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# Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches

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## **1. Introduction**

American society has not had legal slavery for nearly a century and a half. Yet the two communities which were once nearly synonymous with *slave* and *free*, the black and white communities, are not equal in American society in the 21st century. African-Americans have more than double the rate of poverty of white Americans, and still face regular discrimination (Jones 2008; United States Census Bureau 2012a; 2012b). The causes of this continuing inequality have sometimes been rooted in law, as in the case of the *Jim Crow* laws that governments in the South enacted to keep black Americans from the benefits of full citizenship. Other causes are harder to detect, including negative stereotyping and less visible forms of discrimination, as in the recent study that found that a black-sounding name alone was enough to limit employment prospects (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

U.S. Presidents have addressed race relations in speeches numerous times throughout the history of the country, often at times of unrest. Of these, two speeches have been selected for critical analysis for this paper: John F. Kennedy's *Civil Rights Address* (Kennedy 1963) and Barack Obama's *A More Perfect Union* (Obama 2008). These will be subjected to analysis via the discourse-historical approach (hereafter DHA) outlined in Reisigl and Wodak (2009), according to whom, "Ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse" (ibid, heading: 'Critique', 'ideology' and 'power'). In addition to analysis of the ideology behind discourse, DHA places an emphasis on analysis in the context of historical trends and on gathering historical data necessary to reconstruct that context. In accordance with DHA, historical context as well as discursive strategies in both texts will be analysed, and finally the two will be compared for evidence of overriding ideology. First to be analysed will be John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address.

## **2. John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address**

### **a. Historical Context**

The 1960s saw much harder times for African-Americans than one would see today. Black male Americans earned a little more than half of their white counterparts (United States Census Bureau 1998). Occupational discrimination was still very common (Bell 1972; Jeong 1980), and anti-black beliefs were the norm (*Race Relations* 2013). President John F. Kennedy's historic Civil Rights Address came during the struggle to desegregate public schools in the southern states in 1963. The address in effect calls for the legal protections against discrimination that would later be part of his Civil Rights Act, passed in 1964. This address marks his strongest rhetorical engagement with the issue, from a President known for powerful rhetoric (Windt 1991). In addition, it comes as part of a movement which would later be credited with establishing the Republican Party in the South as a backlash against this and other moves by Democratic politicians to further the cause of minority, particularly black, civil rights (Loewen 1995). Kennedy must have been aware that he was speaking on a topic that would offend many white Americans.

The Civil Rights Act has given Kennedy's presidency the appearance of being strongly empathetic toward African-Americans, but in fact a close analysis of his Civil Rights Address reveals a pervasive anti-black bias. The significance of the speech may have been to advance the cause of minority rights, but the language itself betrays an ideology which treats white men as the only legitimate holders of power in the United States. This is revealed in whom the speech chooses to address, whom it associates with problems, and how it codifies social relationships in lexis and grammatical form.

### **b. Analysis**

Racism in Kennedy's Civil Rights Address can be found in at least three areas: Use of the pronouns *we* and *they*, denial of agency on the part of both victims and perpetrators of discrimination, and positive face-saving strategies employed to curry the favour of the white audience.

Part of the racism in the text is to be found in its exclusive use of the pronoun *we*. The text shows repeated juxtaposition of the personal pronoun *we* with the African-American community, as in:

We cannot say to ten percent of the population that you can't have that right; that your children cannot have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go in the street and demonstrate. (Kennedy 1963, paragraph 19)

When speaking of African-Americans, Kennedy uses third-person pronouns, most often *he* and *they*, although text of the speech itself begins with "Good evening, my fellow citizens" (ibid), which implies that blacks are not included in the group *fellow citizens*. The distinction between *us* (*whites*) and *them* (*blacks*) is used to strong rhetorical effect in the closing sentences of paragraph six:

...who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay? (ibid)

Kennedy uses the same strategy near the end of the speech: "I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that" (ibid, paragraph 19). Note also the frame in which granting rights to minorities is a method of self-improvement for whites, as discussed in van Dijk (1997).

