

## **HUMOR, MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY OF HUMOR AND POLITICS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the intersection of humor and politics. Both are based on creativity and flexibility of thought. Politics is, among other things, the expression of a position. Humor is as well. Every instance of humor is a position taken by the one who is laughing towards the subject of the laughter. The common denominator between humor and politics is the use of rhetoric. That is, the verbal ability and the cognitive talent of the politician on the one hand and of the humorist on the other, to find creative solutions to unusual and exceptional situations. In this article we are interested in deepening the existing knowledge on the topic of the use of humor in politics. We start at the birth of rhetoric as a political persuasive device in ancient Greece, and continue to modern day insights into the function of humor and its integration into political rhetoric. Our case study will focus on Barack Obama, politician and President of the United States of America in a number of events from his political career as have been described in the media.

### **Keywords**

Political humor, rhetoric, Obama

### **Résumé**

Ce document traite de l'intersection de l'humour et de la politique. Les deux sont basés sur la créativité et la flexibilité de la pensée. La politique est, entre autres, l'expression d'une position; de même pour l'humour. Le dénominateur commun entre l'humour et la politique est l'utilisation de la rhétorique. Autrement dit, la capacité verbale et le talent cognitif de l'homme politique d'une part et de

l'humoriste de l'autre, de trouver des solutions créatives à des situations inhabituelles et exceptionnelles. Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons à l'approfondissement des connaissances actuelles sur le sujet de l'utilisation de l'humour dans la vie politique. Nous commençons à la naissance de la rhétorique comme dispositif de persuasion politique dans la Grèce antique, et continuons dans la période moderne pour évaluer la fonction de l'humour et son intégration dans la rhétorique politique. Notre étude de cas portera sur Barack Obama, politicien et président des Etats- Unis d'Amérique dans un certain nombre d'événements de sa carrière politique qui ont été décrits dans les médias.

### **Mots-clés**

Humour politique, rhétorique, Obama

## INTRODUCTION

Rhetoric can be defined as “verbal manipulation”, the theory of written or verbal expression using words in an effective manner to influence or convince another person. Rhetoric is a tool used by many people to transmit information, to influence, and to persuade and whose techniques of speaking and writing, when used in the proper and efficient manner, are essential in most areas of life. Man is a social creature – his survival and ability to act is dependent on his capacity to create effective communication and understanding with those around him. The spoken and written word is used, first and foremost, for the transmission of information between people. In almost every person, from ruler to common citizens, there exists the urge to impose his or her opinions and tendencies on others and to dictate their way of life. The ability to convince or persuade others to change their beliefs or attitudes is accomplished by means of communication (Wolman, 1995). Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, 2002).

## THE ORIGIN OF RHETORIC

Rhetoric has been a significant factor in public dialogue from ancient Greece to modern times (Clarke, 1962; Kennedy, 1963). Its development and status were inseparable from the development of patterns of democratic government in Greece. Verbal persuasiveness was not only essential in promoting public affairs, but it was also a necessary skill for every citizen wanting to establish their place in the social system (Aristotle, 2002). The origin of the art of discourse as a subject of formal study goes back to the fifth century BC, and the father of the art of discourse was Corax of Syracuse in Sicily. In 466 BC the “tyrant of Syracuse” was overthrown and a democratic regime was established in his place. Many residents of the city who had fled or were exiled returned and found that their land and property had been expropriated (Nedava, 1957). As a result of the ensuing wave of property lawsuits Corax and Tisias, two residents of Syracuse, developed a method meant to advise people on how to conduct themselves in a court of law. At the height of the Athenian State the use of rhetoric was found not only in courts of law and at meetings, but its echo was heard also in tragedy, comedy, philosophy and historiography (Aristotle, 2002).

Rhetoric instruction involved focusing attention on the main instrument in the hands of the rhetorician – language (Aristotle, 2002). Modern thought everywhere is based on Greek philosophy, which is the fruit of three main philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates, the father of the oral law, laid the foundation of Greek philosophy in general and rhetoric in particular. Plato was Socrates' student, and after Socrates was executed, Plato wrote down his teachings and Socrates was the central character in all of his works (Feurstein, 1976). Aristotle was Plato's student and he formalized the art of rhetoric. His book "Rhetoric" defined for the first time the process of communication between the speaker and his audience for all stages of preparation and delivery of a speech (Brosh, 1993). Greek rhetorical tradition was the model for Hellenistic rhetoric and for the Romans who followed (Aristotle, 2002).

