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Panel Presentation on Presidential Rhetoric in the Age of Obama



Delivered 2 September 2010, American Political Science Association Meeting, Washington, D.C.

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Good morning.

I'm going to try to answer the question: How is it that a person generally seen particularly by the press as eloquent during the campaign, is now seen as largely rhetorically unsuccessful or at least less eloquent than he was seen during the campaign?

And I'm going to argue that during the campaign what Barack Obama offered the American people was classic epideictic in the Greek sense. A rhetoric that created a sense of collective community grounded in hope and a sense of reconciliation embodied in who he was as an individual and in that message.

That's been, that concept isn't new or controversial, I'm just going to assume that you'll accept it on its face. But the point I want to make about it is that the credibility of Barack Obama, an African-American winning the primary in Iowa, giving this sort of message, meant that we were investing that message with Barack Obama. He became the evidence for his own message. And at a time in which the public was widely ready to repudiate George Bush, he became the incarnation of everyone's hopes and dreams as the "un-Bush."

As a result people read into his candidacy whatever they wanted, particularly everything they didn't like about George Bush. And every unfulfilled aspiration of liberals or progressives was also bodied in this person Barack Obama regardless of what he actually said.



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In other words Barack Obama was never as eloquent as we thought he was. A person matched a moment with a rhetoric in a context in which the audience created something it heard as eloquence.

Widely labeled as eloquent, he creates expectations for his presidency that he cannot satisfy in the presidency barring that he is Abraham Lincoln with The Gettysburg Address or a Second Inaugural in his pocket.

And that's my first argument. He comes in with expectations that he and the press and we collectively created that are virtually unmeetable. That said, by historical standards this is not particularly effective rhetoric. I'm drawing up from concepts that Karlyn Campbell and I articulated in a book called *Presidents Creating the Presidency, Deeds done in Words*, published by University of Chicago Press. And I'm going to make three arguments.

First, in the modern presidency candidates don't actually give us speech anymore and when we look at a speech we misunderstand what they're doing. They give a series of rhetorical offerings to the American people, that taken together because they focus on some particular moment or some particular topic, focus our attention on central meaning and as result lead us to come to a speech with a context already set. And in that context they should offer us a digestive understanding of who we are at that moment and how that individual is going to take us into the future that person has offered us.

Now a rhetoric that simply promises hope is going to be inadequate because we're looking for the specifics that are going to be delivered, tied to a compelling and coherent vision, digested in language that we can understand and, importantly, remember.

The Barack Obama that we see in the presidency is actually very good at setting up the moments that lead to the speech. He just isn't very good at delivering the speech.

Barack Obama actually gave his best inaugural address, not when he stood before the American people and swore the oath of office. He gave it in the week coming up to that point, as they were setting up the inaugural address, when he gave a speech at the Mall that reads more effectively than the Inaugural Address itself. In other words, the pre-speech, the part of the build-up, actually exhausted the rhetoric that should have been in the inaugural or they should have simply lifted that speech and given it to an audience large enough to have heard it. There were probably if twenty people in Washington who still remember the speech that he gave leading up and I bet most of them would say if asked, it was better than the Inaugural Address.

He is good at build-up, yet when he went down to give the build-up for the first of the two speeches in the Oval Office, he empathizes with the people who are in the Gulf. He meets with them, we get the visuals which a speech should then recap and bring forward to us, but which actually the speech doesn't do.



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Something Ronald Reagan was brilliant at, something that President Obama does not appear capable of, the minute he sits down at the desk and speaks to camera, but he manages to do it when he is in a speaking situation.

So he empathized and importantly he engaged in performative utterance. He ate seafood, thereby suggesting that it was safe to eat seafood and the next night when he gave the speech, he was still alive, thereby suggesting that the evidence justified the claim that you could safely eat seafood. In other words, he got the build-up right.

What does he do now with his first Oval Office speech? He basically tells you he's going to hold BP accountable and the next day he holds BP accountable. He gets his escrow account. As a result, he's kept the promise.

Difficulty is, that that's a squandering of the first Oval Office speech which should have not only held BP accountable, but harnessed the images in the Gulf that were in news for an extended period of time before that and he was slow to rhetorically respond. But nonetheless, harness those images to a compelling case for climate change legislation; a compelling case for climate change in my judgment is already being made on its own.

In that environment the presidency offer, or the context offered him as President the opportunity to give a great speech. Presidents can't just give a great speech willy-nilly. They need to be in a context in which a great speech is invited.

Now we have weeks of coverage of every evocative image you can put in place from your own memory and in that environment, the public is asking large questions that could yield a legislative answer.

Suppose that night he harnessed all of those images to a speech as graceful, as eloquent as his epideictic during the campaign in service of that larger vision. And he told us the cost and he told us the consequences if we did not act, and he said I may not be able to get this. I know that there's going to be Republicans on the other side who don't want this. I know I don't have the sixty votes I need but it's the most important thing we can do in this environment. He might not have gotten his legislation but he would have increased the likelihood he would have gotten it and that speech could have been memorable as a high point of that presidency.

He walked away from the rhetorical moment and used his first Oval Office speech to basically say I'm going to hold BP accountable which was practically a done deal anyway. They pretty much promised that they were going to be. So having set something up he didn't capture the moment and that's a failure of this presidency.

