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Barack Obama

Address at the Dedication of the National Museum of African-American History

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James Baldwin once wrote, "For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard." For while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard.

Today, as so many generations have before, we gather on our National Mall to tell an essential part of our American story -- one that has at times been overlooked -- we come not just for today, but for all time.

President and Mrs. Bush; President Clinton; Vice President and Dr. Biden; Chief Justice Roberts; Secretary Skorton; Reverend Butts; distinguished guests: Thank you. Thank you for your leadership in making sure this tale is told. We're here in part because of you and because of all those Americans -- the Civil War vets, the Civil Rights foot soldiers, the champions of this effort on Capitol Hill -- who, for more than a century, kept the dream of this museum alive.



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That includes our leaders in Congress -- Paul Ryan and Nancy Pelosi. It includes one of my heroes, John Lewis, who, as he has so often, took the torch from those who came before him and brought us past the finish line. It includes the philanthropists and benefactors and advisory members who have so generously given not only their money but their time. It includes the Americans who offered up all the family keepsakes tucked away in Grandma's attic. And of course, it includes a man without whose vision and passion and persistence we would not be here today -- Mr. Lonnie Bunch.

What we can see of this building -- the towering glass, the artistry of the metalwork -- is surely a sight to behold. But beyond the majesty of the building, what makes this occasion so special is the larger story it contains. Below us, this building reaches down 70 feet, its roots spreading far wider and deeper than any tree on this Mall. And on its lowest level, after you walk past remnants of a slave ship, after you reflect on the immortal declaration that "all men are created equal," you can see a block of stone. On top of this stone sits a historical marker, weathered by the ages. That marker reads: "General Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay spoke from this slave block...during the year 1830."

I want you to think about this. Consider what this artifact tells us about history, about how it's told, and about what can be cast aside. On a stone where day after day, for years, men and women were torn from their spouse or their child, shackled and bound, and bought and sold, and bid like cattle; on a stone worn down by the tragedy of over a thousand bare feet -- for a long time, the only thing we considered important, the singular thing we once chose to commemorate as "history" with a plaque were the unmemorable speeches of two powerful men.

And that block I think explains why this museum is so necessary. Because that same object, reframed, put in context, tells us so much more. As Americans, we rightfully passed on the tales of the giants who built this country; who led armies into battle and waged seminal debates in the halls of Congress and the corridors of power. But too often, we ignored or forgot the stories of millions upon millions of others, who built this nation just as surely, whose humble eloquence, whose calloused hands, whose steady drive helped to create cities, erect industries, build the arsenals of democracy.



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And so this national museum helps to tell a richer and fuller story of who we are. It helps us better understand the lives, yes, of the President, but also the slave; the industrialist, but also the porter; the keeper of the status quo, but also of the activist seeking to overthrow that status quo; the teacher or the cook, alongside the statesman. And by knowing this other story, we better understand ourselves and each other. It binds us together. It reaffirms that all of us are America -- that African-American history is not somehow separate from our larger American story, it's not the underside of the American story, it is central to the American story. That our glory derives not just from our most obvious triumphs, but how we've wrested triumph from tragedy, and how we've been able to remake ourselves, again and again and again, in accordance with our highest ideals.

I, too, am America.

The great historian John Hope Franklin, who helped to get this museum started, once said, "Good history is a good foundation for a better present and future." He understood the best history doesn't just sit behind a glass case; it helps us to understand what's outside the case. The best history helps us recognize the mistakes that we've made and the dark corners of the human spirit that we need to guard against. And, yes, a clear-eyed view of history can make us uncomfortable, and shake us out of familiar narratives. But it is precisely because of that discomfort that we learn and grow and harness our collective power to make this nation more perfect.

That's the American story that this museum tells -- one of suffering and delight; one of fear but also of hope; of wandering in the wilderness and then seeing out on the horizon a glimmer of the Promised Land.

