

# OBAMA

IN PURSUIT OF A  
MORE PERFECT UNION

## LESSON THREE

### THE JOSHUA GENERATION THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO 2008

## OVERVIEW

In this two-day lesson, students will explore how Barack Obama connected his political vision, campaign, and two terms as president with the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout these years, civil rights leaders remained important allies and a consistent source of strength and inspiration for Obama, who saw their ongoing work and struggle to uphold the American creed of a more perfect union as a beacon of hope. By assimilating a range of source materials, students will deepen their background knowledge and strengthen their skills of historical analysis and perspective-taking.



### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- > How did Barack Obama acknowledge and honor the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders during his campaign and presidency?
- > What can we learn about his campaign for president from the viewpoints of Black civil rights leaders?
- > As the first Black president of the United States, was Barack Obama the fulfillment of the Civil Rights Movement?



### LESSON OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- > Learn how Barack Obama connected with and honored civil rights leaders and the Civil Rights Movement.
- > Explore the perspectives of Black civil rights leaders on Obama as a political leader and candidate for president.
- > Explore the historic meaning of Selma, AL, and its political and symbolic importance in American politics.
- > Strengthen historical perspective-taking skills and synthesize their learning by completing The More Perfect Union Venn



### MATERIALS

- Listed in order as they appear in the lesson:
- > Equipment to screen film clips and interview threads curated for this lesson
  - > Film Clips
  - > Handouts One through Six



Two or more  
55-minute  
class periods



U.S. Government, Civics, English  
Language Arts/Rhetoric



All Handouts can be copied as PDFs or uploaded to a shared online platform. Access to the internet via a smartphone or laptop computer is necessary for the completion of this lesson.

# ACTIVITIES



“

I'm here because somebody marched.

— **BARACK OBAMA**

SPEECH IN SELMA, AL, MARCH 4, 2007

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# DAY ONE: OPENING

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Ask students to define “historical perspective” using their background knowledge. Collect their ideas into a working definition.

Compare their understanding with this definition:

*Historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings between us in the present and those in the past.<sup>1</sup>*

Project, or share online, this excerpt from the unedited interview with Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. collected in the production of the Obama documentary.



*“Barack and Michelle Obama were part of a long tradition. They were an extension of the past. They didn’t redefine the past, they embodied the best of the past and were a culmination of a lot of dreams, and a lot of hopes, a lot of sacrifices, a lot of tears, a lot of lynchings, a lot of beatings, a lot of terrorism, a lot of prayers, a lot of hard work in schools, a lot of deferred gratification. The biggest miracle of the Black community, starting in slavery, is that our enslaved ancestors deferred gratification, hundreds of years of slavery, believing that one day.. one day, there’d be a Black man and a Black woman living in the White House.”<sup>2</sup>*



## DISCUSS

- > What is Professor Gates’s historical perspective on Barack and Michelle Obama?
- > What historical connections is Professor Gates suggesting?

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# ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT

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**Teacher Note:** Film Clip One introduces students to the role civil rights leaders and the Civil Rights Movement played in Barack Obama’s campaign for president.



## FILM CLIP

### > Clip One: DNC 2004 (5:19)

Clip One begins after Barack Obama won the Illinois Democratic primary for U.S. Senator. It goes on to examine his rise to national attention after delivering the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, MA, where John Kerry was nominated as the party’s candidate for president

<sup>1</sup><https://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concepts>

<sup>2</sup>Professor Gates is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University. Interview conducted by Kunhardt Films, November 1, 2018.

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# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE-TAKING: OBAMA'S PERSPECTIVE

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**Teacher Note:** Explain to students they will now exercise their historical perspective-taking skills by reading Obama's reflections and watching interviews collected in the production of the documentary **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union**. Remind students to underline passages on the handout and the transcripts that inform their understanding of Obama's relationship to the Civil Rights Movement.



## DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT TWO

Have students read excerpts of Obama's speeches used in the documentary project that reflect different ways civil rights leaders and the Civil Rights Movement informed his personal character and political vision. Students should make note of any sections that are confusing.



## PAIR AND SHARE

- > With a partner, choose one or two underlined sentences that inform your understanding of how Obama sees his relationship to civil rights leaders and the Civil Rights Movement.
- > From these introductory remarks Obama delivered at different times and in different settings, what do you infer about his perspective on the Civil Rights Movement?



## SHARE THE STORY OF JOSHUA

In one passage in the handout Obama refers to the story of Moses, Aaron, and Joshua from the Bible. Students may or may not be familiar with these biblical stories. Ask students if they know the story of Joshua, which Obama focuses on. Either you or a student should share a summary of the story. Check for understanding. Here are a few resources to consider:

- > **Video:** Overview: [Joshua, Animated YouTube](#). Show the opening 2:35 min.
- > **Text:** [The Story of Yehoshua \(Joshua\)](#), 1:10 - 1:18



## FILM CLIP

- > **Clip Two: "The Joshua Generation"** (3:58)

Clip Two focuses on the speech Barack Obama gave in Selma, AL, on March 4, 2007, during his presidential campaign.



## DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- > Why make this speech in Selma, AL?
- > What impression do political candidates want to make in Selma?
- > How do you understand the Moses Generation and the responsibilities of the Joshua Generation?
- > What ties is Barack Obama forging to the Civil Rights Movement in this speech?



## EXTENDED LEARNING

If time permits, distribute **Handout Four**. Have students complete these questions in pairs, small groups, or as a class:

- > What stands out about the sequence of the images?
- > How do the images relate to Obama's speech?
- > What story/stories do they tell? More specifically, what story/stories do these images tell over a span of 50 years?



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# DAY TWO: OPENING

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Begin Day Two of this lesson by discussing the following questions with students:

- > How do you define a historical perspective?
- > What factors inform one's historical perspective?

Take a few minutes to discuss their answers before transitioning to today's work.

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## A CLOSE VIEW

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### Interview Threads: Perspectives of Black Civil Rights Leaders



**Teacher Note:** The filmmakers conducted nearly 40 interviews to produce **Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union**. The full interviews are available in the [Interview Archive](#) on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation website](#). A selection of these interviews, edited together here to create interview threads and aligned to the specific lesson topic, are available for your students' learning.

Transition to the curated interviews is organized into two bundles. The first, "The Moses Generation," is from those who led the struggle for civil rights. The second, "The Joshua Generation," are interviews from contemporaries of Barack Obama who offer their analysis.



### DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT FIVE AND SIX

#### > Watch Interview Thread One: The Moses Generation

Jesse Jackson, Bobby Rush, Carol Moseley Braun, Jeremiah Wright, and John Lewis, all prominent civil rights leaders throughout their lives, share their points of view about Barack Obama and his relationship to the Civil Rights Movement.

#### > Watch Interview Thread Two: The Joshua Generation

Michael Eric Dyson, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jelani Cobb, and Elizabeth Alexander, all contemporaries of Barack Obama, share their views on the relationship between Obama and the Civil Rights Movement.



### DISCUSS

- > What are the different opinions about Obama's work from civil rights leaders over several generations?
- > How do these leaders see Obama as a continuation of their legacy?
- > Discuss students' observations about the differences in understanding Obama's relationship to civil rights leaders and to the Civil Rights Movement.

