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**The Oratory of Barack Obama**

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A few days before the 2004 Democratic Convention opened, speechwriter and Democratic consultant Bob Shrum visited the mostly unknown keynote speaker for that convention’s second night. The speaker’s draft impressed Shrum who had been working on the acceptance speech for nominee John Kerry. ‘Here was a politician who could write,’ he wrote later (Shrum, 2007: 461). There was a problem, though. Both the speaker and Kerry had one line which read exactly the same: ‘I see an America—red, white, and blue.’ Would the speaker, Shrum asked, let Kerry have it?

Barack Obama didn't hesitate. He changed his to ‘There's not a red America. There's not a blue America. There’s a United States of America!’ (Obama, 2004). Shrum was correct about Obama’s writing skills. He had improved on the original. Later, delivering it, Obama displayed another skill of which Shrum had until then been unaware: Obama could *orate*.

Obama was a few days away from turning 43 that night. While political speeches inevitably shade the truth, his contained one line that was completely true – a description of those 43 years he called ‘my improbable story’ (Obama, 2004). It was. He was the grandson of a Kenyan goat herder, whose middle name was Hussein, and now he was running for a seat in the United States Senate. Even more improbably, he won. What made Obama able to hurdle the obstacles in that race, and repeat those same skills four years later to become president of a country whose major parties had never even nominated an African American?

Speeches rarely determine presidential races. Certainly the global economic collapse and growing unpopularity of the Iraq war were more important factors in 2008. But Obama’s 2004 keynote made his presidential race possible, and in 2008 his startlingly effective oratory helped win that race for him. While in American political life speechwriters often make the rhetorical choices for national candidates, Obama seems to have written much of that 2004 speech himself (Bernstein, 2007). But the techniques listeners heard that night are remarkably similar to what they heard in his two campaigns and six years as President.

In this chapter we examine what Obama likes, both in texts and delivery, and what makes them effective. After briefly considering his historical and biographical context, we analyse three core elements of Obama’s oratory and rhetoric. These are his *rhetorical techniques,* such as the learned or practiced devices in the text (rhetoric)and his *oratorical techniques*, such as body language, vocal variety, and other elements of non-verbal communication. We also consider how Obama uses those techniques to communicate policy and themes, including his use of the three elements of Aristotelian rhetoric*, ethos, logos,* and *pathos*. Our section on *strategy* includes an analysis of two specific questions that have often arisen in discussions of Obama’s rhetoric: why Obama’s rhetorical strategies differed between his 2008 campaign and years as President and whether or not he adopted a specific strategy when it came to issues of race. In drawing our conclusions we make no pretense of having read every Obama speech. Indeed, modern American presidents now speak over 400 times a year. Yet together we have examined hundreds of his speeches, and have chosen to focus upon eight which are representative the total as much as any sample case. These are his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote; his 2005 stem-cell research floor speech; his 2008 victory speech; his 2008 speech on religion entitled A More Perfect Union; his 2009 Inaugural; his 2010 Martin Luther King Day speech; his 2013 speech on Syria; and finally his 50th Anniversary of the March in Selma speech (Obama, 2004; Obama, 2008b; Obama, 2008a; Obama, 2009a; Obama, 2010; Obama, 2013; Lehrman, 2009). Each provides an overarching sampling of Obama’s oratorical style which we have drawn upon for our analysis.

**Biographical Context**

To understand Obama’s oratory it is necessary to consider his background, since it is here where he derives his rhetorical *ethos.*

Obama’s parents met as students at the University of Hawaii. Obama grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia, went to Occidental College for one year, and graduated from Columbia University in New York, before attending Harvard University Law School where he was Editor-in-Chief of the *Law Review*. He worked as a community organiser in Chicago and in 2002 won a seat in the Illinois Legislature. There is little to suggest that Obama ever studied classical rhetoric, but David Maraniss's book entitled *Barack Obama: The Story* (2012) argues that Obama took speech and debate in high school. His very first public speech, a protest against apartheid during his freshman year at Occidental, shows him already using sentence fragments, imagery of *choice*, and the techniques of repetition, including *antithesis* that would become a staple in his political career (Maraniss, 2012).

There’s a struggle going on... I say there’s a struggle going on... It's happening an ocean away. But it's a struggle that touches each and every one of us, whether we know it or not. A struggle that demands we choose sides... It's a choice between dignity and servitude, between fairness and injustice (Obama, quoted in Maraniss, 2012: 378).

In those early years Obama wanted to be a writer. He wrote poetry and short stories notable for their precise detail, he read widely, and in one of the letters Maraniss praises his ability to ‘put dialogue together and describe scenes with a few quick strokes’ (Maraniss, 2012: 532). *Dreams from my Father,* the memoir Obama published in 1995 describes other things that came to govern Obama’s rhetorical decisions (Obama, 1995). Indeed, by 2004 his State Senate race had already won him a reputation for eloquence. Hillary Clinton came back from an Illinois event that year, saying of him ‘there’s a superstar in Chicago’ (Heilemann and Halperin, 2010: 14).

