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“Tear Down this Wall”: How President Reagan ‘Framed’ the Soviet Union at Brandenburg Gate

PHILLIP KOSTKA

On June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan gave a speech at Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin. This speech was on the 750th anniversary of the founding of Berlin, and in it, President Reagan praised the city and the people of Berlin, while at the same time decrying the government of East Berlin and the Soviet system. Reagan’s rhetorical performance that day is considered one of the one hundred greatest of the twentieth century. The question is what made Reagan’s speech so compelling? This paper seeks to answer this question by examining how Reagan framed the situation at Brandenburg gate.

All speeches place information into specific ‘frames’ that tell the listener what he should think about and how he should think about it. There are cultural metaframes that encompass many smaller frames, and there are these smaller frames. Taking place when and where it did, this speech fits into the “Cold War frame” that most foreign policy speeches of the time used (Norris, 1995). Within the speech, however, I argue President Reagan utilized several smaller frames that were part of this larger Cold War frame. President Reagan uses the frames of good versus evil, freedom versus totalitarianism, and nuclear weapons as a necessary evil in his speech before Brandenburg Gate.

To that end, I begin this paper by providing some theoretical background on framing and then use that as a lens to examine Reagan’s speech. Finally, I draw conclusions about Reagan’s address and the impact on U.S. foreign policy.

Framing

Framing is a process used by anyone who communicates; its use may be conscious or not. More specifically, frames are not created consciously, but may be consciously applied. When someone speaks, he places a little piece of himself into the speech, and this self is grounded in his culture and beliefs. The speaker’s culture and beliefs are the bases of framing. Framing, according to Pan and Kosicki (1993), is the act of putting information in a specific order and presenting it in a certain way so that certain elements take focus while others are ignored. Anytime that someone communicates, information is presented through a set of frames.

Rhetorical frames can be likened to picture frames. Picture frames put a nice,
 finishes edge on a picture and often crop out parts of the picture that we do not want others to see. At the same time, the picture frame serves to draw attention to the picture itself, to make people want to look at it. In the same way, rhetorical frames crop out the bad and call attention to the good of a situation. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) provide a good definition of a frame: a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (p. 143). Seldom is only one frame used; however, one frame can be adapted to many different subjects through frame amplification, frame extension or frame bridging. Snow and others (1986) tell us that frame amplification is the process through which a small piece is shown to fit into a larger frame; its fit is clarified and made obvious. In another study, Snow and Benford (1988) explain that frame extension adds items into a frame that had not previously been a part of it, with the intent being to make the frame attractive to more people. Snow and others (1986) also tell us that frame bridging links two similar, but unconnected, ideas into a single frame.

The reason that framing is effective is that man likes to categorize things. According to Goffman (1974), we use frames to help us to “classify, organize and interpret life experiences to make sense of them” (p. 56). It is much easier for us to lump things into pre-existing groups in our memories than to create new groups. The groups that exist in our memories are known as schemas. These schemas are developed as we grow, and thus reflect our culture. Schemas are integral to priming, through which framing operates. In priming, Hallahan (1999) explains, ideas are placed into pre-existing schemas so that we will judge a new idea based on what we already know about other things in the schema. There are schemas within each of us that create a sense of good and evil, right and wrong, etc. These ideas are based in, and tend to be similar across a single culture.

In a study on news framing during the Cold War, Norris (1995) argues that framing allows a speech or other act of communication to appeal to a particular culture by collecting ideas, images and words in a certain way to reinforce common thoughts. In so doing, Hallahan (1999) demonstrates that framing shapes our view of the world. Framing works to mould one's view of the world by telling him what he should think about and how he should think about it. R.M. Entman (1993), one of the founders of framing theory, tells us that frames do four things: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies. Kuypers (2006) states that in order for a frame to be believable and accepted, it must be based in the audience’s culture, it must exist in the communicator (the framer), and it must exist in the audience.

