

contrasts, a much fuller, global history of social thought and social argument in the last decades of the twentieth century cries out to be written.

In the meantime, rescuing a piece of that larger global story from the stereotypes and simplifications that are quickly wrapped around the recent past, making it safe and tidy for its boosters and critics alike, may be ambition enough for the book at hand. For us, living in the immediate slipstream of these intellectual events, in the ragged turbulence of argument and conviction they left behind, the question historians have asked for other, more distant times and places takes on a closer importance: how it was that a vocabulary of social thought unexpectedly became outmoded and passé, and another way of thinking, for an era, made claim to its place.

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Losing the Words of the Cold War

We're not called upon to make that kind of sacrifice.

Kenneth Khachigian, notes of a conversation with Ronald Reagan

There had not always been so many words. Surrounding public figures with a nearly endless sea of rhetoric is an invention of the twentieth century. Presidents, in particular, once talked in public far less often than they do now. Thomas Jefferson's rule that presidents should communicate to Congress only in writing remained the norm until Woodrow Wilson broke it in 1913. Nineteenth-century presidents spoke to gatherings of the people at large, but they did so in a strikingly passive voice and not frequently. Jeffrey Tulis counted a total of about a thousand presidential speeches delivered over the course of the entire nineteenth century, almost the number that Jimmy Carter gave in his four years in office. Even in the twentieth century, the stream of words that presidents have issued has grown dramatically. Franklin Roosevelt gave less than three hundred speeches of all sorts during the New Deal's first term—vastly more than Lincoln (who gave seventy-eight) but far below the thousand-speeches-a-term rate that Reagan, G. W. H. Bush, and Clinton all chalked up. The modern talking presidency, drawing on the resources of an extensive staff of writers, idea generators, and message consultants, is a phenomenon of the post-1945 years.¹

Presidents use their modern fount of words for many purposes. They use them to outline their policy proposals and to persuade Congress and the people of the wisdom of their chosen course of action. They use public words to mobilize their electoral base and corral the undecided voters. They use them ritually and ceremonially. But in the very course of the everyday acts of politics, presidents and their speechwriters cannot help mapping an inchoate theory of society and politics: an image of the na-

tion as a collective entity over which they preside. Presidential speeches not only use public words for tactical ends, large and small, but also shape the public words of the day. They set into circulation mental pictures of society and its field of obligations. They articulate the nation and its promises. Even at its most formulaic and ritualized, when test groups pass judgment on slogans and sound bites and relays of writers work over one another's drafts, the modern rhetorical presidency offers a window into the stock of ideas, assumptions, and social metaphors that hold traction in their day.

In the generation after 1945, the assumptions that saturated the public talk of presidents were the terms of the Cold War. In language and setting, a sense of historically clashing structures dominated the presidential style. Urgency and obligation were its hallmarks. The Cold War political style clothed the events of the moment in high seriousness; it bound them into a drama of global struggle; it drew leaders and nation into tight and urgent relationships. It formed a way of articulating public life in which society, power, and history pressed down on individual lives as inescapably dense and weighty presences. Across the divide between the free and the Communist worlds two differently organized social systems confronted each other: not two world-spanning geopolitical powers, merely, but two antagonistic patterns of social roles and norms, two profoundly different ways of organizing political power and authority, two competing understandings of the long march of history. Freedom was at the center of Cold War political rhetoric, but within these urgent contexts, freedom was inescapably social and public. That was what John Kennedy meant in urging the nation "to seize the burden and the glory of freedom." That was what Barry Goldwater's speechwriters meant in 1964 in ringing their changes on the word: "*Freedom! Freedom—made orderly . . . Freedom—balanced* so that liberty, lacking order, will not become the license of the mob and of the jungle."² To act freely within these terms was to act not alone but within a larger fabric of relationships, purposes, obligations, and responsibilities.

In these emphases the rhetoric of the post-1945 presidencies repeated and amplified the dominant language of mid-twentieth-century social thought. The high urgencies of Cold War politics mirrored the theme of intense, agonistically difficult choice that ran through existentialist literature, neo-orthodox theology, and the theater stage. Its insistence on a

world-shattering collision between social systems, mores, and "ways of life" put the language of sociology and social anthropology directly into mass, public play. Its sense of the long drag of history, the thickness with which the past overlaid and bore down on the present, was a college lecture hall truism. No simple generalization can adequately capture the complexity of post-World War II American social thought, or the dissent and dynamics that always roiled within it. From the cultural radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s a more anarchic and libertarian strain was already bursting into the public forum, shaking nerves and certainties. But if there was a characteristic distinctive to social thought in the decades after 1945, marking it off from what preceded and followed it, it was the intensity with which the socially embedded, relational sides of existence framed ideas of the human condition. The freedom which hung so urgently in the balance in 1950s and 1960s America was ballasted by and contained within its complements: responsibility, destiny, justice, morality, and society.

This was the language that saturated the public talk of presidents when the 1970s began. But by the end of the 1980s the language and style of the Cold War presidency were clearly in eclipse. Freedom, once so tightly tied to its contexts of challenge and destiny, had become disembodied, unmoored, imagined. Themes of self-fashioning that had been incubated in the 1960s counterculture were fissuring through every domain of social thought. The nation disaggregated into a constellation of private acts. Among the unexamined ironies of the last decades of the century is that it was in the speeches of the oldest of the Cold Warriors, Ronald Reagan, that the words and gestures of the Cold War gave way, so unexpectedly, to something new.

Modern presidential oratory is a highly structured affair. The major speeches of a president—the Inaugural and State of the Union addresses in which the particularly heavy lifting of social articulation is performed and in which the trail of social thought is etched particularly clearly—proceed within scripts already half written, as if they were welded to massive subterranean templates of grammar and conviction. State of the Union messages report and propose, always in two parts, domestic and foreign. Inaugurals begin, profess continuity, and announce an era of renewal: a "new hope" (Truman), a "new purpose" (Johnson), "a new

era" (Nixon), or, down to tautological bedrock, a "new beginning"—the phrase that Reagan's speechwriters swiped from Carter's, just as Carter's had swiped it from Nixon's.³ Speechwriters learn their art by copying the work of other speechwriters in the way that Peggy Noonan, new to the Reagan speechwriting staff in 1984, set out to find the authentic presidential "sound" by reading the speeches of Franklin D. Roosevelt. The "grammar of the presidency," as Noonan called it, was the work of the speechwriters' continuous, creative recycling of the words and gestures of their predecessors.⁴

The key to that grammar in the post-1945 years was an urgent sense of history's demands. To talk in the presidential voice was to talk against a backdrop of crisis, danger, and trial. Presidents addressed their most important speeches to a world in peril: a "shaken earth" in its "season of stress" (Eisenhower), a nation in its "hour of maximum danger" (Kennedy), at its "time of testing" (Johnson).⁵ In the contest with Communism, the urgencies turned intense and apocalyptic. "It is of the utmost importance that each of us understand the true nature of the struggle now taking place in the world," Eisenhower drew out the theme in 1955:

