

The Great Communicator Files

Mira Cohen

Each president has his own style. We've all seen this reflected in the speeches which presidents give—whether it's delivering a highly formal address such as the "State of the Union," making informal remarks at a stop on a campaign tour, or creating monumental memories out of unimaginable and unexpected moments. The picture of President Reagan standing in front of the Berlin Gate and stating in a voice that was clear, strong and full of conviction, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," has become emblematic of the Fall of the Soviet Union and the victory of democracy over tyranny. The words of this speech reverberate in our national memory. Many Americans also remember other major speeches by President Reagan, such as those commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in June 1944 and honoring the crew of the Challenger after the space shuttle exploded upon takeoff in January 1986.

American presidents are regularly called upon to share their thoughts, ideas, and sentiments both with the nation and the world. This prompts the questions: How are these speeches written? Who writes them? What other resources, texts, conversations, and experiences do presidents use to help them create these famous speeches? Who helps the president put his thoughts and ideas on paper? Who gives a memorable speech that "magic touch"?

These are the questions addressed in the "Great Communicator Files"—a series of teaching materials and primary source documents on presidential speechwriting and speechmaking that can be accessed online at ReaganLibrary.com. The purpose of these curriculum materials is two-fold, to examine presidential speechwriting efforts and to gain insight into President Reagan's personal speechmaking style. Inside the files, educators and students uncover original documents from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives, including copies of original speeches, backup copies of speeches, letters to the president, stories and experiences shared with the president which were incorporated into his speeches, written notes from the president's staff, White House Staffing Memoranda, quotations from historical figures, and other documents.

This article focuses on the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks," delivered in Normandy, France, for the 40th anniversary of D-Day, June 6, 1984. There are currently two additional "Great Communicator Files": one on the "Challenger Speech" and one on the "Pointe du Hoc Address," an additional World War II commemorative speech.

The Speechwriting Process:

President Reagan's speechwriting office was made up of a collection of carefully selected speechwriters. Some, such as Anthony (Tony) Dolan, had experience working with the presidential campaign. Others, such as Peggy Noonan, who had worked with Dan Rather at CBS, were newcomers to the Reagan team.

No matter who the speechwriter was, each was expected to understand both the Reagan ideology and the Reagan speechmaking style. The head speechwriter (in this case Ben Elliott) would check the president's schedule and assign each upcoming speech to a staff writer based on his or her personal backgrounds and strengths. Quotes and references were drawn from a variety of sources, some of which students will discover in the "Great Communicator Files." Often times, past speeches were examined and aspects were incorporated. In the files,

students will also notice pages from *Bartlett's Book of Quotations*, pages from the Bible, poems, speeches by other presidents, and, in this case, a letter from Lisa Zanatta Henn and a story she sent to President Reagan.

The speechwriter did not work alone. Usually, he or she would draft the speech and then it would be sent to a variety of White House staff, including members of the National Security Council, Deputy Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, and others (See "White House Staffing Memorandum" on p. 379). In all cases, President Reagan would be sent a copy of the speech as well. In many cases, he was very involved marking comments and signing his initials "RR" on the page.

The assigned speechwriter would then make adjustments to the speech, incorporating many, but not all, of the comments received. A backup copy would be made for the president on index cards, which he marked for nuance and emphasis, and carried in his pocket. When possible and appropriate, the speech would be programmed into a teleprompter as well, for the president to deliver.

Content

President Reagan considered style and content to be intimately connected.

The documents in this file reveal a picture of a president who was truly moved by the power of a good story and loved sharing the story of America and of Americans with other people. Additionally, the content of a speech, even if it was a historical event, was rooted in President Reagan's contemporary ideology, including his strong stance against communism and his support of a democratic coalition. He was a president who "stayed on message."

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TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

The following activities can be used in conjunction with a unit on the role of the executive branch of the federal government, presidential campaigns, and speech making. The lessons can also be used in American history classes when discussing and analyzing famous speeches by a variety of American presidents including, but not limited to, Lincoln, FDR, Kennedy, and Reagan.



