

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Mount Everest in Cairo ^[1]

It may come to be known as the “new beginnings” speech. The speech that Barack Obama delivered today at Cairo University was probably not his best speech, but it may be his most important and most widely disseminated ever. The U.S. government distributed it immediately in many languages, it was broadcast live in its entirety by Al Jazeera and the other networks of the Arab world, and the White House and State Department used social media such as Facebook to extend its reach and impact. It could be the most consequential presidential speech to a foreign audience in history, certainly since John Kennedy spoke to Berliners in 1963.

What made it so? Unlike other speeches by traveling U.S. presidents, this one tried to reset world politics in a fundamental way, even as it introduced its themes protesting that “no single speech can overcome years of mistrust.” David Gergen, communications advisor to Reagan and Bill Clinton, was clearly in awe of Obama's ambition: he told CNN beforehand it was a “Mt. Everest of a speech” in terms of how much it was trying to accomplish.

Will it change hearts and minds in predominantly Muslim countries? I think it at least will create conditions for a new beginning in America's relations with the Islamic world. Obama spoke knowledgeably about Islam, about Muslims in America and about America's ties with the Muslim countries.

Obama's obvious personal connection to Islam — his father's family, his childhood years in Indonesia — added credibility to Obama's call for tolerance and dialogue. The list of issues presented (at times, more like a professor than a politician) did not neglect any of the political-social realities: violent extremism, Palestine and Israel, nuclear non-proliferation, democracy and human rights, religious freedom, women's rights.

Broader engagement between the United States and the Muslim world. Not just oil and gas. This could indeed be a new beginning.

Published in Foreign Policy Association's Blog: "Public Diplomacy: The World Affairs Blog Network", co-hosted by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.
