



Kennedy's Romantic Moon

What the "Moon Shot" Rhetoric Can Teach Us
About Leadership That Inspires



John W. Jordan, Ph.D.
U. of Wisconsin-Milwaukee



An Object(ive) of Fascination

- Getting to the moon was an eternal quest of humans
- If only imagination was sufficient for accomplishment
- Turning fiction into reality would be a long, hard road
- In 1961, President John F. Kennedy took that first step
- But he didn't just ask Americans to follow him,
he gave them a reason to feel involved in the quest

Kennedy: The Unlikely Advocate

- Known for his boldness, but unproven as a leader
- Barely won in 1960 against V.P. Richard Nixon
- Followed the very popular presidency of Eisenhower (who was outspoken against a moon mission)
- JFK wasn't exactly advocating from a position of strength
- Would have to lead through creativity and inspiration
- May 25, 1961: Kennedy stood before Congress and announced one of the most audacious, expensive, and fantastical policy proposals in human history



“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”



“No single space 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.”
President Kennedy to Congress – May 25, 1961

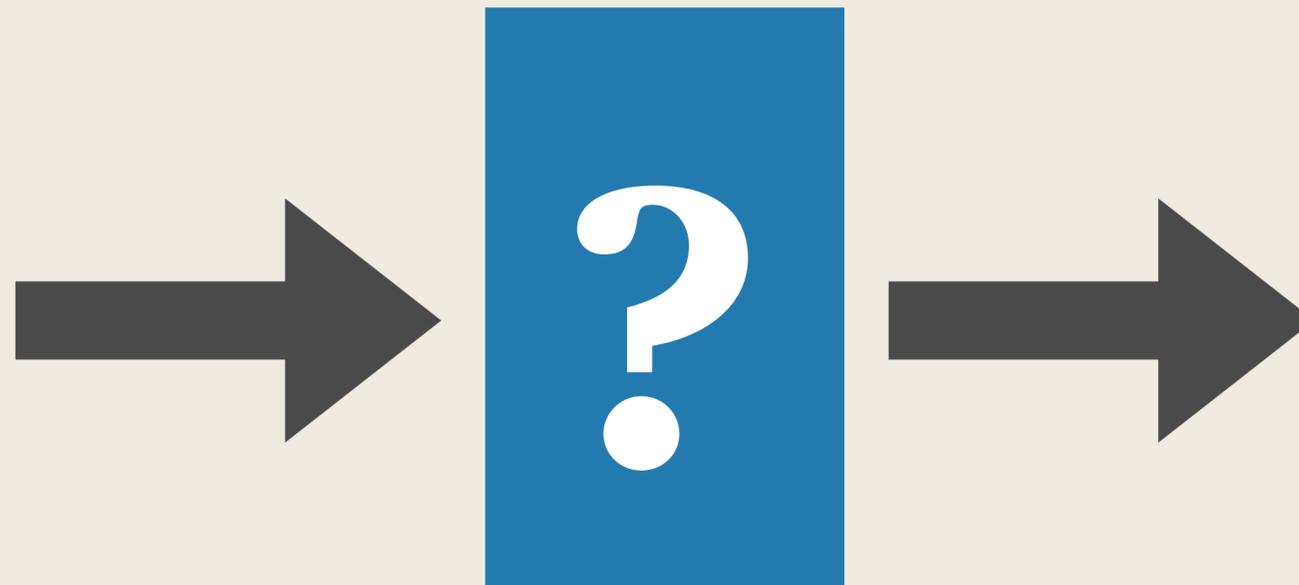
JFK's Lack of Solid Footing

- "Moon shot" came just four months into Kennedy's presidency
- And it had been a bumpy four months...
- Bay of Pigs disaster just one month prior
- USSR's Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth that same month
- America had only 15 minutes of manned space flight when JFK told Congress we would land on the moon
- Kennedy was leading America, but the nation was lagging behind the Soviet Union, and the world took notice



JFK's "Moon Shot" in Perspective

- Time may have muted Kennedy's inventiveness
- Stories are less dramatic when you know the ending
- But with leadership, you *never* know the ending
- You only know how you *want* the story to end, and the drama comes in figuring out how you're going to make that happen



Kennedy's Leadership Role

- Leadership begins with understanding your role
- Identify strengths, weaknesses, and resources
- Kennedy wasn't a scientist or engineer or astronaut
- As president, he could *ask* for money to fund his plan
- But he needed to **convince** policy makers and citizens in order to make his plan happen

Kennedy's Leadership Role

- JFK had to **advocate** for his plans and his values
- Also had to advocate for those doing the labor
- Kennedy employed his ability to use language strategically to persuade people that even an improbable goal is worth the risk and expense

Kennedy's Leadership Rhetoric

- Rhetoric is the art of strategic language
- A means for solving problems and building alliances
- Rhetoric helps create graspable, meaningful ideas
- Works toward understanding rather than assumes it
- "The function of adjusting ideas to people and of people to ideas." - Donald C. Bryant
- How JFK **talked** about the moon shot would make or break how Americans **felt** about the moon shot

Kennedy's Strategic Approach

- **Stay positive**: focus on adventure not adversaries
- **Decomplexify**: keep the language simple and relatable
- **Transform**: "expense" into "expanse"; "price" into "pride"
- **Hasten**: time for action, not delay; seize this moment
- **Relate**: allow "regular" people to become enthralled with and feel like participants in the plan

Kennedy's rhetorical strategy was to increase the popularity of his moon shot plan with everyday Americans, which would then pressure policy makers to enact it

Rice University
September 12, 1962



We vs. They, Now vs. Later

We meet at a college noted for knowledge, in a city noted for progress, in a State noted for strength, and **we** stand in need of all three, for **we** meet in an hour of change and challenge, in a decade of hope and fear, in an age of both knowledge and ignorance. The greater **our** knowledge increases, the greater **our** ignorance unfolds.

