

Priming in Leadership:  
Applying Priming Communication Theory to the Speeches of Ronald Reagan

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**Abstract**

The study of priming gained traction in the 1990s when researchers such as John Bargh demonstrated the nonconscious activation of ideas, often through repeated related words or activated schema. Since then, researchers have studied the effects of priming on self-view, achievement, and teamwork. While the concept of priming has just recently begun to be applied to leadership in the workplace, no research has yet been done in finding examples of priming theory in the speeches of well-known leaders. In this study, Ronald Reagan's persuasive tactics were analyzed and found to use similar methods of repetition and schema used in priming experiments and can be classified as priming in the areas of self-view, goals, and unity.

### **Priming in Leadership:**

#### **Applying Priming Communication Theory to the Speeches of Ronald Reagan**

In a famous experiment performed in 1996, John Bargh demonstrated that words activating a knowledge structure, such as a trait concept, could subconsciously affect human behavior (Bargh et al., 1996). Under the guise of a language ability test, Bargh inserted 15 critical stimuli into a word scramble exercise to prime New York University students toward either rude or polite behavior, including words such as “aggressive” and “bold” or “respect” and “honor” (p. 234). When participants went to collect a second exercise from the experimenter, they found the experimenter ostensibly engaged in a conversation with another student. More than 80% of the students primed toward politeness waited until the experiment ended without interrupting, while only 35% of students primed toward rudeness waited the full ten minutes without interrupting. The study of priming, or the “nonconscious activation of social knowledge structures” has expanded over the years, exploring areas such as motivation, emotions, behavior, goals, and even leadership (Bargh, 2006, p. 147). Priming has been shown to be effective through both written words and written words dispensed through leadership; therefore, it stands to reason that oral speeches by a leader could also be classified as a priming channel.

In order to apply the priming communication theory to Ronald Reagan's speeches, priming techniques must first be examined. Researchers have used repetitive, related words and the activation of schema to prime participants. Additionally, areas of priming must be examined, including the priming of self-view, priming toward goals, and priming toward teamwork and unity. Five of Reagan's speeches, including his inaugural speech, “Evil Empire” speech, “High Flight” Challenger disaster speech, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, and his farewell

address will then be held up against the techniques and types of priming to determine whether his persuasive tactics fit into the category of priming.

### **Literary Review**

#### **Literary Review: History of Priming**

The study of priming began to take root in the 1970s, when researchers began to discover that people could be primed with stimuli and without awareness of the influence in a way that carried over to influence behavior and judgment in following contexts (Bargh, 2006). As early as 1949, scientists were able to determine that models of mental structures could be activated and kept activated even when the external situation changed (Bargh, 2006). A similar idea was introduced by Karl Lashley in 1951: that language comprehension requires keeping earlier elements of a sentence in mind to understand the end of a sentence. Analogous stored knowledge structures are able to influence future decision making and understanding. In 1953, Cherry brought to attention the “cocktail party effect,” in which a person is suddenly attentive to a conversation they had not heard previously because their name was spoken. This demonstrated the unconscious activation of words stored in self-schema could break the attention barrier. Then, Meyer and Schvaneveldt showed in 1971 that words related to each other could create sequential priming and automatic associations. One of the earliest experiments demonstrated that priming individuals with words related to “kindness” caused the participants to view an individual as more kind than their peers (Srull & Wyer, 1979). Since then, priming has been applied and studied in the activation of traits such as achievement or helpfulness, cultural ideologies, and social concepts. Throughout the years, the study of priming has grown and moved through many different sectors, most notably in modern media. For instance, many news outlets will focus on particular issues during voting season to create a prime in voter’s minds so

that voters will put more emphasis on those issues when selecting a candidate (Iyengar, 2008).

Over the last 40 years, priming has been studied in many facets including leadership in the workplace but has yet to be studied in the context of public figures and speeches. By studying the speeches of Ronald Reagan for elements of priming, this study will contribute to this gap in the literature.

