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# “Yes We Did”: Barack Obama, Narrating Change, and Redefining America

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“Yes We Did”: Barack Obama, Narrating Change, and Redefining America

Introduction: An Ethos of Change, Elevating Citizenship, and the “Bully Pulpit”

During his eight years in office, Barack Obama used his presidency as a platform to highlight the voices and experiences of ordinary Americans. His refrain was often that, “in a democracy, the most important office is the office of citizen.”<sup>1</sup> Illustrating this belief, his speeches were littered with references to Americans whose stories exemplified whatever moral vanguard Obama was then attempting to advocate. He identified these citizens as part of both the historical record and the contemporary moment: slaves and abolitionists, coal miners and parents, servicemen and corporate leaders of industry. They were not always names known to us, though Obama does favor stories of the Founding Fathers and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis. In Obama’s narratives, rather, the heroes were more often “ordinary Americans with extraordinary courage,” who helped to bend the “arc of the moral universe,” to borrow King’s phrase.<sup>2</sup> By challenging systems of oppression or instances of injustice, these individuals exemplified the gradual process of moving toward what Obama envisioned of “a more perfect union.”<sup>3</sup> Citizen engagement, for Obama, was part of a communal process required to render a freer, fairer world.

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<sup>1</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 135.

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks at John Lewis’s Sixty-Fifth Birthday Gala,” in *We Are the Change We Seek: The Speeches of Barack Obama* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 63.

As president, Obama framed his role in this process as a conduit. He positioned himself as filling a void in contemporary life, which he characterized as lacking in personal connections—he aimed to become that connection.<sup>4</sup> Having been privy to positive examples of citizen engagement as a grassroots organizer and then as a candidate on the campaign trail, Obama sought to transmit them to the nation at large as didactic devices.<sup>5</sup> By Obama’s measure, if more Americans could only be exposed to such stories as proof of the change that he championed, more would embrace the communal project of enacting that change.<sup>6</sup> Thus Obama used his speeches as spaces to initiate or reorient national conversations to more inclusive, productive directions. Within them, he included anecdotes as microcosmic models of how ordinary Americans could create positive change in their own lives and communities.<sup>7</sup>

One of the clearest examples of this occurs in his Farewell Address, delivered just ten days before he left office. In this speech, Obama concludes, “I do have one final ask of you as your president—the same thing I asked when you took a chance on me eight years ago. I am

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<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, “Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City,” *Illinois Issues*, 1990; In “Why Organize?” Obama argues community organizing “enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other.”

<sup>5</sup> In his prologue to *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama articulates that the book “grows directly out of those conversations on the campaign trail.” He connects his personal encounters with Americans with his belief in a “a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences; a running thread of hope that makes our improbably experiment in democracy work.” He continues that those values “remain alive in the hearts and minds of most Americans — and they can inspire us to pride, duty, and sacrifice” (8).

<sup>6</sup> In numerous places, including *The Audacity of Hope* and his Farewell Address, Obama introduces his explanation of the Founding Fathers’ concept that we are all created equal, with certain unalienable rights, but that “these rights, while self-evident, have never been self-executing,” and that “change only happens when ordinary people get involved, get engaged, and come together to demand it” (Farewell Address).

<sup>7</sup> Not all speeches come with such involved intentions, of course—Obama has stump speeches like every politician. This thesis focuses on moments where I believe intent can be identified with relative certainty, based largely on the occasions of given speeches’ deliveries. Moreover, because this thesis seeks to identify ongoing themes across his full term in office, I have worked from the assumption that while his methods may have shifted, Obama’s core ideology has not changed.

asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change—but in yours.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Obama emphasizes the decade-long continuity of his call to action. In the climactic final moments of the speech—itsself one of his final public appearances as president—he chose to reiterate this message. Thus, with the finite situational power of a Farewell Address, Obama made a final plea for nationwide investment in civic life. As this thesis will suggest, the idea of an individual citizen’s ability to bring about change through collective action suffused his presidency, as represented in his speeches. His Farewell Address thereby exemplifies Obama’s frequent rhetorical mode of extending the responsibilities of citizenship to all of us, challenging traditional assumptions about hierarchies of power.

Moments like the conclusion of his Farewell Address epitomize the core concern of this thesis: to examine how Obama’s speeches can be analyzed as symptoms of an ongoing sociopolitical project, driven by his personal ethos of the power of citizenship. To this end, it benefits us to consider Obama as a community organizer first and a politician second; after his victory in the Illinois Senatorial race in 2005, Michelle Obama described her husband as “a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Obama himself once argued, “Organizing can also be a bridge between the private and the public, between politics and people’s everyday lives.”<sup>10</sup> These testimonies reflect Obama’s ethos—his view of politics as an arena through which dedicated individuals have the power to generate meaningful social change. They also situate Obama’s moral assertions as president within a

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<sup>8</sup> Obama, “Farewell Address,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 340.

<sup>9</sup> Ryan Lizza, “Barack Obama’s Unlikely Political Education: The Agitator,” in *Election 2008: A Voter’s Guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 30; Barack himself later responded to his wife’s comment, “I take that observation as a compliment.”

<sup>10</sup> David J. Garrow, *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama* (New York: William Morrow, 2017), 372, 373.

wider sociopolitical project, traceable from his early days of grassroots organizing in Chicago, through his presidency, and into his post-presidency efforts. Based on the rhetorical work he produced in each of these periods, this project can be understood as Obama communicating and modeling the possibilities of sociopolitical change. The project frames the progress considered fundamental to American history as a product of ordinary people's actions, future change as predicated on the current generation accepting that same role, and the end goal as the fulfillment of what the Constitution calls "a more perfect union."<sup>11</sup> In scholarly publications, formal speeches, and other speaking engagements, Obama capitalized on whatever platform his current position provided to communicate his message to as wide an audience as possible.

An early instance of this rhetorical approach appears in his critical essay, "Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City," published when Obama was the president (effectively editor in chief) of the Harvard Law Review. Having just spent three years as the director of the Developing Communities Project (DCP), a community organizing non-profit on the South Side of Chicago, Obama wrote about generating change from personal experience.<sup>12</sup>

Obama argues that once formed, a community organization acts as a "vehicle," and

holds the power to make politicians, agencies, and corporations more responsive to community needs. Equally important, it enables people to break their crippling isolation from each other, to reshape their mutual values and expectations and rediscover the possibilities of acting collaboratively—the prerequisites of any successful self-help initiative.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Obama, "Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City."

Aside from the underlying perspective operating in this argument, that Americans would be better off embracing “mutual values,” the critical detail to note here is Obama’s framing of organizations as “vehicles,” capable of remaking power structures into better servants of the community. The role Obama identifies for organizations echoes the one he identifies for their leadership. Articulating that, “a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—and not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions,” Obama again prioritizes the role of leadership only so far as it can produce positive outcomes for the public it serves.<sup>14</sup> As James Kloppenberg suggests in his analytical biography, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (2012), “Why Organize?” laid out a model for community organizing as a tool to engender an engaged citizenry.<sup>15</sup> In Obama’s estimation, engaged citizens give organizations and leadership power, not the reverse.

Consequently, this thesis maps Obama’s framework of citizens as the true possessors of power in “Why Organize?” onto his presidential speeches. Expanding his platform from a local audience to a national one, Obama continued to model the importance of civic engagement. As he says in his Farewell Address, his hope was “Not in [his] ability to bring about change—but in yours.”<sup>16</sup> In both cases, Obama acknowledges the need for leaders as directional aids, but ultimately locates the ability to enact change with the public. Through his formal speeches, Obama addressed the nation and delivered countless versions of this argument, united under his wider project of communicating and modeling change.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, 137.

<sup>16</sup> Obama, “Farewell Address,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 340.

Of course, the general conception of the presidency as a model for improving the nation does not lack historical precedent. The power to persuade—what Theodore Roosevelt (TR) called the “bully pulpit”—remains one of the most renowned of presidential capacities.<sup>17</sup> TR first uttered the now iconic phrase in 1909 during a gathering of the press in the Oval Office, as reported by the journalist and Congregationalist theologian Lyman Abbott. In his article for *Outlook Magazine*, Abbott described TR sitting at his desk, working on an upcoming speech, only to whip around and exclaim, “I suppose my critics will call that preaching, but I have got such a bully pulpit!” (At the time, “bully” would have had a positive connotation, along the lines of “excellent.”) Abbott reflected in the same piece that TR had “inspired in his countrymen a fervor of patriotism, and wisely directed it in practical channels to the public service.”<sup>18</sup> Having emerged at this time, the term would only grow in significance.

TR’s service-oriented model of the “bully pulpit” can be understood through his Progressive politics. At the turn of the century, he fronted the Progressive Movement’s effort to address the many sociopolitical problems that had arisen from the rapid industrialization of previous decades. He believed that the government should “serve as an agent of reform for the people,” and that the president should use his unique relationship with the public “to challenge prevailing notions of limited government and individualism.”<sup>19</sup> TR viewed the presidency as an instrument for communicating with and advocating on behalf of the people, but also for initiating a paradigm shift in the political consciousnesses of an American public in need of his guidance.

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<sup>17</sup> From Lyman Abbott, “A Review of President Roosevelt’s Administration,” *Outlook*, 91 (February 27, 1909), [http://college.cengage.com/history/ayers\\_primary\\_sources/abbott\\_president\\_roosevelt\\_1909.htm](http://college.cengage.com/history/ayers_primary_sources/abbott_president_roosevelt_1909.htm).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Sidney Milkis, “Theodore Roosevelt: Impact and Legacy,” *Miller Center*, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://millercenter.org/president/roosevelt/impact-and-legacy>.

