

## **TEAR APART THIS SPEECH! A BURKEAN ANALYSIS OF RONALD REAGAN'S "TEAR DOWN THIS WALL" SPEECH**

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*"Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"* (par. 14) resonated from President Ronald Reagan to the people of West Berlin, of East Berlin, and of the world. Reagan's speech, delivered on June 12, 1987, at the Brandenburg Gate, became one of the capstone events in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. The end of this decade signaled the collapse of the Berlin Wall, but it was at this defining moment in 1987 that the United States once more urged the people of Berlin and of all Eastern nations to assess their lives and rally for freedom.

There is no doubt that Reagan was one of the most effective communicators the presidency had ever seen. As William E. Pemberton claims, Reagan had a gift, probably deriving from both his acting background as well as the fact that he had lived out the "American dream." White House speechwriters, although necessary, were to play by the "Great Communicator's" rules: the shorter the sentence, the better; if one syllable will do, there's no need for two; do not strive for eloquence but, throughout, increase the difficulty of comprehension; use striking images as a framework; avoid negatives as much as possible, give more examples, fewer sermons. He often revised and edited his own speeches, adding little phrases or whole pages as he deemed necessary. Undeniably, he held America in highest esteem and felt that it was continually improving as a world power (204).

Reagan's rhetorical style was fundamental in defining him as a president. In fact, many hold that his speech was directly responsible for the collapse of communism. To determine if this is so, it is essential to critically examine his rhetorical strategies. During "Tear Down This Wall," Reagan was not providing merely his own voice but the voice of a nation. He was not directing his speech to the people directly in front of him but to the people battling communism everywhere. Hence, his "Tear Down This Wall" speech stands as a rallying cry for democratic action.

Reagan's speech begins with a favorable tone, complimenting all Berliners about their culture, their landscaping, and their positive personality traits. He relates himself to former presidents who have also been enamored with the city, thus creating a common past between the United States presidency and Berlin. Reagan then opens his speech up to the East Berliners, addressing them especially and inviting them to listen as he creates a symbol out of the Berlin Wall—a symbol that transcends cultures and ideologies. To Reagan, "standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German, separated from his fellow men" (par. 5). Reagan continues on to forge the

connection between the United States and the rest of the world, citing examples of the Marshall Plan's success, and he conveys how the success could be extended to East Berlin as well. He holds up vague communist threats (i.e., Khrushchev's claim that the Soviets would "bury" the capitalists) and shows how the opposite has held true. At this point, Reagan discusses the current Soviet status (e.g. reforms in Moscow, media freedom, etc.) and then delivers his famous command for Mr. Gorbachev to take every further action to "tear down this wall!"

Although this phrase is certainly remembered as the zenith of Reagan's speech, he does not leave his audience there. He discusses the changes that are occurring worldwide where democracy has taken a footing. He predicts that the Soviet Union must change or perish, a slightly more negative tenor for Reagan. He quickly turns back to more hopeful and uplifting messages about the progress the city would see if united again—international meetings, air access, youth exchanges, cultural events, and international athletic competitions. He ends with a solid message to his audience that democracy and freedom are clearly the answers the communist societies most desperately need.

Before one can appreciate the larger effects Reagan had on the world after his Brandenburg address, one needs to analyze its particularities. The following analysis will reveal the effects of this speech, composed of less than three thousand words, on a city, a people, and a world. Specifically, it will show how Reagan's appeals to emotion and emphasis on the values of the American people surpass one moment in June 1987 and culminate in the opening of the Berlin Wall.

### **Burkean Analysis**

As Sonja Foss acknowledges, in the twentieth century Kenneth Burke was instrumental in advancing our understanding of rhetoric. Burke sought out an explanation of why and how rhetoric is used in discourse (455). There are a handful of fundamental components of his analysis: the pentad of drama, the role of identification, and the ratios or relationships among critical components. His pentad was comprised of the act (what occurs by the delivery of the rhetorical piece), the scene (the situational setup or the context of the discourse), the agent (the person being asked to complete the action), the agency (the tools used to complete the action), and the purpose (the goal of the action). If one analyzes the components of the pentad and their relationships to each other, Burke believed, one would be able to discern the motives underpinning that rhetorical act (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 181).

