

Political Civility in the Age of Reagan

Janet Tran with Tony Pennay and Krista Kohlhausen

These days, the concept of civility in politics seems antiquated. Students interested in the political process cannot be blamed for thinking that political disagreement must always be a vitriolic, winner-take-all dispute that plays out dramatically in the media. But it has not always been this way.

February 6, 2011, marks the 100th anniversary of President Ronald Reagan's birth. Over the course of the year, historians and educators across the country will have another occasion to reexamine the life, times, and accomplishments of the 40th president of the United States. One of the distinctive personal characteristics of Reagan as president was his ability to reach out and befriend even ardent political adversaries. The Ronald Reagan Centennial offers the opportunity both to discuss the impact of his policies and to engage in lessons about leadership, character, and values and the way in which these can influence the entire political spectrum of the country.

Bridging the Partisan Divide

"Civility is not a sign of weakness," John F. Kennedy advised in his inaugural address in 1961. President Kennedy's youngest brother, Edward M. Kennedy, who would earn his title as Liberal Lion of the Senate, shared this belief. His tenure in the Senate during the Reagan presidency was fraught with serious disagreements in beliefs and policy. According to Nancy Reagan, however, Ted Kennedy and President Reagan shared a "wonderful friendship."¹ In his memoir, *True Compass*, Kennedy reflected upon President Reagan's powerful optimism,

"He was more than a candidate at that time; he was a movement."²

During both presidential terms of the Reagan administration, the Senate had a Republican majority, but the House majority was Democratic. One major objective of the president was to maintain good relations with House Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill. Both men were at opposite ends of the political spectrum on issues like the role of government, economic policies, and several foreign policy issues. Despite these differences, they worked together in the interest of effective government. Featured in this article are Reagan's remarks at a dinner sponsored by Boston College honoring his rival, O'Neill, in which Reagan mentions their political disagreements, but jokes about the Irish heritage they shared, and expresses a genuine respect for O'Neill's accomplishments. The speech conveys a common Reagan theme, evoking the aspirations, hopes and accomplishments of immigrants to the United States, like the forebears of O'Neill and Reagan himself.

Chris Matthews, currently host of the political commentary show *Hardball*, was a top aide to Speaker O'Neill and recently described in fond terms the ability of the Republican Executive Branch to work with the Democratic Congress.

In his view, civility was "a valuable piece of the Reagan legacy" and "the 1980s worked because of the way two partisan adversaries, the president especially, decided to make their relationship work, and be seen working." Alluding to today's proudly polarized politics, where party leaders boast of never compromising, Matthews commented that sometimes politics "is not a zero-sum game," pointing out that "Sometimes the success of the matter depends on a good competition... [a] balance where the fight makes both guys end up looking good in history."³ Interestingly, both Reagan and O'Neill left office with very strong approval ratings in public opinion polls.

Diplomacy with the Soviet Union

President Reagan's civility carried not just across party lines in the United States, but also across the iciest barriers of language and international politics. During his presidency, Reagan visited 26 countries, skillfully navigating the terrains of the Cold War. It was his unshakable conviction that freedom and liberty must be intentionally nurtured; however, his belief in the importance of civility in international diplomacy also characterized his dealing with the great rival superpower, the Soviet Union.

Students receiving the Twitter-friendly version of Reagan's foreign policy achievements may primarily associate him with his "Tear Down this Wall Speech," delivered at the Brandenburg

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(DOLAN)



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MARCH 17, 1986

The President has seen 3/18

DROPPY TIP O'NEILL DINNER

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I WANT TO BEGIN TONIGHT BY SAYING HOW TOUCHED I AM TO KNOW THAT TIP WANTED ME HERE THIS EVENING / WHY HE EVEN CALLED ME HIMSELF LAST WEEK AND SAID / "MR. PRESIDENT, MAKE SURE YOU DON'T MISS THE DINNER TUESDAY NIGHT."

BUT, TO BE HONEST, I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN TIP WAS BEHIND ME / EVEN IF IT WAS ONLY AT THE STATE OF THE UNION. / AS I MADE EACH PROPOSAL I COULD HEAR TIP WHISPERING TO GEORGE BUSH / "FORGET IT, NO WAY, FAT CHANCE."

