A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF BARACK OBAMA'S "A MORE PERFECT UNION" SPEECH

RESEARCH QUESTION:

HOW DID OBAMA EMPLOY RHETORICAL STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF HIS "A MORE PERFECT UNION" SPEECH AND CONVEY "UNITY"?

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Contents

1 Introduction

In the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Democratic candidate Barack Obama became the first African-American president in U.S. history. Although there were no significant policy differences between Obama and Hillary Clinton, who was a fierce competitor for the Democratic nomination, and although Clinton had the advantage in terms of experience and connections as a politician, Obama won the Democratic nomination with a greater number of supporters ("Clinton, Obama mostly the same on policy" 2008; "Once Again, It's Obama Versus Clinton" 2008; Nagourney, 2008b). In the runoff election against Republican presidential candidate John McCain, Obama steadily increased his support, and on November 4, Obama won a landslide victory (Nagourney, 2008a).

Though often overlooked today, one of the key contributors to this achievement was Obama's outstanding oratorical talent. With a rhetoric based on "change," Obama issued a powerful call for Americans to break with the Washington politics of the past and move together toward an integrated America of the future ("Campaign Themes, Strategies, and Developments" 2023). And that call won the hearts and minds of many Americans tired of being divided by race, age, class, gender, religion, and party affiliation (Holland, 2008). Although Obama had some concerns, such as his lack of political experience, he transformed himself into an ideal leader by effectively addressing these concerns. In this sense, Obama can be described as a president who represents the idea of a "rhetorical presidency" (Anune and Medhurst, 2008).

It is no wonder that Obama's speeches have caught the attention of many people. Considering the impact of the U.S. as a country and its leader, and the importance of rhetorical communication, more research is needed to examine Obama's speeches. In this essay, an analysis of Obama's speech will be conducted, focusing specifically on his speech entitled "A More Perfect Union." There are several reasons for this choice. Obama often avoids using racially explicit language in his statements, but in this speech, he directly addressed the issue (Sugrue, 2010; Jarrett, 2023). To understand Obama's views on race and the complicated reality of race in the U.S., it is crucial to analyze this speech.

Furthermore, this speech by Obama is not only one of his best but is also considered one of the greatest political speeches ever delivered in the U.S. (Matthews, 2008). During his campaign for the Democratic nomination, Obama faced a challenge when Rev. Jeremiah Wright, someone he had a close association with, delivered a sermon that could have potentially raised doubts about Obama's political leadership qualities ("Barack Obama—'A More Perfect Union'" 2008; Jarrett, 2023). This speech was Obama's response to the pressing need for a "rhetorical exigency" to address his association with Wright and the issue of race. After this speech, "race" was no longer seen as a source of concern but rather as a factor that strengthened Obama's leadership qualities. As such, it is an excellent example of effective rhetorical communication and is worthy of study.

"A More Perfect Union" had persuasive power because Obama received overwhelming support from the most diverse demographic of Americans in history. How did the rhetoric and logic of the speech fit with Obama's thoughts and history and convey his message? This essay analyzes how Obama "persuaded" the public through rhetorical strategies, focusing on his efforts to bring the theme of "unity."

2 A More Perfect Union

2.1 Historical Connections

On March 18, 2008, Obama delivered a thirty-seven-minute speech at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania ("Barack Obama—'A More Perfect Union'" 2008). The speech was immediately posted on YouTube and received 123,000 views within the first 24 hours ("Barack Obama's race speech an online video hit" 2008). Later research found that as of March 28, 85% of Americans had heard at least a little about the speech, and 54% had listened to a lot about it, suggesting that this speech may be one of the most significant events of this presidential race ("Obama and Wright Controversy Dominate News Cycle" 2008).

> We the people, in order to form a more perfect union. (Obama, 2008)

Obama began his speech with a quote from the beginning of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, which was drafted in Philadelphia in 1787 ("The Constitution of the United States" 1787; "Constitution FAQs" 2022). The section chosen was intended for the speech at the Constitution Center. However, it may also serve as an attempt to connect his presidential campaign and the "Jeremiah Wright controversy" to American history by evoking historical facts associated with the venue.

The speech explains the "improbable experiment" of the Declaration of Independence (Obama, 2008). Obama claims that the lofty spirit behind the document was "stained by the nation's original sin of this slavery" (Obama, 2008). Slavery remained in the Constitution until the end of the Civil War (Weber and Hassler, 2023). The tone of the entire speech is set here by discussing the logical contradictions within the Constitution. These contradictions include that the Constitution proclaimed "equal citizenship under the law" while at the same time condoning slavery and leaving the completion of the union as a future task (Obama, 2008).

