**WTH Should I Read This Summer? The**

**Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and**

**the World on the Brink by Will Inboden**

Episode #214 | August 16, 2023 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen and Will Inboden

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka. Welcome to our podcast.

Marc Thiessen: And I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: What the hell is going on? Marc, what the hell is going on this summer?

Marc Thiessen: We're still in August, Dany, and the summer is going on, and we're continuing our summer book series, What the Hell Should I Read This Summer? And today, we've invited Will Inboden, who's a very good friend of ours, who's written an amazing book on Ronald Reagan called [*The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink*](https://www.amazon.com/Peacemaker-Ronald-Reagan-World-Brink/dp/1524745898). And we're having him on to talk about the Reagan legacy and what it means to us today.

Danielle Pletka: The bottom line is, especially now, given what we are seeing going on with Russia, with Russia and China, with Ukraine, all of these questions about the end of the Cold War are vitally important. And one other little footnote that I bring up in the interview as well, now that socialism has gone through a complete and total rebrand, all the more reason for you to read this book, so that you can understand through the eyes of one of our greatest presidents, how absolutely bloody awful it really was.

Marc Thiessen: And the other reason to look forward is I've just been dismayed looking at some people on the right who seem to be on the wrong side of the war in Ukraine, who seem to think that Putin is some sort of good guy, or at least somebody we shouldn't care about, and how the Ukrainians are the bad guys. And this is just so contrary to everything that Ronald Reagan stood for, and I would think that those of us on the right would have what I would call Cold War muscle memory where when something like this happens, we would just automatically know who's the good guy, who's the bad guy, and what the answer is because we're literally employing the Reagan Doctrine right now in Ukraine, though of course Joe Biden is no Ronald Reagan, and so we're not doing it as well as Reagan would have or could have.

But it's just a good reminder for us of what Reagan stood for. We're going to get into a discussion of how he developed the Reagan Doctrine, what he did, and where it came from, and also we'll have some really interesting insights on what Ronald Reagan would've thought about Ukraine.

Danielle Pletka: It's a really fantastic conversation.

Marc Thiessen: And for those of you, if you stay till the end, we've got a little surprise for you at the end. We're going to give you some of the best Soviet humor that Ronald... You've heard a few of these jokes here and there, but if you haven't heard all of them, we've got a little reel at the end of the best of Ronald Reagan’s mockery of Soviet communism and Socialism.

Danielle Pletka: So, for those very few of you who haven't seen Will's outstanding book or heard one of his great lectures or podcasts, William Inboden is the outgoing executive director and William Powers junior chair at the William P. Clements Jr... God, that's a lot of William Jr's, Center for National Security at the University of Texas at Austin. He has just left UT where he did just a fantastic job and has joined the University of Florida. Former Senator Ben Sasse hauled him on over, great idea, where he's going to be starting on August 1st, the director of the Alexander Hamilton Center. William J. Hamilton Junior Center. Please, don't forget the junior.

Marc Thiessen: Not the William J. Hamilton Center?

Danielle Pletka: Will has been an associate professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs. He's a distinguished scholar at the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law, and he was the editor-in-chief of the Texas National Security Review. I could keep going here, but -

Marc Thiessen: And he was my colleague in the Bush administration.

Danielle Pletka: Let's just go straight to the interview.

Marc Thiessen: Here’s our interview.

Marc Thiessen: Will, welcome to the podcast.

Will Inboden: Thank you, Marc. Great to be with you and Dany.

Marc Thiessen: So, I just love your book. My wife and I read this book, the audiobook, on a 10-hour ride back and forth from Maine, and we loved it so much we couldn't wait to get back in the car. That's how great a book it is. I say that this is one of the best books about Ronald Reagan I've ever read, and I've read a lot of them and there've been a lot of them written. Why did you feel another book about Ronald Reagan needed to be written, and what was your mission in writing this book?

Will Inboden: Thanks, Marc. There's a number of threads that went into my decision to write this book. Part of it was my worry that with the passing of time, the longer we're removed from the peaceful end of the Cold War and America's victory in the Cold War, that there was a growing sense of inevitability. As we look back, well, of course the Soviet Union was going to collapse. Of course, the Cold War would end peacefully. Of course, nuclear destruction would've been avoided. Whereas for those of us who were old enough to remember that time, and especially as I was looking back on it, it did not feel inevitable at all, very few people saw that coming.

