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History in the Making: Barack Obama's 2008 Convention Acceptance Speech

It was a moment for the history books on the night of August 28, 2008 when Senator Barack Obama delivered his acceptance speech at the Democratic national convention. It was that week that Democrats confirmed the first African-American presidential candidate from a major party who would soon be the next president. Convention acceptance speeches can go two ways: they can either fit the mold of past addresses and cover the basics or the nominee can go against the odds and use the speech to exceed expectations and meet their needs. Obama did the latter. Obama made the speech historic in a way only he could and, as a result, saw an unprecedented spike in approval ratings from the American public.

During the summer before the convention, Obama and the assumed republican nominee Senator John McCain were in a stalemate. At the end of July, one poll showed the two candidates tied (The News Virginian). Obama brought a fresh face to the race for the presidency, but McCain brought the experience. Both had tools at their disposal and neither used them as effective campaign tactics. McCain was seen as an old, tired war veteran who only liked the idea of the presidency if it did not require too much energy (The News Virginian). Obama, contrarily, showed he had ideas but lacked concrete examples. The public looked for more specific details in his convention speech in the weeks to come (The News Virginian). Obama was also the more talked about candidate in the race, which heightened expectations of his speech.

Obama created media buzz for himself in July when he visited Afghanistan. He became the first presidential candidate to visit the country and earned high approval ratings among the Afghan people (Kabul Weekly). The talk of his trip, however, did not last long and did not result in long-lasting approval ratings at home. One editorial suggested the reason was because Obama focused too much on himself, which opened him up to media criticism (Chait). Obama had so far neglected to respond to the McCain campaign's attacks against him and that did not help him raise support. Obama would only give weak responses to express "disappointment" or calling the attacks the "same old politics" instead of truly responding to the advertisements (Chait). The same editorial suggested that Obama needed to focus more on criticizing current President George W. Bush and present himself as an acceptable alternative to the past eight years (Chait). Obama could do this, Chait said, by using negative ads because they work – even though most people will say they do not like them – to respond to McCain's attacks. A majority of the country wanted a Democrat to win the presidency in 2008 (Chait). Obama had the opportunity to turn the election around in his favor during his convention address.

As the convention opened in late August, Obama was preceded by notable acts and speeches. His primary opponent, Senator Hillary Clinton, followed tradition and released her delegates to vote for Obama if they desired. She then moved for a vote of unanimous consent to confirm Obama as the nominee and unify the party (Alberts). The next night, Senator Clinton's husband and former President Bill Clinton spoke to convention delegates and the American public watching on television. Using his established credibility, he told the electorate he believed Obama had been made "ready to lead" after the hard-fought primary campaign (Alberts). This benefited Obama and helped to establish the first-term senator's ability to be

president with so much less experience in Washington than his opponent. It opened a door for Obama to further establish his readiness in his own speech on the last night of the convention.

Before Obama ever said his first word on the night of his speech, he had already made history at the convention. Aside from being African-American, Obama's team and the Democratic party arranged to have the acceptance speech given at Invesco Field, an outdoor football stadium that would hold the nominee's audience of 75,000 people (The Guardian). Breaking with tradition, Obama would stand on the fifty-yard line and speak to a crowd filled with common Americans and convention delegates alike. This was symbolic of Obama's idea to have a transformational presidency and commemorated the acceptance address of the first African-American major party nominee. Also figuratively hanging over Obama's head and raising expectations for his speech was the anniversary of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which coincidentally occurred on the same night as Obama's speech 45 years before the convention closing night (The Guardian). With expectations high and a massive crowd waiting to hear Obama's words, the nominee started his speech.