## FILM CLIP

### > Watch Clip Three: “When the Movement and the Mission Come Together” (5:22)

Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and John Lewis reflect on the historic significance of Barack Obama’s election.

## FOUR CORNERS



**Teacher Note:** Explain to students that they will be hearing several statements that relate to this lesson. They will need to stand next to the sign that most closely aligns with their perspective and also be able to discuss in small groups the individual(s) who informed their decision. Emphasize that there is no right answer.

### Directions

- > Read each statement.
- > Have students choose their corner.
- > Spend a few minutes sharing why they chose this corner and who informed their decision.
- > Time permitting, ask each group to report on their group discussion.

**Statement One:** Barack Obama could not have become president without the Civil Rights Movement.

**Statement Two:** By becoming the first Black president of the United States, Barack Obama advanced the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Statement Three:** As the first Black president of the United States, Barack Obama was the fulfillment of the Civil Rights Movement.

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## SYNTHESIZING LEARNING

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### Handout: The More Perfect Union Venn Diagram

Return to The Venn Diagram handout. Have students reflect on their learnings from the film clips, interviews, primary documents, and class discussion, and add their ideas within each circle.

If helpful, use these specific prompts to get students started:

- > **Obama circle:** What have you learned about Barack Obama’s relationship to civil rights leaders and the Civil Rights Movement?
- > **You circle:** What have you learned about yourself by learning about civil rights leaders and civil rights history?
- > **America circle:** What have you learned about America by examining Barack Obama’s relationship with civil rights leaders, the Civil Rights Movement, and civil rights history?
- > **Overlaps:** Add any additional ideas and thoughts where these learnings overlap.

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## HANDOUT ONE, LESSON THREE

# FILM CLIPS TRANSCRIPTS

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### CLIP 1: DIRECTLY CONNECTED TO THE LEGACY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

BARACK OBAMA: It was here in Springfield, where North, South, East, and West come together, that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people. Where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America.

AL SHARPTON: When he made the announcement that day in Illinois, at the same time in Virginia there was a Black Agenda Conference. I was there. (ARCHIVAL) I wish all of this about our friend Barack announcing today, I wish Obama had announced here. Because Lincoln — Lincoln did not free us, the abolitionist movement freed us. (INTERVIEW) And I was not yet there supporting him. (ARCHIVAL) We've got to quit giving the wrong people credit for our history.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Black leaders were kind of resentful because he kind of did an end run around Black leadership. Most Black people who rise in Black communities have to come through and kiss the ring of the Black political dignitaries and potentates. Obama leapfrogged over them.

BARACK OBAMA: By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail. But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible.

CORNEL WEST: He makes the announcement at Springfield, tied to the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, which is a rich one. So, we understood — okay, I mean political calculation; every politician has to do that. And you don't want to alienate your White fellow citizens coming out of the box.

BARACK OBAMA: He tells us that there is power in words. He tells us that there's power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station we are one people.

CORNEL WEST: (ARCHIVAL) He's got large numbers of White brothers and sisters who have fears and anxieties, and he's got to speak to them in such a way that he holds us at arm's length enough to say he loves us, but doesn't get too close to scare them off. So, he's walking this tightrope.

BARACK OBAMA: I want us to take up the unfinished business of perfecting our union and building a better America!

CORNEL WEST: I'm not for or against him as a brother; if there's any White supremacist perception of Barack, I defend him. Why? 'Cause I hate White supremacy. But he's gotta be accountable. And starting off in Springfield, Illinois, is not impressive to me. Hey. (INTERVIEW) He called me up. He said "Professor West, I — I heard what you said about my speech, why did you say it?" I said, "I said it because I believed it." He said "I was wondering whether you would work with me?" I said "I've got one question. What is your relation to the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.? And how will your campaign enact the struggle against poverty, militarism, racism, and materialism? Those are the evils that Martin Luther King, Jr. saw right before he was murdered."

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.: I can still sing We Shall Overcome; we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

BARACK OBAMA: ...bends towards justice. It bends towards justice.

CORNEL WEST: He was very honest with me and he said "Professor West, you know that I'm not as radical as you are, but I do see myself directly connected to the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr." I said, "That sounds wonderful to me."

### CLIP 2: THE JOSHUA GENERATION

*Lower Third: Selma, AL, March 4, 2007*

REPORTER: Forty-two years ago, it would have been unimaginable. Two Democratic presidential contenders, one a woman, another an African American. Courting Black voters in Alabama, preaching to overflowing churches.

HILLARY CLINTON: Are you ready to march?

DAVID REMNICK: Every year, there's a commemoration of Selma, a great encounter between the forces of the Civil Rights Movement led by John Lewis and others and police with truncheons. And Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama want to make an impression in Selma.

CYNTHIA BOWERS: Many Black voters say they're torn between voting for the African American, Obama, or sticking with the Clintons, who've supported civil rights for years. That's the agonizing choice for John Lewis, bludgeoned during the Selma March, and now a congressman.

JOHN LEWIS: It was tough, it was very — it was tough. I supported President Clinton and got to know Hillary. It was one of the tough decisions of my political life.

DAVID REMNICK: The Clintons felt that they had deep inroads with the African American community and with — with reason. You'll remember in a certain New Yorker magazine, Toni Morrison wrote that Bill Clinton was the first Black president, said with some irony, said with all kinds of — but mostly with admiration, too. Obama gives his speech at Brown Church. And Hillary is down the street at another church.

HILARY CLINTON: Yes, that long march to freedom that began here has carried us a mighty long way.

DAVID REMNICK: It's — it's a contest.

BARACK OBAMA: Thank you, thank you. Oh, giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us here today. I just want to talk a little bit about Moses and Aaron and Joshua because we are in the presence today of a lot of Moseses. We're in the presence today of giants whose shoulders we stand on.

DAVID REMNICK: He begins paying tribute to what he calls the Moses Generation. Who's Moses? Martin Luther King — who did not see — famously says it in his speech, "I might not get there with you."

BARACK OBAMA: As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him, "Your job is done. We're going to leave it to the Joshua Generation to make sure it happens. There are still some battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed."

DAVID REMNICK: Obama pronounces himself the head of the Joshua Generation. That's incredibly nervy.

BARACK OBAMA: Moses told the Joshua Generation, "Don't forget where you came from." And I worry sometimes that the Joshua Generation in its success forgets where it came from; thinks it doesn't have to make as many sacrifices.

SHERRILYN IFILL: You think people in the 1940's and 1950's woke up and said, "We are the civil rights generation, let's do this," as though it was, you know, fantastic? Our nostalgia has made us look back at that period of time as though it was great, but it was not great getting hit in the head on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. These weren't fun times. These were times of commitment, when people decided that they weren't gonna take it anymore and that they could make this country better.

BARACK OBAMA: Folks complaining about the quality of our government, I understand there's something to be complaining about. I'm in Washington. I see what's going on.

SHERRILYN IFILL: It means we can't sit out elections. It means we can't just vote for people and then not show up to hold them accountable. It means we can't think that government is something other people do.

BARACK OBAMA: But I'll tell you what. I also know that, if Cousin Pookie would vote, if Uncle Jethro would get off the couch and stop watching SportsCenter, and go register some folks and go to the polls, we might have a different kind of politics. That's what the Moses Generation teaches us. Kick off your bedroom slippers. Put on your marching shoes. Go do some politics. Change this country! That's what they teach.

