

# The 100

Insights and lessons from 100 of the  
greatest speeches ever delivered

Simon Maier and Jeremy Kourdi



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Fifth Floor  
32–38 Saffron Hill  
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United Kingdom  
T: +44 (0)20 7421 8120  
F: +44 (0)20 7421 8121  
sales@marshallcavendish.co.uk  
www.marshallcavendish.co.uk

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Jordan was once again a keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in 1992, the one at which Bill Clinton was nominated. In 1994 Clinton appointed her to the Commission on Immigration Reform and in the same year presented her with the Medal of Freedom.

Jordan became a champion for African-Americans or women seeking office. She loved politics because it meant she could make a difference and was wedded to the idea and the words of the Constitution. She felt strongly that politicians were but public servants in the very real sense.

Jordan remains an inspiration to many people. She was born poor, female and black but broke barriers to succeed. Her modesty was genuine while her oratory soared.

## John F. Kennedy

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.”

Inaugural address, Washington DC, USA, Friday 20 January 1961

**John Fitzgerald Kennedy**, America’s 35th president, was born on 29 May 1917 and was assassinated on 22 November 1963. He was one of the most gifted orators of modern times – for several reasons. First, he was appealing partly because of his youth, education, good looks and wealth. He was also a master at tapping into the optimistic spirit of the age. He understood the times in which he lived, the nature of his audiences and, above all, how to connect with people.

### Lessons from John F. Kennedy

**Make the most of your own qualities, experience and advantages.** Kennedy’s relative youth (and inexperience) meant that he was seen as someone who would be optimistic, fresh and able to make changes. He had a deep knowledge of and interest in foreign affairs and so made issues of national security and global concerns a hallmark of many of his speeches. He had also served heroically during the Pacific War, commanding a patrol boat that was sunk near the Solomon Islands. Despite an injury to his back, he saved the life of one man by hauling him through the water to an island before gathering together his crew and ensuring

that they were safe. When Kennedy spoke of patriotism, freedom and public service, which he frequently did, people listened.

**Inspire your audience with a clear vision and a challenge.** Kennedy begins his inaugural with a dramatic and powerful opening which makes it very clear that he is a progressive: “We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.” And consider these words from Kennedy’s speech at Rice University on 12 September 1962: “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things – not because they are easy, but because they are hard. Because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our abilities and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win.” Many of Kennedy’s speeches are littered with stirring calls to action and challenges, all with a lasting and profound impact. Bold, audacious goals set at the right time and in the right way undeniably cause excitement, enthusiasm and fire the imagination.

**Use technology and the most appropriate tools to best effect, but not just because they are there.** People really don’t much care for PowerPoint, unless there’s a precise purpose. If there is a purpose, keep it minimal. Kennedy understood the need to use the relatively new medium of television to reach a wide audience. For example, in September 1960, during the campaign for the presidency, Kennedy debated with Republican candidate and vice president Richard Nixon in the first televised presidential debate in US history. Radio listeners thought that Nixon had won, but the huge television audience considered Kennedy the winner because he was seen to be more relaxed and more comfortable with the occasion than his rival. He was also better-looking, something that shouldn’t matter of course but invariably does. The debates are now regarded as the point at which the medium of television began to play a dominant role in US national politics.

**Empathize and show support.** “Ich bin ein Berliner” in German actually means: “I am a chocolate-covered doughnut”. What Kennedy should have said when addressing a crowd of over 80 per cent of the population of West Berlin on 26 June 1963 was: “Ich bin Berliner”. It didn’t matter

whatsoever. He travelled a long way to show understanding and support to the beleaguered population of West Germany and this overcame any shortcomings he may have had with the German language. In fact, it was seen as endearing.

**Work with talented people. If you can't write great speeches, get someone on board who can.** Kennedy was a great speaker, but he was supported by a brilliant team of writers, foremost of whom was Ted Sorensen, Kennedy's close advisor. It was Sorensen's phrases that ignited the imagination of a generation and his book, *Counselor*, highlights some of Kennedy's attributes as a communicator.

