

**Barack Obama as Superman:
The identity and identification of a presidential candidate**

Dan T. Molden

Introduction

When Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States of America, he represented a milestone in American politics and the end of an era in the presidency. Obama represented not only the first person of African heritage to be elected president and the first president to have a last name ending in a vowel other than e (or y), but also he was the first president born in Hawaii. Although he eventually won the election by an Electoral College vote of 365 to 173 and the popular vote by 69.3 million to 59.6 million ("2008 Presidential Election"), there were several points along the way when the polling seemed to indicate that John Sidney McCain, III would win the election ("General Election: McCain vs Obama").

On the way to winning the election, Obama faced a variety of obstacles and utilized a variety of rhetorical strategies in attempting to overcome those obstacles. Many factors of in the campaign have been carefully scrutinized, of course. The Los Angeles Times, for example, looked at the font choices of the various candidates ("The Character Issue"). Other reports considered if candidate Obama was too fit, exercised too much and ate too healthily (Spector). None of this study and attention should be particularly surprising. The study of U.S. Presidential rhetoric has a long tradition (Medhurst) situated in the more general studies of political and campaign rhetoric.

This paper seeks to examine the use of the D.C. Comics' character Superman in connection with Obama during the campaign in an attempt to understand if and how that use helped to define or create an identity for the candidate Barack Obama. In the process of examining this question, a variety of sources will be considered, ranging from official

communication from the campaigns to news sources to handbills printed out by citizens and pasted on walls. In part, it is the variety of people using Superman and the variety of ways in which the character are used that make this particular choice interesting.

Politics and Personal Identity

All people struggle to some extent with the question of identity. This is especially true for political candidates, of course, who must seek to establish some connection with a wide variety of people—establish a strong enough sense of self-identity and a strong enough identification with the audience that they are willing to select that politician to represent them.

Recently, political commentators have noted the changing landscape in Presidential communication styles, beginning roughly with Vice President Dan Quayle's argument with television character Murphy Brown (Greene xii~xiii), followed by candidate Bill Clinton's appearance on the Arsenio Hall show and continuing with the famous question about boxers or briefs on MTV (Fitzpatrick) and the discussion of which candidates with whom the voters would most like to drink a beer. In short, Presidential rhetoric has become increasingly couched in popular culture and focused on the identity of the rhetor as an individual. Indeed, there has been much study of the "rhetorical presidency." Carol Gelderman (1997), for example claimed that "Speeches are the core of the modern presidency. Presidents are often canonized or vilified not so much for what they do but for what they say they will do and how engagingly they say it. (9)"

In this paper, I will consider the rhetorical exigencies facing Barack Obama as he attempted to gain the office of president. In particular, I will examine the series of McCain campaign advertisements which aimed to identify Obama as "The One" and Obama's response. I will consider the position of Superman as an icon or a container of meaning and how the

image of the character helped Obama to deal with the rhetorical problems before him.

Who is Barack Obama?

Barack Obama was a relatively unknown quantity when he started campaigning for the Democratic Party nomination to run for the office of President. Of course, he had received some exposure as a Senator and as a speaker at the previous Democratic National Convention, however, he was still seen as a person about little was concretely known. George Will, for example, described candidate Obama as a person who was known only on the surface:

the Fred Astaire of politics -- graceful and elegant, with a surface so pleasing to the eye that it seems mistaken, even greedy, to demand depth. No one, however, would have given Astaire control of nuclear weapons, so attention must be paid to Obama's political as well as aesthetic qualities.

Neil Cavuto argued that this newness was a strength, but only in the short term. He provided an example of the particular pressure that the relatively unknown, one-term Senator from Chicago faced in the primary election when competing against a more well-known candidate:

Is Barack Obama hot because of who he is, or who he is not? I suspect the latter. He isn't Hillary Clinton.

Hillary's the frontrunner and this happens to frontrunners.

I think it must be frontrunner angst. . . .

Frontrunners who are frontrunners early have to deal with this: peaking too soon, raising questions too soon, raising doubts too soon.

