

**"Nothing but Hope and Virtue":  
Obama's inaugural and the journey of the United States**

Jennifer McGee

Dan T. Molden

**Introduction**

When Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America, about 37.8 million people were watching on televisions in America (Collins, 2009). Even more were watching around the world or on the Internet. Newsday suggested that the worldwide audience might be in the billions, "a figure that could dwarf viewership numbers for the Super Bowl and Academy Awards and reach heights ordinarily seen only by the Olympics and the World Cup" (Epstein and Gay, 2009). Obama's inauguration caught worldwide attention for many reasons: not only was this the inauguration of the first African-American president, but his speech came at a time of crisis for the country. In addition to longstanding problems in Iraq and Afghanistan (and their related problems of torture and rendition), the U.S. economy had been recently rocked by a series of setbacks and bankruptcies, house foreclosures and unemployment were up, and the current President's disapproval rating was at an all-time high. As a result, people looked to Obama's first speech as President both as a marker of a historic occasion and as a harbinger of things to come. Millions of people asked themselves the question: what vision, if any, does the new President have for the future?

Obama's answer was, in many ways, not what people had expected. Most surprisingly for many, Obama's speech did not include a single reference to Abraham Lincoln. There were countless reasons why he was expected to tie his

administration back to Lincoln's. Obama already had used many parallels to Lincoln during the long campaign, and the lead-up to the inauguration was rich with deliberate allusions to the sixteenth president: the train ride to Washington, D.C. that mirrored the one Lincoln took on the eve of his first inaugural, the theme for the inauguration was taken from the Gettysburg Address ("a new birth of freedom"), a pre-ceremony concert held on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, and the oath of office being delivered on the same Bible used by Lincoln at his inauguration (Dorning, 2009). Indeed, when the *Washington Post* asked its readers to predict how many times Obama would reference Lincoln in his speech; of the 159 people responding, 88% predicted that he would reference Lincoln at least two times. Nine percent guessed he would do it five or more times. Not one single person answered that he would make no reference to Lincoln at all ("Inauguration Day 2009").

Despite the overwhelming assumption that he would make mention of Lincoln, he included not one single quote from or allusion to him. This essay explores some of the reasons why Obama might not have referenced Lincoln and examines what imagery and allusion he used in its place--Washington and the birth of the United States--and, finally, considers the possible reasons why, using Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad as a theoretical framework.

### **Inaugural Rhetoric**

Inaugurations are events which call for an unusual kind of speech. As an investment ceremony in which a normal citizen is transformed into the role of the President, they are an example of epideictic rhetoric--rhetoric which celebrates and reflects on the present rather than calling for some specific action in the future (deliberative rhetoric) or a evaluation of the past (forensic rhetoric). As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and

Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1990) noted in *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*, "Great inaugurals achieve timelessness. They articulate a perspective that transcends the situation that produced them, and for this reason they retain their rhetorical force" (p. 27). As a variety of critics (e.g. Fisher, 2009; Judis, 2009) noted, Obama's speech fell short of this in the middle sections, where he detailed some specific policy goals his administration would have. Noam Scheiber (2009), for example, noted that:

One minute Obama was on top of Mount Olympus ("We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things..."), the next minute he was having lunch in the Brookings cafeteria ("Our health care is too costly ... We will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids ... it helps families find jobs at a decent wage ... We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq...") It was like two speeches on the same topic written for two different audiences on two different occasions.

However, in general, the tone was reflective and present-oriented.

An inaugural address must also focus on the American people and the country in general, not on the specific person taking office. Symbolically, the new President must speak not as a single citizen, but as the symbol of the whole country: "If an inaugural address is to function as part of a rite of investiture, presidents must speak in the public role of president. An inaugural would not fulfill this function if the address pressed forward the personality or personal history of the incoming president" (Campbell and Jamieson,

1990, p. 23). Thus, although Obama's ethnic background was part of what made the day historical, Obama himself referenced his race only once, when he noted that sixty years ago his father would not have been served in many Washington, D.C. restaurants. An article in the *New York Times* remarked that "much as he did during his campaign, he barely mentioned his race in his first moments as the 44th president of the United States," adding, "He did not need to" (Sanger, 2009). Indeed, Obama himself embodied the changes in American culture that his election symbolized, making it unnecessary and redundant (not to mention self-aggrandizing) to mention in his speech. The sight of Obama and his family on the podium behind him were a striking symbol of what his election meant to the United States' self-image: "The president's elderly stepgrandmother brought him an oxtail fly whisk, a mark of power at home in Kenya. Cousins journeyed from the South Carolina town where the first lady's great-great-grandfather was born into slavery, while the rabbi in the family came from the synagogue where he had been commemorating Martin Luther King's Birthday. The president and first lady's siblings were there, too, of course: his Indonesian-American half-sister, who brought her Chinese-Canadian husband, and her brother, a black man with a white wife" (Kantor, 2009). Obama didn't need to talk about himself at all; the sight of him had more than enough rhetorical impact.

