

“THE FINEST WARRIORS FOR FREE GOVERNMENT”:
RONALD REAGAN AND THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines eighteen of Ronald Reagan’s major speeches given between the years of 1964 and 1989 in order to show that Reagan rhetorically constructed a dimension that operated outside of the civil-religious contract as identified by Robert N. Bellah. Reagan, often called the “Great Communicator,” used his rhetoric to promote a definition of freedom that adhered to his strict moral code and established American ideology. Reagan was certainly not the first to utilize religious-political discourse within both his campaign and his two terms as president. Yet by severing the civil-religious contract and constructing a new contract based on evangelical principles, Reagan succeeded in not only conflating religion and democracy, but also used his rhetorical power to shape the political reality of the 1980s. This power enabled Reagan to implement his political ideals both on the domestic and home front, creating a new brand of American exceptionalism that still functions as the center of political discourse in the United States. American exceptionalism remains essential to the leaders who wish to use the principle to gain and keep power, and as the United States continues its march through the twenty-first century, those who subscribe to such an ideology will expect their leaders to live up to the principles that Reagan so strongly set in motion during his eight years as president.

INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CIVIL-RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

“A civil religion is a set of beliefs and attitudes that explain the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality, that are held by the people generally of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths, and symbols.”

E. M. West, “A Proposed Neutral Definition of Civil Religion”

The American people live within a civil-religious dimension, interacting inside such a space through rituals and symbolic gestures. Even those representations that seem minute—such as the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance or the handling of United States currency—function as evidence of a contract between society and self-conception. Civil religion functions as a social glue of sorts, working to create order within a diverse body of people.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the originator of the term “civil religion,” devoted much attention to the theories behind civil-religious rhetoric in *The Social Contract* (1762). Rousseau argues that a society that acts according to individual wishes and desires will dissolve into chaos; therefore, there must be some sort of common goal within a society that bonds together its members. To Rousseau, this goal is furthered through a civil-religious contract.

Since Rousseau’s exploration of civil religion, many scholars, most notably Robert N. Bellah, have investigated how United States presidents construct the dimension of civil religion through presidential rhetoric (“Civil Religion in America”). Bellah, who uses mid-twentieth-century presidential inaugural addresses as his corpus, observes that civil religion “has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does” (1). Bellah’s analysis of presidential rhetoric explores the symbols of civil religion, which, he claims, are “much more related to order,

law, and right than salvation and love” (8). For example, Bellah argues that a president’s use of “God” in an address or speech is symbolic of the dimension of civil religion:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion. The inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority. (6)

For Bellah, American civil religion is based on tradition, with beliefs or behaviors passed from generation to generation functioning as a national meaning that is based on a cultural foundation. Bellah, as well as Rousseau, believe that civil religion is necessary in order for a country to function morally.

Several scholars have broadened Bellah’s definition of civil religion, including E. M. West, who attempts to clarify Bellah’s explanation by addressing the differences between institutionalized religions and civil religion: “A church is likely to be one of the exponents or agents of a nation’s civil religion; however, it will likely not be the only one and may, at times, even oppose the civil religion” (39). West sees the necessity of a distinct separation between formal religion and civil religion; but, similar to Bellah, emphasizes the ritualistic similarities between the two.

Other scholars, such as Roderick P. Hart and John L. Pauley, have studied the evolution of the idea of civil religion within the political realm. In *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (2005), Hart argues that “unofficial civil-religious rhetoric” is destroying the civil-religious contract as first envisioned by Rousseau because it 1) favors one faith or denomination over another; 2) actively promotes a certain theology; and 3) contains a political agenda that is supported by principles of a certain faith (28). Hart continues by identifying “official civil-religious rhetoric,” which he insists cannot not include any “policymaking or policy-endorsing” speeches (78).

The rise of the Evangelical movement aided in the altering of civil religion, and what was once in a sense non-denominational has become dogmatic. Brian T. Kaylor identifies several societal shifts that occurred beginning in the late 1970s that began to chronicle what he calls a “confessional political style” (154). The idea of a confessional is key to Kaylor’s theory because of its emphasis on the rhetorical—it does not mean that America has necessarily become a more religious nation, but it does mean that society expects its leaders to talk about religion more frequently and it also means that their actions should be justified by some sort of religious framework. Kaylor argues that the mixing of religion and politics has caused this confessional society, which in turn has created a religious test for public office, disenfranchised classes, the restriction of dialogue, and, overall, the politicization of religion—meaning the termination of the civil-religious contract.

Hart, Pauley, and Kaylor, who provide an analysis of modern civil-religious rhetoric from a twenty-first-century perspective, do not claim that a particular president has broken the civil-religious contract. In fact, although scholars such as Cheryl

Schonhardt-Bailey, Edward Yager, and Saadi Lahlou argue that Ronald Reagan does employ civil-religious themes frequently in his speeches, they do not consider the evangelical slant that accompanied so much of his rhetoric and how that contrasted Bellah's definition of civil religion ("Yes, Ronald Reagan's Rhetoric Was Unique").

Reagan's election as the 40th president of the United States fits neatly within the emergence of what Kaylor calls a confessional style of politics. Reagan took advantage of that opportune moment to construct, through his language, a world consistent with both his political and religious ideologies. Reagan was certainly not the first to utilize religious-political discourse within both his campaign and his two terms as president. However, his presidential rhetoric succeeded in severing the civil-religious contract and implemented in its place a reconstructed contract that conflated religion and democracy—a combination that allowed a new type of American exceptionalism to emerge.

As an exploration of Reagan's rhetorical ability to reconstruct the civil-religious contract, this thesis analyzes several of Reagan's speeches¹ given between the years of 1964 to 1989. Of the 110 speeches identified by The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library as "major," eighteen were chosen for analysis based on the following criteria: 1) The speech strongly related to foreign policy; 2) The speech contained civil-religious rhetoric as defined by Bellah; and 3) The speech furthered that definition of civil-religious rhetoric by promoting an idea of freedom that adhered to Reagan's expressed moral code. Together, the selected speeches serve as strong examples of the rhetorical dimension that

¹ Although Reagan's speechwriters played a large role in crafting his speeches, Reagan did exercise much control over the text, specifically when he wished to add elements of religiosity (see Kengor 168–69).

Reagan created throughout his eight years as president—a dimension that allowed him to use his power to gather support for his policies both on the international and domestic front.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FOUNDATION OF REAGAN'S RHETORICAL STRATEGY

“We lit a prairie fire a few years back. Those flames were fed by passionate ideas and convictions, and we were determined to make them run all—burn I should say, all across America. And what times we’ve had! Together we’ve fought for causes we love. But we can never let the fire go out or quit the fight, because the battle is never over. Our freedom must be defended over and over again—and then again.”
Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address at the Republican National Convention,
August 15, 1988

The Reagan Revolution is an illustrious description of a presidency. At its best, it constitutes the fulfillment of Ronald Reagan’s October 24, 1980, campaign pledge: the revival of the “mighty music” of the United States that would restore the “confident roar of American progress and growth and optimism” (“A Vital Economy”). Indeed, after his two terms in office, Reagan certainly left the White House satisfied that he had kept his promise. Reagan used fire as an element to symbolize his accomplishments when he spoke to delegates at the Republican National Convention eight years after his 1980 televised campaign address, because he believed that he set ideas into motion that could never be forgotten, lest the fire go out and the country be plunged into darkness. It was a deliberate word choice, emblematic of Reagan’s love of freedom. In Reagan’s eyes, his fire succeeded in destroying the United States’ most threatening enemy by accomplishing the goal of leaving “Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history” (“Address to Members of the British Parliament”). Yet Reagan failed to consider all of the possible effects of his metaphorical fire. Most importantly, what would happen if his ideas were allowed to burn out of control?

Ideologies—especially those rooted in power, patriotism, and religion—are a lot like fire because of the ease in which they can become uncontrollable. The president of the United States, then, has an enormous task at hand because the people call upon him to

determine the best way to represent the country's belief systems. Bellah argues that presidents accomplish this sense of representation through their civil-religious rhetoric, which emphasizes the symbols and values that succeed in unifying the American people without actually furthering an institutionalized religion. Yet Reagan, with his belief in a stable American ideology that does not evolve, revolutionized Bellah's notion of a civil-religious contract by rhetorically constructing a new relationship between the government and religion.

