

On January 3, 2008, Barack Obama took his first big step toward being elected president of the United States by winning the Iowa Democratic Party Caucuses. Two days later, Isabelle Duriez, writing in *Libération*, the progressive French newspaper co-founded and first edited by Jean-Paul Sartre, exclaimed, “How many politicians have the ability to stir up such emotions? How many have done so since John F. Kennedy?”<sup>1</sup>

She begins her piece with an anecdote from July 2004, right after Obama delivered his memorable speech at the Democratic National Convention in Boston: “Early one morning the radio was rebroadcasting the speech of one Barack Obama, and the driver of a bus taking journalists to the convention said out loud, ‘Are you listening to this guy? He’s going to go far.’”<sup>2</sup>

Duriez comes back again and again to Obama’s gifts to move and inspire people as a speaker. His speeches, in her words, are “steeped in idealism.”<sup>3</sup> The French metaphor is more powerful than the metaphor used to translate it. In English, Obama’s speeches are tea bags immersed in the hot water of noble ideas. In French, Obama works his idealism into the very substance of his speeches, like a baker plying dough with his own hands.

I cite Duriez’s article for its value as an outside witness to American political events and the phenomenon that still is Barack Obama, speechmaker. Given the effects of the eight years of the Bush administration’s foreign policy decisions upon the rest of the world, it would be disingenuous to claim Duriez is an impartial third party. Still, despite the keen interest European political journalists and their readers would have in the positions of a leading candidate for the American presidency, Duriez emphasizes not Obama’s political beliefs, or his policy statements, or his welcome, from a liberal international perspective, promises of change, or even his remarkable life trajectory. Instead she focuses on how he speaks about these things, the contagious hope he spreads in his speeches, the way he speaks of himself as a symbol of the American dream of achievement through hard work and education, despite the disadvantages of race, broken family life, socio-economic class, and his coming-of-age bewilderment about his own identity.

We might add here Obama’s straightforward answers to questions that cause other political figures to tap dance verbally around what passes for truth on the political stage. For example, consider Obama’s careful statement

in 2004 that America's war on drugs has been a failure and that "we need to rethink and decriminalize our marijuana laws," but not necessarily legalize addictive drugs; and then, in 2006, his artfully candid seven-word, two-sentence reply, when asked about his own use of marijuana.

A similar marijuana question in 1992 launched former president Bill Clinton on his parallel careers as the Fred Astaire of tortured legalistic reasoning and the second coming of Socrates in his concern for fine shades of meanings of words. George W. Bush, in a salon.com interview<sup>4</sup> with David Horowitz in May 1999 as he ramped up for his first presidential election campaign, responded to questions about his own drug use by claiming he wanted to "elevate the discourse" by not playing the Washington "game of gossip and slander." He countered with his own rhetorical question about such questions and those who posed them: "Should I dignify them by answering their questions?"

Now visualize Obama, sitting cross-legged and relaxed, responding,<sup>5</sup> "I inhaled (pause) frequently." (Longer pause while Obama visibly thinks. Then the rhetorical knockout.) "That was the point." A standup comedian could not have delivered these lines with any better word choice or timing or deadpan finesse.

Certainly, as *Newsweek* senior Washington correspondent Howard Fineman pointed out at the time on Chris Matthews' MSNBC news program, times have changed since 1992 when then presidential hopeful Bill Clinton felt he had to claim he didn't inhale, and maybe even since 1999 when George W. Bush evaded answering questions about his drinking problems and cocaine habit. But Obama does not refer to any extenuating circumstances, e.g., youthful flirtation or experimentation, that many voters now find tiresome and comically outdated business as usual for politicians. Matthews himself laughingly commented after showing the Clinton clip, "How did he know he didn't like it, if he didn't inhale?"

