

FROM CANDIDATE TO PRESIDENT: OBAMA'S DISCOURSE TWO YEARS LATER

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Abstract: *The article explores Barack Obama's most notable speeches after becoming president. The authors intend to write a sequel to their 2009 paper *Yes We Can: A New American Identity in the Speeches of Barack Obama*, which looked at Obama's campaign discourse, and investigate if his rhetoric has changed in the first half of his mandate.*

Keywords: *American Dream, core values, political discourse, rhetoric*

1. Introduction

The charismatic American president has been highly acclaimed for his well-crafted speeches. This article explores Barack Obama's discourse coming in office and it is intended as a sequel to our 2009 paper entitled *Yes We Can: A New American Identity in the Speeches of Barack Obama*, which looked at Obama's campaign discourse. We will focus on five of Obama's most recent speeches, namely the two official *State of the Union Addresses* (2010, 2011b), the *Memorial Service Speech* (2011a), commemorating the January 2011 attack in Tucson, the Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech (2009b), and his first speech to the joint Chambers of Congress (2009a).

Our aim is to investigate if his rhetoric has changed in the first half of his mandate and if, to quote Mario Cuomo, one truly campaigns in poetry but ends up governing in prose (Waldman 2010, online). In other words, we would like to see if, after a candidate is successfully elected, his/her speeches maintain their campaign-time soaring idealism or they become bogged down by the realities of the presidential job.

We will try to establish whether Obama and his team of speech writers still draw inspiration from the same sources as before the election: the fundamental American documents and certain emblematic Democratic leaders, like Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Simultaneously, we will also analyze his speeches in search for the core American symbols and

values on which his electoral speeches greatly relied. For instance, in the past he structured his discourses around the “American Dream” and tenets such as patriotism, faith and family values.

The success of Barack Obama’s discourse, beyond the chord that he strikes with the American collective consciousness, also stems from what analysts agree is skilful use of rhetorical devices that originate from the Roman tradition of public speaking. Thus, in this paper, we will also look at some of the most important rhetorical devices he employs. Finally, we will consider some criticism and draw our conclusions.

2. Role Models and Fundamental Documents

Obama’s election was “greeted with a wave of ideological euphoria not seen since the days of Kennedy. Once again, America could show its true face- purposeful but peaceful; firm but generous; humane, respectful, multicultural to the world” (Ali 2010:37).

It has often been argued that Obama has the makings of a Lincoln or Roosevelt of our times, and he himself repeatedly alluded to these illustrious predecessors. What is more, Obama also frequently mentioned John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Martin Luther King in his electoral speeches, and he continues to do so in his post-electoral discourse. For instance, in his Nobel Peace Prize speech he refers to Kennedy’s vision of peace, “based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions” (Obama 2009b, online).

In the same speech Obama recalls Martin Luther King, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, in four separate paragraphs. He praises King’s use of non-violence and indirectly criticizes violence as a means of solving problems, despite the fact that the US was still embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time.

True to his tactics, Obama takes this statement further and embeds Martin Luther King’s fight into his own life story, presenting himself and his success as a result of the civil rights movement:

As someone who stands here as direct consequence of Dr. King’s life work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there is nothing weak, nothing passive, nothing naive in the creed and lives of Ghandi and King. (Obama 2009b, online)

Yet, as the president of a country at war, Obama is not a pure idealist, and he insists that violence is sometimes a necessary evil, when, for example, the American people are under threat. Tellingly, for the first time in his speeches, he also praises Ronald Reagan for his “efforts on arms control” and for the way in which he managed to improve relations with the former Soviet Union.

As for the forefathers of the United States, so often remembered in his electoral speeches, they are not forgotten in the post-electoral ones either. Thus, during the Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the current American president points out that:

We are the heirs of the fortitude and foresight of generations past, and it is a legacy for which my own country is rightfully proud. (Obama 2009b, online)

Indeed, Americans remember the past while building the future; they are grateful to their predecessors, but also have the responsibility of taking their work further. And their president makes sure they do not forget the fact that the greatness of America lies in the principles expressed by its “founding fathers”.

3. American Dream and Core Values

Throughout his electoral campaign Obama has inserted his life story into his political discourse, frequently stressing the fact that he was living the “American Dream”, and that, indeed in America anything was possible if one worked hard enough in order to achieve one’s goals. This theme seems to have faded in his post-electoral discourse, in the sense that the president does not refer to his biography all that often anymore, but he still obsessively hints at American ideals of hard work, unity, patriotism, democracy and faith.

