

Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." These resolute words of President Ronald Reagan rang through West Berlin and echoed around the globe 25 years ago this week. To a world divided into free and not free, the President's demand went straight to the heart of the defining conflict for an entire generation.

Only a few years later, the Cold War would end and a new era of communication, trade, opportunity and understanding would begin between East and West. The Berlin Wall would be destroyed both as a barrier and as a symbol of all the barriers between people and freedom.

The Berlin Wall served two purposes for the Cold War Communists. First, it kept people from leaving a life that had been planned out for them by the government, from cradle to grave. The Wall held captive a society in which freedom was suppressed, propaganda ruled the airwaves, bread lines were lengthy, and the patience of the government for criticism was short.

In its other purpose, the Berlin Wall kept out the machinery of democracy, examples of liberty in the rest of the world like free elections, free press, free speech, dissent and assembly, and free markets. In a world of sunlight, the Wall cast a long, dark shadow. The reasons to open the gate and to tear down the wall were many, but among the most vital was to unite an imprisoned people with the freedoms that allowed them to live out their human destiny.

President Reagan stood firm against the Soviet Union as more than a matter of military necessity. The resolve of the United States during this tense era was part self-preservation in the face of a vast nuclear arsenal, but also part instruction in the value of freedom and liberty. The message of our Founders was not to keep a candle of independence burning in a dark world, but to expand these ideals endowed upon all of us by our Creator.

History does not often provide us with inflection points like President Reagan's speech at the Brandenburg Gate. Two outcomes were possible at the Berlin Wall: It would either fall to the power of human freedom or it would fall because communism was expanding its darkness into the light of the free world. Hundreds of thousands of American troops, our Allies in NATO, and countless people all over the world contributed to the ultimate goal of toppling the wall and spreading a message of freedom into the Eastern Bloc of Europe and beyond.

Today, we are still charged with being a beacon of freedom to the world. Things are rarely as black-and-white as they were when one part of the world was behind the wall, and another part of the world was outside of it. But our challenges remain to be as resolute as Reagan was, to demand that liberty go places where the thirst for freedom is great but the power of government is even stronger.

Military force cannot alone win freedom for oppressed people. Diplomacy won't work in a vacuum, either. But the abiding spirit of the American people to be the source of power for our government – in elections, in a free press, as upstanding citizens of our communities, as free people – is the strength that gives courage to others in dark places. Twenty five years ago, Reagan gave hope to East Germans in one such dark place, and today they have democracy, elections and freedom of many kinds – most of all, freedom from fear.