

# A Critical Analysis of Barack Obama's Rhetorical Strategies: Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency

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## CHAPTER ONE Introduction and Rationale

The major theme in the 2008 presidential campaign was all about changing the trajectory of the United States of America set by outgoing President George W. Bush. Most candidates in the Democratic and the Republican Parties ran on the slogan “Change” because the American public yearned for a leader who would be able to recover the country from the damage wrought by the eight years of the Bush administration.

Critical incidents facing President Bush exposed his lack of leadership. At first, the nation approved of Bush's handling of his job as the president, especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks. According to a *Gallup/CNN/USA Today* poll during September 21 and 22, Bush's approval rating was about 90 percent, which was the highest rating in the presidential history (Newport, 2001, n.p.). However, the quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan caused by President Bush's “War on Terror” policy significantly undermined public confidence in his ability to manage government. According to The Washington Post, more than four in ten believed that the Iraq war could escalate into this generation's version of the Vietnam War (Milbank & Deane, 2005, n.p.). Furthermore, after the devastating catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the Bush

administration was slammed for its belated response to the crisis. Consequently, President Bush's popularity had dwindled completely toward the end of his second term. Worse, the eight years of the Bush administration had led to widespread public distrust of government. In view of this, all candidates in the 2008 presidential election were hard pressed to persuade Americans into renewing their faith in politics.

*Survey USA* conducted interviews with 300,000 voters in November 2006, asking them how they would vote in the 2008 presidential election between Republican Senator John McCain (Arizona) and Barack Obama, then Democrat Senator from Illinois. The interview results showed that McCain received 510 electoral votes and Obama got only 28 electoral votes. However, it turned out that Obama won a landslide victory with 365 electoral votes and became the 44<sup>th</sup> US president. When Obama announced his candidacy for the presidency in February 2007, he was a relatively unknown politician, having only briefly served in the Illinois Senate and the U.S. Senate. Not surprisingly, rival candidates frequently cited Obama's lack of political experience to discredit his qualifications for President. However, Obama overcame this uphill election battle and clinched the presidential seat.

The chief factor in Obama's victory was the vision of a renewed America he projected through hundreds of campaign speeches. His rhetorical prowess has absorbed public attention ever since he delivered a keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention (DNC). There is no doubt that Obama's mastery of public speech greatly helped him to climb his way up from a little-known state senator to the President in just four years.

## II. Rhetorical Presidency—The Importance of Rhetoric in American Politics

It is almost a truism that rhetoric is an integral part of any democratic society as any rational policy decision presupposes vigorous debate and discussion among its constituents and/or their representatives. As Robert Rowland (2008),

an eminent scholar in American public address, points out, “democracy might be understood as the ‘rhetorical form of government’” (p. 2).

While rhetoric has been studied in a myriad of fields from ancient Greece to the present, it is now studied mainly in the fields of communication and English studies at least in the United States. Presidential rhetoric is a major area of research in the former discipline. The power of a political leader depends in no small part on her or his ability to persuade citizens through the effective use of symbols. As communication scholar Leroy Dorsey (2008) succinctly puts it, “as the rhetorical leader of the nation, the president seeks to lead through words” in order to “inspire its citizenry” (p. 132). Scholars of presidential rhetoric are primarily interested in gaining insight into how the president's verbal and nonverbal messages affect people's attitudes, beliefs, and action. For instance, David Zarefsky (2004), a professor emeritus at Northwestern University, illustrated how George W. Bush depicted the two plane crashes into the World Trade Center as an act of war, not as a crime. The “war on terror” metaphor in turn served as a strong rationale for justifying the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, countries which had allegedly “harbored” terrorists. In other words, the metaphor allowed the president to defend the military invasion of the two countries as an act of self-defense and to denounce any opposition to it as unpatriotic.

The skillful use of rhetoric is critically important to win presidential elections as well. In efforts to increase voters' interest and garner their support, presidential candidates deliver countless speeches, appear in televised presidential debates, and broadcast numerous campaign ads. Furthermore, in the wake of technological developments, people can now obtain an infinite amount of information about the presidential campaign from the Internet. They can also easily watch video clips of candidates' speeches and read their transcripts online. As a result, it has become increasingly important for candidates to choose their words with care and to craft persuasive messages for American citizens.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Fantasy Theme Analysis as a Method of Rhetorical Criticism: Its Origin and Development

This paper uses FTA as a methodological framework to investigate Barack Obama's speeches. This method of rhetorical criticism was invented and developed by the late Ernest G. Bormann (1925–2008), a former professor of speech communication at the University of Minnesota. In a nutshell, it “is designed to provide insight into the shared worldview of groups” (Foss, 2009, p. 97). The method has been applied to many subject matters ranging from the Clinton–Lewinsky affair to Japanese cartoons and teen magazines (for example, see Adams and Hill, 1991; Garner, Sterk, and Adams, 1998; Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne, 2001). As rhetoric scholar James Jasinski (2001) puts it, FTA is regarded as “one of the most popular methods of rhetorical criticism over the past 25 years” (p.246).

The goal of this chapter is two-fold. First, it fleshes out the key elements of FTA and introduces the reader to major case studies on the methodology. The chapter then explains how FTA will be used to analyze Obama's speeches in this thesis.

## I. Fantasy Theme

According to Bormann (1985a), the primary goal of FTA is “to find evidence that a group of people shares a fantasy” (p. 6). The term “fantasy” here does not have the same connotation as it does in everyday usage (i.e., something imaginary, unreal, or fancy). Rather, it involves “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need” (Bormann, 1985a, p. 5).

The fantasy theme refers to the content of a dramatizing message through which such interpretation of events is accomplished in communication (Foss,

2009, p. 98). It can be a word, phrase, statement, or paragraph that tells a story about a group's experience and serves to shape the experience into social reality within the group. Just like film scripts, fantasy themes consist of three elements: setting themes, character themes, and action themes. As Foss (2009) explains:

Statements that depict where the action is taking place are setting themes. They not only name the scene of the action but also describe the characteristics of that scene. Character themes describe the agents or actors in the drama, ascribe characteristics and qualities to them, and assign motives to them. . . . Action themes, which also can be called plotlines, deal with the actions in which the characters in the drama engage. (p.99)

For example, Dobris and White-Mills (2006) examined the *What to Expect* series, or childcare manuals, and isolated the six fantasy themes: 1-2) you can do it/you can do it with his help, 3-4) don't worry/there is a lot to worry about, 5-6) listen to your instincts/listen to your doctor. These conflicting thematic pairs, they contend, "illustrate the position of women as incompetent even in what historically has been their presumed domain of expertise" (Dobris and White-Mills, 2006, p. 35).

## II. Fantasy Type

When a fantasy theme is repeated over time, it grows into a stock scenario. It allows members of a group to easily fit new events and experiences into a familiar pattern. Bormann (1985a) calls such a common plotline "a fantasy type" (p. 7). Put bluntly, a fantasy type means a repeated fantasy theme; more precisely, it refers to "a general scenario that covers several of the more concrete fantasy themes" (Bormann, Cragan, and Shields, 1994, p. 281). Consequently, frequent reference to a fantasy type may well signal that fantasy themes have been shared within a community (Bormann, 1985a, p. 7).

