



Weekly What #4

Elaine Bennett's analysis of Barack Obama's "Yes We Can" Speech, January 8, 2008

Barack Obama became a political star in the United States when he delivered [the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention](#). You can find lots of great analysis of that speech, including [this behind-the-scenes analysis](#).

But the next big turning point in his political career happened after the 2008 New Hampshire primary, the first primary of the 2008 election. He lost that contest to Hillary Clinton, and many thought it might signal the end of his candidacy. After the results came in, he stood in a school gymnasium and delivered a "simple creed" that summed up his belief in the United States and its citizens. It became the theme of his campaign: "Yes We Can."

[Watch the speech before reading on.](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe751kMBwms&feature=youtu.be>

Make a mental note of any places that move you. [Speech transcript as published by The New York Times](#).

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you, New Hampshire. I love you back. Thank you. Thank you.

Well, thank you so much. I am still fired up and ready to go. (APPLAUSE)

Thank you. Thank you.

Well, first of all, I want to congratulate Senator Clinton on a hard-fought victory here in New Hampshire. She did an outstanding job. Give her a big round of applause.

I'm not a fan of "thank you" at the beginning of speeches, but here they serve a purpose—to acknowledge and quiet the crowd. And congratulating Sen. Clinton up front like this isn't just gracious. When the audience knows the speaker has to talk about something, like acknowledging an opponent, they won't take in much else until that's out of the way.

You know, a few weeks ago, no one imagined that we'd have accomplished what we did here tonight in New Hampshire. No one could have imagined it.

For most of this campaign, we were far behind. We always knew our climb would be steep. But in record numbers, you came out, and you spoke up for change.

Notice how he doesn't say he lost the primary. He frames it as a success: Look how far we've come. This is key to what follows; he could easily have given the same speech if he'd won that night.

And with your voices and your votes, you made it clear that at this moment, in this election, there is something happening in America.

(APPLAUSE)

There is something happening when men and women in Des Moines and Davenport, in Lebanon and Concord, come out in the snows of January to wait in lines that stretch block after block because they believe in what this country can be.

By mentioning Des Moines and Davenport, he reminds listeners that he did in fact win the first contest, the Iowa Caucus. He ties that victory to the New Hampshire primary by mentioning two towns in that state.

There is something happening. There's something happening when Americans who are young in age and in spirit, who've never participated in politics before, turn out in numbers we have never seen because they know in their hearts that this time must be different.

There's something happening when people vote not just for party that they belong to, but the hopes that they hold in common.

"There's something happening when..." He repeats this phrase three times, which is a magic number in speechwriting. By the third time you hear it, it's become a refrain. Speakers often balk after two repetitions—or want to go for four or more. No, no, no. No. Three is the magic number. You can occasionally get away with four for emphasis, but don't press your luck.

And whether 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.

That's what's happening in America right now; change is what's happening in America.

This last sentence uses one of my favorite rhetorical devices: chiasmus. Think of it as an X made out of words. "What's happening in America" opens the first clause in the sentence and closes the second. The chiasmus lets Obama mask the repetition of the key phrase without directly repeating it, as he did with "something happening." Well-made sentences settle comfortably into your brain. I think they nudge your subliminally toward agreement with the speaker.

You, all of you who are here tonight, all who put so much heart and soul and work into this campaign, you can be the new majority who can lead this nation out of a long political darkness.

Democrats, independents and Republicans who are tired of the division and distraction that has clouded Washington, who know that we can disagree without being disagreeable, who understand that, if we mobilize our voices to challenge the money and influence that stood in our way and challenge ourselves to reach for something better, there is no problem we cannot solve, there is no destiny that we cannot fulfill.

This is a really long sentence for a speech. Obama's delivery saves it, but if I were writing for a lesser speaker I would break it up—maybe turning each "who" clause into a sentence of its own.

Our new American majority can end the outrage of unaffordable, unavailable health care in our time. We can bring doctors and patients, workers and businesses, Democrats and Republicans together, and we can tell the drug and insurance industry that, while they get a seat at the table, they don't get to buy every chair, not this time, not now.

Next he turns to the phrase “our new American majority.” Listen to him talk about all the great things this “new American majority” can do and it’s easy to remember **he just lost an election**. No wonder this guy titled his campaign autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*. How audacious is it to deliver a victory speech after an election you just lost?

Our new majority can end the tax breaks for corporations that ship our jobs overseas and put a middle-class tax cut in the pockets of working Americans who deserve it.

We can stop sending our children to schools with corridors of shame and start putting them on a pathway to success.

We can stop talking about how great teachers are and start rewarding them for their greatness by giving them more pay and more support. We can do this with our new majority.

Third repetition of “new majority” comes at the end of the sentence, not the beginning. Again, mixing it up. And stretching out the time between mentions of it.

We can harness the ingenuity of farmers and scientists, citizens and entrepreneurs to free this nation from the tyranny of oil and save our planet from a point of no return.

And when I am president of the United States, we will end this war in Iraq and bring our troops home.