It was in the conclusion of his speech that Obama's rhetoric reached its highest point and he fulfilled the needs of the inaugural genre most clearly. As Campbell and Jamieson (1990) noted: "Great inaugurals reenact the original process by which the people and their leaders 'form a more perfect union.' In recreating this mutual covenant, great inaugurals both reconstitute the audience as the people and constitute the citizenry as a people in some new way" (p. 17). Faced with

a situation in which many people had demanded "change," Obama needed to make clear what kind of change he expected from his audience. It is to this rhetorical and symbolic shift that we turn next.

### **The Dramatistic Pentad**

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke (1945) laid out a way of examining motives as revealed in rhetoric, looking at five different possible motivating factors: *scene*, *act*, *agent*, *agency*, and *purpose*. This "pentad," he argued, could be used to analyze an act of rhetoric and see in what ways human beings framed their world: People "may violently disagree about the purposes behind a given act, or about the character of the person who did it, or how he did it, or in what kind of situation he acted; or they may even insist upon totally different words to name the act itself. But be that as it may, any complete statement about motives will offer *some kind of* answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (p. xv).

Burke added to these five driving motivations the idea of *ratios* of motivation. That is, he argued that each rhetorical act would turn largely on the tension or synergy between two of these five terms, with one usually defining and shaping the other: "A ratio is a formula indicating a transition from one term to another" (p. 262). Usually one motivation is the actual and one the potential, the potential called forth by the actual motivation.

Burke suggested the pentad as a way of finding the driving tensions and potentialities within a novel, play, poem, or speech--any act designed to frame and influence perceptions of reality. As Obama took over the presidency, the change symbolized a major shift in American policy, so it makes sense

that his rhetoric would reflect a redefining of motivation for the nation.

**Redefinition: From a Scene/Act to a Scene/Agency Ratio**

The scene/act ratio in rhetoric makes the implicit or explicit argument that the situation calls for or requires certain acts. This ratio was the first that Burke focused on in his book, the one he spent the most time on, and one that he implied is extremely common in Western rhetoric. Writing in 1945, he also explicitly argued that the scene/act ratio is nearly unavoidable in war rhetoric: calls to war are nearly always framed in terms of what *acts* are now required and called forth by the *situation* we find ourselves in. Burke noted the U.S. Supreme Court's decision (in *Korematsu v. United States*) to intern thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent as an implicit appeal to the scene/act ratio, citing Hugo Black's assertion that "when under conditions of modern warfare our shores are threatened by hostile forces, the power to protect must be commensurate with the threatened danger" (p. 13).

The events of September 11, 2001, were a major blow to Americans' sense of self and the world. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, President Bush's administration largely chose to use scene/act ratios in their rhetoric: the horrific situation (the smoking crater, the stunned fear, the confusion) called for--*demanding*--certain acts. Perhaps most famously, Vice-President Cheney said on "Meet the Press" that in the wake of 9/11, "We have to work the dark side, if you will. . . . A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion." Nearly all of the acts done by the Bush administration--the war in Iraq, rendition, torture, domestic wiretapping--were rhetorically defined as unavoidable results of the post-9/11 scene.

Burke would not have been at all surprised at the results of this framing of reality: according to the motivations of the scene/act ratio, he argued that "one might hold that there are certain 'democratic situations' and certain 'situations favorable to dictatorship, or requiring dictatorship'. . . . By the scene/act ratio, if the 'situation' itself is no longer a 'democratic' one, even an 'essentially democratic' people will abandon democratic ways" (p. 16-17).

When Barack Obama assumed the office of President, he found himself with a very different situation on his hands. "Change" had been his catchword all through the campaign, and his election--and the spontaneous rejoicing it elicited--indicated the American people were hungry for some kind of rhetorical shift in motivation. Thus, in his inaugural address, Obama chose to shift the motivating ratio slightly but meaningfully: no longer would the focus be on what kind of acts the situation called for, it would be on what kind of *citizen*, what kind of *character* was called from potential to actual by the scene--a scene/agent ratio.

This, in part, would seem to explain why the Lincoln references went by the wayside in Obama's inaugural. The new president did not want to draw comparisons between the situation America faced at Lincoln's first inaugural and the situation it now faced at his own. Lincoln's first inaugural was not a time of hope, though it was a time of change: deeply wrenching change, a civil war from which scars remain deep and painful more than two hundred years later. The situation for the nation as a whole got worse after Lincoln was inaugurated, not better, and even though great good eventually came from the conflict, it is certainly not a time Obama would want the current situation to be compared to--nor would he want the audience to think of themselves as the sort of agents called forth by that situation.

