

Nov 04, 2016 by [Rob Asghar](#)

A New Chapter, a New Dialogue ^[1]

Newly minted President Obama offered an address this morning that can be viewed on many layers. An inaugural address is primarily a message to Americans and secondarily a message to the governments and peoples of the world. But in 2009, more than in most years, this address is a message from Americans to a global village about what America is, what America seeks to be, and how America intends to work with that global village.

As a longtime speechwriter and as a political commentator with Pakistani and Muslim roots, I'd like to offer some perspective on the public diplomacy-related import – and export – of Obama's remarks.

A UCLA researcher reported several years ago that, of the impact that a public speaker's words have on an audience, only 7% comes from the actual words uttered. About 55% comes from the speaker's physical presence, and 38% comes from the speaker's vocal command.

In that sense, let us recognize that much of Obama's appeal is what we see and how it resonates – a charismatic presence who speaks with assurance, a steady leader in command of himself and his environment. He represents a reconciliation of ethnic rivalries within his own being, a human embodiment of bridges that have been built and of bridges that can still be built. A great speaker's presence is inextricable from his words. Obama may well go down as the greatest speaker of this generation, and it has more to do with his presence than his words. Yes, I know this can sound like some of the Messianic propaganda that drives Obama detractors to drink, but his ability to inspire citizens here and overseas bears out in statistics and in the streets.

Having said that, let's look at the 7% of his address that his words constituted. He began by thanking President Bush, then he propped the ex-president in front of him as a rhetorical punching bag, speed-bagging and jabbing and hooking Bush's eight-year domestic and foreign policy legacy and announcing that things would be different. But again, Obama's irenic presence, and his willingness to embrace a rival, softens the immense pressure of his blows. It is a trait that could help him considerably in his PD work.

At the level of wordsmithing, I believe Obama's speech was not as powerful as his nomination acceptance speech last summer, but it was as effective as he needed it to be. I'll wager that these are the words that are most urgently relevant to American PD efforts:

As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations.... [O]ur power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint....

We will begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people, and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan. With old friends and former foes, we will work tirelessly to lessen the nuclear threat, and roll back the specter of a warming planet. We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense, and for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.

For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus -- and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West: Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

Here, we can see great intentionality in the manner in which he lists Muslims right after Christians as being a part of America. He mentions not only respect for Muslims, but a seeking of mutual interest, which signals that he will expect them to join him in improving our world. And perhaps his most compelling statement in the entire speech involves his signal to America-bashing leaders overseas that he will thwart their efforts to scapegoat the U.S. in order to maintain their own hold on power. That has broad ramifications for how the U.S. will relate to the Muslim world.

A few months ago, Obama's mega-rally in Berlin was used against him by critics who argued that any candidate who has the foreign seal of approval isn't fit to govern the United States. Americans pondered that charge momentarily, and his political momentum dwindled. They then rejected that charge. The result is today's inaugural address, which represents a new spirit of PD dialogue between America and a world that still is mesmerized by this nation.