And so, I wanted to present Reagan and his vision and his leadership, especially on national security to a new generation of readers, as well as reintroduce him to an older generation who might have forgotten just how transformative his leadership was. Then there was also, as far as the research, it's just been in the last five or 10 years that quite a few Reagan administration national security documents have been declassified, and so I was one of the first scholars who was able to look through a lot of the transcripts of his meetings with heads of state, transcripts of National Security council meetings, things like that. And so, there were new dimensions to the interior work of the Reagan administration that have just now become available and it was a great opportunity to present those to readers as well.

Marc Thiessen: What is the coolest thing you discovered in those documents? You had first access to all this stuff. What's the coolest story or anecdote or insight that you got?

Will Inboden: Oh, boy. There were so many. I'll just try to think of a couple. One is behind the scenes, Reagan really comes across as much more in command and versed in the details of issues, especially things dealing with the Soviets and defense policy than the caricature of him out there-

Marc Thiessen: Like that Saturday Night Live skit was true.

Will Inboden: Exactly. I know, and as you know, I do that little vignette about the Saturday Night Live skit, and for listeners who don't know what we're referring to, just Google Reagan Saturday Night Live and you'll see. So, that was a big part of it. Much more his own strategist. Another part that came out was his real ability to empathize with foreign leaders and see the world through their eyes, and this applied to both his good relations with allied leaders such as Margaret Thatcher, or Prime Minister Nakasone of Japan or Brian Mulroney, but also to his diplomacy with Gorbachev. Again, that Reagan was a much more, I think, sophisticated student of the human condition and of leadership than we had realized. And finally what also came out was his much more deep and sincere Christian faith. Again, it wasn't really something I had fully appreciated before or been aware of, but you see this in his diary entries, in the letters he would write, even in his meetings with Gorbachev, especially towards the end when Reagan is trying to persuade the atheist Gorbachev to believe in God. And so, I realized that understanding Reagan's Christian faith is also a real key to understanding his Cold War grand strategy.

Danielle Pletka: It's funny that you say those things. Well, because I don't know, I'm sure you used similar resources. Do you remember Kiron Skinner had a book of Reagan's letters? And exactly the same conclusion comes out of those, just not at all the man he was portrayed to be and not at all the man that he sometimes portrayed himself as, sort of an amiable, handsome, B-list actor. He really was a man of vision and a man of great principle. So, that's what was one of the things that was super interesting to me was that you really aren't there to talk from the perspective. This isn't a Cold War history, this isn't a history of the particular events. This is much more of a broad foreign policy treatment of Ronald Reagan's leadership. Why did you make that decision?

Will Inboden: That's a great question, Dany, because as Marc mentioned earlier, there've been a lot of books written on Reagan. All three of us have read quite a few of them, many of them quite good, others less so, but when I was starting this project, I realized that there hadn't yet been a book written that covers all of Reagan's foreign policy. So of course, the Cold War is the central story here, but as you know, a lot of the book is about his Asia policies, how he deepened the US Alliance with Japan, how he managed the complicated relationship with China. There's a lot in the book on his Middle East policies, counter-terrorism, international trade, democracy promotion, Southern Africa, and I wanted readers to be able to appreciate that every president, every commander in chief, certainly Reagan can't pick and choose the one or two issues you're going to work on.

You've got to deal with that unrelenting cascade of crises and decisions crashing into your inbox every day, and to try to trace how Reagan was managing all those issues, some very well, others less so. The book is favorable to him, but it's not a hagiography, I hope that that would give readers a better appreciation for the general challenges of the presidency and policymaking, but also I think the singular accomplishments of Reagan that he was able to do so much to transform the world, especially bringing the Cold War to a peaceful victory, while managing all of these other issues. And so, you can't appreciate the Cold War victory without appreciating everything else that he was dealing with at the time.

Marc Thiessen: Well, let's talk a little bit about the Cold War victory because one of the things you say is that it seems obvious from hindsight that our policy would be to try and bring down Soviet communism peacefully without a shot being fired, but no US President had tried to do... Our whole policy had been to contain the Soviet Union from without, and he set out deliberately to erode it from within, that no US president had tried that before. Talk to us a little bit about that.

