

# After the Spill and the Speech

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It is sometimes possible to get a sense of what somebody would be like as president from their campaign. In 2008, candidate Obama's unflappability and discipline was reassuring to many voters, while McCain's impulsivity and lack of discipline raised concerns for many voters. There are, however, some major differences between being a candidate and a president. One of these differences is that a candidate has far fewer options for communicating or demonstrating their views on policy matters.

One of the reasons oratorical skills are so important for a candidate is that they are one of the few tools that they have. In 2008, when the country was faced with an economic crisis, candidate McCain sought to take action by suspending his campaign and returning to Washington with the hopes of leading the efforts to save the economy. He looked foolish in this endeavor because as the candidate, he was no longer able to play a useful legislative role. In a somewhat different situation, when candidate Obama was faced with the biggest challenge of his campaign, responding to revelations about his Pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, he responded by making a speech about race in America. The speech itself was extraordinary, but the tactic was not.

Obama's oratorical skills served him very well during his campaign, but they have times seemed misplaced in his presidency. For a president, a great speech does not stand by itself the way it does for a candidate. Instead it occurs in a context. In December, for example, President Obama made a pretty good speech about the war in Afghanistan, but the speech is already forgotten while the wrong-headed policy lives on. Yesterday's speech on the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was a different case, but still demonstrates that oratory, while certainly of great use to President Obama, is not going to be enough.

[Obama's speech](#) was good; and the President hit most of the important points, but it was difficult not to listen to the speech without wondering why it took so long for the president to say some of these things, and more importantly what policies and legislation will follow the speech.

Obama accurately described the coziness between regulators and oil companies before asserting that:

"(O)ne of the lessons we've learned from this spill is that we need better regulations, better safety standards, and better enforcement when it comes to offshore drilling. But a larger lesson is that no matter how much we improve our regulation of the industry, drilling for oil these days entails greater risk."

The component parts of this statement are true, but it is misleading to suggest that this was something that was learned from the spill. Many environmental activists and ordinary citizens knew this before the spill, which is one of the reasons that there has always been such strong opposition to offshore oil drilling. Moreover, offshore oil drilling has been an issue of some

political salience for quite a while, not least during the presidential campaign when Republicans made "Drill, baby drill" one of their mantras. Given all this, it is troubling to think that the Obama administration has learned this lesson only now.

Referring to the need to "tackle our addiction to fossil fuels," Obama remarked, "Now is the moment for this generation to embark on a national mission to unleash America's innovation and seize control of our own destiny." Again, it is the use of the word "now" that is troubling. Now is not the moment to embark on this mission. We are already late for that mission. While Obama cannot be held responsible for the failure of previous presidents to address this problem, the question of why this moment is occurring now after Obama has been in office for almost a year and half is hard to avoid. The moment to embark on that mission for President Obama should have been January 21, 2009. The need to end US dependence on fossil fuels is not a result of this oil spill. It has been known for decades.

Listening to the speech one gets the sense that the oil spill has brought Obama's focus back to the environmental and energy related issues after a year and a half of being pushed off the agenda by the economy and Afghanistan, but effective governance often means addressing issues simultaneously not sequentially. Had Obama still been a candidate but not president, the speech might have resonated more. If he is able to achieve the goals outlined in the speech, Obama will have succeeded on the energy issue, but the speech itself is certainly not enough.