SHERRILYN IFILL INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Sherrilyn Ifill
President, NAACP Legal Defense Fund
November 13, 2018
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 49 minutes and 4 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON

Sherrilyn Ifill interview take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Sherrilyn Ifill

President, NAACP Legal Defense Fund

Feelings about Obama's presidency

01:00:12:03

SHERRILYN IFILL:

Well, I—you know, I'd have to separate out in some ways the two. There's a kind of professional role as a civil rights lawyer, and there's also just the personal role as an African American woman, as the child of a father who passed away long before President Obama was elected but who would have been just over the moon at this transformation in our country. As a parent of children who were having the opportunity to have their president be African American and see an African American family in the White House. I mean I

was out on the mall on inauguration day freezing my tuchus off with lots of other people but with my sister and her kids and my kids and our spouses and my brother. There was a quality to it that was just surreal and very beautiful. And so there was a—a tremendous sense of personal pride, a sense of accomplishment frankly, and a sense of hope for lack of a better word. As a civil rights lawyer, you know, I was well aware that this president was not going to be able to wave a magic wand and resolve hundreds of years of issues around race in this country, our original sin, our most deeply embedded political, economic, social, cultural problem.

01:01:40:06

So I didn't expect anything miraculous to happen as a result of Obama being President but I knew that good things would happen. I knew that good things happen just by virtue of him being elected but also because of what he stood for, his ability to speak in a way that really touched people in both their heart and their mind. That's a very particular quality that not many politicians have. His calling of us to be our best selves. I knew that some people would respond to the call and that others would not. And so it was an opportunity to forge a relationship and to be able to work with an administration that understood the importance of civil rights, understood the issue of racial inequality and racial injustice in the country and that already, just working with an administration that understood those problems and was committed in what ways they could to resolving those problems, I knew that that presented an opportunity.

Thoughts about America's first Black president

01:02:45:01

SHERRILYN IFILL:

I don't know that I ever thought about it and I have to say, when Barack Obama was first running, I did not think he would win. Like many people, I thought you know, this country's just not there yet. I didn't know him and—and like many people in this country, it was kind of as the campaign went on, you know, we threw aside many of our most cynical impulses or our doubt or our lack of belief, and we got caught up in the possibility that it was true. But you know, in my—in my high school yearbook, you know, under my name where it says my career goal, it says first Black female Supreme Court justice. So I was not somebody who thought things couldn't happen in this country. That still hasn't happened by the way. There hasn't been a black woman Supreme Court justice, but it's not because I didn't think that great things could happen in my lifetime and that there couldn't be extraordinary progress in—in my lifetime, but you know, we had been through some pretty tough elections, and you know, we had been through John Kerry's failed bid for the presidency. I personally thought that George W. Bush was a disastrous presidency, so I didn't think the country was in a particularly great place at the moment that Barack Obama decided he was gonna run for president, and it was made worse during the campaign by the financial crisis, which he couldn't have anticipated when he ran for office. So there were lots of reasons to believe that although it could happen in my lifetime, it wasn't gonna happen that year, in 2008. But it did. There was an alchemy to you know, events and individuals and of course the extraordinary talent of this particular individual who was able to make it happen.

Racist opposition

01:04:32:01

SHERRILYN IFILL:

You know, watching the way that President Obama was undermined as a candidate and then later as a president, and being able to see the way in which race was essential part of that undermining was deeply disappointing. Not unexpected, so maybe disappointing's the wrong word, not unexpected, but I think still dismaying and disappointing. The standards that he was held to, even during the campaign, the kinds of aspersions that were cast against him, about his background and his preparation, the way in which his wife was attacked and vilified by some in the media was pretty darn ugly but—and again, not unexpected. I was a grown up civil rights lawyer when Jesse Jackson made his run for presidency, so I didn't have expectations that he would be given an easy road, but nevertheless it was unpleasant and became in my view more unpleasant after he became president. You know, we now know that there were republican senators who met, you know, the night of the inauguration and decided that their, you know, one organizing principle was to undermine this presidency and to ensure that he could not be re-elected. They failed in ensuring that he could not be re-elected but they were effective in many ways in derailing what could have been extraordinary success and progress for the American people, not just for this particular president.

