

High School English



Name: _____ Class: _____

From 'A Time for Choosing' Speech

By Ronald Reagan
1964

"A Time for Choosing," also known simply as "The Speech," was presented by Hollywood actor and motivational speaker Ronald Reagan during the 1964 U.S. presidential election in favor of Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. The speech raised \$1 million for Goldwater's campaign, and is considered the event that launched Reagan's political career. Soon afterwards, Reagan was asked to run for Governor of California, and in 1980 he was elected the 40th president of the United States. As you read an excerpt of the speech below, take note of the rhetorical devices Reagan uses to make his points about freedom in America.

- [1] I am going to talk of controversial things. I make no apology for this.

It's time we asked ourselves if we still know the freedoms intended for us by the Founding Fathers.¹ James Madison said, "We base all our experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government."

This idea – that government was beholden to the people, that it had no other source of power is still the newest, most unique idea in all the long history of man's relation to man. This is the issue of this election: Whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American Revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capital can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.

You and I are told we must choose between a left or right,² but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down. Up to man's age-old dream – the maximum of individual freedom consistent with order or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.³ Regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would sacrifice freedom for security have embarked on this downward path. Plutarch warned, "The real destroyer of the liberties of the people is he who spreads among them bounties, donations and benefits."



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1. The term Founding Fathers refers broadly to those individuals of the Thirteen British Colonies in North America who led the American Revolution against the authority of the British Crown and established the United States of America. Historian Richard B. Morris in 1973 identified the following seven figures as the key Founding Fathers: John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington.
2. Refers to the "left-right political spectrum" in which the left is considered more liberal and the right more conservative.
3. a political system in which the state holds total control over the society and seeks to control all aspects of public and private life wherever possible

- [5] The Founding Fathers knew a government can't control the economy without controlling people. And they knew when a government sets out to do that, it must use force and coercion to achieve its purpose. So we have come to a time for choosing.

Public servants say, always with the best of intentions, "What greater service we could render if only we had a little more money and a little more power." But the truth is that outside of its legitimate function, government does nothing as well or as economically as the private sector.⁴

Yet any time you and I question the schemes of the do-gooders,⁵ we're denounced as being opposed to their humanitarian goals. It seems impossible to legitimately debate their solutions with the assumption that all of us share the desire to help the less fortunate. They tell us we're always "against," never "for" anything.

We are for a provision that destitution⁶ should not follow unemployment by reason of old age, and to that end we have accepted Social Security as a step toward meeting the problem. However, we are against those entrusted with this program when they practice deception regarding its fiscal⁷ shortcomings, when they charge that any criticism of the program means that we want to end payments....

We are for aiding our allies by sharing our material blessings with nations which share our fundamental beliefs, but we are against doling out money government to government, creating bureaucracy,⁸ if not socialism,⁹ all over the world.

- [10] We need true tax reform that will at least make a start toward restoring for our children the American Dream that wealth is denied to no one, that each individual has the right to fly as high as his strength and ability will take him.... But we cannot have such reform while our tax policy is engineered by people who view the tax as a means of achieving changes in our social structure....

Are you willing to spend time studying the issues, making yourself aware, and then conveying that information to family and friends? Will you resist the temptation to get a government handout for your community? Realize that the doctor's fight against socialized medicine is your fight. We can't socialize the doctors without socializing the patients. Recognize that government invasion of public power is eventually an assault upon your own business. If some among you fear taking a stand because you are afraid of reprisals from customers, clients, or even government, recognize that you are just feeding the crocodile hoping he'll eat you last.

If all of this seems like a great deal of trouble, think what's at stake. We are faced with the most evil enemy mankind has known in his long climb from the swamp to the stars. There can be no security anywhere in the free world if there is no fiscal and economic stability within the United States. Those who ask us to trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare¹⁰ state are architects of a policy of accommodation.

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4. the part of a country's economic system run by individuals and companies, rather than the government
 5. This is a reference to political liberals who generally believe the government should spend more money on social programs.
 6. **Destitution** (*noun*): extreme poverty
 7. **Fiscal** (*adjective*): of or relating to government revenue
 8. a system of government in which most of the important decisions are made by state officials rather than by elected representatives
 9. a social and economic system in which major industries are owned and controlled by the government rather than by individual people and companies

They say the world has become too complex for simple answers. They are wrong. There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers. We must have the courage to do what we know is morally right. Winston Churchill said that "the destiny of man is not measured by material computation."¹¹ When great forces are on the move in the world, we learn we are spirits – not animals." And he said, "There is something going on in time and space, and beyond time and space, which, whether we like it or not, spells duty."

You and I have a rendezvous¹² with destiny. We will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we will sentence them to take the first step into a thousand years of darkness. If we fall, at least let our children and our children's children say of us we justified our brief moment here. We did all that could be done.

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10. a social program, often criticized by the political right as a system that encourages people not to work, in which the government provides financial or other assistance to individuals or families who are in need
11. the action of mathematical calculation
12. a meeting, date, or appointment at an agreed time and place

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Summarize the central ideas of Reagan's speech.

2. What effect does the first sentence have on the overall piece?
- A. It captures the listener's attention by suggesting the speaker will make bold statements.
 - B. It suggests that the arguments in the speech are common to most political debates.
 - C. It admits bias, allowing the listener to make up his or her own mind about the arguments to be made.
 - D. It sets the listener up to potentially disagree with the points being made.
3. PART A: As it is used in paragraph 12, the word "accommodation" most nearly means:
- A. Endless generosity for those in need
 - B. Supporting the undeserving
 - C. Foolishness and ignorance
 - D. Systematic greed
4. PART B: Which of the following phrases best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "no fiscal and economic stability"
 - B. "soup kitchen"
 - C. "the welfare state"
 - D. "architects of a policy"

5. How does Reagan use figurative language throughout the speech to make his argument?