Roman rhetoricians, who inherited the Greek rhetoric tradition, expanded upon it and laid the theoretical foundation for rhetoric education and criticism. There remain from the Roman period essays by Cicero "On the Orator" and Quintilian "Education of the Orator", which deal with developing the orator's critical thinking and polishing his verbal style of expression. Cicero, in his writings, emphasized the orator/leader's responsibility/obligation to society and politics; Quintilian detailed the stylistic devices which give the orator persuasive power when speaking before an audience (Brosh, 1993; Quintilian, 1875; Cicero, 1965). Greek and Roman cultures cultivated the study of rhetoric and demagogic persuasiveness for effective arguing in courts of law. The need to defend private property and individual freedom fed the theoretical and practical development of the theory of rhetoric, whose influence spread beyond the courts. In contrast, in modern times, the further development of rhetorical theory and persuasion was the result of the industrial revolution (Wolman, 1995).

## RHETORIC – TRANSMITTING THE MESSAGE AND MODERN POLITICAL LEADERS

The use of rhetoric as a persuasive device in general, and as a way of controlling the masses in particular, has undergone changes in modern times. Today, people understand reality for the most part through the media, and there is no doubt that the remarkable expansion of the communications media has influenced the process of message transmission (Schaffner & Sellers, 2010). The age of television and the internet opened unlimited possibilities for manipulation of audiences of viewers by the transmission of messages mainly for consumer marketing and mass distribution (Galily, 2004).

Political positions of power are conquered more easily by the use of efficient rhetorical stratagems. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> the political behavior of politicians has reflected growth against a different background than that of political leaders of the traditional variety. The origin of these processes of growth is anchored in the phenomenon "the new politics", a term coined by a group of German researchers who emerged from the industrialized democracies (Baker, Dalton & Hildebrandt, 1981). "The new politics" was created as a result of the weakening of the Western liberal democratic parties, which was a result of the growing power of the mass media and the personalization of politics (Galily, 2004). In the last four decades many researchers expanded their investigation of the sweeping social changes that produced "the new politics" in democratic societies in the industrialized West. These changes were expressed by a transition from materialistic values to post-materialistic values, which produced a new paradigm. Researchers who identify with this new paradigm maintain that the "old politics", characterized by economic growth, law and order, national security and a traditional lifestyle, has given way to "the new politics",

characterized by individual freedom, social equality and quality of life (Heath, Jowell, Curtice & Evans, 1990). Inglehart (1977) found that in the new political age, once society attains a certain level of economic prosperity, the public transfers its interest from economic problems to issues related to their quality of life (ibid.), and therefore prefers leaders with flexibility and good communication skills similar to those of an effective manager who can inspire his underlings. (Galily, 2004).

## POLITICAL CHANGES IN THE UNITED STATES – THE MEDIA AS A CENTRAL COMPONENT IN IMAGE BUILDING

A transition to personal politics in the United States has taken place in the last forty years. American presidents began to place their personality at center stage. Already in the 1950s the two major parties proclaimed that they would publicize their platforms and candidates using standard marketing methods. Candidates were trained to memorize grand statements and were instructed on how to present themselves as trustworthy on television (Wollman, 1995). Researchers in this field claim that American presidents from Johnson to Reagan referred to themselves in their speeches more often than did their predecessors Truman and Kennedy. The “Candidate Centered Campaign” became the most prominent phenomenon in Western politics (Wattenberg, 1991, 1998). The leadership preference of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also a result of structural factors, such as the accepted form of presidential elections in the United States. The presidential system brought about changes in the abilities of the candidates. In the past, a candidate was judged by his ability to build a coalition within his party, while today his ability to persuade the masses is what is under scrutiny. The “new politician” needs to be, first and foremost, a media star, a celebrity favorite in the polls (Wallenberg, 1991). To that end politicians and political groups devote a great deal of attention to the process of message delivery to the public. They sort and select punctiliously which issues to emphasize and in what manner, so as to achieve their goal of influencing opinion in the target audience. According to many studies, oratory skills and the ability to transmit messages are very significant in influencing public opinion. (Lawrence & Shapiro, 2000; Entman, 2004; Druckman, 2001).

