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Brock Bellinger

Liberty University, bbellinger@liberty.edu

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Abstract

One challenge which reveals an executive's leadership ability involves making the decision to fire an employee. President Ronald Reagan did not enjoy firing employees, due in part to his own father struggling to maintain employment. When the 1981 PATCO strike occurred, several obstacles arose which tested Reagan's ability to act. The Professional Air Traffic Controller's Organization (PATCO) had publicly supported Reagan during his 1980 presidential campaign when other unions did not. Additionally, Reagan was sympathetic to unions, even serving as President of the Screen Actor's Guild. These potential obstacles proved challenging from a political and personal perspective. However, when the 1981 PATCO strike occurred, President Reagan took decisive action, providing the striking employees with 48 hours to return to their jobs. Those who did not would be fired. Reagan's decision served as a watershed event of his presidency which posed domestic and foreign policy implications. Reagan proved willing to take an alternate route, regardless of the potential political ramifications and his own reluctance to fire employees. The 1981 PATCO strike provided Reagan with an opportunity to exercise decisive action early in his administration, and President Reagan's decision defied expectations. This decision ultimately provided a glimpse into Reagan's management and leadership styles which would impact his later decisions, including his response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

Keywords

President Ronald Reagan, Reagan, PATCO, Professional Air Traffic Controller's Organization, Air Traffic Controllers Strike, Reagan and Labor

Bellinger: An Alternate Route: Reagan and PATCO

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Brock Bellinger

Liberty University

Abstract

One challenge which reveals an executive's leadership ability involves making the decision to fire an employee. President Ronald Reagan did not enjoy firing employees, due in part to his own father struggling to maintain employment. When the 1981 PATCO strike occurred, several obstacles arose which tested Reagan's ability to act. The Professional Air Traffic Controller's Organization (PATCO) had publicly supported Reagan during his 1980 presidential campaign when other unions did not. Additionally, Reagan was sympathetic to unions, even serving as President of the Screen Actor's Guild. These potential obstacles proved challenging from a political and personal perspective. However, when the 1981 PATCO strike occurred, President Reagan took decisive action, providing the striking employees with 48 hours to return to their jobs. Those who did not would be fired. Reagan's decision served as a watershed event of his presidency which posed domestic and foreign policy implications. Reagan proved willing to take an alternate route, regardless of the potential political ramifications and his own reluctance to fire employees. The 1981 PATCO strike provided Reagan with an opportunity to exercise decisive action early in his administration, and President Reagan's decision defied expectations. This decision ultimately provided a glimpse into Reagan's management and leadership styles which would impact his later decisions, including his response to the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

One of the foremost tests of an executive's leadership capability involves knowing when to make the decision to fire an employee. President Ronald Reagan did not enjoy firing personnel and was reluctant to take this course of action.¹ According to President Reagan, "I'm not very good at firing people; maybe it goes back to the fact that as a child I can remember my father being out of work. I know the hardship and dislocation it can cause a family."² In 1981, Reagan was challenged by the Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization's (PATCO) strike and took decisive action to resolve the situation. Reagan's response would have significant domestic and foreign policy ramifications. President Reagan understood both sides of the issue in addressing the PATCO strike, having served a union president, and as a public official who dealt with strikes as Governor of California. Furthermore, PATCO's support for Reagan during the 1980 presidential election complicated his decision. It is therefore instructive to evaluate how Reagan managed the PATCO strike and defied political expectations.

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan faced a daunting challenge in addressing the PATCO strike which had significant domestic and foreign policy implications.³ According to Lou Cannon, "members of the Professional Air Traffic Controller's Organization (PATCO) walked off their jobs on August 3, 1981."⁴ The PATCO air traffic controllers "decided to go on strike until their

¹ Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001.

⁴ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2000, p. 437.

demands for reduced workloads and higher salaries were met.”⁵ Steven F. Hayward identified that, “PATCO presented the government with ninety-six demands, including a reduction in the workweek to thirty-two hours, an immediate \$10,000 raise for every controller, and a 100 percent salary increase over the next three years.”⁶ Despite PATCO consenting to an agreement negotiated by the Federal Aviation Administration, PATCO “did an about-face just days later.... In late July PATCO’s rank-and-file membership rejected the FAA’s offer by a margin of 95.3 percent to 4.7 percent.”⁷ According to President Reagan, “as a former union president myself, I couldn’t go along with the controllers violating not only the law, but their own pledges, not to strike. I also don’t believe government employees have the right to strike, because the strike is against their fellow citizens, not some moneyed employer.”⁸ Robert Dallek concluded that “for Reagan their strike was a chance to make a point about government being the servant and not the master of the people. Whatever the merits of the case, he refused to consider any compromise.”⁹ President Reagan also noted that, “Congress had passed a law forbidding strikes by government employees, and every member of the controllers’ union had signed a sworn affidavit agreeing not to strike.”¹⁰ According to Dinesh D’Souza, “the decisive fact...was that PATCO workers were

⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997, p. 230.

