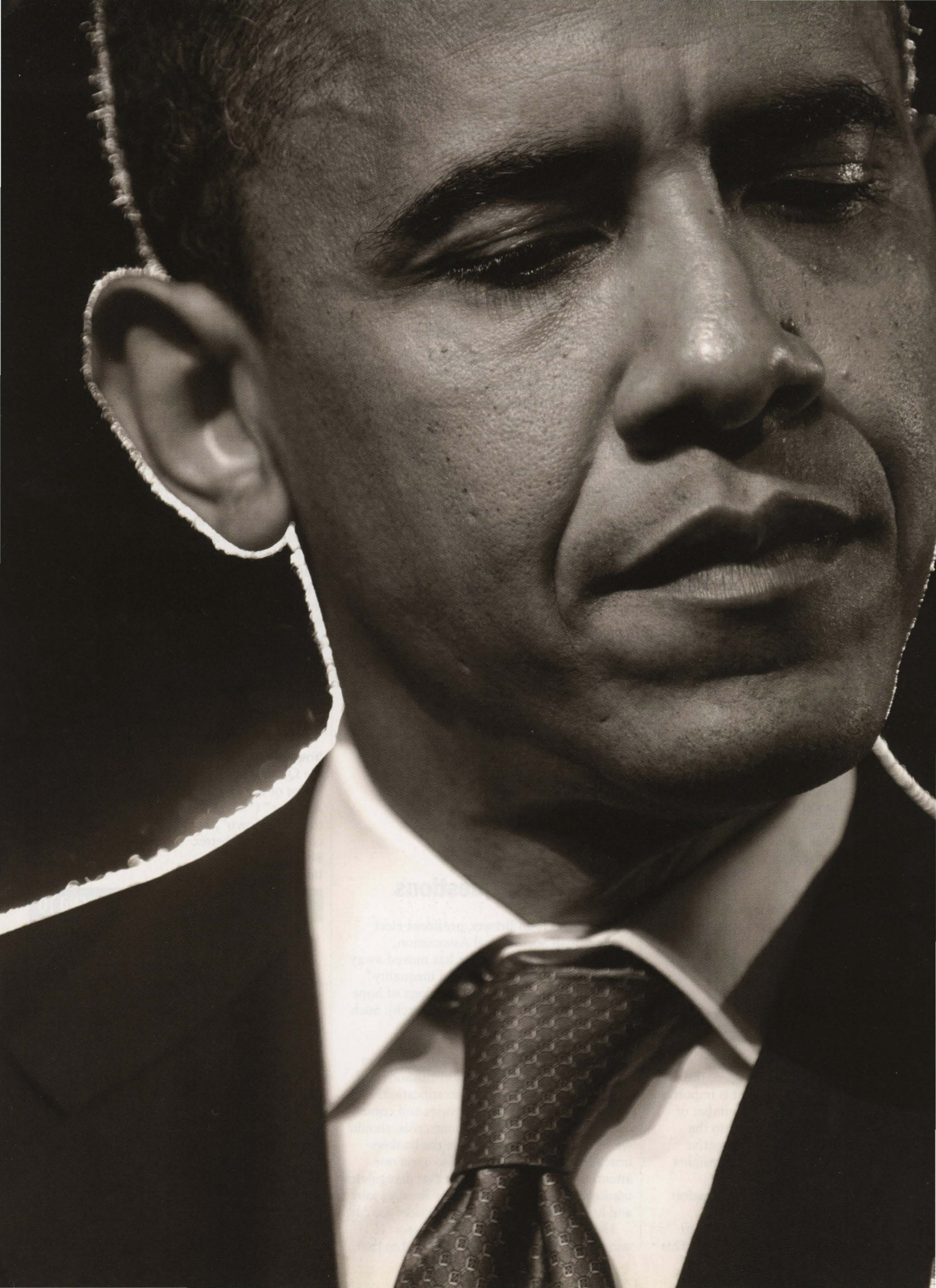


In restoring oratory and rhetoric to a central role in public life, Barack Obama has shown how words and bearing can touch lives and change minds. Tom Palaima traces his lineage from Cato to Martin Luther King

The tools of power

On 3 January 2008, Barack Obama took his first big step towards being elected President of the US by winning the Democratic Party's Iowa caucuses. Two days later, Isabelle Duriez, writing in *Libération*, the progressive French newspaper co-founded and first edited by Jean-Paul Sartre, exclaimed: "How many politicians have the ability to stir up such emotions? How many have done so since John F. Kennedy?"

