



LESSON TWO

THE VISION AND WORK OF DEMOCRACY

A MORE PERFECT UNION

OVERVIEW

Barack Obama invoked the ideals of a more perfect union in his campaign for president and often referred to this civic creed during his presidency as the necessary and hard work of democracy.

In this lesson, students will explore Obama's political vision of a more perfect union and connect it to their own beliefs, values, and vision for American democracy. Beginning with a discussion of the purpose of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, students will closely read excerpts from several of Obama's speeches; exercise critical media literacy skills through watching film clips and curated interviews collected in the production of the documentary; and explore their ideas, values, and commitment to the ongoing work of democracy. Throughout, students will identify new ways to foster solidarity and build upon existing political and social initiatives.



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- > What is the purpose of the opening phrase of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union"?
- > What ongoing work is necessary "to form a more perfect Union?"
- > How did Obama envision a more perfect union and work toward achieving it?



LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will:
- > Understand the purpose of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.
 - > Explore their beliefs and ideas about the phrase "to form a more perfect Union."
 - > View a film clip from **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** and curated excerpts from the Interview Archive to expand understanding of Obama's vision of a more perfect union.
 - > Analyze the rhetorical devices he used to unify Americans around a shared history and vision of a more perfect union.
 - > Synthesize their learning by completing The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram for this lesson.



MATERIALS

Listed in order as they appear in the lesson:

- > Equipment to screen film clips and interview threads curated for this lesson
- > Film Clips
- > Handout One: Film Clip Transcripts
- > Handout Two: Full transcript, 2004 Democratic National Convention speech
- > Handout Three: Interview Transcripts
- > Handout Four: The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram



ACTIVITIES



“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.

— BARACK OBAMA

OPENING

Project and read aloud as a class [the Preamble](#) to the U.S. Constitution:

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."¹



Teacher Note: The definition of the preamble is “an introductory statement especially the introductory part of a constitution or statute that usually states the reasons for and intent of the law.”² The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution was created at the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787. It was intended to introduce the Constitution and explain its purpose and was never meant to outline additional powers of government.³

DISCUSS

- > What do you think is the purpose of the Preamble?
- > What is being proclaimed?
- > How does the Preamble reflect the Founders’ values and their goals for the future of the United States?

¹<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>

²<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/preamble>

³<https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/interpretation/preamble-ic/interprets/37>



ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT



Teacher Note: The following film clips are excerpted directly from **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union** and help to deepen student understanding of contemporary applications of the ideals and values of a more perfect union.

Introduce the film clip with a short discussion on the title of the documentary **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union**.

- > How do you understand the difference in meaning between the phrasing in the Preamble, “in Order to form a more perfect Union,” and the title of the documentary **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union**?
- > What do you think the filmmakers are suggesting?



FILM CLIPS

Introduce the film clips and distribute **Handout One, Lesson Two: Film Transcripts** for students to follow along.

> Clip One: DNC 2004 (5:19)

Clip One begins after Barack Obama won the Illinois Democratic primary for U.S. Senator. It goes on to examine his rise to national attention after delivering the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, MA, where John Kerry was nominated as the party's candidate for president.

> Clip Two: E Pluribus Unum (3:37)

Clip Two focuses on the speech itself and offers different points of view from scholars and journalists on the role it played in laying out Obama's political vision



DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- > Barack Obama weaves into his speech the traditional motto of the United States, “E Pluribus Unum,” translated as “out of many, one.” How do you think this motto reflects the ideal of a more perfect union?
- > What do you think is the American dream of possibility that Obama references?
- > After the closing of his speech a news reporter said, “This is a guy who transcends labels, clichés, racial, ideological, cultural. He mixed it all up, he reinvented it; he gave us a whole new vision of the United States. This guy’s going places.” What did you hear as this new vision of the United States?

Distribute **Handout Two, Lesson Two: Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention**, and have students revisit the speech, this time in its entirety.

- > Have students underline words and phrases they identify as Obama's expression and vision of a more perfect union. Point out that some of Handout One were in the film clip, but this is the whole speech, so they should pay attention to context clues.
- > What rhetorical devices does Obama use and repeat to connect himself with the values and ideals of a more perfect union?

A CLOSE VIEW: INTERVIEW THREADS

For this lesson, two interview threads were created to deepen students' understanding of Obama's vision of a more perfect union and how others understood, accepted, and were critical of this vision.

Print and distribute **Handout Three, Lesson Two: Interview Transcripts**. Have students watch the interviews and follow along on the transcripts. Underline details that catch their attention, and jot down questions and insights that come to mind.

> Thread One: Obama's Visions of a More Perfect Union

David Axelrod and Jon Favreau share their recollections of Obama's Senate campaign and the foundation of his political vision.

