A photograph of President Barack Obama waving with his right hand raised. He is wearing a dark blue suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie. The background is dark with some blurred lights.

ON PRESIDENT  
OBAMA'S FAREWELL  
ADDRESS

And a New Direction for  
American Liberalism

Michael Andoscia

## Obama's Speech in Context

President Obama gave his [Farewell Address](#) last week. (I know I'm tardy on this, but I work for a living). It was masterfully done when one considers the enormity of the task he had in front of him.

Under normal circumstances, it is incumbent upon the outgoing president to remind everyone of his accomplishments. This address is also his last opportunity as head of state to try to steer the political agenda with an overview of some of the challenges the nation faces as his term ends. Two of the most famous such warnings were Washington's admonishment to avoid foreign entanglements and [Eisenhower's](#) warnings about the growing Military Industrial Complex. [Washington's](#) Farewell Address defined and influenced U.S. foreign policy until Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. Eisenhower's? Well...[Not so much.](#)<sup>1</sup>

These are not normal circumstances, however. Washington was handing over the presidency to John Adams, a political ally. Eisenhower may have been handing the keys to a member of the opposition party, but the election was razor thin and John Kennedy was hardly a radical departure from Eisenhower's America. Whereas there have been some schismatic transfers of power in presidential politics, 1801, 1829, 1861, I would suggest that our nation has never seen anything quite like this.

This year marks more than a typical transfer of power from one party to another. Here we see a poised, intellectual, seasoned statesman being replaced by a reality television circus clown. The first black president, known for his aversion to "drama," is handing the White House over to a white nationalist who is walking into the capitol with a veritable binder full of scandals, not the least of which is the possibility that he might owe his presidency to a Russian dictator. Eight years of fake news, political obstructionism, increased partisanship and racial animus is coming full circle as the authors of this conflict are now in full control of the government. Despite growing and obvious economic inequality, the new administration is composed of millionaires, billionaires and cronies to the corporate elite. In the face of a looming global environmental catastrophe, the incoming administration is dedicated to doing exactly the opposite of what is needed to deal with global warming.

Furthermore, the opposition party, that represented by the outgoing president, looks like a dropped mirror.

So the President had his work cut out for him. It's clear that nothing...absolutely nothing...he said during his Farewell Address was going to influence policy in any way. No. President Obama was addressing his final words as president to the people and to his party. First, he took it upon himself to try to staunch the [democratic hemorrhaging](#)<sup>2</sup> in our nation. Secondly, he had to recognize that if American democracy is to survive the installation of a narcissistic autocrat, then the Democratic Party is going to need an infusion of courage and a reminder of its traditional, small "d" democratic heritage, as frayed and messy as it is. The bottom line is that the corporate elite only needs one party. Any opposition party must be one that represents the people if it wishes to remain viable--and at this point, the Democratic Party is not seen as representing the people.

"That's what I want to focus on tonight: The state of our democracy. Understand, democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders argued. They quarreled. Eventually, they compromised. They expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity — the idea that for all our outward differences, we're all in this together; that we rise or fall as one." Rise or fall as one. The most recurring theme in Obama's oeuvre of speeches has been unity. Since his seminal "[One America](#)" speech,<sup>3</sup> Obama has spoken on the importance of unity even in the face of political disagreement. To no avail. His presidency is, arguably, marked by the most pointedly divisive political environment since the 1850's. Furthermore, this divisiveness was entirely constructed by movement conservatives, the Republican Party, and their corporate patrons.

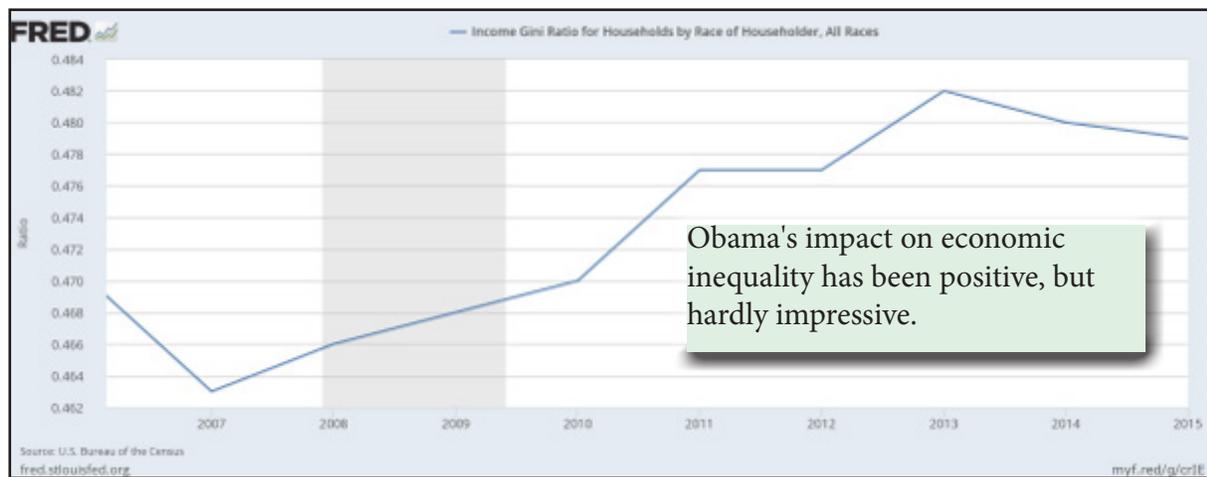
This strategy, a combination of political slash-and-burn and stonewall obstructionism, was successful and is now in the political toolbox for everyone to use in the future. This bodes ill for our political future.

So President Obama's task was to do nothing less than redefine American democracy in the face of pro-fascist autocracy and to refocus the role of the so-called Democratic Party within that democracy. President Obama is one of our nation's most talented rhetoricians, and he did not let us down. In the process, President Obama, a largely centrist political figure, gave what I think was the most left-wing speech of his career. He may have even opened a door for left politics in the Democratic Party. I'll start with Obama's assessment of our economic challenges.

## Economic Challenges

An early, left criticism of President Obama is that, with all of his rhetoric on “Hope” and “Change” he said very little about economic inequality. His hesitancy may have had something to do with his encounter with Joe the Plumberish in which he took political heat for suggesting we should “[spread the wealth around](#).”<sup>4</sup> By the time of his re-election campaign, however, the Occupy Movement rallied thousands in cities all across the country as members of the 99 Percent, left behind by an economy built for the one percent, took to the streets in anger. Economic inequality had its slogan and its voice. Elizabeth Warren became one of the chief spokespeople of the 99% when she advocated for [fair taxation](#) in her senatorial campaign.

With this political wind at his back, Obama really started to address the [economic inequality](#)<sup>6</sup> that continued to grow during his first term. He tried to borrow some of Warren’s tools in 2012, but uncharacteristically flubbed his lines when he made his famous “[you didn’t build that](#)”<sup>7</sup> blunder. Fortunately for Obama, however, he was running against the very embodiment of the one percent, a man who believed that “[corporations are people, my friend](#).”<sup>8</sup> He won re-election, albeit with lower figures than his 2008 landslide.



Since then, however, President Obama has become more articulate on his advocacy for economic fairness. His awakening to the cause of economic justice was too little and much too late, but his embattled administration did, at the very least, stop the unrestrained growth of inequality as measured by Household GINI rates (above). In his Farewell Address, economic inequality and its impact on a supposedly free people was a central theme. “Stark inequality is also corrosive to our democratic ideal. While the top one percent has amassed a bigger share of wealth and income, too many families, in inner cities and in rural counties, have been left behind — the laid-off factory worker; the waitress or health care worker who’s just barely getting by and struggling to pay the bills — convinced that the game is fixed against them, that their government only serves the interests of the powerful — that’s a recipe for more cynicism and polarization in our politics.”