Kennedy also uses pronouns to distinguish between an in-group referred to as *we* and the abstract group *Americans*:

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated (Kennedy 1963, paragraph 6)

The repeated juxtaposition of *we* with *Americans* implies a conceptual difference: The first is the intended audience of the speech, which by the logic of the juxtaposition cannot include all Americans; while the second is a technical term, not necessarily one of shared interests. The implication is clear: blacks are citizens of the country, but whites are the ones who are in the position to bestow rights and privileges.

Also of significance is the fact that Kennedy's intended audience's privileged status as *white* goes mostly unmentioned. As with Gabriel's (1998) finding on discourse on whiteness, being white is considered the default, unmarked racial status. African-Americans have their non-white status pointed out explicitly through Kennedy's speech, with the word *Negro* appearing 12 times alongside only 3 times for *white*.

African-Americans are not only made into the *other*, which is a much-documented phenomenon in political and racial discourse (Gabriel 1998; van Dijk 1997; 2004), but are sometimes described in a way that denies them agency and treats their actions as spontaneous or uncontrollable. Processes such as *protest* and *demonstration* are nominalised and used as subjects, rather than the people protesting or demonstrating. These nominalised processes then go on to *threaten* or *cause* other processes, which obfuscates the human agents responsible for those processes. In paragraph nine, Kennedy states, "Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives." (Kennedy 1963). Although it is clearly the victims of racial discrimination that Kennedy seems to want to absolve of responsibility in this case, the implication that one group's protests of unjust laws and treatment are not the acts of willing individuals may cause them to appear all the more disempowered.

The obfuscation of responsibility serves different functions for empowered and disempowered groups (van Dijk 1997). In the case of this speech, the same rhetorical tact, denial and obfuscation of agency, both dehumanises the out-group and enhances the image of the in-group. Whites are protected from blame in descriptions of their hostile actions against blacks, for instance "wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens" (Kennedy 1963, paragraph 11) or "[an elementary right]'s denial is an arbitrary indignity that no American in 1963 should have to endure, but many do" (ibid, paragraph 12). A possible conclusion to draw from Kennedy's speech might be that in no case does any American actively discriminate; discrimination is self-generating. As Kennedy is addressing whites, his hiding of their role in ongoing racism and discrimination is a way of

Mark Makino, ED0013, module 3, assignment 2, Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches representing his in-group and intended audience in a positive light. As van Dijk (1997) writes, politicians often flatter their audiences when speaking on racial topics by citing the dominant group's supposed fairness, and politicians frame even pro-minority policy as favouring whites (van Dijk 1995). The portrayal of racism as faceless processes rather than acts perpetrated by members of the American public frames the audience's support for the President's policies as a prudent choice to improve the condition of their country, akin to repairing the foundation of a house, rather than a choice to cease one's unjust treatment of other people. In an alternate universe, one can imagine a president instead framing the struggle for civil rights as asking white Americans to abandon their racism, or to redress wrongs they committed, or to join the fight against racists in their midst. Kennedy sacrifices a realistic portrayal of human action for the sake of saving face for his white audience.

Although many Americans remember Kennedy fondly as an advocate for civil rights, his rhetoric in explaining his positions to the American public displays quite a racist mindset. It is largely a speech about black people intended for white people, and follows familiar patterns of racist political discourse. Almost 45 years later, another notable politician from the Democratic Party would address racial issues in a landmark televised speech. The following section will examine one of most famous speeches by the man who would become the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama.

