

THE YEAR  
THAT CHANGED  
THE WORLD

The Untold Story behind  
the Fall of the Berlin Wall

MICHAEL MEYER

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney



Also by Michael Meyer  
*The Alexander Complex*

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To MN  
and those few who dared

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## PREFACE

One fine day in early spring 1988, my phone rang.

“Mike,” asked our chief of correspondents. “How would you like to go to Germany?”

I’d heard, some weeks ago, that the assignment had already gone to someone else. What happened?

“Changed his mind. Decided it was too risky.”

In the news business, *too risky* means “bad for one’s career.” The reporter opting out concluded that Germany and Eastern Europe were too far off America’s radar screen. Not much was happening. He feared he wouldn’t get into the magazine.

I couldn’t believe my good fortune. For fifty years, Europe had been frozen. Now a new man was in charge: Mikhail Gorbachev. Change was afoot. You could feel it. I remember, vividly, thinking I would have perhaps a year or two to see the old Europe, a part of the continent that had been cut off behind the Iron Curtain, as if under glass, before it all went away. In my youthful enthusiasm, I considered it an almost anthropological adventure, a chance of a lifetime.

“When do I leave?” I asked. As soon as you can was the reply. And so, in the summer of 1988, I became *Newsweek*’s bureau chief for Germany and Eastern Europe. It was like stepping onto a magic carpet, to be whisked away into a world of revolution—and revelation—beyond imagining.

Nineteen eighty-nine was a year of magnificent and unfathomable upheaval. Revolutions ignited across Eastern Europe, setting the stage for the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was an eyewitness to history. In Poland, I covered the renaissance of Solidarity. I was with Vaclav Havel and other friends in Prague as they engineered the Velvet Revolution. I was the last American journalist to interview Nicolae Ceausescu and have free run of his tyrannized Romania. I airlifted into Bucharest with the German Luftwaffe during the fighting that deposed him and watched his execution in the company of the secret police who did him in.

The most epochal moment of that epochal year was November 9—the day the Berlin Wall came down. I watched it happen from the Eastern side of the border as the people of East Germany rose up and stormed the gates, ending four decades of communist dictatorship. I joined them as they danced atop the Wall and paraded through the streets, reveling in what was a new Berlin, the famous divided city suddenly divided no more. And like every American, I rejoiced. The Cold War was over. We won. Democracy was triumphant.

We saw this as our moment of vindication, a victory that justified all our struggles—four decades of Cold War confrontation, trillions of dollars spent on national defense, too many lives lost in shadowy wars far across the seas. And in most ways it was. Nineteen eighty-nine was a year that changed the world. The end of the Cold War

moved us from a world of division and nuclear blackmail to one of new opportunity and unprecedented prosperity. It set the stage for our modern era: globalization, the triumph of free markets, the spread of democracy. It ushered in the great global economic boom, lifting billions out of poverty around the world and firmly establishing America as the one and only superpower.

And yet it was a dangerous triumph, chiefly because we claimed it for ourselves and scarcely bothered to understand how this great change really came to pass. I sensed that we weren't seeing the full story, even at the time. Today, I am sure of it. From the vantage point of two decades, and with a great deal of further research, I know now that our victory in the Cold War was not what it seemed. I have learned that it simply did not happen the way we think it did. Most painfully, the myths we spun around it have hurt the world and ourselves.

What are these myths, which we accept as truths?

First, The People. Most accounts of 1989 come down to a simple plotline: Eastern Europe's long-repressed citizens, frustrated by poverty and lack of freedom and inspired by our example, rose up en masse and overthrew their communist overlords. Well, yes and no. In some countries, that is pretty much what happened. But in others, there was nothing of the sort. The most interesting (and certainly most decisive) subplot in this year of revolution was the tale of a small band of East European buccaneers—a mere handful of five or six top Hungarian leaders, with little popular support—who set out to bring down communism, not only in their own country but across the East bloc. In a conspiracy worthy of the most contrived Cold War spy thriller, they deliberately took aim at the Berlin Wall—and more than any others, it was they who brought it down. Theirs is the great untold story of 1989.