### CLIP THREE: THE MOVEMENT AND MISSION COME TOGETHER

AL SHARPTON: I decided to call a Watch Night service like we do on New Year's Eve, down at Martin Luther King's church in Atlanta.

JOHN LEWIS: This election is not the Promised Land, but I tell you, it is a major down payment on the Promised Land.

AL SHARPTON: And when it flashed across that screen, Obama won Ohio, I was in my fifties, and it was the first time in my life that I could honestly tell a kid, you could be president.

WOLF BLITZER: We're only a few seconds away from the top of the hour when these states will be closing and there are some big ones. And presumably, we'll be able to see what's going on and make, perhaps, a major projection at that point. This is a moment that a lot of people have been waiting for. This is a moment that potentially could be rather historic... And CNN can now project that Barack Obama, 47 years old, will become the president-elect of the United States. We project he now has enough electoral votes.

JOHN LEWIS: I never thought that I would live to see a Black man or a Black woman as president of the United States of America. My own mother, my own father, my grandparents didn't become registered voters until after the Voting Rights Act was passed and signed into law on August 6, 1965. And to live to see Barack Obama become president of the United States of America was almost too much. I jumped up so high I didn't think my feet were going to touch the floor, and I started crying.

JESSE JACKSON: It was the moment the movement and the mission all came together. Man, to my mind came the martyrs. Our warriors fight for civil rights in America, we're soldiers too. Fighting for freedom in America is risky, it's very dangerous. And those who made it possible were not there. I wish Dr. King, Medgar Evers, for a moment just — just, God gave them 15 seconds to look at their work. This is their work: he's the result of our work.

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## HANDOUT TWO, LESSON THREE

### A SURVEY OF OBAMA'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

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#### PERSONAL INTERVIEW

*"My mother had inculcated in me the sense that being African American was a wonderful thing. You know, that it was special in some way. My mother really was somebody who identified so greatly with the Civil Rights Movement that that was almost our civil religion. She was constantly talking about King and Malcolm, and I think that most of my influences are not so much people that I knew personally as people whose words I've internalized."*

#### SPEAKING AT THE 2004 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

*"Tonight, is a particular honor for me because, let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth, is my story even possible."*

#### SPEAKING IN SELMA, AL, 2007 CAMPAIGN FOR PRESIDENT

*"I just want to talk a little bit about Moses and Aaron and Joshua because we are in the presence today of a lot of Moseses. We're in the presence today of giants whose shoulders we stand on. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. We're going to leave it to the Joshua Generation to make sure it happens. There are still some battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed. Moses told the Joshua Generation, don't forget where you came from. And I worry sometimes that the Joshua Generation in its success forgets where it came from; thinks it doesn't have to make as many sacrifices."*

#### NATIONAL ACTION NETWORK SPEECH, NOVEMBER 2008

*"I am proud to be a candidate for the presidency of the United States of America. I am mindful that I wouldn't be here if it had not been for Reverend Al Sharpton running for president, and Carol Moseley-Braun running for president, and Jesse Jackson running for president, and Shirley Chisholm running for president."*

#### SELMA 50TH ANNIVERSARY, MARCH 7, 2015

*"There are places and moments in America where this nation's destiny has been decided. We gather here to honor the courage of ordinary Americans willing to endure billy clubs, the chastening rod, tear gas, and the trampling hoof; men and women, who despite the gush of blood and splintered bone, would stay true to their North Star and keep marching towards justice. If Selma taught us anything, it's that our work is never done. The American experiment in self-government gives work and purpose to each generation. And this is work for all Americans, not just some. Not just Whites, not just Blacks. If we want to honor the courage of those who marched that day, then all of us are called to possess their moral imagination. All of us will need to feel as they did, the fierce urgency of now."*

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## HANDOUT THREE, LESSON THREE

EXCERPTS FROM SENATOR OBAMA'S ADDRESS, BROWN A.M.E. CHURCH  
SELMA, AL, MARCH 7, 2007<sup>3</sup>

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It is a great honor to be here. Reverend Jackson, thank you so much. To the family of Brown A.M.E, to the good Bishop Kirkland, thank you for your wonderful message and your leadership. I want to acknowledge one of the great heroes of American history and American life, somebody who captures the essence of decency and courage, somebody who I have admired all my life and were it not for him, I'm not sure I'd be here today, Congressman John Lewis.

I'm thankful to him. To all the distinguished guests and clergy, I'm not sure I'm going to thank Reverend Lowery because he stole the show. I was mentioning earlier, I know we've got C.T. Vivian in the audience, and when you have to speak in front of somebody who Martin Luther King said was the greatest preacher he ever heard, then you've got some problems.

And I'm a little nervous about following so many great preachers. But I'm hoping that the spirit moves me and to all my colleagues who have given me such a warm welcome, thank you very much for allowing me to speak to you here today.

You know, several weeks ago, after I had announced that I was running for the presidency of the United States, I stood in front of the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln delivered his speech declaring, drawing in scripture, that a house divided against itself could not stand.

And I stood and I announced that I was running for the presidency. And there were a lot of commentators, as they are prone to do, who questioned the audacity of a young man like myself, haven't been in Washington too long.

And I acknowledge that there is a certain presumptuousness about this.

But I got a letter from a friend of some of yours named Reverend Otis Moss Jr. in Cleveland, and his son, Otis Moss III is the pastor at my church — and I must send greetings from Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. — but I got a letter giving me encouragement and saying how proud he was that I had announced and encouraging me to stay true to my ideals and my values and not to be fearful.

And he said if there's some folks out there who are questioning whether or not you should run, just tell them to look at the story of Joshua because you're part of the Joshua Generation.

So I just want to talk a little about Moses and Aaron and Joshua, because we are in the presence today of a lot of Moseses. We're in the presence today of giants whose shoulders we stand on, people who battled, not just on behalf of African Americans but on behalf of all of America; that battled for America's soul, that shed blood, that endured taunts and torment and in some cases gave the full measure of their devotion.

Like Moses, they challenged Pharaoh, the princes, powers who said that some are top and others are at the bottom, and that's how it's always going to be. There were people like Anna Cooper and Marie Foster and Jimmy Lee Jackson and Maurice Olette, C.T. Vivian, Reverend Lowery, John Lewis, who said we can imagine something different and we know there is something out there for us, too.

Thank God, He's made us in His image and we reject the notion that we will for the rest of our lives be confined to a station of inferiority, that we can't aspire to the highest of heights, that our talents can't be expressed to their fullest. And so because of what they endured, because of what they marched; they led a people out of bondage.

They took them across the sea that folks thought could not be parted. They wandered through a desert but always knowing that God was with them and that if they maintained that trust in God, that they would be all right. And it's because they marched that the next generation hasn't been bloodied so much.

It's because they marched that we elected councilmen, congressmen. It is because they marched that we have Artur Davis and Keith Ellison. It is because they marched that I got the kind of education I got, a law degree, a seat in the Illinois Senate, and ultimately in the United States Senate.

