Obama’s Change: Republicanism, Remembrance, and Rhetorical Leadership in the 2007 Presidential Announcement Speech

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This essay offers an analysis of Barack Obama’s official announcement speech of 2007 and his definition of “change.” Contrary to critics who have separated “vernacular” and “elite” strands of republican philosophy, I argue that Obama’s “change” rhetorically combined these frameworks into a threefold appeal for political leadership: the expansion of collective freedom, the necessary participation of citizens in public affairs, and the centrality of speechifying to political leadership. Understanding this characterization of change allows better comprehension of Obama’s transition from politician to presidential candidate within his situational constraints, as well as the distinctive public memory attributed to Abraham Lincoln throughout the announcement speech.

In his summary of the 2008 election, Michael Grunwald defined Barack Obama’s victory as a fusion of persona and political climate: “Obama was a change candidate in a change election.” Grunwald was right. No other term was more essential to the Obama campaign than “change.” The symbolic potency of change is particularly evident as incumbents and challengers find themselves opposing the merits of constancy versus alteration. Put differently, change is a discursive appeal and is subject to situational perceptions. Despite the centrality of this term to Obama’s campaign, scholars have not asked how—before he was remembered as a “change candidate”—Obama himself discursively defined change. This essay is a partial remedy.
No text better illustrates the intricate debut of “change” to the 2008 campaign than Barack Obama’s presidential announcement speech. Amid the dense Lincolnian atmosphere of the announcement, it is easy to overlook Obama’s discursive focus of the event. Speaking in front of the Old State Capital in Springfield, Illinois, and addressing an outdoor crowd in early February (two days prior to Lincoln’s birthday), Obama invoked an incredible historical analogy whilst making his entrance to the 2008 race official: “[I]n the shadow of the Old State Capital, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for president of the United States of America.” Media reactions took obvious note. Some called the juxtaposition of the two men “flawless” while others chastised the “hubris” of the symbolic marriage. Contrary to initial reactions, a historical comparison with Lincoln was not Obama’s primary focus in the announcement speech. Obama’s invocation of Lincoln was a key element in a larger discursive definition of “change.” In the following essay, I argue that Barack Obama’s presidential announcement speech defined “change” by combining distinctive frameworks of civic republican philosophy and, in the process, introduced a new public memory of Abraham Lincoln as a fitting model to legitimate Obama’s own characteristics for rhetorical leadership.

Analyzing Obama’s initial use of the change trope yields multiple benefits. First, Obama’s engagement with the term continued far beyond his initial campaign. Second, despite an otherwise robust engagement with Obama’s oratory, critical attention to his entrance to the 2008 election has been comparatively subdued. This analysis sheds light on the public ideology evident at the outset of Obama’s campaign. Indeed, as the Obama presidency has faced political deadlock and the discourse of division, a return to the origins of “change” also helps us understand the potentials and limitations of such ascension rhetoric. Among the insights derived from the announcement speech, two conclusions will be explored at length. First, Obama utilizes two distinctive perspectives of civic republicanism in this speech, fusing what Jennifer R. Mercieca and James Arnt Aune defined as “elite” and “vernacular” republican discourse. Second, Obama’s civic republican conception of change allows him to craft the components of rhetorical leadership needed to diffuse the dominant situational constraints within the context of the speech. To support the above claims and my republican reading of Obama’s announcement speech, this essay proceeds with an overview of Obama’s entrance to the 2008 race, the announcement speech, and a summary of the relevant dimensions of the republican public philosophy essential to this text. Next, I offer a critical analysis of the text that outlines Obama’s rhetorical appeal to change, while summarizing alterations of this term that emerged following its original debut. Finally, I postulate the importance of the text within the spectrum of Obama’s later campaign speeches and the implications of its strategy for rhetors facing perceptions of difference in U.S. political discourse.

The Announcement in Context: Expectations of History

Barack Obama’s political biography is defined by perceptions of difference. His biracial and international upbringing makes for a rare story in American political history.
As numerous scholars have demonstrated, Obama’s rhetorical appeals often begin and move away from perceptions of difference. David A. Frank claims that Obama’s discourse relies on “a dissociation seeking to ‘remodel’ the American perception of identity from division into unity.” This theme is most evident in his breakthrough 2004 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, a speech that, in Evan Thomas’s words, “launched [Obama] into the strange world of celebritydom.” More than just a gateway to recognition, Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones credit this single speech as a “key turning point in American politics,” shifting the rhetorical emphasis from individualism toward communitarian values in Obama’s narrative of the American Dream. Obama’s new vocabulary of unity resonated with political observers. Following his electoral victory in 2004, Obama transitioned from a little-known Illinois state senator to “the speaker most coveted by campaigning Democrats” in 2006.

Once elected to the U.S. Senate, Obama continued to position himself as outside the political norm, stressing themes of collective responsibility amid a new political landscape. Commentator William Kristol likened Obama’s brief time in the Senate to the political career of Robert Kennedy. Obama proved to be a “gifted politician and anti-politician” who was simultaneously “familiar with the halls of power yet a charismatic critic of them.” On topics like political corruption and the malaise of executive leadership, Obama fulfilled his role as both participant and outsider, continually breaking dichotomies and upending conventional wisdom. This reputation added to the momentum for a presidential campaign. Casting convention on patient political grooming aside, Obama attempted a swift political ascension. In the span of less than two years, he became a significant presence in the Democratic Party, and, some political insiders predicted, a likely presidential candidate in 2012, 2016, or even 2008. With unprecedented public interest, Obama did not wait.

