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# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## Barack Obama: “A More Perfect Union”: Document Analysis

by Michael J O'Neal

### Overview

On March 18, 2008, Barack Obama, then running for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, delivered a speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He opened his speech by quoting the first line of the U.S. Constitution: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union,” giving the speech its informal title. In the eyes of many political observers, the speech may have been one of the most important Obama delivered during the campaign, and some even argue that the speech put him over the top in winning the nomination and the presidency later that year.

The speech was significant because issues of race were beginning to swirl around the candidate, who went on to become the nation’s first black president. In particular, questions were being raised about Obama’s association with a Chicago pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who was on record as having made comments from the pulpit that were extremely critical of the United States and that could themselves be regarded as racist—or at best, highly incendiary. Further, there was a perception among some observers that in the quest for the nomination, Obama’s opponents were “playing the race card” by insinuating that a black candidate was ultimately unelectable. Under mounting pressure, Obama needed to respond to the Wright controversy. Accordingly, in his speech he addressed issues of race and inequality in America and discussed head-on such issues as “white resentment” and “black anger.” The speech was widely publicized, and numerous politicians, media commentators, academics, and members of the public responded to it. Obama’s supporters argued that the speech was a thoughtful examination of the issue of race in America; his opponents, while conceding that the speech was memorable, continued to question the candidate’s association with the Reverend Wright, which in turn, they said, raised questions about Obama’s loyalties and judgment.

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Barack Obama: “A More Perfect Union”: The Full Text

Senator Barack Obama speaks about race at a news conference in Philadelphia.

AP/Wide World Photos



## Context

Barack Obama, then the junior U.S. senator from Illinois, announced his candidacy for president of the United States on February 10, 2007. He had attracted national attention by delivering the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, and he quickly emerged as the first African American candidate in the nation's history who had a realistic chance of being elected. Although numerous Democrats entered the race, Obama's chief opponent was Hillary Rodham Clinton, then a U.S. senator from New York and the wife of former president Bill Clinton. Because she had long been in the public eye as first lady and senator, Clinton was widely regarded as the presumptive Democratic nominee, but many of her opponents and some voters were put off because, they argued, she seemed to feel entitled to the nomination. What emerged was a hotly contested race, with the candidates trading wins in primaries and caucuses. Obama tended to perform better in caucus states—that is, in states that do not select a candidate in a primary election but rather in a party meeting. Clinton, in contrast, tended to do better in primary election states. Thus, Obama won the early Iowa caucus, while Clinton won the first primary in New Hampshire. With some exceptions, this pattern continued throughout the contest.

The issue of race hovered in the background, with some bloggers and others questioning whether Obama, the son of a Kenyan man and a white American woman, had even been born in the United States (a requirement for the office of president). Some were put off by his middle name, Hussein, and maintained that he was a secret Muslim. (Hussein was the last name of the Iraqi dictator whom U.S.-led forces deposed in the war that began in 2003.) These were fringe views, but the issue of race moved to the forefront of the campaign in February and March 2008 as the South Carolina primary approached. After Iowa, New Hampshire, and a caucus in Nevada, South Carolina would be the first contested state with a large black population (nearly 29 percent). On January 26, Obama won by a two-to-one margin, carrying some 90 percent of the state's black vote. But in response, Bill Clinton, campaigning for his wife, seemed to dismiss the Obama victory by noting that the Reverend Jesse Jackson, an unsuccessful African

American candidate for the Democratic nomination in 1984 and 1988, had won South Carolina both times. The implication of his remark seemed to be that South Carolina would vote for any black candidate, regardless of his or her electability or positions on the issues. Also during the run-up to the South Carolina primary, Senator Clinton made remarks on a radio show that some listeners interpreted as disparaging to the accomplishments of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the creation of the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Racial divides continued in future contests. On March 11, for example, Obama won Mississippi, garnering 90 percent of the black vote while Clinton won 70 percent of the white vote. Another minor controversy arose when Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 1984 and a Clinton supporter, remarked publicly that Obama was a major presidential candidate only because he was a black man. Ferraro tried to clarify her remark by suggesting that Obama's racial heritage made him a new and exciting phenomenon in American politics and that the press was treating him with kid gloves—in contrast to Clinton, whom, Ferraro said, the press was brutalizing. Ultimately, Obama pulled ahead and in early June was able to claim the lead in delegates to the Democratic National Convention and thus the nomination.

