

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

CORNEL WEST  
*OBAMA*  
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**Cornel West**  
**Cornel West Interview**  
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**Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 00:45:52**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Dr. Cornel West interview, take one, marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

CORNEL WEST

PROFESSOR AND ACTIVITY

**Meeting Obama**

01;00;12;19

CORNEL WEST:

I recall that he gave me a call at Princeton immediately after his powerful speech that he gave in Boston at the Democratic National Convention. He had

said, “America is a magical place.” And I had said, “This brother’s gonna have a Christopher Columbus experience. He’s gonna discover America.” America is free and democratic to the degree to which people fight to keep it free and democratic through blood, sweat, and tears. Nothing magical about this at all, this is not Disneyland or Disney World. So he called me up and he said, “I heard what you said about my speech. Why did you say that?” I said, “I said it because I believed it. It’s clear that you’re brilliant, it’s clear that you’ve got unbelievable rhetorical talent, but at the same time I wanted to speak the truth.”

01;00;57;22

He said, “Well, you know, I’m thinking about running for President and I was wondering whether you would work with me?” I said, “I’ve got one question. What is your relation to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.? How will your campaign enact the struggle against poverty, militarism, racism, and materialism? Those are the four evils that Martin Luther King Jr. saw right before he was murdered.” And he was very honest with me. And he said, he said, “Professor West, you know that I’m not as radical as you are, but I do see myself directly connected to the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.” I said, “That sounds wonderful to me, let’s work together.”

### **Working with Obama**

01;01;37;07

The next thing you know, I was down in Washington DC in a meeting. We were preparing him for a debate at Howard University with—it was with

Charles Ogletree, David Axelrod, Jesse Jackson Jr., Arthur Davis we're all in the room and we worked for two days. And so I became a critical supporter and I did—that was the first time I met him there in Washington and I met him again in South Carolina and I was doing a number of events, but I ended up doing about 65 events all around the country. Beginning in Iowa and ending up in Ohio, those crucial states. And it was always a critical support because there was no doubt that he was better than the other candidates. I thought all he needed to do, and I told him when I first met him, I said, "You—we can leap frog over the Clinton machine, you're gonna be the next president."

01;02;29;22

And at that time, he had about six or seven percent support and even Black folk had not really begin to kick in 'cause this is prior to Iowa. So I was deeply impressed by his intellect, his sharpness, his poise and so on. But it was always a question, would he be able to hold up the bloodstained banner of the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. within the context of the treacherous terrain of American electoral politics. That was a fundamental challenge that I think he and I knew that he had.

### **Obama in relationship to Dr. King**

01;03;05;05

CORNEL WEST:

Well he knew that you know, my—I've got a calling and a vocation, not just a career and a profession, and so I was gonna hold up the legacy of Fanny Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr. vis a vis his candidacy or anybody

else's candidacy in that regard. And when I introduced him here at Harlem at the Apollo, I said exactly the same thing. I said, "We're here to try to keep alive the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and the others and the best candidate who does that is our dear brother Barack."

01;03;35;16

Well again, it's a relative judgment. He was better than the other candidates. There's no doubt about that, that's why my critical support was there. But once he brought in the Wall Street advisors, Wall Street affiliates, Tim Geitner, Larry Summers, Robin Rubin and company, it was very clear that he was willing to bail out Wall Street, the 1% and not bail out the homeowners, whose somebody Martin King and Ella Baker and others would—would resonate with. So my critique already started there and then it began to deepen when I saw Brennan from the Bush administration tied to the same kind of terrorist strategy of dropping those drones on terrorists, and dropping drones on terrorists I can understand in terms of a just war theory, but when it includes innocent people, that to me is a crime against humanity.

01;04;31;06

I don't care what color you are, I don't care what country you're from, and when I saw that policy increase and that was tied to mass surveillance, it was tied to national security policies that were con—cont—that were continuous with something I was very critical of under the Bush administration. Wall Street on the one hand, you got drones on the other hand and then the fundamental issue of poverty that I was hoping that he would make poverty

much more of a central issue even as he was trying to reconstruct the economy.