A second myth concerns the role of history. We Americans tend to see the end of communism as somehow foreordained. The inherent flaws of communism brought about its collapse; it could not stand up to the example of the West. This is a tectonic view, history as the interplay of great and almost inevitable forces. Seen from the ground, however, it looked very different. If you were there the night the Berlin Wall fell, you knew that it came to pass, in the way it did, because of a freak accident, a small and utterly human blunder. The iconic imagery of jubilant East Berliners celebrating atop the Wall, pounding it with sledgehammers, in reality owes as much to happenstance as to culminating history.

A third myth is most dangerous: the idea of the United States as an emancipator, a liberator of repressive regimes. This crusading brand of American triumphalism in time became gospel among neoconservatives, including many in the administration of George W. Bush. For them, the revolutions of 1989 became the foundation of a new post-Cold War weltanschauung: the idea that all totalitarian regimes are similarly hollow at the core and will crumble with a shove from the outside. If its symbol is the Berlin Wall, coming down as Ronald Reagan famously bid it to do in a speech in Berlin in 1987, the operational model was Nicolae Ceausescu's Romania. "Once the wicked witch was dead," as Francis Fukuyama, the eminent political economist, has put it, "the munchkins would rise up and start singing joyously about their liberation."

It is true that instead of seeking to contain the former Soviet Union, as previous administrations had done, the United States under Ronald Reagan chose to confront it.

He challenged Mikhail Gorbachev not only to reform the Soviet system from within but to “tear down this wall.” Yet other factors figured in this equation, not least a drop in oil prices from roughly \$40 a barrel in 1980 to less than \$10 a decade later, not to mention the Soviet leader’s own actions. Even less well-known is Ronald Reagan’s political evolution. From hardened cold war warrior, he softened both his rhetoric and his policies to the point where his administration became the very model of enlightened diplomatic engagement—the antithesis of hard-right confrontation.

Without question, the United States uniquely contributed to the end of the Cold War, from the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Europe, to containment, to our efforts to help create what today has become the European Union. But others “won” it, on their own (and our) behalf. *The Year That Changed the World* gives overdue credit to the true victors and the remarkable degree to which the upheavals of 1989 resulted less from mass revolution than from the careful planning and thoughtful work of a few farsighted and courageous individuals, as well as human error and the shortsightedness of others.

The purpose is not to debunk accepted history but to liberate it. Twenty years later, as a new generation arises with little or no memory of these epic events, the narrative deserves retelling. Told truthfully, it becomes if anything more dramatic. And who knows, perhaps along the way it might help us rethink the underpinnings of American foreign policy as we move into the second decade of a new century.

It’s a straight line from the fantasy of 1989 to Saddam Hussein and Iraq, with all its aftershocks. America’s disaster in the Middle East, it can be argued without overly stretching the point, grows from the hubris attending “our” victory in Eastern Europe. By logical extension, from past to present, all we have to do is confront the Evil One and, with a big push, the people will rise up and throw off their shackles. Drunk on pride and power, we got it terribly wrong. If America could be likened to an alcoholic on the mend, it is time to go back to the beginning, to see where and why we went awry, and to look at the world as it is.

I owe a great many people a great many thanks: to *Newsweek*, chiefly, for sending me to Europe, and to its often brilliant editors. Among them, the late Kenneth Auchincloss, my boss during those exciting days, and more recently Fareed Zakaria. One could not possibly hope for a more rewarding association. The American Academy in Berlin made this book possible, first by awarding the fellowship where I wrote an early draft, in 1999, and second, in helping to shape its themes. For this I am eternally grateful to Richard Holbrooke, Gary Smith and Everette Dennis. Friends, colleagues and loved ones played no less a role. Colin Robinson, who took the project under his wing at Scribner, was a most able editor. My wonderful wife, Suzanne, more than once saved me from scrapping the project. She was its most stalwart champion; this book would not exist without her. Others inspired me to undertake it in the first place and helped me to see much that I would otherwise not have. I do not know how to begin to repay such gifts.