Perhaps the most significant controversy with racial implications was that surrounding Obama's association with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the fiery, defiant pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Wright had been Obama's pastor for twenty years. He had officiated at the marriage of Obama and his wife, Michelle, and had baptized their two daughters. One of Wright's sermons was the source of the phrase "audacity of hope," which Obama used as the title of a memoir. But in March 2008 videos of some of Wright's sermons surfaced, and for weeks snippets were played on television news and commentary programs. Many Americans took offense at comments such as this one:

The government gives them [African Americans] 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.

Likewise this remark was provoking:

We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye. 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 second remark was made shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and seemed to suggest that the United States got what it deserved. In other sermons, Wright accused the U.S. government of lying to its citizens. He cited, for example, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which dragged the United States into World War II in 1941, and claimed that government officials, including the president, knew about the impending attack. He maintained that the government had infected African American men with syphilis during the infamous Tuskegee experiments of the 1950s. (In fact, the experiments withheld treatment from men who already had the disease.) He also asserted that the government caused the HIV/AIDS epidemic in order to control the black population. He referred to the nation as the "United States of KKK," a reference to the white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan.

At first Obama tried to ignore the controversy. Then he tried to dismiss it by saying that Wright was like the "crazy old uncle" found in every family who says things designed to provoke but whom everyone ignores. He also stated that he was not at the church when these and other inflammatory comments were made. Some observers suggested that this position was not credible—that a person could not attend a church for twenty years and not know of the pastor's views. They maintained that Obama would have shown better judgment—the kind of judgment required from a president—if he had withdrawn from the church. Compounding the problem was Obama's loose association in Chicago with William Ayers, a political extremist and founder of the radical Weather Underground Organization, or Weathermen, who had been involved in the bombing of public buildings during the Vietnam era.

As the controversy raged, Obama and his campaign advisers decided that the candidate had to address the matter head-on. Wright had been a member of the candidate's African American Religious Leadership Committee, but on March 14 the campaign announced that Wright had been removed from the committee. Meanwhile, Obama denounced Wright's remarks. Nevertheless, it was widely felt that his denunciations were not forceful enough and that he had to make a major address on the subject. Obama's usual practice (and the practice of most candidates for high office) was to have a speechwriter develop such a speech. In this instance, though, Obama wrote the speech himself, working on it late into the night of March 17–18. He chose the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia as the venue, thus attempting to place the speech symbolically in the context of American history.

## Time Line

### 1961

**August 4** Barack Obama is born in Honolulu, Hawaii.

### 1972

The Reverend Jeremiah Wright is appointed pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ.

### 1988

Obama joins the Trinity United Church of Christ.

### 2001

**September 16** Wright delivers a sermon, "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall," in which he states that through the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, the "chickens have come home to roost."

### 2003

**April 13** Wright delivers his "Confusing God and Government" sermon, in which he says, "God damn America."

### 2007

**February 10** Obama declares his candidacy for the Democratic Party nomination for president.

### 2008

**March** Sermons delivered by Wright, Obama's pastor, begin to come under media scrutiny.

**March 18** Obama delivers his "A More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia.

**June** Obama becomes the presumptive Democratic Party nominee for president.

**November 4** Obama is elected as the forty-fourth president of the United States.

## About the Author

Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Honolulu, Hawaii. His father, Barack Obama, Sr., was Kenyan; his mother, Ann Dunham, was a white woman from Kansas. His parents were separated when he was two years old, and they divorced in early 1964. After Dunham remarried, to an Indonesian, Obama lived and attended school in Jakarta, Indonesia, before returning to Honolulu to live with his maternal grandparents at age ten. After graduating from high school, he attended Occidental College in Los Angeles and then transferred to Columbia University in New York City, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1983. He worked for four years in New York before moving to Chicago to head the Developing Communities Project, an agency that provided job training, tutoring, and other community services. In 1988 he entered Harvard Law School, becoming editor of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* and graduating in 1991. He returned to Chicago, and until 1996 he worked for a civil rights litigation law firm and for various community service organizations. He also taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago from 1992 to 2004.

Obama's political career began in 1996, when he was elected to the Illinois Senate; he was reelected in 1998 and 2002. In 2004 he delivered the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, elevating his profile on the national stage. That year, too, he won election to the U.S. Senate with 70 percent of the vote. In 2008, after a contentious and closely fought race against Hillary Rodham Clinton, he won his party's nomination for president, and in November of that year he and his vice presidential candidate, Joe Biden, defeated the Republican ticket of John McCain and Sarah Palin. He took the oath of office on January 20, 2009.

