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LAURA WASHINGTON INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Laura Washington
Journalist
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Interviewed by: Teddy Kunhardt
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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Laura Washington interview, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Laura Washington
Journalist

Growing up in Chicago

01:00:12:12

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Born and raised, South Side of Chicago. Lived in many different areas of the South Side. Went to journalism school and became a journalist because I saw a lot of disparities on the South Side that I wanted to help fix through my journalism. So, been here pretty much lifelong. Away for a couple stints here and there, but basically lifelong Chicagoan.

The election of Harold Washington

01:00:36:11

LAURA WASHINGTON:

The election of Harold Washington signified a sea of change, politically, like nothing we've ever seen in Chicago. It finally sent the message to African Americans and others who had been left out of the system, that it was their turn to have some access and to have some power in the community and in the city. And he – he forever changed Black politics in Chicago. He showed that African Americans could run for mayor, win, and govern. And govern well and fairly.

01:01:03:02

LAURA WASHINGTON:

It was – it was uh unbelievable. In many ways as unbelievable as the election of Barack Obama as president. People didn't see it coming. At least people outside of the African American community didn't see it coming. We thought it was going to be another 10, 15 years before we see a Black mayor. I remember my father, who lifelong time Chicagoan South Sider, who hadn't voted in 20 years, didn't see any reason to vote. And he voted for Harold Washington. It was that important to him and to African Americans to see that man elected. There was backlash during the campaign from the – I think, for the first few months of the campaign, the powers that be didn't see him coming, they didn't take him seriously. But when he won the primary, particularly at that point, the powers that be, mainly the white power structure in the city, did everything they could to stop him. And there was a

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lot of racism, there was a lot of anger on both sides during the – during the general election in that campaign. And I think that made Harold Washington even more of a hero in the African American community than he had been before. Because he was seen as somebody who was going to be very powerful, and white people didn't want to see that happen. And they tried to do everything they could to stop it.

01:02:12:06

LAURA WASHINGTON:

He was a different kind of politician. Because he was a prominent African American who didn't make any apologies for being an African American. He was also somebody – Harold Washington was someone who made it his first line of business to make sure that he brought fairness to the city. He saw a city that was suffering under deep inequity, and he wanted to change that. And he made no apologies for that. Race was important to who he was, it was important to the city. And he made sure that people understood that. One of my favorite things about him when he was campaigning is the way he talked about fairness. He talked about fairness and equity, and the fact that African Americans and other people of color had been left out of the goodies. And he said, "I'm going to be fair to you. It doesn't matter if you're white, it doesn't matter if you're Black, I'm going to find you. And I'm going to be fair to you. I'm going to go to wherever you are, and I'm going to make sure you get treated fairly. I'm going to force the fairness on you if I have to."

The Chicago political machine

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LAURA WASHINGTON:

Oh, boy. What a, what – the Chicago political machine is an organization that was designed to keep white folks in power. And it did a very good job of that for many, many decades. White – the city was run by white, mainly by white Irish politicians. And the machine was created primarily by Richard M. Daley, but – the machine was created primarily by Richard J. Daley to keep that power in the Irish community, in the white community. And it succeeded for many decades.

“Waiting your turn”

01:03:49:19

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think that's part of Chicago politics in general, that you have to wait your turn. That's why what Harold Washington said was so powerful. He said, "It's my turn. It's our turn. We're not waiting for our turn any longer." And part of politics was, you have to have the seniority. You have to have the connections. You have to have the history. You have to have the mojo. And until you get all of that, it's not your turn. I think that's what Harold Washington was told. I think that's what Barack Obama was told.

Reporting on and working for Mayor Washington

01:04:22:20

LAURA WASHINGTON:

As a reporter, I covered Harold Washington's first campaign. And reporters are not supposed to have opinions, but I was delighted and thrilled when he was elected. And I ended up covering the first part of his administration. About halfway through his first term, an opportunity came up to be his Deputy Press Secretary. And I jumped at it, because I was so invested in his movement, and what he was trying to do. And I wanted to be part of it from the inside. So, I served as his Deputy Press Secretary for a little bit under three years. And in that role, I was one of his spokespeople. But my major role was to be the traffic cop in the mayor's press office. And to manage his press image, to manage his – his press contacts. To deal with the reporters that, that were constantly all over him for a comment, for information, for – for his point of view. So, that was my role.