### **Literary Review: Methods Used to Prime**

#### ***Method 1: Repetition of Words and Ideas***

The methods used to conduct priming can include the repetition of related words or ideas. Researchers often use the repetition of words to activate the subconscious. In an experiment done by Chartrand & Bargh (1996), the researchers sought to subconsciously prime students either toward an impression formation goal or a memorization goal. In order to do this, researchers used the Scrambled Sentence Test originally created by Srull & Wyer in 1979, which requires participants to create a 4-word sentence out of the 5 words that are given. For example, the memory goal prime used sentences like “somewhat memory prepared I was” and used related words such as “absorb,” “retain,” and “remember” (p. 467). Participants then went through a series of exercises. At the end of the experiment, participants were asked if they remembered any words from the Sentence Scramble Test; participants were also asked if they were suspicious of any relation between tasks. No participant showed awareness or suspicion of the tasks being related. In a second experiment, researchers primed participants with flashing, related words followed by a masking string: “XQFBZRMQWGBX” (p. 470). After the experiments were completed, participants were asked to remember the stimulus words, but none of them were able to do so. The repeated, related words affected participant behavior and were subtle enough not to be recognized. A study by Daltrozzo et al. (2011) demonstrated that priming could be done

through the auditory modality in addition to the previous visual modality. In this study, participants were primed auditorily and remained unconscious of the prime. Thus, it stands to reason that because primes can be transferred through speech, impactful speakers can prime their audience auditorily.

### ***Method 2: Activation of Schema***

Another way that priming can be effective is by tapping into preconceived structures, reinforcing them, and applying them to a specific situation. For instance, in an experiment done by Li et al. (2011), researchers found that participants who were primed with a regulatory focus that was congruent with the explanation of situation (promotion/gain or prevention/loss) responded more positively to the explanation and had higher levels of justice perception than those who were primed with an incongruent focus (prevention/gain or promotion/loss). Researchers found that those primed with a promotion focus responded more positively to a message focused on gain-centered messages, while those with a prevention focus responded more positively to loss-centered messages. When explanations fit into an individual's schema in their associative knowledge system, they are much more likely to accept the explanation and less likely to scrutinize. Activating an individual's subconscious can be achieved through repeated related words and phrases or preparing a schema by which the individual will perceive a situation.

### **Literary Review: Impact of Priming**

#### ***Impact of Priming on Self-View***

Priming can be used to change the way that people view themselves, which in turn can affect their performance and behaviors. Lammers et al. (2013) found that when interviewees were primed with a memory of themselves in power, they were significantly more successful in

interviews than those primed with a memory of themselves lacking power. The results were consistent in both written applications and in face-to-face interviews. Another experiment performed by Pickering et al. (2015) also demonstrates this concept. In this experiment, two groups were primed with words related to helpfulness or unhelpfulness and then asked to retell a story. The group that was primed to be helpful took more time and detail to relay the story than those primed to be unhelpful. A third experiment, done by Zdaniuk & Bobocel (2013), exposed participants to descriptions of fair or unfair leaders, and then put the participants in the role of a manager dismissing a subordinate. Those who had been primed to see a manager (and by proxy themselves in that role) as unfair were much less fair when writing the dismissal letter. By priming people to see themselves as a certain characteristic, the primer can affect the performance outcomes.

### ***Impact of Vision Priming Toward Goals***

Specific words can be used to create a prime toward a vision, which can affect people's perception of the present and cause them to act in accordance with the visionary goal. Clark et al. (2013) found that framing and vision priming can determine the effect on group decision-making. In the experiment, the researchers used vision priming to suggest the participants should consider the concerns of stakeholders instead of stockholders. Vision priming had a greater effect on decision outcomes than framing. Priming had the most effect on decision-making when the prime was recent. Li et al. (2011) studied how managers can use priming to cause their employees to view a negative situation in a more positive light. Managers primed a regulatory focus among employees through language or symbols to change how negatively employees view an unfair situation. Participants who were primed with a regulatory focus that matched the

framing of an explanation from a manager responded more positively than those who had an incongruent focus.

In a similar experiment, Kakkar (2019) found that supervisors who framed challenges positively motivated employees toward resilience. Managers who encouraged a positive view of situations, presenting them as challenges that would create growth, created promotion focus in subordinates. Leaders who framed situations as intimidating created a prevention focus in their employee and a lack of resilience. Stajkovic et al. (2018) found that CEOs could increase their employee's productivity without their knowledge simply by priming them through an email with achievement-related and goal-oriented words. This is similar to the experiment performed by Bargh et al. in 2001, where participants were primed without their knowledge to perform better on an intellectual task. These experiments also demonstrated that unconsciously activated goals still effectively guide action. Leaders have the ability to influence people's motivation and decision making by using vision primes to explain a situation or advocate toward a future goal. These studies related to business leadership and goal-priming open the door to study presidential leaders' speeches for similar qualities.