01;05;04;21

But by reconstructing the economy, he had a chance to render Wall Street elites accountable. Their greed was running amok. There were crimes committed; insider trading, market manipulation, predatory lending, fraudulent activities. At least I thought we'd have a justice department that would've—that apply rule of law to them the way they apply rule of law to Jamal on the corner or Juanita on the corner or poor whites, any poor folk who had actually violated the law. So when I saw the tilt toward Wall Street, the tilt toward the drone policies, and then also no serious issue hitting of poverty or the mass incarceration regime, my critique began to deepen and it got, you know, it was consistently deep throughout the um, his eight years.

### **Election night 2008**

01;05;59;18

CORNEL WEST:

Well, I remember my feelings when I saw right there on the CNN screen that he won, you know. The tears of so much struggle against a vicious legacy of white supremacy in the history of this nation. Slavery, Jim Crow, Jane Crow, lynching, spit on, rebuked, scorned, now you've got a Black man in that White House built primarily by Black slaves. That's a moment that I think all of us of all colors who have a care about human beings and the future of American democracy would feel very, very deeply. I'll never forget that as long as I live,

very, very much so. But then the question became, now that we have the success, let's see whether it will be greatness. See, success and greatness are not the same thing for me. Success is being in a position of authority, power, and influence. Greatness is what you do with it.

### **Obama's relationship with Wall Street**

01;07;00;09

CORNEL WEST:

When I read in Ron Susskind's text, *Confidence Men, Wall Street, Washington, and the Education of a president*, that meeting that took place March, 2009 with those 13 firms, seven of them had Wall Street leaders and he walks in, he says, "I stand between you and the pitchforks, but I want to let you know, I'm on your side, I will protect you." That's what you say to poor people, that's what you say to working people, that's what you say to Black people, brown people, red people, yellow people, women, gays, lesbians, trans, the ones who are being pushed to the margins.

01;07;38;17

Wall Street doesn't need that. And I don't want to present myself as a Wall Street hater. I just hate greed and I hate injustice, and I hate entitlement, and privilege that's not accountable to the demos, to everyday people, you see. So when I saw that Wall Street tilt and the bailout, I said, "Oh my God, we got a continuation of neo-liberal politics that tilt toward the corporate elites and not towards working people, and that was a beginning of my deep suspicion that lo and behold he was leaning in a direction away from the legacy of

Martin Luther King Jr., and somebody had to try to keep alive that legacy of Martin and the others that very much were responsible for the election of a Black man in a society so deeply shaped by white supremacy.

**Obama and the Black community**

01;08;38;09

CORNEL WEST:

He would say over and over again that, "I'm not president of Black America, I'm president of America." And I would say back, "I want you to stand for truth and justice." Black people, poor people, working people, we're not asking for anything special, we're asking for fairness, we're asking for justice. If you stand for justice, then I know you're gonna make the mass incarceration regime a priority. You're gonna make poverty a priority. You're gonna make accountability of Wall Street a priority, you see.

01;09;12;00

But the sad thing was, of course, that you had such massive Black elite capitulation and you had ordinary Black brothers and sisters who were so caught up in symbol that they downplayed the substance. And I can understand that. Symbolically, Barack Obama will forever go down in the annals of time as having this great symbolic status, but the struggle for freedom and justice is not just about symbols. You've got to be able to seize the moment and let the world know you are a fighter for those who have been spit on, subjugated, dominated, exploited. They can't live vicariously through your symbolic success.

01;09;54;08

You see, we live in a culture of—the culture of superficial spectacle. All you’ve got to do is have successful woman, successful Black or brown and all the other folk catching hell are supposed to live through them. But you see, that’s not my tradition. No, no not at all. We applaud their success. Now how’re you gonna use your success? You see, are you gonna continue to bend whatever you can, your authority and influence to try to empower poor and working people? Now I think brother Barack, President Obama would come back to me and say, “Well brother West, I am a pragmatist. I’ve got limited options. I’ve got limited alternatives, and I have to be able to maneuver, I have to be able to work in a bipartisan way. I’m a politician, I’m not just part of the prophetic tradition.”

01;10;42;14

I thoroughly understand that. We all have different lanes. But then the question becomes, how intense is your struggle. So when medic—when it came to healthcare, he had been a supporter of single payer, but didn’t allow the voices of single payer to come in. He had a meeting with the pharmaceutical companies, they cut a deal. And I said, “You don’t punt on second down. You punt on the fourth down. You push it as far as you can go, then you say, here’s a compromise. Here are the concessions.” So that I knew that he would not be able to get the single payer, but I thought at least we’d get the public option. You’ve got to fight for it, you see? You don’t have these private meetings just to come out with success.