### ***3. Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union"***

#### ***a. Historical Context***

Before the Democratic Party primary election in spring 2008, then-senator Barack Obama's relationship with his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright of the mostly black Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, came under scrutiny in the media (Nagourney and Zeleny 2008). The reverend had made inflammatory remarks on race relations and other political issues in the United States, and the controversy surrounding him threatened Obama's chances of becoming the Democratic Party's candidate in the upcoming presidential election. The election itself was to be

Mark Makino, ED0013, module 3, assignment 2, Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches an historic one, with Obama becoming the first African-American President of the United States after securing a multi-racial coalition of voters (Bobo 2009), an event of great symbolic significance in race relations in the United States (Hunt and Wilson 2009). The Wright controversy tested Obama's ability to appeal to non-black voters, one which he overcame partly with the aid of this speech, delivered March 18th, 2008, in the midst of ongoing revelations about his former pastor's political views. This speech has gone on to be one of Obama's best-known, from a President like Kennedy renowned for skilled speechmaking, becoming a target of research in its own right (Sharpley-Whiting 2009).

### ***b. Analysis***

As can be expected given the 45 years that separate Kennedy's and Obama's speeches, and the accompanying strides made in racial equality (*Race Relations* 2013), Obama's speech is much less obviously racist than Kennedy's. Still, several aspects of it betray racism, particularly in Obama's depictions of racist acts as crimes without perpetrators, similar to Kennedy's, as well as his descriptions of racism as a problem the country as a whole must overcome rather than a problem with the mindsets and actions of racist individuals. These conspire to make racism appear to be a problem all groups have an equal stake in creating and overcoming.

Obama treats racism as an obstacle standing in the way or hindering the country's progress. As such, Obama's speech makes extensive use of spatial metaphors, juxtaposing the country's proper direction, usually forward or upward, with factors hindering its progress along that path. Among the language used to deliver these metaphors are "launched America's ... democracy" (Obama 2008, paragraph 1), "continue the long march..." (ibid, paragraph 4), and "move beyond some of our old racial wounds" (ibid, paragraph 32). Spatial metaphors bring with them metaphors of *happy* and *sad*, *health* and *sickness*, and most saliently, *progress* and *stagnation*, all described by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as cognitively related. Metaphors of this type applied to a country of millions can be seen as inappropriate or even undemocratic, as they imply that a country moves along a single path as a single body, rather than a country being made



Mark Makino, ED0013, module 3, assignment 2, Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches up of individuals whose interests are often at odds. The country is said to be *moving* or *stuck*, *healthy* or *sick*, or *perfect* or *imperfect* as a whole; individual actors are not prioritised.

Describing factors holding the country back from its path forward and upward, Obama uses phrases such as “...taken a divisive turn” (Obama 2008, paragraph 7), “retreat into ... corners” (ibid, paragraph 22), “blocks the path to understanding” (ibid, paragraph 30), “bound to a tragic past” (ibid, paragraph 34), and “it’s a racial stalemate we’ve been stuck in for years” (ibid, paragraph 32). Relegated to this roadblock-like status are *disunity* (ibid, paragraphs 22 and 30), *hopelessness* or *cynicism* in the face of difficulty (ibid, paragraphs 30 and 34), and topically for Obama at that time, people exploring his relationship with a controversial figure (ibid, paragraph 7 and 37). Obama’s description of the United States is that of a single vessel moving steadily towards a *perfect* destination.

As in much political rhetoric (van Dijk 1997), Obama makes judicious use of pronouns to build up his in-group and denigrate an out-group. As with his spatial metaphors, Obama’s use of pronouns serves often to divide those for and against his idea of racial progress as national project. *We* is used for the group of people sharing Obama’s metaphorical upward and forward journey, without much comparison to an out-group except for a few mentions of naysayers as “those who say ... are not enough” and “they may ask” (Obama 2008, paragraph 11), as well as “some commentators” (ibid, paragraphs 6 and 11). The overall picture painted by Obama’s use of pronouns is one of a single robust, ideologically strong group making progress together, with a few doubters along its borders. Individuals committing racist acts are not expelled from the national project, in fact they are not even referred to.