# **THE YEAR THAT CHANGED THE WORLD**

# CHAPTER ONE

## Genesis

Every great nation has its founding myths. Every true leader has a defining vision. Every person has his or her story, the narrative that gives shape and meaning to one's life. The problem begins when life and the narrative fall out of joint. The greater the disjuncture, the more fatal the problem.

George W. Bush idolized Ronald Reagan. From the outset he modeled his presidency upon him. His first inaugural deliberately echoed Reagan's patented blend of stirring rhetoric, moral clarity and iron conviction in basic principles. Advisers drew the comparison at every opportunity. "Reagan's son," they called him, and spoke reverently of how their man was impregnated with "Reagan's DNA."

Bush put the former president ahead of even Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt—the "gold standard"—in his personal pantheon of heroes. Eulogizing him in 2004, he evoked a legacy he clearly saw as his own. "He acted to defend liberty wherever it was threatened. He called evil by its name." The famous Berlin Wall was the concrete symbol of communism and its hated masters. Among those who swung their hammers to bring it down, said Bush, there was no doubt: "The hardest blow had been struck by President Ronald Reagan."

As Bush saw it, Reagan's world was one of moral absolutes—right and wrong, black and white. As Reagan stood up to confront communist tyranny, so would he stand up to a more modern challenge. The "evil empire" became the new president's "war on terror," the "axis of evil." Yet the essential narrative of a grand struggle against an implacable enemy of freedom remained unchanged.

Standing aboard the USS *Lincoln* on May 1, 2003, Bush declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, a triumph for liberty in the tradition of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, the Truman Doctrine and "Ronald Reagan's challenge to an evil empire." In a 2005 speech to the National Endowment for Democracy (delivered in the Reagan Amphitheater), he spoke of how the fight against Islamic radicalism "resembles the struggle against communism in the last century." He drew a staccato series of comparisons. "Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy teaches that innocent individuals can be sacrificed.... Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy pursues totalitarian aims... Like the ideology of communism, our new enemy is dismissive of free peoples."

On he went, evocations of the threat faced by Ronald Reagan coupled with invocations to answer "history's call" in shouldering today's "global campaign of freedom." To critics who considered the war in Iraq to be a mistake, Bush offered a retort grounded in a Reagan antecedent. In 1982, when the fortieth president told an

audience at Westminster Palace in London that communism's days were numbered, opponents on both sides of the Atlantic ridiculed him as "simplistic and naive, even dangerous."

Again and again, as his political troubles deepened, Bush returned to precedent in answering those who attacked him and his policies. Less than a year before he left office, on a day in early February 2008, when his approval ratings were around 30 percent, he drew cheers at the American Conservative Union. When the Twin Towers fell, "we stood our ground," he declared. "We stood our ground" in Afghanistan and Iraq. "We stood our ground" for America as a "leading light, a guiding star, the greatest nation on the face of the Earth"—language inspired directly by Reagan. Then he concluded with the ultimate exculpation, as if he were a latter-day Saint Sebastian: "Ronald Reagan, too, was called a 'warmonger,' an 'amiable dunce,' an actor detached from reality. Yet within a few years after President Reagan left office, the Berlin Wall came down, the Evil Empire collapsed, the Cold War was won."

Everyone hears the echo. Everyone knows the reference. "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

A generation of speechwriters wish they had crafted that clarion call. A generation of statesmen wish they had uttered it, among them many who belittled it at the time. Rightly, it is included in collections of the century's great presidential addresses. Video clips of the speech can be watched on YouTube. For a generation of Americans, it has become a defining moment of the twentieth century, a turning point in the long struggle to win the Cold War.

This one line, the epochal phrase in the most memorable speech of a presidency, grew over the years to become the touchstone of the Reagan legacy, the man and his ideas distilled to their essence—his optimism, his faith, his willingness to confront the conventional order, his bedrock belief in American values, most of all freedom and democracy and the power of people to change their lives and the world for the better.

