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.

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...}

*Times Higher Education* 9

2 April 2009
Obama’s response is a clear example of Cato the Elder’s well-known aphorism, rem tene, verba sequuntur: ‘Grasp the matter; the words will follow’
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.

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
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
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 said... they said... they said || this day would never come.

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 rhythm 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 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 23 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
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 survives. 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 the 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 jok[e]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 lunch 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.

Tom Palaima is professor of Classics, University of Texas at Austin.