

RONALD REAGAN INSTITUTE

Ronald Reagan's Dallas Republic Conference Nomination Acceptance Speech

By Andrew Roberts

On August 23, 1984, Ronald Reagan accepted the Republican party's nomination as candidate for president in an extremely well-crafted speech that even today, three-and-a-half decades later, has the power to inspire for its sentiments and to impress for its hard-hitting arguments. Yet perhaps because it was a blatantly electioneering speech, historians and political analysts rarely give it the attention it deserves. It does not appear at all, for example, among the scores of speeches quoted in Frederick J Ryan Jr.'s *Ronald Reagan: The Wisdom and Humor of the Great Communicator* (1995) or in Lou Cannon's biography, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (1991).

What President Reagan said that day highlighted several aspects of his statesmanship and beliefs, and rarely has the work put into any speech – initially by the talented Peggy Noonan and her team, but primarily and ultimately of course by Reagan himself – garnered so much return so quickly. It achieved the three things necessary for an oration of that kind: sharply defining the candidate from his opponent, explaining concisely what the candidate was promising to do in the next administration, and energizing the audience both in the hall and at home to fight the election with all their conviction.

When re-reading the speech today, secure in the knowledge that Reagan won that landslide election victory seventy-five days after it was delivered, it is hard to conceive the sense of expectation and excitement in the audience. The written text cannot quite convey the atmosphere in the gigantic Dallas Convention Center that day, which I experienced as a twenty-one year old intern for the Senate Steering Committee all those years ago. We cheered and applauded the President for a full six minutes when he came onto the podium before we even allowed him to say a word.

To understand the admiration and affection that we felt for Ronald Reagan, it is important to remind ourselves of the sorry state that the United States had got herself into during the 1970s, especially in the latter part of that decade under President Jimmy Carter. Winston Churchill wrote of the 1930s' "long dismal, drawling tides of drift and surrender," but for those of us condemned to live through them, the 1970s felt like that too. The sense of excitement, therefore, when first Margaret Thatcher in May 1979 and soon afterwards Ronald Reagan in January 1981 drew a line under that decade and made it clear that things thereafter would be entirely different, was palpable. The people in the Dallas Convention Center were thus doubly celebrating four

years of America standing tall again, and the prospect of a further four if Reagan defeated Mondale. It was a heady mix, and he did not disappoint.

To read the speech today is to lament for the days of great oratory, when cogent thoughts and rational argument could be presented with good humor and ineffable charm, and also with a gentlemanly sense of what was tasteful as well as what was verifiably accurate and true. Reagan was extremely hard-hitting in several of his attacks on the Democrats, but all the blows were landed above the belt. He never mentioned Walter Mondale by name – only ever as “my opponent” – in part because he did not want to improve Mondale’s lowly name-recognition but also because he was deliberately concentrating on the Democrats’ political philosophy of bigger government and higher taxes, rather than on their (as it turned out somewhat hapless) standard-bearer. Reagan wanted to win, but he wanted to win honorably and on his own terms, and was not about to stoop to cheap name-calling or falsifying his opponent’s record. It is hard to not feel nostalgic for the politics of a better age.

After the customary politesse towards the Lone Star State and what he called “the Big D” - the city of Dallas - for its warmth and hospitality, the president started off with a humorous remark. As well as being respected and admired as a leader, Reagan was an accomplished raconteur and wit, someone whose stories and anecdotes were often highly amusing, as well as almost always having a political message somewhere too. At Dallas, he told the story of a first grader at Corpus Christi School in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. “Little Leah Kline was asked by her teacher to describe my duties. She said: ‘The President goes to meetings. He helps the animals. The President gets frustrated. He talks to other presidents.’ How does wisdom begin at such an early age?” It might sound a touch schmaltzy today, but it didn’t then and there.

His next sentence was the only one that was mandated, and he got right to it. “Tonight, with a full heart and deep gratitude for your trust, I accept your nomination for the Presidency of the United States.” He had been nominated unopposed, the unanimous choice of the party for which four years earlier he had delivered 489 electoral college votes over President Carter’s forty-nine, winning control of the Senate and thirty-three seats in the House, as well as 43.9 million votes to Carter’s 35.5 million and John Anderson’s 5.7 million. The Dallas meeting was routinely referred to in the media as a “Coronation” rather than a Convention. “I will campaign on behalf of the principles of our party which lift America confidently into the future,” Reagan continued, citing one of the defining features of his presidency – confidence – which fitted neatly into the sunny, optimistic message he personified and was mentioned four times in the speech.

