

---

## Hippie Day at the Reagan Library

When the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, California, announced it would hold a “hippie contest” one Saturday, I wondered what it would take to win. Dress in tie-dye and refuse to get a job? Put on bell-bottoms, take LSD, and jump out the window? Grow long hair and give the finger to your country, while decent kids were risking their lives defending freedom thousands of miles away?<sup>1</sup>

The hippie contest was part of a daylong “fun-in” (their term) to celebrate the opening of an exhibit titled “Back to the 60s.” As visitors went through the library gates that morning into the beautiful tree-lined courtyard, we were greeted by a kindly woman giving out free samples of Ding Dongs (a Twinkie-like confection). Frisbees were also being handed out, bearing the motto “Back to the 60s, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.” Is that really what it was like in the sixties—free frisbees and Ding Dongs for everyone? Handed out by Reagan’s people?

According to conservative ideology, victory in the Cold War was the work of one man above all others: Ronald Reagan. Alone among presidents, he refused to accept the continued existence of the USSR. That is the argument John Gaddis makes in *The Cold War*, the definitive statement of the conservative interpretation. Reagan famously described the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” That’s why he sought to “hasten [its] disintegration.”<sup>2</sup>

The story has been told a thousand times. Indeed, if you Google “Reagan won the Cold War,” you get 150,000 results. It was Reagan who stood at the Berlin Wall and proclaimed, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” It was Reagan who funded the mujahadeen to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, wearing the Red Army down in its own Vietnam-like quagmire. It was Reagan who ordered a massive military buildup, including “Star Wars,” that

his supporters claim drove the Soviet Union to bankruptcy. And when the Berlin Wall fell, it was Reagan who got the credit.

Margaret Thatcher put it most bluntly: “Ronald Reagan won the Cold War without firing a shot.” Bob Dole, running for president in 1996, told the Republican National Convention, “Were it not for President Reagan, the Soviet Union would still be standing today.” Dinesh D’Souza summed up the conservative consensus in the *National Review* when Reagan died: “Reagan won and Gorbachev lost. . . . In the Cold War, Reagan turned out to be our Churchill: it was his vision and leadership that led us to victory.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus if Cold War victory were going to be celebrated anywhere, the Reagan Library should be its white-hot heart. But the Reagan Library has never held a “Cold War Victory” festival in its courtyard. Instead, it had Hippie Day.

The library courtyard on Hippie Day was teeming with activity: in one corner, dozens of kids were hard at work tie-dyeing T-shirts; the results of their labors hung on lines around the courtyard, drying. The tie-dye would be featured in the day’s climactic event: the hippie contest.

Onstage in the courtyard, an Ed Sullivan look-alike was introducing a Beatles sound-alike group. They wore the collarless black suits of the early lovable-lads-from-Liverpool period but said nothing about the benefits of LSD or being more popular than Jesus. “The sixties,” “Paul” remarked, “when boys liked girls, and girls liked boys, and the only one swinging both ways was Tarzan.”

While the group played “She Loves You,” the photo studio under the arcade offered visitors two different ways to have their pictures taken. You could put on combat fatigues (which they provided) and pose in front of a Vietnam battlefield mural, or you could put on hippie garb (of which they had an impressive assortment) and pose with life-size standup figures of the Beatles in their Sgt. Pepper outfits. The action was with the Beatles; all the kids wanted to be hippies, not soldiers. What would Nancy Reagan say about that?

Reagan’s political ascent, as the museum exhibits explain, began during the 1964 presidential campaign, when he gave a half-hour TV speech supporting Goldwater. His message was apocalyptic: “We are faced with the most evil enemy mankind has known in his long climb from the swamp to the stars.” “Freedom” was fighting a worldwide battle to the death against

“the ant heap of totalitarianism.” If we lost this battle, “a thousand years of darkness” would follow.<sup>4</sup>

Reagan was so much more effective than Goldwater at delivering the message that, as Rick Perlstein has shown, a group of party leaders decided that night he would make a better candidate.<sup>5</sup> They started him on the road to the White House with a campaign for governor two years later. Any serious exhibit about Reagan and the sixties would put “the speech” at its center, on a big screen in a darkened theater, where visitors could savor that historic night.