The historic acceptance speech sounded like many others at first. Obama thanked the crowd and the Democratic party officials and then verbally accepted the nomination in his first full sentence. By saying the words "I accept your nomination," Obama earned prestige and respect as the rightful bearer of his podium in the process of legitimizing the electoral process (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 58). After this formal, ceremonial statement, Obama could proceed with his speech with the attention and honor he deserved as the recipient of his party's nomination. The next few moments of the speech focused on thanking and recognizing many people who played a role in Obama's nomination. He started with both Senator and President Clinton, who had both spoken highly of him earlier in the convention. By doing so, he reminded

the audience of both of their remarks as he delivered his own. Obama then thanked and introduced his running mate Senator Joe Biden and his family. He used his recognition of his wife Michelle and daughters Malia and Sasha to lead into his own introduction.

Obama talked about his parents and the opportunities they provided him, shaping it as an American story shared by many. The use of biography in acceptance addresses is a common strategy as it provides the public with personal information and draws a connection between the candidate and the electorate (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 233). Thus far into Obama's speech he followed tradition and crossed off all the recommended strategies for an acceptance address. He checked off another box when he mentioned President Bush and blamed the past eight years of failed policies on the Bush administration.

He moved into a series of illustrations saying, "this country is more" than what it's seen under the past president. This brief series of stories about struggling Americans teed up for Obama to push his own ideas as a direct contrast to the other party, which is a major strategy of acceptance addresses (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 228). Before breaking from tradition, Obama stresses the importance and crucial nature of this election. Obama said, "this moment is our chance to keep, in the 21st century, the American promise alive." All past presidential candidates, Republican and Democrat, have felt their election represented an important moment in history and Obama made it clear that he believed the same throughout his speech (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 231). Obama tears away from common strategies in the next section of his speech, however, as he begins to talk about his opponent.

While many presidential candidates refrain from mentioning their opponent by name, Obama did not hold back and met his need to go on the offensive against Senator McCain. In his approximately 40-minute speech, Obama named McCain 20 times in addition to references to the

Republican party, President Bush, and other indirect mentions. Obama approached the offensive tactic with dignity, however, by first acknowledging McCain's wartime service and showing him gratitude and respect. After that, Obama compared McCain to President Bush and cited several instances where the senator supported President Bush's policies. Obama questioned what kind of judgment his opponent had when he supported the president's policies 90 percent of the time. As he continued to lament the past, Obama turned his speech to celebrate the future and acknowledge his own ideas (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 228). Obama then addressed a point of criticism he faced over the summer by giving specific examples of how he would fulfill his campaign ideas.

Obama contrasted his new ideas with McCain's ideas by discussing economic and domestic policy. In what was likely one of the first times the public had heard Obama's campaign platform, he outlined his plan for redefining the middle class, health care, home mortgages, family savings, and college costs (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 62). While he contrasted himself to Republicans, Obama compared his policy ideas to President Clinton's and once again reminded voters of the support he received from the last Democratic president. Obama discussed the country's economic situation by sharing stories from his past to make personal connections with the audience. He talked about his grandfather who served in the second world war and went to college on the G.I. Bill and he talked about his mother who raised two kids while working and earning a college degree with the help of loans and scholarships. He talked about helping workers in Chicago fight against the closing of a steel mill. Finally, he talked about his grandmother who worked her way from a secretarial position to middle management even though she faced challenges doing so as a woman. Obama used all of these personal stories to lead into a central theme of his speech: the American promise.

As Obama talked about his family overcoming difficult situations and his idea of the American promise, he started to give specific details about his plan to change the country. His specific policies included eliminating capital gains taxes, rewriting the tax code to reward American workers, eliminating America's dependence on Middle Eastern oil, harnessing nuclear power, helping Americans afford new cars, providing affordable healthcare to every American, and investing in education from early childhood to post-secondary. Obama discussed each policy in contrast to McCain's stance on the issues, but he also discussed issues about which everyday Americans cared. He related each issue to the core of the nation and appealed to them as a candidate who would work for them as president. With an audience of 75,000, Obama played to the invited public and the viewers at home as he also pleased the media critics with specific policy examples. Obama knew what the public wanted to hear and that also influenced his decision to talk in detail about the war in Iraq and foreign policy.

