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# Understanding Obama's Rhetoric on Race: A Critical Analysis of Key Speeches

Jennifer Sweet

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# Understanding Obama's Rhetoric on Race: A Critical Analysis of Key Speeches

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

Candidate for Bachelor of Science  
And Renee Crown University Honors  
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Honors Capstone Project in Communications and Rhetorical Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

Throughout his time as President, Obama was criticized for not speaking more openly on race relations or issues of systemic racism. This paper offers an extensive rhetorical analysis of four speeches, the 2004 DNC Speech, the A More Perfect Union Speech, the 2008 Victory Speech, and the Selma 50th Anniversary Speech, that collectively provide insight into Obama's rhetoric on race. Analyzing these speeches, and assessing their overall impact, I determine what motivated him to speak out when he did, and why he chose to frame racial issues in the way that he did. The major finding of this study is that President Obama was careful and cautious in speaking about racial issues and that he only did so when the right situation arose. When he did address things typically considered to be racial issues, he would frame them as transcending race, problems that were critical because they affected all Americans, and presenting policy changes as solutions which would benefit all Americans.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Obama is widely considered as one of the greatest orators of his time, gifted with eloquence and an ability to captivate nearly any audience. Many Americans were surprised given his rhetorical prowess and his identity, that he did not speak more frequently, or more openly on issues of race relations and systemic racism. This project focuses on Obama's rhetoric on race, and discusses the specific circumstances and motives for speaking on racial issues. Four key speeches were selected for this study. The "2004 DNC Speech", and the "2008 Victory Speech" both of which do not address race directly, but include important references to this topic. Next, the "A More Perfect Union Speech" and the "Selma 50th Anniversary Speech" which include more explicit discussions of racial issues. In the overall analysis, I seek to determine what motivated Obama to speak on the subject of race relations and the reasons or impetus for presenting the topic in the manner that he did.

A rhetorical analysis was performed on each speech independently, followed by a discussion of them in relation to one another. Generally, the rhetorical analysis of speeches involves delving into the invention, structure and style of a given speech. The analysis is done by breaking the speech down into parts and examining them for their persuasive elements, motives, rationale, as well as linguistic devices found in each speech. It also takes into account the rhetorical situation, which includes where the speech is being delivered, who the intended audience is, what the occasion is for the speech, and potential constraints.

Looking critically at these speeches, while taking into account the national climate as well as Obama's identity and background, this paper seeks to explain Obama's rhetorical choices, and draw insights into the choices he made. The primary conclusion I have drawn here is that Obama's main goal was to promote mutual understanding, and unity among racial groups.

In doing so, he wanted to ensure that he was delivering a message which would not isolate any Americans but move the nation in the opposite direction—that of seeing mutual benefits to amicable race relations.

There has been very little research conducted on Obama's rhetoric on race specifically, and understanding his rhetoric on race is key to understanding what it means to be a person of color in national or even regional office. Whether it be President, Governor, or Senator, each position requires you to relate to a broad audience, including people of various identities and cultural backgrounds. While Obama is a unique individual, and it is doubtful the Nation will ever see a politician with his upbringing and background, he does provide valuable insight into the rhetorical constraints placed on politicians of color. Understanding the ways in which Obama's identity prevented him from speaking more openly on racial issues brings to light the idea that other politicians of color may not be able to address racial issues openly either. Identity politics often rests on the belief that those of marginalized identities are better suited to represent those whom they share identities with, but when they are also tasked with representing those who do not share their identity, they may face challenges and constraints. This project's significance lies not only in what it has to say about Obama's rhetorical choices, but also the implications those choices hold for other politicians of color.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to thank my parents for constantly supporting me, and never doubting my ability to achieve my goals. I want to thank my friends, for listening to me talk about this project for the last two years, and always insisting it would get done, and it would be worth the time I was putting into it. I want to thank my advisor, Professor Kiewe, for believing in my vision for this paper, and always having faith in me that it would be a finished product I could be proud of. Lastly, I want to thank President Obama, he is the reason I want to go into political communications and I would not be where I am today without him.

# INTRODUCTION

Barack Obama debuted on the national stage at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, and the country was quickly infatuated with this young charismatic politician. He set himself apart as rhetorically gifted, and he would soon be referred to as the John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan of his time. In spite of his rhetorical skills, Obama was always particularly careful when it came to discussing race and racial issues. While he made strong statements at times, Obama only talked about race when he absolutely had to, and often avoided overtly characterizing himself as black, talking instead about his nationality or economic background. He never mentioned his race at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, but felt it necessary to be more racially explicit when discussing his understanding of his pastor's comments in his "A More Perfect Union" Speech, his willingness to address racial issues ebbed and flowed throughout those twelve years. Obama rarely addressed systemic racism during his time in office, it could be inferred this is because his racial identity reduced his credibility on the topic in the eyes of white Americans, and hindered his ability to take a stronger stance, as he would have been dismissed as unreliable by a large portion of his audience.

## **Purpose of Study**

This paper seeks to examine some of Obama's most iconic speeches, taking into account how he discussed or did not discuss race, in an effort to determine what has influenced his rhetoric on race. Taking into consideration external factors such as the news media's coverage, his re-election prospects, as well as internal factors such as his upbringing and his rise to fame, I seek to determine what motivated him to speak out and what constrained him when he did not. I also examine the implications of his choices. While there is plenty of research analyzing pivotal



speeches Obama has given, there is little research examining the arc of his rhetoric on race as a whole.

Examining the exigencies and constraints that Obama faced regarding speaking on race and racial issues provides a model for taking a closer look at identity politics as a whole. Identity politics is the idea that politicians with similar backgrounds to their constituents can better represent their constituents - be it a shared race, religion, gender or socioeconomic status - but if their identity impacts their ability to speaking out on issues affecting those groups, this may not be the case. While this paper focuses on President Obama, and what influenced him, I also point to the broader implications this may hold for the theory of identity politics.

## **Method**

A rhetorical analysis provides a close reading of a piece of nonfiction, breaking it down into its parts, and then discussing how those various parts come together to create a rhetorical effect. Utilizing my background in rhetorical studies, I analyzed several of Obama's key speeches, taking into account several variables, including historical context, the national climate, his audience, the media response, Obama's identity, and Obama's framing of his identity. Historical context will include Obama in comparison to past presidential candidates, and Presidents, as well as Obama in comparison to past African American politicians. The national climate encompasses the state of race relations at the time, as well as what other events were occurring in the country at the time of the speech. Intended audience focuses on who Obama was physically speaking to, as well as those watching remotely who he hoped to reach with the speech. The media response entails articles which followed the speeches from major news outlets, and news organizations. Obama's identity as a variable will consider his racial identity, his upbringing, and his professional background. It will also be considered how he frames these

aspects of himself depending on the circumstances. Obama's careful diction will be a focal point as well, as he is very precise in his word choice, and there is a lot to uncover there. The choice of appeals made be it to ethos, logos, or pathos, will also be analyzed when they relate to racial issues and racial identity. In order to paint an accurate picture of his rhetorical shifts, I analyzed each speech independently, and then in relation to each other, discussing my overall findings in order to create an arc of Obama's rhetoric on race, and come to a conclusion as to what motivated his shifts in focus.