> Thread Two: Perspectives on Obama and A More Perfect Union

Friends, scholars, journalists, and colleagues including Sherrilyn Ifill, David Remnick, Martin Nesbitt, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. offer personal insights and valuable historical context to the significance of being elected as the first Black president of the United States.

SYNTHESIZING LEARNING: THE MORE PERFECT UNION VENN

Return to **The Venn Diagram Handout**. Have students reflect on their learning from Lesson Two using the film clips, interviews, primary documents, and class discussions, and add their ideas within each circle.

If helpful, use these specific prompts to get students started:

- > **Obama circle:** What have you learned about Barack Obama's vision of a more perfect union?
- > **You circle:** What have you learned about your vision and values of a more perfect union?
- > **America circle:** In general, what have you learned about American ideals of a more perfect union?
- > **Overlaps:** Add ideas to the overlapping spaces with the vision and ideals of a more perfect union in mind.

HANDOUT ONE, LESSON TWO

FILM CLIPS TRANSCRIPTS

CLIP ONE: DNC 2004

BRIAN WILLIAMS: The Democratic party today made it clear they think they have discovered the biggest potential political star of either party to come out of Illinois since Abe Lincoln. His name is Barack Obama, and he's running for U.S. Senate. The party announced today he'll be the keynote speaker at their Boston convention.

REPORTER: Democrats could have picked someone more famous, but the pros saw something special in Barack Obama.

MICHELLE OBAMA: Barack's candidacy isn't just energizing the Democratic party, but it's energizing people and giving them a renewed hope for politics, period. You know, they're tired of a politics of division, so it's very uplifting to see this wonderful young man who reminds so many people of their own sons and grandsons, regardless of race.

TIM RUSSSERT: Do you think the Democratic Party selected you in part because they wanted to present an African American, young, rising politician?

BARACK OBAMA: Well, I think that John Kerry cares a lot about diversity in the party. And I think that certainly made a difference. I also think that the manner in which we won our primary in Illinois was a hopeful sign, because the conventional wisdom was that I would get the Black vote and then a sliver of White vote, and instead we won in places people didn't expect us to win; in suburban areas, in rural areas. And it indicates that people are really ready for a message for change. What they want is somebody who has a positive message, who has a tone in their politics that says, "We can disagree with the other side without being disagreeable." And I think that's the kind of message that John Kerry is going to be projecting at the convention during this week.

AL SHARPTON: The Black caucus of delegates to the 2004 Democratic Convention had their sessions, and they invited me to speak 'cause I was one of the candidates for president that year. And they invited

Mr. Obama. And, he says, "I just want to explain to you, Reverend, that, you know, I'm doing the keynote tomorrow night and I'm probably gonna be more expansive and unifying than a lot of people are used to." And I stopped him then and said, "Don't worry Senator, you do what you have to do tomorrow night because you have to win for the U.S. Senate. I'm gonna take care of the brothers and sisters tonight." And he kind of looked at me the way he kind of cocks his head and he laughed. And I think that began a relationship where he and I understood that we play different roles.

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Let me express my deepest gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention. Tonight is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely.

JELANI COBB: When I first saw Barack Obama, I was skeptical. And my introduction to him was like very many people's introduction, the 2004 Democratic National Convention where he gave the keynote speech. But I was intrigued, even as I was skeptical.

BARACK OBAMA: I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible.

DAVID AXELROD: We wanted to create a movement that inspired people to believe that we could overcome some of these really great barriers in our politics. That we could overcome the cynicism. You know, I thought that this speech was going to have a galvanic effect for Obama. Didn't realize how much until I was in the room in Boston.

BARACK OBAMA: This year, in this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and our commitments, to hold them against a hard reality and see how we are measuring up, to the legacy of our forebears, and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans — Democrats, Republicans, Independents — I say to you tonight: we have more work to do.

CLIP TWO: E PLURIBUS UNUM

AL SHARPTON: I was sitting up in one of the box seats, and I had some activists with me. And they were like, "Well, why isn't he talking about voting rights, and why isn't he talking about some of our issues?"

BARACK OBAMA: John Kerry believes in America. And he knows that it's not enough for just some of us to prosper.

AL SHARPTON: I understood that he had to deal with a broad range of issues, and that he was running for the U.S. Senate to represent everybody in Illinois.

BARACK OBAMA: If there's a child on the South Side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child.

AL SHARPTON: And, I actually got into arguments defending him. I would say, "Wait a minute. We — we cannot fight to get our best to the mainstream, and then tell them, 'Don't talk to the mainstream about mainstream issues.'"

BARACK OBAMA: It is that fundamental belief, I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, and yet still come together as one American family. E pluribus unum: out of many, one.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: It's his position. As an American politician, his goal is to represent the best interest of the entire nation from a particular position and standpoint as a Black man, but broadening out, not only what that Blackness might mean, but how it might also encompass and include all of America.

