

Philosophy As a Strategic Weapon in Reagan's Fundamentalist Rhetoric: Case Study- The Evil Empire Speech (March 08th, 1983)



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Abstract:

This study discusses the philosophical implications of Reagan's Evil Empire Speech. In fact, several researchers made much emphasis on its political background. However, the present article approaches the speech differently; it discerns its philosophical background from an epistemological perspective. For this, this study uses the historical criticism method and epistemological analysis to define the philosophical ideals in Reagan's EES. Henceforth, it demonstrated that the Reagan address implied philosophical background of the 18th century. It concludes that Reagan's psychological warfare rhetorical strategies against the USSR implied a set of philosophical principles that are imports from European rational metaphysics.

key words: Fundamentalism; Evil Empire Speech; Reagan; Philosophy; rational metaphysics;

ملخص:

تناقش هذه الدراسة الخلفية الفلسفية لخطاب إمبراطورية الشر لريغان. درس العديد من الباحثين خطاب ريغان من وجهات نظر تاريخية وسياسية. ركزوا كثيرا على خلفيته السياسية. هذه المقالة تتناول الخطاب بشكل مختلف. حيث تعرف خلفيته الفلسفية من منظور معرفي. وتستخدم هذه الدراسة طريقة النقد التاريخي والتحليلات المعرفية للكشف عن المثل الفلسفية وتحديداتها في خطاب ريغان عن إمبراطورية الشر. تستنبط دراستنا أن خطاب ريغان ينطوي على خلفية فلسفية تعود إلى القرن الثامن عشر. تخلص هذه الدراسة إلى أن استراتيجيات ريغان الخطابية ضد الاتحاد السوفيتي تنطوي على مجموعة من المبادئ الفلسفية التي هي مأخوذة من الميتافيزيقا العقلانية الأوروبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأصولية؛ خطاب إمبراطورية الشر؛ ريغان؛ الفلسفة؛ الميتافيزيقية العقلية

1. Introduction:

The 1980s witnessed serious political clashes between the USSR and the United States. Both powers fostered intolerant political discourses against each other. They divided the globe into two major spheres: pro-Americans and pro-Soviets. The rise of Ronald Reagan and the fundamentalists to the White House in 1981 was a turning point in the American and the Soviet relations. Likewise, the United States' hostile policy against the pro-Soviet regimes affected the US-USSR relations. This stirred accusations between both hostile powers mainly in early 1980s. In other words, they accused each other of expansionism; this led the Reagan administration to supervise confidential operations in Latin America and in South Asia to prohibit the Soviets' expansionist policies in turn.

Objectives and importance of the study:

Reagan addressed the Soviet leaders with rhetorical strategies that historians called psychological warfare strategies. However, historians approached Reagan's political discourse historically and politically even though it carried philosophical connotations. For this, this study sheds light on the philosophical background of Reagan's psychological rhetorical strategies against the Soviets. It reveals their philosophical ideals and, then, defines them through analyzing the Evil Empire Speech. The latter is selected for study because Reagan claimed, through it, for the first time the USSR an empire of evil with philosophical references.

Research questions:

This study answers the following questions: What are the philosophical implications in Reagan's Evil Empire Speech? How did they influence the US-Soviets' relations?

Hypothesis:

Moreover, this article identifies and analyses the philosophical ideals through which Reagan defined the anti-Soviet political agenda of his administration. It assumes that the Evil Empire Speech endorsed the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union through a set of 18th century philosophical principles of rational metaphysics.

To delineate the philosophical background of the Reagan Evil Empire Speech, this study relies on a variety of documents, recent studies and books like Reagan's Address to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, delivered on March 08th 1983 and Tina Seppala's *New Wars and Old Strategies: From Traditional Propaganda to International Warfare and Psychological Operations*(2002). Likewise, to depict the influence of Reagan's use of philosophy in his rhetorical strategy, this research uses recent studies such as William Muir's study *Ronald Reagan's Bully Pulpit: Creating a Rhetoric of Values* (2003) and Dan Rather's study *Ronald Reagan: Communicating the America within* (2008).

Methods:

This research work uses the historical criticism method to depict the philosophical background in the Evil Empire Speech. It also relies on the analytic approach to interpret the philosophical principles epistemologically. It uses also the constructivist approach to discern the impacts of Reagan's strategic use of philosophy on both US-USSR relations.

