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BARACK OBAMA'S RHETORIC ON UNLIFTING  
RACIAL DIVISIVENESS IN THE U.S.A.

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**Abstract:** This paper is an inquiry into Barack Obama's rhetorical craftsmanship that evidently paved the way to his move forward to the White House. As his presidential campaign was placed as part of the journey toward the job of perfecting the nation, the rhetoric of this speech irresistibly challenges and drives Americans to move beyond the existing racial divisiveness in order to address part of the union that was not yet made perfect; thus enabling them to work together to get through the enormity of their common problems.

**Keywords:** Obama's rhetoric on race, Obama's race speech

Race was a serious issue lingering behind Obama's political rise that could jeopardize his presidential candidacy before his advancement to the Democratic South Carolina Primary. Despite the crystal clear of his political platform that was not racially based from the very beginning, the video clips having been released by Brian Ross of ABC's *Good Morning America* on March 13, 2008 showing the racially inflammatory language of Obama's pastor created racial bubbles to attack his position on racial base. While, on one hand, condemning his former pastor's devastating and divisive rhetoric; on the other hand, Obama, on ground of humanity level, honestly objected to denouncing the priest. Instead, more importantly, he stood tall to irresistibly convince his audience to understand the priest that had preached against the backdrop of the African-Americans' struggles in fighting the prevailing injustice and discrimination. Obama invited Americans, both whites and blacks, to widen their horizon to this particular issue of racial relation as part of their union that has never been made perfect. More importantly, he convinced every American to do their part toward "a more perfect union".

Turning back the attack, Obama drove home his great conviction that Americans could only solve their common challenges by coming and working together irrespective of their various backgrounds. Only by so doing, Obama convinced his audience that they could move forward in the same direction toward a better America.

Obama urged Americans not to be swept away by some other distractions. They would have to address their real problems: crumbling schools that stole the future of American children of various racial backgrounds; the unavailability of affordable health care; closed-down mills that once provided decent wages to Americans of whatever race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans of various backgrounds. Problems about corporations that shipped work overseas for profit. Problem as how to bring those in service home safely and treat them decently. He said that he would not run for presidency if he was certain that the vast majority of the people did not want those things. Obama also appreciated young people who were open to make change as proved in the ongoing election.

This paper focuses on studying Obama's rhetoric as displayed in the videotape of the actual delivery of his speech on race relation entitled "A More Perfect Union" in the light of the rhetorical triangle (Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 2-5). Rhetoric as the art of persuasion is understood and presented as a triangular act of communication consisting of three interrelated elements such as rhetor, text, and audience as illustrated as follows:



Figure 1 The Rhetorical Triangle (Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 2-5)

a) **Rhetor** (author, speaker, artist)

Rhetor is the person who originates and/or produces the communication act of persuasion, be it verbal (spoken or written) or visual, to convey a subject matter. According to Aristotle (in Hesford & Brueggemann, 2007: 5), a rhetor has three different ways of persuading others, i.e:

- using his or her own character (*ethos*)
- appealing to audience's emotions (*pathos*)
- appealing to reason and logic (*logos*).

Thus, to understand the rhetorical element "rhetor", one must consider his or her character. And in order to consider the rhetor's point of view, one must take into account how the rhetor approaches his or her subject as well as how the rhetor addresses or imagines his or her audience.

b) **Text** (Oral, Written, Visual)

Text is the communication act of persuasion, be it verbal (spoken or written) or visual, being communicated between rhetor and audience (= reader, listener, viewer).

c) **Audience** (Reader, Listener, Viewer)

The people who become the target of the communication act of persuasion.

Furthermore, Hesford & Brueggemann (2007: 5-7) argue that in analyzing a text for its meaning, the first step to do will be to analyze the concerned text rhetorically in the light of the rhetorical triangle as displayed. Then they also argue that the second step in analyzing a text rhetorically will be to take into account how particular contexts (historical, cultural, political, and other environments) may affect each element of the rhetorical triangle.

Unlike written presentation that is designed to present something for the eye, the principles of orality highlights the very nature of speech as oral presentation, i.e. something to be delivered for the ear. Since listeners are more dependent on the speaker, the speaker must make his or her presentation as easy as possible for listeners to follow and remember (Zarefsky, 2005: 274 - 293). Following Zarefsky's ideas of achieving style through language, the following is a selected list of some of the principles of orality and choices of stylistic resource that are used to back up the inquiry into the element of audience in the rhetorical triangle.