I THINK IT WAS INEVITABLE THOUGH THAT THERE WOULD BE A STANDOFF BETWEEN US / IMAGINE ONE IRISHMAN TRYING TO CORNER ANOTHER IRISHMAN IN AN OVAL OFFICE.

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A LITTLE KIDDING IS AFTER ALL, A SIGN OF AFFECTION / THE SORT OF THINGS FRIENDS DO TO EACH OTHER. / AND, MR. SPEAKER, I AM GRATEFUL YOU HAVE PERMITTED ME IN THE PAST / AND I HOPE IN THE FUTURE / THAT SINGULAR HONOR / THE HONOR OF CALLING YOU MY FRIEND.

I THINK THE FACT OF OUR FRIENDSHIP IS TESTIMONY TO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM WE ARE PART OF AND THE COUNTRY WE LIVE IN.

A COUNTRY WHICH PERMITS TWO NOT-SO-SHY, NOT-SO-RETIRING IRISHMEN / TO HAVE IT OUT ON THE ISSUES / RATHER THAN ON EACH OTHER OR THEIR COUNTRYMEN.

BUT IN ADDITION TO CELEBRATING A COUNTRY AND A PERSONAL FRIENDSHIP / I WANTED TO COME HERE TONIGHT TO JOIN YOU IN SALUTING TIP O'NEILL / TO SALUTE HIM FOR THE YEARS OF DEDICATION AND DEVOTION TO COUNTRY.

- 2 -

BUT DESPITE ALL OF THIS, TIP WANTED ME HERE. / HE SAID SINCE IT WAS MARCH 17TH, IT WAS ONLY FITTING SOMEONE DROP BY WHO ACTUALLY HAD KNOWN ST. PATRICK. / AND THAT'S TRUE, TIP, I DID KNOW ST. PATRICK / IN FACT, WE BOTH CHANGED TO THE SAME POLITICAL PARTY AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME.

IT'S TRUE TIP AND I HAVE HAD OUR POLITICAL DISAGREEMENTS. / SURE, I SAID SOME THINGS ABOUT TIP AND TIP SAID SOME THINGS ABOUT ME. / BUT THAT'S ALL HISTORY. / AND ANYWAY, TIP, YOU KNOW HOW IT IS: / I FORGET. / I JUST FOLLOW THAT OLD MOTTO - "FORGIVE AND FORGET." / OR IS IT "FORGET AND FORGIVE?"

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I THINK YOU KNOW TIP AND I HAVE BEEN KIDDING EACH OTHER FOR SOME TIME NOW / AND I HOPE YOU ALSO KNOW HOW MUCH I HOPE THIS CONTINUES FOR MANY YEARS TO COME.

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TIP'S RECOLLECTIONS OF POLITICS GO BACK, / (OF COURSE) / FAR BEYOND MY OWN. / HE HAS SEEN SOME WHO PLAY THE GAME WELL AND OTHERS WHO DO NOT. / HE HAS SEEN SOME WHO LOVED POLITICS / SOME WHO CAME TO IT ONLY OUT OF A SENSE OF DUTY. / BUT THROUGH IT ALL, / TIP HAS BEEN A VITAL AND FORCEFUL PART OF AMERICA'S POLITICAL TRADITION / A TRADITION HE HAS TRULY ENRICHED.

YET TIP O'NEILL REPRESENTS FAR MORE THAN JUST THIS POLITICAL TRADITION. / DEEP WITHIN, TOO, IS THE MEMORY OF PLACES LIKE BACK BAY AND SOUTH BOSTON / THE DOCKS / THE PIERS / -- THOSE WHO CAME OFF THE SHIPS IN BOSTON HARBOR SEEKING A BETTER LAND / A BETTER WAY FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

AND THEY FOUND THAT SOMETHING BETTER / THEY ROSE ABOVE THE PREJUDICE AND HARDSHIP.

TIP WOULD SEE ONE OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES
BECOME PRESIDENT / JOHN F. KENNEDY WOULD BE
68 TODAY HAD HE LIVED / AND TIP CAN
REMEMBER THOSE GOLDEN HOURS BETTER THAN MOST
IN THIS ROOM. AND THEN NOT MANY YEARS LATER
THERE WAS ANOTHER OF IMMIGRANT STOCK WHO
WOULD BECOME SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE.