> 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... we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren. (Obama, 2008)

The above passage confirms the direction of the debate from a past marked by racial division to a future of integration across cultural differences. While it is true that Americans throughout history have been divided by race, Obama tells the audience that Americans can unite and work together through their willingness to build a better future for their descendants (Obama, 2008). This shows Obama's desire to treat Wright's remarks not just as an individual event but as a public event shared by all Americans, redefining Wright's remarks as a "societal" rather than a "personal" controversy. As a "societal" event, the spirit of mutual aid and concern for social justice is emphasized, leading Americans to a sense of unity within the American community.

2.2 Multiculturalism

Obama strongly criticizes Wright's views as they "denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation, which rightly offends white and black alike" (Obama, 2008). However, he also draws the audience's attention to the reality of the black church that inspired Wright's sermon. Obama claims that the black church encapsulates what it means to live as a black person in the U.S. It is full of "raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor... dancing and clapping and screaming and shouting... kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love... bitterness and biases" (Obama, 2008). And like that black church, Obama explains, Wright's sermons also reflect the black experience in the U.S.

Obama's message to his audience is that labeling Wright as a mere "crank" or "demagogue" does not dismiss the underlying issues of race (Obama, 2008). He insists that the situation is multifaceted and complex and that he demonstrates that complexity. Obama portrays himself as a politician who embodies qualities that transcend racial issues.

Obama lists his autobiographical facts; he states that he represents the multiculturalism inherent in U.S. society based on immigration. Most important are Obama's backgrounds — "son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas... lived in one of the world's poorest nations... married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners" (Obama, 2008). Raised by his white maternal grandmother ("The 'Singular Woman' Who Raised Barack Obama" 2011), and with blood relatives all over the world (Nelson, 2018) — is placed within the framework of an American national narrative in the spirit of the nation's founding. Obama's following words sum up this idea:

> But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts — that out of many, we are truly one. (Obama, 2008)

This assertion suggests that Obama has no choice but to choose an endgame of

integration and solidarity across a "color line," a barrier that separates us by skin color. Many Americans in his campaign are drawn to Obama's vision of the future, which speaks to them because they, too, carry multiple cultures in their genes. Obama acknowledges this fact as follows:

> We won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country... we built a powerful coalition of African-Americans and white Americans. (Obama, 2008)

Through skillful rhetorical strategies, particularly the art of pathos, he enhances his ability to persuade others. He seeks to connect emotionally with his audience and foster a sense of empathy and unity by embracing the theme of "unity" and drawing from the diversity of his supporters. Obama aims to heal the racial divisions that have plagued the country since its inception, challenging the dichotomy that seeks to divide American society into black and white, trying to lead them to unity.

2.3 Criticisms and Defenses for Wright

Obama then moved on to criticism of Wright. In response to a question, "Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial" Obama admitted that he had, but made it clear that he disagreed with Wright's views by using the phrase "incendiary language" (Obama, 2008). Obama then criticizes Wright's sermons for their "potential" to promote racial division unnecessarily. Whether or not Obama supports Wright's views has been the central contention. The fact that Obama listed the specific question in the FAQ style suggests he will take the lead on this core issue.

> 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... problems that confront us all. (Obama, 2008)

Here Obama reiterates that the U.S. needs unity, not division. He then emphasizes that the problems facing Americans, such as "wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and devastating climate change", are not specific to racial groups but "confront us all" (Obama, 2008). Obama repeatedly refers to his audience as "we" and "us", appealing to unity. Again, Obama's future orientation toward overcoming racial tensions is evident in his sharing of existing problems and efforts to solve them.

But Obama does not simply dismiss Wright, as evidenced by "But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man" (Obama, 2008). He mentions Wright's patriotism and devotion to the community. The positive portrayal seems inseparable from the goal of justifying, even indirectly, Obama's decision to maintain a long-standing relationship with him. The logical development of the speech, coupled with a vivid description of the black community that Wright serves, provides an overarching context that prevents the dismissal of Wright as a mere eccentric radical. Notably, this portrayal serves another purpose. Obama uses Wright as an example to show that individuals can have both positive and negative qualities, reflecting the duality of American society. Obama generalizes that this "duality" is not limited to them but applies to everyone, including his audience. He emphasizes human complexity's universality, fostering empathy and understanding among diverse communities.

2.4 Complexity of Racial Issues

> I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community... my white grandmother... (Obama, 2008)

In the above quote, Obama confesses that his white maternal grandmother has "confessed her fear of black men," yet he says he cannot separate her from himself (Obama, 2008). At the same time, he says he cannot separate himself from Wright (Obama, 2008). Wright and Obama's grandmother is linked by a "contradiction." This "contradiction" is not associated with "abnormality." Rather, it represents the conflict that everyone with an affinity for "normality" carries within themselves. Of course, Obama is not calling for

unconditionally accepting this "contradiction." Since this "contradiction" is a product of everyone's inner complexity and passivity, the option to disconnect his ties with Wright and his grandmother is not at all realistic. While foregrounding the problematic nature of the binary question of whether or not to defend Wright, this is an integral part of the debate that sublates the framework of the discussion at Obama's basic recognition that the contentious issue of racism concerns all those who live in the U.S.

