

REVIEW: 'Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union' is long, but worth the watch



CHENNAI: It could not have been easy for Barack Obama to have achieved what he did, with an African father from Kenya, a white mother from Kansas and a Muslim-sounding name. As the 44th president of the US and, most importantly, as the first-ever African American head of state, Obama created history and, well, lived up to it.



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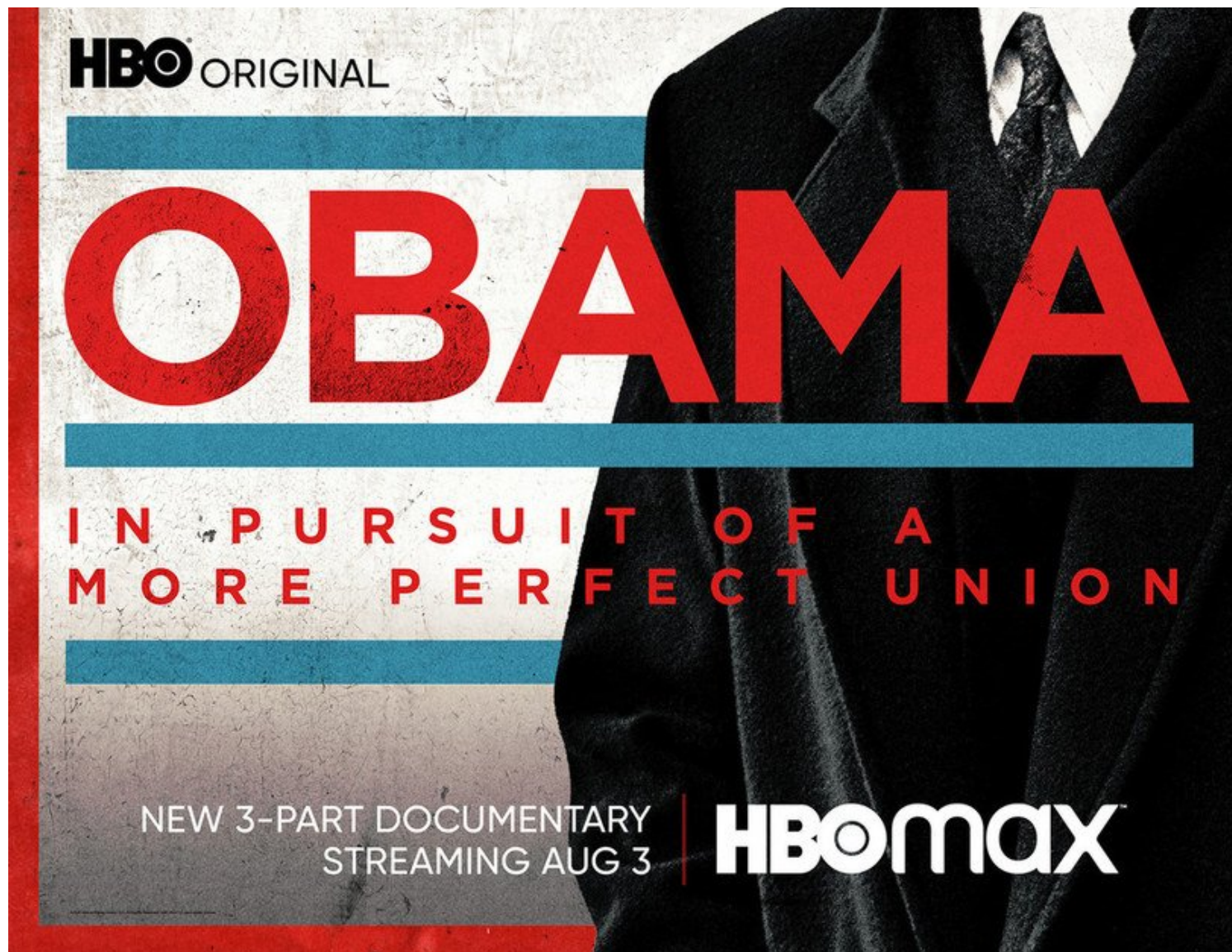
A three-part docu-series on Disney+, "Obama: In Pursuit of a More Perfect Union," is pretty long at five hours, and could certainly have been trimmed. We know most of what was shown in it, and there have already been several films and television series

covering him and former first lady Michelle Obama. Also, the Disney+ series has the feel of an “ode to a beloved president.” He was that, certainly, and perhaps is as adored as Kennedy, but the series could have been a little more critical.

Undoubtedly, as leader, Obama had a very, very difficult task ahead. He had to balance the white-and-Black equation, and was forced to ask whether he was an African American first and president later. Or was it the other way around? But as the docu-series affirms, he earnestly believed that he had to pursue a more perfect union. It was not about a Black America, white America or Latino America, but about the United States of America, he said — and he meant it, too.

But could he achieve this? Not really, as we can see today. Race relations in the US are still tenuous. But in all fairness, he himself believed that something that had been going on for 400 years could not be set right in eight or 10 years. Obama was weighed down by the dilemma that every African American faces — the “twoness” of a single man. And Obama had to carry this as president. Not an easy task.





The documentary was directed by Peter W. Kunhardt. Supplied

Director Peter W. Kunhardt (“Nixon by Nixon: In His Own Words” and “John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls”) examines this complex issue on Blackness and inclusiveness in interviews with the late representative John Lewis, reverend Jeremiah Wright, journalist Michele Norris, reverend Al Sharpton, professor Cornel West, author Ta-Nehisi Coates, political adviser Valerie Jarrett, professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., politician Jesse Jackson and author Michael Eric Dyson, among others. The Obamas are not interviewed for the series, and the only family member to appear is the former president’s Kenyan aunt.

The first part, which follows Obama from childhood all the way to his decision to run for president, begins with his famous “race” speech in March 2008. Obama used the make-or-break opportunity to address the issues of race in the US and promote the idea of American unity and hope.



The Disney+ series has the feel of an “ode to a beloved president.” Supplied

The second part, which covers his presidential run, reveals that Obama felt constant pressure “to define his identity along racial lines,” which left him “frustrated by what he saw as a distraction from other important issues.”

The third part turns to Obama’s time in the White House, which was dominated by the issues of healthcare, police brutality against African-Americans and mass shootings, including the massacre of Black congregants at a South Carolina church.

He also had to tackle an economic downturn — the most severe since the Great Depression.

Even though there is no dearth of literature on Obama — books and an autobiography included — Kunhardt's work takes us deeper into the dilemmas faced by the former president. One of them was the tightrope walking he had to do: Choosing to be a Black president or a president for all. It leaves one wondering whether he ever resolved this dilemma.
