

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JELANI COBB INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jelani Cobb
Author and Journalist
November 19, 2018
Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 56 minutes and 50 seconds

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Jelani Cobb interview take one, marker.

ON-SCREEN TEXT:

Jelani Cobb

Author and Journalist

BET farewell party

01:00:12:22

JELANI COBB:

Toward the end of Obama's presidency, I received an invitation to what was billed as a celebration of Black music at the White House. You know, there were all these kinds of cultural events and things that happened at the White House and the White House in addition to being in the political center of the country is also you know, home to lots of different cultural events and you

know, it has that kind of significance, and so I don't think that I grasped immediately what it was supposed to be. When I got there, it became very clear that this was on the one hand a recognition of the African American contributions to American musical culture but in another sense a very real valedictory for Barack Obama and Michelle Obama and for the specific part of Black life that was inhabiting the White House at that point.

01:01:10:04

And so I'm sitting there in the White House and Usher is 50 feet away from me and De La Soul is there and Common and there—like—all these figures in—kind of entertainment figures and you know, people who I know from the writing communities and like all these kinds of people, everybody Black. It was really almost a punctuation for what Obama and what the Obama's have represented in the United States for the previous eight years. Here's a—there are a couple of presumptions by the way. But like one I don't think that any of us ever thought that we would see a Black president in our lives.

01:02:00:08

I used to say that in 2007 there were only four people in the United States who thought that it was possible for a black man to be elected President and they all lived at the same address on the Southside of Chicago. That was not a general sentiment that people subscribed to. But if that were to ever to happen, if it were ever to be that a Black person would be elected to the presidency, almost unanimous presumption would've been that this was someone who had a very tenuous relationship to the broader Black community or someone who might kind of tacitly acknowledge their

Blackness, but you know, to have us in a box where they didn't want to be too overtly and certainly not too blatantly Black in terms of their cultural identity.

01:02:54:05

And then we got this guy who was born in Hawaii, raised part of his life in Indonesia, whose mother's from Kansas and his father's from Kenya, but idiomatically and in terms of his demeanor and persona, this dude was completely Southside Chicago Black. Like, legible to black people in that way and everything from the hip hop references to the cadence of his speech to the fact that he was married to a woman whose middle name was Lavon, from the Southside of Chicago. Like all of this is reinforcing this very particular and very overt engagement with black people in a way that I think we hadn't anticipated. And so all that was culminating at night in the spring of 2016 as we're at the White House and D-Nice is DJ-ing and you know, there are like Black people dancing in the White House.

Black progress in America

01:04:10:13

JELANI COBB:

I think that the idea of Barack Obama as being this person who just almost inevitably was going to be vested with the weight of Black people's claim on American society. From—everything has been denied to us, starting with the right to even exist as free people, to the civic rights of voting and

employment and these kinds of things, and that seeing him as the embodiment, not the sole embodiment, but a very large embodiment of the struggle to overcome those things, that's what people understood Barack Obama to be, in African Americans. And not solely African Americans but certainly African Americans understood him to be that.

01:05:06:10

And at the same time, people—if you have any kind of cognizance of how American history has typically worked, you understand that Black progress has typically gone hand in hand with White enmity, at least from a certain portion of white Americans. That they understand their status in society not in absolute terms like how well am I doing but in relative terms, how well am I doing in relation to what Black people are doing. And so that progress was going to be seen as threatening.

Backlash to Obama's election win

01:05:46:10

JELANI COBB:

Maybe—it was a couple of weeks out from the election in 2008, but I was talking with a good friend of mine, Eric Easter, who was one of the aides for Jesse Jackson's presidential run in 1988. So he and I were talking about the differences between the 1988 campaign, and—the 1988 Jesse Jackson campaign and Barack Obama's campaign in 2008. And he said something to me that was very ominous but also true, which is that it was apparent by that

point that Barack Obama had a very viable chance of becoming the President of the United States. And there's this euphoria that is surrounding that possibility, and Eric said to me, "You do know that there's going to be hell to pay for this, right?" And I was quiet for a minute, and then I said, "Yeah, I know." And then he said, "And you do know that the Voting Rights Act is gone." And I said, "Yeah, you're probably right."

