

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

DAVID AXELROD INTERVIEW  
*OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**David Axelrod**  
**2004 Senate Campaign Manager**  
**October 22, 2018**  
**Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 1 minute and 56 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

David Axelrod interview, take one. Marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

David Axelrod  
2004 Senate Campaign Manager

## **Meeting Obama**

01:00:13:18

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, I met Barack Obama as a favor to a friend. There's a woman in town named Betty Lou Saltzman who's kind of a doyenne of liberal politics. And she called me. It must have been late '91 or early '92 and said, "I just met the most extraordinary person and I think you've got to meet him and his name is Barack Obama." And I said, "Well, why is that? Why do I have to meet him, Betty Lou? I mean, I'm happy to but—" She said, "I know this sounds crazy,

but I think he could be the first—first Black president of the United States.” And I always thought, well, that was pretty grandiose. But she asked and I sat down with him, and while I didn’t necessarily walk away humming hail to the chief, it was an interesting conversation ‘cause clearly he was a young man, just back from law school and he’d been president of the Harvard Law Review and he could’ve written his ticket, I knew, at any corporation or law firm in America. And instead, he came back to Chicago to run a voter registration drive and to work in a small civil rights firm. And he said, “I want to do something larger than myself.” And, you know, the world of politics divides into two categories. The larger cohort is—are people who run for public office because they want to be something, and then there’s this admirable smaller cohort of people who run for public office because they want to do something and he clearly was in that group.

### **Running for Congress**

01:01:53:14

DAVID AXELROD:

He came to talk to me about running for Congress. He decided that he was in the state senate, he was restless, wanted to go to Washington and he thought that he could challenge Bobby Rush, who was the sitting Congressman of the district. Bobby, in '99, had run for Mayor of Chicago against Richard Daley and- and got badly beaten, including losing his own ward. Obama sensed an opportunity, felt he could contribute more and took Rush on in the primary. I didn’t work with him in that primary. He did come and ask my thoughts on it.

**Running for Senate**

01:02:40:08

DAVID AXELROD:

In the summer of 2002, I got a call from— from State Senator Obama, who was—who told me that he wanted to run for the United States Senate. And it was sort of an existential moment for him because he had lost the race to Bobby Rush by some 30 points. He was broke and though he was widely admired, he also was thought to be damaged political goods. It also was the year after Osama Bin Laden took out the World Trade Center and there was this thought in the political community that the name Barack Obama would not be salable in a state. There was someone who worked with us in that race who suggested to him that he run as Barry Obama, which was his nickname when he was a kid. He just laughed that off and said, “Yeah, that’s fine. I know it probably tests better, but my name is Barack. That’s how we’re gonna run.” But you know, for me, I was going through an existential time myself. I-I-I saw how cynical politics was becoming and I was so discouraged that I thought maybe I was going to get out of politics myself and—and get into— back into journalism from where I came. That call from Obama was very important to me. I went home and I told my wife Susan, “You know, if I could help Barack Obama get elected to the United States Senate, I would feel like I had done something really positive. That could really recharge my batteries.” So we each were having existential crises and we teamed up on this improbable journey. It was really a personal sacrifice for the whole family. And when he called me about the Senate race, he said, “I told Michelle I’ve got

one race left in me. If it doesn't work out, I'll go out and make a living, but I think I want to take a shot at this Senate seat."

01:04:48:06

DAVID AXELROD:

It was a revelation to me to watch Barack Obama campaign in Illinois for the United States Senate. He had a young man who traveled with him who called me from the road. He was down in deep southern Illinois, closer to Little Rock than Chicago in a small town in a VFW hall and the kid said, "Boy, it went over great." And Obama called me that night and I said, "Gee, I heard it went great down at the VFW hall." And I forget the name of the town, and he said, "Why do you sound so surprised?" And I said, "I don't know, a Black guy named Barack Obama from the Southside of Chicago. I thought it might be a little challenging." And he said, "No, no. You don't get it." He said, "We talk about my grandfather who marched in Patton's army and my grandmother who was a Rosie the Riveter and we get along great." And I realized that this was a guy who felt comfortable in any room in which he entered. That he could be in that VFW hall in deep southern Illinois, or in an inner city church, or in a Tony parlor in the suburbs and feel entirely comfortable and make people feel comfortable with him. And at a time when the country was so riven, that was an extraordinary gift.

### **Transcending race**

01:06:11:06

DAVID AXELROD:

Because Barack Obama came from this biracial background; he grew up in Hawaii, you know, he—and had lived in, ya know, different environments at Harvard and at Columbia of understanding and empathy that— that really transcended race. He refused to be put in a box. He always used to say to us, “I’m of the Black community but I’m not limited to the Black community.” And that was absolutely true. He—he was someone who appealed very, very broadly and he gave people hope because of that. People who were— who were worried about how divisive our politics have become, our society was becoming, he was a guy who seemed to break those barriers down.

