

Running head: OBAMA'S SPEECH AS ORATORICAL EXEMPLAR

That was Then, This is Now: President Barack Obama's 2004 Keynote Address
as an Oratorical Exemplar

Abstract

Arguably, there is not a more revered position in the United States than President. As Commander and Chief, the American ideal suggests that this person should be trustworthy and intelligent public servant who acts in the best interests of America and Americans. Presidential candidates typically begin to establish this persona in the minds of voters when they launch their presidential campaigns. Many claim, however, that former President Barack Obama actually did so when he delivered the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC) keynote address in support of then presidential candidate John Kerry. This paper examines that speech from a neo-Aristotelian perspective in order to reveal key rhetorical strategies that helped catapult him into the limelight as a worthy contender for President in 2008. Ultimately, this analysis points to several implications for those seeking to run for political office, as well as for voters wanting to make informed decisions about the candidates.

Keywords: Presidential rhetoric, neo-Aristotelian analysis, Barack Obama

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For nearly 250 years, people of the United States of America have been electing presidents to serve as the nation's commander and chief and, as many also argue, leader of the free world (Fousek, 2000, Safire, 2008). Granted, this role has been called into question with the election of and subsequent decisions made by current President, Donald Trump (Tierney, 2017). However, the fact that these debates are occurring serves as further evidence that many do, in fact, believe that one of roles of the President of the United States is leader of the free world.

During their campaigns, those aspiring to hold the office make speeches and engage in debates as a means by which to demonstrate themselves to be most worthy to hold the post. But what characteristics do we value as most important in our President? Among the many opinions published regarding what makes a great president, several themes emerge. In his book, *The President as Leader*, for instance, Siegel (2012) identifies (a) a clear vision/purpose that energizes the citizenry, (b) the capacity to select talented people to work for and with him or her, (c) intelligent management of those working for and with him or her, and (d) the ability to listen to multiple perspectives and then to make informed decisions based on them. It follows, then, that the most effective campaign speeches will highlight these sorts of values.

For most potential candidates, campaigning for the presidency begins about a year before the election. However, many argue that former President Barack Obama gave one of his most important campaign speeches a full five years before he won the 2008 election when he delivered the 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address in Boston, Massachusetts (e.g., Davey, 2004; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Samuel, 2004). Moreover, this speech eventually

became the foundation of Obama's (2006) book, *The Audacity of Hope*, which became an immediate *New York Times* best seller (Bosman, 2006).

Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, was a relatively unknown junior senator from Illinois when he gave the 2004 keynote address. He came from what he himself calls humble beginnings. He was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii and spent several years of his childhood in Indonesia. After attending Occidental College, he transferred to Columbia University where he earned his bachelor's degree. Afterward, he earned a Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School. Before becoming President, Obama taught constitutional law at Harvard University, worked with community nonprofit organizations in the Chicago area, served in the Illinois State Senate, and eventually represented Illinois in the United States Senate. President Obama would go on to serve two terms in the White House between 2009 and 2017 as the first African-American President of the United States.

Obama's keynote address was one of several speeches given by significant political figures in order to support presidential candidate John Kerry in the upcoming election. Other speakers included, for example, former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, as well as Hillary Clinton, Al Gore, and Al Sharpton (Library of Congress, 2008). Throughout the convention, the Democratic party focused on goals ranging from energy independence and environmental protection to strengthening the military and homeland security (Library of Congress, 2008).

However, this speech also introduced a relatively unknown senator from Illinois to the nation as a key figure in the Democratic party. Although Obama had only about 16 minutes to speak and his primary purpose was to support the candidacy of John Kerry, it also catapulted Obama into the limelight as a highly regarded congressman to be considered seriously for the

post in a future election. Obama would eventually become President based on a platform focused on the very subjects he discussed in this speech. These topics included, for example, bridging the racial divide in America, breaking through stereotypes, persevering and succeeding despite incredible odds, caring for one another as fellow Americans, curbing violence, and ending wars.

Obama's primary audience included politicians, delegates, and other convention attendees. The convention was also broadcast across the nation and watched live in approximately 15,537,000 homes (Nielsen, 2008), as well as by millions via streaming video (e.g., C-SPAN, 2008). The audiences both at the convention and viewing it on television or via streaming video fell in love Obama. Through this one short speech, Obama succeeded in energizing people from all walks of life to embrace his vision of hope for a better future for all Americans. As such, we argue that Obama's 2004 DNC keynote address informally launched his 2008 presidential campaign. We argue further that President Obama's address serves as an exemplar of the characteristics and values the American people want to see in the president and articulated in presidential speeches. Although this prompted speculation about Obama as the first black president, he would obviously need to continue to embody those characteristics and values in future speeches to continue to be perceived as a viable candidate in 2008.

