Study Questions: Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" Speech

President Ronald Reagan, known as the "Great Communicator," gave this speech on March 8, 1983 at the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida. His popularity was at a low point, largely a result of the recession of 1981 and 1982. He was also receiving a lot of criticism for the deterioration in Soviet American relations and the end of détente. Some of Reagan's advisers thought the president needed to energize supporters to counter the growing support for a nuclear freeze as well as the mounting discontent with his Soviet policies. The speechwriter Anthony Dolan encouraged the president to accept an invitation to speak at the annual meeting of the NAE. Dolan argued that Reagan could mobilize an important constituency—conservative Christians, who had backed him in the election of 1980 and supported his social policies. The most memorable part of the speech was about Communism and the Soviet Union, but most of the text revolved around hot-button social issues of the early 1980s. The goal was to enlist social conservatives in what would be one of the last battles of the cold war.

1. Reagan made hundreds of speeches as president, but “evil empire” was one of the most memorable phrases he ever used. Why do you think that these words had such a powerful effect in 1983 and in the following years? What about Reagan's language, the ideas he conveyed, the context of the speech, and the nature of the Soviet-American conflict during the cold war accounted for the power of his words?

2. In the “Evil Empire” Speech, Reagan states that “traditional values” are part of the foundation of American democracy and “that freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted.” Do you agree with Reagan's assertions about the connections between religion and American democracy? In what ways do religious values strengthen or reinforce democratic practices or institutions? In what ways do religious values complicate or weaken democratic practices or institutions?

3. President Reagan presents the cold war as a conflict between a nation committed to freedom and an “evil empire” that recognizes no moral values except whatever advances its goal of world revolution. Do you think that Reagan was right to explain the cold war as fundamentally a moral conflict? Are there other ways of understanding the reasons for the international differences associated with the cold war?

4. President Reagan called the Soviet Union an “evil empire” and explained the cold war with the Soviets as a conflict between good and evil. In his State of the Union address of January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush asserted that Iran, Iraq, and North Korea were parts of an “axis of evil.” He also depicted the war on terror as a conflict between good and evil. Compare and contrast the ways Reagan and Bush used the term “evil” to generate support for their foreign policies.