Burke's analysis is aptly named *dramatism* because of his unwavering belief that life does not resemble drama; life actually is drama. As David Payne writes, Burke considered that "people's actions are themselves symbolic statements" (261). To Burke, rhetoric was found almost everywhere, and in his analysis he often tried to find examples of it in the most obscure places. A blatant piece of rhetoric (e.g. a political speech) would rarely have been analyzed by Burke (Payne

263). However, it is fitting to use Burke's analysis to examine one of President Reagan's speeches because Reagan is known as the Great Communicator and because Reagan began his career not in politics but in show business. Reagan would agree with Burke that drama and life equate the same thing, as he created his life based on his public image. It is therefore likely that Reagan would look at every opportunity as a scene for a new act.

Burke assumed that all drama highlights key human motivation. Rhetoric is no different to Burke; its main goal is to extract the ultimate reason why this particular action occurred (Payne 266). Using Burke's pentadic criticism, one can explore Reagan's motives and their far-reaching effects past the city of Berlin and into the larger arena between the Soviets and the Americans. The pentad provides further understanding of how persuasion depends upon the relationship between the audience and the speaker. Central to Burke's theory, identification between the orator and the audience is the goal of any rhetorical piece. Identification may occur in an attempt to unite against a common enemy, to unconsciously parallel two apparently different groups, or to serve as a means to an end. The orator tries to "consubstantiate" with the audience; it is at this point that persuasion occurs (Foss, Foss, and Trapp 174-175). In the following analysis, pentadic criticism will involve examinations of both the exterior and interior contexts of Reagan's speech.

### **Pentadic Analysis of the Exterior Context of Reagan's Speech**

Rhetorical analysis must consider the larger overlying context of the speech: here, Reagan's efforts to promote the world's view of the United States and to hasten the demise of the Soviet Union. As begins to become evident in this speech, however, Reagan and Gorbachev become interdependent on each other—recognizing the other's power as well as vulnerability (Rose 59).

Notably, the surrounding scene of the utterance was crucial to the deployment of Reagan's message. Delivered at the Brandenburg Gate, the icon of the European schism between capitalism and communism, the speech was presented against a backdrop of cultural history and meaning (Cannon 774). Reagan illustrated the importance of Berlin to the world:

It is here in Berlin where the wall emerges most clearly; here, cutting across your city, where the news photo and the television screen have imprinted this brutal division of a continent 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. (par. 5)

It is important to note here that although East Berliners had been encouraged to listen from their side of the wall, police had forced them away. In that context, Reagan's speech illustrates the power of the American President and encourages Berliners on both sides to embrace the liberties that all are entitled to.

Additionally, Reagan and Gorbachev had a history with each other that undoubtedly affected how Reagan approached Gorbachev in “Tear Down This Wall.” Reagan, known for his abrupt revelations of truth, had already expressed how he felt. When Reagan and Gorbachev first met at the Geneva Summit, Reagan quickly cut Gorbachev off with a decisive declaration that the Soviets were allowing genocide to continue. He also threatened Gorbachev with the two possible alternatives to the arms race of the Cold War: both Americans and Soviets could disarm or both could continue to acquire more weapons. Reagan also strongly suggested that the Soviets had no chance of defeating the Americans in the arms race (Noonan 210).

The scene clearly influenced the act itself: Reagan’s decision to deliver this speech, calling on Gorbachev to take drastic steps. Although renowned as an orator on other occasions, it was evident that Reagan felt emphatic about this specific act and truly believed that this step would be in the ultimate direction of the eradication of communism. In addition, this act had a direct influence on his purpose: to call on Gorbachev to make a change. The act allowed Reagan to narrow down his focus (the larger ideal he aimed for—the end of the Cold War) to one specific obtainable goal. Instead of directing his speech only to the masses, he centered it on one individual who had the potential to be very influential in world politics.

