Introduction

Several years ago my book on The Politics of Proverbs: From Traditional Wisdom to Proverbial Stereotypes (1997) appeared in print, and I was deeply honored when it was selected for the Giuseppe Pitrè International Folklore Prize. This award most assuredly encouraged me to continue my work on the use and function of proverbial wisdom in political rhetoric, resulting in such books as The Proverbial Abraham Lincoln (2000) and “Call a Spade a Spade”: From Classical Phrase to Racial Slur (2002). It is indeed with much pleasure that I can now present eight additional studies on various aspects of the political employment of proverbial language under the collective title of Proverbs Are the Best Policy: Folk Wisdom and American Politics. While my earlier book contained chapters on Adolf Hitler's, Winston S. Churchill's, and Harry S. Truman's authoritative and effective manipulation of proverbs, the proverbial discourse of the Cold War, and the origin, history, and meaning of the two proverbial slurs “The only good Indian is a dead Indian” and “No tickee, no washee,” the present volume is focused on the American political scene ranging from early revolutionary times to the present day. It thus represents a survey of the obvious predominance of proverbs in American political discourse.

The first chapter on “‘Different Strokes for Different Folks’: American Proverbs as an International, National, and Global Phenomenon” serves as an introductory analysis of what characterizes American proverbs. It is shown that many of the proverbs current in the United States have their origin in classical times, the Bible, and the Middle Ages. As such, they were translated into many languages over the centuries, making up a common stock of proverbial wisdom in large parts of the world. Of course, new proverbs were also coined in the United States with some of them having only a regional distribution while others belong to the basic set of commonly known American proverbs with a national dissemination. With the important political and cultural role of the United States and its version of the English language in the world today, both sets of proverbs, the international and national texts, have now a significant global influence. With English being
the *lingua franca* of the modern age, Anglo-American proverbs are being disseminated throughout the world in English or as loan translations. There is thus no doubt that English-language proverbs are now playing the role that Latin proverbs did in former times. In addition, the new American proverbs with their worldview of a democratic and future-oriented society also have a considerable influence on the sociopolitical discourse on the globe.

The second chapter on “Government of the People, by the People, for the People’: The Making and Meaning of an American Proverb about Democracy” investigates when this triadic statement originated and how it became an American proverb defining the entire concept of democracy in a most succinct manner. The various sections of this detailed survey deal with the early beginnings with John Adams and John Marshall, with Daniel Webster’s significant speech of January 26, 1830, with Theodore Parker’s important abolitionist speeches and writings, and with Abraham Lincoln as the catalyst and phrase-forger with his use of the proverbial triad at the end of his famous Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863. From there I move on to Frederick Douglass’s repetitive use of the proverb, taking it far beyond its white-male connotation to include African Americans and women by speaking of “all people.” All of this is followed by further sections on the appearance and meaning of the proverb after Lincoln and Douglass in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the first half of the twentieth century, its use by Churchill and Truman in their attempt to defend democracy during the beginning of the Cold War, and the survival of the “people” proverb in the modern age, both during recent presidential campaigns and in the sociopolitical struggles as they are presented in the mass media. While Abraham Lincoln’s name remains attached to this verbal sign of democracy, the proverb is also often cited as an anonymous piece of wisdom that encompasses the fundamental principles of a democratic government.

Considerable work has been done on the use of proverbs by such major political figures as Otto von Bismarck, Vladimir Ilych Lenin, Mao Tse-tung, and those mentioned above, but there is no reason why female politicians like Indira Gandhi or Margaret Thatcher should not be investigated as well. As a start, my third chapter on “God Helps Them Who Help Themselves’: Proverbial Resolve in the Letters of Abigail Adams” looks at how this remarkable woman influenced her husband John Adams, her family, and numerous politicians of the day with her epistolary missives rich in proverbial wisdom. She never held a political office and never gave a public speech, but her strong character and keen intellect had much influence during the revolutionary years and the subsequent period of building a democratic
American nation. Her employment of proverbs indicates her resolve, her eagerness to give advice, her debating abilities, her role as an independent matriarch, her struggle for the proper treatment of women, her unbending morality, her skill as a political strategist, her insightful observations on human nature, and her incredible optimism regarding the future of her new country. In all of her vast correspondence, be it in the form of letters to family members or to important political leaders, she made ample use of proverbial language to underscore her arguments with the common sense expressed in folk metaphors.

In the fourth chapter on “‘A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand’: From Biblical Proverb to Abraham Lincoln and Beyond” I look at the role that the divided house proverb (see Mark 3:25) has played in American politics, starting with Thomas Paine’s remarkable essay on Common Sense Addressed to the Inhabitants of America (1776). Abigail Adams made good use of it during the War of 1812, followed by such major political figures as Sam Houston and Daniel Webster. By the time Abraham Lincoln gave his famous “House Divided” speech on June 16, 1858, the proverb had become a metaphor for the division in the American nation over the issue of slavery. The proverb developed into a proverbial slogan during the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates of that same year, with Lincoln losing the Senate election to Stephen A. Douglas. Once the Civil War started, Lincoln stopped using the Bible proverb, as its prophetic wisdom had already proven itself to be true. But the proverb had become attached to Lincoln’s name as can be seen from a multitude of contextualized occurrences to this day. In fact, the proverb or allusions to it has repeatedly been used in the titles of historical or political studies regarding divisive issues ranging from the Civil War to the Vietnam War. Former German chancellor Willy Brandt introduced the proverb with reference to Lincoln during the time of Germany’s reunification as a powerful political slogan, showing how this American symbol of unity can be deployed anywhere in the world.