01;11;28;19



And it wasn't just him. He had Rahm Emanuel; he had Geitner and a whole host of others whispering in his ear because he was relatively new at that level of power, and he was falling back on his advisors and most of his advisors were old Clintonites for the most part and I had said exactly the same thing about Bill Clinton as I said about Barack Obama. Too close to Wall Street, foreign policies that I had deep disagreements with and didn't hit the issue of poverty.

### **Challenging Obama**

01;12;03;15

CORNEL WEST:

Well, I got a call from my dear sister Valerie Jarrett and she said, "I want to know whether this is friendly fire or whether this is a critique of someone who is more and more a foe?" And I said, "Well, I'm trying to just accent the moral and spiritual dimensions of what I have to say." I'm trying to look at the world through the lens of poor and working people and as a Christian, I'm looking at the lens—looking at the world through the lens of the cross, and that cross signifies unarmed truth and the condition of truth is always to allow suffering to speak beginning with the most vulnerable. And that comes out of Hebrew scripture. You can spread that steadfast love to the most vulnerable to God. The motherless, the fatherless, the widow, the stranger, and so forth. And then on an unconditional love across the board.

01;12;50;15

So I'm loving the babies in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan who are being killed as much as I'm loving the Black folk who are being killed by police here or anybody else anywhere, you see. And so she made it clear they had—there was a piece in the New York Times when she came out and said, she said, "Brother West is not only crazy, he's un-American." I said, "Oh, I'm an enemy of the state now, I'm anti-American." And I did let 'em know, "No, I'm anti-injustice in America no matter what color the president is." Now you could imagine it created tremendous controversy because my language was very sharp and very, very intense, and people were wondering, wait a minute, I thought Fox News were the critics of the President. Well, they're right wing critics.

01;13;42;04

Most times they're wrong, and you had to protect the president vis a vis the racist attacks 'cause of course his family's very precious, could be killed any minute. So you have to have solidarity with the president on that issue, but there are left wing critiques of the president that need to be heard and people were saying no, no criticisms at all. My dear brother Al Sharpton, who I've known for 30 years, and he would tell me all the time, "Any criticisms of the president in public is not allowed because it reinforces the right wing. And I said, "No, we can't—we can't have that. I come from a people that says, "Lift every voice." That's the anthem of Black people. You gotta lift your voice." I'm not gonna be an echo and just part of some kind of protective crowd.

01;14;29;19

I'm going to protect when he's being viciously attacked for the bad reasons. I'm gonna critique him, I try for good reasons but it's gonna be in the name of the very people and tradition that put him in office. The last thing you need now is a Black president who gets milk toast when it comes to poverty, spineless when it comes to Wall Street, and still dropping drones on folk and therefore not being able to create the kind of, what I call a more radically democratic president. He could be a fusion of the best of FDR. I think Bernie Sanders, my dear brother in his critique of Wall Street, that's what I wanted out of Barack Obama. It was not in him. Bernie Sanders is not a neo-liberal in that sense. He's a social democrat. He's more progressive.

01;15;20;15

And people say, you're asking too much. Maybe. But at least I have to let him know what some of us are thinking. I wasn't all by myself but what so many of us were thinking, in terms of fighting for the poor and working people.

01;15;36;05

CORNEL WEST:

In regard to political calculation. How do you preserve your position, how do you rethink your relation to your constituency? But then there's what I call just moral witness and political courage. And you see, there is a difference between a statesperson who can bring together prudence with moral witness and political courage. See, when FDR said the Wall Street were greedy, they were economic royalists, and he said, "I welcome their hatred." He said that in the White House. That's what a statesman does who's in solidarity with working people. What I saw what Barack Obama was, he didn't have a lot of

political courage, he didn't have a lot of moral witness. He was always obsessed with being in the middle.

