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Great Blunders?: The Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, and the Proposed United States/Mexico Border Fence

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ON DECEMBER 16, 2005, the House of Representatives passed Congressman Duncan Hunter's (R-El Cajon, CA) amendment to the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Control Act, which requires the building of a border fence at five strategic locations along the border with Mexico, including a section running along the Rio Grande River from Laredo to Brownsville in Texas. Although the legislation cited the success of the already existing fence that separates San Diego and Tijuana as proof that border walls "work," it also sparked a heated debate concerning the purpose, effectiveness, and impact of such a border barrier.¹ The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which is tasked with the erection of the fence, and a majority of American citizens claim that a border fence would protect the country from terrorism and drug-trafficking, as well as check the flow of illegal immigrants from Mexico and Latin America.² A majority of the citizens in border cities in the Rio Grande Valley, with the exception of Del Rio,³ however, fear that "the Wall" or "*al Muro*," as the barrier has become locally known, will sever important historically-grown cultural, social, and economic ties; jeopardize wildlife habitats; and may lead to flooding and destruction should a hurricane rupture the vulnerable levees of the Rio Grande River.⁴ The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College (UTB/TSC) have been involved

in a bitter legal struggle with DHS not only because the proposed fence would cut off 180 acres of their joint campus, including the golf course and remnants of historic Fort Brown, but also because a physical barrier on the campus contradicts a key element in the mission of any institution of higher learning: to transcend boundaries and bring cultures together.⁵ Only recently did the parties agree that UTB/TSC was responsible for heightening its existing six-foot fences to ten feet and installing sensors and security cameras by December 31, 2008.⁶

When asked his opinion about the proposed border wall during a recent lecture at the University of Texas Pan American in Edinburg, the former President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, replied, “Well, I am not going to repeat what President Reagan once said, but I think the Great Wall of China or the Berlin Wall have not been very effective, not particularly efficient.”⁷ Yet the former Soviet President was neither the first nor the only one to link “*al Muro*” to the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall. On a somewhat superficial level, such comparisons may have their merit; after all, both walls “fell.” Nevertheless, the following analysis of the Chinese Wall and the Berlin Wall reveals that both grew from unique political, historical, geographical, cultural, and economic circumstances. The article’s intention is not to take sides in the above controversy, but to provide new arguments for a debate that all too often has been waged with emotions, polemics, and misinformation.

The idea for this article evolved from discussions with colleagues and students who have asked me on my “expert” opinion on the Berlin Wall and the proposed border fence, as I am a German citizen. The article could be useful for a variety of teaching activities in World History and United States History survey courses. For example, the article provides a starting point for evaluating the arguments for and against the wall under construction across the southwestern United States. It offers a basis for demonstrating how knowledge of the past and a historical perspective are invaluable for formulating questions about the present and making a whole range of political, economic, and cultural decisions. Furthermore, the article provides a set of case studies for asking questions about the self-perception of civilizations and how they chose to defend themselves from internal and external threats. This could then lead to analyses of the fall of the Roman empire, the end of pre-Columbian civilizations in the Americas, the solutions to the immigration crisis implemented by the European Union, or even immigration debates in different time periods of United States history. Classroom activities could begin with an open-ended discussion initiated by having students respond to the question in the title. Students could then be broken up into small groups to investigate the different aspects suggested in this article.

The Great Wall of China

The original purpose of the Great Wall of China was to separate the civilized Chinese heartland (*hua*) from barbarian territory (*yi*) to the north.⁸ Purported to be some 4,300 miles long and 2,200 years old, the wall is irrevocably linked to Chinese history. The earliest earthen segments of border fortifications date back to the Warring States period (481-221 BCE), while the majestic brick-and-stone wall was completed in the 17th century and renovated by the Communist government during the latter half of the 20th century.⁹

Before discussing the construction of the wall, however, it is necessary to dispel some popular myths. The Great Wall of China cannot be seen by astronauts in space and it did not exist continuously for more than 2,000 years. In fact, as Arthur Waldron argues, the very concept of a Great Wall having a single purpose and symbolizing a long, unified history is misleading. Although all Chinese dynasties, with the exception of the Tang, had been building extensive walls, the impressive brick-and-mortar segments we usually associate with the Great Wall are only about 450 years old and stretch only for a few hundred miles near Beijing. Most other parts of different walls were made primarily from tamped earth (compacting mud and earth in a framework of wood or reed), and their remnants are often barely visible today.¹⁰

The first combined long wall dates to the year 214 BCE, when Emperor Qin Shihuangdi had his engineers connect pre-existing fortifications with new wall construction. Of course, the builders also took advantage of natural barriers, such as cliffs and ravines. Since then, the wall has been rebuilt, renovated, and extended, most notably from 120 to 80 BCE when the Han Emperor Wu commissioned thousands of miles of new wall upon extending the empire all the way to the Taklamakan Desert in the west.¹¹

But the history of these early tamped-earth and brick walls is also a history of disintegration, collapse, and abandonment. Parts of the wall must have certainly been destroyed by earthquakes and other natural disasters, while poor construction by armies of underfed and overworked conscripts combined with poor maintenance by thinly stretched garrisons, general neglect, and underfunding inevitably led to considerable damage and decay. Another reason why the wall kept falling apart was that in periods of civil wars, rebellions, the decline of dynasties, weak central governments, and other interior problems, such as during the Chinese “Dark Ages”¹² from the end of the Han Dynasty to the reestablishment of central control by the Sui in 589 CE, villagers pilfered the wall’s bricks to build their homes. Coincidentally, northern nomads, including the Xiongnu, Huns, Turks, or Mongols, seemed to have been especially dangerous during these times

of trouble, which contradicts the notion that the wall provided adequate defense.

