ISSA Proceedings 2010 – Obama's Rhetorical Strategy In Presenting "A World Without Nuclear Weapons"

"[T]he peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" was a vision held out by President Barack Obama in Prague on April 5, 2009.**[ii]** His vision inspired audiences, helped build momentum, and created a sense of importance and urgency to undertake future actions. He directed listeners toward the small actions they could take immediately to help his cause, which was a shift of U.S. foreign policy from unilateralism to multilateralism. Obama called for a new roadmap to strengthen the international regime on nuclear non-proliferation. By committing the U.S. to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) anti-proliferation rule, Obama brought "a new climate in international politics" (King Jr. & Sonne 2009, p. A1; See also Gibbs 2009, p. A10). What rhetorical methods did Obama use to present U.S. policy actions in the post-September 11 world?

To build rapport and a strong sense of camaraderie, Obama made use of three rhetorical factors. First, Obama framed the circumstances or the situations to which the post-September 11 foreign policy responded (See Stuckey 1995, p. 215). This showed part of his effort to act on his interpretation of the information found in the executive branch. Second, metaphor is used to establish the defiant political reality that reflects Americans' conceptions of themselves and their global responsibility. Obama attempted to present a combination of egalitarianism and pragmatism to a world that had fundamentally changed. In constructing "reality" based on "orientational metaphor" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 14), he eschewed Cold War premises of good versus evil. Third, Obama employed a dramatistic perspective (See Hollihan 1986, p. 379). By focusing on a humanitarian mission, he reformulated central premises about the nature of national security. When addressing the risks people face, it helped to clearly identify the necessary goals. These three patterns are fundamental to a rhetorical strategy that tries to define and legitimate U.S. defense and foreign policy.

By focusing on these rhetorical patterns, this paper **[i]** shows how President Obama shifted foreign policy from Cold War antagonisms to a shared and rational understanding of mutual self-interest. As he personalized his address, his language resonated with the audience. With skillful use of pronouns – the "I," "you," and "we" connection, he created a greater sense of closeness and held out the promise of a more peaceful world than his predecessor, George W. Bush, who defined the post-September 11 order through war metaphors (Rasmussen 2006, pp. 171-74). In presenting the nuclear arms race as remnants of the Cold War, Obama referred to the United States complicated relationship to the atomic bomb. In such a rhetorical shift from moral to practical commitment, he sought to redefine what and how U.S. engagement in world affairs should be.

1. The Nation's Storyteller

Presidential rhetoric in the modern media requires the president to set the political agenda and show strong leadership. To secure popular support for presidential policy initiatives, Obama shaped the national mood through rhetoric and imagery. According to Mary E. Stuckey, the president "tells us stories about ourselves, and in so doing he tells us what sort of people we are, how we are constituted as a community" (1991, p. 1). Consequently, "we, the people of the Untied States" take from President Barack Obama not only the policies and programs he espouses but their own national self-identity. Thus, he must design appeals intended to increase personal support for himself.

In setting the vision of a nuclear-free world, Obama stressed "international cooperation" as a way of relating to his audience. Although the focus on international relations called for U.S. moral and spiritual superiority, he acknowledged the United States "as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon." Along with his attitudes toward history, his remarks took on political significance in the recognition that "the United States has a moral responsibility to act" toward "a world without nuclear weapons." This acknowledgment brought to the United States – the world's leading nuclear power – the credibility necessary to build an international consensus to prevent proliferation. In self-legitimization, Obama identified a set of values to share a perception of what is right and wrong so as to form the basis for political action. Here the world meant a place of both hope and challenge, of opportunity and danger. Overall, his call to "prudent" actions was viewed as pragmatic with a principled foundation.

By pursuing the implications of nuclear weapons, Obama expressed the awareness that the "world could be erased in a single flash of light." He presented the past referring to scientific matters like the nuclear arms race, and then reinforced the U.S. moral and political stance. In reference to competition between the United States and Russia over military superiority, Obama associated "nuclear weapons" with such negative words as "catastrophic," "dangerous," "threat(s)" (4), "risk(s)" (2), "destruction," "fatalism," "deadly," "adversary" (2), "inevitable" (2), "illegal," "massive destruction," and "unsecured." These words signified that he was concerned about the circumstances the world was facing, remembered the details of those circumstances, and would be responsive to those issues (Leanne 2010, pp. 72-74). In fact, Obama expressed his willingness to talk to "rogue" nuclear-capable states such as North Korea and Iran, thereby marking a turning point in the U.S. diplomacy.

