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Palin, NJ police voice criticism; administration says media reports distort what rapper stands for

NBC News and news services
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There were love poems and folk tunes. There were classic verses and modern odes. There were sound effects and a gritty rap.

Michelle Obama's evening of poetry at the White House rolled out seamlessly Wednesday night, showcasing the impact of such words on American culture. The fireworks erupted earlier, as Republicans cried foul before anyone had uttered a word.

President Barack Obama opened the night by describing a great poem as one that "resonates with us, that challenges us and that teaches us something about ourselves and the world that we live in." An all-star lineup of poets and musicians performed.

[Video: White House defends invitation to rapper](#) (on this page)

It was the inclusion of Grammy Award-winning rapper and actor Common that drew complaints from Republicans, who said some of his lyrics celebrate violence. Common, who is considered fairly tame as rappers go, is known for rhymes that tend to be socially and politically conscious.

He was on his best behavior Wednesday night.

The rapper opened his performance with cuts of words from Martin Luther King Jr. and spoke of walking into the White House with "love on my sleeve." His performance gave nods to the challenges of crime and violence that face children, to gangsters and beacons of light for those in dark alleys, and celebrated the rise of Barack Obama.

It ended with "one King's dream, he was able to Barack us."

Other performers included former poets laureate Billy Collins and Rita Dove, singer Aimee Mann and comedian-musician Steve Martin and his bluegrass group the Steep Canyon Rangers.

'Oh lovely, White House ...'

Karl Rove, who worked in the White House for President George W. Bush, labeled Common a "thug" and said on Fox News Channel that the performer had advocated assassinating Bush and violence against police. Rove added that the White House decision to include Common in the event "speaks volumes about President Obama and the White House staff."

Sarah Palin, for her part, tweeted, "Oh lovely, White House ..." and provided the link to an article critical of the decision.

[Story: NJ Cops "Outraged" Over WH Rapper Invite](#)

Common, born Lonnie Rashin Lynn Jr., took the criticism in stride, tweeting back, "So apparently Sarah Palin and Fox News doesn't like me." Later, he added a Facebook post in which he said, "Politics is politics and everyone is entitled to their own opinion, I respect that. The one thing that shouldn't be questioned is my support for the police officers and troops that protect us every day. Peace yall!"

Rove's reference to Common's rap about Bush was based on lyrics criticizing the Iraq war that included the line: "Burn a Bush cos for peace he no push no button."

Defending the decision

White House spokesman Jay Carney defended the decision to invite Common and said reports about the rapper were deliberately being distorted.

Carney said the president has spoken out forcefully against violent and misogynistic music lyrics and has a strong record of support for law enforcement.

"I would say that, while the president doesn't support the kind of lyrics that have been raised here, we do think that some of these reports distort what Mr. Lynn stands for, more broadly, in order to stoke controversy," Carney said.

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He said Fox News Channel just six months ago had described Common as a rap legend.

"One of the things the president appreciates is the work Mr. Lynn has done with children, especially in Chicago, trying to get them to focus on poetry as opposed to some of the negative influences of life on the street," Carney said.

Michelle Obama did not address the criticism during afternoon remarks at a workshop with some of the artists for dozens of students invited in from around the country.

The first lady urged the students to keep on writing and made a pitch for arts education. She also confessed to once being a "budding writer."

"When I was young, I was a passionate creative writer and sort of a poet. That's how I would release myself," Mrs. Obama said. "Whenever I was struggling in school, or didn't want to go outside and deal with the nonsense of the neighborhood, I would write and write and write and write."

The president, for his part, told the evening crowd that he had submitted a few poems to his college literary magazine. "You will be pleased to know that I will not be reading them tonight," he added to laughter.

WNBC: NJ cops outraged

WNBC-TV in New York reported that the invitation drew the ire of the union representing New Jersey state police, as well.

For police officers in that state, the outrage centers on Common's praise for Assata Shakur, formerly known as Joanne Chesimard, who was convicted for the 1973 slaying of Trooper Werner Foerster on the New Jersey Turnpike.

"Your power and pride is beautiful," Common raps in "A Song for Assata." "May God bless your soul."

Shakur escaped prison in 1979, and is living in asylum in Cuba.

"The young people who read this stuff, hear this stuff, are getting a very dangerous and deadly message," said David Jones, president of the State Troopers Fraternal Association union.

The White House appearance comes during the same week that police officers from across the nation, including Jones, make their annual trek to Washington to honor their fallen comrades at the National Law Enforcement Memorial.

Sal Maggio, a retired troop commander with the state police in New Jersey, said his colleagues still talk about Shakur and the million dollar bounty the FBI has put on her capture.

"Hopefully someday she'll be caught," Maggio said in response to Common's White House invitation.

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