
HANDOUT THREE, LESSON TWO

INTERVIEW THREADS TRANSCRIPTS

OBAMA'S VISION OF A MORE PERFECT UNION

David Axelrod

01:08:56:00 - 01:13:57:21

Well, you know, we really built a movement that inspired people to believe that we could do better in our politics. It was the forerunner of what people would see in 2008. The Senate race was really a trial ground for that even though we didn't know that he'd be running for President in 2008 and we wanted to communicate in the ads that we could overcome some of these really great barriers in our politics; that we could overcome the cynicism, that we could overcome this sort of grinding status quo and that Barack Obama was a guy who had overcome a lot of things in his life, in politics, and was a person who represented that hope. So the first ad we ever did was a biographical ad that combined some of the barriers that he had broken in his life but also some of the things he had achieved in public life for people that seemed improbable. And it ended with him saying, "Now they say we can't change Washington? I'm Barack Obama and I approve this message to say, 'Yes, we can.'" Now that was the first ad I ever did for him. We were filming it at a friend's house, a friend of his. Michelle was there. She wanted to see him film his first ad. And he gets to the end of the script and he says, "Yes, we can." "Yes, we..." he says. "That — is that too corny?" And my heart sunk, because I thought I said everything about what we wanted to say, that this was not just about him, it was about us and — and that we could overcome these things that had us so despairing. And I went through my whole shtick and he says, and he turns to Michelle and says, "Mich, what do you think?" And she just slowly turned her head and said, "Not corny." And he said, "OK, let's go." So I knew where my place was in the strategic hierarchy of the Obama organization but I was grateful that she was there because that became kind of the rallying cry of not just that campaign but future campaigns.

Obama was nominated in March for the Senate and it was a very, very resonant victory. I mean, we were expecting it to be very tight. There were seven candidates. He ended up blowing the doors off of it and winning a majority of the vote and winning all over in areas that no one expected an African American candidate to prevail. After he won the primary, there was a fundraiser and John Kerry, who was poised to become the Democratic nominee for President, came in to speak. There were only two other speakers. One was Rich Daley, the Mayor of Chicago. The other was Barack Obama, and Obama gave a rousing speech, so he was

on Kerry's mind. But we decided that we were gonna run a little campaign behind the scenes to try and persuade them to pick him. My partner David Plouffe talked to an old friend of his, Steve Elmendorf, who was the deputy manager of the campaign, made this strong case, and everywhere we could, we kind of planted that seed. Finally, in late June, we got a call from Mary Beth Cahill, the manager of the Kerry campaign. "We'd like you to be the keynote speaker." And he said, "I'd be honored." By the way, he wasn't really privy to the campaign we were running. We did this on our own, so he was — but we told him we'd — "We hope you can do this."

And as soon as he hung up, he said, "I know what I want to say." And I said, "What do you want to say?" And he said, "I want to talk about my story as part of the larger American story." And for the next few weeks, he was — as he drove around campaigning or was at the State Senate voting, in between votes he'd be scribbling notes down in longhand, and then in July, I was overseas with my wife and this fax came in. It was the draft. And I read the first page and handed it to my wife. I read the second page and handed it to my wife. By the third page, I just turned to her. I said, "This is going to be one of the great convention speeches of all time." I had been in the arena in 1984 when Mario Cuomo gave the keynote speech at the Democratic convention for Walter Mondale. And everyone in that room was electrified and knew that Mario Cuomo was now a national figure. He would figure into the future calculation of the Democratic Party. Never ran but everybody assumed that he would and you know, I thought that this speech was gonna have a galvanic effect for Obama. Didn't realize how much until I was in the room in Boston, but it was clear it was a remarkable speech.

Jon Favreau

01:09:53:22 - 01:11:34:14

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 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 this country was founded upon, that's what gives us at least the possibility of coming together and rising above those tensions and I think his belief in hope stems from his experience with his own life and with race in America.

01:12:20:04-01:12:58:18: He used to say this all the time, like the idea that the federal government thought that a Category 5 hurricane is coming and a 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 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.

01:22:20:06 - 01:23:05:20: One thing that people don't understand is that 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 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.

PERSPECTIVES ON OBAMA AND A MORE PERFECT UNION

Sherrilyn Ifill

1:17:15:02 - 01:19:45:04

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, that all men and women, I'm sure they'd have said today are created equal, that every person in this country is entitled to the equal protection of the laws. That is in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. It's not something Black people made up. To demand those things, to demand that your country be what it says it is actually the height of patriotism. 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 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 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.

David Remnick

01:09:08:12-01:11:55:20

There's some people that are just stone-cold racists. We know that. But there are a lot of people also who feel, and are to some degree or another, they feel like they're on the losing end of the stick. Their communities are getting hollowed out. De-industrialization is happening. It's harder for working-class people to make a living. This ignores a whole other thing, that a lot of the working class is people of color, but okay. But there are these people, there are a lot of people, who rose to the bait, I would say, the encouragement of the kind of PR mastery of Trump. "You're being laughed at by elites like Obama. You're being disdained and overlooked by those people." Trump made it into an us and them, and Black and White. There was no question that he had a self-consciousness of a path to whipping up resentment.

