

OBAMA AND THE AMERICAN PROJECT

By Adam I. P. Smith

It has been less than a hundred days into the Obama presidency, and already some of those who were his strongest supporters are showing early signs of disillusionment. Yet even his detractors acknowledge that he is a politician of unusual intellectual depth and exceptional powers of expression. His two books, *Dreams From My Father* (1995), a personal memoir-cum-meditation on race and identity in post-Civil Rights America, and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), in form a more conventional politician's prospectus, are both beautifully written. What's more, they were written by Obama himself. This alone probably qualifies him as the most literary president since Woodrow Wilson or Teddy Roosevelt. On the basis of these books and the series of remarkable speeches he gave during the course of the presidential campaign – especially a speech on race that he gave in Philadelphia in the wake of the furore over his pastor Jeremiah Wright – Obama has been hailed as that rare specimen, a politician who thinks seriously and systematically about ideas. Of the many sub-groups in American society who have been able to claim the new president as their own, one of the most vocal and, it has to be said, misty-eyed in their enthusiasm, has been the academic Left. The *New York Review of Books*, the house journal of intellectual-liberal opinion, has been filled with admiring analyses of Obama's words. And, in a recent lecture, the eminent intellectual historian James T. Kloppenberg described Obama's academic milieu during his time at the Harvard Law School in the early 1990s in order to suggest that the new president's world view has been decisively shaped by the revived progressive Pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Michael Sandel.² Kloppenberg thinks that what he sees as Obama's rejection of relativism and post-structuralism is the key to his approach to practical political problems. (Incidentally, much the same case could be made of the intellectual inclinations of Bill Clinton – he invited Rorty to special seminars in the White House in the late 90s – but Clinton's stained reputation makes him a less-than-ideal exemplar of the political merits of philosopher-kingship, still less of a revived American social democratic tradition.) High hopes, then, rest on the capacity of Obama's supposed intellectual framework to provide an effective guide to policy and political action.

Words matter a great deal in presidential politics, especially words which express a coherent and consistent conception of the core political problem of the moment. Those leaders who have been most successful in re-shaping the political landscape have been those (Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Reagan) who have been able to do that. So it matters what Obama's underlying philosophy is, and it matters even more how he expresses it. So do Obama's speeches and writings offer insights into a coherent view of the world?

A natural place to look might be his inaugural address. Like Fourth of July orations in the early years of the Republic, inaugural addresses have traditionally served as a kind of secular sermon, reminding the faithful of their duties, acknowledging sins and calling for renewal. At their best, past inaugurals have helped to shape the popular image of a presidency, even to define an era: think of John F. Kennedy's 'ask not what your country can do for you' or Franklin Roosevelt's 'the only thing we have to fear is [dramatic pause] fear itself'. At his best, the new president certainly stands comparison with any of the great orators who have occupied the White House before him, but in his inaugural speech, he pulled some of his rhetorical punches. There were purple passages to be sure, and some of the familiar Obama rhetorical devices (such as the repetition of 'on this day') were there, but he did not quite reach the poetic heights that he struck in some of his campaign speeches or in his election night address. Even so, the echoes of past inaugurals could be heard in almost every line. Like Thomas Jefferson, the first president to take office after a bitterly contested election, Obama spoke the language of unity, promising to

² James T. Kloppenburg, paper delivered to the Seminar in American History at the Institute for Historical Research, University of London, 19 March, 2009.

transcend partisanship, or, as he put it, the ‘petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for too long have strangled our politics’. Like Lincoln, who spoke of ‘the mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land’, Obama heard the ‘fallen heroes of Arlington whisper through the ages’. There were Lincolnian echoes, too, in his appeal to ‘choose our better history’ (Lincoln had spoken in 1861 of the ‘better angels of our nature’). Like Ronald Reagan, he spoke the language of renewal (or ‘remaking’, as Obama put it) and of the strength of America resting on the faith and determination of the people. And while no post-Cold War president could plausibly compete with Kennedy’s appeal to the citizens of the world to ask not what America could do for them but what together they could do for the freedom of man, there was, nevertheless, a definite Kennedy-esque quality to Obama’s appeal to those watching from beyond America’s borders. His pledge ‘to the people of poor nations’ to ‘work alongside you to make your farms flourish’ echoed Kennedy’s words in 1961: ‘to those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves’.