Following two major World Wars and Vietnam, the United States began to experience unprecedented military superiority and economic prosperity, and the gap between America and the rest of the world grew ever larger, even as the country interacted more and more with the people and places outside its borders and across its shores. Power became a driving force; it seemed to become part of the American ideology itself, right beside freedom, liberty, and justice. And, as power played an important role in the United States' interactions with the outside world, questions of influence and responsibility also came to the forefront. Godfrey Hodgson asserts, "At Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks and in the creation of the United Nations, it was made plain that the postwar world was to be modeled on American ideas and tailored, albeit in generous interpretations, to uphold American interests" (24). As the influence of the United States continued to become stronger, anything that seemed to threaten the country's power became a direct attack on the freedom of United States citizens. Reagan used this fear rhetorically, and in his reconstruction of the civil-religious contract, he chose to emphasize the transcendent value of the United States to support his idea of religious nationalism while exerting political power both domestically and abroad.

The Cold War serves as a strong example of what happens when two ideologies compete against each other. During the early years of the stand off, a new emphasis on the idea of American exceptionalism emerged. Hodgson argues, “The circumstances of the 1950s wove a new fabric. . . . There was the sense of victory, with the lurking hope that, whatever the dark powers of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons might restore invulnerability. Mingling with that hope was a new fear, that America might be called to do final battle with the forces of evil” (94). Years later, binaries of right versus wrong and good versus evil were especially evident in Reagan’s rhetoric. As a leader who urged American citizens to be more comfortable with domination than cooperation, Reagan enforced the idea of the United States’ exceptionalism so strongly that anyone who questioned such notions became an enemy of freedom. Reagan, arguing that the opposite of freedom was darkness, built his presidency on the idea of bringing fire into the world, both nationally and internationally. During a speech in 1964 that appeared on the pre-recorded television program “Rendezvous with Destiny,” Reagan emphasizes the importance of morality:

Those who would trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare state have told us they have a utopian solution of peace without victory. They call their policy “accommodation.” And they say if we’ll only avoid any direct confrontation with the enemy, he’ll forget his evil ways and learn to love us. . . . Well, perhaps there is a simple answer—not an easy answer—but simple: If you and I have the courage to tell our elected officials that we want our national policy based on what we know in our hearts is morally right. (“A Time for Choosing”)

Reagan's words in 1964 contained a preview of what would happen during his two terms as president in the 1980s. To Reagan, freedom and morality went hand-in-hand. Reagan called on the American people to remember what he considered as true freedom: an independence derived from faith in a higher power, which would in turn bring prosperity to the nation. Reagan's presidency, with its emphasis on smaller government, brought notions of popular sovereignty and the social contract to the foreground. More important, Reagan used these two principles to provide the foundation for the civil-religious themes that dominated his rhetoric as president of the United States, specifically in relationship to foreign policy.

Presidential rhetoric offers an excellent opportunity for analysis because of its civil-religious themes, which are especially obvious in inaugural addresses and state of the union speeches. Yet Reagan's rhetoric strengthens the idea of the United States and its moral responsibility to the world in new ways, resulting in a distinct and powerful example of American exceptionalism. Vanessa B. Beasley recognizes this shift in a general, presidential sense: "It may be that civil religious rhetoric enables presidents to offer norms for proper citizenship even as they articulate the United States' global mission; in other words, they can unite the American people by providing a global, un-American 'them' against which the citizenry can feel like a distinctive, unified 'us'" (50). Reagan's establishment of the "us" versus "them" binary helped to propel his presidency to a level of rhetorical success because he emphasized so strongly that he could not cooperate with evil: "Every lesson of history tells us that the greater risk lies in appeasement, and this is the specter our well-meaning liberal friends refuse to face—that their policy of accommodation is appeasement. . . . If we continue to accommodate,

continue to back and retreat, eventually we have to face the final demand—the ultimatum” (“A Time for Choosing”). These words again foreshadow the approach Reagan would take less than 20 years later as president of the United States: a peace through strength rhetorical strategy that served the purpose of making sure all peoples adhered to his American ideology.

CHAPTER TWO: THE KAIROS OF REAGAN’S PRESIDENCY

It is time for us to realize that we’re too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams. We’re not, as some would have us believe, doomed to an inevitable decline. I do not believe in a fate that will fall on us no matter what we do. I do believe in a fate that will fall on us if we do nothing. So, with all the creative energy at our command, let us begin an era of national renewal. Let us renew our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope.
Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981

Reagan became president of the United States during a time marked with the fear of a growing Soviet military power and consequently the threat of nuclear war. Despite Reagan’s lack of foreign policy experience, the American voters embraced his conservative political platform and elected Reagan president on November 4, 1980, defeating Jimmy Carter in a landslide victory. Reagan’s sense that his candidacy represented an instance of kairos—one that enabled him to be elected—also served as the foundation for his presidential rhetoric, specifically in relation to the Cold War.

The popularity of the Carter administration had declined by the late 1970s because of a continuing domestic economic crisis, worsened by rising fuel prices, and, on the international front, the Iran hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and criticism of Carter’s handling of the second round of Strategic Arms Limitation Talks known as SALT II (1979). In addition to these events, a new ideological movement began to sweep the nation: Christian fundamentalism, with which Reagan, as a self-proclaimed Evangelical, chose to associate. Evangelical principles greatly influenced not only how Reagan lived his personal life but also how he approached the presidency. Paul Kengor argues, “Reagan’s public faith was overt—and not merely for show. As president, Reagan showed an extraordinary inclination to use the bully pulpit *as* a pulpit. . . . To Reagan, the presidency was also his best opportunity to serve a grand purpose: to

help spark the ‘spiritual revival’ he had always envisioned, in America and around the world” (165). The spiritual revival that Kengor emphasizes symbolized, to Reagan, a return to the American ideology that he believed held an unwavering truth—an ideology rooted in faith and freedom, which is why the partnership between Reagan and the Christian fundamentalist movement succeeded.

The Moral Majority, founded by Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell in 1979, appeared as a key political force within the fundamentalist movement. The similarities between Falwell and Reagan’s beliefs were striking, which is why Falwell endorsed Reagan in both the 1980 and the 1984 presidential campaigns. Falwell approached religion with a business-like manner, striving for growth in all aspects of his “franchise.” His church, for example, became one of 16 “megachurches” in the 1970s, around the same time that he founded Lynchburg Baptist College in Lynchburg, Virginia (now known as Liberty University). Falwell’s television program also achieved great success, appearing on 373 stations across the United States. Falwell, believing in a rapidly declining state of morality in the country, began to work toward publicizing the Evangelical movement within the political realm. Daniel K. Williams points out Falwell’s desire to blend together religious and political worlds:

Having come of age at a time when private industry and Cold War military spending were the principal sources of economic uplift for his previously impoverished community, [Falwell] developed a strong faith in the private sector and became an enthusiastic advocate of a strong defense policy. Envisioning a society in which business-oriented pastors and their large evangelical congregations would offer the social and educational

services that had, since the New Deal, primarily been the purview of local, state, and federal governments, he entered politics in order to protect the nation's churches and families from the perceived intrusion of the federal bureaucracy. (126)

Falwell's views of the separation of church and state provide an example of Hart's idea of an "unofficial" civil-religious rhetoric. While Falwell believed strongly in helping people less fortunate, his social services were church-run, and groups like the American Civil Liberties Union accused Falwell of "trying to impose his religious and moral views on others through the use of state power" (Williams 139). Yet Falwell defended his mixing of religion and politics, arguing that many Americans desired a return to conservative family values, which were under attack by the pro-choice movement, feminism, homosexuality, federal welfare programs, and, more importantly, the threat of communism. Falwell's opinions of the separation of church and state mirrored Reagan's own desire to give religion an established place within politics. Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign emphasized a spiritual commitment from the start, with his platform focused on the dangers of the atheistic communist state, of course; but during his campaign and his presidency he was also outspoken against "modern-day secularism," a phrase that he used to justify, among other things, the importance of prayer in public schools ("Evil Empire").

Falwell also paralleled Reagan in his views regarding defense spending, and both men disputed Carter's negotiations with the Soviet Union under the SALT II treaty. Williams recognizes the rhetorical authority behind this attack in its Puritan beginnings: "Employing arguments that harkened back to the seventeenth-century image of the nation

as a “city upon a hill,” Falwell claimed that America had a divine mission to bring freedom and salvation to the rest of the world, but that task would never be accomplished if the nation forgot its covenant with the Lord” (138). Falwell found an ally in Reagan, who, in October 1980, accepted an offer to speak at Lynchburg. Reagan’s speech at Liberty College was reminiscent of many of Falwell’s own remarks about the country’s foreign policy.