On July 15, 1979, President Carter had given an address dubbed the “malaise” speech (even though he never used that specific word). “The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways.” Carter had said. “It is a crisis of confidence.” So Reagan’s choice of the word “confidently” was an apposite one.

Reagan then addressed the first of the three major points, saying “America is presented with the clearest political choice of half a century. The distinction between our two parties and the different philosophy of our political opponents are at the heart of this campaign and America's future. I've been campaigning long enough to know that a political party and its leadership can't change their colors in four days. We won't, and no matter how hard they tried, our opponents

didn't in San Francisco. We didn't discover our values in a poll taken a week before the convention. And we didn't set a weathervane on top of the Golden Gate Bridge before we started talking about the American family. The choices this year are not just between two different personalities or between two political parties. They're between two different visions of the future, two fundamentally different ways of governing -- their government of pessimism, fear, and limits, or ours of hope, confidence, and growth.”

There, in a nutshell, was the clear blue water that Reagan wanted to put between the Republican and Democrat value systems, complete with another reference to “confidence.” The election of Geraldine Ferraro, a Congresswoman from New York’s Ninth District as the first female vice-presidential candidate had persuaded the Democrats to tiptoe into the Republicans’ traditional preserve of the Family, hoping to detach middle-class women from the Republican camp, but Reagan was having none of it, and reminded the electorate that it was a public relations ploy for the four days of the Democratic convention rather than a deeply held conviction.

He went on to differentiate the two parties’ political philosophies: “Their government sees people only as members of groups; ours serves all the people of America as individuals. Theirs lives in the past, seeking to apply the old and failed policies to an era that has passed them by. Ours learns from the past and strives to change by boldly charting a new course for the future. Theirs lives by promises, the bigger, the better. We offer proven, workable answers.” All this rang true after four years of Reagan applying free-market solutions to the problems that had bedeviled the American economy in the 1970s, and drew long and sustained applause at all the “applause-lines” which Reagan, an accomplished actor, delivered with split-second perfect timing.

For all the problems with Lou Cannon’s lackluster biography of him, the presidency was indeed Reagan’s “role of a lifetime,” and the Dallas speech was one of his finer performances. He was preaching to the converted, of course, but plenty of presidential candidates have fluffed acceptance speeches which require a sense of modesty, at least at the start, and which are directed far beyond the hall itself, since it is one of the relatively few political speeches to which the electorate pays attention at the start of the electoral season.

Reagan needed the American people to answer in the affirmative the key question that is posed at every general election: Are you better off than you were four years ago? For the vast majority of Americans, his capitalist, low-tax and free market reforms had ensured they were indeed much better off in 1984 than in 1980, and this was the perfect opportunity to provide the statistics to prove it. “Our opponents began this campaign hoping that America has a poor memory,” he said. “Well, let's take them on a little stroll down memory lane. Let's remind them of how a 4.8% inflation rate in 1976 became back-to-back years of double-digit inflation - the worst since World War I - punishing the poor and the elderly, young couples striving to start their new lives, and working people struggling to make ends meet. Inflation was not some plague borne on the wind; it was a deliberate part of their official economic policy, needed, they said, to maintain prosperity. They didn't tell us that with it would come the highest interest rates since the Civil War. As average monthly mortgage payments more than doubled, home building nearly ground

to a halt; tens of thousands of carpenters and others were thrown out of work. And who controlled both Houses of the Congress and the executive branch at that time? Not us, not us.”

It was wholly legitimate for Reagan to draw attention to the economic situation he had inherited from the Carter Administration, with which Walter Mondale had been intimately connected as the 42nd vice-president, from 1977 to 1981. In retrospect, it was an error for the Democrats to have chosen Mondale as their candidate in 1984, as he could not shake off his connection to the discredited Carter Administration. “Campaigning across America in 1980, we saw evidence everywhere of industrial decline,” Reagan continued. “And in rural America, farmers’ costs were driven up by inflation. They were devastated by a wrongheaded grain embargo and were forced to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates just to get by. And many of them didn’t get by. Farmers have to fight insects, weather, and the marketplace; they shouldn’t have to fight their own government.” Although the Democrats tended to poll well in urban areas, then as today, they were far less successful in rural ones, and Reagan wanted workers in the huge and important agricultural sector to know he was on their side.

