

Seizing the Moment

Memorable presidential speeches are few and far between. But Ronald Reagan's words in Berlin two decades ago will live on

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On the pleasantly warm but overcast afternoon of June 12, 1987, Ronald Reagan stood in front of the Berlin Wall and spoke six words that resonated deeply with millions who endured Soviet domination throughout Europe and among proponents of democracy around the world. "Mr. Gorbachev," Reagan said firmly, with a hint of anger and a flash of indignation, "tear down this wall."

HISTORIC. President Ronald Reagan delivering his famous speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate on June 12, 1987

DARRYL HEIKES FOR *USN&WR*

It was an archetypical moment for Reagan, who had fought communism all his life and as president had made the destruction of the "evil empire" his *raison d'être*. His words have stood the test of time.

As Reagan's admirers prepare to mark the 20th anniversary of that historic speech this week, and as many wonder if inspirational presidential rhetoric is dead, the question is how a president manages to capture a moment and define an era the way Reagan did. It doesn't happen very often—only a handful of times, experts say, in more than two centuries of U.S. history. But political scientists, historians, presidential advisers, and experts on public communication tend to agree on the factors that allow a chief executive to speak for the ages. Such a moment almost always emerges from a crisis, when a president can rise to the occasion and unify or inspire the nation—"when an individual is sitting in the Oval Office and history shows up at the door," says White House Press Secretary Tony Snow. And the commander in chief doesn't do it alone. In most cases, his wordsmiths and other advisers are indispensable.

"There are moments when there is a tide running and someone who understands it, senses it, intuitively and appreciates it," says Mo Fiorina, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a political scientist at Stanford. "It doesn't matter if you are Roosevelt or Reagan, if the moment isn't right, it doesn't work."

Says Mike McCurry, former White House press secretary for President Clinton: "Part of it is the memorable phrase that defines for the country an enormous change we're going through or captures a moment of crisis."

To be sure, Reagan, a former actor who excelled at stagecraft, had more than his share of those moments. He understood that words could bring the country together, and he was always looking for ways to give voice to a special time and place. But a handful of other presidents have also managed to capture or change history with their words:

Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg address on Nov. 19, 1863, dedicated the Civil War battlefield and, in an address infused with spirituality, called on the nation to persevere. "Four score and seven years ago," Lincoln said, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, blended a lyrical spirituality with the nation's yearning for peace and healing amid the bloody Civil War. "With malice toward none," Lincoln said, "with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Franklin Roosevelt, in his first inaugural address on March 4, 1933, reassured shaken Americans that they could overcome the Depression if they kept their courage. "So, first of all," FDR said, "let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

John F. Kennedy, in his inaugural address on Jan. 20, 1961, called a new generation of idealists to action: "Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans...And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

Gerald Ford, in a speech to the nation Aug. 9, 1974, called for national reconciliation after the resignation of Richard Nixon. "My fellow Americans," Ford said, "our long national nightmare is over."

George W. Bush, in a spontaneous moment on Sept. 14, 2001, rallied America after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Bush grabbed a bullhorn when rescue workers shouted that they couldn't hear him as he stood on the rubble of Ground Zero in New York. "I can hear you," Bush declared. "The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon."

Republican pollster Frank Luntz, author of *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, says the key is for a president to be "aspirational." Adds Luntz: "It has to be a time of crisis because our guard is down...We aren't Republicans or Democrats. We are Americans. It has to be a presidential moment where everyone is paying attention, a shared experience. Most important of all, the people have to believe it and have to believe they (the presidents) believe what they are saying."

Peter Robinson, the former White House speechwriter who wrote the "tear down this wall" address and is now a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, told *U.S. News* the inside story of that event. As is so often the case with major addresses, the president's advisers didn't see eye to eye. Reagan's aides talked to outside experts on East-West relations who almost universally advised him not to stir up any trouble or embarrass the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, on his Berlin stop. Specifically, the experts said, don't mention the wall at all. One senior diplomat even suggested that Germans had gotten used to the barrier and it didn't really bother them anymore.