In his speech, Reagan declares, “In all we do we must truly be peacemakers, for ourselves and for our children, for our nation and for the world” (qtd. in McKay, “Centennial Celebration”), drawing parallels to the Biblical passage of Matthew 5:9, which reads, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (English Standard Version). This passage from the Beatitudes is controversial because of the word “peacemakers”—Matthew 5:9 does not advocate a pacifist worldview, but instead can be utilized as a justification for war. Reagan’s rhetoric, even in the days before Election Day, exemplifies the peace through strength strategy that would drive his stance on foreign policy throughout his time as president. Falwell and Reagan, as partners, worked to further the ideology of American exceptionalism: Falwell’s moral-political agenda could take root in Reagan, drawing more attention to his cause—and Reagan could find support in not only the Moral Majority but also in the conservative base of American voters. The conflation of democracy and religion shifted the religious-political rhetoric in not only the 1980 presidential election, but also in the years following Reagan’s election.²

² Interestingly, during his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984, George McGovern accused Reagan of inappropriately “using religion for political purposes” (qtd. in Kaylor 26). McGovern, despite briefly serving as a Methodist minister, shied away from Evangelical rhetoric in his speeches, which, according to Kaylor’s theory of confessional politics, offers a compelling reason for McGovern’s failure to

Falwell's endorsement of Reagan proved to be too much for Carter to overcome, especially because Carter felt strongly that the Moral Majority failed to honor the principles of a separate church and state.³

Reagan's rhetoric post-election continued to utilize religious-political themes as he worked to establish a foreign policy stance that would prove he was a stronger leader than Carter in the face of adversary and calm the American people's fears of nuclear war. His strategy, though, continued to attract the group of supporters he had found the most success with in the past: the Evangelicals. Reagan frequently evokes Evangelical principles in his speeches, and also chooses to address several religious organizations during his first term as president,⁴ but one of his most famous speeches, one that illustrates just how seriously he took his faith as well as the support of the Evangelical movement, was given two and a half years after his speech at Liberty Baptist College. Reagan spoke to those in attendance at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, on March 8, 1983, during Cold War tensions. With the nuclear arms race at a high point, Reagan was weeks away from proposing the Strategic Defense Initiative, dubbed "Star Wars" by the mainstream media. It is no surprise, then, that Reagan's speech addresses the dangers of communism, yet he

connect with a majority of Americans. In 1984, he received only four committed delegate votes.

³ Carter reflects on the 1980 election in his memoir: "That autumn [1980] a group headed by Jerry Falwell purchased \$10 million in commercials on southern radio and TV to brand me as a traitor to the South and no longer a Christian" (469).

⁴ For notable examples, see Reagan's Election Eve address, "A Vision for America," given on November 3, 1980; his Inaugural Address on January 20, 1981; his address to the nation about Christmas and the situation in Poland on December 23, 1981; and his remarks at the Baptist Fundamentalism Annual Convention on April 13, 1984.

veils the issue of the nuclear arms freeze movement behind remarks about the abortion debate, the restoration of prayer to public schools, and a general spiritual awakening in America that was, in Reagan's eyes, "a renewal of the traditional values that have been the bedrock of America's goodness and greatness." Reagan's points are well directed toward his approximately 1,200-member audience, and he lumps himself into what he calls the "God-fearing, dedicated, noble" category of men and women in public office, or as he cunningly phrases it, "us." The distinction between us and them was necessary because it establishes the dichotomy crucial to the central theme in Reagan's speeches. He even goes so far as to identify "them" particularly as those who "have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based." In this speech, Reagan provides a clear picture of the Other as an entity with a value system that is not only immoral, but disrespectful to the Creator and authorizer of "the American experiment in democracy." Reagan is talking war—war against those who supports a woman's right to choose, war against those who commits crimes of infanticide, war against those who feels that prayer should not be a part of public education, and, ultimately, war against any entity that threatens America's "traditional values" and "freedom."

The complete success of Reagan's speech stemmed from his views that all these problems—abortion, infanticide, religious freedom in schools, and, more importantly, the Cold War—were rooted in moral conflicts. For example, in reference to abortion clinics, Reagan declares in his speech that he did not fault the intent of these clinics, but in "their well-intentioned effort, these clinics decided to provide advice and birth control drugs and devices to underage girls without the knowledge of their parents." Reagan's use of

the phrase “well-intentioned” to describe these places that are carrying out what he later dubs to be a threat to morality and the degradation of something “sacred” is key.

Although Reagan says in his speech that his problems with these clinics hinge on the issue of parental notification, the bigger picture is a moral one: yes, it is “the parents’ right to give counsel and advice” to their children, but the second part of that statement includes an important justification—because that advice would save their children “from making mistakes that may affect their entire lives.” Issues of control, freedom, and what constitutes a threat are paramount in this small example. Even those outside of Reagan’s immediate audience were pulled in directly to these assumptions about reality. Reagan acknowledges good intentions, but if those intentions fall outside of the perimeters established by the moral code that Reagan alludes to, then they are wrong.

Reagan’s speech encourages action toward a continuation of true American democracy supported by morality. Reagan’s commitment to adamant pro-life and pro-prayer stances, as well as his references to constitutional amendments and legislation that would restore prayer to public schools, increase restrictions on publically financed abortions, and address the problem of infanticide demonstrate the rhetorical strength that served as the foundation for Reagan’s new brand of conservatism. What seems less apparent, however, is the agenda Reagan sets into motion towards the end of the speech—an agenda also justified by moral values. With the established dichotomy of “us” versus “them” in mind, Reagan begins to make the case for his aggressive stance against the Soviet Union and the nuclear freeze proposals that he found himself up

against:⁵

So, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority. . . . So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride—the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil. (“Evil Empire”)

With these words, Reagan explicitly furthers the binaries of right and wrong and good and evil. If someone chose to not submit to one of these categories, they became prideful and ignorant (and, most likely, he or she then fell on the evil side). Reagan’s stance against communism is deeply rooted in his ideas about morality—that the people who lived in the “totalitarian darkness” he described were without God, and, therefore, they placed their source of strength in the material, and not the spiritual. Reagan used such a stance to gain power both internationally and domestically. The enemy, then, posed such a threat to the American way of life that they must be totally eliminated. Reagan tells a short story about a prominent figure in the entertainment industry to further illustrate his point:

⁵ At this time, the nuclear freeze movement became popular as a result of antinuclear protests in Western Europe. University students and religious groups in the United States began to organize demonstrations in 1982. Reagan, hoping to stem the controversy, directed his attention to religious organizations in hopes that he could make them his allies, and he visited Pope John Paul II in the Vatican Library in early June 1982 to discuss a plan to support the Solidarity underground (see Hoffman 42).

A number of years ago, I heard a young father, a very prominent young man in the entertainment world, addressing a tremendous gathering in California. It was during the time of the Cold War, and communism and our own way of life were very much on people's minds. And he was speaking to that subject. And suddenly, though, I heard him saying, "I love my little girls more than anything." And I said to myself, "Oh, no, don't. You can't—don't say that." But I had underestimated him. He went on: "I would rather see my little girls die now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God." ("Evil Empire")

In Reagan's eyes, communism represents such a threat to traditional American values that those who practice such a thing are "the focus of evil in the modern world." While Reagan insists that peace would be sought after, he also suggests that the nuclear freeze solutions he refers to in his speech would not be enough. They could not provide the assurance of American principles and standards: "The truth is that a freeze now would be a very dangerous fraud, for that is merely the illusion of peace. The reality is that we must find peace through strength" ("Evil Empire"). Because Reagan argues that communism stems from a moral deterioration, he strongly emphasizes the adherence of moral principles within the United States. The country, if conscious of this responsibility, would find the necessary strength to face its enemy. The theme of peacemakers—and just war—had emerged yet again, all while Reagan was gaining power on the home front.

In addition to the discussion of morality, nuclear weapons, and communism, Reagan uses several rhetorical flourishes that appealed not only to his immediate

audience of the National Association of Evangelicals but that also supported his rhetorical peace through strength position. These tactics include the mention of Bible verses, most notably Amos 5:24—“But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”—as well as references to the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis and his book *The Screwtape Letters*—“The greatest evil . . . is conceived and ordered . . . by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.” By saving the more controversial topic of relations with the Soviet Union for the latter-half of his speech, Reagan builds a foundation on issues seen as non-negotiable among people who identified as conservative Christians. The delay also made it possible for him to build his case against a nuclear freeze based upon his appeal to the morality of his audience. Reagan concludes his speech in the same manner, by returning to the crisis that he called a “spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith” and by encouraging his audience that they could “rise to the challenge” (“Evil Empire”). More important, though, was the choice of music following Reagan’s speech, the nineteenth-century English hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers,” with lyrics that reflect his rhetorical intensions clearly: “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war / with the cross of Jesus going on before. / Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe; / forward into battle see his banners go” (qtd. in Williams, “Reagan Steps Up Defense Push”). The lyrics to this hymn coincide with Reagan’s ultimate purpose: to strengthen his political power through a rhetorical dimension, allowing Reagan to implement his policies both internationally and domestically.