⁶ Steven F. Hayward, *The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2009, p. 170.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸ Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989, p. 84

⁹ Robert Dallek, *Ronald Reagan: The Politics of Symbolism* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 91.

¹⁰ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 282.

public employees and had taken an oath not to strike against the U.S. government.”¹¹ From a biblical perspective, keeping one’s promise unto God and to others is of utmost importance, and the PATCO employees broke their oath to the public. In Matthew 5:37, it is written, “all you need to say is simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”¹² The PATCO strike provided Reagan with a challenge and opportunity to exercise decisive leadership.

Reagan’s life experience in Hollywood and as Governor of California equipped him to work with unions and address the challenge of the PATCO strike. Prior to his service as Commander in Chief, Reagan was elected President of the Screen Actors Guild. Reagan led negotiations in which SAG members requested higher wages and better working conditions.¹³ Reagan recalled that he had “served six terms as president of my own union and had led the Screen Actors Guild in its first strike.”¹⁴ Furthermore, while serving as Governor, Reagan had called for the California Legislature to safeguard unions, including guaranteeing “the right of a secret ballot when voting.”¹⁵ Additionally, as Governor, Reagan experienced difficulties with striking public employees. “Reagan had twice stomped on strikes by public sector employees, in one case threatening State Water Resources Department employees that they would be fired if they did not

¹¹ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997, p. 231.

¹² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New International Version

¹³ Ronald Reagan and Richard G. Hubler, *Where’s the Rest of Me?* New York, NY: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1965.

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 282.

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, *The Creative Society: Some Comments on Problems Facing America* New York, NY: The Devin-Adair Company, 1968, p. 85.

return to work within five days... On the fifth day, the striking workers returned to their jobs-without a raise.”¹⁶ Reagan’s union leadership, his public support for unions, and his service as Governor of California prepared and equipped him to later address the PATCO strike.

The PATCO strike proved to be politically challenging for President Reagan, as the Air Traffic Controllers union had endorsed Reagan in the 1980 presidential election.¹⁷ Reagan himself noted that, “PATCO was one of only a handful of national unions that had backed me in the election.”¹⁸ Peggy Noonan, who served as a speechwriter for President Reagan, added that, “Reagan’s decision was not an easy one. Very few unions had supported him when he ran for president in 1980-but PATCO had.”¹⁹ Edwin Meese III, who served as Reagan’s Counsellor to the President and Attorney General, also confirmed PATCO’s support for Reagan.²⁰ Lou Cannon noted that, “at the urging of PATCO president Robert E. Poli, the union had backed Reagan during the 1980 campaign, at a time when support from organized labor was rare and highly prized.”²¹ As noted by Steven F. Hayward, “three weeks before the election, he (Reagan) wrote to PATCO president Robert Poli to express his sympathy with the union’s perception of the air

¹⁶ Steven F. Hayward, *The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2009, p. 171.

¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

¹⁹ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 222.

²⁰ Edwin Meese, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992.

²¹ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2000, p. 437.

traffic controllers' situation."²² Thomas W. Evans found that Reagan's "position was doubly ironic because he himself had been a union leader and because PATCO was one of the few unions that had formally supported Reagan's candidacy."²³ Reagan's appeal to union voters was further noted by William J. Bennett, who served as Reagan's Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and Secretary of Education. Bennett noted that Reagan received substantial support from members of the National Education Association. According to Bennett, "more than half of the NEA membership voted for...Reagan both in 1980 and 1984."²⁴ PATCO's support for Reagan in 1980 served as a potential political hazard.

In some ways, Reagan's response to the PATCO strike defied expectations. From a political standpoint, the decision proved challenging, but Reagan took decisive action by providing the workers with an ultimatum. In his August 3, 1981, Statement on the Air Traffic Controller's Strike, President Reagan declared, "I must tell those who fail to report for duty this morning they are in violation of the law, and if they do not report for work within forty-eight hours, they have forfeited their jobs and will be terminated."²⁵ As noted by Joseph A. McCartin, "for Reagan, it was not a question of whether to invoke the law and dismiss striking controllers from their jobs

²² Steven F. Hayward, *The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2009, p. 169.

²³ Thomas W. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 204.

²⁴ William J. Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992, p. 49

²⁵ Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989, p. 86.

but, rather, how much time to give them to reconsider their position before terminating them.”²⁶

While Reagan did not want to fire the air traffic controllers, he noted that, “if they made the decision not to return to work in the full knowledge of what I’d said, then I wasn’t firing them, they were giving up their jobs based on their individual decisions.”²⁷ Peggy Noonan added that, “when the two-day strike deadline passed, 30 percent of the PATCO members showed up for work; 70 percent stayed out.”²⁸ President Reagan’s decision was influenced by his “hero” President Calvin Coolidge.²⁹ Coolidge was forced to make a similar choice as Governor of Massachusetts in 1919, when Boston police officers went on strike. Coolidge viewed this as a threat to public safety and fired the striking officers.³⁰ Reagan defied political expectations and fired the PATCO employees who refused to return to work.

