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On the Conversational Style of Ronald Reagan: "A-E<[less than]Gc" Revisited and Reassessed

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Abstract  
During contemporaneous rhetorical criticism of his style in discourse, President Ronald Reagan was assessed in terms of his living up to the eloquence of John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. In those two Speaker & Gavel Essays, Reagan was found to be deficient and thus a “less-than-great communicator.” After revisiting and reassessing those two essays, Reagan’s essentially conversational mode of communication for television was found to embody rhetorical elements that indeed may have fostered eloquence sufficient to retain the sobriquet of “great communicator.”  

Introduction  
In two Speaker & Gavel essays during the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan’s style in discourse was the focus of contemporaneous rhetorical criticism. Therein, his attempts to achieve stylized syntax and lexicon were scrutinized (during his presidency) for adherence to classical desiderata conducing to eloquence, and exemplars of style against which Reagan’s sentences were measured often were in John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. In the first of those two essays, canonical lore about style known to Roman rhetoricians as elocutio (abbreviated as “E” for formulary assessment), was measured against Reagan’s “A” (representing the classical canon of actio with advice about effective delivery with voice and body). Hence, whereas Reagan’s prowess with the latter was acknowledged, his deficiencies with the former led to his being deemed a less-than-great communicator—or “[<GC].” Then, when “A—E = <GC” received a redivida essay, Reagan’s style in discourse was judged “impotent” (Carpenter, 1982-83; 1987).  

I  
Ronald Reagan retains the sobriquet, “Great Communicator.” Reassessment of his style in discourse—or lack thereof—thus is warranted. Impetus for so doing now stems partly from Clarke’s 2004 book, Ask not: The inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the speech that changed America, which asserts that this address “is generally acknowledged to have been the greatest oration of any twentieth-century American politician” (p. 9). Kennedy’s lasting impress now prompts this question: why would an able communicator—such as Reagan still is acknowledged to be—try to surpass or even match Kennedyesque eloquence? Plain spoken, “give ‘em hell” Harry Truman eschewed efforts to match the style of his predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, and did not suffer politically by thus being deemed a second-rate stylist (at best). And George Herbert Walker Bush
never matched the polished delivery of his presidential predecessor so why even try (even if that ineptness was lampooned continually on Saturday Night Live)?

Still another factor impels re-assessing the aptness of Kennedyesque style as a standard for Reagan. The Kennedy Inaugural is on a DVD accompanying Tofel’s 2005 book, Sounding the trumpet: The making of John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. Rhetorical critics viewing that speech again likely would concur that Kennedy largely was oblivious of television cameras. Directness with his live audience is obvious; continual, staccato gestures pointing his right hand index finger or poking the lectern with it are intended to enhance effect and affect of his words for people facing him directly; and his emotional involvement with the live audience before him impelled (more toward his peroration) his almost strident delivery—regardless of how it might play for cameras and television screens favoring Marshall McLuhan’s notion of “cool” messages.

Reagan differs. His true audiences virtually always are cameras. And his prowess with delivery for them was honed on Hollywood sound stages, often by a cinematographic technique called “shot and reverse shot,” whereby “continuity editing” of a scene between two actors has an “establishing shot” showing both of them conversing and then “shot and reverse shot” showing each of them in turn either speaking or listening and interacting with the other person. When retakes of a scene are necessary because one actor erred in delivering a line for desired effect, the second actor often left the sound stage; and the remaining actor then simply addressed the camera (Ingrid Bergman, for instance, did not have to be present if Humphrey Bogart’s Casablanca lines had to be delivered again). Skilled actors speak well to cameras, and only a reminder is in order about Reagan’s honed “mastery of voice and body while speaking.”

Conducive to his admirable performance (actio) were a particularly well-modulated baritone voice capable of controlled variation between restrained forcefulness and an almost hushed whisper, sustained eye contact, well-timed gestures, physical poise, and a superb sense of when to pause for clarity, emphasis, and emotional affect. … Add his well-timed, characteristic nod of the head with clenched teeth and pursed lips between some words, whereby an impression of determination was reinforced. In combination with physical poise that bespoke both unflappable stature and the coolness so suitable for television, Reagan’s rhetoric of voice and body warranted acclaim for performance (actio) and the controlled flexibility and polished delivery of his lines (Carpenter & Lawrence, 2005).