Fifteen days after his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, on March 23, 1983, Reagan proposed a new plan that would not only give the United States more power over the Soviet Union, but also would calm the threat of nuclear war without an arms freeze. Reagan's address, now commonly referred to as his "Star Wars" speech, begins by focusing on the defense budget, which he describes as "part of a careful, long-term plan to make America strong again after too many years of neglect and mistakes" ("Star Wars"). The speech, broadcast live on nationwide radio and television, chronicled a shift in typical Cold War strategy, challenging arms control. "The defense policy of the United States is based on a simple premise: The United States does not start fights. We will never be an aggressor. We maintain our strength in order to deter and defend against aggression—to preserve freedom and peace," Reagan says, which set the scene for what came at the end of his speech, a surprise that shocked not only the American people but also Congress and many of his closest advisors.⁶

In his "Star Wars" speech, Reagan's vision of the future relies upon the idea of defense instead of offense: "What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?" Reagan then calls on science to help with a research and development program that would "pave the way for arms control measures to eliminate the weapons themselves" ("Star Wars"). Reagan's plan, formally called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), was later revealed to be unfeasible, but it still captured

⁶ Hoffman points out that Reagan did not tell Congress or even his Cabinet about his plan until right before he gave his speech on the evening of March 23 because he wanted to "keep his potential opponents off-guard" (57).

the attention of the American people during a time of great fear and unrest, because it placed a renewed emphasis on his faith in American technology. Yet Reagan's vision of this initiative provoked Soviet forces, resulting in the continuation of a power struggle that pitted two superpowers against each other in new ways. As G. Thomas Goodnight argues, "Consequently, whether research and development is undertaken with the noble intent of protecting people or not, the future holds a cycle where defense counters offense; offense, defense; defense, offense; until...?" (407). Goodnight raises the question of whether or not this endless round of competition constitutes progress. But in Reagan's mind, it would, because he recognized the rhetorical value of a Strategic Defense Initiative that valued dominance over accommodation. The point suggests that Reagan's "groundbreaking" ideas behind "Star Wars" were actually not so groundbreaking, unless one considers them in the context of his rhetoric. In fact, they simply perpetuate the ideology behind American exceptionalism. As Reagan himself claims in an address in 1963: "In an all out race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up the race as a hopeless cause. Then a noble nation believing in peace extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us" (qtd. in Skinner 442). Here, Reagan's vision of the whimper with which the Cold War would end foreshadows the Strategic Defense Initiative in ways that Reagan himself had probably not yet realized.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSIBILITY OF THE UNITED STATES

*“How can we not believe in the greatness of America? How can we not do what is right and needed to preserve this last best hope of man on Earth? After all our struggles to restore America, to revive confidence in our country, hope for our future, after all our hard-won victories earned through the patience and courage of every citizen, we cannot, must not, and will not turn back. We will finish our job. How could we do less?
We’re Americans.”*

Ronald Reagan, State of the Union Address, January 25, 1984

Reagan’s second state of the union address affirms his rhetorical success in establishing the position of peace through strength, an apparent truism he had achieved in 1983 with his “Evil Empire” and “Star Wars” speeches. In order to fully understand the success of these speeches, though, the motivations behind Reagan’s words must be considered. Together, the Evil Empire and Star Wars addresses are prime examples of Reagan’s peace through strength mentality: true evil cannot be reasoned with; it must be stamped out, especially when the American ideology of freedom is threatened. Yet for Reagan, the responsibility was not just a matter of foreign policy—it was also a religious one, deeply rooted in his spiritual beliefs. Critics have attempted to establish that the faith he believed in so strongly necessitated the destruction of all traces of communism. Paul Kengor, for example, wrestles with the idea of whether or not Reagan considered his presidency a spiritual mission: “Reagan’s explicit assertion that God has chosen his ‘team’ to defeat the USSR speaks volumes: there was no doubt about who was head of that team” (216). Communism directly contradicted Reagan’s religion, and, as leader of the free world, Reagan believed he had both a political and spiritual obligation to spread freedom across the globe. More important, his obligation could not be compromised.

Reagan’s classification of the Soviet Union as an “evil empire,” as well as his announcement of SDI destroyed any lasting hope for détente between the two

Superpowers. SDI moved the Soviet Union to action in ways that had not yet been seen by the United States. The Soviet leadership began to rely heavily on spies in order to intercept intelligence that would give them any idea as to the motive behind Reagan's new defensive, and, in addition, a new emphasis was placed on communication systems that would allow the Soviets to launch missiles quickly, despite any "uncertainty" that might occur (Hoffman 149). Reagan's SDI had set into motion a race for power, and arms control talks became a thing of the past as the relationship between the two Superpowers deteriorated to almost nonexistent levels.

As tensions continued to rise in the early 1980s—especially with Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech and the subsequent announcement of SDI—the Soviet Union began to examine all available options in the event of a nuclear attack, which leaders considered to be imminent. Reagan anticipated that the Soviet Union would be forced to do such a thing, but more important, he hoped that the possibility of SDI would make the Soviets realize that they were too weak to fight the defense initiative.⁷ Reagan himself recognizes the economic motivations of the USSR in an opinion piece published in the *Los Angeles Times* (1991):

The Soviets were spending such a large percentage of their national wealth on armaments that they were bankrupting their economy. [My Administration] also knew that, if we showed the political resolve to develop SDI, the Soviets would have to face the awful truth: They did not have the resources to continue building a huge offensive arsenal and a defensive one simultaneously. ("Star Wars' Muscle")

⁷ For more about Reagan's motivations behind SDI, see Paul Lettow, 120–21.

For Reagan, SDI served as an integral part of his peace through strength strategy, one that would succeed in making the United States more powerful than its greatest enemy.

Reagan did not anticipate, however, that the Soviets would respond to Reagan's plans with an initiative of their own.

David Hoffman suggests that in the event of nuclear war, the Soviets had three courses of action: 1) to monitor changes in United States behavior so well that leaders could know when an attack was about to occur, and then attack before the enemy; 2) to attack upon receiving warnings from satellites and ground-based radars that the United States had launched its missiles; and 3) because early-warning satellites could be mistaken, to launch missiles only when the Soviet Union was actually under attack (151). Although all three of the options carried extreme risks, the Soviets considered the latter to be the best course of action, despite questions of timing. These questions, however, led the Soviets to reconsider wartime communications, forcing leaders to work quickly to finish a system known as Perimeter, which consisted of two parallel plans: an underground command post carved out of granite, called Grot, as well as command rockets that would be launched high above any devastation occurring on the ground. The command rockets would be able to transmit a signal to nuclear missiles that remained on the ground, "telling" them to launch.

Yet more problems remained. What if those in power could not make the decision to retaliate fast enough,⁸ and, subsequently, an attack completely wiped out the general

⁸ At this time, 72-year-old Konstantin Ustinovich Cherneko was serving as general secretary of the USSR. Cherneko's health failed substantially in the early 1980s due to emphysema, and many Soviet leaders called his ability to speak and think quickly into question (Hoffman 144–51).

secretary and other leaders? This possibility led the designers of Perimeter to explore the addition of one new element to the command system:

Buried within the idea [of Perimeter] was an even deeper and more frightening concept that the Soviet leaders considered: a totally automated, computer-driven retaliatory system known as the Dead Hand. It would still function if *all* the leaders and *all* the regular command system were destroyed. Computers would memorize the early-warning and nuclear attack data, wait out the onslaught, and then order the retaliation without human control. This system would turn over the fate of mankind to computers. (152)

Although the Soviets never constructed this fully automatic addition to Perimeter, Hoffman acknowledges that Perimeter as a whole was quite “ominous,” with the duty officers themselves “just another cog in an automatic, regimented system” (153).

Reagan’s strategy of peace through strength drove the Soviet Union toward a continued race for power, and with the complete dissolution of détente, power was no longer shaping reality; it was reality.

