

INTRODUCTION

From the moment Barack Obama gave his speech on the 18th of March, 2008, commentators recognized that a rare event had occurred in American political history. Those who thought in political terms believed that this was one of the great Presidential campaign speeches, on the level of the best ever given.

Obama's speech also was judged in the tradition of American statements of equality that begins with the Declaration of Independence and includes the Gettysburg Address and the *I Have a Dream* speech of Martin Luther King in the summer of 1963.

It was understood from the time he gave the speech that Obama had written it himself in the two days before he gave it, and that he had shown it only to a few members of his campaign staff. So the assessments of its importance as a campaign speech and as an expression of race relations were based upon the work of the speaker, not on that of a group of speech writers.

The starting point for this book is a simple question: does this speech have real merit? Does Obama have anything substantial to say, or are his words merely empty sentiments? Does he ask anything of the American people, or does he offer them only congratulatory platitudes? How does he express himself? Does he use special vocabulary or employ grammatical and poetic devices? Does he operate from any underlying structures that shape his thinking about how Americans might meet the issues he raises?

The speech proves to be worthy of close study. It is a remarkable expression that shows exceptional ability, the sort of ability that Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln demonstrated.

Like Jefferson and Lincoln, Obama has shown the capacity to shape the perception of reality with his words. Perhaps even more than Jefferson and Lincoln, Obama has altered the reality of his time with his oratory. Americans owe to Jefferson the understanding of the central belief that binds us together

as Americans and Lincoln provided eloquent expression of how that belief is embodied in government. Obama has given expression to a new reality in race relations in the United States, a new reality that he himself seems on the threshold of creating.

In many ways Obama's speech is remarkable for a modern American politician. Confronted by a threat to his candidacy, he did not blame or attack his opponents; he mentioned them only in passing. He did not disown the man whose words were the source of the threat. He did not try to use voters' emotions as motivation to secure their support. He did not play on the divisions between groups to win votes. He did not write his speech for applause lines, and he did not end with a rousing peroration.

The great campaign speeches and statements about equality have a common characteristic: their occasion may be fleeting, but they transcend the moment and become part of the national conversation for years or decades to come. In particular, the discussions of equality have had an enduring resonance in American history because the question is central to our definition of ourselves as Americans.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” and we have certain unalienable rights. Unlike other nations, which were bound together by religion, language, geographic area, ethnic identity, and cultural traditions, Americans are bound together by an idea that Thomas Jefferson stated so simply. This is our most important idea, and it is the one that occasions the major arguments among ourselves. We have gone to war with one another only about this idea; for everything else we have managed to find compromises to bridge the differences.

In this context Barack Obama's candidacy as the first by an African-American to compete successfully at a national level was significant in itself. The success of that candidacy widened his platform and made his words on race in America that much more significant. One cannot fully understand the speech without understanding its particular political context, and one cannot

comprehend its importance without at least provisionally placing it in its wider historical context about our central founding idea.

Barack Obama's reputation as the best communicator of his generation, and indeed the best public speaker in American politics since President Ronald Reagan, helped to create an air of expectancy about his speech and probably increased the audience significantly. During the course of the previous year, Obama had become a phenomenon on internet sites popular with young people, and he had garnered a great deal of support online with people less than thirty years old. They had devoted time and energy to excerpting his words and replaying them for one another in loops that made his face and voice familiar to millions. The changed nature of technology is such that Americans can still hear and see Obama delivering his speech.

The perils of instant history on the basis of current events are self-evident, but that should not prevent us from trying to find order and perspective. It is the assumption of this book that the United States is at the opening page of a new chapter in race relations, and that Barack Obama's candidacy with its emphasis on unity is the initial episode. In this view, his speech on the 18th of March is the moment when the implications of the new chapter were first discussed. The discussion will build from this starting point to embrace the new realities and the potential and the problems that the country faces as a result.

Moreover, this new chapter will encourage Americans to write other new chapters in which women, Native Americans, and the bi-sexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender community will be the focus.

Barack Obama is moving the country to the time when Americans once again will add to the list of "unalienable rights" Jefferson began two and a third centuries ago.