

■ “A More Perfect Union”

Date: March 18, 2008

Author: Senator Barack Obama

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

Barack Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” speech, also sometimes referred to as the “race” speech, was a direct and intentional attempt to focus attention on racial divisions and tensions within the United States. The forty-minute speech given at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, was delivered in response to comments about race and the treatment of Black people in America made by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ located in Chicago’s South Side. Because this was the church the Obamas had been attending for years, and because of the close relationship between Barack Obama and Wright, the Reverend’s comments were particularly problematic for Obama’s presidential campaign, which was reaching a critical point in the election cycle. As a Democratic Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama was fighting to earn the presidency, and it was crucial that he did not let these comments derail his campaign. Seeing an opportunity to encourage an open dialogue about racial tensions, Obama delivered a powerful message directed to the American public which candidly and honestly addressed tensions between white and Black America. Drawing upon his own background as a man from a multi-racial background, Obama’s speech urged Americans to come together, try to understand each other’s perspectives, and make an attempt to move the country forward.

Defining Moment

As the presidential race of 2008 moved into the sixth week of the Democratic primary battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the Obama campaign faced a challenge that almost completely disrupted the campaign efforts to date. Comments made by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago began to make press headlines, and Obama found it increasingly difficult to field the persistent questions he was facing. Wright had made comments addressing the racial injustices Black Americans face, and had also stated that he believed the United States government was involved with events that occurred on 9/11. Some were calling the comments made in the church an attack on white America, and a media frenzy ensued. Initially, Obama attempted to downplay the com-



President Barack Obama in 2009. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

ments by acknowledging the Reverend had a fiery presentation style, and admitted the Reverend sometimes made comments Obama did not agree with. But, as the press continued to focus on the story, and as the public became aware of just how close a relationship Rev. Wright and Obama shared, it became increasingly difficult for Obama to deflect scrutiny.

Obama had known the Reverend for over twenty years and was a regular church attendee. The Reverend had married Barack and Michelle Obama, and baptized their two daughters. Obama often credited the Reverend as being his spiritual advisor and has cited the Reverend as inspiring the title of his book, *The Audacity of Hope*. It was this close relationship, and the offense and shock some felt in reaction to the comments made by the Reverend that made it necessary for the Obama campaign to seriously address the issue. Furthermore, the Reverend's message directly contradicted Obama's campaign slogan of "hope," and therefore needed to be dealt with before the campaign reached a point it could not recover from. In a move that would prove to propel the Obama campaign forward in the race, Obama delivered a speech on race that was called "A More Perfect Union." The speech plainly broke down the history of racial injustice in the nation, and urged people to come together to work towards making progress towards racial

equality. The speech was personal, it was honest, and it garnered a significant amount of positive attention for Obama and his presidential campaign.

Author Biography

Barack Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1961. He was raised by his mother and grandparents, and had no real relationship with his biological father who passed away when Obama was 21. Despite the difficulty of having an absent father, a subject he has discussed at great length both in the media and his writings, Obama attended Columbia University for his undergraduate studies where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science. In the early 1980s, Obama moved to Chicago where he worked as a community organizer. He went on to enroll in law school at Harvard University, where he served as the president of the Harvard Law Review. Obama began his political career by serving as an Illinois U.S. Senator before becoming the first African American president of the United States in 2008. He and his wife Michelle have two daughters. Obama has been regarded as one of the American public's most favored presidents, and since leaving office he has been traveling the world delivering speeches and formalizing plans to create the Obama Presidential Center in Chicago.



Historical Document

Obama's "A More Perfect Union" Speech

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union ..."—221 years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars, statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution—a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggles, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience, and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign—to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional of candidates. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.

Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African-Americans and white Americans.

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either “too black” or “not black enough.” We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every single exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

And yet, it has only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation, and that rightly offend white and black alike.

I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy and, in some cases, pain. For some,

nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in the church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely—just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's efforts to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems—two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change—problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television sets and YouTube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way.

But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than 20 years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a United States Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over 30 years has led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth—by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I describe the experience of my first service at Trinity:

"People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters. And in that single note—hope!—I heard something else: At the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories—of survival and freedom and hope—became our stories, my story. The blood that spilled was our blood, the tears our tears, until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black. In chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a meaning to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about—memories that all people might study and cherish, and with which we could start to rebuild."

That has been my experience at Trinity. Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety—the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing and clapping and screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother—a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.

Some will see this as an attempt to justify or excuse comments that are simply inexcusable. I can assure you it is not. I suppose the politically safe thing to do would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. We can dismiss Reverend Wright as a crank or a demagogue, just as some have dismissed Geraldine Ferraro, in the aftermath of her recent statements, as harboring some deep-seated bias.

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America—to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American.

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community and the larger American community today can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were and are inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination—where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions or the police force or the fire department—meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between blacks and whites, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families—a problem that welfare policies for many years

may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods—parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pickup, building code enforcement—all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continues to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late '50s and early '60s, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way, for those like me who would come after them.

For all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations—those young men and, increasingly, young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race and racism continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African-American community in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful. And to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience—as far as they're concerned, no one handed them anything. They built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor.

