

# “You Go Out and Make Me Do It”: The Bully Pulpit and the Articulation of Black Pain

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*In this essay, I argue that Obama frames the killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman as a national tragedy and worthy of commemoration. In short, Obama articulates to the American people the pain that African Americans felt after the verdict and invites all Americans to mourn. Moreover, I suggest that by framing black pain at the center of this "American tragedy," Obama invited all Americans to see "blackness" and its pain as part of the American fabric. However, I also argue that part of Obama's about face had to do with the mounting pressure and protests from the people who took to the streets and social media to not only condemn the verdict, but also call Obama into question. Therefore, I examine the rhetoric of some of the protests and the calls for Obama to "do something."*

**Keywords:** Barack Obama, George Zimmerman, Protest Rhetoric, Race, Racism, Trayvon Martin

In 2011, during an interview with *Democracy Now*, civil rights icon Harry Belafonte shared a story told to him and others by Eleanor Roosevelt. She told the story of the first meeting between her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the famed labor leader A. Phillip Randolph. On an invitation to the White House for dinner from Mrs. Roosevelt, Randolph had an opportunity to tell the President, according to Belafonte's retelling of the story, "his view of the state of the union from the Negro perspective and from the perspective of the black workers." Belafonte said that the president was "very stimulated by what Philip Randolph had to say." After speaking, Randolph waited for a response. Then according to Belafonte the president said to Randolph:

Mr. Randolph, I've heard everything you have to say, the way in which you've criticized the fact that I have not used the power of my platform sufficiently in the service of the workers of this nation, and particularly the Negro people, that I didn't use my bully pulpit more vigorously. And I cannot deny that that may be the case. As a matter of fact, I believe that is the case. And in that context, I'd like to ask you to do me a favor. And that is, if that is so, I'd like to ask you to go out and make me do what you think it is I should do. Go out and make me do it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Harry Belafonte on Obama: 'He Plays the Game that He Plays Because He Sees No Threat from Evidencing Concerns for the Poor,'" *Democracy Now*, January 26, 2011, [http://www.democracynow.org/2011/1/26/harry\\_belafonte\\_on\\_obama\\_he\\_plays](http://www.democracynow.org/2011/1/26/harry_belafonte_on_obama_he_plays).

Belafonte shared that story in response to Amy Goodman's question, "What is Your Assessment of President Obama?"<sup>2</sup> While critiquing Obama for not using his "powers" to "make choices, not only for legislation, but for public discourse and debate, in a greater way than he has," he also criticized the public for not pressuring him to do so. For Belafonte, absent was a movement that would push Obama to do, what for him, needed to be done. Belafonte lamented:

What is sad for this moment is that there is no force, no energy, of popular voice, popular rebellion, popular upheaval, no champion for radical thought at the table of the discourse. And as a consequence, Barack Obama has nothing to listen to, except his detractors and those who help pave the way to his own personal comfort with power — power contained, power misdirected, power not fully engaged. And it is our task to no longer have expectations of him, unless we have forced him to the table and he still resists us. And if he does that, then we know what else we have to do, is to make change completely. But I think he plays the game that he plays because he sees no threat from evidencing concerns for the poor. He sees no threat from evidencing a deeper concern for the needs of black people, as such. He feels no great threat from evidencing a greater policy towards the international community, for expressing thoughts that criticize the American position on things and turns that around. Until we do that, I think we'll be forever disappointed in what that administration will deliver.<sup>3</sup>

For Belafonte, what Obama needed most was a "force, an energy, rebellion, popular upheaval or some radical thought" of some sorts to make him do what needed to be done.

Fast forward two and a half years later and on July 19, 2013, President Barack Obama delivered a speech responding to the verdict in the George Zimmerman case. The jury in the case found Zimmerman not guilty of the murder of Trayvon Martin in February 2012. The verdict prompted surprise and outrage and caused many to question yet again the justice system and its fairness when it came to African Americans seeking justice. What also surprised many pundits was that Obama responded the way he did at all.

