

Ronald Wilson Reagan (1911-2004)

Election Eve Address “A Vision for America”

given on November 3, 1980

The election will be over soon, autumn will become winter, this year will fade into next . . . and yet, the decisions we make tomorrow will determine our country's course through what promises to be one of the most perilous decades in our history.

I know that tonight the fate of America's 52 hostages is very much on the minds of all of us. Like you, there is nothing I want more than their safe return--that they be reunited with their families after this long year of imprisonment.

When they have returned, all of us will be turning to the concerns that will determine the course of America in the next four years.

A child born this year will begin his or her adult life in what will be the 21st century. What kind of country, what kind of legacy will we leave to these young men and women who will live out America's third century as a nation?

10 In thinking about these questions, many Americans seem to be wondering, searching. . . feeling frustrated and perhaps even a little afraid.

Many of us are unhappy about our worsening economic problems, about the constant crisis atmosphere in our foreign policy, about our diminishing prestige around the globe, about the weakness in our economy and national security that jeopardizes world peace, about our lack of strong, straight-forward leadership.

15 And many Americans today, just as they did 200 years ago, feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.

Americans, who have always known that excessive bureaucracy is the enemy of excellence and compassion, want a change in public life—a change that makes government work for people. They seek a vision of a better America, a vision of society that frees the energies and ingenuity of our people while it extends compassion to the lonely, the desperate, and the forgotten.

I believe we can embark on a new age of reform in this country and an era of national renewal. An era that will reorder the relationship between citizen and government, that will make government again responsive to people, that will revitalize the values of family, work, and neighborhood and that will restore our private and independent social institutions. These institutions always have served as both buffer and bridge between the individual and the state—and these institutions, not government, are the real sources of our economic and social progress as a people.

That's why I've said throughout this campaign that we must control and limit the growth of federal spending, that we must reduce tax rates to stimulate work and savings and investment. That's why I've said we can relieve labor and business of burdensome, unnecessary regulations and still maintain high standards of environmental and occupational safety. That's why I've said we can reduce the cost of government by eliminating billions lost to waste and fraud in the federal bureaucracy—a problem that is now an unrelenting national scandal. And because we are a Federation of sovereign states, we can restore the health and vitality of state and local governments by returning to them control over programs best run at those levels of government closer to the people. We can fight corruption while we work to bring into our government women and men of competence and high integrity.

35 This last pledge is particularly important. No person who understands the American presidency can possibly hope to make every decision or tend to every detail in the national government. But he can promise to bring to government the best leaders in this nation and put them to work for the American people.

During the past three months, many of these leaders have been working—as part of our transition process—on ways to reform the federal bureaucracy—to make it truly a partnership between people and government.

40 With their help and guidance, some of the reforms I will seek to implement, if elected, are:

--a new structuring of the presidential cabinet that will make cabinet officers the managers of the national administration—not captives of the bureaucracy or special interests in the departments they are supposed to direct.

--businesslike revisions of federal auditing and management procedures. Such revisions are long overdue and will ultimately save billions in wasted tax dollars.

45 --appointment of a special ombudsman to work with labor and industry groups to strengthen needed federal regulations while eliminating those that are burdensome and unnecessarily costly.

--we would seek to put the Social Security system back on a sound financial footing so there can never be any question about its strength.

--the appointment of special panels of top law enforcement experts to deal with the menacing problems of organized
50 crime, drug abuse and the corruption of public officials.

I realize these reforms provide an ambitious agenda for our nations in the next four years. But I believe each of these objectives can be achieved.

In accomplishing these goals, it will be imperative to establish a close working relationship with the new Congress. No objective will be more important to me, if I am elected president, than that of opening a new era of cooperation
55 between the executive and legislative branches of government.

These are much more than promises made in an election campaign. When I first entered office as Governor of California, that state--which, if it were a nation, would be the seventh greatest economic power in the world--faced many of the same problems that confront our nation today.

