JON FAVREAU INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jon Favreau
Speechwriter
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Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Jon Favreau

Speechwriter

Obama's speech at the 2004 DNC

01:00:12:14

JON FAVREAU:

So, I was the deputy speechwriter for John Kerry, and at the 2004 convention in Boston, my job was to be backstage at the convention and look over a lot of the speeches of the various speakers at the convention and make sure that the message of those speeches was consistent with the Kerry campaign. And so I did this for a bunch of different speakers and then the Obama speech came along and—and, you know, Barack Obama was giving the keynote address at the convention, and he had done one event with John Kerry and so I sort of heard of him. So I get a call from Josh Gottheimer and he tells me there's a problem with the draft of the keynote address that Barack Obama is

delivering. I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "Well, there's a line in that speech that John Kerry also wants to use in his speech." And I said, "Ok, so what do you want me to do about it?" He's like, "Well, you're at the convention, Obama's supposed to be practicing at the convention, so if you could go and let him know that he needs to take that line out of the speech, that would be great." And I'm sitting there, you know, 21 years old, thinking oh great, cool, that's what I get to do now. So, I walk down the hall where Obama is practicing his speech for the very first time and I see Robert Gibbs there, who had been my boss in the Kerry campaign before he went to join the Obama campaign, and I went up to Gibbs and I said, "Hey, I was just told he has to take this line out because Kerry wants to use it." And Gibbs looks at me, he's like, "I'm not telling him, you tell him. It's his favorite line." I walk up to Obama, Obama is like, "What's going on here?" you know. I walk to him, I introduce myself, I tell him what's going on and he comes like right up to like an inch of my face and he looks down at me and he's like, "Are you trying to tell me I have to take out my favorite line in the speech?" And at that point, I pretty much lost consciousness, so I don't remember what happens next.

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But David Axelrod eventually grabs me and introduces himself and says, "Alright son, let's step out in the hall and maybe you and I can rewrite the line together, and so we did. It was a brief exchange, I don't think he was very thrilled with the exchange. I figured I would probably not talk to him again because I don't think he was too happy, and so–– and I thought that was too bad because, you know, when I heard him deliver the speech that night I

thought, you know, it was incredible. And it was better than it read on paper, uh frankly. And I thought to myself, 'If a politician can get up and deliver a speech like that, and still compete in national politics, that's someone that I want to follow.

01:03:07:08

A lot of people see that speech as this call for the country to come together. There are no red states, there are no blue states, there are only the United States of America. And that—part of that is true. I also saw it as Obama's attempt to sort of redefine patriotism as something that's rooted in fundamentally progressive values, that we are all connected to each other. E Pluribus Unum, out of many we are one. And for so oft—for so long, you know, republicans defined patriotism as chest thumping and flag waving and you know, only supporting the troops and all that and Obama defined it sort of as taking care of each other and being a country where we have not only rights but responsibilities and obligations to one another. And to me I thought that's—democrats need to start saying that.

Obama's identity

01:04:00:11

JON FAVREAU:

At the beginning of that speech, he talks about how his story is an unlikely story. He talks about a father from Kenya, a mother from Kansas. And he says that his story is a story that can only happen in America. He did not have the

typical experience of an African American in the United States. He also didn't have the typical experience of a white American in the United States, and so I think because of that unique background, his views on race, his experience with race was different than Black politicians or white politicians. He talks about his race, which is—and his background, and his name, which are all unusual, as not apart from the American story but quintessential to the American story. And I think that was—that was a different way of talking about race.

