**The Politics of Hope: Analyzing Barack Obama’s 2004 DNC Keynote Address through the Neo-Aristotelian Criticism**

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Commander in Chief of the United States Military and President of the United States; quite the title for anyone, but it is especially grand when applied to Barack H. Obama. President Obama rode the wave of Hope and Change in 2008 to beat what appeared to be an outdated Republican party, and then he did it again in 2012 (CBS News, *Why Obama Won****)***. But how is it though that he grabbed national and eventual global fame? Obama from 2004 was a relatively unknown figure; no one would imagine he would become the first African-American President of a nation who had seen such a struggle as the civil war was. Political parties in the United States hold a convention some months before the Presidential election every 4 years (Britannica Encyclopedia, *Political Conventions*). 2004 saw a triumphant John Kerry sail to the nomination of the Democratic Party to face the incumbent, Republican President George W. Bush; and although the election was a grueling one, George W. Bush secured a second term.

**Neo-Aristotelian Criticism**

In order to understand the ethicality of Barack Obama’s speech I will use Neo-Aristotelian criticism and three factors: understanding the context of the speech and the historical moment surrounding it, application of the five cannons of rhetoric and finally conclude with the impact the speech had.

**Background**

There was a key moment during the Democratic National Convention in Boston that saw the rise of a particular politician: Barack Obama. They keynote address is meant to be the speech that creates the necessary environment for the party nominee to triumphantly unite everyone under his banner, it is a privilege granted to rising stars within the party and also serves a symbolism for what the party has to offer. Candidate Barack Obama, from Illinois, provided a minority appeal, was from the young wing of the party and was a fresh face in the minds of voters who had been exposed to hundreds of ads by both sides of the political spectrum. His speech was meant to introduce what everyone should assume would be the next President of the United States. John Kerry was on the ballot for the 2004 Presidential election, but so was Barack Obama. Republican Peter Fitzgerald had announced his retirement after just one term representing Illinois in the United States Senate and the decision threw the field into disarray. Each party had plenty of candidates, and state Senator Barack Obama did not seem to have a realistic chance in a race where many of those running were millionaires (The New York Times, *State Senator Wins Primary*). Through sheer political luck and mistakes by other candidates, Barack Obama clinched the nomination to the Democratic Party; after this, things sped up for the young lawyer from Chicago’s south side. According to a CNN report, the reasoning behind Mr. Obama being selected as the 2004 DNC Keynote address remained a mystery to even Barack but it became his entry way into the national stage of American politics (CNN, *The Day America Met Barack Obama)*. President Bush concluded his presidency with approval ratings in the low 30’s, however this was not always the case. Following his immediate response to 9/11, President Bush saw a 30% jump in his approval rating to 86%, but this number kept falling and he was averaging 54% around the time of the Presidential election in November of 2004 (Gallup, *Presidential Approval Ratings*). This gave Democrats the hope that they could unseat the incumbent who was under fire for his response to the War on Terror. Although initially Kerry did not appear to be a frontrunner, due to Governor Howard Dean taking an early lead, Kerry dominated early primaries. This prompted Dean to go on the offensive which saw an additional drop in his polling, 4 and a half months before the convention in Boston, John Kerry reached the number of delegates needed to acquire the nomination. He then named John Edwards who was also contending for the nomination as his Vice President and this led to the convention in Boston and Barack Obama’s speech (CNN, *2004 Democratic Presidential Primary)*.

