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Obama Asks America to Learn the Radical Lessons of Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall

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Radical historian Howard Zinn, who died three years ago, was persistently critical of almost all politicians, including our current president, but he would have been pleased to hear Barack Obama echo the idea of *The People's History of the United States* in his second inaugural speech. Obama said:

"We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths -- that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth."

For those unfamiliar with American history, Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall are touchstones of three of the key progressive movements -- women's rights, civil rights, and gay rights -- that have transformed America and turned the radical ideas of earlier generations into the common sense of today.

Seneca Falls is the small hamlet in update New York where activists held the first women's rights convention in July 1848. Activists Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Frederick Douglass were among the 300 people who spent two days discussing ways to promote women's equality. Building on the anti-slavery movement, the gathering catalyzed the crusade for women's suffrage that eventually (in 1920) secured women the right to vote and later inspired the modern feminist movement that since the 1970s has pushed for and won victories for gender equality.

Selma is a small town in segregated Alabama where a series of protests and marches in 1965 became a turning point in the civil rights movement, eventually led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act later that year. The first march took place on March 7 -- now known as "Bloody Sunday" because the 600 activists, planning to march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, were violently attacked by state and local police. A few days later, they marched again, but were turned around by police after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Undeterred, the inter-racial activists, led by Martin Luther King, began a third march on March 16 and arrived in Montgomery on March 24. News coverage of the brave marchers, and the horror of police beating the nonviolent protestors, helped shift public opinion. President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act in August, surrounded by Rev. King, Rosa Parks, and other civil rights leaders.

Stonewall is the name of a gay bar (the Stonewall Inn) in New York City's Greenwich Village where in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, patrons resisted arrest when police raided the bar, leading to a series of demonstrations that is considered the first protest action of the modern gay rights movement. The riots quickly led to the formation of several organizations dedicated to challenging not only police harassment of gay bars -- which was routine at the time -- but also of other forms of discrimination against gays and lesbians. The movement quickly spread across the country. The creation of gay civil rights groups, newspapers, parades, and other forms of activism eventually transformed the battle for equality from the margins to the mainstream of American society and politics.

The clear theme of Obama's speech -- "we the people" -- reflected his background as a community organizer as well as the wonderful coincidence of his second inauguration falling on Martin Luther King Day. It was an event filled with symbolism that looked back on the nation's history of hope and looked forward to a future of fulfilling the nation's promise of equality for all.

Merlie Evers-Williams, former head of the NAACP and widow of the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers, delivered the invocation. Richard Blanco, the first Latino (and child of immigrants) and openly gay man to serve as the inaugural poet, delivered his poem, "One Today," that celebrated the lives of ordinary people, in the tradition of radicals Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and Langston Hughes. Rev. Luis Leon, an Episcopal priest whose Washington, D.C., church that has openly gay priests, performs same-sex marriage, and openly welcomes gay members, gave the closing benediction. Leon, who came to the U.S. from Cuba as a 12-year-old child, is founder of the Washington Interfaith Network, a faith-based community organizing group affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, started by Saul Alinsky.

In evoking the battles at Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall -- and in selecting Evers, Blanco, and Rev. Leon to participate in the ceremony -- Obama was reminding Americans that the progress toward a better society is made primarily by people working together through social movements. He said:

"It is now our generation's task to carry on what those pioneers began. For our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers, and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law -- for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well. Our journey is not complete until no citizen is forced to wait for hours to exercise the right to vote. Our journey is not complete until we find a better way to welcome the striving, hopeful immigrants who still see America as a land of opportunity; until bright young students and engineers are enlisted in our workforce rather than expelled from our country. Our journey is not complete until all our children, from the streets of Detroit to the hills of Appalachia to the quiet lanes of

Newtown, know that they are cared for, and cherished, and always safe from harm. That is our generation's task -- to make these words, these rights, these values -- of Life, and Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness -- real for every American. Being true to our founding documents does not require us to agree on every contour of life; it does not mean we will all define liberty in exactly the same way, or follow the same precise path to happiness. Progress does not compel us to settle centuries-long debates about the role of government for all time - but it does require us to act in our time."

Throughout his speech, Obama exalted the importance of collective effort -- through movements, and through government -- to promote economic prosperity, protect the disadvantaged, lift the poor out of hardship, and address the danger of climate change: "Together, we resolved that a great nation must care for the vulnerable, and protect its people from life's worst hazards and misfortune."

And without direct reference to Mitt Romney, or the big business lobbyists who call for shredding the safety net while reducing corporate taxes, Obama slyly challenged his former opponent's outrageous statement that almost half of Americans are irresponsible "takers" who depend on the hard work of others.

"The commitments we make to each other through Medicare and Medicaid and Social Security, these things do not sap our initiative, they strengthen us. They do not make us a nation of takers; they free us to take the risks that make this country great."

He repeatedly emphasized the centrality of equality of a cornerstone of America's values.

"The patriots of 1776 did not fight to replace the tyranny of a king with the privileges of a few or the rule of a mob. They gave to us a republic, a government of, and by, and for the people, entrusting each generation to keep safe our founding creed."

Without directly attacking Wall Street or the nation's corporate titans, Obama nevertheless paid homage to the growing concern over rising inequality and the message articulated by the Occupy Wall Street movement: "For we, the people, understand that our country cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it."

At the end of his speech, without directly mentioning his own experience as a community organizer -- or urging Americans to take to the streets to mobilize to push for specific reforms -- Obama reminded us that it is the power of organized people that has made America a more humane and democratic society, and who "represent our greatest hope."

"You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course. You and I, as citizens, have the obligation to shape the debates of our time -- not only with the votes we cast, but with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals."

We cannot listen to or read those words and expect that Obama will lead America into the promised land on his own. He is a politician, pushed and pulled by the realities of power politics. But his inaugural speech invites us to organize and mobilize to build on the power of grassroots organizing and social movements he invoked by referring to Seneca Falls, Selma and Stonewall.

If we want to enact legislation to control the epidemic of gun violence, repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, enact comprehensive immigration reform, strengthen regulations to control the greed and abuses of big banks and corporations, adopt progressive tax reform so that the very rich pay their fair share, raise the minimum wage, and build a stronger labor movement, we should take Obama's words and translate them into direct action for social justice and peace.

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