Great communicators need more than delivery, however. Effective content of their discourse is mandatory, even at the subtlest nuances of syntax and lexicon.

II

Any “great communicator” surely is that “rhetorically sensitive person … willing to undergo the strain of adaptation” in order “to deal better with the very different perceptual world of the Other” (Hart & Burks, 1972, pp. 76, 83).

Moreover, after determining “which ideas are to be made known,” rhetorically sensitive people will “attempt to process and to choose among all possible verbal strategies before giving utterance to an idea” (Hart & Burks, 1972, p. 89). Obviously, what publics now hear as presidential discourse reflects substantial input from pollsters, speechwriters, political advisors, and even prior empirical quantification of the specific words most likely to work best qualitatively. For Reagan’s 1980 Acceptance Address to the Republican National Convention, for example, Richard Wirthlin’s research tool, PINS (Political Information System) tested early drafts on focus groups of 30 to 100 listeners who turned dials in different directions on electronic boxes while listening to various speech drafts; “real time” EKG-like readouts thus indicated specific words they qualitatively liked or disliked; and those words then predominated quantitatively in Reagan’s important address (Hall, 2002).

In Verbal Style and the Presidency (1984), Hart utilized DICTION, his computerized program that relies on lists of previously chosen words (or “dictionaries”) that then are identified in presidential speeches to reveal predetermined “major” factors of activity, optimism, certainty, and realism as well as “minor” elements of embellishment, self-reference, variety, familiarity, human interest, complexity, and symbolism. Hart (1984) thus examined “individual presidents, searching for those habits of locution which best explain popular reactions to their respective presidencies” and thereby studied “the American people themselves” (pp. 14-17, 24). Nevertheless, other indices of presidents’ “habits of locution” and hence rhetorical sensitivity are found less in final drafts as finally worded with lexical items on investigators’ predetermined lists but rather more in presidents’ personal, longhand emendations—additions, crossed out words, substitutions, and deletions of sentences, for instance—in successive drafts of important speeches as they reveal “adaptation” before delivery. Rather than words found in discourse as it conforms to previously established computer dictionaries, these longhand emendations are evidence of presidents’ personal predilections on behalf of “great” communication.

In Ronald Reagan’s case, such evidence exists in successive drafts of his 27 October 1983, nationally televised “Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada.” After the terrorist bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks at the Beirut airport in Lebanon, “when more than 200 of the sleeping men were killed,” Reagan described this “one hideous, insane attack” and explained what thereby was required of Americans. The Reagan Presidential Library has successive drafts of the speech:

1. One draft went to Reagan from speechwriter Ben Elliott on 26 October as a “proposed draft for your speech to the Nation tomorrow evening. It has been through an initial senior staff review.”

2. Another draft consisting of substantially long passages added in Reagan’s handwriting as well as his deletions of crossed-out passages from the Elliott draft, replete with the longhand emendations in syntax and lexicon.
3. A more polished draft reflecting all of the above but including still further subtle, longhand changes that reveal Reagan’s rhetorically sensitive “adaptation.”

4. A successive draft on 27 October (shortly before its delivery) that embodies additional changes in Reagan’s handwriting plus inclusion of an urgently recommended, substantive addition recommended in a memo from speechwriter Anthony R. Dolan, which also offers insights into the president’s rhetorical sensitivity.

5. The final draft of the speech exactly as delivered.¹

All of our quotations herein revealing Reagan’s rhetorical sensitivity are drawn from these five documents as we specify in our text. In sum total, these materials constitute a treasure trove of direct evidence about Reagan’s personal predilections conducing to “great” communication for which he is acclaimed.