BARACK OBAMA: Now, even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us: the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers, who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America; there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits — the pundits like to slice and dice —

JELANI COBB: You know, he made that statement, "There's not a Black America or a White America; there's the United States of America." Now, that's not true; there's totally a Black America and a White America. And there's a Latino America, a gay America, a poor America. There's a America that is disproportionately incarcerated, there are all of those things.

BARACK OBAMA: We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes; all of us defending the United States of America.

JELANI COBB: But you also had to understand that he was speaking aspirationally; that people wanted to belong to a country in which those were not permanent and impermeable distinctions.

BARACK OBAMA: In the end — in the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism, or do we participate in a politics of hope?

DAVID REMNICK: I don't think Obama had any illusion that everybody had transcended race and had transcended historical animosities and all the rest, and everybody was in full embrace of great unity. It was a new kind of American optimism. Voiced by somebody who embodied this melding of identity.

BARACK OBAMA: It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs, the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores, the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta, the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds, the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: I was there at the convention, and it was riveting, electrifying. It was comparable to King standing at the summit of expectation in 1963 where he identifies a golden thread of the American dream and weaves it into a tapestry of American democratic possibility.

BARACK OBAMA: Hope. Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope. In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us. The bedrock of this nation.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Now, I'm not saying that the 2004 speech measured up to the "I Have a Dream" speech, in terms of rhetorical eloquence, though it was eloquent.

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. Thank you.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: But it did have an electrifying effect in that same way. That was a tremendous coming-out party for Barack Obama.

HANDOUT TWO, LESSON TWO

BARACK OBAMA'S KEYNOTE ADDRESS

2004 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION, BOSTON, MA

On behalf of the great state of Illinois, crossroads of a nation, land of Lincoln, let me express my deep gratitude for the privilege of addressing this convention. Tonight is a particular honor for me because let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father, my grandfather, was a cook, a domestic servant.

But my grandfather had larger dreams for his son. Through hard work and perseverance, my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, which stood as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before. While studying here, my father met my mother. She was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas. Her father worked on oil rigs and farms through most of the Depression. The day after Pearl Harbor he signed up for duty, joined Patton's army, and marched across Europe. Back home, my grandmother raised their baby and went to work on a bomber assembly line. After the war, they studied on the G.I. Bill, bought a house through FHA, and moved west in search of opportunity. And they, too, had big dreams for their daughter, a common dream, born of two continents.

My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential. They are both passed away now. Yet, I know that, on this night, they look down on me with pride.

I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, aware that my parents' dreams live on in my precious daughters. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible. Tonight, we gather to affirm the greatness of our nation, not because of the height of our skyscrapers, or the power of our military, or the size of our economy. Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

That is the true genius of America, a faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence on small miracles. That we can tuck in our children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That we can say what we think, write what we think, without hearing

a sudden knock on the door. That we can have an idea and start our own business without paying a bribe or hiring somebody's son. That we can participate in the political process without fear of retribution, and that our votes will be counted — or at least, most of the time.

This year, in this election, we are called to reaffirm our values and commitments, to hold them against a hard reality, and see how we are measuring up, to the legacy of our forebears, and the promise of future generations. And fellow Americans — Democrats, Republicans, Independents — I say to you tonight: we have more work to do. More to do for the workers I met in Galesburg, Illinois, who are losing their union jobs at the Maytag plant that's moving to Mexico, and now are having to compete with their own children for jobs that pay seven bucks an hour. More to do for the father I met who was losing his job and choking back tears, wondering how he would pay \$4,500 a month for the drugs his son needs without the health benefits he counted on. More to do for the young woman in East St. Louis, and thousands more like her, who has the grades, has the drive, has the will, but doesn't have the money to go to college.

Don't get me wrong. The people I meet in small towns and big cities, in diners and office parks, they don't expect the government to solve all their problems. They know they have to work hard to get ahead and they want to. Go into the collar counties around Chicago, and people will tell you they don't want their tax money wasted by a welfare agency or the Pentagon. Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. They know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a Black youth with a book is acting White. No, people don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that—with just a change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They know we can do better. And they want that choice.

In this election, we offer that choice. Our party has chosen a man to lead us who embodies the best this country has to offer. That man is John Kerry. John Kerry understands the ideals of community, faith, and sacrifice because they've defined his life. From his heroic service in Vietnam to his years as prosecutor and lieutenant governor, through two decades in the United States Senate, he has devoted himself to this country. Again and again, we've seen him make tough choices when easier ones were available. His values and his record affirm what is best in us.