### ***Literary Review: Impact of Priming on Teamwork and Unity***

Priming can also affect the extent to which people desire to work collectively or toward the common good. Ford et al. (2013) found that flight attendants who were primed with a social identity were more willing to engage in team action than those who were primed with a personal identity. Self-categorization as part of a group can alter behavior in relation to others. Social identity priming had an effect on intergroup cooperation but did not change perceptions of leadership, job role, and responsibility. Socially primed flight attendants showed through surveys they would be more likely to work in a team toward a common goal, and they would be more

likely to work together in an emergency than their personally primed counterparts. Similarly, Mishra & Bost (2018) discovered that people primed with independence placed higher weights on counterproductive performance behaviors while people primed with interdependence put more weight on citizenship behaviors. People primed with relatedness showed more restraint in a resource dilemma than unprimed participants (Prentice & Sheldon, 2015). Leaders who can prime people to identify as part of a group can unconsciously motivate people to work together and make decisions with the interests of others in mind.

### **Ronald Reagan's Use of Priming**

Many researchers have studied the tactics that Reagan used in his speeches, including his visionary rhetoric and repetition of impactful phrases. Nicknamed "The Great Communicator," Reagan is renowned for his rhetoric and his speeches have been studied as an example of superb oration that inspired the American people (Sigelman & Whissel, 2004, p. 137). His use of common language made him accessible to everyday Americans; he continually edited his speeches to substitute formal wording for conversational sentence structure, posed questions as though he was engaged in a conversation, and used contractions to create a personal tone (Lawrence & Carpenter, 2007). Reagan utilized humor to capture his audience and mastered the use of rhythm, repetition, and alliteration to drive his points home (Humes, 2007). He painted pictures for the American people, punctuated them with anecdotes, and engaged them through his charm and charisma (Hannaford, 2004). Among these characteristics of Reagan's speeches lie his intentional repetitive word choice, his use of stories and schemas, and visionary rhetoric. It will be argued in this study that these rhetorical tactics can be classified as priming methods and that Ronald Reagan was able to prime his audience toward heroic self-view, united teamwork, and a common vision.

### **Method**

Reagan's speeches and techniques were examined for examples of common priming methods, including the repetition of related words and activated schema. The primes in his speeches were compared to the primes frequently found in research experiments. Specifically, Reagan's speeches will be examined for priming toward goals, self-view, and teamwork. The research was conducted by categorizing Reagan's known persuasive tactics as well as by examining his inaugural speech, "Evil Empire" speech, "High Flight" Challenger disaster speech, his address on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy Invasion, and his farewell address.

### **Results**

#### **Analysis of The First Inaugural Speech**

Reagan gave his inaugural speech on January 20, 1981 after defeating former President Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election. Taking on the high inflation, unemployment rates, and discouraged American people, Reagan promised hope, a new beginning, and smaller government. In this speech, Reagan uses the priming method of repetition to build the ideas of renewal, freedom, and a common bond in the minds of his audience. Throughout the speech, he uses the word "we" 48 times, contrasted with the word "I", which appears only 19 times. "Freedom" and "Americans" are used 9 times each during the speech. An example of repetition appears when Reagan begins to exhort the Americans toward his vision of the future: "...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" (p. 3). Again, he says, "And as we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world" (p. 3). By repeating the same words over and over, he is metaphorically priming the pump for his audience to later think and act in accordance with his words.

Present in Reagan's inaugural speech are three different areas of priming. First, he establishes a teamwork and unity prime among his audience, linking them to himself and to each other. He refers to them in terms of a people united, with the nostalgic address: "We the people..." that harken back to the very first words of the Constitution of the United States (Reagan, 1981, para. 10). Rather than declare all of the personal executive orders he intends to carry out as president, he instead addresses the people as though they are working with him, beginning on that day. He consistently returns to the theme that America is to be run by the people, protected by the people, enforced by the people, and that America's burdens will be borne by the people. He also primes his audience toward a unified vision of the future, saying, "We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom" (1981, p. 3). Reagan paints a vivid picture of a new and prosperous beginning for America, grounded in strength and laden with hope.