2. DISCERNING THE PHILOSOPHICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE EVIL EMPIRE SPEECH, EES

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Historically, along the 1980's, Reagan criticized Détente policy that was issued by President Richard N. Nixon (1913-1994) in 1971. For Reagan, the Détente policy did not work in favor of the United States' political agendas. In other words, the Détente tended to soften the tensions between the Americans and the Soviets. For him, the Soviet Union was an empire of evil that propagated communism in the world. Through their expansionist notions, the Soviets established several pro-communist states in Central America, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia. Consequently, the United States warned that the world was in a serious danger before the communist expansionism (Fischer, 1997, p06).

2.1. Dispensationalism:

Reagan insisted in his speeches that communism was an evil ideology because it was founded upon humanist philosophical thoughts. Explicitly, he viewed that the communist expansionism was against the American social, cultural and political standards because it was unbiblical. He argued: "I think I should point out I was only quoting Lenin, their guiding spirit, who said in 1920 that they repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas—that's their name for religion—or ideas that are outside class conceptions" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1969). Moreover, he emphasized that the American culture inspired its norms from Scriptures; he insisted that the American Founding Fathers ratified the foundational principals of the United States in reference to Scriptures. For this, he asserted that communism was a danger to the United States' culture. Likewise, several republicans and leaders of the Christian Party claimed their absolute objection to the Détente policy and called to raise hostility in the American foreign relations with the Soviet Union. They claimed any direct or indirect relations with the Soviets a betrayal to the American Founding Fathers and to Scriptures as well. He asserted: "But if history teaches anything, it teaches that simple-minded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly. It means the betrayal of our past" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1970).

Moreover, the 1980's was a turning point in the U.S and the Soviets' relations. The rise of the neoconservatives to political power fostered a violent tone against pro-Soviet governments in the world. The American neoconservative political figures claimed the USSR an evil empire. In 1983, Reagan asserted before the National Association of Evangelicals in Florida: "I urge you to beware the temptation ... to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1970).

Besides, several American neoconservatives like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Tim Lahaye propagated, through their ministries, anti-communist ideas and called the American people to object the tolerate notions of the Détente policy. They believed that the only way to end the Cold War was to dissolve the Soviet Union. In this context, they argued that the war on the Soviets was a battle between their scriptural faith and atheism (Marsden, 2006, p234). In other words, Reagan and the neoconservatives of the Republican Party viewed that the United States' relations with the Soviets should be conducted in reference to dispensational backgrounds.

In fact, Dispensationalism is a religious movement that was founded by conservative Protestants in the United States. Its doctrinal teachings were inspired from Calvinist writings. The dispensationalists believed that those who disbelieved their creedal references were enemies of Scriptures. In addition, they argued that the American society and culture were established upon Calvinist and dispensational teachings. The latter emphasized intolerance and discrimination against nations with other doctrinal affiliations. In this respect, they claimed that Scriptures announced the destruction of atheist nations on earth with violence and slaughters (Marsden, 2006, p119). For this, they viewed the Soviet Union an empire of evil that would spread atheism in the world. To prevent this, the United States should dissolve any peace treaties or intentions for Détente with the Soviets. They also emphasized the rupture in peace talks that Nixon had evoked before with the Soviet leaders. Similarly, Ronald Reagan - a dispensationist Protestant- called any tolerations with pro-Soviets in the world a threat to the national security of the United States. In fact, the neoconservatives' political hostility against the Soviets was characterized with intolerant political discourses, lobbyism and economic sanctions. Moreover, the neoconservatives interpreted the political events of the Cold War with fundamentalist and dispensationalist connotations. Explicitly, like Reagan, political activists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell insisted that Scriptures indirectly referred to the Soviet Union as an empire of evil; therefore, it would be destroyed by violence (Marsden, 2006, p239). For this, American fundamentalists claimed Détente an evil political approach. In fact, the

neoconservatives' political doctrine can be identified with political fundamentalism because of their radicalism, intolerance, armament race agendas and dogmatism. They also emphasized the rise in military expenditures, the development of arms industry and interventionism in pro-Soviet regimes in the world. In this, Ronald Reagan claimed in his address before the Alabama State Legislature in 1982: "Standing up for America also means standing up for God, who has blessed our land. I believe this country hungers for a spiritual revival. I believe it longs to see traditional values reflected in public policy again" (*Ronald Reagan in Quotations*, 2012, p101). Above all, in his Evil Empire speech, Reagan asserted that the USSR was a dispensation or a period of history that was about to disappear. He claimed it finite because it was established on worldly and humanist philosophical principles.