Interviewing with Obama

01:04:57:09

JON FAVREAU:

So Kerry loses, Obama wins. I have no job, I go move back in with my parents and I get a note from Robert Gibbs, he said, "Oh, I hear you're a speechwriter now. And Obama doesn't think he needs a speechwriter because he wrote the 2004 convention speech on his own. But I told him now that he's a Senator with a national profile, he's going to need to learn to work with somebody. So would you mind coming in, having breakfast with him, see what happens?" So I had breakfast with Obama his first week in the Senate in 2005 in February, and it was probably the easiest job interview I've ever had. He made me feel completely at ease. He wanted to know why I got into politics, what my family life was like, where I was raised, what I studied in college. He asked me about my theory of speechwriting. I had none but I did tell him that, you know, his speech at the convention was—was different and it was

honest. It had integrity and inspiration and more importantly it told a story. You know, for too long I thought that speeches were, from democrats and republicans, seen as collections of sound bytes and applause lines. And Obama, when he delivered a speech, when he delivered the 2004 convention speech, it had a beginning, a middle, and an end. He didn't care whether every single line landed and elicited applause. He just cared that he told a powerful story that was compelling and that's what he did.

Dreams from My Father

01:06:43:04

JON FAVREAU:

When I started writing for him, I had to unlearn some of the bad habits that I had learned being in the Kerry campaign, and by the way, not just because of John Kerry, like that's how democrats and republicans gave speeches. So I had to unlearn the habits of a professional political speechwriter. And what helped me do that partly was, you know, over the—over Christmas, I had read *Dreams From My Father* for the first time and I think even more than the 2004 convention speech, reading *Dreams From My Father* made me wanna work for Barack Obama, because I thought to myself, if someone can write this honestly about race and about his background, about his life, about his faults, his flaws, his doubts, and still run for national office, that's someone that I want to work for. I want to stick this out and see what happens.

Obama's empathy

01:07:43:15

JON FAVREAU:

Barack Obama is someone who, I think when he was President, one of his best qualities was empathy. He was always able to put himself in other people's shoes, he was always able to see the other side of things, argue the other side of things, and I think that comes from his biography and his life and having a foot in many different worlds. His father is Black, from Africa, his mother's white, from Kansas. He grew up in a very impoverished place in Indonesia for a time. He went to one of the wealthiest private schools in Hawaii. His family is from all kinds of different places, his extended family as well. And that made me think, oh, that was a struggle for him to figure out his own identity because of all of that, but it also allowed him to step outside of himself and understand what other people were thinking, believing, hoping, wishing, no matter who they were or where they came from. He did not have the typical experience of an African American in the United States. He also didn't have the typical experience of a white American in the United States and so I think because of that unique background, his views on race, his experience with race was different than Black politicians or white politicians.

Obama's "Blackness"

01:09:10:16

JON FAVREAU:

I think he came to see himself as that classic American blend. But you know, if you—you know, I think at one point in the primary there was this whole thing, you know, is Barack Obama Black enough? Because of his background.

And I remember he used to say, you know, when I'm trying to hail a cab in New York and I can't do it, I'm certainly Black enough then, you know. So for all the discussion about how, you know, he is from this mixed-race background, I do think he—he definitely had many experiences that are typical of Black Americans.

Beliefs and ideals

01:09:56:01

JON FAVREAU:

From the beginning of the campaign, his belief was we have different beliefs, we come from different places, you know, we have different backgrounds, and yet there is something that connects all of us as Americans because this is a country that was founded not on, you know, allegiance to a specific ethnicity or tribe or, you know, people of a certain background. This is a country that, unlike many other countries, was founded on a set of ideals. Because this country is founded on a set of ideals, allegiance to this country and patriotism is about whether you believe in those ideals and you believe that we can reach those ideals together. Even though, you know, there has been a history of systemic, institutional racism in this country from slavery on until the present day and all kinds of discrimination -- not just among Black americans but all kinds of different ethnic and racial groups -- despite all of that, despite all that struggle, having that North Star of the set of ideals that—that this country was founded upon, that's what gives us at least the possibility of coming together and rising above those tensions.

01:11:18:02

JON FAVREAU:
And, you know, and I think… his belief in hope, um, is–– stems from experience, um, with his own life and with race in America.