01:06:52:16

And in a bigger sense, you know, that groundswell wave of what people euphemistically referred to as populism, you know, because in calling it populism, it was possible to avoid the more onerous aspects of what it really was, which was a kind of revanchist retrenchment of Whiteness in many ways. The seeds of that were born in the Electoral College as those numbers came rolling in in favor of Barack Obama in November of 2000—in November of 2008.

Obama's Blackness

01:07:30:08

JELANI COBB:

In—I remember in 2008, there was this conversation around whether or not people thought Barack Obama was Black enough, and I remember that was a conversation that intellectuals were having but on the ground, I don't really think that was a phenomenon because—I will tell you an interesting story though. In South Carolina, around the South Carolina primary as they were

organizing and you know, South Carolina was crucial to the Obama campaign and especially in the primaries, and they were organizing and there were kind of African Americans who didn't know that there was a Black person running for president, so the campaign there started putting Barack Obama's image on things so people would see, like oh, this person is Black.

01:08:14:07

They were going, Barack Obama? Like what—what kind of name is that? And he seemed foreign in some kind of way, atypical, like I don't know who this person is. The result was that they began putting pictures of him in concert with Michelle and their children because if he seemed atypical or unusual, then she seemed incredibly familiar. There's a Michelle Robinson, Michelle Obama in every community. And you see somebody that you went to high school with or lived down the street from or went to church with and so in that way, she made him that much more understandable I think in terms of just his name.

01:09:00:15

But the other part of it is that there's always been heterogeneous idea of like what it is to be Black in this country. What was more important than his name or his lineage or I think even his educational background was his ability to culturally interact on terms with African Americans. One of the things that the campaign did in South Carolina was they released this DVD of him kind of going around and talking to voters and there's at one point—there is one point in the clip where he goes into a barbershop and he starts cracking on this guys shoes. Because this guy has on like some of these really

extraordinary flamboyant shoes, and Barack Obama points them out and starts kind of making jokes about them. And that was just something that only a person who was comfortable in this culture would do, and someone who knew like what the kind of principles of interaction, especially in that all male, all Black space were.

01:10:12:21

There's a really great moment that expresses Obama's kind of strategic relationship to Black identity, and that was in the Democratic National Convention in Denver in 2008 and there's a point where John Kerry is giving a speech and he mentions that Barack Obama's uncle who is a veteran of World War II is present in the convention hall and he requests that his uncle stand up and be acknowledged by the crowd. And this elderly white man stands up, you know, this man who would not be out of place at any VFW hall in the country. He stands up and people begin cheering, and I happen to be with a group of Black delegates who all howled with laughter, because you understood exactly what he was doing.

01:11:11:23

And the guy next to me said, "If I had a white uncle, I'd take him to every job interview I went to. And so he was Black in this way that he could relate to—intimately relate to aspects of the Black experience, (Inaudible) the culture, he could traffic in the kind of cultural motifs that are very familiar but he also was kind of explaining to—to White people, like if you don't understand who I am, if you're trying to figure out who I am, well here's my uncle. There's a good chance that you have an uncle who is just like this guy and you know, he

is your uncle, he's my uncle too. And so that was a kind of brilliant inversion of the one-drop rule in America because historically in this country, you know, if a person is as they say, if you are Black at all, you were all Black.

01:12:11:0

If you have any discernible aspect of Black community, you were consigned to this category of Black, which was thought of as impure. And White identity was for people who had no history of Africa in their veins. Barack Obama turned that inside out. It's like he understood that history well enough to riff on it and say, I'm in this category of Black but doesn't—that does not preclude me from using everything in my toolkit to maximize my connections with the electorate. And so it was really brilliant.

Obama's 2004 DNC speech

01:12:53:12

JELANI COBB:

So when I first saw Barack Obama, I was skeptical and my introduction to him was like very many people's introduction, the 2004 National Democratic Convention where he gave the keynote speech and you know, he made that famous statement, "There's not a Black America or White America, there's the United States of America." Now that's not true. There's totally a Black America and a White America. And there's a Latino America, a gay America, a poor America, there's a America that is disproportionately incarcerated, there are all of those things. But you also had to understand that he was

speaking aspirationally. That people wanted to belong to a country where those are not permanent and impermeable distinctions.

