

Ronald Reagan and War Rhetoric in the 20th Century Reflection

In this research, I assert the connection between President Reagan's use of performative rhetoric and how it changed the landscape of the Cold War. Rather than focusing on President Reagan's policy structure or global stance seen in most popular academic literature, I instead highlight how the Berlin Wall speech challenged Reagan as a rhetorician and how the techniques used here would continue to influence presidential rhetoric into the 20th century.

To accomplish this, I developed a 3-point relevancy scale to assess how applicable certain sources were to my topic. Sources were evaluated on their applicability on a scale of 1 -3 for each of the three criteria (1 being no application and 3 being high applicability). The first criteria was time frame. I used a 20-year metric to house a wide range of different interpretations and studies, within the tenure of the presidents who served during that time. Between 2000 and 2023, I realized that multiple foreign wars and changing U.S. demographics elicited varying rhetorical strategies from each president. The second criteria was credibility. In order to find specific sources, I first identified an author (ex. Mary Stuckey), then review their published work. By using a 3-pronged review, I checked three other articles published by the same author to see if their viewpoint aligned with the initial source. If the condition was true, I would evaluate that source deeper to procure any details that might be beneficial to my research. The third criteria was contextual formulation. Essentially, under what circumstances was the article created or what constraints were present at the time. For this reason, the time frame for source consideration was 20 years, since different time spans contained different rhetorical interpretations.

To gather information, I employed a wide range of both academic and professional research tools. To find particular information about President Reagan, I heavily utilized Lied Library Cold War video and textbook collection (physical and digital), Library of Congress' congressional speech collection, scholarly journal repositories (i.e. Wiley, Oxford, Taylor & Francis), transcriptions, and videos to locate rhetorical information about the Berlin Wall speech. Outside of academic resources, I also contacted and spoke with the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Academic Center to extract professional viewpoints about what rhetoric defined President Reagan and the historical events that defined him. I also spoke to rhetoricians at the Clark County Library to explain how rhetoric is utilized in the Cold War and with President Reagan particularly.

I encountered a lot of dead-ends in my search for rhetorical sources regarding the Berlin Wall speech. There were very few or no sources about the speech or any form of rhetorical execution in it. To counter this, I changed my search terms from "Berlin Wall rhetoric" to "Cold War rhetoric". This allowed me to narrow down what rhetorical devices were popular during the war itself and improve my search results appropriately. From here, I heavily utilized the term "utilitarian" when searching for rhetoric regarding President Reagan (ex. "Utilitarian technique used by Ronald Reagan"). I decided to use this particular technique because it associated a specific rhetorical device to President Reagan, which allowed the search results to return

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rhetoric-based analysis, and very few on differing topics. In the search tools, I adjusted the time frame to start from 2000 and end at 2023. I realized that beneficial sources regarding President Regan didn't come into fruition until the early 2000s. The previous start date was 1990, but deeper rhetorical analysis of the Berlin Wall speech were very few and limited. Using the 20-year metric, as established in my criteria, helped me find sources more relevant to the nature of President Reagan's speech and identify relevant authors in the space.

As my research evolved, so did my strategies for identifying information. Initially, I began by first analyzing how the Cold War affected President Reagan; however, I found that instead of asking how the war affected the president, the proper question should be how the president affected the war. I realized that this epiphany broadened my research perspective by allowing both supporting and dissenting opinions to my research. Although I assert in my thesis that President Reagan's rhetoric was widely beneficial, I also investigated how certain minority groups in the U.S. and abroad were harmed by his intuition of strategic ambiguity and how this strategy tied into his use of rhetoric during the Cold War. I analyzed how domestic policies could be reformed or how they "sold" to the public in a way that seems euphemistic.