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Finally I Hear a Politician Explain My Country Just the Way I Understand It

"America is not some fragile thing." Words to live by.

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I've been in transit or offline all of today and didn't see President Obama's Selma speech in real time. I'm catching up with it now, very late at night, and had a reaction different from the good job/bad job assessment I can't help giving (as a one-time speechwriter) to most political discourse.

I thought this was a very good job, in written presentation and in delivery, as far as I can judge [via YouTube](#). But for me that takes second place to my overwhelming reaction of gratitude: for once, a public figure expressing *exactly* how I feel.

I think this speech will move to the front of the public statements by which Obama hopes to be remembered in the long run. Of course I'm biased because I agree with him, but the case would be this:

Obama's [career-making speech](#) at the 2004 Democratic convention in Boston, which I happened to be in the hall to witness, was unforgettable political theater, the obvious arrival of a star, but its text is not, in fact, that impressive on re-reading. It assured Americans that they could easily move past Red/Blue tribal divisions. Isn't it pretty to think so.

Obama's [speech on race relations](#) in America, in Philadelphia seven years ago, saved his campaign and thus was again a history-changing performance. Before that speech, it seemed possible that he would be forced from the race by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright "[God damn America!](#)" furore. But I don't think its actual discussion of race relations will be studied for enlightenment in years to come.

Obama's speech today, again declaring my bias in agreeing with him, differs from those of most other national figures, most of the time, in stating with concise complexity what is indeed exceptional about this American experiment.

I first lived outside my native country at age 21, when I went to graduate school in the superficially similar setting of England. Those next few years began for me the process that has

continued ever since, when living in the U.S. or abroad: that of recognizing how *exceptional* the American ambition is, and how much my own tribal identities start with being American.

These are the parts of Obama's speech that rang truest to me, after spending much of my life thinking about the country from afar, with emphasis added:

And yet, what could be more American than what happened in this place? ...

What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this, what greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?

And:

The American instinct that led these young men and women to pick up the torch and cross this bridge, that's the same instinct that moved patriots to choose revolution over tyranny....

It's the idea held by generations of citizens who believed that America is a constant work in progress; who believed that loving this country requires more than singing its praises or avoiding uncomfortable truths. It requires the occasional disruption, the willingness to speak out for what is right, to shake up the status quo. That's America.

That's what makes us unique.

And the riff near the end, with its artful repeated emphasis on *we*:

We were born of change. We broke the old aristocracies, declaring ourselves entitled not by bloodline, but endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights....

Look at our history. We are Lewis and Clark and Sacajawea, pioneers who braved the unfamiliar, followed by a stampede of farmers and miners, and entrepreneurs and hucksters. That's our spirit. That's who we are.

We are Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer, women who could do as much as any man and then some. And we're Susan B. Anthony, who shook the system until the law reflected that truth. That is our character.

We're the immigrants who stowed away on ships to reach these shores, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free — Holocaust survivors, Soviet defectors, the Lost Boys of Sudan. We're the hopeful strivers who cross the Rio Grande because we want our kids to know a better life. That's how we came to be.

We're the slaves who built the White House and the economy of the South. We're the ranch hands and cowboys who opened up the West, and countless laborers who laid rail, and raised skyscrapers, and organized for workers' rights.

We're the fresh-faced GIs who fought to liberate a continent. And we're the Tuskegee Airmen, and the Navajo code-talkers, and the Japanese Americans who fought for this country even as their own liberty had been denied.

We're the firefighters who rushed into those buildings on 9/11, the volunteers who signed up to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq. We're the gay Americans whose blood ran in the streets of San Francisco and New York, just as blood ran down this bridge.

We are storytellers, writers, poets, artists who abhor unfairness, and despise hypocrisy, and give voice to the voiceless, and tell truths that need to be told.

We're the inventors of gospel and jazz and blues, bluegrass and country, and hip-hop and rock and roll, and our very own sound with all the sweet sorrow and reckless joy of freedom.

Political speeches are masterworks of base-touching references to different icons and interest groups. This list in this speech is different from what most politicians would offer — you'll know that the GOP is serious about competing for non-white votes and thus for the presidency when you can imagine one of its candidates presenting a similar list — and it is one that matches my sense of what I love about my country. *That is who we are. That is our character. That is how we came to be.*

Obama is obviously not the first person to formulate this thought. The continual re-making of America was a central theme for Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, and also Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the founders of our magazine. Twenty-five years ago, I even wrote what is essentially a book-length version of this speech, called *More Like Us*. And when our American Futures series re-launches on Monday, similar themes will be central to it. But the appeal to American exceptionalism via embracing our capacity for renewal, self-criticism, and inclusiveness is one I haven't heard this clearly from a public figure in many years. (See the [Atlantic's Matt Ford](#) on these themes.)

And near the end:

That's what America is. Not stock photos or airbrushed history, or feeble attempts to define some of us as more American than others.

We respect the past, but we don't pine for the past. We don't fear the future; we grab for it. America is not some fragile thing. We are large, in the words of Whitman, containing multitudes. We are boisterous and diverse and full of energy, perpetually young in spirit.

The political tribalism of this moment means that Democrats are mostly welcoming today's speech, and Republicans and Fox News mostly condemning it. But these days Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted respectfully even at right-wing gatherings. When the political passions of our time have passed, people of all parties will quote this speech as expressing an essence of our American creed.