Perimeter entered its final year of testing the same year that Reagan launched his re-election campaign. Reagan faced competition from Democratic presidential nominee Reagan portrayed Walter Mondale, who in spite of calling the Soviet Union a “tough and ruthless” adversary in an October 1984 presidential debate, as someone whose foreign policy stance was not only unrealistic but was also lacking in bravado: “Mr. Mondale, in the past, has made statements as if they were just people like ourselves, and if we were kind and good and did something nice, they would respond accordingly. And the result

was unilateral disarmament. We canceled the B-1 under the previous administration. What did we get for it? Nothing” (“Debate”). The Carter administration had canceled the B-1 bomber program in June 1977 because of its cost, which contrasted Reagan’s ideas of the necessity of military buildup. By comparing Mondale’s ideas to that of Jimmy Carter, Reagan effectively smears him as a weak leader while also reminding the public that there was unseen danger in allowing the Soviet Union to possess a greater number of nuclear warheads than the United States. As he had in 1980, Reagan asks the American people to forget about the policy of détente that had defined relations between the Soviet Union and the United States under the Nixon, the Ford, and the Carter administrations, and instead, continue to embrace his peace through strength strategy. As Reagan argues in the 1984 debate against Mondale:

The Soviet Union has been engaged in the biggest military buildup in the history of man at the same time that we tried the policy of unilateral disarmament, of weakness, if you will. And now we are putting up a defense of our own. And I’ve made it very plain to them, we seek no superiority. We simply are going to provide a deterrent so that it will be too costly for them if they are nursing any ideas of aggression against us. Now, they claim they’re not. And I made it plain to them, we’re not. There’s been no change in my attitude at all. I just thought when I came into office it was time that there was some realistic talk to and about the Soviet Union. And we did get their attention. (“Debate”)

Reagan refers to SDI, a defense mechanism that would cause the Soviet Union to work tirelessly toward counter measures of its own, eventually playing a large role in the

nation's bankruptcy. In fact, much of Reagan's rhetoric in the years between his March 23, 1983, speech and the collapse of the Soviet Union compared the Superpowers' economic systems, possibly in an attempt to change the Soviets' minds about capitalism while also using the system to run communism into the ground. In addition, many of Reagan's speeches to the American people during this time emphasized the importance of supporting and having confidence in the economic prosperity that he maintained the country was experiencing, rhetorically widening the gap between the American model and the Soviet model and giving him the political power to implement his vision of a new morning in America. For example, in Reagan's second Inaugural Address he claims the United States' 25 straight months of economic growth transcended domestic policy: "Freedom and incentives unleash the drive and entrepreneurial genius that are the core of human progress. We have begun to increase the rewards for work, savings, and investment; reduce the increase in the cost and size of government and its interference in people's lives." These remarks serves Reagan's purpose of encouraging the American people in their capitalistic prosperity, but he also strengthened the contrast between the "successful" system of capitalism and its enemy, communism.

Although Mondale accuses Reagan in the 1984 debate of being unwilling to negotiate with the Soviet Union—"Where I part with the President is that despite all of those differences we must, as past Presidents before this one have done, meet on the common ground of survival"—Reagan, spurred by his advisers, had actually set into motion a framework that would encourage negotiations between the two countries. Yet these negotiations were not founded upon any level of trust between the two

Superpowers, but on determining the Soviet Union's weakness and then taking advantage of that weakness.

Nine months prior to the debate, in January 1984, Reagan addresses not only the United States, but also many countries around the world, about the state of relations between America and the Soviet Union: "I believe that 1984 finds the United States in the strongest position in years to establish a constructive and realistic working relationship with the Soviet Union. . . . We must and will engage the Soviets in a dialogue as serious and constructive as possible" ("Address to the Nation"). Reagan goes on to outline three main areas that should be addressed in negotiations: 1) the reduction and subsequent elimination of the use of force within international arguments; 2) the reduction of "armaments" in the world;⁹ and 3) the establishment of working relationships between countries, relationships marked by "cooperation" and "understanding." At its most basic level, these three appeals seem similar to what Mondale, and even Carter, advocated in their foreign policy ideologies; yet a closer examination of Reagan's rhetoric reveals that his own attempts toward negotiation were rooted in a different, and more complicated, vision. At the end of the speech, Reagan claims a kind of innocence:

Our challenge is peaceful. It will bring out the best in us. It also calls for the best in the Soviet Union. We do not threaten the Soviet Union.

Freedom poses no threat. It is the language of progress. We proved this 35 years ago when we had a monopoly on nuclear weapons and could have

⁹ Reagan also claimed in this speech that it was "tragic to see the world's developing nations spending more than \$150 billion a year on armed forces—some 20 percent of their national budgets," and urged countries to find "ways to reverse the vicious cycle of threat and response" ("Address to the Nation and Other Countries").

tried to dominate the world, but we didn't. Instead, we used our power to write a new chapter in the history of mankind. We helped rebuild war-ravaged economies in Europe and the Far East, including those of nations who had been our enemies. Indeed, those former enemies are now among our staunchest friends. (“Address to the Nation”)

These words reveal Reagan's understanding that the United States had a religious responsibility to promote democracy—and freedom, as “the language of progress,” exists at the center of this belief. Reagan strongly believed that God gave the United States its freedom, and as the major recipients of such a gift, the United States had to wage what he would later call a “crusade for freedom” (“British Parliament”) to help those who he said were experiencing “cultural condescension.”¹⁰ One of the strongest examples of Reagan's view of the United States' religious responsibility appears in his second Inaugural Address:

It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair. That's our heritage, that's our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old. We raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound—in unity, affection, and love—one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.

¹⁰ Justin Garrison explores Reagan's foreign policy expectations in relationship to the idea of morality; see 34–63.

Reagan clearly implies freedom was a desire that all men and women shared, regardless of what country he or she inhabited. And, in Reagan's eyes, because freedom bound together such a diverse group of American citizens and kept peace within the United States, spreading notions of freedom and democracy would have the same effect around the world. Reagan's rhetoric in his inaugural address relies almost entirely upon the concept of patriotism, and it is also tinged with elements of American exceptionalism in its assumptions of power through its religious responsibility.

As Reagan's second term began to get underway, some sort of negotiations with the Soviet Union began to seem like a real possibility. Mikhail Gorbachev, a younger and more radical member of the Politburo, began serving as the general secretary on March 11, 1985, only a few months after Reagan began to serve his second term. Gorbachev, conscious of the flaws within the Soviet system, understood the monetary strain that the military-industrial complex had on the country. Gorbachev was also wary of Reagan's "Star Wars" dream not only because of its potential to initiate a nuclear weapons battle in space, but also because he knew that the Soviets did not have the resources to pursue a defense option of their own or initiate a counterstrike. Therefore, Gorbachev strongly wished to place limitations on research and development of SDI as indicated by initial arms control talks between the two Superpowers (Hoffman 223). However, Reagan, as well as the Defense Department and the CIA, discredited the actual state of affairs within the Soviet Union in order to further their own agendas. On October 12, 1985, Reagan gave a radio address to the nation on the state of Soviet strategic defense programs, which complimented the release of a comprehensive report by the State and Defense Departments. In his address, Reagan claims that the Soviet Union was expanding

defensive efforts of their own: “They’re doing so well, our experts say they may be able to put an advanced technology defensive system in space by the end of the century” (“Address to the Nation”). In fact, by the 1980s, the Soviets had completely fallen behind the times in research and development, and one of the leading Soviet scientists, Yevgeny Velikhov, had warned Gorbachev that a missile defense system like the one Reagan had proposed was an impossibility (Hoffman 219, 225). The Soviets were not, in fact, “doing so well.” Yet Reagan used this fearful rhetoric to play brinkmanship in order to gain political power at home.

Reagan’s radio address contains numerous claims about Soviet nuclear power, which he used to further the need for his defensive initiative. He declares, “What I’m speaking of is a balance of safety, as opposed to a balance of terror. This is not only morally preferable, but it may result in getting rid of nuclear weapons altogether. It would be irresponsible and dangerous on our part to deny this promise to the world” (“Address to the Nation on Soviet Strategic Defense”). Reagan uses such words to build public support for his “Star Wars” plan on the basis of power—the idea of peace through strength had emerged yet again—but he also touched on the moral aspect of such a strategy. The “balance of terror” that he spoke of would occur if the Soviet Union continued to build up offensive and defensive arms, but also, in Reagan’s opinion, the freedom that the United States could offer the world would be threatened. At this point in the arms race, power still functioned as the main objective, especially for Reagan, who spread the ideas in the State and Defense Departments’ propaganda piece without question. Negotiations seemed to function as a way to further the appearance of a relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, with Reagan sharply

opposed to arms control agreements that would limit the research, development, and testing of his Strategic Defense Initiative.

A few days after Reagan's radio address, he gave a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York (October 24), where he expressed his desire to sit with Gorbachev at the upcoming Geneva summit in November and work toward a "fresh start" with the Soviets. "The only way to resolve differences is to understand them," Reagan claims, and this positive and encouraging statement seemed to set a different tone than the one exemplified previously in Reagan's October 12 radio address. Unfortunately, however, Reagan continues to pit the two Superpowers against each other, relying once again upon the "us" versus "them" dichotomy:

What kind of people will be we 40 years from today? May we answer: free people, worthy of freedom and firm in the conviction that freedom is not the sole prerogative of a chosen few, but the universal right of all God's children. . . . This is the affirming flame the United States has held high to a watching world. We champion freedom not only because it is practical and beneficial but because it is morally right and just. Free people whose governments rest upon the consent of the governed do not wage war on their neighbors. Free people blessed by economic opportunity and protected by laws that respect the dignity of the individual are not driven toward the domination of others. ("Address to the General Assembly")

In this speech, Reagan defines free people in such a way that it directly spoke toward his anti-communist, anti-atheist sentiments, and the qualities Reagan used to construct his definition of freedom were in stark contrast to how he had portrayed the Soviet Union in

past speeches—most notably, as an “evil empire” almost two and a half years earlier.

