

RZ:

Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The program is about to begin. Please turn off all cell phones and electronic devices. Please make sure to keep your mask on for the duration of the program. Thank you.

Good evening. Welcome to the Reagan Library. I'm Roger Zakheim, director of the Reagan Institute. The Institute is the home of the Reagan foundation in Washington, D.C., but today it's great to be back in Reagan country, here in California.

In honor of our men and women who defend our freedom around the world, please stand and join me in the pledge of allegiance. I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. You may be seated. Thank you.

Before we get started, there are a few people in the audience I'd like to recognize this evening. Former Congressman Elton Gallegly and his wife, Janice. Great to see you. The Executive Director of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation Institute, my boss, John Heubusch. We have with us this evening trustees of the Reagan Foundation's board, former governor of California Pete Wilson and his wife Gayle. Former Ambassador to the Court of St. James, Bob Tuttle and his wife Maria Hummer-Tuttle.

This is the latest installment of the Reagan Foundation's speaker series A Time for Choosing. Now, many of you know where this series gets its name, from the iconic 1964 speech that launched Ronald Reagan's political career, it propelled the movement, and laid the foundation for a transformative presidency. But around here, we just call it The Speech.

Today, President Reagan's party is facing its own time for choosing. What do Republicans stand for now? What direction will the party take? What are the philosophies we can all agree on? These are some of the fundamental questions about the future of the Republican party and the conservative movement we have asked our guests to answer.

Since May, we've heard from Speaker Paul Ryan, Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Governor Chris Christie, and Ambassador Nikki Haley. Our invitation to speak during this series come with a key prerequisite: bring substance, not slogans.

Those like our speaker this evening, who served president Reagan in the White House, and those of us now charge with advancing his legacy, know that the only way to do that is to contend with big ideas and forward-looking policy. After all, that commitment to substance and solutions is what fueled the Reagan presidency.

Now, tonight, we welcome a speaker who knows from experience. And in fact, she was a driving force behind this series. Peggy Noonan first gave a national audience insight into the Reagan White House with her first of several best selling books, *What I Saw at the Revolution*. But I've always thought that that title understated her role. She played a major role in giving voice to that revolution, with presidential words that inspired and uplifted, cajoled and comforted, from the convention floor to the Oval Office, from Capitol Hill to Pointe du Hoc.

Let me borrow a phrase she quotes in her book. She writes, "Speech writing in the Reagan white house is where the philosophical, ideological and political tensions of the administration got worked out." For that, I'd say our nation owes her a great deal.

Today, the Republican party seems to be in the middle of another revolution. The choices our leaders make now will determine its outcome. In making those choices, they'd be hard pressed to find counsel wiser than Peggy Noonan. So, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Reagan Foundation board member, Pulitzer prize winning columnist and bestselling author, Peggy Noonan.

PN:

Hi, everybody. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being in this wonderful place on a Monday night, where you could be a lot of other places, but you chose this and I thank you. Roger, Mr. Zakheim, I must say I found your tribute almost embarrassingly flattering, but that's because I wrote it. I'm so sorry. As I always say, in truth, I do not deserve all those kind words, but then I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either. So what the heck? That joke is not really worthy of you, but I love it.

I thank you, John, also. I thank you for being here. It is always an honor to come to this place, my sort of psychic second home, a place so peaceful and placid and lovely that you can forget it is an august presidential library, the repository of the history of a great and turbulent era, one of considerable division. The papers and documents of that era kept here for history are our tribute to history and to future scholars. We have a bunch of them here this evening from the Knowlton Group. We just met them. They're so fabulous. They are the few future. Right over here. I thank them for being here.

We're here to help future scholars and those who hope to more deeply understand the story of America and of the raucous second half of the 20th century. I'm in awe of and I bow to those who have made it the most admired presidential library in the country.

Our subject tonight is also history. What is the future of the Republican party, as Roger said. This speech series grew out of an observation. It seemed it had been a while since anyone had defined what the Republican party is and stands for. What is its historical purpose at this moment in time? What does it exist to do? What do Republicans believe in?

