

Silencing the Outrage: Obama Dog Whistles Over Trayvon

By [Margaret Kimberley](#)

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George Zimmerman was acquitted because the jury empathized with him as a fellow human being, and felt no such connection with Trayvon Martin and his tribe. White privilege – including the privilege to kill Black people – “is accepted and it continues like mass psychosis.” The verdict “tells us that we remain defeated, an oppressed people surrounded by but dependent upon enemies.”

There is much to be said about the verdict which found George Zimmerman not guilty in the killing of Trayvon Martin but one thing is clear. Racism is so deeply embedded in the white American consciousness that significant numbers of white people coalesced in support of Zimmerman without having to openly say so.

The infamous juror [known as B37](#) made that clear in an interview with CNN. She said that the case wasn't about race and that the jurors never discussed it. While her initial attempt to profit from her experience by shopping a book deal makes this woman disreputable, she is probably telling the truth. They didn't have to say out loud that they weren't going to make Zimmerman pay for his crime. They were on the same wave length all along.

Zimmerman never testified but B37 was sure that he feared for his life and she knew his thoughts and she even called him Georgie. Clearly the prosecution's efforts meant little for this woman and her fellow jurors who were determined to let Georgie go.

There is an understanding, like the instinct that tells birds where and when to migrate, which tells white people that they ought to rule black people. They profit from white supremacy quite literally and it is part of their natural order. It is accepted and it continues like mass psychosis. It isn't questioned and keeps black people locked up in jail, and unemployed, and every year it kills more than 300 black people at the hands of cops, security guards and Zimmerman-like vigilantes.

President Barack Obama surely understands this phenomenon. He has made a career out of speaking to white people while pretending to speak to black people. He would never have become president had he not mastered this skill. During his 2008 campaign he never passed up an opportunity to assure white people that their natural order was safe. He ranted that black men were terrible fathers, claimed that the country is “90% of the way” toward equality, called Jeremiah Wright an old crank who should shut up about racism, and so on.

In the wake of the raw anger and grief that black people felt about the Zimmerman verdict, the president was true to form. He spoke right over the heads of black people directly to

white people, once again engaging in “[dog whistle](#)” politics. Just as there are sounds which can be heard only by the canine ear, there is language which can be heard only by specific constituencies though they may appear to be created for others. While black people waited anxiously to hear a statement from him, [his words](#) regarding the verdict were tailor made for white America:

“The death of Trayvon Martin was a tragedy. Not just for his family, or for any one community, but for America. I know this case has elicited strong passions. And in the wake of the verdict, I know those passions may be running even higher. But we are a nation of laws, and a jury has spoken. I now ask every American to respect the call for calm reflection from two parents who lost their young son. And as we do, we should ask ourselves if we’re doing all we can to widen the circle of compassion and understanding in our own communities. We should ask ourselves if we’re doing all we can to stem the tide of gun violence that claims too many lives across this country on a daily basis. We should ask ourselves, as individuals and as a society, how we can prevent future tragedies like this. As citizens, that’s a job for all of us. That’s the way to honor Trayvon Martin.”

His seemingly nonsensical statement made perfect sense to its intended audience. “A jury has spoken.” In other words, shut up, get over it and don’t complain. To say that Martin’s death was a tragedy not just for his or for any one community is an outright lie. His death is a tragedy and a trauma more for black people than for any other group. Not only was his death not tragic to millions of Americans, but some were quite happy that Martin was killed and were happy when his murderer went free. “Tide of gun violence” meant only one thing. The president was in agreement with the white people who minimized Trayvon’s death by constantly bringing up violence within the black community. The “black on black violence” trope was intended to silence the outrage directed at Zimmerman’s slave patroller style murder.

Many people asked themselves why Obama said anything at all given that the Department of Justice announced it would investigate whether to file federal charges in the case. Those people miss the point entirely. He felt it important to speak to his people in the language they understand. The dog whistle range was clearly understood by the people he wanted to hear it.

In 2012 when the story of Martin’s death first became widely known Obama was caught off guard and had to throw black people a bone. He was forced to point out that if he had a son “he would look like Trayvon.” That was the last time he would publicly make a connection between himself and Trayvon Martin. All the more reason to blow the dog whistle at the opportune moment.

The crises facing black America did not become more acute when the verdict was announced. They were simply brought to the fore where they couldn’t be ignored. Times of crisis bring clarity. The clarity of the Zimmerman verdict is an ugly one. The verdict tells us that we remain defeated, an oppressed people surrounded by but dependent upon enemies. Our past victories are constantly undermined and we live a very precarious existence.

We don’t honor Trayvon Martin by shutting up and pretending that there is some mystery involved in preventing future hate crime murders. We honor him and ourselves by demanding justice. A few prominent cases of Zimmerman style vigilantes going to jail will prevent more killing. Obama and attorney general Eric Holder shouldn’t be let off the hook because they investigate this case. They must investigate all of them and use their power to

end the “stand your ground” laws which are a license for racist murder. If we demand anything less, we are just helping to blow the dog whistle.

Margaret Kimberley’s Freedom Rider column appears weekly in BAR, and is widely reprinted elsewhere. She maintains a frequently updated blog as well as at <http://freedomrider.blogspot.com>.

Ms. Kimberley lives in New York City, and can be reached via e-Mail at [Margaret.Kimberley\(at\)BlackAgendaReport.com](mailto:Margaret.Kimberley(at)BlackAgendaReport.com).

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