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Opinion | ‘Living His Mother’s American Dream’

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13-16 minutes

Thirty seconds into his Wednesday speech on the U.S. Senate floor, Tim Scott paused, distraught. Mr. Scott was introducing the Republican police-reform bill, the Justice Act, drafted by a team he led in response to the national outcry after the killing in Minneapolis of George Floyd. It was also the fifth anniversary of the murder of nine black worshipers in a church in Charleston, S.C., Mr. Scott’s hometown.

Mr. Scott, 54, is the first black Republican senator since 1979—and the first elected from the South since 1875. He reminded his colleagues of the Charleston anniversary, “the day in which a racist walked into Mother Emanuel Church.” Then he fell silent. Paralyzed with emotion, he failed to fight back tears, and stood mute for nearly a minute before resuming his address—now delivered extemporaneously. The prepared speech on the lectern went unread.

“That minute felt like an hour,” Mr. Scott tells me in a telephone interview. He had to “pray for a second” to compose himself. “It’s pretty embarrassing. It was a hard day. And I didn’t realize how

hard it was until I walked out there and got overwhelmed with the anniversary."

The day had been made harder by a fellow senator—the Democratic whip, Dick Durbin of Illinois—who'd referred to the Justice Act as "a token, halfhearted approach." The word "token"—sometimes used by those who seek to dismiss a black person as a mere symbol or window dressing—stung Mr. Scott. I ask about Mr. Durbin's choice of word. "I think so much of politics is calculated," Mr. Scott says. "I'm pretty confident that he chose his words carefully." (Mr. Durbin has since apologized.)

Mr. Scott, the only African-American ever to serve in both chambers of Congress, bristles when he talks about Mr. Durbin's put-down. "I'm just really ticked off about how casual and cavalier he gets to be, as a Democrat leader, to race-bait in an intentional, and unnecessary, and unfortunate way." He doesn't think that Mr. Durbin is "a racist," he stresses, but says he's "adopted a rhythm and a cadence that is consistent with what sometimes the elite liberals can get away with because they're supposedly woke. And that's a problem, because it just denigrates everybody who's not in their way of thinking about the world."

Sen. Tim Scott.

Illustration: Terry Shoffner

Frances Scott—the senator's 76-year-old mother, who raised him and his elder brother on her own—watched his Senate speech in her Charleston home. "She had tears as well," Mr. Scott says, "and she was very thankful to the Lord that 'he is still using me,' according to her words." As for Mr. Durbin, Mrs. Scott "just said we should pray for him more," he says. "My mother is a really devout Christian. I'm not always. I'm trying to be." That

effort is unquestionable: A staffer tells me Mr. Scott promised his pastor to be at church in Charleston for 45 Sundays every year.

Mr. Scott's Twitter page carries a single line of biography: "Just a South Carolinian living his mother's American Dream." He is successful way beyond her expectations. "My mother was a nurse's aide," he says. Her mother, a maid, had dreamed of being a nurse. "And my mother, who was helping my grandmother clean houses when she was a teenager, aspired to make her mother's dream come true."

Frances Scott became a nurse's assistant, "really the lowest rung in the nursing arena," her senator son says. "She changed bedpans and turned patients, for sometimes two shifts a day—trying to put food on our table." Dinner was often "a Manwich"—a sloppy joe made with canned sauce, always Original flavor. Meals were washed down with Kool-Aid, which was "cheap and affordable." Once a month, Mrs. Scott took the family to Pizza Inn. "She would get us dressed up to go there."

Mr. Scott's parents divorced when he was 7, and mother and sons went to live with his maternal grandparents in Charleston. "That little house was about 800 square feet," he recalls. "It had my grandparents in one room, and us in the other." In 1982 they settled in a "1,000-square-foot concrete slab house with one bathroom." His mother lived there until 2007, when Mr. Scott, a successful insurance entrepreneur, bought her a house. "It's 1,800 square feet, with one, two, three bedrooms—and two bathrooms," he says proudly.

Mr. Scott draws strength from his disadvantaged background. His maternal grandfather dropped out of school in third grade to work in the cotton fields and never learned to read. That man's grandson, Mr. Scott's brother, became "a command sergeant major in the army, top 1% of noncommissioned officers, 32-year career. I became a senator, which is right below command sergeant majors in the Scott household." Mr. Scott's nephew recently completed a medical degree from Emory and is about to start his residency.

"In our society," Sen. Scott says, "we spend so much time on the 'root causes' and the disadvantages that we forget to talk about the solutions and the advantage that we have over the rest of the world." Advancement, he believes, comes through education. "It is absolutely essential that we have quality education in every ZIP Code, especially the poorest ZIP Codes in America. That is the path forward."

Mr. Scott was drawn to the Republican Party because of its emphasis on religious freedom, national security, small business and free markets. He thinks affirmative action is an idea "whose time has come and gone, and that we're better serving this nation without a set-aside" based on race—a belief that puts him outside the mainstream of America's black leadership.

He has a similarly unfashionable view about "family formation," as he puts it. "If you have two parents in the household," he says, citing the economist Thomas Sowell, "you reduce poverty in the African-American community by 85%. That's a stunning truth that needs more oxygen."