President Reagan’s response to the PATCO strike was viewed as a fundamental decision which shaped his administration and future policy decisions. Reagan noted that, “I think it convinced people who might have thought otherwise that I meant what I said.”³¹ For President

²⁶ Joseph Anthony McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 285.

²⁷ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 283.

²⁸ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 225.

²⁹ Steven F. Hayward, *The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989* New York, NY: Crown Forum, 2009, p. 171.

³⁰ Robert Sobel, *Coolidge: An American Enigma* Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 1998.

³¹ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990, p. 283.

Reagan, the 1981 PATCO strike was “the first real national emergency I faced as president.”³²

Peggy Noonan reiterated this viewpoint, noting that, “the strike was the first immediate national

emergency Reagan faced.”³³ James M. Strock added that, “in his first months in the presidency,

Reagan faced- and faced down- a challenge that established him as a decisive leader: the strike of

the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization.”³⁴ Strock also found that, “the threshold

decision was whether the government would negotiate with a public employee union that was

striking illegally.”³⁵ William French Smith, who served as Reagan’s Attorney General, observed

that despite the perception that Reagan had a “hands-off style of governing. With respect to his

basic philosophical principles and action, matters of policy or rightness, he was hands-on all the

way.”³⁶ Martin and Annelise Anderson, who served as advisors in the Reagan administration,

noted that, “when people first met Reagan, they often thought he was too easygoing and friendly

to be tough. The impression was like a soft pillow. What people failed to see was the two-inch-

thick rod of steel right down the inside.”³⁷ According to Dinesh D’Souza, “in the PATCO

incident, which set the tone for his presidency, Reagan proved that the right thing...can also be

³² Ibid., p. 283.

³³ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 223.

³⁴ James M. Strock, *Reagan on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Great Communicator* Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1998, p. 42.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁶ William French Smith, *Law and Justice in the Reagan Administration: The Memoirs of an Attorney General* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1991, p. 246.

³⁷ Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan's Secret War: The Untold Story of His Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster* New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2009, p. 12.

politically advantageous.”³⁸ Lou Cannon added that, “Reagan’s actions sent a resonant signal of leadership that would be long remembered.”³⁹ However, for Michael Round, “the 1981 PATCO strike was an early look into the executive style of Ronald Reagan, one which...might have provided a “heads up” to a variety of problems which would mark the Reagan presidency.”⁴⁰ Reagan’s response provided a glimpse into the decision-making style he would utilize throughout his presidency.

Reagan’s handling of the 1981 PATCO strike impacted domestic labor relations and carried national security and foreign policy ramifications. Joseph A. McCartin noted that, “it took Reagan’s breaking of PATCO to thoroughly legitimize striker replacement in the eyes of most employers. By conferring legitimacy on strikebreaking Reagan decisively altered the course of U.S. labor relations.”⁴¹ Lou Cannon noted that, “Reagan’s confident decisiveness made a good first impression on the professional politicians who dealt with him early in his presidency.”⁴² According to Ann Reilly Dowd, “Former Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis recounts an incident during the...strike that set the tone for labor-management relations... Lewis worried that Reagan's friends...might urge him to back down on his decision...which Lewis had

³⁸ Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997, p. 231.

³⁹ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2000, p. 437.

⁴⁰ Michael Round, *Grounded: Reagan and the PATCO Crash* New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1999, p. 2.

⁴¹ Joseph Anthony McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 344.

⁴² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2000, p. 438.

recommended.”⁴³ However, Reagan responded “I’ll continue to support you, and you never have to ask that question again.”⁴⁴ Additionally, Reagan was willing to take a risk by hiring new air traffic controllers after the PATCO workers refused to return to their jobs. “Union leaders predicted that planes would crash if they were being directed by inexperienced staff. The aviation industry survived; it was PATCO that lost its certification and crashed into bankruptcy.”⁴⁵ President Reagan recorded that, “about 38% are working- air travel is at 75% normal. We’ve learned we’ve had about 6000 more air controllers than we needed.”⁴⁶ Thomas W. Evans noted that, “fortunately for safety and politics, no plane crashed during the dispute.”⁴⁷ Reagan’s decision likewise had foreign policy consequences. Peggy Noonan found that, “a strike by American air traffic controllers carried real national security implications. PATCO in effect controlled the skies, and American AWACS bombers...were also in those skies.”⁴⁸ Noonan added that actors, both foreign and domestic, observed how Reagan handled the strike. For Noonan, the Soviet Union “saw how the American president dealt with a national security issue,

⁴³ Ann Reilly Dowd, “What Managers Can Learn From Manager Reagan,” *Fortune*, 1986, https://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1986/09/15/68052/index.htm para. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 1.

