

Grow Up, America: Choose Our Better History



I have long thought that now-President Obama's reputation as an orator was little inflated, more by a media and public starved for a leader who could

speak in complete sentences and cogent thoughts than by the man himself. That is an observation, not a criticism. [My short speech-writing period](#) left me with a very lively sense of how hard and ill-advised it is for a real modern human being to write or speak like a JFK film clip. Lots of Democratic politicians have hurt themselves rhetorically by trying to channel JFK. When they try MLK, it is generally even worse.

Today's [inaugural address](#) was much like Obama's convention acceptance speech in wisely avoiding Sorensenian flights of inspirational rhetoric and preacherly flourishes, but instead presenting liberal values and a post-imperial world view in forms that Americans raised on decades of Reaganism might be able to accept. Here is a passage that struck me:

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.

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 short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted – 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 towards prosperity and freedom.

Nothing special there rhetorically – even the nice “better history” line turns out to be recycled from Obama's [late campaign stump speech](#). Yet what he was saying was rather noteworthy, coming from a U.S. president. Here and in other parts of the speech, the infantile exceptionalism that has become nearly our national creed was quietly but firmly rejected. Our freedom, wealth, and power relative to other nations do not exempt us from the exigencies of history or the rules of morality, Obama declared. Quite the contrary. We are not authorized to “do as we please” just because we are America; our activities have an impact on other peoples that must be taken into account, and that accounting must modify our behavior. Poverty, injustice, fear, evil, and incompetence all exist in modern America and as part of our tradition. We can and must choose our “better history,” and also choose not to dwell on the worst, but the worst is still there, some of it of sitting on the inaugural dais, [in a wheelchair](#).

As in the convention speech, there was also a distinctly liberal economic message in Obama's inaugural address, but delivered in so mild and sensible a fashion as to be almost impossible for all but the most hardened ideologues to disagree with. The free market is a powerful tool for generating wealth, but it cannot work properly without the “watchful eye” of government. Otherwise the

market will “spin out of control.” The last line quoted above, about “the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things” was one that many listeners (including Fox’s Brit Hume) probably heard as a shout-out to capitalist entrepreneurs. What it really was, or perhaps simultaneously acted as, was a little restatement of the labor theory of value that can be linked back to the producerism that has been the heart of so many past radical movements in American history. True wealth was not created by amassing “riches,” Obama argued, but instead by making things through our labors.

I make no claim that there is anything radical about Obama, or even Populist, and I worry about the Wall Street/Ivy League establishmentarians he has guiding his economic policy here at the outset. Yet he does represent and express the better part of our historical political tradition. I am happy that we chose it and look forward to the day when it does not take a national crisis to bring some of those better angels out.

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