians with a firm grip on the realities of the human condition. [1] Since the heritage of these figures has, in the case of British politics at least, fallen into confusion, and the truths to which they held firm seem less clear today, understanding their achievement is at the heart of political wisdom, and it could hardly be done more effectively than O'Sullivan has done it.

The sheer improbability of these three getting to the top of their various trees is itself a lesson in the importance of personality in history; it almost seems providential, and hints of such a view may be detected in O'Sullivan's narrative. John Paul was a Pole, and the first to inhabit the Vatican, Thatcher was a woman in a largely male club, and Reagan an aging Hollywood actor, much mocked as a lazy political simpleton. They all won against long odds, and indeed they won partly because they opposed the conventional wisdom of their time. Keynes and containment were looking pretty stale as inflation and disorder started getting out of hand.

John Paul was an orthodox Catholic in a Church in which a kind of *Ostpolitik* had developed, a policy recommending accommodation with rather than resistance against entrenched Communist power. Even liberation theology was coming to seem a necessary adjustment of Catholicism to modern times. Reagan was a conservative in a political tradition long thought to be basically liberal, while Thatcher became an advocate of the free market where clever economists all knew that an economy was an instrument of political policy.

The success of these three conviction politicians was thus a tribute to the power of moral honesty against a feeble pragmatism. All of them took risks, and all of them were victims of assassination attempts. Their capacity for rising above such difficulties, their "grace under pressure," merely dramatized their special qualities. And the result of their courage and honesty was the collapse of the "evil empire," and the creation in Britain and the United States (and in other countries that followed their lead) of the conditions necessary for economies that could deal with inflation and unemployment.

O'Sullivan has the advantage of writing from the inside, being a Catholic who was part of Margaret Thatcher's policy unit, and who, in the 1990s, became editor of *National Review*, the political fortnightly that, though based in New York, had close and abiding ties to the Reagan White House. His inside knowledge of politics means that, like the figures in his story, he has a very clear idea of the balance between principle and pragmatism. Margaret Thatcher, for example, was determined to resist the attempt of British unions to dictate government policy, but she did not accept the challenge from Arthur Scargill's Miner's Union until the power stations in Britain had stocks adequate to resist a long strike. She knew, as indeed all O'Sullivan's characters did, when to temper principle with discretion.

The story he has to tell is, of course, a terrific one. From the drama of assassinations to the subtleties of diplomatic subterfuge, he brings out very clearly the dizzying set of problems at different levels of abstraction with which a contemporary ruler must simultaneously juggle. And this means that he

is acutely aware of one feature of politics that is almost unknown to the average news reader: namely the centrality of off-stage problems in dealing with the matter in hand. Thus Reagan can hold his ground at the Reykjavik summit not only because he knows what he is doing, but also because his position in the polls back home is secure. He did not need a diplomatic triumph.

The world historical event at the center of O'Sullivan's story is the collapse of the Soviet Union. The remarkable thing is that until the signs of that collapse became inescapable, most Western commentators (academics, journalists, economists—especially economists) did not believe it possible. They illustrated Machiavelli's view that the basic illusion in politics is the belief that the way things are is the way they are always going to be.

Another reason for this remarkable obtuseness in what O'Sullivan calls "liberal opinion" flowed from an illusion even more specific than that which so impressed Machiavelli: namely, that social systems can be judged by their officially declared intentions. Communists may have been murderous thugs, but they meant well, and ought not to be confused with really bad people, such as Fascists and racists. Ultimately they believed in social justice at the end of the rainbow. Hence they couldn't be all bad. But this is merely to be taken in by the public relations departments of Marxism and its cognates, indulging a lazy moralism of international benevolence and combining it with an uncritical realism about the status quo. Such simplicities persuaded the Galbraiths and the Samuelsons of Harvard and the *bien pensants* of the academico-media complex that they were tough realists above the absurd moral passions of Reagan and Thatcher. Here in the imagined sophistication of these apologists for the Soviet Union was a replay of the Emperor's New Clothes, and I agree with O'Sullivan in thinking that such obtuseness should not be forgotten. In new versions, it is with us still.