For instance, in the 2011 State of the Union Address he blends his success story with that of ordinary Americans, all of whom have done extraordinary things:

That dream is why I can stand here before you tonight. That dream is why a working-class kid from Scranton can sit behind me. That dream is why someone who began by sweeping the floors of his father’s Cincinnati bar can preside as Speaker of the House in the greatest nation on Earth.

In the 2010 State of the Union Address, Obama links the American Dream to a very stringent concern of his, namely creating jobs. What is more, in the final sentences of this particular speech he returns to this idea and points out that Americans are not quitters. Nevertheless, he always underlines that none of this is possible without hard work, an idea that is a constant in his pre- and post-electoral discourse.

Another core American value is patriotism and upon accepting the Nobel Peace Prize Obama insists on the American soldiers’ courage to sacrifice, as an expression of “devotion to country, to cause, to comrades in arms” (Obama 2009b, online). He praises the American troops once more in the 2011 State of the Union Address, when he thanks them for their patriotism and willingness to support democracy worldwide. Democracy is, of course, an American landmark and in the same speech Obama ties it to patriotism and American exceptionalism: “I know there

isn't a person here who would trade places with any other nation on Earth" (Obama 2011b, online).

To end this section of our paper, it is important to notice that Obama is consistent in his use of certain ethical principles that are considered defining for and by the American people. He adopts the same nondiscriminatory standpoint as before, celebrating diversity, equal opportunity and fair treatment.

4. Politics of Hope and Change

A 2009 editorial in the British newspaper *The Guardian* draws a parallel between the discourse of another American Democratic President in crisis, Jimmy Carter, and that of Barack Obama. It emphasizes how, at a time of unrest and insecurity, there are two important currencies that politicians can rely on: one is money and the other is hope (*The Springs of Hope*, 2009).

When it comes to money, Barack Obama found himself embattled, with the USA facing an unprecedented economic turmoil, Congress being now divided between Republicans and Democrats and vocal rows igniting around the yearly federal budget. Hope, on the other hand, was one of the steadfast elements of Obama's discourse all throughout his presidential campaign, starting with the now famous 2004 speech, dubbed by the press *The Audacity of Hope* (Bran and Pele 2009:227).

Hope has long been an intrinsic part of American society and a driving force behind its founding principles, embedded in their psyche as part of their mystique. It is part of the American Dream and it underpins the rhetoric of change. It is also invisibly inscribed in the pursuit of happiness. It is the driving force behind Obama's famous "Yes, we can" slogan. These reasons alone make hope a profitable commodity in terms of political discourse.

The same *Guardian* editorial speaks about the way in which Obama projects the 2009 economic crisis as an opportunity for Americans (*The Springs of Hope*, 2009). He appeals to the American nation's "can-do" spirit with the message that resurgence is not enough, what the country needs to do is reinvent itself, in other words, change. This is strongest in the 2009 speech before Congress and the State of the Union Addresses (2010, 2011b) we have taken into consideration.

Nevertheless, while change remains on the surface of Obama's speeches, hope, it seems, takes a back seat, away from the limelight. It appears that the President's discourse is indeed less idealistic and more prosaic than before, focusing, among other things, on roads, taxes, energy resources, jobs, and healthcare.

It is probably not a coincidence that hope makes a soaring comeback in the *Memorial Service* speech, also known as *Together We Thrive*, that Obama delivered in Tucson at a

ceremony commemorating the victims of the January 2011 shooting. It is this speech with its emotional background that allows the American President to recapture some of his pre-election rhetorical impetus. For once his task was not to rehash the problems that the country faces on a variety of fronts but to focus on the stories of regular Americans, which are an inherent part of his discourse.

In the speech he spends time on each of those whose lives were taken away and on those whom they left behind, while at the same time, tying all of that in with American ideals, such as work, protection, family, and activism. The build-up finally touches on the most tragic of the losses, that of nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green, whose age, innocence and interest in politics turned her into a vehicle for a larger point: what American society can do to live up to the innocent ideals and hopes of a child at a time of vitriol and cynicism.