The topoi of optimism and reform are powerful. Equally powerful, however, are the constraints that face an unconventional presidential candidacy. As John M. Murphy has argued, Obama’s early campaign was initially defined by a two-pronged “inventional dilemma”: He lacked experience as an elected official and was appealing to break the racial barrier of the U.S. presidency. These two constraints were strikingly evident in the lead-up to Obama’s announcement speech in 2007. Senator Hillary Clinton, believed by many to be the presumptive Democratic nominee, entered the 2008 race with what one strategist called “decades” of “built-in advantages” and polling numbers suggesting that her national experience was a key asset. By contrast, Obama’s entrance from two years in the U.S. Senate meant inheriting the unsavory mantle of being “green” or “the least battle-hardened major candidate in modern memory.”

Though more difficult to quantify, Obama’s race was also a key element to understanding the situational constraints of his early campaign. As Murphy notes, Obama’s mere presence in the presidential campaign illustrated his position as a candidate: “He had no successful presidential predecessor.” While polling around the time of Obama’s announcement reflected race as a minor concern for voters, the fact remains that “voters rarely admit to prejudice.” Before addressing his audience
in Springfield, however, it was clear that Obama framed his racial identity beyond the mold set by prior African American candidates. As Celeste Condit and John Lucaites have demonstrated, in Jesse Jackson’s unsuccessful attempts to gain the Democratic Party nomination in 1984 and 1988, he appealed to “black America and the whole marginalia of Americans who characterized themselves as oppressed minorities.” Jackson’s dominant metaphors—the “rainbow” and the “quilt”—underscored the importance of including others while paradoxically maintaining a sense of enduring difference among demographic populations. Obama’s public discussions on race—or lack thereof—departed from this strategy. Instead of folding distinctive identities into a joint effort, Obama was more likely to universalize issues beyond identification of the downtrodden and oppressed. Gwen Ifill observed Obama’s reluctance in the following way: “When given the chance to talk about race in the ways most expected to hear, he resisted. Race was worth talking about, he thought, but only in the context of broader issues.” Though he was appealing to break the racial barrier to the presidency, Ron Walters has noted, Obama included no reference to racial problems in America during his announcement speech and did not make a single reference to his identity as an African American candidate. In place of race, Obama presented himself at the “cusp of a new generation” in the midst of major political transformation. This absence seemed deliberate. Indeed, James Darsey read the announcement speech as Obama’s rhetoric of “the American journey,” a position that frames “justice, opportunity, and prosperity” as equally important and applicable to everyone.

While lacking both the perceived “leadership credentials” from the pool of potential nominees, as well as a proven strategy for addressing the issue of race in American politics, the prospect of an Obama presidency seemed unlikely in 2007. How did Obama confront the loaded constraints of being inexperienced and breaking the racial barrier on the presidency? Within the immediate context of Obama’s announcement speech, the answer was “change.” As I argue in later analysis, change was Obama’s appeal to reconstitute the expectations of rhetorical leadership and to propose an ideal of communal advancement carefully framed through a lens of racial justice. Though the causes for Obama’s eventual advancement in the primaries cannot be attributed wholly to a change versus experience discourse, by early 2008 “change” held such a ubiquitous presence in the political language—Senator Clinton frequently claimed 35 years of experience making change—that some wondered whether the term was a meaningful expression or fodder for parody. Writing in the New York Times during the early primary season, Michael Kinsley dismissed the bland, catchall status of the word. Emphasizing “change” allowed voters to “give it any meaning they wish,” Kinsley argued, while being “a candidate for change” was to avoid specifics. Kinsey’s frustration with “change” as a roaming signifier is understandable. A close examination of the Obama presidential announcement speech, however, proves Kinsley wrong. As my reading of the announcement speech indicates, Obama’s change was constructed within multiple perspectives of the republicanism political philosophy. Evaluating the debut of change in 2007 expands our understanding of how appeals to public memory and rhetorical leadership helped
Obama transition from popular politician to viable presidential candidate. Before this close reading of the text, however, it is important to highlight relevant themes of republicanism evident in Obama’s announcement.

**Republican Frameworks in Obama’s Announcement Speech**

Civic republicanism is not beholden to a major political party. As Murphy has summarized, republicanism is more accurately understood as “an interpretive framework” that is “offered by speakers to make sense of events and to render political judgments.” Far from an unchanging set of principles, political theory exists as what Jennifer R. Mercieca has called a type of “fiction,” or persuasive appeal employed in an uncertain context. Republican political philosophy, Michael Sandel has argued, is generally defined as a framework that “affirms a politics of the common good” while positioning citizens as “members of a political community controlling its own fate in society.” Of the varied interpretations of republicanism, two competing perspectives converge in Obama’s announcement speech: “elite” and “vernacular” republicanism.

