

ARAM BAKSHIAN, JR. SUGGESTED TOPICS

Prepared by Patrick Roberts

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 7/15/2001

Joining the Reagan Administration

- How did you come to join the Reagan administration? What differences did you notice between the Reagan administration and the Nixon and Ford administrations? Describe your duties in the beginning of the administration as a member of the transition staff, the office of public liaison, and any occasional speechwriting. Work on 1980 Republican platform.

Work in the Office of Public Liaison

- How were you selected for the Office of Public Liaison? What were your duties? Relationship with Elizabeth Dole. Negotiating funding reductions for the NEH and NEA. Relations with arts groups.

Speechwriting in the Reagan White House

- How were you selected as director of the speechwriting office? How did the office change when you came on board? On what issues were you consulted most regularly? How did you divide work among speechwriters? Describe your relationship with the President, Michael Deaver, David Gergen, James Baker, Ed Meese, Tony Dolan, and other staff.
- Drafting the major speeches: Zero-Option Speech, Address to Members of the British Parliament, State of the Unions, Evil Empire speech, Star Wars SDI address. Their impact.
- Reagan as a speechmaker and speechwriter. Reagan's revisions of speeches. Reagan's sense of the audience. How did speeches change through rewriting? How did the strongly moral language of the evil empire speech make it through the revision process?
- White House organization. Centralization, delegation, and accountability in the Reagan White House compared to previous administrations. Why was the job of the office of communications taken more seriously in the Reagan White House than in previous administrations?

The Reagan White House in Retrospect

- Strengths and weaknesses of the Reagan administration. Stereotypes of Reagan. What features of the administration were missed or misunderstood in the press? How should the Reagan presidency be viewed in history?

TIMELINES

- Aram Bakshian, Jr. Timeline, prepared by Patrick Roberts, Miller Center of Public Affairs, 7/15/2001.
- Timeline of Ronald Reagan presidency, *The American Experience*, www.pbs.org.

SELECTED WRITINGS AND PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY ARAM BAKSHIAN, JR.

- Aram Bakshian, Jr., “Introduction: The Once and Future Reagan,” in *The Future Under President Reagan*, ed. Wayne Valis (Westport, CT: Arlington House Publishers, 1981) pp. 1-13.
- Aram Bakshian, Jr., “Review of *What I Saw at the Revolution* by Peggy Noonan,” *National Review*, 2/19/90.
- Interview with Aram Bakshian, Jr., Reagan Exit Interview, August 9, 1983.

OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

Speechwriting Office

- Organizational Chart of the Office of Communications, in John Anthony Maltese, *Spin Control* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) pp. 250-251.
- Bradley H. Patterson, Jr., “Judson Welliver and His Successors: The Speechwriting Office,” *The White House Staff* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 162-172.
- John Anthony Maltese, “The Reagan Years: Perfecting the Art of Communication,” *Spin Control* 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 180-197.

Director of Speechwriting

- Dick Kirschten, “Tending to Fences,” *National Journal*, 4/18/81.
- Irvin Molotsky, “The President, the Congress, and the Arts—Can They Live Together in Happiness,” *The New York Times*, 8/9/81.
- Francis X. Clines, “The Voices that Blend into Reagan’s Speeches,” *The New York Times*, 10/8/82.
- “The Production Company that Gives You Ronald Reagan,” *National Journal*, 1/29/83.
- Dick Kirschten, “The President in Prime Time—‘A Man at Home with the Spoken Word’,” *National Journal*, 1/29/83.
- Walter Isaacson, “Mending and Bending: Ronald Reagan’s State of the Union Message,” 2/7/83.
- Juan Williams, “Writers of Speeches for President Claim Force Is with Him,” *The Washington Post*, 3/29/83.
- Stephanie Mansfield, “The Critic in His Defense,” *The Washington Post*, 9/16/83.
- Leslie Gelb, “Listening between the Lines,” *The New York Times*, 2/11/85.
- David Wagner, “Pens Are Mightier than Soundbites,” *Insight on the News*, 7/22/96.
- Frank Warner, “New World Order,” *Morning Call*, 3/5/00.

SELECTED SPEECHES BY PRESIDENT REAGAN

- Inaugural Address, 1/20/81.
- Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, 2/18/81.
- Remarks to Members of the National Press Club on Arms Reduction and Nuclear Weapons, 11/18/81.
- Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union, 1/26/82.
- Address to Members of the British Parliament, 6/8/82.
- Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, 1/25/83.
- Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, 3/8/83.
- Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security, 3/23/83.

President Ronald Reagan Oral History Project

Briefing Materials

Aram Bakshian, Jr.

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Prepared by Patrick Roberts, Research Assistant

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ARAM BAKSHIAN, JR. TIMELINE

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1980

- March* Bakshian writes in *The Candidates—1980* that presidential candidate John Anderson's only real impact is in strengthening Ronald Reagan's lead over George Bush by splitting liberal-to-moderate voters. Anderson has little chance of doing well in Sunbelt states, which are critical to winning the Republican nomination, according to Bakshian. (Aram Bakshian, *Wall Street Journal*, 3/18/80)
- July* Ronald Reagan wins nomination at the Republican National Convention on the 16th. Bakshian is the assistant editor of the Republican platform.