The rhetorical focus on negotiation and compromise led Obama to describe the post-September 11 relationships as "constructive" in world affairs. With a mix of idealism and realpolitik that can change the world, he sought to reach a general consensus, which looks to peaceful cooperation within a given context for breaking the war mentality, in order "to secure benefits for the Untied States while avoiding conflict" (Stuckey 1995, p. 217). In this regard, a European model – balance of power – enabled him to approach the U.S. relationship with Russia in a more "realistic" way (Sarotte 2009, p. A31). Working with Russia along with its nuclear allies, the United Kingdom and France, as well as with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) changed "Cold War thinking" to "a new framework for civil… cooperation." His remarks on "a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russians" transformed the political competition between the United States and Russia into policy implementation based on "expertise." Overall, Obama stressed a synthesis of negotiation and compromise over the traditional Cold War dualities underlying previous foreign policy rhetoric.

Obama also took on social knowledge as a persuasive means to constrain public deliberation in the framework of "prevailing conceptions of the public" (Farrell & Goodnight 1981, p. 299). While raising critical consciousness of the nuclear danger, Obama described and defined "nuclear power" as the ultimate modern technology. The shift of his focus from "nuclear weapons" to "nuclear energy," characterized as "peaceful" (4), "new" (5), "civil," "rigorous," "sensitive," and "durable," enabled him to support programs in nuclear innovation. The motive of

innovation went along with the vocabulary of scientism, embracing the technological developments in nuclear physics. This "power of nuclear energy" was shown to be a way "to combat climate change." One solution for global warming became a "peace opportunity for all people" to renew nuclear programs. Such rhetorical dissociation from "the risks of proliferation" normalized extraordinary into ordinary technology.

In his call for nuclear disarmament, Obama shifted his focus from "nuclear weapons" to "nuclear materials," from "threat" to "risk," and from "global nuclear war" to "nuclear attack." Along with such rhetorical shift, he employed the bureaucratic words like a "Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty," "the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty" (CTBT), "the U.N. Security Council," "the Proliferation Security Initiative," "the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism," and "a Global Summit on Nuclear Security" to eliminate nuclear arsenals. In reflecting the same critical question of whether risk is a social construction or a rational response as a post-September 11 president's rhetorical position on globalization, Obama's call for nuclear control was more realistic than idealistic, so that it could serve to "build a stronger, global regime."

In displacing political fears with technological uses of nuclear energy, Obama measured U.S. security issues in terms of the future. He created a distance from the "bear any burden" militancy of Cold War rhetoric by saying that "[w]e cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it." While the principal features of the Cold War "world" faded in the post-September 11 world, yet its "world-view" remained in his reference to Article V of North Atlantic Treaty, "An attack on one is an attack on all." In a skillful balance of national interest and national power, Obama prioritized a joint effort to establish a new international architecture, which can meet growing demands for nuclear energy while preventing the leaking and proliferation of nuclear technology. In minimizing risk to "America's commitment," he also sought to meet a global, open-ended promise supporting "the right of people everywhere to live free from fear in the twenty-first century."

Obama played down Manichean dualities underlying U.S. unilateralism by recurring use of the adjective "common" – "common history," "common interests," "common prosperity," "common humanity," "common security" (2), "common cause," and "common concern." In integrating American values and interests into common sense, he set up "terministic screens" for "a world without

nuclear weapons." While emphasizing the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play, Obama also extended rhetorical presidency from the national to the global dimension. On the whole, he took the initiative to control what would be understood as "real" and what attitudes towards this "reality" should be taken at home and abroad.

