

Obama's unprecedented voice

No president knew the literature and religion of America better—not even Lincoln.

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President Barack Obama at Clementa Pinckney's funeral, Charleston, South Carolina.

On the day of the 2004 Illinois primary I was watching the polls at a precinct on the north side of Chicago. Barack Obama's Senate campaign posted me there, where my opposite number was a precinct worker with the alderman's organization. We got along well, handing out competing palm cards at our legally required distance from the polling place. Eventually he asked me who I was doing a favor for by working a cold March election day, and he was genuinely flabbergasted when I said I was there because I believed in the candidate. Like the late Abner Mikva, I was [the nobody that nobody sent](#).

Nobody needed me, either—Obama carried that precinct by a healthy margin, along with the ward, the city, and a stunning share of the state. That corner of the north side was home to the governor, the comptroller, and the attorney general, all bidding fair to become national figures. But the one who emerged was the guy from the south side, the skinny kid with the funny name.

I saw him at the victory party that night, entering the packed ballroom from a side door. The messianic touch was at odds with the eloquent but halting figure I'd seen at volunteer events, the man clearly too smart for the state senate yet hard to picture as a lion of national politics. His speech was pin-perfect and exhilarating. "John Kerry should get this guy to give the keynote speech," I told my friend and fellow volunteer. Four months later, he did. Four years after that Obama was elected president, and as of today he is an ex-president.

There's no point in pretending I can differentiate my evaluation of Obama's tenure from what it has meant for me. I grew up around politics and politicians, tagging along with my dad's door-knocking at the age of three. I have a Zelig-like list of close encounters with presidential candidates. (I almost ran over John Edwards in the lobby of Chicago's Drake Hotel; in retrospect I rather wish I had.) History is made in moments but understood over decades. All the same, to be part of those campaigns eight and 12 years ago was to know you were part of something significant. The candidate, the people, the energy were unlike anything I'd seen.

That March night it was a phrase of Obama's that struck me, an inverted biblical allusion: "*I am my brother's keeper.*" Later, on the night of his re-election, it was his enumeration of the responsibilities that come with rights: "love and charity and duty and patriotism." Later still, in Charleston, it was his invocation of black churches as "hush harbors" during slavery, and places where children are "told that they are beautiful and smart." And in Philadelphia in July, he insisted that as Americans, "we don't seek to be *ruled.*" Just like that, passionately, incredulously, definitively.

Those moments—and many others—clearly escaped the orbit of speechwriters and the conventions of politics. They were, as all such speeches are, aspirational. But they were also the utterances of a unique, unprecedented voice, one amplified and sharpened by all those pauses for thought. No president knew the literature and religion of America better, not even Lincoln. We had a president who quoted *James Baldwin* in a speech at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. You wouldn't dare to imagine it if you hadn't seen it happen.

I disagreed with some of Obama's views and many of his decisions. But you can't read very deeply in presidential biography without finding that the greatest legacies are ambivalent down to the roots. His predecessor was a failure by the most generous measures one can devise for a presidency. His successor managed to disgrace the office before even assuming it. Some of the blame for both Bush's mistakes and Trump's victory has been charged to Obama's account, by right and left alike. But there's more error than injustice in that. It is said that presidents become deeply sympathetic to their predecessors, and as we watch history unfold at the rate of Twitter refreshing, it's not hard to see why.

George H.W. Bush, an object of mockery in his 1992 defeat, looks different today, having had some of his decency and courage restored by posterity. Bill Clinton—brilliant, glib, vulpine, once defining an era—has blurred around the edges. So much of what we love and hate in these people is what we love and hate in ourselves, and in one another. As Obama enters his own complicated posterity, at least it can be said that he only ever tried to show us ourselves, and one another, at our best. For that I would gladly say, all wounding sarcasm and defensive irony aside: Thanks, Obama.