

# RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

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## **Ronald Reagan and the Challenger Speech: A Four Minute Window into a Successful Presidency**

By Tevi Troy

On the morning of January 28, 1986, the U.S. Space Shuttle Challenger exploded, killing all seven astronauts aboard. That night, President Ronald Reagan was slated to give his State of the Union address. Instead, he and his White House team quickly shifted gears, and that evening he gave a short, nationally televised, 648-word speech from the Oval Office about the tragedy. That four-minute speech, with its famous closing about how the fallen heroes "slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of G-d," became not only one of Reagan's best-known and best-loved speeches, but it has also become one of the most famous and important pieces of presidential rhetoric in history. Beyond that, though, the speech and its creation provide us with an illuminating window into the Reagan method and approach, and can help teach us today why his was such a successful presidency.

Reagan was meeting with staff in the Oval Office that Tuesday morning when the Challenger exploded. Vice President George H.W. Bush and National Security Adviser John Poindexter interrupted the meeting with the tragic news. Upon hearing the news, Reagan left the Oval and went into his nearby study to watch the television footage. Reagan, who because of his Hollywood background understood the visual medium better than most politicians, was transfixed, and watched the explosion over and over again. This was part of his method. Reagan was an avid consumer of TV news, and it often shaped his actions. In October of 1981, he used TV to get a sense of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. By watching Gaddafi gloat over Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's assassination, Reagan learned that Gaddafi was not a good actor. Gaddafi's glee over Sadat's death likely stayed with Reagan and influenced his April 1986 decision to bomb Libya after Libyan sponsored terror attacks against Americans in Europe.

In this case, Reagan's watching of the explosion let him share a bond with the American people, and his watching even made its way into his remarks. As Reagan said in the speech, "On the day of the disaster, our nation held a vigil by our television sets. In one cruel moment, our exhilaration turned to horror; we waited and watched and tried to make sense of what we had seen."

Reagan also made some key decisions in the aftermath of the explosion. Holed up with key staff in the presidential study, he initially planned to go ahead with that night's State of the Union address. He wisely reconsidered that decision and went forward with the plan to delay the State of the Union and address the nation about the tragedy from the Oval Office that night instead. Here we see that Reagan was nimble and willing to make changes. Other famous examples of this agility took place on the 1980 campaign trail, when he dropped the self-aggrandizing political strategist John Sears on the day of the New Hampshire primary. Reagan was generally loathe to fire staff but Sears had systematically been picking off his close aides from Reagan's time as governor, the so-called California Mafia. After Sears shed aides Lyn Nofziger and Michael Deaver, he set his sights on close adviser Ed Meese, who had been Reagan's gubernatorial chief of staff.

This was a bridge too far for Reagan. Meese described the incident somewhat gently, writing in his memoir that "At this, the Governor, I am glad to say, balked." In reality, Sears' machinations angered Reagan, who said to Sears, "I know what you're doing. You're after Ed." Reagan's face then reddened and he looked ready to hit Sears, but instead he yelled, "You got Lyn Nofziger. You got Mike Deaver. You're not getting Ed Meese!" Reagan's directional change was a good one, as he cruised to the nomination following New Hampshire and later to an election victory. He was also willing to make changes as president, pulling the Marines out of Lebanon after the Beirut bombing and, after some initial skepticism, giving Mikhail Gorbachev the benefit of the doubt on the glasnost and perestroika openings by the Soviet Union, America's long-standing foe in the Cold War.

In addition to postponing the one speech and planning another, Reagan also developed a response plan to the disaster. He sent Vice President Bush to Cape Canaveral, the site of the disastrous launch, to convey his respects to the families of the fallen. He also called on acting NASA administrator Bill Graham to investigate the crash. This investigation would end up being an important part of the story. Graham and NASA would create a commission, headed by former Attorney General and Secretary of State William Rogers. The commission could have papered over the causes of the accident or accepted NASA's excuses for what happened, but Rogers was determined to get to the heart of the matter. Rogers felt

that inherent problems in NASA, including a cowboy culture, were at fault, and he refused to allow staff who had worked on the launch to testify. Rogers saw that the incident was, in his words, “an accident rooted in history.” It was this attitude from Rogers that enabled a commission determined to identify the root cause, which led to commission member Richard Feynman’s famous demonstration that a non-expanding O-ring was the cause of the problem. At one of the meetings, Feynman theatrically dropped an O-ring inside a glass of ice water, demonstrating to all that O-rings do not in fact expand in temperatures 32 degrees and lower, as NASA had incorrectly and tragically assumed. It was Reagan’s wisdom in setting this commission in motion that allowed this dramatic moment to take place.

