



The Presidents Speak: A Collection of Speeches from Each of the Presidents of the United States

Book Summary:

Those leading in the era of social media need no convincing of the importance of words, but often true meaning can get lost in the noise. When we begin to forget the impact what we say can have, it is often best to return to those who said it best. One work that has continuously aimed to collect the words of some of the US's most influential figures is *The Presidents Speak*. Its newest edition, released in 2018, is comprised entirely of speeches made by each of the first forty-five US Presidents. As diverse in subject matter as they are in their sources, the speeches in the book are separated into the following seven categories: Religion & Culture, Humanity & Liberty, Politics & War, Inaugural Addresses, State of the Union Addresses, Farewell Addresses, and Miscellaneous Speeches.

The overall format is refreshing and makes its content easily digestible for readers in a time crunch, while giving each piece room to breathe. The men whose words are included in this work faced some of the most impressive challenges of their time; some were successful, some were not. They were human, they erred, but the speeches they have given us collectively serve as a masterclass in leadership through communication.

Through the study and discussion of *The Presidents Speak* and the speeches that comprise it, any leader could grow in their understanding of the importance of words and how to use them. This guide is meant to help leaders improve their written and verbal communication skills by engaging in dynamic group discussions and self-reflection on the speeches of the past 45 US Presidents and a list of additional resources.



Read2Lead

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What is Read2Lead?

Read2Lead is a series of book studies published by the Center for Junior Officers, a small Army research center dedicated to empowering junior officers to develop themselves and their teams. Read2Lead modules give junior officers a ready-to-use product that they can integrate into leader professional development programs.

What's in this module?

Every Read2Lead module contains:

- A short summary of the book that you can circulate to prime people for reading
- Advice for running your Read2Lead session
- A series of questions that can be used in multiple sessions, with options for using the questions over different lengths of time
- Additional resources that may be helpful for the facilitator

What do I need to provide to run a Read2Lead program?

First, the time. Read2Lead sessions work best when they're done over multiple sessions, so participants can digest books in small "chunks" instead of trying to cram them in all at once. Make sure you give your participants enough time to read the book and not fake the funk.

Second, the books. Books can be purchased with a government purchase card if they remain in the hands of the unit. Buying books for a Read2Lead session can be a great kickstarter for a battalion or even brigade library. You can also provide the books to Soldiers with the expectation that they pass them along to another Soldier when they are done with them. If you choose this approach, you should ensure you mark the books appropriately per the purchasing regulations and legal guidance of your organization.

Third, the space. Read2Lead sessions should be conducted in spaces where everyone can hear and see one another. Be creative: maybe you do them as hip-pocket training on a range, or at the end of motor stables. Or as a brown bag lunch in a barracks dayroom. When you run the actual session, think of it as a time for your Soldiers to think outside the box, discuss something beyond the day-to-day concerns of the unit, and improve their communication skills. The questions provided on the subsequent pages are a starting point, but feel free to add or substitute your own to make the session more meaningful for your Soldiers.



The Presidents Speak, 6 Week Question Guide

Week 1: Religion & Culture (Introduction & Part 1)

“The Soul of every scoundrel is gladdened whenever an honest man is assailed, or even when a scoundrel is untruthfully assailed”-Teddy Roosevelt

- Part 1 features speeches on religion and culture. They range from consecrations of national days of prayer to criticism of opportunistic journalism. Every US President maintained their own beliefs and came from their own unique background, but the best of them understood how to lead others from every walk of life. How can you apply the lessons from the lives and words of the presidents to your own journey leading Soldiers from diverse backgrounds? How have your own beliefs and background shaped your style of leadership? Looking specifically at Kennedy’s Address on the Space Effort, how can you use your words and actions to influence change and innovation in your organization?

Week 2: Humanity & Liberty (Part 2)

“Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be.”-John Quincy Adams

- Part 2 focuses on two cornerstones of the American Dogma: humanity and liberty. The speeches range in notoriety from the Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation to lesser known speeches like George Washington’s Letter to an Irish Immigrant. These speeches show the importance of striving for higher ideals and communicating such striving in the form of a shared goal. How do these speeches convey the larger vision of their speakers and how might you apply the same methodology to your own words when conveying your vision? How have you attempted to communicate a shared mission to your team in the past, and what was the end result? What were your main take-aways from Jackson’s Proclamation Regarding Nullification? What have your experiences been speaking to a teammate when controversy or conflict is involved?



Week 3: Politics & War (Part 3)

“If silence is ever golden, it must be beside the graves of 15,000 men, whose lives were more significant than speech, and whose death was a poem the music of which can never be sung”-James A. Garfield

- In Part 3, the speeches loosely revolve around politics and war, but there is also a littany of minor themes being touched on. Key examples feature lessons on brevity, speaking directly, communicating uncomfortable truths, and delivering messages with confidence and purpose. What does Garfield’s Decoration Day Speech make you think about the importance of choosing your words wisely and does it bring any other examples of speaking succinctly to mind? What are your reflections on Wilson’s Fourteen Points and do you feel it holds any lessons on organizing and delivering your own thoughts? It is only natural to want to avoid hard topics, but many speeches in this section show that this urge must be overcome when it is time to say what needs to be said; which speeches resonated the strongest with you in regards to this lesson? Are there any speeches you felt taught lessons on what NOT to do as a leader when communicating? What can Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” Speech convey about using words to unite those we lead, instead of divide them?

