

Obama's Self-Organizing Rhetoric

by James Como (March 2015)

Consider the following: The president opines that the world is not messier now than under his predecessors but just *seems* messier because of the amplifying effect of social media; he regrets grinning it up on the links right after his press conference on the first horrific beheading because “I should have anticipated the optics,” not the indecency of his behavior; the Islamist rampage at Fort Hood was “workplace violence,” not a jihadist terrorist attack. Rarely downright inarticulate, his gaffes (“I don’t speak Austrian,” “I campaigned in all fifty-seven states,” “the Marine *corpse*”) bespeak a broad lack of cultivation. But more troubling – and clearly so – are his non-gaffes.

He has referred to the troops “who are fighting for *me*”; when the BP oil disaster happened and he was criticized for doing nothing his response was, “do they expect me to plug it *myself*”; to the Queen of England he presented a collection of his own speeches; he will, on foreign soil, criticize his country and dismiss its policies because “I wasn’t even born yet,” as though all meaningful history began with his entrance. These, along with his “present” votes earlier in his legislative career and much finger-pointing, are of-a-piece: He is a narcissist (clinical? The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* is helpful here) who *will* avoid accountability.

So, in his rhetoric and his policies, the president ranges between puerility and crypto-Fifth Columnism (thus provoking the question of his patriotism, which perfectly qualifies him as the ideal Secretary General of the United Nations.) Yet he is now what he has always been: a Community Organizer – a cooler version of Al Sharpton (a frequent White House visitor) – for whom the opposition is to be coerced and demeaned, not reasoned with, and by whom “the people” are to be kept in a constant state of disaffection. Because the Organizer serves the higher good of social justice, downright lies as well as racist, classist, self-righteous, and belligerent rhetoric are justified.

That is why he favors what ancient Greek rhetoricians called *epideictic* oratory, the practice of “praise and blame”; and that is why he must regale safe hallelujah choruses or stick to insulated venues. Just so does he passionately rail against Republicans as though *they*, not jihadists or Putin, were imminent threats, and unprecedentedly lambasts the Supreme Court in a

State of the Union address. In fact he has little facility with deliberative (policy) speechmaking or forensic (factual) case-making, the other two types of oratory identified by the Ancients. (E.g. about his change in our Cuba policy he would simply assert, over and over again, "it's the right thing to do" – not an argument, let alone a case.) Moreover, this Organizer, not bothering with actual persuasion ("by sweetness," etymologically), simply seems to have a chip on his shoulder: he'll show us.

Like most people I found his 2004 Democratic convention keynote address thrilling, for its message of one America and for his joyful conviction in its delivery. Was I fooled? Soon enough he seemed to be guided by a thought from Winston Churchill's "The Scaffolding of Rhetoric." Written in 1897, it reflects the presumption of a very young person. Of greatest relevance to President Obama is this passage: "To convince them he must himself believe. His opinions may change as their impressions fade, *but every orator means what he says at the moment he says it.*" (Was it Sam Goldwyn who said "sincerity is everything, if you can fake that you've got it made"?)

This ability not only works but explains his many falsehoods. Has any president ever walked back, re-interpreted, or denied having said more of his *own* rhetoric? Or does he believe he has the power to evoke *or* to banish reality simply by affirming a falsehood or leaving a truth unspoken? The clownish rhetorical smokescreen surrounding the depredations of Benghazi; "nothing" being wrong with abuses of the IRS, including its "lost" emails; the "red line" for Assad drawn in the shifting sands of Syria; the "junior varsity" that was ISIL, the "random" murders at the Jewish deli in Paris . . . Cherry-picking, sure, but his presidency provides a bowlful. And like the reverend Sharpton, the president has yet to admit, let alone to apologize for, his abiding fraudulence.

So he "pivots" to the not-yet-quite-bungled precincts – climate change, the minimum wage – because they remain much safer than the instigations of the Chinese routinely harassing our aircraft as they build an ever-bigger and more assertive navy, or the violations of a *nuclear* treaty by the Russians. Eventually, though, the magic is overcome by a cascade of scandal, crisis and incompetence. Now, for example, our leading non-Muslim Islamophiliac must wage a *sort-of-war* against *non-Muslim non-terrorists* – just "folks." That, or fall back on his three defaults: condescension (as when presuming to lesson us all at a prayer breakfast), insulting Republicans, or, best of all, bashing Netanyahu.

He is The One, said the tingle running up Chris Matthews' leg. And such is their befuddlement that President Obama's smug True Believers (a version of Lenin's "useful idiots," though actually more fundamentalist) continue to exult in their New Normal: a disintegrating

Constitutional contract, dysfunctional federal machinery, a divided and diminished sense of national identity, and bumbling American influence abroad. All this, while living “The Life of Julia,” depicted in a Democrat TV ad about a young woman coddled by the federal government from cradle to grave. This constituency certainly has their perfect piper, a Narcissist-in-Chief who (by his own proclamation knowing more than this, that, and the other thing than the very people he put in charge of those things) can organize his own rabbit hole of denial, smugness, not-a-little Schadenfreude, and improvisational – not to say “random” – policy-making.

Alas, it so happens that the neighborhood is not populated by subjects but by citizens who have inflicted an insulting electoral rebuke, who, “clinging to their guns and bibles,” *must* be unworthy of Barack Obama’s stewardship. Thus is the jejune post-adolescent compelled to pontificate on the one hand and rule with tantrum-by-decree on the other. After all, it’s so much easier than actually governing. You don’t really have to *persuade* anyone of anything.

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