GRACE

President Obama and Ten Days in the Battle for America

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The first time I met President Obama was our first week in the White House. Neither of us had any gray hair.

When I became chief speechwriter in the second term, I was as aware as ever that I stood on the shoulders of the Obama for America speechwriting team. Here we are the day before the 2008 election. *Front row, left to right*: Jon Favreau, Sarah Hurwitz, Ben Rhodes, and Adam Frankel. *Back row, left to right*: Me and Kyle O'Connor.

Preparing for a sight gag at the 2009 White House Correspondents' Dinner. Being the most junior member of the team required some grunt work.

On board Air Force One on our way to the memorial service after the January 8, 2011, mass shooting in Tucson, Arizona. Obama was often hands-on until we were wheels down.

The day of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings on December 14, 2012, was the hardest of Obama's presidency. Two days later, he worked on his remarks for the vigil while watching Sasha's dress rehearsal for *The Nutcracker;* he'd miss the performance to deliver the eulogy in Newtown, Connecticut, that night.

Obama dictating some final edits in Newtown High School before spending three hours with the families whose children were murdered, then delivering their eulogy.

The trio who taught me everything I know about speechwriting: (*left to right*) Ben, Favs, and the boss.

Obama didn't have a problem with nerves. He was a lot more relaxed the evening before a State of the Union Address than I was.

The muse hits: Obama writing longhand on a yellow legal pad.

As most of the first-term speechwriters departed, I gradually built my own team. Obama pulled us together for a photo after we gave him a gift for his fifty-fifth birthday: a list of every time he'd added some variant of "I reject that notion" to his speeches. *Flanking Obama, from left to right*: Steve Krupin, Tyler Lechtenberg, Susannah Jacob, Sarada Peri, me, Terry Szuplat, Sarah Hurwitz, and Ben Rhodes.

Meeting Kristen changed everything. Balancing work and our relationship was tricky, but, as this 2012 Fourth of July photo shows, we made each other happy.

I always felt extra fortunate when we got to travel the world together as part of our jobs, including this weeklong swing through Asia in 2014.

Obama and Kristen got along famously, probably because both were skeptical of anything I said.

I saved for a ring for more than a year, then proposed to Kristen atop Rockefeller Center. Obama advised me to bring an umbrella. He was right.

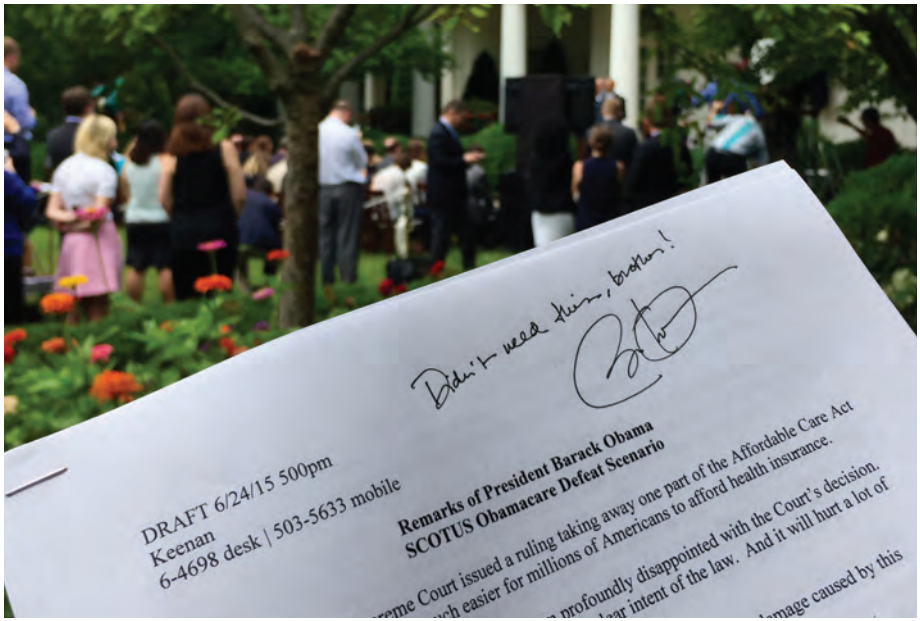
It could be a lonely job, especially when the clock was ticking on a speech.

Once in a while, Obama would stop by the Speechcave unannounced and play a game of mini-cornhole. That's Terry Szuplat on the left.

Our relationship progressed over the years, ultimately including Obama delivering lessons about Miles Davis and "finding the silences," as he is doing here in his private dining room off the Oval Office the week before the 2015 State of the Union Address.

Thanks to a snow day, the Selma speech became our purest collaboration. We had uninterrupted time to talk and pass drafts back and forth, each one better than the last.

Editing Obama's statement in the outer Oval Office the morning after the Charleston massacre. If we were pressed for time, I'd sit at Ferial Govashiri's computer. That's Ferial and Joe Paulsen on the left, with the Rose Garden as background.



