Where the Perfection Begins

Barack Obama's Speech on Race, March 18, 2008

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Dedicated to the memory of

Milton N. Kemnitz,
who devoted his life from 1933 to 1947
to the fight for civil rights,
the rights of labor to form unions,
and the protection of constitutional liberties,
and who never ceased thereafter to
stand for all he believed in

Esther L. Kemnitz,
who cared as passionately
and worked actively
for a more perfect union

We face this wave of repression because we live in a world at war. The traditional enemies of democracy are taking advantage of the war situation to increase their attacks on the people. Whatever differences in views there may be among the American people, we must understand that the basic necessity of today is the need for unity of the people in defense of their democratic rights.

Never before have civil rights been so sharply attacked; never before have there been such open and bitter attacks against labor. But against this assault upon their rights, the people are rallying with a new determination to keep and extend their liberties.

Milton N. Kemnitz
Secretary of the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties
National Action Conference for Civil Rights, April 1942

Introduction

From the moment Barack Obama gave his speech on the 18th of March, 2008, commentators recognized that a rare event had occurred in American political history. Those who thought in political terms believed that this was one of the great presidential campaign speeches, on the level of the best ever given.

Obama's speech also was judged in the tradition of American statements of equality that begins with the *Declaration of Independence* and includes the *Gettysburg Address* and the *I Have a Dream* speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the summer of 1963.

It was understood from the time he gave the speech that Obama had written it himself in the two days before he gave it and that he had shown it only to a few members of his campaign staff. So the assessments of its importance as a campaign speech and as an expression of race relations were based upon the work of the speaker, not on that of a group of speech writers.

The starting point for this book is a set of simple questions: Does this speech have real merit? Did Obama have anything substantial to say, or were his words merely empty sentiments? Did he ask anything of the American people, or did he offer them only congratulatory platitudes? How did he express himself? Did he use special vocabulary or employ grammatical and poetic devices? Did he operate from any underlying structures that shaped his thinking about how Americans might meet the issues he raised?

The speech proves to be worthy of close study. It is a remarkable expression that shows exceptional ability—the sort of ability that Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln demonstrated.

Like Jefferson and Lincoln, Obama demonstrated the capacity to shape the perception of reality with his words. Like Jefferson and Lincoln, Obama altered the reality of his time with his oratory. Americans owe to Jefferson the understanding of the central belief that binds us together as Americans, and Lincoln provided eloquent expression of how that belief is embodied in government and extended to another group of people. Obama gave expression to a new reality in race relations in the United States—a new reality that he himself seemed to create. His emphasis on unity and on the need for people to see themselves as Americans rather than as white or black Americans began to

alter the perceptions of race in America—so much so that many long-standing leaders of the African-American community began reassessing their future.

In many ways Obama's speech is remarkable for a modern American politician. Confronted by a threat to his candidacy, he did not blame or attack his opponents; he mentioned them only in passing. He did not disown the man whose words were the source of the threat. He did not try to use voters' emotions as motivation to secure their support. He did not play on the divisions between groups to win votes. He did not write his speech for applause lines, and he did not end with a rousing peroration.

The great campaign speeches and statements about equality have a common characteristic: their occasion may be fleeting, but they transcend the moment and become part of the national conversation for years or decades to come. In particular, the discussions of equality have had an enduring resonance in American history because the question is central to our definition of ourselves as Americans.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and we have certain unalienable rights. Unlike other nations, which are bound together by religion, language, geographic area, ethnic identity, and cultural traditions, Americans are bound together by an idea that Thomas Jefferson stated so simply. This is our most important idea, and it is the one that occasions the major arguments among ourselves. We have gone to war with one another only about this idea; for everything else we have managed to find compromises to bridge the differences.

In this context Barack Obama's candidacy as the first by an African-American to compete successfully at a national level was significant in itself. The success of that candidacy widened his platform and made his words on race in America that much more significant. One cannot fully understand the speech without understanding its particular political context, and one cannot comprehend its importance without at least provisionally placing it in its wider historical context about our central founding idea.

