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Pamela Taivassalo

Speakers' Corner

President Barack Hussein Obama

Kristina Leon:

In the programme today: President Barack Hussein Obama in his inaugural address. Our specialist and political rhetoric Doctor Nick Turnbull from Manchester University. Meet Daniel Edmundson from the Debating Society at Parris Wood High School.

This is Speaker's Corner.

Dr Nick Turnbull:

I'm Doctor Nick Turnbull and today we are going to talk about Barack Obama's [inaugural address](#), his speech to the nation when he was installed as the president of the United States of America in Washington D.C on January 20th 2009.

President Barack Obama:

I stand here today humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust you've bestowed, mindful of the sacrifices borne by our ancestors.

Dr Nick Turnbull:

It's a fantastic speech I think, underrated by some. It was a very important occasion of course, the first non-white, the first mixed race person to be elected President of the United States. So standing on that platform in front of possibly millions of people and speaking to the whole nation on television, and incredible sense of occasion and achievement. And in that he represents himself, the success of the whole Civil Rights movement from Martin Luther King and before of that acceptance of the African American population. I think Obama is the model of a great orator. He's so interesting because he revives this tradition of Martin



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Luther King, of speakers like Churchill and so on, of creating a sense of grandeur. When he speaks he has a beautiful baritone pitch and he modulates the pitch of his voice in a very melodic style of speaking. He also moves the tempo around to create emphasis at different times, it's like being drawn through a piece of music. Really is almost musical the way he speaks, so it's never boring, it's never robotic.

There are familiar cadences and crescendos, and pauses and rushes. But always slightly varied, so the audience is taken along. He has lots of passion, but he doesn't exaggerate too much, less than Martin Luther King because he's the president he has to have a gravitas, an authority. But he does this perfectly well judged I think. He generates not just authority, but a warmth and sincerity which allow the audience to feel empathy with him. And also to trust him. Even his political opponents admitted how well he spoke, in fact they attacked him for being too good as though perhaps he's performing a trick. But in this inaugural address it's very important that he's speaking to the American people at the time of the financial crisis in 2008.

He doesn't give a whole lot of policy prescriptions, what he does is he speaks to their values and he speaks to their history. And their history of work and successful economic production, so he gives metaphors. He talks about work in sweat shops in the past, farms, the settlers of the West, the suffering of the African slaves. He talks about the bravery of soldiers in great battles. Work is the key to overcoming the crisis. And he gives themes that people know, that they can draw on which will inspire them. Inspire them to get to work. And to rebuild jobs and the foundation of their economy.

President Barack Obama:

We understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those that prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things -- some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor -- who have carried us up the long rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.

For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops, and settled the West, endured the lash of the whip, and plowed the hard



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earth. For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg, Normandy and Khe Sahn.

Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions, greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.

This is the journey we continue today. ... Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

Dr Nick Turnbull:

He rejects those who doubt the capacity of the government to affect change which is very important at that time. And he says their memories are short but they've forgotten what this country has already done, what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, necessity to courage. The ground has shifted beneath their feet, he calls their arguments stale and they no longer apply. So he projects this ethos, this radiation of confidence. Great speakers can do this I think. They're acting, when you give a speech, the key thing is to think it's not me, I'm acting as me giving the speech. Free yourself from your own insecurities or maybe your own nervousness of being in front of a crowd and be an actor. Be yourself, acting yourself if you like. That way you can exaggerate some features you may not feel you possess.

Another resource Obama gives for tackling the crisis is emotional resources, what we call pathos. So again he gives them concrete examples of things in the past. So he says the kindness to aid a stranger when the levees break and that refers to the hurricane in New Orleans and people's charity towards their neighbours. He talks about the selflessness of workers who'd rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job and that refers to private firms where people had sacrifice their hours and their salary so that the others employees could stay in their position. He talks about a fire fighter's courage to storm a stairwell filled with smoke, which is about the September 11th crisis. So he tells a story and here's a great lesson for speaking. I think all great speeches tell a story that creates a narrative that enables the audience to see your point in a language that they understand.



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Kristina Leon:

In Parrs Wood High School in Manchester the Debating Society gathers every Tuesday. Our reporter Pamela Taivassalo paid them a visit.

Pamela Taivassalo:

This Will I am with Yes I can. And I'm standing here with Daniel Edmundson of Parrs Wood Debating Society.

Daniel Edmundson:

I think Obama's rhetoric is very good, I mean almost spot on. I think having read his speeches and we read a speech by Obama in English Language recently and analyzed it for rhetoric devices and you know when you actually take a step back and look at what he's saying the amount of rhetoric he uses is really in depth and it's very clever. And it's all very nuanced and subtle and that's what makes a really, really good public speech if there's a depth to it. And the way he manipulates language to persuade his audience or to get a point across is very, very skilled. So I think he's a very good public speaker.

Kristina Leon:

And now, Doctor Nick Turnbull with a few tips on how to give a great speech.

Dr Nick Turnbull:

So depending on who you're speaking to it changes the delivery. If you're in a debate trying to get the audience to come to your side, you need to speak with more emotion. Act yourself and you can add qualities that you bring from other people and invent your own personality, it's an opportunity actually to be different. In that way, you're not under scrutiny it's only the projection of you who are that is under scrutiny. And you can make that whatever you want.

Kristina Leon:

In Speaker's Corner today you've heard: Doctor Nick Turnbull, Daniel Edmundson and President Barack Obama.

This programme was produced by Pamela Taivassalo, Ingela Håkansson was our sound engineer and my name is Kristina Leon.