Campaigning for Barack Obama

01:13:45:07

JELANI COBB:

Over time he began kind of building momentum, and I was interacting with people who knew him, who were connected to the campaign when he decided to run for president and when I went to South Carolina, the thing that struck me about it was that they were pulling in volunteers from neighboring areas and so obviously Atlanta, which was about three hours away from Columbia, South Carolina, was going to be a big draw.

01:14:15:09

And so partly out of curiosity and partly out of legitimate support, I decided that I was gonna go to South Carolina and when I got to the headquarters, the campaign headquarters and people were leaving out at maybe five am, it looked like an army massing for an invasion. There were just all these rental vans, it was just row after row after row of rental vans and they were just lining people up, filling up these vans and taking off on the highway. I'd never seen anything like this. There was another thing that happened in South Carolina that was particularly striking to me, which is that we were kind of wandering around, we were in this place, Denmark, South Carolina. And

we're on the get out and vote operation and we walk up to this house and I'm kind of admittedly thinking you know, maybe some stereotypical ways.

01:15:16:07

But there's a carcass of a car that's out front, the house is kind of dilapidated, and me, I'm a large black man walking up to knock on this woman's door and I get about halfway down her walkway and this older white woman comes to the door and tells me not to come any closer. And I said, "Ok." And ya know, I stopped where I was. And she said—I said, "I'm with the Obama campaign." And she said, "You don't need to give me that material." And I said, "Ok." And I turned around to walk away and she said, "I already know the date and I know the time; I'm going to be right there to vote for Senator Obama." That was not the interaction I was anticipating having in a kind of out of the way town in South Carolina regarding a Black presidential candidate. And so that was a really significant moment, I think.

"Race doesn't matter."

01:16:16:16

JELANI COBB:

So there were these two tracks that were going on in that campaign and those two tracks were mirrored in the broader conversation that we were having in the country. And one was that there were people who were saying race doesn't matter. That was not true. And that was a political statement, it was something that people needed to think. And at the same time, there was

a conversation about how to mitigate the impact of race and both of those things were happening. And if we know anything about the history of this country, we know that that is not an atypical state of affairs, but in this instance, it's the first viable Black presidential candidate.

01:17:02:05

He can't talk about the real warping, distorting effect of race on American democracy, racism in American democracy, because then he'll be seen as like a grievance—bearer of grievances, you know, so-called angry Black man, all those kinds of things that won't go over well with the electorate, and at the same time you have to be aware that there are people who are understanding this in terms that are very racial, very racialized. And so if you have a crowd in South Carolina that's chanting 'race doesn't matter', it's because people want the day to come when it really doesn't.

Importance of Barack Obama's second term

01:17:53:10

JELANI COBB:

You know, most presidents overwhelmingly want to get a second term, that's generally the case. In a bigger sense, it would have been seen as maybe a failed experiment if there had been a Black person who climbed this seemingly insurmountable peak to the presidency and then was not able to hold onto it. Just in terms of history, we view people who have two terms as substantial presidencies and people who have one term as a fluke. And so

you don't want Barack Obama to be like the Black guy you dated for a semester in college. You know, like his presidency being the equivalent of that. You want him to actually be able to have a substantial impact on the presidency if for no other reason than to validate the idea that a Black person is capable of functioning on the highest level of American politics effectively.

Shirley Sherrod

01:18:58:09

JELANI COBB:

In retrospect, the Shirley Sherrod situation was a harbinger, you know, it was a metaphor for everything that was going to happen in a way that we of course couldn't have known at the time but Breitbart, who released a doctored video in which Shirley Sherrod was giving a speech that appeared to disparage White people. Now let's bear in mind that it'd be inflammatory for a person in any presidential administration to say the things that she appeared to be saying about a group of people, racial or ethnic group. Factor into that the fact that Glenn Beck had said on Fox News that Barack Obama hated White people and hated White culture, ya know, despite the fact that his mother's white and he was raised by his white grandparents.

01:19:57:01

The fact that one sub current of the 2008 campaign had been this really irrational fear that Barack Obama represented some sort of revenge fantasy for Black people, and I don't know, like, he was supposed to be elected and

then the Black barbarians would be at the gate or something, I don't know what was supposed to happen. But all of that had preceded this moment in which Shirley Sherrod's doctored video is released and the White House flinched. Before they contacted her to find out what she'd said, they demanded that she pull over and—you know, she had a position in the Department of Agriculture.

