



3 Lessons From The Fall Of The Berlin Wall

November 6, 2014 **Ilan I. Berman** *U.S. News & World Report*

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A quarter-century ago this month, East Germany's communist leaders announced they were opening the Berlin Wall in an act that, as much as anything else during that momentous year, symbolized the Cold War's end.

The anniversary is timely, for it provides history lessons that seem particularly relevant at a time when America is re-thinking its traditional global role, wondering whether it can still afford to pay the price for it, and mulling whether it would do more good by reducing its footprint on the world stage.

Globally, the U.S. came of age immediately after World War II, shedding isolationism once and for all as a foreign policy and seizing the reins of international leadership from a bankrupt and exhausted Great Britain. Although the United States has suffered occasional bouts of uncertainty over the past nearly 70 years, it has never fully discarded the role that Franklin Roosevelt envisioned and Harry Truman fashioned during their presidencies.

Since the Cold War ended, depriving Washington of the organizing principle of its foreign policy, the nation's presidents have lurched from one grand strategy to another - from George H.W. Bush's "new world order" of U.S. supremacy to Bill Clinton's "democratic enlargement" of democracy promotion to George W. Bush's "Bush Doctrine" of pre-emptive war and freedom promotion to Barack Obama's doctrine-less policy that seems one-part realism and another part retreat.

Now, with China rising, Russia increasingly expansionist, the greater Middle East marinating in turmoil and radical Islam presenting an ever-more threatening face, the United States needs a leadership posture that's appropriate for a less predictable future. With that in mind, here are three key lessons that the Berlin anniversary offers for the America of today.

First, we can sustain America's new role politically. Don't believe the cynics who say that Washington's hyper-partisanship will invariably prevent consensus on big things.

The late 1940s, when the United States built the architecture of the free world, was also a bitterly partisan time in America - arguably a more partisan one than today. Republicans routinely called Truman's policies "communist" while, running for re-election in 1948, Truman compared his Republican opponent, New York Gov. Thomas Dewey, to Adolf Hitler.

Nevertheless, facing a new global threat in the form of the Soviet Union, Democrats and Republicans came together to craft a workable charter for the new United Nations, provide aid to Greece and Turkey in the first installment of the Truman Doctrine, rescue Western Europe through the Marshall Plan and defend Europe from Soviet attack through the North Atlantic Treaty, which created NATO.

Bitter partisanship obviously complicates action in Washington, but history shows that, especially on the foreign front, it doesn't prevent action.

Second, we can afford it economically. As a nation, we are far wealthier today than in the late 1940s, with much higher productivity, far more goods and services and much higher living standards. Economically, we are far better positioned to maintain the burdens of global leadership.

In one sense, foreign policy begins at home - and that's with a strong economy. Not coincidentally, the times over the last several decades when we have wobbled the most internationally - today and the mid-1970s comes to mind - have been when our economy has sputtered, and our people have struggled.

To afford what we must do on the world stage, we need to generate the strong economy that enables our businesses and people to prosper, providing the resources to satisfy both reasonable domestic demands as well as our global burdens.

Third, we must do it - or else. The United States leads the world for reasons that are not just moral but selfish. We protect the peace, secure the sea lanes and promote freedom and democracy all over the world because, as history shows, a freer, more peaceful world makes us a more secure and more prosperous people at home.

To be sure, we can't be everywhere or do everything. Some oppression and humanitarian horror is simply beyond our capacity to address. As in Vietnam and Iraq, our ventures sometimes end poorly.

But, make no mistake: Evil loves a vacuum on the world stage. In recent years, we've seen the consequences of America's uncertainty - e.g., China's growing assertiveness in the Pacific, Russia's mounting recklessness in the Baltic states and Syria's continuing horror show. All else being equal, a stronger, more confident America will make us, our allies and the world more secure and prosperous.

As the U.S. mulls its future at home and abroad, a look back at what we've accomplished would provide a timely perspective for those who question what we can afford to do and what we'd likely accomplish if we try.