1981

- January* President Reagan delivers his First Inaugural Address. (1/20/81)
- February* President Reagan proposes increased defense spending, lower taxes, and reduced domestic spending in a speech to Congress. (2/18/81) The arts community is alarmed when he announces that federal aid to the arts and humanities will have the same cutbacks as other social programs. (Irvin Molotsky, *New York Times*, 8/9/81)
- March* President Reagan names 10 people including Bakshian to work under Elizabeth Dole in the White House office of public liaison, all of whom will have the titles of special assistant to the President and deputy director of the office. Bakshian will serve as liaison for the arts, humanities, and academia as well as write occasional speeches. (Alice Porter, *National Journal*, 3/21/81)
- May* The White House appoints actor Charlton Heston and University of Chicago President Hannah Grey as chairmen of a task force to investigate the disbursement of federal funds for the arts and humanities, with the aim of encouraging greater private financial support for the arts and culture. Bakshian tells the press that one possibility for revitalizing arts funding is the creation of a semi-public corporation to dispense fellowships and matching grants. The corporation would replace the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. (*Associated Press*, 4/27/81; 6/10/81)
- June* The House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior recommends that the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities be funded at

levels about 75 percent higher than those proposed by the Reagan administration for fiscal year 1982. The arts community has been unhappy with the Reagan administration's proposed cuts to the two agencies, which had never suffered a reduction in funding in their 15-year history. (Carla Hall, *Washington Post*, 6/12/81)

November President Reagan delivers his Address on Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, the "Zero Option Speech," to the National Press Club on the 18th. In the speech on reducing nuclear arms in Europe, the President sets a date for deployment of Pershing II missiles, but promises to cancel the deployment if the Soviets dismantle all intermediate weapons aimed at Western Europe. The speech is well received, and the press reports that Bakshian drafted it. (*US News and World Report*, 11/30/81)

1982

January Reagan delivers his first State of the Union Address, emphasizing that social programs should be transferred to the states. (1/26/82) The public reacts favorably to the speech when Reagan recognizes Lenny Skutnik, who was seated next to Nancy Reagan, and asks him to take a bow for diving into the Potomac to rescue a victim of an airplane crash. Bakshian is credited with inventing the "hero-in-the-balcony device" used in many subsequent speeches. (Paul Starobin, *National Journal*, 3/19/94)

May President Reagan names Bakshian as the director of the presidential speechwriting office and Anthony Dolan as chief White House speechwriter. Bakshian will report to David Gergen, the Director of Communications. (*National Journal*, 5/1/82)

June President Reagan highlights the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism in his "Address to Members of the British Parliament." (6/8/82)

September President Reagan receives cautious but positive reactions from Arab nations to his speech on Middle East security. Reagan says publicly what American officials have been saying privately for years: that the Israelis should give up territory captured in the 1967 war, and that the Palestinians should gain autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Charles Hill, the State Department's director of Arab-Israeli affairs writes the substantive part of the speech, and Bakshian takes over the draft, simplifying the language and changing the beginning and end, according to the *New York Times*. (Leslie H. Gelb, *New York Times*, 9/3/82)

1983

January President Reagan calls for a freeze on government spending in his State of the Union Address. (1/25/83) Commentators complain that the freeze unfairly exempts defense spending. (Walter Isaacson, *Time*, 2/7/83)

Bakshian responds to criticism of Reagan's factual lapses, saying that Reagan accurately recalls things he was told or apocryphal stories. "His problem is not a faulty memory, but too good a memory," Bakshian says. "It's sort of a filing cabinet that goes back a great many years." (*National Journal*, 1/29/83)

March President Reagan delivers what has become known as the "Evil Empire" speech to a group of evangelicals in Orlando. Bakshian describes it as a "stealth speech" because it makes it through the White House drafting process with the phrase "evil empire" and other strongly moral language intact. (Frank Warner, *The Morning Call*, 3/5/00)

President Reagan announces a major new research program to develop an antiballistic missile defense system based in outer space in his "Address to the Nation on National Security" or "Star Wars" SDI Speech. He delivers the nationwide television address from the Oval Office. (3/23/83)

September Bakshian leaves the White House to write a newspaper column and magazine commentary. Bentley Elliot is named acting director of the speechwriting staff. (9/1/83)

Feminists criticize Bakshian and the Reagan administration for insensitivity toward women after Bakshian publishes a book review titled "Two Cheers for Rape" in *National Review*. In the review praising a new book by Helen Hazen, Bakshian says rape seems to be "a cherished fantasy" for many women. News services cover Rep. Patricia Schroeder's statements denouncing the review. (Associated Press, 9/15/83)

1987

July President Reagan nominates Bakshian to be a member of the National Council on the Humanities, the advisory group for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Bakshian describes the council as "something of a cross between a board of directors and the House of Lords," a group that gives important recommendations but lacks real power. (William McGurn, "Borking the Humanities," *National Review*, 6/10/91)