

## **Fine speech for an extraordinary historical moment**

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On 4 March 1865, just as Abraham Lincoln began to deliver his second inaugural address to a country soon to emerge from civil war, the sun broke through the clouds and bathed the scene with light.

There was no such obvious indication of heavenly approval during Obama's inaugural address yesterday. But earlier in the morning, long before he took the oath of office with one hand on Lincoln's own bible, an eagle was spotted soaring and swooping in front of the Capitol.

(If, as my neighbour on the Mall believed, the eagle was a ring-in, this only demonstrates again the remarkable efficiency of the Obama machine.)

It was a remarkable day. For me, it began with a joyful announcer on the subway suggesting that passengers should 'rub up against each other – a little rubbin' never hurt no-one.' The raucous capitalism being practiced in the streets by memorabilia hawkers showed that the free market is not finished in the United States – and that Barack is good for business.

The darker implications of elected office in this country were made plain by the bullet-proof glass (or, as the Secret Service styles the latest version, 'transparent armour') wrapped around the speaking podium.

The address Obama delivered from that podium was strong. It was a very fine speech without, perhaps, being one for the ages. It was not as striking as Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, which flattened Boston's Fleet Center in the same manner that the Halifax Explosion in 1917 flattened Halifax. This speech was not the equal of Kennedy's inaugural, or either of Lincoln's. Obama himself admitted last week that 'there's a genius to Lincoln that is not going to be matched.'

Yet these are hard benchmarks, even for a writer and speaker as gifted as Obama. Certainly, his inaugural address was much better than most. Perhaps he pulled back deliberately and kept it low-key for fear of widening the gap between the expectations for his presidency and the challenges before it. If so, then he has confirmed his emerging reputation for prudence.

The foreign policy section of the address was specific and, notwithstanding the centrism of Obama's appointees to key foreign policy positions, entirely consistent with the liberalism of his campaign rhetoric. He directly addressed 'all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born.' He showed that he understands that America's

power derives not just from her strength of arms but also from her 'sturdy alliances and enduring convictions'.

Obama promised to temper that power with 'humility and restraint' – unlike President Bush, who announced in his second inaugural four years ago that his goal was to end tyranny.

Regarding the two bloody conflicts in which the US is currently engaged, Obama promised to 'begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan.' He signaled a determination to press ahead on two of the Rudd Government's signature issues, vowing to 'work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat and roll back the specter of a warming planet.'

To the Islamic world, Obama promised 'a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect'. Perhaps the best line of the speech was an affirmation of his campaign pledge to engage US adversaries: 'To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.'

If the speech was good, though, the historical moment was extraordinary. Obama has made it his practice not to explicitly refer to his race. But yesterday, from the steps of a building raised by slaves, he asked Americans to 'mark this day in remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled.' He noted that 'a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.'

The inauguration of an African-American as president is another instance of the United States defying the naysayers and declinists and surprising even its friends.

Barack Obama's speech will linger in my memory – but not as much as the making of it.

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