Will Inboden: This was another one of the revelations from my research, which I think it's fundamental to understanding Reagan's foreign policy is to just oversimplify a bit, every previous Cold War president from Harry Truman through Jimmy Carter, Democrats and Republicans had followed different versions of the same framework of containment, which is we're going to treat the Soviet Union as a permanent fixture on the geopolitical landscape. It had been around for 70 years, it's going to be around for another century or so at least, was the belief. And so, the Soviet Union is a problem to be managed, but there's no possibility of actually defeating it or of bringing it down, and Reagan reverses that equation. That's why his famous line before he becomes president of, "My theory in the case in the Cold War is we win, they lose." Again, that has a nice kind of visceral punch to it, but embedded within that I think is a very sophisticated, strategic reformulation of the belief that victory actually is possible and that the dissolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union actually is possible.

And people thought Reagan was nuts at the time to say that. Many Republicans thought he was nuts, certainly from the Nixon and Kissinger and Ford wing of the party, most Democrats thought so as well. And the prevailing expert consensus was that the Soviet Union is strong and durable and isn't going to be going away. Sure, we may have known that its economy wasn't super dynamic and growing, but it was still bumping along at one to 2% of growth a year, formidable military. And so, for Reagan to have a very different theory of the case and believing that the defeat and collapse of the Soviet Union is actually possible, again, as I mentioned at the outset, in hindsight, it may appear obvious, but very, very few people saw that at the time, and that's why he was so controversial and so threatening to so many of the expert class, but of course, events proved him right.

Danielle Pletka: So, what do you think? Having looked at the breadth of his foreign policy vision, what do you think drives this attitude? Because well, yes, Reagan had been a Democrat, he became a Republican. He was from the Goldwater wing of the party, he was not from the Richard Nixon accommodationist wing of the party, but what drives this singular vision of the end of this decades' long conflict with the Soviet Union?

Will Inboden: That's a great question. I think it comes down to this is Reagan was a man of ideas who believed that ideas drive history, and again, I'm not saying he's an intellectual, he didn't pretend to be otherwise, but he took ideas seriously. And we can see even back in the early '60s when he's first making his political debut on the national stage with his time for choosing speech for Goldwater, even then, Reagan is talking about vulnerabilities in Soviet communism because he thought the very idea of Soviet communism, of commanding every aspect of the economy, of enforcing atheism, of totalitarian political control, of controlling all of your vassal states in Central and Eastern Europe, he just found that idea appalling, contrary to everything he believed about human liberty and human dignity. And so he thought, "Well, how do you defeat a bad idea? You do it with a better idea."

And his good idea was of strengthening and expanding the free world. And so, because he looked at the world more as a battle of ideas rather than just a clash of interests or material balances of power, he observed new vulnerabilities in the Soviet Union that very few people otherwise had seen, but he also had that positive vision of we're not just going to delegitimize Soviet communism, we're going to positively support the spread of free societies and human freedom as a better alternative.

Danielle Pletka: This has become an object of some debate between sort of, how should I call them, MAGA creeps and others in the Republican Party about what Reagan really believed in and stood for. In other words, did he actually believe in America as a tribune of freedom and democracy in the world? Not that we should go into every country and deliver democracy, but did he really believe that? Just talk a little bit about that, how you see that argument right now.

Will Inboden: Oh, yeah, I think he absolutely believes that, and it's really key to understanding him and the success of his policies. We see this play out in all sorts of different ways. One would be, for example, his speeches. I read all of his major speeches very closely for writing this book, but not only did I read the final version of the speeches or watched them on YouTube, but I dug into the speech writing files, and you see Reagan's personal hand in so many of the speeches, especially say his Westminster speech where he calls for a crusade for freedom, where he says that Marxism-Leninism will end up on the ash heap of history. These are his ideas. Now, there's an important qualifier to put in here, especially as the Republican Party is going through our own... I speak as a Republican, our own internal debates on our foreign policy, and there's still obviously a bitter aftertaste about the less than ideal outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Reagan was very careful about using military force to impose regime change, for example, or impose democracy. He wanted a strong, capable military to deter the Soviets, to outspend them and put pressure on them, but for him, he believed just as much in America's force of example, in diplomatic and economic support for freedom fighters and political and religious dissidents, and in carefully studying the tides of history. So, his commitment to freedom is unequivocal, but I think he's more sophisticated, and if I even say realistic with a small R about how to support and encourage that in ways that it becomes much more sustainable.

