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How Michelle Obama's 2016 DNC Speech Captivated & Uplifted America

In its 227-year history of the presidency, the United States has never seen an election season like this one, in which so many precedents have been set. For the first time, a woman—a lawyer, a former First Lady, a former New York State Senator, and a former Secretary of State, who has dedicated forty years of her life as a public servant—has finally won the official nomination of a major political party. For the first time ever, the current First Lady—an accomplished lawyer and writer of African-American descent—delivered a compelling speech to fully endorse a fellow First Lady to become the next president of the United States.

At the heart of this election, it is not only the matter of deciding who is the most qualified person to lead the country. It is the essential and fundamental question of who we are as Americans that still hangs in the balance. Michelle Obama answered that question at the 2016 Democratic National Convention when she rallied all Democratic Party members together to unify and support Hillary Clinton, after a contentious and close primary battle with Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination. The tone and the timing of Obama's speech was imperative at a time when many eligible voters within the party who have supported Sanders during the Democratic Primary (many of whom are college students and young professionals struggling with debt) doubt Clinton's trustworthiness as a leader. Obama's mission was to deliver a powerful speech that not only embodied Clinton's campaign slogan of "Stronger

Together” to rally all of Clinton’s and Sanders’ supporters together, but also to reframe the voice and the narrative of America’s story with optimism and cultural diversity in the call for unity.

The strength in Obama’s speech springs from the anecdotal ways in which she recounts her personal experiences as First Lady and as a mother to her two daughters, Sasha and Malia, as well as sharing her hopes for them—and by extension, her hopes for an optimistic future for all Americans, especially for the children who often look up to the president as a role model and a figure whom they can aspire to become when they grow up. Obama immediately establishes a visual image of America through her daughters, as symbolic representatives of today’s youth and future generations (Clark). Obama offers not just the antithesis to Donald Trump’s campaign, but also the antidote to his blustering racist and misogynistic rhetoric by defining him as the playground bully that she and Barack have taught her daughters to stand up and confront, as illustrated in this portion of her speech:

See, because at that moment I realized that our time in the White House would form the foundation for who they would become and how well we managed this experience could truly make or break them. That is what Barack and I think about everyday as we try to guide and protect our girls through the challenges of this unusual life in the spotlight, how we urge them to ignore those who question their father’s citizenship or faith. How we insist that the hateful language they hear from public figures on TV does not represent the true spirit of this country. How we explain that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don’t stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high.

(Washington Post)

In fact, Trump’s name was not even explicitly uttered anywhere in her speech. Michelle Obama “elegantly eviscerated” Trump by mentioning his previous controversial actions against

her husband (Traister). In terms of rhetorical devices, one can argue that Obama used *praeteritio* effectively in the aforementioned quote, a subtle rhetorical stylistic device that raised the audience's awareness about Clinton's opponent by the mere mention of his deep character flaws. By not speaking Trump's name aloud and instead simply alluding to his propensity to impulsively insult others on social media and his penchant to openly mock women and minority groups at his campaign rallies, Obama is drawing a stark contrast between Trump and Clinton (Traister). With surgical precision, Obama highlights the tension between the two nominees, and without even directly mentioning his name she deftly emphasizes Clinton's credibility as an experienced, well informed, and level-headed public servant while also eloquently dismissing Trump as an unstable, unreliable, and unpredictable simple-minded gossip in this example:

I want someone with the proven strength to persevere, someone who knows this job and takes it seriously, someone who understands that the issues a president faces are not black or white and cannot be boiled down to 140 characters. Because when you have the nuclear codes at your fingertips and the military in your command, you can't make snap decisions. You can't have a thin skin or a tendency to lash out. You need to be steady and measured and well informed. (Washington Post)

Obama made the case that the two presidential nominees are not just political adversaries; the choice between Clinton and Trump could mean the literal difference of making the choice between good and evil, respectively. Impulsivity is not to be mistaken as decisiveness, just as posting a series of insults and factually incorrect tweets on Twitter is not the same as demonstrating a thorough understanding of complex policy issues. In As Roy Peter Clark humorously pointed out in his article for the Poynter Institute: "The weird-coiffed Donald Trump looks nothing like the reptilian Voldemort, but there is a bit of 'He Who Shall Not Be Named' in

this critique, as if even uttering his name would pollute the language and meaning of her oration.” In other words, the name “Trump” has already become easily equated with the TV mogul’s deplorable actions and divisive rhetoric.

