

PRESIDENTS I HAVE KNOWN

Over the years, I have become friends with many people of influence. I've known and interacted with two America Presidents. I think you will enjoy a couple of my favorite stories.

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter was a god-send for me. When **The Ruff Times** was first launched, he was President. With the help of a compliant congress, he launched spending programs that led to a terrifying rate of inflation and soaring interest rates which threatened America. He was my foil; in fact it was great fun to jump on Jimmy Carter on issue after issue of the new Ruff Times in the '70s. He was what a President should not be – all heart and no brain. He was what we would today call a “policy wonk,” someone who could lose himself in the details and neglect the big picture. This was probably a result of his training as a navy nuclear engineer. He could probably take apart a submarine reactor but have no idea of the politics of the nuclear age.

My first tangle with him came as a result of the Iranian capture of our embassy staff which they held hostage for almost a year. President Carter had made an abortive rescue attempt. He sent an extraction team by helicopter and transport into Southern Iran to mount a rescue assault, but the whole adventure ended in a terrible disaster when they suddenly decided to recall the raid. In the confusion, a helicopter crashed into one of the transports and it ended in a fiery disaster with casualties and eventually, an ignominious retreat.

I was preparing my usual two-minute commentaries for my syndicated radio audience when a subscriber sent me a clipping from the Arab news, an English-language paper

out of Saudi Arabia. The article claimed that the Russians had detected this raid via satellite, and had immediately gotten on the hot line with Carter, demanding that he pull the troops out or Russia would invade Iran and eventually the entire Middle East, taking over the oil fields. Soviet troops were massing on Iran's northern border.

This dire threat would be relieved if we cancelled the raid. That was the reason for the abrupt change of plan that caused the confusion and the eventual disaster.

I had no way of knowing for sure if the Arab News was right, but a friend of mine who was formerly with the Defense Intelligence Agency confirmed that the Russians had the ability to detect the raid, and what's more, in the hours preceding the disaster, there had been a lot of frantic hot-line traffic between the Soviet leadership and President Carter.

I told the story in my radio commentary and published it in greater detail in The Ruff Times, and that's when I made President Carter's enemy list. I received a panicky phone call from the syndicator who had sold my radio show to 300 stations. He screamed at me over the phone, "What did you say in your radio commentary? 50 stations have cancelled you!"



It took me a while to find out why, but eventually we learned that the Carter/Mondale Election Committee (there was an election going on at the time) had notified all the stations in our network that if they didn't drop my show, they would have a real problem with a new Carter Administration during their second term when it came to license-renewal time. At that time, the Administration had a lot of authority over renewing radio licenses, and 50 of the stations caved in.

As soon as I published that information in The Ruff Times, the assault stopped, but my syndicated radio show was downhill from there.

In my naiveté, I didn't realize how much I was hated by Carter and his cohorts because of what I had said. A few months later during the election campaign (we lived in Modesto, California), I heard that one of our neighbors down the street who had a big,

lovely home was hosting a fund raiser for Jimmy Carter. On the day of the fundraiser I said to Kay, "Let's walk down the street and see if we can recognize any celebrities who might be there."

As Kay and I with one of our kids walked out of the house to begin our block-long trek to see what was going on, three burly men with crew cuts, conservative suits and earphones in their ears jumped out of a van without windows parked across the street, rushed up to us and said, "Mr. Ruff, you had better go back in your house until we give you the okay." I took one look at their size and the gun on the hip that had been exposed by one of the men pulling his unbuttoned coat back, so I decided discretion was the better part of valor, and we went into the house.

A few hours later, we looked out and the vans were gone, and we felt safe on our own street again.

This is why I never bought the good-guy image of Jimmy Carter, even though he seems to be a sincere Christian in his personal life. I had a brush with a totalitarian.

Ronald Reagan

Ronald Regan is a different story, though he was actually worse for my business than Jimmy Carter because telling these stories about Jimmy only reinforced my position with my audience which was mostly conservative and anti-Carter. But Ronald Reagan was another problem entirely.

I had known Reagan for some years as we had shared the platform at several conferences, and he had always been very cordial. I had also interviewed him on my TV show, **RuffHou\$e**, and several pictures of us together decorated my office wall.

RuffPAC had also been a significant factor in his election, raising money by the millions for him and running an independent election campaign. He was well aware of who we were.

I had built my early career on deploring high inflation and high interest rates. When Reagan was elected, his dramatic tax cuts, coupled with Paul Volcker holding the line on the Money Supply, reversed that whole process and changed my message from

“bad times are coming” to “there’s a new dawn for America.” Unfortunately that message was nowhere near as exciting as the scary message that came from my heart when I first launched The Ruff Times, and our direct mail began to be less effective.

We were big Reagan supporters, and through **Neal Blair**, who had founded **Ruff PAC** and **Free the Eagle** (our Washington lobby), we had excellent connections with Reagan and the White House staff.

Then came one of the most dramatic events in my personal history, and perhaps the history of the U.S. Jack Anderson (the Glenn Beck of the day) had sent a colleague into Afghanistan to report on the invasion by the Soviet Union. He had hidden on a hillside and watched low-flying jets and helicopter gun ships decimate a village which was thought to be a haven for the Mujahedin, the fierce and almost primitive Afghanistan Freedom Fighters. When the reporter left the counter over the Khyber Pass into Pakistan, he told Jack what he had seen, and Jack called me.

