

PERSPECTIVES

**OBAMA'S INAUGURAL ADDRESS AND U.S.
FOREIGN POLICY: LESSONS FROM HISTORY**

DR MICHAEL FULLILOVE

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**Obama's inaugural address and U.S. foreign policy:
Lessons from history**

Michael Fullilove

At around midday on January 20, after taking the oath of office, President Barack Obama will set aside Abraham Lincoln's Bible, turn to the crowd before the west front of the U.S. Capitol and deliver his inaugural address. It is yet to be seen whether the sun will break through the clouds as Obama begins to speak – as it did for Lincoln himself at the start of his second inaugural, on March 4, 1865.¹ Yet other comparisons with Lincoln are inevitable.

A president's inaugural address goes some way towards democratising the otherwise monarchical tone of the transfer of power in the U.S. system.² It is an opportunity for the new president to set his ideas, plans and governing approach before the American people and the world. The purpose of this paper is to distil some lessons from history for President-elect Obama and his speechwriters about the relationship between presidential language and foreign policy.

Obama as a speechmaker

In recent decades, the drafting of political speeches has increasingly been delegated to professional writers. Speechwriting has become a back-of-house function, like scheduling and focus groups. The speech has been largely superseded by the attack ad and the photo opportunity.

That was until the emergence of Barack Obama, whose remarkable candidacy rested to a large degree on the quality of his speeches. Indeed, the 2008 presidential campaign proved to be a test case, under near-laboratory conditions, of the power of speechmaking. Whereas his two principal opponents, Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain, positioned themselves explicitly as doers, not talkers, Obama filled stadiums and thrilled crowds with his rhetoric. Recording artists put his speeches to music.

Obama's cadences connect him to earlier American orators such as Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr – and like those two men (but unlike, say, Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton), Obama is his own best speechwriter. Obama's early memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, revealed him to be a gifted and subtle author. During the campaign he made his argument to voters via a unique combination of new technologies (such as email, Facebook and Twitter) and old technologies (such as logic, intelligence and wit).

Obama's speeches were critical to his election as president. His chief foreign policy calling-card throughout the campaign was the speech he gave in Chicago in October 2002 against the Iraq war – a speech notable for its nuance and pragmatism:

I don't oppose all wars... What I am opposed to is a dumb war... a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics... I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors, that the Iraqi economy is in shambles, that the Iraqi military is a fraction of its former strength, and that in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history. I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences.³

Obama first stepped onto the national stage to give his famous address to the Democratic National Convention in Boston in July 2004, with its inspired riff:

There is not a liberal America and a conservative America: there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America, a Latino America, an Asian America: there is the United States of America. The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states: red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states.⁴

(Obama is just as deft in his deployment of humor. On the day after his speech to the Boston convention, I was present at an event at which leading Democratic politicians spoke to a small group of party donors. One politico after another gave safe, middle-of-the-road, road-tested speeches. Obama – at this point still just a state legislator from Illinois – took a different tack.

“Sometimes we in the Democratic Party get criticised by our friends for hanging out with rich folks like you”, he said. “But whenever that happens, I just remember what the Scriptures tell us: ‘God loves a cheerful giver.’”)

In his announcement for the presidency in Springfield in February 2007, Obama consciously evoked Lincoln, the greatest writer ever to work at the White House and another “tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer”.⁵ His speech to the Jefferson-Jackson dinner in Des Moines in November 2007 put him on track to win the Iowa caucus – and his acceptance speech after that victory caught the imaginations of people everywhere.⁶

Obama has an unusual belief in the power of rational argument. What did he do at the lowest point of his campaign, in March 2008, when he was forced to deal with the treacherous issue of race? He didn’t buy ad time or schedule a *60 Minutes* interview: he rented a hall in Philadelphia and wrote some remarks.⁷ The result was a long, candid and compelling argument which shut down a short-term political crisis and helped establish his bona fides for the office he sought.

Finally, on the evening of his victory, Obama’s acceptance speech in Chicago’s Grant Park was pitch-perfect. He was both steady and rousing. He reminded listeners of his 2004 DNC speech with his line that “we have never been a collection of red states and blue states: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.” He nodded to old themes: when he asked Americans to “put their hands on the arc of history and bend it” he was conjuring up Dr King’s claim that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”. And then, as if to show a little rhetorical leg, he moved from heavy to light, telling his daughters: “you have earned the new puppy that’s coming with us to the White House.”⁸

Obama is, then, an unusually gifted writer and speaker who has an old-fashioned attachment to speeches. Given the present condition of the world – bloody conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, nuclear programs in Iran and North Korea, persistent terrorist networks, a conflagration in Gaza, a financial meltdown, a cooling economy and a warming planet – we can expect that Obama will address his vision for U.S. foreign policy in his inaugural address.