Obama's response to Hurricane Katrina

01:11:39:06

JON FAVREAU:
Katrina was a moment for Obama—I think it was the moment that he seriously thought about running for president for the first time. His decision around Katrina to avoid saying George W. Bush and the federal government failed on Katrina because they don't care about Black people, was not about trying to necessarily avoid race. It was to show people that it was a much bigger, sys—more systemic problem. And so he said what—what—it was more about—you know, it was institutional racism, it was systemic racism. And I remember he used to say this all the time, like the idea that the federal government thought that a category five hurricane is coming and bunch of people who live in poverty in New Orleans and the surrounding areas can just gas up their SUV, put a bunch of food and water in the back of the truck and take off to go hang out with their relatives in some nice home, that's more—that's larger than just specific discrimination. That's a bigger systemic issue. Throughout his presidency, throughout his career, he wanted people to focus on the bigger structural problems that this country faces that don't necessarily have easy answers.

Speechwriting for Barack Obama

01:13:03:04

JON FAVREAU:

I always took the lead from him, you know. Every time we—he wanted to deliver a speech, I would sit down with him for, you know, 30 minutes to an hour and just get a download from him on what he believed, what he wanted to say, what was on his mind, and every speech would come from that initial session. You know, and I tried to make sure that if he wanted to say something that was uncomfortable, maybe not popular, that I didn't sand that down. That I let him say that. I saw it as the job of like–– if his political advisors, if his communications advisors, if they wanted to scrub that language and have that fight with him, go for it. But I was his—I was his speechwriter, and my job was not to bring my own political judgment or biases to the job, it was to reflect not just how Barack Obama spoke but how he thought. So, that's how I saw my job.

"A More Perfect Union"

01:14:09:22

JON FAVREAU:

I remember walking into the campaign on a Friday in Chicago, and suddenly I saw that Brian Ross piece on ABC about Jeremiah Wright, and I saw those tapes and I think the whole campaign was stunned. We couldn't believe that we didn't know this was coming. We didn't have that research, which was interesting. And, you know, it was a real moment where I think everyone—we had been on a roll. You know, Barack Obama had won Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, he did great on Super Tuesday and suddenly this

becomes this existential threat to the campaign. His advisors said, "Ok, let's have him do a round of cable interviews, he will talk about how obviously he doesn't agree with this, he wasn't in church for these, and we'll have him stick to the talking points, he'll do a round of interviews and maybe that'll be that." And I thought to myself when I heard that strategy, I was like, "Eh, I don't know if this one's gonna work, but I see where—I see where the idea comes from." So go to bed that night, I felt very unsettled, and I wake up Saturday morning and there's a, you know, senior staff conference call, and I get on the call. And I hear Axelrod tell everyone he wants to give a speech. "He wants to give a speech not just on the Jeremiah Wright situation, but on race in America and he wants to do it Tuesday." It is Saturday morning and he's going to deliver a speech on Tuesday? And I'm like, "Hi everyone, speechwriter here. When am I gonna talk to him, when am I going to meet with him?" And Ax is like, "Well, I think you should head into the office, and I'll come in soon and you and I can go through it together." Fine. So I head into the office, sit down with Axelrod and the two of us sit there for like an hour trying to work through what he might say. Finally, we just stopped and I said to Ax, I was like, "We can't do this. I can't do a first draft of this speech for him. This has to come from him, and he knows that. And it's a waste of our time to start trying to figure this out now." And you know, he said, "You're right." So, ten o'clock that night, Saturday night, Obama had just finished a whole day of events and I get a call from him. You know, my first question to him was, "How are you doing?" And he said, "You know, I'm running for president, and this isn't fun, but this is what running for this office requires and I owe people an explanation. And more than that, I've