It is not a struggle merely of economic theories, or of forms of government, or of military power. At issue is the true nature of man. Either man is the creature whom the Psalmist described as "a little lower than the angels" . . . or man is a soulless, animated machine to be enslaved, used and consumed by the state for its own glorification. It is, therefore, a struggle which goes to the roots of the human spirit, and its shadow falls across the long sweep of man's destiny.⁶

In this sustained crisis, the task of presidential leadership was to warn and awaken the American people. This was the axis on which presidential oratory recapitulated the forms of a Protestant sermon and on which the president assumed the preacher's part. The words that defined leadership, the Cold War presidents insisted, were uncomfortable words. "We sometimes chafe at the burden of our obligations, the complexity of our decisions, the agony of our choices," Kennedy had admonished the nation in his State of the Union message in 1962. "But there is no comfort or security for us in evasion, no solution in abdication, no relief in irresponsibility." Presidents were expected to know and to name, as Johnson put it in 1967, the "disorders that we must deal with . . . the frustrations

that concern us . . . the anxieties we are called upon to resolve . . . the issues we must face with the agony that attends them."⁷ As watchman on the walls of the republic, the president awakened the citizenry from its narrow contentments. As preacher, he called his nation to its better self, prescribed its obligations, enunciated its resolve, and blessed its endeavor. The sermonic turns of phrase that coursed through presidential oratory in the post-1945 years—"let us begin" (Kennedy), "let us resolve" (Johnson), "let us accept that high responsibility not as a burden, but gladly" (Nixon)—were emblematic of the relationship between the people and their presidential preacher.⁸

Of all the dangers against which presidents spoke after 1945, none called out stronger rhetorical effort than a weakening of public resolve. In the standing tension between "our common labor as a nation" (as Eisenhower put it) and the temptations of a purely private life, Cold War presidents spoke for the imperatives of public life. "America did not become great through softness and self-indulgence," Eisenhower warned. Greatness was achieved through devotion, courage, and fortitude, through "the utmost in the nation's resolution, wisdom, steadiness, and unremitting effort."⁹ Here freedom's "burden" was clearest. To remain free required resistance to the allure of selfish comfort, the sirens' call of self-gratification. "This is no time of ease or rest," Eisenhower insisted in his Second Inaugural. "High will be its cost" in "toil" and "sacrifice" of the "labor to which we are called." John F. Kennedy's famous challenge "ask not what your country can do for you," his summons "to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle . . . against the common enemies of man," were cut from the same cloth.¹⁰

The upheavals of the 1960s overtly changed none of that. Nixon's speeches were filled with echoes of Kennedy's high rhetorical gestures polished anew. Talk of "crisis," "purpose," "responsibility," and the "honor" of responding to "our summons to greatness" propelled them. The unattached self was, as before, an object of high suspicion. Nixon's speechwriters piled up repetitions of the word "together" in heaps in his major speeches, as if the words themselves could bridge the raw social divisions that the wedge issues of race and the Vietnam War had cracked open in the late 1960s. Nixon, the constant political calculator and polarizing political force, went to the public in the self-abnegating language of his predecessors. "Until he has been part of a cause larger than himself,

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no man is truly whole," Nixon repeated the conventional rhetorical wisdom in his First Inaugural. "To go forward at all is to go forward together."¹¹

The first breaks in the formula that joined freedom and obligation all but inseparably together began with Jimmy Carter. From the start he brought to the presidency a markedly different language shaped not only by his outside-Washington experience but, still more, by his immersion in Protestant evangelical culture. No president's inaugural address in a century had mentioned the Bible on which he had lain his hand to take the oath of office (it was Carter's mother's), much less the passage (Micah 6:8) to which he had had it opened. The idea of the nation as a gathered congregation of faith saturated Carter's rhetoric. He talked easily of the "common good" and the "beloved community." For all his experience as a naval officer and business owner, Carter was never comfortable in the high leadership style of Cold War political culture. In his low-church image of the presidency, the congregation held the nation's moral force; the president was the people's temporary servant.¹²

Carter brought all this into the presidency in 1977 in a flurry of populist symbols. He had campaigned on a promise of a government "as good as its people." His challenge, as he articulated it, was to stay as intimate with the people as a low-church preacher was with his flock. "You have given me a great responsibility," he pledged in his Inaugural: "to stay close to you, to be worthy of you, to exemplify what you are." The people's "sense of common purpose," he repeated the formula the next year, "towers over all our efforts here in Washington . . . as an inspiring beacon for all of us who are elected to serve." The antigovernment line that Carter articulated—"government cannot solve our problems, it can't set our goals, it cannot define our vision," he admonished in 1978—was premised on the assumption that the "new spirit among us all" ultimately mattered more than policies. The presidency, in passages like these, was merely a vessel for the nation's moral will and faith.¹³

But as Carter's administration collided with the economic ruptures that were to reshape the age, the new formulas strained and fell apart. The economic crises had begun in the last years of the Nixon administration. The runaway inflation of 1973–1974 had already ebbed by the time Carter took office in 1977; unemployment receded slowly in the first

three Carter years. But by the end of the 1970s, the annual inflation rate had shot up all over again. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the shock to global oil production as revolution dried up Iran's oil exports set off tremors throughout the world. In the context of inflation, gas shortages, and renewed Cold War fears, as Carter strained to amass the political capital necessary to address the crises that beset the country, the high Cold War style flowed back into his speeches.

Already in his Inaugural address in 1977, Carter's belief in an "undiminished, ever-expanding American dream" had mixed uncertainly with his admonition that even the greatest of nations faced "limits." By his State of the Union message in 1979 Carter was warning of the unprecedented subtlety and complexity of the problems facing the nation. At the depths of the crisis over oil and economics that summer, as angry, bumper-to-bumper drivers queued up for gas in lines that seemed to snake on without end, Carter reached back to the Cold War tropes of crisis, commitment, and sacrifice. He had already invoked the crisis leadership of Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Truman. Now, in this time of "challenge," "pain," and "danger," he pledged to lead the people against the "fundamental threat" that the oil crisis posed to the "social and political fabric of America."¹⁴

The fight for independence from foreign oil was the nation's new moral equivalent of war, Carter urged. "Self-indulgence and consumption" had sapped the nation's will. Worship of material goods had emptied lives of meaning and eroded a sense of common purpose. Faith in the future was unraveling. But by joining hands and pledging themselves to a renewed faith and action, a united people could resist the path "that leads to fragmentation and self-interest." "On the battlefield of energy we can win for our nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny." The "malaise" speech, as it was quickly dubbed in the media, was later to be accounted a blunder: too pessimistic and too moralistic in tone. But the pollsters reported that Carter's approval ratings, which had sagged badly during the spring, shot up 11 points in its wake.¹⁵

Dedication, courage, responsibility, self-scrutiny, and sacrifice: these were the nouns that bore the burden of Cold War presidential rhetoric. The terms clustered together: freedom with responsibility and discipline; peril with wisdom, leadership, firmness, and resolve. The key words of political culture in the third quarter of the century were social, historical,

and relational. Whatever the context of the moment, whatever the other voices straining to make themselves heard in the divided and contention-filled public sphere, this was the way presidents sounded.