She began her piece with an anecdote from July 2004, right after Obama delivered his memorable speech at the Democratic National Convention in Boston: "Early one morning the radio was rebroadcasting the speech of one Barack Obama, and the driver of a bus taking journalists to the convention said out loud, 'Are you listening to this guy? He's going to go far.'"

Duriez returns again and again to Obama's gifts to move and inspire people as a speaker. His speeches, in her words, are "steeped in idealism". The French metaphor is more powerful than the one used to translate it. In English, Obama's speeches are tea bags immersed in the hot water of noble ideas. In French, he works his idealism into the very substance of his speeches, like a baker plying dough with his own hands.

I cite Duriez's article for its value as an outside witness to American political events and the phenomenon that is Barack Obama, speech-maker. However, given the effects of the eight years of the Bush Administration's foreign policy decisions on the rest of the world, it would be disingenuous to claim that Duriez is an impartial third party.

Still, despite the keen interest European political journalists and their readers would naturally have in the position of a leading candidate for the American Presidency, Duriez emphasises not Obama's political beliefs, his policy statements, his welcome (from a liberal-international perspective) promises of change, or even his remarkable life trajectory. Instead, she focuses on how he speaks about these things, the contagious hope he spreads in his speeches, the way he speaks of himself as a symbol of the American Dream of achievement through hard work and education, despite the disadvantages of his race, broken family life, socio-economic class, and his coming-of-age bewilderment about his own identity.

> **"Obama's speeches are wired into what our parents meant, if we were lucky enough to have good parents, when they said in plain American English: 'We just want you to be happy'"**

We might add here Obama's straightforward answers to questions that cause other political figures to dance verbally around what passes for truth on the political stage. For example, consider Obama's careful statement in 2004 that America's war on drugs had been a failure and that "we need to rethink and decriminalise our marijuana laws", but not necessarily legalise addictive drugs; and then, in 2006, his artfully candid seven-word, two-sentence reply when asked about his own use of pot.

A similar question in 1992 launched President Bill Clinton on his parallel careers as the Fred Astaire of tortured legalistic reasoning and the second coming of Socrates in his concern for fine shades of semantic meaning.

George W. Bush, in a Salon.com interview with conservative writer David Horowitz in May 1999 as he ramped up for his first Presidential election campaign, responded to questions about his own drug use by claiming that he wanted to "elevate the discourse" by not playing the Washington "game of gossip and slander". He countered with his own rhetorical question about such queries and those who posed them: "Should I dignify them by answering their questions?"

Now visualise Obama, sitting cross-legged and relaxed, responding: "I inhaled (pause) frequently." (Longer pause while Obama

thinks. Then the rhetorical knockout.) "That was the point."

A stand-up comedian could not have delivered these lines any better in terms of word choice, timing and deadpan finesse.

Certainly, as Howard Fineman, senior Washington correspondent at *Newsweek*, pointed out at the time on Chris Matthews' MSNBC news programme, times had changed since 1992, when Presidential hopeful Clinton felt he had to claim that he didn't inhale, and maybe even since 1999, when Bush evaded answering questions about whether he once had drinking problems or a cocaine habit.

But Obama did not refer to any extenuating circumstances, such as youthful flirtation or experimentation, which many voters had begun to find tiresome and comically outdated. Matthews himself laughingly commented after showing the Clinton clip: "How did he know he didn't like it if he didn't inhale?"

By contrast, Obama directly asserted his frequent use, because we all know you smoke *and* inhale pot to get high and, if you put a lighted joint to your lips, you want to get high. But what Obama did is not what we normally mean when we use the term "honesty".

As Fineman explained to Matthews and the MSNBC audience, Obama, by seeming to speak candidly about such issues, "seems so real. He seems to acknowledge the reality of things. It's almost like a dog whistle... Older people can't hear it. Younger people hear it... He seems to be willing to be honest."

Note the frequent use of the word "seem" by Fineman, and by me. Obama's answer is a clear example of Cato the Elder's well-known aphorism, *rem tene, verba sequentur*: "Grasp the matter; the words will follow." Cato's advice does not mean, either in Roman or modern American politics: "Size the situation up and honest words will come to you." It means: "Develop the skill to be able to do political calculations instantaneously and then with commensurate skill say the words best suited at the moment to your immediate and long-term political interests."