wanted to talk to people about race in America for a long time. And so this is an opportunity to do that." And then he said, "You know, I just—I have a few thoughts off of the top of my head, but you know, you'll have to organize them, but I'll just kick it off with a few thoughts." Well, his few thoughts were the most well organized fleshed out outline that I've ever heard. He is nothing if not a legal mind who thinks in paragraphs and outlines and structures and so it was, "Alright, I want you to say, 1, 1A, 1B, 2." You know, and he went through the whole thing, and we talked for about an hour. He talked about how he wanted to close the speech with a story about a young woman and—who was in South Carolina, and she was sitting with a group of organizers in South Carolina. Her name was Ashley and she's an organizer for the campaign. And she said, "Let's have everyone go around and say why we're here and why we're working for Obama and why we're on this campaign." And she said, "You know, my—"she told this story about how she was poor, her mother had been sick, and they didn't have a lot of money and so she told her mother that mustard sandwiches, just bread and mustard were her favorite thing ever and her mother couldn't understand why she said that. And she, you know, revealed to everyone that the reason she said that was she wanted to help them save money and they couldn't afford more than that, so, you know, she goes around the room. You know, why are you here? And this elderly African American man, he says, "I'm here because of Ashley." And so, Obama tells me that story and he's like, "You know, I told this in church for—around Martin Luther King day a couple of months ago and you know, Valerie Jarrett just brought it up and said, "You know, what do you think about using it to close the speech?"" And he's like, "I don't know, is it bad to

close the speech with an anecdote I used somewhere else?" And I'm like sitting there in tears, I was like, "No of course not, you can definitely use that." So I said, "Alright, so when do you need the draft?" And he said, "Ok, so it's about midnight now on Saturday. Why don't you go off, write a draft and get it to me by Sunday evening. I probably won't read it until I put the girls to bed." Hung up the phone with him, and freaked out a little bit and then decided to go right to bed and woke up at six am, went to the Starbucks down the—down the street in Chicago, and sat there and banged out a draft of the speech, and I sent it to him at eight pm that night, and at three am I got an email from Obama with the draft of the speech with all tracked changes and he had—he had done quite a bit of work on it. There was a lot more blue track changes than there was typing from me. And so then that Monday, I took all of his edits, I made more edits, I made cuts, I did edits, and then that night sent it back to him. He sent another draft back, again it was like three or four in the morning. And he sent it to me, Valerie, Puff, Axelrod, and he said, "Here's what I want to say. No one is allowed to make any substantive changes to this. Favs can make edits for language and grammar and edits and whatever else, but this is what I want to say." And that was the speech. And he delivered the speech that day and it was in the middle of the day and a bunch of cable stations took it but that was about it. And I remember a lot of the pundits afterwards had said, "Oh that was an amazing speech but what's he doing giving it in the middle of the day? Who's gonna see this speech ever? How's this speech gonna travel?" And you know, of course, we know now that it was one of the most watched speeches that he's ever delivered. And he called me after the speech and he said, "You know, I don't know if I can win

the presidency delivering a speech like I just did. But I also know that if I decided not to give that speech, I don't deserve to win the presidency. And so, we'll see if it works."

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

01:21:13:04

JON FAVREAU:

He was on the road and, you know, I was back at headquarters so I didn't talk to him a lot about that, but I know from talking to folks that he was—I think it was one of the hardest parts of the campaign for him and it was profoundly sad because this is someone who baptized his children, who sort of— I mean, he named his book after one of Wright's—a phrase from one of Wright's sermons. The audacity of hope, he writes in *Dreams For My Father* about how Wright sort of introduced him into, you know, Christianity as sort of a means for social justice, to work for social justice. It was very hard, but he also had to do it not—it went beyond political reasons. It was because he fundamentally disagreed with Wright's views of America, even as he understood why Wright had those views and why some Black Americans could hold those views. He understood that, but he saw the country differently. He saw race differently than that. You know, I think he was –– I think one thing that people don't understand is that he was–– Barack Obama was always very clear-eyed at the beginning that his election was not going to usher in some era of post-racial harmony. He was very clear-eyed about that. And, you know, people don't always know that because they think oh, the language was all hope, change, and unity and he thought everything was

going to be wonderful. He didn't. He knew how tough it was, he knew the tensions that existed. He knew the systemic racism that we deal with in this country every day. But his belief was the only way to respond to that is either to do nothing or complain or be pessimistic or be cynical, or to hope that you can make it better and work towards making it better. That was his belief.