By contrast, Obama directly asserts his frequent use, because we all know you smoke *and* inhale pot to get high and, if you put a lighted joint to your lips, you want to get high. But what Obama is doing is not what we normally mean when we use the term 'honesty'. As Fineman explained to Matthews and the MSNBC audience, Obama, by seeming to speak candidly on these kinds of issues, "seems so real. He seems to acknowledge the reality of things. It's kinda almost like a dog whistle kind of thing. Older

people can't hear it. Younger people hear it....He seems to be willing to be honest."

Note the frequent use of the word 'seem' by Fineman, and by me. Obama's answer is a clear example of Cato the Elder's well-known dictum *rem tene, verba sequentur*: "Grasp the matter; the words will follow." Cato's advice does not mean, either in Roman or modern American politics: "Size the situation up and honest words will come to you." It means, "Develop the skill to be able to do political calculations instantaneously and then with commensurate skill say the words best suited at the moment to your immediate and long-term political interests." Romans up and down their very high political and social ladders would not interpret this as falsehood, because everything for them was political. Just watch one or two episodes of the HBO series *Rome*. Whether slave, freedman, plebs or patrician, no one says anything without what we would call personal political calculation, and nothing anyone says is without what we would call personal political consequences.

Obama knows this. It explains his remarkable *gravitas*, a seriousness of manner in his public conduct, not unlike that of the young Octavian on his way to being Caesar Augustus, that is all the more impressive because of his relative youth and because it is not put on. It is exactly the kind of acquired habit that Cato knew a successful political figure had to have. Why? Because if it is not as natural as tying your sandal laces, you will inevitably make a big mistake. It is a habit, by the way, that Obama's predecessor George W. Bush did not have and never will acquire.

The talented orator then knows that 'seeming honest' and 'being honest' in public life are often the same thing and that political self-interests and 'the common good' can coincide. Obama has taken this principle to heart; and his words follow, measured and well-chosen words in uncomplicated syntax. At times, Obama seems to be channeling the spirit of Eric Blair or at least making sure that his public statements and speeches will never end up in the commentary of any new edition of "Politics and the English Language."

In the example I have used here, Obama sized up two things before his seven words followed. Young Americans and 55- to 65-year-old baby boomers aren't concerned about marijuana use any more, or, if they are, they have liberal concerns about how drug laws are written and how they are

enforced in the inner city. Second, he knew that most of those Americans whose votes he had any chance of winning had a long list of other, more serious worries: the undeclared wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture, domestic surveillance, secrecy in government and the rapacious privatizing of government's functions, unethical firings and hirings within the Department of Justice, the decaying of the nation's physical infrastructure, Wall Street and general corporate corruption, e.g., the "secret investments and tricky math" that made Enron a house of cards, cronyism and its consequences in government agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Securities and Exchange Commission, and, and, and.

The arguments in Obama's major speeches are important in themselves. They will be studied by historians, political scientists, and scholars of government and public affairs. But the way Obama constructs and delivers his arguments may heighten interest in rhetoric, the history of speechmaking, and the cultural contexts in which speeches are delivered. In what follows I give more examples of what I mean.

Obama makes his arguments seem like more than talking points pitched first by a political candidate and now by our president. In his campaign speeches, Obama brought voters to understand and feel his viewpoints in human terms. We feel what his views of the world and of his and our place in it say about him as a representative of aspirations that are inculcated into us as Americans from an early age. We acquire these aspirations less by formal education than by the myths we hear in songs, read in books, watch in movies or start picking up in the pieces of adult conversations we overhear as children, the myths that spring from our collective belief in the most memorable phrase in our Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These basic national sentiments defy divisions by race, wealth, class or region. A fatherless young gang member selling drugs around 65<sup>th</sup> and Superior in Cleveland and members of the Palm Beach Country Club investing their money with Bernie Madoff have different, but equally deep-rooted feelings about America's promises. Obama's speeches tap into the last of these three founding aims. His speeches are wired into what our parents meant, if we were lucky enough to have good parents, when they said in plain American English, "We just want you to be happy."