Meanwhile that year, John Kerry’s campaign manager was looking for keynote speakers. Polls showed Kerry with less African-American support than Democrats usually attracted, and so a number of friends had recommended Obama. Obama describes in *Dreams* how he began drafting the speech in longhand a few days after they picked him. Scheduled for eight minutes, the Kerry campaign eventually allowed him 25. And while a team of speechwriters reviewed his draft, Obama has said about 80 per cent of it was his (Obama, 1995). In the last five minutes of his speech, Obama won full-throated applause and cheers sixteen times compared to just six in Kerry’s final five. After that night, Obama was famous, the result of a skillful compendium of rhetorical and oratorical techniques that form the subject of our next section.

**Rhetorical Technique**

Obama’s thousands of speeches over the last eight years don’t all sound alike. He uses different strategies in a University of Maryland rally than in a speech to the Export-Import Bank. But these are differences of degree. To review a broad cross-section of those speeches is to see emerge similarities in four areas we believe provide the keys to his rhetorical effectiveness: structure, story, language, and delivery.

*Structure*

The structure of most Obama speeches resembles the one many American politicians use to persuade: *Monroe's Motivated Sequence*  (Monroe and Ehninger, 1964).We do not need to repeat material on Monroe covered earlier for the Oratory of John F. Kennedy chapter, however a brief overview may be of value. Monroe did not claim to have invented this five-step sequence which comprises of *attention*; *problem;* *solution*; *visualisation;* *call to action*. Rather these are evident in orations which predate Monroe. Furthermore, it is worth repeating that Monroe’s typology resembles the Jeremiad, which is a form of speech attributed to the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah. The most famous example in American history is Jonathan Edwards’ *Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God* (Edwards, 1741). Such is the popularity of the speech that it is still taught in American high schools.

The structure of the speech conforms to Monroe in the following ways. It is effective by winning *attention* with a quote from the biblical Old Testament book of Deuteronomy; describing the *problem* (the unconverted who have forsaken Christ); and then in the last 1400 words presenting a *solution*(a return to God), followed by a *vision of success* (those converting as he speaks), and a *call to action*, by asking listeners why they would ‘not to neglect this precious season which you now enjoy, when so many others of your age are renouncing all youthful vanities, and flocking to Christ?’ (Edwards, 1741). It must be remembered, however that Obama’s political approach is secular. Nowhere does he attribute America’s problems to its abandoning Christ or the broader Christian faith. But his structure is the same as Jonathan Edwards. This was true of his speeches in 2004 and remains so.

One early example is his 2006 speech on the floor of the Senate, urging support for stem-cell research (Lehrman, 2009). He initially wins the attentionof his audience through a *story*: ‘Mr. President, a few weeks ago I was visited by two of my constituents. Mary Schneider and her son Ryan’ (quoted in Lehrman, 2009: 61). He then outlines a relevant *problem*: ‘millions of Americans who are suffering from catastrophic, debilitating and life-threatening diseases and health conditions’ before offering *solutions:* ‘recent developments in stem cell research may hold the key to improved treatments’. He then *visualises* success by reminding listeners of the time when Americans feared polio: ‘Franklin Delano Roosevelt helped galvanise a community of compassion and organise the March of Dimes to find the cure for polio’. He then is in a strong position for his *calls for action*: ‘We should approach this research with the same passion and commitment that have led to so many cures and saved so many lives throughout our history. I urge my colleagues to support this bill’.

 The fact that Obama embraces the Monroe structure does not mean that he and his writers are purposefully using Monroe’s rhetorical typology. Many speechwriters in the US have had little formal training in rhetoric, but they often imitate unconsciously the structure in the two most influential modern American speeches, JFK’s Inaugural or Martin Luther King's ‘Dream’ speech, which employ the Monroe typology. Furthermore, structure functions in concert with language, content and delivery. Using Monroe does not guarantee a memorable speech. Before Obama’s speeches reach the attention step they often conform to *cliché*-ridden traditions of American politics such as jokes, local trivia, and boiler-plate praise for his audience.

 As he concludes, though, Obama commonly amends the Monroe structure in one unusual, though not unprecedented aspect. Like JFK and MLK, rather than settling for Monroe’s two final steps, Obama will use four. These are an *inspirational story*; *a lesson learned*; *a call to action*; and a *memorable last line*, often involving various techniques of repetition. For example, he employed this technique during the close of his 2009 inaugural speech.

*Inspirational example:*

In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river... The enemy was advancing... The snow was stained with blood... the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people: "Let it be told to the future world ... that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]” (Obama, 2009a).