01:06:03:07

I would say among the lowest moments was when the President addressed a joint session of Congress and Joe Wilson, a congressman from South Carolina, heckled him and said, "You lie." And I'll never forget the feeling of it. I'll never forget—I mean I'm—right now I'm discussing it and I'm enraged at this moment of the disrespect that was shown to this Black man because that's who he was for them. He was not the president. At a joint session of congress, televised, you know, for—for the entire nation, and it was despicable. And he suffered no consequences for it. In fact, you know, he may have become more popular. I believe he still sits in the United States congress having done that. He was not censured, nothing happened to him. And in some ways I think that moment was a signal for many people that they could treat this president in a way that's incredibly disrespectful. So that was a tough year. Obviously the arrest of Skip Gates in Cambridge and President Obama said that he thought that the police officer acted stupidly, which was a very charitable interpretation of what the police officer did. And he was vilified for it and chose to have the so-called beer summit. I thought that was a low moment. But the way he was treated for that remark, frankly at this moment given the current president that we have, it's almost surreal to imagine the kind of vitriol that was unleashed at him.

01:07:48:07

There were moments in which it was very apparent how he was being treated and those were some of the most really, disappointing moments. What was interesting was the contrast was—you know, there was incredible pride I have to say when he demonstrated, and I could understood—stand why he was driving them crazy, because there were just moments where he

was so masterful, so superior, so intellectually capable, so astute, so informed, so clear, and I think it was maddening for them. And I'll tell you the example I remember. It was during the healthcare debate and ya know, the healthcare plan that was on the table and being proposed wasn't particularly radical, was—was not embraced by those on the left because it didn't include single payer and so forth. It was a—it was a compromise proposal and that was you know, President Obama's stance on many things, was that he was a compromiser. He stood in the middle and tried to pull people from both sides towards him. People forget how much consultation he had, how many hearings and how many conversations that he had and public conversations that he had and town halls and so forth.

01:09:05:17

And I remember just that one meeting he had where you know, he was in his shirtsleeves and you know, all the Senators were sitting around him, he had the books open on the table, and almost we've just let that moment go by, but I don't think there are very many recent presidents, President Clinton may be the only one in the last 30 years who could have done that, who could have sat with the books open, rolled up his sleeves and been fully equipped, prepared and able to answer every question, to negotiate every term if those who purported to oppose the bill wanted to negotiate in good faith. He was so informed and so smart and so sharp, he was the ultimate CEO sitting around that table and what I actually thought when I saw it is, he's driving them crazy, his capability, they were maddened by it. And this is of course the truth and you know, the reality about race and racism in this country and even you know, Jim Crow and segregation. It wasn't—the exclusion of Black

people was not because they actually thought we were inferior. It was because they feared competition. We saw what happened to major league baseball when it first was integrated, right? We saw who became the stars, who were the most talented in that field. We see it happen in all kinds of industries. It was the fear of somebody just like him, that capable, that would potentially shatter and smash every stereotype that they—that they feared and that was maddening to them. But I just remember that meeting, I just remember the image of him sitting around that table so fully capable and prepared and how you know, even the media, we just went right past that as though George W. Bush could have done it in a million years. As though George H.W. Bush could have done it, as though Ronald Reagan could have done it. I mean, could not have mastered the details of something that complicated in the way that Barack Obama was able to do and willing to do and perfectly prepared to engage with those who opposed him on every element of their opposition.

Racism as a political weapon

01:11:30:08

SHERRILYN IFILL:

Racism is always a very convenient tool to use by those who want power. They don't have to themselves be motivated by race. They can just be motivated by the desire to hold onto, attain or broaden their base of power and because racism is so deeply baked into the American psyche and so deeply a part of our culture, and so deeply a part of White people frankly in America, in the way White people are socialized, you can deploy it. You only

have to tap into the vein to use it for whatever ends you want to use it for. So you can use your coded words, you can you know, create the fear of the other, you can decide that maybe he's a Manchurian candidate; maybe he wasn't really born in this country, maybe he's one of them. You can suggest that he is insufficiently patriotic, you can suggest that he's not Christian, which is an odd charge for this president. You can suggest that if he is Christian, he is under the sway of a Black pastor who hates White people.