Immediately after the verdict, the president issued a statement that while calling the death of Trayvon Martin "a tragedy," he also reminded Americans that we are a nation of laws and that the jury had spoken. He further challenged Americans "to respect the call for calm reflection from two parents who lost their young son" and called for Americans to "ask ourselves if we're doing all we can to widen the circle of compassion and understanding in our own communities."<sup>4</sup>

We should ask ourselves if we're doing all we can to stem the tide of gun violence that claims too many lives across this country on a daily basis. We should ask ourselves, as individuals and as a society, how we can prevent future tragedies like this. As citizens, that's a job for all of us. That's the way to honor Trayvon Martin.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Others believe that this story is apocryphal at best. See Bruce A. Dixon, "Harry Belafonte Explodes the Presidential 'Make me do it' Myth," *San Francisco Bay View*, May 27, 2011, <http://sfbayview.com/2011/05/harry-belafonte-explodes-the-presidential-%E2%80%98make-me-do-it-%E2%80%99-myth/>; Martin Berg, "The Real Story Behind 'Make Him Do It,'" *Where's Our Money*, September 15, 2009, <http://www.wheresourmoney.org/the-real-story-behind-make-him-do-it/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Harry Belafonte on Obama."

<sup>4</sup> Barack Obama, "Statement by the President," *The White House*, July 14, 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/14/statement-president>.

<sup>5</sup> Obama, "Statement by the President."

For many, Obama's statement was not enough. Mychal Denzel Smith, writing for *The Nation* asked, "How long are we supposed to remain calm when the laws we are called to respect exist in an open assault on our humanity? The arc of the moral universe bends slowly. Our lives are on the line right now."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Obama's "statement" reminded them of the delicate balance the president has to navigate when speaking of race-sensitive topics. Obama quickly learned this lesson back in 2009 when he commented that the police acted "stupidly" when an officer arrested African American Harvard professor Henry Louis "Skip" Gates at his home for disorderly conduct. After the infamous beer summit and after the DA assigned to the case elected not to charge Gates for disorderly conduct, the incident still caused a huge drop in the president's approval ratings among white voters. Since that incident, during both his first and second terms, it would seem that the White House had elected not to get involved in race charged incidents.<sup>7</sup>

However, Obama's speech in the Press Briefing Room served as a departure from his silence on race since the Gates incident. Instead of issuing a carefully worded statement that did not mention anything about race, Obama decided it was time to broach the subject. In this essay, I argue that Obama frames the killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman as a national tragedy and worthy of commemoration. In short, Obama articulates to the American people the pain that African Americans felt after the verdict and invites all Americans to mourn. Moreover, I argue that by framing black pain at the center of this "American tragedy," Obama invited all Americans to see "blackness" and its pain as part of the American fabric. However, I also argue that part of Obama's about face had to do with the mounting pressure and protests from the people who took to the streets and social media not only to condemn the verdict, but also to call Obama into question. Therefore, I examine the rhetoric of some of the protests and the calls for Obama to "do something."

## Presidential Rhetoric and Race

When speaking about race, Coe and Schmidt argue that "no single figure is more important in shaping this meaning and influencing the tenor of these discussions than is the president."<sup>8</sup> In their research they set out to answer the question, "How do U.S. presidents, in general, talk about race?" They start by noting that there has been a "presidential silence" when it comes to race:

The vast majority of major presidential addresses make no mention of race whatsoever, and those addresses that do so almost always do so in passing rather than in detail. Presidents do sometimes discuss race in the context of policy, but more often mention it only briefly, as just one in a list of identity categories. It might be tempting to dismiss these

<sup>6</sup> Mychal Denzel Smith, "Trayvon Martin: From Lament to Rallying Cry," *The Nation*, July 15, 2013. <http://www.thenation.com/article/trayvon-martin-lament-rallying-cry/>.

