# "We Must Pick Ourselves Up, Dust Ourselves Off" President Barack Obama's Proverbial Inaugural Address

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**Abstract:** The pressures and expectations for Barack Obama to give a memorable inaugural address were enormous, and there was much conjecture about what he would include and how he would verbalize his thoughts. Many expected him to quote Lincoln, Roosevelt, or Kennedy, as he had done in numerous speeches before. But Obama, impressive rhetorician and orator that he is, refrained from using well-known quotations and instead created a number of his own formulaic statements in the form of pseudo-proverbs that might over time become proverbial, to wit "Greatness is never a given, it must be earned" or "People will judge you on what you can build, not what you can destroy." In addition, he employed a considerable amount of folk speech in the form of proverbial phrases, with these emotive metaphors giving his speech a solid balance between intellectual rhetoric and traditional folk language. Uplifting as this epideictic address needed to be, Obama's rhetoric was once again informed by practical wisdom and pragmatic judgment expressed at least in part by quotable and proverbial statements. The amazing aspect of this use of formulaic language is that Barack Obama does not merely adhere to traditional language but that he insists on its innovative use as he calls for socioeconomic change and a better life for all.
**Keywords:** Paremiology. Proverb. Proverbial expression. Quotation. Pseudo-proverb. Barack Obama. Rhetoric. Oratory.

**Título: "'We Must Pick Ourselves Up, Dust Ourselves Off'. Discurso inaugural proverbial del Presidente Barack Obama"**
**Resumen:** Las presiones y expectativas acerca del memorable discurso inaugural de Barack Obama fueron enormes y hubo muchas hipótesis sobre lo que iba a incluir y cómo iba a exponer sus pensamientos. Muchos creían que iba a citar a Lincoln, Roosvelt o Kennedy, como había hecho en numerosos discursos anteriores. Pero Obama, como buen retórico y orador, se abstuvo de recurrir a citas conocidas y creó una serie de enunciados en forma de pseudo-refranes que con el tiempo podrían convertirse en proverbiales, como "La grandeza nunca es un don, hay que ganársela" o "La gente te juzgará según lo que puedes construir, no según lo que puedes destruir". Asimismo, empleó un número considerable de expresiones populares con forma de frases proverbiales, con metáforas tan emotivas que imprimieron a su discurso un sólido equilibrio entre el lenguaje retórico intelectual y el lenguaje folclórico tradicional. Elevando el discurso al nivel que merecía, la retórica de Obama se reveló gracias a la sabiduría práctica y al juicio pragmático que demostró por lo menos en parte a través de enunciados proverbiales dignos de ser citados. Lo que sorprende de su empleo del lenguaje proverbial es que Barack Obama no se adhiere simplemente al lenguaje tradicional sino que insiste en un uso innovador para aludir al cambio socioeconómico y a una vida mejor para todos.
**Palabras clave:** Paremiología. Paremia. Refrán. Expresión proverbial. Cita. Pseudo-refrán. Barack Obama. Retórica. Oratoria.

**Titre : « 'We Must Pick Ourselves Up, Dust Ourselves Off'. Discours proverbial inaugural du President Barack Obama »**
**Résumé :** Les pressions et les expectatives au sujet du mémorable discours inaugural de Barack Obama furent énormes et il y eu de nombreuses hypothèses sur ce qu'il allait y inclure et comment allait-il exposer ses idées. Bon nombre croyait qu'il allait citer Lincoln, Roosvelt ou Kennedy, de la même façon que dans ses précédents discours. Mais Obama, bon orateur connaisseur de la réthorique, s'est abstenu de