What can Obama and his speechwriters learn from previous inaugural addresses and presidential speeches and their impact on America’s relations with the world? Three lessons can be distilled on the relationship between presidential rhetoric and U.S. foreign policy.

Language can mobilise support for foreign policies

The first lesson is that foreign policy speeches that have flair as well as substance are able to crystallise a leader's intent and mobilise public support. Ronald Reagan, for example, marshaled his phrases and sent them into battle against the evil empire, declaring in Berlin in 1987: "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" A half-century earlier, Franklin Roosevelt used his fireside chats to dramatise a distant war, convert America into "the great arsenal of democracy" and ratchet up public readiness to enter the European conflict.

FDR's special envoys also got into the act. In January 1941, he sent his friend and confidant Harry Hopkins to London to explain Lend-Lease aid and emphasise the president's commitment to the cause of the democracies. At a private dinner in Glasgow, Hopkins was asked to speak. He reluctantly got to his feet and said:

Mr Chairman, I am not making speeches over here. I am reporting what I see to Mr Franklin Delano Roosevelt, my President, a great man, a very great man. But now that I am here and on my feet perhaps I might say in the language of the old book... (and here Hopkins paused and looked straight down the table at Winston Churchill) "Whither thou goest we go; and where thou lodgest we lodge; thy people shall be our people; thy God, our God; even unto the end."⁹

Kennedy's inaugural address, which focused almost exclusively on foreign policy, set the modern standard. Kennedy had a great deal to prove in that speech, given that he had been elected president by less than two-tenths of one per cent of the popular vote, and was regarded by many, both in America and abroad, as being too young and inexperienced to lead the free world in the struggle against communism. His inaugural stiffened Americans' spines and sent a clear message to the Soviets:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty...

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility – I welcome it.¹⁰

It is notable that the quality of the best U.S. foreign policy speeches far outstrips that of other countries, partly because of America's rhetorical tradition but also because of the country's position in the international system. Less powerful countries cannot remake the world in their own image, even if they wanted to. Their external circumstances condition their foreign policy in directions which do not make for brilliant speeches. It is hard to draft soaring rhetoric about market access, E.U. regulations and the other more prosaic elements of international policy.

Good writing helps American presidents to win support for their policies. On the other hand, while foreign policy speeches should be well written, they should not be overwritten. Weighty speeches delivered on big days are often pretentious and overcooked, full of ten-dollar words and highfalutin phrases. Sometimes they are burdened with ambitions beyond the speech's capacity – like transporting an elephant on top of a Mini. The occasion, in other words, can overpower the speech. Upon reading all of the inaugural addresses, for instance, Ted Widmer commented on “the curious awkwardness that bedeviled past presidents at the precise moment of their elevation, as if the dizzying heights to which they had climbed also deprived them of much-needed oxygen.”¹¹

The strongest inaugural addresses are generally the shortest ones. They are notable for their ideas – if you don't have original ideas, you can't give an interesting speech. Often they have a single theme: for FDR's first, it was his “lines of attack” on the Great Depression; for JFK, the Cold War; for George W. Bush's second, his freedom agenda. The greatest of them all, Lincoln's second inaugural, was a short and profound meditation on slavery and the civil war, constructed of plain words, elegantly arranged. This week, Obama remarked: “Every time you read that second inaugural, you start getting intimidated, especially because it's really short... there's a genius to Lincoln that is not going to be matched.”¹²

If it is prudent not to go overboard with the style of an inaugural address, the lesson also applies to its substance. Melvyn P. Leffler has argued that foreign policy values are asserted most strongly by U.S. presidents at times of heightened threat perception. Leffler suggests that values talk helps to mobilise public support for policies, but it also tempts administrations to overreach beyond a careful calculation of the national interest.¹³

The rhetoric of President George W. Bush provides a striking example of Leffler's argument. Many of Bush's prepared speeches were beautifully written, notably those given in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, at the National Cathedral and to a joint session of the Congress.¹⁴ At times, however, his foreign policy speeches have been strangers to nuance.

The reference in the 2002 State of the Union to the “axis of evil” formed by Iran, Iraq and North Korea was a poor analogy, being both inaccurate and inflammatory. On the same occasion the following year, he upped the ante by making a dubious assertion about Saddam Hussein’s alleged hunt for uranium in Africa. Over time, the sweeping tone of the president’s rhetoric may have exaggerated the defects of his policies and scared off natural supporters.

