

Obama Delivers Defense of His Policy Efforts
The New York Times
July 25, 2012
By Helene Cooper

NEW ORLEANS — President Obama wrapped up a three-day fund-raising swing with an emotional appearance here at the National Urban League conference, issuing a robust defense of his efforts to make higher education more affordable, to increase training programs for young people and to expand access to health care.

“From the highest court in the land, health care reform is here to stay,” the president said in a no-holds-barred presentation of what he considers the accomplishments of his term.

Announcing an education initiative for African-Americans, the president challenged his mostly black audience to take advantage of the government programs he has fought to put in place.

“I want all these young people to be getting a higher education, and I don’t want them loaded with thousands of dollars of debt,” Mr. Obama said, to a standing ovation.

Then he paused: “Of course that means all of y’all got to hit the books. Don’t cheer and then don’t do your homework.”

The president also spoke of the need to do more to keep guns out of the hands of troubled people, in the wake of the shootings last week at a movie theater in Aurora, Colo. Besides saying that federal and local efforts should be redoubled, he called on families to step in, as well.

“We have no greater mission as a country than to keep our young people safe,” Mr. Obama said. “But we have to understand that when a child opens fire on another child, there’s a hole in that child’s heart that government can’t fill.”

Before Mr. Obama spoke, many members of the audience in the convention center here were moved to tears by a video that showed the highlights of the civil rights movement. Set to words and music of the black spiritual anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the video montage included the visages of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Rosa Parks and Thurgood Marshall.

It ended, as everyone knew it would, with the Obama family and America’s first black president, but that foregone conclusion did not seem to affect the emotional punch.

By the time Mr. Obama walked onto the stage, the audience had been on its feet cheering for five minutes straight.

Mr. Obama spoke about his early days as a community organizer in Chicago, and cast his efforts to retain the presidency in historical terms, talking about “the belief that in America, change is always possible.”

“Our union may not be perfect, but it is perfectible,” he said, adding that “we can strive through effort, through blood and sweat and tears until it is the place we imagined.”

In response to the speech, an aide to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign said that Mr. Romney would be a better choice for black voters because of his experience in business and as governor of Massachusetts.

Tara Wall, a senior communications adviser for the campaign, said in a statement: "As black Americans, we all take pride in Barack Obama's historic election — but unfortunately his performance as president has not matched that enthusiasm. He's disappointed black small business owners, failed to address rising black unemployment — which now stands at over 14 percent, and is double that among our youth — and failed to address the widening economic disparity gap."

Mr. Obama's appearance Wednesday before the National Urban League came at the end of the day when the issue of race flared up in the campaign.

Earlier Wednesday Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. sharply criticized what he called a "feeble attempt by the Romney campaign to score political points" overseas.

He was referring to an article in London's Daily Telegraph — in which an unidentified Romney adviser suggests that because Mr. Romney is white he has more in common with Britain than Mr. Obama does.

"We are part of an Anglo-Saxon heritage, and he feels that the special relationship is special," the adviser is quoted as telling the newspaper. "The White House didn't fully appreciate the shared history we have."

Mr. Biden, in a statement that the Obama camp e-mailed to reporters, said the comments were "a disturbing start to a trip designed to demonstrate Governor Romney's readiness to represent the United States on the world's stage."

He called it "just another feeble attempt by the Romney campaign to score political points at the expense of this critical partnership."

Furious Romney campaign aides lashed back.

"Today, the race for the highest office in our land was diminished to a sad level when the vice president of the United States used an anonymous and false quote from a foreign newspaper to prop up their flailing campaign," a Romney spokesman, Ryan Williams, said in a statement. "The president's own press secretary has repeatedly discredited anonymous sources, yet his political advisers saw fit to advance a falsehood."

Obama aides were not backing down.

Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One en route to New Orleans, Jennifer Psaki, a campaign spokeswoman, declined to characterize the remark as race-baiting, but said, "There are countless examples, which I'm happy to provide, of occasions where Mitt Romney and his surrogates have questioned whether the president understood America or freedom, and that really goes over a line that we think they shouldn't."

Jay Carney, the White House press secretary, called the remark "gratuitously ignorant of the facts."

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