Reagan then primes his audience with a specific view of themselves in order to increase their motivation and actions in the future. He declares that individual Americans are heroes, whether they be factory workers or drivers (Reagan, 1981, para. 10). He tells them that they are made of compassion and urges them to act consistently with their character. Finally, Reagan tells them that their moral courage and will is more impactful of a weapon than any technological warfare or arsenal (1981). Reagan primes his audience with the idea that they are morally good, that they will never surrender to evil or injustice, that they are capable of self-government, and that they are powerful and have the ability to change the future. He hands them power while also declaring them to be worthy of that power because they are just, which prepares the people to view themselves as fighters for freedom and morality.

### **Analysis of “The Evil Empire” Speech**

Reagan addressed an audience at the National Association of Evangelicals on March 8, 1983 and referred to the U.S.S.R as an “evil empire” for the first time. In this speech, Reagan activates the schema of good and evil in the mind of his audience, building up to the condemnation of the communist regime as the “Evil Empire” that Americans must stand against. In order to set up the schema, he first begins with the premise that the majority of America is morally good. He urges his listeners to keep America morally good so that it will be great (para. 11). He then prepares the audience with smaller good vs evil ideas by addressing evils within their own country that they must fight, such as abortion, religious oppression, infanticide, and racial hatred. He categorizes them all as moral issues, even reproaching racial issues with the biblical command to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (para. 34). Reagan lays out good vs. evil schema throughout his speech and lays out what the evangelicals and America should stand for.

By the time Reagan finishes the first half of his speech, he has set up the premises that America is morally good and therefore must fight what is morally evil. He even acknowledges his positive view of America despite its faults, but he holds that any objective observer should come to the same conclusion. He then tackles the final and principal premise of his thesis and, in doing so, activates the schema in his audience’s mind of the moral good defeating an Evil Empire. He does so by contrasting America’s morality with the Marxist-Leninist belief that morality should be subject to class wars, not God. He also wishes for their salvation while also calling them out as the “focus of evil in the modern world,” even alluding to the fatal sin in the Garden of Eden, when Satan enticed, “Ye shall be as gods” (para. 51). Perhaps the strongest piece of evidence toward the activation of the good vs evil schema, is said by Reagan himself as he calls the cold war the “struggle between right and wrong and good and evil” (para. 48).

Reagan ends his speech by declaring that freedom will always win over enslavement, similar to the audience's ingrained idea that good will always triumph over evil.

### **Analysis of the "High Flight" Challenger Disaster Speech**

Behind "space" and "challenger," the word "we've" appears more than any other word in Reagan's "High Flight" Challenger speech. He continually aligns himself with the nation and unites them through expressing their mutual feelings. He refers to the loss as a national one, with shared pain among all the people. Not only does Reagan prime the audience toward unity, but also primes their self-vision. He refers to them as "brave" and "pioneers" (1986, paras. 5-6). In doing so, he also primes toward a unified goal. He deems the tragedy not the end but the beginning of the future of discovery, as he declares, "Nothing ends here; our hopes and our journeys continue" (Reagan, 1986, para. 8). He repeats the idea that America is expanding man's horizons by their continued exploration in space and that tragedies are setbacks that are part of the process of discovery.

In this speech, Reagan speaks to five audiences: the astronauts' families, school children, NASA workers, the Soviet Union, and America. To the astronauts' families, he repeats the ideas that the astronauts are special, daring, brave, hungry to explore, and servants of the American people. Addressing the school children, he acknowledges the confusing and painful components of the event but repeats the idea of following the Challenger into the future. He helps the children to perceive the astronauts as brave pioneers and just the beginning of the future. To the NASA workers, Reagan repeats empathy and admiration for their professionalism and dedication to their mission. In relation with the Soviet Union, Reagan repeats the ideas of American honesty and integrity in the space program, compared to the Soviets who cover things up. To the American public, Reagan expresses a deep pain that he and his wife share with the nation, but

continually returns to the idea of honor, pioneering, and continuing on. Reagan was able to turn a tremendous tragedy into a beacon of hope and a pull toward the future.

### **Analysis of Reagan's D-Day Speech**

Reagan recounts the events of D-Day, focusing on the honorable character of the men who fought, the evil that they were fighting, and the danger of their circumstances. He emphasizes the love and values that drove the soldiers to fight bravely, the God who helped them, and the lessons learned from World War II. Over and over, he refers to the soldiers as undeterrable men full of "honor," "valor," and "courage," (pp. 1-4). He refers to them as "men who took the cliffs... champions who helped free a continent... heroes who helped end a war" (para. 5). Reagan condemns the evil they faced as a "terrible shadow" and "tyranny" that enslaved millions (para. 1). He repeatedly affirms that the danger they faced was "difficult [and] mighty," further emphasizing their heroism (para. 2).

