

THE 44TH  
**PRESIDENT**

★ IN HIS OWN WORDS ★

Education & Discussion Guide



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# *The* PRESIDENT IN HIS OWN WORDS

HISTORY® presents *The 44th President: In His Own Words*, President Barack Obama's first-hand account on his time in office. In profound and candid new interviews with President Obama conducted both before and after the 2016 Presidential election, this special is a unique examination of the Obama presidency from the inside out. It features President Obama's final and most comprehensive one-on-one television interview in office conducted over nearly two hours of conversation inside the White House.

In this two-hour special, President Obama explores his successes, challenges, difficulties with Congress, race relations during his tenure and ultimately, his legacy. *The 44th President: In His Own Words* also features unprecedented access and interviews with members of President Obama's staff, Congress and the press. Together, these interviews offer deeply insightful perspectives on the nation's 44th president, what he achieved, and the ultimate impact of his administration.



President Barack Obama sits in the Oval Office on his first day in office, Jan. 21, 2009. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

# The PRESIDENT IN HIS OWN WORDS

## The Obama Years: A Nine-Part Oral History

Visit [www.history.com/obamayears](http://www.history.com/obamayears) for an in-depth look at Obama's presidency in his own words and the words of those on his team who lived through it. Topics covered include: the Affordable Care Act, the capture and killing of Bin Laden, foreign policy, climate change, race, President Obama's first 100 days in office and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, CT. This site includes additional interviews and insights from *The 44th President: In His Own Words*.

## Curriculum Links

*The 44th President: In His Own Words* would be useful for History, Politics, Current Events, Media courses and more. It is appropriate for high school and college students and for general audiences. This guide is intended to provide tools and resources for group discussions and further research.

## Key Terms

Define the terms below individually or in small groups to gain insights into the themes and topics explored in *The 44th President: In His Own Words*.

American Exceptionalism

Authenticity

Bipartisan

Consensus

Contingent

Conviction

Demographic

Executive Order

Obviate

Status Quo

Stereotype

Unprecedented

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## Discussion Questions

The questions below can be used in small or large group settings, or can be answered in essay format for further exploration.

### **The Campaign**

"I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."

\* Barack Obama, 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention

1. Why was Illinois State Senator Obama's speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention such a turning point in his political career?  
You can watch that entire speech here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWynt87PaJO>
2. What challenges did the Obama campaign face during the 2008 election?
3. The 2008 election saw the highest participation among American voters in 40 years, and President Obama received 365 of 538 electoral votes. What were the key themes of the campaign and why do you think Obama's campaign resonated so powerfully with Americans?
4. What do you think was the impact of an African American being elected to the highest office in the United States?
5. What do you think was the significance of President Obama using Abraham Lincoln's Bible to take the oath of office when he was sworn in as president?

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## **Great Recession**

President Obama came into office during the worst recession since the Great Depression. Americans were losing jobs, homes and investments. Some of the country's largest companies and lending institutions were bankrupt. The President and his economic advisors took many steps over the course of his Presidency to help the economy grow.

6. When President Obama took office, what steps did his team take to assess the American economic crisis?
7. President Obama discusses the Stimulus Bill of 2009 in the context of the Great Depression. What lessons did he employ from the Depression era and New Deal in creating this bill?
8. What does "American exceptionalism" mean? Do you think this concept applies to America today? In what ways do you think this concept was relevant to the Obama administration?

## **Affordable Care Act**

In 2010, Congress passed the Affordable Care Act. The comprehensive bill has many provisions, but mainly, it ensures that all Americans have access health insurance, prevents insurance companies from denying coverage to consumers because of a pre-existing condition, and create a marketplace for individuals to seek coverage who don't receive health insurance from their employer.

9. What does the phrase "political capital" refer to, and what were some of the issues the Obama administration focused its political capital on?
10. Vice President Joe Biden, in referring to the Affordable Care Act, calls health care "a right, not a privilege." Do you agree with this statement?

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## **Newtown**

On December 14, 2012, a 20-year-old man went to an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut and fatally shot 20 children and six teachers. President Obama describes that day as the worst day of his presidency.