## **Outline**

I focus on the elements of Barack Obama's background and his rise to fame that likely had the strongest impact on his rhetorical choices. I then discuss the national climate, focusing on race relations in the country and studies surrounding race in politics. Following the background discussion, I offer an analysis and discussion of Obama's speeches, looking at events leading up to the speech, as well as the public reaction after the fact. The paper moves chronologically, beginning with Obama's "2004 DNC Speech", followed by "A More Perfect Union Speech", his "2008 Victory Speech", and ending with the "Selma 50th Anniversary Speech". After contextualizing and analyzing each speech individually, I discuss the speeches in relation to one another and come to a conclusion on what motivated Obama's rhetoric on race.

# BACKGROUND

## Obama

Barack Obama had a unique upbringing, he was a child born out of an interracial marriage several years before it was legal across the country, to a father of African heritage, and a mother from Kansas. His unconventional childhood is key to understanding the man he grew to become. Born in Honolulu in 1961, Obama lived with his parents and his grandparents until his father left in 1963, an event that would have a profound impact upon him. At the age of six, his mother moved them to the jungles of Jakarta, Indonesia to be with her second husband, Lolo, a man she had met while he was studying in Hawaii. After four years of life in the jungle, Obama's mother sent him back to Hawaii to live with his grandparents so that he could attend school in the States. Growing up in a white family, in a predominantly white community, yet still aware of his blackness, and black issues, he struggled with his identity. Eventually he found a balance and came to understand how the pieces of his identity fit together.<sup>1</sup>

In college, Obama became involved in the Black Student Union, and found his voice as a community activist. After graduating from Columbia and taking a job working in the private sector, Obama realized he was drifting away from his passion for activism and quit, bouncing from campaign to campaign before landing a job in Chicago. After three years of working as a community organizer for the Developing Communities Project, Obama decided that studying law would be the most effective way to elicit the change he wished to see in the world. At Harvard, he quickly earned recognition from his peers and professors alike, becoming an editor, and then President of the Harvard Law Review. After graduating from Harvard, Obama opted to return to

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<sup>1</sup> "Barack Obama." *Barack Obama (Biography Today)*, May 2011, p. 1. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=b6h&AN=34631761&site=brc-live. Retrieved 2017, Aug 3

community activism in Chicago, rather than working for a corporate firm or taking a prestigious clerkship.<sup>2</sup>

After four years of working as a civil rights attorney and teaching at the University of Chicago, Obama made his first political run for office. In 1996, Obama ran for a seat in the Illinois State Legislature and won. In 2000, he would try his hand at a seat in the House of Representatives, but lost the primary. He continued to work hard in the Illinois State Legislature until 2004, when he tried once again to break into national politics. Winning the Senate primary in a landslide victory indicated to the Democratic National Committee that Obama was an up and coming politician to watch. Although Barack Obama would win the Senate seat, he achieved national recognition months before the November election. Obama would make waves across the Nation with his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in July 2004, capturing the attention of Democrats across the country. Obama would go on to win the Senate seat in November of 2004 by the largest margin in Illinois' state history, making him the fifth African American ever elected to the United States Senate.<sup>3</sup>

Obama's rise to political fame came to be in an unconventional way for any politician, but especially for an African American politician. The keynote address at either the Democratic National Convention or the Republican National Convention is typically reserved for prominent politicians, or political figures well known across the country, and often someone with presidential potential. While Obama had gained the attention of Democratic political elites after his victory in the Senate primary, he was still an unexpected choice to deliver the keynote address, but his relationship with some on the Kerry campaign gained him a consideration. He first met John Kerry in March of 2004, at the time Kerry was the front-runner and expected to

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<sup>2</sup> "Barack Obama"

<sup>3</sup> "Barack Obama"

win the Democratic nomination. They hosted two joint campaign events together which left Kerry very impressed with the young politician. Obama's name was added to the list and pushed forward by a friend of the convention manager, who had worked on the Harvard Law Review with him. There were some internal concerns about his lack of experience, as well as his opposition to the Iraq War - which Kerry had initially supported, but he was ultimately selected because Kerry was struggling to secure the African American vote.<sup>4</sup>

The speech that shot Obama into the national spotlight would have been a unique path to political fame for any state politician, but it put him into an especially difficult situation because of his identity as an African American man. Obama's "blackness" was frequently brought into question by the black community.<sup>5</sup> There are several theories as to why this was, some cite Obama's background, growing up in a predominantly white community and being raised by the white side of his family, but a more compelling argument cites his rise to political power, and where he got his start as a politician. Most prominent African American politicians come out of the black community, gaining their notoriety as activists and then going on to elected office working to advocate for their community. Obama on the other hand, arose from the middle, neither well known in the black community or amongst the general public.<sup>6</sup> He gained notoriety at the 2004 DNC, before he had gained the trust of the black community, and because of this his "blackness" was often called into question.<sup>7</sup> He had successfully won a large portion of the white vote to win his Senate seat in Illinois, but was unknown to the majority of white Americans when he launched his 2008 campaign. Because of this, he had to perform a difficult dance, showing

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<sup>4</sup> Bernstein, David (June 2007). "The Speech". *Chicago Magazine*. Archived from the original on 2009-05-14. Retrieved 2017, Sept 12

<sup>5</sup> Walters, Ron. "Barack Obama and the Politics of Blackness." *Journal of Black Studies* 38.1 (2007): 7-29. Web [tps://www.jstor.org/stable/40034399?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034399?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) Retrieved 2017, June 15

<sup>6</sup> Politics of Blackness

<sup>7</sup> Politics of Blackness

that he was both capable and willing to fight for African American issues without alienating white voters. Rather than already having support from the black community, and largely focusing on white voters, or vice versa, he had to court both groups simultaneously. If his rhetorical appeals were directly targeted at the black community, he would have been dismissed by white voters and deemed unfit to represent their interests. At the same time, if Obama were to ignore black interests and only play to white voters, he would not gain strong support from the black community. This placed him in a double bind of sorts, working to develop ethos within both demographics, with each group placing higher standards on him due to his race.

## **Race and Politics**

Race and politics is an established field of study within political science, which takes an in-depth look at how the race of the voter, and the race of the candidate influence one another. It also focuses on how racial identity influences ideology, coalitions, and policy, as well as how social movements influence national politics. *The Centrality of Race in American Politics* published by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies in 2004, offers the most recent look at the state of race and politics before Obama's debut on the national stage. The commonly held belief at the time was that black and white voters, when given the choice, prefer to vote for candidates of their race. It was seen as exceedingly rare for black candidates to be elected outside of majority-minority districts.<sup>8</sup> Obama disproved this theory when he was elected to the Senate and won the vote of the majority of citizens across racial backgrounds, and again when he won the 2008 Democratic primary, beating out several white candidates.