In the early days of his presidency, Obama was highly popular with the electorate and enjoyed soaring approval ratings; his election to the presidency was regarded as a historic event and was widely seen as a rejection of the policies of his predecessor, George W. Bush. Throughout the first year of his presidency, however, Obama faced numerous thorny issues: a severe economic recession, high unemployment, ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, challenging energy policies, and the continued threat of terrorism. Democrats enjoyed strong majorities in both houses of Congress and were thus able to pass a controversial multibillion-dollar economic stimulus bill. On March 23, 2010, President Obama signed a landmark health-reform bill into law. By 2010 the president's job approval rating had fallen sharply, but one bright spot was his winning the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009.

## Explanation and Analysis of the Document

Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech offers reflections on the issue of race as it has played out historically in the United States. The candidate addresses the Reverend Wright controversy and reflects on his own experiences as a black man living in the United States, and he uses the speech to urge Americans to put aside racial division for the good of all Americans.

# The Nation's Narrative and His Own

In the opening paragraphs, Obama makes explicit reference to the U.S. Constitution. He opens the speech by quoting the first line of the Constitution and then refers to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 that produced the document. He notes, however, that the work of the Constitution remains unfinished, for "it was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery." He alludes to the framers' disagreement about slavery and its decision to defer the issue of slavery for twenty years. Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution states: "The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight." In fact, the United States abolished the importation of slaves, but not slavery itself, in 1808. The candidate's key point is that the Constitution was an imperfect document that had to be perfected over time by those willing to "narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time." Obama then turns briefly to his personal story. He mentions the hope of his campaign to bring unity to the American people and provides details that suggest that his knowledge of America, white and black, rich and poor, is a product of his own diverse background. He calls it "my own American story" and notes that "in no other country on Earth is my story even possible." Shortly after, he suggests that he resisted the temptation to build a campaign based on race and expresses pride in his ability to forge coalitions of blacks and whites in a state such as South Carolina, with its large black population.

## Reverend Jeremiah Wright

The next portion of the speech tackles the issue of Obama's association with Wright. He notes that racial polarization had not been an issue in the campaign so far, but, in the following paragraph, he observes that the issue had taken a "divisive turn." He acknowledges that some observers regarded his candidacy as an "exercise in affirmative action," an effort on the part of white liberals to "purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap." He then turns to the Wright controversy and reminds listeners that he condemned Wright's comments. He uses a rhetorical question-and-answer device that is common in his speeches: "Did I know? ... Of course." He concedes that he had heard Wright express views with which he disagrees. He makes clear his rejection of Wright's statements, noting that they were not simply statements against racial injustice but that they represented a "distorted" view of America, emphasizing what is wrong without giving due credit to what is right. He characterizes Wright's comments as "divisive."

Obama then launches into a partial defense of Wright. He suggests that the comments that were being replayed in the media are only part of the story. He goes on to emphasize the good that Wright had done, including his service in the U.S. Marine Corps. He also gives white America some insight into black churches and how the exuberance of the congregation forged a unity that linked the African American experience with the Christian Bible: "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, clapping, screaming and shouting." The implication is that Wright and his church could not be judged by the same standards as one might use to judge a supposedly more sober church whose members were predominantly white. He goes on to describe his personal relationship with Wright, thereby producing one of the most oft-quoted statements in the speech: "I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community."

## A Conversation about Race

The speech takes a turn when Obama suggests that the politically expedient thing to do would be to simply ignore the broader issue of race and hope that it disappeared. It would be easy, he says, to dismiss Wright as a "crank or a demagogue," just as it would be easy to dismiss the comments made by former vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro as indicative of racism. Earlier that month, Ferraro, a Clinton supporter, had told a California newspaper: "If Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position. And if he was a woman of any color, he would not be in this position. He happens to be very lucky to be who he is. And the country is caught up in the concept." Obama goes on to suggest that the controversy offers the nation an opportunity to have a conversation about "complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect." Using a quotation from William Faulkner's novel *Requiem for a Nun*, he argues that many of the injustices that African Americans had suffered historically were still part of the African American mind-set. He enumerates some of them: slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregated schools, inferior education even

after the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated public education in 1954, legalized discrimination such as the inability to get home loans or to join labor unions, the lack of basic services in black neighborhoods, violence, “blight,” and “neglect.”