Economic inequality has been a mainstay of American liberalism since the late 19th century. It’s a contribution of socialist and the labor movements of that time. It was a central concern of the Populist Movement in the late 19th century and of the Progressives in the early 20th. The New Deal was, perhaps, the Golden Age of economic justice in the United States, with The Great Society representing the last great achievement of progressive liberalism. In the 1970’s the Democratic Party started to turn away from economic justice and, by 2000, the party of the New Deal and of the Great Society no longer existed. Economic justice was relegated to the left while the increasingly conservative Democratic Party embraced a pro-choice, corporatism that was willing to defend Social Security and Medicare, but offered little more than lip service to unions and to the left.

Ironically, Donald Trump was able to capitalize on this Democratic apathy to economic inequality and to twist economic populism into a racist and isolationist scam that too many blindly accepted. Hillary Clinton, a pilot of the Democratic turn from its New Deal/Great Society traditions, may have been sincere about her new found appreciation for economic justice, but she was not an effective spokesperson. Even many of her supporters did

did not believe that she would follow through with her promises, especially if the political winds took her in a different direction.

The left and progressive liberals, however, never abandoned their emphasis on economic justice. We've just been ignored for so long that we've resigned to acting defensively out of desperation. On the one hand, we've worked tirelessly to preserve the tattered remains of the social safety net. On the other hand, we've voted against our interests in order to keep more destructive candidates out of office--which we've largely failed to do. This has served to discredit the progressive left.

If the left is going to build on its recent momentum, playing defense is not going to cut it. We have to come up with new solutions for promoting economic justice. The [fight for fifteen](#) is a great example, though we should be fighting for twenty. We should certainly support this effort. The economy is such, however, that a living wage alone will do nothing to bring the economic stability that so eludes most workers.

The left, in many cases, defends economic policies reminiscent of our manufacturing, urban past. We no longer live in that country, however. We will never live in that country again. Obama pointed out, "the next wave of economic dislocations won't come from overseas. It will come from the relentless pace of automation that makes a lot of good, middle-class jobs obsolete." Jobs, by themselves, may no longer be the ladder to the middle class. So our values and processes with regard to the middle class must change. The left, with our emphasis on class, must be innovative about this new reality. If the goal is to eliminate class as a barrier and as a relation of power, then our analysis and praxis must provide a meaningful vision that goes beyond liberal social safety nets and ladders to the middle class.

The sorest casualty of the last forty years of neoliberalism is the foundational idea of a social contract. Obama recognized this. "And so we're going to have to forge a new social compact to guarantee all our kids the education they need; to give workers the power to unionize for better wages; to update the social safety net to reflect the way we live now, and make more reforms to the tax code so corporations and individuals who reap the most from this new economy don't avoid their obligations to the country that's made their very success possible."

A compact is meaningless in the face of elite power that has no incentive or need to respect that compact. Now that it is clear that our government is little more than a wholly-owned subsidiary of the corporate elite, left movements must focus on strategies that empower the demos in the face of the elite. Our very concept of "union" will have to change in the face of corporate institutions that can be run from laptops on beaches in Fiji while workplace doors are slammed in worker's faces when demanding nothing more than fair remuneration and to be treated with basic human dignity. We must advance the universal principle of humanity, that we are all in this together, and that the fate of our brothers and sisters is, in the end, our own.

That government must have a role in promoting economic justice is paramount. As it stands, conservatives own the American discourse on government. They repeat and echo the Reaganite Mantra that "government is the problem" "government is the problem." So long as conservatives and milquetoast liberals swarm the halls of government, Reagan and his followers will fulfill their own prophecy. Of course, government is a problem, especially in the cold, uncalled hands of boardroom denizens. Government that must bend to the demands of the aching backs and calloused fists rising from the streets, however, becomes a check against the power elite. To get there, the left must present a vision of government that breaks away from the Reagan Mantra and that the rest of the country can embrace after two generations of democratic atrophy at the state level. The left must promote a vision of government that functions for the common good, that liberates rather than oppresses, that acts as a steward for the commons (also an idea that has been destroyed by neoliberalism).

Government might be the original sin, from the perspective of many on the left, but if it is to serve any kind of democratic function, it must be to act as a check against the abuses of the power elite. In the twenty-first century, this power elite is composed of multi-national corporations. In the United States especially, these corporate entities, social structures that exist largely outside of the parameters of the nation state, almost completely own the government. The Democratic Party, ignoring the left, is one of the architects of that fact.

If the Democratic Party, with a strong left coalition, is to win out, then it must be able to make the case that our only hope is a unified and empowered demos organized against the corporate elite and in support of economic justice. To accomplish this, the demos must be made to abandon other forms of cultural tribalism that make unity impossible. Namely, the Democratic Party must build alternative paradigms to the standard racist,

ethnocentric and xenophobic cultural values that have served to weaken the demos for two hundred years while empowering the otherwise impotent elite.

## RACIAL CHALLENGES

If there is a singular category of disappointment in the Obama years it's in race relations. It's not that race relations especially deteriorated while Obama was President. The problem was that race relations did not improve despite the expectation and the corresponding rhetoric that, since the election of a black president, we were living in a post-racial America. "After my election," Obama reminded us, "there was talk of a post-racial America. And such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society."

When it became clear that a post-racial America was as far away from our grasp as it had ever been, this served as tinder for long buried but still hot coals. It was clear that decades of neglect and exploitation in black communities were not going to be addressed despite having a black president. In fact, a right-wing political movement was organized and was taking to the streets in part out of fear that communities of color might get some attention and some long denied resources. It was especially telling that even being President of the United States was not enough to insulate a black family from targeted, racial harassment and abuse.

The racial backlash was two-fold. On one hand, the election of our first black president brought the bigots out of the woodwork. Their traditionally coded language became more openly bigoted in the political discourse. The failings, both real and perceived, of the Obama Administration were imputed upon his blackness. It became easy to convince whites, especially white men whose status was being challenged from multiple angles, that "those people," welfare recipients, immigrants, food stamp users (all people of color, presumably) were being taken care of while whites were left to stagnate. This was absurd on many levels, of course, but perception is reality in the political realm.

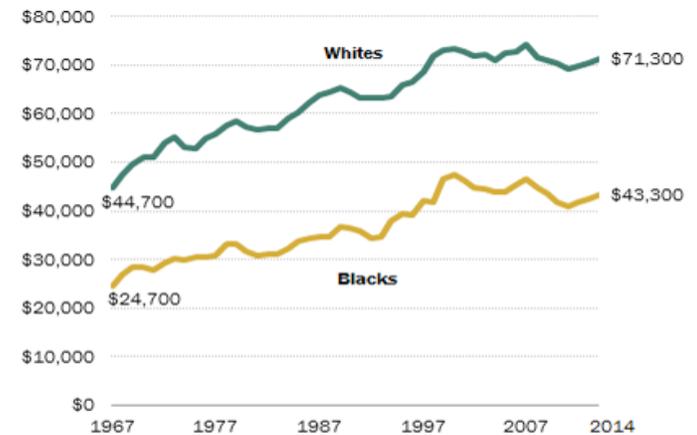
Secondly, communities of color became energized and organized. The Age of the New Right's approach to race, personified by [Reagan's welfare queen and strapping young bucks](#)<sup>9</sup> was the dominant paradigm of racial discourse since the late seventies. Consequently, the work of the Civil Rights movement, having only just begun in the fifties and sixties, was left to flounder. When Obama was elected, two generations of neglected black communities, victims of exploitative policing, families ruined by catastrophic loss of wealth [disproportionately suffered](#)<sup>10</sup> by black

households, among many other grievances, no longer seemed like impossible obstacles, but rather frustrating targets for action. Long smoldering tensions burst into flame, reigniting the civil rights movement.