Mayor Washington's character

01:05:17:08

LAURA WASHINGTON:

He was brilliant politically. He was a brilliant political strategist. He was a very smart intellectual, well read. Understood the world in a way I think we never had a mayor before since who understood the world and how it worked. He was – incredible personal charisma, and a smile that never stopped. And that charisma, I think, overcame a lot of the racism that he confronted as a politician, as he confronted as a mayor. Because you just had to love him. He walked into the room, and, and his energy just reached out

and grabbed you. And I think that that was something that even some of the white racists couldn't overcome.

01:05:59:00

LAURA WASHINGTON:

He wanted to change the way the city worked. He wanted – the city did not work for people of color, and particularly African Americans, Latinos, and poor whites. And he wanted to change that. He wanted to build, he did build – Harold Washington built a coalition to address the inequities and fairness in the city. This city was Black and white, never the twain shall meet. You could – you could look at a map in the city and know where the inequities were. South Side, West Side, poor, less resources, that's where all the bad stuff. North Side, that's where all the good stuff was. He wanted to change that. He – over time, he built stronger relationships with whites. But it started with African Americans and progressive whites, liberal whites. The lakefront liberals who wanted to see more access for people of color. Not a lot of – not all the whites believed that. A lot of the other whites – the white ethnics – were afraid of losing power. They were afraid of losing the goodies and losing the resources. But he built the bridges with whites who were willing to work with him. And, and eventually that coalition expanded. And then Latinos were part of that as well.

Importance of Mayor Washington's second term

01:07:07:09

LAURA WASHINGTON:

The city had to show that it could get beyond the racism that permeated the first campaign and the first term. And that he had been legitimately elected by not just African Americans, but by the city at large. And that his – his version of fairness, his version of reform was a real – he, the city had to prove that his version of reform was real and it was lasting. And I think that second election showed that.

Race in Chicago

01:07:38:15

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Race has been a defining factor in this city for over 100 years. You can go back to the 1919 riots. The city has been always been segregated. There's always been a feeling from whites that blacks are threatening them. They want to keep them in their place. And that's the way the city was divided. And that's why it was so segregated. And that segregation coming – Black folks came up from The Great Migration. And they were told they could only live in Brownsville; they can only live in that part of the city. And the rest of the city was going to be controlled by whites. And that story, I think, is still out there. I think that blacks live with blacks, whites live with whites, Latinos live with Latinos. It's been something that's been lasted – it's lasted over 100 years. The racial dynamic in Chicago has always been based on hate and fear. And those whites in the '60s and those whites in the '80s, were always fearful that African Americans were going to take something from them. And they weren't going to have that. And that fear, I think, played itself out in terms of

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the lack of access that African Americans had to the resources in this city. Because they were segregated and they were not – I mean, I remember growing up in the '70s and '80s, when you were told you didn't cross certain streets. You didn't cross State Street. And then it became Halsted. And then it became Ashland. And eventually, blacks pushed further and further west. But I was told growing up that there were certain streets I dare not cross. Because I didn't belong, and because it could be very dangerous for me. And that's the kind of environment that we grew up in.

Learning about Obama

01:09:13:02

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think I first met him when he was working on the voter registration campaign. And I remember meeting him because he was doing – they were doing a lot of PR around that. And I was covering politics at the time. He was bright, sharp, very eager and idealistic. And we hadn't had any real strong Black political activity in the city since Harold Washington, and he wanted to bring that back through this voter registration campaign. And I was impressed with that. I also remember thinking this guy is not from Chicago. This guy is from the East Coast. He's got the Harvard thing. He's got the biracial thing. He's going to have a hard time making his way in Chicago politics.