01:12:57:23

I mean it's so—it's so convenient. You can suggest that he's angry, that his wife is angry. You can suggest that he lacks the dignity to be in this office. Do you remember when President Obama wanted to give an address that would be broadcast like the first day of school in September to America's schoolchildren and there were—there was violent, you know, resistance around the country because there were those who said he's trying to indoctrinate our children. This is the president of the United States who wanted to give a message of encouragement to our schoolchildren at the beginning of the school year. And those who opposed him resisted this and said they would not allow it. Schools all over the country would not allow the President of the United States to address America's schoolchildren because they thought that he would indoctrinate them. Listen, when I was in elementary school, President Nixon was the president, and I can remember getting certificates when I graduated in the 6th grade signed by the president and we were all very excited. I mean, and we didn't like Nixon, my dad didn't even like him but it was the president and he had signed this certificate that we were getting when we graduated. Arizona State wanted to give the

President of the United States, a Harvard Law graduate an honorary doctorate, and their alumni rose up in opposition, and they ended up retracting the offer. I mean, these were things that were astonishing and unbelievable. Andy Card, the former aid to President George W Bush suggested that Barack Obama had demeaned the oval office by wearing his shirtsleeves in the oval office. I mean this is just—there were all of these coded messages about how he was insufficiently respectful of the office, or lacked the dignity of the office, or shouldn't be trusted to speak to our children. It just was unbelievable. And as a—if you're a Black person, particularly if you're a Black professional of even moderate success, these are—these are all familiar dog whistles to you.

01:15:08:19

You know, the changing of standards, the grasping at any—anything to suggest that you are not where you are supposed to be and that's the signal that unfortunately too many people in positions of responsibility were sending, which was that there was something untoward, something inappropriate about this president sitting in that oval office and his family being in the White House and it was despicable.

Choosing how to respond to racism

01:15:42:14

SHERRILYN IFILL:

I don't know his emotional state. I can only—he's a human being so—and he's a Black man, so I would be shocked if there weren't some level on it that was, you know, that in which it was not deeply, you know, annoying and

angering, but I think this particular person—this is why he could do it, this is why he could run, and this is why he could be president. Because to be—decide that you're going to be successful in an integrated or majority White environment, for those of us of that generation and the president and I are almost the same age, we already made some decisions about when we were gonna take bait and when we were not. About when we—what we were gonna swallow and what we were not, about what we were gonna press past and what we were not. We know who we are, I didn't expect any of this to derail him in any way, but he's a human being, and I think those of us who have been there and who have endured the slings and arrows, not at the level that he had to endure and not on the stage, on the kind of platform that he was on, we understood that there were wounds and in fact, not letting them see it is actually part of the game.

African Americans and patriotism

01:17:11:11

SHERRILYN IFILL:

Even Black soldiers and returning Black veterans, the idea that your demand for racial justice, your critique of American racism somehow calls into question your patriotism has been one of the very effective features of White supremacy in this country, which is to turn your demand for equality into suspicion of your allegiance to the country, and so that's always been true, when in fact, to demand that your country abide by and live up to the words and the spirit of its foundational documents, you know that all men and

women, I'm sure they would have said today are created equal, that every person in this country is entitled to the equal protection of the laws.

01:18:07:03

That is in the 14th amendment to the constitution. It's not something Black people made up. To demand those things, to demand what your country be what it says it is, is actually the height of patriotism. It is—it is the willingness to fight to make your country better, not to have blind allegiance to your country, you know, America right or wrong. No, no, make America right. That's the—you know, that's how civil rights activists and lawyers think about this country and those who are willing to work to make this country better are operating in the highest levels of patriotism in my view. So of course you know, for the first Black president, that's always—also the question, right? And if his name is Barack Hussein Obama, it's also really convenient to be able to use this trope and the anti-Muslim sentiment that runs through much of America and certainly that ran through much of America in the period—in the years following 9/11 to try and resuscitate. As a Black leader, particularly as the first Black president, President Obama's really got two issues on the table. One is that there are White people who are denigrating his legitimacy. The other is that you also have to be authentic and legitimate to your own community. And that's always the twin reality for African Americans who are in leadership positions and figuring out how to navigate that is important too.