Perhaps most importantly and intentionally, Reagan returns to the values that drove them to fight. Reagan says of their motivations: "It was faith and belief; it was loyalty and love" (para. 11). He declares they knew that their country was worth dying for, as it stood for democracy and liberty in the face of tyranny. They fought for freedom rather than power and for the belief that the Allies were fighting for what was morally right. He gives credit over and over to God as he talks about all the nations across the world who had faith that God would rescue. He alludes to the Americans who prayed throughout the middle of the night, the churches that were packed, the colonels and generals who led their men in prayer and quoted God's promises from scripture. The lessons learned he ties together: peace is worthy of protecting globally rather than turning a blind eye, and that Americans must desire reconciliation with their former enemies.

### **Analysis of Reagan's Farewell Address**

Reagan's farewell address is filled with themes of unity and a fulfilled vision. In response to his nickname "The Great Communicator," Reagan turns the compliment back on the people, saying that the ideas he said came from "the heart of a great nation" (para. 13). He repeatedly used the phrase "our" rather than "my": "our experience, our wisdom, our belief" (para. 13). Reagan gives the credit for his victories in Congress to his "Reagan's Regiments, the American people" (para. 25). Reagan also repeats the same ideas he introduced in his inauguration speech. He returns to the famous phrase "We the People" 5 times, to instill in the minds of the people that it is them who should tell the government what to do, not the other way around. He returns to the "shining city on the hill," full of peace, productivity, and heart. Reagan says, "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... 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 here" (para. 32).

He puts a bow on his previous vision and challenges the people for the future. He tells them that they have made a difference and made the world freer; he leaves them with the duty to protect America, to teach their children to love it, and to be people who get things done in the next administration. Reagan tells the story of how his political enemies told him that his policies were going to fail and plunge the nation into ruin, but how they ultimately led to success. He declares that it was their calls and their letters that made the difference. Reagan's speech both congratulates the people on what they have accomplished and challenges the people to live worthily as Americans.

### **Analysis**

Reagan repeated similar words and ideas, especially the ones deemed most impactful. He activated audience schemas of good and evil and applied them to the Soviet Union. Reagan used visionary rhetoric to prime his audience toward a specific goal. He referred to his audience with terms implying strength and exceptionalism (Baker, 2013). He primed Americans with a self-view of exceptionalism and a unified view of themselves as a collective group. Other researchers have studied patterns in Reagan's communication but not applied those patterns to the theory of priming. This discussion analyzes both the results of the empirical study above and applies the lens of priming to the findings of other researchers' studies.

### **Repetition of Related Words and Ideas**

#### *Analyzing Previous Studies*

Priming can include the repetition of words or ideas and the activation of preconceived schema or perception. The repetition of words and ideas is a common method that researchers have used to activate the subconscious. Reagan and his team chose specific words to repeat throughout his campaign and time in office. For instance, he continually returned to the five ideographs of "family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom" (Hall, 2002, p. 330). The word choice was intentional; he used "workplace" rather than "job" because it had a better value association (Hall, 2002, p. 328). He also repeated "power phrases" that Wirthlin found were most successful through his PulseLines research (Hall, 2002, p. 322). Hall examined Reagan's UN speech and found that three phrases from that speech reoccur in future speeches because they were the most impactful to the audience: "a fresh start," "progress and peace," and "escape the prison of mutual terror" (p. 335). Hall found that Reagan's United Nations speech also continuously emphasized the ideas of peace, hope, and freedom. Dr. Lee Edwards (2018) also

noted that Reagan intentionally used similar messages throughout his speeches because he believed that eventually the message would “sink into the collective consciousness of the people... If you have something you believe in deeply, it’s worth repeating time and again until you achieve it” (p. 1). These “stump speeches” then can be pointed to as priming in the sense that related ideas were constantly offered to the public who heard him speak throughout the course of 8 years.