Instead, on Hippy Day, Reagan’s speech ran on a small TV set in a museum gallery dominated by a VW Beetle painted pink and decorated with yellow flowers and butterflies, surrounded by life-size white plaster figures wearing hippie garb, posed working on signs for a demonstration. The signs read, “Vets for Peace in Vietnam,” “Hey Hey LBJ—how many kids did you kill today?,” “We shall overcome,” and “Tyranny is always dependent on a silent majority”—the latter a response to Nixon’s speech proclaiming himself spokesman for the silent majority. Reagan built his political career by attacking the people who carried these signs, which made this part of the exhibit incredible.

The TV set playing Reagan’s historic 1964 convention speech was set up in a replica of a middle-class sixties living room, with modern furniture and posters on the walls that said “Surfing Party,” “Hootenanny,” and “Sock It to Me.” I don’t know of any families that had a “Sock It to Me” poster in the living room.

The problem that seems to face museums like the Reagan Library is that few people will visit if all they’re going to get is right-wing ideology about Cold War victory. To attract visitors, they need to find something people will drive twenty or thirty miles to see—something like Hippy Day. The folks at the Reagan Library seemed to think people were still interested in the Beatles but not in Reagan’s role in defeating communism. Of course, the version of the sixties on display here lacked the confrontational edge of the original, and it was nothing like the way Reagan portrayed the decade, nor did it have anything in common with Republican ideology that sees Reagan’s role in history as equivalent to FDR’s in leading the free world to defeat the totalitarian enemy.

Later in the day, the hippie contest began. The entrants were a dozen sweet kids, virtually all girls and all around ten years old. They came onstage, happy and excited, wearing their newly tie-dyed T-shirts and bell-bottoms, sandals,

headbands, and beads. One by one they walked across the stage, flashed the peace sign, and shouted “Peace!” Nobody seemed to remember that Nancy had denounced her daughter Patti Davis as “nothing but a damn hippie.”<sup>6</sup>

“Let’s hear it for these wonderful kids in their hippie outfits,” the announcer shouted. “Everybody here is a winner!”

It’s not that the Reagan Library neglects Reagan’s claims regarding the fall of the Soviet Union. The story is there, with a big multiscreen video history of the entire Cold War narrated by Reagan—among the new exhibits introduced in 2011. And of course the Reagan Library exhibits feature the Berlin Wall, which the *National Review* called “the most visible, stark symbol of the Cold War divide, a gray, cold tombstone to human freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

It’s not just the right that found the Berlin Wall a potent symbol of an abhorrent system. John Le Carré wrote in 1989 about standing at the wall “as soon as it started going up” and staring at “the weasel faces of the brainwashed little thugs who guarded the Kremlin’s latest battlement.” “I felt nothing but disgust and terror,” he continued, “which was exactly what I was supposed to feel: the Wall was perfect theatre as well as a perfect symbol of the monstrosity of ideology gone mad.” And Chalmers Johnson described the fall of the Berlin Wall as “one of the grandest developments in modern history.”<sup>8</sup>

The Reagan Library is the nation’s central place for commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall. The museum has no fewer than three displays about it. A segment of the “real” wall, three and a half feet wide and ten feet high, weighing six thousand pounds, is displayed outdoors on a terrace (figure 2). The marker doesn’t tell you much about the wall, but it does say the display of the segment of it here was “made possible through the generosity of Carl and Margaret Karcher.” Carl was the founder of Carl’s Jr., a member of the John Birch Society, and the biggest funder of California’s Briggs Initiative, the 1978 proposition that would have required firing all gays and lesbians from employment as public school teachers. Even Reagan opposed it, and it didn’t pass.