Barack Obama's reputation as the best communicator of his generation, and indeed the best public speaker in American politics since President Ronald Reagan, helped to create an air of expectancy about his speech and probably increased the audience significantly. During the course of the previous year, Obama had become a phenomenon on internet sites popular with young people, and he had garnered a great deal of support online with people younger than thirty years old. They had devoted time and energy to excerpting his words and replaying them for one another in loops that made

his face and voice familiar to millions. The changed nature of technology is such that Americans can still hear and see Obama delivering his speech.

The perils of instant history on the basis of current events are self-evident, but that should not prevent us from trying to find order and perspective. It is the assumption of this book that the United States is at the opening pages of a new chapter in race relations and that Barack Obama's candidacy, with its emphasis on unity, was the initial episode. In this view, his speech on the 18th of March is the moment when the implications of the new chapter were first discussed. The discussion will build from this starting point to embrace the new realities, as well as the potential and the problems that the country faces as a result.

Moreover, this new chapter will encourage Americans to write other new chapters in which women, Native Americans, and the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities will be the focus.

Barack Obama helped move the country to a time when Americans once again will add to the list of "unalienable rights" that Jefferson began more than two centuries ago.

Chapter 1:
The Historical Context

Senator Barack Obama's once-charmed presidential campaign was in deep trouble when he began his address on the 18th of March, 2008.

It was a presidential bid that had begun modestly with an announcement in Springfield, Illinois, in 2007 on the 10th of February. He had gained national notoriety less than three years earlier when he gave the keynote address at the Democratic Convention that nominated John Kerry and John Edwards to run for President and Vice President of the United States. After the failure of their 2004 campaign, John Edwards began a run for the top job, and he had been running for more than two years and had gathered many supporters by the time Obama announced his candidacy. But even John Edwards's campaign looked puny compared to the effort of New York Senator and former First Lady Hillary Clinton, assisted by her husband, former President Bill Clinton, and by their mighty phalanx of allies from his two highly successful administrations. Working as a team since the year 2000, the Clintons had rounded up donors, strategists, fundraisers, campaign workers, and public relations and polling experts to create a campaign team that looked unbeatable. The other early contestants for the Democratic nomination included a number of candidates with far narrower appeal; these were able men whose ability did not translate into a successful run for the presidency.

The surprise of 2008 was that Obama had beaten everyone right from the first caucus. He had won the Iowa caucuses and looked strong in the early primary states of South Carolina and New Hampshire. It soon became clear that without fanfare or publicity, Obama had put together the best campaign team and plan. He and his advisors had thought clearly about what it might take to win, had organized their resources well, had gathered excellent information about the rules for winning delegates in every state, had developed a viable strategy for winning the nomination, and had the means to express the hopes and dreams of the American people.

By the time the Democrats had reached the New Hampshire primary—historically the first primary in the presidential contest season—Barack Obama was on the verge of eliminating Hillary Clinton from contention. It was there that she staged the first of her many victories to stave off defeat.

The New Hampshire results underscored the fact that Obama and Clinton had taken most of the wind out of the sails of the other candidates, and only John Edwards remained in the race to go on to the next primaries. After New Hampshire, they went to "Super Tuesday" on the 5th of February, when the assumption of the Clinton campaign was that its national scope and fundraising power would put away all her rivals. That assumption was disastrously wrong; Obama more than held his own that night. It was true that Hillary Clinton won New York and New Jersey and California—the big prizes—but Obama had won, too: his own state of Illinois and many others—in fact, more others than Clinton. Edwards looked at the results, understood their meaning, and dropped out of the race. It had come down to Clinton versus Obama, a white woman against a black man in a race that had been won every time before only by a white man.

Throughout the rest of February, it became clear that the Clinton campaign had not anticipated that there would be any contest after Super Tuesday, and it was unprepared to face a real fight for votes and delegates in the next dozen contests. Obama won them all and seemed poised to continue winning and to wrap up the nomination before the end of March. Faced with losing the nomination to Obama, Hillary Clinton put up a spirited fight.