Moreover, the timing of Reagan’s speech, during a thaw in the Cold War, became vital to understanding how Reagan could have promoted the ideas that he did. The speech itself would have been considered unfeasible and the hopes that Reagan expressed would have been called nonsense had it not been that many realized that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were, in fact, not worsening (and arguably, even improving). Additionally, being at the Brandenburg Gate, the icon of the division that existed across Europe, allowed him to address both the capitalist and the communist vantage points.

Another contextual factor was Reagan’s presidential approval. Extremely high at the beginning of his first term, it then plummeted during 1983. Climbing steadily between 1984 and 1986, it then dropped drastically after the Tower Commission report. But during 1987—with the boom in the economy and the discussions with Gorbachev—it once again ascended (Rose 277). Obviously, Reagan knew of this decline in public opinion, which may have encouraged him to alter his speech in Berlin to be more public-friendly, especially to Americans. The patriotic ring to the speech—the proud mention of the Marshall Plan and America’s attempts to bring peace between the Soviets and the United States—supports this idea. In addition, Reagan was probably avoiding the American spotlight after the domestic Iran-contra affair. To increase his popularity, therefore, he traveled overseas to become the consummate diplomat abroad, with a ten-day tour of Europe highlighted by his excursion in West Berlin (Cannon 773).

Reagan most likely was trying to boost his overseas approval as well. In the autumn of 1987, a few months after the Berlin speech, NBC news surveyed citizens from the United States, Britain, France, and Germany. Only Americans felt more trust in Reagan than in

Gorbachev to reduce cold-war tensions. In the other three countries, citizens either trusted Gorbachev or felt that there would be no difference between the two leaders (Rose 301). Perhaps the speech at the Brandenburg Gate was one more attempt on Reagan's part to garner more support on his side. In addition to infusing his speech with patriotic pride so that Americans would feel a sense of self-respect when listening to their leader, he also tipped his hat to France and Great Britain, by allying with them in a unified attempt to bring international meetings to Berlin.

As agent, Reagan was an impressive force. His convincing manner of speaking, combined with his decades-long experience as an effective communicator, made Reagan a rhetorical power to be reckoned with. As Rose writes, "Ronald Reagan is the prototype of a modern media president, deploying the skills of an actor through television to communicate with the electorate on what appears as a personal basis" (97). William K. Muir, Jr. posits that Reagan chose his themes—his focus was on the development of American morals. Reagan, a firm believer in free will, felt that it was necessary first to advance the character of Americans and improvement of America would follow (194). One could thus believe Reagan felt that to enhance the current situation in Berlin (as well as other divided sections of the world), one needed to first improve the virtue of its citizens. The superior way of doing so was to advance American ideals of democracy and freedom.

In terms of Reagan's agency, then, Reagan used his notable communication skills. Some might argue that his means were shift in Berlin—he tried to appeal to the West Berliners while also embracing those citizens of East Berlin; he attempted to relate to both sides, a difficult task in any bimodal population. Nevertheless, he was also quite capable of displaying intense emotion that was well suited for the moment (a throwback to his former acting days, perhaps). Discussing the infamous command to Gorbachev to "Tear down this wall," Cannon writes, "Later, Reagan would tell me that he could hear the anger in his voice as he spoke those lines. . . . He was angry not at Gorbachev but at the East German police, who just before his speech had herded people away from loudspeakers" (774).

Reagan's speech calls his audience to action. He urges the citizens of West Berlin—and the citizens of the world—to push for freedom and the symbolic collapse of the Berlin Wall. He composes his speech around the central themes of his presidency: the value of work, family, freedom, and community. He calls on Gorbachev to take a decisive stand against the evils of communism, but he also calls on the entire audience to be promoters of democracy. To Reagan, there was no other option to rectify the division that existed. He cites examples from other parts of the world (West Berlin, but also Japan, Italy, France, and Belgium) where through the Marshall Plan, implemented by the United States after World War II, a political and economic renaissance occurred (par. 8). Another trademark Reagan piece is the optimistic conclusion (Pemberton 62). His last anecdote is a brief reminder to all the protestors that demonstrated against his visit: "I wonder if they have ever asked themselves that if

they should have the kind of government they apparently seek, no one would ever be able to do what they're doing again" (par. 30). These profound words fell heavily onto the ears of citizens on both sides of the wall and conclude the President's speech. Although a realistic reminder, they also emphasize the power that freedom has—especially to those who take it for granted.

