

OBAMA

IN PURSUIT OF A
MORE PERFECT UNION

**ENGAGEMENT
GUIDE**

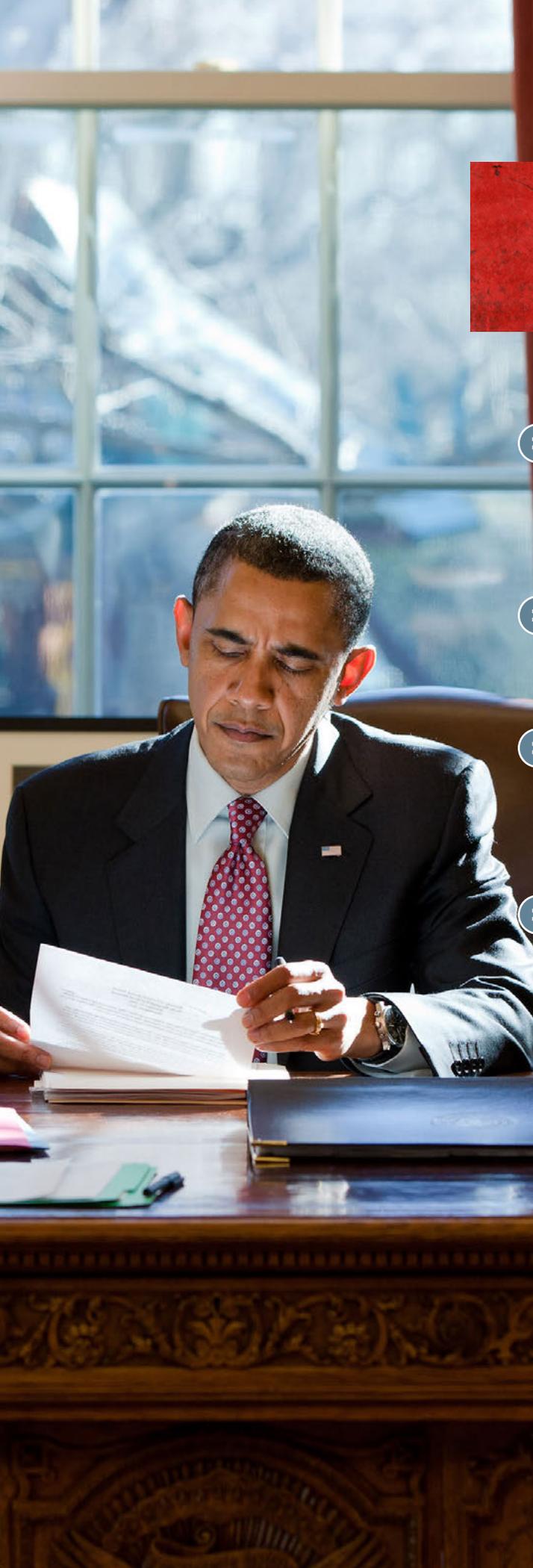
A photograph of Barack Obama sitting at a desk, looking down at a document he is holding. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a red patterned tie. The desk is dark wood with a gold-colored box in front of him. A window with a view of a city is in the background.

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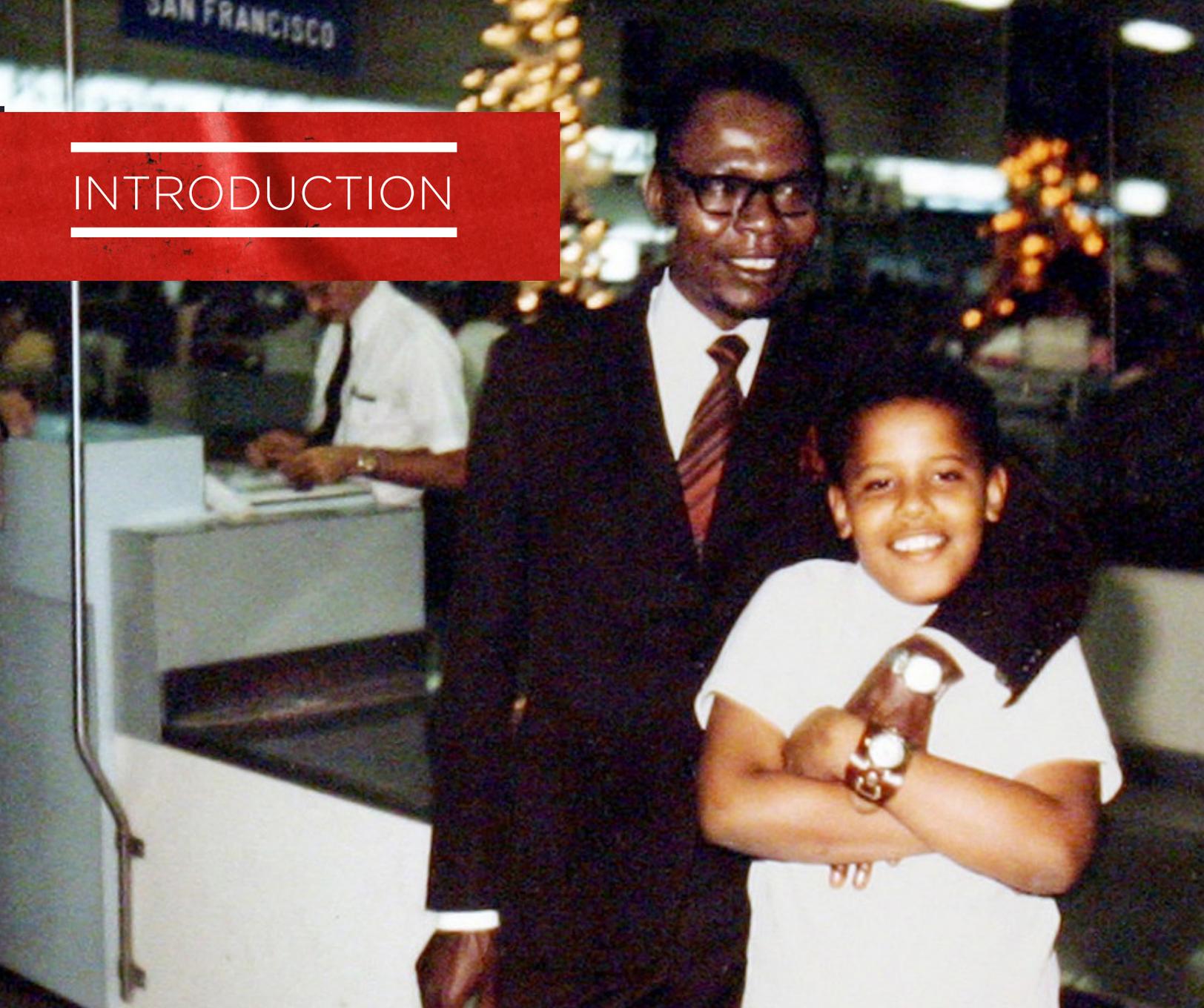