Politicians must display rhetorical power and the ability to influence people and the substance of their reactions, and many of them show their awareness of what is called the “psychology of the masses”. Reason alone will not convince an audience of listeners, and therefore an orator must seek paths to the soul of the listener (Nedava, 1957).

In order to reach the public, the “new politicians” make widespread use of the media; they follow news broadcasts to gain knowledge about what the public thinks, as well as what their political rivals are planning and what they are doing. Today the media plays a central role in establishing the image of the “new politician” (Galily, 2004). An orator’s sources of inspiration, his or her linguistic choices and style fulfill a crucial function in the process of formulating, transmitting, receiving and interpreting his or her message.

## SPEECH AS CULTURAL CODE

Works of mass communication are combined by means of varied dialectics, with different degrees of success. There is a combination of the story, the fiction, the syntagma, and the cultural system. People live in a symbolic reality that enables them to understand the world and give it meaning. Language is a product of social agreement, which constitutes an important tool that helps us give meaning to reality.

Barth ([1977]2003) translates these ideas and the semiology to work and communication research. His article deals with the visual image, though one can also make a similar analysis of written or spoken text; in fact, giving meaning to the image is deliberate in speech as well. Every symbol has denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the straightforward meaning of the symbol. Connotation is culture dependent, relating to a specific time and place, a cultural association which is clear only to those belonging to that culture. The written text guides the reader through symbolic imagery that causes him to ignore certain sections and absorb other sections. This is where the ideology is invested, the social message by means of sophisticated manipulation, the verbal anchor is directed like a remote control towards the one meaning that was selected by the speaker (Barth [1977]2003).

## SPEECH AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

A speech is a communication tool punctiliously designed, with clearly defined goals, whose purpose is to create a relationship between the speaker and the target audience (Coe, 2008; Hart, 2000; Simon, 2002). In Western democratic societies, with their educated citizenry, leaders are often chosen by their oratory skills rather than their qualifications to execute the tasks of government (Wolman, 1995). Delivering a speech in front of a live audience is a performance of an interactive dialogue including both verbal and non-verbal devices. A talented orator is one who, in the first few minutes, can capture the attention, goodwill and compliance of the audience. Aristotle explained the role of personality and character as follows: The personality of the speaker, *ethos*, is the persuasive factor that makes the speaker trustworthy. Two additional elements that contribute to the persuasiveness according to Aristotle are reason, that is, logical convincing by means of words and *pathos*, those rhetorical devices that arouse the audience's emotions (Aristotle, 2002).

## BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA

Barack Hussein Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, has received much praise in the media for his rhetorical skills from the moment he entered the national and international public arena (O'Connell et al., 2010; Coe and Reitzes, 2010). Obama's worldview, in contrast to all previous American presidents, was formed and matured in a different space, distant and distinct from the traditional American story (Azulai, 2009; Ben-Zvi, 2011). Obama was born on August 4, 1961 in Honolulu, Hawaii, the son of a white mother and a black father, and in his early childhood he experienced changes in the family framework, parental figures and living environment – country, culture, language, and even in his personal identity (Peretz and Peretz, 2010). The circumstances of his life molded him and gave him a unique character. Prior leaders of the American people absorbed the American way of life and developed patterns of understanding reality in the spirit of the American dream. Obama's conceptual world and experiences were not exactly the traditional American way (Hoffman,

1968). Obama's self-defined identity is complex and encompasses his varied background, experiences and lessons learned, and is internalized in various cultural settings without any one being dominant. These circumstances enable him to observe with a certain distance the charged issues of race. Obama was able to avoid being labeled a one-dimensional politician with a narrow sectarian message (Ben-Zvi, 2011).