They are anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away. And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze—a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns—this too widens the racial divide and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction—a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people—that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances—for better health care and better schools and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for our own lives—by demanding more from our fathers, and spending

more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Ironically, this quintessentially American—and yes, conservative—notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright’s sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright’s sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It’s that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress had been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination—and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past—are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds, by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more and nothing less than what all the world’s great religions demand—that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother’s keeper, scripture tells us. Let us be our sister’s keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the O.J. trial—or in the wake of tragedy—as we did in the aftermath of Katrina—or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright’s sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as

evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time, we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time, we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a twenty-first-century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the emergency room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care, who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time, we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time, we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time, we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together and fight together and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that should have never been authorized and should have never been waged. And we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them and their families, and giving them the benefits that they have earned.

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation—the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.

There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today—a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There is a young, 23-year-old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, S.C. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there

And Ashley said that when she was 9 years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches—because that was the cheapest way to eat. That's the mind of a 9-year-old.

She did this for a year until her mom got better. So she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents, too.

Now, Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

They're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, “I am here because of Ashley.”

“I'm here because of Ashley.” By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.



Glossary

Jim Crow: the former practice keeping Black and white people separate in the United States

Document Analysis

In a speech that, at times, was highly personal in nature, then-Senator Barack Obama used his speech to invite Americans to join a productive conversation about the state of race relations in the United States. It was an urgent call to the public to stop avoiding or ignoring racial injustices and tensions still very much thriving in modern times. Obama used his own life story to emphasize his points and attempt to make the idea of discussing race accessible to those who felt it was a taboo subject. The speech addressed racial tensions, white privilege, anger felt by Black Americans, and white resentment towards the Black population. Essentially, the speech served to contextualize the comments that Rev. Wright had made, and structured those statements in a way that was not meant to offend but rather to enlighten.

The speech began by highlighting the “original sin of slavery” in this country, and reminded people that the Constitution was built on the principle of equality. Therefore, slavery itself was a direct contradiction to the supposed goals of our founding fathers. While generations of men and women, both Black and white, worked towards making equality in America a real thing, Obama told his listeners there was more work to be done. In what would be a repetitive theme in the speech, Obama told people that they must work together for the common goal of equality to be achieved. The thesis of the speech served as a reminder of why he was running for president: he emphasized the idea of bringing people together to facilitate the goal of equality. In doing this, Obama established himself as solid political candidate who understood the power of uniting people behind a common cause. Obama’s choice to personalize the speech by drawing on his own life history only solidified his potential as a leader and made him relatable to voters.

Barack Obama’s own personal background as a multi-racial individual allowed him to examine the issue of race from both a white and Black perspective. He talked about his own experiences in a way that made race and the idea of discussing race accessible for the average American. Obama did condemn the statements made by Rev. Wright, but found it important to support Wright as a person. The personal

history Obama shared with Wright was too great for him to deny, and although the actual statements the Reverend had made were not supported by Obama, Obama did view the comments as an opportunity to open a racial dialogue which had been ignored in this country for years. While arguably it would have been more politically conventional to try to move forward without directly discussing race in America, Obama clearly felt that this was too important an issue to ignore for political purposes. To ignore the issue would be to allow Americans to remain in their own isolated racial corners of the country; and because Obama’s central theme of the campaign was hope and unity, it was extremely important that he address the nation regarding this issue. However, discussing race candidly meant that listeners would have to face some unsavory and uncomfortable truths about race relations and injustices.

In his “A More Perfect Union” speech, Obama shone a light on the reality that Black people have been disproportionately impacted in a negative way in America simply because they are Black. He cited things such as Jim Crow laws, the segregation of schools, unequal economic opportunities, and legalized discrimination prevalent throughout American history. Obama explained to his listeners that the type of treatment Black people have been subjected to creates a festering anger, and to ignore those injustices and the anger they spawn is to allow for further divisions between white people and minorities. To truly begin to make the move towards actual equality, people would have to come together and discuss these types of problems, regardless of how uncomfortable or difficult it could be. To discuss these issues across racial lines would have to be the first step in working together for true equality in America. Obama urged the general public to engage in these types of discussions, and reinforced the idea that he held out hope for the future if people would only work with, instead of against one another.

Essential Themes

Obama’s race speech held both political and social ramifications. Just three weeks prior to delivering this speech, the Pew Research Center reported that peo-

ple believed that both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were equally visible in the public eye. However, after the speech 70 percent of people reported that they heard more about Obama in the news media than any other candidate in the race. Furthermore, 85 percent of people questioned stated they had heard a little about the speech, and 54 percent had heard a lot. Reverend Wright had cast an initial shadow over the Obama campaign with his inflammatory remarks, but Obama's speech aided in the campaign's recovery and appeared to help Obama move forward—at least in terms of voter visibility. Clearly, the speech gave Obama an edge in the presidential race and helped him to progress towards winning the election. In that regard, the speech was a success.

It remains an open question, however, as to how far the speech actually advanced racial equality in America. If one considers the ills continuing to affect American society today, it appears that racial injustice is no closer to being eradicated than it was in 2008 or before. Debates rage on about unfair treatment of Black people in America, interactions between police and African Americans are scrutinized and criticized, and movements such as Black Lives Matter have gained and waned in strength. While there are laws on the books guaranteeing the equal treatment of Black people in this country, there are still credible stories of active and intentional race-based discrimination occurring on a daily basis in America. So while Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech garnered major attention on the campaign trail, the lasting impact of the message is debatable, having been overrun by later political events. The call to come together and

talk about, and combat, racial injustice has not as yet been answered by a majority of American citizens.

—Amber R. Dickinson, PhD

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