It is because they marched that I stand before you here today. I was mentioning at the Unity Breakfast this morning that my debt is even greater than that because not only is my career the result of the work of the men and women who we honor here today. My very existence might not have been possible had it not been for some of the folks here today. I mentioned at the Unity Breakfast that a lot of people have been asking, well, you know, your father was from Africa, your mother, she's a White woman from Kansas. I'm not sure that you have the same experience.

<sup>3</sup><http://www.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0703/04/le.02.html>

And I tried to explain, you don't understand. You see, my grandfather was a cook to the British in Kenya. Grew up in a small village and all his life, that's all he was — a cook and a house boy. And that's what they called him, even when he was 60 years old. They called him a house boy. They wouldn't call him by his last name. Sound familiar?

He had to carry a passbook around because Africans in their own land, in their own country, at that time, because it was a British colony, could not move about freely. They could only go where they were told to go. They could only work where they were told to work.

Yet something happened back here in Selma, Alabama. Something happened in Birmingham that sent out what Bobby Kennedy called, "Ripples of hope all around the world." Something happened when a bunch of women decided they were going to walk instead of ride the bus after a long day of doing somebody else's laundry, looking after somebody else's children. When men who had PhDs decided that's enough and we're going to stand up for our dignity. That sent a shout across oceans so that my grandfather began to imagine something different for his son. His son, who grew up herding goats in a small village in Africa, could suddenly set his sights a little higher and believe that maybe a Black man in this world had a chance.

What happened in Selma, Alabama, and Birmingham also stirred the conscience of the nation. It worried folks in the White House who said, "You know, we're battling Communism. How are we going to win hearts and minds all across the world? If right here in our own country, John, we're not observing the ideals set forth in our Constitution, we might be accused of being hypocrites." So the Kennedys decided we're going to do an airlift. We're going to go to Africa and start bringing young Africans over to this country and give them scholarships to study so they can learn what a wonderful country America is.

This young man named Barack Obama got one of those tickets and came over to this country. He met this woman whose great-great-great-great-grandfather had owned slaves, but she had a good idea there was some craziness going on, because they looked at each other and they decided that we know that in the world as it has been it might not be possible for us to get together and have a child. There was something stirring across the country because of what happened in Selma, Alabama, because some folks are willing to march across a bridge. So they got together and Barack Obama Jr. was born. So don't tell me I don't have a claim on Selma, Alabama. Don't tell me I'm not coming home to Selma, Alabama.

I'm here because somebody marched. I'm here because you all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants. I thank the Moses Generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. You'll see it. You'll be at the mountaintop and you can see what I've promised. What I've promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. You will see that I've fulfilled that promise but you won't go there.

We're going to leave it to the Joshua Generation to make sure it happens. There are still battles that need to be fought; some rivers that need to be crossed. Like Moses, the task was passed on to those who might not have been as deserving, might not have been as courageous, find themselves in front of the risks that their parents and grandparents, and great-grandparents had taken. That doesn't mean that they don't still have a burden to shoulder, that they don't have some responsibilities. The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way....

Moses told the Joshua Generation: don't forget where you came from. I worry sometimes, that the Joshua Generation in its success forgets where it came from....

And it reminds us that we still got a lot of work to do and that the basic enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, the injustice that still exists within our criminal justice system, the disparity in terms of how people are treated in this country continues. It has gotten better. And we should never deny that it's gotten better. But we shouldn't forget that better is not good enough. That until we have absolute equality in this country in terms of people being treated on the basis of their color or their gender, that that is something that we've got to continue to work on and the Joshua Generation has a significant task in making that happen.

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## HANDOUT FOUR, LESSON THREE

### EXTENDED LEARNING, PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE SELMA MARCH 2007, 2015, 1965

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1965



John Lewis, right, and Hosea Williams, left with fellow protesters cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge during the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, AL. March 7, 1965. Tom Lankford/Birmingham News/Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group<sup>4</sup>

1965



John Lewis (foreground) is beaten by a state trooper in Selma, AL, on March 7, 1965. |AP Photo<sup>5</sup>

2007



Presidential candidates Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge during a reenactment of the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March in Selma, AL, 2007. Photo by Lee Celano/Reuters<sup>6</sup>

2015



President Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama and daughters Sasha and Malia wait with former President George W. Bush, former First Lady Laura Bush prior to walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches, in Selma, Alabama, March 7, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Lawrence Jackson)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/photography/2020/07/18/john-r-lewis-photos-civil-rights-congressional-leader/>

<sup>5</sup><https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2015/07/30/on-exhibit-bloody-sunday/>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/anniversary-selma-march-rekindles-ferguson-comparisons>

<sup>7</sup><https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/03/08/president-obama-marks-50th-anniversary-marches-selma-montgomery>

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## HANDOUT FIVE, LESSON THREE

# INTERVIEW NOTE CATCHER

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NAME	NOTES
BARACK OBAMA	
THE MOSES GENERATION JESSE JACKSON	
BOBBY RUSH	
CAROL MOSELEY BRAUN	
JEREMIAH WRIGHT	
JOHN LEWIS	
THE JOSHUA GENERATION MICHAEL ERIC DYSON	
RA-NEHISI COATES	
JELANI COBB	
ELIZABETH ALEXANDER	

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## HANDOUT SIX, LESSON THREE

# INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

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**Teacher Note:** Jesse Jackson is a very important interview for this lesson. Due to his medical condition, there are portions of Reverend Jackson's interview that are difficult to hear, so remind students to follow along using this transcript.

### THE MOSES GENERATION

**Jesse Jackson**  
**Stages of the Civil Rights Movement**  
**01:21:16:17 - 01:24:07:00**

The four stages in our struggle...the first stage is to end legal slavery. The next stage was to end legal Jim Crow. 5,000 Blacks were lynched...Third stage was access to voting. Beyond voting, access to capital, industry, and technology and deal flow. So, in the stage of political empowerment comes these possibilities of people coming out because if you — if you can't use a public toilet, you're not discussing running for mayor. I mean, the day Dr. King gave the speech in Washington, the reason why it resonated in a certain kind of way, from Texas to Florida to Maryland [is] we couldn't use a single public toilet. We had to go behind cans and alleys or behind trees and ask you not to look, basic indignity. And the women going behind trees said, "Don't look." Men said, "Don't look."

I mean it was humiliating. You kind of learned to drive the routes where you didn't stop at small restaurants. You stopped by friend's houses or churches or roadsides. It was that kind of navigating — navigating life. We couldn't use the toilet. Our money was counterfeit. You couldn't buy a room from Howard Johnson's, you couldn't rent a room at Holiday Inn. You couldn't sit at Woolworth's across the South. We couldn't use public toilets in the state Capitol. We lived in abject [humiliation] and I dream of a day when this will not be...So one can never be at that march talking about I want to be the mayor and you don't have the right to vote. You know, I want to be the congressman and don't have the right to vote. So that in the stage of political emancipation emerged a whole generation of young activists who had various levels of aspirations. Fifty years ago it was different — Dr. King never saw a cell phone, he never saw an African American man in Atlanta or New Orleans, not to mention his staff member Andy Young, voted into Congress. He could not imagine 55 Blacks in the Congress today, African Americans since is full of them and a US president, African American. All those things...in the 50-year span an explosion of opportunities, the possibilities in the last 50 years.

