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On A Frigid January Day in Central Florida: Reagan, Challenger, and the Nation

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Space Shuttle launches are exhilarating to behold. They are grand spectacles, loud and unapologetic. For those up close, observing from the grounds of Kennedy Space Center in Florida, the rumble of the rocket engines is deafening. Hundreds of miles away, the growing trail of white exhaust topped by a small gleaming dot can be seen brightly, climbing silently into the sky. Whether watching with one's own eyes or through a television broadcast, any launch of humans into space is a majestic and terrifying thing to behold.

There is nothing routine, nothing ordinary about space.

Yet on a frigid January day in Central Florida in 1986, the launch of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* was expected to be just that: routine. So “routine”, according to NBC news coverage, that “the Soviet Union reportedly didn't have its usual spy trawler anchored off the coast”.¹ Two dozen previous Space Shuttle missions had taken off from American soil and returned home safely; there was little reason for Americans to think this mission would be any different.

Though most Americans were not watching the launch live, one very special group of Americans was: schoolchildren.

Despite the otherwise ordinary nature of the launch planned for that day, what did make the *Challenger*'s tenth mission special was the presence of Christa McAuliffe, a social studies teacher from New Hampshire. President Ronald Reagan had hoped that including a teacher in a shuttle mission would be an uplifting and inspirational reminder to the nation about the importance of education - and of our space program. Out of thousands of applicants, McAuliffe was selected to journey alongside career astronauts as the first private citizen to go into space on the Shuttle.

In preparation for the mission, NASA had developed special classroom materials for use in schools across the country, seeking to capitalize on the moment to renew enthusiasm for America's space program. They provided proposed lesson plans and activities centered around what McAuliffe had called “the ultimate field-trip.”² They had also arranged for a special

¹ “Coverage from the day space shuttle Challenger exploded: We watched, we gasped, we stayed tuned for the horrible details.” Holston, Noel. *The Orlando Sentinel*. January 29, 1986.

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/space/orl-challenger-25-day-of-tv-reaction-story.html>

² <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/programs/pdf/challenger-documents.pdf>

satellite broadcast of the mission directly into American classrooms, where children from across the country would watch the launch in real-time.³

That day at 11:38 am, *Challenger* took off toward the heavens. Unbeknownst to the crew, O-rings that were sealing part of one of the solid rocket boosters had failed due to the unusually cold temperatures outside. Within a minute and a half, out of a cloud of fire and smoke and debris, McAuliffe, along with crewmates Gregory Jarvis, Ronald McNair, Ellison Onizuka, Judith Resnik, Francis Scobee, and Michael Smith, would be lost.

Most Americans did not watch *Challenger* explode on live television. Adults across the United States were going about their day. They were at work; they were running errands. NASA had been launching Space Shuttles once a month or so for over a year. It had become, after all, routine.

That day, at 11:38 am, as *Challenger* ascended toward the sky, splintered, and fell back to the Earth, it was the youngest and most impressionable among us who had first watched tragedy unfold unfiltered before their innocent eyes.

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American presidents have from time to time been called upon to heal a traumatized country, to strive to mend our spirits with speech. From Roosevelt and Pearl Harbor to Johnson and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the era of mass media has allowed elected leaders to broadcast their words around the world, sending a message of solace and hope at home while conveying resolve and determination to the rest of the globe.

Perhaps no President in modern times understood the power of mass media quite like Ronald Reagan, a son of Hollywood and the silver screen. His moving speeches and charismatic delivery so often cut to the emotional core of the issue at hand and were a hallmark of his presidency.

On January 28th, 1986, President Reagan had been preparing to deliver one of those important speeches: the annual State of the Union address. The tone of the speech was to be upbeat, with an eye toward the nation's future and with passages expressly directed at the next generation. Among other things, the speech included a reference to the beloved film *Back to the Future* with the line "where we're going, we don't need roads."⁴

Never before had a modern State of the Union been moved, but the *Challenger* disaster called for an unprecedented postponement of the original address. To make sure President Reagan would have words worthy of the gravity of the moment, the White House called upon young speechwriter Peggy Noonan to draft remarks for an address that evening.

