

**The Legacy of a Speech:
Exploring Published Response to President Reagan's Speech at the Brandenburg Gate over
the Decades**

President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) was the 40th President of the U.S. from 1981 to 1989, serving two full terms in office. Before he achieved the highest office in the land, his resume included credits as a famous actor, union leader, and Governor of California from 1967 to 1975. Formerly a Democrat until 1962, he defeated incumbent Jimmy Carter for the presidency and became the oldest president ever elected at his second inauguration. His two terms in office are generally seen as prosperous and extremely successful, with things like his supply-side economics policies ("Reaganomics"), tax reduction, deregulation, and decreased government spending being attributed to his terms. His administration was heavily dominated by the Cold War, the tail-end of the Cold War to be precise, including certain events like the Iran-Iraq War (1980 to 1988) and the bombing of Libya (1986).

Some Americans attribute Reagan's hardline policy of American dominance over the Soviets as propelling the end of the Cold War, especially after he escalated an arms race with the Soviets (ending in the INF Treaty in 1987) and publically called the USSR an "evil empire." One of his most famous moments, and arguably the most famous of his presidency, came when he challenged General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR to "tear down this wall!" in a historic speech given at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin, calling for the unification of the two Germanys. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, was a clear icon of the subjection by Communists of Westerners, as it was built for the sole purpose of keeping East Germans in and physically dissuading them from migrating to the West, as well as to prevent Westerners from coming in

and “poisoning” the minds of East Germans. Reagan’s speech, while primarily known for its one famous line, encouraged uniting the two Germanys for the betterment of both in terms of ideology, economics, and history, while also promising help from America to complete this task. Surprisingly enough, despite high tensions, Gorbachev was not provoked by the speech due to strong ties cultivated by Reagan.¹ According to the GHDI site, the original copy of the speech can be found in the “Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States” (Ronald W. Reagan 1987, vol. 1), published by the U.S. Government Printing Office of Washington D.C. However, many transcripts are available online on a variety of sites in text, visual, and audio forms. Another text form other than on GDHI can be found on the [National Archives](#) website, an audio version can be found on [Wikipedia](#), and many recordings of the speech are on [Youtube](#).

The speech was written by Peter Robinson, the official White House speechwriter at the time. The story of its creation is detailed in the article [“Tear Down This Wall”](#) on the National Archives website, written by Peter Robinson himself. Robinson recounts how the speech was written for the celebrations of the 750th anniversary of the founding of Berlin and how initially, Reagan did not intend to visit Berlin (he was in Europe at the time) but decided to go at the request of the West German government. The speech was intended to be strictly about foreign policy – no “Soviet-bashing” but was inspired to be more ideological by Robinson’s meeting with a West Berliner, Ingeborg Elz,² who demanded Gorbachev get rid of the wall – thus inspiring the speech’s famous line. The speech was not received well by the state department, which attempted to squelch it, but Reagan insisted on using it and its famous line, which is not

¹ Editors, History.com. "Ronald Reagan." History.com. November 09, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/ronald-reagan>.

² Elz was a friend of a friend of the Robinsons who lived in Berlin. The Elzes hosted a dinner party for the visitors from the US, inviting a number of locals. Robinson asked the Berliners what they thought about the Wall, whether they had "forgotten it," as a diplomat advising him about what not to say in the speech had told him. See: Peter Robinson, "Ingeborg Elz, R.I.P." (March 12, 2013), in: <https://ricochet.com/175163/archives/ingeborg-elz-r-i-p/>.

surprising considering his stance towards Communism.³ The facts of the making behind the speech are even further emphasized in another article by Robinson, driving home the point that Reagan was determined to give the speech in the face of possibly provoking the USSR.⁴ To summarize the speech, the whole point of the delivery was to challenge Gorbachev to tear down the wall. Reagan calls for this “to advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace” as in a direct call to Gorbachev, seeking “prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.” He also asks Gorbachev to undertake major arms reduction talks with America. Essentially, the speech was given to force action to be taken to improve Cold War tensions as well as to move negotiations forward on arms reductions (seen successfully carried out later that year with the INF Treaty).⁵ [This paper was submitted for a 2019 course at UCSB and is published online.] In particular, what I discovered with the majority of sources I found, three main things were established: the speech is a pivotal moment in the Cold War-era that encapsulates American-Russian relations at the time, as well as the decline of the USSR; how critical the persona of Reagan was to bringing down the Wall and the Soviet Union, as compared to his predecessors; and how the speech, while highly impactful and notable today, was not as well-received in the sense of “fame” at the time as it has been viewed since the fall of the USSR.

