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Past Event: 2022 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference - Kennedy's Romantic Moon Video Transcript

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Event

2022 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference

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Presenter

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- [John] Thank you very much. I'm honored by the invitation and very glad to be able to share some ideas with you about a very unusual policy issue that took place back in the 1960s. Unusual because for a little reason, known as no human had ever done it before, which was to get to the moon and come back. How did that happen?

How did President Kennedy set the stage so that the public and those of influence would understand the importance of this goal and how to reach it? So, I'd like to talk with you a little bit about that and some lessons we may be able to extrapolate from what President Kennedy was able to do. But let's start with the object in question. It seems a little bit silly, doesn't it? It's just a rock out in space, yet it fascinates us, and it's fascinated us throughout our entire human history.

We dream about it. We've turned the moon into a God, and we've always wondered when we gazed up at it, what is up there, and how can we get there to find out? It occupies our imagination to the extent that any time that we've been given an opportunity to imagine going to the moon, we've taken it. It has occupied some of the earliest films that we have.

It's a vision that we wanted to see come true. This movie in particular was based upon the work of Jules Verne in his book "From the Earth to the Moon," where he imagined that what would take place is we would put people into a cannon shell and then fire them at the moon. He wasn't entirely wrong about some of the technology aspects.

Fire is involved and it takes a great deal of force. But the idea that humans should go to that rock out in space, our closest visitor, our nearest neighbor, is something that we have always wanted to do, yet, of course, found difficulty in actually making it happen. It's the age-old dilemma. If only imagination was sufficient to accomplish things, think of what we would be able to do, think of what we would already have done.

But imagination is a wonderful start, but it's not enough. People understand that. Kennedy understood that in particular. And he understood that turning imagination into reality is a long, difficult road, and it requires a leader to continue to set an agenda, cast the vision, and propel the audiences forward if anything is actually going to be accomplished. So, 1961, President Kennedy took that very first step towards getting humans to the moon.

The final step, as we all know, would be completed by Neil Armstrong in 1969. But Kennedy's first step is the one that set everything in motion that made it possible for Armstrong to complete that journey some years later. So, we should look at what Kennedy was able to do, how he was able to do it, and why it seemed to resonate with people.

And that comes down to his leadership and his ability to muster the resources of language that he had available to him in order to captivate a nation and propel us to what became our destiny. But he didn't just ask Americans to follow him. His leadership style wasn't about just telling people what needed to happen. He invited people, everyone in the nation, to understand and participate in this vision of what he wanted us to accomplish.

And in there, I think is the lesson that can be best learned. When you involve the people in the policy, they're more willing to support it than if they feel they're subject to the policy in place. Now, Kennedy, in our mind, of course, is a mythic figure. Camelot, we remember, of course, the greatness, the number of movies, and so on and so forth. But at the time that he was preparing to create this message about going to the moon, his presidency was in shambles.

He wasn't exactly the most likely candidate to put forward such an idea. He was known for his boldness. His brashness would be probably a less polite but more accurate way of describing his persona at this time. But he wasn't necessarily thought of as a leader, but spent very little time as a congressperson and as a senator before being escalated up to the highest office in the land.

In fact, he was quite a controversial and divisive figure, particularly just after his election. We should keep in mind that he just barely won against Vice President Richard Nixon. It was around a hundred thousand votes that separated the two. So, it wasn't as if it was a landslide. It wasn't as if everyone was already believing in Kennedy. He had a lot to prove, and he had a lot to try and make up for in terms of people's perception.

In fact, his presidency came on the coattails of one of the more popular presidents to have served, General Eisenhower. And General Eisenhower, I say general, obviously, he was president, but he had spoken out against a manned moon mission. Said it was foolish. What a waste of time. What a waste of money. We have other priorities within the nation. As a candidate for president, Kennedy had gotten a lot of benefit from calling out the Eisenhower administration as being slow to the moon, slow to space, we're lagging behind the Soviets.

Well, that's fine to say when you don't have the job, when you're just a candidate. But suddenly, now we have President Kennedy and what he had made criticisms of Eisenhower's administration were now his problems to solve. And he had to figure out how to do that in a rather quick amount of time. So, he wasn't exactly arguing from a position of strength. Kennedy's leadership, when it came to the moon policy, was arguing from a deficit.

He was lacking in some credibility. It seemed to be an impossible idea, and he didn't have a whole lot to show for it, and yet he still pursued it very much so. His leadership would've to come through creativity

and inspiration. Those were the things that he had available to him and what he employed to the best of his abilities. And he did this at the start, on May the 25th of 1961, when he stood before Congress and he announced one of the most audacious, expensive, and fantastical policy proposals in human history.

Let's send some people up and bring them back. Let's go to the moon. That's what he wanted. So, he stood before Congress and he announced, with clarity, his vision. "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon," and the crucial bit, "and returning him safely to the earth."

The last bit really matters. Okay. First bit slightly easier to do, last bit difficult. Now, what's interesting about this is the press accounts at the time are wildly different in how Congress reacted to this. Some articles report that applause broke out within the chamber, and there was cheering, and there was support in the motion.

Others say that there was consternation, disbelief that people weren't responding in that particular way. It's weird that there's a difference of opinion on that point because there's video, audio, and video related to this. And what it was actually met with is dead silence. No one applauded, cheered, even nodded. What you see are stunned faces.

This is our president of the United States, and he just said, we're going to send people to the moon. They were stunned by this, and Kennedy knew this and anticipated this. And that's where we see the other shoe drop in this announcement because right after he says, "Let's send some people to the moon," he puts on the table exactly what the benefit and obstacles are going to be.