Ronald Reagan knew those formulas intimately. He was virtually the last American president of the Cold War and the one whose career had been most shaped by its massive impress on politics and culture. Though, as he often joked during his presidential years, he was not quite as old as his audiences might imagine, Ronald Reagan's public career spanned the entirety of the Cold War struggle, from Yalta through *glasnost*, from the blacklists of 1940s Hollywood to the eve of the Soviet Union's disintegration. The words and assumptions of Cold War politics were ones he had lived with for a long time, a way of framing history and politics that came as naturally to him as the ease with which he felt the timing of a speech, or the way his speechwriters sprinkled his trademark word of hesitation, "well," throughout his addresses.

Reagan needed no tutoring in the rhetoric of the Cold War presidency. His basic speech of the early 1960s had fit hand in glove into its prevailing rhetorical structures. It broke the continuity of American history apart at the advent of international Communism. It espied a sea of surrounding terrors ("We are faced with the most evil enemy mankind has known in his long climb from the swamp to the stars"). It pleaded for vigilance ("freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction"). It encouraged inner discipline ("Will you resist the temptation to get a government handout for your community?"). If there was a distinctive thread in Reagan's prepresidential speeches it was the way they turned the Cold War's anxieties back on domestic politics—their displacement of the totalitarian nightmare from the world scene to the stealthy, creeping, insidious growth of government at home. "We'll adopt emergency 'temporary' totalitarian measures, until one day we'll awaken to find we have grown so much like the enemy that we no longer have any cause for conflict," Reagan warned in 1961. His tone was disturbing. He was more the nagging Jeremiah than he was Kennedy's trumpet-sounding Joshua. Still, in their urgencies, their Manichaean readings of history, and their zeal to waken the nation to a contest for total stakes, Reagan's basic speeches of the 1960s flowed down well-worn channels.¹⁶

Reagan's presidential speechwriters knew the grammar of the presi-

dency equally well. They grasped for rhetorical continuity with a more eager hand than had any presidential speechwriters before them. Reagan's post-1980 addresses were virtually an American Bartlett's of pre-used materials, quoted or tacitly cannibalized from Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, Lincoln, Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, and, not infrequently, his defeated antagonist Jimmy Carter. Kennedy's exhortation that we sail "with the tides of human freedom in our favor" was recycled by Reagan's speechwriters in a dozen different variations. Carter's boast in 1978, "It has been said that our best years are behind us. But I say again that America's best is still ahead," was remade to look as if it had been Reagan's all along.¹⁷ At the Democratic party convention in 1976, Walter Mondale had turned to Carl Sandburg's words for inspiration: "I see America not in the setting sun of a black night of despair . . . I see America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God." Looking for something authentically Reaganesque, Reagan's speechwriters reused the identical lines in 1984.¹⁸

With the right occasion and the right speechwriter, the tropes that had dominated the mid-twentieth-century presidency would be reinvigorated, propelled by Reagan's exceptional ability to project his own inner confidence and conviction across the television screen. He would talk of the tides of history, the fabric of society, the vast empire of evil, the heavy responsibilities of freedom, and (in Franklin Roosevelt's words) our "rendezvous with destiny."¹⁹ But those occasions grew rapidly fewer. Already in his years in the California governorship, a less hectoring tone had begun to shape some of his speeches, with more talk of dreams and possibilities. Ensnared in what Theodore Roosevelt once called the "bully pulpit" of the White House, terms like "crisis," "peril," and "sacrifice" slipped one by one out of Reagan's major speeches like dried winter leaves.

One catches the speed and direction of the transformation as early as his First Inaugural, when Reagan paused to tell the story of a World War I soldier, Martin Treptow. The story was mythic, not only in the liberties the speech took with the facts (Treptow's body lay in a Wisconsin cemetery, not in the Arlington hills on which the television cameras focused), but also in having been told in other versions many times before, most famously in Elbert Hubbard's stem-winding paean to Spanish-American War loyalty, "A Message to Garcia," in 1899. Treptow had been a small-

town barber before taking up a post on the Western front—a figure ripped from his private concerns by perils that reached now even into small-town Arcadia. Dispatched to carry a message between battalions, Treptow was killed. His diary, recovered later, revealed a handwritten pledge: “I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.”

Reagan read the words of that pledge, but then he plunged unexpectedly on, lest his listeners mistake the meaning of the story:

The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow and so many thousands of others were called upon to make. It does require, however, our best effort and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God's help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.

It was a remarkable passage in its head-spinning moves from Treptow's self-sacrifice to “our best effort,” from his death to our confidence in ourselves. Treptow's part was to give his life; ours, as Reagan glossed the story, was simply to “believe” that deeds as great as Treptow's were possible. It was to be one of the last significant mentions of sacrifice in Reagan's major speeches.²⁰

On the axis of “belief,” Reagan's speechwriters broke up and recast the rhetorical formulas of Cold War political culture. The story of peril, leadership, and resolve was replaced by a different plot. This one moved from initial confidence to momentary despair (some say that “ours is a sick society”), finally to a “revolution of hope” restored. None of this was wholly new. “For we are a nation of believers,” Lyndon Johnson had declared in 1965. “And we believe in ourselves.” “We've always believed,” Carter had pleaded, trying to brush past the pessimism he sensed in the nation at large in 1979. In no small part, the Reagan speechwriting office's investment in a politics of belief was Carter's gift. To contrast the present moment with the “era of paralyzing self-doubt,” to proclaim that “America is back” and “standing tall,” to insist that the electoral choice was a choice between “their government of pessimism, fear, and limits, or ours of hope, confidence, and growth,” was to make sure that on every domestic political occasion Carter, though unnamed, would be indelibly

remembered. The restoration-of-hope theme was a brilliantly opportunistic political-rhetorical maneuver.²¹

But no president before Reagan had invested belief itself with such extravagant power and possibilities. In Reagan's urgency-filled speeches of the 1960s and early 1970s the enemies were institutionally and sociologically palpable: the Kremlin and its “anti-beap of totalitarianism,” the planners and welfare-state advocates, the forces of “anarchy and insurrection” on the Berkeley campus.²² By the time Reagan entered the White House, freedom's nemesis had migrated into the psyche. Freedom's deepest enemy was pessimism: the mental undertow of doubt, the paralyzing specter of limits, the “cynic who's trying to tell us we're not going to get any better.” From Carter's talk of hard choices, from Reagan's own early desire to talk of “controversial things,” the theme of psychic restoration moved to center stage. “We are first; we are the best,” Reagan told the nation in 1984. “How can we not believe in the greatness of America? . . . We're Americans.”²³