Later 20th century presidents adopted similar attitudes toward the “bully pulpit” in order to galvanize public support for their policy agendas. Through speeches and broadcasts over increasingly prolific mediums (radio, television, and now the internet), the “bully pulpit” has remained a favored tool of presidents, highlighting the significance of the relationship between the executive and the public. For example, although TR coined the term “bully pulpit,” it would be his distant cousin, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), who implemented what would become its most commonly cited use. Broadcast throughout his presidency, dealing with most major policy issues, and communicated directly to a national audience, FDR’s Fireside Chats embodied the full persuasive potential of the “bully pulpit.”<sup>20</sup> Empowered by the advent of the radio, FDR used the broadcasts to speak conversationally with the American public and engage them in an ongoing, nationwide discussion. FDR’s radio speeches “helped make participants—even activists—out of his audience,” according to Roosevelt biographers Lawrence and Cornelia Levine.<sup>21</sup> Far from projecting empty rhetoric, FDR’s use of the “bully pulpit” allowed him to successfully engage with the nation at large.

The phenomenon of Fireside Chats created a precedent of increased personalization in Americans’ relationship with the presidency. While TR used the “bully pulpit” as an instrument to guide the public from above, FDR conceptualized the “bully pulpit” as a means of fostering sociopolitical results through a more horizontal relationship. His mode of communication relied on the expectation of an actively listening, participatory audience, as the Levines suggest above. A number of scholars have consequently referred to FDR’s as the “rhetorical presidency,”

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, *The People and the President: America’s Conversation with FDR*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xi.

<sup>21</sup> Levine, *The People and the President*, 4, 5.

because he treated speeches as “events” wherein he could communicate directly with the public, “over the heads of the legislature and the newspapers.”<sup>22</sup> As what presidential scholar Jon Roper called the “architect” of the “modern presidency,” FDR altered the dynamic between the Commander in Chief and the public in ways that have fundamentally shaped the transformative capacities of his successors.<sup>23</sup> Modern presidential power, particularly in terms of the president’s relationship to national institutions and the American public, can be traced back to FDR’s subversive use of the “bully pulpit.” His Fireside Chats became a space for implementing that newfound relationship.

Through their invocations of the “bully pulpit,” each president since FDR has had to renegotiate his particular relationship with the public, including Obama. As the first president to be wholly immersed in the so-called “Internet Age,” Obama had the choice to utilize social media as a powerful new communications device in the same way that FDR utilized the radio. Scholars have indeed situated Obama as a philosophical descendent of both Roosevelts, particularly FDR, intent on influencing the direction of public debate through argumentative communications strategies.<sup>24</sup> But while Obama did dabble in his era’s emergent communications medium, for example devising his Facebook page as “a place for conversations with the American people about the most important issues facing our country,” as president he relied more on traditional mediums like the formal speech.<sup>25</sup> We can look to his loyalty to the

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<sup>22</sup> Levine, *The People and the President*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Roper, “Chapter 7: The Presidency,” in *Developments in American Politics*, ed. Gillian Peel, Christopher J. Bailey, Bruce Cain and B. Guy Peters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.

<sup>24</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, “Franklin Delano Obama,” in *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Barack Obama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 229-312.

<sup>25</sup> Kori Schulman, “President Obama: ‘Hello, Facebook!’” *White House*, November 9, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/09/president-obama-hello-facebook>.

Roosevelts' use of the "bully pulpit" as a likely context and rationale for this approach, as Obama's speeches exemplify several of their core characteristics.

From TR, Obama adopted his Progressive view of the government as "an agent of reform for the people," recalling his service-oriented view of the presidency.<sup>26</sup> A specific instance of Obama's invocation of TR is discussed in detail in the following analysis of his "Remarks on the Economy." However, differences arise in TR's view of the "bully pulpit" as reflective of a traditional hierarchical attitude, which clashes with Obama's ethos of awakening ordinary Americans to their own power. To understand this disconnect, another source should be acknowledged here, this time from Obama's experience with the DCP. In Chicago, he studied the techniques of "agitation," taken from the radical South Side social scientist Saul Alinsky. In Alinsky's words, "agitation" seeks "to rub raw the sores of discontent."<sup>27</sup> When asked, Obama readily acknowledges the influence of the Alinsky method, which he defines as "challenging people to scrape away habit."<sup>28</sup> Numerous presidential speeches find Obama "agitating" in this way, challenging the nation to rediscover what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature."<sup>29</sup> Thus understanding the concept of "agitation" helps reconcile the apparent paradox of Obama's leadership style—akin to TR's theory of the president as the "agent" of change—and his ethos—which allocates power to the people.

Meanwhile, Obama's use of the "bully pulpit" also has strong connections to FDR, both in terms of their shared economic motivations and rhetorical responses. Both men inherited the

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<sup>26</sup> Milkis, "Theodore Roosevelt: Impact and Legacy."

<sup>27</sup> Lizza, "Barack Obama's Unlikely Political Education: The Agitator," in *Election 2008*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; Obama's fellow DCP organizer, Mike Kruglik, describes Obama as "a natural, the undisputed master of agitation, who could engage a room full of recruiting targets in a rapid-fire Socratic dialogue, nudging them to admit that they were not living up to their own standards."

<sup>29</sup> See: "Remarks on Trayvon Martin," and "Introduction," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 241, xii.

country in the midst of devastating economic crises. Political scientist Gillian Peele argues that, “So severe were the problems faced by Obama in 2009 that many commentators drew parallels with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s advent to power in the aftermath of the Great Depression.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, *Washington Post* business and economics writer Steven Pearlstein commented that, “Not since Franklin Roosevelt delivered his first fireside chat, eight days into his presidency, have Americans been more hungry—and more desperate—for economic leadership.”<sup>31</sup> Others observed a not-so-subtle link to Roosevelt’s “bold” New Deal interventions in Obama’s promise to “assert regulatory control over an anarchic marketplace,” and found that “echoes” of FDR’s handling of the economic crisis “resound[ed] everywhere” in Obama’s actions.<sup>32</sup> FDR became an inevitable and profitable model from which Obama could find policy inspiration, and from whom commentators could draw speculation.

But Obama’s rhetorical strategies, particularly his take on the “bully pulpit” as a mode of direct communication with the American people, even more powerfully invoke FDR’s legacy as the “rhetorical presidency.”<sup>33</sup> In the lead-up to his inauguration, one of Obama’s staffers revealed to the *New York Times* that Obama had studied FDR’s first 100 days extensively, “and in particular had seized on the notion of Roosevelt having a ‘conversation with the American public.’”<sup>34</sup> Obama’s attitude toward this idea can be found in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). He explains his belief that, “if I could reach those voters directly, frame the issues as I felt them, explain the choices in as truthful a fashion as I knew how, then the people’s instincts for fair play

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<sup>30</sup> Gillian Peele, “Chapter 2: A New Political Agenda?” in *Developments in American Politics*, ed. Gillian Peel, Christopher J. Bailey, Bruce Cain and B. Guy Peters (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

<sup>31</sup> Leuchtenburg, “Franklin Delano Obama,” in *In the Shadow of FDR*, 307.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>33</sup> Levine, *The People and the President*, 4

<sup>34</sup> Leuchtenburg, “Franklin Delano Obama,” in *In the Shadow of FDR*, 302.

and common sense would bring them around.”<sup>35</sup> These words reveal a yearning for the kind of responsiveness that FDR experienced from those who listened to his Fireside Chats.<sup>36</sup> When he became president, Obama had the platform he needed to enact those conversations. Moments where he speaks directly to the American people mid-speech find him following in FDR’s footsteps. It is largely through the model of FDR’s Fireside Chats that we can thus understand Obama’s formal speeches as rhetorical, didactic tools to accomplish his larger sociopolitical project.

In sum, this thesis addresses the consistent argument Obama made as president, traceable as a connective thread throughout his personal history, but also in part to his presidential and ideological forebears (and as the conclusion will address, extending into his post-presidency). I consider Obama’s presidential speeches as part of his project of communicating and modeling the possibilities of sociopolitical change. One site where this occurs would naturally be in legislation, but I am more interested in the ways in which Obama sought to communicate these ideas directly with the American people. Therefore what this thesis addresses are the expressions of Obama’s ethos not in legislation, but in rhetoric.<sup>37</sup>

I analyze three speeches for their particular expressions of Obama’s ethos, arguing that Obama utilized the speech as a tool to disseminate and instill his beliefs about active citizenship on a national scale. His speech on race in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (March 2008), his remarks on the economy in Osawatomie, Kansas (December 2011), and his address commemorating the

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<sup>35</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Levine, *The People and the President*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Though much could be said of Obama’s effects on the United States’ international standing, this thesis only attempts to reconcile the way Obama used speeches in domestic conversations. It should be noted that I approach the three speeches with the belief that they did, in fact, effect change. There are certainly speeches for which that assumption would not be true.

fiftieth anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama (March 2015) each respond to a national controversy, crisis, or event, ostensibly charging them with above-average importance for Americans across the country.<sup>38</sup> They also each contain blatant examples of Obama articulating his ethos, but through different lenses of race, the economy, and history. This rhetorical move links inextricably to Obama’s wider project of modeling change for everyday Americans’ adaptation as it suggests the multitude of ways in which Americans are connected to one another. Finally, each speech profoundly invokes its setting, reflecting Obama’s desire to ground his somewhat abstract arguments of citizenship not just in people, but also in place. After analyzing each speech, I offer an example of how each has been implemented or enacted in some way. Ultimately, given their overlapping thematics, I argue that each speech was designed to model specific, identifiable changes to the American conception of civic life.

“A More Perfect Union”: Speech at the National Constitution Center  
Philadelphia, PA, March 18, 2008

In the latter months of Obama’s first campaign for the presidency, a media firestorm erupted and became the Jeremiah Wright controversy. In March of 2008, recordings of Reverend Wright went viral, capturing Obama’s pastor of twenty years using language that mainstream American media considered racially inflammatory. Video recordings published by NBC find the Reverend saying, for example:

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<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “How Well Has President Barack Obama Chosen from the Available Means of Persuasion?” *Polity* 45, no. 1 (2013); However well composed they are, or well-intentioned, most presidential speeches are not well remembered by everyday Americans. As Professor of Communications Kathleen Hall Jamieson remarks, “Most presidential rhetoric lives on not in memory but only on the C-SPAN website, on the White House web page, or in the University of California, Santa Barbara’s internet archives” (154). Similarly to Jamieson, the three speeches I chose rose to an above-average degree of public notoriety, due to their topics, particularly “A More Perfect Union” and his remarks at Selma.