Obama entered the 2008 U.S. presidential race as one who presented a suitable replacement to the policies of George W. Bush. He came with a series of serious center-left positions but nothing unique. His positions did not differ in any significant way from Hillary Clinton, his opponent in the primaries, except as regards to the war in Iraq. Obama completed a law degree but did not have an impressive list of achievements in the executive or legislative spheres. However, his temperament and personality reflected America's dreams and aspirations, and these were the focus of his rhetoric. The magic at the heart of his candidacy was that Obama presented himself, a complex Afro-American man, intelligent, young, clever and pleasant. He was not a preeminent man but he held the promise of greatness. Obama transformed his biracial roots into a symbol of his aspiration to build a wide supportive alliance, and to bring together Americans behind a story – a narrative of moral and political progress (Remnick, 2010). Hence his rhetorical skills attracted, swept up and garnered attention and considerable sympathy (Ivie & Giner, 2009). From the moment he appeared on the national political stage in 2004 his impressive rhetorical skills were a central component of his public persona and political success. Accordingly we will examine the rhetorical elements in Obama's speeches.

## HUMOR AND POLITICS

Humor and politics, two ostensibly unrelated subjects, are in fact both social phenomena, each containing something of the other. Politics, like a couple's relationship, is based on compromise, on give and take. As in relationships, politics is the art of the possible. The political person needs flexibility of thought to survive in a political world. This is the intersection of humor and politics. Both of these are based on flexible thinking. Politics is, among other things, the expression of a position. In order to assure political survival a politician needs to be flexible – to express his or her position but also be open to changing it in accordance with relevant constraints. Humor also is the expression of a position. Every humorous situation is an expression of a position by the humorist and by the one laughing at the humor in regards to the subject of the humor. Humor is the out-of-the-ordinary cognitive ability to grasp the human condition in a humoristic manner.

Everyone is political in the sense that they have views which they would like to convince others to share. Humor is a means of expression by which a person creates humor or responds with laughter to a humorous situation, expresses a position towards the subject of the humor or towards the one who is responding to the humor. In this sense humor is political, and just as politics deals with every aspect of life, so can humor be found everywhere including in politics itself. Use of political humor is sometimes used to express criticism of politics. The politics of humor challenges the political status quo and strengthens the values and dominant aspects of politics (Tsakona & Popa, 2011).

Humor by its nature is critical. Every expression of humor, whatever its content, has an element of criticism that says that the humorist or the one laughing in response to the humor is expressing a position about the object of the humor. Humor in its essence is not aggressive,

and even when it is, the aggressiveness is concealed or softened by the humoristic structure that envelopes the contents of the text. The criticism that is expressed in humor is such that despite it, normal relations of the party on the receiving end of the humor are protected, as is the object of the humor. A political position and humor take into consideration the social environment in which they are expressed and in which they are likely to be valid and acceptable.

Another characteristic feature of humor is that it is a good means of breaking down cognitive barriers and enabling the penetration of messages to another's mind. One who addresses others using humor is perceived by them as someone positive and friendly, one who is worth being around. At the same time the humor causes them to unconsciously open cognitive barriers, and makes them receptive to messages that if heard in a different manner, without humor, they might not have been open to or in agreement with. A politician who is aware of this feature of humor and has the talent to use humor to transmit messages and political positions makes use of one of the best tools for ensuring that the views he or she expresses will be absorbed by another, in the hope that the other will change his or her position to that of the politician's.

The proximity of serious politics and laughter is perceived today as an integral part of the political arena. However the origin of this proximity is ancient Greece and brings us to the classical period of Socrates, Aristophanes and Aristotle (Vasilievich, 2008). In his speech before the jury at his trial Socrates uses rhetorical stratagems, two of the more prominent ones being – breaking the cognitive template and surprise. These two components are central elements of verbal humor and are present in almost every joke. In his opening remarks, Socrates addresses the jury and says:

How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the speeches of my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was – such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth. (Plato, The Apology of Socrates)

The beginning of the sentence indicates that Socrates is claiming that he himself was almost convinced by what his prosecutors said, so well did they speak. From here he goes on to finish in a surprising manner by saying that the truth is that everything they said was false. Immediately afterwards, Socrates uses a similar stratagem when he says:

But many as their falsehoods were, there was one of them which quite amazed me: I mean when they told you to be upon your guard, and not to let yourself be deceived by the force of my eloquence. They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency; they certainly did appear to be most shameless in saying this, unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth: for then I do indeed admit that I am eloquent. But in how different away from theirs! (ibid.)