It is in this embrace of truth, as best as we can know it, in the celebration of the entire American experience, where real patriotism lies. As President Bush just said, a great nation doesn't shy from the truth. It strengthens us. It emboldens us. It should fortify us. It is an act of patriotism to understand where we've been. And this museum tells the story of so many patriots.



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Yes, African Americans have felt the cold weight of shackles and the stinging lash of the field whip. But we've also dared to run north, and sing songs from Harriet Tubman's hymnal. We've buttoned up our Union Blues to join the fight for our freedom. We've railed against injustice for decade upon decade -- a lifetime of struggle, and progress, and enlightenment that we see etched in Frederick Douglass's mighty, leonine gaze.

Yes, this museum tells a story of people who felt the indignity, the small and large humiliations of a "whites only" sign, or wept at the side of Emmett Till's coffin, or fell to their knees on shards of stained glass outside a church where four little girls died. But it also tells the story of the black youth and white youth sitting alongside each other, straight-backed, so full of dignity on those lunch counter stools; the story of a six-year-old Ruby Bridges, pigtails, fresh-pressed dress, walking that gauntlet to get to school; Tuskegee airmen soaring the skies not just to beat a dictator, but to reaffirm the promise of our democracy -- but remind us that all of us are created equal.

This is the place to understand how protest and love of country don't merely coexist but inform each other; how men can proudly win the gold for their country but still insist on raising a black-gloved fist; how we can wear "I Can't Breathe" T-shirt and still grieve for fallen police officers. Here's the America where the razor-sharp uniform of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff belongs alongside the cape of the Godfather of Soul. We have shown the world that we can float like butterflies and sting like bees; that we can rocket into space like Mae Jemison, steal home like Jackie, rock like Jimi, stir the pot like Richard Pryor; or we can be sick and tired of being sick and tired, like Fannie Lou Hamer, and still Rock Steady like Aretha Franklin.

We are large, Walt Whitman told us, containing multitudes. We are large, containing multitudes. Full of contradictions. That's America. That's what makes us grow. That's what makes us extraordinary. And as is true for America, so is true for African American experience. We're not a burden on America, or a stain on America, or an object of pity or charity for America. We're America.

And that's what this museum explains -- the fact that our stories have shaped every corner of our culture. The struggles for freedom that took place made our Constitution a real and living document, tested and shaped and deepened and made more profound its meaning for all people.



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The story told here doesn't just belong to black Americans; it belongs to all Americans -- for the African-American experience has been shaped just as much by Europeans and Asians and Native Americans and Latinos. We have informed each other. We are polyglot, a stew.

Scripture promised that if we lift up the oppressed, then our light will rise in the darkness, and our night will become like the noonday. And the story contained in this museum makes those words prophecy. And that's what this day is about. That's what this museum is about. I, too, am America. It is a glorious story, the one that's told here. It is complicated and it is messy and it is full of contradictions, as all great stories are, as Shakespeare is, as Scripture is. And it's a story that perhaps needs to be told now more than ever.

A museum alone will not alleviate poverty in every inner city or every rural hamlet. It won't eliminate gun violence from all our neighborhoods, or immediately ensure that justice is always colorblind. It won't wipe away every instance of discrimination in a job interview or a sentencing hearing or folks trying to rent an apartment. Those things are up to us, the decisions and choices we make. It requires speaking out, and organizing, and voting, until our values are fully reflected in our laws and our policies and our communities.

But what this museum does show us is that in even the face of oppression, even in the face of unimaginable difficulty, America has moved forward. And so this museum provides context for the debates of our times. It illuminates them and gives us some sense of how they evolved, and perhaps keeps them in proportion. Perhaps it can help a white visitor understand the pain and anger of demonstrators in places like Tulsa and Charlotte. But it can also help black visitors appreciate the fact that not only is this younger generation carrying on traditions of the past but, within the white communities across this nation we see the sincerity of law enforcement officers and officials who, in fits and starts, are struggling to understand, and are trying to do the right thing.

