

## THE RHETORIC OF RONALD REAGAN

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Ronald Reagan ran for President of the United States in the 1980 Presidential election, winning by a landslide victory. His rhetoric in politics, however, can be tied together to show his political views on issues from his 1980 and his 1984 Presidential campaign victories.

First of all, President Reagan's views on big government are very anti-strength and anti-centralized in structure. Reagan is a Conservative in his political views as evident from the following quote by Thomas Paine, a long-time refuge of the Liberals. This quote comes from the autobiography of Ronald Reagan with Richard G. Hubler called, Where's the Rest of Me?:

Government is a necessary evil; let us (nation) have as little of it as possible. (Reagan adds here his own thoughts in the following quote): We (Reagan's administration) are here to see that Government continues to serve the people and not the other way around. Yes, Government should do all that is necessary, but only that which is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

In his acceptance speech for the re-election of the President of the United States at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas on August 23 of this year, Reagan made clear his dislike of too much government intervention into the lives of the citizens of this country.

Reagan emphasizes, in his political rhetoric, the need to cut costs of government. Taxes, he believes, are growing and growing at the peoples' expense. President Reagan's "New Beginning" calls for tax cuts that will be more fairer to all Americans and that will be easier to understand.

President Reagan's rhetorical political style is geared, I feel, for the individual person and not for the mass of individuals that make up the country called America. For example, in his acceptance speech given at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, President Reagan mentioned that he had asked the people of America in 1980: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"<sup>2</sup> He was, in my opinion, using the "you" approach in political rhetoric. This is where one uses the word "you" to try to speak at a one-on-one basis with people, or at least to try to make it appear that way. He uses the words "you" and "we" a lot in his political speeches. He does this so that, once again, he can appear to appeal to the individuality of the American people. Now, the words "you" and the word "we" are different in their uses, or they can be different. However, when this writer talks about Reagan using the words "you" and "we" it is to emphasize the use of these words as opposed to using words like "country" and "my". The words "we" and "you" are so much more personal in context than other political usages of words to refer to the voting people of America. An example to further prove the point is a quote taken from the previously mentioned acceptance speech: "We (nation-people) came together in a

national crusade to make America great again and to make  
"America great again." "and to make" 'a new beginning.'"<sup>3</sup>

Another aspect of Ronald Reagan's political rhetoric is his great use of tying together visual images and verbal language. For example, President Reagan, in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Dallas, Texas, was speaking of the journey of the Olympic torch across various lands of America. His account of the journey not only left a running account of where the torch traveled, but it also gave people images from his quite prolific descriptions of the people who encountered the torch.

The passage, only pointing out a part of it, goes like this:

All through the spring and summer, we (American people in general) marvelled at the journey of the Olympic torch as it made its passage, east to west. Over 9,000 miles, by some 4,000 runners, that flame crossed a portrait of our nation. From our Gotham City, New York, to the cradle of liberty, Boston, across the lovely Appalachian springtime, to the city of the big shoulders, Chicago... And then, in San Francisco, a Vietnamese immigrant, his little son held on his shoulders, dogged photographers and police motorcycles to cheer a 19-year-old black man pushing an 88-year-old white woman in a wheelchair as she carried the torch.<sup>4</sup>

President Reagan is quoted as saying, from the same text as used above from the Republican National Convention in Dallas: "We (Reagan administration) proclaimed a dream of an America that would be 'a shining city on a hill'"<sup>5</sup>

All through his political rhetoric, President Reagan constantly uses prolific words and phrases as key ingredients to his persuasive language. The above passage examples prove this to be true.

President Reagan not only uses the issues of tax cuts and the simplification of government and government spending in his political rhetoric, but he also uses the extremely controversial issues of abortion, ERA, and prayer in school. These two issues of prayer in school (i.e., related to religion which is always a touchy issue in a Presidential election) and abortion are two very sensitive issues to take either a positive or a negative stand on in a Presidential election.

