Obama "Yes We Can" – excerpt – model analysis

This is a short model (possible) analysis of the excerpt of Obama’s speech we dealt with in our lesson. Of course there can be said much more and you can also highlight other aspects of the speech.

The text at hand is an excerpt of the speech "America, yes we can!" which was delivered by Barack Obama in New Hampshire on the eighth of January 2008. Obama refers to several occurrences of key importance in American history, for example the abolition of slavery, to illustrate the possibility of changing the given circumstances. Additionally he tries to encourage the American people to work together as one nation. In the following text I am going to analyse the speech with regard to the rhetorical devices and its content as well.

Obama often uses the personal pronouns "we" and "our" to underline his membership to America and to bridge the gap between him and the audience. The excerpt can be divided in three parts. The first one (II. 1 - 5) functions as an introduction to stress the importance of hope (cf. II. 1f) and to depict a self-confident and pugnacious image of the spirit of the American people who according to Obama defy every assumption that describes an American aim or ideal as unreachable (cf. II. 3ff). Furthermore he induces the term "Yes we can" (I. 5) which is repeated several times in the speech's remain. In the following part (II. 6-14) Obama refers to different occurrences in the history of America, which are all associated with a fight for change or an aim that seemed to be out of reach. By using an anaphora and starting every sentence with the words "It was" he mentions the Declaration of Independence (cf. I. 6), the abolition of slavery (cf. I. 8), the settlement of North America (cf. I. 10), the first lunar landing (cf. 1.13) and some more. By claiming the people who enabled these changes to have said "Yes we can" (II. 5,7, 9,11) he reinforces the terms meaning. In addition he uses allusions to refer to those events, like "A President who chose the moon as our new frontier" (1.13) or "A King who took us to the mountaintop [...]" (II. 13f). With these sentences he alludes to John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, respectively. The last part (II. 15-25) deals with the possibilities which according Obama the American nation has. In line 15 he takes use of a parallelism and thereby mentions justice, equality, opportunity and prosperity, which are all elements of the American Dream. The following line includes a climax ("Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world" (I. 16)) and once again a repetition of the term "Yes we can". Besides the statement "[...] we can heal this nation" implicates that the nation is metaphorically speaking diseased. This can be understood as a dig at the current government. In the next lines he tries to create a feeling of belonging by comparing the situation of American citizens from different places concluding that they are "not as divides as [their] politics suggest" (I. 22) and underlining that they are "one people" (I. 23) that "will begin the great next chapter in America's story" (I. 23f). This proposition also stands for a change. Obama ends his speech with emphasizing the term "Yes. We. Can." (I. 25) one more time by putting every word in a single sentence. Just before he quotes the sentence "from sea to shining sea" (I. 24f) and alludes to the patriotic song "America the Beautiful" this way. The song enjoys great popularity in the American community so that Obama underlines his affinity to it with the quotation.

In my opinion Obama's speech is pretty good and may achieve the aim of convincing the audience that there's the need and the possibility of a change.