01;16;31;15

And there's nothing in the middle but just that yellow line. The truth is beneath the road. The road is hiding and concealing all the suffering, you see? Think of the children. One out two Black and brown children under six live in poverty in the richest nation in the history of the world. Where is the policy? Marian Wright Edelman, she's part of the great legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., she starts the Children Fund, you see. She's raising the same kind of issues. Can't get a word out of him. Will not mention the word poverty. Of course my dear brother Tavis Smiley and I went on two poverty tours; 21 cities the first time, 14 cities the second time, trying to raise the issue of poverty. No response and most of his supporters and cheerleaders.

01;17;17;06

We don't wanna hear it. Well wait a minute. How you gonna have a president here and all these children catching hell and ya can't even raise the issue, and yet Wall Street is break dancing to the bank? They got federal reserve giving—giving this quantitative easing, they're getting nearly zero interest rates, free money flowing. Students have to pay interest rates to go to college. Something's wrong here in terms of the 1%, vis a vis the 99%. So again raise the issue, put the critique forward. And I think it's no accident that you end up with a Black Lives Matter movement under a Black president with a Black Attorney General, with a Black homeland security cabinet member. If Black lives mattered enough in the White House, you would think they'd be able to

come to terms with the accountabilities police killing too many of these precious young brothers and sisters, you see.

01;18;15;01

And when it took place, you know, my dear brother Barack says, “Trayvon would’ve—if I had a son, it would’ve looked like Trayvon.” I said, that’s a beautiful formulation, but when Zimmerman went free, what did he say? “This is a nation of laws, we must observe the law.” That’s not what father’s say when their son gets shot down. So don’t act like you’re a father one moment and then the next moment you’re talking about this is a nation of laws. Slavery was law of the nation. Jim Crow was the laws. Women can’t vote till 1919. That’s part of the laws too; so don’t invoke the laws in relation to your deep feeling and empathy of somebody who just got killed. Don’t play that game with us, you see. And I had to hit him hard on that too.

01;19;05;06

You know, see, in the end this is not about individuals, it’s not about a president, it’s not about a professor or anything else. A tradition has been put in place by a great people who have been hated for 400 years and taught the world so much about how to love, to love justice, to love truth, love beauty, and love the good and for some of us religious love, love God. love the holy. That tradition is richer and deeper coming out of the sweat and tears of everyday people than any president. And that was part of my—my struggle with so many of the Black leaders and Black pundits who wanted to be so uncritical, so deferential, and the kowtow in not recognizing there’s principles involved here.

**Michelle Obama**

01;19;56;15

CORNEL WEST:

Now, it's very interesting in the case of my dear sister Michelle Obama, very interesting, because when I—I saw her a couple of times, and I'd always see her, give her a hug. You know, she'd say hello, ask how the kids are doing. I'm praying for your whole family in terms of no violence, no vicious attacks and threats being executed and so forth. So we never talked policy or anything, but she was always very, very, very, very kind. So it's a fascinating difference there actually.

**Obama's candidacy**

01;20;32;13

CORNEL WEST:

It was surprising because one, of course, my dear brother Jeremiah Wright, Reverend Jeremiah Wright was supposed to be there. He had been Barack Obama's pastor. He had been—he played a fundamental role in the marriage. Of course, he brought—he performed the wedding and so on, and he had sent notes already that he was asked not to be there. And I said, "Whoa, wait, what's going on here?" And then Barack Obama said he would be at Tavis Smiley' State of the Black Union and last minute said no, makes the announcement at Springfield; tied it to the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, which was a rich one. So we understood, ok, I mean political calculation; every

politician has to do that, very much so. And you don't want to alienate your white fellow citizens coming out of the box.

01;21;24;08

So you don't want to be too associated with Black people too early on, but you also want to be clear with the Black folk when you had promised to be there because we didn't know, we found our right there on television. It was like, wait, what's going on? Respect us enough to tell us why you can't do it. So early on there was a certain suspicion, you know, there was no doubt about that.

**Reverend Jeremiah Wright**

01;21;49;20

CORNEL WEST

Reverend Jeremiah Wright is one of the giants in the Black prophetic tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He's deeply influenced by Malcolm X, in some ways even more than Martin Luther King Jr.. He studied at the University of Chicago, so he's both a scholar as well as a powerful preacher. Now, Jeremiah Wright has always been one to engage in a very, very intense critique, not just of white supremacy but of the American empire, war, invasions, occupations, and so forth, you see.