IN SO SHORT A TIME /- SO MUCH LEADERSHIP,
FROM ONE CITY, ONE PLACE, ONE PEOPLE.

HOW FITTING THAT BOSTON COLLEGE /
A PLACE THAT BECAME TO SO MANY OF THOSE NEW
ARRIVALS A SYMBOL OF MOVING UPWARD AND
ONWARD / HOW FITTING THAT BOSTON COLLEGE
WHOSE "TOWERS ON THE HEIGHTS" HAVE REACHED
TO "HEAVEN'S OWN BLUE" FOR SO MANY /
SHOULD SPONSOR THIS SALUTE TO TIP O'NEILL.

TIP, YOU ARE A TRUE SON OF B.C. AND OUR
FRIEND. AND WE SALUTE YOU. YOU ARE ALSO A
LEADER OF THE NATION /- AND FOR THAT WE
HONOR YOU.

BUT YOU ALSO EMBODY SO MUCH OF WHAT THIS
NATION IS ABOUT / THE HOPE THAT IS AMERICA.
SO YOU MAKE US PROUD AS WELL, MY FRIEND,
YOU MAKE US PROUD.

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TEACHING ACTIVITY

Janet Tran

Overview: In this lesson, students will examine President Reagan's remarks in honor of Tip O'Neill and the excerpts from Reagan's radio address to the people of the Soviet Union (p. 50), with the goal of exploring the essential question: Is civility a necessary component of civic life?

Procedures:

- 1. Introduction:** Tell students that today they will examine the accomplishments of President Reagan in working with Congress and in relations with the Soviet Union, and consider how these accomplishments relate to his use of civil discourse.
- 2. Activity:** Have students do a textbook hunt or Internet scour of available secondary sources to list some of Reagan's successes in working with Congress to enact domestic legislation, and his accomplishments in relations with the Soviet Union.

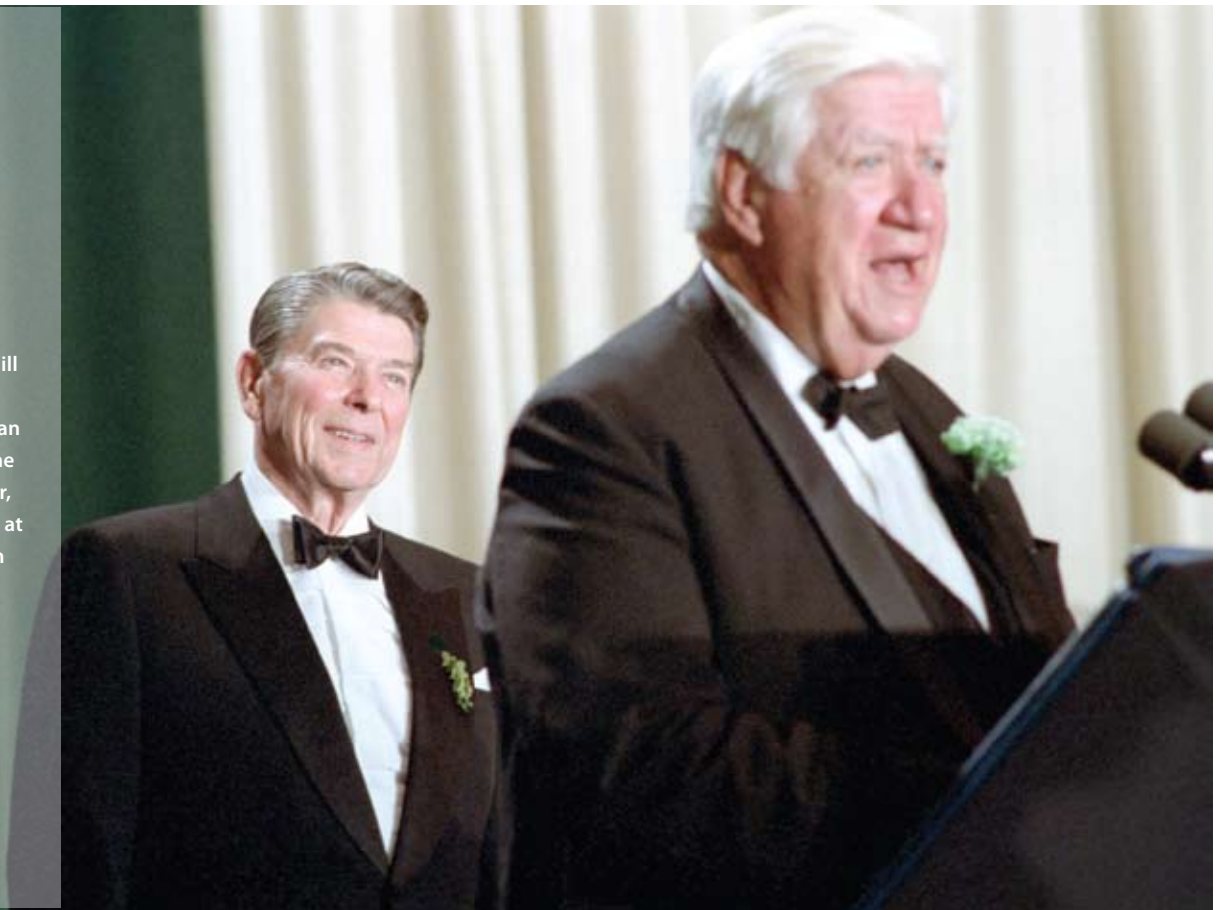
Assign students to two different groups, each of which will study one of the two primary source documents. For each group, distribute copies of the primary source. Ask students to write down what they know about the speaker, the time period of the speech, and its context. Provide a Say, Mean, Matter handout, which is divided into three columns.