The purpose of Reagan's speech was clearly to entice Gorbachev into action. One could hardly imagine a leader listening passively to Reagan's speech without being spurred to respond. Reagan also hoped to convince the remainder of his audience, especially those in Berlin, that freedom was the only alternative to end suffering. He hoped to boost the morale of the East Berliners while assuring the West Berliners that they, in fact, were headed in the right direction and should not give up the fight against communism.

One could argue, as many have, that Reagan's speech did not lead directly to the fall of the Soviet Union. For example, Anthony King and David Sanders argue that the political climate in the Soviet Union had been slowly changing, as first evidenced by the rise of Gorbachev (282). If the environment in the Soviet Union had not been evolving, it is possible that the Soviet Union might not have collapsed shortly after Reagan's speech but existed much longer. Experts, such as Condoleezza Rice, now ponder why Reagan's advances only began to be effective after Gorbachev gained power in the Soviet Union and raise the question as to how much Reagan, compared with the natural progression of events, affected the collapse of the Soviet Union (72). Regardless, it was crucial that Gorbachev be in power because he was receptive to the idea of change.

### **Pentadic Analysis of the Interior Context of "Tear Down This Wall"**

The specific utterance, "Tear down this wall," was delivered in front of a crowd of West Berliners before the Brandenburg Gate. On the surface, Reagan appears to use the West Berliners to be his agents, urging them onward in their battle against the communism found in East Berlin. Upon further consideration, however, it seems that Reagan, although overtly addressing those of the Western mind, is essentially speaking to the Eastern fraction—the East Berliners, the Soviets, and Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, himself. From the beginning of his address, Reagan makes clear that he is not preaching to the choir—that he does, in fact, have an ulterior motive: "To those listening throughout Eastern Europe, a special word: Although I cannot be with you, I address my remarks to you just as surely as to those standing here before me. For I join you, as I join your fellow countrymen in the West, in this firm, this unalterable belief: *Es gibt nur ein Berlin*. [There is only one Berlin.]" (par. 4). He urges all those in the East to listen to him and to his promises of what freedom can deliver and then to reassess their lives objectively without the curtain of communism obscuring it.

His diction in this passage is notable for two reasons. First, by saying "although I cannot be with you," a reminder of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Promised Land" speech that encouraged minorities to be persistent in the battle for civil rights, Reagan similarly urges East Berliners and

other oppressed communist societies to resist the Soviet Union. Secondly, he uses the term “unalterable belief,” which sounds similar to the Declaration of Independence’s “unalienable rights,” to emphasize that he is speaking on behalf of the United States—a nation whose citizens have been oppressed but a nation who now values freedom above all else.

To Gorbachev, Reagan directs his famous command, “Tear down this wall,” making the Soviet leader another possible agent. James W. Ceaser explains that Gorbachev was not a stranger to Reagan; they had convened at a summit in 1986 in Iceland (200). The discourse between the two leaders was bountiful. It appears that both the United States and the Soviet Union knew how much each influenced the other. Additionally, Reagan’s abrupt directive illustrates the power Reagan felt he could exercise over the Soviet Union—the ability to persuade its leader to be his agent.

Reagan argues that the scene for change would be best evidenced in a city such as Berlin—a city that has a rich history, a bounty of culture, a plethora of spirit to reunite its citizens, and a prominent place in the world as a symbol of division. As Reagan begins his speech, “We’re drawn here by other things as well: by the feeling of history in this city, more than 500 years older than our own nation; by the beauty of the Grunewald and the Tiergarten; most of all, by your courage and determination” (par. 3), one senses that he feels that this *must* be the starting place for the radical change against the Soviets. Nowhere else in the world is there such a physical division between the East and the West. Although there are psychological walls built between the two veins of thought, the physical reality of a concrete wall is evidence of the deep divide between the two ideologies. Reagan argues that “[a]s long as the gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind. . . . [Yet] I find in Berlin a message of hope, even in the shadow of this wall, a message of triumph” (par. 6).

