

## Ronald Reagan: Mr. Gorbachev, Tear Down This Wall (1987)

**The End of the Cold War:** Ronald Reagan (1911-2004), was determined to restore American power and credibility in the world. As a staunch anticommunist, he would challenge, wherever and however possible, the Soviet Union and work to roll back communism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Relations between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. had already soured with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and grew worse in 1981 with the communist crackdown of a union movement, involving millions of workers, in Poland. Reagan ordered a massive military buildup, triggering a new arms race in conventional as well as nuclear weapons, which the Soviet Union could ill afford, although this was not known at the time. Reagan also dramatically upped the ante and costs with his Strategic Defense Initiative – a plan to build a space shield to stop incoming Soviet missiles from reaching U.S. targets.

While these actions challenged Soviet power directly, Reagan also increased support for the Afghan mujahideen, men, including Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian, who fiercely resisted the Soviet occupation. These “freedom fighters,” as Reagan called them, succeeded in defeating the Soviets and forcing their withdrawal from the country.

During his second term, President Reagan worked to defuse Soviet-American tensions. Reagan established a working relationship with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in 1985 and sought to modernize the Soviet Union’s deteriorating economy. Arms control talks resumed, and the two leaders met at several summit meetings between 1985 and 1988. In public, Reagan continued to pressure the USSR to reform. He went to West Germany in 1987 to demand that Gorbachev tear down the Berlin Wall, which had been built to keep East Germans from fleeing communism.

The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, immediately became a symbol of the Cold War and the struggle between freedom and communism. On June 12, 1987, Reagan gave a speech in West Berlin at the historic Brandenburg Gate challenging Gorbachev to come to Germany to tear down the wall, thereby ending the central struggle of the twentieth century. The Berlin Wall was finally brought down in November 1989, marking a peaceful revolution as communist governments throughout Eastern Europe and ultimately in the Soviet Union were overthrown and democratically elected governments took their place.

President George H.W. Bush, who succeeded Reagan, was standing watch when most Communist regimes fell from power, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Warsaw Pact was terminated, and Germany reunified. Although communist governments remained very much in power in North Korea, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, the Cold War was declared over, with the United States and its allies victorious. These sweeping changes marked a major turning point in U.S. and world history.

Source: Ronald Reagan, Speech at the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, June 12, 1987. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use.

Chancellor Kohl, *Governing Mayor Diepgen, ladies and gentlemen:* Twenty-four years ago, President John F. Kennedy visited Berlin, speaking to the people of this city and the world at the City Hall. Well, since then two other presidents have come, each in his turn, to Berlin. And today I, myself, make my second visit to your city.

We come to Berlin, we American presidents, because it's our duty to speak, in this place, of freedom. But I must confess, we're drawn here by other things as well: by the feeling of history in this city, more than 500 years older than our own nation... most of all, by your courage and determination... You see, like so many presidents before me, I come here today because wherever I go, whatever I do: *Ich hab noch einen Koffer in Berlin.* [I still have a suitcase in Berlin.]

Our gathering today is being broadcast throughout Western Europe and North America. I understand that it is being seen and heard as well in the East. To those listening throughout Eastern Europe, a special word: Although I cannot be with you, I address my remarks to you... For I join you, as I join your fellow countrymen in the West, in this firm, this unalterable belief: *Es gibt nur ein Berlin.* [There is only one Berlin.]

Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe. From the Baltic, south, those barriers cut across Germany in a gash of barbed wire, concrete, dog runs, and guard towers. Farther south, there may be no visible... wall. But there remain armed guards and checkpoints all the same... Yet it is here in Berlin where the wall emerges most clearly; here, cutting across your city, where the... television screen have imprinted this brutal division of a continent upon the mind of the world...

Today I say: As long as... this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is... [a] question of freedom for all mankind. Yet I do not come here to lament. For I find in Berlin a message of hope, even in the shadow of this wall, a message of triumph.

In this season of spring in 1945, the people of Berlin emerged from their air-raid shelters to find devastation... [I]n 1947 Secretary of State... George Marshall announced the creation of what would become known as the Marshall Plan. Speaking precisely 40 years ago this month, he said: "Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos."

...In West Germany and here in Berlin, there took place an economic miracle, the *Wirtschaftswunder*. ...leaders understood the practical importance of liberty – that just as truth can flourish only when the journalist is given freedom of speech, so prosperity can come about only when the farmer and businessman enjoy economic freedom... From 1950 to 1960 alone, the standard of living in West Germany and Berlin doubled.