Distinctions between a president and a civil rights leader

01:19:49:03

SHERRILYN IFILL:

So, I've been to many meetings as the leader of a civil rights organization; I would get invited to the White House with other civil rights leaders to talk about concrete issues. You know, certainly during the Ferguson unrest, you know, that was a moment of intense concern across the country, around various civil rights issues, the voting rights act and so forth, and so we would be called in and we would have these meetings to talk about issues, and we would ask for meetings to meet with the president as we do with every president to talk about important civil rights issues, and you know a photographer will come in at some point during that meeting and will just take snap candid pictures, and to your delight, weeks later at your office you will receive a photograph usually from that meeting. So I have some of these photographs up at my office. And my late brother visited me in my office some years ago, and he saw—you know, the picture that I had of me at this meeting,and he was so proud, and he was so excited, and he—and he said, "Look, the president is talking directly to you in that photograph." And I said to my brother, "Actually, he's telling me off in that photograph." We were very often kind of tense in those meetings. I was very consciously aware of my role as a civil rights leader. As a civil rights leader, my role is to push the President of the United States, whoever he is and wherever he is, farther than he wants to go on issues of civil rights. And I took that charge very, very seriously. And so I did the same with Barack Obama. I didn't—I didn't treat him like everything you're doing is great. You know, if he was doing something great, I want him to do something greater. So I was always pushing him.

01:21:27:08

And so I was in the weird position of being in these contentious meetings with him despite my tremendous personal admiration for him. And I often struggled with this, I thought, gosh does he even know how much I like him? You know, because I'm constantly in role, you know, doing my job. I felt like I was doing my job and he was doing his job and I respected that he was doing his job, and his job was not to be me. He wasn't a civil rights leader. He was the President of the United States, which is a different job. He knows things that I don't know, he has to respond to constituencies that I don't have to respond to. He's playing you know, a game that's—you know, a four—a four or eight year gain—game. He has to share power; he's got a lot of different things on the plate that he has to manage and—and so you have to be aware of that. Even as you come with your petition and you say, "I want you to do X, Y, and Z." Even if he can do X and Y and he doesn't do X this time, you don't throw him away, right, because you understand that this is part of the dynamic of how you try to influence people in positions of power. So I think it's incredibly naïve and certainly was unrealistic for—if people thought that you know, he was going to be a civil rights leader 'cause that's not who he—he was, or what he was elected to be.

01:22:53:04

At the same time, we were perfectly appropriate in expecting what we got, which was his ear and sensitivity to issues that we cared about and his attempt to do what he felt he could do. I didn't always agree with him on how far he could go but that's ok too. I never felt disrespected by the President in my demands and did feel that he was listening, you know, to us. So that was

the—that's the tension, and it's not an easy one to manage, but it had to be managed.

Michael Brown

01:23:29:14

SHERRILYN IFILL:

One of the most tense circumstances was after the Ferguson unrest and after Mike Brown was killed in Missouri. People were clamoring for President Obama to go to Ferguson. We had asked the Attorney General, then Attorney General Holder to investigate a pattern and practice of unconstitutional policing. We'd asked them to investigate the killing of Mike Brown by officer Darren Wilson, and the Department of Justice had undertaken an investigation and had begun an investigation. And from our own community, from the African American community, the—many people wanted President Obama to go to Ferguson. There were many young people on the street protesting. It was a—if people have maybe forgotten how tense the situation was, it was very tense for all of us. I remember meeting with President Obama at the time, and you know, he explained kind of why he wouldn't go to Ferguson. It may seem quaint given the President we currently have but what—but what was the truth was the Department of Justice was investigating the killing of Mike Brown, and the president felt that if he went to Ferguson, he might be seen as unduly and improperly influencing the investigation of the Department of Justice, which is supposed to be independent of—of the president in that circumstance to conduct their

independent investigation, and he did not want to be seen to be in any way influencing that investigation.