For the interior context, too, scene affects agency. If Reagan’s speech had not occurred at that particular place and time, his skill as a speaker would have been meaningless, since the audience would not have been receptive to hearing the speech. The scene obviously affected the purpose as well, for Reagan most likely would not have been able to entice Gorbachev into action if it had not been the appropriate time to do so. Because of the context, such an exchange was appropriate and meaningful.

Likewise, scene and agent are related. The people of Berlin in 1987, living in a divided city and with the events of the Cold War encompassing their lives, were influential in the scene as Reagan creates it. If they were not progressive thinkers, the chance that there would be a “thaw” in the Cold War itself was unlikely. Because Berliners were frustrated with the circumstances in which they were living, the climate was suitable for a change. Peter Robinson, a speechwriter for Reagan during the time when Reagan delivered the Berlin speech, recounts a conversation he had with Berliners during a dinner party weeks before Reagan’s address:

“Is it true?” I asked. “Have you gotten used to the wall?” . . . Finally one man raised an arm and pointed. “My sister lives 20 miles in that direction,” he explained. “I haven’t seen her in more than two decades. Do you think I can get used to that?” Another man spoke up. Each morning on his way to work, he said, he walked past a guard tower. . . . “That soldier and I speak the same language,” he said. “We share the same history. But one of us is a zookeeper and the other is an animal, and I’m never certain which one is which.” Our hostess now broke in. “If this man Gorbachev is serious with his talk of glasnost and perestroika,” she said angrily, pounding her fist, “he can prove it. He can get rid of this wall.” (170-2)

This latter phrase, taken directly from a Berliner, would be incorporated into Reagan’s speech, becoming the pinnacle of the speech. Berliners, then, were hungry for this decree. Clearly, Gorbachev, as agent, can impact the conditions of which Reagan speaks. As the Soviet leader, he has the power to do as Reagan asks.

Reagan, therefore, presses his listeners—his agents—to act. He asks Gorbachev to take a dramatic step by opening the city of Berlin so that citizens of both sides could enjoy the enrichment of living in such a diverse city. He also proposes the opening so that there would be free air access to the city and international meetings (e.g., the United Nations) could take place there. He recommends programs aimed at the young East Berliners to expose them to a world and culture outside their own (namely, to expose them to our Western culture). In addition, he hopes that the most prestigious athletic competition, the Olympics, would one day be held in the unified city (Reagan par. 23-27).

Understanding Reagan’s agents, the people of Berlin and Gorbachev, is a crucial step in the determination of Reagan’s motives. In term of the agent/act ratio, the psychological divisions between the freedom of the West Berliners and the oppression of the East Berliners play an important role in how the demise of the Berlin Wall would occur and how it would be perceived. The division between the mental life of the West and East Berliners needed to be minimized in order for the physical division to be eradicated. Reagan calls for both sides to support the symbolic fall of the Wall. Additionally, many would argue that there was no more appropriate Soviet leader than Gorbachev to instigate the necessary changes. Gorbachev’s ideas of the future and his professional relationship with Reagan were radical enough that Reagan’s concept of the fall of the Berlin Wall does not seem impossible.

At the same time, Reagan makes active use of Burkean identification to persuade his listeners. For Burke, the rhetorical work of identification encourages the audience to reconsider its identity and align itself with that of the agent. In “Tear Down This Wall,” Reagan aligns himself with his audience of West Berliners. He appears to know what they are thinking and what they desire. He also attempts to align himself with the East Berliners and to encourage them to



demand freedom and the demise of the wall. Even further from the direct audience that can hear him, it seems that he is trying to find common ground with Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader. Repeatedly, Reagan endeavors to find some commonality between himself and his audience by using phrases such as “wherever I go, whatever I do, . . . [I still have a suitcase in Berlin]” (par. 3), “I understand that Berliners of my own generation can remember” (par. 8), “I understand the fear of war” (par. 15), and “One final proposal, one close to my heart” (par. 27).