It is difficult to find English language sources detailing the costs of constructing, maintaining, and garrisoning the wall, but historian Julia Lovell states that total annual expenditures for the Ming Wall in 1576 were estimated to cost 3.3 million ounces of silver, a whopping three quarters of the annual budget.¹³ Not surprisingly, the Chinese chronicles regularly recorded that people complained about the government spending too much money on walls.¹⁴ Although not all walls were as expensive as the Ming Wall, it is obvious that both financial and human costs for these gargantuan tasks must have been stupendous. In 1585, one of the earliest Western observers, Juan Gonzalez de Mendoza, believed that “this king [Qin Shihuangdi] did take of every three men one through his kingdom ... they almost all did perish that followed this work.”¹⁵ Certainly, life for the millions of conscripted peasants tasked with building the walls must have been grueling. Even the journey to the northernmost and most desolate parts of the empire on a rudimentary transportation system (the Grand Canal was completed only in 611 CE) was long and difficult. Construction workers then faced inhuman living conditions in the often inadequate camps and at the worksites: insufficient food supplies, extremely steep hillsides, and unforgivable climate conditions. Many of those who died were buried in mass graves along, or even inside of, the wall, thus indeed making it “the longest cemetery in the world.”¹⁶ Legends have attributed these burials to the cruelty of emperors or generals supervising construction, but it seems more likely that the mass internments were a matter of expediency and for hygienic reasons.

Supplying the wall with workers and the workers with food was challenging enough during construction, but maintaining and garrisoning the wall after completion continued to consume enormous slices of the budget ever afterwards. In general, the Chinese people bore the costs by paying higher taxes, while the government earmarked monies raised from its salt and iron monopolies for wall construction. At times, however, governments tried to make the wall and its garrisons more self-sufficient. The Han, for example, established new frontier farms and storage facilities, while their improved bureaucracy allowed supplies to reach the wall more regularly. Han frontier guards were generally well trained, and officers often brought their families and stayed beyond their terms, thus guaranteeing continuity of leadership. Not unlike the much later border troops at the Berlin Wall, the Han guards also relied on strips of finely raked sand to detect after-dark intruders. Nevertheless, even during the best of times, frontier duty and constantly being on the look-out for the enemy must have been a boring and monotonous assignment.¹⁷

Although primarily conceived as a defense against nomadic peoples of the northern steppes, the wall must also be seen as a monument to, and symbol of, the greatness of its builders. Just as most great leaders and empires built monumental architecture to inspire awe and admiration, Qin Shihuangdi (who also left us the fantastic Terracotta Army and a yet to be excavated burial complex¹⁸) and his successors must have envisioned becoming immortal through their construction or reconstruction of the wall. Even the modern Communist rulers use the myth of a continuous Great Wall as an expression of Chinese power, permanence, and cultural continuity. This point was not lost to President Richard Nixon during his historic visit in 1972: “I think you would have to conclude that this is a great wall, and it had to be built by a great people.”¹⁹ The wall thus continues to be “China’s unofficial national symbol.”²⁰ During the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, the Great Wall served as a backdrop to one of the torchrunners and was a must-see attraction for many athletes and the thousands of international visitors that attended the games.

Despite the wall’s enduring success as a world-renowned symbol of Chinese greatness and longevity, there are legitimate reasons to interpret the wall as a sign of weakness. Many times in Chinese history, building an expensive wall was a policy of last resort when all other options—diplomacy, bribery, trade, tribute, or punitive military expeditions—had failed. Only the expansionist Tang and early Ming dynasties refused to repair the “wall of shame” precisely because they were confident of their military superiority and pursued a strategy of “the offensive as best defense.”²¹ Lovell, on the other hand, argues that walls do not necessarily have to be of a defensive nature at all. She suggests that, just as the recent Israeli border fence often runs on Palestinian territory or cuts off Palestinian villages from their hinterland, the Chinese Wall was often more a land-grabbing ploy than a protective measure. Excavations along some early versions of the wall, for example, have revealed that the artifacts discarded prior to the wall’s construction were typical of nomadic rather than agricultural use, indicating that the Chinese had seized the land from the nomads. At the very least, the wall or frontier fortresses could have served as bridgeheads for expansionist military expeditions as well as for barbarian control.²²

Chinese officials also intended the Great Wall to help them control trade and to serve as an exit and entry portal—not unlike a modern national border. Similar to United States Customs Officers, Chinese border guards at the many gates along the wall checked travelers for authorization and passports; compared the names to lists of wanted criminals, known smugglers, or others forbidden to leave or enter the country; kept records of all crossings; and searched for contraband. But as with modern artificial

boundaries, products and persons continued to pass the wall undetected. According to legend, the most famous case of smuggling happened in 552 CE, when two Buddhist (or Nestorian) monks managed to leave China with silkworm eggs hidden in their bamboo staffs, duping the inspectors at the western end of the wall, and thereby costing China its monopoly over one of its most valuable trade commodities.²³ Obviously, walls and border patrols cannot stop ideas. Thus, the Chinese Wall could not prevent foreign religions (including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, which all arrived along the Silk Road) from entering the country. In general, however, in times of strong dynasties, the wall fulfilled its “customs” function relatively well. It lost this purpose only in the 19th century, when it could no longer protect China from the increasing number of new barbarians arriving by sea—the Europeans and Americans.