Similar to Kennedy’s, Obama’s references to discrimination and racism lack clear perpetrators. He nominalises *the brutal legacy of slavery* (ibid, paragraph 23) without making clear that some American citizens profited by enslaving others, and in multiple other places names racist acts with no actors. Furthermore, he states between paragraphs 24 and 30 (ibid) that both the

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white and black communities have a degree of justified and unjustified resentment. This leaves the audience with the impression that racial animosity in America exists between parties of equal standing rather than between a powerful majority and a underprivileged minority, and obfuscates the fact that anti-black racism is still far more common than anti-white (Jones 2008).

Obama's speech largely seeks to reassure a white audience of his even-handedness, that he does not share his ex-pastor's views on race relations. That may be why it strikes an equivocating tone, refusing to name perpetrators and instead emphasising national unity and forward progress as a nation. Unfortunately, that approach necessitates an unrealistic description of racial problems in the United States. Kennedy's and Obama's speeches share the ideology of racial blamelessness, an ideology which may appear fair but in fact serves as a justification and rationalisation for the white-dominant power dynamic in American society. This and other similarities between the two speeches will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4. Comparison**

Obama's and Kennedy's speeches share an ideology which, while not *a priori* favouring whites, does so by ameliorating white responsibility for racism and treating racism as a problem that all groups participate in equally. As Fairclough describes, "Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations" (2001, p. 27). This is the case with the ideology of racism as national problem, akin to a stain or a sickness afflicting the country as a whole rather than a set of disadvantages one group inflicts upon another, a framing device also found in other popular media (van Dijk 1989).

Although the legal means of racial domination had mostly ended before Kennedy's 1963 address, racism and discrimination still worked overwhelmingly against African-Americans (Jones 2008), a salient fact not found in either Kennedy's or Obama's speeches. Both Kennedy and Obama make reference to the reality of lower achievement and advancement among African-

Mark Makino, ED0013, module 3, assignment 2, Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches Americans, but without his identifying any outside force acting on that community, listeners are invited to conclude that those problems are intrinsic to that community rather than forced on it by others, and that no one else benefited from blacks' lower status. As Dowdall (1974) has written, it is common in discussions on race relations to neglect the gains some groups have made from racism, i.e., that there are winners as well as losers. The ideology of racism as national problem may have been helpful in allowing Kennedy's and Obama's message to be accepted by white members of the voting public, but it also came with an unrealistic message, which is that no one in modern America has committed acts of racism on other Americans, an objectionable view given that blacks are far more likely to be the victims of discrimination than whites (Jones 2008; *Race Relations* 2013; Romano and Samuels 2012; Weitzer and Tuch 1999).

## **5. Conclusions**

Presidential speeches, like other media, have what Black (1998) has called an *implied audience*. In both the cases of Kennedy's and Obama's speeches analysed for this paper, that audience clearly consisted of many white Americans whom it would behoove an aspiring politician not to offend. That is why even on a topic with as clear historical perpetrators and victims as race relations in the United States (Dowdall 1974), they do not mention criminals, only the regrettable fact that crime was committed.

The ideology behind this pattern extends far beyond Presidential speeches: American history textbooks, for one, have been found to "present slavery virtually as uncaused, a tragedy, rather than a wrong perpetrated by some people on others" (Loewen 1995, p. 145), and generally present racism as an uncaused problem (Downey 1980). The language choices and metaphors used to describe race relations therefore leave no room for racists, only for racism as an affliction affecting the entire United States.

This is not to say that this author believes that white Americans should be made to feel guilty over historical wrongs or to be implicated in an ideology that they may not share. It is clear,

Mark Makino, ED0013, module 3, assignment 2, Race and Blame: An Analysis of Two Presidential Speeches however, that fear of a negative white reaction has disproportionate influence on how those in power choose to describe American society. Politicians have little problem in general referring to racial groups or describing problems that exist within some of them. Their lack of frankness in describing the scale of the problem of racism in the white community reveals an ideology that favours maintaining the self-image of white Americans at the cost of truth and honesty.