Romans up and down their high political and social ladders would not interpret this as falsehood, because everything for them was political. Just watch one or two episodes of *Rome*, the BBC/HBO television series. Whether slave or freedman, plebeian or patrician, no one says anything without what we would call personal political calculation, and nothing anyone says is without what we would call personal political consequences.

Obama knows this. It explains his remarkable *gravitas*, a seriousness of manner in his public conduct not unlike that of the young Octavian on his way to becoming Caesar Augustus. It is all the more impressive because of his relative youth and because it is not put on. It is exactly the kind of acquired habit that Cato knew a successful political figure had to have. Why? Because if it is not as natural as tying your sandal straps, you will inevitably make a big mistake. It is a habit, by the way, that Obama's predecessor Bush did not have and never will acquire.

The talented orator knows that "seeming honest" and "being honest" in public life are often the same thing, and that political self-interest and "the common good" can coincide. Obama has taken this principle to heart; and his words follow, measured and well-chosen words in uncomplicated syntax. At times, he seems to be channelling the spirit of George Orwell – or at least making sure that his public statements and speeches will never end up in the commentary of a new edition of "Politics and the English Language" (1946), Orwell's essay on cant, obfuscation and lies.

In the example I have used here, Obama sized up two things before speaking. First, young Americans and 55- to 65-year-old baby boomers aren't concerned about marijuana use, or, if they are, they have liberal concerns about how drug laws are written and then enforced in the inner city.

Second, he knew that most of those Americans whose votes he had any chance of winning had a long list of other, more serious worries: the undeclared wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; torture; domestic surveillance; secrecy in government and the rapacious privatising of state functions; unethical firings and hirings within the Department of Justice; the nation's decaying physical infrastructure; Wall Street and general corporate corruption, eg, the "secret investments and tricky math" that made Enron a house of cards and ultimately led to today's economic crisis; cronyism and its consequences in government agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Securities and Exchange Commission, and, and, and.

The arguments in Obama's major speeches are important in themselves. They will be studied by historians, political scientists and scholars of government and public affairs. But the way he constructs and delivers his arguments may heighten interest in rhetoric, the history of speech-making and the cultural contexts in which speeches are delivered. In what follows, I give more examples of what I mean.

"Obama's response is a clear example of Cato the Elder's well-known aphorism, rem tene, verba sequentur: 'Grasp the matter; the words will follow'"

Obama makes his arguments seem like more than talking points pitched first by a political candidate and now by our President. In his campaign speeches, he brought voters to understand and feel his viewpoints in human terms. We feel that his views of the world, and of his and our place in it, are representative of aspirations that are inculcated in all Americans from an early age.

We acquire these aspirations less by formal education than by the myths we hear in songs, read in books, watch in movies or start picking up in the fragments of adult conversations we overhear as children, the myths that spring from our collective belief in the most memorable phrase in the American Declaration of Independence: "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These basic national sentiments defy divisions by race, wealth, class or religion. A fatherless young gang member selling drugs around 65th and Superior in Cleveland and members of the Palm Beach Country Club investing their money with Bernie Madoff have different but equally deep-rooted feelings about America's promises. Obama's speeches tap into the last of these three founding aims.

FRANCIS MILLER/GETTY

Old Testament power Lyndon B. Johnson's State of the Union address in 1967 lingers long in the memory

His speeches are wired into what our parents meant, if we were lucky enough to have good parents, when they said in plain American English: "We just want you to be happy."

Obama has useful preacher instincts, doubtless gained from attending Reverend Jeremiah Wright's sermons in Chicago and Sunday services at other churches. He has been around both crushing poverty and Petronian wealth and privilege enough to be sensitive to human needs and concerns of all kinds. He knows that an integral part of our American dream of happiness is the happiness acquired by making it possible for others "to be happy". He is smart, and he cares about people.

In so far as political necessity will permit, Obama has moved the word "argument" away from its modern meaning of "controversy" and closer to its root. He seems to "make things clear", and he often does. His preference for explaining his own well-reasoned positions rather than attacking the positions of opponents can be seen in his inclusive choice of Pastor Rick Warren and Reverend Joseph E. Lowery to give benediction at his inauguration. His Cabinet selections followed the same principle, again within the limits of what is politically feasible.

