

NRB Asks Obama to Stand Up for Free Speech

President Barack Obama offered a touching eulogy at a memorial event for the victims of the Tucson shooting on Jan. 8. Obama asked Americans to channel their emotions toward the pursuit of a more perfect union, saying that “If this tragedy prompts reflection and debate—as it should—let’s make sure it’s worthy of those we have lost.”

But some wanted to hear more from Obama about free speech. Craig L. Parshall, senior vice president and general counsel of the National Religious Broadcasters, is among them. Parshall has published an open letter to the president, hoping for a response. The following is the text of Parshall’s letter:

Dear President Obama:

I watched with great interest your eloquent comments delivered at the Tucson, Arizona, memorial ceremony. I appreciated not only the beautiful and ennobling sentiments about the lives both lost and saved in this tragic shooting (as well as the numerous references to Scripture), but also your call for all of us to take stock of the things that really matter—such things as family, and service to others. But of course your speech was not delivered in a vacuum. It followed several days of commentary by many leaders in the Democrat Party who attempted to make a connection between this senseless act of violence and conservative media. Almost immediately, as the facts about the gunman started coming in, it was clear that this tragic act of violence was wrought by a man who was mentally unbalanced. No evidence indicated that he was motivated by the opinions of others delivered over the airwaves or the Internet. Despite that, Steve Israel, the Chair of the Democratic Congressional

Campaign Committee (DCCC), recklessly announced that the killings showed how “political rhetoric turns violent.” Dick Durbin (D-IL), the number two Democrat leader in the Senate, linked the shootings to “toxic rhetoric.” In media interviews, Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-MD), a key House leader as the Minority Whip, echoed the same thought. What concerns me is that these misguided ideas may lead to a new throttling of First Amendment rights in our nation. In the wake of the shootings, Rep. James Clyburn (D-SC) said he will introduce a bill reinstating the “Fairness Doctrine,” an obsolete and nefarious former FCC doctrine that was wisely abandoned in the 1980’s because of the devastating damage it did to the free speech rights of broadcasters. Rep. Robert Brady (D-PA) promised to introduce legislation making it a crime to use certain symbols in connection with comments about Members of Congress. A few days later, Governor Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island banned all state employees from giving interviews on talk radio programs.

The national press observed, as I did, that your speech attempted to address this issue of possible censorship of political rhetoric in general, and the conservative media in particular. The New York Times opined that your remarks contained “clear political ramifications,” and Politico noted that your speech was “undeniably political.” To your credit, you did appear to dispel the wild speculations that conservative commentary could be linked to the tragic events in Tucson. I also noted your call for what the press has called a return to “civility” in our public discourse. As the preeminent association of Christian broadcasters and communicators, we at National Religious Broadcasters expect our members to emulate this kind of respectful tone in their media comments. But while your speech said much that was noteworthy, there was also much that was left unsaid.

You called on America to “challenge old assumptions in order to lessen the prospects of violence in the future,” but did

not expand on that. As a former law professor, you know well, Mr. President, that the price of the First Amendment is that our citizens will often have to endure exposure to ideas that they vehemently oppose. I would like to believe that well-worn ideals of freedom of speech, free exercise of religion, and freedom of the press will not be part of those “old assumptions” that will be jettisoned. My concern is not unfounded. A new wave of anti-Christian censorship has arisen among “new media” platforms of communication, leading NRB to launch its John Milton Project for Religious Free Speech in an effort to reverse this trend. Commentators and even legal scholars are now openly suggesting the outlawing of so-called “hate speech” from not only talk radio, but also from the Internet—an idea that would inevitably translate to a gag rule against politically incorrect ideas including, we fear, statements of traditional Christian orthodoxy.

Against this troubling backdrop of calls for the suppression of opinion stands the White House, with all the prestige, instant media access, and “bully pulpit” power that comes with your high office. Mr. President, the time is now to state your position with clarity: to publicly voice your opposition to these unconstitutional legislative suggestions that have sprung, seemingly in full-bloom, from the blood-spotted soil of Tucson. After all, in what may be the ultimate irony, when shortly before the Arizona shooting the Members of the House of Representatives determined to read into the public record the words of the U.S. Constitution, Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was tasked to read aloud those very concepts now assailed by the pronouncements of some of her colleagues. She recited those historic, and familiar words contained in the First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of

grievances.

Do you agree with Parshall's letter? What should Obama do?