*Lesson learned*:

... in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words

*Call to action:*

With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come.

*Clincher:*

Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God’s grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

Unusual about Obama’s use of a ‘four-part close’ are a variety of imaginative qualities we will cover later. Furthermore, virtually every modern President has used some variety of Monroe’s structure. We advance three reasons. First, we have already argued that the basic structure is as old as the *Book of Exodus*. Presidents and their writers need no training in formal rhetoric to spot a tool they can use. Second, JFK’s Inaugural Address and Martin Luther King's ‘Dream’ speech have each been extraordinarily influential on presidential rhetoric and both use Monroe. But the most significant reason is suggested by Monroe himself, who wrote one must construct a speech ‘to conform with the thinking processes of the listeners. To organise a talk otherwise would be as foolish as trying to make a man fit a suit’.

As a John Dewey advocate Monroe believed human psychology led people to examine a problem, then move in a sequential way towards a solution. After first taking readers through what ‘observation and testing’ has made clear about how people think, Monroe proposes his motivated sequence: ‘the sequence of ideas which, because it adheres to the steps by which people systematically think their way through problems and make decisions motivates the audience to accept the speakers proposition.’

In the United States public speaking textbooks recommend Monroe as a rule, not exception for provoking action. The most popular American textbook on public speaking, Stephen Lucas' *The Art of Public Speaking*, argues ‘it follow the process of human thinking and leads the listener step by step to the desired action. Try using the motivated sequence when you want to spur listeners to action you should find it easy and effective....’

Presidents are not generally interested in just persuading voters that an idea is right. Indeed, ‘when Cicero turned to the crowds in ancient Rome, people said, “great speech”. When Demosthenes spoke to the crowds in ancient Greece and people turned to each other, they said: “Let's march.”’ Like Demosthenes, the outcome American Presidents need is what Monroe offers: to see listeners march.

 **Poetry**

‘A speech,’ wrote Ronald Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan, ‘is poetry: cadence, rhythm, imagery, sweep! A speech reminds us that words, like children, have the power to make dance the dullest beanbag of a heart’ (Noonan, 1990: 68). When it comes to American political rhetoric the term *poetry* has come to mean not just the rhythms of language, but what we might call *ornamentation.* The quotations, anecdotes, jokes, inspirational examples, litanies of concrete detail, and of course actual poetry that add drama, excitement, and color to speeches often about policy. One finds all of those elements in Obama’s speeches. In the previous example alone, we find story, quotation, concrete detail, and inspirational example. To an unusual degree, Obama and his writers lace his speech with such material. We offer two examples: story and quotations.

*Story*

Obama, who once praised a friend for telling a story in ‘quick’ strokes, uses story with unusual frequency and richness of detail. Here are two, used in different ways, chosen from many Obama used in just one month in the summer of 2012.

There was an article the other day in *The Washington Post* about how Mr. Romney's former firm was a "pioneer" in offshoring jobs to China and India. And when they were asked about it, some of his advisors explained, no, there's a difference between offshoring and outsourcing. I'm not kidding, that's what they said. Those workers who lost their jobs, they didn't understand the difference (Obama, 2012b).

Obama’s point to his partisan audience is that his opponent is out of touch with average Americans. Rather than telling them, he shows them, using story to illustrate. He cites a source, giving him *ethos*; uses a quote his sympathetic audience will dislike and in his final sentence uses wit and irony to make his dislike for Romney clear. Each are examples of *ethos,* and in one phrase*, pathos.*

One hundred-fifty years ago, General Ulysses Grant issued an order that would have expelled Jews, “as a class,” from... the military department of Tennessee. It was wrong. But what happened next could have only taken place in America. Groups of American Jews protested General Grant’s decision. A Jewish merchant from Kentucky traveled here, to the White House, and met with President Lincoln in person. After their meeting, President Lincoln revoked the order—one more reason why we like President Lincoln. And to General Grant’s credit, he recognised that he had made a serious mistake... (Obama, 2012a).

Here, Obama uses what for him is a frequent approach. He tells a historical anecdote involving a perceived wrong, and surprises listeners with a happy ending, thus illustrating a theme he uses often: that America is a country where good can triumph.

*Quotation*

Obama often quotes those important to his audiences such as writers, the New or Old Testament, and of course, Scriptures from the Bible. In his 2015 speech on the 50th Anniversary of Selma we see Obama use quotation or paraphrase no less than fourteen times. In that speech he uses quotation to enable him to inspire his audience by enhancing his own rhetorical ethos. ‘They did as Scripture instructed:  rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer’. He also uses pathos to keep the attention of his audience: ‘A white newsman, Bill Plante, who covered the marches then and who is with us here today, quipped that the growing number of white people lowered the quality of the singing’. Furthermore, he reminds his audience of their common heritage by arguing they were ‘a creed written into our founding documents: we the people… in order to form a more perfect union’ and that ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’. This unites his audience behind a single philosophical idea, before he enhances his ethos further by showing his familiarity with America’s literary history through invoking James Baldwin. This enables him to argue that anything is possible ‘once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is’.

