

VOICE OF AMERICA

Ronald Reagan and the American Rhetorical Tradition

STEVEN HAYWARD

Ronald Reagan is often called the “Great Communicator.” It is a grand accolade, resonant of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator. And it is a recognition of Mr. Reagan’s special place in history. Like Lincoln, he has been the catalyst for major changes in the sentiments of Americans, and how they regard the national government.

But not because Mr. Reagan communicates brilliantly. In fact, the title “Great Communicator” seems very odd at times. The President is no orator on the model of Winston Churchill or William Jennings Bryan. He fractures his syntax at press conferences. He rambles in interviews. In his final debate with Walter Mondale, he left the American people wandering among the California wildflowers with an unfinished anecdote.

It is true that Mr. Reagan excels in delivering a prepared speech; Harvey Mansfield has remarked that the President is as good a speaker as a man can be without being eloquent. His sincere manner carries enormous persuasive power, which he has used on several occasions to build popular support.

Mr. Reagan is also a master of the impromptu witticism. “There you go again,” he told Jimmy Carter in the most casually devastating line of the 1980 campaign. A few months earlier, Mr. Reagan may have assured himself of the Republican nomination with another spontaneous outburst, “I paid for this microphone.” In the late 1960s, Mr. Reagan was accosted by antiwar protesters with signs saying “Make love, not war.” He remarked that it didn’t look like they could do much of either.

But this ostensible skill at “communication” does not adequately explain Mr. Reagan’s success and popularity, and the title “Great Communicator” fundamentally misstates his achievement. Americans tend to respond more to

what is said than to how it is said. And it is here that Mr. Reagan’s genius lies. He conveys a message of native optimism and hope for the future which is deeply rooted in the American character and in American history.

Mr. Reagan understands, as our media and intellectual elites do not, that the most prominent feature of the American character is forward-looking optimism, an innate confidence in people and the goodness of the American cause. Americans brook no ambiguity or equivocation; they are open, forthright, and idealistic on a grand scale. Only America would conceive of a war effort as being “to make the world safe for democracy”; would extend a Marshall Plan to battered Europe; or would regard the quest for the moon not simply as a technological achievement but as an expression of American aspirations.



Courtesy of the White House.

March of Destiny

In his second inaugural address, Mr. Reagan said, “There are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams.” In the State of the Union address shortly after he said, “There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect.” This is an expression of faith in individualism, in the American character—it rejects the orthodoxy of the elites of the 1970s who said that the world is terrifyingly complex, there are no easy answers, we have to accept a politics of limits, we have to learn to live with less. Mr. Reagan defined the American character quite differently in a televised address to the Chinese last year.

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Let me tell you something of the American character. You might think that with such a varied nation there couldn't be any one character, but in many fundamental ways there is . . . We're idealists . . . We're a compassionate people . . . We're an optimistic people. Like you, we inherited a vast land of endless skies, tall mountains, rich fields, and open prairies. It made us see the possibilities in everything. It made us hopeful. And we devised an economic system that rewarded individual efforts, that gave us good reason for hope.

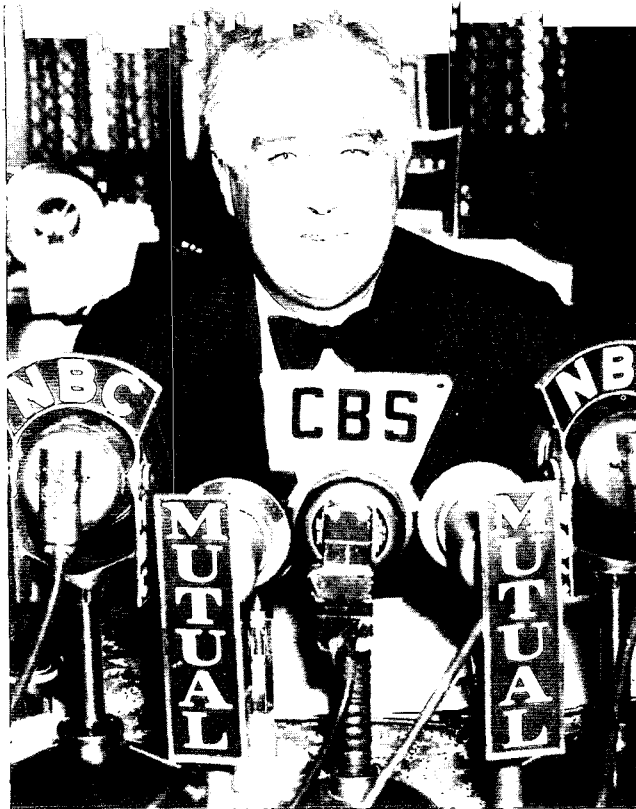
Mr. Reagan's image of America as a "city on a hill," a common theme of his 1984 campaign, comes from a sermon by John Winthrop of Plymouth colony who held out the promise of the New World as "a city on a hill, an alabaster city undimmed by human tears." This is not mere imagery. It is a symbol of something very deep and profound; in this case the essence of the American temperament. For Mr. Reagan, the "city on a hill" theme is hardly new. As early as 1964, in his famous speech for Barry Goldwater, he spoke of America's "rendezvous with destiny" in much the same terms as he has recently talked about keeping alight "the torch of freedom," of preserving "the last best hope of mankind." Mr. Reagan has never viewed this as a city for the few—it is a goal for all Americans, a reaffirmation of the American dream, the redemption of a promise and its extension to future generations. "The American sound," Mr. Reagan said in the second inaugural address, "is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair." The United States is a nation "still mighty in its youth and powerful in its purpose . . ."