recourir aux citations connues et a créé une série d'énoncés sous forme de pseudo-proverbes qui, avec le temps, pourraient devenir des énoncés proverbiaux, comme « La grandeur n'est jamais un don, il faut la mériter » ou « Les gens te jugeront selon ce que tu peux construire, non pas selon ce que tu peux détruire ». De même, il a employé un nombre considérable d'expressions populaires sous forme de phrases proverbiales, avec des métaphores tellement émotives qu'elles ont marqués son discours d'un solide équilibre entre le langage rhétorique intellectuel et le langage folklorique traditionnel. Élevant ainsi le discours au niveau qu'il méritait, la rhétorique d' Obama s'est révélé grâce à la sagesse pratique et au bon sens qu'il a démontré avoir, au moins en partie, à travers les énoncés proverbiaux dignes d'être cités. Ce qui surprend dans son emploi du langage proverbial, c'est que Barack Obama n'adhère pas simplement au langage traditionnel mais il insiste sur une utilisation du langage novatrice pour faire allusion au changement socio-économique et à une vie meilleure pour tous.
**Mots-clé :** Parémiologie. Parémie. Proverbe. Expression proverbiale. Citation. Pseudo proverbe. Barack Obama. Rhétorique. Oratoire.

On January 20, 2009, the brand-new President of the United States Barack Obama delivered his eagerly awaited inaugural address to the American people and the rest of the world. Of course, the pressures and expectations for Obama to give a most memorable speech were exceedingly high, and there was much talk and speculation about what he would include and how he would verbalize this address. This also led to a series of reviews of previous inaugural addresses, with Jill Lepore's essay of January 12, 2009, on "The Speech: Have Inaugural Addresses Been Getting Worse" in *The New Yorker* standing out as a solid piece of historical scholarship. It begins with the statement that "Barack Obama has been studying up, reading Abraham Lincoln's speeches, raising everyone's expectations for what just might be the most eagerly awaited inaugural" (Lepore, 2009: 49). The author goes on to explain how previous presidents received plenty of help from friends and speechwriters in the formulation of their inaugurals, with James Garfield and Jimmy Carter most likely being the only presidents who wrote this particular address completely on their own. As has been pointed out repeatedly by presidential historians and rhetorical studies (Denton and Woodward, 1998; Lim, 2008), the ritual of the inauguration of the president has turned the speech into somewhat of a formulaic event, making it very difficult to deviate from various traditional expectations:

> From a generic perspective, then, a presidential inaugural reconstitutes the people as an audience that can witness the rite of investiture, rehearses communal values from the past, sets forth the political principles that will guide the new administration, and demonstrates that the president can enact the presidential persona appropriately. Still more generally, the presidential inaugural address is an epideictic [rhetorically demonstrative] ritual that is formal, unifying, abstract, and eloquent. At the core of this ritual lies epideictic timelessness – the fusion of the past and future of the nation in an eternal present in which we reaffirm what Franklin Roosevelt called "our covenant with ourselves", a covenant between the executive and the nation that is the essence of democratic government. (Campbell and Jamieson, 2008: 56)

Having looked at previous inaugural addresses that are easily accessible in a number of anthologies (Hunt, 1997; Lott, 1961; Remini and Golway, 2008), Barack Obama was very well aware of their uplifting purpose that is certainly different from speeches given during political campaigns. So Obama, the impressive rhetorician and orator, did well to decide to write his speech himself (Newton-Small, 2008), receiving only minor editorial or factual help, as reported by Mary Kate Cary, former speechwriter for President George H.W. Bush:

> Earlier this morning [January 20, 2009], aides to Mr. Obama told reporters that the president-elect had consulted historian David McCullough (presumably to double-check the references to Valley Forge); Lincoln biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin (he mentioned the Gettysburg address, and his homage to those who endured the "lash of the whip" was a reference to a line in Lincoln's second

> inaugural) and the dean of the White House speechwriters, Kennedy speechwriter Ted Sorensen. I'm sure Mr. Sorensen liked the litany "To the Muslim world ... To those leaders around the globe ... To those who cling to power through corruption ... To the people of poor nations ..." which clearly echoed a similar litany in Kennedy's inaugural address. (Cary, 2009)

And yet, one of the big surprises of the speech was in fact that Obama, breaking with his own predilection to doing so, did not include any of the well-known quotations by such great Americans as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and others. Gerard Baker put it somewhat negatively this way in his comments on "The Speech That Failed to Fly" one day after its delivery in the London *Times*:

> There were few truly memorable pieces of phraseology – no Kennedyesque, or Rooseveltian quotations for the ages.
> He [Obama] laboured hard to echo the tone and cadence of his biggest campaign performances. And there was more than a hint of a self-conscious echo – distractingly – of the speeches of his hero and fellow Illinoisan, Abraham Lincoln.
> The language in particular sounded decidedly 19th century in parts – all those commands to "know" some or other intent of US policy, all those glancing biblical references.
> But it wasn't up to Lincoln's standards – which perhaps is asking too much. In fact, it may not have been really memorable at all. It's unlikely that most people will remember a phrase from it a few weeks from now, let alone a century.
> In fairness it was a speech more obviously measured to the practical immensity of the immediate challenges. It was directed at two audiences: a hopeful but anxious one at home, and an uncertain but hopeful one overseas. (Baker, 2009)

It is true, I must admit that at first I was also a little disappointed by Obama not having employed any of his "favorite" quotations, many of which have turned into proverbs, to wit Abraham Lincoln's use of "A house divided against itself cannot stand" and "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people", Frederick Douglass's "Power never concedes without a demand", Franklin D. Roosevelt's "We have nothing to fear but fear itself", John F. Kennedy's "Don't ask what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country", etc. (Mieder, 1997: 99-137, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2005: 187-209). Of course, I liked Obama's allusion to Winston S. Churchill's title *The Gathering Storm* (1948) of the first volume of his celebrated six-volume history of *The Second World War* (1948-1954) by speaking of the fact that "every so often, the [presidential] oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms" (Mieder and Bryan, 1995; Sanger, 2009). His variation, at the end of the inaugural address, of William Shakespeare's proverbial line "Now is the winter of our discontent" (1594, *Richard III*), popularized by John Steinbeck's last novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), was clearly also very effective as a follow-up comment to the unexpected and little known quotation of a statement made by George Washington at Valley Forge:

> In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At a moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words to be read to the people:
> "Let it be told to the future world ... that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive ... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."
> America. In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. (for references from Barack Obama's speeches see http://www.obamaspeeches.com/)

This quotation by the father of the American nation marks the beginning of Obama's emotional peroration of his magisterial address that speaks not of the "discontent" of the American people but rather of the "hardship" that they can and will conquer: "Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested, we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back, nor did we falter; and with the eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations." This is inaugural speech at its best at the end, and upon reflection I am thoroughly convinced that Barack Obama was wise to finish with Washington's insistence on hope, virtue, and freedom couched not in a quotable phrase but rather in a verbal image of striving towards a better future.

Before moving on to an analysis of the proverbial language of Obama's inaugural address, let me present a few additional comments by journalists and former presidential speechwriters concerning the relationship between rhetoric and content in his remarks. Michael Gerson, who basically wrote George W. Bush's first inaugural address in 2001, was quite harsh in his criticism, claiming that "too many of his [Obama's] words were platitudes" and that "heading into this inaugural address, many expected the speech to be rhetorically masterful but perhaps ideologically shallow. Instead, we heard a speech that was rhetorically flat and substantively interesting. On his first day in office, President Obama has managed to surprise." In fact, Gerson goes on to argue that "like Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr. [Karabegović, 2007], Obama positioned himself as a conservative revolutionary – attempting to re-create our country by reasserting the traditional moral principles that gave it birth" (Gerson, 2009). I am not certain whether all of these leaders would agree with the "conservative revolutionary" label, but, to look at it positively, it might help Obama to bring more Republican conservatives on board of the changing ship of state.

Tom Brune, writing in *Newsday*, is a bit more balanced in his analysis of the epideictic nature of Obama's speech, stressing in all fairness that the address had to be almost somewhat anti-climatic in view of all the incredible "noise" that the media had created around this event:

> Barack Obama didn't always soar in his inaugural address yesterday, but he scored the points he needed to satisfy the legion of hopeful supporters eagerly listening to the new president here and around the world.
> Looking out over a sea of people from the Capitol's west steps on a cold, sunny midday, Obama delivered a confident, almost somber speech, rooted in history and aimed at the future, with the primary themes of responsibility and change.
> After all the hype leading up to the ceremony yesterday, Obama's address almost seemed anti-climatic, but it still hit every marker he needed to hit in a strong speech that lasted just about 20 minutes. (Brune, 2009)