Instead of Lincoln and the Civil War, Obama chose to define the current American scene as analogous to the one faced by the man who would become the first President of the United States, George Washington, during the Revolutionary War. This choice, by itself is not that surprising. Many presidents have referenced Washington in their inaugural addresses. However, his choice of which scene inside that long conflict to focus on is somewhat striking. He did not summon tropes of great victory over the British forces, of fighting for freedom with brave allies against daunting odds, or valiant acts of active heroism. Instead, in the peroration of his speech, Obama referenced the winter encampment at Valley Forge.

The reference to Valley Forge took place directly after Obama's one personal reference to his father, the point of deepest personal emotion in the speech. He then went on to say:

Let us mark this day with remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled. In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At the moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words to be read to the people: "Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."

It is more telling that Obama referenced George Washington,



the Revolutionary War, and Valley Forge without ever naming any of them, for the story of Valley Forge is so deeply engrained in the American mind that this mythological story of the founding of the country needs no explicit names--indeed it may function even more effectively as an enthymeme. In his book about the "myths" of American history, Richard Shenkman (1991) summed up the Valley Forge story:

Valley Forge is surrounded in myth. We are told that the soldiers there nearly froze and starved to death, that this was the hardest winter the army suffered in the Revolution, and that the men were so naked they left their bloody red footprints in the snow. (p. 157)

Valley Forge is then, in popular American mythology, the testing point of American morale, the moment where the American people proved they had the mettle to not merely survive, but also overcome, the harshest conditions in order to attain and protect freedom. The etymological coincidence of "Forge" in the name cements the image: Valley Forge was the valley (low point) where the rag-tag Continental Army was (forged) tested by fire and pain and tempered by the hostile conditions into a new people, a new nation--becoming truly Americans.

By referencing Valley Forge and "the winter of our hardship," Obama encouraged a shift in perception among the people from a scene/act ratio (what actions are required by this situation?) to a scene/agency ratio (what kind of *people* are created by this situation?). The overarching metaphor still may be that of war, but now the battle is far away and the focus of the audience can shift to the terrible suffering and loss of faith that war brings with it. Like the demoralized, bleeding soldiers at Valley Forge, Obama

suggested, Americans need to endure with faith, to keep moving forward toward the promised future even though the present conditions may be terrible.

Unlike Lincoln, who presided over the splintering of the nation, Obama framed himself as Washington, who oversaw the creation of a new nation. This "new nation" he imagined was not the literal legal entity, but a new commitment to the ideals of the Revolution, a re-dedication to what Obama defined as classic American ideas. Over and over again in his speech he defined his inaugural moment as a new beginning, a moving forward out of the past: "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America," he said at one point, and at another, "know that America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity. And we are ready to lead once more." He framed his election and inauguration as a moment for America to reflect on who it is in this dark situation (scene/agent again), and to apply itself once again to its highest ideals.

In a real sense, then, the shift from a scene/act to a scene/agent ratio attempts to restore a focus on freedom and will. Scene/act ratios generally focus on the requirement, the necessity, of certain actions. If the scene is war, then fighting is the act required by that scene. The agents are not free to define their own moral sphere of actions because they are not given space to make decisions. Decisions are forced by the circumstances the agents find themselves in. In a scene/agent ratio, however, the focus becomes the type of person who responds to the situation. Will the agents wilt under the pressure of the situation? Will they give in to the pressures that surround them? Or will the agents rise above the problems before them to create new possibilities and a new way?

By simply changing the focus of the metaphor, Obama made it possible to consider the moment of the inaugural in a new way. It continued the themes of "change" and "yes, we can" established earlier in the campaign and it made it possible for the audience to conceive of themselves as part of that change.

### **Conclusion**

Barack Obama's inaugural is noteworthy for a variety of reasons, but one of the key reasons is its rhetorical attempt to frame the new administration as a step (and only one step) in the creation of a new nation. By overtly rejecting the scene/act motivational rhetoric that had been the hallmark of the Bush administration for seven years, Obama used the inaugural genre's impetus toward reflective, introspective, ritualistic rhetoric to create a call for a scene/agent motivational ratio: a call to consider how the situation shapes Americans and America, and to commit to a rebirth of and recommitment to traditional American values.

Whether Obama's attempt to reframe the current American situation as a Valley Forge, a moment of testing from which the country emerges stronger and renewed, will change the path of the nation remains to be seen. But many people witnessing the moment accepted the rhetorical shift intuitively. As Rebecca Traister (2009) wrote in *Salon*: "I wish I could say that around me the masses of people of every stripe and color were hanging on their new president's every word, but I can't: Mostly, everyone was drying their eyes and taking pictures and video of one another. In a sense, living out the words that were coming from the steps of the Capitol, trying desperately to document, as best we knew how, the day we'd come to see this new country born."

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