One part of the Clinton strategy was to make the case that she had the better chance of the two candidates of winning the general election against the expected Republican nominee, Senator John McCain. Both Obama and Clinton represented firsts in American history. He was seeking to become the first African-American nominee of a major party. She was seeking to become the first woman nominated by a major party. As Obama won election after election in February, Clinton's prospects dimmed, and her need to find a footing to launch a successful counter-offensive became more acute. She tried several avenues of attack unsuccessfully. It seemed that Obama's campaign was charmed. The media had dug up no dirt on him, and few of the political commentators sympathetic to Democratic candidates were critical of him; moreover, many of those commentators were disparaging of the claims and tactics of the Clinton campaign.

For many weeks Senator Clinton argued that she should be the nominee because she already had been the victim of every conceivable opposition attack and that she had no hidden secrets to derail the campaign at an inopportune moment. The implication was that Senator Obama was too new on the national scene, and a damaging discovery might derail his campaign. This argument was plausible because every voter could remember occasions

when a revelation had cost a candidate support or even forced him out of the race. Obama himself had been the recipient of two such gifts in his campaign for the U.S. Senate. One strong Democratic primary candidate had been forced from the race by details of his sexual exploits that came to light in divorce proceedings; then his Republican opponent had been forced out of the race, also by details revealed in divorce proceedings. At the time Clinton was making this argument, the governor of New York was being forced from office by revelations that he had paid large sums of money for the services of prostitutes. He left office the day before Obama gave his speech on race. A decade earlier Senator Clinton's husband was nearly driven from the presidency because he had had a dalliance in the White House with an intern and then had lied under oath about it. And even further back, in 1972, a vice presidential candidate had been forced off the ballot because it was revealed that he had been given electric shock treatments for mental problems; this had been extremely damaging to the candidacy of George McGovern. Moreover, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew—the ticket that defeated McGovern in 1972—were both forced to resign their offices in historic firsts: Agnew because he had accepted bribes as mayor of Baltimore and governor of Maryland, and Nixon because he had authorized and covered up an attempt to wiretap the Democratic Party headquarters in the Watergate Hotel in 1972. In the intervening years, senators, congressmen, and governors had seen their political careers end because of their peccadilloes or proclivities, and even more candidates had failed to gain office because they had been caught in an unflattering spotlight.

For older voters who had seen the problem often, Clinton had a persuasive argument. Those same voters with long experience in all parts of the country were the one group who consistently supported Senator Clinton. They did not feel the "Obama magic," and many believed that the one issue that would hinder Obama more than any other was that of race. They were old enough to remember segregated restrooms and water fountains, lunch counters and restaurants that would not serve blacks, and hotels that would not rent a room to "coloreds." They remembered the vicious hatred and blind prejudice that drove opposition to desegregation of the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, along with countless other communities, and that propelled Lester Maddox and Bull Conner and George Wallace into the national consciousness. They remembered the solid Southern opposition to the civil rights law of 1964, the gradual shift as white people learned not to use racial slurs, and the hostility to integrated neighborhoods, forced busing, affirmative action, and racial mandates. On the basis of their experience and the world they had known

when these passions did not need to be hidden, they believed that many whites remained secretly too prejudiced for Obama to be successful.

Obama had managed to keep an overt discussion of race out of the campaign. It was a topic too dangerous for other candidates to touch because it was getting increasingly difficult in America in 2008 to win elections as an avowed racist. And Obama did not want to raise the issue to his own detriment. Nonetheless, racial attitudes became a part of the campaign. Many white voters older than thirty saw this as a defining moment in American political life—or at least as a moment that was personally defining for them.

The question was asked from a multitude of perspectives. *Do I want one of "them" as Commander in Chief? How much better will the United States look in the eyes of the world if we elect a black man with family ties to southeast Asia and east Africa? Is it too early in our nation's history to bet our chances in the next election on a black guy the racists will never support? Will the election of a black man heal some of the racial divides in this country? Are we going to get a new round of affirmative action? Do I want a white woman or a black man?* These questions were reflected in sentiments heard at highway rest stops, on talk radio, and sometimes when friends got together. It was clear to many people that the election of 2008 would be extraordinarily dirty below the surface.