Quotation and anecdote, of course, stem from the language of others. Now we move from ornamentation to what they ornament: the qualities and characteristics of Obama's language.

Language

Whether in his inspirational or policy speeches Obama’s language is unusually colloquial, idiomatic, concrete, image-filled, and heavily repetitive by the standards of American presidential speech. To better understand his rhetorical style it would be prudent to examine each of these in turn.

Wesleyan University Professor Elvin Lim has documented the long trend in American presidential rhetoric towards colloquial and conversational speech. Covered in Chapter One of this volume, we discussed the quantitative approach to deconstructing language called Flesch-Kincaid. Applying it to Obama’s speeches demonstrates how Obama confirms Lim’s argument than a shift has taken place in the style in the style of language used by political orators. For example, George Washington’s 1792 Inaugural tests at a 22nd grade level, whilst JFK’s is at a 12th grade level. By contrast Obama’s are often at 7th-9th grade, not coincidentally the average reading level of American adults (Doak, Doak, and Root, 1996). His sentences are long, but in delivery he breaks them up. His words are short, and while his speeches vary in accessibility, the variation is relatively small. One can also find effective use of concrete details used in Obama’s language. There are two core ways in which he uses concrete detail that stand out when compared to other Presidents. First, he seems willing to be more *graphic,* such as during his Syria speech:

The images from this massacre are sickening: Men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas. Others foaming at the mouth, gasping for breath. A father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk (Obama, 2013).

Second, he does not limit himself to the time-honored rule of three. His roughly 40 examples in the ‘We are’ section which ended his speech at Selma is not typical. Here is one from ‘A More Perfect Union’. In it at least six concrete examples of the wrong choices, each are able to resonate with listeners and lend oratorical richness to this passage through the sheer accumulation of detail.

We can tackle race only as spectacle, as we did in the O.J. trial; or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina; or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathise with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card; or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies. We can do that (Obama, 2008a).

Furthermore his speeches are also filed with images. Ranging from extended metaphors through to sentence fragments, using personification sufficiently subtle that listeners may not recognise them as images, Obama clearly values imagery as in this passage from his 2013 Inaugural:

The patriots of 1776 did not fight to replace the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few or the rule of a mob. They *gave* to us a republic, a government of, and by, and for the people. And for more than two hundred years, we have. Through blood drawn by lash and blood drawn by sword, we learned that no union founded on the principles of liberty and equality could survive half-slave and half-free (Obama, 2013).

Effective speakers do not use techniques in isolation, and neither does Obama. In this extract alone Obama has made use of a number of rhetorical strategies such as *metaphor*, *anecdote*, and *utilitas* to ensure his speech resonates with his audience.

**Dominated by Repetition**

For skillful orators repetition is an enormous source of power. It enables the orator to capture the attention of their audience and to repeat a point in a manner likely to leave a long-lasting impression. Memorable speeches use repetition to inspire an audience into action, but also to inspire an audience into believing an alternative way may be possible. Politicians know the value of tropes of repetition. What separates Obama from other presidents, however are two things: both the frequency and the variety of his approach. Of the 67 paragraphs in his 2008 victory speech (Obama, 2008b), repetition is used in all 67. He uses repetition with single words*: ‘*Hope—Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!’ He also uses repetition within sentences:‘This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign: to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring, and more prosperous America’. Furthermore, he uses it in litanies of complete sentences:

It’s the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen. It’s the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled. It’s the answer...

Furthermore, Obama uses repetition as *anaphora* to open sentences*: ‘*When there was despair in the dust bowl and depression across the land, she saw a nation conquer fear itself with a New Deal, new jobs and a new sense of common purpose.’ He also uses *epistrophe* at the end of sentences: ‘Yes we can. When the bombs fell on our harbour and tyranny threatened the world, she was there to witness a generation rise to greatness and a democracy was saved. Yes we can.’ Obama’s use of repetition is effective because it taps into the hopes and aspirations of his audience, which he then uses to leave a lasting oratorical impression. Other techniques of repetition include *alliteration*, *periodic sentences*, and *antithesis.* Of course repetition alone does not make a speech memorable. However repetition is an effective tool which Obama uses in motivating his audience to lend him their ears.

**Obama and the Rhetoric of Race**

It is first important to note that Obama was not the first African American to run for President. Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave, ran in 1872 as the Equal Rights Party candidate. Over the following years there were others, however none as successful as Jesse Jackson who in 1984 secured 418 votes at the Democratic National Convention, and three times that number in 1988. Unlike Jackson, however Obama actually believed he could win. But could he overcome the residue of racism in American culture?

