

Famous Speeches: President Ronald Reagan's "Tear Down This Wall"

By Ronald Reagan, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.15.17

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TOP: Germans from East and West stand on the Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate in this November 10, 1989, photo, one day after the wall fell. AP Photo SECOND: Ronald Reagan speaking in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall in Germany on June 12, 1987. Photo by: White House Photographic Office.

Editor's Note: President Ronald Reagan's "Tear Down This Wall" speech was given on his visit to the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Germany, on June 12, 1987. At the time, Berlin was split in half by a wall that had been put in place in 1961 by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had gained control of part of Berlin after Germany lost World War II in 1945. West Berlin was controlled by the Americans, British and French after the war, and then became part of democratic and capitalist West Germany. East Berlin became the capital of East Germany, but remained under the control of the Soviets.

For many years, the Soviet Union and the United States and other Western powers had been locked in a Cold War. This was not an actual shooting war, but a war of ideas. The Western world and the Soviet-controlled Eastern European countries had different views on how the economic system should be run. The Soviets were communists and believed in far greater government control of industry and labor. They also allowed much less political

disagreement — critics of the government were frequently jailed, and rival political parties were generally banned. Berlin, as the place where East and West met, was a symbol of this war of ideas, and of a divided Europe.

Reagan's speech was broadcast to both East and West Berlin. In it he appealed directly to Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, who had come to power after vowing to reform the Soviet system. Unknown to most people, the Soviet Union was already beginning to crack apart by then. Two years later, in November 1989, crowds of people on both sides of the Berlin Wall tore it down with pickaxes.

"The Barriers Between East And West"

Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free zones 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 and guard towers. Farther south, there may be no visible, no obvious wall — but there remain armed guards and checkpoints all the same. There is still a restriction on the right to travel.

Yet it is here in Berlin where the barriers between East and West emerge most clearly. A long wall cuts across your city, dividing it in half. News photos and television screens have imprinted this brutal division upon the mind of the world. Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German, separated from his fellow men. Every man is a Berliner, forced to look upon a scar.

West German President Richard von Weizsacker has said that hopes for German unification will remain only a dream as long as the Brandenburg Gate is closed to West Berliners. Today I say: As long as the gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not German unification alone that remains unrealized, but the hope of freedom for all mankind.

"The Importance Of Freedom"

In the 1950s, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev predicted: "We will bury you." But in the West today, we see a free world that has achieved a level of wealth and well-being never before seen 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. Even today, the Soviet Union still cannot feed itself. Forty-two years after the war's end, then, there stands before the entire world one great and inescapable conclusion: Freedom leads to wealth and well-being. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among nations with 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, and 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 deep 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 the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace.

"Tear Down This Wall!"

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek wealth and well-being 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!

As I looked out a moment ago from the Reichstag building, once Germany's parliament and still an 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, and it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom.

Quiz

- 1 How does the last paragraph reflect a central idea of the speech?
- (A) It reiterates the message that Western ideals such as freedom have won and will continue to win.
 - (B) It highlights the idea that the most important aspect of the entire speech is the concern for the German people.
 - (C) It reinforces a message to young Berliners that they should begin tearing down the wall, no matter what Gorbachev does.
 - (D) It uses the Reichstag building to send a clear message of warning to Gorbachev about what will happen if he does not follow Reagan's wishes.
- 2 Which two of the following sentences from the speech include central ideas?
1. *Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free zones of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe.*
 2. *Today I say: As long as the gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not German unification alone that remains unrealized, but the hope of freedom for all mankind.*
 3. *But in the West today, we see a free world that has achieved a level of wealth and well-being never before seen in all human history.*
 4. *We welcome change and openness, for we believe that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 1 and 3
 - (C) 2 and 4
 - (D) 3 and 4

- 3 Read the selection from the section "Tear Down This Wall!"

General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek wealth and well-being for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate!

Based on the rest of the speech, what does Reagan mean by "liberalization"?

- (A) joining the Democratic Party
 - (B) freedom from government rules
 - (C) getting rid of religion and morality
 - (D) support for poor and disadvantaged people
- 4 Read the sentence from the section "The Importance Of Freedom."

Some economic enterprises have been permitted to operate with greater freedom from state control.

Based on the speech and the Editor's Note, which of the following could replace "economic enterprises" in the sentence above?

- (A) schools
- (B) businesses
- (C) governments
- (D) religious institutions