He acknowledges that the GOP faces an uphill task in its bid to woo black voters, and attributes the disconnect between his party and African-Americans to “lost credibility over the years and perhaps the ‘Southern strategy’ driven by Lee Atwater, ” an aide to Ronald Reagan and manager of George H.W. Bush’s 1988 campaign. These factors, he says, “had a profound and powerful impact that the Republican party has not overcome yet.” (In a 1991 article, a dying Atwater apologized for a comment linking Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis to Willie Horton, a furloughed murderer who is black.)

Mr. Scott believes the GOP can win black support and “make up ground we’ve lost by showing up, and going where we’re not invited.” He says that he has “undertaken that” himself and found it effective: “Our policy position is a strong one. If we have the right tone and passion, we’ll win people back over the next few cycles.”

In some ways, Mr. Scott is different from most black conservatives. He doesn’t play down or efface his ethnicity and is as forthright about race as any black Democrat. He’s less inclined than liberals are to dwell on past injustice, and he says the “conversation about race” should be “more about what you see through the windshield than in the rearview mirror.” He quotes Van Jones, a liberal black radio host, who once said to him that he’d “trade a dozen Black History Months for one ‘black wealth’ and ‘black futures’ weekend.”

Yet Mr. Scott is outspoken about police excesses. He says his ambition to reform law enforcement is driven by his Christian ideas of fairness and justice. It’s also informed by personal

experience. In his Wednesday speech, he said he'd been stopped by police 18 times since 2000, "including seven times in one year" as an elected official.

On four separate occasions, he says, Capitol Police officers have tried to impede his entry into the building, disbelieving that he's a U.S. senator. "The first time, I didn't say much because [the cop] physically put his arms out, so I couldn't walk in," Mr. Scott says. "My chief of staff called the police department after, and they thought I was exaggerating." They looked at the security-camera footage and called back to apologize. "That kind of scars your soul a little bit."

The second time, an officer wanted to see his Senate identification, even though Mr. Scott was wearing the lapel pin that is issued only to members of the chamber. "I was very irritated," Mr. Scott says. He told the cop he was being "irresponsible, and that he should know who I am. That's why they have pictures of all the senators." He did, however, show the man his ID. Again, the department called later to apologize. The third time was when an officer at the entry barricade asked Mr. Scott, seated in a car with his driver, for proof of his status. Mr. Scott refused, and the officer "just let me through." The fourth incident was similar to the third.

Mr. Scott's brother has been stopped so often for "driving while black," the senator says, that the two of them have lost count: "They don't stand out anymore." Mr. Scott says that "all the police chiefs I've spoken to that are African-American tell me that they've been stopped by their own departments, and by other departments." Rare, he believes, is the black man in

America “who has not had some tough experience with the police. I hear the same narrative over and over and over again.”

There are no official statistics on this sort of “persistent or consistent harassment,” but Mr. Scott says it “does something to your ability to expect that law and order is something that is good for you.” He has counseled his nephew to be “as cooperative as he conceivably can be” if stopped by the police. Mr. Scott’s own practice, if stopped in his car, “is to put the window down, put my hands out the window or to 10 and 2” on the steering wheel.

Mr. Scott says that “communities of color have lost confidence in the institutions of power and authority in this country. That has been a slow drain over a couple of centuries.” Police reform is one way to help restore that confidence—and he is adamant that there’s “no binary choice between law enforcement and communities of color.” We can, he says, be “raving fans of both. If we’re not, we’re pitting two very important parts of our society against each other.”

Mr. Scott strikes a conciliatory tone as he discusses partisan differences over police-reform legislation. “The good news is that the Justice Act has a lot of common ground with the House bill,” he says. “The outcomes we strive for are the same.” Both sides agree on the need for more body cameras and training, ending chokeholds, and collecting more data on the use of force, “even though Democrats do not provide more funding for departments to carry out increased training and reporting.”

The major difference is over “qualified immunity,” a legal

doctrine that limits liability for officers who violate constitutional rights. “The White House has said removing qualified immunity is a red line,” Mr. Scott says, “and I want to see something that can be signed into law.” For Mr. Scott, “the critical piece right now is Senate Democrats must vote to let us start debate on the Senate floor. I don’t pretend the Justice Act has all the answers, but if we don’t debate, if we don’t move toward an amendment process, then we absolutely are not going to be able to get a final product.” The American people are “demanding a solution—not in two months, not in two years, but now.”

I ask about the Black Lives Matter movement, and Mr. Scott marks his distance. “BLM today is synonymous with defunding the police. And that’s a big issue from my perspective. We should not defund the police. I reject that.”

To Mr. Scott, the “question about black lives mattering that has nothing to do with the organization can best be seen in the New York City park where the woman says: I’m going to call the police and tell them my life is being threatened by an African-American man.” He refers to the video, which attained global notoriety last month, of a white woman confronting a bird watcher who’d complained about her unleashed dog in Central Park.

“That, to me, is a snapshot of the devaluing that so many African-Americans have spoken about. We should all have the same intrinsic value in society. And that’s an important position to hold on to.”

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Hoover Institution.

Potomac Watch: Trump needs to give voters a reason to support him. He’s working on it. Images: Getty/Bloomberg Composite: Mark Kelly