"No single project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space, and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish." And that was the criticism that he would face. Is the difficulty worth the expense? Is the risk going to be worth the reward? No one had done it before.

He had to argue that it was, he had nothing to offer as proof or evidence. All he could do was inspire and basically promise. Now, that would be fine in a certain sense if he wasn't again operating from that deficit. As I mentioned, the moonshot came early in his presidency, and it wasn't off to a great start. Kennedy was just four months into his presidency when he announced that we would be going to the moon.

And the four months that had led up to that announcement were incredibly bumpy. Just the month prior to this was the Bay of Pigs disaster, which humiliated the nation and Kennedy in particular, said we can't even accomplish trying to do an invasion of Cuba just off the shores of Florida without it going completely sour. Now, Kennedy was trying to blame some of that on a previous administration's plan and so on.

But when you're in the leadership position, no one wants to hear that. They just look at you and say, "This was a wreck and you shouldn't have done this." While that disaster was taking place, the Soviets were further reminding the United States of their superiority in many of these global positioning situations. As that was happening, Yuri Gagarin was orbiting around the earth having a fine old time in his Soviet space capsule, looking down on the rest of us, okay?

The Soviets had put the first object into space with Sputnik, the first animal into space, the first human into space. At the time, Kennedy promised that we would go to the moon, the United States had

accumulated all of 15 minutes of time in outer space, not enough for an orbit. We sent Alan Shepard up, he waved, and then came right back down.

That was it. And Kennedy is making this promise. Lot of gusto. But the world understood the situation. Kennedy was leading the nation, but the nation was not leading the world. It was lagging behind the Soviet Union at this time. And here's our leader making these audacious claims, promising that we would do something no one else had done.

And, again, people would look at him and say, "How are you going to do this? What's your proof? There's nothing that says this should be possible." And so Kennedy said, "Ah, well, we'll see." Now, I'd like to put this in a little bit of perspective for us, and a good reminder of where we are in history versus were the people that Kennedy needed to persuade were in their history. Time perhaps has muted Kennedy's inventiveness, after all, for us, we know how this story turns out.

Apollo is an amazing, objectively, truly incredible moment in history. It worked. We did it. We brought him back. That is fantastic. The Apollo moon landing will be recorded in the annals of human history for all time. But we should look backwards and say, "Okay, we know how the story works out. So, maybe it doesn't appear as dramatic to us now."

But the thing is, when you're in the position of leadership before the event has happened, you do not know how the story is going to turn out. It's going to be a mystery to you. So, we need to put ourselves in the position of Kennedy and the people that he was speaking to at that time in order to truly appreciate and understand what he did in terms of using the inventive resources he had available to him.

When you're in a leadership position, you only know how you want the story to turn out. But the drama is going to come from figuring out how to get there, figuring out, how do I solve that question mark, what is it that I can do to make this sensible. And so Kennedy had to have a little bit of think about it. His idea starts with understanding what his role in this leadership position could be.

As it does with any leadership position, you start by trying to understand your role, which, in part, begins by trying to understand things such as your strengths, your weaknesses, and the resources that you have available to you. Because in essence, that's all any of us ever have to work with, particularly when we're trying to accomplish something in terms of leading a group.

Now, Kennedy was not a scientifically minded person. His degree was in government studies. Good for him, I guess, but he wasn't a scientist, or an engineer, or an astronaut. He was trying to absorb information. He listened to the people at NASA when they lectured him and his administration on what was taking place, but he didn't understand it.

I like this photo in particular because if you can see, left of center, Vice President Lyndon Johnson looking like he'd rather be anywhere in the world than listening to a bunch of NASA eggheads explain to him what jet propulsion is, and he was an education president, and he just didn't have a lot of tolerance for being lectured to so... I just like that McNamara is probably doing the math in his head, just he's off to the side of there.

Anyway. What could Kennedy do then? So, he's not an engineer. He can't help with the actual science of the endeavor. He has to lead from a different direction. Now, the familiar part of this, of course, is that as president, he could ask for money to fund his plan. But who doesn't ask for money?

Everyone asks for money. Asking for money isn't the thing. How is he going to create the impetus for people to want to fund that project, want to fund what his vision is, and want to make this a reality? So, he needed to do more than ask. He needed to convince, he needed to convince the policymakers in order to make this plan happen.

As such, he needed to be an advocate. So, this was going to be a more proactive role, not just asking, but getting out there, putting his message forward, letting people think on it, letting people understand what exactly it would mean for everyone in order for America to accomplish this goal.

That also meant that he was going to advocate for the people doing the labor. He didn't want NASA to have to make these arguments themselves. He wanted them working on the science, doing their job. His job, because he couldn't do the science, was to make sure that they had what they needed and to make sure that he would take the brunt of whatever criticism was available, answer the questions that would be asked, but also provide the inspiration and vision so that people could understand what those NASA technicians were doing and why it was so important.

As such, he used his language. One of his amazing skills, the resource that he had, ideas, words, and we shouldn't discount them or their importance because they're what matter. Evidence doesn't speak for itself. Charts and graphs can't persuade on their own.

The narrative that's created, the idea, the story, the meaning, the vision, all these synonyms that I've been using, that's what matters. And Kennedy understood that he could craft a message, and that message would be the advocacy that the scientists, and engineers, and astronauts, and everyone else needed. What this brings us to is a notion of rhetoric. Rhetoric can be a sort of contentious word.

You hear it often in a disparaging word. Well, that's just some rhetoric. We need to tone down the rhetoric. This is just rhetoric from a campaign, so on and so forth. I tend to believe that people disparage and belittle words that they don't understand the meaning of, and that's sort of a general concept. So, I'm biased because rhetoric is what I study for a living. So, of course, I'm going to stand up for it.

