

Barack Obama a sulking Achilles or something else?

His manner towards Trump has been noble yet the tone of voice has unmistakably changed

The Art of Persuasion



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There are two obvious literary models for late-period [Barack Obama](#) to choose from. One is *Samson Agonistes*, the other is Achilles in his tent.

The first, from Milton, is the hero brought low who, in defeat, offers a final act of defiance: he brings the whole temple down, wiping out the Philistines even as he perishes himself. The other, from Homer, is the great sulker who — pride bruised — retreats to his tent and sits out the game.

The latter is, at least at first, the route taken by [Hillary Clinton](#), who did not concede publicly until hours after the election was called. President Obama has taken neither. Rather, he has made a gracious — if laborious — show of offering support to the man he had said, not long before, was not fit to hold office.

As he resignedly apostrophised [Donald Trump](#) at their post-election meeting: “Mr President-elect [...] we now are going to want to do everything we can to help you succeed — because if you succeed, then the country succeeds.”

That sounds noble. And, with Mr Trump responding with generous noises and offering a stay of execution to [Obamacare](#), it also seems to have worked on its immediate audience. But there is also something in it for Mr Obama. Presidents as they leave tend to think about their legacies. In making nice

with Mr Trump, Mr Obama looks generous. He looks statesmanlike. And he gains the chance, perhaps, to influence his impressionable successor to be more so.

Still, that legacy. It is not the prospective wreck of his legislative programme that is the thing, exactly; or not the whole of it. In the election of Mr Trump, Mr Obama has seen the overthrow of something bigger. The wind has changed. The media have changed. His whole rhetorical approach has been repudiated. Here was a man whose appeal to the electorate was to say we're all one, to reach across the aisle: "We have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red states and blue states. We are, and always will be, the United States of America."

He gives way to a man whose line of attack is about mobilising an in-group against an out-group. Mr Obama's ethos appeal was about calmness, optimism and apparent expertise; his opponent was about naked emotion, anger and outsider can-do.

Mr Obama had done his homework so you didn't have to. Mr Trump had fed his homework to the dog. The outgoing president put it pretty starkly to the [New Yorker's](#) editor David Remnick: "Trump understands the new ecosystem, in which facts and truth don't matter. You attract attention, rouse emotions and then move on. You can surf those emotions. I've said it before, but if I watched Fox I wouldn't vote for me!"

And yet, acknowledging the president-elect's victory, he did not talk about a new ecosystem, but an old one. This could be a version of what philosopher Herbert Marcuse called "repressive tolerance". He was at pains to frame Mr Trump's victory not as a reversal of his view of the US, but — oddly — as an endorsement of it, as a defeat on the chessboard rather than a repudiation of the rules of chess.

"Now, everybody is sad when their side loses an election," he said in his Rose Garden statement on November 9. "But the day after, we have to remember that we're actually all on one team. This is an intramural scrimmage. We're not Democrats first. We're not Republicans first. We are Americans first. We're patriots first." That is a direct, and perhaps deliberate, echo of his red-state-blue-state line so many years before.

And yet the tone of voice has unmistakably changed.

In a press conference in Peru, his optimism went only so far as to say: “I can’t guarantee that the president-elect won’t pursue some of the positions that he’s taken. But what I can guarantee ... is that reality will force him to adjust how he approaches many of these issues. That’s just the way this office works.”

That — eight years on — is a long way from “yes we can”. A third model suggests itself: *Oedipus at Colonus*.

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