People usually conceive of walls and fences as separating people. The lands along the Great Wall, however, have also been places where nomadic steppe culture met settled Chinese farming society. Steppe nomads often came to the wall to trade horses, leather, and other products for metals, pottery, clothing, and other goods provided by the Chinese. In the process, they also absorbed Chinese customs and traditions. Many nomadic groups eventually settled and became sinicized, such as the Qin, Sui, or Qing, who had once been northern barbarians themselves. But this exchange was by no means a one way street. Chinese rulers as far back as the Warring States period, for example, learned to adopt the nomads’ fighting techniques, especially the use of mounted archers, and readily integrated former nomads as leaders of their own armies.²⁴

“Trust in virtue, not in walls,” a Confucian scholar once famously wrote on the wall in 280 CE.²⁵ With barbarians already settled well south of the wall, he reasoned, why did China’s rulers insist on an expensive renovation of the structure? More importantly, however, this unknown scholar was implying that Chinese virtue did not need a physical barrier to civilize nomadic peoples and safeguard Chinese culture and civilization. Another element of this abstract boundary is the Chinese belief in the wall as a marker between the world of human beings and the world of spirits and demons. Chinese people considered dying outside of the wall and the realm of civilization a particular disgrace and disaster. As Peter Lum argues in *The Purple Barrier*, Buddhism reinforced this notion because someone who died outside of the wall could never be reincarnated in a Chinese “host.”²⁶ Finally, Chinese poetry makes ample use of an abstract wall as a symbol of parting ways, leaving the civilized world, or having reached a point of no return. In fact, under the Tang, who ironically did not believe in physical walls, “frontier verse” blossomed and was even recognized as an independent literary genre.²⁷ Overall, Chinese govern-

ments always believed in their cultural superiority over the rest of the world. Ethnocentrism, therefore, not only led to the creation of the wall; it is also resultingly much stronger and more powerful.

Contrary to the considerable symbolic strength that many Chinese assigned to the wall, the Great Wall never counted for much from a military perspective. The unconnected early fortifications could easily be outflanked and the western parts made of tamped earth were not a great deterrent to invaders. Later walls also did not constitute formidable obstacles. In the 13th century, the Mongol forces of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan easily penetrated them and shattered the myth of Chinese invulnerability. The Ming dynasty later built an even more impressive structure, in part also to restore the image of security and protection. In reality, they knew that the wall could only delay a Mongol army long enough for their own armies to arrive. That was not even necessary in 1644, when a desperate Ming general opened a critical border fortress to the Manchus. The Manchus, who assumed the dynastic name of “Qing,” not only served as the last Chinese dynasty, but also unified the territories north and south of the wall, thus rendering the wall obsolete.

The Great Wall of China is a remarkable feat of engineering and a testimony to the cultural achievements and durability of the Chinese people. Today, it has taken on yet another function as a major tourist attraction. Despite its vaunted name, however, the wall was not a great success in its defensive function. At best, it worked reasonably well when it was properly maintained and garrisoned by strong governments. At worst, the wall bankrupted one Chinese dynasty after the other. As the historian Wan Sitang wrote in the late 17th century:

The men of Qin built the Long Walls as a defense against the barbarians.
Up went the Wall and down came the empire....
Dynasty after dynasty has done the same thing.
So why do we only laugh at the First Emperor of Qin?”²⁸

The Berlin Wall

While the Great Wall of China continues to be the country’s largest tourist attraction, the more recent Berlin Wall no longer exists, except for a few sections left as memorials and the bits and pieces acquired by tourists and collectors all over the world. The Berlin Wall was part of a larger fortified border between the democratic, capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany) and the Communist German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). From August 13, 1961 to November 9, 1989, it divided West Berlin (the former American, British, and French occupation zones) from East Berlin (the former Soviet occupation zone)

and the surrounding territory of East Germany. As one of the most notorious symbols of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall not only separated a city and a country, but also two hostile ideological, political, military, economic, and cultural blocs: the United States and its allies against the Soviet Union and its satellites.

Since the Potsdam Conference of July 1945, the demarcation line between the three Western occupation zones and the Soviet zone had morphed into a bona fide national boundary. All travelers except commuters and local farmers needed permits to cross. On December 1, 1946, the newly established East German border police started service along this demarcation line, erected road blocks, barbed wire fences, and other obstacles so that only the few travelers in possession of the new intra-zonal passes could cross. Six years later, in 1952, the young East German state—which had been proclaimed a few months after the creation of West Germany in 1949—tried to stop the massive out migration of its citizens with more fences, increased controls, sensors, and three new security zones right along the border. Approaching the border from the East, one first had to cross a five kilometers (3.2 miles) deep “Off Limits” area, which could only be entered with a special permit usually restricted to local residents. Next, there was a 500 meters (0.3 miles) wide “Protection Strip” followed by a 10 meters (11 yards) wide “Control Zone,” which was patrolled by the border police.

Between 1952 and 1961, one million East German citizens still managed to escape to the West despite the stringent security measures along the inner-German border. More important, however, there remained the still completely open boundary between East and West Berlin, through which almost another one and a half million East German citizens (of a total population of 18.5 million)—mostly young, educated, and highly skilled—left in the same timeframe.²⁹ Other Eastern Europeans, including Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks, also fled through the Iron Curtain via Berlin. In addition, another 50,000 East Berlin citizens legally commuted to work in West Berlin but continued to live in the East because the costs of living there were significantly lower. Finally, both commuters and West Berliners used the Eastern currency (*Ostmark*) acquired at favorable rates on the Western black market to buy cheap and subsidized East German food products as well as the scarce high-end consumer goods. The East German leadership then decided to build a wall to protect its feeble economy, to prevent its most qualified citizens from leaving the country, and ultimately to ensure the existence of its state.