Ultimately, Obama’s greatest political challenge is a domestic one. It is conceivable that Roosevelt’s speech in 1933, more so than any other inaugurals, inspired Obama’s address. The central theme was the same: the nation ‘calls for action’ – a phrase that both men used. Both emphasised that Americans’ capacities were undiminished. ‘Our distress comes from no failure of substance’, said FDR, while Obama insisted that ‘our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began’. Early in his speech, Obama blamed the weakening of the economy on the ‘greed and irresponsibility of some’ which, if it did not quite have the Biblical passion of FDR’s condemnation of the ‘practices of the unscrupulous money changers’, at least nodded in that direction. And if the new president struck a more down-beat tone than he often has in the past, undoubtedly the reason was that, like FDR, he wanted to remind his fellow citizens that the road ahead would be a tough one.

Such echoes are to be expected. They are as familiar, yet as essential to the ritual, as the flags and the singing of *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee*. But was there any one phrase which will become indelibly associated with the age of Obama? The most likely candidate is his stinging reposte to the foreign policy of the outgoing president: ‘we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals’. That one phrase doesn’t quite have the poetic resonance of some of the more famous inaugural sound bites of the past, but it was indicative of the stunning repudiation of the past eight years which ran through the speech. Of course the attack was not couched in the language of the campaign trail but, when the new President told the nation that it was time to put away childish things, an unmistakable blow landed on his blinking, pretzel-eating, mountain-biking predecessor who was always in bed by nine. No previous president has been so utterly dismissive of a former inhabitant of the White House – even Herbert Hoover in 1933 did not have to sit through quite such an effective demolition of his presidential style as did George W. Bush.

It seems to me, though, that the real significance of the inaugural address – and, I would argue, of Obama’s speeches and writings more generally – is not their beautifully turned phrases, nor even their drastic repudiation of the previous administration, but something rather sterner. Through the star-spangled rhetoric one can clearly see where Obama is located among the various strands of American political culture. Political rhetoric in the United States has historically been caught between two competing impulses: to celebrate the ‘city on a hill’ as a place with a Providential mission to redeem mankind, or to see it as an ideal to be continually sought, probably never to be perfectly attained. Many presidents have confidently articulated the first of these interpretations of the meaning of America. Few have so emphatically identified themselves with the second as President Obama. The most striking thing about his inaugural address was his willingness, like a Puritan preacher invoking the prophet Jeremiah, to make Americans confront the idea that somehow they were all culpable, they had all strayed from the path. It may be that a good guide to the Obama administration will be his formidable assertion that ‘our collective failure to make hard choices’ has contributed to America’s problems. FDR

did not say this in 1933. Reagan certainly didn't in 1981. In this most fundamental respect, Obama's inaugural, like so many of his other speeches, reveals his debt to Abraham Lincoln.

There has been no shortage of commentary analysing the influence of Lincoln on Obama – even Radio 3 chose to devote most of an edition of *Night Waves* to the subject one evening in February, prompted by the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth. Most of the focus of this chatter has been on Lincoln's supposed skills as a political leader, making Doris Kearns Goodwin the fashionable authority of the moment. She is the author of a timely book called *Team of Rivals* which argues that one of Lincoln's most brilliant moves was to appoint his deadly rival for his party's nomination Secretary of State. Following Lincoln in that particular respect may or may not prove to be a smart move – only time will tell. But it seems to me that such speculation rather misses the more important point about Lincoln's apparent influence on Obama.

