



Tear Down This Wall: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and Responsibility

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

After World War II, a Cold War erupted between the world's two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Union built the Berlin Wall to divide East and West Berlin, engaged in a massive arms build-up, supported communist insurrections around the globe, and invaded Afghanistan.

When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980, he instituted a tough stance towards the Soviets that was designed to reverse their advances and win the Cold War. His administration supported the Polish resistance movement known as Solidarity, increased military spending, and armed resistance fighters around the world, including those battling a Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Partly due to these efforts, the Berlin Wall fell by 1989, and communism collapsed in both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by 1991.

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On June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan stood before the wall that had separated East and West Berlin since 1961. The Berlin Wall was one of the most important symbols of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and a representation of communist oppression.

Reagan was in West Berlin to speak during a ceremony commemorating the 750th anniversary of the city and faced a choice. He could confront the Soviets about the wall, or he could deliver a speech without controversy.

In the decades after World War II, Reagan, like many Americans, was concerned about the Soviet Union spreading its influence in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. In 1952, Reagan compared communism to Nazism and other forms of totalitarianism characterized by a powerful state that limited individual freedoms.

“We have met [the threat] back through the ages in the name of every conqueror that has ever set upon a course of establishing his rule over mankind,” he said. “It is simply the idea, the basis of this country and of our religion, the idea of the dignity of man, the idea that deep within the heart of each one of us is something so godlike and precious that no individual or group has a right to impose his or its will upon the people.”

In a televised speech in 1964, Reagan stated that he believed there could be no accommodation with the Soviets. “We cannot buy our security, our freedom from the threat of the bomb by committing an immorality so great as saying to a billion human beings now in slavery behind the Iron Curtain, ‘Give up your dreams of freedom because to save our own

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skins, we are willing to make a deal with your slave-masters.”

Reagan targeted the Berlin Wall in a 1967 televised town hall debate with Robert Kennedy. “I think it would be very admirable if the Berlin Wall should...disappear,” Reagan said, “We just think that a wall that is put up to confine people, and keep them within their own country...has to be somehow wrong.”

In 1978, Reagan visited the wall and heard the story of Peter Fechter, one of the first of hundreds who were shot by East German police while trying to escape to freedom over the Berlin Wall. As a result, Reagan told an aide, “My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose.”

Americans knew Reagan’s views when they elected him president in 1980. Throughout the 1970s, the United States had pursued détente, or decreased tensions, with the Soviet Union. Reagan instituted controversial policies that reversed that approach because he thought détente strengthened and emboldened the Soviets.

He also continued his unrelenting attack on the idea of communism in black-and-white moral terms. In a 1982 speech to the British Parliament, he predicted that communism would end up “on the ash heap of history,” and that the wall was “the signature of the regime that built it.” When he visited the wall during the same trip, he stated that “It’s as ugly as the idea behind it.” In a 1983 speech, he called the Soviet Union an “evil empire.”

In June 1987, many officials in his administration and West Germany were opposed to any provocative words or actions during the anniversary speech. The Germans didn’t want the speech to be anywhere near the wall and sought to avoid what might be perceived as an aggressive signal. Secretary of State George Schultz and Chief of Staff Howard Baker questioned the speech and asked the president and his speechwriters to tone down the language. Deputy National Security Advisor Colin Powell and other members of the National Security Council wanted to alter the speech and offered several revisions. Reagan decided to still speak next to the Berlin Wall.

Reagan and his team arrived in West Berlin on June 12. He spoke to reporters and nervous German officials, telling them, “This is the only wall that has ever been built to keep people in, not keep people out.” Contrarily, in East Berlin, the German secret police and Russian KGB agents cordoned off an area a thousand yards wide opposite the spot where Reagan was to speak on the other side of the wall. They wanted to ensure that no one could hear the message of freedom.

Reagan stepped up to the dais with the Brandenburg Gate and the huge wall in the background. “As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind.”

Reagan challenged Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev directly, stating, “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!”

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He finished by predicting the wall would not endure. “This wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.” No one imagined that the Berlin Wall would fall only two years later on November 9, 1989, as communism collapsed across Eastern Europe.

“The key is freedom,” Reagan told students at Moscow State University a year after his speech at the Berlin Wall. “It is the right to put forth an idea, scoffed at by the experts, and watch it catch fire among the people. It is the right to dream – to follow your dream or stick to your conscience, even if you’re the only one in a sea of doubters.” Ronald Reagan believed that he had a responsibility to bring an end to the Cold War to benefit both the United States as well as the world. He dedicated himself to achieving this goal.