Say	Mean	Matter

Tell each group to select sentences to include in the "Say" column and to evaluate what they mean and why they matter. The handout could include prompts suggesting that students start their "Say" column with the words "The speaker says..."; the "Mean" column with words like "One interpretation of their quote is..." or "In other words,..."; and the "Matter" column with words like "This is significant because..." or "This implies that..." Allow a reasonable amount of time for students to read the document and complete the handout. When they have completed the handout, discuss the role of civil discourse in Reagan's promotion of his policies.

- 3. Extension:** Have your students study the discourse style of President Reagan and other influential American presidents by looking at documents such as inaugural addresses, State of the Union speeches, statements before the UN, or other appropriate documents. The National Archives and the Library of Congress have a number of these documents easily accessible via the Internet. Students can share their findings in class and respond to the following questions: Have all presidents been practitioners of civil discourse? How do the communication styles of different presidents affect their accomplishments? How has presidential discourse changed over time?

Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill introduces President Reagan at a dinner in the Speaker's honor, March 17, 1986, at the Washington Hilton.



REAGAN *from page 45*

Gate on June 12, 1987. An accelerated revisionist account of this speech has already occurred, portraying President Reagan's bold proclamation as a popular and inspiring ultimatum. At the time, President Reagan's advisors warned him that the bellicose tone in some segments might cause a deterioration in the discourse that the president had worked to build with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev over the years.

Reagan was also committed to effective diplomacy with the Soviet Union. While Reagan vowed in his campaigns to be tough on the Soviet Union, he also stunned many of his supporters in the first year of his administration when he lifted the grain embargo imposed by former President Jimmy Carter. Reagan rationalized that relationships needed to improve, and felt that taking the first step towards functional communications was the right course of action.

The need to improve relations between

the superpowers led to a tradition of historic televised appeals for peace on New Year's Day from both President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev. In 1986, both addresses were televised simultaneously, effectively introducing the people of the Soviet Union to President Reagan's rhetoric and personality. The second document featured in this article consists of excerpts from a radio address Reagan made to the people of the Soviet Union on January 1, 1987, in which he expressed his wish to reduce nuclear arms and to build peace based on understanding between peoples (see p. 50). He mentioned the need for more people-to-people exchanges between the two countries, and referred in positive terms to improvements in the Soviet treatment of dissident Andrei Sakharov and his wife, Yelena Bonner, who had been allowed by Gorbachev to return to Moscow after a period of internal exile in Gorky. At the conclusion, he evoked the pride of Russians in their arts and culture, quoting the verse that says "you are as

beautiful as a Russian song, as beautiful as a Russian soul." His speech reflected one of the president's basic beliefs--that it was possible to reach out to people and engage them by transcending political differences and expressing a sincere respect for them, their hopes, and their accomplishments.