Although Reagan stresses the importance of both sides going to Geneva “committed to dialogue,” the use of such binaries in his speeches made it difficult to approach talks in a neutral manner; in Reagan’s eyes, the righteous and just free people will always be ahead. Reagan’s rhetoric was working, and as he began to exercise his power at home and abroad, he was able to implement his political agenda.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TRIUMPH OF FREEDOM

“America is committed to the world because so much of the world is inside America....The blood of each nation courses through the American vein and feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves in the fate of this good Earth.”
Ronald Reagan, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, October 24, 1985

Negotiations with Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985 proved to set the stage for what would come almost a year later on October 11, 1986, in Reykjavik, Iceland. The Geneva summit produced no signed treaties and failed to eliminate any nuclear warheads (Hoffman 233), but Reagan’s rhetoric following the meeting pointed toward promise and hope: “No one ever said it could be easy, but we’ve come a long way,” he says in an address before a joint session of Congress on November 21, 1985. Reagan concludes his speech before Congress with an important reminder wrapped in patriotic packaging:

In just a few days families across America will gather to celebrate Thanksgiving. And again, as our forefathers who voyaged to America, we traveled to Geneva with peace as our goal and freedom as our guide. For there can be no greater good than the quest for peace and no finer purpose than the preservation of freedom. It is 350 years since the first Thanksgiving, when Pilgrims and Indians huddled together on the edge of an unknown continent. And now here we are gathered together on the edge of an unknown future, but, like our forefathers, really not so much afraid, but full of hope and trusting in God, as ever. (“Address before a Joint Session”)

Besides the gross oversimplification of the Thanksgiving story—many would argue that, to the Indians, the continent was anything but “unknown”—Reagan’s words speak to the assurance he had for the country through his faith in God, and what reward would come from that faith. Just as God blessed the Pilgrims through their quest for freedom, Reagan believed that God would also find favor in the United States’ mission for peace. The well-chosen, highly appropriate metaphor set the stage for the rest of Reagan’s foreign policy negotiations during the remaining years of his presidency. Without any “greater good” than freedom, as Reagan said, the American people could be secure in the idea that they would triumph over evil. Reagan’s religious rhetoric served the purpose of advancing and securing power on the international and home front.

These patriotic additions to Reagan’s speeches—the stories, metaphors, and historical accounts—were a common feature of his rhetoric. Reagan’s ability to communicate abstract and difficult ideas to a general audience often gained him public support, allowing him to promote a sort of national identity in a time of crisis—an identity with God on the American people’s side. In addition to his morally symbolic anecdotes, several other key features of Reagan’s speeches reveal his attention to the national consciousness, including his attention to easily understood binaries and, ultimately, his use of fear to advance ideas of power.

When Reagan and Gorbachev met in Reykjavik in October 1986, the pair came closer to groundbreaking negotiations than ever before. Reagan and Gorbachev discussed the total elimination of all nuclear explosive devices over the span of two five-year periods. Hoffman maintains the proposal was “the most concrete, far-reaching disarmament initiative by a U.S. president ever to be formally submitted in a superpower

summit negotiation” (265). Yet talks again stalled over missile defense and “Star Wars.” Gorbachev claims in his memoir that the dispute rested on the omission of one word in the treaty, “laboratory.” But Reagan, unwilling to consign his defense initiative to the lab, insisted that the United States be allowed to not only work toward the research and development of such a system, but test it, as well. “You say it’s just a matter of one word,” Gorbachev recalls saying. “But it’s not a matter of one word, it’s a matter of principle” (419). By the summit’s end, no treaty had been signed, despite the fact that the leaders had almost reached an agreement.

This failure to reach a political compromise was also a matter of rhetoric. W. Barnett Pearce, Deborah K. Johnson, and Robert J. Branham claim that Reagan’s rhetoric, in relationship to the Soviet Union, shifted following the meeting at Reykjavik. Pearce and his colleagues argue that Reagan’s unwillingness to negotiate any part of his SDI initiative actually succeeded in swaying the public’s opinion toward Gorbachev. Pearce and his colleagues consider the scope of Reagan’s rhetorical success: “The result was to reverse public opinion around the world as to who was in fact the advocate of peace and to delegitimize the confrontational rhetoric in which Reagan had argued, simultaneously, that the United States occupied the moral high ground and that the United States was morally compelled to continue escalating the arms race” (163–64). In some ways, Reagan’s speeches post-Reykjavik do support the point made by Pearce, Johnson, and Branham, especially Reagan’s address to the nation on October 13, 1986. Although his rhetoric continues to emphasize “peace through strength”—he claims in the address, “I went to Reykjavik determined that everything was negotiable except two

things: our freedom and our future”—Reagan also spends a portion of the speech explaining why his Strategic Defense Initiative is nonnegotiable:

I realize some Americans may be asking tonight: Why not accept Mr. Gorbachev's demand? Why not give up SDI for this agreement? Well, the answer, my friends, is simple. SDI is America's insurance policy that the Soviet Union would keep the commitments made at Reykjavik. SDI is America's security guarantee if the Soviets should—as they have done too often in the past—fail to comply with their solemn commitments. SDI is what brought the Soviets back to arms control talks at Geneva and Iceland. SDI is the key to a world without nuclear weapons. (“Address to the Nation”)

Reagan treats SDI in this passage as a valuable bargaining chip because of mounting pressures from the media and the general public. As Gorbachev began relaying his own version of the talks at Reykjavik, it drew attention to the fact that Reagan would not consider to compromise on the initiative. If the SDI was the sole reason as to why a treaty had not been agreed upon, Reagan's image as a leader was hurt—and he certainly did not want to take the chance of public opinion swaying to Gorbachev because it could mean losing the power that Reagan had worked so hard to build up around his foreign policy initiatives. His rhetoric served the purpose of furthering his political agenda.

In addition to Reagan's emphasis on the importance of SDI, he interjects human rights issues into the rhetorical strategy in his speech in October. Although Reagan had certainly discussed the plight of the people of the Soviet Union before, especially in a

speech following the Geneva summit,¹¹ this new emphasis on humanity contrasted Reagan's portrayal of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" in 1983. Gorbachev, since assuming his duties as general secretary, had begun to implement the first stages of sweeping reforms across the Soviet Union, recognizing the country's deep economic troubles. Although discussions at Reykjavik largely focused on nuclear weapons, Reagan and Gorbachev did talk about the Soviet Union's strict immigration policy. Reagan, after returning from the summit, took advantage of rhetorical opportunities to bring international attention to Gorbachev and to pressure him to work toward reforms in a more urgent manner.¹²

Although Reagan's rhetorical tone did soften in his later years as president, the foundation of his rhetoric—religion—is an idea that Pearce and his colleagues do not explore thoroughly. Reagan had a strong ability to adjust his rhetoric to fit his audience, but his success lies in the undercurrent of religious morality that is in his rhetoric, which truly speaks to his ability as the "Great Communicator." Reagan's consistent emphasis on America as God's country not only continued to shape his personal identity as president of the United States, but also remained his rhetorical foundation. Such consistency enabled Reagan to be the champion of the conservative movement—a timely endeavor—but, more important, provided the American people with a national identity available for those who wished to hold on to in times of uncertainty. Reagan's address at the

¹¹ See "Address before a Joint Session of the Congress following the Soviet-United States Meeting in Geneva" (November 21, 1985).

¹² B. Wayne Howell discusses this theory specifically in relationship to the Strategic Defense Initiative, arguing that SDI is a tool that Reagan uses to emphasize the "political context of the nuclear arms race" (391).

Brandenburg Gate in June 1987 provides an excellent example of his ability to construct, and then use, the creation of such a national identity to his political advantage.

