



Former Reagan Strategist: Public Opinion Research Sound Basis for Leadership

BY BRENT EVANS

Ronald Reagan regularly relied on Richard Wirthlin's advice. The way the former president used that advice, which was based on pioneering public opinion research, is a model for presidential leadership, according to Wirthlin, Reagan's former chief strategist and pollster.

Wirthlin was speaking during the inaugural Myles Martel Lecture in Leadership and Public Opinion April 24. He gave his largely student audience an inside look at the Reagan administration.

Strategic public opinion research was essential in helping the president persuade the public at several critical junctures, Wirthlin said. And persuading the public, he said, is the heart of leadership: "Leadership is not raw power, not even authority, not a title or position. Leadership is the power to persuade."

As an example, Wirthlin recounted his own role in the former president's re-election campaign against Walter Mondale in 1984. After Mondale's election as the Democratic candidate for president, polls indicated that Reagan held only a slim lead over Mondale. And so the Republican presidential candidate called in Wirthlin to design a strategy to widen his lead.

Making use of polls, Wirthlin constructed a "map" of issues on which voters based their assessments of each candidate. He found that Mondale held an advantage in two areas: voters favored his proposal to raise taxes and decrease the deficit, and he was seen as less likely to start a war with the Soviet Union.

Reagan could counter this, Wirthlin said, by "making Mondale's taxes

seem unfair, emphasizing Reagan's strong leadership, and making the link between strong defensive preparedness and preserving world peace." Wirthlin reversed public opinion by designing television ads targeted to these goals, and Reagan was re-elected by a landslide.

Wirthlin said Reagan's re-election strategy is a model for effective presidential leadership. For example, he said, it was Reagan's duty as a leader to develop a vision for national defense, but his aides' duty to work out some of the details of communicating that vision. "It is the president, who articulates the vision, establishes principles that give context for that vision, and develops a pragmatic roadmap," Wirthlin said, and others do the rest.

Developing these kinds of insights into leadership is the goal of the new lecture series, says Myles Martel, CLAS '65, whose gift established the series. "The University is the ideal place for advancing our understanding of leadership," he says.

Martel, president and founder of Martel & Associates, a firm specializing in media and crisis communication, recalls being influenced during his years at UConn by debate coach John Vlandis, now an emeritus professor.

The lecture series adds to UConn's prominence in strategic public opinion research, says Kenneth Dautrich, an associate professor of political science and the director of the Center for Survey Research and Analysis. The Center, the political science department, and the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research provide UConn with a good grounding in the field, he says, "but the lecture series provides a missing piece."

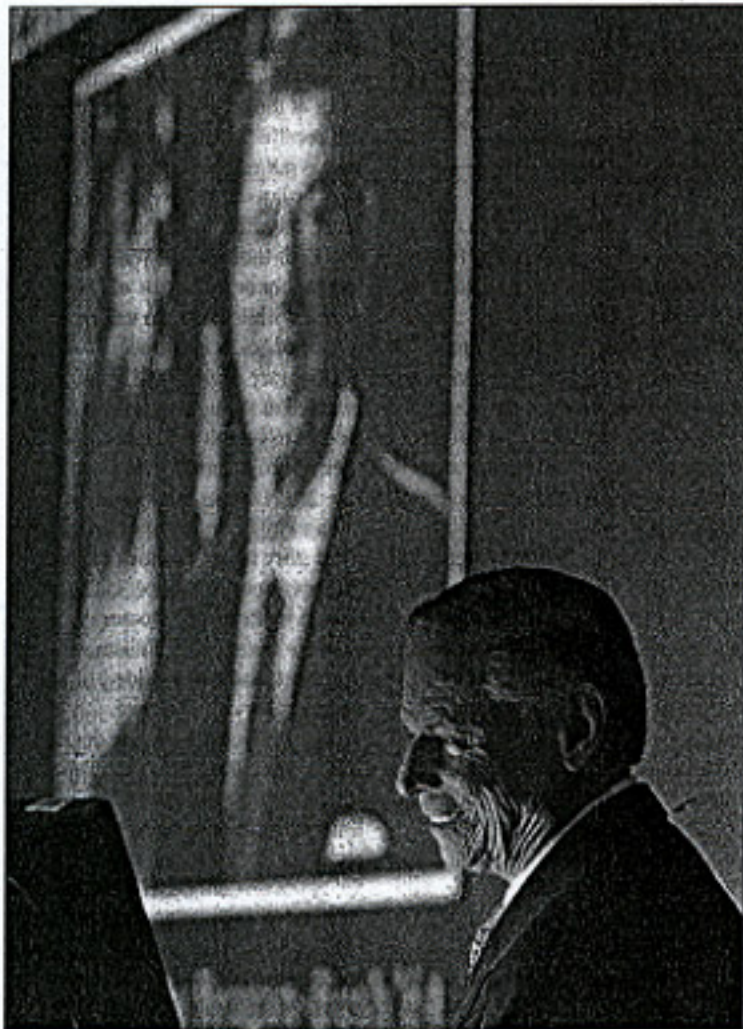


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Richard Wirthlin, '65, President Reagan's chief strategist, gives the inaugural Myles Martel Lecture in Leadership and Public Opinion.