### III. Chaining Out

Chaining out is the process of building collective consciousness and solidifying group cohesion among individuals through the sharing of fantasy themes. Fantasy themes chain out through various channels, including but not limited to face-to-face conversation, speaker-audience transactions, radio programs, and television shows (Bormann, 1972, p. 398). According to Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf (1997), when people share fantasy themes, they come to interpret and react to messages in similar ways:

[W]hen a person dramatizes, others in the group may respond to the message by growing excited and expanding or adding to it. The tempo of the conversation quickens, others join in, and a chain reaction takes place. The members respond in an emotionally appropriate way (p. 255)

Moreover, when fantasy themes resonate beyond a particular group, they are said to be “chaining out” to a larger community. In her fantasy theme analysis of former President George W. Bush’s speeches on the war against Iraq, Okuda (2004) unveiled Bush’s conservative worldview that saw the world in terms of “good-versus-evil” and “us-versus-them” (p. 25). Given that 72 percent of Americans supported the war in Iraq right after the military invasion began in March 2003, the fantasy themes implicit in Bush’s speeches could be considered to have “chained out” throughout the nation.

### IV. Rhetorical Vision

When fantasy themes and types chain out in a given community, they constitute a rhetorical vision. Bormann, Knutson, and Musolf (1997) define rhetorical vision as “a unified putting-together of the various themes and types that gives the participants a broader view of things” (p. 281). Religion rooted in people’s lives is a typical example. As they share basically the same worldview, they become strong believers and devout adherents of the religion. In other

words, a motive for participating in a certain religion resides in its rhetorical vision.

A rhetorical vision is usually indexed by a keyword (e.g. feminism, terrorism), a slogan (e.g. Black Power, silence=death), and a label (e.g. the Cold War, the American dream) (Bormann, 1985a, p. 8; Bormann, 2001, p. 700). While some rhetorical visions last only for a short period, others deeply pervade “an individual's social reality in all aspects of living” (Bormann, 1985a, p. 8). According to Foss (2009), those who fully share a rhetorical vision form a rhetorical community and respond to messages in accordance with the vision (p. 100). The issue of abortion, for instance, is divided into two large rhetorical communities in American society: “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” Those who describe themselves as “pro-life” maintain that since a child is a gift from God, abortion is tantamount to murder. By contrast, those who identify as “pro-choice” claim that women have the right to control their own bodies. In their vision, a ban on abortion is nothing but a violation of women's right. Partly because both pro-choice and pro-life groups inhabit different worldviews, abortion is still a hot-bottom issue after decades of debate.

#### V. Fantasy Theme Analysis of Political Texts: Justification for a Text-Centered Approach

When applied to political texts, FTA serves two purposes. First, it aims to look into how political orators use imaginative language, tell stories, and present their visions in order to craft persuasive messages for their constituents. Second, it is designed to investigate how these messages lead to the building of group consciousness and the sharing of fantasies among their constituents. To discover the process of sharing group fantasies, “it matters how audience communicate” (St. Antoine, Althouse, and Ball, 2005, p. 216). Although it would be ideal to examine both political texts and audience reactions to them, detailed examination of a recurrent theme, plot structure, and persistent vision in a given

political text alone could yield valuable insight. In their study of the Bush administration's public discourse after September 11, West and Carey (2006) defend their text-centered approach to FTA:

The methodological focal point of this essay is where myth and narrative intersect. Reagan told America's story in different ways over different years, and embodied its values and history in his general narration of the myth of America. However, when the presidency chooses a particular narrative thread, made of a particularly potent American myth, and repeatedly targets this story, then the use of the fantasy theme method is warranted. (p. 383)

Page and Duffy (2009) adopt a similar methodological approach in analyzing campaign TV ads from candidates in the 2006 Missouri Senate race:

Although our rhetorical analysis did not seek to identify the creators' intent or the viewers' experience (collective intent and experience are not necessary to reading and understanding the rhetorical composition of these texts), its goals were to understand and assess the rhetorical visions of the candidates and describe the social reality the candidates are asking voters to embrace. (p. 131)

My approach to FTA is similar to West and Carey's and Page and Duffy's. By looking into Obama's several speeches, I seek to identify the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision Obama attempted to construct in his election campaign and during the first year of his presidency.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Literature Review on Barack Obama's Public Speeches

This chapter reviews previous studies that have been conducted to analyze Barack Obama's speeches. Most studies have concentrated on the analysis of



two speeches: his keynote address at the 2004 DNC and his “A More Perfect Union” speech on racial problems in March 2008. Although these studies are valuable in their own right, they stop short of discovering the common themes, narrative structures, and rhetorical visions running through Obama's speeches in the presidential election. It is my contention that Obama's rhetoric could be better understood by analyzing multiple speeches, looking into the themes he repeated over time, and illuminating the vision he put forth by way of public discourse.

#### I. Keynote Address at the DNC on July 24, 2004

It was his 2004 DNC keynote address at the Fleet Center in Boston that brought Obama, a little-known Illinois state senator at the time, to national prominence. The speech entitled “the Audacity of Hope” embraced diversity in the United States and called for a renewed commitment to American values and principles. As Rowland and Jones (2007b) note, “the speech has been widely praised as one of the most powerful and effective speeches of the last twenty-five years” (n.p.). Accordingly, it has received much scholarly attention in the discipline of communication.

Many communication scholars offer a positive assessment of Obama's keynote address. David Frank, a professor of communication at the University of Oregon, regards the keynote speech as historic because few, if any, black politicians had celebrated American values of equality and liberty “without sarcasm and qualification for many years” (Frank and McPhail, 2005, p. 578). He also suggests that Obama's quintessentially “post-racial” speech “has the potential of moving Americans beyond the complicity of racial division and toward coherent reconciliation” (Frank and McPhail, 2005, p. 572).

Along a different line, Rowland and Jones (2007a) maintain that Obama's keynote address succeeded in rejuvenating the liberal version of the American dream. As the nation has become more conservative since the Reagan

administration, the narrative of the American dream privileging individualism over communal responsibilities has also prevailed (Rowland and Jones, 2007a, p. 427). In view of this, Rowland and Jones (2007a) hail Obama's speech as "a key rhetorical turning point in American politics" (p. 442) on the grounds that it eloquently emphasized communitarian values and thereby recast the American dream from a conservative to a liberal story.

Similarly, Elahi and Cos (2005) contend that Obama sought to revitalize the American dream in his keynote address by infusing it with his own immigrant narrative. More specifically, he emphasized the importance of work and faith, or the materialistic and moralistic aspects of the American dream narrative, to reaffirm people's faith in the United States as a promised land. Importantly, by "[speaking] as and for the immigrant as an agent of renewal" (Elahi and Cos, 2005, p. 460), Obama positioned himself as a key figure in renewing his party and, ultimately, the entire nation.

To my knowledge, Mark McPhail, a professor at Miami University, is the only communication scholar to express a critical view of Obama's keynote address. He argues that unlike Al Sharpton's speech at the same convention and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Obama's speech failed to address racial problems still haunting American society. McPhail holds that due to its willful ignorance of the racial realities, "Obama's speech offers little hope for reconciling an America divided by racial difference and indifference" (Frank and McPhail, 2005, p. 572).

## II. "A More Perfect Union": Barack Obama's Speech on Racial Problems at the National Constitution Center on March 18, 2008.

With the advent of video sharing websites such as YouTube, campaign strategies on the Internet have become essential to winning a presidential election. As Thomas L. Dumm (2008), a professor of political science at Amherst College, observes, video clips have had "the most powerful impact on the 2008

campaign,” and “new and unexpected twists in campaign narratives have become, paradoxically, the new norm” (p. 317).

Obama's speech on race in Philadelphia was occasioned by the controversy over inflammatory comments from Reverend Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Excerpts from his past sermons, which contained such notorious remarks as “God damn America” and “Governments lie,” were first posted on several video-sharing websites and soon broadcast on TV over and over again. As the controversy heated up, Obama was forced into an uneasy position to castigate Wright's remarks while defending his long-term relationship with the pastor.