Reagan delivered it on a warm spring afternoon in the divided city of Berlin, June 12, 1987. Behind him rose the famed Brandenburg Gate, its arches and columns still blackened and pockmarked from the smoke and shrapnel of the last European battle of World War II. It was a dramatic proscenium for a bit of geopolitical theater. Snaking through the background, one hundred yards behind the dais where Reagan stood, was the Wall—the crude, blunt twelve-foot barrier of gray cement and barbed wire that divided East from West, the world of democratic freedom from that of totalitarian oppression, the literal embodiment of the Cold War.

A guard tower poked up from the death strip running behind the Wall. Armed East German border guards surveyed the scene through binoculars. Large sheets of bulletproof glass shielded the president from the rear. Unseen from the Western side, crowds of East Germans gathered to hear Reagan, hoping loudspeakers would project his voice across the divide. East German police pushed them back, the president was told. This in itself was a demonstration of all that Reagan hated about communism, and he punched out his words with angry force—a direct exhortation, delivered personally, to the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Reagan began slowly, speaking of other American presidents who had come to

Berlin, John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter, honoring their duty to speak out against what he called “the scar” that split the city. He spoke of America’s efforts to save Berlin after the war—aid under the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift of food and medicine when the Red Army cut supply lines to the West. Echoing the old Marlene Dietrich song, he joked that he kept a “suitcase” in Berlin—*Ich hab’ noch einen Koffer in Berlin*—a metaphor of solidarity with this outpost of freedom so isolated behind enemy territory. And he spoke of the winds of change he knew to be blowing, coming from the East as glasnost and perestroika, openness and reform, authored by none other than Gorbachev himself.

Then, a little after 2 p.m., he made his move: “We hear from Moscow about a new openness.” Could these hints of change be real? Is this talk to be believed or trusted? If so, said Reagan, fixing his jaw and speaking progressively more loudly, bluntly, hammering every word as if it were a nail, give us a sign that you are sincere—“the one sign... that would be unmistakable. 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!”

The crowds cheered. Some waved American flags, though most of these had been planted by the U.S. embassy. After it was done and the president had gone, along with the ten thousand or so West Berliners who had come to hear him, local TV carried highlights. Not many Germans watched. Few admired Reagan and a large majority actively disliked him, especially in liberal and often anti-American Berlin. Most far preferred Gorbachev, seen as the peacemaker, who would arrive a few weeks later to be mobbed like a rock star. (Gorbomania, they called it.) Major U.S. newspapers with correspondents in Europe, such as the *New York Times*, carried stories that ran in the back pages. And that was that until two years, four months, twenty-eight days and nine hours later—long after Reagan had left office—when the Berlin Wall actually came down.

Abruptly, it was as if word were deed. Ronald Reagan became not only a prophet, foreseeing what no one else had, but the prime mover in a stunning geopolitical transformation. Overnight, it seemed, the world changed. The Cold War was over. We won!

At least, this is the spin we Americans put on it. In recent years, particularly among U.S. conservatives, the Berlin Wall speech has taken on the talismanic weight of an ideological icon, both the symbol and founding idea of a new post-Cold War weltanschauung. As president, Reagan did what no one else had done before him: he confronted the enemy—and triumphed. He changed America’s way of acting in the world, its sense of sheer possibility. Reagan had no patience with the old order. Gone was time-honored talk of “détente” and “containment” and “mutual nuclear deterrence.” All that was for the ash heap of history. With his arms race and tough talk, he pushed the Soviet Union to the point of collapse, creating a new axiom of American foreign policy: stand tall and confront the enemy, as Reagan did that day in Berlin.

From this axiom flowed a contemporary corollary—that all dictatorial regimes are similarly hollow at the core and will crumble with a shove from the outside. All it takes is faith and a little Reagan spunk, backed by U.S. military power, and we can

change the world. George W. Bush could thus say, dedicating a memorial in 2007 to an estimated 100 million victims of communism, that “evil is real and must be confronted.” He could tell a graduating class of West Point cadets in 2006 that, as in the Cold War, America today must “confront” new dangers. Indeed, the word became one of the most popular verbs in his rhetorical arsenal. “We will confront threats... confront new adversaries... confront new enemies... and never back down, never give in, never accept anything less than complete victory.” Again, the Reagan echo with a nod to Winston Churchill. Be resolute, and the enemy will blink. Goodness and light will triumph. The fall of the Berlin Wall serves as proof and inspiration.

