

The New Criterion

Features

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Weak will, high wall

by [Donald Kagan](#)

On President Kennedy's failure in the face of barbed wire.

The twentieth anniversary of the Berlin Wall's fall is a happy reminder of the great events to which it was the precursor: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the liberation of the people of Eastern Europe that came with it. We must not forget, however, that, in the 1940s and 1950s, the belief was widespread that nuclear war between the superpowers was likely, if not inevitable. Demands for unilateral disarmament and various forms of concession and appeasement were common on the left and even in more respectable quarters. For a period of time, retreat, styled as "détente," was the preferred policy. It was only when the expansion of Soviet power under cover of such Western weakness led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that Americans returned to the more realistic approach of the Truman administration that this remarkable and unprecedented achievement became possible. But the long struggle ...

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