That's not to say Hillary can't still be who she is. It just confirms Barack can still be a rock star precisely because of who he is not.

Sean Wilentz went further, suggesting that Obama was lacking in any meaningful history or identity, which allowed him to be created or recreated by people in the media and the Democratic party to fit their own desires and needs. In essence, Wilentz considered Obama to be an empty container to be filled not with the candidate's self-identity, but rather to be invested with whatever identities or characteristics the audience most wanted to see for themselves:

There are many possible explanations for this latest outbreak of the delusional style. An ever-intensifying cult of celebrity personality-worship, the more sentimental the better, may finally have overwhelmed precincts of political commentary. (Obama's sidekick, Oprah Winfrey, is, after all, the reigning master of that cult.) Democrats may simply be so battered after what the Globe calls "seven desolating years" that they are looking for a man on a white horse to deliver them from despair — and so they have invented one.

In Cavuto and Wilentz's opinion, then, Obama benefited in the early stages of the election cycle not from his own identity with the voting public but rather from his lack of an identity. Further complicating the issue for Obama was his somewhat diverse personal history. Will provided his readers with a succinct version of Obama's background while critiquing Shelby Steele's book about then candidate Obama, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*. Will described Obama as a "child of racially mixed parentage," and as the "son of an absent black father, [who] lived overseas and in Hawaii, remote from any large black community, and received an elite education."

Barack Obama, in one sense, had access to a wide variety of identities. He had both "white" and "black" ancestry. He had "foreign" and "domestic" parents. (Indeed, what could possibly be more "foreign" than having the middle name of Hussein—the family name of the former leader of Iraq, the country against which the United States had waged a war? Similarly, what could be more "domestic" than a boy whose mother was from Kansas, the heartland of the United States?)

However, each aspect of his identity seemed to cancel out the others. Tony Norman, for example, noted that the white, Kansan background could be used to erase, in a sense, his blackness:

Despite the country's toxic "one drop of Negro blood" rule, some folks are rushing to assure Obama that, thanks to his white Kansas mom, he, too, can be exotic in America without being black: "Look at Tiger Woods," they say. "He's not black. He's Cabalasian."

These various pressures created a real identity problem for Obama. "All this, Steele believes, created an 'identity vacuum' that caused Obama to want to 'resolve the ambiguity he was born into'" (Will). Further, they complicated the ability to craft a clear identity to relate to the voters.

Even something as simple as his name caused confusion. While nicknames are not at all uncommon among politicians, Obama presented several obstacles to easy identification. As mentioned above, his last name ends with a vowel other than e (or y) which marks it as "foreign." In addition, his switching between a nickname and his given name as well as his explanations for those names caused some confusion. Mike Allen noted:

Even his name offers fodder for the critics. When he was growing up, his family, friends and teachers called him "Barry. " Then as a young man, he started insisting on

"Barack, " explaining in a memoir published in 1995 that his grandfather was a Muslim and that it means "blessed" in Arabic. His dad, who was Kenyan, had gone by "Barry" -- probably trying to fit in when he came to the States, his son figured. On the campaign trail during his 2004 Senate race, Obama told reporters that "Barack" was Swahili for "blessed by God. "

Obama, then, suffered from multiple identity problems. He had, on the one hand, far too many identities. Which one was the "real" Obama. On the other hand, he had too little identity. Who was Barack Obama, really? Most importantly, from Obama's perspective was the question of who would decide on that final identity. Who would define Barack Obama?

The One

A particular attack on his identity was casting Obama as pretentious, a person who thought he was a messiah or a prophet. Katherine Zalesky commented on a series of campaign advertisements by the McCain camp which sought to label Obama as a person who saw himself (self-identified) as a messiah, a quasi-religious figure who would divine the proper course of action rather than use experience and wisdom to guide his policies. The advertisements characterized Obama as a person with little real experience (comparing him at first to pop idols Britney Spears and Paris Hilton)but who was convinced of his own infallibility (comparing him to Moses and a Christ-like figure). That messianic figure was given the nickname "The One."

