

WALLS

BY

R. CALVERT RUTHERFORD

PRESENTED TO THE CHIT CHAT CLUB

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

WALLS

R. Calvert Rutherford
Chit chat Club of San Francisco
September 12, 2011

With at least two massive and controversial walls in progress in the world today, namely the wall between Mexico and the United States and the wall separating the Palestinian Arabs from Israel, it seems appropriate to examine how walls have fared throughout the history of humankind, especially since even Dr. Seuss has weighed in on the issue. In his *Butter Battle Book*, a wall separates those bitter enemies, the ones who eat their bread with the butter side down and those who eat their bread with the butter side up.

Then an article in the New York Times of July 20th confirmed my feeling that the issue of walls must be addressed. It told of a fund, established by the State of Arizona that will use private donations to build a wall sealing the Mexican border. They also intend to use low-cost inmate labor from the state prisons in the construction.

This measure was in response to Janet Napolitano's canceling the Bush initiative of a wall separating the two countries and paid for by the U S government, stating that it was neither viable nor cost effective. Napolitano, Secretary of Homeland Security and a former Arizona governor said, "You show me a 50-foot wall, and I will show you a 51-foot ladder." Apparently exploiting the extreme rage at illegal immigration, Tom Mullins, the Republican nominee for a New Mexico congressional seat, suggested placing land mines along then border.

So to see how effective walls have been in the past I thought I would examine three examples, two of which are world famous, and one almost completely unknown, although all three were massive undertakings.

Of course, no discourse on walls would be complete without what is probably the most familiar construction project of all time, the Great Wall of China. There are a great many misconceptions of that monumental construct, like the absurd idea that it is visible from the moon, or that it is a continuous wall of 5000 miles. Actually, there are a number of discontinuous walls built over a span of some 1700 years, intended to keep out various threats of invasion, including the Manchu and the Mongols, none of which were successful. The first section was simple rammed earth built during the *Qin* dynasty (221 – 206 bce), and the last during the *Ming* dynasty (1368 – 1644). The latter is the familiar stone and brick construction which we see in picture after picture.

The real importance of the so-called Great Wall of China is in the inspiration it has been for people all over the world. In 1987 UNESCO designated sections of the Wall as world heritage sites, and since it was opened to the outside world in 1957, there have been over 130 million visitors. Most of the world leaders have taken turns visiting for photo opps and pronouncements as to the Wall's meaning.

Richard Nixon, after breaking the mutual isolation of the two countries with his unorthodox yet successful "ping pong diplomacy", made a historic visit to the country that had been closed to the United States. As he stood on the Great Wall, he said, "A people that could build a wall like this certainly have a past to be proud of. And a people with this kind of past must have a great future."

Perhaps the most significant visitor was Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1989 made a visit to the Wall and said, "It's a very beautiful work, but there are already too many

walls between people.” A reporter then asked him the obvious question of whether that meant that he would allow the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, and Gorbachev replied, “Why not?” And within a few months the infamous wall surrounding the city of West Berlin had become a relic of the past.

The Great Wall, or actually the series of disconnected segments, was less than successful in its original purpose of a barrier keeping foreigners out, but it has been hugely successful in its modern mission as a tourist attraction luring people into China, and thereby has guaranteed its preservation.

Such is not the case with the Berlin Wall, intended not to keep invaders out, but to prevent its own citizens from leaving. Some years ago, Roxann and I were thoroughly enjoying a tour of the Vatican garden (thanks to our erstwhile member, Monsignor Steve Ottelini), reveling in the sheer beauty and artful landscaping of lush gardens when suddenly we encountered an ugly slab of graffiti-covered concrete towering above us. We discovered that it was a segment of the infamous Berlin Wall, one of some 75 such ugly mementoes scattered around the world on every continent - to remind the world at large of the horrors of Russia’s satellite, the East German regime that would shoot its own citizens to prevent them from seeking a better life for themselves in the West. They also serve to remind present and future tyrants that the attempt to curtail a people’s freedom is ultimately doomed to failure.

The Berlin Wall had a short life span, but during its existence, it was also probably the most effective manmade barrier in achieving its goal. Officially named the “Anti-Fascist Protection Wall” by the East German government, and dubbed “the Wall of Shame” by West Berlin mayor, Willy Brandt, it was built solely to prevent the people of the German Democratic Republic from making the relatively simple crossing into West Berlin, and thence to the West German Republic.

Prior to the construction of the wall, some 3½ million Germans had defected to the West, and the main route was through West Berlin. Since that figure represented 20% of the entire population of East Germany, the East Germans were literally facing the dire prospect of the reunification of Germany inside West Germany. The Berlin Wall was a desperate effort to prevent this modern migration into a free and prosperous society from one which was the antithesis of freedom, and which was wallowing in a persistent state of poverty.

Prior to the building of the wall, some 1500 East Germans a day were fleeing to West Berlin; during the 28 years of the wall’s existence, only about 5,000 East Germans dared to attempt to flee the oppressive regime of East Germany; of those, 192 were gunned down and slain and around 200 wounded by border guards. Since it completely encircled the city of West Berlin, and therefore had no ends, as well as the ruthless willingness of the East German government to slay its own citizens, contributed to its success.