Obama entering politics as a community organizer

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01:09:57:23

LAURA WASHINGTON:

A community organizer was a rabble-rouser. Someone who was going to give city hall and every other power structure a real hard time. Someone who was going to ask a lot of tough questions and demand opportunity and access for communities that have been left out.

01:10:13:23

LAURA WASHINGTON:

First of all, he's a troublemaker from day one. Mayors don't return calls to troublemakers; mayors don't meet with troublemakers. Elected officials of any kind don't meet with troublemakers. They're asking for more than what I'm going to give them off the bat. They're – they're there to raise hell. And so, he was – he would be considered not part of the power structure and unwelcomed in the power structure.

Role of churches in Chicago

01:10:41:06

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Churches, I think, for forever and a day have been the most stable, most important institution in the Black community. It's safe, it's where the money goes to the community. It's where the ministers administer and support the community are. It's where, when it comes to votes and voters, that's where most of the voters are. They tend to be churchgoers. So, the church had a lot of influence and sway among Black voters. And politicians in Chicago knew

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that. So, they would often stop at churches first to make sure that they paid homage to the ministers and to the churches, because that's where the votes were.

Mayor Washington's death

01:11:26:05

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Too soon. He had just begun to make a dent in his – Harold Washington's death was too soon. He had just begun to make hay and make a dent in the inequities in the city. People – he was beloved. And he had started to be beloved by people who had hated him when he first ran for office. And he didn't have enough time to complete his work. I think that – I think because he was such a charismatic and powerful and beloved figure, it in many ways destroyed the political power structure in the Black community. Because there was no one else but Harold Washington. And there was a lot of division, and a lot of fighting after his death. And it took the Black community, the Black political power structure, you know, many, many years to recover from that. I actually had to cover his death because I was working for the CBS station by that time. The day he died we got word and I got sent over to city hall to try to find out what was going on. Which was really painful. Because I mean, these are all my former colleagues who I just recently left. And there was a lot of – there was a lot of agony going on at city hall right after his death. And then you know all about the implosion, the political implosion happened. So, I watched all of that very painfully. I knew when I went to

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work for Harold Washington I would never work for another politician. Because I had – I never believed in a politician as I did in Harold Washington because of his cause of fairness and equity. And – and I thought he was really sincere and, and forceful in executing that cause. So, I knew I would never work for someone else like him ever again. So, I'm glad I had that opportunity.

Michelle Obama

01:13:14:23

LAURA WASHINGTON:

She's very very graceful, very smart, poised, very – someone who seemed like she was able to keep her feet in both worlds. You know, she was able to be a part of the Daley administration and be a very powerful, influential lawyer. But also, be involved in the community. She was very involved in that Public Allies program that she ran for a while. You didn't often see people who were involved in community-based organizations who were also had their foot in the power establishment and city hall at that time. And she did. She did both very well. That's one reason why she was such a big asset to her husband. Because she was from Chicago. She had the roots and the history and the pedigree that he didn't have. And he couldn't, you know, he couldn't get it because he didn't have it. But he was able to get it through her.

The Hyde Park neighborhood

01:14:10:17

LAURA WASHINGTON:

The Obama's lived in Hyde Park for the same reason that Harold Washington lived there. Because it was a progressive, liberal, bastion of – because it was progressive, and because it was liberal, and because it was integrated. And it gave you the access and the pedigree of being able to reach out to multiple communities, to progressive communities. At the same time being Black and being part of the South Side. It was unique that way. Hyde Park was the only African American community on the South Side that also happened to be white at the same time. And that was an important thing for any politician who wanted to reach out beyond his or her base.

Carol Moseley Braun

01:14:53:12

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Carol Moseley Braun is a dynamic, charismatic, powerful elected official, who worked her way up through the democratic party system and became a very prominent African American senator. Carol Moseley Braun was a champion for African Americans, but also a champion for women and women's rights. And so, she was revered for that. It was in 1992. And there was – there were Supreme Court confirmation hearings that were very controversial. And those hearings angered a lot of women. And Carol Moseley Braun was – took advantage of that opportunity to become a champion and to raise her voice as a champion for women in politics. There were things said about her. That, you know, she wasn't effective, that she didn't show up at anything on time.