But if you'll allow me this moment to say that rhetoric can actually be useful and good, I think I can help you with that perspective by also demonstrating Kennedy's excellent use of it. So, I want to talk for just a minute here about Kennedy's rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of strategic language, of figuring out how words can have an advantageous meaning beyond just their basic description.

That language really does matter to people. We are a poetic species. Words affect us, matter to us. It's why we like songs. It's like we read books. We wanted to see language express things that otherwise could not be expressed through other thoughts. Rhetoric is very useful for doing this.

It's also useful strategically because rhetoric can be a means for solving problems and building alliances. It can forge new connections, it can motivate people, inspire them, draw them into a vision that they want to participate in, and not something that just is told that they need to do. And the difference there is crucial, and I would argue it makes all the difference in the world.

Rhetoric helps to create graspable, meaningful ideas. What does it mean to go to space? What does it mean that this is going to cost billions of dollars? Ungraspable notions, things we've never done before, money we've never spent before. And yet Kennedy has to make that seem as though it's not just necessary, but right and useful.

And what does he have to make that argument? Words and ideas. And his really good friend Ted Sorensen, who was like his chief speechwriter, who's also really good, but Kennedy, let's focus on Kennedy just for a minute here. He works towards an understanding rather than assuming it.

He knows that he has to fashion and shape the language and not just pretend that because he's president, a president who's had a disastrous first four months in office, that everyone is going to follow him. He's a little bit sharper than that, and he's a little bit more willing to put himself out there and stand behind his words. And doing this, he encapsulates and personifies one of my favorite definitions of rhetoric, it comes from someone named Donald Bryant.

Donald Bryant's definition of rhetoric was to say that it's the function of adjusting ideas to people and if people to ideas, and I really love that because it has that notion of simpatico, this idea that things can be brought together, that you can shape ideas, and meaning, and understanding.

It's kind of a negotiation. And true, sometimes it can be a little bit of a one-sided negotiation in that, you know, it wasn't Q&A time with President Kennedy. He was out there delivering his message. But his idea is he needed to find a way to make space and space travel enticing and interesting to the audience in such a way that would motivate them. And, again, they would need to want to believe in this vision if it was ever going to have any possibility of taking place.

And I like Bryan's definition because I think it gets us there. It gets us to that idea that language is something that involves a give and take when used well and smartly. But for Kennedy, the language was important. How he talked about the moonshot was going to make or break how Americans felt about the moonshot.

And if they felt inspired, he could work with that. If they felt they understood the value of this program, he could motivate policymakers to support it or say, "How dare you go against the will of the people?" And that would be part of his greatest leverage that he would employ. So, in his strategic approach to how to talk about space travel, the moonshot, with people and with policymakers, we can identify a few key things that he was able to do.

And one of the first was that he insisted that he stay positive. Now, yes, we were in a space race with the Soviet Union. We were in a cold war with the Soviet Union. There was a lot going on the 1960s, as I'm sure you know, was an absolutely insane decade. And he was just at the start of it.

That's how that thing kicked off. But he wanted to stay positive. He doesn't talk about the fear of the Soviets getting to the moon first. He talks about the glory of America getting there, the righteousness of America going there. He wanted positivity in his message. He wanted the policy to be based in the positivity of aspiration and adventure. He also wanted to decomplexify.

I could have said simplify, but I'm not sure you can make space travel simple. So, I want to decomplexify, hope you forgive me for a second, okay? You can use simple language in decomplexifying things, and that's what he does. He wanted common speak. He didn't want just a bunch of technical jargon. He didn't want to just talk about propulsion, so on and so forth. He wanted to make space travel, seem like it was the next frontier for Americans to cross.

And that became part of the inspiration behind this. So, to stay positive decomplexify as well as to transform, to reshape the language and the meaning that was being used to discuss his policy, turn expense into an expanse. It's not how much we're going to spend. It's where we're going to go.

Price becomes pride. Not the question of can we afford this, but the question of can we afford not to do this? What would it cost our pride as a nation, our legacy as a people, our dreams as humans, if we do not pursue this? And that was part of his goal. And he was also in a little bit of a hurry.

So, he wanted to use rhetoric that would hasten the moment along. He puts a sense of urgency into his message, not a fear of coming in last, but an idea that we are on the precipice of something good. Why would we hesitate? Why wouldn't we want to do this? Why wouldn't we want to test ourselves against the greatest challenge that humanity had ever set before itself?

He also wanted it to be relatable, to relate to the audience at all points, at all times, to relate to the common American, not just the scientist American, not just the astronaut American, but the everyday American, the taxpaying American, who would need to understand what the justification was for this. And he allowed in his rhetoric, regular people to feel involved, to feel that they mattered, to feel that what they were doing was helping the nation get to the moon.

And that is an incredible insight that we can garner from his text, is to not forget about the people. It can be easy to do so sometimes in policy speak, but to not forget them is an important and crucial element. So, I would argue here that Kennedy's rhetorical strategy was to increase the popularity of his moonshot plan with everyday Americans. Yes, he would talk to policymakers, and he did that constantly.

But he knew that if he could win over the American people, his leverage with the policymakers would be all the more to his advantage. And that would allow him then to pressure policymakers to get behind, and support, and ultimately enact this vision. The most concentrated effort that he gave towards this endeavor took place in 1962 in the football stadium at Rice University in Houston, Texas.

