

The Power of Speech to Change the world

By Nick Morgan

The Trojan War was not going well for the Greeks. Achilles, the Greeks' big threat, was sulking in his tent, refusing to come out and fight. Apparently, he was something of a manic depressive, prone to fits of the blues.

Agamemnon, the Greek leader, sent a group of his best orators – Odysseus (a gifted liar), Ajax (the Greeks' second best fighter) and Phoinix (Achilles' old tutor) to plead with Achilles, get him out of his tent and start slaughtering Trojans again.

The speakers flattered Achilles, telling him how much he was missed on the battlefield, painted lurid pictures of the cost of failure to the Greeks, and promised him wine, women and songs of praise if he would only bestir himself and get to work. Eventually, it worked. Achilles pulled himself together, began butchering Trojans again, and the tides of war slowly began to turn.

This is one of the earliest examples of persuasive public speaking – speeches that literally changed the world. To be sure, the precise historical facts of the Trojan War are a bit elusive, but historians agree that the rough outlines at least are as Homer depicted them.

Speeches have been changing the world ever since – when the right combination of speaker, audience, and moment come together, great public speaking does change the world irrevocably.

There are hundreds of examples, but I'll look at three: truth-telling from Mahatma Gandhi in 1922, inspirational leadership from John F. Kennedy in 1961, and extraordinary courage from Nelson Mandela in 1964. Each of these speeches has lessons for speakers everywhere; taken together, they are a primer on how to change the world.

In 1922, Gandhi was travelling around India exhorting

his countrymen and women to non-violent resistance to British rule. He was arrested by the police, and gave his great speech – the classic statement of non-violent resistance – to the court on March 23, 1922.

Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is the last article of my faith. But I had to make my choice. I had either to submit to a system which I considered has done an irreparable harm to my country or incur the risk of the mad fury of my people bursting forth when they understood the truth from my lips. I know that my people have sometimes gone mad. I am deeply sorry for it; and I am therefore, here, to submit not a light penalty but to the highest penalty. I do not ask for mercy. I do not plead any extenuating act. I am here; therefore, to invite and submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen. . . .

Gandhi's essential humility and honesty – and stubbornness – shine through the simple words. This is great oration because of its clarity and directness. What effect did it have? The judge sentenced Gandhi to six years in prison; it was the first of several incarcerations for Gandhi before the force of his rhetoric and the non-violent resistance of his people drove the British out of India some 25 years later.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy gave one of the most stirring inaugural addresses a president has ever given. The Cold War was raging, and what most have forgotten is that the speech is in fact from the start a call to arms against communism. But the part of the speech that truly changed

the world, and that is remembered because of that, comes at the end:

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility; I welcome it. I



Nelson Mandela

do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavour will light our country and all who serve it, and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

These words signalled the end of the 1950s and that decade's relative quiescence. And they inspired thousands of Americans to join the Peace Corps, and to contribute to the end of American isolationism and the beginning of its permanent engagement in the world, for better or for ill. Kennedy's speech truly changed the world; we are still witnessing the after-shocks of that one famous sentence in places like the former Soviet Union, in Africa, and in South America.

The strength of Kennedy's closing lies in something that most modern speakers have forgotten or are afraid to do: he asked the audience to do something. Audiences are filled with normally active people who are forced to be passive while they listen to the speech. Ask them to do something – either right there in the hall or a rhetorical call to action for later as Kennedy did – and they will give you their hearts and their passion in your service.

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Three years later, half a world away, Nelson Mandela signalled the beginning of his people's long struggle against apartheid on April 20, 1964, near the end of his trial for being a Communist. The trial had lasted nearly two years.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela describes taking two weeks to write the speech, a statement

to the court in lieu of cross-examination. He had circulated the speech to his colleagues before the day itself, and at least one lawyer predicted that if Mandela gave the speech, “they will take him straight out to the back of the courthouse and string him up.” The stakes were very, very high as Mandela made his case:

We want to be part of the general population, and not confined to living in our ghettos. African men want to have their wives and children to live with them where they work, and not to be forced into an unnatural existence in men's hostels. Our women want to be left with their men folk, and not to be left permanently widowed in the Reserves. We want to be allowed out after 11 p.m., and not to be confined to our rooms like little children. We want to be allowed to travel in our own country, and seek work where we want to, and not where the Labour Bureau tells us to. We want a just share I the whole of South Africa; we want security and a stake in society.

Above all, my lord, we want equal political rights, because without them our disabilities will be permanent. I know this sounds revolutionary to the whites of this country, because the majority of voters will be Africans. This makes the white man fear democracy. But this fear cannot be allowed to stand in the way of the only solution which will guarantee racial harmony and freedom for all. It is not true that the enfranchisement of all will result in racial domination. Political division, based on colour, is entirely artificial, and when it disappears, so will the domination of one colour group by another. The ANC has spent half a century fighting against racialism. When it triumphs, as it certainly must, it will not change that policy.

This then is what the ANC is fighting. Our struggle is a truly national one. It is a struggle of the African people, inspired by our own suffering and our own experience. It is a struggle for the right to live.

During my lifetime I have dedicated my life to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realized. But my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

In fact, Mandela was not “strung up” as a result of the speech; instead, he served 27 years in prison. But those words, words which dared to imagine a South African utterly transformed, did change the world. They pushed forward the long, slow process of ending apartheid; indeed, they made it inevitable.

Speak the truth bluntly, ask the audience for something, and dare to describe a vision of a new way of doing things, and your speeches can change the world. Why speak for anything less? **XL**

Dr. Nick Morgan is one of America's top speech coaches. Having both studied and taught at the University of Virginia and Princeton University, Morgan first started writing speeches for then Virginia Governor Charles S. Robb. Since then, he has been commissioned by Fortune 50 companies to write for many CEOs and presidents. He has worked widely with political and educational leaders. And he has helped design conferences and prepares keynote speeches around the world.

He is the author of *Working the Room: How to Move People to Action through Audience-Centered Speaking*, was published by Harvard in 2003 and reprinted in paperback in 2005 as *Give Your Speech, Change the World: How to Move Your Audience to Action*.

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