Delegation was another important part of the Reagan method. The designation of Bush for the condolences and Rogers for the commission also showed that Reagan had an understanding of how to assign tasks to subordinates in the face of a crisis. He had demonstrated his ability to handle a disaster in the aftermath of the September 1982 Chicago Tylenol poisonings. This case, in which a still-unknown killer poisoned bottles of extra-strength Tylenol, leading to seven deaths, had local, federal, and private sector implications. Reagan understood the role of each sector and let them do their jobs. The FBI and the Food and Drug Administration worked with local officials on the investigation into what happened. Congress passed anti-tampering legislation that Reagan initially vetoed, because of an extraneous policy disagreement, and then signed once the bill was to his liking. Tylenol parent company Johnson & Johnson led the effort to rebuild trust in the product, recalling 32 million bottles, at considerable cost, and then relaunching the product with tamper-proof packaging. Reagan later praised the “Tylenol hero,” Johnson & Johnson head James Burke, at a White House East Room event, saying, “Jim Burke of Johnson & Johnson, you have our deepest appreciation.” The president added that Burke had “lived up to the highest ideals of corporate responsibility and grace under pressure.”

One of Reagan’s gifts was understanding who should do what in a crisis. While the expectation today seems to be that presidents need to do all things when disaster strikes, the truth is that delegation of responsibilities is essential in a crisis. In the Tylenol situation, Reagan understood that the primary responsibility for response lay with local officials and Johnson & Johnson. Other leaders might have tried to take complete charge of the situation, but Reagan was instead willing to let the company manage the crisis, and praise it afterwards for doing so.

Delegation to others is important, but Reagan also understood his vital role in the Challenger drama. He had to give the speech that would soothe the nation in a

difficult time, and his team only had six hours in which to prepare it. The speechwriting assignment went to Peggy Noonan. She was not well-known at the time, just “a little schmagoogie in an office in the Old Executive Office Building,” as she put it. But she had a reputation for being good at the emotional speeches. When such a speech was called for, Chief of Staff Don Regan had been known to say, “Get that girl. . . you know, have that girl do that.” Noonan set to work, making sure to note the tragedy, speak positively about exploration, and put in a touch of poetry.

Noonan quickly put together a draft, but that is never the end of the story when it comes to a presidential speech. In fact, sometimes it is only after writing a draft that the hard work begins, as a speech must go through what is known as the staffing process. This process often takes distinctive rhetoric and renders it bland. To get that distinctive rhetoric through the White House maw often requires tough-mindedness and a willingness to push back, hard. The tendency for the staffing process to neuter a speech is recurrent in the White House, in the Reagan administration, and in Noonan’s own career. Gerald Ford’s most famous line, “our long national nightmare is over,” only survived because its author, speechwriter Robert Hartmann, insisted that he would resign if the line was taken out. As Hartmann said at the time, “Junk all the rest of the speech if you want to, but not that. That is going to be the headline in every paper, the lead in every story.” Hartmann was right. Not only is it Ford’s most famous line, it may be his only memorable line.

The Reagan administration was no different when it came to staffing speeches. Later in the administration, junior speechwriter Peter Robinson had to fight hard, through seven drafts over three weeks, in order to keep the line, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall,” in Reagan’s October 1987 Berlin Wall speech. Robinson also had to sneak the line to Reagan in order to get Reagan’s buy-in, but he did, and it worked. “Tear down this wall” remains one of Reagan’s most indelible lines.

Noonan, too, would experience the problem of bureaucrats trying to weaken her sharpest words. She repeatedly faced this challenge in the Reagan years, but would deal with it under Bush as well. When she wrote the famous “Read my lips: no new taxes” line for Bush’s 1988 Republican National Convention speech, she quickly learned that some of Bush’s top lieutenants hated the idea of a tax pledge. Richard “Dick” Darman, a top Reagan aide active on the Bush campaign, was adamantly opposed to Bush handcuffing himself with such a pledge, calling it “stupid and irresponsible.” Craig Fuller, Vice President Bush’s chief of staff, agreed, forming a powerful anti-pledge group of voices within the Bush team.

They made repeated efforts to remove the offending words, using creative arguments, calling the lips “organs,” and suggesting it would be inappropriate for a presidential candidate to refer to an organ in his acceptance speech.

Noonan, however, was willing to fight, and warned staffers not to “screw” with those words. Even so, she might not have succeeded in keeping the pledge without the help of Republican media guru Roger Ailes, who recognized that Bush needed to stand for something if he was going to win. “Goddamit,” Ailes told Bush, “you got to say something definite in these speeches. I mean people want something definite. Say something definite. If this is it, say it.”

The Challenger situation was no different. Even though there was an abbreviated staffing process due to the tight deadline, Noonan faced bureaucratic resistance to her most resonant lines. Her toughest fight was over the words from the poem “High Flight” towards the end of the speech. A National Security Council staffer, whom Noonan discreetly but cruelly described as a “pudgy, young NSC mover,” demanded that she change the words “touch the face of G-d” into “reach out and touch someone—touch the face of G-d.” Not only would this have misquoted the original poem, but “reach out and touch someone” was a banal cliché from an AT&T ad campaign. An irate Noonan fought back, and won. She also had to fight and win to keep in the phrase “Nancy and I are pained to the core” in the final draft.

With the speech written, Reagan then had to give it. Here he was at his best. His Hollywood experience had taught him how to interact with a camera, and he was exquisite at it. As one aide recalled, “He’s an actor. He’s used to being directed and produced. He stands where he is supposed to and delivers his lines, he reads beautifully, he knows how to wait for the applause line.”

