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Why did Obama speak out on Trayvon Martin now?

While downplaying the prospect of a federal civil rights case against George Zimmerman, President Obama offered his own views on the impact of racial disparities on young black men and their families. 'There's a lot of pain,' he said.



President Obama pauses as he speaks to reporters in the Brady Press Briefing room of the White House on Friday, reacting to the jury verdict after the fatal shooting of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin. (Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

By Peter Grier, Staff Writer / July 19, 2013 at 5:34 pm EDT

WASHINGTON

President Obama made a surprise appearance before the White House press corps Friday and delivered highly personal remarks about the aftermath of the George Zimmerman trial and the experience of being an African-American male in the United States.

Expanding on comments made after a Florida jury found the neighborhood watch volunteer not guilty of murdering Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen, Mr. Obama said the trial was conducted in a professional manner. The president praised the dignity shown by Trayvon's parents throughout the ordeal.

Then he went on to talk about what he called the context of the case, and how

people, especially the African-American community, are receiving it.

“When you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there’s a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it’s 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,” Obama said.

Most African-American men have been followed by security when shopping in a department store, said the president – including himself, when younger.

“The African-American community is also knowledgeable that there is a history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws,” said Obama.

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The president then discussed how the African-American community is not “naïve” about the fact that black males are disproportionately represented among both perpetrators and victims of crime. But some of that violence and the poverty endemic in black neighborhoods can be traced to the nation’s difficult history, the president said.

“So folks understand the challenges that exist for African-American boys, but they get frustrated, I think, if they feel there’s no context for it, or that the 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,” said the president.

So, what to do? The president raised that issue, noting that, among other things, the Justice Department is reviewing whether to bring federal civil rights charges against Mr. Zimmerman. But he indicated those might not be forthcoming.

“Traditionally, these are issues of state and local government,” Obama said.

But it might be useful for the Justice Department to expand the availability of police training in avoiding racial profiling, according to the president. States could perhaps reflect on the nature of stand-your-ground laws, and other statutes that might encourage violence as much as protect against it. Everyone could consider how the nation could further bolster the prospects for young African-American males.

“As difficult and challenging as this whole episode has been for a lot of people, I don’t want us to lose sight that things are getting better. Each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race,” Obama concluded.

The president’s remarks were a complete surprise to reporters, as noted above, and delivered on Friday afternoon, which is usually a slow news time in Washington. That did not mean they were unimportant, according to some political

observers.

As the first African-American president, Obama may know that history will judge how he handles issues that have racial elements. Yet in the past, he has often shied away from direct comments on race, writes the Washington Post's political analyst Chris Cillizza on his "Fix" blog.

In that sense, Obama's Friday comments, delivered almost off-the-cuff, without notes or a teleprompter, may mark a major moment in his presidency, according to Mr. Cillizza.

"The personalization of his remarks suggest a man who, like many had hoped when he made history with his election in 2008, wants to leave a lasting legacy on both race relations and the place in society for young men," writes Cillizza.

Some conservative pundits said that, while they did not agree with Obama's focus on the possibility that gun laws add to violence, they appreciated the fact that the president was trying to start an honest conversation on race.

"I don't really have a problem with the president's speech today," said RedState editor and CNN commentator Erick Erickson.

But a few others accused Obama of trying to divide America by race himself.

"I like living in a country where a black president elected twice complains about racism," tweeted Breitbart.com columnist John Nolte.

As to practical implications, Time Magazine's senior national correspondent Michael Grunwald spoke for many in Washington when he said that Obama may be trying to prepare the African-American community for the inevitable: Attorney General Eric Holder is not going to file civil rights charges against Zimmerman.

"Not to be prosaic, but Obama wouldn't have said that stuff about Trayvon if there was going to be a federal case," Mr. Grunwald tweeted.

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