John Kerry believes in an America where hard work is rewarded. So instead of offering tax breaks to companies shipping jobs overseas, he'll offer them to companies creating jobs here at home. John Kerry believes in an America where all Americans can afford the same health coverage our politicians in Washington have for themselves. John Kerry believes in energy independence, so we aren't held hostage to the profits of oil companies or the sabotage of foreign oil fields. John Kerry believes in the constitutional freedoms that have made our country the envy of the world, and he will never sacrifice our basic liberties nor use faith as a wedge to divide us. And John Kerry believes that in a dangerous world, war must be an option, but it should never be the first option.

A while back, I met a young man named Shamus at the VFW Hall in East Moline, Illinois. He was a good-looking kid, 6'2" or 6'3", clear-eyed, with an easy smile. He told me he'd joined the Marines and was heading to Iraq the following week. As I listened to him explain why he'd enlisted, his absolute faith in our country and its leaders, his devotion to duty and service, I thought this young man was all any of us might hope for in a child. But then I asked myself: Are we serving Shamus as well as he was serving us? I thought of more than 900 servicemen and -women, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors, who will not be returning to their hometowns. I thought of families I had met who were struggling to get by without a loved one's full income, or whose loved ones had returned with a limb missing or with nerves shattered, but who still lacked long-term health benefits because they were reservists. When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, and to never ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, and earn the respect of the world.

Now let me be clear. We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued and they must be defeated. John Kerry knows this. And just as Lieutenant Kerry did not hesitate to risk his life to protect the men who served with him in Vietnam, President Kerry will not hesitate one moment to use our military might to keep America safe and secure. John Kerry believes in America. And he knows it's not enough for just some of us to prosper. For alongside our famous individualism, there's another ingredient in the American saga. A belief that we are connected as one people. If there's a child on the South Side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for her prescription and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandmother. If there's an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties. It's that fundamental belief — I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper — that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. "E pluribus unum." Out of many, one.

Yet even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there's not a liberal America and a conservative America — there's the United States of America. There's not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states; red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states and have gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and patriots who supported it. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

In the end, that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope? John Kerry calls on us to hope. John Edwards calls on us to hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism here — the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I'm talking about something more substantial. It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a mill worker's son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. The audacity of hope!

In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation; the belief in things not seen; the belief that there are better days ahead. I believe we can give our middle-class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face us. America!

Tonight, if you feel the same energy I do, the same urgency I do, the same passion I do, the same hopefulness I do — if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the country, from Florida to Oregon, from Washington to Maine, the people will rise up in November, and John Kerry will be sworn in as president, and John Edwards will be sworn in as vice president, and this country will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness, a brighter day will come. Thank you and God bless you.

HANDOUT THREE, LESSON TWO

INTERVIEW THREADS TRANSCRIPTS

OBAMA'S VISION OF A MORE PERFECT UNION

David Axelrod
01:08:56:00 - 01:13:57:21

Well, you know, we really built a movement that inspired people to believe that we could do better in our politics. It was the forerunner of what people would see in 2008. The Senate race was really a trial ground for that even though we didn't know that he'd be running for President in 2008 and we wanted to communicate in the ads that we could overcome some of these really great barriers in our politics; that we could overcome the cynicism, that we could overcome this sort of grinding status quo and that Barack Obama was a guy who had overcome a lot of things in his life, in politics, and was a person who represented that hope. So the first ad we ever did was a biographical ad that combined some of the barriers that he had broken in his life but also some of the things he had achieved in public life for people that seemed improbable. And it ended with him saying, "Now they say we can't change Washington? I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message to say, 'Yes, we can.'" Now that was the first ad I ever did for him. We were filming it at a friend's house, a friend of his. Michelle was there. She wanted to see him film his first ad. And he gets to the end of the script and he says, "Yes, we can." "Yes, we..." he says. "That — is that too corny?" And my heart sunk, because I thought it said everything about what we wanted to say, that this was not just about him, it was about us and — and that we could overcome these things that had us so despairing. And I went through my whole shtick and he says, and he turns to Michelle and says, "Mich, what do you think?" And she just slowly turned her head and said, "Not corny." And he said, "OK, let's go." So I knew where my place was in the strategic hierarchy of the Obama organization but I was grateful that she was there because that became kind of the rallying cry of not just that campaign but future campaigns.

Obama was nominated in March for the Senate and it was a very, very resonant victory. I mean, we were expecting it to be very tight. There were seven candidates. He ended up blowing the doors off of it and winning a majority of the vote and winning all over in areas that no one expected an African American candidate to prevail. After he won the primary, there was a fundraiser and John Kerry, who was poised to become the Democratic nominee for President, came in to speak. There were only two other speakers. One was Rich Daley, the Mayor of Chicago. The other was Barack Obama, and Obama gave a rousing speech, so he was

on Kerry's mind. But we decided that we were gonna run a little campaign behind the scenes to try and persuade them to pick him. My partner David Plouffe talked to an old friend of his, Steve Elmendorf, who was the deputy manager of the campaign, made this strong case, and everywhere we could, we kind of planted that seed. Finally, in late June, we got a call from Mary Beth Cahill, the manager of the Kerry campaign. "We'd like you to be the keynote speaker." And he said, "I'd be honored." By the way, he wasn't really privy to the campaign we were running. We did this on our own, so he was — but we told him we'd — "We hope you can do this."