With the backing of Nikita Khrushchev, the East German leadership had secretly planned to close off access to West Berlin for some time, but by early 1961, anticipation and rumors about such a move were widely

circulating. In fact, Berliners, who are known for their dry, witty, and direct kind of humor, were speaking of “*Torschlußpanik*,” literally meaning fear that the door will be closed, to describe the situation. But as late as June 15, 1961, Walter Ulbricht, the East German Communist Party (SED) leader assured the international press, “No one has the intention to build a wall.”³⁰ Thus, he may have been the first to use the term “wall” for the border fortification almost two months before it was built. “Operation Rose,” the codename for the construction of the wall, then began during the night of August 12 to 13, 1961, when soldiers of the National People’s Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*, or *NVA*), border policemen, members of the People’s Police (*Volkspolizei*, or *Vopo*), and workers’ militiamen (*Betriebskampfgruppen*) cut off all street, railroad, and subway lines to West Berlin. Ironically, even the East German government railroad company (*Reichsbahn*) was caught by surprise. As usual, it had parked some of its subway trains in Western stations and could retrieve them only after some of the already destroyed pieces of rail had been temporarily restored. East German leaders had correctly calculated that they would catch Western politicians by surprise on this summer Sunday morning, yet because of the initial barbed wire barriers, Berliners quickly referred to this day as “Barbed Wire Sunday (*Stacheldrahtsonntag*).”³¹

From August 13 to September 1961, road blocks, barbed wire fences, and a brick wall went up under the cover of the East German security forces and the Red Army. In this early phase, 485 people, including 85 border guards, still managed to flee. The photo of the nineteen-year-old border guard Conrad Schumann dropping his submachine gun while jumping over a temporary barbed wire obstacle to freedom on August 15 has become a memorable document.³²

Over time, the initial wall and fortifications along the Berlin and inner-German border evolved into an intricate and almost impenetrable security system. Any buildings in the way of this fortification, even a church, were ruthlessly dynamited. In its fourth generation, as built in 1975, the wall comprised the following: beginning from East Germany toward West Germany was a 2-3 meter high interior wall with sensors; a 2.9 meter high fence, barbed wire obstacles, and dog-runs; an anti-tank and vehicle ditch; anti-tank obstacles; an access road for guards and vehicles; an alley of lights; guard towers (186 in Berlin alone); and a control strip of raked sand, finally followed by the main exterior wall of 3.75 meter (4 yards) high concrete segments. The 45,000 elements of the exterior wall alone cost more than sixteen million Ostmark.³³

Coincidentally, graffiti artists on the Western side of the wall soon began to take advantage of the wall for their projects.³⁴ For their East German counterparts, however, that would have been unthinkable until late 1989.

In fact, the old “Off Limits” zone remained in existence, preventing any “normal” East German citizen from even reaching the interior wall. Furthermore, plainclothes state security (*Stasi*) agents were stationed in areas that could be observed from the West, such as the famous Brandenburg Gate, to prevent demonstrations or spectacular escape attempts before they could be seen and propagandistically exploited by the West. Along the many waterways of Berlin, a line of white buoys, sometimes with underwater obstacles, signaled the border. The wall as described above then ran along the Eastern bank of the bodies of water. Overall, there were ninety-six miles of wall and twenty-five border crossings in Berlin.

12,000 elite border patrol soldiers, of whom 2,300 were on duty on a normal day, and almost 1,000 dogs guarded the east side of the Berlin Wall. According to a Stasi report of March 1989, the border troops were equipped with 567 armored personnel carriers, 156 heavy engineering vehicles, 2,295 other vehicles, 48 anti-tank guns, 48 grenade launchers, and 114 flame throwers, in addition to patrol boats, submachine guns, rifles, and personal firearms. Looking at this impressive arsenal, one may indeed believe the East German propaganda of an “Anti-Fascist Protection Wall.”³⁵

All border patrol guards furthermore had the notorious “Shoot-to-Kill Order” based upon Article 27 of the Border Statute (*Grenzgesetz*) of March 25, 1982 and a number of administrative and explanatory regulations. Such orders were temporarily rescinded only for the days prior to state visits or holidays in order to avoid negative Western press coverage. Although the East German government and the association of former border patrol soldiers emphasized and continue to emphasize that the use of deadly force was to be employed only as a last resort, the border guards were trained and had various incentives to use their firearms, even against women and children, in order to deter escape attempts.³⁶

After August 13, 1961 and the erection of the wall, Western reactions were rather slow and measured. Only the young mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt, who was also the social democratic candidate for the chancellorship, led sizable protests, while reigning German chancellor Konrad Adenauer simply reminded his citizens to remain calm.³⁷ United States President John F. Kennedy and other Western leaders were interested in peaceful coexistence rather than harsh and hasty reactions in a phase of the Cold War dominated by a balance of nuclear arsenals. As Frederick Taylor argues, these politicians may have expressed their moral outrage, but realistically, they welcomed the building of the wall precisely because it cemented the Four Powers status of Berlin and the permanent division of Germany, thereby eliminating a dangerous problem that could have easily devolved into all-out nuclear war. Kennedy, for example, stated

that building a wall “is not a pretty solution, but still infinitely better than a war (*keine sehr schöne Lösung ist, aber immer noch unendlich viel besser als ein Krieg*).”³⁸ François Mauriac, Charles de Gaulle’s biographer, even more famously summarized the idea that there was an acceptable solution for the German and Berlin Questions: “I like Germany so much, I want two of her.” And British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, who did not bother to interrupt a hunting trip on August 13, was satisfied with the wall as a solution to the Berlin Crisis because it allowed him to reduce military spending in Europe, including Berlin, in order to solve his economic problems at home.³⁹

In spite of his tough rhetoric to the contrary, Nikita Khrushchev also preferred pragmatic solutions to the risk of nuclear war. As German historian Richard Mutz posits in his article, “How the Wall Came to Berlin: Crisis Management on the Edge of the Apocalypse,”⁴⁰ permitting the East Germans leaders to build the wall enabled Khrushchev to diffuse a ticking nuclear time bomb by satisfying the three American minimum demands—Western Allied presence, free access, and viability (free movement from East to West Berlin was not one of them!)—while putting an end to the massive flight of the young population of an important ally. For this, he was ready to pay a high price: loss of international standing and Western exploitation of the wall as an invaluable propaganda tool.