Obama has useful preacher instincts from his attending the Reverend Wright's church in Chicago and Sunday services at other churches. He has been around both crushing poverty and Petronian wealth and privilege enough to be sensitive to human needs and concerns of all kinds. He knows that an integral part of our American dream of happiness is the happiness acquired by making it possible for others "to be happy". He is smart, and he cares about people.

Insofar as political necessity will permit, Obama also has moved the word 'argument' away from its modern meaning of 'controversy' and close to its root meaning. He seems to 'make things clear', and he often does. His preference for explaining his own well-reasoned positions rather than attacking the positions of opponents fits in with his selection of the two ministers who gave benediction at his inauguration. His cabinet selections followed the same principle, again within the limits of what is politically feasible.

George W. Bush claimed to be the uniter and the decider, but, under Karl Rove's guidance, he united his base by means of distracting hot-button issues like gay marriage, abortion and stem-cell research that alienated others. Obama makes real efforts to include and respect his opposition. His cabinet nominations had the added benefit, for him, of summoning up the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, another Illinois senator who assumed the presidency in trying times and whose ten-sentence three-minute, at most, Gettysburg address is considered the greatest example of American presidential speech-making.

Simply put, then, Obama is the first major American political figure in a long time to whom we might consider applying the term 'orator'. Among presidents, besides Lincoln, parallels are drawn to John F. Kennedy or to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I personally think Obama combines the oratorical talents of Robert F. Kennedy<sup>6</sup> and Martin Luther King. I base this not only on what he says. I think Obama has RFK's and MLK's demeanor or *persona* when he speaks, and that his supporters, like theirs, respond to his 'feeling tone'. Psychiatrist Oliver Sacks explains 'feeling tone' this way: "the expression that goes with the words, that total, spontaneous, involuntary expressiveness which can never be simulated or faked, as words alone can, all too easily." Here, too, there is a clear contrast with George W. Bush.

I also see parallels with Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson developed his political instincts and speech-making abilities from an early age. Johnson's mother was a teacher of elocution, and his father had served as a populist in the Texas legislature and was somewhat ineffective because he was too much of an idealist. Johnson as a boy overheard lots of idealistic and realistic political discussion.

Johnson, like Obama, commanded respect as a clear and careful speaker and as a presence when he spoke, mainly because Johnson was, as biographer Robert Caro called him at one-stage of his career, "master of the senate". Johnson said about himself, "One thing I know about is power. I know where to find it and how to use it." Another thing Johnson knew about was being poor and being treated unjustly. In Caro's view, Johnson's political actions in support of racial equality were rooted in the fact that many people of color were also people trapped, through racism, by poverty. MLK, RFK and LBJ all had strong feeling tone when they spoke about the problems of the struggling poor and the basic rights that were denied them as human beings. Obama does, too, on these kinds of big human issues.

Johnson knew his words and his bearing were tools of power. Like Obama, he knew that making good speeches as a statesperson required more than securing good speech writers. Johnson knew public speechmaking involved 'acting' sincere. In public speech performances, Johnson always projected a manner fit for the occasion and befitting his successive roles as congressman, senator, vice president and president.

Johnson had a good ear, as Obama does now, for what we might call a formal biblical seriousness of purpose in delivery, where it is called for, as it was in his State of the Union address in January, 1967. Speaking of the Vietnam War, he told the American people:

I wish I could report to you that the conflict is almost over. This I cannot do. We face more cost, more loss, and more agony. For the end is not yet.

These lines are so powerful I have remembered them ever since I first saw and heard them delivered on a black and white television screen. I was fifteen and my only brother was at risk as a combat controller in special operations in the United States Air Force in southeast Asia. I

can remember my mother's agony that one of her two sons might die because the president would not say the war is at an end.

The sound, meter, increasing clause lengths (two, then three, then four syllables), and epanaphora of "*more* cost, | *more* loss, and | *more* agony" of Johnson's words gave them the effect of three punches thrown by Muhammad Ali. The inverted word order made Johnson's declaration, "For the end is not yet," seem as unchallengeable as one of the ten commandments. It made Johnson seem like Moses. It made my mother sob.

