

## **Barrack Obama's Call to Restore Ethics in Politics**

By: [Spoma Jovanovic](#), Roy V. Wood

Jovanovic, S. & Wood, R. V. (2008). Barack Obama's call to restore ethics in politics., *Communication Currents*, 3(5).

**Made available courtesy of the National Communication Association:**

<http://www.communicationcurrents.com/>

**Used with permission from the National Communication Association. All rights reserved.**

### **Abstract:**

How do we bring ethics into the world of politics? Presidential hopeful Barack Obama told us how in his primary season speech, "A More Perfect Union." Obama offered messages of hope, care and compassion as he communicated about the suffering in our country. He detailed how people and leaders can ethically interact about political matters if we keep our focus there. Obama spoke in a prophetic style, rooted in the Hebrew scripture, and rallied Americans around common values.

**Keywords:** Communication Studies | Ethics | Politics | Speech | Barack Obama

### **Article:**

How do we bring ethics into the world of politics? Presidential hopeful Barack Obama told us how in his primary season speech, "A More Perfect Union." Obama offered messages of hope, care and compassion as he communicated about the suffering in our country. He detailed how people and leaders can ethically interact about political matters if we keep our focus there. Obama spoke in a prophetic style, rooted in the Hebrew scripture, and rallied Americans around common values.

### **[Image Omitted]**

Many citizens are cynical about politics. They point to candidates and elected officials who mask the issues and mislead the public with flimsy campaign slogans, symbols, and messages. The effect is to weaken the public's resolve to fully participate in our democracy. We have come to accept that instead of a focus on public service, self-interest seems the inevitable outcome of political jockeying and the thirst for power. In this political landscape, it is difficult to imagine a place for an ethics of responsibility and care in debate, public speaking, political communication, and even presidential politics.

When Barack Obama spoke to the nation on the subject of race in March 2008, he directed our attention to the need for a new politics that could embrace a vision of hope and unity. Obama stood before the American people to address embarrassing sound bites culled from sermons by

his former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. The speech resounded with compassion and was reflective of a deep concern over the cultural divides in the nation. Obama presented the challenge before us in the struggle for social justice; he urged people to assert their convictions, and, importantly, to work for a democracy that speaks to the enduring values of love of our neighbors.

Months later, former President Jimmy Carter told newsman Jim Lehrer at the 2008 Democratic National Convention that he wept when he heard Obama's speech. President Carter said the speech was a transformative and enlightened analysis of racism that he felt was strong enough to potentially bring an end to the hatred that racism breeds in this country.

Obama's address began with powerful words from our country's founding documents: "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." He said:

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. . . . the document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies.

The speech offered a teachable moment to discuss matters of race and other substantive concerns. What Obama accomplished in this rhetorical feat was to highlight how conversations about race most often seek to divide us when in fact complex problems in education, health, and labor affect all races directly.

Obama's task included an affirmation of his relationship with his friend and former pastor. The speech's power, however, ultimately came from the longer commentary on the entrenched issues of racism and disenfranchisement in this country. Obama recognized that any meaningful change in our political structure relies on the efforts of citizens to first initiate dialogue. Then, citizens together must insist that political leaders follow their lead.

Obama communicated how politics and a concern for justice can lead us back to the ethical imperative to resist the impact of domination in any form. He highlighted how justice is embedded in the constitution in such foundational values as equality, liberty, and union. With these values firmly established and discussed, our communication moves away from blame and retribution for all that remains unjust, to ideals, hopes, and thoughts of a transformative moment when the needs of others become our genuine concern.

This prophetic style of speaking, defined in Hebrew scripture as a calling to return to the foundational values, is forward looking in its attempts to unshackle those who have been left behind; it is also historically situated, recognizing that some people have been subsumed by the unjust or unethical conditions of the past. For Obama, the prophetic voice emerged again and again, most poignantly when he spoke of the persistence of poverty and crime that accompany the lived disappointments of so many people:

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations – those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future.

Obama grants Blacks and all Americans their justified feelings of abandonment by their country. Jobs have been shipped overseas, oil and food prices have sharply escalated, and more dual wage earning families are having, by necessity, to choose between food or medicine rather than having both.

Obama's speech training no doubt came in part from his religious association with the Black Christian church. There, the prophetic tradition is a response to the perpetual economic domination and profound racism that originally confined Blacks to their own churches for spiritual relief. Black Americans found hope in sermons espousing moral revelation and redemption to dislodge the despair that draped their lives. Obama leans on this tradition to assert, “Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.”

Without the turn to the prophetic to encourage our nation's return to ethical communication and action, we are destined to retain instead a self-focused culture that fears the other, pounces on the other's mistakes, and blames the other for our own misfortunes. To choose that path, says Obama, guarantees that we remain in a “racial stalemate” that becomes a metaphor for a nation polarized.

Barack Obama's “A More Perfect Union” speech acknowledged the complexities of outrage steeped in historical wrongs that remain among the major issues of our time. He urged us to face those issues squarely by feeling the pain and struggle of those disenfranchised by the political system, and then to assert a collective vision to right the lingering wrongs. He recognized that the answers are not to be found in glib formulas or the policies of leaders alone. Instead, Obama kept his rhetorical focus on justice for all to resuscitate an ethical public climate where all are honored.

Obama's prophetic style of speech is reminiscent of what Americans once heard from civil rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John F. Kennedy. We believe the country is once again ready to hear the words and the messages that point to faith in human kind and respect for the differences among us in terms of color, religion, and gender. In doing so, we will see ethics return to politics. We applaud Obama's “A More Perfect Union” speech and invite all politicians to speak to the difficult issues we face. We call not for instant solutions, but rather the commitment to engage citizens in the process of charting a course for our country that is reflective of the core tenets of freedom, care, and responsibility around which the dream for America was formed.

**[Images Omitted]**

About the authors: Spoma Jovanovic (right) is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Roy V. Wood (left) is Professor of Human Communication Studies at the University of Denver. This essay was excerpted from a longer essay in the forthcoming volume *Communication Ethics and Crisis* edited by S. A. Groom and J. H. Fritz (Peter Lang). This essay appeared in the October 2008 issue of *Communication Currents*, a publication of the National Communication Association.