And Obama was a Black president. And, you know, one of the things that I've heard Obama say is that maybe he came along 20 years too soon. That maybe for demographic reasons, it might have been better if Gonzales had come along sooner than Obama. You know, he gave a very famous speech that brought him to fame in 2004 at the Democratic Convention in Boston. "There's not a red America, there's not a blue America." That's an aspirational speech. I don't think Obama had any illusion that everybody had transcended race and had transcended historical animosities and all the rest, and everybody was in a full embrace of great unity. It was an aspirational notion. But it made people feel good, it was -- which is what aspiration is all about -- it was a new kind of American optimism, voiced by somebody who had embodied this melding of identity. But I don't think he had radical illusions or disillusion. This is a guy who, you know, at the University of Chicago Law School taught all the texts that are essential to our understanding of race. James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, the history of the Civil Rights Movement, the history of slavery, Reconstruction. He knows that history as well as anybody.

Martin Nesbitt

01:38:07:10 - 01:43:06:00

The first moment that was magical to me was you had sort of the Cabinet and the Senators and friends and family behind the podium at the Capitol at the Inauguration. And we were inside, and they had a specific order that they were seating us. And when I walked out and looked out on the Mall and saw two million people standing there, celebrating the peaceful transition of power in this country, it gave you a sense of what made America great. And at that moment I thought about all the civil wars and the assassinations and the struggle, violent struggle for power in countries all over the world and then looked at our people, with the rule of law, celebrating a democratic election of a new president in this country. And it was a powerful moment. It was an awe-inspiring moment, seeing more people in one place than I've ever seen in my entire life. That was the first moment that was magical.

The second moment was my wife and I heading up to the residence on the first day that they were in the White House and riding up with an elevator operator, Jermaine was his name, I think. And so I say to him — he's an African-American guy who had worked in the White House for 40 years at that time — and I said, "So how did it feel during this whole process where an African American was on his way to be elected president of the United States?" And he said, which is a very revealing moment to me, he said, "At no time during the entire campaign, the primary or the general election did I ever think he was going to win." He said, "I voted for him, but I didn't think he had a chance to win until the moment I read it in the paper the day after the election." He said, "That is how improbable it all felt to a man my age." And that was a very enlightening moment for me in thinking about; I felt like there was a possibility, I thought it was remote. I think younger people thought it was more likely than even I. But I think there was a certain age in the African American community of people like, "This is never going to happen." And so that was an insightful moment.

But then also as we interacted with the staff at the White House, we all saw our own parents. I mean, my mother did domestic work. And to see these African American and Hispanic people on the staff who we could relate to in such an intimate way, it was just a powerful moment. It was like, "This is what our parents did to make our lives possible for us." So, that was another very powerful moment.

And then a third one, just as an anecdote, which I repeated every time I came to the residence, is I just walked into the Lincoln Bedroom every time I went there, and I read the Gettysburg Address, which was a copy, a handwritten copy by Abraham Lincoln, on display in that room. And that speech moved me equally every time I read it and just the history in that moment, reading that Gettysburg Address while the first African American president in this country's history is in the next room reading his daily briefing or whatever was just always very powerful to me. And seeing that connectivity between Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama, that without one, the other's opportunity wouldn't even be possible, was just kind of

a powerful juxtaposition of events that's just right there in front of you.

Ta-Nehisi Coates

01:39:59:22 - 01:42:15:01

I think about the now sort of cliché notion that people say, "Well, I can now tell my son or my daughter they can be president." You know, Black parents would say that. And that's not a small thing. That's not a small thing. You know, I get asked now, "Do I think there'll be another Black president in my lifetime?" Yes, I do. Before Barack Obama, this was like comedy. This was a Dave Chappelle joke. You know, I mean, this was a Chris Rock movie. Richard Pryor. That was where we went to discuss Black presidents.

It's not like that anymore. And I think actually that was manifest in these midterms, with Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum, who came within a hair's breadth of being governors of states in the Deep South. And that's I think a manifestation of a different kind of imagination. And you can't take that away, in terms of what people will feel themselves able to do. And beyond that, I would suspect that the next person, whoever it is, might not feel so hamstrung. That's the other thing, he's first. You know, certain rules you have to obey. I suspect maybe the next person will feel a little differently about what they can and can't say.