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INTRODUCTION



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

— **BARACK OBAMA**

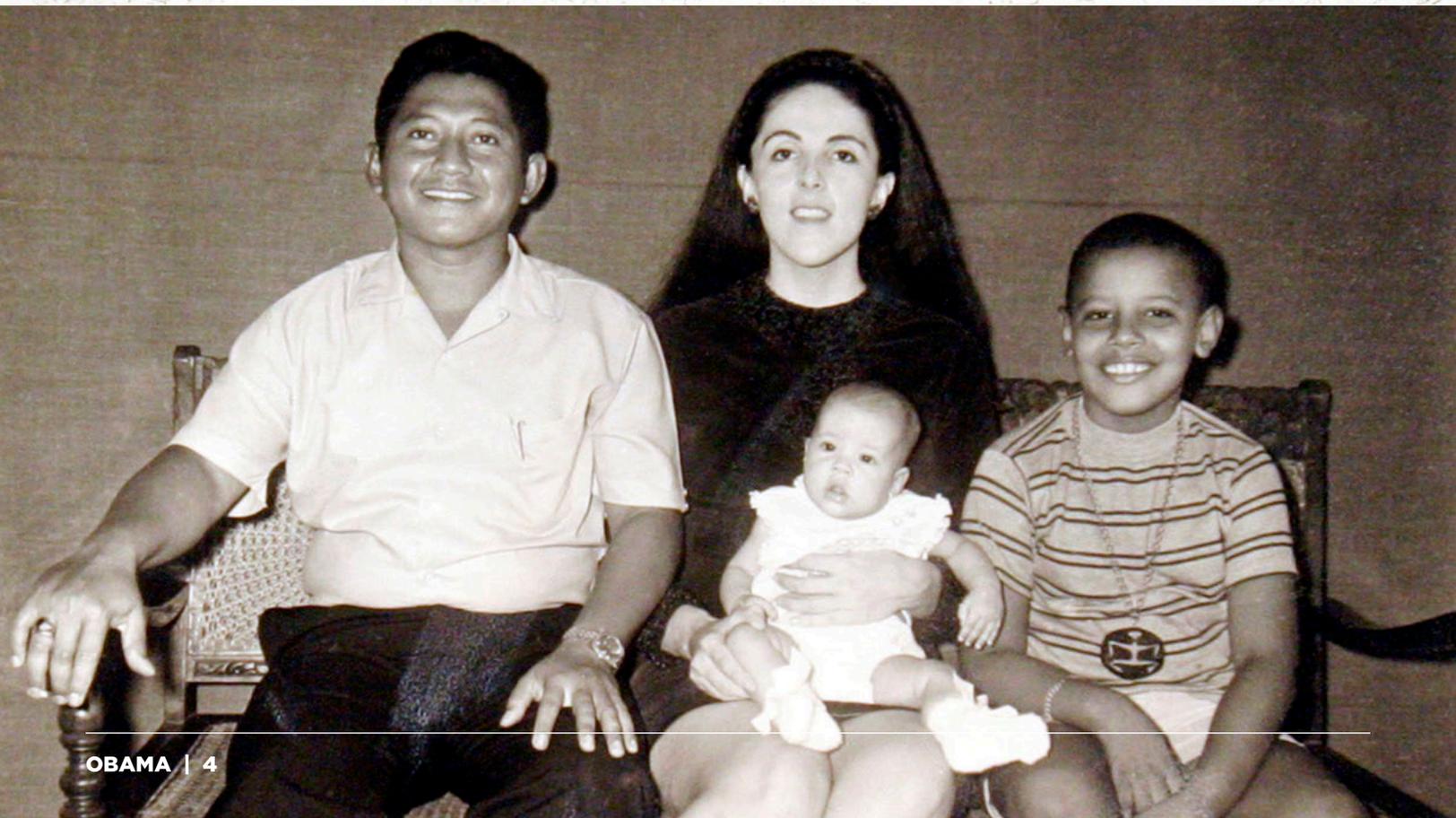
USING THIS GUIDE

Barack Obama's extraordinary life, chronicled in the three-part documentary series *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union*, raises many vital issues for discussion and engagement. The episodes cover distinct periods of Obama's personal and professional life and are situated against the backdrop of the country's racial history. This guide includes background information, guidance for hosting in-person and virtual events, discussion questions, and tools for audiences to discover and use as they participate in the civic life of their communities.