There is evidence that Reagan's rhetoric was successful on the home front. American conservatives tout his address at the Brandenburg Gate as not only one of the greatest speeches of his presidency, but also as the moment that led to the end of the Cold War. Indeed, a little over two years after Reagan's address in Berlin, the wall crumbled in November of 1989. With the arms race not yet over at this point in Reagan's presidency, it had at least shown signs of slowing. Gorbachev had taken steps toward reducing the Soviet Union's stockpiles of weapons without asking the United States to do such a thing in return.¹³ Therefore, Reagan focused a significant portion of his rhetoric to the dangers of the Soviet system—specifically its economic shortcomings, because to Reagan, prosperity came only to “free” nations. American citizens, and United States supporters, had no choice but to support Reagan's political agenda, lest they be seen as opposing freedom. Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, Reagan speaks not only to listeners present at the gathering but also to people in North America, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe. From the beginning he establishes his rhetorical position on the moral high ground: “We come to Berlin, we American presidents, because it's our duty to speak, in this place, of freedom.” Reagan continues in the guilt-laden mode of a neglected parent as he reminds listeners that it was the United States who reached out to Germany

¹³ Hoffman provides several examples of Gorbachev's efforts toward slowing the arms race in the late 1980s, including his resignation to “untie the package” deal that he and Reagan had failed to agree upon at Reykjavik. This acceptance meant that Gorbachev had agreed to reduce missiles despite Reagan's lack of compromise toward the development of the SDI (279). In addition, Gorbachev signed an order in May 1987 that reorganized the way the Kremlin handled defense decisions, effectively giving more power to those who favored disarmament (285).

following World War II, and, referring to the Marshall plan, he quotes George Marshall himself: “Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos.” Thus, Reagan simultaneously strips Gorbachev of any credibility he might have gained after the talks at Reykjavik at the same time he reminds the world that what it was up against was not just a battle of arms, but a battle of freedom. Reagan continued to successfully create power with his rhetoric.

B. Wayne Howell argues that even a reduction in arms on the Soviet Union’s part could not curb the threat of the Soviet Union to Reagan and his vision of America. As Howell claims, “The international threat posed by the Soviet Union, as characterized by Reagan, was based on more than Soviet stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Reagan rooted the threat in the nature and practices of the Soviet system itself, in its ideology and history” (403). Indeed, much of the speech that Reagan gives at the Brandenburg Gate relied upon strict binaries—freedom versus oppression, of course, but more centrally, prosperity versus poverty. As in previous speeches, Reagan ultimately connects freedom to prosperity, and his emphasis on the communist world’s “failure, technological backwardness, declining standards of health, [and] even want of the most basic kind—too little food” serves to conform the “fact” that prosperity could not occur under the current system. He goes on to complete his rhetorical syllogism: “After these four decades, then, there stands before the entire world one great and inescapable conclusion. . . . Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor.”¹⁴ To Reagan, the ultimate symbol of the Soviet Union’s embrace of freedom

¹⁴ A few years later, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Gorbachev lost all control, the resulting chaos was far from “comity and peace.”

would be the fall of the Berlin Wall, and he immortalizes it in his demand toward the end of his speech: “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Perhaps the most frustrating element of Reagan’s rhetoric during his address at the Berlin Wall is that he fails to properly recognize Gorbachev’s efforts toward reform, which supports Reagan’s approach to the Soviet Union—either the system becomes Reagan’s system, or it ceases to exist entirely. Reagan’s rhetoric eliminates the possibility of any type of opposition. In his Brandenburg Gate address, for example, Reagan disguises his acknowledgement of the Soviet Union’s progress toward reform in airs of mistrust: “We hear from Moscow about a new policy of reform and openness...Are these the beginnings of profound changes in the Soviet state? Or are they token gestures, intended to raise false hopes in the West, or to strengthen the Soviet system without changing it?” (“Remarks on East-West Relations”). Reagan pledges to “stand ready to cooperate with the East to promote true openness, to break down barriers that separate people, to create a safer, freer world,” but only on the terms of moral objectivity evident in the concept of American exceptionalism. Reagan’s moral stance served as the core of his power at home.

A little over a year later, Reagan gave a farewell address to the Republican National Convention in New Orleans (August 15, 1988). Almost eight years had passed since his first Inaugural address, when he had summarized a vision for governance that would be quoted extensively for years afterward by conservatives everywhere: “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.

. . . If no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?” (“Remarks at the Republican National Convention”).

In these remarks, he continues to emphasize the driving force behind his entire presidency: the United States, a “brilliant light beam of freedom to the world,” was exceptional because of its emphasis on the individual; freedom, as a morally right concept, was the only way to lead to a life that held value. Reagan tells a story that not only appeals to the emotions of the audience, but that also envisions the prosperity that could only arise out of the principle of freedom:

It’s our gift to have visions, and I want to share that of a young boy who wrote to me shortly after I took office. In his letter he said, “I love America because you can join Cub Scouts if you want to. You have a right to worship as you please. If you have the ability, you can try to be anything you want to be. And I also like America because we have about 200 flavors of ice cream.” Well, truth through the eyes of a child: freedom of association, freedom of worship, freedom of hope and opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness—in this case, choosing among 200 flavors of ice cream—that’s America, everyone with his or her vision of the American promise. (“Remarks at the Republican National Convention”)

Reagan’s story, and then his subsequent comments that spoke toward the “vision of the American promise,” strongly emphasizes his insistence on limited government. By emphasizing individual visions—even that of a small child who loved ice cream—he effectively renounces communism in ways that all listeners could understand. Reagan continues to emphasize the strength of individual visions and what might happen when

they all come together: “This land, its people, the dreams that unfold here and the freedom to bring it all together—well, those are what make America soar, up where you can see hope billowing in those freedom winds” (“Remarks at the Republican National Convention”). His patriotic rhetoric was a rallying point for citizens during a time of fear, but Reagan operated in this rhetorical dimension in order to implement his domestic policies.

In 1989, the United States saw the inauguration of a new president, George H.W. Bush, who had served as Reagan’s vice president, and under this new leadership in the U.S. the Soviet Union continued to break apart at an incredible rate. The Soviet people did not know what to do with their newfound power. Hoffman calls the freedom that those in the Soviet Union began experiencing in the late 80s a “virus, spreading fast” (318). The unrest sparked not only protests for democracy—some that turned violent—but also led to the voting out of the Communist Party leadership on March 26, 1989. Gorbachev lost control of the country, which resulted in a coup d’état attempt two years later, the collapse of the Soviet economy, and the subsequent election of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, who, on June 12, 1991, became the first president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. The Soviet Union officially dissolved on December 26, 1991, following the resignation of Gorbachev the day prior (Hoffman 400).

The time leading up to the end of the Soviet Union, as well as the years after, became object lessons in what happens when power structures fail. It was as if someone had suddenly turned on the lights in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, revealing the missing watchman, whose absence had given the prisoners their freedom. In that moment, the Soviet people had a choice: continue to live under an invisible power structure that they

believed still served a purpose, or rebel against that power structure and create their own source of authority. In many cases, the scientists who had previously held such high regard in Soviet society did just that as they began to sell their secrets and, in some cases, their scientific abilities to countries like Syria in order to feed their families (Hoffman 437–38).

If Reagan anticipated the chaos that the fall of the Soviet Union would cause—not just within the country, but internationally, too, as the United States had to deal with reigning in fissile material and other elements of the nuclear arsenal—his solution would most likely be simple. In his meetings with Gorbachev, most notably at the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in Washington on December 8, 1987, Reagan often repeated the Russian proverb, “Dovorey no provorey,” meaning “Trust, but verify”; and he repeats this proverb to the public for the first time during remarks at the University of Virginia in December 1988. Reagan claims: “It means keeping our military strong. It means remembering no treaty is better than a bad treaty. It means remembering the accords of Moscow and Washington summits followed many years of standing firm on our principles and our interests, and those of our allies” (“Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session at the University of Virginia”). These words exemplified his peace through strength strategy at its finest—because in Reagan’s vision of the United States and its unique role in the world, even trust could not exist without imposing some sort of power to keep lesser countries in check. Reagan refers to “our principles” and “our interests” in his speech, but in fact, they were his own principles and interests, which he accentuated so strongly in order to implement his policies both internationally and domestically. Reagan’s emphasis on American exceptionalism would only make it easier

for future presidents to continue operating in the powerful rhetorical dimension that he created during his presidency.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

“The struggle between freedom and totalitarianism today is not ultimately a test of arms or missiles, but a test of faith and spirit. And in this spiritual struggle, the Western mind and will is the crucial battleground. . . . We must not be reluctant to enunciate the crucial distinctions between right and wrong.”

*Ronald Reagan, Address Before a Joint Session of Irish National Parliament,
June 4, 1984*

Reagan used the word “freedom” multiple times in almost every major speech he gave throughout his eight years as president. In his address to the Irish National Parliament—a relatively shorter speech compared to most—he speaks of freedom 29 times, earnestly making the case that the task before the leaders is to move the world to “march together” in the “cause of freedom.” As leader of the free world, Reagan considered himself the champion of such a movement.

Reagan desired to contain, and subsequently to destroy, communism, but the fuel behind that desire was a moral obligation to, as he said in his address before the Irish National Parliament, “enunciate the crucial distinctions between right and wrong.” For Reagan, the principles of right and wrong stood as unwavering and time-tested, and thus, nonnegotiable; in his mind, there could be no compromise toward anything that threatened his idea of freedom.