The Berlin Crisis was not, however, resolved without confrontation. On August 19, the Western powers finally delivered to Moscow an official note of protest. The same day, President Kennedy sent Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, the reactivated General Lucius D. Clay whose participation in the 1948-1949 Berlin Airlift made him a favorite of Berliners, and an additional 1,500 soldiers to West Berlin. Another five weeks of mutual saber-rattling later, on October 27, American and Soviet tanks faced each other for a few tense hours at the Friedrichstrasse control point.⁴¹ Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and Kennedy and Khrushchev once again resorted to pragmatism: Kennedy did not allow his reinforced Berlin garrison to tear down the as yet temporary obstacles of the wall; Khrushchev did not push for complete control over all of Berlin. Thus, the wall and a divided city gradually became a matter of everyday life for Berliners, Germans, and the rest of the world. By the early 1970s, the new West German social democratic government under the new chancellor Brandt had initiated its famous *Ostpolitik*—a series of agreements with Eastern European governments recognizing the existing boundaries, which included mutual diplomatic recognition of the two Germanys in exchange for an East German relaxation of the strict travel regulations for Westerners. Meanwhile, the superpowers had reached their own agreements confirming the status quo in Berlin and Germany.

Despite the political acceptance of the wall, however, the presence of the barrier was a constant reminder of the continuing struggle between the countries of the free world and the Communist bloc. Leaders on both sides were well aware of Berlin's special status as a hostage in the gun sights of East and West. Nikita Khrushchev, with his usual bluntness, compared Berlin to the testicles of the West: "Every time I want to make the West scream, I squeeze on Berlin."⁴² During his visit to West Berlin in June 1963, President Kennedy, on the other hand, claimed that Berlin stood for all freedom-loving citizens in the world, and therefore he would be proud to state, "*Ich bin ein Berliner* (I am a citizen of Berlin)." Almost a quarter of a century later, in 1987, another American president, Ronald Reagan, also chose the Berlin Wall as the venue to challenge Soviet Communist party leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Standing in front of Brandenburg Gate and pointing at the wall, the "Great Communicator" demanded, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall."⁴³

By this time, Gorbachev had initiated far-reaching new policies remembered under the catch words of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) in the Soviet Union. Whether he recognized that the Soviet system needed reform for humanitarian reasons or to keep up with the Reagan's new policy of strength has been discussed elsewhere,⁴⁴ but his message that the Soviet Union would no longer enforce the Brezhnev Doctrine and allow its satellites to pursue their own course without fear of Soviet intervention was heard loud and clear throughout Eastern Europe, especially in East Germany. Starting in the summer of 1989, increasing numbers of demonstrators in all larger East German cities united under the slogan "We Are the People (*Wir sind das Volk*)" and demanded freedom of travel and liberalization of the rigid Communist system. Other East Germans simply "voted with their feet" by either leaving the country through West German embassies in Prague and Warsaw, or via Hungary, which had opened its border to Austria on September 11, 1989.⁴⁵

The ailing hard-line Stalinist General Secretary of East Germany, Erich Honecker, the man who had once been responsible for the construction of the wall, hoped that a Gorbachev visit in October would offer new guidelines and resolve the rather precarious situation. Yet instead of the anticipated clear directives from the leader of the Communist world, a visit that started with the traditional kiss of friendship between the two politicians quickly deteriorated into open hostility. Gorbachev simply reiterated that the Soviet Union would no longer interfere with the internal dynamics of other countries, then uttered the somewhat mercurial and probably misinterpreted sentence, "The one who stays behind will be punished by history."⁴⁶

Left alone by their Soviet senior partner, the East German leadership

now had to deal with the pressure from the people on the streets and the exodus of its most productive citizens through Hungary and the embassies, not unlike the one in 1961, when the wall was first built. At first, a section within the Politburo believed that replacing the hard-line Communist Honecker with the younger and more moderate Egon Krenz would solve its problems. But the East German people would not be mollified by the token replacement of one party boss by another and continued to demonstrate or to leave the country. Finally, the new East German leaders decided to give in to the demands of the people and open the wall by instituting new, more liberal travel regulations, an irony not lost to an unnamed German drinker in a Berlin bar: "So they built the wall to stop people from leaving, and now they're tearing it down to stop people leaving. There's logic for you."⁴⁷