Stories of police violence against unarmed black men, historically ignored, finally made their way into the mainstream media. The nation was shocked by judicial apathy to black victimization as we watched murderers walk away from juries, acquitted of crimes for which we knew they were guilty--crimes caught on video! The [#blacklivesmatter](#) movement was galvanized into a potent political force.

### Racial gaps in household income persist

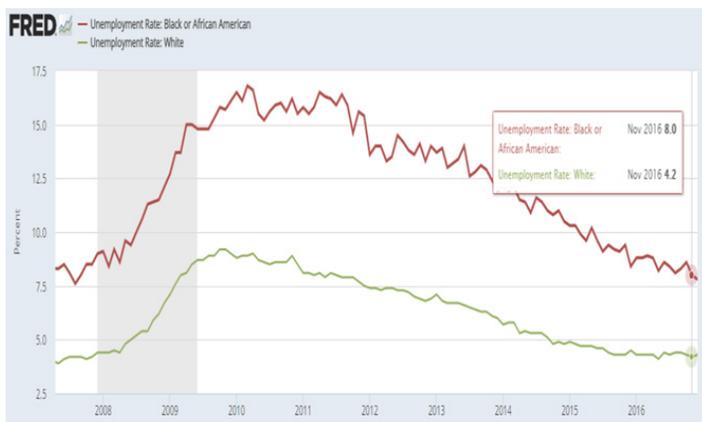
Median adjusted household income in 2014 dollars



Note: Income standardized to a household size of three and is reported for the calendar year prior to the survey year. For details, see Methodology. Race and ethnicity are based upon the race and ethnicity of the head of household. Whites and blacks include only those who reported a single race. Data from 1970 to 2014 include only non-Hispanic whites and blacks; data prior to 1970 include Hispanics.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 1968-2015 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (IPUMS) "On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites are Worlds Apart"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



A new energy imbued the civil rights community. Furthermore, these movements were attracting diverse support. One didn't have to be black to see the disproportionate use of state violence against black communities and individuals.



Unfortunately, as with any viable social movement, we also witnessed a venomous backlash framing this diverse group of activists as “anti-white,” most effectively with the “[All Lives Matter](#)<sup>11</sup>” counter-movement. Others, who never gave a damn before, kept patronizing black activists and communities to pay attention to [black-on-black crime](#)<sup>12</sup> as if nobody had ever noticed. More xenophobic elements referred to #blacklivesmatter as a [terrorist organization](#)<sup>13</sup> directly responsible for promoting violence against police officers. The venom and ferocity of the counter-attack was testament to the veracity of this civil rights renaissance.

For the most part, President Obama was conspicuously quiet about these revelations and resulting movements. This was a source of frustration for black activists, most notably [Dr. Cornel West](#)<sup>14</sup>. Of course, the President had a difficult [balancing act](#)<sup>15</sup> to maintain. As a black president, showing an affinity for black communities would almost certainly have been presented by the frothing Right as favoritism and accusations of being anti-white. For [confirmation](#)<sup>16</sup> of this, simply research the reaction when Obama stated, correctly, that if he “had a son, he would look like Trayvon,” referencing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black youth killed by a gun-wielding, self appointed “neighborhood watch.”

President Obama did address race in some notable speeches in his second term. His more technocratic [contributions to civil rights](#)<sup>17</sup> and criminal justice were not insignificant. It was in his Farewell Address, however, that Obama made the most powerful, most radical, most left-wing statement of his career. “If every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hard-working white middle class and an undeserving minority, then workers of all shades are going to be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves.”

And, really, that's what it all boils down to.

Look, the left, as it emerged from the 19th century, has always challenged the lopsided power of the economic elite. Liberalism began with a critique of absolute authority of the state. It sought to redefine the sovereign as “the people” and government existed, not by virtue of God's will, but by consent of the governed. It was a successful paradigm. So successful that both sides of the political spectrum play within the liberal rhetorical frame of freedom and democracy. By the mid 19th century, however, it was clear to every industrialized nation that limiting the power of government did not necessarily translate into greater freedom for the people. It turned out that economic oppression was just as tyrannical as any authoritarian political regime.

Racism has always been a component of economic oppression. This was especially true in the innately racist United States. Racism was integral to the Europeanization of the Americas right from the start. First, millions of “those people” had to be moved from their traditional lands, or enslaved, or killed to make room for English expansion. Then poor people had to be indentured to do the menial labor in the growing colonies. As the colonies grew and the demand for productivity increased, more of “those people” had to be brought in from West Africa. A population of slave labor had the added effect of impoverishing working class whites throughout the colonies and later the United States. These impoverished whites offered cheap labor, as well as a willing invasion force to liberate



Above left, my view from a “Die In” held on the Federal Courthouse steps in my home town. Above, the diverse protest for racial justice.

more land from natives. Even if they had nothing, they had greater status than blacks, free or slave.

Central to U.S. economic and political development was the imaginary line that demarcated us against them. As slave populations grew and slave labor became more crucial, blacks became a threat. The entirety of the white population, even and especially those who shared a common level of exploitation, had to be convinced of two things. First, that those people deserved and even benefited from being enslaved. Second, that if those people were allowed to step out of their place they would rise up, kill all of the white men and rape all of the white women--because that's just the kind of savages they are (it had nothing to do with the whole slavery thing). After Reconstruction, these discursive formations were preserved and reproduced through black codes, Jim Crow, sun-down laws and other forms of segregation. Similar discourses were used with regard to immigrants, especially the Chinese and the Japanese. Racial Tribalism existed throughout the country with varying levels of subtlety depending on geography and varying levels of intensity depending on the presumed "otherness" of the target population.

Racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, all elements of what I refer to as "Tribal Isms" all serve the purposes of the economic elite to divide the demos, making it less effective in challenging established power. This particular power dynamic must be addressed, and only the left has the theoretical paradigms with which to describe this process of ideologically driven false consciousness. Only the left has the language for bringing discourse into awareness. Racism is not just a matter of some innate human wariness of "the other" that we have to come to terms with by addressing discrimination and prejudice. Racism is a tool of exclusion and exploitation used by the powerful to dis-empower the masses. Yet despite having this language, the left struggles to construct its message of racial solidarity--mostly, I speculate, due to atrophy.

[Bernie Sanders](#) tried to bring a left discourse into the mainstream during his run for the White House. He tried to link his message of economic inequality to a discourse on racial justice. However, he was the first major candidate in a long time to do so. On one hand, he did not effectively communicate the intersection of racism and economic inequality experienced by increasingly insecure whites. He had the courage to speak of state violence against African Americans, but did not effectively connect this state violence to the breakdown of the white middle-class, a social change that is having very real and deadly [consequences](#), especially for middle-aged white men.

Instead, the media and the right have us playing the decline of white standard of living and economic stability against unemployment rates in the black community. We are arguing about rural, white poverty against the stereotyped privations of the ghetto. The left, and the rest of the country are playing the Right's game, the rules of which long established and modified by our corporatocracy. The right would have us believe that white, working-class men (notice the emphasis on "working-class" when referring to whites) can't get ahead because too much is being squandered on poor minorities ("poor" not "working"-class). The left finds itself playing defense against the Welfare Queen and Strapping Young Bucks that still guide our discourse.