Learning about Obama's presidential run

01:23:09:19

JON FAVREAU:

It's funny, he—we—he never talked to me about running for president. I sort of knew, but it was such a closely held secret and I was a kid at the time so the adults did their thing. You know, in the Senate office it was Robert Gibbs the communication director and then next to Gibbs was Tommy Vitor and I sat next to Tommy and Alyssa Mastermonokos sat there and Alyssa and Tommy and I, you, we thought we were like the kids. And we sort of knew something was going on because when he planned the book tour for *Audacity of Hope*, Gibbs had like a big map of the country out, he was like planning the tour in swing states and it was the middle of January, Gibbs just called me into his office and he said, "Are you ready to move to Chicago? 'Cause he's gonna run for President." And then he said, "Can you be out there right after the announcement speech in early February?" I said, "Ok, great." And the next time I talked to Obama; we were working on the announcement speech together.

Michelle Obama

01:24:04:14

JON FAVREAU:

Look, I—I knew she was concerned about him running because of what it would mean for their family. She didn't really trust politics or like politics. I think that ultimately, she had this sense that, you know, just because she didn't like politics, didn't mean she didn't care deeply about the issues that we debate in politics. I think she cares very deeply about those issues, clearly. And so eventually—and you know, she talks about this in her book, I think she—she remembered the time he brought her to an organizing meeting on the Southside. And talked about the world as it is and the world as it should be and you know, I think that she fell in love with him for all of the reasons people fall in love with their partners, but I think there is something even bigger in how he viewed the country and what he could do for the country and what we all are obliged to do as citizens, is one of the reasons she fell in love with him and one the reasons that she ultimately decided that it was, you know, the right move for him to run and was supportive. I just remember the first controversy when, you know, there was that speech, the first time I've been proud of you know, my country or whatever, which is like out of context completely, and I think she was hurt and angry and as much as she knew that politics could be a nasty business, I don't think she had experienced just how bad it could be until that moment and it was hard for her. For me, watching her go from that moment to delivering one of the best convention speeches I've ever heard any democrat or person deliver at a convention a few months later at the 2008 convention, you know, it was fantastic seeing that.

Obama's 2015 Selma speech

01:26:03:15

JON FAVREAU:

To me, what–– the speech that really encapsulated his view on this issue, upon race during his presidency, was the speech he delivered in Selma. And to me—it's one of my favorite speeches he's ever delivered, and I can say that and brag about it because I wasn't there, so I didn't have a hand in writing it. But he has these—he has a couple of paragraphs in his speech where he said, "Look, we can't deny that structural racism, institutional racism, even everyday racism is a part of this country, and people who try to deny that are ignoring the realities of the situations that Black Americans face every day." They face prejudice, discrimination, that there's a wealth gap, that there's a health gap, that there are all these issues that the Black community faces. That there is police brutality that's targeting unarmed Black Americans. Can't deny that that's going on. We can't deny that that is a problem that has been with us in this country, it is the original sin of this country, slavery and the racism that came from slavery. That was the legacy of slavery, that went through the Jim Crow era, that went through the civil rights era, that is with us today. Can't deny that. But we also can't deny that we have made progress on race in America and denying the progress, that's a problem, too. The idea that we had the first African American president, that there's, you know, Black Americans have risen through the ranks of American society. That we've had a Civil Rights Act, a Voting Rights Act, that we see people voting, and—and we have Black representatives in this country. We can't deny that

progress. And that progress, that's not something for us to say, "oh ok we did this now and everything's fine and we can all sit back and relax." That progress is there to give us hope, that the progress left unmade is still possible.