Reagan's Self-Assessment

The traditional farewell address of the American president is essentially a public self-assessment of his or her term in office. President Reagan carefully listed his many achievements, from reviving the economy to improving relations with the Soviet Union. As his largest failure, he cited his inability to reduce the deficit during his eight years in office.

Reagan alluded to his nickname "the Great Communicator," and made light of his effective communication style, but also referred to the inspiration that came from the American people. The optimism and pride in being American is "one of the things I'm proudest of in the

past eight years,” he stated. He referred to “the resurgence of national pride that I called the new patriotism,” and continued, “This national feeling is good, but it won’t count for much, and it won’t last unless it’s grounded in thoughtfulness and knowledge.”⁷⁴

Reagan’s concept of citizenship was rooted in this belief in a thoughtful, knowledgeable patriotism. In 1982, in a proclamation recognizing Citizenship Day on September 17, 1982, he pointed out that “in the end it is each citizen who is responsible for protecting the liberties set forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights....as we approach the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, we must remember that an active and informed citizenry is not just a right; it is an obligation.”⁷⁵

Notes

1. Nancy Reagan’s description of the relationship between Kennedy and Reagan was made in an interview with Larry King on television as part of the feature “Remembering Sen. Kennedy” on *Larry King Live*, CNN, Los Angeles, Calif., August 26, 2009. A brief summary of her description of the relationship can be accessed at www.digitaljournal.com/article/278392
2. Edward M. Kennedy, *True Compass: a Memoir* (New York: Twelve, 2009): 382.
3. These remarks were made by Chris Matthews during a speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library, in Simi Valley, California, July 20, 2010.
4. Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation,” Washington D.C., January 11, 1989. This speech is accessible at www.reaganfoundation.org/pdf/Farewell_Address_011189.pdf
5. A copy of this proclamation, made on June 24, 1982, is accessible on the American Presidency Project website at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=42670&st=&st1=

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Ronald Reagan Centennial Educational Opportunities

In June 2009, President Obama signed a law establishing a bipartisan Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission to promote President Reagan and his legacy throughout the 2011 year.

In the past, Congress has appropriated funds for patriotic tributes to America’s presidents. However, for the centennial of the president who firmly believed in smaller government, the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission has been and will continue to operate without a penny from the taxpayers.

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, onsite at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California, has taken on the task of raising all funds privately to commemorate President Reagan’s legacy.

Stewart McLaurin, executive director of the Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration, recalls a president who was “a lifelong learner who provided lessons pertaining to leadership, character, values and integrity that are valuable and transferable today.”^{*} Naturally, the most long-lasting effects of the centennial are the educational opportunities for educators and students:

Museum Renovation

On February 7, 2011, the newly renovated Ronald Reagan Presidential Library will be open to the public, redesigned as a modern museum reaching a new audience of “digital natives.” Experiential learning (including the award winning Air Force One Discovery Center) makes the Library a 21st century model for museums.

Scholarship Opportunities

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation will launch the GE-Ronald Reagan Scholarship Program to reward college-bound students who demonstrate exemplary leadership, drive, integrity, and citizenship with financial assistance to pursue higher education. This 10-year program is supported by GE (which sponsored

a weekly television series hosted by Reagan before he entered politics) and will reward up to 20 students each year with renewable scholarships that can total up to \$40,000 in honor of the fortieth president.

National Youth Conference

In partnership with the Close Up Foundation, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation will host a national youth conference in the nation’s capital to help students examine the role of civil discourse and its significance in our democracy from the founding of the United States to the present.

Academic Symposia

A constellation of prominent academic institutions across the country will host a series of programs on “The Leadership of President Ronald Reagan: Lessons and Legacy.”

The Walter and Leonore Annenberg Presidential Learning Center Headquartered at the Reagan Library, the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Presidential Learning Center has begun developing and piloting new programming. Thousands of students participate in a plethora of programs including: educational events, teacher training, primary source research, and standards-aligned learning experiences. Charged with developing proactive, informed, educated, and conscientious citizens and leaders, the Center provides national civics programming and curricula free of charge to teachers and schools.

