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The American Sound: The message and meaning of Ronald Reagan's Second Inaugural Address

By Matthew Continetti

Ronald Reagan made small talk while he waited in the White House Map Room for his cue from ABC Sports. It was Sunday, January 20, 1985. Earlier in the day, during a small ceremony elsewhere in the White House, he and vice president George H.W. Bush had been officially sworn into office for a second term.ⁱ Now Reagan was about to perform the coin toss live via satellite for Superbowl XIX, held across the country at Stanford University stadium. As he stood on his mark and listened to the public address announcer introduce the Miami Dolphins and San Francisco 49ers on a nearby television, Reagan hinted that the public inaugural scheduled for the next day would not go as planned. “There might be an announcement forthcoming about some changes for tomorrow,” he told the people around him.

The issue was the weather. The temperature of the nation’s capital was freezing. The wind chill made it feel even worse. “It will be between twenty and thirty below zero,” Reagan went on, half-distracted by the sounds and images on the screen. “And in that, in about 15 minutes, exposed flesh . . . Frostbite.”

The discussion was cut short. It was time for the coin toss. The Dolphins called heads. Reagan flipped the coin in the air and watched it land. “It is tails,” he said. The 49ers elected to receive. The voice of referee Pat Haggerty echoed over the loudspeaker, thanking Reagan for his participation. “All I can say is, something that used to be a little prayer of mine when I played football myself,” Reagan replied. “May everyone do their best, may there be no injuries, may the best team win, and no one have regrets.”ⁱⁱ The game commenced.

The news arrived soon after that the inaugural parade was canceled. The unofficial swearing-in and inaugural address would be held indoors in the Capitol Rotunda. Reagan believed it was the right decision. “There is no way we should inflict this risk on all the people who would have to be out in the cold for hours,” he wrote in his diary.ⁱⁱⁱ

The next morning, Reagan and his family attended religious services at St. John’s Church. Then they returned to the White House for photographs before traveling to Capitol Hill. Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill and Senator Mac Mathias of Maryland, co-chairs of the inaugural committee, served as escorts. The rotunda was filled with associates, dignitaries, and members of Congress. The president estimated that some 1,000 people had gathered beneath the Capitol Dome.^{iv} A few guests clambered up the pedestals of the statues in the Rotunda for a better view of the proceedings.^v

The scene was unlike Reagan's first inauguration. In 1981, he had delivered his address from the Western façade of the Capitol. He had looked out upon the National Mall and the Potomac River and the great continental nation beyond. Four years later, in this packed interior space, jostling bodies and echoing voices made it difficult for the audience to know what was happening. The oaths and remarks were aimed not at the assembled crowd, but at the television audience. Sounds were muffled. "The microphones picked up his voice and beamed it to people listening across the whole world, while we could barely understand what he was saying," Representative Newt Gingrich wrote in a newspaper column.^{vi}

Nor was it just the physical circumstances that differed from before. Both the country and the president's political standing had improved. Reagan had assumed office the first time in the middle of an economic crisis and an international emergency. His tax cuts helped defeat the combination of high unemployment and high inflation known as "stagflation." In 1984, the economy grew by 6.8 percent—more than it had in decades.^{vii} Inflation was under four percent.^{viii} Unemployment had fallen from recession highs.^{ix}

The global situation was also better for America. Reagan's assertion of American ideals reinvigorated patriotic sentiment. His moral clarity, military buildup, and proposed anti-ballistic missile shield put the Soviet Union on the ideological and technological defensive. The Soviets wanted to talk. Reagan held the advantage.

When Ronald Reagan became president the public did not know what to expect. It had been six years since he last held statewide office. In 1976, he had challenged a sitting Republican president and lost. The former actor would be, at that time, the oldest man to serve as chief executive. He also would be, at that time, the only divorced man to serve—as well as the only union member. He won the presidency with a little more than 50 percent of the vote. The results made it clear that the electorate desired change. It was more ambivalent about Reagan's agenda.