**Do something memorable.** Kennedy's life was littered with memorable moments: from being the son of one of America's wealthiest men to being a war hero, senator and the youngest president. His stirring speeches helped his audience feel that it knew him already or was, at the very least, interested in what he was doing. In a sense, the audience was already warmed up and favourably disposed (at least, as far as is possible in the partisan world of politics) before he even said a word. Barack Obama has a similar gift.

## A Legacy

Interestingly, there were relatively few legislative accomplishments during Kennedy's presidency. Much of the landmark legislation that he initiated (such as action on civil rights) was carried through after his death. Uniquely, Kennedy's legacy is his aspiration, his spirit and challenge, his sentiments and his perceived strength and nobility. These continue to inspire modern politicians across the political spectrum and, perhaps more significantly, people across the world.

Politicians and business leaders across the world today listen carefully to John F. Kennedy's speech structures and delivery.

reconciliation, justice and reconstruction. Japan is ready to play its part in this challenging but vital undertaking ...”

Koizumi was regarded by Japan and the United States, for example, as an agent for change. His impact on Japan’s domestic politics, on its economic policy, and on the international community will be long-felt. Before he took charge of the country in 2001, Japan had seen ten leaders in twelve years. Its economy was tiring and its foreign policy was regarded as weak, certainly with little regional or international influence. Koizumi ruled with a firm hand and a vision from which he rarely wavered. He is said to have put Japan on the world map and to have managed an economic revival envied by many.

Unlike many leaders of nations, Koizumi supported America by sending to Iraq a small number of troops – an important moment for Japan, for obvious reasons.

## James Lavenson

Now frankly I think that the hotel business is ... antique. There has been practically no change in the attitude of room clerks at hotels since Joseph and Mary arrived at that inn in Bethlehem and that clerk told them that he’d lost their reservation.”

“Think Strawberries” speech to the American Marketing Association, Plaza Hotel, New York, USA, 1973

**James Lavenson** (who was born in 1919 and died on 19 September 1998) was president and chief executive officer of the Plaza Hotel in New York from 1972 to 1975. In that time, he initiated radical changes and turned around the fortunes of the hotel, making it highly profitable. His (then) novel attitudes towards selling, and empowering staff to sell, was refreshing and pioneering. He was also regarded by employees as an extraordinary manager who made work collaborative and fun.

### Lessons from James Lavenson

**Stories are a valuable part of speeches.** James Lavenson’s famous “Think Strawberries” speech started out as an article that tells the entertaining story of how he turned more than 1,100 employees of the Plaza into a

highly motivated and successful customer-focused sales force. The entire speech is comprised of anecdotes. Every factor in the sales success story is supported by a brief story, charmingly and amusingly told and taken mostly from his own experience. It's the sharing of that experience in a fun way that audiences liked. All audiences like stories and good ones, well related, are remembered. Lavenson had a naturally easy style, perfectly suited to speeches about selling. He didn't need to hector an audience; his simple stories and his positive "can-do" attitude made him enormously popular.

**Self-deprecating humour works – but you *have* to know your audience.**

Lavenson used old-fashioned humour and exaggeration in his speech: "... One day early in my career there ... I heard the phone ring at the bell captain's desk and no one was answering it. So to give a demonstration to my staff that there was no job too demeaning for me, I went over and I picked up the phone and said, 'Bell captain's desk. May I help you?' The voice came on the other end. 'Pass it on, Lavenson's in the Lobby.'"

Lavenson steered away from clichés and delighted in tales about his experience. That enabled him to share what worked and what didn't. He was honest (and very entertaining) about his mistakes and gave listeners tacit permission to make errors as long as they learned from the experience. The self-deprecation of this speech works because he establishes a rapport with the audience and there is an intimacy, a kind of warm, momentary friendship. His achievements went before him and audiences were fascinated to know exactly how this man had achieved. The speech doesn't make anything sound complicated or difficult and he doesn't aim to baffle. He is a great proponent of common sense.

**Sincerity and genuine concern matter.** Lavenson was of the view that, if his staff knew more about the hotel as a whole, then they could offer that information to clients and prospective clients. He made sure that his employees were more knowledgeable and he put into practice simple changes that made a big difference. For example, he got them to remember their guests' names.

