

## Winning Edge #29 – Persuading with a Story

This is Trevor Bragdon with Commonwealth Partners' *The Winning Edge*: Tips to help conservatives persuade and win.



In the weeks leading up to the 40th anniversary of D-Day, presidential speech writer Peggy Noonan had a challenge. How do you write a speech that commemorates the sacrifices made by thousands of Americans and allied troops to free Europe in World War II? How do you capture the enormity of that moment? How do you write it in a way that President Reagan could deliver, make it memorable and impactful to the veterans, and honor those who had given all in the fight for freedom?

After weeks of wrestling with this speech, Noonan decided to zoom in on one main story instead of trying to capture everything. She focused on one place and told the story of a group of 225 men and what the battle was like for them. After a short paragraph setting the stage, she went right to the action and told the story of the fighting on June 6th.

*“We stand on a lonely, windswept point on the northern shore of France. The air is soft, but 40 years ago at this moment, the air was dense with smoke and the cries of men, and the air was filled with the crack of rifle fire and the roar of cannon. At dawn, on the morning of the 6th of June, 1944, 225 Rangers jumped off the British landing craft and ran to the bottom of these cliffs. Their mission was one of the most difficult and daring of the invasion: to climb these sheer and desolate cliffs and take out the enemy guns. The Allies had been told that some of the mightiest of these guns were here and they would be trained on the beaches to stop the Allied advance.”*

In those short 45 seconds of the speech, the words take you to Normandy. You can imagine the scene in your mind's eye, and you know the stakes of the moment. It then continued.

*“The Rangers looked up and saw the enemy soldiers -- the edge of the cliffs shooting down at them with machine guns and throwing grenades. And the American Rangers began to climb. They shot rope ladders over the face of these cliffs and began to pull themselves up. When one Ranger fell, another would take his place. When one rope was cut, a Ranger would grab another and begin his climb again. They climbed, shot*

*back, and held their footing. Soon, one by one, the Rangers pulled themselves over the top, and in seizing the firm land at the top of these cliffs, they began to seize back the continent of Europe. Two hundred and twenty-five came here. After 2 days of fighting, only 90 could still bear arms.”*

There were not many numbers, just a few key facts about how the Rangers went from 225 to just 90. But the words are vivid and packed with action and the determination of that battle. Finally, this story in the speech ends with:

*“Behind me is a memorial that symbolizes the Ranger daggers that were thrust into the top of these cliffs. And before me are the men who put them there.*

*These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war.”*

The last thirty seconds drove home the story and the sacrifice. In total, it was just two minutes of a ten-minute speech. But it's remembered as one of Reagan's finest speeches. Because in those two minutes, he was able to share a story the audience couldn't forget.

None of us are communicators like Ronald Reagan or have full-time speech writers. But we can use stories to create persuasive, emotional, and memorable moments when we speak. These don't happen by accident. Here's how you can create memorable stories to use when you speak.

First, it's about finding great stories. You want to capture them when they happen or when you hear about them. Noonan did this by sifting through all sorts of stories about D-Day. And then when she found the story of those Rangers who scaled the cliffs, she went and interviewed some of them to get a feel for that moment.

We find stories every day that could be used in our speeches, but we simply need to remember them. The best thing to do to capture these stories is to create story buckets. These are places where we can easily store stories in the way we consume them. If you read a bunch of stuff online, make a bookmark folder called "Good Stories" and save stories to that story bucket. If

you read things on X, formerly Twitter, use a bookmark for "Good Stories" and just bookmark those ideas to come back to later. And with reading books on Kindles, you can use tools like Readwise to save highlights. You could even use a simple spreadsheet. The key is creating buckets that make it easy to store a story that you can use later.

The second point is to skip the backstory and jump to the action. Reagan did this when he said "... *the air was dense with smoke and the cries of men, and the air was filled with the crack of rifle fire...*" You are immediately brought to the moment and start imagining what it was like - men fighting for their lives surrounded by the sounds of war.

You don't need as much backstory as you think when you tell a story. You want to get to the action, get to the impact, and pull the listener in. When you have a well-told story, people want to know what the stakes are and what's going to happen next.

To make the story come alive, you want specifics. Can you use real details that make it feel like you were there in the moment? Is there a statistic that drives home the main point of your speech?

Lastly, you want to end with a recap—a sentence or two to sum it all up and say exactly what you want your audience to think about. Reagan did with the lines, "*These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc...These are the heroes who helped end a war.*"

To create a persuasive story, start by collecting stories. Have story buckets where you can keep the great stories you hear or read. Then, use the best story at your next talk. Start by getting right to the action. Add specific details or dialogue to make it come alive, so the audience feels like they are there with you. Maybe even use a statistic to drive home the breadth or depth of what happened. Do this, and you'll have a persuasive story.