01:20:43:15

They demanded that she pull over and resign like on her smart phone, type up a letter of resignation on a highway and this was in order to I guess staunch the bleeding of you know, right wing media losing its mind. And only after the fact do, they realize that this video has been doctored, what appears to be an inflammatory anti-white speech is actually an empowering speech about the power of understanding human beings as human beings irrespective of what they look like, where they're from or their background. And it's coming from a woman who had experienced the worst of southern racism; who'd had a cross-burned on her property as a child, and she's talking about this.

01:21:33:22

And her father dying under circumstances that are like heavily involved with racism. She's saying that she refused to look at white people in the way that she had been looked at by racists. That's what the speech was. And in terms of the learning curve, you know, it just—at that point, it seemed like the learning curve was practically vertical because with that template in mind, you sort of saw Fox and you know, kind of later, more Breitbart and the kind

of what was then nascent tea party movement and all of these elements that seemed convinced that Barack Obama was fundamentally anti-American and anti-White. And I remember thinking like, this is not good and this is probably going to get worse.

Dreams from My Father

01:22:34:22

JELANI COBB:

The interesting thing about *Dreams from My Father* is that the first thing that you notice is that he is an amazing writer, and you know, in the history of the presidency, when people think about great writers, you know there are people who would talk about Grant and maybe his memoirs but really the kind of central figure you talk about is Abraham Lincoln. And of course, as a comparison that Obama later really embraced whole-heartedly but to see a potential statesman who had that fluent an ability to express himself in prose was one, an indicator of his intellect and a kind of keen mind that you know, he possesses.

01:23:27:21

The other thing about it is that *Dreams From My Father* is kind of a fascinating book in its own right, of the narrative of his circumstances of his birth and the absence of his father in his childhood and how he has kind of matriculated through life carrying and processing that absence, you know, what it meant to be a Black person and understand—come to understand

himself as a Black person, even though he's raised by his white mother and his white grandparents and for most of his life in environments where there are not very many black people at all. In that way it seems like a kind of unique narrative.

01:24:09:15

It was similar to the narrative that W.E.B. DuBois had been telling with *Souls of Black Folk* a century earlier. And you know, DuBois is this brilliant mind, person of mixed racial ancestry, grows up in an environment where there are very few black people. As a young person, travels to a community in Tennessee for College in Fisk, where he's introduced to black culture the same way that Obama is when he comes to Columbia and he begins to kind of interact with black people who are in Harlem and then later in the Southside of Chicago and through their interactions in those environments come to understand themselves as black and not only understand themselves as Black but then utilize the highly idiosyncratic nature of their privileges as highly educated people on behalf of this community that they're only relatively recently becoming affiliated with. In reading *Dreams From My Father*, I was you know, I was impressed by his intellect; I was impressed by the grace of his prose and self-expression, but I was also impressed by the way in which he fit into this older tradition that wasn't necessarily visible. I didn't—certainly hadn't recognized it before I read the book.

Bobby Rush

01:25:45:13

15

JELANI COBB:

There was a kind of—a kind of—a kind of another—another Chicago personality that people saw as maybe a kindred spirit to Obama and that was Michael Jordan, you know, who was this apparently genial figure, was like smiling, you know gentlemanly. But people who played against Jordan said that you know, he was an absolute killer and that you should never be confused by the outward appearance of congeniality. And I think that that was something that connected to Obama in a way because he—even the way he got that state senate seat, in which he kind of systematically invalidated the petitions from his competitors and gave himself a clear entrée into the seat.

01:26:41:03

You know, in running against Bobby Rush, that was clearly a miscalculation. There are a couple of things that would suggest that that's not a good idea. One is that you know, Bobby Rush has a really long history of service in that community, dating back to the Black Panther party. And you know, particularly being a veteran of the repression—state/federal repression that—excuse me, the black—veteran of the state and federal repression that the Black Panther party in Chicago had experienced.

01:27:16:14

You know, Fred Hampton of course of the Black Panthers was famously killed in Chicago and Bobby Rush represented a lot of that lineage. There's also the power of congressional incumbency, which in the most generic of circumstances is a very difficult force to overcome. Obama was coming from

16

a district in which he wasn't as well known, wasn't nearly as well known as he was in you know, the Hyde Park community where he'd been a law professor at the University of Chicago. And so put all that together and politically, it's not the most sound idea to challenge Bobby Rush.