"When a tragedy like that occurs, everything pops. Everybody's on the phone, everybody's in a meeting, everybody has to have an urgent communication with somebody else. I just removed

³ "[SPACE SHUTTLE MISSION STS-51L Press Kit](#)". NASA. January 1986. pp. 22–25. Retrieved October 9, 2020.

⁴ <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-4-1986-state-union-address>

myself from all of that and thought, ‘I know the President is going to have to speak in the next few hours because this was a huge tragedy, and someone’s going to have to start working on that,’” Noonan recalled years later.⁵ She got to work.

As Noonan was working on the draft, into her office walked the daughter of one of her colleagues who had brought his little girl to the White House that day. The girl asked, “the teacher was on the rocket – is the teacher alright?” In that moment, Noonan recalls her realization that “every schoolchild in America was watching the *Challenger* go up...so the President is going to have to do a speech that is aimed at those who are eight years old, and those who are eighteen, and those who are eighty, without patronizing anybody.”⁶

Reagan spoke with reporters that afternoon around 1 p.m., noting that he hoped to tell the children of the country “that life does go on and you don’t back up and quit some worthwhile endeavor because of tragedy.”

Traditionally, Presidential remarks are aimed at the nation’s adults. But it had been the children who were watching - the children who may not understand what they had witnessed or what it meant - who would need help coping with unbelievable sadness and shock of it all.

President Reagan would need to find words that would comfort Americans of all generations, and he and his team had just hours to do it.

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It would not just be heartbroken Americans watching the President Reagan speak that night. The Soviets would be watching as well.

In 1958, less than a year after the Soviet Union had launched *Sputnik* into orbit, President Dwight Eisenhower signed into law the National Aeronautics and Space Act, establishing NASA and the U.S. civilian space program. Space was a critical domain for military reasons of course, and the development of ballistic missiles at the time spawned the Space Race between the Soviets and the United States. But the development of a civilian space program had benefits beyond national defense: it gave the United States an opportunity to demonstrate its strength, ingenuity, and potential to the world.

With the Apollo 11 moon landing, the United States had won the biggest prize in the Space Race. From that point on, however, the competition cooled. President Nixon pursued détente with the Soviets, beginning the path toward American astronauts and Soviet cosmonauts partnering on the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project. In the early 1970s, the public was weary of spending tax dollars on space, with nearly two-thirds of Americans saying the government was spending too much.⁷ Sensitive to this, Nixon narrowed government funding for space

⁵ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4562338/user-clip-peggy-noonan-reagans-challenger-disaster-speech>

⁶ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4562338/user-clip-peggy-noonan-reagans-challenger-disaster-speech>

⁷ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nasa-public-opinion-polls_b_6752250

exploration, turning the focus to reusable manned spacecraft. Thus, the Space Transportation System (STS)– the official name for the Space Shuttle program – was born.

Challenger was the second Shuttle to conduct STS program missions, following the Space Shuttle *Columbia*. From its first mission in April 1983, *Challenger* became a workhorse in NASA’s Shuttle fleet, and was the vehicle for around half of Shuttle flights during its three years despite the introduction of the Shuttles *Atlantis* and *Discovery*. It was *Challenger* that carried a thirty-two-year-old astronaut named Sally Ride into space to make history, and it was *Challenger* that brought astronaut Kathryn Sullivan to space for the first spacewalk conducted by an American woman.

By the time the United States was regularly sending astronauts to space without incident in its reusable spacecraft, the Soviets had pivoted their space program toward space stations. The Soviets’ Shuttle equivalent, *Buran* reusable spacecraft technology, lagged far behind the Shuttle in development. But that did not mean the competition for space had completely subsided.