01:24:58:19

Now that may sound crazy given the current president that we have who thinks that the Department of Justice, you know, and the Attorney General is his own personal lawyer and his own personal law firm. But when we had a president who understood the rule of law and understood the nature of our government and understood even the nature of the executive branch, he understood that might be the perception and that the appearance of bias, the appearance of impropriety is often as bad as actual impropriety. He took a lot of heat for that from our community. He took a lot of heat for not going to Ferguson, but he felt that that was the right thing to do. What was interesting is I would get calls all the time from the media. So we were deeply involved you know, in Ferguson at the time, and the media would call me almost every day from the smallest newspaper, to the most important daily newspapers in our country, to all kinds of TV stations and the question, the first question was always, "Do you think that President Obama should go to Ferguson?" I mean, it's almost—they were enjoying the potential for this clash within the African American community.

01:26:00:11

And I got so annoyed with it. By the second week, I would say to reporters, can you tell me the name of the Mayor of Ferguson and invariably they could not. His name by the way was John Knowles. Very few people remember the name of the Mayor of Ferguson because nobody asked. This was a town that was actually run. There was a mayor, there was a city council, there was a

town manager, and there was less interest in the frankly, White people who were running that town where Mike Brown was killed than there was in the question of whether the President of the United States should go to that town and make a symbolic gesture to the young people there. It was a legitimate question whether he should go, but when it got to the point that I really felt they were letting off the hook the local leadership who weren't being asked to do anything at that point. In retrospect, people now say well yes of course the court system. Yeah, but that only came after the Department of Justice released their report.

01:26:57:02

In those first weeks, no one was even asking. You never saw the Mayor standing in front of the mic. You saw the police chief, but who was running this town. There was only that question to try to get that thing going. You know, it would have been an amazing thing. So what did he do? He did send Eric Holder. And people I think forgot that in some ways that was the President speaking also. I mean, Eric Holder was not going to show up in Ferguson unless—you know, if the president didn't want him to be there. So Eric Holder going to Ferguson and listening to people, that was the administration trying to show that they understood the importance of this and demonstrate their deep concern and compassion with the demands of—of young people in that community, but the president himself understood that his going might create a charge—an unfounded charge, nev—you know, nevertheless but a charge that he was improperly influencing what should have been a kind of independent assessment of whether Mike Brown's killing violated federal law. That was one of those times that was just incredibly

difficult, and he had to figure it out. And he had to live—deal with the consequences of it, which is some people are still mad that he didn't go to Ferguson.

Trayvon Martin

01:28:13:12

SHERRILYN IFILL:

This is where presidential leadership, you know, comes in and the—and recognizing all the tools the president has at his disposal, and one of the tools that the president has at his disposal is to just speak, is just to speak in a way that is powerful and moving. This president saying you know, "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon." It spoke directly to us as African American people that he shared the pain, the deep pain that we all felt at the senseless killing of this innocent young man. The pain that we feel and the fear that we feel as parents for our children. And with one sentence, this president told us, I know. I know. I—I feel it too, and that was incredibly powerful and important. Sometimes the president doesn't have the power to go and you know, to order someone's arrest. The President doesn't have that power. We don't have a king. We have a justice system that is deeply imperfect. But he does have the power to speak in a way that tells us that we are seen, that reminds us that he is human, that reminds us that he understands the shared nature of our struggle, and that statement in that moment was that.

Mediation of a meeting of civil rights leaders

01:29:44:01

SHERRILYN IFILL:

To date, the moment that I remain—it's not, it wasn't a moment—but the experience that impressed me more than any other with President Obama that I can personally kind of attest to, occurred after- during one of the most difficult weeks certainly of my work as a civil rights lawyer. In one week, an innocent man named Alton Sterling was killed in Baton Rouge Louisiana by a police officer. 48 hours later, less than 48 hours later, Philando Castile was killed sitting in his car in Minnesota. And a few days later, an African American man opened fire on Dallas police officers and killed several of them. It was a week unlike any other. And President Obama called a meeting, a truly extraordinary meeting.

