Spencer Burleigh

Storytelling and Hope - Everywhere in Life

Jul 25, 2018 • spencerburleigh.com/Obama-Storytelling

> And I believe we have no choice but to move forward, that those of us who believe in democracy and civil rights and a common humanity have a better story to tell. And I believe this not just based on sentiment. I believe it based on hard evidence: the fact that the world's most prosperous and successful societies, the ones with the highest living standards and the highest levels of satisfaction among their people, happen to be those which have most closely approximated the liberal, progressive ideal that we talk about and have nurtured the talents and contributions of all their citizens.
>
> - Former President Barack Obama during his lecture on the occasion of Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday

I generally agree with The Economist's characterization [a] of Mr. Obama's tenure as President of the United States. As this characterization notes, Mr. Obama's presidency was very much defined by the speeches he gave — from the 2004 Democratic Convention Keynote [b], to his victory speech in 2008 [c] onward to his Nobel Peace Prize lecture [d] and his assertion that "every time I think about those

kids it gets me mad" in the wake of the Sandy Hook Shooting (starts at 0:20, quote at 1:02 [e]) (this was one of the first quotes I wrote down in my notes), there's even a highlight video [f] — and indeed this has probably been his best skill/trait (along with being an honorable man who clearly cares deeply for his country and his family). I don't want to just regurgitate The Economist's view that Mr. Obama was sometimes plagued by difficult external forces sometimes mismanaged, did too much in Libya, too little in Syria and the executive orders he fell back to amidst political gridlock late in his second term, but I think this summary is worth stating for those who won't click the link and read the wonderful Economist article [a] (smh).

The key takeaway I have reflecting on Mr. Obama's legacy is the importance of telling a good story and the importance of hope. It's interesting that Mr. Obama reflects on both of these things in this lecture on the story Nelson Mandela projected and the inspiration that brought:

> "Madiba's light shone so brightly, even from that narrow Robben Island cell, that in the late seventies he could inspire a young college student on the other side of the world to reexamine his own priorities, could make me consider the small role I might play in bending the arc of the world towards justice. And when, later, as a law student, I witnessed Madiba emerge from prison, just a few months, you'll recall, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I felt the same wave of hope that washed through hearts all around the world."

To address hope: hope is so powerful that unchecked hope can become dangerous if we overextend ourselves and live in the future we hope for rather than the present (I find myself struggling with this sometimes). Einstein reflected on this by advising: Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning." Perhaps the disappointment the Obama Presidency brought some Democrats stemmed from a lack of this questioning amidst geopolitical and congressional reality (along with a good serving of not properly managing exceptions - probably the subject of a future post).

To address storytelling (more formally ~narrative construction~): across our lives in relations with our family, clients, and coworkers, crafting a strong narrative and getting others' support is essential to moving forward and is the foundation of leadership. Mr. Obama has clearly mastered this act. Perhaps he will be more widely admired (though his approval rating has certainly benefited from the current administration) as Carter has through his humanitarian work and ability to help people dream about a better tomorrow. I wish him the best and look forward to many more lectures like this one :)

Related reading:

The full text [g] of the lecture. It's a good story.

I found this particularly powerful — agree with it or not, it's a very clear articulation of Mr. Obama's view of the world and offers a lot to discuss:

> But what's nevertheless true is that, in their business dealings, many titans of industry and finance are increasingly detached from any single locale or nation-state, and they live lives more and more insulated from the struggles of ordinary people in their countries of origin. Their decisions to shut down a manufacturing plant, or to try to minimize their tax bill by shifting profits to a tax haven with the help of high-priced accountants or lawyers, or their decision to take advantage of lower-cost immigrant labor, or their decision to pay a bribe, are often done without malice; it's just a rational response, they consider, to the demands of their balance sheets and their shareholders and competitive pressures.
>
> But too often, these decisions are also made without reference to notions of human solidarity or a ground-level understanding of the consequences that will be felt by particular people in particular communities by the decisions that are made. And from their boardrooms or retreats, global decision-makers don't get a chance to see, sometimes, the pain in the faces of laid-off workers. Their kids don't suffer when cuts in public education and health care result as a consequence of a reduced tax base because of tax avoidance. They can't hear the resentment of an older tradesman when he complains that a newcomer doesn't speak his language on a job site where he once worked. They're less subject to the discomfort and the displacement that some of their countrymen may feel as globalization scrambles not only existing economic arrangements but traditional social and religious mores.
>
> Which is why, at the end of the twentieth century, while some Western commentators were declaring the end of history and the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy and the virtues of the global supply chain, so many missed signs of a brewing backlash—a backlash that arrived in so many forms. It announced itself most violently with 9/11 and the emergence of transnational terrorist networks, fuelled by an ideology that perverted one of the world's great religions and asserted a struggle not just between Islam and the West but between Islam and modernity. An ill-advised U.S. invasion of Iraq didn't help, accelerating a sectarian conflict.
>
> Russia, already humiliated by its reduced influence since the collapse of the Soviet Union, feeling threatened by democratic movements along its borders, suddenly started reasserting authoritarian control and, in some cases, meddling with its neighbors. China, emboldened by its economic success, started bristling against criticism of its human-rights record; it framed the promotion of universal values as nothing more than foreign meddling, imperialism under a new name.
>
> Within the United States, within the European Union, challenges to globalization first came from the left but then came more forcefully from the right, as you started seeing populist movements—which, by the way, are often cynically funded by right-wing billionaires intent on reducing government constraints on their business interests. These movements tapped the unease that was felt by many people who lived outside of the urban cores, fears that economic security was slipping away, that their social status and

privileges were eroding, that their cultural identities were being threatened by outsiders, somebody that didn't look like them or sound like them or pray as they did.

And, perhaps more than anything else, the devastating impact of the 2008 financial crisis, in which the reckless behavior of financial élites resulted in years of hardship for ordinary people all around the world, made all the previous assurances of experts ring hollow—all those assurances that somehow financial regulators knew what they were doing, that somebody was minding the store, that global economic integration was an unadulterated good. Because of the actions taken by governments during and after that crisis—including, I should add, by aggressive steps by my Administration—the global economy has now returned to healthy growth. But the credibility of the international system, the faith in experts in places like Washington or Brussels, all that had taken a blow.

A politics of fear and resentment and retrenchment began to appear, and that kind of politics is now on the move. It's on the move at a pace that would have seemed unimaginable just a few years ago. I am not being alarmist. I am simply stating the facts. Look around. Strongman politics are ascendant, suddenly, whereby elections and some pretense of democracy are maintained—the form of it—but those in power seek to undermine every institution or norm that gives democracy meaning.

Links

a. economist.com/christmas-specials/2016/12/24/a-reflection-on-barack-obamas-presidency
b. youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJ0
c. youtube.com/watch?v=CnvUUauFJ98
d. youtube.com/watch?v=AORo-YEXxNQ
e. youtube.com/watch?v=67h-vsMX1EQ
f. youtube.com/watch?v=y7hddyiR47k
g. newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-nelson-mandela-lecture-barack-obama-johannesburg