Return to Full

LexisNexis™ Academic

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company
The New York Times

June 10, 2007 Sunday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section 4; Column 2; Editorial Desk; Pg. 14

LENGTH: 1533 words

HEADLINE: Tear Down That Myth

BYLINE: By James Mann.

James Mann, an author in residence at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, is working on a book about the final years of the cold war.

DATELINE: Washington

BODY:

DURING the spring of 1987, American conservatives were becoming disenchanted with Ronald Reagan's increasingly conciliatory approach to Mikhail Gorbachev. Inside the White House, Mr. Reagan's aides began to bicker over a speech the president was planning to give on a trip overseas. That June, the president would travel to Venice for the annual summit meeting of the seven largest industrialized nations. From there, plans called for him to stop briefly in Berlin, which was still divided between East and West. The question was what he should say while there.

The speech Mr. Reagan delivered 20 years ago this week is now remembered as one of the highlights of his presidency. The video images of that speech have been played and replayed. On June 12, 1987, Mr. Reagan, standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall, issued his famous exhortation to Mikhail Gorbachev: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."

In the historical disputes over Ronald Reagan and his presidency, the Berlin Wall speech lies at the center. In the ensuing years, two fundamentally different perspectives have emerged. In one, the speech was the event that led to the end of the cold war. In the other, the speech was mere showmanship, without substance.

Both perspectives are wrong. Neither deals adequately with the underlying significance of the speech, which encapsulated Mr. Reagan's successful but complex approach to dealing with the Soviet Union.

For many American conservatives, the Berlin Wall speech has taken on iconic status. This was Mr. Reagan's ultimate challenge to the Soviet Union -- and, so they believe, Mikhail Gorbachev simply capitulated when, in November 1989, he failed to respond with force as Germans suddenly began

tearing down the wall.

Among Mr. Reagan's most devoted followers, an entire mythology has developed. Theirs is what might be called the triumphal school of interpretation: the president spoke, the Soviets quaked, the wall came down.

Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican and former Reagan speechwriter, told me that American intelligence had reported that the day after the Berlin Wall speech, Mr. Gorbachev confided in his aides that Mr. Reagan wasn't going to give up. "If he's talking about this wall, he's never going to let go unless we do something," Mr. Rohrabacher quoted Mr. Gorbachev as saying. "So what we have to do is find a way to bring down the wall and save face at the same time."

Though no evidence has turned up to corroborate the Rohrabacher account, the triumphal storyline has endured. What's more, it has done so even though it runs counter to Mr. Reagan's actual policies toward the Soviet Union at the time. From the autumn of 1986 through the end of his presidency in January 1989, Mr. Reagan was in fact moving steadily closer to a working accommodation with Mr. Gorbachev, conducting a series of summit meetings and signing a major arms control agreement -- steps that were strongly opposed by the American right.

The opposing perspective on the Reagan speech is that it was nothing but a stunt. The adherents of this interpretation include not just Democrats or liberals but many veterans of the George H. W. Bush administration.

In a 1995 book about the end of the cold war, "Germany United and Europe Transformed," two former officials of the first Bush administration, Condoleezza Rice and Philip Zelikow, minimized the significance of the Berlin Wall address and its role in the events leading up to the end of the cold war. They argued that after the speech was given there was no serious, practical follow-up. No one pursued any policy initiative with respect to the Berlin Wall. "American diplomats did not consider the matter part of the real policy agenda," they wrote.

Others agreed. "I thought it was corny in the extreme," Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to George H. W. Bush, told me. "It was irrelevant, that statement at that time."

Even some of Mr. Reagan's own senior foreign-policy officials seem to think the speech was not particularly noteworthy. In his 1,184-page memoir, former Secretary of State George P. Shultz does not mention the speech at all. Similarly, Jack C. Matlock, who served as Mr. Reagan's Soviet adviser and then as United States ambassador to Moscow, does not discuss the speech in his own book about Mr. Reagan's relations with the Soviets.

But those who dismiss the speech as insignificant miss the point, too. They fail to see its role in helping the president line up public support for his foreign policy.

In the months leading up to his speech, Mr. Reagan had been under attack in the United States for having been beguiled by Mr. Gorbachev. Conservatives were particularly outraged. In September 1986, after the K.G.B. had seized Nicholas Daniloff, a journalist for U.S. News & World Report, in retaliation for the arrest of a Soviet agent in the United States, Mr. Reagan hadn't taken a hard line, but had instead negotiated an exchange.

Later that fall, hawks in the national-security establishment were upset that at the Reykjavik summit meeting, Mr. Reagan had talked about the possibility of abolishing nuclear weapons.

And these events were merely prologue: there was considerably more business Mr. Reagan was seeking to conduct with the Soviets -- business that he knew would be deeply unpopular with many conservatives. By the spring of 1987, he was well into quiet negotiations for two more summit meetings with the Soviet leader in Washington and Moscow. His administration was moving toward a landmark arms-control agreement with the Soviet Union -- a treaty on intermediate-range nuclear forces, which would have to be ratified by the Senate. The idea of such a treaty was beginning to attract considerable opposition in Washington.

The Berlin Wall speech, then, offered cover for Mr. Reagan's diplomacy. It was an anti-Communist speech that helped preserve support for a conservative president seeking to upgrade American relations with the Soviet Union. In political terms, it was the prerequisite for the president's subsequent negotiations. These efforts, in turn, created the vastly more relaxed climate in which the Soviets sat on their hands when the wall came down.

Those who minimize the speech also ignore the message it sent the Soviets. It served notice that the United States was willing to reach accommodations with Mr. Gorbachev, but not at the expense of accepting the permanent division of Berlin (or of Europe).

Yes, on the surface the address seemed like a follow-on to earlier Reagan speeches -- the one at Westminster in 1982, where he predicted that the spread of freedom would "leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history," and the speech the following year in which the president had called the Soviet Union "the evil empire."

Yet the speech reflected an important shift in Mr. Reagan's thinking, one that put him at odds with the Washington establishment: it acknowledged that Mr. Gorbachev represented something significant and fundamentally different in Moscow; that he was not merely a new face for the same old Soviet policies.

So while the speech reasserted the anti-communism on which Mr. Reagan had based his entire political career, it also gave recognition to the idea that the Soviet system might be changing. "We hear much from Moscow about a new policy of reform and openness," Mr. Reagan said. "Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state?"

While the speech did not attempt to answer that question, it did go on to establish a new test for evaluating Mr. Gorbachev's policies:

"There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. 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!"

When viewed strictly as foreign policy doctrine, Mr. Reagan's speech didn't say anything overtly new. After all, it was a longstanding tenet of American policy that the wall should come down. Mr. Reagan himself had already said so before, on a visit to West Berlin in 1982 ("Why is that wall there?") and on the 25th anniversary of the wall in 1986 ("I would like to see the wall come down today, and I call upon those responsible to dismantle it"). The new element in 1987 was not the idea that the wall should be torn down, but the direct appeal to Mr. Gorbachev to do it.

When Mr. Reagan's speech was first drafted, senior officials at the State Department and National Security Council tried repeatedly to get the words out. They believed the statement might jeopardize Mr. Reagan's developing relationship with the Soviet leader.

Like his latter-day interpreters, those officials misunderstood Mr. Reagan's balancing act. He wasn't trying to land a knockout blow on the Soviet regime, nor was he engaging in mere political theater. He was instead doing something else on that damp day in Berlin 20 years ago -- he was helping to set the terms for the end of the cold war.

URL: http://www.nytimes.com

GRAPHIC: Drawing (Drawing by Harry Campbell)

LOAD-DATE: June 10, 2007