

Let's Roll: Speakers Subtract from the Sum of All Fears

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Memorial Day weekend -- welcome to the national speech tournament, in Pittsburgh this year. Five students and I have journeyed to the contest, and by the eighth and final round, they've been eliminated and I've finished judging. I make my usual trek to watch the Oratory final. This event is my favorite -- original speeches delivered by their authors. As they begin, I wonder if 9/11 will affect what they say.

Two weekends later -- school's out, and I accompany friends to see The Sum of All Fears. When the nuclear device devastates Baltimore, I'm stunned. The boisterous audience goes quiet in a way I've only witnessed during Schindler's List. It's hard to watch America under attack, even in such an artificial setting as a stadium-seating movie theater.

In finals, the first speaker uses a nerdy classmate to illustrate that everyone should be heard. The second one -- with great humor -- uses Willard Scott to show the dangers of misplaced priorities, critiquing his importance to a supposed news program. I'm with you, pal.

The third speech grabs me. Simply entitled *Let's Roll*, it uses the battle cry of the Americans who attacked the hijackers on Flight 93 to urge Americans to live lives that salute the 9/11 victims by being our best selves. I usually

am more cynical; the coach in me sees 9/11 salutes as a ploy to the judges for better scores. Even so, this sincere kid wins my mental vote. I want him to be right.

The fourth speaker uses her Chinese mother's attempts at American street slang to illustrate the need for specific language. She's hilarious, as is the next guy, whose speech is entitled *How to Fail* (for success in life). His lessons, sadly, come from his dating disasters. He's the funniest in the round, personable and self-deprecating.

The movie over, I head home, and the radio news denotes the latest details of what our intelligence agencies and political leaders did and didn't know before 9/11. I think what a mess this all is, and I wonder what good finger-pointing will do, even though I know Americans must discover what happened to prevent future failures. If we can.

The last speaker -- an African-American named Venus -- argues against race-based protections in college admissions. Her stance is unexpected; her arguments are well supported. With a commanding presence that fills the room, she's a teen Barbara Jordan. At awards, when she wins, it seems unusual -- so much substance to what she said and without gimmicks. The last few years, the champion has been the kid with the most creative approach. The substance was present but secondary. The trend has changed.

I've been unable to get these six speakers off my mind since that final round. In their prime-time television attorney-style suits and dresses, they represented the best of American education. And maybe they have the solutions we seek.

Our country was stunned and wounded in September. Since then, we've felt that silence of the movie audience in our hearts. The sum of our fears is greater than it used to be. It's harder to distance ourselves from the violence; most of us know someone who was in New York or Washington that day, or who works for an airline. But rather than spending our time focusing on non-issues (sorry Willard) or being mired in popularity or race concerns, we need to listen to the kids' hopes. Each of the speakers promised us the world's problems *could* be lessened or solved (and only took ten minutes to do so). I want them to be right.

The trend in America has changed like the trend in Oratory. As a country, we've learned how to fail now, as officials who didn't see it coming and as citizens whose innocence ended. Now we need to share our own specific language: to keep America great, we must speak up and even more importantly, we must listen -- to each other, to our field agents, to our students. This dialogue is our reply to the terror, letting it roll like those six kids' heartfelt speeches rolled off their tongues. To subtract from the sum of our fears, ***we*** must roll.