**Laying the groundwork for Obama**  
**01:15:47:16-1:17:32:18**

Our struggle is built upon the landmarks of the time.

I mean with the '54 decision, the legal decision, the one by Thurgood Marshall...and that group...laid the groundwork for Rosa Parks. Rosa Parks was protesting legal segregation, testing the '54 decision, which the boycott was won in '55: We won the legal decision in '56. Dr. King emerged out of that, so in some sense, Dr. King's struggle for the right to vote in '65 had Dick Hatchett and Carl Stokes come out of that and so each generation's contribution lays the groundwork for the next generation and it must be seized. I asked Mrs. Parks, "Mrs. Parks, why didn't you go to the back of the bus? You could've been hurt, you could've been thrown under the bus and brutalized." She said, "I wanted to go back. I thought about Emmitt Till. I couldn't go back." Emmitt Till, August 28th, 1955, lynched. Rosa Parks sits up front December 1st, 1955. August 28th, Dr. King's speech is in Washington, March on Washington. August 28, Barack Obama is declared the candidate in Denver, Colorado. August 28th had a certain ring to me. A sense it just started ringing. And so, I look at the '54 decision, laid the predicate for the '64 Civil Rights Act... the predicate for the Voting Rights Act in '65, predicate for the Fair Housing Act. And so, you can almost follow — we live in our faith, we live under the law. The legal victories accumulated and the result was this brilliant, ingenious politician.

**01:15:47:16-1:17:32:18**

My son Jessie Jr. was co-chair [2008 Barack Obama Presidential Campaign] and so we immediately endorsed him for president because he was a live option. It was a long shot, an African American running, it was a long shot. He took the long shot and I could never really have benefitted the way I did from '84 and '88...and that's putting him in that lineage of struggle and he had — the time was right, you know. He didn't start the struggle. He benefited from it. He didn't cause it: he is the result of it. Fifty years of public accommodations and the right to vote and fair housing and women's organizations and women's rights, civil rights, gay rights, it's 50 years of that work resulting in '08. Well, Barack lives six houses from where we are right now. He lives right around the corner. We have a meeting — we've been meeting here every Saturday morning since 1966. Barack would come around almost every Saturday and speak. He was blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh, spirit of my spirit. He was ours. He belonged to us. To watch him grow, much to learn to pronounce his name. It was all a part of our growing up together and so to me it was a simple decision to support him.

**01:40:39:05 - 01:42:29:22**

It was the moment the movement and the mission all came together. When I looked at him walk on that stage and we were near Johnson Publishing Company where we had been tear-gassed in '68. Dr. King was killed in '68. On that spot where we were dodging canisters of tear gas, we stood in the wide-open air.... Barack Obama. Man, to my mind came the martyrs. I wish Dr. King and Rosa Parks...let me say that again. And I wish Dr. King, Medgar Evers, for a moment just God gave them 15 seconds to look at their work. This is their work: he's the result of our work. And so, I thought about the marchers, those who marched on the bridge in Selma that Sunday who couldn't afford to come to Chicago who may have been injured. After all, our warriors in America fighting for civil rights in America, we're soldiers too. Fighting for freedom in America is risky, it's very dangerous. And those who made it possible were not there. Those were very high prices — I was sitting in a very high-priced section. And so, it was the moment and the movement and it came upon me and I was trying to hide behind someone's head and the tears being...was such a movement of joy. The prayers of the righteous had been fulfilled.

**Bobby Rush**

**Resentment against elites**

**01:38:32:18 - 01:40:39:09**

His civil rights credentials were almost nonexistent. And there was — there's an aristocracy of civil rights political leadership. Was, is, even today, and he didn't come from that aristocracy. He's an outsider. There were a lot of people then, still there that felt as though he was being a tool of others' political aspirations — that they were seeking power through him for themselves and some people resented that. We have this problem in America and we started having it in the African American community but all communities, of how do we deal with elites. And Obama represented the elite rather than the ordinary person. You know, in some sense, you know, political campaigns for higher office, especially in the highest office in the land is always a battle most of all between the elites. And the elites have this capacity to — and it is in their interest to utilize common people in order — as weapons in their fight for which elite is going to control, be it the right or the left, you know? It's always a matter between those two elites.

**Carol Moseley Braun**

**Growing Up in Chicago**

**01:00:10:15-01:01:53:09**

Well, I'm third-generation Chicagoan. So, my family has been here for a long time. And I've lived all over the South Side pretty much. Although never west of State Street, which is kind of interesting. We always lived south and east. So, but it was interesting, and the timing of my life has been such that I was actually a witness to all the history that the Civil Rights Movement made. When I was little — when I was a little girl, I was born into a segregated Chicago. And then as I grew up, things began to change to the point that when I was 16, I want to say 15, but when I was a teenager, I was

able to march with Dr. King — Dr. Martin Luther King when he came here to talk about housing and housing segregation and poverty. And so, you know, I was on the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, which made it a very, very exciting time to be in Chicago.

**Carol Moseley Braun**

**Meeting MLK**

I met him, I was actually as close to him as I am to you right now, maybe I shouldn't say that because you're not here, right? Okay, but anyway, I was very close to him, physically. So, when the bricks and the bottles started being thrown, I was close enough to see him get hit and the blood come down. And he was — it was his calm, frankly, that made me into — made me a believer in the whole idea of nonviolent protest, which was his whole point, as you know. And so, that was what transformed me as a young woman at the time, so, because he was so calm and so above it and just so, beatific is probably not too strong a word, in the face of the hate that was being spewed in his direction.

**Harold Washington**

**01:09:11:19 - 01:10:06:09**

Well, the significance of Harold [Washington] generally for the community was huge. For me personally, it was very huge also, because I had just, and I don't know how much of this you got, but I had just sued my Democratic party over gerrymandering. And, and I wound up — I won the case, we created in that case the two, the first Hispanic districts ever for the state of Illinois. We created two new African American districts, in which African Americans could get elected. And so, we did — I thought we did some real good with that lawsuit, but when I won, everybody told me that I had just, you know, pissed off the leadership in such a way, I was dead meat when it came back to going to Springfield. But instead of being, you know, run out of town on a rail, Harold got elected and named me his floor leader. So, I became an assistant majority leader instead of toast. So, it was — it worked out fine.

**01:14:51:10 -01:16:50:00**

Harold's being elected mayor paved the way for a Black president on a lot of different levels. The first was that he showed that, again, think about it. It's a societal thing. He's up against a whole bunch of racist tropes that had been with the country for 100 years at that point. And so, the idea that a Black person could run a two-car funeral, much less the city like the size of Chicago and complexity of Chicago was really alien and foreign to a lot of people. So, Harold rose to the occasion and showed that not only could it be done, but it could be done well. And he did a good job running this city. He brought the city together. He showed people that coalitions based on common interests were not only possible, but were desirable. And I think that's one of the things that everybody responded to and still does — still do, because he brought us together as a community. He showed that by working together we could provide everybody with more of whatever their community wanted or needed. And, and that, and that all the kind of — the

kind of games that the machine had played were not necessary. One of Harold's famous speeches was about patronage, which as you know was a mainstay of the way that the machine worked here in Chicago. By then, the Shakman decision had happened, and so you couldn't use political affiliation to hire people. You couldn't use political affiliation to fire people anymore. And Harold came in just at the time that that decision had been made. And he gave a famous speech where he said, "I've said to patronage. I said, 'Patronage, are you dead?' I walked around the grave a few times and patronage did not answer me." He did a better job of it, obviously. But he gave this great speech about the death of patronage that was really enlightening and illuminating for people. And encouraging. He gave people hope.