On November 9, 1989, the Politburo had once again met and Krenz had made some hand-written corrections on the original travel regulations. He then handed the document to Günter Schabowski, a central committee member who had not been present during deliberations, to present it to the international press. Schabowski simply read the new regulations, but was visibly uneasy and unprepared to answer any questions. When asked when these regulations would be effective, he hesitatingly answered, "As far as I know, right now, immediately." Another journalist followed up on the first question, asking if the new regulations would also apply to Berlin. Schabowski responded, again hesitatingly, "All border crossings from East Germany to West Germany or West Berlin can be used." At 7:05 PM, Associated Press was the first to interpret Schabowski's fumbles, reporting, "According to information supplied by SED Politburo member Günter Schabowski, the GDR is opening its borders." At 8:00 PM, the German ARD television station broadcast this message. East Berliners immediately began to flock to the border crossings and insisted on exercising their new right. The border guards had not received specific orders, but by 11:30 PM, when the crowds had become increasingly larger, they simply opened the border crossings and let them go. West Berliners on the other side of the wall gave them a great welcome.⁴⁸

After more than twenty-eight years, the absence of Soviet guidance, non-interference by the Red Army, a minor misunderstanding between East German party functionaries, Western press reactions, common sense on the part of the border guards, and most importantly, popular pressure led to the celebrated fall of the wall. That came officially more than a year afterward, on November 30, 1990, when the last concrete slabs of the wall were removed. Only a few segments were left as memorials, while pieces of the wall had become sought-after souvenirs, some of which made it all the way to the Rio Grande Valley.

On November 10, 1989, the day after the wall was first opened, the aging Willy Brandt, who had once accompanied John F. Kennedy during his much-celebrated visit in 1963, triumphantly exclaimed, “The wall must fall so Berlin can live.”⁴⁹ The wall indeed fell and Berlin lived, and therefore the wall should be seen as a colossal failure. That is certainly true from a humanitarian perspective. Depending on the sources, between 86 and 262 people lost their lives while attempting to cross the wall.⁵⁰ In addition, an estimated 75,000 people who attempted to flee were caught, charged with “deserting the Republic,” and sentenced to prison terms of up to eight years.⁵¹ On the other hand, of the perpetrators, the ones who ordered the shootings, and the border guards who followed such orders by killing or arresting those who attempted to flee, eight were killed on duty.⁵² Another ninety perpetrators, including Erich Honecker, his successor Egon Krenz, long-time commanding officer of the border guards Colonel General Klaus-Dieter Baum, and rank-and-file soldiers were tried in German courts. These so-called *Mauerschützenprozesse* (Wall-Shooters Trials), which ended on November 19, 2004, exactly fifteen years after the wall came down, nearly coincided with the renewed debate about the culpability and individual responsibility of Holocaust perpetrators, who had once been in a somewhat similar situation.⁵³

As with all walls, even the intricate security system called the Berlin Wall was not impenetrable. Tens of thousands of East Berliners successfully managed to escape, by climbing over the wall, digging under the wall, flying over the wall, hiding in secret compartments of cars, or using a number of other ingenious methods exhibited today in Berlin’s Checkpoint Charlie Museum and elsewhere. But the East German authorities themselves had also left openings to bring their spies through. Finally, the wall could never block the airwaves and propaganda. All Berliners—and by the late 1980s, also most other East Germans—could tune in to Western radio or television stations in order to stay informed about a way of life and standard of living they could not share because of their confinement behind the wall. But despite all that, scholars agree that the Berlin Wall in combination with the border fortifications along the inner-German border were a great success because they stopped the massive out migration of the most qualified and productive East Germans to the West and thereby helped to guarantee the survival of the East German state for another twenty-eight years. The building of the wall was indeed the “Second Birth of East Germany.”⁵⁴

At the same time, it is a sign of the inhumanity and moral bankruptcy of a political system which, despite its massive propaganda to the contrary, needs to build a heavily-guarded wall to prevent its own citizens from leaving. As historian Mary Fulbrook put it so eloquently, “The building

of the Wall was an admission that the population had to be contained by a form of national house arrest, imprisonment within its own country.”⁵⁵ For this reason, the Berlin Wall has become a universal symbol of freedom and the struggle against oppression. As then-presidential hopeful Barack Obama noted on July 24, 2008, almost twenty years after the end of the wall, “Berlin knows the dream of freedom better than any other city.”⁵⁶

Conclusion

Both the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall are commonly believed to have been ineffective in accomplishing their respective objectives—the former could not prevent nomadic barbarians from invading the Chinese agricultural heartland and the latter could not stop East Germans from searching for or dreaming of freedom—but as seen above, that is not necessarily correct. The Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall are two very distinct monuments and they were built for different purposes. Logistically, the various Chinese walls were over 2,000 years old and over 4,000 miles long; they were erected along rugged mountain tops, cutting through desolate steppes and deserts; and, except for the brick-and-mortar eastern parts of the Ming Wall, they were constructed from locally available building materials. The Berlin Wall, in contrast, was barely more than twenty-eight years old and 100 miles long; it was built in a largely urban environment where Berlin’s bodies of water were the only major geographical obstacles; and it made use of sophisticated 20th-century security and surveillance technology. The only exception here was the control strip of good old-fashioned sand, a device which had already been used 2,000 years before by the Han border guards.

Both walls also emerged from different historical circumstances. Whereas the Chinese Wall separated Chinese culture and civilization from perceived lesser civilized nomadic tribes since the beginning of the Chinese empire in 214 BCE, the Berlin Wall divided Stalinist Communist East Berlin and democratic, capitalist West Berlin during the Cold War, the great showdown between the Soviet Union and the United States that dominated the latter half of the 20th century. Both walls, however, also took on mythical and symbolic functions, which ultimately became more important than their intended purpose. As propaganda tools, they created and furthered long-lasting differences and prejudices. From the Qin to the modern Communist government, the Great Wall was designed in part to be a monument to the greatness of China and its people. Yet unfortunately, it has also been a sign of Chinese isolationism and a mentality which attempted to protect a perceived superiority by hiding behind walls. This kind of thinking is, of course, a different kind of moral bankruptcy than the

one shown by the East German leadership. Despite a slew of propaganda that did not even convince the most faithful of the Communist party, the Berlin Wall successfully locked up East German citizens for twenty-eight years. It therefore became a concrete and barbed wire manifestation for the inhumanity of the Communist system. For the people in the rest of the world, the Berlin Wall continues to be a symbol of hope and freedom.