The fallout over the Britney Spears-Paris Hilton celebrity ad only appears to have emboldened John McCain's new strategy to paint Barack Obama as a witless fad. McCain's latest ad ratchets up the celebrity comparisons by putting the Senator next to one of the biggest figures in time: Moses.

McCain's strategy doesn't feel too different from a tactic Hillary Clinton used against Barack Obama in February when her campaign started to realize it wasn't going to fulfill its media-anointed mantle of inevitability. Hillary mocked Obama, telling the crowd "the light will come down, celestial choirs will be singing, and everyone will know we should do the right thing, and the world will be perfect."

McCain personally attempted to make the connection again during a joint appearance with Obama at a charity dinner, while simultaneously attempting to explain away his use of the derisive "that one" during an earlier debate:

This campaign needed the common touch of a working man. After all, it began so long ago with the heralded arrival of a man known to Oprah Winfrey as "The One." Being a friend and colleague of Barack, I just called him "That One" (Kurtzman).

In the absence of any strong identity for Obama, the risk that "The One" would begin to function as his identity was quite real. There were some signs, indeed, that the attempt to identify Obama as "The One" were somewhat successful in moving voters away from voting for Obama:

Tom Daschle, the former Democratic Senate majority leader, said in an interview with the Financial Times that the Mr Obama's Republican rival John McCain was seeing a "short-term blip" as a result of the advertising, including one that used the image of Charlton Heston as Moses to mock the supposedly messianic Mr Obama as being "The One" (Kirchgassner and Luce).

In essence, then, "The One" attempted to characterize Obama as a person more interested in image than in substance

but also filled with the pretension of being a religious leader like Moses or a messiah like Jesus. Such a person would not only be uninteresting to drink beer with, but would also be dangerous to have leading a large super-power in the 21st century.

The Response

This image created some real pressure on the Obama campaign. They needed to not only counteract the overconfident and out of touch image of "The One," but also establish a counter identity that was a better fit for their candidate and would be more appealing to the voters. It was at the same dinner, in response to McCain's statment that Obama described himself as Superman. "Who is Barack Obama? Contrary to the rumors you have heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father Jor-El to save the Planet Earth. "

The short response was, in itself, a rather well crafted joke. It allowed Obama to show some humility (or, more pointedly, to identify himself as a nerd). Without using either name, he was able to capture the essence of the attack against him of thinking he was like Jesus (who was, according to the Christian Bible, born in a manger) and deflect the attack slightly away from Moses and Jesus and toward Kal-El, the son of Jor-El from the doomed planet of Krypton. Kal-El, of course, is more commonly known as Superman.

Who is Superman?

In shart contrast to the identity problems faced by Barack Obama, Superman was an extremely well-known quantity. The character has had more than three-quarters of a century run in American popular culture. Not only is Superman a well known comic book character in the United States, he is also well known around the world. Jeph Loeb, a comic book writer,

briefly described the history of the character in his introduction to a book about Superman:

Out of a world beset by the Great Depression and the oncoming Second World War, they created a legend for all time. Superman may have begun as a comic book character, but he has thrilled the public in movies, television, novels, and animation. He has been lionized, satirized, and galvanized into a call for "Truth, Justice, and the American Way."

Superman, then, has identity to spare. It is no mystery what Superman stands for, what Superman believes in. While (like Obama) the specifics might have been hard to come by, no one would say that Superman was an empty shell to be filled up by the whim of the audience.

Importantly, as Les Daniels noted, there was a second reason why Superman made an excellent counter-point to the image of "The One." Superman, himself was often described as being a combination of Moses (his origins) and Jesus (his goals). Like Moses, Superman was sent away from his people (the Isrealites or the Kryptonians) in a small container (basket or rocketship) against incredible odds (floating down a river or drifting across space). Like Jesus, Superman was sent by his father (God or Jor-El) to Earth to help people and to save the world and make it a better place:

And in presenting an otherworldly being, Siegel seems to have touched upon a mythical theme of universal significance. Superman recalled Moses, set adrift to become his people's savior, and also Jesus, sent from above to redeem the world. There are parallel stories in many cultures, but what is significant is that Siegel, working in the generally patronized medium of the comics, had created a secular American messiah