What makes Christina Taylor Green's story even more poignant and connected to hope is that she was born on 11 September 2001, another day of tragedy in American memory. She, together with other children born that day, had been featured in a photography book, called *Faces of Hope*. Next to her picture there were wishes for this child born on that fateful day, wishes that Obama mentions at the end of his Tucson speech, making it even more emotional:

"I hope you help those in need," read one. "I hope you know all the words to the National Anthem and sing it with your hand over your heart." "I hope" – "I hope you jump in rain puddles" (Obama 2010a, online).

Obama and his team seem to use all these coincidences to their own advantage yet commentators agree that this is one of the president's better speeches. Indeed, what makes this speech stand out of the group we have analyzed is the fact that the message can be more closely associated with Barack Obama's campaign idealism. Joking about salmon, the most memorable moment of his 2010 State of the Union (Shear 2011, online), does not compare to the poetry that hope and change bring to one's discourse. Unfettered by facts, *Together We Thrive* is an exception in Obama's post-election rhetoric, and, at the same time, another argument in favour of our premise that one does in fact govern in prose.

On the other hand, one of Obama's critics, Tariq Ali (2010:78) stresses in his book *The Obama Syndrome*, that rhetoric is not enough, that Obama's rhetoric was impressive, but no alternative plan was mapped for the electorate. He promised little but insisted that only the Democrats could pull the economy out of the recession (Ali 2010: 83).

5. Unity

Another important element in Barack Obama's presidential campaign discourse was unity (Bran and Pele 2009:228), the unity of a very diverse country where he himself was seen as

belonging to a minority. Therefore, it is no surprise that during his election campaign, Obama presented himself as a politician who could unite the country. He made of himself an embodiment of American diversity pursuing traditional American ideals. It is the reason why so many of his critics accused him of creating a brand out of his own image and past. He was determined to come across as a consensual president, one who could please both Democrats and Republicans alike. Nevertheless, writer Tariq Ali (2010:78) suggests that “he ended up annoying most of them.”

The idea of unity remains a focal point of Barack Obama’s discourse, especially at the present moment when America’s diversity seems to be more divisive than ever.

We believe that in a country where every race and faith and point of view can be found, we are still bound together as one people; that we share common hopes and a common creed. (Obama 2011b, online)

Obama’s discourse however never stops referring to unity in connection with Americans and American society. It is present in all the five speeches we have analysed and, again, it is interwoven with the greater American ideals and values.

6. New Themes

What our study of Obama’s post-election discourse has yielded is that necessity has bred a wealth of new themes in the American President’s speeches. However, unlike the constants of Obama’s pre-election discourse it is interesting to notice that these themes are decidedly more run-of-the-mill.

One of the most visible ones is unsurprisingly jobs. Obama speaks about creating new jobs in all the three speeches before Congress. Another perennial is taxes, which feature prominently in the 2009 and 2010 speeches to Congress. In the former he promised to cut taxes and in the latter he underscores how he and his government delivered on that promise.

The 2010 and 2011 State of the Union Addresses feature another theme, which is somewhat more surprising than jobs and taxes: infrastructure. Whether it is roads or technology, Obama insists on the importance of rebuilding these bridges of communication.

Education is another concern reflected in the State of the Union Addresses. It is closely connected to other tangent themes, such as family, parenthood and children. Interestingly, the President repeatedly urges parents to turn off the TV and read to their children, presumably signalling the sociological and psychological problems related to excessive media consumption and alienation. What Obama is trying to achieve is a return to the steadfast American ideal of good parenthood instilling American values in their children and thus engendering a cohesive American society.

Other themes Obama mentions concern new sources of energy, innovation, the war effort, immigration, civil rights, gay rights, security and healthcare.

New themes bring new catchphrases to replace the old and arguably the more famous ones, such *Yes We Can*. There are no rallying calls anymore in Barack Obama's post-election discourse but we do come across a few that are reminiscent of his campaign fervour. And just like in his *Acceptance Speech*, these sound bites are attached to another staple of Obama's discourse, namely the human stories.

"We are not quitters" is one such example. It is present only in the 2009 speech to Congress, which Obama delivered shortly after being sworn in and it is closely connected to the story of a young girl, her derelict school in South Carolina and her determination not to let these obstacles deprive her of an education. A similar sounding message appears in the 2011 State of the Union, "We do big things", in connection to the story of Brandon Fisher whose drilling machine helped rescue the 33 Chilean miners trapped underground.

In both speeches, Obama quotes the two people whose stories he tells in order to give even more strength to these short-lived catchphrases. The idea behind them is simple and effective: to provide encouragement to Americans in crisis, to simply show that they can. These stories and quotes may very well be a subtle embodiment of Obama's campaign message of *Yes, we can*.

