



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

©2022 National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc.

Event

2022 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference

More info: <https://www.ncsbn.org/past-event/2022-ncsbn-leadership-and-public-policy-conference>

Presenter

John Jordan, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

- [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.

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 it?

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.

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."

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

displays, the markings and so on are there when you visit. And maybe they'll be able to show you some

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.

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

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 l