<sup>7</sup> See Krissah Thompson, "Arrest of Harvard's Henry Louis Gates Jr. Was Avoidable, Report Says," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/30/AR2010063001356.html>; Krissah Thompson, "Obama Addresses Race and Louis Gates Incident," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/22/AR2009072203800.html>; Cheryl W. Thompson, Krissah Thompson, and Michael A. Fletcher, "Gates, Police Officer Share Beers, Histories With President," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/30/AR2009073003563.html>; Jon Cohen, "Obama Involvement in Gates Flap Hurt Image, Poll Finds," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/30/AR2009073004097.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Coe and Anthony Schmidt, "America in Black and White: Locating Race in the Modern Presidency, 1933-2011." *Journal of Communication*, 62 (2012): 611.

findings as a case of researchers simply looking for something in the wrong place, but the analytical strategy used in this study prevents such a conclusion....The inescapable conclusion of these data is that modern presidents have not given race the kind of attention that a topic so central to American life would seem to deserve.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, when presidents addressed race, they typically framed the discussion within a universal framework instead of specific. According to Coe and Schmidt, they found that much of presidential rhetoric on race “rarely focuses on specific groups.” “Instead,” they argue, “it follows the habit of much presidential rhetoric, tending toward the general at the expense of the specific.”<sup>10</sup> However, Coe and Schmidt suggest a reason as to why presidential rhetoric on race is so limited.

At a general level, the trends uncovered here point to a reality of presidents’ race discourse: It is a largely reactive rather than proactive force. Presidents rarely seek opportunities to talk seriously with the American public about the issue of race unless they are compelled to do so by the tenor of times. The evidence presented here on the parameters of quantity, framing, and antiracism all point to this conclusion. The civil rights era demanded that presidents address race and they did so, though even then the extent of the discussion was not overwhelming. Race largely disappeared from presidential view after that era, except when uncommon events, such as the Rodney King verdict in the early 1990s, demanded discussion.<sup>11</sup>

They do note that an exception to this is the rhetoric of Bill Clinton. However, they argue that the rule is clear: “Presidents avoid talking about race if at all possible.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, despite the Henry Louis Gates kerfuffle, Obama’s decision to be race neutral may have been nothing more than presidential rhetorical strategy.

### **Rhetoric of Protests: In the Streets and In the Suites**

As Obama and the administration stayed race neutral, many others viewed this decision from the lens of race. The decision to acquit Zimmerman of any wrongdoing set off a wave of protests all across the country. Much of the response first started on social media and then went out to the streets. Protests in Atlanta, Washington D.C., and New York attracted thousands as protesters who chanted “No Justice, No Peace” and “This is what Democracy Looks Like.” Pastors and church leaders led prayer vigils across the country. Some even saw this as an injustice that rivaled the murder of Emmett Till<sup>13</sup> while others in Washington D.C. carried signs that read, “Stop Criminalizing Black Men,” “Trayvon We will Never Forget You,” and “Only White Life is Protected in America.”<sup>14</sup> The NAACP started a petition asking then Attorney General Eric Holder to

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<sup>9</sup> Coe and Schmidt, “America in Black and White,” 621.

<sup>10</sup> Coe and Schmidt, “America in Black and White,” 622.

<sup>11</sup> Coe and Schmidt, “America in Black and White,” 623.

<sup>12</sup> Coe and Schmidt, “America in Black and White,” 624.

<sup>13</sup> Ashton Pittman, “Justice Denied: Is Trayvon Martin Post-Racial America’s Emmett Till?” *Occupy.com*, July 17, 2013, <http://www.occupy.com/article/justice-denied-trayvon-martin-post-racial-americas-emmett-till>.