**Empathy**

01:07:10:06

DAVID AXELROD:

I mean, I saw him—in Barack from the very beginning this interest in other people’s stories. You know, a lot of politicians master the art of appearing to listen, but he genuinely listened. And he would come back from campaigning all over the state and he would just volunteer stories about people he’d met who had moved him. Ya know, the parent who couldn’t get the medications for his kid because he couldn’t afford it. You know, the- the- the person who worked for 30 years at the factory that disappeared. These were—these were not just lines in a speech for him, these were real people and they animated him as he traveled around the state and as he moved forward. It was interesting. We did a little event for him at my own apartment when he was still a long shot candidate for the Senate, and it was a good group of people and he gave a very high-minded but sort of intellectualized speech. And I said, “Barack, you call me every night and you tell these moving stories.

That's really what you should be talking about." Increasingly, he integrated those stories into his rhetoric; he is at heart a natural storyteller. The reason he's such a good storyteller is because he's such a good listener and he does have empathy, and that was an important component of his success in politics.

### **Early Senate campaign advertisements**

01:08:55:18

DAVID AXELROD:

We really built a movement that was—that inspired people to believe that we could do better in our politics. It was the forerunner of what people would see in 2008. The Senate race was really a trial ground for that, even though we didn't know that he'd be running for President in 2008, and we wanted to communicate in the ads that we could overcome some of these really great barriers in our politics; that we could overcome the cynicism, that we could overcome this- this sort of grinding status quo, and that Barack Obama was a guy who had overcome a lot of things in his life, in politics, and was a person who represented that hope. The first ad we ever did was a bio—biographical ad that combined some of the barriers that he had broken in his life, but also some of the things he had achieved in public life for people that seemed improbable. And it ended with him saying, "Now they say we can't change Washington? I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message to say, "Yes, we can."" That was the first ad I ever did for him. We were filming it at a friend's house, a friend of his. Michelle was there. She wanted to see him film his first ad. And he gets to the end of the script and he says, "Yes, we

can.” Yes we—he says, “That—is that too corny?” And my heart sunk because I thought it said everything about what we wanted to say, that this was not just about him, it was about us and—and that we could overcome these things that had us so despairing. And I went through my whole shtick and he says, and he turns to Michelle and says, “Mich, what do you think?” And she just slowly turned her head and said, “Not corny.” And he said, “Ok, let’s go.” So I knew where my place was in the strategic hierarchy of the Obama organization, but I was grateful that she was there because that became kind of the rallying cry of not just that campaign but- but future campaigns.

### **Obama’s 2004 DNC speech**

01:11:10:14

DAVID AXELROD:

Obama was nominated in March for the Senate and it was a very, very resonant victory. I mean, we were expecting it to be very tight. There were seven candidates. He ended up blowing the doors off of it and winning a majority of the vote and winning all over in areas that no one expected an African American candidate to—in which to—an African American candidate to prevail. After he won the primary, there was a fundraiser and John Kerry, who was poised to become the democratic nominee for president came in to speak. There were only two other speakers. One was Rich Daley, the Mayor of Chicago. The other was Barack Obama, and Obama gave a rousing speech, so he was on Kerry’s mind. But we decided that we were gonna run a little campaign behind the scenes to try and persuade them to pick him. My partner David Plouffe talked to an old friend of his, Steve Elmendorf, who

was the deputy manager of the campaign made this strong case and everywhere we could, we kind of planted that seed. Finally, in late June we got a call from Mary Beth Cahill, the manager of the Kerry campaign. She said, “We’d like you to be the keynote speaker.” And he said, “I’d be honored.” By the way, he wasn’t really privy to the campaign we were running. We did this on our own, so he was—but we told him we’d—“We hope you can do this.” And as soon as he hung up, he said, “I know what I want to say.” And I said, “What do you want to say?” And he said, “I want to talk about my story as part of the larger American story.” And for the next few weeks he was—as he drove around campaigning or was in—at the State Senate voting in between votes he’d be scribbling notes down in longhand. In July, I was overseas with my wife and this fax came in. It was the draft. And I read the first page and handed it to my wife. I read the second page and handed it to my wife. By the third page, I just turned to her and I said, “This is gonna be one of the great convention speeches of all time.” I had been in the arena in 1984 when Mario Cuomo gave the keynote speech at that democratic convention for Walter Mondale. And everyone in that room was electrified and knew that some—that Mario Cuomo was now a national figure. He would figure into the future calculation of the Democratic Party. Never ran but everybody assumed that he would and, you know, I thought that this speech was gonna have a galvanic effect for Obama. Didn’t realize how much until I was in the room in Boston, but it was clear it was a remarkable speech.

