

Still No Thrill Up My Leg

I'm sorry, but I'm still having a difficult time understanding why MSNBC's Chris Matthews feels a "thrill going up (his) leg" when he hears Barack Obama speak. I watched Obama give his keynote address at the Democrat's convention in 2004 and wasn't particularly overwhelmed. But my curiosity being greater than my fear of being tortured twice led me to listen to the speech again, just to see if I'd missed anything.

He started out with nine thank yous. (One is enough, thank you.) And even back then he was showing a hint of the future race card with, "Let's face it, my presence on the stage is pretty unlikely." (How are we supposed to "get over" race if everyone keeps bringing it up?)

Obama then went on to his humble origins. "My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack." Yes, his father was a foreign student; he went to Harvard, where he no doubt ran into scores of other underprivileged goat-herders who had also received "best herder of the year" scholarships. The Senator also neglected to mention to his audience that his father was a rabid communist in a government job in Kenya, where he made suggestions like, "Theoretically, there is nothing that can stop the government from taxing 100 per cent of income, so long as the people get benefits from the government commensurate with their income which is taxed." That's straight out of the Marxist playbook: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." (For you Generation X readers, that's Karl Marx, not Groucho.)

Obama left out the generous salary he made as a part-time law lecturer at the University of Chicago, the \$316,962 his wife is paid by the University of Chicago Hospitals, the \$162,500 he makes as a U.S. Senator, the \$1.6 million mansion in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, and the millions he's made in royalties for his two self-absorbed books (shouldn't you be old and have accomplished something before you are allowed to write an autobiography?). But at least the Junior Senator from Illinois didn't mention studying law by candlelight in his log cabin, and trudging to school in the snow uphill both ways with no boots because the white kids had taken them from him. (There's got to be some reason for his anger, doesn't there?)

Obama then tossed in his Kansas-born mother and mentioned that "...the day after Pearl Harbor my grandfather signed up for duty; joined Patton's army, marched across Europe." Not the U.S. Army, but Patton's army, certainly meant to equate the irresolute Obama with the resolute Patton by placing in the audience's mind the image of George C. Scott standing before an enormous American Flag, urging the troops to crush the Nazis. Powerful images aside, I'm quite certain Obama would have strongly disagreed with Patton's desire to continue marching on to Moscow to stop the "Red sons-of-bitches" before they took over where Hitler left off. Obama wouldn't have wanted to upset Joe Stalin, not when diplomacy and a little foreign aid should stop him in his tracks quite nicely.

“After the war, they studied on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through F.H.A., and later moved all the way to Hawaii in search of opportunity.” Here he managed to mention two large federal programs in one sentence, just to remind everyone that the government is where we must always turn when in need of assistance.

“My parents shared not only an improbable love, they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation.” I guess it’s fair to call his parents’ love “improbable” because his father still had his first wife living back in Africa. I’m less agreeable to saying they had an “abiding faith” in America, because Obama’s father high-tailed it back to Kenya to find additional wives and his mother took him to Indonesia with her second husband. I’m trying to picture that scene as painted by Norman Rockwell.

“They would give me an African name, Barack, or “blessed,” believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success.” There’s a little bit of “if you don’t support my views you’re intolerant” in that sentence, but I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt on the name, as Barack is Swahili (meaning “blessing, prosperity, abundance”), although its roots are the Arabic “baaraka,” as in “baarak Allaah fiik” (“may God bless you”). And while his parents may have thought the name was no barrier to success, Barack himself must have had some doubts because he used the name Barry for a while, became Barry Soetoro after being adopted by his step-father, and then switched (legally or not we don’t know) back to Barack Hussein Obama Jr.

“I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.” Okay, that’s perfectly acceptable, but not on par with great orators of history. We know he’s standing, so there’s no need to emphasize that, and I would have omitted the “of those,” but that’s minor quibbling. Who am I to argue with a Chicago Community Organizer who got elected to the Illinois State Senate because he had no opposition and to the United States Senate because the media humiliated his opponent into withdrawing from the race?

“Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our Nation...” and then:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

You can rarely go wrong quoting the Declaration of Independence. But Obama goes on to define what he just read as meaning something entirely different: “That is the true genius of America, a faith -- a faith in simple dreams, an insistence on small miracles...” No, “All men are created” is not a faith, it is a declaration. And “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness” are rights, not simple dreams or small miracles.

Obama’s “small miracles” are “...that we can tuck in our children at night and know that they are fed and clothed and safe from harm; that we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door; that we can have an idea and start

our own business without paying a bribe; that we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted -- at least most of the time.” Those aren’t “small miracles,” they are what Americans expect in a nation where individuals are free to provide for themselves and their families with their own hard work and ingenuity, while the government stays out of our lives. The “...votes will be counted – at least most of the time” was, of course, a reiteration of the Gore claim that President Bush stole the 2000 election, even though each additional counting of the ballots gave Bush more votes. Obama’s childish dig might be expected in a stump speech out on the campaign trail, but it has no place in a keynote address. Great oratory it certainly isn’t.