We brought into California government the best leaders from the private and public sectors. We cut the rate of
60 government spending and provided billions in tax relief to our citizens. We brought the state back from bankruptcy by working closely with the legislature in constructing a welfare program that put cheaters off the rolls, reducing them by 350,000, while it increased benefits to the truly needy. The Urban Institute, a Washington non-profit scholarly foundation, recently referred to this program as a "major policy success."

That's why I am confident we can effect the reforms I have mentioned--reforms that will get government off our
65 backs, out of our pockets and up to the standards of decency and excellence envisioned by the founding fathers.

But beyond even these reforms--as important as they are--there is something more, much more, that needs to be said tonight.

That's why I want to talk with you--not about campaign issues--but about America, about us, you and me.

Not so long ago, we emerged from a world war. Turning homeward at last, we built a grand prosperity and
70 hoped--from our own success and plenty--to help others less fortunate.

Our peace was a tense and bitter one, but in those days the center seemed to hold.

Then came the hard years: riots and assassinations, domestic strife over the Vietnam War and in the last four years, drift and disaster in Washington.

It all seems a long way from a time when politics was a national passion and sometimes even fun.

75 A popular novel of the '60s ended prophetically with its description of a "kindly, pleasant, greening land about to learn whether history still has a place for a nation so strangely composed of great ideals and uneasy compromise as she."

That is really the question before us tonight: for the first time in our memory many Americans are asking: does history still have a place for America, for her people, for her great ideals? There are some who answer "no;" that our energy is
80 spent, our days of greatness at an end, that a great national malaise is upon us.

They say we must cut our expectations, conserve and withdraw, that we must tell our children...not to dream as we once dreamed.

Last year I lost a friend who was more than a symbol of the Hollywood dream industry; to millions he was a symbol of our country itself. And when he died, the headlines seemed to convey all the doubt about America, all the nostalgia
85 for a seemingly lost past.

"The Last American Hero," said one headline, "Mr. America dies, " said another.

Well, I knew John Wayne well, and no one would have been angrier at being called the "last American hero."

Just before his death, he said in his own blunt way, "Just give the American people a good cause, and there's nothing they can't lick." Duke Wayne did not believe that our country was ready for the dust bin of history, and if we'll just
90 think about it we too will know it isn't.

Have we forgotten that night several years ago when we waited through the long hours watching our TV screens for that first plane to land at Clark Field in the Philippines bearing our men who had been prisoners of the North Vietnamese? Finally the moment came. What would we see when that plane door opened? Those men had been imprisoned and tortured by savage captors for years—as many as ten in some cases. The door opened, and we had our
95 answer--Admiral Jeremiah Denton came down the ramp, saluted our country's flag, thanked us for bringing them home and said, "God Bless America."

I was Governor of California at the time, and Nancy and I were privileged to have many of the returned P.O.W.'s in our home on four different occasions. We heard stories of incredible heroism and unbelievable horror told without bitterness or attempt at embellishment. We saw two men meet in our home, hear each other's name and throw their
100 arms around each other—they were the closest of friends, knew every detail of each other's life, but they were seeing each other face to face for the first time in their lives, there in our home. Their friendship had been built up over the years, tapping code on the wall that divided their solitary confinement cells.

One night after such an evening had ended, I asked Nancy, "where did we find such men?" The answer came to me as quickly as I had asked the question. We found them where we've always found them. In our shops, on our farms, on
105 our city streets, in our villages and towns. They are just the product of the freest society the world has ever known.

There were astronauts Virgil Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee who died as other Americans had died in opening new frontiers. Their courage was remembered when later the message came back to earth from other astronauts—"the eagle has landed." Man had set foot on the moon.

These were not the deeds of men who set out to be heroes. In many ways they were ordinary Americans whose
110 spontaneous response to time and circumstance gave us a glimpse into the soul of this country and enduring vigor of her people.