In these cheerleading motifs, Reagan's speechwriters retold the story of the American past. The doubts and inner divisions of the revolutionary era, the anguish of the Civil War, the stresses of twentieth-century social change were edited out. The story of a people “born unto trouble” but nevertheless “always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again,” as Lyndon Johnson had put the American story, was reconstructed as a country of timeless confidence, in which past and present met on a field of eternally positive thinking. At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Benjamin Franklin had told some of those near him that through the long days of the convention and through “the vicissitudes of my hopes and fears,” he had looked at the half sun painted on the back of the president's chair without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. Now, at last, he had “the happiness to know” that it was a rising sun. “Well, you can bet it's rising,” Reagan glossed the story in his State of the Union message in 1987, “because, my fellow citizens, America isn't finished. Her best days have just begun.” In acts of historical revisionism like this, the American experiment was straightened out on the axis of enduring optimism.²⁴

Still more striking was Reagan's embrace of Tom Paine, the radical whom he brought into the sacred circle of American history in a way that Paine had never been embraced in life. The consummate late-eighteenth-

century international revolutionary whose works were a favorite of the Communist reprint presses, the man whom Theodore Roosevelt had once called a "filthy little atheist," Paine was a powerful source for Reagan. "We have it in our power to begin the world over again"—"that stupendously dumb statement by Tom Paine," as George Will termed it, that slap in the face of continuity and tradition, that radically unconservative statement of human hubris—was virtually the whole of Reagan's Paine. But it was all he needed, just as the phrase from one of the early twentieth century's most prominent intellectual socialists and free-love advocates—"all that is and has been is but the twilight of the dawn"—was all Reagan's speechwriters needed of H. G. Wells. Searching for the right quotation to end his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1983, Reagan gave them the cosmic optimism of American history's most radical Deist, Paine.²⁵

Under the new terms of the Reagan presidency, the older layers of rhetoric endured, to be pressed into the breach of other emergencies. Reagan pitched the necessity of military aid to the Nicaraguan *contras* as an exact replay of Harry Truman's commitment of assistance to Communist-beleaguered Greece and Turkey at the Cold War's onset in 1947. In the aftermath of the assault on the U.S. marines stationed in Beirut in 1983, his speeches were charged with appeals to firmness, courage, patience, and responsibility. "We have found the will. We have held fast to the faith," Reagan reassured a London audience in 1988 in the familiar language of Cold War resolve.²⁶ On the White House speechwriting staff, the most consistent champion of the older rhetoric of crisis, resolve, and leadership was Anthony Dolan: protégé of William Buckley, Catholic, and articulately conservative. It was he who, given the National Association of Evangelicals speech that no one else thought important in 1983, succeeded in injecting into it the "evil empire" phrase he had floated, only to be overruled, some months before. He put explicit confession of faith in higher law and the efficacy of prayer into Reagan's Guildhall address in London in 1988. For Reagan's commencement address at Notre Dame in 1981, Dolan remembered writing "this big thing about how the Western heritage of spiritual values would make a mockery of the values held by the Soviet Union—our spiritual values compared to the squalor of Soviet ideology."²⁷

There is no indication in Reagan's extensive handwritten emendations

of his speechwriters' work that he hesitated over most of these reinfusions from the past. As the drafts upon drafts of the major speeches now housed in the Reagan Presidential Library show, Reagan was a meticulous editor of his own words. After 1981 he rarely offered much initial guidance to his speechwriters, but he went over the final products in detail: condensing, rewording, adding a paragraph or two, and smoothing the final text with the skill of a seasoned line editor. The Martin Treptow story and its oddly undercutting moral ("we're not called upon to make that kind of sacrifice") were both his own insertion.²⁸ He did not balk at Dolan's "evil empire" reference. Whatever nerves it rattled in 1983, the phrase, with its attack on the forces of Godless "totalitarian darkness" and their unwitting pawns in the nuclear freeze movement, was considerably milder than Eisenhower's typical references to Soviet Communism, with its overweening desire to "enslave," its regimented atheism, and its relentless "chariot of expansion." It was, for that matter, much tamer than Reagan's own speech to the American Conservative Union six years earlier, in which the cinematic center had not simply been the Soviet Union itself but Communism's "terrifying, enormous blackness," "huge, sprawling, inconceivably immense," slithering across the globe.²⁹ Throughout the friendship with Gorbachev that grew so rapidly after 1986, Reagan's speeches continued their attacks on the brutalities of the Soviet system.

But after its first use in 1983, the "evil empire" virtually disappeared from Reagan's speeches, edited out by Dolan's rivals in the interests of other agendas. It was Reagan himself who struck out Dolan's lines about the spiritual superiority of the West for his Notre Dame address. Where Dolan had proposed ending the Second Inaugural with a call to pass on the dream of freedom "to a troubled but waiting and hopeful world," Reagan kept the phrase but deleted the uncomfortable word "troubled." At Notre Dame, he did not quote Dolan's hero, Whittaker Chambers, as Dolan had hoped; he told his audience how it had felt to play Knute Rockne's story in the movies.³⁰

All presidential speechwriting is fraught with contest. "Each speech was a battle in a never-ending war," Peggy Noonan remembered, each metaphor a hard-fought skirmish in the continuous struggle over policies and politics that marked the speechwriting process during Reagan's adminis-

tration.³¹ Rival versions of the most important speeches streamed out of the Reagan speechwriting office, together with anguished memos pleading for their adoption. Still, over the long haul, for all the shifting and intensely fought lines of battle, the older rhetorical formulas were overrun by the newer, softer, less demanding ones. Only near the end of his time in office, besieged by criticism of his arms trade with Iran, did Reagan lead off a State of the Union address with the foreign affairs section, where the language of duty and steadfastness had its natural home. On the domestic front in the early 1980s, through the first hard years of recession, one can find calls to "courage," "patience," and "strength." "No one pretends that the way ahead will be easy," Reagan warned in this vein in 1982. But appeals of this sort quickly moved out of Reagan's heavy-duty, mass-audience speeches. By the mid-1980s, the familiar Cold War rhetoric, heavy with collective imperatives and presences, had given way to simple ego boosting. "Twilight? Twilight?" he told the Republican party convention in 1988: "Not in America. . . . That's not possible. . . . Here it's a sunrise every day."³²