Among the remarkable things about this particular episode, the speech that he gave, this advertisement if you will, of this proposal was that in September of 1962, in the city of Houston, Kennedy was the only person in that stadium not sweating, I don't know how he did it, but he just stood there and he looked like Kennedy.

If you watch the video, Lyndon Johnson is constantly ...and Johnson was a Texan. He just seems like he's never been there before. But Kennedy, he had that Kennedy thing that he did. And with your indulgence, I'd like to walk us through a couple passages from this speech and point out some of the interesting things that Kennedy did, some of the innovative language that he used, and some of the purpose behind it so we too can learn from this.

So, he starts off by trying to gather the audience together. He begins by using a line of "we" language. We, we, we. Pronouns are important of course. "We meet at a college known for knowledge, in a city noted for progress, and a State noted for strength. And we stand in need of all three, for we meet in an hour," so on and so forth, right?

There's wes, ours, it's in there. Now, I don't want to, you know, insult your intelligence. You know very well that just using "we" doesn't mean that, that means suddenly everyone in the audience agrees. It's not just a question of pronouns, but it's a start. And this is the start of his speech. This is the gathering moment.

And Kennedy cleverly transitions from this gathering moment into a choice that he puts before the audience. So, if "we" are doing this, if "we" are gathered this, if there is an "us," there must be a "them."

But in this situation, the them is not the Soviet Union, he doesn't want to use scare tactics. He wants to stay positive so the "them" in this instance are not the Soviets, but those who would delay.

And so, he says some would have a stay to rest, to wait. Then he says, "The United States," let alone Texas, "was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them," not the people that are glancing backwards and worried about the past. He wants the Americans that are willing to look forward, who want to see the future and bring it about.

And he presents the audience with a simple choice. Whose side are you on? Are you one of those who wish to rest and to wait and to look behind? Or are you one of those who wants to build? Because he says this country was conquered by those who move forward and so will space. Probably nowadays, we would advise him, don't say conquered, but in the frontier spirit, it would seem to be something appropriate to his vision.

So, he presents that audience with a choice, that audience that's listening to him there on that day. Whose side are you on? Which do you want to be? And, of course, it's a false choice. The answer's entirely clear. No one's going to choose, "I'd like to rest. I'm sorry, I don't like going forward." No one's going to say that, of course.

But he gathers them together. He gives them a part to play. He asks them to make the choice, which means now the audience is involved. He doesn't tell them what kind of Americans they are. He invites them to be the kind of Americans that he's talking about. Now, once he has them, in terms of gathering to this position, he's going to propel them forward. So, he moves on, gathers them with the "we" language, separates them from those who hesitate.

He says, "But now 'we' have another choice to make. 'We' have a choice related to our character. Now that 'we' know who 'we' are together, who are 'we' going to be as a people?" And he presents them with what became arguably the most famous, memorable passage in this text. Arguably one of the more famous passages of 20th century, the thing that gets remembered from this very distinctly.

But what I'd like to draw your attention to is, again, the language that he's using here. Not just the objective of reaching the moon, but the way he repeats at the start. The people that are gathered with him, the second choice that we choose to go to the moon, not we should go to the moon, we're going to the moon. I'm taking us to the moon.

We choose, and the responsibility of the choice, he always positions with the audience so that they can feel that they are going to be part of this too. They can participate in this identity that he's fashioning. So, we choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade, so on and so forth. And then at the end of the passage, it's really just two sentences, two of the most remarkable sentences in his presidency, however.

Two sentences, our energies and skills "we" are willing to accept, "we" are unwilling to postpone, and "we" intend to win, and so on. So it's, we, we, we, but also, of course, doing everything that speaks to this remarkable coexistence of them. But I wish to point out one further thing within this paragraph, because to just say we choose and we are the ones who are willing to do this, unwilling to wait and so on and so forth, it doesn't have consequence until he presents it with consequence.

And Kennedy again presented that right in front of his audience. Why do we choose to do this? Why is it that we're so unwilling? Because, and he hits them with four because's, four reasons for here's why we

are going to do this. And the first one's negative, we're going to do this, not because it's easy, but because it's hard. We choose to do tasks that are difficult.

And why do we do that? Because only this goal will serve to organize and measure our energies. Only this goal, only this challenge is worthy of us and worthy of what we can accomplish. This is a remarkable passage, quite well-balanced, very simple in its language, very direct in its understanding, and impossible to ignore.

He does, of course, like all good people arguing for policy, have to address the elephant in the room, the negativity, the criticism. So, of course, people may not still yet be completely inspired. Yes, we want to do this because it's hard, weird thing to say anyway.

But we do like a challenge. So, he addresses it, the cost thing, the cost, the money that has to come up. And so he does hit upon that for a minute, and he says, and he gives the tell "to be sure" all of this, you love the sort of antithesis phrasing that's coming up here, the sort of anti part, right? Whenever someone says, "Well, of course," or "to be sure," or, and the thing is, you always know that they're about to talk about something that they don't want to talk about, to acknowledge something and then dismiss it.

And that's what he does. To be sure, this is going to be expensive. But he couches that by saying, "To be sure, all this costs us all." But again, never lets the audience be separate from him. Once they've made their choice, once they've chosen to be part of this leadership that he is presenting to them, he says, now we all share this burden.

Yes, this is going to be expensive for us all, not just for some, but for all. Then he goes through and he gives this really sort of obfuscated notion of how much it cost. They had the word billion in the 1960s. He chooses, of course, not to use it, 5,400 million. No one talks about numbers that way, but he doesn't want to say the B word. So, he just moves past it.

