

Obama's Michael Vick remarks make sense to African-Americans By [Dr. Boyce Watkins](#)



(AP Photo/Sharon Ellman)

Recently President Obama made a call to Jeffrey Lurie, owner of the Philadelphia Eagles. On the call, the president congratulated Lurie on his decision to sign Michael Vick. The president also noted that formerly incarcerated individuals deserve a second chance to contribute to our society and that Vick's success is a reminder of that fact.

Critics of the president have, for some reason, decided that Vick's punishment should be a life sentence, and somehow find it problematic that the president made that one simple phone call. Even the less-than-thoughtful commentator Tucker Carlson said that he felt that Michael Vick should have been executed for his crime, a very telling statement regarding just how valuable members of the right wing believe a black man's life to be.

Mr. President, *how dare you*. How dare you presume that Michael Vick is a *human being*. I find it unconscionable that you would even attempt to argue that a man who has been convicted of a crime has any ability whatsoever to contribute to society and actually redeem himself. I must publicly condemn you for caring about the fact that Vick has a family that depends on him, and that he is deserving of any human rights whatsoever. After all, he was convicted of a crime and therefore undeserving of any semblance of American freedom for the remainder of his days on this planet.

OK, let's get serious. President Obama, like Michael Vick, has now been found guilty of what some might call "the audacity of compassion." President Obama didn't say that dog fighting is a good thing. He didn't say that Michael Vick is a wonderful guy. He didn't say that he wants to be soft on crime. All the president said, plain and simple, is that those who've been convicted of a crime deserve the chance to make things right and see their punishments eventually come to an end.

Michael Vick has proven President Obama correct by re-emerging as arguably the best player in the NFL. But the truth is that there are hundreds of thousands of Michael Vicks who don't have the opportunity to play professional football. Instead, they must check the little box on the job application that asks if you've ever been convicted of a crime, and soon find that their ability to obtain gainful employment is forever inhibited. Michael Vick is a walking manifestation of these men, and Obama's empathy for Vick speaks volumes on what our president thinks about the state of our corrupt and embarrassing criminal justice system.

Americans who want to condemn Michael Vick must take a second to realize that they are representing a set of values that are deeply inconsistent with the freedoms we purport to embody here in the United States. We spent years fighting the Nazi regime, but have dedicated ourselves to emulating those who chose to exterminate millions of Jews by standing silently while countless numbers of men, women and children are having their lives ruined by a criminal justice system that is designed to destroy them.

The United Nations has written reports condemning the United States for its commitment to mass incarceration and has accused the U.S. of blatant human rights violations for the way we treat those who've been convicted of a crime. The very public attacks on Michael Vick were interesting in that it seems that many Americans view the life of a dog to be more important than the lives of millions of men and women who are never released from the grips of prison, even after they've done their time.

President Obama's public support for Michael Vick was not a statement of approval. The president was not saying that he empathizes with the desire to commit crime or that he wants to free every prison inmate in America. Obama's statement was a bold vision for the pursuit of equity and liberty that reminds us of what our country can be. His words also present elected officials with the opportunity to help our nation return to reality: rather than simply believing that we serve as a beacon of light for free and Democratic societies, we can actually fulfill that lofty expectation with bold and intelligent reform of the prison industrial complex.

The answers to the incarceration problem in America are not simple. But what we all know is that the present system is not working. Barack Obama's decision to speak up in support of Michael Vick was truly presidential in nature and shows the kind of leadership we should expect from our president both now and in the future. Michael Vick and millions of others just like him deserve a second chance, and we should be glad that our president is smarter than Tucker Carlson.

Dr. Boyce Watkins is the founder of the [Your Black World Coalition](#) and the initiator of the [National Conversation on Race](#). For more information, please visit [BoyceWatkins.com](#).