

OBAMA'S RHETORIC, PRAGMATISM, AND THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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Abstract: Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States, has often been described and analyzed in terms of his filiations with certain forms of pragmatism associated with the University of Chicago, on the one hand, and in terms of certain favored rhetorical devices figuring in his major speeches, on the other. This essay brings together these two analytical focal points to show how they often capture, from different angles, the very same political philosophical tendencies, a characteristically practical and political form of pragmatism that grasps the importance of rhetoric for building civic trust and friendship in an effort to advance a more fully democratic culture. This is as much a part of the University of Chicago legacy as the better known associations with Great Books programs or economic libertarianism.

“Thinking about how you provide hope and opportunity to every kid is my biggest motivator. When I see my five-year-old and my two-year-old, it makes me weep because I see children who are just as smart and just as beautiful as they are, who just don’t get a shot. It’s unacceptable in a country as wealthy as ours that children every bit as special as my own children are not getting a decent shot at life.” –Barack Obama, quoted in David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power*, pp. 202-3

“Is it not Abraham Lincoln who has cleared the title to our democracy? He made plain, once for all, that democratic government, associated as it is with all the mistakes and shortcomings of the common people, still remains the most valuable contribution America has made to the moral life of the world.”—Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, p. 26

I. Introduction

On November 4th, 2008, Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, won the presidential election in the United States of America and thus made history both globally and locally. The first African-American ever to win the presidency, he was also the first president ever with strong bonds to the University of Chicago and to the modern day city of Chicago, with its long and notorious history of machine politics and corruption. One of Obama’s senior political advisors and University of Chicago Law School colleagues, Abner Mikva, who also served as general counsel in the Clinton White House, summed up Obama’s victory as also a victory for Chicago: “Really what we’ll get out of this is, it will make clear once and for all Chicago is not just full of pork-barrel, sleazy politicians who know only Machine politics... We also will have a very special president.” (*Chicago Sun-Times*, Nov. 5, 2008, p. 8A).

Interestingly, Mikva did not deny that Chicago is full of “pork-barrel, sleazy politicians who know only Machine politics.” He simply observed that the city now “also will have a very special president”—someone, presumably, to provide an added and more ethically satisfactory dimension to Chicago politics. Now we know, Mikva seems to suggest, that, *even in Chicago*, the political life can be one of service, inspiration, and hope, a life devoted to the democratic potential and guided by the better angels of our nature, rather than by the temptations of kickbacks from driveway permits and the rewards of cronyism.

Mikva, whose own life has been very much devoted to the same cause, through such efforts as the “Mikva Challenge” program for introducing youth to the nobler side of public service, is voicing here a very special triumphal note. It is the triumphal note, not only of the tradition of political reform in the city of Chicago, but also of the tradition of political reform that has long marked the University of Chicago, or at least one side of it. This is the tradition stretching from the 1890s down to today, from John Dewey and Jane Addams, through Charles and Robert Merriam, Paul Douglas, Saul Alinsky, and Leon Despres, through Mikva himself, David Greenstone and Cass Sunstein, down to Danielle Allen and Barack Obama. It is the tradition that has always sought, in both theory and practice, to advance democratic deliberation and democracy as “a way of life,” to use Dewey’s famous expression, to foster a more fully democratic culture that could permeate, reform, and transform narrower forms of political activity. It is a tradition that has had some successes, with settlement houses, community organizing, and independent political opposition to the Chicago Machine. But it is also a tradition that, for the most part, has run against the current, failing to reform the political process, failing to halt or reform unjust urban renewal programs, failing to promote civic friendship across the social, economic, and racial divides built into the very concrete of Chicago, and failing to reform parts of the University itself. The Obama victory, many now hope, will be the victory of this University of Chicago tradition, and mark, at long last, a winning combination of realism and idealism, of narrow political pragmatism and wider philosophical pragmatism, of faith and doubt, and of rhetoric and action. After all, Obama went from his three years in Chicago as a community organizer (1985-88) working in Alinskyite fashion, on to Harvard Law School, and then back to Chicago, where he both taught at the University of Chicago Law School for twelve years (1992-2004) and made the successful transition to the electoral politics that would win him the presidency. Chicago and the University of Chicago can lay claim to him, just as he lays claim to them.

In this essay, I will begin with the present, analyzing Obama’s rhetorical tactics and broader political philosophy as presented in his major speeches, and then track backwards through different historical moments to bring out the linkage between these and the University of Chicago tradition of pragmatic democratic reform and philosophy. Some of these filiations are more indirect than direct, but even so, they provide an important framework for understanding the larger philosophical significance of Obama, who, I shall argue, appears to have taken his playbook from a Rortyeian pragmatism that in turn took its playbook from Chicago pragmatism. For the cosmopolitan, global audience that Obama has now attracted, it is especially important to understand the nature of American pragmatism, political and philosophical, and how Obama was, figuratively at least, “born in Chicago.”

II. Three Speeches, One Voice

"What-what is that American promise? It's a promise that says each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will, but that we also have obligations to treat each other with dignity and respect.

It's a promise that says the market should reward drive and innovation and generate growth, but that businesses should live up to their responsibilities to create American jobs, to look out for American Workers, and play by the rules of the road.

Ours--ours is a promise that says government cannot solve all our problems, but what it should do is that which we cannot do for ourselves: protect us from harm and provide every child a decent education; keep our water clean and our toys safe; invest in new schools, and new roads, and science, and technology.

Our government should work for us, not against us. It should help us, not hurt us. It should ensure opportunity not just for those with the most money and influence, but for every American who's willing to work.

That's the promise of America, the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation, the fundamental belief that I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper.

That's the promise we need to keep. That's the change we need right now"

(Barack Obama, Acceptance Speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, August 28, 2008)

Obama's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention moved artfully between the sense of "promise" as a ground for expectation and "promise" as a specific pledge, as a saying that is a doing. One and the same "American promise" is something that apparently "makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen, that better place around the bend" and something that gets made "to my daughters when I tuck them in at night and ... that you make to yours." The candidate in fact made sparing reference to "democracy" in any serious political philosophical sense, opting instead to inspire with talk of an "American promise" redolent of the aspirational, imaginative element uniting everything from the March on Washington to the bedtime stories told to Malia and Sasha. Dreams that you can believe in, not dreams to be deferred. A promise that can still be kept. In rhetorical terms, this is an artful move from forensic or juridical oratory concerning the past, through epideictic or demonstrative oratory concerning the present, to that deliberative or hortative oratory concerning the future, choices to be made together. With Obama, the accent is always on the latter, the future as consensus and climax.

And tellingly, although the speech manifestly invoked the language and imagery of the social contract tradition, which in its Lockean version has been so crucial to the American political tradition, it did so via pure resonance, without actually buying into any of the suspect political theoretical machinery of the notion of a social contract, original or hypothetical.

For this is indeed a special form of promise, a promise that bends without ever being finally broken, a promise that can be both made to and kept by the people, a promise that in some magical way is almost its own fulfillment, keeping hope alive. After all, the time horizon on this promise appears to be that long arc of the universe tending towards justice. The allusion to the harsher perspective of a Langston Hughes was fleeting and in faintly invidious contrast to the words of King's "I Have a Dream" speech: "The men and women who gathered there could've heard many things. They could've heard words of anger and discord. They could've been told to succumb to the fear and frustrations of so many dreams deferred." Instead, they heard King's Ralph Ellisonian message that "in America, our destiny is inextricably linked, that together our dreams can be one." And "We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." The quotation marks fall as the candidate makes the preacher's words his own. "America, we cannot turn back." We cannot walk alone, turn back, continue the politics of the past (eight years), etc.

In this rhetorical stratagem, it is not quite clear what we are doing: Are we sleeping together, walking together, or waking together? All across America, "something is stirring," and it's us, the American dreamers dreaming of "individual responsibility and mutual responsibility." We need to march, not to Washington, but to the future. Washington will follow. True, Obama knows "the cynicism we all have about government." But he also knows that "Change happens—change happens because the American people demand it, because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a

new time.” It is up to us to keep our brothers, our sisters, and the promise of America. Again, this is the rhetoric of the deliberative, of the future tense, which defines the present and gets us over the past.

And Obama’s acceptance speech not only happily represents his commitment to the deliberative mode of persuasive discourse. It also displays most of his favored rhetorical devices, especially his seeming addiction to anaphora (repeating words or groups of words at the beginning of successive clauses), parallelism and isocolon, allusion, Lincolnesque dubitatio (downplaying his own talents as a rhetorician), and a singular form of antanaclasis, which repeats a word in different senses but with a serious ethical point rather than a punning intention. His remarkable grasp of kairos, seizing the persuadable moment, is of course evident, but so is his deviation from the classical rhetorical forms in his ability to sound the note of the preacher, of a Martin Luther King Jr., without actually sermonizing or even citing much biblical scripture. Obama’s major speeches tend to allude to or indirectly invoke biblical scripture through a secular or political scripture, though the words of King or Lincoln. Adroit at logos, ethos, and pathos, he appeals to logic, character, and emotion in turns, but always with the stress on the evidence that the improbable is possible, that character is in the making, an experiment, and that the making involves empathy and service, especially to future generations. The rhetoric is part and parcel of a pragmatist outlook that denies that character is destiny, that destiny is fixed, and that democratic social experimentation to see what works is somehow a thing of the past, rather than the very future of America.