Aside from highlighting that Hillary Clinton’s opponent should not even be considered as an option on the ballot in November, Michelle Obama also builds a solid and thorough case for Clinton’s many qualifications, experiences, and reliability as a dedicated leader and as a unifier. In doing so, Obama sets up the scene for Clinton’s good character, goodwill, and more importantly, her trustworthiness. She gives examples of Clinton’s career choices to show that Clinton’s past record indicates her passion for helping the American people because she shares their concerns about the economy, education, immigration and assimilation, and healthcare. As Obama stated in her speech at the DNC this past year:

See, I trust Hillary to lead this country because I’ve seen her lifelong devotion to our nation’s children, not just her own daughter, who she has raised to perfection... but every child who needs a champion, kids who take the long way to school to avoid the gangs, kids who wonder how they’ll ever afford college, kids whose parents don’t speak a word of English, but dream of a better life, kids who look to us to determine who and what they can be. You see, Hillary has spent decades doing the relentless, thankless work to actually make a difference in their lives... advocating for kids with disabilities as a young lawyer, fighting for children’s healthcare as first lady, and for quality child care in the Senate. (Washington Post)

By this body of categorical syllogisms, Michelle Obama reminded Democratic Party members, independent voters, and anyone else who happened to be watching the DNC on the television, about all of Clinton’s career accomplishments over the span of her forty years in

public service. Obama drew from her own credibility and position as a First Lady and as a mother to make an emotional appeal to voters about Clinton's likability and patriotism with regards to ensuring that both her daughters' futures—and the future of all young people—look bright under her leadership.

Michelle Obama also made sure to emphasize Clinton's determination and dedication to serving the American people, to show that Clinton has a fighting spirit and that she has the stamina to defend and protect the rights of the people again, ready to face the current challenges this time as their president. At this point, Obama looked out in front of her and fixed her "critical gaze" on all of the Bernie Sanders supporters in the crowd with her "steady smile" (Traister):

And when she didn't win the nomination eight years ago, she didn't get angry or disillusioned. Hillary did not pack up and go home, because as a true public servant Hillary knows that this is so much bigger than her own desires and disappointments. So she proudly stepped up to serve our country once again as secretary of state, traveling the globe to keep our kids safe. (Washington Post)

The second purpose of the above quote is to address the disgruntled Bernie Sanders supporters who felt that Sanders should have won the official Democratic nomination in lieu of Clinton. Many of Sanders' delegates, who refer to themselves as "Berners," were protesting the results of the Democratic Primary and repeatedly booed and grumbled throughout the DNC. As Rebecca Traister wrote in her article analyzing Michelle Obama's speech delivery: "After a day—and night—of Bernie boos, these brief, sharp lines felt hot and stinging, with their implicit comparison of their tantrums to the good sportsmanship of their nemesis."

The most powerful moment in Michelle Obama's speech came toward the end, when she recalled the gradual imperfect progress that the country has undergone throughout its young,

turbulent, and ever-evolving history. It was during this moment when Michelle Obama reframed the discussion about the American narrative and had put into perspective the social upheavals that affected the treatment of several groups of people based on their race, ethnicity, gender, and place of origin. Obama reminded the audience of the struggles that African American specifically had to face—the selling of African slaves among the first Europeans who settled in the Americas, the generations of people who endured a lifetime slavery, and the Jim Crow segregationist era following the Reconstruction period despite the fact that the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments were ratified specifically to end slavery and grant citizenship and voting rights for African Americans:

This is the story of this country, the story that has brought me to this stage tonight, the story of generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving and hoping and doing what needed to be done so that today, I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves and I watch my daughters—two beautiful, intelligent, black young women—playing with their dogs on the White House lawn. (Washington Post)

Obama specified these historical examples to emphasize that without all of these strides toward advancing freedom and expanding peoples' rights through the civil rights movement and social reform, she and her family would never have had the opportunity to live their lives freely and become the First Family. By showing how the long road to freedom has directly impacted her predecessors and her own family, Obama forced the audience to confront her own personal struggles to overcome racism, while also contrasting and reconciling the country's dark past with her own hopes for her daughters' well-being and opportunities for advancement. She blasted Trump again through another stylistic rhetorical device—*prolepsis*—to refute and shut down

Trump's campaign slogan: "So, look, don't let anyone ever tell you that this country isn't great, that somehow we need to make it great again. Because this right now is the greatest country on earth!" (Washington Post)

Obama established an undeniably strong emotional appeal to both patriotism and family values, which enabled her to immediately connect with her audience. In her closing, Obama then used repetition as another stylistic device in her call to action: "We need to knock on every door, we need to get out every vote, we need to pour every last ounce of our passion and our strength and our love for this country into electing Hillary Clinton as president of the United States of America! So let's get to work. Thank you all and God bless" (Washington Post). Saying the words "we need to" three times in this quote almost feels like both an invocation and a rallying cry that echoes her previous motto of "When they go low, we go high," alluding to the necessity to rise above the opposition's oppressive negativity.

Many people, including some conservative news networks and even Donald Trump himself, acknowledged that Michelle Obama had delivered a powerful speech (Clark). As one journalist phrased it, Obama offers herself up to the audience as "living evidence of what American ideals might accomplish" and proof that American democracy works as its citizens strive to continue making this imperfect country a more perfect union (Applebaum). Michelle Obama's effective use of rhetoric captivated them and left them feeling hopeful and uplifted by her unwavering resolve to for her chosen presidential candidate, her love for her family, and her passionate hope that the country will be better off if they choose a candidate who represents strength through unity.

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