Obama, Unity, and “A More Perfect Union”

Introduction

Responding to a controversy that threatened his quest for the presidency, Barack Obama delivered a speech many consider to be one of the greatest ever given on the topic of race. The speech, *A More Perfect Union* (also known as *Speech on Race*), was delivered March 18, 2008, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Response was largely positive, drawing comparisons to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 *I Have A Dream* speech.

An extensive context surveying America’s history of racial tension serves to aid understanding of a critical analysis of Obama’s speech. Applying Burkeian concepts of the negative, hierarchy, and division, and Perelman’s theories of universal audience, appeals to the real, dissociation, and quasi-logical arguments, the following is evidenced: Obama used the quasi-logical appeal of unity as a method for achieving perfection because he knew Americans would identify with its patriotic nature. Additionally, he provided a solution for shared social problems without having to tarnish his image as a leader through self-blame.

Context

Since America’s declaration of independence from Great Britain on July 4, 1776, a framework has been constructed guaranteeing citizens equal treatment and protection (especially from discrimination) under the law. Our nation, however, has been plagued by a history of inequality revolving heavily around black-white racial
tensions. From the introduction of African slaves to America in the early 1500s and the resulting slave rebellions, to the 1896 Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld “separate but equal” racial segregation in the Constitution, it is clear America’s core values have not been uniformly implemented. A landmark victory for the African-American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, however, was the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and declared racial segregation of public schools unconstitutional and fundamentally unequal. The decision set precedent for future cases and laid the foundation for other forms of *de jure* (legal) racial segregation to be declared unconstitutional.

The election of America’s first African-American President, Barack Obama, has brought forth the question of whether race relations will remain an issue much longer. However, studies still reveal a division of social, political, and cultural values between blacks and whites (Lee & Bean, 2007). Obama was born to a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, who raised him with the help of his white grandparents. He later graduated from Harvard Law School where he served as president of the *Harvard Law Review*, a legal journal. Additionally, he represented Illinois as a United States Senator from 2005 to 2008, resigning upon election as president.

In 2007, during his run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, Obama’s former pastor and campaign participant, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, was scrutinized by media and the public for controversial comments he’d made accusing the American government of perpetuating racism. The incident caused widespread questioning of Obama’s viability as a candidate, resulting in Wright’s removal from the campaign. Ultimately, Obama decided merely denouncing Wright’s statements was not
enough. Thus, the basis for his *A More Perfect Union* speech, titled after the first line of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, emerged.

Not limited to those immediately present, Obama’s speech addressed all Americans. As reported by several news sources, the speech was viewed over 1.2 million times the first day it was uploaded to YouTube. Democrats and Republicans alike, and many members of the American public, applauded Obama for his handling of the Wright controversy. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Obama explained his decision to respond to Wright’s comments on such a large scale:

> My gut was telling me that this was a teachable moment and that if I tried to do the usual political damage control instead of talking to the American people like... they were adults and could understand the complexities of race, I would be not only doing damage to the campaign but missing an important opportunity for leadership (Klein, 2008, n.p.).

**Description**

Obama’s speech addresses the issue of racial tension in the United States and seeks to give context to Wright’s statements. To begin, he quotes the section of the Preamble after which the speech is named, “We the people, in order to form a more *perfect union*.” Pointing out the proximity to Independence Hall, where the Constitution was signed, he claims slavery and legalized discrimination in our past conflict with the constitutional ideals of liberty, justice, and equal citizenship under the law. To atone for these “sins,” he argues, we can perfect America by setting aside personal differences and uniting against shared social problems.

Among these social problems, Obama reveals, is deep-seated anger in black communities, which he attributes to the lasting effects of discrimination. He also holds there is resentment by white immigrants who did not perpetuate black-white racial
tensions in the past, but receive blame because of their skin color. Though he acknowledges the legitimacy of these angers, stating they have shaped modern politics, he cautions that harboring such feelings may detract from the goal of unity.