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<sup>8</sup> Hutchings, Vincent L., and Nicholas A. Valentino. "The Centrality of Race in American Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 7, 15 June 2004, pp. 383–408. *Annual Reviews*, [www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.polisci.7.012003.104859](http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.polisci.7.012003.104859). Retrieved 2017, July 30

According to the study carried out by the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies, since the 1960's overt racism influencing voter choice has diminished, but there is a "new racism" which shows its face as opposition for policies which were designed to aid blacks in achieving upward mobility. Many white Americans of varying socioeconomic status oppose policies such as welfare, paid family leave, affirmative-action and food stamps due to the impression that they unfairly help people of color. Studies have shown that when these policies are framed in more universalistic terms, rather than group-centric terms, they receive much more support from white voters. Taking into account this research, it makes sense that Obama constantly reframed "black issues" as issues that affect all Americans regardless of race.

As of 2000, 44% of whites identified themselves as Democrats, while 82% of blacks identified themselves as Democrats. Among white voters, there is a much more even ideological split between Republican and Democrat, than there is among black voters. Voters take black candidates' race as an ideological cue, and they are assumed to be more liberal. For this reason, Obama had to be more careful than the average candidate in expressing his beliefs, as he risked coming across as too far left to appeal to the average voter. Indirect research has found that black candidates received less votes than predicted because Democratic voters are reluctant to admit their opposition to candidates of color. When considering why black candidates may not be getting support from white voters it is important to remember the large voting gap in political beliefs. It is not surprising that black candidates struggle to pull in a majority of white voters, any Democrat has to sway independent voters to win the majority of the white vote.<sup>9</sup>

The 2004 Michigan Study, which took an in-depth look at the state of race and politics, would not have predicted Barack Obama being elected to the US Senate, let alone the

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<sup>9</sup> The Centrality of Race in American Politics

Presidency. The studies which they discuss outline how race influences voters, as well as why race influences policy positions. It is important to consider this when analyzing Barack Obama's actions as President, and his rhetorical choices. He had to balance black and white perceptions, and appear to be neither and both at the same time. While he beat the odds in getting elected, winning primaries and general elections, all of these forces were working against him, and influencing his actions throughout his time on the campaign trail and in office. This was the racial climate he was walking into in 2004, something he was acutely aware of, and always factoring into his rhetorical choices.



# ANALYSIS

## 2004 DNC Speech

Although John Kerry, the Democratic Party's Presidential nominee, lost the election, the 2004 Keynote address is still discussed among scholars as the speech that launched a no-name state senator from Illinois to the Presidency. Obama stepped on stage in July 2004 unknown to most Americans outside of Illinois, where he was running for an open Senate seat. It was one of the first times a national convention invited a state legislator to deliver the keynote address and provided Obama the opportunity to make a historic first impression. Countless academics have analyzed this artifact, looking at the intricacies of the speech and coming to endless conclusions as to why it was so influential, and proved to be such an impactful introduction to the nation. While it set Obama up to run for President in 2008, it also set up his rhetoric on racial issues for the next twelve years, because of the way in which he framed his own race in this historic speech.

The main focus of the speech, like any keynote speech, was to make a pitch to the nation as to why John Kerry should be the next president of the United States, as well as to unite the Democratic party after the primary. Before moving into the campaign focused portion of the speech, Obama introduced himself, which he would do often in his speeches. He began:

Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father -- my grandfather -- was a cook, a domestic servant to the British.

But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.

While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor my grandfather signed up for duty; joined Patton's army, marched across Europe. Back home, my grandmother raised a baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through F.H.A., and later moved west all the way to Hawaii in search of opportunity.

And they, too, had big dreams for their daughter. A common dream, born of two continents. My parents shared not only an improbable love, they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined -- They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential.<sup>10</sup>

This is the first of many times Obama utilizes his own background as a rhetorical tool, often reframing his story to best suit the theme of his speech. He sought to establish his ethos by

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<sup>10</sup> Obama, Barack. Democratic National Convention, 27 July 2004, Fleet Center, Boston, MA. Keynote Address.

relating his personal story to the policy issues he would discuss in the rest of the speech. Because he was largely unknown to the American public he had to draw them in, and engage them before diving into proposed policy change. Speaking about himself as an example of the American Dream presented a strong emotional appeal to one of the Nation's cultural cornerstones, and a value many Americans cherish. In discussing his own story as a prime example of the American Dream come true, he seems to speak of everything but his race. He talks about his ethnicity, he talks about his socioeconomic background, he discusses the ways in which America's policies and values helped him get to where he is today, but he did not racialize himself. For all of the grand implications this speech had, in retrospect, it was a rather safe speech. It edges at something more, discussing his parents' "improbable love", and the faith in American values which led them to name him Barack, but rather than jumping into where America fails in these departments, he keeps things light, after all he was proof that those things were true.

Underlying these broad strokes of optimism is the fact that interracial marriage was not legal across the country when his parents got married, and still today is not widely accepted. Despite his parents' faith that in America "your name is no barrier to success," several studies have proven the contrary, that African names often reduce the likelihood of applicant receiving interviews. Obama knew this when he gave the speech, he knew names are often a barrier to African Americans across the country, and he knew that interracial couples still face discrimination. He chose to remain optimistic, to tell his story as a tale of hope, rather than highlighting the oppression which he had to overcome along the way. This approach is not surprising, given the occasion, after all Obama was not the candidate. It was not his place to criticize America, or point towards areas of growth which he saw, as he was not the one setting the agenda for the night. The setting of the speech placed a lot of constraints on him, as

campaigns generally tell the keynote speaker policy areas to stress, and the tone of Conventions tends to be more positive.

The purpose of Nominating Conventions, aside from formally announcing the nomination, is to unite the party, and introduce the candidate to the nation for the first time. It is a chance for the party to introduce their platform for the coming campaign, and one of the only times the candidate gets to address such a large portion of the country directly, while setting the agenda themselves. Because the goals of the Convention is to unite the base, introduce the candidate, and refute the opposing party, speeches tend to air on the side of caution. Candidates do not want to take controversial stances, and typically focus on the major concerns of the country at the time, and the general party platforms. This is true for the early stages of most political campaigns. Early campaign rhetoric is almost always careful and calculated, as a given candidate does not wish to isolate potential voters by taking a bold stance on a divisive issue. In this sense, Obama was not unique, though he was not the candidate he was a politician introducing himself to the Nation for the first time. A rising member of the Democratic Party, unknown to those outside of Illinois and the beltway, he could not risk offending potential supporters. He had added reason to be cautious, but it was not out of the ordinary for an up and coming politician to choose their words carefully.

The speech goes on to discuss job growth, veterans services, as well as the cost of college, which all connect to his personal history. By telling his story through the frame of the American Dream, he is working to Americanize himself, and gain ethos to speak about these issues. He can relate to blue collar Americans because his grandparents worked blue-collar jobs during the Depression. He can relate to veterans because his grandparents benefitted from the G.I. Bill and the F.H.A. He can relate to high school students struggling to figure out if they can

afford college because his parents believed he would be able to go to great schools despite humble means - and he did. In presenting himself as the product of the American Dream, he becomes the product of hope, the product of hard work and the product of this country genuinely working for its citizens. Because the focus of the Convention was to unite the party and gain broad support for the candidate, it would not have made sense for Obama to focus on black issues, as that would not appeal to a large enough portion of his audience. Still, it did give a preview of how he would present himself going forward, which included rarely racializing himself when speaking to a national audience.