(1) **Simplicity**

The speaker uses simple structures and more common words.

(2) **Repetition**

The speaker repeats key ideas for emphasis.

(3) **Informality**

The speaker uses less formal language than otherwise in written presentation.

(4) **Reflexivity**

The speaker often refers to himself or herself, to the audience and situation.

(5) **Clarity**

The speaker speaks as clearly as possible to the audience using more concrete words and short statements familiar to the audience to describe an idea or situation.

(6) Rhythm

The speaker uses repetition of key idea or argument to hold the audience to have the feel of the ideas being presented so as to make them more involved in the speech situation.

(7) Vividness

The speaker makes the speech easier to digest in the mind's eye of the audience.

**Method**

The approach used in this paper was the qualitative method of inquiry that deals mostly with the non-numerical linguistic units in the forms of words, phrases or clauses, or sentences (Dornyei, 2007: 38, 243; Creswell, 2003: 182,184), from which this research paper attempted to interpret Obama's rhetoric in his race relation speech entitled: "A More Perfect Union". The data was the video of Barack Obama's speech on race: "A More Perfect Union" (Obama, 2008).

**Discussion and Findings**

A. The First Step of the Rhetorical Analysis of the Actual Delivery of Barack Obama's Speech on Race: "A More Perfect Union"

1) The Rhetor

Obama foregrounded some aspects of his own character, those of his audience's emotion, and those of his audience's reason and logic to strongly and convincingly assert his persuasion.

a) Using His Own Character (*Ethos*)

(1) A call to Continue the Long March to Perfect the Nation

Obama asserted that his presidential bid was to do his part to continue the historical long march in the attempts to perfect the nation. His persuasion was to underscore that his candidacy was not just something personal-driven for his own vested interest.

*This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign — to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America.* (Video 5: 02:15-34)

(2) Conviction in the Collaborative Work to Solve Common Problems

Obama asserted that his candidacy was motivated by his own belief in the unity of Americans of various backgrounds to make their common history.

*I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.* (Video 5: 02:35-03:06)

(3) Obama's Genetic Makeup as a Representation of the Diverse Backgrounds of Americans

Obama foregrounded his genetic makeup as evidence and strong argument of the most diversity of all Americans. He argued using his unique personal makeup that characterized diversity in that he was the son of a "black" man from Kenya and a "white" woman from Kansas. Simultaneously he also asserted his own genetic makeup by showing his "white" grandfather's patriotism as he mentioned that his grandfather used "to serve in Patton's Army during World War II" and her "white" grandmother who also worked in the military industry in support of the ongoing war. Obama grand strategy in asserting his own genetic makeup was to minimize his rival(s) attack on his backgrounds as he was also perfectly called American and at the same time also came from a patriotic family background (Video 5: 03:19-04:30).

(4) Being Impartial in Judging One's Character

Obama asserted the importance of having impartial attitude in judging one's character. He made this issue as some critics had attacked Rev. Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor, to the point to be used to attack Obama's political stand on the basis of his close relation to him as his former pastor.

*The truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than 20 years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another, to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a United States Marine; and who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country . . . .(Video 5: 09:09-52)*

*And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me.*

.....  
*He contains within him the contradictions — the good and the bad — of the community that he has served diligently for so many years. (Video 5: 12:25-13:06)*

(5) Conviction in the Ability of the People Together to Heal the Old Racial Disparities

Obama asserted his conviction that Americans were capable of moving beyond their racial disparities and stalemates by working together. They had no other choice if they really wanted to perfect their union.

*But I have asserted a firm conviction — a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people — that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice ... we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. (Video 5: 24:14-35)*

b) Appealing to Audience's Emotions (*Pathos*)

In this great speech on race, Obama also asserted his persuasion using his audience's emotion to further his cause.

(1) Profound Concern with Diverse Backgrounds

Obama asserted the importance of being able to develop great empathy toward other people's lives and attitudes built upon their diverse backgrounds. He was underscoring the importance of being able to accept the things yet to be made perfect that were part and parcel of Americans.