"[The U.S.] is a country and a culture that is controlled by and run by rich white people."

"You [black men] are primary targets in an oppressive society..."

"Not God bless America, God damn America for killing innocent people!"<sup>39</sup>

The Reverend's sharp rebukes appeared in stark contrast to the meditative (and as many outrightly suggested, "postracial"<sup>40</sup>) tones Americans had grown accustomed to associating with the young Senator. Reverend Wright's comments proved problematic for Obama because they invited a sudden public conversation about polarizing racial issues.<sup>41</sup> The mainstream press took the Reverend's comments as racially divisive, unpatriotic, and in terms of Obama's relationship to him, potentially damning. Meanwhile, public opinions were divided along racial lines.<sup>42</sup> While black Americans polled during the controversy were unsurprised by Wright's comments, white Americans expressed newfound uncertainty about Obama's ability to lead a country with such poignant and unresolved racial issues.<sup>43</sup>

When the story broke, Obama quickly released statements condemning Wright's words. But with no end to the controversy in sight and mere weeks left to secure the Democratic nomination, Obama had to act. He took the stage at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to deliver a historic speech that redirected the conversation about

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<sup>39</sup> Brian D. McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 6 (2011), 946.

<sup>40</sup> Martell Teasley and David Ikard, "Barack Obama and the Politics of Race: The Myth of Postracism in America," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>41</sup> McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," 944; Note: This speech operates largely through the black-white binary in the United States, though Obama does mention other ethnic-minority groups as part of his overarching argument about the realities of racialization in the United States.

<sup>42</sup> Table 2, referenced in McKenzie, 954.

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," 945.

race in the campaign and halted attacks against his association with Reverend Wright.<sup>44</sup> His 37-minute address, presented as a historical narrative of racial injustice and inequality in the United States from the time of its foundation, posited that rage like Reverend Wright's illustrated the consequences of the "unfinished" project of American democracy.<sup>45</sup> While he again condemned Reverend Wright's words, he contextualized them to explain why he found it impossible to simply "disown" his old pastor.<sup>46</sup> Obama offered an alternative: rather than deny them, the country needed to confront the issues the controversy had stirred up if its citizens had any hope of achieving "A More Perfect Union."

Even on a structural level, the speech embodies Obama's ethos of modeling change. As is typical of his addresses, "A More Perfect Union" takes narrative form, relying largely on histories and anecdotes, powerfully enacting his belief in everyday citizens. Organizationally, the speech contains roughly four movements: an opening discussion of race in American history, his campaign, and his relationship with Reverend Wright; an examination of how the legacy of racial violence and inequity has found a "voice" today in people of all races; an exploration of the choice Americans have in response to the unresolved racial crisis; and finally, an extended advocacy for seeking a "more perfect union" through finding common cause with one another.<sup>47</sup> In the simplest of terms, the sections can be summarized as contemplations of the past, the present, the choices available in the present, and the possibilities contained in the future.

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<sup>44</sup> Jay Newton-Small, "How Obama Writes Speeches," *TIME*, August 28, 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1837368,00.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 52.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 51-69.

This semi-linear organization mirrors the assertion at the heart of the speech that, however divisive and consuming the present appears, the history of progress in this country is long and ongoing. Remembering Obama's frequent references to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of the "arc of the moral universe" helps explain the perspective that drives this chronological structure.<sup>48</sup> Because the arc "bends toward justice" through the tireless exertions of "ordinary Americans with extraordinary courage," Obama suggests that the past gives us hope for the future.<sup>49</sup> Therefore in this speech, he positions the past as fodder for the present and future: quoting William Faulkner's language that, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past," he foregrounds the idea explicitly.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, the present contains a pivotal moment of change: "For we have a choice in this country," he says before defining that choice in terms of the election.<sup>51</sup> Finally, he frames the future as the place "where the perfection begins" by declaring, "what gives me the most hope is the next generation."<sup>52</sup> By this model, the work we do now should always be to the benefit of the future. For Obama, no part of human history happened without cause. And thus, just as he describes history bleeding perceptibly into the present—and onward—Obama's loosely demarcated structural elements blend into one another. Together, the form and content of his speech emphasize that we must understand the past, present, and future as deeply interrelated.

This quality of past, present, and future's interrelated relationship infuses the speech. Both through reference to the setting at the National Constitution Center and through an

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<sup>48</sup> See: "Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 59.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 67, 69.

examination of his own experience in comparison to Reverend Wright's, Obama offers several concrete examples of how past racial inequality manifests in the present. In regard to setting, the choice to deliver a speech on race while standing in the National Constitution Center grounds Obama's argument that the American experiment, from its first moments, has been "unfinished"—just as the Constitution has required work over time, so has the nation.<sup>53</sup> Obama defines that work as efforts of successive generations, "through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals," as defined by the Constitution, "and the reality of their time."<sup>54</sup> In confronting the Wright Controversy, this speech participates in that multi-generational struggle by modeling productive dialogues about race.

By extension, invoking the setting also recalls Obama's wider project of investing Americans in civic life. The National Constitution Center was home to the original example of American civic engagement, and so embodies the spirit of action that Obama hopes to impart to the nation. As he concludes in the speech, "this is where we start," and furthermore, "as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins."<sup>55</sup> National, wholesale progress may seem a daunting task when viewed from our current vantage point on history, but Obama's use of the setting serves as a reminder that all change must begin somewhere, initiated by someone.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 69.

Similarly, in his own story and Reverend Wright's, Obama offers two contemporary examples of the United States' relationship with race. His own story as a biracial man running for national office reflects significant progress, but also the work still left to overcome racial barriers. While celebrating the fact that his story "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," Obama reminds his audience that "some commentators have deemed me either 'too black' or 'not black enough.'"<sup>56</sup> While he personifies the "sum" of American anti-racist efforts, his candidacy also illuminates the nation's continuing discomfort with racial identity.

Meanwhile, Obama positions Reverend Wright as a different embodiment of the past's effects. He says that the Reverend's comments gave "voice" to a "powerful" anger not typically heard by the white mainstream, and cautions that, "to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races."<sup>57</sup> He identifies those "roots" as the history of racial inequality between black and white Americans, which has never been satisfactorily addressed.<sup>58</sup> His wider admonition is that the Reverend's personal experience proves that ignoring the past perpetuates it—his rebuke applies equally to the white audience who rejected Reverend Wright's criticisms and to the Reverend himself for being closed-minded. Of the Reverend himself, Obama critiques the suggestion that our society is "static,"

*as if no progress had been made; as if this country—a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition*

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 60.

of white and black, Latino, Asian, rich, poor, young and old—is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past [emphasis added].<sup>59</sup>

In this way, Obama positions their two models in opposition. His entire enterprise is to demonstrate the viability of change—he considers Reverend Wright’s enterprise to be stasis, and complacency with the past. Having mapped national change onto himself, he uses the Reverend to illustrate why national conversations about race are not well served by antagonistic perspectives. He regards Reverend Wright’s ideas to be “a profoundly distorted view of this country,” and “not only wrong, but divisive...at a time when we need unity.”<sup>60</sup> Instead, he advocates building coalitions and embracing the progressive racial attitudes his own story demonstrates are possible. The past manifests in both men’s experiences, but Obama views the model proposed by Reverend Wright as unproductive.

But lest listeners think that Obama is proposing himself as a universal model to remedy the country’s “racial stalemate,” he later clarifies, “I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle or with a single candidate, particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.”<sup>61</sup> Rather, he offers the anecdote of Ashley Baia, a white campaign organizer in South Carolina. Ashley’s example takes up almost four minutes of the speech, or roughly ten percent of his total speaking time, giving her story a significant focus enhanced by its placement as the conclusion. Her story, as Obama tells it, goes as follows. One day, Ashley participated in a roundtable discussion about why everyone present had volunteered for the campaign. She shared the story of how her mother had been diagnosed

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 55; A different analysis might examine the efficacy and morality of Obama’s race-neutral, colorblind rhetoric. I discuss the idea briefly in the conclusion to this thesis.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 63.

with cancer when Ashley was a child, and soon found herself in crippling economic straits. To help her family save money, Ashley convinced her mother that she only wanted to eat mustard and relish sandwiches. She joined the campaign to help other children who wanted to help their parents, too. The last person at the table to share a story was an elderly black man who, when asked why he was there, responded simply, “I’m here because of Ashley.”<sup>62</sup>

Drawing the speech to a close, Obama repeats that sentence twice, lingering on it. He signifies the interaction as an example of how upcoming generations’ openness to change has “already made history.”<sup>63</sup> He says with equal simplicity that,

by itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough... But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.<sup>64</sup>

Obama imbues small moments of mutual respect and understanding with enormous importance. Ashley’s connection with the elderly black man epitomizes the change Obama hopes to model to the wider nation, wherein ordinary Americans feel personally invested in one another, regardless of racial difference. This model does not disregard the historically charged realities of race relations, but asks that Americans look for those shared values that transcend them. While here the specific context remains that of race relations, the moment exemplifies his larger project as president of elevating the role of citizen. This move is particularly effective because it brings the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 67-69.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 69.

weighty concepts of race and future-shaping decisions to a personal level; Ashley's story could be any of our stories.<sup>65</sup> Obama's message becomes about taking accountability for each of our own actions. In doing so, he posits, individuals contribute to the broader project of American renewal.<sup>66</sup>

The effects of "A More Perfect Union" were profound. As a precedent, Dionne and Joy argue, this speech "was the first instance of what became an Obama habit: using a lengthy, detailed address to solve a political problem and quell a crisis."<sup>67</sup> Obama would return to this model of the speech as argumentative explication countless times during his presidency, as the speeches examined here exemplify. But even more particularly, like FDR's Fireside Chats, "A More Perfect Union" functioned as an "event" in and of itself. The speech not only responded to the controversy, but also redirected the conversation about race and his candidacy in the short term, and provided Obama with a venue wherein he could assert his ongoing syncretic perspective on the state of the union, with race relations as a critical indicator. In other words, the speech went further than simply answering to the media frenzy. It asked and answered new questions, drawing powerfully on Obama's beliefs about citizen engagement and the perfectibility of the union.