In an effort to quell the controversy, Obama took a risk and dared to address racial problems in American society head-on in a speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. The speech known as “A More Perfect Union” is considered one of Obama's most heralded speeches yet. Dumm (2008) suggests that Obama successfully portrayed himself as an embodiment of all races in his Philadelphia speech (p. 319). Obama's call for a post-racial America, he continues, made the speech not only one of the most important speeches of his campaign but also “perhaps the most important political speech since John Kennedy's in the 1960 presidential campaign” (Dumm, 2008, p. 318).

Similarly, Frank (2009) acclaims Obama for depicting the United States as an “imperfect but perfectible” nation in the “A More Perfect Union” speech (p. 190). He cautions against unfettered appraisal of the speech; for “a melancholic and fatalistic dimension to his thinking about America” is inconsistent with his message of hope (Frank, 2009, p. 190). Still, Frank (2009) acknowledges that the speech is “a masterpiece with small flaws” (p. 190).

Robert E. Terrill (2009), an associate professor of communication at Indiana University, argues that Obama positioned himself in the speech as an embodiment of double consciousness, i.e., as a son of a black African father and a white American mother (p. 365). Then his audience was invited to view his

biracial body as an icon of racial reconciliation and to speak and act in doubled ways to overcome divided politics (Terrill, 2009, p. 373). Terrill (2009) concludes that Obama's speech "encouraged groups with divergent backgrounds and experiences to see themselves as parts of something larger, to understand that... they were comparable, and thus able to sustain a provisional form of stranger relationality" (p. 375).

#### IV. Shortcomings of the Previous Studies

In addition to the above two speeches, a few other speeches by Obama have been analyzed in the field of communication studies (e.g. Ivie and Giner, 2009; Darsey, 2009; Murphy, 2009). However, the vast majority of previous studies single out just one of Obama's myriad campaign speeches, with the exception of Ivie and Giner (2009) and Darsey (2009). Although a close reading of a single speech is valuable in its own right, it is not suited to the discovery of the recurrent themes, narrative structures, and persistent visions that characterize Obama's rhetoric. As Obama (2007a) writes in his *Foreign Affairs* article, he regards "visionary leadership" as the most important qualification for a national leader (p. 2). Ivie and Giner (2008) and Darsey (2009), for their part, outline the key features of Obama's campaign rhetoric and contrast them with those of his rival candidates but don't give a detailed analysis of his actual speech(es). By examining five speeches spanning two years of his campaign and one year into his presidency, the next two chapters conduct a systematic study of Obama's rhetorical appeal.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Fantasy Theme Analysis of Candidate Barack Obama

This chapter conducts a fantasy theme analysis of Barack Obama's speeches

during the Presidential election to illuminate the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision he put forth by way of public discourse. As Jeffrey Cohen (2010) writes, the 2008 presidential election was “of greater moment than most” (p. 203). Similarly, Charles E. Cook, Jr. (2008) points out that the election “featured more surprises and greater volatility than any in 40 years” (p. 193). It is therefore worth investigating Obama's rhetorical strategies during the election. In doing so, I am particularly interested in exploring how Obama defined himself as a viable presidential candidate and a capable national leader in relation to his chief rivals Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator John McCain.

To this end, I analyze four speeches Obama delivered during the election campaign. The first speech is his Presidential candidacy announcement speech on February 10, 2007. Obama announced his candidacy for President at the Old State Capital in Springfield where Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous “House Divided” speech against slavery in 1858. By implicitly comparing himself to Lincoln and conjuring up images of his presidential legacy, Obama projected himself as a presidential candidate capable of healing the divided nation in the times of crisis.

The second speech is the concession speech Obama gave after the New Hampshire Democratic primary on January 8, 2008. Although Obama lost the primary election to Clinton, he addressed his supporters and called for their continued commitment to the election campaign with the repeated use of the phrase “Yes We Can.” Inspired by the spirit of “Yes We Can,” the Black Eyed Peas member will. i. am wrote a song whose lyrics were all made up of quotations from Obama's concession speech. will i. am also produced a video clip of the song in which 30 musicians, actors, and athletes, notably Scarlett Johansson and Tatyana Ali, appeared. The video clip had recorded nearly 700,000 hits in just two days after it was released on YouTube on February 2, 2008 (Alexovich, 2008). The video clip was significant evidence of the way the phrase “Yes We Can” spread among voters. The phrase soon became a secondary slogan for

Obama's campaign along with the initial slogan "Change We Can Believe In."

The third speech is the acceptance speech at the DNC on August 28, 2008. The day fell on the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. It was therefore an important opportunity for Obama not only to accept his Party's nomination but also to urge his supporters and the public at large to complete the great unfinished business of restoring the American dream.

The last speech is the victory speech Obama gave at a rally in Chicago on November 4, 2008. The election of an African-American candidate to President was a milestone in American presidential history. Obama wrapped up his 2-year presidential campaign by thanking his family, staff members, and supporters, calling for bipartisanship, and asking American citizens to work with a new spirit of responsibility and sacrifice.

#### I. Fantasy Theme #1: Ordinary People as Real Americans

One of the major fantasy themes in the 2008 presidential campaign was a story about ordinary people. Obama repeatedly told anecdotes about ordinary people in the election. Obama redefined ordinary people, who had no honorable status and fame, as heroes in American society. Although they were hard-working people, their efforts were unrewarded in the status quo due to "a long political darkness" (Obama, 2008a).

Obama cited episodes of ordinary people who suffered from inequities of the status quo. For example, in the last part of the New Hampshire speech, he (2008a) told stories about people who were under similar predicaments such as "the textile workers in Spartanburg" and "the dishwasher in Las Vegas." In his presidential announcement speech, Obama (2008a) also expressed concern about "the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon" and "the boy who learns on the streets of LA." By doing so, Obama highlighted the difficulty of their situations and stressed a need for changing politics so that they could live a more decent life. In this way, Obama tried to transform the frustrations of

ordinary people into a collective movement for reconstructing the nation.

At the 2008 DNC, Obama (2008b) referred to “the proud auto workers,” who worked hard every day even after the factory in Michigan was closed down, and “the military families” whose lovers left for a battleground for duty. Obama (2008b) praised these people as true heroes in American society because they “work hard and give back and keep going without complaint.” In short, by depicting hard-working yet unrewarded Americans as main characters in his narrative, Obama sought not only to demonstrate his understanding of their plight but also to underscore the importance of sharing common values such as family ties, sacrifices, and hard work. .

Additionally, Obama tried to create a sense of identification with ordinary people by linking his personal life with their experience. More specifically, he (2008b) emphasized that his position as a presidential candidate was not a privileged status because of his wealth:

[I]n the faces of those young veterans who come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, I see my grandfather, who signed up after Pearl Harbor, marched in Patton's Army, and was rewarded by a grateful nation with the chance to go to college on the GI Bill. In the face of that young student, who sleeps just three hours before working the night shift, I think about my mom, who raised my sister and me on her own while she worked and earned her degree; who once turned to food stamps but was still able to send us to the best schools in the country with the help of student loans and scholarships.

Obama portrayed the relationship between his personal life and the experience of ordinary people in order to draw attention to their similarities. His personal story suggested that all Americans had the possibilities to achieve their own dream. Besides, he indicated that not only extraordinary people but also ordinary people with hard work could fulfill the American dream. The description of how Obama's family shared the same values of hard work and aspiration made

that point.

Obama also created a sense of solidarity with ordinary people by frequently using the terms “we,” “our,” and “us.” His consistent use of those terms created linkage with the audience to urge them to get involved in politics. Obama’s view of America was one of a nation where people were on the verge of a crisis because “the American promise has been threatened” (Obama, 2008b). He thus called for restoration of the country where ordinary people through hard work could achieve the dream.