### *Analyzing the Original Text*

Not only does Reagan repeat ideas within speeches, he also repeats ideas across speeches. The most commonly used words in the five analyzed speeches were “us,” “one,” “would,” “government,” “America,” “people,” “great,” and “God.” In these five speeches, Reagan says “us” 59 times and “one” 44 times, repeating these two words more than any other word. By repeating these words, Reagan continually brings the American people into a unified mindset. By using “great” and “God,” he continually reminds the people of how special America’s values are and where they came from. Through his repetitive use of “America,” “people,” and “great,” he reinforces a self-view in the American people to view themselves as a special group of wise, courageous, and morally upright citizens who stand for justice and one another.

In his inaugural speech, Reagan repeats the word “we” more than twice as often as the word “I.” He also adds repeatedly emphasizes the ideas of freedom, American values, and renewal. He refers to the “shining city on the hill” and “We the People” in both his inaugural and final speeches, though they were 8 years apart. In Reagan’s Challenger Disaster Speech, Reagan also consistently repeats the idea of the nation banding together to mourn and celebrate the achievements of their astronauts. By continually referring to the astronauts as pioneers and harkening back to the roots of America’s discoveries, he plants the idea in the minds of his

audience of pressing forward in the face of adversity and not giving up. In his farewell address, Reagan repeats the idea that the successes of his term have been because of the nation as a whole. He challenges them to continue telling the government what to do. This is similar to the priming experiment done by Mishra and Bost in 2018, which found that people who were primed with interdependence put more weight on citizenship behaviors. In both his inaugural speech and his speech on D-Day, Reagan emphasizes the importance of American strength in order to protect peace and to defend it globally. In his final speech and his D-Day speech, he revisits the idea of reconciliation and peace with the Russians, changing his rhetoric schema from that of his “Evil Empire” speech. Reagan’s intentional use of specific and related words and ideas within his speeches can be classified as a priming method.

### **Activated Schema**

#### *Analyzing Previous Studies*

Another way that priming can be effective is by tapping into preconceived structures, reinforcing them, and applying them to a specific situation. When explanations fit into an individual’s schema in their associative knowledge system, they are much more likely to accept the explanation and less likely to scrutinize. In his speeches, Reagan framed the Carter administration as weak and declining and used the binaries of peace/war and strength/weakness to support his national security policy of having enough strength to keep peace (Drury, 2014). These binaries held with the common positive frame associated with times of peace and strength. Reagan also used the value and common story element of “good vs evil” in his speeches, calling the Soviet Union the “Evil Empire” and portraying them as criminal (Medhurst, 1998). Even in relation to economics, Reagan invited common citizens to join his side and to become part of the moral underdog in the battle between good and evil (Kiewe & Houck, 1991). This activated the

already conceptualized framework of how a person should respond and put them in a story where Americans were heroes and had to band together to defeat evil. Reagan also was famous for using parables, folktales, and anecdotes to get a point across. One of his favorite anecdotes in the 1950s was "The Modern Little Red Hen," which he used to point out economic truths with humor within a schema that his audience already understood (Humes, 2010, pp. 20-21). Reagan activated the preconceived schema in his audience's minds to cause them to accept his explanations and reasoning.

### *Analyzing the Original Text*

In Reagan's Evil Empire speech, he primes with a secondary method: activating schema. Throughout the speech, he addresses different moral issues, declaring them to be absolutely right or wrong. His standard, when talking to the National Association of Evangelicals, is based upon the Bible. He presses into their preconceived ideas of good and evil and identifies America as morally good and communist Russia as evil. Because in the original schema, Evangelicals are to fight evil and support good, Reagan's comparison urges them to fight for freedom against the Evil Empire. Lavoie (2016) notes that Reagan's rhetoric allowed him to present his plan as a reasonable reaction to the aggression of the Soviets. It can be argued that Reagan also taps into the schema of the underdog. By painting America as a morally good underdog fighting the Big Evil Empire, Reagan activates the natural instinct to fight for the underdog. In Reagan's Farewell Address, he again activates this underdog schema by recounting the successes of his administration despite the political critics who had predicted its failure. It can also be argued that in Reagan's Challenger speech, he activates a schema in the segment where he is talking to school children. As schoolchildren learn in their history books about pioneers and discovery, Reagan turns the tragedy into a framework that they can understand in order to flip the

perspective from despair to hope. He explains that the astronauts were pioneers who bravely paved a way that others will continue to follow. Reagan activates a schema that they already understand of exploration and discovery and applies it to the newer plane of space.