III

One clearly dominant trend in Reagan’s “habits of locution” (to use Hart’s terminology) is consistent longhand wording and emendations in successive drafts to change what might have been a formal address on a somber subject to an increasingly more conversational or colloquial mode of sentence construction. Reagan introduced a conversation style, rhetorically different from any of his predecessors (Jamieson, 1988). His personal preferences thereby created new potentials for standards within presidential political discourse and thereby gave rise to rhetorical choices different from those expected for a traditional public speech. Indeed, because conversations usually occur between two people or a very small group of individuals, that mode of expression is expected to be more personal and informal than speeches given to larger audiences. Contemporary rhetorical criticism of Reagan’s handwritten alterations reveal three features of the conversation style, each of which arguably offers a distinct advantage contributing to the effectiveness and appropriateness of his discourse for television.

To reveal Reagan’s rhetorical sensitivity, perhaps the most quantitatively prominent of his emendations is a distinct tendency to substitute informal contractions and qualifiers for what instead might have been usage that is more grammatically formal. Indeed, successive drafts featuring Reagan’s personal edits demonstrated his propensity to pepper successful drafts with transitional words to begin sentences, such as “Well,” “Now,” “So,” and “But.” Furthermore, he added contractions throughout his speech such as “it’s,” “don’t,” “can’t,” “that’s,” and “we’re.” Because they generally are more spontaneous and informal, conversations usually feature more qualifiers, broken sentences, and contractions that lend themselves to a more personal tone. These emendations created a more informal, plainer style but were not the only alterations that undergirded his conversational style.

Another personal preference demonstrated in the president’s longhand emendations is his obedience to the rules of polite conversation. In essence, by
mimicking the back-and-forth structure of questioning that is encouraged in a personal dialogue, he privileged the rules of social etiquette wherein turn-taking and polite interaction are essential (Hollihan & Baaske, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, Reagan contended in longhand, “To answer those who ask if we’re serving any purpose in being there, let me answer a question with a question. Would the terrorists have launched their suicide attacks against the multinational force if it were not doing its job?” Much like two participants engaged in conversation, Reagan structured his question as if his audience had asked him a question first. In fact, Reagan’s steadfast commitment to this form is demonstrated when his speechwriters in a successive draft changed his sentence to read simply, “let me answer with a question,” and Reagan changed his sentence back to the original emphasis and repetition of the word “question.” Similarly, Reagan changed: “There are those who say we should get out of Lebanon” to “Let me ask those who say we should get out of Lebanon: If we were to leave Lebanon now, what message would that send to those who foment instability and terrorism?” In another instance, the original draft read:

Brave men have been taken from us. Many others have been wounded. All carried out their duties with honor. The worst possible course we could now take would be to run from Lebanon, stripping every ounce of meaning and purpose from their courageous sacrifice.

To this, Reagan added a question: “Are we to tell them sacrifice was wasted?” Furthermore, the politeness of his style is reinforced by the wording of his questions, such as “May I [emphasis ours] share something with you I think you’d like to know?” Instead of simply stating claims, Reagan asked questions of his audience and mimicked the feel of a participative, personal interaction. Reagan’s wording thereby created an overall feel of a conversationalist who aimed at exchanging information for the sake of understanding and relating on a more personal level.

While sentence structure complemented this personal style, Reagan’s use of an inclusive and familiar tone, accomplished through word choice and analogies, reinforced this conversational form. For instance, in addition to copious usages of pronouns like “we” and “us,” Reagan’s personal editing revealed his changing of “government” to “our government,” “this nation” to “our nation,” and “visible support” to “our support” as evidence of his tendency toward inclusive wording.

Reagan’s emendations also reveal a proclivity for familiar, more common words, with his substitution of the term “well-being” for “vitality” and “suicide mission” for “kamikaze mission.” After all, nearly four decades had elapsed since World War II, and “suicide” was a more likely word in Americans’ vocabulary than “kamikaze.” Further contributing to this tone, Reagan changed “Robert McFarlane” to “Bud McFarlane” opting for the type of nickname more likely found being used with familiar friends. Reagan also made several analogies, noted for their effectiveness in putting the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, in his description of “Grenada” as only “twice the size of the District of Colum-
bia.” Similarly, he included a comparison between freedom and an insurance policy: “Sam Rayburn once said that freedom is not something a nation can work for once and win forever. He said it is ‘like an insurance policy; it’s [sic] premiums must be kept up to date, in order to keep it, we have to keep working for it – sacrificing for it – just as long as we live.’” Reagan even used familiar scenes watched on American televisions as proof of Lebanese ineffectiveness in controlling militias: “Only a year ago we were watching on our TV screens the shelling and bombing of Beirut which was being used as a fortress by P.L.O. bands.” Reagan’s inclusive and familiar tone complimented and reinforced his use of the conversational style.

