

The shuttle
challenger tragedy
address: a speech by
former president
ronald reaga...



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On January 28, 1986 the space program of the United States of America (NASA) experienced one of the most tragic moments in its history. A Space Shuttle disintegrated in mid-flight as many spectators are cheering the seven crew member into a supposed to be routine mission. But it turned out to be a nightmare for the families of the crew members, for the NASA community, for all Americans but especially so for the young children who watched the live coverage of the take-off only to be witnesses to a horrifying sight.

What seemed to be - for a 21st century student or history buff - a simple case of a major accident in the space exploration sector immediately transformed into a national crisis. This is because the tragedy was framed in the context of the 1980's - the Cold War was still very much in effect.

Secondly, NASA was still in its golden age; two decades ago man was able to walk on the surface of the moon through this space agency. Thirdly, children saw what happened in full color on national TV. In every crisis, the people cry out for a leader.

At that time, America was blessed to have Ronald Reagan as their president. The speech was not only a testament that he indeed is a great communicator but also it cemented his legacy as one of the greatest leaders in American history. His Shuttle Challenger address is also an example of what good leadership and good communication can do to lead a nation out of confusion and despair. Objective As mentioned earlier the nation and former President Ronald Reagan were faced with a triple headed problem. The first one concerns the tragedy itself and its effect on NASA and the seven families of the seven member crew.

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The second concerns the children who were witnesses to the terrible tragedy, their young minds bewildered by the day's events. And thirdly, the political aspect of the tragedy had to be addressed as well because at that time the U. S. was in psychological and ideological war with the former U. S. S. R. communist machine - they too have their space program and they use it as propaganda for communism's attributes. The first two parts of the objective was easy to detect because Reagan directly made it known to the public. Also, the tragedy was still fresh in the minds of the people so there is no mistaking that it is what he wanted to address.

The third part of the address which is to deal with the position of the United States as a superpower with an excellent space program and its significance in the Cold War era was inserted in the middle of the speech in a more subtle manner but there again there was no way the audience could miss what he wanted to convey. When addressing the tragedy and the shocked eyewitnesses, Reagan made a direct approach. In the beginning of the speech he said that he was supposed to deliver another very important message concerning the state of the union but the tragedy took precedence over that.

Reagan's heartrending expression was enough to convey a message of grieving and mourning and immediately the audience felt his heart that he wanted to convey his condolences to the family and that he wanted to be one with the space agency in their darkest moments. In addressing the political aspect of the tragedy Reagan used an indirect approach and he used a tragedy and the name of the tragedy - Challenger - took it and transformed it into a challenge for the American people and for NASA.
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And he used it to change the atmosphere from despair to hope to a feeling of greatness and somewhere in between challenged the hegemony of the U. S. S. R. that this nation will not be shaken. That was the stuff of legend and of great communication. Organizational Pattern Reagan organized his speech in an ascending manner – dealing first with the immediate issue at hand, addressing the family of the victims and then went on to go into more generalized topics. The speech started in a very personal way and proceeded to more broader issues but still related to the main topic. In the speech Reagan used a lot of comparing and contrasting and at the same time uses a lot of parallelism.

This method of describing and putting what happened in Delivery Dynamics Reagan's main goal was to assure a shocked nation that is not only privy to the facts of the tragic incident but were also eyewitnesses of the same. His second major goal was to comfort the grieving families of Challenger 7. So in the beginning of the speech Reagan made a very personal appeal and he started off by saying, " Nancy and I are pained to the core by the tragedy. " This single statement alone created such an impact and framed the rest of the speech.

By addressing his wife not as the first lady but as Nancy the president made known his real feelings about the incident. He has broken the wall separating the presidency and the people. By saying that he and his wife Nancy were pained to the core, he was inviting the grieving members of the families of the Challenger crew to come into his inner circle and mourn with them. But not only that, he invited to the whole nation to share in that pain. In order to

provide a sense of bearing or in a more technical language provide context
Reagan used comparisons, contrasts, and parallelisms.

He used these techniques to paint a picture that the audience can easily connect to. He began the contextualizing by framing it with a historical backdrop and he said, "Nineteen years ago almost to the day, we lost three astronauts in a terrible accident on the ground". With this statement Reagan was able to deliver two major ideas. First, that this is not the first time for this kind of accident to happen in U. S. soil in general and in NASA in particular. Secondly, Reagan was making it clear that this one is more tragic than the first.

He was not trying to make it easier to swallow; he was just being honest about it. In the later part of the speech his honesty was rewarded because he was able to transform this apparent weakness into strength when he implied that unlike other governments they cover up this sort of accidents and they do not tell the world what really happened. At the latter part of the speech he again used techniques of comparing and contrasting but this time instead of framing the problem he wanted the audience to understand the significance of the Challenger 7's actions.

Reagan reminded the people that 390 years ago a man named Sir Francis Drake made a similar choice, to offer his life for the sake of exploration and in the quest for truth. He used this illustration to make the American public realize that in order to do something of significance, a requirement of a higher sacrifice is also needed. At the end of the speech Reagan used

this technique subtly when he compared the astronauts' eagerness to launch into space as the ultimate step to touching the face of God.

And the audience were left with that image, not of foul and terrifying death but of an image of free souls able to enter the realm of the divine and fellowshiping in His presence. Conclusion The former president Richard Nixon attests to Reagan's public speaking prowess and his ability to communicate when he made this following comment that Reagan has, "...the ability to present his views in a reasonable and eloquent manner" (as cited in Roper, 2000, p. 136). At the beginning of the speech Reagan told the nation that he and his wife Nancy was suffering immensely because of the tragedy.

This immediately conveyed warmth and a personal touch that the grieving family of the Challenger 7 so desperately needed. It was powerful and it was moving. In that introduction alone he was able to achieve his main goal of reaching out to the said families. His sincerity, warmth, and honesty overpower whatever public speaking technique was employed to deliver that speech. Reagan was a great communicator because the audience could not sense any unease or any conscious effort to stick to the plan and the use of communication tools.

It was just effortless and as mentioned earlier the honesty was just so real that it is difficult not to be moved by the address. To be sure techniques were indeed used. The speech was made in the office of the President. That was a prop used very well. It tells the whole world that this tragedy will be addressed not by a senior administrator at NASA but by the Commander-in-Chief himself. The facial expression was amazing in that it conveyed real

grief and yet at the same time it was like looking at a fatherly image of a Jor-el the father of Superman.

Reagan was like a hero exposing a tender side but still like a fierce warrior-leader was able to rally his troops. He was telling NASA do not be disheartened hold your head up. He was telling the families we grieve with you but your sons and daughters made the ultimate sacrifice and you must be proud of that. He was telling the children this is what heroes are made of and if they wanted to achieve something significant then they too must be willing to pay the price. Finally, he was implying to the communist bloc that this is how democracy is practiced in the real world. All the intended recipient of the message heard it all loud and clear.