

Brittany Scott
English 1101
Dr. Desmet
Fall 2010



When Only Words Prevail

On November 4, 2008 at 11:13 p.m, change came to America. The 2008 election had been finalized; for the first time in history, America elected an African American president. For the first time since Roosevelt, the Democratic Party won by a land slide. For the first time to many, history became personal as Barack Hussein Obama walked onto the Chicago stage to accept his position as President-Elect of the United States. As James Wood said, “many of us would have watched in tears if President-elect Obama had only thanked his campaign staff and shuffled off to bed, but his midnight address was written in a language with roots and stirred in his audience a correspondingly deep emotion” (Wood). Obama uses this speech to rebuild the morality and social state of a nation blinded by the fire of despair. His rhetoric and oratorical mastery allow him to begin the reconstruction of the people who matter most, the citizens. With such skills, Barack Obama not only empowers and unites his nation by strengthening their belief in the possibility of progressive change and their hope, but he also places himself on a pedestal near two great men whose style and focus he shadows, Abraham Lincoln and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, thus making him even more potent as a leader and speaker.

Barack Obama's first notable invention in his speech is what inevitably makes the audience

reach an ultimate intensity—the arrangement. Instead of organizing his address in a manner where introduction leads to purpose, which leads to proposal, Obama orders his speech in a way that gains his audience's support and passion as the speech unfolds. First, he focuses on and moves through the people as did Dr. Martin Luther King in many of his speeches (Warren). Then, he floats through time and history to focus on the future of the nation. With such a strategic order, Obama asserts that the fate of the future is a product of the citizens' strength and unity, echoing Lincoln's description of America as a place “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” (Hines 1). Thus, the full efficacy of Obama's speech is only seen when it is analyzed in parts, sectioned by this same strategic arrangement.

Barack Obama's initial interests are his nation and those who have lost faith in America. Obama's speech addresses their mentality in a demanding manner, a separate but equal manner. This is done by using parallelism. He calls attention to she or he “who still doubts” and she or he “who still wonders” and she or he “who still questions.” He juxtaposes these three groups because similarly they are *all* uncertain of the power of the nation. Furthermore, Obama places all of them beside each other to show that they are *all* equally wrong. He succinctly responds to these minds full of doubt and questions by declaring, “Tonight is [their] answer.” His being elected refutes their doubtful beliefs because he, the person who “was never the likeliest candidate,” is President-elect. If the country can reap such election results, then there is no need to question the nation's existing power.

However, this “answer” is only one part of a tricolon (repetition consisting of three parts of increasing power) that assists Obama in truly empowering his nation. The tricolon continues to describe the answer as “the answer told by lines stretched around schools” and “the answer told by young and old, rich and poor, democratic and republic.” Nevertheless, the tricolon is completed by its fourth addition. Obama states, “It's the answer that led those who have been so cynical and fearful and doubtful...to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more towards the hope of a better day.” This last line, serving as a rhetorical climax, turns the skeptical citizens into believers. The power of this line comes from its climax-engendering position in the tricolon and “the arc” resembling Dr.

Martin Luther King's phrase stating that “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice” (Wood). Obama introduces an ethical appeal as he gains his audience's trust by letting them know he is finishing what King started, thereby making them feel safe under his leadership. This security induces comfort and confidence in the audience, which both strengthens their dynamism.

Extending this emphasis of the dynamic power of the nation, Obama later employs logical appeals. He provides the audience with information which highlights the strength of a united democracy. He states that the lines of voters were “in numbers never seen,” and that voters waited in lines for “three to four hours.” Many voters also were voting for the first time in their lives. All of these details lead to the multiplication of the power Obama is referring to. The fact that Obama won 367 electoral votes to McCain's 173, the fact that 67 million of the 120 million votes were for Obama, and the fact that America had more voters in the 2008 election than ever before in history underscores the power Obama is referring to (Hines 662). The potency that exists in America already enables the nation, as a united people, to do the unthinkable. Obama simply wants his audience to tap into the potential embedded in the country in order to do more.

Having empowered his nation, Obama goes back to the roots of his campaign—change. Obama introduces emotional appeals as he makes his audience feel superior by declaring that they are “above all” and by dedicating his election victory to them. He furthers this pathos by bringing attention to the conditions under which the victory began. Using comparisons to construct an emotional connection with his audience, Obama distinguishes his election from the conventional election by asserting that the victory was not “hatched” in the halls of Washington. With this one term he exemplifies the fact that this triumph did not just come to life in the blink of an eye or the crack of an egg. Instead, it was formed “in the backyards of Des Moines, and the living rooms of Concord, and the back porches of Charleston.” Instead, it was built by “5 dollars” here and “10 dollars” there and “20 dollars” when possible. This sad story is not drawn to seek pity, though: it adds to the possibility for progress, the logic that is introduced next. He explains that his election, his step-by-step and prayer-by-prayer

election, was indeed one “by the people,” thus dedicating the rebirth of true democracy to the audience. As a result, Obama introduces his main argument; based on the nation's previous accomplishments while united, one must assume that possibilities are endless if the nation is united. If one less fortunate campaign team can fight through “the bitter cold and scorching heat” to build a million dollar team of winners, then an entire nation can surely rebuild a country “block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.”