Every four years, both the GOP and DNC national conventions are wrought with myriad of formal speeches given by a variety of famous and not-so-famous people. However, relatively few of these speeches have withstood the test of time as exemplars that capture the essence of important issues of the time. Some of those that have lived on include, for example, William Jennings Bryan's speech about blue collar America in 1896, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's new deal speech in 1932, Barry Goldwater's "in defense of liberty" speech in 1964, Barbara Jordan's

speech on equal rights for all in 1976, Mario Cuomo's speech refuting Reagan's "city on a hill" in 1984, George Bush's "read my lips, no new taxes" speech in 1988, and Mary Fisher's "A Whisper of AIDS" speech in 1992. Although each one is significant in its own right, none served as a launching pad for making a run for the presidency.

Many of these important speeches have been the subject of analysis by communication scholars, shedding light on the communication strategies employed that may have helped propel them into the long-lasting limelight (e.g., Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 1998; Benoit & Gustainis, 1986; Henry, 1984; Marks, 2000; Miles, 1960; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Thompson, 1979). This paper extends their work on convention keynote speeches by examining Barack Obama's 2004 DNC keynote address from a neo-Aristotelian perspective. Moreover, we extend the work of Rowland and Jones (2007) who examined the perceptions about the American Dream held the public from a narrative perspective by examining the speech from a neo-Aristotelean perspective to reveal key rhetorical strategies Obama employed that could be emulated by others with similar political aspirations. Moreover, unlike any of these other convention speeches, his actually served to launch his 2008 presidential campaign (albeit informally). Thus, we examine Obama's speech according to the five rhetorical canons as they help reveal reasons for his success in launching his bid for president, as well as succeeding in both the 2008 election and 2012 re-election campaign. In doing so, we hope to underscore strategies other potential candidates might use to be successful not just as campaign speakers, but also as presidents if and when they are elected. Ultimately, we believe this analysis speaks to several implications not only for the United States but also for the world today.

Analysis

This analysis describes what we learned by examining Obama's 2004 DNC keynote address from a neo-Aristotelian perspective. We explain our findings via invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory.

Invention

Invention is "rhetorical canon focused on the major ideas and lines of argument in the speech via artistic and inartistic proofs" (Sellnow, 2014, p. 262). Not only is it important for an appropriate topic to be discussed based on the occasion, the topic must also be presented through a suitable line of arguments. Artistic proofs include the speaker's ability to effectively convey ethos, logos, and pathos in the content of the message. Speakers may attempt to establish ethos by securing their credibility with the audience; this can be achieved by appearing trustworthy, speaking in terms the audience can understand, and using credible sources. Logos is established by making the audience understand your logic and reasoning, this includes effective use of outside sources as well comparing and contrasting the topic at hand to other things that may help the audience understand. Pathos considers emotional appeals to the audience whether they be negative or positive, effective use of these appeals may further induce an audience to agree with a speaker's line of argument. Inartistic proofs include factual evidence that can be found in outside sources that aid the speaker's argument; Examples of this include statistics or citations from scholarly sources.

The overarching themes in Obama's keynote address are togetherness, having hope in a better future, and perseverance through times of adversity. These themes are addressed through Obama's primary goals focused on race, the war on terrorism, and bringing people together despite of their backgrounds or political affiliation. Obama largely uses artistic proofs in his line

of argument while utilizing little to none inartistic proofs throughout his speech. The majority of inartistic proofs used in this speech are personal accounts from Obama himself or other American's that he has spoken to, such as a man named Shamus, a Marine and Iraqi war veteran. Obama effectively establishes logos through his use of recalling his family's story of working to become Americans and a conversation with a recently enlisted American soldier. Additionally, Obama uses these same examples to establish ethos because he describes that he lived through adversity himself; He went from a "skinny kid with a funny name who [believed] that America [had] a place for him" to the senator from Illinois speaking in front of the audience that day (Obama, 2004). Moreover, Obama speaks of his father who joined the United States Army, went to school on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and settled down in Hawaii.

These stories of a kid who accomplished great things against tough odds and a veteran father who settled down after war make Obama seem very relatable to the audience because those are stories that they may know first-hand or through a friend or family member. Lastly, Obama establishes pathos by describing the hardships of those losing manufacturing jobs to Mexico, parents competing with their children for jobs, and those with the drive and intellect to go to college but lack the funds. Furthermore, Obama says "There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America -- there's the United States of America." This quote and its use of anti-thesis appeals the audience's emotional want or need for togetherness as a nation; the audience in attendance erupted in ovation after this quote in a genuine display of emotion.