In his D-Day speech, Reagan uses the phrase “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee” in three contexts, essentially creating his own schema and bringing it into play at the end of his speech (1984, para. 15). He first gives context for the phrase, which comes from the Biblical story of Joshua, when God promises that he will not leave or forsake him as he goes into the promised land to defeat many nations through God’s power. He takes that quote with all of its power and shows its power in the context of World War II, as General Matthew Ridgway asked God for the same promise as he lay on his cot in the darkness on the eve of D-Day. Finally, he takes the power and emotion of the victories and steadfastness associated with God, the Israelite’s promised land, and the troops who ended World War II and applies it to his current audience. He repeats the phrase but uses it as a vow from his current audience to those who had died 40 years previously. He challenges them to stand for what the fallen soldiers died for. In activating a schema that he had instilled in their memory previously, Reagan is able to convey much more than the phrase itself could have if it stood alone. It holds the ideas of the steadfast faithfulness of an unfailing God, the faith of a general in clinging to hope and fighting for goodness, and a promise that cannot be broken.

### **Vision Priming**

#### *Analyzing Previous Studies*

Specific words can be used to create a prime toward a vision, which can affect people’s perception of the present and cause them to act in accordance with the visionary goal. Leaders

have the ability to influence people's motivation and decision making by using vision primes to explain a situation or advocate toward a future goal.

Reagan primed his audience with specific words and images of the future to convince them that a future with him as President was the most successful future for America. Reagan used "visionary rhetoric" in the 1980 election, promising a "rebirth of the American tradition of leadership" during a time of waning U.S. global power and oil shortage (Drury, 2014, p. 87). Drury argues that Reagan's rhetoric relied on emotion, narration, and appeals to change; Reagan showed his audiences a persuasive and vibrant future in order to move them toward change (2014). He used the idea of destiny, implying that his path was the one that the United States was supposed to take and that the U.S. had a calling to lead the nations toward freedom and democracy again (Drury, 2014). By repeating his visionary rhetoric and impactful words, Reagan was able to encourage and reinforce positive ideas and goals in the minds of his audience. Reagan presented problems as challenges that could be overcome with him as a leader guiding toward a vision.

### *Analyzing the Original Text*

In his inauguration speech, Reagan told his audience that the coming years would be a new beginning founded on core values. He emphasized peace and strength, a platform that he ran on that continued into the era of the Cold War. In his Challenger Disaster speech, Reagan turns the disaster from a tragedy into a celebration of a bright future that is to come as America continues onward into the future of space exploration. Reagan continually gave his audience a vision of America as a shining beacon of hope for the rest of the world to see. According to Szudrowicz-Garstka (2014), this was drawn from Puritan John Winthrop and ultimately the Bible.

### **Priming Toward Self-View**

Priming can be used to change the way that people view themselves, which in turn can affect their performance and behaviors. Much of Reagan's rhetoric stemmed from belief in the American people and their values, perhaps unintentionally priming them to view themselves in a way that would affect their perception and behavior. Throughout the five analyzed speeches, Reagan used the word "great" 32 times, referring to America, the people of the nation, and the values they stood for. In his acceptance speech, he spoke of the "extraordinary strength and character of this breed of people we call Americans" (Reagan, 1980, para. 63). He spoke of them as the generous and progressive people who would not move backwards (Reagan, 1980). He called them heroes, and declared them capable of governing themselves as self-reliant, independent Americans (Sallot, 1990). By priming the people to view themselves in such a way, Reagan was able to guide them to act in power, courage, and resolve to stand for moral values and to not give in to fear and pressure from other countries.

Reagan primed his audience to believe themselves to be capable, honorable, and heroic. In his inaugural speech, Reagan commended Americans for how much they had achieved through genius and freedom. He recognized everyday Americans as being heroes because of their patriotism and compassion. He challenges them to be worthy of themselves, full of moral courage, determination, faith, and hope. In his Challenger Speech, Reagan identifies Americans as brave explorers and pioneers that cannot be irrevocably deterred or defeated. In his farewell address, Reagan identified the people as change-makers, people who love freedom and values.

### **Priming Toward Teamwork and Unity**

Reagan used his platform to consistently point people to relatedness and unity through his constant use of plural, first person pronouns and familial rhetoric. In the five analyzed speeches,

Reagan uses the words “us” and “one” more than any other word. Not only does he align himself as one of the people, but he primes them to be a team with one purpose and one heart. In Reagan’s inaugural speech, Reagan declares that the people are united and that all of them bear the burden of government. He unites the people with himself and with one another, harkening back to the constitution’s famous “We the People.” He speaks of actions and decisions as not being made by some bureaucrats high up, but by the united people. By using the term “we” 48 times and only using the word “you” 11 times, he creates a prime toward teamwork and unity.

