

**The Fall of the Berlin Wall:
A Perspective on Its Twentieth Anniversary**

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*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!*

President Ronald Reagan

So spoke President Ronald Reagan on June 12, 1987. In the background was the Brandenburg Gate, all too visible behind the wall. Reagan's stirring words came dramatically alive when that wall was joyously torn down some two and one-half years later.

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Here at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we must ask ourselves: Why did the wall come down and what can we learn from this historic event? These questions are important because the disappearance of the wall is a metaphor for the end of the Cold War, which occurred largely without bloodshed. And the lessons we should learn are potentially useful because security concerns once again threaten the freedom and prosperity of our world.

I will speak particularly about the Reagan years because they were an important part of the picture and because I know them from personal experience. But I recognize one of the most important reasons for success: we in the West had a strategy that we were able to sustain for almost half a century. The basic architecture was put in place and solidified in the Truman and Eisenhower years and that architecture, particularly the NATO alliance, served us well throughout the Cold War period.

Let me talk first about a few ideas that underlay our success.

The strategy of containment was central. The West undertook to resist any expansion of the Soviet empire with the expectation that, sooner or later, the internal contradictions in the empire would cause it to look inward and, in the end, to change. As time went on, this guiding idea shifted into what was called *détente*: we're here, you're there, that's life, so the name of the game is peaceful coexistence. Well, that's a lot better than war, especially nuclear war.

But Ronald Reagan preferred the initial idea. He denounced *détente* and stood by his belief that the Soviet Union would change because, as he said in his "Tear Down This Wall" speech, "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 – too little food."

He made some people nervous with his views and his rhetoric, but the idea that change is possible turned out to be an energizing and motivating stimulant, true to the original concept of containment.

A second idea, the concept of linkage, characterized the pre-Reagan approach to our relationship with the Soviet Union. The Reagan Administration inherited the result of the application of this idea. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, President Carter was surprised, distressed, and angered. In reaction, he shut down everything from participation by U.S. athletes in the Moscow Olympics to negotiations on arms control and even the annual visit of Foreign Minister Gromyko to Washington prior to the opening of the UN General Assembly.

As I took office, my friend, the West German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, counseled me: “George, the situation is dangerous; there is no human contact.” To put it another way, linkage had been vastly overdone. President Reagan understood that linkage could work against the right outcome. Linkage could encourage the Soviets to do something bad just so they could agree to give it up in order to get something else they wanted. And if the Soviets did something good, linkage put pressure on us to go along with something else they were doing wrong. Above all, Ronald Reagan was determined to

pursue freedom and make an effort to reduce nuclear armaments no matter what else was going on.

We confronted this issue most dramatically in September 1983, when the Soviets shot down a Korean airliner. The Boeing 747, with its unique profile, was carrying 269 passengers and crew. We obtained and released a recording of the fighter pilot's ground controller authorizing him to fire. Of course, we and the rest of the world were outraged.

But rather than cut ties, as his predecessor had done, and over the objections of a great many members of his administration, President Reagan authorized me to go ahead with an earlier-scheduled meeting with Foreign Minister Gromyko. Talk at the meeting was harsh and blunt, and, at one point, Gromyko started to leave but then came back. Our longtime interpreter told me that it was the most difficult and tumultuous meeting he had ever observed. I thought it was good for Gromyko to hear directly how appalled we were, as were people throughout the world.

Even more important, and, once again, over many objections, President Reagan sent our arms control negotiators back to Geneva to continue their quest for an agreement. So, it is not evidence of weakness that you meet with your counterpart. The important point is what you say.

We in the West also understood the importance of strength and its many dimensions. Free societies and free economies, with some help from the Marshall Plan, produced prosperity. These successes, in turn, produced confidence. The achievements could be made known through organizations such as Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, along with the British Broadcasting Corporation and Voice of America. So strength has many dimensions, including, of course, military capability. NATO was formed and held together. There were many difficult moments. Who can forget the Berlin Airlift and the resolute Berliners, as we in the NATO countries stood with them?

I believe the vital turning point in the Cold War was the deployment of Pershing missiles in Germany in late 1983. That deployment did not come easily, even though it was the

implementation of a long-known NATO agreement. The run-up to deployment was accompanied by a drumbeat of threats from the Soviet Union. War, they implied, was in the offing. And the threats from the Soviet Union had an effect on the West. The 1983 nuclear freeze protest in New York City's Central Park still stands as one of the largest public demonstrations in American history, while massive and repeated demonstrations took place throughout the United Kingdom. Protesters filled the streets. Some politicians went wobbly. Nevertheless, a coherent NATO was on display. The hero of that turning point is right here today: former Chancellor Helmut Kohl. For despite the opposition to the 1983 deployment that manifested itself in the United States and the United Kingdom, no one in the West came under pressure as intense as that faced by the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany – no one. I tip my hat to you, sir. If that deployment had not gone forward, our strength and our willpower could have been shattered and the outcome of the Cold War might well have been different.

