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Obama slams Bush for linking accounts to blacks' life span

Social Security pitch `stunning,' he says

By **Jeff Zeleny**, Washington Bureau. Tribune news services contributed to this report

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. Barack Obama on Thursday called President Bush's suggestion that African-Americans could reap greater rewards from overhauling Social Security a "stunning" argument that ignored the true health issues facing blacks in this country.

As the president launched a two-day tour through the South to build support for his controversial plan to revamp Social Security, Democrats challenged a White House assertion that blacks would particularly gain from Bush's proposed private retirement accounts because they have fewer years to collect benefits considering they die younger.

"It is puzzling to me that we are even having this debate about whether Social Security is good or not for African-Americans," said Obama, an Illinois Democrat. "I frankly found the statement that the president made somewhat offensive."

While Bush argued his case that the future of the Social Security program was in peril without substantial changes like creating private investment accounts, Senate Democratic leaders tapped Obama to rebut the argument about overhauling Social Security.

Before the president arrived in Montgomery, Ala., Obama, the only black member of the Senate, conducted satellite interviews there from Washington.

"There is no doubt a disparity in the lifetime opportunities between white America and black America," Obama said. "The notion that we would cynically use those disparities as a rationale for dismantling Social Security as opposed to talking about how are we going to close the health disparities gap that exists, and make sure that African-American life expectancy is as long as the rest of this nation ... is stunning to me."

The administration and conservative scholars have quietly suggested that blacks may be more inclined to support the Social Security changes because, on average, whites live to age 78 and blacks to 72. So blacks, after contributing to Social Security their whole lives, are more likely to die before collecting their fair share.

"African-American males die sooner than other males do, which means the system is inherently unfair to a certain group of people," Bush said this year at a forum on Social Security. "And that needs to be fixed."

The president campaigned in Louisville and Montgomery to try to ease anxiety among retirees and give political cover to Republican lawmakers facing voters in midterm elections. Bush did not use the African-American argument in either stop on Thursday.

Bush repeatedly has reassured those age 55 and over that the Social Security checks they receive, or look forward to getting, won't be touched.

Still, seniors--a group that votes in greater numbers than the nation's youth--are wary about what will happen to the 70-year-old government retirement system if lawmakers tinker with it.

Facing an uphill battle to enact changes, Republicans in Congress recently have begun to emphasize the solvency problems of Social Security over the controversial private retirement accounts.

On his road trip, Bush did too. But while he is focusing on solvency, the president is not letting up on his push for private accounts.

"I'm saying to members of the United States Congress, `Let's fix this system permanently--no Band-Aids,'" Bush said in Montgomery. "Woe be to the politician who doesn't come to the table and try to come up with a solution."

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