Obama and his advisors write Heilemann and Halperin, ‘rarely brought up the subject of race during the deliberations over whether he should run’ (2010: 72). But they also write that ‘race was never really absent from [Obama's] thinking’ (2010: 71). Obama went to Colin Powell, a Republican and first African-American Secretary of State, who was also widely touted presidential candidate, to ask whether Powell felt America was ready for a black president. Powell believed they were. The campaign then ran focus groups on the issue. And describing one incident revolving around race, the *Game Change* writers say, ‘The entire Obama enterprise had been based on the premise that Barack could transcend racial stereotypes, if not race’ (2010: 247).

To acknowledge American racism is not to minimise the extent to which American attitudes have changed. The per cent of Americans who said they would vote for a well-qualified black candidate in their party had increased from 38 per cent in 1958 to 96 per cent in 2012 (Gallup, 2012). Still, in a 2008 survey, white people were asked to rate African-American work ethic and intelligence. Thirty-four per cent said ‘lazy,’ and 22 per cent said ‘unintelligent.’ While most Americans no longer tolerate such overt racist appeals, researchers argued in 2012 that overall that Obama’s black ancestry might cost him about 2 per cent in the polls no matter what he did(AP poll, 2012).

Whatever the campaign said, African-American groups detected a strategy from the start. Obama, they felt, was ignoring issues important to black Americans. After the campaign, this criticism continued. ‘Barack Obama,’ wrote Frederick Harris, ‘is using a deracialised political strategy... de-emphasising the persistence of racial inequality" (Harris, 2008). Adam Frankel, one of Obama’s speechwriters, disagrees: ‘Here’s where I challenge the assumption of that question,’ he says. ‘There was certainly a lot of sensitivity on how to handle race. Not issues important to African-Americans. Race.’ He agrees on the necessity to not offend white voters. ‘You need more than the vote of every tolerant person. [But] we totally leaned into the civil rights struggle’. Frankel points to issues as examples where African-Americans were not marginalised. ‘Economic empowerment, healthcare, education. Actually, I think that’s how the President sees it. – he’s like, “I passed the Recovery Act. What’s going to lift us up?” He was sensitive how he talked. There’s definitely a certain tone. We didn’t marginalise.’

To examine how language reveals strategy involves a degree of interpretation. What might seem like a strategic decision to one might seem like ethical behaviour to another. Nevertheless, examining Obama's rhetoric reveals a clear rhetorical pattern designed for an election in which 72 per cent of voters were white. The strategy is largely one of *ethos*: the creation of a persona very much like what he has described about his high-school self: ‘A well-mannered young black man who didn’t seem angry all the time’ (Obama, 1995: 95).

We see that in the following ways. Obama strikes the theme of unity between white and black, he repeatedly expresses pride in *both* his black and white ancestry and informs but rarely expresses African-American views. Furthermore he often balances praise and criticism equally when blacks and whites clash and rarely demonstrates anger. He also criticises the African-American community in ways African-American leaders rarely do and he recommends that African-American groups focus on solutions that can unite both black and white listeners.

One might ask how does that ‘marginalise’ African-American issues? Earlier in this volume we have already seen how Jesse Jackson called for ‘common ground?’ Why cannot Barack Obama do the same? One answer involves examining the four most publicised events where Obama had to confront the issue of race.

The first, and most serious, was the controversy over Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Wright had been Obama’s minister for over 20 years. In March 2008, *ABC News* aired videotapes of Wright’s sermons, some of which appeared harshly anti-American. About 9/11, Wright said, ‘America's chickens coming home to roost’ (Heilemann and Halperin, 2010: 234) and in another, after a litany of examples demonstrating white racism, Wright finished with antithesis: ‘Not God Bless America. God damn America!’ (Heilemann and Halperin, 2010: 234). Obama was placed into an unenviable position. He could not deny the close ties he and Wright had had. Like Richard Nixon in 1952 and JFK in his 1960 speech to the Houston Ministerial Conference, he had to give a speech to save the campaign, explaining why he and Wright could be so close. In fact, after a long, discursive opening, he posed that very question.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? (Obama, 2008a).

It is instructive to compare the tone and imagery of ‘A More Perfect Union’ with Jackson's speech two decades earlier. Jackson was frank about what brought about his nomination: ‘My right and my privilege to stand here before you has been won, won in my lifetime, by the blood and the sweat of the innocent’ (Jackson, 1988). In contrast, Obama emphasises progress: ‘for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible. It is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one’.

Moreover, Jackson graphically describes racial conflict, saying

Many were lost in the struggle for the right to vote: [Jimmy Lee Jackson](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USACjacksonJL.htm), a young student, gave his life; [Viola Liuzzo](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAliuzzo.htm), a White mother from Detroit, called "nigger lover," and brains blown out at point blank range; [Michael] Schwerner, [Andrew] Goodman and [James] Chaney—two Jews and a Black—found in a common grave, bodies riddled with bullets in Mississippi; the four darling little girls in a church in Birmingham, Alabama. They died that we might have a right to live. (Jackson, 1988)

Obama’s language describing the past is abstract.

