

How Obama's Presidency Helped the Black Lives Matter Movement

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In 2013, three organizers came together with a simple message: “Black Lives Matter.” Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi created a Black-centered political will and movement that called attention to Black humanity in the wake of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. In 2012, Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law protected Zimmerman as he claimed self-defense and was acquitted by a six-woman jury (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013). The eruption of emotions and widespread media coverage of police brutality in 2013 angered many, especially since there was—for the first time in America’s history—a Black man as president. As President and Black-American man, many contended that Barack Obama understood what it meant to be Black in America, and still, he fell short in protecting Black lives. This piece seeks to correct that misguided narrative and highlight his impact on the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Black Americans losing their lives at the hands of police is not a new phenomenon. Instead, it started as early as the nineteenth century with slave patrols that were created to monitor Black people in America—both free and enslaved (NAACP). These slave patrols laid the groundwork for modern policing that continues to affect Black Americans disproportionately. For decades, Black Americans have rallied and resisted a status quo that denies their humanity and continues to relegate them to a second-class citizenship status. In the 1960s and ‘70s, it was evident that America had a police brutality issue, given the constant rallies and riots that occurred. However, in 1991, Americans could no longer ignore this issue (NPR, 2017). In an unprecedented manner, all Americans could watch the footage of a violent encounter between a Black man, Rodney King, and the Los Angeles Police Department. Four police officers savagely

beat Rodney King, leaving him with a fractured facial bone, broken right ankle and teeth, and permanent neurological damage.

Barack Obama was no stranger to these issues. He worked as an organizer in Chicago, a city known for its disproportionate police presence in Black communities. And, in the 2008 presidential race, he campaigned on disparities between crack and powder cocaine punishments, an issue that primarily impacted communities of color. When the Black Lives Matter movement began, there was insurmountable pressure on the White House. Obama was America's first Black president, and Black Americans had high expectations for him regarding racial justice. With this presidential win, many White conservative Americans refused to recognize race, now believing America was post-racial. Despite this dichotomy of White conservative color-blindness and Black expectations, Obama used his administration to help the Black Lives Matter movement and its organizers to the best of his ability.

In 2013, George Zimmerman's acquittal caused nationwide protests. Americans, regardless of color, were furious (Reed, 2013). Zimmerman had not acted out of self-defense; instead, he initiated the conflict that resulted in the murder of an innocent Black teenager. In Los Angeles, demonstrators threw rocks and batteries at police officers. In New York, hundreds marched around Time Square carrying signs and chanting "Justice for Trayvon Martin." In Nashville, Beyoncé called for a moment of silence during her concert. Americans demanded change, and all eyes turned to the White House to see what the president would say about this issue. Initially, Obama called for calm and peace. Then, he gave an emotional, 20-minute speech about his own experiences with racism in America. He stated, "There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me." He also articulated that "Trayvon could have

been my son.” Obama was emotional but, more importantly, genuine in his message, resonating with Black and White Americans.

During Obama’s second term, the Black Lives Matter movement took off, and his administration significantly shaped this movement. Firstly, President Obama acknowledged racism and—cautiously—approved the Black Lives Matter Movement by speaking with activists and organizers. He understood the need for this movement, which would ultimately prove crucial to the movement’s success. Secondly, Black Lives Matter protestors did not have to fear opposition from the White House or federal agencies like the FBI. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black leaders were heavily surveilled by the FBI; there were also numerous efforts made to delegitimize and suppress many of these organizations (Hoban, 2021).

Obama was always cautious when speaking about race. As the first Black president of the United States, there was a different and unwritten set of rules and expectations for him. For instance, when Obama wore a tan suit to a press conference in 2014, it became a major news headline because the color was deemed “unpresidential.” Yet, in his second term, the names of victims of police brutality flooded the media: Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Michael Brown. Like Trayvon Martin’s death, Michael Brown’s death left a lasting impact on the Black Lives Matter Movement and America. When he was shot and killed in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, protests began *immediately* as Black Americans cried out in anger, sadness, and disappointment. The police in Ferguson responded with overwhelming force, creating a conversation in America around police militarization. *Is it too much?*, Americans asked themselves.

Obama sharply criticized the Ferguson police department for violations of the First, Fourth, and Fourteenth Amendments, even though the shooting was ruled justified. Activists

pushed for systemic solutions, and Obama pushed for the same. In 2014, he established the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which aimed to address police brutality by increasing body camera usage, establishing civilian review boards, providing additional training to police officers, and encouraging community policing. Additionally, in 2015, he issued an executive order to limit transfers and establish protocols for oversight and training. Activists' demands were not ignored; Obama's administration listened to them and changed the protocols. Before the Black Lives Matter movement, Obama's administration highlighted the importance of dialogue and community engagement. With the activist demands, his administration understood that structural and legal work had to be done.

With the creation and mobilization of the Black Lives Matter movement, there was nationwide attention on the issue of police brutality. Two central factors contributed to the success of this movement. First, the simple fact that Obama acknowledged the movement's legitimacy. The Black Lives Matter movement began with Black America. Obama did not 'stand in the way' of activists and organizers. Instead, he worked alongside them and attempted to realize their goals. His cooperation was vital to the movement's success, and the president remained on their side. Second, the media played a significant role in displaying police brutality as a continuous threat to Black Lives. The media has always been a powerful tool, but regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, Americans perpetually witnessed these tragedies on their Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook feeds. These events were shown on the news and discussed on the radio; this issue could not and would not be ignored. As Americans now saw and heard about the problem, many were galvanized to act and create change.

The claim that Barack Obama failed the Black Lives Matter movement overlooks the more profound ways in which his presidency laid the groundwork for its growth and impact. His

presence in the White House—as an unapologetically Black president navigating the highest office in a nation built on anti-Blackness—helped expose the limits of representation alone and fueled a new wave of activism. His administration’s Department of Justice investigations, the creation of the Task Force on 21st Century Policing, and his rhetoric on systemic racism gave legitimacy to issues that previous presidents ignored. More importantly, his presidency catalyzed a generation of Black activists to push beyond traditional politics and demand structural change. Far from stifling the movement, Obama’s tenure helped shape the conditions that made the Black Lives Matter movement an unstoppable force for justice.

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