

Remarks on the Situation in Ferguson, Missouri, and an Exchange With Reporters

November 24, 2014

The President. Good evening, everybody. As all of you know, a few moments ago, the grand jury deliberating the death of Michael Brown issued its decision. It's an outcome that, either way, was going to be subject of intense disagreement not only in Ferguson, but across America. So I want to just say a few words suggesting how we might move forward.

First and foremost, we are a nation built on the rule of law. And so we need to accept that this decision was the grand jury's to make. There are Americans who agree with it, and there are Americans who are deeply disappointed, even angry. It's an understandable reaction. But I join Michael's parents in asking anyone who protests this decision to do so peacefully. Let me repeat Michael's father's words: "Hurting others or destroying property is not the answer. No matter what the grand jury decides, I do not want my son's death to be in vain. I want it to lead to incredible change, positive change, change that makes the St. Louis region better for everyone." Now, Michael Brown's parents have lost more than anyone. We should be honoring their wishes.

I also appeal to the law enforcement officials in Ferguson and the region to show care and restraint in managing peaceful protests that may occur. Understand, our police officers put their lives on the line for us every single day. They've got a tough job to do to maintain public safety and hold accountable those who break the law. As they do their jobs in the coming days, 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.

Finally, we need to recognize that the situation in 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. And this is tragic, because nobody needs good policing more than poor communities with higher crime rates. The good news is, we know there are things we can do to help. And I've instructed Attorney General Holder to work with cities across the country to help build better relations between communities and law enforcement.

That means working with law enforcement officials to make sure their ranks are representative of the communities they serve. We know that makes a difference. It means working to train officials so that law enforcement conducts itself in a way that is fair to everybody. It means enlisting the community actively on what should be everybody's goal, and that is to prevent crime.

And there are good people on all sides of this debate, as well as in both Republican and Democratic parties, that are interested not only in lifting up best practices with—because we know that there are communities who have been able to deal with this in an effective way—but also who are interested in working with this administration and local and State officials to start tackling much-needed criminal justice reform.

So those should be the lessons that we draw from these tragic events. We need to recognize that this is not just an issue for Ferguson, this is an issue for America. We have made enormous progress in race relations over the course of the past several decades. I have witnessed that in my own life. And to deny that progress, I think, is to deny America's capacity for change.

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.

That won't be done by throwing bottles. That won't be done by smashing car windows. That won't be done by using this as an excuse to vandalize property. And it certainly won't be done by hurting anybody. So to those in Ferguson, there are ways of channeling your concerns constructively, and there are ways of channeling your concerns destructively. And Michael Brown's parents understand what it means to be constructive. The vast majority of peaceful protesters, they understand it as well.

Those of you who are watching tonight, understand that there's never an excuse for violence, particularly when there are a lot of people in goodwill out there who are willing to work on these issues.

On the other hand, those who are only interested in focusing on the violence and just want the problem to go away need to recognize that we do have work to do here and we shouldn't try to paper it over. Whenever we do that, the anger may momentarily subside, but over time, it builds up, and America isn't everything that it could be.

And I am confident that if we focus our attention on the problem and we look at what has happened in communities around the country effectively, then we can make progress not just in Ferguson, but in a lot of other cities and communities around the country.

Okay?

Federal Role in Ferguson, MO/Media Coverage

Q. Mr. President, will you go to Ferguson when things settle down there?

The President. Well, let's take a look and see how things are going. Eric Holder has been there. We've had a whole team from the Justice Department there, and I think that they have done some very good work. As I said, the vast majority of the community has been working very hard to try to make sure that this becomes an opportunity for us to seize the moment and turn this into a positive situation.

Q. [Inaudible]

The President. But I think that we have to make sure that we focus at least as much attention on all those positive activities that are taking place as we do on a handful of folks who end up using this as an excuse to misbehave or to break the law or to engage in violence.

Q. Are Federal—

The President. I think that it's going to be very important—and I think the media is going to have a responsibility as well—to make sure that we focus on Michael Brown's parents and the clergy and the community leaders and the civil rights leaders and the activists and law enforcement officials who have been working very hard to try to find better solutions, long-term solutions, to this issue.

There is inevitably going to be some negative reaction, and it will make for good TV. But what we want to do is to make sure that we're also focusing on those who can offer the kind of real progress that we know is possible, that the vast majority of people in Ferguson, the St. Louis region, in Missouri, and around the country are looking for. And I want to be partners with those folks. And we need to lift up that kind of constructive dialogue that's taking place.

All right?

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:08 p.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Michael Brown, Sr., and Lesley McSpadden, parents of Michael Brown, who was shot by a police officer in Ferguson, MO, on August 9.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Situation in Ferguson, Missouri; Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Brown, Michael, Jr.; Brown, Michael, Sr.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; McSpadden, Lesley.

Subjects: Civil rights : Minorities :: Relations with police; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Missouri : Civil unrest in Ferguson.

DCPD Number: DCPD201400887.