

President Obama to CBC: 'Shake it Off'...'March With Me and Press On!'

Written by Helen Trice Edney
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The crowd went wild when they walked onto the stage at the annual Congressional Black Caucus Phoenix Awards Dinner. Despite pervasive outcries from African-Americans that he must do more to quell the Black unemployment rate, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle received a welcome nearly as rowdy as their first year.

“She looks fabulous!” yelled one man, commenting on her attire and svelte physic. As the First Lady exited the stage, the first Black President of the United States dived head-long into the topic that CBC Chairman Emmanuel Cleaver had just told the audience was his first, second and third priority – “Jobs!”

By the time President Obama was finished, he had them back on their feet, clapping wildly, cheering, nodding in agreement that – while facing difficult times – everyone needs to be “the good kind of crazy.”

“A few years back, Dr. Lowery and I were together at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma,” he said, speaking of the civil rights icon the Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery who later receive a Phoenix Award. “And Dr. Lowery stood up in the pulpit and told the congregation the story of Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. You know the story. It’s about three young men bold enough to stand up for God, even if it meant being thrown in a furnace. And they survived because of their faith. And because God showed up in that furnace with them.”

He continued as the audience applauded and chuckled. “Now, Dr. Lowery said that those three young men were a little bit crazy. But there’s a difference, he said, between good crazy and bad crazy...Those boys, he said, were ‘good crazy.’ At the time, I was running for president - it was early in the campaign. Nobody gave me much of a chance. He turned to me from the pulpit, and indicated that someone like me running for president - well, that was crazy. But he supposed it was good crazy.”

Facing plummeting poll numbers and grumbling from his Black voting base, many of whom complain that he has not done enough to quell the economic suffering in African-American communities, Obama asked the audience to stand with him with the crazy faith of Shadrach and

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Meshach and Abednego.

"I suppose the reason I enjoy coming to the CBC - what this weekend is all about is, you and me, we're all a little bit crazy, but hopefully a good kind of crazy," he said as the audience applauded repeatedly. "We're a good kind of crazy because no matter how hard things get, we keep the faith; we keep fighting; we keep moving forward."

From the Wall Street and Main Street crisis three years ago to this moment as "the unemployment rate for black folks went up to nearly 17 percent -- the highest it's been in almost three decades," the President articulated the current realities of Black people.

"Forty percent, almost, of African-American children living in poverty; fewer than half convinced that they can achieve Dr. King's dream. You've got to be a little crazy to have faith during such hard times," he said. "It's heartbreaking, and it's frustrating. And I ran for President, and the members of the CBC ran for Congress, to help more Americans reach that dream. We ran to give every child a chance, whether he's born in Chicago, or she comes from a rural town in the Delta. This crisis has made that job of giving everybody opportunity a little bit harder," he said.

If there was a reframe in the President's speech, it was his repeated appeal for Congress – including CBC members – to American Jobs Act that he unveiled in early September.

Dozens of times, he repeated, "Let's pass this jobs bill...I want this bill to pass."

Appealing to the applauding audience, he said, "I've got the pens all ready. I am ready to sign it. And I need your help to make it happen."

Reminding the audience of his own challenges in life, he reflected on his and Michelle Obama's backgrounds.

"When Michelle and I think about where we came from - a little girl on the South Side of

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Chicago, son of a single mom in Hawaii - mother had to go to school on scholarships, sometimes got food stamps. Michelle's parents never owned their own home until she had already graduated - living upstairs above the aunt who actually owned the house. We are here today only because our parents and our grandparents, they broke their backs to support us," he said.

The President did not ignore the frustration expressed by many CBC members and Black voters at large.

"And I know at times that gets folks discouraged. I know. I listen to some of you all. I understand that. And nobody feels that burden more than I do. Because I know how much we have invested in making sure that we're able to move this country forward. But you know, more than a lot of other folks in this country, we know about hard. The people in this room know about hard. And we don't give in to discouragement."

Appearing to hit a home run at the end, he closed the speech by quoting Dr. King and reminding the audience of the struggles of the past and how African-Americans have always overcome. The speech ended to rousing applause, a standing ovation, and hopes lifted as if the disappointment had melted away.

"Throughout our history, change has often come slowly. Progress often takes time. We take a step forward, sometimes we take two steps back. Sometimes we get two steps forward and one step back. But it's never a straight line. It's never easy. And I never promised easy. Easy has never been promised to us. But we've had faith. We have had faith. We've had that good kind of crazy that says, you can't stop marching."

"Even when folks are hitting you over the head, you can't stop marching. Even when they're turning the hoses on you, you can't stop. Even when somebody fires you for speaking out, you can't stop. Even when it looks like there's no way, you find a way - you can't stop. Through the mud and the muck and the driving rain, we don't stop. Because we know the rightness of our cause - widening the circle of opportunity, standing up for everybody's opportunities, increasing each other's prosperity. We know our cause is just. It's a righteous cause."

He quoted Dr. King: "Before we reach the majestic shores of the Promised Land, there is a

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frustrating and bewildering wilderness ahead. We must still face prodigious hilltops of opposition and gigantic mountains of resistance. But with patient and firm determination we will press on."

He concluded, "So I don't know about you, CBC, but the future rewards those who press on. With patient and firm determination, I am going to press on for jobs. I'm going to press on for equality. I'm going to press on for the sake of our children. I'm going to press on for the sake of all those families who are struggling right now. I don't have time to feel sorry for myself. I don't have time to complain. I am going to press on.

"I expect all of you to march with me and press on. Take off your bedroom slippers, put on your marching shoes. Shake it off. Stop complaining, stop grumbling, stop crying. We are going to press on. We've got work to do, CBC."{jcomments on}