01;22;27;06

And one might not always agree with him or not, but there's no doubt that he has put his life on the line and that makes a difference, that makes a big difference. I was blessed to teach in the basement of his church with Molefi

Asante, who's one of the great Black scholars, afro-centric theorists, so I go way back with brother Jeremiah. And I was deeply upset when he was disrespected like that.

01;22;52;07

You see, when he talked about, "God damn America," Martin Luther King's last sermon was gonna be why America may go to hell. It was not America should go to hell. It was not America ought to go to hell. It may go to hell because if you don't come to terms with racism, poverty, militarism, materialism, those evils are gonna suck all the good stuff out of your democracy. That's in part what Jeremiah Wright was talking about. But Fox News and the others, you know, they cast in such a way that he was a hater of America rather than a hater of injustice in America. And so, unfortunately—of course as a—as an American politician, you can't get too close to that kind of prophetic fire or you get burned.

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So I can understand Barack, in some sense, wanting to get a distance as a politician but on a personal level and on a very deep, truthful level, you had to try to teach people that there are voices in our society that are radical, that are not up for elections. They're trying to tell the truth and you can give your own critique of those voices or your agreement with those voices. And of course that didn't take place. He just got completely demonized and that's a very sad thing when somebody raises their voice and is just completely demonized and in some ways people tried to dismiss him but I think—I



think—I went on Fox News and said that I’d take a bullet for brother Jeremiah and I don’t agree with him all of the time.

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But I know that he’s got a deep love for ordinary people, deep love of Black people, deep love of oppressed people. See, integrity is not about ideological purity or moral purity. Integrity’s about saying what you believe, meaning what you say, saying what you mean, and putting your life on the line. That’s bottom line. That’s Martin, that’s Malcolm, that’s Ella, that’s Fannie. And it goes across the board. Dorothy Day was like that. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was like that. Edward Said was like that. This is a human thing. It cuts across race and gender and sexual orientation in that regard. And politicians are always a bit fearful of such people.

**“A More Perfect Union”**

01;25;11;07

CORNEL WEST:

You know, I—I was a bit disturbed by it because he seemed to equate Black rage after 244 years of barbaric slavery and almost 100 years of American terrorism called Jane Crow and lynching and Jim Crow. That Black rage had the same status as white resentment that these Black folk were moving up too quickly. Now I believe in staying in contact with the humanity of my precious white brothers and sisters, but they need to understand that in a white supremacist civilization, when you’ve been the beneficiary of

unbelievable privilege and entitlement, that you have a right to justice, you have a right to fairness.

01;25;54;10

But your resentment will never have the same weight morally and spiritually as the Black rage who've had to term—come to terms with foremothers and forefathers raped and violated and exploited and lynched, and when he presented that equivalent, it made me upset. I said, "You're not telling the truth." You don't give speeches to make white fellow citizens feel better about themselves. You give speeches to try to tell the truth and then win elections. He decided he couldn't tell the truth. He had to ease white fears, insecurities and anxieties and make that equivalent and many, many Black folk, of course, were very deeply upset with the speech, but it was a successful speech because it allowed him to continue on into the electoral process in such a way that white folk weren't too upset with him or associated with that angry Black man, Jeremiah Wright.

### **Obama's use of language**

01;26;56;08

CORNEL WEST:

You see, part of the problem of having a silvery tongue is that it can be used as a substitute for a moral backbone. And a moral backbone, you don't have to have a silvery tongue. You just need witness, courage, fortitude, you see. So that for example, even with the-- when we come back to police brutality and Black lives matter, a silvery tongue gives a formulation and pulls back, no

action at all. You see? What are you gonna do about accountability of the police? “Well, we’ll see with investigation—“ we’ve seen with investigations over and over again, they still walk free.

01;27;40;06

So I think in some ways that kind of silvery tongue is a dangerous thing in terms of not allowing people to keep focus on what the real actions and deeds and policies really are. I mean, he gave a wonderful talk about income inequality. Didn’t you say well why is it after your first term the top 1% got 95% of the income growth. So your policy going one way and your wonderful speech on income inequality going the other way.

