

# Speaker Ryan: Full Text: Speaker Ryan's address at the Reagan Institute on advancing American leadership

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WASHINGTON—Today, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) gave an address to mark the launch of The Ronald Reagan Institute in Washington, D.C. His speech, entitled “Advancing American Leadership,” laid out a bold vision for the future of American leadership in the world. In his remarks, he spoke about the importance of military primacy, free trade, pro-growth economic policies, and moral leadership.

His remarks, as prepared for delivery, are below:

*Thank you, Fred.*

*Before I begin, I know that we are all thinking about the families and communities in the path of Hurricane Florence. Our prayers go out to them.*

*I just want people in the affected areas to know that Congress stands ready to assist in any way we can.*

*It is an honor to be here today, and to help welcome the Reagan Institute to Washington.*

*Roger came by the office last week, and gave me an overview of all the plans for the Institute. It is truly impressive.*

*If I may offer one suggestion. It would be that you replicate the Irish pub from the Museum. We could always use more of those in Washington.*

*The chance to be part of this means a great deal to me.*

*You see, I grew up in a fairly apolitical household in Janesville, Wisconsin.*

*My parents voted, but they didn't talk much about politics or politicians. It just wasn't their thing.*

*There was, however, one exception. My dad was taken with the story of an Irish guy who grew up on the shores of the Rock River, just downstream from where we lived.*

*He admired how President Reagan came from modest means to become president. Whenever Reagan appeared on the news, my dad would nod approvingly—a high compliment from him.*

*One of my first political memories, in fact, is from a night in February 1981. After dinner, my dad turned on the television and had us watch Reagan's first address to Congress.*

*I remember vividly how President Reagan smiled, even as he laid out all that we were up against. One passage in particular toward the end has always stuck with me. He said:*

*"Together, we can embark on this road, not to make things easy, but to make things better. . . . There is nothing wrong with America that together we can't fix."*

*It is just so motivating to me.*

*President Reagan never let us forget how special America is. He called on us to cherish the timeless principles that make us special: freedom, free enterprise, self-determination.*

*And he embraced the hard work it takes to preserve these things.*

*He knew we had it in us. And he knew it could be done.*

*That speaks to what I think is one of the most important things we can do as leaders.*

*Most days, we tend to lurch from crisis to crisis, whether real or manufactured. But we need to have the ability to look around the corner, and plan for what's ahead.*

*In that spirit, today I want to talk about how President Reagan's legacy can guide us in advancing American leadership in the world.*

*Democracy has really been taking it on the chin lately. There is no question about that.*

*All that triumphalism after the Cold War, all that talk about 'the end of history'—it feels like ancient history at this point.*

*But we have been here before.*

*If there was ever a moment when we needed the clarity of President Reagan's vision and example, it is now. We need to renew, relearn, relitigate the principles he advanced, and apply them to the problems of the day.*

*Foreign policy, as you know, is rarely if ever black and white. But we are at our best when we are clear about what we are for, and clear-eyed about what we face.*

*We have illiberal regimes, Russia among them, testing us with thuggery and aggression.*

*And we have Islamist extremists, including al-Qaeda and a depleted but still operational ISIS, plotting attacks on Western capitals.*

*But amid all of this, we need to pay more attention to the direct challenge that the China model poses to democratic capitalism.*

*I see this as the big test, the generational-defining challenge for us as a country.*

*China has a communist system based on centralized power, but it manages to give*

*off this hint, this veneer, of 21st-century capitalism, even as it resorts to repression of its people and intellectual theft from its competitors.*

*It pushes these designs beyond its borders with infrastructure investments in Africa and Asia. It is in the midst of a military buildup that has already begun to shift the balance of power in the Pacific.*

*And now China has made its ambitions clear. It offers itself to the world as a new model of efficiency. It actively seeks to replace our system of democratic capitalism as the best operating system for society. A “new era,” President Xi calls it.*

*We know our system can be inefficient and slow to respond, with all the intervening politics and turbulence. You get that with self-government.*

*This is what China hopes to exploit. And yes, it is easier to plan from era to era when you consolidate power indefinitely.*

*The choice here is rather straightforward.*

*We can allow China to overtake us—not just in the global economy, but in the world order—and see more countries slide in the direction of the autocrats.*

*Or we can do as President Reagan did. We can choose to lead. We can together embark on the road that’s not easy. This means showing that our way of doing things still has juice—that it is still the best way to lift people up and keep the peace. In fact, China has already enjoyed many benefits from this system.*

*So the task for us, and what I have made the mission of my time as speaker, is building up our country’s resilience, our antibodies. We want our institutions—economic, military, and political—to be sturdy enough to adapt to change, and withstand the inevitable ups and downs.*

*It is my hope that a strong and confident America may convince China that their best path is to peacefully rise with us—even though history suggests otherwise.*

*That is to say, that global affairs, like life, does not need to be a zero-sum game.*

*An America, standing up to illiberal regimes with the one hand, while extending an open invitation with the other to join our path to freedom is more likely to succeed when we are strong and secure.*

*The good news is, we are already taking steps in this direction.*

*Earlier this year, the administration's National Defense Strategy declared its 'most far-reaching objective' to be addressing China's ascendance.*

*For most of this decade, our military was forced to operate under a budget sequester that hollowed out our forces. It did not take long until we were confronted with a staggering readiness crisis.*

*Now you know the old adage: if you want peace, prepare for war. Our military primacy is essential to deterring our adversaries and protecting our interests.*

*But these cuts had us falling so far behind, we could barely protect our own troops. Stories proliferated of aging equipment and maintenance lapses.*

*This crisis cost us lives: In 2017, we lost four times as many service members in training accidents and incidents as we did in combat.*