"Sometimes people call me an idealist," Woodrow Wilson once said. "That is why I know I am an American." Mr. Reagan's idealism and his use of American images and symbols echo the great presidents of the past. In Mr. Reagan's words, one hears at times the piety of Washington and Lincoln, the idealism of Jefferson and Wilson, and the courage and optimism of the Roosevelts and Kennedy. Always we find in Mr. Reagan what Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 called "the distinguishing feature of America—expansion, growth, perennial rebirth, and new opportunity." Yet Turner was a pessimist when he said that; he thought America had run out of frontiers; Manifest Destiny had exhausted itself.

This is a misreading of the American character, as Mr. Reagan has recognized. This country is not bounded by geography or shrinking petroleum resources. In his first inaugural address, Mr. Reagan affirmed that "we have every right to dream heroic dreams." He asked us "to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God's help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us." His last line, wonderfully redolent of the American dream: "And, after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans."

Mythical Malaise

Mr. Reagan's themes have been notably absent from recent American discourse. In literature and history, in popular music and films, in the general tone of rhetoric coming from pulpit and politician alike, an almost German



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pessimism came to dominate American consciousness. Our self-confidence was shaken by Vietnam, our trust broken by Watergate, and our optimism and hope battered by a sagging economy. The captivity of 52 Americans in Iran seemed to underscore our steady slide. The "American Century" once heralded by Henry Luce now seemed at an end, with the nation entering a twilight era as everyone was abuzz with talk of limits.

The climax of this troubled time came with one of the most extraordinary moments in the history of presidential rhetoric, President Jimmy Carter's famous "malaise" speech in 1979. It was a schizophrenic speech. Mr. Carter began by affirming "the decency and the strength and the wisdom of the American people," and assuring us of the enduring strength of our political liberties, and our economic and military strength. But the heart of the speech was his warning about "a fundamental threat to American democracy . . . It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of unity and purpose for our nation."

What was unusual about Mr. Carter's speech was not that it perceived the faltering spirit of America. In 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn at Harvard warned of America's loss of "civic courage." Previous presidents have tackled this theme; three times in 1971 President Nixon addressed "the dark night of the American spirit." Even John F. Kennedy, the incarnation of confidence and optimism, warned during his 1960 campaign of "the increasing evidence of a lost national purpose and a soft national will."

But it was precisely this sinking of morale that Mr. Carter, like Kennedy, promised to reverse in his presidential campaign. Mr. Carter didn't limit himself to the usual promises of more prosperity for various interests; he made almost metaphysical vows to give us "a government as good as the people" or, as his autobiography put it, "why not the best?" He promised us, in other words, a govern-

ment of extraordinary strength and morality, which would uplift the natural American dynamism and greatness. But in his "malaise" speech Mr. Carter did not see tragedy as the flip side of optimism and progress; he seemed to deny optimism and progress. In essence he told us that his government was no good because the people were no good.

Today, of course, we are in the midst of a sunburst of patriotism and optimism. It is true that this resurgence cannot be attributed solely to Mr. Reagan, yet he has had more to do with it than anyone else. It is impossible to think of this revival having taken place if Mr. Carter had remained president. What Mr. Reagan did was not so much create the optimism as unleash it, give it expression; it had been dormant. Patriotism has always been a leading feature of the American character, as many European observers have discovered. Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 was struck by the almost "irritable patriotism" of Americans; and Lord Bryce in 1889 noted "the bounding pulse of youth" that marked the American temperament. Perhaps the most significant dimension of what the press is calling "the new patriotism" is the attitude of the young, who have responded overwhelmingly to Mr. Reagan, to the chagrin of their erstwhile liberal shepherds. "Students love him," a 21 year-old was quoted in *Newsweek*. "He made me feel prouder of my country, and that I can make a difference. That's what people want to hear right now."