> But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now... a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect... As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past."... But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist between the African-American community... can be traced directly to inequalities passed on from... the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.
>
> (Obama, 2008)

At first glance, Obama's rationale that Americans must confront racism in the U.S. to avoid repeating Wright's "mistakes" is seamless. Perhaps his purpose in explaining that Obama was not to "recite the history of racial injustice" was primarily intended to open the minds of the non-black audience (Obama, 2008). Nevertheless, Obama's declaration that "we" cannot turn away from the reality of current inequalities as a "legacy of slavery and Jim Crow" has a powerful educational effect with Faulkner's words that the "past" is ultimately inseparable from the "present" (Obama, 2008). In addition to adding an element of "complexity" to the internal "contradictions" described above, it should not be overlooked that the discussion of race is tied to Obama's central political platform.

> This is not to say that race has not been an issue in this campaign... some commentators have deemed me either "too black" or "not black enough."
>
> (Obama, 2008)

The initial approach to race must have been challenging for Obama, who has avoided explicit racial statements (Sugrue, 2010), as evidenced by the form of the double negative

sentence that begins the discussion above. By daring to address the criticism of being "too black" or "not black enough," he gives the impression that his words are not superficial rhetoric but spun from the depths of his heart. Obama then looks for the roots of "black anger" and "white resentment" in American society (Obama, 2008).

> This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up... a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. (Obama, 2008)

Obama reflects on Wright's upbringing and gives historical context to Wright's sermons. He says that Wright lived under discriminatory social conditions characterized by educational disparities and inequalities in financial institutions and public services. Like most blacks, Wright has accumulated negative memories that cannot be erased in his mind and body. Thus, his sermons embody the "black anger" rooted in this history of discrimination.

It is well known that during Obama's presidential campaign, he distanced himself from black civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson (Kantor and Davey, 2013). Much of the "not black enough" criticism mentioned earlier came from Jackson's generation (Sugrue, 2010). Obama was skeptical of the civil rights leaders; by distancing himself from them, he avoided being seen as a "typical black politician" and thus gained broad support (Sugrue, 2010). Nevertheless, demonstrating that he understood the source of the "black anger" of the upper generations was a necessary step in addressing the structural issues underlying the racial issue.

Obama contends that civil rights activists from the 1950s and 1960s, vocalizing anger while identifying it as authentic and rooted in history and memory, failed to change the status quo but blind them to their complicity (Obama, 2008). This assertion is essential to understanding the generational position in which Obama finds himself. His approach to avoiding widening the "chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races," to confronting the roots of "black anger" without allowing it to accumulate within people, and to building the coalitions necessary to effect real change is an essential first step for

Obama in his quest to "transcend race" (Obama, 2008).

> 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 particular privileged by their race. (Obama, 2008)

Obama then acknowledges that frustration with the status quo is also present in white communities. Their ancestors came to the U.S. as immigrants and survived the hard times. Their jobs are being lost to low-wage workers overseas, and they cannot collect pensions (Obama, 2008). Obama admits that whites cannot help but resent the argument that a history of racism put black children in college or jobs over whites (Obama, 2008).

Obama's decision to sympathize with "white resentment" was a "gamble" that could have provoked a backlash, especially from the black community. If Obama had treated "black anger" and "white resentment" equally, it might have weakened the credibility of his perception of the "race issue." Nevertheless, Obama's reference to "white resentment" may have been motivated by his desire to block the view that the issue of race is exclusively about blacks and that whites can act as bystanders. Obama's strategy of drawing whites into the debate over race while demonstrating an inherent understanding of "white resentment" was the crown of his belief that the issue of race is vital to "all" Americans.

> 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. (Obama, 2008)

This explanation of directly confronting history and accepting its burdens and responsibilities but not becoming "victims of our past" is important for understanding Obama's philosophy of history, which focuses on "change," "hope," and "forward" (Sanchez, 2012).

The individualized references to white man and woman, i.e., "white resentment," are sublated to an emphasis on "the larger aspirations of all Americans." A new framework by Obama on racial recognition is presented as one in which full justice cannot be done to the "part" without integration into the "whole," thereby underscoring unity.

> Ironically, this quintessentially American — and yes, conservative — notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright's sermons... The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is... that he spoke as if our society was static... But what we know — what we have seen — is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. (Obama, 2008)

The paradoxical phenomenon of "radical" black leaders emphasizing the neoconservative value of "self-help," exemplified by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, has been analyzed extensively over the years (Mamiya, 2023; Kelley, 1998). Obama's argument, however, is unique in that it focuses on the mutability of the American society in which "self-help" is practiced rather than on the idea of "self-help" itself. By daring not to let go of the idea of "self-help," which might otherwise distract from his critique and indictment of the structural aspects of racism, Obama motivates that since society is changeable, Americans too can "change" by projecting hope into the future. He emphasizes that the country is on a long journey toward "a more perfect union" and that race is the barrier to be overcome for unity.