Reagan then zoned in on another wedge issue between Republicans and Democrats – taxation – the cutting of which he had worked hard to show was a moral cause as much as a financial measure. “The high interest rates of 1980 were not talked about in San Francisco,” he said of the Democratic Convention that had taken place in mid-July. “But how about taxes? They were talked about in San Francisco. Will Rogers once said he never met a man he didn’t like. Well, if I could paraphrase Will, our friends in the other party have never met a tax they didn’t like or hike.” As well as a reminder that Reagan was friendly enough with the likes of Will Rogers – a hugely beloved American icon – to call him by his first name, the rhyming of like/ hike went down well with the audience. “Under their policies, tax rates have gone up three times as much for families with children as they have for everyone else over these past three decades. In just the five years before we came into office, taxes roughly doubled.”

Mondale had been vice-president when the Democrats had, as Reagan put it, imposed “about the biggest single, individual tax increase in our history in 1977,” and to show that this was no exaggeration, he called in aid an impeccably non-partisan source to confirm what he was saying. “The Census Bureau confirms that, because of the tax laws we inherited, the number of households at or below the poverty level paying Federal income tax more than doubled between 1980 and 1982. Well, they received some relief in 1983, when our across-the-board tax cut was fully in place.”

Reagan wanted senators and members of Congress to be swept into Washington on his coat-tails, and for that he needed the electorate to see that it was the entire Democratic party that was to blame. He had been an FDR Democrat as a young man, admiring the New Deal as an imaginative way of saving capitalism in the danger years of the Great Depression, but he had seen the way the party had changed. “It’s up to us to see that all our fellow citizens understand that confiscatory taxes, costly social experiments, and economic tinkering were not just the policies of a single administration,” he told his audience. “For the twenty-six years prior to

January of 1981, the opposition party controlled both Houses of Congress. Every spending bill and every tax for more than a quarter of a century has been of their doing. About a decade ago, they said Federal spending was out of control, so they passed a budget control act and, in the next five years, ran up deficits of \$260 billion. Some control.”

Reagan went on subtly to cite his bipartisan approach via House Speaker Tip O’Neill, and extravagantly praise his popular vice-president George H.W. Bush, who had once described Reaganomics as “voodoo economics” but had since then served loyally and effectively under Reagan. “In 1981 we gained control of the Senate and the executive branch,” the president reminded us. “With the help of some concerned Democrats in the House we started a policy of tightening the Federal budget instead of the family budget. A task force chaired by Vice President George Bush - the finest vice president this country has ever had - it eliminated unnecessary regulations that had been strangling business and industry.” He then went on to point out the long-term effect of this: “The biggest annual increase in poverty took place between 1978 and 1981 - over 9% each year, in the first two years of our administration that annual increase fell to 5.3%. And 1983 was the first year since 1978 that there was no appreciable increase in poverty at all.” These were extraordinary achievements, utterly undermining the Democrats’ claim to be on the side of the poor. Reagan was pointing out that it is the free market that best fights poverty by raising all the boats in the harbor, something we need to re-learn today. “Pouring hundreds of billions of dollars into programs in order to make people worse off was irrational and unfair,” Reagan added. “It was time we ended this reliance on the government process and renewed our faith in the human process.”

The attack on government was one of Reagan’s favourite and most popular refrains, as well as the source of many of his best jokes. He kept serious in this speech, however, as he argued that, “In 1980 the people decided with us that the economic crisis was not caused by the fact that they lived too well. Government lived too well. It was time for tax increases to be an act of last resort, not of first resort. The people told the liberal leadership in Washington, ‘Try shrinking the size of government before you shrink the size of our paychecks.’”

The first part of his speech had by then achieved what was needed, successfully nailing the blame for what had gone wrong with the economy – including all the tax hikes since 1955 - onto the Democrats. He could now begin the second part, which was to set out his own plans for the future. He started with defence and foreign policy. Reagan and his defense secretary Caspar Weinberger, ably assisted by the Secretary of the Navy John Lehman, built the US military to perhaps its strongest-ever point. They did not just fight the Cold War in a way the Carter Administration had shied away from, but they fought it to win. “Our government was also in serious trouble abroad,” Reagan said of the 1970s malaise. “We had aircraft that couldn't fly and ships that couldn't leave port. Many of our military were on food stamps because of meager earnings, and reenlistments were down. Ammunition was low, and spare parts were in short supply. Many of our allies mistrusted us. In the four years before we took office, country after country fell under the Soviet yoke. Since January 20th, 1981, not one inch of soil has fallen to the Communists.”

Anti-Communism had long been one of Ronald Reagan's central beliefs, and here it was given full rein. We started crying, "Four more years! Four more years!" over and over to the point that the president could not get another word out until we simmered down. As it was, of course, at the end of those "four more years," Soviet Communism was on its knees, and one year after that the Berlin Wall was torn down, as Reagan was to demand of Mikhail Gorbachev. So what we cried out for in that hall that day – four more years of Western strength and resilience - proved to be the key ingredient in the most remarkable extension of human freedom since the Allied victory in World War Two. "America is coming back and is more confident than ever about the future," he said. Notice that word "confident" again.