The answer to those questions, era to era, will to some degree evolve because parties evolve and should. Living things do. It is normally the job of political figures to address such questions, but many of them these days, it seems to me in both parties, prefer to operate in a sort of great murk, in which stands are not too sharply defined because this gives them, as professional politicians, more room to maneuver. I understand, but I think they're missing out on something, which is the power of belief and of meaning. The man whose name graces this building went into politics because of belief and meaning. That's what drove him.

It also seems to me that after all the murk of the past six years and all the fiery battles, with so much confusion on the Republican side, a little defining might be a very helpful thing. Even, in time, a unifying thing. You fight best when you know what you're fighting for and who you're fighting for.

As a long time conservative, as a writer of columns and books, I take part each week, I suppose it can be said, in this debate. And as an assistant to Ronald Reagan, who worked with him to express his vision of what was needed at his moment in history, I feel a particular stake in it. So, I am honored and I felt honored when I was asked to come in, take part and take a stab at this.

I begin with a declared bias. I am strong for the continuation of the two party system, even though they don't quite mean to, both major parties actually serve as a unifying force in our country. Why? Because at the end of the day, you have to vote for either party A or party B. You have to discipline yourself to make this decision and tame your own rebellions. You have to decide, "I'm with these folks on the issues." Or, "No, actually I'm with these folks."

Both parties are messes. It's always frustrating. And yet, if we add a third party, we'll soon enough have a fourth party, and then we'll have a sixth party, because this is America and we always overdo it a little bit. And with half a dozen parties, things will fall apart in chaos and inertia. So, I believe the thing to do is try to make each party better. Keep two, but make the one you support better, make it stronger and more coherent and more worthy of leadership. That's the way to go.

So, briefly, where are the parties right now? Republicans, I would say, especially those active on the local level right now ... Pardon me. A frog keeps trying to jump in. I am fighting that frog. Republicans,

especially those active on the local level, right now feel frustrated and beaten about by their party's internal divisions. The past six years, friend has turned on friend, old ally against old ally. People you used to rely on to share with you a shared sense of reality suddenly have completely divergent views as to what's real and what's needed and who is needed to lead. It's been painful. Only the stupid have emerged unscathed, because they're not bright enough to know they took an arrow. You look around you, at GOP groups, and you see fracture and division. And you see it nationally, too, as we all know.

There's a lot within the party that's still healthy, basic bottom line beliefs that can, to some degree, restore and unify. But there are new, unhealthy strains out there, and you're aware of them. Conspiracism, obsessions with political personalities. There's also a new strain. It's a brand new strain of politics as entertainment. It's performative. You're acting out the angers of your little base. You're getting attention with your memes and posts. And Lord knows, there are a lot of grifters in this party. Politics is big business. Bad people can make money off it. This afflicts both parties, but to my mind, it is bad on the Republican side.

None of this, none of these tensions, none of it is going to go away tomorrow. It will have to work its way out in time. It will. Long term, good people will rise. New people will rise. Some young candidates, one after another, will come forward and they're not tied to the past or the divisions of the past, and they can help clean things up.

As for the Democrats, they hold the White House and they sort of hold the Congress. But Democrats, speaking freely off the record, will tell you they fear their party has, at the moment, run out its string. It too is all broken up, in a civil war between the far left and the left. Because the rising more leftward quadrant has been winning by punching way above its weight, the party now appears to stand most prominently for things that the past few years have made the American people deeply unhappy and anxious about the future, too. The Democratic president is historically unpopular. The vice president is even less popular than he is.

So, both parties are in big struggles. But beyond that, the tectonic plates underneath the surface are moving, and I believe they are moving powerfully. All the polling tells us voters are deeply unhappy. Right track, wrong track numbers with the wrong track going through the roof.

There was the recent Gallup poll on party affiliation. This really struck me. Gallup asks, "Which party do you belong to or lean toward?" The Democratic party has tended to garner the higher numbers, there, almost really uniformly with some breaks for about 70 years. But in early 2021, a shift began. And by the end of 2021, Republicans for the first time in years took the lead. 47% said they were Republicans, and only 42% said they were Democrats. That's only one poll, but it was a broad one, and it is big, big news.