(3,276 words)

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**Appendix A: Full text of John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address (Kennedy 1963)**

Good evening, my fellow citizens:

(1) This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, the presence of Alabama National Guardsmen was required on the University of Alabama to carry out the final and unequivocal order of the United States District Court of the Northern District of Alabama. That order called for the admission of two clearly qualified young Alabama residents who happened to have been born Negro. That they were admitted peacefully on the campus is due in good measure to the conduct of the students of the University of Alabama, who met their responsibilities in a constructive way.

(2) I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.

(3) Today, we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. And when Americans are sent to Vietnam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops. It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal. It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.

(4) The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the State in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

(5) This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right. We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

(6) The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

(7) One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.



(8) We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

(9) Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

(10) We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives. It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the facts that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame, as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right, as well as reality.

(11) Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law. The Federal judiciary has upheld that proposition in a series of forthright cases. The Executive Branch has adopted that proposition in the conduct of its affairs, including the employment of Federal personnel, the use of Federal facilities, and the sale of federally financed housing. But there are other necessary measures which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session. The old code of equity law under which we live commands for every wrong a remedy, but in too many communities, in too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens and there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is the street.

(12) I am, therefore, asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public -- hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments. This seems to me to be an elementary right. Its denial is an arbitrary indignity that no American in 1963 should have to endure, but many do.

(13) I have recently met with scores of business leaders urging them to take voluntary action to end this discrimination, and I have been encouraged by their response, and in the last two weeks over 75 cities have seen progress made in desegregating these kinds of facilities. But many are unwilling to act alone, and for this reason, nationwide legislation is needed if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts.

(14) I'm also asking the Congress to authorize the Federal Government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education. We have succeeded in persuading many districts to desegregate voluntarily. Dozens have admitted Negroes without violence. Today, a Negro is attending a State-supported institution in every one of our 50 States, but the pace is very slow.

(15) Too many Negro children entering segregated grade schools at the time of the Supreme Court's decision nine years ago will enter segregated high schools this fall, having suffered a loss which can never be restored. The lack of an adequate education denies the Negro a chance to get a decent job.

(16) The orderly implementation of the Supreme Court decision, therefore, cannot be left solely to those who may not have the economic resources to carry the legal action or who may be subject to harassment.

(17) Other features will be also requested, including greater protection for the right to vote. But legislation, I repeat, cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country. In this respect I wanna pay tribute to those citizens North and South who've been working in their communities to make life better for all. They are acting not out of sense of legal duty but out of a sense of human decency. Like our soldiers and sailors in all parts of the world they are meeting freedom's challenge on the firing line, and I salute them for their honor and their courage.

(18) My fellow Americans, this is a problem which faces us all -- in every city of the North as well as the South. Today, there are Negroes unemployed, two or three times as many compared to whites, inadequate education, moving into the large cities, unable to find work, young people particularly out of work without hope, denied equal rights, denied the opportunity to eat at a restaurant or a lunch counter or go to a movie theater, denied the right to a decent education, denied almost today the right to attend a State university even though qualified. It seems to me that these are matters which concern us all, not merely Presidents or Congressmen or Governors, but every citizen of the United States.

(19) This is one country. It has become one country because all of us and all the people who came here had an equal chance to develop their talents. We cannot say to ten percent of the population that you can't have that right; that your children cannot have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go in the street and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that.

(20) Therefore, I'm asking for your help in making it easier for us to move ahead and to provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want ourselves; to give a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents.

(21) As I've said before, not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or equal motivation, but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves.

(22) We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the law, but they have a right to expect that the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color blind, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century.

(23) This is what we're talking about and this is a matter which concerns this country and what it stands for, and in meeting it I ask the support of all our citizens.

Thank you very much.

**Appendix B: Full text of Barack Obama's A More Perfect Union (Obama 2008)**

Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Let me begin by thanking Harris Wofford for his contributions to this country. In so many different ways, he exemplifies what we mean by the word "citizen." And so we are very grateful to him for all the work he has done; and I'm thankful for the gracious and thoughtful introduction.