If only the revisionist pragmatist public intellectual Richard Rorty, another product of the University of Chicago, had lived to see this version of *Achieving Our Country*. In his book of that title, Rorty had taken his point of departure from James Baldwin's line: "If we--and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others--do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history the world." (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* [Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1998] pp. 12-13). Here is the defining moment, and the handful has become a seeming multitude. Rorty's Baldwin was not the angry Baldwin who, like Richard Wright, moved to France to escape American racism. For Rorty, “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement.... just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely. Emotional involvement with one's country—feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of its history, and by various present-day national policies—is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative and productive. Such deliberation will probably not occur unless pride outweighs shame.” (p. 3),

Rorty would have loved the deep historical irony of having the most truly cosmopolitan presidential candidate the U.S. has ever seen opening up the very University of Chicago liberal/pragmatist Way he had searched for—reweaving our solidarity and/or National pride to help us achieve our country, just when it so desperately needs achieving. Forget the carping and whining of the literary Academic Left and get with the real people, including those in Law School and Econ. Depts. Basketball is a perfectly legitimate substitute for bowling; in fact, it is harder to people to do it alone.

Clearly, Obama may well confirm Rorty's diagnosis and prognosis: “Emphasizing the continuity between Herbert Croly and Lyndon Johnson, between John Dewey and Martin Luther King, between Eugene Debs and Walker Reuther, would help us to recall a reformist Left which deserves not only respect but imitation—the best model available for the American Left in the coming century. If the intellectuals and the unions could ever get back together again, and could reconstitute the kind of Left which existed in the Forties and Fifties, the first decade of the twenty-first century might conceivably be a Second Progressive

Era.” (p. 56). On that score, Obama is trying—he loves the word “Progressive” and FDR, Kennedy, King all loom large—though he will have to aim for the second decade of the twenty-first century. One only hopes that he will turn out to be even more progressive than he is on the matter of income inequality. He needs to undo much more than the damage of the last eight years. And this, of course, is not even to mention the global poor, the billion plus constituency that suffers from U.S. policy but scarcely manages to secure so much as a passing reference in the Democratic candidate's acceptance speech. The biggest problems of justice confronting the world today do not make appropriate campaign material for the major parties.

To be sure, Obama is concerned with global justice. But the favored tropes of his rhetoric are very much in line with Rorty's emphasis on national pride and deliberative rhetoric, or rather restoring national pride by tapping into the American ideal and possible future, rather than the American reality. He is himself perhaps the best vehicle for just such a restoration. His speeches overflow with quotations from or allusions to King and Lincoln, and these are all of a theme—out of the many, one, as a choice we must make:

“If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive for our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in number this nation have never seen, by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different; that their voice could be that difference.

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled—Americans who sent a message to the world that we have never been a collection of Red States and Blue States: we are, and always will be, the *United States of America*.

It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve to put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.”

(Barack Obama, Victory Speech in Grant Park, Chicago, Nov. 4th, 2008)

All things considered, the Obama victory speech was very sober. Again, there was the characteristic anaphora and parallelism, the downplaying of the juridical and the fusing of the epideictive to the deliberative. Again, there was the political sermonizing invocation of King's moral arc of the universe; again, there was the aura of Lincoln, as the father of the second American founding and the architect of the American ideal of union as the defining vision in achieving our country; again, there was the confrontation with cynicism, though this time around, the “change has come to America.” The questions are still posed, but the doubts can now be defeated. The arc of the universe does not seem quite so long, at least looking forward.

But the speech itself does not stand still, cannot rest with this perspective. As in his old days as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side, Obama is compelled, even driven, to provide the

immediate post-mortem, whether it be of defeat or of victory. And even at the moment of ultimate victory, he could not resist, very much like Lincoln, segueing into a mode of tired sobriety (still with hope for the future), albeit in a collective tone:

“I know you didn’t do this just to win an election and I know you didn’t do it for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. . . . The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America—I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you—we as a people will get there.

There will be setbacks and false starts. There are many who won’t agree with every decision or policy I make as President, and we know that government can’t solve every problem. But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you, especially when we disagree. And above all, I will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it’s been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years—block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand.

What began twenty-one months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night. This victory alone is not the change we seek—it is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It cannot happen without you.

So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other. Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it’s that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers—in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people.”

Thus, the speech literally contradicts itself: change has come to America, but this victory is “not the change we seek.” The arc of the universe is still long, and what’s more, now seems to involve an uphill climb. We still cannot go back, but must go forward, and in a new spirit. The “promise” of America and of Obama is still there in all its complexity and ambiguity. The voice of the old community organizer, understanding that change comes one step at a time and the struggle always continues (and that citizen mobilization, democracy in the streets, is crucial), weaves through the speech on the way to a quotation from Lincoln: “We are not enemies, but friends; though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection.” Then a call for help, addressed especially to those “whose support I have yet to earn,” followed by words “to all those watching tonight from beyond our shores.” It is a message and an apology: “tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope.” The conclusion: “For that is the true genius of America—that America can change. Our union can be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”

So, America has changed, can change, and must change—the ideals may endure and inspire hope of perfection, but America as an ideal is not an ideal of static perfection. The future shapes our present and our past. Like all good pragmatists, Obama always finds the anti-Platonic voice, even as he is about to cry “God Bless America.” Like Dewey’s “A Common Faith,” or Cornell West’s oratorical pragmatism, Obama, especially since breaking with the church of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, appears to find his God in the democratic faith, in the ever shape shifting genius of the people. The eternity promised is that of future generations of people on earth. If the universal vision suggests the permanent, the particularity of the people suggests the transient. This sense was powerfully invoked in Obama’s 2008 Father’s Day address at the Apostolic Church of God, in a rare performance that began with a bit of scripture and concluded

with a characteristic play on the word “Father,” trading on the earthly and heavenly, but at the deepest level preached this anaphoric confessional: “And what I’ve realized is that life doesn’t count for much unless you’re willing to do your small part to leave our children—all of our children—a better world. Even if it’s difficult. Even if the work seems great. Even if we don’t get very far in our lifetime.”

This has ever been the paradoxical position of pragmatism. Pragmatism was the first and only truly original American contribution to philosophy, and as a philosophy, it has always been viewed as peculiarly American, somehow carrying on its sleeve the American ideal—for Obama, the Bob the Builderism of “Yes We Can,” because “when Americans come together, there is no destiny too difficult or too distant for us to reach.” Yet at the very same time, the universalizing, Platonizing, Christianizing elements of Americanism are the very things pragmatism usually seeks to undercut, albeit in ways that avoid the old dualisms. Against the declaration of self-evident truth in the Declaration of Independence, pragmatists hold that accepted “truths” are always provisional, experimental, and open to revision. Nothing is written in stone, and old views always need to be reconstructed in light of changing historical realities, though some views do seem to work better than others. As Hilary Putnam has put it: “That one can be both fallibilistic *and* antiskeptical is perhaps *the* basic insight of American pragmatism.” (*Pragmatism* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1995], p. 21). (Putnam, by the way, is a better interpreter of Dewey than Rorty, who resolutely failed to appreciate Dewey’s degrees of epistemological realism).

Such negotiations between the transient and the permanent are quite evident in Obama’s crucial speech on race, “A More Perfect Union,” in some ways that single best source for his rhetoric. Addressing the controversy brought on by Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s inflammatory comments about the racism of the United States, Obama, appropriating the staging and symbolism of the Constitution Center in Philadelphia, began with the Constitution: “the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.”

But, the emphasis is on “perfected over time,” and words without actions do not reality make: “And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggles, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience, and always at great risk—to narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.” As always, the arc is long, the road steep, the answer in union: “This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.”

Although the speech is headed toward associations with King and Lincoln, Obama turns back, in a moment of double indirection, to quote his own words, from *Dreams From My Father*, to describe his version of the religious experience, as he found it at Trinity, Rev. Wright’s church:

“People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend’s voice up into the rafters. And in that single note—hope!—I heard something else: At the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion’s den, Ezekiel’s field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival and freedom and hope—became our stories, my story. The blood that spilled was our blood, the tears our tears, until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black. In chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a meaning to reclaim memories that we didn’t need to feel shame about—memories that all people might study and cherish, and with which we could start to rebuild.”