A final point about Superman that made identifying Obama with him a powerful choice is the strong connection the American audience have with the character. Daniels quoted Joey Cavalieri talking about the responsibility an author or artist feels when they take the responsibility for creating a story about Superman:

"Superman will always retain his roots in the comic books. "I remember what it was like to buy these books," says Joey Cavalieri. "I know how kids think about Superman. I know how they project themselves into that character. That's a real trust, and you try not to betray that trust." It means staying in touch with a myth that has endured for generations, one that began with a couple of kids in Cleveland and now has traveled the world. 187

In essence, Superman is a character with whom it is incredibly easy, perhaps even natural, for American audiences (and voters) to identify. What is more, that identity is an almost universally positive one. Loeb, continuing his introduction, discussed his personal reactions to the character and the sense of character he connects with Superman:

In a world so easily embraced by cynicism and despair, Superman shows me that humankind is capable of greatness. He explains to me the best we can be as parents and children. He never gives up because he knows that life is a never-ending battle. He is, quite simply, an inspiration.

In a sense, Superman is exactly what his name says he is. He is a super man. He strives to do his best so that we can all, in unison with him, do our best. He leads by example and inspires—which would be a pretty good thing to be identified as if you were trying to be elected the leader of a country.

Discussion

Not every rhetorical act is successful, of course. In this case, however, Obama did win the election against McCain and the idea of Obama as Superman continued to carry some weight with the audience. Retrospectively, Jason Johnson recalled the proliferation of references to the connection between Obama and Superman:

Throughout the 2008 election many people compared Barack Obama to Superman. There were pictures of him opening up his shirt à la Clark Kent to reveal a big "O". There was a photo of him posing arms akimbo in front of a giant Superman statue, not to mention dozens of cartoons with him cut and pasted onto Superman's body on YouTube.

One test of the power of any attempt at crafting an identity, of course, is how the identity carries over in the audience. Do they accept this new identification or do they reject it? One of the easiest tests is to see if they replicate or repeat the assertion of identity. In this case, most of these connections between Obama and Superman were created by ordinary people and not by the Obama campaign. (The photo mentioned above was choreographed by the campaign, however).

That audience carry over, a kind of language-in-use shows how the audience accepted the identity and identified with it. Expanding and embellishing the Superman-Obama link. As replicated by the modern discussion of memes on the internet, this kind of creative application is really an extension of the power of the enthymeme.

Byker and Anderson, in *Communication as Identification*, discuss the various strategies one might employ to assert an identity with an audience. Enthymeme, or an incomplete argument, is one of the more risky strategies because an incomplete argument increases the chances that the audience

will misunderstand or fail to comprehend the intended identity. They note that:

When an auditor has to supply two parts of an argument, the probability of misconstruction or mystification is increased. Even if the argument is presented in complete form, receivers will be prone to misconstrue it. A tendency exists to see an argument as closer to or further from one's own position than it actually is. And these misconstructions become more likely when two parts of the argument are left for the listener to supply (52).

However, Byker and Anderson continued by noting the power of using an enthymeme. "On the other hand, one coactor can supply too much of the argument. This slights the other as a contributor to the identification. Therefore, the presenter of an argument has to avoid doing too much or too little" (52).

Basically, the power of an enthymeme is that it creates space for the audience to participate, to engage in the creation of the identity. It becomes the audience's choice, not Obama's that he is linked to Superman.

In the end, then, Obama was successful because he did not strongly assert the identity, but rather allowed the audience to see it and strengthen it. That identification is far more powerful, specifically because the genesis comes not only from the candidate, but also (and perhaps more so) from the audience. For example, the author of the Kabbalah Blog noted that the American public wanted to see something more in Obama because it wanted a Superman:

Superman is a clear symbol of the American Dream; he is the ultimate cowboy, the redeeming angel of a new era. Despite the decades that have passed since he was last seen flying above Metropolis, and the steady stream of heroes that have flooded the world ever since, there is no

doubt that the blue knight in the red cape is still number one.

