

A More Perfect Union? Barack Obama and the Politics of Unity

by Thomas J. Sugrue

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*Barack Obama, January 13, 2009, one week before his inauguration as President of the United States.
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

A *New York Times* headline in January 2009 captured the essence of Barack Obama's inauguration for many Americans: "A Civil Rights Victory Party on the Mall." An estimated 1.8 million people gathered to celebrate. Many heroes of the black freedom struggle enjoyed places of honor. The inaugural committee set aside seats for a few hundred surviving Tuskegee Airmen, members of a celebrated all-black unit during World War II. The dignitaries on the platform included ninety-six-year-old Dorothy Height, who began her career as a civil rights activist in Harlem during the Great Depression and who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Sitting nearby was John Lewis, a Georgia congressman and a former leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who had been arrested during the 1960 lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville and the 1961 Freedom Rides. Delivering the convocation was the Reverend Joseph Lowery, a founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and organizer of the 1965 march to Selma, Alabama, to demand voting rights.

Although Barack Obama was the first African American to be nominated for the presidency on a major party ticket, he had generally shied away from racial controversy as he moved onto the national political scene. He did not run as a "civil rights" candidate, and he generally distanced himself from what were perceived as "black issues" on the campaign trail. Obama eschewed the fiery rhetoric of civil rights-era and black-power activists who challenged discrimination and celebrated black pride; instead he drew lessons from centrist black politicians like former Massachusetts senator Edward Brooke, Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, and Virginia governor Douglas Wilder, all of whom won elections in majority white jurisdictions by downplaying race.

Still, as an African American candidate, the question of race was unavoidable for Obama. On March 18, 2008, Obama delivered perhaps the most famous address of his entire career, in response to the release of excerpts from controversial sermons by his Chicago minister, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr. In his speech, “A More Perfect Union,” Obama distanced himself from Wright but also took the occasion to offer a history lesson on race and civil rights in the United States. Obama called for “a more perfect union,” echoing Abraham Lincoln’s soaring rhetoric. Rather than spotlighting ongoing discrimination, Obama celebrated “the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same flag.” Obama called for unity: “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 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.”¹ The emphasis on unity remained consistent throughout Obama’s campaign, in his First Inaugural Address, and in the first years of his presidency.

Even if Obama mostly avoided racial controversy, the racial symbolism of his election and inauguration was lost on no one. Obama had won nearly 43 percent of white votes and overwhelming majorities of African Americans and Latinos. Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates called Obama’s election “a magical transformative moment . . . the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle, the grand achievement of a great collective dream.”² Many commentators argued that Obama’s victory heralded a new post-civil rights era in the United States.

Addressing the huge crowd gathered in Washington on January 20, 2009, Obama only briefly alluded to America’s racial past, even as the television cameras focused on prominent black faces on the stage, including singer Aretha Franklin in her elaborate hat and the tearful Congressman Lewis. Obama noted—with some pleasure—that “a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.”

Many speechwriters, political analysts, and journalists observed differences between Obama’s First Inaugural Address and his previous speeches. By the standards of the campaign, Obama was restrained and somber. No single passage of the speech had the resonance of Franklin Roosevelt’s famous phrase that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” or Ronald Reagan’s proclamation that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” Obama’s March 2008 race speech was both more substantive and more electrifying. As communications scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson argued, “the fact that the country’s first African-American president delivered the 2009 inaugural is more fixed in memory than any statement from it.”³

¹ Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” speech delivered at the National Constitution Center (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), March 18, 2008, my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords/.

² Henry Louis Gates Jr., Introduction to Steven J. Niven, *Barack Obama: A Pocket Biography of Our 44th President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2, 3.

³ Michael Oreskes, “Deconstructing Obama the Orator,” *Real Clear Politics*, September 6, 2012, realclearpolitics.com/news/ap/politics_topics/2012/Sep/06/essay__deconstructing_barack_obama_the_orator.html.

The content of Obama's address, however, is revealing, even if it lacked catchy sound bites or timeless aphorisms. Obama situated his presidency in a long American political and religious tradition. He began the speech by referring to "our ancestors" and "We the People" and "our founding documents." His words echoed Abraham Lincoln; he consummated the address with a long quote from George Washington.

Obama also laced the address with Christian language, drawing from "the words of Scripture" and referring to "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." References to the founders and the Christian Bible are commonplace in major presidential addresses, but they took on particular significance in 2009, after a campaign in which Obama faced charges that he was un-American. A vocal minority wrongly believed that he was born outside the United States or that he was a Muslim.

Obama's address was steeped in traditional political and religious symbolism, but the President also offered a broader reading of American history and nationhood. He referred to slaves (those "who endured the lash of the whip") and to "the bitter swill of civil war and segregation." And to those Americans who assert that the United States is a Christian nation, Obama offered a far more inclusive definition: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers." Many commentators were especially struck by the fact that Obama was the first president to mention atheists in a positive vein.

Obama turned to the domestic and international crises that he inherited. The country had fallen into the worst economic slump in seventy years, and the United States was embroiled in two costly and unpopular wars. As was the case with most inaugural addresses, Obama's offered exhortations rather than policy recommendations. He offered a moral critique of what he believed were the root causes of the crisis: "Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age." On foreign policy, he looked onto the world with optimism: "as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace." Building on the theme of commonality and unity, he promised to "the Muslim world . . . a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

While some observers heard these comments as Obama's rebuke of the policies of George W. Bush and the Republicans, the new president sought common ground with his political opponents at home. He offered a fusion of liberal and conservative views of the economy and government. To those who believed that market excesses were responsible for the economic crisis, Obama argued that the market's "power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched," a sentiment that echoed President Ronald Reagan. But Obama also distanced himself from right-wing arguments that government was the problem, instead asserting that "[t]he question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works," a position similar to that of President Bill Clinton. Here Obama clearly staked out ground in the political center, fusing elements of liberalism and conservatism.

In the end, whether on race or the role of government, whether on the market or on Islam, Obama's First Inaugural Address demonstrated the President's ideological and political commitment to finding common ground through reason and persuasion. Over the ensuing years of his presidency, that belief in unity—at home and abroad—would be put to a test far more difficult than the President, in his soaring rhetoric in late January 2009, could ever have imagined.

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