It reminds us that routine discrimination and Jim Crow aren't ancient history, it's just a blink in the eye of history. It was just yesterday. And so we should not be surprised that not all the healing is done. We shouldn't despair that it's not all solved. And knowing the larger story should instead remind us of just how remarkable the changes that have taken place truly are - - just in my lifetime -- and thereby inspire us to further progress.



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And so hopefully this museum can help us talk to each other. And more importantly, listen to each other. And most importantly, see each other. Black and white and Latino and Native American and Asian American -- see how our stories are bound together. And bound together with women in America, and workers in America, and entrepreneurs in America, and LGBT Americans. And for young people who didn't live through the struggles represented here, I hope you draw strength from the changes that have taken place. Come here and see the power of your own agency. See how young John Lewis was. These were children who transformed a nation in a blink of an eye. Young people, come here and see your ability to make your mark.

The very fact of this day does not prove that America is perfect, but it does validate the ideas of our founding, that this country born of change, this country born of revolution, this country of we, the people, this country can get better.

And that's why we celebrate, mindful that our work is not yet done; mindful that we are but on a waystation on this common journey towards freedom. And how glorious it is that we enshrine it here, on some of our nation's most hallowed ground -- the same place where lives were once traded but also where hundreds of thousands of Americans, of all colors and creeds, once marched. How joyful it is that this story take its rightful place -- alongside Jefferson who declared our independence, and Washington who made it real, and alongside Lincoln who saved our union, and the GIs who defended it; alongside a new monument to a King, gazing outward, summoning us toward that mountaintop. How righteous it is that with tell this story here.

For almost eight years, I have been blessed with the extraordinary honor of serving you in this office. Time and again, I've flown low over this mall on Marine One, often with Michelle and our daughters. And President Clinton, President Bush, they'll tell you it is incredible sight. We pass right across the Washington Monument -- it feels like you can reach out and touch it. And at night, if you turn the other way, you don't just see the Lincoln Memorial, Old Abe is lit up and you can see him, his spirit glowing from that building. And we don't have many trips left. But over the years, I've always been comforted as I've watched this museum rise from this earth into this remarkable tribute. Because I know that years from now, like all of you, Michelle and I will be able to come here to this museum, and not just bring our kids but hopefully our grandkids. I imagine holding a little hand of somebody and tell them the stories that are enshrined here.



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And in the years that follow, they'll be able to do the same. And then we'll go to the Lincoln Memorial and we'll take in the view atop the Washington Monument. And together, we'll learn about ourselves, as Americans -- our sufferings, our delights, and our triumphs. And we'll walk away better for it, better because of the better grasp of history. We'll walk away that much more in love with this country, the only place on Earth where this story could have unfolded.

It is a monument, no less than the others on this Mall, to the deep and abiding love for this country, and the ideals upon which it is founded. For we, too, are America.

So enough talk. President Bush is timing me. He had the over/under at 25. Let us now open this museum to the world. Today, we have with us a family that reflects the arc of our progress: the Bonner family -- four generations in all, starting with gorgeous seven-year-old Christine and going up to gorgeous 99-year-old Ruth.

Now, Ruth's father, Elijah Odom, was born into servitude in Mississippi. He was born a slave. As a young boy, he ran, though, to his freedom. He lived through Reconstruction and he lived through Jim Crow. But he went on to farm, and graduate from medical school, and gave life to the beautiful family that we see today -- with a spirit reflected in beautiful Christine, free and equal in the laws of her country and in the eyes of God.

So in a brief moment, their family will join us in ringing a bell from the First Baptist Church in Virginia -- one of the oldest black churches in America, founded under a grove of trees in 1776. And the sound of this bell will be echoed by others in houses of worship and town squares all across this country -- an echo of the ringing bells that signaled Emancipation more than a century and a half ago; the sound, and the anthem, of American freedom.

God bless you all. God bless the United States of America.