Big Ideas:

How do citizens communicate with the president? Why would citizens write the president? How does a president communicate with the American people? What do you think is the best way for a president to communicate with the American people?

Presidential speechwriters utilize a variety of experiences and sources to create a presidential speech.

Objectives:

- List the ways in which the American people and the American president interact with each other.
- Analyze the interaction between the president and the American people.
- Synthesize information relating to the speechwriting process.

Opening Activity:

Ask students to list some of the ways in which the American president and the American people interact with each other. Examples may include presidential speeches, writing letters to the president, press conferences, radio addresses, and others.

Explain to students that they will be examining one case in which an American citizen and President Reagan interacted with each other. They will also be analyzing one aspect of the presidential speechwriting process.

Activity:

Read the excerpts from the story by Lisa Zanatta Henn. Imagine you are Reagan's speechwriter. Circle the sentences or paragraphs you would use in a World War II commemorative speech. Explain why you chose these excerpts.

Read the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks." (page 378)

Highlight the sentences and phrases from Ms. Henn's story that Reagan utilized in the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks."

Were the remarks that you circled used in the speech? If not, why do you think there were differences between the excerpts that you circled and the excerpts that you highlighted?

Concluding Discussion Questions:

Would you write a personal story to the president today? If so, what would it be about?

How would you feel if the president used parts of your story in a public speech?

Extension Activities:

List the elements of a great and memorable presidential speech. What is the difference between a good or effective speech and a great speech? Read the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks." Does this speech have the elements of a great speech? Explain.

Watch the current president deliver a speech on television. Write your own letter to the president in response to the speech. Let the president know what you think about the ideas addressed.

Photo courtesy of the National Archives

Picturing the Century: One Hundred Years of Photography

Photographer: Michael Evans, February 8, 1982

"President Reagan speaking at a rally for Senator Durenberger" 1998 print from the original color negative. Ronald Reagan Library.

"Someday, Lis, I'll go back."

"Someday, Lis, I'll go back. I'll go back and I'll see it all again. I'll see the beach, the barricades, and the graves. I'll put a flower on the graves of the guys I knew and on the grave of the unknown solider — all the guys I fought with."

I heard my father say these words hundreds and hundreds of times for as long as I can remember. When he said them, he always looked like he was somewhere else, remembering something painful yet something he was so proud of.

My dad landed on "the beach"—First Wave, Omaha Beach, The Invasion of Normandy, June 6, 1944. The infamous D-Day. Not many people my age know or even care about this day but I always will—I can't remember when it wasn't important to me.

I know most fathers tell their kids war stories. The kids start to roll their eyes and say "oh no, not again. We've heard them all a million times." My brothers and I never said that in our house. No matter how many times we heard the stories, we never got tired of them. I tried to figure out why my dad's stories were different. The only thing I came up with is that he made you see it all, made you feel how it must have been.

My dad was 18 years old when he went into World Ward II. Eighteen — when I was 18, I graduated from high school and the only heavy decisions I had to make were what college I wanted to go to or what kind of car I wanted my parents to buy me. Real life and death situations. But when my dad was 18 he had no choices, he went and fought for his country and was proud to do it. He never even thought twice about it. But those three years and the Normandy Invasion would change his life forever.

(1)

I can only remember a few of the stories he told us. There was one about a castle in Europe that had a long winding staircase. I guess my dad and his division were camping there for the night. Most of the guys were my dad's age, so being kids they slid down the banister. This always struck my brothers and me so funny — that my dad slid down some banister, in some castle in some strange city in Europe during the war. It seems they found a moment to be kids in a situation that would turn them old before their time.

I also remember the story about how he had to lay for a long period of time on top of a dead solder without moving as German troops plowed by. He told us of how he was afraid to breath because the Germans might see him; of how the smell of the dead man made him so sick. We just looked at him with awe and without really comprehending it all. Not then anyway.