The personal qualities of a conversational style are particularly effective as television has changed the nature of the relationship between speaker and viewer, and Reagan used the conversation style to reinforce the transformation of this relationship. If President John F. Kennedy used the camera as something to speak through to a wider audience, Reagan used the camera as his conversational partner and let the immediate audience overhear him conversing. Such a strategy, however, is hardly evidence of eloquence or reason alone for Reagan’s communication greatness. Further critical assessment is warranted.

IV

In addition to contractions, qualifiers, politeness, and turn-taking, conversational style also includes anecdotal forms of evidence, and some of that manifest content (in contradistinction to stylized sentences) well might qualify as what Kenneth Burke calls the “representative anecdote” that is “summational” (1953, p. 324). Reflecting the Aristotelian notion that an apt “example” (typically from “facts of history,” 1356b and 1393a) is a cornerstone of discourse to persuade, Burkeian rhetorical theory extols those “selections of reality” that are so “summational” as to become sources of appeals around which “human relations grandly converge” (1953, p. 324). Or in classical rhetorical theory espoused by Longinus when elaborating On the Sublime, a statement of “extraordinary genius” is “marvelous” in its “power to persuade” by bringing “force sovereign and irresistible to bear upon every hearer”; for “sublimity, we know, brought out at the happy moment, parts all the matter this way and that, and like a lightening flash, reveals, at a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator.”

Could conversational Reagan be capable of Longinian sublime? Perhaps so.

On 26 October 1983, the day before Reagan’s televised address, the following urgent Memorandum was sent (as underlined) to speechwriters Robert C. McFarlane, David Gergan, Ben Elliot, and Allen Myer; its author was a close confidant of the president:

FROM: ANTHONY R. DOLAN
SUBJECT: Very Important Passage in TV Address
Urge inclusion of this anecdote. It says it all.
I know of course that no words from me can ever fully describe or do justice to the unselfish devotion of the young men who were and are today part of our Marine contingent in Beirut. I will attempt no such words.

But I do think something that happened to the commandant of our Marine Corps, General Paul Kelley, while he was visiting critically injured Marines in an Air Force Hospital. It says more than any of us could ever hope to say about the gallantry and heroism of these young men; young men who serve so willingly so that others might have a chance at peace and freedom in their own lives and in the life of their country.

I will let General Kelley's words describe the incident. He spoke of a "young Marine with more tubes going in and out of his body than I have ever seen in one body."

"He could not see very well. He reached up and grabbed my four stars, just to make sure I was who I said I was."

"He held my hand with a firm grip. He was making signals and we realized he wanted to tell me something. We put a pad of paper in his hand . . . and he wrote 'Semper fi.'"

Well, if you've been a Marine or if like myself you're an admirer of the Marines, you know those words are a battle cry, a greeting and a legend in the Marine Corps. They're Marine shorthand for the motto of the corps — "Semper Fidelis" — "always faithful."

General Kelly has a reputation for being a very sophisticated General and a very tough Marine. But he cried when he saw those words, and who can blame him.

That Marine and all those others like him, living and dead, have been faithful to their ideals, they have given willingly of themselves so that a nearly defenseless people in a region of great strategic importance to the free world will have a chance someday to live lives free of murder and mayhem and terrorism. I think that young Marine and all of his comrades have given everyone of us something to live up to. They were not afraid to stand for their country or, no matter how difficult and slow the journey might be, to give to others that last best hope of a better future. We cannot and will not dishonor them now and the sacrifices they have made by failing to remain as faithful to the cause of freedom and the pursuit of peace as they have been.