01:28:01:16

Then it becomes disastrous in the face of him already being—Bobby Rush already being a figure who has kind of made great sacrifices on behalf of that community, who's mourning the loss of his son who dies in the midst of this. And so I think Obama himself acknowledged, he was like one thing you should never do is challenge Bobby Rush in a primary, and that's about right.

Jesse Jackson

01:28:33:22

JELANI COBB:

So from the outset, Barack Obama's relationship with the civil rights establishment is a little bit weird. You know there was this arms length hug that they were trying to give him. And you know, he had gained a lot of attention among regular Black folk but the leadership class of Black people seemed to be very ambivalent about him and one of the most vivid expressions of that is when Jesse Jackson famously said he wanted to castrate Barack Obama. And he said it kind of off handedly in a studio. In no circumstance is that a good statement.

01:29:16:04

But for Black people in particular, that was a horrific thing for him to say because it harkened back to lynching. That this is something that actually used to happen to Black men, especially Black men who were politically and socially prominent. To say that it was impolitic would be putting it mildly, that kind of comment. But it also reflected a kind of deeper—I don't know, it was a deeper, more complicated connection between Jackson and Obama and one of the problems in 2008 was that people were enamored of the idea of this Black person possibly becoming president and they didn't seem to recognize just how indebted Barack Obama's 2008 candidacy was to Jesse Jackson's 1988 candidacy.

01:30:13:05

Everything from the proportional division of delegates in those primaries that really, really rebounded to Obama's favor, to the strategy of creating these grassroots voter registration drives that were simultaneously creating an electorate at the same time as you were tapping into it. That was another thing that came straight from Jesse Jackson's playbook. You know, the populist movement of connecting with ya know, Black and brown folk and White people—the portion of white people who'd be willing to vote for a Black candidate, just going on through the list, you can check off all the kind of genetic similarities between Jesse's '88 campaign and Obama's 2008 campaign.

01:31:05:19

And unfortunately, it fell to Jesse Jackson to point that out, which he never should do—he should never have had to do that by the way. And in the

context of that, it's not hard to see how Jesse Jackson felt some kind of way about being discarded or being forgotten. It seemed as if Jesse Jackson's campaign had become a pejorative in some ways. You remember when Barack Obama won the South Carolina primary, Democratic primary, Bill Clinton kind of disparagingly said, "Well, Jesse Jackson won South Carolina too." As if to say, Jesse Jackson was a political footnote. So yeah, there were a lot of layers in that.

Bill Clinton

01:32:01:22

JELANI COBB:

I think Bill Clinton lost the love of a lot of Black people during the 2008 campaign, especially during the primaries, and the willingness of this person who had ironically or maybe not ironically been referred to as the first Black president and of course when Toni Morrison made that designation that Bill Clinton was the first Black president, she was referring to the way in which he was being treated. That he was being treated in such a manner that she had on—she had only anticipated Black people being eligible for that kind of disrespect and disregard. And so, you have this person who has a passport into Black America. He has a visa.

01:32:48:17

Clinton very overtly made a great deal of political profit from the fact that he was comfortable around Black people. He was a southern White man who'd

kind of been in close proximity to Black people. He'd go into a church and not be intimidated, all those kinds of things and that was supposed to be shorthand for suggesting that he was part of this community, or as close as you can anticipate someone being. Ok. Then in 2008, when a Black candidate comes out of nowhere and seems to be on the verge of usurping a nomination that was supposed to be more a coronation of Hillary Clinton, he begins making these offhanded remarks and he refers to Barack Obama's—I think his track record—something that Obama had referenced as a fairy tale.

01:33:38:17

And people found that to be like a little cutting, and then when Obama won in South Carolina, he compared it to Jesse Jackson winning in South Carolina, which was ya know, strike two. And there are—and then the comment about Obama—allegedly, the comment about Obama, you know, being someone who had been getting their drinks a few years earlier, and so it seemed like 2008 was an unmasking. And for that matter when we got to 2016 and there were all those questions about voter turnout, you know, one of the big questions was, you know, Barack Obama may have forgiven Hillary Clinton for the kind of campaign she ran in 2008 but there's a lot of reason to suspect that Barack Obama's electorate did not.