Obama (2008a) blamed the partisan politics for creating “the division and distraction that has clouded Washington.” As most people were fairly skeptical about “the smallness of our politics” (Obama, 2007b), partisanship and ideological wars must be ended. Obama (2008a) called ordinary Americans a new majority and asked them to fight for changing the conventional politics in Washington, by saying “you can be the new majority who can lead this nation out of a long political darkness.”

In his victory speech, Obama (2008c) claimed that each individual’s contributions to the election were essential for him to clinch the presidential seat. Put differently, he portrayed their involvement in the campaign as historic and heroic. To amplify this point, Obama (2008c) recounted the life of a 106-year-old woman:

She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn’t vote for two seasons – because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. And tonight, I think about all that she’s seen throughout her century in America – the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can’t, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: yes we can.

The enormous change of American history that she had witnessed symbolically indicated that Obama’s triumph in the election was an historic event.



More importantly, Obama did not call Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. by name in most of his speeches. Instead, he referred to them as “a tall gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer” (Obama, 2007b) and “a young preacher from Georgia” (Obama, 2008b). Describing these historic figures as ordinary people, Obama tried to establish “a framework for working with the legacy” (Goldfarb, 2009, p. 238) of Lincoln and King and to appeal to basic American values shared by all citizens.

## II. Fantasy Theme #2: Restoring American Values, Reviving the American Dream

The second fantasy theme in Obama's speech was about the restoration of traditional American values. During the 2008 presidential election, Obama not only invoked the term “change,” but also used “reclaim” (Obama, 2007b), “restore” (Obama, 2008a), “heal” (Obama, 2008c), and “renew” (Obama, 2008c). By utilizing these words, Obama called for the restoration of the nation in which people could enact the American dream.

Obama argued that ordinary people failed to achieve success not because of their own failure but because of the failure of government. In particular, he indicted the Bush administration for launching “a war with no end,” causing “dependence on oil that threatens our future,” and creating the present situation of “schools where too many children aren't learning” and “families struggling paycheck to paycheck despite working as hard as they can” (Obama, 2007b). In Obama's view, the Bush administration epitomized “the failure of leadership” and “the smallness of our politics” (Obama, 2007b).

To shore up his argument, Obama described two Americas in his speeches. One of them was the nation of “a broken politics in Washington” caused in no small part by “the failed policies of George W. Bush” (Obama, 2008b). Obama juxtaposed this image of America with that of a nation of limitless opportunities in which every American could pursue a better, richer, and fuller life (Dorsey, 2008, p. 130). Announcing his presidential candidacy, he (2007b) remarked that

“[t]his 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.” Elsewhere, Obama (2008c) reconfirmed the character of the nation, “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” As Goldfarb (2009) suggests, Obama “has transformed politics by closing the gap between electoral and participatory democracy” (p. 246). In Obama’s estimation, the Bush administration failed miserably to create a society where “each of us can pursue our individual dreams” “through hard work and sacrifice” (Obama, 2008b).

Obama admitted his brief experience as a politician: “I know I haven’t spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington” (Obama, 2007b). To this point, his rival candidates often criticized that “Obama was unready to lead, presumptuous, and a profligate liberal” (Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson, 2010, p. 71). However, Obama rebuffed such criticism, claiming that his lack of political experience was not a barrier but an advantage for being the next President because, in his view, it was necessary to change the existing American politics at the fundamental level. Obama (2007b) defended his lack of political experience by saying he had “been there [in politics] long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change.”

All in all, Obama (2008b) defined his presidential campaign as a “chance to keep, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the American promise alive.” At the beginning of his victory speech, Obama (2008c) said: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” According to Darsey (2009), Obama’s presidential campaign was “a vehicle for our common striving to get the country back on the right track toward our common destiny, the American Dream” (p. 94). In other words, Obama’s message of a renewed America in which all people could pursue the America dream was one of his major themes in the 2008

presidential election.

### III. Fantasy Theme #3: Renewing the Principle of E Pluribus Unum in Multicultural America: Unity despite Diversity

The third fantasy theme was a theme of unity despite diversity, the theme he has embraced since his 2004 DNC keynote speech. In the keynote address, he (2004) criticized “spin masters” and “negative ad peddlers” for attempting to divide America:

Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America – there is the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there is the United States of America.

Obama reiterated the same theme throughout the 2008 presidential election. To this end, he often talked about his experience working with the Republican Party. For example, Obama (2007b) said, “Republican Senator Dick Lugar [and I worked] to pass a law that will secure and destroy some of the world's deadliest, unguarded weapons.” The experience of his political career supported his idea that “[p]olitics doesn't have to divide us on this anymore—we can work together to keep our country safe” (Obama, 2007b).

Obama's ideal image of the United States was the country with the basic American motto, “that out of many, we are one” (Obama, 2008c), which symbolically stood for the phrase in the Great Seal of the United States: “E Pluribus Unum.” In order to restore the United States as a diverse but unified nation, he sought to redefine what it meant to be an American. In his concession speech in New Hampshire, for example, he (2008a) said: “[W]hether we are rich or poor; black or white; Latino or Asian; whether we hail from Iowa or New Hampshire, Nevada or South Carolina, we are ready to take this country in a fundamentally new direction.” The implication was that we must work together as one people toward a common goal while celebrating our diversity at the same time. Obama (2008c) conveyed the same message in his victory speech as well:

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled – Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the United States of America.

In both quotations, Obama embraced the value of finding unity in diversity. In his announcement speech, he (2007b) made a more explicit claim: “beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people.”

The aspect of integration also appeared in his frequent allusion to American history. For instance, Obama (2007b) announced his run for the 2008 presidential election at “the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together.” He (2008c) quoted Lincoln in his victory speech as well: “We are not enemies, but friends... though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.” Conjuring up the images of Lincoln was a means to inspire the public by tapping into basic stories undergirding American history.

By the same token, Obama (2008b) referred to Martin Luther King, Jr. in order to make the case that the celebration of multiculturalism was an essential part of American history.

[P]eople of every creed and color, from every walk of life – is that in America, our destiny is inextricably linked. That together, our dreams can be one. “We cannot walk alone,” the preacher cried. “And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.”

Clearly, he invoked King and the Civil Rights Movement to encourage Americans to take action and leave an indelible mark on history as they did back in the 50s and 60s.

Overall, referring to the audience as if they were the inheritors of the legacies of King and Lincoln, Obama encouraged them to believe in “the hopes that they

hold in common” and “American spirit—that American promise” (Obama, 2008b). To heal the partisan wounds and unite the divided nation once again, Obama (2008b) argued that it would be imperative to fulfill both “individual responsibility and mutual responsibility.” “[T]hat’s,” he continued, “the essence of America’s promise” (Obama, 2008b). Importantly, Obama used his multicultural heritage to picture himself as an embodiment of the promise, which in turn put him in a better position to call for a diverse, yet unified country than Clinton and McCain.

Moreover, McCain and the Republican Party misunderstood the mood of the nation, namely, voters’ overwhelming aspiration for change. For instance, their smear campaign to label Obama “as a ‘radical’ or a ‘socialist’” (Drew, 2008, n.p.) was taken as a usual partisan tactic to divide the nation and thus did not sit well with most Americans. Obama skillfully capitalized on their partisan posture to project himself as the candidate capable of bridging the long-standing partisan divide in American politics.

#### IV. Rhetorical Vision: Ordinary People Can Achieve Extraordinary Things

Obama’s rhetorical vision of the 2008 presidential campaign is a worldview that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. Ordinary people who supported and voted for Obama were at the center of this rhetorical vision. In Obama’s view, the triumph of the election was “our” (Obama, 2008c) accomplishment, not his. Throughout the campaign, Obama recurrently stated that the election was about the American people. For example, he said, “This is why this campaign can’t only be about me. It must be about us” (Obama, 2007b), “it’s not just about what I will do as President, it’s also about what you, the people who love this country, can do to change it” (Obama, 2008a), “this election has never been about me. It’s been about you” (Obama, 2008b), and “I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to—it belongs to you” (Obama, 2008c). As these quotes illustrate, Obama repeatedly told his audiences that

they were protagonists in his narrative of the American dream and thus deserved to live a good, safe life.

