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*Not the Final Frontier: A Rhetorical
Analysis of Ronald Reagan's Challenger
Eulogy*

Stephanie Gorsek '18



“Aiming High in ‘81” reads the headline of *TIME* magazine in their January 1981 issue, with the sub-headline optimistically proclaiming “Like the U.S., the space shuttle *Columbia* is looking up as the year begins” (Rosenblatt). What superseded the United States’ Space Craze of the late 1950s and 1960s would come to be known as the Space Race, an expedition to the final frontier against democratic enemy Soviet Russia. With the thrill of first place on the minds of many Americans, the 1980s only amplified the nation’s curiosity for space through pop culture phenomena from *Star Wars* to *Space Invaders*. It was a decade that dared to go into the unceasingly vast universe with president Ronald Reagan seated at the helm in the captain’s chair, continuously supporting the space shuttle and its manned missions into the cosmos. Kids had a new job in mind when asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. They wanted to go to space. With the consistently successful *Columbia* missions, the race seemed to put the nation in the lead by a long shot, and NASA’s second space shuttle, the *Challenger*, followed suit in the *Columbia*’s footsteps in 1983. Space exploration in the United States was at an unsurpassed high, and both NASA and Reagan felt unstoppable in their quests through the first half of the 1980s.

Yet, progress into space exploration came to an abrupt halt on the afternoon of January 28, 1986 when 73 seconds into its launch, the *Challenger* exploded into pieces, killing all seven members aboard the ship while citizens watched the tragic event occur on live television. Lunch lines halted in schools. Principals everywhere announced on their P.A. systems that the *Challenger* had been blown to pieces. The dreams of many youth vanished at 11:39 a.m. as schoolchildren and teachers watched the disaster unfold, seeing one of the crew members, an elementary school teacher named Mrs. McAuliffe, reduced to ash. Her children were six and nine years old the day of the crash (Corrigan 3-4). The catastrophically unexpected *Challenger* disaster sent shockwaves throughout the entire nation, and many looked to president Ronald Reagan for hope and guidance on how to move forward. On that day in 1986, Reagan stepped down from the commander's chair to play the role of comforting father who would urge the nation to see this crisis merely as a roadblock in moving toward further advancements in space exploration.

Because the *Challenger* launch was broadcasted live, both President Reagan and the rest of the nation watched the disaster in real time, grappling to take in the trauma that unraveled in front of their eyes. So, Reagan combined his passion for space with epideictic rhetoric to grieve for failure endured and lives lost but also exalt the successes of NASA and frame the *Challenger's* fate as motivation to continue moving forward in these expeditions. The primary goals of Reagan's eulogy were to express his sympathies with the crew members, instill hope and a passion for space in his audience, and to justify the continuation of space exploration despite the setback the *Challenger* posed. He unites his viewers with epideictic rhetoric that both sympathizes for the loss of the crew members and makes justifications in supporting the

nation's journeys to space, and I argue that the rhetorical formula of his eulogy is cloaked with an American mythos in the hopes of encouraging Americans to see the *Challenger* as a commitment based upon the future. Additionally, Reagan's ability to combine the two components of sympathy and assertive encouragement all under a narrative of American values is what makes rhetorical critics praise his speech as a peculiar yet eloquent one. His effectiveness in conciliatory rhetoric was particularly important for his presidency, considering he had contributed significant amounts of support and funding to NASA's space program for years and to stop there would be essentially a waste.

Reagan had shown support for NASA and their space exploration program since his first term as president, as the space shuttle *Columbia* launched on April 12, 1981 for its first mission. John Noble Wilford of *The New York Times* mentions shuttle operations director George F. Page delivered a message from President Reagan to astronauts John W. Young and Captain Robert L. Crippen that reads "Through you, today, we all feel as giants once again. Once again we feel the surge of pride that comes from knowing we are the first and we are the best and we are so because we are free" (Wilford). Fortunately, the *Columbia's* first launch was a successful one despite a few of the ship's heat-shielding tiles falling off due to the pressure of the launch, but the words of accomplishment from Reagan aided in the feeling of pride and success. During the *Columbia's* second expedition in November of 1981, Reagan talks to those same astronauts from Mission Control cracking a joke request to pick him up from Edwards Air Force Base and take him to California (Gerhard & Woolley). He also mentions fulfillment again in his message, telling Young and Crippen "All of us here are watching with great pride" (Gerhard & Woolley).