Appealing to the American motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” or “out of many, [we are] one,” Obama insists unification is woven into American conscience. Labeling himself an unconventional candidate because of his multiethnic background, he expresses admiration for “commanding victories” in predominantly white states and in South Carolina, where he garnered support from blacks and whites alike. This, he infers, shows America’s hunger for unity. Ultimately, he maintains that by moving beyond America’s “racial stalemate” and addressing shared social problems (consequences of the past), we can achieve “a more perfect union.”

Analysis

American theorist Kenneth Burke states “man” is “the symbol using, making, and misusing... inventor of the negative... goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection” (1966, p. 16). The negative is not prevalent in nature, rather it takes imagination, a human tool, to describe something as “not” something else (Burke, 1966). Through the lens of the negative, humans create the concepts of identification and division central to Burkeian ideology.

Identification (or consubstantiation) refers to a rhetor’s perception of being “substantially one” with the audience being persuaded (Stoner & Perkins, 2004). According to Burke (1966), this is accomplished through speech, gestures, tonality, order, images, attitudes, and ideas the audience can identify with. Obama spends much of the speech attempting consubstantiality on a patriotic level by quoting the Preamble and referencing America’s shared social problems. Through the story of his
biracial upbringing, he attempts identification with the racial diversity of American people (perhaps with blacks and whites particularly).

Through identification, Burke argues, division is also created. According to Stoner and Perkins, division is used to provide order and structure to human experience. Obama creates division from actions that would lead America away from perfection and unity, exemplified by his condemnation of Wright’s statements. He also criticizes attempts to racially polarize his campaign:

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... nothing will change.

Through identification and division, Burke’s concepts of victimage and hierarchy result. Burke (1966) asserts humans are in a “perpetual state of guilt” resulting from our imperfection and to atone for that guilt we must either scapegoat (blame others) or commit mortification (self-blame).

The title of the speech (A More Perfect Union) and Obama’s arguments create a hierarchy, or “ranking of categories” (Stoner & Perkins, 2004), placing perfection at the top. Obama scapegoats Rev. Wright and the American public, condemning them for ignoring the prevalence of American racial tensions and for dwelling upon the feelings of resentment that followed those tensions. Because he does not admit to possessing these characteristics himself, it is implied that he is higher on the hierarchy of perfection than the audience. Obama presents the story of Ashley Baia, a young white woman who gained recognition by an elderly black man by working to organize her local African-American community, as evidence that it is possible to join him at the top of the hierarchy. He warns, however, unity is only the first step to perfecting
Applying Chaïm Perelman’s theories, the ambition of Obama’s speech becomes more evident.

A central idea of Perelman’s “New Rhetoric” is that of the universal audience, which includes “all people who are rational and competent with respect to the issues being debated (Perelman, 1979, 48).” By this definition, Obama’s universal audience includes those “rational and competent” enough to set aside differences and atone for America’s mistakes. Through consubstantiation, Obama holds that all Americans are capable of working to perfect America. His attempts to persuade the universal audience are revealed through examining Perelman’s concepts of appeals to the real and dissociation.

Appeals to the real employ evidence of causal or correlated relationships (Perelman, 1979). These strategies include use of examples, metaphors, and analogies to reason with an audience (Stoner & Perkins, 2004). Examples provided by Obama include evidence of past racial discrimination leading to black anger (Jim Crow segregation, inferior education for blacks, and limited employment opportunities) which he explains directly influenced Wright’s controversial comments. Exposing the racial gap still present in society, Obama forces the audience to look into a metaphorical mirror, counting on widespread disapproval of the society reflected. This strategy embodies Perelman’s theory of dissociation.

Dissociation is the “creating [of] sufficient cognitive dissonance in an audience [to] reduce their uncertainty by recognizing and accepting a new way of describing or interpreting the real,” which is often used in arguments concerning “myths” and “reality” (Stoner & Perkins, 2004, p. 175). The myth, Obama reveals, is that racism and its lasting effects have become nonexistent, disproven by historical evidence and
his declaration that Wright’s statements reflect an immense societal problem. He attempts to further strengthen his appeal using quasi-logical arguments.