⁴⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997, p. 231.

⁴⁶ Ronald Reagan and Douglas Brinkley, *The Reagan Diaries* New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Thomas W. Evans, *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism* New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006, p. 204

⁴⁸ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 223.

saw his rhetorical toughness could be matched by tough action.”⁴⁹ Edwin Meese III added that, “the August strike of the air traffic controllers- reverberated both domestically and internationally.”⁵⁰ Meese also noted that, “through the years, the American people had become accustomed to public sector union walkouts, which though illegal had prompted little or no response from government leaders.”⁵¹ According to Meese, Reagan’s action during the PATCO strike was supported by the American people, and Reagan’s decision was clear to the Soviet Union.⁵² Reagan’s decision carried both domestic and foreign policy consequences.

While President Reagan’s handling of the 1981 PATCO strike occurred over forty years ago, it is beneficial for observers to evaluate this challenging decision and how this decision impacted future policy. American presidents are required to make challenging decisions which have domestic and foreign policy implications, and a president’s handling of a crisis can ultimately alter the trajectory of history. President Ronald Reagan’s decision involving the striking PATCO employees set the stage for future decisions made by Reagan. President Reagan’s leadership during the PATCO strike demonstrated to observers on the global stage that he was willing to take an alternate route, following through on his words despite the potential political ramifications.⁵³ According to President Reagan’s Chief Political Strategist Dick Wirthlin, “still

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 226.

⁵⁰ Edwin Meese, *With Reagan: The Inside Story* Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992, p. 17.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* Simon & Schuster, 1990.

young in his presidency, Ronald Reagan proved to all watching that his words were real. He didn't bluff. When he said something, he meant it."⁵⁴ Reagan's handling of the PATCO strike also provided an early example of his leadership style which would ultimately play a pivotal role in ending the Cold War.⁵⁵ In subsequent years, Reagan's handling of the PATCO strike was perceived by some as the wrong course of action. In 1993, President Bill Clinton provided "unions an important symbolic victory by reversing Reagan's ban" on reemployment for former PATCO employees.⁵⁶ According to Joseph A. McCartin, "the White House issued a statement signed by the secretaries of transportation and labor and the director of the Office of Personnel Management rather than the president himself."⁵⁷ This reversal of policy under President Clinton ultimately allowed the striking PATCO employees to return to work as air traffic controllers. "Although twelve years had passed since they had been fired... within a year, an astonishing 40 percent of the strikers fired in 1981 applied to return to the FAA."⁵⁸ According to McCartin, "Clinton's removal of the ban that had kept strikers from being rehired by the FAA and his liberalization of air traffic controller pay amounted to nothing more than a tantalizing mirage for most PATCO veterans."⁵⁹ Reagan's handling of the 1981 PATCO strike not only impacted

⁵⁴ Richard Wirthlin and Wynton C. Hall, *The Greatest Communicator: What Ronald Reagan Taught Me about Politics, Leadership, and Life* New York, NY: Wiley, 2004, p. 106.

⁵⁵ Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2001.

⁵⁶ Joseph Anthony McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike That Changed America* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 356.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

future decisions within the Reagan administration, but also influenced the decisions of future leaders, including President Bill Clinton.

President Ronald Reagan's response to the 1981 PATCO strike proved challenging, as Reagan did not enjoy dismissing employees. Additionally, Reagan served as the President of the Screen Actors Guild, and PATCO had publicly endorsed Reagan during the 1980 election. Despite the potential political ramifications, Reagan followed his convictions while still providing the striking PATCO employees with the opportunity to keep their jobs if they returned to work. Reagan's decision also had foreign policy repercussions, as leaders of foreign nations, particularly the Soviet Union, recognized that Reagan would follow through on his words. Ultimately, members of the Reagan administration, many observers, and the American public widely believed that Reagan addressed the PATCO strike in a satisfactory manner.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, "study history, study history. In history lies all the secrets of statecraft."⁶⁰ For modern observers of state affairs, studying President Reagan's response to the 1981 PATCO strike illustrates the significance of a politician acting on the merits of a situation rather than based solely upon satisfying political benefactors. Current and future leaders may benefit from studying the 1981 PATCO strike and the importance of refusing to compromise one's principles for political expediency.

⁶⁰ Winston Churchill, "A Coronation Luncheon in Westminster Hall," (May 1953): quoted in John Plumpton, "The Study of History and the Practice of Politics," International Churchill Society, 2010, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/speeches-about-winston-churchill/the-study-of-history-and-the-practice-of-politics/>, para. 8.

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