Obama sacrificed lofty rhetoric for substance - and it worked.

By John Dickerson, Slate Magazine

For a speech before 80,000 people and Doric columns in a football stadium, Barack Obama might have been expected to summon winged chariots, F-14s, and maybe a marching band. When he finished, hats would be cast into the air, and rent shirts would litter the floor.

Obama didn't deliver that speech. By the Obama standard, his convention speech was conventional—but that's as he intended. "Let me spell out exactly what change would mean if I am president," he said midway through the speech, then proceeded to launch into a list of dozens of specifics about tax policy, health care plans, and his foreign-policy perspective. He was even specific about his vision of bipartisanship, calling for the middle ground on abortion, gun laws, same-sex marriage, and immigration. For a time, the speech felt downright dull, as if his newfound reconciliation with Bill Clinton was so thorough that he'd taken on the former president's passion for laundry-list speeches.

Click on the player below to watch Slate staffers rate Obama's speech.

Obama was addressing the complaint that has dogged his campaign since the beginning: that it lacks specifics. Part of the answer to that charge meant showing that he understood what voters were going through. He told the stories of voters he'd met who were suffering and took it a step further by becoming a warrior for them, challenging Phil Gramm's claim that America was "a nation of whiners." This is the transaction he needs to complete with undecided voters—and it's the one that Hillary Clinton was able to transmit effortlessly: that he will fight for them.

Obama may also have found himself a new slogan: "Enough." "Change vs. more of the same" is the phrase we hear all the time, but a better, more forceful pitch came early in the speech. After one of several passages in which he described the troubles of everyday people, he said, "Tonight I say to the American people, to Democrats and Republicans and independents across this great land—enough!"

It was the single most emphatic word of his address. Change is all well and good, but when Dad says, "Enough," the kids stop fooling around. It conveys an urgency and determination that talk of change simply does not. You could see that single word printed on placards for future rallies.

The speech was also full of "you" and "we," and so even in talking about himself he tried to weave it into the collective. He talked about his grandmother, who fought gender discrimination. He said he saw the face of his grandfather in the Iraq veterans. He recognized his mother in those who are on food stamps, as she was. He then challenged McCain directly. "I don't know what kind of lives John McCain thinks that celebrities lead, but this has been mine. These are my heroes. Theirs are the stories that shaped me. And it is on their behalf that I intend to win this election."

As passionate as Obama was on behalf of other people, he was equally as passionate in confronting John McCain. He challenged him on several fronts, from his vision of national security to McCain's suggestion that Obama has not put his country first. "Even my jaw hurt," one conservative wrote me. His most powerful attack, though, was when he suggested, more in sorrow than in anger, that McCain was out of touch. "Now, I don't believe that Senator McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans," he said. "I just think he doesn't know."

As Obama spoke, the flashbulbs went off the way they do for touchdowns in nighttime football games—except they never stopped. If one of Obama's convention tasks was to unify and energize his party, he could hardly have done a better job. When he finished speaking, I looked at the faces around me. From an older African-American woman to a young father to a middle-aged woman, the tears were either in their eyes or rolling down their cheeks. A couple nearby kissed when the speech was over. Even when Barack Obama deliberately tries to tone it down, he can send an audience over the moon.

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