There’s only one problem—that of disjuncture, a confusion of cause and effect. What if it didn’t happen quite that way?

Let us return to that fateful moment.

It was the night of November 9, 1989. The place: Checkpoint Charlie, the famous border crossing in the heart of Cold War Berlin.

The Wall loomed up, grim and forbidding. In the harsh yellow glare of the frontier’s high-intensity arc lights, strewn round with barbed wire and tank traps, thousands of East Germans faced a thin line of Volkspolizei, the ubiquitous state police. People were gathering at all the checkpoints to the West, confused but exhilarated. They called out to one another and, increasingly, to the guards, who only moments before they feared. “*Sofort*,” they shouted. “Open up!!”

Emboldened by their numbers, they pushed within a few meters of the barricades, arguing with and even mocking the guards, who stood fiddling with their weapons. No one knew what to do. The crisis had materialized from nowhere. It was dangerous, for the police had no orders except to use deadly force to keep people from fleeing to the West. The crowds kept their good humor. But what if that changed, or if they tried to storm the gates? Would the police shoot?

They had begun gathering shortly after 7 p.m., four hours earlier. They came tentatively, huddled in small clusters some distance from the police, asking timid questions and holding out identity cards. But as their numbers grew—first by the dozens, then by the hundreds, finally by the thousands—they grew bolder. By 10 p.m. they had pushed to within a few paces of the guards faced off before them. And still they kept coming, channeling toward the checkpoint from three converging streets like tributary rivers building up behind a dam. The multitude of their voices shouted as one. “Open up! Open up!”

Past the police and their guard dogs, past the watchtower and the curling barbed wire of the infamous death strip, on the other side of the Wall, came an answering call from an equally boisterous mob of West Germans. “Come over! Come over!”

Blazing television lights suddenly flipped on from the West, silhouetting the Wall and the guards, intensifying the eerie scene. Inside his lighted, glass-walled command post, the captain of the East German border guard, a beefy guy with a square face and the dark bristly hair of a Doberman, stood dialing and re-dialing his telephone. For hours he vainly sought instructions. Clearly he was confused. Certainly he was frightened; the crowds had grown so fast, unlike anything he had ever seen, and now they pushed so close to the barriers that their breath, frosting in the night air, mingled

with that of his increasingly anxious men.

Panicky calls flew from checkpoints up and down the Wall to the Interior Ministry, to no avail. Top officials tried to reach the members of the Politburo, but the leaders of the regime seemed to have disappeared. Once again the border guard put down his phone. He stood rock-still. No one had any answers; other border-control commanders were just as confused as he. Perhaps he had just been informed that the Bornholmerstrasse crossing, to the north, had moments ago opened its barriers, besieged by some twenty thousand people. Perhaps he came to his own decision. Maybe he was simply fed up.

Whatever the case, at 11:17 p.m., precisely, he shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *Why not?*

*“Alles auf!”* he ordered. “Open up,” and the gates swung wide.

A great roar rose out of the crowds as they surged forward. Suddenly, the Berlin Wall was no more. *“Die Mauer ist Weck,”* the people cried out as they celebrated atop it before the cameras throughout the night. “The Wall is gone!”

At that moment, history took an epic turn. A frontier that for five decades divided East from West was breached. Within the blink of an eye, it seemed, the Berlin Wall fell. The Cold War ended. Germans, suddenly, were once again Germans. Berliners were Berliners, no longer “East” nor “West.”

Earlier in the evening, just after 6 p.m., another man had shrugged, in much the same manner as that beefy border guard. Gunter Schabowski, the portly spokesman for the new East German Politburo, installed just weeks earlier, stopped by the offices of the communist party boss, Egon Krenz, en route to the daily press briefing, a recent innovation designed to demonstrate the regime’s new openness.

“Anything to announce?” Schabowski asked, casually.

Krenz shuffled through the papers on his desk, then passed Schabowski a two-page memo. “Take this,” he said with a grin. “It will do us a power of good.”

