

Has Obama lost his mojo?

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

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Among the attributes that first caught my attention about Senator Barack Obama were his vision and oratory, the capacity to appeal to our better angels and call us to a higher purpose. I admit, I am a believer in that "vision thing," the notion that human beings can be moved, encouraged, inspired to achieve great things when called upon to do so.

After the first four years of the bombastic, divisive and crude pronouncements of George W. Bush, it was Senator Obama's gift for vision and oratory that touched the delegates at the Democratic National Convention, the media and people across the nation in 2004. That speech immediately catapulted him to political "rock star" status. Vision and oratory is Barack Obama's mojo!

Hillary Clinton tried to disparage "words" and "speeches" as unimportant during the primary contest against Barack Obama. However, in the course of human affairs, words do matter. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address conveyed a sense of definitive resolve that the Union would be preserved. At the height of the Great Depression, it was the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his speeches and Fireside Chats that inspired poor and working people and the nation to believe a brighter tomorrow was possible. Whatever his frailties, John F. Kennedy knew how to call the nation to a service, to a purpose beyond one's own immediate, selfish interests - "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

Lyndon B. Johnson was not a great orator, but after Bloody Sunday in Selma, he leaned into the camera in a nationally televised address, and in his own southern, folksy way, said "and, we shall overcome." His words led to a decisive turning point in the struggle to restore voting rights for Blacks in the south. And, it is not an incidental matter that Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is so highly celebrated in America and the world. It stirs a sense within us that we can rise above our prejudices and shortcomings to climb to higher heights of achievement and fulfillment as a human family.

When Barack Obama spoke on the campaign trail and articulated the hope for "Change," it was like a fresh breeze blowing across the American political landscape, capturing the imagination of millions of people who were sick and tired of politics as usual and desperate for a new sense of national purpose. His agenda was not particularly radical or progressive. Nonetheless, his modest proposals for creating a green economy, providing a 21st century education for every child in this country, enhancing worker rights and achieving universal health care were in stark contrast to the reactionary agenda of Bush/Cheney and company. It was sufficient, just enough, to encourage millions to believe that under his leadership, a better life, a better America, a better world was possible.

Who can forget the excitement and sense of expectancy when Obama won the Iowa Caucuses -- "some said this day would never come." Time and time again, from his critical speech in Philadelphia on race in response to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright controversy, the address at the Democratic National Convention, the climatic presentation to the nation and the world at Grant Park in Chicago on election night to his Inaugural Address on a cold blustery day in the Nation's Capitol, Barack Obama's vision, oratory and modest agenda for change lifted our spirits and made us true believers again. His mojo was working!

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But, something seems to have happened to President Obama since taking up residence in the White House. To be sure, he inherited an incredible mess from Bush/Cheney. That notwithstanding, I was among the progressives who argued that the depth of the crises offered Obama an opportunity for what the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson called for in his 1988 campaign - "bold leadership and a new direction." But rather than be bold, President Obama has tended to be calculating, cautious and timid, with a propensity to prematurely seek compromise with intransigent Republicans in the name of "bi-partisanship." And, as I indicated in a previous article, he has yet to "stand and fight" for what he truly believes in on critical issues, utilizing his brilliant oratorical skills to vigorously articulate a vision and program for a new direction to galvanize the people of this nation.

Nowhere is this more evident than the current struggle for universal health care. President Obama has been all over the map, sending mixed signals rather than firmly and fervently presenting his vision and plan to ensure that every person in this country has access to quality, affordable health care. His pronouncements as a State Senator in Illinois indicate that in his heart President Obama knows a single payer system is the best way to guarantee universal coverage and significantly reduce cost.

Yet, he has never mounted the podium to clearly and forcefully educate the American public to this reality. A "public option" is the next best alternative. To date President Obama has been unwilling to move beyond professorial pronouncements and lectures to vigorously argue the case that the issue is not how to keep the insurance and pharmaceutical companies profitable; the issue is how to prevent disease, keep people healthy and effectively treat those who get sick.

Most importantly, President Obama has failed to utilize his oratorical gifts to make the compelling case that in the "greatest democracy in the world," universal health care is a "moral issue" and a human right, not a privilege. Rabid right wing conservatives are stoking the flames of fear accusing Obama and the Democrats of planning to ration care so that those who currently have insurance will have fewer benefits. Republicans are appealing to the selfish "what's in it for me," syndrome.

President Obama should be challenging the American people to view universal health care as part of our national purpose as a civilized society - and calling on those who have health insurance to pay a little more if necessary to make certain that every person has health coverage. We need to be inspired and encouraged to move beyond narrow concern for self to a sense of compassion and commitment to the least of these among us.

Unfortunately, this is not what President Obama is doing. The nationally televised funeral of Sen. Edward Kennedy, the "liberal lion of the Senate" who made universal health care the labor of his life, was the perfect platform for President Obama to issue a clarion call to the nation to fulfill the "dream." To the dismay of a number of political commentators, he inexplicably passed on the opportunity. It appears that Obama has lost his mojo. As he falters, the blush on the bloom is fading, and he is increasingly beginning to look just like another ordinary politician. If the incredible promise of his campaign is to be fulfilled, President Obama needs to find his mojo again. Otherwise, he is in danger of becoming a one term, transitional, pedestrian President.

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