In 1984, Reagan had used his State of the Union address to call for an American space station to rival the Soviets’. In an interview around NASA’s 50th anniversary, former NASA senior official Peggy Finarelli noted that “Space Station *Freedom* was ‘a leadership issue very much in the context of the Cold War. We were challenging the Soviets in the high ground of space. We had to say that *Freedom* would be bigger and better than the Soviet space station.’”⁸

Less than a year before the *Challenger*’s final launch, Mikhail Gorbachev had become the new leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev hoped to implement reforms to revive the struggling Soviet economy and bring about better relations with the West. For Reagan’s part, his tough posture toward the Soviets had put the United States in a position of strength from which he could deal with Gorbachev. The two men found they could work together on issues such as arms control, and Reagan maintained a posture toward the Soviets that included partnership where prudent, pressure where necessary.

It was in the midst of this evolving relationship that the *Challenger* disaster occurred. Fatalities and disasters in the pursuit of space were sadly nothing new to the United States nor to the Soviets by 1986. Parachute failure had claimed the life of cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov in 1967, and the crew of *Soyuz 11* perished in space in 1971 – still the only human fatalities to have happened outside of Earth’s atmosphere. The United States, meanwhile, had suffered losses as well. The crew of *Apollo 1*, Astronauts Roger Chaffee, Virgil Grissom, and Ed White, died during a test on the pad a few days before they were to launch, devastating the nation and setting back American efforts to get to the Moon.

There were many possibilities for how the Soviets could interpret and respond to the *Challenger* disaster. While the Soviets still faced massive challenges at home in 1986, a major setback to the United States could open the door to the Soviets playing catch up or attempting to re-assert themselves in the domain of space. Furthermore, this was unfolding just at the crucial moment when the Americans were developing anti-ballistic missile defense efforts – efforts led by none

⁸ https://www.nasa.gov/50th/50th_magazine/coldWarCoOp.html

other than astronaut and former associate administrator of the Space Shuttle program Jim Abrahamson.

Perhaps the Soviets would expect the Americans to halt further efforts to pursue space - to pull back and retreat in the face of tragedy. President Reagan's response to the *Challenger* disaster would have to send a signal to the Soviets that the Americans had no interest in backing down.

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“We got the speech done. There was no time to ruin it,” reflected Peggy Noonan on the process surrounding the speech that day. No time for focus groups or poll testing, no opportunity for major surgery at the hands of a brigade of staffers. “We were in a big hurry, boom, boom, boom.”⁹

At 5:00 p.m. that day, President Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office. The speech was televised live to the nation and lasted only four minutes.

The speech opens with President Reagan at the Resolute desk in the Oval Office, a visual reminder to all watching of Reagan as a confident leader in charge in a moment of crisis. As the speech proceeds, the camera shot tightens at key moments, pushing the flags and desk and trappings of the Presidency further and further out of view.

Reagan begins with the focus on the lives lost, on honoring them and remembering them each by name. He speaks personally of his own sorrow at the news, and then directly addresses the families of “the Challenger seven”, lifting up their sacrifice and the special nature of those who are willing to risk everything for discovery, who are willing to be brave for something great and beautiful.

But Reagan then moves to the broader question of space, and why we choose to continue its exploration. He acknowledges that pervasive sense that, in 1986, the miracle of human space flight had become routine. “We've grown used to wonders in this century. It's hard to dazzle us... We've grown used to the idea of space, and perhaps we forget that we've only just begun.” He calls us, in that moment, to continue to push forward toward new heights of discovery.

As he speaks, the camera shot tightens one final time so that all that remains is the anguished face of an American President who is about to tackle the greatest challenge before him in these remarks: addressing the schoolchildren.

“I know it is hard to understand, but sometimes painful things like this happen. It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The Challenger crew was pulling us into the future, and we'll continue to follow them.”

⁹ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4562338/user-clip-peggy-noonan-reagans-challenger-disaster-speech>

Without condescension, Reagan acknowledges the pain and confusion of America's youngest and seeks to channel it, to inspire them instead not to shrink from risk but to embrace it.