I recommend that you Google Obama's Iowa Caucus victory speech<sup>7</sup> with Johnson's Old Testament speaking style still in your head.

Notice at the start, Obama's dignified presence at the podium; his relaxed, but not casual self-containment as he waits for the crowd to quiet down, like a confident young star professor--a style that Robert Kennedy genuinely had, but his more charming, charismatic and sexy brother, the president, did not--waiting for his students to settle in their seats; his generosity in turning slowly and clapping his hands politely and effortlessly in grateful acknowledgment of the victory the celebrating supporters around and behind him have given him. (Obama will later tell them that he knows "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.")

Then listen to Obama's opening words. Pay attention. In all the official transcripts I have read, the opening is reduced to: "You know they said this day would never come." This implies that Obama's repetition ("They said,... they said,... they said") is an unplanned way of accommodating the exuberance of the crowd, who are charged up by what to many of them must have seemed a hoped-for, but unrealizable success.

It is not. Obama could have quieted the crowd in many other ways. In fact, he already had. When he begins his speech proper here, he is fixing their attention. If he is extemporizing, it is artistic and practiced extemporizing, using a technique familiar to congregations in African-American churches on Sundays and equally familiar to the Rev. Martin Luther King when, like Moses, he marched with his truly brave civil rights demonstrators to places they never expected to reach.

Obama prolongs the pronunciation of each phrase-closing single-syllabic 'said', like heroic blues man Big Bill Broonzy, a long-time Chicagoan, in his own brave call for social change "When Will I Be Called a Man?" Broonzy gives emphasis to the three successive final words 'when' that recur in each refrain. Broonzy's justly famous lament that an adult 'Negro' would be called a 'boy', even if he had fought in a world war or had 'got a little education'<sup>8</sup> is his response to what "they said" in the 20's, 30's, 40's and 50's:

They said I was uneducated,  
my clothes were dirty and torn  
Now I've got a little education,  
but I'm still a boy right on  
I wonder when  
I wonder when  
I wonder when | will I get  
to be called a man  
Do I have to wait till  
I get ninety-three?

What beautiful symmetry that the Reverend Joseph Lowery in his concluding benediction at the Obama inauguration structured his own final words on Broonzy's better known song from the early 50's, "Black, Brown, White," a song so controversial and ahead of the curve that no American record company would record it until after it was released in France. The distinguished oldsters sitting up around Obama at the inauguration, and Obama himself, heard Broonzy through Lowery's words and laughed at how far the United States had come, at least symbolically, in sixty years.

Lowery winds up his benediction:

Lord, in the memory of all the saints who from their labors rest,  
and in the joy of a new beginning, we ask you to help us work  
for that day when black will not be asked to get in back, when  
brown can stick around ... when yellow will be mellow ... when  
the red man can get ahead, man; and when white will embrace  
what is right. That all those who do justice and love mercy say  
Amen.

Lowery has inverted Broonzy's order, privileging the color black and issuing a challenge to the color white; and he has singled out other colors in the American social spectrum. Compare one of Broonzy's stanzas:

This little song that I'm singin' about,  
People, you all know that it's true,  
If you're black and gotta work for livin',  
Now, this is what they will say to you,  
They says: "If you was white,  
You's alright,  
If you was brown,  
Stick around,  
But if you's black, oh, brother,  
Get back, get back, get back."

The way Obama speaks his "they said" in Iowa produces a pleasing iambic rhythmic effect. He also stretches out the word 'said' to heighten the suspense and focus the audience's attention. By the third 'said', they are keen to hear what it was that all the nay-sayers had said. And Obama tells them in a quicker closing iambic cadence:

they said,... they said,... they said || this day would never come.