*Earlier in the year, we finally put a stop to these cuts. With a new budget agreement, we are now fully funding our national defense at the levels requested by Secretary Mattis, and for a military redesigned by our National Defense Authorization Act.*

*It is the biggest increase in defense spending in 15 years.*

*As part of this strategic buildup, we are increasing the size and lethality of our forces, streamlining the acquisition process to make it leaner and more efficient, and modernizing our nuclear deterrent. We are investing in new capabilities to address cyber threats.*

*And we are expanding our security cooperation in the region. These are commitments we can make more confidently now that we are rebuilding our military.*

*This is only a start. A buildup has to last for it to be effective.*

*But we have gone from a politics-driven to a mission-driven military budget. This will bolster our national defense for years, if not decades to come.*

*Now, we too often think about peace through strength only in terms of military*

*might.*

*This discounts the value of our economic partnerships with allies. I mean those built on a foundation of free trade.*

*I am an unapologetic free-trader. I believe tearing down trade barriers produces economic benefit to both us and our trading partners.*

*But lost in the economic debate is how free trade agreements also promote stability and order.*

*They allow us to expand our spheres of influence. They boost our allies. And they counter our adversaries.*

*Nowhere is this more relevant today than in the Asia-Pacific region.*

*This is yet another place where China, and nations like it, are trying to assert their version of economics. Anti-capitalist and fueled by cronyism.*

*I've said before and will say again. The TPP agreement that the previous administration negotiated was a flawed one, but the broader goal was correct: to assert U.S. economic leadership in a rapidly developing region and make sure the United States, not China, is the driving force.*

*Right now, many countries are making a choice about how to bring their developing economies into the new century. And if they follow our lead, the growth of freedom and free enterprise will continue.*

*I believe our friends want to side with us in a free-market, liberalized system. They just need to know that the U.S. will be there for the long haul.*

*We must understand: The rules of the road for the 21st century economy are being written right now.*

*Privacy, intellectual property, the way capital moves across borders today—these are all critical issues for the coming decades.*

*So the question is: Will we set the tone or will it be others who don't share our values or ideals?*

*Strong trade agreements and economic partnerships set a high standard and bring our allies into the fold—and they make us more secure.*

*In short, free trade must always be an active instrument of American leadership.*

*America's ability to lead also depends on having a dynamic economy that can be a global force.*

*For the first time since President Reagan in 1986, we came together to overhaul our tax code. We went from having one of the worst tax codes in the industrialized world to one that can compete with anyone.*

*Now we see capital trapped overseas finally coming back to our shores. Confidence is surging to record levels. Small businesses are expanding. Manufacturing activity is booming.*

*We are making our workforce more competitive, too, most recently by overhauling our career and technical education system.*

*This is going to make it easier for people to get the skills and training they need to fill in-demand jobs.*

*It is one of those less-heralded reforms that doesn't get much press attention, but will pay dividends years down the road.*

*We have also worked to ensure our energy independence, including lifting our decades-long ban on oil exports.*

*America is now the world's largest oil producer, and we are set to be a net energy exporter within the next five years.*

*All of this is about revitalizing the growth and upward mobility at the heart of a free economy, and we are back on that path now.*

*There is one other big thing we need to get right. And this is an area where the Institute can make a great impact.*

*It goes back to how President Reagan handled his visit to China in the spring of 1984.*

*At the close of a six-day visit, he spoke to students at Fudan University in Shanghai about the values of freedom and democracy.*

*Yet in some quarters, Reagan was actually criticized for going to a communist country and extolling free markets and his faith in God, what he called “my own values.”*

*In response to those critics, Secretary Shultz, as only he could, said that the president “is the same man whether he’s in Washington, Peking, London or wherever he is, and personally, I like it that way.”*

*Ladies and gentlemen: We have to be ambassadors for what we believe, wherever we are, without equivocation.*

*A set of policies is not what convinces people to side with us—it is the idea of America that draws them to us. It is the idea of a country where the condition of your birth does not determine the outcome of your life. That is where our true power lies.*

*I think back to earlier this year, when I was in Prague to commemorate the 100th anniversary of U.S.-Czech relations.*

*I noticed that the street right in front of the ambassador’s residence is named after Ronald Reagan.*

*One of many such tributes to him in the region, of course.*

*But there is real affection behind it. The people there—especially those who remember what it was like before—talk about his leadership, his rhetoric, how he stood up for them.*

*They speak of him with reverence, yes, but also with such warmth, almost as if they knew him personally.*

*It is an intimate bond that comes from the common humanity that freedom brings out in us. We are connected by our aspirations, by our potential.*

*That is why Congress maintains bipartisan commitments to supporting liberty and democracy around the world, particularly through organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the International Republican Institute.*

*We work together across party lines to promote human rights, fight global trafficking, and support economic development.*

*We advance global health initiatives such as PEPFAR, which now supports more than 14 million people with HIV treatment. This work is done mostly out of the spotlight, but is absolutely vital to U.S. interests.*

*As you know, my time in public service is running short.*

*I look forward to thinking more about these issues. And this Institute is sure to play a vital role in the discussion.*

*People need to be reminded that we have it in us, that we know what has to be done.*

*President Reagan charted the right course—it's peace through strength, pro-growth economy, clear moral leadership. It is not a new or magic formula.*

*What is needed is a new willingness to think big, go bold, and see things through. To show the largeness of spirit that this moment requires.*

*It will take that belief in ourselves that President Reagan instilled in the hearts of so many fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, watching at home on television, glimpsing the future.*

*It is this article of faith which we celebrate as we bring his vision to our capital city once more.*

*Thank you all for having me here today.*