Frames are present in all communication, and everyone uses them every day. Frames help us to understand new and complicated information. Frames help us to categorize and to rate the importance of things. They also help us to focus on specific parts of large, complicated matters. Frames are often referred to as central organizing ideas, or themes. Hallahan (1999) explains that frames tell the listener what is important, and what he should think about by providing him with the “contextual cues” that he needs to guide his decisions (p. 208).

A framing analysis looks at a particular communication event and finds the frames present therein. In doing this type of analysis, a picture of the themes presented by the communicator begins to emerge. In his book, Bush's War, Kuypers (2006) does this type of analysis and argues that it allows an understanding of what is being said and how we are led to interpret it. A framing analysis is a good way to look at the meaning of President Reagan’s speech at Brandenburg Gate. The President does not explicitly say much of what he communicates in the speech, but rather he hints at it and lets the audience infer his meaning. By utilizing frames that most everyone in his audience is familiar with and can understand, President Reagan assures that his meaning is clear. The framing analysis allows us to see just how he made this meaning clear.

Good versus Evil

One of the frames used by President Reagan in his speech at Brandenburg Gate is that of good versus evil. The basic idea behind this frame is that America and other Western nations are good and right, while the Soviet Union is evil and wrong. Unlike his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983, President Reagan does not come out and say that the Soviet Union is an “evil empire” (¶ 49). Instead, he gives examples that serve to prove his point without explicitly saying it. To create the frame, President Reagan explains how America is good by showing the good things that she has done for Europe and the world. He also shows that the Soviet Union is evil by explaining bad things that it has done.

America “reached out to help” (¶ 6) repair Europe following the destruction of World War II. America helped because she, along with the other Western nations, is good. Because America and the other Western nations are good, they helped to create “a strong, free world in the West” (¶ 7). Creating this free world was not for America’s benefit, but for the benefit of mankind. To create this strong, free world, America put the Marshall Plan in place, helping to pull West Germany and the rest of Europe out of the “devastation” (¶ 6) that had been wrought by the war. America established a policy that was “directed not against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos” (¶ 6). This is important because it puts ‘good’ Western nations in contrast to ‘evil’ Communist
nations. While the good nations are willing to help and stand for “freedom for all mankind” (¶ 5), evil nations look to expand and “impose” (¶ 4) upon others. While the USSR has “divide[d] the entire continent of Europe” (para. 4), the good nation of America helped to “rebuil[d] a city that once again ranks as one of the greatest on earth” (¶ 8).

The Soviet Union is an evil nation. It has separated a culture by erecting “a vast system of barriers…a gash of barbed wire, concrete, dog runs, and guard towers” (¶ 4). These barriers are a “scar” (¶ 4) on the nation of Germany and serve as “instrument[s] to impose upon ordinary men and women the will of a totalitarian state” (¶ 4). According to President Reagan, the “totalitarian world produces backwardness because it does such violence to the spirit, thwarting the human impulse to create, to enjoy, to worship” (¶ 25). These impulses are allowed, and indeed encouraged, by Western nations. The evil Soviet Union, however, finds “symbols of love and of worship an affront” (¶ 25) and tries to crush them. The totalitarian “authorities” (¶ 25) of East Germany see symbols of faith, and therefore faith itself, as flawed. These authorities are a “totalitarian presence that refuses to release human energies or aspirations” (¶ 24). All of the things that the President says the Soviets try to crush are freedoms that Westerners largely take for granted. They are freedoms that we exercise every day, and so we can see the evil in a government that would take such things away from its people.

While the good nations of the West take care of their own and others, the evil nation of the Soviet Union, the “Communist world” (¶ 9), can not even care for its own people—“the Soviet Union still can not feed itself” (¶ 9). One of the reasons that the Soviets can not feed themselves, it can be inferred, is because they continually build up offensive weaponry, unlike the good nation of America, who merely “maintain[s] defenses” while “seek[ing] peace” (¶ 13). Continuing with the weapons, the evil nation “challenge[s] the Western alliance with a grave new threat” (¶ 14), while the good nation tries “to negotiate a better solution…the elimination of such weapons on both sides” (¶ 14). This comparison makes the Soviets the evil bully, while America and the West are merely protecting themselves. What this says is that the Soviets are selfish and bent on domination while America works for the good of the world and freedom for all—even those under Soviet control.