Okay? And then, of course, he buries it. Says, yeah, that's a lot of money, but we're already spending more than that on our cigarette habit. We're literally burning that money that we could be using to accomplish humanity's greatest goal. And so he makes it seem almost silly.

We already have the money, we're already wasting the money. Let's use it for something that matters, something that's permanent, not something that's over in 30 seconds. And so, he bounces it again, yeah, they talk about the money, but let's talk about the real use of the money. Let's talk about what we actually have and what we want to accomplish. And this was part of Kennedy's strategy to help people feel involved and maybe feel a little bit guilty.

Next time they light up a cigarette, they're like, "Ooh, that could be an astronaut." So, I'm not sure it worked out entirely that way, but we can see what he is trying to go for. And so, again, part of his strategy as well is to try and decomplexify to make things relatable. And as he gets more comfortable in this speech, after he is given this information, after he is talked about why we choose to do things and how the expense of it isn't really as expensive as people are saying, he gets into kind of a casual role here.

And he lays this on his audience. He just starts thinking. "I think, I think we're going to do it." And I think that we must, I don't think we ought to waste money. I think we ought to do the job. It's oddly casual to hear a president say that "Yeah, I think we should go to the moon, right? We should do this. It's enough."

But he does it with the purpose of, once again, trying to draw the audience to him. So now, even though he's using "I" pronouns, now he's talking about himself and his thoughts. He still is going to relate this back to the audience because he mentions to them that this should be done in the '60s while some of you are still here at Rice University. Wouldn't it be a thing to graduate from your school while we put a person on the moon and return them back to the earth?

Wouldn't that be a story that you would want to tell your future generations? And he gets the subtle dig in there as well. He reminds the policymakers that this will be done during the term of office as some of the people who sit here on this platform, reminding them that they're going to be facing reelections and saying, "You want to campaign on the side of America that is sending people into space? Or do you want to lose because you were one of those people who said, 'No, we should wait and look behind.'"

Kennedy was audacious. He had no trouble calling other people out. And he definitely had his own skeletons in his closet, but he was well aware that he didn't share, or he wasn't the only one who shared that particular issue. So, he was willing to hold people accountable, even for these proposals, to remind them that they were, in fact, all in this together. And he wants to hit them once more with something inspirational.

So, he's talked about a variety of things, why we should do this, so on and so forth. But then he wants to attach this to something that is more tangible, perhaps relatable, at least in terms of a concept. So, he chooses a little thing like scaling Mount Everest. This arguably is the second most famous passage from this particular address and one that resonates throughout history as well.

One of the things that Kennedy left us with was this imagery. And so he talks about George Mallory, climb Mount Everest unsuccessfully, was asked, "Why did he want to climb it?" So, he is positioning us to be in awe of this inspirational figure, Mallory. So, we're seated right behind Kennedy. Looking up at Mallory, wondering what would motivate this person to take on such a challenge.

A challenge that ultimately cost Mallory his life. He never came back down from that mountain. Why do it? Why do something incomprehensible? Why try to accomplish the insane? And Kennedy says, in the simplest terms that could possibly be presented, "Because it is there." That's what Mallory says, why do it?

It's there. Why shouldn't we do? It was the other way of looking at this. And so then Kennedy, again, he flips this around and he says, "Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it." And it's a nice use by Kennedy. First, he attaches this to Mallory, gives Mallory's reasoning because it's there. And then he hits that with the second bit.

Well, space is there. It's kind of a question of, what else is there? By this time, of course, we'd gone up Everest. So, what else is there? What's the next challenge? "Well, space is there. Space is the next thing, and we're going to climb it," he says.

Space is our next Everest. Space is our next challenge. Do we leave it with a mountain on earth? Now, it seems so small when we're now dreaming of going out into space and conquering the moon. Why wouldn't we want to do this? This strategy, if I can nerd out for just a second here, this is something called the formal name for this is antithesis.

And this is where you start off a concept in one way and then sort of flip it around to emphasize the point. Kennedy loved this. It was one of his favorite strategies. "Ask not what your country can do for

you, ask what you can do for your country." Love that pivot. And it always emphasizes the you. What are "you" going to do?

We know what Mallory did. He wanted to climb a mountain because it's there. Now, what are "you" going to do? Space is there, you want to come with? And that's what he challenges the audience with. And he emphasizes that point as well. So, for him, policy wasn't just the technical zeros and ones, the bolts of it.

It was, why are we doing this? Why bother? We're trying to accomplish things as humans. If we don't have these amazing reasons for doing it, if we don't have these humanistic reasons for doing it, what else could be the point of any of this? Why stare at the moon from the beginning of time if you don't eventually try to get there, at least in some part?

And that's what he puts before the audience. As we set sail, I forgive him for mixing metaphors. He's got a sailing and a climbing metaphor in the same thing. But I think he did all right on the whole. So, we asked for the blessing of the divine, and then he recharacterizes what this actual task is going to be. The most hazardous, and dangerous, and greatest adventure.

And now it sounds kind of cool. The hazard and dangerous part are exciting, not fearsome, not terrifying, worthy, worthy of us. And then the question becomes, are we worthy of the goal as well? Are we going to be able to do this? And Kennedy has fired us up for that.

So, his use of language, the way he thinks about how to phrase things, the way he presents information in order to elicit an idealistic response, an excited response from his audience is something that I think we can learn from. And it's something that people seem to have admired. The general consensus is Kennedy did good here. Just one year after proposing to Congress that we should go to the moon.

Just one year, Kennedy delivered that most inspirational speech and it solidified, in the public imagination, not only what we should do in terms of the moonshot, but why we should do it. He was able to craft that using the resources of ideas and language he had available to him.