The document they produced was eventually signed, but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations. Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at is very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time. (Obama, 2008a)

In fact, a first reading of the speech might make it seem like Obama goes further than he needs if his aim is catering to white Americans. He praises the Founding Fathers for their ‘improbable experiment in democracy,’ without mentioning that of the 21, fourteen owned slaves. While he calls slavery a ‘sin’ in his opening section describing America’s ‘unfinished’ business of creating a ‘more perfect union,’ his abstract language, long sentences, and passive voice make it hard to convey Jesse Jackson-style urgency, a skill he uses often with other issues. Meanwhile, throughout the speech many of the elements he favours make their appearance, among them, these two: he explicitly criticises anger in the African-American community:

That—That anger is not always productive. Indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems. It keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African-American community in our own condition. It prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change.

He suggests African Americans find solutions to their ‘particular grievances’ by ‘binding’ to those uniting both black and white listeners.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances, for better health care and better schools and better jobs, to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means also taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them.

One might note that he asks for more responsibility from black families than from white, and at the end, he uses an inspirational story that is about two people, one white, the other black. Yet the more admirable one is white. But this would be a selective reading. Obama does not just describe African-American grievances. He makes it clear that he shares them.

Legalised discrimination, where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or the fire department meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations.

In describing anger, his concrete, image-filled examples—‘the barbershop or the beauty shop...’—at least implies that this comes from personal experience. And his final, understatedly ironic sentence leaves no doubt of his own anger.

The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of that old truism that the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning.

Finally, and astonishingly, when he becomes personal, Obama not only refuses to disown Wright, but credits him with complexity, and in a sentence uniquely revealing in politics, compares Wright’s flaws to those in his own grandmother.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother, a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

Few other Presidents have offered a portrait of a family member admitting she made him cringe. Yet, for someone so skilled at using detail to arouse emotion, to become so abstract seems unlikely to be accidental. The word *strategy*, of course, carries with it the implication of manipulation. It would do Obama a disservice to call this passage merely manipulative. But no matter how deeply felt, the conscious decisions governing it clearly demonstrate a strategy of *ethos*: it establishes him, even at the risk of offending white listeners, as willing to tell the truth even about things politicians and most of us keep private.

In summation, Obama took risks with his speeches on race. But the strategic elements we cite worked. The much-praised speech quieted the controversy. It offered the balanced approach he has followed ever since, but with one notable exception.

In 2009 the audience saw a glimpse of what happens when Obama displays anger. A black Harvard professor, Henry Gates, returning home to Massachusetts after a foreign visit. He had trouble opening the door of his own home, and seeing him struggle, a neighbour called police to report a possible burglary. When the police showed up, Gates told the officer he was at his own home. The police, however arrested him. Obama knew Gates personally and, for once, he did not sound balanced in his criticism of the event. He said

I think it’s fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home. And number three... what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there is a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. That's just a fact (Obama, 2009b).

This reveals that Obama is annoyed not just because he says that might be true of ‘any of us’ but because of repetition. Enumerating sends the message that there is no doubt about the truth. Furthermore, he immediately takes sides using the word ‘stupidity’, which makes no pretense of neutrality. Finally, that last four-word sentence shows us that this time he who often makes concessions to the other side (Lehrman, 2009) because believes there is no other side. Reaction was decisive and critical. A subsequent poll showed Americans disapproved 41/29, and a drop in overall support for Obama from 53 per cent to 46 per cent (Bouie, 2014). Within days, the President had apologised for his tone and then organised a well-publicised lunch with Gates and Vice President Biden.

It is unsurprising, therefore that his approach in the next two incidents was quite different. In 2013, a self-appointed Florida vigilante, alarmed by the looks and dress of an unarmed black teenager named Trayvon Martin walking down the street, approached, scuffled and then killed the teenager. This time Obama does not call the vigilante ‘stupid’, rather, while sounding compassionate about Martin’s family, he focuses on the personal. Only in his final sentence does he imply that his own experience might influence his views.

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is, Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And... I think it's important to recognise that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that—that doesn’t go away. There are very few African-American men in this country who haven’t had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me (Obama, 2013).

Furthermore, in August 2014, during a similar incident in Ferguson, Missouri, the slaying of an unarmed black teenager called Michael Brown by a police officer prompted Obama’s *first* criticism to be of the black demonstrators. He does not criticise the police, rather he calls for preserving constitutional rights without any suggestion that there has been abuse. He calls for unity, and only in one phrase shows sympathy.