Lavenson established an excellent induction programme – rare in those days. And he "walked the walk", again long before that became fashionable for business leaders, although it seems that many still don't stray from the safety of their offices or executive floors. James Lavenson was one of the first CEOs to understand what employee communication was about – for example, recognizing that one-third of the hotel's staff were Hispanic and spoke no English. One third of the staff also therefore had no understanding of any printed materials in the hotel for guests or for

training. Lavenson promptly ensured that all internal communications were in both English and Spanish. He also ensured that English lessons were available. When he made speeches, Lavenson told audiences what he did – simply and with the added element of fun.

**A simple idea can become a strategy.** “Think Strawberries” was James Lavenson’s way of saying that all staff in the hotel had to “ask for the order” and not wait until customers demanded a service. The strawberry issue was nothing to do with buying the fruit out of season. It was about selling strawberries. He was perturbed to learn that when people in the dining room were offered dessert, those on diets would refuse. Lavenson’s point was that staff should make a small effort and suggest strawberries as an option. What started as an effort to sell a particular dessert became a strategy for the up-selling of *all* hotel services.

**End your speech quickly and sweetly.** The endings of speeches can often be over-long. Lavenson doesn’t thank anyone for listening to him, he doesn’t thank people for their time or even for their attention. Tied to the main theme of the speech, the ending is elegant and charming. And short. And sweet.

## A Legacy

Lavenson was instrumental in selling The Plaza to Western International Hotels: “Everybody sells, and that includes me. I made sales calls with the Plaza salesman, and I have only one regret. I got so worked up myself over the strawberry programme that I was indiscriminate about whom I called on. And one day I called on Western International Hotels, and sold them the whole place.”

Lavenson’s legacy is that he changed the way a hotel group operated. He also established a sales philosophy still used today in businesses around the world. It wasn’t an easy philosophy to sell to his own staff. As he says in this speech, “But ... they were very quick to point out the negative: ‘Nobody eats dessert any more,’ they said, ‘everybody is on a diet ...’ ‘So sell them strawberries,’ we said, ‘but sell them!’”

The problems that Lavenson faced in the 1970s are still evident to some extent in all service industries. Yet his approach contributed a fresh focus on issues of customer service (ideas that were further developed by management writers such as Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in their book *In Search of Excellence*).

The Plaza flourished under Lavenson’s management and was sold at a profit. His management ideas hit the textbooks and he was asked many

times to consider a business school career. He did become a speaker in much demand for entertaining audiences with his refreshing ideas of how to motivate people and how to get everyone in an organization to sell. His employers were delighted.

## Lee Kuan Yew

Democracy should not be made an alibi for inertia ... The real issue is whether any country's political system, irrespective of whether it is democratic or authoritarian, can forge a consensus on the policies needed for the economy to grow and create jobs for all, and can ensure that these basic policies are implemented consistently."

Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture, "India in an Asian Renaissance", New Delhi, India, Monday 21 November 2005

**Lee Kuan Yew** was born on 16 September 1923. He was leader of the People's Action Party (PAP) and the first prime minister of the Republic of Singapore, remaining in office from 1959 to 1990. Commentators have it that it was Lee who led Singapore's (much admired) development to become a world-class and burgeoning economy. His and Singapore's success have been regarded as an excellent example of shrewd investment and a fresh understanding of world economies. Certainly, Lee's influence has been one of the most powerful in South- East Asia.

### Lessons from Lee Kuan Yew

**Share your analysis.** Lee Kuan Yew provided an intelligent leadership to a country that forty years ago counted for little in the region. At the outset of his administration, he showed himself to be far-sighted and created a compelling case for businesses and other countries outside the region to invest in Singapore. In speeches, he had a reputation for superb logic and excellent reasoning, which helped him and his government to effect change, sometimes draconian social change. His ability to use facts and information was recognized as first-class. For example, speaking in New Delhi in 2005, at the age of 82, on the subject of an Asian renaissance, Lee marshalled a wealth of facts and data to support his central argument