

Obama urges Americans to ‘be honest’ about racial division

July 13, 2016

DALLAS—President Obama joined others in honoring five Dallas law enforcement officers who gave their lives, and he called for the kind of unity that demands an honest appraisal of racial disharmony in the United States.

Obama spoke at a memorial service at the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center for five police officers gunned down by a sniper July 7 in downtown Dallas. The service—closed to the general public—drew a capacity crowd of more than 2,000 law enforcement officers, dignitaries and families of fallen officers.

Exposed fault lines

“We must be honest with each other and ourselves,” Obama said in a Scripture-filled speech in which he balanced respect for police and for those who have rallied around the Black Lives Matter cause.

The ambush of police officers—five killed and six others injured—in what he called an “act of demented violence” after a peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstration brought to the surface deep underlying division in America.

“The deepest fault lines of our democracy have been exposed—perhaps even widened,” he said.

From suffering to hope

However, he called on Americans to “reject despair” and embrace the hope that develops out of suffering.

“Scripture tells us that in our suffering, there is glory, ‘because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope,’” he said, quoting the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:3-4.

‘The America I know’

Obama urged citizens to recognize “the America I know,” characterized by the selfless and sacrificial acts of the five officers who were killed and others who were wounded.

He applauded the restraint of law enforcement personnel who “were upholding the constitutional rights” of people registering complaints about police and who gave their lives protecting the protesters.

He praised the “strength and grace and wisdom” Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings, who is white, and Police Chief David Brown, who is African-American, demonstrated in the hours and days after the shooting.

“The Dallas Police Department has been doing it the right way,” he said, lauding the city’s community-based approach to law enforcement.

‘None of us is entirely innocent’

Even so, he said, America needs to acknowledge both the progress that has been made in race relations since the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement and the challenges that remain.

“Race relations have improved dramatically in my lifetime,” Obama said. “Those who deny it are dishonoring the struggles that helped us achieve that progress. But America, we know bias remains. ... None of us is entirely innocent.”

Obama applauded the “overwhelming majority of police officers (who) do an incredibly hard and dangerous job fairly and professionally,” saying, “They are deserving of our respect and not our scorn.”

Open hearts

At the same time, protesters should not be dismissed as “troublemakers or paranoid,” he asserted.

“Whites and people of color experience the criminal justice system differently,” he said.

Citing God’s promise to the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel to remove a heart of stone and give him a new heart, Obama asked, “Can we find the character as Americans to open our hearts to one another?”

‘Grief-stricken, heartbroken and forever grateful’

Former President George W. Bush, a Dallas resident, also addressed the memorial service, praising the fallen police officers as “the best among us.”

“We are grief-stricken, heartbroken and forever grateful,” he said, saying citizens of Dallas experienced “five deaths in the family.”

Bush acknowledged powerful forces separating Americans from each other.

“Argument turns too easily into animosity,” he said. “Disagreement escalates too quickly into dehumanization. Too often, we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions.”

Bush urged Americans to unite around common values.

“It is not a mere matter of tolerance,” he said. “At our best, we practice empathy. At our best, we honor the image of God we see in one another.”

Confront evil with good

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, insisted the “men of uncommon courage” who were killed or wounded on July 7 were not overcome by evil.

"They chose to confront evil by overcoming it with good," he said. "They overcame evil by running toward the sound of the gunfire. They overcame evil by shielding their fellow citizens from the spray of bullets."

The interfaith memorial service included prayers offered by an African-American pastor, a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim imam.

Members of six churches in the area—including Park Cities Baptist, Royal Lane Baptist and Concord Baptist in Dallas and St. John Baptist in Grand Prairie—participated in a mass choir.