Obama, for the first time in such a venue, broke through this discourse. He reminded us that the same corporate hand that closes the gate on suburban workers is the same that withholds investment from the inner city, that drives opportunities away from the countryside. It is the same hand that funds the laws that serve to fill their own coffers, to socialize their costs, to reduce their taxes, pulling revenue from those who need it. The corporate elite then demands more money for police and prisons at the expense of schools and parks so it can remain secure in its private enclaves. Like the slave master of old, the contemporary corporate villain despises those below their "station" equally, without regard for race. He plies race to his own ends. Look, those white guys in the suburbs don't want to let you go to good schools. Look, those blacks want to go to your schools.

It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to embrace each other without regard for race.

It is up to the left to make the connection that President Obama resurrected in his Farewell Address. This isn't about white and black. White men will never experience the stability that they once had so long as the black woman can be exploited. The black community will never know justice without the white community joining them in demanding it. We need each other if we are to pose a real check against the power elite, white, black, brown, yellow and red fists in the air. We cannot turn away from "identity politics." Instead, we must learn to understand identity in terms of power relations that distort our understanding of who we are in relation to others. In essence, the left must develop a new humanism that can adequately describe the great tapestry that is the human experience without trying to parse out the separate contributions of each colored thread. Take away one color and the tapestry is less for it.

## SOCIAL INSULARITY

In 2007 Al Gore published a book called *The Assault on Reason*<sup>19</sup>. In the book, the former Presidential hopeful lamented the fact that “reason, logic and truth seem to play a sharply diminished role in the way America now makes important decisions.” The context of the book was the Bush Administration and its clear disregard for evidence, it’s purely ideological drive regardless of the available evidence.

The Assault on Reason, however, was more of an intellectual endeavor than a partisan one. Gore located the problem not in the Bush Administration, but in larger social and cultural influences shaking our faith in institutions that require legitimacy derived from this popular faith.

In many ways, the Bush Administration was the first openly postmodernist regime. This was all but admitted to Ron Suskind by an unnamed source who denigrated what he called “[the reality-based community](#)<sup>20</sup>.” Suskind quoted the source as saying, “we’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Now other American Administrations may have felt and even sometimes acted the same way, but the Bush Administration was the first to frame this rejection of the Enlightenment values of reason and logic as an open and consistent policy.

As those of us invested in the reality-based community predicted, reality, as it is known to do, caught up to the rhetoric. Attempts to “create” reality resulted in two disastrous wars from which we have yet to extricate ourselves, the collapse of the global economy and a devastating loss of legitimacy in our governing institutions. By 2008 it was clear that Bush’s Imperial Reality Construction Project was a failed endeavor. That year we elected into office a man who embodied good, old-fashioned, Enlightenment principles.

Barack Obama was calm, almost frustratingly deliberate and thoughtful, educated and intelligent. When answering questions, it was not unusual to see him pause, close his eyes and give serious thought to his answers, not just what he wanted to say, but also how he wanted to say it. A revealing anecdote happened after AIG awarded bonuses to its executives despite their collapsing the global economy and receiving billions in taxpayer bailouts. Obama was criticized by the press for how long it took him to express outrage. Obama responded, “...I like to know what I’m talking about before I speak.”

Ah, the halcyon days of reasoned discourse!

Yeah. Not so much. Obama was thoughtful, logical, strategic. He was also one of the most bitterly attacked presidents in modern memory. These attacks came from both ends of the political spectrum, but the most visceral, cynical and Machiavellian bombardments belonged to the right. Progressives excoriated him for his “politics of the possible” pragmatism, but at least the left had some reasonable arguments. The mouth-frothing right, however, created a relentless, scorched earth strategy that defied all rules of reasoned discourse.

The Right was willing to say anything, no matter how blatantly and demonstrably false, to advance this cause. And that cause was singular, expressed best by [Mitch McConnell](#)<sup>21</sup> when he said, “The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president.” Conservative claims often slipped well beyond rhetorical hyperbole into ludicrous propositions. Furthermore, the right had a receptive and cerebrally passive audience that accepted the most ridiculous claims as gospel truth. In the face of tragedy resulting from right-wing delusions, it was clear that the assault on reason was not over.

Indeed, the war against reason only escalated. Furthermore, much to the horror of the reality-based community, it became clear that reason was losing.

I realized Enlightenment Principles were endangered species in 2009. Up to that time, I had hoped that reason would win out. The health care debate dispelled any comfortable delusions about that. In what should have been—what needed to be—a serious, maybe wonky, debate on policy turned into a circus freak show as a result of the right wing corporate propaganda machine

The left, liberals and moderates were prepared for a rational argument. We all knew that we were up for a fight as some of the most powerful and wealthy institutions in the nation were sharpening their swords to protect their profit margins. We had our facts, however, our clear and reliable analyses. We were ready. Facts were facts.



Betsy McCaughey dedicated the better part of her career to lying about health care reform. She derailed First Lady Hillary Clinton's attempts in '93, then tried the same with her famous Obamacare Binder in 2009. Sarah Palin, arguably the dimmest bulb in the conservative box, picked up on McCaughey's lies and coined the term "Death Panels." The rest, as they say, is a twisted history



We weren't ready at all. We weren't ready for "death panels" and other outrageous, [intentional lies](#)<sup>22</sup> pandered by the right-wing think tanks and corporate propaganda machine. Facts were not the weapons of choice in this fight. They were nothing more than pea-shooters against the corporate PR [juggernaut](#)<sup>23</sup>. Health care reform advocates like myself spent more time and energy trying to convince our conservative and even our moderate friends and relatives that there were no death panels, the government was not going to pull the plug on grandma or force women to abort fetuses with Down Syndrome. This was not a government take-over of health care. Furthermore, we were arguing in vain. No matter how much reason we applied, how many facts, how many CBO studies, it didn't matter. We might as well have been arguing about how many angels can fit on the head of a pin.

The lies became all encompassing—suffocating. There was no oxygen left with which to actually discuss policy, to hash out the merits and demerits of health care reform.

When we got tired of bashing our heads against the wall

on death panels, there was another lie waiting. People were going to be put in [prison](#)<sup>24</sup> for not signing up for Obamacare. My God! The fear whipped up by the right

translated into Bedlam during summer [town hall meetings](#)<sup>25</sup>. People whose heads were filled with Penny Dreadful Obamacare stories were practically handed a [play-book](#)<sup>26</sup> with which to air their superstitious delusions in the public forum, disrupt meetings and, under no circumstances, allow anyone who actually knew anything to speak. Facts were government propaganda. Obamacare supporters were brainwashed with socialist/liberal Kool-Aid.

For Obama, this was the norm. Never before has reason been so overtly attacked by a phalanx of balderdash. From accusations that he was a secret Muslim ([still believed](#)<sup>27</sup>) to rumors that he was [not a citizen](#)<sup>28</sup>—perpetuated by our [current president](#)<sup>29</sup>—to accusations of terrorism. Every day brought a new set of lies, some more outrageous than others (Mother Jones has a [comprehensive chart](#)<sup>30</sup>). And there wasn't anything anyone could do about it.

So it came as no surprise that President Obama, a man who could be the very personification of the embattled Enlightenment warrior defending the last ramparts of reason, should focus on this issue in his Farewell Address. "[I]ncreasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there."

And why shouldn't we? After all, institutions that should be the bastions of reason, science, journalism, higher education, have been so battered by right-wing trebuchets against the truth, as well as corrupted and discredited by serving capitalist/corporate interests that their legitimacy is questioned across the board, across political ideology. To a certain extent, skepticism is warranted. Taken to the extremes promoted by the Right, however, this skepticism becomes existentially nihilistic.

