

Candidates link Selma march to present

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SELMA, Ala. — Illinois Democratic Sen. Barack Obama, describing himself as “the offspring of the movement,” paid homage Sunday to the civil rights protesters whose violent beatings here at the hands of state troopers and sheriff’s deputies 42 years ago sparked national outrage and led to legislation ensuring the voting rights of African-Americans throughout the South.

Just a few blocks away, New York Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton claimed the same inheritance, describing the Civil Rights Movement as “the gift that keeps on giving” as it propels new types of politicians onto the national stage. Their simultaneous appearances at the annual commemoration of one of the most famous moments in the civil rights struggle embodied the historic nature of a presidential race in which an African-American and a woman lead the Democratic field.

The two presidential candidates spoke at separate Sunday morning services and later joined in the ritual march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, led by Georgia Democratic Rep. John Lewis, who as a young civil rights leader was beaten on the bridge with other protesters on the morning of March 7, 1965, as they began a voting-rights march to Montgomery.

Clinton marched with her husband, former President Bill Clinton, who came to Selma to be inducted into the National Voting Rights Museum’s hall of fame. It was the first time the Clintons appeared together at a major event in the 2008 campaign and an appearance much debated in Hillary Clinton’s campaign before it was announced publicly.

In the days leading up to the commemoration of “Bloody Sunday,” advisers to Obama and Clinton insisted it would not be a day for politics. But the candidates’ mere presence in Alabama signaled the extraordinary importance of Black voters in the upcoming Democratic primaries, with recent surveys indicating that Obama is jeopardizing Clinton’s lead in the race by gaining among African-Americans.

Any pretense that it was not part of the presidential campaign was dropped as the day went on. Supporters carried signs for the two campaigns, former president Clinton joked about the

Civil Rights are cited as enabling their campaigns

“rainbow coalition” of candidates on the Democratic ballot, and Rep. Artur Davis, the Alabama Democrat who represents Selma, unabashedly introduced Obama in his keynote address at Brown Chapel AME Church as the next president of the United States.

The crowd in and around Obama’s appearance was decidedly larger — his audience included 15 members of Congress, compared with four who went to hear Clinton. Obama, who was 3 years old at the time of the Selma clash, used his keynote address to mark his place in a younger generation of Black Americans who do not march in the streets — but who still, in his words, are required “to fulfill that legacy, to fulfill the obligations and the debt that we owe to those who allowed us to be here today.”

Referring to his heritage, Obama said that although his ancestors were not slaves, the Civil Rights Movement inspired his African father to move from Kenya to seek an American education and eventually marry his White mother — “whose great-great-great-grandfather had owned slaves. But she had a different idea. Something stirred across the country because of what happened in Selma, Ala., because some folks were willing to march across a bridge,” Obama said, explaining that, as a result, his parents “got together and Barack Obama Jr. was born.”

Earlier in the day at a prayer breakfast, the Illinois Democrat said: “If it hadn’t been for Selma, I wouldn’t be here.”

“This is the site of my conception. I am the fruits of your labor,” Obama told an audience of Civil Rights Movement veterans. “When people ask me if I’ve been to Selma before, I tell them I’m coming home.”

An aide later said the senator did not mean to imply that his birth was a literal result of the Selma marches but rather of the movement overall.

As Brown Chapel filled to capacity, crowds spilled out onto the lawn and the street, swaying and singing along to gospel music broadcast from speakers set up to accommodate the large number of churchgoers. A lighthearted skirmish broke out among visitors seeking programs

featuring Obama. Dueling barbecues served hot dogs and hamburgers — selling out of both even before thousands gathered mid-afternoon to walk across the bridge.

A smaller group of union members and families lingered outside the First Baptist Church, another civil rights landmark, after Hillary Clinton went inside to speak.

Addressing the congregation from the pulpit where Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke, Clinton, after singing along to a jaunty version of “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” described herself, as well as her main Democratic rival, as beneficiaries of the movement.

Democratic Reps. Anthony Weiner from New York and Rahm Emanuel from Il-

linois went to hear Clinton speak. The bulk of the other members of Congress in Selma on Sunday, including Lewis, went to hear Obama.

Clinton described the Civil Rights Era as a gift, saying, “Today it is giving Senator Obama the chance to run for president.”

“And by its logic and spirit, it is giving the same chance to Governor Bill

Richardson, a Hispanic, and yes, it is giving it to me,” Clinton said.

In her 20-minute speech, Clinton recalled going with a church group as a girl to hear King speak in Chicago in 1963. “I come here as a sister in worship,” she told the churchgoers.

Clinton then linked the spirit of the civil rights march and its future to the ideals underlying her agenda: insuring the uninsured, improving schools, reducing the (See Selma, Page 12)

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