... the vast majority of people are peacefully protesting... a small minority of individuals are not. While I understand the passions and the anger that arise over the death of Michael Brown, giving into that anger by looting or carrying guns, and even attacking the police only serves to raise tensions and stir chaos. As Americans, we’ve got to use this moment to seek out our shared humanity that’s been laid bare by this moment. (Obama, 2014)

Here Obama sounds caring, but he uses abstract language. Only listeners familiar with the implications of understatement will sense his anger. As he did in ‘A More Perfect Union’ he explicitly criticises members of the black community. The textual evidence seems clear that Obama's strategy both in the campaign and in the White House has been skillful and generally consistent – and consciously designed not to inflame white voters who might cost him victory in 2008 and 2012.

**Campaign in Poetry, Govern in Prose**

Criticism of Obama's rhetorical style has been partly led by the columnist and former George W. Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson. He wrote in January 2010 that ‘People once thought Obama could sound eloquent reading the phone book. Now, whatever the topic, it often sounds as though he is’ (Gerson, 2010). Furthermore, in mid-March 2010, *New Yorker* writer George Packer collected a sample of people across the political spectrum, all saying similar things about how Obama no longer demonstrates his ability to inspire from the podium (Packer, 2010). When it comes to the ‘eloquence’ of Obama's oratory as President, critics like Packer and Gerson raised two points.

First, they argued that his presidential speeches were failures because they had become too sophisticated and cerebral to communicate in ways that move Americans. Second they argued that whilst Obama was inspirational in the campaign, he was now ‘workmanlike… flat… explanatory… stone-cold sober. Bloodless’ (Gerson, 2010).

This two-pronged critique of Obama’s oratorical prowess needs contextualising against the longevity of Obama’s personal prominence. At the time of the criticism he had been in the public eye for a number of years. Audiences can tire of rhetoric just as they tire of popular songs. Yet many of his presidential speeches can be considered ‘dry’. As an example, this opening from his Weekly Address, delivered the last week of August 2014.

Nearly six years after the worst financial crisis of our lifetimes, our businesses have added nearly 10 million new jobs over the past 53 months. That’s the longest streak of private-sector job creation in our history. And we’re in a six-month streak with our economy creating at least 200,000 new jobs each month—the first time that’s happened since 1997. (Obama, 2014)

The speech is laden with numbers and boiler-plate bureaucratese. It is bloodless. Yet such criticism disregards the difference between running for president and being one. It also ignores the rule ‘Campaign in poetry. Govern in prose!’ (Cuomo, 1984).

In the March 2014 *Harvard Political Review*, writer Megan Mers offers this view about the strategic need facing Obama once he took office. ‘While the electorate yearns for the poetic one-liners acceptable during campaign season, it also demands to hear details and plans of action from a leader in office. Though the two aren’t mutually exclusive, in serious policy speeches figurative language and flowery wordplay are often inappropriate and ineffective’ (Mers, 2014). Elvin Lim also argues ‘you need to be specific… you lose the lyricism, and with that the valuable space in which likeability grows’ (Lim, quoted in Mers, 2014). Adam Frankel says it more pungently: ‘Obama speaking to a rally in Iowa is very different from Barack Obama, the president, speaking in the East Room of the White House’ (Frankel, as quoted in Mers, 2014).

There are several other reasons critics might see a change. First, Obama’s campaign rhetoric did not always soar. Also, in campaigns, voters generally see the homeruns rather than the strikeouts. That makes the contrast sharper than it is in real life. Yet we do not share the view of some Obama defenders who dismiss *all* criticisms of Obama’s presidential speeches as political, meaning motivated by the conscious need to find something wrong. Cognitive dissonance, and the difficulty of recognising one's own bias, equally the province of Republicans and Democrats, make dispassionate criticism on both sides difficult.

More likely, what Gerson calls ‘workmanlike’ stems from Obama's overarching strategy to minimise inspirational rhetoric to be the kind of President Americans want. The day he was inaugurated, Obama knew that for people to take him seriously, his rhetorical strategy had to include appearing in the White House pressroom dressed impeccably and that his demeanor and speeches needed to be sober.

Further evidence that Obama can inspire an audience can be found in a selection of his Presidential speeches. Some examples include his speeches at Newtown, and Fort Hood; or the ending of his 2012 State of the Union during the section on gun control. Furthermore Obama’s 2015 speech at Selma used few abstract sentences or a temperate tone. The speech is concrete, image filled, and candid about brutality. The speech animates many of his Martin Luther King Day speeches where audiences are largely black, and the media coverage slight, as in his 2010 MLK Day speech, at Washington's Vermont Avenue Baptist Church.

In the speech Obama opens by describing King's arrival to that ‘very church’ just after the end of the Montgomery bus boycott. Obama imagines the mood of people coming to church, happy—but wondering whether the movement ‘could actually deliver on its promise.’ As he approaches the end of that speech, Obama mentions the fact that he reads ten letters each night of the 40,000 he gets—then actually imitates what he imagines as the voices of those who wrote.

