

A MORE PERFECT UNION

Barack Obama



President Obama's Speech on Race March 18, 2008

Looking More Closely at His Words & Our Own Lives

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

DESCRIPTION

On March 18, 2008, then Senator Barack Obama delivered a major speech on race during the presidential election. This speech came after criticism of his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who had delivered scathing sermons about the racist and oppressive nature of the United States. In his speech, Obama carefully examines the history of race in the U.S., seeking to help blacks and whites understand one another better and to help the country move beyond division and join together to address the problems that face us all, no matter what our race, gender or class.

How to Use this Lesson Plan: One, Two, or More Class Sessions!

One Session

Have students read and/or watch the speech for homework. Either photocopy the transcript of the speech that accompanies the lesson plan and give it to students to read as homework OR instruct students to find the video and/or text on-line. Video and transcripts of the speech are available on the internet; have students search under "Obama," "speech," and "race." The speech is approximately 37-minutes and 5,000 words long. Complete the following lesson plan the following day.

Two Sessions

Read and/or listen to the speech during class (see above). Complete the lesson above.



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Three or More Sessions

Follow instructions for two sessions and add one or more of the extension activities.

Grade Level: Grades 9-12.

Subject Area(s): Social Studies and Language Arts; any class during a “special focus” month, during a diversity session or in a diversity club, in a leadership seminar or class.

Purpose

- To examine a major political speech
- To connect the history of race and racism to current understandings of race and racism
- To imagine ways that we can all work toward a “more perfect union”

Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, each student will

- Understand the connection between the history of racism in the U. S. to current conditions
- Empathize with both black and white understandings of race
- Imagine ways that we might all work together for the good of the country

Materials Needed

All Activities:

- Teacher Instructions, including lesson plan
- Speech Excerpts and Discussion Questions
- Six U. S. history textbooks, such as those used in the American history class at the school.



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TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS: LESSON PLAN

Outline of Activities

1. Introduction (5-10 minutes)
2. Small Group Analysis of Excerpts from the Speech (20-25 minutes)
3. Class Discussion (10-20 minutes)

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Provide background to the speech that then Senator Obama gave on March 18, 2008. Remind students of some of the details of the presidential race: gender and race became important factors; the media highlighted the more inflammatory of the Reverend Wright's sermons; and political pundits questioned Obama's ability to be president from both sides of the race question, wondering if he was too black or not black enough to be president. Explain that students will have the chance to meet in small groups to discuss particular sections of the speech and then join together for a large class discussion about the speech and about what all of us can do to help create a "more perfect union."

Small Group Analysis (20-25 minutes)

Place students in six groups; do not allow students to choose their own groups. Give each group a different excerpt from the speech and related discussion questions (Handouts 1-6) and a U. S. history textbook; ask each group to identify a discussion leader, a note taker, and a reporter. Instruct students to read the excerpt aloud in their group and then to answer the discussion questions; the note taker should write down their answers, and the reporter should be prepared to share a brief summary of their discussion. Teachers should circulate during this part of the lesson to answer any questions that might arise during the discussion; some terms and/or historical events might be unfamiliar to students.

Class Discussion (10-20 minutes)

Bring students back together for a group discussion. Ask each group to share a one-minute summary of their conversation. Then, read the final part of the speech (the story of Ashley Baia through the end of the speech) aloud. Lead a discussion asking students to think about the following: Where does our "union" (our country) need to grow stronger? How can the country grow stronger? How can we—those of us in this classroom—participate in the hopeful work of forming a "more perfect union"?



Encourage students to think about both “macro” and “micro” solutions. Help students think about how they might personally help to create a more perfect union, from being more open to people of other races and learning about the history of racism, to working in their own communities to bring people together, to advocating at a larger governmental level for change.

Lesson Extension Ideas

1. Compare President Obama’s “A More Perfect Union” to “I Have a Dream,” the speech that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. gave 45 years earlier on August 28, 1963 from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington. Have students compare the two men’s analysis of race and racism in America, their hopes for the country, and their use of rhetoric. Students could compare the transcripts or the delivery of the speeches. If students watch videos, they should also analyze the reaction of the crowds.
2. Have students watch a longer excerpt (5 minutes or more) of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s sermon where he says “God damn America” (search for “Wright,” “sermon,” and “America” together). Have a discussion of how Reverend Wright came to that famous line: why is he critical of America here? Have students find or show to the class the clips that the media used of this sermon (usually about 3-5 seconds); discuss how the media can frame things to influence their meaning. Discuss what it means to be a responsible media consumer and citizen when making decisions about important issues.
3. Using their history textbooks, have half of your students create a timeline of events that have helped the U. S. become a “more perfect union.” Have the other half of the students create another timeline of events that have prevented us from being a “more perfect union.” Share the timelines in pairs; ask students to evaluate how we’re doing towards this goal.
4. Read one or more chapters from *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* or *Why Are All the Black Kids sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* and hold further discussion or have students write book reviews or position papers about what they read. Both books contain chapters that stand alone if you don’t have time to read the whole book.
5. Buy a copy of the curriculum *Kaleidoscope: Valuing Difference and Creating Inclusion* and teach diversity in a more in-depth way. www.susanohalloran.com



Resources

Halpin, Mikki. *It's Your World—If You Don't Like It, Change It: Activism for Teenagers*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2004.