Cornel West

01:34:39:13

JELANI COBB:

Barack Obama represented a conundrum for a lot of people. And one was the kind of celebratory aspect of a Black person achieving this position that was never supposed to have been open to us, and the other part of it was the fact that that position is bound up so intimately with all the baggage and all the complications and all the difficulties of Black people's status as demi citizens of this republic from its outset. And what do you do when there's a black person who's the face of that? Not to mention when there's a Black person who's the face of a whole lot of foreign policy that is indefensible or largely troubling or all these kinds of things the presidency had always represented. And so, you had the history and lineage of the civil rights movement, which made it possible for him to be elected, and then the fact that he has this office which people have this great deal of ambivalence toward.

01:35:44:16

And so, for a lot of the time, there was this kind of nuance that people were trying to seek out, they were trying—especially for African Americans, to find a way to recognize the historic import of this election and at the same time hold that person accountable in a way that you would any individual. Ultimately, this was transactional politics. What do we get out of this? And I think that Cornel West set out to make sure that he was not co-opted, you know, by Obama, by Obama's charm, by the possibility of access to the Obama administration. I don't think it ended up there because a great deal of what Cornel West began saying seemed to be untenable.

01:36:34:18

When he said he was a Rockefeller Republican in Black face, he came very close to trafficking in the kind of ideas that would have been outrageous and would have been egregiously racist had they come from someone else, and it seemed that this was a matter of personal conflict, not a matter of principled criticism of Barack Obama. And I think one of the things that happened with Cornel west was he veered into this territory where it went from critiquing Obama to almost insulting the intelligence of people who had decided to support him. And that there was nowhere in between for that, and as a result, his own status began to be effaced in Black communities.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

01:37:27:02

JELANI COBB:

I can tell you specifically the first time I saw a Barack Obama t-shirt, and that was the night of the Iowa caucuses. And I was living in Atlanta, and there was a watch party, that all of the—like big democrats in the city were at. I believe Andy Young was there; a number of luminaries from the civil rights era were there, Joseph Lowery was there. And you know, everyone's watching this and I don't think very many people really, really thought that he was gonna win Iowa, and then all of a sudden he won Iowa. And I remember like leaving and there was a White guy wearing a t-shirt that said, "He's Black, I'm proud." Which I thought was a kind of interesting, amusing embrace of him.

01:38:18:00

And then right after that I saw a t-shirt that had Martin Luther King and Barack Obama next to each other on the shirt, and then I saw that t-shirt everywhere in the days that followed. And I think that mantle of King was certainly a blessing in the sense that people understood that—it was another way of reinforcing the idea that Martin Luther King did not die in vain, that this does not happen without him putting his life on the line time and time again, not just in Memphis but in the years that preceded that. And at the same time, King had a fundamentally different stance towards politics than a president could have. Even you saw that tension when Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize and then turned around and gave a speech about the necessity of using force sometimes, which was a really kind of awkward thing.

01:39:15:20

Martin Luther King had really no other constituency—constituency that he had to think about. ‘Cause if you read that speech, the speech that King gave in ‘64, and that speech that Obama gave when he won the peace prize, they’re diametrically opposite. King is talking about the philosophical implications of a movement based in love and non-violence. Obama is talking about the fact that the force of arms, particularly in the Atlantic Alliance is what saved the world from fascism.

01:39:55:19

He’s giving that statement to—in Oslo, to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. And so, there’s always this difficult juxtaposition between those two positions. I think Obama’s strongest critics on the left and his strongest critics within

Black America were very intent upon pointing out the ways in which his legacy as a political person was not in keeping with what Martin Luther King's legacy was as a civil rights activist.

“A More Perfect Union”

01:40:33:06

JELANI COBB:

I mean I think to an extent that people have seldom appreciated, Barack Obama was able to become president based upon the skills he had gained as a professor or based upon the skills that had allowed him to be an effective professor. His writing ability, so *The Audacity of Hope* and *Dreams From My Father*, you know, were both these really engagingly written books and people who were interested in that would kind of say, “Oh wow, this person's really smart and thoughtful.” And the other thing that he did at his best moments was that they were fundamentally pedagogical, where you were looking at a question, examining the implications of the question, looking at what the traditional solutions to this question have been, how those solutions have fallen short and what the possible better solution would be.