Whether he succeeded in transmitting his depth of feeling to the wider nation is virtually impossible to know. However, "A More Perfect Union" does offer some evidence of public internalization and implementation as a pedagogical tool for generating new conversations about

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<sup>65</sup> By not giving the "elderly black man" a name, Obama frames the story about Ashley, and relates the moment mostly for a white audience—presumably as a way to placate the polling data that indicated white Americans were uneasy with his candidacy, following the Wright controversy. In saying Ashley's story could be any of our stories, I mean only that Obama's use of her story is meant to model the presumably universalizing message of his speech of overcoming racial wrongs.

<sup>66</sup> Obama, "Keynote Address at the Call to Renewal Conference," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Obama, introduction to "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 51.

race. Author and Professor of Literacy Denise Davila offers us one example of the speech in use, signaling that for at least one demographic—educators—Obama had succeeded in making his arguments about race salient and enactable for his listening audience. In her article, “‘White People Don’t Work at McDonald’s’ and Other Shadow Stories from the Field: Analyzing Preservice Teachers’ Use of Obama’s Race Speech to Teach for Social Justice,” Davila analyzes the outcomes of two preservice teachers’ (PSTs’) attempts to engage high school seniors in a discussion of race and racism using “A More Perfect Union” as their core text.<sup>68</sup>

Fulfilling the speech’s proposition that more Americans need to engage in activities in order to overcome racial divisiveness, the PSTs’ initial use of the speech and Davila’s later strategic analysis suggest that both sets of educators considered the speech to be a workable teaching device for exactly that purpose. Though Davila’s core purpose is to reflect on the efficacy of the PSTs’ teaching strategies in educating students about social justice, her study also allows us to consider the particular ways in which the participants utilized “A More Perfect Union” as a model. The PSTs Allen and Bernardo (pseudonyms), students, and Davila herself all respond to the speech in different ways. For the PSTs, “A More Perfect Union” represents an example of a text that facilitates social justice education, which they hoped would allow them to “make space” for students to talk.<sup>69</sup> For students, the speech becomes a sounding board for their developing ideologies. For Davila, the speech offers an analytical framework for future social justice education—of the three parties, her analysis offers the most compelling application and exploration of the speech.

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<sup>68</sup> Denise Davila, “‘White People Don’t Work at McDonald’s’ and Other Shadow Stories from the Field: Analyzing Preservice Teachers’ Use of Obama’s Race Speech to Teach for Social Justice,” *English Education* 44, no. 1 (2011), 15.

<sup>69</sup> Davila, “‘White People Don’t Work at McDonald’s,’” 44.

Responding to how the classroom discussions unfolded, Davila's use of "A More Perfect Union" is to suggest a more productive means of guiding such discussions in the future.

Acknowledging the "uncomfortable, multidimensional space" mediating contrasting student positions created for the PSTs, Davila ultimately critiques their particular implementation of the lesson plan.<sup>70</sup> However, as a future framework, she posits that a teacher better familiarized with the speech and comfortable fulfilling various instructional roles, especially one she terms a "Contextual Mediator," "could reference Obama's review of contemporary institutionalized racism" to provide context and help move the students to an understanding of antiracist counternarratives.<sup>71</sup> She cautions that "without adequate pedagogical, procedural, or contextual knowledge and experience, even the most well-intentioned teachers could unintentionally reinforce the kind of hegemonic shadow stories and tropes that they hope to interrogate."<sup>72</sup> Recognizing the trouble the PSTs encountered in addressing students' racial biases speaks to the wider challenges of facilitating racial dialogues without accounting for the "chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races" that Obama references in "A More Perfect Union."<sup>73</sup> Davila's final takeaway emphasizes how ahistorical, uncontextualized discussions merely reify pre-existing biases.

Davila's use of "A More Perfect Union" is therefore as a model for demonstrating the importance of education in disrupting prevalent stereotypes and essentializing depictions. Her framework for future implementations of the speech as a classroom teaching device resonates with Obama's arguments for a more inclusive, historically conscious treatment of race.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 29, 23.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>73</sup> Obama, "A More Perfect Union," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 61.

Consequently, Davila's use of "A More Perfect Union" comes full circle, from analyzing the speech's implementation to arguing implicitly for its merits. She utilizes the speech as a pedagogical tool for future teaching strategies. In doing so, consciously or not, she aligns her critiques of American teaching habits with the model for "a more perfect union" that Obama provided.

"I Am Here to Say They Are Wrong": Remarks on the Economy  
Osawatomie, Kansas, December 6, 2011

Largely due to the stalled economy, late 2011 was a grim time for the Obama administration. Though the "nadir" of the Great Recession had passed more than a year before, for many Americans, the effects were ongoing.<sup>74</sup> The public made its anxiety known by giving the Obama administration some of the lowest ratings of his presidency. Gallup poll data for first week of December found that when asked, "Do you approve of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?" only 43% responded approvingly, while 50% disapproved.<sup>75</sup> Despite two massive bailout packages, the state of the economy meant that many Americans were still struggling.

The events of the summer—the disastrous debt ceiling crisis—unfolded as a result of the bitter power struggle between Congressional Democrats and Republicans. Midterm elections in 2010 had ceded Democratic control of the House to Republicans and vastly reduced the

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<sup>74</sup> Floyd Norris, "Crisis Is Over, but Where's the Fix?" *New York Times*, March 10, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/11/business/economy/11norris.html?>

<sup>75</sup> "Presidential Approval Ratings—Barack Obama," *Gallup*, last accessed March 17, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116479/barack-obama-presidential-job-approval.aspx>; His approval ratings from the same week of December 5-11, 2011 can be broken down to 10% approval among Republicans, 38% among Independents, and 82% among Democrats, demonstrating a typical example of the radical ideological differences in attitude toward the administration associated with party affiliation.

Democratic majority in the Senate. Of particular concern for the Obama administration was the fact that many newly elected Republicans identified with the emergent Tea Party Movement, which opposed high taxation and government intervention in the private sector—two principles that clashed with Obama’s interventionist economic recovery plans.<sup>76</sup> The divided government proved unable to pass compromise legislation, including a bill to reauthorize the traditionally routine increase to the Treasury’s debt ceiling. Congressional Republicans had vowed not to vote for reauthorization unless Democrats agreed to accept significant spending cuts. Hoping to forestall a default, Obama attempted to “circumvent” his party to make a deal with Republican House Speaker John Boehner.<sup>77</sup> He did not succeed. Abroad, the crisis elicited a deluge of disbelieving headlines from international news outlets.<sup>78</sup> At home in Washington, the process produced a confusion of failed compromises and tense negotiations, even after a new budget was eventually passed in August.<sup>79</sup> As the year drew to a close, this tense climate persisted.

Accordingly conscious of both the economic straits affecting the nation and the battle over reelection soon to come, Obama’s advisors proposed a strategic recasting of the president as the progressive champion he had promised to be in 2008.<sup>80</sup> He desperately needed to provide a compelling economic narrative for the country—Obama would later recognize his failure to do

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<sup>76</sup> Michael Ray, “Tea Party Movement,” Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tea-Party-movement>.

<sup>77</sup> Introduction to “Remarks on the Economy,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 172.

<sup>78</sup> See: Ujala Sehgal, “World Tells Us What It Really Thinks About Our ‘Absurd’ Debt Crisis,” *Atlantic*, July 30, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/world-tells-us-what-it-really-thinks-about-our-absurd-debt-crisis/353486/>.

<sup>79</sup> “Debt Ceiling: Timeline of Deal’s Development,” *CNN*, August 2, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/POLITICS/07/25/debt.talks.timeline/index.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Introduction to “Remarks on the Economy,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 172.

so earlier as the “biggest mistake” of his first term.<sup>81</sup> Though policy matters, “the nature of this office is also to tell a story to the American people that gives them a sense of unity and purpose and optimism, especially during tough times,” he conceded in a July 2012 interview with CBS News.<sup>82</sup> Thus, to reclaim his image, the weary president embraced the illustrious memory of his presidential forefather by traveling to the small town of Osawatomie, Kansas.

Over a century earlier, the original Progressive champion, TR, had delivered his pivotal “New Nationalism” speech in Osawatomie. “New Nationalism” reflected the Progressive philosophy of government intervention to promote the public good, or as TR said, “the executive power as the steward of the public welfare.”<sup>83</sup> Roosevelt used his “New Nationalism” speech to propose greater government regulation of corporations, and moreover as a call to action against economic injustice. TR’s criticism was rooted in concern for the country, which had just experienced several decades of rapid industrialization, leading to the “Gilded Age” of industrial tycoons that TR sought to regulate. Obama’s decision to address the economy in Osawatomie drew powerfully on TR’s previous appearance in the town.

Bolstered by the historic setting, Obama’s 50-minute address is characterized by a somewhat belligerent tone, contrasted with a reliance on his hopeful ethos of citizen. As was true of “A More Perfect Union,” this speech relies on a loose structure of roughly four movements. First, Obama grounds the immediate occasion of his speech by referencing the “Great

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<sup>81</sup> Alice O’Connor, “Narrator-in-Chief: Presidents and the Politics of Economic Crisis from FDR to Obama,” in *Recapturing the Oval Office: New Historical Approaches to the American Presidency* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 54.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Megan Slack, “From the Archives: President Teddy Roosevelt’s New Nationalism Speech,” *White House*, December 6, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/12/06/archives-president-teddy-roosevelts-new-nationalism-speech>.