So it is not surprising that **some would have us stay** where we are a little longer **to rest, to wait**. But this city of Houston, this State of Texas, this country of the United States **was not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them**. This country was conquered by those who moved forward—and **so will space**.

Choice Defines Character

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.

Addresses the Argument Against

To be sure, all this costs us all a good deal of money. This year's space budget is three times what it was in January 1961, and it is greater than the space budget of the previous eight years combined. That budget now stands at \$5,400 million a year—a **staggering sum, though somewhat less than we pay for cigarettes and cigars every year.**

Decomplexify & Relate

I think we're going to do it, and I think that we must pay what needs to be paid. I don't think we ought to waste any money, but I think we ought to do the job. And this will be done in the decade of the sixties. It may be done while some of you are still here at school at this college and university. It will be done during the term of office of some of the people who sit here on this platform. But it will be done. And it will be done before the end of this decade.

“Our” Adventure, “Our” Time to Shine

Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, “Because it is there.”

Well, space is there, and we’re going to climb it, and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there. And, therefore, as we set sail we ask God’s blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.

Kennedy Done Good

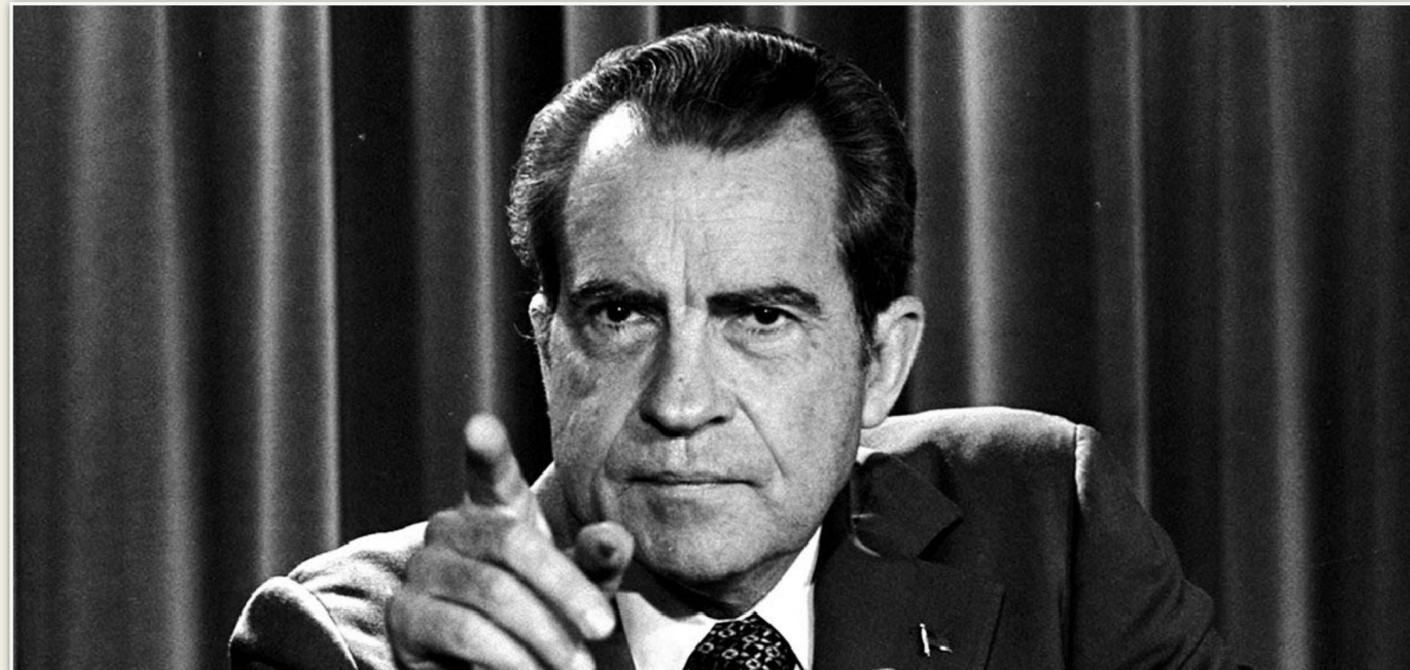
Just one year after proposing to land Americans on the moon, JFK delivered his most inspiring message, and set the nation's mind aflame

- This was his only speech solely focused on space exploration (once he delivered it, it seemed the only one necessary)
- NASA celebrates the speech that rallied America for the moon shot



Nixon Uninspires the Nation

- Americans still yearned for space adventures
- But leaders and policy makers did not
- Nixon introduced the Space Shuttle project in 1972
- But his messaging lacked inspiration and participation



“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.”

Lessons from Kennedy's Rhetoric

- Rhetorical strategies are scalable
(Don't need to be POTUS to make them work)
- Indirect pressure on policy makers can be effective
- Tailor your message; who do you **need** to persuade?
- Play up to people's desire to be part of something
- Avoid talking down to people; rather, bring them up
- People want to be inspired and to do good things
- Leadership is about creating a vision they believe in
- **Words matter**, so use them thoughtfully



Thank You!

John Jordan, Ph.D.

jjordan@uwm.edu