The author's most remarkable argument is that Reagan was actually a kind of unilateralist, with more in common with the peace movements of Europe (and the women of Greenham Common) than his image (at that time) of a war-mongering cowboy would indicate. The point of his much derided proposal to develop the Strategic Defense Initiative was ultimately the complete removal of nuclear weapons and an end to Mutual Assured Destruction. But it was certainly true, as everyone quickly realized, that it was also a direct strike at Soviet superpower pretensions by demonstrating that the Soviets could not match American defense spending. Reagan simply abandoned détente and destroyed the basis for the Cold War between the superpowers.

O'Sullivan's account of these events relates personal relations—how Reagan and Gorbachev responded to each other—to the complex maneuvering of diplomatic summitry. Indeed, in the later stages of his story, the tragic Gorbachev virtually joins the three principals as one who also changed the course of history. In this story, Reagan's remarkable offer to share SDI technology with the Russians in no way mitigated the terror Soviet leaders experienced in recognizing that the game was up. In a 1980s in which millions were preoccupied with the spread of nuclear missiles across Europe in the wake of the Soviet deployment of SS 80s, personal chemistry, diplomatic daring, and calculations about how each move would play in terms of Western electorates became part of the multidimensional chess on which all our fates depended.

Recognizing how deadly was the threat of the SDI to their power—however derided it was as mere science fiction in the Western media—the Soviets put their faith in a bold strategy to get them off the hook. They appealed to Reagan's idealism, by offering an end to all nuclear weapons—as long as it would be combined with a complete ban on all real testing of the SDI. It was so dramatic a move that some of Reagan's advisers thought they should accept, and of course it was just the kind of thing to play well in Western opinion. But Reagan himself was cautious: "I'm afraid," he remarked about Gorbachev to his team over lunch, "he's going after SDI" and Reagan refused. All the goodwill built up beforehand in good personal relations could not for the moment survive that bleak moment in East-West diplomacy.

Out in the real world, however, the legitimacy of Communist power was in any case crumbling throughout Eastern Europe. The Polish case had been simmering since 1980 when Solidarity came into being, an initiative carefully nurtured by John Paul. It became over time almost a shadow regime under the Communist rule. The Soviets considered and rejected the option of invasion, but in December 1981, martial law was declared and Jaruzelski took over the country. Dissident movements were, however, becoming more confident all over Eastern Europe, and in Russia itself. A line of caretaker geriatrics succeeded each other in the Soviet Union until Gorbachev took over with a mandate to reform the system. This event too is no less an illustration of how central personality is to politics.

Perhaps the most charming element in O'Sullivan's story is the Thatcher-Reagan relationship, which cannot be cheapened even if it does totter on the edge of being a romcom. Here were two figures who shared each other's moral instincts, being both patriots and decent people, who admired each other, who spoke honestly to each other, and, while sympathizing and helping each other politically, also never forgot that their basic responsibility was to stand for the national interests of their respective countries. O'Sullivan's account of the Falkland's War comes from the inside, and it makes for an exciting narrative. Fortunately, British and American interests ran largely parallel during these years, and the experience has given fresh life to the idea of the Anglosphere as a distinct moral and political realm in world politics.

The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister ends with a coda on the reputations of these figures, and necessarily so, because political wisdom depends on truth in politics, and subsequent judgments have varied. Reagan was travestied by journalists and academics at the time, but is now recognized for his achievements. Margaret Thatcher, by contrast, became a public relations disaster because the necessary hardships involved in turning Britain around were mythologized as a reign of greed and selfishness. This was a distortion that ushered in the decade of New Labour politics that has undone much of her achievement. That, of course, is politics, but it is depressing to see how extensively malign orthodoxies can blanket out an entire historical experience.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*, by John O'Sullivan; Regnery, 448 pages, \$27.98. [Go back to the text.](#)

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