Arrangement

The rhetorical canon of arrangement focuses on the organizational structure of the message that the speaker is delivering to the audience. The arrangement of a speech can follow multiple styles of organization such as chronological, problem/solution, difficulty of challenge, or the degree to which subjects are controversial. The order that a speaker chooses to address his desired topics in a speech can have direct implications on how well it is received by the audience (Sellnow, 2014). This idea is evident in this keynote address as Obama begins the speech with subjects of common discussion such as his family and eventually working his way into more controversial issues including political issues facing the nation at the time and the loss of American lives in the War on Terror. Similar to a good novel or movie, an appropriate and understandable storyboard must be presented to audience.

The arrangement of this speech presented at the 2004 DNC is largely centered around putting faith in others. Initially, Obama seeks to establish common ground with audience through the story of his late father and his endeavors of fighting in the war, attending school on the G.I Bill, and settling down to start a family. This is coupled with a timeline individuals placing faith in the next person. This arrangement is initiated by the story Obama tells of the progression of his family through the past few generations. Obama described the story of his grandfather who was a servant cook for the British and put faith in his son to have a better life than he did. Obama states “my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America” (Obama, 2004). This is followed by the faith put in Barack Obama by his father, next by the faith Obama has in John Kerry to lead the nation, and lastly by the faith that the Democratic party has in the United States as a whole for a brighter future. This cycle of putting faith in the next person and/or

generation leads to a speech that is progression centric; it also implies that progress is more likely with the faith and support of those around you.

This arrangement provided for a speech that made the audience believe that the topics discussed can and will get better for the United States. Throughout the speech, the breaks taken for the audience's applause and ovation became longer and louder as the excitement steadily increased. The arrangement of this speech was very effective for its audience because it is focused on improving the future which potentially could have been done through their goal which was the election of John Kerry. While it was Obama's goal to aid in the election of the Democratic candidate, he did aim to polarize the audience with his speech. This is exemplified when Obama said "fellow Americans, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, I say to you tonight: We have more work to do" (Obama, 2004); this quote shows an indifference to political affiliation and prioritizes improving the United States. Although that goal was not met, the arrangement of the address reinforced the ideals Obama sought to communicate and achieved the goal set for the occasion all while providing a story that the audience could easily follow.

Style

The rhetorical canon of style is focused primarily on the language choices of the speaker and its effects on the audience. This addresses the word choice and sentence structure of the speaker. The speech style of the presenter can greatly contribute to the intended message of the speaker or potentially detract from it. Word choice is particularly important depending on the audience, the same speech one might give at the International Crisis Risk Communication (ICRC) Conference might not be understood when given to a general audience of Americans, who, on average, read at an eighth-grade level (Kis & Field, 2013). Not only can the use of

words from an advanced vocabulary impact the reception of a speech but emotionally charged words can affect an audience's interpretation of a speech as well.

Obama's word choice and sentence structure in this speech pairs very nicely with the invention and arrangement previously discussed. Obama's sentence structure is very short and poignant for the majority of the speech and primarily when discussing the hope for the future; when discussing the things America must work on improving, his sentences are lengthier. This may have been done in order to show the intensity of the issues while making the parts about hope for the future easier to remember. When speaking about America as a nation, Obama often used very positive words such as magical, tolerant, generous, genius, and decent. The words most commonly used throughout this speech are consistent with the themes of faith and looking forward to improving the future.

The root words of opportunity, dream, faith, believe, and hope are used numerous times throughout the speech. These five root words are used four, six, six, sixteen, and fourteen times respectively. This makes for forty-six words in total that are focused on positive progression for the future. The repetition of these words that centered around a positive progression for America's future earned this speech its title *The Audacity of Hope*. Throughout this speech, Obama praised America for the great attributes it has and the opportunities it offers its people while still acknowledging there is room for improvement.

Memory

The rhetorical canon of memory focuses on the "specific things that make the message [of the speech] positively memorable days, weeks, and even years later" (Sellnow, 2014, p.37). Sellnow (2014) posits that the memory of speeches today primarily focuses on mnemonic devices. Mnemonic devices are cognitive shortcuts that come in many different forms but they

all share the same goal, to transfer speech or information into a form that is easier for the audience to remember in a positive way. Examples of mnemonic devices include acronyms, memorable delivery styles, or traditional ones such as Martin Luther King Jr's repetitive use of "I have a dream", or UNICEF's "50 cents a day" to save a child. These cognitive shortcuts are utilized in order to aid the audience in remembering the message conveyed by the rhetor. Broad & Daddow (2010) suggest that quotations are remembered and repeated through the media can have long lasting effects socially and on political decisions.