Bush claimed to be the uniter and the decider, but under Karl Rove's guidance he united his base by means of hot-button issues such as gay marriage, abortion and stem-cell research that alienated others. Obama makes a real effort to include and respect his opponents. His Cabinet nominations had the added benefit, for him, of summoning up the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, another Illinois senator who assumed the Presidency in trying times, and whose Gettysburg Address – ten sentences and three minutes at most – is considered the greatest example of American Presidential speech-making.

Simply put, Obama is the first major American political figure in a long time to whom we might consider applying the term "orator". Among Presidents besides Lincoln, parallels can be drawn with John F. Kennedy and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, although I would argue that Obama combines the oratorical talents of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. I base this not only on what he says. I think Obama has a similar persona to R.F.K. and M.L.K. when he speaks, and that his supporters, like theirs, respond to his "feeling tone".

Psychiatrist Oliver Sacks explains "feeling tone" thus: "the expression that goes with the words, that total, spontaneous, involuntary expressiveness, which can never be simulated or faked, as words alone can, all too easily". Here, too, there is a clear contrast with Bush.

I also see parallels with Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson developed his political instincts and speech-making abilities from an early age. His mother was a teacher of elocution, and his father had served as a Populist in the Texas Legislature, where he was somewhat ineffective because he was too much of an idealist. Johnson as a boy overheard a lot of political discussion, both idealistic and realistic.

Johnson, like Obama, commanded respect as a clear and careful speaker and as a presence when he spoke, mainly because he was at one stage of his career, as biographer Robert Caro observed, "master of the Senate". Johnson said about himself: "One thing I know about is power. I know where to find it and how to use it."

Another thing Johnson knew about was being poor and being treated unjustly. In Caro's view, Johnson's political actions in support of racial equality were rooted in the fact that many people of colour were also trapped, through racism, by poverty. King, Robert Kennedy and Johnson all had that strong feeling tone when they spoke about the problems of the struggling poor and the basic rights that were denied them. Obama does, too.

Johnson knew his words and his bearing were tools of power. Like Obama, he knew that making good speeches as a statesman required more than good speech-writers. Johnson knew that public speech-making involved "acting" sincere. In public speeches, he always projected a manner fit for the occasion and befitting his successive roles as Congressman, Senator, Vice-President and President.

And he had a good ear, as Obama does now, for what we might call a formal biblical seriousness of purpose in delivery when it was called for, as it was in his State of the Union address in January 1967. Speaking of the Vietnam War, Johnson told the American people: "I wish I could report to you that the conflict is almost over. This I cannot do. We face more cost, more loss, and more agony. For the end is not yet."

These lines are so powerful that I have remembered them ever since I first saw and heard them delivered on a black-and-white television screen. I was 15 and my only brother was at risk as a special operations combat controller in the US Air Force in South-East Asia. I can remember my mother's agony that one of her two sons might die because the President would not say that the war was at an end.

The sound, metre, increasing clause lengths (two, then three, then four syllables) and epanaphora ("*more* cost, *more* loss, and *more* agony") of Johnson's words gave them the impact of three punches thrown by Muhammad Ali. The inverted word order made Johnson's declaration "For the end is not yet" seem as unchallengeable as one of the Ten Commandments. It made him seem like Moses. It made my mother sob.

I recommend that you google Obama's speech marking his victory in the Iowa caucuses with Johnson's Old Testament speaking style still in your head.

Notice at the start Obama's dignified presence at the podium; his relaxed, but not casual, self-containment as he waits for the

Sometimes when I listened to or read coverage of George W. Bush's speeches by television or print journalists, I felt like Winston Smith

PICTORIAL PRESS/ALAMY

Talking the blues Obama's Iowa victory speech echoed the pronunciation of Big Bill Broonzy

crowd to quiet down, like a confident young star professor waiting for his students to settle in their seats – a style that Robert Kennedy genuinely had, but his more charming, charismatic and sexy brother did not; his generosity in turning slowly and clapping his hands politely and effortlessly in grateful acknowledgment of the victory the celebrating supporters around and behind him have given him. Obama will later tell them that he knows "you did this because you believed so deeply in the most American of ideas – that in the face of impossible odds, people who love this country can change it".