In summary, President Reagan creates the frame of good versus evil by giving his audience examples of the good things that Western nations have done by contrasting that with the evil deeds of the Soviets. By giving examples and presenting them as he does, the President leads his audience to make the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ connection without it being explicitly made.

**Freedom versus Totalitarianism**

One of the things that President Reagan uses to frame America as good is that she stands for freedom for all. This relates to another frame used by the President in his speech, that of freedom versus totalitarianism. In this speech, President Reagan uses the word Communist only once, and it is in reference to the area under Communist government, the “Communist world” (¶ 9). Otherwise, any references to the Soviet government use the term totalitarian. Good in the world is presented as coming from that ideal central to Western governments—freedom. In doing this, the President sets up the frame of freedom versus totalitarianism.

The President presents us with the basic idea that freedom is the natural state of man, and that one reaches his fullest potential under freedom. In contrast, totalitarianism holds individuals back, keeps one from doing things that he would enjoy and holds the whole nation back. To present this idea, President Reagan gives us several examples of how freedom has worked.

He begins with the idea that freedom creates wealth, when he speaks of the “economic miracle” (¶ 8) of West Germany. The reason that this miracle occurred is that “prosperity can come about only when the farmer and businessman enjoy economic freedom” (¶ 8). The democratic government of West Berlin gave this freedom, enabling the citizens of West Germany to become prosperous. President Reagan mentions the “busy office blocks, fine homes and apartments, proud avenues, and the spreading lawns of parkland” (¶ 8). All of these things, he says, came because of freedom. The connection between freedom and wealth goes far beyond Germany. According to the President, the free nations of the West have “achieved a level of prosperity and well-being unprecedented in all human history” (¶ 9). All of these statements lead the President to his conclusions about freedom: “Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor” (¶ 9). This set of simple statements gets to the root of what President Reagan is saying about freedom: it is mankind’s best hope. He supports this by explaining, “freedom itself is transforming the globe” (¶ 17), and cites examples of “miracle after miracle of economic growth” (¶ 18), and the “technological revolution” (¶ 18) that is taking place in the West. Overall, freedom is shown to be the driving force in a strong economy.

Another aspect that is presented is that “freedom and security go together” (¶ 11). The implication of this statement is clear: no matter how much control the totalitarian Soviet government exercises over its people, there can not be true security without freedom. The reason that freedom creates security is that “the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of
world peace” (¶ 11). This statement tells us that peace can come about only with freedom. In summary, freedom creates wealth and advances world peace through security.

All of the good that the President says about freedom leads to his point that “in Europe, only one nation and those it controls refuse to join the community of freedom” (¶ 19). That nation is the Soviet Union, and the President argues, “it will become obsolete” (¶ 19) if it does not enter onto the side of freedom. The reason that it will become obsolete is that only freedom can provide all of the good of the modern world. Under Communism (this is the one time where President Reagan uses the term) there is “failure, technological backwardness, declining standards of health, even want of the most basic kind—to little food” (¶ 9). These circumstances do not occur in a free state, but only under the iron hand of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism, exemplified by the Berlin Wall, “can not withstand faith; it can not withstand truth. The wall can not withstand freedom” (¶ 26). The reason that totalitarianism can not withstand these things is because they are natural to man and yet it rejects them so totally. The President speaks of the “violence to the spirit” done by the “totalitarian world” (¶ 25). He speaks of the East German government’s attempts to rid the city of Berlin of the inadvertent display of the cross. This is how deep the control by a totalitarian government goes. The government “refuses to release human energies or aspirations” (¶ 24), but these things can not be contained, and eventually freedom will be victorious.