He had no proof. He couldn't pull out a chart that says, "Well, here's kind of how far we've gotten so far. So, if you can just pledge a few dollars every week, we might be able to get this rocket all the way to the moon. He didn't have that. He had nothing to show, nothing of substance, just the way in which he was able to lead through the use of strategic language.

This is the only speech that Kennedy gave that focused exclusively on space exploration. The message to Congress was sort of a boring budget speech. The thing about going to the moon was the most exciting part. And then there were other bits and pieces asking for more money, fairly presidential. This one, though, was the one that he focused the attention of space on, and it became resonant throughout history.

As a matter of fact, NASA itself celebrates this speech. Of course, NASA celebrates the Apollo mission. Of course, they celebrate the astronauts who go there, but it's interesting to me that they celebrate this speech. It was just the 60th anniversary. I understand some of you're going to NASA in a couple days, which is great if you've been there before or if it's your first time.

What an amazing living museum that NASA is for all the things that it represents. But they just celebrated. They just had a celebration of the 60th anniversary this past September. I hope some of the

displays, the markings and so on are there when you visit. And maybe they'll be able to show you some of the collections that they have, but for them to celebrate, not a technological accomplishment, but the words that inspired it, I think speaks to us as to how important they felt Kennedy's leadership was in helping them to accomplish their goals and set the stage for this and why I think we can learn quite a few lessons from it.

Not everyone, though, seemed to have learned those lessons in the time in which they could have been learned. Our enthusiasm for space did tend to fall off a little bit following the accomplishments of the Apollo missions. And, in fact, it led to some very uninspirational rhetoric and leadership. I'll just share one example with you.

Don't mean to pick on the man, but President Nixon kind of uninspired the nation. Missed an opportunity, I would argue. Americans still yearned for space adventures. Kids were still wanting to drink Tang and dress in their astronaut jammies. Science fiction got only more amazing. We added lasers to it and that became kind of fun.

So, our thirst for space was still very much there, but our leaders and policymakers didn't seem to run with the advantage that Kennedy had offered to them and given them. Take one example. In 1972, President Nixon introduced the space shuttle program, which is an amazing program, to be sure.

But his messaging lacked inspiration and more importantly, it lacked participation by the people. And I think that really was the start of some of his downfall, is that he took away from the people their ability to participate because this is how he described what the benefits of the shuttle program would be to humanity. He said, "This system will center on a space vehicle that can shuttle repeatedly from Earth to orbit and back. It will revolutionize transportation into near space, by routinizing it."

I mean, what's more, inspiring than a routine? So, awesome to participate in the quotidian, in the everyday, in the bang, and the drum, and so on. Now, credit where credit is due, the Apollo program was unwieldy and it was unsustainable.

There was no way the nation could continue to spend at those levels on what the return was. And let's be honest, the accomplishment was the big goal of the Apollo program. We didn't find space people that we could converse with. As far as we know, we didn't find anything on the moon that cures cancer or ends starvation. We didn't find anything, you know, moon gold that is better than our gold or anything along those lines.

We found that we could do it. We found that we could go further than we had ever thought that we could go, but that was about it, and for the expense that the program cost. The question's about whether or not it's worth it came back. And so, I don't blame Nixon for trying to say this is the more economical way of dealing with space, but when he makes it so uninspiring and also when he makes it seem like everyday people have nothing to do with this, he turned it sort of into UPS.

And that means that the job of the average American was just to sit on your doorstep and wait for the doorbell to ring, and then go get your package when it shows up. And that's it. That's what the space shuttle is. That's what satellites are for. So, that you can sit on your couch, turn on your TV, and watch things from all around the world. It's not inspiring.

It is awesome, but it is not inspiring and it's not participatory. And I think that is the great failing from this. So, I hope for the rest of us, we might learn some more beneficial lessons from Kennedy's rhetoric

and the way in which his leadership was able to inspire and motivate the nation, to accomplish the thing that all previous generations are only ever been able to dream of. And, for us, it's now a reality.

And I think that's down to Kennedy. So, rhetorical strategies are scalable. I don't want us to distance ourselves from Kennedy. You have the same 26 letters of the alphabet that all of us possess. You don't have to be the president of the United States in order to make a vision come true. Yes, there are advantages. So, it would seem, but rhetoric is a language and a strategy available to all of us.

It just requires that we think through our messaging and think about how we want to involve our audiences in the vision that we are lending to them. And it also is an important strategic point because what Kennedy proves is that indirect pressure on policymakers can be effective.

He was working the rooms anytime he could among the members of Congress, the senators, and so on. But he knew that if he could put the people behind this effort, it would be all the more difficult for the naysayers to argue against him. And that turned out to be quite significant. It also involves, of course, his understanding that you should tailor your message.

Who do you need to persuade? That one speech he gave at Rice University was tailored for an American audience, a particularly younger people who are looking for something to believe in. He wanted to persuade them. It wasn't geared towards Congress. He already did the thing with Congress, "Give me some money for this really expensive idea I have."

No one moved. So, he goes to the people that he wants to motivate, play up to people's desire to be a part of something. People want to be involved. People like to hear that their contribution would be meaningful. People are less interested in hearing that they just need to stand by the side and applaud as the great people go by.

Kennedy wanted to involve that audience and to give them a reason to also think that they could do something, that their contribution mattered, that this was going to benefit all of us. In that language, we also see him avoiding talking down to people. It's not a condescending rhetoric that he uses. He's trying to bolster people to raise them up in a time of uncertainty.

In a time where people don't know what the future is going to be. In a time where we're not sure that our efforts are going to reward all that we've put into them. People need to be brought up, not talked down to, not told just what to do. Not told that you don't understand the significance of this. Rise up with them.