**Artifact Analysis: Barack Obama’s 2004 DNC Keynote Address**

National Convention keynote addresses are the main entertainment of any political convention; it is a rallying point and a source of pride for the party’s leaders. Then candidate Obama began his speech by addressing the elephant in the room, the unlikeliness of him speaking at such an event. “My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant to the British” (The Washington Post, *Illinois State Senator Barack Obama DNC Speech Transcript)*. This is the first time in history that this kind of introduction is used and it set the tone for the rest of his speech and in the long run set the tone for his rise to political stardom. On the summer night, Barack Obama was selling the concept that America is the place where dreams come true. It is a place where if you work hard you can make it, and that was his messaging and branding. His theme was bold with diversity and how this nation has room for this kind of conversation. This continues to be a message that appeals to a wide majority of American voters, who after all does not like the story of an underdog? Even though the focus of the speech remained to be John Kerry and his candidacy for President, Barack Obama did use the moment to share his vision of the United States. This is what prompted many analysts to pay attention to him and even started throwing around his name for a bigger office later on in his career. In order to analyze Obama’s rhetoric I used the five cannons of Neo- Aristotelian criticism: Invention, Organization, Style, Memory and Delivery. Through this method we can asses not only the content of his speech and how it was delivered, but we can conclude with an overview of the impact of his speech.

**Invention**

Invention can be further categorized into external or internal proofs, external being acquired from outside sources and internal being proofs the speaker creates, these are the familiar logos, ethos and pathos. As with most political speeches, but specially within the context of a parties political convention, most of the speech found its sourcing in the internal proofs. Barack Obama used proofs from his own life and created proofs from the hope of a better future. Out of the three; logos, pathos and ethos, Obama used pathos far more than any other one. The speech was not loaded with technical facts or stats, his promises of John Kerry and his possible administration were built around what was known from his character and not actual quotes from Kerry. Although applicable, ethos was sparingly relevant (The Washington Post, *Illinois State Senator Barack Obama DNC Speech Transcript*). Few people outside of Illinois knew Obama in the way he is known today, his big break came when he managed to beat a crowded field of candidates for the Democratic primary in his home state.

He was not a renowned figure and so the appeal of ethos was limited. However this also played into the context of his speech, he did not sell himself as a seasoned politician with years of experience because not only is this not true but it also gives him credibility when speaking to voters as if he was one of them. If we analyze John Kerry for example, whose experience Obama explains in his speech, we conclude that although he could be a good president he is not one of the people due to his life career. Pathos on the other hand was the backbone of the entire speech. The essence of pathos, its function, is to generate emotions in the audience with the hope that it would create a positive perception of the speaker.

Obama addressed race, homosexuality, war, political division and the democratic process, all of which are issues that have a major impact on how a politician is perceived, specially an African American politician. “There is no white America, or black America, or latino America or Asian America, there is the United States of America(The Washington Post, *Illinois State Senator Barack Obama DNC Speech Transcript*), it is messages like these that appealed to the emotionality of the audience. Coming from an African American, a race that had been traditionally underrepresented, this spoke to the heart of those listening to the state senator from Illinois. He briefly comments on homosexuality when trying to frame the United States as a nation that cannot be broken or stereotyped by political allegiance “… we even had some gay friends in red states(The Washington Post, *Illinois State Senator Barack Obama DNC Speech Transcript*). By appealing through pathos to those issues that voters care about, specially dedicated Democrats, he manages to establish his credibility and contextualize his rhetoric as the candidate of hope and progress, and image he ties to the man he is introducing: John Kerry.

War was also a big topic of the speech considering that 9/11 had just happened 3 years ago and the lingering effects of that event had transformed American society and reorganized the priorities the United States government had. Democrats had largely opposed the invasion of Afghanistan, a move by President Bush meant to act as retaliation for the attacks on US territory; Obama addressed this issue when he both gives credibility to Kerry (GovTrack, *Authorization for Military Force*). First his credibility stems from Kerry’s own veteran experience in Vietnam and then secondly he praises his logic by saying that under John Kerry the United States will never go to war being unprepared, or unfit to complete the mission. This was both a shot to President Bush and a highlight of the Kerry/Edwards team that, by measuring the applause in the room, was a very popular topic with those in the audience in Boston. For us to understand the invention and his proof we have to understand who he was speaking too. Firstly the Democrats in the audience, they are the most passionate party members that would support the candidate no matter who it was just because it was a democrat. Obama spoke to these members by bringing up issues that make up the backbone of the Democratic Party: equality, opposition to war, social balance, etc. Secondly we have those watching through their TV’s or those who heard the speech but were not there. This encompasses a larger audience that primarily includes Democrats, but also a section of independents looking for clues as to who they should support. This group also includes Republicans that both might be watching to see who they are facing and also Republicans who are unsure of their own candidate. The United States’ political process always attracts views from abroad and this is the last part of the “audience”, those who watch this democratic process and who got a chance to see Barack Obama introduce John Kerry. This would set the stage for 2008 and Obama’s future electoral contests, the President sees his popularity abroad reach all time highs in places like Germany or the United Kingdom while they plummet at home.