At the library’s dedication in 1991, two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Reagan highlighted the segment on display. Before an audience that included Bob Hope, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jimmy Stewart, Reagan said, “Visitors to this mountaintop will see a great jagged chunk of that Berlin Wall, . . . hated symbol of, yes, an evil empire, that spied on and lied to its citizens, denying them their freedom, their bread, even their faith. Well,



**FIGURE 2.** Tourists at the Berlin Wall exhibit, Reagan Library, Simi Valley, California. (photo by David Weiner)

today that will all exist only in museums, souvenir collections and the memories of a people no longer oppressed.”<sup>9</sup>

A second Berlin Wall exhibit at the Reagan Library is part of a replica of Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, with a mannequin of a “resolute” U.S. Army MP on one side, standing in front of a huge American flag and a sign that reads, “Achtung! You are leaving the American sector.” On the other side of the gate is a gigantic Soviet flag; “an East German border guard stands menacingly,” the pocket guide declares.<sup>10</sup> It’s a popular background for photos of family members—some of which are posted online at personal websites.<sup>11</sup> When I was visiting, the only comment I heard on this exhibit was a woman complaining to her husband, “They said the wall here was real, but it’s a fake!” (I explained that the “real” one is outside in back.) As for the East German border guard, when I asked a couple of teenagers whether he looked “menacing” to them, they told me, “Not really.” Raised on horror movies and violent video games, they are used to much more demonic villains.

The wall text here declares, “From 1961 to 1989, the Soviet goal was clear: to ‘bury’ the decent and free democracies of the West in the name of Communism. The crimes of Communist regimes against civilians resulted in the deaths of 100 million people. President Reagan identified this as the essence

of an ‘evil empire,’ yielding nothing but death and destruction where it comes to power. The Cold War ended when the Soviet Union finally heeded Ronald Reagan’s demand to ‘tear down this wall.’ That’s the message in a nutshell: Reagan told them to do it, and they did.

After Checkpoint Charlie comes a side gallery on the Cold War featuring a video in which Reagan says, “At my first presidential press conference, I said, ‘They reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime.’” The Soviet goal, according to Reagan, was “a one-world Soviet state.” To put a stop to this, Reagan says, “I decided we had to send a strong message”—so we invaded Grenada! Not only did this help prevent a one-world Soviet state; within a couple of years the Soviet Union itself collapsed. No less than Margaret Thatcher provides the conclusion to the video: “In ending the Cold War, Ronald Reagan deserves the most credit.” I’m furiously taking notes, then look around to find myself alone in an empty room.

Grenada gets its own very small display at the library. The wall text reads, “US rescues 800 US medical students,” next to a button labeled “Press button to learn more.” In Grenada, on the other hand, a big monument commemorating Reagan’s invasion can be found outside the airport (figure 3). It was dedicated in 1986 by Reagan himself. The monument reads, “This plaque expresses the gratitude of the Grenadan people to the Forces from the United States of America and the Caribbean who sacrificed their lives in liberating Grenada in October 1983.” However, the monument was erected not by the people of Grenada but by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The Cold War room at the Reagan Library is mostly empty because it’s a side gallery on the walkway to what the library rightly bills as its biggest attraction, literally and figuratively: the Air Force One exhibit, the “Flying White House” that went on display in 2005. The signs on the freeway say, “Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Air Force One.” They do not say, “Reagan Library and Berlin Wall Exhibit.” Here, Reagan’s “dream” is described not as tearing down the Berlin Wall but as having “this magnificent aircraft here at his Library”—and that dream, the library declares, “has finally come true. We are privileged to have this national treasure and honored by the trust the United States Air Force has placed in us to share it with the American people.”<sup>13</sup>

The Air Force One exhibit is completely apolitical. Conservative ideology is nowhere to be found in the 90,000-square-foot, \$30 million display. Reagan’s “Flying White House,” visitors learn, was used by every president



**FIGURE 3.** Invasion of Grenada monument in Grenada. The marker reads, “This plaque expresses the gratitude of the Grenadan people to the Forces from the USA . . . who sacrificed their lives in liberating Grenada in October 1983.” It was erected not by the people of Grenada but rather by the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. (photo by Robert Kitay)

from Nixon to George W. Bush, including Carter and Clinton—and thus is hardly a monument to Reagan’s unique role in winning the Cold War, which is not mentioned. Instead, visitors learn that Reagan flew more miles in this plane than any other president and that it was in this plane that he “officially started the Daytona Beach, Florida, NASCAR race via phone.” He is quoted as saying, from Air Force One, “Start your engines, Daytona.”<sup>14</sup>