Reagan and his wife eventually do visit Edwards Air Force on the Fourth of July in 1982 to watch the *Columbia* land from its fourth voyage, and Reagan gives a speech expressing his satisfaction of another successful trip, feeling a “real swelling of pride in our chests” (Ronald Reagan Library Archives). He notes that “The conquest of new frontiers for the betterment of our homes and families is a crucial part of our national character” and thanks the astronauts who have gone into space for representing that feature of the United States’ personality (Ronald Reagan Library Archives). He even goes so far as to compare the *Columbia*’s fourth voyage to the golden spike that marked the completion of the Transcontinental railroad. Just as Americans closed the gap between the East and West Coast, so too is the space effort making headway through the galactic frontier. By referencing a significant point of United States industrial history and comparing the country’s history of its quest for the West to space exploration, Reagan emphasizes that these missions into space is an act of patriotic motivation and this century’s manifest destiny. Through Reagan’s brief conversation with the astronauts, his proud and even casual relationship with NASA and its worker becomes increasingly apparent, and his unfaltering passion for the cosmos only increases throughout his presidency.

At the start of 1983, Reagan declared a proclamation that the year would be recognized as the Bicentennial of Air and Space Flight and notes the first instance of a successful manned flight in world history by French balloonist Etienne de Montgolfier. In his relatively brief statement, Reagan views the proclamation of the bicentennial as “an opportunity to increase public awareness of our Nation's achievements in aviation and spaceflight and to rededicate ourselves to the spirit of excellence which has brought us so far so fast” (Gerhard &

Woolley). Once again praising the achievements space exploration has made for the United States, Reagan asks the American people to recognize this day as space voyages continue.

However, the public did not seem to share the same appreciation and motivations Reagan held over the space shuttle expeditions as shown in a February 1983 poll conducted by the Roper organization who asked if Reagan is spending too much on space exploration, and 52% said he should be spending less possibly due to just recovering from a recession two years prior (Roper Organization 1983). Reagan was also already having trouble passing an increased defense budget in the House of Representatives. On March 23, 1983, Reagan announced the establishment of the Strategic Defense Initiative or SDI, a defense program created by Reagan meant to shoot down nuclear enemy missiles from outer space and provide a shield against potential nuclear attacks from the Soviet Union who were just as busy in their space exploration, creating a space race with much of the public infamously dubbing both Reagan's announcement and competition the "Star Wars." In an *ABC* news broadcast the same evening as his announcement, news anchor Ted Koppel called Reagan's "extraordinary proposal" "one of the most radical turnabouts of our time and strategic nuclear policy" (*US Breaking News*). Near the end of the segment Anchor Jack Smith notes that Reagan "didn't make clear just why the Soviets should not view his proposal with alarm" and goes on to call the proposal "dangerous and provocative." Despite the confusion from the media, Reagan was able to show his competence and experience with space by the end of the year when he gave a statement on the *Columbia* voyages' conclusion, reminding people that "the ultimate frontier of space will be a quest for mankind's highest aspirations—the opportunity for individuals, cooperation

among nations, and peace on Earth” (Gerhard & Woolley). A poll from the Roper Organization revealed that by the end of 1983 only 38% of people thought Reagan was spending too much on space exploration, and by 1984, Reagan was already involved in matters of the cosmos both in space exploration and space defense with the establishment of the SDI.