This summational (if not sublime) representative anecdote supplied by Dolan—because “it says it all”—figured prominently in Reagan’s speech.

The memorandum found its way directly to Reagan, who recognized its rhetorical value and quickly added in his own handwriting, an ending to the anecdote that became the peroration of the speech as it evolved into final form before delivery: “I would like to ask you all—where ever you may be in this beloved land to pray for these wounded young men and to pray for the bereaved familys [sic] of those who gave their lives. I will not ask you to pray for the dead because they are safe in God’s loving arms and beyond need of our prayers. God Bless you and God Bless America.” Actually Reagan first had written, “to pray
for these wounded young men and for the bereaved” but as an afterthought changed his sentence to say, “to pray for these wounded young men and to pray [italics ours] for the bereaved …. ” Repetition of “to pray” reveals a sense of a religiosity that might work to his rhetorical advantage. In the final draft as delivered, however, Reagan reversed the original order of the sentences. Thus, “I will not ask you to pray for the dead, because they’re safe in God’s loving arms and beyond need of our prayers” now preceded praying “for these wounded young men and ….” Conforming to Learning Theory law about the advantage of recency over primacy, Longinian “lightening” likely is symbolic of an immediate present more so than a past event now unalterable.

Reagan’s longhand emendations on the memorandum reveal another, almost instinctive impulse to ignore the past and emphasize the present. He simply crossed out Dolan’s first paragraph beginning, “I know of course that no words from me … I will attempt no such words.” Favoring immediacy and getting quickly to the anecdote, as if wanting quickly to tell an important story, Reagan preferred for the final draft, “May I share something with you I think you’d like to know? It’s something that that happened to the Commandant …. ” Even at the last moment of final emendation, along with “you’d,” Reagan changed his original, longhand “It is” to a more conversational “It’s.”

Critical endeavor to explicate Reagan’s rhetorical sensitivity surely should address this question: is a potential representative anecdote about Marine Corps General Paul Kelley evidence of Dolan’s rhetorical sensitivity, which the President usurped and passed off as his own? Or, did Dolan accurately assess, predict, and thereby conform to Reagan’s already established, rhetorical preferences, whether for presidential discourse generally or the Lebanon speech specifically? The latter alternative well may be the more likely. Dolan could serve an important role for Reagan because he knew his president’s preferences. And still other longhand emendations evince that already established predilection on the president’s part.

At 5:30 PM on Wednesday, 26 October, Ben Elliot’s speechwriting team had completed a “proposed draft for your speech to the Nation tomorrow evening. It has been through an initial senior staff review.” The draft at that point in time had this statement:

Well, we intend to meet our responsibilities. For longer than any of us can remember, the people of the Middle East have lived from war to war with no prospect for any other future. Because it is our moral obligation, and because of our important interests in the area, that dreadful cycle must be broken. That is our course and there is no responsible alternative.

With longhand emendations, Reagan changed the paragraph as follows:

Let us meet our responsibilities. For longer than any of us can remember, the people of the Middle East have lived from war to war with no prospect for any other future. That dreadful cycle must be broken. Why are we there?
A Lebanese mother told one of our Ambassadors her little girl had only attended school 2 of the last 8 years. Now because of our presence there her daughter could live a normal life.

Reagan *himself* preferred an anecdote to represent—in a personal story mode of expression—American responsibilities in that part of the world. His preference prevailed in the text as delivered on 27 October 1983. And a sense of its “summational” quality is evident in his immediately next emendation: crossing out, with bold markings, the next four paragraphs of the Elliot draft to start, in his longhand, a new topic: “Now I know another part of the world is very much on your minds, a place much closer to our shores. It is of course the ‘Isle of Spice’—Grenada” (retained, as is, in the draft as delivered).