Then listen to Obama's opening words. Pay attention. In all the official transcripts I have read, the opening is reduced to: "You know they said this day would never come." This implies that Obama's repetition ("They said... they said... they said") is an unplanned way of accommodating the exuberance of the crowd, who are charged up by what to many of them must have seemed a hoped-for, but unrealisable success.

It is not. Obama could have quietened the crowd in many other ways. In fact, he already had. When he begins his speech proper here, he is fixing their attention. If he is extemporising, it is artistic and honed, using a technique familiar to congregations in African-American churches on Sundays and equally familiar to Martin Luther King when, like Moses, he marched with his truly brave civil rights demonstrators to places they never expected to reach.

Obama prolongs the pronunciation of each phrase-closing single-syllabic "said", like heroic blues man Big Bill Broonzy, a long-time Chicagoan, in his own brave call for social change, *When Will I Be Called a Man?* Broonzy gives emphasis to the three successive final words "when" that recur in each refrain. Broonzy's justly famous lament that an adult "Negro" would be called a "boy", even if he had fought in a world war or had "got a little education", is his response to what "they said" in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s:

They said I was uneducated,
my clothes were dirty and torn
Now I've got a little education,
but I'm still a boy right on
I wonder when
I wonder when
I wonder when will I get
to be called a man
Do I have to wait till
I get ninety-three?

What beautiful symmetry that the Reverend Lowery, in his concluding benediction at the Obama inauguration, structured his final words on Broonzy's better-known song from the early 1950s, *Black, Brown, White*, a song so controversial and ahead of the curve that

David Roberts describes the highs and lows of the university orator welcoming honorary doctors at graduation ceremonies. It can be a tough gig and pitfalls abound – the threat of the jaunty mortar board, the disappearing script – but as long as orators are not ashamed to sound academic, it should be fine...

The decisions have been made. Their probity has been checked, their contribution to the marketing strategy assessed and their tenuous connections with the region established, so next year's honorary doctors can be asked. Delighted, honoured, etc, comes the response, and then it is over to you, orator.

Every university needs a staff member prepared to stand up at graduation and read the screed, whether it is a permanent office or one that is rotated among the willing – or the easily coerced.

Public orators in Ancient Greece and Rome were chosen for "civic virtue" as well as rhetorical skill, but now the desire to have a go will often do. For the university, it is a mark of doing things properly, one of those badges of institutional status that puts the newest of the new on a par for the day with the oldest of the old, and one of the few ways in which some universities are not afraid to be associated with that dangerous word, "tradition".

After all, in their impeccably dignified way, university orators were the first media dons, at least for those whose preferred medium was Latin.

Even for experienced teachers, it is a test of nerve to face about 2,000 people and read out your research into the life of someone who may be a performing superstar in one medium or another.

You are likely to have fiddly distractions to deal with: carrying a staff of office, putting it down somewhere, making sure your script does not disappear under the lectern or get too folded, and hoping that someone has left some water for the dreaded dry throat.

Worst of all is the visceral fear that your mortar board (hard to order in quite the right size) might fall off or slide down at an inappropriately jaunty angle.

Then there is the business of how you address, in the usual rigmarole, the chancellor, the vice-chancellor, pro vice-chancellors and so on, while seeming to talk to the audience, some of whom might be 50ft up in the gods.

As if that isn't bad enough, the platform panache of Barack Obama means that the prevailing standard of public oratory has risen dramatically. He has energy and he has raised the bar.

Obama may use the full repertoire of devices from the Ciceronian handbook, but his passion comes straight from the black church. How, in the strait-laced atmosphere of graduation, can you possibly sound even competent by comparison? You can only hope that your audience is fresh from listening to Gordon Brown.

Of course, your most serious problem kicks in before you get anywhere near the platform. What to write? Some orators choose to trot through a CV or *Who's Who* entry, believing that (a) the hon doc is the main act; (b) everyone is having such a nice time that they can put up with a few minutes of boredom; (c) everyone understands the significance of this symphony or that drama, and; (d) it cuts down on preparation time.

After all, in the usual terminology, this is a citation rather than a speech: dullness to order. At my own graduation ceremony, there was such a fine example of the genre that the chancellor had to be woken up to bestow the award. When she did, her face asked: "Where am I?"

Others are prone to lace their mini-biographies with deadly personal anecdotes: "Joe Bloggs was born in East Grinstead, a town I am particularly fond of as the site of my first..."; "I first read one of Joe's books when I was..."