Obama didn't edit the remarks I'd prepared in case the Supreme Court ruled against the Affordable Care Act. But he did leave some feedback. He's delivering the victory remarks in the far background, flanked by Vice President Joe Biden.

I rarely went to watch the president deliver remarks in the Rose Garden, but this week was different. Here, staff and I are watching him speak after the Supreme Court upheld Obamacare.

The next day, as a crowd waited outside the Oval Office to hear the president deliver his remarks on the Supreme Court marriage equality decision, Obama continued to work on the Charleston eulogy. In the foreground, Brian Mosteller is giving the politest it's-time-now ahem he could muster.

I knew Obama well enough to know he was genuinely moved while speaking about marriage equality. He tried to downplay it as just being tired from working on the eulogy.

With staff after the Supreme Court affirmed a constitutional right to marriage equality.

Five minutes after his remarks in the Rose Garden, Obama was already walking me through his newest additions to the Charleston eulogy just before he, Valerie Jarrett, and I boarded Marine One.

And then the president sang "Amazing Grace."

Photos of the White House lit up like a rainbow went viral immediately. But I've always liked this one best. It shows my colleagues enjoying the moment together. There were at least two marriage proposals that night.

I missed it, though. I was asleep by eight o'clock. Kristen took this shot when she arrived home five hours later.

At the White House on our wedding day, July 3, 2016. We told our families and wedding party that Obama was golfing and wouldn't be there. After they regained their composure, he posed for photos with everyone and offered some words of wisdom.

Putting the finishing touches on Obama's 2016 Democratic National Convention speech about an hour before we had to depart for Philadelphia. He was always most relaxed on gameday.

The people I missed most whenever I was writing: Kristen; my sister, Carly; and my parents, Marilyn and Steve, who made this wild journey possible.

Appendix

The Speeches

Remarks of President Barack Obama
As Prepared for Delivery

Selma, Alabama
March 7, 2015

It is a rare honor in this life to follow one of your heroes. And John Lewis is one of my heroes.

Now, I have to imagine that when a younger John Lewis woke up that morning fifty years ago and made his way to Brown Chapel, heroics were not on his mind. A day like this was not on his mind. Young folks with bedrolls and backpacks were milling about. Veterans of the movement trained newcomers in the tactics of nonviolence; the right way to protect yourself when attacked. A doctor described what tear gas does to the body while marchers scribbled down instructions for contacting their loved ones. The air was thick with doubt, anticipation, and fear. They comforted themselves with the final verse of the final hymn they sung:

No matter what may be the test, God will take care of you;
Lean, weary one, upon His breast, God will take care of you.

Then, his knapsack stocked with an apple, a toothbrush, a book on government—all you need for a night behind bars—John Lewis led them out of the church on a mission to change America.

President Bush and Mrs. Bush, Governor Bentley, members of Congress, Mayor Evans, Reverend Strong, friends and fellow Americans:

There are places and moments in America where this nation's destiny has been decided. Many are sites of war—Concord and Lexington, Appomattox and Gettysburg. Others are sites that symbolize the daring spirit

of the American character—Independence Hall and Seneca Falls, Kitty Hawk and Cape Canaveral.

Selma is such a place.

In one afternoon fifty years ago, so much of our turbulent history—the stain of slavery and anguish of civil war; the yoke of segregation and tyranny of Jim Crow; the death of four little girls in Birmingham; and the dream of a Baptist preacher—met on this bridge.

It was not a clash of armies, but a clash of wills; a contest to determine the meaning of America.

And because of men and women like John Lewis, Joseph Lowery, Hosea Williams, Amelia Boynton, Diane Nash, Ralph Abernathy, C.T. Vivian, Andrew Young, Fred Shuttlesworth, Dr. King, and so many more, the idea of a *just* America, a *fair* America, an *inclusive* America, a *generous* America—that idea ultimately triumphed.

As is true across the landscape of American history, we cannot examine this moment in isolation. The march on Selma was part of a broader campaign that spanned generations; the leaders that day part of a long line of heroes.

We gather here to celebrate them. We gather here to honor the courage of ordinary Americans willing to endure billy clubs and the chastening rod; tear gas and the trampling hoof; men and women who despite the gush of blood and splintered bone would stay true to their North Star and keep marching toward justice.

They did as Scripture instructed: "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." And in the days to come, they went back again and again. When the trumpet call sounded for more to join, the people came—Black and white, young and old, Christian and Jew, waving the same American flag and singing the same anthems full of faith and hope. A white newsman, Bill Plante, who covered the marches then and who is with us here today, quipped at the time that the growing number of white people lowered the quality of the singing. To those who marched, though, those old gospel songs must have never sounded so sweet.

In time, their chorus would reach President Johnson. And he would send them protection, echoing their call for the nation and the world to hear:

"We shall overcome."