Recession,” the unfinished economic recovery, and articulating his thesis (“my deep conviction”) for how to move forward.<sup>84</sup> Next, he offers two historical contexts for his speech: TR’s “New Nationalism” and the conservative line of opposition to progressive reforms. He then defines the choice he sees the country poised to make, between the conservative theory of economics and his ideas about how to pursue an economy “built to last.”<sup>85</sup> Finally, he builds to another description of the current moment, including a description of his proposed steps and the Congressional Republican refusals to enforce them.

Though the first movement stands as the shortest and most topical, it leads fluidly into Obama’s following section of contextualization. Here he adds greater personal input and emphasizes the historical dimensions that have produced the contemporary moment. As he does in “A More Perfect Union,” Obama moves from the historical precedent to the contemporary choice facing Americans, making the third movement by far his most ideologically driven. The last and longest movement brings Obama’s argument back to everyday Americans’ lived experiences, where he suggests that rebuilding the economy will require everyone from bankers and CEOs to teachers and parents to “take some responsibility.”<sup>86</sup> This section includes his most biting criticisms of his adversaries in Congress, recalling that part of the occasion of this speech is the growth of Tea Party isolationism. Holistically, this speech offers a value-driven argument for rebuilding the economy, particularly the middle class, by also rebuilding trust in government, the future, and each other. In addition to a searing criticism of Conservative economic attitudes, Obama argues that the economic choices we make today are moreover choices about the

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<sup>84</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Economy,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 176.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

“nation’s welfare” and therefore need to be acknowledged as defending the most fundamental of “American values.”<sup>87</sup> In this way, Obama positions his reform proposals as de-politicized while simultaneously delivering a deeply partisan criticism. Ultimately, he forces listeners to see the crisis not simply as financial, but moral, in keeping with his long-term ambition to reshape national conversations.

While this is undoubtedly still a speech about the economy, it is significant that Obama chose to make it as much about the values of democracy and fairness as about finance. With the devastating consequences of the economic collapse as the backdrop to his speech, Obama asserts that any philosophy that ignores collective needs is “wrong.”<sup>88</sup> He continues,

I’m here in Kansas to reaffirm my deep conviction that we’re greater together than we are on our own. I believe that this country succeeds when everyone gets a fair shot, when everyone does their fair share, when everyone plays by the same rules. These aren’t Democratic values or Republican values. These aren’t 1 percent values or 99 percent values. They’re American values. And we have to reclaim them.<sup>89</sup>

Obama’s statement of purpose offers us a distillation of his personal ethos. He utilizes it here and throughout the speech to establish a directive for how he believes Americans should “reclaim” our fundamental values. In the context of this speech, that directive is to reduce economic inequality. Obama posits that to do so, Americans need to embrace an economic strategy that is both “truer to our history” and embraces “today’s innovation economy.”<sup>90</sup> He clarifies, “If we want a strong middle class, then our tax code must reflect our values. We have to make choices.”

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 186, 176.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 182, 183.

<sup>91</sup> Obama sustains this kind of simple, direct connection between economic viability and values throughout the speech.

This value-based relationship allows him to make the same topical pivot present in “A More Perfect Union,” when he redefines race relations as the speech’s takeaway, rather than the Wright controversy. Instead of merely addressing the economic crisis in financial terms, Obama frames it as a moral choice. In “A More Perfect Union,” Obama had also asserted his “firm conviction” that, “working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds and that, in fact, we have no choice...if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”<sup>92</sup> In Osawatomie, this time with a broadly moral lens instead of a specifically racial one, we see Obama navigating an equally national crisis by examining the past and asserting that, once again, to rectify the situation requires working together to defend fundamentally American values.

Predominantly discussing values is not to say that Obama ignores the pressing financial details that compelled this speech. For example, he says, “Look at the statistics,” and references average incomes of the top one percent of American earners over the past decade.<sup>93</sup> But the numbers represent evidence, not his core deliverable. True to form, Obama chose to weave a historical narrative reliant on beliefs about American values, longterm national welfare, and what is morally right and wrong, rather than one about hard numerical evidence.<sup>94</sup> Stating that, “This kind of gaping inequality gives lie to the promise that’s at the very heart of America: that this is a place where you can make it if you try,” Obama frames economic inequality as clashing with the

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>92</sup> Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 63.

<sup>93</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Economy,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 180.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 175, 176, 181, 186.

moral image of a fair America.<sup>95</sup> Obama challenges listeners to see the contradiction made visible by the economic crisis and act on it.

The contexts Obama chooses to reference also help to broaden the topic from economic to moral by positioning the moment on a continuum of American history. By invoking TR's speech on "New Nationalism" through setting, thematics, and direct rearticulations of his political objectives, Obama legitimizes his own contemporary assertions about how to best respond to the current economic situation. The setting in Osawatomie establishes a baseline association with TR's authoritative presence, but even more pointedly, Obama's references to TR ensure that his historical echoes will not be forgotten. Obama cites TR at the beginning and end of his speech, bookending his contemporary economic arguments as he did with Constitutional references during his Philadelphia address on race. Framing his ideas this way historicizes and imbues them with patriotic candor, folding them into the speech's wider interest in advocating a return to communal values. And as his wider use of the speech suggests, this address exemplifies how Obama has aligned himself ideologically with TR and his concept of the "bully pulpit."

Obama first quotes TR's "New Nationalism" statement that "Our country means nothing unless it means the triumph of a real democracy... of an economic system under which each man shall be guaranteed the opportunity to show the best that there is in him."<sup>96</sup> Democracy depends on the accountability of market systems to the public they ostensibly serve; an ill-functioning economy undercuts democracy by exacerbating an unequal distribution of wealth. Obama draws both hope and contemporary criticism from the overlap in the two historical moments'

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 177.

democratic failures. Hope, because despite pressure to do otherwise, TR successfully implemented systems that continue to benefit the country. Today, Obama reminds listeners, “we are a richer nation and a stronger democracy because of what he fought for in his last campaign: an eight-hour work day and a minimum wage for women—insurance for the unemployed and for the elderly, and those with disabilities; political reform and a progressive income tax.”<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, Obama reassures the audience that there is hope in remembering TR’s regulatory accomplishments because it sets a precedent for how we might respond to the current economic “transformation.”<sup>98</sup> Obama seems to suggest that proactive steps to match the advances of technology in today’s globalized markets should parallel the regulations TR implemented.<sup>99</sup>

However, Obama also finds cause for criticism in the continuity. Arguments against progressive reforms have gone relatively unchanged since TR’s time, and yet, whenever they have been implemented, have failed to remedy economic inequality. He addresses trickle-down economics as the “same old tune” that exhorts, “The market will take care of everything.”<sup>100</sup> Somewhat glibly, Obama dismisses such attitudes by saying, “I mean, understand, it’s not as if we haven’t tried this theory.”<sup>101</sup> Such emphasis on continuity places the current economic crisis on a temporal scale that stretches back to TR, if not further. Only by addressing these concerns does Obama envision Americans moving closer to the Founders’ vision of a “more perfect union,” which is irrevocably consumed with the question of how to achieve equality. This speech

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 178.

pursues the question of economic inequality as much as “A More Perfect Union” pursues racial inequality as a roadblock to that vision of perfection.

A second significant instance in which Obama invokes TR occurs at the end of the speech. Having expanded into half a dozen examples of how inequality still “distorts our democracy,” Obama returns to the lessons he wants listeners to draw from the previous president’s speech.<sup>102</sup> Obama quotes TR’s line, “We are all Americans. Our common interests are as broad as the continent.”<sup>103</sup> Aside from its relevance in this speech, TR’s quote also notably foreshadows how Obama would argue in his 2004 DNC address for de-politicizing American racial identities.<sup>104</sup> In Osawatomie, Obama upholds TR’s model of spreading this message throughout the country, believing that, “everybody would benefit from a country in which everyone gets a fair chance.”<sup>105</sup> Given modern technology, Obama can do the same thing but with an even greater capacity to reach Americans in every corner of the country. Despite obvious changes to the world since TR’s time, Obama asserts that,

[What] hasn’t changed—what can never change—are the values that got us this far. We still have a stake in each other’s success. We still believe that this should be a place where you can make it if you try. And we still believe, in the words of the man who called for a New Nationalism all those years ago, “The fundamental rule of our national life,” he said, “the rule which underlies all others, is that, on the whole, and in the long run, we shall go up or down together.” And I believe America is on the way up.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>104</sup> Obama, “Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 11: “There’s not a liberal America and a conservative America; there’s the United States of America.”

<sup>105</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Economy” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 192.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 192.

This conclusion maintains that the power of the American experiment in democracy resides in our ability to return to this question over time. To establish a freer, fairer economic reality for everyday Americans, Obama's version of progress prioritizes willingness to test the experiment to its limits. He encourages his listeners to embrace the uncertainty embedded in that willingness to try. Even in desperate times, fundamental values sustain the nation, equipping us with the ability to experiment, try, even fail, in the project of securing "a more perfect union."

As a model for implementing these fundamental American values, Obama lists several examples of companies already enacting them. He describes how during the recession, the workers and owners alike of Marvin Windows and Doors, from Warroad, Minnesota, agreed to give up some pay, rather than allow any layoffs.<sup>107</sup> Obama contends, "That's how America was built. That's why we're the greatest nation on Earth. That's what our greatest companies understand. Our success has never been about survival of the fittest. It's about building a nation where we're all better off."<sup>108</sup> Just as he had earlier defined the speech's impetus as about values, rather than hard numbers, this move echoes the rhetorical pivot he made in "A More Perfect Union," when he reframed the speech to be about race relations rather than the Wright controversy. Obama positions Marvin as an embodiment of American values, as applied through economic practices.

Less concrete evidence exists to suggest that the public internalized Obama's remarks on the economy than did for "A More Perfect Union," perhaps because however simply Obama framed his recommendations, practically speaking, the market dissuades such changes. However, evidence of correlating attitudes in influential business moguls like Starbucks CEO Howard

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 192.