In *Political Style: The Artistry of Power*, Robert Hariman synthesized characteristic traits of republican public philosophy derived from letters penned by Cicero. Chief among the traits of classical republicanism, Hariman claimed, is the presumption that “self-government” is the ideal form for achieving good policy, which, in turn, presumes that “citizens’ political activities should be motivated and guided by civic virtues.” Civic institutions and representatives, moreover, are assigned with cultivating “a moral sense in the citizenry that would result in decision being made primarily with regard to the common good.” Republicanism appeals to public virtue and civic participation, Hariman explained, through “practices of cultural memory” and “the social practice of public debate and the performative ideals of the art of oratory.” In their analysis of William Manning’s 1798 pamphlet *Key of Libberty*, Jennifer R. Mercieca and James Arnt Aune draw a contrast between what they term Ciceronian “elite” republicanism and the American tradition of “vernacular” republicanism. While Cicero’s republicanism valued public participation and consensus, Mercieca and Aune argue that vernacular republicanism is, by contrast, predicated on “the aggressive use of a rhetoric of critique” that seeks to open public debate for the common good. Elite leadership is distrusted and civic involvement is necessary insomuch as the public needs to “rectify the discrepancy between the promise of republicanism that serves the interest of the many and the reality of republicanism that serves the interest of the few.”

In the opening of his announcement speech, Obama initially aligns his campaign with a vernacular republican frame, shunning “a politics that has shut you out, that’s told you to settle, that’s divided us for too long” as the villain of the age. Highlighting the lack of citizen involvement in the current system, Obama pledges to cease the “game” wherein lobbyists and insiders “get the access” while citizens with less access to the process “get to write a letter.” Obama frames his campaign as the antidote for this social ill. Borrowing a phrase from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Obama
concludes with a promise to unite the withered relation between citizens and representatives and to “usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth.”

Based on his juxtaposition of political opposition and the promise of replacing elite factions with public participation, Obama’s announcement speech appears on first sight to be rooted in the vernacular republican tradition outlined by Mercieca and Aune. However, the detailed definition of “change” as the means by which the campaign will succeed shifts attention from a vernacular to an elite framework, emphasizing the very elements of republicanism that Hariman argued are “of little importance within contemporary political culture.” Part of cultivating the republican sense of common good, Hariman summarized, is utilizing “specific practices of cultural memory,” including “the veneration of the dead orator and recollection of great speeches” as the focus of communal remembrance. Obama’s announcement address is not only carefully grafted onto the physical and rhetorical presence of Lincoln’s 1858 “House Divided” oration but also takes deliberate steps to reconstruct an appeal to American history that reinforces this elite republican strategy. Lincoln is a key rhetorical device to translate a sense of political virtue within the announcement speech. Obama’s use of history is not a flat stream of facts but is instead an appeal to public memory sustained in rhetoric. As contemporary critics have noted, public or cultural memory is a textual performance and an essential dimension of conveying the republican virtues of the common good. Understanding the relevance of Obama’s invocation of history is essential to understanding how the past is made relevant within his situational constraints. Moving Lincoln into the political limelight is a purposeful expression of what Kendall Phillips has called the “publicness of memory” or the “fragmentary, mutable, and always fleeting” sense by which a collective sense of the past functions in a situational context. Remembering Lincoln is a familiar practice in American public address. As Merrill Peterson has demonstrated, at least five distinctive Lincoln tropes—“Savior of the Union,” “Great Emancipator,” “Man of the People,” “First American,” and “Self-Made Man”—resonate in the American consciousness. Obama’s Lincoln is different and reflects his deliberate combination of “vernacular” and “elite” frameworks that define “change.”

In addition to maintaining the “elite” republican interest in cultural memory, Obama’s announcement speech also includes an unexpected emphasis toward rhetorical performance itself as the basis for good governance. “In the republican mind,” Hariman has noted, “persuasion is the essence of politics, rhetorical virtuosity is the surest sign of political acumen, and public speaking is the master art.” To be politically adept is to be rhetorical. Obama’s announcement address reflects this basis of the republican sensibility by privileging speech as the basis by which leaders are evaluated. While the nameless elites are the object of condemnation, a political leader—such as Obama—can legitimately rise to power through the effective use of oratory. This appeal marks a contrast to other conceptions of leadership. For instance, Leroy Dorsey has defined rhetorical leadership as something that is enacted, or a “process of discovering, articulating, and sharing the available means of influence in order to motivate agents in a particular situation.” Awareness of the “social and political landscape,” furthermore, enables a leader to “craft the appropriate expression of their
character as a symbol for overcoming those troubles.’’53 As David Zarefsky has elaborated, ‘‘Presidents lead by giving voice to a view of the world that offers audiences different and better ways of seeing their own situation.’’54 While some theories of leadership suppose its practice lies with decision making, Obama’s debut of change appeals to leadership defined by wrestling influence from political elites, tapping into the cultural memory of Lincoln, and framing political leadership and oratorical practice as one in the same.