### **Media coverage**

01;28;14;04

And the mainstream media—I mean he had the—you know, the corporate media in his back pocket, I mean we gotta be honest about this. MSNBC was basically a state media, there was hardly a critical word said about him in eight years, Black, white pundits. If you’re gonna be a media obsessed with free speech and first amendment, then engage in affirmation but also critique. Hardly none at all. My dear brother Barack Obama wins the peace prize and his last year he drops over 26,000 bombs. He’s got five wars going on simultaneously, but he’s viewed as a peace man because that’s the image projected. And you say, “Well, wait a minute. Where’s the truth here?” They say, “Oh brother West, how come you’re upset? You ought to be supporting the Black president.”

01;29;04;21

I like the Black brother, he's brilliant. I love him as a human being. He's head of an empire. He is the brilliant poised Black face of the empire, just like now we've got know-nothing, mean spirited, xenophobic, white face of the American empire. We've got to keep track of the structures and institutions, not just the styles and the temperaments. Now of course Barack Obama's much, much, much, much better than Donald Trump, it's no comparison, but they're still running an empire.

**Obama as America's first Black president**

01;29;42;09

CORNEL WEST:

Well, one is I think it sent messages to Black America, brown America, yellow America, red America, white America, that white supremacy was at a crucial level a lie. And that's the symbolic indictment of white supremacy and I resonate with that deeply, that's why I cry, you see? I resonate with that deeply. The very notion that Black people are human beings at the deepest level is still news for too many people, and a lot of my fellow citizens have yet to get that memo. The Black man, brilliant Black wife, charismatic Black wife, beautiful, sharp Black children, symbolic indictment of white supremacy, crucial. That will never be taken away from brother Barack Obama.

01;30;31;15

The challenge will be when the history books are written, it's gonna be more than just symbol, it's gonna be what kind of substance? Did you keep alive the

legacy of the best of Black people? We're talking about Sarah Vonn. We're talking about Donnie Hathaway. These are love warriors at the deepest level. And if you're a love warrior, you hate injustice. And if you're not a love warrior, you can hide and conceal the injustice with silvery speeches and get all the symbolic acclaim, but when it comes to the rubber hitting the road, that's a different thing. That's a different thing.

01;31;11;22

Marvin Gaye could write some beautiful songs but if he can't sing it, then what's going on? It's gonna be a different performance and you're gonna feel it differently. And I think as the years go by, more and more Black people are gonna say, "What a missed opportunity with the Black president," especially given this horrible, nightmarish condition now. How come he didn't hit poverty, how come he didn't hit mass incarceration, how come he didn't talk about race, how come he kept dropping those drones of those folk? How come he assassinated American citizens without due process? We've been concerned about personal liberties as a people because they can assassinate us. You can't assassinate American citizens 'cause you disagree with them with no due process. These are crimes and I got in trouble because I called him a war criminal.

01;31;59;19

You don't kill innocent people in Pakistan and Somalia, over 200 and some children killed. Those are war crimes. Bush, 45 drones. Barack Obama, over 500. I called Bush a war criminal. What does that make Barack Obama? A war criminal, too. You gotta tell the truth. You're not in it for popularity. This is

about an integrity of a people, of a struggle, of a movement, of a grand effort to make the world a better place.

### **Increased racism during Obama's presidency**

01;32;34;21

CORNEL WEST:

In a white supremacist civilization, when you get a symbolic indictment of white supremacy, you're gonna get a backlash. That's another reason why when you're in there, you better fight. You better fight. And this is not no popularity contest in terms of PR strategy, and so when the backlash takes place, we better have serious substantive progress to have something to hold on to because believe me you, I mean all the white supremacist militia groups were operating before Barack Obama. Many of us had to keep track of them 'cause they're coming at us. With him, they almost doubled. Not just him but a whole lot of others too. But especially him as the major symbol.

01;33;15;22

Now that he's gone, it's part of the mainstream. When I'm there in Charlottesville and I'm looking in the eyes of these neo Nazi thuggish brothers and sisters, that hatred bubbling up, it had been there for a long time, but now it could come out. And they're willing to live and die. So that's in parts a white supremacist backlash against a symbolic indictment of white supremacy, which was the Black president. I also think that if Obama's neoliberal policies had actually spoke to the needs of working people, he

would've been able to convince them not to go right wing. He would've given them a sense that they're not forgotten.