Lincoln's conception of the 'meaning' of America was rooted in a blend of Enlightenment rationalism and a Calvinist sense of Providence. For Lincoln, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, with its radical Lockean assumptions about the contractual basis of political legitimacy and, above all, its resounding claim (or 'self-evident truth') that 'all men are created equal', was elevated to the status of secular scripture. One of Lincoln's great contributions to American nationalism, for example in his Gettysburg Address, was to offer a compelling origin myth in which the Union was 'born' and 'conceived in liberty' – with the Declaration of Independence as its ideological foundation. From this premise, Lincoln argued that America had a universal significance as the 'last best hope of earth'; the 'fate of liberty', not just for Americans, but for the 'whole family of man' was at stake in the American experiment. But what makes Lincoln a truly extraordinary figure, and a particularly revealing inspiration for Obama, is that this universal conception of America's redemptive promise was combined with a breathtakingly honest assessment of the fallibility of human beings and the impossibility of certainty. As the death toll mounted, Lincoln – an increasingly brooding and lonely figure – became more and more convinced that the Civil War was God's punishment for the sin of slavery. Lincoln shared with the majority of northern Protestant ministers in the Civil War a conviction that the nation was a moral entity, that slavery was sinful, that an interventionist God had a stake in the outcome of the war. Yet while these propositions led most Northern clergymen to the self-confident assertion that God was on their side, Lincoln remained far more humble and uncertain in the face of what he called Divine Providence. What is truly remarkable about the religious dimension of Lincoln's conception of the American nation is that it was utterly without self-righteousness, always alert to its moral failings, almost obsessed with the dangers of hubris.

Lincoln's remarkable second inaugural address, delivered in March 1865, with the war almost won, is the ultimate expression of this sense of humility. In it, Lincoln acknowledged that the North was as culpable as the South for the sin of slavery and speculated that God gives to 'both North and South this terrible war' as retribution for their collective guilt. He continued:

Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, [...] so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether'.

The closing line of Obama's inaugural – 'Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end' – seems to encapsulate a very Lincolnian idea of America as a work in progress, and simultaneously hint at the moral complexity in the task of governing which lies ahead. And in a campaign speech last year, Obama spoke of the need to 'talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can

never act with the certainty that God is on our side'. Given Obama's well-known admiration for Lincoln, the echo of the 1865 second inaugural in that passage cannot have been accidental.

On the evidence of his speeches and his books, what Obama takes from Lincoln, then, is not so much his practical tips on managing political rivals, but rather his predecessor's brilliant combination of optimism and pessimism – his ability to identify the core ethical choices that need to be faced, his willingness to believe that they can be tackled, and also his profound humility about the imperfectability of man, and, especially, of nations. Professor Kloppenberg may be right in his imaginative reconstruction of Obama's intellectual influences at Harvard, but what we know for sure, on the basis of Obama's own testimony, is that it was while he was a law student that he first encountered the twentieth-century liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and it seems to me that what Obama and Lincoln share is a distinctively Niebuhrian view of the world. In an interview with David Brooks of the *New York Times* during the presidential campaign, Obama offered a deft summary of Niebuhr's philosophy: 'There's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. I take away [from Niebuhr] the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism'. Niebuhr called this 'Christian realism'. He rejected the liberal conception of progress, and with it the arrogance that assumes a monopoly of virtue. 'No group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace and justice', wrote Niebuhr in what was probably his best-known work *The Irony of American History* (1952); yet, this awareness of the inevitability of sin should not give rise to what Obama once called a 'Christian pessimism which becomes an irresponsibility'. Niebuhr's vision of the world is shot through with irony and ambiguity; he is profoundly aware of our own fallibility and the dangers of the conceit that any one, or any nation, has a monopoly of virtue. But that should never be an excuse for inaction, still less for complacency. In *Audacity of Hope*, Obama confesses at one point that he sometimes wonders 'whether men and women in fact are capable of learning from history', yet the book is also filled with lines like 'yet difficult as the work may seem, I believe we have an obligation...' – a very Lincolnian, or indeed Niebuhrian, formulation.

This president is no less convinced of the importance of the promise of America than any of those who have stood in his place before him. Yet he appears to stand in a political tradition of imagining America which is not only starkly different from his immediate predecessor, but which marks him out as unusual among American politicians in general. Lincoln found ways of expressing, in strikingly clear language, his complex understanding of the nation's ethical choices, and Obama seems capable of doing the same. Whether such self-awareness is a source of political success is, as yet, an open question.

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Senior Lecturer in U.S. History
History Department, UCL

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