Nothing threatened Reagan’s idea of freedom more than the atheist communist state, founded upon an ideology in direct opposition to his strong evangelical beliefs. Reagan’s spirituality guided him throughout his presidency—he not only used his faith as a way to garner personal strength, but, more significantly, he believed that such faith played a crucial role in the continued success of the United States. During a speech given in the later days of his presidency to the students and luminaries gathered for Georgetown

University's Bicentennial Convocation, Reagan quotes from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: "Our faith is what supports us. Tocqueville said it in 1835, and it's as true today as it was then: 'Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is more needed in democratic societies than in any other'" ("Remarks at Georgetown University"). Reagan uses this position to not only justify his emphasis on religious faith, but also his insistence on its importance in government actions. Yet in this speech, Reagan succeeds in taking Tocqueville's words out of context by using them to support the mixing of church and state, when in actuality, Tocqueville declares that the separation of church and state keeps a democracy healthy.

Despite Reagan's staunch emphasis on freedom, he seemed to be threatened by any type of thinking that did not have his definition of faith as its guide. In a rather ironic statement to his audience at Georgetown University, he expresses a distinct anti-intellectual sentiment: "Learning is a good thing, but unless it's tempered by faith and a love of freedom, it can be very dangerous indeed. The names of many intellectuals are recorded on the rolls of infamy, from Robespierre to Lenin to Ho Chi Minh to Pol Pot" ("Remarks at Georgetown University's Bicentennial Convocation"). Reagan contended that a powerful human mind required some force outside of the individual to keep it in check. For Reagan, this force included a faith in God and the understanding that a Higher Power had a special plan for His chosen people, as long as those people lived under God's guidelines. It is ironic, really—despite his anti-communist, anti-government rhetoric, as well as his emphasis on the importance of the people, it is striking how similar Reagan's views on "freedom" and "power" really were.

Reagan strongly believed in America as one nation under God, and in order for it to remain prosperous, its citizens had to find common ground in faith that served to define freedom. He viewed these two principles as interchangeable; one without the other would not work and would result in the failure of the country. In several of his last speeches as president, Reagan speaks of the importance of educating children and young adults in the American way, or in the mode of “informed patriotism” as he calls it in the farewell address to the nation he delivered in January 1989. In the speech Reagan expresses his concern about what might happen if faith and freedom are forgotten:

We’re about to enter the nineties, and some things have changed. Younger parents aren’t sure that an unambivalent appreciation of America is the right thing to teach modern children. And as for those who create the popular culture, well-grounded patriotism is no longer the style. Our spirit is back, but we haven’t reinstitutionalized it. We’ve got to do a better job of getting across that America is freedom—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise. And freedom is special and rare. It’s fragile; it needs protection. (“Farewell Address to the Nation”)

For Reagan, the people’s willingness to embrace the true meaning of what it meant to be an American—free, under God—determined the success of the country. His understanding of this very American principle allowed him to exert the power he needed to implement his conservative agenda.

Many conservatives continue to point to Reagan as a champion of the movement, including his son, Michael Reagan, whose *The New Reagan Revolution* (2010) outlines several principles that he claims would “restore America,” including the defense of

freedom and the importance of teaching children the history of America and its exceptional founding. Reagan's son continues to articulate the benefits of utilizing Reagan's "peace through strength" rhetorical strategy: "As liberalism and political correctness have increasingly infected the way we conduct our foreign policy and our defense policy," Michael Reagan argues, "we have given the bullies the run of the world. They have advanced; we have retreated—because we are not willing to throw a punch and stop bullies in their tracks" (146). For President Reagan, and his son, only the exercise of power can keep America strong, justified by the nation's exceptional status as a free country with faith in God as the foundation. The principles of faith, freedom, and American destiny cannot go hand-in-hand with the United States losing grip on its power over the world. With this mindset, human inquiry and interaction, and thus, the importance of dialogue, is reduced to nothing but belligerence.

The ideology of American exceptionalism still functions as the center of political discourse in the United States. In an April 2009 visit to France, President Barack Obama, when asked by a journalist if he believed in the concept of American exceptionalism, responded with, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." He continued, "I see no contradiction between believing that America has a continued extraordinary role in leading the world towards peace and prosperity and recognizing that that leadership is incumbent, depends on, our ability to create partnerships because we create partnerships because we can't solve these problems alone." Obama was later attacked for this statement not only by Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney but also by conservative members of the media, including reporter and foreign

correspondent James Kirchick, who called Obama's reasoning part of a nonsensical, disturbing pattern: "If all countries are 'exceptional,' then none are, and to claim otherwise robs the world, and the idea of American exceptionalism, of any meaning" ("Squanderer in Chief").

Three and a half years later, Obama's comments still generate attention, and much criticism. But this time, because of a reputed transformation of the president's thinking that became evident during the fourth and final presidential debate of the 2012 election: "America remains the one indispensable nation," he said in response to a question regarding America's role in the world. And although Obama went on to emphasize that strong foreign relations make it possible to bring attention back to America itself and to address problems within its own shores, the media began buzzing over Obama's choice of the word "indispensable," with some reporters and correspondents arguing over its significance. An editorial in the conservative newspaper *Washington Times*, written by Charles Hurt, claimed, "Good news America! Just three years and 351 days into his presidency, President Obama has finally accepted the concept of American exceptionalism in the world" ("Exceptionalism"). The tone of the editorial was one of relief—as if Obama finally acknowledged something that other leaders and policymakers, not to mention average citizens—already understood.

Indeed, the Republican Party still champions American exceptionalism. The ideology, since Reagan a centerpiece of the party's vision, remained so in the 2012 Republican platform, outlined on the GOP website under a blue banner that claimed, "We Believe in America":

We proudly associate ourselves with those Americans of all political stripes who, more than three decades ago in a world as dangerous as today's, came together to advance the cause of freedom. Repudiating the folly of an amateur foreign policy and defying a worldwide Marxist advance, they announced their strategy in the timeless slogan we repeat today: peace through strength—an enduring peace based on freedom and the will to defend it, and American democratic values and the will to promote them. While the twentieth century was undeniably an American century—with strong leadership, adherence to the principles of freedom and democracy our Founders' enshrined in our nation's Declaration of Independence and Constitution, and a continued reliance on Divine Providence—the 21st century will be one of American greatness as well.

American exceptionalism remains essential to the leaders who wish to use the principle to gain and keep power. Indeed, one of the two major political parties in the United States bases part of their platform on its elements. The principles mentioned above could be pulled straight from one of Reagan's speeches—the “peace through strength” strategy is directly mentioned, and the ideas of freedom, its “promotion” around the world, and a “reliance” on a Higher Power are evident. As the United States continues its march through the twenty-first century, those who subscribe to this portion of the GOP platform will expect their leaders to live up to the principles that Reagan so strongly set in motion during his eight years as president.

In his farewell address to the nation, Reagan refers to Jon Winthrop's vision of America as a “shining city upon a hill,” toward the end of the speech. In what would be

some of Reagan's last words as president of the United States, he reveals his own image of the shining city:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get there. That's how I saw it, and see it still. ("Farewell Address to the Nation")

Reagan's words spoke of a morally symbolic vision, powerful in its imagery, but lacking in concrete principles. Such a vision's problem rests with its lack of emphasis on the journey, and too strong an emphasis on the outcome. Reagan talked of harmony and peace, but what about the rhetorical strength it took to get to that level of peace?

Reagan's presidency left a foreign policy legacy rooted in the abolition of all inherently flawed systems that he saw as threatening to the exceptional status of the United States. His insistence of an impeccable American ideology failed to account for the inevitable evolution of the world, succeeding in a vision that did not cry liberation, but domination.

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Reagan and his followers wrongly attributed American exceptionalism to this Puritan injunction, and added "shining" to the original, which gave the phrase a distinctly different connotation. Nor was Winthrop referring to any nation, but rather a discrete community of English Protestant believers. Notably, Winthrop's sermon had been neglected for centuries.Â Decline is, in fact, the midwife to the ideology of American exceptionalism. The less exceptional that circumstances in the U.S. appear, the louder defenders of exceptionalism insist on orthodoxy. When the nation was indisputably powerful and its people prosperous, Americans did not collectively require an "ism" to serve as a guiding light. Ronald Reagan is often linked to California and the American West. But he was born and raised in Illinois, in the center of the United States. His father sold shoes, and his mother mostly took care of Ronald and his older brother, Neil. The entire family supported the Democratic Party, especially President Franklin Roosevelt.Â Americans often remember Reagan's presidency as a time of economic growth. Not everyone benefited equally, however. Reagan's critics observed that his policies largely helped people who were already wealthy.Â And Reagan did not reduce government spending in all areas. In fact, he sharply increased military spending. One result was a large national debt. Another result, Reagan's supporters say, was a quicker end to the Cold War.