01:30:43:09

In the room were civil rights lawyers like myself and activists and leaders: Reverend Al and Mark Morial from the Urban League and young activists were there. Mayors—Mayor Garsetti was there. State leaders, police officers, the fraternal order of police. There were about 40 of us, and none of us were happy. We weren't happy because this killing of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile was just unbelievable and so deeply painful. The police weren't happy because their own had been killed and we weren't happy about that either, and there's never been a heavier room in terms of emotion, anger, despair. And the president chaired this meeting for three hours, more than three hours. Everyone spoke. He interacted with everyone. There were tense moments. There were—there were—there were moments of real tension in that room and the President of the United States managed it all. There was no staff person sitting next to him. There was no staff person handing him notes.

For three hours he managed a meeting of people who were deeply in opposition to one another, deeply angry, deeply disappointed; literally everyone of us at boiling point, and I've never seen anything like it. Again, I don't know another president who could have done that, reading back to us you know, what we were saying, what was underneath what we were saying, keeping us moving forward so that it wasn't just a venting session so that we were actually talking about what were real solutions that we needed.

01:32:43:11

Respecting everyone's viewpoint, giving everyone a platform to be heard and making us listen to one another, and then at the end of the meeting pulling it all together and saying, here are the buckets of agreement, the buckets of disagreement, here's what we can do and then inviting the press in, opening the doors and having 50 members of the press, maybe more come in and reading out to the press what this meeting was about. To me it was like, I don't know, the finest ballet. It was a symphony, it was art, it was leadership at its finest. It was leadership. Those are the moments that will never be in the public but those of us who were in the room certainly remember it well. We didn't leave the room hugging each other and kissing. We didn't leave the room saying now the problems are all solved, but we were heard at the highest level of this government in this country. And we were heard in a way that wasn't just an emotional venting. It was, we have a problem and how do we solve these problems, and it was a commitment from the President of the United States to try and solve these problems. This was—this was really important and moments like those are ones that mark him as an exceptional leader.

Opposition to Obama

01:34:17:19

SHERRILYN IFILL:

When you have politicians who are—and there was a whole cadre of them—who were determined, whose goal, simple goal was to undermine the president. It wasn't to solve any of American's problem. It wasn't to advance any particular policy. These aren't even policy people. These are people who just want power and wanted to undermine president Obama as a way of gaining power and took delight in it. So these were not people who were really actually in the game, but they were ruining the game anyway. They were, you know, over our shoulders throwing bombs into- onto the table. And It's truly unfortunate that they were able to do this, and then the bomb throwers you know got into the White House.

Charleston church shooting

01:35:14:17

SHERRILYN IFILL:

I want to say it was the last black history month of the Obama presidency, so it must have been February of 2016, and there was a kind of celebration at the White House, and a number of us were invited to meet with the president, and some of us were contemporary civil rights leaders, lots of young—younger than me, you know, activists and leaders and then those from you know, kind of the generation of the civil rights movement, so John Lewis and so forth. One of the people in the room was Reverend C.T. Vivian,

who was one of the older civil rights leaders who I admire the most. He begins to talk to President Obama about what President Obama meant to him and us. And you could hear a pin drop in the room as C.T. Vivian just starts to say what it meant to him to have a president like President Obama and his family, and he says you know, "You never embarrassed us." And he ends by saying, "I would literally take a bullet for you." I mean—and President Obama is not for all the flattery so he's like, "Stop." You know, just—but—but it's something I'll never forget because it's not unconnected to the Emanuel nine in Charleston, which was, you know, among the most devastating moments in our country and certainly in the Obama presidency for all of us.