And here then is a third view, this time from abroad, by Fintan O'Toole of *The Irish Times*, who to my way of thinking hits the proverbial nail on the head with his analysis. Yes, there definitely was a change of Obama's rallying campaign rhetoric with its use of preformulated language based on emotive expressiveness to a more sober and content-rich communicative approach. On January 20, 2009, with the oath of office and the inaugural speech, the candidate and President-elect Barack Obama changed to President Barack Obama, and this giant step is, appropriately so, reflected in a noticeable change of language:

> The shift from candidate to president was obvious to a degree that may have disappointed some of his hearers.
> It was not just that Obama's eloquence was less fluent, less dazzling, less of a performance, than the electrifying speeches that previously defined him, the address to the Democratic Party convention in 2004 that marked him out [see Frank and McPhail, 2005], or the brilliant discourse on race that saved his candidacy last year [see Wills, 2008].

> His body language was certainly more constrained, his cadences less dramatic, his rhythms less mesmeric. (O'Toole, 2009)

I must admit that from a purely rhetorical point of view I also was at first a bit disappointed with the inaugural address by missing some of the quotations, pseudo-proverbs, proverbs, proverbial phrases and twin formulas that had been the trademark of Obama's writings and speeches. Upon reflection, I came around to thinking that Obama, wanting this speech to be his very own, must have consciously decided to stay away from some of those expected quotations by former presidents and time-worn proverbs (Harnsberger, 1964; Jay, 1996; Miller, 1989). However, I am still wondering why he did not use some of his own phraseological creations from previous speeches that by their structures and metaphors have a good chance to become quotable or proverbial (Mieder, 2004: xii-xiii, 132-133):

> "America prospers when all Americans prosper." (June 28, 2008, Washington, D.C.; and in five subsequent speeches)
>
> "If you invest in America, America will invest in you." (June 16, 2008, Flint, Michigan; and in nine subsequent speeches)
>
> "In America, separate can never be equal." (May 1, 2005, Detroit, Michigan; and in three subsequent speeches)
>
> "Ballot boxes don't make a democracy." (March 21, 2007, Washington, D.C.; and in one subsequent speech)
>
> "Countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow." (September 3, 2007, Manchester, New Hampshire; and in one subsequent speech)
>
> "You can't change direction with a new driver who follows the same old map." (September 18, 2008, Espanola, New Mexico; and in one subsequent speech)
>
> "The government that people count on most is the one that's closest to the people." (June 21, 2008, Miami, Florida)
>
> "One man cannot make a movement." (September 28, 2007, Washington, D.C.)
>
> "Opportunity doesn't come easy." (September 18, 2007, Washington, D.C.)
>
> "A new politics for a new time." (August 28, 2008, Denver, Colorado)
>
> "We cannot have a thriving Wall Street and a struggling Main Street (while Main Street suffers)." (July 30, 2008, Springfield, Missouri; and in seven subsequent speeches)

Obviously not every one of these quotable creations in the form of pseudo-proverbs (i.e., proverb-like) by Barack Obama would have been suitable for the inaugural address, but his formulation "A new politics for a new time" would have fit, at least in my opinion. He had used it in his acceptance speech on "The American Promise" at the Democratic National Convention on August 28, 2008, at Denver, Colorado, with millions of Americans witnessing its creation as they watched and heard Obama on television. Strangely enough, he never used his pseudo-proverb again, and he missed the opportunity to make it into a truly memorable phrase at the time of his inauguration when he said:

> That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war, against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly; our schools fail too many; and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet.

At the end of this enumeration, I believe that Barack Obama might well have interspersed his quotable, memorable, and proverb-like invention "A new politics for a new time." I am convinced that critics of the inaugural address would have interpreted its use positively. But instead, Obama moved on with a short but powerful paragraph, employing the first of eighteen proverbs, pseudo-proverbs, and proverbial phrases that are part of this speech:

> These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics. Less measurable but no less profound is a sapping of confidence across our land – a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights. Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America: They will be met.