What enormous faith these men and women had. Faith in God—but also faith in America.

The Americans who crossed this bridge were not physically imposing. But they gave courage to millions. They held no elected office. But they led a nation. They marched as Americans who had endured hundreds of years of brutal violence, and countless daily indignities—but they didn't seek special treatment, just the equal treatment promised to them almost two hundred years before.

What they did here will reverberate through the ages, never to be undone. Not because the change they won was preordained; not because their victory was complete; but because they proved that nonviolent change is *possible;* that love and hope can conquer hate.

As we commemorate their achievement, we are well-served to remember that many in power condemned rather than praised them. Back then, they were called Communists, half-breeds, outside agitators, sexual and moral degenerates, and worse—everything but the name their parents gave them. Their faith was questioned. Their lives were threatened. Their patriotism was challenged.

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

What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than plain and humble people—the unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many—coming together to shape their country's course?

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?

That's why Selma is not some outlier in the American experience. *That's* why it's not just a museum or static monument to behold from a distance. It is instead the manifestation of a creed written into our founding documents:

"*We* the People . . . in order to form a more perfect union."

"*We* hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

These are not just words. They are a living thing, a call to action, a roadmap for citizenship and an insistence in the capacity of free men and women to shape our own destiny. For founders like Franklin and Jefferson, for leaders like Lincoln and FDR, the success of our experiment in self-government rested on engaging *all* our citizens in this work. *That's* what we celebrate here in Selma. That's what this movement was all about, one leg in our long journey toward freedom.

The American instinct that led these young men and women to pick up the torch and cross this bridge is the *same* instinct that moved patriots to choose revolution over tyranny. It's the *same* instinct that drew immigrants from across oceans and the Rio Grande; the *same* instinct that led women to reach for the ballot and workers to organize against an unjust status quo; the *same* instinct that led us to plant a flag at Iwo Jima and on the surface of the Moon.

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's right and shake up the status quo.

That's what makes us unique and cements our reputation as a beacon of opportunity. Young people behind the Iron Curtain would see Selma and eventually tear down a wall. Young people in Soweto would hear Bobby Kennedy talk about ripples of hope and eventually banish the scourge of apartheid. Young people in Burma went to prison rather than submit to military rule. From the streets of Tunis to the Maidan in Ukraine, this generation of young people draws strength from *this* place, where the powerless could change the world's greatest superpower, and push their leaders to expand the boundaries of freedom. They saw that idea made real in Selma, Alabama. They saw it made real in America.

Because of campaigns like this, a Voting Rights Act was passed. Political, economic, and social barriers came down, and the change these

men and women wrought is visible here today: African Americans who run boardrooms, who sit on the bench, who serve in elected office from small towns to big cities; from the Congressional Black Caucus to the Oval Office.

Because of what they did, the doors of opportunity swung open, not just for African Americans, but for *every* American. Women marched through those doors. Latinos marched through those doors. Asian Amer-icans, gay Americans, and Americans with disabilities came through those doors. Their endeavors gave the entire South the chance to rise again, not by reasserting the past, but by transcending the past. What a glorious thing, Dr. King might say.

What a solemn debt we owe.

Which leads us to ask: Just how might we repay that debt?

First and foremost, we have to recognize that one day's commemoration, no matter how special, is not enough. If Selma taught us anything, it's that our work is never done—the American experiment in self-government gives work and purpose to each generation.

In teaches us too that action requires us to slough off cynicism. When it comes to the pursuit of justice, we can afford neither complacency nor despair.

Just this week, I was asked whether I thought the Department of Justice's Ferguson report shows that, when it comes to race, nothing has changed in this country. I understand the question, for the report's narrative was woefully familiar. It evoked the kind of abuse and disregard for citizens that spawned the civil rights movement. But I cautioned against suggesting that this was proof nothing's changed. Ferguson may not be unique, but it's no longer endemic or sanctioned by law and custom; and before the civil rights movement, it was.

We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, or that racial division is inherent to America. If you think nothing's changed in the past fifty years, ask somebody who lived through Selma whether nothing's changed. Ask the female CEO who once might have been assigned to the secretarial pool if nothing's changed. Ask your gay friend if it's easier to be out and proud in America

now than it was thirty years ago. To deny this progress—*our* progress—would be to rob us of our own agency; our responsibility to do what we can to make America better.

Of course, an even more common mistake is to suggest that racism is banished, that the work that drew men and women to Selma is finished, and that whatever racial tensions remain are a consequence of those seeking to play the "race card" for their own purposes. We don't need the Ferguson report to know that's not true. We just need to open our eyes, and ears, and hearts, to know that this nation's racial history still casts its long shadow upon us. We know the march is not yet over, the race is not yet won, and that reaching that blessed destination where we are all truly judged by the content of our character requires admitting as much.

"We are capable of bearing a great burden," James Baldwin wrote, "once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is."