As for souvenirs of the Berlin Wall, the gift shop sells a paperweight with the inscription, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” It’s \$49. But it’s only one of thirty-three “desk items” for sale. Other paperweights are inscribed with other quotations from the president, including one for \$39 that says, “There is nothing as good for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse.”<sup>15</sup>

Does Reagan really deserve credit for the collapse of the Soviet Union? It’s true that there’s “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” which is featured prominently, and appropriately, at the library. An uncompromising voice of freedom spoke—and totalitarianism crumbled. But what happened in

Berlin in fact was something quite different. Michael Meyer was *Newsweek's* bureau chief in Germany and Eastern Europe in 1989 and wrote about it in his book *The Year That Changed the World*. Chance, he says, played a huge part in bringing down the Berlin Wall; what happened was mostly an accident. It began when Hungary decided to open its border with Austria. East Germans thus for the first time had an exit route to the West, and tens of thousands departed every day. East German leader Egon Krenz decided he had to do something to stem the tide; he concluded that, if travel to the West was not banned, East Germans would return after visiting. So he announced freedom of travel, to begin “immediately”—by which he meant the next day, with some kind of “appropriate” controls.

But on November 9, 1989, as soon as the announcement was made, East Germans headed for Checkpoint Charlie, where a border guard decided to open the gate. What happened next is what we call “the fall of the Berlin Wall.” As the historian Gerard DeGroot explained, “History pivoted on the misinterpretation of a word. Krenz called it a ‘botch.’”<sup>16</sup>

Conservative writers claim that the fall of the wall was the result of a longer-term process, also instigated by Reagan: a massive military buildup by the United States that set off a new round of the arms race that bankrupted the USSR. But these claims, as Sean Wilentz writes in *The Age of Reagan*, have “little credible evidence” to back them up. “New expenditures by the Soviet Union in the face of Reagan’s buildup were not especially heavy in the 1980s,” he writes, “and certainly were not enough to cause major damage to its already wracked economy.” Scholars examining the Soviet archives that were opened in the nineties found no evidence of any “panicky response to the Reagan rearmament that led to Soviet economic or political depletion.”<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the skyrocketing defense budget of the Reagan White House was based on “manifestly exaggerated estimates of the Soviet Union’s military superiority,” Wilentz writes, “which were later proved wrong.” A sizable portion of the Reagan defense increase was “consumed by fraud, waste, and mismanagement.” Meanwhile the weapons Reagan so passionately promised—the \$15 billion MX missile system and the \$26 billion Star Wars program—were never deployed.<sup>18</sup>

The claim that Reagan’s aggressive military budget and bellicose rhetoric forced Kremlin leaders to come to the bargaining table is equally unsupported by evidence. The change was the work of Gorbachev, who came to power in March 1985. “Without Gorbachev,” Wilentz writes, “it is conceivable that the Soviet Union might have carried on for decades, its nuclear



deterrent strong enough to ward off threats from the West, its conventional forces powerful enough to contain rising discontent within its own satellites in eastern and central Europe.”<sup>19</sup>

George H. W. Bush said pretty much the same thing on the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Instead of praising Reagan, he gave credit to the Soviet leader. “We can never repay the debt we owe Mikhail Gorbachev,” Bush declared at a ceremony in Berlin in 1999. “History still hasn’t given him the credit he deserves, but it will.”<sup>20</sup>

One more thing: when Reagan proposed the Star Wars missile defense system in 1983—also featured at the library—he did not say his goal was “to hasten the disintegration” of the USSR (John Gaddis’s words). He said his goal was “introducing greater stability” in the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. He said, “We seek neither military superiority nor political advantage.”<sup>21</sup> Those quotes are not displayed on the wall at the Reagan Library.

In private communications with Soviet leaders Reagan was even clearer. He wrote Gorbachev’s predecessor, Konstatin Chernenko, in 1984, “I have no higher goal than the establishment of a relationship between our two great nations characterized by constructive cooperation. Differences in our political beliefs and in our perspectives on international problems should not be an obstacle to efforts aimed at strengthening peace and building a productive working relationship.”<sup>22</sup> You might call that policy “détente.”