We could be listening to the opening of a speech by a minister like Dr. King himself. This opening itself is the beginning of a triplet:

They said this day would never come.  
They said our sights were set too high.  
They said this country was too divided,...

And it leads Obama to yet other cascading triads:

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.

The rhythmic patterns here are entrancing. They are the inheritance of a long tradition, in blues, in gospel, in church preaching, in field calls and

responses, in the dozens, in rap and hip hop. They result from long attention paid to how words fall upon our ears, not how they are picked up off printed pages. They result from paying attention to how words get imbedded in our minds.

Understandably then Obama relies on a young speechwriter, twenty-something Jon Favreau, chosen not for his years of experience or for his knowledge of American political history, but for his ear. As Ed Pilkington reported in *The Guardian* on inauguration day,<sup>9</sup> Favreau has “studied Obama’s speech patterns and cadences with the intensity of a stalker. He memorised the 2004 speech to the Democratic national convention which first brought Obama into the limelight.” Favreau knows the music of Obama’s oratory. In blues, gospel and folk, in rap and hip hop, and in church, quotation and appropriation of the lines of other songs and singers, of Jesus Christ himself, is a vital part of the art.

Barack Obama called his second book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Reviewers, like Christopher Hitchens, traced what Hitchens called its “overly portentous subtitle” to Martin Luther King’s “dream” rhetoric. But for the title proper, Obama certainly had in mind Martin Luther King’s speech in accepting his Nobel Prize in Oslo, Norway, December 10, 1964. On that occasion Dr. King declared, at the defining moment in world history when he was recognized for his leadership of a non-violent movement for racial equality, “I accept this award today with an abiding faith in America and an audacious faith in the future of mankind.” He then asserted, “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

Even more audacious are two things Obama does in his Iowa Caucuses victory speech. First, its opening echoes Dr. King in front of the state capitol building in Montgomery, Alabama, March 25, 1965, at the end of the impossible march he led from Selma:

They told us we wouldn’t get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and that we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, “We ain’t doin’ let nobody turn us around.”

Dr. King rallies the brave and weary Selma marchers by making them aware of the significance of their accomplishment. Obama rivets the attention of his supporters and rallies them in the same way. Obama is so bold as to call his victory in the Iowa Caucuses “this defining moment in history.” And who would criticize him now for being too audacious?

Obama’s statement also resonates with Dr. King’s last speech in Memphis, April 3, 1968. On the day before he died, King surveys great periods in human history from pharaonic Egypt to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. He then opts for the second half of the twentieth century, the defining period when “we have been forced to a point where we’re going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history.” Obama, too, makes clear he is an ‘I’ who is part of a ‘we’ who see large problems in life and choose to set to the hard work and personal sacrifice it takes to try to solve them.

It is impossible to study Barack Obama as a speaker without acknowledging the contrasts with George W. Bush. I have done some of this already in passing. During the two Bush terms, we Americans were in a kind of Babylonian exile away from the country our constitution originally set up and is supposed to safeguard, where we expect reasonably honest explanations of actions taken by our elected and appointed officials, open discussions of political issues, clear justifications for White House policy decisions, an intelligent measure of bipartisanship within our Congress on matters of national and international importance, and effective transparency in government.

Almost all of these ways of keeping our democracy healthy depend upon good speaking and equally good listening and thinking. The White House Press Secretary should be a conduit of information about what the president is thinking, not a Cerberus keeping our increasingly self-satisfied and coopted press corps away from lots of dirty business and incompetence.

The eight years Bush was president was a period so bleak that on the evening when Obama won just under 38% of the votes in the Iowa Caucuses, at the very beginning of the democratic primary campaign season, Chris Matthews on MSNBC could barely contain his proleptic excitement:<sup>10</sup>

“Barack Obama has won the Iowa Caucuses....I want to say it loudly. This country, and this is not a partisan view right now, we are in a rut. [Barack Obama] is taking us out of the rut and taking us to a new place. The biblical term for it, since we are in a biblical era, is deliverance. We are being picked up and moved to where we have to be.”