It's no wonder that people are associating Obama with Superman, as if asking the two to join forces and defeat the escalating crisis ("Will Obama be").

Although Obama is not, of course, Kal-El, the rhetorical identification with Superman has been quite strong. Time will tell if that helps or hurts his presidency, of course. Superman is a hard image to live up to.

Works Cited

- "2008 Presidential Election." *U.S. Electoral College*. Office of the Federal Register. n.d. Web. November 3, 2009.
<http://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/2008/election-results.html>
- Byker, Donald and Loren J. Anderson. *Communication as Identification: An introductory view*. New York: Harper & Row. 1975
- Cavuto, Neil. "Barack Obama: Rock Star." Dec. 11, 2006.
Foxnews.com. Web.
<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,235931,00.html>
- Daniels, Les. *Superman: The Complete Guide*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books. Paperback edition 2004.
- Fitzpatrick, Laura. "Top 10 MTV Moments: Boxers of Briefs." *Time*. Feb. 10, 2010. Web.
http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1963569_1963568_1963528,00.html
- "General Election: McCain vs Obama." *Real Clear Politics*. n.d. Web November 3, 2009.
http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/us/general_election_mccain_vs_obama-225.html
- Gelderman, Carol. *All the Presidents' Words*. New York: Walker and Company. 1997.

- Greene, Eric. *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race, Politics, and Popular Culture*. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press. 1996).
- Johnson, Jason. "Obama becomes the one when Superman won't fly." *Tri-State Defender*. March 11, 2010. Web. <http://tristatedefenderonline.com/articlelive/articles/4708/1/Obama-becomes-THE-One-when-Superman-wont-fly/Page1.html>
- Kirchgaessner, Stephanie and Edward Luce. "Obama advisor blames McCain ad for poll dip." *Financial Times*. Aug. 6, 2008. Web. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/42fae334-63f4-11dd-844f-0000779fd18c.html#axzz1FBTBgccc>
- Kurtzman, Daniel. "Obama and McCain Trade Jokes at Comedy Roast." *About.com*. Oct. 18, 2008. Web. <http://politicalhumor.about.com/b/2008/10/18/obama-and-mccain-trade-jokes-at-comedy-roast.htm>
- Loeb, Jeph. "Foreword." *Superman: The ultimate guide to the Man of Steel*. ed. Alastair Dougall. London: DK Publishing. Updated ed. 2006. p.6
- Medhurst, Martin J. "From Retrospect to Prospect: The Study of Presidential Rhetoric, 1914-2005." *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*. eds. Martin J. Medhurst and James Arnt Aune (TAMU Press 2008)
- Norman, Tony. "The burgeoning bandwagon of Barack Obama." *The Pittsburg Post-Gazette*. July 30, 2004. Web. <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/04212/354164-153.stm>
- Spector, Felicity. "Barack Obama tries eating for America." *Channel 4 News*. Channel 4. August 2, 2008. Web. November 3, 2009 http://www.channel4.com/news/articles/politics/international_politics/barack%20obama%20tries%20eating%20for%20america/2373467
- Tschorn, Adam. "The Character Issue." *Los Angeles Times*. March 30, 2008. Web. November 3, 2009. <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/30/image/ig-font30>

Wilentz, Sean. "The politics of delusional pundits." *The New Republic*. Dec. 22, 2007. Web.
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/12/21/opinion/main3639210.shtml>

Will, George. "Misreading Obama's Identity." *The Washington Post*. Dec. 30, 2007. Web.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/28/AR2007122802448.html>

"Will Obama be the last Superman? " *Kabbalah Blog*. July 31, 2009. Web. <http://www.kabbalahblog.info/2009/07/will-obama-be-the-last-superman/>

Zalesky, Katherine. "New McCain Ad: Obama may be 'The One.'" *The Huffington Post*. Aug. 1, 2008. Web.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/08/01/new-mccain-ad-obama-may-b_n_116384.html