## Anger and Resentment Find Voice

With these injustices as a historical backdrop, Obama returns to Reverend Wright, stating, “This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up.” He argues, then, that people such as Wright inevitably would carry with them vestiges of anger and resentment and that anger sometimes “finds voice” in the pulpit. The anger is not always productive, he says, but it is real and cannot be dismissed or wished away. Obama at this point notes that the white community, too, sometimes feels anger and resentment over such issues as the loss of jobs, stagnant wages, immigration, or the lack of opportunity. At this point, Obama’s speech begins to resemble a campaign speech as he uses the opportunity to promote a traditional Democratic agenda, particularly by railing against “economic policies that favor the few over the many.” He refers to the Reagan Coalition, that is, the alliance of traditional Republicans and moderate Democrats that swept the Republican Ronald Reagan into the White House in 1980. In light of the lingering animosity and differences between significant portions of the nation’s black and white communities, Obama concludes that the nation has reached a racial “stalemate.”

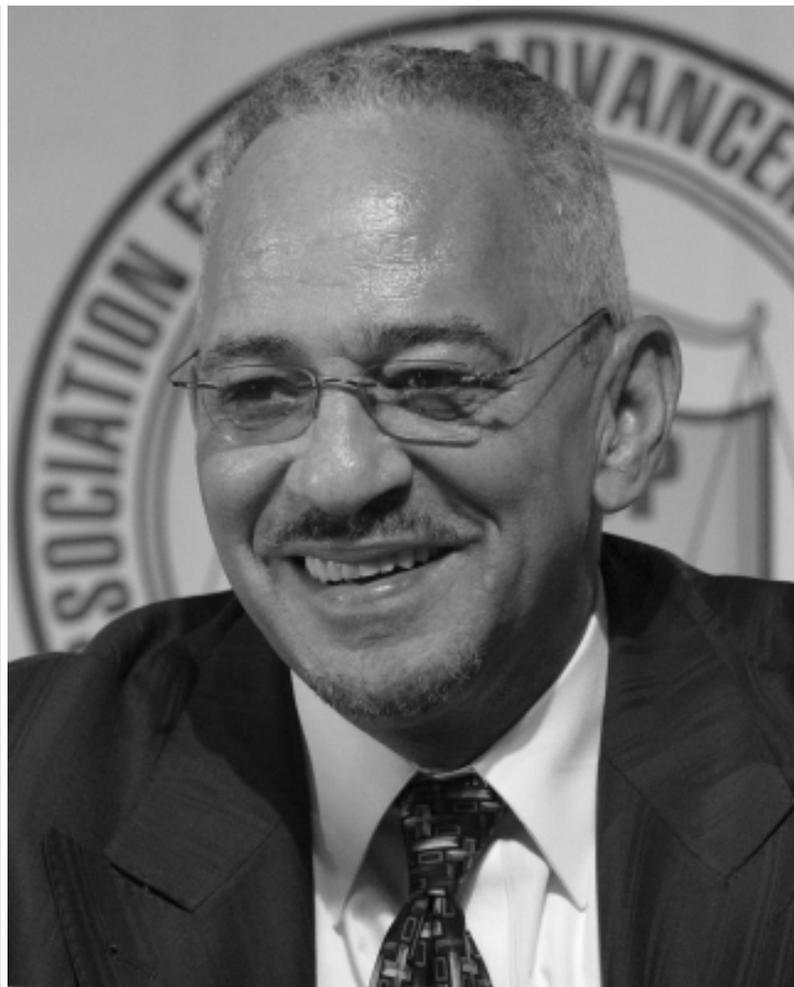
## Racial Division

Addressing his black audience, Obama urges the African American community to embrace “the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past” and to bind its grievances to the “aspirations of all Americans” for a better life. He argues that African Americans have to take responsibility for their own actions and their own families, noting that this was a doctrine that Reverend Wright preached. Distilling his thoughts to characterize the essence of his disagreement with Wright, Obama states that Wright “spoke as if our society was static” and as if all Americans are “still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.” He notes that the “genius” of America is the possibility for change.

Obama next turns to his white audience to urge members of that audience to acknowledge the legitimate grievances of the African American community. Turning to scripture, he urges all Americans to be their brother’s keepers and calls for an end to cynicism and division. He notes that race is too often treated as a “spectacle” and cites as an example the “OJ trial.” This is a reference to the trial of O. J. Simpson, the black former football star who in 1995 was acquitted of the 1994 murder of his former wife and an acquaintance after a highly publicized trial; reactions to the not-guilty verdict tended to polarize along racial lines, with many African Americans applauding it and white Americans condemning it. He also makes reference to Hurricane Katrina, a deadly storm that flooded the Gulf Coast in 2005 and that raised racial conflict because of its devastating impact on black neighborhoods in and around New Orleans, Louisiana. He argues that Americans could continue to focus on racial division but repeatedly urges his listeners to say “Not this time.” Again he goes into campaign mode by outlining a political agenda and referring to the war in Iraq, which, he says, “never should’ve been waged.”