This is work for all and not just some. Not just whites. Not just Blacks. If we want to honor the courage of those who marched that day, then all of us are called to possess their moral imagination. All of us will need to feel, as they did, the fierce urgency of now. All of us need to recognize, as they did, that change depends on our actions, our attitudes, the things we teach our children. And if we make such effort, no matter how hard it may seem, laws can be passed, and consciences can be stirred, and consensus can be built. We can do that. Yes we can.

With such effort, we can make sure our criminal justice system serves all and not just some. Together, we can raise the level of mutual trust that policing is built on—the idea that police officers are members of the communities they risk their lives to protect, and citizens just want the same thing young people here marched for—the protection of the law. Together, we can address unfair sentencing, and overcrowded prisons, and the stunted circumstances that rob us of too many boys before they become men, and too many men who could be good dads.

With effort, we can roll back poverty and the roadblocks to opportunity. Americans don't accept a free ride for anyone, nor do we believe in equality of outcomes. But we do expect equal opportunity, and if we really mean it, if we're willing to sacrifice for it, then we can make sure *every* child gets an education suitable to this new century, one that expands imaginations

and lifts their sights. We can make sure every person willing to work has the dignity of a job, and a fair wage, a real voice, and sturdier rungs on that ladder into the middle class.

And with effort, we can protect the foundation stone of our democracy for which so many marched across this bridge—and that is the right to vote. Right now, in 2015, fifty years after Selma, there are laws across this country *designed* to make it harder for people to vote. As we speak, more of such laws are being proposed. Meanwhile, the Voting Rights Act, the culmination of so much blood and sweat and tears, the product of so much sacrifice in the face of wanton violence, stands weakened, its future subject to partisan rancor.

How can that be? The Voting Rights Act was one of the crowning achievements of our democracy, the result of Republican *and* Demo-cratic effort. President Bush signed its renewal when he was in office. More than a hundred members of Congress have come here today to honor people who were willing to die for the right it protects. If we want to honor this day, let these hundred go back to Washington, and gather four hundred more, and together, pledge to make it their mission to re-store the law this year.

Of course, our democracy is not the task of Congress alone, or the courts, or the president. If every new voter suppression law was struck down today, we'd still have one of the lowest voting rates among free peoples. Fifty years ago, registering to vote here in Selma and much of the South meant guessing the number of jellybeans in a jar or bubbles on a bar of soap. It meant risking your dignity, and sometimes your life. What is our excuse today? How do we so casually discard the right for which so many fought? How do we so fully give away our power, our voice, in shaping America's future?

Fellow marchers, so much has changed in fifty years. We've endured war, and fashioned peace. We've seen technological wonders that touch every aspect of our lives, and take for granted conveniences our parents might scarcely imagine. But what has *not* changed is the imperative of citizenship, that willingness of a twenty- six- year- old deacon, a Unitarian minister, or a young mother of five, to decide they loved this country so much that they'd risk everything to realize its promise.

That's what it means to *love* America. *That's* what it means to *believe* in America. *That's* what it means when we say America is *exceptional*.

For we were *born* of change. We *broke* the old aristocracies, declaring ourselves entitled not by bloodline, but *endowed* by our Creator with cer-tain unalienable rights. We secure our rights and responsibilities through a system of self-government, of and by and for the people. That's why we argue and fight with so much passion and conviction. That's why, for such a young nation, we are so big and bold and diverse and full of contradictions: because we know our efforts matter. We know America is what we make of it.

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

We are Teddy Roosevelt, who charged up that hill with the Rough Riders, and invited Booker T. Washington to dinner to hear his implausible vision of things to come. That's what we do.

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's our character.

We're the immigrants who stowed away on ships to reach these shores, and the hopeful strivers who cross the Rio Grande because they want their 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, and we're the countless laborers who laid rail, and raised skyscrapers, and organized for workers' rights.

We are the millions of volunteer warriors who leave no one behind and risk everything to save one of our own. We're the fresh-faced GIs who fought to liberate a continent, and we're the Tuskeegee Airmen, Navajo code-talkers, and Japanese Americans who fought for this country even as their own liberty had been denied.

We are the huddled masses yearning to breathe free—Holocaust survivors, Soviet defectors, the Lost Boys of Africa.

We are the gay Americans whose blood ran on the streets of San Francisco and New York, just as blood ran down this bridge.

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

We are the inventors of gospel, jazz and the blues, bluegrass and country, hip-hop and rock and roll, our very own sounds with all the sweet sorrow and dangerous joy of freedom.

We are Jackie Robinson, enduring scorn and spiked cleats and stealing home plate in the World Series anyway.

We are the people Langston Hughes wrote of, who "build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how."

We are the people Emerson wrote of, "who for truth and honor's sake stand fast and suffer long"; who are "never too tired, so long as we can see far enough."

