

## **Barack Obama's Iowa Caucuses Rhetoric**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is to explore the depth of Barac Obama's rhetoric in his Iowa Caucuses Speech: "Our Time for Change has Come". Obama displayed his outstanding rhetorical craftsmanship to drive irresistibly his power of persuasion in the earliest Democratic caucuses in the whitest state of Iowa that gave him a victory; thus the speech underscored the ground-breaking messages to the rest of the nation that America was ripe for an African-American President.

**Keywords:** Obama's Iowa rhetoric, Obama's power of persuasion, Obama's ground-breaking messages

**Abstrak:** Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi kedalaman retorika Barack Obama pada pidatonya di Kaukasus Iowa: "Waktu Kita untuk Perubahan telah Tiba". Obama menunjukkan kepaiawaian retorikanya yang luar biasa dalam mengungkapkan secara tandas kekuatan persuasinya di Kaukasus Demokrat yang mula-mula di negara bagian Iowa yang dominan berpenduduk orang kulit putih yang memberinya kemenangan; dengan demikian, pidato ini menegaskan pesan awal penting ke seluruh penjuru negeri bahwa Amerika sudah siap untuk memiliki Presiden Afrika-Amerika.

**Kata-kata Kunci:** retorika Iowa Obama, kekuatan persuasi Obama, pesan awal penting Obama

In his Iowa caucuses speech, Barack Obama uses the introductory clause "*You said the time has come*" three times to drive home his important points that his campaign is gaining momentum. He irresistibly enforces his better prospect on ground that a coalition for change is building up throughout the country. Simultaneously, he uses the occasion to remind the people of New Hampshire that will become his voters in the next leg of his campaign trail, if and if only

they give him the same chance as the people of Iowa did, he will be the president for America who makes affordable health care available, frees American from the tyranny of oil, ends the war, restores American moral standing, and fights against the common threats of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Obama illustrates his victory repeating the introductory clauses “*this was the moment*” five times to highlight that he and his supporters are beginning to beat Washington ways, tear down barriers, and prompt more people to become voters. Obama also repeats as many as ten times his philosophy of hope that serves to be a driving force for his campaign and the motivating force for him to run for the U.S. President. He splendidly brings his persuasion to the personal level by using an anecdote of his own life as a personalized down-to-earth illustration of the American dream that could only be found in America. From there he points out that hope also becomes the “*bedrock*” of the nation and the force to “*remake*” the world they live in. On account of those eloquent delivery of Barack Obama’s persuasion, this paper is to focus on Barack Obama’s power of rhetoric as vested in his Iowa Caucuses Victory Speech “Our Time for Change has Come”.

The videotape of the actual delivery of Barack Obama’s Iowa Caucuses Victory Speech was analyzed using the rhetorical triangle (Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 2-5) in order to be able to grasp his power of persuasion. Rhetoric as the art of persuasion is understood and presented as a triangular act of communication consisting of three interrelated elements such as rhetor, text, and audience as illustrated as follows:

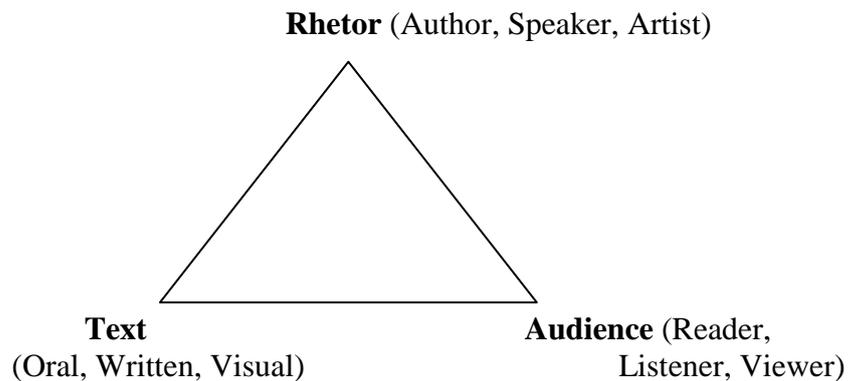


Figure 1 The Rhetorical Triangle (Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 2-5)

a) **Rhetor** (Author, Speaker, Artist)

Rhetor is the person who originates and/or produces the communication act of persuasion, be it verbal (spoken or written) or visual, to convey a subject matter. According to Aristotle (in Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 5), a rhetor has three different ways of persuading others, i.e:

- using his or her own character (*ethos*)
- appealing to audience's emotions (*pathos*)
- appealing to reason and logic (*logos*).