**Alan Keyes**

01:14:01:13



DAVID AXELROD:

Barack Obama defeated Alan Keyes by 50 points and yet I don't think there's been a politician who got under his skin more. Keyes questioned his commitment to his faith. Keyes questioned his Blackness. Even when he was talking about the issue of abortion rights, Keyes said, "You know, Obama has the slave owners position on abortion." All these little jives irritated Obama to the point where one day, I was watching the evening news and it was the day of the Puerto Rican day parade and the two of them had been marching. And there is footage of Barack Obama jabbing his finger into Alan Keyes's chest. And I called him up and I said, "What is this?" And he said, "That guy just gets under my nerve—he gets on my nerves, you know. I'm not gonna get punked by him." I said, "Barack, we're ahead by like 150 points here." I said, "We don't—you know, we don't need this." He says, "Yeah, I know." And the debates that we had there with Keyes were really irascible kinds of affairs, really acrimonious, because Keyes was so good at- at- at pushing his hot buttons. When Obama decided to run for president or was considering running for president, one of the questions that I raised in a memo that I wrote to him was how he would react to the constant kind of provocations that one has to endure when ones running for president and I said, "I don't know if you're Floyd Patterson or Muhammad Ali. I don't know, you know, when you take a punch flush on the chin whether you're gonna go down or whether you're gonna keep fighting." And it was only during the campaign that I—you know, that I learned. And he grew a much thicker skin. You know, I learned that he indeed could take a punch, but no one scored more against him and his psyche than Alan Keyes.

## **Obama's visit to Africa**

01:16:09:12

DAVID AXELROD:

You know, for the first year of the -- of his Senate tenure, we really tried to be very low key for two reasons: We didn't want to signal to the people of Illinois that somehow Obama was using Illinois as a stepping-stone to something else. And—and that wasn't his intent. We also didn't want to aggravate his colleagues who were, ya know, naturally resentful of all the advance notice that he had gotten and all the attention. He could have done a Sunday show every week. We didn't do any. Late 2005, Katrina happened and that drew him back in and little by little, you know, things escalated. But we postponed a trip to Africa; finally in the summer of 2006, he went. And the reaction to him there, not just in Kenya, but elsewhere was so kinetic that it—it—it was something akin to what I imagine Bobby Kennedy experienced when he went to South Africa in 19— in 1966. The level of the coverage they got, because a lot of reporters followed, and the reaction he got there, which was frenetic was—ya know, really signaled that this guy was a—was a globally important leader. This happened just as the- the drumbeat was building for him to become a candidate for president, the draft was- was on; clearly, you know, we threw a few logs on that fire. The trip to Africa we knew would be well covered, but this really accelerated people's interest in him as a candidate.

## **The process of deciding to run for president**

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01:18:06:13

DAVID AXELROD:

Throughout 2006, it became clearer and clearer that he was gonna have to take a look at running for president, and that he might be interested. In the Spring of 2006, Harry Reid and Chuck Schumer called him into their office, into Reid's office to say, "You really ought to think about running." Which kind of shocked Obama that the leaders—the Senate leaders would take that step to encourage him and he said, "Ya know, I gotta think about this." In the summer, we—he took the trip to Africa. He also authorized us to begin quietly taking soundings in Iowa and New Hampshire. He went and spoke at the Harken's Steak Fry, which was an iconic event in Iowa run by Senator Tom—then Senator Tom Harken, gathering place for Democrats and a trial setting for all presidential candidates, Democratic presidential candidates. And Obama took—took that place by storm. Then his book came out, he had a book coming out called *The Audacity of Hope* and he went on a book tour in October and there were a thousand or more people at every stop. And each person said, "You've got to run for president. You've got to run for president." I met him in Philadelphia in mid-October of 2006 because he was going to do Meet the Press. It was a Saturday, he was going to do Meet the Press the next day and we were gonna brief for it on the way down to Washington, so Robert Gibbs and I traveled down there with him. And I said, "You know, you know Tim, I mean, one of the first questions he's gonna ask is, "You said you weren't going to run in 2008. Is that still your position?" It's his favorite question." And I said, "How are you gonna answer?" And he said, "Guess I'm gonna say I've changed my mind and I'm thinking about it." And Gibbs and I

both looked at him--each other, and Gibbs said to Senator Obama, "Sir, have you talked to Mrs. Obama about this?" And he said, "Oh gee, ya know I gotta make that call tonight." And the next day he—he did that. And it—it was, you know, it was volcanic in its impact on the political community. And—but he didn't make a final decision on running until late December, early January. And the day after the election in 2006, the midterm election, eight or so of us gathered at my office in Chicago and began talking seriously about it, and his questions were some personal, some soul searching about what he could bring to it, and then some very practical questions about whether it was possible.