2.2. Neoclassicism : Rational metaphysics:

It is crystal clear that Reagan argued his refusal for nuclear freeze initiatives with the Soviets by illustrating with American Founding Fathers like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. He claimed that his hostility against the Soviets was primarily ideological for communism was synonymous with atheism. He also insisted that any peace treaty with the USSR was a betrayal to the Founding Fathers who embraced, as he viewed, Scriptural beliefs. In this, he claimed: "Its discovery was the great triumph of our Founding Fathers... Explaining the inalienable lights of men, Jefferson said, 'The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time' " (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1966). Besides, he avowed: "One of our Founding Fathers, Thomas Paine, said, 'We have it within our power to begin the world over again.' We can do it, doing together what no one church could do by itself" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1970). In addition, Reagan emphasized that George Washington claimed Scriptures the spiritual reference for the establishment of the political and social norms in the United States.

Reagan quoted from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine's neo-classical statements of an ideal relationship between morality, the Divine and humans. The three founding fathers were known with their naturalist ideas that shaped their political thinking. It is important to note that even though they referred to divinity in their understanding of the role of spirituality in the political matters of the United States, they had never claimed for the establishment of religion in the American political system. In this, they emphasized the moral role of religion in governing not the establishment of a state religion. They viewed secularism a political philosophy that involved constitutionalism, Law, and civil religion that separate religious influence on the institutional and political levels of government in the United States. However, Reagan viewed that the Founding Fathers had never objected the interference of the Protestants on politics and decision-making. He claimed in the Evil Empire

Speech that they emphasized the religious influence on politics through their deism and naturalist ideas as they referred to God in their addresses. For this, Reagan claimed himself to follow the track of the Founding Fathers and supported his hostile political discourse against the Soviets through scriptural quotes such as Isaiah's lamentations (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1966).

Indeed, historical archives and records of American history reveal that the Founding Fathers did not recognize Scriptures as their religious reference. For instance, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) insisted in his Letter to the Danbury Association (January 1st, 1802) on the strict separation between the matters of State and church. He asserted: "Their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof', thus building a wall of separation between Church and State" (*Thomas Jefferson: Political Writings* p397). More, Thomas Paine (1737-1809) asserted his disbelief in the theological writings of the church. In his *The Age of Reason* (1779), he argued: "The total abolition of the whole national order of priesthood...in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true" (p267). Paine believed that only through reason, people would attain scientific, political and economic welfare. He argued that the church believed in irrational dogmas and superstitions. He claimed rational metaphysics a righteous system of thinking through which man would interpret spirituality. Moreover, he viewed that by deducing the laws of Nature, man could establish ideal social and political systems and governments (*ibid*). Similarly, Thomas Jefferson declared the colonies independent states by referring to rational metaphysical ideals such as the laws of Nature and divine Providence. In the American Declaration of Independence (July 4th, 1776), he stated: "It becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume ... the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p167). He added: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p168).

All in all, this discussion revealed that Reagan used the rhetorical strategy of oriented story-telling to converge his dispensational philosophical views with the neoclassical philosophical background of the American Founding Fathers. This is involved in his psychological warfare strategy to influence his audience.

3. IMPACTS OF REAGAN'S STRATEGIC USE OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE EES ON US-SOVIETS' RELATIONS

Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, was born in Illinois in February 6th, 1911. He raised in a conservative family. He studied economics and sociology; then, he became a cinema actor. In the 1960's, he was elected governor of California. Reagan was an influential political figure in the conservative party in the United States, known as the Christian Right; this encouraged him to present his candidacy for the presidential elections. The evangelical movement in the United States involved a significant number of Protestant political parties and ministries. Reagan, for instance, was a born-again Christian and embraced dispensationist teachings too. In 1981, he became president of the United States. Indeed, the rise of the Republicans and the Christian Right party to the political arena constituted a supporting lobby for Reagan to enter the White House where he governed for two consecutive presidential terms. In this, the evangelical movement lobbied for the establishment of Reagan as president of the United States along his two terms. It is important to note that the movement militated for the rise in United States' armament expenditures and objected peace talks with the Soviets and their allies too (Byrne, 2018, p09).

