

## Chapter 12

# How President Obama Promoted Conflict Reconciliation and Diplomacy

**Karen A. Feste**  
University of Denver, USA

### ABSTRACT

*The American president is expected to demonstrate strong, respected political leadership at home and abroad. As a proposal for achieving more effective global governance, the 2008 Obama presidential campaign portrayed an optimistic appeal that U.S. interests should be redirected toward greater cooperation and inclusivity by engaging adversaries in conflict resolution processes. Did Barack Obama succeed in manifesting his campaign identity as a peacemaker during his first term in office? This question is examined through a content analysis of selected speeches of wide-audience appeal that illustrate his efforts to extend the olive branch in the context of the meaning of reconciliation. The net assessment is that Obama's campaign image was transferred into the presidency, in particular the continuation of a high level of optimism expressed in his public speeches, in spite of political crises facing his administration.*

### INTRODUCTION

The president is the most prominent focus of political leadership in the United States—the primary mover in shaping national discourse on domestic and foreign policy. Accordingly, an important objective for any newly installed American executive administration is to structure the context in which events or proposals are viewed, says Ryfe (2005), who labels presidential communication “crafted talk” because it is produced by many individuals—speech writers, consultants, political aides, and policy experts. Spoken words provide

important clues to the perceptions, visions, and goals of political leaders. They are designed to reflect political plans coherently, including the outlines of a verbal strategy for achieving objectives. Hart (1984) sees the rhetoric of the presidency as a model to articulate policy, a model to imagine social agreement that never existed before, or a model to develop particular images of the president. Shogan (2006) says the arguments a president chooses to emphasize in speeches have political consequences that can affect prospects for effective governance. Yet rhetoric can only operate as a contingent source of leadership—be-

havioral dynamics of the political environment, particularly motivational incentives for adversaries to accept the chief executive's agenda, will ultimately determine rhetorical effectiveness of a president's ethos.

Presidents may be directors of change—to move in new directions, establishing an agenda, and persuading the public and organized interests; or facilitators of change—understanding the opportunities for change in the environments and fashioning strategies and tactics to exploit them (Edwards, 2009). The director reshapes the contours of the political landscape to pace the way for change, whereas the facilitator exploits opportunities presented by a favorable configuration of political forces. The conceptualization is similar to Burns' (1978) two types of political leadership: transactional and transformational. Transformational leadership involves shifts in the beliefs, the needs, and the values of followers. It originates in the personal values and beliefs of leaders; values such as justice and integrity that cannot be negotiated or exchanged, and includes idealized influence (the leader's ability to display conviction, and highlight the importance of purpose, commitment, and ethical consequences of decisions), inspirational motivation (the ability to articulate an appealing vision of the future); and, intellectual stimulation (encouraging new ideas and reasoning). These factors intertwine with the legitimate basis of social power accorded to the presidential office and the nature of conflicts faced by the occupant in that role. Neustadt (1961) viewed presidential communication essentially as a bargaining instrument useful for the accrual of a leader's power. Presidential rhetoric has been institutionalized as a norm of modern politics—it is codified in appeals and the use of words and phrases to activate particular responses that resonate with the public. Language expression remains fundamental to this process.

On February 10, 2007, Barack Obama, who had served just two years in Congress as the junior Senator from Illinois, formally announced he was

running for the office of President of the United States. His speech that day conveyed a message anchored in hope ("We can build a more hopeful America"); change (...in the face of impossible odds, people who love their country can change it"); and political reconciliation ("Politics doesn't have to divide us ... we can work together"). He aimed "not just to hold an office but together with you to transform a nation." (Campaign speeches were published in Jones, 2008). Although his experience in national and international politics was quite limited, he had captured the attention of veteran political insiders for his optimism and aversion to ideological dogma. With a biography that "radiated possibilities of overcoming divisions and the capacity for change" he cast a figure of national stature, Heilemann and Halperin (2010, p. 27) wrote in *Game Change*, a detailed story of the 2008 United States Presidential Campaign. Obama became the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency; he won the national vote in November, and was inaugurated into office on January 20, 2009.

Barack Obama was elected on a political platform largely drawn from his presidential announcement speech: he remained "on point" throughout his campaign, conveying a passion and motivation to unite voters around common hopes and common dreams, urging everyone to stand together and believe that positive changes lie ahead. Under his transformative leading guidance, "yes we can," the rallying call crescendo shouted with conviction at many campaign events, would become reality. Basically, he was swept into office on the persuasiveness of his public rhetoric to the American people, capturing 68% of electoral college ballots by securing polling victory in the larger states. By popular vote, however, the Democratic Party's candidate margin of victory was much smaller, just 53%, an indication the nation was divided on political preference. Candidate, and later President, Obama designed his vision of leadership around themes of hope and change—his intent was to foster widespread

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