Schabowski scanned the memo while being driven from party headquarters. It seemed innocuous enough—just a short press release. At the news conference, he read it out as item four or five from a list of the various announcements. It had to do with passports. Every East German would now, for the first time, have a right to one.

For a nation locked so long behind the Iron Curtain, it was tremendous news. At the press conference, there was a sudden hush, followed by a ripple of whispers. Schabowski droned on. Then from the back of the room, as the cameras rolled, broadcasting live to the nation, a reporter shouted out a fateful question: “When does it take effect?”

Schabowski paused, looked up, suddenly confused. “What?”

The reporter repeated the question, his voice almost lost in a cacophony of shouts from others seeking similar clarification.

Schabowski scratched his head, mumbled to aides on either side. “Um, that’s a technical question. I’m not sure.” He perched his glasses on the end of his nose, shuffled through his papers, then looked up again... and shrugged.

*“Ab Sofort,”* he read aloud from what he saw written on the press release.

Immediately. Without delay.

At this, the room erupted. Schabowski, we now know, didn't fully appreciate the significance of his announcement. He had been on vacation during the preceding days when the decision was taken; he was out of the loop. Krenz had handed him the memo, without further explanation; Schabowski simply read it off to the press.

For the reporters in the room, the impact was tremendous. At that very moment, thousands of East Germans were illegally fleeing the country, driving their sputtering two-stroke East German-made cars, the infamous Trabant, across the border to neighboring Czechoslovakia, and from there over the mountains to West Germany. Earlier that summer, hundreds of thousands of other East Germans had escaped via Hungary. Of all the ills of communism, as they saw it, the most onerous was that they could not travel beyond the Iron Curtain. Like anyone else, they, too, wanted to see the world. They, too, wanted to see the West. A passport represented their right to live free.

Thus the uproar in the pressroom. Amid the instantaneous hubbub of shouted questions, one rang sharp and clear. "Mr. Schabowski, what is going to happen with the Berlin Wall?" As if finally sensing danger, the ground shifting beneath his feet, Schabowski dodged. "It has been brought to my attention that it is seven p.m. I'm sorry. That has to be the last question. Thank you for your understanding." And off he went.

The damage had been done, however. *Sofort*. Immediately. Without delay. In fact, this was not at all what the regime had in mind. Yes, East Germans would be granted passports. Yes, they would be allowed to travel. But to use them, they would first have to apply for an exit visa, subject to the usual rules and regulations. And the fine print said they could do that only on the next day, November 10. Certainly, the last thing Krenz intended was for his citizens to just get up and go. But East Germans didn't know that. They only knew what they heard on TV, which circulated like wildfire through the city. Thanks to Schabowski, they thought they were free. *Sofort*. By the tens of thousands they flocked to the crossing points to the West.

Strangely oblivious to the earthquake his words had caused, Schabowski headed home for dinner. Other senior officials went to the opera, or to the bowers of their mistresses. As East Germany's final, existential crisis fell upon it, the country's leadership was virtually incommunicado. Overwhelmed by the crowds, receiving no instructions from the military or party elite, border guards at the Wall were left to act on their own. Like Schabowski, the Checkpoint Charlie border guard shrugged—literally—and threw open the gates.

And so the Wall came down.

From afar, it was as Ronald Reagan decreed. But was it? Seen up close, on the ground, it looked very different from how we remember it.

No big international crisis set the stage for November 9, 1989. It did not spring from any great-power confrontation. There was no stirring rhetoric, no rattling of sabers, no politicians playing to the cameras. To Americans, particularly, this decisive moment of the Cold War came unexpectedly, seemingly out of the blue.

Only one TV anchorman was on the scene—Tom Brokaw of NBC. No Western

leader was on hand to witness the event or greet the victims of so many years of communist oppression as they found their way, wide-eyed and bewildered, to freedom and the West. German chancellor Helmut Kohl was on a state visit to Poland. President George H. W. Bush learned of it from his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, who heard it on the news. Together, the two men went into the president's private study adjoining the Oval Office and turned on the TV. Gosh, Bush remarked to aides. "If the Soviets are going to let the communists fall in East Germany, they've got to be really serious—more serious than I realized."