That's what America is. Not stock photos or feeble attempts to define some as more American than others. We respect the past, but we don't pine for it. 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 full of energy, perpetually young in spirit. That's why someone like John Lewis at the ripe age of twenty-five could lead a mighty march.

And that's what the young people here today and listening all across the country must take away from this day. You *are* America. Unconstrained by habits and convention. Unencumbered by what *is,* and ready to seize what *ought to be*. For everywhere in this country, there are first steps to be taken, and new ground to cover, and bridges to be crossed. And it is you, the young and fearless at heart, the most diverse and educated generation in our history, who we are waiting to follow.

Because Selma shows us that America is not the project of any one person.

Because the single most powerful word in our democracy is the word *we*. *We* the People. *We* Shall Overcome. It is owned by no one. It belongs to everyone. Oh, what a glorious task we are given, to continually try to improve this great nation of ours.

Fifty years from Bloody Sunday, our march is not yet finished. But we are getting closer. Two hundred and thirty-nine years after this nation's

founding, our union is not yet perfect. But we are getting closer. Our job's easier because somebody already got us through that first mile. Somebody already got us over that bridge. When it feels that the road is too hard, when the torch we've been passed feels too heavy, we will remember these early travelers, and draw strength from their example, and hold firmly the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint."

We honor those who walked so we could run. We must run so our children soar. And we will *not* grow weary. For we believe in the power of an awesome God, and we believe in the promise of America.

May He bless those warriors of justice no longer with us, and may He bless our precious United States.

REMARKS OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY ON THE SUPREME COURT'S RULING ON THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT

The White House
June 25, 2015

Five years ago, after nearly a century of talk, decades of trying, and a year of bipartisan debate—we finally declared that in America, health care is not a privilege for a few, but a right for all.

Over those five years, as we've worked to implement the Affordable Care Act, there have been successes and setbacks. But as the dust has set-tled, there can be no doubt this law is working. It has changed, even saved, American lives. It has set this country on a smarter, stronger course.

And today, after more than fifty votes in Congress to repeal or weaken this law; after a presidential election based in part on preserving or re-pealing this law; after multiple challenges to this law before the Supreme Court—the Affordable Care Act is here to stay.

This morning, the Court upheld a critical part of this law—the part that has made it easier for Americans to afford health insurance regard-less of where you live. If the partisan challenge to this law had succeeded,

millions of Americans would have had thousands of dollars' worth of tax credits taken from them. For many, insurance would have become unaffordable again. Many would have become uninsured again. Ultimately, everyone's premiums could have gone up.

America would have gone backward. And that's not what we do. We move forward.

Today is a victory for hard-working Americans all across this country whose lives will continue to become more secure in a changing economy because of this law.

If you're a parent, you can keep your kids on your plan until they turn twenty-six—something that has covered millions of young people so far. That's because of this law.

If you're a senior, or an American with a disability, this law gives you discounts on your prescriptions—something that has saved 9 million Americans an average of $1,600 so far.

If you're a woman, you can't be charged more than anybody else—even if you've had cancer, or your husband had heart disease, or just because you're a woman. Your insurer has to offer free preventive services like mammograms. They can't place annual or lifetime caps on your care.

Because of this law, and because of today's decision, millions of Americans will continue to receive the tax credits that have given about eight in ten people who buy insurance on the new marketplaces the choice of a health care plan that costs less than $100 a month.

And when it comes to preexisting conditions—someday, our grandkids will ask us if there was really a time when America discriminated against people who get sick. Because that's something this law has ended for good.

As the law's provisions have gradually taken effect, more than 16 million uninsured Americans have gained coverage so far. Nearly one in three Americans who were uninsured a few years ago is insured today. The uninsured rate in America is the lowest since we began to keep records. That's something we can all be proud of.

The law has helped hold the price of health care to its slowest growth in fifty years. If your family gets insurance through your job, you're

paying about $1,800 less per year on average than you would be if we hadn't done anything. By one leading measure, what business owners pay out in wages and salaries is now growing faster than what they spend on health insurance for the first time in seventeen years—which is good for workers and good for the economy.

The point is, this is not an abstract thing. This law is working exactly as it's supposed to—and in many ways, better than we expected it to. For all the misinformation campaigns and doomsday predictions; for all the talk of death panels and job destruction; for all the repeal attempts—this law is helping tens of millions of Americans. As many have told me poignantly, it has changed their lives for the better. And it's going to keep doing just that.

Five years in, this is no longer just about a law. This isn't just about the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare.

This is health care in America.

Unlike Social Security or Medicare, a lot of Americans still don't know what Obamacare is beyond the political noise in Washington. Across the country, there remain people who are directly benefiting from the law but don't even know it. There's no card that says Obamacare when you enroll. And that's okay.

For this has never been a government takeover, despite cries to the contrary. This reform remains what it always has been—a set of fairer rules and tougher protections that have made health care in America more affordable, more attainable, and more about you.