There is no excuse for giving a boring speech on foreign policy – not when the world is so interesting and the challenges so formidable. Equally, though, presidents should take care that their policy is informing their language, and not vice versa.

Rhetoric and reality should be aligned

A second, related lesson is that foreign policy rhetoric must be firmly tethered to foreign policy reality. In his 1941 State of the Union, for instance, Franklin Roosevelt enumerated the Four Freedoms on which the post-war world should be built: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. This speech, along with the Atlantic Charter and other Rooseveltian innovations, helped provide a moral basis for Washington’s European policy. However, the lack of qualifications in the Four Freedoms speech also created problems for its author who, although critical of European colonialism, subordinated this concern to the priority of alliance management. Indian nationalist leader Mohandas Gandhi complained to Roosevelt in 1942 that the “declaration that the Allies are fighting to make the world safe for freedom of the individual and for democracy sounds hollow, so long as India and, for that matter, Africa are exploited by Great Britain, and America has the Negro problem in her own home.” As Roosevelt’s biographer, James MacGregor Burns, observed: “the more he preached his lofty ends and practiced his limited means... the more he widened the gap between popular expectations and actual possibilities... Indians and Chinese contrasted Roosevelt’s anticolonial words with his military concessions to colonial powers, and falsely inferred that he was an imperialist at heart and a hypocrite to boot.”¹⁵

President Bush’s second inaugural is one of the great ones. Bush’s claim that “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one” echoed Jefferson’s remark in his own second inaugural that “with nations as with individuals our interests soundly calculated will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties”. Yet the ambition of the speech – in particular the statement that the United States would “seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world” – sat awkwardly with the reality of the administration’s policies at that

time. By January 2005 it had been apparent for almost a year that the early failures of the Iraq war had undermined the ideologues in Bush administration and chastened U.S. foreign policy. Diplomacy had become the comeback concept. Washington was already taking a more multilateral approach to the problems posed by the two remaining members of the axis of evil, Iran and North Korea, and working closely with authoritarian states such as Libya and Egypt. The disjunction between the president's policies and his language did not serve America's interests.¹⁶

Multiple audiences need to be addressed

The final lesson from history concerns what Owen Harries once called “the problem of multiple and diverse audiences”.¹⁷ High-profile politicians giving public speeches need to keep different audiences in their head at the same time: supporters and opponents; those who can follow the entire argument in the room as well as those who will only catch snippets of it in the media; contemporaries as well as future historians. Sometimes a speech will work for one audience but not the other: Lincoln's Gettysburg Address may be the most famous speech in history, but on the day it was delivered it made a smaller impression on those present than the verbose efforts of the official orator, Edward Everett.¹⁸ To read many other speeches of the nineteenth century, by contrast, is to realise the anaesthetising effect transcription can have on the most stirring live performances.

Obama is more than capable of addressing – and exciting – all these audiences simultaneously. His speech to the 2004 Democratic National Convention was a huge success in the convention hall in Boston, on television that night, and on YouTube to this day.

However, U.S. presidents face another complication: they have to address foreign as well as domestic audiences. Naturally, the principal target of most presidential communications is the American public – yet speeches on foreign policy will also be parsed for meaning in capitals around the world. Obama will need to judge his words carefully, especially as they may relate to U.S. adversaries such as Iran and conflicts such as that taking place in Gaza. “In diplomacy”, said one former Australian foreign minister, “words are bullets.”¹⁹

Yet the overwhelming majority of Obama's international audience on January 20 will be sympathetic. In many countries, after all, he was the preferred candidate for president by ratios of four and five to one. Obama is a child of globalisation – linked by his father to Africa, by his middle name to the Middle East, by his upbringing to Southeast Asia. Obama

understands the power of his own story to shift international perceptions of America. During the campaign he said: “if you can tell people, ‘We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who’s half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian,’ then they’re going to think that he may have a better sense of what’s going on in our lives and in our country.”²⁰

The new president should directly address the people of the world, especially those watching from the margins. He should signal that he understands that America is strongest when it is open to the world, and promise that he will be deaf to the siren songs of isolationism and protectionism. He should sign up his long-distance listeners to a new compact: that Washington will work to solve global problems through multilateral means if other capitals will help to ensure that multilateralism works. If Obama can do all this, then his inaugural address will be a powerful source of American prestige and power.