Because Kennedy, in his optimism, believed that people wanted to be inspired and to do good things. Give them a chance and they'll prove you right. But you have to give them that chance, and you have to be able to create an understanding within their mind that they recognize the opportunity. Every parent knows that you tell a child that they have an opportunity in front of them, and they'll just shrug, "Yeah, I could do that."

But if you help them feel inspired, if you help them feel that contributions matter, that will be more influential to them. A Kennedy style of leadership, centered around creating a kind of vision in which they could believe and see themselves in. Find a place for themselves in his message of inspiration. And I would argue and hope that you might find it an argument that you yourselves believe in slightly that words really do matter.

Kennedy was a wordsmith, along with Sorensen, but he liked words and he understood their power, and he liked the ability of being able to communicate to people through those words, through that vision that he could describe. So, if we think about the language, not just, okay, what do I need these people to do in terms of policy?

What's my end goal? The objective? Yes, all those, of course, are very important, but how are you going to get there? What is the actual material communication that you are going to use in order to persuade another person as to the idea in your head? And the thing, its words and their significance, and how you arrange them, and how you make them meaningful.

And it's vital to think about that, that we don't adopt a casual relationship to language, but rather that we think strategically. And I think Kennedy is an inspiration for this. I would urge you to study that speech. It's there on the internet, like every other thing in the world is. You can go and you can look at it, and it's not intimidating, and it's not beyond any of us. Yes, he's quite clever, but I don't think that he's cleverer than the rest of us.

He's just a bit more thoughtful in terms of how he is using his language and how he wanted to understand how people understand language and what could be drawn from that. And so I find a great deal of inspiration in Kennedy as not just a leader, not just a historical figure, but as someone who put ideas into language and lets us consider them. Thank you so much for your time and attention, and I'd be happy to discuss this at further length with anyone.

This is stuff I nerd out on, so here for it. Thank you so much. If there's questions, certainly.

- [Female 1] Thank you. That was really interesting.

- Thank you.

- My question is, do you think, had the assassination not taken place, do you think that Kennedy's inspirational rhetoric would have been strong enough to have a man walk on the moon in 1969?

- That's very good morbid question.

- Sorry.

- But a practical...

- Post-Halloween.

- Exactly, a very practical one. The answer is yes, but it would not have been quite so easy. So, both Presidents, Johnson and Nixon, continue to support the Apollo program, but it became a legacy. We need to do this in part to honor the memory of the person who set us on this course. You know, it's always speculative, you know, what would've happened if history hadn't happened type of thing.

But I think the costs that were going on and so on would've made it difficult even if Kennedy had been elected to a second term and had the responsibility, it still would've been a tough road to go. And even if he had lived and been reelected, we still wouldn't have gotten there during his presidency. He would've been out of office because of the two-term limit. And it still would've been either Johnson or Nixon, ultimately was Nixon who was in office when we landed on the moon.

So, regardless, some other president would've been able to take the, you know, to been able to crow about it and make the call to the astronauts. So, maybe it's my optimism that says, "Yes, this would continue because when I look at how Johnson and Nixon talked about space with the Apollo program they drew from Kennedy," so they kept that ball rolling. It was just once we landed on the moon, things faded and no one was able to rekindle it until we get to Reagan and his inspirational message.

But that's out of tragedy. And the, you know, with the Challenger disaster, the context is entirely different, even though he does find and rekindle the idea that space is inspirational, that it's an adventure, and so on. Thank you. I hope that provides some insight. Hello.

- [David] Hi, I, David Benton. I'd like to ask you to think about if Kennedy had been born today, how might he apply this thinking in a world where we are limited by the number of characters that we can transmit at any one time? What's the lesson?

How does it translate into the social media universe?

- It's a very good question. And what Kennedy would be like on Instagram or Twitter, it's a great rabbit hole to go down and to think about. I think it would have to be more imagistic maybe use fewer words and more images. That seems to be the way in which we're going is sort of towards rhetoric as art imagery.

He'd probably, like, have some sort of clip or whatever that he would try to do. I'm not sure how he would do with memes. He seemed a little bit straightforward for that, but he also proved to be quite adaptable to message formats. I mean, his presidency and his candidacy really, were at the birth of what we might consider to be the political age of television.

And his ability to muster the resources that he had in terms of whether it was a speech in front of Congress or whether it was going to be something that went out over the airwaves. He was quite media savvy as far as that goes. And Sorensen also was quite the wordsmith. So, I think he likely wouldn't have done as many overall speeches.

Of course, no one speaks as much as the president of the United States. Even our presidents that are not fond of giving speeches are still required to do so. But I think he still would've been able to find a way to get that message out because what mattered to him most was connecting with the people. And if the people were connected through social media, I think Kennedy would want to connect with them there too.

And I think he'd make that a priority. I apologize for sweating so much. Florida humidity is not something I'm 100% great with. Nothing else? Then, please...

Oh, sorry, one more question.

- [Female 2] Hello. Thank you. That was great. It makes me pause about what I say and what I've put out there in my life after this. Like, "Oh my gosh, my words." So, my question is, I hear so much about speechwriters now. And so do you think back then, or did he have more help?

Did he start it and they polished it, or, I mean, it's a different time now, and I just wondered about that.

- It's a very good question. Really, we can sort of start the modern age of presidents relying on speechwriters with FDR. And he had a group of people that he trusted and also pit against one another in

order to help craft messages. Typically, what we see is a president will have one person in particular, a chief speechwriter, that they will rely on quite a bit.

