

The Power of Words

Do Words Matter?

“Don’t tell me words don’t matter.”

So said Senator Barack Hussein Obama on the campaign trail in Wisconsin in February 2008, defending himself against Democratic rival Hillary Rodham Clinton, who had claimed her opponent had little to offer other than high-sounding, empty rhetoric.

“‘I have a dream’—just words?” Obama asked sarcastically, warming to his theme. “‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal—just words? ‘We have nothing to fear but fear itself—just words? Just speeches?’”¹

The audience applauded politely. Few realized at the time that Obama’s speech had been given before—by Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick, in October 2006, from whom Obama had borrowed the remarks without attribution.² It was, the Clinton campaign later charged, “plagiarism”³—a transgression that had once ended the 1988 presidential campaign of Obama’s former presidential rival, and future running mate, Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

But Obama managed to escape unscathed, telling journalists that it was what his campaign was “doing and generating” that was important, “based on the core belief in me that we need change in America.” It was actions, not words, that mattered, he seemed to say.

In December, addressing reporters as America’s new president-elect, Obama declined to respond to questions about his rhetoric just a few months before.

Don't Tell Me Words Don't Matter

“I think this is fun for the press, to try to stir up whatever quotes were generated during the course of the campaign,” he said dismissively.

So perhaps words really didn't matter after all.

Or do they?

Early in John McCain's presidential campaign, he delivered a speech on video to a packed crowd in Greenville, South Carolina that was also watched on television by five million professional wrestling fans.

McCain looked into the camera and growled:

How are ya, South Carolina? Finally the Mac has come back to Greenville. Looks like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama wanna settle their differences in the ring. Well, 'at's fine with me. But lemme tell ya: If you wanna *be* the man, you have to *beat* the man.⁴ Come November, it'll be game over. And whatchu gonna do when John McCain an' all his McCainiacs run wild on ya?

You wanna pull out of Iraq? Well, I say: “No surrender.” America can win the war against terror. I'm gonna introduce Osama bin Laden to the Undertaker. You wanna raise taxes? Well, I want a smaller government, and bigger individuals.

You see, my friends, I believe that America is the greatest nation in the world. And Americans don't watch wrestling because we're “bitter.” We watch WWE because wrestling is about celebrating our freedom. It's about fighting to be the very best. So, can you smell what the Mac is cookin'?

Lemme give ya a little straight talk, WWE fans. You might need a ticket to the Fatal Four next weekend. But you don't need a ticket to the cage match in November. All you have to do is get out there and vote. *You* decide the champion. *You* make the difference. And that's the bottom line, because John McCain said so.⁵

In eighty-seven short seconds, McCain managed to squeeze in references to every major professional wrestling icon of the preceding twenty years. But he also managed to describe everything he stood for: lower taxes, a tough foreign policy, and an embrace of individual liberty. The crowd roared, and even the color commentators were impressed:

“How about that? You heard it—cage match in November. Get out there and vote.”⁶

Clinton and Obama also appeared on the program, seeking to reach the same audience. But Clinton looked thoroughly wooden, while Obama read awkwardly from his prompt and grinned clownishly at the camera. Former wrestling champion John Bradshaw Layfield recalled the next day, “A lot of wrestlers were really disappointed that Obama didn’t come across better.” McCain, by contrast, “tore the place down.”⁷

That same candid energy, that same bravado and zany sense of humor, eluded McCain through the rest of the campaign. Instead, he had to overcome countless speech disasters, including the one in September that sent his poll numbers plunging, never to recover:

“The fundamentals of our economy are strong.”⁸

Those words mattered.

In fact, words were crucial to the 2008 presidential election. Words were Barack Hussein Obama’s main claim to power. He had few legislative achievements to point to, nor had he fought for any great causes. He also had an ideological background on the far, marginal left of the American political spectrum. But he did have a way with words. He had risen to national prominence on the strength of a single speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, a call to unity that resounded with voters across the land. And in 2008 he used his speeches to offer Americans a utopian vision of a future of greater harmony—with each other, with the world, with the planet. Words were the alpha and omega of what he offered to the American electorate.

Endnotes

Chapter 1 – The Power of Words

¹ Barack Obama, Speech in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Feb. 16, 2008, *ibid*.

² Jeff Zeleny, “An Obama Refrain Bears Echoes of a Governor’s Speeches,” *New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2008, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/18/us/politics/18video.html>>.

³ Howard Wolfson, quoted in Mike Allen, “Clinton aide accuses Obama of plagiarism,” *Politico.com*, Feb. 18, 2008, <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0208/8570.html>>.

⁴ As a volunteer writer on the McCain campaign, the WWE speech was one of the handful of texts I wrote. This particular line, taken from wrestling legend Ric Flair, and the line about The Undertaker, are the only two in the WWE speech that I did *not* write—they were added in a later draft before the video was filmed.

⁵ John McCain, “John McCain on WWE Monday Night RAW,” Apr. 19, 2008, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8XkIeTz-NU>>.

⁶ Jerry Lawler, *Monday Night Raw*, USA Network television broadcast, Apr. 21, 2008, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWeZvuRZkIg>>.

⁷ John Bradshaw Layfield, *Your World With Neil Cavuto*, Fox News television broadcast, Apr. 22, 2008, <<http://www.wwe.com/content/media/video/vms/none/2008/april22-28/6939642>>.

⁸ John McCain, Remarks in Jacksonville, Florida, Sep. 15, 2008, quoted in Sam Stein, “McCain on ‘Black Monday’: Fundamentals of Our Economy are Still Strong,” *Huffington-Post.com*, Sep. 15, 2008,

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/15/mccain-fundamentals-of-th_n_126445.html>.