Marc Thiessen: I wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about the Reagan Doctrine because it seemed like the moment that Reagan came into office is very similar in the moment today, whereas you pointed out, and Americans after Iraq and Afghanistan and 20 years of war, there's not an appetite for sending US forces around the world. Same thing in Reagan's time where after Vietnam, there wasn't an appetite for sending US forces around the world to confront communism. So, he came up with the Reagan Doctrine, which is supporting freedom fighters around the world who would do the fighting themselves.

It seems like today a lot of Republicans are channeling their inner Ted Kennedy and the Democrats who opposed Contra aid, who opposed the Reagan defense buildup. Where's the Cold War muscle memory in the Republican Party today? This should almost be reflexively... It should be reflexive for us to look at Ukraine and say, "Good guy, bad guy. Help the good guys. Give them weapons, give them training, oppose the Soviet Empire they reestablished under Putinism." Talk a little bit about how Reagan saw this, where the Reagan Doctrine came from and how it applies today.

Will Inboden: Marc, that was a great setup for this because you're exactly right, and I even in other settings have a little riff I do comparing January of '81 when Reagan takes office to our present moment, and part of that is the United States then, as now had very recently withdrawn in defeat and disgrace from our longest war in our history. It was Vietnam back then and Afghanistan more recently. And so for Reagan, the day he takes the oath of office is eight years almost to the day after the last American combat troop had left Vietnam, and less than six years after South Vietnam had fallen, helicopters out of Saigon, after South Vietnam had fallen into communism. So, the Vietnam legacy was not a historical memory for Reagan and his team, it was yesterday. It was still a very raw, painful wound on the entire United States.

And so Reagan, that's one reason why he's much more careful about committing large scale American ground troops in a foreign war, but he also does not want to sit back and let communism continue its advance. And again, quick little detour in the 1970s there, from the fall of South Vietnam, there really was a broader cascade or domino effect of developing world countries falling into communism, so Laos, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Afghanistan, of course with the Soviet invasion, Nicaragua, Grenada, South Yemen. So on every continent when Reagan takes office, Soviet communism and its proxies have had a really good decade, they seem to be advancing. And so, that's where the Reagan Doctrine comes from, is Reagan realizes there are plenty of people in a number of these countries that have fallen to communism who don't want to live under communist dictatorship. They don't want to be satellites or colonies effectively of the Soviet bloc.

We don't want to send American ground troops there. There's no political appetite or capability for that, but let's support those people who want to fight for their own freedom. It's much more cost-effective for the United States, and yet it also is a way of putting real pressure on the Soviet bloc. And so, I think this is another revelation from my research, I think overall in the aggregate, the Reagan Doctrine was wildly successful. It imposed punishing costs on the Soviet bloc, especially in Afghanistan.

We could point to Angola as well, Cambodia, another one, and so yes, I think there's a very direct through line from the Reagan Doctrine to supporting Ukraine today with arms, with economic aid, because they too are trying to fight for their own freedom against a Kremlin invasion. Sure, as you know from the book and from your own memories, there were downsides to the Reagan Doctrine. Some of the forces we were supporting engaged in some of their own atrocities or abuses. Some of them weren't very effective fighters, but in the aggregate overall, I think it was very successful, and it's certainly a positive lesson that Republicans today should take away.

Danielle Pletka: So, I have a quick comment, and then a question for you. So the quick comment is, one of the things I love the most is among the immigrants from these countries that had been taken over by communism, by socialism, whether in Latin America or in Africa or in Asia, those who are now living in the United States, they're the only ones who... They and we are the only ones who seem so hostile to the idea of socialism. Socialism has gotten this rebranding for the 21st century, people who remember how awful it was, especially the immigrants who lived under it, I just love seeing those. Really, it's a breath of fresh air in our putrid political life. That's my comment, my question-

Will Inboden: Amen.

Danielle Pletka: Sorry for the editorializing, but one of the things that I think made Reagan so effective and really distinguished him from some of his successors, both Republicans and Democrats, is his ability to have a whole of government approach. When you work with opposition movements, believe me, I've been through, this opposition movements in foreign countries, if you have the State Department with a different policy than the White House and the White House with a different policy than the Department of Defense and all of them with a different policy than the Central Intelligence Agency, you don't get squat done, but Reagan managed to bring everybody with him. How?