With this case behind us, we still have work to do to make health care in America even better. We'll keep working to provide consumers with all the tools you need to make informed choices about your care. We'll keep working to increase the use of preventive care that avoids bigger problems down the road. We'll keep working to boost the steadily improving quality of care in hospitals, and bring down its cost. We'll keep working to get people covered. We'll keep working to convince more governors and state legislatures to expand Medicaid and cover their citizens.

But we are not going to unravel what has now been woven into the fabric of America. My hope is that rather than keep refighting battles

that have been settled again and again, I can work with Republicans and Democrats to move on, and make health care in America even better.

Three generations ago, we chose to end an era when seniors were left to languish in poverty.

Two generations ago, we chose to end an age when Americans in their golden years didn't have the guarantee of health care.

This generation of Americans chose to finish the job. To turn the page on a past when our citizens could be denied coverage just for being sick. To close the books on a history where tens of millions of Americans had no hope of finding decent, affordable health care, and hung their chances on fate. To write a new chapter, where in a new economy, we can change our jobs, chase that new idea, and raise a family, free from fear, and secure in the knowledge that portable, affordable health care is there for us, and always will be.

That's when America soars— when we look out for one another. When we take care of each other. When we root for one another's success. When we strive to do better, to *be* better, than the generation that came before us, and try to build something better for generations to come.

This is a good day for America. Let's get back to work.

REMARKS OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY ON THE SUPREME COURT'S RULING ON MARRIAGE EQUALITY

The White House

June 26, 2015

Good afternoon. Our nation was founded on a bedrock principle: that we are all created equal.

The project of each generation is to bridge the meaning of those founding words with the realities of changing times—a never-ending quest to ensure those words ring true for every single American.

Progress on this journey often comes in small increments, often two steps forward for every step back, propelled by the effort of persistent, dedicated citizens.

But sometimes, there are days like this— days when that slow, steady effort is rewarded with justice that arrives like a thunderbolt.

This morning, the Supreme Court recognized that the Constitution guarantees marriage equality. In so doing, they've reaffirmed that all Americans are entitled to the equal protection of the law. That all people should be treated equally, regardless of who they are or who they love. This decision will end the patchwork system we currently have. It will end the uncertainty hundreds of thousands of same-sex couples face from not knowing whether their marriage, legitimate in the eyes of the law in one state, will remain that way if they decide to move to or even visit another. And it will strengthen all of our communities by offering to all loving same-sex couples the dignity of marriage across this great land.

In my second inaugural address, I said that if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well. So I am very pleased to see that principle enshrined into law by this decision. This ruling is a victory for Jim Obergefell and the other plaintiffs in the case. It's a victory for gay and lesbian couples who have fought so long for their basic civil rights. It's a victory for their children, whose families will now be recognized as equal to any other. It's a victory for the allies and friends and supporters who have spent years, even decades, working and praying for change to come.

And this ruling is a victory for America. This decision affirms what millions of Americans already believe in their hearts: When all Americans are treated as equal, we are all more free.

My administration has always been guided by that idea. It's why we stopped defending the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, and why we were pleased when the Court finally struck down a central provision of that discriminatory law. It's why we ended Don't Ask, Don't Tell. From extending full marital benefits to federal employees and their spouses to expanding hospital visitation rights for LGBT patients and their loved ones, we have made real progress in advancing equality for LGBT Americans—in ways that were unimaginable not too long ago.

Change, for many of our LGBT brothers and sisters, must have seemed so slow for so long. But compared to so many other issues, America's shift has been so quick. I know that Americans continue to hold a wide

range of views on this issue, based on sincere and deeply held beliefs. All of us who welcome today's news should be mindful of that fact. We re-spect different viewpoints and revere our deep commitment to religious freedom.

But today should also give us hope that on the many issues with which we grapple—often painfully—real change is possible. A shift in hearts and minds is possible. And those who have come so far on their journey to equality have a responsibility to reach back and help others join them.

Because for all our differences, we are one people, stronger together than we could ever be alone. That's always been our story. We are big and vast and diverse, a nation of people with different backgrounds and beliefs, each with our own experiences and stories—but bound by our shared ideal that no matter who you are, what you look like, how you started out, or who you love, America is a place where you can write your own destiny. We are a people who believe that every single child is entitled to life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

There is so much work to be done to extend the full promise of America to every American. But today, we can say in no uncertain terms that we have made our union a little more perfect.

Thank you, and may God bless this country we love.

REMARKS OF PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

Charleston, South Carolina

June 26, 2015

The Bible calls us to hope. To persevere, and have faith in things not seen.

"They were still living by faith when they died," Scripture tells us. "They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on Earth."

We are here today to remember a man of God who lived by faith. A man who believed in things not seen. A man of service who persevered, knowing full well that he would not receive all those things he was

promised, because he believed his efforts would deliver a better life for those who followed.