From there, the narrative moves with empathy through the black experience and the white, and then through the path of the past to the path of the possible future, in which people recognize the pain and sacrifice of the past, but move on: “I would not be running for President if I didn’t believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of American want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.” Obama then concludes with another artful repetition, of the story of Ashley, which he had told when speaking at King’s church, Ebenezer Baptist in Atlanta, on King’s birthday. Ashley, a young, white campaign worker in South Carolina, joined the campaign because her own difficult childhood experiences of sacrifice to help her ailing mother had led her to want to help “the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents, too.” She tells her story at a roundtable discussion, moving around the room to ask the others why they are supporting the campaign: “finally they come to this elderly black man who’s been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he’s there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the way. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, “I am here because of Ashley.”

The moral: “I’m here because of Ashley.’ By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.”

From the many, one, from the particular, the universal, and from the transient, the permanent. We live in the particular and the transient, but we live by the universal and the permanent. Except that, as with the word “promise,” Obama works the word “perfection” into something worthy of Stanley Cavell, taking antanaclasis to a new level of political significance. “Perfection,” on his reading, is not like “pregnant” or “best” etc. “This union my never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected”—which means, it seems, not “perfected” as in achieving “perfection,” but “perfected” as in “improved.” The transitive verb form here does mean “To bring to perfection or completion.” It is rather the means by which Obama pragmatizes the American Dream. Perfection, whatever it may be, is so far off and so much the business of future generations, that we are left, for all practical purposes, afloat on our makeshift raft of belief and democratic experimentation. No one will live to see the Promised Land. The road is too long, too steep. But life, especially democratic life, just is hope, in all its audacity.

Perfecting is enough for us. And as William James would add, we have every right to experiment, to try on this outlook and see where it goes and what it produces.

Some might think that this is pragmatism through the back door, rather than the kind of thing promoted by Dewey et al. As Rorty insists, when noting the link between Dewey, the philosopher of democracy, and Walt Whitman, the poet of democracy:

“Both Dewey and Whitman viewed the United States as an opportunity to see ultimate significance in a finite, human, historical project, rather than in something eternal and nonhuman. They both hoped that America would be the place where a religion of love would finally replace a religion of fear. They dreamed that America would break the traditional link between the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself, and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance. They wanted to preserve the former and discard the latter. They wanted to put hope for a casteless and classless America in the place traditionally occupied by knowledge of the will of God. They wanted that utopian America to replace God as the unconditional object of desire. They wanted the struggle for social justice to be the country’s animating principle, the nation’s soul.” (Rorty, pp. 17-18).

But Rorty is surely right that “Forgetting about eternity, and replacing knowledge of the antecedently real with hope for the contingent future, is not easy.” How could he have denied the power of Obama’s effort, very much in the mood of Whitman, Dewey and Rorty himself, to marshal the future transcendental for the present pragmatic? This is the very approach Rorty sought, and Obama, far more effectively than Cornell West, has achieved the rhetorical pragmatism, self-creation, and Americanism that Rorty described.

III. The Love of a King, the Politics of a Lincoln

Obama’s speechcraft, it should be stressed, was something developed on the campaign trail, and rather late in the day, after his period as a community organizer. Although, as we shall see, many of the characteristic themes and topics represent very long-standing concerns, his rhetorical style in presenting them was only honed to perfection during his successful race for the U.S. Senate starting in 2003. A key player in the process was his political consultant David Axelrod (another product of the University of Chicago), the man who would eventually play a crucial role in Obama’s presidential campaign. As David Mendell’s biography of Obama puts it:

“‘My involvement was a leap of faith,’ Axelrod said. ‘Barack showed flashes of brilliance as a candidate during the early stages of the campaign, but there were times of absolute pure drudgery.... His speeches were very theoretical and intellectual and very long. But I thought that if I could help Barack Obama get to Washington, then I would have accomplished something great in my life.’

To counter Obama’s shortcomings as a candidate, Axelrod did two things. He urged Obama to think more in terms of people and their stories rather than pure policy, and he stressed the importance of this advice to Obama’s other close adviser—Michelle Obama.

Axelrod told Obama to visualize the people he had met and would be meeting on the campaign trail, to try to bring their stories to life, to ‘invoke more humanity in his speeches.’ ‘In a classic way he grew under the tutelage of the people he was meeting out on the stump and realized that he was internalizing their everyday concerns and problems and realizing what the whole was about,’ Axelrod said. ‘It clicked in his head and he became a much better candidate over time. His learning curve is great. Once he realized that he was not taking orals at Harvard he became a better candidate.’

This maturation process is not dissimilar to that of many great politicians. Again, John F. Kennedy was a poor speechmaker and even worse glad-hander at the beginning of his political career. But after coaching from aides and his own observations on the campaign trail, Kennedy developed into one of the great presidential orators ...” (Mandel, *Obama: From Promise to Power* [New York: Harper, 2007]).

Axelrod has also explained that his coaching sessions with Obama were like “musicians riffing together” (Ibid., p. 224).

Mikva, too, has noted that Obama was not, early on, a very effective speaker—he was too professorial and abstract. Although Obama sometimes claims that his public speaking was greatly improved by his teaching experience at the University of Chicago, it is very clear that he struggled hard to get beyond that pedagogical model. He worked very hard, first to speak more effectively to the black audiences on Chicago’s South Side—“Obama spent countless hours in Chicago’s African-American churches digesting the cadence of a preacher’s rhythm and the themes that stoke an African-American crowd”—and then, later, under Axelrod’s coaching, to transmute that style into a larger call for unity through the personal and the particular. The first of these transformations occurred during his earlier phase of political development (roughly 1994-2000), when running for state office and then (unsuccessfully) for Congressman against black political icon Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther who has controlled the first Congressional district in Chicago for many years. As Mandell observes, the “I am my brother’s keeper” themes came to the fore at that point, and such “addressed from Obama were mostly secular and political in nature, but he made sure to pepper them with hints of the Bible, Christian orthodoxy and borrowed phrases from the nation’s African-American civil rights icon, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.” It was at this time that Obama began repeating the King mantra “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” adding “but it doesn’t bend on its own. It bends because you put your hand on that arc and you bend it in the direction of justice.” (Ibid., p. 227).

But as Jerry Kellman, the Alinsky method –trained community organizer who brought Obama to Chicago in the first place, after his graduation from Columbia and early public interest work in New York in 1985, has observed: “Barack has become the expectation of his people, and in that sense he is similar to King. As I know Barack, he will carry that as a weight, but he will carry that burden with great seriousness....I think he knows that if he wants to go where he wants to go in politics, he has to speak for more than the black community. But I think the rest of his life, he will take on that burden of being that person who changes the situation for African-Americans” (Ibid. p. 74).

However, speaking for more than the black community has not been the chief problem for Obama. His voracious reading in political theory and history, particularly under the philosopher Roger Boesche at Columbia, was never particularly Afro-Centric. He is familiar with philosophers and theologians, from Nietzsche to Niebuhr, in a way that is decidedly unusual for an American politician, and much more of a true intellectual than even that darling of the Democratic liberal intellectuals Adlai Stevenson, another son of Illinois (one might also mention former Senator Paul Simon in this context, a huge force in Illinois politics whose untimely death came just before his planned endorsement of Obama in the 2004 Senate

race). And as a recent issue of the University of Chicago Magazine had it, in a story on “How U of C is Barack Obama?” that quoted the conservative columnist and alum David Brooks: “Around U of C people Obama is pretty U of C. Meaning cerebral, reasonably Socratic, always emphasizing the complicated nature of any question.” Dean of the College John Boyer also weighed in: “Obama reminds Boyer of Paul Douglas, a Chicago economics professor and social reformer alongside Jane Addams who went to Washington in 1949 as an Illinois Senator: ‘Paul Douglas was an iconic activist here, a lefty professor at a time when it was unpopular,’ he says. ‘Both men were in the machine but not of the machine.’” (*University of Chicago Magazine* [Sept.-Oct. 2008], p. 45). Moreover, Boyer added “Axelrod is a creature of the College,” noting his “analytic skills, his disciplined approach to problem-solving.” Indeed, the side of both men that shows how they “know the world”—especially the world of Chicago machine politics—but are never reduced to it seems very much in line with the legacy of Douglas, Simon, Stevenson, Despres, et al.

The point here, however, is that more of Obama’s big negotiations have come from modulating his other worldly side into his this worldly side, assembling the materials of his philosophical self-creation in ways that served his more theorized than realized purposes. Thus, although he has gone on record as explaining that his most important philosophical influences were Gandhi, King, and Lincoln, it is manifest that in his political realization, increasingly evident in his speeches, the politics of the first two gets subordinated to the politics of the third.

Indeed, the constant stream of references, quotations, and allusions to King and Lincoln in Obama’s speeches can obscure some fundamental differences important for understanding his pragmatism.

On King, for example, Obama can sound in deep harmony, especially with King’s key message, so brilliantly expressed in his sermon on “The Man Who Was A Fool”: “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” (*Strength to Love* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963], p. 7).