Almost everyone feels the pull of humour and on that subject one UK university offers sound advice: "The speech needs to combine appreciation, warmth, lightness of touch and gentle wit.

"Bear in mind that it is quite a large audience and they – and the graduands – will be feeling a bit anxious, so any 'jokes' may take a while to penetrate." The speech marks say it all.

There is a simpler approach that can be relied on to do the main task of persuading everyone that the award was not given lightly. If you are an orator, you are quite likely to be an experienced teacher, so think of it as an opportunity to teach.

Do not offer a chronological tour and do not self-refer, but think. Think about the significance of the hon doc's life, their social and political background, because this is a rich story for everyone, whether they are media stars, voluntary workers or businesspeople.

The university is giving an honorary degree, so the least you can do is not to be ashamed of sounding academic. That may even leave room for "jokes".

David Roberts holds the John Henry Newman chair, Newman University College, and is an experienced university orator.

no American record company would release it until after it was issued in France. The distinguished oldsters sitting around Obama at the inauguration, and Obama himself, heard Broonzy through Lowery's words and laughed at how far the US had come, at least symbolically, in 60 years.

Lowery wound up his benediction: "Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labours rest, and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get in back, when brown can stick around... when yellow will be mellow... when the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace what is right. That all those who do justice and love mercy say Amen."

Lowery inverted Broonzy's order, privileging the colour black and issuing a challenge to the colour white; and he singled out other colours in the American social spectrum. Compare one of Broonzy's stanzas:

This little song that I'm singin' about,
People, you all know that it's true,
If you're black and gotta work for livin',
Now, this is what they will say to you
They says: "If you was white,
You's alright,
If you was brown,
Stick around,
But if you's black, oh, brother,
Get back, get back, get back."

The way Obama speaks his "they said" in Iowa produces a pleasing iambic rhythmic effect. He also stretches out the word "said" to heighten the suspense and focus the audience's attention. By the third "said", they are keen to hear what it was that all the nay-sayers had said. And Obama tells them in a quicker closing iambic cadence:

they saíd... they saíd... they saíd || this dáy would néver cóme.

We could be listening to the opening of a speech by Martin Luther King himself. This opening itself is the beginning of a triplet:

They said this day would never come.
They said our sights were set too high.
They said this country was too divided...

And it leads Obama to further cascading triads:

But on this January night, at this defining moment in history,
you have done | what the cynics | said we couldn't do.
You have done | what the state of New Hampshire | can do in five days.
You have done | what America | can do in this new year, 2008.

The rhythmic patterns here are entrancing. They are the inheritance of a long tradition in blues, in gospel, in church preaching, in field calls and responses, in rap and hip hop. They result from long attention paid to how words fall upon our ears, not how they are picked up off printed pages. They result from paying attention to how words get embedded in our minds.

Understandably, then, Obama relies on a young speech-writer, 27-year-old Jon Favreau, who was chosen not for his years of experience or for his knowledge of American political history, but for his ear.

As Ed Pilkington reported in *The Guardian* on inauguration day, Favreau has "studied Obama's speech patterns and cadences with the intensity of a stalker. He memorised the 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention which first brought Obama into the limelight."

Favreau knows the music of Obama's oratory. In blues, gospel and folk, in rap and hip hop, and in church, the quotation and appropriation of the lines of other songs and singers, of Jesus Christ himself, is a vital part of the art.

Barack Obama called his second book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2007). Reviewing the book, critic Christopher Hitchens traced what he called its "overly portentous subtitle" to Martin Luther King's "dream" rhetoric. But for the title proper, Obama certainly had in mind King's speech

We have a President who uses his vast talents to explain clearly where he wants us to go

Learn from the best Martin Luther King's powerful rhetoric has been a major influence on Obama

when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo on 10 December 1964.

On that occasion, at the defining moment in world history when King was recognised for his leadership of a non-violent movement for racial equality, he said: "I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind.

"I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits."

Even more audacious are the two things Obama does in his Iowa victory speech. First, its opening echoes King's words in front of the State Capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama, on 25 March 1965, at the end of the impossible march he led from Selma: "They told us we wouldn't get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and that we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama, saying, 'We ain't goin' let nobody turn us around.'"

King rallied the brave and weary Selma marchers by making them aware of the significance of their accomplishment. Obama rivets the attention of his supporters and rallies them in the same way. He is so bold as to call his victory "this defining moment in history". And who would criticise him now for being too audacious?