Obama had already given several ideas of new domestic policy by the time he brought up foreign affairs. He discussed foreign policy by saying he opposed the Iraq War because it distracted from the real threats, which he said was the terrorist network in over 80 countries the could not be defeated by simply focusing on Iraq and Iran. He promised to end the war responsibly, rebuild the military, and also renew direct diplomacy. To establish credibility and trust to fulfill this promise, Obama mentioned Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy who both were Democratic presidents in times of war. Obama placed himself in history alongside two of the most beloved presidents, recognizing in the moment that he was a historic candidate. Having spent the bulk of his speech criticizing McCain, Obama continued to defy the norms of an acceptance speech as he criticized partisanship as a whole in the country.

Even though Obama identified as a Democrat and disassociated himself from Republicans, he also talked in his speech about the hyper-partisan Washington politics and attempted to find common ground. It would be expected that Obama would make simple, harsh statements saying he is better than the other party's nominee, but he did not do that (Trent, Friedenber, and Denton 226). On issues of abortion, gun ownership, same-sex marriage, and immigration, Obama mentioned ways that both parties should be able to compromise. In doing this, he not only recognized the platform of the opposing party but he also showed he would be willing to work with Republicans on these issues as president. Before he could become president, however, he had to convince the American voters he was truly fit to lead.

President Clinton had given his vote of confidence to Obama the night before the acceptance speech, but Obama needed to speak on his qualifications to be president himself in order to capitalize on Clinton's comments. Obama was still in his first term in the U.S. Senate and before that only had experience within Illinois. Facing an opponent that was seen as a long-term politician, Obama needed to show he had the experience necessary. Obama followed the advice of Chait's editorial and made the election about voters, not him. He said "it's about you," and acknowledged that he was speaking that night because something was stirring in America and people wanted change. To solidify his credentials, Obama said he has seen the change America needed in Illinois, Washington, and on the campaign. He implied that he did not need decades of political service to bring the change the country needed. Obama acknowledged many of the important pieces of his campaign in his historic speech but had one more historic element to acknowledge before saying good night.

As an African-American candidate accepting the Democratic nomination for president on the anniversary of Dr. King's own historic speech, Obama could hardly end without referencing

that moment 45 years ago. Obama recognized that the country had come a long way since King's speech but also noted that the work was not finished. He used this coincidental anniversary to finish his speech by again addressing the crucial nature of the 2008 election. He said the country could not turn back and there was much more work to be done. He stood before the public in an unprecedented arena, accepted the challenge, and ended by asking Americans to walk with him and join him in the cause.

Obama's acceptance speech and the nomination convention as a whole was historic for the country. Obama gave his speech to a crowd of 75,000 people, including those from the general public, and his primary opponent and a former president gave Obama incredible endorsements preceding his own speech. Within the speech itself, Obama broke away from tradition and took on his Republican opponent and criticized Washington partisanship while also meeting all of the expectations placed on him by the media and the public. Obama's convention acceptance speech is one that is golden for political communication not only because of the historic achievements before and during the speech but afterward as well.

The day after Obama accepted the Democratic nomination, Gallup conducted a poll to determine the public response to the speech. A remarkable 58 percent of Americans gave Obama a positive review and 35 percent said he was "excellent" (Jones). That 35 percent excellent rating was at least 10 points higher than the acceptance speeches of Bush in 2000 and 2004, both of his opponents in those elections Al Gore and John Kerry, and Bob Dole in 1996 (Jones). While Gallup did not have ratings for Clinton's acceptance speeches or any candidates before 1996, seeing that Obama received an unprecedented approval rating in over a decade of convention speeches confirmed the success of his speech. Despite taking a risk and going

against tradition and common practice, Obama's speech paid off and gave him the response he needed going into the general election.

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