As for the “Reagan Doctrine”—U.S. military aid to anticommunist forces around the world seeking the “rollback” rather than the “containment” of communism—visitors to the library are told that Reagan’s “unshakeable lifelong opposition to communism . . . helped to free hundreds of millions of people around the globe.” But the Reagan Doctrine’s role in hastening the demise of the Soviet Union is exaggerated at the library and by conservative writers.<sup>23</sup> In Nicaragua, U.S. support for the Contras led to perhaps 200,000 deaths but didn’t hurt the Soviet Union and was abandoned at the insistence of Congress. In the meantime the Reagan White House sent arms to the Contras, paid for with the proceeds from selling weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of hostages—the “Iran-Contra Affair”—which did a lot more damage to the Reagan administration than it did to the USSR. (The library display on Iran-Contra says only that it happened “without his knowledge.”) In another prong of the so-called Reagan Doctrine, the United States supported the anticommunist rebels in Angola led by Jonas Savimbi, but that also had virtually no effect on the Soviet Union.

The strongest case for the Reagan Doctrine leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union can be found in U.S. support for the mujahadeen in Afghanistan, which of course is emphasized in the exhibits at the Reagan Library. But even with that argument, two major problems arise. First, support for the mujahadeen began before Reagan. It was started by the Carter administration—although the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta doesn't mention that.<sup>24</sup> Second, and more important, that support wasn't significantly increased until 1986, a year after Gorbachev had come to power and was already reversing Soviet policy and beginning withdrawal from Afghanistan.

And the official premise of the Reagan Doctrine turned out to be faulty. In its original formulation, antidemocratic left-wing regimes were described as incapable of change and thus required force to overthrow them, while antidemocratic right-wing regimes were described as open to peaceful transformation. But support for the right in Afghanistan led to a vicious civil war, the triumph of the Taliban, and the rise of Bin Laden, and the notion that regimes on the left could be changed only by military force was definitively disproven—by the case of the Soviet Union.

The greatest weakness at the Reagan Library concerns Reagan's meeting with Gorbachev in 1986 at Reykjavik, where the president proposed phasing out all "offensive" missiles. The exhibit in Simi Valley doesn't give the president the credit he deserves. Something monumental almost happened at Reykjavik. Reagan sincerely dreamed of a world without nuclear weapons. Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps the greatest left-wing historian of the twentieth century, writes that, at Reykjavik, Reagan's "simple-minded idealism broke through the unusually dense screen of ideologists, fanatics, careerists, desperados and professional warriors around him." The president "let himself be convinced" by Gorbachev that the two superpowers could live in peace. For practical purposes, Hobsbawm concludes, the Cold War ended at Reykjavik—and we should not "underestimate the contribution of President Reagan."<sup>25</sup>

More than thirty places in the United States in addition to the Reagan Library display segments of the Berlin Wall, and these displays present a stunningly wide range of interpretations: one treats its graffiti as art; another treats the whole thing as a joke. And size matters: there are competing claims over who in the United States has the biggest section of the Berlin Wall. The Newseum in Washington, D.C., says it does; the Wende Museum in L.A.

says it does. L.A. wins, with ten segments compared to the Newseum's eight. However, the Newseum claims it has the largest section of "unaltered" wall segments, as well as a real East German guard tower.<sup>26</sup>

The Kennedy Library in Boston has a segment of the Berlin Wall, because Kennedy went to the wall just after it was built and said, "Ich bin ein Berliner." When the wall went up, Kennedy and the other Western leaders said they were outraged, but, as Tony Judt explains, "behind the scenes many Western leaders were secretly relieved." Berlin had been the focus of official anxiety and unsuccessful diplomacy for three years. Now "Western leaders privately agreed that a wall across Berlin was a far better outcome than a war"—because "whatever was said in public, few Western politicians could seriously imagine asking their soldiers to 'die for Berlin.'" Dean Rusk explained simply and clearly that the wall was not a bad thing for the West: "the probability is that in realistic terms it would make a Berlin settlement easier."<sup>27</sup> And Kennedy himself said in private, "A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."<sup>28</sup> That fact is missing from every exhibit on the Berlin Wall.