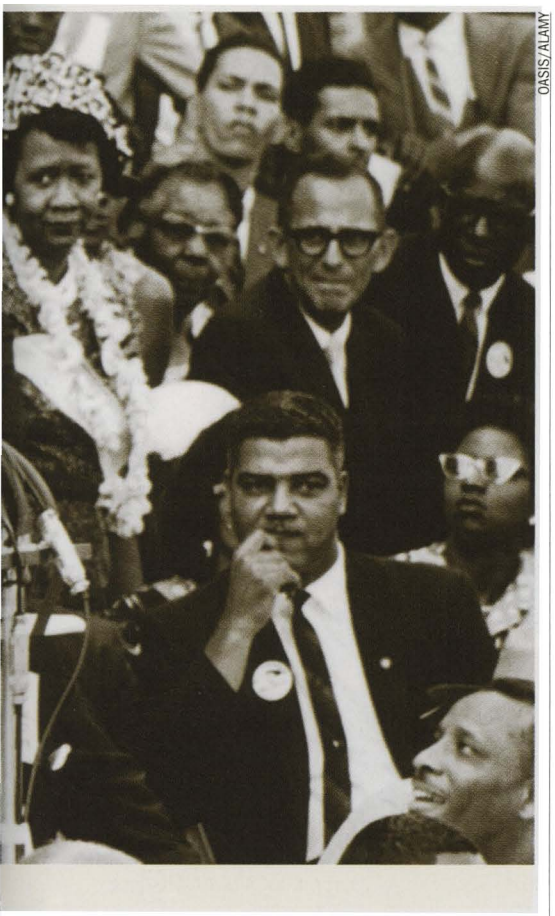
Obama's statement also echoes King's last speech, in Memphis, Tennessee on 3 April 1968. On the day before he died, King surveyed great periods in human history, from Pharaonic Egypt to the American Civil War and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. He then opted for the second half of the 20th century, the defining period when "we have been forced to a point where we're going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history".

Obama, too, makes clear he is an "I" who is part of the "we" who see large problems in life and choose the hard work and personal sacrifice it takes to try to solve them.

It is impossible to study Obama as a speaker without acknowledging the contrasts with Bush. I have done some of this already in passing. During the two Bush terms, we Americans were in a kind of Babylonian exile from the country our Constitution originally set up and is supposed to safeguard. There we expect reasonably honest explanations of the actions taken by our elected and appointed officials, open discussion of political issues, clear justifications for White House policy decisions, an intelligent measure of bipartisanship within our Congress on matters of national and international importance, and effective transparency in government.

Almost all of these ways of keeping our democracy healthy depend upon good speaking and equally good listening and thinking. The White House Press Secretary should be a conduit of information about what the President is thinking, not a Cerberus keeping our increasingly self-satisfied and co-opted press corps away from lots of dirty business and incompetence.

The eight years Bush was President was a period so bleak that on the evening when Obama won just under 38 per cent of the votes in the Iowa caucuses, at the very beginning of the Democratic primary campaign season, Chris Matthews on MSNBC could barely contain his excitement. "Barack Obama has won the Iowa caucuses... I want to say it loudly. This country, and this is not a


OASIS/ALAMY

partisan view right now, we are in a rut. [Obama] is taking us out of the rut and... to a new place. The biblical term for it, since we are in a biblical era, is deliverance. We are being picked up and moved to where we have to be."

Whether we call it feeling tone, or, as the late James Brown did when singing about poverty and education, "what it is and what it is", for me the major change between the Bush and Obama Administrations is the return of a firm grip on reality.

Oliver Sacks, as we have mentioned, brought up feeling tone in his classic 1985 essay "The President's Speech" in *The New York Review of Books*. It is now a chapter in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1998), Sacks' bestselling collection of essays on individuals with aberrant mental and psychological conditions. His discussion is particularly appropriate here.

Sacks describes how his aphasic patients, who were incapable of understanding the words of President Ronald Reagan – "the old charmer, the actor with his practised rhetoric, his histrionics, his emotional appeal" – were nevertheless convulsed with laughter as they watched him giving a speech on television. Sacks goes on to explain "the feeling I sometimes have – which all of us who work closely with aphasiacs have – that one cannot lie to an aphasiac. He cannot grasp your words, and so cannot be deceived by them."

