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Barack Obama: Same Story, New Character

By JONATHAN FREINBERG

American voters are “pervasively disgusted with politicians.”¹ They are tired of the professional politician, who, to them, cares only about power. When voters detect political professionalism, they quickly withdraw their support and seek new leadership in those with the opposite reputation. To avoid detection and the stigma of the professional label, many politicians cast themselves as political outsiders. They create a false image that is “planned, created especially to serve a purpose, to make a certain kind of impression.”² They portray themselves as new to the political machine, ‘above the conniving nature of politics’, appearing to be just like you or me.³ However, over time, the American voter learns that these politicians are indeed not outsiders at all.⁴

The image of the outsider, scrutinized carefully, is no different from that of the insider politician, the engineer of consent, who applies “tried practices in the task of getting people to support ideas and programs.”⁵ An engineer of consent works to get as many voters as possible to support him or her, regardless of disparate backgrounds and opinions among voters. He speaks with rhetoric specifically tailored to represent the character and situation of his audience.⁶ He is a professional whose strategy turns voters away from questioning how a political outsider can so adeptly gain their consent. People do not even notice they are accepting what they see as fact, simply on the “credit of testimony or authority of [this] elite.”⁷

Senator Barack Obama fits this mold; in fact, he is a master of the science. Obama is an engineer of consent and not the outsider politician he purports to be. He de-

picts himself as a political outsider, identified in the media and by his own accounts. Revealing instances of contextualization, repetition of specific themes, and pseudo-event application in the Senator’s keynote speech in Selma, Alabama for the *Voting Rights March Commemoration* proves this assertion. It is important to remember that “man’s reflexes, are as the psychologists say, ‘conditioned’. And, therefore he responds quite readily to a glass egg, a decoy duck, a stuffed shirt, or a political platform.”⁸

Contextualization

Contextualization artificially transforms situations from low-context to high-context. A low-context situation occurs when the message is more important than the speaker.⁹ A high-context situation exists when the speaker is just as or more important than the message.¹⁰ In the case of the latter, politicians create an atmosphere that the average American would find at the dinner table, where “once a relationship...form [s], loyalty is never questioned.”¹¹ The speaker then need not be specific because trust is implicit. Obama creates such a high context frame in Alabama “that facilitates and simplifies matters and makes it possible to take advantage of what the person already knows.”¹² He employs three strategies that make contextualization work: 1) He speaks in a situational dialect with simple diction; 2) he engages with local leaders; and 3) he repeats choice words selected for resonance.

First, he speaks with a situational dialect “immediately identify[ing] the

speaker as one who belongs,” simultaneously contradicting his natural speech inflection.¹³ Although Obama was born in Hawaii and has been a Chicago resident since 1985, he declares with a clear Black Southern Baptist accent, “Something happened when a bunch of women decided they were going to walk instead of ride the bus.” Yet, a few moments later, he states “we’re not observing the ideals set forth in our Constitution”, clearly lacking the accent he used a few moments earlier. Senator Obama even drawls in a halting rhythm reminiscent of the dialect in Alabama. He says, “I was mentioning at the Unity Breakfast this morning, my...,” followed by a long pause where his voice becomes exceptionally Southern, “...at the Unity Breakfast this morning,”¹⁴ wherein he matches the rhythm and tempo of the situational dialect and repeats himself.¹⁵ These inconsistencies abound in his speech, illustrating conscious attempts to frame the situation as high-context.

He also “speaks in simple language”¹⁶ in an effort to employ a more familiar vocabulary, emulating the speech of his audience. For example, he declares, “Don’t tell me it doesn’t have to do with the fact that we got too many daddies not acting like daddies,”¹⁷ to build trust that he is a member of the community. Obama purposely and methodically strives to gain his audience’s support using this tactic of contextualization.

Second, he frequently references local leaders who “control the opinion of their publics”¹⁸ as “a means of reaching the larger public.”¹⁹ Obama mentions local reverends and other community leaders to integrate himself into the family atmosphere of the church. Listing his associations “demonstrate[s] that he has a large and influential constituency”²⁰ and proves that he understands that local leaders are the “key figure(s) in the molding of public opinion.”²¹ Thus, this tactic serves “as a shortcut to understanding and action” by surreptitiously engineering consent.²² He builds credibility, and accrues the affinity that comes with being a member of the Church.

Third, Obama weaves in words that

resonate predictably with his audience. As he presides over the *Voting Rights Commemoration*, he consistently restates the words the “march” and the “journey” and continuously repeats the phrase “because they marched.” For the same reasons, because he is in church, he references the Bible to demonstrate his morals and principles are one with his audience. He repeats Joshua’s name an extraordinary twenty times and the word “prayer” seven times. He also speaks often of challenging “the Pharaoh, the princes, powers.”²³ Obama liberally references religion because “If a proposition is backed by some weighty authority, like the Bible, or can be associated with a great name, people may be expected to respond to it in accordance with the veneration they have for these sources.”²⁴ Restating the principles of an audience provokes attention to the speaker’s commonalities with the people. True political analysis of the speaker’s message is lost in rhetorical flourishes. In this case, the audience sees the speaker as a virtual participant in the original Voting Rights March and a virtual member of the audience’s Church, who understands exactly his listeners’ feelings and history. In this light, the audience no longer sees him as a professional politician—Obama has gained their consent.