Frederick Douglass, former slave and abolitionist spokesman, shared the proverbial prowess of his friend Abraham Lincoln, as I demonstrate in my fifth chapter on “‘Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do Unto You’: Frederick Douglass’s Proverbial Struggle for Civil Rights.” As a deeply religious person, Douglass relied heavily on biblical proverbs to strengthen the social and moral statements in his debates, lectures, and writings. But while this wisdom from the Bible provided religious authority to Douglass’s rhetoric, he was also very much aware of the social significance of folk proverbs in his fight against slavery and for civil rights. He employs proverbs as collective wisdom and social strategies to bring across his important social and moral messages that included the struggle for his own race after the
Civil War and the expansion of women’s rights. As such, proverbs show themselves to be traditional wisdom well suited to become verbal weapons in his untiring fight for freedom, democracy, and civil rights for all people. Douglass fought with words and deeds for his egalitarian beliefs, with his own proverbial motto “If there is no struggle, there is no progress” expressing his moral commitment to uphold the so-called Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you as the ultimate wisdom for human life.

Such American presidents as John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Harry S. Truman were masterful “proverbialists,” but this could certainly be shown to be true for a number of additional presidents. In order to get at least an idea of how proverbial some of our other leaders have been, I looked at a certain speech that every president delivers in my sixth chapter on “It’s Not a President’s Business to Catch Flies: Proverbial Rhetoric in Presidential Inaugural Addresses.” I carefully investigated all fifty-five ceremonial speeches by American presidents, dividing my findings into seven convenient sections from George Washington to John Quincy Adams, from Andrew Jackson to James Buchanan, from Abraham Lincoln to William McKinley, from Theodore Roosevelt to Herbert Hoover, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Dwight D. Eisenhower, from John F. Kennedy to Jimmy Carter, and from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush. There is no doubt that the inaugural speeches by Lincoln, FDR, and Kennedy stand out in rhetorical quality, and their speeches also contain some of the most often quoted phrases that have found their way into dictionaries of quotations and proverbs. The use of quotable phrases or proverbs adds significantly to the communicative and emotional quality of such presidential rhetoric to millions of people. As presidents struggle to find the right words to relate to people of different cultural, ethnic, and intellectual backgrounds, they will do well in citing at least some proverbs as sapiential expressions of common sense.

Both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill were magnificent public speakers and masters of the English language, frequently relying on proverbs and proverbial expressions to add metaphorical expressiveness to their statements. The seventh chapter on “We Are All in the Same Boat Now’: Proverbial Discourse in the Churchill-Roosevelt Correspondence” demonstrates this by way of a detailed analysis of the 1161 and 788 messages sent by Churchill and Roosevelt respectively to each other during the turbulent war years between 1939 and 1945. As both world leaders rallied their people through word and deed to fight as allies against the dictatorial powers during the Second World War, they relied heavily on proverbial language for effective communication. This is also true
for their private and secretive letters, messages, memoranda, and telegrams. The proverbial language, especially metaphorical texts referring to the body, animals, and the military, gives their important communications a lively and humane flavor that illustrates their deep friendship, trust, and support of each other. Frequently used as colloquial arguments, these proverbial interjections into an otherwise factual epistolary exchange bear witness to the determination of these two leaders of the free world to win the struggle against the Axis powers. There is no doubt that the use of proverbs helped these two friends to cope with life and death matters by adding some traditional common sense to a complex situation.

Finally, the eighth chapter on “‘Good Fences Make Good Neighbors’: The Sociopolitical Significance of an Ambiguous Proverb” looks once again at the origin, history, dissemination, function, and meaning of an American proverb by interpreting a large number of contextualized examples from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present day. This time I have divided my inclusive investigation into fourteen sections on international proverbs about fences, two English antecedents to the proverb, other proverbs of the structure “Good X make(s) good Y,” the Irish variant “Good mearings make good neighbors,” the history of the proverb before 1914, the proverb in dictionaries of quotations and proverbs, and Robert Frost’s celebrated poem “Mending Wall” (1914) that helped to spread the hitherto rather infrequently found proverb throughout the nation and beyond. Then I look at the proverb in literary works and in the mass media, dividing the rich references into those dealing with fences as positive and aesthetic structures, housing feuds over fences, metaphorical fences, the proverb and the law, international politics and the proverb, and the need for fences in the modern world. As such, this chapter becomes a survey in culture, folklore, history, language, psychology, and worldview, showing that the proverb “Good fences make good neighbors” is by no means a “simple” piece of folk wisdom. The proverb certainly takes on a very ambiguous role as it is applied to the political ramifications of building walls at the borders between Mexico and the United States or between Israel and the Palestinians. This chapter is thus a unique example of the many layers of meaning that one and the same proverb can take on in different contexts.

As can be seen from these short paragraphs summarizing the eight individual chapters, there is considerable overlap among them to justify bringing them together under the heading of Proverbs Are the Best Policy: Folk Wisdom and American Politics. They represent part of my work on proverbs during the past five years, with five chapters having previously been published. The additional three chapters help to round out the picture of how proverbs play a major role in the American political scene throughout
the history of the United States and ranging from everyday political issues
to presidential politics. Proverbs permeate our sociopolitical life everywhere
and at all times, and they are significant signs of the wisdom and worldview
of an entire nation trying to uphold the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and
the pursuit of happiness for all its citizens, and, with the help of the United
Nations, for all humankind. It is my hope then that this book might be a
small contribution to a better understanding of how proverbs as strategically
used folk wisdom continue to be important communicative devices that
deserve close scrutiny.