Reagan then seamlessly turns his attention to that other key audience, the Soviet Union.

"I've always had great faith in and respect for our space program, and what happened today does nothing to diminish it. We don't hide our space program. We don't keep secrets and cover things up. We do it all up front and in public. That's the way freedom is, and we wouldn't change it for a minute."

Rather than viewing America's openness as a weakness of a free society, Reagan chooses this moment to embrace it and extol its virtue. Sending this message to the Soviets, who were themselves on the brink of *glasnost* after decades of opacity and obfuscation, was no accident and was intended to draw a clear contrast.

But a message about values is not the only thing Reagan conveys to the Soviets in his remarks; he also reminds the world that our commitment to pursuing space is also firm and unwavering. As Reagan notes: *"We'll continue our quest in space...Nothing ends here; our hopes and our journeys continue."* He reassures both our adversaries and friends that we will forge onward.

As the speech concludes, Reagan leaves the audience with both a history lesson and a bit of poetry.

"On this day 390 years ago, the great explorer Sir Francis Drake died aboard ship off the coast of Panama. In his lifetime the great frontiers were the oceans, and an historian later said, "He lived by the sea, died on it, and was buried in it." Well, today we can say of the Challenger crew: Their dedication was, like Drake's, complete."

The coincidence was extraordinary. The connection between ocean exploration and space exploration is a powerful one. Even today, the State of Florida selected both an explorer's ship and the Space Shuttle as the icons of discovery to be included on the state's specially designed quarter coin.

But perhaps the most notable and memorable line of the speech came from words not written by a speechwriter or a president, but by a nineteen-year-old American pilot named John Gillespie Magee, Jr. The image of astronauts waving as they walked to the Shuttle had triggered a key memory for speechwriter Peggy Noonan, a memory of a poem she had learned in school when she was young. The poem, "High Flight", had been written by Magee just months before he died in a plane crash in the lead-up to World War II. The poem was also known to President Reagan, and it resonated with him as he remembered encountering the poem on a plaque outside his daughter's school.

"The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God.'"

In a national moment of shock, horror, and despair, President Reagan made room for beauty and made way for hope.

Yet that evening after the cameras stopped, Reagan was not convinced it had been enough. “Reagan did not feel the speech had met the moment,” says Peggy Noonan.¹⁰ And in some ways, it seemed to Reagan impossible that it ever could. As he would say to the families of the lost astronauts just days later, “I wish there was something I could say to make it easier, but there aren't any words.”¹¹

But words do have the power to heal. It was the next morning, when the reaction in the press was glowing, when leaders like Speaker Tip O’Neill called to say thanks, when none other than Frank Sinatra himself phoned to tell President Reagan that the speech had “landed” that Reagan came to see the speech was a success.¹²

“Of all his presidential moments, on this particular day, I was desperate to hear from my President. I needed him, his comfort, and his insight. His words came across the airwaves like salve for my soul,” wrote Nancy Duarte, one of the world’s top communications experts who was in her twenties at the time of the disaster and who would some years later go on to help NASA with its branding and communications.¹³ ¹⁴ Duarte was far from alone, and the immediate effect of Reagan’s remarks was to help a saddened nation deal process its grief and feel healed.

Or as then Secretary of Labor William Brock put it in a note to President Reagan shortly after the speech: “We are so blessed to have a President who can help us to recognize our oneness with each other and with God, and to share our grief, even as we raise again our eyes to the future.”¹⁵

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There are a handful of moments in modern American history that have been so shocking and profound that people who lived through them remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when it happened. The *Challenger* disaster sits alongside D-Day, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the terrorist attacks of September 11th in that short, painful list of tragedies that have shaken a nation in the modern era.