01:21:05:16

DAVID AXELROD:

Because that was the whole Obama for America organization in that room. Eight people—you know, Hillary Clinton was running. She had a national organization. She was clearly the frontrunner. John Edwards had run before and was very popular in Iowa. And the question was, could we raise the money, could we attract the talent? We had gotten enough data from some of the earlier soundings we took for me to believe the answer was yes, and my read of the situation was that he—that he could. So we—we systematically answered all of these questions. He went to Hawaii in December with his family to talk to Michelle seriously about doing this because this is a commitment of family, not just one person. But it was pretty clear to me when he left that he was- he was trending yes. And then on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, he came—he was back from Hawaii. I was sitting in my office and he came in

unannounced and he plopped down in a chair and said, “Ya know, I’m close to making the decision to do this.” And we had a two hour conversation. I told him, “My concern for you, Barack, is not that you’re gonna lose, it’s that you’re gonna win, and this will change your life forever and your family’s life forever and you can never go back. And so, you just need to think about that.” And you know, it was—it was—it was a pretty deep discussion. My other concern about him as a candidate was that he was kind of the most ordinary, extraordinary guy I knew, that he actually had friends. That he likes to watch—liked to sit down and watch football games, spend time with his kids. All of that was gonna be disrupted and, in fact, in the first six months of the campaign, he was—there were times when he was really down because he missed his family, he missed his life. He was a little bit aggravated with the absurd, you know, customs of modern presidential campaigning and all of the kind of ludicrous tests those—that entailed. That first conversation was important. I felt, as a friend, he had to go with eyes wide open about what it was that he was committing to because I really did believe that he could win this thing.

### **The governing philosophy of the campaign**

01:23:43:19

DAVID AXELROD:

The first meeting we ever had with a senior staff, there are probably ten people there who were beginning to work on the campaign. It was before he formally announced, but after he had made the decision and was taking steps to put the organization together. He—he joined us for meetings and he said,

“Look, I just have three rules. You know, one is, this is gonna be a grassroots campaign because first of all, it’s the only way I can win and then secondly, it’s the kind of politics that I believe in. The second thing is, we’re not gonna be leaking on each other here. We’re not gonna be pointing fingers at each other and if that—if I see that, you’re gonna have to leave. We’re either gonna rise or fall together.” And the third was, he said, “You know, running for president is a deadly serious thing. You know what I mean? It’s an incredibly important pursuit, but there ought to be joy in that pursuit, we ought to have fun. Also, we’re gonna make mistakes, things are gonna happen,” and he said, “To paraphrase Tom Cruise from Risky Business, sometimes you just gotta say what the fuck.” That was a—the governing philosophy of our campaign. We survived the vicissitudes of a long, long campaign, and ultimately, you know, a challenging administration because he had that quality and demanded that of others or encouraged that in others to just take things as they come and not get too low on those low days and not get too high on the high days and have some fun in the pursuit and we did.

**Obama and Hillary Clinton during the primary process**

01:25:29:15

DAVID AXELROD:

As it became clear that Obama was making his move in Iowa, some of Hillary’s supporters became very outspoken. One of them, Billy Shaheen, the husband of Senator Shaheen in New Hampshire, I guess then Governor Shaheen, told reporters that Obama, because of past drug use-- that he himself had written about in his own autobiography-- would be a failed

candidate if he were nominated, it'd be a terrible disaster for the Democratic party. Fast-forward, we're in Washington and Hillary's in Washington for Senate votes and now both of them have to fly to Iowa for a debate. We pull up to the air terminal; their planes are parked next to each other. Kid runs up and says, "Senator Clinton would like to talk to Senator Obama." And he turned to me and said, "Well what do you think that's about?" And I said, "She's gonna tell you that she knew nothing about what Billy Shaheen had to say and- and that she was sorry about it." And he got out of the car, and he walked over to see her. Robert Gibbs and I walked onto the plane and we're watching from the window of our plane and they're standing in front of Hillary's plane. And at first, it's calm, she's speaking. And then he said something in response and then now she's pointing at him and jabbing at him and it's clear that this is becoming—and we're watching with mouths agape not knowing exactly what was being said, and then finally he walked back to the plane and he kind of plopped down in his chair and he was clearly contemplating what had just happened and he said, "Boys, I think I just saw for the first time fear in her eyes." And- and I think that was right.

### **South Carolina Democratic primary**

01:27:28:11

DAVID AXELROD:

South Carolina is the first southern primary. The majority of voters who participate in democratic primaries—in the democratic primary there are majority African American, but Barack needed white votes as well to win. He wasn't gonna get all the African American votes, and wanted them because

he didn't want to win on that basis. But it was a crucial primary for both us and for Hillary Clinton. Bill Clinton was campaigning in the state the week before the primary. And he was in rural areas appealing to white voters we felt in ways that were sort of dog whistles to these voters. And there was a Mason Dixon poll the Friday before the Saturday primary that suggested that Obama's white support was collapsing, and that's the way the poll was reported. It was an NBC poll so there was all this apprehension about whether, in fact, our hopes were going to be dashed, that we weren't in fact in a new era where we could attract a—a multi-racial coalition. The day of the South Carolina primary, we—there was nothing to do but wait. I was sitting with Michelle Obama filming some ad material and my—my blackberry went off and it was the initial exit poll and I'm looking at it saying, "Oh I can't believe this, this can't be right." And she's just going, "What? What?" And it says, well, we're going to win handily here. And she slugged me and said, "Don't ever do that to me again." But it was a beautiful night. I mean there were two great moments in that campaign. One was the night that he won the Iowa caucuses. Maybe the most emotional night that I've ever had in politics. It was just a beautiful, beautiful night because of the kind of up from the grass roots nature of the campaign. We had done what people thought was not possible. South Carolina was a beautiful night as well because he got about 30% I think of white votes in the state in addition to a majority of black votes and built the multi-racial coalition that we had hoped for, completely outstripped everyone's expectations and in that hall the night when he spoke, there were people chanting race doesn't matter. Now that was premature



and that was more of a hope than—than a reality. But this was a big moment in the campaign, and I think a big moment for the country.