*2. Orientational Metapho*r

In representing the post-September 11 world as "less divided," "more interconnected," Obama made use of an "orientational metaphor," that constructs "a whole system of concepts with respect to one another" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 14), to order political reality. Using such spatial orientations as "HAVING CONTROL OR FORCE IS UP," "FORESEEABLE FUTURE EVENTS ARE UP (and AHEAD)," "VIRTUE IS UP," and "RATIONAL IS UP" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, pp. 15-17), he symbolically structured a situation that favors a certain "orientation" over others or a way of coping with a difficult and complex problem. His foreign policy metaphors thus gave rhetorical interpretations of events that put the United States in a leadership role in pursuit of nuclear arms control vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

Since the choice of language is not neutral, but strategic to manage risks, Obama associated military means with political ends. In describing and defining the political and social conditions under which nuclear weapons could be used, he transferred the focus of responsibility from agency to agent. In the association of "terrorists" (4) like "al Qaeda" (2), "North Korea" (2) and "Iran" (7) with nuclear dangers, Obama presented these agents as responsible for "destruction" (2), "adversary" (2) and "[v]iolations." The scene was framed in the formula – who did what – that terrorists and some countries broke the rules so as to be punished. Exhorting the audience to face such contingencies, he emphasized "a global non-proliferation regime" as the route to "peace and progress." The emphasis on "a new international effort" entailed reconciliation in which an "UP orientation" led in the direction of moving ahead and/or forward to well-being.

Since "ordinary language is by itself the manifestation of agreements of a community of thought" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, p. 153), Obama made use of everyday language to reconfirm the "friendship" between the U.S. and the Czech people. Following the parallelism "We are here today because…" (5), he repeated the passive voice "We are bound by shared values, shared history" (2) which strengthened the importance of "the fundamental human rights" and "the

peaceful protest." In addressing the inclusive ideals presumed to be shared, he turned "friendship" into "alliance" within the framework of NATO. From an equal standpoint, he projected intimacy, encouraged empathy, and identified the U.S.-Czechoslovakia relationship with "the strongest alliance that the world has ever known." Here he used the strategy of identification to confirm a close association between the United States and the Czech Republic. Reinforcing "our common security," he blended realistic assessment of security alliance with expressions of hope to create a new security framework for nuclear deterrence – a mode of Cold War thinking – which resulted in promoting nuclear armament.

Obama's call for "a world without nuclear weapons" in Prague symbolically transformed the older slogans like "Ban the bomb!" into his presidential campaign slogan "Yes, we can!" With the disappearance of the Cold War 20 years ago, the nuclear danger changed from the spread of "the ultimate tools of destruction" to "[b]lack market trade in nuclear secrets and nuclear materials" – "dangers that recognized no borders." In the January 2007 *Wall Street Journal* opinion and editorial page, the vision of a nuclear-free world was articulated by former secretary of State George Shultz, former secretary of Defense William Perry, former secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and former chairperson of the Senate Armed Services Committee Sam Nunn. These four public figures argued for the United States to take the lead in halting the production of fissile materials for use in weapons and securing all nuclear materials around the globe (Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, & Nunn 2007, p. A15; See also Shultz, Perry, Kissinger, & Nunn 2008, p. A13). This nuclear-free agenda reminded the U.S. people of a more positive, constructive direction in nuclear disarmament (See Hart 2007, pp. 23-25; Wolfenstein 2007, p. H1). Along with such public consciousness-raising, Obama took into account the status quo in which no state or combination of states except the United States could fill the leadership void in the international arena.

Realistically, foreign policy needs to take into account the historical context and the geographical position of each state in order for them to forgo the very capabilities that they retain as critical to their national security. In pursuit of a world eventually free of nuclear arms, Obama explained and justified organized political action in order to ease international tensions. The effectiveness of a comprehensive nuclear-control regime depends not only on a political commitment, but on a binding legal undertaking. The universal adherence to nonproliferation can only work if the nuclear disarmament obligation is equally

applied to all states within a time-bound framework.

To justify U.S. involvement in world affairs, Obama managed to subsume pragmatic national self-interest within the context of nuclear defense strategy. The structure of his argument made it clear that "a world without nuclear weapons" would be the perfection toward which disarmament would "move." He implied that the United States would no longer take unilateral action or to decide what would be in the best interest of the world. He proposed "a new framework for civil nuclear cooperation" which would make for "true international cooperation."