01:41:29:12

Under other circumstances, we would call that a class. In Barack Obama's circumstance, this is a public address or speech. We could kind of walk through the moments in which he did that, but the first time I think he did it that was really effective was when he gave the more perfect union speech.

He's confronted by Reverend Jeremiah Wright's speeches, which are thought to be inflammatory. In reality, I think that you know, what he said was probably far less inflammatory than had been depicted, or people had been led to believe, but media had been taking you know, a hit for saying that they were going too soft on Barack Obama and that they were having you know, this basically love fest, that he hadn't gotten the kind of critical coverage that a presidential candidate needs and so they go to Jeremiah Wright.

01:42:20:12

Jeremiah Wright being the kind of personality he is, really doesn't back down and what you have is a kind of resulting conflagration. People would distance themselves. Certainly, there was a long history when you look at the Clinton's in particular for people who become liabilities, that you were cut loose immediately or smaller things have ended presidential candidacies. Remember you know, Edward Muskie who was kind of congested or choked up, whatever it was, he was just—spoke in a way that was a little bit off tone and that was it, the end of his presidency. Or Howard Dean who just yelled off key and that was it, you know. His presidency is done. And Barack Obama is really looking at this tsunami of anxiety as a result of his association with Jeremiah Wright.

01:43:15:15

And as opposed to doing any of those things, as opposed to just kind of cutting Jeremiah Wright off immediately or even kind of saying that it's not possible for me to win, he does exactly what a professor or a teacher would do in that circumstance, which is step into the middle of it and look at it

panoramically and then try to understand it for what it is and then offer solutions that are rooted in the perspectives of as many people as possible, people who thought about this question as possible. That's what he did and it was brilliantly executed. Not only did it save his candidacy, it was an actual valid assessment of how race operated in the United States. There's some things you could quibble with but generally speaking, you know, that was a really sound undertaking that he'd given there.

Republican resistance

01:44:19:20

JELANI COBB:

There was one thing about Obama that was endlessly frustrating, which seemed to be—which was his seeming naiveté around matters of race. I know it seems like impossible because he had so astutely navigated race in the campaign in order to become president, but as president he sometimes seemed incapable of recognizing the lengths to which people would go to diminish him as a Black representative in this office. Even like the birther thing where he had to show his birth certificate to prove that he was eligible to vote in the election that he won. That was, I think, a metaphor for the bigger rejection of him, not based on his policies, not based on you know, what it was he wanted to do, what his conception of what American priorities should be but for who he was.

01:45:27:02

And so like time and time again you saw this. Like he moved aggressively on deportations of people who were in the country illegally, believing that that would allow republicans to have room to come down somewhere in the middle on immigration reform, but instead he got nothing. In hopes of negotiating a deal on climate change was willing to give a kind of favorable position to off-shore drilling. That got him nothing in return. The biggest instance of this I think was healthcare where time and time again he's trying to find some sort of middle ground, only to realize that there is no middle ground.

01:46:14:21

And that the republicans are very much following their electorate. They don't want him to be successful in any way. When Mitch McConnell said that his main objective was to ensure that Barack Obama would be a one-term presidency, people were outraged that you know, this was a misstatement of what should be the priorities of a sitting Senator. The problem was that he was reflecting a really significant impulse among a not small number of White people in the United States. That Obama by virtue of the fact of who he was, was an illegitimate occupant of the White House. I think it became hard particularly for African Americans to see that he didn't seem to get that.

Conspiracy theories

01:47:13:09

JELANI COBB:

There had been a paranoia around Obama, an irrational paranoia around Obama, always a current of it since he became a viable figure in national politics. And what his identity did was allow people to run wild with the kind of most feverish conjurings of their conspiratorial minds. So he's from Kenya. He is trying to create death panels that will kill elderly people. Your grandparents are going to be killed by the government. There are people who still believe he reflects some sort of Black vengeance plot in some kind of way and then most inscrutably for legislation that was going to overwhelmingly benefit uninsured White people, one of the right wing talking points was that the affordable care act was some sort of stealth plan to give Black people reparations. It's not shocking in that circumstance you would see things like Barney Frank being referred to by you know, kind of prominent anti-gay epithet as he's—you know, on capitol hill.

