

TEACHER GUIDE

1984 DOC. #2: Reagan “Morning In America” TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt won his campaign against Herbert Hoover in the early years of the Great Depression using the theme song, “Happy Days Are Here Again.” This optimism was music to the ears of voters who were uncertain about where they stood in times of great change. Before the 1980 election, incumbent President Jimmy Carter had spoken of a “malaise” in the nation brought on by difficult times in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam. Ronald Reagan borrowed a page from FDR’s songbook and pledged to “bring pride back” to a country wracked by crisis.

A “Tuesday Team” of advertising specialists created the “Morning in America” television commercials. The upbeat and positive message of these commercials stood in stark contrast to the negative commercials that made up the bulk of both campaigns’ political advertising. Reagan was a master of political imagery. The *New York Times* Hedrick Smith said, “no presidency has been more image conscious or image driven than that of Ronald Reagan” (Melder 193). Reagan’s genius was in appearing to fit the image of how citizens of the United States wished to see themselves: self-reliant, patriotic, and connected to family and community.

The commercial you will see is titled, “Prouder, Stronger, Better.” It was part of the Reagan campaign’s “Morning in America” series.

> **Play** the video clip. **Ask** half the class to listen closely to the words and the other half to focus on the images.

QUESTION | **What messages are communicated in this commercial? What words are used to support these messages?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The commercial says that the U.S. is doing well under Reagan’s presidency and switching to Mondale would return the country to bad times.

EVIDENCE | words: “It’s morning again,” “more men and women will go to work,” “interest and inflation are down,” “why would we want to return?”

QUESTION | **What are the themes you saw in the images?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | The themes of the images include moving ahead, family connection, and patriotic spirit.

EVIDENCE | images that show moving ahead are people going to work and moving into new homes; images of family are the wedding, hugs and kisses; images of patriotism are the Capitol dome, man raising the flag

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Reagan “Morning in America” TV Commercial

Video Clip
Length: 30 seconds

Commercial Script:

VO It’s morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history. With interest rates and inflation down, more people are buying new homes and our new families can have confidence in the future. America today is prouder, and stronger, and better. Why would we want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?

SEE NOTE →

QUESTION **Is this a message-based commercial, an issues-oriented commercial, or an attack commercial? Explain your answer.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER This is a message-based commercial.

EVIDENCE upbeat images and text with no direct reference to policies or to Reagan's opponent

QUESTION **Reagan's "Morning in America" series of TV commercials is considered one of the most memorable, and possibly the most successful, in campaign history. Why do you think this was the case?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The "Morning in America" commercials associated the candidate with emotional images that evoked positive feelings about the nation and the future. The country was still recovering from a loss in confidence stemming from the Watergate scandal and the recession under Carter, as well as from the traumas of the Vietnam War and the Iranian hostage crisis. Using classic advertising strategies, the Reagan team linked the President to idealized images of the United States that rose above these depressing memories and embraced a hopeful future.

QUESTION **Who is the target audience for this commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER White, suburban, middle-class voters are the target audience.

EVIDENCE nearly all the people in the commercial appear to be white and middle class; images of suburban homes (interest rates and inflation would be concerns of this population)

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of television commercials today that use a similar positive image to sell their product?

Is there information left out of this commercial that might be useful in judging the record of the Reagan presidency from 1981-1984? If so, what would it be and why wasn't it included?

NOTE

Mondale was Jimmy Carter's Vice President during the recession of the 1970s.

ADDITIONAL INFO

Phil Dusenberry, one of the leaders of the "Tuesday Team," had many years of experience making soft drink commercials before he joined the Reagan campaign. The soft focus and "happy story" style of these commercials is very similar to Pepsi commercials of that time. Dusenberry explained that the commercials were designed "not to [make viewers] think about or understand so much as to feel. That's the most powerful part of advertising. It stays with people longer and better" (American Museum of the Moving Image, 1984).

Reagan's team unveiled their image-making strategy with an 18-minute-long film at the Republican convention. Some media analysts attempted to point out the ways in which the marketers were using their trade to manipulate voters into "purchasing" their candidate. But these criticisms failed as Reagan's image and idealistic message resonated with so many people (Adatto 22).

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Economic Issues
"Family Man"

Target Audience (middle class whites)