*I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother .....*

*These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love. (Video 5: 13:08-49)*

(2) Rekindling Voters' Religious Conscience

Obama persuasively encouraged his audience's supportive attitudes and convictions in the national politics based on their religious conscience.

*In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more and nothing less than what all the world's great religions demand — that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well. (Video 5: 28:27-57)*

(3) Anecdotes to Concretize the Point to Drive People's Emotional Involvement on the Personal Level to Do their Parts to Perfect the Union.

Obama used a personalized illustration by means of the anecdote of Ashley Baia, a white girl, who chose to join Obama's campaign in order to help other people having trouble with the unavailable affordable universal healthcare. Joined by an elderly black man who could not spell out the reason of his involvement but simply trusted Ashley Baia as his role model, Obama underscored the importance of Ashley Baia's and that elderly black man's concrete actions as a starting point necessary to perfect the nation.

*"I'm here because of Ashley."(applause) By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.*

*But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the 221 years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins. (Video 5: 36:16-37:00)*

c) Appealing to Reason and Logic (Logos)

Obama asserted his persuasion using reason and logic to further his cause.

(1) The Persuasive Power of Historical Legacy

Obama asserted his persuasion using his knowledge about the US Constitution and historical facts most familiar to his audience to drive home the points regarding race relation in the USA. The ideal of equal citizenship guaranteed in the US Constitution as the law of the land was and is still very strong and powerful to address unequal treatment and injustice pertaining to race relation in the USA. Since there existed a gap between the ideal of equal citizenship as the promise vested in the US Constitution and reality in the society, he asserted every American to narrow down the existing gap by doing their parts through whatever democratic means available.

*"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union ..." — 221 years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street ... launched America's improbable experiment in democracy.*

*The document ... was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery .....*

*Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution — a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.*

*.....  
What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part . . . to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.  
(Video 5: 00:00-02:13)*

(2) Empathy in Understanding the Existing Racial Issues in America

Obama asserted the point for every American to have the empathy to understand racial issues in the USA, especially the Afro-American that also had its legitimate tradition but inseparable part of the nation.

*That has been my experience at Trinity. Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety ... The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America. (Video 5: 11:32-12:22)*

(3) Being Resolute to Solve Whatever Racial Issues for the Sake of their Common Better Future

Obama convinced every American that it was about time to do their parts to take more concrete actions to heal the old racial wounds for their common good and better future. With the greater power of all Americans of the most diverse backgrounds together, Americans would be capable of solving the enormity of their universal problems.

*But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.*

*.....  
The fact is that the comments ... reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through — a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American. (Video 5: 14:-15:13)*

2) The Text

Referring to the whole prepared text of Obama's *A More Perfect Union* speech, obviously Obama only slightly modified the prepared text in the actualization of the speech by adding words or clauses for



drawing more attention or emphasis, repeating some part of the previous clauses for drawing more attention or emphasis, and adjusting the structures or the choice of words as selectively exemplified:

... I describe the experience of my first service at Trinity: It goes as follows: (Video 5: 9:58-10:04)

Now, some will see this as an attempt to justify or excuse comments that are simply inexcusable. (Video 5: 13:51-57)

Understanding (applause) ... understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. (Video 5: 15:15-39)

... they must always believe (applause) ... they must always believe that they can write their own destiny. (Video 5: 25:34-47)

There is a young, 23-year-old woman – a white woman – named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, S.C. (Video 5: 33:42-52)

The following is a scrutiny of the speech in terms of Zarefsky's selected list of some of the principles of orality and choices of stylistic resource.

(a) Simplicity

The need to pack more complex ideas and their relations seemed to have influenced the structure of the language of the speech to be more complex. However, Obama was quite skillful in reducing the complexity of the structures of the language of his speech by creating smaller semantic unit breaks of the complexity in his oral delivery.

*Farmers and scholars, / statesmen and patriots / who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny / and persecution / finally made real / their declaration of independence / at a Philadelphia convention / that lasted through the spring of 1787.* (Video 5: 00:21-39)

(b) Repetition

Obama repeated key ideas for drawing more attention from his audience, more convenient footing of delivery as well as emphasis of the messages being delivered.