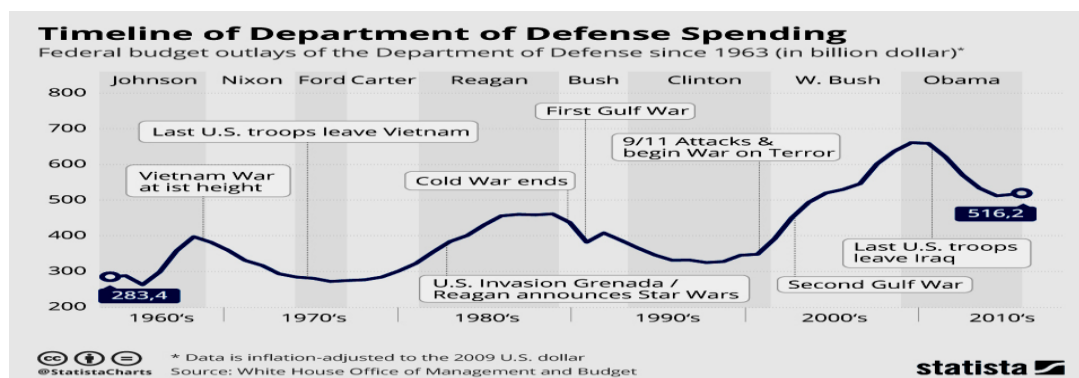
Historically speaking, the Reagan administration inclined towards power politics. It fostered a strategic psychological warfare policy against the pro-Soviet governments and the USSR. Explicitly, Reagan's political discourse was designed to demoralize his rival Soviet leaders. He relied on prophetic politics as well as psychological warfare, known as modern wars. In his study *The psychological Dimension in National Strategy* (1989), Carnes Lord defined psychological operations (PSYOP) as follows: "A psychological-political component is inherent in every use of the diplomatic, economic, and military instruments of national power. The art of negotiation rests on an understanding of individual and group psychology and a sensitivity to cultural contexts" (p20). Likewise, Tina Seppala argued in her *New Wars and Old Strategies* (2002): "Psychological operations are ... planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning" (p06). More, Jan Hanska claimed in his study *Prophetic Politics-Leadership Based on the Stories of a Golden Past and a Glorious Future* (2009) that prophetic politics is a fundamental tool in the new wars strategies (p102).

Relying on the definitions above, two main principles of modern wars can be substituted from Reagan's Evil Empire Speech (EES); these are: prophetic politics and the value tradition.

To start with, Reagan's prophetic leadership was embodied in his use of philosophical ideals in his oriented story-telling and future predictions (Hanska, 2009, p98). To illustrate with, on March 8th, 1983, in his address before the Evangelical Association in Florida, Reagan predicted the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the Soviets' political philosophy from history. He emphasized that the United States would hinder any peace talks with the Soviet leaders. He also insisted that the United States would never support nuclear disarmament. He argued: "I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written"(Milestone Documents in American History,2008, p1970). In addition, Reagan's political discourse was characterized with a violent tone, intolerance and the idealization of the American civil religion. The latter is a set of philosophical principles that the American leaders claimed to their people and to the world as America's cultural norms and beliefs. In this context, Reagan claimed in his addresses before American citizens and the Soviets that the United States was founded on a political philosophy that embraced constitutionalism, the supremacy of the Law, religion and Exceptionalism. He believed that the American Creed was the ideal lifestyle for the world's nations because it was divinely inspired by the American founding fathers (Lieven, 2004, p63). He viewed communism an evil philosophy. For this, he emphasized that the United States would put down the Soviet expansionism ideologically, politically and economically.