This is vintage Obama rhetoric, with first applying the negative proverbial phrase "To lower one's sights" and then immediately pushing it aside in favor of meeting the challenges facing the country with courage, hope, and optimism. By now Obama is on a proverbial roll, even though his use of the Biblical phrase "To set aside childish things" (I Corinthians 13,11; Stevenson, 1949: 290) and the allusion to the proverb "All men are created equal" and the triad "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" from the Declaration of Independence are much more subtle than their employment during the campaign:

> We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

It is here where I can show that Barack Obama consciously tuned down his use of quotations and proverbs as he was gearing up for his inaugural address. It will be remembered that three days before his inauguration, on Saturday, January 17, 2009, Barack Obama and Joe Biden and their families embarked on a whistle-stop train trip from Philadelphia to Washington, in part retracing the trip that Abraham Lincoln had taken to his inauguration. In two basically identical speeches at Philadelphia and Baltimore on that day Obama said:

> And yet, they [early patriots] were willing to put all they were and all they had on the line – their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor – for a set of ideals that continue to light the world. That we are equal. That our rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness come not from our laws, but from our maker. And that government of, by and for the people can endure. It was these ideals that led us to declare independence and craft our constitution, producing documents that were imperfect but had within them, like our nation itself, the capacity to be made more perfect.

Already here he has changed the proverb "All men are created equal" to the shorter and gender-free statement "We are all equal." However, he still maintains the proverbial triad "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness", and he also at least alludes to the proverbial definition of democracy by stating that "government of, by and for the people can endure" (Mieder, 2005: 15-55; Wills, 1992). Personally I wish he would not have dropped this proverb in its shortened form. In fact, I think this entire paragraph with its reference to making the union more perfect is better formulated than its counterpart in the inaugural address. But I can also understand Barack Obama's predicament. He clearly was working on his whistle-stop and inaugural speech at the same time, and he did not want to have them be identical! So he edited a bit more, weakening his key address ever so slightly from a rhetorical and proverbial vantage point.

But to return to the speech at hand, Obama next turns to a major theme of his, i.e., the basic greatness of the American nation. And it is here where he includes the statement "Greatness is

never a given. It must be earned" that in its wording, form, and structure is memorable and that consequently might, in due time, find its way into quotation dictionaries:

> In reaffirming the greatness of our nation, we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of shortcuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the fainthearted – for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things – some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor – who have carried us up the long, rugged path toward prosperity and freedom.

Using such favorite words as "struggle" and "work", Obama continues to argue that America and its people need to be steadfast in dealing with the socioeconomic crisis at hand, once again amassing three proverbial phrases, namely "To stand pat", "To pick oneself up", and "To dust oneself off", thereby adding some colloquial color to his plea:

> This is the journey we continue today. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth. Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year. Our capacity remains undiminished. But our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions – that time has surely passed. Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

Not being a poker player, I must admit that I did not know the phrase "To stand pat" with the meaning of "to stick by a decision, to refuse to budge" (Wilkinson 1993, 486). Obama, on the other hand, appears to be well versed in the phrases relating to this card game, as can be seen from his use of the expression "To maintain a poker face" in his autobiography *Dreams from My Father* (1995): "Roy maintained a poker face, as if the conversation didn't concern him. Both he and Amy had the sheen of too many beers, and I saw Jane sneak an anxious look at Kezia. I decided to change the subject, and asked Zeituni if she'd been to Garden Square before" (Obama, 2004: 363). The *New York Times* columnist and former speechwriter for President Richard Nixon, William Safire, in his quite negative review of this speech – "[it] fell short of the anticipated immortality" – includes a fascinating comment regarding the idea of standing pat that plays off the first name of Pat Nixon:

> He [Obama] got into good rhythm with a cheer-up paragraph, reminding us of America's productive workers and inventive minds, our capacity undiminished, setting up his warning against "standing pat." (I once wrote a line for Nixon, "America cannot stand pat," which got a glare from the First Lady – we never used the phrase again.) Obama topped that passage with a warmly familiar metaphor: "Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America." That worked. (Safire, 2009)