After viewing the film, groups can use the engagement guide to navigate questions of Obama's identity, race, and leadership through multiple lenses, exploring:

- > Obama's **personal journey** leading up to his political career.
- > The **role of race** in American politics.
- > Obama's **leadership qualities**.
- > The ways Obama **engaged in civic and political life**.
- > The challenges and opportunities of **creating a more perfect union**.
- > Obama's **evolving legacy**.

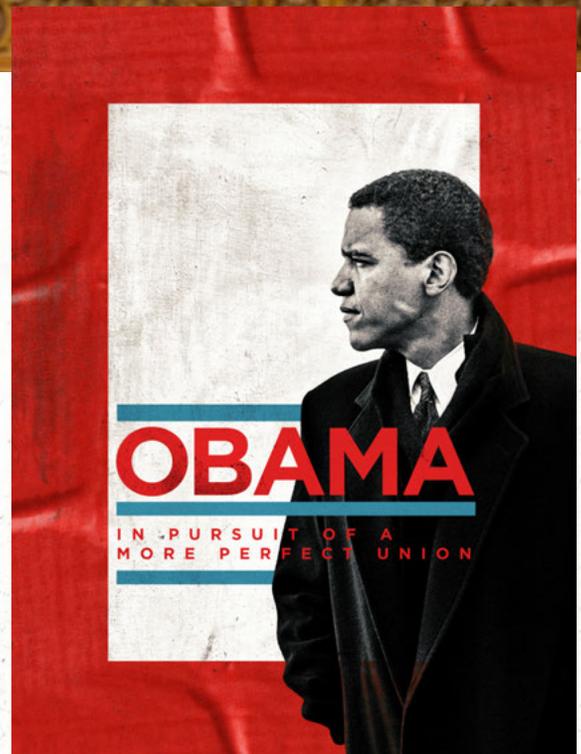
More in-depth content, including lesson plans with curated film clips and the Interview and Photo Archives, is available on the Kunhardt Film Foundation website, www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org.





FILM SUMMARY

HBO's *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union*, a three-part documentary, chronicles the personal and political journey of President Barack Obama, as the country grapples with its own racial history. Weaving together conversations with colleagues, friends, and critics, interspersed with his own speeches, news interviews, and never-before-seen footage, the series chronicles the personal and political journey that informed Obama's identity and the challenges his presidency faced while attempting to help shape a more inclusive America. By detailing the story of one man uniquely bound to the history of a country, *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union* widens into a reflection on past and present national and racial identity.



- > **EPISODE ONE:** The first episode of *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union* covers Obama's childhood, his 2004 election as US Senator from Illinois, and the momentum leading up to his presidential campaign. Woven through the episode are perspectives on race in America and its critical role in political life.
- > **EPISODE TWO:** Beginning with Obama's decision to run for president in 2007, this episode follows his hard-fought, contentious campaign against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary. After Obama secures the Democratic nomination, we follow his presidential campaign against Republican candidate John McCain, which ends with his historic election as the 44th, and first Black, president of the United States.
- > **EPISODE THREE:** The third episode spans the eight years of Obama's two administrations, starting in 2008. This period saw recovery from an economic recession, passage of the Affordable Care Act, the response to the tragic mass shootings in Newtown and Charleston, the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and others, and the rise of the Movement for Black Lives. Throughout, Obama was forced to respond to racist rhetoric and to the obstruction of his legislative agenda by Congress.

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

Over the past three decades, I've made numerous documentary films on American presidents, fueled by my deep passion to show the personal side of the nation's most public figures. These films included portraits of John F. Kennedy Jr., Richard Nixon, and Abraham Lincoln, and a ten-part series called *The American Presidents*. For Obama's story, through the course of four years of research, it became clear it would be a different kind of portrait.

It was important to reflect on how our 44th president has been uniquely bound to the history of our country, as well as our past and present national identity. When I first heard Senator Barack Obama deliver his speech *A More Perfect Union* during his run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination on March 18, 2008, I, like many others, was moved by his vision for America and how it might inspire unity. I thought his election might be the start of an open national dialogue about race, a subject that is often avoided.

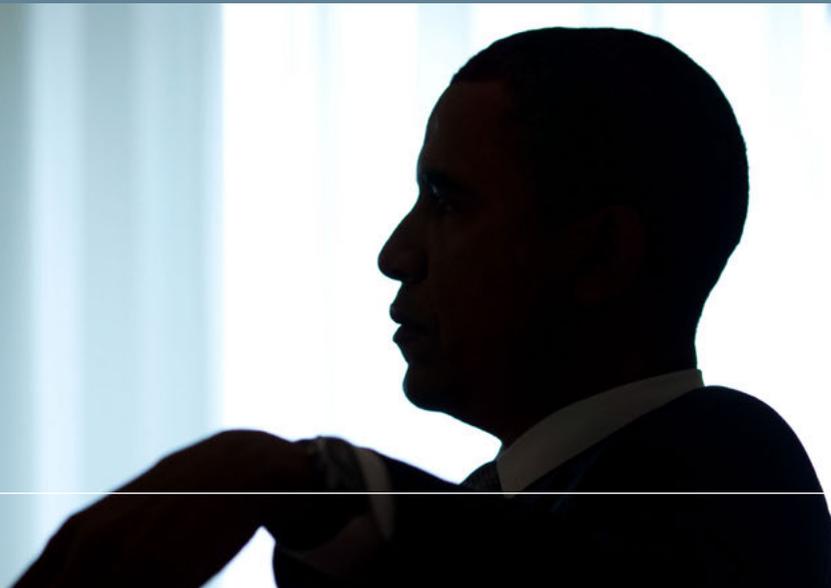
We began working on the documentary for HBO in 2014, while President Obama was still in office. The first four years were entirely focused on research, and we were able to access a vast amount of rare and never-before-seen archival footage. Writer, author, and educator Jelani Cobb, (*The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress*) was a key subject in the film and became an executive producer early on,