Where four decades ago there was rubble, today in West Berlin there is the greatest industrial output of any city in Germany... Where a

city's culture seemed to have been destroyed, today there are two great universities, orchestras and an opera, countless theaters, and museums. Where there was want, today there's abundance – food, clothing, automobiles – the wonderful goods of the *Ku'damm*. From devastation, from utter ruin, you Berliners have, in freedom, rebuilt a city that once again ranks as one of the greatest on earth. The Soviets may have had other plans. But my friends, there were a few things the Soviets didn't count on – *Berliner Herz, Berliner Humor, ja, und Berliner Schnauze.* [Berliner heart, Berliner humor, yes, and a Berliner Schnauze.]

In the 1950s, Khrushchev predicted: "We will bury you." But in the West today, we see a free world that has achieved a level of prosperity and well-being unprecedented in all human history. In the Communist world, we see failure, technological backwardness, declining standards of health, even want of the most basic kind... Even today, the Soviet Union still cannot feed itself. After these four decades, then, there stands before the entire world one great and inescapable conclusion: Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor.

And now the Soviets themselves may, in a limited way, be coming to understand the importance of freedom. We hear much from Moscow about a new policy of reform and openness. Some political prisoners have been released. Certain foreign news broadcasts are no longer being jammed. Some economic enterprises have been permitted to operate with greater freedom from state control.

Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state? Or are they token gestures, intended to raise false hopes in the West, or to strengthen the Soviet system without changing it? We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make... that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace.

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!

I understand the fear of war and the pain of division that afflict this continent – and I pledge to you my country's efforts to help overcome these burdens. To be sure, we in the West must resist Soviet expansion. So we must maintain defenses of unassailable strength. Yet we seek peace; so we must strive to reduce arms on both sides... And because we remained strong, today we have within reach the possibility, not merely of limiting the growth of arms, but of eliminating, for the first time, an entire class of nuclear weapons from the face of the earth...

While we pursue these arms reductions, I pledge to you that we will maintain the capacity to deter Soviet aggression at any level at which it might occur. And in cooperation with many of our allies, the

## Period 9

United States is pursuing the Strategic Defense Initiative—research to base deterrence not on the threat of offensive retaliation, but on defenses that truly defend; on systems, in short, that will not target populations, but shield them... But we must remember a crucial fact: East and West do not mistrust each other because we are armed; we are armed because we mistrust each other. And our differences are not about weapons but about liberty. When President Kennedy spoke at the City Hall those 24 years ago, freedom was encircled, Berlin was under siege. And today, despite all the pressures upon this city, Berlin stands secure in its liberty. And freedom itself is transforming the globe...

In Europe, only one nation and those it controls refuse to join the community of freedom. Yet in this age of redoubled economic growth, of information and innovation, the Soviet Union faces a choice: It must make fundamental changes, or it will become obsolete.

Today thus represents a moment of hope. We in the West stand ready to cooperate with the East to promote true openness, to break down barriers that separate people, to create a safe, freer world. And surely there is no better place than Berlin, the meeting place of East and West, to make a start...

And I invite Mr. Gorbachev: Let us work to bring the Eastern and Western parts of the city closer together, so that all the inhabitants of all Berlin can enjoy the benefits that come with life in one of the great cities of the world...

In these four decades, as I have said, you Berliners have built a great city. You've done so in spite of threats—the Soviet attempts to impose the East-mark, the blockade. Today the city thrives in spite of... the very presence of this wall. What keeps you here? Certainly there's a great deal to be said for your fortitude, for your defiant courage. But I believe there's something deeper, something that involves Berlin's

whole look and feel and way of life... No one could live long in Berlin without being completely disabused of illusions. Something instead, that has seen the difficulties of life in Berlin but chose to accept them, that continues to build this good and proud city in contrast to a surrounding totalitarian presence that refuses to release human energies or aspirations. Something that speaks with a powerful voice of affirmation, that says yes to this city, yes to the future, yes to freedom. In a word, I would submit that what keeps you in Berlin is love—love both profound and abiding.

Perhaps this gets to the root of the matter, to the most fundamental distinction of all between East and West. The totalitarian world produces backwardness because it does such violence to the spirit, thwarting the human impulse to create, to enjoy, to worship. The totalitarian world finds even symbols of love and of worship an affront... [But] in Berlin, like the city itself, symbols of love, symbols of worship, cannot be suppressed.

As I looked out a moment ago from the Reichstag, that embodiment of German unity, I noticed words crudely spray-painted upon the wall, perhaps by a young Berliner: "This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality." Yes, across Europe, this wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.

And I would like, before I close, to say one word. I have read, and I have been questioned since I've been here about certain demonstrations against my coming. And I would like to say just one thing, and to those who demonstrate so. I wonder if they have ever asked themselves that if they should have the kind of government they apparently seek, no one would ever be able to do what they're doing again.

Thank you and God bless you all.

### Questions:

1. How does Reagan use the Berlin Wall to talk about the greater divide of the Cold War?
2. What does Reagan ask the Soviets/Mr. Gorbachev to do? Explain!
3. According to Reagan, what is the true divide between East and West?