Lee, Enid, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (eds.). *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development*. Washington, D. C.: Network of Educators on the Americas, 1998.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1995.

“Our Challenges as a People.” *Teaching Tolerance* magazine. Spring 2009.
www.tolerance.org/teach/magazine/features.jsp?p=0&is=44&ar=1012. Three lesson plans related to President Obama’s speech, “A More Perfect Union.”

Zinn, Howard. *A People’s History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.



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Excerpt #1

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union ..." — 221 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 an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

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.

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.

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 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.

Discussion Questions

1. Look up the Constitution in your history book; read the preamble. What do you think the founders thought would make a “more perfect union”? How would you define a “more perfect union” for the U.S.?
2. How have our words and our actions agreed and disagreed when it comes to race and racism?
3. How has the U. S. changed over its history to become a “more perfect union”?
4. President Obama says that we can “solve the challenges of our time” if we work together, even across our differences. How can we better work together? On what should we work? How should we try to bridge our differences?



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Excerpt #2

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.

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, or 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.

But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than 20 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; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for 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. . . .

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened 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.



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.

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

Discussion Questions

1. President Obama talks about two people he loves—his pastor Reverend Wright and his grandmother—and their flaws. What does he love about them? In his opinion, where do they “go wrong”?
2. Describe someone in your life whom you love but with whom you disagree. How do you stay in relationship with that person? Can you ever challenge that person to think differently?
3. How does President Obama’s description of Wright and his grandmother help you to think about race and racism in the U. S.?



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Excerpt #3

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.

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 v. 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.

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



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urban black neighborhoods — parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pickup, building code enforcement — all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continues to haunt us.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Use your history books to look up some of the issues that President Obama raises in this section of his speech. Did you know about these issues? Why or why not?
2. How does knowing about these issues change your thinking about race and racism in the U. S.?
3. How does the past in your own family / ethnic group influence you personally today?



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Excerpt #4

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 worldview 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. 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.

. . . 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 condition, and 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.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have 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 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 prejudiced, resentment builds over time. 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.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you heard people in your own community blame their problems on another group of people, either people of a different race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and so on? Why do you think people engage in that kind of blaming? After reading this section of the speech, how might you challenge those who blame their problems on others?
2. How might blaming one another benefit certain groups? Who might want blacks and whites (and Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans or men and women or middle class and poor) to be enemies? Read about the labor movement in your textbook for some help with this question; focus especially on the history of the “Great Migration” of African Americans that occurred from the south to the north between 1915-1930.
3. What do you think we ought to do within our own communities and with other racial groups to address and heal the anger that we feel regarding race and racism in the U. S.?



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Excerpt #5

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy — 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 if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

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 has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means 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 that they can write their own destiny.

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 and Asian, rich and poor, young



and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know — what we have seen — is that America can change. That is the 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.

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 — 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.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Using your history book, make a list of 5-10 ways in which the U. S. has changed since the writing of the Constitution to become a “more perfect union.” How did those changes come about? What might be next for us? How can we all be involved?
2. President Obama encourages whites to listen to and believe blacks’ experiences of racism; he also encourages blacks to listen to and understand white frustration for being blamed for something they didn’t create. What might happen if we followed his suggestion(s)? What other groups might we involve in this conversation and how?
3. President Obama suggests that we are all intertwined, that we must be “our brother’s (and sister’s) keeper” and that we have a “common stake” in one another. What do you think keeps us from believing that we have a common destiny and that we need one another? How might we encourage Americans to act as a community rather than self-interested individuals?
4. Imagine someone in the U. S. who is most “opposite” you; how might you and this other person rely on one another, even if you never meet?



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Excerpt #6

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.

That is one option. 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.



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, 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 have never been authorized and should have 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.

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.

Discussion Questions

1. President Obama addresses the ways in which race has been used to distract us from even more important issues and to divide us. Using your memory and your history books, how has race been used in the past as a way to separate people and/or to distract from other issues?
2. How might we be a “more perfect union” if we created alliances and friendships across racial lines rather than dividing up into racial groups?
3. What does President Obama say are the more important issues facing us as a country? Which issues do you think are most important and why?
4. President Obama says he has hope in the next generation—that's you! How would you respond to the President's hopeful challenge that we continue to develop into a “more perfect union”?