Even though the SDI eventually passed and was established, the push for peaceful space exploration continued in 1984 when Reagan called to colonize space by creating a manned space station in orbit, effectively normalizing the idea of space travel. In an article from *The Globe and Mail*, Reagan also wanted to reach out to allied nations to join him in his newest space program (Johnson). By normalizing space travel, Reagan could make the idea of going into space more comfortable, and one of ways in which he proceeded with his agenda was the announcement of a Teacher in Space Project in August of 1984 that would put the “first citizen passenger in the history of our space program” (Thomas Tagliente). In July 1985 out of 11,416 applicants Reagan had chosen his winner, New Hampshire elementary school teacher Sharon Christa McAuliffe who in *The Boston Globe* stated that she wanted to “demystify NASA and space flight” (Robinson). According to an article from *The Washington Post*, she planned on keeping a journal during the spaceflight, “just as the pioneer travelers of the Conestoga-wagon days kept personal journals,” as stated in her application (Cohn). Efforts to demystify the commonality of space travel seemed to be going smoothly as observed in a 1986 message on January 22nd to Congress from Reagan that reported NASA’s successful activities from 1984, stating the engineers’ ability to “recover, repair, and redeploy malfunctioning spacecraft. This capability promises substantial savings in

both time and money” (Gerhard & Woolley). Ultimately, his enthusiasm for space could not have been higher.

Then arrived the fated day, just six days after Reagan’s message, where the hopes of both NASA employees and Reagan himself were shattered as they watched the *Challenger* explode only a minute and thirteen seconds into the air. Now, after his immense efforts to promote and fund the space stations and its cosmic quests, Reagan would not only grieve the loss of life and publicly acknowledge the failure of this launch, but he will also have to convince the American people that the nation should persist in the journey toward the great unknown.

That evening, Reagan addressed the disaster with a memorial speech instead of giving his scheduled State of the Union address. His message of grief, hope, and motivation compacted into bite-sized sentences poignant enough for the audience to digest and process express his agenda to move forward with space exploration as well as Reagan’s proudly enthusiastic relationship with NASA and the space program. Journalists, speech analysts, and American public alike remember Reagan’s *Challenger* speech as a touching, inspiring, eloquent one. Lines such as “The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave” and the quote “slipped the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God” remain memorable to this day. Yet, underneath his poetic wording is an epideictic speech that aims to evoke a drive to move forward.

Colleen Shogan, in her book review of Mary E. Stuckey’s book on Reagan’s *Challenger* speech rhetoric, states that President Reagan “used the ceremonial trappings of epideictic address effectively to make a deliberative, political argument about the continuation of the space program” (484). By turning his crisis rhetoric into that of a ceremonial speech, Reagan could work on the grounds of which epideictic rhetoric is based, that is, emphasizing on

unity with the American public, reiterating communal values, and celebrating the successes the nation has successfully accomplished.

Shogan posits that through by typing his sympathy of the deaths for the *Challenger* crew to specific policy goals, Reagan justifies the continuation of NASA and space program. Reagan's fluid change in targeted audience also contributes to both the unification of the country and motivation to continue space exploration. In the speech he "addresses the nation, the families of the astronauts, the children who watched the explosion earlier in the day, and NASA" in that order, which both Chogan and Stuckey argue is deliberate (486). Stuckey notes that to achieve this type of rhetoric is almost remarkable, as it was "routine practice in the Reagan White House to give speech writers a week to write an address" (as cited in Shogan 485). Through his eulogy, he expresses his thought process in moving forward by celebrating what makes the country united, what makes us American.