As turning points in history go, this was pretty ad hoc. World War I ended with the ceremonial signing of an armistice in a railroad car in a forest near Compiègne. It was followed by the grand partition of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, a literal redrawing of the world's map. World War II ended with formal surrenders at Allied headquarters in Belgium and on the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay in 1945, signed by the representatives of a defeated emperor, in top hat and tails, flanked by ranks of their conquerors. By contrast, the Cold War ended with a spontaneous whoop, or more accurately a street party. Ordinary people, demanding change, took matters into their own hands. They brought down the Wall, not armies or world statesmen. And then they danced atop it.

Accident played an enormous role. Would the Berlin Wall have fallen, as dramatically as it did, were it not for Gunter Schabowski's bungle? It was the shrug that changed the world. And what of the commander of the East German border guard at Checkpoint Charlie? Another shrug, another bit of happenstance that through the ages has shaped history and decided the fates of men.

As for those famous four words of Ronald Reagan's—"tear down this wall"—they were nearly never uttered. Peter Robinson, a White House speechwriter, tells how Reagan planned to attend the annual summit of G7 industrialized nations in Venice. Then came a request from the German government to visit Berlin on the occasion of the city's 750th anniversary. Here was a chance to emulate Kennedy and speak at the Wall, suggested someone on the president's staff. Could Robinson please write up something to say on foreign policy?

Robinson spent a day and a half in Berlin gathering material. First he wrote, "Herr Gorbachev, bring down this wall." Then he considered playing to the local audience by having Reagan deliver the line in German: "*Herr Gorbachev, machen Sie dieses Tor auf.*" (There's a quote for the ages.) Settling finally on the words we now know by heart, Robinson circulated the speech to the State Department and the National Security Council. "Both attempted to squelch it," he writes in his memoir, *How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life*. The draft was "naïve," they said. It would raise "false hopes." It was "clumsy" and "needlessly provocative." It would make the president look like a "crude and anticommunist cowboy." The ranking diplomat in Berlin, John Kornblum, eventually to become ambassador to Germany, was particularly dismissive and offered what he considered to be a far superior substitute: "One day, this ugly wall will disappear." And one day, perhaps, pigs will fly, Robinson thought to himself.

In all, the speech went through seven drafts. Each time the policy experts elided the offending line. The fight raged all the way to Berlin, when Reagan resolved the flap with Kenneth Duberstein, his deputy chief of staff, en route to the Wall in the

presidential limo.

“So, Ken. I am the president?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, Ken,” said Reagan with a laugh. “Let’s just leave that line in.”

The rest, as they say, is history—of a sort. For nothing, here, supports what has come to be conventional wisdom about Reagan’s Berlin speech: that it was a defiant challenge, a ringing expression of a U.S. policy of confrontation that would lead not only to victory in the Cold War but beyond. To the contrary, Ronald Reagan would have been appalled at the uses to which his words have been put. The truth is that, in 1987, he faced a new phenomenon—a challenge to which confrontation, he came to conclude over time, was no answer. That was the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the communist party of the Soviet Union on March 11, 1985.

Gorbachev hit the Soviet landscape like a giant meteor from outer space, transforming everything on impact. He was that rarest and most powerful force in history: the singularity, the wild card, what scientists call an exogenous variable, the unprecedented element that changes all theories and throws off all calculations and, with them, changes the world as it is known.

Aside from a certain softness around the eyes, Gorbachev looked little different from his old-guard predecessors. Gray-suited and stockily built, the son of peasant farmers in Stavropol in remote southern Russia, he had risen through the ranks of the party by virtue of bureaucratic smarts and hard work. Only a sharp sense of humor, a certain outspokenness and the birthmark on his forehead, looking nothing so much as a large bird-dropping, seemed to distinguish him from the communist pack. And yet, this new Soviet man came to office full of indignation and a passion for change. At fifty-four, he was the youngest general secretary, promoted by his mentor, head of the KGB secret police, Yuri Andropov. Like Andropov, he saw the flaws of the Soviet system: an economy that was stalled, that soaked up money for military use but left little for civilian expenditures, a society that was sinking ever deeper into backwardness and stagnation. Unlike Andropov, he was determined to do something about it. He saw the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, in early 1986, precisely for what it was: an indictment of the Soviet system, poisonous and broken and a threat to all humanity. It had to be changed, he knew. He was convinced that it could be reformed. “We cannot go on like this,” he told his wife, Raisa, walking in their garden the night of the disaster, as Chernobyl’s radioactive plume reached slowly across Europe. “We cannot go on like this.”