The eclipse of words thick with a sense of society, history, and responsibility by the new rhetoric of psychic optimism was abetted by the new focus-group techniques that had begun to move in a big way into Republican campaign management strategies in the 1980 contest. In a typical session, a group of one or two dozen people, each gripping a handheld response device, viewed the precast of an advertisement or listened to the draft of a speech. When they heard a phrase they liked, they squeezed, and an analyzer correlated the phrase, the images, and the squeezes together. They squeezed eagerly when they heard the words "reach," "free," and "America." They squeezed on positive terms. They did not like hearing worrisome words such as Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, or Nicaragua.³³ Whether because of these electro-psychic tabulations of the public's hunger for optimism, or the more intuitive judgments of the speech vetters, or the influence of the cadre of libertarians on the White House staff, references to collective obligations dried up in Reagan's speeches. In a particularly shrewd comparison of Carter's and Reagan's emotional rhetoric, Haig Bosmajian noted the highly charged words that carried the burden in Reagan's and Carter's inaugural addresses. Common to them both were freedom, faith, confidence, glory, liberty, love, and strength. The list of terms unique to Reagan's inaugu-

als, however, reads like a handbook of self-actualizing psychology: alive, big-hearted, courageous, daring, dynamic, forward, liberate, progress, robust, reborn, vibrant.³⁴

None of this was necessitated by the moment—not even by the anti-government animus that Reagan's election instantiated in the White House. Reagan's friend and ally Margaret Thatcher was, like Reagan, a convert to Friedrich von Hayek's strictures against creeping, liberty-destroying statism. She worked just as hard on her major speeches as Reagan did, arguing into the night with her speechwriting staff in a way that the much more distant Reagan never did. In the process, phrases from the new, oddly unconservative American conservatism occasionally slipped into Thatcher's vocabulary. "Can we not believe in ourselves?" she asked her fellow Tories in this Reaganesque vein in 1981. But freedom in Thatcher's speech was never unqualified, and it was rarely actually free. "There are many difficult things about freedom; it does not give you safety; it creates moral dilemmas; it requires self-discipline; it imposes great responsibilities," she cautioned in 1978, the year before she ascended to the position of prime minister. If there was a key word in Thatcher's public speech it was "responsibility." She quoted not the radical Tom Paine but Rudyard Kipling, poet laureate of striving, burden-bearing, imperial England. "What I am working for is a free and responsible society," Thatcher urged. In these times of "difficulties," "testing," and "sacrifices," "let us stand together and do our duty."³⁵

The theme that soared in Reagan's rhetoric, by contrast, was that ultimate state of boundlessness: dreaming. Nothing captured so well the eclipse of the Cold War vocabulary of peril, endurance, leadership, and courage than the way Reagan's public speech turned more and more frequently not merely on the need for confidence but on the possibility of slipping free from limitations altogether. The most striking employment of the "dream" motif was the series of transitions that climaxed Reagan's address to Congress on his program for economic recovery in the spring of 1981. From a somewhat tedious restatement of the terms of his tax and budget proposals, Reagan moved suddenly to remind his television audience of the recent space shuttle launch (the *Columbia* "started us dreaming again"), thence to a snippet from Carl Sandburg ("The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream"), on to a claim for the national distinctiveness of dreaming ("that's what makes us, as Americans,

different"), until his tax and budget cuts were enveloped in an aura of boundless optimism. "All we need to begin with is a dream that we can do better than before. All we need to have is faith, and that dream will come true."³⁶

In its report in 1980, the blue-ribbon President's Commission for a National Agenda for the 1980s, stocked with distinguished business and civic leaders, had warned that the reigning motif of the decade would be the "hard choices" that lay ahead for Americans—the tradeoffs that could not be avoided where unlimited claims clashed with limited resources. But in Reagan's America-dreaming sequences of the mid-1980s there was no hard thorn of sacrifice, no tradeoff in choice. "In this land of dreams fulfilled, where great dreams may be imagined, nothing is impossible, no victory is beyond our reach, no glory will ever be too great."³⁷

Dreaming was limitless. It was cut loose from the past. It was, in the language of focus group analysts, a pro-word, a button-pusher. Even as the sharply critical shots at totalitarianism continued, the face of the nation's enemies was reconstructed. They were no longer the masters of the Kremlin; now they were the doubters, the qualifiers, the realists without vision. "Let us begin by challenging our conventional wisdom," Reagan urged in his State of the Union address in 1985. "There are no constraints on the human mind, no walls around the human spirit, no barriers to our progress except those we ourselves erect."³⁸

The rhetoric was familiar, but not from politics or from conservatism. Into the network of associations with the term "freedom," Reagan and his speechwriters drew the language of the self-actualization psychology handbooks of the 1970s, the Jonathan Livingston Seagull phrases, the Esalen notion of freedom, the slogans of the 1960s cultural radicals. Tony Dolan, clinging to an older understanding of conservatism, would insist years later that "what Reagan is about [is] a rejection of the modernist notion that man is sovereign."³⁹ But there was nothing perilous or fragile in the new rhetoric of freedom, as there had been in Reagan's speeches of the 1960s, when freedom had been never more than a generation away from extinction. There was no need for overcoming, no manacles to be broken, no trial to be endured, no pause in the face of higher law. As Meg Greenfield noted at the time, Reagan "is the first president in years who has, at least so far, failed to cultivate the image of crisis and ordeal and almost unbearable testing."⁴⁰ To dream, to reach, to sing, to break loose, to

fly as high and as far as the imagination would carry you, to be all you might be: under the skin of the familiar words, the notion of freedom was enchanted. It was privatized and personalized, bent in on itself in the very enunciation of its limitlessness.

As the vocabulary shifted, as phrases of the counterculture leaked into the rhetoric of conservatism, the way Reagan acted the presidential part changed as well. Nowhere had the line between the rituals of church and state been more blurred in the post-1945 years than in the way in which presidential speech making capitalized on the forms of Protestant preaching. The resemblance ran much deeper than the references to God sprinkled heavily throughout presidential speeches or the benedictory forms with which they closed. Adaptation of sermon authority and sermon cadence was integral to the high presidential style. The people gathered together—preacher and congregation—to hear their civic creed reaffirmed, their mandate of leadership accepted, and their duties made clear. The pulpit rose above the pews. The words that came from it bound the people and their president together and made sacred the responsibilities of both.

On particular occasions, Reagan's speechwriters gave him a statement of faith to confess. But just as the terms of crisis and resolve receded from Reagan's vocabulary, so he slipped out of the preacher's role and pulpit. He did not speak in church syntax with the modifying clauses piled up at the front of his sentences, the hortatory verbs ("let us," "grant us"), and the Biblical references. He served not as the nation's better conscience or (as Carter tried, however ineffectually, to be) as its revivalist. His distinctive rhetorical field was the story of America. His *métier* was that of the program host: the president as the nation's off-camera narrator.

