Comparisons of the Political Rhetoric of President Barack Obama and Chicago Mayor Harold Washington

Presented by Assoc. Prof. Alton Miller, Assoc. Dean, School of Media Arts Columbia College Chicago
Approach:
• My credentials
• History of the Barack Obama / Harold Washington connection
• Some reflections

Premise:
Obama’s rhetoric was influenced by Harold Washington who thus deserves a closer look… especially as a comparison may help to explain some contradictions
My credentials...
My credentials . . .

• Arts Advocacy & Public Relations, theater & dance

• Press Secretary, Speechwriter, Mayor Harold Washington, 1984-87

• Speechwriter, communications director for

  Mayor W. Wilson Goode, Philadelphia,
  Sen. candidate Carol Moseley Braun,
  Chicago City Treasurer Miriam Santos
  Illinois Arts Alliance
If the alternative to war is public diplomacy, then political rhetoric may save the world.
Who does this describe?

- He became the first black politician elected to the highest office.
- It had been a hard-fought duel on the tightrope of race. Even friends who acknowledged his charisma and professional merits argued that the electorate wasn't ready for a black candidate.
- The language of the campaign was crafted to consolidate his progressive base, yet avoid white reaction to an “angry black.”
- The rhetorical challenges were further complicated by the fact that his primary opponent was a woman, the frontrunner, whose supporters he would later need.
- He knew that once he was in office, the real campaign would begin.
“Washington knew he needed to build a multi-racial coalition. That was the movement that ultimately swept Washington into power, and subsequently provided the basis of his administration. Washington's victory was viewed by political observers as 'a great awakening'."

Xolela Mangcu, "A Mainstream Radical Against the Machine", Swans.com, June 16, 2008"
"The Reverend Jesse Jackson explicitly used Washington's hybrid campaign/crusade as a template for his presidential runs in 1984 and 1988... His trans-racial appeal and his progressive politics seemed to echo Washington's, and they triggered hopes for a revival of the progressive coalitions he inspired."

*Salim Muwakkil, In These Times*
"... that era was a time of hopeful activism. His mayoral tenure was a time of governmental transparency, political fairness and even racial reconciliation. The Washington years were a time when progressive coalitions of multiracial and multiethnic Chicagoans were celebrating their successes and mobilizing for more."

Salim Muwakkil, In These Times
Obama: “I originally moved to Chicago in part because of the inspiration of Mayor Washington's campaign, and he was there in Chicago when I moved there more than two decades ago. For those of you who recall that era and recall Chicago at that time, it's hard to forget the sense of possibility that he sparked in people.”

To the Congressional Black Caucus Annual Legislative Conference on Sept. 27, 2008…
Obama: “I'll never forget how he reached out to everyone – black, brown and white – to build a coalition for change. He wasn't part of the insider crowd. He wasn't somebody who the establishment immediately embraced. He understood that ultimately power comes from people and if you are working at the grass roots – and people trust you are fighting for them – then there's nothing you can't accomplish.”
Another perspective:

“Nineteen eighty-three, that was a phenomenal election. Harold Washington – extraordinary guy. I mean, he was the most kinetic campaigner and politician that I've ever met. It was inspiring the way the African-American community came alive around the prospect of electing Harold.”
“. . . There were those who mistook that for a negative campaign, but it was one of the most positive campaigns I've ever seen, because people felt empowered.”

-- David Axelrod, media consultant to Harold Washington and senior advisor to Pres. Obama

Christopher Hayes, "Obama's Media Maven"
The Nation 2/19/07
“Now, as Axelrod prepares to try to persuade nonblack Americans to elect a black man President, it's clear the experience of Harold Washington was a defining moment in the formation of his political consciousness... Axelrod sees Obama as a marker of progress, writing the second act of a story that Washington started...”

Christopher Hayes
“...Twenty-one years later, when Barack ran for the US Senate in the primary against six very strong candidates, he carried every ward on the northwest side except one, and carried the ward that St. Pascal's is in, and I think even the precinct. That's what he was thinking about on primary night. I was thinking, and I told Barack, that Harold Washington is smiling down on us.”

Christopher Hayes quoting Axelrod
"What Obama and Washington shared, Axelrod points out -- a trait common to many of the successful black candidates he has worked for -- is the direct, lived experience of the effects of injustice with a simultaneous faith that the injustice wasn't permanent, that it could be overcome. . ."
"In many cases their stories are symbolic of the kinds of values that we as a society hold dear even if we haven't always honored them historically,' Axelrod says. The notion that you can overcome great obstacles – [they're] very hopeful figures, and I think that made them very potent politically."

Christopher Hayes quoting Axelrod
"They've seen the obstacles and the barriers and they've also overcome them. It shows the work we have to do and the possibility that the work can get done, that you can work for a better future.' In other words, they make people feel good about how far we've come."

Christopher Hayes quoting Axelrod
• Harold Washington’s election was a transformative moment.
• Obama was personally, immediately moved to action, enough to pull up stakes and move to Chicago and trade his options for the role of community organizer.
• The Harold Washington connection is greatly intensified in the influence of his collaborator David Axelrod.
• So what are the points of comparison?
1. Politics is ABOUT something
2. Don’t fall into the “race” trap
3. Preoccupation with finances
4. Governing style: legislative
5. Leadership style: teach, don’t boss
6. Charismatic attribute: dignity in adversity
7. Role of the Media: A new birth of responsibility
8. But race matters
Ira Glass, This American Life

When [Obama] says ‘There is no black America, and there is no white America, only the United States of America,’ you can hear the echoes of Harold Washington saying he would be fairer than fair.
Barack Obama

“Those years, watching him as a larger-than-life figure and seeing the impact he had on the confidence of the African-American community, the hopefulness of the community, it had a lasting impact on me. And I suspect that was the first time when I fully appreciated the potentials of a political figure, not just to pass laws, but also to change people’s attitudes about themselves.”

Machiavelli, on Reform

"It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favor; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it. Thus it arises that on every opportunity for attacking the reformer, his opponents do so with the zeal of partisans, the others only defend him half-heartedly, so that between them he runs great danger."

www.altonmiller.com