01;34;00;16

So when you get an authoritarian populist, a crypto-neo-fascist like Trump who tries to convince them he's on their side because they had been forgotten, and they were forgotten with the wealth inequality in place under this—under Obama's administration. The sta—the wage stagnation. Massive redistribution of wealth from poor and working people to the top 1% that had been going on for a while, it escalated, you see. So that it helped set the context for the kind of both white backlash as well as the rule of big money, the rule of big military, the scapegoating of our precious Mexicans and other immigrants, the vicious misogyny that emerged, all of the various forms of hatred that we've seen since Donald Trump came down that escalator.

01;34;46;12

You know, as somebody who for so long had to live under death threats myself, it's clear to me that the levels of hatred and contempt and the willingness to kill and murder... cut very deep in certain circles of my fellow citizens. That's precisely the reason why when you get a chance to make your blow for justice, you better do it strong, 'cause if you don't, you'll still be misconstrued as being more militant than he is. He was called a socialist. Everybody knows he's not a socialist. Ask Wall Street whether he's a socialist or not. He's called a Muslim, we know the brother's not a Muslim. He was called somebody that's not born in America. Hawaii is in America last time we checked. All these lies are gonna go on.

01;35;32;02

That's par for the course. So, no I'm not surprised at all. I mean, my God, this is America. You've got magnificent human beings in America of all colors and you've got some xenophobes in America who hold onto their whiteness for dear life. That's just the kind of country we are.

**Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr.**

01;35;56;19

CORNEL WEST:

Well, I recall when it happened. Brother Skip just got back from China. You know, Skip and I go back 40 years. He's my very, very dear, dear brother, and Skip, you know, now he's a liberal too now so we don't agree on everything, but I have a deep love and respect for him. And when I called him up, I said "This is a moment in which you can link your plight to the plight of everyday Black people who get mistreated like this all the time." And the first time he was on CNN, that's exactly what he did. Then, the intervention took place to somehow isolate him as this Black professional who's tied to these particular kinds of sites, from Martha's Vineyard to Harvard and so forth and to create some kind of beer summit to bring them together so there's more individual as opposed to institutional and structural.

01;36;47;01

It's very important that the Black middle class people, that Black bourgeois people link their plight with the plight of the Black poor and Black working class because one of the strategies of the powers that be is to isolate them,



extricate them, make them exceptional negroes, exceptional people and still treat the rest of Black people in a disrespectful way. And I thought that what was upsetting about the response from the White House, it—it made it too individualistic as if this thing is not something that's widespread. And by the time you got to Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, Baltimore, Oakland, Chicago, it became very clear, of course it's systematic, of course it is chronic. Of course it's something that's much more widespread than—than these individuals, especially these very brilliant well to do individuals like my very dear brother Skip Gates.

*Amazing Grace*

01;37;47;23

CORNEL WEST:

Again, I thought it remained on a superficial level. This is not the time for singing. This is a time for policies that speak to institutional racism that are responsible for the deaths of so many Black folk. So it was almost a kind of diversion or distraction in that way. And I must say also, I thought he sang the wrong song. 'Cause when you've got precious bodies in the court—in the coffin owing to a vicious white supremacist, this is not about amazing grace at all. It's not about worms that we are. Uh-uh. We got some other songs in the Black tradition. You could sing "Wade in the Water." God's gonna trouble the water. We're gonna meet God in this trouble, in this struggle, we're gonna make sure that justice is—is—can be found for these folk in the coffin. You

need a fighting song. We got some fighting songs in the Black tradition. Now “Amazing Grace” is a beautiful song, there’s a time to sing that song.

01;38;57;17

He got the wrong song. And what does that do? That pacifies people, you see. So I was—I wasn’t that excited about that particular moment either. I was glad he went down there. I thought he should have gone to Ferguson. Barack Obama, he’s got a decency about him. He really does. I don’t wanna downplay that. I don’t see enough courage and backbone, but he’s got a decency about him, so there’s things that he’s done that are beautiful. I thought the speech that he gave for the brothers and sisters in Connecticut... Newtown, it was powerful. When he cried, those were genuine tears, absolutely. That’s the decency about him, you see. But decency and tears is not the same as action based on political courage and moral witness. And that’s what I’ve seen that’s relatively lacking in his eight years.