But now I note that the strength we put on display was never used. What preceded the deployment was intense diplomacy with the

Soviets and a continuing and even more intense consultative process among the Allies. In the end, that process made the deployment possible and the deployment – a magnificent display of the strength, determination, and cohesion of NATO – in turn made possible the diplomacy that followed and, in the end, tore down that wall. And by containing the Soviets – by making it clear that we would not permit them to isolate Berlin – NATO established the conditions in which brave people throughout the Warsaw Pact could bring the Cold War to a peaceful end. President Reagan called on Mr. Gorbachev to tear down the wall, but in the end it was the German people who did so.

So we see on display here a set of important ideas:

- Change toward freedom and openness is possible.
- Economic development goes in tandem with political openness.
- Strength of purpose and capability are essential.
- Strength works in tandem with diplomacy.
- A deep and continuing consultative process among like-minded people creates the understanding necessary to make hard choices.

- A successful strategy must be based on realism and sustainability.

Well, the Cold War is over, the world now proceeds on a global basis, and economic expansion is taking place almost everywhere at an unprecedented pace. The world is, in many ways, at a golden moment. But we know all too well what constitutes the main threat to the continuation of this prosperity and the political openness that tends to be its handmaiden.

The threat posed by Islamic extremists using the weapon of terror – even, potentially, nuclear terror – is all too real. We have seen the face of terror in the Americas, in Asia, in Europe, in the Middle East – in every corner of the world. There are Islamists who would build a kind of wall of ideology in an effort to shut in vast multitudes of believers in Islam who nevertheless wish for a better life consistent with the teachings of their religion. These radical jihadists promulgate a culture of hate and division.

What lessons can we draw from our earlier experiences as we combat and seek to isolate the forces of division and find accommodation with more moderate and tolerant Islam?

The notion of containment can also work against terrorism as it did against the Soviet Union. If we can prevent the spread of hateful ideology, then we have taken the first essential step. If you look at Indonesia and Malaysia, countries with large numbers of Muslims, you will see some signs that the strategy of containment can work. And remember that the strategy of containment includes the idea that change is possible. So look at Algeria today, where, as reported recently by the *New York Times*, 60 percent of the enrollment in colleges is by women, and they are filling an increasing array of jobs, including 70 percent of Algeria's lawyers and 60 percent of its judges.

Economic development based on human effort, not just the exploitation of oil wealth, can lead to more open political systems. Why not encourage that kind of development in Islamic lands and communities?

Strength is always a key: the military capability, willpower, and self-confidence to act when necessary. A special challenge is created by the potentially devastating consequences of a terrorist attack: huge numbers of lives lost, in addition to destruction of property and economic damage and dislocation. The need for sharply improved intelligence capability is obvious. Knowledge about attacks before they take place is essential. Then we have an uncomfortable decision to make, especially when the culprit group or individuals are in a country where terrorists are tolerated or even assisted. The failure to use preventive force in such circumstances can have consequences that are simply not acceptable.

Other ideas can also be effective.

Consultation and diplomatic engagement are essential. To paraphrase Helmut Schmidt, there is no substitute for human contact. The point is to be careful what you say and to be sure that your diplomacy is supported by strength.

Perhaps we can also gain some momentum for this agenda and strength, cooperation, containment, and diplomacy from the pursuit of two big ideas on a global scale. Each one is drawn from the Ronald Reagan playbook.

Can we find our way to a world free of nuclear weapons? I'm working hard on this problem on a nonpartisan basis with Sam Nunn, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sid Drell, along with many others. We took a cue from development of that idea at the Reykjavik meeting between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev where the two leaders came close – very close – to an agreement that would have led to the abolition of most kinds of nuclear weapons. Immediately afterwards, we all felt dejected, but within a few hours, we recognized the import of what had taken place. As I told President Reagan when we returned to Washington, Reykjavik had been a success, not a failure, because it demonstrated the possibility of a world free of the nuclear threat.

Many steps need to be taken and with great care. The world must be rallied to this grand endeavor. The use of nuclear weapons

has never made sense. Now, as they spread, the likelihood grows that they will be used rather than merely relied upon for their deterrent value, with potentially disastrous consequences.

The pursuit of big ideas on a world scale might well generate just the sense of cohesion that would help like-minded nations face down other problems that threaten our peace and our prosperity.

I am deeply honored and moved by the opportunity to speak here at the Reagan Foundation on this special anniversary. The occasion reminds us that unpleasant realities can change if we confront them with strength, cohesion, and sustained diplomatic effort.