For me the major change between the Bush and Obama presidencies is, we might call it feeling tone, or we might call it, as the late James Brown did in singing of poverty and education, “what it is and what it is,” a firm grip on reality.<sup>11</sup> Oliver Sacks, as we have mentioned, brought up feeling tone in his classic 1985 essay “The President’s Speech” in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>12</sup> It is now a chapter in his best-selling collection of essays on individuals with abnormal mental and psychological conditions, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. His discussion is particularly appropriate here.

You may recall Sacks describing how patients in the aphasia ward, who were incapable of understanding the words of “the old charmer, the actor with his practiced rhetoric, his histrionics, his emotional appeal,” i.e., Ronald Reagan, were convulsed with laughter as they watched him giving a speech on television. Sacks goes on to explain “the feeling I sometimes have—which all of us who work closely with aphasiacs have—that one cannot lie to an aphasiac. He cannot grasp your words, and so cannot be deceived by them.”

Likewise Sacks reports the reactions to the president’s speech of a patient with the opposite condition, tonal agnosia compounded by acute glaucoma that blocked out her ability to take in facial expressions and bodily gestures. She focused on the “meaning [that] is largely given by the apt choice and reference of words.” Sack gives us her critique of the president’s speech through her special filters:

"He is not cogent," she said. "He does not speak good prose. His word use is improper. Either he is brain-damaged, or he has something to conceal."

For eight long years, I felt both ways about what George W. Bush was saying. The words, especially as he delivered them, were unconvincing. He clearly had lots to conceal. Worse still was his visible lack of feeling for

human suffering that his feeling tone conveyed. Sometimes when I listened to or read coverage of his speeches by television or print journalists, I felt like Winston Smith. I am not talking here about obvious, but nonetheless terrifyingly immoral, examples of newspeak, like ‘preemptive warfare’ for a unilateral first strike against a foreign sovereign nation and its people, or ‘enhanced interrogation technique’ for torture, or ‘mission accomplished’ in the third month of a now six-year ongoing presidential authorized use of military force. (‘Iraq War’ is just a shorthand. The good majority of the members of Congress we elected failed to live up to their constitutional duty to decide on whether or not our nation should go to war.) I am talking about mannerisms and actions that minimally signal a deep-rooted incapacity to empathize with other human beings, and, to get back to my allusion to Orwell, that seemed to matter to few other people.

In fact, it is symptomatic of the eight Bush years that the best criticism of George W. Bush as a speaker came not from members of the news media, but from talented comedians like Lewis Black, Stephen Colbert and John Stewart. This is a phenomenon that sociologists, psychologists and American studies experts will be studying seriously. It may explain why the takes of Roman satirists like Juvenal and Persius and Athenian comic dramatist Aristophanes survive. They told powerful truths in periods when reality itself must have seemed equally challenged. In many periods not even jesters are brave enough to speak the truth. Then we comfort ourselves by reading examples from other times and places of what could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about our own times.

During the Bush years, comedian Stephen Colbert’s White House Correspondents Association Dinner appearance (April 29, 2006) was a rare instance of speaking the truth to power and to the professional journalists who, as a group, did not take their civic responsibilities seriously enough. Colbert proved that sometimes satire is nothing more than close observation and description of reality. He told the assembled correspondents:

Over the last five years you people were so good -- over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn't want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.

But, listen, let's review the rules. Here's how it works: the president makes decisions. He's the Decider. The press

secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put 'em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you've got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration. You know -- fiction!

Let me close then by giving due honor to another comedian, Lewis Black. In his 2006 HBO special "Red, White and Screwed,"<sup>13</sup> he hammers many nails on the head about George W. Bush and what his administration did. Here is the nail about Bush's speechmaking and feeling tone:

I did though have a breakthrough. About six months ago, I was home alone watching the president speak on television. So it was just really the two of us. As I listened to him, I realized that one of us was nuts. And for the first time ever, I went, "Wow. It's not me."