Skip Gates

Obama's election and the Constitution

01:09:58:14 - 01:18:21:10

His election was an example of history overruling the abomination of the Three-Fifths Clause in the United States Constitution. Very few people think of it that way but, you know, the Founders, at least ideally, wanted to rid our country of heredity-based obstacles, like property ownership, religion — they weren't so good about race, but we could debate about whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison had that debate. Douglass initially thought so but then he changed his mind. He thought that there was enough room for more maneuverability. Well, Barack Obama proved Frederick Douglass right. And that abominable Three-Fifths Clause bit the dust. No one said that that night in the coverage, but that's what I thought of: that that horrible compromise at the Constitutional Convention was now completely buried, just as the stigma or the obstacle of being a Roman Catholic was buried by John Kennedy's election in 1960. Black people, the enslaved Black people in the South, were counted in the census not as a full human being, but as three-fifths of a human being. And that was to give the South certain a weight in the Electoral College. So, many people have written about being defined as three-fifths of a man. Imagine if you were defined as three-fifths of a human being. That's how Black people are inscribed in the Constitution — the word "slave" never appears in the Constitution, but "three-fifths of a human being" does appear in the Constitution — that's how slavery is inscribed, and race,

therefore, was inscribed as a hereditary obstacle toward holding office and toward voting. Even free Negroes in the North by 1860 could only vote in five states. So the relationship between race and the electorate was enormously vexed in this country, as you well know.

Skip Gates The Obamas and the Concept of the “New Negro”

One of the ways that Black people fought back against the rise of White supremacy was to invent a concept of a New Negro. Now, why would they do that?

They did that because there were so many stereotypes, as part of White supremacy, about the old Negro — the freedmen, the freed women, the formerly enslaved. So, upper-class well-educated Black people, starting in 1894, invented a concept called “the New Negro.” And, the history of the New Negro goes through many iterations between 1894 and 1925. In 1895, Booker T. Washington, just like Barack Obama... Booker T. Washington, at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, gives a speech that makes him the heir of Frederick Douglass. Douglass dies in February 1895, Booker T. Washington makes a speech — one speech — at the Atlanta Exposition — it was like the World’s Fair — in September of 1895, and overnight he is hailed by the White press as the New Negro. And five years later, he publishes a book, which he edits with two other people, called: *A New Negro for a New Century*.

And this concept goes through different iterations, reaches its apex at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1925. So, it was a metaphor that was defined with different content. For some people, a New Negro was like Booker T. Washington; for some people it was like W.E.B. Du Bois, who started the Niagara Movement and the N.A.A.C.P.; for some people, like Alain Locke, the New Negro was going to defeat racism through culture. For Marcus Garvey, a New Negro was a Black nationalist. For A. Philip Randolph, a New Negro was a militant socialist who had learned to shoot in World War I and would shoot the Klan. They’d put a big cartoon in *The Messenger* magazine of the New Negro shooting the Ku Klux Klan, running off in the distance.

I was astonished that even before he was elected, certain Black commentators started comparing him to the New Negro. One article is even headlined “The New Negro in the New Politics.” Charles Johnson, a brilliant novelist, a sober, astute philosopher, you know, wrote an essay in which he sees Barack and Michelle as a new kind of Black person, something sui generis, something unprecedented in the history of the race, and that we were going to have to change the way we described race relations in America because of the coming of this couple — that’s the same rhetoric of the New Negro at the turn of the century. Another political scientist talked about his significance as literally the New Negro in politics. That’s ridiculous. With all due respect to my friend Charles Johnson, there is only one Negro; it’s just old Negro, there never was a new Negro, they were just Black people. And they were part of a long tradition, both Michelle and Barack, there wasn’t a break with the

past they were an extension on the past. They didn’t redefine the past; they embodied the best of the past. It was a culmination of a lot of dreams, and a lot of hopes, a lot of sacrifices, a lot of tears, a lot of lynchings, a lot of beatings, a lot of terrorism, a lot of prayers, a lot of hard work in schools, a lot of deferred gratification.

Skip Gates The Obamas in the Context of Black History

Barack and Michelle were a culmination of hundreds of years of dreams deferred, as Langston Hughes put it. So, I don’t think that Barack and Michelle were guilty of seeing themselves as breaks with the past, but people around them definitely were and commentators definitely were. They wanted to see them as, somehow, different. “I’m different than these other Negroes,” as we used to say. That, somehow, they were unlike African Americans; that they had redefined the possibility of an African American. And, as a race man, as someone who teaches African American history, I know that wasn’t true; they were an extension of the best of the African American tradition. And that new Negro fantasy had an unfortunate effect, which was to lead to a claim of a new America overnight: Post-racial America was born because of the election of Barack Obama. That is totally and utterly ridiculous. This discourse of a post-racial America was a fantasy. And I think it had deleterious effects in our society. People — Americans want a quick fix, “Okay, we elected a Black man, stop complaining. No more racism, no more NAACP, no more discrimination.”

“Do we really need affirmative action? What are you guys complaining about? You got Barack and Michelle in the White House.” And if anyone doubts that post-racial America was not born, just take a quick look at who’s living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue today [at the time of this interview, President Trump was in office.] Having that lovely, loving, wonderful, bright, brilliant nuclear family of Brown faces in the White House for eight years inspired many of us. I couldn’t believe it some days. But it also drove many others of us totally and completely crazy.