The keynote address is a valuable tool for both parties in this sense, as they use it as an opportunity to test the waters at the national level. Because so many Americans today evaluate candidates based on their personality, candidates may test good on paper, but if the public doesn't like them as a person their candidacy will never make it off the ground. Nominating Conventions act as a testing ground for the feasibility of a successful Presidential run. The fact that Obama went on to run for President in the election following his keynote address is not out of the ordinary, as keynote speakers are typically chosen due to their status as a rising star in the party. Looking at the past keynote speakers in the era of nominating conventions, many either ran in that election, but failed to secure the nomination, or go on to run for President. While most speakers are either Governors or Congressmen, they are often unknown to those outside of their state, and the national convention provides the party a chance to see what the general public thinks of them. Although some keynote speakers never make it past the primary, it is fairly common for them to attempt a run. Obama is among a long list of keynote speakers who went on to run for President.

## **A More Perfect Union Speech**

On March 13, 2008, ABC News published a story highlighting controversial comments which Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, had made in past sermons. The Obama family had a very close relationship with the pastor, who officiated Barack and Michelle's wedding, baptized both of their daughters, and had been an active member of the Presidential campaign thus far. The article included a quote from Obama explaining he did not agree with everything his pastor had to say, but went on to say he felt the good had done outweighed his political missteps. The article discussed two sermons in particular, one from the Sunday after the September 11th attacks, and one from 2003. In his sermon following the 9/11 Attacks, Reverend Wright argued that the attacks on the U.S. were warranted, and something that the nation had brought upon itself, stating, "We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost." The 2003 sermon again condemned the country, this time for its treatment of African American citizens, vehemently stating that his congregation should condemn the country which oppresses them. "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people, God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."<sup>11</sup>

After being published by ABC News, the story was picked up by all major news outlets, and although Obama attempted to quell the fire with comments, and interviews, the story

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<sup>11</sup> Ross, Brian, and Rehab El-buri. "Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11." *ABC News*, ABC News Network, 13 Mar. 2008, [abcnews.go.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1](http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1). Retrieved 2018, Jan 5

continued to pick up steam. Speaking outside the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, America would see for the first time Obama speaking explicitly about his race and his identity as a black man in America. The speech discussed the major factors influencing Reverend Wright's comments, and how they relate to Wright as well as the black community, concluding with an attempt to frame the issues frustrating Reverend Wright and others in the black community as issues impacting all Americans. Obama attempted to convey to white Americans what the black church means to the community, and the many functions it serves for its people. Obama offered a historical perspective, highlighting why those of Reverend White's generation are often frustrated with the state of race relations. He pointed out that he was alive during the Civil Rights Movement and has seen where the country has gone since. He did not justify the frustration of many African Americans but rather attempted to explain to white Americans where that frustration stems from, and how we as a nation could do to work to fix it.<sup>12</sup>

Obama begins, as he did his 2004 DNC speech, with his history, situating himself in this narrative, discussing where he came from and who he has become. This time however, he presents his background through a racialized lens.

I'm 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 I've 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 slave owners, an inheritance we

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<sup>12</sup> Obama, Barack. "A More Perfect Union" 18 March 2008, National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, PA.

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.<sup>13</sup>

Each piece of this description of his identity and his background is intentional, by discussing the whiteness of his mother and grandparents, he is building his ethos. Because white is often seen as the “default” racial identity in the United States it is unusual to hear the specific classification of white, and it is also unusual to hear Obama explicitly address his race. The speech touched on delicate topics, and raises criticisms of the country rarely addressed, so it was important that Obama began by establishing his credibility, and making it clear that what he was saying was not un-American but actually inherently American. He built his credibility to bridge the divide between black and white. Due to his identity as both black and white, he has seen both sides of this, because of who he is and the environment in which he was raised. Mentioning his grandparents service acted to prove himself as an American; he’s coming from a line of people who have served his country. By touching on Michelle’s background, he brought in a personal connection to slavery, something he himself does not have, and something the black community had held against him. He closed out this narrative by again presenting himself as the product of the American Dream, stressing his belief in the inherent good of this country, despite the issues he is going to discuss.

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<sup>13</sup> A More Perfect Union Speech



Obama went on to talk about how race had influenced the campaign, and that despite what the media had to say, this campaign “saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity.” He seems to imply that the racial tensions and the influence of race was not as dominant in the mind of voters as the media would like people to believe.

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.<sup>14</sup>

Although he qualified his earlier statement of the American people being hungry for unity by stating that race has been an issue, the examples he gave all seem to point towards the media making race an issue, rather than the electorate. Pointing towards commentators, and the press, he was ever so subtly blaming the media for bringing race to the forefront. Throughout the speech, there was an undertone that the media was pushing to make race a focus, despite that not necessarily being the case. He mentioned several times throughout the remainder of the speech that the news channels could continue to run his pastor’s comments on a loop, or allow the country to move on from them. Obama knew that the news networks would be covering his speech, and more than the average political speech people in the media were a part of the intended audience. They were the ones driving this scandal, and Obama was reminding them that

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<sup>14</sup> A More Perfect Union Speech

they have the power to set the agenda, and set the tone. It was up to them how long this continued to dominate the national conversation.

Obama could have taken the easy way out and simply denounced his pastor, and the church, severing all ties, and removing any connection he had to his pastor's comments. Instead he capitalized on the opportunity to bridge the gap between whites and blacks, to explain to white Americans where Wright's comments stemmed from, and why the black church is so important to the community. The biggest challenge, and the goal of the speech was to get the American people to understand where Reverend Wright's comments were coming from, and to see Trinity United Church as more than these provocative sermons. Most white Americans know little about the black church and its involvement in the community. He attempted to paint an accurate picture of the church, "Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety -- the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger.... 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." Not shying away from the truth, and presenting both the good and bad side of what Trinity United Church encompassed.

Obama's identity and background gave him a unique ability to communicate effectively with a white audience. Growing up in a predominantly white community and, surrounded by white family, he had the ability to put himself in their shoes and view his pastor's comments from an outside perspective. His speech was more persuasive due to his understanding tone, and patience in explaining the dynamics of the black church. He worked to give the complete picture, bringing a refreshing honesty to scandal, an area of rhetoric that often lends towards deception and spin. He took the middle ground, not dismissing his pastor, or justifying his statements, but

rather attempting to show both sides of the story. He clearly stated his opposition to the angry sermons, but also looked to foster understanding and tolerance; it is not the typical way in which a politician responds to such a scandal. He stayed true to himself, and his community, deciding to use this as a “teachable” moment, seizing the moment to openly discuss black issues for the first time since launching his campaign. Although Obama’s rhetoric is always careful and calculated, by approaching this scandal in the way that he did he added a sense of authenticity.

Obama used this opportunity to shift the conversation. He looked to turn the focus away from his pastor’s comments and towards the inequalities that fueled those comments. While he has largely been quiet on issues of systemic racism, this scandal provided the kairos necessary for him to speak openly and honestly.