The point is true literally as well as figuratively. Reagan's speechwriters were the first to exploit to the full the possibilities of removing the president from the center of the camera's eye. Toward the end of his First Inaugural address, Reagan turned from the guiding principles of his foreign policy, through a short paragraph telegraphing his support for school prayer, suddenly to the view of the city from the West Front of the Capitol. The metamorphosis from president to tour guide proceeded without a hiccup: "Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man, George Washington. . . . Off to one side, the stately memo-

rial to Thomas Jefferson." Beyond, the Lincoln Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery. Primed with advance copies, CBS cameramen obediently swung to the narration. Peggy Noonan's description of the making of Reagan's Normandy address on the fortieth anniversary of D-Day evokes the film-making imagination that flourished in the White House communications office. The words came to her, she later reported, "cinematically." Reagan would say, "These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc," and "that's when the cameras would start to turn and the President would say, 'These are the men who took the cliffs.' And suddenly you were going to look at these faces—I'm getting choked up—of these seventy-year-old guys, and you'd be very moved."⁴¹

Even when the cameras stayed fixed on Reagan, his scripts worked on cinematic rather than sermonic principles. Standing within the Capitol during his Second Inaugural, he told the nation, "we see and hear again the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely President paces the darkened halls and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American song." Some of the central figures on Reagan's speechwriting staff dismissed these passages as mere "rubbish" and "schmaltz," even as they took their turns at larding them in between the hard-fought policy points of his major addresses. But poeticized and visually immediate narration of this sort was as indispensable a part of Reagan's presidential persona as the eloquent call to arms was to Kennedy or the plain-speaking radio chat to Franklin Roosevelt. The long narration with which Reagan's 1984 convention acceptance speech concluded, in which he described the journey of the Olympic torch across the continent, carried by toddlers, teenagers, and grandmothers in wheelchairs, passing crowds that burst into spontaneous song, was out of the same mold. The preacher left the church and settled in a porch chair to tell the nation's story, making word-pictures in the air.⁴²

If this momentary disappearance from the camera's eye came more easily to Reagan because he knew the role of program host from his years with *General Electric Theater*, it represented nonetheless a remarkable reimagining of the presidential role. Carter had sprinkled his speeches heavily with the word "I." ("I promise you that I will lead our fight.")

Reagan, by contrast, effortlessly blended his self into his story of America. He did not stand outside the present moment, challenging its premises, as he had in the 1960s. He retold an American story that was already embodied in fact, and from which, as its narrator and speaking voice, he was inextricable. He claimed no special knowledge, no expertise, no special qualities of leadership beyond embodiment of the public's common sense. As Kathleen Jamieson observed: "Reagan does not reside at the center of his discourse."⁴³

This cinematic dissolve of the president into the people, this relinquishing of overt authority, goes a long way toward explaining the resilience of Reagan's popularity. It was to become one the stories woven around Reagan that he was an extraordinarily loved president: the most popular occupant of the White House, according to some versions of the tale, since polling data began in the 1940s. In fact, by most of the available measures, he was not an exceptionally popular president. His highest approval rating, 71 percent, was three points below Carter's highest rating. (At their peak, Eisenhower [77 percent], Kennedy [83 percent], Johnson [79 percent], and both Bushes [89 percent] were all rated much higher.) Reagan's lowest approval rating, 35 percent, at the depths of the recession of the early 1980s, was a point below the worst that the hapless Gerald Ford achieved. Reagan's reelection in 1984 was, like Johnson's reelection in 1964 and Nixon's reelection in 1972, one of the landslide victories of postwar politics. But measured by the percentage of his months in office (61 percent) during which he polled a positive approval rating, Reagan ranks just about in the middle of post-World War II presidents. Coming into office on the heels of four presidencies that ended disastrously—Johnson's in civil turmoil, Nixon's in disgrace, Ford's and Carter's in defeat—Reagan stands taller than life, an embodiment of the restoration theme. Measured against that of Eisenhower, who fell only twice below 50 percent in his approval ratings, and that of Kennedy, who never fell below the 50 percent mark at all, Reagan's popularity was unremarkable.⁴⁴

The distinctive point about Reagan was not his popularity per se but the way his popularity was produced. In an outline for the 1984 campaign, Richard Darman, then White House assistant chief of staff, advised: "*Paint RR as the personification of all that is right with or heroized by America. Leave Mondale in a position where an attack on Reagan is tanta-*

mount to an attack on America's idealized image of itself—*where a vote against Reagan is in some subliminal sense, a vote against mythic 'America.'*"⁴⁵ Reagan amassed affection by distancing himself from his often polarizing policies, by blending his self and his story-telling voice into the fabric of everyday dreams and aspirations, by dissolving the distance between people and president. Abdicating the high presidential style, he let mountains of responsibility roll off his and his listeners' shoulders.

Getting himself out of the way was key to Reagan's gestures. Restoration was his primary rhetorical act. He gave the nation's freedoms and its future promise back to "the people." It was their seamless history that he painted in verbal miniatures, their hopes he claimed to enunciate. Reagan performed the part of identification with the people far more effortlessly and with vastly less inner contradiction than did his rival, the populist Carter, despite Carter's sweaters, suitcases, and Mr. Rogers-derived props of neighborliness. Carter and his advisers, struggling to read the minds and the anguish of the people, worried through a relationship that Reagan simply took for granted. "Just three words," Reagan told the nation's children in his State of the Union address of 1987, contained the whole secret of America: "We the people."⁴⁶

Reagan's commitment to these lines was unswerving. Kenneth Khachigian, called in to work on the 1987 State of the Union message, heard the "We the people" motif from Reagan himself, and wrote it into the speech with the excitement of adding a new and "perfect Reagan touch." In fact it had been part of Reagan's core stock of phrases since at least the mid-1960s. In Reagan's mind the anecdote paired with the words was always the same. In other countries, governments told the people what to do. In contrast, "Our revolution is the first to say the people are the masters and government is their servant."⁴⁷

To insist on the concrete reality of "the people" was, for Reagan and conservative Republicans, an essential precondition to the act of wedging the government and the people apart into sharply antagonistic political fields. The division was old in Reagan's rhetoric. "Already the hour is late," he had warned in 1964. "Government has laid its hand on health, housing, farming, industry, commerce, education . . ." For the Constitution's drafters, the phrase "We the People" had been a legitimating de-

vice: a means to give moral and political foundation to a stronger national government. In Reagan's speeches, the same words were refashioned to distance the natural, spontaneous acts of the people from the work of those they elected to be their representatives.⁴⁸

Reagan was not the first of the post-1945 presidents to run on an anti-government program. "Government cannot solve our problems," had been Carter's line in the 1970s; "it can't set our goals, it cannot define our vision." Carter's populist rhetoric, however, had strained toward healing. Alienation underlay these formulas as strongly as antagonism underlay Reagan's. We "have seen our Government grow far from us . . . almost become like a foreign country, so strange and distant," Carter lamented in his 1978 State of the Union message. He talked easily of humility, mercy, justice, spirit, trust, wisdom, community, and "common purpose." "It is time for us to join hands in America," he urged in his energy crisis address.⁴⁹ Reagan's talk of government and the people, by contrast, pushed toward severance. His goal was to rearrange the verbal system such that government was not the agent, embodiment, or reflection of the people. Rather, government was the people's antagonist, the limiter of their limitlessness. The twin pillars of his domestic policy—tax cutting and corporate and environmental deregulation—flowed directly from those premises.

