Racial violence and presidential rhetoric

By Edward J. Blum

July 24, 2013

When Barack Obama addressed the "Trayvon Martin ruling" Friday, he did more than offer his "thought and prayers" to the family of Martin, applaud them for their "incredible grace and dignity," and narrate a history of racial surveillance that often leaves African Americans frustrated and even afraid. The president did more than acknowledge that the democratic judicial system had done its work, urge demonstrations to be peaceful, and call for close evaluations of "stand your ground" laws.

Obama took a moment where the nation was viciously debating its most cherished values through the death of a child and cast a vision for a better future through other children. His daughters and their generation, Obama intoned, are "better than we. They're better than we were on these issues." They would help create "not a perfect union, but a more perfect union." For a presidency defined by many firsts, this one seems to be yet another.

Approaching the topic personally, historically and legislatively, Obama's speech stands out in the history of presidential addresses on race and violence. Often, American presidents have accepted racial violence, remained silent on it or hidden behind passivity:

- When white Georgians desired the lands of Cherokee Indians in the 1820s and 1830s, Andrew Jackson justified Cherokee removal by juxtaposing "savage" Indians with God-fearing white Americans. He asked rhetorically, "And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian?"
- Thirty years later, near the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln made it clear that slavery was a cause of the conflict. But in his now-famous second inaugural, which Reinhold Niebuhr viewed as a model of political sermonizing, Lincoln cloaked responsibility behind the passive voice. Of the slaves, Lincoln intoned, "All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war." For

those who believed slaveholders were evil, Lincoln followed with “let us judge not, that we be not judged.”

- In response to the Scottsboro Boys case of 1931, Herbert Hoover’s administration initiated an investigation. Even after it was evident that the Alabama judicial system had mistreated the accused teenage African Americans, Hoover refused to pardon them.
- In 1963, after the bombing of Sixteen Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama, killed four young girls, John F. Kennedy expressed a “deep sense of outrage and grief.” At no point, however, did he personalize his message by naming the girls or invoking his own family.
- After New Yorker Bernhard Goetz used an unregistered firearm to shoot four African American teenagers in the 1980s (who were presumably trying to mug him), Ronald Reagan portrayed Goetz as “the victim.” Reagan’s administration had eagerly sought to protect citizens like Goetz in their use of violent reprisals.

The only speech in American history that approximates Obama’s was Lyndon Johnson’s address on the Voting Rights Act on March 15, 1965. It took place one week after violence had erupted in Selma, Alabama, where civil rights marchers had been attacked by police and local whites. In it, Johnson declared, “There is no Negro problem. There is no southern problem. There is no northern problem. There is only an American problem.”

Johnson called for federal legislation to protect the voting rights of all Americans, and he quoted the great civil rights song “We Shall Overcome.” He went even further, siding with those who had been oppressed. “The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety, and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation.” Ultimately, American greatness “depends upon the force of moral right—not on recourse to violence, but on respect for law and order.”

Throughout Obama’s presidency, he has often been compared to Abraham Lincoln. Both hail from Illinois, and Obama consciously deployed Lincolnian rhetoric in several of his early speeches. In response to the Zimmerman-Martin case, however, Obama took a page from Johnson’s book—calling upon Americans to side not with those who perpetuate violence but with those who have suffered from it.

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This post was edited July 24 to correct the date of President Johnson's address on the Voting Rights Act.