He also has not yet in this presidency in the moments in which he has given us major pieces of rhetoric offered us a digressive sense of what this presidency is going to do.



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When one talks about these setting docking statements or digestive statements of the presidency such as, "Ask not what your country can do for you". They sound as if they're sound bites until you realize that there's a definition underlying a presidency in those kinds of statements.

That helps us understand the Kennedy presidency. So when he confronts big steel, he comes back to an ask not sacrifice theme. When he founds the Peace Corps, he comes back to an ask not sacrifice theme. It's a theme of transformation of generational identity. There's nothing that's comparable in the Obama lexicon, indeed I would challenge you to give me a phrase that is memorable at all, that defines who we are and where we're going under this presidency.

So he creates the context for speeches, he then doesn't give in a satisfying fashion. He focuses the media on the importance of the moment and he does that well and then the speeches don't actually deliver. That's failure number one.

Failure number two, in those moments in which great rhetoric is called for, he doesn't actually deliver the speech that responds to the moment. I've given you the first, he didn't take the Gulf catastrophe into a great rhetorical moment, asking for some great, important initiative. Something that would change the climate as, you know, for future generations and change the world as we know it.

More importantly, since we just heard the speech the other night, he did, he had the same problem again. What is the concern of the American people as they sit down to listen to the second speech? It actually isn't the transition that's happening in Iraq and it isn't the transition in Afghanistan. It's the economy.

American people come to that speech in many fewer numbers and they are asking among other things what are you going to do now about an economy that's faltering, an economy that may be going into a double-dip recession.

To illustrate the failure of rhetoric, I'm going to read the first sentence from the speech. "Good evening. Tonight I'd like to talk to you about the end of our combat mission in Iraq, the ongoing security challenges we face, and the need to rebuild our nation at home."

You cannot give a great focus to speech that addresses the economic anxiety of the nation or tells us what we were doing in Iraq or celebrates the troop there or talks about the transition in Afghanistan in any coherent, meaningful way out of that opening sentence.

"I'd like to talk to you about the end of our combat mission?" He doesn't want to talk to us about the end of our combat mission. What he wants to do in the speech topically -- and he spends most of his time on it -- is pay tribute to the troops. He doesn't want to tell us the meaning of our being in Iraq. He can't. We haven't satisfied our objectives there.



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It's the end of the combat mission. It's not after all the end of the war and as he admits he doesn't have a government in place there. That country doesn't have a government in place there so he can't say we brought stable democracy. And he certainly doesn't want to spend much time with what we've got because what we've got is a corrupt government there. And I shouldn't say we, what they've got.

He then says, "The ongoing security challenges we face." You can't get a decent speech that he's going to give out of that as a preview. He's not actually going to talk about that anyway. It's not the subject of the speech.

And then the third part of the sentence, "And the need to rebuild our nation here at home." We are not in any need to rebuild our nation. Our nation is just fine. Indeed a President is supposed to reassure us that our nation is fine, that we are resilient, that our democratic values are what make us great.

He wants to say we need to rebuild our economy at home. They haven't even gotten the first sentence right and they're not even in the speech yet.

Now let's look to what he says about the economy once he gets to it. First he says too little. If that's your central concern as the audience then the speech needs to reduce your anxiety, explain what we're going to do, and you need to walk away from the speech believing things are going to get better. And it would help if you also believed that the stimulus is working, because it can't work if you don't believe it is working and he has yet to persuade the American people that it actually is working.

I'm going to go to a sentence that is an indictment of his own presidency in what should be his central message. Again, "Unfortunately," he says, "Over the last decade we have not done what is necessary to shore up the foundation of our own prosperity."

Let me read this again. "Unfortunately over the last decade we have not done what is necessary to shore up the foundation of our own prosperity." Let me ask you this question. Over the last decade who has been President for a year and a half? "Over the last decade, we" (I in the last year and a half) "have not done what is necessary to shore up the foundation of our own prosperity."

I don't know what the speech writers were thinking. I think they think the last decade was George Bush's presidency. Okay, well let's assume that. Well then we're indicting in a democratic President's voice the last two years of the Clinton presidency. This is poor writing, poorly executed, in a part of a speech that doesn't do what it needed to do in order to satisfy the anxieties of an audience, who after all creates the meaning of discourse by bringing its assumptions to bear on what the audience is being offered by the speaker at a specific moment in time.



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Having said that largely the Obama presidency succeeds in setting up speeches it never delivers and when it delivers doesn't deliver well, let me say one thing that is positive about the rhetoric of the Obama presidency. There has been one high point rhetorically in this presidency and it was not a traditional rhetorical moment.

It was one that a President created. Presidents either respond to what's there -- and he should have in a way that he didn't in the Gulf crisis -- or they create a moment for us, wrestle our attention and tell us something we need to know. When Barack Obama gathered the Republicans together and engaged in a dialogue with them about the health care reform initiative, he demonstrated the strength of his own arguments. He demonstrated his intellect. He demonstrated rhetorical capacity largely not evident in debates. He suggests a high level of competence and also command of that as an issue and he won the moment.

That person has got to find his way to feature those skills in the presidency, if he is to become not a great President, if he is to become an adequate President rhetorically.