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That she had a boyfriend who was a bad influence on her. And I think many women felt that those – those comments were sexist. That those were the kinds of comments they would never direct toward a man, and certainly not a white man. And that was her – that was her view. And I think a lot of women felt the same way. They felt that there was a double standard. And that the things that white male politicians do, Black women can't do. I think that the attitude was, "We're going to let you be a member of this club, but you'll never be a full member. You have to keep your place and stay in your place, Black girl." And that was the message I think that was sent to her by her white colleagues and by some white voters.

Connection between Carol Moseley Braun and Obama

01:16:26:00

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think you asked me about her paving the way for Obama. I think well, first of all, if she'd run – she was thinking about running for office, again. She was thinking about trying to retain – trying to regain her senate seat at the time that Obama was talking about running for the US Senate. And if she'd stepped up and decided to run, he wouldn't have been able to. So, she did him a huge favor there. And it's another example of some of the lucky shots that Obama's had over the years. But she was also, because she was the first Black senator from Illinois, she sent the message that this could be done. That you could make this happen. And she, during the time I think when she ran, was also during the period when Obama was out there doing the voter registration

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work. And he helped get her elected by raising the bar, and raising the level of voter registration and voter activity in the African American community. And that helped set the stage for him down the road. I don't think we had seen that kind of energy and political activity in the Black community since Harold Washington. And Obama helped create that by doing a really great job on the organizing. But Carol Moseley Braun was there to take advantage of it.

Obama and Project Vote

01:17:36:08

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Project Vote was a voter registration drive that Barack Obama was hired to run. He – he came in, I think, after he had been at Harvard. And brilliantly got to know the city, got to understand the politics of the city, and got to figure out – and he's, and he's brilliant at understanding the politics of the city and the strategy that he needed to do to get folks registered. And raise the bar and the energy around Black political empowerment in a way that we hadn't seen since Harold Washington.

Obama's strategic trajectory

01:18:10:21

LAURA WASHINGTON:

The man was brilliant at strategically thinking about all the things he had to do, all the steps he had to take to get to that grand prize in the White House. He knew he had to not only understand community organizing, but political

organizing. He understood he had to start to develop relationships. He understood he had to start to build the chits that he would need. The things that he would go back to people and ask for in return. And so, the voter registration drive was just one example of that. It gave him a chance to get to know the power players. He got a chance for him to develop relationships. To develop the chits he would need to become an elected official.

01:18:51:04

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I remember asking him how high did he want to go? And his answer, like any good politician was, "I just want to serve the people. I just want to do what's best for the people." He was extremely ambitious. Nobody writes a book about their life when they're 30 years old. Nobody comes from Harvard and Columbia and comes to South Side of Chicago to do some organizing for some little community group you never heard from. Unless he's got a plan. Nobody runs for Congress when he's as young as he did, unless you have a plan. So, I think – I think he knew he wanted to get as high as he could. president, I don't think anybody thought that was coming. And certainly not at the time that I first met him. Who helps him? Well, you know, I think, you know, there's – he's had a number of, you know, allies and mentors along the way. Someone like Emil Jones, who I don't know if you're going to talk to him, or you have talked to him. He was his sort of political godfather. And I think he saw the potential in him. And helped put him in a position when he was in the State Senate to carry some important bills. To be very deeply involved in policy at a time when folks who'd been around Chicago a lot longer than

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Obama had, were not involved. So, I think people like that helped to build his political image. And helped to – helped to mentor him and get him in the right position so that he could run for senate, and then run for president. It was a double whammy. He took – he had the strategy, and he took the right steps. But he also had a lot of luck going for him.

Jesse Jackson and PUSH

01:20:23:09

LAURA WASHINGTON:

My mother was very active as a volunteer in PUSH. And she used to drag me to the Saturday morning meetings at PUSH for years, it seemed like. So even though I was a kid and really didn't completely understand politics, and certainly didn't want to be there – I wanted to be out playing – I was sort of brought up in that environment. That political activist environment that was created by Jesse Jackson. PUSH is the Rainbow – now it's called Rainbow/PUSH, is a national organization. It was based in Chicago. That was working around civil rights and equity issues for decades. And led by Jesse Jackson.