Reagan, according to the book, The American Elections of 1980, edited by Austin Ranney, was anti-abortion and anti-ERA in the 1980 Presidential election. Reagan's rhetoric then and his rhetoric in the 1984 Presidential election on these two issues was the same: Reagan is against both abortion and ERA. The abortion issue, though, was a big issue with womens' groups in both the 1980 and the 1984 Presidential elections. According to Mr. Ranney, the 1980 Presidential election focused heavily on the issues of abortion and ERA. He went on to say in his book that feminist groups and pro-abortionists fought Reagan's group for clearer stands on how he felt about legally expressing his views on these issues.<sup>6</sup>

Mr. Reagan's rhetoric in both 1980 and in 1984 on the issues of abortion and ERA are more clearly pinned down in this passage from Mr. Ranney's book:

ERA and abortion remained the biggest burrs under Reagan's saddle. Satisfying conservative activists on these issues had always been fairly easy: he (Reagan) opposed ERA and abortion.<sup>7</sup>

In Blue Smoke and Mirrors (How Reagan Won and Why Carter Lost the Election of 1980), authors Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover

elaborated on the differences of then President Jimmy Carter and his Republican opponent Ronald Reagan. One point mentioned in the book was the image of Reagan in 1980 as one who would push our country into a war. Germond's and Witcover's book indicated President Carter made several statements describing Reagan as war-like. In retaliation to these statements to the press, Reagan made this statement to the press:

Every time you (Jimmy Carter in 1980) talk about national security and restoring the margin of safety that...for thirty years this country has had, there are those who say that's war-like, that this is the fellow (Reagan) who wants to take us into war. I think to accuse that anyone would deliberately want a war is beneath decency.<sup>8</sup>

However, Reagan does push for America's strong defense policies abroad. From the text of Reagan's acceptance speech from the Republican National Convention mentioned earlier in the paper from Dallas, Texas, Reagan explains how important a strong military defense is to our country, since other countries, like Russia, are presenting dangers to us. This passage from his acceptance speech text mentioned earlier best shows how hard-hitting and to-the-point Reagan's beliefs in a strong military defense can be to him. I also think that the following passage best expresses how President Reagan tries and succeeds in going right for the conscious and the pride of the American people:

Our policy (defense policy of the Reagan administration) 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(nation) were too strong. It is weakness that invites adventurous adversaries to make mistaken judgments.<sup>9</sup>

Reagan plays on the emotions of the American people to a large degree in his political rhetoric to get the persuasive edge in his speeches. This passage, also from the text from the Republican National Convention mentioned above, further shows this:

Today our troops have newer and better equipment, and 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 are 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.<sup>10</sup>

On the subject of education, Reagan has made cuts on the amounts of federal subsidized grants for college students, claiming that it was done to keep the students who can afford to attend a public college from getting the federal funds from possible students who really need the money to attend college. On the other hand, Reagan has pushed for tuition tax credit for the parents of students attending private schools, approaching this issue on the emotional appeal rhetorical style that he employs in his speeches. The following passage from Reagan's acceptance speech text shows this:

Millions of average parents pay their full share of taxes to support public schools, while choosing to send their children to parochial or other independent schools. Doesn't fairness dictate that they should have some help in carrying this double burden?<sup>11</sup>

Before concluding this paper, this writer would not be too fair to the readers if the "I love America, how about you?" rhetorical speech style of Reagan's political persuasion were not mentioned. This rhetorical style is used by him to not only

make the American citizen feel better about himself/herself, but also about their country and what he and his administration have done to put us (nation and the people) back in a respectable position, both at home and abroad.

President Reagan's acting past has aided him in using his rhetoric. This good camera appearance that he projects to the people of America (no doubt due to his acting background?) on television helps him to get the attention of the people. He has had experience in trying to convince people of his various characters and characteristics with his acting past, so why not use this type of rhetorical style in a political situation? He has incorporated both acting skills rhetoric and his own political rhetoric in winning voters and other forms of support for his ideas.

With statements like the one that follows from the acceptance speech text of Ronald Reagan, one can see why he is able to capture the attention of the American people and to gain their support:

Today, of all the major industrial nations of the world, America has the strongest economic growth; one of the lowest inflation rates: the fastest rate of job creation, ... 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.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ronald Reagan with Richard G. Hubler, *Where's the Rest of Me?* (New York: Karz Publishers, 1981), p. 297.

<sup>2</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>4</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>5</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>6</sup>Austin Ranney, ed., *The American Elections of 1980* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1982), pp. 103-121.

<sup>7</sup>Ranney, pp. 114-115.

<sup>8</sup>Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Blue Smoke and Mirrors (How Reagan Won and Why Carter Lost the Election of 1980)* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), p. 247.

<sup>9</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>10</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>11</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.

<sup>12</sup>New York Times, August 24, 1984.