**The Clinton campaign's remarks during the Democratic primaries**

01:30:22:12

DAVID AXELROD:

Bill Clinton was a force for racial reconciliation in the south. He was one of the new south governors and—who really promoted racial understanding, who promoted equal opportunity, equal rights, civil rights. When he got elected, that was one of the things that he prided himself on. Maya Angelou famously referred to him as the first Black president. So it was shocking to see him campaigning in the way that he did, but he wanted to see Hillary win, he believed in her. But when he got called on it by reporters, you know, he had said that he—he—he claims that it was about the Iraq war, but he had said in New Hampshire that, you know, the Obama thing was a fantasy. You know, reporters pressed him on these things, and he blew up at them during that weekend in South Carolina, and in fact when the primary was over, he left the state as the votes were being counted and he said, “Well, Jesse Jackson won South Carolina, too.” Which was meant to belittle Obama’s victory and to cast him as a—as a—you know, as a niche candidate and not as a real candidate. And it was painful. It was painful, and I think it was hurtful to Hillary’s efforts as well. The weekend of the South Carolina Primary was probably the most significant weekend of the campaign because not only did Obama win an un—unexpectedly resounding victory in South Carolina that was brimming with emotion, but it was also the weekend that it became—

that Ted Kennedy let us know that he was gonna endorse Caroline Kennedy. Placed a piece in the New York Times saying that—that she had always been—encountered people who said her father was the one who inspired them and she said, “I’ve finally met the candidate who inspires me,” which brought tears to my eyes as a Kennedyophile, and then that Monday was the endorsement from Senator Kennedy, Caroline Kennedy, Patrick Kennedy at American University. The Kennedy endorsement was incredibly important for Obama, not because Kennedy would bring large numbers of votes to him, but because Kennedy was the leader of sort of Democrats in Washington. He was an establish figure, highly respected, and his willingness to lay hands on Obama and say he’s ready to be president really spoke to concerns that people had about that, and he was a great credentializer for Obama.

01:33:23:06

DAVID AXELROD:

Senator Kennedy was disturbed by some of the attacks on Obama from the Clinton camp. And he called President Clinton, and he had a very heated discussion with President Clinton about it, and this was before Kennedy endorsed Obama. I’m given to believe that it was partly that discussion that tipped him over to want to endorse Obama because he was disturbed by the nature of the conversation.

**“A More Perfect Union”**

01:33:59:01

DAVID AXELROD:

Campaigns are really long oral exams and character tests for the presidency. You know, ours really came on a day, I think, in March 2008. The Obamas belonged to a church in Chicago and the Reverend there, the pastor; Reverend Wright was—had been there for 30 years, he was a really bright and highly respected guy. He was also someone who was capable of fiery rhetoric, and we knew that. We neglected to do what we should have done, to go back and look at his sermons. Obama was- was not there for all of his sermons. Some of them there were lines you could remove from Reverend Wright's sermons that were really, really incendiary or could be viewed as such. So much of what our opponents wanted to do was paint Obama as a kind of militant Black man, who someone-- people should fear. And it was very difficult because he's not and because he was such a reassuring figure. So I think that they shifted their focus to Reverend Wright and tried to make him a surrogate as Obama's Pastor and took clips and wove them together into ya know, the most incendiary things he had said over a 30-year career in like two minutes. But it had the desired effect. I think because the media was—was questioning whether in fact a Black man could get elected president; political community wondered about it, and now came this tape. And there was this sense that, well maybe this is it. Maybe this will trip him up. Maybe people will move away from him because of this. Obama was in the Senate the day this greatest hits of Reverend Wright tape surfaced in the media. He was voting all day. I don't think he had a sense of how much it had captured the imagination of the media. It was big fodder for cable TV. He came back to Chicago on Friday, and he did some cable TV hits. And he immediately got a sense of how hot this issue was, and he called me and

David Plouffe that night, our campaign manager, and said, “I want to make a speech. I want to make a speech about race, and I want to put this Reverend Wright issue in context.” And we said, “Ok.” And he said, “And I want to do it no later than Tuesday.” This was Friday.