Dr. King's influence on Obama's rhetorical style

01:27:55:18

JON FAVREAU:

I guess when he was in the south, sometimes, you know, and he was in a Black church, I think the spirit would move him. I mean, he did–– Part of his rhetoric and his rhetorical style, it-- it really was drawn from preachers, right? From Dr. King to, you know, some of the Black preachers that he had come in contact through his political life and his life as an organizer. And um, you know I-- I–– In preparation to write for him, uh it wasn't just look back at old presidents: John F. Kennedy and Roosevelt and the like and LBJ. It was, you know, we did a lot of reading of Dr. King, and how Dr. King spoke. So Dr. King, especially towards the end of his life, becomes much more radical, talks a lot about the ills of militarism and capitalism and focuses a lot not just on racism but poverty and–– and yet in his rhetoric, Dr. King sort of grounded his beliefs in the founding documents. Founding documents, by the way, that were written and signed at a time when slavery was legal, but yet he saw in those documents the promise of America. He talked about the need for equality because equality was based in the founding documents, that freedom was based in the founding documents. And that rhetorical style

where King is fighting injustice and inequality and racism, and yet doing so by saying if you look at these documents, if you look at how this country was founded, and what the ideals of this country was founded upon, we're owed this. We are owed a country that actually reflects these founding documents, even though the men who signed these documents owned slaves. Obama saw that rhetoric and studied that rhetoric, and-- and that's how his rhetoric was as well. That's how he spoke as well.

Right wing backlash against Obama

01:30:12:09

JON FAVREAU:

I think the—the right-wing attacks on him as you know, the Kenyan Muslim imposter, I think he—he didn't take them super seriously. He wanted to address them, but I think for a long time he treated those attacks as yet another example of how stupid politics could be, that politics is a game, that you know, it's filled with name calling and insults. And of course I think he saw it as specifically racial in nature, but he saw it as just one more example. You know, I think—I think I remember him saying, you know, if I was—"If I was a white president who is a democrat, a liberal, they'd find something else." It wouldn't be race based but it would be something else. So I think for a longtime in his presidency he saw it like that.

Obama's response to Birtherism

01:31:12:02

I think the birther stuff from Trump got to him. Um, I don't know if it made him angry because he never—I never really saw him get angry, but clearly when we were writing a speech for the White House correspondents dinner and Barack Obama had just, in one of the most bizarre scenes I had witnessed in the White House, had to present his long form birth certificate in front of the national press corps in the briefing room and then that weekend deliver a speech to the White House correspondents dinner that was supposed to be funny. We decided to make sure there were a lot of jokes in that speech about Donald Trump and about his crazy birtherism. And I can tell you that the President was delighted to tell those jokes.

Donald Trump

01:31:59:13

JON FAVREAU:

When the birther thing happened, I do not think Obama or any of us saw Trump as someone we had to watch out for. I don't think anyone in the country did. I do think he saw Trump's birtherism as emblematic of sort of a larger right wing push to delegitimize him and his presidency. Certainly, I think the fact of Obama's election triggered a backlash among certain white Americans who have racial resentment, and I don't know if the fact of his election did it for everyone, but the response to his election by Fox news, the right wing media, right wing politicians, I think poured gas on the fire and they used his presidency to tell a lot of white Americans he—his presidency is for people who look like him and not people who look like you. And that is

a deliberate strategy and that is what the people who run Fox news did to this country.