(APPLAUSE)

We will end this war in Iraq. We will bring our troops home. We will finish the job -- we will finish the job against Al Qaida in Afghanistan. We will care for our veterans. We will restore our moral standing in the world.

And we will never use 9/11 as a way to scare up votes, because it is not a tactic to win an election. It is a challenge that should unite America and the world against the common threats of the 21st century: terrorism and nuclear weapons, climate change and poverty, genocide and disease.

Beginning with “Our new American majority” and ending here, he’s laid out a series of policies, or the beliefs that shape his policies. Now he enters the final section of the speech. Be on the lookout for a call to action.

All of the candidates in this race share these goals. All of the candidates in this race have good ideas and all are patriots who serve this country honorably.

Nothing to say about that language. Just feeling nostalgic for the old days when politicians spoke with civility about each other, no matter what party they represent.

But the reason our campaign has always been different, the reason we began this improbable journey almost a year ago is because it's not just about what I will do as president. It is also about what you, the people who love this country, the citizens of the United States of America, can do to change it.

That's what this election is all about.

That's why tonight belongs to you. It belongs to the organizers, and the volunteers, and the staff who believed in this journey and rallied so many others to join the cause.

We know the battle ahead will be long. But always remember that, no matter what obstacles stand in our way, nothing can stand in the way of the power of millions of voices calling for change.

Again, **he lost the election**. How can a loser talk about “the power of millions of voices calling for change”? And now the call to action begins: **Let nothing stand in the way of change**.

We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics. And they will only grow louder and more dissonant in the weeks and months to come.

We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope. But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope.

“We’ve been” 3x

For when we have faced down impossible odds, when we've been told we're not ready or that we shouldn't try or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. Yes, we can. Yes, we can.

Three “we” clauses build up to the “simple creed.” And the triple repetition again—which he delivers perfectly.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation: Yes, we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail towards freedom through the darkest of nights: Yes, we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness: Yes, we can.

It was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot, a president who chose the moon as our new frontier, and a king who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land: Yes, we can, to justice and equality.

“It was...” four times—in increasingly longer sentences. This is poetry. With a “yes we can” after each—though the fourth one adds some specificity about what we can say yes to. And that ushers in the next section:

Yes, we can, to opportunity and prosperity. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can repair this world. Yes, we can.

Three more times with specificity and a fourth for emphasis.

And so, tomorrow, as we take the campaign south and west, as we learn that the struggles of the textile workers in Spartanburg are not so different than the plight of the dishwasher in Las Vegas, that the hopes of the little girl who goes to the crumbling school in Dillon are the same as the dreams of the boy who learns on the streets of L.A., we will remember that there is something happening in America, that we are not as divided as our politics suggest, that we are one people, we are one nation.

He's not just reeling off place names. He's alluding to specific stories. He doesn't need to tell the whole story—the crowd can fill in the details in their own heads, deciding how a textile worker in South Carolina and a dishwasher in Las Vegas may be connected. Again, he uses a really long sentence to ratchet up the emotion of his delivery. And the denser language of the beginning of the sentence gives way to crystal clear, one-syllable words at the end. Okay, “people” and “nation” have two syllables. But they're the words this whole paragraph is driving toward. So the extra syllable gives them extra weight.

And, together, we will begin the next great chapter in the American story, with three words that will ring from coast to coast, from sea to shining sea: Yes, we can.

He lifts “from sea to shining sea” from one of our patriotic hymns, “America, the Beautiful”—lyrics by Katherine Lee Bates:

America! America!
 God shed his grace on thee
 And crown thy good with brotherhood
 From sea to shining sea!

His listeners would recognize the reference immediately. So it draws the crowd together, reminds them of their civic pride. Perhaps evokes a memory of a time when they sang the song themselves. It evokes warmth and patriotism. A great thing to do when you know you're about to leave town to finish the long primary season, but you want your voters to remain cohesive and committed.

Thank you, New Hampshire. Thank you. Thank you.

You might be interested in...

[Ray Charles created my favorite arrangement of “America the Beautiful”](#) when he sang at the Republican convention that nominated Ronald Reagan for president in 1980. He starts with the seldom-sung third verse that includes the lyric about heroes “...who more than self their country loved/and mercy more than life.” Charles later said he didn't support Reagan; he did it because they were paying.

Obama himself cited this speech as a turning point in the campaign. He gave [his final interview as president](#) on the new podcast *Pod Save America*, hosted by two of his former speechwriters.

Links:

Obama 2004 DNC Keynote: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0&feature=youtu.be>
 Chicago magazine analysis of DNC Keynote: <http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/June-2007/The-Speech/>
 Video of New Hampshire Primary 2008 speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fe751kMBwms&feature=youtu.be>
 NYT transcript of speech <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/08/us/politics/08text-obama.html>
 Ray Charles singing “America the Beautiful” <https://youtu.be/W1GEpg0c1fw>
 Obama interview on “Pod Save America”: <http://podbay.fm/show/1192761536/e/1484813100?autostart=1>