The above leads the listener to think in a certain direction and creates an expected cognitive template. Then Socrates unexpectedly changes course and causes a reversal in thinking, from which one can understand that he is indeed a great orator.

The use of humor as a rhetorical device can be seen in the verses of Aristophanes, which were performed in Athenian theater several times a year in celebrations of the god Dionysus. Aristophanes' comedies were essentially social and political satires. The rhetorical wit expressed in these plays and the power of the humor concealed in them, as well as the openly political criticism they contained, illustrates the rhetorical richness of the humor that was an important part of Athenian culture (Hartnoll, 1968).

The integration of humor as a rhetorical device in political speeches can be seen in Cicero's second book *De Oratore*. Cicero, a political personage and one of the great Roman orators, dedicates a section of his book on the theory of rhetoric to the advantages of incorporating humor in the structure of a speech (Sover, 2009).

The use of humor and the humorous treatment by politicians reflects a number of important human traits: the ability to be creative and flexible, the ability to be critical and most important the ability to cope with changing circumstances, even difficult situations, in an unusual and humoristic manner. All these are desirable traits that characterize the modern politician and give him or her credit with potential voters. A political leader with these qualities projects confidence to his or her audience of listeners. This is a leader that can be trusted in times of trouble, and therefore the listeners will be more receptive to his or her political positions.

Peretz and Peretz (2010) claim that humor helps endear oneself to people. They cite studies that found that 78% of people surveyed think they have an above average sense of humor. On dating sites, when asked to describe oneself, having a sense of humor is the most frequently mentioned trait as well as one of the most desired traits in an ideal partner. They agree with the statement: "Humor is a serious tool for leading and influencing people." However, humor has become a confrontational tool in the political domain. Politicians have learned that it is preferable to use humorous rhetoric to attack one's opponent and damage his/her image due to the positive attitude and receptiveness of the public to this approach. Therefore, it is also recommended that every politician be able to respond in a humorous manner to such an attack by an opponent (Ridanpää, 2009, Rolfe, 2010, Tsakona, 2009). Politicians' humorous abilities are revealed to the public through the media, either in Congress or at official functions like party conventions, or in interviews and political discussions on television shows. Television can either be of a serious nature or purely entertainment. A sense of humor that is expressed in non-political settings supports the image of a strong and confident politician, and this serves him/her well in the political arena. One who has been blessed with this talent is given more credit than a politician without this ability.

## Barack Obama's Humor

Obama is blessed with a healthy sense of humor. He knows that if he can get his audience to smile then he will probably succeed in breaking down barriers, arousing interest, giving pleasure, and perhaps, also winning support, influencing his listeners and bringing them over to his side.

The following are some examples where Obama chose to use his characteristic humor:

In the mid 1990s, before Obama's presidential campaign, when he was the newly elected junior state senator from Illinois of the minority party, he was asked if he wanted to be president. His answer was:

Guys, I am a state senator. I was elected *yesterday*. I have never set foot in the U.S. Senate. I have never worked in Washington. And the notion that somehow I am going to start running for higher office, it just doesn't make sense.....I am going to be spending the first several months of my career in the U.S. Senate looking for the washroom and trying to figure out how the phones work. (Remnick, 2010)

These words recall the style of expression used by Socrates to address his prosecutor. His reference to marginal things like "washrooms" actually intensifies the great things that potentially await him. That is, the possibility that he will be president. In addition, his unusual answer emphasizes his talent for humor, which strengthens his image as a creative and flexible man, traits important in a leader.

Before he was sworn in as president and after the publication of his book *Dreams of My Father*, Obama appeared in many places. His appearance on the David Letterman show gave him a platform to display his wit (Remnick, 2010):

Letterman: The thing about your name, it's easy to pronounce and it's cool.

Obama: Well, that's what I think, that's what I think. You know, there were some advisors who told me to change my name.

Letterman: Really?

Obama: Yeah, and somebody suggested "Cat Stevens," for example...

Letterman: Now, was there a guy running for Senate, maybe an incumbent, maybe not, I think a Republican, and he had a problem because he and his wife would go to strip clubs and have sex.

Obama: Well, that was –

Letterman: Did I dream that? Does any of this ring a bell?

Obama: There were some issues, some allegations.

Letterman: (laughs) Yeah.