Even bigger than that, and surely connected to it, is what is happening politically with many immigrants to the United States and minority groups within the United States. They're starting to show new signs of considering the Republican party as a real alternative for their backing and their loyalty. Maybe they're looking for a temporary home, a foster home, while their old party gets it together. I don't know. I think it's bigger than that.

All this shifting about and movement, I'm not really sure it's because Republicans in general have gotten so much right. I believe it's that Democrats have, past few years, gotten so much wrong, and they are dug into their wrong positions. They are invested in them.

This is going to get me very briefly to the year 2020. I think we are still just getting our heads around what a huge year in American political history 2020 was. It will be remembered, I believe, as big a year as 1929, The Great Depression year, which forever changed America's political and economic realities.

For regular Americans, just regular people, 2020 was disorienting. I think the wrong track numbers can be traced exactly to that. What has been disorienting is that I think people are not just thinking 2020 was a bad, a kind of historically challenging year. I don't think that's it. I think they're thinking 2020 was the beginning of something bad that is going to continue unless we stop it.

Somehow in that year, it seems, a new and strange and unnamed ideology arrived and used the events of 2020 to come in, sit down and declare itself in charge in America. A worldwide pandemic and a federal government that bobbled and wasn't quite up to the emergency, masks, mandates, lockdowns. Three years of it. We're in our third year of it, actually, and we're still fighting it out.

There was a lack of wisdom about the American people, what they would want, who they really are. There was the shock America felt during and after the killing of George Floyd. America watched that videotape with horror and self-examination and understood the rage and anguish that followed. There were peaceful protests. They were right. Part of our tradition, good people joined them.

And yet, when riots started to follow those protests, we were just aghast, all of us, to watch TV and see stores burned down and innocent people undefended, citizens seemingly abandoned. And then a lot of people denied there were riots, denied they were violent and destructive. And somehow that turns into defund the police. And suddenly, there was a progressive series of legal theories in place, and suddenly criminals who are not stupid, who understood they were starting to have the upper hand, moved forward. And the crime wave we have begun to live in was born.

At home with the kids, parents were listening to the Zoom instruction coming in from the schools and starting to think, "Hey, a lot of this sounds political. It sounds like not education. It sounds like something else." And this was so disturbing for a lot of people. Now, none of this quite started in 2020. Much of it had been building for years, but it kind of came to fruition in 2020, and it took power in 2020.

In our national culture, it felt as if, as a people, we were now constantly, bitterly pitted against each other. We have to be force-fed the idea of America as an ugly, misogynist, racist nation, whose founding was all about ugliness. We're fruit of a poisoned tree. We're losing some higher sense of ourselves, and that higher sense is what allows us to keep climbing towards improvement. You can only aspire successfully if you have a feeling of hopefulness. And damnation kind of kills hopefulness.

Again, in truth, this didn't all start in 2020. We've been in a kind of ongoing cultural catastrophe for probably 25 years, but it all speeded up and settled in, in some new way, in 2020. Tent cities, homeless encampments, smash and grab, cops are the bad guys, identity politics. It's like somebody turned America on its head and shook it and let everything fall out. And it has made everyone in America so very unhappy and anxious, because these conditions cannot make people happy or confident.

I think the Democratic party allowed itself, because of its civil war, to stand on the wrong side of almost every issue that arose. It seemed bizarrely detached from the suffering caused by the increase in crime, and they continued to back the stance that contributed to that crime. They made a mistake in not standing against a woke ideology that kind of pushes everybody around. They've allowed or cleared the way for the imposition of an ideology of racial and gender and sexual identity that tells us, "You're not part of a whole with your fellow citizens who are your equal and your brothers and sisters." No. You're reduced to being members of warring groups.