Information about all of these educational opportunities can be found at www.reaganfoundation.org

^{*} *In an interview with Janet Tran and Krista Kohlhausen at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library, Simi Valley, California, November 23, 2010.*

Reagan's New Year's Radio Address to the People of the Soviet Union [Excerpts]

January 1, 1987

...a great deal of work remains, but both sides [the U.S. and the Soviet Union] are closer now than ever before. At Reykjavik we agreed on the desirability of real reductions in nuclear arsenals and on the ultimate goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons. We agreed that as a start, we could eliminate all but a small number of U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles. We also agreed to cut in half the number of strategic arms over a 5-year period. And we agreed that it's necessary to have effective verification of any final agreements. We discussed as well approaches to strategic defenses, approaches that the United States believes would protect the security and interests of both sides. As part of the strategic defense discussion, I proposed the elimination of all U.S. and Soviet offensive ballistic missiles over a 10-year period. I suggested that, as we had agreed, we cut strategic offensive forces in half in the first 5 years, and then that we go on to eliminate all remaining offensive ballistic missiles of all ranges in the next 5 years. As you've heard, we did not reach an agreement on any plan for the second 5 years. We in America are ready to discuss this or other proposals for moving beyond the reduction of the first 5 years. After our Reykjavik meeting, both sides took time to reflect on what had been accomplished and on ways to move forward again. And then the United States followed up at the Geneva negotiations with concrete proposals to implement the understandings of Reykjavik.

As we look to the new year, we in America remain ready to continue to do everything necessary to turn this hard work into verifiable agreements. Our hope is that the Soviet Union will approach negotiations with this same spirit. Peace is built not just on agreements about arms reduction but on understanding between peoples. It hasn't always made the headlines of either your newspapers or ours, but the United States and the U.S.S.R. have made progress here too by expanding exchanges and other contacts between our countries. Scientific, educational, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges, especially among our young people, have grown. We in America would like to see more of these exchanges in all areas. The American people are deeply concerned with the fate of individual people, wherever they might be throughout the world. We believe that God gave sacred rights to every man, woman, and child on Earth. "Rights," as the founders of our country wrote, "to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—rights that include the right to speak and worship freely and the right of each of us to build a better future for ourselves and our families. Respect for those rights is the bedrock on which our system is built. But let us remember that respect for those rights, for the freedom and dignity of individuals, is also the bedrock on which any true and enduring peace between our countries must be built.

Whenever there's a restoration of those rights to a man or a woman [Andrei Sakharov and Yelena Bonner], as has happened recently, it helps strengthen the foundations for trust and cooperation between our countries. And by the same token, whenever those rights are denied the foundation is seriously weakened. Much more can and should be done to strengthen that foundation. We welcome progress in this area as much as we welcome it in the effort to secure nuclear arms reduction. In fact, progress here and in all key areas of our relationship is essential if we are to build on this foundation....

In 1986 our two countries made progress on some of the toughest questions of all. In 1987 we'll make more, I'm sure. We must continue together on the journey toward lasting peace. Yes, peace is a journey. Peace is also a dream. For two centuries, men and women from all over the world have left their homelands to make often dangerous passages to the shores of my country, to a land of peace where they had the freedom to make their hopes into realities for their families and themselves. They had a dream, and we in America call it the American dream. But to live in a land of peace and hope is not just the American dream; it's the dream of all people, of all lands.

There's an old verse that goes, "Happy or sad, my beloved, you are as beautiful as a Russian song, as beautiful as a Russian soul." All the world knows and honors the suffering and courage of the Soviet peoples in the Second World War, just as all the world knows and honors the nobility of your diverse heritage in literature and the arts. That great heritage springs from a magnificence of the soul that no suffering can ever obscure. That suffering has also only ennobled a soul and culture that have in turn enriched all of civilization. Let us in this season of hope hear the voice of this soul that encompasses so many peoples and traditions. Let us hear the voice of all humanity's soul—the voice that speaks through Leo Tolstoy and through William Faulkner, through the martyrs, the poets, and the saints. And, yes, the voice that speaks also through a mother's prayer—with a message that you can see in a child's eyes, a prayer for peace and a message of good will to all.

So, once again, on behalf of the American people, let me wish you all a happy, healthy, and prosperous new year. Thank you. God bless you, and good night.

Note: The President's remarks were recorded at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles, CA, on December 29, for broadcast in the Soviet Union on January 1, 1987, by the Voice of America.