By the time of the Second Inaugural Address, Reagan's political power was at its height. He had won reelection in a landslide. He had defeated former vice president Walter Mondale by 18 percentage points. He had lost only the state of Minnesota and the District of Columbia. His job approval rating approached 70 percent.^x He was on course to become the first president since Dwight Eisenhower to complete two full terms.

But this appeal was personal. It did not translate to the Republican Party. In 1984, GOP congressional candidates ran far behind Reagan. He received 59 percent of the popular vote, but Republicans won only 47 percent of the national House vote. That was good enough to net 16 additional seats. But it was still far short of a majority. The GOP retained control of the Senate, but barely. And it lost two seats in the upper chamber, where the moderates who dominated party leadership often undermined the conservative president.

Reagan deferred to advisers throughout the campaign. They wanted him to avoid controversy as much as possible, to stick to the gauzy uplifting general theme of "Morning in America." There was plenty of good news to celebrate. And there was no good reason, according to the consultants, to describe specific conservative proposals that the media would be sure to find

“divisive” and Mondale would be sure to attack. Reagan’s advisers said that he should float above the fray. He should symbolize national unity and the prospect of a brighter future. This went against the president’s instincts. He would have preferred to be precise, to lay out his facts and figures and present the conservative case. But he decided not to fight his own lieutenants. He went ahead with their plan.

It worked of course. Election night was a triumph. No president since has met, much less exceeded, Reagan’s margin of victory. The trouble was that little thought had been given to what came after that victory. Reagan hit all the right notes on the trail, and the electorate loved the song. But the composer had not yet written an end to the tune.

The speech Reagan delivered inside the Capitol on that freezing cold day in January 1985 had the same problem. Reagan’s second inaugural address includes many of the central concepts and themes of his political philosophy. But it is also a gauzy piece of rhetoric. It lacks sharp edges. In its preference for expansive rhetorical flourishes over concrete policies, it recalls the weaknesses of the reelection campaign. It foreshadows both the plusses and minuses of Reagan’s second term.

The second inaugural is not as well-known as many of the fortieth president’s other speeches. That is why it deserves a closer look. Its text communicates the spirit of Reaganism. But it also reminds us that Reaganism requires more than beautiful imagery. Reaganism also requires the articulation of conservative principle—and a program of substantive reform.

THE SPEECH

Reagan was busy in between Election Day and the inauguration. He had to deal with matters of personnel. His chief of staff and Treasury Secretary switched jobs. His Secretary of State forced out his U.N. ambassador. His days were filled with meetings, including with the prime ministers of the United Kingdom and Japan. He visited Camp David. And he made two trips to California for vacation.

His speechwriting team was at work on the inaugural address. Peggy Noonan, Ben Hart, and Tony Dolan each wrote separate drafts that reached Reagan on December 26.^{xi} Noonan was frustrated, however. She hadn’t had the chance to speak to the president about what he wanted to say. And the West Wing was silent after the drafts were delivered.

“For a week we hear nothing,” Noonan wrote in *What I Saw at the Revolution*. “Another week: nothing.”^{xii} She vented to Hart. “You know, I don’t mean to be impolite, and far be it from me to be critical of a genuinely great man who has turned this country around,” she told him, “but I was just wondering if it’s not unusual that the president of the United States appears to be taking no interest in his inauguration address.”^{xiii}

The speechwriters heard from the president on January 14. He had incorporated elements of all three drafts into a version of his own. “It wasn’t anything like what I expected,” Noonan wrote. “It wasn’t broad and thematic; it was chock-full of facts and statistics and percentages. I thought, How unlike him. Ben said no, this is the essential Reagan; everyone thinks he doesn’t give a fig

for facts but he loves his factoids, loves his numbers.”^{xiv} Noonan had hoped for (and composed) some soaring rhetoric. Her wish was for an inaugural in the Kennedy tradition. That was not what Reagan wanted. The speechwriters went over his draft again and returned it to the Oval Office.