As for the public schools, I think the Democrats have acted as if they were a wholly owned subsidiary of the teachers union and teachers union ideology. Immigration, they no longer even seem to be trying to control the border to get some order there. A pandemic comes and the government stumbles, as governments do in first-time-ever circumstances. They do some good, some not so good.

But at the end of the day, we're a few years into this, you sense the government was far more confident than it was competent. And somehow, even with its failures, it's taken on itself not just new powers, but

new powers it maybe doesn't want to relinquish. They've gotten pretty full of themselves, and they don't always seem to like the citizens they're instructing and directing.

And of course there is inflation, which is starting to be so hard on people. Which is, at least in part, the creation of high spending of the last few years. It didn't start a year ago. It's the past few years. And the Democrats only answer is to insist on spending more, because that's the only move they have.

So, I think somehow the Democratic party allowed itself to become aligned with all this progressive kind of thinking and policy. So many individual Democrats are against it. They don't like this stuff, but they are not necessarily young. And it is the young who are rising, and they like this progressive stuff a lot. Anyway, it was a party decision. It was a mistake. Someone is going to have to win the Democratic civil war before the Democratic party can take new shape, adopt new stands, and find its old innards again.

America is certainly well familiar, in 2022, with what doesn't work. And I believe a lot of Americans are looking around and considering the party not in power, the Republicans, and looking at them and thinking, "Well, what do you got? Could you help? Is it possible I agree with you? Is it possible I'm one of you?" So, this is a really crucial and profound and interesting political moment.

So many Americans feel beleaguered, beset and somewhat abandoned. To meet this moment, the Republicans I believe have to stop, breathe in and get serious again. If they stand for big things that can make life better, they will be the big party and they will win. But if they stand by small and eccentric things or small and obsessive people, they will miss their moment, which would be sad for the party and very sad for America. It's so crucial now, in part because America is in play again. You can just feel it. Things are moving around. The political pieces are moving. Everything's shifting.

Here now I shift to what the Republican party is for now and what its job is. I really thought about this. Here is some basic, bedrock Republican party belief. And I decided to give this section to Ronald Reagan's old friend, George H W Bush. It was 1988. He was running for president. He was behind in the polls, but he actually thought it would be helpful to do some defining.

So, he said at the GOP Convention in '88, he said, "An election about ideas and values is also about philosophy, and I have one. At the bright center is the individual and his or her rights. Radiating out from the individual is the family, that essential unit of closeness and of love. It's the family that communicates to our children our culture, our religious faith, our traditions. From the individual to the family, to the community, and then on out to the town, the church, the school, and still echoing out to the county, the state and the nation, each part doing only what it does well and no more. I believe that power must always be kept close to the individual, close to the hands that raise the family and run the home."

He said, "I am guided by certain traditions. One is that there is a God, and he is good. And his love, while free, has a self-imposed cost. We must be good to one another." He said he believed in another tradition, a very basic one, one that is now really embedded in the national soul. And that is that learning is good, in and of itself. We are a nation about schools. We're a nation about teaching the young and helping to form their minds and their souls as they go on into the future.

He said, "There's another tradition: the idea of community. This isn't a cluster of interest groups waiting for Washington to tell them to set the rules. That's not community. To us, it's thousands of religious, social, ethnic, business, labor groups. Government has its place. We don't hate government, but we always remember the people are its master."

Now, to my mind, all that still applies very much. Republicans know it. They know these things, but it's always good to be reminded. Republicans start with freedom, the individual and his or her just powers. So, that's foundational. What do we do in 2022? I think we build on it.

What is the right approach or attitude for this particular era? A great party's stance must reflect and address the needs of the time. Ronald Reagan knew that. Reagan respected reality. His stance as he

entered politics were focused on the needs and realities of the latter half of the 20th century. The Soviets really high taxation, government mishandling of the economy. He felt conservative thinking was the answer there.

When he was a young man, he was a passionate New Deal Democrat because he felt that that program, that party, the liberal one, had the best plan to respond to the needs of that moment.