But if King’s belief in the interdependence of all life links seamlessly to Obama’s on service, there is a vast divide when it comes to politics. As Coretta Scott King observed, “‘Christ gave us the goals,’ he would often say, ‘and Mahatma Gandhi provided the tactics.’” King’s distance from the mainstream political process and embrace of the pacifist, direct action tactics of Gandhi do indeed point to something deeply puzzling about Obama’s commitments. One cannot imagine him writing what King wrote, in the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”:

“But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love—‘Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.’ Was not Amos an extremist for justice—‘Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a might stream.’ Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—‘I bear in my body the works of the Lord Jesus.’ Was not Martin Luther an extremist—‘Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God.’ Was not John Bunyan an extremist—‘I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.’ Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—‘This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.’” (*I Have a Dream* [San Francisco: Harper, 1986, 1992], p. 94).

What is Obama's extremism? If anything, an extremism of hope—that “audacity” of hope of which his second book speaks, taking the expression from the Rev. Wright. But it is an extremism that, like Lincoln's and unlike King's, is tied to democratic mobilization to change the electoral process, rather than the pacifist direct action that King directed against the going political and legal institutions. Obama's roots in community organizing were never in the same mode as King's, drawing rather on the more secular influence on King represented by Saul Alinsky's form of community organizing. On the other side, he could never really adopt the hard-nosed confrontationalism of Alinsky's followers, and sought refuge in the imagery and spirituality of the civil rights organizers. As he put it in *Dreams From My Father*:

“Such images [from the civil rights movement] became a form of prayer for me, bolstering my spirits, channeling my emotions in a way that words never could. They told me (although even this much understanding may have come later, is also a construct, containing its own falsehoods) that I wasn't alone in my particular struggles, and that communities had never been a given in this country, at least not for blacks. Communities had to be created, fought for, tended like gardens. They expanded or contracted with the dreams of men—and in the civil rights movement those dreams had been large. In the sit-ins, the marches, the jailhouse songs, I saw the African-American community becoming more than just the place where you'd been born or the house where you'd been raised. Through organizing, through shared sacrifice, membership had been earned. And because membership was earned—because this community I imagined was still in the making, built on the promise that the larger American community, black, white, and brown, could somehow redefine itself—I believed that it might, over time, admit the uniqueness of my own life.” (*Dreams*, p. 135).

It is the unity, not the confrontation, in these images that inspires Obama, a unity he also felt and witnessed in the electoral victories in the 1980s of Chicago's first African-American mayor, Harold Washington. This is the theme uniting *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, a work that is both a reflection on his political achievements and a resource for a great deal of his speechmaking. *Audacity* explains Obama's take on the civil rights movement at length, and in singularly pregnant terms, when addressing the long history of American racism going back to the Founders:

“How can I, an American with the blood of Africa coursing through my veins, choose sides in such a disputes? I can't. I love America too much, am too invested in what this country has become, too committed to its institutions, its beauty, and even its ugliness, to focus entirely on the circumstances of its birth. But neither can I brush aside the magnitude of the injustice done, or erase the ghosts of generations past, or ignore the open wound, the aching spirit, that ails this country still.

The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty. The hard, cold facts remind me that it was unbending idealists like William Lloyd Garrison who first sounded the clarion call for justice; that it was slaves and former slaves, men like Denmark Vesey and Frederick Douglass and women like Harriet Tubman, who recognized power would concede nothing without a fight. It was the wild-eyed prophecies of John Brown, his willingness to spill blood and not just words on behalf of his visions, that helped force the issue of a nation half slave and half free. I'm reminded that deliberation and the constitutional order may sometimes be the luxury of the powerful, and that it has sometimes been the cranks, the zealots, the prophets, the agitators, and the unreasonable—in other words, the absolutists—that have fought for a new order. Knowing this, I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of similar certainty today—the antiabortion activist who pickets my town hall meeting, or the animal rights activist

who raids a laboratory—no matter how deeply I disagree with their views. I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty—for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute.

I'm left then with Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limits of such deliberation. We remember him for the firmness and depth of his convictions—his unyielding opposition to slavery and his determination that a house divided could not stand. But his presidency was guided by a practicality that would distress us today, a practicality that led him to test various bargains with the South in order to maintain the Union without war; to appoint and discard general after general, strategy after strategy once war broke out; to stretch the Constitution to the breaking point in order to see the war through to a successful conclusion. I like to believe that for Lincoln, it was never a matter of abandoning conviction for the sake of expediency. Rather it was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas—that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side, and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence.

That self-awareness, that humility, led Lincoln to advance his principles through the framework of our democracy, through speeches and debate, through the reasoned arguments that might appeal to the better angels of our nature.” (*Audacity*, pp. 97-98).

This is, to be sure, the ultimate pragmatist stance—namely, to avoid being dogmatic even about pragmatism. And as I shall argue in later sections, Obama is in the finest pragmatist tradition in this appropriation of Lincoln. But the point here is that this negotiation between King and Lincoln has Obama flatly on the side of Lincoln.

As Andrew Delbanco notes, in a perceptive essay on Obama, “His books are ‘how-to’ books about his own exemplary success at competing with others in the marketplace, but they are also conversion narratives about his discovery that serving others is the only way to save himself.” (“Deconstructing Barry: A Literary Critic Reads Obama,” *The New Republic*, July 9, 2008, p. 22). But this “service” floats across many different tactics, without drawing the sharp boundaries between direct action and politics that both Alinsky and King (and the founders of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality) drew. And it is precisely because of this that Obama can become, in effect, the hope of the Mikva Challenge—someone bringing the ethical attractions of service back to electoral politics. This is as much Harold Washington as King, and more Lincoln than Washington. As Delbanco rightly argues:

“one feels in Obama’s books as well as his speeches the presence of that iconic American, Abraham Lincoln, whom he sometimes names and sometimes namelessly invokes. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he tells of having once received a rebuke (‘not entirely undeserved’) for presumptuously likening himself in print of Lincoln. On his first visit to the White House as a freshman senator, he tells us, Lincoln appeared to him as a ghostly figure ‘pacing the hall, shouldering the weight of a nation,’ the moral and political genius who managed to maintain ‘within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas....’

This description of Lincoln as a man of self-doubt yet with an unswerving sense of mission is as instructive as it is insightful. Obama seems to have composed his public life in conscious emulation of Lincoln. He announced his candidacy in Springfield and delivered his speech on race in Philadelphia, where Lincoln, en route to his first inauguration, gave a great speech on the Declaration of Independence as American’s secular scripture. In his victory speech on the night of clinching the Democratic

nomination, Obama incorporated or played variations on several phrases from Lincoln—‘the last full measure of devotion,’ ‘the last best hope of earth,’ ‘the better angels of our nature.’

To some, it all seems calculated and hubristic, and they will no doubt continue to detect in his style a self-involved inwardness. But, to me, it feels like heartfelt homage from someone with a keen sense of the complexities and commonalities of human experience.” (Ibid., p. 22).

Delbanco is surely correct on many counts. Some, notably James Fallows, have suggested the Obama the presidential debater was a far cry from the Obama who debated in 2004 with a wry sense of fun and wit (see “Rhetorical Questions,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 2008). But a broader comparison of Obama’s self-presentations, in his speeches, books, interviews etc. suggests that, whatever his sense of fun, his message has remained remarkably constant and consistent, in its Lincolnesque pragmatism, the pragmatism of this worldly doubt and action. The gravity and more restrained expression, like the heightened oratorical skills, were timely additions to Obama’s talents, coming relatively late in the day. Like the strategic repetitions in his speeches, quotations of or allusions to his own earlier words, they provide a subtext of constancy and stability through all the self and nation reconstructing and creating.

Indeed, the Rortyeian style appropriation of Lincoln as the source of personal and political self-creation is about as much of a constant in Obama as anything. As his Springfield “Declaration of Candidacy” speech wound to its conclusion, the identification was forthright:

“By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail.

But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible.

He tells us that there is power in words.

He tells us that there is power in conviction.

That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people.

He tells us that there is power in hope.

As Lincoln organized the forces arrayed against slavery, he was heard to say: ‘Of strange, discordant, and even hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought to battle through.’

That is our purpose here today.

That’s why I’m in this race.

Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation.”

The positive fits of anaphoric word play only accentuate how Obama, like Rorty, Dewey, and Addams (whose father was friends with Lincoln) seeks comfort and inspiration from Lincoln, especially when the doubt and self-doubt start to gnaw. And in fact, it is well worth stressing in this context that Obama’s own favorite speech from among his productions is the one that he delivered to a Chicago anti-war rally in Oct. of 2002. It was a risky speech, since it was politically risky at that time to oppose Bush’s Iraq policy, and Obama made it all the riskier, given his audience, by going out of his way, in his usual anaphoric mode, to distance himself from anything smacking of Gandhi’s or King’s pacifism:

“What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war. What I am opposed to is the cynical attempt by Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz and other armchair, weekend warriors in this administration to shove their own ideological agendas down our throats, irrespective of the costs in lives lost and in hardships borne. What I am opposed to is the attempt by political hacks like Karl Rove to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income—to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression.