Barack Obama’s announcement address is arranged around a sense of growth, evolution, and expansion. He begins by reviewing his political biography in Illinois then transitions from the official announcement to a litany of national problems and their ideal solutions. Finally, he concludes with the promise of remaking citizens’ political experience with a ‘‘new birth of freedom on this earth.’’ To support my primary thesis of the speech, however, I proceed by analyzing the text thematically rather than chronologically. Obama’s republican framework supports a definition of change that addresses his situational constraints. Change is comprised of three traits informed by different strands of republican public philosophy: the expansion of collective freedom, the involvement of citizens in the political process, and leadership based on oratory.

Change Defined

In order to clarify the precise components of change, Obama’s announcement speech features a memorable overview of how the national practice of change has been exercised in the past. ‘‘The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government than can be changed,’’ he begins, ‘‘and we should take heart, because we’ve changed this country before.’’

In the face of tyranny, a band of patriots brought an Empire to its knees. In the face of secession, we unified a nation and set the captives free. In the face of Depression, we put people back to work and lifted millions out of poverty. We welcomed immigrants to our shores, we opened railroads to the west, we landed a man on the moon, and we heard a King’s call to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. We’ve done this before.55

This initial definition of change carries listeners through crises past and constructs a representation of a larger process of change by which results were achieved. Obama combines major shifts from military, legislative, and public protests alike, crediting all under the foundational ‘‘system of government’’ adopted by the founders. The three epochs that begin this quote recount transitions in American public policy when the inequality of the ‘‘colonial social order’’ was ‘‘made illegitimate,’’ when the ‘‘principle of national citizenship’’ under law was spread to Americans ‘‘regardless of race,’’ and when the notion of ‘‘economic security’’ became a ‘‘political condition of personal freedom.’’56 Each expansion of freedom carries implications for a collective well-being, made obvious in Obama’s reference to setting ‘‘the captives free’’ and the ‘‘millions’’ lifted out of poverty. Further, Obama’s initial definition of change
is informed by remembering the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Great Depression as collective efforts, without specific mention of great leaders or the individual accomplishments of Washington, Lincoln, or Roosevelt. This is a collective history of expanding collective freedom that—consistent with a vernacular republican framework—hones attention on new opportunities for the oppressed.57

Not every element of Obama’s historical overview describes a clear sense of expanding collective freedom, however. References to “welcoming immigrants to our shores” and “building railroads to the west” cannot be pinned to a declarative document or pivotal moment. Instead, these references note the nebulous mantras of collective opportunity of industrial growth and expansion. As Gordon S. Wood has noted, early precepts of republicanism during the American Revolution were defined in part through “equality of opportunity” and “equality of condition,” each of which considered social distinctions in divergent manners.58 Obama’s inclusion of equal opportunity and acceptance helps solidify the primary basis of what change means as constituted in the expansion of collective freedom. Final references of this section to the American moon landing and King’s “I Have a Dream” oration each continue the trend of collective participation (“we landed” and “we heard”) but do not illuminate collective freedom in the same manner. While the moon landing might be considered a moment of national pride, it resides more with ingenuity and perseverance than freedom. While the Civil Rights Movement was no doubt a great expansion of collective rights for black Americans, Obama places the emphasis of the event on King’s speech and the national will to listen. These final two components are seemingly displaced. Both play a crucial role, however, in rounding out Obama’s definition of change, and I will attend to their importance in a later part of this analysis.

In addition to framing American history through a republican expansion of collective freedom, Obama also nurtures an appeal for change in the future. What does the new expansion of change mean in 2007? As mentioned earlier, Obama frames his candidacy as the antidote to exclusionary politics, a foe accentuated in the opening of the address as the process of special interests and cronyism that has “shut you out, and told you to settle.” The new chapter of change is the campaign. Obama’s candidacy is remarkable not for the chance to be the first African American president but as a representative symbol of civic involvement. “This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change,” he intones.59 Change in the twenty-first century is more traditional than radical; it is a return to political involvement from the anonymous forces of obstruction. It is the campaign—not Obama—that is “the vehicle,” he suggests, “of your hopes and your dreams.”60 Without the collective engagement of a republican philosophy, freedom is an empty prospect. It is no surprise, then, that the second key component of Obama’s change is the cultivation of public participation in the electoral process, a point of emphasis that alters the conventional status of Lincoln as a key of cultural memory.

Obama’s sense of change follows the republican tradition of privileging the collective efforts of the populace to affect policy. He underscores this principle early in the
text while recounting his political biography, noting how his time as a community organizer in Chicago taught him that “our cherished rights of liberty and equality depend on the active participation of an awakened electorate.” Collective freedom requires collective work, or, as Robert Bellah et al. argued, “Political equality can only be effective in a republic where in the citizens actually participate.” Asserting one’s own understanding of participation as a civic virtue is one strategy. Carving out a history of the practice, however, proves more effective in providing a sense of importance to the practice. For this task, Obama grounds his emphasis on republican political participation in part on a cultural memory of Abraham Lincoln befitting the occasion.