Within weeks of taking office, the new Russian leader introduced the world to those twin revolutionary concepts that he would become famous for, and to which Ronald Reagan alluded in his Berlin speech—glasnost and perestroika. He called for an era of “new political thinking,” at home and abroad. He fired the Soviet Union’s traditional face to the West, Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko, the dour hard-liner popularly known as Mr. Nyet, and replaced him with the charismatic Eduard Shevardnadze. Gorbachev began reaching out to Europe and the United States, cultivating personal ties with Western leaders. Famously, Margaret Thatcher pronounced him a man she could “do business with.” He struck up a friendship with Helmut Kohl and began speaking of how Russia belonged in what he called the “common house of Europe.”

Most important, he began telling leaders of the Soviet satellite nations of Eastern Europe that their future resided with themselves. Just as he would seek to reform Russia from within, so too should they work to reform their own societies. How they would do it was for them to choose, without interference from Moscow.

Reagan's speech in Berlin came at a critical moment in his own relations with the new Soviet leader. He first met Gorbachev in Geneva, in November 1985, where they discussed nuclear disarmament in a media-friendly "fireside chat." They continued the conversation at their second famous summit in Reykjavik, in October 1986, where in an extraordinary meeting of minds the two men came close to a deal to abolish nuclear weapons. By the time of his Berlin Wall speech, Reagan was well along in changing his thinking about Gorbachev. The president had read his recently published book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. "It was as damning as anything written about communism in the West," said Reagan. Meanwhile, negotiations for a third summit were far advanced. On December 8, 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan met in Washington to sign a treaty rather clumsily known as the Intermediate Nuclear Forces accord, or INF. Dramatically, it did away with an entire class of nuclear weapons as Soviet SS20s and U.S. cruise and Pershing missiles were removed from Europe.

Hard-liners in the U.S. national security establishment were aghast. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, backed by his special adviser Richard Perle, among others, viscerally opposed Reagan's talk of disarmament and instead pushed hard for an escalation of military spending. As the hawks saw it, Reagan was in danger of going soft on communism. And they were right. Like Thatcher, Reagan had concluded that Gorbachev was trustworthy, that he could "do business" with him. But he had a problem: within the right wing of his party, all this was heresy.

As Reagan sought to change the climate of U.S.-Soviet relations, then, he had to find a way to neutralize opposition within his administration, just as Gorbachev himself had to negotiate a delicate and often perilous path among the factions of his own government. The Berlin Wall speech gave Reagan cover, notes James Mann, author of *Rise of the Vulcans*, a definitive portrait of George W. Bush's foreign policy team. To the hard-liners, it would sound like a traditional anticommunist speech of defiance and Cold War confrontation, which of course is why the State Department and the National Security Council tried so hard to get those four words out.

In fact, the speech was a remarkably nuanced balancing act. It managed to acknowledge how far the Soviet Union had come, while underscoring how far it had to go. Yet what many Americans heard only as a challenge was also an invitation—an invitation to engage, to continue further down the road the two men had come, a holding out of a hand, an offering to meet halfway. Certainly that's how the men standing at Reagan's side heard it that day; Berlin mayor Eberhard Diepgen said so at the time. Today's buzz phrase for this sort of diplomacy had not yet been coined: *soft power*. But that's what it was—a conviction, in the heart of the ultimate cold warrior, this consummate idealist, that cooperation and compromise and faith in the power of America's example would go further than militarist confrontation in making a better world. Reagan knew this, even if his disciples did not.

Within half a year, he had jettisoned the easy rhetoric of the "evil empire." That