NOTES

- ¹ Ronald White. *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*. New York, NY, Simon & Schuster: 2002, p 42.
- ² Ted Widmer. So Help Me God. *The American Scholar* 74 (1), Winter 2005, pp 31-32.
- ³ Barack Obama. *Speech to an Anti-War Rally, Chicago, IL*. 2 October 2002: <http://www.barackobama.com/pdf/ObamaIraqHandout.pdf>.
- ⁴ Barack Obama. *Speech to the Democratic National Convention, Boston, MA*. 27 July 2004: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html>.
- ⁵ Barack Obama. *Speech Announcing Presidential Bid, Springfield, IL*. 10 February 2007: http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php.
- ⁶ Barack Obama. *Speech to the Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, Des Moines, IA*. 10 November 2007: http://www.barackobama.com/2007/11/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_33.php; Barack Obama. *Victory Speech on Iowa Caucus Night, Des Moines, IA*. 3 January 2008: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/01/03/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_39.php.
- ⁷ Barack Obama. *A More Perfect Union, Philadelphia, PA*. 18 March 2008: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_53.php.
- ⁸ Barack Obama. *Victory Speech in Grant Park, Chicago, IL*. 4 November 2008: http://www.barackobama.com/2008/11/04/remarks_of_presidentelect_barack_obam_53.php.
- ⁹ Martin Gilbert. *Winston S. Churchill*. London, Heinemann: 6 vols, published 1966-1988. Vol. 6, p 991. Robert Dallek. *An Unfinished Life*. Boston, MA, Little, Brown and Company: 2003, p 294.
- ¹⁰ John F. Kennedy. *Inaugural Address, Washington, DC*. 20 January 1961. The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp. See generally: Thurston Clark. *Ask Not: The Inauguration of John F. Kennedy and the Speech that Changed America*. New York, NY, Henry Holt and Company: 2004; Richard J. Tofel. *Sounding the Trumpet: The Making of John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address*. Chicago, IL, Ivan R. Dee: 2005; Ted Sorensen. *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*. New York, NY, Harper Collins: 2008, pp 220-227.
- ¹¹ Widmer. So Help Me God. p 35.
- ¹² Barack Obama. *Transcript of Interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC*, 11 January 2009: <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/Economy/story?id=6618199&page=1>.
- ¹³ Melvyn P. Leffler. 9/11 and American Foreign Policy. *Diplomatic History* 29 (3), June 2005, pp 395-413.
- ¹⁴ George W. Bush. *Speech Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, DC*. 14 September 2001: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010914-2.html>; George W. Bush. *Speech to Joint Session of Congress, Washington, DC*. 20 September 2001: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.
- ¹⁵ James MacGregor Burns. *Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom 1940-1945*. San Diego, CA, Harcourt Inc: 1970, pp 33-35, 239, 549, 609.
- ¹⁶ For a thoughtful and sympathetic treatment of Bush's Second Inaugural, see John Lewis Gaddis. Ending Tyranny: The Past and Future of an Idea. *The American Interest* 6 (1), September/October 2008, pp 6-15.
- ¹⁷ Owen Harries. Preparing speeches on foreign policy. Undated memorandum from the late 1970s to Australian Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock.
- ¹⁸ Garry Wills. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*. New York, NY, Simon & Schuster: 1992, pp 34-35.
- ¹⁹ Michael Millett. PM will have a tough task to recover from Jakarta fumbles. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 18 September 1996, p 8.
- ²⁰ Michael Fullilove. *Hope or Glory? The Presidential Election, U.S. Foreign Policy and Australia*. Lowy Institute Analysis, October 2008, pp 12-13; Fergus Hanson. *Australia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*. September 2008, pp 9, 19; *All Countries in BBC Poll Prefer Obama to McCain*. BBC World Service Poll. 10 September 2008: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/10_09_08_ws_us_poll.pdf; James Traub. Is (His) Biography (Our) Destiny? *The New York Times Magazine*. 4 November 2007, p 50.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Michael Fullilove is the Program Director for Global Issues at the Lowy Institute and a Visiting Fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. A lawyer and historian by training, Michael served as an adviser to Prime Minister Paul Keating. He studied as a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oxford, where he wrote his doctorate on Franklin D. Roosevelt. Michael has published more than ninety articles on international relations and politics in publications including *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Slate*, *The Daily Beast*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Financial Times*, *The National Interest* and *Foreign Affairs*. His first book, *'Men and Women of Australia!' Our Greatest Modern Speeches*, was published by Vintage.

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