And as soon as he hung up, he said, "I know what I want to say." And I said, "What do you want to say?" And he said, "I want to talk about my story as part of the larger American story." And for the next few weeks, he was — as he drove around campaigning or was at the State Senate voting, in between votes he'd be scribbling notes down in longhand, and then in July, I was overseas with my wife and this fax came in. It was the draft. And I read the first page and handed it to my wife. I read the second page and handed it to my wife. By the third page, I just turned to her. I said, "This is going to be one of the great convention speeches of all time." I had been in the arena in 1984 when Mario Cuomo gave the keynote speech at the Democratic convention for Walter Mondale. And everyone in that room was electrified and knew that Mario Cuomo was now a national figure. He would figure into the future calculation of the Democratic Party. Never ran but everybody assumed that he would and you know, I thought that this speech was gonna have a galvanic effect for Obama. Didn't realize how much until I was in the room in Boston, but it was clear it was a remarkable speech.

Jon Favreau
01:09:53:22 - 01:11:34:14

From the beginning of the campaign, his belief was: We have different beliefs, we come from different places, you know, we have different backgrounds, and yet there is something that connects all of us as Americans because this is a country that was founded not on you know, allegiance to a specific ethnicity or tribe or you know, people of a certain background. This is a country that unlike many other countries was founded on a set of ideals. Because this country is founded on a set of ideals, allegiance to this country and patriotism is about whether you believe in those ideals and you believe that we can reach those ideals together. Even though there has been a history of systemic, institutional racism in this country from slavery on until the present day

and all kinds of discrimination — not just among Black Americans but all kinds of different ethnic and racial groups — despite all of that, despite all that struggle, having that North Star of the set of ideals that this country was founded upon, that's what gives us at least the possibility of coming together and rising above those tensions and I think his belief in hope stems from his experience with his own life and with race in America.

01:12:20:04-01:12:58:18: He used to say this all the time, like the idea that the federal government thought that a Category 5 hurricane is coming and a bunch of people who live in poverty in New Orleans and the surrounding areas can just gas up their SUV, put a bunch of food and water in the back of the truck and take off to go hang out with their relatives in some nice home, that's larger than just specific discrimination. That's a bigger systemic issue. Throughout his presidency, throughout his career, he wanted people to focus on the bigger structural problems that this country faces that don't necessarily have easy answers.

01:22:20:06 - 01:23:05:20: One thing that people don't understand is that Barack Obama was always very clear-eyed at the beginning, that his election was not going to usher in some era of post-racial harmony. He was very clear-eyed about that. And people don't always know that because they think oh, the language was all hope, change, and unity and he thought everything was going to be wonderful. He didn't. He knew how tough it was, he knew the tensions that existed. He knew the systemic racism that we deal with in this country every day. But his belief was the only way to respond to that is either to do nothing or complain or be pessimistic or be cynical or to hope that you can make it better and work towards making it better. That was his belief.

PERSPECTIVES ON OBAMA AND A MORE PERFECT UNION

Sherrilyn Ifill

1:17:15:02 - 01:19:45:04

The idea that your demand for racial justice, your critique of American racism somehow calls into question your patriotism has been one of the very effective features of White supremacy in this country, which is to turn your demand for equality into suspicion of your allegiance to the country, and so that's always been true, when in fact to demand that your country abide by and live up to the words and the spirit of its foundational documents, that all men and women, I'm sure they'd have said today are created equal, that every person in this country is entitled to the equal protection of the laws. That is in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. It's not something Black people made up. To demand those things, to demand that your country be what it says it is is actually the height of patriotism. It is the willingness to fight to make your country better, not to have blind allegiance to your country, you know, America right or wrong. No, no, make America right. That's how civil rights activists and lawyers think about this country, and those who are willing to work to make this country better are

operating in the highest levels of patriotism in my view. So of course you know, for the first Black president, that's also the question, right? And if his name is Barack Hussein Obama, it's also really convenient to be able to use this trope and the anti-Muslim sentiment that runs through much of America and certainly, that ran through much of America in the period, in the years following 9/11, to try and resuscitate. As a Black leader, particularly as the first Black president, President Obama's really got two issues on the table. One is that there are White people who are denigrating his legitimacy. The other is that you also have to be authentic and legitimate to your own community. And that's always the twin reality for African Americans who are in leadership positions and figuring out how to navigate that is important too.

