

The unbelievable night the Berlin Wall Fell By Peter Robinson

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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Peter Robinson, a former White House speechwriter who drafted President Reagan's 1987 Berlin Wall address, recalls the historic events that followed the president saying, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Two scenes from the end of the Cold War:

Scene one: On June 12, 1987, President Reagan stood before the Berlin Wall, the Brandenburg Gate rising behind him, to challenge to the leader of the Soviet Union. "General Secretary Gorbachev," the president said, "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!"

Scene two: On Nov. 9, 1989, just 29 months after Reagan's speech, the Berlin Wall fell. Responding to weeks of protests across East Germany, the East German politburo met in emergency session, hoping to **quell** the protests with new **diktats**.

When a member of the **politburo** mistakenly announced that the East German regime had lifted all border controls, East Berliners began streaming to the wall. As the crowds grew, one border guard, unable to obtain orders from his confused superiors, opened his gate. Guards at the remaining checkpoints followed his example.

Thousands of East Berliners rushed into West Berlin, which took on the air of a giant street party. While some Berliners danced atop the wall, others mounted a run on hardware stores, buying every sledgehammer and pickaxe they could find to begin demolishing the structure.

Did Reagan's 1987 speech prompt the events of 1989? Since I drafted the address, I've pondered that. And though I've found no direct or immediate link, conversations over the years have led me to conclude that it mattered.

Consider the account of Ulrike Marschinke, who grew up in East Berlin. "When I heard Mr. Reagan say, 'tear down this wall,'" Marschinke once told me, "I thought to myself, 'What a strange idea!' I only knew the world with the wall. I couldn't imagine how it would work to live without the wall. It was impossible for me to understand what would happen."

Or listen to Otto Bamel. A West German diplomat, Bamel lived in East Germany when the wall came down. "I didn't believe this could happen," he told me.

Strange. Unimaginable. Unbelievable. The Berlin Wall seemed so immovable — such a fixed part of everyday life and of the entire Communist outlook and philosophy — that the very idea of life without it seemed **inconceivable**.

Reagan thus spoke the unspeakable.

He helped create for people in the East a new sense of the possible. If an American president could call on the leader of the Soviet Union to tear down

the Berlin Wall — if that could happen — what else might prove possible?

Reagan was not alone in calling for freedom, of course. Pope John Paul II, Margaret Thatcher, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and others all denounced the Communist **regimes** of Eastern Europe. Yet Reagan alone spoke in the tradition of America's Cold War presidents.

Like President Harry Truman, who bucked Stalin's 1948 blockade of West Berlin by flying supplies to the city in the Berlin Airlift. And John F. Kennedy, who went to Berlin and declared, "Ich bin ein Berliner."

Reagan spoke, that is, as the leader of the one nation that possessed the military forces capable of **counterbalancing** those of the Soviet Union — and that for more than four decades demonstrated its determination to stand for the cause of liberty. When Reagan called on Gorbachev to tear down the wall, he was only giving voice to the American people.

On this 30th anniversary of the fall of the wall, it's worth a final glimpse of that second scene. In the words, again, of Otto Bamel:

"Early in the morning we saw a piece of paper on our kitchen table from our youngest boy, Jens, telling us, 'I crossed the wall. I jumped over the wall at the Brandenburg Gate with my friends. I took my East Berlin friends with me.'

"I said to my wife, 'Something is wrong.' Without eating we took our bicycles and went to the border ... There were people crossing the border on foot and in cars and on bicycles and motorbikes. It was just overwhelming. Nobody expected it ... The joy about this event was just overwhelming all other thoughts. This was so joyful and so unbelievable."

Whatever mistakes we make or bitterness that seeps into our politics, be proud: Throughout the Cold War, Americans stood for one cause — liberty.

Peter Robinson, a former White House speechwriter, drafted President Reagan's 1987 Berlin Wall address.

Personal Reflection

What will be the Fall-of-the-Berlin-Wall event of your adolescence? What world event do you think could happen that would change the world now in such a fundamental way and change the course of history permanently for the better?
