

Boyang Li

History 124B

Professor Novoa

April 25th, 2020

Analysis on "The Final Year" and It's relation to "A More Perfect Union"

The last president, Barack Obama, is still being reminisced by a lot of American people nowadays. Despite the detest for the current president, one of the major reasons is that in Obama's time, the United States had better domestic policies as well as foreign relations compared to that of today. Two resources separately reflect both aspects: the documentary film "The Final Year" and the speech Obama gave in 2008, "A More Perfect Union".

The Final Year is a documentary film directed by Greg Barker, released in 2017. The film focused on what Obama's foreign policy team, namely John Kerry, Samantha Power, Susan Rice, and Ben Rhodes, did and the events happened in his last year in office. As oppose to what many people might expect, the documentary did not put much emphasis on how Obama was doing in his last year in office, but rather focused on how people working around him and for him did in his final year. Event wise, the film described the major foreign events happened in his last year, such as the visit to Cuba, Vietnam, Japan, and Cameron as well as foreign policies on Iran and Syria. Obama's personal image, however, was mainly built by the interviews of his foreign policy team with occasionally his actual speech footages.

However, although it is a documentary film, *The Final Year* is clearly biased in Obama's favor. Obama's last year in the White House was part of the presidency that has been criticized the most, and from the film we could see that the director was clearly trying to reframe this narrative. The chosen footages of Obama's speech as well as his daily life is trying to convert the message that Obama is a leader with clear goals. Also because of the special relation between Obama and his foreign policy team, the narratives from the main characters in this documentary is also more prone to outweigh the positive side of Obama's behaviors over the negative side. Interestingly, the documentary did not at all cover other people's point of view. The interviewed group was limited within those who worked in Obama's office, therefore the voice of normal people (for example, their approval rating of Obama's last year in office or their point of view on Obama leaving the White House) are definitely excluded. Last but not least, the documentary did not at all mention the controversies in Obama's last year in office, and by selectively covering the events happened in the final year, the film is somehow biased in his favor. While the main audience of this documentary are going to be those who support Obama and reminisce his era, it makes sense for the documentary to have bias to make it more appealing to its potential audiences.

Interestingly, what Obama was trying to do portraits in this documentary corresponds to his speech delivered in Philadelphia on March 18th, 2008, in response to Rev. Jeremiah Wright for his speech which offends a lot of American people. In the speech, Obama discussed how Slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow resulted the racial division between generations as well as

the rhetorics being used within each racial community. He also concluded the historical contexts that resulted the point of view helped by the reverent when condemning his speech. On the first glance, there is not much relevance between the documentary and the speech. However, Obama talked about Philadelphia in the speech, where the Declaration of Independence was signed, as he mentioned in the speech:

“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.”¹

Declaration of Independence was also mentioned in the documentary, when Obama was asked by a young Vietnamese student for advices to become a great leader like him. In response, Obama responded that people are incentivized by not only money and power but stories. He also mentioned that the United States had a really good story called the Declaration of Independence and people should spend time listening to the stories that are important to other people — something he was emphasizing 7 years ago in the speech.

The speech and the documentary are acting like two different yet complementary parts talking Obama’s achievements as well as legacies (Although the speech was delivered before his presidency). In Obama’s era, a lot of social injustices were emphasized, especially the racial ones. Meanwhile, the international relationships between the United States and other countries were also better compared to the situation right now. In some way, the two resources concluded Obama’s legacy both domestically and internationally, although the speech was more like a

¹ Barack Obama, A More Perfect Union, 2008

prediction of what Obama would do with respect to racial divisions in the United States if he was elected president. In fact, we did see some of Obama's ideas being put in practice while he was the president. For example, in the speech in 2008 he said the following:

“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.”²

It turned out that during his term, Obama did try to push for changes in fields such as jobs and healthcare, such as millions of jobs he created³, the Obama Care, and the all-time-high 83.2% high school graduation rate.⁴ Meanwhile, the documentary recorded Obama's legacy in terms of foreign relations, such as Cuban thaw, the speech in Hiroshima, and the end of sanctions on Iran.

The two resources, combined together, did offer a good summary (again, although the speech is not really a summary as it was delivered before Obama's presidency) of Obama's legacy, both on his domestic policies to ease the racial divisions within the United States as well as his foreign policies internationally to gain more allies. They together did provide a picture of how U.S. presidents before him built up the American empire, both improve living conditions and human rights domestically and form allies internationally to amplify the American power.

² Barack Obama, *A More Perfect Union*, 2008, pp.14

³ The Balance, *Which President Created the Most Jobs?*, (thebalance.com, 2017)

⁴ NPR, *Obama's Impact On America's Schools*, (npr.org, 2020)