

**Talk might be cheap, but a great speech is divine**

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This presidential campaign is proving to be a test case, under near-laboratory conditions, of the power of speechmaking. The Democratic frontrunner, Senator Barack Obama, is the finest American political orator in a generation. Much of his campaign rests on the quality of his speeches, of which he is the principal author. Indeed, he owes his national political career to a single speech - his famous address to the Democratic National Convention in Boston in 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."

Obama does a good line in inspiration but he is equally deft in his use of humour. The day after his convention speech, I was present at an event in Boston at which leading Democratic politicians addressed a small group of party donors. All the established politicos gave safe, middle-of-the-road, road-tested speeches. Obama - at this point still just a state legislator from Illinois - took a braver and funnier tack. "Sometimes we in the Democratic Party get criticised by our friends for hanging out with rich folks like you," he began. "But whenever that happens, I just remember what the Scriptures tell us: 'God loves a cheerful giver.'"

The other two remaining presidential candidates are positioning themselves explicitly as doers, not talkers.

Senator Hillary Clinton's speeches tend to sit at the wonky end of the spectrum. They are impressive for the breadth of policy knowledge they reveal and the resilience she demonstrates by delivering them day in and day out regardless of the fix she's in. Rather than try to match Obama's stylishness, she has taken direct aim at it, proposing a dichotomy of "speeches versus solutions" and "talk versus action".

"It's time we moved from good words to good works, from sound bites to sound solutions," she told an audience at Hunter College, New York. In Ohio, she warned: "Some people may think words are change. But you and I know better. Words are cheap." To workers at a General Motors plant in the same state, she observed: "Speeches don't put food on the table. Speeches don't fill up your tank, or fill your prescription, or do anything about that stack of bills that keeps you up at night. My opponent gives speeches. I offer solutions."

That last passage is a cracker - but think how demoralising it must have been for the speechwriter who drafted it.

Senator John McCain has also joined in the anti-rhetoric rhetoric, promising he won't allow Americans to be "deceived by an eloquent but empty call for change". McCain's campaign is built on his experience and his character: he's a war hero and a workhorse, not a show pony. His campaign bus is called the Straight Talk Express and the truth is, he's not really built for fancy talk. Many of his speeches are elegantly written but invariably he swallows his lines, albeit in a very likeable way. McCain's appeal lies in the fact that he's about as smooth as the rough end of a pineapple.

This campaign season, then, will reveal what electoral advantage is to be had from giving great speeches. It will measure the muscle of the speech lobby. In recent decades, the manner of our communications has changed utterly. The speech has been largely superseded by the attack ad and the "media avail". Speechwriting has become a back-of-house function, like scheduling and focus groups. No corporate meeting is complete these days without a PowerPoint presentation; no teenager's day goes by without fragmentary communications via email or SMS.

There is something very old-fashioned, therefore, about Obama. His cadences connect his audiences to earlier American orators. To communicate ideas he uses older devices - such as logic and wit. This presidential campaign will reveal what kind of premium attaches, in a 21st-century election, to the pro-speech candidate.

If Obama wins in November, we will also learn something else: whether the power of oratory can survive the transition to government.

Clinton and McCain argue, correctly, that governing is about a lot more than speechifying.

Yet in the end, there is no better way to make an argument than with a speech. In all the back-and-forth over the content of Obama's Philadelphia remarks on race, too little was made of the fact that they took the form of a speech. In dealing with the most treacherous issue in American politics, Obama did not hold a press conference or schedule a 60 Minutes interview: he made a long, candid and compelling argument.

After nearly eight years of presidential speeches that were strangers to nuance, the audiences of the world may be ready for more such arguments.

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