The first mention of the inaugural address in Reagan’s diary is not until January 16. “And upstairs early to work on Inaugural address which I think I’ve finally finished,” he wrote.^{xv} The final draft that the speechwriters received included a handwritten note from the president: “Just fine.”^{xvi}

That was a fair description. The speech recapitulated the fundamental tenets of Reaganism, gestured in the direction of a second-term agenda, and contained more than a few dollops of syrupy language. Reagan began by restating his view that government is not the master but the servant of the people. “Its only power [is] that which we the people allow it to have.” His goal had remained the same ever since his televised speech for Barry Goldwater in October 1964: “The ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society.” He recited the so-called “litany” of important institutions that were a part of his rhetoric since the 1970s: “faith, family, work, and neighborhood.”

The repetition of several words indicated Reagan’s hierarchy of values. Unsurprisingly, the word “freedom” appeared 12 times. There were also four appearances of “free” and “freely.”^{xvii} And Reagan reminded his audience that he was no reactionary. The word “progress” appeared six times. “Dignity” appeared five times. The words “growth” and “opportunity” appeared three times each. And in a preview of where the GOP was headed in the decades after Reagan left office, the word “compassion” appeared twice.

What made Reagan’s conservatism unique was its simultaneous regard for the past and celebration of the future. He did not succumb to either pessimism or despair. “We, the present-day Americans, are not given to looking backward,” he said. “In this blessed land, there is always a better tomorrow.” For Reagan, freedom was above all the ability to shape one’s personal destiny, to set one’s own course in life. There are, he said, “no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams.”

Nor did Reagan see the Founders as aristocrats out to protect their property. For Reagan, the Founders were revolutionaries who unleashed human potential by securing freedom through the Constitution. He paraphrased one of his favorite quotes from Thomas Paine. The Founders, he said, “dared to think they could start the world over again.”

The second inaugural was inclusive. Reagan pledged to extend the benefits of economic recovery. “We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom, dignity, and opportunity as our birthright.” He took from Newt Gingrich and Rep. Jack Kemp the idea of an “opportunity society” where “all of us—white and black, rich and poor, young and old—will go forward together arm in arm.” Reagan was well aware that America is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic democracy. Its survival depends on a shared commitment to citizenship and constitutional principle. “Let us remember,” he said, “that though our heritage is one of blood lines from every

corner of the Earth, we are all Americans pledged to carry on this last, best hope of man on Earth.”

Reagan was not a doctrinaire libertarian. He acknowledged that in some cases government action was necessary. Those who could not work on their own deserved assistance. For the most part, however, the private economy “and support from family and community” were the best means to “reduce dependency and upgrade the dignity of those who are infirm or disadvantaged.” The “new American emancipation” that Reagan desired would not take the form of welfare. Instead it would “tear down economic barriers and liberate the spirit of enterprise in the most distressed areas of our country.”

Reagan was coy about his plans. Tax reform was at the top of his list. “We must simplify our tax system, make it more fair, and bring the rates down for all who work and earn.” He said he would ask Congress to restrain non-defense discretionary spending, and called for a Balanced Budget Amendment. He briefly referred to the protection of the unborn.

On foreign policy Reagan was more detailed. He said he would work for arms control agreements that did not merely freeze but actually reduced the number of nuclear weapons held by the United States and Soviet Union. He called once more for “global zero”: “We seek the total elimination one day of nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth.” He defended the Strategic Defense Initiative. He put America on the side of those “people, worldwide,” who “hunger for the right of self-determination, for those inalienable rights that make for human dignity and progress.” It was an oblique reference not only to Reagan’s support for building “the infrastructure of democracy,” but also to the financial and technical assistance to anti-Communist rebels that would become known as the Reagan Doctrine.