### **Jesse Jackson's significance in electoral politics** 01:19:49:11- 01:24:44:13

A lot of Project Vote came out of Jesse Jackson's presidential efforts, because he made the point, and I think at this point, the Democratic party has pretty much embraced the notion that if you register voters, those voters will probably be your voters. Again, back to the easy, the easy play. And so, what Jesse did, particularly since there was such a tradition in this country of Black people not voting, not being able to vote. I mean, there was a time when, you know, if you tried to vote in Alabama, you'd get hung. Or Mississippi or Georgia. But not so much Illinois. But the fact is, people come particularly with the great migration, there was a tradition of lack people not getting involved in electoral politics for a variety of reasons, and primarily it's safety.

And so, Project Vote said we're going to take the message out to these people in the communities and explain to them why not only is it their right and their obligation, but that they can do this without expecting to get lynched. That it's safe to do. And so, it was a matter of registering voters and they were very successful doing it. And a lot of grassroots people were active in getting people signed up to vote. I'll tell you something. Because Jesse Jackson came, he ran against the machine, let's start with that. When he — particularly the first time he ran, it was not with no support from the Democratic party here locally or even the Democratic party nationally. And he shook things up. He gave people who had no reasons to expect that a Black person could get elected president a reason to hope that it was possible. He got out there and of course, particularly, he's so brilliant, and he was able to hold his own in the debates and what not and he made people proud. He made people proud that he could do as well and hold his own in these venues as a candidate for president. And he was a credible candidate for president. He changed the Democratic party rules, as you're well aware, to open it up and make it more inclusive. To begin the conversation about how do you treat the people who vote for you almost automatically, 89% or 90% of the time? How are you treating the Black community? And so he was really at the vanguard of a lot of the civil rights — he represented the Civil Rights Movement coming together with electoral politics for

the first time. And that had not really happened before.

### **Jesse Jackson's Operation Breadbasket**

When Jesse Jackson came to Chicago for the first time, he had something called "Operation Breadbasket." And it was out of a theater on Halsted. And so, and Operation Breadbasket was about teaching people A, they could vote without fear — without fear of their own personal safety. And B, that there was something to be said to participate — participation in the electoral process.... That's what he called it, a coalition of people from all walks of life who had the same, shared values in terms of making sure that this country worked for everybody and not just for the privileged few. And so, you know, I think it's major kudos for having done that for the country and he paved the way for Barack. There would not have been a Barack Obama had it not been for Jesse Jackson. That's just that simple.

### **Shirley Chisholm and Black Women**

You know, the thing is, and she's my personal heroine because the fact that she, as a woman, she brought together both the challenge of race and gender. And frankly, that's a little more difficult because you've got two different sets of competing values, competing issues and stereotypes. So, assuming for a moment you've got the stereotypes associated with being a Black person on the one hand, when you're talking about a Black woman you've got the stereotypes associated with being a woman on the other. And they come together in unique and bizarre ways sometimes. They fight each other sometimes; they complement each other other times. But the fact is, it's a different ballgame for a woman candidate, I think. And again, Shirley Chisholm opened the doors for women across the board. Her challenge was less race based than it was about gender and opening up our democracy and making it work for everybody. And so, you know, just as Jesse came at it from the civil rights or from the racial perspective, Shirley Chisholm came at it from gender, and — but they both had the same message, which is: this democracy has got to work for everybody.

### **Jeremiah Wright** **Growing Up Under Segregation** 01:01:18:15-01:06:53:07

Philadelphia had YMCA for White people and a YMCA for Colored. The YMCA for Whites had a pool. We could not use that pool as Coloreds but one day a week, after which they emptied the pool to get all that Colored water out. I didn't understand. Is this the Young Men's Christian Association? This is how Christianity works? Added to that was the fact that both [of my] parents as I said finished Virginia Union, their mother and their father lived in Virginia so I spent half my life in Virginia and that always meant packing a lunch. I couldn't — did not understand why we couldn't stop at a restaurant. We went to restaurants in Philly. My father refused to go to a segregated restaurant, so we packed a lunch so we would have something to eat on the way down to Virginia. And he always [would] go to the washroom

before we crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Now, I'm trying to understand how this fits in with Christianity and it didn't fit in at all. Then the other blessing and curse for me growing up as a [inaudible] was Daddy had rules. Be in the house when the streetlights come on. One hour of television only when we got a television. But then you had to read. Well, if the teacher said read to page 62, I would read to page 62. My sister would go on to read the next two or three chapters. Not me. But I had to read something, so I would go in my father's study to read, and that impacted me in an awesome way.

My father was a student of Carter Woodson, the father of African American history. So I was reading Carter Woodson's books but I was also reading his books. My daddy had a master of divinity, a bachelor of arts, a bachelor of divinity, and he had a master in sacred theology. And I was reading books way above my pay grade with no teacher, causing me to question a whole lot of things that were going on in church and a whole lot of things I would hear preachers and Christians say, put in contradiction to the reality of being Black in Philly and Black in Virginia. So asking him gave me some answers but many times it raised more questions in my mind than giving me answers.

### **Attending College During the Civil Rights Movement**

I got to Virginia Union in January of '59 and the sit-ins started in '60. I was a part of the sit-ins. I was also part of — Virginia Union is a Baptist-related Christian university and we had joint Christian activities with what was then RPI, Richmond Polytechnic Institute, which is now a big college. I was trying to think of it. Virginia — it's a huge White school, state school. And the Christians, we worshipped together, sang together, studied the Bible together, Black and White. But at the sit-ins I saw these same kids who were in Christian organizations, calling us names, dragging our girls, our women across the street by the heels, spitting on us. That impacted me in a very negative way in terms of, is this what the faith is all about?

These are my brothers and sisters in Christ and calling me a n\_\_\_\_\_? Well, the sit-ins only made it worse because as militant as the kids were at Virginia Union, Virginia State, Norfolk State, all the schools with which we had any kind of affiliation, North Carolina A&T, North Carolina College — summertime I go to Philadelphia. Woolworth's is a national chain. Woolworth's has segregated seating. I believe that's where the students from Greensboro started it. We go to Woolworth's; we're meeting the students of Virginia Union, Virginia State down south. We're gonna picket Woolworth's and the members of my father's church who were all gonna cross the picket line telling us that it's our problem in the South, it was not their problem.

Now that was very disappointing, disheartening and confusing for them to not see that the struggle was about equality and human rights for everybody, every place, not just in the south. And because Woolworth's in Philadelphia was not segregated, it was OK? That made it worse.