7. Rhetorical devices

Being "the most literate president in recent memory" (Ali 2010:111), Obama's discourse has remained catchy and coherent after his election. Even though there have been changes in the themes of Obama's speeches, he and his writing team remain faithful to the Ciceronian devices that have brought him so much praise. Two of the most evident the rhetorical devices that still buttress his speeches are the anaphora and the tricolon.

7.1. The Anaphora

It is a rhetorical device based on the repetition of a word or set of words at the beginning of a sentence. It is the prevalent figure of style employed by Obama in all his speeches, evidently used for emphasis:

We cut taxes for 95% of working families. We cut taxes for small businesses. We cut taxes for first-time homebuyers. We cut taxes for parents trying to care for their children. We cut taxes for eight million Americans paying for college. (Obama 2010, online)

7.2. The Tricolon

It is also based on repetition, consisting of a succession of three phrases, words or even whole sentences, grouped around the same idea. Obama also uses a variant of this device called the tetracolon, which is a series of four phrases, words or sentences.

Now is the time to jumpstart job creation, re-start lending, and invest in areas like energy, health care, and education. (Obama 2009a, online)

8. Criticism

Critics have claimed that Obama's 2008 campaign was built around a cult of personality, and that Obama was the focal point of his own electoral discourse. Certainly, he has embedded his own life story, or his version of it, into his electoral speeches (see Bran and Pele 2009). One particular observer remarked that the then candidate was the embodiment of his own message (Corsi 2008: 213) because it appeared that he was living the American Dream. Moreover, he always presented himself as adhering to the work ethic and values advanced in his discourse.

Others have noticed that Obama's presidential campaign as a whole was conducted as a well oiled and costly advertising campaign, and that after he came into office he failed to deliver his campaign promises. Thus, Tariq Ali claims in his book *The Obama Syndrome* (2010) that slogans such as "Change we can believe in" or the ultra-famous "Yes, we can" were used in order "to win support without offering anything in return except fine words, and on that level the new chief is a master" (Ali 2010:8). He goes on to argue that:

Little of what Obama actually said in a combination of blandishments, special pleading and specious arguments justified much optimism, but the manner of his speaking, the color of his skin and the constant invocation of the word "change" helped create a new spirit in the country – Obamania – that propelled him to the White House (2010:8).

Ali (2010:78) believes that Obama is nothing more than a "skillful and gifted machine politician", one who is "unable and unwilling to deliver any serious reforms". "Temperamentally, he is not a renovator but a conciliator" (Ali 2010:88), and this further undermines his "rhetoric of change" and dismisses it as empty words spoken by an opportunist.

Finally, Obama's speeches recycle American principles that have been rehashed by many other campaigners and presidents. These are, however, sound bites that the voters and the public at large are familiar with and what they respond best to: the American Dream, freedom, rights, American exceptionalism, etc.

In point of fact, journalist M. Novak (2009, online) considers that for all this talk of change and "revolution", what Obama's speeches actually embody is a "re-volution", a return to the point of departure, a repetition of the same age-old ideals. In other words, what he says is

nothing new. This may also stem from the fact that, due to his “otherness” in the eyes of a part of his electorate, he needed to reconfirm those familiar principles even more strongly.

9. Conclusion

The tone and content of Obama’s speeches have ironically fallen victim to the president’s own mantra: they have changed.

Barack Obama’s speeches have lost their campaign utopianism, starting as early as the *Inaugural* (Bran and Pele 2009, Novak 2009), while gaining heavily in realism. They focus on real-life issues (jobs, taxes, the budget, roads, healthcare, etc.) while striving to blend them with what were the major themes of Obama’s campaign (change, hope, unity).

This time, rhetoric is measured up against facts and deeds, giving commentators, supporters, detractors and the public at large the opportunity to scrutinize his words against his government’s achievements. So far his delivery has been deemed lacklustre (Kennedy 2010, online). His post-election speeches have been described as “bland” and “inoffensive” at best and graded as mostly “B-” (idem). It is a marked change from the reaction stirred by his campaign discourse. In fact out of all the five speeches we have analysed in this paper, only the one delivered in Tucson appears to have struck the same resonant chord with listeners that his earlier speeches had.

It also goes to show that indeed the soaring idealism of his campaign has been bogged down by the realities of the job, that prose has in fact replaced poetry.

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