

Obama slams state of US politics in 1st post-presidency campaign stops, calls for rejection of Charlottesville hate

Former President Barack Obama made his much-anticipated first post-presidential appearance on the campaign trail Thursday, speaking at events for Democratic gubernatorial candidates in New Jersey and Virginia before elections there next month.

Appearing at a rally in Richmond, Virginia with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ralph Northam, Obama commented on the political climate in the country.

"Folks don't feel good right now about what they see, they don't feel as if our public life reflects our best," Obama said. "Instead of our politics reflecting our values, we've got politics infecting our communities."

Obama did not mention President Donald Trump by name, but did offer some pointed criticism that appeared to be directed at him.

"You'll notice I haven't been commenting on politics a lot lately, but here's one thing I know: If you have to win a campaign by dividing people you're not going to be able to govern them. You won't be able to unite them later if that's how you start," Obama told the crowd of thousands at the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

Obama also got animated when offering some deeply personal thoughts on the events over the summer in Charlottesville.

"We saw what happened in Charlottesville, but we also saw what happened after Charlottesville, when the biggest gatherings of all rejected fear and rejected hate and the decency and goodwill of the American people came out," Obama said. "That's how we rise. We don't rise up by repeating the past, we rise up by learning from the past."

The race between Northam and former Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie is considered the only competitive statewide race in the nation this year, raising the stakes for Obama's visit to the state with the election less than three weeks away.

Obama slammed Gillespie for television advertisements attacking Northam over recent MS-13 gang violence in the Commonwealth, dismissing it as nothing more than fear-mongering.

"It's a tactic by the way that shows Ralph's opponent doesn't really think very highly of Virginians," Obama said, adding, "If he honestly thought these were serious issues he'd offer serious solutions. But he's not because what he's really trying to deliver is fear. What he really believes is if you scare enough voters you might score just enough votes to win an election."

The former president is still popular in Virginia, a state he won in 2008 and 2012.

Appearing at an event earlier in the day in Newark with Phil Murphy, who served as U.S. Ambassador to Germany during the Obama administration, the former president praised Murphy as the right choice for New Jersey voters.

"When Phil and his family said I'm ready to go, I'm willing to step out there and step into what can be a pretty tough political environment, I wasn't surprised because I knew him," Obama said. "I knew their character."

Obama's re-emergence comes as President Trump has taken aim at various parts of his legacy, including the Iran nuclear agreement and the Affordable Care Act and as the controversy around Trump's interactions with families of fallen U.S. soldiers persists.

Obama shied away from calling out Trump directly in his remarks in Newark, instead hammering his critique of the state of U.S. politics today.

"Some of the politics we see now, we thought we put that to bed. That's folks looking 50 years back, it's the 21st century, not the 19th century," Obama said.

The former president also told the crowd to ignore the polls and focus on turning out as much grassroots support as possible.

"I don't know if y'all noticed, but you can't take any election for granted," Obama

said, "I don't care what the polls say. I don't care what the pundits say."

Aides to the former president said Obama planned to stick to policy instead of political attacks on President Trump.

"It's in no one's interest - including the former president's, the Democratic Party's, or the country's - for President Obama to become the face of any resistance or the party," a senior adviser to the former president wrote in a statement to ABC News, "Instead, he is creating the space for leaders in the party to craft the best path forward that will make our country better.

"He is acutely aware that when he consumes political oxygen, it can stifle the attention that should be on current and emerging leaders in the party."

The elections in New Jersey and Virginia will take place Nov. 7.

Source: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-hitting-campaign-trail-today-1st-time-trump/story?id=50586283>

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