There were many stories — Christmas over there when the shooting stopped for a few minutes at midnight and turkey dinners fell from the sky; of giving his food to starving children so they would stop eating garbage; of being injured and then sent right back to the front; of the beauty of Paris even with the destruction of war; of the guys he knew — who lived and fought right next to him and those who died; of the songs they sung (that he taught us to sing); and of being afraid and yet going on every day — just trying to live and make it back to the glorious place called home.

But the story to end all stories was D-Day. No single incident in my dad's life ever meant more to him and I can understand why.

As I said earlier, my dad landed on Omaha Beach — on the First Wave. Even when I was small and he would tell us about D-Day, I could tell by the look in his eyes that this was different — this was the biggest thing that had ever happened in his life.

When I talk of Dad, I always say he landed on the First Wave at Omaha Beach.

People are amazed that I even know or care about that day or event at all. But I'm just so proud of it and I always will be.

"I'm going there someday, Dad, and I'll see the beaches and the barricades and the monuments. I'll see the graves and I'll put the flowers there just like you wanted to do. I'll see the ceremonies honoring the veterans of D-Day and I'll feel all the things you made me feel through your stories and your eyes. I'll never forget what you went through, Dad, nor will I let anyone else forget — and Dad, I'll always be proud."

Lisa Zanatta Henn
March, 1984

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
May 10, 1984

Dear Lisa:

Thank you for your letter to President Reagan.

The President has requested the Secretary of Defense to include you and your family on the United States Invitation List for the Omaha Beach commemoration on the 6th of June.

You should receive an official invitation from the Secretary of Defense in a few days. Unfortunately, intercontinental travel and accommodations cannot be provided by the United States government. However, you will be given whatever assistance is required once you arrive in France.

Please provide me as soon as possible the names and addresses of other members of your family who desire to attend the commemoration.

If you have any questions or there is anything else I can do for you, please write or call me on (202) 456-2150.

Sincerely,

M. P. Caulfield
M. P. CAULFIELD
Colonel, U. S. Marine Corps
Deputy Director
White House Military Office

Ms. Lisa Zanatta Henn
1100 Elmwood Drive
Millbrae, California 94030

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In fact, when discussing World War II, in the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks," President Reagan makes reference to the strength of democracy and the maintenance of positive relationships among democratic leaders. He gave a firm nod to the president of France in remarking, "The French forces of the interior will forever personify courage and national spirit; they will be a timeless inspiration to all who are free, and to all who would be free." Additionally, Reagan stated, "We reaffirm the unity of democratic peoples who fought a war and then joined with the vanquished in a firm resolve to keep the peace."

Style

President Reagan not only surrounded himself with talented speechwriters, but with speechwriters who grasped his ideology and his personal style. They understood it and made a point of searching out the words of the "man or woman on the street" with whose dreams and struggles President Reagan identified and admired. In fact, when you examine Reagan's speeches, you will notice that he often used people's personal anecdotes to symbolize and create a national sentiment.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

FYI //

Mr. President:

I ran this by Dick Darman and he thought that page 4 of this letter might be useful to speechwriters for possible use in Europe or for radio speech from Europe. Any objections?

NOT AT ALL.

Col. Caulfield already answered Lisa so no reply from you is necessary.

If Lisa's problem is insurability to afford transportation how about a ^{Kathy} first. initiative to raise money for some people like this? RR

On October 24, 1984, in his "Remarks at a White House Ceremony Marking the First Anniversary of the Grenada Rescue Mission," Reagan linked the national sense of loss with Sean Luketina, a paratrooper who lost his life as a result of that mission. President Reagan pointed to Sean's father, Colonel Luketina, and shared his story with the world. When Sean awoke from a coma before he died, his father asked him, "Would you do it again?" And Sean had answered, "Hell, yes, Dad."

In the "Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks," Lisa Zanatta Henn's story became essential to the speech. Reagan's speechwriter Tony Dolan came across a letter Ms. Henn had written to President Reagan requesting to be part of an envoy of Americans accompanying Reagan to Normandy in 1984. With the letter, Lisa Zanatta Henn had included a story about her father that she had written, but never published. Her sincerity resonated with Dolan, and he felt confident the letter would move Reagan as well. As a result,

Dolan extracted quotes and messages from Ms. Henn's letter and inserted them into the Omaha Beach speech.