The question of race remained largely beneath the surface until the 13th of March, 2008, when the first of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright videos was posted on the website YouTube.com. The next day, the cable channel MSNBC was already on the air reporting on them. Within the next two days, even the slower-to-react network news had taken note. Typical was one piece from the national news broadcast by television network ABC that was slanted by showing some of Reverend Wright's remarks out of context, then showing black members of the congregation saying that his views were normal in the context of black America, thereby leaving viewers with the false impression that the members of Wright's church were commenting on the out-of-context snippets ABC had just shown to its viewers. It was not the case, but that did not stop ABC from engaging in blatant distortion, to the detriment of Obama's reputation.

Two videos were particularly damaging. One showed the Reverend Wright saying, "God bless America? No, God damn America." Another showed him blaming America's actions abroad for the attacks on the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

The very abbreviated clips of the Reverend Wright, taken out of context, were there to be seen by everyone, and people repeatedly pointed out that Barack Hussein Obama had spent twenty years as a member of Wright's church, listening to his inflammatory words. Many white people were shocked by what they saw and heard. It was nothing like what they heard in their own churches, nothing like what was said around the water cooler at work, nothing like the talk they heard out bowling, golfing, or having a few beers. This was not the banter of half-time or between innings. This was something alien, foreign, and repugnant. The strategically extracted clips were designed to emphasize the difference between Obama and white America. They were given added weight by a number of long-existing anti-Obama campaigns of the extreme right, of right-wing talk radio, and of vicious racist emails. Those charges were that Obama was a Muslim, that he had strong ties to the Nation of Islam and Louis Farrakhan, and that he was anti-patriotic because he did not wear an American flag pin on his lapel.

It was clear that Senator Obama had a huge problem that might fatally damage his campaign. He had to decide quickly how to meet this new development, which seemed to be everything Hillary Clinton had prophesied: it was a surprise, and it was very damaging. The clamor began in earnest on Friday, the 14th of March; by the end of the weekend, Obama had made a decision.

He decided to meet the challenge head-on. The nation would be focused on him and on what he had to say. He viewed it as an opportunity, and he took that opportunity to seek avenues that would not only salvage his campaign but also would benefit the entire nation. He wanted to begin a reasoned discourse on race in the United States. He wanted to take a step forward in healing the racial division that still produced an obvious faultline in the national body politic and psyche. He chose Tuesday the 18th as the day and the National Constitutional Center in Philadelphia as the place to give this speech. He planned a serious speech and needed a serious audience. Two hundred members of the clergy and elected officials were invited to hear him.

These people were used to sitting still for long speeches—and Obama's planned speech was long; it contains 4,909 words (counting numbers as one word). By contrast, Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* was 267 words. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech was 1,650 words; Obama's speech was three times longer. It lasted thirty-seven minutes. The 200 people his campaign invited would not make a large audience; this would not be a large political rally; he would not be practicing political applause ploys.

Obama knew that millions would hear his speech; CNN and other cable networks would broadcast it live; it would be housed on the Web for people to watch and listen to for months after he finished delivering it; excerpts would go on YouTube, Facebook, and other internet sites; and his campaign would sell CDs of the speech for the duration of the electoral campaign.

This was not an occasion to be left to speech writers. Needed at this moment were the candidate's own ideas and words. Obama had long reflected on the issues that he would discuss in this speech. He had written about some of them in *Dreams from My Father*, published thirteen years earlier in 1995. He had taught at the University of Chicago Law School for twelve years. There he had had ample opportunity to explore and discuss many of the issues pertinent to his situation. He had written extensively about these issues in *The Audacity of Hope*, published two years earlier in 2006. He had plenty to say, and he had had plenty of practice saying it. According to his campaign, he wrote the speech in the two days before he gave it.