providing invaluable editorial insight. We started filming in 2018 and shot 39 interviews, some of the participants speaking on camera about President Obama for the first time. We were privileged as storytellers that the passage of time worked in our favor, because it was only after Obama left office that many in the circle of people around him told us that they could reflect in ways that they couldn't before.

The project grew organically from one feature-length documentary into two parts and finally landed at three parts. As we dug into the archival footage and original interviews, we came to realize that a complicated conversation around race emerged from nearly every aspect of Obama's personal and professional narrative and that to understand the actions and inactions of the first Black president, it meant we needed the story of his early days when his sense of identity began to take shape. It meant understanding his relationship with his family, especially his estranged father, and how that influenced so much of who Obama became.

Ultimately, this series is a chronicle of the personal and political journey of President Obama told through his own interviews from the past and through the people who bore witness to the way he grappled with race both personally and through the challenges of his administration.

Peter Kunhardt



BEFORE SCREENING



I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

— **BARACK OBAMA**

PROGRAM DESIGN

There are many formats for engaging audiences with the themes and content of *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union*. Consider these suggestions to set priorities and define the goals of your event. There are several designs described in “Fostering Community Engagement” on pg. 10 that may support your planning.

- Define the outcomes you envision for your viewers, which may range from theoretical discussion to action-oriented work.
- Think about what skills, resources, or information you want participants to walk away with to meet those goals.
- Share these program plans in the outreach and invitations to participants.
- Consider physical space and room setup to provide an inclusive and accessible space that will foster compassionate and constructive engagement. Provide childcare and refreshments when possible.
- If your event is online, be prepared with technical support and instructions for using the platform and consider poll questions, breakout rooms, and chat functionality to encourage participation.
- Consider who the important voices are to invite into the room, and which individuals or organizations in your community might make good partners as co-hosts or panelists.
- The three-part series covers approximately five hours, so curation will take some thought.



WAYS TO WATCH

- **Full Film:** [Request Here](#)
- **Movie Night:** Choose one episode to screen together and then engage in a discussion or activity using the resources.
- **Workshop:** Share a link with participants and suggest that they screen one or more episodes on their own time in advance. The meeting time, virtually, or in person, will focus on engagement.
- **Seminar:** Over the course of a few weeks or months, participants watch the entire documentary. The discussion questions included in this guide can be used as a template and shared prior to each viewing. You may also want to assign readings from books or articles that complement the film’s subjects or issues.

REFLECTIVE FACILITATION

Events using *Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union* cover some of the most challenging and important issues our nation struggles with, such as race, racism, and economic inequality. These topics can evoke strong emotions and reactions, and when approached in a respectful manner, can fuel constructive conversation about the future of our nation. Every person will see the film and lessons through a lens that is influenced by their own identity and background. Audiences will have varying degrees of experience and comfort discussing race.

Our suggestions for hosting safe and constructive conversations are inspired and informed by the [Resource Guide on Documentary Storytelling for Community Engagement](#) published by The Radical Optimist Collective and the Center for Media and Social Impact. The guide is evidence-based, building on experience and best practices from around the country, and offering many strategies for hosting effective screening events for diverse audiences on the subject of race in America. The guide recommends as a first step, especially for facilitators hosting a screening of a film that reveals racial history or traumas in a community different from their own, to reflect on themselves and their relationship to the topics being raised. It advises, “Community organizers should be equipped with the resources and guidance they need to understand the nuance and gravity of the issue featured by the documentary before they facilitate any community-level conversations around it.” Every facilitator will benefit from assessing their own understanding of the history of racial harms and traumas that have sparked social movements that continue today. The *New York Times*’s 1619 Project, the Equal Justice Initiative, and Color of Change have resources that support this historical context.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

- > Be intentional about creating a space for conversations in which the experiences of community members of color are centered and valued.
- > Consider creating and distributing “Shared Understandings” before your event so the group can agree upon language and how participants will engage with each other.
- > Model listening to understand, rather than to respond, and let others finish speaking.
- > A moderator guides, rather than leads, a conversation. Share the floor by introducing a question or theme and then step back to allow the group to share thoughts and reactions with one another.
- > Invite people to speak one at a time and introduce themselves by name.
- > Be mindful of audience dynamics — is someone dominating the conversation? Are others hesitant to speak? Share your observations and gently guide the interactions.
- > If the conversation becomes one sided, redirect to a new topic. There are so many rich themes raised by this film, it may be helpful to keep an ongoing list of ideas on a whiteboard or in a shared online space so the group can refer to them during and even after the conversation.



FOSTERING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

“ I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it.

— **BARACK OBAMA**



FILM DISCUSSION

***Moderator Tip:** Ideal for gatherings when one or more episodes have been watched and a moderator is prepared to guide a discussion using these questions.*



PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- > What brought you to this event?
- > What do you know about President Obama's early life?
- > What questions would you like answered about him?
- > What are some of your most vivid memories of his presidency?
- > What does the title **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** suggest about the documentary?
- > What, to you, is a more perfect union?



POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS

- > What new information did you learn about President Obama?
- > How does his political career reflect his vision of a more perfect union? How did his presidency move the nation toward or farther away from that goal?
- > What does Obama's life story and presidency reveal about race in America and what it means to be American?
- > How does your own racial background and perspective influence how you see his candidacy and presidency?
- > After examining President Obama's vision and work, what are your reflections on the ideal of a more perfect union? What is still left to be done to form that union?

EPISODE ONE

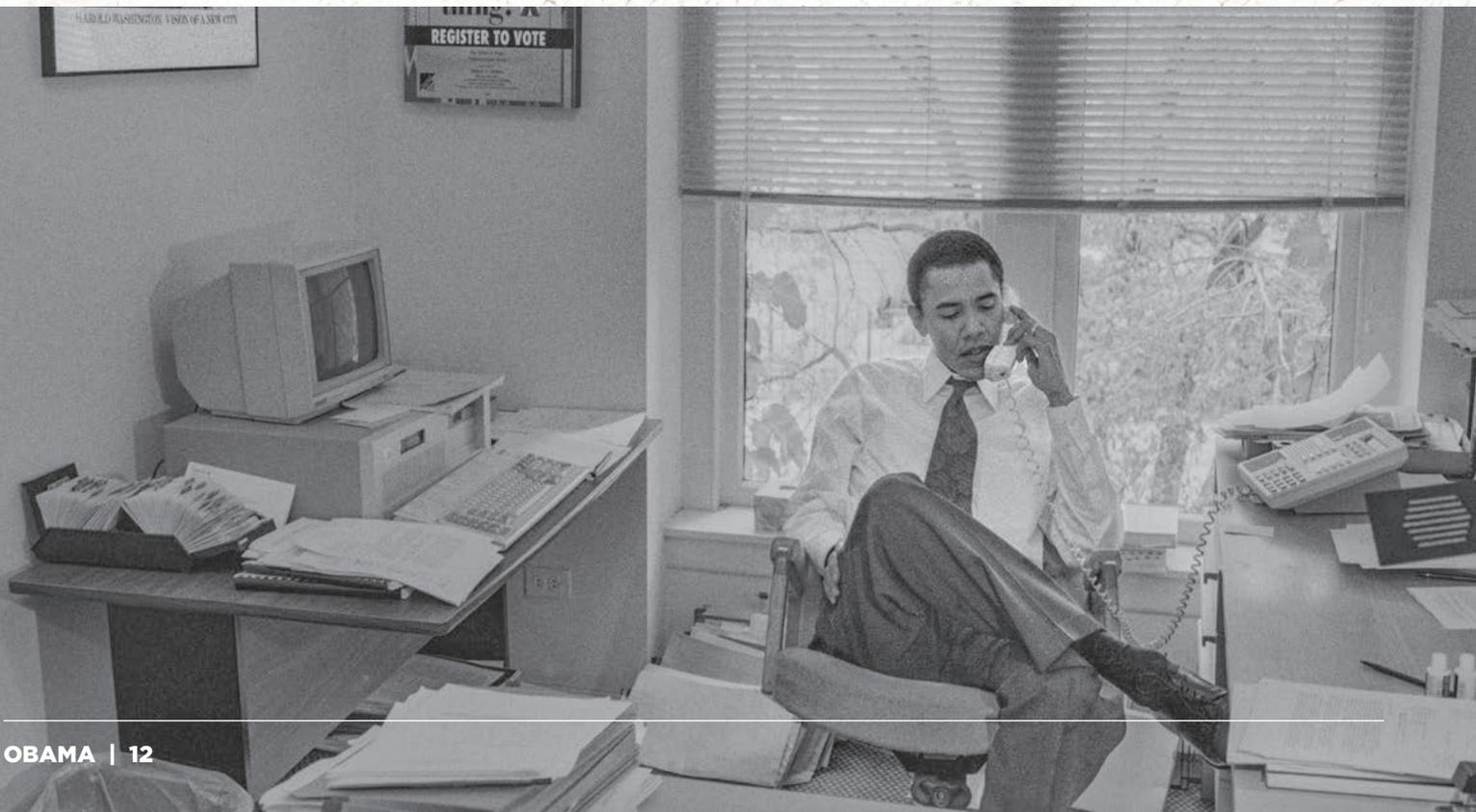
- > In what ways did Obama's experiences growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia in a biracial family shape his political vision, ambition, and success?
- > As a child and teenager, how did Obama explore and define his racial identity?
- > How did his early life influence his decision to be a community organizer and pursue politics as a profession?
- > What experiences, people, or places shaped Obama's vision of a more perfect union?

EPISODE TWO

- > How did the choices Obama made with regard to his family and faith influence the public perception of his candidacy, election, and administration?
- > What historical movements, events, and predecessors made Obama's candidacy and election possible?
- > In what ways did race and racism influence his campaign?
- > As the first Black president of the United States, was Obama the fulfillment of the Civil Rights Movement?

EPISODE THREE

- > In response to President Obama's election, Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said, "No one thought we would live to see this day. But what did that day signify? That was the question. How much had America changed because it had finally gotten rid of this hereditary barrier of occupancy to the White House?" From your perspective, what did that day signify?
- > How did the expectations of America's first Black president vary in different communities?
- > What new factions and coalitions did Obama invite into the political process?
- > What factions and coalitions saw him as a threat?
- > What are the evolving legacies of President Obama?