Like the Great Wall of China, the proposed U.S. border fence is meant to be a barrier against foreigners and undesirable elements, such as terrorists and drug runners. Like the Great Wall, it will be expensive to build and maintain; like the Great Wall, it may indicate a degree of American ethnocentrism and cultural superiority; like the Great Wall, it will be permeable; and like the Great Wall, it may become a portal of commerce and exchange. Unlike the Great Wall, it does not seem poised to become a symbol of American greatness or a tourist attraction. Yet like the Berlin Wall, the border fence could be used by foreign enemies and critical observers as a symbol of American hypocrisy—i.e., undermining the very foundations of American democracy and contradicting the Statue of Liberty's welcome of the poor and downtrodden. Like the Berlin Wall, the border fence will keep people seeking freedom and opportunity locked in poverty and desperation. Like both the Great Wall and the Berlin Wall, the U.S. border fence will not stop the flow of ideas, information, and cultural exchanges. Nevertheless, whether the proposed border fence between the United States and Mexico will become another Chinese Wall, another Berlin Wall, or something entirely different remains to be seen.

Notes

1. For the amendment, see Duncan Hunter, "Hunter Proposal For Strategic Border Fencing Passes House," Press Release, 15 December 2005, <http://www.house.gov/hunter/news_prior_2006/fence.amendment.html>. For the controversy, see, for example, Dudley Althaus and James Pinkerton, "Opinions Split on Proposed Border Fence," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 December 2005, sec. A, p. 19; Spencer S. Hsu, "In Border Fence's Path, Congressional Roadblocks," *The Washington Post*, 6 October 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/05/AR2006100501935_pf.html>; or Ralph Blumenthal, "In Texas, Weighing Life With a Border Fence," *The New York Times*, 13 January 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/13/us/13border.html?ei=5088&en=603eef67e822a58&ex=1357880400&adxnnl=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&adxnnlx=1215199047-ma6bWQn6yFuI4W4dabU9vA>>.

2. According to the Rasmussen Reports of August 18, 2007 and May 1, 2008, fifty-six and fifty-two percent, respectively, of Americans polled favor the building of a wall along the Mexican border. See Rasmussen Reports, 17 August 2007, <<http://www>

rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/election_20082/state_toplines/texas/toplines_texas_august_17_2007> and Rasmussen Reports, 1 May 2008, <http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/election_20082/state_toplines/texas/toplines_texas_may_1_2008>.

3. Michelle Roberts, "Texas Border City Actually Embraces Fence Idea," *The Brownsville Herald*, 9 July 2008.

4. See the frequent reports and letters to the editor in local newspapers, such as *Laredo Morning Times*, *Del Rio News Herald*, *Valley Morning Star*, or *The Brownsville Herald*.

5. See a series of "Breaking News" articles by Kevin Sieff in *The Brownsville Herald*, including "Feds Sue UT Chancellor, TSC over Proposed Border Fence," 8 February 2008; "UTB, Government Reach Settlement on Border Fence," 19 March 2008; "UTB-TSC Settles Dispute with DHS," 20 March 2008; "DHS, Engineers Reveal Details of Border Fence," 21 March 2008; "UTB-TSC: DHS Violated Settlement," 19 June 2008; "Back to the Table," 1 July 2008.

6. Kevin Sieff, "Tough but 'Friendly,'" *The Brownsville Herald*, 7 August 2008.

7. Jennifer L. Berghom, "Mikhail Gorbachev Speaks on Globalization, Democracy," *Valley Morning Star*, 10 October 2007.

8. Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9.

9. For great photographs of all sections of the wall, see Daniel Schwartz, *The Great Wall of China* (London, U.K.: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

10. Waldron.

11. Julia Lovell, *The Great Wall: China Against the World, 1000 BC-AD 2000* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 66-91.

12. Parallel to European history, the term "Dark Ages" seems to be applicable to these years in Chinese history. Although the traditional view of the fall of the Roman Empire and a subsequent political, cultural, and economic decline into the "Dark Ages" has been challenged in the 1980s and 1990s, recent archaeological and historical research has confirmed that the material and intellectual decline after the Germanic invasions justifies the concept of the "Dark Ages." See Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

13. Lovell, 229.

14. Jonathan Fryer, *The Great Wall of China* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1975), 100.

15. *Ibid.*, 165. Parenthesis mine.

16. *Ibid.*, 64.

17. *Ibid.*, 91-93; Lovell, 66-91.

18. Scientists wait for the proper technology to be developed before they begin with excavations of Qin Shihuangdi's tomb because they do not want to destroy its content. Lovell, 51.

19. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Richard Nixon, 67 - Exchange With Reporters at the Great Wall of China, February 24, 1972," *The American Presidency Project*, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3749>>.

20. Waldron, 169.

21. Fryer, 119; Lovell, 17, 137-157, 188-189.

22. Lovell, 20-22, 43-45, 189.

23. Two Buddhist monks are mentioned in Lovell, 159; whereas Colin Thubron speaks of two Nestorian monks in *Shadow of the Silk Road* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 126.

