



# The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama

By Richard W. Leeman



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*The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama*, by Richard Leeman, provides an in-depth analysis of President Barack Obama's speeches and writings to explain the power of the 44th president's speaking. This book argues that, from his earliest writings through his latest presidential speeches, Obama has described the world through a teleological lens.

Teleology is the philosophy of discovering in the essential nature of humans or countries the *telos*, or ideal, towards which one should progress. Obama consistently portrays freedom and equality as essential to human nature and the American spirit. Understanding his discourse as teleological helps explain the inspirational and philosophical nature of his rhetoric, as well as his famous patience, perceiving progress where others become frustrated. Teleological discourse is ancient, with its roots in philosophies such as Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Christian theology, and its handprints evident in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In order to discover the roots of Obama's teleological perspective, Leeman also examines the speeches of presidents Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan, as well as the civil rights discourse of Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Although the roots of his teleological discourse run deep, President Obama's particular use of the philosophy is very modern. *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama* is an essential contribution to the study of American politics and political rhetoric.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Most Americans, regardless of their political persuasions, are captivated by President Barack Obama's soaring rhetoric. Even when his rhetorical brilliance is the target of criticism, as it certainly has been, few can deny the powerful and dynamic effect of his speeches. Richard W. Leeman, in his insightful and in-depth work, *The Teleological Discourse of Barack Obama*, sets out to identify exactly what it is about Obama's rhetoric that touches and inspires his listening audiences. In doing so, Leeman masterfully critiques not only Obama's rhetorical style, but also his leadership qualities, his values, and his vision for the American polity. ... Taken as a whole, Leeman's argument that Obama's discourse, worldview, and character are teleological is both cogent and fully nuanced. Indeed, the book itself stands as a teleological ideal, striving toward an understanding of the essential nature of political rhetoric. (*Presidential Studies Quarterly*)

Leeman presents a thoughtfully conceived, theoretically grounded, and analytically sound argument for understanding Barack Obama, first and foremost, as a teleological rhetor. His thorough explication of Obama's books, campaign oratory, and presidential speeches stands as the most comprehensive examination of Obama's rhetorical efforts to date and should be recognized as a definitive text on the subject. Leeman's work is an excellent continuation of the public address scholarship concerning *telos*, presidential oratory, national identity, and American polity. Although a scholarly work, Leeman's ability to write complexly, yet clearly and concisely, makes this book well worth the time of public address scholars, presidential historians, and any individuals who have an interest in the Obama presidency. Institutional libraries, as well as public libraries, would do well to make this text available to their patrons. (*Rhetoric & Public Affairs*)

Richard Leeman has written a careful analysis of Barack Obama's rhetoric that provides important insights into the man, his values, and his vision for America. (Craig Allen Smith, North Carolina State University)

#### About the Author

**Richard Leeman** is professor of communication studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

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