Tethered neither to ideology or party, the public memory of Lincoln has been ethereal, rooted and shaped only by repeated and sometimes divergent invocations. While the exterior of Obama’s announcement speech seems to exalt Lincoln’s iconic character, the interior treatment is far more subdued. The result, however, is a purposeful crafting of a republican Lincoln and a model of political excellence forged in cultural memory. Lincoln’s example, Obama claims, is proof that change is feasible. First, Obama recounts the principles of civic participation, claiming the nation’s “unyielding faith” is “that in the face of impossible odds people who love their country can change it.” Next, he roots this claim with an unconventional telling of Lincoln’s story. “That’s what Abraham Lincoln understood,” he continues, “He had his doubts, he had his defeats. He had his skeptics.” Despite this, Lincoln succeeded in making change, but not on his own merits: “It was because of the millions who rallied to his cause that we are no longer divided, North and South, slave and freed. It is because the men and women of every race, from every walk of life, continued to march toward freedom long after Lincoln was laid to rest, that today we have a chance to face the challenges of this millennium together, as one people—as Americans.”

Imbued with the republican virtue of change through public involvement, Obama’s Lincoln cannot be the sole agent of his political accomplishments. In the midst of an occasion largely defined in symbolic proximity to Lincoln, Obama elides references to the Great Emancipator or Savior of the Union, focusing instead on “the millions who rallied to his cause” to define the effect of change and the expansion of collective freedom. We are witness not only to a cultural memory taking form but also to a recollection of roles based on communication: Citizens were listeners taking Lincoln’s cue; an engaged electorate beyond Lincoln’s power achieved what seemed impossible. This shape of Lincoln allows Obama to acknowledge the centrality of African Americans to the story of change, but in a way that is not exclusive to race, gender, or time itself. “Lincoln’s cause” is worthy of admiration, but the agency for emancipation in the longitudinal sense is derived from a republican virtue of citizens working to expand the collective well-being of the populace. In an essay published during his brief time as a U.S. Senator, Obama praised Lincoln while insisting a personal interest with “the man and not the icon,” noting he could not “swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator,” citing his awareness of the limitations of the Emancipation Proclamation and his views as a “civil rights lawyer and as an African-American.” Obama lauded Lincoln’s political skill, specifically, praising
his ability in "governing a house divided." When invoking such rich memory for the occasion of his presidential announcement, Obama hones the issue of rights expansion as an important historical marker for African American freedom, but one that translates the memory to be applicable to all and, even more, achieved because of all.

Obama’s announcement address introduces a new Lincoln apart from those mentioned in Peterson’s archetypes: a figure who is steadfast and enduring, but whose primary achievement was his ability to inspire. This memory dispenses with traditional images of the Great Emancipator or Savior of the Union, both of which position Lincoln as a heroic individual. Obama’s speech crafts a new shape to an old memory, Lincoln the Orator: an agent whose words meld a multitude of interests toward collective betterment. Under this republican-infused energy, Lincoln’s accomplishments were not his alone.

Obama’s collectivist ethos, once established in the cultural memory of Lincoln, saturates later portions of the text. In forging a list of proposals for future policy, he emphasizes the pronouns “us” and “we,” while utilizing anaphora with the phrase “Let us be the generation,” starting each new prospect with an echo of John F. Kennedy’s promise from his inaugural address, “Let us begin.” Like Lincoln, Obama’s presence as leader of these proposals is minimal. With only slight acknowledgement of his legislative contribution to Congressional ethics reform and a brief focus on his early opposition to the war against Iraq, he instead emphasizes the possibilities of collective work directed toward domestic goals like health care, employment, and energy policy. The promise of collaborative participation is so strong that Obama briefly disappears within the words of his own speech. “Let us be the generation that says we will have universal health care in America by the end of the next president’s first term,” he proclaims, “We can do that.”

Who is the president? Who is the leader? Obama’s republican framework—a blend of remembering Lincoln and projecting toward the future—has all but melded the work of leader and public into one: Obama’s commitment to health care reform is experienced from the audience’s point of view, a promise for change that places power in the work of the masses, or “what we can do together.” In isolation lies political death; in collective work lies political opportunity. When the achievements of expansive collective freedom grow from public participation, the natural question remains: What happens to leadership? In this, the final component of Obama’s philosophy of change from the republican framework, the role of leader emerges within the role of the orator emphasized in Ciceronian republicanism.

Hariman’s observation that in “the republican mind, persuasion is the essence of politics... and public speaking is the master art” is evident in Obama’s announcement speech insomuch as oratory is privileged as the nexus of political leadership. Obama’s discursive positioning of change is the fulfillment of communication between leader and populace. Unlike speech in “vernacular” republicanism that “functions as the medium of the political process—nothing more or less,” Obama’s change in the announcement speech positions rhetoric as the central component of political leadership. Again, Hariman’s observations are instructive: Ciceronian
republicanism is a style “endangered by silence, for without the continuing dis-
cussion of public duties, virtue could wane, citizens become distracted, forces of
change gather strength as political energies dissipate.” Obama’s change relies on
both the speechifying of leaders and the energies of the electorate. We may now
return to the original narrative arc of change introduced at the outset of this analysis
and glean a clearer sense of how the moon landing and King’s “I Have a Dream” ora-
tion fit into the principles of collective freedom and opportunity. Obama accented
the act of hearing King’s “call” for change, meaning the public met the leader’s direction.
Without reading too much into the text, the same conclusion may be presented on
the moon landing, another accomplishment Obama frames as a collective effort. In
his concession speech following the New Hampshire primary, Obama substituted his
focus of “change” with the rejoinder, “Yes we can,” whilst maintaining a similar,
expanded narrative through America’s past struggles, balancing the popular efforts of
“slaves and abolitionists” and “workers who organized,” with the “president who chose
the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed
the way to the promised land.” Public efforts are met—and balanced—with the
inspiration and direction of leaders as speakers, with Kennedy credited with striving
to the moon the same way King is credited with striving for social and political equality
on the basis of race. Though less clear in the announcement speech, Kennedy and King
both used words to inspire, to lead, and to set the example for change.