Nuclear Weapons as a Necessary Evil
In his speech, President Reagan also frames the issue of nuclear weapons. As far as these weapons are concerned, the United States and the West have them only to keep the peace, while the Soviet Union maintains them to threaten and intimidate. The President’s use of words is very important in this frame. America has “defenses” (¶ 13) while the Soviets have “missiles” and “weapons” (¶ 14). While America “maintain[s] defenses of unassailable strength” (¶ 13), the Soviet Union threatens the West with “hundreds of new and more deadly SS-20 nuclear missiles” (¶ 14). The Soviets deploy their weapons “on the threat of offensive retaliation” while America seeks “defenses that truly defend” (¶ 17). This language serves to present the Soviets as using these weapons to threaten the West. The West, meanwhile, “seek[s] peace” (¶ 13) and is forced by the Soviets to have these weapons. America must have these weapons in order to remain strong, because it is through strength that the West “resist[s] Soviet expansion” (¶ 13). It is through strength that the West works toward peace.

The fact that America does not want these weapons is supported by a whole section where President Reagan details all of the arms control actions taken by the West. America “strive[s] to reduce arms on both sides” (¶ 13), and has attempted to do this, he says, but the “Soviets … walked away from the table” (¶ 14). Although “the Soviets refused to bargain in earnestness” (¶ 14), Western nations “proposed deep cuts in strategic offensive weapons,” and “made far-reaching proposals to reduce the danger of conventional war” (¶ 16). By showing that America has been working to eliminate these weapons, and that the Soviets refuse to discuss the matter, President Reagan presents America as the ‘good guy’ forced to do something that he does not agree with for the benefit of the world. America’s goal is to “deter Soviet aggression,” and she intends to do this while “not target[ing] populations,” as the Soviets do, “but [by] shield[ing] them” (¶ 17). In short, America “seek[s] to increase the safety of Europe and all the world” (¶ 17) through deterrence while the Soviets seek “expansion” (para. 13), and work through “aggression” and “offensive” threats (¶ 17).

Conclusions
President Reagan’s speech at Brandenburg Gate was a crucial moment in Cold War rhetoric. At the time that it was given, many had been resigned to the fact that the Soviet Union would exist forever and had decided that we should accept that fact. President Reagan did not believe this. He firmly believed that the Soviets were evil and that their system was fundamentally wrong, indeed, he considered it “backward” (¶ 9). He believed that freedom was fundamentally right. President Reagan knew that many people, American, British, German and even Soviet, agreed with him. This is why the President framed his remarks in Germany as he did. In their study, Rowland and Jones (2006) reveal that even within his own administration, many told the President that he should not be too demanding of Mr. Gorbachev, and that he should not degrade the Soviets, because it would only alienate the two leaders from each other. President Reagan was firm in his beliefs, and framed his speech through these beliefs. Within only a few years even his toughest demand, to “tear down this wall” (¶ 12), had been met and the Soviet system had crumbled.

President Reagan’s steadfast adherence to his beliefs is one of the reasons that the Soviet Union crumbled. The speech at Brandenburg Gate is an example of his adherence to these beliefs. By refusing to temper his beliefs that Communism is evil, freedom is good and peace comes through strength, President Reagan showed the Soviet Union and the entire world that he meant business. By utilizing his beliefs in the framing of the speech, the President made the frames that much stronger and more believable. This, perhaps most of all, has implications for foreign policy. All of President Reagan’s speeches regarding the Soviet Union, but especially this one, show us that when a President firmly believes in something
and tells the public so, it can have a dramatic impact on foreign policy, and on the actions of foreign nations.

The framing analysis shows that what is stated in a speech is not all that is said. President Reagan did not use the word ‘good’ in reference to America, nor did he use the word ‘evil’ at all, yet that message is ever apparent. The other frames are stated more explicitly by the President, but still leave much to be determined and understood by the audience. By utilizing the frames of good versus evil, freedom versus totalitarianism, and nuclear weapons as a necessary evil, President Reagan was able to decry the Soviet government and arouse the anti-Soviet attitudes in his audience while at the same time maintaining the decorum of a statesman.

References