The importance of Reagan’s tough stance against Communism is highlighted in the book *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*. The book portrays Reagan in an almost “hero-like” sense, with a major focus on that fact that without his charisma and firm ideology, the Soviet Union might not have seen such a decline in the 1980s as it did during his presidency.⁶ Reagan’s power as a speaker is highlighted in *The Fall of the Berlin Wall*:

³ Robinson, Peter. "Tear Down This Wall". National Archives and Records Administration. 2007.

⁴ Robinson, Peter. "The Inside Story of Reagan’s Berlin Challenge." *American History*. 2003.

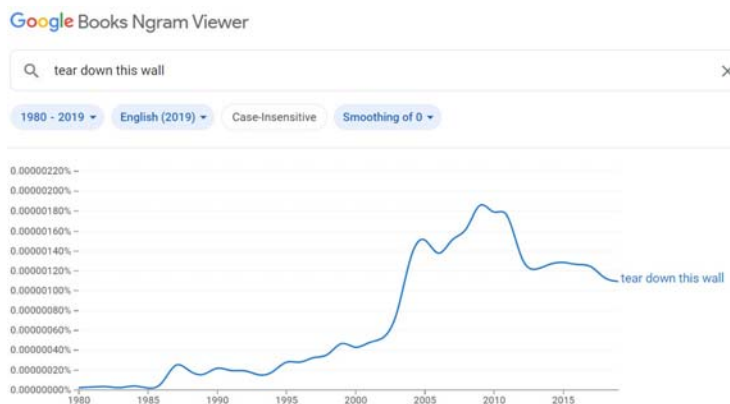
⁵ "Reagan Challenges Gorbachev to Tear down the Berlin Wall." History.com. November 13, 2009.

⁶ Kengor, Paul. *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Reassessing the Causes and the Consequences of the End of the Cold War, which delves into his power as “The Great Communicator” in his ability, as well as that of his administration, to push in the right places in regards to lowering the tension between the Cold War enemies, something he did well in the Brandenburg speech by targeting East Germany directly rather than Gorbachev’s Russia, prompting reform of a satellite of the Communist bulwark in a generally positive sense for the rest of the world.⁷ Additionally, another book covers this similar theme – *Tear Down This Wall: A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War* - which emphasizes how critical the speech the Brandenburg speech was in signifying the beginning of the end for both the USSR and the division of the two Germany’s in the sense that the relationship Reagan maintained with Gorbachev due to his personal diplomacy helped achieve more peaceful relations between the two enemies, and allowed for American influence to prevail.⁸

However, for all this professional praise of Reagan and his prompt ability to deliver a meaningful, yet unprovocative speech, there are numerous scholarly sources that point out that the speech has taken on more importance in the years after the fall of the Soviet Union due to the speech’s successful political legacy, considering the U.S. “victory” in the Cold War. This is evident in an Ngram of the phrase

“tear down this wall.” There is a rise starting in the late 80s until shooting up around 2004 and increasing for the next decade, with the most significant



⁷ Schweizer, Peter. *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: Reassessing the Causes and the Consequences of the End of the Cold War*. Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2000.

