

Obama's Farewell Speech

¹ [...] tonight, it's my turn to say thanks. Whether we have seen eye-to-eye or rarely agreed at all, my conversations with you, the American people, in living rooms and in schools, at farms, on factory floors, at diners and on distant military outposts – those conversations are what have kept me honest, and kept
⁵ me inspired, and kept me going. And every day, I have learned from you. [...]

I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it.

After eight years as your President, I still believe that. And it's not just my belief. It's the beating heart of our American idea – our bold experiment in self-
¹⁰ government. It's the conviction that we are all created equal, endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It's the insistence that these rights, while self-evident, have never been self-executing; that We, the People, through the instrument of our democracy, can form a more perfect union. [...]

¹⁵ For 240 years, our nation's call to citizenship has given work and purpose to each new generation. It's what led patriots to choose republic over tyranny, pioneers to trek west, slaves to brave that makeshift railroad to freedom. It's what pulled immigrants and refugees across oceans and the Rio Grande¹. It's what pushed women to reach for the ballot. It's what powered workers to orga-
²⁰ nize. It's why GIs gave their lives at Omaha Beach² and Iwo Jima³, Iraq and Afghanistan. And why men and women from Selma⁴ to Stonewall⁵ were prepared to give theirs, as well.

So that's what we mean when we say America is exceptional – not that our nation has been flawless from the start, but that we have shown the capacity to
²⁵ change and make life better for those who follow. Yes, our progress has been uneven. The work of democracy has always been hard. It's always been contentious. Sometimes it's been bloody. For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all and not just
³⁰ some. [...]

That's what I want to focus on tonight: The state of our democracy. Understand, democracy does not require uniformity. Our founders argued. They quarreled. Eventually they compromised. They expected us to do the same. But they knew that democracy does require a basic sense of solidarity – the idea that for all
³⁵ our outward differences, we're all in this together; that we rise or fall as one. [...]

Our democracy is threatened whenever we take it for granted. All of us, regardless of party, should be throwing ourselves into the task of rebuilding our democratic institutions. [...] Our Constitution is a remarkable, beautiful gift.

But it's really just a piece of parchment. It has no power on its own. We, the
40 people, give it power. We, the people, give it meaning. [...]

Because for all our outward differences, we, in fact, all share the same proud
title, the most important office in a democracy: Citizen. Citizen.

So, you see, that's what our democracy demands. It needs you. Not just
when there's an election, not just when your own narrow interest is at stake,
45 but over the full span of a lifetime. If you're tired of arguing with strangers on
the Internet, try talking with one of them in real life. If something needs fixing,
then lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you're disappointed by
your elected officials, grab a clipboard, get some signatures, and run for office
yourself. Show up. Dive in. Stay at it. [...]

50 My fellow Americans, it has been the honor of my life to serve you. I won't
stop. In fact, I will be right there with you, as a citizen, for all my remaining
days. But for now, whether you are young or whether you're young at heart, I
do have one final ask of you as your President – the same thing I asked when
you took a chance on me eight years ago. I'm asking you to believe. Not in my
55 ability to bring about change – but in yours.

I am asking you to hold fast to that faith written into our founding docu-
ments; that idea whispered by slaves and abolitionists; that spirit sung by immi-
grants and homesteaders and those who marched for justice; that creed reaf-
firmed by those who planted flags from foreign battlefields to the surface of the
60 moon; a creed at the core of every American whose story is not yet written: Yes,
we can. [...]

(768 words)

Source: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>

Annotations

- 1 Rio Grande: river running along the border between the USA and Mexico
- 2 Omaha Beach: name the allies gave to a beach in Normandy, France, where they landed on 6 June 1944, which was decisive for ending WW II in Europe
- 3 Iwo Jima: Pacific Island where the USA and Japan fought a decisive battle in WW II
- 4 Selma: city in Alabama, the starting point of a Civil Rights protest march
- 5 Stonewall: short for Stonewall Inn, a bar where in 1969 a group of homosexual and trans-gender people put up resistance against police violence