Thus, to understand the rhetorical element "rhetor", one must consider his or her character. And in order to consider the rhetor's point of view, one must take into account how the rhetor approaches his or her subject as well as how the rhetor addresses or imagines his or her audience.

b) **Text** (Oral, Written, Visual)

Text is the communication act of persuasion, be it verbal (spoken or written) or visual, being communicated between rhetor and audience (= Reader, Listener, Viewer).

c) **Audience** (Reader, Listener, Viewer)

The people who become the target of the communication act of persuasion.

Furthermore, Hesford & Brueggemann (2007: 5-7) argue that in analyzing a text for its meaning, the first step to do will be to read the concerned text rhetorically in the light of the rhetorical triangle as displayed. Then they also argue that the second step in reading a text rhetorically will be to take into account how particular contexts (historical, cultural, political, and other environments) may affect each element of the rhetorical triangle.

As the object of investigation of this paper was focused on how Barack Obama's rhetorical power of persuasion was realized in the real delivery of his Iowa Caucuses Speech, the research was therefore focused on the video of the speech as a text in the light of the rhetorical triangle and its rhetorical contexts as described by Hesford and Brueggemann (2007).

Unlike written presentation that is designed to present something for the eyes, oral presentation is designed for the ears. The latter follows the principles of orality and choices of stylistic resource that highlight the very nature of speech as oral presentation, i.e. something to be delivered for the ear (Zarefsky, 2005: 274 - 293). Since listeners are more dependent on the speaker, the speaker must make his or her presentation as easy as possible for listeners to follow and remember. Following Zarefsky's ideas of achieving style through language, a selected list of

some of the principles of orality and choices of stylistic resource is used to back up the inquiry into the element of text in the rhetorical triangle as follows:

(1) Simplicity

The speaker uses simple structures and more common words.

(2) Repetition

The speaker repeats key ideas for emphasis.

(3) Informality

The speaker uses less formal language than otherwise in written presentation.

(4) Reflexivity

The speaker often refers to himself or herself, to the audience and situation.

(5) Clarity

The speaker speaks as clearly as possible to the audience using more concrete words and short statements familiar to the audience to describe an idea or situation.

(6). Rhythm

The speaker uses repetition of key idea or argument to hold the audience to have the feel of the ideas being presented so as to make them more involved in the speech situation.

(7). Vividness

The speaker makes the speech easier to digest in the mind's eye of the audience.

**Method**

The approach used in this paper was qualitative method of inquiry that deals with the non-numerical linguistic units in the forms of words, phrases, clauses or sentences (Dornyei, 2007: 38, 243; Creswell, 2003: 182,184), by means of which this research paper attempted to identify and interpret Obama's rhetoric in his Iowa Caucuses Speech entitled "Our Time for Change has Come".

The data for this study were derived from the video of Obama's Iowa Victory Speech (Obama, B. 2008, January 3).

### **Discussion and Findings**

#### 1. The First Step of the Rhetorical Reading of the Actual Delivery of Obama's Iowa Caucuses Speech: "Our Time for Change has Come"

##### a. The Rhetor

The following are some deliberate acts of persuasion employed by Obama as the rhetor by using his character, appealing to his audience's emotions, and appealing to his audience's reason and logic.

##### 1) Using His Own Character (*Ethos*)

Using some aspects of his character, Obama asserted his power of persuasion.

##### a) A Character Imbued with Optimism to Do Great Things

Obama resonated the strength of his spirit of optimism to do great things. He was adoring the great achievement of his supporters to do great things in Iowa.

*You know, they said ... they said ... they said this day would never come. They said our sights were set too high. They said this country was too divided, too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose. But on this January night, at this defining moment in history, you have done what the cynics said we couldn't do (audience cheer and applause). ... . You have done what America can do in this new year, 2008 (audience cheer and applause). (Video: 00:01-02.15)*

In the concluding part of the speech, Obama spoke agitatedly to the point to activate his supporters as one unity, the power of the people, to do great things:

*The same message (cheer and applause throughout) we had when we were up and when we were down; the one that can save this country, . . . that together, ordinary people can do extraordinary things (Obama pronounces it distinctively). Because we are not a collection of red states and blue states. We are the United States of America (cheer and applause). And in this moment, in this election, we are ready to believe again (cheer and applause). (Video: 13:13-49)*

#### b) A Character in Close Touch with the Common People

Obama brought to the front his own character as the type of a presidential candidate who suited to the requirement as somebody who knew his people best:

*The time has come for a president who will be honest about the choices and the challenges we face, who will listen to you and learn from you, even when we disagree, who won't just tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to know. And in New Hampshire, if you give me the same chance that Iowa did tonight, I will be that president for America (cheer and applause). (Video: 04:18-45)*

Obama's close touch with the common people was also demonstrated by his personalized anecdote of the life of the common people:

