Maggie and Ron: not so lovey-dovey?

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

In November 1988, Margaret Thatcher made her last visit to Ronald Reagan's White House. Following a 19-gun salute, "The Gipper" stood on the South Lawn to praise "The Iron Lady." Amid "a crisis of faith, a crisis of will in democracies," the president claimed, the prime minister had stood firm in freedom's defense. Acting in concert, the leaders of the United States and Great Britain had "transformed this decade into a turning point, a turning point for our age and for all time."

That Reagan and Thatcher had a special relationship, akin to the bond between Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, has become conventional wisdom on both sides of the Atlantic. In this dual biography, Richard Aldous, a professor of British history and literature at Bard College, draws on private papers and a cache of recently declassified public documents to challenge the popular myth that these two conservative icons had a "loving political marriage."

During eight years together in power, he demonstrates, often in vivid detail, the president and the prime minister had sharp exchanges over U.S. sanctions on a Soviet gas pipeline, the Falklands war, the American invasion of Grenada, nuclear deterrence and Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.

At times, however, Mr. Aldous presses his thesis too hard. Reagan's nuclear arms reduction talks with Mikhail Gorbachev probably did not shake Thatcher and the special relationship "to the core." Nor is it the case that the two leaders "fought and disagreed over almost every international decision that they confronted."

Far more persuasive is Mr. Aldous' claim that the relationship is best understood as "an exacting diplomatic engagement between the leaders of two sovereign, independent states of vastly different strengths and interests." This was especially true in the Falkland Islands (America's "backyard") and Grenada (a member of the British Commonwealth).

Their disputes over the Cold War endgame, it seems to me, were more tactical than strategic -- and were expressed most often in private exchanges. Pleased to have Thatcher's support, Reagan "simply brushed her aside," Mr. Aldous indicates, when they disagreed. And she rarely forgot that she was a junior partner.

Reagan and Thatcher, Mr. Aldous reminds us, were "conviction politicians," shaped more by beliefs than ideas, ardent anti-Communists who articulated "an unquenchable optimism about the future." Their relationship was grounded in the shared culture of English-speaking people.

Nonetheless, they had vastly different personalities and temperaments. Thatcher was combative and confrontational. During the Falklands crisis, she promised a colleague she would be reasonable in her conversation with the president "provided I get my way." By nature courteous and conciliatory, Reagan was, at times, intimidated by her. On such occasions, Mr. Aldous indicates, he tried to turn on the charm, "burbled on," or apologized. But he never changed his mind -- or his policies -- to accommodate her.

Despite their differences, Mr. Aldous concludes that Reagan and Thatcher displayed and sometimes shared a political and strategic vision; he contrasts it, unfairly, in my judgment, with the "managerial" leadership of George H. W. Bush and John Major.

Reagan and Thatcher were, indeed, "dropped into a grand historical moment." They wanted to defeat the Soviet Union, not merely contain it. To that end the Reagan administration plotted a secret economic war and an arms race (set forth in National Security Decision Directive 32, "The Plan to Prevail") to bring the communists to their knees and called on Mr. Gorbachev to "tear down that wall."

It came tumbling down in 1989 and the Soviet Union Empire imploded a few years later. The president and the prime minister certainly deserve some credit for ending the Cold War. Historians, however, do not agree on how much.

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