In addition to the delivery, the rhetoric was also appropriately Reaganesque. One of Reagan’s many gifts was his strong sense of optimism, which informed his positive view of America. To Reagan, there was no obstacle that America could not overcome. In this speech, given in the midst of tragedy, it was essential to convey that tragedy would not get in the way of the essential American characteristics of innovation and exploration. While Reagan recognized the tragedy that had just taken place, and was careful to read the names of each of the seven fallen, he also did not express regret about the endeavor. In his praise of innovation was a recognition that there is inherent risk – and at times mortal danger – in order to attain technological and civilizational advancement.

Reagan's background as a Westerner was also important here. Although born and raised in the Midwest, Reagan moved to California as a young man to pursue acting, and saw himself as a Westerner. He rode horses, wore the occasional cowboy hat, and had his own ranch. He carefully cultivated this Western persona, letting it be known that he enjoyed reading Western novels in his spare time. At one point, his spokesman Marlin Fitzwater suggested that he could let the media know that Reagan was reading some recent nonfiction instead of the typical stories of Reagan reading lowbrow Louis L'Amour Westerns. Reagan declined, saying, "No, Marlin, I don't think we need to do that." Reagan's Western regular guy persona was long in the making, and he wanted to be careful not to undermine it.

The West was important because it was part of the American language of exploration. So much of American history is about the move westward – Manifest Destiny, the Frontier thesis, 54-40 or fight. With the Pacific Coast now populated, space was, as noted in the famous opening to Star Trek, "the final frontier." Westward expansion was now complete, but the stars were still uncharted territory. Reagan was consciously echoing this concept when he said in the speech that "We've grown used to the idea of space, and perhaps we forget that we've only just begun. We're still pioneers."

Paying attention to the rhetoric paid off. Reagan is remembered for his speeches far more than his immediate predecessors or successors. The most famous words of presidents immediately before or after Reagan tend to be mistakes or problematic statements. Nixon's "I am not a crook" obviously turned out to be incorrect. Ford's "our long national nightmare is over," discussed above, was said in relation to pardoning Nixon, the single act that had the most to do with Ford's being voted out of office. Jimmy Carter said "I'll never lie to you" on the campaign trail, but after four years of him voters were not so sure. The presidents after Reagan were little better. Bush's famous "Read my lips: no new taxes," also discussed above, turned out to be a broken promise. Clinton's "I did not have sex with that woman" was sordid and proven false. George W. Bush's most famous statements turned out to be malapropisms, some of which he said – "I'm the decider" and some of which he didn't – "strategery." ("Heck of a job, Brownie" was even worse.) In the midst of this desert of presidential oratory came Reagan with his soaring rhetoric and gifted delivery. The Challenger speech was emblematic of Reagan's speaking talents, and it was not an exception.

The speech was a hit. It even went over well with Democrats, something hard to imagine in today's more partisan times. Tip O'Neill, the Democratic Speaker of the House, recalled generously in his memoir that "It was a trying day for all

Americans, and Ronald Reagan spoke to our highest ideals.” More importantly for Reagan, the Chairman of the Board himself liked it. Reagan reported to Noonan that “Frank Sinatra called me, and Frank Sinatra didn’t call me after every speech, let me tell ya.” Reagan liked the outside accolades from Democrats and entertainers, places from which it’s unlikely for Republican presidents to receive praise today. But Reagan did not need external validation to understand that he had done a good job with the speech. As Noonan put it, “Reagan came up in show business, and he knew when something landed.”

Historians have judged Reagan’s speech kindly as well. Presidential communications expert Martha Joynt Kumar said that, “With television now making us part of such events, we need someone to express our grief and feelings of tragedy. The president is that person. President Reagan did that for us and he is forever remembered for it.”

This was a lot to pack into just one quarter of a day. In this one short speech, Reagan managed to highlight everything that was great about his presidency. In only four minutes, he gave us a window into so many aspects of himself and his administration. We learned about his response to disaster and his ability to delegate, but also to use himself in areas in which he could do the most good. In changing his mind about the State of the Union, we learned about Reagan’s willingness to change direction when the situation warranted, while always maintaining a commitment to his core principles. The speechwriting process taught us about some of the bare-knuckled infighting that took place in Reagan’s lightly managed White House, and the ability of talented staffers to stand their ground in the face of bureaucratic resistance to get the best results for the president and for the country.

We learned about Reagan’s gifts as a performer, and his commitment to elevating rhetoric that helped inspire the American people. And we learned about Reagan’s ability to reach across the aisle and, in doing so, unify the country in a way that seems beyond presidential capabilities in today’s hyper-partisan era. Reagan packed so very much into his 648-word speech that it takes thousands of words of description to give the Challenger speech the due it deserves today. No wonder that Reagan later recalled that January 28, 1986, the day of the Challenger tragedy and one of Reagan’s greatest speeches, was “one of the hardest days I ever spent in the Oval Office.” It may have been hard, but Reagan as always made it look easy.

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