The Internet doesn't help. In fact, one could argue, this technology only exacerbates social insularity. We have, at our fingertips, a veritable tidal wave of information, much of it valuable, valid and reliable—a great deal worthless. Discerning which is which is tiresome. That, and the sheer volume of information requires us to filter out most of it. Doing so responsibly takes significant discipline, energy, and know-how—which we do not foster in our schools. Instead, it's easier to find comfort in information that we like, that satisfies us emotionally, rather than testing every drop of information for validity.

We filter this onslaught of information through our chosen reference groups. We identify ourselves according to certain knowledge structures, or associations such as political parties, religious beliefs, or other ideological constructs. These structures shape our world-view. We then turn to those sources that reinforce our world-view, thus reinforcing our identities. The Internet and cable television give us plenty of options through which to reinforce our biases. We tend to avoid those sources that challenge our ideologies, our world-view. We protect our

established identities. After that, in-group and out-group dynamics prevail over careful analysis and evaluation. Knowledge produced by my reference group is valid not because it satisfies some criteria of validity, but rather by virtue of its acceptance within my reference group. That information coming from the out-group is not to be trusted, especially if that information contradicts that of the in-group—the more challenging the information, the greater the lie.

Furthermore, more radical elements within each reference group are inclined to attribute conspiratorial and sinister motives to the out-group. Political, cultural or religious out-groups are not just people who have different opinions, they are not simply those with whom we disagree. Rather, they are threats to our very existence, intentionally and maliciously trying to undermine all that is good and right in order to press their own twisted agenda. They are not to be trusted. Indeed, they [must be eradicated](#)<sup>31</sup>. Certainly, there can be no discussion, no debate, no compromise with “those people.” This is war!

The resulting group closure and social insularity are a threat to the very fundamentals of our society. No ideological reference group, liberal or conservative, is immune to these processes. In fact, when one group takes such a radical and blinded position, it encourages other groups to do the same, especially when such groups hold as much power and cultural influence as do political parties. This is more than a social problem. It is, potentially, an existential crisis threatening to fray and snap the very ties that have, for two hundred years, bound diverse peoples into a uniquely American culture. Obama cautioned, “America, we weaken those ties when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character aren’t even willing to enter into public service; so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are seen not just as misguided but as malevolent. We weaken those ties when we define some of us as more American than others; when we write off the whole system as inevitably corrupt, and when we sit back and blame the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them.”

Of course, this puts the Democratic Party in an awkward position. Ideally, one would expect a political party to represent the interests of its constituents as well as prioritize reasonable, rational and ethical governance. Yes, we might expect a certain amount of institutional strategizing and opportunism. That’s what institutions do. However, we expect that these strategies abide by certain norms upholding responsible governance. At some point, the parties must put political gamesmanship aside, come to the table, and govern.

On the other hand, the Republican Party has made it very clear that governing is [not the priority](#)<sup>32</sup>. For Mitch McConnell, the empowerment of the Republican Party at all costs, is the endgame. The infamous [Caucus Room Strategy](#)<sup>33</sup> brought the Republican Party from the political wilderness into almost total dominance in the last eight years, while Democrats continued to reach across the aisle, compromise, plead...and lose—lose badly. With such a successful strategy, there’s little incentive for McConnell Republicans to turn over a new leaf and consent to responsible government.

So what should the Democrats do? Responsible government or political gamesmanship? Are Democrats being naive to hold themselves to civilized standards when they are up against raging barbarians flowing through the gates? How do you reason with [Dr. Moreau’s Monsters](#)<sup>34</sup> once they’ve broken from the cages? On the one hand, someone has to be the sensible adult in the room. If not the Republicans, it must be the Democrats. On the other hand, you can’t bring a pea-shooter to a gunfight.

Take, for instance, the coming confirmation fight for the Antonin Scalia’s open seat on the Supreme Court. President Trump has made his nomination, Neil Gorsuch. Should the Democrats even consider this, or any other nominee, for that seat? After all, the only reason the seat remains open after almost a year is due to irresponsible Republican gamesmanship. Will any attempt on the part of Democrats to play nice in the government sandbox reward Republicans and thus reinforce their immoral behavior? It’s impossible to believe that, should Democrats play nice, the Republicans will be influenced by their good example and return the favor in the future. Reciprocity is not in the Republican play-book.

This is the inherent problem with the Republican gambit, supported by the conservative propaganda machine. They’ve destroyed any incentive to good government. Closure and ideological insularity on the part of one group almost demands the same from the other, especially in a two-group dynamic. This is exactly the opposite of what is needed for good government. Ironically, dysfunctional government works for Republicans,

having built their party on the [Reaganite Mantra](#)<sup>35</sup> that government is bad. Ineffective government only confirms this regressive mantra, drawing more people to the Republican herd.

For the Democratic Party, however, having predicated its existence on responsible government serving the interests of the people (at least rhetorically), this strategy cannot work. Sabotaging government to hurt the current administration only reinforces the underlying conservative philosophy. It's as if this scenario were planned by an evil genius.

This, of all three issues brought up in Obama's Farewell Address, is arguably the most pressing challenge to left-liberalism—one for which the left has been demonstrably unprepared to meet. As it stands, research shows that Americans, overall, [prefer left policies](#)<sup>36</sup>. Americans believe that the wealthy should be expected to pay more into a system that benefits them disproportionately and that tax money should be used to help working people. Americans want the government to stop companies from polluting their air, water, and communities. They want something to be done about global warming and advancing clean energy infrastructure. Public funding of education and healthcare is popular. When it comes to social and cultural issues, Americans are clearly on the left of the spectrum. They want the government to stay out of personal decisions from family planning to marital practices to reading patterns.

When asked about their [social ideology](#)<sup>37</sup>, however, only about thirty-one percent identify themselves as liberal/very liberal, about even with social conservatives. On economic issues, liberals place at the bottom of the polling. This is indicative of a nation-wide identity crisis. It's not that the left is having difficulty promoting its ideas. Progressive ideas are well [supported](#)<sup>38</sup> by the public. The left is having difficulty translating these ideas into political capital. People are not associating what they want politically with a belief in progressive liberalism.

Part of the reason is the left's failure to cultivate ideological identities. In the United States, identity politics is often a reference to race, ethnicity, and gender. This has backfired on the left and on the Democratic Party in general as working-class white voters, blind to the hard-fought progressive platform of the Clinton campaign, abandoned the party in favor of someone catering to their racial and ethnic fears. Identity politics is not the problem *per se*. The problem is that the left should return to building an identity based on class unity, recognizing racial and ethnic disparities as weapons used to keep working people impotent in the face of increasing corporate power.

Another problem has to do with education. Americans, in general, have no real idea of what liberalism and conservatism are in the United States, let alone more nuanced concepts like progressivism, socialism or even fascism. Americans seem to have little [incentive](#)<sup>39</sup> to learn the ins and outs of government, let alone political philosophy. Teachers, many of whom have lost any kind of job protections, are afraid of possible parent backlash should they teach more controversial philosophies. Journalists have been bullied into presenting a he-said-she-said version of politics for fear of right-wing bullying and accusations of liberal bias. Consequently, the only structures in place for teaching political ideology are right-wing talk radio and what I call the FoxNoise machine. The left has a skeletal information infrastructure in place but has yet to develop the kind of educational networks that propelled its success in the early 20th century.

