

Here's to the Skinny Kid with the Funny Name

George Vradenburg

Barack Obama—the keynoter at the Democratic Convention—is a new political talent with enormous potential. Speaking with striking eloquence of the “politics of hope,” he electrified the Democrats convened in Boston in language appealing to Republicans and non-voters as well.

What was so unique about this new voice? He spoke simply but compellingly of what unites us, not of what divides us. He spoke in honest and visual language of one America, not two (and John Edwards adjusted his message accordingly). He spoke of creating opportunity by empowering every American to fulfill their dreams—not by taking from those who have been successful. And he spoke for all of us in saying that “we have real enemies in this world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued. And they must be defeated.”

This perspective, no doubt, reflects Obama’s personal background. Born of an African father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas, he was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia. This product of a multiracial, global background brings in a different and more inclusive perspective. Obama is seeking the open Senate seat in Illinois as only the fourth African-American Senator.

In his keynote address, Obama didn’t offer any programmatic specifics, but that was not the purpose or place for detail. His message did demonstrate, however, an unusually clear and articulate understanding, not contempt, for those who might have a different point of view.

As just one example, Obama noted, “we worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states.” He spoke “not of a liberal America and a conservative America” but of a “United States of America.”

Senator Kerry’s acceptance speech mirrored Obama’s rhetoric and, to some extent, began to outline foreign and domestic priorities of a future Kerry administration. Notwithstanding a powerfully delivered, fully inclusive vision for a better America, Kerry’s foreign and domestic program does not yet match the inclusiveness of his articulated vision. Without further development, Kerry is vulnerable to claims that he does not “walk the talk.”

For example, while Kerry forcefully and effectively uses

his own war experience to demonstrate his personal “strength” on national security matters, he articulates only tonal, not substantive, differences with the Bush foreign policy. He is not articulating the broader and more unifying message that America is committed to the UN Millennium goals of reducing oppression, poverty, illiteracy, gender inequity, and disease, and that military force is one—but only one—tool in achieving those goals. In that larger context, Iraq is a battle worth winning because victory in securing the peace there will provide hope that freedom, gender equity, and prosperity is achievable even in historically repressive environments.

And Kerry plays “old” politics by promising to reduce middle-class taxes and increase taxes only for those making \$200,000 a year or more. Whatever the efficacy of this divisive political strategy to “tax the rich” (most middle-class Americans aspire to earning over \$200,000 and regard a tax on the “rich” as potentially applicable to them), Kerry is not articulating a broader, more unifying call for all Americans to chip in to make sure all Americans have health care coverage. An across-the-board tax increase, even with a progressively greater contribution from the wealthy, feels less like an attack on the success to which everyone aspires than a fair contribution to the common wealth.

Is it likely that President Bush will broaden his appeal and unify us around common values? The Republican Convention is weeks away, but based on his record to date, optimism is hard to come by.

So, our candidates, once again, will base their strategies on narrow appeals to what is perceived to be in our particular “interest,” failing to recognize that all Americans have a genuine interest in the well-being of all Americans.

It is the greatness of this nation that we are not locked into class, or caste, or position. Rather, we are a dynamic and generous people who share a common destiny. There is so much more that unites us than divides us. Appeals to our shared values can rally us in ways that political pundits can not even imagine.

Intriguingly, the son of a goatherd from Kenya sees clearly the shared vision that is our America. We are confronted daily by those who claim to want to be “unifiers” but propose policies that drive us apart. We can only hope that with time and experience, Obama will find the policies that match his appealing message. □

George Vradenburg is co-publisher of TIKKUN.

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