11. How did the tragic shootings in Newtown, Connecticut affect President Obama? How did he respond personally and in terms of legislation? Why do you think gun legislation has been so difficult to pass?
12. How has being a father shaped President Obama's term in office?
13. What are some of the ways First Lady Michelle Obama has shaped the president's approach to family and leadership?

## **Foreign Policy**

President Obama received the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize and his Administration has also overseen many significant foreign policy events. He is credited with winding down and ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that began in the aftermath of September 11. He ordered a seal team invasion that assassinated Osama bin Laden, the founder and head of Al-Qaeda. He opened trade relations with Cuba, and he became the first sitting President to visit Cuba in over 90 years.

14. Why was finding Osama Bin Laden so important to President Obama? Why was it important to the United States, and the world?
15. What was President Obama's approach to the crisis in Syria?
16. How does President Obama describe his approach to foreign policy and intervention? How does his approach differ from other possible approaches?

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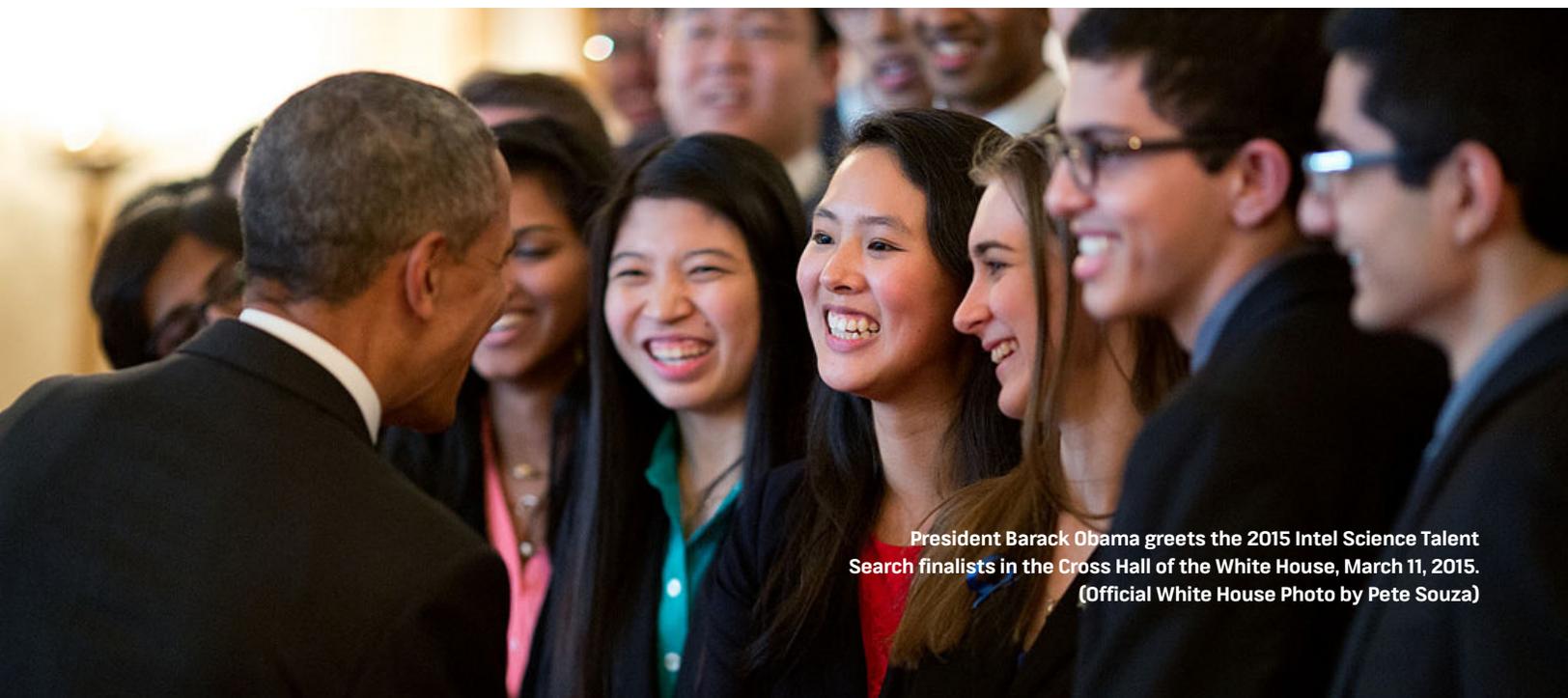
## **Race Relations**