Basic Political Themes

Obama repeats the most basic political themes of self-preservation, ambition, threat and reassurance – rhetorical devices commonly associated with the insider politician.²⁵ Obama expresses the first theme, “Materialism alone will not fulfill the possibilities of your existence. You have to fill that with something else.”²⁶ Next, Obama speaks of ambition: “I’m fighting to make sure that our schools are adequately funded all across the country.”²⁷

The most telling sign occurs when the politician “talks about the perennial threats faced by any audience, and then about the way in which he will deliver them from the threats.”²⁸ Obama exemplifies the

final themes of threat and reassurance when he states, “I’m not sure, I’m not sure that I’m up to the challenge.” He next implores, “be strong and have courage, for I am with you wherever you go...when you see row and row of state troopers facing you and the horses and tear gas...be strong and have courage, for I am with you wherever you go.”²⁹ Again, he then speaks of “doubts and fears...in the face of skepticism, in the face of cynicism”³⁰ when he replies, “Be strong and have courage and let us cross over that Promised Land together.”³¹ The threats in this case are the state troopers, the doubts and fears. His call for people to “be strong and have courage” is the reassurance.

Obama extensively repeats these political themes to demonstrate the “endless spectacle of threat and assurance in which political actors try to assert order in ways calculated to impress their audience with their heroism, devotion, sincerity, dexterity and other laudable qualities.”³² Insider politicians use these themes to elevate the tone of their rhetoric so the audience will think highly of the politician and see him as their leader.

The Pseudo-Image

Obama’s outsider image gains strength and legitimacy in the pseudo-event where “participants are selected for their newsworthy and dramatic interest.”³³ Obama’s attendance at the Commemoration, its 46th anniversary (2007), is a less dramatic event to attend than its 45th or 50th anniversary. At the event, Obama equates himself and his existence with the Selma March: “There was something coming across the country because of what happened in Selma, Alabama, because folks are willing to make it across a bridge, so they got together and Barack Obama was born.”³⁴ Yet, Obama was born in 1961, four years prior to the March. He makes a conscious effort to tailor this event to his meticulously crafted image.

In this manner, the insider politician, cloaked in the appealing mantle of the outsider, takes advantage of the fact “that for

the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see.”³⁵ A politician can easily repeat and tailor these strategies to new situations. Obama is just one of many politicians who apply this method. The strategy is a fake, a ploy—it is an “image” that hides reality, demonstrating how well engineering consent works within America without anyone noticing.

Why Engineering Consent Works

Since its founding, American society has attempted to obtain any kind of consensus, however false (i.e. the outsider image) or impossible. Voters must trust politicians because there is a “need for interposing some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled.”³⁶ There is often no other choice. American society demands this distilled reality and it sometimes must be “taken for truth because the fiction is badly needed.”³⁷ It is comfortable not to reevaluate these ‘truths’ because they “preserve us from all the bewildering effect of trying to see the world steadily and see it whole.”³⁸ Many voters survive quite well without reminders that elites manipulate their voting impulses.

Americans need the image of the outsider because they “suffer from extravagant expectations.”³⁹ Americans do not want to see the truth behind the false consensus created by politicians because it is comfortable not to, and because it ‘works.’ As long as voters feel secure that the man they elect is not like all other politicians, and that he actually represents their concerns and interests, then they are pleased the system works.

However, below the surface, it is a fact that politicians create various images for various audiences to engineer consent. Thus, insider politicians, like Barack Obama, can enlarge their political constituency in spite of an imprecise message that may appear on first glance that he ‘represent [s] their concerns and interests.’

American voters need someone with Obama’s mythical outsider “image,” however false or engineered, because it is far easier to

judge a book by its cover. Obama could be the 'new kid on the block,' or he could be like every other professional politician in America. The possibility of the latter is simply too

daunting and disturbing for the average American voter to think about. For many Americans, it is easier to believe that change is possible.

Endnotes

- ¹ Walter Lippmann, Phantom Public (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1993) XLIV.
- ² Daniel J. Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 39.
- ³ Author's own definition, gleaned from works of Doris Graber and Walter Lippmann
- ⁴ Around the time of 2000, with the election of George W. Bush, who portrayed himself as an outsider.
- ⁵ Edward L. Bernays, Public Relations (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928) 158.
- ⁶ Richard Weaver, Language is Sermonic (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 208.
- ⁷ Weaver 209.
- ⁸ Lippmann, Phantom Public 278.
- ⁹ Definition attributed to Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*
- ¹⁰ Definition attributed to Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*
- ¹¹ Edward T. Hall, Beyond Culture (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1977) 113.
- ¹² Hall 132.
- ¹³ Hall 132.
- ¹⁴ Barack Obama, address, [Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration](#), Brown Chapel, Selma, 4 Mar. 2007.
- ¹⁵ Please refer to http://youtube.com/watch?v=9r-XG_VJZDw and contrast with any other video appearance by Obama in northern States and/or interviews with news stations.
- ¹⁶ Edward L. Bernays *Propaganda*, p. 105.
- ¹⁷ Obama.
- ¹⁸ Bernays, Propaganda 105.
- ¹⁹ Bernays, Public Relations 164.
- ²⁰ Doris Graber, Verbal Behavior and Politics (Chicago: University of Illinois College Press, 1976) 176.
- ²¹ Bernays, Public Relations 164.
- ²² Bernays, Public Relations 166.
- ²³ Obama.
- ²⁴ Weaver 210.
- ²⁵ Bernays, Public Relations 166.
- ²⁶ Obama.
- ²⁷ Obama.
- ²⁸ Graber 185.
- ²⁹ Obama.
- ³⁰ Obama.
- ³¹ Obama.
- ³² Graber 188.
- ³³ Boorstin 39.
- ³⁴ Obama.

³⁵ Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997) 29.

³⁶ Lippmann, Public Opinion 239.

³⁷ Lippmann, Public Opinion 12.

³⁸ Lippmann, Public Opinion 75.

³⁹ Boorstin 39.