There's another segment of the Berlin Wall at the Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, but according to the Reaganites, Nixon doesn't merit any credit because he pursued *détente* with the Soviets rather than victory over them. There's a segment of the Berlin Wall at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, where Churchill gave his "Iron Curtain" speech—but that was fifteen years before the wall was built.<sup>29</sup>

The George H. W. Bush Library in College Station, Texas, has outdone all of them. The entrance displays a monumental bronze statue of five horses jumping over the rubble of the Berlin Wall (figure 4). The entire sculpture is thirty feet long and weighs seven tons. The sculptor explains, "The horses simply represent humanity and the sculpture represents a victory of the human spirit." He also says the sculpture received the CIA's Agency Seal Medallion for "Best Artistic Expression of the end of the Cold War."<sup>30</sup>

Bush of course was president when the wall fell. The text here claims that he "was very instrumental in . . . the coming down of the Berlin Wall." But in fact he was completely surprised by the events in Berlin.<sup>31</sup> The website [www.berlin-wall.net](http://www.berlin-wall.net) sells a photo titled "Presenting the Berlin Wall to Vice President Dan Quayle." It's actually just a small piece, but that piece is not on display at the Dan Quayle Museum in Huntington, Indiana. In his now-forgotten 2000 presidential campaign, Quayle did claim to have "participated in winning the cold war" as vice president.<sup>32</sup>



**FIGURE 4.** “The Day the Wall Came Down,” sculpture at the George Bush Library, College Station, Texas. It’s thirty feet long and weighs seven tons. The sculptor says, “The horses simply represent humanity and the sculpture represents a victory of the human spirit.” It received the CIA’s Agency Seal Medallion for “Best Artistic Expression of the end of the Cold War.” (photo courtesy of George Bush Presidential Library and Museum)

Microsoft has a segment of the wall in its art collection at its Redmond, Washington, campus, outside of Seattle (figure 5). That wall segment, and the rest of the collection here, can be seen by the public by appointment only, and tours are offered one Thursday per month. Visitors learn that the official Microsoft collection includes, in addition to the Berlin Wall section, 4,500 works of art hanging in more than one hundred Microsoft buildings around the world, where they are “displayed for the benefit and enjoyment of Microsoft employees, their guests and our customers.” Visitors also learn that the Microsoft Art Collection, including the Berlin Wall section, “represents an important aspect of the culture at Microsoft.” That’s because, “in partnership with artists and the business community, the Collection takes a leadership role in shaping culture.”

And there’s more: Microsoft believes that art in the work environment, including its chunk of the Berlin Wall, “enhances employee morale, leads to networking opportunities, reduces stress, increases creativity and productivity, broadens employee appreciation of diversity, encourages discussions and



**FIGURE 5.** Berlin Wall segment in the Microsoft Art Collection, Redmond, Washington. Wall text reads, "Is this Art?" Answer: yes. It contains "a richly colored, energetic and tightly-composed abstraction." Ronald Reagan is not mentioned. (photo courtesy of Microsoft Art Collection, Accession Number 1996274)

expression of opinions,” and “evidences the company’s interest in improving quality of life in and outside of the company.”<sup>33</sup> So the Berlin Wall section on display here helps make the eighty thousand Microsoft employees happier, more productive workers.

Microsoft’s 12-foot-high, 4-foot-wide, 3.5-ton section of the Berlin Wall was a gift from Daimler-Benz AG of Germany, presented to Bill Gates when he visited the Mercedes corporate headquarters in Berlin. The German company “wanted to establish a long-term strategic partnership involving software technology . . . for future in-car computers.”<sup>34</sup> Of course it didn’t require the fall of the wall for Mercedes to do business with Microsoft, but the 3.5-ton gift does symbolize the victory of capitalism in a big way.

This segment of the wall, like the others, is covered with graffiti. The Microsoft exhibit guide opens with the question, “Is this Art?,” pointing out that many people “customarily think of graffiti as little more than urban vandalism.” Microsoft wants viewers to know that “the Wall attracted artists—unknown and well-known— . . . whose efforts ranged from scribbled words to complex compositions.” This particular chunk contains “a richly colored, energetic and tightly-composed abstraction—a collage of urban graphic gestures.”<sup>35</sup> So it belongs in an art collection. Ronald Reagan, however, is not mentioned in Microsoft’s exhibit text.