I need a job. I’m about to lose my home. I don’t have health care… My mama or my daddy have lost their jobs, there something you can do to help? Ten letters a day we read.

Obama confesses inadequacy.

There are times when it feels like all these efforts are for naught, and change is so painfully slow… and I have to confront my own doubts.

He finishes with this extraordinary image-filled passage.

It’s faith that gives me peace... The same faith that keeps an unemployed father to keep on submitting job applications even after he’s been rejected a hundred times. The same faith that says to a teacher even if the first nine children she’s teaching she can’t reach, that the 10th one she’s going to be able to reach. The same faith that breaks the silence of an earthquake’s wake with the sound of prayers and hymns sung by a Haitian community. A faith in things not seen, in better days ahead, in Him who holds the future in the hollow of His hand. A faith that lets us mount up on winds like eagles ... lets us run and not be weary ... lets us walk and not faint.

This is not bloodless. Even the awkwardness of some sentences points to a speaker adlibbing a little to add the details that overwhelm him. With the White House providing almost two speeches a day for Obama, writers will produce some speeches that fail to resonate. ‘Obviously, we produced some bad ones,’ Frankel says. But overall, Obama and his writers have produced a collection of moments and sometimes an entire speech reflecting the same skill to inspire that he demonstrated in 2008.

**Legacy**

In the weeks before an interview with Chuck Todd in September 2014, Obama came under fire for some of his remarks on the surprising rise of the so called ‘Islamic State’ and its attempts to reform the first Caliphate since the Ottoman Empire. Obama had belittled ISIS, telling a reporter that ‘if a jayvee team puts on Lakers uniforms that doesn’t make them Kobe Bryant’ (Remnick, 2014). When asked about his strategy for combating them in an August 2014 press briefing, he said, ‘We don't have a strategy yet’—the last word often ignored in reports of the remark. In earlier decades, few Americans would have even heard these comments due to the limitation of television and radio coverage. In today’s climate, millions have seen him utter both, contributing somewhat to a decline in his approval ratings.

More generally, however technology has changed little. Americans still hunger for ways to see a President live, whether on television, online or in person. Obama’s last State of the Union drew approximately 40 million viewers. But technology has made a significant difference to how rhetoric is consumed. When 40 million people watch a State of the Union speech, presidents must extend their appeal to a lower common denominator, and as Lim has argued, the ‘dumbing down’ of Presidential rhetoric, which has measurably accelerated since television arrived (Lim, 2008). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to how much of what Obama says uses classical rhetorical and oratorical devices first conceptualised by the Ancient Greeks.

Indeed, there is certainly nothing original about imagery, concrete detail, story, repetition, precise diction, or candour. Still, regardless of his views on policy or achievements, Obama’s speeches have broken new ground. Change does not occur in a vacuum. New technology has meant more people watching his appearances. It has also made reworking speeches easier. When Sorensen completed the draft of JFK's American University Commencement speech, he had to get on a plane and fly with it to Hawaii so Kennedy could review it. Now he would simply hit ‘Send’.

But there are differences in Obama’s rhetorical style as well. He not only continues the trend towards language that is easier to understand, he also uses tropes of repetition, story, and other techniques with new variety and frequency. As the new technology allows more people to read and study their interesting structure, blend of the colloquial and precise, and varied delivery, he can expect imitators.

It was only in 1948 that President Harry Truman exasperated his aides by his ineptness at the podium. ‘He generally read poorly from written texts,’ his speechwriter, Clark Clifford, wrote. ‘His head down, words coming forth in what the press liked to call a “drone”’ (Clifford, 1991: 199). As a consequence they stopped giving him texts altogether, hoping he might be better ad-libbing.

With the ease now possible with the click of a mouse, millions can see a president demonstrate techniques, and then imitate them. It is hard to imagine Harry Truman winning a nomination, today, without serious coaching, and better writers. While researchers have well documented the limited immediate effect rhetoric has on policy and world events (Packer, 2010), the influence on campaigns may be another matter. The popular vote margin in the last four Presidential elections was under four per cent. The visibility of presidents, larger audiences, changing needs of American politics and the expanded role played by speechwriters, have helped usher in a trend not just to more colloquial speech, but more skillful speeches. Shifting one or two percentage points is no small matter.

This collection opens by painting a picture of JFK, performing an Inaugural Address that to many Americans seemed entirely new. While not original, it was new in American presidential politics. And in the almost six decades between JFK and Obama the changes in structure, concrete detail, easy-to-understand language, have accelerated.

From the moment he walked on stage in 2004, to his speeches as President, Obama has always had opponents attack his views, as indeed they should in a healthy democracy. In their own speeches, they may display how much they have learned by adapting for very different views, the ways he has expressed them.