*Hope is what I saw in the eyes of the young woman in Cedar Rapids who works the night shift after a full day of college and still can't afford health care for a sister who's ill. A young woman who still believes that this country will give her the chance to live out her dreams. (Video: 11:30-47)*

*Hope is what I heard in the voice of the New Hampshire woman who told me that she hasn't been able to breathe since her nephew left for Iraq. Who still goes to bed each night praying for his safe return. (Video: 11:48-58)*

#### c) A Character of a Typical American Life

Obama even presented his own life that was uniquely American to become the corner stone of the point as he was describing the idea of "hope":

*Hope -- hope is what led me here today. With a father from Kenya, a mother from Kansas and a story that could only happen in the United States of America (cheer and applause). (Video: 12:29-39)*

## 2) Appealing to Audience's Emotions (*Pathos*)

Obama appealed to his audience's emotions to strengthen their belief or conviction to further his cause in a number of different ways.

### a) Evidence of the Rising Power of Coalition

Obama convincingly aroused his audience's emotion as he was splendidly describing the rising power of the coalition to support him:

*In lines that stretched around schools and churches, in small towns and in big cities, you came together as Democrats, Republicans and independents, to stand up and say that we are one nation. We are one people. And our time for change has come. (applause) (Video: 02:16-36)*

### b) Alluding to the People's Power for Change as the Most American Ideas

Obama encouraged his audience's emotions saying that they came to the ballot for a higher call to bring about change to the country:

*I know you didn't do this for me. You did this - you did this because you believed so deeply in the most American of ideas - that in the face of impossible odds, people who love this country can change it. (applause) (Video: 07:46-18:05)*

### c) Alluding to the Power of Belief

Obama asserted his persuasion for encouraging his supporters to further their cause as he was talking about the value and the importance of the belief that gave way to one's hope:

*Hope is that thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it and to work for it and to fight for it (applause and cheers). (Video: 11:06-2)*

## 3) Appealing to Reason and Logic (*Logos*)

Obama underscored his political platform using his audience's reason and logic.

a) The Power of Coalition for Change

Obama convinced his supporters that the occasion was ripe to bring change to Washington as evident in the power of the coalition that was gaining a momentum.

*You said the time has come to move beyond the bitterness and pettiness and anger that's consumed Washington. To end the political strategy that's been all about division, and instead make it about addition. To build a coalition for change that stretches through red states and blue states (applause and cheer). Because that's how we'll win in November, and that's how we'll finally meet the challenges that we face as a nation (applause and cheer). (Video: 02:49-03:25)*

b) The Spirit of Common Concerns

Obama referred to the spirit of common concerns and national unity that was gaining ground to enable the people to overcome the long-standing divisiveness:

*This was the moment when the improbable beat what Washington always said was inevitable. This was the moment when we tore down barriers that have divided us for too long; when we rallied people of all parties and ages to a common cause; when we finally gave Americans who have never participated in politics a reason to stand up and to do so (cheer and applause). This was the moment when we finally beat back the policies of fear and doubts and cynicism, the politics where we tear each other down instead of lifting this country up (cheer and applause). This was the moment (cheer and applause). (Video: 09:42-10:23)*

b. The Text

The following is a scrutiny of the speech in terms of Zarefsky's selected list of some of the principles of orality and choices of stylistic resources:

1) Simplicity

Obama used more simple structures and common words. This was evident as he referred to the rising participation of voters that reflected the spirit of coalition to bring about change to the country.

*In lines that stretched around schools and churches, in small towns and in big cities, you came together as Democrats, Republicans and independents, to stand up and say that we are one nation. We are one people. And our time for change has*

*come (cheer and applause, followed by shouting "Obama!Obama!Obama!").*  
(Video: 02:16-36)

## 2). Repetition

Obama used plenty of repetitions of key ideas for various purposes such as for having a more convenient footing of the speech delivery, drawing his audience's attention, emphasis for the key ideas or even amplifying his messages.

*You know, they said ... they said ... they said this day would never come.*(Video: 00:54-01:03)

## 3) Informality

Obama also used repetition of phrases or words to display less formal and colloquial language:

*Give it up for Michelle Obama. (to Michelle Obama) You. You.* (Video: 07:28-38)

*... there are nights like this; a night ... a night ... that, years from now... .* (Video: 08:54-59)

The use of less formal language was also evident by the omission of "that-relater" as in "...*they said* ... they said ... they said this day would never come" (Video: 00:55-01:03).

