

The Huffington Post



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It's Not Just What You Say...

Posted March 26, 2008 | 02:42 PM (EST)

It's been a very long eight years. I was reminded of that as I listened to Barack Obama's amazing speech on race in America.

Just as you eventually get used to the annoying buzz from a failing light fixture, we have become accustomed to the snarling dismissiveness of Dick Cheney, the monotonic state-speak of Condoleezza Rice, the squinty-eyed arrogance of Donald Rumsfeld, and the whiney weaseling of Karl Rove.

There is, of course, a special place in linguistic hell for the Commander-in-Chief - the "decider", the man "misunderestimated," the fighter of "nuclear" ambitions. The man whose philosophy of communication is this: "See in my line of work you got to keep repeating things over and over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the agenda." The man whose instinct for connection runs so true that he said to a divorced mother of three: "You work three jobs? ... Uniquely American, isn't it? ... it is fantastic that you're doing that." There are, of course, the classics: "Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?" and "... fool me once, shame on you. Fool me -- you can't get fooled again."

Enough. Some targets are too easy.

And not to pick on the Republicans. We've listened to the precisely scripted tears and laughter of Hillary Clinton - not to mention the "misspoken" memories of dodging snipers. We have endured the old-school bombast of Ted Kennedy; the Foghorn Leghorn oratory of John Kerry; the hall-monitor petulance of Harry Reed.

If, by chance, our political leaders say what they believe, do they have even the rudimentary skills to communicate that belief clearly, logically and with power?

As I listen to the those whose job descriptions begin with communicating to constituencies, I can't help thinking about the words of Yankee great Casey Stengel when he managed the then lowly Mets: "Can't anybody play this here game?"

And then comes Obama and his thoughts on "A More Perfect Union." By all accounts, it

was written in the early hours of the night before, without adjoining rooms full of handlers and wordsmiths furiously trading drafts and arguing conjunctions.

No doubt, Obama was dragged to the Philadelphia podium by the ravings of his pastor. But once there, he could have done a hundred things wrong.

He could have issued an unconditional denunciation of a friend who had been a great influence in his life. He could have pulled out the tested racial platitudes that would have let him to address the issue without actually dealing with it. He could have gone after the media for putting the selected inflammations of a long sermon on an endless loop. He could have tried to squirm his way out of it all together, the default setting for American politics.

But instead of all he could have done wrong, he did everything right. And nothing was more right than making his message real.

One of the Clinton campaign talking points recently is that you can't select a leader because he gives a good speech. But after all these years of mangled messages and cynical misdirection, I believe it's a very good place to start.

The ability to put your hand on the shoulder of the American public, look us in the eye, and say "this is who I am" matters. It matters in ways and with stakes that are more critical than any time in any other generation.

Like a lot of us, I still don't know who is going to get my vote. But after listening to one of the great speeches of this or any other political year, I know who has my attention.