At the other end of the spectrum of cultural capital, another graffiti-covered piece of the Berlin Wall is on display in Las Vegas, at the Main Street Station casino, in the men’s room. It’s behind a row of three urinals. “Of all the Berlin Wall chunks in museums and memorials across America, we think this one is the most fun,” declared the guidebook *Roadside America*, which bills itself as “a caramel-coated-nutbag-full of odd and hilarious travel destinations.” Their piece was titled “Pee at the Berlin Wall.”<sup>36</sup>

This site was named “Las Vegas’ number two historic bathroom” by the Travel Channel in its *Las Vegas Top 10 Bathrooms* documentary and is featured at the Cheapo Las Vegas website.<sup>37</sup> To get there you leave the glitter and crowds on the strip and head downtown—and downscale—to what is politely termed the “budget” area of the city’s tourist attractions. Main Street Station has a Victorian/Gay Nineties décor and offers rooms “at the mid-range of the low end” of downtown Las Vegas, as one gambler there explained it to me. The hotel for some reason is a favorite of visiting Hawaiians and of serious gamblers who come for what I was told was one of the most liberal craps games in town.

On the way to the men's room you pass the quarter slots and video poker and \$5 blackjack tables. The piece of the Berlin Wall in the men's room is about four feet high and six feet long. You're not really supposed to urinate on the wall but rather in the standard urinals attached to it. Above the wall and the row of urinals is a plaque reading, "Gentlemen: The Berlin Wall . . . over 100 people were killed trying to escape to freedom." The plaque does not mention Reagan. The hotel says that women who want to see the wall can ask a security guard to make sure the coast is clear. The urinal/Berlin Wall is featured at the website *Urinal.net*, "the best place to piss away your time on the internet."<sup>38</sup>

In 2009, on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the wall, a commemorative "art event" was held in Los Angeles, not far from the Reagan Library. Described as "the most ambitious commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall outside of Germany," the event was staged across the street from LACMA, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, by the Wende Museum, a wonderful Culver City repository of artifacts of Cold War life in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> The event was in two parts: "The Wall Along Wilshire," segments of the real wall billed as "the longest stretch of the Berlin Wall in the world outside of Berlin," on display across the street from LACMA, indefinitely; and "The Wall Across Wilshire," a three-hour event at which "60 feet of specially-constructed material" were erected blocking the street, "bringing traffic to a stop for three hours on one of the busiest and most important thoroughfares in Los Angeles" (figure 6). At midnight on November 8, 2009, "select segments of the Wall" were "destroyed by invited dignitaries" and by a wild crowd.<sup>40</sup> A street party followed. The twelve-hundred-word press release didn't mention Ronald Reagan.

The art part of the project consisted of commissions to artists to paint the two "Berlin Walls" with images expressing "their creative response to the Walls in our lives." Among the artists selected were Shepard Fairey, who did the iconic Obama "Hope" poster, and a French muralist named Thierry Noir. In interviews with the *Los Angeles Times*, Fairey said his painting on the wall in L.A. was an "antiwar, anti-containment piece" that "makes a parallel to the Wall of Palestine." Noir said his painting would draw an analogy between the Berlin Wall and the border wall between the United States and Mexico—the point being that "every wall is not built forever."<sup>41</sup>



**FIGURE 6.** The Wende Museum’s “Wall Across Wilshire” event to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Los Angeles, November 9, 2009. The artists said the wall that separated East and West Berlin is like the walls today separating Israel and Palestine and the United States and Mexico. (photo by Antoine Themistocleous/The Wende Museum)

So the wall separating East and West Berlin, communism and freedom, is like the wall separating Israel and Palestine and the one separating the United States and Mexico. The Berlin Wall prevented victims of communism from reaching freedom in the West, the way the Israeli wall prevents victims of Zionism from returning to their homes in Palestine, the way the U.S. border wall prevents Mexicans from entering their historic territory. That’s the meaning of the fall of the Berlin Wall “in our lives” today, according to “the most ambitious commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall outside of Germany.” Back at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, one can only imagine the dismay at the range and diversity of public commemorations of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.