## 4) Reflexivity

Obama used reflexivity many times, for instance, as he was referring to himself in an introductory clause "*I'll be a president*" (4). He used reflexivity as he was referring to the audience as the second person pronoun (plural) "*you*" in:

*You said the time has come to move beyond the bitterness and pettiness and anger that's consumed Washington.* (Video: 02:49-57)

He also used reflexivity as he was referring to the situation:

*This was the moment when the improbable beat what Washington always said was inevitable. This was the moment when we tore down barriers that have divided us for too long; when we rallied people of all parties and ages to a common cause; when we finally gave Americans who have never participated in politics a reason to stand up and to do so. This was the moment when we finally beat back the policies of fear and doubts and cynicism, the politics where we tear each other down instead of lifting this country up. This was the moment. (Video: 09:42-10:23)*

#### 5) Clarity

When Obama was talking about the people's power in the face of possible odds to bring about change to the country they loved, he was referring to it as “*the most American of ideas*” (Video: 07:56-58). He was also making attempts to speak in more concrete words when he was comparing what his coalition of supporters did in Iowa in terms of a more concrete goal so as “*to make people's lives just a little bit better*” (Video: 08:26-29).

#### 6) Rhythm

Obama used repetition of key ideas or arguments to create more energetic delivery so as to make his audience more involved in the speech situation.

*You know, they said ... they said ... they said this day would never come. They said our sights were set too high. They said this country was too divided, too disillusioned to ever come together around a common purpose. But on this January night, at this defining moment in history, you have done what the cynics said we couldn't do. You have done what the state of New Hampshire can do in five days. You have done what America can do in this new year, 2008. (Video: 00:54-02:09)*

#### 7) Vividness

Obama made it easier for the audience to digest the speech when he was amplifying the messages by repeating the clause “*This was the moment...*” (4):

*This was the moment when the improbable beat what Washington always said was inevitable. This was the moment when we tore down barriers that have divided us for too long; when we rallied people of all parties and ages to a common cause; when we finally gave Americans who have never participated in politics a reason to stand up and to do so (cheer and applause). This was the moment when we*

*finally beat back the policies of fear and doubts and cynicism, the politics where we tear each other down instead of lifting this country up (cheer and applause). This was the moment (cheer and applause). (Video: 09:42-10:23)*

### c. The Audience

The attendants visible as shown on the video were mostly white. Most slogans visible read “Stand for Change” with the backdrops of the podium with a banner that read “Change we can believe”, that became one of Obama’s overarching twin themes – change and coalition. This also showed that Obama’s political base that set aside divisiveness in politics and society asked his supporters to join hands in the form of coalition for change.

### 2. The Second Step of the Rhetorical Reading of the Actual Delivery of Obama’s Iowa Caucuses Speech: “Our Time for Change has Come”

The video that shows that Obama’s close attendants were mostly white came as no surprise as Iowa is known as a state whose population is 94.7% white, 3.7% Hispanics and 2.3% African American. Therefore it was a real test case for an African-American candidate to see whether America was ready or not for an African-American president. So Obama’s winning turnout (by 38%) in Iowa caucuses to come in front of New York Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton (29%) and surpassed other candidates was evident that he had the power to come up as a serious contender for the presidency. Obama’s win was even described as “rarity of the rarities”: a surprising shock to the American politics (Meyerson, Jan 4, 2008). At least, Iowans sent a resounding message to the rest of the country that America was ready to have an African-American president (Thomas, Jan. 17, 2008).

For Obama, his win in an overwhelmingly white state was considered as a measure of the progress that had occurred in the American society. It was also evidence for his own electability. Voters – young people, old people, democrats, crossover Republicans, independents thronging the ballot – showed that the American people were hungry for change. They were hungry to put an end to the broken politics and determined to work across party lines to tackle the fallen economy. Obama also had the confidence from the very beginning in the power of the people to bring change.

### **Conclusion**

From the first step of the rhetorical reading, Obama used some aspects of himself as the rhetor: a character to do great things, a character with a typical American life, and a character who was close to the common people. He appealed to his audience's emotions to strengthen their belief by arousing their emotion as he was splendidly describing the rising power of the coalition to support him; alluding to the people's power of change; and alluding to the people's power of belief. He also appealed his audience's reason and logic by underscoring the coalition's power for change and the power of the common concerns.

The text of Obama's Iowa speech shows the characteristics of the principle of orality and choice of stylistic resources such as simplicity, repetition, informality, reflexivity, clarity, rhythm, and vividness.

The audience to Obama's Iowa speech were mostly white representing Iowa as one of the whitest states. Thus one of Obama's overarching twin themes – change

– could only be made possible by bringing the white population into his big tent of coalition.

The second rhetorical reading of the speech indicates that Obama's victory in Iowa as one of the whitest states sent a convincing message to the rest of the country that America had made a tremendous progress in racial relation. His electability was also evident that America was ready for an African-American President to bring change to the fallen economy and politics.

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