01:48:43:13

That John Lewis would be referred to by the prominent anti-Black epithet as he's on the hill. That you see these kind of scatters—scattered instances of violence and that people have you know, at these—certainly at these town hall meetings that congressional figures are having when they go back to their districts or back to their states that seem to teeter on the brink of bedlam, like all of this is happening in direct relationship to this idea of who the president is and you know, what you believe that this president's ultimate agenda is.

01:49:22:12

It was very reminiscent of reconstruction almost. We were thinking about this a lot, you know that in the context of you know, the end of slavery where there are you know, 600 plus Black legislators elected in the south and they begin creating an infrastructure around public education only to find you know, a decade later that very many White people would rather have no education than have education as being given to them by Black legislators, and it was that kind of dynamic with healthcare too, that people were willing to sacrifice their own well being rather than have to express gratitude to a black president for having delivered healthcare.

Hurricane Katrina

01:50:14:23

JELANI COBB:

Hurricane Katrina was I think probably central to the narrative that wound up ultimately giving Barack Obama an opportunity to run for president. There's this recalcitrant faith I think, or recalcitrant hope that it's possible to create you know, actual equal democracy in this country and that hope gets battered a lot and especially for people who have been historically excluded from that democracy.

01:50:58:03

So what do you do when you have the wealthiest nation nation in the world and at the same time you see hundreds of Black people floating in the streets of a major American city and the government alternately saying that it's

powerless to intervene in any way that would save these people's lives, and then applauding the efforts of the person who had overseen this cataclysmic loss of life? It's hard to kind of think that we have tolerance for that, if those victims are White in America.

01:51:45:09

And hurricane Katrina was just a visual reminder of the disposability of Black peoples lives in the United States, especially poor people. Even though you know, this happened in 2005 and you know, the election wasn't until three years later, that was a real benchmark and I think a lot of people thought of it as like a catastrophe or you know, a disaster in the context of you know, every year or every two years, we see something very significant that happens as a result of you know, acts of God, you know, a fire or an earthquake or whatever. But for I think a lot of African Americans, hurricane Katrina was like 9/11 in terms of shaking the foundations of their relationship to this country.

Charleston church shooting

01:52:38:10

JELANI COBB:

So June 17th, 2015, Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old White supremacist enters the sanctuary of the AME—of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. It's a Wednesday, he attends bible study with them. And at the conclusion of Bible study, he draws a .45 Caliber Glock and murders nine

people in the church for the sole fact that they were Black. In the midst of this shooting spree, he—you know, a young man by the name of Taiwansa Sanders who has already been shot says to him, “You don’t have to do this, we mean you nor harm.” And in response, Roof says, “I have to do this because you all are raping our women and taking over the world.”

01:53:40:06

And what he meant by this was you know, the kind of age old paranoia of Black men representing some sort of sexual threat to White women and taking over the world was presumably a reference to the fact that the highest office in the land was occupied by a Black man. The literal most powerful man in the world as we say, we refer to the president of the United States, and that person is Black. And so it was very clear that there’s this—this aspect of current events that is a mode of force in Dylan Roof committing this atrocity. That’s on June 17th. What was striking to me was that on June 16th, just one day earlier, Donald Trump had announced his presidential candidacy in this very gaudy spectacle in Trump Tower. You know, he kind of meanders and talks about these various things kind of extemporaneously.

01:54:45:09

But then he strikes upon this thing, which—this reference in which he says that you know, the country is besieged by Mexican rapists and it was twice within 24 hours that we saw that same language being deployed. You know, to very different ends but both responding to this very common zeitgeist of you know, this fear of men of color posing some threat presumably to White

women and it wasn't coincidental that those things emerged at the same time that there was a Black man occupying the White House.

Obama's presidency in retrospect

01:55:31:12

JELANI COBB:

I think the thing that I took from Barack Obama's presidency was a firmer understanding that we cannot escape history. History is an animate force inside us because what that entire eight year span really proved to be was kind of—it was kind of an experiment in how race works in the United States. That it is possible under circumstances—certain circumstances to transcend and make great achievements, and that there will likely be hell to pay for you if you do. That both of those things are true. This is a country where a Black person can become president and a country wherein that person will be routinely subjected to indignities that are beneath that office or that station and ultimately succeeded by the person that helped author them. Like both of those things are true about this country.

END TC: 01:56:49:22