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LAURA WASHINGTON:

Back when Jesse Jackson worked with Martin Luther King, and when he began to emerge as a national figure, the only way you could do that was, as a Black man, was to be involved with the civil rights movement. There wasn't really much in the way of politics, a political opportunity for African

Americans back then. So, he started out as a civil rights activist. He was one of those guys banging at the door on city hall demanding equity long before he decided to be a politician. But eventually, if you want to have real power in this city, and in this country, you need to run for office. So, I think he saw the political platform as being an important way for him to build his power. It didn't even necessarily matter if he got elected to office. The fact that he could run a serious, credible campaign for president, would elevate him and elevate his power. And I think it worked for him.

Obama's State Senate run

01:21:48:22

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Barack Obama wanted to run for State Senate, and Alice Palmer, a long time revered South Side state senator, had decided she wanted to run for higher office, for a congressional seat. She had promised him that she would support him if he – because she was going to the next level. She lost the primary. So, she wanted her seat back, essentially. And so, she wanted Obama to step back. And he was not going to step back. They'd made a deal. Politics deals are sacred. So, he didn't step back. There was a lot of anger, and tension, and division in the community about that. Because in the African American community, politicians believe that you should always wait your turn. And many voters feel that way, too. So, there were some voters that felt like, "Alice has been here for us for a long time, we want to support her." Others were saying, "Barack Obama made a deal. He's – it's his turn, give him a

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chance." So, there was some anger and some division over that. But Obama ran and won.

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LAURA WASHINGTON:

In order to get on the ballot, you have to have valid – a certain number of valid signatures on your petitions. And when she decided to run anyway, he challenged her petitions to get her off the ballot. That's a time-worn, Chicago way strategy that people use to get to elective office. He did it, and he got her knocked off the ballot. And that enabled him to run. I don't think that Obama was a cut-throat politician. I think he was a pragmatic politician who had a plan. He had made a deal with her. It wasn't like he came out of nowhere. And he had the right under the rules to challenge her petitions. Some people think that he was unfair to her. Some people feel that he should have waited his turn. But if he had waited his turn, he would never have become president.

Obama's challenge of Bobby Rush

01:23:38:20

LAURA WASHINGTON:

He had already established himself and his credibility very well. Not that he wasn't qualified. But I know how Black voters think, particularly older African American voters. And those are the ones that turn out. They want the experience. They want the seniority. They want the guy who's already been there for them, and has been supporting them. And that was Bobby Rush. And they weren't going to turn away from him for some young

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whippersnapper they'd never heard of before. Bobby Rush was an— Bobby Rush was an iconic civil rights activist, community organizer who came out of the Black Panther movement. He was beloved because of that Black Panther model that he came out of. And he was able to turn that into elective office. First in city council, and then later as a congressman. And he was an established Black politician who had street cred. And that's something you don't see that often in the African American community, when you had both the political skills and the political pedigree and the street cred. And he had both.

01:24:39:06

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Yes, um, I think that Bobby Rush took that very personally. But I think the bigger issue was that you just don't challenge seniority, and you don't challenge the established power structure in Chicago. And especially if you're not even from Chicago. And I think there was a lot of resentment on the part of Bobby Rush, and a lot of other people to that. Bobby Rush had paid his dues as a Black Panther and as elected official. And he had earned the trust of voters. Voters liked him. He was out in the community. They knew who he was, he stood for something. He wasn't necessarily as effective as some voters would have liked. But there's also this feeling that African American politicians don't get a fair deal. And they're held to a different standard. So maybe he wasn't as effective as maybe some white Congress people had been, but they didn't care. He was their guy, and they were going to stick with him.