Obama then goes on to talk about the people he’s met who have lost their jobs or their health insurance, who are destitute but who are not looking for a federal hand-out. “People don’t expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They now we can do better. And they want that choice.” It won’t be a hand-out, because Obama will simply change the name. (“It’s already February 2; my “slight-change-in-priorities” check is late again!”)

Suddenly remembering why he was supposed to deliver the speech in the first place, Obama abruptly turns to praise for John Kerry, with a handful of the expected, “John Kerry believes...” lines. The usual generic and easy stuff, like “Again and again, we’ve seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available” and he won’t let us be “held hostage to the profits of oil companies.” (Tough choices, like voting the way the NARAL lobby that pays for your campaign wants you to vote, and those oil companies whose executives would, four years later, give more to Obama’s campaign than to McCain’s.)

Obama then gets to the Iraq War criticism: “You know, a while back -- awhile back I met a young man named Shamus in a V.F.W. Hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-looking kid -- six two, six three, clear eyed, with an easy smile. He told me he’d joined the Marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. And as I listened to him explain why he’d enlisted, the absolute faith he had in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all that any of us might ever hope for in a child. But then I asked myself, “Are we serving Shamus as well as he is serving us?””

If he had “absolute faith” in “our country and its leaders,” then didn’t Shamus mean President Bush and his Administration? If not, which leaders did Shamus (or is it Seamus?) mean? I doubt the new Marine held in high regard such a stalwart leader as Harry “we’ve already lost the war” Reid, or Nancy “let’s stop the funding now” Pelosi. And why did Obama notice that the young cadet was “clear eyed?” Aren’t most young people “clear eyed?” Or is Obama used to friends with the vacant gaze of a drug hangover?

Be that as it may, Obama said he wondered, “Are we serving Shamus as well as he is serving us?” The experienced listener knows what Obama really asked himself was, “Why was Shamus stupid enough to join the military?” because he then went on to list many of the hardships faced by soldiers, without mentioning once why young Americans really enlisted: to prevent crazed Islamist terrorists from staging another attack on the United States and destroying their beloved country.

“When we send our young men and women into harm’s way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they’re going, to care for their families while they’re gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.” Having enough troops to go to war is an admirable goal, but the enemy doesn’t always wait for you to rebuild your defenses after eight years of funding cuts by a Democrat President who “loathes the military” and is preoccupied with trying to avoid being impeached for treating the Oval Office like a massage parlor. And Obama may be surprised to learn that military commanders don’t rank “the respect of the world” (i.e., socialist appeasers in Western Europe) very high on their list of battle goals. Defeating the enemy comes in at number one every time.

“Now -- Now let me be clear. Let me be clear. We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued.” A nationally televised speech might be a good place to define who those enemies are, but Obama leaves that to our imagination. “Trust us to identify the bad guys,” he is saying. Heaven forbid you should name an “evil empire” as did Ronald Reagan; that might contribute to its collapse, and we wouldn’t want to stand in the way of the crooks at the United Nations who are getting kick-backs from any of those empires.

“John Kerry believes in America. And he knows that it’s not enough for just some of us to prosper -- for alongside our famous individualism, there’s another ingredient in the American saga, a belief that we’re all connected as one people. If there is a child on the south side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there is a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for their prescription drugs, and having to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandparent. If there’s an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.”

Obama’s “alongside our famous individualism” just oozes with contempt for the concept of existence without reliance on government. We can’t have any of that damned individualism, it would eliminate the jobs of bureaucrats! Then, “...a belief that we’re all connected as one people,” blah, blah, blah. I’ve already seen “The Grapes of Wrath,” thank you, but at least Henry Fonda made no unsubstantiated claims of Arab American families “being rounded up.” Note that Obama didn’t say “Arab American,” he said “Arab American family.” Why did he choose that language? Because he knows Americans have no problem with the authorities going after young Arab males who have homemade bomb recipes on their laptops, but the image of children and their elderly

grandparents being “rounded up” is obviously offensive. When an objective argument won’t do the trick, appeal to the emotions.

“It is that fundamental belief -- It is that fundamental belief: I am my brother’s keeper. I am my sister’s keeper that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family. E pluribus unum: “Out of many, one.”” No, it is not being your “sister’s keeper that makes this country work.” It is free market capitalism. When Obama says “I am my brother’s keeper” he doesn’t mean that we, as individuals, should help out people we know personally who are down on their luck. No, he uses the religious phrase to justify government programs to help the needy (and the not-so-needy friends and relatives of politicians feeding at the public trough). Further, “E pluribus unum” is read by Obama not as a symbol of American strength in being united against adversaries, but as a justification for the collective good at the expense of individualism.