David Remnick

01:09:08:12-01:11:55:20

There's some people that are just stone-cold racists. We know that. But there are a lot of people also who feel, and are to some degree or another, they feel like they're on the losing end of the stick. Their communities are getting hollowed out. De-industrialization is happening. It's harder for working-class people to make a living. This ignores a whole other thing, that a lot of the working class is people of color, but okay. But there are these people, there are a lot of people, who rose to the bait, I would say, the encouragement of the kind of PR mastery of Trump. "You're being laughed at by elites like Obama. You're being disdained and overlooked by those people." Trump made it into an us and them, and Black and White. There was no question that he had a self-consciousness of a path to whipping up resentment.

And Obama was a Black president. And, you know, one of the things that I've heard Obama say is that maybe he came along 20 years too soon. That maybe for demographic reasons, it might have been better if Gonzales had come along sooner than Obama. You know, he gave a very famous speech that brought him to fame in 2004 at the Democratic Convention in Boston. "There's not a red America, there's not a blue America." That's an aspirational speech. I don't think Obama had any illusion that everybody had transcended race and had transcended historical animosities and all the rest, and everybody was in a full embrace of great unity. It was an aspirational notion. But it made people feel good, it was -- which is what aspiration is all about -- it was a new kind of American optimism, voiced by somebody who had embodied this melding of identity. But I don't think he had radical illusions or disillusions. This is a guy who, you know, at the University of Chicago Law School taught all the texts that are essential to our understanding of race. James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the history of slavery, Reconstruction. He knows that history as well as anybody.

Martin Nesbitt**01:38:07:10 - 01:43:06:00**

The first moment that was magical to me was you had sort of the Cabinet and the Senators and friends and family behind the podium at the Capitol at the Inauguration. And we were inside, and they had a specific order that they were seating us. And when I walked out and looked out on the Mall and saw two million people standing there, celebrating the peaceful transition of power in this country, it gave you a sense of what made America great. And at that moment I thought about all the civil wars and the assassinations and the struggle, violent struggle for power in countries all over the world and then looked at our people, with the rule of law, celebrating a democratic election of a new president in this country. And it was a powerful moment. It was an awe-inspiring moment, seeing more people in one place than I've ever seen in my entire life. That was the first moment that was magical.

The second moment was my wife and I heading up to the residence on the first day that they were in the White House and riding up with an elevator operator, Jermaine was his name, I think. And so I say to him — he's an African-American guy who had worked in the White House for 40 years at that time — and I said, "So how did it feel during this whole process where an African American was on his way to be elected president of the United States?" And he said, which is a very revealing moment to me, he said, "At no time during the entire campaign, the primary or the general election did I ever think he was going to win." He said, "I voted for him, but I didn't think he had a chance to win until the moment I read it in the paper the day after the election." He said, "That is how improbable it all felt to a man my age." And that was a very enlightening moment for me in thinking about; I felt like there was a possibility, I thought it was remote. I think younger people thought it was more likely than even I. But I think there was a certain age in the African American community of people like, "This is never going to happen." And so that was an insightful moment.

But then also as we interacted with the staff at the White House, we all saw our own parents. I mean, my mother did domestic work. And to see these African American and Hispanic people on the staff who we could relate to in such an intimate way, it was just a powerful moment. It was like, "This is what our parents did to make our lives possible for us." So, that was another very powerful moment.

And then a third one, just as an anecdote, which I repeated every time I came to the residence, is I just walked into the Lincoln Bedroom every time I went there, and I read the Gettysburg Address, which was a copy, a handwritten copy by Abraham Lincoln, on display in that room. And that speech moved me equally every time I read it and just the history in that moment, reading that Gettysburg Address while the first African American president in this country's history is in the next room reading his daily briefing or whatever was just always very powerful to me. And seeing that connectivity between Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, that without one, the other's opportunity wouldn't even be possible, was just kind of

a powerful juxtaposition of events that's just right there in front of you.

Ta-Nehisi Coates**01:39:59:22 - 01:42:15:01**

I think about the now sort of cliché notion that people say, "Well, I can now tell my son or my daughter they can be president." You know, Black parents would say that. And that's not a small thing. That's not a small thing. You know, I get asked now, "Do I think there'll be another Black president in my lifetime?" Yes, I do. Before Barack Obama, this was like comedy. This was a Dave Chappelle joke. You know, I mean, this was a Chris Rock movie. Richard Pryor. That was where we went to discuss Black presidents.

It's not like that anymore. And I think actually that was manifest in these midterms, with Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum, who came within a hair's breadth of being governors of states in the Deep South. And that's I think a manifestation of a different kind of imagination. And you can't take that away, in terms of what people will feel themselves able to do. And beyond that, I would suspect that the next person, whoever it is, might not feel so hamstrung. That's the other thing, he's first. You know, certain rules you have to obey. I suspect maybe the next person will feel a little differently about what they can and can't say.