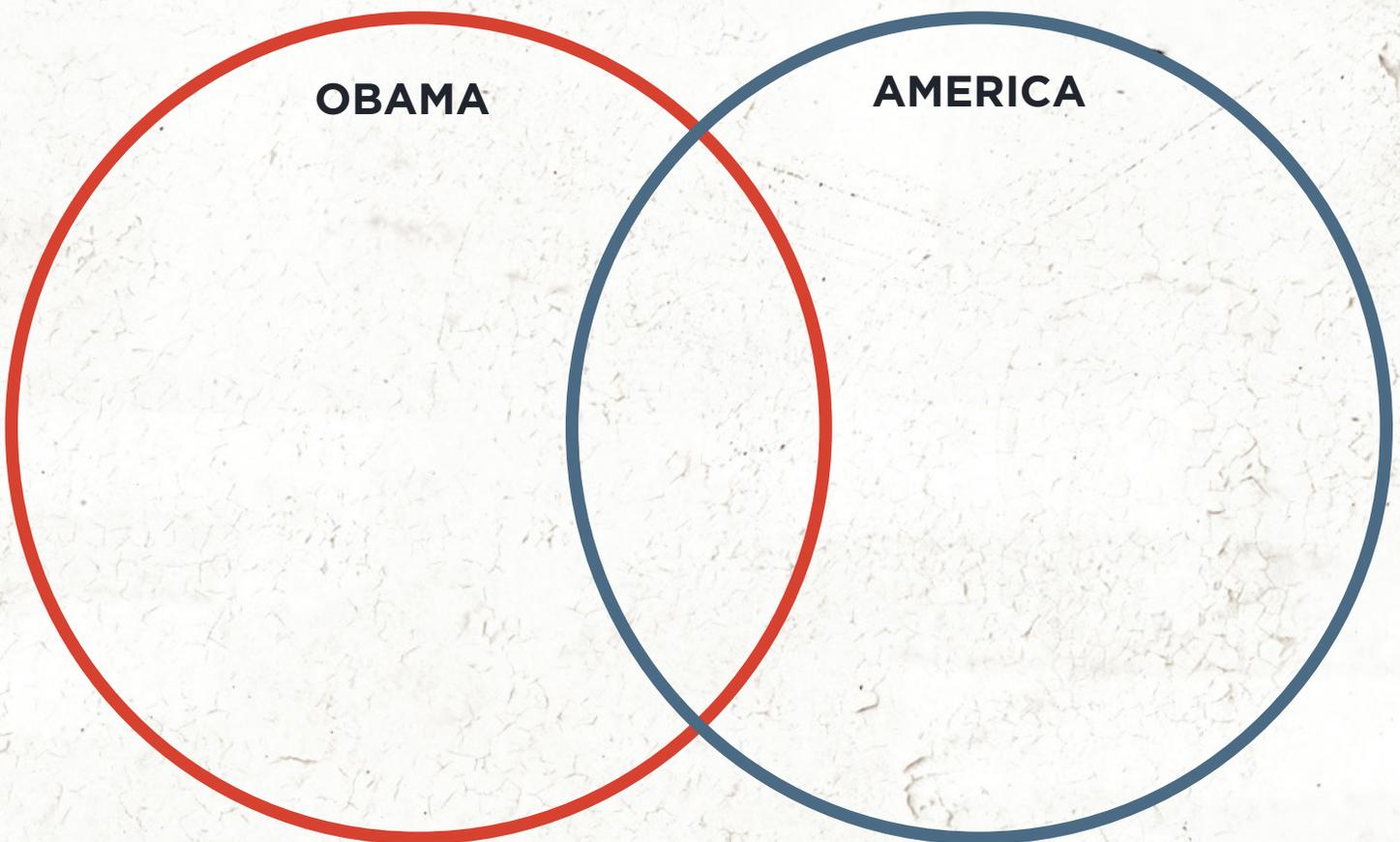


OBAMA VENN DIAGRAM

Moderator Tip: Print a copy of the Venn diagram for each participant to fill out separately and then discuss as a group, or project the diagram and discuss and complete together.

Engage with the film by considering the relationship between Obama's personal and political life and the broad cultural context of our nation's history. In this Venn diagram, one circle represents Obama, and the other represents America. Audiences can think about which events and ideas raised in the film might fit within the "Obama" circle, meaning what happened was unique and internal to him; which fit within the "America" circle, meaning what happens (or happened) is external to him; and, finally, which events overlap and reflect both contexts.

This activity is an opportunity to examine how Obama's trajectory was influenced by, intersected with, and in turn, impacted our history and culture. It may also be useful to compare and contrast Obama's pursuit for a more perfect union with those of another figure from the documentary, such as Shirley Sherrod or John Lewis.



EXPLORING POINTS OF VIEW

Moderator Tip: This strategy works best with small groups such as workshops, classrooms, youth groups, or mentorship programs. The quotes, organized by episode, can be projected, read aloud, posted in a gallery format around a room on tables, or printed as handouts to read and discuss. Consider using the episode specific discussion questions on pg. 12 for additional support.

One of the most compelling aspects of **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** is the diverse collection of voices helping tell Obama's story. Along with personal friends and loyal colleagues, there are academics, rivals, and critics. Some see only the progress and success of the Obama administration while others express disappointment and regret. Inviting participants to more deeply engage with these points of view is a meaningful way to address the themes of the series as a whole. Obama's quotes were collected from archival interviews, and the others were recorded during production. For a complete collection of all the interviews and transcripts visit www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org.



EPISODE ONE

Barack Obama

"I am the son of a Black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived the 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.... And for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible."