But to devolve power to the people required that the people themselves be made visible. They needed words and representation. The terms in which Reagan referred to the people were instinctively expansive and inclusive. He was the last president to preside over the common audience that television network news had made, where a single voice could be imagined to speak to and for the nation. The gray, muffled prose of an Eric Sevareid and the mannered but reassuring avuncularisms of a Walter Cronkite were already under challenge in 1980. The pioneer of argumentative television, where panelists faced off like wrestling team opponents to parry, declaim, interrupt, and shout, *Agronsky and Company*, had been launched in late 1969. *The McLaughlin Group*, a favorite of Reagan's, heated up the formula in 1982, from which it was quickly and widely cloned. Radio, with its smaller niche audience always more argumentative than television, turned up the volume of dispute sharply with the arrival of Howard Stern and, by 1988, Rush Limbaugh. But Reagan still

presided over an America in which public speech was not yet systematically polarized, and the notion of the "people" was not yet a mere verbal fig leaf covering the fact of permanent political campaign.⁵⁰

At times, Reagan's speechwriters slipped into something close to Franklin Roosevelt's image of the people as a broad occupational phalanx: workers, farmers, and businessmen bound together by bands of economic interdependence. "We the people," Reagan limned them in 1981: "neighbors and friends, shopkeepers and laborers, farmers and craftsmen." But Reagan's word-pictures of the people almost never showed them working together, their energy and talent joined in a common action. As Benjamin Barber, one of the first to pick up this sub-surface theme, wrote of "the people singing" sequence in Reagan's Second Inaugural in 1985: "The speech lauds 'We the People,' but its heroes are men alone . . . In the President's script, Washington leans on no comrades in arms, Lincoln consults no cabinet . . . a single settler is conjured for us—his family wagon and the long train of Conestogas that must surely have accompanied it are kept out of sight (and out of mind)." In Reagan's very celebrations of the people, the plural noun tended to slip away, to skitter toward the singular.⁵¹

The impulse to disaggregate and individualize the people took still more prominent symbolic form in the so-called heroes in the balcony segment of his State of the Union messages. Reagan did not inaugurate the practice of calling forward an individual's special deeds in a major state address. He was the first, however, to take the inherently public occasion of a report on the nation from the chief of one branch of government to the heads of another and dissolve it, toward the end, into a montage of individual faces. Heroes, volunteers, teenagers with dreams, returned prisoners of war were gathered in the halls of Congress, where Reagan, stepping out of the camera's eye once more, would introduce them one by one. In 1963, John Kennedy had read the names of three American soldiers killed in Cuba, South Korea, and Vietnam. But here they now were in the flesh, where the applause, the acts of individual accomplishment, and the guest-program tableau all redounded to the administration's acclaim. The first three heroes in the balconies appeared in Reagan's State of the Union address in 1982; five more appeared in 1984, two in 1985, four in 1986.

Reagan was fond of saying that his political opponents saw people only

as members of groups; his party, to the contrary, saw the people of America as individuals.⁵² In fact, no set of Americans was ever chosen with a keener grasp of interest group politics than were Reagan's heroes in the balconies. A charitable black woman reassured Reagan's audience that the president had not forgotten the poor; a Hispanic medic drew sympathy for the Grenada invasion; a returned prisoner of war appealed to the patriotic electorate; a teenager whose experiment had been lost in the *Challenger* explosion lobbied silently for the high frontier of space; the two business figures on the list, a black female advertising executive and a Cuban refugee entrepreneur, spoke to the aspiration of minority business owners.

But the collective calculations of politics brooked no mention. Introduced by the presidential program host, the constituent atoms of the people stood up, for their moment in the camera's eye, one by one. Reagan asked viewers, not to imitate them or to rise to the challenge they set, but only to applaud them, to believe that their acts were possible. "We the people," as a collective entity, tacitly disaggregated under the touch.

Acting the Cold War part was a different matter, of course, from speaking its lines. Reagan was a more cautious Cold Warrior than his pre-Vietnam War predecessors had been. He preferred surrogates—*contras* in Nicaragua, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels in Angola, the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* in Afghanistan—to direct military intervention. He preferred to spend defense dollars than to risk military casualties or long-term military entanglements. The much-touted invasion of Grenada was the sort of act that U.S. presidents had ordered frequently in the Caribbean in the 1910s and 1920s, without much apology or much political fanfare. On the other side of the balance, Reagan's massive additions to the defense budget, even at the cost of the ballooning deficit, his insistence on funding for the Strategic Defense Initiative and on the deployment of a new generation of missiles in Europe, at the risk of destabilizing the nuclear standoff, and his deep, instinctual sense of embattlement with a resurgently aggressive Soviet Union on fronts across the world were acts fully within the Cold War frame. Reagan was far too little the Cold Warrior for his critics on the Committee on the Present Danger, who (even before Reagan's friendship with Gorbachev began to ripen) had written openly of their "anguish" at his weakness and penchant for wishful thinking. For his critics on the

left, Reagan was far too much the Cold Warrior. Still, there is no doubt that Reagan saw himself, like the Cold War presidents before him, as the leader of a nation locked in a continuing, vigilance-demanding, globally diffused war with the heirs of the Communist Revolution.⁵³

Reagan did not lose that war. What he lost were its words and its rhetorical gestures, its collectively enacted rituals of urgency, the language of obligation and responsibility that had been its inextricable attachment. In his major addresses, those were eclipsed by different terms; structures gave way to cameos, destiny to infinite possibilities, the preacher's voice to that of the family storyteller's. In the place of the style that had reigned since the 1940s, he offered a less urgent and commanding presidency, a seamless and tension-drained sense of time, a set of dreams and narratives in the place of old-style demands and certainties, a vision of freedom without obstacles or limits, a vocabulary of public words not abandoned but quietly individualized and privatized, a populism whose representation of the people dissolved society into pieces.