Skip Gates**Obama's election and the Constitution****01:09:58:14 - 01:18:21:10**

His election was an example of history overruling the abomination of the Three-Fifths Clause in the United States Constitution. Very few people think of it that way but, you know, the Founders, at least ideally, wanted to rid our country of heredity-based obstacles, like property ownership, religion — they weren't so good about race, but we could debate about whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison had that debate. Douglass initially thought so but then he changed his mind. He thought that there was enough room for more maneuverability. Well, Barack Obama proved Frederick Douglass right. And that abominable Three-Fifths Clause bit the dust. No one said that that night in the coverage, but that's what I thought of: that that horrible compromise at the Constitutional Convention was now completely buried, just as the stigma or the obstacle of being a Roman Catholic was buried by John Kennedy's election in 1960. Black people, the enslaved Black people in the South, were counted in the census not as a full human being, but as three-fifths of a human being. And that was to give the South certain a weight in the Electoral College. So, many people have written about being defined as three-fifths of a man. Imagine if you were defined as three-fifths of a human being. That's how Black people are inscribed in the Constitution — the word "slave" never appears in the Constitution, but "three-fifths of a human being" does appear in the Constitution — that's how slavery is inscribed, and race,

therefore, was inscribed as a hereditary obstacle toward holding office and toward voting. Even free Negroes in the North by 1860 could only vote in five states. So the relationship between race and the electorate was enormously vexed in this country, as you well know.

Skip Gates

The Obamas and the Concept of the “New Negro”

One of the ways that Black people fought back against the rise of White supremacy was to invent a concept of a New Negro. Now, why would they do that?

They did that because there were so many stereotypes, as part of White supremacy, about the old Negro — the freedmen, the freed women, the formerly enslaved. So, upper-class well-educated Black people, starting in 1894, invented a concept called “the New Negro.” And, the history of the New Negro goes through many iterations between 1894 and 1925. In 1895, Booker T. Washington, just like Barack Obama... Booker T. Washington, at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, gives a speech that makes him the heir of Frederick Douglass. Douglass dies in February 1895, Booker T. Washington makes a speech — one speech — at the Atlanta Exposition — it was like the World’s Fair — in September of 1895, and overnight he is hailed by the White press as the New Negro. And five years later, he publishes a book, which he edits with two other people, called: *A New Negro for a New Century*.

And this concept goes through different iterations, reaches its apex at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1925. So, it was a metaphor that was defined with different content. For some people, a New Negro was like Booker T. Washington; for some people it was like W.E.B. Du Bois, who started the Niagara Movement and the N.A.A.C.P.; for some people, like Alain Locke, the New Negro was going to defeat racism through culture. For Marcus Garvey, a New Negro was a Black nationalist. For A. Philip Randolph, a New Negro was a militant socialist who had learned to shoot in World War I and would shoot the Klan. They’d put a big cartoon in The Messenger magazine of the New Negro shooting the Ku Klux Klan, running off in the distance.

I was astonished that even before he was elected, certain Black commentators started comparing him to the New Negro. One article is even headlined “The New Negro in the New Politics.” Charles Johnson, a brilliant novelist, a sober, astute philosopher, you know, wrote an essay in which he sees Barack and Michelle as a new kind of Black person, something *sui generis*, something unprecedented in the history of the race, and that we were going to have to change the way we described race relations in America because of the coming of this couple — that’s the same rhetoric of the New Negro at the turn of the century. Another political scientist talked about his significance as literally the New Negro in politics. That’s ridiculous. With all due respect to my friend Charles Johnson, there is only one Negro; it’s just old Negro, there never was a new Negro, they were just Black people. And they were part of a long tradition, both Michelle and Barack, there wasn’t a break with the

past they were an extension on the past. They didn’t redefine the past; they embodied the best of the past. It was a culmination of a lot of dreams, and a lot of hopes, a lot of sacrifices, a lot of tears, a lot of lynchings, a lot of beatings, a lot of terrorism, a lot of prayers, a lot of hard work in schools, a lot of deferred gratification.