Yet today, a majority of Americans would have no answer to the question “where were you on the day the *Challenger* exploded?” Only the very oldest of the Millennials – those born in 1981 - might have been in one of those school assemblies on the day of the tragedy, watching the Shuttle disintegrate before their eyes, and even they may not remember or have processed what

¹⁰ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4562338/user-clip-peggy-noonan-reagans-challenger-disaster-speech>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/01/us/reagan-pays-tribute-to-our-challenger-heroes.html>

¹² <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4562338/user-clip-peggy-noonan-reagans-challenger-disaster-speech>

¹³ <https://www.duarte.com/presentation-skills-resources/remembering-the-challenger-and-one-of-historys-greatest-speeches/>

¹⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-sep-15-fi-duarte15-story.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.archives.gov/files/presidential-libraries/programs/pdf/challenger-documents.pdf>

they saw. Nearly all of the 166 million Americans under the age of 40 would were not yet alive or would be too young to recall the events of that day.¹⁶

And yet, we can still honor the sacrifice of the *Challenger* Seven, even those who do not personally recall the day they perished.

There are the conventional ways to honor and remember their sacrifice: revisiting President Reagan's poignant remarks, teaching history lessons about the disaster in schools, passing along from one generation to the next an oral history of where they were when they heard the awful news. There is the elegant Space Mirror memorial at Kennedy Space Center, dedicated five years after the final flight of *Challenger* - a mammoth rotating slab of polished granite in which the names of the dead are carved and are illuminated during the day by the reflected light of the sun.

Yet the best way a new generation can remember and honor the *Challenger* Seven is by keeping alive their spirit of risk-taking, their quest for discovery.

After the *Challenger* disaster, the Space Shuttle program continued to launch Americans into space for another twenty-five years. We would go on to send Americans into space to launch probes that would survey Venus and Jupiter, to work on telescopes that would let us see into the far reaches of the universe, and even – in what would have been unthinkable at the height of the Cold War - to dock with the Russian space station *Mir*.

Those twenty-five years were not without setbacks and loss. Tragically, in 2003, George W. Bush had to address the nation after yet another loss of life aboard an American spacecraft with the loss of the Shuttle *Columbia*. His words echoed those of Reagan those years before. “In an age when space flight has come to seem almost routine,” he said, “it is easy to overlook the dangers of travel by rocket, and the difficulties of navigating the fierce outer atmosphere of the Earth.”

We no longer think of human spaceflight as routine. The iconic sonic booms of a Space Shuttle re-entering the atmosphere no longer shake the state of Florida. Nearly a decade elapsed from the end of the Shuttle program to the next manned spaceflight taking off from American soil to head toward the stars.

And yet today we are on the cusp of a bold new era of spaceflight. Rather than being spurred forward by competition with the Soviet Union, our efforts to go back to space are driven this time by partnerships between our government and private-sector innovation. (Reagan would no doubt smile on this development, as he himself once noted that “government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector of the economy.”¹⁷)

Just this year, in the midst of a global pandemic and an economic collapse, millions of Americans tuned in to watch the SpaceX Falcon 9 launch of astronauts Bob Behnken and Doug

¹⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/07/30/now-more-than-half-of-americans-are-millennials-or-younger/>

¹⁷ “A Time for Choosing.” <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-behalf-senator-barry-goldwater-time-for-choosing>

Hurley as they headed to the International Space Station.¹⁸ Behnken and Hurley returned safely to Earth in August, and a crew of four is set to ascend on another SpaceX Crew Dragon mission, likely this fall.¹⁹

The themes of President Reagan's remarks on the day of the *Challenger* disaster still resonate even today as we chart a new course back to the stars.

There are still those around the world that wish to compete with us; our ability to explore space is a valuable signal to the rest of the world of America's strength and ingenuity.

The children who watched the *Challenger* now have children of their own, watching a new generation of astronauts and spacecraft head into the skies, with the bravery and curiosity that drove seven men and women to give their lives for the cause of discovery.

America has not stopped looking up. And we will not stop looking forward.

¹⁸ <https://www.space.com/nasa-spacex-astronaut-launch-viewer-record.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.engadget.com/nasa-delays-spacex-crew-dragon-operational-mission-142824050.html>