Obama continues to combine rhetorical appeals and techniques to persuade his nation to believe in change and unity. He brings attention to the fact that his election “alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change.” He then comments on the “enormity of the task that lies ahead.” He sums it up into “two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century.” The asyndeton (lack of conjunctions) allows Obama to emphasize that the problems are all separate issues for America and that none of them outweighs the other. More importantly, it lessens the load of the task by making it seem like three minor issues instead of one major issue and consequently brings comfort to the audience. This comfort is furthered by an ethical appeal, the term “we.” Obama's phrase “We, as a people, will get there,” is a quote from Martin Luther King's *I've been to the Mountaintop* (Warren). This fact adds an extra degree of sincerity and unity. If one was wondering how Obama would or could do anything, this incorporation of King's words offers the ethos that erases their doubt. The nation feels that they can get there. Despite the fact that “the roads ahead will be long” and that “the climb will be steep,” they will seek change. The “roads” of America will no longer diverge, the nation will climb the mountain of prosperity and progress as a whole, as a “we.” Suitably, his election is the most apparent example of that. His being elected helps prove that change is a plausible and possible and probable thing.

Obama starts another ethical appeal in an effort to further unify his nation. He reaches out to his audience by explaining to them that he can't make it without them, that change “can't happen” without them. He seeks to touch the people who are so doubtful of change that they don't even support it. He

addresses them as those whose support he has “yet to earn.” As a humble man, he not only asks for their help but tells them that “[he] will be [their] President too.” Obama shows that he is ready for change; he is only waiting on his nation to join him. More importantly, at this point Obama speaks as if Lincoln's ghost lives inside of him (Wood). He alludes to Lincoln to certify the possibility of change and to, moreover, highlight the probability of change when a nation is united. This is a main idea in Lincoln's first and second inauguration speech, along with his Gettysburg Address (Hines 701). Obama shows his knowledge of Lincoln as he carefully “crafted his language, reminiscent of Lincoln's appeal for unity and reason, to encourage Americans to embrace change and hope” (Hines 698). Furthermore, he uses the extra worth gained from his evocative style to proclaim “the true genius of America”:
America can be perfected; “America can change.”

After uniting his citizens and gaining their faith in change, Obama focuses on the hope of his nation. He reintroduces his renowned campaign slogan, “Yes We Can,” a motto of faith in possibilities (Zeleny). He rests his motto on the belief that “what we've already achieved gives us HOPE for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.” The audience becomes emotionally charged as he repeats “Yes We Can” after every section of the testimony. Each time the phrase is chanted, the volume of the audience increases. Such rising intensity underscores the audience's rapidly growing degree of hope. In response, Obama allows logic to create a final mark. He takes his audience (which is now united, empowered, and supportive of change,) and conquers any future doubt by using Ann Nixon Cooper's testimony to influence them to find the bravery of having hope. This 106 year old woman witnessed an evolving world in America. The many changes she has seen through her life allow him to provide examples of growth, such as Woman's Suffrage and the Civil Rights Movement. As a result, Obama points out that the probability of refinement occurring is high because of the pattern of change that occurred so much in the past. Therefore, Americans not only have “unyielding hope” as an emotional concept, but also as a logical matter.

The power of rhetoric can greatly move a people. Barack Obama's speech is the perfect

demonstration of such power in effect. His words are enlightening, captivating, and influential. He does not simply rely on persuasion to make his audience believe in his optimistic view; instead, he employs rhetoric to guide his audience in building their *own* positive perspective. Even more significantly, he rides on the beliefs of his historical predecessors. Obama brings forth an assertiveness that is reinforced by Dr. Martin Luther King as he speaks of reclaiming the “dream,” and Abraham Lincoln as he speaks of reaffirming the “fundamental truth, that...we are one.” With this credit of being a glowing shadow of King and Lincoln and placing his focus on making change, Obama uses this “defining moment” as a chance to redefine his nation. He binds the wounds crippling his nation and leaves his audience faithful for prosperity—faithful for him.

Works Cited

"Barack Obama wins presidential election." *CNN*. 4 November 2008. 6 November 2008.

<<http://www.cnn.com/2008/politics/11/04election.president/index.html>> November 5, 2008.

Hines, Darlene Clark. *The African-American Odyssey*. Vol 2. San Francisco: Kelleman, 2001. Print. 2 vols.

Warren, Mervyn A. *King Came Preaching: The Pulpit Power of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 2001. Print.

Wood, James. “Close Reading: Victory Speech.” *The New Yorker*. Conde Nest Digital. 2010. 17 November. 2008 <http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2008/11/17/081117ta_talk_wood>

Zeleny, Jeff. “Obama Clinches Nomination; First Black Candidate to Lead a Major Party Ticket,” *The New York Times* 4 June. 2008: A8. Print