Likewise, Sacks reports the reactions to Reagan's speech by a patient with the opposite condition, tonal agnosia compounded by acute glaucoma, which blocked her ability to take in facial expressions and bodily gestures. She focused on the "meaning [that] is largely given by the apt choice and reference of words". Sacks offers her critique of the President's speech through her special filters: "'He is not cogent,' she said. 'He does not speak good prose. His word use is improper. Either he is brain-damaged, or he has something to conceal.'"

For eight long years, I felt both ways about what Bush said. The words, especially as he delivered them, were unconvincing. He clearly had lots to conceal. Worse still was his visible lack of feeling for human suffering that his feeling tone conveyed. Sometimes when I listened to or read coverage of his speeches by television or print journalists, I felt like Winston Smith.

I am not talking here about obvious, but nonetheless terrifyingly immoral, examples of newspeak, such as "pre-emptive warfare" for a unilateral first strike against a foreign sovereign nation and its people, "enhanced interrogation technique" for torture, or "mission accomplished" in the third month of what is now six years of the presidentially authorised use of military force. ("Iraq War" is just shorthand. The majority of the members of Congress we elected failed to live up to their constitutional duty to decide whether or not our nation should go to war.)

I am talking about mannerisms and actions that minimally signal a deep-rooted incapacity to empathise with other human beings, and that seemed to matter to few other people.

In fact, it is symptomatic of the eight Bush years that the best criticism of him as a speaker came not from members of the news media, but from talented comedians such as Lewis Black, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart. This is a phenomenon that sociologists, psychologists and American studies experts will be studying seriously. It may explain why the work of Roman satirists such as Juvenal and Persius and Athenian comic dramatist Aristophanes survive. They told powerful truths in periods when reality itself must have seemed equally challenged. In many periods, not even jesters are brave enough to tell the truth. Then we comfort ourselves by reading examples from other times and places of what could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of our own times.

During the Bush years, Colbert's appearance at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner on 29 April 2006 was a rare instance of speaking truth to power – and to the professional journalists who, as a group, did not take their civic responsibilities seriously enough. Colbert proved that sometimes satire is nothing more than the close observation and description of reality.

He told the assembled correspondents: "Over the last five years, you people were so good – over tax cuts, WMD [weapons of mass destruction] intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.

"But listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works: the President makes decisions. He's the Decider. The Press Secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spellcheck and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you've got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the Administration. You know – fiction!"

Let me close by giving due honour to another comedian, Lewis Black. In his 2006 HBO special *Red, White and Screwed*, he hit many nails on the head about Bush and what his Administration did.

Here is the nail about Bush's speech-making and feeling tone: "I did, though, have a breakthrough. About six months ago, I was home alone watching the President speak on television. So it was just... the two of us. As I listened to him, I realised that one of us was nuts. And for the first time ever, I went, 'Wow. It's not me.'

"Here's why I think there's something a little odd with George. Because a lot of the time when he speaks, his words don't match his face. Something is askew. You can't talk about the war in Iraq with a smile on your face. He does it constantly. If you're the President, you have to say: 'We're going to talk about the war. I must have a frowning face.'"

If you are so unaware of the death, damage and suffering that the war in Iraq has caused and will continue to cause throughout the world long after your time as commander-in-chief is over, you will not be able to mimic sombre concern in your gestures and facial expressions when you speak about the war you and only you authorised.

And you won't see anything wrong with making what *The Guardian* understatedly described as "tasteless and ill-judged joke[s] about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq" at the 60th Annual Radio and Television Correspondents' Dinner in Washington on 24 March 2004, almost one year to the day that you unleashed the murderous "shock and awe" of war.

You will get easy laughs from a room full of privileged, well-educated news personalities who should know better. All you have to do is click slides and say, with a trademark impish fraternity-brother smirk: "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere... No, no weapons over there... Maybe under here?"

Siegfried Sassoon acquired his own well-developed feeling tone about the horrors of war by serving in the trenches during the First World War. He wrote that he would like to see a tank lurch through the stalls of music halls so that no more jokes would be told in the name of patriotism "to mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume".

For eight long years, many Americans, like me, felt something like that about our White House. We are glad now we have a President who understands history, culture and the world around him, who has a strong sense of human decency and personal responsibility rooted in first-hand experience, and who uses those talents and virtues to explain to us in his own clear and honest words where he wants us to be heading. ●

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