Do not mistake me, no reasonable man who sees the world as it is, who views the deterioration of our economy, the waning of our relationships with our allies, the growth of Soviet might and the sufferings of our recent past could underestimate the difficulties before us.

115 But I wonder if those who doubt America have forgotten that just as in the lives of individuals so too in the lives of nations: it is always when things seem most unbearable—that we must have faith that America's trials have meaning beyond our own understanding.

Since her beginning America has held fast to this hope of divine providence, this vision of "man with God."

It is true that world peace is jeopardized by those who view man—not as a noble being—but as an accident of nature,
120 without soul, and important only to the extent he can serve an all powerful state.

But it is our spiritual commitment—more than all the military might in the world—that will win our struggle for peace.

It is not "bombs and rockets" but belief and resolve—it is humility before God that is ultimately the source of America's strength as a nation.

125 Our people always have held fast to this belief, this vision, since our first days as a nation.

I know I have told before of the moment in 1630 when the tiny ship Arabella bearing settlers to the New World lay off the Massachusetts coast. To the little bank of settlers gathered on the deck John Winthrop said: "we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the
130 world."

Well, America became more than "a story," or a "byword"—more than a sterile footnote in history. I have quoted John Winthrop's words more than once on the campaign trail this year—for I believe that Americans in 1980 are every bit as committed to that vision of a shining "city on a hill," as were those long ago settlers.

We celebrated our 200th anniversary as a nation a short time ago. Fireworks exploded over Boston harbor, Arthur Fiedler conducted, thousands cheered and waved Old Glory.

These were not just images of a bicentennial; they were reminders of our birthright of freedom—and of generous, fervent patriotism that burns in America. A patriotism that shows itself sometimes in very unexpected places. Remember "baseball's designated patriot"—Rick Monday—an outfielder for the Chicago Cubs who on April 25, 1976, at Dodger Stadium grabbed our flag from two demonstrators who were trying to burn it in center field—and as he came off the field to the dugout, carrying the flag, thousands stood and cheered and then found themselves singing "God Bless America."

During this last year, I have had a chance to meet and talk on the campaign trail with Americans in every corner of the United States.

I find no national malaise, I find nothing wrong with the American people. Oh, they are frustrated, even angry at what has been done to this blessed land. But more than anything they are sturdy and robust as they have always been.

Any nation that sees softness in our prosperity or disunity—in our sometimes noisy arguments with each other—let such nations not make the mistakes others have made—let them understand that we will put aside in a moment the fruits of our prosperity and the luxury of our disagreements if the cause is a safe and peaceful future for our children.

Let it always be clear that we have no dreams of empire, that we seek no manifest destiny, that we understand the limitations of any one nation's power.

But let it also be clear that we do not shirk history's call; that America is not turned inward but outward—toward others. Let it be clear that we have not lessened our commitment to peace or to the hope that someday all of the people of the world will enjoy lives of decency, lives with a degree of freedom, with a measure of dignity.

Together, tonight, let us say what so many long to hear: that America is still united, still strong, still compassionate, still clinging fast to the dream of peace and freedom, still willing to stand by those who are persecuted or alone.

For those who seek the right to self-determination without interference from foreign powers, tonight let us speak for them,

For those who suffer from social or religious discrimination,

For those who are victims of police states or government induced torture or terror,

For those who are persecuted,

For all the countries and people of the world who seek only to live in harmony with each other, tonight let us speak for them.

And to our allies—who regard us with such constant puzzlement and profound affection—we must also speak tonight.

To our Canadian neighbors who so recently rescued Americans in Teheran, to the people of Great Britain to whom ties of blood, language and culture bind so closely, to the people of France who midwived our birth as a nation, to the people of Germany and Japan with whom we bound up the wounds of war, to the people of Ireland and Italy and all the ethnic communities whose national heritages have enriched this nation and become our own, to the people of Israel with whom we enjoy the closest of friendships, to the people of Latin America, Australia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Korea—to all our allies great and small, we say tonight: at last the sleeping giant stirs and is filled with resolve—a resolve that we will win together our struggle for world peace—our struggle for the human spirit.

And to the people of Africa, we say that we seek a lasting, just and close relationship.

To the people of China, with whom we have begun the first important steps to friendship—let it be known to them that we mean for that friendship to bring our peoples closer together.

To the people of Russia—if only we could speak to them without their government intervening, they would know our
175 willingness to build an enduring peace.

Tonight, my fellow Americans, we have reached deep into our national past—remembered the words and deeds of great men who have gone before us.

But before I close, I want to leave with you a speech by a man not so well remembered in history, but those words, spoken on the eve of our struggle for independence, should uplift and inspire now as surely as they did in 1775.
180 Joseph Warren, a Boston doctor, left us these words before giving his life at Bunker Hill: "Our country is in danger, but not to be despaired of...on you depend the fortunes of America—you are to decide the important question, on which rests the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves."

Tomorrow morning, you will be making a choice between different visions of the future. Your decision is a uniquely personal one. It belongs to no one but you. It will be critical in determining the path we will follow in the years ahead.

185 If you feel that Mr. Carter has faithfully served America with the kind of competence and distinction which deserve four more years in office, then you should vote for him. If he has given you the kind of leadership you are looking for, if he instills in you pride for our country and a sense of optimism about our future, then he should be reelected.

But consider these questions as well when you finally make your decision:

Are you more confident that our economy will create productive work for our society or are you less confident? Do
190 you feel you can keep the job you have or gain a job if you don't have one?

Are you satisfied that inflation as the highest rates in 33 years were the best that we could do? Are interest rates at 14 percent something you are prepared to live with?

Are you pleased with the ability of young people to buy a home; of the elderly to live their remaining years in happiness; of our youngsters to take pride in the world we have build for them?

195 Is our nation stronger and more capable of leading the world toward peace and freedom or is it weaker?

Is there more stability in the world or less?

Are you convinced that we have earned the respect of the world and our allies, or has America's position across the globe diminished?

Are you personally more secure in your life? Is your family more secure? Is America safer in the world?

200 And, most importantly--quite simply--the basic question of our lives: are you happier today than when Mr. Carter became President of the United States?

I cannot answer those questions for you. Only you can.

It is autumn now in Washington, and the residents there say that more than ever during the past few years, Americans are coming to visit their capital—some say because economic conditions rule out more expensive vacations
205 elsewhere; some say an election year has heightened interest in the workings of the national government.

Others say something different: in a time when our values, when our place in history is so seriously questioned, they say Americans want their sons and daughters to see what is still for them and for so many other millions in the world a city offering the "last best hope of man on earth!"

You can see them—these Washington visitors—looking for the famous as they walk through congressional hallways; see them as they return silent and tightlipped to tour buses that brought them for a walk through rows of white crosses in Arlington Cemetery; you can see them as they look up at a towering statue of Jefferson or out from the top of the Washington Monument; or as they read the words inscribed at the Lincoln Memorial. "Let us bind up the nation's wounds."

These visitors to that city on the Potomac do not come as white or black, red or yellow; they are not Jews or
215 Christians; conservatives or liberals; or Democrats or Republicans. They are Americans awed by what has gone before, proud of what for them is still...a shining city on a hill.

At this very moment, some young American, coming up along the Virginia or Maryland shores of the Potomac is seeing for the first time the lights that glow on the great halls of our government and the monuments to the memory of our great men.

220 Let us resolve tonight that young Americans will always see those Potomac lights; that they will always find there a city of hope in a country that is free. And let us resolve they will say of our day and our generation that we did keep faith with our God, that we did act "worthy of ourselves;" that we did protect and pass on lovingly that shining city on a hill.

(3655 words)

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