<sup>14</sup> Carol D. Leonning and Jenna Johnson. “Anger Flows at Acquittal of George Zimmerman in Death of Trayvon Martin,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/anger-flows-at-acquittal-of-george-zimmerman-in-death-of-trayvon-martin/2013/07/14/e1a1216a-ec98-11e2-bed3-b9b6fe264871\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/anger-flows-at-acquittal-of-george-zimmerman-in-death-of-trayvon-martin/2013/07/14/e1a1216a-ec98-11e2-bed3-b9b6fe264871_story.html); Benjamin R. Freed, “Protesters March Through D.C. After George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty in Death of

take some action. In the petition, the NAACP declared that it was “time for the Department of Justice to Act.” “The most fundamental of civil rights,” they said, “the right to life — was violated the night George Zimmerman stalked and then took the life of Trayvon Martin. We ask that the Department of Justice file civil rights charges against Mr. Zimmerman for this egregious violation.”<sup>15</sup>

While some protesters focused their attention on the Justice Department to take action, many directed their frustration towards President Obama. Keli Goff, writing for *The Root*, suggested that Obama failed both “Black America and Trayvon” when he released his initial response. “For starters,” she wrote, “one way to honor Trayvon would be to have an honest conversation about why his death happened. You can’t do that without mentioning the issue of race.”<sup>16</sup> She further wrote that

[T]he White House strived to do everything possible to distance the president from the ugly truths and incredibly uncomfortable conversations this case forced many Americans to have. The most uncomfortable is the one in which people are forced to admit that even some white Americans who voted for Obama would probably fear a man who looked exactly like him if he were walking down the street at night wearing jeans and a hoodie—and not because he was wearing a hoodie, but because he was a black man wearing a hoodie.<sup>17</sup>

Calling the subtle racism a cancer that needs to be removed, she wrote, “For the president to not even acknowledge the existence of such a cancer is unconscionable.” Goff argued that the president should say more about this type of racism.

The president should say more. When it comes to issues like sky-high black unemployment, President Obama has spent much of his tenure in office running so far from the issue of race that he is close to falling off a cliff. Many of us forgave him for his silence before the last election, recognizing that the cancer of subtle racism that killed Trayvon could quite possibly kill the re-election hopes of any black candidate who dared have the courage to honestly discuss the racial dynamics of the case. But now he is in his final term, and yet he continues to pretend that our country’s racial cancer is in remission.<sup>18</sup>

In an editorial in the *Washington Post*, Janet Langhart Cohen wrote that “few expected the president to denounce the (Zimmerman) verdict or call upon people to take to the streets in protest, but we did expect him to speak in a way that touched the heartbreak, despair and quiet rage that so many of us feel at this moment.”<sup>19</sup> Addressing Obama’s silence on race and other issues germane to the African American community, Cohen wrote

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Trayvon Martin,” *DCist*, July 14, 2013. [http://dcist.com/2013/07/protesters\\_march\\_through\\_dc\\_after\\_g.php#photo-1](http://dcist.com/2013/07/protesters_march_through_dc_after_g.php#photo-1).

<sup>15</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, “Open a Civil Rights Case Against George Zimmerman,” NAACP.org, <http://www.naacp.org/page/s/doj-civil-rights-petition>.

<sup>16</sup> Keli Goff, “Obama Fails Black America and Trayvon,” *The Root*, July 14, 2013, [http://www.theroot.com/blogs/blogging\\_the\\_beltway/2013/07/obama\\_fails\\_black\\_america\\_and\\_trayvon.html](http://www.theroot.com/blogs/blogging_the_beltway/2013/07/obama_fails_black_america_and_trayvon.html).

<sup>17</sup> Goff, “Obama Fails.”

<sup>18</sup> Goff, “Obama Fails.”

<sup>19</sup> Janet Langhart Cohen, “After Zimmerman Verdict, Obama Needs to Speak About Racism,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2013 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-zimmerman-verdict-obama-needs-to-speak-about-racism/2013/07/16/a3b48432-ee28-11e2-9008-61e94a7ea20d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/after-zimmerman-verdict-obama-needs-to-speak-about-racism/2013/07/16/a3b48432-ee28-11e2-9008-61e94a7ea20d_story.html).