## V. Conclusion

In the course of the 2008 presidential election, most candidates argued that Obama lacked political experience required to be President of the United States. McCain, among others, insistently faulted Obama for his lack of experience in warfare and foreign policy—understandably so, in view of his war hero image and many years of service in the Senate. These relentless attacks, however, did not hinder Obama’s campaign. On the contrary, he cast the lack of experience in Washington as an asset to his credential as a reformer.

Moreover, Obama called on American citizens to join him on the path toward restoring the American dream throughout his election campaign. His rhetorical vision with the central message of hope and change reaffirmed the American dream and embodied the conviction that ordinary people could do extraordinary things. Obama’s narrative of the American dream not only convinced many Americans to vote for him but also inspired them to act with him as agents of change. In many ways the campaign slogans “Yes We Can” and “Change We Can Believe In” encapsulated Obama’s vision for America(ns): America as a nation of equal opportunity and Americans as driving forces for changes.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Fantasy Theme Analysis of President Obama’s Speech on Health Care Reform

In this chapter I analyze President Obama’s rhetorical strategies to push for sweeping health care legislation. First, I briefly summarize the historical background surrounding the health care controversy and outline major issues involved in the current debate over health care reform. Second, I examine the

health care speech Obama delivered to a joint session of Congress on September 9, 2010. It is my contention that his speech succeeded in boosting public support for his health care plan in the short term, but his vision of health care reform did not “chain out” in the long term.

### I. Historical Background of Health Care Reform

National health care is one of the most controversial issues facing the United States since Theodore Roosevelt called for universal health care in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to an editorial from *The New York Times* on March 21, 2010, the United States is the only country among advanced developed nations that does not have a universal health care system (n.p.). Most of the previous Democratic Presidents and some Republican Presidents have attempted to provide affordable health care coverage for all Americans. However, almost all of them resulted in failure.

In the aftermath of World War II, President Harry S. Truman (1945–1953) advocated a national health care system under which all citizens would receive equal health care coverage. However, the American Medical Association (AMA) immediately declared itself against Truman's universal health care plan, labeling it as “socialized medicine.” With this harsh label attached and then proliferated throughout the political discourse, it became difficult to eradicate the image of socialism. AMA's negative campaign succeeded and the term “socialized medicine” firmly registered in citizens' minds. As a result, Truman's plan fell by the wayside.

In the 1960s, the legislation of Medicare “covering much of the expense of physician and hospital care for the retired elderly” (Jacobs and Skocpol, 2010, p. 25) became subject to huge controversy. In 1962, over 60 percent of the public viewed Medicare as a necessary program under the existing health care system (Fogel, 2010, p. 244). President John F. Kennedy (1961–1963) attempted to capitalize on the majority backing to pass Medicare legislation, but AMA made a

counterargument on television to block the passage of the program (Fogel, 2010, pp. 243–244).

After the assassination of Kennedy on November 22, 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–1969) succeeded him as President and set out to complete his unfinished task. President Johnson “urged in his State of the Union address that Medicare be made a legislative priority” (Fogel, 2010, p. 244). Although opponents denounced Medicare as “a potentially mortal intrusion of government on the American way of life” (Blumenthal and Morone, 2005, n.p.), it was signed into law on July 30, 1965. However, the creation of a universal health care program was still a tall order.

In the 1990s President Bill Clinton (1993–2001) called for universal health coverage and appointed his wife, Hillary Clinton, to head a task force on health care reform. The Health Care Insurance Association of America (HIAA) took a stand against the president’s proposal, and launched an anti-health care campaign to stir up public opposition (Fogel, 2010, p. 245). After all, almost all Democratic Presidents from Harry Trumann through Bill Clinton tried to revamp the health care system but failed. It is in this historical context that President Obama’s attempt to pass health care legislation must be evaluated.

During the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama pledged to expand health insurance coverage to all uninsured Americans. Since then, health care reform had been his highest legislative priority. Although both Republicans and Democrats agreed on the need to reform the health care system, they were sharply divided over how it should be reformed. First of all, the estimated budget for Obama’s health care plans that could cover every American was almost \$100 million a year. A lot of people expressed concern that “the government cannot afford a big investment in health care, that these plans are going nowhere fast” (Gruber, 2008, n.p.). Furthermore, some people and groups were strongly antagonistic toward government intervention in health care. For example, the AMA opposed the creation of a government-run insurance plan that many



Democrats viewed as a vital part of legislation (Pear, 2009, n.p.).

On the other hand, proponents of health care reform argued that extension of affordable health care would benefit all Americans on the grounds that the nation would suffer from skyrocketing medical expenses without a comprehensive overhaul of the health care system. Most analyses showed that medical costs would rise sharply and go beyond the average paycheck if no action were taken (Abelson, 2010). Similarly, the Center for Economics and Policy Research (CEPR) estimated that the budget deficits would soar to 10 percent of GDP by 2030 and 50 percent of GDP by 2080 due to an unbridled increase in health care costs.

Yet President Obama had to wind up a long legislative path to health care reform. On February 24, 2009, the president unveiled his agenda for recovery from the economic crisis in a joint address to Congress. In this address he focused mostly on such domestic issues as the “bank bailout proposal, housing programs and health-care overhaul,” arguing that they “would work in concert to turn around the nation’s struggling economy” (Froomkin, 2009, n.p.).

On March 5<sup>th</sup> Obama convened a health care summit to jump-start the stalled health care debate. Participants in this day-long televised summit included lawmakers, healthcare executives, insurers, doctors, and patients. Although Obama pointed to the urgency of curbing the rising cost of health care, he failed to propose any concrete measures to achieve that goal. According to *The New York Times* on March 7, two central questions remained unclear in his proposal: “how to cover tens of millions of uninsured Americans, and how to reform the health care system to reduce costs and improve the quality of care” (n.p.). Although President Obama called on Congress to flesh out the details of the health care proposal, they could not meet the deadline.

One of the ideas Obama had promoted since he was running for President was the public health insurance option, or public option for short. It was a health insurance plan offered by the federal government as an affordable alternative to

private health insurance. Immediately after the idea of public option was introduced, it became an ideological hot button. For example, many conservatives gathered at town hall meetings across the country and castigated public option as a government take-over and Obama as a socialist. Seen in this light, it seemed like a daunting task to work out a compromise on Obama's health care proposal in a way that would satisfy its critics and skeptics while not disappointing its supporters.

## II. Major Issues Involved in the Current Health Care Reform Controversy

While President Obama and his fellow Democrats focused on congressional negotiations in order to pass a health care reform bill, its critics, notably Tea Party activists and right-wing populists, attempted to prevent the bill from being passed. Harsh negative campaigns created by these opponents were rampant across the nation. Many opponents decried health care reform as government-controlled "socialized medicine." The rumor that the health care proposal would create "death panels" also circulated. According to James A. Morone (2010), both claims were "pungent, memorable, simple, and effective" (p. 1098). In the face of mounting criticism, President Obama was hard-pressed to defend and justify his health care proposal as an improvement over the status quo.

There were other major issues with health care reform, primarily the budget. Although Obama insisted that the health care bill would be "'deficit neutral,' with the roughly \$1 trillion, 10-year cost to be offset by reduced spending or new taxes," Republicans took issue with this estimate and warned that "the legislation 'would probably generate substantial increases in federal budget deficits' beyond 2019" (*The New York Times*, n.d.). They also charged that Obama's health care proposal would include funding and coverage for abortions. Obama denied this charge and clarified that his proposal would not "direct taxpayer money to pay for elective abortions" (Kirkpatrick and Pear, 2009,

n.p.).