The wall was 96 miles of concrete slabs, roughly 12 feet high, isolating West Berlin from the East German State, which surrounded the city. A year later, a second parallel fence was built within East Germany at a distance of 100 meters from the concrete wall. All structures between the wall and the fence were razed, creating what came to be known as the “death strip.” This death strip was covered with raked sand, so that footsteps could easily be traced, showing which border guards were lax in preventing defections.

The Berlin Wall failed because of the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and its consequent inability to control the satellite nations of Eastern Europe. Finally, on November 9th, 1989, the West German television station, ARD, announced, "This ninth of November is a historic day. East Germany has announced that, starting immediately, its borders are open to everyone." There was general jubilation on both sides of the wall at the news, with people from both communities standing on the wall and cheering. Then came the question of how the fall of the hated barrier was to be memorialized. There was a proposal to make November 9th a national holiday, since that was also the date of Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication in 1918. However, it was also the date of the Nazi's 1923 Beer Hall Putsch as well as the date of the infamous *Kristallnacht* pogroms of 1938, and nobody wanted to be reminded of those atrocities. Finally it was decided to make October 3rd a national holiday; the date German reunification was completed.

So the most successful wall had the shortest life span, because the Western World prevailed in the Cold War that followed World War II, and the notorious "Wall of Shame" is now scattered around the globe - evidence of the depths to which governments can sink in abusing their own citizens and the ultimate futility of attempting to curtail a people's freedom.

And now for the most bizarre of all the attempts at manmade barriers we must leave it to the British! And it is one that I would be willing to bet the family jewels that none of you have heard of, namely the Great Hedge of India, or as it was officially known, The Inland Customs Line. In spite of the fact that it was an enormous public work almost on the scale of the Great Wall of China, the Great Hedge, stretching over 2500 miles of Indian countryside, and staffed by 14,000 employees, might have been lost to history had it not been for the curiosity, which soon became an obsession, of an obscure conservator of the University of London library named Roy Moxham, who devoted three years of his vacation time to rediscovering what the journalist, Madeleine Bunting, writing in *The Guardian* in February, 2001, called one of the most grotesque achievements of the British in India. Jan Morris, who produced a monumental three volume work on Victoria's empire, at first thought that Moxham's book about the Great Hedge was a hoax.

In one of the annual reports of the India Inland Customs Department, the Hedge was described as follows: "In its most perfect form the hedge is a live one, from ten to fourteen feet in height, and six to twelve thick, composed of closely clipped thorny trees and shrubs, amongst which the babool, the Indian plum, the carounda, the prickly pear and the euphorbia are the most numerous, with which a thorny creeper is constantly intermingled." I did not recognize the trees and bushes cited in the report, but as one who grew up in South Texas, I know that no man or beast is going to find his way through six to twelve feet of full-grown prickly pear hedge.

The Hedge was all about salt, or rather the interdiction of salt smuggling from the Princely States of Rajasthan where salt was plentiful and cheap, and over which States the East India Company did not have full control. I suppose it is because salt is absolutely essential to life that it has been the subject of taxes more or less universally. France did not abolish the salt tax until 1946, although the ill-fated Louis XVI did so in 1790 as a last ditch attempt to prevent the revolution in which he lost his head.

The British East India Company profits on salt rose from less than half a million rupees a year in 1772 to well over six million by 1785, during which time, the price of

salt had risen to such an extent that the minimum needs for a small Indian peasant family of two adults and three children consumed 1/6th of the family's annual income. Sir John Strachey, Lytton Strachey's father, called the Inland Customs Line "a monstrous system, to which it would be almost impossible to find a parallel in any civilized country." Although the Great Hedge, or Inland Customs Line, was abandoned in 1879, the salt tax was not, and as we all know Ghandi used the patent unfairness of the odious tax on a basic necessity as an opportunity to further his policy of *satyagraha*, or nonviolent rebellion.

After three years of intensive searching, Moxham finally discovered a few yards of what was undeniably a remnant of the Great Hedge. However, instead of the elation he expected to experience after a successful conclusion to his three-year search, he was horrified by what he had discovered. In his own words, he described the conclusion to his epic search for the Inland Customs Line this way: "When I had first started my search for the Customs Hedge, I had been looking for a folly, a harmless piece of English eccentricity. It had been a shock to find that the great hedge was in reality a monstrosity; a terrible instrument of British oppression." A barrier that had had such a dire impact on the population of India, and entailed an enormous effort on the part of the British Raj, in little over a century has become only a vague memory preserved in moldering reports from an English bureaucracy.

In his poem, *Mending Wall*, Robert Frost begins, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." And yet we keep building them. Aside from the two that have captured everyone's attention – the wall along the Mexican border and the one isolating the Palestinians, India has begun constructing a series of barriers along its borders with Bangladesh, Burma and Kashmir and is considering one on the Pakistani border. Iran is building a fence along its border with Pakistan, and Pakistan is proposing one along its Afghani border.

Odious or necessary, successful or not, the walls of the world are unlikely to impact the lives of any of us in this room. And I submit that the walls most dangerous for us are those we construct within our own minds. There is the wall of religious intolerance that prevents us from seeing that all religions have the same goal – that of apprehending and participating in the divine. And there are the walls of bigotry and xenophobia that prevent us from recognizing, embracing and celebrating our common humanity with those who differ from us in color or language or political belief.

To echo Mikhail Gorbachev, there are too many walls separating us from each other, and when the question arises as to whether they should be dismantled, the answer must be as his was, "Why not?"

