



The President Stands His Ground

By Shanin Specter
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President Obama's oral essay on the meaning to African-Americans of Trayvon Martin's death and George Zimmerman's acquittal is an amazing window into the heart and soul of the president.

It speaks volumes that the president felt the need to speak at length, with no teleprompter, without notice, on an exquisitely delicate subject, in a deeply personal way, on a sleepy, slow-news Friday afternoon. It was an unprecedented combination for this president—it may be unprecedented for any president.

By making a surprise, long, personal, sensitive, and obviously heartfelt presentation, Obama was saying to all of America, "Please listen, know this is from me, from my heart, and please know this matters."

Perhaps because the remarks, as delivered, weren't all carefully scripted, the words he used also tell us a lot about Obama.

He spoke of the "Trayvon Martin ruling." But the case was captioned "State of Florida vs. George Zimmerman," and that, or something like it, is the way most lawyers would refer to the case. And it wasn't just a "ruling," it was a jury verdict. The president, as a Harvard-trained lawyer, surely knows these things.

But he doesn't look at it that way. He looks at it as the Martin family's case, because, though he's been a lawyer for 22 years, he's been an African-American for 51 years, and that experience defines him much more than his legal training.

He commented on the grace and dignity of the Martin family. And that's true. But there wasn't any comment about Mr. Zimmerman or his family, who, by most accounts, also comported themselves credibly. Why not? It's because the president repeatedly and explicitly identifies himself with Trayvon Martin. This seems to domi-

nate his thinking, even beyond his role as the president of us all and the chief law-enforcement officer of the nation.

Most tellingly, in describing the humiliations suffered by young black men, the president used the present tense: "That happens to me." He caught himself and said this pre-dated his becoming a senator. But the slip more likely reflects an underlying truth: Obama feels that others think he's dangerous because he's black.

It is undoubtedly true that many Americans look at the president through a bigoted lens. To date Obama has been determined not to talk about that, likely because to complain is to risk a corrosive quagmire. By acknowledging that his race defines how some regard him, the president nods to reality. It's about time that he—and we—confront the unfortunate fact that some of the opposition to the president is rooted in bigotry. And while it might be preferable if a president's reference point for a criminal trial weren't his own race and his own experience, it's good that he's said it and good that we know it.

This candor provides essential context to the president's vital message. He told all of America how and why they can and should understand why African-Americans are angry about the verdict. He told African-Americans not to overdo their protests and to remember that race relations are improving. He gave some good suggestions for how we can improve our society.

Every American should carefully examine the president's remarks with an open mind. Race relations are perhaps the greatest unresolved issue in our nation, and the president's thoughts are deep and provocative.

But maybe most interesting is what we now know about the heart and soul of Obama. And that helps assure that his remarks of July 19, 2013, will be an indelible historical contribution.