President Obama is the country's first African American President, but his presidency has also come during a period of heightened frustration among African Americans. The Black Lives Matter movement, which came to national prominence in the wake of the 2014 police shooting of an unarmed black 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, continues to gain attention following other incidents involving the deaths of black Americans during encounters with the police.

17. What were the biggest challenges related to race that the country has faced over the last 8 years? What does it mean to create a "post-racial" society? Do you think this is possible?

## **Legacy**

18. What do you think are the most important contributions of President Obama's administration, and why?
19. What do you think were President Obama's biggest challenges, and why?
20. What ultimately will you take away from the Obama presidency?



President Barack Obama greets the 2015 Intel Science Talent Search finalists in the Cross Hall of the White House, March 11, 2015.  
(Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)



President Barack Obama speaks at Cairo University in Cairo, Thursday, June 4, 2009. In his speech, President Obama called for a 'new beginning between the United States and Muslims', declaring that 'this cycle of suspicion and discord must end'. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

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## Further Explorations

1. In March 2008, during the presidential campaign, Senator Obama gave a speech entitled “A More Perfect Union.” You can read his remarks here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html>

What were the main themes of this speech? Why do you think this speech was considered a breakthrough for Obama?

2. Read President Obama’s first inaugural address here: <http://millercenter.org/president/obama/speeches/speech-4453>. Compare and contrast this inaugural speech with that of another president. How are they similar and how do they differ? What was unique about President Obama’s historical context?
3. Commentators in this special describe the importance of President Obama’s speech in Cairo, Egypt in June, 2009. You can watch the speech here: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/NewBeginning/transcripts> or read a transcript: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

What were the main messages of this speech? How did it mark a “new beginning” in American foreign politics?

4. In this special, President Obama discusses many of the key issues he focused on during his time in office. Choose one of these issues (examples might include foreign policy, healthcare, reducing gun violence, civil rights, etc.) and research the topic. What was the approach of the administration on this issue, and what was the impact?
5. In one hundred years, how do you think President Obama will be remembered? Write a short essay or op-ed piece making an argument about President Obama’s legacy as a world leader.

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## Pull Quotes

The quotes below from *The 44th President: In His Own Words* offer a variety of perspectives on President Obama's administration and his approach to leadership. Choose one of these quotes and reflect on its meaning in group discussion or in short writings.



President Barack Obama signs a letter to Ileana Yarza, a 76-year-old letter writer in Cuba, in the Oval Office, March 14, 2016. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

**President Barack Obama reflecting on his role in recovering the United States economy:**

*“When I look back now, I am extraordinarily proud of the steps that we took and the rapidity with which we took them when there wasn’t a big blueprint there. I am very confident that by almost every economic measure we are better off than we were when I came into office, and that because of smart decisions that we made early on, we recovered faster than almost every other advanced economy and significantly faster than economies have previously from financial crisis of similar scope.”*

**Vice President Joe Biden on the passing of the health care bill:**

*“It established once and for all that in the United States of America, healthcare is a right, not a privilege, a right.”*

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President Barack Obama on making decisions with less than perfect information:

*“Learning to get comfortable with making big decisions based on probabilities was something that came to me fairly quick.”*

President Barack Obama on his legacy:

*“What I won’t have any regrets about is whether or not I did my very best.”*



President Barack Obama on  
his legacy:

*“I can look at  
myself in the  
mirror and say  
I left it all on  
the field.”*

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hold hands as they listen to Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., during an event to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the Selma to Montgomery civil rights marches, at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., March 7, 2015. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