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

(2) The document they produced was eventually signed, but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations. Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution -- a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

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

(4) This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign: to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring, and more prosperous America. I chose to run for President at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction: towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren. And this belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own story.

(5) I'm the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's army during World War II, and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and I've lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners, an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and cousins of every race and every hue scattered across three continents. And for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible. It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional of candidates. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts -- that out of many, we are truly one.

(6) Now throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans. This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some

commentators have deemed me either "too black" or "not black enough." We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every single exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

(7) And yet, it's only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn. On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wild and wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation and that rightly offend white and black alike.

(8) Now I've already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy, and in some cases, pain. For some, nagging questions remain: Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in the church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely, just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagree.

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

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

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

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

(13) In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity, and it goes as follows:

(14) *People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up to the rafters.*

(15) *And in that single note -- hope -- I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones.*

(16) *Those stories of survival and freedom and hope became our stories, my story. The blood that spilled was our blood; the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black. In chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a meaning to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about -- memories that all people might study and cherish and with which we could start to rebuild.*

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

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

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

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

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

(22) But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America: to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality. The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through, a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American.

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

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

(24) Legalized discrimination, where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or the fire department meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between blacks and whites and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today's urban and rural communities. A lack of economic opportunity among black men and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family contributed to the erosion of black families, a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods -- parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up, building code enforcement -- all helped create a cycle of violence, blight, and neglect that continues to haunt us.

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

(26) But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it -- those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations -- those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their world view in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away, nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years.

(27) That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends, but it does find voice in the barbershop or the beauty shop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians to gin up votes along racial lines or to make up for a politician's own failings. And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of that old truism that the most segregated hour of American life occurs on Sunday morning.

(28) That -- That anger is not always productive. Indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems. It keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity within the African-American community in our own condition. It prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful, and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

(29) In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they've been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience. As far as they're concerned, no one handed them anything; they built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pensions dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and they feel their dreams slipping away. And in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town, when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves

never committed, when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudice, resentment builds over time.

(30) Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism. And just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze: a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns, this, too, widens the racial divide and blocks the path to understanding.

(31) This is where we are right now.

(32) It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. And contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, 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 -- particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own. But I have asserted a firm conviction, a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people, that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds and that, in fact, we have no choice -- we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

(33) For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances, for better health care and better schools and better jobs, to the larger aspirations of all Americans -- the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who's been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means also taking full responsibility for our own lives -- by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism. They must always believe -- They must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

(34) Ironically, this quintessentially American -- and, yes, conservative -- notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright's sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change. The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static, as if no progress had been made, as if this country -- a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black, Latino, Asian, rich, poor, young and old -- is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. What we know, what we have seen, is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope -- the audacity to hope -- for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

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

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

(37) For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division and conflict and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle, as we did in the O.J. trial; or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina; or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card; or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies. We can do that. But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction, and then another one, and then another one. And nothing will change.

(38) That is one option.

(39) Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native-American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not "those kids," -- they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st-century economy. Not this time. This time we want to talk about how the lines in the emergency room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care, who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

(40) This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit. This time -- This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that should've never been authorized and should've never been waged. And we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them, and their families, and giving them the benefits that they have earned.

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

(42) There's one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today, a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta. There's a young, 23-year-old woman, a white woman named Ashley Baia, who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She'd been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there. And Ashley said that when she was 9 years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.



(43) She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches -- because that was the cheapest way to eat. That's the mind of a 9 year old. She did this for a year until her mom got better. And so Ashley told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she had joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

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

(45) Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he doesn't bring up a specific issue. He does not say *health care* or *the economy*. He does not say *education* or *the war*. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley." "I'm here because of Ashley."

(46) Now, by itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where perfection begins.

Thank you very much, everyone. Thank you.