If Kennedy’s presence as rhetorical leader lacks precise form in the announcement
address, the emphasis on linguistic leadership in other portions of the text is unde-
niable. None is more important, however, than the memory of Lincoln. Lincoln’s
involvement in expanding collective freedom came through “The millions who rallied
to his cause.” However, Lincoln’s role, as mentioned earlier, is more nuanced as
a model of change. Positioning Lincoln as the proof and potential of change, Obama
reconstructs the cultural memory of suffrage: “That’s what Abraham Lincoln under-
stood. He had his doubts. He had his defeats. He had his skeptics, he had his setbacks.
But through his will and his words, he moved a nation and helped free a people.”
Obama’s cultivation of collective participation in politics from the memory of Lincoln
also prompts an appreciation for Lincoln the Orator, whose role as communicator
shows forethought, direction, and resilience by utilizing the arsenal of speech.

Obama’s emphasis on change achieved through speech is evident in his past recollec-
tion of Lincoln as well as his primary concerns with the present. The exigence of change
introduced at the beginning of the speech is that the injustice of the political process has
“shut you out,” and even taken on the human trait of speech in having “told you to
settle.” Reminding his audience of mishandled policies of the previous administration
reverses the traits of leadership defined previously in the speech. A failure of leadership
is also a failure of communication. “We know the challenges,” Obama says, turning
to present-day concerns, “we’ve talked about them for years.” In more elaborate terms,
the importance of speech by way of its failure grows in fruition:

For the last six years, we’ve been told that our mounting debts don’t matter, we’ve
been told that the anxiety Americans feel about rising health care costs and stagnant
wages are an illusion, we’ve been told that climate change is a hoax, and that tough
talk and ill-conceived war can replace diplomacy, and strategy, and foresight. And when all else fails, when Katrina happens, or the death toll in Iraq mounts, we’ve been told that our crises are somebody else’s fault. We’re distracted from our real failures and told to blame the other party, or gay people, or immigrants.78

George W. Bush’s tenure, unidentified by name but unmistakable by time and topic, is defined through events following the 2004 election as an unfulfilled model of leadership beckoning the need for “change.” Meaningless endeavors and dishonest messages are matched only by the tone of not communicating well to the public. Like the “politics” of the text’s introduction, Bush’s primary flaw is that he speaks falsely from a position of leadership, adding a major rub to Obama’s philosophy of leaders motivating positive action through their discourse. Speech, through the positive examples of Kennedy, King, Lincoln, as well as the negative example of Bush, continues to permeate Obama’s republican conception of leadership. To speak well as president is not a means to an end: Speech is part of leadership and an end in itself. Or, in J. G. A. Pocock’s description, Obama’s change privileges the “verbalization as an act or performance—indeed, an assertion of power—in its own right.”79

As a candidate suspected of being too inexperienced or “green” to be president, the final component of change answers key arguments addressed around the time of the announcement speech as to Obama’s overall preparedness. For Obama, leadership is something observable in examples past and present. Even more, by including effective speech as a condition for leadership, Obama not only appeals to quiet his critics but also selects a prerequisite that he has demonstrated in the past and present situations. Far from being inexperienced, Obama’s preparedness is well proven through his established ability to inspire. Cicero would have approved; the politician leads through speech.

This brand of rhetorical leadership differs from forms past. As David Zarefsky has noted, the ability to utilize a shared past has been a tool in constructing presidential leadership beyond the Constitutional requirements of the office. Presidents, he continues, appeal through “the rhetorical reconstruction of history in order to contextualize present issues in a historical trajectory.”80 As memory is introduced to the present, its application frames “the context in which the audiences see themselves in their own time.”81 Lincoln is imagined in a way that turns Obama’s potential weaknesses into political strengths. Obama forges what Howard Schuman calls a “looking-glass perception” of the past, or what Schwartz elaborates as the “tendency to see our own thoughts and values in others,” thus revisiting the meaning of the past “while creating the perception that no change has occurred.”82 Obama’s translation of leadership is a decentered approach that focuses on the energy of speech not merely as a distraction from policy leadership but as a prerequisite for effectively achieving it.83

All three principles of Obama’s “change”—the expansion of collective freedom, the participation of citizens in the political process, and the importance of speech as the basis for political leadership—converge in crescendo at the conclusion of the announcement and the final appearance of Lincoln:

By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail. But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us a different future is possible.
He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us there is power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us there is power in hope. As Lincoln organized the forces arrayed against slavery, he was heard to say this: “Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought to battle through.” That is our purpose here today. That’s why I’m in this race. Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation.84