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*“I think President Obama is going to do very, very well as historians judge the record of his eight years.”*

**Secretary of State, John Kerry, on  
President Barack Obama’s legacy**

*“I think people will be reminded about how they felt when they first heard him on the world stage, and that sense of hope and promise and change will be his legacy.”*

**Senior Advisor, Valerie Jarrett, on  
President Barack Obama’s legacy**

*“If nothing else, this president was, I think, a significant change agent. It is America at its best, a more diverse America, a progressive America. A tolerant America.”*

**Attorney General, Eric Holder, on  
President Barack Obama’s legacy**

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President Barack Obama visits with students in a classroom at Clarence Tinker Elementary School at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Fla., Sept. 17, 2014.  
(Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

**Joshua DuBois, White House Office of Faith Based and Neighborhood Partnerships:**

*“People expected President Obama to usher in a post-racial era, to somehow move us to a place where race no longer mattered in the country. Of course he did not do that....instead what the president has done in large ways and small is he’s really held up a mirror to the American psyche on race and he’s allowed us to finally see who we really are, and where we really are.”*

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## Additional Websites

### History.com Links

[www.history.com/obamayears](http://www.history.com/obamayears)

<http://www.history.com/specials/the-44th-president-in-his-own-words>

<http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/barack-obama>

### Official White House Site:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/>

### Obama Presidential Center:

<https://www.barackobamafoundation.org/the-center>

### Additional Resources from the Miller Center:

<http://millercenter.org/president/obama>



President Barack Obama visits soldiers at the USO at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany on June 5, 2009. (Official White House photo by Pete Souza)

# The PRESIDENT IN HIS OWN WORDS

Comprehensive list of interviewees for  
*The 44th President: In His Own Words*

## Administration/Former Administration

**Barack Obama**, President of the United States  
**Joe Biden**, Vice President of the United States  
**Denis McDonough**, White House Chief of Staff  
**Jon Favreau**, White House Director of Speechwriting  
**David Plouffe**, Campaign Manager, White House Senior Advisor to the President  
**Valerie Jarrett**, Senior Advisor to the President  
**Ben Rhodes**, Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications  
**Cody Keenan**, White House Director of Speechwriting  
**Susan Rice**, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, National Security Advisor  
**Tim Geithner**, Secretary of U.S. Department of the Treasury  
**Arne Duncan**, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education  
**Reggie Love**, Personal Aide to the President  
**Michael Strautmanis**, Chief of Staff to Valerie Jarrett  
**Marty Nesbitt**, Campaign Treasurer 2008  
**Jen Psaki**, White House Director of Communications  
**Cecilia Muñoz**, Director, Domestic Policy Council  
**Melody Barnes**, Director, Domestic Policy Council  
**Danielle Gray**, Cabinet Secretary  
**Brian Deese**, Senior Advisor to the President  
**Admiral William McRaven**, Commander of the United States Special Operations Command  
**Eric Holder**, Attorney General  
**David Axelrod**, Senior Advisor to the President  
**Rahm Emmanuel**, White House Chief of Staff  
**Joshua DuBois**, Director White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships  
**John Kerry**, U.S. Secretary of State

## Journalists

**Christi Parsons**, White House Correspondent, LA Times  
**Glenn Thrush**, White House Correspondent, Politico/NY Times  
**Jeffrey Goldblum**, Editor-in-Chief, The Atlantic  
**Jeff Glor**, Correspondent, CBS Evening News

## Members of Congress/Opposition Voices

**Rep. Nancy Pelosi** (D-CA), House Minority Leader  
**Rep. Eric Cantor** (retired)  
**Sen. Richard Lugar** (retired)  
**Sen. Mitch McConnell** (R-KY), Senate Majority Leader  
**Sen. Rand Paul** (R-KY)  
**Sen. Jeff Sessions** (R-AL)  
**Dr. Eddie Glaude** (Professor of African American Studies - Princeton)  
**Gov. Mitt Romney**



President Barack Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama and Vice President Joe Biden join White House staff on the South Lawn of the White House to observe a moment of silence marking the 13th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Sept. 11, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy)