

RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

When ‘A Time For Choosing’ Became the Time for Reagan

By Karl Rove

For a speech that launched one of the most consequential political careers in American history, it didn't seem to be a good idea to some people.

The race for the White House had only a week left and Gallup had the Republican challenger behind in its latest survey with 36% to the incumbent president's 64%.

The nationally televised half-hour program would divert valuable resources from the challenger's desperate efforts to get-out-the-vote.

The candidate wouldn't even appear on the program. Instead, a Hollywood actor who had switched parties just a couple of years before would deliver the message.

The program was taped before the campaign's manager and policy director even knew about it – and when they saw the tape, they were aghast: the speech dealt with an issue the campaign wanted to avoid at all costs.

But the manager couldn't cancel it. California friends of the broadcast's star, led by an oil industry titan, had paid the production and placement costs out of their own pockets.

When the candidate personally called and asked the speaker not to let the program be aired, he dodged and weaved. It wasn't up to him, the star said. It was other people's money and their decision, not his. Besides, he asked, what was wrong with the message?

In the end, Senator Barry Goldwater watched the tape of 53-year old Ronald Reagan's speech with special attention to the segment on Social Security that his manager and long-time confidant, Denison Kitchel, and campaign policy director, William J. Baroody, had objected to. When the tape finished, he turned to the two men and growled, “What the hell's wrong with that?”

Nonetheless, one observer later claimed that three hours before the broadcast began on the evening of Tuesday, October 27, 1964, Kitchel and Baroody were still trying to get Reagan's speech replaced with a re-run of a program that featured Goldwater himself.

But because the half-hour special was paid for by Henry Salvatori and other California friends of Reagan through an independent committee called “TV for Goldwater-Miller,” all Kitchel and Baroody could do was carp, fret and prepare their “we told you so's.”

By today's standards, the program seems simple, even bland. Only a handful of shows were then broadcast in color and only infrequently. Most TV fare was in black and white, as was this campaign special. So while Reagan appeared at a podium festooned with patriotic bunting, viewers didn't see red, white and blue but only shades of grey, broken by white. Behind him was a monochromatic curtain of uncertain color with folds in the cloth streaking its surface. On the side wall to the left was a large portrait of Goldwater, which could be seen in the occasional shot from the camera at the room's back-right corner or the camera over the candidate's right shoulder. Otherwise, television watchers only saw a close-up of Reagan on the platform, the monotony of this view interrupted by occasional even closer shots of him and, in the broadcast's 29 minutes, ten cutaways to the crowd on the auditorium floor, 12 feet or so below the podium.

The venue for Reagan's speech was an anonymous ballroom, full of Goldwater partisans, seated in rows of folding chairs. These were middle-class Americans, young and old. Many men were in short sleeves, some with thin black ties; a few in sport coats and even fewer in suits. The dresses of the women looked like they were off the rack at J.C. Penney or Sears. Eyeglasses often had thick frames. Not a single beard could be spotted. Women in cowgirl dress with white hats were scattered through the crowd, as were young men with what appeared to be handwritten signs on stakes. Several "Democrats for Goldwater" placards were prominently displayed in the front row.

As the camera panned the crowd and a silent figure stood at the podium a disembodied voice announced the sponsoring organization – "TV for Goldwater-Miller" -- and introduced the speaker. The crowd applauded and Ronald Reagan began in a clear, **strong** voice.

"Unlike most television programs, the performer hasn't been provided with a script," he explained. "I have been permitted to choose my own words and discuss my own ideas regarding the choice that we face in the next few weeks." With the election only seven days off, this comment betrayed that the speech had been taped weeks before and then delayed, as money was collected to pay for the TV time and objections raised by the campaign were dismissed.

Reagan confessed he had "spent most of my life as a Democrat. I recently have seen fit to follow another course." The reason he changed parties was that "I believe that the issues confronting us cross party lines." For the next few minutes, he seemed rushed, moving at a fast pace, walking over applause lines as he made the case that America's prosperity could not withstand a high tax burden and growing debt and, alluding to the Vietnam war, arguing that America could not be at peace "while one American is dying some place in the world for the rest of us."

These two themes, the danger of Big Government to America's prosperity and freedom and the threat of Soviet communism – "the most dangerous enemy that has ever faced mankind" – dominated his address and, because of their resonance, became the conservative movement's focus for decades to come.

Just before the three-minute mark, Reagan slowed a little, telling a story of two friends who met a Cuban refugee and listened as he shared his experience under Communist rule. One of the friends said to the other, "We don't know how lucky we are" to which the Cuban said, "How

lucky you are? I had someplace to escape to.” “And in that sentence,” Reagan said, “he told us the entire story. If we lost freedom here, there’s no place to escape to. This is the last stand on earth.”

But rather than stop and milk his words for reaction and applause, Reagan pressed on. At four minutes, the camera panned to the crowd. Their eyes were fixed on Reagan, but their faces showed interest, not emotion, as he described the choice in the election as between “whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far distant capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.” This populist note should have drawn applause, but Reagan failed to give the crowd an opportunity to express its approval.

Instead, he shared quotes from prominent Democrats attacking the underpinnings of the American experiment. “The cold war will end through our acceptance of a not undemocratic socialism,” he quoted one saying. “The profit motive has become outmoded,” said another. “Our traditional system of individual freedom is incapable of solving the complex problems of the 20th century,” said a third. A Democratic senator called the Constitution an “antiquated document” while another senator praised “the full power of centralized government.”

The camera cut away from this litany to the crowd. They were still attentive, but a woman wiped her lips and another smoothed her hair while one man scratched his nose and another absent-mindedly twirled his sign. Reagan swung into an attack on the government’s farm program, whose cost had doubled in a decade. The three-quarters of farmers who were not on the federal dole were more productive than those who were at the government trough. Reagan was seven minutes into his speech before he used Goldwater’s name. The Arizona Senator didn’t want to eliminate farmers, as Democrats charged. He wanted to free the quarter of farmers who were subject to the Agriculture Department’s punishing rules and regulations.

Reagan then mocked the Agriculture Department for having one employee for every 30 farmers “and still they can’t tell us how 66 shiploads of grain headed for Austria disappeared without a trace and Billie Sol Estes never left shore.” This reference to a Texas cony of LBJ’s involved in a commodities swindle drew applause and laughter. This seemed to put Reagan more at ease. His pace slowed and he began pausing at moments when applause and audience reaction seemed appropriate.

He turned to the administration’s urban renewal program, telling the story of how a new building in Cleveland was being destroyed “for what government officials call a ‘more compatible use of the land.’” He told how a county out on the Plains had just been named “a depressed area. Rice County, Kansas has two hundred oil wells, and the 14,000 people there have over 30 million on deposit in personal savings in their banks.” “And when the government tells you you’re depressed, lie down and be depressed.” The crowd laughed. Their eager applause signaled they were now engaged.

Reagan’s voice remained strong as ever, but now it was more modulated and often slowed, just enough to remove the feeling his delivery was rushed. He paused more often, sensing those moments where the crowd wanted the chance to respond with applause, laughter and

occasionally cheers. The signs were now waved with enthusiasm and in cutaway shots, some in the crowd were leaning forward towards the speaker.

Reagan pounded away at government's failure solve the problems of hunger and poverty. If Washington simply took the money it was spending on welfare and gave it to poor families, it would raise them nearly 50% above the poverty line and "eliminate poverty." But a large, overly bureaucratic government was sucking off vast sums. "It would seem that someplace there must be some overhead," he said to applause.

Throwing in the name of an LBJ friend caught up in scandal, Bobby Baker, and drawing laughter, Reagan attacked the administration's plan "to solve the dropout problem" by bringing back a Depression-era program, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and putting "our young people in these camps" at a cost of \$4,700 a year to undertake make-work projects. Harvard only cost \$2,700 a year, he declared, provoking more applause. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "I'm not suggesting Harvard is the answer to juvenile delinquency." The crowd roared its agreement to his populist thrust.

Reagan told the story of a young woman with six children in southern California who divorced her husband to get a bigger welfare benefit. His point was that government programs often hurt the people they claim to serve by providing perverse incentives. Yet when "you and I question the schemes of the do-gooders, we're denounced as being against their humanitarian goals," he acknowledged. "Well, the trouble with our liberal friends is not that they're ignorant; it's just that they know so much that isn't so."

Then came the part of the speech Kitchel and Baroody had wanted to avoid. Reagan took up Social Security. It was sold as "insurance," but in a case before the Supreme Court, the government admitted it was welfare and that mandatory contributions for each American's paycheck were taxes "for the general use of the government, and the government has used that tax" for other purposes. Social Security was \$298 billion in the hole, according to Congressional testimony from the program's actuary who said not to worry "because as long as they have the power to tax, they could always take away from the people whatever they needed to bail them out of trouble."

Reagan then made the point that if a young working man of average salary were able to buy a real insurance policy, it would guarantee him \$220 a month at age 65. Social Security couldn't match this annuity: it could only promise \$127. "Are we so lacking in business sense that we can't put this program on a sound basis?" For only the second time, Reagan used his candidate's name. "Barry Goldwater thinks we can."

After outlining Goldwater's proposed reform of the program – permitting people to opt-out of Social Security "upon presentation of evidence" that they had "made provision for the non-earning year," making it possible for widows to keep working without losing their survivor benefits, and allowing beneficiaries to designate beneficiaries for what they'd put in – Reagan turned his attention briefly to foreign policy.

He questioned the representative nature of the United Nations, with a majority of its member nations comprising 10% of the world's population and raised doubts about whether foreign aid was being dispensed wisely before abruptly shifting to warnings about the spread of socialism here at home and the growth of the federal government.

These trends had led Democrats like that party's 1928 standard-bearer, Al Smith, and Reagan himself to abandon their life-long affiliation with that party. "It doesn't require expropriation or confiscation of private property or business to impose socialism," he warned. It could be done by regulation and lawsuit, red tape and harassment.