That’s what I’m opposed to. A dumb war. A rash war. A war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.” (quoted in Mendell, p. 175).

The big divide, with Gandhi and King on one side and Lincoln on the other, comes with, not just the philosophy of direct action to bring social change, but with the pacifist philosophy of direct action—against a more eclectic, less absolutist, electorally open set of strategies. He was indeed “left then with Lincoln.” Obama never underestimates the power of words, especially Lincoln’s words. And those words are not the words of an absolutist pacifism.

And of course, it is just here that one finds the materials for understanding both the wider and narrower senses of Obama’s pragmatism. After all, Lincoln was one of the figures that pragmatists from Dewey to Rorty most wanted to appropriate. Consider Rorty’s account, in *Achieving Our Country*:

“The contrast between national hope and national self-mockery and self-disgust becomes vivid when one compares novels like *Snow Crash* and *Almanac of the Dead* with socialist novels of the first half of the century—books like *The Jungle*, *An American Tragedy*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. The latter were written in the belief that the tone of the Gettysburg Address was absolutely right, but that our country would have to transform itself in order to fulfill Lincoln’s hopes. Transformation would be needed because the rise of industrial capitalism had made the individualist rhetoric of America’s first century obsolete.

The authors of these novels thought that this rhetoric should be replaced by one in which America is destined to become the first cooperative commonwealth, the first class-less society. This America would be one in which income and wealth are equitably distributed, and in which the government ensures equality of opportunity as well as individual liberty. This new, quasi-communitarian rhetoric was at the heart of the Progressive Movement and the New Deal. It set the tone for the American Left during the six decades of the twentieth century. Walt Whitman and John Dewey ... did a great deal of shape this rhetoric.” (pp. 8-9).

Indeed, as Rorty goes on to explain, in words redolent with resonance with Obama’s political language:

“I think there is no point in asking whether Lincoln or Whitman or Dewey got America right. Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity. The argument between Left and Right about which episodes in our history we Americans should pride ourselves on will never be a contest between a true and a false account of our country’s history and its identity. It is better described as an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo.

As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation’s political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks that anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in

good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere troublemaking, as utopian foolishness. The Left, by definition, is the party of hope. It insists that our nation remains unachieved. . . . Whitman and Dewey were among the prophets of this civic religion. They offered a new account of what America was, in the hope of mobilizing Americans as political agents." (Ibid., pp. 14-15).

In this sense, then, Obama is clearly of the Left, of the party that hopes because it sees the need for change. The broad tone is that of this school of Progressivism, though without the overt references to any form of economic socialism or economic democracy. Obama, like the British political philosophers of the generation prior to Dewey—e.g., Henry Sidgwick and T.H. Green—obviously prefers a form of ethical socialism, a civic ethic of service to the common good as one of the best means to one's own good, without thinking that this necessarily translates into any actual form of economic socialism.

Moreover, as stated above, Obama's own rhetorical tactics fit this Rortyeian mode of rhetorical hope making extremely well. Like Rorty's somewhat opportunistic retelling or reconstruction of the western tradition of philosophy, Obama's retelling or reconstruction of American political history and his own life story are, avowedly, moves in the effort to forge a moral identity, not to represent something already given. The "community I imagined was still in the making"—and he is helping to construct it, assembling the materials of a useable past in the light of the future. This is indeed only a "quasi" or democratically qualified form of communitarianism (much like Dewey's). It is precisely the type of anti-essentialist pragmatism, applied to racial identity as well as other forms of identity, that Tommy Shelby and Eddie Glaude have persuasively defended in recent years (see, especially, Shelby, *We Who Are Dark* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005] and Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007]). Thus, the ruthless appropriation of the solidarity of the sixties civil rights movement, but not the pacifist direct action, or "extremism," and of the grass roots mobilizing of the community organizing tradition, but without the opposition to or disdain for electoral politics, are suggestive of the creative reconstruction that Obama represents and that Rorty would have adored. And this is not to mention the identification with Lincoln's self-doubt in the service of decisive action to overcome deep social divisions. It is the type of pragmatist reconstruction that at times can seem a bit like a self-esteem movement for the nation as a whole, with its accentuation of the positive and the possibilities of the future. Yes We Can!

However, if Obama is the political figure capturing the hopes and dreams of Rortyeian pragmatists, he is also, at a somewhat deeper level, a figure genuinely in line, not only with recent pragmatist critics of racial essentialism and identity politics, but also with the strands of Lincolnesque pragmatism that made Dewey, Addams, and then Rorty and many others think Lincoln needed to be appropriated in the first place. There is a story to tell about this that is rather more than a plausible move in the game of self-invention. And it is a story with a special place at the University of Chicago.

IV. The Pragmatism of Illinois and Chicago

The story in the *University of Chicago Magazine* cited in the last section did not get the political history quite right. The history of the University of Chicago is in many respects the history of the battle for pragmatism, as both a philosophical and social movement. Dewey, for half a century America's best known and best loved philosopher, was very much a formative influence at the University in the 1890s, but so were various of his friends and allies, notably Jane Addams and George Herbert Mead. This

“Chicago School” encompassed philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, and the new social science of sociology, and it was ardently reformist right from the start.

As Robert Westbrook has shown, in his compelling work on *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), both Dewey and Jane Addams were far more radical figures than their somewhat masked public writings revealed. They both sympathized with Labor in the bloody 1894 Pullman Strike, and consistently bemoaned the narrow and divisive materialism of the capitalist class. But,

“With regard to one condition of liberty Dewey did, however, take a strong and definite public stand in this period. All members of a democratic society, he declared, were entitled to an education that would enable them to make the best of themselves as active participants in the life of their community: ‘Men will long dispute about material socialism, about socialism considered as matter of distribution of the material resources of the community, but there is a socialism regarding which there can be no such dispute—socialism of the intelligence and of the spirits. To extend the range and the fullness of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual resources of the community is the very meaning of the community.’

For a child to become an effective member of a democratic community, Dewey argued, he must have ‘training in science, in art, in history, command of the fundamental methods of inquiry and the fundamental tools of intercourse and communication,’ as well as ‘a trained and sound body, skillful eye and hand; habits of industry, perseverance, and, above all, habits of serviceableness.’ In a democratic community children had to learn to be leaders as well as followers, possessed of ‘power of self-direction and power of directing others, powers of administration, ability to assume positions of responsibility’ as citizens and workers. Because the world was a rapidly changing one, a child could not, moreover, be educated for any ‘fixed station in life,’ but schools had to provide him with training that would ‘give him such possession of himself that he may take charge of himself; may not only adapt himself to the changes which are going on, but have power to shape and direct those changes.’ (Westbrook, p. 94).

Dewey got caught up in the efforts to reform the Chicago Schools and, in 1896, was successful in founding the University’s Laboratory School, his own effort to put his philosophy into practice. So possessed was he with educational reform that at one point he considered giving up teaching philosophy altogether, except through the vehicle of teaching pedagogy.

And Dewey’s pragmatist approach to education worked at all levels. If the early Lab School was aimed at elementary school children, Addams’s Hull House, one of the most successful of the Settlement Houses (the model was taken from Toynbee Hall, which Addams visited), was directed to adults as much as children. Dewey devoted a great deal of time and energy to Hull House, regarding it as the very embodiment of his vision of experimentation in democratic community, and Addams, who was also designated as a lecturer at the University, welcomed this alliance. In many ways, as Westbrook demonstrates, Hull House enjoyed a freer and more open public sphere for the exchange of ideas than the University, which had been founded by the combined forces of Rockefeller and Marshall Field and overall had little sympathy with radical democracy, especially when it led to labor unrest. William Rainey Harper, the University’s first president, moved steadily in the direction of the more elitist and managerial approach favored by business. As Robin Bachin has argued, in her persuasive work, *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago, 1890-1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004):

“The battle over school reform demonstrates the competing visions that were emerging at Chicago over what form modern American education would take in the wake of the rise of the modern research institutions like the University of Chicago. Harper emphasized business models of consolidation and efficiency for his vision of modern education. His school reform bill reflected the rising belief in the power of centralized coalitions of trained experts to direct all phases of education. Because the university offered the most efficient and professional model for shaping education, Harper sought to bring other educational institutions under its control.

By contrast, Haley, Dewey, and Mead saw the potential for engaged public participation, with decentralized teacher control, as the best course for providing democratic education in modern America.... The pedagogical debate further underscored the tensions over civic culture emanating from the University of Chicago. The processes of centralizing education in Chicago, designing the university, and regulating land use all suggested a model of civic engagement different from the one initially invoked by Harper. Rather than seeing the university as a neighbor and partner in shaping knowledge in the city, the administration envisioned a more paternalistic role. Just as the university centralized and consolidated the production and dissemination of knowledge, so too did it try to exert direct control over the process of shaping its physical borders and isolating itself from the rest of the city. These practices were hand in hand, for they illustrated both the physical and the intellectual barriers the university erected as it developed into a leader of higher education both in Chicago and across the nation.