Election night 2008

01:33:18:14

JON FAVREAU:

The night of the election was a surreal experience that I'll never forget. I—it was incredibly nervous as I always am every election, win or lose. And I don't think any of us had really grasped that this was gonna happen because remember, he was up in the polls by then, it wasn't super close then and yet none of us allowed ourselves to believe that it was gonna happen because oh my god, it's not just the democrats are gonna win, it's that this democrat is gonna win who we believe in so deeply and that he's gonna make history. I remember sitting in headquarters and the states start coming in, and you know, we're doing well and we're winning. We won a few swing states early. They still haven't called Ohio and then I had the draft of the election night speech, the win speech. We had a loss speech, too. But I had a draft of the win speech ready, and it looked pretty good for us. Obama called me and he said—I said congratulations and he said, "Do not congratulate me yet. It's not done yet." He said, "But I think we're close enough that I will give you my edits to the victory speech so we can do that, but no official congratulations." So I make a few edits and hang up with them and the speech ends with a story about a woman named Ann Nixon Cooper. And Ann Nixon Cooper is a woman from Atlanta, and CNN wrote a story that day that said she stood in line for three hours to cast her vote for Obama. And the reason that was

especially interesting is because Ann Cooper Nixon was 103 years old. We have her at the end of the story and Tommy Vitor is next to me and he said, "You know, we should probably give Ann Nixon Cooper a call and let her know she's about to be in the story, about to be in the speech." And so we have our researchers find her number, I give her a call and this—this frail, lovely woman answers the phone and I tell her who I am, I tell her who I'm working for and I tell her about this speech and basically at the end of the speech I tell her like, "Well, we're gonna talk about you waiting in line to vote, we're gonna talk about your whole life story." Because she grew up at a time when she couldn't vote because she was a woman and because she was an African American, and we sort of trace her entire life, her 100 years on this planet and all the progress she saw in that time. Civil rights, workers' rights, women's rights, the right to vote, voting rights, and she's lived through two world wars, the great depression, the civil rights era, and so I'm telling her all this and it—and she stops me and says, "So will this speech be on TV?" And I said, "Yeah it'll be on TV." And then I kept talking, she's like, "What channel will it be on?" And I said, "All the channels." And then she ended and she said, "I'm so proud of him, I'm so proud of us. And then she started—she started crying and, you know, I did too. And then—and then they called Ohio and then we won and everyone's cheering in the campaign and I hid under my—hid under my desk and talked to Ann Nixon Cooper for a few more minutes. So that was-- that was election night for me.

Working with Obama

01:36:48:08

JON FAVREAU:
The most frustrating thing about working for Obama was, he's an incredible writer, he's an author, he knows what he wants to say. Trying to live up to that standard was tricky. I think what was difficult for both Barack Obama and the speechwriters was that every time there was some big problem, challenge, scandal, controversy, inevitably somebody on the staff would say, "Oh he should give a big speech." There's this history of Barack Obama giving a speech and then solving a problem that usually came from the race speech. And we had this—Dan Pfeifer and I would always have this joke that—that people on the staff would say, "Oh we need a race speech for the economy, we need a race speech for the oil spill, we need a race speech for Syria." Right? So every time there was some big problem, it was like, "If only Obama went out there and gave a big speech like he did on race, everything will be fixed." And of course that's not how politics works at all and that's certainly not how government works, but that would always be frustrating to us. I was never frustrated when he wanted to pull back and not take a big swing at his critics or go on the attack, partly because I think I had so internalized the Obama mindset that it became sort of inseparable from my own view of the situation. I can tell you that anyone who follows me on Twitter or listens to my podcast now that I'm—I've left the Obama presidency, I don't—I don't have that restraint anymore that I did when I was in the White House and working for Barack Obama. But at the time, you know—and I—look, I still think even today I could use even more of that Obama-like restraint, I think we all could.

How Obama responded to criticism

01:38:39:02

JON FAVREAU:

After the 2012 Democratic Convention, he gave a speech at the convention, and it was sort of panned by a lot of pundits. And I was pretty pissed, Obama was pissed, we were all pissed because we were pretty happy with the speech, and I remember we were flying to our next stop afterwards and I was sitting with Obama, and I was complaining about Politico or someone who was criticizing the speech and he was too. And we kept going and going and going. He finally stopped, I kept going because I love critiquing the media and at some point, he finally looked at me and he goes, "Hey man, how do you think I feel?" He's like, "Every day, I go out there knowing that at least half the country doesn't like me, doesn't think I'm doing a great job. And you gotta just keep going." He's like, "The presidency and being a leader is about getting all the facts, getting all the information, listening to as many people as you can, but then once you've done all of that, you have to make a decision and you have to let the chips fall where they may. And some people might like it, some people might not, but you can't let it get you down." To me that was how he handled the presidency.