Reagan also binds the people together in his Challenger Disaster Speech and D-Day memorial speech through repetition of similar words and phrases. He uses the word “we’ve” more than the majority of other words in his Challenger Disaster speech. Repeating the word “we’ve” so many times in his speech is similar to the experiment done by researchers Ford, O’Hare, and Henderson, where flight attendants were primed with a social identity. The group of flight attendants primed with a social identity, as opposed to a personal identity, were more likely to work together toward a common goal in an emergency. In his final speech to the public, he tells them that together they have been able to make a difference. In his D-Day speech, he quotes the Bible early in the speech, explaining that General Ridgway listened for the same words that God said to Joshua: “I will not fail thee nor forsake thee” (para 15). At the very end of his speech, he circles back to that quote to spur the people of the West to band together and to stand for the same values of those who perished by not failing or forsaking them. By first using this in relation to God never leaving Joshua and then calling them to do the same to their fallen soldiers, he primes steadfastness and faithfulness in Americans to stand in unity.

**Addition to the Literature**

Bargh's research from 1982 onward was published during and after Reagan's presidency; therefore, it is highly unlikely that Reagan intentionally used the communication theory of priming in his speeches, especially those during his election campaign. His speeches included elements consistent with the theory, however, and may provide another possible reason for his success as an orator and leader which earned him the moniker, "The Great Communicator."

This study adds to the existing literature because priming has often been studied, but not often in the context of leadership. New studies are being written that are evaluating whether business leaders can have an impact on the achievement and teamwork of their employees. It is interesting to consider that Reagan's leadership of a nation could, in part, be effective because of the many ideas and visions he repeated to the American people, and for how he caused them to view themselves. His repetition of impactful phrases and ideas mirrors the repetition methods demonstrated in priming experiments. He was able to activate the schema of right and wrong, good and evil, and apply it to the problems of the day. He was able to convince the people that his solution was the best solution through constantly giving them a view of his goal of a shining future. Additionally, he was able to spur the American people on to make decisions by priming with them with a specific view of themselves. These elements point to Reagan unconsciously using techniques that fit under the category of priming, add to the existing literature surrounding Reagan's persuasive prowess, and open the door for the study of verbal priming in leadership.

### **Conclusion**

Priming has been shown to influence the behaviors, motivations, and thought patterns of people. Priming has been demonstrated by methods such as the repetition of related words and phrases as well as matching an explanation to a preconceived mental model. This theory of communication has only recently begun to be applied to leadership. Researchers have found that leaders are able to prime their subordinates toward goals, higher achievement, teamwork, and self-view. Ronald Reagan was an effective leader who used a variety of rhetorical tactics in his speeches to influence Americans. Some of his persuasive techniques, including his specifically repeated phrases and molding of situations into his audience's accepted schema, can be classified as priming. His use of priming can be demonstrated in his priming of Americans' self-view, his visionary rhetoric toward a common goal, and his priming of Americans' view toward one another. This may add to the literature concerning Reagan's effectiveness as a speaker and a leader.

Reagan's persuasive tactics have often been studied, but not in the context of priming. Analyzing his techniques in light of persuasion is valuable given his high levels of persuasion, evidenced by indicators such as his winning 49 out of 50 states in the 1984 election, only losing Minnesota. Examples of priming in his speeches may add to the reasons why he was able to change the behaviors and perceptions of people in the same way that researchers were able to do in priming experiments. Reagan demonstrated methods such as repetition and activating schema, and his priming appeared in methods of vision priming and priming of self-view.

This study raises the question for future research of how many other leaders have unintentionally used priming techniques in the past and how leaders of the future can use this knowledge. It raises the question of ethics: whether it is right or wrong for a leader to

intentionally prime people to act in accordance with their goals. Studies could also be expanded to determine what factors make people less susceptible to priming. Future research can be done in examining previous speeches of leaders, performing experiments on groups of people using a leader to prime them, and the applications of ethics to this theory. Perhaps then, “The Great Communicator” used a great communication theory to reach his audience, guiding toward a vision through impactful phrases and memorable stories, all the while paving the way for future leaders.

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