### **John Lewis The First Black U.S. President 01:00:13:23 - 01:02:23:19**

I never thought that I would live to see a Black man or a Black woman as president of the United States of America. Growing up the way I grew up in rural Alabama 50 miles from Montgomery was very hard and very difficult for people of color to even register to vote. My own mother, my own father, my own grandparents didn't become registered voters until after the Voting Rights Act was passed and signed into law on August 6th, 1965. People had to stand in unmovable lines, people were asked to count the number of bubbles in a bar of soap, the number of jelly beans in a jar; and to live to see Barack Obama become president of the United States of America was almost too much. As a matter of fact, when he was declared the winner of the election, he was speaking in Ebenezer Baptist Church, Dr. King's old church, not the same building, and I jumped up so high I didn't think my feet were gonna touch the floor, and I started crying. Someone asked me, "Why are you crying so much?" I said, "It's more than tears of happiness and joy, I'm crying for those people who didn't live to see a person of color elected president." And I remember some reporters asking me over and over again "Why, why, what are you going to do during the inauguration?" I said, "If I have any tears left, I'm gonna cry some more." And that's exactly what I did. The election of Barack Obama gave us all hope, a greater sense of hope that said Barack Obama can do it, maybe other men and women of color can follow.

### **Obama and Brown Chapel 01:06:42:04 - 01:08:03:04**

I wanted him to come and walk across the bridge [Edmund Pettus Bridge.] I thought it was important. Other people had gone and walked across that bridge. And he was there, Hillary was there, and I think President Clinton came. But it was — it was coming together in a very strange way. I wanted President Obama before he became president to see and walk that path that other people have walked, to come and sit in that church and feel the spirit of what happened in Selma. To be there with the local indigenous people, and I think they have changed him and inspired him.

### **Election Night 01:08:06:07 - 01:09:31:00**

The night that President Barack Obama won, I was standing in the pulpit of Ebenezer Baptist Church speaking in downtown Atlanta, the church that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his father had been the co-pastor. And when he was declared the winner, I just started crying. I jumped up like I had been touched by the spirit, maybe the Holy Spirit or maybe the spirit of Dr. King and I just cried. The day — the day when he was inaugurated, I walked up to him and asked him to sign something. He wrote on this piece of paper, "It's all because of you, John." I said, "Why thank you, Mr. President." He gave me a hug. I hugged him and we both teared up. Then the second inauguration, he walked up to me and said, "It's still because of you, John." That touched me deeply. So he remembered exactly what he had said four years earlier.

## THE JOSHUA GENERATION

**Michael Eric Dyson**

**01:33:13:00 - 01:37:06:23**

It was comparable to King standing at the sunlit summit of expectation in 1963 at the March on Washington where he identifies a golden thread of the American dream and weaves it into a tapestry of American democratic possibility. Now, I'm not saying that the 2004 speech measured up to the "I Have a Dream" speech. In terms of rhetorical eloquence, though, it was eloquent, or the devices, oratorically, that were deployed. King is a master orator of the 20th century, but it did have an electrifying effect in that same way and kind of coming out of nowhere.... His real coming out to the nation was in '63 with that speech when the globe was able to consume what he was saying.... It was clear to see to anybody else that he was a Black man, but he was a different kind of Black man, and this was the announcement that this is not, though they are enormously important, Jesse Jackson, Reverend Al Sharpton, stalwarts of the Civil Rights Movement, but those who were perceived to be, necessarily so, as people who could channel Black anger to express Black grievance to realize Black progress. With Barack Obama, there's a different moment here. Barack Obama's not a Black leader, he's a leader who's Black, right? Jesse Jackson is an African American leader. Al Sharpton is an African American leader. Barack Obama is an American leader who happens to be Black. So, there was a tremendous difference that was evident that day in that speech that here's a Black guy, an American leader who happens to be Black, who can use the resonance of that tradition to really ally it with our own goals and aspirations in America, and that was a tremendous coming-out party for Barack Obama.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates**

**01:33:18:08 - 01:34:59:13**

I think about Shirley Sherrod. I think that was a really, really telling incident. Here you have a Black woman, who — civil rights activist, part of SNCC. Actually, when SNCC has its schism, when it goes, some folks want to go, the Black power separatist route, other folks still believe in the integrationist route. This Black woman who went the integrationist route, believed in it, like the last candidate in the world for — and is that, but in her family is this history of lynching and brutality, just the worst kind of racism that you ever want to see. And the notion that the Obama administration bought that this woman was perpetrating some sort of vengeful scheme against White people.

It was sad that you would part with Shirley Sherrod, who in some really, profound way as I've written, made it possible for a Black president to exist, in pursuit of people who don't like you, who will never like you. Who will never believe you, who will never support you, who have never accepted you. It was incredibly, incredibly sad. The belief in the goodness of White America did not allow you to see that this could actually get really bad, that this could get really, really, really, really bad.

I know he'll have a different version of that, and he would disagree with that, but I think to me that was the tragedy of it.

**Jelani Cobb**

**01:28:33:22 - 01:31:58:08**

So from the outset, Barack Obama's relationship with the civil rights establishment is a little bit weird. It was this arms-length hug that they were trying to give him. And you know, he had gained a lot of attention among regular Black folk but the leadership class of Black people seemed to be very ambivalent about him and one of the most vivid expressions of that is when Jesse Jackson famously said he wanted to castrate Barack Obama. And he said it kind of off-handedly in a studio. In no circumstance is that a good statement. But for Black people in particular, that was a horrific thing for him to say because it hearkened back to lynching. That this is something that actually used to happen to Black men, especially Black men who were politically and socially prominent. To say that it was impolitic would be putting it mildly, that kind of comment.

But it also reflected a kind of deeper — I don't know, it was a deeper, more complicated connection between Jackson and Obama and one of the problems in 2008 was that people were enamored of the idea of this Black person possibly becoming president and they didn't seem to recognize just how indebted Barack Obama's 2008 candidacy was to Jesse Jackson's 1988 candidacy. Everything from the proportional division of delegates in those primaries that really, really redounded to Obama's favor, to the strategy of creating these grassroots voter registration drives that were simultaneously creating an electorate at the same time as you were tapping into it. That was another thing that came straight from Jesse Jackson's playbook. You know, the populist movement of connecting with you know, Black and Brown folk and White people — the portion of White people who'd be willing to vote for a Black candidate, just going on through the list, you can check off all the kind of genetic similarities between Jesse's '88 campaign and Obama's 2008 campaign. And unfortunately it fell to Jesse Jackson to point that out, which he never should do — he should never have had to do that, by the way. And in the context of that, it's not hard to see how Jesse Jackson felt some kind of way about being discarded or being forgotten. It seemed as if Jesse Jackson's campaign had become a pejorative in some ways. You remember when Barack Obama won the South Carolina primary, Democratic primary, Bill Clinton kind of disparagingly said, "Well, Jesse Jackson won South Carolina, too." As if to say, Jesse Jackson was a political footnote. So, yeah, there were a lot of layers in that.

**01:37:27:02 - 01:40:29:10**

I can tell you specifically the first time I saw a Barack Obama t-shirt, and that was the night of the Iowa caucuses. And I was living in Atlanta and there was a watch party, that all of the — like big Democrats in the city were at. I believe Andy Young was there; a number of luminaries from the civil rights era were there, Joseph

Lowery was there. And you know, everyone's watching this and I don't think very many people really, really thought that he was going to win Iowa, and then all of a sudden he won Iowa. And I remember leaving and there was a White guy wearing a t-shirt that said, "He's Black, I'm proud." Which I thought was a kind of interesting, amusing embrace of him.