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Downstate Illinois vs. Chicago

01:25:33:02

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Downstate is wider. It is more Southern in many ways, farm country, agricultural country. People downstate see Chicago as a big city that doesn't relate to them. The big city that gets all the goodies from the state. There's – there was a movement for a while, and it may still be out there, Downstate wants to secede from Illinois because they don't like Chicago. I think some of that is racism. Most people of color in the state live in the Chicago area. And there's just – and I think politicians over the years have sort of played against that divide. Some of the republicans especially downstate try to use that as a wedge against the Democratic Party. So that's – that's how I would describe it. The way I've always seen it is that racism in the South is very genteel, and polite, and mannered. In Chicago, it's bare – it's bare knuckles. People will say things to you, people will hold signs up to you, that are far more blatant than anything you would see in the South. There's – there's this sort of permission, you know. Because while we're in the north we're more civilized than they are in the South. So, if we say something, it has more validity than it does in the South. It's kind of weird, but that's sort of my take on it.

Obama's U.S. Senate race

01:26:50:22

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Obama was seen as an outlier, as he had been much of his career. As someone who wasn't ready to step up to higher office. There were other far more established politicians that were running for the Senate than he was. He was not well known outside the African American community. But I think people underestimated the connections and the relationships he had.

Blackness

01:27:14:18

LAURA WASHINGTON:

There was a feeling, particularly I think, it started under the Bobby Rush period, when he ran against Bobby Rush, that he wasn't Black enough. He's not from here, he's not from us. He's half white. He's from Hyde Park, which is a, you know, a white community in many ways. He doesn't really know us. And I think that was something that he had to overcome. I think that was something that was put out there by some of his opponents, like Bobby Rush, as a way of denigrating him. But he had to prove his Black credentials. I think one of the interesting things that I heard a lot about was, "Is he really Black." And this is different from the, "He's not Black enough." I was hearing this from whites. What makes him Black? His mother was white. Well, how does he get to be a Black guy? And how does he get to be the first Black president? Or how does he get to be a Black senator when he doesn't even really have an African American background? Alan Keyes talked about that. It was – I think it said a lot about race in this country and the fact that particularly whites

didn't really understand our racial heritage. And they were really innocently questioning how could this guy be considered Black?

Alan Keyes

01:28:25:22

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Alan Keyes was this very conservative diplomat, who had recently moved to Chicago. And the Republican Party was desperate to find somebody to run in the Republican primary. And so, he was their guy. I think they felt because he was African American, maybe he could somehow dilute Obama's effectiveness. But he was – many people really wondered, you know, where that came from. And I think Alan Keyes was sort of at a big disadvantage from day one. I think they had to recruit him because they had lost their nominee, the Republican Party had to recruit him. And so, he was kind of a late comer. He was not a Chicagoan. He was not well known. He was super conservative for Chicago.

Obama on gay marriage

01:29:08:05

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Barack Obama was always good at playing it safe. He didn't want to get too far out there; he was already going to be accused of being a radical. So, he had to be relatively conservative for a Black elected official. So, I think he didn't want to get too far ahead of – I think he didn't want to get too far ahead of the

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times in terms of his positions. So, he didn't want to go the gay marriage route at that point. It took him a while to come around on that one. By the time he did, he was already president by the time he did. And I think, I mean, supposedly, Biden helped bring him around on that one. I think he was very astute at reading the times and reading how far out to get ahead of his constituents. And he knew that that would have been one step too far.

Obama's political ambition

01:29:52:15

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I knew Barack Obama was extremely ambitious and wanted to go to the highest places he could go. And he had a plan to go there. He didn't share it with me, but you could tell. I think Barack Obama was impatient. I think he wanted to sort of get the little stuff, the little political stuff out of the way so he could get to the big stuff. And the State Senate seat was just sort of a minor steppingstone that he wanted to get through quickly. And so maybe that's where that cockiness came. He was super confident, super smart, super charismatic. And so, to many people, that came off as being someone who was trying to get ahead of himself.

01:30:27:16

LAURA WASHINGTON:

People were already talking about the next step by the time he won the US Senate. You know, he was – he was presidential material. And he had been very fortunate. But he'd been very strategic in the way he had positioned his

career. Barack Obama was the kind of African American who could become the first African American president. And I think people saw that in him when he was first elected to the US Senate.