During this period of self-imposed silence, we have watched our criminal laws become racialized and our race criminalized. Blacks continue to be faced with punishing unfairness and inequalities. Soaring rates of unemployment, discriminatory drug laws, disproportionate prison sentences, unequal access to health care and healthy food, unfair stop-and-frisk policies and “accidental” shootings of unarmed black men by the police—these and more are treated with indifference or contempt. We’re told to stop complaining, to get over it. No one cares.<sup>20</sup>

She argued that there was a “fierce urgency of now for the president to talk boldly and truthfully about race and racism and why it still matters in the United States.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin<sup>22</sup>**

After reassuring the press corps that Jay Carney was going to take their questions and after reiterating his earlier statement, Obama framed the speech within the context of understanding “how people have responded to it (the verdict) and how people are feeling.” What Obama invited his audience to do was to imagine and maybe even to see how others responded to the verdict—a verdict that many found unjust.

Obama then shifts into the major part of his speech. He starts by saying that “You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot I said that this could have been my son.” However, after the verdict, Obama adds another way of interpreting his previous statement—“Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago.” Framed this way, the president moves from locating himself as a parent of a slain teen to a more concrete position—he locates his own body with that of the slain Trayvon Martin. By doing this, Obama does two things. First, when he says Trayvon “could have been my son,” he stands with not only the parents of Trayvon but also all parents who have had to grieve the death of a child by gunfire. Second, Obama’s comment, “Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago,” shifts the issue to its current position. The president invites his audience to see him as Trayvon Martin and to begin to understand some of the frustrations from a portion of Americans—African Americans.

With this as his frame, Obama then proceeds to address America from the White House Briefing Room on the pain African Americans feel in response to the Zimmerman verdict. After telling the nation that there is “a lot of pain around what happened here,” he also validates the pain by saying it is “important to recognize that the African American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn’t go away.” By locating the pain African Americans feel within a “set of experiences” that does not go away, Obama reiterates that the pain felt is a legitimate pain—a pain that others would also feel if the circumstances were turned around. Next, he locates his experience with this:

There are very few African American men in this country who haven’t had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven’t had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me—at least before I was a senator. There are very few African Americans who haven’t had the experience of getting on an elevator

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen, “After Zimmerman Verdict.”

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, “After Zimmerman Verdict.”

<sup>22</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all of the quotations in this section come from Barack Obama, “Remarks from the President on Trayvon Martin,” *The White House*, July 19, 2013. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>.

and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.

By framing his narrative this way, Obama places himself with the many people who are racially profiled. “That includes me,” signifies the complete understanding of this feeling—whereas “at least before I was a senator indicts not a removing of the racism, but an elevation of class and notoriety. As he admits, since becoming a senator, he has not been subjected to racial profiling; Obama does not dismiss the racial profiling from others. In short, Obama’s critique that racial profiling continues remains as he moves to the elevator comment of women clutching their purses when African Americans get on the elevator.

After not wanting to exaggerate this (speaking of racial profiling and race biases), Obama suggests that those “sets of experiences inform how the African American community interprets what happened one night in Florida” and “it’s inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear.” Further, he surmises that “The African American community is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws—everything from the death penalty to enforcement of our drug laws. And that ends up having an impact in terms of how people interpret the case.”

Obama argues that African Americans not only see the case from their own perspective, but they have reason to see the case this way. In short, the president validates African American interpretation of the Zimmerman case. African Americans are not crazy, too sensitive, or too radical—there is a “history of racial disparities” that gives rise to these feelings and it shapes the way many African American interpret the case.

Obama continues this line of thinking when he speaks on the frustration of African Americans when he notes that

African American boys are painted with a broad brush and the excuse is given well, there are these statistics out there that show that African American boys are more violent—using that as an excuse to then see sons treated differently causes pain.....

But they get frustrated, I think, if they feel that there’s no context for it and that context is being denied. And that all contributes I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different.

Here, Obama not only shares the frustration of many African Americans and the excuses that folks use to treat sons differently, Obama also offers a new way to see this incident. By introducing a different “scenario,” adding a white male teen to the mix instead of a black teen, Obama, while careful not to agree himself, suggests that many African Americans see the case this way.