By the time Obama delivered an address to a joint session of Congress, the nation had been divided over these controversial issues with no sign of a compromise in sight. It was in this political climate that President Obama had to justify his proposal for health care reform.

### III. Fantasy Theme Analysis of President Obama's Address to A Joint Session of Congress

Having sketched the historical background of the health care controversy and the major issues involved in the current debate, I now turn to a critical analysis of President Obama's health care speech. Obama delivered an address to a joint session of Congress on September 9, 2009, in which he outlined the protections and benefits of health care reform. According to Dan Balz (2009), a *Washington Post* staff writer, Obama sought to achieve two objectives through this speech: to rally public support for comprehensive health care reform and to end the long-standing stalemate in Congress by calling for bipartisan action to pass health care legislation (n.p.).

In pursuing these ends, he advanced three arguments to call on Congress to legislate health care reform. First of all, the health care bill, if signed into law, would expand access to affordable health care coverage to millions of uninsured Americans. Second, the bill would provide security and stability for those who already had health insurance because insurance companies could no longer refuse to pay for treatment of pre-existing conditions or deny new coverage for those with pre-existing illnesses when they changed their jobs or started their own businesses. Lastly, health care reform would be essential in preventing a burst of skyrocketing health care costs. On the whole, he argued that health care reform would provide prosperity for the nation and help all Americans to live a good and safe life.

### A. Fantasy Theme #1: Ordinary People as Real Americans

In the health care speech President Obama reiterates many of the themes that figured prominently during the 2008 presidential election. As I explained in Chapter 4, one of his major themes in the election was the extraordinary hardships faced by ordinary people, or real Americans in Obama's fantasy theme. Obama's definition of ordinary people is clear and consistent throughout the speech. As he narrates it, ordinary people are almost synonymous with working-class and middle-class Americans, many of whom cannot afford high insurance premiums and thus have to endure "extraordinary hardship" (Obama, 2009). 30 million American cannot get health care insurance and 14,000 Americans are losing their coverage every day. In Obama's view, these ordinary citizens are real Americans and it is therefore unbearable and intolerable to see them in agony due to the flawed health care system. Indeed, Obama (2009) states emphatically that "we are the only democracy—the only advanced democracy on Earth—the only wealthy nation—that allows such hardship for millions of its people."

Obama (2009) also offers compassion to "small businesses," "aspiring entrepreneurs," and "our automakers" which are on the cusp of bankruptcy due to rising health care costs. He claims that the current health care system is erroneously forcing owners of small businesses to shift health care costs to their employees or to drop their coverage entirely. In Obama's estimation, both of them are victims of the faulty health care system that places an unbearable burden on them. For this reason, Obama proposes tax credits to owners of small businesses so that they could provide coverage for their employees.

At the same time, Obama (2009) depicts the health care crisis not merely as a working-class or middle-class problem but as an American problem because the denial of health care coverage "can happen to anyone" even when they are insured. In this regard, Obama denounces money-greedy insurance companies,

main villains in his fantasy theme, for taking advantage of the current system to deny coverage to people with preexisting conditions. To illustrate that the denial of coverage actually “happens every day” (Obama, 2009), Obama cites episodes of two Americans from Illinois and Texas:

One man from Illinois lost his coverage in the middle of chemotherapy because his insurer found that he hadn't reported gallstones that he didn't even know about. They delayed his treatment, and he died because of it. Another woman from Texas was about to get a double mastectomy when her insurance company canceled her policy because she forgot to declare a case of acne. By the time she had her insurance reinstated, her breast cancer more than doubled in size.

By telling this “heart-breaking” story and arguing that “no one should be treated that way in the United States of America” (Obama, 2009), Obama attempts to portray the health care crisis as one of the biggest national problems affecting every American.

It is important to note that Obama highlights the suffering of people in the Midwest and the South, major settings in his fantasy theme, to underscore the significance of health care reform. That is, health care reform is represented as a symbol of his resolute commitment to changing Washington politics controlled by the political establishment and big corporations, major villains in his fantasy theme. For if his proposal were enacted, it would be illegal for private health companies to turn down health insurance coverage.

Moreover, Obama tries to correct misinformation that has been released by special interest groups and pundits, other villains in his fantasy theme. Obama (2009) indicts them for making the “bogus claims” that he is pushing for “socialized medicine” or “death panels.” He flatly dismisses such criticism as “a lie, plain, and simple” (Obama, 2009)

As Obama narrates it, his health care proposal is not intended to impose stricter restrictions on American people. On the contrary, he maintains that it

aims at providing them with a better choice by regulating insurance companies. Obama (2009) repeatedly assures the audience that his proposal would force no one “to change the coverage or the doctor you have.” Rather, “what this plan will do,” he continues, “is [*sic*] make the insurance you have work better for you” (Obama, 2009) because it would prohibit insurance companies from rejecting someone for coverage because of their pre-existing conditions. Nor would they any “longer be able to place some arbitrary cap on the amount of coverage you can receive in a given year or in a lifetime” (Obama, 2009).

Obama promises that his proposal would not affect anyone who is satisfied with their current health insurance coverage. Instead, it is designed to offer better, more affordable coverage to millions of under-insured or uninsured Americans by creating a government-sponsored program he calls “public option” (Obama, 2009).

In order to make his health care proposal work, Obama urges each and every citizen to buy an insurance plan, be it public or private. Employers for their part would be required to share the responsibility of paying for health care. Finally, the government would be responsible for providing tax credits for those individuals and small business owners that cannot shoulder the burden of health care costs on their own. The implication is that Americans can make the health care system work only if all of them take action with a strong sense of responsibility. In other words, Obama depicts the fulfillment of each responsibility as a chief action theme in his narrative.

The president’s interpretation of the existing health care is that of a system in which there exists an unbalanced relationship between individuals and communities. Lots of difficulties lying before Americans such as high health care costs or unequal coverage blocks the path for equal access to health care coverage. Obama defines the concept of living a good, safe life as the American dream. That is, the reform of the existing health care system on the level proposed by President Obama would fundamentally change the system and

potentially change the American economic situation in many ways, with the goal of creating a more equal path to achieving the American dream.

#### B. Health Care Reform as an Economic Necessity and a Moral Imperative

The second theme is health care reform as an economic necessity and a moral imperative. Obama characterizes the existing health care system as inadequate to bring prosperity to American citizens. To begin with, Obama (2009) argues that if the government does not take any action, the nation will plunge into wider and deeper deficit:

Our deficit will grow. More families will go bankrupt. More businesses will close. More Americans will lose their coverage when they are sick and need it the most. And more will die as a result. We know these things to be true.

Substantial health care reform is therefore necessary not only to offer all Americans “quality, affordable choices” but also to stabilize the economy as a whole. To illustrate the economic benefits of health care reform, Obama cites one estimate showing that “if we are able to slow the growth of health care costs by just one-tenth of one percent each year, it will actually reduce the deficit by \$4 trillion over the long term.” It should be noted that Obama emphasizes the urgency of sweeping health care reform by linking the nation’s economic problems to the living conditions of ordinary people.