01:36:54:00

DAVID AXELROD:

And I said, “Well, you know—” and he said, “I have to write it.” I said, “Well, you’re campaigning tomorrow. We—we’re filming ads on Sunday.” “We have to do it; we need to do it. And you’re campaigning all day in Pennsylvania on Monday. When are you gonna write this speech?” He said, “Don’t worry about it. Just schedule it no later than Tuesday morning. I will get this speech done. I know what I want to say. He dictated an outline to his speechwriter, John Favreau, and then Sunday night after he put his kids to bed, he worked on it from like ten at night to two or three in the morning. The next day, the speech was half done, the day before he was going to deliver it, and we set out at 8:30 in the morning for Pennsylvania. He campaigns all day. 9:30 at night we arrive at the hotel. He went off to his room to finish this speech. I went off to the bar to—to assuage or allay my anxiety and I—three in the morning I was asleep in my room, and I got up and I noticed that there was an email from Obama on my blackberry; it was the speech. And I stood there, and I looked at it in the dark and I emailed him back and said, “This is why you should be president.” The next morning, we went to the Constitution Center in Philly. We set up this speech for the Constitution Center in Philadelphia on the theory that if you’re gonna go down, go down on a big stage. And we got to

the Constitution Center and the anxiety in the room, there were a lot of his friends and supporters there, was palpable. And we were in the green room right before the speech. And he turned to me and said, “You know, I’m gonna go out there and give this speech, and people will either accept it or they won’t. And if they don’t, then I just won’t be president, but at least I’ll have said what I think needs to be said.” He said, “That’s worth something.” And he went out there and he gave a speech worthy of a president, worthy of a moment. Probably the best speech on race any candidate for president has ever delivered and—and it—and it—it actually turned a moment that could have been a disaster for the campaign into a moment of triumph. Because people saw how he would deal with pressure and how he would deal with really personal attacks, and he dealt with it with such strength and dignity and wisdom that it actually strengthened his own image as a potential president.

***The New Yorker magazine cover***

01:39:33:12

DAVID AXELROD:

There was some event where Barack and Michelle had a fist bump and this created all kinds—you know, Fox News said this was some sort of militant exhibition. The New Yorker picked up on this and did a cover cartoon that kind of portrayed the Obamas as— as— as militants. It was meant to lampoon those who were making the charge, but I think that part was lost on people. So, you know, as much as we navigated these rocky shoals—they were rocky and they were—and you know, they would appear from time to time because

I think those who were running against him thought that this was the best opportunity to stop him.

**Obama's safety**

01:40:29:08

DAVID AXELROD:

Barack Obama wasn't just my client; he was my friend. And, you know, I love the guy. And I—I know his family and I know he has—and I knew his children who were quite young then. You can't help but worry about a candidate-- a guy who might be the first African American president of the United States in a country where race has been a searing story from its very beginning. We've had a history of violence in our politics, and I remember very well the Bobby Kennedy assassination and his campaign was not unlike Obama's campaign in that it stirred—in fact, we talked about trying to be that kind of campaign that could stir hope for change. And so when—when Hillary at the end of the campaign said she was staying in the race because you never know what might happen and she kind of invoked the Kennedy experience. I found that really, really troubling, really tasteless and -- because I worried about him, and we all did. You know, he got Secret Service protection earlier than most candidates do. And I remember he was going to do a crowd—outdoor crowd event and the Secret Service came in and they asked him to wear this kind of truncated vest that would cover his heart and they showed it to him, and the reality of that, especially for me because I—ya know, I remember when he—before he was even a candidate for the state

Senate and now, you know, they were worried about his personal safety. It was—it was really, really troubling.

### **The economic crisis and a new president**

01:42:19:08

DAVID AXELROD:

We met with the president elect and the vice president elect at the transition headquarters in Chicago in mid-December. I think it was December 16<sup>th</sup> of 2008 for the first time with his newly assembled economic team. Christie Romer, who was the incoming head of the counsel of economic advisers, spoke first and she was an expert on The Great Depression. And she said, “Mr. President—” it was the first time I heard people referring to him this way. “Mr. President, we’re—we’re in a recession now that will be as de—will be the deepest since we’ve—that we’ve seen since the great depression.” Larry Summers spoke next, who was his incoming Chairman of the National Economic Council and he said, “There’s a one in three chance of a second great depression.” Tim Geitner, the incoming Treasury Secretary said, “Mr. President, the banks are locked up and the financial system could collapse.” And then Peter Orzag, who was going to be the budget director and said, “And this is gonna add—the steps we need to take and the recession stuff will add trillions of dollars in debt.” And then everybody turned to him after this dismal report and he said, “Well, I guess we can’t ask for a recount so we better figure out what to do.” And very calmly over the next four hours, he led a discussion about what the options were, what was needed, you know, he gave his own priorities for how to begin getting out of this hole. But what

was very clear leaving that meeting and what everybody felt was this sense of sobriety, that this was nothing any of us had anticipated when he began running for president. And now it was clear he was going to take office amid the worst economic crisis that any president had experienced since Franklin Roosevelt in 1933.