Schultz suggests that Obama's ideas have grounds for application elsewhere. Three months before Obama delivered his speech in Osawatomie, he called Schultz to praise the CEO's recent political activities. Though known as a long-time Democrat, Schultz had made headlines for his announcement that he would halt all of his campaign contributions to either party until lawmakers put aside their partisanship and began working toward the "well being of the people."<sup>109</sup> More than one hundred executives joined his campaign, prompting much attention from the media and eventually, from the president himself.<sup>110</sup> In addition to his campaign contributions freeze, Schultz announced "Create Jobs USA," which *Fortune* reported would function as a grassroots private fund to provide loans to small businesses in underserved markets across the country.<sup>111</sup> These activities reflect Schultz's wider ambitions for Starbucks as a responsible, for-profit, public company. The company's website states, "We have always believed Starbucks can—and should—have a positive impact on the communities we serve. One person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time."<sup>112</sup> Causational or not, the overlap between the Starbucks responsibility statement and the one Obama makes in his speech on the economy is distinct. In Osawatomie, Obama said that rebuilding the economy as one fairness "will require all of us to see that we have a stake in each other's success. And it will require all of us to take some responsibility."<sup>113</sup> In both cases, the responsibility of the whole is distributed on an individual level. Schultz's long-term dedication to fostering positive material effects for the wider country,

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<sup>109</sup> Charles Riley, "100+ CEOs Promise No Campaign Donations," *CNN*, August 26, 2011, [http://money.cnn.com/2011/08/24/news/economy/ceo\\_pledge\\_donations/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2011/08/24/news/economy/ceo_pledge_donations/index.htm).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> David A. Kaplan, "Howard Schultz Brews Strong Coffee at Starbucks," *Fortune*, November 17, 2011, <http://fortune.com/2011/11/17/howard-schultz-brews-strong-coffee-at-starbucks/>.

<sup>112</sup> "Responsibility," *Starbucks*, accessed April 23, 2018, <https://www.starbucks.com/responsibility>.

<sup>113</sup> Obama, "Remarks on the Economy," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 190.

and particularly his efforts within the business community in 2011, embody the moral leadership Obama championed in Osawatomie.

“For We Were Born of Change”: Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of “Bloody Sunday”  
Selma, Alabama, March 7, 2015

Every year, hundreds gather to remember the Selma to Montgomery marches, “Bloody Sunday,” and the coordinated civil rights efforts that coalesced on the Edmund Pettus Bridge one afternoon in 1965. As part of the fiftieth anniversary weekend of celebrations, Obama spoke that Saturday before walking across the bridge in honor of the original marches. Packed crowds joined him, including Civil Rights leaders Martin Luther King III and Reverend Jesse Jackson, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, and upwards of one hundred Congressmen and women.<sup>114</sup> Aside from its historic meaning, the weekend was also critical as political leverage for Obama—efforts to renew key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, originally spurred by the events in Selma, were stalled in Congress.<sup>115</sup> Nodding to this fact mid-speech, Obama called on the gathered Congressmen to “honor those [who marched] on this bridge” by pledging to restore the act.<sup>116</sup> Obama directed his rhetoric in Selma not just toward the nation, but also toward political leaders in Washington.

A second, pressing context foregrounded Obama’s presence in Selma, emphasizing the urgency of racial dialogues in the present day. Just days before the commemoration, the

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<sup>114</sup> Los Angeles Times, “Bloody Sunday 50th Anniversary: Thousands Crowd Selma Bridge,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/thousands-join-second-day-of-selma-remembrances/2015/03/08/60d6784c-c5da-11e4-a199-6cb5e63819d2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ea19d6104ae2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/thousands-join-second-day-of-selma-remembrances/2015/03/08/60d6784c-c5da-11e4-a199-6cb5e63819d2_story.html?utm_term=.ea19d6104ae2).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday,’” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 262.

Department of Justice (DOJ) had released a “scathing” report, summarizing its investigation into the events of August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri.<sup>117</sup> Following the shooting of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, a white Ferguson police officer, the DOJ opened investigations into Brown’s shooting and into the Ferguson police department’s operations. The Ferguson Report concerned the latter case, and found that African Americans were impacted to a severely disproportionate degree in “nearly every aspect of Ferguson’s law enforcement system.”<sup>118</sup> By March of 2015, similar examples of police brutality against African Americans, particularly Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio, had become prominent national news.<sup>119</sup> Obama’s presence in Selma that weekend poignantly evoked the legacy and contemporary consequences of racial inequality in the United States. He would address the report’s narrative as “sadly familiar.”<sup>120</sup>

In a way, Obama’s speech in Selma communicated a turning point in his presidency. During his first term, black leaders had frequently criticized Obama for avoiding meaningful conversations about race.<sup>121</sup> His appearance commemorating “Bloody Sunday,” along with the additions of sentencing reform and police misconduct to his agenda and the creation of “My

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<sup>117</sup> Mark Berman and Wesley Lowery, “The 12 Highlights from the DOJ’s Scathing Ferguson Report,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/03/04/the-12-key-highlights-from-the-dojs-scathing-ferguson-report/?utm\\_term=.175920a312f2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2015/03/04/the-12-key-highlights-from-the-dojs-scathing-ferguson-report/?utm_term=.175920a312f2).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> See: Rodney Gainous Jr., “Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Other Victims, Part 1,” *Medium*, July 7, 2016, <https://medium.com/@rodneyg/sandra-bland-tamir-rice-trayvon-martin-rekia-boyd-eric-garner-alton-sterling-philando-castile-d148f053bd89>.

<sup>120</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday,’” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 259.

<sup>121</sup> See: Perry Bacon Jr., “The Professor vs. The President: Has Obama Done Enough for African-Americans?” *NBC News*, February 28, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/professors-vs-president-has-obama-done-enough-african-americans-n523811>.

Brother's Keeper," a mentoring program for young black men, concretized the commitment he made in his second term to make race relations a greater priority.<sup>122</sup> His speech, however, presents a mixed message of specific and universalizing lessons from the events of fifty years before. Despite Obama's celebration of Civil Rights leaders and activists' achievements at Selma as a critical moment for the Civil Rights Movement, he frames the site as an example of his wider project of engaged citizenship, which itself fits neatly within a narrative of American progress. Dionne Jr. and Reid categorize the speech as an "American elegy," given its odes and poetic quality, which facilitates its overall message of harmony.<sup>123</sup> Given Obama's role as president, we can understand this as a strategy to invest all Americans, regardless of race, in his wider project of "a more perfect union" by bettering race relations.

At just 30 minutes, Obama's speech at Selma is the shortest of the three examined here. Despite its brevity, the speech's exuberant tone, use of direct address, and invocation of setting make it perhaps the most overt in its reliance on Obama's core ethos. The speech's prevailing argument presents a perfect distillation of Obama's core ethos: that America embodies an unfinished project, wherein each generation must contribute to the process of remaking the nation to better align with the promise of the Founding Fathers. Using the same idea of his speeches composed of loose movements, we can view his remarks in three parts with a broadening effect similar to the first two speeches. First, Obama responds to the immediate occasion by imagining the audience back into the events of March 7, 1965, but quickly frames "Bloody Sunday" within larger American narratives of destiny, character, and progress. He then

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<sup>122</sup> Edward-Isaac Dove, "What Obama's Trip to Selma Means," *Politico*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/what-obamas-trip-to-selma-means-115816>.

<sup>123</sup> Obama, "Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday,'" in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 253.

addresses the recently released Ferguson Report, but largely as a transition into his third movement. At this point, he discusses the ongoing “march” toward “a more perfect union.” The third movement is particularly poetic, which allows Obama to conclude with resounding declarations of hope for the future.

As ever, Obama’s narrative structure creates a sense of interrelatedness between the ideas he highlights. He utilizes the poignant image of an ongoing “march” across generations, time, and space to create the narrative organization of the speech, creating the same kind of visceral connection between form and content present in “A More Perfect Union.” In this case, beginning with the immediate context of the commemoration allows Obama to invoke the Civil Rights Movement and metaphorically expand upon the ongoing “march” of progress into which his wider project fits. At the beginning of the speech, he declares that “We gather here to honor the courage of ordinary Americans willing to endure billy clubs and the chastening rod; tear gas and the trampling hoof; men and women who despite the gush of blood and splintered bone would stay true to their North Star and keep marching toward justice.”<sup>124</sup> These lines transition seamlessly from the specific purpose of the weekend—honoring the “ordinary Americans” who were the original participants of “Bloody Sunday”—to Obama’s grander purpose for the speech—symbolically hoisting the idea of a continuous “march toward justice,” extending from their efforts to ours today.

This rhetorical move foreshadows the litany of similar instances Obama makes throughout the speech. In the final minutes of the address, for example, Obama returns to the

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 255.

idea of Selma as a project that “belongs to everyone,” and to which we must “continually try to improve.”<sup>125</sup> He continues,

Fifty years from Bloody Sunday, our march is not yet finished, but we’re getting closer.

Two hundred and thirty-nine years after this nation’s founding our union is not yet perfect, but we are getting closer. Our job’s easier because somebody already got us through that first mile. Somebody already got us over that bridge.<sup>126</sup>

Situating the current moment as the result of the two time frames (the nation’s total history and its history since Selma) emphasizes that the ongoing “march” has scope beyond the fifty year anniversary being celebrated. Obama’s image of the “march” connecting Americans across time and place poignantly illustrates his argument that “a more perfect union” must be the work of everyone, not just black or white Americans or a few select leaders. That previous generations have already accomplished concrete progress should give listeners hope. Obama’s loaded reference to the “bridge” contains a similar combination of literal and symbolic resonances. The symbolism at work here may be somewhat overdetermined, but Obama uses the overttness of the metaphor to ascribe reverence to the image of a perpetual “march,” particularly as the implicit destination of Obama’s imagined “march” is the fulfillment of the nation’s foundational ideals.