The presidential rhetoric based on an orientational metaphor has shaped a sense of who Americans are while broadening the U.S. political community. "Our" sense of national identity has thus evolved across time in expanding and contracting foreign policy. Through his rhetorical and political choices, Obama introduced the language of inclusion in order to project "a world without nuclear weapons" as an accepted vision both at home and abroad. Such rhetorical inclusions enabled him to inspire a diverse set of people to band together, focusing not on their differences but on their commonalities.

3. A Dramatistic Perspective

Taking into account economic, social, political, and moral implications that "war is the ultimate dramatic event" (Hastedt 1997, p. 80), Thomas A. Hollihan argues that "foreign policy dramas situate events by providing credible historical accounts and visions of the future. … To win and sustain support, rhetorical dramas must be consistent and must corroborate people's beliefs and expectations regarding the fulfillment of dramatic form" (1986, p. 379). In his case study of the public discussion concerning the ratification of Panama Canal Treaties, Hollihan examines three dramas that provide justification for U.S. foreign policy action – the Cold War, the New World Order, and Power Politics.

The Cold War drama of "good versus evil" goes beyond the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Whereas the villain can be any enemy of democracy, the role of hero belongs to the United States. This rhetorical structure characterized by the conflict between good and evil legitimates the superiority of American moral force supported with physical force within a world of black and white. In argumentation, Cold War logic links expediency with moralism. Guided by the defining characterization of a far-off event, its persuasive power is used to

guarantee action in a time where little is certain.

Unlike the above Manichean worldview, the New World Order rhetoric takes into account international law and fundamental human rights. By equalizing all international actors in avoiding confrontation, this rhetorical paradigm requires U.S. leaders to recognize other national leaders as potential peers. Instead of the dichotomous choice of good versus evil, it poses a variety of equal policy choices. Stressing commonalities rather than differences, the leaders focus on key aspects such as shared history and values. Such focus on common ground is fraught with difficulty in defining heroes and villains. Hence, the New World Order drama requires the United States to come to terms with its imperial and colonial past.

Distinct from both the Cold War and New World Order, the Power Politics rhetoric does not rely on moral claims. Instead, the rhetoric of "technocratic realism," derived from technological changes and the post-war emphasis on scientism, is an important element in the Power Politics drama. While calling for a shared and rational understanding of mutual self-interest between the powers, it focuses on pragmatic justifications for action, scientific principles of administration, and the possibilities of negotiation. This dramatistic perspective turns a world of nation-states into a world of self-interested pragmatists, insisting on the urgency and importance of events and political actions.

Among these three rhetorical paradigms, Barack Obama attempted to replace the Cold War drama with the hybrid of the New World Order and the Power Politics dramas. By seeing the United States as one among equals, he portrayed his country with the power and the capacity for multilateral action. In this framework, the incompatible national interests and foreign relations continue to give rise to threats of conflict. In such a state of conflict, President Barack Obama used his position as the first colored president to go beyond the Manichean Cold War worldview by saying "[w]hen I was born, the world was divided, and our nations were faced with very different circumstances. Few people would have predicted that someone like me would one day become the President of the United States." With balancing the continuity and the changes in national self-understanding, he alluded to a high level of "transcendence" himself. In a sense, the power of ethos moved his audience to go forward.

In the dramatistic perspective, what Kenneth Burke calls "symbolic perfection," in which individual differences become unified with some cosmic or universal

purpose so as to disappear, was useful in explaining how the term “nuclear weapon” functioned as “ultimate terms” that label such fundamental, all-encompassing values as life and death (1962, pp. 130-31 & 262). In shifting his focus from “the threat of global nuclear war” to “the risk of a nuclear attack,” Obama worked first with nuclear disarmament, and then with the spread of nuclear weapons in order to remove the nuclear danger.

One nuclear weapon exploded in one city – be it New York or Moscow, Islamabad or Mumbai, Tokyo or Tel Aviv, Paris or Prague – could kill hundreds of thousands of people. And no matter where it happens, there is no end to what the consequence might be – for our global safety, our security, our society, our economy, to our ultimate survival.

