

Buried in Eloquence, Obama Contradictions About Pastor

In Speech, Obama Contradicted More Than a Year of Denials About His Knowledge of Rev. Wright's Sermons

By BRIAN ROSS and AVNI PATEL

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Buried in his eloquent, highly praised speech on America's racial divide, Sen. Barack Obama contradicted more than a year of denials and spin from him and his staff about his knowledge of Rev. Jeremiah Wright's controversial sermons.

Similarly, Obama also has only recently given a much fuller accounting of his relationship with indicted political fixer Antoin "Tony" Rezko, a longtime friend, who his campaign once described as just one of "thousands of donors."

Until yesterday, Obama said the only thing controversial he knew about Rev. Wright was his stand on issues relating to Africa, abortion and gay marriage.

"I don't think my church is actually particularly controversial," Obama said at a community meeting in Nelsonville, Ohio, earlier this month.

"He has said some things that are considered controversial because he's considered that part of his social gospel; so he was one of the leaders in calling for divestment from South Africa and some other issues like that," Obama said on March 2.

His initial reaction to the initial ABC News broadcast of Rev. Wright's sermons denouncing the U.S. was that he had never heard his pastor of 20 years make any comments that were anti-U.S. until the tape was played on air.

But yesterday, he told a different story.

"Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes," he said in his speech yesterday in Philadelphia.

Obama did not say what he heard that he considered "controversial," and the campaign has yet to answer repeated requests for dates on which the senator attended Rev. Wright's sermons over the last 20 years.

In the case of his relationship with Rezko, Obama has also been slow to acknowledge the full extent of his relationship.

It was only last week that he revealed Rezko had raised some \$250,000 in campaign contributions for him.

The campaign had initially claimed Rezko-connected contributions were no more than \$60,000, an amount the campaign donated to charity. Then the figure grew to around \$86,000, and there were additional revelations that put the amount at about \$150,000. Obama's \$250,000 accounting was a substantial jump and clearly contradicted earlier campaign statements that Rezko was just one of "thousands of donors."

Rezko is now on trial in federal court in Chicago, charged with a pattern of bribing state officials to obtain various Illinois state contracts. Rezko has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Obama was initially vague about Rezko's role in helping him buy a new home on Chicago's south side. Unable to afford an adjacent vacant lot the seller wanted to sell at the same time as the house, Obama approached Rezko. Rezko's wife bought the lot on the same day Obama bought the house, and then later, Mrs. Rezko sold the Obamas a strip of the lot which gave the Obamas a larger backyard.

Obama called it a "bone-headed" mistake but never revealed, until he met with Chicago reporters last week, that Rezko had actually toured the house with him and been deeply involved in the transaction.

In a statement, campaign press secretary Bill Burton said, "Last week, Sen. Obama spent almost three hours answering every single question about Tony Rezko posed by the local reporters who've covered the story closest for years. Those newspapers said they were more than satisfied with his open, honest answers. We've given all of the money contributed to Barack Obama's federal campaigns that could reasonably be credited to Mr. Rezko's political support to charity. Sen. Obama also provided an estimate of the most that could have possibly been raised as a result of Mr. Rezko's efforts, but that estimate is not a basis upon which any individual contributions can be donated to charity. "

As to Rev. Wright, Burton said, "While Sen. Obama was not in church for the incendiary and offensive statements of Rev. Wright that have been played on television over the last week, yesterday he delivered a deeply personal, honest speech on race in America in which he acknowledged that over the course of 20 years, of course he heard statements from Wright that could be considered controversial."

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