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EDITORIAL

## Mr. Obama's Profile in Courage

There are moments — increasingly rare in risk-aborrent modern campaigns — when politicians are called upon to bare their fundamental beliefs. In the best of these moments, the speaker does not just salve the current political wound, but also illuminates larger, troubling issues that the nation is wrestling with.

Inaugural addresses by Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt come to mind, as does John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech on religion, with its enduring vision of the separation between church and state. Senator Barack Obama, who has not faced such tests of character this year, faced one on Tuesday. It is hard to imagine how he could have handled it better.

Mr. Obama had to address race and religion, the two most toxic subjects in politics. He was as powerful and frank as Mitt Romney was weak and calculating earlier this year in his attempt to persuade the religious right that his Mormonism is Christian enough for them.

It was not a moment to which Mr. Obama came easily. He hesitated uncomfortably long in dealing with the controversial remarks of his spiritual mentor and former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., who denounced the United States as endemically racist, murderous and corrupt.

On Tuesday, Mr. Obama drew a bright line between his religious connection with Mr. Wright, which should be none of the voters' business, and having a political connection, which would be very much their business. The distinction seems especially urgent after seven years of a president who has worked to blur the line between church and state.

Mr. Obama acknowledged his strong ties to Mr. Wright. He embraced him as the man “who helped introduce me to my Christian faith,” and said that “as imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me.”

Wisely, he did not claim to be unaware of Mr. Wright's radicalism or bitterness, disarming the speculation about whether he personally heard the longtime pastor of his church speak the words being played and replayed on YouTube. Mr. Obama said Mr. Wright's comments were not just potentially offensive, as politicians are apt to do, but “rightly offend white and black alike” and are wrong in their analysis of America. But, he said, many Americans “have heard remarks from your pastors, priests or rabbis with which you strongly disagree.”

Mr. Obama's eloquent speech should end the debate over his ties to Mr. Wright since there is nothing to suggest that he would carry religion into government. But he did not stop there. He put Mr. Wright, his beliefs and the reaction to them into the larger context of race relations with an honesty seldom heard in public life.

Mr. Obama spoke of the nation's ugly racial history, which started with slavery and Jim Crow, and continues today in racial segregation, the school achievement gap and discrimination in everything from banking services to law enforcement.

He did not hide from the often-unspoken reality that people on both sides of the color line are angry. “For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation,” he said, “the memories of humiliation and fear have not gone away, nor the anger and the bitterness of those years.”

At the same time, many white Americans, Mr. Obama noted, do not feel privileged by their race. “In an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero-sum game,” he said, adding that both sides must acknowledge that the other's grievances are not imaginary.

He made the powerful point that while these feelings are not always voiced publicly, they are used in politics. “Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan coalition,” he said.

Against this backdrop, he said, he could not repudiate his pastor. “I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community,” he said. “I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother.” That woman whom he loves deeply, he said, “once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street” and more than once “uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.”

There have been times when we wondered what Mr. Obama meant when he talked about rising above traditional divides. This was not such a moment.

We can't know how effective Mr. Obama's words will be with those who will not draw the distinctions between faith and politics that he drew, or who will reject his frank talk about race. What is evident, though, is that he not only cleared the air over a particular controversy — he raised the discussion to a higher plane.

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