

Wesleyan professor analyzes Obama's address

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By SLOAN BREWSTER, Press staff

MIDDLETOWN — Barack Obama's inaugural address provoked action rather than thought, according to a speaker at the Wadsworth Mansion Tuesday.

Elvin Lim, assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University, author of "The Anti-Intellectual Presidency," and self-proclaimed political cynic, took on the task of analyzing what Obama's speech "really" meant at a fundraiser and inaugural celebration at the mansion.

Lim described the speech as less than memorable. It was not, he said, an example of "soaring oratory carved in stone in our national monuments."

It was not a speech with inherent timelessness.

"I do not think this speech was particularly eloquent," Lim said. "I do not think this speech was particularly soaring."

These observations, however, were not intended as an insult to the new president. Rather, Lim said Obama intentionally chose to speak to the present moment.

"Soaring oratories provoke thought, but what he did provoked action," Lim said in an interview preceding his speech.

Lim told listeners Obama's speech was meant for the masses, not the dignitaries.

"The speech was not lofty," Lim assessed. "It was very serious."

Specifics Lim discussed included commentary on Obama's promise to return science to its rightful place, which he said may have to do with Obama's plans to fund stem cell research.

He pulled meaning from beneath the surface, jabs at outgoing President George W. Bush, which he said "were masked in oratory."

"We are ready to lead once more," he quoted from the speech, adding his analysis. "So we never did."

Lim also quoted a line from the speech.

"The question we ask today is not whether or not our government is too big or too small," Lim repeated. "But whether it works."

To the author and professor, this quote signified an endeavor by the new president to change the relationship between the government and people.

The president invited the public to "sweep aside existing conceptions against government," he said. "He's being very subversive to a more conservative idea that people should be left alone."

After he spoke, Lim answered questions from the audience.

Jeannie Gugliemino asked how Lim thought the speech played to foreigners, especially Muslims.

"This is a new administration and a new world," Lim said, adding he had just returned from London. "Even the Brits were excited ... I think it's important that the 'H' initial was articulated today."

In addition, Lim pointed out the need to see Obama as an individual.

"The presidential office is a lonely, lonely office," he said.

To a question from another member of the audience on the chances Obama would prosecute Bush for war crimes and whether doing so would have a restorative effect on America's public face, Lim said Obama would not take a different approach.

"My answer is probably not," Lim said. "His way of restoring America's role in the world is to move on."

In an interview, Lim refused to say if he approved or disapproved of what Obama said in his speech, that, he said, will bear itself out over time.

The president will be judged by such things as whether or not he solves the financial crisis or brings peace to Iraq. In the meantime, Obama's speech suggests he will bring a new type of government — one that includes self-governance.

"The conditions are ripe for it," Lim said. "He jolly well intends to seize that moment."

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