### **Sarah Palin and the growth of populism**

01:44:21:17

DAVID AXELROD:

We were on the plane leaving Denver after a very successful convention when the word came that Sarah Palin was gonna be McCain's running mate. And I ran up to the front of the plane to say to—tell Obama the news and he thought about it, and he said, "Well you know, I wonder why he did it?" He said, "I guess change, she's a woman." And then he stopped and said, "Ya know, she may be the greatest politician since Ronald Reagan and she can come out of Alaska and handle this," he said, "but this running for national office is really tough." He said, "I was a terrible candidate for six months before I learned how to do it. I'll give this about four weeks." And four weeks later she did that interview with Katie Couric; so it was kind of impressed on his part that speaks to his sort of insight into people and the process. He's a writer and he sees the—he has the gift of being able to see the scenes that he is participating in and stepping back and evaluating them. Sarah Palin gave—whatever the long term impact of Sarah Palin on McCain's chances, she gave him a short term adrenaline shot, and his campaign began to attract big crowds, but the crowds also—the tone and tenor of the crowds turned



uglier and uglier and there was—there was a more sort of overt racism that was evident there, and you could see the forerunner of what would become the movement that ultimately elected Donald Trump. Not to say that everybody who voted for Donald Trump shared that view. Some of the ugliness you'd see at Trump rallies later were evident in those rallies of- of- of Palin's. You know, we all saw John McCain confront that at that town hall meeting in Minnesota. And ya know, we all thought that was, ya know, his finest moment in the whole campaign but you know, I—I don't recall having a long conversation with Senator Obama about those rallies other than the one where McCain confronted the woman, and I don't think he was surprised by some of that—some of the acrimony out there. He, after all, was a Black man who had grown up in America, so he didn't—he understood that there were these darker impulses out there. But at the same time, he was traveling the country and there were as many as 100,000 people showing up at his rallies, and they were very much affirming, and they were very integrated, and so that was a tonic in a way for some of the ugliness that we saw on the other side.

**Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr.**

01:47:40:19

DAVID AXELROD:

It's difficult to be the first anything. You have to be very strong, and he had that strength, but there were times when he saw things that- that- that really upset him. The initial reports about Skip Gates up at Harvard were disturbing, and I think disturbing to a lot of African Americans. The details

became a little hazier over time, but when he—he got asked the question at a press conference— it was the last question he was asked at a press conference and I think he answered instinctively because he knows that there have been many, many cases in which police have overstepped their authority in their relations with the African American community. I mean, that was palpable for anyone who lived in the community, and it was something that we now all see more clearly because we live in the age of cell phones and videotape. So he reacted in a—in an instinctive way, but it created a firestorm that was a distraction from other important things he needed to- to- to do.

### **The Affordable Care Act**

01:49:09:09

DAVID AXELROD:

Healthcare reform was a really challenging issue for many presidents. Seven presidents have tried, seven presidents had failed. Barack Obama was determined to get it done, despite political advice that suggested it would be really hard, that he would have to spend his political capital. To his everlasting credit, he said, “What are we supposed to do? Put our approval rating on the shelf and admire it for eight years? Or are we supposed to draw down on it to solve these problems? And this is a problem that has to be solved or at least we have to begin.” And—and so he committed himself to it. You know, we live in an age of—of grievance and— and the opponents of the Affordable Care Act, some of whom would be the beneficiaries of it, were led to believe by political forces they were going to lose something, someone else

was going to gain something. The inference was that someone were poor minorities, you know, maybe illegal immigrants and so on. I mean, it was—it was an ugly campaign, and it served the political purposes of some, but it really did a disservice to the—to the issue itself, and the fact that he was an African American president helped contribute to that, I'm sure.

**Trayvon Martin**

01:50:45:11

DAVID AXELROD:

Well, his temperament is such that, you know, he—he doesn't fling himself head long into any issue; I mean, he thinks about it and reflects on it. The Trayvon Martin case was really, really—touched him, for the reason that he said that Trayvon could've been his son. After many years in the public eye and a lifetime of interactions with people, I think that he understood that every time he engaged on these issues, that it would create a reaction. He tried to treat these—these tragedies and these incidents as teaching moments. His inclination is to treat them as teaching moments, but it's hard to escape the fundamental dynamic of race in America.

**My Brother's Keeper Alliance**

01:51:49:08

DAVID AXELROD:

The most compelling interactions I ever saw Barack Obama have was with young Black men, men—particularly young Black men who- who didn't have fathers like he didn't have a father and, you know, his interaction with them,

his sense of empathy for them, but also his very hard advice to them about no matter what hand you're dealt, the personal responsibility that you have to assume for your own lives was really compelling. His investment in that program is a reflection of that. I mean, I think he wants to provide the support, but also the admonitions that are necessary for these young men who are—are in, you know, difficult circumstances.