Obama: But we didn't touch that stuff.

Letterman: I see.

Obama: We took the high road, and –

Letterman: Now is this who you were running against, or he dropped out, right?

Obama: Yeah, he dropped out – yeah, the Republicans, you know, they seem to have a lot of fun given all their moral values stuff. They enjoy themselves.

A couple of weeks later, Obama was in Washington. He had not yet been sworn in, but he was a headline speaker at the Gridiron Club. Adopting a tone of flagrant depreciation, he admitted that he was now so overexposed that he made “Paris Hilton look like a recluse.”

“I figure there’s nowhere to go from here but down,” he said. “So tonight, I’m announcing my retirement from the United States Senate.” Here Obama uses verbal humor based on double-meaning, and this humorous device is very agreeable to audiences because it not only indicates his cognitive abilities, but also causes his listeners to pat themselves on the back for understanding the sophisticated humor (Sover, 2011).

Obama also knows how to deal sensitively, not without humor with more complex issues. Take for example (Remnick, 2010):

When Obama paid a visit to the Senate elder Robert Byrd, of West Virginia, who as a young man had been a member of the Klu Klux Klan, he listened sympathetically as the old man described the sins of his youth as ‘the cross around my neck.’ It was the Rorschach effect all over again: Byrd saw in Obama a welcoming, forgiving face. And Obama, who was a gifted reader of other people, replied soothingly to Byrd, ‘If we were supposed to be perfect, we’d all be in trouble, so we rely on God’s mercy and grace to get us through’.

In another example, after the Hurricane Katerina disaster in New Orleans, Obama was harshly critical of the Bush administration that didn’t immediately deal with the affected black population (ibid.):

Whoever was in charge of planning was so detached from the realities of inner-city life in a place like New Orleans that they couldn’t conceive of the notion that people couldn’t load up their S.U.V.s, put a hundred dollars’ worth of gas in there, buy some sparkling water, and drive off to a hotel and check in with a credit card.

Even in his work in the Senate Obama did not hesitate to joke (ibid.):

At committee sessions, Obama, as the most junior senator, was eighteenth in line to ask questions; the committee room would often be all but empty when his turn at the microphone came. During Rice’s confirmation hearings in the Foreign Relations Committee, Obama grew increasingly bored during one of Joe Biden’s bloviations. Finally Obama leaned back in his chair and handed one of his aides a note. The aid was excited to receive his first serious communication from the Senator. The note read, ‘Shoot. Me. Now.’

Humor is an excellent tool for neutralizing negative emotions in others. Obama, who is endowed with a healthy sense of humor, knew how to defuse his political rival’s anger with a lighthearted response. When Obama received an especially harsh reprimand in a letter from veteran Senator John McCain he responded with understanding and restraint (ibid.):

The fact that you have now questioned my sincerity and my desire to put aside politics for the public interest is regrettable, but it does not in any way diminish my deep respect for you nor my willingness to find a bipartisan solution to this problem.

In this response, according to the Socratic model, Obama appears to be humbling himself and telling his rival you are greater than I and my respect for you is the main thing. However, later we see a turnabout that makes his words seem only a basis for creating humor at his rival's expense, meant in fact to diminish his importance. When Obama was asked about the letter he replied (ibid.):

The tone of the letter, I think, was a little over the top, but John McCain's been an American hero and has served here in Washington for twenty years, so if he wants to get cranky once in a while, that's his prerogative.

Here we see Obama's ability to use humor in an aggressive manner, something that politicians who have the appropriate skills are wont to do opposite their political rivals (Georgalidou, 2011). Another example of Obama's use of the Socratic model in creating a humorous template was in his November 2007 speech relating to his rival for the Democratic presidential nomination Hillary Clinton. He said that she was a skilled and seasoned politician who was conducting her campaign "by the book" but that "the problem is the book itself" (Peretz and Peretz, 2010). The concluding phrase "the problem is the book itself" completely changes the meaning of what he had appeared to be saying about Hillary Clinton. Here are two clearly humoristic elements: One is the transformation of the listener's format of thinking – which occurs in most jokes, and the surprise, which is one of the basic elements in the creation of many humorous situations (Sover, 2009; Sover, 2011).