If the left wants to build a viable movement in the United States, which, based on a surge of progressivism among Millennials, is clearly within reach, it must reclaim its history. President Obama said, "Let me tell you, this generation coming up — unselfish, altruistic, creative, patriotic — I've seen you in every corner of the country. You believe in a fair, and just, and inclusive America. You know that constant change has been America's hallmark; that it's not something to fear but something to embrace. You are willing to carry this hard work of democracy forward. You'll soon outnumber all of us, and I believe as a result the future is in good hands." This progressive generation must know that the left has a long history of fighting for these very principles. The American right, however, has a practiced genius when it comes to shaping the histories of those they oppose. With regard to the American left, that history has been muddled by right-wing propaganda about Stalin, Soviet Gulags and even Hitler. This is our fault.

The left must restore its hereditary links to liberation, equality and justice. It was liberals who overthrew the absolutists in the late 18th and early 19th century. Liberalism was the center of democratic movements all over the world. It was liberals, in the mid 19th century who realized that political liberation was not enough, that economic oppression was just as tyrannical as political oppression—if not more so. Liberals have always believed in limited government, but the Progressive Movement advanced the notion that a truly representative govern-

ment should have at least as much power as is necessary to protect the rights of the people from the powerful and to level the playing field for the little guy. It was the left that ended slavery, child labor, and debt bondage. The left was responsible for minimum wages, workplace safety, unemployment insurance, even much beloved weekends.

Furthermore, it was always the right that opposed and continue to oppose, every single one of these advances.

The left must reclaim its Enlightenment traditions of liberty, reason, and science. “It is that spirit, born of the Enlightenment, that made us an economic powerhouse — the spirit that took flight at Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral; the spirit that cures disease and put a computer in every pocket,” Obama pointed out. In fact, almost every single recognized social, economic, political and technological advance can be traced to this liberal, Enlightenment history, from secret ballots to Keynes’ General Theory, from communication satellites to Social Security. This is a history that will resonate with Millennials as well as with anyone else who actually cares about these things (which is quite a lot of people). But the left must be out there countering right-wing propaganda with the truth. We cannot just assume that the truth will win out in the end—it won’t.

At the same time, the left needs to inspire innovation and reforms relevant to the twenty-first century. Liberalism is the philosophy of new ideas, about instituting change to make the world more free, more just and more equitable. Conservatism is about stability, tradition and stasis. Lately, in the United States, liberals have engaged in a peculiar kind of conservatism. This was largely strategic. The right-wing uprising and entrenchment of the last forty years forced liberals into a defensive position, protecting the gains made during the New Deal and Great Society heydays. In our desperate attempt to protect Social Security, Medicare, and the tattered remains of the social safety net, a more conservative Democratic Party was able to abandon the progressive base and scare us into voting against even more destructive Republicans. This has been disastrous for liberals no less than Democrats themselves. The bottom line is, you can’t win by playing defense. The best you can do is delay your defeat.

The defining challenges of our time include the instability of a global economy moving away from human manufacturing and toward greater automation, artificial intelligence, and decentralization. The nation-state, as an economic regulator, is breaking down. Cyberspace has emerged as a locus of economic, political and cultural conflict and power struggles. In the meantime, global climate change, the threat of pandemic, and the toxification of global ecosystems are imminent concerns of modern life. And the threat of nuclear annihilation remains a Sword of Damocles hanging over humanity. A liberalism that stopped innovating in the 1960’s is not prepared to meet any of these challenges.

While liberty, justice, tolerance and reason are foundational elements of left-liberalism, these concepts must be made relevant to a more global, technologically integrated, multi-cultural world. In the meantime, we must continue to deal with issues that should have been resolved a hundred years ago, such as racism and economic injustice.

Conservatives have no answers for these challenges except to offer a dystopian update on their traditional social Darwinism. Their corporatist agenda and new feudalism are outrageously and universally unpopular. Because of this, conservatives are reduced to two related strategies: lying and inciting fear.

Consequently, it is incumbent upon left-liberals to offer an alternative vision (as opposed to the alternative facts that drive The Right). The left must stand for truth, reason, and community. This means developing a new social contract that brings our diverse constituency together, framing this social contract in order to educate others outside of the left, and engaging aggressively in the ensuing debate. Look, we are not going to convince the Deplorables. They are snug in their insular bubbles. However, if we are to find our way politically, we must reach out from our own bubbles and form networks with the vast number of peoples, often unregistered, uncommitted, disenchanted and disengaged. They must know that the left stands with them, that the left stands for something better. We must educate those who act against their own interests, and the interests of all of us, out of ignorance and fear.

Furthermore, we cannot discredit our movement by using right-wing strategies. Lies, deception, fake news are the tools of the right. A movement sprung from the Enlightenment must be dedicated to truth. We must police ourselves, as every liberal who engages in this base form of gamesmanship discredits the movement as a whole in ways that are simply not true for conservatives who do the same. When you are trying to change the world, you must have the facts on your side. The Truth does not always win out. This is clear. Reality, however,

always asserts itself, even if the results are calamitous to those involved.

Nor can the left countenance ignorance and violence, anger or hatred. Our movement must be a positive and constructive endeavor. That's why vandals like the [Black Bloc<sup>40</sup>](#), or those who might advocate violence against our perceived "enemies" must be soundly and loudly repudiated. Violence and fear may be effective tools of the right, but the left must stand for something more. The powerful will always have the [advantage of might<sup>41</sup>](#). Those who wish to stand in the face of power have their numbers and their ideas. Both of which must be cultivated by the left if it is to win against entrenched power.

President Obama was no leftist. It's unreasonable to assume that this fact will change post-presidency. However, his Farewell Address has a lot to offer the left in terms of planning for an uncertain future.

## APPENDIX A: THE SPEECH

“It’s good to be home. My fellow Americans, Michelle and I have been so touched by all the well-wishes we’ve received over the past few weeks. But tonight it’s my turn to say thanks. Whether we’ve seen eye-to-eye or rarely agreed at all, my conversations with you, the American people — in living rooms and schools; at farms and on factory floors; at diners and on distant outposts — are what have kept me honest, kept me inspired, and kept me going. Every day, I learned from you. You made me a better President, and you made me a better man.

“I first came to Chicago when I was in my early twenties, still trying to figure out who I was; still searching for a purpose to my life. It was in neighborhoods not far from here where I began working with church groups in the shadows of closed steel mills. It was on these streets where I witnessed the power of faith, and the quiet dignity of working people in the face of struggle and loss. This is where I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved, get engaged, and come together to demand it.

“After eight years as your President, I still believe that. And it’s not just my belief. It’s the beating heart of our American idea — our bold experiment in self-government.

“It’s the conviction that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

“It’s the insistence that these rights, while self-evident, have never been self-executing; that We, the People, through the instrument of our democracy, can form a more perfect union.

“This is the great gift our Founders gave us. The freedom to chase our individual dreams through our sweat, toil, and imagination — and the imperative to strive together as well, to achieve a greater good.

“For 240 years, our nation’s call to citizenship has given work and purpose to each new generation. It’s what led patriots to choose republic over tyranny, pioneers to trek west, slaves to brave that makeshift railroad to freedom. It’s what pulled immigrants and refugees across oceans and the Rio Grande, pushed women to reach for the ballot, powered workers to organize. It’s why GIs gave their lives at Omaha Beach and Iwo Jima; Iraq and Afghanistan — and why men and women from Selma to Stonewall were prepared to give theirs as well.

“So that’s what we mean when we say America is exceptional. Not that our nation has been flawless from the start, but that we have shown the capacity to change, and make life better for those who follow.

“Yes, our progress has been uneven. The work of democracy has always been hard, contentious and sometimes bloody. For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all, and not just some.