Such metaphorical reliance on the idea of a “march” and the “bridge” also powerfully evokes the setting of Selma and the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Several times throughout the speech, Obama invites a contemplation of setting through overt references. An early example occurs

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 265.

when he asks, “what could be more American than what happened in this place?”<sup>127</sup> Still discussing Selma as a historically charged site, he continues,

What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this, what greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals? That’s why Selma is not some outlier in the American experience... It is instead the manifestation of a creed written into our founding documents: “We the People... in order to form a more perfect union.” ...These are not just words. They’re a living thing, a call to action, a roadmap for citizenship.<sup>128</sup>

The idea driving this passage is that the United States is a product of change. Selma becomes “not some outlier,” but instead a “manifestation” and a “roadmap” for the American experience. Positioning Selma this way casts the site as a model, similarly to how Obama positioned himself and Ashley Baia in “A More Perfect Union.” By indicating successful examples like their stories or Selma’s, Obama proposes that their methods can be replicated by the current generation with equal success. Of course, as a site of civil rights protest, Selma represents an inherently fraught power relationship between citizens and nationhood that should seemingly be in tension with the universalizing message Obama presents. But rather than address it as such, he frames Selma as inherently American, and protest as the means by which the country enacts change and progress. He solidifies this impression by listing iconically recognizable “places and moments in America

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 257.

where this nation’s destiny has been decided,” and declaring, “Selma is such a place.”<sup>129</sup> By rhetorically adding Selma to that list, which includes Concord and Lexington, Appomattox Courthouse, Gettysburg, Independence Hall, Seneca Falls, Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral, Obama recenters the actions of Civil Rights activists as a defining part of American history.<sup>130</sup> Sites like Selma embody his sense of American progress because they serve as permanent witnesses to moments in history where ordinary citizens have eroded the boundaries of inequality.

Engaging historically with Selma’s setting makes change a tangible force in this speech. Indeed, the soaring rhetoric of his conclusion responds directly to the concept of change at work in the American experience:

Fellow marchers, so much has changed in fifty years. We have endured war and we’ve fashioned peace. We’ve seen technological wonders that touch every aspect of our lives. We take for granted conveniences that our parents could have scarcely imagined. But what has not changed is the imperative of citizenship.<sup>131</sup>

Change, then, constitutes an inherent part of the American experience. Ironically perhaps, Obama frames change as a constant force. Though not always positive, as the caveat of war implies, he suggests that change on the whole has fostered a better reality for most Americans. But the responsibility for fostering such positive change is no abstract thing—thus Obama situates the “imperative of citizenship” as a single counterexample in his narrative of change.<sup>132</sup> The assertion bears striking resemblance to his argument in his remarks on the economy in 2011,

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 263.

when he argued that “[What] hasn’t changed—what can never change—are the values that got us this far. We still have a stake in each other’s success.”<sup>133</sup> That same moral imperative manifested in Selma, but also in other places and other figures throughout American history. Declaring, “We know America is what we make of it,” Obama embarks on a list of more than two dozen examples of such figures who, like Susan B. Anthony, “shook the system until the law reflected that truth,” or like the “Tuskegee Airmen, and the Navajo codetalkers, and the Japanese Americans who fought for this country even as their own liberty had been denied.”<sup>134</sup> He infuses the address with individuals who challenge traditional conceptions of the status quo, redefining America by their examples. All of these figures fostered change during their lives, but Obama calls on them to do that work again, rhetorically embodying his argument that small acts of individual courage can change more than one’s own life.

As so often happens in Obama’s rhetoric, change as indicated by the past also reflects hope for the future. He declares that, “If Selma taught us anything, it’s that our work is never done. The American experiment in self-government gives work and purpose to each generation. Selma teaches us, as well, that action requires that we shed our cynicism.”<sup>135</sup> This lesson derives from Obama’s ethos of citizen engagement, which is here clearly predicated on the hope of current and future generations’ ability to improve the nation. As an example, he asserts that the Ferguson Report’s narrative, while “sadly familiar,” was not entirely correct because racial violence is no longer “sanctioned by law or by custom” as it was before the Civil Rights

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<sup>133</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Economy,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 192.

<sup>134</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday,’” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 263-264.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

Movement.<sup>136</sup> Just as he asserted of his own ability to run for national office in “A More Perfect Union,” Obama here frames change in the lived experiences of African Americans over the last fifty years as tangible proof of progress. Furthermore, he argues, “We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, that racial division is inherent to America.”<sup>137</sup> Buying into cynicism creates a blockade to progress in this model. More echoes of his argument in “A More Perfect Union,” that the Constitution contained the promise of “a union that could be and should be perfected over time,” despite the original sin of slavery, arise in Obama’s assertions in Selma.<sup>138</sup> Obama’s hopeful redefinition of the American narrative gives collective action against oppression precedence over the hardships that must be overcome.

Through a critical moment of direct address to the audience, this speech evokes the Alinskian concept of “agitation” that Obama developed as a community organizer.<sup>139</sup> Nearing the end of the speech, having spent upwards of three minutes offering an anaphoric list of the identities that make up the abstract concept of America, Obama rhetorically pivots to include listeners in the list: “And that’s why the young people here today and listening all across the country must take away from this day. You are America. Unconstrained by habit and convention. Unencumbered by what is, because you’re ready to seize what ought to be.”<sup>140</sup> Rhetorically expanding the definition of “America” to include the identities of all those listening, Obama implicates us all in his vision. Whereas in many other speeches, Obama allowed his audience the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 259; Continued racial violence since this speech took place undoubtedly cast doubt on the full truth of this statement.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>138</sup> Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 52.

<sup>139</sup> Garrow, *Rising Star*, 372.

<sup>140</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday,’” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 265.

choice of making a personal connection, his use of direct address, the universalizing “you,” and explicit directive of lessons to be learned denies listeners the choice.

By aiming his instruction at “young people,” Obama evokes his belief that the possibilities of “a more perfect union” lie with future generations, and in the work of current ones. In typical Obama fashion, he places great emphasis on this future-looking aspect of the speech, as if to move audience attention from the past to the future. “We respect the past, but we don’t pine for the past. We don’t fear the future, we grab for it,” he exclaims, just before espousing this instruction.<sup>141</sup> The energy of “agitation” infuses these declarations, particularly when he characterizes the young generation with inventiveness. If youth embrace their “unconstrained” and “unencumbered” status, Obama suggests, the first steps toward a fairer, freer America will be achieved.<sup>142</sup>

Obama’s interest in young generations emerges prominently across his career. His education initiatives, success winning the “youth” vote in both general elections, and frequent references to his two daughters, Sasha and Malia, have ensured this image. Speeches like the one in Selma speak broadly to this interest, but also to the particular way in which he locates hope for the future in youth’s organizing power. Since leaving office, Obama’s most recent public statement to this effect was published as part of *TIME*’s *100* “Most Influential People of 2018.” Obama writes that the students from Parkland, Florida, who have energized the nation’s conversation on gun violence through “March for Our Lives,” have tapped into “the power so often inherent in youth.”<sup>143</sup> This is the power “to see the world anew; to reject the old constraints,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>143</sup> Barack Obama, “Cameron Kasky, Jaclyn Corin, David Gogg, Emma Gonzalez, and Alex Wind,” *TIME* *100*, April 18, 2018,

outdated conventions and cowardice too often dressed up as wisdom. The power to insist that America can be better.”<sup>144</sup> The former president’s short *TIME* piece contains striking rhetorical similarities to the speech in Selma’s conclusion, where Obama directly addresses “young people” to declare, “You are America. Unconstrained by habit and convention. Unencumbered by what is, because you’re ready to seize what ought to be.”<sup>145</sup> Maintaining this assertion has allowed Obama the chance to hone the language and parse its significance for different applications. Even more critically, this continuity rhetorically invokes his earlier iterations each time he makes statements to this effect.

The conclusion to Obama’s *TIME* article also echoes the role of history in his Selma speech. In a far more concise format, Obama argues that moments of change, where complacency becomes impossible, define American history. Here, of course, Obama tunes his language to young people’s particular influence on the historical record:

Our history is defined by the youthful push to make America more just, more compassionate, more equal under the law. This generation—of Parkland, of Dreamers, of Black Lives Matter—embraces that duty. If they make their elders uncomfortable, that’s how it should be. Our kids now show us what we’ve told them America is all about, even if we haven’t always believed it ourselves: that our future isn’t written for us, but by us.

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[http://time.com/collection/most-influential-people-2018/5217568/parkland-students/?utm\\_campaign=time&utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social&xid=time\\_socialflow\\_twitter](http://time.com/collection/most-influential-people-2018/5217568/parkland-students/?utm_campaign=time&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&xid=time_socialflow_twitter).

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Obama, “Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of ‘Bloody Sunday,’” in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 265.

<sup>146</sup> Obama, “Cameron Kasky, Jaclyn Corin, David Gogg, Emma Gonzalez, and Alex Wind,” *TIME 100*.

The piece celebrates putting words into action. Listing the Parkland leadership—Cameron Kasky, Jaelyn Corin, David Gogg, Emma Gonzalez, and Alex Wind—alongside Dreamers and Black Lives Matter broadens Obama’s message to include the entire movement of young people who have become engaged in politics and civic life since the last election. All three serve as successful models of the kind of engagement he advocated as president. In arguing that the future is formed “by us,” Obama’s final words, in particular, recall his core ethos and the main argument from his speech in Selma. Endorsed by its powerful publishing institution, *TIME 100* stands as a highly anticipated form of national praise, making it an effective platform for transmitting this message. Participation in the list indicates that since leaving office, Obama has continued to evaluate the means of national communication at his disposal.

#### Conclusions: Obama and the Future of Communications Technologies

Obama’s speeches never relinquished his belief in the power of genuine conversation to change people’s lives and attitudes. Obama believed that politics at its best allows people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to come together in mutual regard for productive outcomes. Politics at its worst sends us back into old debates and hampers our ability to move outside of our ideological circles. He entered office explicitly hoping to forge a “new kind of politics,” and foster a national community environment that respected difference but simultaneously cherished our shared qualities.<sup>147</sup> His presidential addresses emphasized ordinary Americans’ ability to change the course of the nation’s destiny. They invoked his belief in the efficacy of civic life and his conviction that by working together, each new generation brings us into closer alignment with the Founding Fathers’ original vision of democratic equality.