And then right after that, I saw a t-shirt that had Martin Luther King and Barack Obama next to each other on the shirt, and then I saw that t-shirt everywhere in the days that followed. And I think that mantle of King was certainly a blessing in the sense that people understood that — it was another way of reinforcing the idea that Martin Luther King did not die in vain, that this does not happen without him putting his life on the line time and time again, not just in Memphis but in the years that preceded that. And at the same time, King had a fundamentally different stance towards politics than a president could have. And so even — you saw that tension when Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize and then turned around and gave a speech about the necessity of using force sometimes, which was a really kind of awkward thing.

Martin Luther King had really no other constituency — constituency that he had to think about. 'Cause if you read that speech, the speech that King gave in '64, and that speech that Obama gave when he won the peace prize, they're diametrically opposite. King is talking about the philosophical implications of a movement based in love and non-violence, and Obama is talking about the fact that the force of arms, particularly in the Atlantic Alliance is what saved the world from fascism. He's giving that statement to — in Oslo, to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. And so there's always this difficult juxtaposition between those two positions. I think Obama's strongest critics on the Left and his strongest critics within Black America were very intent upon pointing out the ways in which his legacy as a political person was not in keeping with what Martin Luther King's legacy was as a civil rights activist.

## Elizabeth Alexander 01:03:02:18-01:05:16:04

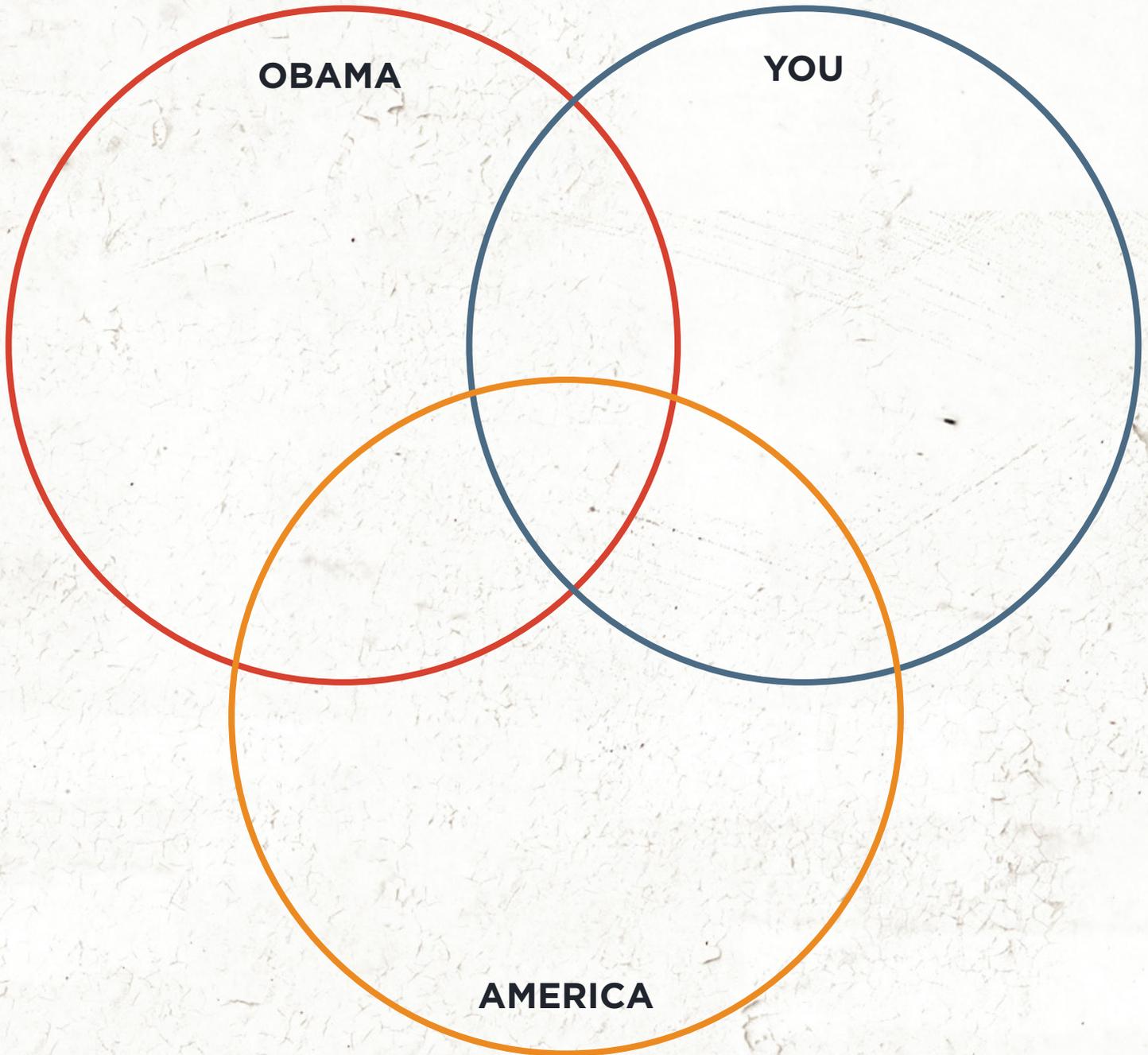
I think we're actually kind of an interesting generation because I think those heroes of the Civil Rights Movement and those heroic acts of the Civil Rights Movement, by which I mean not just the headlines of the Civil Rights Movement. I mean the long Civil Rights Movement, I mean the on-the-ground Civil Rights Movement. I mean the Civil Rights Movement as it manifested itself in arts and culture. So I'm really talking very, very, very broadly. And the Civil Rights Movement in the context of other kinds of social movements. I know that for myself and I think this is something that we shared. We looked to those big brothers and sisters and aunties, you know, that generation and saw their courage and saw them acting on their courage. We've never talked about this but both of us in our college years were very, very engaged with anti-Apartheid work. And so I think that you know, South Africa and the wrongs of Apartheid gave those of us with certain sensibilities a way to enact our politics even though that wasn't something that was happening in the United States. So what did we then do when we had trained and — and found our way? That's what was the interesting question. With my own family and with my parents, yes, my parents you know, the iconic story was that they took me to the March on Washington when I was a baby in the carriage. And there was a way in which you know, change — my father worked for President Johnson on the Voting Rights Act, on the Civil Rights Act. You know, was a liaison to the civil rights community with the White House was the first head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He is a justice warrior who comes out of that movement in a way people don't always see, so I always knew that but I still couldn't own it. I didn't do it. I had to figure out OK, all of this road has been cleared for you, so you better figure out something that moves it forward. And I think that that is kind of where generationally President Obama and I met. We are very deeply schooled in the philosophy of you know, the I that doesn't exist without the we and that you know, we weren't just invented with our talents out of nothing and that you actually can't get anything done by yourself even if you do have certain individual talents.

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**HANDOUT SEVEN, LESSON THREE**  
**THE MORE PERFECT UNION VENN DIAGRAM**

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*Directions: Use this Venn diagram to capture your ideas and analysis from this lesson.*



**Keep in mind:**

- > How does this information relate to Obama's vision of a more perfect union?
- > How does it relate to your own vision of a more perfect union?