Week 4: Inaugural Addresses (Part 4)

“This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure, as it has endured, will revive and prosper.”-FDR

- Part 4 covers the opening speeches of multiple presidencies, reflecting both the range of personalities who filled the office and the nature of the times in which they were beginning their service. What have your experiences been trying to communicate your intentions and leadership style when moving to new units, positions, or environments? Looking at JFK’s Inaugural Address, how might a leader in a divisive time use their words to help reunite a group and shift their focus back to the mission ahead of them? To what extent do you feel the circumstances a leader walks into affects their future success? Can their words have an affect regardless?



Week 5: State of the Union Addresses (Part 5)

“The storm of frenzy and faction must inevitably dash itself in vain against the unshaken rock of the Constitution. I shall never doubt it.”-Franklin Pierce

- Part 5 features the key venue for Presidents to communicate to their people the events and forces of change in effect, and what they intend to do to steer them in an advantageous direction; the State of the Union Address. These speeches can serve as a time to reflect on the past, speak honestly about the present, and turn the eyes of the people toward the future. What similar chances have you had to do so in your own career? Unexpected events will occur under any leaders purview, but these can be seen as positive opportunities if the moment is seized; which speeches come to mind when you think about turning a negative situation into a positive one?

Week 6: Farewell Addresses and Miscellaneous Speeches (Part 6 & 7)

“You and I, my fellow citizens, need to be strong in our faith that all nations, under God, will reach the goal of peace with justice. May we be ever unswerving in devotion to principle, confident but humble with power, diligent in pursuit of the Nation’s great goals.”-Dwight D. Eisenhower

- Part 6, while short, encapsulates the full range of time and circumstance in which Presidents have left the office. What can the three speeches listed teach you about saying goodbye and effectively communicating closure? Are there any other examples from outside sources or your personal experience of leaders doing so effectively? What similarities and differences do you think were most notable between Washington’s and Nixon’s Farewell Addresses?

“Friends, I shall ask you to be as quite as possible. I don’t know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot; but it takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose”-Theodore Roosevelt

- In Part 7, those speeches that did not fit a prior topic are collected. These range greatly in topic and format, and further hold their own lessons in communication. Do you feel that these lessons are still relevant to 21st Century leaders, and if so, how? Multiple speeches in this section focus on failures of communication; can you recall a situation where you failed to properly communicate and what you may have learned from it?

Finally, how has your experience reading this book caused you to reflect on the importance of your own words, and how do you plan to implement changes in the future to better build trust and effectively communicate?



Additional Resources

Discussion facilitators may want to have participants read the assigned chapters and the short articles below. If this is too time-consuming, the discussion facilitator should consider reading the articles to help him/her prepare to lead a robust discussion

Week 1: Every US President has led the same nation, but no two have led the same culture. The amorphous nature of culture will continue to affect the considerations of any leader, and cultural sensitivity has never been more important to leaders in Army. Multiple speeches in part 1 cover massive changes in culture or highlight the mixed nature of the US. Understanding the importance of culture will only become more of an essential task for successful leaders as time goes on, and below is an article that can assist in developing this skill.

[Are You Prepared to Lead a Diverse Team?](#)

Week 2: While readings of history often include a large pair of rose-tinted glasses, there is not a single leader quoted in *The Presidents Speak* who went their whole tenure without making a few mistakes. Understanding where we fall short and where we have succeeded is an important part of leadership. The article below covers the importance of reflecting on our own performance and communicating our assessment honestly to ourselves and others.

[Reflecting and What It Means to Learn in the Army](#)

Week 3: Speaking decisively, with confidence and authority, is a skill set any leader must develop, although it may come more natural to some than others. Below is a link from The Leaders Edge that discusses how to exercise decisive leadership.

[A Decisive Leader-Leader's Edge](#)

Week 4: Nailing a first introduction can be nerve-racking for anyone, whether during a Change of Command or simply during the transition to a new unit or position. Any leader should want to start off on the right foot and begin to make an impact, and the words we choose can be one of the easiest ways to do so. Read the article below and see how its advice fits with the first impressions given by the speeches in part 4.

[How to make a good impression as a new leader, and why you should! - TS Grale Executive Search](#)



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Week 5: Creating cohesion in your unit and using your words to unite rather than divide can be difficult, but there are countless resources that can help make them happen. Read the article below from the Lead Change Group on how to bring teams together and compare it to some of the speeches you have read so far on the subject of unity.

[How to Bring People Together and Resolve Team Issues - Lead Change \(leadchange.org\)](http://leadchange.org)

Week 6: Words can communicate any number of messages, but more important than these messages can be the trust your audience has in them. Maintaining integrity and the high value of your words can be an ongoing challenge, but there are any number of resources that can help leaders do so. Read the article below from CJO that discusses the worth of one's word, and compare it to the level of trust that the US and the world has had in the various presidents whose speeches appear in the book.

[What is Your Word Worth? - The Center for Junior Officers \(army.mil\)](http://www.army.mil)

This Read2Lead module was produced by 1LT Dylan Nigh. 1LT Nigh holds a Bachelor's in Biology and a Master's in International Relations. He is an avid reader and is passionate about sharing the joys of learning and education with his teammates and peers.