"I'll never forget the moment," Dolan is quoted as saying in a book by Douglass Brinkley. "It was 2:00 a.m. and I was writing the Dublin speech. I stumbled upon this incredible letter. I had grown up around veterans' families and her voice was so real to me. And, therefore, I knew it would also be real to Reagan."¹ From that point, it was up to Reagan, with

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Remarks at a United States-France Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, D-day

June 6, 1984

Mr. President, distinguished guests, we stand today at a place of battle, one that 40 years ago saw and felt the worst of war. Men bled and died here for a few feet of—or inches of sand, as bullets and shellfire cut through their ranks. About them, General Omar Bradley later said, “Every man who set foot on Omaha Beach that day was a hero.”

No speech can adequately portray their suffering, their sacrifice, their heroism. President Lincoln once reminded us that through their deeds, the dead of battle have spoken more eloquently for themselves than any of the living ever could. But we can only honor them by rededicating ourselves to the cause for which they gave a last full measure of devotion.

Today we do rededicate ourselves to that cause. And at this place of honor, we’re humbled by the realization of how much so many gave to the cause of freedom and to their fellow man.

Some who survived the battle of June 6, 1944, are here today. Others who hoped to return never did.

“Someday, Lis, I’ll go back,” said Private First Class Peter Robert Zanatta, of the 37th Engineer Combat Battalion, and first assault wave to hit Omaha Beach. “I’ll go back, and I’ll see it all again. I’ll see the beach, the barricades, and the graves.”

Those words of Private Zanatta come to us from his daughter, Lisa Zanatta Henn, in a heart-rending story about the event her father spoke of so often. “In his words, the Normandy invasion would change his life forever,” she said. She tells some of his stories of World War II but says of her father, “the story to end all stories was D-day.”

“He made me feel the fear of being on that boat waiting to land. I can smell the ocean and feel the seasickness. I can see the looks on his fellow soldiers’ faces — the fear, the anguish, the uncertainty of what lay ahead. And when they landed, I can feel the strength and courage of the men who took those first steps through the tide to what must have surely looked like instant death.”

Private Zanatta’s daughter wrote to me: “I don’t know how or why I can feel this emptiness, this fear, or this determination, but I do. Maybe it’s the bond I had with my father. All I know is that it brings tears to my eyes to think about my father as a 20-year-old boy having to face that beach.”

The anniversary of D-day was always special for her family. And like all the families of those who went to war, she describes how she came to realize her own father’s survival was a miracle: “So many men died. I know that my father watched many of his friends be killed. I know that he must have died inside a little each time. But his explanation to me was, ‘You did what you had to do, and you kept on going.’”

When men like Private Zanatta and all our allied forces stormed the beaches of Normandy 40 years ago they came not as conquer-

ors, but as liberators. When these troops swept across the French countryside and into the forests of Belgium and Luxembourg they came not to take, but to return what had been wrongly seized. When our forces marched into Germany they came not to prey on a brave and defeated people, but to nurture the seeds of democracy among those who yearned to be free again.

We salute them today. But, Mr. President, we also salute those who, like yourself, were already engaging the enemy inside your beloved country—the French Resistance. Your valiant struggle for France did so much to cripple the enemy and spur the advance of the armies of liberation. The French Forces of the Interior will forever personify courage and national spirit. They will be a timeless inspiration to all who are free and to all who would be free.

Today, in their memory, and for all who fought here, we celebrate the triumph of democracy. We reaffirm the unity of democratic peoples who fought a war and then joined with the vanquished in a firm resolve to keep the peace.

From a terrible war we learned that unity made us invincible; now, in peace, that same unity makes us secure. We sought to bring all freedom-loving nations together in a community dedicated to the defense and preservation of our sacred values. Our alliance, forged in the crucible of war, tempered and shaped by the realities of the postwar world, has succeeded. In Europe, the threat has been contained, the peace has been kept.

Today the living here assembled—officials, veterans, citizens—are a tribute to what was achieved here 40 years ago. This land is secure. We are free. These things are worth fighting and dying for.