Framing the conversation around the Affordable Care Act

01:39:49:01

JON FAVREAU:

Every time we talked about healthcare and every time he pushed for the Affordable Care Act, he would talk about that African Americans are more

likely to not be insured, they are more likely to pay more for insurance and so—and same thing with Latino Americans and other minority groups in this country that, you know, over time sort of there is a health gap in this country where if you are poor and Black, you are much more likely to either not be insured or have health problems than if you are wealthy and whiter. Most people in the country have health insurance and most people in the country are relatively happy with their health insurance, and so we had to frame the debate around, yes, maybe you're happy with your health insurance, but there are certain protections that every person who has health insurance should have. And even if you may be happy with your health insurance right now, if you get sick, you might not have that protection. And so, that's why we want these insurance company protections as well as the expansion of health insurance to those who don't have it.

Sense of humor

01:40:47:18

JON FAVREAU:

His sense of humor was always about the absurdity of politics, and he loved to poke fun of just the craziness of-- of White House life and the political establishment and DC media and the republicans and stuff like that.

Barack Obama's Presidency in retrospect

01:41:08:21

JON FAVREAU:

When I think about his presidency and race, the line that always sticks with me is what Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, that, "For eight years he walked on ice and never fell." Which I think is, you know, probably the best way to sum up how he handled race in America as the first African American in the United States and that he—everything was—you know, people always talk about how careful and cautious he was. And he was operating within an environment, a political environment, a social environment, where systemic racism still exists. Clearly there's still plenty of prejudice and discrimination as is evidenced by the fact that Donald Trump is our president now. That background was still there when Obama was President and yet, you know, he—as he walked on that ice, he was still trying to make progress the whole time, and I think he did. And I think he would say that progress in this country has never come all at once, it's never come from one presidency, it's never come from one decade. It comes in fits and starts. I think as he told a journalist once, you know, we're all out there trying to get our paragraph right.

Obama's Legacy

01:42:32:03

JON FAVREAU:

I think there's an entire generation of Americans who came of age during the Obama presidency, and for those young people knowing that there's a time in this country where Barack Hussein Obama was elected to the presidency of the United States, twice, and presided over, you know, an economy that started in crisis and then ended in recovery, that made progress on race, on

social issues, Don't Ask, Don't Tell, all the different—all the different things that he accomplished. Knowing that progress is possible in this country, and that Obama's presidency was symbolic of that progress. That will give generations to come hope.

"Yes, we can."

01:43:25:07

JON FAVREAU:

Yes we can was a tagline that David Axelrod came up with for Obama's 2004 Senate run, and it was part of, I think, some of his campaign ads. When he started running for President, we, you know—I knew that it was part of the Senate campaign so we didn't really use it in speeches that much until the New Hampshire primary speech and, you know, it was—we had—we had briefly used it a couple weeks before in some speech he gave in Iowa, we had brought it back just because we thought it was a good idea. But in New Hampshire it became more important because he lost that primary. And even before he knew he was going to lose, he called Ben Rhodes and me and said, "Look, even if I win this thing, it's gonna be a long path to the nomination; it's gonna be a long path to the presidency and the presidency is gonna be tough too, and I want to give people a sense that this isn't easy, this will be really difficult but that there's hope, and that's what our history teaches us." And so in that speech, "yes, we can" was the answer given by immigrants, slaves, people who have come to this country and pioneers, right? People who have come to this country and tried their hardest to sort of break out of the

prejudices and the constraints that they faced and, you know, tried to do better.

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