In this second section of the speech, Reagan gave his listeners solid reasons to vote Republican, rather than merely voting against the Democrats. He gave a blizzard of statistics showing that the American economy was booming, just as Milton Friedman and other free market economists had predicted that it would once tax and regulations were slashed. "Today, of all the major industrial nations of the world," Reagan announced, "America has the strongest economic growth; one of the lowest inflation rates; the fastest rate of job creation – six and a half million jobs in the last year and a half - a record six hundred thousand business incorporations in 1983; and the largest increase in real, after-tax personal income since World War II. We're enjoying the highest level of business investment in history, and America has renewed its leadership in developing the vast new opportunities in science and high technology. America is on the move again and expanding toward new eras of opportunity for everyone. Now, we're accused of having a secret. Well, if we have, it is that we're going to keep the mighty engine of this nation revved up. And that means a future of sustained economic growth without inflation that's going to create for our children and grandchildren a prosperity that finally will last."

In a foray back to foreign affairs – which was red meat to this strongly anti-Communist and patriotic audience – Reagan, who had been labelled as a warmonger by the Democrats, explained how peace came through strength. "Today our troops have newer and better equipment," he said, "their morale is higher. The better armed they are, the less likely it is they will have to use that equipment. But if, heaven forbid, they're ever called upon to defend this nation, nothing would be more immoral than asking them to do so with weapons inferior to those of any possible opponent. We have also begun to repair our valuable alliances, especially our historic NATO alliance. Extensive discussions in Asia have enabled us to start a new round of diplomatic progress there. In the Middle East, it remains difficult to bring an end to historic conflicts, but we're not discouraged. And we shall always maintain our pledge never to sell out one of our closest friends, the State of Israel." This brought renewed applause, as did the line, "Our policy is simple: We are not going to betray our friends, reward the enemies of freedom, or permit fear and retreat to become American policies -- especially in this hemisphere. None of the four wars in my lifetime came about because we were too strong. It's weakness that invites adventurous adversaries to make mistaken judgments."

Reagan then addressed the myth that was already common amongst the Democrats that the United States was a warlike and aggressive hegemon, the self-hating theories of left-wing intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, and today the constant refrain of leftist propagandists such as Michael Moore. Reagan wanted to counter this kind of slander, and did so forcefully. "America is the most peaceful, least warlike nation in modern history," he said. "We are not the cause of all the ills of the world. We're a patient and generous people. But for the sake of our freedom and that of others, we cannot permit our reserve to be confused with a lack of resolve." On October 25 1983, he had sent the Marine Corps to invade the Caribbean island of Grenada, six days after a left-wing military coup had overthrown and killed its prime minister Maurice Bishop. American medical students who had been endangered there were rescued, and the operation had been a great success. When Reagan mentioned this it was not to boast of his victory, but instead to lambast those Democratic candidates who likened Reagan's actions to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the crushing of human rights in Poland, and the genocide in Cambodia.

"Could you imagine Harry Truman, John Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, or Scoop Jackson making such a shocking comparison?" Reagan asked. We of course shouted back, "No!" He then said, "Nineteen of our fine young men lost their lives on Grenada, and to even remotely compare their sacrifice to the murderous actions taking place in Afghanistan is unconscionable. There are some obvious and important differences. First, we were invited in by six East Caribbean states. Does anyone seriously believe the people of Eastern Europe or Afghanistan invited the Russians?" We in the audience roared back, "No!" He continued, "Second, there are hundreds of thousands of Soviets occupying captive nations across the world. Today, our combat troops have come home. Our students are safe, and freedom is what we left behind in Grenada. There are some who've forgotten why we have a military. It's not to promote war; it's to be prepared for peace. There's a sign over the entrance to Fairchild Air Force Base in Washington State, and that sign says it all: 'Peace is our profession.'" There were further eruption from us of, "Four more years! Four more years!" until the smiling president said "I heard you." When he said of the Democrats, "For forty-two of the last fifty years, they have controlled both Houses of the Congress," we boomed.

Reagan then promised to fight for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution mandating government to spend no more than government takes in, and the right of a President to veto items in appropriations bills without having to veto the entire bill. He said that as Governor of California, he had used such vetoes no fewer than nine hundred times. We boomed when Reagan told us that Mondale ("their candidate") had said, "We need a deficit in order to stimulate the economy," and had voted for higher taxes every chance he got. "If our opponents were as vigorous in supporting our voluntary prayer amendment as they are in raising taxes," Reagan said, "maybe we could get the Lord back in the schoolrooms and drugs and violence out."