Purple prose obscured these faint articulations of policy. “My friends, Reagan said, “we live in a world that is lit by lightning. So much is changing and will change, but so much endures, and transcends time. History is a ribbon, always unfurling; history is a journey.” The audience would have been forgiven for wondering what Reagan was talking about. Other lines were banal: “We must do what we know is right and do it with all our might.”

It is worth comparing Reagan’s second inaugural address with his first. Structurally, they are rather similar. Both speeches begin with domestic issues and later turn to foreign policy. Both mention the Founders. But the second inaugural is less substantive than the first. It is less focused. There is no single line that stands for the whole, no “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.” The first ends with the story of an American Doughboy, an everyday hero. The second ends with an abstraction.

“A settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air,” Reagan concluded. “It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, and fair. That’s our heritage; that is our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old, as we raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music.”

What is striking about this passage is that, unlike Reagan's Farewell Address with the remarkable and beautiful description of the city on the hill, it plays on the aural rather than visual sense. But it is difficult to capture music in words. That is what makes the metaphor of "the American sound" indistinct.

The American sound is a pleasing notion. It is worthy of contemplation. But it is too indefinite to lodge itself in one's memory.

THE AFTERMATH

"The press saved the speech," Noonan wrote in her memoir. "The reviews were uniformly good. It wasn't a great speech, but the press, full of people anticipating the Great Communicator communicating greatly, heard it and couldn't believe it wasn't great."^{xviii}

It helps to have the audience on your side. At one point, the Great Communicator almost stumbled into an embarrassing mistake. No one had revised the text to account for the last-minute change of venue. "We stand together again at the steps of this symbol of democracy," Reagan said, before catching himself. Then the actor went off script. "Or we would have been standing at the steps if it hadn't gotten so cold." Everyone laughed.

The media coverage was friendly, as Noonan recalled. "Reagan Opens Second Term with a Vintage Performance," read one *New York Times* headline.^{xix} The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board was pleased. "If you look closely at the president's words," the editors wrote, "you'll discover a politician who, for all his geniality, simply refuses to play the policy game by the established rules."^{xx}

Some of the notices were lukewarm. "Reagan's Second Inaugural was a respectable effort, above the average and worth reading over," wrote William Safire in *The New York Times*. "A B-plus of a speech, not great, not near-great, but not bad. Not bad at all."^{xxi} In *The New Republic*, Morton Kondracke wrote, "Some inaugural addresses inspire both Washington and America (FDR's in 1932 and John Kennedy's in 1960 are the best examples), but Reagan's address did not seem to be one of these."^{xxii}

Nor did the president dwell on the speech. His diary contains no description of how it was received. His entry for January 21, 1985, records how he went about his day, his pleasure at seeing parade participants gathered inside the Capitol Center, and Tip O'Neill's private remark that "he was very conscious of the fact that I had received 59% of the vote."^{xxiii}

In the evening the Reagans visited all 11 inaugural balls. The president and first lady danced briefly at each one. "Except for 1 orchestra they all played very slow music," Reagan wrote in his diary. "I figure they were being nice—thought they were because of my age."^{xxiv} It was, wrote *Time* magazine, "a quiet, \$10 million bash."^{xxv} Reagan enjoyed himself. Addressing the audience at one of the parties, he said, "You ain't seen nothing yet."^{xxvi}

Over the next four years, achievements would be intermingled with disappointments. Tax reform was a bipartisan success, but Congress failed to control spending. The Balanced Budget

Amendment went nowhere. Reagan's personal popularity did not stop his party from losing the Senate in 1986. Reagan's second attorney general, Ed Meese, launched a national debate over the jurisprudence of intent. Originalism gained a foothold in the Supreme Court with the confirmation of Justice Antonin Scalia. But the nomination of Robert Bork crashed against the shoals of the Democratic Senate. Reagan stood by SDI at Reykjavik, leading to Soviet concessions and the eventual parting of the Iron Curtain. But the Iran-contra scandal involving the exchange of arms for hostages, with the proceeds going to Nicaraguan freedom fighters, almost sank Reagan's presidency altogether.

