

## **White House Speeches: Reagan versus Obama**

*How political ideology translates into speechwriting*

Barack Obama's 2008 speeches hover somewhere between legend and myth, and for a good reason. The speeches succeed on so many levels that every time you return to them you notice another technique, and you see how and why it works.

In this workshop we'll analyse several of these techniques, from focus to problem-constructing, thematics to ideology.

For several of these analyses, we'll use linguistics-based methods developed at the writing program of the University of Chicago. But there's a special puzzle when it comes to ideology. It's no puzzle at all, of course, that ideology would play a key role in political speeches. Campaign speeches exist to gain political power, and ideology is key to that power.

What's puzzling is the particular way that ideology worked in the 2008 Obama campaign. Conventional US ideology was certainly at work in the speeches - you're not going to be elected President of the United States if you reject or even just ignore the underlying framework of US political culture. But the Obama campaign used ideology in perplexing ways: conventional yet unorthodox, familiar yet radical, challenging yet comforting.

I have my own theory about this. As it happens, Barack Obama and I were teaching vaguely similar courses at the University of Chicago during the 1990's, an era in which the high-level clash between post-structuralism and the Western tradition was working its way through the day-to-day work of Chicago's campus.

In Obama's case, post-structuralism took the form of critical legal studies, and I think that his essays in *The Audacity of Hope* show how this version of post-structuralism came to shape his thinking about ideology.

To show what Obama was up to in 2008, we'll contrast his use of ideology with an earlier virtuoso of US political speeches: Ronald Reagan.

Reagan was known as the Great Communicator, and deservedly so: in my view, his First Inaugural ranks third among US political speeches, after Lincoln's Second, and Kennedy's.

Reagan and Obama rely on many of the same techniques for the success of their work, and it's exactly this similarity that allows us to see the hidden differences in their use of ideology. Both are astonishingly powerful; one is revolutionary.

### **Who should attend?**

This workshop is for those who like to get their teeth into the intellectual depths of speechwriting.

**Laurence McEnerney** was Writing Director at the University of Chicago for 40 years. The video of his class *Leadership Lab, The Craft of Writing Effectively* has clocked up over 7m views on YouTube.