Obama's presidential run

01:30:54:08

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I felt because of all the lucky breaks and strategic – smart strategic moves he had taken along the way, I felt that this was destiny for him. That he was going to make it. But it was a treacherous road. He got everything thrown at him. And particularly all the tropes that people use against Black men and Black women. Michelle saw that happen to her, too. That they're radical, that they're communists, that they're substandard in some way. Those – there was a lot of messaging during the presidential campaign that he had to deal with that anyone who was not a Black man would have had to deal with.

Rev. Wright Controversy

01:31:38:17

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Jeremiah Wright was a – Jeremiah Wright is a revered, well established, Black minister on the South Side of Chicago who runs one of the biggest Black churches in the city. Very well respected but can be fiery at times. And he'd done some – he had some fiery speeches, sermons that he had made that were controversial. And Obama's opposition had been doing this homework

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and had dug up some of those controversial speeches, some of those controversial remarks. And they were going to use them against them. I think that was sort of a seminal point. I think the Jeremiah Wright episode was a seminal point in the campaign. Because it proved Obama could hold his own and withstand some of the worst criticism that he got during the campaign. And that famous speech that he made, was a very crucial speech. And he had to – he had to educate voters that the life experience of a Black preacher and of a Black man in America is different from your experience. It doesn't mean it's wrong. It doesn't mean it's bad. But he had to use that opportunity, that moment, to educate whites about African American life, and about African American culture. And I think he did that well.

01:32:50:15

LAURA WASHINGTON:

The way Jeremiah Wright was treated was the cut-throat version of Barack Obama. At that point, there was too much at stake. And he couldn't afford to be associated, even with his beloved longtime minister. He did what he needed to do to win. Jeremiah Wright is the, is the- is the- is the casualty of that. I think a lot of people in the church and a lot of people in Chicago were kind of taken aback by that. But I think by that time, people knew that Obama had to do what he needed to do to win. And Wright was a casualty of that.

Obama's relationship with Jesse Jackson

01:33:31:04

LAURA WASHINGTON:

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Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama always had a very uneasy relationship. And I think Jesse Jackson wanted to be where Obama was. And he tried to be there twice. And I'm sure there was some regret and some resentment because of that. And that's human. So, he was caught on a hot mic saying something unpleasant about Obama that he probably believed. Jesse Jackson ran for president – historically ran for president of the United States twice. And was an effective candidate and did relatively well. He was never going to get elected in that time. But he, in many ways, probably paved the way for Barack Obama. Because he shows that an African American could run for office and be taken seriously and be credible. And so, I think that in many ways, Jesse Jackson, thought he should be in the White House. That he should be in that place because of the work he had done to get Obama there. So, it must have been a bittersweet time for him, you know, as I'm sure he's talked about. You know, I remember the night of the election when he was crying. I'm sure he was crying because he was thrilled with the history that we were making that night. But he was also crying because it wasn't him.

Election night 2008

01:34:42:08

LAURA WASHINGTON:

As a journalist, I understood that – well, as a journalist and a Chicagoan, it meant a lot to me because this came from Chicago. And I don't think it's any accident that Barack Obama came from Chicago. There's not a city in the country that was in more need of an African American hero. Someone who

could uplift the community than Chicago. And that's why it was so important that Obama came from here. Having had a chance to meet him and cover him, that's something I don't think I would ever do in Chicago. Because Chicago is in many – the East Coast, the New Yorks and Washingtons consider Chicago a backwater. Well, we proved that night that we were not a political backwater. That we were the place where a president would be made. I was interviewed by Chicago magazine and asked if I thought that he should be running for president. And I said stupidly, "He'd be crazy to run for president. There's no way he's going to ever get there." And I was wrong. And so, I was gladly wrong. But I never thought that he would – that the country – I never thought that the country was ready for a Black man to be president. And I was wrong.