... they must always believe ... they must always believe that they can write their own destiny. (Video 5: 25:34-47)

*This time (applause) ... this time, we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together and fight together and bleed together under the same proud flag.* (Video 5: 31:55-32:13)

(c) Informality

Eventhough the language of the speech was a little more formal than any other Obama's speech, he obviously made attempts to reduce the degree of formality of his speech than otherwise in written presentation.

... current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past – these things are real and must be addressed... (Video 5: 27:32-41)

... since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins.

Thank you very much audience. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. (Video 5: 36:52-37:00)

(d) Reflexivity

Throughout the speech Obama dominantly referred to the unity between he himself and his supporters of whatever racial backgrounds by the use of the "inclusive" first person plural pronoun as high as 123 (2.47 %) consisting of "we" (66) and its possessive form "our" (42) , objective form "us" (14), and reflexive form "ourselves" (1). He also used the first person singular pronoun as high as 83 (1.67 %) consisting of "I" (40), "my" (31) and "me" (12), of which having the highest frequency of occurrences of all Obama's speeches, obviously to indicate Obama's strong determination to spell out succinctly his position regarding racial issues related to his political agenda for the nation as a whole.

*This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign — to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have*

*different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren. (Video 5: 02:15-03:06)*

Obama also referred to situations, for instance, as he was describing the existing segregation and discrimination.

*Segregated schools were and are inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, 50 years after Brown v. Board of Education (applause). And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.*

*Legalized discrimination — where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions or the police force or the fire department — meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between blacks and whites, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persist in so many of today's urban and rural communities. (Video 5: 16:13-17:19)*

(e) Clarity

Obama spoke as clearly as possible to the audience on race relation in the U.S.A. Obama was, for instance, quite skillful in driving home his point regarding the unity of all Americans for their common future despite their most diverse backgrounds.

*I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren. (Video 5: 02:35-03:06)*

(f) Rhythm

Obama had a rhythm of using repetition of key ideas to hold his audience's interest and involvement in the message being delivered.

*Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution — a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time. (Video 5: 01:11-36)*

(g) Vividness

Obama gave crystal clear anecdotes of a white volunteer — Ashley Baia — and an elderly black volunteer to illustrate his point that everybody would have to start to do their part in the task of perfecting the nation.

*By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.*

*But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger . . . that is where the perfection begins. (Video 5: 36:17-37:00)*

3) The Audience

This great speech on race was delivered on March 18, 2008, at the Constitution Center in Philadelphia. The choice of this place was also symbolic as Philadelphia is known as home of both The American Declaration of Independence and The US Constitution. The video available shows how Obama was standing against the backdrops of tall poles bearing the national flags on either side of him - a necessary prop to support the significant message on race being resumed from the high ground of the power as vested in the US Constitution, thus giving the opportunity for Obama to start from the same ground as also shared by his audience. Unlike most videos of Obama's speeches available, the video on race available does not show a bit the audience present in the moment of the speech's delivery. Not until almost the middle of the speech did the Audience's applause just began to be heard. This could

have told that this speech, unlike Obama's other electoral speeches that were delivered in particular caucuses or primaries, was set up on a higher position. The direct audience was important, but the target audience – indirect audience – were undoubtedly much more important as the issues being addressed were to settle the racial bubbles that could be damaging to Obama's candidacy and – not the least important – was the position that Americans would have to take to perfect their union.

B. The Second Step of the Rhetorical Analysis of the Actual Delivery of Barack Obama's Speech on Race: "A More Perfect Union"

Race was and is probably still a complex issue in the U.S.A. However imperfect it may be, Obama was quite able to read that America has done tremendous progresses in race relation. It was from the very beginning that Obama realized that his political base was not politics of identity restricted to a particular group of Americans. He argued that it was time for Americans to go beyond racial divisiveness to realize the unity of all Americans in pursuit of their common better future. The coalition of Americans of the most diverse backgrounds had come up as the new majority to become Obama's backbone.