Several rhetoric scholars have studied four types of crisis: consummatory, justificatory, deliberative, and epideictic. In the case of Ronald Reagan's *Challenger* speech, the focus of this analysis will mainly surround epideictic rhetoric. According to Bonnie J. Dow, who also studied Reagan's speeches in a time of emergency, crisis rhetoric that comes in response to an event "is characterized by epideictic strategies that function to allow the audience to reach a communal understanding of the events which have occurred" (Dow 296). Other than emphasizing communal values, epideictic rhetoric aims to unite the country and work on a basis of memory. One type of epideictic rhetoric that Dow looks at is the eulogy. When the country suffers a loss, not everybody in the nation is directly affected by it, but their lack of understanding over the loss will make them look for

guidance. That is why one of Reagan's epideictic strategies was to have his crisis rhetoric placed "within a context that aligns it past experiences and the beliefs and values that govern their understanding of such experiences" so that the audience may understand the severity of a loss and grow connected to a core of memory (Dow 298). In both speeches Dow analyzes, Reagan places the crisis events in a larger context to comfort his audience and offer them a broader understanding of the crisis, creating rhetoric rooted in emotion and values rather than a "pragmatic defense" (Dow 300). Dow notes that Reagan also made sure to avoid schismatics in a crisis speech as the main goal for epideictic rhetoric "demands that the speaker not advocate radical or divisive change but suggest a fitting response" (Dow 301). For example, in Reagan's address on the Soviet shootdown of a Korean airliner, rather than call for action, he uses his "interpretation of the attack to urge perseverance in current U.S. arms control deliberations" (Dow 301). He mentions staying strong both emotionally and in faith, establishing the nation as the morally good character and the Soviets as the vicious aggressors in the narrative of the speech. In his address regarding events in Lebanon, the only instances in which Reagan calls for action are not action but rather "reaffirmations of current policy" (Dow 301). Epideictic crisis rhetoric does not ask for a call to action, urge a decision to be made or give a warning to other nations, but rather Dow notes that "the function of an epideictic strategy is precisely to prevent radical, divisive reactions and to promote continuity, restore communal feeling, and peacefully reconcile the audience to a new situation" (Dow 301). Ultimately its main goal is to create a strong sense of unity among the president's audience.

Reagan left his State of the Union address to eulogize the crew members and remind his audience of the

virtues they all share. Of course, not every viewer was neither directly affected by the disaster nor knowledgeable in space exploration. In fact, according to a poll held by the National Science Foundation just two months before the *Challenger* only about half of participants said they were “moderately informed” on matters of space exploration (National Science Foundation). Reagan knew this and used pluralistic pronouns such as “we” and “they” to make the *Challenger* incident a shared trauma, even if people did not watch the explosion live, and he unites his audience by including these pronouns. He frames the reflection of the trauma as a collected one and makes his audience aware of the magnitude and seriousness of the situation by telling the audience “But we’ve never lost an astronaut in flight. We’ve never had a tragedy like this” (Gerhard & Woolley). He even plainly states that the *Challenger* incident is “truly a national loss” (Gerhard & Woolley). He further emphasizes his grief and display of unity by including his wife Nancy in mourning, stating “Nancy and I are pained to the core by the tragedy of the shuttle Challenger. We know we share this pain with all of the people of our country” thereby making the speech more personal and showing viewers that he grieves as much as they do (Gerhard & Woolley). Again, Reagan makes use of pluralistic pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ to cast the grief as both a personal (he and Nancy Reagan) and national (the viewers) matter.

Before Reagan talks about the future of space exploration for America, he looks to the past to remind people of the kinds of narratives that was crucial in forming the identity of the nation. Reagan ventures to unite the country through reinstating common American virtues, in this case the country’s history with exploration. Note that McAuliffe used the word ‘pioneer’ to reference the “pioneer travelers of the Conestoga-wagon days” in her application for the Teacher in Space Project. Reagan

makes use of the mythos surrounding that word by reminding viewers “We've grown used to the idea of space, and perhaps we forget that we've only just begun” (Gerhard & Woolley). He continues with “We're still pioneers” and outright states that “They, the members of the Challenger crew, were pioneers” (Gerhard & Woolley). Just as McAuliffe likened herself to the pioneers of the Oregon trail, Reagan asserts that the crew members and all those at NASA are pioneers travelling to space. By using the word pioneer, Reagan harkens back to America's earlier days of exploration, and he links America's celebrated journeys to the West to the country's cosmic expeditions. He also associates pioneer with the future when just prior to mentioning the crew as pioneers “perhaps we forget that we've only just begun” implying the desire to move forward.

Perhaps what made Reagan's eulogy memorable as its personalization from the roll-call of the names of all seven crew members to directly addressing the children who had watched the launch in their classrooms. He mentions each crew member by name, including Christa McAuliffe. The project called for one teacher to be selected from thousands of applicants to fly on the *Challenger* and deliver two lesson plans from space for all children to watch. What seemed like the heart wrenching loss of an ordinary citizen, a schoolteacher, for some, became a downfall of a hero to Reagan. He empathizes with the family members of the seven crew members, saying “We cannot bear, as you do, the full impact of this tragedy. But we feel the loss, and we're thinking about you so very much,” and he also frames them as extraordinary heroes when he states that all of the crew members possessed “that special grace, that special spirit that says, ‘Give me a challenge and I'll meet it with joy’” (Gerhard & Woolley). The day after his speech, *The Washington Post* regarded

this quote specifically and remarked “Isn’t that the way Christa McAuliffe will be remembered?” (*The Washington Post*).

Peggy Noonan, the writer behind Reagan’s *Challenger* eulogy kept the crew members in mind “as everything is exploding around me,” as stated in a panel discussion at the 2015 Miami Dade College book fair (C-SPAN). She recalls her boss’s daughter (who was around seven or eight years old, according to Noonan) coming into her office and asking her “The teacher was on the rocket. Is the teacher all right?” (C-SPAN). She continues, “At that point I remembered every schoolchild in America was watching the *Challenger* go up . . . it was so exciting for all the schools of America” (C-SPAN). One of the challenges Noonan faced when writing the speech was that Reagan’s audience would consist of “those who were 8 years old and those that were 18 years old and those who were 80 without patronizing anybody” (C-SPAN). So, in Reagan’s effort to unite viewers and the nation, he had to speak to young children about what they watched that afternoon. Needless to say, both she and Reagan were keen to stress to schoolchildren across of how the country grieves and move on from a tragedy such as this, taking on the comforting parental role as he tells them “I know it’s hard to understand but sometimes painful things like this happen. It’s all part of the process of exploration and discovery” (Gerhard & Woolley). Reagan uses the words ‘exploration’ and ‘discovery’ to revive the curiosity children may have had about going into space and explains that the fun activities of exploring and discovering is “all part of taking a chance and expanding man’s horizons,” yet he also reinforces the American ideal of exploration in a way children can understand (Gerhard & Woolley). According to Justin W. Moyer of *The Washington Post*, Reagan stated that he had to make clear to those children

who watched the *Challenger* that “life does go on and you don’t back up and quit some worthwhile endeavor because of tragedy” (Moyer). However, this message reached not just children but everyone in the audience.

While still maintaining short, concise sentences for children to understand, Reagan switches from comforting father to motivational coach by declaring “The future doesn’t belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave” (Gerhard & Woolley). Here, Reagan links the future of space exploration with those who live in the home of the brave further reinforcing American values within its mythos. After the *Challenger* incident, America had to wonder if risking the lives of the crew members in the name of space exploration was worth it. While Reagan acknowledges the tragedy of the *Challenger*, he makes it clear that such an event will not prevent further shuttle launches or further innovations in the space exploration program. After reconciling and sympathizing with the families of the crew members and addressing the schoolchildren, Reagan makes clear that Americans must push forward so that the crew members will not have died in vain. He heralds their efforts, stating “The *Challenger* crew was pulling us into the future” and swearing to viewers that “we’ll continue to follow them.” (Gerhard & Woolley). It may sound like an aggressive push for a divisive decision, but Reagan makes it feel as if it is the nation’s duty to follow in the footsteps of the humanized crew members.