To further demonstrate that his proposal would be “decisive for our future prosperity” (Obama, 2009), Obama reads a letter from Senator Edward Kennedy (1932–2009) that he received upon his death. As Mary McNamara (2009), a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, puts it, Kennedy is one of the most admired and reputed politicians in the nation. He is also known as a long-time advocate for a universal health care program. President Obama (2009) uses his letter as authoritative evidence not only to garner support for health care reform but also to define “the character of our country” and to reclaim American values. More

specifically, Obama (2009) makes the following case for health care reform in relation to Kennedy's letter:

In it, he spoke about what a happy time his last months were, thanks to the love and support of family and friends, his wife, Vicki, his amazing children, who are all here tonight. And he expressed confidence that this would be the year that health care reform – “that great unfinished business of our society,” he called it – would finally pass. He repeated the truth that health care is decisive for our future prosperity, but he also reminded me that “it concerns more than material thing.” “What we face,” he wrote “is above all a moral issue; at stake are not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country.”

By telling personal anecdotes regarding Edward Kennedy and his family, Obama (2009) seeks to frame health care as “above all a moral issue.” “[A]t stake are,” he (2009) continues, “not just the details of policy, but fundamental principles of social justice and the character of our country.” With this statement, Obama (2009) suggests that health care reform be essential to restore traditional American values and to reconstruct the nation:

I've thought about that phrase quite a bit in recent days—the character of our country. One of the unique and wonderful things about America has always been our self-reliance, our rugged individualism, our fierce defense of freedom and our healthy skepticism of government. And figuring out the appropriate size and role of government has always been a source of rigorous and, yes, sometimes angry debate.

In short, the immediate purpose of President Obama utilizing the letter of Sen. Kennedy is to call on Congress to pass the legislation. His larger goal is to show that health care reform is part of the essential nature of the country. That is why he (2009) links together his proposal and American values such as “self-reliance,” “individualism,” and “freedom” in his health care speech.



President Obama refutes other accusations as well. In response to the charge that he is advocating a “government takeover” of health care or “socialized medicine,” Obama maintains that his proposal would simply give Americans a better choice. Rather than controlling medical resources and medical costs, his proposal aims to give Americans an option so that they could choose the best insurance policy at an affordable price. Obama (2009) makes it clear that his “guiding principle is, and always has been, that consumers do better when there is choice and competition.” Obama (2009) also uses the metaphor of “marketplace,” another major setting theme in his fantasy theme. For instance, he (2009) expresses his commitment to creating “a marketplace where individuals and small businesses will be able to shop for health insurance at competitive prices.” Ideally, his proposed health care reform would give “customers” “greater leverage to bargain with the insurance companies for better prices and quality coverage” (Obama, 2009). By using the language of capitalism (i.e., “marketplace,” “customers,” and “competitive prices”) throughout the speech, Obama tries to assure the American public that his proposal would be compatible with capitalism and the American way of life.

Furthermore, Obama responds to the allegation of “death panel” by saying that because no change would be made to Medicare, senior citizens would continue to receive the same benefits they enjoy in the current system. If anything, the goal of his health care proposal is to make Medicare “more efficient” and “help usher in changes in the way we deliver health care that can reduce costs for everybody” (Obama, 2009).

### C. Bipartisanship in Health Care Reform, Unity between Democrats and Republicans

The third fantasy theme in Obama's health care speech is a narrative of bipartisanship. Bipartisanship is an essential action theme that has permeated Obama's health care reform campaign from the beginning. He reiterates the

theme in his Congress speech as well. Specifically, he attributes the cause of the health care debacle to “the same partisanship spectacle.” By admonishing that partisan politics will only exacerbate public disdain for government, he calls on Congress to work across party lines: “Now is the season for action. Now is when we must bring the best ideas of both parties together....Now is the time to deliver on health care.” By adopting the strategy of repetition with “Now,” Obama emphasizes the importance of leaving behind partisan ideology and acting together to resolve the nation’s most thorny issue.

While Obama accuses the Bush administration of creating trillion-dollar deficits and dragging the nation into two “wars on terror,” he deliberately avoids calling Republicans names. Instead, he refers to them as “friends”: “[T]o my Republican friends, I say that rather than making wild claims about a government takeover of health care, we should work together to address any legitimate concerns you may have.”(Obama, 2009). As proof of his commitment to bipartisanship, Obama (2009) points out that he has incorporated many Republican ideas into his health care proposal:

[F]or those Americans who can’t get insurance today because they have preexisting medical conditions, we will immediately offer low-cost coverage that will protect you against financial ruin if you become seriously ill. This was a good idea when Senator John McCain proposed it in the campaign, it’s a good idea now, and we should all embrace it.

In urging Congress to transcend partisan politics, Obama (2009) positions himself not only as a bipartisan bridge builder but also as a reformer for restoring the values that founded this great nation:

I still believe we can replace acrimony with civility, and gridlock with progress. I still believe we can do great things, and that here and now we will meet history’s test. Because that’s who we are. That is our calling. That is our character.

#### D. Rhetorical Vision: Health Care Reform is the Character of America.

A rhetorical vision undergirding Obama's health care reform speech is American exceptionalism, or the idea that the United States is—at least can be—the greatest and most blessed nation in the world. Throughout the health care speech, Obama appeals to the values largely shared among American citizens, such as freedom, hard work, and competition. For example, Obama stresses that the public option would enhance people's freedom of choice by stimulating competition and offering a wider range of affordable health care options. In view of this, his proposed health care reform is a pro-American policy, as it would help to build a society where all Americans have equal opportunities to live a good and safe life.

Importantly, Obama regards the federal government as an institution to provide equal opportunities for all citizens, regardless of race, creed, and financial circumstances. Obama admits that his proposal would strengthen government's role in health care policies. But it does not mean that Obama argues for government intrusion into personal and private medical decisions. Rather, his proposal aims to ensure that citizens can make better medical decisions by regulating the practices of insurance companies and promoting competition in health care markets.

### IV. Did Obama's Messages for Health Care Reform Chain Out?: Short-term and Long-term Perspectives

#### A. Short-Term Perspective

Obama's health care speech received wide acclaim from the media and the public alike. Most opinion polls conducted after the speech showed that the majority of Americans responded favorably to his proposal for health care reform. For example, a *Gallup* poll (2010) conducted on October 9 found that Obama's job approval ratings were at 56 percent, up from 51 percent in early September.

Similarly, *CNN* on September 9, 2009, reported that 67 percent of Americans supported Obama's health care proposal. Furthermore, according to a poll conducted by *Time* magazine (n.d.), 70 percent of respondents gave his health care speech an A-grade.

Many health care experts also hailed the speech as a successful attempt to break the stalemate in the health care debate and move the bill toward final passage. For instance, Karen Davis, president of the Commonwealth Fund, commented that Obama "painted the need for reform in both human and economic terms...and made it clear that failure is not an option" (*USA Today*, 2009, n.p.). Likewise, Dr. Henry Black, a clinical professor of internal medicine at New York University, stated that Obama "dealt with all the accusations that have been leveled at him and the need for reform" (*USA Today*, 2009, n.p.).

Even though the President's approval ratings did not dramatically rise, it can be extrapolated from the poll data that Obama's health care speech helped to tip the scale in favor of health care legislation. Put differently, many voters became aware of the magnitude of the health care crisis and were attracted to the vision for reform Obama put forth in the speech. Among others, the idea of public option, which was included in Obama's proposal, gained support from the majority of American citizens. According to Marjorie Connelly (2009), a *New York Times* reporter, "almost three fourths said it was important to have a choice between a public plan and a private plan" (n.p.).

Following on the heels of President Obama's health care speech, the House of Representatives narrowly (by 220-to-215) passed health care legislation on November 7, 2009. The bill included a weaker version of the public option provisions, a compromise needed to secure votes from conservative Democrats. Still, the passage of the bill was a progress as it would extend coverage to approximately 30 million uninsured Americans and bar insurance companies from denying coverage or charging higher premiums for someone because of their pre-existing conditions or medical history (Hulse and Pear, 2009, n.p.).