We are nearing the end. It's amazing to think of this, but we're nearing the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, and Republicans, of course, Reagan would say this, Republicans can't just repeat the 20th century stands, smaller government, lower taxes and spending. Of course you don't want government bigger than it needs to be. You always want lower taxes rather than higher. But that style or approach of conservatism, in my view, is not enough in and of itself because it is not fully in line with the crises of our time, nor I would say its political realities.

Let's be frank. The federal government is not going to become small or much less costly in our lifetimes. The demands after the past 25 or 30 years are too great, from a military trying to reckon and align itself with the high tech realities of the future, to finally addressing I think the mental health crisis in America that's been ongoing for at least 20 years. It's going to take money to deal with that.

There is no political will in Congress on the issue of making the government smaller or less expensive. There is no political will for it in Congress, among Republicans or Democrats. They privately admit this, all of them. There is no will for it really in the parties, or among their supporters on the ground. To my mind, the question is what the government does. My thought is to train it toward conservative ends.

I would say to the Republican party, make peace with programs that support the poor and middle class. Make peace with the social safety net, with the welfare state. Make peace with these things. Your own voters did long ago. Appreciate and respect the fact that so many members of your party, so many potential supporters of your party rely on Medicare, Medicaid, social security disability, the whole edifice created in the past century by both parties to help our people feel secure and with a steady foothold in the world. These programs have been a positive good. Make them stronger, better, undergird them.

Republican congressmen really enjoy going on TV and damning high government spending, while not cutting it. And they think this is the best of both worlds because people like to damn spending without changing it. But I think it is sort of the worst of both worlds. It's leaving people, as they hear you, afraid you will pull out the rug from under them, when the past few years they've had too many rugs pulled out from under them. So, I think that's something important to know. Don't have old arguments about limited government. Make it a better government. Work on it every way you can, but shift government focused toward conservative ends.

In preparing my remarks, I did a lot of reading, including as Roger mentioned, my first book about working for Ronald Reagan. It's called What I Saw at the Revolution. I hadn't read it in 30 years. In that book, I actually didn't know this or didn't remember it, but I did a little speech and I addressed the Republican party.

And I said, "This is your future. You are a working class party, the party of the lower middle and the middle of the struggling suburbs, the party of those just starting out, of those trying to make their way through, of those learning English for the first time. You are their natural home." Well, 30 years later, I still think that's right. Though I don't like now casting the argument in terms of working class. It doesn't feel right. You don't define people that way. Life is more complicated than that.

Now I would say the Republican party should be the party of the working class, the middle class, of every class. It should be the party of parents. It should be the party of those who really need someone to have their back, the party of the struggling suburbs, as I said, and the entrepreneurs. It should be the

party of the unprotected, of the regular people who make this place run, the party of strivers who don't want to be oppressed, creators who don't be thwarted. The party of the store owner, who shouldn't be in constant fear of regulation or taxes or crime. The party should have an identification with regular people who are being thwarted by this strange new world they are living in.

I would like it said of the Republican party's composition what was said once of the Catholic Church. When the Catholic Church walks down the street, you can honestly say, "Here comes everybody." That's what I would like the Republican party to be.

I want to give you a picture, just very quickly, of what I mean, how broad things are now or should be. You probably saw something last week, it was the funeral of Jason Rivera at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York city. He was a 22-year-old kid, a policeman. He's from a Dominican immigrant family. He was gunned down and killed on a house call with another cop, Wilbert Moore, age 27, also from a big Dominican immigrant family. They were young men on fire with the desire to be policemen and protect and defend the people.

Well, Cardinal Dolan of New York opened the cathedral. Dozens of priests and officiants, a choir. It was a long, beautiful service. It was an act of real respect and affiliation. The cathedral was packed, filled with the family and friends and colleagues of the two fallen. It was all the immigrant community of New York, members of minority groups, all Americans, regular normal people rising in honor of a cop. St. Patrick's saw those two policemen off the way they would see off a president, and it was beautiful.