The style employed by Obama has a large part to do with memorability of this speech. The frequent use of the root words of "believe" and "hope" played a large role in the inspiration of the audience. The audience gradually cheered louder throughout the speech they were continually inspired more for a better future. The topic of togetherness was also an integral part of Obama's keynote address. In the latter half of his speech, Obama recited the quote, "E pluribus unum: Out of many, we are one". Obama used this memorable quote that appears on the Great Seal of the United States to further support his claim while making it easily memorable. The use of this quote is a primary example of Obama's use of exemplars throughout this speech. Zillmann (1999) states that "everybody...has some tacit understanding of a relationship between an example and a larger entity to be exemplified by it." In this instance, Obama used a quote from the Great Seal of the United States as an exemplar to strengthen his conjecture about the need for unity within the larger entity of the United States.

The speech earned its title from the line after he describes himself as a skinny kid with a funny name who believed America had a place for him; in this line, Obama states that he is talking about "Hope -- Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!" This line 'stuck' with people because he discussed personal issues of his own

while stating that he maintained the “audacity of hope” (Obama, 2004). The repetitive use of the word “hope” coupled with a strong adjective such as “audacity” makes the audience really think about what he is saying and remember it. Although the word “audacity” may not be considered Layman's terms, the audience still understood the point Obama aimed to make through the context in which it was used. The few lines leading up to it about having hope through difficulty and uncertainty gave the crowd a contextual situation in which they could decipher the meaning of the word “audacity”. Audience members who may not have grasped the meaning of the word through prior knowledge or context, might have decided to look up the word upon arriving home after the speech which would only further engage them with Obama's speech.

Delivery

The rhetorical canon of delivery's main focus is the presentation of speech; this pertains to the speaker's use of voice and body. Beyond just tone of voice or inflection, this examines whether the speaker appeared to be conversational or just following a script, engaging or disinterested, and includes filler words such as “uhs's” and “uhm's”. Additionally, this canon considers body language such as making eye contact with audience, swaying, gestures, and facial expressions. A speech full of filler words might be painstaking for audience members and might lead to them tuning out the speaker and completely missing the intended message. The same applies to a speech where a speaker does not appear engaging and has his face down reading from a paper the entire way through. All of these speech habits have implications on the delivery of the speech and how it is received by the audience.

Obama's delivery helped him communicate the message and achieve the goals he sought to achieve with this speech. Dressed in black suit, white shirt, and steel colored tie, his outfit was not attention grabbing and did not detract from the occasion or content of his speech. The

choice of color in Obama's outfit is significant as it can have a psychological effect on the audience; for instance, wearing red enhances the perception of dominance and threat by others (Feltman & Elliot, 2011). Obama maintained a serious face throughout the speech without appearing stoic or somber. Throughout the speech, Obama shifted his gaze throughout the room and established eye contact with the entire audience as well as the camera to establish eye contact with viewers at home which aided engagement with the audience. This is no secret as, Ellsworth & Carlsmith (1968) found that frequent eye contact coupled with positive verbal content leads to more positive evaluations from the audience.

Furthermore, Obama's use of a simple and easy to understand vocabulary made the speech understandable and conversational for the audience. Obama also utilized a somewhat happy tone in his voice which helped reiterate the message of hope he sought to convey to the audience. Obama's use of hand gestures were very noticeable during this speech; throughout the speech Obama is constantly pointing to the audience, raising an open hand, or making a 'precision grip' with his fingers. The first two of these gestures appeared to excite the audience and give them energy while the last occurred when Obama spoke about pressing matters indicating how serious they were. A great example of Obama utilizing the 'precision grip' during a situation to give added weight to the matter at hand is when he began to quote the Declaration of Independence Obama (2004) began with "Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago" followed by this excerpt from the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776) "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*" This excellent use of delivery tactics was an integral part in the success of this speech and its lasting positive memory.

Conclusion and Implications

This analysis of Obama's 2004 DNC keynote address reveals several important conclusions. For example, Obama showed the audience that he is not that different from the everyday citizen and his family life is very relatable to others. Carnes and Lupu (2016) found that voters believed blue-collar Presidential candidates were equally qualified when compared white-collar candidates, more relatable, and just as likely to get their vote. Although Obama's educational background could have made it difficult for blue-collar workers to identify with him, his choice of examples threaded throughout the speech made him relatable and, thus, bolstered a sense of trustworthiness among voters. Given the outcome of the most recent election wherein President Trump appealed to blue-collar workers by wearing seed cap and touting the message of "make America great again," it appears that creating a persona of relatability can prove successful among voters even when a candidate is highly educated as was the case with Obama or extremely wealthy as is the case with Trump.