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. . . .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. . . .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. . . .And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.<sup>15</sup>

While these claims are backed by endless amounts of data and research, they are still considered to be controversial. Black Americans are often criticized for bringing everything back to slavery

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<sup>15</sup> A More Perfect Union Speech

and Jim Crow, despite the fact that it truly is to blame for many of the problems plaguing the black community today. Many Americans, especially conservatives, push the narrative that the black community is to blame for their own hardships, and that the only real solution is for them to begin to take responsibility and take initiative. Turning the conversation to education, the speech moved towards tangible policy solutions which could ameliorate the issues frustrating the black community. Addressing Reverend Wright's comments in terms of racial attitudes, and cultural misunderstandings may have been enough to quell the uproar but by also addressing policy solutions, it becomes a campaign speech rather than just damage control.

After educating, and attempting to foster understanding, Obama turns towards solutions, shifting into a campaign speech, and what he would do to change these things if elected. He understood that the anger that fueled Wright's sermons did not stem from unconscious biases of whites, and that that anger will not dissipate because of mutual understanding, it comes from frustration with deep seeded systemic injustices. The historic and generation struggle which he's explaining throughout the speech was not for social change but for policy change, for institutional change, and that is where he goes next.

Now, 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 -- that these things 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. . . .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.<sup>16</sup>

The call to action Obama is offering is for white Americans to admit that there is racial disparity and admit that there are systemic issues ailing the black community. The education, civil rights, and criminal justice policy changes called for here are what many black Americans expected from Obama from the start. While he may have mentioned these issue areas in other speeches, this is one of the only times he talks about them in the context of specifically black issues, and even here he qualified them. He is well aware that making these issues a major campaign platform could isolate white voters, who were already anxious about his African American identity, especially after the comments made by his pastor. Even in the most honest speech he offered throughout the campaign in regards to racial issues, he still qualified these issues as issues that affect all Americans, and presented the solutions as solutions that will benefit all Americans.

Overall, the speech was the most personal discussion of race the nation had and would see from Obama throughout his campaign. When news of Reverend Wright's controversial sermons first came out it seemed it would be the end of the Obama campaign. Instead Obama used the scandal as an opportunity to address systemic racism and the way it impacts all Americans. Liberals and conservatives alike would praise the speech as one of the best speeches on racial issues that the nation had seen in decades, possibly ever. It was immediately deemed

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<sup>16</sup> A More Perfect Union Speech

historic, and set Obama apart as Presidential material, showing his ability to proceed with grace through the most delicate situations. For once, it was not a safe speech. He chose to take an unusual path through this scandal, utilizing it as an opportunity to take a stand, and make a political statement, rather than air on the side of caution and shut the scandal down. Not all were happy with the speech, but criticism from the right stressed what the speech was missing, not what was said. Some conservative pundits were upset that Obama did not go further to condemn Reverend Wright, others felt the speech covered a lot of history but did not offer enough in ways of a solution for our racial issues.

Polls taken by Fox News and CBS News in the days after the speech show that the speech was rather well received by the public. According to the Fox poll, following the speech 36% of Republicans, 20% of independents, and 17% of Democrats believed that Obama shared Reverend Wright's views.<sup>17</sup> The CBS poll found that 71% of Americans felt that Obama had effectively explained his relationship with Reverend Wright -a rather high number given that was the aspect of the speech which was most criticized by the media. The data showed that after the speech, 14% of Americans felt they were more likely to vote for Obama, while 14% felt they were less likely to vote for Obama.<sup>18</sup> The Pew Research Center polling done after the scandal found that the numbers had not changed much since before the scandal began, but there was no data collected between Reverend Wright's comments breaking and Obama's speech.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to say whether those numbers held due to Obama's response, or if the scandal would not have

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<sup>17</sup> Blanton, Dana. "FOX News Poll: More Than Half Believe Obama Doesn't Share Views of Pastor Wright." *Fox News*, FOX News Network, 21 Mar. 2008, [www.foxnews.com/story/2008/03/21/fox-news-poll-more-than-half-believe-obama-doesnt-share-views-pastor-wright.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/03/21/fox-news-poll-more-than-half-believe-obama-doesnt-share-views-pastor-wright.html). Retrieved 2018, Feb 9

<sup>18</sup> "CBS Poll: Good Reviews For Obama Speech." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 21 Mar. 2008, [www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-poll-good-reviews-for-obama-speech/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-poll-good-reviews-for-obama-speech/). Retrieved 2018, Feb 9

<sup>19</sup> "Obama Weathers the Wright Storm, Clinton Faces Credibility Problem." *Pew Research Center U.S. Politics and Policy*, Pew Research Center, 27 Mar. 2008, [www.people-press.org/2008/03/27/obama-weathers-the-wright-storm-clinton-faces-credibility-problem/](http://www.people-press.org/2008/03/27/obama-weathers-the-wright-storm-clinton-faces-credibility-problem/). Retrieved 2018, Feb 9

influenced primary voters either way. To make an accurate inference on the impact of the speech on potential primary voters, there would have to have been a poll taken after the sermons had surfaced and before Obama's response. Because that data was not collected it can be assume the scandal negatively impacted voters and the speech brought the numbers back up.

## **2008 Victory Speech**

On Tuesday November 4, 2008, Barack Obama was elected as the 44th President of the United States. The election was called just after 11:00 pm, with Obama winning 52.9% of the popular vote, and 365 out of 538 electoral votes.<sup>20</sup> Later that evening Obama gave his acceptance speech to a jubilant crowd at Grant Park in Chicago. The park is historically known as the location of protests during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, where various organizations gathered to express their opposition to the Vietnam War. Demonstrators were met by police and national guardsmen, using force and teargas to remove them from the park.<sup>21</sup> Fifty years later the park saw a vastly different scene, packed with roughly 125,000 jubilant supporters eager to hear the newly elected President speak about his victory.<sup>22</sup>

At first glance speech appears to be an average election night victory speech. It opened by highlighting voter turnout, mentions the concession call from John McCain, thanks Joe Biden, Michelle, his campaign manager, chief strategist, and campaign team. He went on to mention the unconventionality of his campaign and to thank his supporters and all those individuals who donated. He then briefly highlighted his campaign promises and what he hoped to do in the next four years. Then he moved to a story about an elderly woman from Georgia.<sup>23</sup> All of these

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<sup>20</sup> "Barack Obama Wins Presidency." *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 4 Nov. 2008, [www.cbsnews.com/news/barack-obama-wins-presidency/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/barack-obama-wins-presidency/). Retrieved 2018, Feb 9

<sup>21</sup> Farber, David. *Chicago 68*. University of Chicago Press, 2014. (pg 195-196)

<sup>22</sup> Barack Obama Wins Presidency

<sup>23</sup> Obama, Barack. "Election Victory Speech." 4 November 2008, Grant Park, Chicago, IL.

pieces, though done in signature Obama fashion - with precise diction and genuine tone - are typical of any election night victory speech. It is always a speech with a joyous tone, thanking supporters and campaign members, discussing broad goals, and reminding supporters what they have to celebrate. Upon reading the speech, something does seem to be missing, this was a historic night for the nation, electing the first African American President, and nowhere in it does Obama directly acknowledge that. It takes a second reading, and a careful eye to uncover the coded messages written into the speech, giving a subtle nod to those tuned into his dog whistle rhetoric.