## The Quest for a More Perfect Union

Rev. Jeremiah Wright  
AP/Wide World Photos



Obama draws toward his conclusion by referencing one of the major themes of his campaign, “hope.” The Union, he says, “may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected.” He concludes with a common technique used in speeches of this type. He tells the story of a woman named Ashley who was a campaign organizer in South Carolina. He details the hardships of Ashley’s life and links Ashley’s story to his own campaign for health care reform, economic growth, opposition to the war in Iraq, and the like. He concludes by stating that the reason he was running for president was to help people like Ashley. In the final paragraph, he comes full circle to refer to the nation’s founders and the ongoing quest for a more perfect union.

### **Audience**

Although Obama was addressing an audience at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, his speech was clearly directed at all of America, in an effort to quell the controversy spawned by his association with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Coming as it did in the middle of the primary election season, the address was also a campaign speech designed to allay the fears of some Americans that Obama was sympathetic to Wright’s more inflammatory views. The speech, which was broadcast live on television, was widely reported on and publicized. On the popular Web site YouTube, a video of the speech had 1.2 million hits within twenty-four hours and 4.5 million hits by the end of March 2008. A Pew Research Center poll showed that 85 percent of Americans knew something about the speech and that 54 percent claimed to know a lot about it.

### **Impact**

As might be expected, reactions to “A More Perfect Union” were divided along political lines. Democrats and liberals almost overwhelmingly praised the speech, and while many Republicans and conservatives conceded that the speech was thoughtful and well delivered, they continued to question the candidate’s judgment in remaining associated with a pastor who held such incendiary views. Polling organizations, including network news organizations, conducted numerous surveys on the electorate’s reaction to the speech, asking such questions as whether people believed that Obama shared Wright’s views (most said they did not), whether

the speech would influence their voting decisions, and whether the speech effectively ended the controversy. And since the speech was made in the middle of an election campaign, pollsters wanted to know what effect it had on the contest between Obama and Clinton. The speech demonstrated the growing power of the Internet and social media such as Facebook in politics, with millions of people watching recordings of the speech and sending them as a link to others.

Virtually every newspaper, editorialist, and commentator weighed in on the speech. At one end of the political spectrum, the generally liberal *New York Times* wrote that

Mr. Obama's eloquent speech should end the debate over his ties to Mr. Wright since there is nothing to suggest that he would carry religion into government. But he did not stop there. He put Mr. Wright, his beliefs and the reaction to them into the larger context of race relations with an honesty seldom heard in public life.

In contrast, the conservative editorialist Charles Krauthammer, writing in the *Washington Post*, called the speech a "brilliant fraud" and "little more than an elegantly crafted, brilliantly sophistic justification" for Obama's association with Wright. He concluded his editorial column by saying:

This contextual analysis of Wright's venom, this extenuation of black hate speech as a product of white racism, is not new. It's the Jesse Jackson politics of racial grievance, expressed in Ivy League diction and Harvard Law nuance. That's why the speech made so many liberal commentators swoon: It bathed them in racial guilt while flattering their intellectual pretensions.

It would not be unfair to say that Obama's speeches, including this one, were a vessel into which people poured their own political views and aspirations, though much the same could be said of any political candidate.

## Questions for Further Study

1. What political developments during his presidential campaign prompted Barack Obama to make this speech at this particular time?
2. Many people believe that Obama's longstanding association with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright in some way disqualified him to be president—that he should have shown better judgment in ending the association. In his speech, Obama offers a defense of Wright while rejecting Wright's more inflammatory comments. What is your position on this issue? Do you think that most candidates for high office have associations in their past that might raise questions and doubts in the minds of voters?
3. A theme that runs through Obama's speech is that of forging "a more perfect union." What is the origin of this phrase? What do you think the phrase meant to Obama in his speech? In what sense is the United States of America an ongoing project?
4. Obama suggests that he wants the nation to have a conversation about race. In this regard, compare his speech with *One America in the 21st Century*, the report issued by President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race in 1999. To what extent did the latter document initiate a conversation about race? Do you believe that the nation needs to have such a conversation, or do you believe that the nation is constantly talking about race?
5. What effect do you think this speech had on the outcome of the 2008 presidential election? Do you find Obama's arguments convincing?

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