Great comment by the acute language observer William Safire! Yet, he does not know everything, for that "warmly familiar metaphor", which I had identified as a combination of the two proverbial phrases "To pick oneself up" and "To dust oneself off", is actually two lines from "a Hollywood musical", as the unsigned editorial "Inaugural Address Sounds Notes of Optimism and Reality" in the *Los Angeles Times* reminded its readers (Editorial, 2009). When I asked our administrative assistant Janet Sobieski of the Department of German and Russian at the University of Vermont about these lines and a possible song, she recalled it instantly and subsequently located it by way of a Google search. The song is in fact called "Pick Yourself Up" (lyrics by Dorothy Fields, music by Jerome Kern) and was part of the film *Swing Time* (1936), staring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The following four stanzas appear twice in the popular song:

Nothing's impossible I have found,
For when my chin is on the ground,
I pick myself up,
Dust myself off,
Start all over again.

Don't lose your confidence if you slip,
Be grateful for a pleasure trip,
And pick yourself up,
Dust yourself off,
Start all over again.

Work like a soul inspired,
Till the battle of the day is won.
You may be sick and tired,
But you'll be a man, my son!

Will you remember the famous men,
Who had to fail to rise again?
So take a deep breath,
Pick yourself up,
Dust yourself off,
Start all over again.

For the record, there was also Jeff Shesol, deputy speechwriter for President Bill Clinton, who should have done a bit more checking before writing the following comment a few hours after President Obama finished his address:

> The speech was well written, structured and paced. To the credit of Mr. Obama and his speechwriters [he basically wrote it himself!], there was no swinging for the rhetorical fences. They did not yield to temptation. They did not strain to etch a new line in granite somewhere or in Bartlett's [*Familiar Quotations*] or the collective memory. Perhaps as a result, there were memorable passages but few memorable phrases. What appears (at least for now) to be the most quoted line was one of the most colloquial: "pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off" may not be poetry, but it well describes a nation that's been knocked to the ground and kicked around for eight years. (Shesol, 2009)

These well-known lines by the American songwriter Dorothy Field (1905-1974), with famous songs like "On the Sunny Side of the Street" (1930) and "I'm in the Mood for Love" (1935) to her credit, have still not made it into the most recent edition of John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (2002), but Fred Shapiro's exquisite new *Yale Book of Quotations* (2006) does finally include several memorable lines from four of her songs – alas not yet from the "Pick Yourself Up" lyrics (Shapiro, 2006: 255-256). Now that Barack Obama has revitalized the lines by changing "yourself" to the more inclusive "ourselves", new editions of Bartlett, Shapiro, and other quotation dictionaries are bound to list them. The new "proverb" might even become associated with Barack Obama's name just as the "Government of, by, and for the people" will forever be linked with Abraham Lincoln. Jeff Shesol is certainly correct in claiming that Obama's slightly modified lines from Dorothy Field are already the most frequently cited from his inaugural address (Brune, 2009; Cary, 2009; Stewart, 2009).

But speaking of quotable passages in President Obama's inaugural address, I would think that his statement "[It] is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works" might reach a certain currency, even though it appears to be somewhat of a rephrasing of President Ronald Reagan's famous maxim that Obama quotes in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006): "Or, as Ronald Reagan succinctly put it: 'Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem" (Obama, 2006: 147). In any case, here is Obama's own formulation in context:

> What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them – that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply. The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works – whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified. Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end. And those of us who manage the public's dollars will be held to account – to spend wisely, reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day – because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government.

It is interesting to note that Obama adds the proverbial metaphor "To do something in the light of day" at the end of this paragraph to underscore his intent of conducting the nation's business in a fair and open fashion. No matter how pragmatic or philosophical his remarks might be, he usually resorts to some fixed phrase to add an easily understood image to his rhetoric.

And he strikes an impressive balance between quotable statements in the form of his own pseudo-proverbs and traditional folk expressions. Consequently, he continues with a well formulated paragraph that includes yet another statement that could catch on in common political parlance, namely "A nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous":

> Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched, but this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market can spin out of control – and that a nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous. The success of our economy has always depended not just on the size of our gross domestic product, but on the reach of our prosperity; on our ability to extend opportunity to every willing heart – not out of charity, but because it is the surest route to our common good.