Obama’s veneration of Lincoln’s “House Divided” speech and Lincoln’s role in history requires that he appropriate and also abandon the original intention of Lincoln’s words. In this republican vision of change, Lincoln’s cause was expanding freedom through the varied political interests of the Republican Party, an achievement born from collective cooperation and Lincoln’s leadership through “words” and “conviction.” Gone are Lincoln’s original partisan tone85 and reference to a “disciplined, proud and pampered enemy.”86 By reversing the temporal flow, Obama casts Lincoln in the philosophy of change: While Lincoln spoke to an occasion in the present recalling the recent emergence of the Republican Party against “the formidable slave power,”87 Obama speaks to the present, using Lincoln’s words as a model for the future: “That’s our purpose here today,” he clearly states. Within the text’s emphasis on political unrest, the memory of Lincoln moves Obama beyond mere electoral-prospect and into a larger frame wherein his campaign represents the genesis of reconstituting the political interests of the twenty-first century. It is also appropriately the next phase of expanding collective freedom through “change.” As Lincoln the Orator emerges as the dominant memory in Obama’s announcement speech, it is the candidate himself who undergoes a discursive alteration and transition: from inexperienced outsider to accomplished leader, and a justifiably rhetorical candidate required for the moment.

Conclusion

Barack Obama’s presidential announcement speech introduced a discursive definition of change that fit the situational constraints of the early 2008 campaign. Remembrance of Lincoln was both a strategy for Obama to historically define change and to draw favorable comparisons to his qualities of leadership. Divided by history, these are two of a kind. Responding to claims of being unprepared for office, Obama’s Lincoln is strategically imagined as a figure motivating public participation in the political process. The republican memory of Lincoln allows Obama to craft a historical analogy while suppressing traits or expectations that might overshadow Obama’s abilities and known quantities. For example, Obama’s Lincoln hovers over a pre-presidential space (both physical and temporal) in the “House Divided” speech but possesses qualities that, when melded with the activities of engaged citizens, eventually yield the “change” attributed to Lincoln’s presidency. Lincoln’s relevant tools to overcome those challenges are, in kind, limited to Obama’s known qualities. Indeed, by crafting a definition of change predicated on public involvement and rhetorical inspiration, Obama ensured at the outset that any future victory or setback
would be shared together. Under Obama’s original definition of “change,” his role as advocate and campaigner fulfill the expectations of rhetorical leadership advanced in the 2007 announcement speech.

In response to cultural uncertainties in electing the nation’s first African American president, Obama’s Lincoln fulfills a similar need. Obama’s change stressed the expansion collective freedom as a renewed involvement of citizens in the political process. Explaining this change, however, is a translation of time and topic. While Obama’s primary focus of the text revolves around political unrest and wrestling power from elite circles of influence, our understanding of the solution to the problem comes primarily from a memory of Lincoln expanding freedom to African Americans with the aid of public action. Obama’s race becomes relevant and addressed in the speech only by how he simultaneously remembers Lincoln’s advance of African American freedom in the application to a larger political context. Lincoln’s presence defies composite, political, and racial assumptions to be applicable to all. In turn, Obama’s trailblazing role as an African American candidate campaigning for an office of a monolithic racial history is also applicable to all, as its primary motive rests in strategically dispensing with allegiances to party and demographics, and focusing instead on political unrest informed through the example of racial freedom. Acknowledging the importance of the former comes through reverence to the latter.

As Murphy argued in his analysis of Obama’s biblical invocations, Obama’s strategy was largely one of “assuring supporters that even the unlikely overcame. They did so by joining together and, as powerless as they seemed at first, they moved the arc of history.” Just as Murphy argued Obama’s choice to extend “the Exodus tradition into the Promised Land, declining to play Moses and embodying Joshua” was ultimately a keen rhetorical choice, this essay presages Obama’s move to the biblical tradition in certain contexts by highlighting strategies derived from the republican tradition utilized to address prevalent constraints of his entrance to the campaign.

Though the braided strands of republican philosophy and memory of Lincoln that inform Obama’s appeals are rich with rhetorical strategy, the 2007 announcement speech ultimately represents a starting point for appeals that soon gave way to more expansive political visions. His victory speech following the Iowa caucuses, for example, introduced the equally important complement of “hope” to “change” while maintaining the same narrative arc through national history, recalling the past efforts of “colonists” who “[rose] up against an empire,” “the greatest of generations to free a continent and heal a nation,” and “young women and young men to sit at lunch counters and brave fire hoses and march through Selma and Montgomery for freedom’s cause.” Obama’s speech following the New Hampshire primary brought a new face of change again, this time with the phrase, “Yes, we can.” Again, the essence of change was expanded to include “slaves and abolitionists,” “immigrants” who “struck out from distant shores,” and “workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot.” Finally, coming full circle from candidate to presumptive nominee, Obama returned to the expansive evolution of change in his address in Saint Paul, Minnesota. After critiquing Senator John McCain by listing, in the style of anaphora,
a train of policy positions prefaced with the charge “It’s not change,” Obama provides a lasting image of change born from challenge:

So it was for that band of patriots who declared in a Philadelphia hall the formation of a more perfect union, and for all those who gave on the fields of Gettysburg and Antietam their last full measure of devotion to save that same union. So it was for the greatest generation that conquered fear itself, and liberated a continent from tyranny, and made this country home to untold opportunity and prosperity. So it was for the workers who stood out on the picket lines, the women who shattered glass ceilings, the children who braved a Selma bridge for freedom’s cause. So it has been for every generation that faced down the greatest challenges and the most improbable odds to leave their children a world that’s better and kinder and more just. And so it must be for us.92

One step closer to securing his party’s nomination, Obama’s “change” morphed into a collective sense of expanding freedom and opportunity and resided almost exclusively with the participation of citizens in their own political life. Gone are overt references to Lincoln, or the “elite” republican emphasis on speech as the means of defining and evaluating credentials for political leadership. Indeed, the memory of Lincoln was an essential, conciliatory, and safe public memory to introduce Obama’s campaign but soon gave way to a recurring narrative arc that both privileged the activities of engaged and dispossessed citizens past and also allowed Obama to expand the history of change to resonate with various audiences addressed throughout the campaign.93

Within this framework, Obama’s attempt to renegotiate presumptions of leadership and to broaden the historical lineage of change invites further consideration. Rhetorical scholars should investigate the broader circulation of Obama’s unconventional conception of rhetorical leadership, particularly among candidates perceived as unseasoned or otherwise unconventional. Moreover, scholars should consider how this rhetoric of change might create self-imposed constraints when translated to the construction and implementation of public policy as president. Finally, observers may also uncover the opportunities and limitations of combining “elite” and “vernacular” republican frameworks to overcome cultural hurdles through the strategic use of public memory. In this, rhetors continue the task of reconstituting public and political identities—a rich process always open to change.

Notes


Obama’s lack of experience was seen as a positive good by Joe Klein. See Klein, “Barack Obama Isn’t Not Running For President,” *Time*, June 5, 2006, 26.


Of respondents polled, the primary reason for not voting for Obama was his lack of experience; less than one tenth of those polled at the time of Obama’s announcement speech voiced a proclivity to vote for Obama because of his race, while even less (4%) voiced hesitation to support Obama because of race. *PEW Research Center for the People and the Press*, “As Campaign Moves Into High Gear, Voters Remains in Neutral,” February 23, 2007, http://www.people-press.org/2007/02/23/voters-remain-in-neutral-as-presidential-campaign-moves-into-high-gear/.


Ibid., 213.


The parody Web site *Jib-Jab* gave viewers a summary of the 2008 campaign by lampooning Obama’s frequent use of the term. In the production, Obama rides a unicorn across a rainbow while proclaiming the benefits of “the change we must change to the change we hold dear.” *Jib-Jab*, “Time for Some Campaignin’,” July 16, 2006, http://sendables.jibjab.com/originals/time_for_some_campaignin.


Ibid., 96.

Ibid., 129 and 107.


Ibid., 135.

Ibid., 135.

Obama,” Official Announcement.”

Ibid.

Ibid.

Hariman, *The Political Style*, 129.

Ibid., 129.


Hariman, *The Political Style*, 102.


Ibid., 17.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.
Arguably, Lincoln the Orator is a more precise vision born from the broader archetype of Lincoln that Peterson called the “Man of the People.” In Peterson’s words, the “Man of the People” image “celebrated Lincoln’s faith in democracy, his shrewdness as a popular leader, his uncanny reading of the public mind, and his ability to inspire trust in people.” These traits are evident in Obama’s address, but his announcement address maintains a consistent focus on Lincoln’s inspirational leadership through oratory. See Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 31.


Hariman, *Political Style*, 102.


Hariman, *Political Style*, 111.


Ibid.


Hariman, *Political Style*, 102.


Hariman, *Political Style*, 111.


Ibid.

Ibid., emphasis added.


Ibid.


Pfau, “The House that Abe Built,” 634.


Ibid., 402.


Obama returned to Lincoln in several campaign speeches during the 2008 contest, invoking the sixteenth president on issues ranging from labor regulation, veteran affairs, to public education. Though many of these comments were often cursory compared to the official announcement speech, it is telling that Obama’s speech on election night in Grant Park jumped past the antebellum memory of Lincoln to borrow a theme from the first inaugural
address in comments directed toward Republicans: “As Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, ‘We are not enemies, but friends . . . though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.’ And to those Americans whose support I have yet to earn—I may not have won your vote, but I hear your voices, and I need your help, and I will be your President too.” Considering that Obama chose not to rely on Lincoln for his Democratic National Convention address in Denver, readers might further question how a memory of Lincoln carried multiple uses for Obama, particularly in contexts wherein he stressed leadership and bipartisanship. Intending to strike the appropriate bipartisan tone for the Grant Park speech, David Axelrod advised speechwriter Jon Favreau, “Figure out a good Lincoln quote to bring it all together.” See Barack Obama, “Address in Chicago Accepting Election as the 44th President of the United States,” November 4, 2008, in The American Presidency Project, eds. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=84750; Axelrod as quoted in Evan Thomas, “Obama Looks Lincoln,” Newsweek, November 14, 2008, http://www.newsweek.com/obama-looks-lincoln-85439.