“If I had told you eight years ago that America would reverse a great recession, reboot our auto industry, and unleash the longest stretch of job creation in our history...if I had told you that we would open up a new chapter with the Cuban people, shut down Iran’s nuclear weapons program without firing a shot, and take

out the mastermind of 9/11...if I had told you that we would win marriage equality, and secure the right to health insurance for another 20 million of our fellow citizens — you might have said our sights were set a little too high.

“But that’s what we did. That’s what you did. You were the change. You answered people’s hopes, and because of you, by almost every measure, America is a better, stronger place than it was when we started.

“In ten days, the world will witness a hallmark of our democracy: the peaceful transfer of power from one freely-elected president to the next. I committed to President-Elect Trump that my administration would ensure the smoothest possible transition, just as President Bush did for me. Because it’s up to all of us to make sure our government can help us meet the many challenges we still face.

“We have what we need to do so. After all, we remain the wealthiest, most powerful, and most respected nation on Earth. Our youth and drive, our diversity and openness, our boundless capacity for risk and reinvention mean that the future should be ours.

“But that potential will be realized only if our democracy works. Only if our politics reflects the decency of the our people. Only if all of us, regardless of our party affiliation or particular interest, help restore the sense of common purpose that we so badly need right now.

“That’s what I want to focus on tonight — the state of our democracy.

“Understand, democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders quarreled and compromised, and expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity — the idea that for all our outward differences, we are all in this together; that we rise or fall as one.

“There have been moments throughout our history that threatened to rupture that solidarity. The beginning of this century has been one of those times. A shrinking world, growing inequality; demographic change and the specter of terrorism — these forces haven’t just tested our security and prosperity, but our democracy as well. And how we meet these challenges to our democracy will determine our ability to educate our kids, and create good jobs, and protect our homeland.

“In other words, it will determine our future.

“Our democracy won’t work without a sense that everyone has economic opportunity. Today, the economy is growing again; wages, incomes, home values, and retirement accounts are rising again; poverty is falling again. The wealthy are paying a fairer share of taxes even as the stock market shatters records. The unemployment rate is near a ten-year low. The uninsured rate has never, ever been lower. Healthcare costs are rising at the slowest rate in fifty years. And if anyone can put together a plan that is demonstrably better than the improvements we’ve made to our health care system — that covers as many people at less cost — I will publicly support it.

“That, after all, is why we serve — to make people’s lives better, not worse.

“But for all the real progress we’ve made, we know it’s not

enough. Our economy doesn't work as well or grow as fast when a few prosper at the expense of a growing middle class. But stark inequality is also corrosive to our democratic principles. While the top one percent has amassed a bigger share of wealth and income, too many families, in inner cities and rural counties, have been left behind — the laid-off factory worker; the waitress and health care worker who struggle to pay the bills — convinced that the game is fixed against them, that their government only serves the interests of the powerful — a recipe for more cynicism and polarization in our politics.

"There are no quick fixes to this long-term trend. I agree that our trade should be fair and not just free. But the next wave of economic dislocation won't come from overseas. It will come from the relentless pace of automation that makes many good, middle-class jobs obsolete.

And so we must forge a new social compact — to guarantee all our kids the education they need; to give workers the power to unionize for better wages; to update the social safety net to reflect the way we live now and make more reforms to the tax code so corporations and individuals who reap the most from the new economy don't avoid their obligations to the country that's made their success possible. We can argue about how to best achieve these goals. But we can't be complacent about the goals themselves. For if we don't create opportunity for all people, the disaffection and division that has stalled our progress will only sharpen in years to come.

"There's a second threat to our democracy — one as old as our nation itself. After my election, there was talk of a post-racial America. Such a vision, however well-intended, was never realistic. For race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society. I've lived long enough to know that race relations are better than they were ten, or twenty, or thirty years ago — you can see it not just in statistics, but in the attitudes of young Americans across the political spectrum.

"But we're not where we need to be. All of us have more work to do. After all, if every economic issue is framed as a struggle between a hard working white middle class and underserving minorities, then workers of all shades will be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves. If we decline to invest in the children of immigrants, just because they don't look like us, we diminish the prospects of our own children — because those brown kids will represent a larger share of America's workforce. And our economy doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Last year, incomes rose for all races, all age groups, for men and for women.

"Going forward, we must uphold laws against discrimination — in hiring, in housing, in education and the criminal justice system. That's what our Constitution and highest ideals require. But laws alone won't be enough. Hearts must change. If our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, each one of us must try to heed the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'

"For blacks and other minorities, it means tying our own struggles for justice to the challenges that a lot of people in this country face — the refugee, the immigrant, the rural poor, the transgender American, and also the middle-aged white man who from the outside may seem like he's got all the advantages, but who's seen his world upended by economic, cultural, and technological change.

"For white Americans, it means acknowledging that the effects of slavery and Jim Crow didn't suddenly vanish in the '60s; that when minority groups voice discontent, they're not just engaging in reverse racism or practicing political correctness; that when they wage peaceful protest, they're not demanding special treatment, but the equal treatment our Founders promised.

"For native-born Americans, it means reminding ourselves that the stereotypes about immigrants today were said, almost word for word, about the Irish, Italians, and Poles. America wasn't weakened by the presence of these newcomers; they embraced this nation's creed, and it was strengthened.

"So regardless of the station we occupy; we have to try harder; to start with the premise that each of our fellow citizens loves this country just as much as we do; that they value hard work and family like we do; that their children are just as curious and hopeful and worthy of love as our own.

"None of this is easy. For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or college campuses or places of worship or our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. The rise of naked partisanship, increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste — all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we accept only information, whether true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that's out there.

"This trend represents a third threat to our democracy. Politics is a battle of ideas; in the course of a healthy debate, we'll prioritize different goals, and the different means of reaching them. But without some common baseline of facts; without a willingness to admit new information, and concede that your opponent is making a fair point, and that science and reason matter, we'll keep talking past each other, making common ground and compromise impossible.

"Isn't that part of what makes politics so dispiriting? How can elected officials rage about deficits when we propose to spend money on preschool for kids, but not when we're cutting taxes for corporations? How do we excuse ethical lapses in our own party, but pounce when the other party does the same thing? It's not just dishonest, this selective sorting of the facts; it's self-defeating. Because as my mother used to tell me, reality has a way of catching up with you.

"Take the challenge of climate change. In just eight years, we've halved our dependence on foreign oil, doubled our renewable energy, and led the world to an agreement that has the promise to save this planet. But without bolder action, our children won't have time to debate the existence of climate change; they'll be busy dealing with its effects: environmental disasters, economic disruptions, and waves of climate refugees seeking sanctuary.

"Now, we can and should argue about the best approach to the problem. But to simply deny the problem not only betrays future generations; it betrays the essential spirit of innovation and practical problem-solving that guided our Founders.

"It's that spirit, born of the Enlightenment, that made us an economic powerhouse — the spirit that took flight at Kit

ty Hawk and Cape Canaveral; the spirit that that cures disease and put a computer in every pocket.

“It’s that spirit — a faith in reason, and enterprise, and the primacy of right over might, that allowed us to resist the lure of fascism and tyranny during the Great Depression, and build a post-World War II order with other democracies, an order based not just on military power or national affiliations but on principles — the rule of law, human rights, freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, and an independent press.

“That order is now being challenged — first by violent fanatics who claim to speak for Islam; more recently by autocrats in foreign capitals who see free markets, open democracies, and civil society itself as a threat to their power. The peril each poses to our democracy is more far-reaching than a car bomb or a missile. It represents the fear of change; the fear of people who look or speak or pray differently; a contempt for the rule of law that holds leaders accountable; an intolerance of dissent and free thought; a belief that the sword or the gun or the bomb or propaganda machine is the ultimate arbiter of what’s true and what’s right.