> 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... are real and must be addressed... It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams. (Obama, 2008)

Here, Faulkner's admonition that the "past" is "present" blends seamlessly with the view that the "racial issue" requires transcending racial divisions and recognizing that each individual is responsible for their affairs. What began as a debate about race has

been sublated into a prescription for an "ideal future" that transcends race. Here sums up the breadth of the speech, and the mastery of its logical structure brings all listeners into the discussion as "active participants." Thus, Obama highlighted the complicated nature of race in the U.S. by juxtaposing "black anger" with "white resentment." At the same time, Obama argues that because he inherits both black and white blood, he must embrace both spirits together, thus making himself the authority on racial integration.

Finally, Obama directs the audience to another "common enemy" that afflicts most Americans today. The common enemy here is greedy industry, special-interest groups, and the Washington politics that put advancing their interests ahead of social justice (Obama, 2008). To defeat these enemies, Obama calls for solidarity across "color-lines." Thus, the speech converges with a standard message that Obama has deployed in his presidential campaign.

3 Conclusion

"A More Perfect Union" speech brought the contentious issue of racism to the attention of many Americans and made Obama look like a viable presidential candidate. While acknowledging the complexity of racial issues in the U.S., Obama made a powerful statement to his audience that these issues must and can be overcome.

Obama strategically portrayed himself as a figure who embodied racial duality. By impressing upon his audience his upbringing as a man of both black and white heritage, raised in the cultural traditions of both, his multiracial demographic emerge before them as the embodiment of racial integration in America as he tells his autobiographical story. Having thus impressed his audience, Obama introduced them to adopt a "dual perspective." He strategically created a context for interpreting Wright's sermons from an angle that would resonate with the largest possible number of blacks and whites. From the arbitrarily fragmented videos of Wright's sermons that proliferate on the Internet, it is difficult to read the hard-won history that blacks share and the social adversity they find themselves in.

If people listened to Wright's sermons without sharing the "lived experience" of blacks, his claim would sound dangerous and destructive. On the one hand, Obama urges whites to look at Wright's address from a black's perspective. By providing the context of the reality of the black church, "black anger" is reinterpreted by his audience as having a reasonable basis. On the other hand, Obama urges blacks to understand "white resentment." By describing the lives of whites who do not benefit from race and suffer from "reverse discrimination," the audience is reminded that "black anger" and "white resentment" share some aspects in common. Thus, by juxtaposing, Obama gives his audience a "stereoscopic gaze" (Terill, 2009). By pitting the future against the past and universalism against racism, he invited his audience to enter his uncharted territory of "ideal America" while embracing the complexity of the debate over race.

Obama's narratives remind his audience that while their experiences of black and whites are never the same, but are "comparable." Obama's speech offered Americans a new perspective of "unity and duality": "out of many, we are truly one" (Obama, 2008). By shifting Americans' focus from the present to the future, Obama sought to free listeners from dichotomous thoughts. In his speech, Obama imaginatively created the U.S. as an ideological model that could hold differences and still be cohesive. Obama may have hoped that voters who heard his speech had gained a "double insider-outsider perspective" and would take an active role in the form of voting, thereby realizing "a more perfect" integration of the U.S.

For Obama, the controversy generated by the video of Wright's sermon could have been fatal to his campaign. What would have driven Obama to deliver the "A More Perfect Union" speech must have been the "rhetorical exigency" that compelled him to talk about Wright's sermon, his relationship with Wright, and race in the United States of America. It is truly a miracle that he successfully explained the frustrations of both blacks and whites in a situation where not a single word could be misused. As a result, Obama's argument that solutions to the "specific issues" of race and poverty could only be achieved if they were widely seen as the concerns of all Americans, in addition to emphasizing fairness and justice, was persuasive and widely accepted. The fact that even Republican

authorities have also praised the importance of this speech and poll results of the general electorate show that the speech has received a high level of interest and positive reception (Frank and McPhail, 2005; "CBS Poll: Good Reviews For Obama Speech" 2008). The speech's rhetorical strategy effectively rescued Obama's presidential campaign from a crisis and left a positive impression on the public regarding his statesmanship. More telling than the polls and leaders' opinions, however, is the fact that Obama defeated Clinton and McCain and went on to become president. It should be clear that the "A More Perfect Union" speech was a skillful rhetorical practice that turned a crisis into an opportunity to persuade the American public to promote understanding, unity, and a commitment to healing racial divisions.

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