To Jennifer, his beloved wife; to Eliana and Malana, his beautiful daughters; to this Mother Emanuel family and the people of Charleston:

I did not have the good fortune to know Reverend Pinckney very well. But I did have the pleasure of meeting him, here in South Carolina, back when we were both a little bit younger. The first thing I noticed was his graciousness, his smile and reassuring baritone, his deceptive sense of humor—all qualities that helped him wear so effortlessly a heavy burden of expectation.

Friends of his remarked this week that when Clementa Pinckney entered a room, it was like the future arrived; that even from a young age, folks knew he was special. Anointed. He was the progeny of a long line of the faithful—a family of preachers who spread God's word, and protesters who sowed change to expand voting rights and desegregate the South.

Clem heard their instruction and did not forsake their teaching. He was in the pulpit by thirteen, pastor by eighteen, public servant by twenty-three. He did not exhibit any of the cockiness of youth, nor youth's insecurities; instead, he set an example worthy of his position, wise beyond his years, in his speech, his conduct, his love, faith, and purity.

As a senator, he represented a sprawling swath of the Lowcountry, a place that has long been one of the most neglected in America. A place still wracked by poverty and inadequate schools; a place where children can still go hungry and the sick too often go without treatment. A place that needed someone like Clem. His position in the minority party meant the odds of winning more resources for his constituents were often long. His calls for greater equity were too often unheeded, the votes he cast sometimes lonely. But he never gave up; stayed true to his convictions; would not grow discouraged. After a full day at the capitol, he'd climb into his car and head to the church to draw sustenance from his ministry, and from the community that loved and needed him; to fortify his faith, and imagine what might be.

Reverend Pinckney embodied a politics that was neither mean nor small, conducting himself quietly, and kindly, and diligently. He encouraged progress not by pushing his ideas alone, but by seeking out yours, and partnering with you to make it happen. He was full of empathy, able to walk in someone else's shoes, see the world through their eyes. No wonder one of his senate colleagues remembered Senator Pinckney this week as "the most gentle of the forty-six of us—the best of the forty-six of us."

Clem was often asked why he'd choose to be a pastor *and* a public servant. But as our brothers and sisters in the AME Church know well, they're one and the same. "Our calling," Clem once said, "is not just within the walls of the congregation, but . . . the life and community in which our congregation resides." It's the idea that our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words; that the "sweet hour of prayer" actually lasts the whole week long; that to put our faith in action is about more than our individual salvation, but about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not merely a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society.

Preacher by thirteen. Pastor by eighteen. Public servant by twenty-three. What a life Clementa Pinckney lived. What an example he set. What a model for his faith.

And to lose him at forty-one—slain in his sanctuary with eight wonderful members of his flock, each at different stages in life but bound together by a common commitment to God.

Cynthia Hurd. Susie Jackson. Ethel Lance. DePayne Middleton-Doctor. Tywanza Sanders. Daniel L. Simmons Sr. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton. Myra Thompson.

Good and decent people, so full of life, and kindness, and perseverance, and faith.

To the families of these fallen, the nation shares in your grief. Our pain cuts that much deeper because it happened in church. The church is and always has been the center of African American life—a place to call our own in a too often hostile world, a sanctuary from so many hardships. Over the course of centuries, Black churches served as "hush harbors" where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free

descendants could gather; rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; and bunkers for the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement. They have been and are community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and networking; places where children are loved and kept out of harm's way and told that they are beautiful and smart; taught that they matter.

That's what the Black church means. Our beating heart; the place where our dignity as a people is inviolate. There is no better example of this tradition than Mother Emanuel—a church built by Blacks seeking their liberty, burned to the ground because its founder sought to end slavery, only to rise up again, a phoenix from these ashes. When there were laws banning all-Black church gatherings, services happened here, in defiance of unjust laws. When there was a righteous movement to dismantle Jim Crow, Dr. King preached from its pulpit, and marches began from its steps. A sacred place, this church, not just for Blacks or Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights in this country; a foundation stone of liberty and justice for all.

We do not know whether the killer of Reverend Pinckney and eight others knew all this history. But he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act—an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches as a means to terrorize and control and oppress; an act that could only incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion; an act that could only deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin.

Oh, but God works in mysterious ways, doesn't He?

Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the *grace* surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group—the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join their fellowship circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court, in the midst of unspeakable grief—with words of forgiveness. The alleged killer could not imagine how the city of Charleston under the wise leadership of Mayor Riley, and the state of South Carolina, and the United States of America would respond—with not merely revulsion at this evil

act but with a bighearted generosity and, more important, a thoughtful introspection and self-examination so rarely seen in our public life.

Blinded by hatred, he failed to comprehend what Reverend Pinckney so well understood: the power of God's grace.

This whole week, I've been reflecting on this idea of grace—the grace of the families who lost loved ones, the grace Reverend Pinckney would preach about in his sermons; the grace described in my favorite hymnal; the one we all know:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see.