What Mr. Reagan understands about American domestic policy is that it should be formulated and presented in the context of broader, almost philosophical, American goals. The tax cut of 1981, for instance, was not merely a scheme for improving the take-home pay of individuals, it was a moral imperative springing from Mr. Reagan's understanding that government must not come to dominate the initiatives and actions of individuals. Mr. Reagan declared in his first inaugural address:

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this great land, we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available here than in any other place on earth.

This is curious rhetoric coming from the most conservative president in the 20th century. Mr. Reagan's rhetoric is individualist; he believes that excessive government stifles human freedom and chokes progress. In his Goldwater speech he said, "Our Founding Fathers knew that you can't



control the economy without controlling the people," which is reminiscent of that classical liberal, John Stuart Mill, who said: "a state which dwarfs men. . . will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished."

One of Mr. Reagan's favorite sources for quotations is that radical firebrand Tom Paine. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again," Mr. Reagan has often quoted Paine, in terms that surely must be anathema to traditional conservatives. All Mr. Reagan's main themes—optimism, hope, initiative, opportunity, work, and middle-class values—

were once traditional themes of liberals. His rhetoric often reminds us more of Wilson, FDR, Truman, and Kennedy than the parsimonious Republican rhetoric of Taft, Goldwater, and Nixon. Even Mr. Reagan's criticism of the dependence induced by federal programs is echoed by Franklin Roosevelt, who told Congress in 1935, "Continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."

Freedom and Universality

Mr. Reagan's foreign policy rhetoric is not motivated either by *Realpolitik* or fuzzy idealism, but by an understanding of universal principles enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and shared by most Americans. While President Carter worried about our "inordinate fear of Communism" and his secretary of state believed that the world's leaders "share similar dreams and aspirations," Mr. Reagan understands that Communism is subversive to the principles of human dignity and freedom held by all civilized men.

To deny the democratic values and that they have any relevance to the developing world today, or to the millions of people who are oppressed by Communist domination, is to reject the universal significance of the basic timeless credo that all men are created equal—that they're endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . . By wedding the timeless truths and values Americans have always cherished to the realities of today's world, we have forged the beginnings of a fundamentally new direction in American foreign policy—a policy based on the unashamed, unapologetic explaining of our own priceless institutions and proof that they work, and describing the social and economic progress they so uniquely foster.

In this Mr. Reagan sounds like Lincoln, who repeatedly

reminded us that the great principle of America “was not the mere matter of separation of the colonies from the motherland; but something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.”

Mr. Reagan has cited these very words, most recently in his 1985 State of the Union message. On other occasions he has declared: “Especially in this century, America has kept alight the torch of freedom, but not just for ourselves but for millions of others around the world.” “Freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few,” Mr. Reagan has stressed. “It is the universal right of all God’s children.”

More than any other recent president—including the born-again Baptist Jimmy Carter—Mr. Reagan understands and has repeatedly spoken out about the religious foundations of American order, and the religious dimension of the American character. “Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged,” Mr. Reagan proclaimed in his controversial “evil empire” speech in Orlando in 1983.

He expanded on this theme in another controversial speech to a prayer breakfast during the Republican National Convention in Dallas in 1984. “The truth is,” he argued, “politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related.” Mr. Reagan concluded:

We establish no religion in this country nor will we ever; we command no worship, we mandate no belief. But we poison our society when we remove its theological underpinnings; we court corruption and we leave it bereft of belief . . .

Without God, we are mired in the material, that flat world that tells us only what the senses perceive; without God, there is a coarsening of the society; without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure. And that, simply, is the heart of my message: if we ever forget that we are “one nation under God,” then we will be a nation gone under.

That Mr. Reagan’s remarks on religion should be so bitterly controversial is indicative of the lack of historical self-understanding of the nature of America by our intellectual and media elites, for Mr. Reagan’s words are taken almost verbatim from Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Wilson. “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure,” Jefferson asked, “when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath?” In his farewell address,




Washington admonished: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable support . . . reason and experience forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.” Woodrow Wilson, in words that make Mr. Reagan’s seem mild, declared: “America was born a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.”

Religion, indeed, lies at the very core of the American character, a fact that is either

forgotten or ignored today, even though it has always been obvious to keen foreign observers of America. Tocqueville wrote that it was not until he visited the churches that he understood the genius of America. G.K. Chesterton described America as a nation “with the soul of a church.”