Even while projecting the vision of nuclear apocalypses, Obama saw the fulfillment of abolishing nuclear weapons as a logical progression from “today.” In fact, he reminded the audience that “now is the time for a strong international response” twice.

Obama acknowledged that a nuclear-free vision might not be realized in his lifetime by stressing the need for people to “take patience and persistence.” Yet he offered a historic opportunity for making progress on the nuclear agenda, reassuring the U.S. allies for their protection and encouraging people to think about imaginative ways forward. The steps he outlined guided the world to build the largest possible coalition – to expand nuclear-free zones – in favor of preventing proliferation. This path required a real commitment to turn the logic of zero into a practical reality.

4. Conclusion

The Cold War rhetoric based on dualities structured U.S. thinking about foreign policy for nearly half a century. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the consequent incongruity of the world system has left no widely-shared worldview. Like his post-Cold War predecessors, President Barack Obama was required to explain foreign policy decisions on a case by case basis. In the Prague Speech, he first called for a decrease in the U.S. role internationally, and then justified his rhetorical position in the specifics of a particular case. In doing so, he sought to offer compelling accounts for world events in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

Obama made a shift of U.S. foreign policy from the Manichean rhetoric of the

Cold War. In the name of “national security strategy,” he gave a vision of U.S. “moral responsibility to act” that was far beyond a mere instrumental purpose. U.S. involvement in world affairs, on the one hand, entailed an element of mission. On the other hand, he proved that the situation not only involved U.S. interests, but that those interests were vital also to the world. Along with credible historical accounts and visions of the future, strategy as a system of thought leading to action enabled him to justify the U.S. in hosting “a Global Summit on Nuclear Security.” At the nuclear-security summit held on the April 12-13 of 2010, forty-seven countries agreed “nuclear terrorism is one of the most challenging threats to international security” (“Disarmament” 2010, p. 62). Slowly but steadily, the emerging international consensus on global zero was supporting his active role in leading the way to global security without nuclear arms.

Obama combined the pragmatic appeal with a humanitarian perspective to take on the nuclear future. In his address to the people of the Czech Republic, he clearly stated that nuclear disarmament meant to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our [=America’s] national security strategy.” In order to reach that goal, former Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev pointed out that the U.S. military superiority “would be an insurmountable obstacle on the path to a world without nuclear weapons.” In his opening speech at the conference in Rome, on 16 April 2009, he also underscored the need to “demilitarize international relations, reduce military budgets” to overcome nuclear dangers (Gorbachev 2009).

Finally, Obama’s acceptance speech in Oslo on 10 December 2009 was thought-provokingly pragmatic. Obama expressed a presidential “doctrine” with an internationalist perspective. He was aware of the conference on nuclear security that was scheduled for April 2010, and that two weeks later the UN would review the NPT. For that purpose, Obama had worked hard to win unanimous political support for remaking the nonproliferation treaty and regulating nuclear trafficking. He thus committed himself to winning Senate ratification of the CTBT and acknowledged the U.S. legal obligation to move toward eliminating its own nuclear arsenals. In this speech, he continued to express the vision for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on 9 October 2009: for his “extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples,” in particular his “audacious” vision of and work for nuclear disarmament (Erlanger 2009, p. 1).

Employing pragmatism and vision, President Obama was able to reset the U.S. dysfunctional relations with the world, present the UN as a new global forum, and turn to world affairs with his status enhanced. The 5 April 2009 speech in Prague set out a new foreign policy that rejected the Manichean view of his predecessor, George W. Bush, who had walked away from Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Kyoto Protocol). With conciliatory pragmatism, Obama set American diplomacy to work for new nuclear-arms reduction, peace between Arabs and Jews, and climate change so as to give birth to the harmony of a multipolar world.

NOTES

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[ii] All the quotations from "Remarks by President Barack Obama" at Hradcany Square in Prague, the Czech Republic, on April 5, 2009 are based on the immediate release from the Office of the Press Secretary, the White House.

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