After offering some directions and suggestions that Americans can do to honor the memory of Trayvon Martin, Obama closes this part of the speech with a powerful reflection.

And for those who resist that idea that we should think about something like these “stand your ground” laws, I’d just ask people to consider, if Trayvon Martin was of age and armed, could he have stood his ground on that sidewalk? And do we actually think that he would have been justified in shooting Mr. Zimmerman who had followed him in a car because he felt threatened? And if the answer to that question is at least ambiguous, then it seems to me that we might want to examine those kinds of laws.

Obama offers a reversal in “black fear.” In Obama’s reshaping of the narrative, by placing a gun in an “of age” Trayvon Martin’s hand, the president can then, by way of rhetorical question ask if Trayvon Martin could “have stood his ground on that sidewalk?” Further, by asking again rhetorically, “do we actually think that he (Martin) would have been justified in shooting Mr. Zimmerman who had followed him in a car because he felt threatened,” the president does two things. First, by framing this part of the speech using rhetorical questions, Obama invites his audiences to reflect on this event itself. In reversing the roles, Obama, instead of telling the audience what to see, hopes that the audience can see not by leaving race out, but by beginning to examine their own race biases. Second, and more politically important, Obama uses the rhetorical questions to call for at least an examination of Stand Your Ground Laws. In short, the president argues that if one could not see an “of aged” Trayvon Martin (again a reminder that Martin was indeed a child when he was fatally shot) standing his ground, the law probably is unfair both as it is written and in its application and interpretation.

### Race and the Bully Pulpit

In examining a portion of Obama’s remarks after the Zimmerman verdict, I argue that for the first time, America heard its president not only describe black pain, but also affirm its manifestation. I suggest this is new to the American experience—that previous presidents, Democrats or Republicans have not articulated the pain of the African American experience. Moreover, while I demonstrate that he does it here in this speech, this critique prior to the speech would have included Obama as well. The reason why this speech was a surprise to many was the fact that Obama continuously stayed away from race themed topics throughout both terms.

On an episode of Meet the Press, Tavis Smiley, a vocal critic of the administration’s policies, called the speech “weak as pre-sweetened Kool-Aid,” and added

I appreciate and applaud the fact that the president did finally show up. But this town has been spinning a story that’s not altogether true. He did not walk to the podium for an impromptu address to the nation; he was pushed to that podium. A week of protest outside the White House, pressure building on him inside the White House pushed him to that podium. So I’m glad he finally arrived.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Smiley’s critique of Obama, we should not dismiss his insight here. What if the protest outside the white House and all over the country moved the president to rethink his rhetorical stance on the Zimmerman verdict? The *New York Times* reported that after days of “angry protests and mounting public pressure,” the president summoned five of his top advisers to the Oval Office to talk about a verbal response to the George Zimmerman verdict.<sup>24</sup> According to one of the president’s senior aides, Obama spoke “without interruption” for about fifteen minutes on “why the not-guilty ruling had caused such pain among African-Americans.”<sup>25</sup> After hearing from the president and his determination to make a statement, his team decided that Obama

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Shapiro, “Tavis Smiley On Obama’s Trayvon Martin Speech: ‘He Was Pushed To That Podium,’” *Huffington Post*, July 21, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/21/tavis-smiley-obama-trayvon-martin-pushed-podium\\_n\\_3631739.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/21/tavis-smiley-obama-trayvon-martin-pushed-podium_n_3631739.html).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Landler and Michael Shear, “President Offers a Personal Take on Race in U.S.,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/20/us/in-wake-of-zimmerman-verdict-obama-makes-extensive-statement-on-race-in-america.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/20/us/in-wake-of-zimmerman-verdict-obama-makes-extensive-statement-on-race-in-america.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>25</sup> Landler and Shear, “President Offers a Personal Take.”