The relationship between John Kennedy and Ted Sorensen was almost as if they shared a mind. It also helped that Sorensen was willing to be dominated by Kennedy. He was willing to be in that role of writing up these words and whatnot. But Kennedy would interact with Sorensen. He didn't just wait for Sorensen to deliver copy onto his desk, and then he went out and read it.

They would converse, they would debate, they would banter with each other continually and had a very simpatico relationship. I think when we look at this now, we say that relationship for a president is still quite essential. And sometimes we'll see presidents go through numerous speechwriters. It's a very difficult job.

Reagan relied greatly, particularly for the Challenger message, on Peggy Noonan. And she's written books about her time in the White House, what she was thinking on that particular day, the conversations that she had with Reagan. And they're quite revealing as to how close the president and their speechwriter, in some cases speechwriters, must be.

It's not at all a casual relationship. Sometimes the president won't see some of their cabinet officers for months, whether because they don't like them or just because they're traveling the world. But those conversations, those near daily conversations, sometimes hourly conversations, particularly in moments of crisis, are crucial for that because, again, presidents, whether they're willing or not, have to understand that their words matter a great deal.

If a president says something, when, you know, if a president says, "Well, the COVID crisis is over," it moves the needle across the entire universe, right? If a president says, "I'm not happy that other leader did the other thing to the other country," it's picked up on the world news. And so when you began your comment, I appreciate that saying that you're thinking more about your words and your...

I think we all should. We treat sometimes conversations so casually, it's so easy to do. We're used to talking. We don't want our words to get in the way of our message and whatnot. But then if we say, but what is the message but for our words? You can't impart a thought into someone else's mind through telekinesis. Not yet, maybe they're working on that.

But for right now, our medium is language. And so I think a president has to be quite thoughtful and they pick the, I think the ones that have been most successful have worked to develop a good relationship with the people who help them with their messaging. And it can be quite fascinating and quite useful. There's a great anecdote about President Clinton, one of his first addresses before Congress, the teleprompter quit, right when he was about to speak, and he just kept going.

He knew that speech backward and forwards, they'd been working on it, even on the limousine ride over there. President Obama was known to do this, to hand mark speech drafts to work on the language. I think presidents more and more understand, there are exceptions, of course, but I think presidents more and more understand that they're going to be held accountable for the words that come out of their mouth.

Even if they didn't write every single one of those words, the buck stops with them, to mix presidential metaphors. And so they take an active investment, an interest in the words that they're going to say. I think the ones that do it best do that anyway. And I think the ones that have had some noticeable

fumbles, part of those fumbles is because they failed to take as active an interest in their language as perhaps they should have so...

Please, let me thank you again, and it was a pleasure to be here, and I hope you enjoy the rest of your conference. Oh, no, there is one more question. Sorry. My fault.

- [Susan] Sure, if we're done. Oh, sorry. Anyway, I was just reflecting, I'm Susan VanBeuge and from Nevada, I'm a board member, and I was thinking about this, you know, my first degree is in communication, so that was, you know, a lot of years ago. A lot of trips around the sun. But I'm thinking about as regulators when we are, you know, kind of taking in this message and thinking about, you know, the words matter.

I remember hearing our, being at a board meeting when the attorney said, "Words matter, every word matters in the statute and what we do." And I think about the messages that we have to convey as regulators, as policymakers, and how that moves forward. So, I think that what you're telling us here today and really sharing with us is really reflective of the roles that we play, not only in the regulatory process, maybe with our people coming before us, as you know, for administrative hearings or things like that, but also in the policy that we craft not only locally, but nationally.

And so when we're working on things like the Nurse Licensure Compact, and the APRN Compact, and all those things, it's really about connecting with people, and then having words that people can also frame and understand as well because we have our own language, just like all of us in healthcare, but then crafting that to go forward to other people, to connect, like real people makes such a huge difference.

- It so does. It's such a good point that you're making because I think I call it sort of the productive schizophrenia that we have to work with in language, which is first to say, does this make sense to me when I'm crafting something? But then instantly, you have to put yourself in the position of someone who you are not, and to say, "Would this make sense to someone else? What if I was reading this for the first time? What if I hadn't been spending months working on this language and this was the very first time that I'm seeing it? Would it make sense?"

And I think those are the things we have to go through to say, "Okay, you sort of get too far into your own mind when you're working on something for a long time. And your mind makes all these shortcuts, particular with language, because you know what you mean, you know what you're referring to, you know what document that links up with, but someone else may have no idea, let alone what their interpretation is going to be. So, in terms of thinking the plurality and possibilities of language, I think that's time well spent to say, "Okay, how else might someone interpret this? What maybe should I guard against?"

And to, you know, think about that, to test each other. You know, I see this in classrooms all the time. We ask them, what did you think of that... It was great. It's like, "Okay, come on." Like, they just want to compliment each other to say, "Dig into it." Right?

You can be a better friend sometimes by being a kind of negative advocate, picking things apart, challenging each other, right? Thinking about the worst interpretation that the language could receive. And then working back to say, "Okay, how do we guard against that? Or how can we clarify this? What else could we do to help make this more impactful for the people that we are trying to demonstrate?"

So, getting out of our own mind. Like first obligation is make sure that it's sensible to you. But then the second obligation is I now have to forget who I am, and I have to put myself in the shoes of someone else. And only when I've done that exercise can I feel confident my message might actually reach out to the people that it's intended for. And it, worth the effort in my, you know, what else am I going to say? That thinking about language is not important.

Of course, it's important. So, but I thank you for that prompt. Thank you. Mm-hmm. Okay. Thanks again.