The act of the American Founding was not merely an act of defiant separatism from the “Old World,” but was the defining act, both in principle and in spirit, for what Lincoln called our “political religion.” The Founding was an act of panoramic idealism and unbounded hopefulness and optimism. It is this idealism and optimism that distinguishes America from Europe; it is the basis for what is known as “American exceptionalism.” “The European,” Luigi Barzini noted, “is pessimistic, prudent, practical, and parsimonious, like an old-fashioned banker,” while America is “alarmingly optimistic, compassionate, incredibly generous . . . It was a spiritual wind that drove Americans irresistably ahead from the beginning. Few foreigners understand this, even today.” The apocalyptic gloominess and gritty *Realpolitik* that characterize European politics has never affected America; the spirit of Spengler’s *Decline of the West* never applied to America. The European dwells on his past, considering it more glorious than his future. The American sees in his glorious past a prologue to an even more glorious future.

Presidents in the last generation have proceeded in the shadow of FDR, not simply because he changed the course of government—after all his New Deal policies were largely ineffective at the time—but because his infectious optimism restored confidence in the future. Few presidents have had the oratorical resonance of FDR, or now of Mr. Reagan. While it is true that Mr. Reagan’s place in history books will largely depend on the outcome of discrete problems—whether the budget is controlled, whether peace and security are maintained—Mr. Reagan will probably set the standard against which the next generation of presidents will be measured. By his rhetoric, he has caused us to think again of possibilities, of growth and progress, and of confidence in our future. 

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NO. 10

SPRING 1985

THE FDA'S BAD MEDICINE

Overregulation Is Dangerous To Your Health

DALE H. GIERINGER

Recently newspapers carried the announcement of an important medical advance: a new sonic-wave device that destroys kidney stones of a type that would otherwise require surgery on 100,000 Americans each year. In a ceremony that has become increasingly common in recent years, the Food and Drug Administration, not the developer, made the announcement. Buried deep inside the newspaper accounts was the fact that the new kidney device had already been used for two and a half years in Germany before the FDA bureaucracy began to evaluate it.

Under present law, no new drug or medical device can be sold until it has been officially approved as "safe and effective" by the FDA. While the purpose of this is to protect consumers' health, it also limits their access to potentially valuable therapies. FDA approval is a complex and time-consuming process, and Americans often have to wait months and years for the approval of innovative treatments that are widely available elsewhere. The FDA even discourages the approval of relatively innocuous treatments such as vitamins, food products, and other innovative drugs and chemicals that may possibly be of value for life extension, memory enhancement, prevention of cancer, treatment of herpes, and other conditions not generally curable through orthodox medicine.

A recent book, *Orphan Drugs*, by Kenneth Anderson, lists over 200 drugs that are presently available in foreign countries but have not been approved in the United States. Unapproved products can be used only in investigative studies that have been cleared by the FDA through a procedure known as IND approval. This requires formal application by the doctor or sponsor on behalf of the patient. Most recently, the FDA approved initial experimentation with a drug known as isoprinosine which may be of some use in treating AIDS, yet isoprinosine was already being sold in 72 foreign countries and many American AIDS victims were going to Mexico to buy the drug.

Although the FDA tries to allow for "compassionate INDs" in emergencies, its decision is not always prompt or reasonable. In a highly publicized case this March, the FDA admonished a Tucson hospital for disobeying its order forbidding an experimental mechanical heart transplant in a last-ditch attempt to save a dying 33-year-old

patient. When the FDA blocked medical use of DMSO, a purported treatment for arthritis and muscular injury which also happened to be legally available as an industrial solvent in hardware stores, many consumers ended up treating themselves with industrial strength DMSO of questionable purity, without any instructions on safe medical use. Some patients have been unable to obtain investigational products, even when suffering from such debilitating conditions as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and cancer.

Losing the Edge

In recent years, critics have argued that FDA overregulation has produced a U.S. "drug lag" relative to foreign countries. The drug lag problem dates from 1962, when Congress was prompted to strengthen the FDA's powers following the thalidomide disaster. (Thalidomide was never approved by the FDA, but caused several thousand severe birth defects in Europe and elsewhere, where it had been prescribed to pregnant women as a tranquilizer.) The 1962 Amendments extended FDA regulation to drug research, creating the present IND approval system and strengthening requirements for animal studies. In addition, new drugs were required to be proven not only safe but also "effective" in at least two well-controlled clinical studies.

Many of these provisions had little connection with the actual problem of thalidomide. Given that retrospective animal tests of thalidomide showed no evidence of harmful effects in 13 out of 22 studies, it seems likely that it would have been approved even with further testing. At the same time, both aspirin and penicillin have dire effects on laboratory animals, leading many experts to question whether they could gain FDA approval today.

In the wake of the 1962 Amendments, new drug development costs began to soar, rising over tenfold to \$54 million per drug by the mid-1970s. The average time of development increased, while introductions of important new drugs plummeted from 50 to 17 per year. Not all of these costs were entirely due to regulation, but there is no

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