24. Fryer, 83; Lovell, 39-42.
25. Fryer, 107.
26. Peter Lum, *The Purple Barrier: The Story of the Great Wall of China* (New York: Hale, 1960).
27. Fryer, 65; Lovell, 150-157.
28. Quoted in Lovell, 260.
29. "Fluchtbewegung aus der DDR in den Westen 1949-1961," *Berliner Mauer Online*, <<http://www.berlinermaueronline.de/geschichte/fluchtzahlen.htm>>.
30. Frederick Taylor, *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided, 1961-1989* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 137. For the international build-up to the Berlin Crisis of August 1961, see pp. 126-163.
31. *Ibid.*, xix.
32. "Conrad Schumann, 1961," World's Famous Photos, <<http://www.worldsfamousphotos.com/conrad-schumann-1961.html>>.
33. See "Schema Berliner Mauer, Ende der 70er Jahre," *Berliner Mauer Online*, <<http://www.berlinermaueronline.de/geschichte/schema-berliner-mauer.htm>> and "Die 4. Generation der Berliner Mauer," *Berliner Mauer Online*, <<http://www.berlinermaueronline.de/geschichte/grenzmauer-1975.htm>>. The organization of the border obstacles was top secret and most East Germans did not know about them. Additional mine fields and booby traps existed only along the inner-German border, not in or around Berlin.
34. "Berliner Mauerkunst und Graffiti," *Berliner Mauer Online*, <<http://www.berlinermaueronline.de/mauerkunst/index.htm>>.
35. "Grenzsicherung in Berlin 1989," *Chronik der Mauer*, <<http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/index.php/de/Media/TextPopup/id/317840/oldAction/Statistik.htm>>.
36. For Article 27, see "Gesetze über den Gebrauch von Schußwaffen," *Grenztruppen der DDR*, <http://www.grenztruppen-der-ddr.de/index.php?show=history&history_id=85>. For the application of the order, see "Schießbefehl für Stasi-Einheit gefunden," *Heute.de*, 11 August 2007, <<http://mobil.zdf.de/sevenval.fit/7val-fit-cid=3/7val-fit-sid=997fee08e505b2ed72cd856d9df00410/7val-fit-ssid=1/7val-fit-ur=http://www.zdf.de/ZDFmobilfeed/heute/0/0,6741,5586854,00.html>>; and "The Shoot-to-Kill-Order," *Dokumentationszentrum Berliner Mauer*, <http://www.berlin.de/mauer/zahlen_fakten/index.en.html>.
37. "O-Töne August 1961, RIAS: Erklärung des Bundeskanzlers Dr. Konrad Adenauer, 13. August 1961," *Chronik der Mauer*, <<http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de/index.php/de/Start/Index/id/631935>>.
38. "Mauerbau in Berlin: Straßensperren und Stacheldraht," *Spiegel Online*, 12 August 2001, 2, <<http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/0,1518,149154,00html>>.
39. Taylor, xxi, 206-209.
40. Reinhard Mutz, "Wie die Mauer nach Berlin kam: Krisenmanagement am Rande der Apokalypse," *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 July 2008, Feuilleton. Translation mine.
41. For this "High Noon in the Friedrichstrasse," see Taylor, 269-289.
42. Quoted in Taylor, xix.
43. There are many sources on the Kennedy and Reagan speeches. One is a documentary, *Ode to Joy and Freedom: The Fall of the Berlin Wall*, produced by Beate Schubert, 54 minutes, NDR International Weltvertrieb, 1992, videocassette.
44. See, for example, Michael R. Beschloss and Strobe Talbot, *At the Highest Levels: The Inside Story of the End of the Cold War* (London, U.K.: Little, Brown, 1993); John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution,

1994); Michael J. Hogan, ed., *The End of the Cold War: Its Meaning and Implications* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Gabriel Partos, *The Word that Came in from the Cold: Perspectives from East and West on the Cold War* (London, U.K.: RIIA and BBC, 1993); George Urban, *End of Empire: The Demise of the Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1993).

45. Taylor, 380-398, 404-407.

46. *Ode to Joy and Freedom*.

47. Taylor, epigraph.

48. For the press conference and subsequent reactions on November 9, see *Ibid.*, 423-427.

49. *Ode to Joy and Freedom*.

50. The low number of victims is from the Berlin District Attorney's Office, the high number from the Arbeitsgemeinschaft 13. August. The Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer (Berlin Wall Memorial) und des Zentrums für Zeithistorische Forschung (Center for Historical Research) Potsdam has confirmed one hundred thirty-eight cases, but is working on at least a hundred more. See "Todesopfer an der Berliner Mauer," *Chronik der Mauer*, <<http://www.chronik-der-mauer.de>>; "Victims of the Wall," Dokumentationszentrum Berliner Mauer, <<http://www.berlin.de/mauer/museen/dokumentationszentrum/index.en.html>>.

51. "Berliner Mauer," Wikipedia, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berliner_Mauer#Maueropfer>.

52. "Death of GDR Border Guards," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GDR_border_system#Deaths_of_GDR_border_guards>.

53. For the trials, see Elke Schwinger, "Die Mauerschützenprozesse oder: das 'moderne Gewissen' vor Gericht," *WeltTrends* 31 (2001): 85-100; and Volkmar Schöneburg, "Der verlorene Charme des Rechtsstaates. Oder: Was brachten die Mauerschützenprozesse," *WeltTrends* 34 (2002): 97-109. The so-called Goldhagen Debate is based on Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

54. Taylor, 345. See also Mary Fulbrook, *The Divided Nation: A History of Germany 1918-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 195-196, 202.

55. Fulbrook, 196.

56. "Schaut auf diese Stadt," *Soester Anzeiger* (Germany), 25 July 2008.

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