Early on in the speech, Obama states “*It’s been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.*”<sup>24</sup> While most listeners likely realized this was referencing his race, it is not explicit, and it is easily lost in the rest of the speech. It does not strike the listener in a way that it would stick with them or reverberate for days or weeks in their mind, unless they understood the reference being made. The line referenced the chorus of the famous Sam Cooke Song, and Civil Rights anthem “A Change is Gonna Come”. The chorus which resonated with activists across the country, from the song still considered one of the greatest ever written sang “It’s been a long, a long time coming / But I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will.”<sup>25</sup> While the song is certainly well known, the reference is subtle, it was not intended for everyone in the audience to hear the line in the speech and think this was a nod to the Civil Rights Movement. It had a smaller intended audience than the speech as a whole, it was intended for the black community, it was intended for those who not only knew the song but knew the history behind it.

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<sup>24</sup> Election Victory Speech

<sup>25</sup> NPR Staff. “Sam Cooke And The Song That Almost Scared Him.” *NPR Music*, NPR, 1 Feb. 2014, [www.npr.org/2014/02/01/268995033/sam-cooke-and-the-song-that-almost-scared-him](http://www.npr.org/2014/02/01/268995033/sam-cooke-and-the-song-that-almost-scared-him). Retrieved 2018, Jan 6



Even more subtle than the song reference were rhetoric borrowed from Martin Luther King Jr., so discreet it was almost as though Obama did not want it to be picked up on by his audience. Only scholars and rhetoricians studying the speech would have noticed these nuanced statements, it's almost as though Obama put them in just for himself, and maybe too for King. In the speech Obama states “. . . put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day,”<sup>26</sup> which is believed to reference a line from King's speech at the Selma march in 1965 where he stated “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”<sup>27</sup> This reference is much more subdued, it is not as straightforward as the Sam Cooke reference, but again is a nod to the Civil Rights Movement. Some have criticized the use of the quote in this fashion, as MLK was speaking more spiritually, rather than politically, and it could be said that Obama took it out of context and used the reference incorrectly.<sup>28</sup> But it is also possible that Obama understood how King used the quote, but wanted to repurpose the rhetoric in a way that better suited the situation, which included making it more political and democratic in nature.

Looking at the speech as a whole, it was a typical acceptance speech. While it could be said that Obama should have gone further to highlight the historical significance of his victory for the African American community and for America, that would have been out of character for him. Electing an African American President, breaking down that barrier for all people of color, giving young black boys and girls someone to look up to, putting a family in the White House that looks so different from any of their predecessors, was huge for the nation as a whole.

Certainly, if Obama had decided to stress the historic nature of his election more, that would

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<sup>26</sup> Election Victory Speech

<sup>27</sup> King, Martin Luther Jr., “How Long, Not Long.” 25 March 1965, Montgomery, AL.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, Matt. “Obama Loves Martin Luther King's Great Quote-But He Uses It Incorrectly.” *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 16 Jan. 2017, [www.thedailybeast.com/obama-loves-martin-luther-kings-great-quotebut-he-uses-it-incorrectly](http://www.thedailybeast.com/obama-loves-martin-luther-kings-great-quotebut-he-uses-it-incorrectly). Retrieved 2018, Feb 12

have been the angle that he took, because it was a historic night for the nation as a whole, not just the black community. It is hard to say how that would have been received, it may have alienated some Americans, or raised concerns that his priority in office would be to represent the black community rather than the Nation as a whole. Taking the approach that he did allowed him to acknowledge the historic nature of the evening only to those tuned in to that message, without isolating others in his audience.

## **Selma 50th Anniversary Speech**

March 7, 2015 marked the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the start of the Selma to Montgomery March. The march, which was intended to bring attention to black voter suppression and the tactics used to prevent blacks from registering to vote, should have taken protesters around three days to complete. In total, it took over two weeks, due to the response of the state. The protest began in Selma on March 7, 1965 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge with about 600 people. Protestors were met by state troopers armed with night sticks and teargas, and forced to retreat back to Selma. The scene was captured by news crews and nationally televised, which enraged the nation and resulted in thousands heading to Selma and join in the fight. The protesters had multiple run ins with state troopers and were unable to make their trip until March 27, when President Johnson ordered National Guardsmen to protect the demonstrators in their march to Montgomery. In the televised address which insured the safe travel of the protesters, President Johnson called on Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, which he would sign into law the following August.<sup>29</sup> On the 50th Anniversary of the march, President Obama spoke at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, addressing a crowd of roughly 40,000 people.

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<sup>29</sup> Staff. "Selma to Montgomery March." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2010, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/selma-montgomery-march](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/selma-montgomery-march). Retrieved 2018, March 13

The first half of the speech honored the legacy of Selma, and those who marched there. Obama told the story of the march, from protesters first showing up on March 7th, to the national response, and LBJ's eventual statement. He reminded his audience that not all Americans had kind words for the individuals protesting at the time of the march, and that history looks at it very differently than when the march first occurred. Obama also highlighted how inherently patriotic it is to protest, because it shows a great love and passion for the country to strive to make it better, though it is often not perceived that way until years later. Then the speech shifted to towards broader issues, describing Selma as a manifestation of America. He situated it among other famous protests and victories for individuals across the world who were inspired to stand up for what they felt was right and make change in their countries.<sup>30</sup> While much of this alluded to current issues Obama did not begin explicitly addressing current issues until nearly halfway into the speech.

Obama addressed the Ferguson report, and rejected the notion that the report implied nothing had changed since the Civil Rights Movement. He highlighted the areas of change and progress, stating “ To deny this progress, this hard-won progress -- our progress -- would be to rob us of our own agency, our own capacity, our responsibility to do what we can to make America better.” Again, bringing up the notion that protest, and pushing for progress is patriotic, even a civic duty. Still Obama did not minimize the issue,

Of course, a more common mistake is to suggest that Ferguson is an isolated incident; that racism is banished; that the work that drew men and women to Selma is now complete, and that whatever racial tensions remain are a consequence of those seeking to

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<sup>30</sup> Obama, Barack. “Selma 50th Anniversary Speech.” 7 March 2015, Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, AL.

play the “race card” for their own purposes. We don’t need the Ferguson report to know that’s not true. We just need to open our eyes, and our ears, and our hearts to know that this nation’s racial history still casts its long shadow upon us.<sup>31</sup>

This statement was very poignant, and almost had a sarcastic tone to it, taking aim at many of the ways in which people responded to Ferguson and other incidents of police brutality. Obama stated these things as though it is obvious that racism isn’t banished, and the work of the Civil Rights Movement is not done, but he was well aware this was not the perspective of most Americans. He knew that many Americans saw his election as marking the end of racism in the United States, albeit a naive perspective, many believed that if a black man could rise to the highest office in the land racism could not be a prevalent issue. He did not shy away from addressing many American’s perspective on Ferguson.

