

Primary Source

Barack Obama, *A More Perfect Union*, 2008



What progress has been made in the twentieth century in the fight to realize Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans? What work must still be done?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice in the 1960s to the present day.
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans.
- ☐ I can explain why the civil rights movement fractured in the 1960s.
- ☐ I can compare movements for liberty, equality, and justice for African Americans over time.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Building Context

In 2008, Illinois Senator Barack Obama was running for the Democratic party's nomination for president. During his campaign, he made the following speech in Philadelphia. Senator Obama went on to secure the Democratic nomination for president, was elected, and served two terms (2008–2016) as the nation's first African American president.

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Source: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>

... 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.

...

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.

Notes

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. How does Senator Obama use the words of the Constitution in his speech?
What effect does this have?

2. What does Senator Obama mean when he says African Americans must
“bind their grievances . . . to the larger aspirations of all Americans”?

3. How does Senator Obama challenge his listeners to be hopeful?