Let me here return one more time to William Safire, who agrees with my assessment of this quotable statement, and who also mentions a number of other proverbial utterances by Obama that I wish to comment upon as well:

> To his oratorical credit, the president did not strain for quotable quotes. "A nation cannot prosper when it favors only the prosperous" was a nice insertion with an eye toward Bartlett's, and I liked "the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve," though it is not in the league with "the mystic chords of memory" [in the last paragraph of Lincoln's first inaugural address of March 4, 1861]. Obama's "know that you are on the wrong side of history" message to Muslim extremists concluded with "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist"; that is quotable if it is original, but I think I've seen it before. His "this winter of our hardship" is a well-turned phrase about discontent, even if not as Shakespeare punned it, "made glorious summer by this sun of York." (Safire, 2009)

First of all, I actually think that President Obama strained at least a bit "for quotable quotes", especially since he knew very well that his entire audience – from general citizen to erudite scholar – wanted him to deliver at least two or three memorable phrases! For example, Safire misses an incredibly important statement in the very paragraph that he is discussing, namely "People will judge you on what you can build, not what you can destroy." The audience liked this pseudo-proverb, and they also could relate to Obama's extension of the proverbial phrase "To be on the wrong side" to include human history in general:

> To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West: Know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

Regarding the other memorable sentence in this "loaded" proverbial paragraph, i.e., "We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist," I have to admit that my comprehensive search in numerous dictionaries of quotations and also on the internet have not resulted in any identification of an earlier use. Thus, at least for now, my conclusion is that Obama has simply taken the proverbial phrase "To extend a hand to someone" (see July 24, 2008, Berlin, Germany; and in two subsequent speeches) and expanded it by the somatic image of an "unclenched fist" into a memorable statement.

And how about Obama's sententious "The world has changed, and we must change with it" that summarizes his entire presidential campaign for change in one sentence that he had not used before? This formulaic phrase might also be remembered:

> To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and we must change with it.

Of course, the necessity for change was always just one side of the equation in the struggle for progress, as far as Obama is concerned. The other side is clearly the return to a solid value system based on rigorous work ethics, where all Americans give their proverbial all to perfect the union and by extension the world:

> Our challenges might be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends – hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism – these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship.

That last sentence is a fitting reminiscence of Barack Obama's frequent use of that seemingly so mundane proverbial expression "To pay a (the) price for something" that he cites twenty-nine times in his books and speeches. One of these appears in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, where Obama uses the phrase in connection with his hero Abraham Lincoln having done his utmost to save a house divided and to perfect the union through ethical struggle: "Lincoln, and those buried at Gettysburg, remind us that we should pursue our own absolute truths only if we acknowledge that there may be a terrible price to pay" (Obama, 2006: 98). This severe statement would not have been in the spirit of an epideictic inaugural address, in which the new President of the United States wants to be positive and optimistic.

By relying on quotable new pseudo-proverbs of his own and traditional proverbs as well as proverbial phrases, Obama followed in the footsteps of previous presidents, as I have shown in my study "'It's Not a President's Business to Catch Flies': Proverbial Rhetoric in Presidential Inaugural Addresses" (Mieder 2005, 147-186). And uplifting as this speech and other major addresses might have been in language and content, Obama's political rhetoric is characterized by such important ingredients as "'practical wisdom,' 'practical knowledge,' 'practical reason,' [and] 'practical judgment'" that are part of quotations and proverbs in particular (Nichols 1996, 687). With his most recent address behind him, President Barack Obama has once again illustrated that proverbial language is a significant part of the inauguration of the presidents of the United States. Quotations, pseudo-proverbs, proverbs, and proverbial phrases certainly do their metaphorical part in making the inaugural addresses "timeless words", to use two final words from President Barack Obama's memorable inaugural address. But, as I have tried to show in this study on the president's proverbial rhetoric, such folk speech together with innovative variations and new formulations assures a colorful, meaningful, and comprehensible communication with the American people.

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