Some critics even compared the tactics of the University of Chicago to those of Standard Oil, arguing that taking over smaller competitors in the realm of education was the equivalent of John D. Rockefeller’s trust-building project. By swallowing smaller competitors and supplanting competition with a system of corporate consolidation, the university-like Rockefeller—undermined the democratic ideal.” (Bachin, pp. 71-72).

Thus, for all of their success on the community level, both Dewey and Addams represented only one part of the University, not the more dominant “business side.” Dewey would leave with the turn of the century, and when he did it was not on happy terms with Harper. Thus, as Bachin concludes, the “more activist and democratic model of civic engagement promoted by Dewey became an auxiliary function of the university rather than a defining component of it.” (p. 72).

Still, if this more participatory, Deweyan form of democratic education and community building became an auxiliary function of the University, it proved to be a lively and enduring one. Mead continued his work at Chicago for decades, and the University had a contingent devoted to its own Settlement, in the Back of the Yards neighborhood eventually made famous by the community organizing of the University’s most famous organizer, Saul Alinsky, another chapter in the story of making democracy a way of life in Chicago. And the University’s Lab School has throughout proudly proclaimed its Deweyan legacy, even as it has grown and evolved in ways Dewey never could have anticipated. (Though Dewey would surely have been delighted to learn that his experimental school would in due course enroll the children of the first African-American President).

Moreover, the more radical, reform elements of the University regularly supported independent reform-minded candidates for city government, unsuccessfully in the case of political scientist Charles Merriam, but successfully in the case of 5th Ward Alderman Leon Despres, who from 1955 on would prove to be one of the most powerful voices on behalf of civil rights, racial equality, and political reform. It was, in the end, Despres, rather than Alinsky, who forcefully (if unsuccessfully) opposed, on grounds of fairness, the University supported urban renewal plans of the 1950s and 1960s, recognizing that this form of

“urban renewal” was indeed, as critics noted, simply a mask for “Negro removal.” The University clearly wanted a largely white middle-class residential neighborhood for its surroundings, and it used all of its considerable clout to get exactly that. In recent years, political theorist Danielle Allen has been especially significant in calling attention to the ways in which the University has often failed to act as a good neighbor on the South Side and cultivate the forms of civic friendship that might make for a healthier democracy (see especially the “Epilogue” to her *Talking to Strangers* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004]). The problematic elitism and isolation of the University has, she maintains, unfortunately limited the educational experience the University has had to offer. She founded the Civic Knowledge Project expressly out of the (very Deweyan) belief that scholars and students at the University “need to become civic knowers, that is, people who can learn to decipher the structure of their own world just by observing physical, social, and aesthetic details immediately around them” (see <http://civicknowledge.uchicago.edu/files/Origins.pdf>).

As we shall see, Allen’s work provides some very helpful analytical material for grasping the significance of Obama’s political rhetoric. But before turning to her work, and the work of David Greenstone, more must be said about the survival of the Deweyan legacy in the mid-twentieth century, when it took certain forms that would also prove crucial to the shaping of Obama.

With Despres and Alinsky, the pragmatist sensibility took a very hardball turn. Gone was the high rhetoric of Addams on reconciliation and unity, a distancing from social conflict that even Dewey found hard to follow. With the pacifist Addams, as with the pacifist King, the emancipation of the oppressed and the emancipation of the oppressor went together—one’s tactics needed to allow the opposition to convert. Consider by contrast the lesson in Alinskyean pragmatism that Obama received from his first mentor on the subject, the Alinsky-style organizer Jerry Kellman:

“Marty [Jerry] decided it was time for me to do some real work, and he handed me a long list of people to interview. Find out their self-interest, he said. That’s why people become involved in organizing—because they think they’ll get something out of it. Once I found an issue enough people cared about, I could take them into action. With enough actions, I could start to build power.

Issues, action, power, self-interest. I liked these concepts. They bespoke a certain hardheadedness, a worldly lack of sentiment, politics, not religion.” (Obama, *Dreams*, p. 155).

Alinsky himself had relished conflict and confrontation—when asked if he believed in reconciliation, he explained that yes, once his side had the power and the other side got reconciled to it. Movement created friction and friction created sparks. The organizer could not be afraid of that.

Still, for all of his hard-boiled and decidedly unpacifistic Chicago organizing, Alinsky thought of himself as in the Deweyan tradition:

“To organize a community you must understand that in a highly mobile, urbanized society the word ‘community’ means community of interests, *not physical community*. The exceptions are ethnic ghettos where segregation has resulted in physical communities that coincide with their community of interests, or, during political campaigns, political districts that are based on geographical demarcations.

People hunger for drama and adventure, for a breath of life in a dreary, drab existence.... But it’s more than that. It is a desperate search for personal identity—to let other people know that at least you are alive. Let’s take a common case in the ghetto. A man is living in a slum tenement. He doesn’t know anybody and nobody knows him. He doesn’t care for anyone because no one cares for him. On the

corner newsstand are newspapers with pictures of people like Mayor Daley and other people from a different world—a world that he doesn't know, a world that doesn't know that he is even alive.

When the organizer approaches him part of what begins to be communicated is that through the organization and its power he will get his birth certificate for life, that he will become known, that things will change from the drabness of a life where all that changes is the calendar. This same man, in a demonstration at City Hall, might find himself confronting the mayor and saying, 'Mr. Mayor, we have had it up to here and we are not going to take it any more.' Television cameramen put their microphones in front of him and ask, 'What is your name, sir?' 'John Smith.' Nobody ever asked him what his name was before. And then, 'What do you think about this, Mr. Smith?' Nobody ever asked him what he thought about anything before. Suddenly he's alive! This is part of the adventure, part of what is so important to people in getting involved in organization activities and what the organizer has to communicate to him. Not that every member will be giving his name on television—that's a bonus—but for once, because he is working together with a group, what he works for will mean something.

Let us look at what is called *process*. *Process* tells us *how*. *Purpose* tells us *why*. But in reality, it is academic to draw a line between them, they are part of a continuum. Process and purpose are so welded to each other that it is impossible to mark where one leaves off and the other begins, or which is which. The very process of democratic participation is for the purpose of organization rather than to rid the alleys of direct. Process is really purpose." (pp. 123-24).

As one of Alinsky's allies remarked: "Saul felt strongly that you don't patronize people but instead have them experience their own authority and practice their own power. The assertion of personal value is the core of his whole philosophy." (quoted in Sanford Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* [New York: Vintage Books, 1989], p. 383). Abrasive as his tactics were, Alinsky ultimately articulated his position in profoundly Deweyan terms, as an effort to make democracy a way of life and an opportunity for self-creation. For Dewey, democracy was more than a form of government or a means to other ends; it was a "form of moral and spiritual association," the very metaphysics of experience.

Obviously, just on the political face of things, Obama continues this legacy even after moving from community organizing into electoral politics. His experiences as an organizer, as a member of Rev. Wright's church, as a supporter of Harold Washington—all involved charged experiences of bringing people into action and into their identities. The move to organizing a highly successful get out the vote drive in the early nineties and promoting educational reform (especially through Deweyan strategies for improving teacher quality) were also very much in the pragmatist mode. And like both Dewey and Alinsky, Obama is prepared to organize the middle class too, challenging its identification with the super rich and working to align it with the more disadvantaged.

Indeed, it could also well be said that like Dewey, Obama found the business of enhancing democratic education and participation a seamless web of electoral and nonelectoral activity. New publics and public spheres needed to be formed, yes, but no pragmatist should ever take a hard, dogmatic line on what government can or cannot do or what the agent of change should be. To suppose that the public and the private are somehow eternally fixed spheres is to fall into another old and untenable dualism, like mind v. matter, or faith v. reason. Obama goes to Kenya in search of roots, attends Harvard Law School, and then returns to Chicago more determined than ever to work with what works, rather than a preconceived ideological position. He carries the same searching questions with him, even as he confronts even harsher realities:

“What is our community, and how might that community be reconciled with our freedom? How far do our obligations reach? How do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love? The answers I find in law books don’t always satisfy me—for every *Brown v. Board of Education* I find a score of cases where conscience is sacrificed to expedience or greed. And yet, in the conversation itself, in the joining of voices, I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might somehow, ultimately prevail.

That faith, so different from innocence, can sometimes be hard to sustain. Upon my return to Chicago, I would find the signs of decay accelerated throughout the South Side—the neighborhoods shabbier, the children edgier and less restrained, more middle-class families heading out to the suburbs, the jails bursting with glowering youth, my brothers without prospects. All too rarely do I hear people asking just what it is that we’ve done to make so many children’s hearts so hard, or what collectively we might do to right their moral compass—what values *we* must live by. Instead I see us doing what we’ve always done—pretending that these children are somehow not our own.” (*Dreams*, p. 438).