⁸ Ratnesar, Romesh. *Tear Down This Wall: A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

rise being in 2004 after the death of Reagan. This is most likely due to the speech being reexamined and re-popularized not just after the collapse of the USSR but also after his death when there were efforts to further his legacy and focus on the success of his presidency decades before. *The Year that Changed the World: The Untold Story Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall*'s main argument is that the speech was not as impactful at the time as it is today, mostly due to the fact that the generations of today give it far more credit than even Americans of the 80s gave it at the time.⁹ This seems to be a feature of many famous speeches – they are well-received at the time in an average sense but with the idea of hindsight in mind in regard to history, the fate of countries and individuals plays a huge role in how a speech or legacy can be portrayed over time. If the Berlin Wall had not fallen so quickly and if the Soviet Union had not essentially toppled right after the Reagan presidency, and if Reagan was not viewed as such a successful president today, the speech would not carry the same weight it does now. This is most clear when reading newspaper articles of the time, such as in the *New York Times* article “Raze Berlin Wall, Reagan Urges Soviet,” written just a day after the speech was delivered. Remarkably for such a famous and decade-defining speech, it is not given more than a mere few paragraphs speaking of the circumstances and basic facts of the speech – and nothing more.¹⁰ The same could be said by another article written the same day as the speech in the Palm Springs, CA *Desert Sun*, “Reagan Challenge: ‘Remove Berlin Wall’”, which was only given a handful of lines on the front page.¹¹ Yet another article from the time, “‘Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!’”, speaks about the speech in the same manner but this time addresses a bit of the Russian perspective at the time,

⁹ Meyer, Michael. *The Year that Changed the World: The Untold Story Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

¹⁰ Boyd, Gerald. “RAZE BERLIN WALL, REAGN URGES SOVIET.” *New York Times*: June 13, 1987.

¹¹ “Reagan Challenge: ‘Remove Berlin Wall.’ *Desert Sun*: June 12, 1987.

saying that they denounced it as “war-mongering”.¹² And an earlier 80s article, “Thousands of Anti-Reagan Protestors Clash with Police in West Berlin”, is a great insight into the fact that not everybody in the West was a fan of American supremacy at the time and even the idolized version of Reagan portrayed in contemporary books and articles wasn’t exactly the view of him in many regions during his presidency.¹³ So, with all this in mind, one must come to the conclusion that the speech was nothing more than proper political timing, circumstance, and ideological nuance, as emphasized in the scholarly article, “Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate: Moral Clarity Tempered by Pragmatism,” in which one can see that the speech’s success over time was mostly due to factors like Reagan’s political and ideological realism, as well as the strong moral message of the speech that disguises the political goals of Reagan’s intention.¹⁴ Another scholarly article, “Tear Apart this Speech!,” attributes the increasing fame of the speech to factors outside the realm of attributing it just to fame, as timing, the political position of both nations at the time, and Reagan’s charismatic message of justice rather than force, lends more credence to its ability to stay “alive” in the 21st century.¹⁵ Thus, it is a combination of timing, political aptness on Reagan’s part and his positive relations with Gorbachev, as well as a proper message veiling political motivation and the legacy of both Reagan and the Soviet Union that have allowed the speech to take on the popular notion of fame that it holds today.

¹² “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” *The Guardian*: June 13, 1987.

¹³ Tagliabue, John. “Thousands of Anti-Reagan Protestors Clash with Police in West Berlin.” *New York Times*: June 12, 1982.

¹⁴ Rowland, Robert C., and John M. Jones. “Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate: Moral Clarity Tempered by Pragmatism.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006): 21-50.

¹⁵ Skoniecki, Stefanie. “Tear Apart this Speech! A Burkean Analysis of Ronald Reagan’s ‘Tear Down This Wall’ Speech.” *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, no. 2 (2004): 18-28.

Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

- Tagliabue, John. "Thousands of Anti-Reagan Protestors Clash with Police in West Berlin." *New York Times*: **June 12, 1982**.
This article chronicles how the "American-way" was not received well by all in Germany and in fact caused a bit of violence and dissention during a previous trip Reagan took to West Berlin in 1982.
- "Reagan Challenge: 'Remove Berlin Wall.'" *Desert Sun* (Palm Springs, CA), **June 12, 1987**.
A contemporary local newspaper article with barely a paragraph dedicated to the Brandenburg Gate Speech, showing how the speech was just another standard presidential address at the time and not the impactful message it is today.
- Boyd, Gerald. "Raze Berlin Wall, Reagan Urges Soviets." *New York Times*, **June 13, 1987**.
A New York Times article written a day after the speech was given and a fascinating study in that it reveals that the speech was not received quite as enthusiastically as it is today in terms of impact and legacy. The speech was received just like any other presidential address and Boyd simply discusses the cold, hard facts of the speech and the face-value details of it, as no one then could have predicted the hold it would take in later years in American culture.
- "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" *The Guardian*: **June 13, 1987**.
A contemporary article on the Brandenburg speech, addressing the facts of the event while also giving a take on the Russian response to the speech, stating on how they received it negatively but took no diplomatic action against Reagan.
- Schweizer, Peter. *The Fall of the Berlin Wall: Reassessing the Causes and the Consequences of the End of the Cold War*. Stanford: Hoover Institution, **2000**.
A collection of essays found on the UCSB Library Catalog. Published in 2000 based on presentations given by key players in U.S. foreign policy during the 1980's who met in Washington of February of 1999 to discuss how the Reagan administration challenged Soviet power.
- Robinson, Peter. "The Inside Story of Reagan's Berlin Challenge." Academic Search Complete, **(2003)**.
Another article by Peter Robinson on Academic Search Complete, the writer of the Brandenburg Gate speech, where he recounts the creation of the speech, specifically in this evolution of ideas for it, as well as the warnings he was given by members of the administration not to provoke the Soviets with the speech.
- Skoniecki, Stefanie. "Tear Apart this Speech! A Burkean Analysis of Ronald Reagan's 'Tear Down This Wall' Speech." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, no. 2 (**2004**): 18-28.
An analysis on the speech on Google Scholar in regard to content, timing, message, legacy, etc., as well as the persona of Reagan himself in terms of its impact on the Cold War from a Burkean Conservatism perspective.
- Rowland, Robert C., and John M. Jones. "Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate: Moral Clarity Tempered by Pragmatism." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (**2006**): 21-50.
A scholarly article found on JSTOR which argues that Reagan's speech coupled

ideological and moral clarity with pragmatism to dually criticize the Soviets while also displaying a willingness to work with them.

Kengor, Paul. *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism*. New York: HarperCollins, **2006**.

Found on Google Books. Touches on the speech but mostly speaks about Regan himself and his presidential fight against Communism, as well as how his stance towards the Soviet Union helped bring about the end of the Cold War, with facts on how this occurred and his ideology from 1950 onwards.

Robinson, Peter. "'Tear Down This Wall'" National Archives and Records Administration. **2007**.

Written by Peter Robinson, the official White House speechwriter for Reagan and the creator of the Brandenburg Gate speech recounting the background of the creation of the speech, the inspiration behind it, and the initial hesitancy of Reagan's advisors towards the delivery of the speech.

Editors, History.com. "Ronald Reagan." History.com. **2009**.

<https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/ronald-reagan>.

A basic biography on History.com of President Reagan detailing his life from birth to death, and highlighting the most important aspects of his presidency, especially in regard to his mission to achieve dominance over the USSR.

"Reagan Challenges Gorbachev to Tear down the Berlin Wall." History.com. **2009**.

A background article on History.com with a summary of the speech's contents, highlighting Reagan's call "to advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace" with attention to asking for an arms reduction talk with Gorbachev, the main political aim behind the speech.

Ratnesar, Romesh. *Tear Down This Wall: A City, a President, and the Speech That Ended the Cold War*. New York: Simon & Schuster, **2009**.

Found on the UCSB Library Catalog. Chronicles how Reagan arrived at his defining Brandenburg moment, what followed from it, and its impact based on interviews with former administration members, not to mention a closer look on the personal relationship between Reagan and Gorbachev.

Meyer, Michael. *The Year that Changed the World: The Untold Story Behind the Fall of the Berlin Wall*. New York: Simon & Schuster, **2009**.

Found on Melvyl. Speaks of the impact of the speech today, making the main argument that it was not this speech that was the definitive moment that ended the Cold War, as many today think it did.

Peter Robinson, "Ingeborg Elz, R.I.P." (March 12, 2013), at:

<https://ricochet.com/175163/archives/ingeborg-elz-r-i-p/>.