**Organization**

Barack Obama began his speech by thanking the state that saw him rise and he linked this to his own personal story which he used to introduce the major themes of race and the American dream that define his speech. The speech is around 18 minutes long and has a specific order (although it was not evident at first). We can organize his speech in the following way. First, as mentioned previously, he uses his own life story to establish his credibility and introduce the topics that are closest to him such as war, race and the economy. After portraying these issues, whether it was by describing a less than positive situation or showing it in a good light, he then liked it to John Kerry and how he is the candidate that could alter all these things in a good way.

The last part of the speech is a call to action, a call to support John Kerry for President and John Edwards for Vice President in all 50 states. It is important to note that this is the moment that we realize how relevant this speech was in Obama’s eventual rise to the White House, a state senator introducing a veteran senator who was running for President. The organization was key in the eventual impact of this address, he ended the speech by transmitting hope and energizing those who were viewing him to do something and improve the country they so proudly called home.

**Style**

The speech was loaded with symbolism and uses words that invoke the values that America is known for. Freedom, hope, pursuit of happenings, American dream, etc. all words that helped create a persona for Barack Obama, and also introduce John Kerry as the hopeful next President of the United States. The declaration of independence is mentioned and quoted when declaring that the United States is unique not because of the size of its economy or the power of its military but because it gives everyone the chance to succeed. His language was personal and direct; as much as he invoked messages of hope and change he also used his own story and background to attest to his credibility.

**Delivery**

Barack Obama is known as an exceptional speaker, and in this speech that was more than evident. It appeared that the future President had his speech memorized; there were no awkward pauses to read notes or obvious staring at what could be a teleprompter. This speaks highly of his confidence in the statement. Any speech can be a great speech if delivered eloquently. Obama highlighted important words in every sentence by marking them with a higher volume of speech. The speech was not noticeably too fast nor was it too slow, it slowed down when important content was mentioned as if to call attention to that. We can label his speech as fiery and full of energy, it was not low key, it was meant to excite those watching and motivate them to act upon their political allegiance if it was to candidate John Kerry.

**Impact of the Speech**

John Kerry did not win the 2004 Presidential election, and although conventions rarely play a vital role in the outcome of the election, they do serve as a way to get a bump in the polls. Barack Obama’s speech, being the keynote address, was of course the spotlight of the night and to a certain extent it did help John Kerry in his own speech and establishing his credibility by being endorse by Barack Obama. However the real winner of the night was Barack Obama. The context of his speech remains the essence of the analysis just presented, his political freshman status was both a negative and a positive. Negative because as he was introduced to speak, few knew him in the way that a national stage politician should be known, however this ended up benefiting him because he then had the benefit of shaping his own image.

Granted this could have also ended negatively if the speech did not end well, but his delivery and content supported him all the way. Obama then went on to win his general election contest with over 70% of the popular vote, a feat matched by few politicians in that type of contest. His fiery style of speaking, something analyzed in the delivery, and the content of his speech gave him characteristics that propelled him as a well-known democrat and an eventual nominee for the 2008 Democratic primary.

**Ethicality**

In my opinion this speech was ethical for several reasons. Firstly the focus was not to portray the opposing party in such a negative way that would make the Democratic Party look better. Obama focused the speech on highlighting his own personal story and the strengths of his proposed candidate rather than the flaws of the opposition. Although like with every political speech there were some attacks, this has become the norm to the point that when we don’t have such attacks as the backbone of a speech then that becomes surprising. Secondly, his story did not sell itself in a fake way, particularly Obama’s own family history. Speeches in environments like this tend to motivate the speaker to exaggerate their own statements in order to appeal to a wider audience, Obama, in his own political innocence perhaps, stuck to what was accurate.

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