Throughout his speech, Obama clearly declared his faith not only in the Democratic party specifically but in the American people generally. As such, he appealed to a broad cross-section of his audience with his message of hope for the future and faith in the American people. Doing so using a plainspoken delivery again enhanced the credibility his hope and faith that the American people are better together than we are divided. Interestingly, the most recent election campaign did not employ a strategy of togetherness, hope, and faith in the American people. Whereas Obama touted a message of belief in and hope for the American people, President Trump described the nation using terms like "American carnage" and that he is here to fix it rather than sharing the task with the American citizens (Should we cite this?). Furthermore, contrary to Obama's keynote address that complimented the positives the United States had to

offer and promoted perseverance in tough times, Trump's speeches painted a bleak picture of the United States and promoted quick fixes to resolve the problems facing the nation. While Obama placed his hope in the citizens of the United States in order to inspire progress toward a better future, Trump appears to utilize negative depictions of the United States and create fear in order to inspire action and support toward quick fix actions. These quick fixes promoted by Trump are products of divisiveness, such as a travel ban on nations with a majority of Muslim citizens, as opposed to Obama's attempt to denounce the terms "Black America", "White America", "Latino America", and "Asian America."

Additionally this speech was memorable for its theme of hope; Obama used a comparatively subtle mnemonic device through repetition of terms like "hope" and "believe" while Trump would join his audiences in chants such as "Build that wall" or "Who's going to pay for it?" "They are" when referring to the claim that Mexico would pay for the construction of a wall on its border with the United States. As for delivery, Trump and Obama often used hand gestures but there was a significant decrease in their use after Obama took his place in office. Additionally, Trump continually used gestures throughout his campaign to belittle others, including his fellow candidates; examples include looks of disgust when other candidates made statements he did not agree with or mocking a reporter with a physical disability (Hall, Goldstein, & Ingram, 2016). Only time will tell whether Americans truly value the position on which Obama ran and won regarding togetherness and hope.

Based on the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, appears that the persona President Obama showcased to the American people through his speeches did not set a standard for future American Presidents. The 2016 election showed that although the American people were very fond of the persona President Obama showed them, they were willing to elect a

president who did not even attempt to meet the standards of those that came before him.

President Obama's speech delivery continued to develop throughout his time in office, which is easily exemplified by the decrease in hand gestures; the same may be true for President Trump but his short time in office has not displayed such a change yet. This is a judgement based on one presidential election and time along with future elections may prove otherwise.

The speech examined in this rhetorical analysis was extremely effective in communicating the intended message to the audience of togetherness and hope for an improving future while garnering support for the Democratic candidate John Kerry. Perhaps unintentionally, this speech was so effective and memorable that it played a large role in Obama winning the election as the Democratic nominee at the following DNC and eventually becoming the President of the United States. Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention was significant because it is not often that a speech made by someone other than the Presidential candidate is the most memorable and impactful from a political party's national convention. President Obama proved to be an extremely strong candidate, the likes of which have been hard to reproduce. Perhaps, Democrats should study Obama's success and use their findings to advise their future candidates. This speech is still significant at this moment for a few reasons; some believed that Obama's persona displayed through his speeches would set a standard for future Presidents to live up to and that has not been the case thus far. Five years after this speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama would go on to assume the position of President of the United States. Not only was President Obama, the first African American President of the United States but he will also be remembered as one of the most charismatic leaders of the United States (Bligh, 2009). Beyond the content of the speech, the delivery and style are two of the most important reasons why this speech was so relatable and has become very memorable.

The charisma Obama displayed through his speeches was described as a voice of empowerment and a role model for youth (Bligh, 2009). Lastly, many of the issues mentioned throughout the keynote address, such as terrorism and racial tensions amongst Americans, are still social issues that plague the United States today and are issues its President should hope to resolve.

There are multiple avenues for future research regarding the topics discussed in this analysis. Future research could be done on this analysis to include more speeches from President Obama as well as President Trump after he has served more time in office and there is more content to consider. Additionally, researchers should consider potential correlations between the findings of rhetorical analyses on candidate speeches and voter sentiment. It might be easier to use exit poll data, rather than voter sentiment, but the 2016 election has thrown a massive wrench in their credibility.

Finally, although the campaign speeches and presidential addresses of Obama seem to embrace the characteristics and values of a great president as espoused by Siegal and others and proved to be successful for him both in terms of getting elected and re-elected, the strategies employed by President Trump did not. Thus, what the American people value in a president today and in the years to come is unclear. Only time will tell.

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