### **Obama and mentorship**

01:52:58:19

DAVID AXELROD:

Whenever you try and do something meaningful in—in a highly charged environment, there are going to be critics, you know, from right to left. Obama knows that. I mean, he's experienced it over a long period of time. I so remember when he was a State Senator representing a district on the Southside of Chicago, talking about what it was like to go to Kindergarten rooms and first grade rooms and have these kids with a light in their eyes say I want to be a doctor, I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a president. And—and then going to a middle school class and seeing all that hope and all those aspirations kind of dampened and that light extinguished because of the reality of life in the community. I don't think he needs any lectures from anyone on the struggles that these young people have. I—I—he's more interested in offering an—you know, opportunities, offering advice, offering mentorship, which is something that is really needed.

### **Obama's legacy**

01:54:10:12

DAVID AXELROD:

When Barack Obama was considering running for president, I wrote him a memo and one of the premises of the memo is that when a president retires after two terms, that president sets the stage for the next president in the sense that the country never looks—no matter how popular the president is - for the replica of what they have, they generally look for the remedy. And one of the reasons I thought he could win in 2008 was he represented the most authentic and compelling antithesis to the style of George W. Bush. By that measure, you know, there's no one who's a greater antithesis to Barack Obama than Donald Trump. So maybe those seeds were planted in that way. Some of the things that Trump has tried to undo are ultimately undoable. You know, it is instructive how, for example, resilient the Affordable Care Act has been, because people want healthcare. They're—they need healthcare, they need the coverage. They believe that people with pre-existing conditions shouldn't be discriminated against and should be able to get healthcare they can afford. They believe there shouldn't be a penalty if you get ill and exceed a lifetime cap and lose your insurance. So ya know, on climate change the steps that President Obama took spurred a whole series of commitments on the part of—of states and local communities and businesses and spurred a whole industry of renewable energy that is not going to be denied. That is gonna continue, and down the line he set things in motion that they have enough momentum. His legacy is also the fact that he led us through the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. You know, President Trump can claim whatever credit he wants, but the fact of the matter is the

quarter before Barack Obama took office, the economy shrunk by 8.9%. The worst quarter I believe since 1930. We—we were losing 800,000 jobs a month when he became president. He made a series of decisions, each of which were as politically fraught as they were necessary, to pull us out of the ditch and he got the economy growing again or his leadership to help get the economy growing again and started the greatest—the longest expansion that we've had. That is an enormous part of the story. We—we had 180,000 or more troops in active combat situations when he took office. That is no longer the case today. There's a whole range of things he did for which history will remember him, and then ultimately the fact that he did break that barrier down is just so important to the country. And don't ask me, ask young kids whose—who lived to see an African American president—young African American kids, Hispanic kids, Asian American kids and I think young girls as well. The notion that barriers that people thought unthinkable could be broken is the legacy of Barack Obama and he'll be remembered for that.

01:57:50:10

DAVID AXELROD:

It was an honor to see him do his work the way he did it. There was a sense of decorum, and ethics and—and honesty, and commitment to the country that suffused the entire White House, and the administration when he was there. And I think that was a model for— for presidents. Not all abide by it, but I think it's what the country wants, yearns for. People will look back and say, "I'm proud of the way that he conducted himself as president of the United States. That's no small thing."

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**The importance of moral leadership**

01:58:38:12

DAVID AXELROD:

Virtually every president in my lifetime understood, whether they were republican or democrat, that they were trustees of the democracy, that how they conducted themselves in office was important. Important for the—for our institutions, important for how the world looked at us. Barack Obama felt that way very, very deeply. Understood that the words he spoke had sent armies marching and markets tumbling and understood that if he disrespected our institutions, that others would feel licensed to do so as well. That if he spoke in ways that were divisive, that others would feel licensed to do that as well. He understood that the burdens of the presidency included the burden to act—or the requirement to act in a way that would encourage good citizenship and cooperation between people and so on. It's something he felt deeply.

01:59:48:22

DAVID AXELROD:

When we came to the White House, we lived in crisis every day. We worried for months and months and months whether the economy would collapse. We had two wars raging without a real strategy, particularly in Afghanistan. It was a very, very fraught time, and the thing that gave us all reassurance was the president himself. He was a guy who went home every night with a stack of homework and thought about it and came in the next day and asked the right questions and challenged people in the right way, and there was a

sense of solidity about him. Never saw him unprepared for a meeting. Most of the time he asked questions that the experts in the room would say, "Gee, I hadn't thought about that. Let us get back to you." I felt better about the country and about the future and about dealing with a crisis we were facing because he was such a solid, thoughtful presence in the center of the storm. What was remarkable to me was how a guy who was relatively young, had been in Washington a relatively short time, assumed the office amid the greatest crisis you could imagine and was such a source of calm and focus. You want to believe that the person sitting in that chair has extraordinary qualities like that. And in this case, he did. And even those of us who were close to him, even those of us who had been around him for years and years and years, I think, kind of marveled at the sense of focus and calm and- and wisdom that he brought to that office at a time when the country really needed it.

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