

POWERFUL WORDS AND  
CONTEXT

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In *Leaders Understand the Power of Words*, Robert Millward attempts to draw the connection between some of the great orators in history and the void that exists in college preparation programs and teacher presentations. He writes that "leaders understand the power of words, and possess an uncanny knack to communicate those words with passion and beliefs." Communication is often listed as the primary skill needed for all effective leaders, whether cited by John W. Gardner or through a review of the works by Tecumseh, Rev. Martin Luther King, Rev. Jessie Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, or even Adolph Hitler. Their speeches speak volumes about not only word selection but also content and passion.

What one must understand about these speeches, however, is that their words have to be placed in context with the respective social/historical movements. These are, after all, identified leaders that have risen through the evolution of monumental historical events. Their words, content, and passion are part of a much broader fabric, which has also been chronicled by the retrospective review associated with history. A closer look at the speeches that have a video and audio recording shows leaders recognized at the crest of social change. When you combine the power words and gestures with an explosive backdrop, it becomes clear that the leaders were in the right place at the right time. One might question whether these same speeches given before the local Chamber of Commerce (although I doubt that one existed during the Tecumseh era) would have received the same historical footnote? These individuals knew their audience and were masters of the key elements of communication.

The historical events that followed these epic speeches also helped to define the importance of the man and his word! We did, in fact, land on the moon before the end of the decade, as articulated by John F. Kennedy. As for Martin Luther King, his vision of civil rights and the movement itself was defined, in part, through his "I Have a Dream" speech in

Washington, D.C. Staged literally in the shadows of Abraham Lincoln, King masterfully linked Lincoln's heroic emancipation proclamation with the need for social justice and equality that eluded Americans for some 100 years. If John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech was synchronized more directly to the fall of the Berlin Wall some 30 years later, it too would have been elevated in historical importance.

The great orators also had other common advantages. They oftentimes possessed a clerical or legal/political background, controlled their communication settings, and had many opportunities to perfect their skills through years of practice. The former training would be characteristic of Martin Luther King and Jessie Jackson, while the later is attributable to Abraham Lincoln and Robert Kennedy. Not to put Adolph Hitler in the same category as the other individuals previously noted, but certainly from an oratory standpoint, Hitler's hatchet-like gestures led followers to believe in the dominate role that Germany should play in promoting the Aryan race. The staging included bands and banners and thousands of uniformed troops hanging on Hitler's every word. Martin Luther King's gestures, on the other hand, during his "I Had a Dream" speech, would lead the audience to believe that he was prepared to die because he had been to the mountain top and was able to see a brighter future.

I agree with the author, that college students today must be given the opportunity to review the great speeches, analyze the content, and recognize the critical elements in delivery. They must also understand the historical context and settings as well. Only then will they be prepared to speak with increasing degrees of passion on the issues that burn within them. Their metaphors, rhythms, and analogies will not only impact the quality of their presentations but also lead to a deeper and long-lasting meaning for their students. Each great teacher or orator must ask the following questions at the end of a presentation: Would they want to sit in the audience? Has the presentation created a greater level of understanding or call to action?

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