Lisa Zanatta Henn began her story by quoting her father, who promised that he would return to Normandy. She ended with a promise to her father, who died 8 years ago of cancer: “I’m going there, Dad, and I’ll see the beaches and the barricades and the monuments. I’ll see the graves, and I’ll put flowers there just like you wanted to do. I’ll feel all the things you made me feel through your stories and your eyes. I’ll never forget what you went through, Dad, nor will I let anyone else forget. And, Dad, I’ll always be proud.”

Through the words of his loving daughter, who is here with us today, a D-day veteran has shown us the meaning of this day far better than any President can. It is enough for us to say about Private Zanatta and all the men of honor and courage who fought beside him four decades ago: We will always remember. We will always be proud. We will always be prepared, so we may always be free.

Thank you.

Note: The President spoke at 4:33 p.m. at the Omaha Beach Memorial at Omaha Beach, France. In his opening remarks, he referred to President Francois Mitterrand of France. Following the ceremony, President Reagan traveled to Utah Beach.

WHITE HOUSE STAFFING MEMORANDUM

DATE: 5/25/84

ACTION/CONCURRENCE/COMMENT DUE BY: 10:00 A.M. TUESDAY, 5/29

SUBJECT: REMARKS: OMAHA BEACH MEMORIAL REMARKS
(5/25 - 3:00 p.m. draft)

VICE PRESIDENT	ACTION FYI	McMANUS	ACTION FYI		
MEESE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MURPHY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BAKER	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	OGLESBY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DEAVER	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	ROGERS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
STOCKMAN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	SPEAKES	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DARMAN	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	SVAHN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FELDSTEIN	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	VERSTANDIG	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FIELDING	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	WHITTLESEY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FULLER	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	ELLIOTT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
HERRINGTON	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	TUTWILER	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
HICKEY	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	WIRTHLIN	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
MFARLANE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	HENKEL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

REMARKS:

Please provide any edits directly to Ben Elliott by 10:00 a.m. Tuesday, May 29th, with an information copy to my office.

Thank you.

RESPONSE:

Richard G. Darman
Assistant to the President
Ext. 2702

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his own deep pride in the American military, his sense of connection with everyday Americans, and his experience as a professional orator, to make Lisa Zanatta Henn's story come alive.

Viewers of the taped event will see Lisa Zanatta Henn sitting with her mother and her brothers, listening to President Reagan repeat her words to the world. At one point during the speech, Ms. Henn cries, and viewers see Reagan's eyes tear up as well. Americans watching this live broadcast in 1984 had never seen Lisa Zanatta Henn before. But her story symbolized the story of many. And after hearing her

words, many felt they knew her, that she was one of them, a neighbor or a friend. ☺

Notes

1. Douglass Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion*, HarperCollins, 2005.

MIRA COHEN is the director of education at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley, California. She is also a former social studies teacher. The Great Communicator Files can be accessed online at ReaganLibrary.com under the "education" tab. To obtain a hard copy or a DVD of the speeches, please email reaganeducation@nara.gov.

Document-Based Class Questions:

Omaha Beach Memorial Remarks

According to President Reagan, to what cause did the men who fought in the Battle of Normandy dedicate themselves?

List two people President Reagan quoted in his speech.

What is a "liberator"?

Why did President Reagan refer to the allied soldiers in the Battle of Normandy as liberators?

White House Staffing Memorandum, May 25, 1984

From which office does this document originate? How do you know this?

What do you think was the purpose of this document?

What evidence did you use to draw this conclusion?

Why are there so many names written on this document?

Letter from Colonel M.P. Caulfield, May 10, 1984

Based on reading this letter, what do you think Lisa Zanatta Henn was requesting? Use a direct quote from the document to back up your response.

How was Ms. Henn's request accommodated? Explain.

Note to President Reagan from Presidential Secretary Kathy Osborne

Did President Reagan read any part of these documents?

How do you know?

Was President Reagan aware that Lisa Zanatta Henn's story was going to be written into the speech? How do you know?