"I've been continually experimenting with ways to bring about change. I tried community organizing. I've worked as a civil rights attorney. Politics, I think, is one more way of approaching the same set of problems that I have been interested in throughout my career."



Joella Edwards, Classmate, Punahou School

"When Barry first came into my school, I was excited... Yes, I had friends and everything, but still being the only little Black girl and being teased all the time was very difficult for me. So, when I saw him I thought, he is just like me, but he's a guy. Same color skin, so maybe we can be allies and we can work together."



Alvin Love, Pastor, Lilydale First Baptist Church

"I think the fact that Barack was looking for himself, and part of that was that nomadic movement in his early childhood. He wanted to be rooted, he wanted to be grounded, have some sense of stability.... Let's put some roots down, let's get settled, and let's give our children that kind of stability and consistency that we didn't have."



Loretta Augustine-Herron, Community Organizer

“Barack was one of the greatest resources our area ever had. He changed the way that we thought. And that is part of the job of a community organizer. Not only to empower and further the cause of the people in the community, but to change the way people think. It goes from, ‘I can’t’ to ‘I can’ and ‘I will.’”



Laura Washington, Journalist

“‘He’s not Black enough.’ I was hearing this from Whites. ‘What makes him Black? His mother was White. Well, how does he get to be a Black guy? And how does he get to be the first Black president? Or how does he get to be a Black senator when he doesn’t even really have an African American background?’”



David Axelrod, Political Consultant

“It was a revelation to me to watch Barack Obama campaign in Illinois for the United States Senate.... He told me ‘I am of the Black community but not limited to the Black community.’”

▶ EPISODE TWO

Barack Obama

“It was here in Springfield, where North, South, East and West come together, that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people. Where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America.”



Valerie Jarrett, Political Advisor

“The theory of the case was that if we can win Iowa, then he would be credible; not just to people in White America but also people in Black America, who were hesitant about his chances of winning. But that strategy came with a cost, and the cost was Black people feeling somewhat neglected. Now we came up with a magic solution, which was we asked Michelle to go to South Carolina.”



Jeremiah Wright, Pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ

“I think that President Obama’s joining Trinity before he was a senator, before he was a candidate for the presidency, gave him visibility among a very large number of persons in the Black community.... I know several commentators that, since the election, have said he joined for that reason.... I don’t know that that’s true.... He joined the legal counseling ministry with a legal background where we ask all new members to pick a ministry and become active in that, particularly with a church our size. So he’s just not coming in on Sunday anonymously, leaving on Sunday anonymously, but having your life interwoven with the lives of other persons whether in your profession or not.”



Michele Norris, Journalist

“During the Obama candidacy, there was a word that was in vogue. There were a lot of people, people of influence, talking about the notion that America might be entering a post-racial status. Post-racial is an interesting word, you know, it was a new word — it was not part of the American vernacular.... It’s interesting why we as a society embraced that word. Was it hope that maybe race would be less important? Was it hubris? Were we deluded?”



Jelani Cobb, Author and Journalist

“Right after [Obama won the Iowa caucus] I saw a t-shirt that had Martin Luther King and Barack Obama next to each other on the shirt, and then I saw that t-shirt everywhere in the days that followed.... King is talking about the philosophical implications of a movement based in love and non-violence, and Obama is talking about the fact that the force of arms, particularly in the North Atlantic Alliance, is what saved the world from fascism. I think Obama’s strongest critics on the left and his strongest critics within Black America were very intent upon pointing out the ways in which his legacy as a political person was not in keeping with what Martin Luther King’s legacy was as a civil rights activist.”



Charlamagne Tha God, Radio host, The Breakfast Club

“I was one of those people who, that was my first time ever voting, period, ever. I never voted in any local elections, no presidential elections, nothing. Barack Obama was the first person that energized me and made me say, ‘I want to go out here and vote.’”



Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Professor

“Jesse’s victory was symbolic and, let me be clear, I think most historians would agree that without Jesse Jackson in ‘84 and ‘88, there’d be no Barack Obama.”



John Lewis, U.S. Representative, Georgia

“I think the election of President Barack Obama forced all of us but maybe the majority of Americans to come to terms with the issue of race.... He was picking up where Dr. King left off, that we’re one people, we’re one family, and we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters.”





EPISODE THREE

Reporter: *"Yours is a rather historic presidency, and I'm just wondering whether in any of the policy debates that you've had within the White House, the issue of race has come up? Or has the last 64 days been a relatively color-blind time?"*

Obama: *"I think that the last 64 days have been dominated by me trying to figure out how we're going to fix the economy and that affects Black, Brown, and White. Obviously at the inauguration, I think that there was justifiable pride on the part of the country that we had taken a step to move us beyond some of the searing legacies of racial discrimination in this country. But, that lasted about a day."*



Carol Moseley Braun, U.S. Senator, Illinois

"Until we have a common vocabulary about race, it'll be a very difficult conversation for anybody to have.... Barack was particularly challenged because he, again, did not come from the indigenous African American experience. He had to learn all of that. He had to learn what a lot of people in the neighborhoods grow up with. Did he do enough for Black people? I think history will tell the tale on that."