Will Inboden: And this is where when he had a clear strategic vision, especially in fighting against communism, as I described in the book, he did become more involved in the details. Just a couple of vignettes I can share, so Reagan was extremely supportive of American information warfare and broadcasting efforts, both on the black side and the white side overt and covert. So, he was one of only two presidents in history to even visit the Voice of America Radio for Europe, Radio Liberty Headquarters, JFK was the other one. Also, a Democrat who believed in the battle of ideas. Reagan dramatically increased funding for our broadcasting efforts, but he also made sure, working in tandem with Bill Casey, his CIA director, that the CIA was doing, it's now been declassified, a massive covert action flooding the Iron Curtain of Soviet Union with translated copies of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn books and speeches, Dr. Zhivago, sermons, any sort of contraband literature to strengthen the free world's battle of ideas in undermining the illegitimacy of communism.

Likewise, with his defense buildup, he saw it as very integral to strengthening his diplomacy because he wanted to keep the Cold War cold. He doesn't want to get in a shooting war with the Soviets, but he also knows that his diplomatic efforts are going to be strengthened if he has a much more capable, advanced, well-funded military. And that's why he invests so much in developing the next generation of weapons systems. Now, I do have to say, he was not always a great manager, that was one of his weaknesses, and that's why there was a lot of backbiting and feuding and bickering within the administration. So, to understand some of the policies that didn't work so well or scandals like Iran-Contra, that's where some of his management liabilities come out, but on the big picture, especially on this Cold War strategy, he did get all elements of his government working in the same direction.

Marc Thiessen: Let's talk about the battle of ideas, and you'd mentioned the importance of Reagan's speeches. The one anecdote that I found fascinating from your book was when he delivered the evil empire speech that everybody got up upset, "Oh, he's calling them evil. This is so destabilizing," and the Soviets actually weren't offended by the evil, they were offended by the empire, that they had overthrown the Russian Empire, that they were calling us the imperialists, and he was calling them an empire. That's what offended them, not the evil part. Could you talk about that and also how that speech made its way to the Gulag?

Will Inboden: Sure, there's a number of really important threads here. So this is where when I talk about Reagan as a man of ideas, he had studied Marxism-Leninism, he understood communist ideology a lot more than people gave him credit for. And so if you look at some of the most poignant or memorable phrases from his speeches, evil empires, he said, Marxism-Leninism will end up on the ash heap of history, communism is some bizarre ideology that we won't just contain, but we're going to transcend, all of those are trying to take head on and counter Marxist ideology, which believes in the historical dialectic and the inevitability of classless utopia coming in, who believes that capitalism is the engine of imperialism, rather than communism. So when he uses those phrases, he's really wrong-footing Soviet ideology and Marxism-Leninism.

And again, that provides great encouragement, your other question, to many of the dissidents and prisoners of conscience behind the Iron Curtain, and there is that wonderful vignette, I love sharing in the book, which I got from Natan Sharansky, how he was in prison for being one of the leading Soviet dissidents in 1983. I think he had about an eight-year prison sentence for being a leader among Soviet Jews, especially the refuseniks who wanted to immigrate to Israel. And of course, he's not given regular newspaper access in his prison cell, but every few weeks the guards would give him a copy of Pravda, the official Soviet propaganda rag. And when Sharansky was given a copy of Pravda denouncing Reagan for having called them an evil empire, Sharansky reads that and is overjoyed. He realizes finally, we have an American president who will speak on our behalf, who will tell the truth about this wicked system oppressing us.

And so Sharansky, using whatever primitive Morse code function that he and his fellow prisoners had worked out, he taps out on his prison cell to his neighbors that the American president has called our oppressors an evil empire. And he says shouts of joy start to erupt throughout the prison, and that was Reagan's way of putting internal pressure on the Kremlin. He didn't just want to bring pressure on them from the outside. He wanted them to feel pressure from their own people who hated that government, and yet could not speak out enough for themselves. One of the vignette I also want to share because this goes back to early part of Dany's question about how did Reagan understand and see the vulnerabilities in Soviet communism? It's because anytime a dissident was freed from the Gulag and able to get exile or asylum in the United States, Reagan would try to meet with them and he'd ask them, "What's life like living under communism?"

And he'd hear over and over, "We hate it. It's miserable. The food lines are miles long. None of us have a real job. We don't trust our government. It's all built on an edifice of lies," and so when Reagan is hearing these firsthand accounts from people living under the system, that gives him a lot more skepticism when he'd read say, a CIA assessment that says the Soviet economy is strong and durable and doing just fine. And so, that also was one of the insights to how he saw the weaknesses of Soviet communism because hearing these firsthand accounts.