When Obama attacks an opponent he does so with dignity and sensitivity interwoven with subtle humor, as seen in the following examples (Remnick, 2010):

I don't think George Bush is a bad man. I think he's a patriotic person and I don't think that the people who work for him are stupid people. I think **a lot** of them are smart **in their own way**. I think that the problem is that they've got a **different idea of America than the idea we've got.**"

In this section, he creates meanings that are not visible and it is up to the reader or listener to discover and interpret them. This is one of the ways of transforming a text to contain humorous qualities (Sover, 2009). Note the highlighted words in the text. The words **a lot** add an additional meaning which is not said outright – that some of the people who work with Bush are in fact stupid. In another point instead of saying that those stupid people are grossly mistaken, he says that they have "a different idea of America than the idea we've got". The word **America** intensifies the extent of the mistake that results from those of his advisors who are unworthy.

Obama uses an additional type of humor, which is based on abundance. That is, inserting a mass of data into the text which, all together, creates an image of an absurd situation with a humorous tone. This is a method of exaggeration which is one of the central tenets in creating humorous caricatures.<sup>1</sup> For example: "They believe in different things. They have a sense that in fact government is the problem, not the solution, and that if we just dismantle government, piece by piece, if we break it up in tax cuts to the wealthy and if we just make sure that we privatize Social Security and we get rid of public schools and we make sure that we don't

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<sup>1</sup> The caricature was first developed in Italy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The word caricature comes from the Italian word caricare which means exaggeration or abundance.

have police on the streets, we hire private security guards and we don't have public parks, we've got private parks and if we just break everything up, then in fact everybody's going to be better off – that in fact we don't have obligations to each other, that we're not in this together but instead you're on your own. That's the basic concept behind the ownership society. That's what George Bush and this Republican Congress have been arguing for the last six years. And it's a tempting idea because it doesn't require anything from each of us.” (Remnick, 2010).

In the above piece from 2008, Obama is relating to Senator McCain's economic plan. The opening is in the Socratic style. Obama continues and adds so many examples that they create an overload. The addition of the following second part, which is so overloaded with data, serves to emphasize the Socratic first part and strengthens its humoristic aspect: “Now, I don't believe that Senator McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans. I just think he doesn't know. Why else would he define middle-class as someone making under five million dollars a year? How else could he propose hundreds of billions in tax breaks for big corporations and oil companies but not one penny of tax relief to more than one hundred million Americans? How else could he offer a health care plan that would actually tax people's benefits, or an education plan that would do nothing to help families pay for college, or a plan that would privatize Social Security and gamble your retirement?” (from: The American Promise acceptance speech at the August 2008 Democratic National Congress).

When Obama decided to run for president, during a meeting in David Axelrod's office he was handed a background memo which included the question like “Are you intimidated by the prospect of being leader of the free world?” He laughed and replied “*Someone's* got to do it.” (Remnick, 2010).

And then they discovered the massive adoration for Obama.

The public adoration was extraordinary. One afternoon Abner Mikvah waited for Obama at a famous German restaurant in the Loop called Berghoff, which was just around the corner from Obama's Chicago office. ‘He was just a few minutes late but he pulled up in his black S.U.V. He hadn't walked, and I teased him about it,’ Mikva recalled. ‘Barack said, ‘If I had walked, I would've been an *hour* late.’ (Remnick p.460)

Later in the same conversation, when told that if he ran for president there was a strong likelihood that someone would take a shot at him he replied: “You sound like Michelle.” (Remnick p.461)

And when concern over his lack of experience as opposed to his opponents was raised “Obama answered that if experience necessarily led to good judgment then Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney would be supreme. “But look where that got us,” he said.” (Remnick p.462).

As regards his to physical appearance, more specifically his color, and his somewhat problematic name (Obama sounds like Osama (Bin-Laden) and his middle name – Hussein) – Obama handles these topics by mustering his ability to laugh at himself as is seen in the following two examples:

During the 2008 campaign “Obama told the St. Petersburg *Times* that McCain was trying to ‘scare’ voters because ‘I don't look like I came out of central casting when it comes to Presidential candidates’.” (Remnick p. 541)

Back in 2004 in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, he called himself “a skinny kid with a funny name”.