According to Christian tradition, grace is not earned. It is not merited; not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings.

As a nation, out of terrible tragedy, God has visited grace upon us. For He has allowed us to see where we've been blind. He has given us the chance, where we've been lost, to find our best selves. We may not have earned it, this grace, with our rancor and complacency and shortsightedness and fear of each other—but we got it all the same. He's once more given us grace—but it is up to us now to make the most of it, to receive it with gratitude, and prove ourselves worthy of the gift.

For too long, we were blind to the pain that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens. It's true—a flag didn't cause these murders. But as people from all walks of life, Republicans and Democrats now acknowledge—including Governor Haley, whose recent eloquence on the subject is worthy of praise—the flag has always represented more than just ancestral pride. For many, Black and white alike, it has been a reminder of systematic oppression and racial subjugation. We see that now. Removing the flag from the state capitol isn't an act of political correctness or an insult to the valor of Confederate soldiers. It is an acknowledgment that the cause for which they fought—the cause of slavery—was wrong. That the imposition of Jim Crow and the resistance to civil rights for all was wrong. It is one step in an honest accounting of America's history,

and a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds. It is an expression of the amazing changes that have transformed this country for the better because of the work of so many people of goodwill, people of all races striving to form a more perfect union. By taking down that flag, we express God's grace.

For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now. Perhaps this tragedy causes us to ask some tough questions about how we can permit so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or career. Perhaps it causes us to examine what we are doing to cause some of our children to hate. Perhaps it softens hearts toward those lost young men, tens and tens of thousands caught up in the criminal justice system, and leads us to make sure it is not infected with bias; that we embrace changes in how we train and equip our police so that the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve make us all safer and more secure. It's possible that we now realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it, so that we guard against not just racial slurs, but also guard against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal; so that we search our hearts when considering laws that make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote. By recognizing our common humanity, by treating every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born, and do what is necessary to make opportunity real for all, we express God's grace.

For too long, we've been blind to the unique mayhem that gun violence inflicts upon this nation. Our eyes open when nine of our brothers and sisters are cut down in a church basement, and twelve in a movie theater, and twenty-six in an elementary school. But maybe we will now also see the thirty precious lives cut short by gun violence in this country every single day, as well as the countless more whose lives are forever changed: the survivors crippled with permanent pain; the children traumatized and fearful every day as they walk to school; the husband who will never again feel his wife's warm touch; the entire communities whose grief overflows every time they have to watch what happened to them happen

again somewhere else. The vast majority of Americans, the majority of gun owners even, want to do something about this. We see that now. By acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and various ways of life that make up this beloved country; by making the moral choice to change if it will save even one precious life, we express God's grace.

We don't earn grace, but we choose how to receive it. We decide how to honor it. None of us can expect a transformation in race relations overnight; none of us should believe that a handful of gun-safety measures will prevent any tragedy. People of goodwill will continue to debate the merits of various policies, as our democracy requires, and whatever solutions we find will necessarily be incomplete.

But it would be a betrayal of everything Reverend Pinckney stood for, I believe, if we allowed ourselves to slip into a comfortable silence again, once the eulogies have been delivered and the TV cameras have moved on. To avoid uncomfortable truths about the prejudice that still infects our society; to settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change—that's how we lose our way again. Likewise, it would be a refutation of the forgiveness expressed by those families if we merely slipped into the old habits, whereby those who disagree with us are not merely wrong but bad; where we shout instead of listen, and barricade ourselves behind our preconceived notions, or a well-practiced cynicism.

Reverend Pinckney once said, "Across the South, we have a deep appreciation of history—we haven't always had a deep appreciation of each other's histories." What is true in the South applies to America. Clem understood that justice grows out of recognition, of ourselves in others; that my liberty depends on my respect for yours; that history must not be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, and a roadway toward a better world. He knew that the path to grace involves an open mind, but more important it requires an open heart.

That's what I've felt this week—an open heart. That, more than any particular policy or analysis, is what's called upon right now, I think, what a friend of mine, the writer Marilyn Robinson, calls "that reservoir of

goodness, beyond, and of another kind, that we are able to do each other in the ordinary cause of things."

If we can find *that* grace, anything is possible. If we can tap *that* grace, everything will change.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see.

Clementa Pinckney found that grace.
Cynthia Hurd found that grace.
Susie Jackson found that grace.
Ethel Lance found that grace.
DePayne Middleton-Doctor found that grace.
Tywanza Sanders found that grace.
Daniel L. Simmons Sr. found that grace.
Sharonda Coleman-Singleton found that grace.
Myra Thompson found that grace.

Through the example of their lives, they have now passed it on to us. May we find ourselves worthy of this precious and extraordinary gift, as long as our lives endure. May grace now lead them home, and may God continue to shed His grace on the *United* States of America.