

In farewell, Obama urges faith and political engagement

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CHICAGO (RNS) In his final speech as president of the United States, President Barack Obama spoke of his faith in American democracy and warned his supporters not to retreat into despair.

Obama had returned to his adopted hometown of Chicago for his farewell address January 10 at McCormick Place.

It's the city where his political career began—where he had given his victory speeches on election night in 2008 at Grant Park and in 2012, also at McCormick Place.

And it's the city where, he said Tuesday, he “began working with church groups in the shadows of closed steel mills. It was on these streets where I witnessed the power of faith and the quiet dignity of working people in the face of struggle and loss.”

“This is where I learned that change only happens when ordinary people get involved, and they get engaged, and they come together to demand it,” he said.

That's not just his belief, he said. That's “the beating heart of our American idea,” and it's a theme the president returned to throughout his speech.

Obama touted what he saw as the successes of his presidency, including those that have received pushback from the religious right: the Iran nuclear deal, marriage equality, and the Affordable Care Act.

His statement that he rejected discrimination against Muslim Americans drew prolonged applause and cheers. President-elect Donald Trump, during the election campaign, had proposed a registry for Muslims and a ban on Muslim immigrants

entering the country.

The outgoing president also encouraged Americans to try harder, to pay attention and listen, to realize that “science and reason matter.” That’s important in a time, he said, when it’s “become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or on college campuses or places of worship or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions.”

Michael McBride, director of PICO National Network’s Live Free Campaign, called Obama’s farewell address “a primer on resistance.”

Resistance is a holy act, McBride said, when it’s resisting “evil” and the things that “war against the soul” and enacting justice instead. The president, in particular, had said ISIS would not defeat America, nor would Russia or China match its influence, if Americans did not betray the Constitution, their principles, and what they stand for.

“Our resistance must be grounded in hope and in the power of possibility in a future not yet determined and the wisdom of our ancestors and sacred texts,” McBride said.

For Christian author and blogger Kathy Khang, who came to the speech from the Chicago suburbs with her husband and two of her three children, the president’s encouragement for ordinary Americans to get involved in democracy was “very much in step with my faith, that it does matter how I believe, the choices I make or the actions that I take,” Khang said. “Not everybody in that room necessarily shared my religious convictions, but they heard from our president that it isn’t just our rhetoric, it’s our behavior” that matters.

Obama also addressed what Jacquelyn Dupont-Walker, director of the Social Action Commission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, called “the despair and anxiety people have about rhetoric which appears to take us back to a day in the past that was not so pleasant.”

Dupont-Walker said that for her the current political climate is “a moment of letdown,” and many may be tempted to hopelessness. But she remembered Scripture’s encouragement to take her burdens to God: “I don’t know yet why this happened, but I know it will be revealed. In the meantime, I need to be focused on what it is I’m supposed to do.”

Obama had warned in his speech against disengagement, urging those listening to do the work of democracy, maybe even to run for office, and always to assume the best of others.

That can be risky, he said. It can disappoint.

But, the president said, “More often than not, your faith in America—and in Americans—will be confirmed.”

“That faith that I placed all those years ago, not far from here, in the power of ordinary Americans to bring about change—that faith has been rewarded in ways I could not have possibly imagined,” he said.