Needless to say, he did more than survive. He flourished. Reagan left office as one of the most popular presidents in American history. But that popularity came at a cost. He did not fully implement the program of Reaganism. It is true that he faced the constraints of a Democratic Congress. It is true that he gave precedence to foreign policy (and rightly so). But Reagan often followed those of his advisers who told him to remain aloof from political hardball. As he conceded in his Farewell Address, Reagan was unable to institutionalize the very spirit "of well-grounded patriotism" that he helped renew. Nor did he guarantee that his successor was a true believer in the Reaganite faith that "America is freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise."^{xxvii}

The ambitious but ultimately disappointing Second Inaugural Address exemplifies Reagan's challenges in the waning days of his presidency. It is revealing that he did not include the second inaugural in *Speaking My Mind*, the anthology of speeches he released in 1989. Reagan chose instead his speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference a little over a month later. "What I'm saying in this speech to my fellow conservatives could actually serve as the inaugural address for my second term," Reagan wrote by way of introduction.^{xxviii} But the CPAC address is far more polemical, more pointed, more confrontational than the inaugural—even as it displays Reagan's natural wit and good humor.

The careful reader of the second inaugural address is left with a question. What exactly is the American sound? It only can be described in general. It has no precise tune. No one can be sure what it is. About the American sound we know only one thing. Ronald Reagan was its voice.

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ⁱ <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/oaths-office-taken-president-and-vice-president-white-house-swearing-ceremony>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n62tGPVMohc>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ronald Reagan. *The Reagan Diaries*. Edited by Douglas Brinkley. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. 2007. P. 295.

^{iv} Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, p. 296.

^v Newt Gingrich, "An Inaugural in the Rotunda," *Atlanta Daily World*, Feb. 10, 1985.

^{vi} Newt Gingrich, "An Inaugural in the Rotunda," *Atlanta Daily World*, Feb. 10, 1985.

^{vii} Joseph Kraft, "A Nation of Different Dreams," *WaPo* January 24, 1985

^{viii} Joseph Kraft, "A Nation of Different Dreams," *WaPo* January 24, 1985

^{ix} <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1986/02/art1full.pdf>

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- ^x Morton Kondracke. "Full Speed Ahead." *The New Republic*, Feb. 11, 1985.
- ^{xi} Peggy Noonan. *What I Saw at the Revolution*. New York: Random House. 1990. P. 187.
- ^{xii} Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, p. 189.
- ^{xiii} Noonan *What I Saw at the Revolution* 189.
- ^{xiv} Noonan *What I Saw at the Revolution* 190
- ^{xv} *The Reagan Diaries* p. 294.
- ^{xvi} Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution* (191)
- ^{xvii} William Safire. ("Grading the Speech," NYT, Jan. 24, 1985.
- ^{xviii} Noonan, *What I Saw at the Revolution*, 191
- ^{xix} Francis X. Clines, "Reagan Opens Second Term with a Vintage Performance," January 27, 1985.
- ^{xx} "Breaking the Rules," Review & Outlook. WSJ, Jan. 22, 1985.
- ^{xxi} William Safire. "Grading the Speech," NYT, Jan. 24, 198
- ^{xxii} Morton Kondracke. "Full Speed Ahead," TNR, Feb. 11, 1985.
- ^{xxiii} Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 296.
- ^{xxiv} Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* 296.
- ^{xxv} Gil Troy. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2007. P. 179.
- ^{xxvi} Francis X. Clines, "Reagan Opens Second Term with a Vintage Performance," January 27, 1985
- ^{xxvii} Reagan Farewell Address. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation>.
- ^{xxviii} Ronald Reagan. *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1989. P. 271.