Obama goes on explain that “we know the march was not yet over. We know the race is not yet won.”<sup>32</sup> The “we” here is really powerful, he was speaking to the country, but also speaking for the country, and he was saying things that not everyone in the country would agree with. But still, the use of “we” prevents it from taking an accusatory tone, the line takes a completely different meaning if “I” is replaced for “we”. The use of “we” puts Obama along with the American people, fighting this fight together. He went on to quote James Baldwin, “We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is.”<sup>33</sup> This quote was especially fitting, as Ferguson was the incident that brought many white Americans to reality, drawing attention to the reality of being black in America. “If

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<sup>31</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

<sup>32</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

<sup>33</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

we want to honor the courage of those who marched that day, then all of us are called to possess their moral imagination. All of us will need to feel as they did the fierce urgency of now.”<sup>34</sup> The Selma Anniversary provided the kairos for Obama to make this call to action, and ask Americans to join in the fight to end police brutality.

Without specifically referencing the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Obama went on to say:

With such an effort, we can make sure our criminal justice system serves all and not just some. Together, we can raise the level of mutual trust that policing is built on -- the idea that police officers are members of the community they risk their lives to protect, and citizens in Ferguson and New York and Cleveland, they just want the same thing young people here marched for 50 years ago – the protection of the law. Together, we can address unfair sentencing and overcrowded prisons, and the stunted circumstances that rob too many boys of the chance to become men, and rob the nation of too many men who could be good dads, and good workers, and good neighbors.<sup>35</sup>

To equate it to the Civil Rights Movement asked the audience to look at it differently, and think more critically about what the protests were about, rather than to simply dismiss them as violent and disruptive because of the negative press surrounding Black Lives Matter. It was a careful rhetorical move. While it would have been meaningful if he had acknowledged BLM directly, it also would have isolated much of his audience. It could have prevented them from really hearing what he had to say, due to the negative connotation the movement’s name holds for many

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<sup>34</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

<sup>35</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

Americans. Without identifying the movement by name, he made a call to action to address their concerns. He used more universal language to make a call for criminal justice reform, asking his audience to join him in this fight to end mass incarceration. He referenced the fact that mass incarceration has been a major factor in the deterioration of the black family, and the cycle of poverty which plagues minorities. Because of the context of the speech, it would have been unconventional for it to be policy driven, which is likely why he pointed towards the collateral consequences of mass incarceration without explicitly discussing them.

Obama continued with a call to action to revitalize the Voting Rights Act, explaining the history of the Act, a bipartisan policy renewed by both Democratic and Republican presidents, as well as how the Act had been weakened over time.

One hundred members of Congress have come here today to honor people who were willing to die for the right to protect it. If we want to honor this day, let that hundred go back to Washington and gather four hundred more, and together, pledge to make it their mission to restore that law this year. That's how we honor those on this bridge.<sup>36</sup>

It is a fitting call to action to make on the Selma Anniversary, and it was not a politically motivated call to action, as Obama had nothing to gain directly from seeing the Act renewed. The Voting Rights Act protected against laws aimed at disenfranchising voters, laws which disproportionately affect the poor and minorities. Naturally if these laws disenfranchise poor and minority voters, they also negatively impact the Democratic Party, as lower income individuals and people of color are more likely to vote Democrat than Republican. While the Democratic

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<sup>36</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

Party stood to benefit from the Voting Rights Act being restored, Obama did not, as he was in his second term, and would not be seeking re-election again. The situation also makes this a strong appeal, asking the Congressmen who came to Selma to honor those who marched to do so by continuing the fight that they began here. The event drew both Democrats and Republicans, and for those in attendance to refuse to pick up this charge would appear hypocritical.

The speech went on to highlight the diversity of our history and our country, discussing leaders who have challenged the system, as well as those who have sought refuge here at various points throughout history. He explains,

That's what America is. Not stock photos or airbrushed history, or feeble attempts to define some of us as more American than others. We respect the past, but we don't pine for the past. We don't fear the future; we grab for it. America is not some fragile thing. We are large, in the words of Whitman, containing multitudes. We are boisterous and diverse and full of energy, perpetually young in spirit.<sup>37</sup>

This seems to take aim at conservative rhetoric, which often attacks immigrants and people of color as less American than white Americans who have been here for generations. He was defining our diversity as something to celebrate, rather than condemn, something that makes our country stronger, rather than a threat to our democracy. Once again rather than focusing just on blacks, he is focusing on all of the groups who have been oppressed, and marginalized throughout our history, doing his best to make his message universal. He was highlighting those from all different backgrounds, whose efforts were not respected at the time of their actions, from Japanese Americans who fought in World War II to gay Americans who protested in San Francisco and New York. He wanted to highlight the history of protest, but also the history of

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<sup>37</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

oppression, “we don’t pine for the past” because of that oppression; because we are a country constantly working to achieve the promises it made to its people at its founding, constantly growing and changing.

The speech went on to focus on what the younger generation can do, “Unencumbered by what is, because you’re ready to seize what ought to be . . . it is you, the young and fearless at heart, the most diverse and educated generation in history, who the nation is waiting to follow.”<sup>38</sup> This statement was powerful, as young people were a catalyst of change during the Civil Rights Movement, and he asked for the youth of today to pick up that fight, or any fight which they feel strongly about it, and be the catalyst once again. It is meaningful for the head of the government to recognize the importance to civil unrest, and recognize that protest and dissent is how change has been brought about in the past and how we will achieve change going forward. Obama closed the speech with a nod to the well known Martin Luther King Jr. quote “If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward,”<sup>39</sup> revising it as, “We honor those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children can soar.”<sup>40</sup> This line tied together the speech nicely, because of the way in which it gave a nod to the past, but also acted as a final call to action to continue this fight.

The speech as a whole came together as a powerful combination between honoring the past Civil Rights leaders, and calling upon Americans to stand up and be their own leaders. Typically this type of event would have called for a ceremonial speech, sticking to the historical aspects, and highlighting the Civil Rights leaders who were there 50 years ago and are still doing

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<sup>38</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech

<sup>39</sup> King, Martin Luther Jr. “Keep Moving From This Mountain, 10 April 1960, Spelman College, Atlanta, GA

<sup>40</sup> Selma 50th Anniversary Speech



that work today. Obama instead took this opportunity to give a more substantial speech, giving historical context, but also calling on congressmen and citizens to take action. He made an effort to speak in universal terms. He was speaking not only to those who feel they have been directly affected by the Civil Rights Movements, but attempting to frame the Civil Rights Movement, as well as other movements throughout history as impacting America as a whole, and affecting all Americans. Ferguson was still a controversial subject at the time, and this provided a strategic moment to discuss it, because the goals of Black Lives Matter align so closely with those of the Civil Rights Movement. While it was a risky move for him to equate the two, because of the negative press surrounding BLM, the speech was widely well received, and the kairos certainly aided in that. This speech may have been different had these protests not occurred, or had another president been the one delivering it, but all of these factors came together and provided Obama the perfect opportunity to discuss the current state of race relations in the country.