should speak about the verdict in “brief interviews with four Spanish-language television networks.”<sup>26</sup> That plan did not work because none of the interviewers asked him about the verdict. Therefore, according to the *Times*, the White House was well aware of the protests, the anger and the disappointment from the people.<sup>27</sup>

This new found rhetorical agency was on display with his remarks after the announcement of the grand jury’s decision not to indict Darren Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown. Understanding lessons from the Zimmerman verdict and feeling pressure from activists, protesters, and civil rights leaders, Obama eschewed presidential race talk protocol when offering his remarks. After reminding the nation that we are a “nation of laws” and appealing especially to protesters for peace, Obama also appealed to law enforcement officials in Ferguson to “show care and restraint in managing peaceful protests that may occur.”<sup>28</sup> “As they do their jobs in the coming days,” he continued, “they need to work with the community, not against the community, to distinguish the handful of people who may use the grand jury’s decision as an excuse for violence—distinguish them from the vast majority who just want their voices heard around legitimate issues in terms of how communities and law enforcement interact.”<sup>29</sup>

Further, he reminded the nation that “Ferguson speaks to broader challenges that we still face as a nation. The fact is, in too many parts of this country, a deep distrust exists between law enforcement and communities of color. Some of this is the result of the legacy of racial discrimination in this country.”<sup>30</sup> After reminding the nation that “we have made enormous progress in race relations, he followed by saying

But what is also true is that there are still problems and communities of color aren’t just making these problems up. Separating that from this particular decision, there are issues in which the law too often feels as if it is being applied in discriminatory fashion. I don’t think that’s the norm. I don’t think that’s true for the majority of communities or the vast majority of law enforcement officials. But these are real issues. And we have to lift them up and not deny them or try to tamp them down. What we need to do is to understand them and figure out how do we make more progress. And that can be done.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued that the protests coming after the Zimmerman verdict had an effect on Obama reexamining his racial rhetoric. By speaking on the Zimmerman verdict, Obama used the bully pulpit to not only speak on the issue of race and racial biases and profiling, but also included African Americans into the nation’s fabric. This time, the President of the United States, the president for all the people, offered a pedagogical speech in which he attempted to explain and teach to some, why some African Americans felt hurt and betrayed, yet again, by a system that many tell them to trust. In doing so, he brought issues germane to the African American community to

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<sup>26</sup> Landler and Shear, “President Offers a Personal Take.”

<sup>27</sup> Landler and Shear, “President Offers a Personal Take.”

<sup>28</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President After Announcement of the Decision by the Grand Jury in Ferguson, Missouri,” The White House, November 24, 2014. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/24/remarks-president-after-announcement-decision-grand-jury-ferguson-missou>.

<sup>29</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President After Announcement.”

<sup>30</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President After Announcement.”

<sup>31</sup> Obama, “Remarks by the President After Announcement.”

the forefront and reassured the African American community that he in fact does see and that the African American pain is part of the fabric of America—when one hurts, we all hurt.

This led to his response following the grand jury's decision not to indict Darren Wilson. Instead of issuing a generic race safe statement, Obama delved into some of the issues and problems that the country faced when it comes to race. I suggest that this would not have happened without the pressure of the people pushing and asking for a deeper and thoughtful reflection on race from the president.

This work is in its embryonic stages and I have only taken a small sample here. Future work could examine how after the Zimmerman verdict, Obama talked about race in settings primarily made up of African Americans. In addition, critics can examine Obama's race talk with other speeches of commemoration such as his speeches at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma march,<sup>32</sup> the ten year anniversary of Katrina<sup>33</sup> or even the eulogy of Clementa Pinckney.<sup>34</sup> Critics can examine just how Obama's rhetorical trajectory on race shifts (or not) during these and other speeches.

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<sup>32</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the 50th Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery Marches," *The White House*, March 7, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-anniversary-selma-montgomery-march>

<sup>33</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President on the Ten Year Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina," *The White House*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/28/remarks-president-ten-year-anniversary-hurricane-katrina>

<sup>34</sup> Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney," *The White House*, June 26, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>.