01:36:53:10

To defeat racism and the work of civil rights is not a story of relentless progress. It's just not. There is progress. There's also retrenchment. There are also moments that crystalize the fragile nature of the progress that you've made, and this was one of them. And so I was there at this service when President Obama spoke and you know, you're in this auditorium, thousands and thousands and thousands of people. I remember the moment that Reverend Pinckney's family came in, his wife and his daughters. And just the kind of—the feeling that—the feeling that was in that room was just incredibly heavy. President Obama's words, his speech, you know, was exactly what it's supposed to be which is very much in the African American church tradition, you know, that even in our darkest moments, there is a sense of hopefulness, there's a sense in which your faith allows you to transcend the worst moments and to see over the hill, at least to catch a

glimpse of it, or maybe you convince yourself you can see it, but whatever it is, it's what kept us going, and he tapped into that very powerfully.

01:38:18:07

We all remember when he started singing Amazing Grace, and there was a moment of absolute disbelief I can just say when he hit, ya know, the first notes. It was kind of—we laughed, you know, we did because we just couldn't believe that—is he gonna actually sing it? And he did sing it. That was just really very interesting. I mean so on one hand it's incredibly moving. I mean frankly anybody singing Amazing Grace; the song is so incredibly moving. Now it's the President of the United States singing this song. But what was so moving about it is it's saying all the things he can't say, you know, in our tradition. There's a lot that can't be said about what that moment, what this killing meant to us, how devastating this was to us and how we had to organize ourselves, you know, as our forbearers have had to do many times in the past, not to allow ourselves to be defined by and to allow our sense of who we are and who we will be in this country to be defined by these moments of hideous violence and tremendous tragedy, and it was all in that song.

01:39:29:03

It was all in the President of the United States, Barack Obama leading us in that song and to pull that off, to know that—I don't know if he knew it, but he instinctively knew it was the right thing to do, and it was the right thing to do, and we left as you are supposed to leave a home going service, which—which means that even though you've lost—you've suffered this tremendous loss, you're supposed to feel some kind of joy in our faith tradition and that

happened, largely because—because he did that. So those again are those moments where it's not in the presidential powers book, it's not in the handbook, but a very talented president and a president who's unafraid to allow his intuition to play a role in his governance can do it at very special moments. He's not the only president who—who's done it but he sure did do it that day.

Donald Trump

01:40:46:04

SHERRILYN IFILL:

When people report to be shocked by the fact that Donald Trump could follow Barack Obama and the dashed hopes that we were beyond this and that we were moving in a progressive fashion, I remind them of some of the most devastating moments that we faced in our country, I remind them that for many people, watching Eric Garner choked by a police officer in the NYPD is maybe the first time they've seen someone killed. If you remember how you felt when you watched a 53-year-old man Walter Scott running in that park and being shot in the back by that officer and then the officer dropping something. If you can remember—maybe we're numb to it now, if you can remember that. If you can remember the Emanuel nine being killed in Charleston and what that felt like. That was during the Obama presidency. It wasn't as though Donald Trump created racism, and it happened during the campaign. It was there. You know, I've said to people, I think about all of the voting rights cases that—that we've brought; our challenge to Texas's voter ID law, we filed that case in 2014, you know. The judge found that Texas had

engaged in intentional discrimination in creating this voter ID law, that the—that the law was created to disenfranchise Black and Latino voters. The judge found that in—in 2015.

01:42:12:19

Trump didn't create voter suppression laws. I lacked for no number of civil rights cases during the Obama presidency and before the Obama presidency. You know, I was a young civil rights lawyer when President Clinton was president, and I was litigating voting rights cases then. We should just remember that Donald Trump did not introduce racism to America. It was there; it was there very powerfully during the Obama presidency. Here's the thing. If Hillary Clinton had won that night, I mean even by a fraction, we would have dropped the balloons and we would have believed that the country was just on a trajectory of just incredible progress. We had the Black president, now we have a woman president, wow America, look at what we've done in a short period of time. But we would have not fully accepted what was lying beneath the surface at a fraction of a percentage point. We wouldn't have accepted what we now know to be true about this country. And if there's anything positive to co—if we survive as a nation, as a democracy, if we survive the Trump presidency, I hope that people now understand how fragile our democracy is and what—how fragile the progress is that we have made on race.