He then offered an ardent and effective defense of Goldwater the man. He'd provided profit sharing, health insurance and pensions to his employees at his family's Phoenix department store. He'd spent weeks before Christmas behind the controls of his small private plane, ferrying home to Arizona servicemen returning from the Korean War who'd been stranded at the LA airport. Reagan shared the story of Goldwater leaving the election trail to comfort "an old friend who was dying of cancer," telling impatient campaign officials, "There aren't many left who care what happens to her. I'd like her to know I care."

Reagan spent the last six minutes of his remarks by returning to the specter of communism, urging Americans to reject accommodation and appeasement and to instead seek "peace through strength." He quoted Churchill and borrowed liberally from the words of Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, the Bible and even FDR, saying "You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we'll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness." Barry Goldwater, he said, "has faith" that "you and I have an ability and the dignity and the right to make our own decisions and determine our own destiny."

Almost as an after-thought, California real estate mogul John Kilroy appeared on camera to thank Reagan and urge viewers to send whatever they could to "TV for Goldwater-Miller" at Box 80 in Los Angeles 51, California.

The screen went blank and regular programming resumed.

The reaction was astonishing. Over \$1 million – a huge sum for the time – flew into Box 80, so much money that the campaign was unable to spend it all. While nothing could stave off defeat on Election Day, Goldwater did close the gap with LBJ by five points from the final Gallup Poll.

More importantly, Reagan became an instant star among the nation's conservatives and the frontrunner for the California GOP gubernatorial nomination for 1966.

While Reagan's address, soon called "A Time for Choosing," did not have as much of a sunny, optimistic tone as did his later speeches, especially those of his 1984 White House reelection campaign, it did reveal much of what Americans would see in the years ahead.

It showed Reagan was an independent thinker who knew what he wanted to say. It may be surprising that Reagan wrote "A Time for Choosing" without a speechwriter pounding out copy

on a typewriter. But he had delivered many talks over the years as a spokesman for General Electric, speaking to both factory and white-collar workers, management employees and local chambers of commerce and business groups and now drew some of its elements from those remarks.

While the public perception of him among the unknowing was that of a well-meaning front man for thinkers and plotters and doers in the backroom, that was not the experience of those who served around him. Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz, once wrote, he "was a lot smarter than most people thought." Indeed he was.

But Reagan was more than well informed. The broadcast also demonstrated Reagan's superb skills as a communicator. Though he was rushed at the beginning, he got into the swing of it, leaving many conservatives to conclude he connected with his audience even better than Goldwater could have.

As good as Reagan was that October night, however, he would become even better in the years ahead. He was his own strongest critic, always considering how to strengthen his connection with his audience. He knew how to read a crowd and was constantly making a mental note of what appeared to grab the attention of his audience and sway their opinions. He was interested in persuasion. Reagan discarded what didn't work, honed what did and experimented with new stories and language in a constant effort to improve his message.

What few viewers knew that night in October 1964 was that Reagan was not relying on a script or Teleprompter. At just after 18 minutes into the event, the camera shot over his right shoulder reveals that on the podium, Reagan was using note cards. What cannot be seen in the grainy picture is that what was likely written on those cards was Reagan's own shorthand for speeches.

Martin Anderson, his White House domestic policy advisor, later recounted Reagan's unique note-card method. Reagan would list words, numbers, abbreviations or even what amounted to hieroglyphics in precise lines, the items separated by dots on a 4" x 6" card. Each mark represented a phrase, a sentence or two or even complete paragraphs. The symbol or word would help Reagan recall a thought, a section of a previous speech, facts and figures supporting his arguments or a story to personalize an issue. Reagan's acting years reciting dialogue and his time as GE's spokesman, talking to different audiences in various circumstances, honed this practice of relying on note cards. However only a facile, well-informed mind could transform those scribbles into a masterful address.

"A Time for Choosing" established Ronald Reagan as a leader in the conservative movement with strong potential as a candidate for public office. There are few other such moments in American history when one speech was so crucial to creating political success. One thinks of Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union speech in February 1860 or William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold Speech" at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. But both Lincoln and Bryan were experienced politicians, having served in Congress, and both were maneuvering for nominations when they delivered their speeches.

Reagan was a fresh political face who had never held office, except in a movie actors' union, and he was not seeking office at that moment. And unlike Bryan, who literally fashioned half his speech on the fly and had decided only the day before to use the closing line that made him famous – “You shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold,” Reagan has assiduously prepared himself for his moment.

For years afterwards, many conservatives would recall the first time they saw the future president, not as a Hollywood actor but as leader of their movement and future chief executive of the country. That moment began when a voice intoned, “The following pre-recorded political program is sponsored by TV for Goldwater-Miller, on behalf of Barry Goldwater, Republican candidate for president of the United States. Ladies and gentlemen, we take pride in presenting a thoughtful address by Ronald Reagan. Mr. Reagan.”

The rest is history.