“Because of the extraordinary courage of our men and women in uniform, and the intelligence officers, law enforcement, and diplomats who support them, no foreign terrorist organization has successfully planned and executed an attack on our homeland these past eight years; and although Boston and Orlando remind us of how dangerous radicalization can be, our law enforcement agencies are more effective and vigilant than ever. We’ve taken out tens of thousands of terrorists — including Osama bin Laden. The global coalition we’re leading against ISIL has taken out their leaders, and taken away about half their territory. ISIL will be destroyed, and no one who threatens America will ever be safe. To all who serve, it has been the honor of my lifetime to be your Commander-in-Chief.

“But protecting our way of life requires more than our military. Democracy can buckle when we give in to fear. So just as we, as citizens, must remain vigilant against external aggression, we must guard against a weakening of the values that make us who we are. That’s why, for the past eight years, I’ve worked to put the fight against terrorism on a firm legal footing. That’s why we’ve ended torture, worked to close Gitmo, and reform our laws governing surveillance to protect privacy and civil liberties. That’s why I reject discrimination against Muslim Americans. That’s why we cannot withdraw from global fights — to expand democracy, and human rights, women’s rights, and LGBT rights — no matter how imperfect our efforts, no matter how expedient ignoring such values may seem. For the fight against extremism and intolerance and sectarianism are of a piece with the fight against authoritarianism and nationalist aggression. If the scope of freedom and respect for the rule of law shrinks around the world, the likelihood of war within and between nations increases, and our own freedoms will eventually be threatened.

“So let’s be vigilant, but not afraid. ISIL will try to kill innocent people. But they cannot defeat America unless we betray our Constitution and our principles in the fight. Rivals like Russia or China cannot match our influence around the world — unless we give up what we stand for, and turn ourselves into just another big country that bullies smaller neighbors.

“Which brings me to my final point — our democracy is threatened whenever we take it for granted. All of us, regardless of party, should throw ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions. When voting rates are some of the lowest

among advanced democracies, we should make it easier, not harder, to vote. When trust in our institutions is low, we should reduce the corrosive influence of money in our politics, and insist on the principles of transparency and ethics in public service. When Congress is dysfunctional, we should draw our districts to encourage politicians to cater to common sense and not rigid extremes.

“And all of this depends on our participation; on each of us accepting the responsibility of citizenship, regardless of which way the pendulum of power swings.

“Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift. But it’s really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the people, give it power — with our participation, and the choices we make. Whether or not we stand up for our freedoms. Whether or not we respect and enforce the rule of law. America is no fragile thing. But the gains of our long journey to freedom are not assured.

“In his own farewell address, George Washington wrote that self-government is the underpinning of our safety, prosperity, and liberty, but ‘from different causes and from different quarters much pains will be taken . . . to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth;’ that we should preserve it with ‘jealous anxiety;’ that we should reject ‘the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest or to enfeeble the sacred ties’ that make us one.

“We weaken those ties when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive that people of good character are turned off from public service; so coarse with rancor that Americans with whom we disagree are not just misguided, but somehow malevolent. We weaken those ties when we define some of us as more American than others; when we write off the whole system as inevitably corrupt, and blame the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them.

“It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy; to embrace the joyous task we’ve been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours. Because for all our outward differences, we all share the same proud title: Citizen.

“Ultimately, that’s what our democracy demands. It needs you. Not just when there’s an election, not just when your own narrow interest is at stake, but over the full span of a lifetime. If you’re tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try to talk with one in real life. If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you’re disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clipboard, get some signatures, and run for office yourself. Show up. Dive in. Persevere. Sometimes you’ll win. Sometimes you’ll lose. Presuming a reservoir of goodness in others can be a risk, and there will be times when the process disappoints you. But for those of us fortunate enough to have been a part of this work, to see it up close, let me tell you, it can energize and inspire. And more often than not, your faith in America — and in Americans — will be confirmed.

“Mine sure has been. Over the course of these eight years, I’ve seen the hopeful faces of young graduates and

our newest military officers. I've mourned with grieving families searching for answers, and found grace in Charleston church. I've seen our scientists help a paralyzed man regain his sense of touch, and our wounded warriors walk again. I've seen our doctors and volunteers rebuild after earthquakes and stop pandemics in their tracks. I've seen the youngest of children remind us of our obligations to care for refugees, to work in peace, and above all to look out for each other.

"That faith I placed all those years ago, not far from here, in the power of ordinary Americans to bring about change — that faith has been rewarded in ways I couldn't possibly have imagined. I hope yours has, too. Some of you here tonight or watching at home were there with us in 2004, in 2008, in 2012 — and maybe you still can't believe we pulled this whole thing off.

"You're not the only ones. Michelle — for the past twenty-five years, you've been not only my wife and mother of my children, but my best friend. You took on a role you didn't ask for and made it your own with grace and grit and style and good humor. You made the White House a place that belongs to everybody. And a new generation sets its sights higher because it has you as a role model. You've made me proud. You've made the country proud.

"Malia and Sasha, under the strangest of circumstances, you have become two amazing young women, smart and beautiful, but more importantly, kind and thoughtful and full of passion. You wore the burden of years in the spotlight so easily. Of all that I've done in my life, I'm most proud to be your dad.

"To Joe Biden, the scrappy kid from Scranton who became Delaware's favorite son: you were the first choice I made as a nominee, and the best. Not just because you have been a great Vice President, but because in the bargain, I gained a brother. We love you and Jill like family, and your friendship has been one of the great joys of our life.

"To my remarkable staff: For eight years — and for some of you, a whole lot more — I've drawn from your energy, and tried to reflect back what you displayed every day: heart, and character, and idealism. I've watched you grow up, get married, have kids, and start incredible new journeys of your own. Even when times got tough and frustrating, you never let Washington get the better of you. The only thing that makes me prouder than all the good we've done is the thought of all the remarkable things you'll achieve from here.

"And to all of you out there — every organizer who moved to an unfamiliar town and kind family who welcomed them in, every volunteer who knocked on doors, every young person who cast a ballot for the first time, every American who lived and breathed the hard work of change — you are the best supporters and organizers anyone could hope for, and I will forever be grateful. Because yes, you changed the world.

"That's why I leave this stage tonight even more optimistic about this country than I was when we started. Because I know our work has not only helped so many Americans; it has inspired so many Americans — especially so many young people out there — to believe you can make a difference; to hitch your wagon to something bigger than yourselves. This generation coming up — unselfish, altruistic, creative, patriotic — I've seen you in every corner of the country. You believe in a fair, just, inclusive America; you know that constant change has been America's hallmark,

something not to fear but to embrace, and you are willing to carry this hard work of democracy forward. You'll soon outnumber any of us, and I believe as a result that the future is in good hands.

"My fellow Americans, it has been the honor of my life to serve you. I won't stop; in fact, I will be right there with you, as a citizen, for all my days that remain. For now, whether you're young or young at heart, I do have one final ask of you as your President — the same thing I asked when you took a chance on me eight years ago.

"I am asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change — but in yours.

"I am asking you to hold fast to that faith written into our founding documents; that idea whispered by slaves and abolitionists; that spirit sung by immigrants and homesteaders and those who marched for justice; that creed reaffirmed by those who planted flags from foreign battlefields to the surface of the moon; a creed at the core of every American whose story is not yet written:

"Yes We Can.

"Yes We Did.

"Yes We Can.

"Thank you. God bless you. And may God continue to bless the United States of America."

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