America as a 65 year old country

01:43:48:23

SHERRILYN IFILL:

You know, we talked about this when I was a little kid, we had the bicentennial, 1776. It was so exciting—1976. I've got the coin somewhere in my house and you know, it's like we were this 200 year old country and now 250 year old country, and we talk about ourselves in these terms, I don't think of us that way. I think of us as a 65 year old country because I don't see us as being a true democracy until Brown versus Board of Education is decided and I could go a step further and even take it to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 since most Black people in the south really could not exercise the right to vote until after 1965, which means we could not have been a democracy because we deliberately denied the franchise to a set of people who were enfranchised in our constitution. If you begin to think about this country that way, it means we are a very young country and we behave like one. We are like teenagers, and we have temper tantrums, and we have mood swings. We haven't been at this very long at all at all so how could Trump follow President Obama? Because we haven't been at this very long and we continue to have mood swings, and this idea of us as a multiracial democracy hasn't fully set yet. It's early days yet for this country in terms of thinking about equality. And we've been trying to expand it and we have been expanding it.

01:45:11:20

You know, the civil rights movement, which was largely focused on equality for African Americans, is now understood to encompass you know, Latinos, as understood to encompass women and was part of the undergirding of the women's movement. We understand that it now encompasses members of the LGBTQ community, we understand all of that but it's thin. It's not deep. It

takes time to put down deep roots and we're not there yet. Knowing that means we have to behave differently in our democracy. It means we can't sit out elections. It means we can't just vote for people and not show up to hold them accountable. It means we can't think that government is something other people do and yet we don't encourage—you know, we don't encourage our kids to run for office. What's wrong with being on the school board? It's a part time job, you know? You can do it. We have to behave differently. We can't behave as though our democracy is some unshakable thing that's been around for hundreds of years and can't be toppled. It isn't, it's new, particularly where race is concerned, our progress is very new, and the roots haven't fully caught yet, and if we're not careful, it can be unearthed.

Strengthening America's multi-racial democracy

01:46:32:19

SHERRILYN IFILL:

What we're to get out of this is we've been faced with a stark reality that we perhaps would have been able to deny if Hillary Clinton had won the election. We're faced with the reality of what work we still have to do to strengthen the roots of this country as a true multi-racial democracy. We're just not there yet and I understand that people would like to not have to do it but who told us that we get to skip a generation? Who told us? I mean, do you think—do you think people in the 1940's and 1950's woke up and said, we are the civil rights generation, let's do this, as though it was you know fantastic? Our nostalgia has made us look back at that period of time as though it was great but it was not great getting hit in the head on the

Edmund Pettis Bridge. We forget that four girls were blown up in that church. We forget that Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot and killed. We forget that Med—Medgar Evers was assassinated on his driveway. These weren't fun times. These were times of commitment when people decided that they weren't gonna take it anymore and that they could make this country better. And then somehow we got this idea in our head that that was now done, and we didn't have to do anymore. No, no.

01:47:41:04

Now, we're being called up to the front to deal with this battle. Some of it is a retrenchment, is returning to battles that we fought before. Some of them are new battles but this is—this is the hand we were dealt, and we've got to play that hand. So all of the kind of bellyaching about you know, I can't believe we have to return to that —yeah we do, it's—we've only been at it for 60 or so years, of course we have to return to it. Of course, we do. So, I don't think that President Trump's election—I mean he's uniquely disastrous and so you know, it's a question of whether we make it out of this, but I don't think that his election means that the electorate is so very different then it was in 2012. It's that it can be moved by very small shifts, and it moved in a way that was I think devastating by a candidate who called to our worst impulses, who made it fun to be coarse and vulgar and mean and racist and denigrating. It was liberating for many people. That's a—that's a very dangerous thing to get addicted to, but he gave it free reign and people were attracted to it. That's the reality. All it means is we've got to dig in deeper, and now we know we can't turn away from the truth and it's time, to work.

END TC: 01:49:03:22