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<sup>147</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 9.

In “A More Perfect Union,” Obama argued that historically perpetuated inequalities had produced the current state of racial division in the United States. To achieve a “more perfect union” of racial equality, people from diverse backgrounds would need to engage in new dialogues where they listened and learned from one another. These ideas appeared through a different but equally powerful moral lens in his speech on the economy in Osawatimie, Kansas. Economic inequality prevents us from holistic equality, Obama asserted. Meanwhile, in his address for the fiftieth anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” Obama returned to questions of history and racial division, narrating an American history defined through the identities of every disenfranchised American who has fought for greater equality. These speeches share several distinct features, including invocations of place as a historical reminder of Americans’ ability to triumph over divisiveness, statements that explicitly distill Obama’s ethos of citizen engagement, and the use of individuals’ stories to form a composite image of American values. Together, these three speeches exemplify Obama’s ambition to narrate into existence a past, present, and future America capable of overcoming its sins. A gifted orator, Obama utilized his power of the “bully pulpit” to extend his rhetorical persuasiveness to a national audience, whom he could only hope would be listening.

A growing body of literature concerned with Obama’s rhetoric often attempts to locate him in the realm of postracial and colorblind ideology. The question of whether his rhetorical strategy presents an inspirational, optimistic, naive, or even irresponsible narrative remains largely open to interpretation. Indeed, much of the language analyzed in this thesis supports a reading of Obama as race-neutral, and perhaps guilty of ignoring critical divisions in favor of his message of unity. At the same time, Obama’s position as president seemingly justifies his

impulse toward rhetorical unity. Given the complex nature of the public's relationship to the office of president, claiming definitive answers here becomes not only impossible, but also deceptive and counterproductive in the presumed certainty of such assertions. Rather than subscribing to an interpretation on either side of the debate, I propose a reading of Obama's rhetoric in line with what Professor of American Studies Brian Ward theorizes. Framing him as representative of the power of "postracial fictions," Ward posits that Obama offered "a way to reconnect with America's core civic ideals" by carefully occupying "a similar ideological space" of postracialism, but without resorting to its essentializing, "simplistic" language."<sup>148</sup> As the three speeches examined here illustrate, Obama's dominant mode of speaking relied on examples of the vast multiculturalism that he depicted as synonymous with the American experience. Inclusivity, rather than homogeneity, defines Obama's rhetoric, though the border between the two remains blurry.

As a student of history and a biracial man in modern America, Obama could hardly be unaware of the pitfalls of viewing the American dream through rose-colored glasses.<sup>149</sup> Regardless, the narrative he persists in telling relates a history of American progress, composed of compromise, debate, and the spirit of democracy. Kloppenberg cites how, as a law student, Obama developed the idea of the Constitution as a conversation between the Founders and the present day.<sup>150</sup> Obama reiterated this belief in *The Audacity of Hope*, in his chapter called, "Our Constitution." He writes of the Constitution as a "living document," rather than a "static" one,

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<sup>148</sup> Brian Ward, "'I Want My Country Back, I Want My Dream Back': Barack Obama and the Appeal of Postracial Fictions," in *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement*, ed.

Danielle McGuire and John Dittmer (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 331, 341.

<sup>149</sup> Introduction to "Second Inaugural Address," in *We Are the Change We Seek*, 201.

<sup>150</sup> Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*, 161.

which “must be read in the context of an ever changing world,” and which forces us to negotiate arguments over the country’s future as a “deliberative democracy.”<sup>151</sup> This dialectic understanding perhaps explains why the wider project Obama appears engaged in conceives of America as an unfinished undertaking—he views nothing as static. To communicate this vision as president and inspire ordinary Americans to join in as active participants, Obama arrived at podium after podium, ready with new framings and situations that modeled his belief.

However, as the remainder of this thesis will suggest, his formal speeches do not ultimately represent the only (or potentially best) way of understanding Obama’s wider sociopolitical project of communicating and modeling change to the American public. Increasingly over the years, Obama has demonstrated a willingness to experiment with different kinds of communications technologies. In his final interview as president Obama admitted that he wished he had spent more time “thinking about new ways of communicating with the American people,” rather than “standing behind a podium and giving a bunch of grim lectures.”<sup>152</sup> After two terms of delivering speech after speech about the need to engage creatively with the world around us, Obama thus indicated that he was reconsidering the efficacy of the formal speech itself. With this in mind, we can find evidence of his willingness to experiment with communications strategies dating back to his early days as president.

One example arises in his first term. José Villalobos writes in, “Sitting with Oprah, Dancing with Ellen: Presidents, Daytime Television, and Soft News,” that Obama’s first historic appearance on *The View* on July 29, 2010 sent media pundits into a spiral of speculation. Would

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<sup>151</sup> Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 90, 92.

<sup>152</sup> Barack Obama, “Obama’s Last Interview,” *Pod Save America*, 41:13, January 19, 2017, <https://crooked.com/podcast/obamas-last-interview/>.

the appearance—billed as the first time a sitting president would appear on a daytime television program—be appropriate? What kinds of topics would be covered, and would it affect the public’s perception of him?<sup>153</sup> When the day arrived, Obama spoke to a mixture of serious political topics and light-hearted personal questions about his family and American pop culture, leaving critics to continue the debate over whether he had successfully changed people’s perspective of him.<sup>154</sup>

Villalobos argues that despite relatively unchanged polling numbers immediately following the appearance, the long-term results suggest Obama had significant foresight. He engaged with key voting blocs that day, particularly women, in a way that they were more likely to connect with than via more traditional “hard news” outlets.<sup>155</sup> Such appearances allowed Obama to engage with the public in less formal, mainstream channels, and perhaps to subtly expose new audiences to his messages. Daytime television may have a limited capacity for rigorous political debate, but Obama established a precedent in the age of social media of moving beyond the borders of “high” and “low” brow culture. If we presume that his ultimate goal is to reorient our national discourse by extending a nationwide invitation to act as equal participants, appearing on *The View* may have been one of Obama’s most significant communications achievements.

Since that first daytime appearance, the president—and Michelle Obama as well—have become savvy users of “soft news” outlets, which combine news and entertainment. Through

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<sup>153</sup> José D. Villalobos, “Sitting with Oprah, Dancing with Ellen: Presidents, Daytime Television, and Soft News,” in *Women and the White House: Gender, Popular Culture, and Presidential Politics*, ed. Justin S. Vaughn (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 163.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 170, 174.

cameos and interviews, the Obamas have established themselves as unlikely pop culture icons, appearing with viral success in dozens of programs. In the lead up to the presidential election of 2016, for example, Obama teamed up with BuzzFeed to star in a video called “5 Things That Are Harder Than Registering to Vote,” capitalizing on the media conglomerate’s massive viral success to encourage their young demographic to vote.<sup>156</sup> The video opens with the president, dressed in suit and tie, struggling to place plastic organs in the classic children’s board game, *Operation*, before concluding with a clip of him speaking directly into the camera. “That stuff’s hard,” Obama says genially, “But you know what isn’t? Registering to vote. I hope you all understand that you have the power to shape our country’s course. Don’t take that for granted.”<sup>157</sup> Recalling his speech commemorating “Bloody Sunday,” this appearance allowed Obama to directly address the emergent younger generation. Moreover, in less than two minutes, the video mimics what Obama’s appearance on *The View* nearly eight years ago modeled: the fusion of serious and comical through a popular medium to provide a vehicle for an important political message.

Even more unconventionally, in March of 2018, sources confirmed that Netflix and the former president were in “advanced negotiations” to produce a series of shows.<sup>158</sup> Though their formats remain unknown as of yet, speculation suggests that the programs will “highlight inspirational stories,” and give the Obamas a “global platform” to address the trend of misinformation that has gripped the country.<sup>159</sup> It requires no great stretch of the imagination to

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<sup>156</sup> *BuzzFeedVideo*, “5 Things That Are Harder Than Registering To Vote, Featuring President Obama,” Youtube video, 1:31, published June 27, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eE7Da\\_6AMM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eE7Da_6AMM).

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Michael D. Shear, Katie Benner, and John Koblin, “Obama in Talks to Provide Shows for Netflix,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/08/us/politics/obama-netflix-shows.html>.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

make the connection between Obama's use of the "bully pulpit" as president and his use of Netflix now—both platforms enact Obama's project of modeling citizen engagement. The *New York Times* report analyzing the deal supports such conclusions. Eric Schultz, a senior advisor to Obama, explains in the report that "President and Mrs. Obama have always believed in the power of storytelling to inspire... Throughout their lives, they have lifted up stories of people whose efforts to make a difference are quietly changing the world for the better."<sup>160</sup> In light of Obama's oeuvre of speeches, the Netflix deal appears as the former president's latest approach to the same goal of engaging the American public in serious debates about the quality of American life.

The trajectory of his "soft news" appearances suggests that Obama has shifted his emphasis from traditional mediums to contemporary ones. His first daytime television appearance, his participation in viral social media campaigns, and his future Netflix collaborations exemplify how, especially in recent activities, Obama has engaged actively with the intersection of technology and communications. In retrospect, such mediums offer Obama a form more appropriate to his goal than the formal speech—rather than a one-way delivery, they allow Obama to facilitate two-way conversations with the public. Their capacity for reciprocity and personalization changes the relationship Obama can nurture with the public, challenging traditional, hierarchical divisions of power and authority. In search of an analogue for this change, we might return to the example of FDR, whose Fireside Chats fundamentally altered the president's relationship with the public.<sup>161</sup> FDR's radio broadcasts also brought the president into closer contact with ordinary Americans, but Obama's innovation goes even further. Having

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Roper, "Chapter 7: The Presidency," in *Developments in American Politics*, 104.

continued FDR's tradition of facilitating a conversation with the American people through nearly a decade of formal speeches, Obama's series of new communications strategies have allowed him not just to advocate for an engaged citizenry, but also to himself reengage in the process he has so long championed.

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