Now Obama gets to the paragraph that contains his most media-quoted phrases: “Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us -- the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of “anything goes.” Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America -- there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America -- there’s the United States of America.” Shades of Rodney King’s “Can’t we all get along?” But the truth is that both sides have the spin masters and the negative ad peddlers, and Obama and camp certainly know the tricks too. And yes, Virginia, there really is a liberal America and a conservative America - that’s why we have elections. It’s true that we should not have separate black, white, Hispanic, and Asian Americas, but some of that division is caused by the racist hatred spewing out of the church Obama himself has attended for 20 years. It isn’t the conservatives who give Louis Farrakhan “man of the year” awards for his anti-Semitic ravings.

“The pundits, the pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an “awesome God” in the Blue States, and we don’t like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and yes, we’ve got some gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.” Nothing too overwhelming here, either in grandness or idiocy, but where the “awesome” came from I don’t know. I have noticed, however, that Obama often pledges allegiance to the stars and stripes only after someone in the audience makes a fuss about it.

“In the end -- In the end -- In the end, that’s what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?” He learned here from the Clintons: blame the opponents for doing what you’re doing, and make sure you blame them first. Obama’s campaign is overflowing with cynicism and negativity (despite the “hope” and “change” bromides), but he started his campaign by telling everyone how

“above the fray” he would be. Once he did that, he immediately descended to the depths of ordinary politics, and got away with it with the zealous support of the media.

“John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope.” Let’s assume that Obama didn’t know Edwards was an adulterous liar when he made that statement. But even for John Kerry I don’t want to “hope.” Americans shouldn’t have to “hope.” They should get up in the morning, go to school, go to their jobs, work hard, be responsible, provide for their families, obey the law, start new businesses, develop machines and methods for improving productivity and efficiency, enjoy their leisure time any way they’d like, worship as they see fit, and not be harassed by the government with high taxes and burdensome bureaucracies.

“I’m not talking about blind optimism here -- the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don’t think about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. That’s not what I’m talking about.” And then Obama goes on to talk about the “blind optimism” he says he wasn’t talking about: “I’m talking about something more substantial. It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker’s son who dares to defy the odds.” And here’s the “support me despite my socialist views or you’re a racist” comment again, “the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.” Maybe he wants affirmative action for skinny candidates, but I think we’ve already fulfilled the skinny President quota.

“Hope -- Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!” I could only think of the audacity of a small-time Chicago community organizer who had the nerve to run for President of the United States largely on a record of “undecided” votes in both the Illinois State Senate and the U.S. Senate. (And I would have substituted “adversity” for “difficulty” because it flows better when followed by “uncertainty.”)

“In the end, that is God’s greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.” No, God’s greatest gift to us was liberty, not hope. Without liberty, nothing is possible, not even hope.

Obama follows that with, “I believe that we can give our middle class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair.” Purely from an organizational perspective, those sentences are totally out of place. And purely from a language perspective, he should have used “for” instead of “to” in two places. Oh, and he forgot food for the foodless, shirts for the shirtless, teeth for the toothless, and abortions for the abortion-less. All free, of course. Paid for by the paycheck-less.

“I believe that we have a righteous wind at our backs and that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face

us.” That’s astoundingly sophomoric and relies on over-used clichés, and if Obama is such a great speaker he should know enough not to mix metaphors. Trying to go immediately from the open seas with sails filled by a “righteous wind,” directly to a highway at the “crossroads of history” is a bit awkward. (But maybe he crossed that bridge as he turned the other cheek.) At least he didn’t mention blood, sweat, and tears. Or Pink Floyd.

“America! Tonight, if you feel the same energy that I do, if you feel the same urgency that I do, if you feel the same passion that I do, if you feel the same hopefulness that I do -- if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine, the people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as President, and John Edwards will be sworn in as Vice President, and this country will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come.” He forgot, “...and Nancy Pelosi will be sworn in as Speaker of the House,” and neglected a few of the 57 Islamic states as well.

“Thank you very much everybody. God bless you. Thank you.”

Everybody? Who says “everybody” at the end of a speech? And why would someone who thinks that school “holiday programs” must skip traditional Christmas carols in order not to offend non-Christians, say “God bless you” to a national audience that includes some agnostics and atheists?

Sorry, Chris Matthews, but I don’t get a thrill up my leg from Obama like you do. I’ll take Reagan’s “shining city on a hill” over “America sucks but we can all hope together for more federal programs” any day.

Don Fredrick
August 24, 2008

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