Besides, the Soviets considered Reagan's prophetic politics seriously; they reacted with intolerance to United States' hostile foreign policy. The latter tended to sabotage the nuclear armament program of the USSR by refusing to hold talks with the Soviet leaders. As shown in figure 1, the Reagan administration supported United States' armament race and insisted on the nuclear disarmament on the behalf of the Soviets. Consequently, the Soviet Union raised expenditures of its nuclear industry. Thus, both hostile powers, the USSR and the United States, established a nuclear arsenal with highly sophisticated military technology (Fischer, 1997, p42).

Figure 01: Federal Budget of the US department of Defense



Source: Loesche 2017

Indeed, along his first presidential term, Reagan fostered a foreign policy agenda with intolerance and showed his hostility against the Soviet leaders rhetorically. In his Evil Empire Speech (EES), he rejected any sort of nuclear talks and initiatives with pro-Soviet governments. He claimed the latter a threat for America's national security. He asserted: "The truth is that a freeze would now be a very dangerous fraud, for that is merely the illusion of peace" (*Milestone Documents in American History*, 2008, p1969). Explicitly, he viewed the pro-Soviet governments in Latin America, like Cuba and Granada, a harbor for the Soviets to establish their military bases to attack the United States with nuclear arms. Accordingly, for Reagan, the United States would be exposed to direct nuclear attacks from the Soviet forces. For this, the presence of the Soviets, politically, militarily or even ideologically ought to be prevented and chased by the US army. As shown in figure 1, US military spending sharply increased from less than \$300 billion in 1981 and reached about \$500 billion in the end of Reagan's first presidential term. Then, by his 2nd term, the military expenditures stabilized and gradually decreased into below \$400 billion (Loesche 2017). During the first term, Reagan's rhetorical strategies were harsher and more violent than the second presidential term. This is reflected in the statistics shown in figure 1 that demonstrated an important fall in the military spending during the second half of the 1980's.

Consequently, Reagan's intolerant rhetorical strategy provoked more tensions between both powers. For instance, the United States raised its military budget to \$219 billion in 1982. Besides, the discontent toughened between the United States and the Soviet Union over their spheres of influence and objected disarmament talks. For this, they raised their expenditures in their nuclear and military industries (Fischer, 1997, p86). The following table exposes the main political values that characterized the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during Reagan's presidential terms.

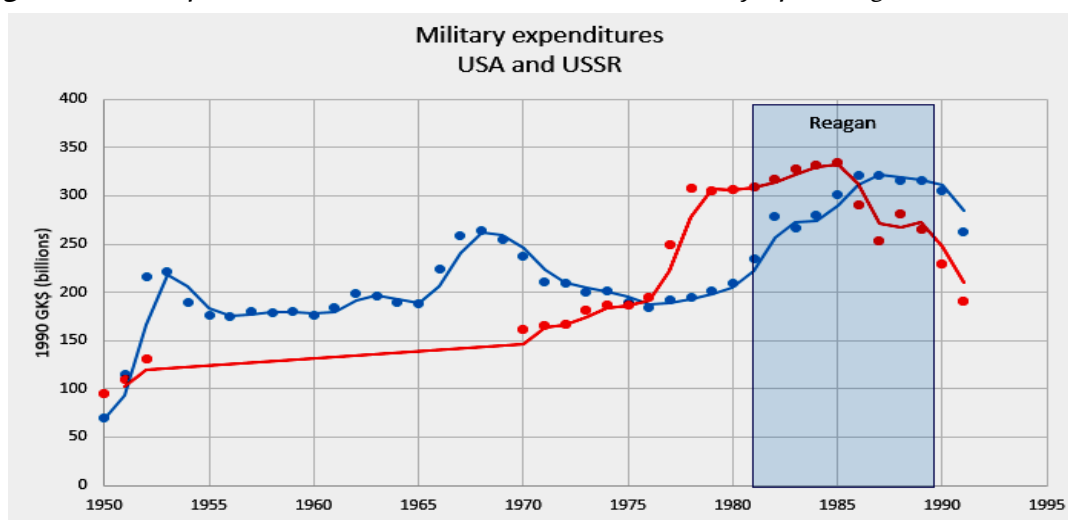
Table No. 01: A Summary of the Soviets' and U.S Relations

	1981-1983	1984-1985
Nature of Superpower relations	Zero-Sum Competition	Combination of Common Interests and Rivalry
Received Primary threats	Soviet Expansionism Soviet Military Strength	War Misunderstanding
Goals of US-Soviet Policy	Soviet Restraint Soviet Reciprocity	Cooperation Understanding
Strategies	Linkage Rebuild US Military Strength Low Priority for Arms control	Superpower Dialogue Emphasize Need for Global Arms Reduction Confidence-Building Measures

Source: Beth A. Fischer, (1997), p.18.