Finally, Dolan’s correct anticipation of Reagan’s personal predilection for anecdotes, such as that about General Kelley, is demonstrated in what may be the most subtle but nevertheless revealing evidence of his president’s rhetorical sensitivity. Working in longhand with the Elliot draft, Reagan read the following sentence about the situation in Lebanon: “We are there protecting our own interests.” Reagan crossed out the last word, “interests.” That wounded Marine could not be summational of any ignoble interest (such as Middle East oil) but only the nobility of *our own* people. Nevertheless, for the draft as finally delivered, Reagan could not resist—again—his imperative to embody more conversational contractions: “We’re not somewhere else in the world protecting someone else’s interests; we’re there protecting our own.” Reagan was subtle, summational, and perhaps even sublime.

In 1964, Marshall McLuhan published a significant book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. The analysis therein of television as a medium of monumental import is directly relevant for an understanding of some person in an electronic age that potentially could become a “Great Communicator.” For if any president matched McLuhan’s notion of how television might be used for optimal rhetorical advantage, Ronald Reagan was he.

Essentially, McLuhan epitomized television as a “cool” medium of communication, which in turn requires a correspondingly “cool” communicator as well as “cool” messages, in both content and form as well as substance and style. After all, television essentially requires of viewers a high degree of “participation” as they connect light emitting dots flitting rapidly across a screen to create images low in definition (despite current claims for HDTV). Thus, in short, anyone using TV as a primary mode of communication—as American presidents now do—will strive for a correspondingly “low pressure style of presentation” so that the message meets the strictures of the medium (McLuhan, 1964, p. 270). As if presciently anticipating an actor turned President, McLuhan (1964) described an ideal television persona:

The TV actor does not have to project either his voice or himself. Likewise, TV acting is so extremely intimate, because of the peculiar
involvement of the viewer with the completion or “closing” of the TV image, that the actor must achieve a great degree of spontaneous casualness that would be irrelevant in movies and lost on stage. For the audience participates in the inner life of the TV actor as fully as in the outer life of the movie star. … Newscasters and actors alike report the frequency with which they are approached by people ‘who feel they’ve met them before. Joanne Woodward in an interview was asked what was the difference between being a movie star and a TV actress. “She replied: “When I was in the movies I heard people say, ‘There goes Joanne Woodward.’ Now they say, ‘There goes somebody I think I know’” (pp. 276-277).

And as in real-life, face-to-face conversation, with its “preference for the facial expression, TV is not so much an action, as a reaction medium” (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 277). In the past, the Jack Paar show was an example that “revealed the inherent need of TV for spontaneous chat and dialogue”; in the present of his presidency, Ronald Reagan, with his penchant for a conversational mode of expression for the Lebanon speech is an exemplar of likable “cool.”

The contrapuntal representative anecdote, however, is potentially a message segment whose specificity renders high definition. Reagan’s account of General Kelley’s moving encounter with the badly wounded Marine left nothing to the imagination. TV viewers listening to that account heard all the details about the characters, their outward states, and their inner feelings. The approximately 385 words of the anecdote likely required about 3 minutes of time for delivery. Nevertheless, in an age becoming attuned to five commercials in a row, each of which is 15 seconds in length (or perhaps more), three minutes of continuous statement about General Kelley and the Marine may have pushed the limits of required time span for “sublimity” that in the Longinian mode “brought out at the happy moment, parts all the matter this way and that, and like a lightening flash, reveals, at a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator” (1988, p. 267). Nevertheless, if he indeed achieved Longinian effect and affect, Ronald Reagan found a rhetorical counterpart for the eloquent style of John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address. Thus, failure to match favorably the epigrammatic prose of a president in 1961 was not an apt criterion to assess presidential language in the 1980s as “less-than-great.”

For those rhetorical critics and theorists who maintain a vital interest in the traditional canon of style as a source of epigrammatic sentences, Reagan’s successful mastery of the contemporary medium of television well may have raised a serious question: have efforts to achieve apt anecdotes replaced striving for stylized sentences? Ronald Reagan may have offered an answer. Both can be eloquent.
In the Reagan Presidential Library, these five documents are found under “Collection and/or Subject File” as White House/Office Files Speechwriting Drafts, OA 8206, WHORM Subject Files, SP 818 and SP 818 18858, and WHORM Subject Files SP818. The authors express their gratitude to Professor Kurt Ritter, Texas A & M University, for making these primary source, textual materials available to us.


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