

CHAPTER 14: CONCLUSION

It is clear that Obama's speech is remarkable because of its content. He was confronted by a threat to his candidacy, and he met it with a speech that was unprecedented in American politics.

Instead of denying his relationship to an individual whose words were damaging to his candidacy, Obama embraces the individual in extraordinary words of his own and repudiates only the language of Reverend Wright.

Instead of saying that the words were an aberration of an abhorrent individual, Obama positions the words as an understandable expression of the frustrations and anger of a generation of African-Americans.

Instead of saying that the American people may ignore the frustrations and anger because the language was not acceptable, Obama says that Americans must understand them and move to ameliorate the continuing conditions that underlie them.

Instead of ignoring the frustrations and anger of the white population, Obama describes them and says that the American people must understand and accept them.

Instead of praising his audience, Obama challenges both blacks and whites to follow a new path toward a better future.

Instead of making the challenge simple, Obama lays out a course that is complex.

Instead of soothing his audience with platitudes, Obama offers them nuance and complexity.

Instead of using "all men are created equal" as his beginning point, Obama looks to the Constitution of the United States to frame his discussion.

Instead of blaming his political opponents and attacking them, Obama never mentions his opponents or their positions.

Instead of seeking divisions between people to exploit for electoral advantage, Obama seeks to unite groups of people.

Instead of laying out a program of legislation that a chief executive could implement and claim credit for, Obama has laid out a path that ordinary Americans must follow.

Instead of working his audience with applause lines, Obama gives a speech without applause lines, and his audience listens in rapt silence for most of the speech.

Instead of ending with a powerful peroration, Obama ends with a simple story of a young white woman and an old black man finding a moment of recognition.

For all these reasons, the speech was extraordinary.

Obama uses simple language to communicate with his audience. His words are mostly one or two syllable common words, and his sentence structure is built upon simple subjects next to simple verbs. He does not use metaphor or simile or hyperbole or irony or satire. His most prominent poetic device is anaphora—the simple repetition of words or phrases.

Obama uses alliteration, assonance, and consonance to make his speech pleasing. And he is adept at using all three together in a single clause or phrase. He takes care with choosing words to get good sounds.

His most remarkable language is reserved for conveying the emotion of the racial divide in the United States.

Obama has the ability to be extremely clever with language. His rewriting of the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address as his first sentence shows this. His rhymed couplet tribute to the Reverend Wright is further evidence of his ability as is the sentence that follows it.

It is the overriding irony of the speech that Obama dedicated so much of it to saving his relationship with Jeremiah Wright, but Wright was more concerned in the next month with restating his positions and the underlying reasons for his offending words and was willing to undermine the interests of Barack Obama in the process. In the course of the next three months, Obama had to disown Wright and to resign his membership in Trinity Church because of the embarrassment and damage to his campaign that both caused.

Finally, it is the greatness of the speech that it has the capacity to alter the nation, to set for the United States a new course of Obama's creation.

“The absence of even rough agreement on the facts puts every opinion on equal footing and therefore eliminates the basis for thoughtful compromise. It rewards not those who are right, but those—like the White House press office—who can make their arguments most loudly, most frequently, most obstinately, and with the best backdrop.

Today's politician understands this. He may not lie, but he understands that there is no great reward in store for those who speak the truth, particularly when the truth may be complicated. The truth may cause consternation; the truth will be attacked; the media won't have the patience to sort out all the facts...”

The Audacity of Hope, p. 127.