He promised an anticrime bill, tuition tax credit legislation, enterprise zones, a simplified tax system, and joked of the Democrats: "You know, we could say they spend money like drunken sailors, but that would be unfair to drunken sailors." We cried, "Four more years! Four more years!" and he joked again, "All right. I agree," and then added, "I was going to say, it would be unfair, because the sailors are spending their own money." Cue more laughter.

There was a further promise to reduce the levels of nuclear arms, asking the Soviets to return to the negotiations so they could together go about "ridding the Earth of this awful threat." That

turned out to be a Utopian dream, but his talks at Reykjavik with Gorbachev in October 1986 show how sincere he was.

“We don't lump people by groups or special interests,” he said, in words that resonate greatly today. “And let me add, in the party of Lincoln, there is no room for intolerance and not even a small corner for anti-Semitism or bigotry of any kind. Many people are welcome in our house, but not the bigots.” He even questioned the efficacy of concepts such as the right and left in politics, saying, “Go back a few years to the origin of the terms and see where left or right would take us if we continued far enough in either direction. Stalin. Hitler. One would take us to Communist totalitarianism; the other to the totalitarianism of Hitler. Isn't our choice really not one of left or right, but of up or down? Down through the welfare state to statism, to more and more government largesse accompanied always by more government authority, less individual liberty and, ultimately, totalitarianism, always advanced as for our own good. The alternative is the dream conceived by our Founding Fathers, up to the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society. We don't celebrate dependence day on the Fourth of July. We celebrate Independence Day.”

As the audience chanted “U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!” the president quoted from the Declaration of Independence. He mentioned his wife Nancy, and claimed that he had not left the Democratic Party so much it leaving him, and reminded us of his vision of America as “a shining city on a hill.” He declared, “We're in the midst of a springtime of hope for America. Greatness lies ahead of us,” citing the holding of the Olympics in Los Angeles as “defining the promise of this season.” The USA had won eighty-three gold medals, with the next country, Romania, winning twenty.

He described the Olympic torch being taken across America in lyrical terms: “From our Gotham City, New York, to the Cradle of Liberty, Boston, across the Appalachian springtime, to the City of the Big Shoulders, Chicago. Moving south toward Atlanta, over to St. Louis, past its Gateway Arch, across wheat fields into the stark beauty of the Southwest and then up into the still, snowcapped Rockies. And, after circling the greening Northwest, it came down to California, across the Golden Gate and finally into Los Angeles. And all along the way, that torch became a celebration of America. And we all became participants in the celebration. ... At Tupelo, Mississippi, at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning, a robed church choir sang ‘God Bless America’ as the torch went by. That torch went through the Cumberland Gap, past the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial, down the Santa Fe Trail, and alongside Billy the Kid's grave. In Richardson, Texas, it was carried by a 14-year-old boy in a special wheelchair. In West Virginia the runner came across a line of deaf children and let each one pass the torch for a few feet, and at the end these youngsters' hands talked excitedly in their sign language. Crowds spontaneously began singing ‘America the Beautiful’ or ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic.’ And then, in San Francisco a Vietnamese immigrant, his little son held on his shoulders, dodged photographers and policemen to cheer a 19-year-old black man pushing an 88-year-old white woman in a wheelchair as she carried the torch. My friends, that's America.”

For his peroration, Reagan deftly switched the image from the Olympic torch to that held by the Statue of Liberty, saying, “The poet called Miss Liberty’s torch the ‘lamp beside the golden door.’ Well, that was the entrance to America, and it still is. And now you really know why we’re here tonight. The glistening hope of that lamp is still ours. Every promise, every opportunity is still golden in this land. And through that golden door our children can walk into tomorrow with the knowledge that no one can be denied the promise that is America. Her heart is full; her door is still golden, her future bright. She has arms big enough to comfort and strong enough to support, for the strength in her arms is the strength of her people. She will carry on in the eighties unafraid, unashamed, and unsurpassed. In this springtime of hope, some lights seem eternal; America’s is. Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America.”

We left the hall determined to work harder for Reagan’s re-election than ever before, and on November 6, 1984, he won 525 electoral college votes to Walter Mondale’s thirteen, winning every state barring Minnesota and the District of Columbia, while retaining the Republicans’ Senate majority and increasing their representation in the House, with a 58.8% share of the popular vote. It was a landslide, and as this speech proved, one that was richly deserved. It ought to be better known than it is, as it was a masterpiece of the art of oratory.

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