### B. Long-term Perspective

Although public support of health care overhaul jumped soon after Obama's speech to Congress, the tide gradually began to shift against it. According to a *Gallup* poll conducted in November 2009, more than half of Americans thought that health care was not the government's responsibility. A *CNN* poll in December 2009 came to a similar conclusion, having discovered that 61 percent of Americans opposed the Senate bill.

Republicans and a conservative fraction of Democrats continued to oppose Obama's health care reform as well. Right after the health care bill was passed by the House, Kevin Brady, a Republican Representative from Texas, furiously remarked that "[t]his government takeover has got a long way to go before it gets to the president's desk" (Hulse and Pear, 2009, n.p.). Undying opposition to health care reform forced the Senate to make even more concessions. The Senate began to work on a health care bill proposed by the majority leader Harry Reid. While the bill originally "included a public option that would allow states to choose not to take part in it—a so-called 'opt out'" (The New York Times, 2010, n.p.), it was eventually dropped from its final version to secure filibuster-proof 60 votes for the bill. After weeks of political maneuvering, the Senate finally approved the health care bill with the party line 60–39 vote on December 24<sup>th</sup>.

Although the passage of the bill in the Senate brought Democrats inches closer to historic health care reform, the prospect for legislation became increasingly bleak with their loss of a Senate seat in Massachusetts. On January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Scott Brown, a little-known Republican state senator, won a major upset victory over Democrat Martha Coakley. The election result dealt a major blow to the Obama and the Democratic Party in two ways. For one thing, Brown was elected to fill the Senate seat long held by the late Edward Kennedy, a leading advocate for comprehensive health care coverage. The Republican candidate's victory in the blue state symbolized the repudiation of health care legislation. Additionally, Democrats' loss of the 60<sup>th</sup> seat ended their

supermajority in the Senate required to overcome a filibuster, a tactic used to delay or block passage of a bill. In other words, Democrats had to face even tougher negotiations with Republicans to pass health care legislation.

Faced with the unexpected defeat in the Massachusetts election, Obama was hard pressed to concede to Republican demands and modify health care legislation. In an effort to draw bipartisan support, Obama unveiled a new health care bill on February 22. The new health care bill mostly followed the Senate version and thus did not include a public option. Obama and most Democratic supporters of the bill came to the conclusion that the only way to pass health care reform was to eliminate the public option provisions altogether.

On February 25, President Obama convened a bipartisan health care meeting in order to address ideologically polarizing health care issues facing the nation. During the meeting Democrats made the case that their health care bill was centrist and thus acceptable to mainstream voters. Yet Republican insisted that the bill was different from what Americans want.

In the end, the Senate approved the bill with a 56-43 vote on March 21, to be signed into law by the President two days later. No Republican senator voted for the bill. The new law, entitled the Affordable Health Care Act, made several major changes to the existing system. First of all, 4 million seniors who fall into the coverage gap known as the donut hole would be able to receive discounts of up to 50 percent on their prescriptions. Second, under the new health care system, insurance companies have to allow children to stay on their parent's insurance until the age of 26 or 27 years. Third, small business owners can receive tax credits to buy their employees' coverage. Finally, uninsured people with pre-existing illness or conditions would finally be able to buy health care coverage at affordable rates.

### C. Discussions and Conclusions

Overall, the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision in Obama's health care speech were almost identical to those he kept putting forth throughout his

election campaign. That is, they were imbued with the promise of restoring the American dream. For Obama, helping all Americans to live a good, safe life was a fundamental step to fulfill the dream.

Yet the rhetoric that served him well in his presidential campaign did not “chain out” and failed to win public support in the context of health care. A *CBS News* poll conducted from March 18 to 21, 2010 found that 51 percent of Americans disapproved of the new health care law. Similarly, a Fox News poll in March 2010 revealed that 55 percent of Americans were against the health care reform, up from 51 percent in January 2010, and from 47 percent in July 2009 (Blanton, 2010). Those poll results indicate that the American public became increasingly skeptical about Obama's health care reform.

Despite Obama's call for bipartisanship, the debate over health care reform ended up exacerbating the partisan divide between conservatives and liberals. Since the health care law was enacted in March 2010, Republicans have launched an even harsher campaign for repealing the law. In particular, they have made relentless efforts to depict the legislation as “un-American.” For example, Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate leader, framed the health care debate as “an argument between Democrats and the American people” (*The New York Times*, 2010, n.p.). By the same token, Sarah Palin accused the Obama administration of pursuing an un-American policy and thereby leading the nation down the wrong path.

Moreover, in persuading the American public that health care reform would provide prosperity for the nation, President Obama suggested that the public option would guarantee citizens a better choice in their health care options, expand coverage to millions of Americans, and encourage greater competition among insurance companies. Around the same time, Obama “promised for-profit hospital lobbyists that there would be no public option in the final bill.” (Mogulescu, 2010, n.p.). His flip-flopping on the public option might have been necessary to win a concession from opponents of health care reform.

Nevertheless, failing to make good on his initial reform plan led to a decline in his approval ratings and caused more people to doubt Obama's leadership.

In conclusion, Obama's speech to a joint session of Congress succeeded in boosting public support for his health care plan in the short term. However, given that about half of Americans disapproved of the new health care program, it is safe to say that his vision of health care reform did not resonate with the public in the long term. Yet strong public opposition to the health care law is odd; for public polls consistently show that "the public supports the basic constituent elements of the bill" (Gross and Miller, 2010, n.p.). This suggests that Republicans' anti-health care rhetoric has trumped Obama's rhetorical vision for a better America. In an interview aired on National Public Radio (NPR), Todd Purdam, a former *New York Times* White House correspondent, stated: "[O]ne of the Republicans' big rhetorical successes of the past 20 months is to make people say they dislike a bill whose specific provisions they largely embrace" (Gross and Miller, 2010, n.p.).

Health care reform has been subject to a huge rhetorical battle throughout its history. Conservatives and liberals have been sharply divided over such issues as "public vs. private, big government vs. small government, freedom vs. tyranny, socialism vs. liberty, and change vs. choice" (Neuberger, 2010, n.p.). Despite its initial public acclaim, Obama's health care speech soon lost much of its rhetorical appeal in the face of the intensifying partisanship and the growing conservatism.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

#### I. Introduction

Barack Obama won a landslide victory over Republican candidate John McCain in the 2008 presidential election by attracting the black vote 24 to 1,



the Hispanic vote 2 to 1, and a large share of the White vote (Buchanan, 2010, n.p.). A *Gallup* poll conducted on January 16, 2009 also showed that Obama received an outstandingly high 83 percent approval rating for the way he handled the presidential transition (Newport, 2009).

Many interlocking factors account for Obama's historic victory and remarkable popularity. For one thing, the Obama campaign effectively utilized the Internet to raise an enormous amount of money in donations. It also promoted grassroots organizing efforts to expand the Democrat base, boost voter registration, and garner public support. Last but not least, Obama's rhetorical adeptness in crafting appealing messages of hope and change captured the hearts of many Americans.

Despite his eloquence, however, Obama has lost much of popular support since he became the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. His approval rating fell to a record low, hitting 48 percent in March 2010 (Jones, 2010, n.p.). Moreover, according to NPR on December 28, 2010, "Obama's legislative achievements are under attack, and even some Democrats don't want to be associated with him or the party's agenda" (n.p.). The Democratic Party's big loss in the mid-term elections in November 2010 is probably most symbolic of growing public discontent with Obama's presidency.

The overarching goal of this thesis was to explore the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision Obama put forward during the 2008 election and in the first year of his presidency. While the reassuring themes and hopeful vision he constructed in his campaign speeches mesmerized millions of voters, they failed to win over the American public when he pushed for sweeping health care legislation.

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