According to Stoner & Perkins (2004), quasi-logical arguments are made by providing information to lead an audience to a desired conclusion by mimicking the structure of a classical syllogism. Below is the primary quasi-logical argument Obama presents:

[Major Premise] American society is imperfect.

[Minor Premise] We (and Rev. Wright) are reflections of American society.

The audience is led to conclude they are imperfect because they embody the shortcomings of a flawed society. Ultimately, Obama’s idea that we can achieve perfection by working to solve America’s shared social problems is upheld. Now that the speech has been thoroughly analyzed, it is important to discuss why Obama made the rhetorical choices he did.

**Interpretation**

The decision of Obama to frame his speech around the Preamble, adopted over 220 years ago, was a risk. However, had he relied solely on his own Christian morals instead of backing his argument with the traditional and patriotic rights America was founded on, he might have failed to achieve consubstantiation on the level intended. He knew few would argue against such ingrained societal values, as doing so would estrange them from the rest of America. Another risk was including race as the grounds for giving the speech, which brought feelings Americans may not have wanted to acknowledge to the foreground. Had Obama not addressed racism, however, the speech might not have been the teaching moment he intended it to be.

Obama understood the sensitivity of the issue and sought a way to acknowledge past mistakes and unify Americans toward a shared cause. Surprisingly, given his
attempt to become consubstantial as an American, he avoided revealing society’s imperfections in himself. Perhaps he figured ignoring his own flaws would place him at the top of the hierarchy of perfection, effectively inspiring the audience to become more like him. He likely knew the audience would respond more positively to a leader than to someone they viewed as a peer.

As America’s first viable African-American presidential candidate the issue of race permeated Obama’s campaign. Because he was perceived as “black,” many questioned whether his skin color would discourage the Caucasian majority from electing him. Obama attempted to counteract any hesitance by pushing a message of unity. It was not enough for activists to call for reform, rather Obama felt, given his position, responsibility lay with him to give a speech that could change society’s view of race forever. Had he not given the speech, he might not have garnered the widespread support needed to be elected. Conversely, he took a risk that could have backfired had his argument not been so carefully constructed.

This critique serves to confirm America’s failure to epitomize the principles set forth by the Constitution, reinforcing the necessity and appropriateness of Obama’s speech. Ultimately, Obama used the quasi-logical appeal of unity as a method for achieving perfection because he knew Americans would identify with its patriotic nature. Additionally, he provided a solution for shared social problems without having to tarnish his image as a leader through self-blame.

**Evaluation**

To evaluate the effectiveness of Obama’s rhetorical strategies, the Preamble, which provides the speech’s framework, will be referenced. The Preamble reads:

> We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure 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 (1787).

The major goal set forth in the Preamble, and by Obama’s speech, is to “form a more perfect union.” To do so, the Preamble states justice must first be established. “Justice” shall be defined as the quality of being fair and reasonable. Obama’s equal recognition of black anger and white resentment, and his acknowledgment of our personal imperfections as reflections of our imperfect society proved both fair and reasonable.

Second is the ensuring of “domestic tranquility.” Tranquility is defined as “freedom from disturbance.” This goes hand-in-hand with the third and fourth goals of providing for “the common defense” (implying a responsibility to protect America from internal and external threats) and promoting the “general welfare” (or wellbeing) of the people. Whether Obama’s rhetorical tactics ensure freedom from disturbance and protection against threats is unclear. However, it is inferred by inspiring unification and perfection that domestic tranquility and general wellbeing would likely result.

Last is the securing of “blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Posterity refers to future generations, which leads to the conclusion that we should ensure liberty (or freedom) is equally accessible now and in the future. Obama’s speech embodies this idea by providing a view of a society working together to solve common problems. Through evaluation of the speech using the Preamble, it seems Obama acted effectively to persuade the audience to move toward a more progressive social structure. Whether he has significantly altered the course of race relations has yet to be determined.
References


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537, 539 (1896).

