

Obama and the Power of Words

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These are words that move and uplift, that give hope to the hopeless. These words inspired millions of voters nationwide to join the grand experiment called democracy, casting votes for their candidate, their country, their destiny:

"More than anything else, I want my candidacy to unify our country, to renew the American spirit and sense of purpose. I want to carry our message to every American, regardless of party affiliation, who is a member of this community of shared values . . . For those who have abandoned hope, we'll restore hope and we'll welcome them into a great national crusade to make America great again!"

So Ronald Reagan proclaimed on July 17, 1980, as he accepted his party's nomination for president at the Republican National Convention in Detroit, Mich.

Earlier that day, the *New York Times* ran a long profile of Reagan on its front page. The author, Howell Raines, lamented that the news media had been unsuccessful in getting Reagan to speak in anything other than "sweeping generalities about economic and military policy." Mr. Raines further noted: "political critics who characterize him as banal and shallow, a mouther of right-wing platitudes, delight in recalling that he co-starred with a chimpanzee in 'Bedtime for Bonzo.'"

Throughout his campaign, Reagan fought off charges that his candidacy was built more on optimism than policies. The charges came from reporters and opponents. John Anderson, a rival in the Republican primary who ran as an independent in the general election, complained that Reagan offered little more than "old platitudes and old generalities."

Conservatives understood that this Reagan-as-a-simpleton view was a caricature (something made even clearer in several recent books, particularly Reagan's own diaries). That his opponents never got this is what led to their undoing. Those critics who giggled about his turn alongside a chimp were considerably less delighted when Reagan won 44 states and 489 electoral votes in November.

One Reagan adviser had predicted such a win shortly after Reagan had become the de facto nominee the previous spring. In a memo about the coming general election contest with Jimmy Carter, Richard Whalen wrote Reagan's "secret weapon" was that "Democrats fail to take him very seriously."

Are Republicans making the same mistake with Barack Obama?

For months now, Hillary Clinton has suggested that Mr. Obama is all rhetoric, no substance. This claim, or some version of it, has been at the center of her campaign since November. One day after losing to him in Wisconsin and Hawaii -- her ninth and tenth consecutive defeats -- she rather incredibly went back to it again. "It's time we moved from good words to good works, from sound bites to sound solutions," she said -- a formulation that could be mistaken for a sound bite.

As she complained about his lack of substance, tens of thousands of people lined up in city after city, sometimes in subfreezing temperatures, for a chance to get a shot of some Mr. Obama hopemongering. Plainly, her critique is not working.

And yet, Republicans are picking it up. In just the past week, conservative commentators have accused Mr. Obama of speaking in "Sesame Street platitudes," of giving speeches that are "almost content free," of "saying nothing." He has been likened to Chance the Gardner, the clueless mope in Jerzy Kosciński's "Being There," whose banal utterances are taken as brilliant by a gullible political class. Others complain that his campaign is "messianic," too self-aggrandizing and too self-referential.

John McCain has joined the fray. In a speech after he won primaries in Washington, D.C., Virginia and Maryland, Mr. McCain said: "To encourage a country with only rhetoric rather than sound and proven ideas that trust in the strength and courage of free people is not a promise of hope. It is a platitude." After Wisconsin, he sharpened the attack, warning that he would expose Mr. Obama's "eloquent but empty call for change."

The assumption behind much of this criticism is that because Mr. Obama gives a good speech he cannot do substance. This is wrong. Mr. Obama has done well in most of the Democratic debates because he has consistently shown himself able to think on his feet. Even on health care, a complicated national issue that should be Mrs. Clinton's strength, Mr. Obama has regularly fought her to a draw by displaying a grasp of the details that rivals hers, and talking about it in ways Americans can understand.

In Iowa, long before the race became the national campaign it is today, Mr. Obama spent much of his time at town halls in which he took questions from the audience. His answers in such settings were often as good or better than the rhetoric in his stump speech, and usually more substantive. He spoke about issues like immigration and national service in a thoughtful manner -- not wonky, not pedantic, but in a way that suggested he'd spent some time thinking about them before.

More important for the race ahead, Mr. Obama has the unique ability to offer doctrinaire liberal positions in a way that avoids the stridency of many recent Democratic candidates. That he managed to do this in the days before the Iowa caucuses -- at a time when he might have been expected to be at his most liberal -- was quite striking.

His rhetorical gimmick is simple. When he addresses a contentious issue, Mr. Obama almost always begins his answer with a respectful nod in the direction of the view he is rejecting -- a line or two that suggests he understands or perhaps even sympathizes with the concerns of a conservative.

At Cornell College on Dec. 5, for example, a student asked Mr. Obama how his administration would view the Second Amendment. He replied: "There's a Supreme Court case that's going to be decided fairly soon about what the Second Amendment means. I taught Constitutional Law for 10 years, so I've got my opinion. And my opinion is that the Second Amendment is probably -- it is an individual right and not just a right of the militia. That's what I expect the Supreme Court to rule. I think that's a fair reading of the text of the Constitution. And so I respect the right of lawful gun owners to hunt, fish, protect their families."

Then came the pivot:

"Like all rights, though, they are constrained and bound by the needs of the community. So when I look at Chicago and 34 Chicago public school students gunned down in a single school year, then I don't think the Second Amendment prohibits us from taking action and making sure that, for example, ATF can share tracing information about illegal handguns that are used on the streets and track them to the gun dealers to find out -- what are you doing?"

In conclusion:

"There is a tradition of gun ownership in this country that can be respected that is not mutually exclusive with making sure that we are shutting down gun traffic that is killing kids on our streets. The argument I have with the NRA is not whether people have the right to bear arms. The problem is they believe any constraint or regulation whatsoever is something that they have to beat back. And I don't think that's how most lawful firearms owners think."

In the end, Mr. Obama is simply campaigning for office in the same way he says he would operate if he were elected. "We're not looking for a chief operating officer when we select a president," he said during a question and answer session at Google headquarters back in December.

"What we're looking for is somebody who will chart a course and say: Here is where America needs to go -- here is how to solve our energy crisis, here's how we need to revamp our education system -- and then gather the talent together and then mobilize that talent to achieve that goal. And to inspire a sense of hope and possibility."

Like Ronald Reagan did.

Mr. Hayes, a senior writer for The Weekly Standard, is the author of "Cheney: The Untold Story of America's Most Powerful and Controversial Vice President," (HarperCollins, 2007).