Danielle Pletka: I was going to ask you my exit question, but I have another question I want to ask you, so I'm not giving you up or letting you go. So, one of the things that is very interesting, you really emphasize the importance, you've done it in our podcast, but it shines in the book, the importance of ideas, of principles, and ideas that are intended to solve problems. It's not simply that it's an evil empire. It is that our system is better, but the world has changed so much, and that's going to be my exit question, but the world has changed so much, and we are now confronted truly by enemies who are not ideological. They are dictators, they may be hiding behind Chinese communism or various different ideas, but they're not, they're really just dictators and tyrants of the sort of run-of-the-mill variety. How do we face up to that? Is it harder given the absence of the battlefield of ideas?

Will Inboden: So, I will partially agree and partly disagree with how you frame the question. So first of all, where I'll agree is, yes-

Marc Thiessen: Me too.

Will Inboden: Communist China today is not identical to Soviet communism in that communist China today is not sponsoring communist revolutions around the world. Now, they're trying to exert their influence in Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere, but they're not trying to export their ideology globally. Similarly with Putin, he's not trying to export Putinism globally, he's just trying to impose it on a few vulnerable states in the near abroad such as Ukraine, but where I will disagree is I still think that there are ideas shaping these new despots, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, ideas that dictatorship is better than democracy, that state control is a more viable system than a free society, and that they certainly don't want to allow free world ideas into their societies.

And so, I think that if the United States today completely abandons the battle of ideas, we're just unilaterally disarming ourselves. We need to confront China with military power and certainly decouple our economic ties. Those dimensions are there as well, but there still are plenty of Chinese people who don't like living under a system of constant surveillance and totalitarian control, who are more attracted to the ideas behind the American system and the free world. So, I think it can't be a one for one page from the Reagan playbook, but I still think there's enough there that we should have more confidence in our own values and the fact that certainly a critical mass of people share them. And if we doubt that, just ask Putin and Xi Jinping because they're obsessed with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the end of the Cold War, and they think that it's free world ideas that played a key part in that. So even if we may be not sure ourselves, that's what they believe, and so let's exploit that.

Marc Thiessen: So, one of the ways you point out that he fought that battle of ideas was through humor, and at the end of the podcast, Dany, I think we're going to play some clips of Ronald Reagan Soviet jokes because they're just so good, and I don't want to interrupt Will right now. You found one in the book that I had never heard, which was that they issued an end drop-off stamp, but it wasn't working because people kept spitting on the wrong side. That was one I had never heard, but he actually tasked the CIA, and it was recently declassified with going out and finding the jokes that the Soviet people were telling about their own society, and then he gave voice to them. Talk about how he used humor to destabilize the Soviet Empire.

Will Inboden: Oh, yeah, absolutely, and this is where it goes back to some of what we were talking about earlier, is Reagan thought that the best way to understand a society is hearing firsthand accounts from people that are living under it, especially a closed society like Soviet communism. And he further thought that one of the best ways to understand its vulnerabilities is, what are the jokes that people are telling surreptitiously outside of the Kremlin's hearing? Because humor is a way that we cope with difficult situations and with deprivation and privation. And so, he tasked the CIA and then some of our embassy diplomats with every week sending him a cable of what are the latest jokes being told on the streets of Moscow and the breadlines elsewhere. He'd sometimes share those in his speeches, but he'd also share some of those jokes when he'd be meeting with the Soviet leader, such as Gorbachev, and this drove Gorbachev crazy because Gorbachev also knew that these jokes were revealing a lot of vulnerabilities of their own system.

Danielle Pletka: Which one was your favorite?

Will Inboden: I think my favorite is... There were two or three different versions of it Reagan would tell, but it goes something like this, so Reagan is meeting with Brezhnev, the Soviet dictator who was in power when Reagan first came into office. They never actually did meet when he's in office, but the joke goes like this. He'd meet with Brezhnev, he says, "General Secretary Brezhnev, I want to tell you what freedom means in the United States. It means that someone can stand on Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House with a bullhorn and yell as loud as they can, 'Ronald Reagan is a bum and a terrible president.'" And he said, "They're free to do that. We won't do anything to them." And then Brezhnev says, "Ah, Ron, Mr. President, you don't understand. In this Soviet Union, we have the same freedom." And Reagan says, "What do you mean?" And Brezhnev says, "Someone can stand with a bullhorn in the middle of Red Square and yell the same thing."