Peretz and Peretz (2010) say that Obama does not act in an expected manner. He laughs at himself and his weaknesses. Most people prefer to promote themselves and to play down their weaknesses. His use of this technique in the proper dosage wins him points with his audience, for a person who is able to laugh at himself proves his modesty and his humanity. He also shows integrity in that he presents himself in a natural light without trying to beautify reality or the “product”.

And even after he was elected to the Presidency in 2008 he continued the self-humor to his benefit, as seen in the following example: In May 2009 Obama was invited to speak at the University of Arizona, which had decided not to grant him an honorary degree. Among the reasons for this was the claim that he had not achieved enough in his life and he still had to prove himself with deeds. This of course was in contrast to the decision taken a few months later when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize even though he had yet to achieve anything in that arena. Obama turned this to an advantage in his speech before the tens of thousands of students and their families who had assembled in the stadium to hear him. He said that even his wife Michele agreed with this principle: “I have a long list of things I haven’t done waiting for me at home.”

Another example of Obama’s humor took place a few weeks before his inauguration when Obama called the Reverend Joseph Lowery to ask him to give the benediction. “Lowery, Dr. King’s comrade in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was now eighty-seven years old. Obama left a message and asked him to call back on his cell phone. Lowery had campaigned with Obama in Iowa and Georgia. He had introduced him in Selma with his speech about all the ‘good crazy’ things going on in the country. He had been with Obama from the start. Lowery returned the call, saying ‘I am looking for the fellow who is going to be the forty-fourth President.’ ‘Well, I believe that would be me, Brother Lowery’, Obama replied.” (Remnick p. 576)

A few moments before the start of the inauguration:

After absorbing the blast of cold and the thudding roar from the Mall, Obama glanced to his right. He spotted on the steps, a few feet away, John Lewis – squat, bald, hatless – the eleven-term representative of Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District and the only one of the speakers at the 1963 March on Washington still alive. Obama bent to embrace him. “Congratulations, Mr. President,” Lewis whispered in his ear. Obama smiled at the sound of that and said, “Thank you, John. I’ll need your prayers.

As president he continued to maintain a sense of humor. In his first speech to the joint houses of Congress in March 2009, he incorporated humor in his opening remarks saying: “The First Lady... is here somewhere” and while speaking of our responsibility not to leave debts for our children to repay he received applause from both Democrats and Republicans, causing him to add a spontaneous crack that did not appear in the written speech: “You see, I know we can reach a consensus here.” (Peretz and Peretz, 2010)

## SUMMARY

In the present article we tried to show a particular aspect of President Barack Obama's public persona. This presentation is limited by the scope of the examples included, but they encompass a wide and varied landscape that creates an authentic picture regarding one of the most interesting and important features of his image. We touched on a number of humorous aspects that are expressed in different arenas: the private, the public, and the political. These three support the formation of Obama's personality as a man, as a politician and as a leader. Obama the man and the leader, with a highly developed sense of humor, transmits his ability to cope with changing and difficult situations. Likewise, having a sense of humor helps make him popular with the public.

To be a politician and to be endowed with a sense of humor is a winning combination. This does not mean to say that a politician with a developed sense of humor but who is lacking leadership and decision making capabilities can guarantee his/her job. But there is no doubt that the characteristics that are attributed to everyone with a developed sense of humor – leadership, ability to deal with difficult situations, flexible thinking and high social skills – will have an influence on those that he/she is to lead.

To conclude, we present some additional examples taken from Obama's political campaign speeches. But before that, we bring an example illustrating Michelle Obama's sense of humor, which shows that in Obama's family humor holds a place of honor: "Michelle Obama regarded the unending clamor and sycophancy that now attended her husband with a bracingly astringent bemusement. At the swearing-in ceremony, she observed all the commotion and said, 'Maybe one day he will do something to warrant all this attention'." (Remnick p. 427)

### 2004 DNC Keynote Address

"That we can participate in the political process...and that our votes will be counted...At least most of the time."

### 2008 DNC Acceptance Speech

"Out of work? Tough luck. No health care? The market will fix it. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps – even if you don't have boots. You're on your own."

### 2008 Economy Speech

"At this rate the question isn't just 'are you better off than you were four years ago?', it's 'are you better off than you were four weeks ago?'"

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