01:35:42:03

LAURA WASHINGTON:

And unfortunately, I couldn't be in Grant Park because I was working. And I wanted to be there because it was such a historic night. I just remember thinking that – I remember thinking that the country will never be the same. And that no matter what kind of a President Obama is, he's put race on the map. He's put African Americans on the map in a way that you'll never be able to turn back from. And I think that the most – the most important thing that came out of that election, was that not any policy he enacted, not anything that he did as president, but the fact that he was able to get there. The fact that he was able to overcome our racist roots and our racist tendencies and get elected by the majority of the country.

Advancing the national dialogue on race

01:36:27:01

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think there was a lot of hope coming out of that Skip Gates Summit. But I think that Skip Gates Summit, which is another one of these examples where you get a moment where it seems like the country is going to blow up or where things are going to really change. And we say we're going to have that conversation that's going to change everything. And it never happens. I think that Trump's – Donald Trump's election proved – Donald Trump's election and his administration proves how far we still have to go on race. You know, Donald Trump is catering to the racist nature of many of his supporters, freely catering to it. And this is after we've had a Black president. Maybe in some ways it's a rejection – maybe in some ways it's a rejection to his, to Obama's presidency.

Importance of a second term for Obama

01:37:14:13

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Presidents are often judged on their political skill and acumen, and their ability to unite a country. And if Obama had only served one term, there would have always been doubts about whether or not he was just a one off. And whether or not the country really should be electing a Black president. That second term proved – that second term put him in the annals with all

the other white guys who did so well, who won that second term, and who will go down in history. And he needed that second term to do that.

Charleston Church Shooting

01:37:46:20

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think the Black church is at the heart and soul of the community. It's where we feel the safest. It's where – the Black church has crusaded for Black people since we came to this country, and we created our own church. And for a white racist to be able to go in a Black church and do that, I think went to the heart of – it went to the heart of who we are. And our – and really showed how vulnerable we still are as a people. I think that being a Black man– Barack Obama– as a Black man, Barack Obama could speak with credibility and total – because of who he was, because he was a Black man, he could speak with unchallenged credibility about how important it is for us to get beyond our racial barriers. And I think that that speech or that time was a time when only, only a Black man could adequately speak to that moment.

01:38:45:07

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think that many people never accepted him as their president, because he was a Black man. And the political establishment in Congress, voters in the states that did not support him, spent most of their time trying to undo his election. And their basis for undoing it was only because he was a Black man. There were a lot of other excuses that were made, but it was because he was

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a Black man. And we – and they still we're not ready to accept a Black president.

Obama's legacy

01:39:16:07

LAURA WASHINGTON:

I think that he showed that despite all our racial divisions, and despite our deep racial history, that we can look above that. If you can elect a Black president in the United States of America, you can do just about anything. So, I think it gives – it gives me hope that we can prevail, and then we can continue to progress. A lot of people thought when Barack Obama was elected, that all our racial problems would be solved. Well, I think that we still have a tremendous long way to go on that. And I think that Barack Obama helped lead the way in his own small way. This – and actually, there's nothing small about being the first Black president. But I think that this country has very deep roots in racism that are not going to be overcome overnight. And we just have to keep working at it, and we have to keep talking about it. And the fact that he was there to remind us, and that people will come after him that will remind us, is crucial.

Shooting at Sandy Hook

01:40:23:16

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Uh Presidents– Presidents– in times of crisis, the most important thing a president can do is bring us together and tell us right from wrong. And I think in that instance, he was there to help us heal, and help us understand that we needed to do something about gun control in this country. We still haven't progressed, which is one of the disappointing things coming out of his presidency. But I think he brought people together, and unified people around the horror of that incident in a way that I think no other president has.

Obama as a father

01:41:07:10

LAURA WASHINGTON:

Barack and Michelle clearly had a very ideal, very positive family life, and had great relationships with their children. And they were a family unit, just like any other family unit in this country. And it was important for Americans to see that. And to see the love and the care that they gave their children. Black people get dehumanized too often. And the family is at the root of what we all care about, whatever your family is. And the fact that people could see that Black family – a happy, stable, positive Black family, I think was a very important symbol and message for the country.

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