

Analysis of reagans  
national association  
of evangelicals  
speech politics essay



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In President Reagan's remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, he uses the association with the Convention, appeals to a common ethical background and relevant historical examples to persuade the Convention to be involved in politics and to persuade the American public that the conflict against communism is a matter of good versus evil in an attempt to solicit more support in the increase in hostilities against the Soviet Union and the push against secularism dominating moral decisions in America. Just a few years into his first term, President Reagan was not a man to shrink from challenge or controversy. Well entrenched in his belief that man was good and that good would eventually defeat evil, he used this speech to hammer home the ideas that he held into his audience, and also give warning to his enemies.

Perhaps the most important rhetorical strategy of President Reagan's speech was its setting. In choosing to deliver this speech before the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, the President was able to affect many details that added credibility and weight to his speech in one fell swoop. Already known for his strong conviction in God, the fact that he would speak before this group was not shocking, nor was it shocking that he would take a stance against some more liberal policies being pushed in political circles at the time. It was this sense of comfort and security that worked on President Reagan's behalf twofold. By allowing both opponents and allies alike to believe that this was simply any other speech, President Reagan is able to free himself from concerns about how the speech will be received and helps set up for the bait and switch later on.

Once the tone, general Republican rhetoric, and style of the speech was established, it had become apparent that President Reagan was planning to use the speech as a political pulpit to combat certain liberal agendas that he was not in favor of, such as abortion without parental notification or the starving of disabled infants. Both of these examples carried with them extreme moral weight with the crowd and President Reagan made sure to place himself on the side of the audience, that is the belief that all life needs 'its right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness . . . protected.' By using this assumption of his goal along with the audience mirroring his ethical code, President Reagan set up a bait-and-switch, in that his solidified brotherhood with the audience used this agreement of goals and morals to make a more significant statement. This more significant statement flows from the same lines of reason and logic that was previously identified and accepted, but is a statement that the audience would generally be uncomfortable making. By putting the reasoning first, President Reagan checkmates the audience into agreement, thus a bait and switch.

The bait-and-switch itself was rather simple. In the initial portion of the speech, President Reagan appealed to the ethical nature of the audience by giving examples of current events and using the audience's common ethical background to create common ground with that audience. He also seeks to calm the audience by informing them that they are not the minority as the media of the time made them feel. '95 percent of those surveyed expressed a belief in God,' President Reagan assured, 'and a huge majority believed the Ten Commandments had real meaning in their lives.' This information was perfectly aimed at his audience of Christian Evangelicals. He went on to

say that most studies found most Americans disapproved of adultery, teenage sex, pornography, abortion, and hard drugs. By using these facts, President Reagan was able to convey a measure of strength and confidence to the audience, and an important strategy of this speech emerges. By allowing the audience to feel comfortable in accepting President Reagan's assertions, and once the audience was made to feel emboldened and powerful by acts of support through the country, President Reagan could make assertions based off of this camaraderie with the audience. Having bolstered his credibility and logical base, P. Reagan then applied all of this to his final point, the labeling of the Soviet Union as the ' Evil Empire' that must be fought.

While President Reagan had previously described the Soviet Union with other disparaging remarks, such as declaring that the Soviet Union would soon be on the ' ash heap of history', this statement declared an entire sovereign nation to be not just belligerent or stubborn, but whole heartedly evil, drawing parallels to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Such an accusation speaks volume to President Reagan's characterization of the conflict between the Western World and the Soviet Bloc. In addition to simply escalating his previous rhetoric, this statement makes it clear that President Reagan saw the conflict as not just an intellectual battle between competing economic and political systems, but a moral battle between good and evil. .

In an excellent use of debate technique, before declaring the Soviet Union evil President Reagan made sure to shield his argument from outside criticism that the United States itself had some aspects of evil in it by acknowledging that the ' nation, too, has a legacy of evil with which it must

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deal. The glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past. For example, the long struggle of minority citizens for equal rights, once a source of disunity and civil war is now a point of pride for all Americans. . . There is no room for racism, anti-Semitism, or other forms of ethnic and racial hatred in this country.' By looking inwardly first, President Reagan disallowed his opponents from using these exact previous transgressions against his argument.

Once President Reagan has made this declarative statement and due to the skill used by President Reagan in setting up the bait and switchup to this point in his speech, the conclusion that the Soviet Union is 'evil' was actually a foregone one; President Reagan named and analyzed other examples of evil, all of which were being committed or existing in the Soviet Union at the time. He draws these examples from the founding fathers of America and in doing so both adds credibility to the speech as well as add emotional support to the cause. Calling on William Penn, President Reagan stated, 'If we will not be governed by God, we must be governed by tyrants,' and followed with Jefferson, 'The God that gave us life gave us liberty at the same time.' In theme with the founding fathers, President Reagan then finishes us his litany of quotes with perhaps the most venerated founding father George Washington, who said, 'Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.'

Using these quotes as well as the ethical and moral foundation he laid earlier in his speech, President Reagan explains to the audience the exact reasons why the Soviet Union is in fact evil. Marxist-Leninists, President Reagan

points out, believe that the only morality allowed in the Soviet Union is one  
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that furthers the cause of world revolution. In paraphrasing Lenin, President Reagan let the audience know that the Soviet Government officially believes the any morality based on 'supernatural ideas" should be rejected and that morality of any sort was subordinate to class warfare, the goal of the Soviet Revolution. Using these pointed examples, President Reagan asserts that morality and religion are seen by the Soviet Union as tools of the oppressors, and that in order to have a new beginning, both must be destroyed. Thus, President Reagan concludes, the Soviet Union will eventually seek the destruction of the very religion and morals the audience holds at the center of their existence.

Having already convinced the audience that it is in fact America's belief in morality and religion that had allowed America to be as successful as it had been, and the assumed fact that religion and morality are central cores to the audiences' life, President Reagan completed his bait-and-switch. By refocusing the energies and drive of the audience from the earlier domestic agendas to the foreign realm, President Reagan was able to elicit a solid base of support as well as a convincing argument, for combatting the Soviet Union on a platform not based on economic disagreements, but moral imperatives on par with the eternal struggle of good and evil. By being able to label America and her allies as good, and the Soviet Union and its protectorates as evil, President Reagan had established his reasoning for dealing with the Soviet Union, and at the same time acted very effectually to convince his audience, the Convention as well and America as a whole, that they needed to become involved in domestic and foreign policies as a matter of morality; the struggle of good versus evil.