By the end of the 1980s, the new style had become a common coin of rhetorical politics. At the Democratic party convention of 1992, though Clinton pitched his "new covenant" in the sermonic language of the past, the most striking theme was the omnipresence of the personal story. Tom Harkin told the tale of his mother's emigration from Slovenia, Lena Guerrero told the story of her mother's labor picking cotton, Paul Tsongas talked about his cancer and his mother's tuberculosis, Clinton related (not for the first time) the life story that had begun in Hope, Arkansas. Heroes of ordinary life told their stories: a mother whose infant had died of AIDS from a transfusion of contaminated blood, a couple who had lost their health insurance, and a machinist laid off after twenty years of work, who spoke via satellite television. Pain abounded, personalized, individualized, made empathetic, and so did dreams. But the "hard choices" of the party's 1980 convention rhetoric, the need for "courage" and steadfastness, the recognition (as Clinton himself had put it then) that "we are in a time of transition, a difficult and painful time from which no one can escape the burden and no one can avoid a responsibility to play a part," had quietly been omitted.⁵⁴

The new ingredients that flowed into political language came from many sources. The motifs in Reagan's public speeches were patched together from the optimistic 1940s movies that Reagan loved, from the

counterculture and the psychic self-empowerment literature of the 1960s and 1970s, from a populist backlash against the experts and against the oil-crisis engendered talk of limits, from a new libertarian strain in the conservative coalition, and from the market confidence of the sun belt entrepreneurs prominent in the Reagan Republican coalition. But in ways beyond either Reagan's or his speechwriters' knowing, Reagan's post-Cold War style was connected to intellectual trends that ramified out far from the Reagan White House, often articulated by persons who would have denied any connection with the figure who by 1981 held the presidential stage.

No one has ever persuasively described Ronald Reagan as an intellectual. He was instead, as Margaret Thatcher described herself, a "conviction" politician. Reagan cared passionately about his commitments, just as he cared passionately about the rhetoric of persuasion. He had written out his own speeches longhand for years before he acquired a staff to write them for him. He read voraciously, although, like many readers, he preferred to read things he already agreed with rather than those he didn't. But though a set of powerful ideas framed his understanding of the world, he had no interest in the play of argument, the nuances of a concept, the passion for inquiry that are the marks of the modern intellectual. The academic debates of the day were for him largely a foreign country.

And yet in the enchanted, disembedded, psychically involuted sense of freedom that slipped into Reagan's speeches, in the disaggregation of "We the people" into balconies of individual heroes, in the celebration of the limitless possibilities of self and change, there were more parallels with the intellectual dynamics of the age than many observers recognized at the time. The realm of free, spontaneous action that Reagan celebrated mirrored the way in which the economists began to reimagine the spheres of exchange as self-acting, naturally regulating markets. The recession of the social echoed the shrinking prestige of sociology, which had ridden the crest of the social movements of the 1960s. Concepts of power became more subtle, more intangibly imagined, and harder to pin down. Identity loomed larger than ever before: not as a collective given, now, but as a field of malleability and self-fashioning. The categories of race, class, and gender, after sweeping into academic discourse in the early 1980s, turned less distinct, disaggregated into subcategories and intersec-

tions of categories, or slipped into quotation marks. Historians talked less of structure and more of narratives and consciousness—if not of the end of history and the disappearance of its powerful dialectical pincers altogether. As the force seeped out of the older, mid-twentieth-century ways of imagining society, talk of freedom did not diminish. But its meanings changed. Individualized and privatized, released of its larger burdens, freedom was cut loose from the burdens and responsibilities that had once so closely accompanied it.

No single event precipitated this sea change in ideas and social metaphors. Reagan's words did not call the new world of social thought into being. But they caught, in mid-course, a movement of ideas and arguments. In losing the words of the Cold War, Reagan helped articulate some of the broader intellectual dynamics of the times—even if it was not in the way he might have imagined or that we, pulling an old phrase like the “evil empire” like a well-thumbed thread out of the novel pattern, have been inclined to remember.

2

The Rediscovery of the Market

“Market” is one of the most overworked and imprecise words in economics.

James Tobin, “Are New Classical Models Plausible Enough to Guide Policy?”

The term “macroeconomic” will simply disappear from use.

Robert Lucas, Models of Business Cycles

In an age when words took on magical properties, no word flew higher or assumed a greater aura of enchantment than “market.” It meant not only the affairs of Wall Street and its sister hubs of global exchange, swelling by the late 1980s with new wealth for those lucky enough to have a foothold in them. The term “market” that insinuated itself into more and more realms of social thought meant something much more modest than the financial markets’ churning, and, at the same time, something much more universal and audacious. It stood for a way of thinking about society with a myriad of self-generated actions for its engine and optimization as its natural and spontaneous outcome. It was the analogue to Reagan’s heroes in the balconies, a disaggregation of society and its troubling collective presence and demands into an array of consenting, voluntarily acting individual pieces. “You know, there really is something magic about the marketplace when it’s free to operate,” Reagan told the nation in early 1982 as the motif of limitless dreams was swelling in his speeches. “As the song says, ‘This could be the start of something big.’”¹

“Something big” was a corny touch. Still, not in a century, not since the late-nineteenth-century vogue of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, had the idea of the beneficent results of competition cut so broad a swath through public and academic discourses or been called upon to do and explain so much. Conservatives, who had so often worried about the

- Now? *Multicultural Conservatism in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 76. On the long shadow the 1960s cast over the next decade, see the essays by Stephen Tuck, Simon Hall, and others on “the long 1960s” in *Journal of Contemporary History* 43 (2008): 617–688.
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 9. Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65–78; Everett Carl Ladd, *The Ladd Report* (New York: Free Press, 1999); Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).
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 13. The literature here is enormous. For a start: Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think-Tanks and the Economic Counter-Revolution, 1931–1983*, rev. ed. (London: HarperCollins, 1995); Alice O’Connor, “Financing the Counterrevolution,” in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, ed. Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Burton Yale Pines, *Back to Basics: The Traditionalist Movement That Is Sweeping Grass-Roots America* (New York: Morrow, 1982); Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment: From Conservative Ideology to Political Power* (New York: Times Books, 1986); James Fallows, “The New Celebrities of Washington,” *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986, 41–49; Gregg Easterbrook, “Ideas Move Nations,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1986, 66–80; Eric Alterman, “The ‘Right’ Books and Big Ideas,” *Nation*, November 22, 1999, 16–21; Eric Alterman, *Sound and Fury: The Making of the Punditocracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).
 14. The most aggressive conservative foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, was one-fiftieth the size of the Ford Foundation in the early 1980s; Ford could have endowed a foundation of Olin’s size with one year of its regular

- grant allotments. *Foundation Center Source Book Profiles*, 1984 (New York: Foundation Center, 1984). On the think tanks: R. Kent Weaver, “The Changing World of Think Tanks,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22 (1989): 563–578; Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); James Allen Smith, *Brookings at Seventy-Five* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1991); Patrick Ford, “American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research,” in *Organizations for Policy Analysis: Helping Government Think*, ed. Carol H. Weiss (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991).
15. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
 16. Niall Ferguson et al., eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

1. Losing the Words of the Cold War

Epi-graph: Kenneth Khachigian, notes of a conversation with Ronald Reagan, January 12, 1981, SP100, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

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