## DISCUSSION

It is said that the impact of a Presidency cannot be determined until several years after their term has ended and they have left the Oval Office, but it does not take a decade of hindsight to tell that Obama is one of the greatest orators to grace the White House. His precise diction, and unique story captured the nation in 2004 and continued to hold its attention through his eight years in office. Analyzing several of his speeches, it is clear he has a distinct rhetorical style, and common themes he emphasizes, be it a ceremonial speech, or a statement addressing a scandal, there are commonalities between them all. The most prevalent theme is his message of unity, and a clear desire to move towards mutual understanding, which most heavily influences his rhetoric on race. He also has a habit of using his personal story to build ethos to speak on various topics - whether he is highlighting his childhood or his family history. None of these things are uncommon rhetorical techniques in politics, they are quite common. The significance comes in examining how these things impacted Obama's rhetoric on race in a way that defied the expectations of his supporters.

The African-American community was skeptical of Obama from the start, due to his path to notoriety, many were unsure if he was "black enough," or if he would truly represent black voters. While he had spent much of his life thus far working with community organizations in Chicago, he had not been raised in that community, and had spent nearly all of his life before college living in predominantly white communities surrounded by his white family. It is likely this had a great influence on his rhetoric on race. Though he was aware of black issues growing up, he was not in a space where he could openly and honestly discuss them. He had a deep understanding of the ways in which whites saw these issues, which comes through in how he discussed them. As someone who embodied two identities, and struggled to balance those

identities, it makes sense that his rhetoric on race would work to bring those two communities together to see common ground.

Even when Obama was speaking more candidly than in other speeches, the motive was always to bring about a sense of mutual understanding. In the “A More Perfect Union” Speech, as well as the “Selma 50th Anniversary” Speech, Obama spoke more openly about racial issues than he typically did, but he did so in a way that works towards common ground. When discussing his pastor’s comments Obama attempted to help his audience understand where they were coming from, and explain the role of the black church in the community. Rather than shut the scandal down, he took the opportunity to address racial issues, and to make a policy driven call to action. He explained the problems facing the black community, from failing schools to mass incarceration, impacts all Americans, and moving to correct these things benefits all Americans. His speech in Selma makes a similar point, highlighting that there have been trailblazers of all backgrounds throughout American history, and that their efforts positively impacted all Americans. Again here he emphasized that the issues seen as “black issues” do not just impact the black community, but all Americans, and that diversity is not something to be afraid of but rather something to celebrate.

When addressing his audience, and speaking of his goals to improve the country, Obama constantly used the term “we”. Despite the opposition he faced in Congress he never used divisive language, he did his best to present his solutions as something in which everyone could have a part. His policy solutions were often accompanied by calls to action, recognizing that the change he was looking to make was not something that he could do on his own, but rather something that required the support of the nation. The repetition of “we” also acted as an equalizer, placing him alongside his audience in this fight. He did his best to present himself as

equal to those he was speaking to, equal to all citizens and constituents. His desire to bring people together and unite the country likely impacted his rhetoric on race, as well as influenced the way that he characterized himself. Obama was constantly working to bring the country together, highlighting his race in the “2004 DNC Speech” or the “2008 Victory Speech” would have run the risk of isolating white Americans and separating himself from a large segment of the population. He wanted every American to be able to see themselves in him, not just black Americans. This also helps explain why he used his family history as a frame so often.

Obama wanted to be accessible and relatable to all Americans, which is why using his family history had such powerful appeal. It worked to build credibility, and also proved to be an effective emotional appeal. His father exemplified the American Dream in the eyes of immigrants, someone who came from a third world country, studied at an American university, and was able to give his son the life all immigrants dream to give their children. His mother’s family gave the middle America version of the American Dream, a military family who benefited from the G.I. Bill, worked hard, and gave their daughter opportunities they never had. His parents came together, making him the byproduct of two tales of America. It was easy for him to reframe these stories to fit whatever his rhetorical situation was, everyone had a piece of his history to relate to. That is exactly what he wanted, if his audience could relate to him, and were able to see his own story as similar to theirs, then they would listen to what he had to say. It was not only about gaining their attention, and persuading them to share in his position, but also to bring people together, and show that in the end American citizens have more in common than differences.

While it is common for political candidates to use their background to characterize them as no different from any other American, Obama was different from most Americans. He had to

prove himself as American, something that was contested well into his Presidency. He also had to convince voters that he would fight for all Americans, and advocate for all Americans not just those who looked like him. He had to be careful with his rhetoric regarding racial issues because he did not want to be dismissed by white Americans as only representing black constituents' interests. Part of why he constantly reframed black issues as issues facing all Americans is because if he did not do so he ran the risk of losing the interest of all other Americans listening. Some would criticize Obama for not speaking more openly on racial issues, or not facing racial issues head on, but his own identity made that challenging. When he was given opportunities to speak on racial issues, he took them, and did so eloquently, but he did not bring race into situations that did not absolutely require it.

## CONCLUSION

When the right situation arose, Obama did not shy away from the hard truths of racial injustice in America, but even then he always spoke in universal terms. His failure to address race more in his second term reinforces that his reservations were not about isolating white voters but rather pursuing a consistent message of “it is not a black problem or a white problem, it is an America problem which must be dealt with by all Americans.” Obama did not speak on racial issues without grounds, because of his identity he ran the risk of being dismissed by a large part of his audience. Obama understood that his words were only impactful if people were listening, and therefore it would not benefit anyone to speak on issues in a manner that would not hold the attention of his audience. When situations arose where it was appropriate to discuss racial issues, he spoke openly and honestly, taking full advantage of the opportunity. Nonetheless, he always spoke through a lens of unity, his rhetoric on race tried to facilitate a deeper understanding between blacks and whites, culturally and socioeconomically. He understood that Americans are more receptive to welfare, education reform, and other issues often perceived as minority issues when they are not presented as such. He attempted to persuade listeners these are issues impacting all Americans, because that is both the truth, and the most convincing argument to elicit change.

Obama’s rhetorical choices surrounding racial issues were motivated by the constraints his identity placed on his ethos, as well as his opinion on the most effective means of persuading all Americans to support change. Although many Americans were critical of Obama for not addressing racial issues more directly or frequently, it may not have been effective if he had. He not only wanted to make policy change but also to ease racial tensions and increase mutual understanding, which required very calculated rhetorical choices. This in-depth look at Obama’s

rhetoric on race implies that if people of color are going to effectively communicate concerns on racial issues it requires a delicate dance. They have more constraints than white politicians when it comes to discussing racial issues to a broad audience, because they have to work harder to build their ethos. Presenting these issues too bluntly runs the risk of being dismissed as just another black man shouting about black issues. This is not to say that there is no truth to identity politics, a person of color certainly has a better understanding of the realities of people of color, but if they are going to get the majority of Americans to understand those realities it is not as simple as speaking openly and honestly. If the United States is going to see another person of color rise to the office of the presidency it will require the same calculated diction that ensures they represent all Americans not just their community.

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