### **Obama’s contributions as president**

01;39;54;15

CORNEL WEST:

Well, I think first and foremost, he provided a sense of hope, optimism, upbeat quality in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, just as the American empire was beginning to undergo various forms of decline and decay. And it looked as if he could provide a regeneration and revitalization of American democracy at that moment, and that’s a major contribution that had repercussions all around the world. Africa was looking toward him. Latin

America was looking—the Middle East was looking toward him and so forth and that's something again that can never be taken away.

01;40;37;15

The problem is when you provide that level of hope, if you don't come through, the disappointment is felt in a very deep way. Now, we talked before about the symbolic indictment of white supremacy being a Black president, that will never be taken away from him. But when you do that, you have to then also be measured by the best of that Black tradition. And when you've got, you know, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, and Martin King and Malcolm X and others in that tradition, it doesn't get too much better than that. That's like somebody showing up gonna blow their horn. "How am I sounding?" "Well you're sounding good, but let's play some Coltrane and Miles Davis, let's play some Mary Lou Williams on the piano and you listen to this." "Oh, I've got to do some more practice." "You sure do. Yes you do."

01;41;27;02

That's true for Black presidents, too. 'Cause the standards are set from inside of the traditions of the everyday people. They set the highest standards of love, courage, fortitude, service to others, sacrifice, that's where the standards are, you see. And it's not Wall Street, it's not stock markets, it's not Harvard, it's not Princeton, you see. Those are the elite institutions that will pat you on the back, but the real measurement is going to be the ways in which you empowered or willing to serve and sacrifice for those who I still call everyday people.

**Donald Trump**

01;42;08;00

CORNEL WEST:

Well I think the Obama presidency was a neo-liberal rule and by neo-liberal, what I mean is the rule of big money with market logic shot through every sphere of our society, militarism with wars in various countries, disproportionately Muslim countries. You have a neo-liberal rule in place unable to speak to the wealth inequality, unable to speak to the militarism, in fact, reinforcing it and here comes along someone who calls for the collapse of that status quo and Trump's called for the end of this kind of regime and what does he have? Well, what we had was we had Bernie on the left, and I do believe Bernie Sanders could have beat him. I knew that the old neo-liberalism of Clinton just didn't have enough gumpf and gut and grit to deal with the newness of this spectacle, substantless, xenophobic movement that Donald Trump was galvanizing.

01;43;12;18

And so there's a sense in which the Obama Administration in no way is a cause of the Trump administration, no not at all. But he helped set the atmosphere by not following through and speaking to the needs especially of working people, and by working people, I mean all colors across the board. Reigning in the Wall Street greed, not allowing people to think they've been forgotten and so forth.

**The future of democracy**

01;43;45;07

CORNEL WEST:

The rule of big money and the rule of the military industrial complex; you gotta remember now for every dollar spent in the US budget, 53 cents goes straight to the military industrial complex. So they already have—they already feel very truncated and narrowed. If it is the case that America can no longer generate high quality leadership or states persons of integrity, then democracy is just sliding down a slippery slope to chaos, and that means not just anarchy, that means tyrants—tyrannical rule. Plato becomes right. Every democracy produces a demos that's driven by unruly passion and ubiquitous ignorance that becomes gullible to a strongman. And so you end up with a tyrant who takes over and democracy goes under. Slowly but surely it goes under. We're already seeing signs of that under Trump.

01;44;42;06

So I refuse to believe that given all the magnificent human beings in this country, full of unbelievable imagination, intelligence, courage, that the best we can do is the kind of mediocre and under-mediocre leadership that we have right now. If that is the best we can do, then you know, something very precious is coming to an end. Democracy is very fragile, very fragile.

### **Possibility of reconnection with Obama**

01;45;15;13

CORNEL WEST:

Well you never know, you never know. You know, I mean, he's always been my brother. He's always in my prayers in terms of his safety and so forth. And my hunch is that there will be a context in which we'll get a chance to talk. You know, I'll give the brother a hug and tell him why I had my strong critique, why I still think I'm right and so on. But- but maybe not, too. You- you know, you never know. You never know. All of us need to be rendered accountable in some way. I'm not always right, either. He could correct me on some things, you see. But you never know. I'm always open. I'm always open.

END TC: 01;45;52;08