Danielle Pletka: I'm getting old, but the worst part about it is I remember all of these jokes, oh my God. All right, so my outro, a little bit of current events. This is a little bit outside of Reagan's time, but obviously he had a huge influence on the collapse of the Soviet Union. Do you think that given what Russia has become, do you think those considerations were sufficiently part of our vision, our Cold War efforts, or did we also make mistakes?

Will Inboden: This is a very good question, Dany, and I've thought about it a lot, and I can't give a really clear, tight answer on this. So there's some uncertainty, but let me just give you a couple of observations, speculations. One is, it's clear, especially from Reagan's last couple of meetings with Gorbachev, that Reagan really desired a genuine friendship between the United States and Russia. Well, post-Soviet Union Russia, and the Russian people. And Reagan would often reference the end of World War II, and he'd say, "Look, the United States has a history of turning enemies into allies." Look what we did with Japan and Nazi Germany after we defeat them militarily in the war, we then provide for their economic reconstruction, we help them build their own democracies, and they're now two of our best allies and friends. And he would say, "I want that same possible future for the United States and Russia."

So in that sense, I do think he was envisioning a better path forward, but for all of his strategic vision in leading the United States to a peaceful victory in the Cold War and the Soviet Union's collapse, I never found any evidence of a really comprehensive blueprint that he put together or hedging or contingency planning of like what if Russia descends into chaos or has a weak leader in the rise of oligarchs in the Yeltsin area and everything that it has become since then? And I don't say that to criticize him. None of us can have perfect strategic vision of the future, but I didn't see a lot of evidence that that was something that he planned for quite a bit.

Marc Thiessen: Exit question from me, what do you think Reagan would've thought of Ukraine right now? Where would he be on this? You've spent more time studying Ronald Reagan than almost anybody, what would Reagan do?

Will Inboden: First, truth in advertising, I have to say, I don't know for sure. He's not here for us to ask him. But that said, I won't dodge the question either. I think that he would be very supportive of Ukraine's fight for its independence and freedom against the Russian aggressors, and I'll give you two reasons why. The first, as we mentioned earlier, is the Reagan Doctrine. Any time he saw a country, a society trying to fight for its own freedom against Soviet aggression or Soviet invasion, he wanted to provide them as much support as possible, weapons, economic aid, so on and so forth. So, I think Ukraine today is a direct descendant of that, but the other reason is even while he was president, Reagan was supporting and signing off on some CIA covert actions, since declassified, to support Ukrainian nationalism. And he saw Ukraine as a distinct country of its own and a victim, again, of Soviet imperialism. So, even on that very particular case of Ukraine, I think there's certainly some precedence for Reagan supporting the Ukrainian identity and the Ukrainian people's self-determination.

Marc Thiessen: Will, we've only scratched the surface of all the great scholarship you've done on this. Folks, if you have a long summer drive this summer, his book's available on Audible, it's a great way to pass 20 hours driving around between Maine and Washington, or wherever your summer plans are taking you. Will, thank you so much for joining us.

Will Inboden: Thanks for having me.

Danielle Pletka: Really, just a wonderful, wonderful piece of work, really kudos. I know you came and spoke at AEI and did an absolutely great job with Corey and Hal, and for those of you who haven't read this or listened to it as Marc has, we commend it wholeheartedly.

Will Inboden: Well, it's a great privilege, so much fun to be with both of you, such longtime friends and stalwarts in the field, and I'm honored you'd give some nice words to say about the book. So, thank you very much.

Marc Thiessen: Take care.

Danielle Pletka: All right, so that was an amazing interview, and one thing we want to leave you with, Will alluded to it, and you've heard some of this as Marc mentioned on the podcast before, but one of the things that drives me crazy about modern Washington is that there's just no sense of humor. You can't say anything about anybody, you can't insult anybody, you can't make fun of anybody, you can't laugh at anybody because everybody's so bloody precious. Well, Ronald Reagan didn't feel that way.

Marc Thiessen: No, he didn't, and the great thing about it was it shows what a happy warrior he is. He fought communism and defeated communism, but he did it with a twinkle in his eye, and that comes through in his humor. We leave you with this little compilation of the best of Ronald Reagan's humor at the expense of Soviet Communist, take care.