“Howard, you have got to use your influence to persuade President Reagan to get shoulder-mounted Stinger missiles to the Mujahedin so they can shoot down those low-flying aircraft; if we don’t the Soviets will win in six months or less.”

So Neal began working with Oliver North and John Poindexter who were on the White House National Security staff. Eventually, we got to President Reagan directly. In the meantime, we had brought several of Mujahedin Freedom Fighters and maimed children to Washington, and shared the Free the Eagle offices with them as the children underwent reconstructive surgery and other medical care.

President Reagan looked at our proposal and said, “I’ll get them the stinger missiles *if* you can get Congress behind me.” So my staff went to work. We visited every senator and congressman’s office with these maimed children and freedom fighters. Eventually, a roll-call resolution was passed unanimously by both houses of Congress in support of the Mujahedin.

This was not simply “a voice vote” where everyone says Aye and it is determined to be unanimous. This was a roll-call vote where each Congressman had to go on record, and

it is the first unanimous roll-call resolution in the history of the United States Congress without a single dissent.



Armed with this support, Reagan sent Stingers to the Afghans and the war took on a totally different character as the Soviet planes could not fly below 10,000 feet. The war settled into an expensive stalemate and the body bags began going back to Russia as Soviet casualties mounted.

When Gorbachev became Premier of the Soviet Union, he suspected that the Soviet books were being cooked and that the finances of the Soviet Union were nowhere near as represented. Eventually he determined that their Gross National Product was less than half what they claimed and military expenditures were three times higher than they claimed; Afghanistan was bankrupting the Soviet Union. As the war ground on, Gorbachev made a calculated decision to “reform” communism to make it more “user friendly.” He began pulling back internationally, because he knew they could no longer afford to support Soviet troops and Soviet sponsored “wars of liberation” in Angola, Nicaragua, and other hot spots around the world.

No sooner did they do that than the suppressed longing for freedom began to prevail. He cancelled several billion dollars a year of subsidies to Castro in Cuba. He told the East European bloc that they could not depend on Soviet troops to keep order in their countries, but had to handle it themselves. Eventually Gorbachev learned, to his horror, that if you removed the military oppression from the Soviet Empire, it could not be held together, because fear was the only glue which held it together, and it began to fly apart. Soon the Berlin wall came down and the Soviet Union was on its way to oblivion.

I don't claim *full* credit for this, but we played an important part in stalling the Soviets in Afghanistan, and that combined with Reagan's decision to launch Star Wars and if necessary spend the Soviet Union into oblivion in an expensive arms race, resulted in the collapse of that Evil Empire.

There is one other instance that I still remember with a chuckle.

Me vs. Reagan

Reagan had been convinced by his advisors that the American banks were on the verge of collapse with all their multi-billion-dollar loans to South and Central American countries going bad. He was told that it could bring down the American banking system. A multi-billion dollar bill to give money to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had made its way through the House of Representatives and looked like a slam dunk in Senate, with the money supposedly earmarked for poor debtor countries.

I and my advisors concluded that this money would never leave New York; it would simply go into the bank accounts of the IMF, and from there to Chemical Bank, Citibank and other banks to make good their bad third-world loans so they wouldn't have to write them off the books. We also knew that the banks could have powered through congress legislation which would have allowed them to take a gradual write down, rather than having to have to write these IOUs off all at once if the money was not forthcoming. The only ones who would suffer were management and the boards of directors of those banks which had made those crummy loans.

So we began following Reagan's team around the Senate Office Building with a Truth Squad, explaining how this would simply be a giveaway to the banks. We even held a rally in Washington, a public demonstration which got a lot of press, and I did a joint press conference with Ralph Nader who joined us for reasons of his own – he hated big banks as bastions of capitalism.

As a result, the bill was defeated in the Senate as we turned it completely around. Reagan eventually got his bill by buying Democrat votes when he caved in on a housing bill that they wanted, but Free the Eagle had made its mark on the Reagan Administration.

The most interesting part of this story was when one of my kids said, "Dad, the White House is on the phone, and President Reagan wants to talk to you."

I told him, "I really don't want to talk to him; tell him I'm not here." I knew what he wanted, and I wasn't buying it. Apparently I said it too loud, and President Reagan heard me and hung up.

He called Neal Blair. "Tell your friend Ruff I'm really pissed," which Neal duly related to me. I was worried that our very useful relationship with the Reagan Administration would be irreparably damaged, but I stopped worrying when two weeks later I got a package with a big lovely sketch of Ronald Reagan inscribed "to my good friend, Howard Ruff." Apparently someone on his staff didn't realize that someone else on his staff had sent me that one, and two weeks later I got a big photographic portrait with the same inscription.

Ronald Reagan simply could not hold a grudge. He made a special effort to keep his friends. What we had done was consequential, but he reaffirmed that he would let bygones be bygones, and we retained our cordial relationship with the Reagan White House.

In retrospect, this was a lot of fun, but it was rather scary when it was going on. I have nothing but the highest regard for Ronald Reagan. Yes, he did some things I didn't like, that I thought were not economically or, in some cases, politically sound. But on the whole, he was one of the greatest presidents. His courage and stubborn determination brought down the Evil Empire and also stopped the runaway inflation and interest rates of the Carter years dead in their tracks. I love and respect the man!