Like Dewey, Obama finds the test of his philosophy, its meaning and application, in the fate of future generations, future generations who must perforce be brought into the deliberative democratic dialogue through imagination and empathy. Civic knowledge and education for democracy as it should be means providing people, especially young people, with the opportunities to cultivate their humanity in this larger sense. And in this context, the old social contractarian talk must be left behind, as the pragmatists urged. We are not in a relationship of reciprocal agreement with the future.

V. Pragmatism in the Long View

In her moving work, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. the Board of Education*, Danielle Allen, formerly both a Professor of Political Science and Dean of the Humanities at the University of Chicago, defends a form of political rhetoric (“talking to strangers”) that, she maintains, can help build up the forms of civic friendship and trust crucial to a healthier democratic culture. Drawing on recent work on both the theory and practice of democracy, especially the work on democracy and social capital made famous by Robert Putnam (another direct influence on Obama), Allen claims that the pervasive distrust and alienation that has distorted American politics, and that is especially evident in the tensions of racial politics, stems in part from the failure to recognize the enabling sacrifices made by various groups of citizens, especially people of color. Drawing heavily on Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, and the touching, courageous sacrifice made by Elizabeth Eckford, in the famous battle to integrate Little Rock’s Central High School, she points to various ways, including rhetoric, by which the sacrifices of peoples rendered invisible by the political culture might be recognized and reconciliation achieved, with a much enhanced circulation of knowledge across various racial, ethnic, and social barriers. America, she holds, underwent a new founding during the civil rights era, but we have yet to complete the work of building civic friendship that the civil rights movement began.

Allen’s vision has also been shaped by her background in classics and her work with Josiah Ober on ancient Athenian democracy. The more participatory, direct form of democracy that marked ancient Athens was characterized in part by a more fluid circulation of knowledge across different knowledge communities, such that political life reflected a richer and more inclusive social intelligence, at least for citizens. Adapting that lesson to our very different circumstances, Allen nonetheless holds that it is possible to improve democracy as a way of life here and now by cultivating new citizenly habits of trust,

friendship, and communication that share something of the ancient model of civic friendship. And in this, she certainly shares much with the Deweyan legacy, though without explicitly acknowledging the overlap between her democratic theory and that of, say, *The Public and Its Problems*. Like Dewey, she casts democracy in cultural terms, as a set of background habits and practices that create the context for certain types of institutional arrangements. When applying her views through concrete institutional reforms, such as the creation of the University of Chicago's Civic Knowledge Project, she in effect cast her model of democratic friendship in highly Deweyan terms as the most effective mobilization of social intelligence.

But of special interest here is Allen's case for political rhetoric as a vehicle for facilitating these new citizenly habits and richer conception of civic knowledge. To her mind, and contra such conservative or neo-conservative political theorists as the Straussians, rhetoric, properly understood, "is not a list of stylistic rules but an outline of the radical commitment to other citizens that is needed for a just democratic politics." It is "the art not of rousing people to immediate or unthinking action but of putting as persuasive an argument as possible to an audience and then leaving actual choices of action to them." (p. 141). Even so, she does formulate a list of suggestions for equipping ourselves to change our habits:

"In order to generate trust, a speaker should

- aim to convince 100 percent of her audience; if she finds herself considering rather how to carry a majority, she is acting in a fashion that over the long term will undermine democracy;
- test herself by speaking to minority constituents whose votes she does not need;
- once she has found the limits of her ability to persuade, she should think also about how to ameliorate the remaining disagreement and distrust;
- 'separate the people from the problem' by (i) developing external standards and universal principles for assessing problems and (ii) recognizing that dealing with the people means engaging with specific features of their subjective situation;
- be precise about which emotions are at stake in a particular conversation;
- seek to transform conditions of utility into experiences of good-will;
- recognize that reciprocity is established over time and that enough trust has to be generated to allow this process to proceed;
- recognize that the most powerful tool for generating trust is the capacity to prove that she is willing to make sacrifices even for the strangers in her polity;
- be aware too that she is trustworthy only if she can point to a *habit* of making sacrifices for strangers and not merely to a single instance;
- recognize that where there is no trust, a great sacrifice will be necessary to sow the first seeds of trust, which can develop only over time through repeated interactions in which citizens have opportunities to test each other;
- give her audience opportunities for judging (accepting or rejecting) her arguments;

--be willing to have any member of the polity respond to her arguments;

In order to prepare the way for the generation of trust, a listener should

--separate a speaker's claims about facts from the principles on which her conclusions are based; assess both;

--ask whether a speaker has a history of making pragmatically correct decisions;

--ask who is sacrificing for whom, whether the sacrifices are voluntary, and honored; whether they can and will be reciprocated;

--ask whether the speaker has spoken as a friend;

--insist on opportunities to judge political arguments;

--judge.

Here then are some new habits to try on. Rhetoric is relevant not only in the halls of the legislature and in the courtrooms but wherever any stranger has to convince another of anything. Any interaction among strangers can generate trust that the polity needs in order to maintain its basic relationships. If citizens keep in mind these guidelines for speaking and listening to their fellow citizens, they will import the expertise of ordinary friendship into the political realm, and political friendship will grow out of that. Political friendship thus generated sustains a democratic polis by helping citizens to accept decisions with which they may disagree. But friendship must be mutual." (Allen, *Talking*, pp. 157-58).

In a great many respects, Obama's rhetoric fits this model. In his major speeches, his campaign tactics, and in his presidential debate performances, he has been conspicuous in his efforts to speak to a wider range of citizens, generously acknowledge the strengths of his opponents, and reach out to those not won over. His candid confessions, acknowledgements of his own weaknesses, and magnanimity toward opponents have often succeeded, in classical rhetorical fashion, in persuading people of the strength of his character and convictions, not their weakness. By and large, though not completely, refusing to go in for personal attacks on his opponents, he has reserved most of his remarks about character for soul-searching discussions of his own strengths and weaknesses. And like Allen, Obama appeals to self-interest mostly in a much more exalted sense than material self-interest. Finding oneself through service, through devotion to the common good, especially for future generations—that is the message he resolutely sticks to, so much so that when he talks of sacrifice, it is less of the sacrifices he has made and more of how the sacrifices of others have enabled him to hope and succeed. His message, like Allen's, is the Ellisonian one, the vivid empathizing with and recognition of sacrifice. And it is very much the message that he shares with his most important partner, his wife Michelle (nee Robinson), a product of Chicago's South Side who has also worked for the University. Her work in community relations has also often sounded the Dewey-Allen note: "We have so much more in common as people," she told *People* magazine in 2007. "It's just that we don't cross paths enough as communities." (quoted in Liz Mundy, *Michelle* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008], p. 119).

Ironically, however, Allen's account, which fits Obama so well in so many ways, has it that a key problem in the American effort to cultivate new citizenly habits is the fixation on oneness, on unity, the *e pluribus unum* that celebrates maximal agreement and obscures the loss and sacrifice that the real world of democracy entails. She urges a common democratic faith that settles for wholeness, achieving

reconciliation between winners and losers through better habits of genuinely reciprocal civic friendship, rather than fantasies of having somehow overcome all difference and loss in oneness.

Perhaps in practice Obama is not quite as distant from Allen on this point as it would seem, at first blush. But it is impossible not to acknowledge his extraordinary commitment to the rhetoric of oneness, of unity. Americans may be “a people of improbably hope,” but their aspirations—to “live free from fear and free from want . . . speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please”—“are bigger than anything that drives us apart.” We can “answer our destiny and remake the world once again” only through unity.

And this of course is simply another side of the language of Lincoln, which above all was devoted to the rhetoric of union. As helpful as Allen’s analysis is for filling in the details of and updating the rhetorical pragmatism that Rorty theorized and Obama practices, it has some enormous gaps, one of the most problematic of which is her complete disregard for the role of Lincoln in American political rhetoric and democratic practice. Despite her emphasis on the new founding of the civil rights movement, her detailing of the ideal of oneness moves away from actual American political history to deal with theorists, from Hobbes to Habermas, who have had very little actual influence on American political culture. Yet Lincoln was the architect of the second American covenant, and Obama’s recognition of his importance, like Rorty’s, has been a mainstay of the pragmatist reconstruction of the American political tradition. Intriguingly, the crucial mediation between oneness and wholeness was theorized by another University of Chicago pragmatist political scientist, whose work bridged the period from Alinsky to Allen—J. David Greenstone.