Obama realized that the race issue was really that serious to the point that could potentially be damaging to his candidacy. The most potentially damaging was probably the controversy over a story began to be released by ABC news in March 2008 that examined the incendiary statements made by his long-time pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. From Rev. Wright's taped sermons, he was seen as, among other things, saying "God Damn America" as his denunciation to the policies of the United States Government (Malik, n.d.). On the basis of that sort of denunciation and Rev. Wright's other incendiary statements and Obama's own relation to his long-time pastor that Obama was severely attacked as clinging to a liberal "un-American" beliefs. However, Obama came up to deflate the damaging controversies; and in addition, he addressed quite powerfully the issue of race relation in the U.S.A urging every American to move beyond their racial wounds and they had no choice if they really wished to perfect their union. This happening reminded Americans of a most similar damaging issue that was successfully tackled by John F. Kennedy's speech in defense of separation of church and state when his candidacy was challenged by those who made an issue of his Catholic faith.

Obama's determination to come up as a strong guy began on Saturday, March 15, 2008 when dictated a lengthy draft of what was to become "A More Perfect Union" to his speechwriter, Jon Favreau, who edited it the next morning. Obama kept working on the draft until the following Tuesday and sent the final copy to both Favreau and his campaign strategist, David Axelrod early that Tuesday morning, March 18, 2008. Having read Obama's final draft of the speech, Favreau replied: "This is why you should be president"

### Conclusion

Obama's speech on race: "A More Perfect Union" displayed excellent rhetorical craftsmanship from both the first and the second rhetorical analyses.

Obama's strongly and powerfully interwoven rhetorical craftsmanship as seen from the rhetorical triangle was capable of deflating not only his long-time pastor's racially inflammatory and destructive language that could potentially ruin his candidacy, but also – more importantly – his powerful plea to all Americans to do their real part to heal the old racial wounds and divisiveness. Only by so doing could Americans, Obama powerfully convinced, be enabled to address and solve the enormity of their common problems.

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B. The Second Step of the Rhetorical Analysis of the Actual Delivery of Barack Obama's Speech on Race: "A More Perfect Union"

Race was and is probably still a complex issue in the U.S.A. However imperfect it may be, Obama was quite able to read that America has done tremendous progresses in race relation. It was from the very beginning that Obama realized that his political base was not politics of identity restricted to a particular group of Americans. He argued that it was time for Americans to go beyond racial divisiveness to realize the unity of all Americans in pursuit of their common better future. The coalition of Americans of the most diverse backgrounds had come up as the new majority to become Obama's backbone.

Obama realized that the race issue was really that serious to the point that could potentially be damaging to his candidacy. The most potentially damaging was probably the controversy over a story began to be released by ABC news in March 2008 that examined the incendiary statements made by his long-time pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. From Rev. Wright's taped sermons, he was seen as, among other things, saying "God Damn America" as his denunciation to the policies of the United States Government (Malik, n.d.). On the basis of that sort of denunciation and Rev. Wright's other incendiary statements and Obama's own relation to his long-time pastor that Obama was severely attacked as clinging to a liberal "un-American" beliefs. However, Obama came up to deflate the damaging controversies; and in addition, he addressed quite powerfully the issue of race relation in the U.S.A urging every American to move beyond their racial wounds and they had no choice if they really wished to perfect their union. This happening reminded Americans of a most similar damaging issue that was successfully tackled by John F. Kennedy's speech in defense of separation of church and state when his candidacy was challenged by those who made an issue of his Catholic faith.

Obama's determination to come up as a strong guy began on Saturday, March 15, 2008 when dictated a lengthy draft of what was to become "A More Perfect Union" to his speechwriter, Jon Favreau, who edited it the next morning. Obama kept working on the draft until the following Tuesday and sent the final copy to both Favreau and his campaign strategist, David Axelrod early that Tuesday morning, March 18, 2008. Having read Obama's final draft of the speech, Favreau replied: "This is why you should be president"

#### Conclusion

Obama's speech on race: "A More Perfect Union" displayed excellent rhetorical craftsmanship from both the first and the second rhetorical analyses.

Obama's strongly and powerfully interwoven rhetorical craftsmanship as seen from the rhetorical triangle was capable of deflating not only his long-time pastor's racially inflammatory and destructive language that could potentially ruin his candidacy, but also – more importantly – his powerful plea to all Americans to do their real part to heal the old racial wounds and divisiveness. Only by so doing could Americans, Obama powerfully convinced, be enabled to address and solve the enormity of their common problems.

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