



For Immediate Release

June 9, 2004

## An Uncommon Man Among Uncommon People

By Congressman Joe Pitts

On January 27, 1978 Ronald Reagan looked out of his hotel room at the ribbons of red and white light filling the city streets outside. He was watching cars, their drivers headed home after a long day's work.

During his radio broadcast that evening, he mused that the social planners deemed these people "the masses" or "the common man." Reagan knew better. In fact, he said, "They are very uncommon. Individuals each with his or her own hopes and dreams, plans and problems and the kind of quiet courage that makes this whole country run better than just about any other place on earth."

I met President Reagan in 1983. I was a state legislator visiting Atlanta for a convention. He had a gift of making you feel uncommon, like the only person in the room. Not only did he believe it, he made you feel it.

This gift confirmed his heartfelt belief that one person could change the world. People who knew and worked with him understood this about him. Looking back today, though, his life confirmed the truth of that belief to the world.

Last week, as I reflected on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, I thought a great deal about President Reagan's speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the operation that began the liberation of Europe.

He gave two speeches that day. But he didn't talk about the history of that day or the geo-political importance of what followed. Instead, he spoke of "the men of Normandy" who "had faith that what they were doing was right, faith that they fought for all humanity, faith that a just God would grant them mercy on this beachhead—or on the next."

Later that day, he spoke about one uncommon man and his daughter.

Private First Class Peter Robert Zanatta was part of the first assault wave to hit Omaha Beach. Through the years he told his daughter, Lisa Zanatta Henn, about his experiences that day and the days that followed in the liberation of Europe. Private Zanatta never realized his dream of returning to Normandy. But

on that day in 1984, his daughter was there, fulfilling a promise she made to her dad.

President Reagan knew that the effort and sacrifice of 16 million uncommon Private Zanattas won World War II. When the war ended these uncommon men and women came home, went to work, bought homes, and started families.

But our work in Europe was unfinished. Fear of angering the Soviets led politicians to divide the continent, leaving half under the control of Moscow. What began as a robust policy of reconstruction in Europe led eventually to a strategy of appeasement and fear by the late 1970s.

By 1981, our nation was in trouble. We had slipped into a collective malaise. America's post-World War II optimism lay dormant, in danger of extinction. We questioned our purpose. Europe had all but surrendered to the moral and political bankruptcy of Soviet totalitarianism.

Where once the uncommon allied soldiers fought bravely to free the continent from the clutches of totalitarianism, we had abandoned other millions trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

President Reagan changed that. He stood up and said what needed to be said – “if history teaches anything, it teaches that simple-minded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly.” Soviet communism was an evil empire whose aggressive impulses were meant to achieve the global domination of its totalitarian vision; the fight for freedom wasn't finished.

Communism was an affront to President Reagan's worldview and to democracy. While tyranny sought uniformity, President Reagan called each person “uncommon.” Communism enthroned the supreme wisdom of the state, President Reagan relied above all else upon the enduring wisdom of God and the liberty of the human spirit.

Communism and freedom were, by nature, incompatible. In saying so, he directly challenged the mentality of those who believed there was no moral difference between communism and democracy. And in acting on that belief he destroyed communism's greatest weapon – the complacency of Western leaders in the face of the Soviet threat.

When it came to talking plainly about the nature of the Soviet style of government, he did not mince any words. For President Reagan, freedom was non-negotiable. He gave voice to what so many of us knew, but had grown unable to express.

For Natan Sharansky, President Reagan's honesty about the Soviet Union was welcome news. In 1977, Mr. Sharansky, a Jew and opponent of the regime, was abducted by the KGB and charged with espionage and treason – crimes punishable by death.

He spent nine years in Lefortovo Prison, where he epitomized President Reagan's description of the "religious dissident trapped in that cold, cruel existence."

Mr. Sharansky read President Reagan's "evil empire " speech in a cell in Siberia. Knocking on walls and talking through toilets, he spread the word of the American President's speech to other prisoners in the Gulag.

"The dissidents were ecstatic," Mr. Sharansky, now an Israeli cabinet member, wrote. "Finally, the leader of the free world had spoken the truth—a truth that burned inside the heart of each and every one of us."

President Reagan's words similarly encouraged those yearning for freedom throughout the Soviet Union and around the world. That message was spread by word of mouth, through taps on the walls of prisons, and in the media.

That same truth burned in our hearts here at home. More than any other man, President Reagan caused the Soviet Union's demise.

At Normandy President Reagan made this promise: "We will always remember. We will always be proud. We will always be prepared, so we may always be free."

Whether through the efforts of an uncommon soldier or an uncommon president, we should all remember the unique ability we each have to make a difference. And we should never forget the unique purpose to which our great nation has been called.

# # #