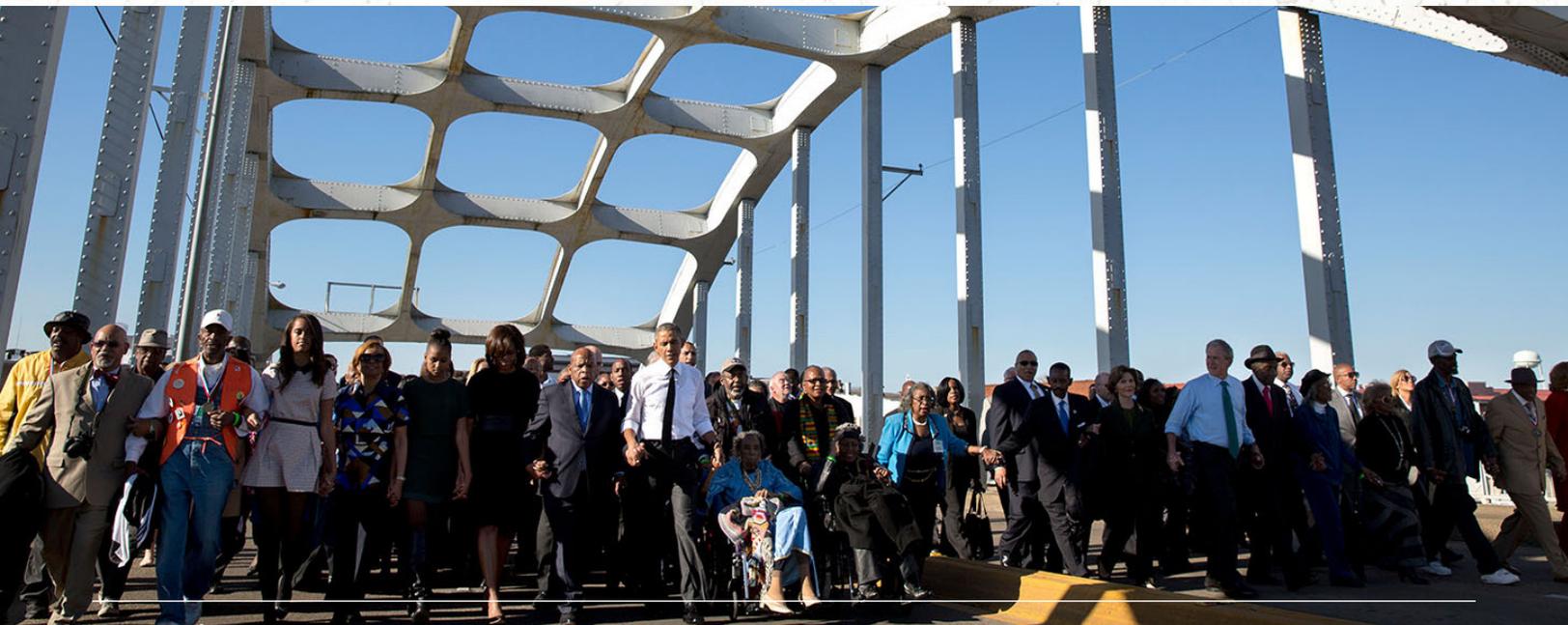
Sherilynn Ifill, President, NAACP Legal Defense Fund

"I remember it was during the healthcare debate... People forget how much consultation he had, how many hearings, community conversations, and town halls... He was the ultimate CEO sitting around that table and what I actually thought when I saw it was, he's driving them crazy, his capability, they were maddened by it."



Cornel West, Professor and Activist

"Barack Obama will go down in the annals of time as having this great symbolic status but the struggle for freedom and justice is not just about symbols...for those who have been spit on, subjugated, dominated, exploited. They can't live vicariously through your symbolic success."



PURSuing A MORE PERFECT UNION



I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

— **BARACK OBAMA**

TAKE ACTION

“ One voice can change a room. And if one voice can change a room, then it can change a city. And if it can change a city, it can change a state. And if it can change a state, it can change a nation. And if it can change a nation, it can change the world. Your voice can change the world. ”

— BARACK OBAMA



Like Obama used his voice to register voters and work to advance legislation as an elected official, your voice can make change too. Your action can make a difference to issues addressed in the series, such as access to healthcare, criminal justice system reform, gun safety, equity in education, and re-imagining policing. **Here are a few ways to energize and mobilize your community, inspired by President Obama's legacy.**

- > **Highlight changemakers in your community and nationwide.** Visit the Obama Foundation's [Voices that Inspire Us](#) to share how other people's legacies have impacted you.
- > **Find and join your local My Brother's Keeper Community** to continue conversations about racial equity: bit.ly/ObamaMBK
- > **Bring change to your community.** Visit our action page to find upcoming elections, voting locations, and find out what's on the ballot near you. And encourage three friends, family members, or classmates to register to vote: bit.ly/ObamaSeriesTakeAction.
- > **Join the virtual conversation** on social media with [#ObamaHBO](#).
- > **Keep track of local rules, issues and deadlines.** Obama's legacy reminds us that local community involvement is one of the most important ways to be engaged. League of Women Voters' tool allows you to find specific info about voting rules and regulations - issues that vary from state to state and can sometimes be confusing. bit.ly/LWVVotingTool
- > **Share the documentary and educator resources with a school in your community.** The foundation of our democracy is rooted in knowing and understanding our role as citizens. Visit bit.ly/ObamaEducatorResources to find these materials.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- > [Black Futures Lab](#)
- > [Center for Policing Equity](#)
- > [Movement for Black Lives](#)
- > [My Brothers Keeper Alliance](#)
- > [NAACP Legal Defense Fund](#)
- > [National Black Justice Coalition](#)
- > [National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform](#)
- > [New York City Anti-Violence Project \(AVP\)](#)
- > [Participatory Budgeting Project](#)



OBAMA

IN PURSUIT OF A
MORE PERFECT UNION

Engagement Guide developed and written by [Blueshift Education](#)

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