And when it was over and the mourners walked out of the cathedral, out onto fifth avenue, what they saw for blocks, spilling downtown and uptown, was sea of thousands of police in full regalia, loyal cops come to honor two of their own in an avenue full of flags. The mourners, the sea of cops, the cathedral, all of it was a statement. It was a show of force. And it was a question: who will help us? Who is with us?

And I would say to the Republican party, they are your people. They believe in what you believe in. They are new here. They work hard. They fled something bad. They want America to work. They are the big center. And I believe the Republican party, here and forward, should be the party of the big center.

So, when you think of who you are, think of the cops, the mourners and those heartbroken people who watched the coffin go by and took off their hats as if they were watching the old America go by, and yet will absolutely not allow the old America to just go by and just recede into the past. They are you. They are moderate in their politics. They are not extreme. And it is possible they will find that their home can be the Republican party.

So, what is the Republican party for right now? I think it is to stand for normal, regular people in all their human variety, races, ethnicities, faiths against the forces of ideology currently assailing them. It is your job to stand for the permanent against the merely prevalent, as Ronald Reagan put it.

But let me be very direct. Your job is to be sane and to stand with the sane and thereby save the country. It's your job to be serious. It is not your job to pose for Christmas cards with your family, including little children, fully armed with guns, in order to troll the libs, as a Congresswoman did recently. It's not your job to become a cable news Congressman who complains endlessly about problems and never ever solves them. Because talking about problems makes you money.

It is not your job to call the events of January 6th, the riot on the Capitol, legitimate political discourse. That is a lie that the cops in the cathedral can see right through, that everyone can see right through. You've got to be better than that. If you knew how high the stakes really are, you would not be frivolous.

It is your job to be sane and to be centrist. The Republican party should stand now against excess on all fronts, excessive regulation, excess rejiggering of cultural norms. The Democrats right now are in love with excess, spending trillions without care, insisting on changing the language. They're in an actual war on language, birthing person instead of woman, equity instead of equality. That's what they're teaching

our kids. Orwell told us long ago, "The corruption of language is the first step in the corruption of everything else." It's sort of all about code words in the service of a new culture, a meaner one that says it is kinder, in which apologies are never good enough, and the only way to express yourself is to talk like the head of human resources.

I do believe the left, as it is now, has sort of abandoned its commitment to the betterment of the poor and instead just wants to be the HR department of the nation. And their chief targets are often the disadvantaged who get dragged through endless lecturing by wealthy white liberals who could care less about them, at the end of the day. And I believe everyone knows this, too.

So, the GOP's job is to say, "Wait. Stop. What is this? Why are these new rules being imposed?" And you know, they don't have an answer. If they had an answer, they wouldn't be at war with the language. They can't stand clarity and precision because their ideas can't survive them.

A great party cannot be a cult. That fellow who is so very controversial, do you know who I mean? That fellow who's so greatly controversial, he brought new voters in, it's true. And you must hold onto those voters. And you can, through your stands and through your affiliation and through knowing who you are. But don't forget the votes he lost. He never came even close in two tries to winning the popular vote. He lost Arizona and Georgia. He got two liberal senators elected in Georgia. You can say a lot about Ronald Reagan, but nobody ever called him a loser.

Anyway, that controversial fellow, so long as he's around the party will not succeed nationally, will not meet the moment, and how sad that would be when the stakes are so high. So to his friends and followers, I would say, please put America first. Be a patriot. If Republicans right now are immature, if their congressmen and senators are merely self-seeking and small boar, they will look out at this landscape and boldly go on a cable news show and talk about stop the steal. But if they are mature, if they're fully mature and serious and actually want to help the country, they will talk about the things that bedevil us.

So I say, party, see this moment for what it is. Let go of old obsessions. St. Paul, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, but then I put away childish things." Many people in this party must put away childish things. So be serious, or this moment will be just another moment and not something that allows you to understand yourself and your role in a new way, and that allows you to help America. Your attitude, be more moved by what you love than what you hate. Do everything with a spirit of repair. Win the right to leadership and lead this wounded country.

That is all I have to say. I thank you for your gracious listening. I could feel you listening, and I appreciate it. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.