Here's why I think there's something a little odd with George. Because a lot of the time when he speaks, his words don't match his face. Something is askeeeew. You can't talk about the war in Iraq with a smile on your face. He does it constantly. If you're the president, you have to say, "We're going to talk about the war. I must have a frowning face."

If you are so unaware of the death, damage and suffering that the war in Iraq has caused and will continue to cause throughout the world long after your terms as commander-in-chief are over, you will not be able to mimic somber concern in your gestures and facial expressions when you speak about the war you and only you authorized. You also will not see anything wrong with making what *The Guardian* understatedly described<sup>14</sup> as "tasteless and ill-judged joke[s] about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq," at the 60th Annual Radio and Television Correspondents' dinner in Washington (March 24, 2004) almost one year to the day that you unleashed the murderous shock and awe of war.

You will get easy laughs from a room full of privileged, well-educated news personalities who should know better. All you have to do is click slides and say, with a trademark impish fraternity-brother smirk: "Those weapons

of mass destruction have got to be here somewhere.” And “No, no weapons over there.” And “Maybe under here?”

Siegfried Sassoon acquired his own well-developed feeling tone about the horrors of war by serving in the trenches during World War I. He wrote<sup>15</sup> that he would like to see a tank lurch through the stalls of Music-halls so that no more jokes would be told in the name of patriotism “[t]o mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.”

For eight long years, many Americans, like myself, felt something like that about our White House. We are glad now we have a president who understands history, culture and the world around him, who has a strong sense of human decency and personal responsibility rooted in firsthand experiences, and who uses those talents and virtues to explain to us in his own clear and honest words where he wants us to be heading.

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<sup>1</sup> Combien d'hommes politiques sont capables de susciter de telles émotions ? Combien l'ont fait depuis John F. Kennedy ?

<sup>2</sup> Un petit matin de juillet 2004, à Boston, quand la radio a retransmis le discours d'un certain Barack Obama, le chauffeur du bus qui conduisait des journalistes à la convention démocrate, un jeune noir, a commenté tout haut : «Vous entendez ce gars-là ? Il ira loin.»

<sup>3</sup> ...ses discours pétris d'idéalisme.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/1999/05/06/bush>.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpBzQI\\_7ez8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpBzQI_7ez8).

<sup>6</sup> *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson commenting on the Iowa Caucuses victory also cites the parallel with Robert F. Kennedy: "I was in my teens when Bobby Kennedy was running for the presidency, and there was something about Obama that captures some of that feeling, I think, of the Bobby Kennedy candidacy, that enormous outpouring of hope that he kind of inspires."

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZEYo4I5K3o>

<sup>7</sup> <http://vodpod.com/watch/433834-obamas-iowa-victory-speech>.

<sup>8</sup> Oral historian Studs Terkel, *And They Sang* (The New Press: New York and London 2005) 191, says Broonzy wrote the song in 1928, affected by the experiences of an old man he knew: "When I went to the army and came back in 1919, well he was an old man then and the white people was calling him Uncle Mackray. So he never got to be called a man, from 'boy' to 'Uncle Mackray'. And so it still is today. They call all Negro men 'boys' and some of them is old enough to be their father."

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/20/barack-obama-inauguration-us-speech>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XE8hcjBFsz4&feature=related> MSNBC News January May 3, 2008 9:35 PM ET.

<sup>11</sup> James Brown, "Mind Power," *The Payback* (Polydor Records 1973) cd no. 314 517 137-2.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Review of Books* 32:13 (August 15, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Black, "Red, White and Screwed" (dvd release date October 3, 2006) ASIN: B000GTLQW6. Taped at the Warner Theater in Washington, DC.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/mar/26/usa.iraq>.

<sup>15</sup> S. Sassoon, "'Blighters'" in Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems* (London, Faber and Faber: 1947) p. 21.