

Reagan as Hero and Storyteller

Whether or not people agreed with the policies of former President Ronald Reagan, there was general consensus that he was one of the West's most gifted communicators. Reagan could make mistakes and could appear inconsistent, yet his supporters remained loyal. What can account for his remarkable popularity? Lewis believes the answer lies in the predominance of narrative form in Reagan's speeches. Lewis' purpose was to examine how Reagan used stories to shape his message.

Reagan used two kinds of stories. He was adept at short anecdotes, jokes, and incidents that illustrated simple precepts; because the stories seemed true or true to life, audience members accepted their morals. Reagan also used a larger and more important type of story, the myth. Reagan's myth was a story about America, its origin and its destiny. Lewis believes that the Reagan myth showed America as "chosen nation, grounded in its families and neighborhood, and driven inevitably forward by its heroic working people toward a world of freedom and economic progress unless blocked by moral or military weakness."

The narrative form is especially powerful because it encourages identification. In Reagan's narrative, ordinary audience members could see themselves either as the active participant who makes America strong or as the irresponsible onlooker who, and compassion, contributes to its decline. What is Reagan's place in the story? Reagan is at once the mythic hero, the active force who rights wrongs and protects the country, and the narrator, who realistically and simply tells us the truth of the story. According to Lewis, Reagan's popularity can be explained by his "exclusive and explicit reliance" on this single story.

What was important to the audience was the spell of the story. Reagan's inaccuracies were simply dismissed as unimportant details that did not affect the overall truth of the narrative. His failures in policy were also seen as unimportant when contrasted with the rightness of his aims. By using the mythic narrative, he deemphasized means in favor of noble ends. Finally, his narrative was grounded in simple, common-sense actions. He was the hero who realized that the solutions to problems were simple, although not easy. Thus his supporters could "recognize Reagan as 'no rocket scientist' and still respect his intelligence."

Lewis believes that Americans accepted Reagan's story. They wanted to see him both as the passionate and courageous hero and as the realistic narrator. They also judged his errors from within the frame of the story, where they were relatively unimportant. Because his story reflected popular morals and common sense, it had enormous appeal.

Source: William F. Lewis, "Telling America's Story: Narrative Form and the Reagan Presidency," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73 (1987), 280-302.