

Power of Words

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More than 200 years after the first presidential contest, the weapon of choice remains the same. Despite all the technological progress we've made since 1796, the battle is still largely fought with the spoken word.

For speechwriters like me, this not only vindicates what we do but is actually quite heady. Imagine that the keys to the most powerful office in the world are the tools of your trade.

Unfortunately, the past few campaigns have not shown this war of words at its best. When the most memorable phrases are "Where's the beef?" and "Read my lips," then our speechmaking tradition has reached a low ebb.

This state of affairs is all the more distressing because much of our history can be traced through inspired remarks, going back to John Winthrop, one of the first Colonial governors.

Even before his ship sighted land, Mr. Winthrop sermonized to his fellow passengers, "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." His words gave expression to the sense of destiny and moral leadership that have come to characterize this country.

Ben Franklin's remarks after signing the Declaration of Independence, "We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately," cleverly served notice to the squabbling colonies of the larger task ahead.

Words again set the stage in the years leading up to this country's worst nightmare when Lincoln warned that "A house divided against itself cannot stand." His brilliant depiction of the political landscape bolstered the country's resolve to maintain the Union.

And Theodore Roosevelt's exhortation to his countrymen, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," announced America's coming of age as an international power.

Maybe it's asking too much to demand such visionary language. After all, we live in an age of sound bites and dumbed-down language, a time when spin counts more than substance. And certainly, the speeches of Messrs. Bush and Gore are well-crafted and expertly tailored for their intended audiences.

Still, it's unfortunate that the candidates have not depicted more strikingly the issues facing this country - the growing disparity between rich and poor, the stalled progress in race relations, the need to win over rogue countries to the family of nations, the challenges and benefits of rapidly changing technology.

Language that would vividly evoke these issues does not necessarily have to be in the form of metaphor. The beauty of this country's greatest speech, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, is in its phrasing and cadence.

The powerful wording forces us onward from one well-considered thought to the next. In our collective memory, we can't hear "a new nation, conceived in liberty," without also hearing, "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Or, "government of the people, by the people, for the people," without the closing phrase "shall not perish from the earth."

Some might say that great speeches, like great leaders, emerge only during times of crisis. Without the Great Depression, we wouldn't have Franklin Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Absent Britain's desperate evacuation at Dunkirk, Churchill would not have exhorted the British to "their finest hour."

But John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, delivered during a time of relative peace and prosperity, would indicate otherwise. His famous line, "ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country," is now recognized as a hallmark of the 1960s, a watershed moment that helped usher in an era of volunteerism and activism.

Surely, this is the true power of inspired speechmaking - to draw the electorate into the political process, to make voters feel they have an active part in this democracy. And surely Kennedy's words demonstrated, as did those of his forebears, that inspired language speaks not just to the moment. It also speaks to each generation's role in the future.

The need for such language continues. Like Mr. Winthrop's fellow passengers, we too could use a visionary sense of our role in this ongoing enterprise and where it will lead. As the current candidates respond to weekly polls and press reports, one can only hope that they keep this longer-term objective in mind. For when all is said and done, history will judge us by our best-chosen words.