Using identification, Reagan carefully portrays both the Americans and the Soviets. Although it is clear that he does not support the socialist claims, he does not appear condescending toward them, either. He sees the action of the Soviet Union as progressive, although not nearly as far along as it ought to be: “And now the Soviets themselves may, in a limited way, be coming to understand the importance of freedom” (par. 12). Nevertheless, he continues to say that recent changes in the Soviet Union might be a true indication of fundamental change, or they could be meaningless motions to provide false hope and to appease the pressures from the West.

The agent/agency ratio is important here because Reagan uses two tools as his agency—identification with his audience and the implementation of freedom. His agents and audience are the same: the people of Berlin and Gorbachev. Therefore, if his attempt at identification is to be successful, his means should also logically lead to success. He uses the notions of freedom to inspire his agents to act, but his success, freedom leading to the appropriate end, depends entirely on the responsiveness of his agents. If the people of Berlin refuse to see the benefits of freedom, how can they plausibly follow Reagan to the consummate goal of destroying the physical division of their city? Likewise, if Gorbachev will not allow for the possibility of freedom, Reagan will most likely not achieve his ultimate purpose—the end of the Cold War.

Thus, Reagan makes freedom itself a significant agent for change. Although he calls Gorbachev to action, he urges the people to become active, as well. He claims that they must realize that freedom is the only way to cultivate economic growth leading to worldwide security on the national and local levels and to a richer, more meaningful existence for citizens (Reagan par. 11, 20, 22). The stress associated with existing in a divided world would be lessened, as each side would agree upon certain basic principles by which to live. Although Reagan does not openly condone a complete adherence to Western thought, he does recommend the inclusion of a larger principle of freedom to rule the land, as opposed to the inflicted communist concepts. Lou Cannon relays the idea that Reagan’s speech fell not only on West Berliners’ ears, but “resonated throughout Europe and [was] heard as far away as Moscow” (774). Ultimately, the importance of freedom to Reagan cannot be underestimated. When Peggy Noonan asked President Reagan to evaluate what he thought his legacy ought to be, he answered, “‘He tried to expand the frontiers of freedom, in a world at peace with itself’” (203).

## What Were Reagan's Overarching Motives?

Reagan knew the precise words that needed to be said at this moment in history. The ratios for both the interior event and the overlaying context of this event provide a cohesive group of possible motives. As already mentioned, Reagan's ratings were on the decline in America and this pro-democratic speech was a rallying cry for the American people against the Soviet Union. The time, place, and larger social context were filled with layered meaning—significant features that Americans understood and respected (e.g., the Berlin Wall representing the chasm between communism and capitalism). Subsequently, Reagan was also promoting the United States' ideals of democracy to other nations. Throughout the speech, Reagan provided numerous examples of how freedom, especially economic (i.e. capitalism), was beneficial to a society and was the only means to achieve worthwhile progress. His most salient motive was, of course, to end the Cold War and to witness the fall of both the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. Although Reagan stopped with demanding only the collapse of the physical partition, one can assume that he intended to eventually see the mental barrier between capitalism and communism destroyed as well. He argued for peace in Berlin, but he undeniably intended to extend those demands for peace around the world, wherever there was disharmony between the two ideologies. Of course, this disharmony would only be quelled when communism was eradicated.

Reagan's rhetorical talent was undisputable. His presence in front of a podium or a camera commanded respect and reverence. What he lacked in other areas he made up for in communication skills, at least as far as the majority of Americans thought. Nevertheless, the question remains: how effective was Reagan on his audience of Berliners, Soviets, and the world? We may never know. In actuality, Reagan may not have been as persuasive as some believe, but he could still be considered prophetic. One of his final remarks includes a short narrative about words he saw spray-painted upon a section of the Berlin Wall: "This wall will fall. Beliefs become reality". Reagan comments, "Yes . . . for it cannot withstand faith; it cannot withstand truth. The wall cannot withstand freedom" (par. 29). And indeed, it did not.

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