Greenstone, an extraordinarily creative political scientist who died in 1990 at the tragically young age of 52, had a profound effect on both the Dept. of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago. He had travelled an unusual academic path from a specialization in American labor politics and educational policy to a focus on the broader philosophical and cultural dimensions of the American political tradition, developing along the way a passionate interest in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein that shaped his analysis of the languages and practices of American political life, highlighting (like Allen) the importance of habits and background contexts for their interpretation. Remarkably, Greenstone appreciated the deep filiations between Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and American pragmatism long before Rorty and his followers did. And even more remarkably, he had spelled out, long in advance of *Achieving Our Country*, something very like Rorty’s take on Deweyan (or Wittgensteinian) pragmatism and its links to the figure of Lincoln. In his posthumously published book, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), some of the crucial points are made in the following passage:

“The point is not that Lincoln’s enthusiasm for institutions overrode his belief in individual development; on the contrary, as a devotee of Whig culture, Lincoln believed that the improvement of individual and society were almost inseparably joined. He considered the collective activities of past and present generations to be morally worthy, because they were indispensable for the cultivation of individual human reason. In his most interesting discussion of this question, at the height of the slavery crisis in 1859, Lincoln examined the connection between the ‘habit’ of ratiocination and ‘the most important discoveries and inventions,’ that is, between *reflection* and *experiment*. In his view, the process of rational inquiry was essentially communal. Not only was ‘the inclination to exchange thoughts with one another . . . probably an original impulse of our nature’ but, especially when language becomes written, it was this exchange—sometimes across generations—that enabled ‘different individuals to . . . combine their powers of observation and reflection, greatly [facilitating] useful discoveries and inventions. . . . What

one observes ... he [then] tells to another ... [and a] result is thus reached which neither *alone* ... would have arrived at.'

This view casts in a progressive and egalitarian form the familiar Whig belief in the importance of social and historical development. Anticipating the arguments of the late-nineteenth-century Pragmatists, Lincoln emphasized the importance of a community of inquiry and practice that depended on both socially established habits and socially shared language. As a number of authors have suggested, Emerson can be seen as a link between the Puritans' focus on nature as God's handiwork and the Pragmatists' emphasis on naturalism. Similarly, Lincoln represents a link between the Puritans' focus on society and the Pragmatists' emphasis on community and scientific collaboration. Lincoln's argument about the nature of this community is indicative of perhaps his most fundamental justification for unionism; it is an argument that echoes that of the tenth Federalist paper: the full exercise and development of human reason requires not the intimacy of a small, morally homogeneous community, but the diversity and freedom of a geographically and temporally extended republican society.

For Lincoln, in other words, there was a symbiotic relationship between individual development and the institutional life of a community. Lincoln thought that only a regime devoted to improving the capacities of its members of self-development could rightfully be called the Union. His emphasis on the social dimensions of inquiry, however, also suggests the converse: that the humanitarian cause of individual improvement could flourish only in a republican society large and complex enough to sustain human inquiry and progress." (Greenstone, *Lincoln*, pp. 277-78).

Sadly, the fuller account of the transition from Lincoln to the pragmatists that Greenstone planned to publish was never completed. But his interpretive line was clearly articulated in some brilliant articles completed before he shifted his attention to Lincoln. Thus, in "Dorothea Dix and Jane Addams : From Transcendentalism to Pragmatism in American Social Reform" (*Social Service Review* [December 1979]), Greenstone argued:

"By Jane Addams's time, a clearly weakening belief in moral certainty and moral community had created a political and intellectual crisis that threatened the viability of the social reform tradition to which Dix had made such signal contributions. On one side, interested-oriented liberals could quite easily rally to a new social Darwinist rationale for a self-interested politics. But if the standards tradition was to continue to invoke human rationality (acting prior to or independent of sense experience) as a warrant for developing each individual's moral and intellectual capacities, then that rationality would have to be redefined.

Pragmatism provided a philosophic response to this problem. On a Pragmatist view, the claim that the universe is unfinished and that we cannot attain final truth, or that our knowledge of particular objects is never complete, does not reduce the status of human rationality. Rather, these claims make rationality all the more important. If these claims are valid, human knowledge (including the interpretations that render sense experience meaningful) is radically dependent on an active process which seeks to define objects more clearly by moving from hypothesis, through experiment and confirmation, to still further hypothesis.

Addams's achievement was to connect epistemology to ideology, to link the Pragmatists' new account of rational thought to the theory and practice of social reform and social service. In that sense, she helped introduce into American social and political thought both a new version of and a new justification for the reformer's traditional vision.

None of this is to say that Addams successfully resolved the reformers' great problem: that the contradictions within a society might be simply too great to respond to the appeals to conscience and moral standards so central to the reform tradition. If this problem can be solved, and perhaps it can, it may require moving beyond the somewhat abstract and optimistic features of Dewey's Pragmatism to the related but more critical and concrete philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein." (Greenstone, "Dix and Addams," pp. 553-54).

As these passages demonstrate, Greenstone's interpretation of the American political tradition contested the view, long associated with Louis Hartz, that there was a single dominant, and highly Lockean, American political ideology. Greenstone was more impressed by what he called the "bi-polarity" in American liberalism, the ways in which the larger political culture had in fact always suffered versions of the same tensions marking democratic theory and practice that the University of Chicago had. Against something more akin to classical rights or interests based liberal individualism, one could always find a counterforce shaped by a passion for moral and democratic reform that could not fit that paradigm. To be sure, this counterforce, in the larger drama of American history, went through many transformations, from a more conscience based, Transcendentalist version to a more this worldly pragmatist one. In a sense, Greenstone, like Allen, seizes on the illusions of oneness, and the difficulties of achieving even wholeness. But unlike Allen, and very much like Rorty, he brilliantly reconstructed and revived the pragmatist gambit of making Lincoln the pivotal figure in this transition. Lincoln's vision of Union was that of a community built on habits of civic friendship, true, but it was also of a diverse, multi-cultural community of inquirers—in key respects, a forerunner of Deweyan democratic community, in which people cultivate their humanity and apply their social intelligence in social experiments aimed at solving the problems they face together, and this without any transcendental guarantees of success or even being on the right path.

Thus, Greenstone was prescient in his appreciation of how Dewey and Addams hung together, how their epistemological and philosophical positions could be helpfully updated through later philosophical developments (Wittgenstein and other philosophers of language, notably Donald Davidson), and how in the American context, the living reality of pragmatism owed a crucial debt to the legacy of Lincoln. Although Greenstone did not use the word "rhetoric" in the way he might have, his keen appreciation for the language of politics and its cultural, habitual context amounted to the same thing. Like Allen, he did not share the invidious Straussian comparison between rhetoric and philosophy, despite having shared an academic Department with Strauss himself. And it is also worth mentioning that he knew the Alinsky approach to democratic activism intimately.

Now, the larger point here is of course that this Lincoln, Greenstone's Lincoln, is the Lincoln of Obama. There have been a great many academic and non-academic efforts to come to terms with the Lincoln legacy, and they have run a very wide gambit, from Lincoln as Great Man, to Lincoln as opportunist, to Lincoln as racist, etc. But surprisingly little of this interpretive work has had the philosophical sophistication of the pragmatists, both early and late, from Addams and Dewey to Greenstone and Obama. And with philosophers, at least, Lincoln has magnetized pragmatists like no other political figure, no doubt because of his deeply experimental temper in grappling with the deeply divisive problems of forging democratic community. What Obama has found in Lincoln just is what the pragmatists have always found in him, and this has been a type of pragmatism long associated with the University of Chicago. It is a vision of a democratic community as an educating community, as an experimental, open community of inquiry that through participation mobilizes our collective intelligence and problem-solving abilities.

Has Obama actually read Greenstone? Allen? Rorty? At one level, it scarcely matters. Just as his daughters, as students at the Lab Schools, absorb Deweyanism as a matter of course, the intellectual air he breathed both as an organizer and at the University was simply filled with these ideas—ideas which one of his leading advisors, Cass Sunstein, was directly involved in developing. Until his recent move to Harvard, Sunstein held appointments in both the Law School and the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Chicago, and he was a close colleague of Greenstone's, one whose own work on deliberative democracy—e.g., *The Partial Constitution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) or *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)—has long been positively steeped in Deweyanism, especially Deweyan worries about the dangers of self-insulation and atomistic individualism. And in fact, Sunstein was part of the faculty consulting group that assembled *The Lincoln Persuasion* for publication after Greenstone's untimely death. Even if Obama has never read this book, he has clearly been exposed to its ideas many times over from colleagues who were part of the community of inquirers who produced it. And this is not to mention Axelrod, a product of Greenstone's Dept. of Political Science (he chaired it when Axelrod began his studies) and Greenstone's College (he was Master of the Social Sciences Collegiate Division when Axelrod graduated).

Still, it is true that Greenstone's influence on political philosophy, especially in its American context, has not been as widely appreciated as it should have been. His is one of those University of Chicago legacies that takes a bit more insider knowledge to appreciate, someone whose impact was great but whose name has often been invisible.

But perhaps now, as the new generations of political philosophical interpreters struggle to make sense of a presidency that has already been declared historic, there will be a renewed appreciation for that less than dominant side of the University of Chicago's political history that has always struggled to make its voice heard. The arc of the rhetorical universe has indeed been long. But at last it is clear that with Obama, whatever his fondness for and admiration of Gandhi and King, it is the rhetoric of Lincoln that matters most, and moreover the rhetoric of Lincoln is the rhetoric of pragmatism. How fitting that the nation is preparing to celebrate the Lincoln Bicentennial at the very same moment it is preparing to inaugurate the most Lincolnian president since Lincoln himself.