But Robinson learned otherwise. He traveled to West Berlin to inspect the potential venues and found deep resentment toward the wall. At a dinner party in the divided city, his hostess said that if Gorbachev was serious about reform, he would remove the wall. Another Berliner said his sister lived about a mile away, and he hadn't seen her in 20 years. "How do you think I feel about the wall?" he asked sadly. Robinson concluded from this and other conversations, and his gut feeling, that "just beneath the surface they hated it every day of their lives." Robinson saw something else—the potential for a powerful moment. "I knew it was a big speech," he recalled, after walking along the wall, seeing the Brandenburg Gate and the nearby Reichstag, former site of the German Parliament, and sensing "the drama of the place."

But when he got back to Washington, at first he got little support for his suggestion that Reagan demand the wall's removal. He knew that, with Reagan's history of opposing what he called the "evil empire" of communism and his belief in standing up to the Soviets, Reagan would want to say something meaningful. Robinson also knew that Reagan, as a former actor, loved dramatic moments. The president would think through every step of his upcoming visit—knowing he would stand in front of the wall, with crosses nearby marking where people were killed trying to escape to freedom, and feel deeply moved. "I knew he couldn't come here and mouth platitudes," Robinson says. "That's the kind of man he was. He would feel the affront to human dignity, and he'd want to say something powerful."

On May 18, less than a month before the trip, the president met with his speechwriters to discuss the speech. Tom Griscom, the White House communications director, asked the president his thoughts on the text. "I thought that was a good, solid draft," Reagan said.

Told that people would be able to tune in to the speech on their radios throughout Eastern Europe and perhaps all the way to Moscow, Robinson asked what he wanted to say to the captive peoples.

"There's that passage about tearing down the wall," Reagan replied. "That's what I want to say to them."

Chief of Staff Howard Baker objected, arguing that the passage sounded "unpresidential" and extreme. Deputy National Security Adviser Colin Powell agreed. Other senior advisers argued that it would put Gorbachev on the spot and perhaps increase pressure on him.

But Griscom disagreed, arguing that Reagan needed to say something big, and the "tear down this wall" line would do the job very well.

But the issue remained up in the air.

Reagan settled it all in Italy, where he was attending an economic summit just prior to the Berlin stop. Robinson had given Reagan the controversial draft with a batch of other speeches and remarks to be delivered on the trip. Deputy White House Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein sat the president down and handed him the Berlin speech open to the key passage, and he asked Reagan to re-read it, with the reminder that some of the administration's senior officials objected to the language.

Duberstein said it was a great line, but Reagan was the president and he got to decide. Reagan read the passage and said, "I think we'll leave it in." In the limousine en route to the Berlin Wall for the actual address, Duberstein checked one last time. He asked the president to review the final draft, which contained the "tear down this wall" language.

Reagan, slapping Duberstein on the knee jovially, said: "The boys at State are going to kill me for this, but it's the right thing to do." He also confided later to friends that he wanted to mention Gorbachev specifically to put responsibility for the wall—and the division of Eastern Europe—squarely on his shoulders.

So, on that dramatic June afternoon, Reagan delivered his lines. The staff members who had opposed the demand were "horrified," recalled Martin Anderson, a senior Reagan aide at the time. And the media reaction at home was tepid at best. Most of Reagan's critics thought that he was hopelessly naive and that the wall would remain intact for their lifetimes, at least.

But Reagan saw something that his detractors missed. He concluded that the U.S.S.R. was rotting from within, and that, if the West continued to forcefully apply economic,

military, and diplomatic pressure, it would collapse. Millions of Europeans living under communism, especially those in East Germany, took Reagan's message to heart and felt that at last an American president was standing up for them. In the Kremlin, Russian sources say, Gorbachev dismissed the address as "just the actor being the actor."

But he quickly discovered that Reagan's words had resonance. "Suddenly, life without that wall became thinkable," says Robinson. "He permitted a new space for the imagination."

For his part, Reagan felt the impact immediately. "Addressed tens and tens of thousands of people stretching as far as I can see," he wrote in his diary June 12. "I got a tremendous reception—interrupted 28 times by cheers."

It took a while—two more years—before the hammer fell. When Gorbachev finally allowed Berliners to destroy the wall, blow by blow, in 1989, it was clear that Reagan's speech was not just a brilliant moment of theater. Miraculously, the Soviet Union broke up, just as Reagan said it would. The evil empire unraveled. And Reagan's words took on the mystique of prophecy.

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