He reminisces on the nation’s narrative of exploration when he references Sir Francis Drake’s expedition on the water, noting that he died aboard his ship as a sea captain. He quotes a historian who says ““He lived by the sea, died on it, and was buried in it”” and compares Sir Francis Drake’s oceanic frontier to the fate of the crew members as “Their [the *Challenger* crew] dedication was,

like Drake's, complete" (Gerhard & Woolley). Reagan continues to remind viewers that dying in the embrace of discovery warrants noble and honorable recognition for which we as citizens must carry on so that their actions may hold worth. He also recognizes and sympathizes for the NASA workers, and tells them he wishes he "could talk to every man and woman who works for NASA, or who works on this mission, and tell them: 'We know of your anguish. We share it.'" (Gerhard & Woolley). Again, his use of the pronoun "we" emphasizes how much this crash impacted everyone, from the young children who watched the events unfold, possibly too young to understand the severity of the situation to those from NASA, having to watch such a catastrophic setback of their work to even Reagan and Nancy who were both grieving with the rest of the nation. He continues with the short, matter of fact statements of affirmation, asserting that "We'll continue our quest in space. There will be more shuttle flights and more shuttle crews and, yes, more volunteers, more civilians, more teachers in space" (Gerhard and Woolley). Reagan demonstrates to the nation that the advancement in space discovery require great risks, as all endeavors do, and that America cannot afford to let the *Challenger* incident hinder the future of the space program. He makes it clear that the audience can both grieve and move forward from that suffering.

Another reference Noonan makes to the American canon is a poem she had read in the seventh grade called "High Flight," by John Gillespie Magee Jr., who would later become a fighter pilot for the United States in WWII. She includes the first and last phrases of the poem as the last line of Reagan's speech. Honoring the *Challenger* crew, Reagan's final sentence reads "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped

the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'" (Gerhard & Woolley). As he read those last words, Reagan incorporates one more part of the American mythos, that of religion. The divine actions of the *Challenger* crew will be rewarded by the presence of God, the harbinger of faith and salvation to the American people, therefore restating the fact that the crew members' efforts were not and shall not be in vain. Unbeknownst to Noonan while writing the speech, Reagan also knew "High Flight," as he frequently saw it written on a plaque outside of his daughter's grade school (C-SPAN). Thus, this last line contains implications of religion and associations with elementary school, where McAuliffe worked before she rode the *Challenger* and the place where many kids crowded to watch the launch. With these associations in mind, Reagan could deliver what would become one of most well-known presidential crisis speeches of the 20th century.

On January 29th, 1986, *The Wall Street Journal* published a reflective piece simply titled "Space" following the *Challenger* disaster that carries a similar tone to Reagan's eulogy, explaining that "Humans are instinctively driven toward new knowledge . . . Others will follow these seven brave men and women. Mr. Reagan put it just right in his brief remarks yesterday afternoon: 'Nothing ends here'" (*The Wall Street Journal*). While Reagan and Congress faced increased public fear of space followed by a lengthy investigation on what happened to the *Challenger*, his epideictic eulogy ultimately succeeded in the long run. By utilizing components of epideictic rhetoric and reinstating the American mythos in viewers, Reagan performed the role of both the grievous parental figure and fervent advocate for the continuation of space exploration. *The Wall Street Journal* was right in its assertion that space travel will not end, as NASA and its space shuttle program continued until 2011, but it is difficult to imagine where

NASA and space aviation in the United States would be if Reagan chose to make a more abrasive statement during his speech, potentially alienating viewers and veering Congress away from supporting funding for the space station. Despite what could have been, if there is one chapter of the *Challenger* crisis story that will never change, it is the image Americans watched that cold, fateful January afternoon, Peggy Noonan included, who remembers “As they left in their astronaut uniforms with their big heavy gloves, they waved goodbye to TV cameras in this jolly way that said ‘see you in a few hours’” (C-SPAN).

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“Would you go down that list and for each one tell me whether you think we should be spending more than President Reagan has proposed in his budget, or spending less than he has proposed, or that he has proposed spending about the right amount on it?”

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