Likewise, the Soviets responded to Reagan's psychological warfare strategy through a set of measures. As a step to compete with the American nuclear advancement, they raised the budgetary requirements of their nuclear armament industry. Moreover, they expanded their arms manufacture that reached high levels of production rates. This impelled the Soviets to search for exterior markets to sell their arms. As shown in figure 2, both the US and Soviet military spendings sharply increased in the period between 1980 to 1985. They reached about \$350 billion for both hostile powers. However, by 1986, their expenditures started to slowly decrease.

Figure 2: A comparison between the US and USSR's military spending



Source: (Nintil2016)

Accordingly, they exported their products to countries under their sphere of influence like Croatia, Poland and North Korea. In addition, they struggled with the United States to dominate the international arms market. In other words, both hostile powers purposed to stretch their international markets as a step to restrict the ideological and political expansionism of each other. In this respect, they spanned their target markets in Europe, Asia and Africa by selling missiles, combat aircrafts and other military vehicles. To illustrate with, the United States' arms exports surpassed those of the Soviets. According to R. T. Maddock's study, both the Soviets and the Americans reached approximately the same rates in the international arms market in 1985. In opposition to the USSR's 22 %, the United States reached 25 % of the world's arms exports (Maddock, 1990, p157).

Table No. 02: The World's Principal Weapons Exporters (1985)

	Combat Aircraft			Armoured Vehicles			Missiles			Naval Vessel	
Country	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	C
USSR	22	9	28	28	36	27	8	4	15	26	26
US	25	44	18	25	2	27	76	82	63	5	6

Key: A Share of total world exports

B Share of exports to advanced industrial countries

C Share of exports to Third World countries

Source: R. T. Maddock, (1990), p.157.

Moreover, the Soviets expanded their foreign markets in Latin America, Southern Asia and Eastern Europe where they had pro-Soviet allies. This demonstrates that international military trade dealings were ultimately influenced by the United States' and the Soviets' paranoiac foreign relations.

Henceforth, this section demonstrated that Reagan's Evil Empire Speech involved psychological warfare strategies. The latter used a set of philosophical principles that were imported from neoclassical philosophy of the 18th century such as rational metaphysics. In addition, it related on two major strategies; these are: prophetic politics and the value tradition. Reagan's fundamentalist rhetoric affected US-Soviets' relations on the diplomatic, military and economic levels. Likewise, the EES implied philosophical background that Reagan used in his psychological warfare strategy against the USSR and dispensationist philosophical background too that was involved under the secular political philosophy.

Conclusion:

This present study discussed the rhetorical strategy of Ronald Reagan against the Soviet Union. It defined the mechanisms of the psychological warfare strategy in Reagan's Evil Empire Speech. It has uncovered the philosophical background of the EES through an epistemological approach. It has shown that the Reagan psychological warfare strategy was based on two major tactics. These are: prophetic politics and the value tradition. Moreover, this study revealed that the EES implied 18th century rational metaphysical philosophical principles that were introduced by the Founding Fathers into the political philosophy of the American system. Likewise, it demonstrated that

Reagan argued his objection for nuclear armament talks with the Soviets with a set of neoclassical philosophical ideals. Explicitly, he accused the Soviets for atheism and claimed their expansionism a threat for what he called American civil religion. He argued his hostility against the Soviets through converging between his dispensational beliefs and rational metaphysical ideals of the Founding Fathers under a secular political philosophy. He presented both philosophies as sharing the same ideological background and origin. This study demonstrated how Reagan intertwined both diverging beliefs through rhetorical and psychological warfare strategies in the light of secularism. It also revealed that Reagan's strategic use of philosophy in his political fundamentalist views provoked the Soviets and caused a sharp increase in nuclear armament expenditures of both hostile powers.

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