Skip Gates

The Obamas in the Context of Black History

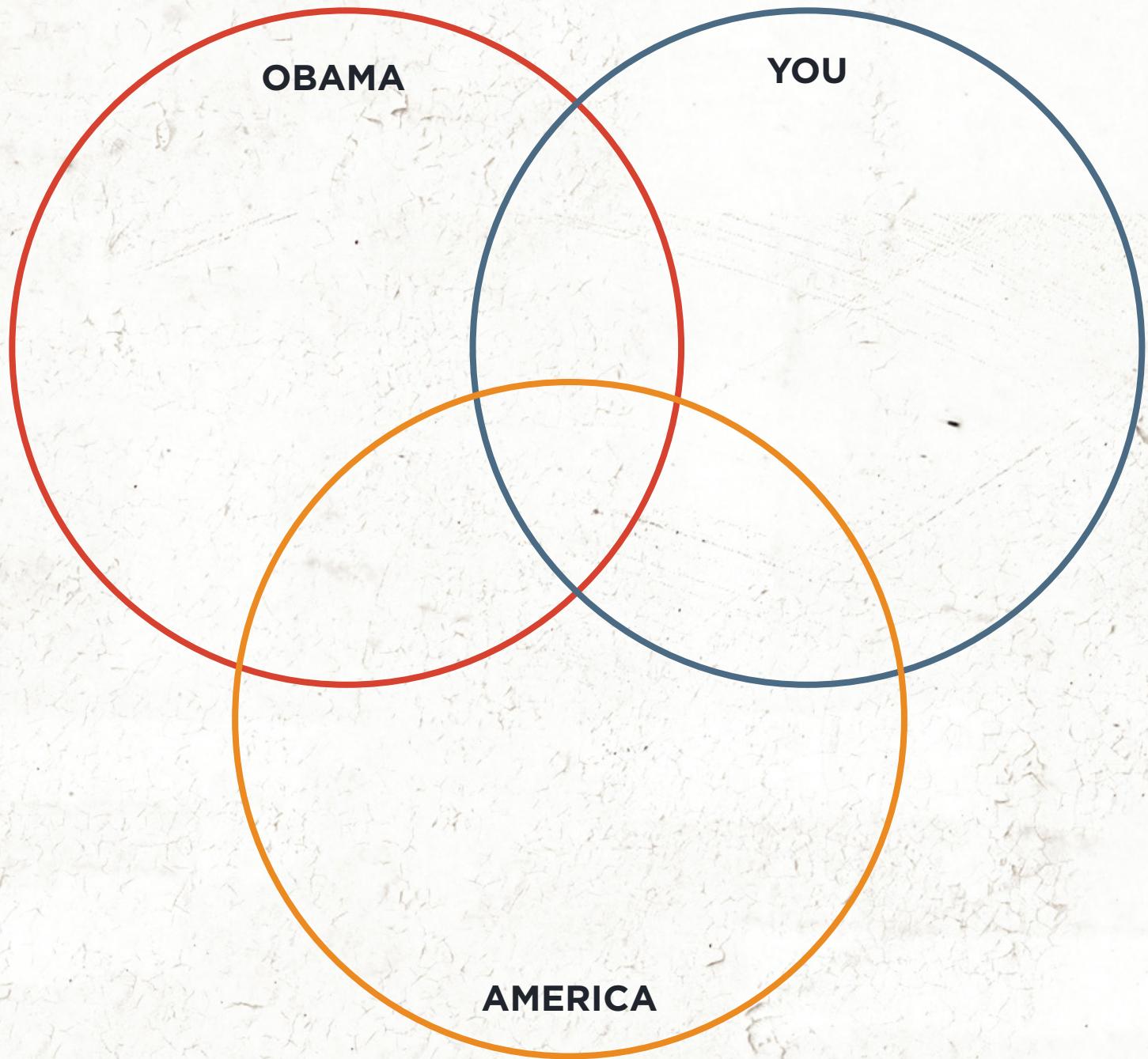
Barack and Michelle were a culmination of hundreds of years of dreams deferred, as Langston Hughes put it. So, I don’t think that Barack and Michelle were guilty of seeing themselves as breaks with the past, but people around them definitely were and commentators definitely were. They wanted to see them as, somehow, different. “I’m different than these other Negroes,” as we used to say. That, somehow, they were unlike African Americans; that they had redefined the possibility of an African American. And, as a race man, as someone who teaches African American history, I know that wasn’t true; they were an extension of the best of the African American tradition. And that new Negro, fantasy had an unfortunate effect, which was to lead to a claim of a new America overnight: Post-racial America was born because of the election of Barack Obama. That is totally and utterly ridiculous. This discourse of a post-racial America was a fantasy. And I think it had deleterious effects in our society. People — Americans want a quick fix, “Okay, we elected a Black man, stop complaining. No more racism, no more NAACP, no more discrimination.”

“Do we really need affirmative action? What are you guys complaining about? You got Barack and Michelle in the White House.” And if anyone doubts that post-racial America was not born, just take a quick look at who’s living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue today [at the time of this interview, President Trump was in office.] Having that lovely, loving, wonderful, bright, brilliant nuclear family of Brown faces in the White House for eight years inspired many of us. I couldn’t believe it some days. But it also drove many others of us totally and completely crazy.

HANDOUT FOUR, LESSON TWO

THE MORE PERFECT UNION VENN DIAGRAM

Directions: Use this Venn diagram to capture your ideas and analysis from this lesson.



Keep in mind:

- > How does this information relate to Obama's vision of a more perfect union?
- > How does it relate to your own vision of a more perfect union?